

The House Surgeon*

BY RUDYARD KIPLING

A STORY IN TWO PARTS—PART II.

BEFORE I joined Baxter at Burry Mills Hydro, I spent a night at Holmescroft. Miss McLeod had returned from her Hydro, and at first we made very merry on the open lawn in the sunshine over the manners and customs of the English resorting to such places. She knew dozens of hydros, and warned me how to behave in them, while Mr. and Mrs. McLeod stood aside and adored her.

"Ah! That's the way she always comes back to us," he said. "Pity it wears off so soon, ain't it? You ought to hear her sing, *With mirth thou pretty bird.*"

We had the house to face through the evening, and there we neither laughed nor sang. The gloom fell on us as we entered, and did not shift till ten o'clock, when we crawled out, as it were, from beneath it.

"It has been bad this summer," said Mrs. McLeod, in a whisper, after we realized that we were freed. "Sometimes I think that the house will get up and cry out—it is so bad."

"How?"

"Have you forgotten what comes after—the—the depression?"

So then we waited about the small fire, and the dead air in the room presently filled and pressed down upon us with the sensation (but words are useless here), as though some dumb and bound power were striving against gag and bond to deliver its soul of an articulate word. It passed in a few minutes, and I fell to thinking about Mr. Baxter's conscience, and Agnes Moultrie, gone mad in the well-lit bedroom that waited me. These reflections secured me a night during which I rediscovered how, from purely mental causes, a man can be physically sick; but the sickness was bliss compared to my dreams when the birds

waked. On my departure McLeod gave me a beautiful narwhal's horn, much as a nurse gives a child sweets for being brave at a dentist's.

"There's no duplicate to it in the world," he said, "else it would have come to old Max McLeod," and he tucked it into the motor. Miss McLeod, on the far side of the car, whispered, "Have you found anything, Mr. Perseus?"

I shook my head.

"Then I shall be chained to my rock all my life," she went on. "Only don't tell papa."

I supposed she was thinking of the young gentleman who specialized in South-American railways, for I noticed a ring on the third finger of her left hand.

I went straight from that house to Burry Mills Hydro, keen, for the first time in my life, on playing golf, which is guaranteed to occupy the mind. Baxter had taken me a room communicating with his own, and, after lunch, introduced me to a tall, horse-headed elderly lady of decided manners, whom a white-haired maid pushed along in a Bath chair through the park-like grounds of the Hydro. She was Miss Mary Moultrie, and she coughed and cleared her throat just like Baxter. She suffered—she told me it was the Moultrie caste-mark—from some obscure form of chronic bronchitis, complicated with spasm of the glottis; and, in a dead flat voice, with a sunken eye that looked and saw not, told me what washes, gargles, pastilles, and inhalations she had proved most beneficial. From her I was passed on to her younger sister—Miss Elizabeth—a small and withered thing with twitching lips, victim, she told me, to very much the same sort of throat, but secretly devoted to another set of medicines. When she went away with Baxter and the Bath chair, I fell across a Major of the Indian Army

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with gout in his glassy eyes, and a stomach which he had taken all round the Continent. He laid everything before me; and him I escaped only to be ravished by a matron with a tendency to follicular tonsillitis and eczema. Baxter waited hand and foot on his cousins till five o'clock, trying, I saw, to atone for his treatment of the dead sister. Miss Mary ordered him about like a dog.

"I warned you it would be dull," he said, when we met in the smoking-room.

"It's tremendously interesting," I said. "But how about a look round the links?"

"Unluckily damp always affects my eldest cousin. I've got to get her a fresh bronchitis-kettle. Arthurs broke her old one yesterday."

We slipped out to the chemist's shop in the town, and he bought a large glittering tin thing whose workings he explained.

"I'm used to this sort of work. I come up here pretty often," he said. "I've the family throat too."

"You're a good man," I said. "A very good man."

He turned towards me in the evening light among the beeches, and his face was changed to what it might have been a generation before.

"You see," he said, huskily, "there was the youngest—Agnes. Before she fell ill, you know. But she didn't like leaving her sisters."

He hurried on with his odd-shaped load, and left me among the ruins of my black theories. The man with that face had done Agnes Moultrie no wrong.

We never played our game. I was waked between two and three in the morning from my hygienic bed by Baxter in an ulster over orange and white pajamas, which I should not have suspected from his character.

"My cousin has had some sort of a seizure," he said. "Will you come? I don't want to wake the doctor. Don't want to make a scandal. Quick!"

So I came quickly, and led by the white-haired Arthurs in a jacket and petticoat, entered a double-bedded room reeking with steam and Friar's Balsam. The electrics were all on. Miss Mary—I knew her by her height—was at the open window, wrestling with Miss Eliz-

abeth, who had her by the knees. Her hand was at her throat, which was streaked with blood.

"She's done it. She's done it too!" Miss Elizabeth panted. "Hold her! Help me!"

"Oh, I say! Women don't cut their throats," Baxter whispered.

"My God! Has she cut her throat?" the maid cried, and with no warning rolled over in a faint. Baxter pushed her under the wash-basins, and leaped to hold the gaunt woman who crowed and whistled as she struggled toward the window. He took her by the throat, and she struck out wildly.

"All right! She's only cut her hand," he said. "Wet towel—quick!"

While I got that, he pushed her backward. Her strength seemed almost as great as his. I swabbed at her throat when I could, and found no mark; then helped him to control her a little. Miss Elizabeth leaped back to bed, wailing like a child.

"Tie up her hand somehow," said Baxter. "Don't let it drip all over the place. She"—he stepped on broken glass in his slippers—"she must have broken a pane."

Miss Mary lurched toward the open window once more, dropped on her knees, her head on the ledge, and lay quiet, surrendering her cut hand to me.

"What did she do?" Baxter turned toward Miss Elizabeth in the far bed.

"She was going to throw herself out of the window," was the answer. "I stopped her and sent Arthurs for you. Oh, we can never hold up our heads again!"

Miss Mary writhed and fought for breath. Baxter found a shawl, which he threw over her shoulders. "Nonsense!" said he. "That isn't like Mary," but his face worked while he said it.

"You wouldn't believe about Aggie, John. Perhaps you will now!" said Miss Elizabeth. "I saw her do it! And she's cut her throat too!"

"She hasn't," I said. "It's only her hand."

Miss Mary suddenly broke from us with an indescribable grunt, flew, rather than ran, to her sister's bed, and there shook her as one furious schoolgirl would shake another.

"No such thing!" she croaked. "How dare you think so, you wicked little fool?"

"Get into bed, Mary," said Baxter. "You'll catch a chill."

She obeyed, but sat with the gray shawl round her lean shoulders, glaring at her sister. "I'm better now," she crowed. "Arthurs let me sit out too long. Where's Arthurs? The kettle."

"Never mind Arthurs," said Baxter. "*You* get the kettle." I hastened to bring it from the side table. "Now, Mary, as God sees you, tell us what you've done."

His lips were dry, and he could not moisten them with his tongue.

Miss Mary applied herself to the mouth of the kettle, and between indraws of steam said: "The spasm came on just now, while I was asleep. I was nearly choking to death. So I went to the window. I've often done it before, without waking any one. Bessie's such an old maid about draughts. I tell you I was choking to death. I couldn't manage the catch, and I nearly fell out. That window opens too low. I cut my hand trying to save myself. Who has tied it up in this filthy handkerchief? I wish you had had my throat, Bessie. I never was nearer dying!" She scowled on us all impartially, while her sister sobbed.

From the bottom of the bed we heard a quivering voice: "Is she dead? Have they took her away? Oh, I never could bear the sight o' blood!"

"Arthurs," said Miss Mary, "you are an hireling. Go away!"

It is my belief that Arthurs crawled out on all fours, but I was busy picking up broken glass from the carpet.

Then Baxter, seated on the foot of the bed, began to cross-examine in a voice I scarcely recognized. No one could for an instant have doubted the genuine rage of Miss Mary against her sister, her cousin, or her maid; and that the doctor should have been called in—for she did me the honor of calling me doctor—was the last drop. She was choking with her throat; had rushed to the window for air; had nearly pitched out, and in catching at the window-bars, had cut her hand. Over and over she made this clear to the intent Baxter. Then she turned to her sister and tongue-lashed her savagely.

"You mustn't blame me," Miss Bessie

faltered, at last. "You know what we think of, night and day."

"I'm coming to that," said Baxter. "Listen to me. What *you* did, Mary, misled four people into thinking you—you meant to make away with yourself."

"Isn't one suicide in the family enough? O God, help and pity us! You couldn't have believed that!" she cried.

"The evidence was complete. Now, don't you think"—Baxter's finger wagged under her nose—"can't you think that poor Aggie did the same thing at Holmescroft when she fell out of the window?"

"She had the same throat," said Miss Elizabeth. "Exactly the same symptoms. Don't you remember, Mary?"

"Which was her bedroom?" I asked of Baxter, in an undertone.

"Over the south veranda, looking on to the tennis lawns."

"I nearly fell out of that very window when I was at Holmescroft—opening it to get some air. The sill doesn't come much above your knees," I said.

"You hear that, Mary? Mary, do you hear what this gentleman says? Won't you believe that what nearly happened to you—must have happened to poor Aggie that night? For God's sake—for her sake—Mary, *won't* you believe?"

There was a long silence while the steam-kettle puffed.

"If I could have proof—if I could have proof," said she, and broke into most horrible tears.

Baxter motioned to me, and I crept away to my room, and lay awake till morning, thinking more specially of the dumb grief at Holmescroft which wished to explain itself. I hated Miss Mary as perfectly as though I had known her for twenty years, but I felt that, alive or dead, I should not like her to condemn me.

Yet at midday, when I saw her in her Bath chair, Arthurs behind, and Baxter and Miss Elizabeth on either side, in the park-like grounds of the Hydro, I found it difficult to arrange my facts.

"Now that you know all about it," said Baxter, aside, after the first strangeness of our meeting was over, "it's only fair to tell you that my poor cousin did not die in Holmescroft at all. She was dead when they found her in the morning—just dead."

"Under that laburnum outside the window?" I asked, for I suddenly remembered the crooked, evil thing.

"Exactly. She broke the tree in falling. But no death has ever taken place in the house—as far as we were concerned. Never has. You can make yourself quite easy on that point. Mr. McLeod's extra thousand for what you called the 'clean bill of health' was something toward my cousins' estate when we sold. It was my duty as their lawyer to get it for them—at any cost to my own feelings."

I know better than to argue when the English talk about their duty. So I agreed with my solicitor.

"Their sister's death must have been a great blow to your cousins," I went on. The Bath chair was behind me.

"Unspeakable," Baxter whispered. "They brooded on it day and night. No wonder! If their theory of poor Aggie making away with herself was correct, she was eternally lost!"

"Do you believe that she made away with herself?"

"No, thank God! Never have! And after what happened to Mary last night, I see perfectly what happened to poor Aggie. She had the family throat too. By the way, Mary thinks you are a doctor, otherwise she wouldn't like your having been in her room."

"Very good. Is she convinced now about her sister's death?"

"She'd give anything to be able to believe it, but she's a hard woman, and brooding along certain lines makes one groovy. I have sometimes been afraid for her reason—on the religious side, don't you know. Elizabeth doesn't matter. Brain of a hen. Always had."

Here Arthurs summoned me to the Bath chair, and the ravaged face, beneath its knitted Shetland-wool hood, of Miss Mary Moultrie.

"I need not remind you, I hope, of the seal of secrecy—absolute secrecy—in your profession," she began. "Thanks to my cousin's and my sister's stupidity, you have found out—" she blew her nose.

"Please don't excite her, sir," said Arthurs, at the back.

"But, my dear Miss Moultrie, I only know what I've seen, of course, it seems to me that what you thought was

a tragedy in your sister's case turns out, on your own evidence, so to speak, to have been an accident. A dreadfully sad one—but absolutely an accident."

"Do you believe that too?" she cried. "Or are you only saying it to comfort me?"

"I believe it from the bottom of my heart. Come down to Holmescroft for an hour—for half an hour—and satisfy yourself."

"Of what? You don't understand. I see the house every day—every night. I am always there in spirit—waking or sleeping. I couldn't face it in reality!"

"But you must," I said. "If you go there in the spirit, the greater need for you to come there in the flesh. Go to your sister's room once more, and see the window—I nearly fell out of it myself. It's—it's awfully low and dangerous. That would convince you," I pleaded.

"Yet Aggie had slept in that room for years," she interrupted.

"You've slept in your room here for a long time, haven't you? But you nearly fell out of the window when you were choking."

"That is true. That is one thing true," she nodded. "And I might have been killed as—perhaps—Aggie was killed."

"In that case your own sister and cousin and maid would have said you had committed suicide, Miss Moultrie. Come down to Holmescroft, and go over the place just once."

"You are lying," she said, quite quietly. "You don't want me to come down to see a window. It is something else. I warn you we are Evangelicals. We don't believe in prayers for the dead. 'As the tree falls'—"

"Yes. I dare say. But you persist in thinking that your sister committed suicide—"

"No! No! I have always prayed that I might have misjudged her."

Arthurs at the Bath chair spoke up: "Oh, Miss Mary! You would 'ave it from the first that poor Miss Aggie 'ad made away with herself; an' of course Miss Bessie took the notion from you. Only Master—Mister John stood out, and—and I'd 'ave taken my Bible oath you was making away with yourself last night."

Miss Mary leaned toward me, one finger on my sleeve.

"If going to Holmescroft kills me," she said, "you will have the murder of a fellow creature on your conscience for all eternity."

"I'll risk it," I answered. Remembering what torment the mere reflection of her torments had cast on Holmescroft, and remembering, above all, the dumb Thing that filled the house with its desire to speak, I felt that it might be a good riddance.

Baxter was amazed at the proposed visit, but at a nod from that terrible woman went off to make arrangements. Then I sent a telegram to McLeod, bidding him and his vacate Holmescroft for that afternoon. Miss Mary should be alone with her dead, as I had been alone.

I expected untold trouble in transporting her, but to do her justice, the promise given for the journey, she underwent it without murmur, spasm, or unnecessary word. Miss Bessie, pressed in a corner by the window, wept behind her veil, and from time to time tried to take hold of her sister's hand. Baxter wrapped himself in his newly found happiness as selfishly as a bridegroom, for he sat still, and smiled.

"So long as I know that Aggie didn't make away with herself," he explained. "I tell you frankly I don't care what happened. She's as hard as a rock—Mary. Always was. *She* won't die."

We led her out on to the platform like a blind woman, and so got her into the cab. The half-hour crawl to Holmescroft was the most racking experience of the day. McLeod had obeyed my instructions. There was no one visible in the house or the gardens; and the front door stood open.

Miss Mary rose from beside her sister, stepped forth first, and entered the hall.

"Come, Bessie," she cried.

"I daren't. Oh, I daren't."

"Come!" Her voice had altered. I felt Baxter start. "There's nothing to be afraid of."

"Good heavens!" said Baxter. "She's running up the stairs. We'd better follow."

"Let's wait below. She's going to the room."

We heard the door of the bedroom I

knew open and shut, and we waited in the lemon-colored hall, heavy with the scent of flowers.

"I've never been into it since it was sold," Baxter sighed. "What a lovely, restful place it is! Poor Aggie used to arrange the flowers."

"Restful!" I began, but stopped of a sudden, for I felt all over my bruised soul that Baxter was speaking truth. It was a light, spacious, airy house, full of the sense of well-being and peace—above all things, peace. I ventured into the dining-room, where the thoughtful McLeods had left a small fire. There was no terror there, present or lurking; and in the drawing-room, which for good reasons we had never cared to enter, the sun and the peace and the scent of the flowers worked together, as is fit in an inhabited house. When I returned to the hall, Baxter was sweetly asleep on a couch, looking most unlike a middle-aged solicitor who had spent a broken night with an exacting cousin.

There was ample time for me to review it all—to felicitate myself upon my magnificent acumen (barring some error about Baxter as a thief, and, possibly, a murderer), before the door above opened, and Baxter, evidently a light sleeper, sprang awake.

"I've had a heavenly nap," he said, rubbing his eyes. "Good Lord! That's not *their* step!"

But it was. I had never before been privileged to see the Shadow turned backward on the dial—the years ripped bodily off poor human shoulders—old sunken eyes filled and alight—harsh lips moistened and human.

"John," Miss Mary called, "I know now. Aggie didn't do it!" and, "She didn't do it!" echoed Miss Bessie, and giggled.

"I did not think it wrong to say a prayer," Miss Mary continued. "Not for her soul, of course, but for our peace. Then I was convinced."

"Then we got conviction," the younger sister piped.

"We've misjudged poor Aggie, John. But I feel she knows now. Wherever she is, she knows that we know she is guiltless."

"Yes, she knows. I felt it too," said Miss Elizabeth.

"I never doubted," said John Baxter, whose face was beautiful at that hour. "Not from the first. Never have!"

"You never offered me proof, John. Now, thank God, it will not be the same any more. I can henceforward think of Aggie without sorrow." Miss Mary tripped, absolutely tripped, across the hall. "What ideas these Jews have of arranging furniture!" She spied me behind a big cloisonné vase.

"I've seen the window," she said, remotely. "You took a great risk in advising me to undertake such a journey. However, as it turns out, I forgive you; and I pray you may never know what mental anguish means. Bessie! Look at this atrocious piano! Do you suppose, doctor, these people would offer one tea? I miss mine."

"I will go and see," I said, and explored McLeod's new-built servants' wing. It was in the servants' hall that I unearthed the McLeod family, bursting with anxiety.

"Tea for three, quick," I said. "If you ask me any questions now, I shall have a fit!" So Mrs. McLeod got it, and I was butler, amid murmured apologies from Baxter, still smiling to himself, and the cold disapproval of Miss Mary, who thought the pattern of the china vulgar. However, she ate well, and sent me to get her a napkin. Happiness may lighten people's souls, but it does not in the least soften their manners.

They went away in the twilight—the twilight that I had once dreaded. They were going to an hotel in London, to rest after the fatigues of the day, and as their cab turned down the drive, I capered on the door-step, with the all-darkened house behind me.

Then I heard the uncertain feet of the McLeods, and bade them not turn on the lights, but to feel—to feel what I had done; for the Shadow was gone, with the dumb desire in the air. They drew short, but afterwards deeper breaths, like bathers entering chill water; separated one from the other; moved about the hall; tiptoed up-stairs; raced down; and then Miss McLeod, and I believe her mother, though she denies this, embraced me. I know McLeod did.

It was a disgraceful evening. To say we rioted through the house is to put it

mildly. We played a sort of Blind-Man's Buff along the darkest passages, in the unlighted drawing-room and little dining-room, calling cheerily to one another after each exploration that here, and here, and here, the trouble had removed itself. We came up to *the* bedroom—mine for the night again—and sat, the women on the bed, and we men on chairs, drinking in blessed draughts of peace and comfort and cleanliness of soul, while I told them my tale again, and received fresh praise, thanks, and blessings.

When the servants, returned from their day's outing, gave us a supper of cold fried fish, McLeod had sense enough to offer no wine. We had been practically drunk since nightfall, and grew incoherent on milk and water.

"I like that Baxter," said McLeod. "He's a sharp man. The death wasn't in the house, but he ran it pretty close, ain't it?"

"And the joke of it is that he supposes I want to buy the place from you," I said. "Are you selling?"

"Not for twice what I paid for it—now," said McLeod. "I'll keep you in furs all your life, but not our Holmescroft."

"No—never our Holmescroft," said Miss McLeod. "We'll ask *him* here on Tuesday, mamma." They squeezed each other's hands.

"Now tell me," said Mrs. McLeod. "That tall one I saw out of the scullery window—did she tell you she was always here in the spirit? I hate her. She made all this bother. It was not her house after she had sold it. What do you think?"

"I suppose," I answered, "she brooded over what she thought was her sister's suicide night and day—she confessed she did—and her thoughts being concentrated on this place, they felt like a—like a burning-glass."

"Burning-glass is good," said McLeod.

"I said it was like a light of blackness turned on us," cried the girl, twiddling her ring. "That must have been when she thought about her sister and the house."

"Ah, the poor Aggie!" said Mrs. McLeod. "The poor Aggie, trying to tell every one it was not so! No wonder we felt Something wished to say Some-

thing. Thea, Max, do you remember that night—"

"We need not remember any more," McLeod interrupted. "It is not our trouble. They have told each other now."

"Do you think, then," said Miss McLeod, "that those two, the living ones, were actually told something—up-stairs—in your—in the room?"

"I can't say. At any rate they were made happy, and they ate a big tea afterward. As your father says, it is not our trouble any longer—thank God!"

"Amen!" said McLeod. "Now, Thea, let us have some music after all these months. *With mirth, thou pretty bird*, ain't it? You ought to hear that."

Thea sang an old English song which I had never heard before:

"With mirth thou pretty bird rejoice
Thy Maker's praise enhanced,
Lift up thy shrill and pleasant voice
Thy God is high advanced!
Thy food before He did provide
And gives it in a fitting side
Wherewith be thou sufficed!
Why shouldst thou now unpleasant be
Thy wrath against God venting,
That He a little bird made thee,
Thy silly head tormenting
Because He made thee not a man.
Oh, Peace! He hath well thought thereon.
Therewith be thou sufficed!"

THE END.

All in the Bud and Bloom o' the Year

BY SARAH PIATT

ALL in the bud and bloom o' the year,
When the heart is sad as the first green leaf—
(Love comes not back with the rose, I fear).
Ah, the time of joy is the time of grief—
All in the bud and bloom o' the year.

All in the bud and bloom o' the year,
When the grass comes back, to cover the dead—
(Love comes not back with the grass, I fear;
Does he sleep below, with a stone at his head?)—
All in the bud and bloom o' the year.

All in the bud and bloom o' the year,
The wind keeps singing a lover's rhyme—
(Love comes not back on the wind, I fear),
And the sweetest time is the saddest time—
All in the bud and bloom o' the year.

All in the bud and bloom o' the year,
Heavy with honey, the bee blows by—
(Love comes not back with the bee, I fear;
Love's sweet is bitter, Love's laugh is a cry)—
All in the bud and bloom o' the year.

All in the bud and bloom o' the year,
When wings grow weary of alien skies—
(Love comes not back with the bird, I fear:
Love builds no nest, save in Paradise!)—
All in the bud and bloom o' the year.