The Turning

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"NOTHING doing," said Chichester. "I've got a liver. You'd better run away and play, children. No noise, mind. You haven't told the gardener about those weeds, Bertha."

"I did tell him," his wife said shortly. Bennet scarcely knew her "short" with him.

"Then why didn't you see that he did what he was told?"

"I don't profess to manage the garden," she retorted. "It seems to me that you are looking for something to grumble about. Your liver is only an excuse for——"

At this point the ear-flaps began to buzz. Bennet only caught a word here and there for the next few minutes. He could see from the picture on the screen that a quarrel worked up. He wasn't surprised to see Chicester look disagreeable, and stamp up and down the fine dining-room; but he was astounded to see the anger on his wife's charming face, and the way that she bit her lips and tossed her head.

He caught a few words of the dispute indistinctly now and then. "Neglect everything but—" "Kill joy." "If I had married a woman who—" "I'd have been happier if —" "A poverty-stricken beggar!" (Did that refer to *him*?) "Anyhow he cares for his—bur-ur-ur-ur." The machine kept on buzzing from this point. Finally his wife swept out of the room, turning at the door for a last angry word. Bennet really hadn't realised that she could look so furious, and then the picture changed to the hall. It was a large hall, with a fireplace—Bertha always wanted that—and a wide stairway with a rich pile carpet and great triangular rods—she longed for them also —and his wife went up it wringing her hands.

"My baby!" she cried.

Bennet lost the picture, and found himself staring at the stranger.

"The baby," he demanded hoarsely. "What has become of little May? I haven't seen her. She was always delicate; and once she was ill, and—where's my baby child?"

The stranger went behind the ivory door, and something clanked, as if he were setting the apparatus, which Bennet observed to be there. He always regrets that he did not ask to see it.

"Look at the knob," he directed, "and perhaps you will see the little girl of whom you speak."

Bennet stared at the knob till he felt dazed; and a mist grew and cleared, and he found a distinct picture; but no Baby May. The picture which came was only a little tombstone with a marble cross, in a green churchyard.

"Mabel Winifred Chichester
Born 2nd May, 1910
Died 7th July, 1913."

Bennet found himself crying after the picture had gone. He wiped his eyes, staggered from the platform, and gripped the stranger's arm.

"She didn't die," he asserted fiercely. "We pulled her through the fever. Bert and I sat up with her all night. It was the morning of the 7th July when she opened her eyes, and we——"

"In the life that might have been," the stranger interrupted very quietly, "that good woman who is now your wife sat up alone. She hadn't quite strength enough without her husband's support. She fainted, and the little one died."

"And you think," Bennet said, "that I'd take a million and let her bear things alone!'

And suddenly Bennet missed the stranger and his house; rubbed his eyes and looked and missed them still. After a time he pressed his hat down on his head and trudged on home, thinking that he had dreamed a dream, and saying in his heart that a marvel had happened to him, and vowing in his soul to find a cross-way to some small road of prosperity that his family could tread with him.

"If ever I tell Bertha about it," he muttered, "I shall call it a dream; but I'm afraid she'll think I make it up to comfort her about the sideboard! I sha'n't tell her about that till the children have gone to bed. I'll laugh and talk, and she won't guess that there's anything wrong.

Nobody could have laughed and talked more merrily than Mr. Bennet when he returned home and told his family how he had lost his way at the turning. He imagined that he had completely disguised his distress; but his wife followed him into the bathroom when he went to wash his hands. She put her elbow on his shoulder and pulled the towel from his face. Really Bert was just a childish sweetheart sometimes.

"Well," she asked, "what's troubling you, dear old man?"

Will you believe it! He put his wet face down on her soft shoulder and cried.

"Markham has broken, Bert," he stated, "and I—I—sha'n't get the money for your sideboard."

"Well, old stupid!" she whispered in his ear, "what does it matter? You *wanted* to give it to me. That's the important thing."

There is the story, and you can say that it was a dream, or you can say that it wasn't a dream; but you know as well as I do that it is very nearly true.

What happened afterward? You tiresome, kind people who won't let a poor author finish when his story is done, I'll tell you a secret. The author finds it as hard as you do to leave his story-people, and has to have another peep at them. I don't know exactly what happened afterward; but I do know that whenever I gaze at the ivory door—we all have one in our minds —and see the Bennets' dining-room, there is always a brand new sideboard against the long wall; and it is twice as good as the one in the window of the Universal Furnishing Emporium.

In the next issue will appear the first instalment of a serial story, specially written for "The Ladies' Mirror" by New Zealand's well-known authoress, Isabel Maud Peacocke.

The serial is entitled "THE CAREER OF STELLA FRANE," and the many admirers of Miss Peacocke's work will look forward with interest to this latest story from her pen.