

The doctor looked anxiously to the door to see if the neighbor had returned, suddenly there came a change over the countenance of the sick one. A bluish shadow spread itself over her, but it seemed as if he hesitated became dark.

The doctor knew that the end was near. Death had laid its hand upon her, but it seemed as if he hesitated to seize his victim, so great was her unwillingness to follow him. Minute after minute passed and the agonising 'I cannot die' still would not cease.

Perspiration stood upon the doctor's forehead. He had sat by many a deathbed and witnessed many a hard parting from this life, but this surpassed all that he had ever seen. He looked upon the poor woman whom anxiety for her children would not permit to die, he looked upon the children, who had thrown themselves upon the bed in the excess of their grief, vainly endeavoring to smother their pitiful weeping in the pillows. His honest face quivered and struggled, his breast heaved heavily.

When the excruciating 'I cannot die' again struck upon his ear, a firm determination lighted up his eyes. He bent over the sick one and whispered a few words to her. She suddenly raised herself up and clasped the hands of the doctor.

Surprise, unbelieving wonder, rapture spoke out of her gaze, while with waning voice she asked: 'All five?'

'All five, so help me, God,' he answered, earnestly and solemnly.

Suddenly the anguish was gone from her face, and instead an expression of endless rest, of indescribable peace, spread over it and remained hovering about her lips like a smile. Gently her fingers slipped into the hand of the doctor.

Come here if you want to kiss your mother once more,' called the doctor to the children.

While the two larger boys, sobbing aloud, covered their mother's face with kisses, the girl hastily brought the two little ones from their bed that they might take leave of their dying mother. As the smallest one pressed his rosy mouth upon the pale lips of his mother her head sank back. A soft sigh, a shrill outcry from the children, a slight quiver and all was over. Her figure extended itself for the last long sleep.

With a gentle pressure the doctor laid his hand upon her eyes and beckoned to the neighbor just entering: 'Take the children out with you; your mother has at last found rest.'

It was on the next day, a holiday. The doctor and his wife were sitting at the dinner table. The doctor's wife was a small, plump woman of pleasant appearance, in spite of her forty years, with a kindly, motherly expression of countenance, such as is rarely seen in a childless woman, and one who knew her well could easily see that she was planning something special to-day. However tidy and tasty her usual dress, several gay-colored ribbons betrayed her evident desire to please, and though she was never wanting in attention to her husband, whom she loved with all her heart in spite of his rough ways, the liveliness with which she played about him through the whole dinner was much more than usual.

However, the doctor appeared to notice nothing of all this. He was remarkably sober and absent-minded and helped himself silently to the dishes, which were chosen with special regard to his taste. He became attentive for the first time when a dish of large prunes was brought upon the table for dessert, which he could seldom obtain from his wife, although he was very fond of them. He cast a searching glance at her and a somewhat ironical smile appeared upon his lips.

'What does it mean, wife? Speak it out. What will you have?'

'What will I have? How does such a thought enter your mind?'

'H'm! I suppose you have put the prunes on the table for no purpose! And the beautiful red ribbons! They are indeed very becoming. You are always a very pretty wife. Just tell what you wish.'

The doctor's wife turned scarlet. She had not wished the affair to turn in such a manner. 'I did wish to talk with you about a little matter, but not so suddenly.'

'Well, allow yourself time. To-day is a holiday. People do not like to die on a holiday, as I have already found out. Well? It must be something terribly big that you are so uncommunicative about.'

'Yes, but you know, Albert, you must let me talk quietly and you must fancy yourself in the mind of a woman.'

'Of my wife, I suppose?'

'And you must not constantly interrupt me. Therefore, now you see it will be eighteen years at Christmas time that we have lived in this same house.'

The doctor pushed back his plate, laid his pipe, which he had been about to light on the table, and arose. 'If you wish to talk of moving, I prefer to go away at once. Every word which you should say about that would bring sorrow to me.'

'Why, I am not even thinking of moving. So please stay.' The doctor's wife held her husband fast by the arm. 'I only mean that when one has been in the house so many years without doing anything to it it is no wonder that it does not look particularly nice.'

'It suits me,' said the doctor, glancing around contentedly.

'But it would please you better if it were once put in order. Just look at the floors. I take so much trouble to improve their looks, but there is no color left in the old, worn-out boards.'

'Perhaps you wish French flooring?'

'It is not necessary to have French flooring. I would be perfectly satisfied with hard floors.'

'So? Go on, then, for you are certainly not through yet.'

'The old smoky wall papers must go at the same time and also the old-fashioned curtains. Who uses purple curtains nowadays? We could try auto curtains if you objected to white ones.'

'Then I suppose we would buy new furniture?'

'Only for the parlor. We would take the old furniture out of that into the room next the sitting-room. Your apparatus, which stands in there now, can easily be put somewhere else and we would have a charming room.'

'And the money for all these plans?'

'Now, Albert, be reasonable for once. I know that, although you take care of half the town for nothing, you lay by a handsome sum every year. But for whom are you saving it? We have no children—a sigh accompanied these words—also no near relatives. So we should spend something once in a while for ourselves.'

The doctor took a couple of long pulls at his pipe. 'You used to think a good many times of adopting a child?'

'Yes, indeed, I have thought of it, but you know how it always is. We could never find a child well developed mentally and bodily without having a whole train of greedy relatives hanging about. How often we have tried it. And do you know, I am truly glad it was never accomplished. It is always a venturesome thing to take a strange child. One never knows what is in him. And the ingratitudes one receives from strange children! The friendship one bestows upon them they take as their rightful portion. While they are small they cause nothing but trouble and vexation, and when they are grown up and need us no more,

it suddenly occurs to them that they are not our children. No, no, Albert, it is better as it is.'

The doctor looked thoughtful a few moments, then said:

'And I had the intention this very day of asking you to take not only one child, but five.'

'Five children! The doctor's wife sank back in her armchair with such a dejected countenance that her husband hastened to add: 'Now, now, I do not of course mean for ever, it would be for only a few days. You know that poor Mrs. Mosback died yesterday,' he continued, after a pause, as his wife still remained speechless. 'Her children have no one to take them.'

'Does not the city have to care for them?' asked the doctor's wife, quietly.

'They will, I suppose, but that can't be done so quickly. The police would first of all take care of the children.'

'Can they not stay with the neighbor's wife of whom you spoke?'

'She has seven children of her own.'

'But I should have no place for so many.'

'You might perhaps use the room next the sitting-room. The few apparatus of mine—the doctor could not repress a somewhat malicious wink—are easily put away.'

'But five beds cannot be put in there.'

'Two beds and a crib for the little ones would be enough. The children are accustomed to sleep by twos.'

'But the immense amount of work! Stina will refuse it.'

'Stina will be reasonable when I talk with her. If she is not ready, Augusta, the cabinet maker's daughter from across the street, can help me. Her mother asked for work for her to-day.'

'How long will the children stay?'

'I cannot tell just exactly myself. Not longer than a week.'

'And I hoped to have the house all remodeled by Christmas.'

'Now, my dear wife, since we have been so happy for such a long time in the old house, won't it do for a couple of weeks longer? He looked so lovingly at her that she yielded and asked: 'When, then shall the children come?'

'To-morrow afternoon after the burial. The neighbor promised to take care of them until then. But now I must go. It is high time.'

The doctor took his hat and cane and left his wife in a very mixed state of mind.

The conversation which she had planned and arranged so carefully had ended in an entirely unexpected way.

The doctor's wife looked for the coming of the children the next day with anxious suspense. How will they behave? Will she take a fancy to them?

There they stood in the door already, huddled together in a little bunch, like a handful of snowflakes which the storm had cast away.

The three largest, a boy of nine, another of seven, and a six year old before them stood the two youngest, gul formed the background, while a plump smiling little fellow of three and a rosy two-year-old girl. The two clung timidly to the folds of their sister's dress, from which their bright eyes looked out half shyly and half questioningly.

The doctor's wife glanced hurriedly at the group and then breathed a sigh of relief. They were not crippled, neglected children, as she had half expected, but the tastily-dressed and well-bred children of an intelligent family, who showed none of that awkwardness in their looks and manners which make the children of the poor appear so unattractive.

The conversation did not go on very well. The children answered all questions willingly, but one could see how sorrowful they were at heart, and there was not much change at supper even with the doctor, whom they knew better. The children tried