

The Appeal of Weakness

A Case Where Science Came into Conflict with Sentiment—and Lost

By WILLIAM HUGO PABKE

HAD Robert Durant obeyed his impulse, he would have asked Evelyn Hastings to marry him on the second day of their acquaintance. Robert in love was much like Robert in business. He would brook no thought of failure. Determined he was to sweep everything before him by the overwhelming strength of his personality. His reason, however, saved him for the time being from making the mistake. He realized that she was too fine to be won easily. At the same time, his masterfulness created opportunities to see her every day, and he took advantage of these meetings to foster a rapidly-growing intimacy.

His slender stock of patience lasted a week. At the end of it, his feeling of unrest and dissatisfaction became unmanageable. When a situation became irksome to Robert, he changed it.

He was on his way to see Evelyn to tell her that life was impossible without her when he was stopped by a pain in his heart, so violent, so numbing, that he was forced to return to his club. He had felt similar twinges before; but they had never been severe enough to interfere with the affairs of the moment. This was the first time in his life that he had ever been directly thwarted, and he resented it unreasonably.

The next afternoon, he sauntered into the office of his friend, Doctor Searle, a man with a national reputation.

"I thought I'd drop in for a chat," he said, by way of introduction.

"Glad to see you, Robert," said the kindly old man; "although I'm a bit surprised. You don't spend your afternoons chatting, as a rule; do you?"

"That shows you haven't followed my career; I'm a gentleman of leisure now."

"Don't you find it tiresome?"

"It was becoming a bit trying," admitted Robert; "but I've got another interest now, a lasting one this time."

"More speculation, eh?"

Robert vouchsafed no answer. He sat tapping the floor nervously with his stick. After a moment, he said, abruptly:

"It's about this new interest that I came to see you, you old charlatan. You know what I think about your profession; you're a lot of humbugs; and you, personally, are the biggest fake of all, because you've got the gaudiest reputation."

Doctor Searle laughed. "Really, Robert," he protested, "you should show me more respect. I'm old enough to be your father."

Robert's face softened. "I've got respect enough for you as a man," he said, "respect and affection, too. But your profession! Well, I can't go it."

"Don't you believe in anything?"

"Yes, myself," declared Robert, with a frank laugh. "But to get down to my new interest: I've made it a practice, whenever I went to a venture, to take stock of my assets, to know exactly where I stood. That's been the basis of my success. Now that I'm going to shoulder new responsibilities—"

"I see," interrupted his friend. "You're worried about yourself. You turn to our profession for comfort, even if you won't admit it."

"Not a bit of it," denied Robert, impatiently. "It's merely this: your word is law; and, if you gave me a free pass to health, I shouldn't feel any compunction about doing what I am going to do."

"And you're going—"

"To marry Evelyn Hastings."

"My dear boy!" cried the Doctor, extending his hand.

"Congratulations aren't in order yet. I have still to propose."

"Failure would be impossible in your case, of course."

"Naturally," said Robert, ignoring the sarcasm with a beautiful ingenuousness.

DURING the pause that followed, he hesitated about unburdening himself. Presently, he began with assumed nonchalance:

"I'll tell you my symptoms. Please remember that I won't believe anything you say and that this little game isn't for my benefit."

"Then why are you here?" cried the little old man.

"I'll be good," laughed Robert. "To begin with: I've had queer and marvellous pains around my heart, extending down my left arm. Also a most damnable choking sensation, which brought with it a fear of impending disaster. It isn't pleasant, and I'd like you to stop it for me—if you can. I'll elaborate, if you wish, and—"

"Never mind," said the Doctor, hastily, reaching for Robert's wrist and rolling the artery between his finger-tips.

The personal relation vanished instantly. The

Doctor became a scientist, and Robert a problem, at once.

"Take off your coat," he said, brusquely.

He laid his ear against Robert's chest and listened. The problem was becoming interesting. The scientist laid bare the flesh beneath which the heart was hammering, fluttering, fainting; and, with deft fingers, he examined for shape and size. He listened again and caught a murmur as of defective machinery, the sucking sound of a leaking valve. He pressed his fingers on the spot again and studied the pulsations carefully. They were irregular, tripping, like the workings of a machine ready for the scrap-heap. Once more, he felt the pulse, hoping that his sense of touch had played him false. This time, he knew.



"He laid his ear against Robert's chest and listened."

Drawn by A. M. Wickson.

The personal element returned, transforming the cold scientist into a friend again, a friend with very human sympathies.

"Robert," he said, "tell me frankly how far this affair with Evelyn has gone. I knew her when she was a little girl; hence my interest."

"She knows that I care."

"And does she—care?" asked the Doctor, avoiding Robert's glance.

"No."

"Then, don't make her—don't, Robert."

"And why not, pray?" Robert's shoulders straightened and his jaws closed with a snap.

"Because of what I have found here." The Doctor tapped Robert's bared chest with his finger. "It wouldn't be right," he continued, earnestly. "It would be criminal to gain her love, to marry her merely to desert her in a day, or a week, or a month; I can't tell which it would be."

"Desert her!"

"Don't you understand? If you live quietly, without excitement of any kind, an easy, restful, uneventful existence, you may live for years. You may, I say; but I can't promise it. On the other hand, a shock, a surprise, a sudden fit of anger, or a strong emotion would bring on one of the attacks that you have described. You may pass safely through one, perhaps two; but, sooner or later—" the Doctor ended with a shrug.

"There speaks the charlatan," growled Robert. "I told you I wouldn't believe you, and I don't. Here's

a case of acute indigestion, or perhaps a mere nervous affection, and you tell me I'm going to die. Pshaw! And as regards its being a crime to marry Evelyn—that's rot. I will marry her and I won't take anybody's advice in the matter."

"But you came to me, intending to be governed by an advice," said the Doctor, struggling to speak calmly. "Why do you change your attitude now? I tell you that you are in no condition to assume the responsibility of any woman's happiness."

"We won't argue the matter," said Robert, curtly.

"Is it impossible for you to consider any one except yourself?" implored the Doctor.

"It's absurd!" cried Robert, vehemently. "I've never known a sick day. Why should this thing come upon me suddenly? It's nothing, I tell you. I've overcome every obstacle in my life, and I won't be thwarted now by a transient ache."

HE walked rapidly the length of the room and back again, stubbornly fighting against the doubt that was entering his mind.

"It's not a 'transient ache,' as you call it," corrected the Doctor; "it's angina pectoris."

"I don't care what you fakers call it," cried Robert. "In a year's time, in six months, I'll live it down." He strode toward the Doctor, excitedly. "I won't be browbeaten by a pain, and what I've planned I will execute. I'm going now to see Evelyn. I will ask—" He stopped and pressed his hand to his heart.

His face became livid, his lips a purplish blue. He staggered forward, and would have fallen if the Doctor had not caught him. He gasped for breath, the fear of death distorting his features. His heart was bursting. Each laboured throb was a sword-thrust. His pain was so acute that he fancied he could see it. In the blood-red flashes before his eyes, he seemed to recognize the enemy that was robbing him of breath, strangling him, hurling him into a hell of torment.

The Doctor opened a drawer in his desk, snatched a pearl of amyl nitrite, crushed it in his handkerchief, and held it to Robert's nostrils. The volatile drug acted instantly. The sweetish fumes raced through the patient's body, opening the hardened, contracted arteries, and relieving the strain on the heart. In a moment, a flush spread over his face, the veins stood out boldly on his forehead, and his breathing became easier.

He sat quite still, apparently nursing his returning strength. To the watchful physician he seemed to be merely resting; but he, himself, knew that he was fighting, fighting desperately, that his untamed spirit was crossing swords with Fate.

Presently, he rose unsteadily, reaching for his coat. "I don't believe you, at that," he said, shaking himself like a dog coming out of the water.

The Doctor shrugged his shoulders. "There are some men so obstinate—" he stopped short, his eyes blazing. "Good-by, Robert," he continued quietly; "you'd better find another physician."

Robert came out on the street thirsting for victory. He turned toward Evelyn's house. Not once during his walk did he swerve from his purpose. The effect of the

drug gave him a momentary sense of physical well-being; the crisp air cleared his brain. Failure seemed far removed as he entered the familiar room and waited impatiently for Evelyn to appear.

"I've had a hard day, Evelyn," he said, as she greeted him. "I've been badgered and worried, and I lost my temper."

"I am sorry for your bad day; but that hardly gives you the right to call me 'Evelyn,'" she replied, with asperity.

"Perhaps it doesn't; but I can't propose to you from the standpoint of 'Miss Hastings,' and that's what I'm here for."

"Indeed?" Her brows became supercilious semicircles.

"As though you didn't know it!" exclaimed Robert, testily. "I don't understand women; they let a man get to the point of proposing; then, when he does ask one to marry him, she is insulted. Hasn't he a right?"

"After a week?" she asked, frigidly.

"A week or a month or a day, what difference does it make? I'd have proposed to you the second day I knew you, only I thought my chances would be better if I waited. But this is about the limit of my endurance."

"I must admit that I have never been made love to quite in this manner before," she said, a humorous little quirk relieving the severity of her lips.

"Then, that's the reason you've never been won," suggested Robert calmly. "O don't be offended at