

CHAPTER XII

THE SHADOW OF PESTILENCE

Very soon it became evident that the fight in Dunchester would be severe, for the electorate, which for so many years had been my patient servant, showed signs of rebelling against me and the principles I preached. Whether the voters were moved by a desire for change, whether they honestly disagreed with me, or whether a secret fear of the smallpox was the cause of it, I do not know, but it is certain that a large proportion of them began to look upon me and my views with distrust.

At any other time this would not have caused me great distress; indeed defeat itself would have had consolations, but now, when I appeared to be on the verge of real political distinction, the mere thought of failure struck me with dismay. To avoid it, I worked as I had not worked for years. Meetings were held nightly, leaflets were distributed by the ton, and every house in the city was industriously visited by my canvassers, who were divided into bands and officers like a regiment.

The head of one of these bands was my daughter Jane, and never did a candidate have a more able or enthusiastic lieutenant. She was gifted with the true political instinct, which taught her what to say and what to leave unsaid, when to press a point home and when to abandon it for another; moreover, her personal charm and popularity fought for her

cause.

One evening, as she was coming home very tired after a long day's work in the slums of the city, Jane arrived at the model cottages outside my park gates. Having half an hour to spare, she determined to visit a few of their occupants. Her second call was on the Smith family.

"I am glad to see you now as always, miss," said Mrs. Smith, "but we are in trouble here."

"What, is little Tottie ill again?" Jane asked.

"No, miss, it isn't Tottie this time, it's the baby. She's got convulsions, or something like it, and I've sent for Dr. Merchison. Would you like to see her? She's lying in the front room."

Jane hesitated. She was tired and wanted to get home with her canvass cards. But the woman looked tired too and in need of sympathy; possibly also, for nature is nature, Jane hoped that if she lingered there a little, without in any way violating her promise, she might chance to catch a brief glimpse of the man she loved.

"Yes, I will come in for a minute," she answered and followed Mrs. Smith into the room.

On a cheap cane couch in the corner, at the foot of which the child,

Tottie, was playing with a doll, lay the baby, an infant of nearly three. The convulsive fit had passed away and she was sitting up supported by a pillow, the fair hair hanging about her flushed face, and beating the blanket with her little fevered hands.

"Take me, mummy, take me, I thirsty," she moaned.

"There, that's how she goes on all day and it fairly breaks my heart to see her," said the mother, wiping away a tear with her apron. "If you'll be so kind as to mind her a minute, miss, I'll go and make a little lemonade. I've got a couple of oranges left, and she seems to like them best of anything."

Jane's heart was stirred, and, leaning down, she took the child in her arms. "Go and get the drink," she said, "I will look after her till you come," and she began to walk up and down the room rocking the little sufferer to and fro.

Presently she looked up to see Dr. Merchison standing in the doorway.

"Jane, you here!" he said.

"Yes, Ernest."

He stepped towards her, and, before she could turn away or remonstrate, bent down and kissed her on the lips.

"You shouldn't do that, dear," she said, "it's out of the bargain."

"Perhaps I shouldn't," he answered, "but I couldn't help it. I said that I would keep clear of you, and if I have met you by accident it is not my fault. Come, let me have a look at that child."

Taking the little girl upon his knee, he began to examine her, feeling her pulse and looking at her tongue. For a while he seemed puzzled, then Jane saw him take a little magnifying glass from his pocket and by the help of it search the skin of the patient's forehead, especially just at the roots of the hair. After this he looked at the neck and wrists, then set the child down on the couch, waving Jane back when she advanced to take it, and asked the mother, who had just entered the room with the lemonade, two or three short, quick questions.

Next he turned to Jane and said--

"I don't want to frighten you, but you will be as well out of this. It's lucky for you," he added with a little smile, "that when you were born it wasn't the fashion for doctors to be anti-vaccinationists, for, unless I am much mistaken, that child has got smallpox."

"Smallpox!" said Jane, then added aggressively, "Well, now we shall see whose theory is right, for, as you saw, I was nursing her, and I have never been vaccinated in my life. My father would not allow it, and I

have been told that it won him his first election."

Ernest Merchison heard, and for a moment his face became like that of a man in a fit.

"The wicked----" he began, and stopped himself by biting his lips till the blood came. Recovering his calm with an effort, he turned to Jane and said in a hoarse voice:--

"There is still a chance; it may be in time; yes, I am almost sure that I can save you." Then he plunged his hand into his breast pocket and drew out a little case of instruments. "Be so good as to bare your left arm," he said; "fortunately, I have the stuff with me."

"What for?" she asked.

"To be vaccinated."

"Are you mad, Ernest?" she said. "You know who I am and how I have been brought up; how, then, can you suppose that I would allow you to put that poison into my veins?"

"Look here, Jane, there isn't much time for argument, but just listen to me for one minute. You know I am a pretty good doctor, don't you? for I have that reputation, haven't I? and I am sure that you believe in me. Well, now, just on this one point and for this one occasion I am going

to ask you to give up your own opinion and to suppose that in this matter I am right and your father is wrong. I will go farther, and say that if any harm comes to you from this vaccination beyond the inconvenience of a swollen arm, you may consider all that has been between us as nothing and never speak to me again."

"That's not the point," she answered. "If you vaccinated me and my arm fell off in consequence I shouldn't care for you a bit the less, because I should know that you were the victim of a foolish superstition, and believed what you were doing to be right. No, Ernest, it is of no use; I can assure you that I know a great deal more about this subject than you do. I have read all the papers and statistics and heard the cleverest men in England lecture upon it, and nothing, nothing, nothing will ever induce me to submit to that filthy, that revolting operation."

He heard and groaned, then he tried another argument.

"Listen," he said: "you have been good enough to tell me--several times--well, that you loved me, and, forgive me for alluding to it, but I think that once you were so foolish as to say that you cared for me so much that you would give your very existence if it could make me happy. Now, I ask you for nothing half so great as that; I ask you to submit to a trifling inconvenience, and, so far as you are personally concerned, to waive a small prejudice for my sake, or, perhaps I had better say, to give in to my folly. Can't you do as much as that for me, Jane?"

"Ernest," she answered hoarsely, "if you asked anything else of me in the world I would do it--yes, anything you can think of--but this I can't do and won't do."

"In God's name, why not?" he cried.

"Because to do it would be to declare my father a quack and a liar, and to show that I, his daughter, from whom if from anybody he has a right to expect faith and support, have no belief in him and the doctrine that he has taught for twenty years. That is the truth, and it is cruel of you to make me say it."

Ernest Merchison ground his teeth, understanding that in face of this woman's blind fidelity all argument and appeal were helpless. Then in his love and despair he formed a desperate resolve. Yes, he was very strong, and he thought that he could do it.

Catching her suddenly round the waist he thrust her into a cottage armchair which stood by, and, despite her struggles, began to cut at the sleeve of her dress with the lancet in his hand. But soon he realised that the task was hopeless.

"Ernest Merchison," she said, as she escaped from him with blazing eyes and catching breath, "you have done what I will never forgive. Go your own way in life and I will go mine."

"----To death, Jane."

Then she walked out of the house and through the garden gate. When she had gone ten or fifteen yards she looked back to see her lover standing by the gate, his face buried in his hands, and his strong frame shaking with sobs. For a moment Jane relented; it was terrible to see this reserved and self-reliant man thus weeping openly, and she knew that the passion must be mighty which would bring him to this pass. In her heart, indeed, she had never loved him better than at this moment; she loved him even for his brutal attempt to vaccinate her by force, because she understood what instigated the brutality. But then she remembered the insult--she to be seized like a naughty child who will not take its dose, and in the presence of another woman. And, so remembering, she hardened her heart and passed out of his sight towards the gateways of the grave.

At that time Jane said nothing of her adventure to me, though afterwards I learned every detail of it from her and Mrs. Smith. She did not even tell me that she had visited the Smiths' cottage until one morning, about eight days afterwards, when some blundering servant informed us at breakfast that the baby Smith was dead of the smallpox in the hospital, and that the other child was dangerously ill. I was shocked beyond measure, for this brought the thing home, the people lived almost at my gates. Now I remembered that I had seen the red-headed tramp catch the child Tottie in his arms. Doubtless she introduced the infection, though, strangely enough, her little sister developed the disease before

her.

"Jane," I said when the servant had left, "did you hear about the Smith baby?"

"Yes, father," she answered languidly, "I knew that it had smallpox a week ago."

"Then why did you not tell me, and how did you know?"

"I didn't tell you, dear, because the mere mention of smallpox always upsets you so much, especially just now with all this election worry going on; and I knew it because I was at the Smiths' cottage and nursing the baby when the doctor came in and said it was smallpox."

"You were nursing the baby!" I almost screamed as I sprang from my seat.

"Great heavens, girl; why, you will infect the whole place."

"That was what Ernest--Dr. Merchison--seemed to think. He wanted to vaccinate me."

"Oh, and did you let him?"

"How can you ask me such a question, father, remembering what you have always taught me? I said----" and with omissions she told me the gist of what had passed between them.

"I didn't mean that," I answered when she had done. "I thought that perhaps under the influence of shock----Well, as usual, you showed your wisdom, for how can one poison kill another poison?" and, unable to bear it any longer, making some excuse, I rose and left the room.

Her wisdom! Great heavens, her wisdom! Why did not that fool, Merchison, insist? He should have authority over her if any man had. And now it was too late--now no vaccination on earth could save her, unless by chance she had escaped infection, which was scarcely to be hoped. Indeed, such a thing was hardly known as that an unvaccinated person coming into immediate contact with a smallpox patient after the eruption had appeared, should escape infection.

What did this mean? It meant that within a few days Jane, my only and darling child, the very hope and centre of my life, would be in the fangs of one of the most dreadful and dangerous diseases known to humanity. More, having never been vaccinated, that disease was sure to strike her with its full force, and the type of it which had appeared in the city was such that certainly not more than one-half of the unprotected persons attacked came alive out of the struggle.

This was bad enough, but there were other things behind. I had never been vaccinated since infancy, over fifty years ago, and was therefore practically unprotected with the enemy that all my lifetime I had dreaded, as I dreaded no other thing or imagination, actually standing

at my door. I could not go away because of the election; I dared not show fear, because they would cry: "Look at the hangman when he sees the rope." Here, since compulsory vaccination had been abandoned, we fought smallpox by a system of isolation so rigorous that under its cruel provisions every one of whatever age, rank or sex in whom the disease declared itself was instantly removed to a hospital, while the inhabitants of the house whence the patient came were kept practically in prison, not being allowed to mix with their fellows. We had returned to the preventive measures of centuries ago, much as they were practised in the time of the Great Plague.

But how could I send my daughter to one of those dreadful pest-pits, there at the moment of struggle to be a standing advertisement of the utter failure and falsity of the system I had preached, backing my statements with the wager of her life? Moreover, to do so would be to doom myself to defeat at the poll, since under our byelaws, which were almost ferocious in their severity, I could no longer appear in public to prosecute my canvass, and, if my personal influence was withdrawn, then most certainly my adversary would win.

Oh, truly I who had sown bounteously was reaping bounteously. Truly the birds which I had sent out on their mission of evil had come home to roost upon my roof-tree.