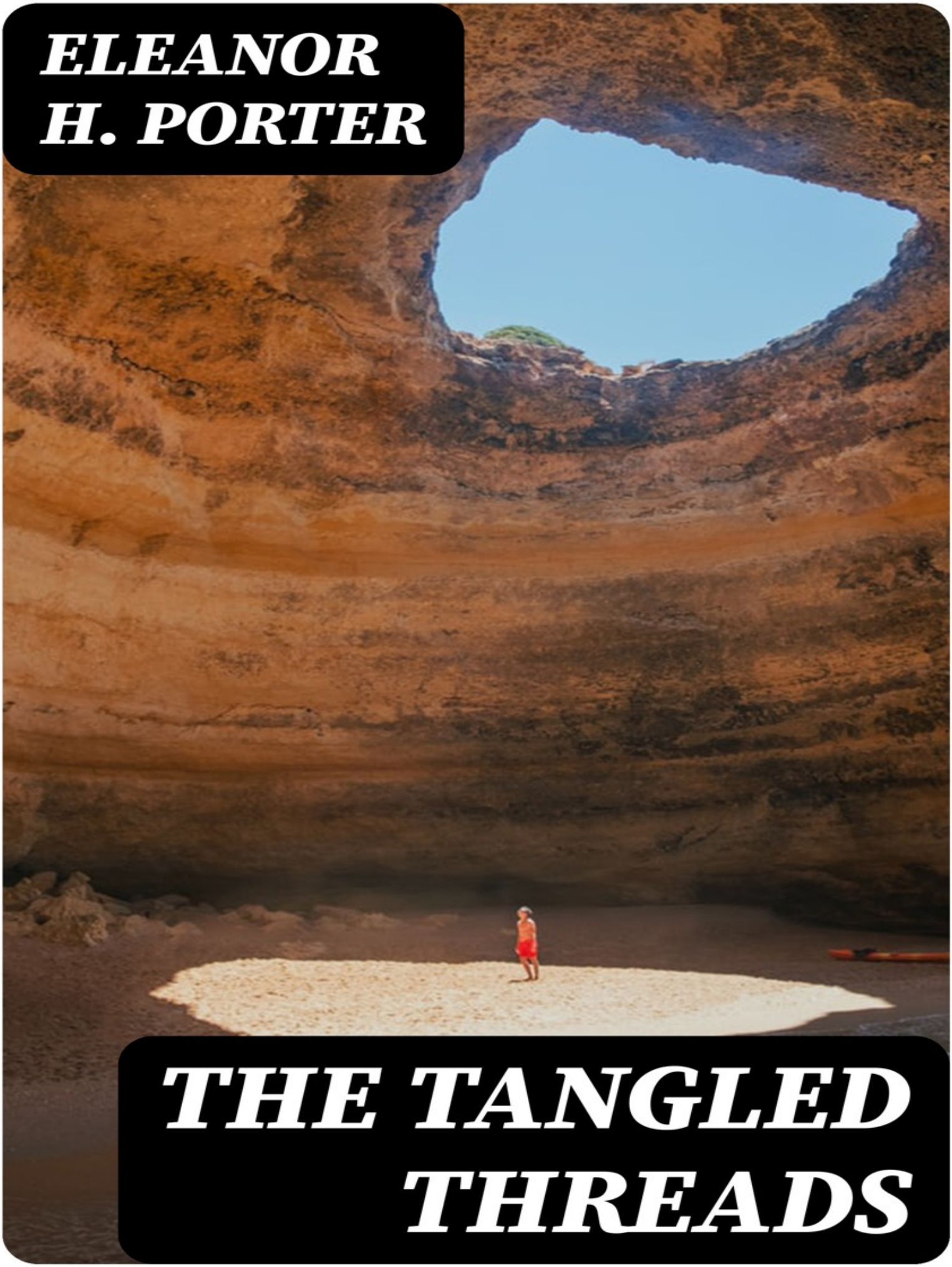
ELEANOR H. PORTER



THE TANGLED THREADS

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The Tangled Threads

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The Tangled Threads

A Delayed Heritage

When Hester was two years old a wheezy hand-organ would set her eyes to sparkling and her cheeks to dimpling, and when she was twenty the "Maiden's Prayer," played by a school-girl, would fill her soul with ecstasy.

To Hester, all the world seemed full of melody. Even the clouds in the sky sailed slowly along in time to a stately march in her brain, or danced to the tune of a merry schottische that sounded for her ears alone. And when she saw the sunset from the hill behind her home, there was always music then—low and tender if the colors were soft and pale-tinted, grand and awful if the wind blew shreds and tatters of storm-clouds across a purpling sky. All this was within Hester; but without—

There had been but little room in Hester's life for music. Her days were an endless round of dish-washing and baby-tending—first for her mother, later for herself. There had been no money for music lessons, no time for piano

practice. Hester's childish heart had swelled with bitter envy whenever she saw the coveted music roll swinging from some playmate's hand. At that time her favorite "make-believe" had been to play at going for a music lesson, with a carefully modeled roll of brown paper suspended by a string from her fingers.

Hester was forty now. Two sturdy boys and a girl of nine gave her three hungry mouths to feed and six active feet to keep in holeless stockings. Her husband had been dead two years, and life was a struggle and a problem. The boys she trained rigorously, giving just measure of love and care; but the girl—ah, Penelope should have that for which she herself had so longed. Penelope should take music lessons!

During all those nine years since Penelope had come to her, frequent dimes and quarters, with an occasional half-dollar, had found their way into an old stone jar on the top shelf in the pantry. It had been a dreary and pinching economy that had made possible this horde of silver, and its effects had been only too visible in Hester's turned and mended garments, to say nothing of her wasted figure and colorless cheeks. Penelope was nine now, and Hester deemed it a fitting time to begin the spending of her treasured wealth.

First, the instrument: it must be a rented one, of course. Hester went about the labor of procuring it in a state of exalted bliss that was in a measure compensation for her long years of sacrifice.

Her task did not prove to be a hard one. The widow Butler, about to go South for the winter, was more than glad to leave her piano in Hester's tender care, and the dollar a

month rent which Hester at first insisted upon paying was finally cut in half, much to the widow Butler's satisfaction and Hester's grateful delight. This much accomplished, Hester turned her steps toward the white cottage wherein lived Margaret Gale, the music teacher.

Miss Gale, careful, conscientious, but of limited experience, placed her services at the disposal of all who could pay the price—thirty-five cents an hour; and she graciously accepted the name of her new pupil, entering "Penelope Martin" on her books for Saturday mornings at ten o'clock. Then Hester went home to tell her young daughter of the bliss in store for her.

Strange to say, she had cherished the secret of the old stone jar all these years, and had never told Penelope of her high destiny. She pictured now the child's joy, unconsciously putting her own nine-year-old music-hungry self in Penelope's place.

"Penelope," she called gently.

There was a scurrying of light feet down the uncarpeted back stairs, and
Penelope, breathless, rosy, and smiling, appeared in the doorway.

"Yes, mother."

"Come with me, child," said Hester, her voice sternly solemn in her effort to keep from shouting her glad tidings before the time.

The woman led the way through the kitchen and dining-room and threw open the parlor door, motioning her daughter into the somber room. The rose-color faded from Penelope's cheeks.

"Why, mother! what—what is it? Have I been—naughty?" she faltered.

Mrs. Martin's tense muscles relaxed and she laughed hysterically.

"No, dearie, no! I—I have something to tell you," she answered, drawing the child to her and smoothing back the disordered hair. "What would you rather have—more than anything else in the world?" she asked; then, unable to keep her secret longer, she burst out, "I've got it, Penelope!—oh, I've got it!"

The little girl broke from the restraining arms and danced wildly around the room.

"Mother! Really? As big as me? And will it talk—say 'papa' and 'mamma,' you know?"

"What!"

Something in Hester's dismayed face brought the prancing feet to a sudden stop.

"It—it's a doll, is n't it?" the child stammered.

Hester's hands grew cold.

"A—a doll!" she gasped.

Penelope nodded—the light gone from her eyes.

For a moment the woman was silent; then she threw back her head with a little shake and laughed forcedly.

"A doll!—why, child, it's as much nicer than a doll as—as you can imagine. It's a piano, dear—a pi-a-no!" she repeated impressively, all the old enthusiasm coming back at the mere mention of the magic word.

"Oh!" murmured Penelope, with some show of interest.

"And you're to learn to play on it!"

"Oh-h!" said Penelope again, but with less interest.

"To play on it! Just think, dear, how fine that will be!" The woman's voice was growing wistful.

"Take lessons? Like Mamie, you mean?"

"Yes, dear."

"But—she has to practice and—"

"Of course," interrupted Hester eagerly. "That's the best part of it—the practice."

"Mamie don't think so," observed Penelope dubiously.

"Then Mamie can't know," rejoined Hester with decision, bravely combating the chill that was creeping over her. "Come, dear, help mother to clear a space, so we may be ready when the piano comes," she finished, crossing the room and moving a chair to one side.

But when the piano finally arrived, Penelope was as enthusiastic as even her mother could wish her to be, and danced about it with proud joy. It was after the child had left the house, however, that Hester came with reverent step into the darkened room and feasted her eyes to her heart's content on the reality of her dreams.

Half fearfully she extended her hand and softly pressed the tip of her fourth finger to one of the ivory keys; then with her thumb she touched another a little below. The resulting dissonance gave her a vague unrest, and she gently slipped her thumb along until the harmony of a major sixth filled her eyes with quick tears.

"Oh, if I only could!" she whispered, and pressed the chord again, rapturously listening to the vibrations as they died away in the quiet room. Then she tiptoed out and closed the door behind her.

During the entire hour of that first Saturday morning lesson Mrs. Martin hovered near the parlor door, her hands and feet refusing to perform their accustomed duties. The low murmur of the teacher's voice and an occasional series of notes were to Hester the mysterious rites before a sacred shrine, and she listened in reverent awe. When Miss Gale had left the house, Mrs. Martin hurried to Penelope's side.

"How did it go? What did she say? Play me what she taught you," she urged excitedly.

Penelope tossed a consequential head and gave her mother a scornful glance.

"Pooh! mother, the first lesson ain't much. I've got to practice."

"Of course," acknowledged Hester in conciliation; "but how?—what?"

"That—and that—and from there to there," said Penelope, indicating with a pink forefinger certain portions of the page before her.

"Oh!" breathed Hester, regarding the notes with eager eyes. Then timidly, "Play—that one."

With all the importance of absolute certainty Penelope struck *C*.

"And that one."

Penelope's second finger hit *F*.

"And that—and that—and that," swiftly demanded Hester.

Penelope's cheeks grew pink, but her fingers did not falter. Hester drew a long breath.

"Oh, how quick you've learned 'em!" she exclaimed.

Her daughter hesitated a tempted moment.

"Well—I—I learned the notes in school," she finally acknowledged, looking sidewise at her mother.

But even this admission did not lessen for Hester the halo of glory about
Penelope's head. She drew another long breath.

"But what else did Miss Gale say? Tell me everything—every single thing," she reiterated hungrily.

That was not only Penelope's first lesson, but Hester's. The child, flushed and important with her sudden promotion from pupil to teacher, scrupulously repeated each point in the lesson, and the woman, humble and earnestly attentive, listened with bated breath. Then, Penelope, still airily consequential, practiced for almost an hour.

Monday, when the children were at school, Hester stole into the parlor and timidly seated herself at the piano.

"I think—I am almost sure I could do it," she whispered, studying with eager eyes the open book on the music rack. "I—I'm going to try, anyhow!" she finished resolutely.

And Hester did try, not only then, but on Tuesday, Wednesday, and thus until Saturday—that Saturday which brought with it a second lesson.

The weeks passed swiftly after that. Hester's tasks seemed lighter and her burdens less grievous since there was now that ever-present refuge—the piano. It was marvelous what a multitude of headaches and heartaches five minutes of scales, even, could banish; and when actual presence at the piano was impossible, there were yet memory and anticipation left her.

For two of these weeks Penelope practiced her allotted hour with a patience born of the novelty of the experience.

The third week the "hour" dwindled perceptibly, and the fourth week it was scarcely thirty minutes long.

"Come, dearie, don't forget your practice," Hester sometimes cautioned anxiously.

"Oh, dear me suz!" Penelope would sigh, and Hester would watch her with puzzled eyes as she disconsolately pulled out the piano stool.

"Penelope," she threatened one day, "I shall certainly stop your lessons—you don't half appreciate them." But she was shocked and frightened at the relief that so quickly showed in her young daughter's eyes. Hester never made that threat again, for if Penelope's lessons stopped—

As the weeks lengthened into months, bits of harmony and snatches of melody became more and more frequent in Penelope's lessons, and the "exercises" were supplemented by occasional "pieces"—simple, yet boasting a name. But when Penelope played "Down by the Mill," one heard only the notes—accurate, rhythmic, an excellent imitation; when Hester played it, one might catch the whir of the wheel, the swish of the foaming brook, and almost the spicy smell of the sawdust, so vividly was the scene brought to mind.

Many a time, now, the old childhood dreams came back to Hester, and her fingers would drift into tender melodies and minor chords not on the printed page, until all the stifled love and longing of those dreary, colorless years of the past found voice at her finger-tips.

The stately marches and the rollicking dances of the cloud music came easily at her beck and call—now grave, now gay; now slow and measured, now tripping in weird harmonies and gay melodies.

Hester's blood quickened and her cheeks grew pink. Her eyes lost their yearning look and her lips their wistful curves.

Every week she faithfully took her lesson of Penelope, and she practiced only that when the children were about. It was when they were at school and she was alone that the great joy of this new-found treasure of improvising came to her, and she could set free her heart and soul on the ivory keys.

She was playing thus one night—forgetting time, self, and that Penelope would soon be home from school—when the child entered the house and stopped, amazed, in the parlor doorway. As the last mellow note died into silence, Penelope dropped her books and burst into tears.

"Why, darling, what is it?" cried Hester. "What can be the matter?"

"I—I don't know," faltered Penelope, looking at her mother with startled eyes. "Why—why did n't you tell me?"

"Tell you?"

"That—that you could—p-play that way! I—I did n't know," she wailed with another storm of sobs, rushing into her mother's arms.

Hester's clasp tightened about the quivering little form and her eyes grew luminous.

"Dearie," she began very softly, "there was once a little girl—a little girl like you. She was very, very poor, and all her days were full of work. She had no piano, no music lessons—but, oh, how she longed for them! The trees and the grass and the winds and the flowers sang all day in her ears, but she could n't tell what they said. By and by, after

many, many years, this little girl grew up and a dear little baby daughter came to her. She was still very, very poor, but she saved and scrimped, and scrimped and saved, for she meant that this baby girl should not long and long for the music that never came. *She* should have music lessons."

"Was it—me?" whispered Penelope, with tremulous lips.

Hester drew a long breath.

"Yes, dear. I was the little girl long ago, and you are the little girl of to-day. And when the piano came, Penelope, I found in it all those songs that the winds and the trees used to sing to me. Now the sun shines brighter and the birds sing sweeter—and all this beautiful world is yours—all yours. Oh, Penelope, are n't you glad?"

Penelope raised a tear-wet face and looked into her mother's shining eyes.

"Glad?—oh, mother!" she cried fervently. Then very softly, "Mother—do you think—could you teach *me*?— Oh, I want to play just like that—just like that!"

The Folly of Wisdom

Until his fiftieth year Jason Hartsorn knew nothing whatever about the position of his liver, kidneys, lungs, heart, spleen, and stomach except that they must be somewhere inside of him; then he attended the auction of old Doctor Hemenway's household effects and bid off for twenty-five cents a dilapidated clothes basket, filled with books and pamphlets. Jason's education as to his anatomy began almost at once then, for on the way home he fished out a coverless volume from the basket and became lost in

awed wonder over a pictured human form covered from scalp to the toes with scarlet, vine-like tracings.

"For the land's sake, Jason!" ejaculated Mrs. Hartsorn, as her husband came puffing into the kitchen with his burden an hour later. "Now, what trash have you been buyin'?"

"'Trash'!" panted Jason, carefully setting the basket down. "I guess you won't call it no 'trash' when you see what 't is! It's books—learnin', Hitty. I been readin' one of 'em, too. Look a-here," and he pulled up his shirt sleeve and bared a brawny arm; "that's all full of teeny little pipes an' cords. Why, if I could only skin it—"

"Jason!" screamed his wife, backing away.

"Pooh! 'T ain't nothin' to fret over," retorted Jason airily. "Besides, you've got 'em too—ev'ry one has; see!" He finished by snatching up the book and spreading before her horrified eyes the pictured figure with its scarlet, vine-like tracings.

"Oh-h!" shivered the woman, and fled from the room.

Shivers and shudders became almost second nature to Mehitable Hartsorn during the days that followed. The highly colored, carefully explained illustrations of the kidneys, liver, heart, and lungs which the books displayed were to her only a little less terrifying than the thought that her own body contained the fearsome things in reality; while to her husband these same illustrations were but the delightful means to a still more delightful end—finding in his own sturdy frame the position of every organ shown.

For a month Jason was happy. Then it was suddenly borne in upon him that not always were these fascinating new acquaintances of his in a healthy condition. At once he

began to pinch and pummel himself, and to watch for pains, being careful, meanwhile, to study the books unceasingly, so that he might know just where to look for the pains when they should come. He counted his pulse daily—hourly, if he apprehended trouble; and his tongue he examined critically every morning, being particular to notice whether or not it were pale, moist, coated, red, raw, cracked, or tremulous.

Jason was not at all well that spring. He was threatened successively with typhoid fever, appendicitis, consumption, and cholera, and only escaped a serious illness in each case by the prompt application of remedies prescribed in his books. His wife ran the whole gamut of emotions from terror, worry, and sympathy down to indifference and good-natured tolerance, reaching the last only after the repeated failure of Jason's diseases to materialize.

It was about a week after Jason had mercifully escaped an attack of the cholera that he came into the kitchen one morning and dropped heavily into the nearest chair.

"I tell ye, my heart ain't right," he announced to his wife. "It's goin' jest like Jehu—'palpitation,' they call it; an' I've got 'shortness of breath,' too," he finished triumphantly.

"Hm-m; did ye catch her at last?" asked Mehitable with mild interest.

Jason looked up sharply.

"'Catch her'! Catch who?" he demanded.

"Why, the colt, of course! How long did ye have ter chase her?" Mrs. Hartsorn's carefully modulated voice expressed curiosity, and that was all.

Jason flushed angrily.

"Oh, I know what ye mean," he snapped. "Ye think thar don't nothin' ail me, an' that jest fetchin' Dolly from the pasture did it all. But I know what them symptoms means; they mean heart disease, woman,—'cardiac failure,'—that's what 't is." Jason leaned back in his chair and drew a long breath. When he could remember his "book-learnin'" and give a high-sounding name to his complaint, his gratification was enhanced.

"Hm-m; mebbe 't is, Jason," retorted his wife; "but I'm a-thinkin' that when a man of your heft and years goes kitin' 'round a ten-acre lot at the tail of a fly-away colt, he'll have all that kind of heart disease he wants, an' still live ter die of somethin' else!" And Mehitable cheerfully banged the oven door after making sure that her biscuits were not getting too brown.

As it happened, however, there was really no chance for Jason's heart disease to develop, for that night he scratched his finger, which brought about the much more imminent danger of blood-poisoning—"toxemia," Jason said it was. For a time the whole household was upset, and Mehitable was kept trotting from morning till night with sponges, cloths, cotton, and bowls of curious-smelling liquids, while Jason discoursed on antiseptics, germs, bacteria, microbes, and bacilli.

The finger was nearly well when he suddenly discovered that, after all, the trouble might have been lock-jaw instead of blood-poisoning. He at once began studying the subject so that he might be prepared should the thing occur again. He was glad, later, that he had done so, for the Fourth of

July and a toy pistol brought all his recently acquired knowledge into instant requisition.

"If it does come, it's 'most likely ter be fatal," he said excitedly to his wife, who was calmly bathing a slight graze on his hand. "An' ye want ter watch me," he added, catching up a book with his uninjured hand and turning to a much-thumbed page for reference. "Now, listen. Thar's diff'rent kinds of it. They're all 'te-ta-nus,' but ye got to watch out ter find out which kind 't is. If I shut my jaws up tight, it's 'lock-jaw.' If I bend backwards, it's 'o-pis-tho-to-nos.' If I bend forwards, it's 'em-pros-tho-to-nos'; an' if I bend ter one side, it's 'pleu-ro-tho-to-nos,'" he explained, pronouncing the long words after a fashion of his own. "Now, remember," he finished. "Like enough I shan't know enough ter tell which kind 't is myself, nor which way I am a-leanin'."

"No, of course not, dear," agreed Mehitable cheerfully; "an' I'll remember," she promised, as she trotted away with her salves and bowls and bandages.

For some days Jason "tried" his jaw at regular intervals, coming to the conclusion at last that fate once more was kind, and that "te-ta-nus" was to pass him by.

The summer ended and autumn came. Jason was glad that the cold weather was approaching. The heat had been trying. He had almost suffered a sunstroke, and twice a mosquito bite had given him much trouble—he had feared that he would die of malignant pustule. His relief at the coming of cool weather was short-lived, however, for one of the neighboring towns developed a smallpox scare, and as he discovered a slight rash soon after passing through the place, he thought best to submit to vaccination. He caught a

bad cold, too, and was sure pneumonia was setting in—that is, he would have been sure, only his throat was so sore that he could not help thinking it might be diphtheria.

Realizing the seriousness of the situation, and determining to settle once for all the vexed question, he pored over his books in an exhaustive search for symptoms. It was then that he rushed into the presence of his wife one morning, his face drawn, his eyes wildly staring, and an open book in his shaking hand.

"Hitty, Hitty," he cried; "jest listen ter this! How 'm I goin' ter tell what ails me, I should like ter know, if I don't ache where I'm sick? Why, Hitty, I can't never tell! Jest listen:

> The location of pain is not always at the seat of disease. In hip disease the pain is not first felt in the hip, but in the knee-joint. In chronic inflammation of the liver the pain is generally most severe in the right shoulder and arm.

"Only think, Hitty, 'In the right shoulder and arm'! Why, I had a pain right in that spot only yesterday. So that's what I've got—'hip-disease'! an'—oh, no," he broke off suddenly, consulting his book, "'t ain't hip-disease when the shoulder aches—it's the liver, then."

"Well, well, Jason, I don't think I should fret," soothed Mehitable. "If ye don't know, where's the diff'rence? Now I've got a pain right now in my little toe. Like enough that means I 'm comin' down with the mumps; eh?"

"Hitty!" Jason's voice was agonized. He had been paying no attention to his wife's words, but had been reading on down the page. "Hitty, listen! It says—'Absence of pain in any disease where ordinarily it should be present is an

unfavorable sign.' An', Hitty, I hain't got an ache—not a single ache, this minute!"

There was no possibility of quieting Jason after that, and the days that followed were hard for all concerned. If he had an ache he was terrified; if he did not have one, he was more so. He began, also, to distrust his own powers of diagnosis, and to study all the patent medicine advertisements he could lay his hands on. He was half comforted, half appalled, to read them. Far from being able to pick out his own particular malady from among the lot, he was forced to admit that as near as he could make out he had one or more symptoms of each and every disease that was mentioned.

"Now, Hitty, I'll leave it to you," he submitted plaintively. "Here's 'Dread of impending evil.' Now I've got that, sure; ye know I'm always thinkin' somethin' dreadful's goin' ter happen. 'Sparks before the eyes.' There! I had them only jest ter-day. I was sweepin' out the barn, an' I see 'em hoppin' up an' down in a streak of sunshine that come through a crack. 'Variable appetite.' Now, Hitty, don't ye remember? Yesterday I wanted pie awful, an' I ate a whole one; well, this mornin' seems as if I never wanted ter see an apple pie again. Now, if that ain't 'variable,' I don't know what is. 'Inquietude.'"

"Humph! You've got that all right," cut in Mehitable.

"'Weakness.' I hain't got a mite o' strength, Hitty," he complained. "An' thar 's dizziness, too,—I can't chase the calf three times round the barnyard but what my head is jest swimmin'! An' Hitty,"—his voice grew impressive, —"Hitty, I've got ev'ry one of them six symptoms, ev'ry

blamed one of 'em, an' I picked 'em out of six diff'rent advertisements—six! Now, Hitty, which disease is it I've got? That's what I want ter know—which?"

His wife could not tell him; in fact, no one could tell him, and in sheer desperation Jason answered all six of the advertisements, determined to find out for a certainty what ailed him.

In due course the answers came. Jason read one, then another, then another, until the contents of the entire six had been mastered. Then he raised his head and gazed straight into his wife's eyes.

"Hitty," he gasped. "I've got 'em all! An' I've got ter take the whole six medicines ter cure me!"

Even Mehitable was stirred then. For one long minute she was silent, then she squared her shoulders, and placed her hands on her hips.

"Jason Hartsorn," she began determinedly, "this thing has gone jest as fur as I'm goin' to stand it. Do you bundle yourself off ter Boston an' hunt up the biggest doctor you can find. If he says somethin' ails ye, I 'll believe him, an' nuss ye ter the best of my ability; but as fur nussin' ye through six things—an' them all ter once—I won't! So there."

Twenty-four hours later Jason faced a square-jawed, smooth-shaven man who looked sharply into his eyes with a curt, "Well, sir?"

Jason cleared his throat.

"Well, ye see, doctor," he began, "somethin' ails me, an' I ain't quite sure what 't is. I 've been poorly since last spring, but it's been kind of puzzlin'. Now, fur instance: I had a pain