

*Mr. Penne Becomes
Immortal*

Isabel Ecclestone
Mackay

Illustrated by

Orison MacPherson

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Title: Mr. Penne Becomes Immortal

Date of first publication: 1927

Author: Isabel Ecclestone Mackay (1875-1928)

Illustrator: Orison MacPherson (1898-1966)

Date first posted: Apr. 9, 2023

Date last updated: Apr. 9, 2023

Faded Page eBook #20230416

This eBook was produced by: John Routh & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <https://www.pgdpCanada.net>

Mr. Penne Becomes Immortal

In which Mr. Penne, the lover, fights it out with Mr. Penne, the theorist

By ISABEL ECCLESTONE MACKAY

Illustrated by ORISON MACPHERSON

Christopher Penne unbuttoned his overcoat and walked the station platform in an expansive mood. He felt light, happy and inclined to whistle. This symptom alone should have warned him. Had he been a Celt he would have known that he was 'fey'. As it was he merely wondered why he should want to whistle. Ordinarily, the fact that his car was not drawn up by the steps to meet him would have precluded anything remotely resembling a whistle. But to-day he was complacent. He would walk on to meet the car.

"Hi! Mr. Penne!"

The shrill call caught him at the very end of the platform and he turned to see a bare-headed station-clerk waving a yellow envelope. Something urgent—otherwise the clerk would scarcely have ventured on 'Hi!'

"A telegram for you, Mr. Penne," said the clerk, with more personal interest than Mr. Penne relished. "There was another one a coupla days ago. Sent it right up to the house, but they said you hadn't left any forwarding address. Been away, I guess, haven't you?"

Mr. Penne did not trouble to corroborate the self-evident fact. Taking the envelope with a brief 'thank you', he paused for a moment before opening it. The clerk waited expectantly. Deplorable manners, but what can one expect in these days? Mr. Penne's impulse to put the telegram in his pocket was checked only by the reflection that the clerk, having taken the message, knew all about it anyway. There is no privacy now, none at all. He opened the envelope.

'Miss Chelmsford wishes inform you operation entirely successful.—Jevons.'

Mr. Penne raised blank eyes.

"Maybe I'd better look up the copy of the first one for you," suggested the clerk helpfully.

“Please do,” said Mr. Penne.

He looked at the telegram again . . .

‘*Jevons?*’ that would be Jevons the surgeon, since he spoke of an operation. But what operation? And on whom? ‘*Miss Chelmsford wishes inform you*’ . . . it must be someone, then, in whom he and Linda took a great interest. Otherwise she would not have wished him informed. Linda never informed him of irrelevant trifles.

. . . Well, the clerk was bringing the former message now. It would explain.



It was like Linda to sign initials only. But what did she mean . . . An operation? Didn't she know that he did not approve of operations?

This message was longer, a night letter, in fact. He read:

‘Sorry to have missed you on Monday stop Dr. Jevons in consultation advises immediate operation stop Strathclair Hospital stop No cause for anxiety stop Will wire you at once stop Love—
L. C.’

It was like Linda, he thought, to sign initials only. Thank Heaven, she disliked the modern intrusions upon privacy quite as much as he did. Though, of course putting the two messages together, the clerk would guess that L. C. stood for Linda Chelmsford. But—but what on earth was she talking about? . . . operation . . . had she had an accident, then? . . . And didn't she know that he did not approve of operations? . . .

"There's a train to the city in a quarter of an hour if you're going up," said the clerk, but under the stare of Mr. Penne's astonished eye his helpfulness evaporated. "Sign here," he directed briefly and, shrugging, returned to his work. "Bout as human as a black beetle" was how he put it to himself.

Mr. Penne stood irresolutely at the end of the platform. All the brightness of his mood had fled . . . He buttoned up his overcoat. With the buttoning, something of his ordinary efficient grasp of things came back. The news of the telegrams arranged itself as a series of definite facts. It was Linda who had had an operation. The operation had been successful. How fortunate, in a way that he had received the second message first. It had spared him much anxiety. On the other hand—well, on the other hand, surely Jevons had taken a great deal on himself? Advising an operation off hand like that? Surgeons are far too ready to order operations. What did Jevons mean by it? Linda hadn't a thing the matter with her—not terribly robust, perhaps, but perfectly sound and healthy. He had convinced himself of this before he—well, when he had felt himself so strongly attracted to Linda. Naturally he had been solicitous regarding the health of his (possibly) future wife. If all men were to show the same common sense the race would improve by leaps and bounds. Not that eugenics, as such, could ever expect to do more than suggest and direct. He was far from approving of compulsion of any sort. But when a man has once realized children as the end and aim of marriage, apart from the purely sentimental side, everything else adjusts itself. And the first adjustment is, plainly, the choosing of a perfectly healthy bride. Linda had been his choice and she had been perfectly healthy . . . What was Jevons thinking of? . . .

Of course, there might have been an accident . . . a leg . . . an arm . . . something which necessitated setting. He supposed that they might call that an operation. And Linda *would* drive in traffic. He had warned her many times about driving in traffic.

What had that clerk said about trains? He had better run up to the city at once and see what really had happened . . . Strathclair Hospital . . . He would go directly there, although, if it had been the mere setting of a bone,

Linda might have returned home already. She knew how he hated hospitals . . . all those nurses . . . no privacy . . . not even in the most private wards. Perhaps he had better go to the house first.

When the train came in, Mr. Penne entered it mechanically without buying a ticket. Obscurely he felt that he couldn't give that clerk the satisfaction of seeing him buy a ticket. But he did not realize this. He was absorbed in a vision of Linda, at home in her own bed, propped up with pillows, telling him how sorry she was that she had not listened to his warnings about driving in traffic . . . 'So foolish of me to get my collar bone (or arm . . . or leg) smashed up like this' . . . not that it was really at all serious . . . he mustn't worry.

Linda looked very attractive on the pillows. She was so little and light. Her hair spread out around her. It had never been cut. She knew how he hated bobbed hair. He saw himself touching it gently. After all, Linda was young. He wouldn't say too much about her foolishness in driving in traffic. He would let it go . . . merely pointing it out in a serious word or two before he kissed her . . . no, he would kiss her first . . . just to show that he wasn't holding it against her . . . dear, foolish Linda! . . .

The train was stuffy and, closing his eyes, he must have dozed a moment for suddenly, without warning, the vision of Linda on the pillows with her hair spread out changed. The bed was still there but different—narrow, high. The pillow was there but different, flat, stained, Linda was here, but was it Linda?—that small, ghastly face and tight-shut eyes? . . . an operation? . . . Great heavens! Linda!

His eyes snapped open. How horrible! He had dozed . . . a nightmare. Those telegrams had upset him. People should be careful how they send telegrams. Mr. Penne drew the yellow slips from his pocket and read them over, the second one first . . . '*Operation entirely successful*' . . . that was plain enough, surely. It meant that Linda was perfectly all right . . .

How annoying one's mind can be! Why on earth should his mind persist in remembering that silly joke, 'Yes, the operation was successful, but the patient died'. He had always thought that joke in bad taste. Nothing in it, either. People did not die from successful operations. And Jevons' message said '*entirely successful.*'

Nevertheless, for one awful moment, he had thought of Linda as dying—a nightmare. It was gone now. His nerves steadied. He re-read the first telegram. That was Linda . . . he recognized Linda speaking. '*Sorry to have missed you.*' It had been her fault that she had missed him and she was

generous enough to recognize it. ‘*No cause for anxiety.*’ She had been perfectly frank about it. Other women might have liked to make him anxious . . . ‘*Love.*’ It was hardly like Linda to put ‘love’ on a telegram. He never did it himself. But Linda was seldom consistent . . . if there had been any danger at all she would have said so, wouldn’t she? She would have asked him to ‘come at once’, or something feminine like that? Linda was very feminine. Good mothers ought to be. One made allowances—but it was trying at times. Linda, for instance, had a way of shirking serious issues. From the very moment of their engagement he had tried to explain his views to her with small success . . . with no success at all! He had spoken of life and of death and of the vain hope of any personal immortality. He had told her gently that the only immortality vouchsafed to man is the immortality he attains through his children and his children’s children. She must see, then, the tremendous, importance of the child? . . . Linda hadn’t seen it at all.

“But,” he had protested, “Your children *are* you.”

“Not me,” said Linda, shaking a charming unbobbed head, “No one is me but me.”

He had foreborne to correct her English. “But doesn’t the thought thrill you?” he had almost pleaded. “Think—a little bit of yourself to go on living until the race dies out?”

“I’d rather think of every bit of me going on living long after the race dies out,” said Linda. “All of me, just myself, always.”

The old, narrow, personal view! He had never been able to shake her. But there was a great deal of biological explanation which he had not considered suitable to produce. After marriage he could make the facts of life more plain to her and she would see the logic of it as he did.

It wasn’t as if Linda was not fond of children. She adored them. To see her pick one up was proof enough of that. He, himself, in spite of his realization of their sacredness as life carriers, was stiff with children. He could not romp with them as Linda did, nor whisper things into their ears, nor kiss them in the right places.

Once, taking advantage of the new freedom of talk between the sexes—a freedom which nevertheless, he deplored—he had said to her as she lifted a rosy, laughing boy into her arms: “How wonderful to think that some day such a child may be—us.”

Linda had missed the significance of the pronoun altogether. She had blushed, as was perfectly proper, and whispered, “Yes—ours.”

“More than that—us,” he had insisted.

Her face had lifted suddenly in a delicious, Linda-like way. “Or, your Uncle Abner, or my Aunt Jane,” she laughed. “What terrible things ancestors are.”

He had noticed, though, that she kissed the baby very gently as she set it down . . .

The train was slow. It crawled. Mr. Penne felt an idiotic desire to get out and run. He opened his window wider and got a cinder in his eye. When he shut it the stuffiness became unbearable. He was afraid to close his eyes again. Nightmares are nasty things . . . people never looked like—like Linda had looked in that nightmare, do they? Not unless there has been something very, very serious—something much worse than collar-bones or broken arms? . . . Perhaps it was tonsils. Tonsils may happen to anyone. But no. He remembered casually asking Linda about her tonsils one day after reading an article on ‘Tonsils as a source of infection.’ Linda had laughed and opened a round pink mouth and showed a curled pink tongue “Haven’t got any,” she declared, “never had” . . . It couldn’t be tonsils.

What then?

A word jumped at him and he seized it eagerly, ‘Appendicitis’. . . . Why, of course! Appendicitis is very sudden. That was why he hadn’t known that anything was wrong. Perfectly healthy people have appendicitis. One moment they are quite all right and the next—hospital. It is quite simple and has nothing to do with the constitution, really. People who have it get well quickly and are better than ever before. He understood it all now. It quite explained the word ‘immediate’ in the telegram. The one thing about appendicitis is that you have to take it in time. That was why Jevons wouldn’t let Linda wait. And perfectly right of Jevons. A stitch in time—heavens, had he made a pun? Was his brain going . . . ?

The city at last . . . a taxi . . . Mr. Penne gave Linda’s address as he sprang in. “And hurry up!” he said tartly. It was not his custom to tell a driver to hurry. He held that good citizens respected the framed notice in the taxis which requested that no driver be asked to disregard traffic rules. But to-day he did not think about being a good citizen. He wanted to get to the house as soon as possible. He wanted to see Linda on her pillows with her hair spread out—one recovers from appendicitis very quickly. Though he still hoped it might prove a collar bone.

He rang the door bell and fidgeted. There was a delay. And then the door was opened, not by the maid but by Linda's companion-help, Mrs. Piper. Mrs. Piper was dressed for going out. She looked white and worried. Her expression on seeing him was one of pure surprise. Mr. Penne found himself stammering:

"I—I have just heard of Miss Chelmsford's accident," he said. "Is she—hasn't she returned home yet?"

"Home—yet," repeated Miss Piper in a thin, blank voice. "How could she be? I am just going down to the hospital now. Will you come in?"

Her tone implied that she sincerely hoped Mr. Penne would not come in, but he found strength of mind to ignore it. He wasn't going to ask questions about Linda on the steps.

"How did the accident occur?" he asked, "Was Miss Chelmsford driving in traffic?"

"Accident?" Miss Piper had an annoying way of repeating his words. "It wasn't an accident. It was an operation. I thought you knew."

Mr. Penne let the broken collar bone go and parted reluctantly with the fractured arm.

"Appendicitis?" he asked calmly.

The answer seemed a little long in coming. Then, "No," said Miss Piper, adding hurriedly, "I don't know just exactly what they call it. But it's more than that, Mr. Penne. I'm going down to the hospital now."

Mr. Penne took a firm hold on himself.

"I have kept the taxi," he said, "We will go together."

When they were seated in the car he managed the conventional, "How is she?"

"They say she is doing nicely," said Miss Piper, "But one never knows. They always say that. They won't let me see her."

"But you are going to see her now?"

"No, I don't expect to. But I shall see the nurse. Though you can't tell much from nurses either. They say what the doctors tell them."

Evidently Miss Piper had no opinion of doctors, Mr. Penne found his own opinion hardening.

“I can’t understand Jevons,” he declared. “I can’t understand why I had no warning of this. Miss Chelmsford was in perfect health ten days ago.”

“She didn’t show anything—much,” agreed Miss Piper, “but, of course, there were those terrible weak spells and the pain in the back of her head.”

Mr. Penne was conscious of a tightening of the nerves.

“She never spoke,” he said, “of a pain in the back of her head.”

“She couldn’t hide it from *me*,” Miss Piper’s voice held mild triumph. “Dr. Jevons wanted something done months ago. But she wouldn’t hear of it. Then a week Monday, when she was to have met you for lunch and had that fainting spell instead, she was so bad afterwards that I expect she got frightened.”

‘*Sorry to have missed you Monday*’—the words of the night letter flashed before Mr. Penne like living things. He caught his breath quickly. “Frightened?” he repeated slowly. “Do you mean there was danger? That her heart was affected?”

Miss Piper looked prim. “No, it wasn’t her heart. And the danger wasn’t of her going off suddenly. It was—I understood the danger was—was nervous in character.”

“Good Heavens!” The exclamation was shocked from Mr. Penne with violence.

“Oh, she’ll be all right now,” soothed Miss Piper, pleased with the effect she had produced. “She’ll be quite all right. It wasn’t really her brain but the effect of—of other things on it. Pressure on the nerves. You’ll have to ask the doctor.”

They were at the hospital now—a pleasant looking place with smooth lawn, and a few late flowers blooming. On a balcony in the sun was a white bed—high and narrow. Mr. Penne who knew nothing of hospitals seemed to recognize it—where had he seen a bed like that before?

“This is Ward ‘A’,” said Miss Piper, her voiced dropped to a whisper, “We’ll go right in.”

He followed her across a wide, bare entrance hall, down wide, bare corridors, to a swinging door, marked ‘Ward A’, and, beneath, the warning word, ‘Silence’. A smiling nurse met them as they passed in.

“Miss Chelmsford’s nurse? Oh, yes. I’ll tell her. I don’t think anyone is seeing Miss Chelmsford yet. Will you wait here?”

They waited. Mr. Penne held his hat tightly. He had never been able to stand the smell of antiseptics. The nurse came quickly—a pretty, young girl, humming a tune under her breath. Christopher hated her at sight.

“I can’t stay,” she warned them. “But I thought you’d like to know she is doing very nicely. The doctor is with her. He won’t be very long. If you would like to see him perhaps you’ll wait.”

“Did she have a good night?” asked Miss Piper eagerly.

The nurse, who had already turned, paused. “Well—of course, one can’t *expect* much so soon,” she said, smiling. “But you mustn’t worry. Just try not to think about it.”

What would happen, Mr. Penne wondered dully, if he were to wring her white-collared neck? He took a step or two after her retreating figure but was stopped by the pressure of Miss Piper’s hand. “Not that way,” she said, “The waiting room is at this end. It is nice that we can see the doctor. I’ll just ask how she is and then I’ll leave you. There will be things,” vaguely, “that you will wish to know.”

Christopher went dumbly to the waiting room. There certainly were things that he wished to know. He had never felt more utterly without knowledge or understanding. But his impatience to know was tempered by an undefined fear of knowing. Had he been a Celt he would have said that he had a ‘grue’. Something unpleasant was coming to meet him; something which would push and elbow him out of his comfortable, settled grooves; something for which he, to whom life had been so nicely tempered, was all unprepared. There was no time to think, to adjust or even to feel, for the doctor was already coming along the passage.

Dr. Jevons was not as cheerful as the nurse had been. He appeared pre-occupied. The words with which he reassured Miss Piper were soothing but indefinite. She might be able to see the patient to-morrow. He would let her know . . . the earliest possible moment . . . at present, absolute quiet . . . most essential.

Miss Piper glided out. Dr. Jevons looked at his watch. Mr. Penne felt that it was now or never. He must assert himself.

“I am very much surprised at this, doctor,” he said, “I had no idea that Miss Chelmsford was in anything but the best of health. You know, I suppose, that we are to be married shortly. As Miss Chelmsford has no near relatives I think that under the circumstances—” he paused, uncertain how to voice his protest. But the doctor took him up briskly enough.

“You feel you would like to know why this operation was necessary? Natural, I’m sure. As a matter of fact, since Linda hasn’t told you, I suspect she intended me to do it. Linda and I are old friends, you know. I knew her mother well. Naturally when the poor girl became worried about her health she came to me. That was a year ago. The operation which she has just undergone ought to have been performed then. But she wouldn’t have it. She knew, of course, what it involved. She felt reluctant. One can understand that. No doubt she hoped that under treatment the trouble might improve. The responsibility was hers. I believe in telling my patients the truth and letting them decide themselves.”

“And the truth,” said Mr. Penne, with dry mouth, “was—”

“Er—I’ll explain it as well as I can,” said the doctor. He did so. Carefully, sympathetically, and with as few technicalities as possible he explained to Linda’s fiance what had been done and why—a serious operation—but one attended nowadays with remarkable success . . . in this case, certainly. Linda, who had been surely sinking into the miseries of nervous invalidism, perhaps worse, would presently be restored to health . . . able to enjoy life once more—with care—It meant, of course, that she would be childless . . . a grief, no doubt . . . Linda was very fond of children. Still, many women bear no children and get along very well . . . in any case, better no children than children born under a handicap. He had explained this to Linda. It was this, he considered, that had decided her. A very sweet, unselfish woman. He, Christopher Penne, was to be congratulated on having won such a woman. “And if you will permit a word of advice from a friend,” finished the doctor warmly, “I would say that, when you have been married for a bit, better encourage her to adopt a child, two children—goodness knows, there are enough of them! You’ll find she’s the type who won’t be quite happy without something small to fuss over.”

Mr. Penne found himself shaking hands and saying “Thank you” . . . was anything more necessary? He didn’t know. But perhaps the doctor felt a lack, for he paused at the door and half-turning said:

“Better not see her to-day, I think. She doesn’t know you’re here . . . won’t be expecting you . . . See her to-morrow if you—if you feel you’ve got over the shock. Mustn’t see you depressed or—or anything like that . . . cheerfulness . . . very essential, you understand?”

Mr. Penne said that he understood. He tried to let his voice imply that he would be very cheerful, to-morrow. Was the doctor quite sure, quite sure that—that—

“That she will recover?” finished Dr. Jevons, kindly. “Yes, I am quite sure, humanly speaking. Unless, as is unlikely, there should be unexpected complications. What she needs now, is rest, happiness, peace of mind—mustn’t be upset, of course—very essential.”

When the doctor had gone Mr. Penne continued to sit in the waiting room. He forgot it was a waiting room until an inquisitive nurse looked in and said, brightly; “Can I help you?”

“I am just leaving,” said Mr. Penne. And upon that he left. There appeared no particular place to go, but a taxi seemed the nearest thing. There are always taxi stands near hospitals. It was necessary, really imperative, that he do a little quiet thinking. But to his annoyance he found that he couldn’t think, quietly or otherwise. That is, he couldn’t think about the proper things. He caught himself thinking about all kinds of absurd nothings—detached recollections of the journey down, the strange bird transfixed upon Miss Piper’s hat, the queer feeling of Linda’s hall without Linda in it, the peculiar taste of air in hospitals, the pompous assurance of Dr. Jevons’ manner—yes, pompous was not too strong a word—the criminal callousness of a hospital which employed young nurses with bobbed hair . . .

“Stop it!” Mr. Penne brought himself up with a severe mental wrench. “It’s Linda you have to think about . . . *Linda*.”

But Linda slipped through his mind like a slim ghost and was gone. He thought instead how red the taxi-man’s ears were and wondered how people could allow a barber to shave their necks—horrible! He thought that if he drove much farther he would have a nice bill to pay. He wondered where on earth all the people on the streets were going and then suddenly he remembered that he hadn’t had anything to eat for ages.

At the first decently respectable restaurant he saw he stopped the taxi. It wasn’t the kind of place he usually patronized. But it was very clean. The tables were white with white iron legs. The walls were white. The place looked like—good heavens! it looked like a hospital! He turned in a panic and hastened out. Farther down the street there was another eating place. It did not look quite so clean as the first. But, for once, Mr. Penne did not mind. In this place there were tablecloths on the tables and an occasional coffee stain. The girls who waited were not dressed in white. He sat down in the first vacant chair and not until he was seated did he notice that the opposite chair was occupied . . . annoying . . . it might look pointed to move

. . . the man was reading a magazine anyway. Mr. Penne ordered coffee and rolls.

After he had eaten, perhaps, he would be able to think about Linda . . . and about . . . other things . . . quietly—and clearly—face the situation . . . compose his mind . . . what an odd place to take coffee and rolls. Quite bohemian . . . man across the room eating with his knife . . . girl in corner drinking out of . . .

“And they expect us to believe trash like *that!*”

Mr. Penne started violently at the sound of the over-loud voice. It belonged to the man reading the magazine and ‘that’ referred evidently to the magazine he had been reading.

“Do they?” asked Mr. Penne, weakly.

“I tell you,” said the man, “The day’s past when they could put it over. And the preachers that preach it has got to go.”

“Where?” asked Mr. Penne. The way the man banged on the table confused him. “I gather that you are an anti-cleric,” he added politely.

“I’m an anti-anything that ain’t common sense,” said the man. His eyes were red-rimmed and pugnacious, and the finger which he pointed at the magazine was distinctly uncared for.

“Look at that, now!” he invited, “two bloomin’ pages of slush on ‘The Individual Soul’. Don’t they think we got any intelligence? Individual soul be damned!”

“But you can’t, if there isn’t any,” said Mr. Penne, reasonably. “And that, apparently, is your contention.” He didn’t like strong language but he tried to be broadminded about it. Also he was willing to talk to anyone if thereby he might postpone his own little time of quiet thinking. Odd, too, that he should have run against a man who didn’t believe in souls.

The red-eyed one shrugged. “Small town stuff,” he declared. “Can’t see farther than their own nose. Can’t get past the Big I. Ever read Ben Holt’s book ‘What Next?’ . . . Well, you oughta . . . great book! Shows us we gotta pin to something bigger than that.”

“Such as . . .?” suggested Mr. Penne, buttering a roll.

The man made a sweeping gesture. “How about a Race Soul,” he demanded, threateningly.

“Quite,” said Mr. Penne.

The man looked disappointed. “Thought of that, have you?” he said, “Well, it gives a man something to chew on anyway. Too big for most folks though. Blind—that’s what most folks are. All they gotta do is to look around. Take nature. Not much fussing about the individual there—eh? But they won’t look. Grab on to a little soul of their own and won’t let go. Even death can’t shake ’em . . . immortality . . . they can’t get hold of anything bigger. You’d think they’d see there’s only one thing that goes on . . . life . . . man dies . . . mankind lives . . . life . . . that’s all.”

“Um,” said Mr. Penne. “Why not say it plainer? We live on only in our children . . . is that it?” It was really amazing, he reflected, that he should sit at a stained table and listen to a man with red eyes expound his own special gospel—astonishing.

“Sure—that’s it,” agreed the man.

“Have you got any?” asked Mr. Penne.

“Any what?” asked the man.

“Any children?”

The man’s eyes grew redder, if that were possible.

“What the hell does it matter whether I have or not?”

“That’s it,” said Mr. Penne. “That’s what I have been trying to think about, whether it matters or not. The logic is plain . . . you drop out, that’s all.”

“Me?” said the man in a surprised voice. He looked so absurdly astonished that Mr. Penne almost smiled.

“Odd idea, isn’t it?” he added, buttering his second roll.

The man picked up his magazine, and hurriedly consulted his watch. “Must be getting along now,” he said. “Pleased to have met yuh.” The surprised look persisted as he walked away.

“I believe he actually had never thought about it,” mused Mr. Penne. He sighed. The necessity for thinking about it himself loomed nearer. He could not side-step much longer. Life had changed its face since the morning. He must become familiar with its new aspect . . . pin his mind down . . . Linda . . . but again Linda slipped away before he could capture her . . . he found himself thinking how healthy the waitress looked . . . and how uninteresting . . . what absurd vanity enabled her to slip into that corner and there smilingly daub her thick nose with powder? Why were parents

permitted to bring small children into restaurants? . . . tiresome noisy little things! . . . it was quite evident he couldn't think here. Better get along to his hotel . . . Jevons might want to call him up.

The idea of a possible call from Jevons brought him abruptly to his feet. He felt suddenly in a hurry . . . breathless . . . Jevons might want him to see Linda. He tried to recall the vision of her on the pillows with her hair spread out. But it eluded him. He saw instead the scene in his nightmare . . . and recognized, with an abominable start, the high, narrow bed . . . he had seen a bed like that only a few hours ago . . . The recognition frightened him. It seemed to lend the dream reality. What if—but, no! He resolutely closed his mind.

At his hotel the clerk, to whom he was familiar, greeted him with: "Thought you might be dropping along, Mr. Penne. Telephone call for you not ten minutes ago. Party seemed in a hurry. Left no message."

"Do you know who called?"

"Party didn't give any name, Mr. Penne. Your usual room?"

With nerves painfully tightened, Mr. Penne made his way to a vacant phone booth. It must have been Jevons who had called. Why? With some delay he got through to the doctor's office. But only the office nurse answered. Dr. Jevons was not in at present . . . no, she didn't know just when . . . no, she couldn't locate him at the moment . . . perhaps if he would ring again in an hour . . .

An hour!

Mr. Penne went up to his room. It was quiet enough there—the dreary, impersonal quiet of the hotel bedroom. The news of the telephone call had startled him out of his dazed state. The call might mean that Jevons had changed his mind and that he might see Linda before to-morrow—at once, perhaps. And, like a swimmer rising from a deep dive in a troubled sea, coherent thought pushed upward. Fairly upon the surface once more it seized upon the one great essential and held it. He must prepare himself to see Linda. Linda's peace must not be disturbed.

His own disturbance, profound, unplumbed as yet, must not appear. It must be battened down, hidden, smothered. He did not dare to look at it himself. It was always very hard to hide anything from Linda. Linda's gift of seeing hidden things was uncanny. What if she should look right in and see

the dark disturbance in its secret place? He could lie, of course. But would she believe the lie?

No. Better not lie. Better to ignore the secret place altogether. Better take everything for granted. His mind began feverishly to construct a possible conversation—on a cheerful note . . . Well, well, what did she mean by getting herself laid up like this? . . . never mind, everything was all over now . . . and the doctor so pleased . . . all that she, Linda, had to do now was to get well . . . and quickly, please, or they'd lose the best month for their honeymoon . . . how long, nurse? A few weeks, eh? . . . Well, after all, a few weeks—just what she needed to get a thorough rest. They could make up for it when she was strong again . . .

If he could keep to the light note everything might be well. But why in the devil didn't Jevons 'phone? What had he meant by leaving no message? . . . very casual conduct . . . and why wasn't he in his office? For a doctor to run around just anywhere, leaving no means of locating him, was almost criminal . . . why, Linda might be worse and at the mercy of that bob-haired child they called a nurse!

Hurrying to the 'phone he demanded Central and called up the hospital. The voice that answered was very cool and far away . . . Miss Chelmsford? . . . wait a moment . . . did he know the ward? . . . Oh, ward 'A'? . . . hold the 'phone, please . . . Was it a Miss L. Chelmsford? . . . wait a moment. Hello? is this the party enquiring for Miss Chelmsford? . . . latest report doing very nicely . . .

They hadn't inquired! He knew they hadn't inquired! He felt it . . . 'doing very nicely'—a formula, nothing more—Linda might be worse . . . dying . . . dead . . .

Linda, dead?

He caught sight of his face in the dressing-table mirror and saw upon it the same look of absurd astonishment which he had seen upon the face of the man in the restaurant. And properly so. Linda *couldn't* be dead. Thought refused to envisage Linda dead. Nonsense! He knew with basic certainty that, while this thing he called his thought lived, Linda was immortal.

What then was death? If Linda were immortal in his thought was she immortal, too, in the thought of Jevons, in the thought of all those others who loved her? Was she immortal in her own thought? . . . in the thought of God?

The idea had a vastness in which he lost himself. He tried to pick his way back to trodden ground—to grasp again his familiar idea of immortality—Linda, himself, living on in their children . . . the germ of life in its endless procession down the ages. But he could not do it—the accustomed words were a shell, empty of meaning. He could see the children as plainly as ever. But none of them were Linda—none himself. They were just children . . . stranger . . . passing on . . . passing out of sight. Linda and he remained.

But where was Linda?

A great desire to find her, to be with her, for a moment even, anywhere, swept over Christopher Penne. The thought of himself apart from her became suddenly horrible. He loathed himself. What if, while he had been wandering the city streets or sitting in this hotel bedroom, waiting, Linda had gone away somewhere without him? Without even telling him where she went? . . . *Linda!*

It was a distracted looking Mr. Penne who blundered into Ward ‘A’ of the Strathclair Hospital a short half hour later. A passing nurse paused to question him, although it wasn’t her business and she was in a hurry.

“Can I help you?—”

“I want to see Miss Chelmsford,” said Mr. Penne, “I want to see her now. I can’t wait until the morning. I won’t.”

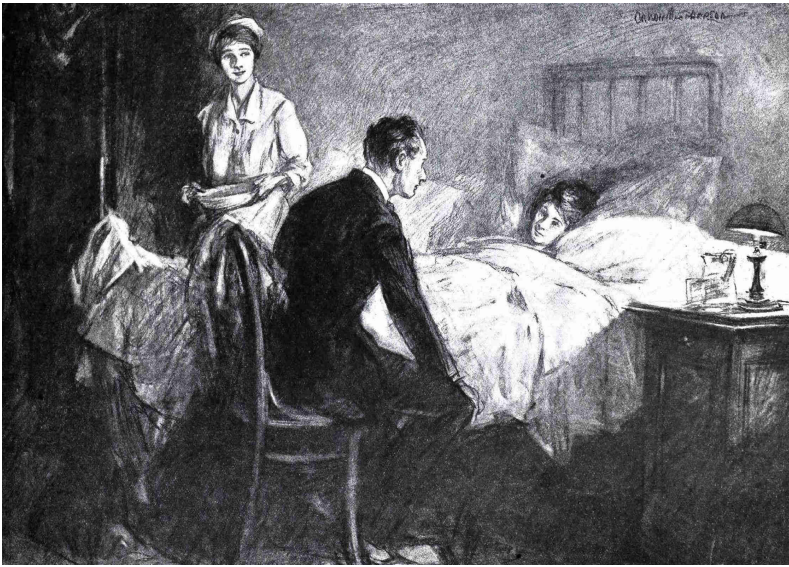
The nurse made round eyes. “I’ll get Miss Chelmsford’s ‘special’ ”—she began. But Mr. Penne paid no attention. He simply followed the nurse down the corridor and when she opened a door he went in . . .

The high, narrow bed . . . the flat pillow . . . the face with tight-closed eyes . . . Linda.

Someone rose from a chair somewhere and blotted out the picture.

“Ah,” said the ‘special’ cheerfully. “Then the doctor did get you? He thought perhaps that, after all, she would sleep better—”

Mr. Penne had pushed passed her. The eyes in the face on the pillow had opened . . . Linda!



A very weak voice: “Kit!—oh, my dear!” No words at all from Mr. Penne.

A very weak voice in Mr. Penne’s ear: “Kit!—oh, my dear!”

No words at all from Mr. Penne. Only a great, silent gladness.

“Let me look in your eyes,” said the voice. Mr. Penne let her look. There was no hidden place there . . . no darkness . . . she could look anywhere . . .

“I was afraid,” whispered the voice which was like the ghost of Linda’s voice.

“So was I,” Mr. Penne whispered back. He shivered. There was a silence, and then:

“Did they tell you, Kit? No babies, ever?”

“Yes,” said Mr. Penne.

“Just me?”

“You!” said Mr. Penne.

“But,” there was astonishment in the whisper now, and a thread, just a thread, of Linda’s laughter, “don’t you mind, Kit? Don’t you want us to be im-immortal?”

“We are,” said Mr. Penne.

There was a long sigh like the soft breaking of a long strain.

“I fear you are tiring the patient, sir,” said the ‘special’, firmly.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

Illustrations have been relocated due to using a non-page layout.

A cover was created for this eBook which is placed in the public domain.

[The end of *Mr. Penne Becomes Immortal* by Isabel Ecclestone Mackay]