

* * * The Story Page. * * *

The Woman who Wasn't an Angel.

BY A. ST. JOHN ADCOCK.

I.
At first when Tim Fennell came to himself again he was aware of little more than a sort of weakness in all limbs, and a slow, dull pain which it was difficult to locate.

Presently, he recognised that he was lying in bed in a long, tranquil ward of a hospital. Twilight was filling the ward with shadows, and a red flare of sunset in the sky drew his eyes to the window. And whilst he lay dreamily watching the waning light, it occurred to him that one of the shadows had gathered darkly over him, and looking up, he met the gaze of a quiet-featured sister who was seated by his bed.

She rose and lit a gas jet near by, and drew the blind. "How are you now?" she enquired, reseating herself.

"I'm awful thirsty," he said, wondering at the thinness of his own voice.

She gave him something to drink, and asked whether he felt much pain.

"Not so very much, miss," he said. "I feel stiff, like, and it hurts me to move myself."

"You must keep quite still. You must not move about."

"Is it going to be a long job, miss?"

"I hope not."

"Dunno how I come to be such a fool. I hadn't bin drinkin', I give you my word. I was just crossin' the road when somebody yelled 'Hi!' then everybody yelled all at once and I got confused, like—didn't know which way to run. See what I mean? An' afore I know where I was the horses is on me—down I goes, an' the whole thing went over me. I suppose I fainted, miss?"

"Enough to make you."

"I can feel I'm all bandaged up. The wheels must have gone right over my legs, I reckon?"

"I'm afraid so. But, now, you mustn't talk too much," said the nurse. "Tell me your name, and where you live, will you?"

"I don't live nowhere, miss."

"Oh, you must live somewhere."

"Honour bright, I do! I ain't got a home, I mean. I sleeps at the doss houses."

"Where do you work, then?"

"Nowhere reg'lar, miss. I does odd jobs. Anything I can get—carryin' parcels, cab runnin', cleanin' winders—anything."

"Are you married?"

"Well—yes."

"Where is your wife? Wouldn't you like us to send for her?"

"She wouldn't come, miss. See what I mean? I ain't seen her for about six years now."

"Haven't you any friends, or—"

"No, miss. None at all."

"Then we had better let your wife know where you are and what has happened to you. Do you know where she is living?"

"Yes—unless she's moved. I ain't seen her for six years. —But it's no good, miss; she wouldn't come. I treated her very bad, I did, an'—well, she won't ha' no more to do wi' me."

While he was speaking the house surgeon came up. He talked aside with the nurse for a minute, then put a few questions to Tim, and felt his pulse.

"What is your wife's address?" he demanded.

"It's no good, sir," Tim persisted feebly; she won't come. I served her very cruel. See what I mean? I left her—fact is, I was a fool—I went off with another woman, an' left her. I was sorry directly after. The other soon chucked me, an' I was awful miserable. I went back to the missis one day an' wanted to make it up, an' she slammed the door in my face an' told me she'd done wi' me, an' if I went there agen she'd put the police on me. I was shamed, like, yer know, an' I haven't liked to go near her since. She keeps herself very comfortable with tailorin' work, I hear, an' I desay she's better off without me. A good woman she is, sir, but—see what I mean?—she ain't no angel. She's had enough o' me, an' it serves me right. It's no good sending."

"Never mind about all that," said the doctor. "You don't seem to have anybody else belonging to you. I want to send a messenger to let her know what's the matter, at all events. What is the address?"

Tim gave it reluctantly, and the messenger was sent.

"Very well. He will have his own way," Tim grumbled to the nurse, "but she won't come. You see."

He lay back drowsily, a sinewy gaunt figure of a man, sun-burnt and black-bearded. In age he was probably nearer fifty than forty; and he was evidently too well used to roughing it to make much of his newest misfortune.

II.

When the messenger returned, Mrs. Fennell came with him.

She was a plain, decently dressed, middle aged woman, bony of figure and sharp of feature, with a cool, equable voice, and clear, grey eyes; her speech and manner were curiously unsympathetic and restrained.

"You will be careful not to excite him," said the nurse, warningly.

"I shan't excite him," returned Mrs. Fennell brusquely.

"He was rather upset just now," the sister added.

"The doctor has been examining him again and thought it best to tell him about the operation."

"Oh! That's got to be done then?"

"Not later than to-morrow. Yes."

Mrs. Fennell passed in along the ward to Tim's bed, and stood gazing down on the sufferer as self-possessed and unemotional as if they had never been parted for a day and he was in no pain or danger at all.

"You've had a bad accident, Tim," she observed. "Whatever was you doing?"

He was surprised to see her, and not altogether unmoved. Somehow, the sight of her made him feel sorry for himself as the sight of no stranger could have done; and he answered diffidently, and coughed now and then to subdue a certain quavering of his voice.

"I didn't like to send for you," he went on, when he had explained how his injuries came about. "It was very good of you to come, Mary—"

"Nonsense. Of course I come. —Who's goin' to come if I don't?" she said, curtly.

"There ain't nobody else, Mary."

"Very well, then. I've got to come; that's all about it. They sent for me."

He was not the least hurt or disappointed by the unyielding hardness of her manner. He had never been demonstrative, and she was even less so than he was. Knowing her so well, for they had married early, that she had so much as come to see him was, in the circumstances, more than he had really expected.

"I shall most likely come again tomorrow if I have time," Mrs. Fennell said at parting. "This operation they talk about—there's no danger. It's a very common thing."

She did not stoop to kiss him. He had vaguely wondered whether she would. She just stood up, threw a glance round on the other patients, several of whom were watching them with an indolent curiosity, then merely touched his hand with hers and went away.

She found time to come again next day; in fact, she was there quite early, before breakfast was finished.

"I had to go right past here this morning," she explained, "so I thought I might as well look in an' see if they wanted me."

He thanked her with genuine humility, for he was sick at heart with fear of the operation, and it comforted him to feel he was not wholly alone among strangers, for, though she had no love for him now, she was not a stranger. It was comforting to have her familiar face near him, and looking at it he could remember a time before it was so thin and hard. . . . But he would not let himself think of it, for it made him feel as weak as a child, and he did not want them to imagine he was frightened.

Perhaps she was remembering too; he caught her staring at him with a strange anxiety, and at a sign from the nurse she suddenly hurried away without saying goodbye to him.

She did not leave the building, but for a little, walked up and down the echoing corridor outside with an air of imperturbable calm.

Then, suddenly, she seemed to lose patience, and came to the door of the ward every other minute to peer in at the clock. Presently, she stopped, an attendant and enquired the whereabouts of the operating room; and when, three minutes later, the sister emerged from the door of that grim chamber, Mrs. Fennell confronted her with a very white face and gasped, with an obstinate catch in her voice.

"Is—is it all right?"

"Yes, it's done," the nurse responded briskly, "and he's coping round nicely. You had better not stay here now. Come and see him in the ward in a quarter of an hour. They are just bringing him out."

Mrs. Fennell withdrew irresolutely, and hovered in the distance until she saw a little crowd come from the operating room, and in the midst of it something carried in a huge basket.

Before the quarter of an hour had elapsed, she reappeared in the ward.

"You may see him," said the sister, who disliked her, being unfavorably impressed by the harshness of her demeanor, "but only for a few minutes, mind."

She sat down by the bed, and Tim, still sleepy from the chloroform, knew her and smiled faintly.

"It's only one," he said, rousing himself, "but I shall be a cripple all the rest of my life. It was hard enough to get a livin' before; dunno how I'll manage now."

"Something will have to be done," she agreed quietly.

"Do you remember that one-legged chap who used to sell matches? . . . No; of course you never saw him. He dosses at the same place as me sometimes. He managed very well, an' was always as jolly an' lively . . . I daresay I'll get used to it after a bit."

"I daresay," she said, dully.

"I can't do no more cab-runnin' or window-cleanin'," he muttered, with a dismal laugh; "but one ain't so bad as two an' there's other things."

"Plenty," she said.

Neither of them spoke, and he fell asleep.

"You'd better go now," the nurse suggested.

Mrs. Fennell started at the sound of her voice as if she too had been sleeping; she drew her shawl round her shoulders and departed, saying she should try and come again tomorrow.

As a matter of truth, she returned a couple of hours later, and again shortly after dark: on each occasion she declined to enter the ward, but made shame-faced enquiries at the door, mentioning each time, by way of excuse, that she happened to be passing and thought she might as well look in.

When she came next day, Tim was pronounced to be practically out of danger; and after that she came on the ordinary visiting days, twice a week. See invariably carried a small covered basket with her, and at the close of her visit, when she got up to go, she would start as with sudden recollection, lift the lid of the basket and take out some eggs and some grapes, or oranges, which she left on the low cupboard beside Tim's bed without calling anybody's attention to them.

Tim would talk to her occasionally of his life during the past six years, and tell her blunderingly of his remorse, of how miserable and lonely he had been; but she never uttered any comment on these confessions or betrayed any particular interest in them. As he approached convalescence her manner towards him hardened again and grew chillier. He could not but be sensible of this; indeed, he accepted it rather as a matter of course.

"She's a good woman," he confided more than once to the nurse, "but she's no angel. She's been comin' to see me because you sent for her, an' because she sort o' feels it's her duty as there ain't nobody to come instead; she gets ideas like that, she does. But as soon as I'm myself agen, she won't have no more to do wi' me. You see. She never goes back on her word."

By-and-bye, Tim was sufficiently mended to be able to go out with crutches into the hospital garden, and sit on one of the benches there to smoke and read the newspaper, and when she came on visiting days, if it was fine, she would sit there with him, very quiet and brooding, as if her thoughts were always far away.

And at length came a day when he announced to her that the doctor had said he was well enough to go out next week. Beyond an exclamatory "Oh!" she made no response of any description.

"I've had a good time of it here," Tim continued.

"How I'm goin' to get along outside with my one leg, is more'n I know. Suppose I shall pick up some sort of a livin'—I ain't much good for anything, that's very certain."

She said nothing. She looked along the garden at the only other person within sight—a patient who was snoring asleep on an adjacent seat—and Tim fancied she had not been listening to him.

"I don't know where I'll go to begin with," he resumed gloomily. "I suppose, though, they'll let me go into the workhouse infirmary for a bit—"

"Workhouse infirmary!" she cried, sharply. "What do you want to go there for?"

"Well," he was momentarily taken aback, "where else can I go?"

"Where else? Why, you'll go home, of course. Where else, indeed!"

And then, quite suddenly, her tone and her look changed.

"Oh, Tim!" she faltered, and her arms were about his neck and her lips touching his jaw cheek. But before he could realize it—before he could clear the choking lump from his throat and ask her to forgive him, her arms relaxed and with a swift movement she drew some inch or two aside from him. He raised his sleeve, and wiping away the mist that obscured his vision, saw that she sat there as calm and collected as if he had only dreamed she had changed; yet he had thought there were tears in her eyes a moment ago.

Two medical students had turned the corner of the hospital and were strolling down the path toward them.

"You won't be fit to walk far," she remarked, with an air of calculation. "I expect I shall have to arrange about a cab. What day did the doctor say you could go out?"—The British Weekly.

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