WARWICK DEEPING

THE SECRET SANCTUARY

HISTORICAL NOVEL

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The Secret Sanctuary (Historical Novel)

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CHAPTER I
BEAL INTERVIEWS VARIOUS STRETTONS

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Bartholomew Stretton, Esq., was shown into Beal's dining-room.

"Dr. Beal won't keep you a minute, sir."

"Quite so, quite so. He expects me—I think."

Mr. Stretton put his hat and gloves on the table, and picking up a month-old copy of *Punch,* looked at one or two of the pictures and then discarded the paper with an air of impatience. He was in no mood to appreciate humour. He glanced round Beal's dining-room as though he disliked it. His restlessness would not permit him to sit down; it carried him to one of the windows and exhibited to him a section of Wimpole Street: iron railings, pavement, road, more pavement, more railings, a series of windows and three green front doors decorated with a number of very clean brass plates. It was raining. People passed with open umbrellas. To Mr. Stretton the rain, the pavements, the houses, and the people all looked the same colour.

"Beastly place!"

It occurred to him that he had never seen Wimpole Street till six months ago, that it had not existed so far as he was concerned, and that it would have had no present existence had he not needed help. And yet he hated the street as a comfort-loving man hates anything which associates itself with some very unpleasant and importunate reality. Wimpole Street was an ugly smudge across the suburban serenity of Mr. Stretton's vision of life. He had been a successful man, a genially self-satisfied man, and that Fate should have administered a kick to him just when he was

entering the last lap seemed monstrous and an outrage. It was the kind of scandal that impels a man to write angry letters to the papers—but this affair was too personal and too serious for such splutterings in self-relief. The problem—for it was a problem—stuck in poor old Stretton's throat, made his lower lip lax and querulous, and gave a slightly bewildered irritability to his blue eyes.

The street depressed him so thoroughly that he turned about and began to wander round the room, looking at Rollin Beal's exquisite Georgian furniture and pictures with an air of perfunctory attention. He really did not see them, the beauty and the distinction of them; they were just so many chairs and cabinets and pieces of coloured porcelain and canvas. He had to look at something; the mental attitude of the man who reads every page of the morning and the evening paper.

An oval mirror in a mahogany frame hanging slightly tilted above the Adam mantelpiece showed Bartholomew Stretton a reflection of himself. Instantly interested, he paused, like a very young child. He put up a hand and smoothed his hair, and gave a little touch to his tie. An observant person could have told him that he belonged to a previous generation, and that he should have worn a white top-hat, a white waistcoat and spats, and black-and-white check trousers.

As a matter of fact, he did wear spats, but they were biscuit-brown in colour. Mr. Stretton was very punctilious about being up to date. He was very punctilious in all the externals. When golf knickers were baggy, he wore them baggy. He was the most careful of formalists. That was why his son's disaster had hurt him so badly. He was sorry for his son; he was sorry for his wife—but he was bitterly sorry for himself.

The door opened.

"Dr. Beal is ready for you, sir."

Bartholomew Stretton was shown into Rollin Beal's consulting-room. A tall man with kind eyes and an ironical mouth rose from his desk and extended a hand.

"Well, how are things?"

Old Stretton's face betrayed annoyance. Always, he had found Rollin Beal sympathetic, and when a man has a grievance he cannot resist airing it in the sunshine of some other man's sympathy.

"It's perfectly damnable!"

"Sit down. Is your son back?"

"He has been back a week. And my wife, sir, has been unable to sleep."

He sat down. His blue eyes seemed to grow more prominent. In the most impressive and sentimental moments of his life he had always contrived to express his prejudices or his emotions by putting them into the mouth of his wife. It saved personal odium and suggested a considerate unselfishness. "Mrs. Stretton, sir, always says—" "My wife may be a little old-fashioned, but she does not approve," etc.

Beal looked at him with observant eyes. They were kind, like the eyes of most men who do big things, or live big, active lives.

"Nothing fresh, I hope?"

"Oh, not in that way. But he is so utterly unreasonable. I don't think that we could have done more to soften the affair for him. My wife has been a perfect angel, and John has done nothing but sulk."

"He feels it a good deal?"

"My dear sir, I can understand that, but what I cannot understand is his way of showing it."

"Or perhaps—of not showing it."

Mr. Stretton sat forward in his chair. His irritation changed suddenly and became an impulse of compassion; we are all of us egotists, and even our affections are tinted with

various shades of egotism, and in Bartholomew Stretton's case his vexation was largely a matter of balked affection.

"That's it, doctor. While John was in prison his mother and I talked everything over. We have been very happy in our children, you know, Beal, and rather proud of them; there's Reginald making his three thousand a year at the Bar, and Carlyon a managing director of Medmenhams at three-and-thirty. Well, we decided that when John came out we would have him home and go on as if nothing had happened."

Beal's eyes were faintly smiling.

"You did not even mention this affair?"

"No."

"And John did not mention it?"

"He has never said a word. That is what has hurt his mother—wounded her. My wife is a very affectionate woman, Beal, and I can tell you she has felt his silence—his almost hostile silence, I might call it."

Beal nodded his big head.

"But if you and Mrs. Stretton had agreed to bury the misfortune why should you be annoyed when your son did the same thing?"

Old Stretton looked at him reproachfully.

"But, my dear sir, perhaps you don't understand. I don't think you are married—please excuse me—I have no wish to be personal; I am merely trying to explain why John's silence wounded us."

"I see," said Beal, and turned to his desk and the open case-book which was lying on it. Rollin Beal was forty-five, young enough to sympathize with the younger man, and old enough to understand the prejudices of the father, yet the vital part of his sympathy was with the son.

Bartholomew Stretton had lived his life; Beal doubted whether sorrow had ever touched him; a man with that pink and comfortable face had never suffered very acutely. The very way in which he wished to claim a sort of ownership over the sufferings of a younger man who happened to be

his son showed how little he fathomed the rebellious deeps of this other and more sensitive nature.

Beal's compassion went out to the son. Here was a man who had spent three years in the trenches, who had enlisted as a private and been twice wounded before he had won his company, and that other and far more disastrous wound which carried no visible scar and had brought him no honour. Beal, alienist and man of the world, had a warm heart and a deep compassion for all that generous youth which had laughed and died and suffered. He had seen the wreckage, the driftwood.

No case had appealed to him more personally than John Stretton's. There was a likeness between them. As he looked at his case-book he had a very vivid picture of John Stretton, fine strung, sensitive, intensely intelligent, going tight lipped and brittle-eyed through all those years, to be brought down to a sort of ignominy, the victim of a spiritual wound of which no one could see the scar. It was a queer case, not a little pathetic, of a fine life balked and twisted, brought not only to apparent impotence, but to the very edge of disaster.

Bartholomew Stretton was fidgeting in his chair.

"The thing is—what are we to do with him?"

Beal turned on the older man with curious swiftness. It was as though his impulse was to strike not a physical blow, but a spiritual one, and the austerity of his fine face seemed sharpened. He could be severe, and his severity was all the more potent because his eyes remained kind.

"You know the danger? I think that is the one thing we should keep in mind."

Old Stretton's face showed a slight increase of colour.

"You mean that his career has gone? Of course, he had to resign from Rome and Mellabys; in six months he would have been a partner."

"I mean nothing of the sort. Don't you realize that some day—under certain circumstances—your son might commit

murder—"

Old Stretton bounced in his chair. He believed in plain speaking, or said he did, but when a very conventional man has become crystallized and rigid he is apt to resent sudden and violent vibrations. And Mr. Stretton looked inexpressibly shocked. Beal had meant to shock him.

"It can't be as bad as that. I know you doctors always exaggerate a little."

"I am stating a plain fact. It might be as bad as that. Morally your son would be innocent, because when these brain storms arise he is not responsible for what he does. Remember, it has happened three times, and on the last occasion—"

Old Stretton put up an appealing hand as though to ward off a blow. "Don't, man, don't! The idea is too horrible. It would kill my poor wife." And then he added with a plaintive wail, "but why should this have happened to us?"

"My dear sir, it might have happened to anybody."

Beal's face softened. There was pathos and humour in the picture of this chubby, genial old Christian who had come through life with the idea that he and his were sacrosanct. Job-like he was almost ready to curse the Deity, the war, the doctors, his own incredible and undeserved affliction, but Beal did not want curses; he required the father's logical and kindly help in the healing of the son.

"Well, there's the danger. Now, what are we going to do about it? I know quite well how this is worrying you for John's sake. There is something very lovable about John."

Stretton's face twitched in response.

"Of course there is. He was the gentlest child of the whole lot. You know, Beal, when we are hurt we get rather touchy. I'm ready to make any sacrifice, and so is his mother."

"Well, we must all work together."

"What do you suggest? A nursing-home, or something of that sort?"

"No, nothing like that. But for this one leak in his brain your son is a healthy and a normal man. We have got to try to close that leak, give him the chance of leading a healthy life under circumstances which are the least likely to produce one of these storms."

Old Stretton nodded; he had become an audience, a docile and eager audience.

"Money need be no consideration."

"That's a great help, a very great help; but I don't think your son wants to be an idler."

"The trouble is, Beal, that I don't know what the devil he does want! If he'd only talk—"

Beal smiled. There were moments when his face became luminous.

"We have got to find out. It is possible that he does not know himself. When a sensitive and proud man has had a knock-down blow like that—"

Then old Stretton saw light; it may have dawned on him in Rollin Beal's smile, in the patient and subtle wisdom of this healer of broken souls.

"I say, doctor, I know that you are a very busy man, but could you come down to Esher and spend the week-end with us? I have an idea that John might talk to you. He likes you."

Beal turned to his desk and glanced at his book of appointments.

"I think I might manage it. I am free after one o'clock on Saturday. I should have to be back in town on the Sunday evening."

Stretton breathed gratitude and relief. The problem of his youngest son's future had scared him into a sense of helplessness.

"That's awfully good of you, Beal. Look here, I will send the car up for you on Saturday. I was booked to play golf, but of course—"

Beal, rising, stood over him protectingly.

"Play golf. I shall want to be alone with John. And will you ask Mrs. Stretton to look on me as a friend and not as a doctor."

"I will give her the hint, Beal."

"That's right. I'll expect the car at two o'clock on Saturday."

Rollin Beal was busy for the rest of the morning; all his days were busy and he loved them, for Beal's life was good. There are some men who inspire gratitude and devotion, men of whom women speak with tenderness and not a little awe, the man whose work is as a fire to which the sick and the unfortunate come to warm their hands. Our little cynicisms and meannesses, our scoffings and clevernesses leave such men untouched.

To them—the Pasteurs and the Listers of this world—the children whom they have saved run to be kissed, and we—who believe and strive—turn from the little dirtinesses of some cad's novel, or the treacheries in an egoist's memoirs, to the patient and unsensational greatness of such men's lives, and take heart and breathe more deeply.

But if Rollin Beal thought that he had finished with the Stretton menfolk for the day, they had not finished with him. He lunched at one, and at half-past two he had his out-patients and his clinic at Great Ormond Street, where a hundred or more students, packed in the big room, waited to see Rollin Beal's thin hands disentangle with sure brilliance some complex knot. At a quarter to two Rollin Beal's bell rang, and his maid brought him a card. "Mr. Reginald Stretton." The three thousand a year man was close on the heels of his father.

"The gentleman particularly wishes to see you, sir."

"I can give him five minutes, Parker."

Beal found Reginald Stretton planted well and square on the consulting-room hearthrug, and in this tacit assumption of his right to all hearthrugs lay the inwardness of his success. He was tall, deadly pale, with a slight stoop, and a

bald superciliousness that was disturbing to smaller people. His great rolling forehead, cold eyes, and dominating nose made him impressive. He was laconic and deliberate. He gave shy people the feeling that he was prodding them as he might have prodded a hostile witness.

Beal did not like Reginald Stretton. You may respect a man's ability and hate him all the more for it, and Beal had very human moments. To be able to heal people you must have the understanding of all frailties, and Reginald Stretton had no frailties. Beal had hardly closed the door before the barrister had him in the witness-box, and was cross-examining him in his flat and inexorable voice. Bartholomew's eldest son would have been a failure in criminal cases, but then crime in its physical aspects had not appealed to him.

"I take it that this sort of thing may occur again?"

"It might occur to-morrow."

"Well, may I ask what your experts are going to do about it? Here is this unfortunate youngster knocking about loose at Esher. Isn't that a temptation to providence?"

Beal saw in a flash what was at the back of this other man's mind, and he was nettled, not on his own account but on John's.

"Providence may be kinder than we are."

He gave Reginald Stretton a blind eye. He wanted the other man to commit himself to the more or less brutal suggestion that it was annoying for him to have a young brother appearing at the police courts and getting sent to prison, and that this inconvenient ex-soldier should be caged up somewhere.

"I am going down to Esher for the week-end. I think I may be able to do something."

The rolling forehead and the emphatic chin became more aggressive.

"I don't like this delay. Now, can you assure me—?"

Beal glanced at the clock.

"I'm sorry; I am due at my hospital at half-past two. But, tell me, what do you mean—exactly—by delay?"

"Nothing is being done."

"It is better that nothing should be done. I presume you are suggesting some form of restraint?"

"Certainly; in my brother's interest."

Beal showed him eyes that were not blind.

"The interest lies all the other way. You'll excuse me; can my maid ring you up a taxi? Before I go, I may as well remind you I don't want your brother fussed or frightened."

Reginald Stretton remained on the hearthrug looking at the opposite wall for something he had meant to say and had forgotten, and Beal left him there still groping for the thing that he should have said. He discovered it and got it out as the doctor reached the front door.

"If you assume the whole responsibility—"

Beal turned in the doorway and saw the other man's big white face at the end of the hall.

"Certainly, but without interference, in the interests of my patient."

It was an evening of blue, autumnal dusk, with the lights shining big and yellow when Rollin Beal walked back to Wimpole Street. He had been an athlete in his day, but walking was the only exercise left to him, so exacting had life become. He had swung the door open and was removing his latchkey when Parker met him in the hall.

"A gentleman waiting to see you, sir. Another Mr. Stretton."

Beal laughed.

"Oh, well, Parker, all good things come to an end! What is the other name?"

"Carlyon, sir."

Parker took his coat. This elderly woman with the watchful eyes and the pale and restrained face contradicted the old tag that no man is a hero to his servant. Or rather, they both shared in the contradiction of it, and the little

leisure which Beal had lay in the lap of this devoted woman's shrewd loyalty. She was a sure buttress against fools and bores. She had the manners of a great lady, and an eye that never forgot a face.

"In the dining-room, Parker?"

"Yes, sir. In a quarter of an hour I shall come in to lay the table."

But Carlyon Stretton, "Car" as he had been called at Cambridge, was a very different proposition from his elder brother. He was the younger brother, without John's sensitiveness and his reticencies, a rather frail man, but sanguine and full of vitality. He was energetic, generous, a hater of all humbug, one of those direct, spontaneous people who carry the world along.

"Forgive me waiting for you like a tout, Dr. Beal, but I'm worried about Jack. Can you give me five minutes?"

They looked at each other as men do when they like each other instinctively.

"Sit down, my dear man. Parker is allowing you a quarter of an hour. We are all worried about Jack."

"What I want you to tell me is, can I help, back you up in any way? I'm not here to fuss or to fiddle."

Beal took the chair at the end of the table.

"I fancy you understand," he said. "Your father and Mr. Reginald Stretton have both been here to-day."

"And they are both as blind as bats! No. Stretton Primus sees certain things clearly enough—but they are his things. I ought not to blackguard my brother."

He sat there with his alert easiness, smiling at Beal.

"Can I help? What I mean is, doctor, that a man in Jack's position needs help of a certain sort, the sort of unconscious help we gave each other during the war."

"Exactly," said Beal; "you could not have put it better."

He picked up a magazine from the table, crumpled up a page, and then made a movement as of smoothing it out.

"That sort of thing. Certain surroundings, certain people, some particular occupation. I am going to find out."

The younger man nodded.

"Smoothing out the creases! Of course. But if I can help —"

"I'll tell you. I am spending the week-end at Esher. I want Jack to talk to me. I think he will."

"Car" rose, glancing at his wrist-watch.

"I have beaten Parker by exactly seven minutes. Good night, Beal. And thanks—ever so much."

Beal lit a cigarette.

"How much more work one could do," he thought, "if more people were like that."

CHAPTER II
THE CASE OF JOHN STRETTON

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Rollin Beal spent his evenings in his library on the first floor, a room of cream and of old gold, calm, gracious and very still. The shelves were of oak, and Beal's visitors had often noticed the fact that there were no purely medical books upon these shelves. Everything worth reading in psychology was here, and beside the psychologists the novelists had a place. Or you could take down Mosso on Crete, or one of Stephen Graham's vividly personal pilgrimages, or the Life of Burton, or a volume of Keats, or a book on tapestry or English water-colour art. The humorists had a shelf to themselves in this varied and very human family of books, such masters of sly joy as Neil Lyons. If there was one thing Beal hated it was pedantry, especially the pedantry of superior people who will deign to write essays on the dead but lift a pompous leg over the living.

Parker cherished this room. When Beal came up from his dinner he found the big, amber-coloured corded velvet chair turned to the fire, with book-table and electric reading-lamp beside it, and always a bowl of flowers. To-night they were tawny-headed chrysanthemums. He had his coffee and his pipe. He read, or sometimes he wrote, unless the world could convince Parker that it had a human right to disturb him. After this very Stretton day he took up with him to the library one of his casebooks, and in it he renewed his friendship with John Stretton.

For here, set down in Beal's rather psychic hand was a human picture of the man and his history. No detail was missing. As an alienist and a biographer Beal was most amazingly thorough, which is another way of saying that as

a workman he was a lover. He had gathered his information from wherever it was to be found; he had gone in search of it, hunted for it with the patience of a zoologist.

The record began with a short family history of the Strettons, good middle-class stock, with no trace of any mental taint. There was peasant blood on the mother's side in the person of Mrs. Stretton's mother, who had been the daughter of a yeoman farmer in Dorsetshire.

Bartholomew's children had all been healthy, normal youngsters, though the mother admitted that John had been a very sensitive boy and rather difficult, but at his public school he had played for the rugger team and held the school record for the hundred yards. Bartholomew, who was a shipping merchant, had retired from business about that time, and on leaving school John had been placed with a firm of underwriters.

He had remained with them till August, 1914, when he had enlisted in a London Territorial regiment and begun his career as a soldier. This earlier picture showed him as a clean-living and slightly reserved young man, rather fonder of books and of long week-end rambles in Sussex and Surrey than he was of games, but quite without priggishness and never lacking a healthy sense of fun. He had had but one love affair, and that had come to grief in the war, nor had it left any serious scar behind it. Carlyon had handed over to Beal some of his younger brother's letters, and one or two casual references in them spoke of this broken romance without any bitterness or pique.

In Beal's case-book the actual history of the affair opened with a letter—a characteristically breezy and vivid letter from a youngster—a Lieutenant Rendall, who had served under Stretton in B Company of the 5th Blanks. It was dated February, 1918.

"DEAR DR. BEAL,—Your letter was forwarded to me through Cox's. You have asked me to be quite frank, and

I will try to tell you everything. I remember the day quite well, when Stretton was knocked out. I think you ought to know that we had been in the line for eight days and that we had had a most damnable time, for when you were holding captured ground the Germans gave you no rest, and you gave them the same. Bursts of savage shelling, counter-attacks to repel, the ground like chaos, everything difficult—water—rations—getting the wounded away! Stretton had been fine, but he was feeling the strain. We had a nasty angle to hold, and as a company officer he never spared himself.

"It was about seven in the morning when the brigadier and the brigade-major turned up. I won't give you the brigadier's name. We called him 'Slaughterhouse.' I think he was about the stupidest man I have ever met; his neck was as thick as his head, and he had eyes like blue marbles. He hardly ever gave you a word of praise, and he was a bully.

"We had had a particularly nasty night, the C.S.M. killed and a lot of men buried. Stretton and a corporal had crawled out just before dawn—Stretton shouldn't have gone by rights—and they had managed to get a good idea of where the Germans were. Stretton had just got back to company headquarters—two tin sheets over a hole—when 'Slaughterhouse' blew in. Stretton had had no breakfast; he was worn to an edge, and you could see the red in his eye. And then 'Slaughterhouse' started scolding. Did Stretton know where the Boche front line was? Stretton told him. The brigadier said he was wrong; they couldn't be there.

"I saw Stretton's face grow as thin as a knife; there was a blaze in his eyes, a sort of red rage—you know, at being hectored and hustled by this chap after we had

had a hell of a time. Stretton knew; he'd been there, and he knew this other man didn't know. Well, I saw that row coming, and so, I think, did the brigade-major, who was an awful little sport. He tried to stop it, but Stretton blew up, and in twenty seconds he had said things to 'Slaughterhouse' which half the brigade would like to have said. And then that shell came. It covered us all with dirt. The brigade-major was killed, and Stretton knocked unconscious, but if he hadn't been knocked out that morning he would have been up for a court-martial, sure as fate—"

Beal had added a note here.

"The point to be remembered is that at the moment when Captain Stretton was 'shocked' he had been under very severe strain, and his self-restraint had given way. He was in a blind, red rage; there was a complete loss of self-control.

"Also, it is of significance that he had been attacked by what was probably to him a repulsive personality. It is probable that the two men were intensely antipathetic. It was a case of hate, the impulsive hatred of the finer nature for the coarser one.

"Follow up this point; it is interesting."

Then followed a history of John Stretton's sojourn in various hospitals. There were extracts from case-sheets, quotations from letters written to Rollin Beal by one or two keen R.A.M.C. officers, the findings of various medical boards. Observations on Stretton's progress were jotted in since. "Slight tremor of the hands. Some sleeplessness. No mental clouding but a faint hesitancy in speech. Appetite and physical condition fairly good." Rollin Beal had included an incident which had occurred in a general hospital. Stretton had made a curiously unprovoked attack upon one of the orderlies, breaking his bed-table over the man's head.

Beal had been unable to obtain more detail, either as to any possible provocation or as to the orderly's "physical type."

The records became more and more encouraging. "No tremor. Sleep good, and without terrifying dreams. The hesitation in speech had disappeared. Physical condition excellent."

This part of the history closed with Stretton's discharge from the service in December, 1918. His mental condition was given as normal.

Somewhere in April, 1919, Stretton had returned to his pre-war post with Messrs. Rome and Mallaby, living for a while with his people at Stow House, Esher, but this arrangement lasted less than two months. Beal had more than a suspicion that Stretton was bored by his people; at all events he broke free and took rooms in town. He appears to have pulled through the restless post-war period fairly well; he danced a good deal, spent his weekends on the river or in the country, and went to the theatre or a concert twice a week. He saw a good many women—but did not develop a very vivid passion for any particular woman. His attitude to life was rather negative. The war, like a severe spring frost, had nipped his youth, and the sap of his complete manhood had not yet risen with full force to his brain.

And then that second outbreak had occurred. Beal had no doubt but that the breaking of a bed-table over some stupid orderly's head had been the first of the series pointing to that curious leak in Stretton's self-control. The affair occurred when he was trying to enter a crowded tube train; the train was just in motion, the gates were closed against him, and a rather officious platform attendant caught Stretton by the arm and pulled him back. Stretton turned on the man and knocked him down. He was summoned and fined.

Later Rollin Beal had taken the trouble to hunt out the attendant and to interview him. The man was florid, thick set, with glaring blue eyes and a brusque manner, a heavy

and aggressive type. He bore no malice, and his account of the affair interested Beal.

"He came at me blind. When I got up I was going to give him one, but he stood there looking queer, his hands hanging down, just as though he had hit me in his sleep. I couldn't touch him, sir. It would have been like hitting a dead body."

Rollin Beal's picture of the third and far more serious outburst was vividly personal. It was here that he had been brought into the affair to advise, to heal and to defend. He had seen it all so clearly, that foolish crowd pushing and elbowing to board a bus in Oxford Circus, and in it that square, red-faced man of five-and-fifty in a stubborn hurry to get home and quite determined to board that bus. Beal could visualize the stupid selfish shoulders of the man, the stare in his eyes, his complete insensitiveness increased during the war. Life had become more difficult, the routine of the day more of an animal struggle; the finer edge seemed blunted, and the women were as much affected as the men. Courtesy had disappeared. The herd does not feel; it stampedes and jostles.

Beal could see it all: that heavy man, round-headed and bovine, heaving his elbow against a girl's breast. He must have touched Stretton, pushed against him in the obtuse selfishness of the scramble. And Stretton flared. Witnesses described his violence, his taking the other man by the throat and throwing him down into the gutter. When the police came he still struggled, and then suddenly stood still, trembling a little, obviously bewildered.

Unfortunately for Stretton the man whom he had thrown against the kerb had a fractured skull. He was pushed into a taxi, and taken to the Middlesex Hospital. That he recovered was the one sop Fate threw to Stretton.

Beal remembered the police court proceedings very well. He was there to give expert evidence and to explain to laymen how a man who had suffered as John Stretton had

suffered could not be held wholly responsible for such an outburst. He could still see Stretton standing in the dock, a figure apart, brittle with the tension of it, but very still. His eyes had seemed to see everything and nothing. But the man in charge had remained unconvinced. These acts of "wanton violence," as he called them, had become too common. One might wish to make allowances for an ex-officer who had been wounded, but, after all—There was the previous conviction. The police and the public had to be protected.

Stretton was sent to prison for two months. An appeal was lodged and failed. Old Bartholomew and Reginald had had to negotiate with the man of the thick head and the thrustful elbows and fob him off with two hundred pounds in cash.

Rollin Beal put his case-book aside on the table and sat and stared at the fire.

He had no need to ask himself the question: "Might it occur again?" Of course it might occur again. John Stretton had missed manslaughter by the narrowest of margins.

And the explanation? Rollin Beal had translated his theory into simple and untechnical language for the benefit of Stretton's father.

"What I want to emphasize is that at the moment your son was 'shocked' his self-control had given way. Supposing we regard this self-control as a membrane—a piece of skin—stretched across a channel through which the vital force, or whatever you like to call it, flows. Imagine this membrane, this trap-door weakened, imagine a sort of leak in the brain, imagine our most primitive and savage impulses able to rush through this leak and produce sudden acts of uncontrollable violence.

"Well, let us suppose this little trap-door weakened. It may be able to hold up against ordinary strains, but imagine some particular forcible impulse pushing against it, a particular impulse resembling the original thrust which

broke it down. It gives way; something violent happens. That is how I read your son's case. As you know, he has a very vague recollection of what he does during these rare outbreaks. In every other way he is absolutely normal.

"Some people might diagnose epilepsy. I do not. I prefer to regard the case as a weakening of self-control, a mental lesion, a thinking of the resistance to certain strains. Association is a great word with us, but I think I am growing too technical—"

So much for the explanation to the father, but what of the salvation of the son?

Beal lay deep in his chair, looking over his crossed legs at the red heat of the fire. Being a vitalist he had a reverence for instinct, that massive force at the back of consciousness. He believed that a man could be healed through instinct, by giving play to the healthy promptings of it. A wrong instinct, or rather an old and savage instinct, incompatible with modern life had pushed John Stretton to the edge of a precipice. The sudden lust to kill! The problem was to find its opposite, a creative, happy gentle spirit, and the atmosphere in which it could function.

Beal the man was touched as deeply as Beal the doctor was interested. John Stretton was so very likeable, such a fine weapon twisted and blunted.

What to suggest? Yes, there came the rub!

Yet he had a feeling that John Stretton's intuition might help him, the instinct of the wounded thing towards the herb that would heal it.

Intuition! That which is greater and more subtle than reason.

"I have got to find out," he thought, "what his inclination is."

CHAPTER III
JOHN STRETTON

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Stow House, Esher, was very much what Rollin Beal might have expected it to be, save that it was white instead of red. Its chimneys and slate roofs were visible from the road, but you won no complete view of the house until you had passed through the blue gates hung on white pillars, and rounded a bank of rhododendrons and conifers. Then the house burst upon you suddenly, smiling its broad white smile at the end of a lawn which had the colour and the flatness of a billiard table. It was an obvious house and it said the obvious thing. "Here I am! Yes, I am feeling very well, thank you." It had the appearance of being polished, for it had been repainted that spring. The polish extended to the drive and the garden, where everything was patted and raked and rolled into superlative neatness, and no errant autumn leaf was suffered to skip and whirl to the music of the wind.

Beal had one glimpse of old Stretton's house standing there in its white waistcoat before the slowly rolling car carried him up the long drive and showed him the figure of a young man moving slowly along the front of the herbaceous border on the far side of the lawn. The attitude of the figure was curious. The man carried a stick. He kept pausing and hitting at something with the stick just as though he were knocking off the heads of flowers. He did not appear to hear the car, or if he did he took no notice of it.

Beal was dropped into the porch, a classic thing with two solid white pillars. A maid stood at the door, ready to receive him and his suit-case from the chauffeur. The large

hall had a Turkey carpet, a soft and very comfortable carpet like everything else in the house of Bartholomew Stretton.

The maid, setting down the suit-case, took Beal's hat, scarf and coat. She said nothing. She was all detachment, thoroughly impersonal. She opened the door of the drawing-room and for the first time Beal heard her voice.

"Dr. Rollin Beal."

A woman rose to meet him, giving him the impression that she had been sitting on the edge of a chair for the last half-hour, waiting to get up and make a speech.

"I am so very glad to see you, Dr. Beal; I am so grateful to you for coming."

Old Stretton's wife had blue eyes and grey hair, a weak mouth, the lips rather pouched out over prominent teeth. She was thin, tallish, long in the waist, with a back which seemed to bend easily, too easily. Her attitude was one of amiability, an amiability that was without insight or discretion, and smiled the same smile at coalheavers or kings. She was a woman who made a mystery of things without having any grasp of the essential mystery of everything. She had a pathetic little trick of trying to appear very shy and sweetly knowing, just as though she were trying to mystify and hoodwink some eternal child.

"I must apologise for my husband. He has gone to golf, but he went on purpose. Of course, you understand."

She sat down, uneasily, looking at him with a conspirator's smile. Beal sat down opposite her in this pink room of hers, pink in its cretonnes, its carpet, its light shades, its roses on the wall, like the artificial pinkness of her pleasant and unmysterious life. She was a good woman, a very limited woman, but Beal had a feeling that she would be saved by her good nature.

"John is in the garden. It is such a relief to feel that you are here, Dr. Beal. It has been a terrible time."

Beal very gently assured her that it must have been, and then he tried to find out whether the mother had any

intuitive knowledge of what was passing in the mind of her son. She was ready to talk, eager to talk; unlike her husband, she had not been irritated by having so painful a problem forced upon her affections at a time of life when people expect to be able to relax. She was an affectionate woman; John had always been her favourite, but the affair had bewildered her. She could make nothing of it save that it seemed part of "that terrible and wicked war."

It was obvious to Beal that she had been hurt by her son's fierce reticence. She did not understand it; she said so.

"He's so funny, doctor. We have done all that we can think of to make him feel that we are just the same as ever, that we know that he couldn't help what happened, and that the old home is home. He won't talk to us."

She shed a few tears.

"I had his old room ready for him—just as it used to be. I did everything. There were all the old books he used to love, and the picture of Dante and Beatrice. He never said a word! He hardly speaks to us at all. Oh, it has hurt me."

Beal's kind eyes glanced towards one of the windows.

"You must not think too much of this silence. Some men, Mrs. Stretton, hate showing any emotion. They hide it."

"But why from me? Isn't a mother a man's best friend?"

He could not answer, "Sometimes, but not often," and so he turned the conversation towards the object of his visit.

"I want to see as much of John as I can. Men sometimes talk to doctors. That mustn't make you jealous. We are fellow conspirators, Mrs. Stretton."

She rallied to that, and getting up with her air of sweet knowingness, tiptoed to the window and peeped out. She made a mystery of it, as she made a mystery of everything.

"Yes, he is still there. Now what on earth is he doing with that stick?"

The stoop showed in her figure. She drooped over the eternal child idea, blindly sentimental even when a grown

man raged.

"Perhaps you would like to go out to John?"

Beal welcomed the suggestion, and he went.

Autumn has a way of coming into a garden with a broad sweep of the hand, a gesture of liberation, of a queen claiming her own. A wild beauty returns, and with it a touch of sadness; the last flowers hang heavy with dew; the leaves are yellowing on the stems; man's ordered neatness becomes a tangle, a mystery. But in this garden of the Strettons man still held his own, defying autumn with a forest of green stakes and a spider-work of bass, with scissors and hoe, lawn-sweeper and broom. In it Beal heard the voice of the conventional soul, the soul which has a horror of mystery and of the uncomfortable and changeful, things it cannot understand.

"Security—security! Let us have chrysanthemums in pots. Let us stake the dahlias, and parade the begonias like bits of coloured tin in rows. Let us have our bacon and eggs at nine o'clock each morning, and our bridge at nine each night. Security—comfortable security. Great goddess, we love thee."

Rounding a bank of Michaelmas daisies, sheaves of green starred white and rose and purple, Beal came upon a living protest against the Stretton worship of security. Old Bartholomew loved labels; if he could read the name of a thing he felt that he knew all about it, and there were times in the year when the Stretton garden grew labels and no flowers. Neat white pegs stuck in everywhere, or little zinc lockets dangling from the throats of the bushes and the trees. And here was Jack Stretton with his stick swiping deliberately at every label within reach, sending them flying out of the ground.

Beal felt relieved. It was as though a black panther had got into a suburban back garden and was making things interesting.

"Hallo, doctor!"

Beal saw the other man's eyes light up. Often it had been Beal's experience to be met with suspicion, for those who are sick in mind may see in the physician the judge and arbiter, the man who can deny to them the precious privilege of sanity. Beal knew that look, the animal's fear of the cage, but Stretton's eyes met his without distrust.

"I'm glad you've come."

He gave a last swipe at a label.

"Look at these fool things!"

And then he faced Beal, smiling slightly, the lovable rebel, a man whose eyes had a deadly sincerity. He was not asking anybody to perpetuate illusions. He knew his own danger, and it was probable that he realized his own immediate helplessness.

"The pater's at golf."

"I know," said Beal.

"You have seen my mother."

"She suggested I should come out here."

He looked at John Stretton. He felt that he had never seen him so vividly, so much himself, the slim, tallish, whipcord figure, the brittle blue-grey eyes, the head held rather high with its intelligent and slightly sloping forehead and pointed chin suggesting movement and the forward urge and uplift of the prow of a ship. The figure was a little defiant. It confronted things that were calculable and incalculable. There was something about it too that suggested helplessness, appeal, a look that touched Beal very deeply. It was like youth, wounded, suffering, proud, crying with its dumb eyes: "Doctor, get me out of this!"

Stretton glanced at the house with its flat, white smile.

"Everything is dead here, you know, dead as—"

And then he swung round again and faced Beal. "Look here, I have got to talk. If I don't—"

"Of course," said Beal, "that's what I have come for. I'm glad."

They began to wander up and down together, and Beal noticed that Stretton kept as far away from the house as possible, favouring the stretch of grass beyond the cedar. He was restless, extremely restless. He kept prodding the ground with his stick. Now that he could talk and had the very man to whom he could talk unconstrainedly, he found himself inarticulate. He just blurted things with a half brutal boyish sincerity.

"I feel I want to get out of the whole damned show. But I'm tied up in it. Just like this garden with all those infernal labels."

He swung about and looked almost fiercely at Beal.

"Don't try and gloze things over, doctor. I'm sick of this 'hush camp.' I'm a case. I'm not afraid of facing it; one got used to that out there."

He smacked with his stick at a branch of the decorous cedar.

"But, after all those years, to come back as a potential murderer, a sort of live shell which everybody is afraid of! It sounds absurd, doesn't it?"

Beal said quietly that nothing is absurd except ignorance and conceit, and the vulgarity which does not know that it is vulgar.

"You are going to get well, Jack."

And then Stretton blazed.

"But not here. Don't think me a beast, but look at that damned house! Just look at it, like a fat, respectable stomach! I tell you what it is, Beal, I see things too clearly. The pater is the kindest-hearted old soul, but there are times when he hates me. I'm a thing which every decent middle-class person hates, a problem, like the unemployed, you know, or the ex-soldier. We are always in such a hurry to forget uncomfortable things, and I'm an uncomfortable thing. Poor old dad; he gets me at breakfast; he gets me in the morning paper. He has reached the age when he wants