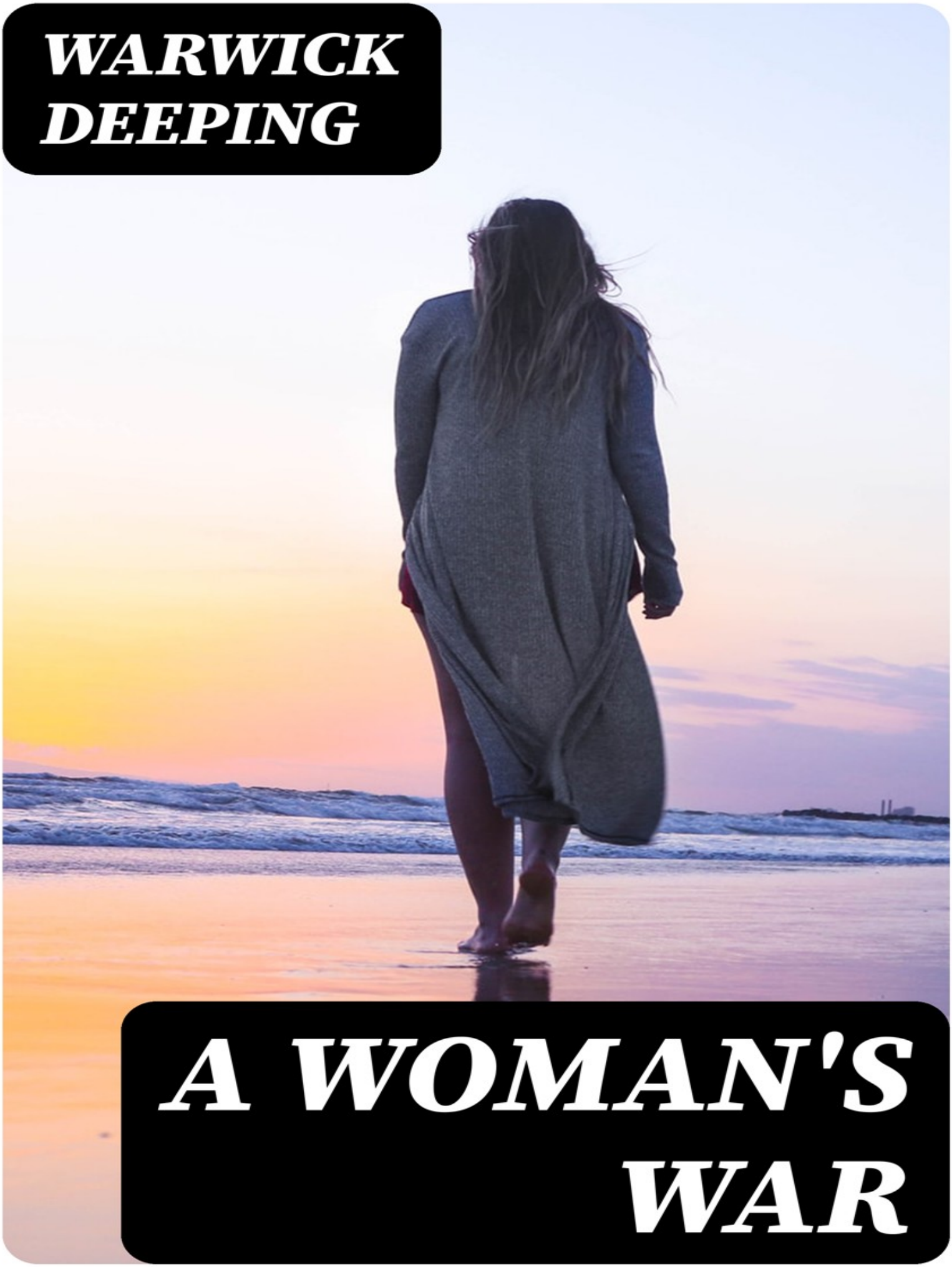
WARWICK DEEPING



A WOMAN'S WAR

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A Woman's War

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CHAPTER I

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There was a ripple of chimes through the frosty air as Catherine Murchison turned from King's Walk into Lombard Street, and saw the moon shining white and clear between the black parapets and chimney-stacks of the old houses. St. Antonia's steeple was giving the hour of three, and a babel of lesser tongues answered from the silence of the sleeping town. Hoar-frost glittered on the cypresses that stood in a garden bounding the road, and the roofs were like silver under the hard, moonlit sky.

Catherine Murchison stopped before the great red-brick house with its white window-sashes, and its Georgian air of solidity and comfort. The brass lion's-head on the door seemed to twinkle a welcome to her above the plate that carried her husband's name. She smiled to herself as she drew the latch-key from the pocket under her sables, the happy smile of a woman who comes home with no searchings of the heart. Several shawl-clad figures went gliding along under the shadows of the cypresses, giving her good-night with a flutter of laughter and tapping of shoes along the stones. Catherine waved her hand to the beshawled ones as they scurried home, and caught a glimpse of St. Antonia's spire diademed by the winter stars. She remembered such a night seven years ago, and man's love and mother's love had come to her since then.

Catherine closed the door gently, knowing that her husband would be asleep after a hard day's work. It was not often that he went with her to the social gatherings of Roxton. Professional success, fraught with the increasing responsibilities thereof, brightened his own fireside for him, and Catherine his wife would rather have had it so. James Murchison was no dapper drawing-room physician. The man

loved his home better than the dinner-tables of his patients. He was young, and he was ambitious with his grave and purposeful Saxon sanity. His wife took the social yoke from off his shoulders, content in her heart to know that she had made the man’s home dear to him.

A standard-lamp was burning in the hall, the light streaming under a red-silk shade upon the Oriental rugs covering the mellow and much polished parquetry. There were a few old pictures on the walls, pewter and brass lighting the dead oak of an antique dresser. Catherine Murchison looked round her with a breathing in of deep content. She unwrapped the shawl from about her hair, rich russet red hair that waved in an aureole about her face. Her sable cloak had swung back from her bosom, showing the black ball-dress, red over the heart with a knot of hothouse flowers. There was a wholesome and generous purity in the white curves of her throat and shoulders.

Catherine laid her cloak over an old Dutch chair, and turned to the table where fruits, biscuits, and candles had been left for her. Her husband’s gloves lay on the table, and his hat with one of Gwen’s dolls tucked up carefully herein. Catherine’s eyes seemed to mingle thoughts of child and man, as she ate a few biscuits and looked at Miss Gwen’s protégé stuffed into the hat. James Murchison had had a long round that day, with the cares and conflicts of a man who labors to satisfy his own conscience. Catherine hoped not to wake him; she had even refused to be driven home lest the sound of wheels should carry a too familiar warning to his ears. She lit her candle, and, reaching up, turned out the lamp. Her feet were on the first step of the stairs when a streak of light in the half-darkness of the hall brought her to a halt.

Some one had left the lamp burning in her husband’s study. She stepped back across the hall, and hesitated a moment as other thoughts occurred to her. Housebreaking was a dead art in Roxton, and she smiled at the

melodramatic imaginings that had seized her for the moment.

A reading-lamp stood on the table before the fire, that had sunk to a dull and dirty red in the smokeless grate. The walls of the room were panelled with books and the glass faces of several instrument cabinets—the room of no mere specialist, no haunter of one alley in the metropolis of intelligence. On the sofa lay the figure of a man asleep, his deep breathing audible through the room.

To the wife there was nothing strange in finding her husband sleeping the sleep of the tired worker before the dying fire. Her eyes had a laughing tenderness in them, a sparkle of mischief, as she set down the candle and moved across the room. Her feet touched something that rolled under her dress. She stooped, and looked innocent enough as she picked up an empty glass.

“James—”

There was mirth in the voice, but her eyes showed a puzzled intentness as she noticed the things that stood beside the lamp upon the table. An open cigar-box, a tray full of crumbled ash and blackened matches, a couple of empty syphons, a decanter standing in an ooze of spilled spirit. Memory prompted her, and she smiled at the suggestion. Porteus Carmagee, that prattling, white-bobbed maker of wills and codicils had slipped in for a smoke and a gossip. James Murchison never touched alcohol, and the inference was obvious enough, for her experience of Mr. Carmagee’s loquacity justified her in concluding that he had droned her husband to sleep.

Wifely mischief was in the ascendant on the instant. She stooped over the sleeping man whose face was in the shadow, put her lips close to his, and drew back with a little catching of the breath. The room seemed to grow dark and very cold of a sudden. She straightened, and stood rigid, staring across the room with a sense of hurrying at the heart.

Then, as though compelling herself, she lifted the lamp, and held it so that the light fell full upon her husband’s face.

CHAPTER II

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Man is the heir of many ancestors, and his inheritance of life's estate may prove cumbered by mortgages unredeemed by earlier generations.

In the spring of the year the blood is hot, and the quicksilver of youth burns in the brain. The poise of true manhood is not reached at twenty, the experience to know, the strength to grapple. James Murchison of the broad back and sunny face, first of good fellows, popular among all, had followed the joy of being and feeling even into shady back-street rooms. In the hospital "common-room" he had always had a knot of youngsters round him, lounging, smoking, lads with no studied vice in them, but lads to whom life was a thing of zest. For Murchison it had been the crest of the wave, the day of the world's youth. An orphan with money at his bank, the liberty of London calling him, a dozen mad youngsters to form a coterie! As for heredity and such doctrines of man's ascent and fall, he had not studied them in the thing he called himself.

James Murchison had carved up corpses, electrified frogs, and learned the art of dispensing physic before the world taught him to discover that there were other things to conquer besides text-books and examiners. His father had died of drink, and his grandfather before him, and God knows how many fat Georgian kinsmen had contributed to the figures on the debit side. From his mother he had inherited wholesome yeoman blood, and the dower perhaps had made him what he was, straight-backed, clean-limbed, strong in the jaw, brave and blue about the eyes. There had been no blot on him till he had gone up to London as a lonely boy. There in the solitude the world had caught him,

and tossed him out of his dingy rooms to taste the wine of the world’s pleasures.

The phase was natural enough, and there had been plenty of young fools to applaud it in him. The first slip had come after a hospital concert; the second after a football match; the third had followed a successful interview with the Rhadamanthi who passed candidates in the duties of midwifery. An ejectment from a music-hall, a brawl in Oxford Street, a *liaison* with a demi-mondaine, complaints from landladies, all these had reached the ears of the Dean’s “great ones” who sat in conclave. Murchison had been argued with in private by a gray-haired surgeon who had that strong grip on life that goes with virility and the noble sincerity of faith.

“Fight yourself, sir,” the old man had said; “fight as though the devil had you by the throat. If you bring children into the world you will set a curse on them unless you break your chains.” And Murchison had gone out from him with a set jaw and an awakened manhood.

Then for the first time in life he learned the value of a friend. The man was dead now; he had died in Africa, dragged down by typhoid in some sweltering Dutch town. James Murchison remembered him always with a warming of the heart. He remembered how they had gone together to a little Sussex village by the sea, taken a coast-guard’s disused cottage for eighteen pence a week, bathed, fished, cooked their own food, and pitched stones along the sand. James Murchison had fought himself those summer weeks, growing brown-faced as a gypsy between sun and sea. He had taken the wholesome strength of it into his soul, passed through the furnace of his last two years unscathed, and set out on life, a man with a keen mouth, clean thoughts, and six feet of Saxon strength. The world respected him, never so much as dreaming that he had the devil of heredity tight bound within his heart.

* * * * *

“Dear, are you better now?”

He had told her everything, sitting in the dusk before the fire, one fist under his chin, and his eyes the eyes of a strong man enduring bitter shame. Woman’s love had watched over him that day. She had striven to lift him up out of the dust of his deep remorse, and had opened her whole heart to him, showing the quiet greatness of her nature in her tenderness towards this strong man in his sorrow.

“Kate, how can you bear this!”

“Bear it, dear?”

“Finding so much of the beast in me. My God, I thought the thing was dead; we are never dead, dear, to our father’s sins.”

She came and sat beside him before the fire, a man’s woman, pure, generous, trusty to the deeps. The light made magic in her hair, and showed the unfathomable faith within her eyes.

“Put the memory behind you,” she said, looking up into his face.

He groaned, as though dust and ashes still covered his manhood.

“You are too good to me, Kate.”

“No,” and she drew his hands down into her bosom; the warmth thereof seemed to comfort him as a mother’s breast comforts a child at night.

“I am glad you have told me—all.”

“Yes—all.”

“It helps me, it will help us both.”

“I ought to have told you long ago,” he said.

“But then—”

“I thought that I had killed the thing, and I loved you, dear, and perhaps I was a coward.”

She drew closer to him, leaning against his knee, while one of his strong arms went about her body. The warm darkness of the room seemed full of the sacred peace of home. They were both silent, silent for many minutes till the sound of children's laughter came down from the rooms above.

James Murchison bent forward, and drew a deep breath as though in pain. The flash of sympathy was instant in its passage. Husband and wife were thinking the same thoughts.

"Kate, you must help me to fight this down—"

"Yes."

"For their sakes, the children—for yours. I think that I have worked too hard of late. When the strength's out of one, the devil comes in and takes command. And the servants, you are sure—?"

She felt the spasmodic girding of all his manhood, and yearned to him with all her heart.

"They knew nothing; I saved that. Don't let us talk of it; the thing is over"—and she tried not to shudder. "Ah—I am glad I know, dear, I can do so much."

James Murchison bent down and drew her into his arms, and she lay there awhile, feeling that the warmth of her love passed into her husband's body. The hearth was red before them with the fire-light, and they heard the sound of their children playing.

"Shall we go up to them?" she said, at last.

"Yes"—and she knew by his face that he was praying, not with mere words, but with every life-throb of his being—"it will do me good. God bless you—"

And they kissed each other.

CHAPTER III

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Mrs. Betty Steel sat alone at the breakfast-table with a silver teapot covered with a crimson cosy before her, and a pile of letters and newspapers at her elbow. The west front of St. Antonia's showed through the window, buttress and pinnacle glimmering up into the morning sunlight. Frost-rimed trees spun a scintillant net against the blue. The quiet life of the old town went up with its lazy plumes of smoke into the crisp air.

Mrs. Betty Steel drew a slice of toast from the rack, toyed with it, and looked reflectively at her husband's empty chair. She was a dark, sinuous, feline creature was Mrs. Betty, with a tight red mouth, and an olive whiteness of skin under her black wreath of hair. Her hands were thin, mercurial, and yet suggestive of pretty and graceful claws. A clever woman, cleverer with her head than with her heart, acute, elegant, aggressive, yet often circuitous in her methods. She had abundant impulse in her, blood, and clan, even evidenced by the way in which she ripped the wrapper from a copy of the *Wilmenden Mail*.

Mrs. Betty buried her face in the pages, crumbling her toast irritably as her eyes ran to and fro over the head-lines. She glanced up as her husband entered, a smooth-faced, compressed, and professional person, with an assured manner and an incisive cut of the mouth and chin.

"Any news in this hub of monotony?"

His wife put down the paper, and called back the dog who was poking his nose near the bacon-dish on the fire-guard.

"Quack medicines much in evidence. The fellows are arrant Papists, Parker; they promise to cure everything with nothing. Tea or coffee?"

Mrs. Betty spoke with the slight drawl that was habitual to her. Her admirers felt it to be distinguished, but its effect upon shop assistants was to spread the instincts of socialism.

Dr. Parker Steel declared for coffee, and took salt to his porridge. He was not a man who wasted words, save perhaps on the most paying patients. Professional ambition, and an aggressive conviction that he was to be the leading citizen in Roxton filled the greater part of the gentleman's sphere of consciousness.

"And local sensations?"

"Mrs. Pindar's ball, a very dull affair, sausage-rolls and jelly, and a floor like glue—probably."

"Any one there?"

"The Lombard Street clique, the Carnabys, Tom Flemming, Kate Murchison, etc., etc., etc."

Parker Steel grunted, and appeared to be estimating the number of cubes in the sugar bowl by way of exercising himself in the compilation of statistics.

"Murchison not there, I suppose?" he asked.

"The wife—quite sufficient."

Her husband smiled, showing the regular white teeth under his trim, black mustache with scarcely any flow of feeling in his features. Dr. Parker Steel was very proud of his teeth and finger-nails.

"You don't love that lady much, eh?"

Mrs. Betty's refined superciliousness trifled with the suggestion.

"Kate Murchison? I cannot say that I ever trouble much about her. Rather fat and vulgar—perhaps. Fat women do not appeal to me; they seem to carry sentimentality and gush about with them like patchouli. Do you think that you are gaining ground on Murchison, Parker, eh?"

The husband appeared confident.

"Perhaps."

“Old Hicks will resign the Hospital soon; you must take it.”

“Not worth the trouble.”

Mrs. Betty’s dark eyes condemned the assertion.

“Dirt’s money in the wrong place, as they say in trade, Parker.”

“Well?” And the amused consort glanced at her with a cold flicker of affection.

“Study it on utilitarian principles. Lady Twaddle-twaddle sends her cook, or her gardener, or her boot-boy to be treated in Roxton Hospital. You exercise yourself on the boot-boy or the cook, and Lady Twaddle-twaddle approves the cure. Praise is never thrown away. Let the old ladies who attend missionary meetings say of you, ‘that Dr. Steel is so kind and attentive to the poor.’ We have to lay the foundation of a palace in the soil.”

Parker Steel chuckled, knowing that behind Mrs. Betty’s elegant verbiage there was a tenacity of purpose that would have surprised her best friends.

“I wonder whether Murchison is as privileged as I am?” he said, passing his cup over the red tea cosy.

“I suppose the woman gushes for him, just as I work my wits for you.”

“The Amazons of Roxton.”

“We live in a civilized age, Parker, but the battle is no less bitter for us. I use my head. Half the words I speak are winged for a final end.”

“You are clever enough, Betty,” he confessed.

“We both have brains”—and she gave an ironical laugh—“I shall not be content till the world, our world, fully recognizes that fact. Old Hicks is past his work. Murchison is the only rival you need consider. Therefore, Parker, our battle is with the gentleman of Lombard Street.”

“And with the wife?”

“That is my affair.”

Such life feuds as are chronicled in the hatred of a Fredegonde for a Brunehaut may be studied in miniature in many a modern setting. Ever since childhood Betty Steel and Catherine Murchison had been born foes. Their innate instincts had seemed antagonistic and repellent, and the life of Roxton had not chastened the tacit feud. Girls together at the same school, they had fought for leadership and moral sway. Catherine had been one of those creatures in whom the deeper feelings of womanhood come early to the surface. Children had loved her; her arms had been always open to them, and she had stood out as a species of little mother to whom the owners of bleeding knees had run for comfort.

The rivalry of girlhood had deepened into the rivalry of womanhood. They were the “beauties” of Roxton; the one generous, ruddy, and open-hearted; the other sleek, white-faced, a studied artist in elegance and charm. Both were admired and championed by their retainers; Catherine popular with the many, Betty served by the few. Miss Elizabeth had beheld herself the less favored goddess, and as of old the apple of Paris had had the power to inflame.

Catherine’s final crime against her rival had been her marrying of James Murchison. Miss Betty had chosen the gentleman for herself, though she would rather have bitten her tongue off than have confessed the fact. The hatred of the wife had been extended to the husband, and Dr. Parker Steel had assuaged the smart. And thus the rivalry of these two women lived on intensified by the professional rivalry of two men.

As for my lady Betty, she hated the wife in Lombard Street with all the quiet virulence of her nature. It was the hate of the head for the heart, of the intellect for the soul. Envy and jealousy were sponsors to the bantling that Betty Steel had reared. Catherine Murchison had children; Mrs. Steel had none. Her detestation of her rival was the more intense even because she recognized the good in her that

made her loved by others. Catherine Murchison had a larger following than Mrs. Steel in Roxton, and the truth strengthened the poison in the stew.

With Catherine the feeling was more one of distaste than active enmity. Betty Steel repelled her, even as certain electrical currents repel the magnet. She mistrusted the woman, avoided her, even ignored her, an attitude which did not fail to influence Mrs. Betty. Catherine Murchison's heart was too full of the deeper happiness of life for her to trouble her head greatly about the pale and fastidious Greek whose dark eyes flashed whenever she passed the great red brick house in Lombard Street. Life had a June warmth for Catherine. Nor had she that innate restlessness of soul that fosters jealousy and the passion for climbing above the common crowd.

Parker Steel reminded his wife, as he rose from the breakfast-table, of a certain charity concert that was to be given at the Roxton public hall the same evening.

"Are you going?"

"Yes, I believe so; Mrs. Fraser extorted a guinea from us; I may as well get something for my money. And you?"

Her husband smoothed his hair and looked in the mirror.

"Expecting a confinement. If you get a chance, be polite to old Fraser, she would be worth bagging in the future, and Murchison thieved her from old Hicks."

Catherine Murchison sang at the charity concert that night, and Mrs. Betty listened to her with the outward complacency of an angel. The big woman in her black dress, with a white rose in her ruddy hair, bowed and smiled to the enthusiasts of the Roxton slums who knew her nearly as well as they knew her husband. Catherine Murchison's rare contralto flowed unconcernedly over her rival's head. She sang finely, and without effort, and the voice seemed part of her, a touch of the sunset, a breath from the fields of June. Catherine's nature came out before men in her singing. A glorious unaffectedness, a charm with no trick of the self-

conscious egoist. It was this very naturalness, this splendid unconcern that had forever baffled Mrs. Betty Steel. The woman was proof against the mundane sneer. Ridicule could not touch her, and the burrs of spite fell away from her smooth completeness.

“By George, what a voice that woman has!”

The bourgeoisie of Roxton was piling up its applause. Mrs. Murchison had half the small boys in the town as her devoted henchmen. Politically her personality would have carried an election.

“It comes from the heart, sir.”

Porteous Carmagee, solicitor and commissioner for oaths, had his bald head tilted towards Mr. Thomas Flemming’s ear. Mr. Flemming was one of the cultured idlers of the town, a gentleman who was an authority on ornithology, who presided often at the county bench, and could dash off a cartoon that was not quite clever enough for *Punch*.

“What did you say, Carmagee? The beggars are making such a din—”

“From the heart, sir, from the heart.”

“Indigestion, eh?”

Mr. Carmagee was seized with an irritable twitching of his creased, brown face.

“Oh, an encore, that’s good. I said, Tom, that Kate Murchison’s voice came from her heart.”

“Very likely, very likely.”

“I could sit all night and hear her sing.”

“I doubt it,” quoth the man of culture, with a twinkle.

The opening notes rippled on the piano, and Mr. Carmagee lay back in his chair to listen. He was a little monkey of a man, fiery-eyed, wrinkled, with a grieved and husky voice that seemed eternally in a hurry. He knew everybody and everybody’s business, and the secrets his bald pate covered would have trebled the circulation of the *Roxton Herald* in a week. Porteous Carmagee was godfather to Catherine Murchison’s two children. She was one of the

few women, and he had stated it almost as a grievance, who could make him admit the possible advantages of matrimony.

“Bravo, bravo”—and Mr. Carmagee slapped Tom Flemming’s knee. ‘When the swans fly towards the south, and the hills are all aglow.’ I believe in woman bringing luck, my friend.”

“Oh, possibly.”

“Murchison took the right turning. Supposing he had married—”

Mr. Flemming trod on the attorney’s toe.

“Look out, she’s there; people have ears, you know; they’re not chairs.”

Mr. Carmagee nursed a grievance on the instant.

“Mention a name,” he snapped.

And Thomas Flemming pointed towards Mrs. Betty with his programme.

Parker Steel’s wife drove home alone in her husband’s brougham, ignoring the many moonlight effects that the old town offered her with its multitudinous gables and timbered fronts. She was not in the happiest of tempers, feeling much like a sensuous cat that has been tumbled unceremoniously from some crusty stranger’s lap. Betty had attempted blandishments with the distinguished Mrs. Fraser, and had been favored with a shoulder and half an aristocratic cheek. Moreover, she had watched the great lady melt under Catherine Murchison’s smiles, and such incidents are not rose leaves to a woman.

Mrs. Betty lay back in a corner of the brougham, and indulged herself in mental tearings of Catherine Murchison’s hair. What insolent naturalness this rival of hers possessed! Mrs. Betty was fastidious and critical enough, and her very acuteness compelled her to confess that her enmity seemed but a blunted weapon. Catherine Murchison was so cantankerously popular. She looked well, dressed well, did things well, loved well. The woman was an irritating prodigy.

It was her very sincerity, the wholesomeness of her charm, that made her seem invulnerable, a woman who never worried her head about social competition.

Parker Steel sat reading before the fire when his wife returned. He uncurled himself languidly and with deliberation, pulled down his dress waistcoat, and put his book aside carefully on the table beside his chair.

“Enjoyed yourself?”

“Not vastly. I wonder why vulgar people always eat oranges in public?”

“Better than sucking lemons.”

Mrs. Betty tossed her opera-cloak aside and slipped into a chair. Her husband’s complacency irritated her a little. He was not a sympathetic soul, save in the presence of prominent patients.

“You look bored, dear. Who performed?”

“The usual amateurs. I am tired to death; are you coming to bed?”

Parker Steel looked at the clock, and sighed.

“I shall not be wanted till about five,” he said. “Confound these guinea babies. I hope to build a tariff wall round myself when we are more independent.”

“Yes, of course.”

“And Mrs. Fraser?”

“Safe in the other camp, dear.”

Parker Steel was dropping off to sleep that night when he felt his wife’s hand upon his shoulder. He turned with a grunt, and saw her white face dim amid her cloud of hair.

“Anything wrong?”

“No. Do you believe in Murchison, Parker?”

“Believe in him?”

“Yes, is he reliable; does he know his work?”

Her husband laughed.

“Why, do you want to consult the fellow?”

“You have never caught him tripping?”

“Not yet. What are you driving at?”

“Oh—nothing,” and she turned away, and put the hair back from her face, feeling feverish with the ferment of her thoughts.

CHAPTER IV

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No one in Roxton would have imagined that any shadow of dread darkened the windows of the house in Lombard Street. Even to his most intimate friends, James Murchison would have appeared as the one man least likely to be dominated by any inherited taint of body or mind. His face was the face of a man who had mastered his own passions, the mouth firm yet generous, the jaw powerful, the eyes and forehead suggesting the philosopher behind the virility of the man of action. He had built up a substantial reputation for himself in Roxton and the neighborhood. His professional honesty was unimpeachable, his skill as a surgeon a matter of common gossip. But it was his warm-heartedness, the sincerity of his sympathy, his wholesome Saxon manliness that had won him popularity, especially among the poor.

For Catherine the uncovering of the past had come as a second awakening, a resanctification of her love. Women are the born champions of hero worship, and to generous natures imperfections are but as flints scattered in the warm earth of life. Women will gather them and hide them in their bosoms, breathing a more passionate tenderness perhaps, and betraying nothing to the outer world.

James Murchison and his wife had held each other's hands more firmly, like those who approach a narrow mountain path. They were happy in their home life, happy with each other, and with their children. To the woman's share there was added a new sacredness that woke and grew with every dawn. There were wounds to be healed, bitternesses to be warded off. The man who lay in her arms at night needed her more dearly, and there was exultation in the thought for her. She loved him the more for this stern thorn in the flesh. The pity of it seemed to make him more

her own, to knit her tenderness more bravely round him, to fill life with a more sacred fire. She was not afraid of the future for his sake, believing him too strong to be vanquished by an ancestral sin.

It was one day in April when James Murchison came rattling over the Roxton cobbles in his motor-car, to slacken speed suddenly in Chapel Gate at the sight of a red Dutch bonnet, a green frock, and a pair of white-socked legs on the edge of the pavement. The Dutch bonnet belonged to his daughter Gwen, a flame-haired dame of four, demure and serious as any dowager. The child had a chip-basket full of daffodils in her hand, and she seemed quite alone, a most responsible young person.

A minute gloved hand had gone up with the gravity of a constable's paw signalling a lawbreaker to stop. James Murchison steered to the footway, and regarded Miss Gwen with a surprised twinkle.

"Hallo, what are you doing here?"

Miss Gwen ignored the ungraceful familiarity of the inquisitive parent.

"I'll drive home, daddy," she said, calmly.

"Oh—you will! Where's nurse?"

"Mending Jack's stockings." And the lady with the daffodils dismissed the question with contempt.

Murchison laughed, and helped the vagrant into the car.

"Shopping, I see," he observed, refraining from adult priggery, and catching the spirit of Miss Gwen's adventuresomeness.

"Yes. I came out by myself. I'd five pennies in my money-box. Nurse was so busy. The daffies are for mother."

Her father had one eye on the child as he steered the car through the market-place and past St. Antonia's into Lombard Street. The youth in him revolted from administering moral physic to Miss Gwen. Even the florist seemed to have treated her pennies with generous respect, and like the majority of sympathetic males, Murchison left

the dogmatic formalities of education to his wife. The very flowers, the child's offering, would have withered at any tactless chiding.

Mary, the darner of Mr. Jack's stockings, was discovered waddling up Lombard Street with flat-footed haste. Miss Gwen greeted her with the composure of an empress, proud of her flowers, her father, the motor-car, and life in general. To Mary's "Oh—Miss Gwen!" she answered with a sedate giggle and hugged her basket of flowers.

Murchison saw his wife's figure framed between the white posts of the doorway. He chuckled as he reached for his instrument bag under the seat, and caught a glimpse of Mary's outraged authority.

"Look, mother, look, you love daffies ever so much. I bought them all myself."

Catherine's arms were hugging the green frock.

"Gwen, you wicked one," and she caught her husband's eyes and blushed.

"We are growing old fast, Kate. I picked her up in Chapel Gate."

"The dear flowers; come, darling. Jack, you rascal, what are you doing?"

"Master Jack! Master Jack!"

Male mischief was astir also in Lombard Street, having emerged from the school-room with the much-tried Mary's darning-basket. There was an ironical humor in pelting the fat woman with the stockings she had mended and rolled so conscientiously. His father's appearance in the hall sent Master Jack laughing and squirming up the stairs. He was caught, tickled, and carried in bodily to lunch.

James Murchison was smoking in his study early the same afternoon, ticking off visits in his pocket-book, when his wife came to him with a letter in her hand.

"From Marley, dear. A man has just ridden in with it. They need you at once."

"Marley? Why, the Penningtons belong to Steel."

He tore open the envelope and glanced through the letter, while his wife looked whimsically at the chaos of books and papers on his desk. The ground was holy, and her tact debarred her from meddling with the muddle. The room still had a sense of shadow for her. She could not enter it without an indefinable sense of dread.

Murchison did not show the letter to his wife. He put it in his pocket, knocked out his pipe, and picked up his stethoscope that was lying on the table.

“I am afraid you will have to go to the Stantons’ without me, dear,” he said; “Steel wants me at Marley.”

Catherine gave him a surprised flash of the eyes.

“Something serious?”

“Possibly.”

“Parker Steel is not fond of asking your advice.”

“Who is, dear?”

“I’m sorry,” she said.

“So am I, dear,” and he kissed her, and rang the bell to order out his car.

Marley was an old moated house some five miles from Roxton, a place that seemed stolen from a romance, save that there was nothing romantic about its inmates. A well-wooded park protected it from the high-road, the red walls rising warm and mellow behind the yews, junipers, and cedars that grew in the rambling garden. Spring flowers were binding the sleek, sun-streaked lawns with strands of color, dashes of crimson, of azure, and white, of golden daffodils blowing like banners amid a sheaf of spears. Here and there the lawns were purple with crocuses, and the singing of the birds seemed to turn the yew-trees into towers of song.

The panting of Murchison’s car seemed to outrage the atmosphere of the place, as though the fierce and aggressive present were intruding upon the dreamy past. A manservant met the doctor, and led him across the

Jacobean hall to the library, whose windows looked towards the west.

Parker Steel was standing before the fire, biting his black mustache. He had the appearance of a man whose vanity had been ruffled, and who was having an unwelcome consultation forced upon him by the preposterous fussing of some elderly relative.

The two men shook hands, Steel's white fingers limp in his rival's palm. His air of cultured hauteur had fallen to freezing point. He condescended, and made it a matter of dignity.

"Sorry to drag you over here, Murchison. Mr. Pennington has been on the fidget with regard to his daughter, and to appease him I elected to send for you at once."

Murchison warmed his hands before the fire. Steel's grandiloquent manner always amused him.

"I am glad to be of any use to you. Who is the patient, Miss Julia Pennington?"

"Yes."

"Anything serious?"

"Nothing; only hysteria; the woman's a tangle of nerves, a mass of emotions. I have grown to learn her idiosyncrasies in a year. One month it is palpitation—and imaginary heart disease, next month she is swearing that she has cancer of the œsophagus and cannot swallow. The lady has headaches regularly every other week, and merges on melancholia in the intervals."

Murchison nodded.

"What is the present phase?" he asked.

"Acute migraine and facial neuralgia. She is worrying about her eyes, seems to see nothing—and everything, mere hysterical phantasmagoria. The woman is not to be taken seriously. She is being drenched with bromide and fed upon phenacetin. Come and see her."

Parker Steel led the way from the library as though he regarded the consultation as a mere troublesome formality,

a pandering to domestic officiousness that had to be appeased. Miss Julia Pennington was lying on a sofa in the drawing-room with a younger sister holding her hand. The room smelled horribly of vinegar, and the blinds were down, for the patient persisted that she could not bear the light.

The younger lady rose and bowed to Murchison, and drew aside, with her eyes fixed upon her sister's face. Miss Julia was moaning and whimpering on the sofa, a thin and neurotic spinster of forty with tightly drawn hair, sharp features, and the peevish expression of a creature who had long been the slave of a hundred imaginary ills.

Murchison sat down beside her, and asked whether she could bear the light. His manner was in acute contrast to Parker Steel's; the one incisive, almost brusque in his effort to impress; the other calm, quiet, deliberate, sympathetic in every word and gesture.

The younger Miss Pennington drew up the blinds. Murchison was questioning her sister, watching her face keenly, while Parker Steel fidgeted to and fro before the fire.

"Much pain in the eyes, Miss Pennington?"

"Oh, Dr. Murchison, the pain is terrible, it runs all over the face; you cannot conceive—"

She broke away into a chaos of complaints till Murchison quieted her and asked a few simple questions. He rose, turned the sofa bodily towards the light, and proceeded to examine the lady's eyes.

"Things look dim to you?" he asked her, quietly.

"All in a blur, flashes of light, and spots like blood. I'm sure—"

"Yes, yes. You have never had anything quite like this before?"

"Never, never. I am quite unnerved, Dr. Murchison, and Dr. Steel won't believe half the things I tell him."

Her voice was peevish and irritable. Parker Steel grinned at the remark, and muttered "mad cat" under his breath.

“You are hardly kind to me, Miss Pennington,” he said, aloud, with a touch of banter.

“I’m sure I’m ill, Dr. Steel, very ill—”

“Please lie quiet a moment,” and Murchison bent over her, closed her lids, and felt the eyeballs with his fingers. Miss Pennington indulged in little gasps of pain, yet feeling mesmerized by the quiet earnestness of the man.

Murchison stood up suddenly, looking grave about the mouth.

“Do you mind ringing the bell, Steel? I want my bag out of the car.”

Steel, who appeared vexed and restless despite his self-conceit, went out in person to fetch the bag. When he returned, Murchison had drawn the blinds and curtains so that the room was in complete darkness.

“Thanks; I want my lamp; here it is. I have matches. Now, Miss Pennington, do you think you can sit up in a chair for five minutes?”

The thin lady complained, protested, but obeyed him. Murchison seated himself before her, while Parker Steel held the lamp behind Miss Pennington. A beam of light from the mirror of Murchison’s ophthalmoscope flashed upon the woman’s face. She started hysterically, but seemed to feel the calming influence of Murchison’s personality.

Complete silence held for some minutes, save for an occasional word from Murchison. Parker Steel’s face was in the shadow. The hand that held the lamp quivered a little as he watched his rival’s face. There was something in the concentrated earnestness of Murchison’s examination that made Mrs. Betty’s husband feel vaguely uncomfortable.

Murchison rose at last with a deep sigh, stood looking at Miss Pennington a moment, and then handed the ophthalmoscope to Steel. The lamp changed hands and the men places. Miss Pennington’s supply of nerve power, however, was giving out. She blinked her eyes, put her