

The Storyteller

DR. JACK'S MAGIC

When Dr. Jack Carroll began life, no one would have prophesied anything very remarkable for him. He passed through college with no special distinction, which was a decided disappointment to his father, a highly successful merchant, who would have wished him to enter public life and aspire to a seat in the Dominion Parliament. It was not in this field, however, that Jack was destined to succeed.

Soon after leaving college he was induced through the influences of a pious sister to join the League of the Sacred Heart, and from that time he observed the simple practices to which he had pledged himself with an exact fidelity which was a part of his character. He wore a medal upon his watch chain; he was seen regularly in the ranks of those who approached the Holy Table, with the badge upon his breast, insignia of the new crusade, upon which the members of the Apostleship have entered. He left the picture of the Sacred Heart in his room and never failed to say short but fervent prayers before it morning and evening and to refer to it the various circumstances of his daily life.

It was wonderful, indeed, how the devotion seemed to take root in his strong and virile mind and to send forth shoots in all directions. After mature deliberation, he had chosen the profession of medicine, and almost from the first was wonderfully successful.

He settled in a very populous neighborhood, and, in the course of comparatively few years had made for himself an unusually large practice. He used to laugh his deep, quiet laugh when men who had been at college with him as fellow-students in medicine referred half enviously to his phenomenal success. He always replied that it was because he had a magic of his own the secret spring of which was in his room. But let their curiosity reach what pitch it might, he never made any further explanation. For his piety, though deep, was unostentatious, and he did not care to parade it before all comers. In his own mind he always attributed the good fortune that seemed steadily to pursue him to the devotion which he so steadfastly practised and to his custom of referring all important cases to the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

He was soon possessed of a competency, which enabled him to purchase a house and think of taking a wife, and this, notwithstanding the fact that his charity to the poor was proverbial and the number of patients whom he attended gratuitously never to be known till the great accounting day. His name was a household word with the poor of the city, and they would send from all quarters to consult him or to beg him for a visit. And his visits always brought sunshine with them, even to the poorest slums. It was good to see him in some miserable court surrounded by a group of dirty and ragged children, his strong, earnest face lit with pleasure; and it was a more beautiful sight still to see the popular young doctor bending over some tiny sufferer upon a wretched bed, touching a broken or infirm limb with infinite gentleness, bathing a fevered head or smoothing a ruffled pillow.

But a crisis occurred in the successful physician's career, first when he had made up his mind to marry and had chosen a charming girl who was certain to make him an ideal helpmate. Such happiness is not, perhaps, for earth, or is denied to chosen souls who, like the doctor, are called to shining heights. One evening he had returned from a round of calls so wearied that he sat down to a table, unable to eat a morsel—merely drinking a cup or two of tea. He was disturbed before he had finished even this slight refreshment. A card was handed to him, that of a medical man, as he saw at a glance, but the name was altogether unfamiliar.

He rose at once; he would not keep a confrere waiting. In his office he found an old, shabbily-dressed man with bent shoulders and haggard, careworn face. Dr. Jack, noting these things, held out his hand with even more than his customary cordiality and took the withered one extended to him in a warm, strong clasp. He begged his visitor to be seated, but the old man, evidently disturbed in mind, paced up and down, stopping at last and facing his brother physician as he said:

Doctor, I am going to ask an extraordinary thing of you; a most extraordinary thing.

'Let me hear it,' said the younger man, with his smile, which inspired most people with confidence.

'It is a tremendous thing,' went on the old doctor, pacing back and forward again in his excitement; 'yes, a tremendous thing.'

Doctor Jack stood waiting with his hand on the back of the chair.

'I do not belong to the city,' explained the old man.

'So I fancied by your card.'

'Perhaps you will have some idea of what brought me when I tell you that I came from Ridgeville.'

Dr. Jack grew a shade paler as some perception of the other's meaning was brought home to him.

Typhus of the worst description was raging at Ridgeville.

'I am almost alone,' continued the old physician; 'three of the young men are dead, two of the older practitioners are in the hospital. There is only one remaining besides myself, and he is not strong—may go at any moment. Doctor, I ask a terrible thing of you. I ask you to come.'

Doctor Jack's hand tightened upon the back of the chair; the air seemed to grow very close in the room.

'It is not only that we are but two,' said the old doctor, tremulously; 'death does not care for such paltry victims as myself, and I might go on indefinitely and see the pestilence through, but—'

And here an indescribably wistful look came into the aged practitioner's eyes; he drew close to his successful confrere and whispered:

'But, doctor, I distrust my own skill. I am old now. I was trained in an old-fashioned school and I have had little chance of improvement. A country doctor's life gives scant time for study, and I never made money enough to buy books.'

There was infinite pathos in his look and tone, and the honest eyes that looked into his were dim with tears as Doctor Jack cried, impulsively:

'I would trust you in preference to any half-dozen of us modern featherweights. But I see there is only one thing to be done. I must go with you to Ridgeville.'

The young man's disengaged hand closed around the medal of the Sacred Heart upon his watch chain, while the other still clenched the arm of the chair, as for support.

This was, indeed, a tremendous thing which the visitor asked, a sacrifice almost too great for his strength. To give up even for a time, a time which at least was indefinite, his splendid practice, to give up the home and the wife he had chosen—to go hence from the crowded mart, as it were, of success and popularity into the obscure byway of Ridgeville, where he was a stranger, and, perhaps, to share the fate of those who were in the hospital or of the other three who had passed from pestilential death-beds into the great silence of eternity. He had been working hard lately; he was not in the very best condition.

For an instant he was tempted to draw back, and he said, with some hesitation: 'Unless, indeed, doctor, you could get some one else to go; some young fellow who is not established yet.'

The old man's face, which had brightened, now fell again, as he said almost hastily: 'I have tried half a dozen of them and some of the older physicians, too. They all had their excuses, like the guests invited to the Gospel marriage feast. I had heard of you, knew something of your career, and I thought you might come. But no man is obliged, I suppose, to risk his life, unless the occasion offers in his daily work. I will bid you good-night, doctor, and try somewhere else.'

'Stop!' cried Doctor Jack, who was already taking himself to task for cowardice and arguing that since the call had come to him he had no right to pass it on to another, even if that other were a young fellow not yet established. 'Stop! I will go with you. What time does the last train leave to-night?'

'Half-past ten,' cried the old man, bewildered; 'but you cannot mean to come with me at once, to-night!'

Doctor Jack looked at his watch.

'That gives me just two hours for preparation. It is enough. I think I can leave my practice in the hands of a neighbor—Dr. Willoughby—and I have a few other matters which require attention.'

One of these was writing to his betrothed, but he did not explain further, nor could the old man guess the pain that was gnawing at his heart. He invited his guest to partake of some refreshments, an offer which was gratefully accepted, and then he went manfully about his preparations for departure. He put his practice into the hands of a man whom he knew to be