

Firebaugh Ellen M.

The Story of a Doctor's Telephone – Told by His Wife



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Ellen M. Firebaugh

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TO THE READER

The telephone has revolutionized the doctor's life.

In the old days when a horse's galloping hoofs were heard people looked out of their windows and wondered if that wasn't someone after a doctor! The steed that Franklin harnessed bears the message now, and comments and curiosity are stilled. In the old days thunderous knocks came often to the doctor's door at night; they are never heard now, or so rarely as to need no mention. Neighbors have been awakened by these importunate raps: they sleep on undisturbed now.

The doctor's household enjoys nothing of this sweet immunity. A disturbing factor is within it that makes the thunderous knocks of old pale into insignificance.

When the telephone first came into the town where our doctor lived he had one put in his office of course, for if anyone in the world needs a 'phone it is the doctor and the people who want him. By and by he bethought him that since his office was several blocks from his residence he had better put one in there, too, because of calls that come in the night. So it was promptly installed. The doctor and his wife found their sleep disturbed far oftener than before. People will not dress and go out into the night to the doctor's house unless it is necessary. But it is an easy thing to step to the 'phone and call him from his sleep to answer questions – often needless – and when several people do the same thing in the same night, as frequently happens, it is not hard to see what the effect may be.

One day the doctor had an idea! He would connect the two 'phones. It would be a handy thing for Mary to be able to talk to him about the numberless little things that come up in a household without the trouble of ringing central every time, and it would be a handy thing for him, too. When he had to leave the office he could just 'phone Mary and she could keep an ear on the 'phone till he got back.

About this time another telephone system was established in the town – the Farmers'. Now a doctor's clientele includes many farmers, so he put one of the new 'phones into his office. By and by he reflected that farmers are apt to need to consult a physician at night – he must put in a Farmers' 'phone at home, too. And he did. Then he connected it with the office.

When the first 'phone went up Mary soon accustomed herself to its call – three rings. When her husband connected it with the office the rings were multiplied by three. One ring meant someone at the office calling central. Two rings meant someone calling the office. Three rings meant someone calling the residence, as before. Mary found the three calls confusing. When the Farmers' 'phone was installed and the same order of rings set up, she found the original ring multiplied by six. This was confusion worse confounded. To be sure the bell on the Farmers' had a somewhat hoarser sound than that on the Citizens' 'phone, but Mary's ear was the only one in the household that could tell the difference with certainty. The clock in the same room struck the half hours which did not tend to simplify matters. When a new door-bell was put on the front door Mary found she had eight different rings to contend with. But it is the bells of the Telephone with which we are concerned and something of their story will unfold as we proceed.

When the doctor was at home and the 'phone would ring he would start toward the adjoining room where the two hung and stop at the first.

Mary would call “Farmers’!” and he would move on to the next. Perhaps at the same instant the tall boy of the household whose ear was no more accurate than that of his father would shout “Citizens’!” and the doctor would stop between the two.

“*Farmers’!*” the wife would call a second time, with accrued emphasis. Then she would laugh heartily and declare:

“Any one coming in might think this a sort of forum where orations were being delivered,” and sometimes she would go on and declaim:

“Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears – my husband has borrowed mine.”

So the telephone in the doctor's house – so great a necessity that we cannot conceive of life without it, so great a blessing that we are hourly grateful for it, is yet a very great tyrant whose dominion is absolute.

I had a pleasing picture in my mind in the writing of this chronicle, of sitting serene and undisturbed in a cosy den upstairs, with all the doors between me and the 'phone shut tight where no sound might intrude. In vain. Without climbing to the attic I could not get so far away that the tintinnabulation that so mercilessly wells from those bells, bells, bells did not penetrate.

I hope my readers have not got so far away from their Poe as to imagine that ringing sentence to be mine. And I wonder if a still greater glory might not crown his brow if there had been telephone bells to celebrate in Poe's day.

So I gave up the pleasant dream, abandoned the cosy den and came down stairs to the dining room where I can scatter my manuscript about on the big table, and look the tyrants in the face and answer the queries that arise, and can sandwich in a good many little odd jobs besides.

Through a doctor's telephone how many glimpses of human nature and how many peeps into the great Story of Life have been mine; and if, while the reader is peeping too, the scene suddenly closes, why that is the way of telephones and not the fault of the writer.

And knowing how restful a thing it has been to me to get away from the ringing of the bell at times, I have devised a rest for the reader also and have sent him with the doctor and his wife on an occasional country drive where no telephone intrudes.

E. M. F.

Robinson, Ill.

CHAPTER I

The hands of the clock were climbing around toward eleven and the doctor had not returned. Mary, a drowsiness beginning to steal over her, looked up with a yawn. Then she fell into a soliloquy:

To bed, or not to bed – that is the question:
Whether 'tis wiser in the wife to wait for a belated spouse,
Or to wrap the drapery of her couch about her
And lie down to pleasant dreams?
To dream! perchance to sleep!
And by that sleep to end the headache
And the thousand other ills that flesh is heir to,
The restoration of a wilted frame, —
Wilted by loss of sleep on previous nights —
A consummation devoutly to be wished.
To dream! perchance to sleep! – aye, there's the rub;
For in that somnolence what peals may come
Must give her pause. There is the telephone
That makes calamity of her repose.
Her spouse may not have come to answer it,
Which means that she, his wife, must issue forth
All dazed and breathless from delicious sleep,
And knock her knees on intervening chairs,
And bump her head on a half open door,
And get there finally all out of breath,
And take the receiver down and say: “Hello?”
The old, old question: “Is the doctor there?”
Comes clearly now to her awakened ear.
Then, tentatively, she must make reply:
“The doctor was called out an hour ago,
But I expect him now at any time.”
Good patrons should be held and not escape
To other doctors that may lie in wait;
For in this voice so brusque and straight and clear
She recognizes an old friend and true,
Whose purse is ever ready to make good,
And she hath need of many, many things.
But then, again, the message of the 'phone
May be that of some stricken little child
Whose mother's voice trembles with love and fear.
Then must the listener earnestly advise:
“Don't wait for him! Get someone else to-night.”
Perchance again the message may be that
Of colics dire and death so imminent
That she who listens, tho' with 'customed ear,
Shrinks back dismayed and knows not what to say,
Lacking the knowledge and profanity
Of him who, were he there, would settle quick

This much ado about much nothingness.
And so these anticipatory peals
Reverberate through fancy as she sits,
And make her rather choose to bear the ills
She has than fly to others she may meet;
To wait a little longer for her spouse,
That, when at last she does retire to rest,
She may be somewhat surer of her sleep.
And so she sits there waiting for the step
And the accompanying clearing of the throat
Which she would know were she in Zanzibar.
And by-and-by he comes and fate is kind
And lets them slumber till the early dawn.

CHAPTER II

Ten P.M. The 'phone is ringing and the sleepy doctor gets out of bed and goes to answer it.

"Hello."

No response.

"Hello!"

Silence.

"Hello!!"

"Is this Doctor Blank?"

"Yes."

"I want you to come out to my house – my wife's sick."

"Who is it?"

"Jim Warner. Come just as –"

A click in the receiver.

The doctor waits a minute. Then he says "Hello." No answer. He waits another minute. "*Hell-o!!*"

Silence. "Damn that girl – she's cut us off." He hangs up the receiver and rings the bell sharply. He takes it down and hears a voice say leisurely, "D'ye get them?"

"Yes! What in h-ll did you cut us off for?"

"Wait a minute – I'll ring 'em again," says the voice, hasty and obliging, so potent a thing is a man's unveiled wrath. She rings 'em again. Soon the same voice says, "Are you there yet, Doctor?"

"Yes, *now* what is it!"

The voice proceeds and the doctor listens putting in an occasional "Yes" or "No." Then he says, "All right – I'll be out there in a little bit." He hangs up the receiver and his wife falls asleep again. The doctor dresses and goes out. The house is in darkness. All is still. In about five minutes Mary is suddenly, sharply awake. A slight noise in the adjoining room! She listens with accelerated heart-beats. The doctor has failed to put on the night latch. Some thief has been lying in wait watching for his opportunity, and now he has entered. What can she do. Muffled footsteps! she pulls the sheet over her head, her heart beating to suffocation. The footsteps grope their way toward her room! Great Heaven! A hand fumbles at the door knob. She shrieks aloud.

"What on earth is the matter!"

O, brusque and blessed is that voice!

"John, you have nearly scared me to death," she says, sitting up in bed, half laughing and half crying. "But I heard you tell that man you were coming out there."

"Yes. I told him I was."

"Well, why didn't you go?"

"*I did* go."

"You don't mean to tell me you have been a mile and back in five minutes."

The doctor flashed on the light and looked at his watch, – "Just an hour since I left home," he said. Mary gasped. "Well, it only proves how soundly I can sleep when I get a chance," she said.

Ting-a-ling-ling-ling. Ting-a-ling-ling-ling.

It is the office ring but Mary hurries at once to answer it.

"Is this Dr. Blank's office?"

"This is Mrs. Blank. But the doctor telephoned me about twenty minutes ago that he would be out for half an hour. Call him again in ten or fifteen minutes and I think you will find him."

In about fifteen minutes the call is repeated. Mary would feel better satisfied to know that the doctor received the message so she goes to the 'phone and listens. Silence. She waits a minute. Shall she speak? She hesitates. Struggle as she will against the feeling, she can't quite overcome it – it seems

like “butting in.” But that long silence with the listening ear at the other end of it is too much for her. Very pleasantly, almost apologetically she asks, “What is it?”

“The doctor hasn't come yet?” says a plainly disappointed voice.

“No – not yet. There are often unexpected things to delay him – if you will give me your number or your name I will have him call *you*.”

“No, I'll just wait and call him again.” The inflection says plainly, “I don't care to admit the doctor's wife into my confidences.”

“Very well. I am sure it can't be long now till he returns.”

Mary goes back to her chair and ponders a little. Of what avail to multiply words. No use to tell the woman 'phoning that she was willing to take the waiting and the watching, the seeing that the doctor received the message upon herself rather than that the other should be again troubled by it. No use to let her gently understand that she doesn't care for any confidences which belong only to her husband, but Fate has placed her in a position where she has oftentimes to seem unduly interested. That these messages which are only occasional with the one calling are constant with her and that she is only mindful of them when she must be.

“Watch the 'phone.” How thoroughly instilled into Mary's consciousness that admonition was! She did not heed the office ring when it came, but if it came a second time she always went to explain that the doctor had just stepped over to the drug store probably and would be back in a very few minutes. Often, as she stood explaining, the doctor himself would break into the conversation, having been in another room when the first call came, and getting there a little tardily for the second. But occasions sometimes arose which made Mary feel very thankful that she had been at the 'phone. One winter morning as she stood explaining to some woman that the doctor would be in in a few minutes, her husband's “Hello” was heard.

“There he is now,” she said. Usually after this announcement she would hang up the receiver and go about her work. Today a friendly interest in this pleasant voice kept it in her hand a moment. Mary would not have admitted idle curiosity, and perhaps she had as little of it as falls to the lot of women, but sometimes she lingered a moment for the message, to know if the doctor was to be called away, so that she might make her plans for dinner accordingly. The pleasant voice spoke again, “This is Dr. Blank, is it?”

“Yes.”

“We want you to come out to Henry Ogden's.”

“That's about five miles out, isn't it. Who's sick out there?”

“Mrs. Ogden.”

“What's the matter?”

No reply.

“How long has she been sick?”

“She began complaining last night.”

“All right – I'll be out some time today.”

“Come right away, please, if you can.”

This is an old, old plea. The doctor is thoroughly inured to it. He would have to be twenty men instead of one to respond to it at all times. He answers cheerfully, “All right,” and Mary takes alarm. That tone means sometime in the next few hours. She feels sure he ought to go *now*. Somebody else can wait better than this patient. There was a kind of hesitancy in that voice that Mary had heard before. A woman's intuitions are much safer guides than a man's slow reasoning. She must speak to John. She rings the office.

“Hello.”

“Say, John,” she says in a low voice, “I came to the 'phone thinking you were out and heard that message. I think you ought to go out there right *away*.”

“Well, I'm going after a little.”

“But I don't think you ought to wait. I'm sure it's —*you* know.”

“Well, – maybe I had better go right out.”

“I wish you would. I know they'll be looking for you every minute.”

A few minutes later Mary saw him drive past and was glad. Half an hour later the office ring sounded. She did not wait for the second peal. True, John had not said, “Watch the 'phone,” today, but that was understood. Occasionally he got an old man who lived next door to the office to come in and stay during his absence. Possibly he might have done so today. But even if he were there the telephone and its ways were a dark mystery to him and besides, his deafness made him of little use in that direction.

Mary took down the receiver and put it to her ear. A lady's voice was asking, “Who *is* this?”

Mary knew from her inflection that she had asked something before and was not satisfied with the reply.

“*This is Dr. Blank's office?*” announced the old man in a sort of interrogative.

“Well, where is the *doctor?*”

“The doctor,” said the old man meditatively, as if wondering that anybody should be calling for him – “the doctor – you mean Dr. Blank, I reckon?”

“I certainly do.”

“Good Heavens,” thought Mary, “why *don't* he go on!”

“Why, he's out.”

“Where *is* he?”

“He went to the country.”

Mary shut her lips tight.

“*Well*, when will he be back?”

“He 'lowed he'd be back in about an hour or so.”

“How long has he been *gone?* Maybe I'll get some information after a while.”

Mary longed to speak. Why hadn't she done so at first. If she thrust herself in now it would make her out an eavesdropper. But this was unbearable. She opened her mouth to speak when the old man answered.

“He's been gone over an hour now, I reckon.”

“Then he'll soon be back. Will you be there when he comes?”

“Yes ma'am.”

“Then tell him to come up to Mrs. Dorlan's.”

“To Mrs. Who's?”

“Mrs. *Dorlan's.*”

“I didn't ketch the name.”

“*Mrs. Dorlan's*, on Brownson street.”

“Mrs. Torren's?”

“MISS-ES – DOR-LAN'S!” shouted the voice.

Mary sighed fiercely and clinched her teeth unconsciously. “I *will* speak,” she thought, when the old voice ventured doubtfully,

“Mrs. Dorlan's?”

“That's it. Mrs. Dorlan's on Brownson street, will you remember it?”

“Mrs. Dorlan's, on Brownson street.”

“That's right. Please tell him just as soon as he comes to come right up.”

“All right – I'll tell him.”

“Poor old fellow!” said Mary as she turned from the 'phone, “but I don't want to go through any more ordeals like that. It was a good deal harder for me than for the other woman.”

The doctor came down late to dinner. “You got Mrs. Dorlan's message did you?”

“Yes, I'll go up there right after dinner.” He looked at his wife with peculiar admiration.

“How did you know what was wanted with me out in the country?” he asked.

With a little pardonable pride she replied: “Oh, I just felt it. Women have ways of understanding each other that men never attain to. Is it a boy or a girl added to the world today?”

“Neither,” said the doctor placidly, helping himself to a roll.

Chagrin overspread her face. “Well,” she said with an embarrassed smile, “I erred on mercy's side, and it *might* have happened in just that way, John, and you know it.”

The doctor laughed. “There was mighty little the matter out there – they didn't need a doctor.”

“Are they good pay?”

“Good as old wheat.”

“Then there are compensations.”

Some hours later when the 'phone rang, Mary went to explain that the doctor had 'phoned her he would be out about twenty minutes. But she found no chance to speak. A spirited dialogue was taking place between a young man and a maid:

“Where *are* you, Jack?”

“I'm right here.”

“Smarty! Where *are* you!”

“In Dr. Blank's office.”

“What are you there for?”

“I'm waiting for the doctor and to while away the time thought I'd call you up.”

Then it was his ring that Mary had answered. “I ought to hang this receiver right up,” thought she, but instead she held it, her face beaming with a sympathetic smile.

“Are you feeling better today, Dolly?”

“Yes, I'm better.”

“Able to go to the show then, tonight?”

“*Yes*, I'm able to go.”

Here a thin small voice put in, “No, you're not able! You're not going.”

“Mamma says, – ” began a pouting voice.

“I heard what she said,” said Jack, laughing. “Have you been up all day?”

“Most of the day.”

“Can you eat anything?”

“I ate an egg, some toast and some fruit for dinner.”

“That's fine. I'll bring you a box of candy then pretty soon – I'm coming down in a little bit.”

“That will be lovely.”

“Which, the candy or the coming down?”

“The candy, goose, of course.” A laugh at both ends of the wire.

Then Jack's voice. “Well, here comes the doctor. I've got to have my neck amputated now. Goodbye.”

“Good-bye.”

“All's fair in love and war,” said Mary, “and it's plain to see what this is.” Then she hung up the receiver without a qualm.

There were other times when the doctor's wife was glad she had gone to the 'phone, as in this instance.

She had taken down the receiver when a man's voice said, “The doctor just stepped out for a few minutes. If you will tell me your name, madam, I'll have him call you when he comes in.”

Disinterested courtesy spoke in his voice, but Mary was not in the least surprised to hear the curt reply, “It won't be necessary. I'll call *him* when he comes.”

“I dare say that gentleman, whoever he may be, is wondering what he has done,” thought Mary. But it was not altogether unpleasant to her to hear somebody else squelched, too!

There came a day when the doctor's wife rebelled. When her husband came home and ate his supper hastily and then rose to depart, she said, "You'd better wait at home a few minutes, John."

"Why?" He put the question brusquely, his hat in his hand.

"Because I think someone will ring here for you in a minute or two. Some man rang the office twice so I went to the 'phone to explain that you must be on your way to supper and he could find you here."

"Who was it?"

"I do not know."

"Thunder! Why didn't you find out?"

Mary looked straight at her husband. "How many times have I told you, John, that many people decline to give their names or their messages to any one but you. I think I should feel that way about it myself. For a long time I have dutifully done your bidding in the matter, but now I vow I will not trample my pride under my feet any longer – especially when it is all in vain. I will watch the 'phone as faithfully as in the past, but I will not ask for any name or any message. They will be given voluntarily if at all."

"All right, Mary," said the doctor, gently, seeing that she was quite serious.

"I do not mean to say that most of the people who 'phone are grouchy and disagreeable – far from it. Indeed the majority are pleasant and courteous. But it is those who are not who have routed me, and made me vow my vow. Don't ask me to break it, John, for I will not."

And having delivered this declaration, Mary felt almost as free and independent as in ante-telephone days.

The doctor had seated himself and leaning forward was swinging his hat restlessly between his knees. He waited five minutes.

"I'll have to get back to the office," he exclaimed, starting up. "I'm expecting a man to pay me some money. Waiting for the 'phone to ring is like watching for the pot to boil."

When he had been gone a minute or two, the ring came. With a new step Mary advanced to it.

"Has the doctor got there yet?" the voice had lost none of its grouch.

"He has. And he waited for your message which did not come. He could not wait longer. He has just gone to the office. If you will 'phone him there in two or three minutes, instead of waiting till he is called out again, you will find him."

"Thank you, Mrs. Blank." The man was surprised into courtesy.

The clear-cut, distinct sentences were very different from the faltering, apologetic ones, when she had asked for his name or his message twenty minutes before.

Mary's receiver clicked with no uncertain sound and a smile illumined her face.

One day when the snow was flying and the wind was blowing a gale the doctor came hurrying in. "Where is the soapstone?" he asked, with small amenity. His wife flew to get it and laid it on the hearth very close to the coals. "Oh dear! How terrible to go out in such a storm. Do you *have* to?" she asked.

"I certainly do. Do you think I'd choose a day like this for a pleasure trip?"

"Aren't you glad you got that galloway?" she asked, hurrying to bring the big, hairy garment from its hook in the closet. She helped her husband into it, turned the broad collar up – then, when the soapstone was hot, she wrapped it up and gave it to him. "This ought to keep your feet from freezing," she said. The doctor took it, hurried out to the buggy, pulled the robes up around him and was gone.

"Eight miles in this blizzard!" thought Mary shivering, "and eight miles back – sixteen miles. It will take most of the day."

Two hours after the doctor had gone the telephone rang.

"Is Dr. Blank there?"

"No, he is in the country, about eight miles southwest."

“This is Drayton. We want him at John Small's as soon as possible. How soon do you think he will be back?”

“Not for several hours, I am afraid.”

“Well, will you send him down as soon as he comes? We want him *bad*.”

Mary assured him she would do so. “Poor John,” she thought as she put up the receiver.

In a few minutes she went hurriedly back. When she had called central, she said, “I am very anxious to get Dr. Blank, central. He is eight miles southwest of here – at the home of Thomas Calhoun. Is there a 'phone there?” Silence for a few seconds then a voice, “No, there is no 'phone at Thomas Calhoun's.”

Disappointed, Mary stood irresolute, thinking. Then she asked,

“Is there a 'phone at Mr. William Huntley's?”

“Yes, William Huntley has a 'phone.”

“Thank you. Please call that house for me.”

In a minute a man's voice said, “Hello.”

“Is this Mr. Huntley?”

“Yes.”

“Mr. Huntley, this is Mrs. Blank. You live not far from Thomas Calhoun's, do you not?”

“About half a mile.”

“Dr. Blank is there, or will be very soon, and there is an urgent call for him to go on to Drayton. I want to save him the long drive home first. I find there is no 'phone at Mr. Calhoun's so I have called you hoping you might be able to help me out. Perhaps someone of your family will be going down that way and will stop in.”

“I'll go, myself.”

“It's too bad to ask any one to go out on a day like this – ”

“That's all right, Mrs. Blank. Doc's been pretty clever to me.”

“Tell him, please, to go to John Small's at Drayton. I am very deeply obliged to you for your kindness, Mr. Huntley,” she said, hanging the receiver in its place.

“Eight miles back home, six miles from here to Drayton, six miles back – twenty miles in all. Four miles from Calhoun's to Drayton, six miles from Drayton home – ten miles saved on a blizzard day,” she thought in the thankfulness of her heart.

A few minutes later she was again at the 'phone. “Please give me John Small's at Drayton.” When the voice came she said, “I wanted to tell you that the doctor will be there perhaps in about an hour now. I got your message to him so that he will go directly to your house.”

“I'm mighty glad to know it. Thank you, Mrs. Blank, for finding him and for letting us know.”

A terrible drive saved and some anxious hearts relieved. That dear 'phone! How thankful she was for it and for the country drives she had taken with her husband which had made her familiar with the homes and names of many farmers. Otherwise she could not have located her husband this morning. One day like this covered a multitude of tyrannies from the little instrument on the wall.

It was about half past seven. The doctor had thought it probable that he could get off early this evening and then he and Mary and the boys would have a game of whist. He had been called in consultation to W., a little town in an adjoining county, but he would be home in a little bit – in just ten minutes the train would be due.

“O, there goes that 'phone,” said the small boy wrathfully. “Now, I s'pose papa can't get here!” His mother was already there with the receiver at her ear.

“This is Dr. Blank's residence.”

“No, but he will be here in fifteen or twenty minutes.”

“To Drayton?”

“Very well. I will give him your message as soon as he gets home. I'm afraid that ends the game for tonight, boys,” putting the receiver up.

“Why, does papa have to go away?”

“Yes, he has to drive six miles.”

“Gee-mi-nee – this dark night in the mud!”

Here a thought flashed into Mary's mind – Drayton was on the same railroad on which the doctor was rapidly nearing home – the next station beyond. She flew to the telephone and rang with nervous haste.

“Hello.”

“Is this the Big Four?”

“Yes.”

“This is Mrs. Blank. Dr. Blank is on the train which is due now. He is wanted at Drayton. When he gets off, will you please tell him?”

“To go on to Drayton?”

“Yes, to Alfred Walton's.”

“All right. I'll watch for him and see that he gets aboard again.”

“Thank you very much.”

The train whistled. “Just in time,” said Mary.

“But how'll papa get back?” asked the smaller boy.

“He's got a tie-ticket,” said his brother.

“Yes, papa would rather walk back on the railroad than drive both ways through this deep mud,” said their mother. “I have heard him say so.”

Another ring.

“Is the doctor there?”

“He has just gone on the train to Drayton.”

“How soon will he be back?”

“In an hour and a half, I should think.”

Mary heard the 'phoner say in an aside, “He won't be back for an hour and a half. Do you want to wait that long?”

Another voice replied, “Yes, I'll wait. Tell 'em to tell him to come just as quick as he gets back, though.”

This message was transmitted.

“And where is he to go?”

“To Henry Smith's, down by the Big Four depot.”

A few minutes later Mary had another idea. She went to the 'phone and asked central to give her Drayton, Mr. Walton's house.

In a minute a voice said, “What is it?” It was restful to Mary to have the usual opening varied. Perhaps eight out of ten began with,

“Hello!” The other two began, “Yes,” “Well,” “What is it?” and very rarely, “Good morning,” or “Good evening.”

“Is this the home of Mr. Walton at Drayton?”

“Yes.”

“Dr. Blank is there just now, isn't he?”

“Yes, but he's just going away.”

“Will you please ask him to come to the 'phone?”

In a minute her husband's voice was heard asking what was wanted.

“I want to save you a long walk when you get home, John. You're wanted at Henry Smith's down by the Big Four depot.”

“All right. I'll go in to see him when I get there. Much obliged.”

“A mile walk saved there,” mused the doctor's wife, as she joined the two boys, mildly grumbling because they couldn't have their game, and never could have it just when they wanted it. But a few chapters from *Ivanhoe* read to them by their mother made all serene again.

The Citizens' 'phone was ringing persistently. The doctor's wife had been upstairs and could not get to it in less than no time! But she got there.

“Do you know where Dr. Blank is?” the words hurled themselves against her ear.

“I don't know just at this minute – but he's here in town. I'm sure of that.”

“Why don't he *come* then!” The sentence came as from a catapult.

“I don't know anything about it. Where was he to go?”

A scornful “*Huh!*” came over the wire – “I guess you forgot to tell 'im.”

“I have not been asked to tell him anything this morning.”

There was heated silence for an instant, then a voice big with wrath:

“You told me not fifteen minutes ago that you would send him right down.”

“You are mistaken,” said Mary gently but firmly. “This is the first time I have been at the 'phone this morning.”

“Well, what do you think of that!” This was addressed to someone at the other end of the line, but it came clearly to Mary's ear and its intonation said volumes.

“You're the very identical woman that told me when I 'phoned awhile ago that you'd send him right down. It's the very same voice.”

“There is a mistake somewhere,” reiterated Mary, patiently, “but I'll send the doctor as soon as he gets in if you will give me your name.”

“I'll tell ye agin, then, that he's to come to Lige Thornton's.”

“Very well. I'll send him,” and Mary left the 'phone much mystified. “She was in dead earnest – and so was I. I can't understand it.” Glancing out of the window she saw her tall, young daughter coming up the walk. The solution came with lightning quickness – strange she didn't think of that, Gertrude had answered. She remembered now that others had thought their voices very much alike, especially over the 'phone. “If the woman had not talked in such a cyclonic way I would have thought of it,” she reflected.

When the young girl entered the room her mother said, “Gertrude, you answered the 'phone awhile ago, didn't you?”

“About twenty minutes ago. Some woman was so anxious for father to come right away that I just ran down to the office to see that he *went*.”

“That was very thoughtful of you, dear, but it's little credit we're getting for it.”

She related the dialogue that had just taken place and mother and daughter laughed in sympathy.

“Why, Mamma, we couldn't forget if we wanted to. That telephone is an Old Man of the Sea to both of us – is now and ever shall be, world without end.”

“But did you find your father at the office?”

“Yes, and waited till he fixed up some medicine for two patients already waiting, then shooed him out before some more came in. I wanted to get it off *my* mind.”

“I'm glad he is on his way. Now stay within hearing of the 'phone, dearie, till I finish my work up-stairs.”

“All right, Mamma, I'm going to make a cake now, but I can hear the 'phone plainly from the kitchen.”

It wasn't long till a ring was heard. Gertrude dusted the flour from her hands and started. “Which 'phone was it?” she asked the maid.

“I think it was the Farmers',” said Mollie, hesitating.

So to the Farmers' 'phone went Gertrude.

“Hello.”

No answer.

“Hello.”

Silence.

She clapped the receiver up and hurried to the Citizens' 'phone.

“Hello.”

“Is this Dr. Blank's?”

“Yes.”

“Is he there?”

“No, he was called – ” Here a loud ring from the other 'phone sounded.

“He was called down to – ” said Gertrude rapidly, then paused, unable to think of the name at the instant.

“If you will tell me where he went, I'll just 'phone down there for him,” said the voice.

A second peal from the other 'phone.

“Yes, yes!” said Gertrude impatiently. “O, I didn't mean that for you,” she hurried apologetically. “The other 'phone is calling, and I'm so confused I can't think. Will you excuse me just an instant till I see what is wanted?”

“Certainly.”

She flew to the Farmers' 'phone.

“Is this Dr. Blank's?”

“Yes.”

“Good while a-answerin',” grumbled a voice.

“I did answer but no one answered *me*.”

“Where's the doctor?”

“He's down in the east part of town – will be back in a little bit.”

“Well, when he comes tell him – just hold the 'phone a minute, will you, till I speak to my wife.”

“All right.” But she put the receiver swiftly up and rushed back to the waiting man. She could answer him and get back by the time the other was ready for her.

“Hello, still there?”

“Yes.”

“I've thought of the name – father went to Elijah Thornton's.”

“Thornton's – let's see – have you a telephone directory handy – could you give me their number?”

“Wait a minute, I'll see.” She raced through the pages, – “yes, here it is.”

A violent peal from the Farmers' 'phone. “He'll think I'm still hunting for the number,” she thought, letting the receiver hang and rushing to the other 'phone.

“Hello.”

“Thought you was a-goin' to hold the 'phone. I've had a turrible time gittin' any answer.”

“I've had a turrible time, too,” thought poor Gertrude.

“Tell the doctor to call me up,” and he gave his name and his number.

“All right, I'll tell him.” She clapped the receiver up lest there might be more to follow and sped back.

“Here it is,” she announced calmly, “Elijah Thornton, number 101.”

“Thank you, I'm afraid I've put you to a good deal of trouble.”

“Not at all.”

As she went back to her cake she said to herself, “Two telephones ringing at once can certainly make things interesting.”

One day in mid winter Mary sat half dreaming before the glowing coals. Snow had fallen all through the previous night and today there had been good coasting for the boys and girls.

Ting-a-ling-ling-ling. Ting-a-ling-ling-ling. Ting-a-ling-ling-ling.

She started up and went to answer it.

“Is this you, Mary?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll be out of the office about twenty minutes.”

“Very well.”

Sometimes Mary wished her husband would be a little more explicit. She had a vague sort of feeling that central, or whoever should chance to hear him make this announcement to her so often, might think she requested or perhaps demanded it; might think she wanted to know every place her husband went.

In about half an hour the 'phone rang again, two rings.

John ought to be back. Should she take it for granted? It would be safer to put the receiver to her ear and listen for her husband's voice.

“Hello.”

“Hello.”

“Is this you Dr. Blank?”

“Looks like it.”

“We want ye to come down to our house right away.”

“Who is this?”

“W’y, this is Mrs. Peters.”

“Mrs. Peters? Oh yes,” said the doctor, recognizing the voice now.

“What's the matter down there, grandmother?”

“W’y – my little grandson, Johnny, was slidin' down hill on a board and got a splinter in his setter.”

“He did, eh?”

“Yes, he did, and a big one, too.”

“Well, I’ll be down there right away. Have some boiled water.”

Mary turned away from the telephone that it might not register her low laughter as she put the receiver in its place. The next instant she took it down again with twinkling eyes and listened. Yes, the voices were silent, it would be safe. She rang two rings.

“Hello,” said her husband's voice.

“John,” said Mary, almost in a whisper, “for English free and unadorned, commend me to a little boy's grandmother!”

Two laughs met over the wire, then two receivers clicked.

One day Mary came in from a walk and noticed at once, a vacant place on the wall where the Farmers' 'phone had hung. She had heard rumors of a merger of the two systems and had fervently hoped that they might merge soon and forever.

“Look! Mamma,” said Gertrude, pointing to the wall.

“Oh frabjous day! Callooh! Callay!

One telephone is taken away!”

she chortled in her joy.

(The small boy of the household had been reading “Alice” and consequently declaiming the Jabberwock from morning till night, till its weird strains had become fixed in the various minds of the household and notably in Gertrude's.)

“It will simplify matters,” said her mother, smiling, “but liberty is not for us. *That* tuneful peal will still ring on,” and as she looked at the Citizens' 'phone the peal came.

CHAPTER III

One Monday evening the doctor and his wife sat chatting cosily before the fire. In the midst of their conversation, Mary looked up suddenly. "I had a queer little experience this morning, John, I want to tell you about it."

"Tell ahead," said John, propping his slippered feet up on the fender.

"Well, I got my pen and paper ready to write a letter to Mrs. E. I wanted to write it yesterday afternoon and tell her some little household incidents just while they were taking place, as she is fond of the doings and sayings of boys and they are more realistic if reported in the present tense. But I couldn't get at it yesterday afternoon. When I started to write it this morning it occurred to me to date the letter Sunday afternoon and write it just as I would have done yesterday – so I did. When I had got it half done or more I heard the door-bell and going to open it I saw through the large glass – "

Ting-a-ling-ling-ling. Ting-a-ling-ling-ling.

The doctor went to the 'phone.

"Yes."

"Yes."

"Where do you live?"

"I'll be right down."

He went back, hastily removed his slippers and began putting on his shoes. Mary saw that he had clean forgotten her story. Very well. It wouldn't take more than a minute to finish it – there would be plenty of time while he was getting into his shoes – but if he was not enough interested to refer to it again she certainly would not. In a few minutes the doctor was gone and Mary went to bed. An hour or two later his voice broke in upon her slumber. "Back again," he said as he settled down upon his pillow. In a minute he exclaimed, "Say, Mary, what was the rest of that story?"

"O, don't get me roused up. I'm *so* sleepy," she said drowsily.

"Well, I'd like to hear it." The interest in her little story which had not been exhibited at the proper time was being exhibited now with a vengeance. She sighed and said, "I can't think of it now – tell you in the morning. Good night," and turned away.

When morning came and they were both awake, the doctor again referred to the unfinished story.

"It's lost interest for me. It wasn't a story to start with, just a little incident that seemed odd – "

"Well, let's have it."

"Well, then," said Mary, "I was writing away when the door-bell rang. I went to open it and saw through the glass the laundry man – "

Ting-a-ling-ling-ling. Ting-a-ling-ling-ling. Ting-a-ling-ling-ling.

"Go on!" exclaimed her husband, hurriedly, "I'll wait till you finish."

"I'll not *race* through a story in any such John Gilpin style," said Mary, tartly. "Go, John!"

The doctor arose and went.

"No."

"I think not."

"Has she any fever?"

"All right, I'll be down in a little bit."

Then he went back. "Now you can finish," he said.

"Finis is written *here*," said Mary. "Don't say story to me again!" So Mary's story remained unfinished.

But a few days later, when she was in the buggy with her husband she relented. "Now that the 'phone can't cut me short, John, I will finish about the odd incident just because you wanted to know. But it will fall pretty flat now, as all things do with too many preliminary flourishes."

“Go on,” said the doctor.

“Well, you know I told you I dated my letter back to Sunday afternoon, and was writing away when I heard the door-bell ring. As I started toward the door I saw the laundry man standing there. I was conscious of looking at him in astonishment and in a dazed sort of way as I walked across the large room to open the door. I am sure he must have noticed the expression on my face. When I opened the door he asked as he always does, ‘Any laundry?’”

“Any laundry *today*?” The words were on my tongue's end but I stopped them in time. You see it was really Sunday to me, so deep into the spirit of it had I got, and it was with a little shock that I came back to Monday again in time to answer the man in a rational way. And now my story's done.”

“Not a bad one, either,” said John, “I'm glad you condescended to finish it.”

The doctor came home at ten o'clock and went straight to bed and to sleep. At eleven he was called.

“What is it?” he asked gruffly.

“It's time for Silas to take his medicine and he won't do it.”

“Won't, eh?”

“No, he vows he won't.”

“Well, let him alone for a while and then try again.”

About one came another ring.

“We've both been asleep, Doctor, but I've been up fifteen minutes trying to get him to take his medicine and he won't do it. He says it's too damned nasty and that he don't need it anyhow.”

“Tell him I say he's a mighty good farmer, but a devilish poor doctor.”

“I don't know what to do. I can't make him take it.”

“You'll have to let him alone for awhile I guess, maybe he'll change his mind after awhile.”

At three o'clock the doctor was again at the telephone.

“Doctor, he just will *not* take it,” the voice was now quite distressed. “I can't manage him at all.”

“You *ought* to manage him. What's a wife for? Well, go to bed and don't bother him or me any more tonight.”

But early next morning Silas' wife telephoned again.

“I thought I ought to tell you that he hasn't taken it yet.”

“He'll get well anyway. Don't be a bit uneasy about *him*,” said the doctor, laughing, as he rung off.

“It's time to go, John.”

Mary was drawing on her gloves. She looked at her moveless husband as he sat before the crackling blaze in the big fireplace.

“This is better than church,” he made reply.

“But you promised you would go tonight. Come on.”

“It isn't time yet, is it?”

“The last bell will ring before we get there.”

“Well, let's wait till all that singing's over. That just about breaks my back.”

Mary sat down resignedly. If they missed the singing perhaps John would not look at his watch and sigh so loud during the sermon. And it might not be a bad idea to miss the singing for another reason. The last time John had gone to church he had astonished her by sliding up beside her, taking hold of the hymn-book and singing! It happened to be his old favorite, “Sweet fields beyond the swelling flood.”

Of course it was lovely that he should want to sing it with her – but the *way* he sang it! He was in the wrong key and he came out two or three syllables behind on most of the lines, but undismayed by the sudden curtailment went boldly ahead on the next. And Mary had been much relieved when the hymn was ended and the book was closed. So now she waited very patiently for her husband to make some move toward starting. By and by he got up and they went out. No sooner was the door

closed behind them than the “ting-a-ling-ling-ling” was heard. The doctor threw open the door and went back. Mary, waiting at the threshold, heard one side of the dialogue.

“Yes.”

“Down where?”

“Shake up your 'phone. I can't hear you.”

“That's better. Now what is it?”

“Swallowed benzine, did she? How much?.. That won't kill her. Give her some warm water to drink. And give her a spoonful of mustard – anything to produce vomiting... She has? That's all right. Tell her to put her finger down her throat and vomit some more... No, I think it won't be necessary for me to come down... You would? Well, let me hear again in the next hour or two, and if you still want me I'll come. Good-bye.”

They walked down the street and as they drew near the office they saw the figure of the office boy in the doorway silhouetted against the light within. He was looking anxiously in their direction. Suddenly he disappeared and the faint sound of a bell came to their ears. They quickened their pace and as they came up the boy came hurriedly to the door again.

“Is that you, Doctor?” he asked, peering out.

“Yes.”

“I told a lady at the 'phone to wait a minute, she's 'phoned twice.” Mary waited at the door while her husband went into the office and over to the 'phone.

“Yes. What is it?.. No. No. *No!*... Listen to me... Be *still* and listen to *me!* She's in no more danger of dying than *you* are. She couldn't die if she tried... Be still, I say, and listen to me!” He stamped his foot mightily. Mary laughed softly to herself. “Now don't hang over her and *sympathize* with her; that's exactly what she don't need. And don't let the neighbors hang around her either. Shut the whole tea-party out... Well, tell 'em *I* said so... I don't care a damn *what* they think. Your duty and mine is to do the very best we can for that girl. Now remember... Yes, I'll be down on the nine o'clock train tomorrow morning. Good-bye.” He joined his wife at the door. “If anybody wants me, come to the church,” he said, turning to the boy.

Mary laid her hand within her husband's arm and they started on. They met a man who stopped and asked the doctor how soon he would be at the office, as he was on his way there to get some medicine.

“I'd better go back,” said the doctor and back they went. It seemed to Mary that her husband might move with more celerity in fixing up the medicine. He was deliberation itself as he cut and arranged the little squares of paper. Still more deliberately he heaped the little mounds of white powder upon them. She looked on anxiously. At last he was ready to fold them up! No, he reached for another bottle. He took out the cork, but his spatula was not in sight. Nowise disturbed, he shifted bottles and little boxes about on the table.

“Can't you use your knife, Doctor?” asked Mary.

“O, I'll find it – it's around here somewhere.” In a minute or two the missing spatula was discovered under a paper, and then the doctor slowly, *so* slowly, dished out little additions to the little mounds. Then he laid the spatula up, put the cork carefully back in the bottle, turned in his chair and put two questions to the waiting man, turned back and folded the mounds in the squares with the most painstaking care. In spite of herself Mary fidgeted and when the powders with instructions were delivered and the man had gone, she rose hastily. “*Do* come now before somebody else wants something.”

The singing was over and the sermon just beginning when they reached the church. It progressed satisfactorily to the end. The doctor usually made an important unit in producing that “brisk and lively air which a sermon inspires when it is quite finished.” But tonight, a few minutes before the finale came, Mary saw the usher advancing down the aisle. He stopped at their seat and bending down whispered something to the doctor, who turned and whispered something to his wife.

“No, I'll stay and walk home with the Rands. I see they're here,” she whispered back.

The doctor rose and went out. “Who's at the office?” he asked, as he walked away with the boy.

“She's not there yet, she telephoned. I told her you was at church.”

“Did she say she couldn't wait?”

“She said she had been at church too, but a bug flew in her ear and she had to leave, and she guessed you'd have to leave too, because she couldn't stand it. She said it felt *awful*.”

“Where is she?”

“She was at a house by the Methodist church, she said, when she 'phoned to see if you was at the office. When I told her I'd get you from the other church, she said she'd be at the office by the time you got there.”

And she was, sitting uneasily in a big chair.

“Doctor, I've had a flea in my ear sometimes, but this is a different proposition. Ugh! Please get this creature out *now*. It feels as big as a bat. Ugh! It's crawling further in, hurry!”

“Maybe we'd better wait a minute and see if it won't be like some other things, in at one ear and out at the other.”

“O, hurry, it'll get so far in you can't reach it.”

“Turn more to the light,” commanded the doctor, and in a few seconds he held up the offending insect.

“O, you only got a little of it!”

“I got it all.”

“Well, it certainly felt a million times bigger than that,” and she departed radiantly happy.

CHAPTER IV

One day in early spring the doctor surprised his wife by asking her if she would like to take a drive.

“In March? The roads are not passable yet, surely.”

But the doctor assured her that the roads were getting pretty good except in spots. “I have such a long journey ahead of me today that I want you to ride out as far as Centerville and I can pick you up as I come back.”

“That's seven or eight miles. I'll go. I can stop at Dr. Parkin's and chat with Mrs. Parkin till you come.”

Accordingly a few minutes later the doctor and Mary were speeding along through the town which they soon left far behind them.

About two miles out they saw a buggy down the road ahead of them which seemed to be at a stand-still. When they drew near they found a woman at the horses' heads with a broken strap in her hand. She was gazing helplessly at the buggy which stood hub-deep in mud. She recognized the doctor and called out, “Dr. Blank, if ever I needed a doctor in my life, it's now.”

“Stuck fast, eh?”

The doctor handed the reins to his wife and got out.

“I see – a broken single-tree. Well, I always unload when I get stuck, so the first thing we do we'll take this big lummoX out of here,” he said picking his way to the buggy. The lummoX rose to her feet with a broad grin and permitted herself to be taken out. She was a fat girl about fourteen years old.

“My! I'll bet she weighs three hundred pounds,” observed the doctor when she was landed, which was immediately resented. Then he took the hitching-rein and tied the tug to the broken end of the single-tree; after which he went to the horses' heads and commanded them to “Come on.” They started and the next instant the vehicle was on terra firma. Mother and daughter gave the doctor warm thanks and each buggy went its separate way.

Mary was looking about her. “The elms have a faint suspicion that spring is coming; the willows only are quite sure of it,” she said, noting their tender greenness which formed a soft blur of color, the only color in all the gray landscape. No, there is a swift dash of blue, for a jay has settled down on the top of a rail just at our travelers' right.

Soon they were crossing a long and high bridge spanning a creek which only a week before had been a raging torrent; the drift, caught and held by the trunks of the trees, and the weeds and grasses all bending in one direction, told the story. But the waters had subsided and now lay in deep, placid pools.

“Stop, John, quick!” commanded Mary when they were about half way across. The doctor obeyed wondering what could be the matter. He looked at his wife, who was gazing down into the pool beneath.

“I suppose I'm to stop while you count all the fish you can see.”

“I was looking at that lovely concave sky down there. See those two white clouds floating so serenely across the blue far, far below the tip-tops of the elm trees.”

The doctor drove relentlessly on.

“Another mudhole,” said Mary after a while, “but this time the travelers tremble on the brink and fear to launch away.”

When they came up they found a little girl standing by the side of the horse holding up over its back a piece of the harness. She held it in a very aimless and helpless way. “See,” said Mary, “she doesn't know what to do a bit more than I should. I wonder if she can be alone.”

The doctor got out and went forward to help her and discovered a young man sitting cozily in the carriage. He glanced at him contemptuously.

“Your harness is broken, have you got a string?” he asked abruptly.

“N-n-o, I haven't,” said the youth feeling about his pockets.

“Take your shoe-string. If you haven't got one I'll give you mine,” and he set his foot energetically on the hub of the wheel to unlace his shoe.

“Why, I've got one here, I guess,” and the young man lifted a reluctant foot. The doctor saw and understood. The little sister was to fix the harness in order to save her brother's brand new shoes from the mud.

“You'd better fix that harness yourself, my friend, and fix it strong,” was the doctor's parting injunction as he climbed into the buggy and started on.

“I don't like the looks of this slough of despond,” said Mary. The next minute the horses were floundering through it, tugging with might and main. Now the wheels have sunk to the hubs and the horses are straining every muscle.

“Merciful heaven!” gasped Mary. At last they were safely through, and the doctor looking back said, “That is the last great blot on our civilization – bad roads.”

After a while there came from across the prairie the ascending, interrogative *boo-oo-m* of a prairie chicken not far distant, while from far away came the faint notes of another. And now a different note, soft, melodious and mournful is heard.

“How far away do you think that dove is?” asked the doctor.

“It sounds as if it might be half a mile.”

“It is right up here in this tree in the field.”

“Is it,” said Mary, looking up. “Yes, I see, it's as pretty and soft as its voice. But I'm getting sunburned, John. How hot a March day can get!”

“Only two more miles and good road all the way.”

A few minutes more and Mary was set down at Centerville, “I'll be back about sunset,” announced her husband as he drove off.

A very pleasant-faced woman answered the knock at the door. She had a shingle in her hand and several long strips of muslin over her arm. She smilingly explained that she didn't often meet people at the door with a shingle but that she was standing near the door when the knock came.

Mary, standing by the bed and removing hat and gloves, looked about her.

“What are you doing with that shingle and all this cotton and stuff, Mrs. Parkin?” she asked.

“Haven't you ever made a splint?”

“A splint? No indeed, I'm not equal to that.”

“That's what I'm doing now. There's a boy with a broken arm in the office in the next room.”

“Oh, your husband has his office here at the house.”

“Yes, and it's a nuisance sometimes, too, but one gets used to it.”

“I'll watch you and learn something new about the work of a doctor's wife.”

“You'll learn then to have a lot of pillow slips and sheets on hand. Old or new, Dr. Parkin just tears them up when he gets in a hurry – it doesn't matter to him what goes.”

The doctor's wife put cotton over the whole length of the shingle and wound the strips of muslin around it; then taking a needle and thread she stitched it securely. Mary sat in her chair watching the process with much interest. “You have made it thicker in some places than in others,” she said.

“Yes; that is to fit the inequalities of the arm.” Mary looked at her admiringly. “You are something of an artist,” she observed.

Just as Mrs. Parkin finished it her husband appeared in the doorway.

“Is it done?” he asked.

“It's just finished.”

“May I see you put it on, Doctor?” asked Mary, rising and coming forward.

“Why, good afternoon, Mrs. Blank. I'm glad to see you out here. Yes, come right in. How's the doctor?”

“Oh, he is well and happy – I think he expects to cut off a foot this afternoon.”

A boy with a frightened look on his face stood in the doctor's office with one sleeve rolled up. The doctor adjusted the fracture, then applied the splint while his wife held it steady until he had made it secure. When the splint was in place and the boy had gone a messenger came to tell the doctor he was wanted six miles away.

About half an hour afterward a little black-eyed woman came in and said she wanted some more medicine like the last she took.

“The doctor's gone,” said Mrs. Parkin, “and will not be back for several hours.”

“Well, you can get it for me, can't you?”

“Do you know the name of it?”

“No, but I believe I could tell it if I saw it,” said the patient, going to the doctor's shelves and looking closely at the bottles and phials with their contents of many colors. She took up a three-ounce bottle. “This is like the other bottle and I believe the medicine is just the same color. Yes, I'm sure it is,” she said, holding it up to the light. Mary looked at her and then at Mrs. Parkin.

“I wouldn't like to risk it,” said the latter lady.

“Oh, I'm not afraid. I don't want to wait until the doctor comes and I know this must be like the other. It's exactly the same color.”

“My good woman,” said Mary, “you *certainly* will not risk that. It might kill you.”

“No, Mrs. Dawson, you must either wait till the doctor comes or come again,” said Mrs. Parkin. The patient grumbled a little about having to make an extra trip and took her leave.

When the door had closed behind her Mary asked the other doctor's wife if she often had patients like that.

“Oh, yes. People come here when the doctor is away and either want me to prescribe for them or to prescribe for themselves.”

“You don't do it, do you?”

“Sometimes I do, when I am perfectly sure what I am doing. Having the office here in the house so many years I couldn't help learning a few things.”

“I wouldn't prescribe for anything or anybody. I'd be afraid of killing somebody.” About an hour later Mary, looking out of the window, saw a wagon stopping at the gate. It contained a man and a woman and two well-grown girls.

“Hello!” called the man.

“People call you out instead of coming in. That is less trouble,” observed Mary. The doctor's wife went to the door.

“Is Doc at home?”

“No, he has gone to the country.”

“How soon will he be back?”

“Not before supper time, probably.”

The man whistled, then looked at his wife and the two girls.

“Well, Sally,” he said, “I guess we'd better git out and wait fur 'im.”

“W'y, Pa, it'll be dark long before we git home, if we do.”

“I can't help that. I'm not agoin' to drive eight miles tomorry or next day nuther.”

“If ye'd 'a started two hour ago like I wanted ye to do, maybe Doc'd 'a been here and we c'd 'a been purty nigh home by this time.”

“Shet up! I told ye I wasn't done tradin' then.”

“It don't take *me* all day to trade a few aigs for a jug o' m'lasses an' a plug o' terbacker.”

For answer the head of the house told his family to “jist roll out now.” They rolled out and in a few minutes they had all rolled in. Mrs. Parkin made a heroic effort not to look inhospitable which made Mary's heroic effort not to look amused still more heroic.

When at last the afternoon was drawing to a close Mary went out into the yard to rest. She wished John would come. Hark! There is the ring of horses' hoofs down the quiet road. But these are white horses, John's are bays. She turns her head and looks into the west. Out in the meadow a giant oak-tree stands between her and the setting sun. Its upper branches are outlined against the grey cloud which belts the entire western horizon, while its lower branches are sharply etched against the yellow sky beneath the grey.

What a calm, beautiful sky it was!

She thought of some lines she had read more than once that morning ... a bit from George Eliot's Journal:

“How lovely to look into that brilliant distance and see the ship on the horizon seeming to sail away from the cold and dim world behind it right into the golden glory! I have always that sort of feeling when I look at sunset. It always seems to me that there in the west lies a land of light and warmth and love.”

A carriage was now coming down the road at great speed. Mary saw it was her husband and went in to put on her things. In a few minutes more she was in the buggy and they were bound for home. It was almost ten o'clock when they got there. The trip had been so hard on the horses that all the spirit was taken out of them. The doctor, too, was exceedingly tired. “Forty-two miles is a long trip to make in an afternoon,” he said.

“I hope Jack and Maggie are not up so late.”

“It would be just like them to sit up till we came.”

The buggy stopped; the door flew open and Jack and Maggie stood framed in the doorway with the leaping yellow firelight for a background.

CHAPTER V

Once in a while sympathy for a fellow mortal kept the doctor's wife an interested listener at the 'phone. Going, one morning, to speak to a friend about some little matter she heard her husband say:

"What is it, doctor?" A physician in a little town some ten or twelve miles distant, who had called Dr. Blank in consultation a few days before, was calling him.

"I think our patient is doing very well, but her heart keeps getting a little faster."

"How fast is it now?"

"About 120."

"But the disease is pretty well advanced now – that doesn't mean as much as it would earlier. But you might push a little on the brandy, or the strychnine – how much brandy have you given her since I saw her?"

"I have given her four ounces."

"Four ounces!"

"Yes."

"Four ounces in three days? I think you must mean four drachms."

"Yes. It *is* drachms. Four ounces *would* be fixing things up. I've been giving her digitalis; what do you think about that?"

"That's all right, but I think that strychnine would be a little better."

"Would you give her any aromatic spirits of ammonia?"

"Does she rattle?"

"A little."

"Then you might give her a little of that. And keep the room open and stick right to her and she ought to get along. Don't give her much to eat."

"Is milk all right?"

"Yes. You bet it is."

"All right then, doctor, I believe that's all. Good-bye."

On another occasion, Mary caught this fragment:

"She's so everlastin' sore that she just hollers and yells every time I go near her. Would you give her any more morphine?"

"Morphine's a thing you can't monkey with you know, Doctor. You want to be mighty careful about that."

"Yes. I know. How long will that morphine last?"

"That depends on how you use it. It won't last long if you use too much and neither will she."

"I mean how long will it last in the system?"

"O! Why, three or four hours."

"Well, I think she don't need no more medicine."

Mary smiled at the double negative and when she laughingly spoke of it that night her husband assured her that that doctor's singleness of purpose more than offset his doubleness of negative. That he was a fine fellow and a good physician just the same.

One morning in March just as the doctor arose from the breakfast table he was called to the 'phone.

"Is this Dr. Blank?"

"Yes."

"Doctor, will it hurt the baby to bathe it every morning? I've been doing that but some of the folks around here say I oughtn't to do it; they say it isn't good for a baby to bathe it so often."

The doctor answered solemnly, "The baby's fat and healthy isn't it?"

"Yes, sir."

“And pretty?”

“Yes, *sir*.”

“Likes to see its mamma?”

“You *know* it.”

“Likes to see its papa?”

“He does that!” said the young mother.

“Then ask me next fall if it will hurt to bathe the baby every morning.”

“All right, Doctor,” laughed the baby's mamma.

“The fools are not all dead yet,” said John, as he took his hat and departed. On the step he turned back and put his head in at the door. “Keep an ear out, Mary. I'm likely to be away from the office a good bit this morning.”

An hour later a call came. Mary put the ear that was “out” to the receiver:

“It's on North Adams street.”

“All right. I'll be out there after awhile,” said her husband's placid voice.

“Don't wait too long. He may die before you git here.”

“No, he won't. I'll be along pretty soon.”

“Well, come just as quick as you can.”

“All right,” and the listener knew that it might be along toward noon before he got there.

About eleven o'clock the 'phone rang sharply.

“Is this Dr. Blank's house?”

“Yes.”

“Is he there?”

“I saw him pass here about twenty minutes ago. I'm sure he'll be back to the office in a little bit.”

“My land! I've been here three or four times. Looks like I'd ketch him *some* time.”

“You are at the office then? If you will sit down and wait just a little while, he will be in.”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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