

## Stories from the Diary of a Doctor.

By the Authors of "THE MEDICINE LADY."

### VI.—THE WRONG PRESCRIPTION.



I AM generally far too busy to leave town for Christmas, but one December comes vividly now before my memory, when, feeling the need of change and partial rest, I was induced to spend a week with my friends, the Onslows, at their beautiful country seat in Hampshire.

The house was full of guests, several of whom I knew already. My host was an old college friend; his wife was a distant relation of my own. For the first day or two of my visit I almost forgot that I was a doctor, and enjoyed the merry season as thoroughly as the youngest present.

There were three guests in the house who from the very first aroused my strong interest. One of these was a bright-looking young fellow of the name of Oliver; the others were two young girls, one of eighteen, the other a child of ten.

The open secret quickly reached my ears that Oliver and Frances Wilton were engaged to be married. They were a devoted couple—at least, that was my first impression; I had reason afterwards to fancy that the devotion was mostly on the part of the lover, and that the young lady, beautiful as she was to look at, had that callous nature to which strong feeling was impossible.

Miss Wilton was a contrast to her little sister, who was a perfect whirlwind of impetuosity, high spirits, laughter, and noise. The little girl, whose name was Rosamond, was a favourite with everyone in the house, and as she happened to be the only child of the party, all kinds of liberties were permitted to her.

On the morning of my third day at Holmwood, I was strolling through the shrubberies after breakfast when I came face to face with my host, Jack Onslow, in earnest conversation with Captain Oliver.

"Look here," said Jack, the moment he met me, "you are the very man I want. Here's Oliver in a dreadful state of mind. I tell him he cannot do better than consult you. You will quickly show him that he is merely suffering from an attack of the nerves."

"But you have noticed it yourself—confess that you have," said Oliver, turning and looking full at his host.

"Oh, I confess nothing," said Jack. "You had better confide in Halifax. Have a cigar, Halifax? Now I will leave you and Jim to have your conference together."

Whether Oliver would have confided in me at that moment I cannot say, but before I could accept Onslow's cigar or make any suitable reply, a shrill little voice was heard calling to us, and the next instant Rosamond Wilton, her hair streaming behind her and her eyes bright from excitement, rushed up.

"Jim, Jim," she exclaimed, addressing Oliver, "Frances wants you to do something for her. Oh, you needn't go to the house," as he was preparing to start off. "She wants you to go to the chemist at Market Lea at once. Take this note with you. The chemist will give you some medicine that you are to bring back. *Please* go at once, Jim."

"Is Frances ill?" asked Oliver.

"I don't know—I don't think she is quite well. Anyhow, she wants you to go at once—will you?"

"That I will, of course," said Oliver, his face brightening. "Tell her so, Rosamond."

Rosamond darted away, and I turned to the young man.

"I should like a walk," I said; "may I come with you?"

"With pleasure," he replied.

We started immediately, cutting across an open common as the nearest way to the little town.

When I saw Oliver talking to Onslow, he seemed undoubtedly depressed, but now he had recovered his usual spirits. He was a handsome young man of about five-and-twenty, with bright eyes, a resolute face, and an upright bearing. He was a captain in a crack regiment, and I understood that he was rich. I was at least ten years his senior. He represented the happy boy to me, and certainly gave me no hint of any possible cause for melancholy during our brisk walk.

We reached the chemist's. I waited outside while Oliver went in to execute his commission. After about a moment's absence he joined me, perturbation now very evident on his face.

"Look here, Dr. Halifax," he said, "I wonder if you can help me."

"With pleasure, if I can," I replied.

"Well, I wish you would come into the shop and speak to this stupid chemist. He refuses to give me the medicine which Miss Wilton has written for. He says he cannot supply it without a prescription, and that I must go back and get one. Frances evidently wants it very badly, and will be vexed at this delay. As you are a doctor, perhaps you can manage the matter."

I entered the shop immediately, and went up to the chemist. He was holding Miss Wilton's open letter in his hand.

"This gentleman is a doctor," said Oliver. "He'll make it all right. You had better let me have the medicine at once, as I know the lady wants it."

"Perhaps the doctor will write a prescription," said the chemist.

"I cannot do so, unless I know what is required," I said. "What medicine has Miss Wilton written for?"

"Are you her medical attendant, sir?"

"No."

"Then please pardon me, I am not permitted to tell you. This note is confidential."

As he spoke he tore it into several pieces, and flung the fragments beneath the counter.

"I am sorry to disoblige," he said, "but the contents of Miss Wilton's note are strictly private. If you, sir, as a doctor will see the lady, I have no doubt everything will be put right."

"You did well not to betray a confidence," I said, briefly, to the man, and then I hurried Oliver out of the shop.

All his good humour and high spirits had left him. He showed more disturbance than I thought the occasion warranted.

"Don't be distressed," I said to him, soothingly. "If Miss Wilton will allow me, I'll see her as soon as ever we get back to Holmwood, and will supply her with a proper prescription for anything she may require. There is nothing to alarm yourself about in the chemist refusing to supply a certain medicine without a prescription. A chemist lays himself open to a large penalty if he does so. Miss Wilton is probably suffering from toothache, and has sent for chloroform or something of that nature."

"Oh, it is not this alone," answered the poor fellow. "It's this and a hundred other things added on to it."

Here he paused and gave me a quick glance of interrogation. After a moment he said, with a certain reluctance:—

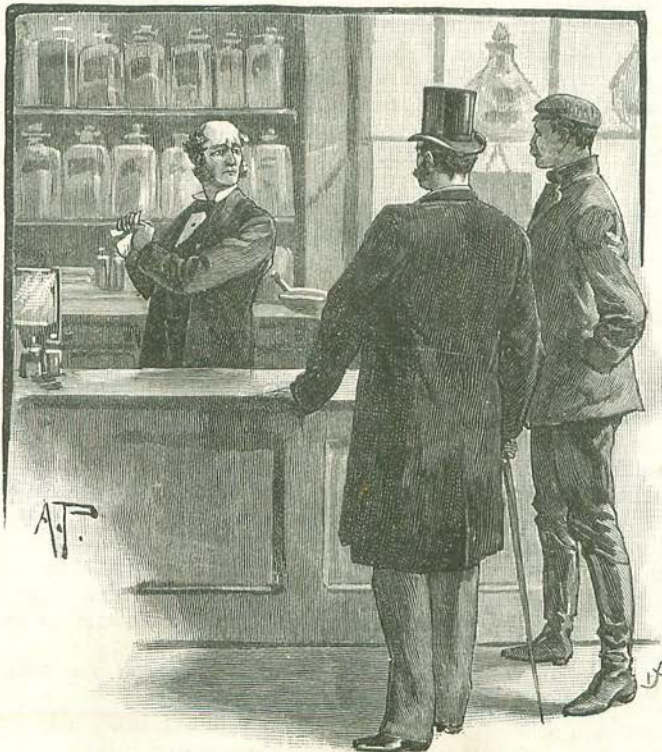
"Onslow says that you are awfully good-natured, Dr. Halifax."

"I should be a brute if I took up the medical profession and were not good-natured to people in trouble," I replied.

"Well, that's just what I am: I'm in an awful state of perplexity. Onslow laughs at me; but, then, he's not a doctor. I'm convinced this is a case for a medical man. May I state it to you?"

"I shall be delighted to give you any advice in my power," I replied.

"It isn't about myself. It's about Frances. You know, of course, that we are engaged to be married? You have seen her—I think you sat next her last evening at dinner. Do you mind giving me your candid opinion about her?"



"HE TORE IT INTO SEVERAL PIECES."

"She is a very pretty girl," I replied.

"Oh, yes, yes—I don't mean her appearance. If you were asked about her—her health, mental and physical, what would you say?"

"Nothing; for I know nothing."

"I always thought doctors could see farther than most men," answered Oliver, almost with irritation. "I tell you what it is: Frances, to all intents and purposes, is a dead woman, a statue cut in marble. She can move, she can speak, she can look lovely, she can eat—a little, not much—but she can no more love, she can no more feel than if she were really the marble I have likened her to. We have been engaged for six months; I have been away for over four. When I parted with her last she was Rosamond grown up. Think of Rosamond with her fire, her overflowing spirits, her vivacity. Is Frances like Rosamond now?"

"No," I said. "I have noticed the two sisters and observed the great contrast between them. The little one has a great deal of colour and her eyes are bright. Miss Wilton is deadly pale, and pretty as her eyes are, their expression is dull."

"They usen't to have a dull expression," said Oliver. "Six months ago they had plenty of sparkle and life in them, and her cheeks were just like roses. But," continued the poor fellow, "it is not the physical change that cuts me to the heart, it's the— the absence of all life; all—all affection; all interest in me and everything else. We are to be married in two months' time; Frances has not the least idea of breaking off our engagement. There's not a scrap of the flirt about her; but I might as well make a bride of a doll, or a bit of marble, for all the real interest she takes."

"Was she excitable and affectionate when first you were engaged?" I inquired.

"Yes—yes—*rather!*" He coloured as he spoke.

"Did you ever ask her if she felt ill?"

"Often. She says that she is in perfect health; but, oh! the apathy in her eyes! Sometimes, Dr. Halifax, I am inclined to fear that her mind is deranged."

"I don't think there is the least occasion for you to alarm yourself on that score," I said. "Do you think Miss Wilton will see me as a medical man?"

"I am sure she won't. Nothing makes her so much annoyed as the faintest hint that she is not in perfect health."

"She cannot maintain the position that she is in perfect health when she sends you

off in a hurry for a certain medicine to the chemist. Look here, Captain Oliver, I'll take it upon myself to see her as soon as ever I go home. You may trust me to respect your confidence, and if there is anything really wrong, I think I can soon discover it."

I had scarcely said these last words before the sound of hurrying feet caused us both to look up. Little Rosamond Wilton had come up the road to meet us.

"I came for the medicine," she panted. "Give it to me, Jim."

"Unfortunately, I haven't got it," said Oliver.

"Not got it? What will poor Frances do?"

"I am ever so sorry, but it is her own fault. She forgot to send the prescription."

"No, she didn't forget; she hadn't got the prescription. Collins has it. Oh, what an awful worry this is! What a stupid, stupid chemist! Frances wrote to him, and told him exactly what she wanted. He might have sent the medicine to her. Poor darling, she is nearly wild with misery now; and what will she do if there is any further delay? What a cruel chemist!"

"No, Rosamond, he is not cruel," I said. "The law forbids chemists to give certain drugs without proper prescriptions. The chemist could not have acted otherwise."

"Then Frances will die!" exclaimed the child, stamping her little foot on the ground, and tears filling her bright brown eyes. "Frances will die. She can't go on suffering like this, it is quite impossible. You don't know. You can't guess. It is dreadful!"

"I can soon put your sister right," I said, in a confident tone. "Take me to her immediately."

"You are a doctor, aren't you?" she inquired.

"Yes; the right person to see your sister if she is suffering."

"But she won't have any doctor except Collins."

"Who is Collins?"

"A nurse. She was with Frances once when she was ill. And now she always sends for her if she feels the least bit of anything the matter with her."

"Well," I said, after a pause, "we are wasting time. Your sister is in pain. Collins is not here, and I am. Take me to her immediately."

"Yes, Rosamond, do as you are told," said Oliver.

"She'll be angry; but I can't help it," murmured the child under her breath.

She took my hand, and we went quickly to the house.

In another moment I found myself in Miss Wilton's presence. I gave one glance at her face, and then told Rosamond to leave us. I knew what was the matter. The young girl was in the complete state of prostration caused by acute neurosthenia. Her respiration was hurried—she scarcely noticed me when I came into the room. She was lying on a sofa. I took her hand in mine and felt her pulse. It was beating one hundred and fifty times to the minute. Miss Wilton was very ill, and it was not difficult for me to ascertain the cause of this complete nervous prostration. I pushed up her sleeve and saw certain marks on her slightly wasted arm, which told me but too plainly that she was the victim of morphonism. The whole



"I SAW CERTAIN MARKS ON HER SLIGHTLY WASTED ARM."

situation was now perfectly plain. Miss Wilton had suddenly come to the end of her supply of morphia, and was at present going through the awful storm of abstinence.

I thought for a moment, and then made up my mind that, whatever the future consequences, there was only one thing to be done at present. I went to the bell and rang it sharply.

A servant appeared in answer to my summons.

"Can you tell me if Mrs. Onslow is at home?" I asked.

"I don't know, sir; I'll inquire."

"If she is in any of the sitting-rooms or about the grounds, send a footman to ask her to come to me immediately, to Miss Wilton's room."

The servant withdrew, and in about ten minutes' time Mildred Onslow hastily appeared.

"What do you want with me?" she asked. Then as her eyes fell on Miss Wilton's prostrate form, she uttered a startled exclamation.

"What is the matter with poor, dear Frances? How frightfully ill she looks!"

"She is very ill," I replied, "but I think I can soon relieve her. She is suffering from a most acute nervous attack, and I intend to inject a little morphia under the skin. That will quickly restore her to a more normal

condition. Please stay with her, Mildred, while I fetch my bag of drugs and instruments."

I rushed away, fetched a bottle of morphia and a hypodermic syringe, and quickly injected a dose which contained one grain of morphine.

The relief was almost instantaneous. Miss Wilton opened her eyes, gave a sigh of intense pleasure, and presently sat up. She was still bewildered, however, and scarcely recognised who were present.

"She is much better," I said to Mrs. Onslow, "but I should like her to keep very quiet for the rest of the day. Please send some soup or some other strong nourishment to her here. She will do

best to stay in this room for to-day. Perhaps you will come and sit with her for a little in the afternoon. Now I want to have a short talk with my patient by herself."

When I said this I noticed an uneasy glance in Miss Wilton's eyes, which showed me how rapidly she was returning to a convalescent stage.

"Need Mildred go away?" she asked. "I am much better now. You must have given me something to relieve that horrible, horrible pain."

"Yes, I gave you a dose of morphia," I said.

"Ah, then, of course I am better," she remarked, with a sigh of relief.

"Yes," I said, "you may be able to have a nice sleep by-and-by, but there are one or two points I should like to talk over with you first. I shall not take up more than a moment or two of your time."

Mildred left the room, and Miss Wilton seated herself with her back to the light.

"I may as well state frankly," I said at once, "that when I came into the room just now, your condition filled me with alarm. You were terribly weak, your respiration was hurried, your pulse quick. You had symptoms also of spinal exhaustion. I came to tell you that Captain Oliver had failed to get the medicine which you sent for."

"Why failed?" she asked, in a quick, nervous voice.

"Because you had not sent a prescription. Chemists are forbidden by law to supply certain poisonous drugs without written instructions from a medical man. No such instructions accompanied your letter; therefore the medicine was not supplied."

"Did you go with Jim to see the chemist?"

"I walked with him to Market Lea."

"And the—the——" Miss Wilton half rose from her chair, "the chemist showed you my letter?"

"No, the chemist was quite faithful to the trust you reposed in him."

She sank back again on her seat, while an expression of intense relief swept over her young but worn face.

"Your little sister met us on our return home, and told us that you were in a state of suffering," I continued, "so I hastened to the rescue."

"You are very kind," she replied, "and you have relieved my suffering for the time."

She shuddered slightly as she spoke. She knew but too well how evanescent the small dose of morphia I had injected would be in its effects.

"It is tiresome about that prescription," she continued. "Nothing relieves me like that special medicine."

"Then you are subject to these attacks?"

"Oc—occasionally." This word came out with great reluctance.

"Perhaps I could write you a prescription somewhat similar to the one you have lost?"

She looked at me with intense eagerness. Then her eyes fell.

"No, thank you," she said. "My medicine partakes of the nature of a—a quack medicine. It suits me better than anything else. I think I'll send for a nurse who has

often been of use to me. Her name is Collins. I should like to telegraph for her. That can be managed, can it not?"

"Certainly," I answered; "where does she live?"

"In London."

"She cannot get to you before the evening," I answered. "And in the meantime you may have another attack. Of course, I am not prepared to say what causes them." Here I looked hard at her. She trembled and shrank from me. "I am not prepared to say what causes your attacks," I repeated; "but I have seen precisely similar ones occasioned by the abstinence from morphia in the victims of morphinism. A small dose of the poison invariably gives relief, as it did in your case. Only that it is quite impossible to imagine that you can be the victim of such a pernicious habit, I should say that you took morphia secretly."

"As if that were likely," she stammered; "I—I hope—I should not do anything wicked of that sort."

"It certainly is a very wicked habit," I replied, "and leads to the most disastrous results: the wreck of life in its fullest sense, the destruction of all the moral qualities. For instance, the morphia-maniac thinks nothing of telling lies, however truthful he may have been before he became the victim of this habit. Well, I will leave you now, as you look inclined to sleep, and sleep will be beneficial to you. If you feel a return of the painful symptoms which prostrated you this morning, send for me, and I will inject a little more morphia."

"Oh, thank you," she answered, with a look of gratitude. And now she prepared to settle herself comfortably on the sofa.

"You won't forget to telegraph for Collins?" she said, as I was leaving the room.

"You must give me her address," I answered.

She supplied me with it, and I left her.

I must confess that I felt much puzzled how to act. Miss Wilton was a morphia-maniac. Her flimsy half denial of the fact was but in keeping with her disease. Should I tell the truth to poor Oliver?

I thought over the circumstances of the case briefly, and then resolved to take Mildred Onslow into my confidence. I saw her alone immediately after lunch, and told her what I had discovered.

"How dreadful!" she exclaimed, when I had finished my short story. "It seems almost impossible to believe that Frances, of



"I HOPE I SHOULD NOT DO ANYTHING WICKED OF THAT SORT."

all people, could he addicted to such a vice, and yet you said you saw the marks on her arm?"

"I did, but even without that evidence all the other symptoms point to the same conclusion."

"But what can be her motive?" said Mildred. "Six months ago there could not have been a brighter, dearer girl in existence. She was so happy in her engagement too; in short, she was the very personification of perfect health, happiness, and all the graces which adorn young womanhood."

"You cannot say that she is the personification of these things now," I replied.

"No; she is much changed—Jim notices it—he is very unhappy. Oh, poor Frances! Is there any chance of her being cured?"

"Yes, if she will help herself. She is particularly weak, however. I seldom saw anyone as young so completely under the influence of the drug. I could not counsel complete abstinence from it at the present moment, and I intend to inject morphia again to-night. We have now, however, to decide immediately on two things: is the nurse Collins

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to be telegraphed for, and is Captain Oliver to be told?"

Before Mildred could reply, the door of the room where we were talking was abruptly opened and Oliver himself, looking perturbed and heated, came in.

"I saw you two talking through the window," he said, "and could not restrain my impatience. I know you are discussing Frances's condition, and perhaps you are intending to conceal some particulars from me. Now, I insist upon knowing the truth immediately."

Mildred coloured and hesitated.

"Dr. Halifax and I were just wondering whether we ought to send for a nurse of the name of Collins," she began.

"Collins," repeated Oliver, abruptly. He laughed in a somewhat harsh manner. "Rosamond and I telegraphed for Collins half an hour ago," he said. "What is the use of hesitating about a natural wish of that sort? I suppose a sick girl may be at liberty to send for the nurse she fancies?"

"Certainly," I replied.

"And now I want the truth," he continued. "What is the matter with Frances?"

Before I could reply, Mildred came suddenly up to me. There was an imploring look on her face. She did not speak, however, and the next moment hastily left the room.

I looked at Oliver. He was startlingly white round his eyes and lips.

"You know what ails Miss Wilton," he began. "For God's sake, whatever it is, don't make a mystery of it. I can bear the truth, whatever it is. Is she dying?"

"Almost as bad," I murmured to myself.

Aloud I said, "Nothing of the sort. You want the truth, so you must have it. I warn you in advance that it is startling and painful. Miss Wilton is a confirmed morphia-maniac."

"Nonsense," said Oliver. He looked as if he would much like to knock me down. I walked to the window before I replied.

"I told you that the truth would be painful. That is it. That simple fact accounts for the change which you spoke to me of. I have seen such things before, but never,

never, in one so young, so apparently healthy and happy. I had my suspicions even while you were speaking to me, but when I saw the young lady, all doubts were solved immediately."

"What were her symptoms?"

"Those which invariably arise when the unhappy victim is from any cause deprived of the accustomed stimulant. The larger the quantity of morphia taken, the greater is the distress when it is done without. When I came to Miss Wilton, she was almost *in extremis*. This fact shows that she has been accustomed to injecting large doses."

"Injecting!"

"Yes, with a hypodermic syringe. There are many marks on her arm."

"Did you do anything for her relief?"

"Yes, the only thing. I gave her more morphia."

"Why?"

"I will tell you why presently. The thing immediately to decide on now is: what is to be done when this nurse arrives? I must say plainly I am sorry you telegraphed for her."

Oliver was about to reply when I interrupted him.

"I suspect the nurse," I continued, "but forewarned is forearmed. As soon as ever she comes, I shall have an interview with her, and tax her with what I feel is the truth. In the meantime, I shall consider Miss Wilton my patient, and as I have begun to prescribe for her will go on doing so. And now, Captain Oliver, your part is to look cheerful and to pretend to know nothing. I want you to go and sit with Miss Wilton for a short time this afternoon. If she confides in you, well and good. She may possibly do so, for she has had a good fright, I can assure you; but if she does not, you must treat her as if you knew nothing. Remember."

"Oh, yes, I'll remember," said Oliver. His face worked; I saw that he was struggling with emotion, and left him.

At six o'clock that evening Collins arrived. I saw her before she was admitted to Miss Wilton's presence; she was a thin, refined-looking woman, neatly dressed, and with an almost lady-like manner and appearance. Her

face was sharp and pale; she had light, thin, auburn hair, and very pale-blue eyes with white eyelashes. I took a dislike to her on the spot.

"I wish to see you," I began, "to tell you I have discovered what ails Miss Wilton. She is a morphia-maniac of a most confirmed type."

The nurse started when I said this. I saw denial on her lips, but she quickly took her cue, and spoke in a deprecating tone.

"Ah!" she said, "that fact is no news to me. Poor dear! How often have I begged of her not to get under the influence of this pernicious drug."

"Your entreaties have been quite without effect," I replied. "I am glad, however, that you are fully awake to the danger Miss Wilton runs. The victims of morphonism go through many phases—Miss Wilton is rapidly approaching that of direct poisoning, and if the drug is freely administered now,



"THE NURSE STARTED."

she will undoubtedly die. I say this to warn you, on no account whatever, to inject morphia. I am her medical man, and I will give it her myself when necessary. Have you a hypodermic syringe and morphia with you?"

My question was so direct that the woman coloured and stammered.

"I always carry these things about with me," she said, more truthfully than I expected. "No one can ever tell, in a profession like mine, when they may be required."

"That is quite true," I replied; "but under the present circumstances I should be glad if you would give both the morphia and the syringe to me. Thus, if your patient begs of you to administer the drug, it will be out of your power to yield to her entreaties."

She looked at me hard when I said this, and then, opening a hand-bag, she gave me a small bottle containing some of the dangerous fluid, and a little case which held the syringe.

After putting a few more questions, during which I elicited the information that Nurse Collins had been trained at Guy's Hospital, I took her myself to Miss Wilton's room.

There was no mistaking the look of relief which spread itself over the young girl's face when she saw her.

"Oh, nurse, you have come!" she exclaimed, and, tottering forward, she flung herself into the woman's arms.

I closed the door softly behind me. I felt more uneasy than I cared to own. It is true I had secured the syringe and the morphia, but the nurse might find means of supplying herself with more morphia, and, of course, Frances must have a syringe of her own.

I had administered my first dose of morphia to Miss Wilton at noon. As I expected, she sent for me to ask for another injection between four and five. This was shortly before the nurse arrived. If Nurse Collins had really no morphia in her possession, my services would be probably required between ten and eleven that night. I little guessed, however, what was really to occur.

A large party of friends were coming to dine at Holmwood that evening. The dinner was to be followed by a dance, to which all the young people of the neighbourhood were invited. I, as one of the guests staying in the house, had, of course, to be present. I held myself in readiness, however, to go to my patient whenever the summons came.

Little Rosamond had begged hard to be allowed to sit up for the dance.

"I don't want to stay with Frances now that horrid Collins has come," was her frank remark.

Miss Rosamond was sufficiently spoiled to have her way, and Jim in particular took her under his special patronage.

I was standing near one of the doorways watching these two as they threaded the

giddy mazes of the waltz. I was inwardly feeling a good deal of uneasiness at not being summoned to Miss Wilton, for the hour was now long past that when she ought to require a fresh dose of her stimulant, when I was suddenly attracted by a look of astonishment on Rosamond's bright face. She was gazing past me towards another door further down the ball-room.

I turned in the direction of her glance, and saw to my amazement Frances, beautifully dressed, the flash of diamonds in her hair and round her white throat, advancing into the room.

I went up to her at once. She looked slightly, but only slightly, annoyed when she saw me.

"I'm all right now," she said, in a cheerful tone. "I have quite recovered. I told you, Dr. Halifax, that I only needed my own special quack medicine and Collins's aid to restore me."

I could scarcely reply to her. She swept past me to speak to an acquaintance. She looked brilliant, and was unquestionably the most beautiful girl in the room. Her fine dark eyes, generally so dull in expression, were now bright and sparkling. There was not the least doubt that she was under the influence of a powerful dose of the poison.

I hastily left the ball-room and went upstairs to find Nurse Collins.

She was not in Miss Wilton's sitting-room. I rang a bell, and asked the servant to send her to me.

"Do you mean the nurse from London, sir?" inquired the maid. "She isn't here. Miss Wilton ordered a carriage for her, and she went away about an hour ago."

I felt too astonished to speak for a moment.

"I was not aware of this," I said, after a pause.

I quickly returned to the ball-room. Frances was now dancing with Oliver, who looked in the highest spirits, and Rosamond ran up to my side.

"Do waltz with me, Dr. Halifax," she asked.

I took her little hand and led her into the midst of the dancers.

As we were revolving round and round, I asked her a few questions.

"Do you know, Rosamond, that your *bête noir*, Collins, has gone?"

"No," she replied, in a tone that did not express much surprise. "But she doesn't often stay long. I suppose she has filled up all Frances's bottles with the quack medicine."



"But that quack medicine is very bad for your sister."

"I don't think so. She can't live without it. Doesn't she look lovely? Isn't she a beautiful girl?"

"Yes," I replied, briefly.

"And don't her diamonds flash? Don't you love diamonds, Dr. Halifax?"

"Yes, but not on such young girls as your sister."

"Frances always likes to wear diamonds; she doesn't mind whether her taste is peculiar or not. Let's come a little nearer to her, I want to be sure of something. Yes, just as I thought. She hasn't on her pendant. I suppose that has gone now."

"What do you mean, Rosamond?"

"Oh, nothing, nothing at all. I shouldn't have said it. I'm tired of dancing. . . I'd like to go to bed. . . Please let us stop. . . Good-night, Dr. Halifax. Good-night."

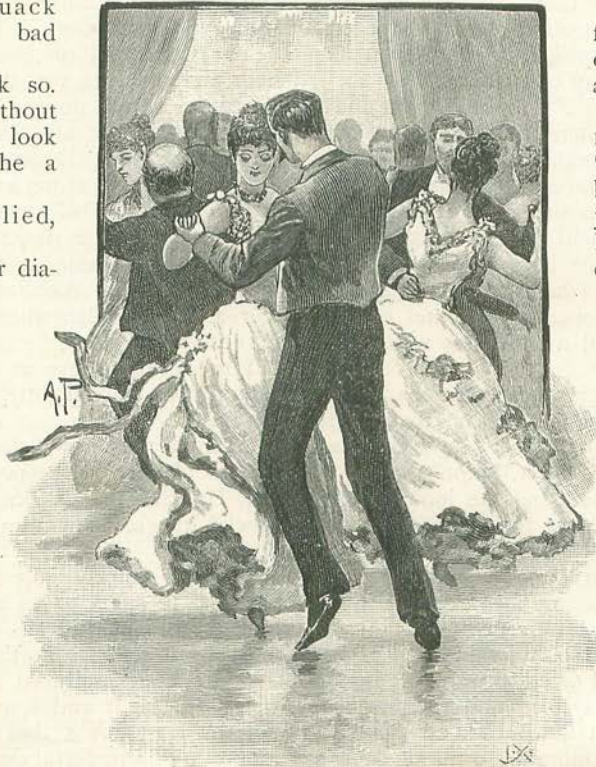
She rushed away before I could question her by another word.

Miss Wilton was the life and soul of the ball-room. The gay party did not break up until the early morning, and it was late the next day when the visitors who were staying at Holmwood met again round the breakfast-table.

As soon as ever I appeared, I was greeted with an extraordinary piece of information. Frances Wilton and her sister had left Holmwood by an early train.

This was simply stated with little or no comment at the breakfast table, but immediately afterwards my host and hostess took me aside. Mildred put a small note into my hand.

"Read it," she said, "and try and solve the mystery, if you can."



"FRANCES WAS NOW DANCING WITH OLIVER."

The note was from Rosamond, a childish production, and very short.

"DEAR DR. HALIFAX," she wrote, "I'm awfully unhappy, so I must just send you this letter. Frances has quarrelled with Collins, who won't do what she wants. We are both going away, and no one is to know where we are going to. I don't know myself, so I can't tell you. Frances says that you are a horrid man; she says you have accused her of doing dreadful, wicked things. I don't believe you are a horrid man. I like you very much, and I am very un-

happy about going away.—ROSAMOND."

After reading the little note I gave it to Mildred. She glanced her eyes quickly over it, then threw it, with a gesture of despair, on the table.

"Now, what is to be done?" she exclaimed. "Frances and Rosamond have disappeared. No one knows where they have gone. Frances was very ill yesterday. If what you say is true, it is extremely unsafe for her to be left to her own devices."

"It is more than unsafe," I replied. "Miss Wilton is in a condition when she ought not to be left for a single moment without a responsible person to look after her. Surely it can't be difficult to trace the sisters? Surely they can be followed at once?"

"Of course they can," said Onslow. "You always go to the fair about things, my love," he continued, turning to his wife. "A pair of children like Frances and Rosamond cannot lose themselves in these nineteenth century days. We can soon track them, and if we have a doctor's authority for taking such a step, it shall be done immediately."

"Ought not Oliver to be consulted?" I said.

"I'll go and fetch him," said Onslow.

He left the room and returned in a few moments, accompanied by Jim Oliver. The young soldier was quite alive to the difficulties of our position. The nervous distress, which yesterday so completely overpowered him, had now vanished.

He was intensely anxious, but he did not show undue agitation. We had a brief consultation, and then it was arranged that I should go back immediately to London and try to learn everything there was to be known about Nurse Collins. I had elicited one apparent fact from her yesterday, viz., that she had been trained as a nurse at Guy's Hospital. Accordingly, on the afternoon of that same day, I went to the hospital and set inquiries on foot with regard to her. The books were searched, and it was soon abundantly proved that no nurse of the name of Collins had ever been trained at that hospital.

"Then," I exclaimed, "the woman is not even a medical nurse. If she is really still with that poor girl, her wretched victim may be dead before we can rescue her."

The matron to whom I was speaking became interested, and presently asked me to describe the supposed nurse's appearance.

I did so, minutely.

"Light auburn hair," quoted the matron, "very light blue eyes and white eyelashes—a thin face. How old should you say the woman was, Dr. Halifax?"

"From five-and-twenty to thirty," I replied.

"About the middle height?"

"Yes, a slight person."

"Did she walk with the faintest suspicion of a limp—so very slight that it might be passed over without comment?"

Now it so happened that Nurse Collins did walk with a sort of swing, which had arrested my attention when I took her to my patient the evening before.

"I could scarcely call it a limp," I said, "but it is certainly true that the nurse's walk was a little peculiar."

"Then I know who she is," said the matron; "that description could scarcely fit two people. She was trained here, but not under the name of Collins. See—I will show you her name in the book. Nurse Cray—twenty-three years of age—auburn hair, light blue eyes, very slight limp. That nurse, Dr. Halifax, stayed with us exactly a year. She was an admirable and clever nurse. She left at the end of that time under peculiar circumstances."

"Do you mind telling me what they were?"

The matron hesitated.

"I don't wish to injure anyone," she said, after a pause; "but in this case it is right for you to have all possible information. Nurse Cray left here on suspicion of theft. A large sum of money had been left in her charge by a lady patient. This is quite an exceptional thing to do. When the lady was leaving, the money was not forthcoming. Nurse declared it had been stolen from her. The lady was not willing to prosecute, and the matter was dropped. But Cray left the next week, and we have not heard anything of her since. I believe her to be a dangerous woman, and I should be sorry to have any girl in her power."

This information I imparted in due course to my friends at Holmwood. In the meantime Onslow and Captain Oliver were leaving not a stone unturned to trace the two girls. The end of the second day arrived, however, without our having obtained the slightest clue to their whereabouts.

Poor Oliver was nearly wild with anxiety, and my own fears were very grave. I could not get Frances Wilton's face out of my mind. I saw it in my mind's eye, wherever I turned, or whatever I did. I wondered what the wretched girl's ultimate fate would be. There was little doubt that she was quickly reaching that stage when direct morphia poisoning begins. If she were really still in Collins's power, her days on earth were numbered.

Sitting by my fireside on the evening of the second day I thought of her with increased uneasiness. It was almost impossible to believe that two rather remarkable looking girls like Frances and Rosamond could disappear as it were bodily from the earth. Onslow and Oliver were both clever and keen-sighted men. We were employing the best private detective we knew to assist us, and yet up to the present we had not got the slightest clue to the whereabouts of the girls. I felt so anxious as I pondered over these things that I felt inclined to run down to Holmwood by the last train that evening. Before this thought, however, had taken the form of a resolution, there came a ring to my hall door, and the next moment my servant told me that a woman was waiting to see me.

"What is her name?" I asked.

"She refuses to give it, sir," replied the man. "She says she will not keep you long, but she earnestly begs of you to let her see you without delay."

"Show her into the consulting-room," I said.

I went there a moment later, and to my amazement found myself face to face with Nurse Collins.

"Now, what do you want?" I said in a stern voice, which could scarcely conceal my inward rejoicing.

"To confess—to confess," she said, in a broken, highly-strung, nervous tone. "Oh, Dr. Halifax, I have only just made the discovery. Pray do not lose a moment in going to Miss Wilton. If you see her at once there is just a possibility of her being saved."

"What is the matter?" I asked. "Tell me your story briefly."

"Oh, it is this," she exclaimed, clasping and unclasping her thin hands. "Poor, poor young lady, I have given her the wrong prescription! I only found this out an hour ago."

"Sit down," I said. "You must tell me the whole story in as few words as you can."

"I don't want to be a murderer," she began. "I—I draw the line at that. I—I don't mind most things, but I draw the line at murder."

"You will be a murderer," I said, "unless you can collect your thoughts sufficiently to tell me at once what is the matter."

"And you will use your knowledge against me, sir?"

"That I cannot say."

"Well, I don't much care whether you do or not," she continued. "If only Miss Wilton's life is saved, nothing else matters. This is my story. I was called in to nurse Miss Wilton six months ago. She was suffering very terribly at the time from the effects of a feverish attack. Her nerves were much disordered; she was sleepless, and she used to undergo agonies of pain from neuralgia. Dr. Johnson, of Queen Anne's Street, was attending her. He prescribed small doses of morphia, which I was to inject in the usual way with a hypodermic syringe. The morphia gave her both relief and pleasure. By-and-by she got stronger, the pain disappeared, and Dr. Johnson ordered me to cease administering the morphia. I think I should have done so, but for Miss Wilton herself. She had already acquired a certain liking for the drug, she could not sleep well without it, and she begged me very hard to repeat the doses. I refused. She said she would pay me if I gave her relief. I was in debt, and I wanted money badly. I do not pretend to be scrupulous, and I quickly yielded to

temptation. I stayed on with Miss Wilton: I repeated the morphia doses, and in an incredibly short space of time, I had her in my power. She could not live without the drug, and was willing to pay me anything to obtain it. She had plenty of money, and was the possessor of many valuable jewels. One by one these jewels were handed over to me in exchange for morphia. I was obliged to leave her at last, but I supplied her with a syringe and a couple of bottles of the medicine; I also gave her minute directions how much to inject at a time. When she sent for me three days ago, her supply had unexpectedly run out. I obeyed her summons at once, and would have remained with her, but for my interview with you. You frightened me with regard to her state; I saw that you suspected me. If it were known that I had played thus, almost with the life of a patient, I should have been ruined. I did not dare to run the risk of discovery. I injected as large a dose of morphia as I could with safety into my patient's arm, and then told her that I must leave her. Before I went away I gave her a small supply of morphia, enough to last her for a day. I also gave her, or thought I did, the prescription which Dr. Johnson had given me for her six months ago. She paid me, of course, for my services. I helped her to dress for the ball, and then I left."

"Miss Wilton paid you with her diamond pendant," I interrupted.

The nurse's eyes flashed an angry, frightened fire.

"How can you tell?" she exclaimed.

"No matter—proceed, please."

"I have not much more to tell," continued Nurse Collins; "mystery is nearly over. I have only now to reveal to you my awful discovery. An hour ago, I was looking through some prescriptions, when I suddenly discovered that I had *not* given Miss Wilton the one which contained morphia. On the contrary, I had given her another prescription, which in her case would probably lead to fatal results."

"What was in it?" I asked.

"Strychnine, Dr. Halifax. Strychnine in a form for hypodermic injection. This prescription had been given to me a year ago by a physician for a male patient who was suffering from paralysis. Now, sir, you know why I apply to you. Don't mind me. I promise not to hide if I'm wanted. Go at once to Miss Wilton. She may not have been able to have the prescription made up. Go to her and save her."

"Where am I to go?" I asked.

"What do you mean?" she answered. "Go to Holmwood, of course. It's my only comfort to know that Miss Wilton is in a country place, where medicines are not easily obtainable."

"She is not there," I replied. "She left Holmwood, with her little sister, the morning after you left. We have been two days moving Heaven and earth to find her, but in vain. Nurse Collins," I continued, "if anyone knows where Miss Wilton is hiding, you must be that person. Tell me at once, or I shall have you arrested."

"You needn't threaten me with *that*," she answered, stepping back in some scorn; "I would tell you only too gladly if I knew, but I don't. Oh, merciful God! I don't know where the wretched girl is. If she is not found she will die. Oh, if her death is laid to my door I shall go mad!"

I saw the woman was becoming hysterical, and was about to quiet her in as peremptory a manner as I could, when the consulting-room

she's not dead, but she's very nearly dead. *Do* come and save her."

"Where are you staying?" I asked.

"At the Métropole. Oh, we've been there all the time. Frances said it was safest of all to go to a great big hotel like that. She wouldn't let me tell you until to-day, and now she craves for nothing so much in all the world as for you to come to her. Do, do come at once!"

"Of course I will," I replied. "Sit down, Rosamond. You are a very good child to have come for me. Nurse Collins, you can go now. I do not wish you to have anything further to do with my patient."

"For God's sake, sir, save her life!"

The wretched woman fell on her knees.

"Get up," I said, in some disgust; "you don't suppose I need your entreaties to make me do my utmost for this unfortunate girl. Now Rosamond, come."

I rang the bell as I passed, and desired my servant to show the nurse out. Then



"FOR GOD'S SAKE, SIR, SAVE HER LIFE!"

door was suddenly and noiselessly opened—there came the quick patter of young feet across the carpet, and Rosamond Wilton rushed to my side and clasped one of my hands in both of hers.

"Come at once!" she said, excitedly.

"Frances says I may bring you. Don't delay a second. Never mind *her*," with a look of anger in the direction where the woman was standing. "Come, Dr. Halifax, come. Oh,

Rosamond and I got into a hansom, and in a few minutes we arrived at the Métropole. We went up in the lift to the third story, where Frances's luxurious bedroom was.

"Here he is, Frances," said little Rosamond, in her bright tones, pulling my hand as she entered the room. "He's come, Frances; now you'll be all right."

I looked at the patient, who was lying perfectly still on the bed, and then motioned to

the child to leave us. She turned away with a little sob in her throat, and a look of dog-like entreaty to me in her pretty eyes.

"Dear little mite," I said to myself, "I will do all that man can do to help her." I went up to the bed and began to make a careful examination of the patient. When last I saw Miss Wilton, she was brilliant in her ball-dress. Her eyes were bright, as bright as the jewels that flashed in her hair and round her neck. Now she was in so complete a state of collapse that I could scarcely have recognised her as the same girl. Her face was so worn and thin, that for the time it had lost all its youth and comeliness. Her long hands lay motionless on the coverlet. Her sunken eyes were closed. She was scarcely breathing, and looked almost like a dead woman of forty. I bent over her and tried to rouse her. It was more than evident that she had done without morphia now for several hours. She was in a state of acute nervous disturbance—in short, she was completely prostrated. My first business was to rouse her. I put my hand under her head and raised her up. To my relief she opened her eyes and gave a perceptible start of pleasure when she saw me.

"You can save me," she said, in a weak and very thin voice. "You know what is the matter. You know what I've done. You said it the other day."

"You are a morphia-maniac," I said.

"Yes, yes—I don't care who knows now."

She suddenly pressed her hands to both her sides, and began to roll about in anguish.

"I am cramped, I am dying," she gasped.

I watched her until the paroxysm of pain was over, then I began to question her.

"Why did you send for me?"

"Because I am dying."

"Have you been taking much morphia?"

"Oh, yes, a good deal. I had a prescription. It was made up, and I injected the quantity which always gave me relief. Dr. Halifax, an awful thing has happened: the morphia no longer relieves me; it—it fills me with *horror*, with sickness, and cramp. I am in agonies. I dare not take any more. Each dose makes me worse."

Again she pressed her hands to her sides and writhed in torture.

I walked to the table, hoping to find the prescription. It was not there. Miss Wilton was past speaking now. I went to the door of the bedroom and called Rosamond.

"I want the prescription," I said, "of your sister's last medicine. You went out to have it made up, did you not?"

"I did—here it is. Is Frances very ill?"

"She is ill. How often has she injected this medicine?"

"Oh, several times last night, but scarcely at all to-day. She says it makes her worse, much worse. She is afraid of it. She has been in awful pain all day, and at last she called to me to fetch you. Can you—*can* you save her?"

"Oh, yes, dear, I hope so," I replied.

I went back to the room and studied the prescription. Then I gave a sudden start of pleasure. It was a prescription for strychnine, certainly, but it could not have been the one which Nurse Collins imagined she had given Miss Wilton. The doses ordered to be injected were too small to cause death, although they would doubtless, if administered frequently, give rise to disagreeable and painful sensations. I thought hard for a moment, and then a sudden idea occurred to me. I went back to my patient and carefully noted every symptom. She had been now quite twenty-four hours without morphia; she had therefore arrived at the very height of that terrible time when the abstinence storm is worst. Every fibre, every cell in her body ought now to be crying out for its accustomed solace. The functions of the brain ought to be exhausted. Her respiration ought to be terribly hurried; her pulse almost past counting. She was ill, and in frightful suffering, without a doubt; she was also in a state of extreme prostration, but her pulse was fairly steady and was not beating more than a hundred and twenty times to the minute. When I had examined her at Holmwood two days ago, after a very much shorter period of abstinence, her pulse had beat a hundred and fifty times to the minute. The idea therefore which occurred to me was this: Nurse Collins, without the least intending it, had found a *cure for my patient*. If I went on administering the strychnine in very small quantities, it would undoubtedly act as a tonic, ward off the extreme weakness of the heart, which was to be dreaded, and in short enable Miss Wilton to weather the awful abstinence storm. I did not take long in making up my mind, then going into the next room, rang the electric bell. A servant answered my summons, to whom I gave a note desiring it to be sent to its destination by a special messenger without a moment's loss of time. In consequence of this note, an hour later, a staid and respectable nurse, in whom I had every confidence, was installed in Miss Wilton's room. I gave

her a brief history of the case and took her into my confidence with regard to treatment.

"I mean to continue the strychnine," I said, "and I wish the patient to be under the impression that she is still having morphia injections. Her nerves will then be less strained than if she thinks she is doing without her accustomed sedative, and the chances of cure will be greater."

The nurse promised to obey all my directions implicitly. She was to inject minute doses of the strychnine at certain intervals, and was also to feed up the patient with milk, strong chicken broth, and champagne. I then went out and telegraphed to Onslow and Oliver, and finally returned to spend the night with my patient.

I shall never forget the fortnight which followed. Notwithstanding the strength which the carefully injected doses of strychnine gave the poor girl, her sufferings were terrible. I shall not quickly forget the look of despair in her eyes nor the agonized expression on her young face. I knew she was going through agonies of torture. The first five days were the worst, then gradually and slowly there came longer and longer intervals of comparative relief, until at last there arrived an hour when I had the pleasure of seeing Miss Wilton fall into a long and perfectly natural sleep.

When she awoke, refreshed and calm, and with an altogether new look on her face, I was standing by her bedside.

"Oh, I am better," she said, with a sigh. "I have had a heavenly sleep. How thankful I am that the morphia is beginning to take effect again."

"How do you know that morphia produced that sleep?" I asked.

"How can I doubt it?" she replied. "Nurse injected some into my arm just before I dropped off to sleep."

I looked at the nurse, who smiled and turned away.

I motioned to her to leave the room. I thought the time had come when I might tell Frances Wilton something.

"You are wonderfully better," I said, sitting down by her.

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"I have every reason to believe that you will soon be perfectly well."

"You have great faith," she answered, with a blush and something like tears in her eyes; "but what is the use of holding out hope to me? I can never do without morphia. I am its slave. I shall try and take it in smaller quantities in the future, but I can never do without it as long as I live. The agonies I suffered during the fortnight when it ceased to have any effect, can only be understood by those who have gone through them. Dr. Halifax, I must confess the truth; I cannot live without morphia."

"Think of your lover, Miss Wilton," I said. "Think what this means to Captain Oliver."

"I do think of him," she replied. "For his sake I would do much. But I can't break myself of this awful habit even for him. It is useless for me to try—I am too weak."

"Not a bit of it," I said. "Now listen to me. I have some good news for you."

"What is that? What good news can there possibly be for so miserable and wicked a girl?"

"You think the refreshing sleep you have just enjoyed was due to the injection of morphia?"

"Of course it was—nurse injected it."

"She did nothing of the kind—she injected water with a very little strychnine."

"Strychnine! What do you mean?"

"What I say, Miss Wilton. You may rejoice, for you have already conquered that miserable habit. It is a whole fortnight now since any morphia was injected. What you thought was morphia was strychnine injected in very minute quantities, to act as a tonic. You have, indeed, gone through a frightful time; but the worst is over, has been over for days. That refreshing and natural sleep proves you to be not only convalescent, but in short—*cured!*"

"May we come in?" said a cheerful voice at the door.

"Yes, certainly," I answered, and Mrs. Onslow and Oliver entered the room. I saw Frances Wilton sit up and look rapturously at her lover. I noted the light of love and hope in her eyes.

