

The Operation

A Surgeon's Adventure, as Told by Nurse Mary Follet

By CHARLES G. D. ROBERTS

THE dog growled at me that morning, as I came up the path from the front gate.

I had spoken to him civilly, as I always do to all well-disposed animals, great or small, being convinced that, like the rest of us, they resent impoliteness. Even if it was hot, I was annoyed that he should receive my courtesy so rudely, the more so as we had always been fairly good friends. I, who had so often, across hospital bed or operating table, stood up to and pushed back Death himself—I was not going to be growled at, for no reason, by any dog, even if he was as big as a calf. I spoke to him sharply.

"Get out! Get out of my way! How dare you growl at me?"

For a second or two he looked at me surlily out of his red, pocket-lidded eyes; then, heaving himself to his feet he marched off round the corner of the house, grumbling in his throat. I remember thinking to myself, as I went up the steps, that one never could be quite sure of the temper of those Mastiff-Great Dane crosses.

In the wide hall I found it deliciously cool, with sweet airs drawing softly through from the garden that surrounded the house on three sides. I was on the way to the dressing-room, to put on my white things for the operation, but I lingered a moment in the hall sniffing a jar of red roses, for I knew that I was looking cool and fresh myself, in my trim, new blue linen suit, and I hoped that the Doctor might see me before I changed it.

He did; for just as I lifted up my face from the roses he came into the hall, from his study. But I'm afraid he did not quite take in the full effect of the new blue linen suit. His strong face—boyish in its fresh colour, though the close-cut black hair was already greying about the temples—was unusually grave, and his grey eyes, which had sometimes seemed to rest on me appreciatively, were full of preoccupation. I realized for the first time how desperately serious was the task before us, and started hurriedly toward the dressing-room, ashamed of myself for having thought of the new suit at such a moment.

"I find there's really no time to lose, Miss Follet," said he in a low voice. "You might get the patient ready as soon as possible. Doctor Williams can't be with us before two o'clock—and then it would be too late."

As he was speaking little John, the Doctor's only child, came in from the dining-room, followed by the nurse maid, a stupid-looking country thing of sixteen or seventeen. The boy was the kind that makes an unmarried girl like me, however full her life, pity herself. With his sturdy little rosy legs, and frank little rosy face surrounded by fair curls, he made me fairly hungry. But I had no time to speak to him. He ran to his father, who snatched him up, kissed him a bit absent-mindedly, and set him down again.

"KITTY," said he somewhat peremptorily, "take him down to the bottom of the garden, under the apple-trees—and keep him there, do you understand? I am not to be disturbed on any account. Mrs. Barnes will answer the bell if necessary. You play with Boz, boy."

"Boz doesn't want to play. He looked cross at me this morning," said the child.

"Well, don't tease him then, dearie. Maybe he thinks it's too hot to play," answered the Doctor abstractedly.

I did as I was bidden, and lost no time in getting the patient ready. She was an insignificant-looking little soul, named Simpson, from a nearby village. Her face was drawn with pain, but I was pleased with her, she was so plucky—and her faith in the Doctor was touching. She knew quite clearly what she was to go through, but she was so cool and

still about it. Like everyone else who came in contact with him, she trusted Doctor Eliot.

And then I, seeing her so steady, realized that it was I, myself, who was nervous.

It was not for the life of the Simpson woman that I was nervous, it was for the Doctor.

The case* was one of terrible responsibility, thrust upon him so suddenly that there was no time for him to wait and get a specialist from the city. I knew he was an expert general surgeon. I knew he was sure of eye, swift, and sure of hand. I knew that, as far as one man could be, he was equal to his task. Yet I found myself trembling for him—trembling because he must bear so great a responsibility alone—trembling indeed, because I could not bear some real share of the responsibility for him. Then I was angry with myself, as I thought—"but that's the way all women feel about him. He's so used to it. It's nothing to him."



"I dropped on my knees and flung my arms around the dog's neck. . . ."

Then I looked all round the room, minutely, to see that nothing had been forgotten.

The room had been made ready in haste, but all was as it should be. It was empty of everything we did not need—bare, clean, white, aired from the windows let down from the top, and antiseptic-smelling. The operating-table—a combination chair-and-table—had been wheeled in from the office, so that the patient could be lifted straight from it to the bed.

The Doctor came in. His face had no longer that air of stern abstraction which it had worn in the hall. It was so smiling and cheerful that the last trace of anxiety faded out of the patient's haggard eyes. He felt her pulse, said a few gentle words of encouragement and commendation for her bravery; and then the smell of iodoform began to be drowned out by the smell of mixed chloroform and ether.

For me that smell, though I should live within it for the rest of my natural life, will be associated forever with that room—the big shining brass bedstead, the gilt lines and festoons of tiny pink roses in the wallpaper, and that still, small, angular white form of the poor little Simpson woman stretched on the operating-table. It is cut, or rather I should

* (It is not necessary to go into details which the non-technical reader would not understand. For those who do understand, I may say merely that it was a case of an abdominal tumour, hitherto unsuspected, becoming suddenly engorged. M. F.)

say eaten, into the very fibre of my memory.

The Doctor had not noticed my nervousness. He had paid me the compliment of taking my coolness and complete fitness for granted. And as I watched him—for I could not help glancing up at his face from time to time—all uncertainty vanished. His face had changed yet again. It was white, but hard and keen as steel, the eyes piercing and intent as if the whole brain and nerve and spirit of the man were concentrated in them—in them and in his firm, swift, unhesitating fingers, which seemed themselves to have eyes in their tips.

When the poor little body was opened up, the state of affairs inside proved to be even worse than we had feared; I saw that by a look of surprise, of disapproval even, in the Doctor's face. I realized that the operation must be a long one. I saw, indeed, by the little clock on the stand nearby that we had already been a long while at it. But the inspired precision of the knife in that busy hand seemed to hypnotize me, and I had no sense of time.

At last the dreadful thing was removed. I drew a sharp little breath of relief. But I saw the Doctor's forehead knit itself in tense lines as he gripped at the flooding artery which had fed the cruel growth. It was the critical moment, the supreme moment. And at that very moment of all moments, through the open top of the window,

over the peaceful green of shrubbery and lawn, from the far back of the garden, came a sudden confusion of sound, at which the hair rose on my scalp and my heart stood still.

It was a very explosion of savage growls and barking—pierced, an instant later, by shrill screams, one, two, three. They were a child's screams. I knew it was the voice of little John.

Then silence—so complete that the soft ticking of the clock on the table grew suddenly loud.

I saw it all, the scene at the foot of the garden, so clearly, in that awful instant. My knees gave way somewhat, so that, as I partly sank, I had to catch the leg of the table between them to brace myself. But I kept my hand steady, holding the ether cone to the patient's face.

I SAW the Doctor's hurrying hand stop for a second, contract, and grow rigid. For a second, only for a second, his eyes met mine, full. They seemed to sink right back into his head and grow dull, like bits of grey glass. The sweat jumped out in beads on his grey face and a groan forced itself from between his teeth. I felt myself praying for him—though I don't know what I said, or what I thought. I was horribly afraid. And in that second a jet of scarlet blood seemed fairly to spurt up between his motionless fingers.

But it was for a second only. Those terrible, lifeless eyes dropped their grip on mine, and fell back to their task. The fingers moved again, and the scarlet jet stopped. I heard, with a sort of surprise, my own breath come gaspingly, several times.

Then for fifteen minutes—the little clock was straight in front of me, so I knew it was only fifteen minutes, that awful lifetime—there was no sound. The Doctor went on with his work. The life that was his in trust—he left nothing undone for it. At last the bandages were all in place. The thin body was almost ready to be lifted to the bed. He turned to me swiftly and almost swept me away with a jerk of his left hand.

"Go! See!" he muttered with difficulty, out of a dry throat. I did not see how he could finish without me; but I ran.

For a moment I tore madly at the door, forgetting we had locked it. Then I controlled myself, opened it, and shut it quietly behind me.

In the hall I stopped to listen. The stillness was deathlike. I saw the walls wave for an instant, and had to steady myself at the table with the bowl of roses. For a few seconds my feet quite refused to move, as if they were glued to the floor. Then I got control of them again.

I ran out through the dining-room to the back verandah. I flew down the steps, down the long, long path between the roses. Their pink and red

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