



THE  
*Doctor's Story*

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# THE Doctor's Story

It might be a wise world  
if doctors could talk freely.

Well, once in a while  
one does and here is the tale  
he told, of love  
and hate and revenge.

BY **Martha Ostenso**

ILLUSTRATED BY HAROLD VON SCHMIDT

Illustration: An unconscious woman is lying on the examination table in a doctor's office. "I see you've got a real patient at last," jeered Velma. Amos could have struck her.

**T**HE RICHNESS of old Dr. Thrale's library resided not in its furnishings, but in the mellow atmosphere that many years of good talk and kindly human thinking had accumulated there. His books, which almost completely lined the walls and were a collector's dream, no doubt contributed to that richness, but what are books, after all, but men in bindings?

After a good dinner on this October evening, during the course of which the old doctor's guests had shaped and reshaped the postwar world until it was virtually beyond recognition, they had all gathered about the fireplace, where chunky oak logs burned and flushed up the shadows of the otherwise unlighted room. There was brandy with a fine old bouquet for those who desired it, and there were excellent cigars. It was Dr. Thrale's eightieth birthday. If he had any regret on this occasion, it was that his wife was not present. She had died a decade ago, and shortly after that he had retired from active practice to live with his books and his memories.

But the men and women here tonight were all true, tried friends, and he was grateful for them. They were, every one of them, younger than himself. Even Judge Colwell was a scant seventy-five, and his wife trailing. The physicist, Albert Vik, from the university, and his wife Nora, a pretty little woman, were in their sixties. The other two, District Attorney Bob Overlea and Dr. Luther Roke, although under the half-century mark, had already proved their worth to humanity. Yes, Dr. Thrale thought, he was fortunate to have such friends.

It was Bob Overlea who said, from the comfortable depths of his chair, “We’ve had enough of world politics for one evening. Dr. Joe, why don’t you celebrate your threescore years and twenty by telling us the most interesting experience you’ve had in your professional life? Isn’t there something you’re keeping for your memoirs? And don’t you think we deserve to hear it first?”

“That’s an idea!”

Judge Colwell rumbled over his brandy inhaler. “The last good one you told us was that ghoulish grave-digging affair—that insurance case. I grant you it was interesting, whether we believed it or not.”

Dr. Thrale smiled tolerantly and said, “What’s the good of my telling you the truth when you insist I’m pulling a Baron Munchausen on you? If I were half as inventive as you think I am, I’d have gone the way of Doyle and Maugham and made myself a fortune long ago.”

But Mrs. Colwell and Nora Vik both protested that they had always believed every word he spoke, and wouldn’t he *please* tell them the story he himself considered his best?

*My friends are not young*, Dr. Thrale mused, glancing at each of them in turn, *but perhaps they still remember love*.

He raised a bony hand and ran it through the spun-silver of his hair. It was for love he had done the thing he had done more than twenty years ago. Love—the sort of love that keeps life going on this odd planet the human race has inherited. Thinking back, he knew his adventure had been first in the cause of that primitive emotion, and only incidentally in the cause of his other great love, the ever-groping science of medicine.

He said slowly, “It isn’t a pretty story, I’ll promise you that. I’m eighty, or I wouldn’t be telling it at all. And it isn’t one for the memoirs, either, if there ever are any memoirs. I’m too jealous of my reputation to take any chances with it after I’m dead.”

Professor Vik, grinning, said, “With all that buildup, it has to be good or I’ll never listen to another of your yarns.”

“Very well, then,” said Dr. Thrale, “let’s say it’s just another of my tall

stories.

“It has come to me often,” he went on, “that if a man had taken yesterday’s train instead of today’s his destination in life would have been a very different one. I’m not speaking in symbols. In this case I literally mean yesterday’s train. I can’t use real names, for certain people involved are still living. One is on the eve of retiring, but he performed miracles in plastic surgery during and immediately following the First World War. His son is a brilliant young psychiatrist, performing equally astounding feats with minds that have been disordered in the course of what many of us are calling this Global War.”

Amos Corbett was twenty-six in 1907, when he interned at the Pacific Coast hospital where Dr. Joseph Thrale was superintendent. Amos was tall, gaunt, black-haired, with the darkly burning, big-pupiled blue eyes that one associates either with starvation or with some fanatical zeal. In the case of Amos Corbett, one would have been right in guessing that his eyes were the reflection of both.

He had been brought up by a kindly spinster aunt of limited means who had given him what she could toward an education. The rest he had earned himself, seizing every odd job he could find. His aunt lived long enough to know he had acquitted himself brilliantly at college and that his career was beginning at excellent St. Sebastian’s.

With her passing, Amos Corbett was quite without kin and almost without friends, for he had had no time to cultivate agreeable companionships. The years of lonely struggle toward his goal had made him even shyer than he might have been, so that people meeting him for the first time were likely to experience a sense of rebuff and thereafter avoid the striding, rangy young man who acted as if any relaxation from his work was a criminal waste of time.

While others dubbed him “Ichabod,” Dr. Thrale was more wont to think of “Honest Abe,” and before his internship was over, Amos was to be seen at least once a week at the Thrale table, where Mrs. Thrale was conducting a campaign to put a little meat on his bones.

“If you’re bent on this coal-mine survey, Amos,” the doctor’s wife said on one occasion, “you’ve got to hide that skeleton of yours. You can’t expose yourself to all manner of lung diseases with your own lungs practically hanging out like flags!”

Shortly before his year at St. Sebastian’s was concluded, Amos had been in communication with the company doctor attached to one of the lesser collieries in a Pennsylvania town. The doctor had finally offered to take him on as an

assistant, warning him, however, that there was no money for research—coal mines were coal mines, after all—the poor we have always with us, and so forth. Far from being dismayed, Amos took the news as a challenge—and high-heartedly packed his shabby trunk.

But it happened that on his way to the railway station that evening an automobile struck his cab, and the woman in the car would have bled to death had he not made from her stockings a tourniquet that saved her life. But he had missed his train, was obliged to remain over to give his testimony as a witness to the accident—and thus found the entire course of his life altered.

For on the afternoon preceding Amos Corbett's tardy arrival in the Pennsylvania mining town, the company doctor died of a heart attack. The unfortunate man had informed nobody of his plan to take on a young assistant. By the time Amos got there, a cousin of one of the mine owners, fresh from an Eastern medical school, with a face like a pair of scissors, was already installed in the office of the late practitioner. Amos stood on the threshold with his heart and his hopes in his boots. Scissor-face, confident of a sinecure, said a few regretful words, and Amos walked numbly out in the street.

He found a rooming house in a district of incredible coal smog. The walls of the house were a greasy black, and a pitiful broom of a tree stood black in the patch of yard. A sign, flapping from the tree like a despondent underlip, said, "Two ground floor rooms furnished. Five dollars per week."

Amos reminded himself that what he wanted after all was to be right here in the thick of things—the uglier the better—where he could get a clear view of conditions and draw his own conclusions. With a hundred and two dollars in his pocket, and with a glance at the tawdry ground-floor window where he could already visualize his name plate hanging—Amos Corbett, M. D.—he strode up to the rachitic door.

A middle-aged woman opened it and peered suspiciously at him. Her straggling hair and her skin were of a matching horn-color.

"You have two front rooms to let?" Amos inquired politely.

He carried his cheap medical kit bag, and the woman glanced hostilely at it.

"You ain't one o' these here labor agitators, are you?" she demanded in a reedy voice. "I've had enough o' them!"

"No. I'm a doctor."

"Well, you can take a look at the rooms." The woman grudgingly opened the door wider, and Amos entered. "Though what a doctor would want hereabouts is beyond me!"

Ah, my good woman, Amos thought happily, that's where you and I differ, fortunately! Whereupon his ears were pricked by a curious, soft, rosy sound, and glancing toward the end of the dim passage, he saw a fair-sized rat disappear into the unknown hinterland.

The woman had hastily opened the door to the left. "Nice an' airy," she proclaimed, with an evident change of heart. "Bay windows ain't common round here. It's nailed down on account o' the dust, but if you want it open you can get one o' them double screens cheap enough. Furnished comfortable too, ain't it?"

If she had stopped at the word "furnished" she would still have been guilty of exaggeration. Sleazy grass mats adorned the rough floors, and the lace curtains could not have stood another washing if they had been treated to it. The "parlor" contained two wicker chairs, an imitation leather sofa and a table covered with a soiled green ball-fringe cloth. In the bedroom were a washstand, a shelf, a rack of hooks, a kitchen chair and a single bed of white-painted iron shrouded by a white spread that was clean.

"Here in the back is another window," the woman was saying. "It lets out on the garden, so it ain't nailed down. An' you've got a real sink here, see, an' a gas ring. I guess a doctor would need them things, wouldn't he, for hot water an' all? The gas an' 'lectric is thrown in, an' there's a phone in the hall. I never expected a doctor, or I'd of fixed up the walls a little."

She was actually apologetic! Amos glanced through the rear window at the "garden"—a nameless bush fringed by grass full of bald spots—and hastily inspected the water faucet above the sink. Water came from it.

"Five dollars a week?" he asked.

"That's what I've been gettin', just like it stands. Change o' linen once a week. A towel every other day. Bathroom's upstairs, an' you have to let me know when you want hot water. But"—the woman colored faintly—"if *you* want to come in, I'll have the place fixed up some. It'll be nice to have a decent young fellow round for a change. I can't afford much, but——"

"Look! Tell you what I'll do, Mrs.——"

"Mrs. Rawlins. I'm a widow." She reported this as though it were an illness.

"My name is Amos Corbett," he said. "I was going to suggest that I'd leave my bag here and get my trunk up from the depot. And while I'm downtown I'll buy some calcimine and a brush and do these rooms over myself."

The poor woman was all but speechless. "Oh, well, now, I ought to make that right with you. I'll put up new curtains and——" She stopped, suspicion narrowing, her mouth again. "I can't see why a young man like you—say, you

ain't up to something, are you? There was a doctor down to Kimper Knob, an' he blamed a thing on his landlady——”

Amos laughed. “I'm here to study lung troubles among the miners. I won't be able to blame that on you, will I?”

She drew a sigh of relief, and at that moment there was a soft sound behind Amos. He turned quickly, remembering the rat. But what he saw was a girl standing just within the doorway.

“Velma, where have you been?” Mrs. Rawlins asked. “There's all them upstairs rooms to do yet, an' it's almost noon!”

Velma ignored Mrs. Rawlins. She was staring at Amos with eyes as thick-lidded and passive as ripe blue plums.

“This is my daughter,” Mrs. Rawlins hastened to say. “She'll keep your rooms tidy for you, or else you give her the switch!” She sighed heavily as she looked at the girl. “Upstairs with you now an' get at them rooms. You can leave your things in here, doctor; I'll lock the door an' give you the key. We don't lock the outside door, on account of us all goin' an' comin' at all hours.”

“Thanks. I'll be back as soon as I can get the calcimine.”

The girl Velma, pausing on the staircase, glanced over her shoulder. Although she could not have been more than seventeen, she wore the sheer puff-sleeved silk blouse and the gored skirt fashionable in 1908. Her bronze hair was arranged in an exaggerated pompadour, and her mouth curved in a calculating way. But her skin was as beautiful an ivory as her mother's must once have been. And she had a figure.

With a wry smile, Amos looked away from her and went out the front door. A type, this Velma! he thought. A type he had often seen strolling that darkly glowing street not far from his college. He himself had always sped by with a shudder, but some of the boys . . .

He was irritated to find that even outside in the black-veined sunlight the chill of Velma Rawlins lingered with him, as though she were some bird of prey who might swoop down upon him.

“His few letters to me during those months,” Dr. Thrale said to his friends about the fireside, “were sketchy. Their tone was obstinately cheerful, but he must have had a devilish cruel time of it keeping body and soul together. At Christmas, my wife sent him a big hamper of food. His letter of thanks made her cry. He said it would take him a month to eat all that, and quite likely he made it last a month.

“In one of his letters he joked about the scarcity of patients. He said,



‘People don’t get sick here. They die first.’ But he was bent on getting his pulmonary data, so he inserted an ad in a local paper, offering a free examination of the lungs to any miner desiring it.

“My wife and I went to Europe that next spring, and we didn’t discover the tragic thing that had happened to him until after our return. It was too late then for me to give him the help I might have given him had I been here.”

Amos Corbett had known from that first day that Velma Rawlins was likely to become a pest. Later, her ogling, sidling blandishments while she lingered over the cleaning of his rooms in the mornings were hard enough to endure, but he sternly pretended not to notice them. When he came in late at night, however, spent from some o. b. case for which he would receive next to nothing—if that!—to find Velma lurking in the shadows of the staircase clad in slippers and gaudy wrapper, his disgust all but overwhelmed him. At first, on such occasions, she would feign demure confusion and then with an artful swaying of her silk-draped hips emerge into the dusty glare of the single bulb in the hall ceiling and smile up at him.

She must have decided finally that her tactics were too subtle. A few nights later, when Amos returned, the hall light was out and Velma’s soft, breathing flesh collided with him in the darkness. With an oath he sprang back, and then he heard her throaty giggle and her mocking apology.

“For the love of God, what are you trying to do?” he demanded. “Get that light lit!”

“Aw right,” she drawled in a whisper, “but you needn’t yell and wake Mom!”

He flung himself in through his own door and locked it with a shaking hand. From his cupboard he fetched a slice of cheese and part of a loaf of bread, and sitting on his bed, he wolfed the food down angrily. This business could not go on much longer. He had been here for four months now, and Velma was growing more ardently resolute.

There was only one thing for it. Since he didn’t have the heart to expose her shamelessness to her mother—and he’d look a fool doing it, anyhow!—he’d have to seek other lodgings. But poor Mrs. Rawlins had been decent with him, had even paid him for removing a wen from her scalp. Moreover, he owed her twelve dollars in rent. He threw himself back on his bed and covered his burning eyes with his arm.

Velma’s next attack, while not quite so offensive to his own sense of self-respect, was even more exasperating in that it took superlative will power on

Amos' part to combat it. When he came home one midnight, famished, there on his table stood a pint of milk and a handsome chicken sandwich. There was no sign of Velma, and while he ate ravenously he lied to himself that Mrs. Rawlins must have noticed how his cheekbones stuck out like little shelves on his face.

The next time was even worse. The bait was a savory stew. For one incredible moment he felt almost sorry for the girl. Then he set his jaws suddenly and placed the stew outside his door. There was a muffled stir in the hall, and then the light shuffling of feet. Amos never ate stew again as long as he lived.

For a week then he enjoyed a mysterious respite which he did not trust. Velma was coolly aloof when she swept his rooms or made his bed, but instead of being relieved at this Amos placed himself more grimly on his guard.

And with reason, as it turned out.

He let himself into his rooms one night after he had performed a delicate emergency operation on a child in the home of one of the miners he was keeping under observation. The baby had swallowed an open safety pin which had perforated the trachea, and Amos felt he might well be proud of the speed and skill with which he had gone about saving the child's life. The parents had both wept their gratitude.

Amos was treading on air as he walked home. The operation had been just what he needed to get his start in town. All the miners would hear of it—and all the doctors, too. People would have confidence in him now, young as he was.

When he let himself into his front room, it was dark as usual, but the soft motion of a body and the soft inhalation of a breath close to him were more than illuminating. He groped out with one hand and caught Velma by the hair. She struggled and gave a squeal like that of a small trapped animal, and then she laughed as she melted into his arms.

“Damn you!” he raged as he pried her arms from about him. “Get the hell out of here before I call your mother!”

In the pallor of the light from the street he saw her crouch back like something ready to spring, and the incoherent revilement that came from her lips could be compared to nothing but a snarl. For a second Amos was coldly dumbfounded, awed by this incredible manifestation of physical desire in what was supposed to be the gentler sex.

“I'll go,” she said finally, drawing herself up like a strangely flamboyant icicle. “But I'll wait my chance. You think you're too good for me, don't you? Well, you just watch out, *Dr. Corbett!* Don't think I'm through with you. Just

watch out—from now on.”

She slammed the door behind her as she went out.

Mrs. Rawlins came to do the rooms the next morning. “Velma’s got the toothache,” she explained. “Or so she says. Wisht I could o’ brought a boy into the world instead o’ that baggage! She keeps talkin’ about how she’s goin’ to quit this place soon an’ go to New York or somewheres an’ go on the stage an’ marry a millionaire. An’ I wish she would. She hates it here.” Mrs. Rawlins sighed. “I don’t know as I blame her much. A pretty girl like her, an’ nothin’ but riff-raff from the mines to look at! Her father was killed in a cave-in, poor man. An’ that reminds me—down to the store this mornin’ they was all talkin’ about the wonderful job you done on Nick Galenti’s kid. I was mighty proud to tell ’em you was a roomer o’ mine.”

“Well, thanks,” Amos smiled, and moved a handful of charts to one side on his desk so that she might dust it.

He was working on his pulmonary charts that evening when a startling sound reached him from beyond the thickly screened open front window. It was a scuffling, human sound, and Amos instinctively drew his defenses about him. But when the outer door of the house opened and there came a weak tapping at his own door, he got up.

The girl in the doorway—she would have fallen if he had not caught her—was white-faced, her cheap clothes drenched with rain. He half carried her to the sofa, snatched a bottle of spirits of ammonia from his cabinet, and brought her out of her fainting spell. But before that he knew with an icy conviction what was wrong with her.

“Tell me, quickly,” he urged. “Who did this—I mean, the operation? Who did it?”

*He must know or he was done for, having this girl here in his office!*

SHE mumbled something unintelligible and lapsed once more into unconsciousness. Amos looked about him wildly. There was no time to call an ambulance. Hemorrhage had already begun. He stripped off her outer clothing and carried her to the examination table. She was so miraculously light, and yet through Amos’ mind flew the thought that she bore the weight of death—not only her own, but possibly his as well. He worked frantically on the fragile, destroyed body. But gauze and injections and every known last resort were of no avail. When he finally ran to telephone the nearest hospital, his door opened and there on the threshold stood Velma.

“Well, I see you’ve got a real patient at last,” she jeered. “What a pity she didn’t come to you in the first place!”

“You must remember,” Dr. Thrale said, “that my wife and I were in Europe at the time. It was five years after our return from abroad, in fact, before we learned the whole truth about what had happened. While he was in prison he was too bitter to talk much, even to me—and I was unable to visit him except on my vacations, until I moved East and joined the staff of the university here. But my wife wrote him often and did all in her power to keep up his spirit. She kept saying, ‘He might have been our son, Joe! And to think we had to be so far away when he needed us most! When he gets out we must do something to re-establish him in his profession.’

“I didn’t have the heart then to tell her that he no longer had a profession, that his license had been taken from him, and that he was considered lucky to have got off with only five years—the unfortunate girl had died in his office before the ambulance could get there. At the trial, the landlady’s daughter gave the most damaging evidence. She left home after that—vanished—content, no doubt, with the complete destruction she had made of the man’s career.

“A week before his release, I arranged to have him come to me. I’d rather not dwell on that first glimpse I had of him, because his face, was—well, I’d like to forget it! His oldest acquaintances wouldn’t have recognized him. I had become head of the university hospital here, half a continent away from the college in which he had received his earlier training. I had considerable influence, and I acted boldly. I revealed nothing of his past. I recommended him—under another name—and at the age of thirty-three, he enrolled once again as a student in medicine. I felt, you see, that society owed him a second chance to do what I knew he *could* do.

“Frankly, he amazed me. He knew where he was going, and he went there without hesitation. When he was thirty-eight, he began life again with a new diploma—and a new vision. That was in 1918, when the First World War was coming to a close. He became one of the foremost plastic surgeons of his time, molding new faces for boys who had been blown featureless during those terrible days in France.”

Dr. Thrale smiled whimsically. “Life had performed a similar operation on his own face. His hair was iron-gray; he wore glasses and a clipped mustache. The men who had known him best fifteen years before would not have recognized him.” The old doctor rolled his cigar thoughtfully in his fingers. “Of course he was bound to fall in love sooner or later. A very remarkable young woman . . .”

Amos Corbett had begun life anew as Amory Cort. He was married in late May to Bliss Welland.

He had met Bliss at a dinner given by her mother, who was something of a lion-collector, and Amory was already a lion in his field of surgery.

Two days later Amory told her his story—the story of his broken youth—which left her shaken to the depths of her soul. It was she, in a sense, who had proposed to him, because she had thrown her arms about him and kissed him with tears in her eyes. They still laughed together about her boldness, as they had laughed and had joy in so many things, putting all the darkness of Amory's past resolutely where it belonged—out of their happy, rich life. Little Joey had come to make that life complete—little Joey who was named after old Dr. Joseph Thrale.

Amory's offices in the great midwestern city were only a short drive from the university town in which Dr. Thrale made his home. They were in the habit of driving back and forth over the scant hundred miles to spend the week end together when their work permitted. Just as Amory had always been to the old man like a son, now Bliss became to him like a daughter and Joey a grandson.

When the baby was almost three, Amory and Bliss decided to leave him with the nurse and spend New Year's Eve with the Thrales. And so it was that they found themselves in the country club on the last night of the old year, where Dr. Thrale and his university friends had met to celebrate. The place was festive with balloons and streamers, while an orchestra wrought emotional havoc from a platform at one end of the dance floor.

Amory was what Bliss laughingly called a faithful though not exactly inspired dancer. But she loved to dance with him, if only to be in his arms. The top of her dark head just reached his chin. The orchestra was hush-hushing in the sensuous rhythm of "Whispering." It was nearing midnight, and in the provocative dimming of the lights Amory held his wife close while she tilted her head back to look up at him through tears.

"Darling!" he breathed. "You're so damned beautiful! Shall I kiss you, right here and now?"

Bliss smiled, her lovely mouth trembling. "Old married people don't do such things. Not—not until midnight. But you can tell me again that I'm beautiful."

"You're the most exquisite female in this room, and you know it, damn it!"

She was wearing a gown of black taffeta. The close-fitting bodice was cut just low enough to show the smooth lift of her breast, and silver tulle wreathed her satiny shoulders. At her slim waist was Amory's corsage of sweetheart

roses.

*“Whispering a dream of you . . .”*

Amory sang close to her ear, his deep voice buoyant, and lifted her almost off her feet, while she laughed and joined in the song that everybody was humming around them. The music muted off to a final sigh, and then the leader, raising his baton, spoke in a voice of exaggerated solemnity.

“Ladies and gentlemen! When the Pied Piper gives forth on his pipe, nineteen hundred and twenty-three will be history—and nineteen hundred and twenty-four will be *news!*”

An instant later there came the silver sound of a trumpet. Amory held Bliss hard against him and kissed her.

Immediately the lights came on full and the riotous New Year’s ritual burst forth again. It was then, while friends were milling about and trying to make their greetings heard above the din, that Amory saw, across the room, a face he had never forgotten. There, not forty feet away, stood Velma Rawlins in a gold satin gown that outlined her figure and complemented her flaming hair. She was actually smiling at him, Amory was sure, while she pretended to be listening to what the man beside her was saying.

Once before, Amory had experienced the sensation of having all his blood settle to a bursting point in the tender region at the back of his knees. That had been when he had seen Velma Rawlins jeering at him in a certain doorway in a certain coal-mining town on a certain spring night in 1908. Mechanically, even at this moment, he thought: She was seventeen or eighteen then. She must be in her early thirties now. He saw the diamond-and-emerald bracelet on her wrist and the small clusters of diamonds and emeralds swinging like dazzling fruit from her ears, and thanked God that Bliss for the moment was the center of a laughing group gathered behind him.

He had one hope left, and he clung to that with all the desperation of a drowning man. Perhaps he had been mistaken in thinking that her smile had been a smile of recognition meant for him. Sixteen years had wrought in him a change Dr. Thrale had called unthinkable.

But the man with Velma was leading her toward the group of which Bliss was the center. Amory remembered the man now—a friend of the Thrales—a middle-aged lawyer by the name of Little. When they were only a few feet away, a waiter paused before them with a tray of cocktails, but Velma shook her head and smiled.

“I don’t drink, thank you,” she said.

It was at that instant that a startling ray of light smote across the troubled darkness of Amory’s mind. So Velma didn’t drink! Then he knew with

certainly why she didn't. The signs were there—in the pupils of her eyes; in

But Little was introducing her to his friends. Amory heard her name spoken—Mrs. Velma Dumont—and Bliss was acknowledging an introduction: “I hope you are enjoying the party, Mrs. Dumont.”

“Oh, very much, thank you!” Mrs. Velma Dumont replied, her eyelids cowering the blueness of her eyes. “It was so kind of Mr. Little to bring me along. You see, I'm quite alone in your city.”

That was meant for my ears, Amory thought with horrible clarity. But you're not alone now, that's what you're thinking, isn't it? You're back with the past; with something your rapacious heart wanted when you were seventeen—damn you!

What monstrous fate had brought about this meeting that could never happen in any ordinary man's lifetime but must happen in his? He listened a moment longer to the talk behind him. It seemed that Little was rounding up a few people for a cocktail party at his apartment the next afternoon. Velma was ostensibly intent upon the light talk going on about her, but Amory knew she was as aware of his presence as some crouching thing would be aware of its intended prey.

There came a sudden clash of music, and the dancers swirled toward the middle of the floor. Amory glanced aside and saw Bliss wave gaily to him as she moved away with a handsome young man. Then he made for the nearest exit to the wide sun porch that ran along three sides of the clubhouse. Somehow he must find time to steady his reeling thoughts. If his convictions concerning Velma Dumont were correct—and he was sickeningly positive they were—he could look for no human compassion from her. She had had little enough to begin with, but now any moral instinct she might once have possessed would have been warped out of existence.

The porch was glassed in securely, but the air was refreshingly cool and the lighting subdued. Three or four couples sat at a distance, their voices faintly audible above the din. Amory lighted a cigarette and stood looking toward the lights of the town three or four miles away. How, he wondered in desperation, was he going to break the truth of Mrs. Dumont's identity to Bliss? It was just possible that Velma might prefer to conceal her own past; of course, confident that Amory would gladly fulfill his part of a tacit agreement between them.

“The fresh air is a relief, isn't it, *Dr. Cort?*”

Amory wheeled about and confronted Velma Dumont. “Yes,” he said, steeling every nerve to meet her challenge. “It's warm in there, with such a

crowd.”

She stood beside him. “May I have one of your cigarettes?”

He offered her his case, then a light.

She inhaled deeply and smiled. “We have come a long way, haven’t we, Amos?”

*Amos!* The insolence of the woman!

“What is it you want?” he demanded.

She regarded him coolly. “Frankly, I wouldn’t have known you if it hadn’t been for something——” She hesitated. “I think it was the way you avoided me, exactly the way you used to when——”

“What is it you want?” he repeated.

“May I come to see you at your office tomorrow?” she asked.

“My office is a hundred miles from here,” Amory told her. “If you have anything to say, you can say it here just as well.”

“I—I’m here to look after some property that was part of my husband’s estate when he—passed on—a year ago.” Her blue-oiled lids fluttered an instant. “I don’t intend to rake up the past unless you insist. But I have been plagued lately with—with neuralgia, so that I can’t sleep.”

“Neuralgia?”

“That’s what I said.” She laughed and gave him a bold, knowing look. “Don’t torment me, Amos. You know what I want. It’s so little, and you can get it for me. But—*I have to have it!*”

Old Dr. Thrale rested his story for a moment while he drew on his cigar. Nobody spoke.

“The woman admitted she had been addicted to drugs for four or five years,” he finally resumed. “She even told him the degree of tolerance she had reached in her use of the drug, and that she intended to settle within easy reach of him so that he could supply her with all she wanted. He told me later that night—when we sat here alone together—that she was so arrogant in presenting him with this piece of blackmail that he would always wonder what kept him from strangling her on the spot. But he managed to keep his head.

“He told her that her particular lotus was hard to get at once. She’d have to give him a day or two. She agreed to wait, but made it clear that she would tolerate no prolonged delay. When he suggested that he should tell his wife all about it at once I cautioned him against it. As between husbands and wives, I have always held that nothing can take the place of implicit faith and forthright



understanding. But I have seen enough of life to know that such ends are often best served by a thoughtful reticence on the part of one or the other. His love for his wife, and his other love, medicine—I knew about those two myself, in my own life. I don't want to think of what I might have done if they had been threatened.

“I persuaded him to let me talk to the woman. I had come to certain conclusions of my own about her. I met her the next afternoon at the lawyer's cocktail party. She pretended great enthusiasm when I talked with her, but I didn't miss the look with which she followed my friend. It made my blood run cold—that rigid, nervous brilliance; that demand, with all the hatred of a fiend behind it! An hour later, alone with her in a small conservatory, I offered to place her under treatment in a rest home. She refused.

“I wondered if there were any shred of character left in the woman. I proposed an experiment. I produced from my pocket three capsules—one white, one pink and one brown. I gave her to understand that only one of them contained the drug she craved. The other two contained a harmless concoction that would produce no effect. On the threat of refusing to give her any relief, I exacted a promise from her that she would take one capsule before retiring, and report to me the following day.

“I had a theory concerning narcotics. The human mind has a strange and a powerful influence. I have known addicts to get relief from a dose of powdered sugar so long as they were convinced that it was their cherished drug. What I actually did may sound a bit complex.

“All three capsules I gave her contained the drug she asked for—in full measure. It was my hope that when she brought me the two remaining capsules I would be able to prove to her that at least one of them contained the drug—that she had taken an innocent powder, yet had found relief. With that as a starting point, we might look forward to an ultimate breaking of the habit.

“As it turned out, she didn't come to my office the next day. Her body had been found in her bed by her maid that morning. Not to be cheated out of what she wanted, she had taken all three capsules—considerably more than her heart could tolerate. Her maid admitted knowing of her habit. There was a hospital record back East.”

It was seconds before the tense silence was broken by the rosy crumbling of a log in the fireplace.

“That's the whole story, Joe?” Judge Colwell asked crustily.

Dr. Thrale's eyebrows lifted. “What more could there be?”

“But did your friend tell his wife who the woman was?” Nora Vik asked.

The old doctor shrugged. “Yes, he told her. I was with them at the time, as

a matter of fact.”

“And how did she take it?”

Dr. Thrale looked at Nora with an odd twinkle. “How would you have taken it?”

“I would have thanked God that Fate had not left the job for me to do,” Nora retorted.

“Well, there you are!” said Dr. Thrale. “I have always maintained that women are sheer realists at heart!”

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### **Transcriber's Notes:**

A few obvious spelling and punctuation errors have been corrected without note. The illustration by Harold Von Schmidt has been omitted due to copyright considerations but a brief description of the illustration and the caption have been provided to assist the reader.

[The end of *The Doctor's Story* by Martha Ostenso]