

JOHN STEPHENS PERICARDIUM.

BY ELIZABETH KIRK.

"Now I am going to tell you just what my husband said to me this morning, Doctor, word for word," and the invalid, Mrs. Stephens, lay back again on the sofa pillows, the very picture of misery.

"Last night, you see, Doctor, I had an ill turn, and he wanted to come for you; but when I got so that he dared to leave me, he concluded that we'd better let you sleep."

"Much obliged to him," said the Doctor, with a little sarcastic emphasis on the personal pronoun. "Last night was the first undisturbed night's rest I have enjoyed for a week."

Mrs. Stephens continued: "This spell was the same as I had the last time you were sent for, Doctor."

"A slight nervous attack," broke in the physician, "nothing more."

"Well, it don't make any difference what you call it, it was mighty hard to bear; but let me tell you what my husband said first, Doctor, before we go into symptoms. When he was going down to breakfast, he says to me, 'Kate what shall I send you up?'"

"Says I 'I don't want anything in the world but a good strong cup of tea. Tell Bridget to send it up in the little tea-pot.' I saw, Doctor, that he didn't move after I said this, so I turned and looked up at him and such a picture of rage and disgust I never saw in my life. Finally, says he, 'teal teal teal it's nothing but tea from morning till night. 'Kate,' says he, 'you are the color of a chinaman now. Why don't you order a piece of beefsteak, and a slice of brown bread, and a cup of chocolate; that would be a sensible breakfast!'"

"But John," says I, "you forget that I am sick and have no appetite." I was all ready to cry, but I was determined that he shouldn't have the satisfaction of seeing the tears fall.

"Forget," says he; "forget! I wish to Heaven I could forget! It's nothing but grunt and groan from one year's end to the other! I have lost all patience with you," says he. "When we lived in part of a house, and you did your own house work you were as well and as happy as anybody, and no man ever had a pleasanter home than John Stephens; but what have I now to leave, or come back to?" and this, Doctor, is what he ended up with:

"Kate," says he, "you are nothing more nor less than a drunkard! and in the sight of God, more culpable than most of the men who stagger through the streets; because the majority of those poor devils have some sort of an excuse for their conduct, and you haven't the slightest. You have a luxurious home, a husband doing his best to make you happy—everything under the light of the sun to please you, and yet you will persist in swilling tea." Yes, Doctor, swilling was the word he used—hoor! hoor! Oh dear me! to think I should ever have lived to have heard such dreadful language from my husband's mouth; and then says he—"and making me as miserable a wretch as walks the earth."

"Pretty plain talk," interrupted the Doctor, with a shrug of his broad shoulders.

"Oh yes," sobbed the victim, "and so awfully coarse and unkind. If I had had a spell, and died there before his very face, I don't believe he would have cared a snap of his finger. I tell you, Doctor Ellis, there is such a thing as a man's getting hardened."

"Evidently," replied the physician, with a laconicism absolutely painful. "But my husband has nothing in the world to trouble him but just my poor health; and I am sure I can't help that. This remark was more in answer to her companion's tone and manner, than the one single word that had accidentally escaped his lips, and this the Doctor felt.

"Anybody would think, by the way he goes on," continued the irate woman, "that I enjoyed myself with spasms, and cramp, and fainting fits. Anybody would think it was a pleasure to me to feel, every time I see a funeral procession, as if the hearse was going to stop at our door next. Oh yes! such a life is very enjoyable, very, indeed."

Doctor Ellis took notice of these last words; the man's eyes grew luminous, and his whole face declared that he considered himself master of the situation; and if Mrs. Stephens had not been so entirely taken up with her own ailments, mental and physical, that honest countenance would have betrayed him.

"You say," he began, settling himself in the large easy chair, and assuming a stately professional air, "that your husband has nothing to trouble him but your health; how do you know that Mrs. Stephens?"

"How? why how do I know anything? By the evidence of my sense. Don't I know that John Stephens has a splendid business that looks after itself, a magnificent income, and money enough to live on the bare interest, as well as a family need to live, if he never entered his office again while he has breath?"

"But money isn't everything, Mrs. Stephens," proceeded the physician, with a calmness almost mephistophelian. "There are other troubles beside money troubles. How about health, madam?"

"Health?" repeated the lady with a smile, she intended to be sarcastic to the last degree. "Health? Doctor Ellis! Why, there isn't a healthier or sounder man than my husband in the whole United States. He eats more in one meal than I do in three months."

"There is nothing the matter with your husband's stomach, Mrs. Stephens," Dr. Ellis shaded his face with his hand, and waited further developments. Mrs. Stephens mistook this attempt at forced concealment for emotion, and immediately assumed a sitting posture, brushed her hair away from her forehead, and looked piercingly into her companion's face.

"Why do you accent the word, 'stomach' so strongly, Dr. Ellis?" she inquired in anxious tones. Mrs. Stephens was forgetting herself, and this the Doctor hailed as an excellent omen.

"Only that I might make you understand that a man's digestion could be most unexceptionable, and he be far from sound in other directions."

"Then you mean to tell me that my husband is sick?"

"I do."

"Perhaps you will go still further, and say dangerously?"

"If you desire it."

"Oh, Doctor Ellis, how cold and unfeeling you are! I should think you ought to know by this time,"—and just here Mrs. Stephens broke down entirely, and sobbed as if her heart would break.

"Ought to know what, Mrs. Stephens?" inquired the doctor, with uncalled for deliberation.

"You ought to know—to know—that my husband's health and life are of a good deal more consequence to me than my own."

"Ah, indeed," interrupted the physician, with an elevation of his bushy eyebrows, immensely suggestive of a contrary opinion, as well as several excellent reasons for said opinion.

"Doctor Ellis will be kind enough to tell me what's the matter with my husband?"

Mrs. Stephens was now on her feet—tears all wiped away, eyes flashing with resentful spirit, and only a little quiver of the lip, to show how deep a wound the kind heart in her bosom had sustained. There she stood, reproachful, defiant, determined, womanly. The Doctor was delighted, and such an honest face it was, that he carried round with him from door to door, from sunrise to sunset, every day in the year, that it was a mighty hard matter to keep it from an immediate betrayal of the whole purpose.

"Mrs. Stephens," said he, "you have no cause to be alarmed. If I can only get your co-operation in this business, I feel certain that I shall be able to make a well man of your husband in a few months, at the longest; but, as true as I sit here before you, I cannot do this alone."

"Why have I not been informed of this before?" broke in Mrs. Stephens, imperiously.

"Who was there to inform you, madam? Your husband does not know his condition, and I should really liked to have told you when you have been sufficiently calm to hear all that was necessary for you to know."

"But Doctor Ellis, I should think you ought to have understood that my own health and comfort are nothing, compared with my husband's." Mrs. Stephens was weeping again.

"There's no sacrifice I would not make for him."

"Curious creatures!" muttered the Doctor; delightful bundles of contradiction! "How the mischief should I know, Mrs. Stephens, how much you care for your husband? I am sure you have spent the last half hour complaining about him. Is that the way women generally testify their regard for their husbands?"

"Oh don't, Doctor Ellis, please don't," pleaded the terrified woman. "I will never complain again—never—if you will only let me know what I am to do for him. Do you know, Doctor, that I had begun to think that something must be amiss with him, he was growing so irritable. Poor dear! how wicked and thoughtless I have been!"

"This, then, is the trouble. I shall take it for granted, madam, that you know something about physiology, and can follow me without difficulty?"

"Oh yes—yes, for mercy's sake go on."

"Very well; I find that the pericardium—"

"The pericardium?" repeated Mrs. Stephens.

"You know what that is, I suppose?" Evidently Mrs. Stephens' anatomical knowledge was limited. She shook her head in despair. "Something about the heart, isn't it?" she asked at last of him.

"Yes, the pericardium is the membrane sac that holds the heart. Well, sometimes this sac—it is no matter about particulars, Mrs. Stephens," and Doctor Ellis suddenly came to a stand still.

"It is enough, though, for me to say that we are both very anxious that his heart should remain where it belongs. Mr. Stephens must be amused. He wants the opera, the lecture, the social circle, entertaining books, a happy home music. You play and sing, do you not, Mrs. Stephens?"

"Oh, yes,—I used to," and Mrs. Stephens' tones were so pitiful now, that big Doctor Ellis really and truly was obliged to wipe both his eyes and nose. Before he was aware, the lacrymal duct had got the upper hand. "Well try it again; get a teacher and go to practicing."

"But how am I going to massage my spasms?" sobbed the lady.

"Well, perhaps between us both—you using your will power, and thinking of your husband, going out with him—and I doing my best in my way, we may be able to subdue them; but you must remember this madam—do not let Mr. Stephens have the faintest suspicion that you think anything is the matter with him; and above all do not treat him like an invalid. Just amuse him, add all that you know, just as you used to when you were first married."

Another series of sobs from Mrs. Stephens.

The Doctor arose to go. His patient had entirely forgotten that he had left no prescription.

"About tea, Doctor?" she asked, as he prepared to leave. "Do you think it very hurtful?"

"As an occasional tonic, I have no objection to tea; but as a daily beverage, madam, it is an invention of the devil.—Good morning."

John Stephens sought his home that evening with a heavy heart. His wife he believed a confirmed invalid, or hypochondriac—it mattered little which; one was as bad as the other. His remonstrances and pleadings had proved of no avail, he was doubtful even whether his wife loved him. He opened the door softly with his latch-key. This had become habitual; seldom did the gentleman slow himself to his wife until after the dinner bell had summoned the family to the dining-room.

A strain of music met and transfixed him on the very threshold, Abt's beautiful song was being rendered, and his wife was the musician. He was just in time to hear—

"The eyes that cannot weep Are the saddest eyes of all."

For a full year this charming voice had been as silent as the grave.

"Company, perhaps," he muttered.—Curiosity overcame him. He opened the parlor door and peeped in. There was Mrs. John Stephens, becomingly attired all alone, as enthusiastic over the fine rendition of a piece of music as he had ever seen her. "What does this mean, Kate?" he asked, with outstretched arms.

"That I have given up tea, and I am going to try hard and get well!" I guess my voice will all come back, John."

"I guess so," he replied; folding her tight to his heart. Three months after this, the cure was so radical, that Doctor Ellis made a clean breast of the whole thing, and there is no word or set of words that can provoke so hearty a laugh in the happy home of the Stevens as this physiologically scientific one.

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