

## THE WRONG DOOR.

My condition, at last, became alarming, and I was afraid of myself. The cause of it—ah, that was something! Had it been a matter which an honorable man might discuss with a friend, I could have had the healing consolation of sympathy; but at the very core of my affliction lay the obligation of silence. Let us suppose a case:

Once there was a very beautiful woman, married happily, and a mother. Her husband had a friend, a man of the world. This man discovered in his friend's wife an accumulation of all womanly graces; he saw in her the ideal woman, in all the world the only one he could have loved and courted, fought for and died for. Yet she was wholly inaccessible, even in dreams! She was as good as she was beautiful, as true as she was winsome. Even had she not been so, his hands were tied by loyalty to his friend. Some of you will laugh at that. Well, if a man's honor fails him in one direction, I will not trust it in another; for a man is a whole remainder after subtracting all his evil from all his good. But "the flesh is weak." That is the villain's only plea for mercy.

The friend could not conceal it from the wife. *Could not?* I must be careful in my choice of words. Is there anything in the line of right that a man can not do in such a case? The world is wide—he could have gone away—but *she* was so beautiful and winsome! Nor, as he had not declared himself, could she presume to send him away. He thought he saw in her eyes something of pity, something of warning, something of everything. The suffering wore him out.

But I must return to the beginning and resume my story. I was much prostrated in mind and flesh, and the services of a skillful physician were imminently needed. With that idea, I went to see a famous man, Dr. Brownell, a specialist in matters of the nerves. It may be thought a little peculiar that I went to consult this particular man, but it must be considered that besides being a very skillful physician, he was my friend. There might have been certain reasons why I should not consult him, but we need not discuss them now. His wife was a beautiful woman, and I knew her well—but what in the world has this to do with my visit to her husband?

Brownell was a peculiar man. Though he was the best friend I ever had, there was not a very close intimacy between us, and yet I was nearer to him than was any other of his friends. He was much older than his wife. A kind heart, given force and direction by great wealth, had been exercised by him in my behalf with so intelligent purpose that I was become a man of a little importance in the community.

The physician lived in a fine old house of great size. Not all of it was occupied. He was a tireless collector of curiosities, and had expended a fortune in that pursuit. Few of these were ever shown to his friends, and he never spoke of them, but kept them in out-of-the-way places in the great establishment. He was a reticent man, and many feared him; but I saw in him nothing but goodness and a marvelous skill.

So it was upon Dr. Brownell that I called formally as a patient. His office was on the main floor of the house, and consisted of two rooms—a handsomely fitted reception-room, and back of it one in which his patients consulted him. Both were very large. Although I had called and visited very often at his house, I had never been in his office before.

When I entered he was just ready to go out, but he welcomed me with his old-time cordiality.

"Why, I am glad to see you," he said, taking my hand; "this is the first time you have honored my office with a call. Come in and rest awhile. You surely haven't come to see me professionally?" He looked closely at me as he asked the question.

"Yes," I replied; "I fear I am in rather a bad way."

His face showed much concern.

"You do look a little shaken," said he, removing one of his gloves. Then he began, in a deliberate fashion, to make a scientific inquiry into my case. While he was occupied thus, a messenger, all out of breath, arrived to call him to a case of great urgency. Dr. Brownell, seeing the need to hurry, asked me if I could come as well on the following day. Of course I released him. He hurried away, saying:

"I am very sorry to leave you, but it can't be helped. Step into the house and see Mrs. Brownell. I am sure she will be glad to see you. Go through that door—it is the nearest way. You will find the hall a little dark, but go straight ahead, and you will be all right." Then he hurried away, and in a moment was gone.

I went to the door, which I understood him to have pointed out. It was in the consultation-room. I discovered that there were two doors, close together. I selected the left-hand one. I turned the knob and pulled the door open. The hall beyond appeared to be quite dark, but I remembered what he had said about that, and I felt safe. I stepped into the hall, and instantly the door, which was a heavy affair, made of oak, closed upon me, pushing me out of its way into the hall. Then I discovered that I was in absolute darkness, although there was a bright day without. Nevertheless, recalling Brownell's instruction, I went ahead with much confidence. Suddenly, to my infinite amazement, the ground seemed to open, and I plunged headlong downward into a suffocating darkness, at every instant striking cruelly upon hidden obstacles along the way. At last, after having taken what seemed to be a great flight, I came heavily to a stone floor, where the darkness was as dense as ever before I fell. Fright was my first sensation and indignation my next; for was it not likely that Brownell had played some ugly trick upon me? I sat perfectly still for a little while, doing much wondering. There was nowhere the smallest glimmer of light; the darkness was ponderable and terrifying. With it was a silence so vast that the ordinary roaring in my ears became an obtrusive presence.

A little reason at last found exercise in my disordered faculties. I reflected that the abyss into which I had fallen was an unguarded flight of stairs, into which I had walked in the darkness. A cautious hand-survey verified the belief, for

there I lay at the bottom of the stairs. A moment later I remembered that I had noticed two doors, one beside the other. It was very clear that I had made a mistake by choosing a door leading to the cellar. It then was no serious matter at all, and I laughed at myself for my terror. All that was necessary was to ascend the flight, open the door, and emerge by the other. Without any waste of time I went about putting this plan into use; but when I had clambered up the stairs and found the door, I discovered that I was securely locked within this dismal place! There was no knob on the inside at all. My first intention was to get relief by knocking on the door; but there quickly arose two reasons why I should not—no one was within, and, besides, even if I should summon attention, how could I explain my ridiculous plight? My clothing had been torn by my fall, and I knew by the token of a warm, sticky sensation about my face and neck that I had been hurt and was bleeding freely. I was satisfied there must be some way of escape from the cellar without alarming the household, and, though my prison was darker than night, I determined to exhaust this resource before trying the other.

Accordingly I descended the stairs, and, by keeping my hands on one of the walls, began to creep forward, with a careful guard upon the possibility of another flight of stairs. Presently I found a turn in the passage, and followed it on. Then I came to a transverse passage, and was in doubt which way to turn. Meanwhile, the darkness did not relax in the smallest way, and absolute silence packed my environment. I turned to the right, and in that direction, not far away, I saw an exceedingly thin line of light, which I surmised issued from the bottom of a door. I went toward this, and was about to put my hand upon the door, when it occurred to me that caution sometimes was a valuable exercise. Thereupon, I knelt and examined the line of light more closely; and it was somewhat disheartening to discover that the light, instead of being white, was yellow. In other words, it was gas-light, and not daylight, that shone beyond the door.

While thus I knelt, I thought I heard a certain scurrying within. It was a sound not very unlike that which I had heard in the dark passage, and which I had mistaken for automatic aberrations of my hearing sense. Now, the same sound gave me a certain depressing feeling of insecurity, as though a malign mystery, suited to this uncanny place, was preparing a grotesque, and perhaps dangerous, reception for me. Should I abandon this enterprise and seek another door? There was danger that I might not find this one again. Indeed, was there anything to fear? Surely my conscience—I gently pushed upon the door. It did not open. I found a keyhole, and peered through it. A curious large hall seemed to be beyond, lighted faintly, and I thought I saw the shadowy form of a woman float across the field of vision. Just above the keyhole I found a knob. I turned it, and instantly the door flew open, pulling me violently with it; and, before the instinctive movement to seize upon a support and hold it securely permitted me to take my grasp from the knob, I found myself wholly at the mercy of unresisted gravitation, flying undoubtedly downward, if reason is to be accepted, but in all other directions as well, if my feelings had been the ground of judgment. But this time, instead of falling upon a cold, stone floor, I alighted on a deliciously soft carpet, of the thickest and finest rugs; and, for that matter, the distance which I had fallen was in reality quite small.

Upon looking about I found myself in the strangest place it was ever my fortune to see; but, before I describe it, I must say something in explanation of my unaccountable flight through the air. The floor of this hall was sunk a few feet below the level of the passage by which I had approached, and down from the door led a flight of stone steps, which the pulling of the door had made me to clear as I fell. I had thought that some one was concealed behind the door and pulled it open quickly when I turned the knob; but, upon looking, I saw no one, and I must believe that, for some reason which I shall not attempt to explore, the conduct of the door was guided by a powerful spring.

There was no time for any intelligent kind of thinking, for, besides being in a large hall of extraordinary appearance, I found myself in a company of the most astonishing people. The walls were covered with curious things from every corner of the world. The roof was perforated with openings, representing stars, animals, angels, demons, and other things. These openings were covered with colored glass of every shade, and above all was the light, which shone through the grotesque openings, and filled the room with a soft, yellow radiance.

The light was too faint for a fine definition of features, and so I could not then have said that I knew any of the persons present. They were all on the opposite side of the room, and every one of them was looking at me. Some were sitting, others standing, and all were upon an elevated platform which ran around the room. This platform was raised not more than eight inches above the floor.

I scrambled to my feet and looked around upon them, of course expecting that I should be spoken to. But not a word was said and not a movement was made. The whole circumstance was so extraordinary, and the silence and immovability of the assembled people so impressive, that a strange tingling feeling, which all who have been frightened know the nature of, crept up my face and into my hair, and my heart beat with what seemed to be so strong a torsional force that it twisted a sharp pain out of its function. I made an essay of speech.

"This," I said (indignation arising with the emergence of courage), "may be a very amusing pastime for you, but I have it that you are putting a very gross indignity upon me. If Dr. Brownell is in this distinguished company, I would like him to hear me say that I resent being made the victim of this boyish prank for the edification of spectators invited to enjoy my discomfiture, and that I propose, without any loss of time, to give to my resentment such form and character as will cause it to have a disagreeable permanency in his recollection."

This wide-winged and rather silly threat might as well have been spoken to the red dragons and green angels in the ceiling, for not a word or movement did it elicit. I found it easy to speak, but my voice sounded as though it had come from some one else to me alone, and that made me uncertain that I had spoken at all. But a quickening anger was straining its leash within me, and I made no effort to control it. A sense of outrage, shame, and indignation swept over me; there were things I would not bear. At this moment, Brownell's individuality emerged from the dim shadows of the company, and I walked straight up to him. He looked at me steadily as I approached, the old, good-natured, half-quizzical expression that I knew so well sitting upon his face. I had approached him very near, when an indefinable, violent sensation seized upon me and bled me from further advance. Likely it was as much dread as terror; but, whatever it was, there I stood grown to the floor, staring in dismay at this silent and motionless man with the quizzical expression. Quite near me was an old man sitting on a chair, his hand resting on a heavy stick. I seized the stick and tried to wrench it from his grasp, intending to brain Brownell with it; but think what must have been my horror to see the old man's arm come away from his body with the stick, the hand still retaining its hold! I threw the stick away with a shudder, and went up closer to Brownell. I caught him by the shoulders, and shook him with such violence that his head rolled on the floor at my feet. Then the truth burst through the envelope of my vast and inconceivable stupidity—not all stupidity, for another affliction beset me—these were all wax-figures! I had stumbled into one of those queer nooks in Brownell's house where some of his treasures were stored, and where, in these uncanny ways, he enjoyed himself alone.

The reaction from this discovery was peculiar. At first I laughed, but my laughter became so loud and furious that I saw it was hysteria, and then I had trouble to check it. My head was splitting, and my throat was cracked and burning. Pains of various kinds found employment in torturing me, and they were pains to which I was in nowise accustomed. Therefore, it was necessary that I make haste to escape from this almost unearthly place. The silence and apparent intelligent immobility of the wax-figures were more than depressing. I began to fear, indeed, that, after all, they would take on life and present some new form of suffering for my torture.

At the end of the hall was a wide door draped with a portière. From where I stood, I could see the white satin of a woman's skirt just behind the portière on one side. Evidently no light entered that room, except the weak, diffused light of the demons and angels in the room where I was standing, and, hence, it was much darker beyond the portières; but, after looking around, I saw that if there was any escape except by the way I had come, it must be through the room in which stood the woman in satin. Yet I feared to enter that room. The dim light, the woman behind the portière—it all looked mysterious and dread-lurking. It was evident that the woman stood, as did the others, on a platform; but was that sufficient upon which to construct a belief that she, too, was wax? And would it not be all the better if she were flesh and blood? Assuredly, for that meant deliverance.

I went, without further thinking, to the portière, and passed within the room, having an unaccountable care that I did not pass too near the woman in satin. I went into the room and looked around for a door. None could I find. My gaze fell upon the woman whose skirt I had seen, and then came upon me the very heaviest blow of all in that day of miseries; for there, before me, beautiful and radiant, embodiment of all the finest graces of womankind, unspeakably winsome, and in all possible ways the loveliest woman under the sun, stood the physician's wife. If only it had been she, indeed, instead of an artful wax counterfeit! I stood and admired her to my heart's content, and then I looked another way and continued my search for the door.

In what way soever I turned, I felt that the soft, blue eyes of this enchanting figure were upon me. This gave me a certain fear, the meaning of which, beyond a consciousness of extreme nervous irritation, I was not able to understand. My disorder began to take on an exhilaration much like that which comes from hashish, imparting a quickening power to my senses and a keen edge to my imagination. A feeling of happy confidence and lively enthusiasm struck off the angles of the fear which formerly had depressed me, and I became bold, valiant, and adventurous. What an inspiring effect even the wax-image of a beautiful woman may have on a man! I again looked at the figure in satin. Could I have been in error? Was it possible that a wax-figure could be caught stealing a quick glance at me and suppressing a delicious smile? Was this a new Galatea, ready to step from her pedestal and be my devoted slave? . . .

A great hope, so wild that I dared not give it too generous entertainment, leaped up from my heart. Fool or madman— which was I? Though the whole world might be consumed with love of her, *she* would remain steadfast in the way of a wife forever. It was wholly impossible that she should choose this astounding way of letting me know that the one secret of my life had slipped away from me and had been welcomed into her own life. I gazed upon her, filled with awe. . . . Her head slowly turned, her glorious eyes rested full upon my face, and the sweetest smile that I had ever seen on her beautiful face saturated all my sensibilities with inconceivable delights. There was a meaning in that look and smile that I had never seen before, and the light that shone through it was a welcome to me!

I went closer to her, my feet winged with joy. The smile beckoned, the glance was a reassurance.

"Alice!" I cried.

"I have waited for you long," she answered; and there can be no music on earth so sweet as those words.

I caught her in my arms and drew her to my breast, nearly crushing her. I looked up into her face and she looked down into mine. I drew her from the pedestal. All at once a look of horror came into her face.

"You are bloody!" she cried.

"It is nothing," I protested.

The look of horror became one of terror. "Oh," she said, "there is blood on your face and villainy in your heart! So, this is how you would betray your best friend, and wreck my life. I will save him and you." With that I saw something bright and keen glitter a moment in her hand, and in an instant a thing cold and sharp slipped between the ribs of my breast. I choked; a blindness assailed me, and I felt myself going all at large to the floor.

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Dr. Brownell was sitting beside me in a room of his house, and I was lying in bed, with a feeling of great weakness. He saw that I was watching him. He arose and stood over me, and his face showed much relief.

"You are all right now, aren't you, old fellow?" How kind his voice was!

"Yes."

I felt no pain in my breast, but feebly I put up my hand. "Is the wound dangerous?" I asked.

"What wound?"

I made no reply.

"The only wound you had was a slight abrasion of the scalp, and that has been cured a week."

I dared not ask any more questions.

"Alice came in to see you this morning and left these flowers for you. I told her I thought you would be all right to-day, and she will come to see you as soon as I send her word. By the way, old man, that was a curious mistake you made in getting among my wax-figures. We found you unconscious there. In your delirium you must have developed a strong dislike for the figures of Alice and me, as you completely demolished them. W. C. MORROW.

SAN FRANCISCO, February, 1891.

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