

## CHAPTER XIX

## THE VOICE IN THE DARKNESS

JUST the dark head upon the pillow. That was all Jane saw at first, and she saw it in sunshine.

Somehow she had always pictured a darkened room, forgetting that to him darkness and light were both alike, and that there was no need to keep out the sunlight, with its healing, purifying, invigorating powers.

He had requested to have his bed moved into a corner—the corner farthest from door, fireplace, and windows—with its left side against the wall, so that he could feel the blank wall with his hand and, turning close to it, know himself shut away from all possible prying of unseen eyes. This was how he now lay, and he did not turn as they entered.

Just the dear dark head upon the pillow. It was all Jane saw at first. Then his right arm in the sleeve of a blue silk sleeping-suit, stretched slightly behind him as he lay on his left side, the thin white hand limp and helpless on the coverlet.

Jane put her hands behind her. The impulse was so strong to fall on her knees beside the bed, take that poor hand in both her strong ones, and cover it with kisses. Ah surely, surely then, the dark head would turn to her, and instead of seeking refuge in the hard, blank wall, he would hide that sightless face in the boundless tenderness of her arms. But Deryck's warning voice sounded, grave and persistent: "If

you value your own eventual happiness and his —" So Jane put her hands behind her back.

Dr. Mackenzie advanced to the side of the bed and laid his hand upon Garth's shoulder. Then, with an incredible softening of his rather strident voice, he spoke so slowly and quietly that Jane could hardly believe this to be the man who had jerked out questions, comments, and orders to her, during the last half hour.

"Good morning, Mr. Dalmain. Simpson tells me it has been an excellent night, the best you have yet had. Now that is good. No doubt you were relieved to be rid of Johnson, capable though he was, and to be back in the hands of your own man again. These trained attendants are never content with doing enough; they always want to do just a little more, and that little more is a weariness to the patient. — Now I have brought you to-day one who is prepared to do all you need, and yet who, I feel sure, will never annoy you by attempting more than you desire. Sir Deryck Brand's prescription, Nurse Rosemary Gray, is here; and I believe she is prepared to be companion, secretary, reader, anything you want, in fact a new pair of eyes for you, Mr. Dalmain, with a clever brain behind them, and a kind, sympathetic, womanly heart directing and controlling that brain. Nurse Gray arrived this morning, Mr. Dalmain."

No response from the bed. But Garth's hand groped for the wall; touched it, then dropped listlessly back.

Jane could not realise that *she* was "Nurse Gray." She only longed that her poor boy need not be bothered with the woman! It all seemed, at this moment, a thing apart from herself and him.

Dr. Mackenzie spoke again. "Nurse Rosemary Gray is in the room, Mr. Dalmain."

Then Garth's instinctive chivalry struggled up through the blackness. He did not turn his head, but his right hand made a little courteous sign of greeting, and he said in a low, distinct voice: "How do you do? I am sure it is most kind of you to come so far. I hope you had an easy journey."

Jane's lips moved, but no sound would pass them.

Dr. Rob made answer quickly, without looking at her: "Miss Gray had a very good journey, and looks as fresh this morning as if she had spent the night in bed. I can see she is a cold-water young lady."

"I hope my housekeeper will make her comfortable. Please give orders," said the tired voice; and Garth turned even closer to the wall, as if to end the conversation.

Dr. Rob attacked his moustache, and stood looking down at the blue silk shoulder for a minute, silently.

Then he turned and spoke to Jane. "Come over to the window, Nurse Gray. I want to show you a special chair we have obtained for Mr. Dalmain, in which he will be most comfortable as soon as he feels inclined to sit up. You see? Here is an adjustable support for the head, if necessary; and these various trays and stands and movable tables can be swung round into any position by a touch. I consider it excellent, and Sir Deryck approved it. Have you seen one of this kind before, Nurse Gray?"

"We had one at the hospital, but not quite so complete as this," said Jane.

In the stillness of that sunlit chamber, the voice from the bed broke upon them with startling suddenness; and in it was the cry of one lost in an abyss of

darkness, but appealing to them with a frantic demand for instant enlightenment.

"Who is in the room?" cried Garth Dalmain.

His face was still turned to the wall; but he had raised himself on his left elbow, in an attitude which betokened intent listening.

Dr. Mackenzie answered. "No one is in the room, Mr. Dalmain, but myself and Nurse Gray."

"There *is* some one else in the room!" said Garth violently. "How dare you lie to me! Who was speaking?"

Then Jane came quickly to the side of the bed. Her hands were trembling, but her voice was perfectly under control.

"It was I who spoke, sir," she said; "Nurse Rosemary Gray. And I feel sure I know why my voice startled you. Dr. Brand warned me it might do so. He said I must not be surprised if you detected a remarkable similarity between my voice and that of a mutual friend of yours and his. He said he had often noticed it."

Garth, in his blindness, remained quite still; listening and considering. At length he asked slowly: "Did he say whose voice?"

"Yes, for I asked him. He said it was Miss Champion's."

Garth's head dropped back upon the pillow. Then without turning he said in a tone which Jane knew meant a smile on that dear hidden face: "You must forgive me, Miss Gray, for being so startled and so stupidly, unpardonably agitated. But, you know, being blind is still such a new experience, and every fresh voice which breaks through the black curtain of perpetual night, means so infinitely more than the

speaker realises. The resemblance in your voice to that of the lady Sir Deryck mentioned is so remarkable that, although I know her to be at this moment in Egypt, I could scarcely believe she was not in the room. And yet the most unlikely thing in the world would be that she should have been in this room. So I owe you and Dr. Mackenzie most humble apologies for my agitation and unbelief." He stretched out his right hand, palm upwards, towards Jane.

Jane clasped her shaking hands behind her.

"Now, Nurse, if you please," broke in Dr. Mackenzie's rasping voice from the window, "I have a few more details to explain to you over here."

They talked together for a while without interruption, until Dr. Rob remarked: "I suppose I will have to be going."

Then Garth said: "I wish to speak to you alone, doctor, for a few minutes."

"I will wait for you downstairs, Dr. Mackenzie," said Jane, and was moving towards the door, when an imperious gesture from Dr. Rob stopped her, and she turned silently to the fireplace. She could not see any need now for this subterfuge, and it annoyed her. But the freckled little Napoleon of the moors was not a man to be lightly disobeyed. He walked to the door, opened and closed it; then returned to the bedside, drew up a chair, and sat down.

"Now, Mr. Dalmain," he said.

Garth sat up and turned towards him eagerly.

Then, for the first time, Jane saw his face.

"Doctor," he said, "tell me about this nurse. Describe her to me."

The tension in tone and attitude was extreme. His hands were clasped in front of him, as if imploring

sight through the eyes of another. His thin white face, worn with suffering, looked so eager and yet so blank.

"Describe her to me, doctor," he said; "this Nurse Rosemary Gray, as you call her."

"But it is not a pet name of mine, my dear sir," said Dr. Rob deliberately. "It is the young lady's own name, and a pretty one, too. 'Rosemary for remembrance.' Is not that Shakespeare?"

"Describe her to me," insisted Garth, for the third time.

Dr. Mackenzie glanced at Jane. But she had turned her back, to hide the tears which were streaming down her cheeks. Oh Garth! Oh beautiful Garth of the shining eyes!

Dr. Rob drew Deryck's letter from his pocket and studied it.

"Well," he said slowly, "she is a pretty, dainty little thing; just the sort of elegant young woman you would like to have about you, could you see her?"

"Dark or fair?" asked Garth.

The doctor glanced at what he could see of Jane's cheek, and at the brown hands holding on to the mantel-piece.

"Fair," said Dr. Rob, without a moment's hesitation.

Jane started and glanced round. Why should this little man be lying on his own account?

"Hair?" queried the strained voice from the bed.

"Well," said Dr. Rob deliberately, "it is mostly tucked away under a modest little cap but, were it not for that wise restraint, I should say 't might be that kind of fluffy, fly-away floss-silk, which puts the finishing touch to a dainty, pretty woman."

Garth lay back, panting, and pressed his hands over his sightless face.

"Doctor," he said, "I know I have given you heaps of trouble, and to-day you must think me a fool. But if you do not wish me to go mad in my blindness, send that girl away. Do not let her enter my room again."

"Now, Mr. Dalmain," said Dr. Mackenzie patiently, "let us consider this thing. We may take it you have nothing against this young lady excepting a chance resemblance in her voice to that of a friend of yours now far away. Was not this other lady a pleasant person?"

Garth laughed suddenly, bitterly; a laugh like a hard sob. "Oh yes," he said, "she was quite a pleasant person."

"'Rosemary for remembrance,'" quoted Dr. Rob. "Then why should not Nurse Rosemary call up a pleasant remembrance? Also it seems to me to be a kind, sweet, womanly voice, which is something to be thankful for nowadays, when so many women talk fit to scare the crows; cackle, cackle, cackle — like stones rattling in a tin canister."

"But can't you understand, doctor," said Garth wearily, "that it is just the remembrance and the resemblance which, in my blindness, I cannot bear? I have nothing against her voice, Heaven knows! But I tell you, when I heard it first I thought it was — it was she — the other — come to me — here — and —" Garth's voice ceased suddenly.

"The pleasant lady?" suggested Dr. Rob. "I see. Well now, Mr. Dalmain, Sir Deryck said the best thing that could happen would be if you came to wish for visitors. It appears you have many friends ready and anxious to come any distance in order to bring you

help or cheer. Why not let me send for this pleasant lady? I make no doubt she would come. Then when she herself had sat beside you, and talked with you, the nurse's voice would trouble you no longer."

Garth sat up again, his face wild with protest. Jane turned on the hearth-rug, and stood watching it.

"No, doctor," he said. "Oh my God, no! In the whole world, she is the last person I would have enter this room!"

Dr. Mackenzie bent forward to examine minutely a microscopic darn in the sheet. "And why?" he asked very low.

"Because," said Garth, "that pleasant lady, as you rightly call her, has a noble, generous heart, and it might overflow with pity for my blindness; and pity from her I could not accept. It would be the last straw upon my heavy cross. I can bear the cross, doctor; I hope in time to carry it manfully, until God bids me lay it down. But that last straw — *her* pity — would break me. I should fall in the dark, to rise no more."

"I see," said Dr. Rob gently. "Poor laddie! The pleasant lady must not come."

He waited silently a few minutes, then pushed back his chair and stood up.

"Meanwhile," he said, "I must rely on you, Mr. Dalmain, to be agreeable to Nurse Rosemary Gray, and not to make her task too difficult. I dare not send her back. She is Dr. Brand's choice. Besides — think of the cruel blow to her in her profession. Think of it, man! — sent off at a moment's notice, after spending five minutes in her patient's room, because, forsooth, her voice maddened him! Poor child! What a statement to enter on her report! See her

appear before the matron with it! Can't you be generous and unselfish enough to face whatever trial there may be for you in this bit of a coincidence?"

Garth hesitated. "Dr. Mackenzie," he said at last, "will you swear to me that your description of this young lady was accurate in every detail?"

"Swear not at all," quoted Dr. Rob unctuously. "I had a pious mother, laddie. Besides I can do better than that. I will let you into a secret. I was reading from Sir Deryck's letter. I am no authority on women myself, having always considered dogs and horses less ensnaring and more companionable creatures. So I would not trust my own eyes, but preferred to give you Sir Deryck's description. You will allow him to be a fine judge of women. You have seen Lady Brand?"

"Seen her? Yes," said Garth eagerly, a slight flush tinting his thin cheeks, "and more than that, I've painted her. Ah, such a picture! — standing at a table, the sunlight in her hair, arranging golden daffodils in an old Venetian vase. Did you see it, doctor, in the New Gallery, two years ago?"

"No," said Dr. Rob. "I am not finding myself in galleries, new or old. But" — he turned a swift look of inquiry on Jane, who nodded — "Nurse Gray was telling me she had seen it."

"Really?" said Garth, interested. "Somehow one does not connect nurses with picture galleries."

"I don't know why not," said Dr. Rob. "They must go somewhere for their outings. They can't be everlastingly nosing shop windows in all weathers; so why not go in and have a look at your pictures? Beside, Miss Rosemary is a young lady of parts. Sir Deryck assures me she is a gentlewoman by birth,

well-read and intelligent. — Now, laddie, what is it to be?"

Garth considered silently.

Jane turned away and gripped the mantel-piece. So much hung in the balance during that quiet minute.

At length Garth spoke, slowly, hesitatingly. "If only I could quite disassociate the voice from the — from that other personality. If I could be quite sure that, though her voice is so extraordinarily like, she herself is not —" he paused, and Jane's heart stood still. Was a description of herself coming? — "is not at all like the face and figure which stand clear in my remembrance as associated with that voice."

"Well," said Dr. Rob, "I'm thinking we can manage that for you. These nurses know their patients must be humoured. We will call the young lady back, and she shall kneel down beside your bed — Bless you! She won't mind, with me to play old Gooseberry! — and you shall pass your hands over her face and hair, and round her little waist, and assure yourself, by touch, what an elegant, dainty little person it is, in a blue frock and white apron."

Garth burst out laughing, and his voice had a tone it had not yet held. "Of all the preposterous suggestions!" he said. "Good heavens! What an ass I must have been making of myself! And I begin to think I have exaggerated the resemblance. In a day or two, I shall cease to notice it. And, look here, doctor, if she really was interested in that portrait — Here, I say — where are you going?"

"All right, sir," said Dr. Rob. "I was merely moving a chair over to the fireside, and taking the liberty of pouring out a glass of water. Really you

are becoming abnormally quick of hearing. Now I am all attention. What about the portrait?"

"I was only going to say, if she — the nurse, you know — is really interested in my portrait of Lady Brand, there are studies of it up in the studio, which she might care to see. If she brought them here and described them to me I could explain — But, I say, doctor. I can't have dainty young ladies in and out of my room while I'm in bed. Why shouldn't I get up and try that chair of yours? Send Simpson along; and tell him to look out my brown lounge-suit and orange tie. Good heavens! what a blessing to have the *memory* of colours and of how they blend! Think of the fellows who are *born* blind. And please ask Miss Gray to go out in the pine wood, or on the moor, or use the motor, or rest, or do anything she likes. Tell her to make herself quite at home; but on no account to come up here until Simpson reports me ready."

"You may rely on Nurse Gray to be most discreet," said Dr. Rob, whose voice had suddenly become very husky. "And as for getting up, laddie, don't go too fast. You will not find your strength equal to much. But I am bound to tell you there is nothing to keep you in bed if you feel like rising."

"Good-bye, doctor," said Garth, groping for his hand; "and I am sorry I shall never be able to offer to paint Mrs. Mackenzie!"

"You'd have to paint her with a shaggy head, four paws, and the softest amber eyes in the world," said Dr. Rob tenderly; "and, looking out from those eyes, the most faithful, loving dog-heart in creation. In all the years we've kept house together she has never failed to meet me with a welcome, never con-

tradicted me or wanted the last word, and never worried me for so much as the price of a bonnet. There's a woman for you! — Well, good-bye, lad, and God Almighty bless you. And be careful how you go. Do not be surprised if I look in again on my way back from my rounds to see how you like that chair."

Dr. Mackenzie held open the door. Jane passed noiselessly out before him. He followed, signing to her to precede him down the stairs.

In the library, Jane turned and faced him. He put her quietly into a chair and stood before her. The bright blue eyes were moist, beneath the shaggy brows.

"My dear," he said, "I feel myself somewhat of a blundering old fool. You must forgive me. I never contemplated putting you through such an ordeal. I perfectly understand that, while he hesitated, you must have felt your whole career at stake. I see you have been weeping; but you must not take it too much to heart that our patient made so much of your voice resembling this Miss Champion's. He will forget all about it in a day or two, and you will be worth more to him than a dozen Miss Champions. See what good you have done him already. Here he is wanting to get up and explain his pictures to you. Never you fear. You will soon win your way, and I shall be able to report to Sir Deryck what a fine success you have made of the case. Now I must see the valet and give him very full instructions. And I recommend you to go for a blow on the moor and get an appetite for lunch. Only put on something warmer than that. You will have no sick-room work to do; and having duly impressed me with your washableness and serviceableness, you may as well wear something com-

fortable to protect you from our Highland nip. Have you warmer clothing with you?"

"It is the rule of our guild to wear uniform," said Jane; "but I have a grey merino."

"Ah, I see. Well, wear the grey merino. I shall return in two hours to observe how he stands that move. Now, don't let me keep you."

"Dr. Mackenzie," said Jane quietly, "may I ask why you described me as fair; and my very straight, heavy, plainly coiled hair, as fluffy, fly-away floss-silk?"

Dr. Rob had already reached the bell, but at her question he stayed his hand and, turning, met Jane's steadfast eyes with the shrewd turquoise gleam of his own.

"Why certainly you may ask, Nurse Rosemary Gray," he said, "though I wonder you think it necessary to do so. It was of course perfectly evident to me that, for reasons of his own, Sir Deryck wished to paint an imaginary portrait of you to the patient, most likely representing some known ideal of his. As the description was so different from the reality, I concluded that, to make the portrait complete, the two touches unfortunately left to me to supply, had better be as unlike what I saw before me as the rest of the picture. And now, if you will be good enough —" Dr. Rob rang the bell violently.

"And why did you take the risk of suggesting that he should feel me?" persisted Jane.

"Because I knew he was a gentleman," shouted Dr. Rob angrily. "Oh come in, Simpson — come in, my good fellow — and shut that door! And God Almighty be praised that He made you and me *men*, and not women!"

A quarter of an hour later, Jane watched him drive

away, thinking to herself: "Deryck was right. But what a queer mixture of shrewdness and obtuseness, and how marvellously it worked out to the furtherance of our plans."

But as she watched the dog-cart start off at a smart trot across the moor, she would have been more than a little surprised could she have overheard Dr. Rob's muttered remarks to himself, as he gathered up the reins and cheered on his sturdy cob. He had a habit of talking over his experiences, half aloud, as he drove from case to case; the two sides of his rather complex nature apparently comparing notes with each other. And the present conversation opened thus:

"Now what has brought the Honourable Jane up here?" said Dr. Rob.

"Dashed if I know," said Dr. Mackenzie.

"You must not swear, laddie," said Dr. Rob; "you had a pious mother."