

The Inglenook.

The Fiftieth Chance.

BY ANNIE HAMILTON DONNELL.

In the handsome waiting-room of the great oculist there were, on that dismal day of rain and fog, but few waiters. There were but two. They sat the width of the room apart, and gazed absently out of opposite windows. There was not one apparent trace of similarity between them except the fact of their waiting together in that room.

"Spectacles! I won't do it!" Constance Quay was fuming inwardly. "I could bear eyeglasses, but *spectacles*—never! He may talk and talk. It's too dreadful to be borne! And to wear them always—never to take them off—that was what he said. I heard him telling daddy. No! no! no!"

The girl was sweet and dainty from her beautiful hat to the soles of her pretty boots. Every detail of her costume was perfect, every feature of her lovely face. She looked straight out into the rain through wonderful, indignant gray eyes. She tapped nervously with her fingers on the window-sill. The faint, indefinable perfume that enveloped her stole across the room on the breeze, to the other girl.

"The idea! O, why can't they see what it would mean to me—daddy and Dr. Bell and Aunt Pamele? One might as well be deformed and done with it as to go through life spectacled like an old, old woman! I tried on the housekeeper's when she didn't know—I looked at myself in the glass. It was awful, but I had to do it. And—I—*saw*!"

The climax of her thoughts wrung a little groan from her lips. Constance Quay had never known a trial before, and the taste of this one was bitter on her tongue like gall. She was sure she could not bear it. She was sure no one else had ever had so terrible a possibility looming before her.

"He told daddy I'd have to wear spectacles—spectacles—spectacles, like the housekeeper's spectacles. He told daddy so," her thoughts wailed on.

Her eyes turned toward the beautiful, sumptuous room, and roved about its luxurious appointments, coming to rest on the other waiter across the room. She was not beautiful or sumptuous. She wore spectacles. Constance shivered unconsciously.

"He is so long! It is terrible to wait!" Judith Reese mused. "She will go in first, that other girl, and I shall sit here, and wait—and wait! It is the hardest part to wait."

As the minutes lengthened to half an hour of waiting, she could not subdue her anxiety. It was impossible; she could not sit still. She got up and walked about restlessly.

The "other girl" watched her, in idle misery of her own. She saw her take off her glasses once and grope ahead of her like a blind person. It reminded her of when she was a little tot and "played blind" with a tight hold of the nurse's hand.

By and by the incongruity of her being there at all occurred to Constance. Dr. Bell's prices were notoriously high, and this girl in her shabby reefer and sailor hat did not suggest a fat purse. She had come to the wrong place probably. There was another—why, yes, another Dr. Bell around

the corner, who performed miracles of healing in general. The papers all teemed with his advertisements. Daddy had joked this Dr. Bell—this patrician, blue blooded Dr. Bell—about him. Now Constance remembered it.

Judith Reese's aimless circlings around the room eddied near Constance. Suddenly Judith halted. She began to speak hurriedly, her voice strained and high.

"It's Wednesday, ain't it?"

"I beg your pardon."

Constance drew her slight figure up frigidly, and her skirts rustled softly.

"It's Wednesday, ain't it?—to-day?"

"Yes, it is Wednesday."

There was a tone of finality in the cool, low voice. It seemed to end the conversation definitely. But the other voice went on.

"I made sure it was; of course I *knew* it was. But I had a sudden feelin' that I'd made a mistake, maybe. And then I got to bein' afraid—"

A faint color deepened in her sallow, lean little cheeks. She peered into Constance's face with near-sighted eyes.

"Wednesdays are the days it's—the free, ain't they? The consultin', I mean? Of course I know it is;—only—"

It seemed difficult for her to go on. She circled about the room once more, and came back to the same spot.

"Only I've been sittin' here, dreadin' it so. An' I got all confused in my head. But of course I know it's Wednesdays, I couldn't have mistook that."

The indignant color had flushed the fair face of Constance Quay in a warmer tide. Impulsive, scornful words rose to her lips. Did this—person think *she* would be here—she, Constance Quay—if it was a "free" day? Did she look like one who would hunt out the right day to do her "consultin'" for nothing?

But the words tarried on Constance Quay's sweet, fresh lips. A sudden pity for this poor, excited creature held them in leash there. Afterward she was glad. She was glad the girl had never known there were no "free" days here.

The inner door opened noiselessly, and a lady led out a little child with bandaged eyes. They were both laughing gayly.

"It's only fun making b'lieve blind, isn't it, mamma?" piped the little one. "We'll have a reg'lar play, same as that *nice* doctor man said to."

"Yes, sweetheart, a reg'lar play."

The mother eyes met the pitying ones of Constance, but they smiled back happily.

"It's all right," she whispered as she passed. "She's only got to wear the bandage a little while, and then *she will be cured*! I was so afraid to go in there with her—but it's all right now. I could jump up and down for joy, right here in this room!"

"Let's play you told me what the color o' the sky was, mamma, and the grass and everything. That's the way they do blind folks."

The cheerful little voice trailed back to them faintly through the half closed door. Then Dr. Bell appeared at the other door.

"Your turn, Miss Quay," he said briskly, and Constance went in. But she came back instantly, and motioned to the other girl who

was waiting.

"No, you go first. I can wait," she said. "I did not think at first about your being here longest."

And the other girl went in. She stumbled across the room blindly. At the door she turned a white face toward Constance.

"Good-by," she said wistfully.

It was nearly half an hour before she came out again. Then she was not stumbling or wild. She walked quite firmly and straight, but her face was terrible with dumb despair. Constance uttered a cry of horror when she saw it.

The girl crossed the room to Constance slowly.

"It's over," she said quietly. "I'm glad of *that*. He told me I was goin' to be blind."

"No, no!" Constance cried.

"In a little while. I think he said six months. That isn't long, is it? When you're going to be blind, six months ain't long to be left to you, is it? He was very kind. I—I might have known what he'd say."

She gasped a little as if she were under water.

"He said I was goin' to be blind. I think he said six months," she repeated dully. "I forgot to ask him if it was free Wednesdays, but of course I know so. I don't suppose doctors ask much, anyway, to tell you you're goin' to be blind."

Constance caught the little working fingers entreatingly.

"Don't! please don't!" she said. "Don't say it again. I can't bear it! I am so sorry you don't know how sorry I am for you! No, you must not try to go away yet—you are not strong enough. See, I want you to wait here in this easy chair while I am gone; then we will go away together. You will be better then."

She was talking in steady, cheerful tones and gently forcing the trembling little figure into one of the softest chairs. In all her carefree life Constance Quay had never been so deeply moved before. The horror of what this girl had told her appalled her. And she had thought nothing could be worse than wearing glasses!

"Dr. Bell," she began abruptly in the inner room, "are you sure? Can't anything be done for her? Wait; please don't answer yet! If it were I, instead of that girl out there—if I was the one who was going blind—"

Constance shuddered violently.

"Would there be no hope for me at all, Dr. Bell, not one ray of light?"

"There would be one chance in fifty—for you. There is no chance for her, I'm afraid. There might be under different circumstances, but I did not tell her so. It seemed cruel."

The great man paced the floor nervously. He had told hundreds of poor souls their fate within those four walls, but his kind heart ached for this last sufferer.

"I told her the truth. God pity her!" he said, as if to himself.

"One chance in fifty—for me. What does that mean, doctor?"

Constance was pacing, too, beside him. She peered up into his grave face intently.

"It means, if she—if you—could spend six months in absolute darkness and quiet, if you could be surrounded with cheerful influences and every luxury under heaven except the blessed light of day, if you could have the costly treatment, daily, that only money could provide—well, it means that then you would have one chance in fifty. You see it would be a very little 'ray of light,'