



JIMMY AND THE BEAST

A Short Story by H. J. Kavanagh

AS improbable as being out of dog chains or rabbit traps, Kensing's General Store was out of Lingard's Wondrous Pain-Kure. Looking thoughtfully into the space between the Cod Liver Oil and the Fuller's Earth and back again at Jimmy, Mr. Kensing pulled at his beard and recalled having sold the last bottle to old Mrs. Waters for her neuralgia. He reckoned that would be about the beginning of last week; and immediately confirmed his reckoning by a reference to "Memoranda to Wholesale—One gross P.K. 15th Feb." Acknowledging an emergency liability of a good ten days Mr. Kensing was sorry on Mrs. Munro's account and must remember to talk pretty straight to Wholesale.

For himself, though, he hoped he'd know what to do when he got a pain any place he didn't expect one: see a doctor. These cure-alls were all dosed with laudanum.

"Laudanum," said Mr. Kensing solemnly, looking down on Jimmy. "Ever heard of it?"

Jimmy Munro was undersized and slender for his twelve years, with large blue eyes set in a thin, pale face which looked paler under its large freckles. The eyes were wider, too, from some inner agitation which he tried to conceal by staring hard at his feet, which were bare and very dusty.

"Tincture of opium's another name for it," Mr. Kensing went on informatively. "Believe me, it's something you don't take for a toe-ache. One drop and your pain's gone; a drop too much and you're gone with it."

Mr. Kensing had, in the part of an old soldier, a tendency to be cryptic in his humour even though, with the young ones, his tangle of beard made the response so uncertain that he was obliged to wink and laugh at his own jokes.

"Not, mind you, that there aren't some pains that make you want to try anything—so long as it's quick. There were fellows with us in China after the Boxing Rising—that's a bit before your time, my lad—got wounds so bad that as soon as they got out of hospital

they took to opium straight. 'If a man's got to go,' they'd say, 'then why not go easy?'"

"Now," said Mr. Kensing, indicating with his head a gig drawn by a smartly-groomed horse, making the turn out of the main road, "wouldn't that sort of thing make you wonder whether some people really know they're alive?"

Jimmy saw it was the doctor's gig, with the doctor in tweeds leaning back easily with his pipe, while his young wife in a blue summer frock drove. They watched it go on down the grass lane, rolling easily in the ruts with the spurts of dust from the horse's heels making a thin trail from between the yellow, varnished wheels.

"Three times this week," said Mr. Kensing, "to take Mrs. Basset's temperature and change the pills. And she'll get out of bed just when it suits her. Nice handful young Basset's got there—take my Davy. But I've been noticing your mother, Jimmy. She's not one to run after doctors, and she hasn't looked well for weeks. What's your father think?"

Jimmy hesitated. "Well, I heard what I wasn't supposed to, but it's a swelling he's worried about, Mr. Kensing. He said we'd have to have Dr. Benjamin. That was before the pain started. Mother keeps saying, 'It's nothing; it will pass.'"

"Swelling, then pain; and a woman doesn't think she needs a doctor," Mr. Kensing, in a gesture of impatience ran his hand over the oilcloth-covered top of his counter to collect a few scattered grains of rice. "Strikes me a man has to know when to take things into his own hands. Emily!" he called through the house door. There being no response from behind a continuous clatter of dishes, he left the shop and went back into the kitchen, where his wife, a short, dumpy woman with spectacles, was washing up.

"Emily," he said, "how old is the Munros' infant?"

Mrs. Kensing turned from the sink. "Eight months. Anything happened?"

"Oh, no. Only I remember you saying Mrs. Munro had trouble with her breast."

"Yes."

"Well, young Jimmy's out there now. She sent him down for Pain-Kure. Has a pain and swelling and doesn't want to see a doctor—that's fright, isn't it? What do you say we send Dr. Benjamin on his way back from Basset's?"

Mrs. Kensing nodded briskly, wiped her hands in the tea towel.

"I'll do my best with her," she said. "For all she's about the mildest woman you'd ever meet she has quite a mind of her own."

Two customers came in as Mr. Kensing returned; and telling Jimmy to hang on a minute, he went to serve them. One of the customers wanted something off the shelf where the tops and marbles were.

"Catch, Jimmy," said Mr. Kensing, tossing a top down. "Take a piece of string and try it on the asphalt."

Jimmy took the top outside, desultorily wound the string around it and put it in his pocket.

Mrs. Kensing appeared presently, basket in hand, pushing some straggling hair under her hat. Her working blouse just showed above the collar of her brown coat.

"Mr. Kensing will see Dr. Benjamin," she told Jimmy. "You had better wait outside the gate for him."

Mrs. Kensing walked so quickly that Jimmy had now and then to break into a trot to keep up. The Munros' place, a two-roomed lean-to, was about half a mile from the store facing the main road. It was an old place, older, much older, than Jimmy's mother, who had been born in it. In front was a macrocarpa hedge, and on one side a row of pine trees. A cluster of tall pink and white hollyhocks around the gate threw a spatter of colour on to a broad water race which flowed beside the hedge clear and sun-mottled.

Jimmy showed Mrs. Kensing directly into the kitchen, where his mother sat with a coat on over her nightdress feeding a baby in a pram. Mrs. Munro half rose in surprise. She was a resolute little woman, slightly pale. Her smile came with an effort.

"Don't get up, Mrs. Munro," said Mrs. Kensing. "Arthur just made a sort of suggestion like that I might bob in and see you. What with your good man away with the threshing machine, he says a woman might like to have someone beside her when a doctor calls."

Mrs. Munro's hand allowed the feeding bottle to slip and the baby immediately set up a howl.

"I didn't send for Dr. Benjamin," she said.

"That's the very thing, if you'll excuse us the liberty, Mrs. Munro, which we thought you might be having trouble making up your mind about. Jimmy, if you will do as I told you, your mother and I will talk things over."

ON the edge of the water-race Jimmy sat and waited for the doctor. He had stumbled on a jagged flint coming back from the store and to ease its throbbing he lowered his feet into the

water, down into the grey mud bottom. Dragon-flies soared and skimmed over the surface, while, in the depths, the cockabullies darted through the weed like the flickering shadows of his own secret fear. What was Mrs. Kensing advising his mother about? About putting aside fear, of course. Fear of what? With the whole of his being tensed to resist it the thought came, and stayed.

It had come to him first the night he had lain awake and heard his father remonstrating with his mother—using the name of a woman who had died a year ago.

"Look at what happened to Mrs. Parsons. She didn't think it was anything, either."

"I tell you," he'd heard his mother protesting, "it took Mrs. Parsons different. Besides, it didn't appear for years."

There hadn't been any more spoken; but once, after his father had first gone away, he had heard her in the night walking up and down the passage.

The wind rising and veering to the north-west set the great branches of the pine trees moving lazily with a sound like the sea. On the edge of the long white stretch of road, through a faint shimmer of heat, the black and white spaniel from Basset's farm snuffled along in the dust. He sighted Jimmy, took sudden inspiration from his position, and plunged into the race.

"Away, Rover," Jimmy said, getting up and backing away before a bundle of water-charged caresses could erupt into his lap. The dog scrambled out to present himself expectantly to retrieve a stick. Jimmy's attention had returned to the road.

The doctor's gig had turned into the road down by the store and stopped. Mr. Kensing was there standing out in the middle; Jimmy could see his white apron. He stood talking to the doctor a long time; till Jimmy thought they would never move. Then before he knew it they had started and were on him. The doctor was driving with a strong curb on his young horse.

"Whoa, you demon," he said, drawing up beside Jimmy. He waited a second or two for the horse to stand steady before passing the reins to his wife. "Was there ever such an outlaw once his head's turned for home!" He climbed down, put the chain round the wheel, and reached for his bag.

"Hullo, young Munro," he said. "You haven't given me much trouble since I brought you into the world. I'd like to see more colour in your cheeks, though; more beef on those bones." Then, as Jimmy went to follow him in, "I can find my way in, thank you. You stay and keep my wife company. She's nervous of flighty horses."

Dr. Benjamin was tall, broad shouldered, with a trim beard turning grey. He had a deeply tanned face and looked very serious, till he smiled.

Jimmy had never been close to Mrs. Benjamin before and was surprised at how much younger she was than the doctor; how pretty she was, too, in her blue frock and white straw hat. Now as she looked down on him and smiled he recalled that his mother had once pronounced her "lovely." Better still, she wasn't a bit grand like the women you saw riding with the Cricklefield Hunt. She had been a doctor's daughter, he'd heard his mother say, when she had married Dr. Benjamin in England; and someone had a picture of her taken from an English magazine. She had the softest, wavy brown hair and gentle grey blue eyes.

"Have you waited long, Jimmy?" She had his name, of course, Jimmy guessed, from Mr. Kensing.

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