

# **THE CURSE OF EVE**

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

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Robert Johnson was an essentially commonplace man, with no feature to distinguish him from a million others. He was pale of face, ordinary in looks, neutral in opinions, thirty years of age, and a married man. By trade he was a gentleman's outfitter in the New North Road, and the competition of business squeezed out of him the little character that was left. In his hope of conciliating customers, he had become cringing and pliable, until working ever in the same routine from day to day, he seemed to have sunk into a soulless machine rather than a man. No great question had ever stirred him. At the end of this snug century, self-contained in his own narrow circle, it seemed impossible that any of the mighty, primitive passions of mankind could ever reach him. Yet birth, and lust, and illness, and death are changeless things, and when one of these harsh facts springs out upon a man at some sudden turn of the path of life, it dashes off for the moment his mask of civilization and gives a glimpse of the stranger and stronger face below.

Johnson's wife was a quiet little woman, with brown hair and gentle ways. His affection for her was the one positive trait in his character. Together they would lay out the shop window every Monday morning, the spotless shirts in their green cardboard boxes below, the neckties above hung in rows over the brass rails, the cheap studs glistening from the white cards at either side, while in the background were the rows of cloth caps and the bank of boxes in which the more valuable hats were screened from the sunlight. She kept the books and sent out the bills. No one but she knew the joys and sorrows which crept into his small life. She had shared his

exultations when the gentleman who was going to India had bought ten dozen shirts and an incredible number of collars, and she had been as stricken as he when, after the goods had gone, the bill was returned from the hotel address with the information that no such person had lodged there. For five years they had worked, building up the business, thrown together all the more closely because their marriage had been a childless one. Now, however, there were signs that a change was at hand, and that speedily. She was unable to come downstairs, and her mother, Mrs. Peyton, came over from Camberwell to nurse her and to welcome her grandchild.

Little qualms of anxiety came over Johnson as his wife's time approached. However, after all, it was a natural process. Other men's wives went through it unharmed, and why should not his? He was himself one of a family of fourteen, and yet his mother was alive and hearty. It was quite the exception for anything to go wrong. And yet in spite of his reasonings the remembrance of his wife's condition was always like a somber background to all his other thoughts.

Doctor Miles of Bridport Place, the best man in the neighborhood, was retained five months in advance, and, as time stole on, many little packages of absurdly small white garments with frill work and ribbons began to arrive among the big consignments of male necessities. And then one evening, as Johnson was ticketing the scarfs in the shop, he heard a bustle upstairs, and Mrs. Peyton came running down to say that Lucy was bad and that she thought the doctor ought to be there without delay.

It was not Robert Johnson's nature to hurry. He was prim and staid and liked to do things in an orderly fashion. It was a quarter of a

mile from the corner of the New North Road where his shop stood to the doctor's house in Bridport Place. There were no cabs in sight so he set off upon foot, leaving the lad to mind the shop. At Bridport Place he was told that the doctor had just gone to Harman Street to attend a man in a fit. Johnson started off for Harman Street, losing a little of his primness as he became more anxious. Two full cabs but no empty ones passed him on the way. At Harman Street he learned that the doctor had gone on to a case of measles; fortunately he had left the address—69 Dunstan Road, at the other side of the Regent's Canal. Robert's primness had vanished now as he thought of the women waiting at home, and he began to run as hard as he could down the Kingsland Road. Some way along he sprang into a cab which stood by the curb and drove to Dunstan Road. The doctor had just left, and Robert Johnson felt inclined to sit down upon the steps in despair.

Fortunately he had not sent the cab away, and he was soon back at Bridport Place. Doctor Miles had not returned yet, but they were expecting him every instant. Johnson waited, drumming his fingers on his knees, in a high, dim-lit room, the air of which was charged with a faint, sickly smell of ether. The furniture was massive, and the books in the shelves were somber, and a squat, black clock ticked mournfully on the mantelpiece. It told him that it was half-past seven, and that he had been gone an hour and a quarter. Whatever would the women think of him! Every time that a distant door slammed he sprang from his chair in a quiver of eagerness. His ears strained to catch the deep notes of the doctor's voice. And then, suddenly, with a gush of joy he heard a quick step outside, and the sharp click of the key in the lock. In an instant he was out in the hall, before the doctor's foot was over the threshold.

“If you please, doctor, I’ve come for you,” he cried; “the wife was taken bad at six o’clock.”

He hardly knew what he expected the doctor to do. Something very energetic, certainly—to seize some drugs, perhaps, and rush excitedly with him through the gaslit streets. Instead of that Doctor Miles threw his umbrella into the rack, jerked off his hat with a somewhat peevish gesture, and pushed Johnson back into the room.

“Let’s see! You *did* engage me, didn’t you?” he asked in no very cordial voice.

“Oh, yes, doctor, last November. Johnson the outfitter, you know, in the New North Road.”

“Yes, yes. It’s a bit overdue,” said the doctor, glancing at a list of names in a note book with a very shiny cover. “Well, how is she?”

“I don’t——”

“Ah, of course, it’s your first. You’ll know more about it next time.”

“Mrs. Peyton said it was time you were there, sir.”

“My dear sir, there can be no very pressing hurry in a first case. We shall have an all-night affair, I fancy. You can’t get an engine to go without coals, Mr. Johnson, and I have had nothing but a light lunch.”

“We could have something cooked for you—something hot and a cup of tea.”

“Thank you, but I fancy my dinner is actually on the table. I can do no good in the earlier stages. Go home and say that you have seen

me and that I am coming, and I will be round immediately afterwards.”

A sort of horror filled Robert Johnson as he gazed at this man who could think about his dinner at such a moment. He had not imagination enough to realize that the experience which seemed so appallingly important to him, was the merest everyday matter of business to the medical nun who could not have lived for a year had he not, amid the rush of work, remembered what was due to his own health. To Johnson he seemed little better than a monster. His thoughts were bitter as he sped back to his shop.

“You’ve taken your time,” said his mother-in-law reproachfully, looking down the stairs as he entered.

“I couldn’t help it!” he gasped. “Is it over?”

“Over! She’s got to be worse, poor dear, before she can be better. Where’s Doctor Miles?”

“He’s coming after he’s had dinner.”

The old woman was about to make some reply, when, from the half-opened door behind, a high, whinnying voice cried out for her. She ran back and closed the door, while Johnson, sick at heart, turned into the shop. There he sent the lad home and busied himself frantically in putting up shutters and turning out boxes. When all was closed and finished he seated himself in the parlor behind the shop. But he could not sit still. He rose incessantly to walk a few paces and then fell back into a chair once more. Suddenly the clatter of china fell upon his ear, and he saw the maid pass the door with a cup on a tray and a smoking teapot.

“Who is that for, Jane?” he asked.

“For the mistress, Mr. Johnson. She says she would fancy it.”

There was immeasurable consolation to him in that homely cup of tea. It wasn't so very bad after all if his wife could think of such things. So lighthearted was he that he asked for a cup also. He had just finished it when the doctor arrived, with a small black leather bag in his hand.

“Well, how is she?” he asked genially.

“Oh, she's very much better,” said Johnson, with enthusiasm.

“Dear me, that's bad!” said the doctor. “Perhaps it will do if I look in on my morning round?”

“No, no,” cried Johnson, clutching at his thick frieze overcoat. “We are so glad that you have come. And, doctor, please come down soon and let me know what you think about it.”

The doctor passed upstairs, his firm, heavy steps resounding through the house. Johnson could hear his boots creaking as he walked about the floor above him, and the sound was a consolation to him. It was crisp and decided, the tread of a man who had plenty of self-confidence. Presently, still straining his ears to catch what was going on, he heard the scraping of a chair as it was drawn along the floor, and a moment later he heard the door fly open and some one come rushing downstairs. Johnson sprang up with his hair bristling, thinking that some dreadful thing had occurred, but it was only his mother-in-law, incoherent with excitement and searching for scissors and some tape. She vanished again and Jane passed up the stairs with a pile of newly aired linen. Then, after an interval of silence, Johnson heard the heavy, creaking tread and the doctor came down into the parlor.

“That’s better,” said he, pausing with his hand upon the door. “You look pale, Mr. Johnson.”

“Oh, no, sir, not at all,” he answered deprecatingly, mopping his brow with his handkerchief.

“There is no immediate cause for alarm,” said Doctor Miles. “The case is not all that we could wish it. Still we will hope for the best.”

“Is there danger, sir?” gasped Johnson.

“Well, there is always danger, of course. It is not altogether a favorable case, but still it might be much worse. I have given her a draught. I saw as I passed that they have been doing a little building opposite to you. It’s an improving quarter. The rents go higher and higher. You have a lease of your own little place, eh?”

“Yes, sir, yes!” cried Johnson, whose ears were straining for every sound from above, and who felt none the less that it was very soothing that the doctor should be able to chat so easily at such a time. “That’s to say, no, sir, I am a yearly tenant.”

“Ah, I should get a lease if I were you. There’s Marshall, the watchmaker, down the street. I attended his wife twice and saw him through the typhoid when they took up the drains in Prince Street. I assure you his landlord sprung his rent nearly forty a year and he had to pay or clear out.”

“Did his wife get through it, doctor?”

“Oh, yes, she did very well. Hullo! Hullo!”

He slanted his ear to the ceiling with a questioning face, and then darted swiftly from the room.



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