

SIR HALL CAINE

THE BLIND MOTHER, AND
THE LAST CONFESSION

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THE BLIND MOTHER

I

The Vale of Newlands lay green in the morning sunlight; the river that ran through its lowest bed sparkled with purple and amber; the leaves prattled low in the light breeze that soughed through the rushes and the long grass; the hills rose sheer and white to the smooth blue lake of the sky, where only one fleecy cloud floated languidly across from peak to peak. Out of unseen places came the bleating of sheep and the rumble of distant cataracts, and above the dull thud of tumbling waters far away was the thin caroling of birds overhead.

But the air was alive with yet sweeter sounds. On the breast of the fell that lies over against Cat Bell a procession of children walked, and sang, and chattered, and laughed. It was St. Peter's Day, and they were rush-bearing; little ones of all ages, from the comely girl of fourteen, just ripening into maidenhood, who

walked last, to the sweet boy of four in the pinafore braided with epaulets, who strode along gallantly in front. Most of the little hands carried rushes, but some were filled with ferns, and mosses, and flowers. They had assembled at the schoolhouse, and now, on their way to the church, they were making the circuit of the dale.

They passed over the road that crosses the river at the head of Newlands, and turned down into the path that follows the bed of the valley. At that angle there stands a little group of cottages deliciously cool in their whitewash, nestling together under the heavy purple crag from which the waters of a ghyll fall into a deep basin that reaches to their walls. The last of the group is a cottage with its end to the road, and its open porch facing a garden shaped like a wedge. As the children passed this house an old man, gray and thin and much bent, stood by the gate, leaning on a staff. A collie, with the sheep's dog wooden bar suspended from its shaggy neck, lay at his feet. The hum of voices brought a young woman into the porch. She was bareheaded and wore a light print gown. Her face was pale and marked with lines. She walked cautiously, stretching one hand before her with an uncertain motion, and grasping a trailing tendril of honeysuckle that swept downward from the roof. Her eyes, which were partly inclined upward and partly turned toward the procession, had a vague light in their bleached pupils. She was blind. At her side, and tugging at her other hand, was a child of a year and a half – a chubby, sunny little fellow with ruddy cheeks, blue eyes, and

fair curly hair. Prattling, laughing, singing snatches, and waving their rushes and ferns above their happy, thoughtless heads, the children rattled past. When they were gone the air was empty, as it is when the lark stops in its song.

After the procession of children had passed the little cottage at the angle of the roads, the old man who leaned on his staff at the gate turned about and stepped to the porch.

"Did the boy see them? – did he see the children?" said the young woman who held the child by the hand.

"I mak' na doot," said the old man.

He stooped to the little one and held out one long withered finger. The soft baby hand closed on it instantly.

"Did he laugh? I thought he laughed," said the young woman. A bright smile played on her lips.

"Maybe so, lass."

"Ralphie has never seen the children before, father. Didn't he look frightened – just a little bit frightened – at first, you know? I thought he crept behind my gown."

"Maybe, maybe."

The little one had dropped the hand of his young mother, and, still holding the bony finger of his grandfather, he toddled beside him into the house.

Very cool and sweet was the kitchen, with white-washed walls and hard earthen floor. A table and a settle stood by the window, and a dresser that was an armory of bright pewter dishes, trenchers, and piggins, crossed the opposite wall.

"Nay, but sista here, laal lad," said the old man, and he dived into a great pocket at his side.

"Have you brought it? Is it the kitten? Oh, dear, let the boy see it!"

A kitten came out of the old man's pocket, and was set down on the rug at the hearth. The timid creature sat dazed, then raised itself on its hind legs and mewed.

"Where's Ralphie? Is he watching it, father? What is he doing?"

The little one had dropped on hands and knees before the kitten, and was gazing up into its face.

The mother leaned over him with a face that would have beamed with sunshine if the sun of sight had not been missing.

"Is he looking? Doesn't he want to cuddle it?"

The little chap had pushed his nose close to the nose of the kitten, and was prattling to it in various inarticulate noises.

"Boo – loo – la-la – mama."

"Isn't he a darling, father?"

"It's a winsome wee thing," said the old man, still standing, with drooping head, over the group on the hearth.

The mother's face saddened, and she turned away. Then from the opposite side of the kitchen, where she was making pretense to take plates from a plate-rack, there came the sound of suppressed weeping. The old man's eyes followed her.

"Nay, lass; let's have a sup of broth," he said, in a tone that carried another message.

The young woman put plates and a bowl of broth on the table.

"To think that I can never see my own child, and everybody else can see him!" she said, and then there was another bout of tears.

The charcoal-burner supped at his broth in silence. A glistening bead rolled slowly down his wizened cheek: and the interview on the hearth went on without interruption:

"Mew – mew – mew. Boo – loo – lal-la – mama."

The child made efforts to drag himself to his feet by laying hold of the old man's trousers.

"Nay, laddie," said the old man, "mind my claes – they'll dirty thy bran-new brat for thee."

"Is he growing, father?" said the girl.

"Growing? – amain."

"And his eyes – are they changing color? – going brown? Children's eyes do, you know."

"Maybe – I'll not be for saying nay."

"Is he – is he *very* like me, father?"

"Nay – well – nay – I's fancying I see summat of the stranger in the laal chap at whiles."

The young mother turned her head aside.

The old man's name was Matthew Fisher; but the folks of the countryside called him Laird Fisher. This dubious dignity came of the circumstance that he had been the holder of an absolute royalty in a few acres of land under Hindscarth. The royalty had been many generations in his family. His grandfather

had set store by it. When the Lord of the Manor had worked the copper pits at the foot of the Eal Craggs, he had tried to possess himself of the royalties of the Fishers. But the present families resisted the aristocrat. Luke Fisher believed there was a fortune under his feet, and he meant to try his luck on his holding some day. That day never came. His son, Mark Fisher, carried on the tradition, but made no effort to unearth the fortune. They were a cool, silent, slow, and stubborn race. Matthew Fisher followed his father and his grandfather, and inherited the family pride. All these years the tenders of the Lord of the Manor were ignored, and the Fishers enjoyed their title of courtesy or badinage. Matthew married, and had one daughter called Mercy. He farmed his few acres with poor results. The ground was good enough, but Matthew was living under the shadow of the family tradition. One day – it was Sunday morning, and the sun shone brightly – he was rambling by the Po Bett that rises on Hindscarth, and passed through his land, when his eyes glanced over a glittering stone that lay among the pebbles at the bottom of the stream. It was ore, good full ore, and on the very surface. Then the Laird sank a shaft, and all his earnings with it, in an attempt to procure iron or copper. The dalespeople derided him, but he held silently on his way.

"How dusta find the cobbles to-day – any softer?" they would say in passing.

"As soft as the hearts of most folk," he would answer; and then add in a murmur, "and maybe a vast harder nor their heads."

The undeceiving came at length, and then the Laird Fisher was old and poor. His wife died broken-hearted. After that the Laird never rallied. The shaft was left unworked, and the holding lay fallow. Laird Fisher took wage from the Lord of the Manor to burn charcoal in the wood. The breezy irony of the dalesfolk did not spare the old man's bent head. There was a rime current in the vale which ran:

"There's t'auld laird, and t'young laird, and t'laird among
t'barns,
If iver there comes another laird, we'll hang him up by
t'arms."

A second man came to Matthew's abandoned workings. He put money into it and skill and knowledge, struck a vein, and began to realize a fortune. The only thing he did for the old Laird was to make him his banksman at a pound a week – the only thing save one thing, and that is the beginning of this story.

The man's name was Hugh Ritson. He was the second son of a Cumbrian statesman in a neighboring valley, was seven-and-twenty, and had been brought up as a mining engineer, first at Cleaton Moor and afterward at the College in Jerman Street. When he returned to Cumberland and bought the old Laird's holding he saw something of the old Laird's daughter. He remembered Mercy as a pretty prattling thing of ten or eleven. She was now a girl of eighteen, with a simple face, a timid manner, and an air that was neither that of a woman nor of

a child. Her mother was lately dead, her father spent most of his days on the fell (some of his nights also when the charcoal was burning), and she was much alone. Hugh Ritson liked her sweet face, her gentle replies, and her few simple questions. It is unnecessary to go further. The girl gave herself up to him with her whole heart and soul. Then he married another woman.

The wife was the daughter of the Vicar, Parson Christian. Her name was Greta: she was beautiful to look upon – a girl of spirit and character. Greta knew nothing of Hugh Ritson's intercourse with Mercy until after he had become her husband. Mercy was then in the depth of her trouble, and Greta had gone to comfort her. Down to that hour, though idle tongues had wagged, no one had lighted on Mercy's lover, and not even in her fear had she confessed. Greta told her that it was brave and beautiful to shield her friend, but he was unworthy of her friendship or he would stand by her side – who was he? It was a trying moment. Greta urged and pleaded and coaxed, and Mercy trembled and stammered and was silent. The truth came out at last, and from that moment the love between the two women was like the love of David and Jonathan. Hugh Ritson was compelled to stand apart and witness it. He could not recognize it; he dared not oppose it; he could only drop his head and hold his tongue. It was coals of fire on his head from both sides. The women never afterward mentioned him to each other, and yet somehow – by some paradox of love – he was the bond between them.

A month before the birth of the child, Mercy became blind.

This happened suddenly and without much warning. A little cold in the eyes, a little redness around them and a total eclipse of sight. If such a disaster had befallen a married wife, looking forward to a happy motherhood, death itself might have seemed a doom more kind. But Mercy took it with a sombre quietness. She was even heard to say that it was just as well. These startling words, repeated to Greta, just told her something of the mystery and misery of Mercy's state. But their full meaning, the whole depth of the shame they came from, were only revealed on the morning after the night on which Mercy's child was born.

They were in the room upstairs, where Mercy herself had been born less than nineteen years before: a little chamber with the low eaves and the open roof rising to the ridge: a peaceful place with its white-washed walls and the odor of clean linen. On the pillow of the bed lay the simple face of the girl-mother, with its fair hair hanging loose and its blind eyes closed. Mercy had just awakened from the first deep sleep that comes after all is over, and the long fingers of one of her thin hands were plucking at the white counterpane. In a nervous voice she began to speak. Where was Mrs. Ritson? Greta answered that she was there, and the baby was sleeping on her knee. Anybody else? No, nobody else. Was it morning? Yes, it was eight in the morning, and her father, who had not been to bed, had eaten his breakfast, and lighted his pipe and gone to work. Was the day fine? Very fine. And the sun shining? Yes, shining beautifully. Was the blind down? Yes, the little white blind was down. Then all the room was full

of that soft light? Oh, yes, full of it. Except in the corner by the washstand? Well, except in the corner. Was the washstand still there? Why, yes, it was still there. And mother's picture on the wall above it? Oh, dear, yes. And the chest of drawers near the door with the bits of sparkling lead ore on top? Of course. And the texts pinned on to the wall-paper: "Come unto Me" – eh? Yes, they were all there. Then everything was just the same? Oh, yes, everything the same.

"The same," cried Mercy, "everything the same, but, O Lord Jesus, how different!"

The child was awakened by the shrill sound of her voice, and it began to whimper, and Greta to hush it, swaying it on her knee, and calling it by a score of pretty names. Mercy raised her head a moment and listened, then fell back to the pillow and said, "How glad I am I'm blind!"

"Good gracious, Mercy, what are you saying?" said Greta.

"I'm glad I can't see it."

"Mercy!"

"Ah, you're different, Mrs. Ritson. I was thinking of that last night. When your time comes perhaps you'll be afraid you'll die, but you'll never be afraid you'll not. And you'll say to yourself, 'It will be over soon, and then what joy!' That wasn't my case. When I was at the worst I could only think, 'It's dreadful now, but oh, to-morrow all the world will be different.'"

One poor little day changed all this. Toward sunset the child had to be given the breast for the first time. Ah! that mystery

of life, that mystery of motherhood, what are the accidents of social law, the big conventions of virtue and vice, of honor and disgrace, before the touch of the spreading fingers of a babe as they fasten on the mother's breast! Mercy thought no more of her shame.

She had her baby for it, at all events. The world was not utterly desolate. After all, God was very good!

Then came a great longing for sight. She only wished to see her child. That was all. Wasn't it hard that a mother had never seen her own baby? In her darkness she would feel its little nose as it lay asleep beside her, and let her hand play around its mouth and over its eyes and about its ears. Her touch passed over the little one like a look. It was almost as if there were sight in the tips of her fingers.

The child lived to be six months old, and still Mercy had not seen him; a year, and yet she had no hope. Then Greta, in pity of the yearning gaze of the blind girl-face whenever she came and kissed the boy and said how bonny he was, sent to Liverpool for a doctor, that at least they might know for a certainty if Mercy's sight was gone forever. The doctor came. Yes, there was hope. The mischief was cataract on both eyes. Sight might return, but an operation would be necessary. That could not, however, be performed immediately. He would come again in a month, and a colleague with him, and meantime the eyes must be bathed constantly in a liquid which they would send for the purpose.

At first Mercy was beside herself with delight. She plucked up

the boy and kissed and kissed him. The whole day long she sang all over the house like a liberated bird. Her face, though it was blind, was like sunshine, for the joyous mouth smiled like eyes. Then suddenly there came a change. She plucked up the boy and kissed him still, but she did not sing and she did not smile. A heavy thought had come to her. Ah! if she should die under the doctor's hands! Was it not better to live in blindness and keep her boy than to try to see him and so lose him altogether? Thus it was with her on St. Peter's Day, when the children of the dale went by at their rush-bearing.

There was the faint sound of a footstep outside.

"Hark!" said Mercy, half rising from the sconce. "It's Mrs. Ritson's foot."

The man listened. "Nay, lass, there's no foot," said Matthew.

"Yes, she's on the road," said Mercy. Her face showed that pathetic tension of the other senses which is peculiar to the blind. A moment later Greta stepped into the cottage, with a letter in her hand. "Good-morning, Matthew; I have news for you, Mercy. The doctors are coming to-day."

Mercy's face fell perceptibly. The old man's head dropped lower.

"There, don't be afraid," said Greta, touching her hand caressingly. "It will soon be over. The doctors didn't hurt you before, did they?"

"No, but this time it will be the operation," said Mercy. There was a tremor in her voice.

Greta had lifted the child from the sconce. The little fellow cooed close to her ear; and babbled his inarticulate nothings.

"Only think, when it's all over you will be able to see your darling Ralphie for the first time!"

Mercy's sightless face brightened. "Oh, yes," she said, "and watch him play, and see him spin his tops and chase the butterflies. Oh, that will be very good!"

"Dusta say to-day, Mistress Ritson?" asked Matthew, the big drops standing in his eyes.

"Yes, Matthew; I will stay to see it over, and mind baby, and help a little."

Mercy took the little one from Greta's arms and cried over it, and laughed over it, and then cried and laughed again. "Mama and Ralphie shall play together in the garden, darling; and Ralphie shall see the horses – and the flowers – and the birdies – and mama – yes, mama shall see Ralphie."

II

Two hours later the doctors arrived. They looked at Mercy's eyes, and were satisfied that the time was ripe for the operation. At the sound of their voices, Mercy trembled and turned livid. By a maternal instinct she picked up the child, who was toddling about the floor, and clasped it to her bosom. The little one opened wide his blue eyes at sight of the strangers, and the prattling tongue became quiet.

"Take her to her room, and let her lie on the bed," said one of the doctors to Greta.

A sudden terror seized the young mother. "No, no, no!" she said, in an indescribable accent, and the child cried a little from the pressure to her breast.

"Come, Mercy, dear, be brave for your boy's sake," said Greta.

"Listen to me," said the doctor, quietly but firmly: "You are now quite blind, and you have been in total darkness for a year and a half. We may be able to restore your sight by giving you a few minutes' pain. Will you not bear it?"

Mercy sobbed, and kissed the child passionately.

"Just think, it is quite certain that without an operation you will never regain your sight," continued the doctor. "You have nothing to lose, and everything to gain. Are you satisfied? Come, go away to your room quietly."

"Oh, oh, oh!" sobbed Mercy.

"Just imagine, only a few minutes' pain, and even of that you will scarcely be conscious. Before you know what is doing it will be done."

Mercy clung closer to her child, and kissed it again and yet more fervently.

The doctors turned to each other. "Strange vanity!" muttered the one who had not spoken before. "Her eyes are useless, and yet she is afraid she may lose them."

Mercy's quick ears caught the whispered words. "It is not that," she said, passionately.

"No, gentlemen," said Greta, "you have mistaken her thought. Tell her she runs no danger of her life."

The doctors smiled and laughed a little. "Oh, that's it, eh? Well, we can tell her that with certainty."

Then there was another interchange of half-amused glances.

"Ah, we that be men, sirs, don't know the depth and tenderness of a mother's heart," said old Matthew. And Mercy turned toward him a face that was full of gratitude. Greta took the child out of her arms and hushed it to sleep in another room. Then she brought it back and put it in its cradle that stood in the ingle.

"Come, Mercy," she said, "for the sake of your boy." And Mercy permitted herself to be led from the kitchen.

"So there will be no danger," she said. "I shall not leave my boy. Who said that? The doctor? Oh, good gracious, it's nothing. Only think, I shall live to see him grow to be a great lad."

Her whole face was now radiant.

"It will be nothing. Oh, no, it will be nothing. How silly it was to think that he would live on, and grow up, and be a man, and I lie cold in the churchyard – and me his mother! That was very childish, wasn't it? But, then, I have been so childish since Ralphie came."

"There, lie and be quiet, and it will soon be over," said Greta.

"Let me kiss him first. Do let me kiss him! Only once. You know it's a great risk after all. And if he grew up – and I wasn't here – if – if – "

"There, dear Mercy, you must not cry again. It inflames your eyes, and that can't be good for the doctors."

"No, no, I won't cry. You are very good; everybody is very good. Only let me kiss my little Ralphie – just for the last."

Greta led her back to the side of the cot, and she spread herself over it with outstretched arms, as the mother-bird poises with outstretched wings over her brood. Then she rose, and her face was peaceful and resigned.

The Laird Fisher sat down before the kitchen fire, with one arm on the cradle head. Parson Christian stood beside him. The old charcoal-burner wept in silence, and the good Parson's voice was too thick for the words of comfort that rose to his lips.

The doctors followed into the bedroom. Mercy was lying tranquilly on her bed. Her countenance was without expression. She was busy with her own thoughts. Greta stood by the bedside; anxiety was written in every line of her beautiful, brave face.

"We must give her the gas," said one of the doctors, addressing

the other.

Mercy's features twitched.

"Who said that?" she asked nervously.

"My child, you must be quiet," said the doctor in a tone of authority.

"Yes, I will be quiet, very quiet; only don't make me unconscious," she said. "Never mind me; I will not cry. No; if you hurt me I will not cry out. I will not stir. I will do everything you ask. And you shall say how quiet I have been. Only don't let me be insensible."

The doctors consulted together aside, and in whispers.

"Who spoke about the gas? It wasn't you, Mrs. Ritson, was it?"

"You must do as the doctors wish, dear," said Greta in a caressing voice.

"Oh, I will be very good. I will do every little thing. Yes, and I will be so brave. I am a little childish sometimes, but I *can* be brave, can't I?"

The doctors returned to the bedside.

"Very well, we will not use the gas," said one. "You are a brave little woman, after all. There, be still – very still."

One of the doctors was tearing linen into strips for bandages, while the other fixed Mercy's head to suit the light.

There was a faint sound from the kitchen. "Wait," said Mercy. "That is father – he's crying. Tell him not to cry. Say it's nothing." She laughed a weak little laugh.

"There, he will hear that; go and say it was I who laughed."

Greta left the room on tiptoe. Old Matthew was still sitting over a dying fire, gently rocking the sleeping child.

When Greta returned to the bedroom, Mercy called her, and said, very softly, "Let me hold your hand, Greta – may I say Greta? – there," and her fingers closed on Greta's with a convulsive grasp.

The operation began. Mercy held her breath. She had the stubborn north-country blood in her. Once only a sigh escaped. There was a dead silence.

In two or three minutes the doctor said, "Just another minute, and all will be over."

At the next instant Greta felt her hand held with a grasp of iron.

"Doctor, doctor, I can see you," cried Mercy, and her words came in gusts.

"Be quiet," said the doctor in a stern voice. In half a minute more the linen bandages were being wrapped tightly over Mercy's eyes.

"Doctor, dear doctor, let me see my boy!" cried Mercy.

"Be quiet, I say," said the doctor again.

"Dear doctor, my dear doctor, only one peep – one little peep. I saw your face – let me see my Ralphie's."

"Not yet, it is not safe."

"But only for a moment. Don't put the bandage on for one moment. Just think, doctor, I have never seen my boy; I've seen other people's children, but never once my own, own darling. Oh,

dear doctor – "

"You are exciting yourself. Listen to me: if you don't behave yourself now you may never see your child."

"Yes, yes, I will behave myself; I will be very good. Only don't shut me up in darkness again until I see my boy. Greta, bring him to me. Listen, I hear his breathing. Go for my darling! The kind doctor won't be angry with you. Tell him that if I see my child it will cure me. I know it will."

Greta's eyes were swimming in tears.

"Rest quiet, Mercy. Everything may be lost if you disturb yourself now, my dear."

The doctors were wrapping bandage over bandage, and fixing them firmly at the back of their patient's head.

"Now listen again," said one of them: "This bandage must be kept over your eyes for a week."

"A week – a whole week? Oh, doctor, you might as well say forever."

"I say a week. And if you should ever remove it – "

"Not for an instant? Not raise it a very little?"

"If you ever remove it for an instant, or raise it ever so little, you will assuredly lose your sight forever. Remember that."

"Oh, doctor, it is terrible. Why did you not tell me so before? Oh this is worse than blindness! Think of the temptation, and I have never seen my boy!"

The doctor had fixed the bandage, and his voice was less stern, but no less resolute.

"You must obey me," he said; "I will come again this day week, and then you shall see your child, and your father, and this young lady, and everybody. But mind, if you don't obey me, you will never see anything. You will have one glance of your little boy, and then be blind forever, or perhaps – yes, perhaps *die*."

Mercy lay quiet for a moment. Then she said, in a low voice:

"Dear doctor, you must forgive me. I am very wilful, and I promised to be so good. I will not touch the bandage. No, for the sake of my little boy, I will never, never touch it. You shall come yourself and take it off, and then I shall see him."

The doctors went away. Greta remained all that night in the cottage.

"You are happy now, Mercy?" said Greta.

"Oh yes," said Mercy. "Just think, only a week! And he must be so beautiful by this time."

When Greta took the child to her at sunset, there was an ineffable joy in her pale face, and next morning, when Greta awoke, Mercy was singing softly to herself in the sunrise.

III

Greta stayed with Mercy until noon that day, begging, entreating, and finally commanding her to lie quiet in bed, while she herself dressed and fed the child, and cooked and cleaned, in spite of the Laird Fisher's protestations. When all was done, and the old charcoal-burner had gone out on the hills, Greta picked up the little fellow in her arms and went to Mercy's room. Mercy was alert to every sound, and in an instant was sitting up in bed. Her face beamed, her parted lips smiled, her delicate fingers plucked nervously at the counterpane.

"How brightsome it is to-day, Greta," she said. "I'm sure the sun must be shining."

The window was open, and a soft breeze floated through the sun's rays into the room. Mercy inclined her head aside, and added, "Ah, you young rogue, you; you are there, are you? Give him to me, the rascal!" The rogue was set down in his mother's arms, and she proceeded to punish his rascality with a shower of kisses. "How bonny his cheeks must be; they will be just like two ripe apples," and forthwith there fell another shower of kisses. Then she babbled over the little one, and lisped, and stammered, and nodded her head in his face, and blew little puffs of breath into his hair, and tickled him until he laughed and crowed and rolled and threw up his legs; and then she kissed his limbs and extremities in a way that mothers have, and finally

imprisoned one of his feet by putting it ankle-deep into her mouth. "Would you ever think a foot could be so tiny, Greta?" she said. And the little one plunged about and clambered laboriously up its mother's breast, and more than once plucked at the white bandage about her head. "No, no, Ralphie must not touch," said Mercy with sudden gravity. "Only think, Ralphie pet, one week – only one – nay, less – only six days now, and then – oh, then – !" A long hug, and the little fellow's boisterous protest against the convulsive pressure abridged the mother's prophecy.

All at once Mercy's manner changed. She turned toward Greta, and said, "I will not touch the bandage, no, never; but if Ralphie tugged at it, and it fell – would that be breaking my promise?"

Greta saw what was in her heart.

"I'm afraid it would, dear," she said, but there was a tremor in her voice.

Mercy sighed audibly.

"Just think, it would be only Ralphie. The kind doctors could not be angry with my little child. I would say, 'It was the boy,' and they would smile and say, 'Ah, that is different.'"

"Give me the little one," said Greta with emotion.

Mercy drew the child closer, and there was a pause.

"I was very wrong, Greta," she said in a low tone. "Oh! you would not think what a fearful thing came into my mind a minute ago. Take my Ralphie. Just imagine, my own innocent baby tempted me."

As Greta reached across the bed to lift the child out of his mother's lap, the little fellow was struggling to communicate, by help of a limited vocabulary, some wondrous intelligence of recent events that somewhat overshadowed his little existence. "Puss – dat," many times repeated, was further explained by one chubby forefinger with its diminutive finger nail pointed to the fat back of the other hand.

"He means that the little cat has scratched him," said Greta. "But bless the mite, he is pointing to the wrong hand."

"Puss – dat," continued the child, and peered up into his mother's sightless face. Mercy was all tears in an instant. She had borne yesterday's operation without a groan, but now the scratch on her child's hand went to her heart like a stab.

"Lie quiet, Mercy," said Greta; "it will be gone to-morrow."

"Go-on," echoed the little chap, and pointed out at the window.

"The darling, how he picks up every word!" said Greta.

"He means the horse," explained Mercy.

"Go-on – man – go-on," prattled the little one, with a child's in-difference to all conversation except his own.

"Bless the love, he must remember the doctor and his horse," said Greta.

Mercy was putting her lips to the scratch on the little hand.

"Oh, Greta, I am very childish; but a mother's heart melts like butter."

"Batter," echoed the child, and wriggled out of Greta's arms

to the ground, where he forthwith clambered on to the stool, and possessed himself of a slice of bread which lay on the table at the bedside. Then the fair curly head disappeared like a glint of sunlight through the door to the kitchen.

"What shall I care if other mothers see my child? I shall see him too," said Mercy, and she sighed. "Yes," she added, softly, "his hands and his eyes and his feet, and his soft hair."

"Try to sleep an hour or two, dear," said Greta, "and then perhaps you may get up this afternoon – only *perhaps*, you know, but we'll see."

"Yes, Greta, yes. How kind you are."

"You will be kinder to me some day," said Greta very tenderly.

"How very selfish I am. But then it is so hard not to be selfish when you are a mother. Only fancy, I never think of myself as Mercy now. No, never. I'm just Ralphie's mama. When Ralphie came, Mercy must have died in some way. That's very silly, isn't it? Only it does seem true."

"Man – go-on – batter," was heard from the kitchen, mingled with the patter of tiny feet.

"Listen to him. How tricksome he is! And you should hear him cry 'Oh!' You would say, 'That child has had an eye knocked out.' And then, in a minute, behold he is laughing once more. There, I'm selfish again; but I will make up for it some day, if God is good."

"Yes, Mercy, He is good," said Greta.

Her arm rested on the door-jamb, and her head dropped on

to it; her eyes swam. Did it seem at that moment as if God had been very good to these two women?

"Greta," said Mercy, and her voice fell to a whisper, "do you think Ralphie is like – anybody?"

"Yes, dear, he is like you."

There was a pause. Then Mercy's hand strayed from under the bedclothes and plucked at Greta's gown.

"Do you think," she asked, in a voice all but inaudible, "that father knows who it is?"

"I can not say — *we* have never told him."

"Nor I – he never asked, never once – only, you know, he gave up his work at the mine, and went back to the charcoal-pit when Ralphie came. But he never said a word."

Greta did not answer. At that moment the bedroom door was pushed open with a little lordly bang, and the great wee man entered with his piece of bread insecurely on one prong of a fork.

"Toas'," he explained complacently, "toas'," and walked up to the empty grate and stretched his arm over the fender at the cold bars.

"Why, there's no fire for toast, you darling goose," said Greta, catching him in her arms, much to his masculine vexation.

Mercy had risen on an elbow, and her face was full of the yearning of the blind. Then she lay back.

"Never mind," she said to herself in a faltering voice, "let me lie quiet and *think* of all his pretty ways."

IV

Greta returned home toward noon, laughing and crying a little to herself as she walked, for she was full of a dear delicious envy. She was thinking that she could take all the shame and all the pain for all the joy of Mercy's motherhood.

God had given Greta no children.

Hugh Ritson came in to their early dinner and she told him how things went at the cottage of the old Laird Fisher. Only once before had she mentioned Mercy or the child, and he looked confused and awkward. After the meal was over he tried to say something which had been on his mind for weeks.

"But if anything should happen after all," he began, "and Mercy should not recover – or if she should ever want to go anywhere – might we not take – would you mind, Greta – I mean it might even help her – you see," he said, breaking down nearly, "there is the child, it's a sort of duty, you know – and then a good home and upbringing – "

"Don't tempt me," said Greta. "I've thought of it a hundred times."

About five o'clock the same evening a knock came to the door, and old Laird Fisher entered. His manner was more than usually solemn and constrained.

"It's coom't to say as ma lass's wee thing is taken badly," he said, "and rayder suddent."

Greta rose from her seat and put on her hat and cloak. She was hastening down the road while the charcoal-burner was still standing in the middle of the floor.

When Greta reached the old charcoal-burner's cottage, the little one was lying in a drowsy state in Mercy's arms. Its breathing seemed difficult; sometimes it started in terror; it was feverish and suffered thirst. The mother's wistful face was bent down on it with an indescribable expression. There were only the trembling lips to tell of the sharp struggle that was going on within. But the yearning for a sight of the little flushed countenance, the tearless appeal for but one glimpse of the drowsy little eyes, the half-articulate cry of a mother's heart against the fate that made the child she had suckled at her breast a stranger, whose very features she might not know – all this was written in that blind face.

"Is he pale?" said Mercy. "Is he sleeping? He does not talk now, but only starts and cries, and sometimes coughs."

"When did this begin?" asked Greta.

"Toward four o'clock. He had been playing, and I noticed that he breathed heavily, and then he came to me to be nursed. Is he awake now? Listen."

The little one in its restless drowsiness was muttering faintly, "Man – go-on – batter – toas'."

"The darling is talking in his sleep, isn't he?" said Mercy.

Then there was a ringing, brassy cough.

"It is croup," thought Greta.

She closed the window, lighted a fire, placed the kettle so that the steam might enter the room, then wrung flannels out of hot water, and wrapped them about the child's neck. She stayed all that night at the cottage, and sat up with the little one and nursed it. Mercy could not be persuaded to go to bed, but she was very quiet. It had not yet taken hold of her that the child was seriously ill. He was drowsy and a little feverish, his pulse beat fast and he coughed hard sometimes, but he would be better in the morning. Oh, yes, he would soon be well again, and tearing up the flowers in the garden.

Toward midnight the pulse fell rapidly, the breathing became quieter, and the whole nature seemed to sink. Mercy listened with her ear bent down at the child's mouth, and a smile of ineffable joy spread itself over her face.

"Bless him, he is sleeping so calmly," she said.

Greta did not answer.

"The 'puss' and the 'man' don't darken his little life so much now," continued Mercy cheerily.

"No, dear," said Greta, in as strong a voice as she could summon.

"All will be well with my darling boy soon, will it not?"

"Yes, dear," said Greta, with a struggle.

Happily Mercy could not read the other answer in her face.

Mercy had put her sensitive fingers on the child's nose, and was touching him lightly about the mouth.

"Greta," she said in a startled whisper, "does he look

pinched?"

"A little," said Greta quietly.

"And his skin – is it cold and clammy?"

"We must give him another hot flannel," said Greta.

Mercy sat at the bedside, and said nothing for an hour. Then all at once, and in a strange, harsh voice, she said:

"I wish God had not made Ralphie so winsome."

Greta started at the words, but made no answer.

The daylight came early. As the first gleams of gray light came in at the window, Greta turned to where Mercy sat in silence. It was a sad face that she saw in the mingled yellow light of the dying lamp and the gray of the dawn.

Mercy spoke again.

"Greta, do you remember what Mistress Branthet said when her baby died last back end gone twelvemonth?"

Greta looked up quickly at the bandaged eyes.

"What?" she asked.

"Well, Parson Christian tried to comfort her and said: 'Your baby is now an angel in Paradise,' and she turned on him with: 'Shaf on your angels – I want none on 'em – I want my little girl.'"

Mercy's voice broke into a sob.

Toward ten o'clock the doctor came. He had been detained. Very sorry to disoblige Mrs. Ritson, but fact was old Mr. de Broadthwaite had an attack of lumbago, complicated by a bout of toothache, and everybody knew he was most exacting. Young person's baby ill? Feverish, restless, starts in its sleep, and cough?

Ah, croupy cough – yes, croup, true croup, not spasmodic. Let him see, how old? A year and a half? Ah, bad, very. Most frequent in second year of infancy. Dangerous, highly so. Forms a membrane that occludes air-passages. Often ends in convulsions, and child suffocates. Sad, very. Let him see again. How long since the attack began? Yesterday at four. Ah, far gone, far. The great man soon vanished, leaving behind him a harmless preparation of aconite and ipecacuanha.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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