

CHAPTER VI

THE GATE OF DARKNESS

Taking the phial from the chest I poured an ample but not an over dose of the poison into a medicine glass, mixing it with a little water, so that it might be easier to swallow. I lingered as long as I could over these preparations, but they came to an end too soon.

Now there seemed to be nothing more to do except to transfer that little measure of white fluid from the glass to my mouth, and thus to open the great door at whose bolts and bars we stare blankly from the day of birth to the day of death. Every panel of that door is painted with a different picture touched to individual taste. Some are beautiful, and some are grim, and some are neutral-tinted and indefinite. My favourite picture used to be one of a boat floating on a misty ocean, and in the boat a man sleeping--myself, dreaming happily, dreaming always.

But that picture had gone now, and in place of it was one of blackness, not the tumultuous gloom of a stormy night, but dead, cold, unfathomable blackness. Without a doubt that was what lay behind the door--only that. So soon as ever my wine was swallowed and those mighty hinges began to turn I should see a wall of blackness thrusting itself 'twixt door and lintel. Yes, it would creep forward, now pausing, now advancing, until at length it wrapped me round and stifled out my breath like a death mask of cold clay. Then sight would die and sound would die

and to all eternities there would be silence, silence while the stars grew old and crumbled, silence while they took form again far in the void, for ever and for ever dumb, dreadful, conquering silence.

That was the only real picture, the rest were mere efforts of the imagination. And yet, what if some of them were also true? What if the finished landscape that lay beyond the doom-door was but developed from the faint sketch traced by the strivings of our spirit--to each man his own picture, but filled in, perfected, vivified a thousandfold, for terror or for joy perfect and inconceivable?

The thought was fascinating, but not without its fears. It was strange that a man who had abandoned hopes should still be haunted by fears--like everything else in the world, this is unjust. For a little while, five or ten minutes, not more than ten, I would let my mind dwell on that thought, trying to dig down to its roots which doubtless drew their strength from the foetid slime of human superstition, trying to behold its topmost branches where they waved in sparkling light. No, that was not the theory; I must imagine those invisible branches as grim skeletons of whitened wood, standing stirless in that atmosphere of overwhelming night.

So I sat myself in a chair, placing the medicine glass with the draught of bane upon the table before me, and, to make sure that I did not exceed the ten minutes, near to it my travelling clock. As I sat thus I fell into a dream or vision. I seemed to see myself standing upon the

world, surrounded by familiar sights and sounds. There in the west the sun sank in splendour, and the sails of a windmill that turned slowly between its orb and me were now bright as gold, and now by contrast black as they dipped into the shadow. Near the windmill was a cornfield, and beyond the cornfield stood a cottage whence came the sound of lowing cattle and the voices of children. Down a path that ran through the ripening corn walked a young man and a maid, their arms twined about each other, while above their heads a lark poured out its song.

But at my very feet this kindly earth and all that has life upon it vanished quite away, and there in its place, seen through a giant portal, was the realm of darkness that I had pictured--darkness so terrible, so overpowering, and so icy that my living blood froze at the sight of it. Presently something stirred in the darkness, for it trembled like shaken water. A shape came forward to the edge of the gateway so that the light of the setting sun fell upon it, making it visible. I looked and knew that it was the phantom of my lost wife wrapped in her last garments. There she stood, sad and eager-faced, with quick-moving lips, from which no echo reached my ears. There she stood, beating the air with her hands as though to bar that path against me. . . .

I awoke with a start, to see standing over against me in the gloom of the doorway, not the figure of my wife come from the company of the dead with warning on her lips, but that of Stephen Strong. Yes, it was he,

for the light of the candle that I had lit when I went to seek the drug fell full upon his pale face and large bald head.

"Hullo, doctor," he said in his harsh but not unkindly voice, "having a nip and a nap, eh? What's your tippie? Hollands it looks, but it smells more like peach brandy. May I taste it? I'm a judge of hollands," and he lifted the glass of prussic acid and water from the table.

In an instant my dazed faculties were awake, and with a swift motion I had knocked the glass from his hand, so that it fell upon the floor and was shattered.

"Ah!" he said, "I thought so. And now, young man, perhaps you will tell me why you were playing a trick like that?"

"Why?" I answered bitterly. "Because my wife is dead; because my name is disgraced; because my career is ruined; because they have commenced a new action against me, and, if I live, I must become a bankrupt----"

"And you thought that you could make all these things better by killing yourself. Doctor, I didn't believe that you were such a fool. You say you have done nothing to be ashamed of, and I believe you. Well, then, what does it matter what these folk think? For the rest, when a man finds himself in a tight place, he shouldn't knock under, he should fight his way through. You're in a tight place, I know, but I was once in a tighter, yes, I did what you have nearly done--I went to jail on a

false charge and false evidence. But I didn't commit suicide. I served my time, and I think it crazed me a bit though it was only a month; at any rate, I was what they call a crank when I came out, which I wasn't when I went in. Then I set to work and showed up those for whom I had done time--living or dead they'll never forget Stephen Strong, I'll warrant--and after that I turned to and became the head of the Radical party and one of the richest men in Dunchester; why, I might have been in Parliament half a dozen times over if I had chosen, although I am only a draper. Now, if I have done all this, why can't you, who have twice my brains and education, do as much?

"Nobody will employ you? I will find folk who will employ you. Action for damages? I'll stand the shot of that however it goes; I love a lawsuit, and a thousand or two won't hurt me. And now I came round here to ask you to supper, and I think you'll be better drinking port with Stephen Strong than hell-fire with another tradesman, whom I won't name. Before we go, however, just give me your word of honour that there shall be no more of this sort of thing," and he pointed to the broken glass, "now or afterwards, as I don't want to be mixed up with inquests."

"I promise," I answered presently.

"That will do," said Mr. Strong, as he led the way to the door.

I need not dwell upon the further events of that evening, inasmuch as they were almost a repetition of those of the previous night.

Mrs. Strong received me kindly in her faded fashion, and, after a few inquiries about the trial, sought refuge in her favourite topic of the lost Tribes. Indeed, I remember that she was rather put out because I had not already mastered the books and pamphlets which she had given me. In the end, notwithstanding the weariness of her feeble folly, I returned home in much better spirits.

For the next month or two nothing of note happened to me, except indeed that the action for damages brought against me by Sir Thomas Colford was suddenly withdrawn. Although it never transpired publicly, I believe that the true reason of this collapse was that Sir John Bell flatly refused to appear in court and submit himself to further examination, and without Sir John Bell there was no evidence against me. But the withdrawal of this action did not help me professionally; indeed the fine practice which I was beginning to get together had entirely vanished away. Not a creature came near my consulting-room, and scarcely a creature called me in. The prosecution and the verdict of the jury, amounting as it did to one of "not proven" only, had ruined me. By now my small resources were almost exhausted, and I could see that very shortly the time would come when I should no longer know where to turn for bread for myself and my child.

One morning as I was sitting in my consulting-room, moodily reading a medical textbook for want of something else to do, the front door bell rang. "A patient at last," I thought to myself with a glow of hope. I was soon undeceived, however, for the servant opened the door and

announced Mr. Stephen Strong.

"How do you do, doctor?" he said briskly. "You will wonder why I am here at such an hour. Well, it is on business. I want you to come with me to see two sick children."

"Certainly," I said, and we started.

"Who are the children and what is the matter with them?" I asked presently.

"Son and daughter of a working boot-maker named Samuels. As to what is the matter with them, you can judge of that for yourself," he replied with a grim smile.

Passing into the poorer part of the city, at length we reached a cobbler's shop with a few pairs of roughly-made boots on sale in the window. In the shop sat Mr. Samuels, a dour-looking man of about forty.

"Here is the doctor, Samuels," said Strong.

"All right," he answered, "he'll find the missus and the kids in there and a pretty sight they are; I can't bear to look at them, I can't."

Passing through the shop, we went into a back room whence came a sound of wailing. Standing in the room was a careworn woman and in the bed lay

two children, aged three and four respectively. I proceeded at once to my examination, and found that one child, a boy, was in a state of extreme prostration and fever, the greater part of his body being covered with a vivid scarlet rash. The other child, a girl, was suffering from a terribly red and swollen arm, the inflammation being most marked above the elbow. Both were cases of palpable and severe erysipelas, and both of the sufferers had been vaccinated within five days.

"Well," said Stephen Strong, "well, what's the matter with them?"

"Erysipelas," I answered.

"And what caused the erysipelas? Was it the vaccination?"

"It may have been the vaccination," I replied cautiously.

"Come here, Samuels," called Strong. "Now, then, tell the doctor your story."

"There's precious little story about it," said the poor man, keeping his back towards the afflicted children. "I have been pulled up three times and fined because I didn't have the kids vaccinated, not being any believer in vaccination myself ever since my sister's boy died of it, with his head all covered with sores. Well, I couldn't pay no more fines, so I told the missus that she might take them to the vaccination

officer, and she did five or six days ago. And there, that's the end of their vaccination, and damn 'em to hell, say I," and the poor fellow pushed his way out of the room.

It is quite unnecessary that I should follow all the details of this sad case. In the result, despite everything that I could do for him, the boy died though the girl recovered. Both had been vaccinated from the same tube of lymph. In the end I was able to force the authorities to have the contents of tubes obtained from the same source examined microscopically and subjected to the culture test. They were proved to contain the streptococcus or germ of erysipelas.

As may be imagined this case caused a great stir and much public controversy, in which I took an active part. It was seized upon eagerly by the anti-vaccination party, and I was quoted as the authority for its details. In reply, the other side hinted pretty broadly that I was a person so discredited that my testimony on this or any other matter should be accepted with caution, an unjust aspersion which not unnaturally did much to keep me in the enemy's camp. Indeed it was now, when I became useful to a great and rising party, that at length I found friends without number, who, not content with giving me their present support, took up the case on account of which I had stood my trial, and, by their energy and the ventilation of its details, did much to show how greatly I had been wronged. I did not and do not suppose that all this friendship was disinterested, but, whatever its motive, it was equally welcome to a crushed and deserted man.

By slow degrees, and without my making any distinct pronouncement on the subject, I came to be looked upon as a leading light among the very small and select band of anti-vaccinationist men, and as such to study the question exhaustively. Hearing that I was thus engaged, Stephen Strong offered me a handsome salary, which I suppose came out of his pocket, if I would consent to investigate cases in which vaccination was alleged to have resulted in mischief. I accepted the salary since, formally at any rate, it bound me to nothing but a course of inquiries. During a search of two years I established to my satisfaction that vaccination, as for the most part it was then performed, that is from arm to arm, is occasionally the cause of blood poisoning, erysipelas, abscesses, tuberculosis, and other dreadful ailments. These cases I published without drawing from them any deductions whatever, with the result that I found myself summoned to give evidence before the Royal Commission on Vaccination which was then sitting at Westminster. When I had given my evidence, which, each case being well established, could scarcely be shaken, some members of the Commission attempted to draw me into general statements as to the advantage or otherwise of the practice of vaccination to the community. To these gentlemen I replied that as my studies had been directed towards the effects of vaccination in individual instances only, the argument was one upon which I preferred not to enter.

Had I spoken the truth, indeed, I should have confessed my inability to support the anti-vaccinationist case, since in my opinion few people who

have studied this question with an open and impartial mind can deny that Jenner's discovery is one of the greatest boons--perhaps, after the introduction of antiseptics and anaesthetics, the very greatest--that has ever been bestowed upon suffering humanity.

If the reader has any doubts upon the point, let him imagine a time when, as used to happen in the days of our forefathers, almost everybody suffered from smallpox at some period of their lives, those escaping only whose blood was so fortified by nature that the disease could not touch them. Let him imagine a state of affairs--and there are still people living whose parents could remember it--when for a woman not to be pitted with smallpox was to give her some claim to beauty, however homely might be her features. Lastly, let him imagine what all this means: what terror walked abroad when it was common for smallpox to strike a family of children, and when the parents, themselves the survivors of similar catastrophes, knew well that before it left the house it would take its tithe of those beloved lives. Let him look at the brasses in our old churches and among the numbers of children represented on them as kneeling behind their parents; let him note what a large proportion pray with their hands open. Of these, the most, I believe, were cut off by smallpox. Let him search the registers, and they will tell the same tale. Let him ask old people of what their mothers told them when they were young of the working of this pestilence in their youth. Finally, let him consider how it comes about, if vaccination is a fraud, that some nine hundred and ninety-nine medical men out of every thousand, not in England only, but in all civilised

countries, place so firm a belief in its virtue. Are the doctors of the world all mad, or all engaged in a great conspiracy to suppress the truth?

These were my real views, as they must be the views of most intelligent and thoughtful men; but I did not think it necessary to promulgate them abroad, since to do so would have been to deprive myself of such means of maintenance as remained to me. Indeed, in those days I told neither more nor less than the truth. Evil results occasionally followed the use of bad lymph or unclean treatment after the subject had been inoculated. Thus most of the cases of erysipelas into which I examined arose not from vaccination but from the dirty surroundings of the patient. Wound a million children, however slightly, and let flies settle on the wound or dirt accumulate in it, and the result will be that a certain small proportion will develop erysipelas quite independently of the effects of vaccination.

In the same way, some amount of inoculated disease must follow the almost promiscuous use of lymph taken from human beings. The danger is perfectly preventable, and ought long ago to have been prevented, by making it illegal, under heavy penalties, to use any substance except that which has been developed in calves and scientifically treated with glycerine, when, as I believe, no hurt can possibly follow. This is the verdict of science and, as tens of thousands can testify, the common experience of mankind.