

An hour or two later found the rough but worthy doctor driving at a sober pace towards the bank.

"There goes Old Murder," cried the pert chemist's assistant to a groom of the Prices, who was talking to him at the door of the shop in the High-street.

"Yes. There goes old four miles an hour. Did you hear of young Harkness, and how he carried on last night at the billiard-room? Swore he'd been cheated, got noisy drunk, and fought three of the men there with the butt-end of a billiard-cue. Oh, he's going the whole hog, he is! How he flashes his money, to be sure."

"Well, Thatcher," said the manager of the bank, as the doctor alighted from his chaise, "what can we do for you?"

"I want this cheque, Miller, for one hundred and fifty pounds, cashed, and I want to look at my book."

"Certainly. Edward, get Dr. Thatcher's book from the parlour."

"I am going to the post-office, and will call in a minute or two. Pshaw! how cold it is. Seen my son to-day?"

"Drove by, doctor, about half an hour ago, down Church-street."

"Always at work. That's the way. Early bird picks up the worm."

"Thought he looked ill, sir. Works too hard."

"Yes, it is a dog of a life, ours. One gets old before one has leisure to enjoy what one has earned."

The manager smiled deprecatingly, as much as to say, "Rich people will have their joke."

The doctor came to the post-office.

"Any letters, Mrs. Johnson?"

"Yes, doctor. There's one for you."

"Hand it out."

The doctor sat in the chaise and read it. It was from a hospital in London, a consumption hospital, to which he annually subscribed twenty pounds. The secretary wrote to tell him that two years' subscriptions were due.

"Stuff about due!" growled the doctor. "Sent Jack to pay it into their bank a month ago. He never forgets anything."

"Here is your book," said the manager, handing the small parchment-covered book to the doctor as he entered the bank, where a farmer was scooping up a salmon-coloured bag of sovereigns.

"No, it is not entered," said the doctor, in a startled way. "Did not my boy Jack pay in twenty pounds the end of last month for Drummond's? Surely? The last cheque he paid in. I've not sent since to you for anything."

"No, Dr. Thatcher, but he called last week for the hundred pounds for you."

"The hundred pounds?"

"Yes, didn't he, Edward?"

"Oh yes, sir, and the week before for the fifty pounds."

"For the fifty pounds?" the doctor stammered. "Let me see the cheques, Mr. Miller." The doctor spoke quite calmly, but his voice trembled. "Will you allow me to sit down for a moment in your back parlour till this gentleman has gone? There has been some mistake about a subscription; a quiet minute or so will set it right."

"Certainly, sir. Edward, show Dr. Thatcher in and give him a chair. There, sir, are the cheques. Edward, put on a bit of coal, the fire's low."

The doctor, as the door closed behind the manager, looked closely at the cheques, turned the signatures up and down; then he rested his head on his hand and burst into tears. The signatures were forgeries.

"I see it all," he murmured. "Oh, that unhappy boy! and this, I fear, is not the worst. O Absalom, my son, my son!"

"There's something up," said the clerk to the manager, as he took a hasty peep over the green curtain of the glass door. "Why, good gracious, Mr. Miller, the doctor's fainted!"

IV.

"Good morning, Mr. Miller," said the doctor, when he had recovered, and retaken his seat once more in the chaise; "there is no blunder,

after all. I see where the mistake lay. I have taken all the cheques up to yesterday. Continue the draught. Young man, be kind enough to turn the chaise. Thank you."

The Spartan boy kept the wolf hid till it gnawed into his heart. Dr. Thatcher had a secret whose teeth were sharper than even the wolf. In that half hour he had suffered the pangs of death itself.

He drove straight to his sister's, Mrs. Thatcher's, whose neat little cottage was about a quarter of a mile from the town, and near the old parish church. As the doctor's chaise drove up, Miss Paget ran out, looking very pale and anxious.

"Well, Letty, how's Aunt Fanny?"

"Very, very ill, dear uncle. No appetite, very weak, no sleep."

"That won't do; and has Jack been?"

"Yes, and orders the same medicine, only larger doses; but I'm sure—I'm sure it does not agree with her. Do give your advice, uncle."

"I promised Jack, only two days ago, never to interfere with his patients; but this once I will. Send some one, Letty, to take the mare round to the stables."

Mrs. Thatcher, the doctor's sister, was sitting up in bed, propped with pillows. Her handsome features were sharpened by illness, her cheeks were sunken, her eyes pale and anxious.

"Well, Fanny, and how is it with you?"

"Bad, bad, John; perpetual pain, nausea, no sleep, no appetite."

The doctor's face changed, a ghastly pallor came upon his lips.

"Let me see the medicine, Letty."

Miss Paget brought it. The doctor looked at it eagerly, then tasted it. The next moment he had flung the bottle on the fire. A dew of nervous excitement broke out upon his forehead.

"Uncle?"

"Brother?"

"The medicine is much too powerful for you in this weak state. Jack is a clever fellow, but he does not know your constitution as I do. You must not, however, pain him by telling him you have not taken his stuff, so I will send you some tonic that resembles it in colour, but less violent. This was too much for you. Jack was right—he was right, but he has not taken into account your age, Fanny."

"I could not take it yesterday, and Jack was very angry."

"You take the medicine I shall send you when I return directly it comes; take it every two hours till the sickness abates. Now, come, lie back, Fanny; you are very weak."

The pale worn face turned towards him and smiled on him, then the head sank back on the pillow, and the weary eyelids closed.

"I cannot shake off this stupor, John. Good-bye, and bless you, dear John."

The doctor signed to Letty to leave the room. When she had done so, and the door closed, he sat down by his sister's bedside, sorrow-stricken and thoughtful; in that silence, broken only by the tick of the watch at the bed head, and the deep breathing of the sleeper, he fell on his knees, and prayed for help and guidance from the Giver of all Good. Then he took out his repeater and waited till the minute-hand reached the half hour. It was three o'clock that had struck when Letty closed the door. Then he took his sister's hand and woke her.

"What, John, are you here still? How good of you! I thought I was alone. I feel better now. It was that dreadful medicine that hurt me."

"Fanny," said the doctor, with all a woman's tenderness, "when you made your will in the summer, you told me you left all your money to Jack on his marriage with Letty. Now, I want you to do me a kindness."

"I left it all to dear Jack; I told him so. What kindness can I show you, brother, a poor dying old woman like myself?"

"Alter the will this evening, and leave me the money during my lifetime. It will be a check on Jack, if he grows extravagant or wild."

"Oh, he won't, dear boy. Yet, as you will, John. You have always some kind and good object in what you do."

"I will bring a lawyer and witness in half an

hour. It might ruin even a well-intentioned lad, and make him idle. Later in life it will perhaps come better."

In the room below the doctor found Letty, anxious and apprehensive of some evil, but she scarcely knew what.

"O, uncle, uncle," she said, in tears, "auntie is not in danger, is she? Oh, do say she is not in danger."

"By God's help, Letty, she will be out of danger in a few hours. It is well I came. Letty, you love me, and you love my son Jack?"

"I do! I do! you know how I do, dearly, uncle."

"If you love us both, you will then do as I tell you, and not dervate a single iota, for much depends on what I am now going to say. But first let your man George ride quick into town and get this prescription made up."

What the doctor's instructions were, must not at present be revealed.

V.

There hours later the doctor was in his surgery, examining a drawer of dangerous drugs that was generally kept locked. He had just closed it, and was musing with one elbow on his desk and his head on his hand, when there came a step behind him. He looked round; it was John.

"John," he said, and he said no more. But there was an infinite depth of reproachful sadness in that one word.

"Dear father," said his adopted son, "I deeply regret the events of last night. I was tempted to stay at a farmer's harvest-home, and I talked nonsense (did I not?) about debt and wanting money. It was all wandering. Forget it all—it meant nothing. It was foolish, wrong of me. I'm sorry for it."

"Let it be the last time, Jack," said the doctor; "it is harder to come up hill one step, than to go down twenty. Do not break my heart by becoming a bad man. By-the-by, have you sent Aunt Fanny the medicine, and how is she?"

"Oh, pulling through all right. She's as tough as nails."

"What prescription are you using?"

"This," and John Harkness help up a bottle of simple tonic drops. "The old lady wants strength. Oh, she'll do, if she can only get stronger."

The doctor sighed, and said, "The tonic is right. At that moment the surgery door opened, and an old farmer presented himself.

"Why, Farmer Whitehead, how are you?"

"Ailing, doctor, thank ye, with the finzy. Uncommon bad, to be sure; and so is my missus."

"Ah, I thought Jack here had been attending you for months; you are down in our books. How is this, Jack?"

The young man's colour rose. "It is a mistake of mine. I'm a regular duffer for memory; it was Robinson at Woodcot I meant. I'll put it all right."

"Just see to Farmer Whitehead then, now. Give him a diaphoretic and ipecacuanha to keep the pores open. I'll go and dress for dinner."

"Steeped in lies," the doctor muttered, as he shut the surgery door behind him. "I fed this serpent, and now he stings me; but still no one shall know his shame, for I may still, by God's help, save him from crime, and leave him time and opportunities for repentance. Heaven have mercy upon him! Yes, still—still I may save the boy I once loved so much."

Dinner was over. The doctor had been cheerful, as usual, and had made no further reference to the unhappy events of the night before. John Harkness had grown boisterous and social as ever, seeing the doctor satisfied with so brief an apology.

"Jack," said the doctor, warming to the conversation, "go and get a bottle of that thirty-two-port; I feel to day as if I wanted a specially good bottle."

John Harkness went, and returned in a few minutes with the bottle, carrying it carefully, with the chalk mark uppermost.

"That's right, Jack. Don't do like the country butler, who, when his master said, 'John, have you shaken that wine?' replied, 'No, zur; but