

At last

by

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'When I was young - I'm not very old yet, but I was very young then, and it all seems long ago - I made an ass of myself. It wasn't very bad, not criminal; but I was pretty well ashamed of it, for my people were of high rank and held a great position in the county. When I came back I was afraid to tell the girl I was engaged to. She was a clever girl, and she knew by a sort of instinct that there was something, and asked me what it was. I denied that there was anything. That did for me, for I knew she was clean grit, and that she would have the truth or nothing, and as I didn't want to tell her I was a liar as well as an ass, I shoved for Australia. What I did there doesn't concern you much, and it was pretty tame, anyhow. I only mention this that you may understand something later. I had been a medical student, and liked the work so well that I have had a sneaking fondness for everything connected with it ever since. On the ship I went out on was a nurse, who was going out

as an assistant matron to one of the Melbourne hospitals. She was a young woman, but with white hair; and she used to come down to the steerage - where I was - and try to be of service. I had become a kind of volunteer help to the doctor, who recognised that I had been a gentleman - you are not much of a gentleman in a steerage, I can tell you - and made things a little comfortable for me in several ways. By being about with him I met the nurse, and we became very good friends. She was very sympathetic, and knew pretty well that I was sore-hearted about something; and with the natural sweet helpfulness of a woman - God bless 'em! - soon got to know my secret. One night - I shall never forget it, a heavy, still night with the moon a blaze of gold over the silent sea - we sat out late, right over the screw, which ground away beneath us but disturbed us no more than the ticking of a clock. The mystery of the place, and the hunger for sympathy which always gnawed at my soul, got the better of me, and I opened my heart as I have never done before or since. When I stopped I saw that her great eyes were gleaming out over the sea, and the tears were rolling down her cheeks. She turned to me and took my hand between both of hers and said:

"Oh! why didn't you tell her all? She would have forgiven all - everything, and would have loved you better for it all your life long. It is the concealment that hurts! Noble natures feel it most. I know, I know it too well, out of the bitterness of my broken heart!" I saw here a sorrow far greater than my own, and tried to comfort her. It seemed a relief to her, as it had been to me, to speak of her trouble, and I encouraged her confidence. She told me that in her youth she had run away with a man whom she thought she loved; they were married at a registry, but after a while she found out that he was married already. She wanted to leave him then at once, but he terrorised her, threatening to kill her if she tried to leave him. So she had perforce to remain with him till, happily, he met with a fatal accident and she was free. Then her baby was born dead, and she found herself alone.'

Here there was an interruption on the part of the Sewing Woman, who remarked sotto voce:

'He's a-tykin' of my Dead Byby, too!'

'Hush! hush!' said the MC. And the Young Man went on:

'She changed her name, and after trying work of several kinds, found her way on the stage. There she fell in love, in real love, with

a man she honoured; and when she found that he loved her too, she was afraid to tell him the dark chapter of her life lest she should lose him. She thought that as it was all past, and as no trace remained, no one need ever know. She was married and was ideally happy, and, after a couple of years, which had brought them a daughter, towards the end of a certain tour was on her way home where she would see her little baby daughter again, when in a time of great peril, when everyone round her was making confession of all they had ever done wrong, she was drawn into the hysterical whirlpool, and told her husband all that had been. He seemed cut to the heart, but said very little - not a word of reproach. Then she, too, felt constrained to silence, and a barrier seemed to grow up between them, so that when they reached England - home was a name only, and not a reality - they did not seem able to speak freely; and it became apparent to both that nothing remained but to separate. He had wished to take the child, and when the subject was mooted, said he wanted to take her far away where she would never know what had been. "Oh, I loved him so," she wailed, "that I felt that all I could give him was my child. The baby when she grew up would never know her mother's shame. It was a bitter atonement for my deceit; but it was all I could do. Perhaps God will account it to me and my child and the husband that I love, and somehow turn it to usefulness in His good time."

'Well, I comforted her as well as I could, though there was not much comfort to her in the world, poor soul, separated from her husband, whom she still loved, and from their child. We became fast friends, and we often wrote to each other; and in all my wanderings I kept her informed of my whereabouts.

'I went up-country herding,' and after a weary, weary time on

'The bitter road the younger son must tread
Ere he win to hearth and saddle of his own,
Mid the riot of the shearers in the shed
In the silence of the herder's hut alone,'

I found my way to a lonely place on the edge of a creek. It was a lovely spot, and the man who owned it had evidently given time and care to its beautifying, for all the natural trees and flowers were used to the best advantage, and it was a delight to see growing with the added luxuriance of a new soil all the home flowers as well. My employer, Mr Macrae, was a crank in some ways, but he was a gentleman, and he made my life a very different one from what

it had been in my stock-keeping apprenticeship. He, too, soon recognised that I had been a gentleman, and took me into the house instead of letting me camp outside in a rough shed, as is the usual thing with hired hands. Oh! the comfort and luxury of being in a real house with real bedding and real food, after a bunk and damper of your own making. Mr Macrae was very kindly, but stern on certain points. He simply idolised his little daughter, a bright, pretty child with golden hair and big grey eyes that I seemed, when I saw them, to have known all my life. The sun seemed to the father to rise and set in the child; but even to her he could be stern, even cruel, to an extent I never saw equalled. One night after dinner the little thing was nestling up to him and playing with him in her usual coaxing way. He asked her some little question, and she fenced with the answer. This seemed all at once to make him stern, and he asked some more questions with a fierce gravity which frightened the child. She attempted playfulness as a weapon against wrath, as a woman does; but the father would have none of it. He brushed it aside and continued his inquisition. It was quite apparent to me that the child had little or nothing to conceal, but she was frightened, and in her fear yielded to the weakness of the woman within her and lied. It was a harmless little lie at worst, one rather of not telling the truth than of speaking falsely; but it seemed to inflame the father to a white heat. His eyes glowed with the intensity of his anger. He mastered himself, however, and his cold anger was infinitely worse than his hot. He took the child very tenderly in his arms and said:

"Little one, you know that I love you?"

"Yes, daddy!" came the pretty voice, in a flood of tears.

"And you know I wouldn't hurt you but for your good, darling?"

"Yes, daddy! But, oh, daddy, daddy, don't hurt me! - don't hurt me!"

"I must, my little one, I must! You will have to remember all your life what it is to lie; that fire on earth or in hell is the liar's portion. And it is better that you learn it now than suffer it hereafter and make others suffer!" He bent down towards the fire, holding her hand in his; her pitiful little struggles were as nothing in his powerful grasp. Seeing me instinctively draw near, for I thought to protect the child, he motioned me back gravely.

"Do not interfere. It is necessary that my child learn a little

lesson to save her a harder one later on."

"With an iron determination, and with lips set and growing white as snow, he put for a moment the rosy fingers of the child on the hot bar of the grate. Despite her shriek of pain, he held it there quite a second or two, and then drew her back almost fainting. The child loved and trusted him in spite of the cruel act, and clung to him, sobbing as if her little heart would break. He held her close to him, and then disengaged her arm very gently from his neck. He stepped closer to the fire, and saying to her: "See, little one, you have no pain that is not mine!" thrust his own right hand down into the very heart of the glowing fire. He held it there a few seconds without a quiver, whilst fine child shrieked and flew to him and dragged the hand away.

"Oh, daddy, daddy, daddy!" she wailed, "and I have by my lying made you suffer this!" As I am a living man, I saw a glad light flash into his eyes, though the pain he suffered must have been excruciating. With his other hand he stroked the child's golden locks as he said:

"It was worth pain, my little one, that you should learn so great a truth."

I could not but be silent in face of such a splendid heroism, and offered to use such medical knowledge as I possessed on his behalf. He accepted cheerfully, and when I had got oil and lint he made me dress the child's burn before allowing me to attend to his own. It was a bad burn, and I was in real fear that it might have an ill ending. He made light of it, however, and tried to keep up the child's spirits. I tried to help him, and she went to bed less unhappy than I expected. Macrae's strength and constitution stood to him, and, though the hand was badly scarred, he fully recovered its use.

That night he was so feverish that I insisted on sitting up with him. I was able to give him some ease, and he was grateful for it. He talked with me more freely than he had ever done. He insisted on going several times to see how the child slept. He came back after one of these visits with his eyes wet, and as he lay down on his bed said softly:

"Poor little mite! God forgive me if I was wrong; but I thought it best!" Then turning to me, he went on:

"I suppose you thought me not merely brutal, but fiendish. But if you knew how deeply for her own future happiness I value truth, you would perhaps be tolerant with me. It was a lie that ruined her

mother's life and my own; and I would guard her against such an evil. Her mother and I loved each other, and there seemed no flaw in our lives; but once when in danger of death as we were rushing through a seething flood, she confessed to me that the innocence which had charmed me at the first was but an acted lie; that she had loved another man before she had seen me, and had lived with him guiltily. But, there! that page of my life is closed for ever." He said no more, and, of course, I never referred to the subject again. It struck me afterwards as strange that two people whom I had met had each suffered from a similar cause - as I myself had suffered - but it never struck me to connect them.

'After that night we became better friends, for we seemed to understand each other. I grew to love the child almost as much as if she had been my own daughter. During all that time I worked hard, and had few distractions; but I promised myself a treat when I should go over to Warrow, the nearest town beyond the Creek, for I had heard from Nurse Dora that she had become matron of the hospital there. The time which I had promised myself for my holiday was at hand, when little Dora fell ill of a fever. The white woman who was with us got it at the same time, and Macrae and I had to do the nursing ourselves. The floods were out, and the Creels was like a sea; the natives, seeing a fever in the house, ran away. It was a quick fever, though a low one, and in a few days the woman died. The child got worse and worse, and her moaning was pitiful to hear. The father used to sit hour after hour with his head in his hands and groan. One evening I heard him say that if we had a woman to nurse her she might be saved; and this gave me an idea. I said nothing except that I was going out for a bit, for my mind was made up that I would try to fetch my friend the matron. I took my mare, Wild Meg, and swam the flooded Creek; and early in the morning, riding for all I was worth, fetched up at Warrow. I went to the hospital and asked for the matron. When she came my heart leaped, and something within me seemed to cry out. It was as though two ends of an electric current were come together. Little Dora's fever-wasted face, as I had seen it the night before on the pillow, was reproduced in the pale lineaments of her who stood before me. I understood it all now. The man with the story; the woman with the story; the child parted from the mother; the mother who lied! Heaven had sent at the moment me, who, coming across the world, held in his hand the two ends of this chain of destiny. I told her of the child who was ill, dying; she wept, but said her duty held her to her post. Then I described the child and the solitary man, and a quick light leaped to her eyes. Hope had dawned in that withered heart! She said not a word, but with a gesture to me to wait, disappeared behind the hospital. In a

minute she reappeared, leading by the bridle a magnificent roan horse.

"Come!" she said, and sprang to the saddle.

'We rode all day without a word. Late in the afternoon we struck the creek, just as a thunderstorm came on, which in a moment lashed the flood into a raging torrent. But nothing daunted her. She rode boldly into the water, I following, and together we battled the watery element. Through danger and toil we won the further shore, though our two gallant steeds fell dead within sight of the house. We hurried in, she leading, I following. When she stood in the doorway Macrae rose to his feet with a wild cry:

"Dora, Dora, my darling, come at last! Now the child must live!" Then he fell fainting on the floor.'

Mr Sparbrook paused and looked round. Some of the womenkind were wiping their eyes, and sniffed, their bosoms heaving. Some office men said 'Hear! hear!' feebly. The only audible remark was the comment of the Wardrobe Mistress:

'Mr Bloze is a-goin' of it this evening. He'll be a-puttin' of it into a ply. Him in Australiar! W'y, I've known 'im since 'e was a nipper, which 'is mother 'ad a puddin' shopp at Ipswich close along of the theyatre, an' 'e never was hout of England in 'is life!'

'You're next on the list,' said the MC to the Second Heavies, Mr Hemans, who was sipping his hot grog with a preternaturally solemn look and manner.

'I know it, alas! I pity you all; but duty must be done. I suppose it is not necessary that I wander into the fields of romance?' - this with a covert look at the last story-teller.

'You give us fact, old man!' said the MC. 'After the heroics, a little sordid realism won't come amiss. If you could manage to tell us something funny we should all be grateful.'

'Anything in the shape of a Dead Byby?' he asked, with his face for one instant illumined by a humorous twinkle in his eye.

'Lydies and gents, not forgettin' of you, Mr Benville Nonplusser, sir, whenever ye likes I'm ready to go on with the 'arrowin' tyle of

the Dead Byby what I eluded to before if - 'She was cut short by the Second Heavies, who had no intention of being 'queered' at the start by this species of realism:

'No dead babies in mine, thank you; but I was going to tell you of a somewhat humorous episode of a live baby - I may say a very-much-alive baby, '

'Hear! hear!' 'Silence!' 'Hus-s-sh!'

'Next!' said the MC to the Second Heavies, who was ready to begin:

'Some of you may perhaps know that I was not always an actor! That I am not one even now,' he added quickly, seeing the Tragedian take his pipe from his lips preparatory to making a caustic comment. 'Having had aspirations towards the stage, and in especial towards high tragedy, I naturally became a commercial traveller, for I thought that self-possession and sheer, unadulterated, unmitigated impudence were the qualities which I ought to cultivate most assiduously!'

'Look here,' said the Tragedian, half rising from his seat. Seeing, however, no sympathy in the faces of the Company, he sat down again and smoked hard. The Second Heavies went on:

'From that I graduated into the undertaking business, for I soon saw that lugubriousness was a still more important item of stock-in-trade if my ambition was ever to be materialised. It was strange, however, that in neither branch of tragic art did I succeed. The clients considered me as a "drummer" too solemn, and suspected a levity of manner superimposed upon a lugubriety of appearance. I found the greater centres of civilisation slow to compete for my mature efforts. So, crossing the seas, I gradually drifted towards the Setting Sun, earning for a time a precarious livelihood by drumming in the neighbourhood of the Black Mountains a new "Curative Compound" calculated to obviate equally the ravages of sunstroke or frost-bite.