

CHAPTER IV - WAITING FOR THE DOCTOR

Jess had gone early to rest, and the door of her bed in the kitchen was pulled to. From her window I saw Hendry buying dulse.

Now and again the dulseman wheeled his slimy boxes to the top of the brae, and sat there stolidly on the shafts of his barrow. Many passed him by, but occasionally some one came to rest by his side. Unless the customer was loquacious, there was no bandying of words, and Hendry merely unbuttoned his east-trouser pocket, giving his body the angle at which the pocket could be most easily filled by the dulseman. He then deposited his half-penny, and moved on. Neither had spoken; yet in the country they would have roared their predictions about to-morrow to a ploughman half a field away.

Dulse is roasted by twisting it round the tongs fired to a red-heat, and the house was soon heavy with the smell of burning sea-weed. Leeby was at the dresser munching it from a broth-plate, while Hendry, on his knees at the fireplace, gingerly tore off the blades of dulse that were sticking to the tongs, and licked his singed fingers.

"Whaur's yer mother?" he asked Leeby.

"Ou," said Leeby, "whaur would she be but in her bed?"

Hendry took the tongs to the door, and would have cleaned them himself, had not Leeby (who often talked his interfering ways over with her mother) torn them from his hands.

"Leeby!" cried Jess at that moment.

"Ay," answered Leeby, leisurely, not noticing, as I happened to do, that Jess spoke in an agitated voice.

"What is't?" asked Hendry, who liked to be told things.

He opened the door of the bed.

"Yer mother's no weel," he said to Leeby.

Leeby ran to the bed, and I went ben the house. In another two minutes we were a group of four in the kitchen, staring vacantly. Death could not

have startled us more, tapping thrice that quiet night on the window-pane.

"It's diphtheria!" said Jess, her hands trembling as she buttoned her wrapper.

She looked at me, and Leeby looked at me.

"It's no, it's no," cried Leeby, and her voice was as a fist shaken at my face. She blamed me for hesitating in my reply. But ever since this malady left me a lonely dominie for life, diphtheria has been a knockdown word for me. Jess had discovered a great white spot on her throat. I knew the symptoms.

"Is't dangerous?" asked Hendry, who once had a headache years before, and could still refer to it as a reminiscence.

"Them 'at has 't never recovers," said Jess, sitting down very quietly. A stick fell from the fire, and she bent forward to replace it.

"They do recover," cried Leeby, again turning angry eyes on me.

I could not face her; I had known so many who did not recover. She put her hand on her mother's shoulder.

"Mebbe ye would be better in yer bed," suggested Hendry.

No one spoke.

"When I had the headache," said Hendry, "I was better in my bed."

Leeby had taken Jess's hand--a worn old hand that had many a time gone out in love and kindness when younger hands were cold. Poets have sung and fighting men have done great deeds for hands that never had such a record.

"If ye could eat something," said Hendry, "I would gae to the flesher's for 't. I mind when I had the headache, hoo a small steak--"

"Gae awa for the doctor, rayther," broke in Leeby.

Jess started, for sufferers think there is less hope for them after the doctor has been called in to pronounce sentence.

"I winna hae the doctor," she said, anxiously.

In answer to Leeby's nods, Hendry slowly pulled out his boots from beneath the table, and sat looking at them, preparatory to putting them on. He was beginning at last to be a little scared, though his face did not show it.

"I winna hae ye," cried Jess, getting to her feet, "ga'en to the doctor's sic a sicht. Yer coat's a' yarn."

"Havers," said Hendry, but Jess became frantic.

I offered to go for the doctor, but while I was up-stairs looking for my bonnet I heard the door slam. Leeby had become impatient, and darted off herself, buttoning her jacket probably as she ran. When I returned to the kitchen, Jess and Hendry were still by the fire. Hendry was beating a charred stick into sparks, and his wife sat with her hands in her lap. I saw Hendry look at her once or twice, but he could think of nothing to say. His terms of endearment had died out thirty-nine years before with his courtship. He had forgotten the words. For his life he could not have crossed over to Jess and put his arm round her. Yet he was uneasy. His eyes wandered round the poorly lit room.

"Will ye hae a drink o' watter?" he asked.

There was a sound of footsteps outside.

"That'll be him," said Hendry in a whisper.

Jess started to her feet, and told Hendry to help her ben the house.

The steps died away, but I fancied that Jess, now highly strung, had gone into hiding, and I went after her. I was mistaken. She had lit the room lamp, turning the crack in the globe to the wall. The sheepskin hearthrug, which was generally carefully packed away beneath the bed, had been spread out before the empty fireplace, and Jess was on the arm-chair hurriedly putting on her grand black mutch with the pink flowers.

"I was juist makkin' mysel respectable," she said, but without life in her voice.

This was the only time I ever saw her in the room.

Leeby returned panting to say that the doctor might be expected in an hour. He was away among the hills.

The hour passed reluctantly. Leebby lit a fire ben the house, and then put on her Sabbath dress. She sat with her mother in the room. Never before had I seen Jess sit so quietly, for her way was to work until, as she said herself, she was ready "to fall into her bed."

Hendry wandered between the two rooms, always in the way when Leebby ran to the window to see if that was the doctor at last. He would stand gaping in the middle of the room for five minutes, then slowly withdraw to stand as drearily but the house. His face lengthened. At last he sat down by the kitchen fire, a Bible in his hand. It lay open on his knee, but he did not read much. He sat there with his legs outstretched, looking straight before him. I believe he saw Jess young again. His face was very solemn, and his mouth twitched. The fire sank into ashes unheeded.

I sat alone at my attic window for hours, waiting for the doctor. From the attic I could see nearly all Thrums, but, until very late, the night was dark, and the brae, except immediately before the door, was blurred and dim. A sheet of light canopied the square as long as a cheap Jack paraded his goods there. It was gone before the moon came out. Figures tramped, tramped up the brae, passed the house in shadow and stole silently on. A man or boy whistling seemed to fill the valley. The moon arrived too late to be of service to any wayfarer. Everybody in Thrums was asleep but ourselves, and the doctor who never came.

About midnight Hendry climbed the attic stair and joined me at the window. His hand was shaking as he pulled back the blind. I began to realize that his heart could still overflow.

"She's waur," he whispered, like one who had lost his voice.

For a long time he sat silently, his hand on the blind. He was so different from the Hendry I had known, that I felt myself in the presence of a strange man. His eyes were glazed with staring at the turn of the brae where the doctor must first come into sight. His breathing became heavier, till it was a gasp. Then I put my hand on his shoulder, and he stared at me.

"Nine-and-thirty years come June," he said, speaking to himself.

For this length of time, I knew, he and Jess had been married. He repeated the words at intervals.

"I mind--" he began, and stopped. He was thinking of the spring-time of Jess's life.

The night ended as we watched; then came the terrible moment that precedes the day--the moment known to shuddering watchers by sick-beds, when a chill wind cuts through the house, and the world without seems cold in death. It is as if the heart of the earth did not mean to continue beating.

"This is a fearsome nicht," Hendry said, hoarsely.

He turned to grope his way to the stairs, but suddenly went down on his knees to pray. . . .

There was a quick step outside. I arose in time to see the doctor on the brae. He tried the latch, but Leeby was there to show him in. The door of the room closed on him.

From the top of the stair I could see into the dark passage, and make out Hendry shaking at the door. I could hear the doctor's voice, but not the words he said. There was a painful silence, and then Leeby laughed joyously.

"It's gone," cried Jess; "the white spot's gone! Ye juist touched it, an' it's gone! Tell Hendry."

But Hendry did not need to be told. As Jess spoke I heard him say, huskily: "Thank God!" and then he tottered back to the kitchen. When the doctor left, Hendry was still on Jess's armchair, trembling like a man with the palsy. Ten minutes afterwards I was preparing for bed, when he cried up the stair--

"Come awa' doon."

I joined the family party in the room: Hendry was sitting close to Jess.

"Let us read," he said, firmly, "in the fourteenth of John."