

FICTION

Josephine Daskam Bacon

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A PUBLIC DOMAIN BOOK

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IN THE VALLEY OF THE SHADOW

By Josephine Daskam

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TO Belden, pacing the library doggedly, the waiting seemed interminable, the strain unnecessarily prolonged. A half-hour ago quick feet had echoed through the upper halls, windows had opened, doors all but slammed, vague whisperings and drawn breaths had hovered impalpably about the whole place; but now all was utterly quiet. His own regular footfall alone disturbed the unnatural stillness of a large house.

Outside, the delicious October sun poured down through an atmosphere of faultless blue. The foliage was thick yet, and the red-and-yellow leaves danced heartlessly in the wind. A year ago they had gone on a nutting-party, and Clarice had raced with the children and picked up more than anybody else. Now--even to think of her brought that faint odor of salts-of-lavender and beef-tea that disheartened him so, somehow, when he sat by her bed coaxing her into sipping the stuff.

Some one was coming down the stairs. It was Peter's step--his new one since last Friday, when they had all, it seemed, begun to walk and talk and breathe a little differently. Belden hurried across the room and caught him at the foot of the steps.

"Well, old man, how goes it?" he demanded, with a determined cheerfulness.

His brother-in-law stared at him emptily.

"It's to-morrow," he said, gripping the newel-post, "to-morrow afternoon. Jameson is coming--they'll do it here. Jameson brings his special nurse for the--the operation, but the other one is due at five, and you get her just the same. I told Henry to put up the dog-cart. I don't know, though--maybe the runabout--no, the tire's loose. Still, it might do--"

"For heaven's sake, Peter, don't bother about it! I'll find a rig. What else does he say?"

"He says there's a good fighting chance--a very good one. He says her grit alone--Oh, Belden, what shall we do? *What shall we do?*"

Peter sat down heavily on the lowest stair.

"Only last week she was so well--and yet she really wasn't. I suppose he knows. But it doesn't seem possible--I can't get it through my head. Poor little Caddy! She never had a sick day in her life. No headaches, like most Women, even--no nonsense--Oh, Belden, *what shall we do?*"

"Brace up, Peter; think what a good fighting chance means, think of that! It's not as if Caddy were old; she has that on her side. She's seven years behind me, you know."

Peter scowled. "You're fifty, aren't you?"

"Not a bit. Only forty-eight, and just that, too. Now you go out and get the nurse, and I'll stay here. It'll do you a lot of good. Don't mope around in the house all day--what's the use?"

"I can't leave the house. Honestly, Belden, I can't. I've tried twice, and I just walk right back. It's no good. There's the cart--and you won't be long, will you?"

Belden took up the reins with a vague sense of momentary relief: it was something to do. Under the influence of the fresh autumn air his spirits rose; he found himself enjoying the swift rattle of the cart and the beat of the horse's feet. After all, think of Caddy's grit; think of her fine constitution! A fighting chance--that was little enough to say, though. Why couldn't he have put it a little stronger? Hitchcock always was a pessimist.

At the station the usual crowd of well-dressed suburbanites quieted their horses and waited impatiently for the express. As Belden drew up into line, they greeted him with a subdued interest; coachmen left their seats to ask how Mrs. Moore was to-day, and when could one see her? A sudden mist came over his eyes as he answered briefly, "Very soon--I hope."

The train thundered in; in an incredibly short time all the guests and commuters were hurried off toward town--where was that nurse?

As his glance wandered through the thinning crowd, it was met suddenly and squarely by two brown eyes set in a fresh pink face framed by dark hair lightly sprinkled with gray. The second that he looked into that woman's eyes taught him her character, absolutely, as finally as if he had grown up with her. One could trust her to the last ditch, he thought.

She walked straight up to the cart. "I am the nurse sent for by Dr. Hitchcock. Are you Mr. Moore?"

"I am Mrs. Moore's brother--Mr. Belden," he explained. "Have you your checks?"

"That is all arranged," she returned briefly. "I am all ready. May I ask you to hurry? Dr. Hitchcock was anxious for me to see her before six, when the fever begins."

His nerves were more sharply edged than he knew: an instant irritation seized him.

"There is plenty of room in the back of the cart," he insisted, "the express people are very uncertain. Would you not better give me the checks?"

She swung herself up beside him with a firm, assured motion; for a heavily built woman she carried herself very lightly.

"I think not," she said decidedly, "the man has started, I am sure. I would rather lose no time."

He bowed and started the horse: he disliked her already. To a deep-seated, involuntary disgust that any woman should have to earn her living he added a displeased wonder that one should choose this method of doing it. There must be disagreeable details connected with it, embarrassments, absolute indignities: why did they not marry? This woman was good-looking enough. She was very obstinate--almost dictatorial. His idea of womanhood was hopelessly confused with clouds of white tulle, appealing eyes, and a desire for guidance. It was impossible to connect any of these characteristics with the woman beside him.

For a while they drove in silence. Then compunction seized him and he remarked on the beauty of the foliage. She assented easily, but seemed no more relieved by the speech than embarrassed by the silence. It was impossible to treat her as a hired servant: one felt a strong personality in her. Before they reached the house he was searching for conversation that should not bore her.

As they stepped into the wide hall, where he observed with a shade of displeasure that her luggage had come before them, Dr. Hitchcock met them.

"Ah, Miss Strong, glad to see you. Come right up. On time, as usual, of course! I was afraid you couldn't make it. Jameson comes to-morrow, you know--"

They were up the stairs; Belden stood idly in the hall where they had left him. He had had an idea of showing her the house, stating some of the facts of Clarice's sudden and terrible need of her, indicating that in a family so jarred from the very foundations it would be wiser to look to him than to the bewildered master of the establishment; but this was not necessary.

Evidently she persisted in dispensing with his services.

His hand slipped to his vest pocket, but he replaced the cigar uncertainly: it seemed not quite the thing to smoke. Ought he to go to Peter? In his mind's eye he saw the poor fellow haunting the landing by Caddy's door; he had an idea that in some way he kept things quiet by doing this. And how could one be sure that the troubled creature wanted company?

There was a violent ring at the bell, a jarring of wheels on the asphalt. The door flew open and the prettiest little woman imaginable, all fluffy ends and scarlet flowers and orris scent, rushed toward him.

"Oh, Will! Oh, Will!" she gasped, "isn't it terrible? Where is Peter? Can I see her? Oh, Will!"

Instinctively he took her in his arms--one always did that with Peter's sister--and she put her head on his shoulder and cried a little, while he patted her and murmured, "There, there!"

She was so manifestly comforted, and it was so pleasant to comfort her--this was what a woman should be. He felt a renewed sense of capacity, of readiness for even the most terrible emergency. He led her gently to the great cushioned window-seat and listened sympathetically to her excited babblings.

"It will kill Peter--it will kill him! In--in a great m-many ways, you know, Will, Peter isn't so--so c-calm as Caddy. He is just bound up in her. Suppose--Oh, Will!"

"Don't cry, Sue dear, don't!" he said soothingly. "She has a good chance--a fine chance, really. These things are mostly resisting power, you know, and grit, and think what a lot of grit Caddy's got!"

"Oh, I know, I know! Don't you know when the baby died--that first baby--and s-she was so weak she could hardly speak? Never mind, P-Peter, we'll have another! Oh, dear, she was so pl-plucky, Will! And now to think--"

He choked a little. "I know, I know," he murmured, "Caddy's a brick. She always was."

She sat up, not wholly withdrawing from his arm, and patted her eyes, breathing brokenly. Little gusts of orris floated toward him.

"Where are the children?" she asked, almost herself now.

"They're here--Peter wants them one minute and sends them away the next. I should send them to grandmother's, but he won't hear of it."

A light step sounded on the stair. The nurse appeared on the lower landing. She was dressed in cool blue gingham;

the straps of her white apron marked the firm, broad lines of her bust and shoulder.

"Is this Mrs. Wylie?" she said in her clear, assured voice. "Mrs. Moore would like to see her a moment. Will you come with me?"

"I will come directly," and Sue gathered together her gloves and hand-bag.

"She's very good-looking--it's a pity her hair is so gray," she breathed in his ear. As the two women stood together a moment on the landing he realized, not for the first time, that Sue was a little too small. But he had never thought her sallow before.

Peter came in by the greenhouse door, walking slowly, his hands behind his back. He looked old for the first time in his jolly, persistently boyish life.

"Those chrysanthemums are all drying up," he complained fretfully; "not one of the blamed servants has done a thing since--since--O Lord, Will, what shall we be doing this time tomorrow? Where are the children? Where's Miss Strong? There's a woman for you! Caddy took to her directly. She's there now. She's talking to her about the children. Oh, my God!"

Belden grasped his hand and they walked silently up and down the hall.

"Aunt Lucia's coming to-night," Peter resumed nervously. "She will drive me mad. Take care of her, will you? If I could have choked her off--but when you think she was just like a mother to Cad all these years, what can you do? She's got a right. You'd think she'd have got some sense from living with Cad so long. I told Henry to go for her--and there you are," he added, as the cart drew up before the open door.

Belden went slowly down the steps; he detested Aunt Lucia, and Clarice had always stood between them.

"How do you do?" he began, assisting her from the high seat. Her long crape veil caught in the wheel, and the numberless black and floating ends of her costume wound themselves about him as he bent down to disentangle her.

"Oh, Wilmot, this is a terrible day for us all, is it not? Be careful of the hem of that veil, please. When I kissed Clarice good-by last Christmas I little thought *what* a good-by it was! Is she conscious? You have muddied the boa, I think, but never mind. Can I see her once more?"

"For Heaven's sake, Aunt Lucia, anybody would think Caddy was in her grave! She's a long way from it yet, thank God! Of course she's conscious, and spunky as the--as ever. I don't think you really needed to--"

"My dear Wilmot, I prepared Clarice for her confirmation, I dressed her for her wedding, and I was here when the children were born. If you think that I would fail her in this crisis you have a very poor idea of my character. But then, I am perfectly aware that you always had. Oh, there is Peter! My poor Peter!" She rushed toward him, and Belden smiled sardonically as his brother-in-law planted a perfunctory kiss on her chin.

"This may comfort you, Peter, as it has me so often in such circumstances. So short, so true, so helpful. 'Undemeath are the everlasting arms!' Do you feel that, Peter?"

"I--I--yes, indeed, Aunt Lucia--you must want a bite of something, I'm sure, driving so far."

Peter writhed miserably in Aunt Lucia's crape-and-jet arms.

"Not till I have seen her, Peter. Afterwards I shouldn't mind. I have brought such a beautiful address by Bishop Hunter. It was delivered on the occasion of the death of Governor -----, unless I forgot to put it in with my knitted shawl. I believe I did. I will send for it directly. When my dear husband--he was so fond of Clarice--died, I read it more than anything else, except the Prayer-book, of course. You will surely find it a help."

"Yes, Aunt Lucia. Your room is ready, and--"

"Not till I have seen her, Peter."

"Susy is there now, and Miss Strong says nobody else this evening. Tomorrow--"

Aunt Lucia drew away.

"Do I understand that Susy Wylie--no relation at all--is preferred before the only mother Clarice has had for all these years?"

Peter winced. "But you weren't here, Aunt Lucia," he argued wearily.

"Who is Miss Strong?"

"Here she is!" There was great relief in Peter's voice. "Miss Strong, my aunt, Mrs. Wetherly."

"Mrs. Moore sends you her best love, and wants you to get thoroughly rested, so that you can see her the first thing in the morning, Mrs. Wetherly. She says you are not to let them frighten you."

As if by magic the formidable frown faded from Aunt Lucia's forehead. She smiled approvingly at the nurse.

"Very well. I should like to ask you a few questions--Clarice was always thoughtful."

They moved away together. The two men stared at each other.

"How do you account for that?" Belden queried.

"Oh, it's her calm way and her voice. You want to do everything she says. Norah says she's sure Mrs. Moore will get well now, with her to take care of her. By George, Will, if she pulls Caddy through it'll be worth her while, I tell you."

"Oh, they always do their best. And they all have that habit, I fancy. It's part of the training."

Peter looked up surprised.

"You don't like her, eh?"

"How absurd. I never considered her particularly. I don't care for masculine, dictatorial women, on general principles--"

"Oh, nonsense! I tell you you've taken a grudge against her, and you want to get rid of it as soon as possible."

"I suppose I have a right to my opinion," Belden began hotly, but a wave of remorse surged over him at sight of the other man's drawn, nervous face.

"Any one would think we had nothing to do but scrap over a trained nurse," he said lightly. "She's all you say, I haven't a doubt, old man, and if she pulls Caddy through, I'll sing her praises louder than any of you."

They sat in silence. A burst of laughter from the kitchen-garden startled them, and Belden started up as if to check it.

"Don't stop 'em--it's the servants. Why shouldn't they laugh?" said Peter quietly. "I've been thinking it all over. If Caddy--if--if she doesn't get well, she doesn't want a lot of black and all that. It's bad for the children. And she said the children oughtn't to grow up without a mother--think of that!"

"I guess that's all right," said Belden sadly. "Look at my boy there!"

A slender, stoop-shouldered lad slouched by the long hall-window, his hands in his pockets, an unlighted cigarette in his mouth.

"Well, well, we all have our load!" Peter's mood had changed utterly, to the other's astonishment. He seemed gentler, more thoughtful, controlled beyond belief.

"I don't see why we shouldn't smoke," he added, and they lighted cigars.

"You see, we talked it all over," he said, half to himself, "and she's so reasonable and calm, herself... She says Margaret's going to grow up just like her. That's a comfort.. And there's the boy."

Suddenly the cigar dropped from his lips to the floor.

"Good God, Belden!" he shouted, "I kept thinking she'd be here, too! I forgot--I--Oh, what rot! Do you think I'll stand it? Do you think I'll put up with it? Why didn't Hitchcock know before? It was his business to know! I tell you I'll ruin that man if it takes every dollar I've got!"

Belden stared at him helplessly. Was this Peter, this red-faced, scowling menace? As he watched him silently the nurse came in from the greenhouse.

"Mrs. Moore wants to say good night to you, Mr. Moore," she said, her deep, clear voice echoing strangely after the hoarse passion of Peter's rage. "I found these all picked--were you going to take them to her?"

Peter drew a deep breath and put out a shaking hand for the flowers.

"I don't know what's the matter with me, Will--I talk like a fool," he half whispered. "I can't get used to this damned see-saw. First I'm all ready for it, and then I'm nearly wild. And so it goes--up and down, up and down."

"How is she? Is it all settled for to-morrow? Hitchcock said that perhaps--"

"Mrs. Moore is doing very well--really very well. She was a little excited when Mrs. Wylie was with her, but she is nicely sleepy now. I think it will be better to stay only a moment. She will get a good night's rest to-night, it is so cool. The weather is on our side."

She smiled into his eyes and nodded gravely. He brightened and squared his shoulders. As he went quickly up the stairs, Belden stopped the woman.

"Tell me," he said authoritatively, "how is my sister, really? What do you consider her chance?"

She looked him easily in the eyes. "It is impossible to say," she returned gravely. "Your sister is a very brave, self-possessed woman, and seems to have a good constitution. That is, of course, half the battle. But her case is very complicated, and until the operation, no one can tell. You may have every confidence in Dr. Jameson. He is a magnificent surgeon."

Before her non-committal eyes his own fell baffled. He was more irritated than he cared to own. Could she not see that he was prepared for anything, that his self-control was as great as her own? She treated him like a child; those professional reserves, necessary, doubtless, in the case of Peter and his excitable sister, were wasted on him. Why could she not see it?

"I am quite aware of Dr. Jameson's skill," he said coldly, "but I had hoped that you would find yourself able to break through the professional attitude sufficiently to give me your real opinion, which, of course, you must have formed."

She threw him a quick glance. "Ah, my friend," he thought exultingly, "you have a temper, then!" But in an instant it

was gone.

"I have told you all I was able to tell," she said evenly. "I have been here but a short time, you know."

She turned and left the hall, and he, chafing under a sense of merited rebuke, conscious of a foolish petulance, went discontentedly into the library. He seemed to be continually at fault with Miss Strong, but unable to resist the effort to master her.

The evening was very lonely and still. Peter had gone to his room early, and the children had effaced themselves: Susy was with them. Aunt Lucia read the "Imitation of Christ," by the fire. Bel-den's mind turned unconsciously to the old days when Caddy and he dreamed out their future in the nursery. It had all come out just as she had planned, except this. Poor little Caddy--a fighting chance!

The next morning seemed to fly by them: it was nine o'clock, ten, eleven.

At this hour a feverish activity suddenly spread through the house. They met and passed each other, hurrying, troubled, secretive; the servants stumbled and quarrelled in their purposeless haste. To Belden, quieting when he could, sternly optimistic everywhere, at heart heavy and uncertain, it seemed that the one anchor of their hopes was this calm, clear-eyed woman in her uniform of authority!

Peter hung pathetically on her lightest word; the children, dazed and terrified, ate and exercised at her command; his own boy, a strange hard look in his furtive eyes, followed her like a dog, and Aunt Lucia submitted with unprecedented meekness to an abrupt curtailment of her interview with Clarice. He himself went into the bedroom for a moment, half uncertain of the reality of the experience. It was absurd to remember that he might never see her, conscious, again--his own little Caddy.

He sat awkwardly on the side of the bed.

"Well, little woman, how goes it?"

"Queen's taste, Will!"

"Good for you! I'm proud of the Beldens, Caddy--Billy acts like a drum-major."

Her eyes softened.

"The dear boy," she murmured. Their eyes met. "*Look after him*," hers said, and his, "*As long as I live!*" He stooped and kissed her lightly. "Mind you look as well as this to-morrow!"

"Oh, I shall be all right. Miss Strong will take care of me. When I think how I have the best of everything--such care--I've been a very happy woman, Will dear."

His eyes filled. He threw her a kiss and went out blindly.

A hand touched his arm. "You've done her good," said the nurse softly. "You stayed just long enough. She'll take her nap now."

He went heavily into his own room. Below him a little porch led out from the smoking-room, and as he sat lost in a miserable reverie, voices rose from it to his window.

"Nobody knows what she's been to me. As much like a mother as I'd let her. I did everything but the cigarettes, and I meant to tell her I'd do that too, next month--that's her birthday."

Was this his boy, that pleading, shaken voice? He looked out: the lad was fingering Miss Strong's white apron nervously. She leaned over the railing of the little porch, her hand on his shoulder.

"You tell her about it--I'll never smoke another one. It was the last thing she asked me."

"I'll tell her--she will be so pleased, I know. She asked about you yesterday. I'll let you know as soon as I can."

Belden, a little later, hurried downstairs, with a confused idea of thanking her. On the threshold of the library he paused, amazed. Dr. Hitchcock sat before a small green baize table, studying five playing-cards held fan-shape in his left hand. Opposite him sat Miss Strong, holding the pack expectantly.

"You can give me two, my dear, I think," he said as Belden entered. Looking up, he smiled apologetically.

"I dare say you are surprised," he suggested, "but I have been much exasperated, Mr. Belden, and a long experience has taught me that nothing so quickly clears the mind as throwing a few hands of poker. Miss Strong--an invaluable person--is kindly assisting me. Did I say three? Yes, of course. Thank you. We are playing for beans only, you see."

Belden watched them curiously. She sat as imperturbably as by Caddy's bedside, her eyes fixed thoughtfully on her cards.

"--And raise you three," she said.

"Five more. You will excuse me, Belden, but your aunt, Mrs. Wetherly, is a somewhat unusually irritating woman. I'll see you, Miss Strong--ah, yes, two pair, queens up."

"What has she done?"

"She insists that Mrs. Moore shall not only see Mr. Burchard, to which I have not the least objection, but that he

shall hold a communion service, directly, there. Now, if your sister had asked for this herself, it would be another matter, but unless this is the case I always regard it as a depressing agent. It is a strain, in any case."

"I think Mrs. Moore will go through with it very easily, doctor," Miss Strong interposed, slipping the cards into their leather envelope and gathering up the beans. "She will be fresh from her nap, and it will be very short. She has promised Mrs. Wetherly, you know, and it would distress her more to break it--"

"All right, all right. Have it your way. Much obliged."

He took the cards from her and went out.

"My aunt is very trying," Belden began.

"Oh, many people feel so about it," she assured him, "especially High Church people. She only did what she thought right."

He drew a breath of relief.

"You'll see she's not too tired?" he asked; and as he went to luncheon he wondered at the comfort he derived from her mute nod.

He was roused from the table, where the dishes left by them were untouched for the most part, by a disturbance in the hall.

"It's the priest," the waitress murmured, and with a frown he checked her rising tears.

Aunt Lucia bustled through the room.

"You must come, Wilmot," she whispered eagerly, "she asked for you. Peter is locked into his room, and neither of the children has been confirmed. Susy, of course, is a Presbyterian. Not that dear Mr. Burchard would object--he is so broad. But you have no excuse. Oh, it is beautiful, Wilmot! She looks so lovely!"

He followed her wearily. What did it matter? It seemed to him ominous, terrible--but it would please Caddy. She sat propped up in the bed. Her cheeks were crimson, her eyes bright. White chrysanthemums stood in silver vases, candles burned softly on the white-draped dresser. Mr. Burchard, in the hall just beyond, was slipping his surplice over his head. A faint odor of wine mingled with the flowers.

Belden dared not look at her. She was to him, in that moment, mystic, holy, a thing apart. He dropped on his knees beside a silvery white apron, his eyes on the floor, his heart beating hard.

The clergyman entered slowly, the service began. It was all a murmured maze to him. Aunt Lucia sobbed quietly beside him, but as he glanced at her he caught a light on her wet, uplifted face that thrilled him strangely. Her deep responses spoke a faith and surety that swallowed for the moment all her little sillinesses and obstinacies.

The solemn words grew in intensity, the candles flickered audibly in the sacred hush. The clergyman moved toward the bed, and they heard Caddy's breath draw out in a deep, shuddering sob; her teeth chattered against the cup.

Belden set his jaw; it was cruel, brutal! They were killing her. His clinched fist moved blindly toward his neighbor: he touched her hand and gripped it fiercely.

In front of him on the wall hung a large photograph of Billy's base-ball nine in full uniform. He could have drawn it from memory, afterwards. Billy, he remembered, was a great catcher. He held hard to that cool, firm hand.

"--be amongst you and remain with you always. Amen." There was a little stir. The hand was drawn from his.

"Come, now," whispered Aunt Lucia, and he walked, stumbling and stiff from kneeling, from the room. At the door he glanced a second backward, but only Dr. Hitchcock was to be seen, bending over the bed. Miss Strong had already taken away candles and flowers, and Caddy's triple mirror was back on the dresser.

Mr. Burchard, in his long black cassock, offered his hand cordially.

"I am glad you could be with us, Mr. Belden," he began, but the other broke in:

"If you have tired her, if this--makes a difference--" he muttered fiercely, "you will have me to settle with. Mind that!"

He hurried down the stairs, his hands still clinched. Peter was starting off with the road-wagon. They nodded shortly at each other.

From then the time raced on incredibly. The great surgeon, with his two assistants, was in the hall; he was on the stairs; he was lost to sight. There was a momentary rush and bustle, the closing of a door. Peter came out, whispering to himself, and disappeared somewhere. The others, clustered in the library, spoke fitfully.

"They carried her on a cot into the west room," somebody murmured close to Belden. It was little Margaret. "I saw her. She waved her hand at me! I threw her a kiss. Miss Strong smiled at me--I love Miss Strong."

Aunt Lucia sobbed. Susy bit her lip and played with Billy's unwilling hand.

"Where's my father? Where's he gone?" he demanded. "Who's that other woman with the apron?"

Miss Strong appeared at the door. "She has taken the ether very well indeed; they are much pleased," she said softly. They hung on her words, they overwhelmed her with questions. She soothed them like children.

It grew suddenly clear to Belden that Caddy would die. It must be so. He wondered that they had hoped for anything else. He was sorry for them all. He watched indifferently while Miss Strong led the children away--he knew she was taking them to their father. Later, while Aunt Lucia, on her knees, read through streaming eyes from her prayer-book, and Susy talked nervously to him, he watched the firm, full figure of the woman pacing up and down the piazza outside, her arm drawn through his restless boy's.

"God bless her!" he said aloud.

Afterwards he could never recall the consecutive happenings of the end. He saw only separate pictures.

In one, a strange young man opened the door and said the words that frightened them with delight.

In another, a drawn, old, white-faced man--surely not Dr. Jameson--leaned weakly in a chair, while a woman handed him a tiny glass of colored liquid.

In yet another, a father hid his face in his little daughter's bosom and sobbed, with shaking shoulders; his tall son smiled bravely over the bent head.

In the last picture he himself bore a part; for when he came upon his shy, suspicious boy clasped in the kind arms of the woman whose brown eyes, once seen, had haunted his thoughts ever since, he gathered them both to him irresistibly. As he laid his cheek against hers, he felt that it was wet with tears.

"It lies with you now," he whispered in her ear, "to give her back to us, well and strong. He says you can. Afterwards--"

She drew away from him.

"I--I must go. I am so glad--I will do my best," she answered unsteadily.

He caught her hand. "And afterwards?" he repeated, a growing mastery in his voice. She tried to meet his eyes, but her own fell, conquered.