

FACE TO FACE.

BY M. H. IN IRISH CATHOLIC.

Some years ago in a Southern city the yellow fever was at its height. Day by day and hour by hour death won its victims. The business of the fated city was stopped, and over the people's hearts lay the deep, smothering pall of fear and woe, for the pestilence with its contagious elements added dread and isolation to its other evils.

Joy and gladness vanished from the people's faces, and even the children lisped the tales of death and counted with childish wonder the numerous funerals, and catching up their parent's cry, "looked for the coming of the frost."

Most of the wealthy people had sought safety in cooler climes, and their elegant houses were closed for the season. But some of the fine residences were still occupied, especially in the suburban parts of the city.

From one of these, early one September morning, a lady emerged. She was dressed in deepest mourning, but her heavy veil was thrown aside from her face, revealing its sad sweetness. An irresistible charm lay in the large, dark, pathetic eyes. Otherwise the face was plain. The features stood sharply out from the pale, thin face, marked with heavy lines of some steady-weighting grief.

Years ago Mrs. Amhill had been left a widow, with an only son. For a time the child was her consolation, but as he grew up to manhood he made her life miserable. Wild, wilful, reckless, he rejected all guidance, flung aside the saving restraints of religion, and finally became involved in some gambler's quarrel. Embittered at his own misconduct he abandoned his home without a word of farewell.

Ten years had passed. His mother's efforts to find him had failed, and she had almost despaired of ever hearing of him again when, accidentally, in a Western paper she read the account of his death; shot in a drunken revel by one of his boon companions—Max Glenn. The news crushed her. The name of her son's murderer haunted her. The evidence as to the victim being her son seemed conclusive—age, birthplace and name, Harold Foxstone Amhill, all were correct. When she recovered from the first shock she made every effort to obtain further particulars, but in vain. As the affair had occurred upon the plains there seemed to be no hope of further information. Consoling herself as best she could, she had been preparing to visit the place herself when the fever broke out, and she found herself barred within the fever-scourged city.

Mrs. Amhill, walking quickly along, soon found herself before the doors of an immense building, the City Hospital, under the charge of the Sisters of Charity. She entered almost gaily, for the heroic mission upon which she was bent gave new energy to her weary soul and lightened her shadowed heart. She saluted the Superioress in a cheerful tone and then shortly and urgently offered her services.

"You have lost one of your Sisters recently, let me take her place. I want to do something useful, and now is the chance. Let me work with you. For God's sake I will tend these poor creatures, and—you see I am selfish—in opening my heart to them perhaps I shall let out my own grief."

The Sister was surprised. She had long known of the lady's worth and charity, but this self-sacrifice was exceptional. As a friend she was dear to all the Sisters, but the Superioress hesitated before she consented.

"You are so unused, dear Mrs. Amhill, to this life, to the close, stifling air, to the dangers and discomforts, to all this trying scene. I fear your brave heart overestimates your power of endurance," added the Sister gently, as the remembrance of Mrs. Amhill's beautiful home rose in contrast to their plain surroundings.

The lady at once replied: "Do not fear because of my ignorance of such places, do not refuse me, Sister."

"I dare not refuse you," answered the Sister, gravely, "I dare refuse no one least perhaps the sick and dying should upbraid me; but I would have you count the cost of your undertaking."

"I am not acting from impulse I have

considered the matter, and without rash presumption, I shall hold to my resolution."

"God bless you, then. I will give you our dead Sister's post. It is in the men's department. Ah, poor mother, you may be as a mother to many suffering ones!"

She then led the way to an immense room, a crowded ward, and pointing to a long line of low beds, whispered a few brief directions, then left the new volunteer nurse to her strange duties. Mrs. Amhill had laid aside her veil and donned a snow-white apron over her black dress. Though extremely simple in her attire, her lady-like air was striking and attractive as ever. The lovely light of charity gleamed from her expressive eyes as she glanced down the room and beheld the tossing, struggling, fever-burnt patients, whose very breath meant contamination and perhaps death.

Turning to her task, with renewed zeal, she smoothed the pillows, handed water to this one, consoled that convalescent crying for food that must be refused, and busied herself in various ways.

Soon the doctor came on his rounds, and she listened attentively to his different directions.

After he had made his calls he stopped for a few moments to give a short, parting advice:

"Give particular attention No. 12, he is the only dangerous case you have. He was found in a raging fever yesterday in the woods. He must have been sick for two days at least. Look out for him. He needs watching."

No. 12 was at the extreme end of the row; and by order of the physician, his bed was pushed into an alcove beside the window.

The man lay in all the distress of a burning fever, tossing his head from side to side as if to ease its racking pain, and throwing his arms wildly about while his staring eyes shone with all the startling brightness of the fever heat. His high brow, well-formed features and shapely head gave evidence that he must have once been handsome. But now the dishevelled, matted hair, the thick untrimmed beard, the contraction of the face did not warrant such an epithet.

Mrs. Amhill did not scrutinise his appearance; her quick glance only marked the pained, harassed look, and then, seeking to make him more comfortable, she slightly raised the curtain to admit more air.

"Thank you," he murmured; "are you a new nurse? O, I am so thirsty, and so hot!"

"Let me give you your medicine, it is time now. Perhaps you will feel better," said the lady, as she handed him the carefully prepared mixture.

He drank it quickly, then taking a dusty, soiled pocket-handkerchief he wiped his lips, and flung it aside.

"Horred, isn't it? I've kept this thing about me ever since I've been sick. My eyes are blurred, but I know it isn't fit to use. I wish I had a clean one!"

"I will get you one, there are some in the next room ready for distribution. I will put yours where it will be sent to the laundry. Give it to me."

He handed it to her with an apology, and something of respectful courtesy was in his manner.

She stepped into the adjoining room, selected some clean handkerchiefs, and was about to cast the soiled one aside when her eye fell on the delicately traced letters written in the corner—Max Glenn.

The few letters were quickly scanned, but instantly, as if petrified, she stopped; holding it at arm's length in the full light of the morning sunshine, re-read it with a searching gaze—then again, pronouncing the words in a low, awe-struck tone—Max Glenn! Then, as if each repetition had added new conviction, as if the utterance of the name had been a lightning flash rifting in twain the last cloud of doubt, she flung the handkerchief loathingly from her. Staggering as if blinded, she tottered towards the open window, and leaning against it for support, she gave vent to her long pent up feelings.

For a moment she remained thus, forgetful, heedless of all else, realizing only the terrific import of that name. She had beheld the murderer of her son, and as if anguish must be weighted with torture, she found herself acting as nurse to the destroyer of her own child.

At first she faltered, bitterness, wrath and hate struggled in her heart. Nature vehemently asserted itself, claiming its due from a mother's love.

She raised her eyes despairingly, half resolving to abandon her new found charge. She looked with a vacant stare far out on the city beyond. Her gaze was drawn almost magnetically to the cross of St. Peter's Church. High in air, it rose almost upbraidingly before her, teaching her anew, the lesson of self-sacrifice. She saw in vision the dying Christ, and the mother standing beside Him receiving us all—the crucifiers of her Child—as her own children. Quick to her soul came the question: "Could any mother love as she loved?"

She fell on her knees; the Crucified and the Mother of Sorrows had wrought their effect, and the frail, quivering heart triumphed. Rising after a prayer for strength, she turned again to her duties, feeling that God would aid her in her hours of trial.

Her mission was not fulfilled without enduring keener pangs than any bodily pain. Every moment was brewing its own bitter draught as she hung about the sick bed of her strange patient.

Every groan from his lips, every sigh, every touch of his fevered hand, even his very mutterings added a fresh sting to her maternal heart, and recalled the proud, handsome face of her lamented child.

And so the days wore on. No. 12 was rapidly growing worse, and Mrs. Amhill, fearful lest he should become delirious, tried to suggest to him some thoughts of God, and of preparation for death.

But the man fretted visibly at her words:

"Not now; don't talk to me now, if I had got home to my mother she might, but—am I going to die? Don't tell me I am going to die!" he exclaimed wildly, clutching the lady's hand.

"We will hope not," she said softly alarmed at the effect his agitation might have upon him. "Try and be quiet, and if you wish, I could send for your mother," added Mrs. Amhill, all her sympathies going out to the unknown mother.

"No—no—no," he repeated fiercely; "not here. She thinks I am dead, and it would only break her heart over again. If I die here it will be better for her not to know," and he groaned and writhed at the agonizing thought.

Mrs. Amhill, seeing further expostulation was unwise, left him for a while to attend to her other patients, but made fervent aspirations to God for the poor soul.

Soon afterwards No. 12 became delirious, and as Mrs. Amhill lingered beside the bed she could not fail to hear the strange, incoherent words, the wild, meaningless exclamations, and wilder oaths, while now and again, like fragrant flowers among the thorns of his rough language, came the word—"Mother—mother!"

Once from his fever parched lips, with a strange emphasis, fell a short sentence, "Harold Foxstone—Amhill—you—you—you—"

Mrs. Amhill clasped her hands convulsively, the words and tone jarred strongly on her feelings, and it required all the force of her resolute nature and lofty virtue to still the tempest unwittingly aroused.

But her very emotion nerved her to greater watchfulness, and, fearful of leaving anything undone, she bestowed extreme care upon her strange charge.

After some time the patient fell into a refreshing sleep, and his face took on a more natural expression.

Mrs. Amhill, glad of the change, attended to the needs of her other patients. When No. 12 awoke Mrs. Amhill perceived at once that the fever had decreased, and that he was rational.

For the first time since she had seen him his eyes had lost their unnatural brilliancy, and the glow of fever was replaced by an ashen pallor.

"Do you feel better?" she asked hopefully.

"Yes. I'm not burning up now. Shall I die?"

"I hope not, but—"

"But I shall die," he said, interrupting her; "I shall die, young as I am, and—my soul will be lost forever!"

"Don't say that," said Mrs. Amhill tenderly. "One instant's time is enough to save you if you but repent."

"I can't help it!" he exclaimed bitterly, "dying—all my life wasted—gambler—drunkard—nothing but sin! It is all before me now, my whole life, and there is no hope! no hope!"

The lady fell on her knees. "Christ's Blood has atoned for all," she whispered reverently, "pray for mercy."

mercy?"

"Hark! that bell. What is it? Listen!" he cried, "listen!"

The dying man strained his ear to catch the sound as the bell rang out with its peculiar pauses.

"I used to know it long ago, when I served at Mass."

"It is the noon-day Angelus bell," said Mrs. Amhill gently. "Repeat the words as I say them, and the Mother of Sinners will surely aid you."

His failing voice joined in the Hail Marys, and the lady was surprised and pleased. Yet she made no further remark as she arose, but silently moved on to the other sick beds, feeling that grace would soon win his newly awakened soul, and that a little quiet reflection would best suit his present needs. Coming back, after a short interval, she noticed him start as he watched her intently with a puzzled, wondering look. As she came near him he seized her hand, and, holding it, looked fixedly into her face, then over the man's face came a look of pain, followed instantly by an expression of profound joy. Great tears rolled down his cheeks as he turned his face away, burying it deep in the pillows.

"O, I beg you not to distress yourself," she said imploringly; "the fever will return under such excitement."

But he did not answer or look up—only hid his face more completely, as if unwilling or afraid to look upon her.

Disturbed and perplexed, Mrs. Amhill moved aside, trying to conjecture the reason of his emotion. She wondered if in any way he could have discovered her identity as his victim's mother, feeling almost certain that some inkling of it had come to him.

After a long time he raised his face, but determinedly restrained his eyes from resting upon her.

"Madam," he murmured, "your words and prayers have borne fruit. Send for a priest."

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Two hours after Mrs. Amhill re-entered the ward. In the meanwhile she had dined and rested, having placed one of the men nurses as substitute in her place.

"How is No. 12?" she asked of the nurse as she met him at the entrance of the ward.

"No. 12 is all fixed up, ma'am. He is all prepared for death, and nothing would please him but I should shave his beard all off and cut his hair. It seems, ma'am, as if he wants you so, and thinks you ought to be overlastingly beside him."

"Poor fellow," murmured Mrs. Amhill, "perhaps he is thinking of his mother."

She went at once to No. 12. The change in his personal appearance struck her forcibly.

The beard was shaved off, and the white face looked almost boyish, the neatly brushed hair showed the high, white brow. A look of humble peace had effaced all traces of bitterness, and brought back an expression of almost childlike innocence.

He was looking eagerly towards her as she approached him, and something startlingly familiar shone in the yearning soulful, concentrated gaze.

Impelled by some strange hope, she rushed forward, pulled aside the curtain, and stared at him spell bound, as if paralyzed by the awful suspense.

The full brightness of the light fell upon his upturned face, and his sweet child's smile hovering on his lips answered her love's bewilderment. With a mute appeal, the arms were held out to enfold her, and the weakening voice found strength to speak the gladness of the heart. She saw no longer the murderer of her boy, but her boy himself! She heard the echoes of his childhood, in the thrilling cry:

"Mother! Mother!"

She could not speak! Still clinging to him in that first rapturous embrace, heart and soul flooded with the rush of profoundest joy, she could only live—speech and action were beyond her. It was enough to see him, to hear him, to clasp him as her very own.

Her silence appalled him.

"Mother—mother—have I killed you?" he exclaimed, brokenly.

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