

## The Fireside.

### ONLY A WOMAN.

BY HANNAH B. MACKENZIE.

"A lady doctor! Heaven defend us from her, Molly! Have the townfolk all gone mad?"

"The townfolk cannot keep a lady-doctor out of Levenbridge if she chooses to come, Ralph," said Mrs. Tom Leslie, with some spirit. She respected her brother, Ralph Hume, owner of the Levenbridge Paper Works, and was proud of him, as she had been all her life; but his dogmatic and intolerant opinions sometimes set her on the defensive. "And I am sure Levenbridge needs a new doctor, and one with some spirit and sense. The other two are petrified old mummies—nothing more!"

"I hope the lady doctor may not cross my path, that's all," said Hume grimly. "Well, Molly, I must be off. Tell Tom to think seriously over what I've said. If he goes in for the contest he'll have a strong body of supporters."

Little Mollie kissed her big brother, and looked after him as he strode down the pathway with a smile. But she was thinking not of him, but of "Tom," who owned the property of Borthwick, was an advocate and a very clever fellow, and had been asked to stand for Levenbridge in the coming parliamentary contest.

Ralph Hume strode along the pretty country road, not twenty miles from Edinburgh. He was a man of three-and-thirty, well made, upright, with a resolute step, and a strong yet not unkindly face. For three generations the Humes had been owners of the Levenbridge Paper Works. There was a colony of the workers at Northend, the poorest part of Levenbridge, and Hume owned most of the houses. He was a well-known and a deeply-respected man in Levenbridge; yet it was doubtful if any, beyond Molly, his sister, loved him.

He crossed the old Roman bridge leading into Northend. A long, unsavory street ran along by the river's edge; the stream was the River Caddon, which supplied his own mills with water-power. The back alleys lying beyond the main street were less savory. The mill-hands were not over-particular as to cleanliness and sanitation.

A girl passed Ralph Hume, walking swiftly, with a light, firm footstep. He did not know her. She was a mere girl, and something in her light, slim, yet active figure, in the poise of her little brown head, in the irrepressible energy of her steps, drew Hume's attention. He did not see her face.

She was past him when she suddenly paused, wheeled round, and spoke.

"Can you tell me where Miners' Buildings are, please?"

"Certainly. Take the first turning to the left; you will find yourself in a square yard; Miners' Buildings are to the left."

"Thank you."

He saw her face now, a little pale, but very sweet and frank, the clear dark eyes looked straight, with childlike direction into his face. Who was she?

He had been in London for a fortnight on business, and only returned the day before. She must be some stranger visiting the old town—"English," he thought, from her accent.

She turned away with a bow, and

walked on; at the same moment a ragged urchin shot down an alley, and rushed up to her. Ralph Hume heard the child's exclamation:

"Come, awa', miss—oh, come fast! The barin's deein', and me mither is near daft."

He saw the girl stoop and take the child's hand. Hume stood staring after them. The truth had dawned upon him so suddenly as to be bewildering.

The girl was the new doctor of Levenbridge—the lady-doctor.

Ralph Hume walked home in an unreasonable temper. He felt irritated by the discovery that this sweet-faced girl, in whom he had actually taken a momentary interest, was the woman whose coming had annoyed him so much.

Hume was a good man, but he had the faults of a good man. He was intolerant, stubborn, "dour," as the Scotch word is: once he had taken an idea into his head nothing would oust it. And he was a rigid Conservative; he hated innovations and changes. A woman's place in the past had been the home, the fireside; what right had she now to step beyond that? If she did so, he, at least, would treat her with the opposition, the discourtesy even, which she courted in usurping a man's place.

He was destined to hear plenty about her. Levenbridge was divided into two parties: the one the more aristocratic, for the most part ostracised and opposed the new-comer; the other, the Northend folk, adored her. She was ready at every one's call, whether they could pay her or not. "The lady-doctor—God bless her!" Hume heard on every side. It irritated the man still further against her.

One day—it was in the beginning of November—she called to see him in his office. Hume at first felt inclined to say he would not see her; but he thought better of it, and told the clerk to admit her.

She came in, quietly, gravely, without the slightest embarrassment or hesitation, her sweet face grave and anxious. Hume rose and offered her a seat stiffly. He had met and been introduced to her, but his greeting was of the stiffest and most formal when they met in the street.

"I have come," said the lady-doctor, going to the point at once, about those houses in Miners' Yard, Mr. Hume. I am sure you have no idea that their continued existence is a peril to the whole community. The foundations are rotten, the stagnant water has lodged beneath them. They must come down."

As a matter of fact, Hume had meant to see to these miserable cottages at once; Olive Mayrick's words made him change his mind. He turned a face cold as stone to her.

"If I refuse I suppose you will apply to the sanitary authorities?"

"I hope there is no necessity for that," Olive Mayrick replied, a tone of surprise in her voice. "I concluded that you only required to know the facts of the case to take the requisite steps, Mr. Hume."

"None of the other medical men have complained to me," said Hume coldly. "You are a new-comer, Dr. Mayrick, and cannot possibly know as much of the case as the old and tried practitioners. I cannot take your word, unsupported by any evidence."

"But I have evidence—all the evidence that any one could require," said Olive quickly, even warmly. Then, as if checking herself, "Ask Dr. Carmichael and Dr. Whyte to examine the houses, Mr. Hume. I am positive their verdict will be the same as mine."

"I do not intend to," he answered, not looking at her, but speaking in a hard, harsh tone. "I have not the slightest doubt but that either of these gentlemen would have come to me with a complaint before now if they saw any necessity for it. I would not insult their self-respect by hinting that they have neglected the interests, the common safety, of the community. And you will pardon me for saying, Dr. Mayrick, that I am old-fashioned and conservative enough to go by old and tried customs rather than by new; so that, until I learn that feminine intelligence on medical subjects is superior to masculine, I shall continue to consult in all matters requiring medical advice my old friends, who have been in Levenbridge since I can remember."

Olive Mayrick rose. There was a crimson spot on each pale cheek. She was roused at last.

"In that case there is no more to be said," she responded, in her own voice like ice. "Good day, Mr. Hume."

She was gone.

Never in his life had Ralph Hume endured a worse half-hour than that which followed. He knew, in his deepest soul, she was right—to a certain extent, at least. Was he going to imperil the safety, perhaps the lives, of his work-people—nay, as she had said, of the whole community—in obedience to a mere preconceived personal whim?

Ralph Hume was so thoroughly conscientious a man that he could not rest until he had gone to old Dr. Carmichael and consulted him about Miners' Yard. When Dr. Carmichael "pooh-poohed" the idea of the houses being unhealthy, Hume felt, with a sigh of relief, that he could let the matter drop.

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This was in the month of September. Two months later, in the dark, misty, unhealthy days of November, there was a case of illness in Miners' Yard.

The news—at first only a whisper, then seeming to swell into a roar—flew through the whole town. It was a case of typhoid.

By the time Christmas was at hand the fever was raging from end to end, not in Northend alone, but in all Levenbridge.

The three doctors had their hands full enough. The fever spread like a plague from house to house, from street to street; and the damp, unwholesome mist which lay low on the valley of the Caddon helped to retain it. The wealthy left the town, but even some of them were stricken down elsewhere. Hume's mills were still open, but every day fresh hands were taken on as the old ones were smitten down.

What Ralph Hume's feelings were none could say. He felt that it was he alone whose obstinacy and perversity had brought this plague on the town. Every death of which he heard, every funeral he passed in the street—made him feel like a murderer.

A temporary hospital was started; Hume bore the heaviest part of the expense. Nurses were sent down from Edinburgh; old Dr. Carmichael gave way and left the town; he was an old man, and of delicate constitution. The other two fought single-handed, as if with death itself.

Ralph Hume heard the name of Olive Mayrick everywhere. She worked with

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a courage and hopefulness that never failed, fighting on to victory inch by inch, like one who does not know how to yield; she sat up nights sometimes, nursing the dying child of stricken parents or the dying mothers of sick children. When the children died, she brought linen wherein to lay them, out of her own slender purse, and, stooping over them, kissed their folded hands, her own warm tears dropping on them. "She's one o' the angels of the Lord; God Almighty bless her!" said a toil-hardened worker to Ralph Hume, speaking of that last sweet act of her's, the tears running down his own cheeks. And Ralph Hume has turned away, feeling as if a knife had stabbed him.

He saw Olive sometimes going to and fro, looking paler and thinner, but always with the same bright smile; and he dreaded, yet longed, to meet her alone, and tell her with what bitter re-

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