DOCTOR THERNE

CHAPTER I

THE DILIGENCE

James Therne is not my real name, for why should I publish it to the world? A year or two ago it was famous--or infamous--enough, but in that time many things have happened. There has been a war, a continental revolution, two scandals of world-wide celebrity, one moral and the other financial, and, to come to events that interest me particularly as a doctor, an epidemic of Asiatic plague in Italy and France, and, stranger still, an outbreak of the mediaeval grain sickness, which is believed to have carried off 20,000 people in Russia and German Poland, consequent, I have no doubt, upon the wet season and poor rye harvest in those countries.

These occurrences and others are more than enough to turn the public mind from the recollection of the appalling smallpox epidemic that passed over England last autumn two years, of which the first fury broke upon the city of Dunchester, my native place, that for many years I had the honour to represent in Parliament. The population of Dunchester, it is true, is smaller by over five thousand souls, and many of those who survive are not so good-looking as they were, but the gap is easily

filled and pock-marks are not hereditary. Also, such a horror will never happen again, for now the law of compulsory vaccination is strong enough! Only the dead have cause of complaint, those who were cut off from the world and despatched hot-foot whither we see not. Myself I am certain of nothing; I know too much about the brain and body to have much faith in the soul, and I pray to God that I may be right. Ah! there it comes in. If a God, why not the rest, and who shall say there is no God? Somehow it seems to me that more than once in my life I have seen His Finger.

Yet I pray that I am right, for if I am wrong what a welcome awaits me yonder when grief and chloral and that "slight weakness of the heart" have done their work.

Yes--five thousand of them or more in Dunchester alone, and, making every allowance, I suppose that in this one city there were very many of these--young people mostly--who owed their deaths to me, since it was my persuasion, my eloquent arguments, working upon the minds of their prejudiced and credulous elders, that surely, if indirectly, brought their doom upon them. "A doctor is not infallible, he may make mistakes." Quite so, and if a mistake of his should kill a few thousands, why, that is the act of God (or of Fate) working through his blindness. But if it does not happen to have been a mistake, if, for instance, all those dead, should they still live in any place or shape, could say to me, "James Therne, you are the murderer of our bodies, since, for your own ends, you taught us that which you knew not to be

the truth."

How then? I ask. So--let them say it if they will. Let all that great cloud of witnesses compass me about, lads and maidens, children and infants, whose bones cumber the churchyards yonder in Dunchester. I defy them, for it is done and cannot be undone. Yet, in their company are two whose eyes I dread to meet: Jane, my daughter, whose life was sacrificed through me, and Ernest Merchison, her lover, who went to seek her in the tomb.

They would not reproach me now, I know, for she was too sweet and loved me too well with all my faults, and, if he proved pitiless in the first torment of his loss, Merchison was a good and honest man, who, understanding my remorse and misery, forgave me before he died. Still, I dread to meet them, who, if that old fable be true and they live, read me for what I am. Yet why should I fear, for all this they knew before they died, and, knowing, could forgive? Surely it is with another vengeance that I must reckon.

Well, after her mother's death my daughter was the only being whom I ever truly loved, and no future mental hell that the imagination can invent would have power to make me suffer more because of her than I have always suffered since the grave closed over her--the virgin martyr sacrificed on the altar of a false prophet and a coward.

I come of a family of doctors. My grandfather, Thomas Therne, whose name still lives in medicine, was a doctor in the neighbourhood of Dunchester, and my father succeeded to his practice and nothing else, for the old gentleman had lived beyond his means. Shortly after my father's marriage he sold this practice and removed into Dunchester, where he soon acquired a considerable reputation as a surgeon, and prospered, until not long after my birth, just as a brilliant career seemed to be opening itself to him, death closed his book for ever. In attending a case of smallpox, about four months before I was born, he contracted the disease, but the attack was not considered serious and he recovered from it quickly. It would seem, however, that it left some constitutional weakness, for a year later he was found to be suffering from tuberculosis of the lungs, and was ordered to a warmer climate.

Selling his Dunchester practice for what it would fetch to his assistant, Dr. Bell, my father came to Madeira--whither, I scarcely know why, I have also drifted now that all is over for me--for here he hoped to be able to earn a living by doctoring the English visitors. This, however, he could not do, since the climate proved no match for his disease, though he lingered for nearly two years, during which time he spent all the money that he had. When he died there was scarcely enough left to pay for his funeral in the little churchyard yonder that I can see from the windows of this quinta. Where he lies exactly I do not know as no record was kept, and the wooden cross, the only monument that my mother could afford to set over him, has long ago rotted away.

Some charitable English people helped my mother to return to England, where we went to live with her mother, who existed on a pension of about 120 pounds a year, in a fishing-village near Brighton. Here I grew up, getting my education--a very good one by the way--at a cheap day school. My mother's wish was that I should become a sailor like her own father, who had been a captain in the Navy, but the necessary money was not forthcoming to put me into the Royal Navy, and my liking for the sea was not strong enough to take me into the merchant service.

From the beginning I wished to be a doctor like my father and grandfather before me, for I knew that I was clever, and I knew also that successful doctors make a great deal of money. Ground down as I had been by poverty from babyhood, already at nineteen years of age I desired money above everything on earth. I saw then, and subsequent experience has only confirmed my views, that the world as it has become under the pressure of high civilisation is a world for the rich. Leaving material comforts and advantages out of the question, what ambition can a man satisfy without money? Take the successful politicians for instance, and it will be found that almost every one of them is rich. This country is too full; there is scant room for the individual. Only intellectual Titans can force their heads above the crowd, and, as a rule, they have not even then the money to take them higher. If I had my life over again--and it is my advice to all young men of ability and ambition--I would leave the old country and settle in America or in one of the great colonies. There, where the conditions are more elastic and

the competition is not so cruel, a hard-working man of talent does not need to be endowed with fortune to enable him to rise to the top of the tree.

Well, my desire was to be accomplished, for as it chanced a younger brother of my father, who during his lifetime had never taken any notice of me, died and left me 750 pounds. Seven hundred and fifty pounds! To me at that time it was colossal wealth, for it enabled us to rent some rooms in London, where I entered myself as a medical student at University College.

There is no need for me to dwell upon my college career, but if any one were to take the trouble to consult the old records he would find that it was sufficiently brilliant. I worked hard, and I had a natural, perhaps an hereditary liking, for the work. Medicine always fascinated me. I think it the greatest of the sciences, and from the beginning I was determined that I would be among the greatest of its masters.

At four and twenty, having finished my curriculum with high honours--I was gold medallist of my year in both medicine and surgery--I became house-surgeon to one of the London hospitals. After my term of office was over I remained at the hospital for another year, for I wished to make a practical study of my profession in all its branches before starting a private practice. At the end of this time my mother died while still comparatively young. She had never really recovered from the loss of my father, and, though it was long about it, sorrow sapped her

strength at last. Her loss was a shock to me, although in fact we had few tastes in common. To divert my mind, and also because I was somewhat run down and really needed a change, I asked a friend of mine who was a director of a great steamship line running to the West Indies and Mexico to give me a trip out, offering my medicine services in return for the passage. This he agreed to do with pleasure; moreover, matters were so arranged that I could stop in Mexico for three months and rejoin the vessel on her next homeward trip.

After a very pleasant voyage I reached Vera Cruz. It is a quaint and in some ways a pretty place, with its tall cool-looking houses and narrow streets, not unlike Funchal, only more tropical. Whenever I think of it, however, the first memories that leap to my mind are those of the stench of the open drains and of the scavenger carts going their rounds with the zaphilotes or vultures actually sitting upon them. As it happened, those carts were very necessary then, for a yellow fever epidemic was raging in the place. Having nothing particular to do I stopped there for three weeks to study it, working in the hospitals with the local doctors, for I felt no fear of yellow fever--only one contagious disease terrifies me, and with that I was soon destined to make acquaintance.

At length I arranged to start for the City of Mexico, to which in those days the journey from Vera Cruz was performed by diligence as the railway as not yet finished. At that time Mexico was a wild country. Wars and revolutions innumerable, together with a certain natural leaning that way, had reduced a considerable proportion of its

inhabitants to the road, where they earned a precarious living--not by mending it, but by robbing and occasionally cutting the throats of any travellers whom they could catch.

The track from Vera Cruz to Mexico City runs persistently uphill; indeed, I think the one place is 7000 feet above the level of the other. First, there is the hot zone, where the women by the wayside sell you pineapples and cocoanuts; then the temperate zone, where they offer you oranges and bananas; then the cold country, in which you are expected to drink a filthy liquid extracted from aloes called pulque, that in taste and appearance resembles soapy water.

It was somewhere in the temperate zone that we passed a town consisting of fifteen adobe or mud houses and seventeen churches. The excessive religious equipment of this city is accounted for by an almost inaccessible mountain stronghold in the neighbourhood. This stronghold for generations had been occupied by brigands, and it was the time-honoured custom of each chieftain of the band, when he retired on a hard-earned competence, to expiate any regrettable incidents in his career by building a church in the town dedicated to his patron saint and to the memory of those whose souls he had helped to Paradise. This pious and picturesque, if somewhat mediaeval, custom has now come to an end, as I understand that the Mexican Government caused the stronghold to be stormed a good many years ago, and put its occupants, to the number of several hundreds, to the sword.

We were eight in the coach, which was drawn by as many mules--four merchants, two priests, myself and the lady who afterwards became my wife. She was a blue-eyed and fair-haired American from New York. Her name, I soon discovered, was Emma Becker, and her father, who was dead, had been a lawyer. We made friends at once, and before we had jolted ten miles on our journey I learned her story. It seemed that she was an orphan with a very small fortune, and only one near relative, an aunt who had married a Mexican named Gomez, the owner of a fine range or hacienda situated on the border of the highlands, about eighty miles from the City of Mexico. On the death of her father, being like most American girls adventurous and independent, Miss Becker had accepted an invitation from her aunt Gomez and her husband to come and live with them a while. Now, quite alone and unescorted, she was on her way to Mexico City, where she expected to be met by some friends of her uncle.

We started from Vera Cruz about mid-day and slept, or rather passed the night, at a filthy inn alive with every sort of insect pest. Two hours before dawn we were bundled into the diligencia and slowly dragged up a mountain road so steep that, notwithstanding the blows and oaths of the drivers, the mules had to stop every few hundred yards to rest. I remember that at last I fell asleep, my head reposing on the shoulder of a very fat priest, who snored tempestuously, then awoke to pray, then snored again. It was the voice of Miss Becker, who sat opposite to me, that wakened me.

"Forgive me for disturbing you, Dr. Therne," she said, "but you really

must look," and she pointed through the window of the coach.

Following her hand I saw a sight which no one who has witnessed it can ever forget: the sun rising on the mighty peak of Orizaba, the Star Mountain, as the old Aztecs named it. Eighteen thousand feet above our heads towered the great volcano, its foot clothed with forests, its cone dusted with snow. The green flanks of the peak and the country beneath them were still wrapped in shadow, but on its white and lofty crest already the lights of dawn were burning. Never have I seen anything more beautiful than this soaring mountain top flaming like some giant torch over a world of darkness; indeed, the unearthly grandeur of the sight amazed and half paralysed my mind.

A lantern swung from the roof of the coach, and, turning my eyes from the mountain, in its light I saw the face of my travelling companion and--fell in love with it. I had seen it before without any such idea entering my mind; then it had been to me only the face of a rather piquante and pretty girl, but with this strange and inconvenient result, the sight of the dawn breaking upon Orizaba seemed to have worked some change in me. At least, if only for an instant, it had pierced the barrier that day by day we build within us to protect ourselves from the attack of the impulses of nature.

In that moment at any rate there was a look upon this girl's countenance and a light shining in her eyes which overcame my caution and swept me out of myself, for I think that she too was under the shadow of the

glory which broke upon the crest of Orizaba. In vain did I try to save myself and to struggle back to common-sense, since hitherto the prospect of domestic love had played no part in my scheme of life. It was useless, so I gave it up, and our eyes met.

Neither of us said anything, but from that time forward we knew that we did not wish to be parted any more.

After a while, to relieve a tension of mind which neither of us cared to reveal, we drifted into desultory and indifferent conversation. In the course of our talk Emma told me that her aunt had written to her that if she could leave the coach at Orizaba she would be within fifty miles of the hacienda of La Concepcion, whereas when she reached Mexico City she would still be eighty miles from it. Her aunt had added, however, that this was not practicable at present, why she did not say, and that she must go on to Mexico where some friends would take charge of her until her uncle was able to fetch her.

Presently Emma seemed to fall asleep, at least she shut her eyes. But I could not sleep, and sat there listening to the snores of the fat priest and the strange interminable oaths of the drivers as they thrashed the mules. Opposite to me, tied to the roof of the coach immediately above Emma's head, was a cheap looking-glass, provided, I suppose, for the convenience of passengers when making the toilette of travel. In it I could see myself reflected, so, having nothing better to do, in view of contingencies which of a sudden had become possible, I amused myself by

taking count of my personal appearance. On the whole in those days it was not unsatisfactory. In build, I was tall and slight, with thin, nervous hands. My colouring and hair were dark, and I had soft and rather large brown eyes. The best part of my face was my forehead, which was ample, and the worst my mouth, which was somewhat weak. I do not think, however, that any one would have guessed by looking at me as I then appeared at the age of seven and twenty, that I was an exceedingly hard-working man with extraordinary powers of observation and a really retentive memory.

At any rate, I am sure that it was not these qualities which recommended me to Emma Becker, nor, whatever we may have felt under the influences of Orizaba, was it any spiritual affinity. Doctors, I fear, are not great believers in spiritual affinities; they know that such emotions can be accounted for in other ways. Probably Emma was attracted to me because I was dark, and I to her because she was fair. Orizaba and opportunity merely brought out and accentuated these quite natural preferences.

By now the day had broken, and, looking out of the window, I could see that we were travelling along the side of a mountain. Above us the slope was gentle and clothed with sub-tropical trees, while below it became a veritable precipice, in some places absolutely sheer, for the road was cut upon a sort of rocky ledge, although, owing to the vast billows of mist that filled it, nothing could be seen of the gulf beneath.

I was reflecting, I remember, that this would be an ill path to drive with a drunken coachman, when suddenly I saw the off-front mule stumble unaccountably, and, as it fell, heard a shot fired close at hand. Next instant also I saw the driver and his companion spring from the box, and, with a yell of terror, plunge over the edge of the cliff, apparently into the depths below. Then from the narrow compass of that coach arose a perfect pandemonium of sounds, with an under cry of a single word, "Brigands! Brigands!"

The merchants shouted, supplicated their saints, and swore as with trembling hands they tried to conceal loose valuables in their boots and hats; one of the priests too literally howled in his terror, but the other, a man of more dignity, only bowed his head and murmured a prayer. By this time also the mules had tied themselves into a knot and were threatening to overturn the coach, to prevent which our captors, before meddling with us, cut the animals loose with their machetes or swords, and drove them over the brink of the abyss, where, like the drivers, they vanished. Then a dusky-faced ruffian, with a scar on his cheek, came to the door of the diligence and bowing politely beckoned to us to come out. As there were at least a dozen of them and resistance was useless, even if our companions could have found the courage to fight, we obeyed, and were placed before the brigands in a line, our backs being set to the edge of the gulf. I was last but one in the line, and beyond me stood Emma Becker, whose hand I held.

Then the tragedy began. Several of the villains seized the first

merchant, and, stopping his cries and protestations with a blow in the mouth, stripped him to the shirt, abstracting notes and gold and everything else of value that they could find in various portions of his attire where he had hidden them, and principally, I remember, from the lining of his vest. When they had done with him, they dragged him away and bundled him roughly into the diligence.

Next to this merchant stood the two priests. Of the first of these the brigands asked a question, to which, with some hesitation, the priest--that man who had shown so much terror--replied in the affirmative, whereon his companion looked at him contemptuously and muttered a Spanish phrase which means "Man without shame." Of him also the same question was asked, in answer to which he shook his head, whereon he was conducted, though without violence or being searched, to the coach, and shut into it with the plundered merchant. Then the thieves went to work with the next victim.

"Dr. Therne," whispered Emma Becker, "you have a pistol, do you not?"

I nodded my head.

"Will you lend it me? You understand?"

"Yes," I answered, "I understand, but I hope that things are not so bad as that."

"They are," she answered with a quiver in her voice. "I have heard about these Mexican brigands. With the exception of that priest and myself they will put all of you into the coach and push it over the precipice."

At her words my heart stood still and a palpable mist gathered before my eyes. When it cleared away my brain seemed to awake to an abnormal activity, as though the knowledge that unless it was used to good effect now it would never be used again were spurring it to action. Rapidly I reviewed the situation and considered every possible method of escape. At first I could think of none; then suddenly I remembered that the driver and his companion, who no doubt knew every inch of the road, had leaped from the coach, apparently over the edge of the precipice. This I felt sure they would not have done had they been going to certain death, since they would have preferred to take their chance of mercy at the hands of the brigands. Moreover, these gentry themselves had driven the mules into the abyss whither those wise animals would never have gone unless there was some foothold for them.

I looked behind me but could discover nothing, for, as is common in Mexico at the hour of dawn, the gulf was absolutely filled with dense vapours. Then I made up my mind that I would risk it and began to shuffle slowly backwards. Already I was near the edge when I remembered Emma Becker and paused to reflect. If I took her with me it would considerably lessen my chances of escape, and at any rate her life was not threatened. But I had not given her the pistol, and at that moment even in my panic there rose before me a vision of her face as I had seen

it in the lamplight when she looked up at the glory shining on the crest of Orizaba.

Had it not been for this vision I think it possible that I might have left her. I wish to gloze over nothing; I did not make my own nature, and in these pages I describe it as it was and is without palliation or excuse. I know that this is not the fashion in autobiographies; no one has done it since the time of Pepys, who did not write for publication, and for that very reason my record has its value. I am physically and, perhaps morally also, timid--that is, although I have faced it boldly enough upon occasion, as the reader will learn in the course of my history, I fear the thought of death, and especially of cruel and violent death, such as was near to me at that moment. So much did I fear it then that the mere fact that an acquaintance was in danger and distress would scarcely have sufficed to cause me to sacrifice, or at least to greatly complicate, my own chances of escape in order to promote hers simply because that acquaintance was of the other sex. But Emma had touched a new chord in my nature, and I felt, whether I liked it or not, that whatever I could do for myself I must do for her also. So I shuffled forward again.

"Listen," I whispered, "I have been to look and I do not believe that the cliff is very steep just here. Will you try it with me?"

"Of course," she answered; "I had as soon die of a broken neck as in any other way."

"We must watch our chance then, or they will see us run and shoot. Wait till I give you the signal."

She nodded her head and we waited.

At length, while the fourth and last merchant, who stood next to me, was being dealt with, just as in our despair we were about to throw ourselves into the gulf before them all, fortune gave us our opportunity. This unhappy man, having probably some inkling of the doom which awaited him, broke suddenly from the hands of his captors, and ran at full speed down the road. After him they went pell-mell, every thief of them except one who remained--fortunately for us upon its farther side--on guard by the door of the diligence in which four people, three merchants and a priest, were now imprisoned. With laughs and shouts they hunted their wretched quarry, firing shots as they ran, till at length one of them overtook the man and cut him down with his machete.

"Don't look, but come," I whispered to my companion.

In another instant we were at the edge of the cliff, and a foot or so below us was spread the dense, impenetrable blanket of mist. I stopped and hesitated, for the next step might be my last.

"We can't be worse off, so God help us," said Emma, and without waiting for me to lead her she swung herself over the edge.

To my intense relief I heard her alight within a few feet, and followed immediately. Now I was at her side, and now we were scrambling and slipping down the precipitous and rocky slope as swiftly as the dense wet fog would let us. I believe that our escape was quite unnoticed. The guard was watching the murder of the merchant, or, if he saw us, he did not venture to leave the carriage door, and the priest who had accepted some offer which was made to him, probably that his life would be spared if he consented to give absolution to the murderers, was kneeling on the ground, his face hidden in his hands.

As we went the mist grew thinner, and we could see that we were travelling down a steep spur of the precipice, which to our left was quite sheer, and that at the foot of it was a wide plain thickly but not densely covered with trees. In ten minutes we were at the bottom, and as we could neither see nor hear any sign of pursuers we paused for an instant to rest.

Not five yards from us the cliff was broken away, and so straight that a cat could not have climbed it.

"We chose our place well," I said pointing upwards.

"No," Emma answered, "we did not choose; it was chosen for us."

As she spoke a muffled and terrifying sound of agony reached us from

above, and then, in the layers of vapour that still stretched between us and the sky, we perceived something huge rushing swiftly down. It appeared; it drew near; it struck, and fell to pieces like a shattered glass. We ran to look, and there before us were the fragments of the diligence, and among them the mangled corpses of five of our fellow-travellers.

This was the fate that we had escaped.

"Oh! for God's sake come away," moaned Emma, and sick with horror we turned and ran, or rather reeled, into the shelter of the trees upon the plain.