
The
Challenge
of Love
Warwick Deeping

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Victorian Romance Novel

e-artnow, 2021
Contact: info@e-artnow.org

EAN: 4064066387457

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CHAPTER ONE

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A wet, winter dusk tangled itself among the oak woods west of Navestock town, making the blacks and greys of the landscape seem colder and more sad. The grinding of wheels and the “plud-pludding” of drenched horses drifted along the high road with the galloping of the wind. Old Tom Tyser, muffled up on the box of the “White Hart” coach, shook the rain from his hat-brim, and grumbled.

“Never knowed such weather! I’ve come home these seven days a-sittin’ in a puddle.”

Wet it was, and Navestock Valley might have been some primeval sea-bottom suddenly upheaved, still drenched and running with the backwash of the sea. The land lay sodden and tired; the trees shook the rain from their boughs with petulant imprecations. As for the grey coach-horses, their ears flopped dejectedly, and did not prick up at the sound of the postman’s horn. Mr. Winkworth’s red-wheeled coach laboured and squeaked, and strained. A decrepit veteran, it crawled daily between the railway at Wannington and Navestock town, its black panels needing paint, its musty interior smelling of stable dung and straw.

The passenger on the box beside old Tom Tyser saw Navestock town draw out of the dusk like a great rock in a grey sea. At first it was a mere black mass in the valley, but lights began to blink as the coach passed the lodge gates of “Pardons” and swung along beside the swollen river. Darkness blotted out the cloud scud above the swaying tops of the elms, and in Navestock lights blinked more and more, isolated yellow specks upon the outskirts, but clustered like star clusters towards the centre of the town. By old Josiah Crabbe’s stone house, where the row of Lombardy poplars whistled with the wind, the cobbles of West Street clashed a welcome to the horses' hoofs. The sounds reverberated in the winding street, where empty footpaths gleamed wet in the light from cottage windows.

A church tower, more elm trees, and the black mouths of side streets and alleys drifted by before the coach crunched across the market-place and drew up outside the White Hart Hotel. The darkness of a wet February evening hid the utter unimportance of this old-world event. The coach arrived, that was all. It carried just three passengers, and they abandoned it, and went their several ways. There was no stir of ostlers, no fluttering of curtains at the windows, no fat Mr. Winkworth standing under the "White Hart" portico. A single oil lamp flickered on its iron bracket over the hotel door. The pavement and square were crowded with nothing but puddles. All the upper windows in the big, white-fronted, square-built inn were black and lifeless patches. The bar and the billiard-room alone were steamily and huskily alive.

The tall man in the ulster had climbed down from the box-seat and deposited a shabby leather portmanteau under the portico of the "White Hart." He glanced about him, took off a rain-splashed top-hat, and smoothed the nap with the sleeve of his ulster. The light from the oil lamp dribbled down on him with a draughty waywardness. He was tall, with a gaunt breadth of shoulder that wedged out his ulster into sharp, square corners. The lamp-light fell on his face and ran off it like water off a crag, an ugly face with a big nose and a square chin. He was clean-shaven about a straight, terse mouth, and his eyes looked very steadily and very intently at life, as though determined to see nothing but the truth.

A boy came splashing through the puddles in the market-place, and stared doubtfully at the young man under the "White Hart" portico.

"Be you for Dr. Threadgold's, mister?"

He was a fat boy, with blown-out cheeks, a white muffler that bulged under his chin, and trousers that fitted very tightly over a certain portion of his figure. The man studied him with that indescribable gleam of the eyes that goes with a lively sense of humour.

“That’s right—Mr. Pickwick. I’ve just come by the coach.”

“My name’s not Pickwick.”

“I beg your pardon, I’m sure.”

The boy eyed him suspiciously.

“My name’s Sam, Sam Perkins, and I carry out the bottles.”

“That’s something to begin with. Can you manage this bit of luggage?”

The boy heaved at the portmanteau, and found that it came up quite easily. The tall man’s voice had had a peculiar effect upon him. It was a deep, yet quiet voice, a voice that suggested a reserve of breath stored away in a capacious chest, a voice that would grow quieter and quieter under stress, like the smile of a man who is doggedly good-tempered and knows how to use his fists.

“Anything else, sir?”

The “sir” was a distinct uplift.

“No; that’s the lot.”

The portmanteau was exceedingly light, and its lightness filled the fat boy with speculative surprise. He remembered that when young Surgeon Stott came as assistant to Dr. Threadgold at Navestock, that gentleman’s luggage had filled the “White Hart” hand-cart, and that Fyson, the coachman, had broken his braces in getting it upstairs. Sam balanced the portmanteau on his shoulder, and made an imaginary inventory of its contents. He allowed the big man one night-shirt, a razor and washing-bag, a pair of slippers, two shirts, a pot of jam, and a second-best pair of trousers. Nor were Sam’s calculations far from the actual facts. Dr. John Wolfe had all his worldly possessions in that leather portmanteau.

Dr. Montague Threadgold’s house stood on the north side of Mulberry Green, the long windows in its flat red front overlooking the old mulberry trees, and the white posts and chains that bounded the stretch of grass. A solid and portly house, it had for its neighbours a dozen other solid and portly houses, all built of red-brick with white stone cornices and ashlar work at the angles, all with massive front doors and lion-headed brass knockers, and door-steps white as newly starched aprons.

Sam gave a tug at the bell-handle.

"I'll take the box round the back, sir."

John Wolfe nodded to him, scraped his boots on an iron scraper let into the wall, and saw the great green front door of Prospect House swinging back over a brown doormat that carried the word "Salve."

"Dr. Threadgold at home?"

"Yes, sir."

"I'm Dr. Wolfe. You might take my ulster, and get it dried. Mind your apron. The thing's wet through."

The maid smiled at the big man with the quiet voice. He was laughing to himself over that word "Salve," and his mouth and eyes looked very pleasant when he was amused. A few details are full of significance to a man who has learnt to observe and to weigh impressions. Dr. Montague Threadgold was either a wag of a fellow or an affable person with no real sense of humour. Salve! Turn the word from Latin to English, and the mat might as well have whispered "pills."

A mahogany door at the end of the hall opened, and a short, stoutish man in a neat pair of black-and-white check trousers came sailing out.

"Mr. Wolfe, I presume. Glad to see you, sir, glad to see you."

Dr. Montague Threadgold was the most affable of men. He was round, pink-faced, wore gold-rimmed glasses, and spent twenty minutes each morning in training a number of well-oiled hairs across the bald crown of his head. His affability and his energetic worthiness expressed themselves even in the play of his check-patterned legs. They were legs that twinkled, went at a quick strut, and pattered up and down stairs very quickly. His mouth was one of those prim mouths that purse themselves into a straight line and insist on seeming shrewd and determined. A little wind-bag of a man, he bounced and floated through the life of Navestock and its neighbourhood, bringing children into the world with unction and patting them on the head three years later, with still greater unction; uttering sweet, shallow solemnities at bedsides; drinking his port at dinners and twinkling through sly, beaming spectacles; subscribing his guinea to all charities, and living very fatly behind the heavy rep curtains of Prospect House.

Dr. Threadgold’s chubby hand disappeared into Wolfe’s great fist. Urbanity hid some of the elder man’s condescension. He looked through his round spectacles at Wolfe and seemed a little bothered by the surgeon’s height and by the grave and steady way he had of staring people in the face.

“A wet journey, I’m afraid.” Dr. Threadgold always looked on the point of saying “my young friend.” “It is a disgrace that there is no branch line to Navestock, a positive disgrace. But privilege, vested interests—ah, well, I’m a bit of a Liberal, Mr. Wolfe. And luggage—what about your luggage?”

“I think I heard it going upstairs.”

“Ah—to be sure. I expect you would like some supper. We take that informal meal at half-past seven—precisely.”

“Very good, sir.”

“Ah—let me see—your room, yes—Sykes will show you your room. You will find Mrs. Threadgold and myself in the drawing-room. No, no professional questions to-night. They can stand over till the morning.”

Threadgold had begun to talk very fast, as though his composure had run away from him, and he was trying to catch it again. His affability appeared a little hurried and out of breath. All because this tall and rather ugly young man had a reserved air, and steady, watchful eyes.

“Sykes—Sykes——”

“Yes, sir.”

“Conduct Mr. Wolfe to his room, Sykes.”

And Sykes led the way up three long flights of stairs.

John Wolfe’s room was on the top floor of Prospect House, a room whose single window opened upon a leaded gutter and the brick face of a parapet. By standing on one of the chairs he could have seen over the parapet and, by daylight, the mulberry trees and the green below. The furniture of the room was very simple, a three-cornered mahogany washstand with a blue Spode jug and basin, a wooden bedstead, painted yellow, a chest of drawers of the same colour, a couple of chairs, and for a dressing-table a plain deal table draped with pink glazed calico and muslin, rather dirty. Over the bed hung a text, “My God, Thou seest me.” The carpet was in four strips, arranged about the bed.

Wolfe stood in the middle of the room, and his head came within six inches of the ceiling. He looked round critically, with just the slightest twitching of the upper lip. The text over the bed interested him. He went and unpinned it, and turned it with its face to the wall.

He moved next to the little Georgian fireplace, put a boot into the opening and felt for the register.

“Down—of course!”

Wolfe kicked it up, and a shower of soot descended upon the white shavings and the pink paper fronting that decorated the grate.

“I’ll wager that man’s an old duffer. Fussy and amiable. I wonder what sort of life they lead down here? Quiet and sleepy and harmless.”

He laughed and turned to the portmanteau that the fat boy had left at the bottom of the bed. Nor was his unpacking a very lengthy business. Out of the portmanteau came two shirts, rather ragged; a pair of slippers; a washing-bag; a comb and brush; a pair of boots that had been re-capped at the toes; a razor; a strop; a brown leather instrument case; a meerschaum pipe wrapped up in a paper bag; two pairs of trousers; a tail coat; two night-shirts, with the buttons showing metal; five collars; a tie, and two or three well-worn books. Wolfe packed most of these possessions away in the chest of drawers before he went to the wash-hand stand and washed himself in the blue Spode basin.

As he stood by the dressing-table where the maid had left the candle, his hand went reflectively into the breast pocket of his coat and pulled out a faded green silk purse. He shook the contents out on to the dressing-table, and counted one sovereign and nine shillings in silver. An investigation of his trousers pockets disclosed the sum of ninepence in coppers. Wolfe eyed the money thoughtfully, picked it up piece by piece, and put it back, all save the coppers, into the green silk purse.

This green silk purse had shared with Wolfe all the lean years of his student's life. No romantic associations belonged to it. He had bought the purse seven years ago at a little fancy shop in Islington, in the days when, as a young man of twenty-one, he had taken the £100 a Quaker aunt had left him. Those seven years would have killed or crushed a man with less toughness and less heart, for no fanatical or mediæval scholar could have suffered more in the pursuit of philosophy. One shirt, one pair of boots, one meal a day; heroic hoarding to pay for fees and books; a genuine garret to cook and sleep in. He had not only to learn, but to earn money to learn with. For three years he had acted as night dispenser at a surgery. More than once he had spent a part of the summer travelling the country with an itinerant "boxing booth" and acting as "bruiser" at country fairs. He had sung songs in London taverns for a shilling and a pot of porter a night, and worked for three months as a navvy in the cuttings and on the embankments of a new south-country railway. At the hospital he had been called "The Wolf," and the name had suited his lean, predatory look. A quiet man, the best "heavy weight" in the London hospitals, clean to the point of ferocity in his living, shabby, a hater of snobs, he had a few good friends, and a fair number of shy enemies.

Those seven years had left their mark upon the man, and upon his belongings. He was hard, grim, straight as his own "left," absolutely fearless, an enthusiast who had fought through. Wolfe had been thorough. He had not scraped a little knowledge and the lowest possible qualification, and then disappeared to make a little money. He had served as house-surgeon and resident obstetric surgeon, and had spent some months studying that elemental science—public health. Wolfe was a sound man, a man who could not bear not to know what could be known.

Yet he had come by more things than knowledge and thoroughness. No true man who has struggled and suffered loses in heart by these strugglings and sufferings. For these things are life, and without them a man does not understand half the things that he sees. Insight, sympathy, humour, a deep tenderness, you find them in the men who have come with sound hearts through the rough and tumble.

And now, at the end of these seven years, John Wolfe found himself in Navestock town as assistant to Dr. Montague Threadgold. Experience in general practice and money to save for a career—these were his necessities. If Navestock had known the contents of John Wolfe's portmanteau and his green silk purse, it would have attached no great importance to the fact that Dr. Montague Threadgold had taken a new assistant.

"Old Monte's got another bottle-washer!"

Yet the man who was descending Dr. Threadgold's stairs and pausing to decide which was the door of Dr. Threadgold's drawing-room, was fated to shake the torpor out of the bones of that most corrupt of towns. The great, outer world had dropped a live shell into Navestock market-place.

A high-pitched, serene squeak of a voice gave Wolfe the clue as to the position of Dr. Threadgold’s drawing-room door.

“Montague,” it said, “Montague, be so good as to put two more lumps of coal on the fire.”

And Wolfe heard the scoop of a shovel as he put his hand to the white china handle.

CHAPTER TWO

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The drawing-room of Prospect House reminded Wolfe of the conventional idea of heaven, in that it was full of much gold and of things that glittered. The pictures were all in gold frames, and the mirrors vied with the pictures. Lustres glittered on the great central chandelier and on the candlesticks upon the marble mantelpiece. The clock was a monstrous creation in gold. The turkey-red curtains were edged with gold braid and looped back with gold tasselled cords. Purplish red tapestry covered the sofa, ottoman, and chairs, the upholstering being finished off with red gimp and brass-headed nails. On the wall-paper yellow roses rambled through festoons of orange ribbons. The antimacassars were in red and yellow wool, and the carpet was not unlike a glorified antimacassar.

Beside the fire sat a very regal little person in a huge crinoline, black bodice, and lace cap. Her round, puddy, exquisitely complacent face looked out from between clay-coloured ringlets and from under the lace, ribbons, and jet ornaments of the aforesaid cap. Her nose was a little beak, and her blue eyes protruded slightly and always retained the same hard, staring expression. Her mouth drooped at the corners over a dumpy and formless chin. As for her dress—it was of black silk, and rustled whenever she moved.

Dr. Threadgold jumped up from mending the fire.

“Ha—Mr. Wolfe. My dear, permit me to introduce Mr. Wolfe to you. Mr. John Wolfe—my wife, Mrs. Threadgold.”

Wolfe’s bow did not equal the sententious dignity of the doctor’s introduction. Mrs. Threadgold gave the new assistant a very slight inclination of the head and went on with her knitting. She felt it to be part of her business in life to counteract the effects of her husband's intense affability.

"Draw up a chair, sir, and get warm. That's right. Never mind the hearthrug."

"My dear Montague, I—must put in a word for the hearthrug, especially when the edge is all crumpled up."

Wolfe thrust the arm-chair a yard farther back. He caught Mrs. Threadgold's eyes fixed upon the extreme length of his outstretched legs, and upon the muddy pair of boots that he had forgotten to change. A nervous man would have drawn up his legs and tucked his feet under the chair. Wolfe did not move.

"Well, sir, and how do you like Navestock?" Threadgold's spectacles beamed—"not much opportunity to judge yet, eh? We are quiet, humdrum people, but I think you will find us quite alive after our fashion. In politics, though, I am a bit of a Liberal."

"Montague, you know that you are nothing of the kind."

"My dear——"

"Dr. Threadgold must have his facetiosities, Mr. Wolfe. The most eminent men are sometimes the most playful. I may inform you that Navestock is one of the most loyal and Conservative towns in the kingdom; as it should be, and as it will always be so long as Lord Blackwater is Lord of the Manor, the Brandons hold 'Pardons,' and the old families remain. I must say that the neighbourhood is a most aristocratic one, and that the gentry——"

A gong sounded downstairs. Mrs. Threadgold ignored it.

"That the gentry realise their responsibilities to the poor, without needing any impertinent, vulgar clamour on the part of low Radicals."

Dr. Threadgold pulled out his watch.

"It is exactly one minute before the half hour, Montague."

"So it is, my dear."

“I think it right that a young man in Mr. Wolfe’s position should receive some instruction as to the character of the neighbourhood in which Dr. Threadgold is the leading physician and surgeon. I need not say that in a practice such as this——”

The gong sounded a second time.

“Good manners—and tact—are of great importance. Was that the gong, Montague?”

“My dear, it was.”

“Then we will go down to supper.”

Mrs. Threadgold possessed the power of making nervous people lose their appetite and refuse with a fluster of self-consciousness the second helping that they so much desired. John Wolfe was as hungry as a man could be, and not being troubled with shyness, he listened gravely to Mrs. Threadgold’s tittle-tattle and kept on good terms with the round of roast beef at the end of the table. Threadgold helped him generously, for his good humour was not a surface virtue, and the doctor and his dining-room harmonized admirably. Everything was solid, comfortable, and opulent. Old portraits in oils hung upon the brown-papered walls. The sideboard was a fine piece of Sheraton, the chairs Hepplewhite, and upholstered with red brocade. The Turkey carpet claimed part of the prosperity of the practice.

Mrs. Threadgold had an eye on Wolfe’s plate. She had been studying the new man, noticing the faded edges of his tie and the shiny buttons of his coat. Her observation dealt mainly with external details. She did not go below the surface, for to Mrs. Sophia Threadgold life was all surface, a matter of gilding, glass, fresh paint, pew cushions, silk, pasteboard, and fine linen. Wolfe impressed her as a raw gawk of a man who was inclined to be silent and sulky. He had come into her drawing-room with dirty boots, and eaten three helpings of cold beef, and these details were full of significance.

It was an understandable impulse that drove her to talk about Sir Joshua Kermody, the senior physician at Guy’s, a gentleman with a fashionable consulting practice and a decision in the dieting of dukes and yet more distinguished persons.

“Sir Joshua has often stayed a night with us here at Navestock. He and Dr. Threadgold were students together and great friends——”

“O yes—I knew Kermody pretty well.”

“One of the most perfect gentlemen I have ever met. I suppose you have often listened to Sir Joshua’s lectures, Mr. Wolfe?”

“Yes, for one whole year.”

“And you have followed him round the wards, too?”

“Miles.”

Mrs. Threadgold’s face showed some transient animation.

“What an opportunity for you young men. Quite an education—in manners. I have often heard that medical students are such vulgar young fellows. Sir Joshua is just the one to provide them with a little polish. The hospital should be very proud of Sir Joshua.”

Wolfe laid his knife and fork side by side and looked in his grave, penetrating way at Mrs. Threadgold. He knew old Kermody and his reputation, a man with the tastes and the manners of a Brummell, spruce, bland, and untrustworthy, obsolete in his knowledge, a man who had always refused to accept anything that was new. Kermody was one of the handsomest old snobs in London. He had grand manners and the heart of a cad.

“We have plenty of good men at Guy’s, madam.”

“I don’t doubt it, sir. Sir Joshua has often said that Dr. Threadgold would have been one of the leading physicians in London, if he had cared to stay there. I have no doubt that you will find Dr. Threadgold’s experience of infinite service to you. It is good for young men to sit at the feet of experience."

Wolfe's eye caught the doctor's.

"That's what I've come for, sir."

Dr. Threadgold blinked, beamed, and moved uneasily in his chair.

"Ha—one lives and learns, lives and learns. Our responsibilities, Mr. Wolfe, thicken as we grow older. Now, you young men——"

"I think we have more to carry."

"Oh!"

"We have our unmade reputations on our shoulders."

"Ah, that's true."

"Quite a sensible remark, Mr. Wolfe. Montague, perhaps Mr. Wolfe will take—a third helping of that sponge custard."

"Allow me, sir."

"Thanks. I will."

It had begun to rain again, and what with the wind blowing the rain full upon the windows and howling through the mulberry trees upon the Green, none of the three at Dr. Threadgold's supper table heard the rattle of a horse's hoofs over the cobbles. The stones gave place to gravel in front of the sententious, red-coated house on the north side of Mulberry Green, and a gig that came swinging round the white posts and chains drew up briskly outside Dr. Threadgold's door. A loafer who had been following the gig at a run, gave a pull at the doctor's door-bell, and set up a tremendous hammering with the lion-headed knocker.

Dr. Threadgold still had the spoon in the dish of sponge custard.

"Hallo, hallo, do they want to knock the house down!"

"Montague, if that is old Crabbe's boy, I wish you would box the little wretch's ears. He always makes noise enough for Lord Blackwater's footman."

They heard Sykes, the maid, cross the hall and open the front door. A gust of wind whirled in with the sound of men's voices.

“Confound it, Ruston, don’t touch that side of me!”

The door closed again, shutting the voices into Dr. Threadgold’s hall.

“This way, sir, please.”

“What? Is he in? Deuce take——”

A second door closed on the snarling voice, cutting it off sharply. Sykes came whisking into the dining-room with a scared white face.

“Please, sir, it’s Sir George Griggs. He’s met with a haccident, sir, ’unting.”

Dr. Threadgold pushed his chair back, put his napkin on the table, and gave his waistcoat a tug, the unconscious gesture that betrayed the professional dignity putting itself in order. His prim little mouth straightened into a tighter and more emphatic line.

“Excuse me, my dear.”

“Most certainly, Montague.”

She turned to Wolfe, who was on the point of rising, and treated him as though he had asked her a question.

“Certainly, Mr. Wolfe. By all means accompany Dr. Threadgold. I know that a young man in your position——”

Wolfe was up, and had given her a slight, stiff bow.

“Go and watch Dr. Threadgold, sir. No doubt you will learn something.”

In Dr. Threadgold’s consulting room a huge, bullet-headed man in a red coat was striding to and fro from corner to corner, a splash of blood over his left temple, and his left cheek brown with mud. His riding breeches were ripped along one thigh and soaked with mud and slime. The man was like a great beast in pain. He swore—in gusts—as he stamped to and fro, holding his left arm folded across his chest, the right hand under the left elbow. A younger man stood leaning against the bookcase, looking on rather helplessly, and pulling the joints of his brown whiskers.

Dr. Threadgold bustled in with John Wolfe at his heels.

“Come, come, bless my soul! what’s all this about?”

The big man turned like an angry bull.

“Matter? Shut that door. I don’t want to have the whole house hear me swearing. Swear, confound it, I must.”

“My dear Sir George—swear.”

“The devil take that new hunter of mine. I’ll have the beast shot to-morrow. Played me a dirty trick. What!”

The young man by the bookcase emitted sympathetic language through a cloud of hair. His nose and eyes looked like the beak and eyes of a bird all puffed up with feathers.

“Ged, sir, never saw a beast refuse more scurvily. I nearly rode over you. Why——”

“Look here, Threadgold—man, something’s pretty well messed up. The beast refused at a big ditch, and banged me over his head into an oak stub. We were down Bordon way, ten devilish miles. Thought it would be quicker to drive straight here in Ruston’s gig. Confound it—this shoulder kicks like an old duck-gun!”

Threadgold took off his spectacles, wiped them with a silk handkerchief, and replaced them with an air of “now—for business.”

“Please sit down, Sir George. You say you fell on your shoulder. That’s right, Mr. Wolfe, you might light that other gas jet. Now, sir. I’m afraid we shall have to have your coat off.”

Threadgold made little, soothing gestures with his hands.

“Coat off? Of course. But how the——”

“I am afraid, Sir George, we shall have to sacrifice the coat.”

“Confound the coat, cut it into ribbons.”

“Mr. Wolfe, sir, you will find a pair of scissors in that drawer. What?”

He found Wolfe standing at his elbow with a sharp-bladed knife.

“Shall I slit the sleeve for you?”

“Please do so, sir.”

Wolfe went to work, and peeled the red coat from the injured man by slitting it along the seams. He was very dexterous and very gentle. Sir George watched Wolfe's hands, keeping his jaw set for the moment when the surgeon should hurt him. But Wolfe had the coat off without causing him a pang.

"By jove, that was smart!"

Mr. Ruston of the hairy face chimed in with "Ged, it was, sir."

Wolfe threw the coat aside, slit the baronet's waistcoat across the shoulder, unbuttoned it, handed it to Mr. Ruston, saying, "There's a watch there, I think." Then he dissected away the sleeve of Sir George's shirt, and laid bare the bruised and swollen shoulder.

Threadgold, who had grown rather fidgety, stepped forward, and reassumed his authority.

"Thank you, Mr. Wolfe. Now, sir, we will see what is the matter."

Wolfe drew aside and watched Dr. Threadgold make his examination. His first impressions had tempted him to mistrust the little man's ability, nor had he watched Dr. Threadgold's chubby hands for half a minute before he knew him for a fumbler and no surgeon. A craftsman is very quick in judging a fellow craftsman, and Threadgold was fussy, ineffectual, and uncertain with his hands. He chattered half to himself and half to his patient, with the busy self-consciousness of a man of poor capacity.

His hands gave Wolfe the impression of not being quite sure of what they ought to do next. There was no decisive, diagnostic intelligence about them. Moreover, Threadgold caused the big man a great deal of unnecessary pain.

"Acromion process—hum—exactly. Clavicle a leetle bit up—perhaps. Swelling very pronounced, very pronounced——"

Sir George writhed.

"Confound it, Threadgold."

"One moment, sir. I assure you——"

“How much longer do you want to mess me about?”

Threadgold patted the swollen joint, looked wise and sympathetic, and glanced at Wolfe.

“Support Sir George’s arm, Mr. Wolfe.”

He pursed up his lips, and frowned over the gold rims of his glasses. Wolfe had a shrewd suspicion that Dr. Threadgold was none the wiser than when he began.

“There is a great deal of swelling there, Sir George, a very great deal of swelling. I should prefer to have the injured part rested, ice applied, and a second examination made to-morrow.”

The big man stared.

“What! You don’t mean to say——”

“My dear sir, in a case such as this, when some hours have elapsed——”

“Oh, bosh, man, I want the thing settled. Do you mean to say I’ve driven ten miles—for nothing? You’ve pulled me about enough——”

Dr. Threadgold went very pink.

“My dear Sir George, let me assure you that a diagnosis can only be hypothetical under such conditions.”

The baronet looked ugly. He was one of those plethoric, short-tempered men who lose all self-restraint under the influence of pain or of much provocation. He stared hard at Threadgold, and then turned his bristling eyebrows towards Wolfe, who was supporting the arm.

“Look here—just take this on. I don’t want to be fooled about any longer.”

Wolfe glanced at Threadgold. The little man’s face looked pink and suffused. His eyes were big behind his glasses.

“If you care to let my assistant examine you, Sir George——”

“Yes, I do.”

“Very well, sir, very well. I have nothing more to say.”

Threadgold pivoted round on one check-patterned leg, strutted to the hearthrug, pulled the lapels of his coat forward, and stood with chest expanded.

In five minutes Wolfe had Sir George Griggs stretched upon the sofa. The surgeon had taken off his left boot and was sitting on the edge of the sofa with his heel in the baronet's armpit.

"I shall have to hurt you badly—for about ten seconds, sir."

"Go on. I'm not a baby."

"Catch hold of Mr. Ruston's hand. Nothing like something to grip. Now, hold on."

There was a moment of writhing, of grim, clenched anguish as Wolfe pulled at the arm and worked at the dislocated shoulder.

"In. That's good."

"What—all over?"

"Yes."

The big man lay on the sofa and panted, while Mr. Ruston flapped his hand.

"I say, that was a twister!"

"Ged—you gave me a squeezing!"

"Get me a 'peg,' someone; it's made me feel pretty funny."

He was sweating. Dr. Threadgold turned and rang the bell.

"Head of the bone was out, was it?"

"Yes. If you can sit up in a minute, sir, I'll just see that everything is all right."

Sir George sat up readily enough while Wolfe manipulated the left arm very gently and made sure that the head of the bone was back in its normal position.

"Yes, that's all right, sir."

"Sykes, a glass of brandy and water."

Dr. Threadgold lingered at the door.

"I say, sir, I am confoundedly obliged to you."

Wolfe smiled.

“Oh, that’s all part of the campaign. I shall have to tie you up to keep that shoulder quiet. What about your forehead?”

“A little gravelling, isn’t it?”

“Yes, nothing serious. I’ll wash it, and patch you up with a bit of plaster. By the way, though——”

He remembered suddenly that he was in Dr. Threadgold’s consulting-room, and that a hot and rather humiliated little man was fidgeting on the hearthrug.

“Dr. Threadgold will tell you what precautions you ought to take.”

“Oh, all right,” said the baronet, gulping brandy and water.

Half an hour later Mr. Ruston was driving Sir George Griggs homeward in his gig. It was still raining hard, and the wet streets of Navestock were deserted. The big man had so far recovered himself that he was able to see the humour of much that had passed.

“What a confounded old woman! I always knew Threadgold was a duffer. I wouldn’t have come within a mile of him only I knew Odgers of Hinkley was in London.”

“Well, that other chap——”

“Jove, that’s the sort of man for me. Plenty of grip there. I can’t stand these counter-bouncing little beasts like Threadgold. He’s only fit to slosh people with treacle and water.”

“Mrs. T. ought to run the practice.”

“Sophia Pudson—don’t, my dear chap, don’t! That woman’s face always acts on me like an emetic. You should hear old Johnson’s parrot next door shouting ‘Monte, Monte,’ all day in summer. A man like Threadgold ought to be shot for marrying such a woman.”

And the gig, with its lamps flaring through the rain, rolled out of South Street into the wet night.

At Prospect House Wolfe sat on the sofa in the consulting-room, smoking a clay pipe. There had been a slight scene after Sir George’s departure. Dr. Montague Threadgold had got upon his dignity and spoken with some heat.

“Mr. Wolfe, sir. I reproach myself with having allowed you to behave with such rashness. A swollen joint like that ought to be treated with the extremest caution.”

Wolfe had a big heart and no pettiness. He was rather sorry for Dr. Threadgold.

“Well, sir, I felt convinced——”

“When you are a little older, Mr. Wolfe, you will not be convinced so easily. Experience teaches a doctor to be cautious.”

Dr. Threadgold retired to the drawing-room, where his wife was sitting before the fire. The faint tinkle of a piano came from the next house, and the mellow piping of a flute. The Misses Johnson and the Rev. Charles Chipperton of St. Jude’s were playing old Johnson, the wine merchant, to sleep.

Mrs. Threadgold looked up with one of her expressionless smiles. If you could ascribe any colour to smiles, Mrs. Threadgold’s resembled the yellowish wool in her lap.

“Everything quite successful, Montague?”

“Most successful, my dear.”

“A serious accident?”

“Dislocated shoulder. Mr. Wolfe and I reduced it.”

Mrs. Threadgold looked gratified.

“I thought the young man ought to profit by your experience, Montague, so I sent him after you.”

“Exactly, my dear, exactly.”

“Rather a raw young man, and very ugly, but I have no doubt that you will polish him and improve his manners.”

Dr. Threadgold poked the fire rather testily.

“Mr. Wolfe,” he said, “seems to be a young man of some ability. But a little forward, a little inclined to be above himself. I shall have to modify that.”

CHAPTER THREE

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People with a sense of the picturesque, who drove for the first time over Tarling Moor and saw Navestock—the town of the southern midlands—lying far-away in the green valley below them, thought of it as a dream town, hidden away among innocent, wooded hills. Even in later years, when a more restless generation began to run about the world in a mad hurry to admire anything that was "antique" and "quaint," Navestock remained the quintessence of "quaintness."

Artists came to paint its old inns, its stretches of red roof, and the mellow gloom of its alleys. It still kept much of its mystery, much of its crowded colour, much of the "quaintness" that earnest and dreamy persons seek so loyally.

From the distance Navestock looked like a red heart transfixed by a silver bodkin, red roofs on either side of the River Wraith. It was compact, and crowded, all mellowed to a warm maturity, from the garden houses on Peachy Hill to the hovels by the river alleys. The Builder Beast of the late 'sixties and the 'seventies had not then scented the town and scattered filth in the fields and gardens.

Those people who were in search of old-world quaintness found pieces of many centuries jumbled together like the pieces of a puzzle. Georgian gentlemen might still have strutted in the market square, their coats of red and green and blue brightening the grey cobbles, the powdered heads the colour of the clouds that floated over the town. In Bung Row and Bastard Alley by the river loitered those broad-hipped, snub-nosed slatterns whom Hogarth would have painted. If you desired a setting for some sweet serial in a Sunday magazine, you had but to walk past the Brandon

Almshouses and along Green Street where the timber and plaster houses overhung the road. Noble young cavaliers came riding by, and sweet Dorothies flung red roses out of the casement windows. Then bells tolled by St. Jude’s Church, and Grey Friars came sweeping along, two by two, hairy, barefooted men, with hungry faces and wolves’ eyes. Let but a trumpet blow and young Mortimer clashed by in full war gear upon his great white horse, the tall spears of his men-at-arms moving after him like the masts of ships in a Dutch town. One artist, who came to paint Navestock’s queer corners, swore that if he watched the green doors in the red houses at Vernor’s End, he saw sentimental young women in huge bonnets and loose muslin gowns glide out and shake their curls at him in the sunlight. But this artist was a very impressionable man. He painted Navestock as a town of horsemen and of coaches, of blue wagons thundering along the narrow streets at the tails of huge, black horses. He painted it also as a town of gables and dormer windows, of high brick walls with roses and fruit trees showing over the tops thereof, of rich unsuspected gardens, of still more unsuspected foul, back yards. Strangers thought Navestock a sweet, innocent, peaceful old place where quiet and kindly people lived quiet and kindly lives.

It is to be feared that Romance hides a number of dirty garments under her gay-coloured cloak, and that Navestock was a thoroughly dirty and corrupt old town. She may have had pots of musk in her windows, but her back yards, her alleys, and her lanes were full of many odours. Nor was the town’s morality particularly clean. In the river alleys children swarmed like cockroaches, and family relationships were a matter of speculation. Inns and little beer-houses were plentiful. They leered at people round unsuspected corners and winked knowingly at the thirsty.

Behind the gardens belonging to the houses on the north side of Mulberry Green ran Snake Lane, and from Snake

Lane a passage branched off between high brick walls that were topped with broken glass. A black door, with “Surgery” painted upon it in white letters, opened out of this passage. Daily, between the hours of nine and ten and six and seven, the sickly lees of the life of this old town oozed into Dr. Threadgold’s surgery. Threadgold had no rival in Navestock, and so far as his practice was concerned, his patients were divided into the blessed and the damned. To his assistants—such as they were—had been given the river alleys and their hovels, the sots and incurables, the miserable old men and women, the strumous, rickety children. Dr. Threadgold moved in the upper regions. He did not climb dirty stairs and knock his head against sloped ceilings. That chubby little hand of his went gliding up mahogany banister rails, and felt pulses under skin that was white and clean.

“Mr. Wolfe, sir, have you nearly finished with that case?”

There was some asperity in the elder man’s voice as his head and one check-patterned leg appeared round the edge of the door that led from the consulting-room into the surgery. Wolfe was seated on a chair by the window with a baby howling on his knees. A thin woman stood beside him, blinking away tears, and the crowded bottles on the shelves seemed to blink in sympathy.

“In one minute, sir.”

“My carriage has been waiting for half an hour.”

“I can’t leave the child for the moment, sir.”

Nor could he, since he was in the act of snipping an over-tight ligament that tied down the baby’s tongue.

Wolfe found Dr. Threadgold warming his feet at the fire. He turned briskly, and began to speak with a certain forced rapidity.

“Mr. Wolfe, I have drawn you out a list of patients who will be under your charge. And since you are new to the place I have ordered Samuel, the surgery boy, to go round with you and act as guide. Here are the list and the addresses.”

Threadgold handed Wolfe a strip of paper, and turned rather hurriedly towards the door. There were some twenty names on the list, and against each name Dr. Threadgold had written a diagnosis—in red ink.

“I shall be glad if you will be guided by my experience, Mr. Wolfe. If you have any suggestions to make as to treatment, I shall be pleased to consider them.”

He swung the door open, and then turned as though he had suddenly remembered something.

“And, by the way, sir, Mrs. Threadgold has asked me to tell you that she cannot allow the smell of tobacco about the house.”

Wolfe glanced up from the list that he had been scanning.

“Mrs. Threadgold, sir, is exceedingly sensitive to the smell of tobacco. Moreover, this house is a house of very frequent entertainment. In fact——”

Wolfe cut him short.

“I quite understand, sir. I’ll smoke in the garden—or in the stable.”

Threadgold gave a mild stare.

“Anywhere you please, Mr. Wolfe, in private. But of course not in public. I could not see a representative of mine walking the streets of Navestock——”

“No, sir, I quite understand you.”

Threadgold bounced out like a timid man who has been ordered to say his say, leaving Wolfe standing by the window with a queer and thoughtful smile upon his face.

The people of Navestock stared a good deal at John Wolfe as he spent his first morning striding about the town with fat Samuel plodding at his side. Most of the patients on the list that Dr. Threadgold had given him belonged to the lanes and alleys near the river. The very names of these places were suggestive—Bung Row, Bastard Alley, Dirty Dick’s, Paradise Place. The lanes were mere crevasses into which very little sunlight fell, and in winter, when the Wraith was in flood, half the low-lying ground would be under water. The whole neighbourhood was like a rabbit-warren, full of winding ways, black holes, and dark entries, and to judge by the condition of the yards and gutters—the art of scavenging was unknown.

Wolfe had to visit three cottages in Bung Row, and he felt himself back in the familiar London slums. In the first cottage, he found a frowsy woman sitting before a bit of fire, holding a baby to her breast, and trying to smother a cough. Wolfe sat down on a chair that had lost its back and talked to her with the ease of a man who is too interested and too much in earnest to be self-conscious. The woman was pitiably servile, and seemed surprised that this new doctor was not in a curt and casual hurry.

"It's me soide, sir, I've got such a pain in me soide."

She reiterated the cry, screwing her mouth into a queer triangular slit, so that Wolfe, struck by some ludicrous memory, had to get up and appear interested in her back.

"Much coughing?"

"It's the coughing as pulls me to bits, sir. I coughs until I retches, and the pain in me soide, sir, is fair awful. Sleep? Wish I could, sir. It's cough, cough, cough the whole blessed night. And my man—he's that disagreeable, talks of stuffing a stocking in me mouth. And I'm getting that thin."

A lean girl of twelve came and took the baby, and Wolfe examined the woman's chest. Dr. Threadgold had given a diagnosis of bronchial catarrh. Wolfe very soon satisfied himself that the woman must have been suffering from consumption for months.

"Ever spat blood?"

"Blood, sir? Pints, sir."

"You told Dr. Threadgold?"

"He only saw me once, sir, and he was that hurried. It was after Mr. Timmins left. He didn't thump me and listen, like you do, sir."

"No?"