

AT THE DOCTOR'S DOOR.

(Continued from page 2, column 3.)

prayed for strength to tell someone—tell anyone about her beaded bag. Yet her mind, darkening and darkening...

“You’re all beat out,” a shrill voice was saying in her ear. “Can’t I get you something?” again the voice urged through the whirling mist.

“Bottle—in my handbag,” she found the strength to whisper. She opened her eyes and dimly made out the dull complexion and untidy hair of Wanda Holt bending over her.

“You haven’t got any handbag with you,” Wanda was groping round her skirts and the chair. She seemed then to fly away for a long time.

“Your bag’s not at the table,” the voice said again close to her ear. “Maybe somebody took it.”

The mind which still lived within Alberta told her that the girl who had danced away with Ronny Pray had taken her beaded bag. There seemed no way now but to go quickly to her husband.

“If you’ll call a taxi,” she managed to whisper. “Shall I tell you—?” “No. Let me go—alone.”

She was conscious of struggling to her feet and attempting flight. A balustrade caught her on one side and the little girl in the Peter Pan costume held her on the other.

A man from the door came and guided her down the rest of the way. She was passing things with distorted distinctness, as though she were looking into a bright room through a slit in a black curtain.

As she was helped out toward the street she was aware of two red-faced men in costume who grinned unpleasantly. “So soon?” asked one, winking.

“What a waste of good liquor!” commiserated the other. “And the evening is just begun.”

Wanda had helped her into the taxicab and she had collapsed among the cushions. She saw the plain little woman leaning anxiously in and heard her inquire:

“Where do you want to go?” Alberta was conscious of all this and aware of pronouncing her husband’s name. But she knew, in a sort of vague, disembodied despair, that the words never got beyond the barrier of her lips.

“Drive to the nearest drugstore. Be quick,” she heard Wanda order the driver as she got in beside her, and slammed the door and put her scrawny arm protectively around her shoulders.

At the moment when the front door banged upon Alberta and her red knight, Dr. Plaisted stood at the head of the stairs and smiled rather sadly down upon their departure.

He wondered at the nervous strength of this delicate-looking woman, her hunger for enjoyment which kept her going on and on for periods of activity which, if devoted to any sort of useful work, would put a strong man in the hospital.

Dr. Plaisted rated himself as a strong man, yet in his younger days when he had gone in for the physical endurance he had lacked of these long spells under strain.

“The nervous reserve in women,” thought he, “which Nature has stored up against the needs of motherhood.”

Lacking children, women must go looking for an Aztec Ball somewhere and dance until they drop. And then they send for the doctor.

He went into his dispensary and lit one of the rank cigarettes which he had affected since his medical-student days. With the first indrawing of the smoke he wondered if Bertie were in good health.

Her life had been a few weeks ago; but she never complained of anything. At any rate, it wouldn’t be a bad plan to give her an overhauling. She needed a talking-to—perhaps a month or so of enforced rest in the country.

He was sorry he had been so busy with their confounded frivolous practice of his as not to give her the proper amount of attention. After all, in spite of her ambition and ability, Bertie was a good deal of a child. What was it that detestable old bore, Bobly, had said about pretty women?

“To give beauty to some women is like giving dynamite to a baby.” Dr. Channing Plaisted was not a jealous man. His faith in his wife was founded on the knowledge of the love which they bore for the other.

wind, he thought, as he tossed it back, buttoned the flap and restored the bag to its place behind the door.

He turned out the light and shuffled into his bedroom and threw aside his bathrobe. He hoped Bertie wouldn’t wake him when she came in, as he must get a good night’s sleep if he would endure old Hellig in the morning.

He had been dreaming of battle. The Hun had just chained him to a stake and pointed a machine-gun at his head. “Don’t!” he had screamed as the machine went rat-tat-tatting with a curiously bell-like sound.

He sat up in bed. The telephone on the little table at his elbow was ringing furiously. “Hello, hello,” half-awake and furious at the interruption of his repose.

“Is this Dr. Plaisted?” The voice which came to him was thin and plebeian, not the distinguished utterance of his chosen clientele. However, he reflected rapidly, this might be a maid from some important house, honoring him with a night-call.

“Yes. This is Dr. Plaisted,” he answered guardedly. “I have a very sick woman here, Doctor,” wavered the voice, which seemed to grow higher with every word and to break with anxiety. “She seems to have a heart attack and I’m afraid that if she doesn’t get attention right away she’ll collapse.”

Dr. Plaisted’s first impulse was to leap out of bed, array himself in the garments of emergency and be off to the call of duty. Strange that Bertie had been so insistent on this very night—after all, she wouldn’t be hard with him in a case like this.

He swung half-way out of bed and switched on the electric light over the small clock on the stand. It now lacked a quarter of three.

“I think I might—” he was beginning to promise the telephone when his eye was caught by that correspondence card, scribbled across with Bertie’s frivolous handwriting. It lay accusingly under the light beside the clock.

“I take no patients after ten p. m.,” he repeated aloud as he read. “Oh, but you must!” came the urgent treble over the wire. “She’s in dreadful shape. I can’t get anyone else.”

“Is she a patient of mine?” asked Plaisted guardedly, his eye still upon Alberta’s card, as though for moral support.

“I don’t know.” The voice had risen to a sort of panic-stricken wail. “I’ve scarcely met her. She’s a Miss Warren—but what difference does it make?”

What difference should it make? Plaisted cast the eye of an inner conscience on Alberta’s scribbled warning as it stared up at him under the light. There was something ghostlike in the frantic, broken appeal of the telephone, coming to him out of the dark—as though it had been sent as a rebuke for the selfish ways into which his life was falling.

“How did you come to be calling me?” the physician temporized. “I know a doctor up on Riverside Drive. He was too far away and mentioned you as—”

“Where is the patient now?” asked Plaisted, somewhat wearily. “She’s in my studio. Washington Square South—”

That settled the matter. Probably some Bohemian had taken a bit too much to drink. Bertie’s card seemed to nod approval to the thought.

“I’m very sorry.” It came much easier now for him to refuse. “I’ve made it a rule not to go out for night-cases. There’s a younger man who attends to night-cases for me—a Dr. Chase.”

“I know—my doctor mentioned him. But I’ve called him up a dozen times—he isn’t there.”

“I’m sorry.” Wearily he tried to keep his temper, thinking how this senseless interruption to his sleep would spoil his game in the morning.

“You’ll probably find someone by looking around.” He snapped up the receiver and sank back upon his pillow. He lay for some time in a half-waking state, that nasal little voice spectral and cruel on the surface of it, he argued to himself. But a doctor’s work must be like a soldier’s—no place for sentimentality. Bertie had been quite right in insisting on this rule—Bertie had a way of being right in practical things. A doctor must have his hours of rest just like any other worker or he’ll never be good for anything.

What was the lazy little beggar, Chase, doing at this time of night? The visitation seemed to hang over his pillow, taunting him out of his sleep. He lay there stupidly for a long time, momentarily dreading the jangle of that telephone and that shrill voice crying: “What difference does it make? She’s in a desperately bad condition—”

“I’m getting maudlin!” snarled the doctor and turned over on his pillow. Again the telephone jangled.

“Hello!” shouted Dr. Plaisted violently at the specter. “This is Miss Holt again—oh, Doctor—you must come. I can’t get anybody—the hospital says I’m out of their district—she’s dying! Oh, come, please, or she can’t live!”

“Miss Holt, this is very irregular—I—” Against that storm he seemed perfectly inadequate. “I don’t care how irregular it is,” said the nasal voice decisively. “I want you to come and help her before she dies.”

“It’s probably not so bad as that,” he replied soothingly. “Suppose you get a taxi-cab and bring her over to my house.”

“But she’s too ill to move.” “Oh, you can get her here, I’m sure.” “That’s very cruel, Dr. Plaisted.” It cut into his ear like a whip of steel.

“But Miss Holt—” There was no reply. She had shut him off.

He was not at all sure what the impatient Miss Holt had decided to do, but just the same he couldn’t lie supinely wooing sleep with her reproaches ringing like a box in the ear. He was guiltily glad that Bertie had not come home yet, for he obeyed an impulse to slip into his bathrobe and shuffle over to his dispensary, where he turned on the light and went clinking among his medicine bottles. Perhaps the sick woman might be brought to his doorstep; and

in such a contingency he could not well refuse her aid and comfort.

The doorknob rang and Dr. Plaisted, fussing with the cord of his gray bathrobe, went shuffling down the stairs. In the square of face on the street-lamps, he could see a shadowy group—a man with a military hat, a woman with a queer headdress and between them something drooping and formless. The physician groped for the button on the wall to switch on the electric light; and he swore softly as he pressed his thumb against the button, for the hall remained in darkness.

“Blasted thing burned out!” he growled and, feeling for the knob, opened the door to his untimely callers.

There was something vaguely terrifying about the group which now confronted him silently. A stout man in the untidy uniform of a chauffeur, a small, gnome-like person in a garb which was neither man’s nor woman’s; loosely like a corpse, her head hanging, her body draped in a man’s overcoat, a woman’s helpless figure.

“We’ll have to get her up stairs,” the doctor announced without ado. “The lights have gone out down here.”

“She ain’t nothing to carry,” gruffly explained the man in the cap, lifting the bundle in his arms and surging into the hall and up the stairs.

The doctor followed stiffly in the wake of the girl in the Peter Pan costume. Belated conscience was upon him and he protested to the small person ahead.

“If I had known you were having so much trouble getting a doctor—” “I know!” shrilled the nasal voice.

“I told you plainly enough. I think your sleep is worth more than a human life!”

By the glare from above he could see her plain, thin face with its short hair and gnome-like eyes, one furious mask of accusation.

“She’ll be all right in a short time, I’m sure,” soothed the doctor. Meanwhile, the chauffeur with his burden had struggled into the dispensary at the first landing. He was bending over the sick woman, easing her down upon a leather couch when Dr. Plaisted entered, so he did not see standing plainly in view of the blanched face with its half-closed eyes, laboring nostrils and tangle of soft, brilliant hair, recognition, at first, turned him into an unknowing lump, for he stood perfectly still, fingering the cord of his bathrobe.

“Aren’t you going to do something?” screamed the gnome woman, clutching him by the arm and shaking him back to life.

“Why certainly—good Lord!” He threw himself down beside her, lifted the lids of those drooping eyes, put his ear to her heaving breast; and even in the midst of the routine of his trade he was moaning insanely.

“Bertie! Speak to me—what’s happened to you?” In another instant he was running toward his medicines and fumbling inadequately with the test-tube.

“Here you!” he called roughly to the Peter Pan girl. “Hold this over the flame.” He was trying to fit a needle to the hypodermic syringe, but his hands trembled so that he twice failed.

“Why in the world didn’t you tell me who it was?” he asked the girl savagely.

“Isn’t one life as good as another?” she glared back. “I told you it was Miss Warren—that’s the name she gave me.”

“Told you!” he growled. “You idiot—she’s my wife!”

He had rushed back to the couch and dug the point of the needle deep into the smooth, white arm. There came no response, for the breast had wider open, stared unseeing. Over the side of the brown couch her beautiful hair rilled like a flood of crystal.

Again the doctor raised one of the drooping eyelids, and now he bit his lip as if to suppress the thing that was tearing him apart.

Suddenly he stood straight up and threw the hypodermic needle wildly across the room.

“It’s curious—how it could have happened,” he kept saying with a vacant, puzzled look.

Wanda Holt had been standing quietly by the door, and when she found she was going to cry she ran precipitately down the stairs. In the darkness of the lower hall she made out the fat chauffeur, true to his business, waiting for his fare.

“Want the taxi any more?” he asked in a voice which somehow managed to convey understanding.

Quite unable to answer, she opened the door and let him follow her out into the street. The little eccentric vehicle he had been keeping at her disposal since their departure from the Aztec Ball waited, a melancholy

lump with a single glaring eye, close to the curb.

“I—I’ll walk home,” replied Wanda, dazedly looking from his face, which was round and blank like a full moon.

“Well, who’s paying for this ride?” he asked gruffly.

She took her eyes from his stare and glanced up at the pleasant, white-trimmed brick house from whose second story a light still shone with a sort of hypocritical cheerfulness.

“Oh,” she replied at last as she turned toward Washington Square, “collect from the Doctor. This party seems to be on him!”—By Wallace Irwin, in Hearst’s Magazine.

Reportorial Repartee.

The proofreader in a small Middle Western daily was a woman of great precision and great propriety. One day the reporter succeeded in getting into the type an item about eyes getting into the West End by a live wire.

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