

## MR. AND MRS. SMITH--Continued

Smith had never been able, somehow, to break Alice's window. He remembered strangely how, instead of going out on that evening, when she had lain aloofly at his feet with closed eyes and a trickle of blood stealing across her temple, the lamp had burned higher and higher, and



higher still, silently, steadily, gently, so terrifying him with its clear brilliance that he had gone mad, and rushed away, and hidden his murderer's head.

Mr. Smith had, as has been said, had only two or three drinks, yet he must assuredly have been growing maudlin. He told himself so, with a burst of ferocity, and opened the gate determinedly, and walked up the path to the door, which stood open as usual, to the air and sounds of the evening.

The glass door, too, at the end of the little passage was ajar. Mr. Smith entered, and tiptoed along, and peeped in at Mrs. Smith.

Just the same Alice. A small, neat woman, with smooth brown hair in which the grey was beginning to show, and a quiet face, and firmly closed brave lips. Sewing, as usual, composedly, in the shining little lamplit room.

Mr. Smith felt at a loss as to how to announce his presence and so was relieved—and panic stricken—when quite suddenly Mrs. Smith raised her head, inquiringly, and looked at him. For a moment her eyes, dazzled by the white work, did not recognise him. When, after a second, they did, Mr. Smith had the impression that something had fled all at once from her face, or else was fading so swiftly and imperceptibly that he could not be sure it had really been there.

She laid down her work, rising slowly, and put her hand with the old gesture to her throat.

This irritated Mr. Smith. He entered at once, defiantly. "Well?" he demanded.

"So you have come back, Jim." That was all she said, waiting, watching him, with no questions, no reproaches.

This irritated Mr. Smith still more. He threw his cap into a chair "Yes, I've come back," he answered gruffly, seating himself. "Got any tea?"

Mrs. Smith stood watching him just a second longer, then her eyes left his face and rested a moment, almost dazedly, on his cap in the chair, then with a hunted expression sought the bedroom door, the hall door, the window even. Then grew quiet, and hopeless and aloof again as they always were when Mr. Smith was at home.

"I daresay I can find you something, Jim, but it will be cold," she said, and with another dumb glance all round, left the room, without waiting for his reply.

Presently she reappeared with a tray. She set it down before him, served him

deftly, and went out again, quietly and briskly, to attend to the kettle. Mr. Smith listened to her movements in the kitchen, and took stock of the familiar room, and finally, and furtively, before beginning to eat, took the necklet out of his pocket and laid it, still in its brown paper, at the side of his plate.

He was very much engaged indeed with his tea when she returned with the teapot, and did not even look up. Mrs. Smith waited a moment when she had put it down, as if for him to speak, but seeing only his bent head, wrung her hands, her eyes seeking first the bedroom door again, and then the bookcase, and then the snowy tangled heap of sewing, and turned, half distractedly, like one who knows that there is no choice but to brace oneself anew for an intolerable burden, and yet rebels, uselessly, in frantic panic.

Mr. Smith waited, with industriously moving jaws, until she was turning away, then swallowed hastily, and demanded suddenly and roughly, "Well, don't you want it?"

MRS. SMITH turned back, in quiet surprise—she never startled, or hurried, or flinched; she had a weak heart, and had long ago trained herself—and looked at him. Mr. Smith indicated the parcel at his plate, and raised his cup and drank, and choked, to save explanations.

Mrs. Smith picked up the parcel wondering, slipping off the string, unwrapping the paper, taking so long that Mr. Smith grew nervous in the quiet room, and felt impelled to rise and face her. And now at last the necklet lay revealed, and after a long moment, Mrs. Smith raised her eyes, slowly, questioning, fearfully—yes, fearfully, for the first time—to her husband's face.

Mr. Smith shifted, awkwardly. "What's the matter," he demanded, "it's Christmas Eve, isn't it?"

At these words, standing there, gazing at him, Mrs. Smith began to tremble, slightly at first, and then more and more, until suddenly, and with a shower of sound, the necklace snapped in her hands.

The beads popping and scattering about her feet recalled her. She stopped trembling, looked down and watched them until the last one lay still, and then swayed and would have fallen had it not been for Mr. Smith's brawny arm. But she was not fainting. She was weeping, which was a great deal worse, in Mr. Smith's opinion. He didn't know what to do with her. He tried squeezing her hard as she lay against him, and then clumsily patting her hair and then even saying "There, there, my girl," although the sound of his voice above her low sobbing scared him horribly every time he said it.

When these had no effect he grew a little panicky, and might even have kissed her had not a sudden inspiration come to him.

"Come on, old girl, you'll make your face all red," he said, relievedly, firmly, as became an indulgent husband with an hysterical wife. "Go and get your hat on and I'll take you down town to see the fun."

Mrs. Smith drew away from him, stopped crying. She had never lost control of herself for very long—Mr. Smith had often noticed this, had noticed how quickly and quietly she had always adjusted herself after an announcement that he had lost his job, or that he was going to sell out again and try Whangarei, or New Plymouth, or Napier.

The tears were wet on her cheeks, but her cheeks were blushed, and her eyes

shining, like the cheeks and eyes of the pretty little prim school-ma'am of twelve years ago.

"Oh, Jim," she said, a catch in her voice and her hand to her throat again to still its tremulousness. "I can't. I—I have something to show you, Jim."

Mr. Smith was feeling more and more relieved and at ease. He followed her, good humouredly, quite jauntily, when she beckoned to the bedroom door. But when she had pushed it gently open, standing aside for him to enter, he hesitated. In his bad moods he had always hated his wife's bedroom—his wife's always, never his—still and speckless and hushed, with never a sign, even before breakfast, of his drunkenly discarded boots, or cigarette end, or scattered matches. Always, somehow, like a little chapel, undisturbed, untouched, by a single blasphemous word just uttered aloud and now dying and drifting away unheeded into silence, as if it had never been spoken.

As he stood there, uncertainly peering in beyond her, the impression of the chapel was stronger than it had ever been. The shadowy quiet corners, the dim white walls, the single tranquil steady taper—God! God! *the crib*, even!

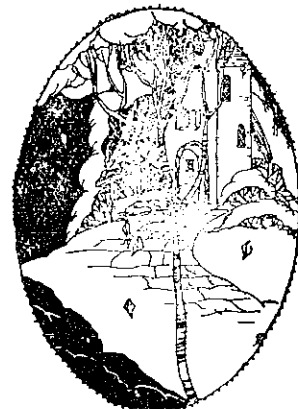
With a low, almost animalish cry, Mr. Smith reeled back, bringing up sharply against the table. His eyes, blood-shot and bulging, and terribly questioning, sought those of his wife, leaning there, suddenly bereft of strength, against the door post.

And, very very gently, Mrs. Smith's eyes answered him. Very gently her voice explained, from a great distance, each word clear and distinct in the age-old silence, like diamonds dropping one by one through darkness.

"A boy, Jim. . . . Nearly three months old."

One would have thought, looking on, that it was Mr. Smith's heart, and not his wife's which was weak. Great cords stood out upon his forehead, his mouth was open and gasping, and with one hand he tore madly at his collar while with the other he warded her off. At last, still standing at bay against the table, with his collar wrenched off and lying at his feet, he got the words out, thickly, with paralysed tongue and purple lips. "All is he—quite—all right?"

She understood almost in an instant. Dim, sad tears filmed her eyes as she nodded, slowly. And now her words were not diamonds, but pearls, softly gleaming,



sweet pearls. . . . "Quite all right. And so bonny, Jim."

The tears overflowed suddenly, her smile was revealed, happy and fond and mysterious.

"Come, Jim," she said, encouragingly, as she might have said it long ago to a grubby, ashamed little pupil, and took his hand and led him, softly—into the sanctuary.