

## CHAPTER III

### SIR JOHN BELL

Now it is that I came to the great and terrible event of my life, which in its result turned me into a false witness and a fraud, and bound upon my spirit a weight of blood-guiltiness greater than a man is often called upon to bear. As I have not scrupled to show I have constitutional weaknesses--more, I am a sinner, I know it; I have sinned against the code of my profession, and have preached a doctrine I knew to be false, using all my skill and knowledge to confuse and pervert the minds of the ignorant. And yet I am not altogether responsible for these sins, which in truth in the first place were forced upon me by shame and want and afterwards by the necessities of my ambition. Indeed, in that dark and desperate road of deceit there is no room to turn; the step once taken can never be retraced.

But if I have sinned, how much greater is the crime of the man who swore away my honour and forced me through those gateways? Surely on his head and not on mine should rest the burden of my deeds; yet he prospered all his life, and I have been told that his death was happy and painless. This man's career furnishes one of the few arguments that to my sceptical mind suggest the existence of a place of future reward and punishment, for how is it possible that so great a villain should reap no fruit from his rich sowing of villainy? If it is possible, then verily this world is the real hell wherein the wicked are lords and the

good their helpless and hopeless slaves.

Emma Becker when she became my wife brought with her a small dowry of about five thousand dollars, or a thousand pounds, and this sum we both agreed would be best spent in starting me in professional life. It was scarcely sufficient to enable me to buy a practice of the class which I desired, so I determined that I would set to work to build one up, as with my ability and record I was certain that I could do. By preference, I should have wished to begin in London, but there the avenue to success is choked, and I had not the means to wait until by skill and hard work I could force my way along it.

London being out of the question, I made up my mind to try my fortune in the ancient city of Dunchester, where the name of Therne was still remembered, as my grandfather and father had practised there before me. I journeyed to the place and made inquiries, to find that, although there were plenty of medical men of a sort, there was only one whose competition I had cause to fear. Of the others, some had no presence, some no skill, and some no character; indeed, one of them was known to drink.

With Sir John Bell, whose good fortune it was to be knighted in recognition of his attendance upon a royal duchess who chanced to contract the measles while staying in the town, the case was different.

He began life as assistant to my father, and when his health failed purchased the practice from him for a miserable sum, which, as he was practically in possession, my father was obliged to accept. From that time forward his success met with no check. By no means a master of his art, Sir John supplied with assurance what he lacked in knowledge, and atoned for his mistakes by the readiness of a bluff and old-fashioned sympathy that was transparent to few.

In short, if ever a faux bonhomme existed, Sir John Bell was the man. Needless to say he was as popular as he was prosperous. Such of the practice of Dunchester as was worth having soon fell into his hands, and few indeed were the guineas that slipped out of his fingers into the pocket of a poorer brother. Also, he had a large consulting connection in the county. But if his earnings were great so were his spendings, for it was part of his system to accept civic and magisterial offices and to entertain largely in his official capacities. This meant that the money went out as fast as it came in, and that, however much was earned, more was always needed.

When I visited Dunchester to make inquiries I made a point of calling on Sir John, who received me in his best "heavy-father" manner, taking care to inform me that he was keeping Lord So-and-so waiting in his consulting-room in order to give me audience. Going straight to the point, I told him that I thought of starting to practise in Dunchester, which information, I could see, pleased him little.

"Of course, my dear boy," he said, "you being your father's son I should be delighted, and would do everything in my power to help you, but at the same time I must point out that were Galen, or Jenner, or Harvey to reappear on earth, I doubt if they could make a decent living in Dunchester."

"All the same, I mean to have a try, Sir John," I answered cheerfully.

"I suppose you do not want an assistant, do you?"

"Let me see; I think you said you were married, did you not?"

"Yes," I answered, well knowing that Sir John, having disposed of his elder daughter to an incompetent person of our profession, who had become the plague of his life, was desirous of putting the second to better use.

"No, my dear boy, no, I have an assistant already," and he sighed, this time with genuine emotion. "If you come here you will have to stand upon your own legs."

"Quite so, Sir John, but I shall still hope for a few crumbs from the master's table."

"Yes, yes, Therne, in anything of that sort you may rely upon me," and he bowed me out with an effusive smile.

"---- to poison the crumbs," I thought to myself, for I was never for one moment deceived as to this man's character.

A fortnight later Emma and I came to Dunchester and took up our abode in a quaint red-brick house of the Queen Anne period, which we hired for a not extravagant rent of 80 pounds a year. Although the position of this house was not fashionable, nothing could have been more suitable from a doctor's point of view, as it stood in a little street near the market-place and absolutely in the centre of the city. Moreover, it had two beautiful reception chambers on the ground floor, oak-panelled, and with carved Adam's mantelpieces, which made excellent waiting-rooms for patients. Some time passed, however, and our thousand pounds, in which the expense of furnishing had made a considerable hole, was melting rapidly before those rooms were put to a practical use. Both I and my wife did all that we could to get practice. We called upon people who had been friends of my father and grandfather; we attended missionary and other meetings of a non-political character; regardless of expense we went so far as to ask old ladies to tea.

They came, they drank the tea and inspected the new furniture; one of them even desired to see my instruments and when, fearing to give offence, I complied and produced them, she remarked that they were not nearly so nice as dear Sir John's, which had ivory handles. Cheerfully would I have shown her that if the handles were inferior the steel was

quite serviceable, but I swallowed my wrath and solemnly explained that it was not medical etiquette for a young doctor to use ivory.

Beginning to despair, I applied for one or two minor appointments in answer to advertisements inserted by the Board of Guardians and other public bodies. In each case was I not only unsuccessful, but men equally unknown, though with a greatly inferior college and hospital record, were chosen over my head. At length, suspecting that I was not being fairly dealt by, I made inquiries to discover that at the bottom of all this ill success was none other than Sir John Bell. It appeared that in several instances, by the shrugs of his thick shoulders and shakes of his ponderous head, he had prevented my being employed. Indeed, in the case of the public bodies, with all of which he had authority either as an official or as an honorary adviser, he had directly vetoed my appointment by the oracular announcement that, after ample inquiry among medical friends in London, he had satisfied himself that I was not a suitable person for the post.

When I had heard this and convinced myself that it was substantially true--for I was always too cautious to accept the loose and unsifted gossip of a provincial town--I think that for the first time in my life I experienced the passion of hate towards a human being. Why should this man who was so rich and powerful thus devote his energies to the destruction of a brother practitioner who was struggling and poor? At the time I set it down to pure malice, into which without doubt it blossomed at last, not understanding that in the first place on Sir

John's part it was in truth terror born of his own conscious mediocrity. Like most inferior men, he was quick to recognise his master, and, either in the course of our conversations or through inquiries that he made concerning me, he had come to the conclusion that so far as professional ability was concerned I was his master. Therefore, being a creature of petty and dishonest mind, he determined to crush me before I could assert myself.

Now, having ascertained all this beyond reasonable doubt, there were three courses open to me: to make a public attack upon Sir John, to go away and try my fortune elsewhere, or to sit still and await events. A more impetuous man would have adopted the first of these alternatives, but my experience of life, confirmed as it was by the advice of Emma, who was a shrewd and far-seeing woman, soon convinced me that if I did so I should have no more chance of success than would an egg which undertook a crusade against a brick wall. Doubtless the egg might stain the wall and gather the flies of gossip about its stain, but the end of it must be that the wall would still stand, whereas the egg would no longer be an egg. The second plan had more attractions, but my resources were now too low to allow me to put it into practice. Therefore, having no other choice, I was forced to adopt the third, and, exercising that divine patience which characterises the Eastern nations but is so lacking in our own, to attend humbly upon fate until it should please it to deal to me a card that I could play.

In time fate dealt to me that card and my long suffering was rewarded,

for it proved a very ace of trumps. It happened thus.

About a year after I arrived in Dunchester I was elected a member of the City Club. It is a pleasant place, where ladies are admitted to lunch, and I used it a good deal in the hope of making acquaintances who might be useful to me. Among the habitués of this club was a certain Major Selby, who, having retired from the army and being without occupation, was generally to be found in the smoking or billiard room with a large cigar between his teeth and a whisky and soda at his side. In face, the Major was florid and what people call healthy-looking, an appearance that to a doctor's eye very often conveys no assurance of physical well-being. Being a genial-mannered man, he would fall into conversation with whoever might be near to him, and thus I came to be slightly acquainted with him. In the course of our chats he frequently mentioned his ailments, which, as might be expected in the case of such a luxurious liver, were gouty in their origin.

One afternoon when I was sitting alone in the smoking-room, Major Selby came in and limped to an armchair.

"Hullo, Major, have you got the gout again?" I asked jocosely.

"No, doctor; at least that pompous old beggar, Bell, says I haven't.

My leg has been so confoundedly painful and stiff for the last few days that I went to see him this morning, but he told me that it was only a touch of rheumatism, and gave me some stuff to rub it with."



"Oh, and did he look at your leg?"

"Not he. He says that he can tell what my ailments are with the width of the street between us."

"Indeed," I said, and some other men coming in the matter dropped.

Four days later I was in the club at the same hour, and again Major Selby entered. This time he walked with considerable difficulty, and I noticed an expression of pain and malaise upon his rubicund countenance. He ordered a whisky and soda from the servant, and then sat down near me.

"Rheumatism no better, Major?" I asked.

"No, I went to see old Bell about it again yesterday, but he pooh-poohs it and tells me to go on rubbing in the liniment and get the footman to help when I am tired. Well, I obeyed orders, but it hasn't done me much good, and how the deuce rheumatism can give a fellow a bruise on the leg, I don't know."

"A bruise on the leg?" I said astonished.

"Yes, a bruise on the leg, and, if you don't believe me, look here," and, dragging up his trouser, he showed me below the knee a large

inflamed patch of a dusky hue, in the centre of which one of the veins could be felt to be hard and swollen.

"Has Sir John Bell seen that?" I asked.

"Not he. I wanted him to look at it, but he was in a hurry, and said I was just like an old woman with a sore on show, so I gave it up."

"Well, if I were you, I'd go home and insist upon his coming to look at it."

"What do you mean, doctor?" he asked growing alarmed at my manner.

"Oh, it is a nasty place, that is all; and I think that when Sir John has seen it, he will tell you to keep quiet for a few days."

Major Selby muttered something uncomplimentary about Sir John, and then asked me if I would come home with him.

"I can't do that as a matter of medical etiquette, but I'll see you into a cab. No, I don't think I should drink that whisky if I were you, you want to keep yourself cool and quiet."

So Major Selby departed in his cab and I went home, and, having nothing better to do, turned up my notes on various cases of venous thrombosis, or blood-clot in the veins, which I had treated at one time or another.

While I was still reading them there came a violent ring at the bell, followed by the appearance of a very agitated footman, who gasped out:--

"Please, sir, come to my master, Major Selby, he has been taken ill."

"I can't, my good man," I answered, "Sir John Bell is his doctor."

"I have been to Sir John's, sir, but he has gone away for two days to attend a patient in the country, and the Major told me to come for you."

Then I hesitated no longer. As we hurried to the house, which was close at hand, the footman told me that the Major on reaching home took a cup of tea and sent for a cab to take him to Sir John Bell. As he was in the act of getting into the cab, suddenly he fell backwards and was picked up panting for breath, and carried into the dining-room. By this time we had reached the house, of which the door was opened as we approached it by Mrs. Selby herself, who seemed in great distress.

"Don't talk now, but take me to your husband," I said, and was led into the dining-room, where the unfortunate man lay groaning on the sofa.

"Glad you've come," he gasped. "I believe that fool, Bell, has done for me."

Asking those present in the room, a brother and a grown-up son of the

patient, to stand back, I made a rapid examination; then I wrote a prescription and sent it round to the chemist--it contained ammonia, I remember--and ordered hot fomentations to be placed upon the leg. While these matters were being attended to I went with the relations into another room.

"What is the matter with him, doctor?" asked Mrs. Selby.

"It is, I think, a case of what is called blood-clot, which has formed in the veins of the leg," I answered. "Part of this clot has been detached by exertion, or possibly by rubbing, and, travelling upwards, has become impacted in one of the pulmonary arteries."

"Is it serious?" asked the poor wife.

"Of course we must hope for the best," I said; "but it is my duty to tell you that I do not myself think Major Selby will recover; how long he will last depends upon the size of the clot which has got into the artery."

"Oh, this is ridiculous," broke in Mr. Selby. "My brother has been under the care of Sir John Bell, the ablest doctor in Dunchester, who told him several times that he was suffering from nothing but rheumatism, and now this gentleman starts a totally different theory, which, if it were true, would prove Sir John to be a most careless and incompetent person."

"I am very sorry," I answered; "I can only hope that Sir John is right and I am wrong. So that there may be no subsequent doubt as to what I have said, with your leave I will write down my diagnosis and give it to you."

When this was done I returned to the patient, and Mr. Selby, taking my diagnosis, telegraphed the substance of it to Sir John Bell for his opinion. In due course the answer arrived from Sir John, regretting that there was no train by which he could reach Dunchester that night, giving the name of another doctor who was to be called in, and adding, incautiously enough, "Dr. Therne's diagnosis is purely theoretical and such as might be expected from an inexperienced man."

Meanwhile the unfortunate Major was dying. He remained conscious to the last, and, in spite of everything that I could do, suffered great pain. Amongst other things he gave an order that a post-mortem examination should be made to ascertain the cause of his death.

When Mr. Selby had read the telegram from Sir John he handed it to me, saying, "It is only fair that you should see this."

I read it, and, having asked for and obtained a copy, awaited the arrival of the other doctor before taking my departure. When at length he came Major Selby was dead.

Two days later the post-mortem was held. There were present at it Sir John Bell, myself, and the third medico, Dr. Jeffries. It is unnecessary to go into details, but in the issue I was proved to be absolutely right. Had Sir John taken the most ordinary care and precaution his patient need not have died--indeed, his death was caused by the treatment. The rubbing of the leg detached a portion of the clot, that might easily have been dissolved by rest and local applications. As it was, it went to his lung, and he died.

When he saw how things were going, Sir John tried to minimise matters, but, unfortunately for him, I had my written diagnosis and a copy of his telegram, documents from which he could not escape. Nor could he deny the results of the post-mortem, which took place in the presence and with the assistance of the third practitioner, a sound and independent, though not a very successful, man.

When everything was over there was something of a scene. Sir John asserted that my conduct had been impertinent and unprofessional. I replied that I had only done my duty and appealed to Dr. Jeffries, who remarked drily that we had to deal not with opinions and theories but with facts and that the facts seemed to bear me out. On learning the truth, the relatives, who until now had been against me, turned upon Sir John and reproached him in strong terms, after which they went away leaving us face to face. There was an awkward silence, which I broke by saying that I was sorry to have been the unwilling cause of this unpleasantness.

"You may well be sorry, sir," Sir John answered in a cold voice that was yet alive with anger, "seeing that by your action you have exposed me to insult, I who have practised in this city for over thirty years, and who was your father's partner before you were in your cradle. Well, it is natural to youth to be impertinent. To-day the laugh is yours, Dr. Therne, to-morrow it may be mine; so good-afternoon, and let us say no more about it," and brushing by me rudely he passed from the house.

I followed him into the street watching his thick square form, of which even the back seemed to express sullen anger and determination. At a distance of a few yards stood the brother of the dead man, Mr. Selby, talking to Dr. Jeffries, one of whom made some remark that caught Sir John's ear. He stopped as though to answer, then, changing his mind, turned his head and looked back at me. My sight is good and I could see his face clearly; on it was a look of malignity that was not pleasant to behold.

"I have made a bad enemy," I thought to myself; "well, I am in the right; one must take risks in life, and it is better to be hated than despised."

Major Selby was a well-known and popular man, whose sudden death had excited much sympathy and local interest, which were intensified when the circumstances connected with it became public property.

On the following day the leading city paper published a report of the results of the post-mortem, which doubtless had been furnished by the relatives, and with it an editorial note.

In this paragraph I was spoken of in very complimentary terms; my medical distinctions were alluded to, and the confident belief was expressed that Dunchester would not be slow to avail itself of my skill and talent. Sir John Bell was not so lightly handled. His gross error of treatment in the case of the deceased was, it is true, slurred over, but some sarcastic and disparaging remarks were aimed at him under cover of comparison between the old and the new school of medical practitioners.