

The Operation

(Continued from page 8.)

seemed endless. I skirted the vine-covered pergola, threaded the narrow, winding path between the trimmed box, and came out at last, after what seemed a voyage in a nightmare, upon the grassy space beneath the apple trees.

I stood, and stared wildly. There was no one in sight—no dog, no maid, no child. But the gate at the back stood open. I ran and peered out. There was nothing. The yellow high-road that ran along beneath the hedge was empty in both directions. In the wide fields across the road a few red cows were tranquilly grazing.

I turned back. Could it be possible that it was all a nightmare? Had I dreamed, had it been a vision, some trick of the ether-tainted air—that brutal outburst of roars, those screams of little John, that death-mask of the Doctor's face as he went on with his task? Then I saw a small white Teddy-bear lying under one of the trees.

I ran and snatched it up. The grass was trampled heavily all about it. I turned it over in my shaking hands. There was a red stain upon it, a wet stain, which came off on my hands. It was unmistakably blood. I felt weak, and sat down in a sort of heap on the grass. Then I remembered the Doctor—or I'm afraid I should have fainted.

A nurse does not faint. I stood up, holding the Teddy-bear at arm's length, and passed a hand sharply over my eyes to try and clear my brain. My business was simply to find out something for the Doctor. Where had everybody gone to? Where was the maid? Where was Mrs. Barnes? Where was—? But I could not ask myself the rest, the obvious questions. I turned back to the house, with the purpose of searching the kitchen and the yard.

I had to thread again the winding path through the box, again to skirt the vine-wreathed pergola, and I shall never forget how long it seemed to take me. My sense of time must have been completely overthrown, for those few steps seemed to drag through a whole eternity. But at last I did come to the foot of the straight walk leading up to the house.

I could not believe my eyes. There at the foot of the verandah steps, just starting down the path, was the tall figure of the Doctor, with little John perched on his shoulder. Crowding as close as possible to the Doctor's legs, and plainly in high favour, came the massive, tawny form of the great dog. Behind, on the verandah, I saw Mrs. Barnes, her cap on crooked, evidently in high excitement.

My heart gave a great leap, and the garden, the sky, the whole world I am sure, was flooded all at once with a more wonderful sunshine. I ran forward up the path with both hands outstretched—one of them foolishly clutching the Teddy-bear. As I approached, little John reached out his hands for it eagerly, but I said, in the most ordinary tones in the world—

"Wait till I wipe the blood off, Sweet-heart."

Then I tried to take him from his father, but he would not come—though as a rule he was always ready to come to me, from anyone, even from his father—which I could not understand. The Doctor looked at me earnestly.

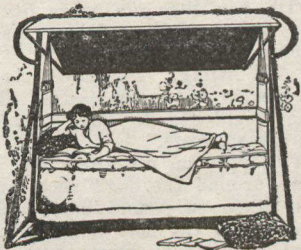
"You are looking very white, Miss Follet," he said quietly. "Will you please go to Miss Simpson now? And I will come in a few minutes and bring you something to steady your nerves. It has been too much for you, child."

"But what—but what did it all mean? I thought I should die!" I panted, incoherently, as I turned away.

A sort of spasm went over his face, at the remembrance of the horror. But he answered very quietly—

"You see, Boy was left alone down there with only Boz to look after him while that wretched girl ran out into the road—to meet some admirer, I suppose—and left the gate open behind her. Then two ruffians—bad men, Boy calls them—tramps or Gypsies, I suppose, came in and undertook to kidnap Boy. I think we were both wronging old Boz here, rather hideously, Miss Follet," and he dropped a caressing hand

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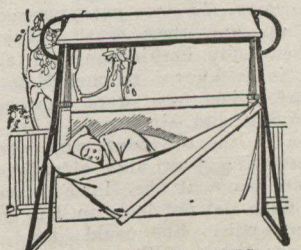
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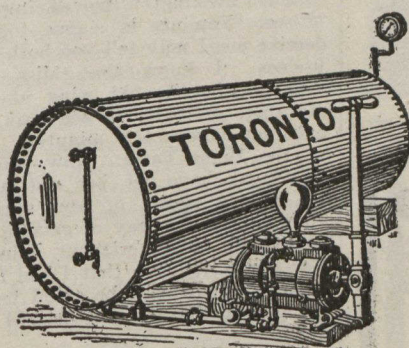


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