

# The Question

BY GRACE DENIO LITCHFIELD

"THE nurse says that you wish to see me, Dr. MacLeod. My husband is not worse, is he?"

The doctor, a spare but strongly built man, with the tireless, alert face of the persistent searcher into causes, was examining a water-color in the beautiful little sitting-room with the gratified eye of a connoisseur. He turned with a courteous salutation as the speaker entered.

Mrs. Fayre was dressed for the street. She glanced at the dainty jewelled clock upon the mantel; then bent her head to button her glove around her slender wrist while awaiting the doctor's answer. Her attitude gave the exquisite Madonna-like face under the flaring brim of her hat a look as if she were saying her prayers.

"No," the doctor replied, presently, "Mr. Fayre is not worse. This is the third week of the fever, as you know. It has been running a nearly normal course. I see no reason why all should not go well, if only—"

He paused, and Mrs. Fayre again lifted her beautiful eyes to the clock. The doctor intercepted the glance.

"You are going out? You cannot give me a few moments?"

"Oh, a few moments, yes," she answered, unwillingly, loosening the gray furs about her throat. "But service begins at ten o'clock."

The doctor drew out his watch. "St. Paul's is half a block away. It lacks ten minutes of the hour. You can spare me five minutes."

Mrs. Fayre silently seated herself and waited his pleasure.

"What is the trouble on your husband's mind?" the doctor asked.

She looked up, meeting his direct, keen gaze in unfeigned surprise. "Trouble? On Donald's mind? What should be troubling him?"

"That is precisely what I expected you to know. Whatever it is, it must be

removed. It is the only obstacle I see to his recovery."

The young wife drew her delicate brows together in distinct displeasure. "Of course I should know if anything were troubling him. But there is nothing—nothing whatever. What could there possibly be?"

"He is not in any financial distress that you know of?"

Mrs. Fayre's eyes passed slowly around the luxuriously appointed room, her classically chiselled lips taking on a slight curve, whether in disdain of the question or in scorn of the luxury was difficult to determine. "That is altogether impossible," she replied. "Donald is not in any business. He inherited his wealth. He has never known a moment's anxiety on that score."

"Are there any family difficulties, perhaps?"

She was visibly annoyed now. "Of course not. I represent Donald's family. He has nobody but me."

"How long have you been married?"

"Over four years."

She rose as she answered, impatient of the catechism. The doctor maintained his attitude unchanged.

"Then you do not see that your husband has any cause for worry apart from his illness?"

"There is nothing else," she answered. Her tone was almost resentful.

"I thank you for sparing me the time. Permit me to open the door."

He still stood beside it after he had closed it upon her. With all her reticence, this beautiful frigid woman had told him more than she divined.

A few moments later he re-entered his patient's room. An atmosphere of strength and vitality seemed to go in with him. The sick man was lying in a state of apathetic relaxation, his eyes closed, his long thin hands thrown out nervelessly on either side of the bed.

But he roused as the door opened, and his face brightened, his glance passing beyond the doctor as if in expectation of another figure. Seeing no one following, his eyes came back to Dr. MacLeod.

"Where is Katharine? Where is my wife?"

"Doubtless on her knees at St. Paul's by now," the doctor answered, cheerily, his cool skilled touch falling lightly on the emaciated wrist. "If her prayers hasten your recovery, she could be in no better place."

Donald Fayre cast a disappointed glance at a bunch of violets lying on the counterpane beside him. "She has gone without her flowers. I have them for her every morning."

"The violets must have a powerful rival for her to forget them," the doctor said, lightly.

A shadow crossed the refined, super-sensitive face on the pillow—a face that through all the ravages and distortion of illness still had an extraordinarily magnetic charm.

"Yes," Donald assented, quietly. "Katharine never misses a service. She loves her church—*loves* it."

He pushed away the violets with a restless motion, dismissing the topic, but the shadow on his brow deepened.

The doctor drew up a chair and sat down.

Donald's thin fingers suddenly closed over the strong hand that rested near his. "Doctor, will you do me a favor?"

"With the greatest pleasure in the world, my dear fellow."

"Thanks. I knew you would." The charming smile flickered gratefully over Donald's face, and was again eclipsed by the brooding trouble that caused the physician such anxiety. "You say I must not worry. Well, let me write a letter—a mere note—just a line! Doctor, I must!"

The doctor thoughtfully weighed the pros and cons. The pros won. "A necessary letter, I take it for granted," he said, drawing a fountain-pen from his pocket. "Very well. I will write it for you immediately."

The sick man stretched out an eager hand. "No! I must write it myself. I can do it, lying as I am. It is the merest line—a single question. Only—

this is the point—no one must know—*no one*. Not even my wife. Oh, Katharine least of all! You will post it for me, won't you? And I will have the answer sent to you. You can hand it to me when we are alone. Will you?"

Dr. MacLeod gave one more searching look into his patient's flushed and trembling face. He dared not combat its deadly earnest. Crossing the room to an open desk, he took from it a writing-pad and envelope, and returned to the bedside. "A word first," he said, looking down at Donald with rare kindness and concern. "See here, Fayre. I see you are in some tight place—I don't know what. Will the letter set matters right?"

"Not the letter, but the answer. It—it will tell me what to do."

"And you will quit worrying?"

The tremulous smile returned. "It will be a relief—a relief. Yes, in any case. Quick, Doctor, quick! Those morning services are short. Katharine will be back."

For answer the doctor placed the pad and pen in his patient's hands, stamped the envelope and laid it beside him, and turning to the table, ran his eye over a book-rack, selected a volume, and sitting down with it, became instantly as engrossed in it as if he were alone in the room.

He had read but a page or two, however, when a faint voice called him to the bed. Donald was holding out his letter in a shaking hand. The doctor took it, turning it face downward as he did so, sealed it, and slid it into his pocket. Donald watched him breathlessly, made a half gesture as if to take it back, checked himself, and turned his face to the wall. The doctor quietly restored the pad to its place, recalled the nurse, and went out.

From that time Donald's anxiety, instead of lessening, visibly increased, and at each succeeding visit, at the doctor's scarcely perceptible shake of the head in reply to his eyes' mute question, he clenched his hands in unconcealed impatience. The fifth day came, and still there was no answer.

"Dr. MacLeod, are you keeping it from me?"

"Scarcely," the doctor answered, smiling. "I fancy I am about as eager for

it to come as you, since your peace of mind appears to depend so greatly upon it."

"Because," Donald continued, pursuing his train of thought as if the doctor had not spoken, "if you are—if you keep it from me—or if by any luck it does not come before the week is out—I give you fair warning—I shall kill myself. I mean it, Doctor."

"Nonsense!" the doctor ejaculated, still smiling.

"I mean it," Donald reiterated, solemnly. "I have thought it all out. If there is no answer by to-morrow night, I shall kill myself. I have only to disobey orders—to fling myself around as I lie here—and all is done. My life is in my own hands, as you know."

"No man's life is his own, and you would do no such thing though the letter should not come till doomsday," returned the doctor, decisively. "By to-morrow, without a doubt, I shall bring you your answer, and all will be right."

But Donald had not so long to wait. That afternoon's mail brought the letter to its destination. As Dr. MacLeod was starting on his rounds his man handed it to him, saying that it was addressed to Mr. Fayre. The doctor reached out for it, thrust it inside his breast pocket, and ordered himself driven at once to the Fayres'.

Going up stairs unannounced as usual, he found the wife sitting with her husband in the nurse's absence. He had opened the door noiselessly for fear of rousing his patient from a possible slumber, and so entered the room unperceived by either of its occupants.

Katharine Fayre, a devotional book lying face downward upon the pale blue folds of her gown, was seated in an aesthetically straight high-backed chair—the only uncomfortable one in the room—beside a table on which a slim little desk-clock stood facing her like a sentinel. She had lifted both arms to the top of the chair, and was leaning her head back between them, her lips parted, and her upraised eyes fixed dreamily on some far-off unseen point. It is a rest to mental as to physical vision occasionally to lift one's gaze from immediate surroundings to an intangible distance. Katharine's features showed some such sense of re-

lief now. Anything more beautiful and more remote than her face with that ghost of a smile upon it the doctor had never seen. In her cold purity and aloofness she might have been a disembodied spirit.

Donald was lying motionless, his head turned to one side, gazing at his wife with an expression that not often in a lifetime does any one surprise upon another's face. In the unguardedness of the moment the man's entire soul lay bare. It was a revelation of such intensity of love, such capacity for renunciation, and such depths of loneliness as few natures are capable of experiencing. Dr. MacLeod was startled as he saw it.

As he made his presence known, Katharine returned to her environment. She rose instantly to her feet, slightly coloring at the indignity of being taken thus unawares, and went forward to meet him; but a servant appearing at that juncture with a card, she was obliged to withdraw, and the doctor passed on to his patient.

Donald's haunting question immediately came back to his eyes. The doctor made a gesture toward his pocket.

"It has just come. You shall have it as soon as I have given you a little whiskey."

Donald's color went and came in floods. His pupils dilated till his eyes looked black. A nervous tremor seized and shook him. As he took the letter an odd sound broke in his throat. He tried to turn it into a laugh—a still more pitiful sound—and tore open the envelope with desperate courage. Dr. MacLeod, wishing not to appear to be watching him, ostentatiously turned to look at something passing in the street, while still keeping a light touch upon his patient's wrist. A flicker in the rapid pulse called to him like a cry. Donald looked up at him over the open sheet, smiling singularly. His face was deathly white, and the moisture stood in great beads upon his forehead under the tumbling brown locks.

"Well?" the doctor asked, with that medical optimism which is never off its guard. "It is all right now, is it not?"

"All right," Donald replied, framing the words with difficulty through strained lips. "I know—now. It will be all right—now."

The pulse under the watching fingers

gave a sudden bound. The doctor looked round for the cause. The door had opened, and Mrs. Fayre stood just within the threshold.

Donald made a futile attempt to hide the letter and envelope under the sheets, realized that it was too late, and snatching them out, thrust them into the doctor's hand. "Burn! burn!" he commanded, in a hoarse whisper, feebly motioning toward the open fire.

Without an instant's hesitation Dr. MacLeod crossed the room, passing in front of Mrs. Fayre with an apologetic bow, stooped over the grate, and held the fluttering papers down with the tongs till the last tiniest fragment was destroyed.

Katharine stood perfectly still near the door, watching the holocaust without a word. Then her eyes, cold, stern, and passionless as an avenging angel's, sought her husband's face. Donald lay spent, his hot breath coming in short gasps. He looked steadily back at his wife, the singular smile still upon his face, but with such an overpowering rush of love behind it that the doctor marvelled how she could refrain from springing to clasp her arms about him. A long breathless instant went by. The air seemed charged with some subtle electric current, along which accusation, refutation, passion, and entreaty flashed wordlessly back and forth between the two.

Then Katharine withdrew her gaze and walked quietly forward. "Miss Fielding will be in directly," she said, addressing the doctor. "But have you any orders to leave with me before you go?"

Early the next morning, as the doctor was admitted into the spacious hallway, the footman informed him that Mrs. Fayre wished to speak to him, and ushering him into the drawing-room, a state-ly, rarely used apartment, softly closed the folding-doors upon him. Mrs. Fayre was standing at the farther end of the room, an alien figure in the severe fashion of her dress amid the sumptuousness around her. She made no motion toward him, but with a slight grave bow signed to him to approach.

He had never imagined anything so set and hard as her face. It was as if cut in veined marble. As he approached her he saw that, despite the extreme quiet of her pose and manner, she was quivering

from head to foot with restrained excitement. He waited for her to speak.

"My husband tells me," she began, in a low, carefully controlled voice, "that you mailed a letter to which the one that you burned yesterday was a reply. He refuses absolutely to say more than this. But he owes me an explanation. Why should he wish to keep any letter a secret from me? I have the right to know more. That is why I appeal to you. Will you be so good as to tell me to whom Donald's letter was addressed?"

"I have no idea whatever, madam."

Dr. MacLeod's manner was as politely but defensively cold as her own.

"And the reply—the letter that you brought him?"

"I know nothing whatever about that letter either."

Her eyes scanned his face closely to determine if he were telling the truth.

"Did you notice the post-mark?"

"I did not."

"Nor the handwriting? Was it a man's or a woman's hand?"

"My dear Mrs. Fayre, you cannot suppose that I examined Mr. Fayre's letter? My office in the matter was purely that of postman."

She looked at him, baffled, yet defiant. Then unexpectedly her reserve broke down.

"I could bear anything—anything but that—that it should be another woman!" she cried, the hot color flooding her face and throat. "I cannot—I will not—endure the suspicion of it!"

The doctor's cool, collected voice broke in upon her agitation. "Why should you presuppose such a thing? Your husband's devotion to yourself must be at least as patent to you as it is to all others."

Katharine struck her hands together impatiently. "I never doubted Donald before. Little as his devotion is to me, at least I have trusted it hitherto."

She looked suddenly up at the doctor. The fixed concentration of his gaze seemed to compel her confidence.

"There is no secret about it. Donald knew that I cared nothing for him—nothing at all for all his wealth—that heart and soul I loved—always should love—another man."

The doctor made no answer, but the fixity of his look was like a command.

She hurried on: "They had forbidden me to marry him, because he was poor—very poor—with a precarious future; that was all they had against him. And there was nothing against Donald, except that I loved some one else. They thought that no reason. They were cruel to me—cruel! And in spite of all I said, Donald was sure that I would grow to love him in time."

Dr. MacLeod recalled the sensitive, magnetic face upstairs, with its tenderness, loveliness, and charm. "Surely Mr. Fayre was right," he said. "No one could help loving him."

"No, no, no!" Katharine cried, with tragic intensity. "Love is not to women what it is to men. It does not go and come at will. Not loving him, my marriage was a sin, though I recognized it only after it was too late. But I married him. I have a wife's rights before the world. And I will not tolerate this suspicion."

"But assuredly," the doctor interposed, "you must be basing your fear on better grounds than the mere burning of a letter? There could be twenty admirable reasons for your husband's choosing to destroy it."

"What reason but the one could he have for refusing to tell me?" Katharine asked, with conviction. "There is nothing else that he could wish to conceal from me. Speculations—money entanglements—loss of property—he knows well enough that I would never care for any material losses. I should always have my church left. He would have told me instantly were it anything else. But he refuses any explanation whatever. I asked only for an explanation. I made no accusation. But I must—I will—know the truth. If he is deceiving me—"

Dr. MacLeod interrupted her. "I beg your pardon, but was it yesterday that you had this discussion with your husband?"

"No. I waited till this morning. I had to think over it, to—to pray over it first," she added, throwing back her head as she made the half-defiant admission.

"This morning?" The doctor turned to the door.

She called after him, but he kept on his way.

"Wait here," he said, authoritatively, over his shoulder. "I must see what

mischievous the excitement of your disagreement may have done him. I will return later."

He was not gone long. Katharine had not stirred by a hair-breadth. He strode up to her.

"It is as I feared. Mr. Fayre is in a state of nervous restlessness which in his present condition is exceedingly critical. He must be quieted at all costs. You must come to him at once."

The color fled from Katharine's face. "You mean that he is—dying?"

The doctor stood over her, relentless, uncompromising, like the embodiment of fate. "I mean that the balancing of the scales is in your hands. Whatever you said to put him in this state must be unsaid. However you feel, you must contrive an immediate reconciliation. If you are still harboring that preposterous suspicion—if you cannot forgive him for any and every wrong that you fancy he may have done you—then forgive him in appearance at least."

Katharine dropped her hands to her sides with a gesture of passionate protest. "I cannot pretend! I have never pretended! It must be truth or nothing!"

"Then for God's sake make it truth!" the doctor said, harshly.

He laid an imperative hand on her arm, and, dazed and unresisting, she yielded to its pressure and went with him to her husband's room.

Donald's restless tossing ceased as he saw his wife. The tense muscles relaxed, and he lay scarcely breathing, watching her with eyes shining with a preternatural brilliance.

"Mr. Fayre," the doctor said, very gently, "you see you were mistaken. Your wife came directly when she knew that you wanted her. It was all only a misunderstanding."

"Katharine!" Donald whispered, putting out his hands gropingly. "Katharine!"

The inflection of his voice made the name a prayer.

All the hardness melted suddenly from his wife's face. She fell on her knees and reached out both hands to his. "Forgive me, forgive me, Donald! I was wrong. I was cruel. I do not want any explanation. I trust you. I do trust you. You could never do anything that



was not for my happiness before your own."

An exquisite smile illumined Donald's face. "Dear!" he breathed.

Then suddenly the smile vanished under a longing that was like a devouring flame.

"Oh!" he cried. "If but you could tell me once—just once—before—" He caught himself up. "If only you could say that you love me—that you really love me at last—as you loved—*him*! Could you—could you—Katharine—in truth?"

It was a cry wrung out of his heart of hearts, and it moved her to the depths. She shrank as if the words were a blow. Her features worked pitifully. She was like a creature in pain. An intense desire to give him what he wanted, to comfort him at any sacrifice, was written over all her yearning face. Twice she tried to speak—twice tried to frame the lie aloud. But each time the truth that was so inexorable a part of her confronted and silenced her. She could not look at him. Her lips moved soundlessly in a dumb denial. Two scalding tears splashed down upon her cheeks.

As the doctor passed out of the room, that the couple might be alone, he pondered over the look on Donald's face. Overshining all its heartbrokenness was an unaccountable exaltation—the exaltation of a martyr giving up his life at the stake for the sake of the faith that is in him.

At midnight the doctor received a peremptory call to the Fayres'. Their house was at some distance from his, but he reached it almost before the panting messenger who had summoned him. The nurse, pale and red-eyed, met him in the hall. He stood still at sight of her face.

"It is not possible— You do not mean—"

She bowed her head with a sob. "He is dead."

"But I do not understand," Dr. MacLeod said, sharply, after she had reported the details. "All was going well when I saw him this evening. What could account for it? Did his restlessness return?"

The nurse choked down her tears. "Never while I was with him. But I had to go out of the room once or twice on errands. I was never away more than

a moment, but the last time—don't tell Mrs. Fayre this! it was all he could do to persuade her to go to bed at all—as I came back I caught sight of him tossing around on the bed. I hadn't thought he had so much strength in him. When I cried out at him he lay still, and smiled at me as a child might. I shall never forget that smile. I wish to Heaven I had never left him!"

Dr. MacLeod stood a moment with his head bent over on his breast, his brows knotted, and his clenched hands thrust deep in his pockets. He too had loved the man.

Finally, rousing himself with a short fierce sigh, he passed on to the familiar chamber. There Donald lay, marble-white and still, with closed eyes and folded hands, all the trouble gone forever out of his face, and his smile irradiating it like a living glory. Never in all his life had he looked so happy. And prone by the couch, her arms flung across his feet and her head buried upon them, his wife was sobbing convulsively in an overwhelming agony of grief.

Five years later Dr. MacLeod was called to a patient at a noted summer-resort. It was evening when the consultation came to an end, and during the hour elapsing before he could take his return train he sat on the piazza of one of the monster hotels chatting with a chance acquaintance, a man of extremely prepossessing appearance and manner, from whom he had begged the favor of a light for his cigar. The gay crowd was surging up and down at the farther end of the great veranda, but in their quiet corner they were comparatively alone, and the desultory talk wandered pleasantly from one theme to another. It turned at last upon the singular incidents in real life which furnish the professors of fiction with themes for their narrations. The doctor suddenly looked up.

"I had a curious case once," he said, knocking off the ash of his cigar against the balustrade. "I lost my patient, and I could never determine whether his death was due to natural causes or to his own action. There seemed no sufficient motive, and yet— No one else had any such idea, and of course I never hinted it to the family—that is, to his wife; there

was no one besides. I was extraordinarily drawn to the man. He was a most lovable fellow."

"What were the facts?" the stranger asked, with an interested glance. "I should like to hear them."

"Well, let me see how you settle the question," Dr. MacLeod said; and throwing away his cigar, he resettled himself in his seat and began the story of Donald Fayre.

He had barely related the episode of the letter when the man beside him suddenly turned upon him.

"My God!" he exclaimed. "Can it be possible that you are Myron MacLeod?"

The doctor looked at him in surprise. "Certainly. That is my name."

The other rose to his feet in uncontrollable excitement. "Why, then—why, then—you must be telling me about—your patient must have been Donald Fayre!"

"What? You knew Fayre?"

"Yes! Yes! That is, I knew his wife—before he married her. I am Julius Dalrymple."

The doctor bent toward him in pleased recognition. "Dalrymple? The writer?"

"You would not have known the name then," the other returned, more quietly. "I was a poor journalist in those days, living from hand to mouth. But I knew her—well. She was a beautiful woman."

"She was the most beautiful woman I ever saw in all my life," the doctor corroborated, deliberately. "I have often wondered what became of her."

"You do not know?"

"No. She disappeared after his death—sold the house and left the city. I have heard nothing of her since."

Dalrymple lifted his hat and drew his handkerchief several times across his forehead. "I can tell you," he said, after a slight pause. "I saw her husband's death in the papers, and I went to see her—not at once, of course—a decent time after. She had disappeared, as you say. But I traced her. It was some time before I found her. I did not see her, however. She refused to see me."

"And where was she? In a sisterhood?"

"You are good at guessing. Yes. In a sisterhood. She had entered it for life."

There was silence for a few moments.

"And the end of your story?" Dalrymple resumed. "I must hear it out."

Dr. MacLeod narrated the remaining circumstances. He felt rather than saw the absorbed attention with which the other followed his account.

"At the time I confess I thought Mrs. Fayre's suspicion groundless—not to say unpardonable," he wound up. "But in thinking it over since, I can come but to the one conclusion. He certainly seemed to adore his wife. Yet what else could he have desired to keep from her? Yes. It *must* have been another woman."

Dalrymple flashed round on him indignantly. "It was *not* another woman!" he cried, angrily. "How could there ever be another woman where she was concerned? That letter was to me."

"To *you*?"

"Yes, to me. I was to address my answer to your care. Whatever you thought, he thought himself dying. He asked me to tell him the truth as to a dying man."

"Humph! Did he?" ejaculated Dr. MacLeod, dryly. "He was not dying, all the same—was in no danger of dying if he had obeyed orders and kept quiet. He knew perfectly well the condition attendant upon his recovery."

"Dr. MacLeod, what Donald Fayre asked me was if I still—still cared for his wife. Of course I had no notion what it meant," he continued, hurriedly. "But could it have been—you must tell me—was my answer the cause—of his death, I mean?"

"Ah!" the doctor said, with a quick sidelong glance of intelligence. "To leave her free."

"It is a miserable fluke all round," Dalrymple said, hopelessly. "I feel like a murderer. Doctor, did he or did he not kill himself?"

"I cannot guess. I wish to Heaven I could!" he replied.

## The Changeless

By *Mary Applewhite Bacon*



THE King had called together his counselors into the chamber where only cases of life and death were considered. From the tall window opposite the dais the heavy silk curtains were drawn back. Between their yellow folds shone the paler glow of the wide sunset sky. But the King's eyes saw nothing except the woman before him. Her back was to the light; the curves of her drooping head and tall, slender form were in lovely outline; the dark shadows below her eyes and around her lips seemed darker still.

"All the good things of life were yours," the King said to her, "but you gave nothing to him—no place at your feasts, no flower from your gardens, no song to make him glad. And there was not a desire of your heart that was not precious in his sight."

The woman made no answer. Her long lashes drooped against the heavy circles below her eyes. Her white hands lay passive in her lap.

"You loved him not, and he died because there was no place for him in your heart."

The woman raised her heavy eyelids and looked for a moment into the King's face.

"Have you any defence to make?"

She shook her head. Her eyes had fallen again.

"My lord," one of the counsellors said, a sudden pity breaking over his countenance, "the man had no comeliness of form nor grace of speech. The woman is not wholly to blame."

The woman lifted her head. "The sweet coming of the summer dawn was less sweet than the light of his eyes," she said. "His thoughts were those of an angel and not of a man."

"And yet you loved him not."

In the uncertain light her face seemed to quiver, but her lips framed no reply.