

A Riddle Of Terror

By HOWARD FIELDING

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THEY were a strangely assorted couple, but I am used to that because I had hospital experience and a few years' private practice in New York before I came to Glenshaw. Away from the crowded centers, however, one still expects that people will exercise at least a rudimentary discretion in mating.

The wife was dignified by the respect which her great-grandfather had felt for her great-grandmother and for all other good women and by similar influences extended through centuries, I've no doubt. The husband did not know enough to stand aside and let her pass before him into my office. I was compelled to put my shoulder gently against his before he would take his proper place. He was a tall, loosely built fellow, awkward as a giraffe and with a countenance made up of odds and ends, yet neither very bad nor wholly displeasing—merely miscellaneous, like six kinds of dog upon four legs.

There was a better light in the office than in the reception room, and I perceived that the young woman was really beautiful. She had china blue eyes and light brown hair, she was neat and simply dressed, and she looked so very young that I experienced relief when she mentioned that she was twenty-one.

It appeared that Mr. and Mrs. Merrill had recently arrived in Glenshaw and that both expected to obtain work in the enormous watch factory which is sometimes called the "main spring" of our little city's life. At present they were living in one of the big boarding houses.

It was the lady who gave me these introductory details, and she went on to say that she wished to go to the Ogden hospital in order that she might be treated for an injury which she had received a few days before.

"I was crossing the street," said she, "in front of the opera house on Tuesday evening after the performance, and a trolley man rang his gong and frightened me so that I stepped directly in the way of a horse. One of the shafts struck me on the head."

At this moment the bell of the clock on my mantel chimed once for half past 7, and Mr. Merrill jumped up as if he had been connected with the machinery.

"I shall have to go," said he in a strained and nervous voice.

I looked at him and saw that his forehead was dripping.

"You'll come back for me?" said she. "It will be very dark to go home alone."

"Of course I'll come back," he replied; "in about half an hour, doctor."

"Yes," said I, "in half an hour." And he hurried out of the room without a word of good cheer or even a glance of affection. The look he gave her was all fear, and the instant that the door closed behind him she buried her face



"YOU'VE HAD A DOCTOR."

in her hands. When she raised her head, however, she was perfectly calm.

"You're the surgeon at the Ogden hospital, aren't you?" said she. "You can send me there and tell me how to hire a private room—not a very expensive one, because we haven't much money."

"You can get a nice room for \$10 a week," said I, "but I hope you won't have to go."

"Oh, yes, I shall," she replied. "And I may not come away again—ever—alive, I mean." And she looked up at me with a brave smile.

I summoned my nurse and proceeded to examine the patient's injury. She had worn a cloak with a hood, and this had covered the wound, which was almost precisely in the middle of the top of her head. It had received medical attention, but not of the best, as I thought.

"You've had a doctor already," said I. But she answered me that she had not.

Her reason for this falsehood was obscure, but I did not attach much importance to it. In fact, the injury itself immediately engaged my attention to the exclusion of everything else. There was no fracture of the skull, and the superficial indications might have seemed trivial to a layman, but there

was harm that the eye could not see, and, while no human skill could forestall the result, there could be no doubt that my poor little patient was in grave peril.

"Well," said I, "perhaps it would be better for you to go to the hospital if you've set your mind upon it. We'll treat you as nicely, as we can and send you away feeling like a new girl. Did you have that driver arrested?"

"Oh, no," she replied, "it wasn't his fault."

"Do you know his name?"

"No."

"What sort of wagon was it?"

"I don't remember. I think it was some kind of an express wagon."

My patient seemed singularly free from resentment, and if this reckless jehu had been her brother or her husband and on trial for hurting somebody else she could not have been more forgetful of the circumstances.

Meanwhile I had caused a carriage to be called, and presently I put my patient into it.

The next day I performed what my experience taught me might be only the first of a series of operations, perhaps three, of which the last would mean life or death. The immediate results, however, seemed to be very favorable, and I was pleased professionally and otherwise.

"Upon my word, Clarendon," said one of the assistant surgeons to me, "I think you smuggled her in. She ought to have gone across town."

"Across town" meant the children's hospital, which was under the same management and received patients up to eighteen years of age.

"I'm glad she's with us," said I. And in my heart I was very glad indeed and very strongly resolved to send her forth restored.

This thought suggested Mr. Merrill. For it was to him that I must send her, and I had taken a great dislike to him. In fact, I had already begun to distrust him and to entertain vague suspicions.

By arrangement he called at the hospital at half past 5 o'clock, the hour when I was usually ready to depart.

"You won't be able to see her, Mr. Merrill," said I. And he replied, "Oh, no," with far too great alacrity.

"Any message which you wish to leave for her will be promptly delivered," said I, "but as to little presents and that sort of thing which women appreciate so much when they're ill and especially when they're separated from those they love—just now I wouldn't send anything except flowers. They're not exciting, you know, like jewels and trinkets."

He stared at me, uneasily a minute to frame a question, for his mouth was a little open, and he repeatedly wet his lips. Then he shut his jaws with a nervous snap and walked out of the room.

I went across the street to Harley, the florist's, and got a few violets, which I sent to Mrs. Merrill with her husband's love. The nurse told me afterward that the patient was much surprised, as she certainly had every right to be.

The next afternoon Mr. Merrill succeeded in delivering his question:

"Is there any danger?"

"What sort of danger?" said I.

He looked over his shoulder hastily and then whispered:

"That she's going to die?"

Was this man a mere weakling and coward or had he some private source of terror?

"Mr. Merrill," said I suddenly, "how did your wife get this injury?"

"Just as she has told you," he protested.

"Who was the doctor that attended her before she came to me?"

"I don't know. She went alone."

"Why did you let her go alone?"

It took him a long time to frame an answer to this simple question.

"I didn't know about it," he said at last.

"How long have you been married?" I asked. And he replied, "Two years," with evident relief at the change of subject.

At the close of this profitless interview I went across to Harley's and procured a bunch of hyacinths, because the nurse had shrewdly found out for me that they were Mrs. Merrill's favorite flower.

Thereafter for five days a token of an affectionate husband's esteem, quite unknown to that individual himself, was sent to my patient every afternoon, and some of the messages which accompanied these offerings were really quite affecting.

Evidently Mrs. Merrill had been unable to realize at first that her unfeeling husband had shown the indications of a heart, but about the third day she began to believe that this good news was true. She became very particular about the disposition of the flowers and was greatly delighted when "her husband" was inspired to send a couple of pretty vases for the posies "with all the love of his heart," or words to that effect. I am unable to remember just how I expressed it.

On the seventh day, just as we were all hoping for the best and beginning to feel safe, a change for the worse set in. At 5 o'clock on that afternoon I had a serious talk with the president of our board of trustees, an old man full of worldly wisdom.

"Mr. Curtis," said I after stating the case briefly, "there's a chance that this poor little girl is going to die, and I suppose we'll have to tell her so if she's much worse tomorrow, as I'm afraid she may be, in order to get a statement which will have the highest legal value. I believe that her brute of a husband struck the blow which endangers her life today, and he shall not escape the just punishment."

Mr. Curtis rubbed his chin, which always had a three days' growth of beard upon it.

"I will make a few inquiries myself," said he. "Perhaps I may look in upon you this evening at your house."

"I shall be here," said I. He looked at me over his glasses and then pushed them up and looked under them.

"Indeed," said he, "indeed! So serious as that? Well, well!"

"I don't know just what you mean," I replied, "but in every way it's about as serious as it can be—especially," I added to myself, "as she's another man's wife, and I love her and can't save her. Her youth, her life—gone, all gone, and I can't help it."

About 9 o'clock I was watching Mrs. Merrill sleeping, with a part of my latest offering of hyacinths in her hand, when I was informed that Mr. Curtis wished to see me.

"This is very peculiar," said the old gentleman, lifting his glasses unevenly with his right hand and exposing one



"THIS IS VERY PECULIAR."

eye. "The Merrills are unknown at the address given you. I can get no trace of them. An accident similar to the one described seems to have occurred in front of the opera house on the date named, but the victim can hardly have been Mrs. Merrill. It was a much younger person. Perhaps she was present and saw it and framed her story upon it. I will continue my investigations tomorrow and endeavor to see this young man when he calls in the afternoon. He calls every day, eh?"

"What's left of him," I replied. "He's gradually wearing away. The fellow's under a terrible strain, and yet he seems to feel no love whatever for his wife and no remorse. It's just plain yellow fear."

Mr. Curtis carefully adjusted his glasses.

"We will make it several shades yellower tomorrow," said he.

If I have any eye for color Mr. Merrill's hue was a pale sea green when he was summoned from the usual visitors' room to a more private place and found himself confronted by the formidable, gold-bowed spectacles of old Simeon Curtis. The fellow broke down completely at the very first question.

"I can't stand it no more," he sobbed. "I promised her I'd never tell, but I got to! Oh, my mother'll murder me if she finds this out!"

"Finds what out?" demanded Curtis.

"My name ain't Merrill. My name's Joe Holland. Hers is Stetson—Cynthia Stetson. We ain't married. Married! Me? Why, I wouldn't be good enough to walk on the same side of the street with her. That's what she thinks. She never spoke ten words to me before she was hurt, though she boarded at my mother's house near a year. She's too good to talk to nobody. There hasn't been a feller called at the house to see her since she's been there."

"She ain't a Glenshaw girl. She come from away off. Her folks used to have money, but they lost it and died. That's what I hear. Anyhow, she works in the watch factory."

"After she was hurt in front of the opera house and began to have trouble with her head she went to a doctor—Simmons, that runs the drug store—and he said she was going to be worse and ought to go to the hospital. She ain't quite eighteen, and he said she'd have to go to the children's hospital. But she's seen Dr. Stewart up there, and she thinks he's a butcher. She's stuck on Dr. Clarendon."

"Absurd! Why, she never saw me before."

"Oh, yes, she was at the night school lectures during the winter, and she made up her mind that you was all right. She said that if anybody had got to fool with her brains she'd rather it would be a man who had some of his own and would know the importance of 'em. So she says to me: 'You go with me to Dr. Clarendon's, and we'll pretend to be married. Then he won't send me to the children's.' I near dropped dead. But she just fair made me do it. I'm only nineteen; I'm nothing but a kid, for as big as I am, gee, I've been scared! If my mother finds out that I've been going round pretending to be married I can see my finish. Perhaps you don't know my mother."

"I have not the pleasure," said I, "but you needn't be alarmed. Just go home and say nothing. Miss Stetson will recover. She is very much better today. She will return to your mother's house—temporarily, I hope—in about two weeks. I suppose her things are there still?"

"No; she had 'em taken to an express office and gave out that she was going away. I've got a sealed letter telling me what to do with her stuff if she died. Wouldn't that be fierce?"

"Nothing of the kind will happen," said I, escorting the big baby to the door.

When I had disposed of him I went across to Harley's and bought all the hyacinths in the shop and sent them to "Mrs. Merrill" with a very tender message of love and hope.

An Animal Story For Little Folks His Purpose Was Right

Griffo was a dancing bear—that is, he was supposed to dance and was frequently prodded by his master in his attempts to make him. But Griffo's movements were more like moving a house than dancing, for Griffo's heart was heavy. His life had never been a happy one. Early in life he had been taken from home and had an iron collar riveted about his neck, was dragged from town to town, kicked and cuffed and half starved till life became unbearable.

"What use am I?" he sadly said. "I do no good to any one, except, perhaps,



HE GAVE A MIGHTY YELL.

this drunken master of mine, who spends everything at the saloon for drink. I shall run away and find something to do that is worth while, something useful to the world. But where shall I run?"

Looking down, he saw that his master was dozing. He quietly pulled the chain out of his hand, and seeing a large hole in the roadway not far off, he made a bolt for that. Crawling down a long passageway, he saw a light.

"Well!" he exclaimed. "What have we here? An adventure, at any rate."

The light grew brighter as he came near and showed a large chamber under ground in which an Irishman was working with a pick and shovel, digging a passage for the subway. "My, this looks like home down here," said Griffo. "and, as this fellow and I are the only persons present, I shall speak to him and ask him if he knows something I could do to be of use."

As he said this he rose on his hind legs and walked toward Pat, who, hearing a sound behind him, turned. As he did so he gave a mighty yell:

"Oh, oh, oh! The saints protect us! Help! Help! I'll never touch a drop of rum again so long's I live!" And, dropping his shovel, he ran out of the shaft and did not stop till he reached his home.

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"Mary, Mary!" he cried. "Give me the pledge quick till I sign it. I've seen the 'old boy' himself. I'll never drink again!" And poor Griffo never knew the good deed he had done.—Atlanta Constitution.

How It Struck Joe.

Joe was the name of a servant employed for many years by Clarence King, the eminent geologist. Joe's life was evidently in his work, and he judged of all things in the world by their relations to it. In "King's Memoirs" this anecdote of Joe's point of view is given:

At a gentleman's country seat, with good servants' accommodations, ample facilities for blacking boots and brushing clothing, well trimmed lawns and genteel society, Joe was in paradise, but experience in the muddy or dusty wilderness had paralyzed his usefulness and wholly quenched his enjoyment.

On one occasion, attended by this man only, King made his way to the Grand Canyon of the Colorado and stood for a time dumb upon its brink, overwhelmed by the vastness and the glory of the scene. At last it seemed to him that he must speak, and as he turned away he said:

"Well, Joe, how does it strike you?"

"It's no place for a gentleman, str," was the reply.

At the state convention of Sons of Veterans at Milton, the city of York was chosen for the encampment in 1906.

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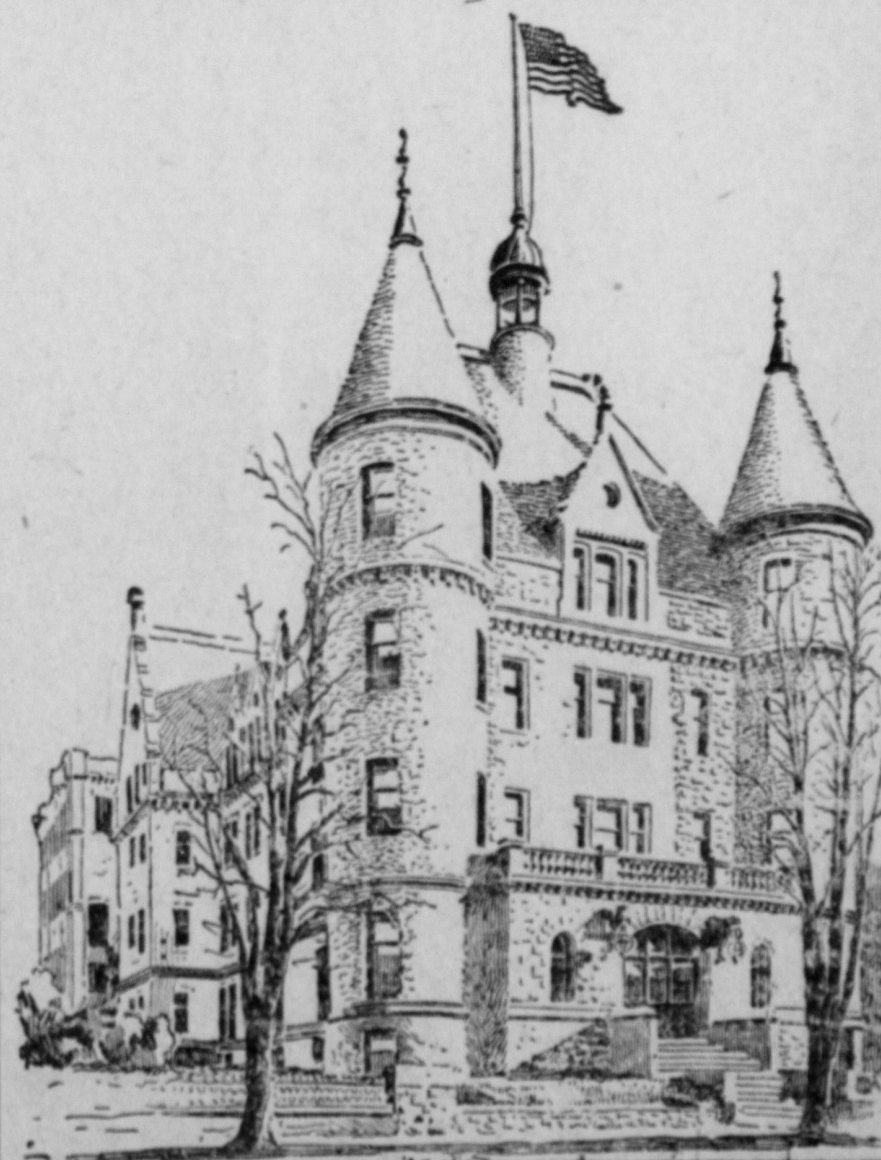
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