A THIEF INDEED

By RICHARD WASHBURN CHILD

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a battle. Prudence had learned to smoke within a few months after her marriage, when nothing more or less in the way of loads to carry mattered. She had not learned to smoke in that restrained and graceful after-dinner custom of women who consider smoking more of a symbol of well-bred sophistication than of vulgarity, but she had learned to smoke hungrily as one who earns only for the stroking of tightened nerves.

"I'm not at all sure I can stop," said Prudence.

"I know, replied Edith. "It will be something of a fight."

"Particularly when I am alone. I've been experimenting with giving it up on my own account. I'll try again."

Prudence went through several weeks of torment to rid herself of the craving, and Edith Orlan felt a keen satisfaction in another victory when it came.

The tension which at first made it impossible for the rescued personality to work steadily at any application of mind, gradually relaxed. Edith had not only assigned to the new Miss Smith secretarial work, but she had introduced her, as she always had introced her, without comment to Dr. Parcross of the W. and S. Endowment Research Laboratory; and Prudence, beginning by statistical work in medicine, occupied with interest and eagerness the field of activity as it was enlarged for her.

She became an indefatigable worker, it appeared. No one could say that the limitations of her education were not a handicap, or that for a long time she found herself free from lapses into reminders of the life she had led. But she climbed; she climbed with a dogged persistence and with a manner of silence. Her expression of opinion was rare; her words were few. Sometimes she laughed; the laugh suggested a moment's relaxation from a long battle within.

"Next to motherhood there is nothing like this," she once said. "I've known neither, of course—not a bit—never imagined it before. And yet something beckons—calls me—away from work."

"What?" asked Edith.

"I don't know what it is," said Prudence. "I suppose it's all the things that make folk no good—the easy way—the thing that makes most people just live and rock along somehow and die without—without steering for some place."

This thrilled Edith; she felt that she had done something when she had taken the helm.

Prue, as Miss Orlan now called her, gave and invited a measure of affection as time went on. Toward Edith she directed a quiet flow of steady gratitude. She set up no opinions of her own; she made her own personality subservient to Edith's. This might have been expected while the girl still carried the remains of her first unpleasant contest with life, while even she herself might notice differently between her and the athletic, well trained, strong personality of Edith set off by a background of affluence, social position, clothes and other superior equipment. But it became more noticeable when she had acquired with that ease with which she acquired, all things, in manner and poise of a girl who had been neither narrowed by her girlhood in the country nor coarsened by an experience with the dregs of the city; when indeed she had become an individual who could equal Edith in refinement of appearance and excel her, perhaps in the research work of the laboratory. It might have been expected that she would assert that strong, active personality which shone from her eyes and was expressed in her gestures. Instead, she kept it suppressed. Though she lived alone, and though she might have drawn to her intimacy, at last, some of the acquaintances she met in the Orlan house, she made her entire life consist of the laboratory and a devotion to Edith which never approached the devotion of an equal for an equal. She remained distinctly an adjunct to Miss Orlan.

Edith, like all human beings, as she herself knew, was susceptible to the attentions of a devotee. Though Prudence never was demonstrative, though she was silent, there was a pleasurable asset in the constancy of her willingness to play a charming second fiddle accompaniment to Edith's existence and to Edith's will. She was a friend, but always a secretary. And this assumption of inferiority gradually induced Edith to believe that she was, in fact, expressing herself through the new and revised and rebound Prudence Smith.

This was the situation when the war came, and with it the disappointment bitter enough to each of the two young women, each in her way. Neither of them had anything to do with the war except indirectly.

Parcross had spent not only two years in laboratory research in the causes and prevention of gangrene wounds and contusions, but from every important hospital in this country and two others he had collected an immense amount of data bearing upon the systematic effect of gangrenous poison. This was the data from which were evoked at last the now famous Parcross preventive treatment.

Parcro's himself was something of a crank upon the undeveloped resources of feminine ability. In his laboratory, K. Uchidashi, the Japanese, and Basil Stelling, who published the remarkable work on the tropical fevers before he was twenty-seven, were his assistants; but the older man had thrown to Edith Orlan all the work done on the Simple Parcross Reaction, and finally to a girl, no less than two years before had slept on a park bench, all the statistical work. He had made no mistake. When he was to go abroad with the army, he called Stelling, who had done most of his work in his own laboratory, and said to him:

"You've got to pick this up where I leave it. The bacteriological side of it is already in your grip, but the body of the data and its interpretation are in the hands of Orlan and Smith."

"Two women!" said Stelling, a little irritated and a little scornful. No doubt he did not realize the importance of these two in his personal future.

"Yes, two women," said Parcross. "I know they are women, and that is about all I know about 'em except one thing."

Dr. Stelling inquired with one of those characteristic raisings of eyebrows which is the only unpleasant trick of his rather handsome, earnest, tropic-tanned face with no boyishness in it except his smile.

"The only thing I know is this," Parcross said. "They will stick like two fiends to any work you'll give 'em; and in this war pressure when every moment counts in this laboratory over two thousand miles away from suffering, dying men at the front, you'll find they'll help you more than men ever helped you in all your life. Furthermore, why kick? They are the two who know the work. You've got to go along with them or the work is held up six months."

Stelling felt that Parcross, who to all appearances made no distinction between men and women not founded on articles of attire—like trousers—had left him a pretty deficient staff.

He called Edith and Prue into the laboratory office, however, and talked to them eye to eye.

"For you and me there'll be no war," he said. "For us there is a gigantic task, but probably no one will ever hear of us. If you've set your hearts on Dr. Parcross giving you a chance to go abroad—"

Edith said: "Then I'm to stay—here!"

The other girl caught her breath and shook with one gasp of relief in her throat—the first disclosure she had made of her desperate desire to go. Perhaps now that the war has gone sliding back into the reflex of history even Prudence cannot realize what her desire to go to France meant to her.

"Yes," said Stelling. "For us the Bronx, for us days, nights and Sundays of plugging routine work speeded up until we're ready to drop.

"I suppose, if you want to, you can keep before you always the thought that you may have a part—a real part—in saving lives in thousand lots. But you'll forget it a good deal of the time, and it will just seem as if the greatest show on earth had come and gone, without a chance to take part or see it. Furthermore, all the work we do may come to nothing, and that thought will snatch away the comfort of the sacrifice. Either one of you may get run down and catch pneumonia and die like a shop girl instead of being bombed in a French hospital. Of course neither of you will ever get even a mention in a medical journal, much less a flap-doodle of a medal pinned on by a king. It's all grind and no glory.

"I'm telling you beforehand. You're necessary to me, but if either of you now or later wants to quit or will want to quit I want to know it now."

Edith said as if speaking for herself and Prudence Smith as one. "I shall have to think about it—"

"I shan't," said Prue.

Miss Orlan looked up in surprise—almost indignantly.

"You mean you'll go abroad?" asked Stelling in a tired voice.

"No, stay here—I'll see it through," said the girl.

"Of course," said Edith.

This once and only this once did Prudence Smith take leadership.

It can not be said that in constancy of purpose she quite equaled Edith Orlan in the year and a half of grinding, nerve wearing labors when every day made the personal knowledge of each girl in the accumulating of data and the application of it more and more an essential part of the success which Stelling, building on the work of Parcross, attained. Edith became as dependable as a machine of steel. Apparently without effort she stood the routine, to Prudence these months came as a test for which her more emotional temperament was not fully prepared. What battles she had with restlessness no one perhaps except Stelling will ever know, and possibly he does not know yet. Once he noticed that the pencils and pens put upon Miss Smith's desk literally were eaten; she sat sometimes and tore off shreds of wood with her even white teeth.

Sometimes after prolonged periods of high pressure when days went by with five or six hours of sleep and the rest of the circle of time filled by unceasing work, Miss Smith would stand with her nails pressed into the palms of her clenched hands staring out of the window as she talked with him, as if her calm voice were a mechanism at its task, while her spirit had gone forth to the vivacities of an adventurous world of more obvious romance than that of three hundred case cards recording the course of gangrenous fevers in the hospitals of Cuba or some other distant land.

The call for endurance, for continuity of will, was a call for material cut from the same piece of human quality that made men in larger groups than theirs stand the trenches. The work done by these three in obscurity promised no relief in the form of final exciting crisis, no fame, and was done with only three personalities to give morale to one another through the undramatic humdrum of intense routine labors.

Edith Orlan learned to draw her inspiration from Stelling. His magnetism, an extraordinary spell which he throws out almost impersonality, engaged her as nothing else had ever engaged her before. The intimacy between them became deep without expression, sympathetic without words, acknowledged without even exchange of glances. The work was under such high pressure, the expenditure of energy was so complete, that neither in the course of a day's labors nor after these days were done was there that surplus of self expression necessary to any exchange or disclosed growth of definite affection. Stelling, to Edith, was a friend—the kind of friend who might develop in a more leisurely period into a lover. Possibly, to Stelling, Edith may have been a co-worker, who in the rest that would follow their labors might become an object of his concentrated affections. Subsequent events, however, showed that there was a difference between them, admirable as both were. Edith assumed that Stelling would come to her in the end and ask her to be his wife; she pledged herself to him silently. Basil Stelling subconsciously recognized the possibilities, but he pledged nothing even to himself.

On one occasion Prudence Smith disclosed to Edith that she had recognized the new, suppressed spark that burned in Edith's heart. Stelling had just left the laboratory, and Edith's eyes, still fixed upon the doorway through which the young stalwart figure had gone, though, tired, were brimming with that impulsive adoration that is sometimes uncovered in a restrained woman's eyes.

"So that is the way you feel about him," said Prudence.

Edith turned upon her resentfully.

"Why do you dare—?"

She stopped, remembering that not twenty-four hours before, she had protested that Prue never had quite opened herself to Edith as one true friend to another.

Prudence smiled patiently and with a little twist of cynicism at the corners of lips that had become beautifully expressive of tenderness and self control; Prudence knew that when Edith had talked of the barriers between them she had spoken of those erected against her and not those which she maintained around her own self.

"I'm sorry," said Miss Smith.

Edith seized Prue's hand. But it was too late. Some kind of gulf had been between the two all along; now it had yawned and widened.

Miss Orlan, after reflection, however, was content. If there were any obligation flowing from one to another of the two women it flowed toward her. She had not attempted in the first instance to make a friend of Prudence; she had attempted to re-make a woman, and she could congratulate herself that she had succeeded. The gulf was there, but the gulf was nothing to deplore.

In January, 1918, the result of the W. and S. Research Laboratory, the Parcross Experiments had already been utilized on the Western front. As Stelling had predicted, it was Parcross and the French Hospital who took the credit for those life-saving principles. Some British medical journal—the only one on the two continents that did so—published the letter sent out by Parcross himself acknowledging the importance of the work done by Stelling and his staff of two obscure women. Before the armistice came, the reason for continuing the work had disappeared. The second step in the Parcross treatment had been uncovered by four great authorities working independently in Edinburgh.

"I'm going to the mountains," said Edith. "I'm tired; I want the pines. Come with me. I feel that strange feeling—that I've wasted a whole life in that laboratory."

"No," said Prudence. "Please don't ask me. I've had just two days of nothing to do, and the sense that I left my life behind when the laboratory was closed. I can't shake it off. I've got to stay in the city and haunt it like a ghost."

Edith went away alone. Before she went Stelling came to the Orlan house for dinner. Prudence was not there. He looked around as he came in, inquiringly, as if he expected to find her at this farewell occasion. Later he realized why she had not been asked, because Edith told him, as she had told no one else, the story of Prue's life and the part that Edith had played in its making.

"Splendid!" said Basil. "But you never told me of this before!"

There was a long silence.

"Shall I see you when you come back?" he said finally.

"If you wish."

"Wish?" he exclaimed. "Of course! We will both be rested then."

Edith no doubt felt her heart leap. It often beat fast while she was away.

Winter had begun to tinge the air with chill before she came back. The old friends of the Orlans who came to call on the first Thursday after her return, totled up the steps in furs, their breath showing in the frosty air. Stelling had promised in an exuberant voice over the telephone that he would come late and stay for a chat with her; and when the others were gone it was discovering that Prudence Smith, who had come too, had not the sense to go.

The young doctor leaned on the mantel looking from one girl to the other, from the dark Edith to the golden Prudence, from the big chill of Miss Orlan to the restrained wild energy of Miss Smith.

"Haven't you two seen each other?" asked Edith.

"No," said Stelling. "I tried to find her. She was always out or wouldn't or wouldn't."

Prudence laughed nervously. "I'm afraid I was a little tired," she said with a feeble excuse. "A little too tired to see any one. It wasn't the work I had done, but all that came before."

"I know," said Stelling, nodding. "All that you left behind."

The disclosure had been made! Edith had told him!

Prudence smiled rather bitterly.

Miss Orlan arose and walked quietly out of the room. She went up the carpeted stair and stood for a long time looking at herself in the mirror, wondering just how much she had betrayed the girl whom she had salvaged. Surely she owed her nothing—no duty to suppress the truth!

She had left the two casual as one does who quite at his ease leaves a room for a few moments but plans to return; and now she could go back with the same poise she had summoned when she left.

After a descent of the broad stairs she walked slowly across the heavy rugs toward the reception room door. She would find a way to suggest that Prudence leave.

She stopped suddenly and stood silent and motionless in the half light of the dusk. The servants had lit no lamps. The house was quite still.

Edith could see Prudence Smith in Stelling's arms. His lips were upon the lips of the girl. His powerful body was in the posture of one who fears lest by some weakness or relaxation a precious thing once taken might escape him.

Edith could hear Prudence say incredulously, "You mean that you want me—want me when you know all that you know?" And she could hear his deeper voice answer, "More than anything else in all the world!"

She turned dizzy, the blood pounding up into her head, into her wide-staring eyes, that now, shocked, were looking into a hopeless emptiness where her life and hopes had been swallowed in gigantic nothingness. With clenched hands and gagging throat she climbed the stairs and stumbled forward into her chamber, in a tumult of grief and fury, she threw herself across the bed.

She neither heard the door below close as Stelling left nor the steps taken by Prudence Smith as she came into Edith's room and switched on the electric current. She only sprang up when this flood of light pounced upon her in her prostration of rage and humiliation.

"You know?" asked Prudence.

"I saw," said Edith with a snarl in her throat. "I heard."

All the years of restraint, of training in self-control, all the cover and crust of manners and customs were gone. With the blazing eyes of an infuriated tigress, and crouched as one who would spring upon the throat of a victim, she faced the other girl.

"Is this the reward?" she asked in a whisper that was more suggestive of violence than any louder tone could be. "Was it for this that I took you from the dirt of the streets and clothed and fed you—nursed you and was good to you—gave you your chance and drove you forward? Was it for this that I held out my hand and lifted you up? Is this your gratitude—you thief!"

"I am no thief," said Prudence. "I played fair. I never told either you or him what was in my heart. I wouldn't see him while you were away. But my life belongs to me and our love is his and mine."

"So you claim all that I have given you!" exclaimed Edith Orlan. "Gratitude. I'll test your gratitude. I call upon you—you who owe everything to me. It is not too late—go away—forever."

Prudence's lips were firm, her chin held high. She shook her head in firm refusal.

"You vipers! I warmed you in my bosom," exclaimed Edith between closed teeth.

Prudence smiled—a smile reminiscent of a wise smile of long ago when Edith had bade her stay.

"You do not speak?"

"You have never seen the truth," said Prudence. "You say that I must be grateful. Is that why you were kind? Expecting a return? You say that I have betrayed your friendship. Did you ever open your heart to me? You say I have turned upon you. But it was you who thought you owned me—that you could chat with some friend about me as if I were your horse, or dog, or cat."

Edith uttered a cry of rage.

"Stop!" commanded Prudence, as if a new authority were here. "Stop, for you are a fool, as almost all the world are fools. You thought that when the fight was won that it was your fight. But it wasn't your fight. It was mine. You were kind, you were wise, but the battle was mine, and the victory was mine. You shall not claim it!"

Edith clutched at her own throat; she had moved slowly backward toward her dressing table. She leaned upon it, feeling with one hand behind her. Her eyes were bloodshot. She panted for breath; all that was primitive and concealed in Edith Orlan had burst its way out.

"Go!" she said evilly. "I never want to see you again."

"Good-by," Prudence said, as one who speaks to close a chapter of life, and turning she walked toward the half opened door. She paused once to look back almost affectionately at her benefactor, then with a sigh she went on.

Edith, holding the rail at the foot of her bed swayed drunkenly, listened to the retreating footsteps. They were gone. Downstairs the servants were moving about, clearing away the tea trays, lighting the evening lamps. Otherwise the house was still.

As the moments went by, with Edith's frightened eyes wandering ober the counterpane of the bed, aimlessly, perhaps, the spirit of old Stulleman Orlan returned to the house and stood at Edith's shoulder. For Edith suddenly remembered that he had left her a message—a sealed message—to be opened when she had looked upon Prudence Smith for the last time.

She opened her jewelry case, and taking from the bottom compartment the envelop, she broke its seal and read the message within.

It said:

"Beloved—daughter of mine—remember always that kindness is a gift and not an investment to be repaid. Remember, too, in your hour of bitterness, that you who have said to me, 'I will make this girl,' have spoken with the folly of the many and the blind. Even the fools see that when the right of men and women to live their own lives is stolen in the name of evil, a crime has been committed. Only the wise can know that each living soul has a right to be the captain of its own ship, and that whoever tries to take that right away, though it be in the name of goodness and of God, and though it be done by a saint, has none the less tried to steal from another all that makes life a profit to the soul of man and, therefore, is a thief indeed."

COMMANDER OF AMERICAN FLEET IS TAR HEELIAN

STATESVILLE, Sept. 29.—It will be of interest to many people in this State and elsewhere to know that Vice-Admiral Andrew T. Long, who is mentioned in the press dispatches as in command of the American fleet in European waters, and who is to be sent to Constantinople is not only a native of North Carolina, but was born in Iredell County. In referring to this interesting fact, the Statesville Daily says: "He is a native of Iredell County but was reared in Catawba County where he was living when he was appointed a cadet to Annapolis by the late Honorable R. F. Armfield, of Statesville, who was a member of Congress 1879-1883. Admiral Long is a brother of former Postmaster J. W. C. Long, of Statesville. The fact that he is in command of American vessels in European waters and is to be sent to Constantinople, presumably in connection with the near eastern situation, is evidence of his standing in naval circles."

Little Children Brighten Homes

EVERY young couple starting out in life has visions of joyful hours spent before the fireside with healthy, happy children; but, alas, how often young women who long for children are denied that happiness because of some functional derangement which may be corrected by proper treatment. Lydia E. Pinkham's Vegetable Compound is just the medicine for these conditions, as the following letters show:

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