

A little girl who sat at a wooden table, blinding herself with a book, glanced up at her visitors, then gravely measured the candle, and remarked positively:

"Harold you are early."

"And have all your lessons in deportment been for naught? Don't you know your duty toward your neighbor yet, Cheviot?"

The child quickly slipped from her chair, and put her fingers into the astonished colonel's.

"A friend of Harold's, I hope? Friends are scarce but welcome." She sighed and looked at her father with the request, "Introduce us."

"This gentleman is Colonel Haines," proceeded Harold, politely. "May he never want a bottle, nor a friend to give it, too. Colonel, my daughter, Cheviot. So called because she was born among those ancient hills, and because her mother wished her to be called something else."

Cheviot withdrew her hand and crept back to her book, and Haines sat down and stared blankly about him, while Vance poised himself on the table's edge and smiled satirically.

It is seldom that one is ashamed of being well-dressed, but, at the moment the colonel would have cheerfully forfeited a month's pay to his faultless evening suit and his light overcoat for articles of apparel that would have held up his friend's attire in less embarrassing and cruel contrast. His shining hat insulted the wooden table; his burnished boots shod scorn over the uncarpeted boards. Of the two the colonel was the man abashed.

The man of poverty quoted dryly: "Poor and content is rich and rich enough."

Hugh barely repressed a groan, and asked almost angrily, "How did you come to it? You promised brighter things in those old days. You never gambled, never drank——"

"No, never was beastly drunk in my life. Not an irremediable disgrace, though. Might attempt something in that line yet."

Haines made an impatient gesture.

"We are not back on the old footing and and the fault, Harold, is yours, not mine. There used to be confidence between us now we are speaking across a chasm."

"Meaning, I suppose, that I do not rattle off engagingly the various occurrences of the past twelve years, with philosophical analysis of the main causes which have led to these very palpable results. Can't do it, Hugh. A man never acknowledges he is falling until he strikes bottom with a thump. Expect no more from me than the admission that I am in perfect condition to point a moral or adorn a tale."

He flashed a suggestive glance over his bare surroundings, and again smiled at his friend's perturbation. Cheviot married the silence by turning a page.

"How old is she?" asked the colonel.

"Nearly thirteen."

"Impossible! you——"

"Exactly, I was married before I took my degree."

"But no one knew of it!"

"Naturally enough. It was nothing of which to be proud. In fact, it was an act of reparation."

"Reparation, Oh!"

"Yes, I followed the noble impulse of the soul that old Rugge used to preach to us fellows, and the result was as disastrous and almost as prompt as if I had blown out my brains; there's a hitch in ethics for you."

His voice was melody itself, but his eyes burned with a fierce light as they looked back over a wasted, embittered life. Had the colonel seen that hot and hunted look, he would have withheld, I know, his next words.

"You seem to forget," he began slowly, "that had no wrong been done in the beginning——"

"Don't you suppose," insinuated Harold, "that my wife used frequently to present to me that view of the matter?"

In the voice was so dangerous a smoothness that the colonel looked at the speaker, and surprised on his young face a look of such utter agony, that he rose impulsively and sat beside him upon the little table, putting his arm around his neck and laying a hand upon his shoulder, recalling to both those far-off but well-remembered days in which they had so often read and talked together in just that familiar attitude.

"You have suffered, Harold, how much, how long, I will not ask, since you have no wish to tell; but I am in a position, thank God, to help you, if you will let me. On your side there must not be hesitation. You know the claim you have upon me. You seemed to think that, after you had succeeded in dragging me out of the water and bringing me up again into blessed sunshine, each mention of it from me was a personal affront. You forbade the topic; but the fact remains that my life belongs to you. You saved it in the face of fearful dangers, at your own life's risk."

"Do you forget that you gave me your note for the amount of the debt?"

"I remember nothing but the friendship of those old days," quickly interposed the colonel, speaking with an intensity of emotion, and yearning to electrify his old comrade out of what was apparently callous apathy—"those days when your arm used to be around me as mine is around you, now!"

"What fools we must have looked!" was the sympathetic response. The colonel's arm turned to lead and fell to his side. Vance with cynical carelessness took up the catechism in his turn:

"You, I thought, were in India, accepting promotions as fast as they offered themselves. How come you to be in London?"

"My cousin died a few months ago, unmarried," answered Haines, feeling baffled and weary-hearted. "I inherited the property and my presence here was imperative."

"Done with your liver disease and your bungalows, then? And do you propose to set me on my legs again with some of your new wealth?"

"Yes!" cried the colonel eagerly.

"No!" was the stern response, while the man's eyes glittered with somber pride. "If you have philanthropic ideas in regard to me, put them at once out of your thoughts. Fling your money, if you like, to London's despicable poor, but don't dare offer it to me!"

Here Cheviot stirred unconsciously, and both men turned their eyes upon her. Everyone is familiar with the invigorating and noble growth which a potato puts forth in dark places. Her slim weakness was of the same pitiable order.

"Have you no thought of her?" asked the childless man. "Can you imagine what her condition would be were you to die?"

"Very easily," replied the father with an inexplicable smile. At the same moment that the smile played over his blue lips, a dewy moisture broke out upon his brow. It was naturally invisible to a casual observer. The man's nerve was superb in spite of its display being so highly unnecessary. "No, don't think of reforming me. I decline to sparkle as a jewel in your heavenly crown. Besides, by this time, respectable London is too hot to hold me. Not, of course, speaking climatically, but morally."

His brilliant and smiling eyes hinted at a new story of debt or shame. The colonel not only felt but looked as hopeless as a man who is trying to batter down an iron door with his fists.

The younger man laughed—laughed, for his sex is not the one which weeps. He continued: "Don't look so down in the mouth, Hugh. I may not long encumber the ground, you know. Since you take an interest in my death, I will tell you that exactly nine months ago I was given but three to live. I have a devilish bad knack of disappointing expectations. Just recall for a moment the various honors which you chaps used to prognosticate for me. You see, experience teaches us to expect nothing from fellows who go off like rockets from the roof of Alma Mater; they are never heard of again. The scrubs, mental scrubs, you understand, go promptly to work to invent a disease, or find a worm, or write a book, and get famous in a night. Study over the theorem and favor me with your deductions."

But the colonel studied instead the wasted physique of his friend, and said:

"I never heard of your being ill."

"I am not surprised. No one ever seems to have heard about me, somehow, and