

A VOICE FROM THE HIDDEN WORLD

A Story of Interest to Those Who Believe the Unbelievable

By E. PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM

CHAPTER I.



SHOULD like it to be distinctly understood at the outset of this brief narrative that I am not a disciple of any of the so-called apostles of modern psychology. I am going to tell a plain story in plain words, and leave any possible explanation of it to those who are interested in the great unknown science. There are men and women to-day rising up amongst us like prophets, and pointing upwards through the mists of an untrodden land to a light beyond the shadowy boundary dividing things material from things spiritual. Whether they be false prophets or true, another generation will determine. Only this much is certain, that the light they offer fails to pierce the curtain of darkness which hangs before our eyes, and that the truths which should become as manifest to us as floating dust in the clear sunlight are represented only by thin theories and hysterical but ineffective single assertions. The black clouds are nowhere pierced by the lightning of truth. All is still chaos, mysterious and impenetrable. It may well be true that there exist more things in this world than are dreamed of in our philosophy, but this much is also true—no voice has yet been lifted which can read the riddles of the new science, no hand has yet shown itself able to lift the veil between this and another world. Nor has any light yet been kindled in whose illumination those vast secrets are laid bare. Nothing is more certain and obvious than our profound ignorance concerning it. We are like blind men groping in the dark. In all probability we shall die as we have lived, without a gleam of absolute knowledge, looking out upon life with half-shut eyes. Yet the wisest of us are those who hold their peace and wait.

Twenty-four years ago I bought my first practice and furnished my first house. It was not a choice neighbourhood, nor was the practice itself either extensive or select; but in the ardour of youth I scarcely considered those drawbacks worth considering. At twenty-five years old one scarcely expects to start life—in the professions, at any rate—in a very large way, and I was perfectly satisfied. The shining brass plate outside my door, on which was inscribed

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compensated fully—to me, at any rate—for the shabbiness of my abode. I had fifty pounds a year of my own. I was unmarried, and had quite as much self confidence as was good for me, notwithstanding that the outlook demanded no ordinary share.

My patients were six in number, excluding my own family. I say excluding my own family, because from the time of my setting up for myself there was not one of them, from my youngest sister, aged six, to my father, who did not immediately develop some extraordinary and utterly unheard-of ailment, and persist in being treated for the same with due gravity. My father, who was one of the healthiest men living, began to complain from loss of appetite and dejection of spirits, and was unhappy until I had prescribed and administered a tonic; my mother, who scarcely knew what a cold was, began to talk gravely about her chest, and insisted upon a cough medicine; whilst Ada, my little sister, complained continually, but vaguely, of "bad feelings all over her body," and swallowed all the harmless physic I could bring her with absolute relish. "Rover," the family dog, was the most ungrateful of the household, for, after hearing one night a long account of his various and alarming ailments, I was induced at last to prepare for him a strong dose of castor oil, an attention for which he showed the most gross ingratitude, ever afterwards rising hurriedly at my entry into the room, and retiring under the table with an ominous growl and a sidelong glance, half threatening, half apprehensive.

To return to my patients proper. Five of them were totally uninteresting to me save as "cases"; the sixth was too poor to pay even my modest bill with anything like reasonable punctuality, yet she was the one whom I would have relinquished the

least readily. I remember the first time she came to me, and how pitifully she stated her case.

"I don't know what is the matter with me, doctor. Perhaps you can tell. I have no pain—at least, no acute pain—to speak of; only sometimes I seem to ache all over, and I am growing thin—thinner every day. I get plenty to eat—quite plenty," she repeated, keeping her eyes anxiously fixed upon my face.

"I am afraid the food you take is scarcely nourishing enough," I said. "Do you mind telling me how old you are?"

"No. I am twenty-two."

Twenty-two! It seemed barely credible. I was young at my profession, and compassion was still easy. I looked at the high cheekbones and sunken dark-rimmed eyes, bright now with anxiety, at the long, wasted fingers and the simple black dress, hanging loosely around her shrunken figure, and I sighed. She seemed to read my look, and her eyes filled with tears.

"I suppose I do look rather bad," she said nervously. "Can't you do anything for me, doctor? I'm very poor; but—"

"I can't do much," I interrupted; "but I can tell you what is the matter. You have some trouble which you are allowing to prey upon your mind, and you are starving. I am afraid that sounds a little blunt; but it's the truth."

She looked frightened, almost horrified.

"Starving! Oh, no, no, doctor; indeed, I am not that. I spend every cent that I can upon food. I must save a little for—never mind what for—but I must save a little."

"I'm sorry I cannot help you further, then," I said, rising. "I have told you what is the matter with you. No medicine could do any good. Of course, I don't know what the saving you mention is for; but you must remember that you are paying for it with your life. It is my duty as a doctor, you know, to speak plainly. You ask me what is the matter with you, and I tell you—starvation!"

She turned away and looked wearily out of the window.

"Thank you, doctor," she said, as I turned to go. "May I ask you one more question?"

"Certainly."

"Is it that which is making me so worn and pinched-looking? I feel like an old woman when I look in the glass."

"It has its effect upon your appearance, of course," I answered.

"Will they—come back again—I mean, my looks?" she asked wistfully, with a little tremble in her voice and her eyes very earnestly fixed upon me. "I used to be better-looking once and I shouldn't like him—my friends, I mean—to see me like this when he—when they come. I will try and eat a little more. Will that help, do you think?" she asked eagerly.

"That would make all the difference," I assured her; "commence at once. Have a good meal this evening, and you'll feel all the better for it."

"Very well; I will, then. And—and, doctor, how much?" she commenced wistfully.

"Nothing until I have to give you medicine," I interrupted shortly. "I'll send my bill in then, fast enough. Good-day."

My patient—Miss Desmond, she called herself—took my advice, and in a few weeks there was a marked change in her. I was scarcely prepared, however, for the transformation which I witnessed on my last professional visit.

It was Christmas morning, and I was just starting westwards to spend a day with my people. On the doorstep I encountered a messenger from her. She was quite well, but she wished to see me, if I could spare the time to go round. I went at once.

My first impression on entering the room was that I was in the presence of a stranger, and as that vanished, I found myself marvelling at the metamorphosis. The ragged black gown, the wan cheeks and dull eyes, were things of the past. I found myself greeted by a tall, graceful woman, clad in a simple but elegant gown of soft pink and black. A most becoming glow had dyed her pallid cheeks, and her eyes were sparkling with pleasurable excitement. She looked at me with slightly parted, tremulous lips, as though anxious to see whether I noted the change. At my look of surprise her features relaxed into a half-deprecating, half-pleased smile.

"You see a difference, doctor?" she asked.

"I do, indeed, Miss Desmond," I answered warmly. "Let me offer you my sincere congratulations. Is it out of compliment to the season, may I ask?"

"Partly; and partly for another reason. I am expecting a visitor."

Her tone was hesitating, almost shy. Yet in a certain way it seemed as though she desired to make a confidant of me. I pulled a chair up to the fire and waited.

"Doctor!"

"Yes, Miss Desmond."

"You don't think my gown is too thin, do you? The room is quite warm."

I leaned over and felt her arms; but the wistful look with which she was watching me checked the remonstrance which had been upon my lips.

"Perhaps not. You must be careful to keep out of draughts, though."

"I will, I will, indeed. And, Doctor."

"Well?"

She hesitated, and the colour came and went quickly in her delicate cheeks. There was no doubt about it, she was a perfectly beautiful woman.

"Do you think that it is a pretty gown? It is a little old, I know," she went on hurriedly, "but it is nicely made, and the colours used to suit me. I was different then, though," she added with a sigh.

I was scarcely more than a boy, and a most unprofessional lump had risen in my throat. To me there was something very pathetic about that dress and the other little attempts at decoration about the room. I knew too well the meaning of that exquisite colour and the unreal beauty of her face.

Loath though I was to admit it to myself they were too ethereal for health. It was like the strange, star-like beauty of some tropical plant, which blossoms into perfection and fades in a single day. My heart was sad, and though I answered her cheerfully, I kept my face turned away.

"You look charming, Miss Desmond. Let me wish you a very happy Christmas, and no end of good fortune in the next year."

"Thank you, doctor. Do you know, I believe that your wish will come true. I am expecting a visitor."

Visitor! It was odd how interested I felt. I sat up in my chair and looked at her inquiringly.

"Indeed! Some of your relations, I presume? I am glad."

She was a full minute before she answered me. During that time I could hear my heart beat, and I crushed a fallen cinder under my boot into powder.

"No; it is only—a friend."

"A man?"

"Yes."

She was too absorbed to notice or resent the impertinence of the question. There was a shy, soft look in her downcast eyes and a happy smile parting her lips.

Her thoughts were far away, and I was forgotten. As for me, the light seemed to have died out of the bright winter's day. The cheerful, blazing fire had dwindled down into a handful of white ashes. I felt chilled and heartsick. I could not understand what had happened; and I knew that I had a longing to get away into my own room and lock the door upon my misery. Yet I must be quite certain.

"Is he a very dear friend?" I asked.

"Very, very dear."

"Why has he not come to see you before?"

"He has been away—he has known nothing. I have been content to wait for his return. He will come to me now."

The dreamy, far-away look maddened me. It was strange that she did not notice the sharpness of my tone.

"Is that why you are wearing that dress?"

"Yes; it was his favourite. He used to think that I looked better in it than anything."

She was actually blushing now. I looked away quickly, with something like a groan almost escaping me.

"So you have been keeping it for him. You would not let any one else see you in it, even."

Her expression changed swiftly. I had touched a painful chord. How I hated myself for it!

"It was not that," she said in a low voice; "I had not got it. I was very poor, and I had to—part with it for a time. But I used to lay by a little

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