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THROUGH TWO FIRES.

CHAPTER III.

Billy Dinneen is offended, outraged, deeply moved. Ever since his master's hasty return from the seaside that ill-used physician has aided his destroyers, the public, in their homicidal intentions by working harder than before, giving scores of free consultations to persons sent specially, as Billy says, to torture man and master, attending hospitals and consultations, and, most unforgivable offence of all, writing and studying through the long midnight hours, instead of taking his natural rest like any decent Christian.

Christmas Eve has come again, and Billy, with a crosser shade than usual on his countenance, and deeper indignation burning in his heart against the public, is engaged in the same agreeable occupation in which we first made his acquaintance. To-day Billy has a new cause of hatred against the public. For the first time his master spoke sharply to him, and who is to blame for that? Who or what has ruined his master's equable temper? The public, of course. The public is accountable for the fact that the doctor interrupted Billy that very morning as he was reasonably stating his opinion on the deplorable state of the weather and the murderous intentions of the free patients—not only interrupted him, but actually said that he, Billy Dinneen, was a disgrace to humanity, with his constant repinings and causeless murmurings, and, furthermore, the hitherto lamb-like doctor added that he believed his faithful factotum to be a confounded old wailing humbug and a canting old sinner.

Therefore Billy nurses his wrath to keep it warm, and huris it in vindictive but happily impotent showers on its supposed original cause, the public. The doctor enters, looking sadly pale and worn. Without noticing the beligerent countenance of his attendant, he seizes a paper, and, seating himself in his familiar arm-chair, mechanically opens it.

Billy, furtively watching him, sees him glaze his eyes into some particular paragraph, glance from thence to the date of the paper, then jumping impetuously to his feet he rushed at Billy, and almost froze the blood in that individual's veins by demanding in sepulchral accents: "Billy, you fell destroyer, when did that paper come?"

"O Lord save us, Master Bernard agra, an' sure it came the day 'twas printed, like all of 'em." "Why didn't you bring it to me, you villain? You've ruined me. Oh, Billy!" Laying his head on the table, and shutting out the light with his extended arms, the doctor actually moaned.

"Musha, Master Bernard agra," said Billy, greatly moved at his master's evident misery, "what earthly difference does one old newspaper make? Don't you remember you gave up readin' the papers unless of an odd time? When? I the onedhawn to leave 'em there—the dirty rubbish—instead of burnin' 'em? Here now," he added, in his most coaxing tone, "sit over an' eat your lurch, an' don't mind them old papers."

But instead of obeying Billy, the doctor, murmuring, "Lost, lost again!" rushed from the room, and in a moment the hall door banged on his retreating figure. Billy saw him enter a cab and drive away. "Lord deliver us! He's gone stark mad—mad as a March hare. The impudent, audacious, murderin' public has him kilt at last. Oh, what'll I do at all, at all—what'll I do? I'll write to the father an' mother at once, though I'm in dread I'm too late. Oh, musha, thanks be to God that I never tied myself to a woman—no—no—never will. I'll get a peeler to watch

him, to keep him from drownin' himself. Amn't I to be pitied? Oh! wach ona, wach ona, what's the world comin' to."

All this Billy said in tones of deepest affliction—the thanksgiving for his escape from matrimonial snares being peculiarly lugubrious—whilst his arms kept melancholy to the motion of his sad heart by working up and down like rusty pump-handles. "He wrote immediately to his old mistress imploring her to come up to Dublin at once if she had any regard for the welfare of her son.

That duty performed, he took up the unlucky newspaper and hunted through it over and over again for a paragraph dreadful enough to cause his master such grief and surprise. His search was unsuccessful. There was not a murder, a suicide, or even an agrarian outrage in this most civilized and peaceable newspaper. He laid it down, fully convinced that his master's mind was unhinged. Yet, all unconsciously, he several times passed over and once half read the disconnected paragraph, which ran thus: "We are deeply grieved to learn that the rumors which were afloat a month ago concerning the bankruptcy of our worthy and respected citizen, Sir John Gregory, have unfortunately proved true. The principal cause of this great disaster, like so many others of a similar nature, is the unparalleled frauds in Gowrie Bank. We understand that Sir John privately arranged with his creditors, and, with the small residue of his once colossal fortune, has, with his daughter, sought an asylum on the Continent."

The paper was dated six weeks back, and the reader, more enlightened than Billy, will guess why this simple announcement had such an alarming effect upon Doctor Somers. The bells had rung their joyous welcome to the new-born Saviour ere the doctor returned, and, the next day, when his frightened parents and sister made their appearance, determined to carry him away *volens volens* for much needed recreation, they found him raving in fever, Sir John St. George standing by his bedside.

"I fear, madam," said the great physician to the weeping mother, "your son is in for it. I frequently predicted this, but he only laughed at my warnings. Christmas Eve settled him. Think of his insane whim in sitting up by a dying fever patient—a poor little messenger lad—during the long cold night. Anyhow, we'll see what good nursing and patience will do."

Good nursing and patience can do a great deal when their object is young and of sound constitution. But the spring flowers were peeping above the ground, the birds singing merrily as they disported themselves in the warm, balmy breeze, ere Doctor Somers returned to his work in the city again.

CHAPTER IV.

Some years have gone by since the first wild Christmas Eve on which we introduced Billy Dinneen to the reader. Billy now enjoys a well-merited *otium cum dignitate* in a large mansion in one of our most fashionable city squares; but his opinions regarding the peculiar merits of the Dublin public, especially of that portion who come under the rank of "advice gratis patients," are daily intensifying in contempt and spleen. A new star has arisen in the faculty—a star which promises to eclipse all its predecessors in lustre, brightness and duration. People cannot understand how the owner of a head still brown and glossy can have worked his way beyond so many who had the start in the race, and so many others from whose path kind friends removed all troublesome obstacles. But the fact remains, and Dr. Somers, young, unassuming, kind-hearted, charitable, hard-working, is laden with money, fame and honors.

Society says that Dr. Somers has no heart. It must be some mechanical contrivance that does duty as one, else how could he avoid the gilded snares set to entrap him by match-making mammas and matrimonially inclined spinsters. It wants one week of Christmas Day, and the doctor sits over his breakfast table reading a letter. It is from his friend Colonel Murchason, and is a pressing invitation to spend the Christmas week in the colonel's country mansion, Murchason House. The colonel and family have just returned from the Continent, where they have been residing for several years. The letter concludes: "And we are all so delighted to get back again to poor old Ireland that I intend to give such a housewarming that its memory will descend traditionally to the future. So, like the 'quintessence concentrated' of the 'sublimated brick' that you always were, leave your physic and your pills and your skeletons behind, throw dull care and work to the winds, and come down here, where I promise you a warm welcome and plenty of fun by lake, field and fell. You need not dread being 'sent to Coventry,' for as I do not drive, harass, starve, belie, or excruciate my tenants, we are, and ever will be, please God, the best of friends. So come."

"I declare I feel strangely inclined to accept," said the doctor to himself. "I will accept it. I say, Billy—Billy!" "Here sir," answers that personage, as he steps before his master. "Do you think, Billy, you could manage without me at Christmas for a few days? I wish to pay a visit. Of course, yourself and the servants will have the usual amusements." "Manage without you, sir, is it? Why, then, I think I can manage without any one, for, thanks be to God! I

never tried myself to a woman—no, nor never will. So, sir, go with an easy mind, and bedad, 'tis I that's glad to see you gettin' a bit of spreegoin in ye at last. Ay," he muttered, as he turned away with a grin smile, "manage without him inagh, as if I'm not managin' him and his every day of my life. We must humor him, though the poor bouchal; but the foolishness of some men is supreme."

The doctor writes a cordial acceptance and when it is posted he feels a buoyancy of spirit and lightness of heart very unaccountable to himself. Ten o'clock strikes on Christmas Eve, as the carriage containing the doctor rolls along the Murchason avenue. The house itself seems the centre of light, warmth and happiness; sounds of subdued music fall on the ear; and as the visitor steps into the hall he is gratified by the sudden change from the frigid outer air to the almost torrid temperature within.

The host in person conducts him to his room. Sounds of mirth and laughter reach their ears; servants, hot and happy, are flying out in all directions. The two friends laugh and talk. Old friends, old times, old faces rise before their mental vision. "Doctor," said the colonel, after a time, "do you feel deucedly hot? I fear my people have taken my orders too literally. I told them to pile on such fires to-night as would knock the rheumatism out of these old walls, and I believe an overdose is the result."

The gentleman addressed confessed that the heat was surprising, and he suggested the advisability of reducing the fires. "No use now," said the colonel; "let them burn away. But, seriously, doctor, I was anxious for your professional services an hour ago. A young lady—a friend—indeed a member of the family—fainted away quite unexpectedly. We did all that we could for her, but she is gone to bed quite indisposed. My youngest daughter is with her now. You will see her in the morning, doctor, if she's not better?"

"With pleasure," returned the doctor; "but," he added, with a smile, "you ordered me to leave physics, etc., behind. How consistent you are, colonel!" "The way with the world, my boy. However, I was startled at the lady's illness; for, though I have known her for many years, I never saw her faint before, and her poor father, when dying, confided her to my care. Besides, the girls are so fond of her, and so am I."

"A relation, I suppose?" asked the doctor. "No; my daughter's governess. Ha! Kathleen," he exclaims, catching a glimpse of a white dress passing along the corridor, "come here, pa. This is my youngest daughter, Dr. Somers," he continued, introducing a pretty, dark-eyed, dark haired girl of about sixteen, who welcomed the doctor warmly. "How is Miss Gregory, darling?" asked the father. "The doctor started. The springs of that mechanical contrivance within him must have been suddenly loosened, for he felt it beat with fearful velocity. "She is much better, dear papa. She would not be pleased if I did not return to the drawing-room and enjoy myself! But you know, papa, that is like dear Marion—always thinking of others, never of herself. I told her I'd prefer her company to any drawing-room. But she smiled and commanded. I obeyed. And do you know, doctor," the young lady rattles on, "you owe her a visit, for we were just speaking of your advent—I believe Miss Smileypoint was telling what a dreadful flirt you were in Dublin—when our dear Marion fainted. But now that you are here I feel quite assured."

"My dear little girl, you're an angel," was the doctor's very unexpected reply, as offering his arm they proceeded to the drawing-room, followed by the amused host, all three in high spirits. Surely the Dr. Somers of the Murchason House drawing-room cannot be the same individual whom society in Dublin thought so cold and grave. He laughs, he dances, he sings; he outshines all the gentlemen present—he enchants the ladies. Finally, as the clock strikes 1, he betakes himself to his room, and falling on his knees prays thankfully, gratefully, fervently for a considerable time. He opens the window and looks out. A wide expanse of beautiful, hilly scenery lies before him, rendered startlingly distinct by the extreme brightness of the moon. Glistening snow clothes the turf, loads the evergreens, decks the branches, tops the hills and beautifies everything. A very great happiness possesses him, but he puts the thought away. He thinks of the mystery of mysteries. He hears the angels directing the shepherds to the cave.

With them he enters. An ass, an ox, a manger, a kneeling artisan, a woman more pure and beautiful than human heart can conceive, looking with maternal love and wrapt admiration upon a little Babe, clothed in rags, lying on straw, surrounded by celestial halo. Suddenly angelic voices raise the hymn of peace. Almost unconsciously the young man repeats aloud, and adds, "Thanks be to Thee, sweet Infant Jesus! Eternal praise be given to Thee for all things!" A strange, sickening sensation makes him turn around. The room is full of sharp, biting smoke. The words, "fire! fire!" issuing from the stentorian lungs of the stable boys and groom, fall on his ears as he darts to

the corridor. Echoing the dread words until he seizes the bell rope and pulls it until it breaks. Turning with the intention of rushing through the guests' rooms and arousing them ere it be too late, a slight dark-robed figure is at his side, a little hand falls softly on his arm, and a well-remembered voice whispers: "Bernard—Dr. Somers—come this way. All are assembled in my room. I have a rope ladder. Come!" "Marion, at last! Thank God! oh, thank God!"

The fierce flames have devoured the stairs and are fast making their way through the upper story; the smoke and heat are almost unbearable, as Bernard Somers and Marion Gregory, united so strangely in the midst of danger after so many years, make their way to the shivering, frightened, half-dressed group who cluster around a window, beneath which some of the men servants are making frantic efforts to place ladders.

Marion and a housemaid attach the rope-ladder to the bedstead, while the doctor throws out showers of mattresses, bed-gear, rugs, shawls—everything that he can collect in the uninjured rooms, and which he thinks would be useful in case any of the nervous group might fall, or that he himself might have to jump for it in the end. "Courage, Mrs. Deering, courage," says Marion Gregory to a large, wailing lady. "But she is incapable of movement, so the doctor helps her down and lands her in safety. Some of the ladies descend unaided, others are petrified with fear and can scarcely move. These latter are conveyed safely by the doctor. Colonel Murchason and his daughters wish Marion and the doctor to descend before them. A decided refusal from both; so the colonel, who knows that no time can be squandered in useless argument if all are to be saved, descends. The flames burst in at the door as he does so; the heat is maddening;