

Her face flushed at the sound of a foot upon the stair. It mounted as she listened eagerly, but she fell back in her seat with a sigh of patient disappointment as a knock sounded at the door.

"Come in!" she answered, and the visitor obeyed.

"Mr. Bream?" she asked, peering at him through the shadows.

"Yes," answered a cheery voice. "I was passing on my way home and thought I would run up and see how you were, and the little one."

Gillian rose and lit a candle.

Her visitor was a man of thirty-five or so, broad shouldered and strongly built, deep in the chest, long in the arms, with a clean-shaven face of healthy pallor and crisply curling hair. He was rather negligently dressed in the uniform of a Church of England curate, but his general style and manner were by no means of the conventional clerical kind, and but for his clothes he might have been anything in the world but a parson.

"Mr. O'Mara's out, I see," he remarked, after shaking hands.

"Yes; he finished the picture this morning, and has gone to take it home. I am expecting him back every minute. Pray take a seat, Mr. Bream."

Mr. Bream's quick eyes, travelling round the room in a perfectly candid examination, rested on the brandy and the empty soda water bottle.

"Hum!" he said, in a tone too low to reach his companion's ears, and, obeying her invitation, drew the remaining chair to her side and sat down.

"And how is Dora?" he asked, bending above the child as she lay in her mother's lap. "Allow me."

He took the child delicately in his strong hands, and examined it by the light of the candle, with his finger on the little wrist.

"Hum!" he said again. "The medicine does not seem to have answered as well as I had expected; you are sure you obeyed the directions?"

Gillian's fluttering breath was the only answer to his question.

"The pulse is weaker," said Bream, as if to himself, but with his eyes fixed on the mother's averted face. "Dry skin, distinctly feverish—Mrs. O'Mara, answer me, please. Has the child had the medicine?"

"No," she answered faintly.

"That," said the curate, "can mean only one thing—that you have not the money to buy it. Come, come, are we not old friends enough yet to speak to each other plainly? Do you put your pride in the balance with your child's life?"

"With her life?" she said. "Oh, Mr. Bream."

"The child is seriously ill," he answered. "She was ill yesterday, and is worse to-day."

Mrs. O'Mara stared at him with a face as white as paper.

"I warn you that Dora's life is in danger. She must have proper treatment, proper food, change of air. Think! Is there no way of procuring these for her?"

Gillian shook her head, with her hands opening and shutting with a nervous, mechanical gesture. The blow had been so sudden she could not realize it yet.

"The medicine," said Mr. Bream, "is easily arranged for."

He turned to the table and wrote on a leaf torn from his note-book.

"Excuse me," he said, "while I give this to the landlady."

Gillian, left alone with the child, strained it in her arms, but without looking at it, staring straight before her, with a wide-eyed look of terror.

"Listen to me, Mrs. O'Mara," said Bream, re-entering the room. "I knew, when first you came to live in this place, that both you and your husband were different in birth and breeding from the people about you. It was impossible to see either of you and not to know it. It was not my business then—it would have been an impertinence—to ask questions, to pry into your past, to seek in any way to know more of your history than you chose to tell. It is different now, and I am resolved to allow no scruple of false delicacy to restrain me from prompting you to plain duty. Have you any relations, any friends, who could help you?

I do not ask to know who they are, for the moment at least. But are there any such?"

"No," she answered. "There are none. I wore out their patience months ago."

"If you have friends and relatives," said Bream, "think if there is not one among them who would help you once more. Your child's life depends upon it!"

"I have tried them," she answered. "They have not even answered my letters."

"Your parents?"

"They are dead."

"Your husband's friends?"

"He has none. None, at least, who would help."

"Who are his friends? You knew his family when you married him?"

"No."

She tried to bound her answer to that one syllable, but her longing for sympathy, the need which lies in all of us to lighten the burden of our suffering by speech impelled her on, though she kept watch over herself, and spoke only in guarded words.

"He was a stranger when he came to—to where I lived. I was only a child. He said he loved me. My father was dying, my mother was dead, I had neither brother nor sister, I saw the time coming when I should be alone in the world. He won my father's confidence, who was glad to leave me with a protector who could take care of me, and urged me to the marriage."

"And you know nothing of his people—of his family?"

"Nothing. I do not even know if he had any right to the name he gave me."

Mr. Bream was silent for a moment before asking—

"Does he know the state of the child?"

"I told him what you said last night. When he went out this morning with the picture he promised, if he sold it, to return and give me some money for the child. Oh, my poor little innocent darling!"

The floodgates of her tears, closed too long, opened, and she wept without restraint.

"I have some money," said Bream, "entrusted to me for charitable purposes by friends of mine. A month of country air and proper attention, and wholesome food, would save the child's life. You must let me be your banker, Mrs. O'Mara. No, no! I won't hear a word. You must take it. When fortune is kinder to you, as must happen, for no man of Mr. O'Mara's talents can remain poor for long, you may repay me, and if you like to add a little interest I shall not refuse it. Here is the money—ten pounds. With economy that should be enough to give you and Dora a month in the country, or at the seaside. Mr. O'Mara, I am sure, will not object to your receiving it as a loan."

"I cannot refuse it," said Gillian. "I have not the right. And yet—Mr. Bream, I shall never be able to repay you."

"You will repay me, and over pay me, by bringing back Dora strong and well. In the meantime, while you are away, I must try and see if I cannot find you some employment in the neighbourhood. Do you think you could teach in the school? One of the ladies there is about to leave us. The salary is not large, but every little helps, and we might be able to find something better later on. And now I must get away, for I have other visits to make. No, don't move, I beg. I can find my way out perfectly well. Good-bye, little one; I hope you will come back with the roses in your cheeks which used to be there. Good-night, Mrs. O'Mara."

He gently extricated his hand from Gillian's gratefully clinging grasp, and bustled out to cut short the flood of incoherent thanks she poured out on him. The landing outside was too dark to permit him to see the figure of O'Mara, against whom he almost brushed as he descended the stairs.

Left alone with Dora, Gillian's joy overflowed in a thousand hysterical caresses, which so frightened the child that she began to cry. The mother quieted her by dancing before her eyes the glittering coins which Bream had left behind him; a thousand times the sum in minted gold had never

sounded half so sweet in the miser's ears as did the chink of those few precious coins in Gillian's.

"Isn't he a good man, my darling? You shall learn to bless him, and thank him, and pray for him. He has saved your life, my sweet, and your poor mother's, too; for how could I live if my precious one were taken away from me? I knew help would come. I knew it. God could not be so cruel as to rob me of you, my treasure."

She stopped suddenly at sight of O'Mara, who had entered the room unnoticed, and was standing almost beside her, his clothes glistening with rain.

"You seem excited," he said. "May I ask if anything particular has occurred?"

His sudden appearance, his monotonous, mocking voice, froze her with terror and foreboding.

In that sudden bright dream of hope for her child she had forgotten her husband's mere existence. At the first sight of him she had instinctively closed her hand upon the money. She stood panting and staring at him, as if he surprised her in the commission of a theft. He looked back at her with a face like a mask, and his eyes glittering evilly in the candle light.

"What have you got in your hand?" he asked.

"Mr. Bream has been here," she began, and paused.

"Mr. Bream has been here," he repeated. "Well?"

"He has given me money to take Dora into the country."

"How much?" he asked.

"Ten pounds," she answered. He had expected her to say less, and had merely asked the question to help her in the lie, which showed how little real knowledge he had of her nature after their years of marriage.

"Mr. Bream is generous," he said, with a hardly perceptible sneer.

His manner was unusual, and puzzled Gillian almost as much as it frightened her. There was something of a struggle going on in his mind, which he disguised by his expressionless face and voice. He meant to take the money Bream had left, but his sense of shame was not wholly dead, and he hesitated as to the means he should employ to wrest it from her.

Suddenly his brutality, always ill-concealed beneath the varnish of his affectation, triumphed.

"I want that money," he said. "Give it to me!" For the first time for many a day the courage which underlay Gillian's acquiescence, flamed out into open revolt.

"Not one penny, if you kill me!" she answered, with her teeth set, and outraged wife and mother written in her face and the inspired poise of her figure as she faced him. "Stand off!" she cried, as he advanced. "Don't dare to touch me. It is my child's life I hold in my hands, and I will die rather than yield it up."

He made a sudden clutch at the hand which held the money, and, missing it, seized her by the throat in a sudden access of rage. For the moment her passion lent her strength, and she struggled hard, but the cruel grip choked her breath. She tried to cry for help, but only a stifled moan escaped her, and she fell, striking her head heavily against the leg of the table with a crash which seemed to shake the house, and lay still upon the floor.

With a noiseless step O'Mara ran to the door and listened.

The house was still, no one had heard Gillian's fall.

He crept back to her, and saw from among the tumbled tresses of her hair a dark red line, momentarily growing in width, staining the boards. Even in falling she had kept the hand which held the money close shut.

In a thievish tremour, with heart beating like a muffled drum in his ears, he knelt beside her, and forced open the reluctant fingers. With pale face and shaking limbs he moved backwards to the door, closing it to shut out the haunting vision of Gillian's white face—whiter in contrast with that widening stain.

A minute later he had reached the street.

(To be continued.)