

While the Child Lived.

This death-scene was the strangest I had ever witnessed. Quite in the center of the room, which was furnished with every conceivable luxury and made beautiful by bright silk draperies and flowers, was a bed which seemed a world too wide and too long for the frail infant that lay upon it, slowly breathing its short life away. An embroidered screen was spread out at its head to shield it from the draughts, and the brilliant hues, so deftly mingled that they seemed a shimmering mass of undistinguishable color, made more noticeable the waxen pallor of the dying child—a child who had been always delicate, and who could never hope to gain health or strength even if it lived, therefore whose dreaded loss could not surely be the sole cause of that tragedy of the emotions which was being enacted before me.

Strangely enough, the two who should have been drawn together by this common trouble seemed held apart by it. Each met it in a different manner, yet neither with that resignation which I, knowing the facts of the child's case, had expected. Like a statue stood the mother, so erect and motionless, the straight-falling folds of her severe white morning-gown tending to complete the illusion. Her features also were hard and absolutely as expressionless as marble, though once as she raised their heavy lids I saw in her eyes a suppressed gleam—more like fear than sorrow. It was as though she were paralyzed by some resistless dread. Tears and warm soft grief I could understand; it is natural a woman should cling to a first and only child, even though its retention may mean life-long misery for itself and her; but this deep, silent agony of mind or heartless callousness, whichever it might be—I confess was quite beyond my comprehension, and I turned to her husband to see if I could learn anything from his aspect that would help to solve the problem.

Jack Carisfort's face wore no such impenetrable mask. He was white and haggard-looking, and his pleasant gray eyes, blurred with a not unmanly moisture as they met my gaze, were expressive of very real feeling, that yet—as I studied him more attentively—I could not help fancying—was connected only in a secondary degree with their threatened bereavement. It appeared as if he were suffering another pain through this; and the eager glances which sped frequently in my direction—as though I were the Delphic Oracle, and possessed of superhuman powers to bring my prophecies to pass—were full of anxiety, and surely this time it must be my imagination suggested fear.

Had I been unaware of the true circumstances of their marriage, I might have allowed fancy to run riot in an opposite direction. I might have supposed him passionately devoted to a wife who had no love to give him in return, and by that means come to the conclusion that jealousy of the child, which had, perhaps, been nearer to her heart, was the keynote of his mysterious attitude towards her. But this could not be so, I knew. Since I entered the room he had not addressed a word to her, save the necessary commonplaces, and all the time he had stood aloof from her, without an attempt at consolation, while she never turned to him as though expecting it. Besides which, I remembered well their wedding-day, and the disagreeable impression it had left upon my mind.

Jack's father had been an old friend of mine, and when the boy was left to fight his way in the world as best he could on his slender pay as lieutenant in the navy, I had felt a semi-paternal interest in him which I had demonstrated as often as possible in acts of practical help. He was a warm-hearted, reckless youngster, whose worst faults had been the natural ones of his age. It came upon me as a shock when the report reached me that he was deliberately intending to marry for money—a fact which he himself subsequently confirmed. "I shan't have to sponge on you any more, doctor. Do you think I don't know that you have often deprived yourself of little luxuries, perhaps necessities, on my account?"

"It is better to accept a trifle now and then from an old friend than live altogether on the bounty of a woman," I retorted dryly.

For a moment he was confused, and a dark flush of shame suffused his face; then he answered hesitatingly:

"You are viewing it from its worst point. Suppose I happen to know—I would not say it to any one but you—that she is so fond of me, it might kill her if she thought I did not care too? Besides, she is enchantingly pretty. If she had not had this money, I should have fallen hopelessly in love with her, I expect, and that would have been more awkward, considering the circumstances, don't you think?"

But what I thought it was useless saying, as the wedding-day was already fixed, and his word pledged beyond recall; though when I saw the bride I felt more strongly than ever how great and irreparable a mistake he had made.

This was no mindless child, to be satisfied with rugged phrases and graceful deeds, that cost the donor nothing. If she were blinded now by love and the novelty of her position, the truth must dawn upon her eventually, and she would suffer cruelly in a knowledge come too late. Here face, with its lovely smiling mouth, and soft, sweet eyes, ever wandering

towards her husband, as birds at eventide flutter round their lofty nests, haunted me for many days.

In spite of all forebodings, I was amazed that in two short years she could have developed into the stoney-eyed woman who greeted me with such cold, unnatural composure when, in answer to a telegraphic summons, I arrived just an hour before; for I had never met her in the interval, and had heard nothing to prepare me for so startling a change.

While I was pondering over these things, Jack was called out of the room; and as the door closed behind him, Mrs. Carisfort fell upon her knees beside the bed, and passionately caressed the tiny fingers that lay like snowflakes on the satin coverlet. She had thrown off all pretence of coldness. I wondered then how even for an instant I could have suspected she was lacking in sensibility or love.

"Doctor," she cried, turning her anguished eyes to mine, "tell me—is there no hope?"

"There is always hope," evasively. "Be patient: be submissive. Think what is better for the child," I added as an after-thought.

"God help me! I was only thinking of myself!" I laid my hand gently on her bowed head, a familiarity my age and position as her husband's friend permitted me. The cry wrung from her tortured heart had gone straight to mine. We were no longer strangers; I felt at that moment she was as much my daughter as Jack, without protestations on either side, had ever been the son of my adoption. I did not answer. It was better to leave all words unsaid than, by ill-chosen ones, touch a false or irresponsible chord; but I think the consciousness of my mute and unobtrusive sympathy had its good effect, for she looked up gratefully through tears that began to fall quietly at first, then afterwards as though the flood-gates of her heart once opened would never close again.

I went away quietly, knowing that indulgence in her sorrow would be its best relief. Downstairs I found an elaborate cold luncheon spread in the dining-room, of which Jack insisted on my partaking, though he himself ate nothing, and flung himself down on a chair near the window after drinking a tumbler of claret at a draught.

"You'll excuse my sitting at the table, doctor; the mere sight of food turns me sick. I have scarcely swallowed a mouthful since the child was taken ill."

I might have considered this an affectation, or, at least, an exaggeration of grief, knowing the child was doomed from its birth, and that its life had been already protracted beyond their hopes; but I caught sight of his face in the sideboard mirror that fronted me, reflected between the massive pieces of shining silver plate that stood before it, and could not doubt the sincerity of his speech, though ignorant still as to its meaning. However, I could wait patiently for an explanation—it having become clear to me that not only on account of my presumed professional skill had I been summoned, but as an old friend, to give extraneous advice in some crisis of the boy's life.

He turned to me now, his eyes glittering with strong, only half-controlled excitement.

"Doctor," he broke out earnestly, "is there no hope?"

The same question his wife had put to me, and I answered more plainly than I had dared on that occasion, that a few hours at latest must see the end. Professionally speaking, it was impossible the child should live.

With a deep groan Jack buried his face in his folded arms, and by degrees blurted out his story, or, at least, enough of it to make me understand the rest.

In my profession confidences are often forced upon us in moments of exaltation that are subsequently repented in cold blood, and I myself had invariably found that these indiscretions were visited on me, who if at all, had only passively offended. This resulted in my cultivating a manner so determinedly stern and unsympathetic that the most effusive were restrained by it. Even now, when I would have scattered such prudential scruples to the winds, I must unconsciously have fallen into it again, for Jack, after the first unconsidered burst of eloquence, began to falter in his recital, and something, much or little, was left to my intelligence to supply. Enough I gathered to be sure that what I anticipated had taken place. The young wife had gradually discovered her husband's want of love for her, and had resented it, not in angry words or glances, but by a studied scornful indifference, most galling to one of Jack's open and impulsive disposition, especially as he was beginning to realize he had merited no better treatment at her hands.

The estrangement grew more serious every day, she going her own way with quiet, uncomplaining pride, he striving to stifle his conscience, and forget her existence in dissipation that had formerly been little to his taste; a strained state of affairs culminating at last in a passionate scene between them, when Mrs. Carisfort had declared that only while the child lived, for its sake, would she remain beneath her husband's roof. If it died she would consider herself free to go, leaving him half the money he had so degraded himself to gain.

Whether she had merely this one grievance against him, or whether her wrath had been aggravated by any deeper wrong, I could not tell. The strangest part of the story was that ever since the day they had resolved only to meet in friendly intercourse before the world to silence any rumors that might be afloat, ever since that day Jack had been desperately in love

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with his own wife—with less hope of ever touching her heart again than if it had never been his entirely, to do with as he would. The death of the child, which had been daily, sometimes hourly, expected, would be the signal for their separation, if in the interim he had not succeeded in proving his repentance and winning pardon with her love.

So much Jack Carisfort had told me, when a message came from upstairs begging my immediate presence.

The child was sinking fast. I could see that the instant I entered the room; and this, if it was not read in my expression, must have been divined by my order to stop all remedies and stimulants, with the intent that, all hope being over, these last moments might be peace.

In perfect silence we waited for the end. Mrs. Carisfort was on her knees as I had left her, her face still averted from my view; but the lines of her figure had lost their rigidity, and were bent in an abandonment of grief. The injured feelings she had had cause to cherish were swept away by an overwhelming sorrow for the babe who had laid in her bosom so many weary nights and days, and now was passing beyond reach of her mother love and care.

And while she watched the child, her husband was watching her yearningly, infinite pity in his gaze; all thought of self merged in the desire to lighten her grief by sharing it, knowing the impending blow would not fall so heavily if met together. But apparently they were farther apart than they had ever been before, and the slender thread that had bound them hitherto, and on which their present visionary fabric of happiness depended was slowly breaking—while I looked was broken.

A shadow falling athwart the wee pale face, a shiver running through the wasted frame, and it was all over; the child was dead.

Mrs. Carisfort staggered to her feet, and with wild eyes searched my face for confirmation of her fears. Silently I bowed my head and turned away, with an effort mastering my wish to do or say anything to comfort her; for I felt if ever the breach between those two could be bridged, it would be now, when her love thrown back upon herself, she would more sorely feel the need of some one to turn to in her trouble. Both thought me heartless no doubt. My actions have been so often interpreted wrongly. Whose are not? I could afford to rest under this one more misconstruction, and was satisfied when I saw that things fell out as I designed.

Jack Carisfort went toward his wife with arms outstretched, such an expression in the face as must have softened her resentment, had she once looked up. But with downcast eyes she retreated blindly as he advanced, until, reaching the chamber door, she leant against it, no longer a marble statue, but a woman startled into animation, and panting in her nervous excitement like a wounded deer at bay.

"Wife, listen to me; I have a right to comfort you," he cried in sharp impassioned tones.

"The right is forfeited."

She spoke slowly, with that stiff utterance which is not indicative of lack of feeling, but the reverse. I, who had not mixed with my world without observing and grasping some of the contradictory intricacies that go to form a woman's character, guessed that already she was relenting, though her fingers were on the handle of the door, and the starched folds of her white gown were gathered hastily round her with a forbidding rustle to escape his contact. Jack, however, was less experienced, and his perceptions were