

# The Price of Ambition

A DOCTOR'S CHRISTMAS STORY

BY HERBERT MONTGOMERY

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I RECEIVED one morning in my surgery a visit from Herbert Springthorpe.

"I have heard a good deal of you lately, doctor," he said. "That was a very clever cure you effected in my friend Russell's case."

"That was nothing," I replied. "I discovered that my predecessor in the case had made a mistake in his diagnosis and was treating the patient for an imaginary disease, thereby aggravating the one from which he was really suffering. I simply reversed the treatment, whereupon the patient, who is a man of excellent constitution, began to mend directly."

"You are modest, doctor," he said laughingly. "However, I have sufficient confidence in your judgment to ask your advice in a somewhat delicate matter. The delicacy lies in the circumstance that the patient must be kept in ignorance of the fact that she is being observed. It is my wife, Mrs. Springthorpe, to whom I refer. She has been in failing health for some time, but from what cause I cannot ascertain. Our family physician, Dr. Hollister, in whom I place implicit trust, confesses himself entirely at fault and would be very glad of your opinion, but Mrs. Springthorpe is firm in her refusal to see another physician. Therefore, you will have to conceal the real object of your visit under the guise of friendship."

"Can you give me any idea of the symptoms?" I asked.

"Nothing but a wasting away, a fading from day to day, a mysterious sapping of the foundations of vitality."

"Has Dr. Hollister formed any opinion?"

"He is inclined to believe that the trouble is mental; that she has some brain disease, or that she has something on her mind the anxiety of which is killing her. But that, of course, we know to be impossible."

"I must confess that you have aroused my professional curiosity," I said. "I shall be happy to see Mrs. Springthorpe and compare notes with Dr. Hollister."

"Thank you, doctor. As I have already indicated, it would not do for you to come openly in your professional capacity, but I shall be entertaining my friends Christmas week at Gravelly Grange, my North Carolina country place, where you know we live in a very quiet way, as Mrs. Springthorpe does not care for town life. I shall be very glad if you would make one of them."

"Nothing could better agree with my own ideas," I replied. "If the case presents any difficulty, I shall be more likely to arrive at a correct opinion from random observations."

"Very well, then, doctor; we shall expect you on Monday."

Gravelly Grange was a red brick edifice faced with stone, in the style known in colonial days. Upon my arrival I had scarcely time to change my dress when a knock came at my door, and Springthorpe entered.

"I believe we tacitly agreed not to discuss the real object of your visit, but I must express my great anxiety for my wife's health. I am afraid if this mysterious disease is not promptly checked Mrs. Springthorpe is not long for this world. I must tell you that we are an exceptionally affectionate and devoted couple, although I am nearly twice her age, and the separation would be cruel both to me. As we grow older our attachments become stronger or our sensibilities more keen. Come; I will introduce you to Mrs. Springthorpe."

One glance told me as much as I should probably ever know of Mrs. Springthorpe's case. In the enlaced lines of her face I read phthisis, and there was a furtive, hunted look in the eyes that as plainly spoke of mental trouble. I saw, too, that she was no ordinary person.

I was surprised to detect a fleeting expression of recognition at sight of me, but it passed so quickly that I should have thought myself mistaken had not Springthorpe, also observing it, asked:

"Have you two met before?"

"No," I replied; "at least not to my recollection."

She smiled sweetly and extended her hand.

"No," she said. "Dr. Norris and I have never met."

At the sound of her voice I started, for there was a tone which struck my ear as familiar; but, although I scrutinized her countenance, I certainly did not remember having seen that face.

After dinner, when we had rejoined the ladies and the other guests were either chatting in couples or grouped about the piano, Mrs. Springthorpe came and sat beside me.

"Well," she asked, "have you found the owner of the voice?"

The speech was accompanied by a slight, peculiar gesture, one of those little nervous tricks of manner to which we are all subject and which so clearly mark our individuality. In this case it supplied me with the missing link of evidence and enabled me at once to reply:

"Yes; it has just occurred to me."

"Who was it?"

"A lady who once called to consult me professionally."

"Indeed?"

Her tone implied a desire for further information, so I proceeded:

"It was about six years ago. I was then a struggling young physician, nursing a feeble practice in a new neighborhood. One day a lady in a thick veil called to ask my advice in regard to her mother, who, she said, was suffering from heart disease. Then she described the symptoms, which were those of a person in a very critical state. They had been expecting, she said, the return of a long absent son and brother who was a naval officer, but she had that morning received the sad intelligence of the wreck of his vessel, with the loss of all on board. Some explanation would have to be made to the mother of his continued absence, but could they tell her the truth in the state of her health?"

"I replied that such a revelation at such a time would probably be attended by fatal consequences. She left, declaring that at whatever cost she would conceal the truth from her mother."

"And you have never seen her since?"

"No; I had quite forgotten the circumstance."

"And you would not recognize her if you met her again?"

"As I said, her face was concealed by a thick veil. I have not the slightest idea of her features."

"But the voice was like mine?"

"Yes."

"You do not think it was I?"

"Had it been you you would have recollected the circumstance."

"Which I do not. But there are resemblances between voices, I suppose, as there are sometimes between faces."

"I do not remember ever having heard of such a case."

"And you are skeptical on the point?"

"I should have been but for this instance."

"The coincidence appears to me to be remarkable, for at first sight it seemed as though I had met you before. How do you account for that?"

"It is something I cannot account for."

"Do you believe that two people who have never met in the flesh may meet and become acquainted in dreams?"

"I protest," I said, laughing. "You have me at a disadvantage. This is a theory I never heard before and in regard to which I am unprepared to offer an opinion. I am curious to hear more of it. What do you call it?"

"Ah, doctor, I am afraid you would only prove a seoffer." At this point she was called away.

"Mrs. Chay, the present Mrs. Springthorpe, usually slept in the same apartment—she was my first wife's companion—but on this particular night my first wife was feeling so well that she dismissed her to her own room. The maid slept in the anteroom, but heard nothing."

"Had your present wife access to her during the night?"

"No. Although their rooms adjoined wall to wall, they were entered from different passages. But I am sure I am boring you by talking so much of my own affairs."

"On the contrary, you have aroused my interest."

"You are very kind to say so, doctor."

Here we parted, and I retired to rest.

"So," I thought, "I have already learned more of Mrs. Springthorpe's case than I care to know."

Revolving in my mind some pretext for taking my departure on the following day, I fell asleep.

My rest was uneasy. I seemed never to lose consciousness of my surroundings, yet there was something eerie and uncanny about them that did not belong to the waking world. There seemed alternations of light and shadow, as thin, fleecy clouds chased each other across the path of the moon, as if the moon had been open to the sky, and there were rushes of cold wind that stirred my hair with the soothing rustle of leafy branches. I seemed to hear the whisperings about my bed as strange, airy beings floated in and out upon the moonbeams and hovered round about me, and through all and above all I heard the sound of that voice I had heard in my surgery six years before, the voice of the present Mrs. Springthorpe.

"You shall not part us! You shall not part us!" it seemed to say. Then I was awakened by an unmistakable actual sound, a dull thud, that jarred the room.

It was the closing down of my window, which I had left partly open to admit a free current of air. Doubtless a sash line had parted, I thought, and turned again to slumber.

This time I slept so heavily that it seemed to me I was imprisoned deep

down in the bowels of the earth in a sulphurous atmosphere at an enormous pressure in a darkness so dense as to seem material. My head was buried under some crushing weight. Ages passed thus, and I had become incorporated with the rock itself, when human voices broke in upon the eternal stillness of my inferno; but, although I heard their very words and can remember them now, they conveyed no meaning to me. Then came the sound of blows, which gave way to a fearful crash, and the pure air of heaven rushed into my prison house. I felt myself lifted upon my feet, but movement was so painful that I threw myself down again, for I felt that I only wanted to sleep undisturbed. Then a voice said:

"Norris, Norris! For God's sake, rouse yourself!"

"Walk him up and down," said another voice. "Bring him out into the passage!"

Again I was lifted up and forced along, and after what seemed to be endless peregrinations it began to dawn upon me that I was in the passage of Gravelly Grange, surrounded by Springthorpe's guests.

"How did this happen, doctor?" asked my host, who held me by the arm. I turned and gazed upon him stupidly.

"How did what happen?" I asked.

"What has happened?"

"You left your gas turned on full on going to bed."

"Impossible!"

"It is true. However, we were in time to save you. It was a fortunate circumstance that the major here chanced to be awake and, detecting the smell of gas, was able to trace it to your room. We were just in time, for you were quite unconscious."

"I cannot explain it," I said. "I never make a practice of leaving a jet burning. It is incredible that I should have broken into a habit of a lifetime."

In five minutes I was sleeping on a couch in my host's room without being troubled with dreams.

an outdoor reading, but this was not an ordinary woman.

Christmas passed at Gravelly Grange as it usually passes in the country houses of wealthy persons. There were the usual service at the church, the usual good cheer on the table and the usual Christmas tree in the evening for the guests. At the latter function Mrs. Springthorpe was at her best. She greeted every woman and child with a condescension so charming as to rob it of the implication of superiority. She was undoubtedly the most popular person present, and Springthorpe's eyes followed her with an eagerness and affection that to me were almost pitiable.

After the Christmas tree festivities host, hostess and guests danced merrily together, and the celebration was kept up until a late hour. When we went to our rooms we were a very tired lot of mortals; but, despite my fatigue, I determined to remain at my post to await developments. I threw myself half dressed upon the bed, resolved that nothing should tempt me to go to sleep. But the flesh is weak, and in a short time I was in as deep a slumber as though nothing were on my mind. Suddenly I started up, awakened by the shuddering sound of my slowly rising window.

There, without the window, outlined against the sky, appeared a dark robed, hooded figure like that of a Capuchin monk. Slowly the sash ascended to its full height, and noiselessly the figure mounted upon the sill and, stepping upon the window seat, reached the floor, whence it glided into the shadow that filled the corner of the room and was lost to sight.

After an anxious interval I again saw its dark outline encroaching on the area of diffused light that lay between me and the window, and I knew that it was slowly drawing toward me. As it approached the same stealthy footfall and deep, suppressed breathing I had heard the night before became audible. By the side of the bed it halted, with a deep inspiration, and a hand holding something which gleamed was lifted above the head. Dropping my feet to the floor, I sprang up, seizing the uplifted arm with my left hand and with my right arm pinning the figure against my breast.

There was a woman's cry, the gleaming thing fell to the floor, and the figure lay limp in my embrace. I placed it in a chair and hastily lit the gas.

Then I saw the insensible form of Mrs. Springthorpe and on the floor one of my own surgical knives, which I had thought secure in the case in my portmanteau. I had solved the mystery.

As Mrs. Springthorpe recovered her senses we remained gazing at each other in silence.

"Well," she said at last, "you have conquered. You know everything."

"Unhappy woman," I said, "I know that you caused the death of your former mistress because she stood in the way of your ambition and that you have twice attempted my life."

"Mercy, mercy!" she cried. "If you knew how I dreaded this moment! It was your life against his love. All night I paced my room, crying, 'You shall not part us!'"

"I heard you in my sleep."

"Yes; years ago I discovered the secret of these two rooms, the curious acoustic fact that at certain points in one low, intense sounds are reproduced in the other with such vivid distinctness as to seem actually present, and so I heard you breathing as you slept, and the thought came to me, as it came to me when I listened to her breathing and broke upon her slumber with the false story that killed her. My ambition has reaped nothing but Dead sea fruit."

"And you entered my room, and by the window! But how? Surely not by the coping, less than a foot in width?"

"Yes. At one time I was a gymnast and acrobat, and even if it had not been for that my determination would have carried me through, the determination of a dying woman, for whom death and danger have no further terror. The first night you were saved by an accidental discovery. The second I alarmed you by incautiously allowing you to hear me listening for your sleep. Tonight, the third, I thought to make sure. I put in your water bottle an opiate."

"Which I did not touch."

"You would have been found dead with your own knife in your heart. The general verdict would have been suicide. But it was not to be. You were to be my fate. Go to him. Break his heart with your revelation. Denounce me as a murderess."

She fell forward. I raised her and, seeing that she was indeed near the point of death, administered a restorative from my case.

"Mrs. Springthorpe," I said when she had somewhat recovered, "whatever your crime, this is not a time for judgment, and I am not your judge. Tomorrow I leave this place, and believe me, I shall never open my lips in regard to what I have discovered. Your punishment is complete. May your days end in peace and your husband never have cause to regret you less. But let me assist you to your room. You must not be discovered here."

I raised her to her feet, but she drew away. "My door is locked on the inside," she said and glanced toward the window.

"Not that way, for heaven's sake!" I cried. But she sprang upon the window seat and, turning, waved me back. Then she disappeared.

I dared not look after her, fearful of bringing about the catastrophe I dreaded. I stood breathless until I heard the words seemingly whispered in my very ear:

"All safe! Good night!"

The next day I announced that I should be obliged to return at once to the city. Springthorpe objected strenuously. "I have taken a great liking to

you," he said. "I like to talk to you. Perhaps it is because you are a good listener."

I again pleaded that my patients in Baltimore required my attention and informed him as gently as possible that Mrs. Springthorpe was beyond my help. I begged him to be prepared for the end.

Springthorpe was stunned by my information, but so far from operating as I had hoped my statement only seemed to make him more insistent that I should remain. Again I sought refuge in a white lie and explained with great circumspection the impossibility of my staying a day longer. Several of the guests who were to be there until Saturday afternoon implored me to accede to Mr. Springthorpe's request, but I was obdurate. I could not bring myself to pass another night under the roof of a hostess I knew to be morally, if not technically, a murderess. Seeing that argument was unavailing, Springthorpe ordered a carriage to take me to the station, and, looking at my watch, I saw that I had barely time to catch the fast mail for Baltimore. The carriage came in due time, and with a hurried "Goodby," I was about to step into it when a servant from the Grange informed me that his mistress begged that on no account should I leave without seeing her. I was in a quandary, but there was nothing for me but to wait. In a moment Mrs. Springthorpe arrived. Her usually drawn features were more plucked than ever, and she walked uncertainly. Her husband stepped forward and gallantly assisted her. As Mrs. Springthorpe approached the carriage she looked at me in an indescribably significant manner and, holding something aloft, said:

"Doctor, have you not forgotten this?"

In her hand was the knife with which she had the night before attempted my life. In the confusion of the moment I had neglected to pick it up from the floor where it fell when I grappled with her, and she must have got it after I had left to start for home. Mr. Springthorpe reached for the instrument, but she withdrew her hand.

"No," she said, "I will hand it to the doctor myself. He has been so kind to me since he has been here." And she gave me a meaningful look as she advanced, shaking off her husband's arm.

I was in doubt as to the creature's intentions. Something in her eye, something in the furtive-like movement with which she came toward me, warned me that her mind had given way and that there was just enough lucidity left to enable her to realize that before her was an enemy whom she must destroy. But I stepped forward, at the same time keeping my eye fixed upon the knife. We were within a couple of yards of each other when Mrs. Springthorpe staggered and would have fallen but for her husband, who caught her as she reeled backward.

I hastened to her side. As I bent my head toward her bosom I heard an indistinct whisper. I listened, and with a last effort she fairly hissed into my ear, "I hate you, and I should have!"

She collapsed. I made a careful examination, but it was unnecessary.

Mrs. Springthorpe had paid the price of her ambition.

FOR TWELFTH NIGHT.

Important Role Played by the Cake in England.

A Twelfth Night cake in England is as much a part of the Christmas festivities as is the tree itself. On Twelfth Night various gaudies and revels are arranged, the cake being finally drawn in by the children on a decorated cart or borne aloft by the servants on a board trimmed with Christmas greens. A recipe for making the cake comes from England: Beat to a smooth cream two pounds of unsalted butter, then add two pounds of powdered sugar, a whole nutmeg grated and an ounce each of powdered cinnamon, ginger, mace and allspice. Beat this mixture ten minutes and add gradually twenty eggs, beating the cake after that for twenty minutes. Stir in, a little at a time, two pounds of flour, four pounds of currants, a half pound of bruised almonds and half a pound each of candied orange and lemon peel and citron, beating the cake lightly after each addition. Last of all add a quart glass of brandy. Line a large cake tin with well buttered paper and fill it three-quarters full of the dough, which will leave room for the cake to rise. Cover the top with the buttered paper, and if the oven bakes fast at the bottom put a tin under the cake to keep it from burning. It should bake for four and a half hours in a slow but well heated oven. The icing that covers it is very thick, and to be thoroughly English the cake should be decorated with sugar figures and other large designs in ornamental icing. It will be seen that these are proportions for a large cake, and such the English Twelfth Night cake is meant to be.—Pittsburg Chronicle-Telegraph.

Joyousness at Christmastide.

Joyousness is the keynote of Christmastide. It is a time for Faith to sing her highest songs of praise. Sometimes and in some countries the glad-some spirit of the season has degenerated into bolsterous mummeries out of harmony with the character of a religious festival, but the great truth of the incarnation of Jesus has ever been beneath the various manifestations of joy. As the celebration of Christmastivity it must always remain one of the great festivals of the Christian year. This is a time for charitable deeds, for smiling faces, merry greetings and exchange of gifts, and it is certainly a fitting opportunity for us to accentuate the truth that our religion is one of hope and cheerfulness.—Christian Work.



I SPRANG UP, SEIZING THE UPLIFTED ARM.