

A FOLORN VICTIM

The Tragedy of a Drunkard's Wife

By GEORGE EDGAR GULLEN

IT was early after dinner one frosty winter's day. I was sitting in my office in the little Ontario town of Bradford. Who I was, and why I was there, you, gentle reader, might easily have discovered had you been sitting beside me—that is, provided you were sufficiently endowed with learning and patience to read the notice, painted in black characters, upon the frosted pane of my office window. The characters would appear backwards and upside down of course (as the world and life itself might, if you were ill enough to consult me). There, without intending to do so, I have told you who or what I am. Yes, I'm a modern medicine man, and I might as well tell you that that notice upon my office window reads thus:

DR. J. B. EDGAR
OFFICE HOURS—
8—9 a.m.
1—2 p.m.
6—8 p.m.

That is what I was doing that wintry afternoon, spelling out the sign upon the window, waiting for the patients who seldom came. So I had waited day after day. So am I waiting still. Bradford is provokingly healthy. I looked wearily at my watch—one-ten. Only ten minutes of that tedious hour gone. How could I idle the time away? I snapped my watch shut viciously, and picked up a newspaper.

Just then the office-door bell rang sharply. I threw the newspaper upon the table standing in the corner, sat down hastily before my desk, and snatched from the shelf a dust-covered, and ponderous volume on fevers, written by the very learned Dr. Pillbody of Spokane. I heard Joe, my handy boy, answer the ring. He came towards my office, through the outer hall, oh! so slowly. "Wise boy that," I muttered. Yes, some one was actually with him. Just as the door slowly opened, I reached up with one hand for a bottle of salts, while with the other I kept open my place in the stiff volume before me.

"The Rev. Mr. Sinclair," announced Joe. I dropped the bottle I held, and it broke upon my desk. (I didn't care. The salts were stale anyway.) I allowed the weighty book to turn its own stiff pages at its own free will, and swung around in my chair.

"Hello, Sinclair," I cried, perhaps a little too familiarly, for he was my pastor; just newly arrived at that; had been with us but a week. However, "Sin," (as we used to call him) and I had been at Varsity together, back in the dear old college days; and of course that made a difference—didn't it?

"Do you want a physic, sir?" I asked, in mock "seri-voce." (That's bad Latin, but I don't care. You may correct it, reader, if you can.)

"Oh, no," smilingly replied the Rev. George Sinclair. "I just thought I'd drop in for a few minutes and see you at your work."

Then he laughed, the rogue! See me at my work, indeed! I expected no work to do, and I believe he knew it, too.

Then the bell rang again. I could have shouted "Eureka." I didn't; I just looked as indifferent as I possible could. My eyes, however, nearly burned a hole in the ceiling as I waited for Joe to open that door. Would the boy never come!

"Mrs. Silverthorne," piped Joe's voice at the open door.

You are thinking, I know, kind reader (if ever I have any, and that the Lord only knows), that this "announcing business" was an innovation in a country-town doctor's office. So it was. That was one reason why I kept Joe. He was a Bradford boy, and knew everybody and his brother, about town. The "announcing business" I thought would be a drawing card. It didn't draw very much, however, but I had always kept it up, and I do still.

I stood up as the lady entered. Yes, though dressed very humbly, anyone could see she was a lady. Her hair was almost white, though her face appeared too young for such a token of extreme old age. But her eyes! they held you; they haunted you; they made that choking feeling come up into your throat. They were beautiful eyes, to be sure; but they were more than that; they were so expressive! They told a whole life's story to you in a look, and oh! such a sad story.

Sinclair, who also had risen at the lady's entrance, looked at her curiously, and, I suppose fearing he was intruding, withdrew silently into another room.

I gave Mrs. Silverthorne the medicine she asked for. Her heart was weak, some medical men would have said. I knew it had broken years ago; but, broken or not broken, she had forced it to its painful task, day after day, through all those years. She felt she had to live. She had her duty to perform. But now her duty, she felt, was about done; and each day her heart grew weaker as her desire for heaven and rest grew stronger. I knew I could do her no permanent good; and, I believe, she knew it, too. She suffered a good deal of pain at times, and I tried to ease it for her as much as I dared.

As Sinclair heard the outer door shut, upon her departure, he returned to the office. I saw the questioning look upon his face, so, without waiting for him to ask his question, I said, "All right, old man! Sit down in that easy chair and I'll relate to you the story those eyes of hers tell."

"You remember Jack Silverthorne, Sin, who graduated at Varsity in 188—?"

"I do," he replied briefly, with a look of wonder coming into his eyes.

"Well, Mrs. Silverthorne, the lady whom you saw in my office just now, is his widow. He is the story of those eyes. But—by the way, you shouldn't have run away just now. You should have allowed me to introduce you. She's one of your parishioners now. You surely saw her sitting in church last Sunday morning? She sat near the front on your left. Her daughter, Alice, was with her. I warrant you saw the daughter, the prettiest young lady in all Bradford."

"Yes, yes," said Sinclair, "but go on with your story."

So I continued. "Silverthorne and I were both of us born in this town; and we grew up here together. My father was the merchant of the town; Silverthorne was the only son of Bradford's only lawyer. Nellie Maynard (the lady whom you saw just now) was my predecessor, Dr. Maynard's only child. Her mother died when she was but three years of age—Maynard never married again.

"Silverthorne, senior, and Dr. Maynard were great cronies. They drank together; (for both drank heavily, but no one ever saw either of them the worse of liquor); they played chess together up in the village reading-room; they went canvassing Tory votes together, and died, finally, within a week of each other.

"My father was of old Puritan stock, and too straight-laced to be on very familiar terms with either Maynard or Silverthorne. However, in our boyhood, Jack Silverthorne and I were great friends—quite the David and Jonathan style, until—well, wait and learn.

"Nellie Maynard was the brightest, prettiest and most popular girl at school, both at the public school, and later at the high school. Jack was taller and handsomer and cleverer, too, than I; good-natured, a general favorite in and out of school. It was only natural that he and Nellie should early be very friendly, since they were so well matched, as the old ladies say, and their fathers were such close friends.



"I thought I loved Nellie, too, at that time and consequently my high school days were rather unhappy ones. But the passing years have helped me a little." (Sinclair's eyes softened. He had often asked me, jokingly, why I had never married. I had never told him until now.)

"We three, Nellie, Jack and I, matriculated in the same spring. I left for Varsity the next fall; but John remained in Bradford two years longer, studying law with his father. Then he, too, came down to Varsity and Nellie went to some ladies' college in the east. Jack and Nellie were betrothed.

"You know Silverthorne's college life as well as I do, Sinclair. Brilliant fellow, wasn't he! He took old Varsity by storm, on the campus, and in study halls, too. He graduated, finally, at the head of his year.

"But you, being a 'theologue,' didn't see the more seamy side of Silverthorne's life down there. I knew all about it. I really loved the fellow, with a kind of dog-like love perhaps. He outshone me as the sun the stars, but for that and plenty more I forgive him. He drank and gambled heavily, went at it like he went at everything else, with all his might. I had little influence over him. I just stood by and tried to keep away all the trouble I could.

"I graduated and came back home, a full-fledged M.D.; he went to Osgoode for two years. Father bought out Dr. Maynard's practice for me, and I started into work, very hopeful, and ambitious. (The years that are gone have tempered both somewhat.) Nellie, returning that same year from the east, heard of Jack's wild ways in Toronto and remonstrated with him. Silverthorne blamed me for telling Nellie of his dissipation, and our first severe disagreement arose from that. I had worried a good deal, for her sake and his as well, over Jack's wild ways; but, though I felt Nellie ought to know, I never peached on Jack, nor, to this day, do I know how she learned of Jack's wickedness.

"I had been practising medicine a year in Bradford, when Jack was admitted to the bar, and came home to take up his father's law practice. The next June Jack and Nellie were married. He had straightened up splendidly, owing to Nellie's influence over him; had signed a total abstinence pledge, and had joined the church, in spite of his father's pooh-poohing. Old man Silverthorne had never worried over Jack's careless ways. He had but laughed at them, and said Jack was only sowing his wild oats, and would make the better man for it, eventually. He had been wild himself, in the same way when he was young. So he laughed at Jack's sudden, and apparently complete, reformation.

"Jack had built a handsome new home for Nellie and himself beside his father's fine old mansion. He worked hard and kept himself perfectly straight. He was making both money and a name for himself as a brilliant, and rising young lawyer. The sight of Nellie's happy face in those days did me good. She was perfectly happy, and so proud of her clever and handsome young husband; and well she might be. I was proud of him, too; for Jack and I were now fast friends again.

"Then Dr. Maynard died, and a little while after old man Silverthorne went over the river to rejoin his old friend. Dr. Maynard died almost a pauper. His practice had never been very lucrative (alas, I was fast finding that out for myself), and he had always been rather extravagant in his living, for a country-town doctor. What amount of property and money Silverthorne, senior, left behind him the town did not know, but it must have been quite considerable in extent and value.

"It was nearly a year after his father's death that Jack's troubles began. He had been ambitious to become very wealthy, and quickly. He began speculating. You remember Jim Skinner, who was with the class of '82 for a while?"

"I remember him," replied Sinclair. "I'll never forget his cold, cruel, uncanny face. He got kicked out of college for some nasty business and went into the stock broking business."

"Yes, that's the fellow. Well, he came down here to Bradford and took in Jack Silverthorne. Skinner must have been pretty clever to do it, for Jack was no novice. Anyway Jack got hit, and hit hard. He lost about all he had, even to his beautiful house. The night he learned of his loss he went up to the hotel and got drunk. They sent for me to come and take him home. I shall never forget the look that swept over Nellie Silverthorne's beautiful, cultured face, as she saw Jack's condition. At first her black eyes flashed wicked fire, and she shrank loathingly from him. Then she burst into tears and wrapped her arms lovingly about him, as if to protect him from all future

