

The Doctor's Story

by A Retired Member of the Detective Police [William Russell]

ONE cold, blustering, snowy night in November, I had reached my home utterly tired and exhausted with my day's labor; and as I threw myself into the great arm-chair before a blazing fire of bituminous coal, and felt the cozy comfort of my room, the luxury of the warm dry stockings and slippers, the grateful fumes of the tea and steak standing before me on the table, I could not but feel great happiness in the thought that I had nothing further to draw me away from the house that night. I had left each and all of my patients in a state that my services could be dispensed with till morning. This is a circumstance so seldom enjoyed by a physician in good practice, that when it does occur it is looked upon as no common holiday.

I could listen to the mutterings of the wind, and the tapping of the frozen snow against the window-pane, almost with enjoyment, or rather with a feeling that added a zest to what I was partaking of inside.

A blazing fire is provocative of thought, and a cup of tea is no preventive; I sat, therefore, and sipped and thought. I was staring into the blaze, and recalling a hundred days in the past—a hundred incidents, having a chain that led invisibly from my first thought. I recalled the night when I sat in my humble lodging the first day of my arrival in New York, fresh from the small town where I was accounted of some importance among my peers, and how my self-esteem was lowered from my one day's experience of the great city. I recalled my first entrance in the Medical School, my disgust, and my ambition; the gradual sloughing from the half-rude country lad to the rather stylish city-dressed young man. The going into society, and the first and last real passion of my life, Marianne Graydon, that more than sacred memory to me of twenty years—that memory for which I sit here a solitary, solemn man, wifeless and childless at forty-five—I sat before the blazing fire that night and thought of it all.

I met her first at a musical *soirée*. Before I saw Marianne's face I heard her voice. She was surrounded by a crowd while she was at the piano, rolling out, with a careless *abandon*, one of the popular ballads of the day. I was not sufficiently critical to know whether her voice was a soprano, mezzo-soprano, alto, or contralto, but I did know there was a spell in it to me that sends its tones even now, at a distance of almost a quarter of a century, ringing through my heart and brain. I stood with the crowd about the piano, and saw her handed away from it: A *blonde*, of middle height, quiet in appearance, save only when she raised a bright, flashing blue eye to my face as she passed slowly up the room. I felt strangely that some portion of my soul had gone with her—a particle that held attraction for the great body. It must have been so; for, reason as I would with myself through the next hour, I could not exercise the strength to deny myself watching her in every movement, and finally seeking her.

I left that room with the great problem of my life solved. I loved deeply, passionately. I loved one whom I felt and acknowledged as my superior. Though I had scoffed at belles, and put no faith in brilliant women, Marianne Graydon was a belle—a brilliant belle—and yet she was not beautiful—and a *blonde* should be beautiful if she would be a belle. She had fine eyes, a wealth of very light brown hair, and then all was told. Nor was she rich, though she was the best dresser in her set—not the most extravagant, but dressed with the most exquisite taste. The secret of

Marianne Graydon's great success was earnestness, which, whether it be affected or real, rarely fails to achieve great ends. I loved her dearly. In one month I had lived years. It was this love that caused me, after graduating, to establish myself for practice in New York, rather than return to my native place. I would fight the battle out upon the spot where she could see the struggle I would make to rise for her sake. I am told that I am undemonstrative. To this, perhaps, may be attributed many of my failures in life—failures to make myself understood, to attach those to me for whose affection I would have made every sacrifice. If this was so in ordinary, I am sure it was not with my approaches to Marianne Graydon. If I had naturally any timidity, it was laid aside, and with every wild word that passion could utter I pressed my suit.

I am sure she loved me. It did not rest alone upon her telling. But the years went quickly away, and I still remained a poor physician, working among the thousands who possessed all the requisites of myself, with more ability to make them known; and, as a matter of course, we could not marry. I knew it must be so. I could not bring her down from her position to mine. Even were I willing—which God forbid!—I knew well that she would never consent.

My best friends told me she was mercenary, and I drove them away in derision. They said she never thought seriously of me for one moment. I think now perhaps they were right, and I was blind. They said Marianne Graydon only waited a wealthy wooer to throw me away as she would a worn garment. In this I knew they were right too soon. The wooer came; and amidst many tears and protestations of lasting friendship—amidst pleas for pardon and regrets that we had ever met—amidst entreaties, retrospective recallings, and curses upon my side, we parted, she to become Mrs. Robert Wharton, the wife of a wealthy railroad financier, and I to plod away on my daily round, and build up that position before the world for which I had lost all ambition.

It was upon this night, five years ago, I sat in my study recalling it all, staring meanwhile in the blazing firelight, and thinking for the thousandth time how strange it was since that time I had lost all desire for society, and never should look with eyes of love again upon [a] woman. Years enough had rolled away to blunt the memory, and Marianne Graydon was now nothing but a myth to me. I had not even sufficient curiosity to express a silent wish that I might know what had been her ultimate destination, or whether she was yet living. I knew that the wealth for which she had sacrificed herself and me had within one year gone to the winds of heaven in one brief night in the great panic of '37. I knew also that herself and husband had left New York immediately after—I knew not where, nor would I suffer my pride to ask. But upon this cold night in November all this past came back to me, and I reviewed the life that had, without my seeking, brought me reputation, wealth, and calm, quiet content, more, perhaps, than I should have achieved as the husband of Marianne Graydon.

“Doctor, there's a man in the hall says he wants you.”

I did not much like this interruption to my reverie. It came from my housekeeper. I have no doubt I spoke rather petulantly when I asked what the man wanted.

“He says he wants a doctor.”

“Cannot he find one somewhere else?”

“So I told him; but he says he won’t go to any other this night—he has been to three without success already. And there he sits by the hall stove warming himself, quite comfortable like.”

“Send him up to me.”

I did not like to be interrupted, and much less I liked the idea of going out; and if the last could by any means be avoided, I was ready to do so. The man was ushered in. A miserable, squalid-looking wretch he was, over whom my housekeeper stood guard, not seeming disposed to trust him alone with me.

“What do you want?” I asked.

“A doctor, to be sure; what else do you think I came for?”

This was not a very encouraging beginning.

“For yourself?”

“He! he! he! grinned the man; “d’ye think now I look as if I wanted a doctor? No, sir-ee! Blind Mag’s the one ’at wants you.”

“Who is blind Mag?”

“Why, she’s a woman, of course; she says so, anyhow.”

“Where is she, and what is the matter?”

“Down here to Bully Dick’s, dying.”

“Dying! what of?”

“Oh! what’s the use asking a feller sich questions? I don’t know what people dies of. They dies—that’s all I know.”

I had got on my over-coat and boots as the man delivered this last address, and in a few minutes I was on my way, he trotting on a few steps in advance, down dark streets, up alleys, through blind entrances, over a heap of rubbish, groping up some flights of stairs, and we stood in a room, in one corner of which was heaped a parcel of dingy, dirty bedclothes. A chest, a chair without a back, an old table, a pitcher without a handle, and a few pieces of wood, completed the furniture, the whole illuminated by one tallow candle burning from the neck of a bottle standing on the floor.

On the bed was my patient, introduced thy the messenger as I entered, with—

“Wake up, now, Mag! I here’s the doctor. That’s Blind Mag, doctor.” With this he disappeared.

The woman turned in the bed as I approached. The light was imperfect, but I could see that her hair was gray, and the spot where once were the eyes was deeply sunken, and the lids entirely closed. She put out her hand with the peculiar manner of the blind.

“Where are you, doctor? May God bless you for coming to me, though you can do me no good in this world, save to smooth my path into the next.”

The woman spoke well, and I knew directly had once been in a good position, though I could not realize that she should be able to fall lower in poverty than I found her. She was dying, in the last stage of consumption, hastened by foul air, bad food or no food, and exposure.

“I do not know you,” she went on, “but I sent for a physician—all of that profession are alike to me now. You see, doctor, I am blind. Yes, yes! I have been blind now for years—I do not know for how many. Draw nearer, doctor; I wish to speak with you.”

I said something entreating her to lie still. For a moment she was silent, and then breaking out again, she said,—

“This world will soon close on me, doctor, and fallen and degraded as I am, I still believe in man enough to think that none could be so base as to act any deception with a dying woman. I like the sound of your voice; there is something in it that assures me you will serve me. Will you do me a last service, doctor?”

“She had raised herself in the bed, and was sitting with her eyeless face turned toward me.

“If it is in my power,” I answered.

In a half whisper she asked me:

“I have been told that a physician would buy a body for dissection. What is the price they generally give, doctor?”

All my familiarity with sickness and death, with anatomy and the dissecting-room, could not take from the horror of this question. What did the dying woman mean? From the hollow, black spots that once held eyes, she seemed to gaze at me with an intensity that was fearful. It was a question I dreaded to answer, and yet feared to leave unanswered. I said:

“The medical schools buy subjects, but not the physicians. They give generally from twenty to fifty dollars for a good healthy body.”

“Is that all?” she answered, and a deep shadow passed over her face; and then in a moment recovering, she stretched forward. “Doctor, do you think I shall be worth that? I am healthy, you see—I mean I have not fallen away much. Look at me, doctor. My arm is pretty full. There is nothing the matter with me but blindness— that is nothing.”

“What is the meaning of this, woman?” I said, as sternly as I could gather courage to speak, while a shivering dread was running over me. “Do you mean to sell your own body?”

“Ah! doctor, listen to me. Why should I not sell my body after death? Have I not sold it in life? For fifteen years I have lived a life of shame and degradation; lower and lower I have fallen, until you see me here. I am dying without enough to place upon my eyes for closing. Why should I care what becomes of my body after death? Can it matter to me whether it goes into the hands of the surgeons by my own will, or into the hands of the authorities to be thrust rudely into the ground at the public expense? I want money, doctor; and what have I to sell or to give for it but my body, worthless to myself, and only good for the purpose I would give it to? It is money, doctor. Promise me that I shall have the value of my body paid after death to a source I shall designate, and I will worship you—I will bless you as a dying woman here and hereafter. You shall take it from hence as soon as the spark of life has passed away, and I will believe you when you say that its value to the medical school shall be paid to the one I shall designate.”

There was something in this too dreadful for contemplation, however familiar I might be with the details of misery. I had never yet known an instance of one bargaining before death for her own body. There was a dreadful earnestness about the woman as she sat there with her face turned toward me, repeating each few moments, “Do this, doctor, for a dying woman!”

What did she want this money for? What want could there be after death? A very perceptible shudder ran over the woman when I asked the question, and she dropped, apparently exhausted, on the bed. After the lapse of a few moments she raised herself again upon her elbow, she threw back the matted hair from her face, and said,—

“I would tell you all if I dared, though what sympathy could you have with me—poor, degraded, fallen creature that I am? False wife, false mother, and false friend! But, oh! doctor, I was once good—I was once rich—I learned to love wealth, and I grasped at its shadow instead of the reality. I would tell you all; but first you must promise me that you will serve me—that you will find a buyer for all I have to offer. My wretched soul was long since sold. Only my body—only my body. Promise me that its price shall be paid, and I will tell you all.”

I must have been terribly hardened in the trials of my profession if I could say “No” to the dreadful appeal of this woman. I told her that her request should be gratified; but she must tell me to whom and for what purpose this money must be paid. She caught my hand suddenly, and kissed it several times in rapid succession; and then, with a short, hysterical sob, sank away again upon the bed. So still did she lie that I thought her dead, and to ascertain this I placed my hand on the region of the heart. She raised herself quickly.

“I am not dead, doctor. I cannot die until I tell you all. Mine is a common story, though it has remained locked within me, untold. Where can one find sympathy for her own misdoing? I have been loved, doctor—loved for myself alone—and I have thrown that love away like a worthless thing. I have been a wife—a faithless wife. I have been flung away by him for whom I lost heaven itself, as he would cast off a loathsome reptile. I have gone down, step by step, until I have wanted the very bread for which I would have been willing to have sold myself to my

shame, but there were no buyers—no buyers for the wretched, wanton woman who cried herself for sale.

“For the poor girl who yields to a first love the world should have some charity in its condemnation—for the guilty wife, none. Let her be cursed for evermore. And so have I been cursed. It was for wealth I married—wealth that escaped my grasp. It was for wealth I passed away with the tempter—and here I lie dying, wretched and penniless. He took me to Paris, and there I forgot, in the mad whirl of my dissipation, all shame. It was there in the gayety and pleasure I determined to stay. I would drown all thought, and become only the light woman of the world, embarking no feeling in any argosy not my own. I to make resolves!—I, who was a slave to the caprice of the man who found me in gold enough to aid me in all my dissipations, but not enough to make me independent of his will! And then came my husband—he from whom I had fled to guilty shame—and claimed me before all the world. Oh! gold is a mighty conjurer, doctor. He was poor; we were rich; and it was thus he became suddenly blind. It was thus he went away quietly, after seeking me through all the world, ready to dabble his hands in my blood. And I was bought—bought for gold. A slave, a bauble to be worn as long as it pleased my buyer to wear me, and when he tired of my fashion, give me to his valet, as he would his worn coat. My lot was not singular. He was tired; he wearied of my discontent—of the discontent himself had created—and he pensioned me off with the same liberality he would have treated a servant. He sent me home.

“Home! Where was my home? By courtesy the land of my birth. I came *home*, therefore, with my child,—his child. I came among my former intimates to be shunned and pointed at. I could not bear that, you know! Then at this point, where I might have stopped, and perhaps have remained without further taint, I became desperate. They should not scoff me. I would buy my position. I had money; they should feel it. With a woman’s estimate I rushed into all schemes of pleasure. I was surrounded by flatterers and sycophants. They lived upon me, they robbed me; and that which I had brought as the wages of my guilt faded away like the mist, and again I was poor. Is it strange that a woman should pall before poverty for the sake of her child? He was all I had to care for on earth. I was maddened, and prayed only for the time when I could tell him my fancied wrongs, and call on him to avenge them. For him, therefore, I would make every sacrifice. It was thus I argued in those days, doctor. False argument! I have learned better. Poverty is no plea for a woman’s guilt; for, with all man’s heartlessness, I believe he would rather aid her in virtue if he believes her earnest, than aid in her downfall. Is this so, doctor? You are a man; can you answer?

“There are two falls for a woman; the one where she persuades herself love is the cause; the last, when she deliberately sells herself for gold. The last assuredly follows the first, and is the last step in shame. Whether I ever took the first I can leave you to judge. The last has brought me here.

“Oh, that life of shame, and its gradual steps! From the first where, amidst glitter and gilt, a few poor girls, chosen for their beauty and frivolity, are kept in a continued round of intoxication and glare—where thought is debarred, and tears are treasonable—where she is the most worthy who is the most sinful; and talent is accorded to her by the power she may possess of tossing down

bumpers of champagne, and persuading the half or wholly drunken men with whom she meets to do the same. A touch of paint to hide the ghastly pallor of the cheek; a little opium to brighten the eye; satin in gorgeous folds over the corroding heart; jewels to flash under the glare of the gas; and you have a woman, doctor—a woman, a creature with an immortal soul, made up for sale, and thrown out in the market to the highest bidder—sold for what will pay for her satin and silk, her jewels and gold, and—bread.

“Bad enough, bad enough, is it while the poor intoxicated wretch is surrounded by splendor and plenty; but beauty cannot last always—she must come one step down, to the dirty drabby house, and the faded grasping landlady, to the streets, and the theatres. Oh, that terrible unwritten history!

“And further still, if imagination can picture any thing worse. The garret and the corner gin shop; the cellar, and the eager grasping literally for bread. All these I have known, doctor—all these I have known—in their bitterest way. I have been beaten, spit upon, kicked, starved. The law has no protection for the abandoned woman. I am blind from the blow of a ruffian, who laughs when he sees me. ‘Blind Mag!’ I have been taken from the streets at night, to be paraded in the morning with half a hundred fallen, shameless creatures like myself, before a brutal magistrate and a jeering crowd. I have known the prison walls and the prison fare. And oh!—Thank God! I am dying. But for one thing I would thank God! It is for my child, doctor, my boy, my grand and beautiful boy, who knows not of his mother’s degradation. It is for him, doctor, I am pleading. The pittance for which I would sell myself would be his great need. For years he has not heard of or seen me. I have struggled and striven, I have deprived myself of every necessary that would have smoothed my downward path to the grave, that he might remain at his studies, unknowing his origin. That trifle will complete the sum necessary to insure his stay at college for the few months more until he shall graduate. Oh! My brave boy, who will never know of his mother. They give such praises to his progress, doctor, I am sure of his success in life could he but graduate. For the sake of my boy, doctor, grant my request. When life shall be fled, take what was once a woman, and send the sum you would give to this address.”

She had till this moment kept herself raised in the wretched bed, with her blind face turned eagerly toward me. Now she fell exhausted, with a heavy groan, as I took the paper from her hand and stooped toward the light that I might read the name: “John Edward Stewart.” I read the name aloud, and the woman turned in the bed and repeated it after me.

“And your name is”—and I hesitated that she might answer my question.

“Is it necessary, doctor, that I should speak a name that has been dead many years?”

“It would be better, my good woman,” I answered, taking her hand as kindly as I could, “that I should know it for many reasons. Perhaps I shall be able to serve your son.”

“Oh, God bless you for those words, doctor! Though I do not know your name I trust you;” and she clung to my hand, and pressed it to her lips. “I will tell you the name that for many years has not passed my lips—a dead name. My husband’s name was Robert Wharton; my childhood name Marianne Graydon.”

Marianne Graydon! Had I sat that hour by the bedside of that woman whom once I had loved better than life, and not known it instinctively? and was this wretched, fallen, blind, and degraded creature before me, the memory I had cherished so many years? It fell upon me worse than the shock of death. I was speechless and deathly cold. She must have known the change, perhaps heard the groan I could not suppress; and once again she was sitting upright in the bed.

“What is your name, doctor? Let me hear the name of him who will befriend my son.”

Should I tell her to whom she appealed? Yes.

“Walter Hall.” She repeated the name in the same manner she had repeated her son’s; then for almost a minute she was silent. At last there came a long, deep sob, and then she lay very still. This time it seemed to me she must be dead, so slightly did she hold her life. I thought the shock had parted the thread. I took the candle from the floor and held it to her lips. She still lived.

Until the first gray of the morning I sat by the bedside of the dying woman, expecting every moment her last breath. No human aid could avail now even in smoothing the path of the final moments. I could only sit and wait.

It was daylight when I first heard a step in the outer passage; and in a few moments a small, repulsive-looking man, whose face was scarred and disfigured, entered the room. He walked over to the bed and looked at the woman, and then turned to me with a nod and said:

“Has she gone in, doc.?”

“She is not yet dead,” I answered.

“There was a cove here last night inquiring after blind Mag, doc. I tole him she warn’t likely to be around agin for a spell; but he said his duty was done when he give her this ’ere letter, though I don’t think it be for her. It’s got another name on the kiver— ‘Mrs. Robert Wharton.’”

“Who calls me?” came from the bed in very shrill tones, startling myself and causing Mr. Bully Dick, who was stooping to the candle reading the superscription of the letter, to jump quickly toward the door.

“Thunder!” said that gentleman, recovering himself in a moment, “how she skeered me! Here’s a letter for you, old woman, though it ain’t directed to you, nuther.”

“Give it to me,” she said, raising herself to a sitting posture, and stretching out both her hands toward the man, who at arm’s length put the letter in them. She tuned it over rapidly in her hands for a moment, and then called:

“Doctor, I cannot read this.”

“Shall I read it for you?”

“Yes.” She spoke hesitatingly.

I opened the letter. It was simply a notification for Mrs. Robert Wharton to call at the office of Graves & Hendrick, attorneys, as soon as possible, either in person or by attorney, on business of importance.

“Graves and Hendrick? They were attorneys for the father of my child. What of them? I shall never know, doctor. Feel my pulse. Am I dying? There is something in this, I know. Oh! if I could but live to know. How long shall I live, doctor?”

I begged her to be calm, that all excitement would but hasten her end, that it would be several hours yet before any thing could be known concerning it, promising to remain with her till that time, and to call myself on Graves and Hendrick, and immediately inform her of the result. Very quietly she lay for several hours, only rousing herself occasionally to ask the time. The hours slipped by, and I sat by the bedside recalling all my life, and musing over the strange chance that should have brought me, of all men, to sit by the deathbed of Marianne Graydon. Nine, ten o'clock came, and I spoke to her, announcing that I would now go to Messrs. Graves and Hendrick. She felt for and caught my hand eagerly, and, speaking in a calm tone, said,—

“Dear friend, permit me to call you so, though I have done you great wrong. Forgive me all. I have been sorely chastened in my sin. When you return I shall be dead; but something tells me all is well, and my son is safe. For the sake of the wretched mother extend over him your protection. Farewell forever!”

I passed forth upon my errand to hear, at the office of Messrs. Graves and Hendrick, that Mr. John E. Stewart had died in the city of Paris, leaving all his property, real and personal, to his son by Marianne Graydon, bearing the same name as himself, then residing in New York. These gentlemen attorneys had ably performed their duty in tracing the wretched woman through all her haunts, until they had discovered her, only the day before, at the establishment of Bully Dick. Through her they hoped to get trace of the son, not for a moment believing that, through all her shame and degradation, the mother had secretly supported the child.

It was true. When I returned to the room where lay Mrs. Robert Wharton, I found her cold in death. Two or three wretched-looking women, who rise like vultures on all occasions, stood over her, quarrelling among themselves for the division of the few miserable rags of clothing lying about her bed.

A plain white slab in Greenwood marks the spot where lie the remains of “Marianne.” Her son is with me. He will make a good man. Though he is rich, still he regards a profession as a necessity, and writes M. D. after his name. He is a great relief to me in my practice. I find I am not so young as I once was. Today I have made my will. I had no one to leave my little savings to who so well deserves them as Stewart. He is a fine fellow, and though his abundance is great, he will use it all well. I am sure I had much experience of him since that memorable night Five Years Ago.

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