

The Widow's Lodger

"No, my dear child, but in this room. It is just a similar one to that I had arranged for my butler, and he absolutely refused to sleep in it."

"I do not sleep here," said Mary; "this is my sitting-room, my bed chamber is in front. It is large and open, and so much better for baby's health. Most people make a mistake about their sleeping-rooms; when both cannot be large, they should choose the smaller for the day time. As for butlers, I do not know their habits or what they expect."

"You do not understand me, my dear child. I mean that it would never do for you to receive my brother Michael here, for though everything has been explained most satisfactorily, he would still be shocked to find Arthur's wife shut away at the back of the house. You must, you really must, get rid of that old gentleman in the drawing-room. I will pay the rent with pleasure."

"Thank you, madame," said Mary, with a resolute, negative gesture of her pretty head. "I could not think of it for a moment. Nothing would induce me to disturb Mr. Barker."

"But consider how it may injure your prospects."

"With whom?"

"Uncle Michael."

"Whatever prospects I may have, and I certainly have no expectations, will not be injured by this. I have met many kind people since I have been alone, but Mr. Barker is the kindest. I should be very sorry to lose him. He will never leave me through any fault or at any suggestion of mine."

"Well, my dear," said Mrs. Allenby, "it is for you to decide, of course. This is not my house; still I think it almost reprehensible to run the risk of offending him. Do think of it. What do you say, George?"

"Pray do not ask me, my dear lady. I am so entirely an advocate of letting people have their own way when they can afford it. As for Uncle Michael, I do not really think he would mind; and Mr. Barker might not care to go."

"But he must, if told."

"There is a legal fiction to that effect, but Mr. Barker is a man who would be very likely to barricade himself in his rooms and keep a loaded revolver on the table. He thinks nothing of throwing the furniture at people."

Then followed some anecdotes of Mr. Barker's temper that made Mrs. Allenby's heart sink, and she wondered how Mary could have such a dreadful person in the house.

"Now that we have broken the ice, you may expect me very often," she said at parting. "We meet on quite new terms, and will have no by-gones. Is that understood?"

"That is my wish," said Mary.

Mrs. Allenby kept her word, and was a frequent visitor. She never by any chance caught a glimpse of Mr. Barker, as she told Uncle Michael with a sense of injury; but she made progress with Mary, though the progress was slow. Mary thought Arthur's mother was sorry for the past, though she was too proud to say it in words; but many little acts of kindness showed a wish for a better understanding.

Perhaps they were never drawn so near together as when baby fell ill, and never might have been. Dr. Hyde said it was an ordinary infantile complaint, but it filled the house with terrible anxiety, and Mrs. Allenby took up her quarters there, to be near him night and day.

CHAPTER XIII.

The night and day spoken of by Mrs. Allenby in her resolve to nurse the baby proved to be but a figurative expression. She would have stayed, but Dr. Hyde told her there was no real danger, and that he was better left to his mother.

"You shall hear how he is every day and twice a day if you like," Dr. Hyde said, "but you must not see him too frequently. The plain truth is, he has not grown accustomed to you yet, and you are more likely to disturb him than otherwise; his baby fancies must be indulged as much as if he were an older patient, and he cannot have too much sleep or too much quiet."

Mrs. Allenby gave way, but it seemed hard, for she loved that child as she had never loved but one before. Every day, and sometimes twice a day, a messenger was sent from Orthorpe Square, and went back with the consoling reply—"baby was a little better," or "baby was much the same, no worse." This had to satisfy them all—even Margaret, but she was admitted when others were not.

The one, however, admitted most of all, and even asked for by baby himself, was Unky Bako. The old man went about so noiselessly that Mr. Hyde suggested the gout had been frightened away by his little favorite's danger, slight as it was. Uncle Michael had gone to Bristol, and the time of his return was uncertain; but he sent affectionate inquiries, and letters were sent to him every morning.

It was curious to Mary to see how Arthur's little life had become entwined with that of her eccentric lodger. The old man would play with him, nurse him, or sit at his bedside by the hour together, just as might be required of him; he never tired,—his patience never gave way. There was something pathetic in the beauty which grew into his rugged face while the child was ill. He had a kind word for everyone in the house, even for Mr. Barker, who crept about the house on the tips of his toes, and inquired how baby was every hour

or so.

"You will excuse me, sir," he said, meeting Mr. Barker on the stairs one day, "but would you mind telling me how the baby is?"

"Better," said the old gentleman in a whisper. "Bring your pipe and come up and stay with me for an hour."

Their speaking acquaintance began from that moment, and in after days Mr. Barker was wont to tell extraordinary stories of the eccentric old gentleman's room. They were waited upon by Sensi, who brought them curious liquors and rare old wines, such as he had never believed existed out of Monte Christo; they were served on trays of solid gold—Mr. Barker swore to that when doubted. There was a different glass for each liquor and wine, slender, fragile, and exquisitely cut, and for the last—a celestial nectar, according to Mr. Parker's description—they had goblets of pure gold, studded with gems. This may have been the effect of the magnificent meerschaum, or it may have been true. No one believed him till years afterwards, when a tray of solid gold and two goblets of the same precious metal, studded—and thickly too—with valuable gems, stood under a glass shade in Dr. Parker's drawing-room. He spoke of them as a wedding present from his wife's uncle, and said not a word about Mr. Barker.

In those early days of their acquaintance while baby was ill, the eccentric lodger seemed to like the simple-hearted, earnest-minded student. He could look at him very kindly through those hideous blue spectacles, and speak sympathetically in spite of his horrible voice and bushy grey beard. All Mr. Parker's secrets came out under the influence of the magnificent pipe and the rare old wine, and not a thing was left untold, even his love for Margaret.

"I know," he said, "nothing could be more hopeless, and I am wrong to build up such a heaven out of her kindness. She would be sorry, and angry too."

"Why?"

"I shall have to depend entirely on my profession, and that means many years' hard work."

"So much the better," said the old gentleman, cheerily. "If a profession is worth anything, you ought to desire nothing better. You would hardly, if you are the man I take you to be, care to depend on your wife or your mother."

"Certainly not."

"And unless you have expectations from a grandfather who may outlive you, or an uncle with half-a-dozen nephews and nieces besides yourself, what else would you depend upon? Be independent—work and wait, and do not forget the faint heart which never won a fair lady. Not that Miss Allenby is fair—it is just a healthy English medium color that will wear well. She might do worse."

"You refer to me, sir?"

"Yes, sir, I do. There are plenty of better-looking men—plenty."

"I know it," said Mr. Parker, meekly. "And you are not a genius," the old gentleman went on; "but that is so much the better. No woman in her senses would marry a good-looking genius. Work and wait, and win, my boy, and you may find a friend in me."

Mr. Parker took comfort from that. It was a promise of the vaguest kind, but the medical student had unlimited faith in the eccentric lodger's power; and from this time the oddly-assorted pair were very much together; they had an interest in common—little Arthur's danger. The child was ill much longer than he would have been in the ordinary course of things; for he had been over-indulged, and an obstinate low fever clung to him. Mr. Barker had misgivings of his own, based on a guilty knowledge of tamarinds and preserved ginger; but baby had been petted and spoiled throughout the house, and there was great rejoicing when he toddled about again. He was sadly wasted, and there did not seem much of him left but golden hair and large bright eyes; but he soon picked up.

A second blow, however, and a heavier one fell upon the house. Mary was taken ill. She had been needlessly anxious over her boy.

Now she was stricken down. Doctor Hyde looked grave when Mr. Barker asked him what was the matter with her, and the old man said:

"There is danger?"

"There is danger," was the grave reply, "her system is sadly shaken, and some latent symptoms of pulmonary disease have shown themselves, but the worst feature is fever."

"Such as the boy had?"

"No, you must keep him away from her."

"Merciful Heavens, man, you will not tell me it is contagious?"

"No more so than typhoid fever usually is," the young doctor said, with a dryness in his voice that was not in his eyes.

The old man bowed his head in his hands with a groan.

"That is the one thing in the world I would not have," he said, "we must save her, George; you love her I know, but not as I do."

"Not as you do," repeated Dr. Hyde, quietly; "but my future lives or dies with her."

He had never hinted at this before, but Mr. Barker understood him; he comprehended how difficult it would be for Arthur's dearest friend to undertake the guardianship of Arthur's girl-widow, and retain only a brotherly feeling as the time wore on.

George Hyde had intended to wait till Mary's sorrow for her young husband became a memory, and left room for new thoughts of the time to come, but he told the eccentric lodger now

now much he had built upon winning Mary's love.

"I had begun to feel," he said, that it was only a question of time, and now this trouble has come."

"This may be only a question of time," Mr. Barker replied. "Mary is young, and if you doubt your own skill, or your affection renders you nervous, have a physician; then there is the nursing. Margaret must not run the risk, although she would, and it is a matter in which I am powerless."

"Mrs. Allenby has offered her services, and in the most generous spirit," said George; "but then—"

"Do not think of me. Would she be worth having as nurse?"

"Invaluable; she has nerve and coolness, and is as clever as most medical men; she would not be likely to mistake the medicines, give too little or too much, or go past the time. You are the only difficulty."

"I shall stay in this house," Mr. Barker said, "the boy wants me, no one else could keep him quiet, and I will not leave her; as for the rest I can keep out of the way, and even should she meet me by accident I can take care she does not recognize me. Do you think she had better come?"

"We could depend upon her watchfulness and attention, and she has nerve, knowledge, and experience."

"Let it be so then. The women in the house are kind enough, but they are clumsy, even with the best intentions, and the hired nurse is always half asleep, the normal condition of hired nurses, it appears to me."

Mrs. Allenby had offered her services when she first heard of Mary's illness, but George had steadily declined them. The lady of Orthorpe Square thought it hard that she should be debarred a position that she chose to consider hers by right since her reconciliation with Mary was so complete.

"You kept me away from baby," she said, with an air of injury, "and I did not mind so much, because he had his mother to attend him, but she has no one except the servants and hired people, and I know how inefficient they are."

It seemed to please her very much when George told her he found the hired nurse more inefficient than he at first thought possible, and he placed no obstacle in her way when she repeated her willingness to take charge of "that poor darling girl."

She took her position in the sick room that same evening, and proved, as George had said, invaluable. Mrs. Allenby was a woman of iron nerve and had no fear of contagion; she surely believed in it. She was hopeful from the outset as to Mary's recovery from the fever, but expressed a dread of the after consequences. There were symptoms of pulmonary disease, and there always had been; Arthur had told her so when he was attending her father.

"We shall pass the crisis of the fever safely," she told George Hyde. "I have seen too many fever cases to be afraid, and this has not so strong a hold upon her as you think, but it will leave her very low, and she will need all our care."

Doctor Hyde had great faith in Mrs. Allenby. She had always taken a large interest in her husband's profession, and he would talk to her of his patients by the hour together, getting many a useful hint from some remark she might let drop, and she had undertaken the nursing—or the superintendence of it—of more than one distinguished client when the life was valuable and the condition critical. As for the members of her own household, she had been their physician ever since her husband's death, and George had to give her credit for her treatment of them.

"I hope you are right," he said. "I believe you are right; but I have too much at stake to be as calm as I should if it were anyone else than Mary. Give her your care, and more than my life-long gratitude will be yours."

"Too much at stake," Mrs. Allenby repeated slowly. "Ah, yes, I see; but you have surprised me, George. And you need not fear, she shall have all my care—the more for this."

Her familiar, affectionate touch upon his arm was a caress, and Dr. Hyde felt more certain of her help now she knew that what he had at stake. He had not intended to let her into his secret yet. He knew there would be some soreness and disappointment concerning her daughter Victoria, though there had never been anything more than the kindly and trustful feeling which would naturally exist between a brother's sister and that brother's friend.

He could not, however, disguise from himself that a declaration was expected of him. Mrs. Allenby had gone out of her way to advance his interest, and it was entirely due to her that he was sent for by so many of her husband's patients. George was quite aware that he would not have acquired such an extensive practice at his age but for some strong private influence, but to marry Victoria in return would have been a heavy price to pay for it. She was beautiful enough, and more, but her unsympathetic nature would have been a cloud over his heart and energy.

Had Mary been anyone else, George would have been satisfied with himself as her physician. As it was, he consulted a friend—a very eminent man. The eminent man simply approved of the young doctor's treatment—said they were doing all that could be done; she could not be in better hands, and was exceptionally fortunate in such a nurse. Even Mr. Barker was satisfied then.

Mrs. Allenby was right in her prediction. Mary passed the crisis of the fever safely, but it left her very low.

She seemed to need more care than ever now; she was in a state of utter prostration at the time when in the ordinary course she should have been able to be moved from her bed to a couch, or even from one room to another, and this state of things did not mend.

The worst feature in it was an apathetic resignation which brought George Hyde almost to the point of despair. Long after the fever was gone she remained in the same condition. She thanked Mrs. Allenby very sweetly for her kindness, and seemed to grow fond of her; but she could not rally, and did not seem to try. When they took the baby to her, and let him nestle down on the pillow by her side, she only looked at him wistfully, and said, "I am glad mamma's boy will have such good friends when mamma is gone."

"My darling child," said Mrs. Allenby, "have you no wish to live? You must not speak like that."

"I should like to live, if it is to be so," was the low reply; "but if I die I shall see Arthur the sooner."

A deep sigh made her turn, and she saw George Hyde sitting by the bed with his hand before his face.

"However closely we may cling to the memory of the dead," Mrs. Allenby said, in a low and sympathetic whisper, "we should not forget the living. If you knew how deeply and faithfully George loved you, you would try and live for him."

"Poor George!" Mary said, softly. "It might be if I lived; but I do not think I shall."

"But you love him?" Mrs. Allenby said, in the same whisper. "Let him hear you say so."

"Not as I loved Arthur," Mary responded; "but I love him dearly."

Mary would not have said this at any other time, but no falsehood can be told, or truth concealed, when the world is gliding away and death has been near enough to give the soul a glimpse of Heaven. It comforted George to know that she loved him, and might be his if she lived. He could only, in the fullness of his heart, pray that she would live.

CHAPTER XVI.

IN THE NIGHT.

If prayer and medicine and careful nursing could have helped Mary back to health, she would not have remained so long in danger after the crisis of the fever was passed; but her condition took a shape which baffled Dr. Hyde and puzzled the physician he had before consulted.

"There are points at which the science of our profession stops," he said, "and new combinations of every disease are continually appearing, but I have never seen anything like this. The pulmonary symptoms would not account for it. The whole system is affected and seems to be sinking of gradual and complete exhaustion."

"Would it be the shock of her baby's illness, following so, comparatively, soon after her husband's death?" Mr. Barker inquired. The consultation took place in his room, and Mr. Barker sat there deeply interested.

"Well, it might be," the physician assented, with manifest reluctance; "but I hardly think so. What was her general health before this?"

"Unusually good, I should say," said George.

"Would the reason exist, then, in some earlier cause—to put it plainly, privation in the way of food and exposure to the weather when she was a child or in her early girlhood? Children are frequently neglected, not so much for want of means as for want of thought; they are sent to low-priced schools or fed at home on the allowance system, and either would be fatal to a delicate constitution, though the result might not show at the time or for some years afterwards."

"Her father was very poor," said George, "and they struggled hard for a livelihood. When he was ill, she was, I know, out in all weathers, and she did a great deal of his work at the Museum, but that is years ago."

"No matter how many years," the physician said, shaking his head. "There is no doubt the mischief was done then. Want of proper nourishment at the proper time, exposure to the weather in unsuitable clothing, and the cramped position she would have to assume at a desk or writing-table would plant the seeds of weakness; and though she might grow strong apparently, a trying illness such as she has gone through would be a crucial test of the extent of the mischief done. Still"—and he shook his head again—"I am not satisfied. If she had a negligent nurse, now; but Mrs. Allenby is the most perfect mistress of her art I ever saw."

"And has been most devoted," said George. "Wherever the fault may be, it is not in the nursing."

The physician, too, was sure of that, and took his leave implying rather by his manner than his words how little hope he could give their anxious hearts. And then some inexplicable change took place in Mary; she would rally one day only to sink lower the next; and finally she became almost unconscious, though keenly alive to the slightest sound. They had to keep her very quiet, so quiet that Sensi, who could move with a footfall that would not have disturbed a mouse, was appointed carrier from the sick-room to the kitchen. He took the various trays from Mrs. Allenby's hand at the bedroom door, and conveyed to her what was required. Sometimes he was allowed to steal in and look at Mary when she was asleep, and then he would retire with his great eyes full of tears. It was understood that he was never to knock at

the door; he had to open it a little way, and then Mrs. Allenby's white hand would put the tray out, or take one from him, and that was all.

One morning he went up with some dainties and opened the door a little way as usual, but Mrs. Allenby did not come; it was not the first or the second time this had happened, and then he had crept in, sat down by the bed, and wakened her with a light touch of his finger on her shoulder. On this occasion he went in, and both were sleeping, patient and nurse, very soundly. He sat his tray down and touched Mrs. Allenby, but she did not wake; the deep and profound slumber following a long vigil had come suddenly and heavily upon her. The small basin he took up had a covering lid; he put it on the small spirit lamp stove with the light turned low; then he collected the cups and wine and medicine glasses, taking one of the latter from the table by Mary's bed, and left the room noiselessly, his tray was full, being a small one, and he carried that glass down in his hand.

Downstairs at the dining-room door, Mr. Parker lying in wait for him, beckoned him in. This was his usual practice, but it did not always succeed, for Sensi was as quick as he was silent. This morning, however, the student caught him.

"Is there no change?" he asked, closing the door.

"No change," was the mournful reply, "except that Mrs. Mary looks more like an angel, and the other is asleep."

"Worn out, poor thing; she is a good nurse really. Doctor Hyde is asleep, too, and your master dropped off to sleep while I was talking to him, with the baby in his arms. Sensi."

"Sir."

Mr. Parker had stopped, and was looking at the glass in Sensi's hand with an expression of horror and incredulity slowly creeping over his face.

"Where did you take that glass from?"

"The little table by Mrs. Mary's side. Was I wrong? Her mother was asleep, and I saw it had been used, though it is not quite empty."

"Have you ever done such a thing before?"

"Never! Old Mrs. Allenby always gives me everything; but stop; you know something, Mr. Parker, and you must tell me—you must," and he rolled his terrible eyes at the young man. "If she has done anything to Mrs. Mary, I will strangle her in her chair."

"Stay!" said Parker, with a sudden and resolute sternness which took the mulatto by surprise; "sit down and let me test it before we say a word to anyone. Should the test fail, no harm is done, and if it is as I suspect, we must keep the secret to ourselves. I want no help but yours, and not a word to your master, mind, or Doctor Hyde, till I tell you to speak."

He opened a small chest of drawers used by him in some analytical experiments, and applied a test to the few drops of medicine and sediment remaining in the glass; he waited for the changes, and as they came a low thick sweat broke out upon his face.

"Amongst all the things—cruel and horrible things—that I have heard or read," he said, "there was never any one thing so bad as this, and she is Margaret's mother. No wonder that we could not understand the symptoms."

"What is it, Mr. Parker? Was Mrs. Mary being killed?"

"Slowly and surely poisoned, Sensi, unless there has been some terrible and almost inexplicable mistake; but we shall know to-night. Now, Sensi, listen to my plan. If it is as I suspect, it will be time enough to tell your master and Doctor Hyde when we have proved it. If not, we can keep our own counsel, and shall have done no harm."

The mulatto, with a rapidly growing respect for Mr. Parker, listened attentively, and it was quite half an hour before he left the room, and then he went about the house with his sweet good-tempered smile, quiet face, and quiet footstep as usual.

The next time he was sent to the sick room Mrs. Allenby opened the door rather wider than was customary, and stepped out on the landing.

"I was asleep when you came in this morning," she said, with her unvarying pleasant manner.

"Yes, madam," he said, with an unmoved countenance. "I tried to wake you, but I could not, so I set the chicken broth over the spirit lamp and cleared the room."

"You are very kind and thoughtful, Sensi, and would make an excellent nurse. Will you please tell the cook or the housemaid, or whoever cleans that china and glass to be very careful that they are quite bright and dry, the medicine glasses especially; they generally are, but if there is the slightest smear or dullness it is so distasteful."

"I always do that myself," said Sensi, with that same unmoved face and respectful attitude, "they are too busy."

"Then you attended to those you took down this morning?"

"Yes, madam."

"That is right. Will you be good enough to say there is a slight change for the better, and Doctor Hyde may come up when he arrives?"

The mulatto bowed and went downstairs; if she could have seen his dark face when it was turned away from her Mrs. Allenby would have trembled.

He took the message down, to the intense relief of the household, though a similar message had gone down many times before. George Hyde thought, or hope and love made him think, he saw favorable signs when he went into the room, and Mrs. Allenby cheered him with a few words.

(To be Continued.)