

IF WINTER COMES

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BY A. S. M. HUTCHINSON

"Then Sabre: 'Nonsense, Effie, You must. You must. I insist. Don't be silly.'"

"Then a door slammed. 'Well, I ask you! If I didn't say to myself, 'The plot thickens,' if I didn't say it, I can promise you I thought it. I did. And it proceeded to curdle. The door that had slammed opened and presently in comes Sabre with the girl. And the girl with the baby in her arms. Sabre said in his ordinary, easy voice—'he's got a particularly nice voice, has old Sabre—'This is a very retiring young person, Hapgood. Had to be dragged in. Miss Bright. Her father's in the office. Perhaps you've met him, have you?'"

"Well, I don't know what I said, old man. I know what I thought. I thought just precisely what you're thinking. Yes, I had a furiously vivid shot of a recollection of old Bright as I'd seen him a couple of hours before, of his blazing look, of his gesture of wanting to hurl the Table of Stone at me, and of his extraordinary remark about Sabre—I had that and I did what you're doing: I put two and two together and found the obvious answer (same as you) and I jolly near fell down dead, I did. Jolly near."

"But Sabre was going on, pleasant and natural as you please. 'Miss Bright was here as companion to my wife while I was in France. Now she's staying here a bit. Put the baby on the sofa, Effie, and let's get to work. I'd like you two to be friends. Hapgood and I were at school together, you know, about a thousand years ago. They used to call him Porker because he was so thin.'"

"The girl smiled faintly. I put up an hysterical sort of squeak, and we sat down. The meal wasn't precisely a banquet. We helped ourselves and stacked up the soiled plates as we used them. No servants, if you see. That was pretty clear by now. No wife, no servants, no wedding ring; nothing but old Bright's daughter and old Bright's daughter's baby—and—and—Sabre."

"I suppose I talked. I heard my voice sometimes. The easy flow Sabre had started with didn't last long. The girl hardly spoke. I watched her a lot. I liked the look of her. She must have been uncommonly pretty in a vivacious sort of way before she ran up against her trouble, whatever it was. I say whatever it was. I'd no real reason to suppose I knew; though mind you, I was guessing pretty shrewdly it was lying there on the sofa wrapped up in what d'you call em—swaddling clothes. Yes, uncommonly pretty, but now sad—sad as a young widow at the funeral, that sort of look it was her eyes that especially showed it. Extraordinary eyes. Like two great pools in a shadow. If I may quote poetry at you,

Her eyes were deeper than the depth
Of waters stilled at even—

And all the sorrow in them of all the women since Mary Magdalen. All the time but once. Once the baby whimpered, and she got up and went to it and stooped over it the other side of the sofa from me, so I could see her face. By gad, if you could have seen her eyes then! Motherhood! Lucky you weren't there, because if you've any idea of ever painting a picture called Motherhood, you'd ha' gone straight out and cut your throat on the mat in despair. You certainly would."

"Well, anyway, the banquet got more and more awkward to endure as it dragged on, and mighty glad I was when at last the girl got up—without a word—and picked up the baby and left us. Left us. We were no more chatty for being alone. I can promise you. I absolutely could not think of a word to say, and any infernal thing that old Sabre managed to rake up seemed complete and done to death the minute he'd said it."

"Then all of a sudden he began. He finished out some cigarettes and chucked me one and we smoked like a couple of exhaust valves for about two minutes and then he said, 'Hapgood, why on earth should I have to explain all this to you? Why should I?'"

"I said, a tiny bit sharply—I was getting a bit on edge, you know—I said, 'Well, who's asked you? I haven't asked any questions, have I?'"

"Sabre said, 'No, I know you haven't asked any, and I'm infernally grateful to you. You're the first person across this threshold in months that hasn't. But I know you're thinking them—hard. And I know I've got to answer them. And I want to. I want to most frightfully. But what beats me is this infernal feeling that I must explain to you, to you and to everybody, whether I want to or not. Why should I? It's my own house. I

can do what I like in it. I'm not, anyway, doing anything wrong. I'm doing something more right than I've ever done in my life, and yet everybody's got the right to question me and everybody's got the right to be answered—and—Hapgood, it's the most bewildering state of affairs that can possibly be imagined. I'm up against a code of social conventions, and by Jove I'm absolutely down and out. I'm absolutely tied up hand and foot and chucked away. Do you know what I am, Hapgood—?"

"He gave a laugh. He wasn't talking a bit savagely, and he never did talk like that all through what he told me. He was just talking in a tone of sheer, hopeless, extremely interested puzzlement—bafflement—amazement; just as a man might talk to you of some absolutely baffling conjuring trick he'd seen. In fact, he used that very expression, 'Do you know what I am, Hapgood?' and he gave a laugh, as I've said, 'I'm what they call a social outcast. A social outcast. Beyond the pale. Unspeaking. Ostracized. Blackballed. Excommunicated.' He got up and began to stomp about the room, hands in his pockets, chin on his collar, wrestling with it,—and wrestling mind you, just in profoundly interested bafflement."

"Unspeaking," he said. 'Excommunicated. By Jove, it's astounding. It's amazing. It's like a stupendous conjuring trick. I've done something that isn't done—not something that's wrong, something that's inconceivably right. But it isn't done. People don't do it, and I've done it and therefore hey, presto, I'm turned into a leper, a pariah, an outlaw. Amazing, astonishing!'"

"Then he settled down and told me. And this is what he told me."

"When he was out in France this girl I'd seen—this Effie, as he called her, Effie Bright—had come to live as companion to his wife. It appears he more or less got her the job. He'd seen her at the office with her father and he'd taken a tremendous fancy to her. 'A jolly kid,' that was the expression he used, and he said he was awfully fond of her just as he might be of a jolly little sister. He got her some other job previously with some friends or other, and then the old lady there died and the girl came to his place while he was away. Something like that. Anyway, she came. She came somewhere about October, '15, and she left early in March following, just over a year. His wife got fed up with her and got rid of her—that's what Sabre says—got fed up with her and got rid of her. And Sabre was at home at the time. Mark that, old man, because it's important. Sabre was at home at the time—about three weeks—on leave."

"Very well. The girl got the sack and he went back to France. She got another job somewhere as companion again. He doesn't quite know where. He thinks at Bournemouth. Anyway, that's nothing to do with it. Well, he got wounded and discharged from the Army, as you know, and in February he was living at home again with his wife in the conditions I described to you when I began. He said nothing to me about the conditions—about the terms they were on; but I've told you what I saw. It's important because it was exactly into the situation as I then saw it that came to pass. This:

"The very week after I'd been down there, his wife, reading a letter at breakfast one morning, gave a kind of a snort (as I can imagine it) and chucked the letter over to him and said, 'Ha! There's your wonderful Miss Bright for you! What did I tell you? What do you think of that? Ha!'"

"Those were her very words and her very snorts and what they meant—what 'Your wonderful Miss Bright for you' meant—was, as he explained to me, that when he was home on leave, with the girl in the house, they were frequently having words about her, because he thought his wife was a bit sharp with her, and his wife, for her part, said he was forever sticking up for her."

"What do you think of that? Ha!" and she chucked the letter over to him, and from what I know of her you can imagine her sitting bolt upright, bridling with virtuous presence confirmed watching him, while he read it."

"While he read it . . . Sabre said the letter was the most frightfully pathetic document he could ever have imagined. Smidged, he said, and stained, and badly expressed as if the writer—this girl—this Effie Bright—was crying and incoherent with distress when she wrote it. And she no doubt was. She said she'd got into terrible trouble. She'd got a little baby. Sabre said

it was awful to him the way she kept on in every sentence calling it 'a little baby'—never a child, or just a baby, but always 'a little baby,' 'my little baby.' He said it was awful. She said it was born in December—you remember, old man, it was the previous March she'd got the sack from them—and that she'd been living in lodgings with it, and that now she was well enough to move, and had come to the absolute end of her money, she was being turned out and was at her wits' end with despair and nearly out of her mind to know what to do and all that kind of thing. She said her father wouldn't have anything to do with her, and no one would have anything to do with her—so long as she kept her little baby. That was her plight; no one would have anything to do with her while she had the baby. Her father was willing to take her home, and some kind people had offered to take her into service, and the clergyman where she was had said there were other places he could get her, but only, all of them, if she would give up the baby and put it out to nurse somewhere; and she said, and underlined it about fourteen times, Sabre said, and cried over it so you could hardly read it, she said: 'And, oh, Mrs. Sabre, I can't, I can't, I simply can't give up my little baby. . . . He's mine,' she said. 'He looks at me, and I can't give him up. I can't let my little baby go. Whatever I've done, I'm his mother and he's my little baby and, I can't let him go.'"

"Sabre said it was awful. I can believe it was. I'd seen the girl, and I'd seen her stooping over her baby (like I told you) and I can well believe awful was the word for it. Poor soul."

"And then she said—I can remember this bit—then she said, 'And so, in my terrible distress, dear Mrs. Sabre, I am throwing myself on your mercy, and begging you, imploring you, for the love of God to take in me and my

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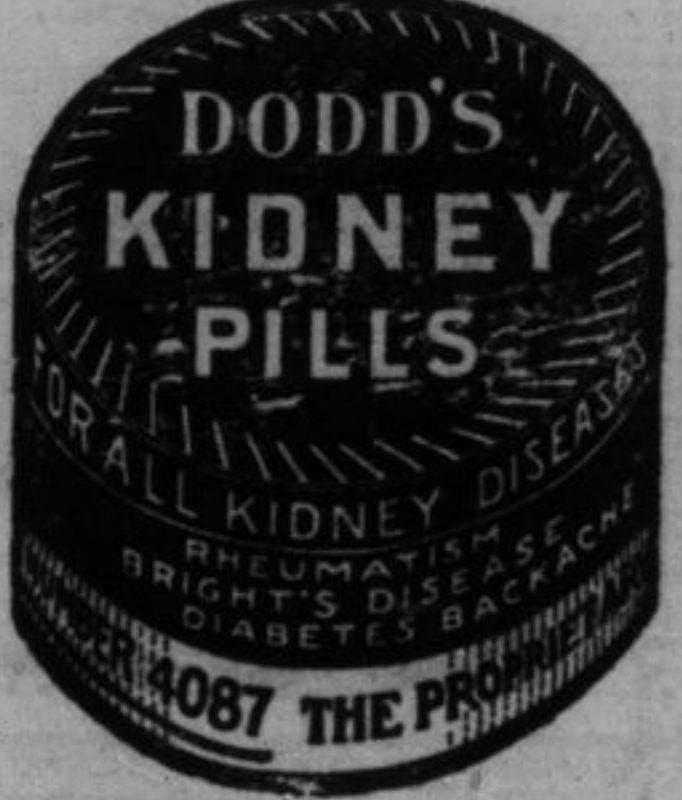


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little baby and let me work for you and do anything for you and bless you and ask God's blessing for ever upon you and teach my little baby to pray for you as—something or other, I forget. And then she said a lot of hysterical things about working her fingers to the bone for Mrs. Sabre, and knowing she was a wicked girl and not fit to be spoken to by any one and was willing to sleep in a shed in the garden and never to open her mouth, and all that sort of thing; and all the way through 'my little baby,' 'my little baby.' Sabre said it was awful. Also she said—I'm telling you just what Sabre told me, and he told me this bit deliberately, as you might say—also she said that she didn't want to pretend she was more sinned against than sinning, but that if Mrs. Sabre knew the truth she might judge her less harshly and be more willing to help her. Yes, Sabre told me that."

"All right. Well, there was the appeal," as Sabre said, and there was Sabre profoundly touched by it, and there was his wife bridling over it—once up against her husband who'd always stuck up for the girl, d'you see, and about two million up in justification of her own opinion of her. There they were; and then Sabre said, turning the letter over in his hands. 'Well, what are you going to do about it?'"

"You can imagine his wife's tone. 'Do about it! Do about it! What on earth do you think I'm going to do about it?'"

"And Sabre said, 'Well, I think we ought certainly to take the poor creature in.'"

"That's what he said; and I can perfectly imagine his face as he said it,—all twisted up with the intensity of the struggle he foresaw and with the intensity of his feelings on the subject; and I can perfectly well imagine his wife's face as she heard him, so, Jove, I can. She was furious. Absolutely white and speechless with fury; but not speechless long, Sabre said, and I dare bet she wasn't. Sabre said she worked herself up in the most awful way and used language about the girl that cut him like a knife—language like speaking of the baby as 'that brat.' It made him wince. It would—the sort of chap he is. And he said that the more she railed, the more frightfully he realised the girl's position, up against that sort of thing everywhere she turned."

human creature. Breathing the same air. Sharing the same mortality. Responsible to the same God. You've got to! You can't help yourself. You're caught. If you hear some one appealing to any one else you can scuttle out of it. Get away. Pass by on the other side. Square it with your conscience any old how. But when that some one comes to you, you're done, you're fixed. You may hate it. You may loathe and detest the position that's been forced on you. But it's there. You can't get out of it. The same earth as your earth is there at your feet imploring you; and if you've got a grain, a jot of humanity, you must, you must, out of the very flesh and bones of you, respond to that cry of this your brother or your sister made as you yourself are made."

"Well, Hapgood," he went on, 'that's one claim the girl had on us, and to my way of thinking it was enough. But she had another, a personal claim. She'd been in our house, in our service; she was our friend; sat with us; now, turned to us. Good God, man, was that to be refused? Was that to be denied? Were we going to repudiate that? Were we going to say, 'Yes, it's true you were here. You were all very well when you were of use to us; that's all true and admitted; but now you're in trouble and you're no use to us; you're in trouble and you're no use, and you can get to hell out of it.' Good God, were we to say that?'"

"You should have seen his face; you should have heard his voice; you should have seen him squirming and twisting in his chair as though this was the very roots of him coming up out of him and hurting him. And I tell you, old man, it was the very roots of him. It was his creed, it was his religion, it was his composition; it was the whole nature and basis and foundation of the man as it had been storing up within him all his life, ever since he was the rummy, thoughtful sort of

beggar he used to be as a kid at old Wickamote's thirty years ago. It got me, I can tell you. It made me feel funny. Yes, and the next thing he went on to was equally the blood and bones of him. In a way even more characteristic. He said, 'Mind you, Hapgood, I don't blame my wife that all this had no effect on her. I don't blame her in the least, and I never lost my temper or got angry over the business. I see her point of view absolutely. And I see absolutely the point of view of the girl's father and of every one else who's willing to take in the girl but insists she must give up the baby, a see their point of view and understand it as plain as I see and understand that calendar hanging on the wall. I see it perfectly, and he laughed in a whimsical sort of way and said, 'That's the devil of it.'"

"Characteristic, eh? Wasn't that just exactly old Sabre at school puzzling up his old nut and saying, 'Yes, but I see what he means?'"

(To be Continued.)

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