

SWEETHEARTS.

It is ill for the general practitioner who sits among his patients both morning and evening and sees them in their homes between the hours of ten and twelve daily breath of fresh air. To win it he must slip early from his bed and walk out between shutters, when it is chill, but clear, and all things are sharply outlined, as in a frost. It is an hour that has a charm of its own, when but for a postman or a milkman, one has the pavement to oneself, and even the most common thing takes an ever recurring freshness, as though causeway and lamp and signboard had all awakened to the new day. Then even an inland city may seem beautiful and bear witness in its smoke tattered air.

But it was by the sea that I lived in a town that was lovely enough were it not for its glorious neighbor. And who cares for the town when one can sit on the beach at the headland and look out over the huge blue bay and the yellow scimitar that curves before it? I loved it when its great face was freckled with the fishing boats, and I loved it when the big ships went past, far out, a little hillock of white and no hull, with topsails curved like a bodice, so stately and demure. But most of all I loved it when no trace of man marred the majesty of nature and when the sunbursts slanted down on it from between the drifting rainclouds. Then I have seen the farther edge draped in the gauze of the driving rain, with its thin gray shading under the clouds, while my headland was golden, and the sun gleamed upon the breakers and struck deep through the green waves beyond, showing up the purple patches where the beds of seaweed are lying. Such a morning as that, with the wind in his hair and the spray on his lips and the cry of the eddy gulls in his ear, may send a man back braced afresh to the work of a lifetime and the dead drab weariness of practice.

It was on such another day that I first saw my old man. He came to my bench just as I was leaving it. My eye must have picked him out even in a crowded street, for he was a man of large frame and fine presence, with something of distinction in the set of his lip and the poise of his head. He limped up the winding path, leaning heavily on his stick, as though those great shoulders had become too much at last for the failing limbs that bore them. As he approached my eye caught nature's danger signal—that faint bluish tinge in nose and lip which tells of a laboring heart.

"The brace is a little trying, sir," said I. "Speaking as a physician, I should say that you would do well to rest here before you go further." He inclined his head in a stately old world fashion and seated himself upon the bench. Seeing that he had no wish to speak, I was silent also, but I could not help watching him out of the corner of my eyes, for he was such a survival of the early half of the century, with his low crowned, curly brimmed hat, his black satin tie, which fastened with a buckle at the back, and above all, his large, fleshy, clean shaven face, shot with its mesh of wrinkles. Those eyes, ere they had grown dim, had looked out from the box seat of mail coaches and had seen the knots of navvies as they toiled on the brown embankments. Those lips had smiled over the first number of "Punch" and had gossiped of the promising young man who wrote them. The face itself was a 70 year almanac and every seam and crease upon it, were public as well as private sorrow left its trace.

The pucker on the forehead stood for the mutiny perhaps; that line of care for the Crimean winter, it may be, and that last little sheaf of wrinkles, as my fancy hoped, for the death of Gordon. And so as I dreamed in my foolish way, the old gentleman with the shining stock was gone, and it was 70 years of a great nation's life that took shape before me on the headland in the morning.

But he soon brought me back to earth again. As he recovered his breath he took a letter out of his pocket, and putting on a pair of horn rimmed eye glasses he read it through very carefully. Without any design of playing the spy I could not help observing that it was in a woman's hand. When he had finished it he read it again, and then sat with the corners of his mouth drawn down and his eyes staring vacantly out over the bay, the most forlorn looking old gentleman that ever I have seen. All that was kindly within me was set stirring by that wistful face, but I knew that he was in no humor for talk, and so at last, with my breakfast and my patients calling me, I left him on the bench and started for home.

I never gave him another thought until the next morning, when at the same hour, he turned upon the headland and shared the bench which I had been accustomed to look upon as my own. He bowed again before sitting down, but was no more inclined than before to enter into conversation. There had been a change in him during the last 24 hours, and all for the worse. The face seemed more heavy and more wrinkled, while that ominous venous tinge was more pronounced as he panted up the hill. The clean lines of his cheek and chin were marred by a day's growth of gray stubble, and his large, shapely head had lost something of the brave carriage which had struck me when first I glanced at him.

He had a letter there, the same or another, but still in a woman's hand, and over this he was moping and numbing in his senile fashion, with his brow puckered and the corners of his mouth drawn down like those of a fretting child. So I left him, with a vague wonder as to who he might be and why a single spring day should have wrought such a change upon him.

So interested was I that next morning I was on the lookout for him. Sure enough, at the same hour, I saw him coming up the hill, but very slowly, with a bent back and a heavy head. It was shocking to me to see the change in him as he approached.

"I am afraid that our air does not agree with you, sir," I ventured to remark. But it was as though he had no heart for talk. He tried, as I thought, to make some fitting reply, but it slurred off into a mumble and silence. How bent and weak and old he seemed—ten years older at the least than when first I had seen him! It went to my heart to see this sweet old fellow wasting away before my eyes. There was the eternal letter, which he unfolded with his shaking fingers. Who was this woman whose words moved him so? Some daughter, perhaps, or granddaughter, who should have been the light of his home instead of—! I smiled to find how bitter I was growing and how swiftly I was weaving a romance round an unshaven old man and his correspondence. Yet all day he lingered in my mind, and I had fiftful glimpses of those two trembling, blue veined knuckly hands, with the paper rustling between them.

I had hardly hoped to see him again. Another day's decline must, I thought, hold him to his room, if not to his bed. Great, then, was my surprise when, as I approached my bench, I saw that he was already there. But as I came up to him I could scarce be sure that it was indeed the same man. There was the curly brimmed hat, and the shining stock, and the horn glasses, but where were the stoop and the gray stubbled, pitiable face? He was clean shaven and firm lipped, with a bright eye and a head that poised itself upon his shoulders like an eagle on a rock. His back was as straight and square as a grenadier's, and he switched at the pebbles with his stick in his exuberant vitality. In the button-hole of his well brushed black coat there glinted a golden blossom, and the corner of a dainty red silk handkerchief lapped over from his breast pocket. He might have been the eldest son of the weary creature who had sat there the morning before.

"Good morning, sir, good morning!" he cried, with a merry waggle of his cane. "Good morning!" I answered. "How beautiful the bay is looking!" "Yes, sir, but you should have seen it just before the sun rose."

"What you have been here since then?"

"I was here when there was a light to see the path."

"You are a very early riser."

"On occasion, sir, on occasion." He looked his eye at me as if to gauge whether I were worthy of his confidence. "The fact is, sir, that my wife is coming back to me to-day."

I suppose that my face showed that I did not quite see the force of the explanation. My eyes, too, may have given him assurance of sympathy, for he moved quite close to me and began speaking in a low, confidential voice, as if the matter were of such weight that even the sea gulls must be kept out of our counsels.

"Are you a married man, sir?"

"No, I am not."

"Ah, then you cannot quite understand it. My wife and I have been married for nearly 50 years, and we have never been parted, never at all until now."

"Was it for long?" I asked.

"Yes, sir. This is the fourth day. She had to go to Scotland—a matter of duty, you understand—and the doctors would not let me go. Not that I would have allowed them to stop me, but she was on their side. Now, thank God, it is over, and she may be here at any moment."

"Here?"

"Yes, here. This headland and bench were old friends of ours 30 years ago. The people with whom we stay are not, to tell the truth, very congenial, and we have little privacy among them. That is why we prefer to meet here. I could not be sure which train would bring her, but if she had come by the very earliest she would have found me waiting."

"In that case," said I, rising. "No, sir, no," he entreated. "I beg that you will stay. It does not weary you, this domestic talk of mine?"

"On the contrary."

"I have been so driven inward during these last few days. Ah, what a nightmare it has been! It was very good in writing, but still it was dreadful. Perhaps it may seem strange to you that an old fellow like me should feel like this?"

"It is charming."

"No credit to me, sir! There's not a man on this planet but would feel the same if he had the good fortune to be married to such a woman. Perhaps because you see me like this and hear me speak of our long life together, you conceive that she is old too. You laughed heartily, and his eyes twinkled at the humor of the idea."

"She's one of those women, you know, who have youth in their hearts, and so it can never be very far from their faces. To me she's just as she was when she first took my hand in hers, in 1845. A wee little bit stouter, perhaps, but then, if she had a fault as a girl, it was that she was a shade too slender. She was above me in station, you know—I a clerk and she the daughter of my employer. Oh, it was quite a romance, I give you my word, and I won her, and somehow I have never got over of the freshness and the wonder of it! To think that that sweet, lovely girl has walked by my side all through life, and that I have been able—"

He stopped suddenly, and I glanced round at him in surprise. He was shaking all over, in every fiber of his great body. His hands were clanking at the woodwork and his feet shuffling on the gravel. I saw what it was. He was trying to rise, but was so excited that he could not. I had extended my hand, but a higher courtesy constrained me to draw it back again and turn my face to the sea. An instant afterward he was up and hurrying down the path.

A woman was coming toward us. She was quite close before he had seen her—30 yards at the utmost. I know not if she had ever been as he described her, or whether it was but some idea which he carried in his brain. The person upon whom I looked was tall, it is true, but she was thick and shapeless, with a ruddy, full blown face and a skirt grotesquely gathered up. There was a green ribbon in her hat which jarred upon my eyes, and her blouse-like bodice was full and clumsy. And this was the lovely girl, the ever youthful! My heart sank as I thought how little such a woman might appreciate him, how unworthy she might be of his love.

She came up the path in her solid way, while he staggered along to meet her. Then, as they came together, looking discreetly out of the farthest corner of my eye, I saw that he put out both his hands like a child when his little journey is done, while she, shrinking from a public caress, took one of them in hers and shook it. As she did so I saw her face, and I was easy in my mind for my old man. God grant that when this hand is shaking and when this back is bowed a woman's eyes may look so into mine!

THE SABBATH BREAKER.

The moment came near for the Polish centenary grandmother to die. From the doctor's statement she had only a bad quarter of an hour to live. Her attack had been sudden, and the grandchildren she loved to scold could not be present.

She had already battled through the great wave of pain and was drifting beyond the boundaries of her earthly refuge. The nurses, forgetting the trouble her querulous nature and overweening dietary scruples had cost them, hung over the bed in which the shriveled entity lay. They did not know that she was living again through the one great episode of her life.

Nearly forty years back when though already hard upon 70, and a widow, a Polish village was all her horizon, she received a letter. It arrived on the eve of the Sabbath, on a day of rainy summer. It was from her little boy—her only boy—who kept a country inn 37 miles away and had a family. She opened the letter with feverish anxiety. Her son—her kaddish—was the apple of her eye. The grandmother eagerly perused the Hebrew script, from right to left. Then weakness overcame her, and she nearly fell.

Embedded casually enough in the four pages was a passage that stood out for her in letters of blood: "I am not feeling very well lately. The weather is so oppressive, and the nights are misty. But it is nothing serious. My digestion is a little out of order, that's all." There was rubles for her in the letter, but she let them fall to the floor unheeded. Panic fear, traveling quicker than the tardy post of those days, had brought rumor of a sudden outbreak of cholera in her son's district. Already alarm for her boy had surged about her heart all day. The letter confirmed her worst apprehensions. Even if the worst touch of the cholera fiend was not actually on him when he wrote, still he was, by his own confession, in that condition in which the disease takes easiest grip. By this time he was on a bed of sickness—nay, perhaps on his deathbed, if not dead. Even in those days the little grandmother had lived beyond the common span. She had seen many people die, and knew that the angel of death does not go about his work leisurely. In an epidemic his hands are too full to enable him to devote much attention to each case.

Maternal instinct tugged at her heartstrings, drawing her towards her boy. The end of the letter seemed impregnated with special omen: "Come and see me soon, dear little mother. I shall be unable to get to you for some time." Yes, she must go at once. Who knew but that it would be the last time she would look upon his face?

But then came a terrible thought to give her pause. The Sabbath was just "in" a moment ago. Driving, riding, or any manner of journeying was prohibited during the next 24 hours. Frantically she reviewed the situation. Religion permitted the violation of the Sabbath on one condition—if life was to be saved. By no stretch of logic could she delude herself into the belief that her son's recovery hinged upon her presence. Nay, analyzing the case with the cruel remorselessness of a scrupulous conscience, she saw his very illness was only a plausible hypothesis. No. To go to him now were beyond question to profane the Sabbath.

And yet, beneath all the reasoning, her conviction that he was sick unto death, her resolve to set out at once never wavered. After an agonizing struggle she compromised. She could not go by cart. That would be to make others work into the bargain, and would, moreover, involve a financial transaction. She must walk! Sinful as it was to transgress the limit of 2,000 yards beyond her village, the distance fixed by rabbinical law, there was no help for it. And of all the forms of traveling walking was surely the least sinful. The Holy One, blessed be he, would make allowances for an old woman who had never profaned his rest day before.

And so that very evening, having made a hasty meal and lodged the precious letter in her bosom, the little grandmother girded up her loins to walk the seven and thirty miles. No staff took she with her, for to carry such came under the Talmudical definition of "work." Neither could she carry an umbrella, though it was a season of rain. Mile after mile she strode briskly toward the pallid face which lay so far beyond the horizon and yet

ever shone before her eyes like a guiding star. "I am coming, my lamb," she muttered. "The little mother is on the way."

It was a muggy night. The sky, flushed while a weird hectic glamour, seemed to hang over the earth like a pall. The trees that lined the roadway were shrouded in a dragging vapor. At midnight the mist blotted out the stars. But the little grandmother knew the road ran straight. All night she walked through the forest, fearless as Una, meeting neither man nor beast, though the wolf and the bear haunted its recesses and snakes lurked in the bushes. But only the innocent squirrels darted across her path. The morning found her spent and almost lame. But she walked on. Almost half the journey was yet to do.

She had nothing with her to eat. Food, too, was an illegal burden, nor could she buy any on the holy day. She said her Sabbath morning prayer walking, hoping God would forgive the disrespect. The recital gave her partial oblivion of her pains. As she passed through a village the dreadful rumor of cholera was confirmed. It gave wings to her feet for ten minutes. Then bodily weakness was stronger than everything else, and she had to lean against the bushes on the outskirts of the village. It was nearly noon. A passing beggar gave her a piece of bread. Fortunately it was un-buttered, so she could eat it with only minor qualms, lest it had touched an unclean thing. She resumed her journey, but the rest had only made her feet move painfully and reluctantly. She would have liked to bathe them in a brook but that, too, was forbidden. She took the letter from her bosom and reperused it and whipped up her flagging strength with a cry of, "Courage, my lamb; the little mother is on the way." Then the leaden clouds melted into sharp lines of rain, which beat into her face, refreshing her for the first few minutes, but so wetting her to the skin, making her sopped garments a heavier burden, and reducing the pathway to mud that clogged still further her feeble footsteps. In the teeth of the wind and the driving shower she limped on. A fresh anxiety consumed her now—would she have strength to hold out? Every moment her pace lessened. She was moving like a snail. And the slower she went the more vivid grew her presence of what awaited her at the journey's end. Would she even hear his dying word? Perhaps—terrible thought—she would only be in time to look upon his dead face! Perhaps that was how God would punish her for her desecration of the holy day. "Take heart, my lamb," she whispered. "Do not die yet. The little mother comes."

The rain stopped. The sun came out hot and fierce and dried her hands and face, then made them stream again with perspiration. Every inch won was torture now, but the brave feet toiled on. Bruised and swollen and crippled, they toiled on. There was a dying voice—very far off yet, alas—that called to her, and as she dragged herself along she cried: "I am coming, my lamb. Take heart! The little mother is on the way. Courage! I shall look upon thy face. I shall find thee alive!"

Once a wagoner observed her plight and offered her a lift, but she shook her head steadfastly. The endless afternoon wore on. She crawled along the forest way stumbling every now and then from sheer faintness and tearing her hands and face in the brambles of the roadside. At last the cruel sun waned, and reeking mist rose from the forest pools. And still the long miles stretched away, and still she plodded on, torpid from over exertion, scarcely conscious, taking each step only because she had taken the preceding. From time to time her lips mumbled. "Take heart, my lamb; I am coming." The Sabbath was "out" ere, broken and bleeding, and all but swooning, the little grandmother crawled up to her son's inn, on the border of the forest. Her heart was cold with fatal forebodings. There was none of the usual Saturday night litter of Polish peasantry about the door. The sound of many voices, wailing and lamenting, floated into the night. A man in a caftan opened the door and mysteriously raised his forefinger to bid her enter without noise. The little grandmother saw into the room behind. Her daughter-in-law and her grandchildren were seated on the floor—the seat of mourners.

"Blessed be the true Judge," she said, and rent the skirt of her dress. "When did he die?"

"Yesterday. We had to bury him hastily ere the Sabbath came in."

The little grandmother lifted up her quivering voice and joined the hymn: "I will sing a new song unto thee, O God! Upon a harp of ten strings will I sing praises unto thee."

The nurses could not understand what sudden inflow of strength and impulse raised the mummified figure into a sitting posture. The little grandmother thrust a shriveled claw into her peaked, shrunken bosom and drew out a paper, crumpled and yellow as herself, covered with strange, crabbed hieroglyphics, whose hue had long since faded. She held it close to her bleared eyes. A beautiful light came into them and illumined the million puckered face. "The lips moved faintly. 'I am coming, my lamb,' she mumbled. 'Courage! The little mother is on the way. I shall look on thy face. I shall find thee alive.'"

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