THE

Hepgarth Telegram.

As a young man Sidney Melville had encountered more than his share of trouble. An impecunious medical student cannot expect to find his path particularly smooth, yet it really seemed as if in this case nothing could be bad enough. Most men would have given up the struggle at an early stage, but not so this man. There was something in his composition that would not let him surrender. When things were at their very worst, when nothing would go right, when the outlook was just as black as possible, he would set his teeth and draw down his lean chin so that it nearly disappeared behind the doubtful whiteness of his high, loose collar. This meant that he was damned if he was going to give up. And in the end tenacity paid.

He qualified and left the university. Still trouble met him at every corner, and still he fought with it and wrested it, and flund it down, and went on over it with his chin up again till the next time. At first his practice was not sufficiently remunerative to keep him from hunger that occasionally bordered on starvation, but he thrust ahead, though slowly. His patients, coming once, invariably came again to him to cure their next complaint, irrespective of its nature. They came just the same if they had left the neighbourhood, and they sent others. Gradually his reputation spread. In course of time he moved to Walton street, and five years later he made that discovery which established him as a coming man. He was in Welbeck street, then, and people began to talk about his skill.

At forty-five we find him in Harley street, and, on a brass plate there, those who are curious may read his name. Fate, it seemed, had thrown up the sponge. The determination to succeed, backed up by a nature that would not acknowledge defeat, had proved too much for her.

London flocked to Doctor Melville's consulting room, and the provinces contributed their daily quota. Honours were showered upon him. He was elected president of the Royal College of Physicians and a Fellow of the Royal Society. And close on the heels of the last came an intimation from a high official that he was to be created a baronet in the King's birthday list.

Socially, too, he was a lion, and a lion who roared all the year round. Hostesses never tired of him. He was an attraction in himself, not so much perhaps for what he was or for what he did, though both were sufficiently important to warrant attention, but for what he said. For here it must be confessed that, despite his gallant victory over Fate, the conflict had not left him unmarked, and at forty-five he was a cantankerous old cynic with a frank rudeness of speech that delighted the many people who went to other people's houses expressly to meet him. The hardships of his youth had soured his mind. He was forever railing at the folly of the human species and sneering at the cant of modern life. A lady once asked him in jest what he thought of her.

"Madam," said he in reply, pointing as he spoke to a bowl of flowers beside him, "you resemble one of these roses—very pretty, but without root. All there is of both of you is in sight."

Yet this was well enough. Had it been the sum total of the damage done by those years of battle, Doctor Sidney Melville would have been merely an amusing acquaintance. But there was something else. Just as a schoolboy, when ill-treated as a junior, often becomes later on one of the most brutal of bullies, so did Doctor Melville practice retaliation. He was getting his own back on the world that had used him hardly. And he did not forget the interest of twenty-five years.

It was this way that he took his toll. He was flinty. "Curmudgeon" he had been styled many a time and "miser," though he was not quite of that stamp. Close-fisted enough, he was not averse to spending money on himself, but for charity he had no use whatever. He never gave away a penny. And in his consulting room he was adamant. Probably in all London he was the only doctor who never had a non-paying patient. More than once he had sued people in the courts—an unheard of breach of medical etiquette that brought down upon him the wrath of the profession. Since he, however, took absolutely no notice of this and invariably won his cases, the ban had perforce to be removed, and before long to prosecute defaulting patients became a recognised privilege reserved for him alone. After all, he was the greatest physician of the age. No one, however much he disliked him, ever attempted to dispute that. He stood alone.

At this stage of his career he was no longer on the staff of any hospital except in a consultative capacity, which is to a large extent purely honorary. He very rarely saw patients in their own homes. If anyone wished to consult him, well, let them write to him asking for an appointment. Sometimes they got it. Often they did not. Yet should some enterprising person require Doctor Melville to visit him it might be done. A great deal depended on the fee, the amount of which was almost invariably settled beforehand. This, then, was the state of affairs when the telegram came.

Melville read it three times—first without interest, then with astonishment and at last with anger. Finally he crumpled it up into a ball and threw it contemptuously into the waste-paper basket. Then he began to stride up and down his study, his hands clasped behind him.

It was time he dresesd for dinner. At eight o'clock he was due at General Lawson's, and it was already seven. He looked up at the clock on the mantelpiece and frowned.

Presently he paused in his promenade and, going to a bookcase that held nothing but books of reference, took out "Who's Who?" After searching for a few seconds he found what he wanted.

"Weldon," he read, "Honourable Patrick Edward, second son of the fourth Earl of Wynchalsea and brother of the fifth Earl, M.P. for Askaw. Unmarried. Recreations—politics, golf, and big game hunting."

Melville shut the book with a snap and put it back.

"It's Weldon all right," he said to himself, thoughtfully. "Why the devil doesn't he sign his name properly. We're not such old friends. I've only met him twice."

He picked up the waste-paper basket and took out the telegram. "Pat Weldon," he read, "Come at once, Pat Weldon. Hepgarth."

He laid it on the desk, "I suppose he was in a hurry. Wonder what's wrong with him. Must be something very serious. Question is, shall I go or not! If I do it'll mean missing this dinner to night and Lord knows what else to-morrow. But it'll mean at least five thousand to me."

He picked up the telegram again and fingered it idly.

"And if I don't go I lose that, besides—really, though, if it were almost anyone else I wouldn't go. There are still a few men I can't afford to offend. But he shall pay through the nose for it."

He laughed rather harshly. "It looks as if I shall get that seat," he mused. 'And he's certainly good for five thousand. What on earth's he doing at Hepgarth, though? And where is it? What's the Bradshaw got to say? Ah! Cumberland, 268 miles. Change at Carlisle. Now—ah, yes—leaves King's Cross—six-fifty, eight-five. I'll go!"

He flung down the book and went out, slamming the door. When the northern express left King's Cross at exactly five minutes past eight, he was on board, seated in a first-class smoker. Presently he went along to the dining car and had dinner. And afterwards lingered there with a cigar, conscious that six hours off, to his mind, extreme discomfort lay before him.

But at last he had to go back along the corridor and stumble over the legs of his travelling companions to his own seat, where, knowing that sleep would not come to him for some time, he lit another cigar, and smoked gloomily, busy with his thoughts.

The arrival at Carlisle woke him from a troubled doze, and he climbed stiffly down on to the platform. A porter seized his bag and his medicine case, and led the way to the small local that was to take him to Hepgarth, some fifteen miles away.

Melville settled himself as well as he could and tried to go to sleep again. But the seats were too hard. He lay down at full length, his head resting on his bag. If anything this posture was still more uncomfortable than the first. He sat up again.

At three o'clock he reached Hepgarth and got out on to a wooden platform. It was a very dark night, and windy, with now and then a sudden shrieking gust and driving rain. Shivering, he turned up the collar of his overcoat and peered about for a porter. None was visible. His fellow-traveller had vanished. And, hearing the snort of the engine behind him with the rumble of wheels, he swung quickly round, just in time to see the tail light of the coach pass the end of the platform.

He shouted, but no one came. He walked the length of the station and found that it only consisted of a wooden stage on which he stood and a fence with a gate in it. Beyond this it seemed there was a path that wound away into the darkness of the hill side.

A thought occurred to him. There might be something on the farther side of the line. Cheered by this hope he returned to the platform's edge and peered across, looking for its fellow. It was too dark, however, to distinguish anything, and in desperation he got down on to the track. Then he realised that this was a single guage railway and that there was no other platform!

Very wearily he got up again, picked up his bag and case, and went out by the gate on to the hill path that seemed his only way to anywhere. And his chin, as in the old days, sank down against his collar.

For some thirty minutes he climbed steadily, though not by means always in the same direction. The country here was all hills and craks and glens, with now and then in the bare rock a yawning rift from which, far down, came the rushing music of a torrent. Here the path was continued by a bridge of logs. Often, too, the way lay along the edge of a precipice or round the face of one—a road that few would care to travel. Melville did not like it at all. But ever his will drove him on, and he would stagger forward again with his luggage; up a steep gradient with on one hand a blank wall and on the other, two feet away, a sheer drop to certain death.

Then at last came respite. When it seemed that his endurance was not far from breaking point, he reached, quite suddenly, level ground in a valley, shut in by mighty hills. Before him stretched a road, rough it is true, but still a road, and he stepped out joyfully. It could not be far to the house where Weldon was staying. The thought of shelter, a drink, and a bed roused his enthusiasm. He was indignant with Weldon, however. What a ghastly spot to stay in! And what a dreadful journey it had been. That five thousand would have to be six. Really he wasn't——

What the devil was this. Oh, a fence—a garden fence and a gate, latched. That betokened a house. Better go in and knock up the owner and get some idea of one's whereabouts. Aha! A flower bed. . . a path . . . a door. Now for a stone to knock with. . . .

"That ought to wake him," said the doctor aloud.

A window flew open somewhere above him. "Who's that?" called a sleepy voice.

"A traveller," replied Melville, putting the householder down as a young man. "Is this an inn?" he added.

"It is not. If you want a drink go along to the Arms after ten to-morrow."

"Where am I?" asked the doctor. "Is this Hepgarth?"

"It is. Came by the three o'clock from Carlisle, didn't you?"

"Yes, where——"

"Then you won't be able to go back till the one-seven this afternoon. I suppose it is this afternoon and not to-morrow? You see, we only run two trains a day—that includes the night to meet London expresses. I'm the station-master."

"Then you are not to be congratulated on your station," snapped the doctor.

"Don't you think so?" asked the voice rather anxiously. "Well, d'you know I rather fancied it. It's six months since I came here, and I've made no end of improvements. Didn't you like the new latch on the gate and—surely you admired the station light?"

"The gate was open and the light was out," roared the doctor, "And damn your station, sir!"

"Oh, I say," protested the voice, "that isn't fair, you know."

"If you are really the station-master—"

"I am. I'm also the porter, the ticket collector, the signalman and the clerk in the booking office, not to mention the telegraph office, where I also keep things going. Oh, I run Hepgarth."

"Did you send a telegram for a Mr Weldon yesterday" asked the doctor, much more pleasantly.

"Sure," agreed the voice. "To a big London doctor. Rather funny——"

"Where does he live?"

"Who? The doctor?"

"No! Mr Weldon."

"Mr Weldon? Oh, old Pat's shanty not a hundred yards along from here on the right. You can't miss it. But, say, who're you? You aren't surely——"

Melville heard no more. He was striding up the road, keeping to the right. A hundred yards . . . what on earth was Patrick Weldon doing in this out-of-the-way place? And why had that station-master clerk fellow called him "old Pat"? Then he had mentioned the word "shanty." Had Weldon got a house here? Apparently he had. But what matter? He was very close to his destination. The five thousand pounds, now raised to six, loomed pleasantly near.

He found a gate at about the distance named—a cottage gate old and tottering on its rusty hinges. Was this really the place whence Weldon had sent that wire? He could not very well imagine the Earl of Wynchalsea's son in such surroundings. Yet there did not appear to be any building near by except that dark mass he could see over the gate. Anyway, he decided, one couldn't stay out in the rain.

He went up the path slowly, and, as he neared the door of the cottage—for such it was—he saw a thin shaft of light show from behind a shutter. That meant that there was someone awake. He knocked boldly.

Almost at once the door was opened and a little old woman, bent with age, stood before him. She held a lamp in her hand, and by its light he saw a kitchen, sparsely furnished and evidently that of a poor man. This much he grasped at once, although he was half blinded even by the feeble glare of that one oil lamp, so great was the sudden change from utter blackness.

"Is it the doctor?" asked the old woman eagerly in a high, cracked voice.

"I am Doctor Melville," said he. He was expected. Good! "Is Mr Weldon here?" he asked, to make certain. Everything seemed so odd, somehow.

"Yes, yes! An' you're the Lunnon doctor? Praise be to God! Come along in, sir, come in!"

He entered gladly and set down his burdens. Then he looked about him, though without interest. The blackened rafters and the neatly whitewashed walls were to his mind merely symbolic of poverty, which he despised. He had no use for the poor nowadays.

"Where's the patient?" he asked almostly roughly.

"In the bedroom," replied the old woman timidly, and she shuffled past him to open the door of it. In he went, and she followed.

This is what he saw. On a mattress laid against the further wall and covered by two blankets of a miserable quality lay the guant frame of a tall man. Melville, coming closer, perceived that he was old and that his hands resting on the top blanket, were rough and scarred by toil. He was no more the Honourable Patrick Weldon, M.P., than the Emperor of China!

"Where is Mr Weldon?" cried the doctor, aghast.

"That's my Pat," replied the old woman, surprised at his consternation. And, seeing that he was about to say something more, she continued rapidly, "'E's very bad, sir. 'As bin these four weeks, an' me sittin' night after night with 'im to 'elp 'im bear it. 'E's dyin', sir, an' 'e's my man, as I married when a slip of a girl five an' forty year agone. I can't let 'im go, sir, I can't! Doctor Freeman said you was the best doctor in England, so I sent a telegram, sir—and I've never sent none before—for my man Pat askin' you to come, sir. An' you'll cure 'im, won't you, sir? You'll save my man? Oh, I can't, I can't let 'im go! Not after five-an'-forty year! I can't!"

Melville looked at her for a moment and saw tears streaming down those faded cheeks. Then he looked at the man on the bed and saw old Pat Weldon open his eyes and turn his head a little and heard him call faintly, "Maggie! Where are you, Maggie?"

His old wife ran to him, and the doctor, turning away to the window, drew back the shutter to look out. The rain had stopped, and he saw over the hills the first faint promise of the dawn. For a long time he stood there, motionless.

At last he closed the shutter and strode towards the door. After him came the old woman's despairing cry, "Sir, you ain't goin' to leave 'im, are you?"

"No," said he, without looking round. "I'm only going to get my medicine case from the other room."

. . . .

A few days later I met Sidney Melville in Mount street and stopped to talk to him. Now, though I am twenty years younger than he is, I am usually rude to him, as he invariably is to me. That is to say I was. Anyway, almost at once I noticed that he was wearing a half-crown piece on his watchchain mixed up with the seals. It looked odd.

"Hullo!" said I. "Where did that come from?"

"What? Oh, that was a fee," he explained. "Yes, a fee I got from an old lady, who thought that she could summon a specialist from London to Cumberland