

CHAPTER XIII

HARVEST

Another five days went by--to me they were days of most unspeakable doubt and anguish. Each morning at breakfast I waited for the coming of Jane with an anxiety which was all the more dreadful because I forced myself to conceal it. There had been no further conversation between us about the matter that haunted both our minds, and so fearful was I lest she should divine my suspense that except in the most casual way I did not even dare to look at her as she entered the room.

On the fifth morning she was late for breakfast, not a common thing, for as a rule she rose early. I sent one of the parlour-maids to her room to ask if she was coming down, and stood awaiting the answer with much the same feeling as a criminal on his trial awaits the verdict of the jury.

Presently the girl returned with the message that Miss Therne would be down in a few minutes, whereat I breathed again and swallowed a little food, which till then I had been unable to touch.

Soon she came, and I saw that she was rather pale and languid, owing to the heat, perhaps, but that otherwise she looked much as usual.

"You are late, dear," I said unconcernedly.

"Yes, father," she answered; "I woke up with a little headache and went

to sleep again. It has gone now; I suppose that it is the heat."

As she spoke she kissed me, and I thought--but this may have been fancy--that her breath felt cold upon my cheek.

"I daresay," I said, and we sat down to table. By my plate lay a great pile of correspondence, which I opened while making pretence to eat, but all the time I was watching Jane over the top of those wearisome letters, most of them from beggars or constituents who "wanted to know." One, however, was anonymous, from a person who signed herself "Mother." It ran:--

"Sir,--After hearing your speeches some years ago, and being told that you were such a clever man, I became a Conscientious Objector, and would not let them vaccinate any more of my children. The three who were not vaccinated have all been taken to the hospital with the smallpox, and they tell me (for I am not allowed to see them) that one of them is dead; but the two who were vaccinated are quite well. Sir, I thought that you would like to know this, so that if you have made any mistake you may tell others. Sir, forgive me for troubling you, but it is a terrible thing to have one's child die of smallpox, and, as I acted on your advice, I take the liberty of writing the above."

Again I looked at Jane, and saw that although she was sipping her tea

and had some bacon upon her plate she had eaten nothing at all. Like the catch of a song echoed through my brain that fearsome sentence: "It is a terrible thing to have one's child die of the smallpox." Terrible, indeed, for now I had little doubt but that Jane was infected, and if she should chance to die, then what should I be? I should be her murderer!

After breakfast I started upon my rounds of canvassing and speech-making. Oh, what a dreadful day was that, and how I loathed the work. How I cursed the hour in which I had taken up politics, and sold my honour to win a seat in Parliament and a little cheap notoriety among my fellow-men. If Stephen Strong had not tempted me Jane would have been vaccinated in due course, and therefore, good friend though he had been to me, and though his wealth was mine to-day, I cursed the memory of Stephen Strong. Everywhere I went that afternoon I heard ominous whispers. People did not talk openly; they shrugged their shoulders and nodded and hinted, and all their hints had to do with the smallpox.

"I say, Therne," said an old friend, the chairman of my committee, with a sudden outburst of candour, "what a dreadful thing it would be if after all we A.V.'s were mistaken. You know there are a good many cases of it about, for it's no use disguising the truth. But I haven't heard of any yet among the Calf-worshippers" (that was our cant term for those who believed in vaccination).

"Oh, let be!" I answered angrily, "it is too late to talk of mistakes,

we've got to see this thing through."

"Yes, yes, Therne," he said with a dreary laugh, "unless it should happen to see us through."

I left him, and went home just in time to dress. There were some people to dinner, at which Jane appeared. Her lassitude had vanished, and, as was her manner when in good spirits, she was very humorous and amusing. Also I had never seen her look so beautiful, for her colour was high and her dark eyes shone like the diamond stars in her hair. But again I observed that she ate nothing, although she, who for the most part drank little but water, took several glasses of champagne and two tumblers of soda. Before I could get rid of my guests she had gone to bed. At length they went, and going to my study I began to smoke and think.

I was now sure that the bright flush upon her cheeks was due to what we doctors call pyrexia, the initial fever of smallpox, and that the pest which I had dreaded and fled from all my life was established in my home. The night was hot and I had drunk my fill of wine, but I sat and shook in the ague of my fear. Jane had the disease, but she was young and strong and might survive it. I should take it from her, and in that event assuredly must die, for the mind is master of the body and the thing we dread is the thing that kills us.

Probably, indeed, I had taken it already, and this very moment the seeds of sickness were at their wizard work within me. Well, even if it was

so?--I gasped when the thought struck me--as Merchison had recognised in the case of Jane, by immediate vaccination the virus could be destroyed, or if not destroyed at least so much modified and weakened as to become almost harmless. Smallpox takes thirteen or fourteen days to develop; cowpox runs its course in eight. So even supposing that I had been infected for two days there was still time. Yes, but none to lose!

Well, the thing was easy--I was a doctor and I had a supply of glycerinated lymph; I had procured some fresh tubes of it only the other day, to hold it up before my audiences while I dilated on its foulness and explained the evils which resulted from its use. Supposing now that I made a few scratches on my arm and rubbed some of this stuff into them, who would be the wiser? The inflammation which would follow would not be sufficient to incapacitate me, and nobody can see through a man's coat sleeve; even if the limb should become swollen or helpless I could pretend that I had strained it. Whatever I had preached to prove my point and forward my ambition, in truth I had never doubted the efficacy of vaccination, although I was well aware of the dangers that might result from the use of impure or contaminated lymph, foul surroundings, and occasionally, perhaps, certain conditions of health in the subject himself. Therefore I had no prejudice to overcome, and certainly I was not a Conscientious Objector.

It came to this then. There were only two reasons why I should not immediately vaccinate myself--first, that I might enjoy in secret a virtuous sense of consistency, which, in the case of a person who had

proved himself so remarkably inconsistent in this very matter, would be a mere indulgence of foolish pride; and secondly, because if I did I might be found out. This indeed would be a catastrophe too terrible to think of, but it was not in fact a risk that need be taken into account.

But where was the use of weighing all these pros and cons? Such foolish doubts and idle arguments melted into nothingness before the presence of the spectre that stood upon my threshold, the hideous, spotted Pestilence who had slain my father, who held my daughter by the throat, and who threatened to grip me with his frightful fingers. What were inconsistencies and risks to me compared to my living terror of the Thing that had dominated my whole existence, reappearing at its every crisis, and by some strange fate even when it was far from me, throwing its spell over my mind and fortunes till, because of it, I turned my skill and knowledge to the propagation of a lie, so mischievous in its results that had the world known me as I was it would have done wisely to deal by me as it deals with a dangerous lunatic?

I would do it and at once.

First, although it was unnecessary as all the servants had gone to rest, I locked that door of my study which opened into the hall. The other door I did not think of locking, for beyond it was nothing but the private staircase which led to the wing of the house occupied by Jane and myself. Then I took off my coat and rolled up my shirt sleeve, fastening it with a safety-pin to the linen upon my shoulder. After this

I lit a spirit-lamp and sterilised my lancet by heating it in the flame. Now, having provided myself with an ivory point and unsealed the tiny tube of lymph, I sat down in a chair so that the light from the electric lamp fell full upon my arm, and proceeded to scrape the skin with the lancet until blood appeared in four or five separate places. Next I took the ivory point, and, after cleansing it, I charged it with the lymph and applied it to the abrasions, being careful to give each of them a liberal dose. The operation finished, I sat still awhile letting my arm hang over the back of the chair, in order that the blood might dry thoroughly before I drew down my shirt sleeve.

It was while I was sitting thus that I heard some movement behind me, and turned round suddenly to find myself face to face with my daughter Jane. She was clothed only in her nightdress and a bedroom wrapper, and stood near to the open staircase door, resting her hand upon the end of a lounge as though to support herself.

For one moment only I saw her and noted the look of horror in her eyes, the next I had touched the switch of the electric light, and, save for the faint blue glimmer of the spirit lamp, there was darkness.

"Father," she said, and in the gloom her voice sounded far away and hollow, "what are you doing to your arm?"

"I stumbled and fell against the corner of the mantelpiece and scratched it," I began wildly, but she stopped me.

"O father, have pity, for I cannot bear to hear you speak what is not true, and--I saw it all."

Then followed a silence made more dreadful by the darkness which the one ghostly point of light seemed to accentuate.

Presently my daughter spoke again.

"Have you no word of comfort to me before I go? How is it that you who have prevented thousands from doing this very thing yet do it yourself secretly and at the dead of night? If you think it safer to vaccinate yourself, why was I, your child, left unvaccinated, and taught that it is a wicked superstition? Father, father, for God's sake, answer me, or I shall go mad."

Then I spoke, as men will speak at the Judgment Day--if there is one--and for the same reason, because I must. "Sit down, Jane, and listen, and, if you do not mind, let it remain dark; I can tell you best in the dark."

Then, briefly, but with clearness and keeping nothing back, I told her all, I--her father--laying every pitiable weakness of my nature open to my child's sight; yes, even to the terror of infection that drove me to the act. All this while Jane answered no word, but when at length I finished she said:--

"My poor father, O my poor father! Why did you not tell me all this years ago, when you could have confessed your mistake? Well, it is done, and you were not to blame in the beginning, for they forced you to it. And now I have come to tell you that I am very ill--that is why I am here--my back aches dreadfully, and I fear that I must have caught this horrible smallpox. Oh! had I known the truth a fortnight ago, I should have let Ernest vaccinate me. It broke my heart to refuse him the first thing he ever asked of me. But I thought of what you would feel and what a disgrace it would be to you. And now--you see.

"Turn up the light, for I must go back. I daresay that we shall never meet again, for remember you are not to come into my room. I will not allow you to come into my room, if I have to kill myself to prevent it. No, you must not kiss me either; I daresay that I have begun to be infectious. Good-bye, father, till we meet again somewhere else, for I am sure that we do not altogether die. Oh! now that I know everything, I should have been glad enough to leave this life--if only I had never--met Ernest," and turning, Jane, my daughter, crept away, gliding up the broad oak stairs back to the room which she was never to quit alive.

As for me, daylight found me still seated in the study, my brain tormented with an agony of remorse and shame which few have lived to feel, and my heart frozen with fear of what the morrow should bring forth.

After but one day of doubt, Jane's sickness proved to be smallpox of the prevailing virulent type. But she was not removed to the hospital, for I kept the thing secret and hired a nurse, who had recently been revaccinated, for her from a London institution. The doctoring I directed myself, although I did not actually see her, not now from any fear of consequences, for I was so utterly miserable that I should have been glad to die even of smallpox, but because she would not suffer it, and because also, had I done so, I might have carried infection far and wide, and should have been liable to prosecution under our isolation laws.

I wished to give up the fight for the seat, but when I suggested it, saying that I was ill, my committee turned upon me fiercely.

"Smallpox," they declared, "was breaking out all over the city, and I should stop there to 'sweep out my own grate,' even if they had to keep me by force. If I did not, they would expose me in a fashion I should not like."

Then I gave in, feeling that after all it did not matter much, as in any case it was impossible for me to leave Dunchester. Personally I had no longer any fear of contagion, for within a week from that fatal night four large vesicles had formed on my arm, and their presence assured me

that I was safe. At any other time this knowledge would have rejoiced me more than I can tell, but now, as I have said, I did not greatly care.

Another six days went by, bringing me to the eve of the election. At lunch time I managed to get home, and was rejoiced to find that Jane, who for the past forty-eight hours had been hovering between life and death, had taken a decided turn for the better. Indeed, she told me so herself in quite a strong voice as I stood in the doorway of her room, adding that she hoped I should have a good meeting that night.

It would seem, however, that almost immediately after I left a change for the worse set in, of such a character that Jane felt within herself her last hour was at hand. Then it was that she ordered the nurse to write a telegram at her dictation. It was to Dr. Merchison, and ran: "Come and see me at once, do not delay as I am dying.--Jane."

Within half an hour he was at her door. Then she bade the nurse to throw a sheet over her, so that he might not see her features which were horribly disfigured, and to admit him.

"Listen," she said, speaking through the sheet, "I am dying of the smallpox, and I have sent for you to beg your pardon. I know now that you were right and I was wrong, although it broke my heart to learn it."

Then by slow degrees and in broken words she told him enough of what she had learned to enable him to guess the rest, never dreaming, poor child,

of the use to which he would put his knowledge, being too ill indeed to consider the possibilities of a future in which she could have no part.

The rest of that scene has nothing to do with the world; it has nothing to do with me; it is a private matter between two people who are dead, Ernest Merchison and my daughter, Jane Therne. Although my own beliefs are nebulous, and at times non-existent, this was not so in my daughter's case. Nor was it so in the case of Ernest Merchison, who was a Scotchman, with strong religious views which, I understand, under these dreadful circumstances proved comfortable to both of them. At the least, they spoke with confidence of a future meeting, which, if their faith is well founded, was not long delayed indeed; for, strong as he seemed to be, within the year Merchison followed his lover to the churchyard, where they lie side by side.

About half-past six Jane became unconscious, and an hour afterwards she died.

Then in his agony and the bitterness of his just rage a dreadful purpose arose in the mind of Merchison. He went home, changed his clothes, disinfected himself, and afterwards came on to the Agricultural Hall, where I was addressing a mass meeting of the electors. It was a vast and somewhat stormy meeting, for men's minds were terrified and overshadowed by the cases of disease which were reported in ever-increasing numbers,

and even the best of my supporters had begun to speculate whether or no my anti-vaccination views were after all so absolutely irrefutable.

Still, my speech, which by design did not touch on the smallpox scare, was received with respect, if not with enthusiasm. I ended it, however, with an eloquent peroration, wherein I begged the people of Dunchester to stand fast by those great principles of individual freedom, which for twenty years it had been my pride and privilege to inculcate; and on the morrow, in spite of all arguments that might be used to dissuade them, fearlessly to give their suffrages to one who for two decades had proved himself to be their friend and the protector of their rights.

I sat down, and when the cheers, with which were mixed a few hoots, had subsided, my chairman asked if any one in the meeting wished to question the candidate.

"I do," said a voice speaking from beneath the shadow of the gallery far away. "I wish to ask Dr. Therne whether he believes in vaccination?"

When the meeting understood the meaning of this jester's question, a titter of laughter swept over it like a ripple over the face of a pond. The chairman, also rising with a smile, said: "Really, I do not think it necessary to put that query to my friend here, seeing that for nearly twenty years he has been recognised throughout England as one of the champions of the anti-vaccination cause which he helped to lead to triumph."

"I repeat the question," said the distant voice again, a cold deep voice with a note in it that to my ears sounded like the knell of approaching doom.

The chairman looked puzzled, then replied: "If my friend will come up here instead of hiding down there in the dark I have no doubt that Dr. Therne will be able to satisfy his curiosity."

There was a little commotion beneath the gallery, and presently a man was seen forcing his way up the length of the huge and crowded hall. For some reason or other the audience watched his slow approach without impatience. A spirit of wonder seemed to have taken possession of them; it was almost as though by some process of telepathy the thought which animated the mind of this questioner had taken a hold of their minds, although they did not quite know what that thought might be. Moreover the sword of smallpox hung over the city, and therefore the subject was of supreme interest. When Death is near, whatever they may pretend, men think of little else.

Now he was at the foot of the platform, and now in the gaunt, powerful frame I recognised my daughter's suitor, Ernest Merchison, and knew that something dreadful was at hand, what I could not guess.

There was still time--I might have pretended to be ill, but my brain was so weary with work and sorrow, and so occupied, what was left of it,

in trying to fathom Merchison's meaning, that I let the precious moment slip. At length he was standing close by me, and to me his face was like the face of an avenging angel, and his eyes shone like that angel's sword.

"I wish to ask you, sir," he said again, "whether or no you believe that vaccination is a prophylactic against smallpox."

Once more there were opportunities of escape. I might for instance have asked for a definition of vaccination, of prophylactics and of smallpox, and thus have argued till the audience grew weary. But some God of vengeance fought upon his side, the hand of doom was over me, and a power I could not resist dragged the answer from my lips.

"I think, sir," I replied, "that, as the chairman has told you, the whole of my public record is an answer to your question. I have often expressed my views upon this matter; I see no reason to change them."

Ernest Merchison turned to the audience.

"Men of Dunchester," he said in such trumpet-like and thrilling tones that every face of the multitude gathered there was turned upon him, "Dr. Therne in answer to my questions refers to his well-known views, and says that he has found no reason to change them. His views are that vaccination is useless and even mischievous, and by preaching them he has prevented thousands from being vaccinated. Now I ask him to

illustrate his faith by baring his left arm before you all."

What followed? I know not. From the audience went up a great gasp mingled with cries of "yes" and "shame" and "show him." My supporters on the platform murmured in indignation, and I, round whom the whole earth seemed to rush, by an effort recovering my self-control, rose and said:--

"I am here to answer any question, but I ask you to protect me from insult."

Again the tumult and confusion swelled, but through it all, calm as death, inexorable as fate, Ernest Merchison stood at my side. When it had died down, he said:--

"I repeat my challenge. There is smallpox in this city--people are lying dead of it--and many have protected themselves by vaccination: let Dr. Therne prove that he has not done this also by baring his left arm before you all."

The chairman looked at my face and his jaw dropped. "I declare this meeting closed," he said, and I turned to hurry from the platform, whereat there went up a shout of "No, no." It sank to a sudden silence, and again the man with the face of fate spoke.

"Murderer of your own child, I reveal that which you hide!"

Then with his right hand suddenly he caught me by the throat, with his left hand he gripped my linen and my garments, and at one wrench ripped them from my body, leaving my left breast and shoulder naked. And there, patent on the arm where every eye might read them, were those proofs of my infamy which he had sought.

I swooned away, and, as I sank into oblivion, there leapt from the lips of the thousands I had betrayed that awful roar of scorn and fury which has hunted me from my home and still haunts me far across the seas.

My story is done. There is nothing more to tell.

THE END