

"OF COURSE, if he regains consciousness . . ." the doctor had said. A stealthy sound from the floor below, broke the eerie stillness of the darkened house. Nearer it came—on the stairs—in the corridor beyond the yawning doorway. Elinor's attitude became, if possible, more tense, more rigid, as she strained her eyes to pierce the gloom. A man's huge frame filled the doorway. He stood, without speaking, projecting his hungry soul, as it were into the room. He gave the impression of one excluded by unseen barriers, yearning over those whom he was powerless to reach.

"There is no change."  
The dead level of her tone was horrible, the result of scarifying emotions which had left wounds too poignant for further sensation. "I will call you if—" she added, but the words were without promise of hope. Rather were they a foreshadowing of, a preparation for, the end!

George Paget melted into the blackness and crept down the corridor. On the stairs, he staggered like a man who had received a death blow but could not die. If his wife felt the passionate yearning in his soul, the need for giving and receiving comfort, she made no sign. Not until he reached the floor below did she remove those unseen barriers at the dim doorway, relax slightly, and turn back to her motionless vigil.

"He did it!" she repeated soundlessly to herself. "He did it!"

Deliberately, determinedly, she closed her eyes to a fact that struggled for recognition in her inner consciousness. She refused to see that primal instincts exist alike in all women; that Mrs. Paget's impulse to shield and protect, was her own impulse, but slightly exaggerated. A paragraph her husband had marked for her to read, rose unbidden and unwelcome in her mind.

"We want a chance to subdue. Boys like to go stamping through the woods in thick soled boots. They like to crush the sticks in their path and to jerk off the branches that get in their way. If there is need to clear a path, so much the better. For there is in most of us an ancient hunger to subdue the chances which we meet, to tame what is wild. We want to encounter the raw and crude—the stubbornness of nature arouses our determination to subdue it. Before the commercial age, war, hunting and agriculture, gave us this foil. We want it still, and for lack of it often find our work too soft."

Blots of gloom floated indefinitely about. Elinor watched them settle for an instant in one spot, then another, and finally dissolve. It was terrifying.

Suddenly, a chill like a visible Presence, crept into the room. It approached slowly, purposefully, as though it said, "I am come! Make way for me! This is my hour!"

Mentally the woman rose to meet it, to dispute it, and she threw her spirit like a protective mantle over the body of her child. With all the power of her soul she fought the dread Thing back.

Still she had not moved.

A trembling flicker of pale radiance touched the boy's fair head. His outline gradually came out of the shadow. A bird chirruped, leaves rustled softly and whispered that morning was astir. Beyond the open casement, a fringe of sombre pines fenced off the flush of dawn.

A pony neighed!

The child quivered faintly. A little moan escaped between his parted lips. Stiffly, Elinor fell forward and crushed her tearless sobs into the cold, white quilt.

She knew that her husband had entered the room, and was standing beside her; she knew that he was racked with anguish that included her hideous pain. But she turned to him neither for pity nor for comfort. She was glad that he did not touch her.

"Whoa . . ." said the child, distinctly. "I can't hold him, Daddy—Daddy!"

All that had been frozen in her turned to concentrated fire. He had called his father—the man who was responsible for this murderous outrage. She, his mother, was forgotten!

"My son—My own dear son . . ." a husky voice above her murmured. "Speak to mummy! Tell her that you will get well."

She felt a small hand stirring feebly in her hair. She raised her head and looked into the boy's clear eyes.

"Don't cry, mummy," he whispered. "I'm not so very much hurt. As soon as I've had tea, I'm going to ride again—better, mummy, much better! I didn't know that riding was like a game . . . and I got beaten. But," the childish treble grew in strength, "you know Daddy says a fellow had to be a good loser before he's a winner, mummy . . ."



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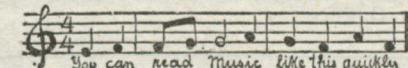
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