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A Tragic Story, Powerfully Told

GREY SLEEP

By CHARLES HORN



TIMES there were in her married life when Meta Hansen asked for death. Not many times, true, but each one stood out terrifically, even after she believed she had made herself over.

Worst of all of these were the days following the death of her firstborn, a boy, and the days following the death of her lastborn, a girl. After these were the times when David, her husband, had found her pets, the two white rats, where she had hidden them in the shed back of the house. David had held her off and watched coldly while the fat grey cat caught the rats, one after the other. (The cat was the property of a neighbor.)

Last of all of her petitions for death came, it seemed, when David tipped into the yard the two geranium plants that for a day had decked the side window of the little living room. David crushed the red blossoms under his heel.

"Foolishness! Soft foolishness!" he growled, both when disposing of the white rats and the red flowers. "A woman ain't got no time for them things. A woman has her work to do."

The most terrific death, then, Meta would have kissed as it came to her.

All these occurrences came to pass in the first five years of her married life, and looking back frequently—but more infrequently—she had asked questions. Had these times taken something out of her? Had they deadened her passionate longing for love? Had these cruelties—twice at the hands of her husband and twice at the hands of her God—made her reconciled to life?

She believed they had. For more than fifteen years she had taught herself that she must bend every nerve of her body, every thought of her consciousness, every impulse of her hours, to David, and as he willed. His actions had taught her that she must not be soft; that she must

not disturb him with caresses; that she must not interrupt his hours with chatter; that she must not have impulses of affection, except as he willed and at his command. Her life became a series of "must nots."

Months after the death of her last child, with her eyes on a yellow-haired, lusty, three-year-old boy, Meta timidly suggested an adoption. Her arms were aching, her bosoms lifting and pulling with the great yearning each time she saw the child. Her mother-heart, starved for love, hungered for him. He would bring the great completeness to her hours. And they could get this child. Tentatively she had arranged this. Timidly she carried the question to David.

"Talk not to me of other people's brats!" he roared. "Why should we take things that ain't for us?"

Then, after a long silence, and just as her lips trembled on the edge of another plea:

"If you can't raise kids of your own—if you ain't got it in you to have kids that'll live—talk not to me of other people's brats."

And he turned to his evening paper. Meta was silenced.

This was the way of it: "Your kids died. You couldn't raise your own." Never "our daughter" or "our son," but "your kids." Had they lived, and had they been credits, Meta knew he would have claimed them. Had they lived, and had they been discredits, they would have been *her* children, wholly hers. . . . Even as in death they were hers.

A slave to great love was Meta. It had come into her with the first breath of life; she had taken it with the milk from her mother's breast. It had filled the home of her girlhood—even now tears came to her eyes when she remembered the adoration of her father for her mother—and she carried it full-visionsed into her marriage with David. She worshipped her man. She it would be, she believed, who would wait upon him, labor for him, suffer for him; be his right and left hand; mend his garments, wash them, lay them out neatly for him; run to his bidding, sit with him in the evenings—talking, laughing, dreaming, loving—*loving!* Riding pink clouds in a sea of roses.

David desired none of these. He forbade them. He was a hard man.

"When I want you I'll call you," he rapped, many times. "Don't baby me. I ain't that kind. Don't bother me. Don't ask questions. When I want you, you'll know it. I can take care of myself. I ain't a soft booby. You take care of the house. That's your job."

Thus, Meta believed something had died within her; certain of the elements of her being had expired, after the first few years. She believed she had crushed down her great love for love; believed she had forgotten it, put it back of her, stilled its outcry. When a peeping voice called, resolutely she beat it down.

And thus, for twenty-one years, seven months and thirteen days she lived in Hell.

IN A hard, tight way they were prosperous. David's job as foreman of the construction gang gave somewhat above their living, (the expenses always sternly dictated by the husband) and they managed to buy a cottage. On each Sunday they went to church, and David dropped a dime on the collection plate. Seven times in the years they had gone to a show.

On each workday morning, at six-thirty o'clock, David lifted from his seat

at the table, wiped the back of his hand across his mouth, slammed the back door and went to his work. On each workday night he returned at six o'clock, silently drew cold water from the tap in the kitchen, doused his face and hands in the blue-enamel basin, flirted the blue-edged towel over his head and ate his supper.

After that, feet propped on a chair, he read the paper, tight-eyed, tight lipped—the same tight eyes and lips he used with his foreign workmen. Sometimes, dropping the paper, he spoke four or five curt words. Usually he didn't! When Meta, in the early days of her married life, attempted to prolong the conversation, he lifted to his feet and went to bed. Later in the years he told her gruffly, "Shut up, I'm tired."

Came the morning of the twenty-first year, seventh month and fourteenth day, which was in David's fifty-fourth year. He tossed back the covers of their bed, yawned, stretched, rubbed his eyes with his knuckles, and sat up. On the other side of the bed Meta bent over her shoe-laces. She felt his hands pulling at the covers.

"It's still dark," he complained. "It ain't daylight."

Meta straightened up, staring at him and from him to the new sunlight streaming in at the window. She said nothing; surprise, fear, was heavy upon her.

David rubbed his eyes, stretched the lids, pulling them out with his fingers. Lifting his legs over the side of the bed he staggered to his feet, tottered a step or two, with hands outstretched, pawing the walls, feeling his way. Meta hurried to him.

"What's—what's the matter?" she asked quickly. Her thin hands were trembling.

"Eh?" He was feeling along the walls. "I don't—I don't know." He peered vacantly above her, around her, but never directly at her. "Something's the—I can't see! I don't—Is it morning? Is it daylight?"

Meta led him to a chair. Hovering about him, his curt commands brought her to herself.

"Get my clothes," he commanded. "Help—help me into them."

So far as she could remember, this was the first time in years that he had asked her aid. It came strangely from him.

"I don't know what's the matter with me," he worried, rubbing his eyes.

"Don't rub them," Meta advised. "That'll make them worse."

David grumbled. Carefully, filled with nervousness at the unusual in her assisting him, Meta aided him to dress.

He didn't bark at her. He was curiously silent—pathetically silent.

"I'll go down and see a doctor," he mused as she led him into the kitchen. "Wind's been blowing cement in my eyes, last two-three days. And dust, more'n a week. Eyes been hurting me for months, with the wind and dirt and everything. Mebbe my stomach is out of fix."

Meta watched him curiously, tensely. He strove to be casual, matter-of-fact, but his hands wavered in their task of conveying the food to his lips.

"I'll go down and see a doctor," he said again as he fumblingly pushed back the chair, almost fell to the floor, recovered his balance and clung to the table edge. "I'll go down right away. Get my hat!"

But David didn't go to the doctor. He didn't go to anyone, outside the narrow yard. David was blind.

AT FIRST, after the physician had made three trips, examined closely and announced positively there was no hope, both David and Meta were stunned.

The house was paid for, true, and compensation insurance would be available. They'd live—frugally—but they'd live. The thing of it was that David could not—would not—realize he was stricken. He cursed, grumbled, damned the Creator and His universe, and promised largely what a man would do when he could again see.

Meta held herself aloof, at first. Timidly her fingers would wander toward his shoulder, at times when she read aloud to him. Then, without touching him, they would be withdrawn.

After weeks it was that David realized: realized and was afraid. He who was now in total darkness, and who had been unafraid during all the days of his life, before, took on a fear of the night. It was not the darkness of blindness that overcame him, but the clutching fingers of dusk—he could feel them!—the whispering, hoarse voices that came with nightfall. His nervousness would grow in the late hours of the afternoon, and after supper, when Meta read to him, David would ask that she sit close. By little and little, after weeks, his hand would stray to her chair, seeking the assurance of her nearness.

Meta expanded quickly under this new softness. A hint of the forgotten maternal crept into her manner and into her eyes as she aided him in dressing or undressing, as she combed his hair and washed his face and hands. The warmth of youth came to her—a warmth matured with years, true—when merely she sat and watched, unseen, and saw the

nervous fumbling of his fingers, the increasing droop that was coming to his hard jaws, and the little trick of lifting his head, sideways. Seeing with his ears, this was. Meta began to hear vague boomings of happiness. Songs at times leaped to her lips.

A small cat came to the house, lingered, grew into Meta's affections, was carefully hidden in the kitchen. By little and little, as her boldness increased, she would carry the cat into the living-room, letting it sleep in her lap as she read to David.

One day, humming at her work in the kitchen, she peeked in to David and saw him tapping out the time of her song with his fingers on the arm of the chair. A sudden catch came to her breath. . . . The song leaped forth, full-touted, vibrant. David tapped and nodded, tapped and nodded, tapped and nodded.

Yet, with the repression of more than twenty-one years to fight against, Meta held herself back. In more than nineteen years David had never kissed her, willingly; in all that time so term of endearment had passed his lips, graciously. So she fought the coming of new thoughts, new hopes. They were too wide and deep; too likely to be misunderstood. . . . As she once had misunderstood things.

One night David awoke in a great terror, and was as a small boy, frightened, alone in a strange room. The fear of the dark, the night-dark, was heavy upon him. He could feel it, pulling at him, crushing him, threatening him. A terrific dream had shaken him, and he couldn't open his eyes against it. That was the Hell of it! Before, when dreams had come, he could open his eyes, look about the familiar room, and know it was merely a dream. Now, the film of terror continued.

Instantly Meta's arms were about him, the soothing mother-touch. Meta's head was close to his shoulder, she whispered. Her voice reassured him. Out of a sound sleep—and this is the marvel that the mother-germ in every woman makes possible—she had arisen, prepared, unshaken, calm, David relaxed.

"Something. . ." he muttered, almost whimpered. "Something. . ." Then, after a long silence: "Oh, God—blind!" It was his first complaint in words. Before that he had always been the hard, truculent old man, blinded yet truculent. Now he was softening.

Meta's arms pressed him back to the pillow. Her fingers crept to his hair, smoothing, smoothing. David drew close as though for protection, and his heavy right arm lay across her body. His lips were against her thin hair. Once, in

his sleep, he murmured, "I'm sorry, old woman." Softly. In the tones that another man would have used with, "My dearest."

Meta understood, fully understood. Her body thrilled to it.

"I know," she whispered. "I know. Go to sleep—go to sleep—go to sleep."

Crooning to him, holding him close, gently she rocked him in her arms, as one would rock a babe, until he slept.

BUT Meta didn't sleep that night, which was the awakening to her Heaven. Her hand kept up its soft stroking of his hair, her voice kept up its whispered crooning. Even long after he slept, hand and voice went on. She felt him relax, breathe deeply, yet still she rocked gently, whispering her lullaby. . . . the one she had learned in years gone past, and had used such a little while.

"Dear God in Heaven!" she whispered, once. "After these years—all these years." And again took up her lullaby.

After hours she rose, went into the bathroom, turned on the electricity so that it lighted into her sleeping room, and stood again above David. It was years since she had seen him like this, calm in sleep. So quiet, so good. Dear David!

Fearing the beating of her heart would awaken him, she crept back to the bathroom door and watched from there. David tossed. His hand went out, seeking over the pillow. Instantly she was at his side, slipping into the bed.

"Where?" he muttered. "Where are—"

"Here. . . dear," Meta whispered. It was the first time in nearly twenty years, that "dear." Her thoughts often had held it, but her lips had never framed it.

"Here, my dear," she repeated, growing bolder.

David sighed. The lids slipped back over his blank eyes. He breathed evenly, content in her keeping, and his hard hand snuggled against her cheek.

IN THE weeks that followed Meta expanded like a flower that has been kept in a darkened cellar and is suddenly lifted to sunlight. Ten years dropped from her eyes, her breasts grew rounder, higher, her body straighter. She became alert.

Smiling through the hours of the day she hurried about her tasks—singing, laughing through the doorway to David, who sat in his chair and tapped out the time to her songs.

At night, his head pillowed on her shoulder, she would close her eyes tight,

forcing herself to sleep that the day might come more quickly. She was as of a new bride. Every hour held a hundred new wonders.

The little cat grew into a larger cat, and grew more largely into Meta's affections. David, at times, held the purring animal on his knees, stroked it, seemed content in the touch of companionship it brought to him.

Haltingly, David had come to say "My dear," "sweetheart." When one of these had first dropped from his lips, Meta stopped in her work, tensed. Then she hurried to him, crept to him; almost on her knees. Great sobs shook her.

Six months wore on, and after the coming of the blindness, and one day Mrs. Jobbins, who kept the drug store at the corner of the block, came hurrying into the yard of the Hansen place. Meta and David sat on the porch. Mrs. Jobbins motioned mysteriously to Meta, who went down to the gate to talk with the woman.

"There's a—Doctor Dulayne," Mrs. Jobbins began breathlessly. "He's a great specialist, eye specialist. He's here, in town—a friend of our family, used to visit us when he was a little feller," (she had recovered her breath and was running on at her usual speed), "and I told him about your man, and he thinks he may do something for him. Thinks maybe he can op'rate."

Importantly and smilingly, after the whispers, Mrs. Jobbins waited. She was an eager fat woman who garbed with importance each action and movement, exactly as she importantly weighed out the poisons and medicines in her shop. This was the highest moment in her life, she felt, this carrying of the great news to Meta.

"Let's tell David," Meta said at last, turning back to the porch.

David heard, without speaking, but the tightening of his body was perceptible. At the end he nodded.

"We'll have him up tomorrow," Meta suggested. David was deep in thought. Mrs. Jobbins was hurrying back to her neglected shop. "We'll go to see—"

"Tell him to come up right away," David cut in. "Today. Right away!"

"But, dear," Meta objected, "perhaps he—"

"At once! Tell him to hurry." Finality was in his command.

Dr. Dulayne came on the third day, and during the hours intervening between Mrs. Jobbins' breathless announcement and the specialist's visit, Meta lived with shrieking nerves, hers and David's. Nothing that she attempted pleased the man. Her fingers on his

head, in the soothing gesture he had asked in those past weeks, were flung off. His old arrogance grew into him again.

"Yes," the specialist announced, after the long examination, "success is certain. It will be a tedious operation, but it will come out fine."

He made an engagement for the following Saturday, four days off.

"There's nothing we can do until then," he continued. "I will be busy until Saturday. Two or three old friends I must look up. Bring him to the hospital, then. No, there's no occasion for that expense. We'll look after it right here. I'll find a nurse."

Rubbing his hands together, he smiled broadly, delightedly.

"It will be a splendid operation—great! You will be very happy."

Meta wondered, steadily and increasingly wondered about this, after the doctor left. Would she be happy? Could anything, any set of circumstances in the world bring so great happiness as the past months in which she had mothered a man? What would be the way of her life, after David saw? . . . Steadily and increasingly, as the four days wore on, she gave herself to the solution of this question.

Already David was changing, the dictatorial manner falling upon him again. His voice was hardening, his jaw stiffening, his shoulders lifting aggressively. Already he had begun to tell her of the things a man would do for himself, after the coming of Saturday. In all its hideous repulsion, Meta felt again the coming of her Hell.

On Thursday, working, she had begun to sing. David called out angrily:

"Cut out that yowling! I want to think. Let me think. I haven't had a minute to myself for nearly a year."

Later in the afternoon, after reading a newspaper, she obtained David's permission and went to Mrs. Jobbins' store, sitting in the space back of the partition with the proprietress. Meta's eyes wandered searchingly over the shelves, laden with their bottles. Before her she saw strange names of drugs. Flitting back and forth across the rows of bottles, her body gave a little start as she recognized a name. Furtively she glanced at the folded paper, which she had brought with her.

"It tells here," she said, "about two people that took something and never waked up."

Mrs. Jobbins wiped her glasses on the hem of her apron, and read the tale in the newspaper.

"A hypnotic," she said importantly, when she had finished, and went into description of hypnotics. Thus Meta

learned there were poisons that did not twist as they killed.

A girl came in to buy a chocolate soda, and Meta was left alone in the space back of the prescription case, the space with its shelves filled with bottles that bore strange-sounding names, fingering over this stock, after she had arisen hurriedly and looked stealthily toward the front, she found the bottle with the familiar name, the name that was set forth in the newspaper.

When Meta left the back room, half hour later, one hand in her apron pocket tightly was clasping a hurriedly-wrapped small package.

FRIDAY was torture-day. David gave Meta no moment to herself, but continually called to her, demanding some attention, then bemoaning the blindness that made the attention necessary.

"But, dear," Meta said once, "I am so glad—"

"Don't 'dear' me!" he barked. "I'm not a baby. In a week I'll be different. I won't be setting here while you're babying me. Don't baby me! Don't 'dear' me!"

Thus she found she must drop the new tender word from her thoughts. She must harden herself again. She must—

Out in the kitchen, later, she fought the thing out. Could she forget? Could she go back to the terror! After these weeks? These white, golden glad weeks?

From the time of the doctor's first visit, David lost his fear of the night-dark. He turned his back to Meta, on each of the three nights, and snored immediately. On Friday night, Meta did not sleep and David did not know it. She did not sleep because she had been to see the great specialist, her visit unknown to David, and had questioned him.

"David—my man," she asked, "will come out all right?"

Dr. Dwayne had patted her shoulder. "As surely as the sun rises—as the day comes, he will see again," he smiled.

"There is no—no mistake!" she insisted.

"None."

So, thinking over this statement, weighing the possibility, striving to arrange in her mind the various perplexities, that night she lay awake. In the small hours of the morning she rose, went into the living-room, carefully lighted the fire, fearful of a noise that would awaken David, and sat long before the little stove, gazing into it. At times she walked to the window, watching the coming of the dawn, seeing the stretching forth of the golden-pink fingers of the east. She marveled at the

beauty of the coming of day. She had not noticed it before, for years and years. She had been too tired, too taken up with other things. Now she was keyed up.

Aiding David to dress, after breakfast, on that last morning, she fell under the continual pricks of his tight temper. He fumed when she momentarily left the room.

"Don't you know I've got to hurry!" he called. "I have to be ready by eleven o'clock. What are you doing? Step around, there!"

"Yes. I'm just getting things ready. Myself and some things for you."

"For me? I don't have to get anything ready!"

"Yes," she answered quietly. "You must be dressed. You would not look like a bum—a hobo. You must dress." She brought his black suit, and stood quietly at his side.

"I'm ready to dress you, now."

His fingers skipped over the cloth. "Get my grey suit," he ordered. "I don't want that black thing. I'm not going to a funeral."

"This is your grey suit," Meta lied. "You—, you have just not yet learned to feel—"

"That's right!" he stormed. "Twit me about my blindness!"

"Dear!" she cried. "Dear!"

"Do what you've got to do and don't pester me with talk!" he raged. "Get away! I can do this."

His arms becoming twisted in the vest, Meta quietly assisted him. He stormed and called her "clumsy."

"In about a week—a week," he whimpered, "I'll be out of this: I'll be my own man again. . . . But this feels like my black suit."

"It's your grey one," Meta said again.

Pattering about the kitchen in her slipper feet, an apron over her best grey silk dress, Meta put the kettle on the stove, and squeezed two lemons into two cups. The querulous tones of David grated into her. The sunlight had left her days, the voices of the birds were stilled, the colors had bleached from the flowers.

The faces of her two children came into things, seemed to be ringed in the bottoms of the cups; and she saw again the piteous fright of the two white rats. The crunching of the bones in the jaws of the old cat, her neighbor's cat, was in her ears. The little new cat, the one that had come to her, brushed against her skirt, and she lifted it in her arms, cradling it close, feeling her body respond to the rumbling of its purr. Walking to the window, she looked out into the golden world.

She had glimpsed Paradise. During a few short weeks of the long, long years, unutterable joy had flashed before her. She had drunk deep of the wine of living. Now, the dregs again.

"Ah, God!" she whispered. "No." And, again, fiercely, "No!"

The room swam. She felt herself falling. The cat leaped from her arms, and stood in a corner, watching her. Catching at the table, she steadied herself until she was calmed, quieted.

She moved to the stove, lifted the kettle, divided the water into two cups and carried them into the living-room. David kept up his railing, fretting, asking about the time, about the weather, about the possibility of the doctor forgetting the engagement, about her fumbling, clumsy, trembling fingers. She had never known him so voluble, so vitriolic.

"Here," she said gently, holding the steaming cup beneath his nose. "Drink this. It'll strengthen you. . . . You'll need strength, you know."

He pushed it away.

"Don't baby me! Don't pester around me. I'm strong enough."

"But drink it," she insisted. "It will warm you up."

Still grumbling, he obeyed, then resumed his raging.

"Blast a pestering woman," he grated.

"We ain't got no time to fool around. Look out the door, there, and see if you can see him. Hurry!"

Drained cup in her hand, Meta waited,

quietly waited. David started from his chair, fumbled to his feet, took a staggering step or two, feeling his way about the room.

"Where. . . ?" he asked. His lips curiously were thickened. He staggered against the door frame, and would have fallen except for Meta's quick arms.

"I'm—I'm—," he muttered. "I'm—"
"I know," she whispered. "Just lie down a little. Just rest a minute."

With his body leaning heavily against her, she guided his feet to the bed and stretched him upon it. Breathing deeply, he sighed, struggled upward and would have risen, except for Meta's pressing hands. During ticking minutes she stood there, watching. . . . watching. David groaned, whimpered. His body stiffened.

One could see it stiffening.

Meta went into the living-room, lifted the second cup from the table and carried it back to the sleeping room. In the careful moment, out of her habit of a lifetime, she crossed David's arms over his body, straightened his legs, smoothed his thin hair. Two specks of lint she found on the coat of the black suit, and with wetted finger she brushed them away. David looked nice, she thought as she stood looking down upon him. The new cat had followed her into the room, and was now at her feet, rubbing its arched back against the edge of her skirt.

Stretching herself beside David, Meta

smoothed all wrinkles out of the grey silk dress. She hoped it wouldn't be mussed.

Then, having prepared her house, she lifted on one elbow, raised the second cup to her lips, and drained it. It had a sweetish taste, she decided.

In a little while, a grey haze began to steal over her, a soft grey haze. She was rising, floating, wavering in long loops and dashes. It was delicious; peacefully and quietly delicious. Grey clouds enveloped her, softening her journey; she knew David was beside her, could feel his body rising and lifting with hers, going with her on the journey through the grey clouds.

Once, for a moment—or was it an age!—she was fearful that David would fall from the great height to which they were ascending. David was blind. She must guard against his falling. Her arms wavered out, under David's neck, cradling his head in the crook of her shoulder, drawing him closer to her as the grey sleep came.

The new cat leaped lightly to the bed, stood for a moment, tail switching, watching Meta's features. Her free hand was stretched at her side, close to the feet of the cat. Her fingers began to close, thumb folding inward, under the fingers, close against the hardened palm.

The new cat watched, tail switching. Cautiously the animal extended a front paw, delicately touching the closing fingers. Dropping to its belly, it gently touched the fingers, as they gripped the thumb, touched them again and again.

