

Fenn George Manville

Nurse Elisia



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Chapter One. The Elthornes

Crick!

“There: just as I expected. The old story. Hard and indigestible as lead.”

“I’m very sorry papa, dear.”

“Sorry! What’s the good of being sorry? You know how I suffer from indigestion, and yet you persist in giving me eggs like that for my breakfast.”

Mr Ralph Elthorne, of Hightoft, in the county of Lincolnshire, threw down the knife with which he had given a savage chop at the side of an egg, as if to cut off the top at a blow, pushed away his plate so that the silver egg-cup fell over sideways, finishing the breaking of the egg, and letting a thick stream of rich yellow yolk begin to flow, while the irritable gentleman made a snatch at the toast-rack, and uttered an angry ejaculation.

“Will you take tea or coffee, papa, dear?” said the sweet, rather delicate looking girl seated at the head of the table; but there was no reply, and after exchanging glances with the lady, a good-looking, sun-tanned young fellow on her right said:

“Let me send you some of this, father,” and he “made an offer” at the hot water dish before him with a glistening spoon.

“Eh? What is it, Al?”

“Kidneys, sir.”

“Bah! No, I’ve got leather enough here. Look at this. Does that idiotic woman in the kitchen call this dry toast? Look at it. Only fit to make soles for shooting boots.”

“Rather caky,” said the young man, with his mouth full. “Not bad kidneys; nice and hot.”

“Well, Isabel, how long am I to wait for that cup of coffee? No, I’ll take tea.”

The girl, who had poured out two cupfuls tentatively, started up from her chair, and took the cup of tea round to the other end of the table, placed it beside the rather fierce looking elderly man, bent down and kissed his forehead, and hurried back to her place.

“We never did have but one servant who could make the toast properly,” continued the head of the family. “How is she, Isabel? When is she coming back?”

“Very soon, I hope, papa. Neil mentions Maria in his letter this morning.”

“Eh? Neil written to you?”

“Yes, papa.”

“Humph!” ejaculated Mr Elthorne, making a dig at a pat of butter as it floated in water in the cooler, splashing some of the water over the cloth, and harpooning the said pat so insecurely that it dropped off his knife before it reached his plate. “I think it would be more creditable to Neil if he wrote a little more often to his father.”

Alison Elthorne exchanged glances with his sister, and his lips moved as if he were speaking words which Isabel interpreted to mean, “Got out of bed wrong way.”

The breakfast went on. Mr Elthorne placed a pair of spring folding glasses on his well-cut aquiline nose, and took up and frowned at a letter. “When’s Neil coming down?”

“He did not say, papa. He writes that poor Maria causes him a great deal of anxiety.”

“Poor Maria? I think she ought to be very glad and grateful. It is wonderful what is done for the poor in this country. Here is this girl, taken up to London free of expense, placed in a magnificent

institution, and receives the attention of such an eminent man as – hah, not a bad cup of tea,” – a long breath drawn after a hearty draught – “as Sir Denton Hayle, without counting that of Neil. Is your aunt coming down to breakfast, or is she not?”

“She will be down soon, papa. She – she rather overslept herself.”

“Rubbish! Idleness! Pure idleness! She knows how I hate to see an empty chair at the table. Professes to keep house, and is never in her place at proper time. Keep house, indeed! Eggs like leaden bullets; toasts and kidneys like leather; tea half cold and not fit to drink; and – ”

“Now, papa, dear, you said just now that it was not a bad cup of tea.”

“Eh? Did I? Humph – a *lapsus linguae*,” said Mr Elthorne with a grim smile, for his breakfast was softening down his asperities. “Alison, ring that bell.”

The young man rose slowly and straddled to the fireplace after the fashion of men who are a good deal in the saddle, rang, and came back to the table.

“Been in the stables this morning, Al?”

“Yes.”

“How did The Don look?”

“Oh, right enough, but I don’t like him any better, sir.”

“Prejudice, Al, prejudice. Because I let someone else choose him instead of you. Wants an older man to judge a horse.”

“Dare say it does, sir. But I would not have given a hundred pounds for The Don – nor yet thirty,” added the young man *sotto voce*.

“Bah! Prejudice, boy. Sound wind and limb; well bred.”

“Granted, sir. He is all that you say, but he has a temper. You wanted a quieter animal – a nice weight-bearing, steady cob.”

“Indeed!” said Mr Elthorne, sarcastically, “or a donkey. I’m growing so old and feeble.”

“You rang, sir,” said the quiet, staid looking butler.

“Yes; send one of the maids up to ask Mrs Barnett – humph! Never mind.”

The butler held open the door for a rather stout, florid looking, middle-aged lady to enter, which she did in a hurried, bustling way, pressing her *pince-nez* on to her nose.

“Good-morning!” she exclaimed. “I am so sorry, Ralph. I hope I have not kept you waiting.”

“Oh, dear, no,” began Mr Elthorne. “Oh, hang it all, Anne, do mind,” he continued, as there was a click caused by the encountering of two pairs of spectacles, as the lady kissed him, and then bustled on to salute Alison with a similar kiss to that bestowed upon his father.

“Morning, my dear. Good-morning once more, Isabel, my dear.”

“And how are you now you have come?” said Mr Elthorne gruffly.

“Oh, not at all well, Ralph, dear,” sighed the lady, as she settled herself in her chair and spread her snowy napkin across her knees. “What have you there, Alison, dear? Yes, I’ll take one. Coffee, please, Isabel dear. It’s very chilly this morning.”

“Very,” said Mr Elthorne sarcastically. “You should have a fire in your bedroom.”

“Well, really, Ralph, I think I will. It is so cold getting up.”

She sneezed sharply. There was a faint click, and a tiny splash in her cup.

“Oh, dear me, look at that!” cried the lady. “Isabel, my dear, will you pass me the sugar tongs. Thanks.”

Alison burst into a fit of laughter as his aunt began solemnly to fish in her coffee cup for *her pince-nez*.

“You shouldn’t laugh, my dear.”

“Enough to make a donkey laugh,” said Mr Elthorne grimly.

“Did you mean that term for me, sir?” said Alison sharply.

“No, Al, no,” said his father coolly. “If it had been meant for you I should have called you an ass.”

“Thank you,” said the young man.

“Quite welcome, Al. You are one sometimes.” Alison frowned, but his annoyance passed off as he saw success attend his aunt’s diving apparatus, for she made a successful plunge, brought out the dripping glasses, and began placidly to wipe them upon her napkin.

“The springs of these glasses do get so terribly weak,” she said, and then paused to raise her head, throw it back, and gaze plaintively up at a corner of the ceiling.

“Er – er – er – er – ”

“What’s the matter, Auntie?” said Alison mockingly.

“Tchischew! – er – tischew!” she sneezed. “Oh, dear me, what a cold I have caught!”

“Be careful, then, not to put on damp spectacles, or you may make it worse,” said Mr Elthorne, smiling.

“You don’t think so, do you, Ralph?”

“No, Auntie; papa’s making fun of you.”

“You shouldn’t, Ralph; it really is too bad, and before the children, too. But I’m afraid I’m going to have a very bad cold. I wish Neil would make haste and come down.”

“What for?” said Mr Elthorne.

“He seems to understand my constitution better than anyone I have ever been to.”

“Bah!” ejaculated her brother. “He is only an apprentice to his trade. Mark my words: he’ll poison you one of these days by making experiments upon you.”

“Really, my dear, you shouldn’t. I’m sure Neil has too much respect for his aunt to be so wicked,” said the lady, going on with her breakfast very composedly. “I hope he will soon cure Maria, though, and send her back. I do miss her sadly.”

“Humph!” grumbled Mr Elthorne; “that’s why you were so late, I suppose.”

“No, Ralph. Alison, my dear, give me a bit of that toast that is soaked in gravy; thank you, my dear. I do not say that; I know I am late this morning, but I do miss her very much. But I thought you people were going out riding.”

“So we are,” said Alison.

Aunt Anne turned to her niece.

“Oh, I can soon put on my riding habit, Auntie. A little more sugar?”

“Well, yes, just a very little more, my dear; thank you. Ralph, I hope you will be careful over that new horse.”

“Why?” said Mr Elthorne, sharply; and Aunt Anne prattled on.

“Because Alison was saying he thought it had a bad temper, and I always do feel so nervous about horses that kick and bite.”

“Perhaps you’d like me to be tied on.”

“Now, Ralph, you are making fun of me,” said the lady placidly. “Of course I should not.”

“Or have the groom with me to hold a leading-rein?”

“Nonsense, Ralph, dear; that would be absurd; but if the horse bites, I should like you to make it wear that leather thing over its nose.”

“What?” roared Mr Elthorne.

“The crib-biter’s muzzle, father!” cried Alison, roaring with laughter; and the head of the house uttered a fierce growl.

“I do not see anything to laugh at, Alison,” said the lady reprovingly. “I may not understand much about horses, but I have heard that their bite is very dangerous.”

“Don’t you go near him,” said Mr Elthorne sneeringly. “Al!”

“Yes, father.”

“Is Sir Cheltnam coming over this morning?” Isabel looked conscious, and glanced uneasily at the speaker.

“Said he should,” replied Alison.

“Then you’d better mind what you are about.”

“I always do,” said the young man sourly.

“Don’t speak to me in that tone, sir.”

“Now, Ralph, dear! – Alison!” cried Aunt Anne, turning from one to the other as she hastily interposed, to play the part of mediator. “You should not speak so abruptly to papa. But I’m sure he did not mean to be disrespectful, Ralph.”

“You mind your own business, madam; I can manage my children,” growled Mr Elthorne. “A puppy! Do you think I’m blind? Sir Cheltnam was cutting in before you all the time we were out last, and I could see that Dana was encouraging him out of pique. She as good as owned to it afterward to me.”

“I don’t suppose Burwood would like it if he knew you called him a puppy.”

“I did not, sir – I called you one.”

“Don’t – pray don’t be angry, Ralph,” said Aunt Anne softly.

“I told you to mind your own business, madam,” said her brother shortly. “If you’d do that, and look after the housekeeping, I should not have my digestion ruined with gutta percha kidneys and leathery toast. Now, look here, Alison, as this topic has cropped up, please understand me. I don’t like to speak so plainly about such delicate matters, but one must be clear when the future careers of young people are in question.”

“Oh, dear me,” muttered Alison. “More coffee, Isabel,” he added aloud, while his father pushed away his plate, took off his glasses, and began to swing them round by the string.

“If that cord breaks, Ralph, those glasses will break something,” said Aunt Anne, and Mr Elthorne uttered an impatient snort.

“Now, look here, Alison. I suppose you fully understand that I have a reason in encouraging the visits here of those two girls?”

“Yes, father, I suppose so.”

“Humph – that’s right; but don’t be so indifferent. Dana is an exceedingly pretty, clever girl; a splendid horsewoman; of good birth; and she and Saxa have capital portions. One of them will have Morton, of course; in all probability Dana, for Saxa, when she marries your brother, will go to live in town. Now, I should like to know what more a young fellow of your age could wish for – the money you will get from me, Morton Court, Dana’s portion, and a pretty, clever wife.”

“I think you might have put the lady first, Ralph,” said Aunt Anne.

“Mrs Barnett, will you be good enough to finish your breakfast, and let me speak,” said Mr Elthorne cuttingly. “Then, by-and-by, you will be on the bench, and, before long, have a third of your aunt’s money, for she cannot live long if she eats so much.”

“My dear Ralph,” cried the lady.

“Can you make any better plans, sir? If so, pray let me hear them, there is no coercion – I merely ask you all to do well, and be happy.”

“Oh, no, I have no plans. I like Dana very well. She’s a jolly enough girl.”

“Then that’s settled, sir; only just bear it in mind, and don’t let Burwood be stuffing her head full of nonsensical ideas. Some girls would be attracted at once by the prospect of becoming ‘my lady,’ but Dana is too shrewd.”

“Almost a pity that the girls have no brother,” said Alison carelessly.

“Why, sir?” said his father sharply.

“Because then he could have married little Isabel, and completed the combination,” said Alison, looking meaningly at his sister.

“Don’t be an ass, boy. Hallo! Who’s this?” cried Mr Elthorne, turning sharply in his chair as a bell rang.

“Only Beck, father. I asked him to come with us.” Mr Elthorne turned upon his son mute with anger and annoyance; hence he did not notice the bright look and increase of colour in his daughter’s face. “You asked him to come over – this morning?”

“Yes, father. Poor beggar, he only has a few more days before he sails for China, and I thought it would be neighbourly. Old Beck is always very nice to me.”

“Oh, very well,” said Mr Elthorne abruptly; and Isabel uttered a low sigh of relief as she busied herself over her aunt’s cup, suddenly displaying great anxiety that the placid looking lady should have some more coffee.

“Better ask him in to breakfast, Al,” said Mr Elthorne.

“Yes; I was going to,” said Alison, rising and leaving the room, to return in a few minutes with a frank, manly looking young fellow of seven or eight and twenty, whose face was of a rich, warm brown up to the centre of his forehead, and there became white up to his curly chestnut hair, which was a little darker than his crisp, closely cut beard.

“Ah, Beck, come over for a ride with us?” said Mr Elthorne. “How is the vicar?”

“Quite well, sir.”

“And Mrs Beck?”

“Oh, yes, sir. Alison was good enough to ask me to join your party.”

He shook hands with the ladies, and there was rather a conscious look between Isabel and the visitor as their hands joined – one which did not escape the head of the family.

“Sit down, Beck, sit down,” he said, cordially enough, all the same.

“Oh, I have breakfasted, sir.”

“Yes; we’re late,” said Mr Elthorne, with a look at Aunt Anne.

“That means it is my fault, Mr Beck,” said the lady; “but never mind, my dear, sit down and have some more. Sailors always have good appetites.”

“Oh, well, just a drop of coffee,” said the young man, for Isabel had quickly filled a cup, and was holding it out to him. “Thanks, Miss Elthorne; but really I did not mean – ”

“You are on the vicar’s cob?” said Mr Elthorne quickly, as he noted his daughter’s heightened colour, and the young man’s hesitation and evident pleasure.

“Try some of this game pie, Beck,” cried Alison, pushing over a plate. “Aunt Anne finished the kidneys.”

“Ally, my dear.”

“Oh, thanks,” said the visitor, taking the plate as he settled himself at the table. “Cob, sir? Oh, no; a friend sent me over one of his horses. I have had it these three days.”

A curious look of trouble crossed Isabel’s countenance, and she sat watching the speaker as he went on: “That’s the worst of being ashore. Everyone is so kind. I am always spoiled, and it takes me a month to get over it when I get back to my ship.”

“And when do you go?” said Mr Elthorne.

“This day fortnight, sir.”

“For six months, isn’t it?”

“There is no certainty, sir, I’m sorry to say. We may be ordered on to Japan afterward.”

“Isabel, my dear, I am sure Mr Beck will excuse you.”

“Eh? Oh, yes, certainly,” said the visitor with his lips, but with a denial of the words in his eyes.

“Go and put on your riding habit, my dear. Aunt Anne will pour out the coffee.”

“Yes, papa,” said the girl; and she rose, and, after exchanging glances with their visitor, left the room.

“Oh, yes, I’ll pour out the coffee,” said Aunt Anne, changing her seat. “You are very fond of riding, Mr Beck, are you not?”

“Well, ye-es,” said the young man, laughing, and with an apologetic look at his host and friend; “I like it very much, but I always seem such a poor horseman among all these hard riders, and feel as if I ought to congratulate myself when I get back safe.”

“Oh, well,” said Mr Elthorne condescendingly, “you would have the laugh at us if you got us to sea. Did you see anything of Sir Cheltnam?”

“No; I came by the lower road.”

“Here he is – they are, I ought to say,” cried Alison, jumping up and going to the window.

“Eh?” ejaculated Mr Elthorne, rising too, and joining his son at the window to watch a party of three coming across the park at a hard gallop – the party consisting of two ladies and a gentleman, with one of the ladies leading, well back in her saddle, evidently quite at her ease.

“Humph,” muttered Mr Elthorne; and then in a low voice to his son: “Of course. If you had had any brains you would have ridden out to meet them, and not left them to another escort.”

“Oh, I shall be with them all day, sir, and – Ah Saxa, you foolish girl,” he cried excitedly, of course with his words perfectly inaudible to the member of the group whom he was addressing. “The horse will rush that fence as sure as I’m here. Oh, hang all wire and hurdles!”

“What’s the matter?” cried Beck, starting from the table as Alison opened the French window and stepped out. “My word, how those two girls can ride.”

“Like Amazons, sir,” said Mr Elthorne proudly, as he watched the party, now coming over the closely cropped turf at quite a racing pace; and his voice was full of the excitement he felt. “Will she see it, Al, my boy? Yes, she rises – cleared it like a swallow. Bravo! With such a lead the others are safe to – ”

“Well done! Well over!” cried Alison, from outside, as he began clapping his hands.

“Capital! Bravo!” cried Mr Elthorne, following his son’s example, as he now stepped outside to meet the party who were rapidly coming up after skimming over the hurdle which formed part of the ring fence of the estate.

“All safe over, Mrs Barnett,” said the vicar’s son, returning to the table.

“Then they don’t deserve to be, Mr Beck,” said the lady. “I do not approve of girls being so horribly masculine. If our Isabel were like that, I should feel as if I had not done my duty to her since her poor mother died.”

“But she is not like that,” said the visitor, after a quick glance at the open window.

“No, my dear, not a bit. I hate to see young ladies such tomboys. But there – poor girls! – no mother – no father.”

“And no Aunt Anne to guide them,” interpolated the visitor.

“Thank you, my dear. It’s very nice of you to say so. I’m afraid I’m not clever, but I do try to act a mother’s part to dear Isabel. I don’t know, though, what I shall do when Neil and Alison marry those two. They don’t like me a bit, and, between ourselves, I really don’t like them.”

“Morning, daddy,” came in a loud, breathless voice from the outside. “What do you think of that?”

“Morning,” came in another voice; and the word was repeated again in the deep tones of a man, and supplemented by the snortings of horses.

“Morning, my dears. Capital! But very imprudent. I will not have you trying to break that pretty little neck – nor you neither, Dana. Burwood, you should not have encouraged them.”

“I? That’s good, Mr Elthorne. They both took the bit in their teeth, and all I could do was to follow.”

“Oh, stuff and nonsense!” cried the second voice. “What a fuss about a canter. Come, you folks, are you ready?”

“How’s Aunt Anne?”

“Good gracious me! Is the girl mad?” cried that lady, as there was the crunching of gravel, the window was darkened, a horse’s hoofs sounded loudly on the step, and the head and neck of a

beautiful animal were thrust right into the room, with the bright, merry face of a girl close behind, as its owner stooped to avoid the top of the window and peered in.

“Hallo! There you are. Good-morning! We’ve had such a gallop. Where’s Isabel? Hallo, sailor, how are you?”

“My dear child, don’t – pray don’t,” cried Aunt Anne. “You’ll be having some accident. Suppose that horse put his foot through the glass.”

“Good job for the glazier. Here Tom Beck, give Biddy some lumps of sugar.”

“Bless the child!” cried Aunt Anne. “Oh, here’s Isabel. Mr Beck, take the sugar basin, and back that dreadful animal out.”

The young sailor obeyed her to the letter, as Isabel entered to look on laughingly, while the other touched the skittish mare upon which she was seated, so that it might join in crunching up the sweet pieces of sugar with which they were fed in turn.

“Morning, parson,” said the new arrival with the deep-toned voice, to Tom Beck, as the young lieutenant went on sugaring the two steeds. “Thought you were off to sea again.”

“Did you?” said Beck, meeting his eyes with a lump of sugar in his hand, and with rather a stern, fixed look, from which the new arrival turned with a half laugh.

“Yes; you sailors are here to-day and gone to-morrow.”

“Exactly,” said Beck; “but this is to-day and not to-morrow.”

“Mr Beck – take care!”

It was Isabel who cried out in alarm, but her warning was too late, for the handsome mare which Dana Lydon rode had stretched out its neck and taken the lump of sugar the young lieutenant was holding; and as he turned sharply, it was at the sudden grip, for the greater part of his hand was held between the horse’s teeth.

“Great Heavens!” cried Mr Elthorne.

“Wait a moment, I’ll make her leave go,” cried Dana, raising her whip to strike the animal between the ears.

“Stop!” cried Beck sharply, as he caught the mare’s bit with his left hand, standing firmly the while, but with his face drawn with pain. “If you do that she’ll crush the bones.”

Isabel uttered a faint sob, and turned white, while Sir Cheltnam sprang from his horse and stepped close to her.

“Don’t be frightened,” he whispered, giving additional pain now to the young sailor in the shape of that which was mental.

Isabel paid no heed to him or his words, but stood gazing wildly at the brave young fellow whose hand was gripped as if in a vice by the powerful jaws, but who, beyond knitting his brows and turning pale, made no sign.

“Here, Alison,” cried Mr Elthorne, “take the other side of the mare’s muzzle. She’ll crush his hand.”

“No, no,” said the young man, quickly. “She’ll let go soon. Be quiet, all of you, or you’ll startle her.”

The young man’s words were full of the authoritative tone of one accustomed to command in emergencies; but his voice shook a little at the last, for he was oppressed by a deadly feeling of sickness which he fought hard to resist, while the group closed round him, and there was a low buzz of excitement through which came the trampling of other horses, as the grooms led them round from the stable yard.

Tom Beck felt that he could hold out no longer. He had tried and manfully to combat the physical pain at a time when the mental was agonising, for he had seen the young baronet approach Isabel and whisper to her, and he had felt that any increase of the terrible grip would mean a horrible mutilation, and the utter blasting of his career and his hopes. Despair was combining with the sensation of faintness; and with the scene around him growing dim and the excited voices beginning

to sound muffled and strange, nature was rapidly conquering the education of a brave man who had been schooled to face danger unmoved; he turned his eyes wildly to where Isabel stood.

But that look moved her to spring forward, lay her hand on the mare's muzzle, and falter out vainly a few caressing words. Worse than vainly, for the mare lowered her head, and increased the sufferer's agony.

"Don't," he whispered hoarsely.

"Dana, I shall have to shoot her," cried Mr Elthorne hoarsely.

Alison pressed forward, and passed his arm about his friend's waist, for he saw that he was ready to fall, and the morning's comedy was on the point of becoming tragic, when a loud neigh came from one of the horses being led around to the front, and Beck's hand fell from the mare's jaws, for she threw up her head and uttered a whinnying answer to the challenge of Mr Elthorne's new hunter, The Don.

"Ah!"

It was more a groan than a sigh of relief from all around, while, tightening her rein, Dana cut the mare across the ears with all her might; and as the graceful animal bounded forward, she kept on lashing it furiously, making it curvet and plunge and snort, as it excited the other horses near.

"Don't! don't! Dana," cried her sister. "She'll throw you."

"A vicious beast! – a vicious beast!" panted the girl, as she still plied her whip till Mr Elthorne caught her arm.

Beck stood, half supported by Alison, watching Isabel being assisted into the breakfast-room by her aunt and Sir Cheltnam, till she disappeared, when he reeled slightly, but made an effort to recover himself.

"Much hurt, old man?"

"No," he said hoarsely; "a nasty grip. Tell that girl not to beat the mare. It was not wise."

"Now, how is he?" cried Mr Elthorne, coming back. "Help him in. Send one of the grooms for the doctor."

"No, no, sir," said Beck, with a faint laugh, as he held up the hand deeply indented by the mare's teeth. "It's nothing to mind. Shan't be a one-armed Greenwich pensioner this time."

"Oh, my dear boy! my dear boy!" cried an excited voice, and Aunt Anne came rushing out of the window with a cup and saucer. "Here, drink this."

"Anne! Don't be so foolish," cried her brother. "He doesn't want tea."

"But there's brandy in it, Ralph," protested the lady. "Drink it, my dear; it will do you good."

"Thanks," said Beck, raising his injured hand to take the cup, but letting it fall again. "Not this time," he said with a laugh, and taking the cup with his left he drained it. "That's better, Mrs Barnett," he said. "There, I'm very sorry, Mr Elthorne, I've made quite an upset."

"And I'm very glad, my boy," replied his host. "What a horrible mishap!"

"How is he?" cried Dana, cantering up with her sister.

"Oh, it's nothing – nothing at all."

"That's right," cried Saxa. "Oh, it will soon go off. Not so bad as a spill by a five-bar."

"Get a liqueur," said Dana. "I say; it has made you look white. Worse disasters at sea, eh?"

"Much," said Beck, quietly; and then to himself, "Oh, how I do hate a horsey woman."

"I say," cried Saxa; "this isn't going to spoil our ride, is it, daddy?"

"Oh, no, I hope not; but I will stay, my dears," said Mr Elthorne.

"What! and not try your new horse! I should like to have the saddle shifted, and put him through his paces myself," said Saxa, looking at the noble hunter held by a groom.

"No, no, my dear, not to-day," said Mr Elthorne hastily. "Alison will go with you, girls, and – oh, there's Burwood. Ask how Isabel is. Say it's all right now, and the horses are waiting. She turned faint, I suppose. Beck, come in; you had better see the doctor."

"Nonsense, my dear sir. I'm all right. It isn't my bridle hand. I shall not want a whip."

“Oh, no,” said Sir Cheltnam; “your mount wants no whip. Shall you venture?”

“Of course,” said Beck, walking toward where a helper held his horse, just as Isabel came out, looking very pale.

“Well, he has got some pluck in him, Al,” said Sir Cheltnam, “even if he is a parson’s son.”

“Poor fellow! yes,” replied Alison.

“Moral,” said Sir Cheltnam laughingly, to the Lydon girls, “never give lumps of sugar to a skittish mare.”

Ten minutes later the little party were mounted and moved off, leaving Aunt Anne waving her lace handkerchief from the steps.

Chapter Two.

Nurse Elisia

The roar of the big road sounded plainly, but it was far enough off for it to be subdued into a mellow hum, suggestive to the country sufferer lying in the narrow bed with its clean linen and neat blue checked hangings by the open window, of bees swarming, and a threshing machine at work in the farm beyond the park.

And yet it was London, for the windows were coated with a sooty layer outside, and the sun shone as if Nature were afraid its beams would be too strong for Londoners' eyes, to which it came as in an eclipse through smoked glass, and a murky haze full of germs and motes was interposed between the dwellers in the city and the blue sky above.

The ward was long and clean, and every bed was occupied. The air was fairly fresh and pleasant, though dashed with the odour of antiseptics. But there was none of the faint medicinal effluvia of the sick wards, for this was surgical – the special empire of the celebrated Sir Denton Hayle, well known in his profession as the most skillful and daring operator this generation has seen. There were those who shrugged their shoulders and said he had murdered many a patient, and it was true that a percentage – thanks to his skill, a very small percentage – of his sufferers had died; but, on the other hand, he could point to those whom he had saved from an apparently inevitable early death, brought on by one of the evils of poor human nature which had heretofore set medical and surgical skill at defiance.

Maria Bellows, in other respects a stout, hearty, country lass, had been one of these sufferers, and the provincial doctors called in to Hightoft by Aunt Anne to see the upper housemaid, had shaken their heads and said there was only one thing that would save her, and that was to go up to the great East Central Hospital and place herself in the hands of Sir Denton Hayle.

Then, during one of his visits home, Aunt Anne insisted upon Neil Elthorne seeing the woman. Mr Elthorne said it was absurd, but he was quiet afterward when he heard that his son had also declared that the only thing that could save the patient's life was for her to come up to the hospital in town. Furthermore, he said that he would speak to the illustrious chief under whom he studied, and see that every arrangement was made for her reception.

Maria went up, and now lay by the open window thinking of the country, of how long it would be before the doctors made her well again and sent her back to her situation. Then she wondered how Miss Isabel was, and Mr Alison, and how soon there would be weddings at the house. For it was an open secret among the servants at Hightoft that "Master's" sons were to marry the Misses Lydon, and that Miss Isabel would become Lady Burwood.

"I shall be glad to get back," she said at last with a sigh. "I always thought London was a gay place, but – ugh! – it is dull."

"Dull lying here, my poor girl," said a sweet voice, and she turned sharply and uttered a cry of pain with the effort.

In an instant busy hands were about her, changing her position and wiping the agony-engendered perspiration from her brow before assisting her to drink a little water.

"I am sorry I startled you."

Maria looked half angrily in the beautiful face bent over her, with its clearly cut, aristocratic features and large eyes, which gazed searchingly into her own. For it was a countenance that attracted attention with its saddened, pitying look, heightened by the smooth white cap and stiffened quaint linen "bib and tucker," as our mothers termed the old puritan-like costume, the whole being strongly suggestive of the portrait of some lady of the Pilgrim Father days.

"You came so quiet, you quite frightened me," said the woman.

“Your nerves are over-strung,” was the reply. “I ought to have known better.”

There was something so sweet and soothing in the deep musical tones of the soft voice that it had its effect upon the patient directly, and she lay back with a sigh.

“It don’t matter, nurse,” she said, “but do make haste and get me well.”

“Indeed, we are trying very hard. But you are mending fast. Sir Denton will be here soon to see you again.”

“Yes,” said the woman, with her brow growing rugged and a petulance of manner, “to hurt me again, horrid. He’ll kill me before he has done.”

“You do not think so, Maria,” said the nurse gently, as she laid her cool white hand upon the patient’s brow. “He is as tender and gentle as a woman, and he takes great interest in your case.”

“But, I say, they won’t take me into the theatre again, will they? Oh, I say, what a shame to call that horrid place a theatre!”

“No; that is all over now, and you have nothing to do now but get well and go back to the country.”

“But it takes so long, and it was so horrid with all those doctors and people, and the chloroform, and stuff, and – ”

“Do you not think it would be better,” said the nurse gently, “if, instead of looking at what has passed in that spirit, you were to try and remember it only with gratitude, and think that a month back you were in a very dangerous state, while now you are rapidly getting well?”

“I don’t know,” said the woman querulously. “It’s very horrid lying here listening to other people complaining and saying how bad they are, and no one near who knows you.”

“Come, come,” said the nurse gently, “you are hot and tired. I have brought you some flowers and fruit. There!”

She placed a bunch of roses in the patient’s hand, and placed a bunch of large grapes before her on the bed.

“Thanky,” said the woman, ungraciously, as she sniffed at the flowers. “But they’re not very fresh.”

“No,” said the nurse, smiling; “but you must recollect that they had to be cut in the country and sent up by rail. Try a few of the grapes.”

She held up a little tray, and the patient picked one or two grapes off the bunch with an indifferent air.

“Not much of grapes,” she said. “You should see them in the vineries at Hightoft. Much nicer than these poor tasteless things.”

“I am sorry they’re not better, Maria,” said the nurse with a pitying smile. “They were the best I could get. You must remember we are in London.”

“Oh, yes; it isn’t your fault, nurse. You can’t help it.”

“Eat a few more.”

“No; I don’t want ’em. I say, how long will the doctor be? I want to know if I mayn’t get up.”

“I can tell you that, Maria. Not yet. Try and be patient and trust to us.”

“Oh, very well,” said the girl petulantly; “but it’s horrid lying here so long.”

“Do you think you could read a little if I brought you a book?”

“No. It only makes me tired. I hate reading.”

“Hush! Here is Mr Elthorne.”

As she spoke a tall, keen-looking, youngish man approached the bed. He was handsome and with a strong resemblance to his father; but his high forehead wore a peculiarly thoughtful, intent look, and there were the lines in his face made by constant devotion to some study, and a something in his eyes which suggested that he was thinking deeply of an object which had eluded his mental grasp.

“Good-morning,” he said quietly. “How is your patient?”

“A little nervous and restless, sir. Ought she not to have change?”

“Yes,” said the young surgeon, taking the patient’s hand and watching her intently. “As soon as we can move her, but we must hasten slowly. You will be glad to get back – home, Maria?”

“Oh, yes, sir, please, sir. I am so tired of being here.”

“I suppose so,” said the young surgeon. “Naturally;” and he turned to the nurse with a slight shrug of his shoulders.

“It is so sad and painful, sir,” she said gravely. “Poor thing! I am sure she has tried to be very patient.”

“Well, we will hear what Sir Denton says.”

Neil Elthorne went across the ward to another bed, and Maria uttered a little laugh.

“What amuses you?”

“Oh, nothing, nurse; I was only thinking. Of course I want to get home again. Anybody would.”

“Well, be patient. You are getting better, and you must think of health and strength, and the bright country life, where you will have fresh flowers and better fruit, and be among your friends.”

The nurse smiled, and then placed a little bottle of lavender water in her patient’s hand.

“To sprinkle about you when you feel faint,” she said.

“Thanky,” said the woman, in a tone of voice which robbed the word of thankfulness; and the nurse went across to where the young surgeon was busy with another patient.

“And she knows I don’t like lavender water,” grumbled the woman. “Always trying to play the fine lady nurse, and showing off, and I don’t believe she’s a lady at all. A real lady would have brought Padchouly or Odyklone. Think I don’t know. Flowers and grapes only cheap rubbish. Can’t afford better, I suppose.”

She lay back watching the actions of nurse and surgeon the while, and commenting thereon.

“She’s an artful one, she is, with all her demure looks and mincing ways. I’m not blind. Only come here because she can wear them play-acting clothes and show off. I haven’t patience with her. Lady nurse, indeed. No more a lady than I am. Yes, of course. Look at that. But it won’t do, madam. He’s engaged, and if I see much more of it I’ll tell the old doctor – see if I don’t. You’re not going to trap our Master Neil, and so I tell you. I should like to set Miss Saxa at her. My word, she’d startle my lady. Well, now; look at that!”

There was not much to see, only that Neil Elthorne had spoken as they were leaving the other patient’s bedside, and the nurse had turned to look at him as if half startled, and then turned away and came back seeming slightly disturbed. But by the time she had reached the first patient’s bedside her face was perfectly calm again, and an unbiased observer would have said that it was very beautiful in its gentle, resigned expression.

“Let me sprinkle a little of the scent for you,” she said.

“Oh, very well. If you like,” said Maria ungraciously. Then quickly, and with a flash of suspicion in her eyes, “I say, why do you look at me like that? You don’t think I shall die, do you?”

“Oh, no,” said the nurse, smiling, “indeed no. You will get better and go.”

“But lots of them do die, don’t they?”

“Some do, unfortunately; but why should you think of that?”

“You’ve seen lots die, haven’t you?”

“Yes,” said the nurse gravely; “in spite of all our efforts; and I have seen many grow strong and well, thanks to the skill of Sir Denton Hayle and Mr Elthorne.”

“We always call him Mr Neil at home; master’s Mr Elthorne.”

“And go away at last, cured,” continued the nurse, not heeding the interruption, “thankful for Heaven’s mercy and full of gratitude to those who have tended them.”

“So am I,” said Maria, shortly. “You think I’m not, but I am.”

“Hush! Do not talk. You are getting flushed and excited. Here is Sir Denton.”

“That’s right,” muttered Maria, as the nurse left the bedside to go toward a slight little white-haired gentleman, closely shaven, and whose lips were closely compressed, as, with his large, deeply-set eyes he gave a quick glance round the ward, which became perfectly still as he approached.

“Good-morning,” he said. “Come, my child, this will not do. Too pale! Too much application. The nurse will have to be nursed if we go on like this.”

“Oh, no, I am quite well, Sir Denton,” she said, smiling, with quite an affectionate look in her face.

“Then I am an ignorant old pretender, my child,” he said gravely. “Well, Elthorne, anything special to report?”

“Number forty-four, here, not quite so well as I should like to see her. Been a little feverish in the night, has she not, nurse?”

“Yes, sir,” replied the nurse; “but if I might say so – .”

“Of course, of course,” said Sir Denton, “a little irritable.”

“I think it is more that she is fretting to get away from here, than from any fresh complication.”

“Let’s see,” said the keen-looking old surgeon, turning at once to the bed, where Maria had lain watching them and trying to catch their words. “Well,” he said aloud, as he seated himself and made his rapid examination, “flowers and fruit, and a clear eye and a clean tongue. Healthy look, too, about your skin, and the colour coming back. Why, you may get up – yes, for an hour or two, say the day after to-morrow, and in another week or two we will send you back home cured. What do you say to that?”

“Thanky, sir.”

“Strange woman, that,” said Sir Denton, an hour later, when he was leaving the ward. “I believe that when she was made, all the atoms or particles which go to form the virtue known as gratitude were left out. What do you say, nurse?”

“The poor woman has suffered a great deal.”

“Yes, but she might have shown some little thankfulness to you for what you have done.”

“I, Sir Denton?” said the nurse deprecatingly. “Yes, my child, you. What I have done would have been useless without your help. But there, it is waste of words to praise you, for you are a dreadful sceptic. By the way, Elthorne, there is nothing to prevent you from taking a week’s run. You ought to have it now.”

“I don’t like to leave till that woman is perfectly safe from a relapse.”

“Well, she is now, so go. It will suit me better than if you wait to go later on. Nurse Elisia and I will see to her. I suppose you will trust us?”

“What a question!” said the young surgeon. “Well, under those circumstances I will go for a few days – say four.”

“Take a fortnight, man.”

“No; the time I said. I should not go down only my people consider that I am neglecting them. I shall be back at the end of four days.”

He glanced sharply at the nurse as he spoke, and she met his eyes in the most calm, unmoved way.

“You may depend upon my taking every care of the patient, Mr Elthorne,” she said quietly.

“Thank you; I am sure you will,” he said with his brow wrinkling a little. But he mastered himself the next minute, as he gave a few directions concerning other patients in the ward.

“Tut, man! that will do,” said Sir Denton, impatiently. “The conceit of you young fellows is dreadful. Do you think there will be screens drawn round all the beds just because you are out of the way? We’ll try and keep your patients alive.”

Neil laughed good-humouredly.

“I have perfect faith in nurse,” he said apologetically. “Forgive me for being anxious about my ward.”

“Partly humbug, my dear boy,” said the great surgeon to himself. “But there, I don’t blame him.” Then aloud: “My dear Elthorne, seriously, I think change is necessary sometimes, and take my word for it, as an old experienced man, when I say that a holiday is no waste of time. You will come back clearer-headed, and with your nerves toned up. When you come back I shall myself take a few days’ rest, and I can do so with the pleasant feeling of confidence that everything here in my ward will go on exactly as I could wish – thanks to you both.”

“Thanks to your teachings,” said Neil.

“Well, perhaps I have done my best. You are wanted there.”

One of the dressers had come up and was waiting to speak, and Neil went off with him directly to the other end of the ward.

“He will be a great man one of these days, nurse,” said the old surgeon quietly. “His heart is in his work, and he is having chances far beyond any that came to my lot when I was young. We have made such vast strides during the past five and twenty years. And now, my child, a word or two with you.”

“With me, Sir Denton?” said the nurse, with the blood flushing up at once into her pale cheeks.

“Yes,” he said, watching her keenly. “Proof positive. The colour flooded your face directly I spoke. You are as nervous as if you had been ill.”

“Oh, I am quite well, Sir Denton,” she said hastily.

“No, you are not, my child. You are over-strung. You have been working too hard, and you are on the point of breaking down. Your life is too valuable to us all here for your health to be trifled with.”

“Indeed, I – ”

“Know nothing about it,” said the old man decisively. “I do, and I know that your heart is so much in your work that you would go on till you dropped. You must have change from the air of this place.”

“Really, Sir Denton, I am – ”

“Going to do exactly as I bid you, nurse; and I wish that you would look upon me as a very old friend, and not merely as a crotchety surgeon, who worries and bullies the nurses about his patients.”

“Indeed, you have always been most kind and considerate to me, Sir Denton.”

“Have I? I thought I was very inconsiderate sometimes, and found a great deal of fault.”

“You have just given me proof of the interest you take in me, Sir Denton.”

“Ah, well, we all try to do our best. Then, as your friend, I shall insist upon your taking a month.”

“A month, Sir Denton?”

“Yes; it is quite necessary; and you, too, will come back like a lioness refreshed, ready to battle with our troubles here. Look, that woman wants you,” he continued, nodding toward Maria’s bed. “Don’t spoil her too much. She’s an ungrateful baggage. I’ve noticed her. Behaves to you as if you were her servant.”

“Oh, I do not mind,” said the nurse, smiling. “That’s right. Neither do I, for we’ve made a splendid cure of it, nurse. It’s a perfect triumph for science. I shall have to read a paper upon her case at the Institution. Morning. I shall insist upon your going away soon.”

Sir Denton went out of the ward in a quick, energetic way, and Nurse Elisia crossed to Maria’s bed. “Did you want me?” she said gently.

“Yes, of course I did. It’s too bad for you to stop away talking to the doctor so long.”

“Sir Denton was giving me instructions partly,” said the nurse.

“Yes, partly,” said the woman maliciously. “Things go on at hospitals that wouldn’t be allowed in a gentleman’s house, I can tell you.”

The nurse’s eyes flashed, but her voice was unchanged as she said quietly:

“What did you wish me to do for you?”

“Oh, you needn’t turn it off. I’m not blind. I’ve seen and noticed a deal while I’ve been lying here. Isn’t it time I had my meat jelly?”

“No,” said the nurse quietly. “I should have brought it to you if it had been time.”

“I don’t know so much about that. Never mind. I shall soon be fit to go, and precious glad of it.”

“Yes, it will be a great relief for you to get away.”

“And so Mr Neil’s going for a holiday down home. I suppose he can’t stop away any longer without running down to see his sweetheart. Shouldn’t wonder if he got married before he comes back.”

She gazed in the nurse’s face with eyes full of low-class cunning, expecting to see there a peculiar shrinking – the wincing of one found out. But the countenance into which she gazed was perfectly calm and unruffled.

“Can I do anything more for you?”

“No; not now. Thank ye,” said the woman ungraciously; “I’m going to have a nap.”

“Do,” said the nurse, rearranging the pillow. “If you do not find that it interferes with your night’s rest, sleep as much as you can. It gives nature a better opportunity to build up your strength again.”

“Yes; but I’m not blind,” said Maria to herself, as she saw the nurse go and bend over another patient, and try to alleviate her sufferings. “I’ve been long enough in the world to know what’s what. I’ve seen too much here. She’s a nasty, artful one. She’s playing the fine lady, and mincing and using big words, and trying to lead Mr Neil on till he is getting ever so stupid over her, and then she looks up at him as meek and innocent as a lamb, and as much as to say: ‘Oh, my! what do you mean?’ Wait till I get home again, and master shall know all about it, and if he don’t put a stop to it pretty sharp, my name isn’t Maria. Such impudence! A common hospital nurse trying to lead him on. Ugh! I hate the smooth, whitefaced thing, dressed up in her starched cap and collar and cuffs, and making believe to be so superior. Oh, how I should like to see Miss Saxa have a turn at her. I’ll tell her; that I will. I haven’t patience with the creature; and as for Mr Neil, he ought to be ashamed of himself.”

Nurse Elisia was having her fit of musing about the same time, and her face for the moment looked troubled and strange.

Chapter Three.

Neil at Home

“Morning, Elthorne. Had breakfast?”

“No,” said Alison, as he patted the neck of Sir Cheltnam’s horse, just reined up in front of the house. “No one down yet but the gov’nor and Isabel.”

“Isabel?” said the baronet eagerly. “Where is she?”

“Garden, I think. No, no. Don’t go after her. You’ll only scare her away. If you want that to come off, you must be careful. There, walk your horse round and come in to breakfast.”

“Had it.”

“Then come and have another. We shan’t start for our ride these two hours.”

“Oh, hang it! Mr Elthorne said he wanted me to see him put his horse through his paces. He’s not quite satisfied with his deal.”

“Yes, and ride alongside of Isabel.”

“Humph – perhaps.”

“And look here, young man, if you don’t wish to develop a row you had better be a little more attentive.”

“I should be attentive enough, but your sister seems to prefer the attentions of the parson’s boy.”

“What, Beck? Oh, he’s nobody. Besides, he’ll be off to sea directly, and you’ll be married and have a family before he comes back. That is, if – ”

“If? What do you mean?”

“The governor has not thrown you over, and Neil has not knocked your head off.”

“Propound, O, Sphinx. Read me the riddle.”

“I mean that if the governor sees you so attentive to Saxa, he’ll cry off, and if Neil notices it he will pitch into you. I should if I saw you hanging after Dana as you do after her sister.”

“Rubbish, man! A few civil words to a lady who rides well.”

“Sort of civil words the dad does not understand in his quiet, old-fashioned way. I suppose it is to be Isabel, is it not?”

“Of course; that is understood.”

“Very well, then, behave yourself, and don’t let Neil see anything, for he is as hot and peppery as – ”

“You are.”

“If you like. He’s down, you know.”

“Who is? Your brother?”

“Yes. Came down by the mail, and got in here by three this morning, I suppose. I have not seen him yet.”

“Well, I like that,” said Sir Cheltnam.

“Like what?”

“Your lecturing me about being inattentive to your sister. Here’s the blue-jacket again.”

“What nonsense! He has always been like one of us. We were schoolboys together, and he has come here, as Neil and I used to go to the vicarage, just as if it was our own home.”

“Oh, all right. I should not have said a word but for the wiggling I had.”

“Good-morning,” cried the young lieutenant, walking his horse up to where they stood. “Neil down yet?”

“No,” replied Alison. “Yes, he is. That’s being a doctor. I believe these fellows can do without sleep. You knew he had come, then?”

“Yes; heard it from the postman. Ah, Neil, old fellow!”

The young doctor came up looking rather pale, but in no wise like one who had been travelling all night, and shook hands warmly with all, supplementing the grasp of his hand with a clap on the young sailor's shoulder of a very warm and friendly nature.

"You are here early, Burwood," he said.

"Yes. Mr Elthorne planned one of his rides yesterday; weather's so fine. On the make-your-hay-while-the-sun-shines principle. He wants me to try his new horse for him."

Five minutes later the young men had paired off and were strolling down the garden, waiting for the breakfast bell, which was always rung as soon as the head of the family came down.

"I'm so glad you've come down, Neil," said Beck eagerly.

"Why?"

"I wanted a chat with you before I sail. I did think of coming to the hospital, but I don't believe I could have said what I wanted there."

Neil fixed his eyes upon his companion.

"What is it?" he said. "You don't want to borrow money?"

"Oh, hang it, no!"

"What is it, then?"

The young man was silent, and began to break the twigs of the shrubs they were passing.

"Don't do that, boy, unless you want to make my father wroth."

"No, of course not," said Beck. "How absurd!"

"Well, what's the matter? You're just off to sea, I believe."

"Yes. Long voyage," said the young man huskily. "Go on; I'm all attention."

Tom Beck did not go on, but stood examining his right hand, and frowning.

"What's the matter with your hand?"

"Oh, nothing. Miss Lydon's horse gave it a nip the other day."

"Humph! Vicious brute. Those girls are more like rough riders than ladies."

Beck looked at him curiously, while the young doctor flushed under the scrutiny, and said hastily:

"Well, boy, what is it? Isabel?"

"Yes," cried Beck, snatching at the words. "You see I may be gone for two years, and I wanted – and I thought that –"

"Thought what? Is she very hard to please?"

"Heaven bless her! no," cried the young sailor eagerly. "There, I can speak to you, Neil. You have always been to me like a big brother. And you know that I care for her."

"Well, I suppose I have thought so, my lad. What's the matter?"

"That's the matter," said the sailor, giving his head a side nod in the direction of Sir Cheltnam, who was crossing the lawn.

"Humph! Burwood? You think so?"

"He comes here a good deal, and I can't help being fidgety. It's the going away, you see. Can you help me?"

"No," said Neil. "You must help yourself. Have you spoken to my father?"

"No."

"Why not? 'Faint heart never won fair lady,' boy. Go and speak to him like a man."

"All very well for an argumentative, scientific fellow like you. I can't talk; you can."

"Nonsense!"

"I know. I'm only a quiet, thoughtful sailor, and I tell you frankly, old fellow, I felt so miserable one day about your sister that I thought the best way out of it all would be to go and drown myself."

"And did you?"

"No, Irishman, I did not; but, 'pon my word, seeing how Burwood is encouraged here, I have been really disposed, not to drown myself, but my sorrows – in drink."

“And did you?” said Neil, mockingly.

“No,” replied Beck dryly. “It was no good to try; they all know how to swim.”

“Humph!” ejaculated Neil laughing. “You’re a queer fellow, Beck. So you think you love my sister?”

“Neil, old fellow, I swear – ”

“No rhapsodies, please. Be matter of fact. I don’t believe it’s love; it’s liver. Better let me prescribe for you.”

“Yes, do, old chap. Tell me what to do.”

“Go straight to my father and tell him in a frank, manly way that you care for Isabel, and as you are going away for so long, you would like to be engaged.”

“Neil, old fellow, I feel as if I dare not.”

“Nonsense! You, a sailor, who faces storms?”

“Yes, but your father’s a regular typhoon. I say, though, wouldn’t it be premature?”

“Of course not.”

“You would go – really?”

“If I cared for the lady, certainly,” said Neil, laughing at the combination of frank, manly daring and shrinking bashfulness before him. “It is not capital punishment if you fail.”

“No,” said Beck thoughtfully, “it isn’t. I’ve no cause to be afraid, have I?”

“Not a bit.”

“Then hang it all, I will the first moment I can get your father alone.”

“Bravo, brave man!” cried Neil merrily.

“Ah, it’s all very well for you to laugh, old fellow. You don’t know how bad it is. But I say, Neil, you wouldn’t mind, would you?”

“My dear Tom,” said Neil, clapping him warmly on the shoulder, “it seems to me something like sacrilege for a man to come here to the old home, and to want to rob us of my darling, innocent little sister; but if it is to be I do not know a man to whom I would sooner see her given than you.”

“Thank you,” cried the young sailor warmly, and his voice sounding a little husky from the emotion he felt. “Thank you, Neil, old fellow, you seem more than ever like a big brother to me now.”

“Here is my father,” said Neil, quickly. “Wait your opportunity, and get it over.”

For at that instant Mr Elthorne appeared at the door, looking the *beau-idéal* of a tall, middle-aged country gentleman, with many years of hearty, vigorous life before him.

“Morning, Beck,” he cried. “Ah, Neil, my boy, glad to see you down already. Why, you ought to have had a few hours’ more rest.”

“I’m accustomed to short and broken nights,” said the young man, warmly returning the grasp of his father’s hand. “How well you look, sir!”

“Sorry I can’t return the compliment, my boy. You look, white and careworn. Never mind; we’ll soon blow the London smoke out of you. Can you manage a ride after breakfast?”

“Yes, and enjoy it.”

“That’s right. The Lydon girls are coming over, and we’ll mount you on the old cob. By the way, I thought I heard Burwood’s voice.”

“He is down the garden with Alison,” said Neil.

“That’s right. I asked him to come over to breakfast. He is going to try my new purchase for me. But it’s of no use to talk horseflesh to you. Well, my dear?”

This to Isabel, who came running out, looking very innocent and girlish.

“Good-morning, papa,” she cried, kissing him. “I did not know you were down. Good-morning, Mr Beck,” she continued shyly, as she let her hand rest in his for a moment, and then turned to her brother to kiss him affectionately. “I’m so glad you’ve come, dear Neil.”

“Let’s have breakfast, Isabel. Aunt’s not down, I suppose?”

“Oh, yes, papa, and waiting for us.”

“Wonderful!” said Mr Elthorne grimly. “Run down the garden, Isabel, and fetch Alison and Sir Cheltnam in to breakfast. Will you have a cup of coffee, Beck?” he continued rather coldly.

“Thank you, sir, I have breakfasted, but – ”

“Oh, he can manage another,” said Neil laughingly. “Come along, Tom;” and then to himself: “Poor boy! It will be no, for certain.”

Mr Elthorne took no further notice of the young sailor, but laid his hand upon his son’s shoulder and pointed to a clump of trees at the farther end of the park.

“I’m going to have those down, Neil.”

“Pity, isn’t it, sir?”

“No; if it were I should not take them away. They shut off the view in that direction. And I’m going to make an opening out there,” he continued, pointing due south. “All improvements for your benefit, sir.”

“Say for Alison’s, father. I shall never settle down here.”

“Humph! No?” said Mr Elthorne, glancing sidewise at his son. “If you go on like this you’ll be an old man before I am. I must have a talk to Saxa about you.”

Neil looked round sharply.

“Well, what is it?” said Mr Elthorne.

“Nothing, sir, nothing.”

“You looked as if I had said something shocking. Look here, Neil, my boy, as you are down at last, suppose you try if you cannot make up a little for lost time. You know what I mean.”

“Hush! Beck will hear you,” said the young surgeon quickly.

“Let him stand a little farther off, then,” said Mr Elthorne peevishly; “but,” he continued, in a lower tone of voice, “Saxa feels hurt; I know she does. She tries to carry it off by being boisterous and merry, but she is piqued by your coldness.”

“You still foster that idea, then, sir?”

“Foster? That idea? Of course, sir; and I should like to see you display a little more warmth respecting the carrying out of your father’s wishes. There, I’m not going to scold now you have come down; but just keep my last letter in mind. A bright, pretty young wife with two thousand a year and more to come later on, is not to be sneered at, my boy, and you must not quite bury yourself in London over your hospital work.”

He turned sharply.

“Really, Beck,” he cried, “I’m afraid I have behaved very rudely to you.”

“Very, sir,” thought the young man. “Don’t mention it, sir,” he said aloud.

“Let’s see: you are coming with us this morning?”

“I think you asked me to come, Mr Elthorne,” said Beck quietly.

“To be sure – of course – I am very forgetful. Come in – come in. Oh, by the way, would you mind telling your father that I cannot accede to his request. I think I have done quite enough for those people, and they must now shift for themselves. One wants to be charitable, but even charity has its limits. Come, you folks, breakfast, breakfast,” he cried cheerily, as Sir Cheltnam and Alison came up with Isabel.

“Poor Beck is right,” thought Neil, as he saw his father’s particularly cordial greeting of the baronet. “It is time to speak. But too late, I fear, after all.”

“Ah, Neil, my dear,” cried Aunt Anne, kissing him affectionately. “I’m so glad to see you home again. I hope you slept comfortably. And how is poor Maria?”

“Getting well fast, Aunt, dear.”

“That’s right. I’m so glad, for I do want her back very badly.”

“Breakfast! – something solid, and less talk,” shouted Mr Elthorne loudly, and the meal progressed, the head of the house leading the conversation, and always to one topic – his new horse.

Chapter Four. The New Horse

“Well, Isabel,” said Neil, in an undertone, as his father was loudly debating with Sir Cheltnam some vital question in which bits, bridles, and surcingles were mentioned again and again.

“Well, Neil, dear,” said the girl archly; “why do you keep looking out of the window? It is not Saxa’s time yet.”

“Thank goodness!” he said to himself. Then aloud: “Facetious this morning, eh? Two can play at that, as we used to say when I was at home. Which is it to be – Sir Cheltnam or the sailor boy?” The arch expression passed away from Isabel’s countenance on the instant. She gave a frightened glance round the table, as if dreading that the brother’s words had been overheard, and then, bending down over her cup, she whispered:

“Don’t, please, Neil, dear. You hurt me when you talk like that.”

“Then you do care for Beck?” he said in a sharp whisper.

“I – I don’t know,” she faltered.

“Well, you know that he cares for you?”

She gave him a piteous look.

“And you know, too, that he is going to speak to your father this morning?”

“O Neil, dear, he must not,” whispered the girl, in an agony of fear.

“But he must if he means to win you. I advised him to do so.”

Isabel caught hold of the cloth below the level of the table and glanced wildly at Beck, but he could not interpret the meaning of the look, and replied to it with one full of hope.

The little party rose from the table soon after and fate favoured the sailor by giving him the opportunity he sought – Mr Elthorne crossing the hall to the library, while the others went out on to the lawn.

“Eh! Want to speak to me, Beck?” said Mr Elthorne. “Come in here.”

He closed the door after the young officer, and pointed to a chair.

“Sit down, my lad,” he said pleasantly. “Now I’ll be bound to say I can guess what you are about to say.”

“You can, sir?” said Beck eagerly.

“I think so,” said Mr Elthorne, with rather a set smile on his lips. “You were going to tell me that you have to start for the East in a very few days – am I right so far?”

“Yes, sir, quite.”

“And that, as I have known you from a boy, you felt that without hesitation you might speak to me and not trouble your father. Still right?”

“Yes, sir – I think so.”

“I felt it at once,” said Mr Elthorne nodding. “Well, yes, my lad, I will try and oblige you. How much do you want?”

“Want? How much?” cried the young man, starting up with his face flushing. “Did you think I wanted to borrow money, sir?”

“Yes, my lad, of course.”

“Oh, no, sir,” he cried; and, excited now by his position, he somewhat blunderingly, but with manly frankness, told how long he had loved Isabel, and asked for a sanction to his engagement.

Mr Elthorne heard him in silence to the end, and then said briefly: “Impossible.”

“Impossible, sir?”

“Quite, my lad. It is all a boy and a girl piece of nonsense. Yes; you two have known each other from children, been playfellows and the like, but I could never sanction my child’s marriage to one who leads such a life as yours.”

“But, Mr Elthorne – ”

“Hear me out, my lad. I tell you frankly, I like you and always did as a boy and the friend of my sons, but as my prospective son-in-law, once for all, it is impossible.”

“Mr Elthorne!” cried the young man appealingly.

“No, my lad, no; so give up all thought of it at once. Isabel will leave home one of these days, but not with you. You are not the man. Do you ride with us this morning?”

Beck did not answer for the moment, for he was half stunned, but an angry flush came into his cheeks just then, for Sir Cheltnam’s voice was heard through the open window. There was the cause of his rejection, he felt sure, and, full of resentment and the feeling that Mr Elthorne had not treated him well, he replied sharply:

“Yes, sir, I shall go with the party this morning, and if I tell you that I cannot give up my hopes – ”

“Ah, well,” said Mr Elthorne sharply, “you will think differently, I dare say, after the first smart of the disappointment has worn off.”

“Ready, father?” came from the window.

“Yes. Have they got the horse round?”

“All right. Burwood is going to try him over a fence or two before we start.”

“I’ll come,” said Mr Elthorne. “You like horses, Beck; come and see the leaping.”

Beck followed mechanically, cut to the heart by the half-contemptuous, cold-blooded way in which his aspirations were treated, and in a few minutes he stood with the others looking at the noble looking animal held by a groom, while Sir Cheltnam examined him after the fashion of a dealer, and then mounted.

“I’ll trot him across the park and take the hedge, and the fence as I come back. Thick in his breathing, you think?”

“Yes, I thought so,” said Mr Elthorne.

“Well, we shall soon know, and if he is, I’d make them take him back.”

Sir Cheltnam mounted and went off at a sharp trot for some hundred yards, curved round full into sight, and, increasing his pace, came toward them at a good swinging gallop, rose at a hedge, cleared it well, and then pressed the horse on toward a stiffish fence, which it also cleared capitally, and cantered back to the waiting party, where Sir Cheltnam pulled up and leaped down.

“I can detect nothing,” he said.

“You did not take him far enough to prove it,” said Mr Elthorne shortly. “I’ll canter him down to the far hedge and back.”

As he approached the horse, there was the trampling of other hoofs, the groom and helper bringing round the horses ordered for the morning ride, while just seen in the distance over the hedge which ran along by the road were the heads of the sisters coming over to join in the excursion.

The next minute Mr Elthorne was in the saddle, and the horse sprang forward at a touch.

“Your father rides well, Elthorne,” said Sir Cheltnam. “Capital seat for so heavy a man.”

“Hasn’t followed hounds thirty years for nothing,” replied Alison. “I say,” he shouted; “better take that lower down.”

For, reversing the baronet’s process, Mr Elthorne directed his course straight for the fence, and was apparently about to take it at rather an awkward spot.

“He can’t hear you, man,” said Sir Cheltnam; “but he knows what he is about. Ah, here is your sister. I say, keep that Beck along with you this morning: he monopolised her entirely the other day.” Alison did not heed his words, but started forward with a cry, just as Neil and Beck also made a rush for the spot.

Only a few minutes before, The Don had risen and cleared the fence with the greatest ease. This time, possibly from some bad management on the part of his rider, he rushed at it so clumsily that horse and man came down together with a crash; and as Neil, who was nearest, dashed forward, he could see that his father was beneath the horse, which was plunging violently in its attempts to rise, and fell back twice, crushing his rider, before he could regain his feet.

Chapter Five.

Need of a Surgeon

As Neil Elthorne reached the spot where his father had fallen, the horse dashed off at full gallop across the park, followed by one of the grooms, who saw in it something of far greater consequence than his master, who lay perfectly motionless upon the grass.

“Any bones broken?” cried Sir Cheltnam. “Only a bit of a spill. Here, someone go for a doctor.”

No one heeded his words; but Alison and Beck watched Neil curiously as he was down on one knee making a hasty examination of the injured man.

“Oh, papa, papa!” cried Isabel. “Neil, Neil, is he dead?”

“Hush, my dear, be quiet.”

“Hadn’t you better send for a doctor?” cried Sir Cheltnam. “Nasty thing for a horse to roll across a man.”

“Be good enough to be silent, sir,” said Neil sharply. “Alison, make two of the men lift one of the light iron gates off its hinges. Isabel, my child, be a woman. Run to the house and make them bring down a mattress to lay upon the gate, and tell Aunt Anne to bring the brandy, some water, and a glass.”

“But, Neil, dear – ”

“Don’t stop to question. I know nothing yet.”

“But hadn’t you better send a groom at once for a doctor?”

“Confound it all, sir!” cried Beck in a low voice, “can’t you see that Mr Elthorne is in a skillful surgeon’s hands?”

Sir Cheltnam gave him an angry look, and turned his back, while Beck, in the matter of fact, cool fashion of a sailor in a time of emergency, bent down over Neil.

“Can I help you?” he said quietly.

“Eh? Thanks, no. I can do nothing till I get him to bed. Poor old dad!” he muttered to himself. “I little thought I was coming for this.”

He had placed the injured man’s head in an easy position, and in his cursory examination found that no limb was broken or joint dislocated; but Elthorne was perfectly insensible, and the young surgeon dreaded the crushing in of ribs and some internal injury.

Meantime the strong, hale, imperious man of a few minutes earlier lay there, breathing painfully, while those about him were too much occupied to notice the soft, dull sound of horse’s hoofs approaching fast.

Neil started as a shadow was thrown across him, and a sharp, metallic voice cried:

“Hallo! What’s the matter? Anyone hurt?”

“Yes; a bad fall,” said Neil coldly, as his eyes met those of the speaker, the elder of the two Lydons.

“Well, I couldn’t help it,” said the girl rather resentfully. “No fault of mine.”

“Poor old guardy!” cried her sister. “Don’t look like a ride to-day.”

“Not much,” said Saxa. “Did the horse throw him?”

“Fell with him,” said Sir Cheltnam.

“Looked it,” cried Saxa. “I told Dan here that I didn’t like the looks of the mount, but it was no use to tell the old man. He always would have his own way, eh, Dan?”

“Always,” assented her sister.

“Burwood,” cried Neil impatiently, “will you give me your help?”

“Certainly. What shall I do?”

“Take these ladies away somewhere; their talking disturbs the patient.”

“Well, I’m sure!” cried Saxa with a laugh full of annoyance. “But we will not trouble Sir Cheltnam; we know our way back.”

“Here’s someone else coming who will be more civil, perhaps,” said Dana to herself, as Isabel, followed by half the household, came hurrying back.

Alison was returning too, with some of the stablemen and gardeners bearing a light iron gate and the mattress, with the result that the sufferer was borne carefully back to the house.

“I say, Elthorne, though,” said Sir Cheltnam, as they followed behind; “no offence to your brother, who is, I dare say, clever enough, – I forgot that he was a doctor, – hadn’t you better send to the town for the best man they’ve got? I’m afraid your old gov’nor has come off badly.”

“Neil will know,” replied Alison. “He will do what is right.”

“Oh, very well; I only suggested; but I say, hadn’t you better make a bit of a clearance? So many people about must be bad for the patient.”

Alison looked at him curiously, but he said nothing, though the idea did occur to him that it would be satisfactory if his friend were to ride off in company with the Misses Lydon.

“How is he, Neil? What do you think of him?” said Alison, after quietly watching his brother for some time.

“Bad,” said Neil laconically. “I can say nothing yet for certain.”

“Will he die?”

“Please God, no; but the symptoms are serious.”

“Bones broken?”

“No; injury to the spine, I fear. I must have help and further advice.”

“I’ll send on to the town at once for Morrison.”

“No,” said Neil quietly. “This is not a case for a general practitioner. Get me a telegraph form, and have the message sent on at once.”

“Yes,” said Alison eagerly; “but tell me what you are going to do.”

“Send for Sir Denton Hayle.”

“Will he come?”

“If I ask him – yes.”

The message was written and sent off. The Lydons, after waiting till after noon, had shaken hands with the brothers, and said they were very sorry, and then accepted Sir Cheltnam’s escort home.

Neil, who had left his father’s side for a few minutes to say good-bye, heaved a sigh and turned to go back.

“They don’t seem very much broken-hearted about the poor old dad, Neil,” said Alison.

“No,” cried his brother, flashing out angrily. “I wonder sometimes whether – no, no, we can’t discuss that now, with him lying like that,” he added hastily, and he went back into the house to find that Beck still lingered.

Neil looked at him reproachfully and the young sailor caught his arm.

“I have not gone,” he said. “I’m staying in case I can be of any use.”

“Thanks,” said Neil shortly. Then a thought struck him, and he turned back. “Did you speak to my father?” he said.

Beck nodded.

“What did he say?”

“That it was impossible.”

Neil went hastily toward the room where his father had been carried, and found his sister listening by the door.

“You here, Isabel?” he said.

“Yes, dear,” she whispered in broken tones. “Let me go in and see poor papa now.”

“No, my child, not yet.”

“But, Neil, I am not a child now. You have let Aunt Anne be with him.”

“Well, she is older, and experienced, dear. Pray be patient. You will be helping me then.”

“Yes, Neil,” she said with a sigh, and she reached up and kissed him.

“That is my darling sister,” he said tenderly. “But, Neil, dear, one word – pray tell me the truth. Will papa get better?”

“Heaven only knows, dear,” he said solemnly. “He is very badly hurt.”

He passed through the door, and closed it after him almost without a sound, and then stopped to gaze on the scene before him, feeling a glow of warmth in his breast toward his Aunt, who, in their freedom from anxiety, had always seemed to him a weak, self-indulgent woman. But self was evidently forgotten now as she knelt beside her brother’s couch, holding one of his hands against her breast, and watching the pale, slightly drawn face as if her life depended upon her noting the slightest change.

“Has he moved, Aunt?” said Neil softly. She started violently.

“O Neil, dear!” she exclaimed, “I did not hear you. No, no, no,” she cried, with a burst of sobbing, “he’s dying! My poor brother! What shall I do?”

“Be patient and helpful, Aunt, dear. We must not think of our now sufferings now.”

“Yes, my dear, and I will, indeed I will. But, Neil, my love,” she whispered, as she caught his hand and held it in both hers; “don’t think me unkind. I know what a good, clever boy you are, but don’t you think you ought to send for a real doctor?”

Neil smiled sadly as he bent down and kissed the agitated woman, and thought of his diplomas, and the trust and faith of the eminent surgeon who had chosen him for assistant in the ward of the great London hospital.

“Yes, Aunt, dear,” he said quietly. “You are quite right. I have sent for Sir Denton.”

“Oh, that’s very good of you, my dear. You are so young; and I was afraid, dear, that you would be too proud to accept any help, and – ”

“Hist!” said Neil quickly; and he stepped to his father’s side, for he had seen a quick, trembling motion about the eyes, and the injured man began to mutter.

“Quite out of the question, my lad – I have made other arrangements for my child.”

He uttered a heavy sigh.

“Ride any horse – jumps well – you did not – ”

His eyes open and staring now, and fixed on his son.

“Neil!” he said aloud, “what’s the matter? Here, give me your hand.”

He tried to rise, and a spasm contracted his face as Neil watched him anxiously and saw a confirmation of his fears.

“I don’t understand.”

“Don’t try to move, father. You are a little hurt,” said Neil gravely. “Are you in much pain?”

“Pain? No,” said his father irritably. “Why don’t you both speak? What does it all mean?”

“Your horse fell, sir,” said Neil gently. “Lie quite still.”

“My horse fell? What horse fell? How long have I been here?”

“My dear father, you must try and be calm, please.”

“But I don’t understand,” he cried angrily. “You said my horse fell. I can’t remember.”

“But you will soon. Try and go to sleep.”

“Don’t be absurd, boy. Here, help me to get – ”

He did not finish his sentence but tried to raise himself and then lay perfectly still, with his jaw dropped, and a look of horror in his eyes.

“Neil – my boy,” he said piteously, “I can’t move. This sudden weakness – I – yes – I remember now. The Don fell with me. Quick – tell me – am I much hurt?”

“I hope not, sir. It was a bad fall, but there are no bones broken.”

“But – ”

He stopped, and looked wildly at his son.

“Father, you must try and be calm,” said Neil firmly.

“Ralph, dearest – pray – pray – be calm,” said Aunt Anne.

“Silence, woman!” he cried harshly; and the great drops of perspiration began to gather on his brow. “Yes,” he continued hoarsely, “I begin to remember clearly now. The brute fell and rolled over me. Here, Neil, you are a surgeon – tell me – not seriously hurt?”

“You are hurt, father, and it is absolutely necessary that you should be quite calm.”

“Calm, sir! How can I be calm? Do you take me for a child? Send for a proper doctor at once – a man who can understand, and who will tell me the truth.”

“I am telling you the truth, father. I repeat – it is absolutely necessary that you should lie still and try to be calm.”

“But – ”

He uttered that word angrily, and clutched at the side of the couch to try again and raise himself, but his arm fell nervelessly by his side, and he gave his son a piteous look.

“My back,” he groaned. “No feeling; Neil, my boy, you know and you will not speak. Don’t, don’t, tell me I am to be a cripple.”

“My dear father,” cried Neil huskily, as he grasped his hand, “I dare not tell you that, for I am not sure. I have sent up for Sir Denton, and he will, I know, come by the earliest possible train. I hope that my fears are wrong.”

“Then they are right,” said the sufferer with a groan. “I know now. Great Heavens!”

He closed his eyes, and lay perfectly still, but the dew upon his contracted face told plainly enough of the mental agony he suffered.

Aunt Anne drew back, and signed to Neil to come to her side.

“Speak to him,” she whispered. “Try and say something to comfort him, dear.”

“It would be folly,” replied Neil sadly, “and only increase his irritation.”

“Oh, but, my dear!” she whispered.

“Aunt, it was what I feared, and he has grasped the truth.”

“Neil!”

“Wait till Sir Denton comes, and let him decide.”

He went back to the side of the couch, and sat down to watch and wait, ready to try and alleviate pain, and wipe the drops of agony from the sufferer’s brow from time to time.

And so an hour passed without the patient once unclosing his eyes, but it was plain that he did not sleep; a sharp twitch across the face now and again eliciting a faint groan.

Aunt Anne had been out twice to speak to Isabel, who was weeping silently in the adjoining room.

And so the dreary day crept on with a strange silence pervading the place where all, as a rule, was bustle and activity. Alison softly paced the hall hour after hour, waiting patiently for news of which Aunt Anne was the bearer.

But she had little to communicate, and night was coming on fast when the sound of carriage wheels was heard, and a fly from the station drove up to the door, out of which stepped the famous London surgeon, who had arrived quite a couple of hours sooner than had been expected.

Neil hurried out, leaving Aunt Anne to take his place while he welcomed the visitor.

“Thank you,” he said simply, as he grasped the old man’s hand.

“I came down at once. How is he?”

Neil shook this head, and led the way at once into the room where Mr Elthorne lay with his eyes tightly closed; but he opened them at once as Sir Denton approached, showing that he had been keenly conscious of every sound.

Aunt Anne rose from his side, bent down again to kiss him, and then hurried out of the room to hide her tears, leaving the great surgeon to decide upon what her brother’s future was to be.

Isabel and Alison were outside, and the three waited together anxiously for the great man's verdict, and all oppressed by the strange sensation produced by the sudden shock which had fallen upon the family. Everything seemed strange, and the very silence to be charged with portents.

Alison strode up and down the room, while his sister crouched by Aunt Anne's side, holding her hands tightly, and starting at every sharp turn her brother made.

It seemed an age before they heard the opening of a door and steps in the hall; and as Isabel started up, listening excitedly, Neil appeared, looking white and anxious.

"Go to my father, Aunt," he said, and then drew back to lead Sir Denton into a little room much affected by the young man, half study, half museum, where the surgeon sank into a chair and leaned back gazing at the worn, troubled face before him, as if waiting for his companion to speak.

"Well, sir?" he said at last, for Sir Denton remained silent.

"Well, Elthorne," said Sir Denton gravely.

"Don't trifle with me. I am in agony."

"Naturally, my dear fellow, and I am not trifling with you. I only shrank from giving you pain."

"Then you think – " began Neil.

"No; I am sure, Elthorne. My dear boy, you have not worked with me for years without being able to come to a decision at once upon such a case as this. I can quite understand your feelings. In your horror and despair you mistrusted yourself, or tried to mistrust yourself, hoping, I presume, that you might be wrong, and sent at once for me. Is it not so?"

Neil bowed his head; and then quickly, as drowning men catch at straws, he said:

"But, Sir Denton, do you feel absolutely certain?"

"My dear Elthorne, would to Heaven I could say that there is a doubt. There is none. You know there is none."

Neil uttered a low groan.

"It comes hard from one who feels toward you as I do, my dear brother," said the old man gently; "but we doctors and surgeons can have no concealment from each other. Your examination must have shown you that the spine is hopelessly injured."

"Yes, yes," groaned Neil; "but I clung to the hope that I might be wrong. Then you can give me no hope?"

"Yes, I can do that. With careful nursing you may save his life, and he may have many years before him. There will be little physical suffering, and fortunately for him, being a wealthy man, he can palliate much of this by attendants and the many contrivances our mechanics have invented for the benefit of the injured. It is a terrible case, but nothing compared to what it would be if some poor breadwinner had suddenly been stricken down – a case such as we have seen hundreds of times. Your father has everything to soften the hardship, and, above all, the love of his children."

"Then you feel that nothing more can be done?"

"Frankly, nothing. It is the greatest kindness to tell you so, Elthorne. As you well know, the treatment is of the simplest. Time, and a thoroughly good, trustworthy nurse. There is the prescription that forty years of earnest study have taught me to offer you."

"Yes," said Neil, after a pause, "I felt all this – thanks to your teachings. Poor old father!" he continued as if to himself; "so full of vitality, so determined and energetic, so full of plans, and in an instant all at an end."

"Oh, no," said Sir Denton. "You must look at the brighter side of the accident, my dear fellow. He will – I am speaking plainly – he will be utterly paralysed in his lower limbs, but in all probability the mental faculties will be sharpened, and from what I have seen of your father I should say he will be more energetic and active than ever."

"Thank you," said Neil warmly; "thank you – "

“Now go and break the bad news to your people at once, and all of you face the worst. You are spared a great deal. You know as well as I do that his accident might have meant a few hours’ hopeless struggle against death and then the end.”

“Yes, yes,” said Neil. “You are right, and I will try – we will all try – to face the trouble as we should. But you will stay the night and see him in the morning.”

“No, I can do no good. You will act in everything exactly as I should, and there are others waiting in agony for my return.”

“But – ”

“You know in your heart what I say is just, my dear Elthorne. Come, pupil, your old master trusts you,” said the surgeon, taking his hand. “Forget for the time being that the patient is a relative; sink everything in the scientific aspects of the case; do your duty, and trust yourself. Now, God bless you, and good-bye.”

He grasped the young surgeon’s hands warmly and turned to go, but stopped short.

“I shall get someone to come and lend me a hand, so that you can stay down here as long as is necessary, but you will be able to come up for a day or two at the end of a week. Of course the first thing is to send you down an efficient nurse. Everything will depend upon her, as you know.”

“Yes,” said Neil huskily, and he walked out into the hall.

“I will not ask to see your sister or your aunt, Elthorne. My kindest regards, and I hope to renew my friendship with them at some happier time.”

He stepped into the waiting fly and looked at his watch.

“Tell him to drive fast, and I shall just catch the last up-train. Good-bye.”

The wheels grated on the gravel drive, and the sounds were dying away as Neil turned to find that the drawing-room door had opened.

Isabel ran to him and threw her arms about his neck, trying vainly to speak, as he held her to his breast, while her eyes looked imploringly into his.

“What does he say, Neil?” said Alison huskily. “Tell us the worst.”

“The worst,” replied Neil gloomily.

“Then he will die?” cried Alison excitedly.

“No, no.”

“But he has gone so soon. Don’t keep it back, man. He said he could do nothing?”

“He said that with care our father will live, but – ”

He stopped short for a few moments and a sigh that was almost a groan escaped him.

“The poor old dad. Al,” he said softly, “I am afraid he will be a hopeless cripple if the knowledge of his state does not kill him right off.”

“What’s that? What’s the matter?” cried Alison sharply, as the door opened and the butler appeared. “We are engaged.”

“Beg pardon, sir,” said the man. “Mrs Barnett, sir, rang the bell. Master wants Mr Neil directly.”

“O Neil, he is worse,” sobbed Isabel; and, as her brother hurried out of the room and across the hall, she followed, and they all entered together, just as Aunt Anne was coming to summon them, her ruddy face looking blanched and strange in places, while her eyes were wide open and she seemed to have been scared.

“Pray come to him, my dear,” she whispered. “He frightens me.”

“What is that?” said Mr Elthorne sharply. “What is the meaning of that whispering? Am I to lie here without any attention because I have had a bit of a fall? Here, Neil, quick. It is disgraceful. Anne – Isabel – you can go. I want to talk to Neil.” Isabel crept deprecatingly to the speaker’s side and bent down to kiss him.

He responded to her kiss, and then seemed annoyed with himself, as if he considered his conduct weak.

"There, there," he cried. "Don't hang about me, my dear. You make me hot. There is nothing much the matter. Go and nurse up your aunt, and try to teach her to be sensible."

"Oh, papa, dear!"

"Now, don't you begin to be absurd too. I'm hurt and in pain. Let me ask you one question – Is it likely to do me good to have a foolish woman sitting close to me soaking her pocket handkerchief?"

"Ralph, dear, I was only sympathetic," cried Aunt Anne.

"I don't want sympathy," cried Mr Elthorne. "I want help. I want you to go now. Shut the door after them, Alison. You can stop. Now," he continued angrily, as soon as they were alone, and he fixed his eyes fiercely upon his elder son's, "you chose to be a doctor, sir, and I gave way unwillingly. I studied no expense, and you have gone on studying up your profession. But, once for all, if I am to take any of your assistance, I warn you that I will have none of the tricks of your trade played upon me."

"My dear father, pray be calm," said Neil anxiously.

"Did you hear what I said, sir? Be calm! Am I not calm? There you are bringing out all your medical stock in trade – medical cant to bear."

Neil looked at him anxiously, and saw that he was wild in his manner, and that there was a curiously excited glare in his eyes which troubled him a good deal, and affected his words as he replied.

"Now," cried his father, "tell me at once, what did Sir Denton say?"

"That you must be kept perfectly quiet, sir, and be troubled by nothing exciting."

"Why?" said Mr Elthorne sharply. "Did he say that my case was hopeless, and that I must die?"

"No; decidedly not. Nothing of the kind, sir. He told me that you only needed proper nursing to recover."

"To recover my health?"

"Yes, sir."

"And strength?" said Mr Elthorne, gazing at him searchingly.

Neil was silent.

"Why don't you speak, boy?" said the old man sternly. "No; you need not speak. A man is a physician or a fool at forty. I am long past forty, and not quite a fool, boys, as you both know. He told you that I should be a hopeless cripple."

"He told me, I repeat, that you must be kept perfectly quiet, father, and I must insist upon your now trying to help me by following out his wishes."

"A cripple – a helpless cripple," said the injured man, without paying the slightest heed to his son's words, but speaking as if to someone he could see across the room. "I did not want telling that. A man knows. But what does it mean? Wreck? Utter helplessness? Being led about by the hand? No, no, no; not so bad as that. The brain is right. I am strong there. You boys are not going to usurp everything yet. Do you hear? I say you boys are – you boys – I say – the doctor – quick – the doctor – ah!"

His eyes glared wildly as the fit of excitement rapidly increased, till he almost raved like one in a fit of delirium, and every attempt to calm him by word or action on the part of his son only seemed to intensify his excitement, till a sudden spasm made his face twitch, and his head fell back with the angry light dying out of his eyes.

"Quick!" whispered Neil. "Run up to my room and bring down the little case on the drawers."

He raised his father's head as he spoke, and, after glancing at him in a frightened manner, Alison hurried out of the room.

An hour later Ralph Elthorne was lying perfectly insensible, with his son watching by his bedside. It was no new thing to him this tending of a patient in a serious strait consequent upon an accident, but their relative positions robbed him of his customary *sang-froid*, and again and again he asked himself whether he had not done wrong in accepting so onerous a task, and whether Sir Denton had not placed too much confidence in his knowledge of the treatment such a case demanded. When such thoughts mastered him he was ready over and over again to send a fresh message to the great surgeon, and it was only by a strong effort that he mastered himself and maintained his calmness. For

he knew in an ordinary way a doubt of his capacity would never enter his head; all he had to do, he told himself, was to strive as he would have striven for another.

“But he is my father,” he muttered, “and it is so hard to feel confidence when one knows that the patient mistrusts every word and act.”

Chapter Six.

Watching the Sufferer

“What are you going to do about sitting up?” said Alison in a whisper about eleven o’clock that night. “He must not be left.”

“Certainly not,” said Neil, after a glance at the bed where his father lay sleeping uneasily. “I am going to sit with him.”

“That will not do,” said Alison quietly. “*You* are the doctor, and must be rested and ready when wanted. You had better go to bed and I’ll sit up. Aunt Anne wants to, and so does Isabel, but the old lady is hysterical and fit for nothing, and Isabel is too young.”

“Of course,” said Neil quietly. “But I have settled all that. I shall sit up, and if there is any need I can call you directly.”

Alison looked as if he were going to oppose the plan, but he said nothing for the moment, only sat watching his brother and occasionally turning to the bed as the injured man made an uneasy movement.

They were interrupted by a tap at the door, to which Alison replied, coming back directly to whisper in his brother’s ear.

“You had better go and talk to the old lady yourself,” he said. “She has come prepared to sit up.” Neil went hastily to the door and passed out on the landing, where his aunt was standing, dressed for the occasion, and armed with night lights and other necessary appliances used in an invalid’s chamber.

“No, Aunt, dear,” said Neil quickly. “Not necessary. I am going to sit up.”

“My dear boy, your brother said something of this kind to me,” said the lady querulously; “but pray don’t you be obstinate. I really must sit up with your father. It is my duty, and I will.”

“It is your duty, Aunt, to obey the surgeon in attendance upon the patient,” said Neil firmly, but he winced a little at his aunt’s next words.

“So I would, my dear, if we had one here; but do you really think, Neil, that you are able to deal with such a terrible case? Hadn’t you better have in the Moreby doctor, and hear what he says?”

“We have had Sir Denton Hayle to-day, and I have his instructions. Is not that enough?”

“No, my dear, really I don’t think it is. You see it isn’t as if you were a much older man and more experienced, and had been a surgeon ever so long.”

“There is no need for you to sit up, Aunt,” said Neil quietly. “I can quite understand your anxiety, but, believe me, I am doing my best.”

“Oh, dear,” sighed Aunt Anne. “You boys are as obstinate and as determined as your poor father. Well, there, I cannot help myself,” she continued in a tone full of remonstrance. “No one can blame me, and I am sure that I have done my duty.”

“Yes, Aunt, dear, quite,” said Neil soothingly. “Go and get a good night’s rest. I don’t think there will be any need, but if it is necessary I will have you called.”

“Encouraging!” he said to himself as he returned to the sick room, thinking that after all it was very natural on his aunt’s part, for it must seem to her only a short time since he was a boy at home, when, upon the death of his mother, she had come to keep house.

Alison rose from a chair near the bed as he closed the door, and signed to him to come to the other end of the room.

“I say,” he whispered, “I don’t like the governor’s breathing. Just you go and listen. Its catchy like and strange.”

Neil crossed to the bed and bent down over the sleeping man, felt his pulse, and came back.

“Quite natural,” he said, “for a man in his condition. I detect nothing strange.”

Alison looked at him curiously, turned away, and walked softly up and down the shaded room, to stop at last by his brother.

“I don’t want to upset you,” he said, “but I feel obliged to speak.”

“Go on,” said Neil, “but I know what you are going to say.”

“Impossible!” said Alison, staring.

“By no means. You are uneasy, and think I am not capable of caring for my father.”

“Well, I can’t help it, old fellow,” said Alison. “I was thinking something of the kind. You see a regular old country doctor – ”

“Has not half the experience of a young man in a large hospital,” said Neil, interrupting him and speaking now in a quite confident manner. “We have had many such cases as this, and I have helped to treat them.”

“Yes, but – ”

“Pray try and have a little confidence in me, old fellow. I am sure you do not mean it, but you are making my task much harder.”

“Oh, I don’t want to do that, but you see I can’t help looking at you as my brother.”

“Never cease to, pray. Now go and lie down for a few hours. Yes,” he continued, as Alison hesitated, “I wish it. I desire it. I will call you about four.”

“Oh, very well, if I must, I must,” said Alison rather sulkily. Then, as if ashamed of the tone he had taken, “All right. Be sure and call me then.” He crossed to the bed again, stood looking down at the sleeping face, and returned.

“I say,” he whispered, “what a change it seems! Only this morning talking to us as he did, and now helpless like that.”

“Yes; it is terrible how prostrate an accident renders a man.”

“Did – did he say anything to you about – about marriage?”

Neil started and looked sharply at his brother, who had faltered as he spoke.

“Yes, but there is no occasion to discuss that now.”

“No, I suppose not, but he was wonderfully set upon our being regularly engaged to those two girls. Don’t seem natural for that sort of thing to be settled for you downright without your being consulted. It’s just as if you were a royal personage.”

“My dear Alison, is this a time for such a subject to be discussed? Pray go now.”

“Oh, very well – till four o’clock, then.”

The young man left the room, and Neil sat down to think, after a closer examination of his father’s state. For Alison’s words had started a current of thought which soon startled him by its intensity, as it raised up the calm, pale face of one who had constantly been at his side in cases of emergency – one who was always tenderly sensitive and ready to suffer with those who suffered, whose voice had a sweet, sympathetic ring as she spoke words of encouragement or consolation to the agony-wrung patient, but who could be firm as a rock at times, when a sufferer’s life depended upon the strength of mind and nerve of the attendant.

Always that face, looking with calm, deep, thoughtful eyes into his, but with no heightening of colour, no tremor in the sensitive nerves of the smooth, high temples; and as he sat there thinking, she seemed to him one whom no words of man, however earnest and impassioned, could stir, certainly not such words as he could speak.

He started from his reverie, which had in spirit taken him back to the hospital where the tall, graceful figure glided silently from bed to bed, and the colour mounted quickly to his cheeks as a faint tapping came at the door, and upon his opening it he started again, for there was a figure, tall and slight, indistinctly seen in the darkness, as if his thoughts had evoked the presence of her upon whom his mind had dwelt.

“It is only I, Neil, dear,” whispered a pleasant, silvery voice.

“Isabel? I thought you were in bed.”

“How could you, Neil, dear!” she said reproachfully. “I could not go to bed and sleep knowing you were sitting up with poor papa. How is he now, dear?”

“Just the same, and must be for some time.” Isabel sighed.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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