

A LATE VISITOR

(Benziger's Magazine.)

"I'm terrified, doctor!" said Mrs. Ind. She had tripped hurriedly on the steps of the doctor's house, when she stood alone a little way up the street. Apparently she had run all the way from the bank, and was almost breathless, her color coming and going, and her golden hair rather wild. She had a little black case in her arms and was absurdly hugging it.

The doctor regarded her gravely. He was a solemn young man, apt to look reproachful if his patients were only slightly ill. With dignity he put this patient in a chair.

"And the symptoms—" he had begun. Mrs. Ind. laughed nervously. "It's these rumors," she said, "about thieves and burglars. You don't know how frightened I have been lately, and the servants say—oh, doctor, pity me! With my husband away, and suspicious characters haunting the place, I am nearly frantic!"

The doctor looked puzzled, perhaps doubtful what he should prescribe for that.

"And so I came in this afternoon to bring my sapphires and put them in the bank. Imagine my state of mind, doctor—the bank was closed!"

She looked at him tragically, pausing. Outside the horses were jingling their harness, lifting their heads impatiently toward each other; the carriage had followed her down the street.

"It will be dark before I get home," said Mrs. Ind. piteously. "Think! The long, long lonely drive, and then all night to be in terror about my sapphires. I can't face it! Doctor, will you—will you let me leave them here? If not, I shall be gray with fright."

She thrust the black case into his hands with an excited gesture. "Leave them here?" repeated the doctor, uncomfortably.

"Please! You can run across with them to the bank directly it opens tomorrow morning, and you are so safe living in the town, and your house such an unlikely place—so very safe altogether! Shut them up in that cupboard, behind the bottles!"

Rather unwillingly he had to acquiesce. After all, it was only for a night. He took up the little black case that was so precious, and wrapped it in medicated cotton-wool till it was completely hidden. Then he put it on the highest shelf of his private cupboard, as the lady prayed him, behind the bottles.

She had driven away in a hurry, afraid that she might repent, and he shut the door after her with a new sense of responsibility.

"What was it?" called a young voice from the upper regions as he stood on the mat reflecting. Peggy, sister, housekeeper, and dispenser, was leaning over the stairs. The doctor glanced up gravely.

"My patients," he said, "trust me not only with their lives—but their sapphires."

Peggy came running down. She was a young girl with eager eyes, and although she had none of her brother's solemnity, the laugh in them was always frustrating her attempts to look staid. Just now her expression was dismay.

"Oh," she cried, "and if anybody were to break in?"

"We must risk it," said the doctor, smiling.

The night-bell had been ringing in Peggy's dreams.

She had heard it and half awakened, her brother had come along the passage hurriedly and called something through the keyhole, but the dreaming held her fast. It must have been a long while after that she started up and listened.

What was that? Had Harold not gone out, after all? How was it, then, that she remembered the house door's clang and the sounds of wheels? She should have got up to see that he had all he wanted, and—heavens!—to bar the door. That must have been what he called through the keyhole. Mrs. Ind's sapphires in their charge and the house-door left on the latch!

Peggy sat up in bed conscience-stricken, reaching out for her dress-

ing-gown and her stockings. It was pitch dark, but she felt a queer kind of hesitation in striking a match, as if that would make visible many terrors, all merged in the general eeriness of the dark.

Again! What was it? She held her breath to listen. Surely, surely, there was somebody in the house!

With a courage that ruled her beating pulses she sprang out of bed and dressed, feeling that she would be braver with all her clothes on. Then she ventured out on the landing. Leaning over the stairs she heard, surely, unmistakably, little noises far down below.

It was no use waking the maids on the upper landing. They were only two, an old woman and a young girl, and they would only add their shrieks. Peggy turned quickly into her brother's room. As she thought, it was empty. What would she not have given to hear a powerful snore? The bed was not even rumpled; he had been sitting up late, and the summons must have surprised him on the way up. And then it struck her—what if it had been a false alarm to get him out of the way?

There was an old pistol in the room that the doctor played with occasionally, shooting bottles in the backyard; and Peggy had learned to fire it. She took it up now and charged it, betwixt fright and laughter, and then, like a ghost, but in a very unghostly panic, slipped down the stairs.

The hall lamp was out, black out. Peggy felt her way across to the door, and passed her hand up and down. It was only latched. Her fingers were turning the key, and mechanically feeling to find the bar, when a thought arrested her. Who might she be barring in?

A subdued rustle reached her from the doctor's study; it was queer and threatening, because unaccountable. And with it another sound, horribly like the tread of a man.

Peggy was an audacious young woman, and had always been famed in the family for her pluck. A little minute passed while she was standing there listening—and shaking. Then she stumbled forward in the darkness, past the glistening hall chairs, and an oak chest that was terribly in the way, and flung open the study door.

The lamp was lighted. It glimmered dangerously in the eyes of a man—a stranger.

Peggy had not guessed till then how sure she had been that, after all, it was only the cat—or Harold. She was dumb with fright.

At her appearance he had jumped up, confounded. He was tall and dark and powerful; a man who could crush her with a finger; but—she had the pistol. She lifted it quickly. It might be a matter of life and death, and—she were not daunted—less!

"Stir, and I shoot!" she cried. He looked at her; it was a measuring glance that might carry the fate of either. Peggy braved it with a high front and her little shaking finger at the trigger. Then she saw his eyes twinkle amusedly and there was a sudden smile at his mouth.

"Do you think I am a burglar?" he asked. "I do," Peggy answered stoutly. "But—but—I assure you—"

He smiled at her as if the accusation were too absurd to be entertained for a minute; his manner was very gentlemanly, more amused than embarrassed. Peggy saw then that he was better dressed than one would expect in a burglar; good-looking and rather careworn. At least he was not a ruffian. A queer little impulse of pity moved her to say—

"If you will go away quietly, I—I will not call the police."

He made no sign of willingness to accept her offer. Rather it appeared to amuse him more than her threatening attitude with the pistol.

"Will you not allow me to explain?" he asked. Peggy looked at him sternly. She was not much afraid of him just at present. Only she must not let herself think and tremble.

"What are you doing here?" she said. "Who are you?"

"Has your brother—you are Miss Ryder?"—never spoken to you of Jack Lancaster?"

Peggy shook her head. "It looks black, then," he said, with another twinkle. "But the fact is, I'm an old chum of his, and happening to be traveling this way I thought I'd pay him a surprise visit. The last train, you know, gets in here at about eleven."

It was glib, but the housekeeper shook her head again, unbelieving. "Harold would have wakened me," she said. "There would have been a room to get ready."

"I wouldn't have anybody called up," said he. "Ryder said I could share his room, and asked me to go up and take possession. But he was sent for half-an-hour ago, and I said I would sit up till he came in."

Peggy's eyes wandered doubtfully about the room. The fire was snoring, dim and red, the doctor's slippers were flung, as usual, inside the fender. His pipe lay on the mantelpiece beside another, an unfamiliar one; perhaps, after all, it was true. As she wandered her eyes fell lower, and she saw a strange array on the table. Three silver mugs and a flagon were glittering in a row. The stranger saw her quick glance.

"By Jove!" he exclaimed, "she thinks I was packing up his college trophies to make off with."

That frank explanation and his look of comical despair disarmed the girl at last. What would Harold say when he came and heard how she had treated his chum? She threw up her hands in consternation.

"Oh!" she cried. "What am I to do? How can I apologize?"

"Don't!" he said. "I'm willing to admit that it was suspicious, and I am greatly obliged to you for not insisting on marching me off to prison." He laughed, the joke of the thing apparently striking him for

more than its awkward side. Peggy wondered amazedly at herself that she could ever have taken him for a burglar. She was very full of remorse.

"I'm so sorry," she said, looking at him with an eager longing to make amends. "What can I do to make you comfortable?"

"It's all right," said Mr. Lancaster. "With your permission I will just sit here and smoke till Ryder comes in. Please go up again, and don't bother about me. Leave me in charge of the house and—the sapphires."

Peggy started. "I won't wonder you were anxious," he said, with a smile. "Ryder was just telling me about it when he was called out and had to go. They seemed to be weighing upon his mind, too, and he asked me most solemnly to keep an eye on them. He forgot to say where they were, though, so how am I to guard them? Are they in here?"

"Yes," said Peggy, faintly. Mr. Lancaster surveyed the room carelessly.

"All right," he said. "Then am I to guard that cupboard? But, look here, Miss Ryder, you really must go back to bed and leave me at my post."

His tone was kind and authoritative, as any one might address a wan little weary person who ought to be sent to bed. Peggy reddened, and wondered again at her past belief.

"Is there anything I can do first?" she asked, wistfully. "Don't you want something to eat or drink? Did you have any supper?"

"I—I believe we hadn't," he answered. "We were so glad to see each other, and just sat talking; and then Ryder was called out in such a hurry. I said I'd forage—Oh, pray, don't trouble!"

However, Peggy had already disappeared into the kitchen. The fire in the range was still alight; it had been left so to keep a kettle warm for the doctor. She thrust a bit of kindling wood into it until it lit all the kitchen, and, although terribly afraid of rats, tucked her skirts tight around her and ventured gallantly into the larder.

Finally she came back laden to the guest in the doctor's study.

"You should not, you really should not," he said, coming forward to help her to put down the things she carried. With indiscriminate hospitality she had fetched ham and cold beef and a leg of mutton that was unhappily still uncooked. Mr. Lancaster laughed, and she laughed, as they both looked at this proof of her bewilderment, and then she fled and brought in a cheese. It was a huge one in a china dish, and the guest cleared the silver cups off the table to make room, arranging them almost affectionately along the mantelpiece.

"They are pleasant reminders," he said with a little sigh, "of ancient triumphs and the old days at Princeton."

The doctor was a Fortham man. That little slip had been fatal. True, the inscription on the silver mug he was handling referred to a Princeton triumph, but it had not been won by Harold; it was a relic of a cousin who had left it in his keeping. Peggy watched him with an appalling conviction in her soul. Coming so close upon the relief of the past few minutes, this revelation made her feel all unstrung. She put out a hand to support herself at the table, and her eyes grew large with fear.

He had taken up one of the smaller mugs, and she thought he started.

"I tried both colleges, you must know, Miss Ryder, and I'm afraid neither was very proud of me. I was always a lazy chap."

The wonderful readiness of the man! He turned carelessly from the mantelpiece and began to finger the doctor's pistol. (If she had only kept it instead of rashly flinging it on the table!)

With her heart in her mouth Peggy watched him. He was examining the thing with an air of amused disdain, probably finding it rickety, and also, she thought, debating. She saw him glance up quickly at the place where Mrs. Ind's sapphires had been put, and she believed she could understand why the same glance should fall on her. He was making up his mind.

"If you're sure you have all you want," she said, quickly, "I will say 'good-night.'"

And she saw his look of relief. He took a step toward her and put out his hand.

"Good-night," he said.

be allowed to escape and give the alarm. Had he guessed what was in her mind? All at once an idea struck her; she paused, and looked at him with a smile that, if he had only known it, was a smile of daring.

"Oh," she said, "I have forgotten to get you anything to drink. You will have some sherry?"

"Thank you," he answered briefly. "I—I never drink anything stronger than tea."

"Then you will have that," she said. "I can hear the kettle singing. I will make you a cup of tea."

"Don't trouble," he said, rather impatiently.

"It will not take a minute," said Peggy kindly. Courage was returning to her with a chance of action, and she was able to play her part. Her impetuous hospitality reassured him; he did not try to arrest her as she vanished, leaving the study door wide open. If he were to follow her all would be lost, but he did not. He could hear from where he was standing if she unbarred one of the outer doors or slid up a window.

In the kitchen she caught up a teapot and emptied into it an extravagant heap of tea; then she bent over the kettle, and there was a reassuring sound of pouring water. The man in the doctor's study could not fail to hear it. When there was about a cup full of water in the teapot she put on the lid, and with a quick motion set a jug under the boiler and turned the tap. Then, while the noise of pouring went on unintermittently, she darted across the kitchen—across the passage.

There was hardly a clink in the surgery and she searched among the bottles. She was back again in an instant. The light had gone out in her hand as she crossed the hall in a breathless hurry, but the bottle she was bringing with her glimmered in the flickering darkness of the kitchen. With her hand on the teapot she paused, and peered fearfully out of the darkness toward the lamp-lit study. By an effort she lifted the teapot and walked steadily, quickly in.

"I will pour out a cup," she said, "and you must drink it—you really must."

He took it from her hands and drank it, swallowing it hot, with an unwilling haste. As he put down the cup she rose.

"And now," she said, "good-night!"

He watched her up the stairs. She knew it. From where he was standing he could see the far-away flutter of her skirt, higher and higher as she disappeared, and she walked up lightly, humming a little, high scrap of song. But as soon as she reached the turn of the stairs, and shutting the nearest door with a bang, leaned over the banisters and listened.

Would he find out the trick? Would she hear his angry tread and his voice quick and dangerous, warning her of the punishment she must reap? Or would nothing happen? It was a risk; she had known it when the idea came, and she had faced it desperately. A minute—another minute. She hardly knew whether it was the clock on the stairs or her own heart beating. With it the silence was getting awful.

Ah, what was that? A faint attempt at movement, a stumble, and then a fall?

Peggy waited until she could stand the hush no longer and then went creeping down the stair. It was taking her life in her hand, but still—

The light was still as high in the study, but all the room was curiously still, and something strange was lying half on the floor, half across a chair! It had happened!

Peggy halted, triumphant, and yet terror-stricken, gazing at her work. If she had killed him? But no, no, surely—her hand had been almost steady.

She came a little nearer. His head lay against the chair; his dark hair was ruffled as he had fallen.

At that sight triumph had altogether the upper hand. She turned to rush out into the street and alarm the nearest houses, to bring men to carry the burglar away to prison; and just then she heard the doctor's key at the door.

He was almost overturned by her eager rush, and her wild, white face was as startling to him as a ghost's.

"Why—" he gasped. "Peggy—Peggy!" and his solemn young countenance lost its professional gravity. She almost dragged him into the study.

"It's a burglar," she said. "He broke in to steal the sapphires. And I wasn't sure that he hadn't murdered you! And, oh! Harold, it has been awful! But I gave him some of that new stuff; you said it took effect very quickly—just enough to make him sleep. Oh! I hope I have not killed him, after all!"

The doctor could not understand half her speech any more than Peggy had understood what he had called to her through the keyhole before he started; but he saw the prostrate figure and gave a jump. He dropped on his knees before the burglar.

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1	Th.	w.	All Saints [of Obligation.]
2	F.	b.	All Souls.
3	S.	w.	Of the Octave of All Saints.
			Twenty Second Sunday After Pentecost
4	Su.	w.	S. Charles Borromeo.
5	M.	w.	Of the Octave of All Saints.
6	T.	w.	Of the Octave of All Saints.
7	W.	w.	Of the Octave of All Saints.
8	Th.	w.	Of the Octave of All Saints.
9	F.	w.	Dedication of S. John Lateran.
10	S.	w.	S. Andrew Avellino.
			Twenty Third Sunday After Pentecost
11	Su.	w.	Patronage of B. V. Mary.
12	M.	r.	S. Martin I. Pope.
13	T.	w.	S. Nicholas I. Pope.
14	W.	w.	S. Desusedit, Pope.
15	Th.	w.	S. Gertrude.
16	F.	r.	S. Josephat.
17	S.	w.	S. Gregory the Wonderworker.
			Twenty Fourth Sunday After Pentecost
18	Su.	w.	Dedication of SS. Peter and Paul.
19	M.	r.	S. Pontianus.
20	T.	w.	S. Felix of Valois.
21	W.	w.	Presentation of B. V. Mary.
22	Th.	r.	S. Cecilia.
23	F.	r.	S. Clement.
24	S.	w.	S. John of the Cross.
			Twenty Fifth Sunday After Pentecost
25	Su.	r.	S. Catharine.
26	M.	w.	S. Sylvester.
27	T.	w.	S. Elizabeth of Hungary.
28	W.	w.	S. Gregory III. Pope.
29	Th.	w.	S. Gelasius I. Pope.
30	F.	r.	S. Andrew, Apostle.

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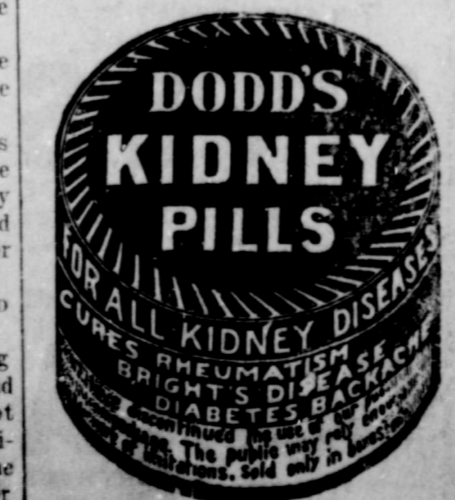
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