

ON THE BRIDGE.

The night was dark. Overhead the few sad stars were shining dimly, buffeted by the clouds, and the water underneath hurried between the arches with a strange rush past as if fearing a sudden despairing lunge from above. On the bridge were two shadows, two only in the bitter wind.

"My dear Charlotte, why did you do it?"

"I had to. One must be civil."

"But why tonight? I cannot eat or drink while this goes on, and I am famishing."

The hostess bent over across the flowers and murmured sagely, "Dear, when I asked him, I was morally sure that he had a vestry meeting," and then she drew back a little remorsefully.

Mrs. Chatterton had invited one too many and this one was doing all the talking. The hungry blank before dinner had been filled with his sonorous voice, and the same voice in its mass meeting tone, was thundering down the table, compelling the frivolous to attend. The very servants appeared to feel that they had no business to offer anything to eat.

The Rev. Johnson was an earnest man, and these men have no compunction. He had few other opportunities of touching such worldly people, and his thin, kind, clever face was eager. He had been holding forth upon the awful desolation beyond these doors.

"Not so very far," he was saying—and his soup was cold—"others, men and women, are seeking shelter, wandering in the night. They watch the glimmer of lamps, houses lit like yours, and their despair becomes more bitter to endure when they think of the happiness beyond!" ("Which you are properly diminishing," said Colonel Somebody to himself). "It's not fair, it's not right. It is your task to change it. Not with a guinea here and there, but with earnest, honest help. Go and look and you will believe it. Think of it, here hundreds of happy homes" (a woman under her breath said "happy!"), "there hundreds shut out—shut out, do you understand?—from all but the pain of life. That very bridge yonder! Mrs. Chatterton, you know it, but only in the sunshine, when the water ripples gladly enough. Your carriage rattles over it hastily in the dark. These others know it in the night. They creep there, hungry and weary, to hide themselves in the shadows, dark on the bridge, and darker upon the water, with the darkest of all shadows in their hearts. Do you ever think of that, Mrs. Chatterton?"

The hostess put both hands up to her fair, wild hair—a habit of hers when troubled. The look of airy satisfaction had left her face.

"Poor things!" said she. "I don't like going to stare at them when they are reclaimed like convicts. I wish I could go there some dreadful night and carry them all off and make them happy."

"A pity it should only be a wish," said the Rev. Johnson, glancing dryly across the wilderness of silver and ferns and glasses. He did not believe in Mrs. Chatterton. She was like a rose leaf whirled over the grass by the summer winds and quite as careless. Then he bent quietly to his plate, but after one mouthful he began again to impress these people, most of whom did not often hear his words elsewhere.

Mrs. Chatterton was clasping and unclasping her fingers nervously, as if she were to blame for it all. Mr. Peterson, at the other end of the table, was only thinking that the dinner was a fiasco. He was the father of a little girl who had died—yes, but he was not frivolous. He was also the father of many sons, and some men have few ideas, letting the sad ones slip. These do not need distractions—trifles. The Rev. Johnson, principally addressed himself to Mr. Peterson.

Mr. Butterfield was getting all the attention of the servants. He was almost the only person who did not keep things waiting at his elbow, but then he was a rich man and a hard man, rumor said, and perhaps he was not lightly moved. Miss

Lavender, on his left, was an authoress. She was handsome and tall and brilliant and her mouth took on a sarcastic twist whenever she had to listen to other people's views. It seemed this time as if her patience failed her. She turned to Mr. Butterfield all at once and in rather a high voice inquired what he thought of a certain play. The Rev. Johnson looked earnestly at them both and judged them.

It was dark on the bridge and the wind was bitter. Mr. Butterfield had taken a strange way home.

He, the hard man of the world, could hardly account for the way in which he had been stirred by facts he had already heard more than once. He had meant to walk to his own house across the square but his feet had almost unconsciously led him hither, "to have a look," he assured himself uneasily shivering in the cold. On either side down the water was a wavering line of lights: in the distance the rumbling of a carriage: on the bridge nothing.

"It is a strange thing," the Rev. Johnson had said in parenthesis, "how these waifs vary in their haunts! Some nights the bridge is lined with despairing men, and on others it is deserted."

Mr. Butterfield shivered again and whistled.

"There is me," he muttered grimly.

His mind wandered to his neighbor of that spoiled dinner party, the clever Miss Lavender. He admired her, had always admired her, with all her independence and startling ways—and yet—something in her that night had jarred. A woman who could hear unmoved the pitiful stories that had been urged upon them, who could turn impatiently and interrupt with a vain talk of plays, was hardly the woman a man would want for his wife.

It troubled him more than he would have thought, and he tried to shut out the fancy

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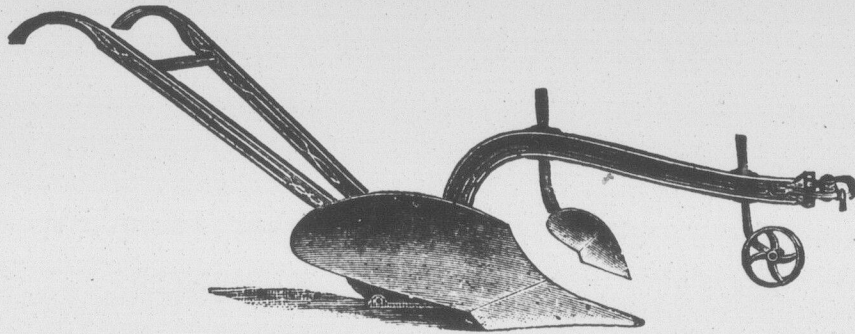
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