

**THE DOCTOR'S
FAMILY**

**BY
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Chronicles of Carlingford

THE DOCTOR'S FAMILY

CHAPTER I.

Young Dr Rider lived in the new quarter of Carlingford: had he aimed at a reputation in society, he could not possibly have done a more foolish thing; but such was not his leading motive. The young man, being but young, aimed at a practice. He was not particular in the mean time as to the streets in which his patients dwelt. A new house, gazing with all its windows over a brick-field, was as interesting to the young surgeon as if it had been one of those exclusive houses in Grange Lane, where the aristocracy of Carlingford lived retired within their garden walls. His own establishment, though sufficiently comfortable, was of a kind utterly to shock the feelings of the refined community: a corner house, with a surgery round the corner, throwing the gleam of its red lamp over all that chaotic district of half-formed streets and full-developed brick-fields, with its night-bell prominent, and young Rider's name on a staring brass plate, with mysterious initials after it. M.R.C.S. the unhappy young man had been seduced to put after his name upon that brass plate, though he was really Dr Rider, a physician, if not an experienced one. Friends had advised him that in such districts people were afraid of physicians, associating only with dread adumbrations of a guinea a visit that miscomprehended name; so, with a pang, the young surgeon had put his degree in his pocket, and put up with the inferior distinction. Of course, Dr Marjoribanks had all the patronage of Grange Lane. The great people were infatuated about that snuffy old Scotchman—a man behind his day, who had rusted and grown old among the soft diseases of Carlingford, where sharp practice was so seldom necessary; and no opening appeared for young Rider

except in the new district, in the smug corner house, with the surgery and the red lamp, and M.R.C.S. on a brass plate on his door.

If you can imagine that the young man bowed his spirit to this without a struggle, you do the poor young fellow injustice. He had been hard enough put to it at divers periods of his life. Ambition had not been possible for him either in one shape or another. Some people said he had a vulgar mind when he subsided into that house; other people declared him a shabby fellow when he found out, after the hardest night's thought he ever went through in his life, that he durst not ask Bessie Christian to marry him. You don't suppose that he did not know in his secret heart, and feel tingling through every vein, those words which nobody ever said to his face? But he could not help it. He could only make an indignant gulp of his resentment and shame, which were shame and resentment at himself for wanting the courage to dare everything, as well as at other people for finding him out, and go on with his work as he best could. He was not a hero nor a martyr; men made of that stuff have large compensations. He was an ordinary individual, with no sublimity in him, and no compensation to speak of for his sufferings—no consciousness of lofty right-doing, or of a course of action superior to the world.

Perhaps you would prefer to go up-stairs and see for yourself what was the skeleton in Edward Rider's cupboard, rather than have it described to you. His drag came to the door an hour ago, and he went off with Care sitting behind him, and a certain angry pang aching in his heart, which perhaps Bessie Christian's wedding-veil, seen far off in church yesterday, might have something to do with. His looks were rather black as he twitched the reins out of his little groom's hands, and went off at a startling

pace, which was almost the only consolation the young fellow had. Now that he is certainly gone, and the coast clear, we may go upstairs. It is true he all but kicked the curate down for taking a similar liberty, but we who are less visible may venture while he is away.

This skeleton is not in a cupboard. It is in an up-stairs room, comfortable enough, but heated, close, unwholesome—a place from which, even when the window is open, the fresh air seems shut out. There is no fresh air nor current of life in this stifling place. There is a fire, though it is not cold—a sofa near the fire—a sickening heavy smell of abiding tobacco—not light whiffs of smoke, such as accompany a man's labours, but a dead pall of idle heavy vapour; and in the midst of all a man stretched lazily on the sofa, with his pipe laid on the table beside him, and a book in his soft, boneless, nerveless hands. A large man, interpenetrated with smoke and idleness and a certain dreary sodden dissipation, heated yet unexcited, reading a novel he has read half-a-dozen times before. He turns his bemused eyes to the door when his invisible visitors enter. He fancies he hears some one coming, but will not take the trouble to rise and see who is there—so, instead of that exertion, he takes up his pipe, knocks the ashes out of it upon his book, fills it with coarse tobacco, and stretches his long arm over the shoulder of the sofa for a light. His feet are in slippers, his person clothed in a greasy old coat, his linen soiled and untidy. That is the skeleton in young Rider's house.

The servants, you may be sure, knew all about this unwelcome visitor. They went with bottles and jugs secretly to bring him what he wanted; they went to the circulating library for him; they let him in when he had been out in the twilight all shabby and slovenly. They would not be human if they did not talk about him. They say

he is very good-natured, poor gentleman—always has a pleasant word—is nobody's enemy but his own; and to see how "the doctor do look at him, and he his own brother as was brought up with him," is dreadful, to be sure.

All this young Rider takes silently, never saying a word about it to any human creature. He seems to know by intuition what all these people say of him, as he drives about furiously in his drag from patient to patient; and wherever he goes, as plain, nay, far more distinctly than the actual prospect before him, he sees that sofa, that dusty slow-burning fire—that pipe, with the little heap of ashes knocked out of it upon the table—that wasted ruined life chafing him to desperation with its dismal content. It is very true that it would have been sadly imprudent of the young man to go to the little house in Grove Street a year ago, and tell Bessie Christian he was very fond of her, and that somehow for her love he would manage to provide for those old people whom that cheerful little woman toiled to maintain. It was a thing not to be done in any way you could contemplate it; and with a heartache the poor young doctor had turned his horse's head away from Grove Street, and left Bessie to toil on in her poverty. Bessie had escaped all that nowadays; but who could have forewarned the poor doctor that his elder brother, once the hope of the family—that clever Fred, whom all the others had been postponed to—he who with his evil reputation had driven poor Edward out of his first practice, and sent him to begin life a second time at Carlingford—was to drop listlessly in again, and lay a harder burden than a harmless old father-in-law upon the young man's hands—a burden which no grateful Bessie shared and sweetened? No wonder black Care sat at the young doctor's back as he drove at that dangerous pace through the new, encumbered streets. He might have broken his neck over

those heaps of brick and mortar, and it is doubtful whether he would have greatly cared.

When Dr Rider went home that night, the first sight he saw when he pulled up at his own door was his brother's large indolent shabby figure prowling up the street. In the temper he was then in, this was not likely to soothe him. It was not a much-frequented street, but the young doctor knew instinctively that his visitor had been away in the heart of the town at the booksellers' shops buying cheap novels, and ordering them magnificently to be sent to Dr Rider's; and could guess the curious questions and large answers which had followed. He sprang to the ground with a painful suppressed indignation, intensified by many mingled feelings, and waited the arrival of the maudlin wanderer. Ah me! one might have had some consolation in the burden freely undertaken for love's sake, and by love's self shared and lightened: but this load of disgrace and ruin which nobody could take part of—which it was misery so much as to think that anybody knew of—the doctor's fraternal sentiments, blunted by absence and injury, were not strong enough to bear that weight.

"So, Fred, you have been out," said Dr Rider, moodily, as he stood aside on his own threshold to let his brother pass in—not with the courtesy of a host, but the precaution of a jailer, to see him safe before he himself entered and closed the door.

"Yes, you can't expect a man to sit in the house for ever," said the prodigal, stumbling in to his brother's favourite sitting-room, where everything was tidy and comfortable for the brief leisure of the hard-working man. The man who did no work threw himself heavily into the doctor's easy-chair, and rolled his bemused eyes round upon his brother's household gods. Those book-shelves with

a bust at either corner, those red curtains drawn across the window, those prints on the walls—all once so pleasant to the doctor's eyes—took a certain air of squalor and wretchedness to-night which sickened him to look at. The lamp flared wildly with an untrimmed wick, or at least Dr Rider thought so; and threw a hideous profile of the intruder upon the wall behind him. The hearth was cold, with that chill, of sentiment rather than reality, naturally belonging to a summer night. Instead of a familiar place where rest and tranquillity awaited him, that room, the only vision of home which the poor young fellow possessed, hardened into four walls, and so many chairs and tables, in the doctor's troubled eyes.

But it bore a different aspect in the eyes of his maudlin brother. Looking round with those bewildered orbs, all this appeared luxury to the wanderer. Mentally he appraised the prints over the mantelshelf, and reckoned how much of *his* luxuries might be purchased out of them. That was all so much money wasted by the Cræsus before him. What a mint of money the fellow must be making; and grudged a little comfort to his brother, his elder brother, the cleverest of the family! The dull exasperation of selfishness woke in the mind of the self-ruined man!

"You're snug enough here," he exclaimed, "though you shut me in up-stairs to burrow out of sight. By Jove! as if I were not good enough to face your Carlingford patients. I've had a better practice in my day than ever you'll see, my fine fellow, with your beggarly M.R.C.S. And you'd have me shut myself up in my garret into the bargain! You're ashamed of me, forsooth! You can go spending money on that rubbish there, and can't pay a tailor's bill for your elder brother; and as for introducing me in this wretched hole of a

place, and letting me pick up a little money for myself—I, a man with twice the experience in the profession that you have——"

"Fred, stop that," cried the doctor—"I've had about enough. Look here—I can't deny you shelter and what you call necessaries, because you're my brother; but I won't submit to be ruined a second time by any man. If I am ever to do any good in this world—and whether I do any good or not," he added fiercely, "I'll not have my good name tarnished and my work interfered with *again*. I don't care two straws for my life. It's hard enough—as hard as a treadmill, and never a drop of consolation in the cup; though I might have had that if I had been anything but a fool. But look here, I do care for my practice—I won't have you put your confounded spoke in my wheel again. Keep on in your own way; smoke and drink and dream if you will; but I'll stand no interference with my work—and that I tell you once for all."

This speech was uttered with great vehemence, the speaker walking up and down the room all the while. The bitterness of ingratitude and malice had entered into the young man's soul. All the wrongs which the clever elder brother, to whose claims everybody else was subordinated, had done to his family, rose upon the recollection of the younger; all the still bitterer sting of that injury which had been personal to himself; all the burden and peril of this present undesired visit, the discontent, the threats, the evident power of doing evil, woke the temper and spirit of the young doctor. It was not Fred's fault that his brother had made that mistake in life which he repented so bitterly. Bessie Christian's bridal veil, and white ribbons; her joyful face untouched with any pensive reminiscences; and the dead dulness of that house, into which foot of woman never entered, were not of Fred's doing; but passion is not reasonable. The doctor gave Fred credit

unconsciously for the whole. He walked up and down the room with a whole world of passionate mortified feeling—vexation, almost despair, throbbing within him. He seemed to have made a vast sacrifice for the sake of this brother who scorned him to his face.

"You're hot," said the disreputable figure in Dr Rider's easy-chair, "much hotter than there's any occasion for. Do I envy you your beggarly patients, do you suppose? But, Ned, you never were cut out for the profession—a good shopkeeping business would have been a deal better for you. Hang it! you haven't the notions of a gentleman. You think bread and water is all you're bound to furnish your brother when he is under a cloud. As for society, I never see a soul—not even yourself, though you're no great company. Look here—I am not unreasonable; order in some supper—there's a good fellow—and let's have a comfortable evening together. You're not the man you used to be, Ned. You used to be a fellow of spirit; somebody's jilted you, or something—I don't want to pry into your secrets; but let's have a little comfort for once in a way, and you shall have the whole business about the old colony, and how I came to leave it—the truth, and nothing but the truth."

It was some time before the victim yielded; at last, half to escape the painful ferment of his own thoughts, and half with a natural yearning for some sympathy and companionship, however uncongenial, he fell out of his heat and passion into a more complacent mood. He sat down, watching with a gulp of hardly-restrained disgust that lolling figure in the chair, every gesture of which was the more distasteful for being so familiar, and recalling a hundred preliminary scenes all tending towards this total wreck and shame. Then his mind softened with fraternal instincts—

strange interlacement of loathing and affection. He was tired, hungry, chilled to his heart. The spell of material comfort, even in such company, came upon the young man. They supped together, not much to the advantage of Dr Rider's head, stomach, or temper, on the following morning. The elder told his story of inevitable failure, and strange unexplainable fatality. The younger dropped forth expressions of disappointment and trouble which partly eased his own mind. Thus they spent together the unlovely evening; and perhaps a few such nights would have done as much harm to the young doctor's practice as had he introduced his disreputable brother without more ado into the particular little world of Carlingford.

CHAPTER II.

Next morning Dr Rider rose mightily vexed with himself, as was to be supposed. He was half an hour late for breakfast: he had a headache, his hand shook, and his temper was "awful." Before he was dressed, ominous knocks came to the door; and all feverish and troubled as he was, you may imagine that the prospect of the day's work before him did not improve his feelings, and that self-reproach, direst of tormentors, did not mend the matter. Two ladies were waiting for him, he was told when he went down-stairs—not to say sundry notes and messages in the ordinary way of business—two ladies who had brought two boxes with them, and asked leave to put them in the hall till they could see Dr Rider. The sight of this luggage in his little hall startled the doctor. Patients do not generally carry such things about with them. What did it mean? What could two ladies want with him? The young man felt his face burn with painful anticipations, a little shame, and much impatience. Probably the sister who adored Fred, and never could learn to believe that he was not unfortunate and a victim. This would be a climax to the occupation of his house.

As the poor doctor gloomily approached the door of the room in which he had spent last evening, he heard a little rustle and commotion not quite consistent with his expectations—a hum of voices and soft stir such as youthful womankind only makes. Then a voice entirely strange to him uttered an exclamation. Involuntarily he started and changed his aspect. He did not know the voice, but it was young, sweet, peculiar. The cloud lightened a little upon the doctor's face. Notwithstanding Bessie Christian, he was still young enough to feel a little flutter of curiosity when he

heard such a voice sounding out of his room. Hark! what did she say? It was a profoundly prosaic speech.

"What an intolerable smell of smoke! I shouldn't wonder a bit—indeed, I rather think he must be, or he wouldn't live in a place like this—if he were exactly such another as Fred."

"Poor Fred!" said a plaintive voice, "if we only can learn where he is. Hush, there is a footstep! Ah, it is not my poor fellow's footstep! Nettie, hark!"

"No, indeed! twenty thousand times sharper, and more like a man," said the other, in hurried breathless accents. "Hark! here he is."

The entire bewilderment, the amaze, apprehension, confusion with which Dr Rider entered the room from which this scrap of conversation reached him, is indescribable. A dreadful sense that something was about to happen seized the young man's mind with an indescribable curiosity. He paused an instant to recover himself, and then went boldly and silently into the room which had become mysterious through its new inmates. They both turned round upon him as he entered. Two young women: one who had been sitting at the table, looking faded, plaintive, and anxious, rose up suddenly, and, clasping her hands, as if in entreaty, fixed two bright but sunken eyes upon his face. The other, a younger, lighter figure, all action and haste, interposed between him and her companion. She put up one hand in warning to the petitioner behind her, and one to call the attention of the bewildered stranger before. Evidently the one thing which alarmed this young lady was that somebody would speak before her, and the conduct of the *situation* be taken out of her hands. She was little, very slight, very pretty, but her prettiness

was peculiar. The young doctor, accustomed to the fair Saxon version of beauty given by Bessie Christian, did not at the first glance believe that the wonderful little person before him possessed any; for she was not only slender, but *thin*, dark, eager, impetuous, with blazing black eyes and red lips, and nothing else notable about her. So he thought, gazing fascinated, yet not altogether attracted—scarcely sure that he was not repelled—unable, however, to withdraw his eyes from that hurried, eager little figure. Nothing in the least like her had ever yet appeared before Dr Rider's eyes.

"We want to inquire about your brother," said the little stranger; "we know this was to be his address, and we want to know whether he is living here. His letters were to be sent to your care; but my sister has not heard from him now for a year."

"Never mind that!—never mind telling that, Nettie," cried the other behind her. "Oh, sir! only tell me where my poor Fred is?"

"So she began to fear he was ill," resumed the younger of the two, undauntedly; "though Susan will do nothing but praise him, he has behaved to her very shamefully. Do you happen to know, sir, where he is?"

"Did you say Fred—my brother Fred?" cried the poor young doctor in utter dismay; "and may I ask who it is that expresses so much interest in him?"

There was a momentary pause; the two women exchanged looks. "I told you so," cried the eager little spokeswoman. "He never has let his friends know; he was afraid of that. I told you how it was. This," she continued, with a little tragic air, stretching out her arm to her sister, and facing the doctor—"this is Mrs Frederick Rider,

or rather Mrs Rider, I should say, as he is the eldest of the family! Now will you please to tell us where he is?"

The doctor made no immediate answer. He gazed past the speaker to the faded woman behind, and exclaimed, with a kind of groan, "Fred's wife!"

"Yes, Fred's wife," cried the poor creature, rushing forward to him; "and oh! where is he? I've come thousands of miles to hear. Is he ill? has anything happened to him? Where is Fred?"

"Susan, you are not able to manage this; leave it to me," said her sister, drawing her back peremptorily. "Dr Rider, please to answer us. We know you well enough, though you don't seem ever to have heard of us. It was you that my brother-in-law gave up his business to before he came out to the colony. Oh, we know all about it! To keep him separate from his wife cannot do you any benefit, Dr Edward. Yes, I know your name, and all about it; and I don't mean indeed to suffer my sister to be injured and kept from her husband. I have come all this way with her to take care of her. I mean to stay with her to take care of her. I have not parted with my money, though she gave all hers away; and I mean to see her have her rights."

"Oh, Nettie, Nettie, how you talk!" cried the unfortunate wife. "You keep him from answering me. All this time I cannot hear—where is Fred?"

"Be seated, please," said the doctor, with dreadful civility, "and compose yourselves. Fred is well enough; as well as he ever is. I don't know," added poor Rider, with irrestrainable bitterness, "whether he is quite presentable to ladies; but I presume, madam, if you're his wife, you're acquainted with his habits. Excuse me for

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