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A VOICE FROM THE HIDDEN WORLD

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 15

every week, and yesterday I was able to bring it away. Oh, how thankful I was! All the others have gone, but it would have broken my heart to have parted with this one. He liked it so much."

A great wave of pity rose up in my heart, and swept away every meaner feeling before it. I bent forward with my eyes fixed upon the floor, and all that I could so well imagine seemed to rise up before me in a sort of dream-picture. I saw the stooping figure of that lonely woman, working night and day in a cheerless solitude, starving herself of food and warmth, wearing her fingers to the bone, scraping every farthing together that she might redeem from the pawnshop the gown so precious to her through his preference. I could see her late at night, wearied out and with aching eyes, pushing her work away, and indulging for a few brief moments in one of those day-dreams so precious to her. A faint colour steals into her ashen cheeks, and her eyes are of a sudden wonderfully soft. The thin hands rest peacefully in her lap, and her poor, tremulous heart is once more beating with renewed strength. She is thinking of the time when he will come. She can see him standing there; almost she can feel his strong arms around her wasted form. How eagerly she watches to see whether he will notice his favourite dress; her hair arranged with shaking fingers as he had liked it; and how anxiously she seeks to read his thoughts in his expression! Does he think her so much changed? Will that old fondness survive her hollow cheeks and shrunken face? Is the old love as faithful and strong as ever? Ah, how sweet those dreams! How sad and cold the awakening!

And my awakening, too, came just then; for I felt a light touch on the arm, and, starting up, found Miss Desmond by my side.

"Doctor, forgive me for interrupting your day-dream," she said nervously; "for I fancied that I heard a cab stop in the street, and you know that I am expecting a visitor. Would you—"

I rose quickly, and turned towards the door.

"I beg your pardon, I'm sure, Miss Desmond," I said. "My next case is a very interesting one, and in thinking out some of the symptoms I lost myself for a moment. Once more, a happy Christmas!"

She looked perfectly beautiful as she laughed and nodded to me with the strange new colour in her cheeks and her whole manner and bearing full of a new-born animation. She might have posed for a statue of "Hope"—not that strong, calm hope which is but a misnomer for faith, but hope tempered by uncertainty, nervous and fearful through the very greatness of the issue, yet with all a woman's sweet trust in the man she loves, leaning towards the belief that this meeting, to which she was looking forward with so much yearning tenderness, would end as she would wish. So I saw her, and saw her for the last time. When next I looked into her face she was a dead woman. I met no one on the stairs after leaving Miss Desmond; and instead of spending the day as I had planned, I went straight back to my apartments. It must have been about twenty minutes to five before I was disturbed by a violent ringing of the surgery bell, and almost immediately afterwards my housekeeper knocked at the door.

"A gentleman wishes to see you immediately, sir," she announced.

"Show him in," I directed.

He had evidently followed close behind her, for before she could turn

round he had walked into the room. I turned up the lamp, and rose from my chair.

"You are Mr. Faggett?" he inquired quickly.

"Yes."

"I have just left a lady whom you have been attending—Miss Desmond. She is ill. Will you come to her?"

The pipe which I had been holding between my fingers slipped to the ground, and I drew a quick breath between my teeth. This, then, was Miss Desmond's visitor, this was the man whom she had been expecting so eagerly; and he had left her ill, he had left her at the very moment when she must have most needed his support, on an errand which any other messenger could have accomplished. I stooped down and turned up the lamp with a fierce, angry swelling at my heart, but when I bent forward to look into his face he stepped quickly back into the shadows with an impatient exclamation. His purpose was manifest—he wished to conceal his features from me as far as possible.

"I ask you again whether you will come to her, Dr. Faggett?" he said abruptly. "I left her in a faint, and the case may be urgent. Kindly postpone your curiosity as to my personal appearance until you have seen your patient."

"I will come at once," I answered. "I am ready now." We went out into the street together. I had expected to find my companion silent and reserved, but he commenced talking at once.

"I learn from Miss Desmond that you have been very good to her, Dr. Faggett," he said slowly. "She has been in sore straits, I fear, and has needed friends."

"I am not aware of any particular goodness on my part," I answered stiffly. "I have only done what Miss Desmond has a right to expect from me—or any other of my patients."

"You have done more; but I fear that you are prejudiced against me, Dr. Faggett. I do not know how much Marian—Miss Desmond—has told you of her history, but—"

"She has told me nothing."

"I do not wonder at it; she is naturally reserved. You knew, at any rate, that she was expecting a visitor to-day?"

"Yes."

"I was that visitor. You may have surmised that?"

"I imagined so; and also, from your errand to me, that your visit was a disappointment to her."

"I fear so," he answered in a low tone; "I fear so."

"Then, at any rate, it is my duty to tell you, sir, that events may make you her murderer," I said pitilessly.

We were passing a gas-lamp, and the momentary view which I had of his face startled me. It was pale, as though with a sudden horror, and great beads of perspiration were standing out upon his forehead; never before or since have I seen such agony upon a human face. The people who thronged the pavement glanced curiously at him, and then at me. To escape their observation I increased my pace a little, and as we threaded our way amongst them I heard him whisper in my ear:

"If you can save her, doctor, your fee shall be a thousand guineas."

"Only you can do that," I answered sharply.

There was no reply. I looked round, and found that he was no longer by my side. Across the road I could see him vanishing in the mist. Without hesitation I pushed onward. I cared nothing for him; I was only anxious to reach my patient.

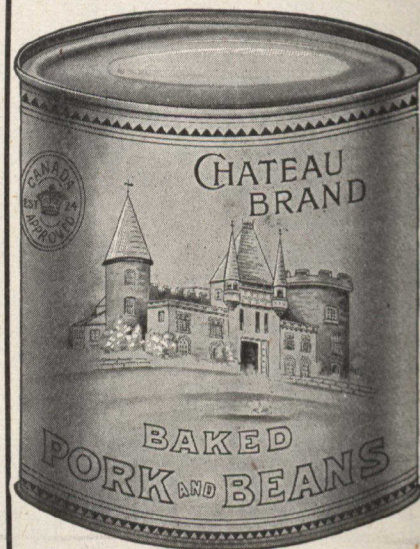
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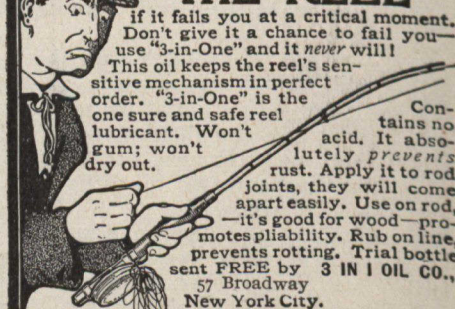
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