

CHAPTER IV

STEPHEN STRONG GOES BAIL

Great are the uses of advertisement! When I went into my consulting-room after breakfast that day I found three patients waiting to see me, one of them a member of a leading family in the city.

Here was the beginning of my success. Whatever time may remain to me, to-day in a sense my life is finished. I am a broken-hearted and discomfited man, with little more to fear and nothing to hope. Therefore I may be believed when I say that in these pages I set down the truth and nothing but the truth, not attempting to palliate my conduct where it has been wrong, nor to praise myself even when praise may have been due. Perhaps, then, it will not be counted conceit when I write that in my best days I was really a master of my trade. To my faculty for diagnosis I have, I think, alluded; it amounted to a gift--a touch or two of my fingers would often tell me what other doctors could not discover by prolonged examination. To this I added a considerable mastery of the details of my profession, and a sympathetic insight into character, which enabled me to apply my knowledge to the best advantage.

When a patient came to me and told me that his symptoms were this or that or the other, I began by studying the man and forming my own conclusions as to his temperament, character, and probable past. It was this method of mine of studying the individual as a whole and his

ailment as something springing from and natural to his physical and spiritual entity that, so far as general principles can be applied to particular instances, often gave me a grip of the evil, and enabled me, by dealing with the generating cause, to strike at its immediate manifestation. My axiom was that in the human subject mind is king; the mind commands, the body obeys. From this follows the corollary that the really great doctor, however trivial the complaint, should always begin by trying to understand the mind of his patient, to follow the course of its workings, and estimate their results upon his physical nature.

Necessarily there are many cases to which this rule does not seem to apply, those of contagious sickness, for instance, or those of surgery, resulting from accident. And yet even there it does apply, for the condition of the mind may predispose to infection, and to recovery or collapse in the instance of the sufferer from injuries. But these questions of predisposition and consequence are too great to argue here, though even the most rule-of-thumb village practitioner, with a black draught in one hand and a pot of ointment in the other, will agree that they admit of a wide application.

At least it is to these primary principles over and above my technical skill that I attribute my success while I was successful. That at any rate was undoubted. Day by day my practice grew, to such an extent indeed, that on making up my books at the end of the second year, I found that during the preceding twelve months I had taken over 900 pounds in fees and was owed about 300 pounds more. Most of this balance,

however, I wrote off as a bad debt, since I made it a custom never to refuse a patient merely because he might not be able to pay me. I charged large fees, for a doctor gains nothing by being cheap, but if I thought it inexpedient I did not attempt to collect them.

After this matter of the inquest on Major Selby the relations between Sir John Bell and myself were very strained--in fact, for a while he refused to meet me in consultation. When this happened, without attempting to criticise his action, I always insisted upon retiring from the case, saying that it was not for me, a young man, to stand in the path of one of so great experience and reputation. As might be expected this moderation resulted in my triumph, for the time came when Sir John thought it wise to waive his objections and to recognise me professionally. Then I knew that I had won the day, for in that equal field I was his master. Never once that I can remember did he venture to reverse or even to cavil at my treatment, at any rate in my presence, though doubtless he criticised it freely elsewhere.

And so I flourished, and as I waxed he waned, until, calculating my chances with my wife, I was able to prophesy that if no accident or ill-chance occurred to stop me, within another three years I should be the leading practitioner in Dunchester, while Sir John Bell would occupy the second place.

But I had reckoned without his malice, for, although I knew this to be inveterate, I had underrated its probable effects, and in due course the

ill-chance happened. It came about in this wise.

When we had been married something over two years my wife found herself expecting to become a mother. As the event drew near she expressed great anxiety that I should attend upon her. To this, however, I objected strenuously--first, because I cannot bear to see any one to whom I am attached suffer pain, and, secondly, because I knew that my affection and personal anxiety would certainly unnerve me. Except in cases of the utmost necessity no man, in my opinion, should doctor himself or his family. Whilst I was wondering how to arrange matters I chanced to meet Sir John Bell in consultation. After our business was over, developing an unusual geniality of manner, he proposed to walk a little way with me.

"I understand, my dear Therne," he said, "that there is an interesting event expected in your family."

I replied that this was so.

"Well," he went on, "though we may differ on some points, I am sure there is one upon which we shall agree--that no man should doctor his own flesh and blood. Now, look here, I want you to let me attend upon your good wife. However much you go-ahead young fellows may turn up your noses at us old fossils, I think you will admit that by this time I ought to be able to show a baby into the world, especially as I had the honour of performing that office for yourself, my young friend."

For a moment I hesitated. What Sir John said was quite true; he was a sound and skilful obstetrician of the old school. Moreover, he evidently intended to hold out the olive branch by this kind offer, which I felt that I ought to accept. Already, having conquered in the fray, I forgave him the injuries that he had worked me. It is not in my nature to bear unnecessary malice--indeed, I hate making or having an enemy. And yet I hesitated, not from any premonition or presentiment of the dreadful events that were to follow, but simply because of my wife's objection to being attended by any one but myself. I thought of advancing this in excuse of a refusal, but checked myself, because I was sure that he would interpret it as a rebuff, and in consequence hate me more bitterly than ever. So in the end I accepted his offer gratefully, and we parted.

When I told Emma she was a little upset, but being a sensible woman she soon saw the force of my arguments and fell in with the situation. In truth, unselfish creature that she was, she thought more of the advantage that would accrue to me by this formal burying of the hatchet than of her own prejudices or convenience.

The time came and with it Sir John Bell, large, sharp-eyed, and jocose. In due course and under favourable conditions a daughter was born to me, a very beautiful child, fair like her mother, but with my dark eyes.

I think it was on the fourth day from the birth of the child that I went after luncheon to see my wife, who so far had done exceedingly well.

I found her depressed, and she complained of headache. Just then the servant arrived saying that I was wanted in the consulting-room, so I kissed Emma and, after arranging her bed-clothing and turning her over so that she might lie more comfortably, I hurried downstairs, telling her that she had better go to sleep.

While I was engaged with my visitor Sir John Bell came to see my wife. Just as the patient had gone and Sir John was descending the stairs a messenger hurried in with a note summoning me instantly to attend upon Lady Colford, the wife of a rich banker and baronet who, I knew, was expecting her first confinement. Seizing my bag I started, and, as I reached the front door, I thought that I heard Sir John, who was now nearly at the foot of the stairs, call out something to me. I answered that I couldn't stop but would see him later, to which I understood him to reply "All right."

This was about three o'clock in the afternoon, but so protracted and anxious was the case of Lady Colford that I did not reach home again till eight. Having swallowed a little food, for I was thoroughly exhausted, I went upstairs to see my wife. Entering the room softly I found that she was asleep, and that the nurse also was dozing on the sofa in the dressing-room. Fearing to disturb them, I kissed her lips, and going downstairs returned at once to Sir Thomas Colford's house, where I spent the entire night in attendance on his wife.

When I came home again about eight o'clock on the following morning it

was to find Sir John Bell awaiting me in the consulting-room. A glance at his face told me that there was something dreadfully wrong.

"What is it?" I asked.

"What is it? Why, what I called after you yesterday, only you wouldn't stop to listen, and I haven't known where to find you since. It's puerperal fever, and Heaven knows what gave it to her, for I don't. I thought so yesterday, and this morning I am sure of it."

"Puerperal fever," I muttered, "then I am ruined, whatever happens to Emma."

"Don't talk like that, man," answered Sir John, "she has a capital constitution, and, I daresay, we shall pull her through."

"You don't understand. I have been attending Lady Colford, going straight from Emma's room to her."

Sir John whistled. "Oh, indeed. Certainly, that's awkward. Well, we must hope for the best, and, look you here, when a fellow calls out to you another time just you stop to listen."

To dwell on all that followed would serve no good purpose, and indeed what is the use of setting down the details of so much forgotten misery? In a week my beloved wife was dead, and in ten days Lady Colford had

followed her into the darkness. Then it was, that to complete my own destruction, I committed an act of folly, for, meeting Sir John Bell, in my mad grief I was fool enough to tell him I knew that my wife's death, and indirectly that of Lady Colford, were due to his improper treatment and neglect of precautions.

I need not enter into the particulars, but this in fact was the case.

He did not say much in answer to my accusation, but merely replied:--

"I make allowances for you; but, Dr. Therne, it is time that somebody taught you that people's reputations cannot be slandered with impunity. Instead of attacking me I should recommend you to think of defending yourself."

Very soon I learned the meaning of this hint. I think it was within a week of my wife's funeral that I heard that Sir Thomas Colford, together with all his relations and those of the deceased lady, were absolutely furious with me. Awaking from my stupor of grief, I wrote a letter to Sir Thomas expressing my deep regret at the misfortune that I had been the innocent means of bringing upon him. To this letter I received a reply by hand, scrawled upon half a sheet of notepaper. It ran:--

"Sir Thomas Colford is surprised that Dr. Therne should think it worth while to add falsehood to murder."

Then, for the first time, I understood in what light my terrible misfortune was regarded by the public. A few days later I received further enlightenment, this time from the lips of an inspector of police, who called upon me with a warrant of arrest on the charge of having done manslaughter on the body of Dame Blanche Colford.

That night I spent in Dunchester Jail, and next morning I was brought before the bench of magistrates, who held a special session to try my case. The chairman, whom I knew well, very kindly asked me if I did not wish for legal assistance. I replied, "No, I have nothing to defend," which he seemed to think a hard saying, at any rate he looked surprised. On the other side counsel were employed nominally on behalf of the Crown, although in reality the prosecution, which in such a case was unusual if not unprecedented, had been set on foot and undertaken by the Colford family.

The "information" was read by the clerk, in which I was charged with culpable negligence and wilfully doing certain things that caused the death of Blanche Colford. I stood there in the dock listening, and wondering what possible evidence could be adduced against me in support of such a charge. After the formal witnesses, relations and doctors, who testified to my being called in to attend on Lady Colford, to the course of the illness and the cause of death, etc., Sir John Bell was called. "Now," I thought to myself, "this farce will come to an end, for Bell

will explain the facts."

The counsel for the prosecution began by asking Sir John various questions concerning the terrible malady known as puerperal fever, and especially with reference to its contagiousness. Then he passed on to the events of the day when I was called in to attend upon Lady Colford. Sir John described how he had visited my late wife, and, from various symptoms which she had developed somewhat suddenly, to his grief and surprise, had come to the conclusion that she had fallen victim to puerperal fever. This evidence, to begin with, was not true, for although he suspected the ailment on that afternoon he was not sure of it until the following morning.

"What happened then, Sir John?" asked the counsel.

"Leaving my patient I hurried downstairs to see Dr. Therne, and found him just stepping from his consulting-room into the hall."

"Did he speak to you?"

"Yes. He said 'How do you do?' and then added, before I could tell him about his wife, 'I am rather in luck to-day; they are calling me in to take Lady Colford's case.' I said I was glad to hear it, but that I thought he had better let some one else attend her ladyship. He looked astonished, and asked why. I said, 'Because, my dear fellow, I am afraid that your wife has developed puerperal fever, and the nurse tells

me that you were in her room not long ago.' He replied that it was impossible, as he had looked at her and thought her all right except for a little headache. I said that I trusted that I might be wrong, but if nearly forty years' experience went for anything I was not wrong. Then he flew into a passion, and said that if anything was the matter with his wife it was my fault, as I must have brought the contagion or neglected to take the usual antiseptic precautions. I told him that he should not make such statements without an atom of proof, but, interrupting me, he declared that, fever or no fever, he would attend upon Lady Colford, as he could not afford to throw away the best chance he had ever had. I said, 'My dear fellow, don't be mad. Why, if anything happened to her under the circumstances, I believe that, after I have warned you, you would be liable to be criminally prosecuted for culpable negligence.' 'Thank you,' he answered, 'nothing will happen to her, I know my own business, and I will take the chance of that'; and then, before I could speak again, lifting up his bag from the chair on which he had placed it, he opened the front door and went out."

I will not attempt, especially after this lapse of years, to describe the feelings with which I listened to this amazing evidence. The black wickedness and the cold-blooded treachery of the man overwhelmed and paralysed me, so that when, after some further testimony, the chairman asked me if I had any questions to put to the witness, I could only stammer:--

"It is a lie, an infamous lie!"

"No, no," said the chairman kindly, "if you wish to make a statement, you will have an opportunity of doing so presently. Have you any questions to ask the witness?"

I shook my head. How could I question him on such falsehoods? Then came the nurse, who, amidst a mass of other information, calmly swore that, standing on the second landing, whither she had accompanied Sir John from his patient's room, she heard a lengthy conversation proceeding between him and me, and caught the words, "I will take the chance of that," spoken in my voice.

Again I had no questions to ask, but I remembered that this nurse was a person who for a long while had been employed by Sir John Bell, and one over whom he very probably had some hold.

Then I was asked if I had any witness, but, now that my wife was dead, what witness could I call?--indeed, I could not have called her had she been alive. Then, having been cautioned in the ordinary form, that whatever I said might be given as evidence against me at my trial, I was asked if I wished to make any statement.

I did make a statement of the facts so far as I knew them, adding that the evidence of Sir John Bell and the nurse was a tissue of falsehoods, and that the former had been my constant enemy ever since I began to practise in Dunchester, and more especially since the issue of a certain

case, in the treatment of which I had proved him to be wrong. When my statement had been taken down and I had signed it, the chairman, after a brief consultation with his companions, announced that, as those concerned had thought it well to institute this prosecution, in the face of the uncontradicted evidence of Sir John Bell the bench had no option but to send me to take my trial at the Dunchester Assizes, which were to be held on that day month. In order, however, to avoid the necessity of committing me to jail, they would be prepared to take bail for my appearance in a sum of 500 pounds from myself, and 500 pounds, in two sureties of 250 pounds, or one of the whole amount.

Now I looked about me helplessly, for I had no relations in Dunchester, where I had not lived long enough to form friends sufficiently true to be willing to thus identify themselves publicly with a man in great trouble.

"Thank you for your kindness," I said, "but I think that I must go to prison, for I do not know whom to ask to go bail for me."

As I spoke there was a stir at the back of the crowded court, and an ungentle voice called out, "I'll go bail for you, lad."

"Step forward whoever spoke," said the clerk, and a man advanced to the table.

He was a curious and not very healthy-looking person of about fifty

years of age, ill-dressed in seedy black clothes and a flaming red tie, with a fat, pale face, a pugnacious mouth, and a bald head, on the top of which isolated hairs stood up stiffly. I knew him by sight, for once he had argued with me at a lecture I gave on sanitary matters, when I was told that he was a draper by trade, and, although his shop was by no means among the most important, that he was believed to be one of the richest men in Dunchester. Also he was a fierce faddist and a pillar of strength to the advanced wing of the Radical party.

"What is your name?" asked a clerk.

"Look you here, young man," he answered, "don't have the impertinence to try your airs and graces on with me. Seeing that you've owed me 24 pounds 3s. 6d. for the last three years for goods supplied, you know well enough what my name is, or if you don't I will show it to you at the bottom of a county court summons."

"It is my duty to ask you your name," responded the disconcerted clerk when the laughter which this sally provoked had subsided.

"Oh, very well. Stephen Strong is my name, and I may tell you that it is good at the bottom of a cheque for any reasonable amount. Well, I'm here to go bail for that young man. I know nothing of him except that I put him on his back in a ditch in an argument we had one night last winter in the reading-room yonder. I don't know whether he infected the lady or whether he didn't, but I do know, that like most of the poisoning

calf-worshipping crowd who call themselves Vaccinators, this Bell is a liar, and that if he did, it wasn't his fault because it was God's will that she should die, and he'd a been wrong to try and interfere with Him. So name your sum and I'll stand the shot."

All of this tirade had been said, or rather shouted, in a strident voice and in utter defiance of the repeated orders of the chairman that he should be silent. Mr. Stephen Strong was not a person very amenable to authority. Now, however, when he had finished his say he not only filled in the bail bond but offered to hand up a cheque for 500 pounds then and there.

When it was over I thanked him, but he only answered:--

"Don't you thank me. I do it because I will not see folk locked up for this sort of nonsense about diseases and the like, as though the Almighty who made us don't know when to send sickness and when to keep it away, when to make us live and when to make us die. Now do you want any money to defend yourself with?"

I answered that I did not, and, having thanked him again, we parted without more words, as I was in no mood to enter into an argument with an enthusiast of this hopeless, but to me, convenient nature.