

The Vicar's Nephew; or The Orphan's Vindication

CHAPTER XIII.—(Cont'd.)

Then he became conscious of the strained immobility of his hosts, and stopped.

"He is a relative," the Vicar repeated; "but not an acquaintance."

The conversation flagged awkwardly for a few minutes; then the visitor looked at his watch.

"It's time to go, I think."

In the garden the Vicar stopped short.

"Pardon me," he said to his guest; "I forgot a message to my wife. I will catch you up the road."

He went back into the house. His wife was standing where they had left her, quite still, her eyes on the door.

"Sarah," he began, and paused in the doorway.

She started, then recovered her self-possession, and came up to him.

"Did you forget anything?"

He hesitated, looking away from her. "You perhaps feel lonely when I am out so much?"

"No, Josiah; I'm used to being alone."

"Yes," he paused again.

"I was wondering whether you would like Dr. Jenkins' little girl to come and sit with you sometimes. She is a nice, quiet little thing, and you were always so fond of children."

The words died in his throat as he saw her draw back from him, her hands outstretched, her eyes widened, full of dread.

"No, no! Josiah. Oh, don't bring a child in here!"

His face had turned to stone.

"You mean, Sarah?"

They stood still and looked at each other. He was brave enough, but not she. Her eyes sank; her old hand fluttered against the skirt of her gown.

"I—I'm not so strong as I was—and children are so noisy—"

He had not flinched. "It is as you prefer," he said, and went out.

She watched him from her window as he walked up the lane; a black and sunless blot upon the landscape; correct, professional, with stubborn shoulders still unbowed under the weight of grief.

She sat down at her neat work-table to darn his socks.

The church clock struck the hour; and, looking up, she saw the door of the board school open and a crowd of little girls coming out, laughing and chattering, their satchels swinging from their wrists. She put down her work.

"My eyes seem failing lately," she said aloud. "I am getting old."

Then she arose and pulled her stiff, white curtain aside, very carefully, not to spoil its starched perfection, and looked out at the children.

She shrank away, as Spotty used to shrink when any one crossed the yard, and drew the curtain forward again. But she peeped between its frilled edge and the shutter to see the children.

"Johnny dangerously ill. Diphtheria. Crying for you."

Jack repeated the words to himself over and over again. The wheels of the train hammered them out; the rattle of the windows, the breathing of his sleepy fellow-passengers, the heavy thumping of the thing that achieved somewhere inside his chest somewhere in the top of his head (he was not quite sure which) all worried and pursued him with their senseless iteration. Sometimes the refrain would break off for a moment and let him hear another one that was going on more softly underneath it, scarcely audible, but always going on: "You'll come too late; you'll come too late; you'll come too late."

Surely that must be St. Albans, that blur of brown streets in the shadowy landscape as the train rushed past. He would soon be home now. But it was a long time since Molly's telegram had called him from his breakfast in Edinburgh and set him tearing to the station for the first train back to London.

He raised the window blind and looked out. It was growing dark already, but it grows dark so early in winter. Patches of snow gleamed faintly here and there in the level pasture land.

Somewhat he had never realized till to-day what the child was to him. In-

deed, he had never had much time for thinking about his personal affections; there were always so many things to do, what with the hospital and the microscope work, and chance jobs of coaching students for examinations, to make both ends meet. One couldn't afford to neglect opportunities for earning a few odd pounds here and there, with three mouths to feed and Johnny's education to save up for. And when he did get free, he was tired or worried about patients, or rushing across the Continent in express trains in response to wild telegrams from Theo.

Poor Theo! The periodical tragedies with his duchesses and countesses had a trick of coming at such inconvenient times; and they were so real to him, while they lasted. Only a year ago he had tried to asphyxiate himself with charcoal fumes, together with the misunderstanding and beautiful young wife of some ambassador. The farewell telegram had come when Jack was down with influenza, and he had dragged himself out of bed and caught the mail for Brussels. He had arrived just in time to open the windows and to keep the scandal out of the papers, and administer the first restoratives and then consolation and fatherly advice to the two grown-up children. They had probably forgotten each other's existence by now.

"You'll come too late. You'll come too late. . . ."

It was a bit hard that it should be diphtheria, the very disease that he had toiled and labored over, that had been the centre of his secret hopes for the last three years. He was nearly convinced now that he was on the track of discovery; but what use are discoveries if they cannot save the child you love?

He lowered the blind again and leaned back in his corner with closed eyes. He had been tired when he left Edinburgh; and now his head throbed like a steam-thresher.

Ah, the staircase. . . . and the door that creaked when his uncle pushed it open. . . . and the room with the sloping ceiling. . . . the two rafters. . . . He started and opened his eyes. He had slipped back somehow to childhood, to the vicarage at Porthcarick, to the room of horrors. It was some years now since he had last been troubled by that particular nightmare, the same which had haunted him after Helen died. He brushed his hand across his forehead; it was quite wet.

"Tickets, please!"

As the door jerked open he sat up straight and realized dimly that he had been bargaining in his sleep with some unknown god; promising to forget Porthcarick, to wipe out the image of the gable room, if the child might live.

His sister met him under the disinfectant sheet on the landing of the stairs. Her face wore a strangely passive look, as if she had been suddenly awakened, as if her eyes were still heavy with sleep.

"Molly," he said, and paused; then again, in a whisper: "Molly—"

She leaned her head against his shoulder.

"You're too late."

They went into the room. It had already been put in order; a shaded lamp burned beside the cot where Johnny lay like a big wax doll, his yellow hair spread round him. A bunch of snowdrops had been placed in his right hand. Jack knelt down and stayed a long time motionless and silent. At last he uncovered his face and kissed the rigid baby hands. As he rose, the sleeve of his coat brushed against the lamp-shade and tilted it back. A band of yellow light fell across the cot and lit up the profile of the little corpse. It was like Helen's.

Jack stood quite still beside the cot. The minutes dragged by heavily, and he stood looking. Something seemed to have dried up in him, and withered. One made so many mistakes in life, and when one found them out they mattered very little; indeed, nothing in the world mattered much.

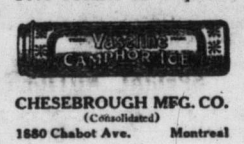
Something moved on the other side of the cot. It was Molly; and as he looked up their eyes met. She put out her hands as if he had struck her.

"Ah, don't look so hard! He wanted

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to tell you; it was not his fault, it was mine!"

"It was mine," he answered wearily, and turned away. "I might have seen."

He crossed the room and leaned upon the mantel-piece, looking down at the helpless grudge. Molly came to him.

"I couldn't tell you, dear; it might have made you hate him. He has no one else in the world that will love him faithfully, only you and me; and me he has forgotten. If you were to desert him—"

She broke off. Jack had not moved, and his face was still hard. She slipped her arm about his neck, as Helen used to do.

"Remember, he is not quite a human being. It is not fair to blame him if he hurts us; he can't understand responsibilities, any more than an angel might, or a skylark. It's not his fault that he has genius. And if I bore a child to him, he bore one to me; his first sympathy. Anyhow, if there ever was any thing to forgive, I forgave it long ago. Some one must pay for the music."

He shook his head with a hopeless gesture.

"You don't understand. It wasn't of you I was thinking. You can't be quite forsaken while I live; and at the worst you're a grown woman and can defend yourself, as far as any creature can, in a world like this. But if you and I had happened to die, there are so many chances in life, and the child had lived, and fallen into uncle's hands—I wonder, did he ever think of that?"

She drew his head down against her cheek.

"Dear, that is morbid and unjust; it's not like you, you are always so just. There was never much danger for Johnny; surely either you or I could always have managed to save him from that, if only with a little chloroform. And anyway the fates have been merciful; whatever they may do to us, they have at least spared the child. Jack, you have no right to be bitter against him, the child has sinned no wrong. He has hurt no one but me, and I have not complained."

"Don't be afraid," he answered, sighing. "It will make no difference; nothing will ever make any difference. He's her son and he has a right to me. I must just bear it."

"A knock at the street door roused him."

"That sounds like a telegram. From Edinburgh, perhaps; I was to have shown some sections to-night. For me, Susan? No, there's no answer."

There was a little hush after he shut the door.

"Is it from Edinburgh?" Molly asked, looking round. Jack was standing by the table, the telegram still in his hand. As he turned his head to answer, the look on his face cut her to the heart. Something faint and bitter, scarcely a smile, flickered for an instant round the bearded mouth.

"No," he said. "Something wrong with one of the duchesses, I suppose."

He handed her the telegram. It was dated from Paris.

"A dreadful misfortune has happened. Come to me.—Theo."

She laid the paper down in silence and went back to her place by the dead child.

Jack passed a hand across his eyes. A dim reflection of his childish misery flitted before him, and vanished; a half-forgotten image of a bird flying away from an open cage. He went back to the cot.

"Molly, how much money have we in the house?"

"Three sovereigns and a little silver."

He looked at his watch.

"I'd better take the gold and write you a cheque to go on with. Where's the carbook, dear? Ask Susan to call a hansom while I get disinfected; I've only just time to catch the boat-train; it starts at nine from Charing Cross."

He stood a moment silent, looking down; then stooped, and drew the sheet over Johnny's head.

THE END.

A Hard Job.

One afternoon in the trenches, an Irish soldier discovered that one of his company was wearing a nice new pair of boots. "How did you manage to get hold of them?" asked Pat, enviously.

"Well," said his friend, "I stole out of the trench last night, and found them on a German I killed."

Pat became thoughtful and that night disappeared. Early next morning he staggered back into the trenches carrying a pair of boots. Making for his friend he whispered: "I've had the hardest job of my life. Had to kill about fifty of the blighters before I got a pair to fit me."

POULTRY

LESSONS FROM FAILURES.
By A. P. Marshall, Niagara Falls, Canada.

When failures occur in a small way they do not seem to be very serious, but a failure on a big scale with large amounts involved may mean, at least, temporary disablement and place the individual beyond recovery for some considerable time. In the poultry game it is so easy to dream of immense possibilities, and, based on cost per hen, average production and profit, just by a little multiplication arrange the profits and immensity of the business to perfectly suit the desire of the operator.

Knowledge and the application of it seem to be absolutely essential, and whether secured through expert help or actual experience on the part of the owner, it is most unreasonable to look for any degree of profit without them. In the time that it takes one to gain the knowledge or experience in the necessary details for profitably growing and breeding of poultry the good values of the original stock may be lost and entirely ruined at a loss of most of the first expenditure. If the start is small improvement can be made, and, if necessary, a fresh start made with but little loss. The dream of the possibilities in the first place may be quite correct, but without the application of known ways of securing results they never could be realized. Quite true many variations of systems are used, but the close analysis of each will be bound to furnish evidence of supplying the same essential. The results are obtained the required elements are furnished in better balance and in more satisfactory manner.

Watching the operations of a big start for amassing of big profits in a nearby well equipped plant has prompted this article. Here was the case of a man, rich in business experience, being a very successful manufacturer, but woefully lacking in the poultry knowledge that goes to produce even ordinary results. In his own business accustomed to watch and control every detail, his natural tendency was to keep the same watchful eye on directing the poultry and using really inexperienced workers with the poultry. At the start it was an inspiration to talk chicken, for it conjured up pictures of a manufacturing plant, where all kinds of poultry products were turned out as they might be from a factory, and by using attractive packages and judicious advertising building up a steady trade, select, that would bring in a continuous profit. He was the case of a man who actually believed that in a year's time he could, with a hundred-acre farm, mostly laid out in fruit, establish a plant that could produce everything and buy nothing. What a delusion he has found that to be!

But what has been the trouble? In his own business success was not accomplished in a few weeks or a year. No, it has taken a great many years to perfect the organization, and there were many years when the work was hard and up-hill. Could he expect results at once that could be called good unless he could supplement his good equipment with the knowledge and experience that was so essential in the own business? The plant a 1,400-capacity incubating and brooding equipment was installed, which, together with the 4,000-capacity colony houses, were the best earmarks of good judgment on the place. To handle the building up to this equipment of poultry was hired to "buy up" for "crist rail" of the community. He told the writer they offered their culls and good-for-nothing runts, telling the man they were only such, and he seemed satisfied to buy at a lower price and, we suppose, got a higher commission. 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