DOCTOR RAST

BY
JAMES OPPENHEIM
Author of "Monday Morning and Other Poems," etc.

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Doctor Rast

James Oppenheim

James Oppenheim (1882–1932) reflects a rather notable perspective. This native Minnesotan, born to a family of German Jewish background, came east as a child, studied at Columbia University, and from 1905 to 1907 was employed in New York by the Hebrew Technical School for Girls. That experience informs his first book, Doctor Rast, *the collection of vignettes he first published in 1909. Oppenheim wrote other novels and produced five volumes of poetry. In 1916, together with Waldo Frank, Paul Rosenfeld, and other friends of socialism, he founded an ambitious periodical called* Seven Arts, *which, owing to the pacifist sentiments of its editors and contributors, could not weather the furies of World War I. Oppenheim also deserves to be remembered among the early defenders of Jungian psychoanalysis in the United States.*

It is possible to ascribe genuine distinction to Oppenheim's oeuvre. Louis Untermeyer has said of Doctor Rast *that the book reveals its author's "strength . . . embodied in a social vision, a consciousness that was also conscience, a passion for justice, and a hunger for hidden beauty." The book, as Untermeyer was well aware, testifies in addition to a pervasive—surpassingly Victorian—sentimentality.*[1] *No doubt it is this factor which accounts for the oblivion visited on Oppenheim by post–World War II critics.*

1. Universal Jewish Encyclopedia *(New York, 1948), 8:306.*

Chapter I

It All Began—

It all began on one of those wonderful gray days that make New York a gray city. The pavements are the same color as the leaden skies, and the very people take on a grayish tint. When I emerged from the elevated station at Canal Street and looked east, the red goods displayed in stores, the red brick tenements and the red shawls on the women seemed to fade into the general grayness. Old Grabo at his news-stand looked up dreamily, recognized me, and muttered a salutation. Halfway down the block a street organ was droning out "Mother dear, come bathe my forehead," and I was not surprised to find my friends, the organ-grinders, Old Sinn and Tiffy.

I crossed Seward Playground Park, noting the new public library that was rapidly being erected opposite the Educational Alliance. This new library pleased me greatly. It was only a few doors from Dr. Rast, and I knew what it would mean to him and to Nell.

As I turned into East Broadway, one of the relic horse-cars of New York rumbled by, and looking at it, I realized how little the neighborhood has changed in recent years. The same poverty-stricken antique Old-World crowd moved by; the same shabbiness was everywhere—house and gutter, store and push-cart.

I turned in at the entrance of the familiar old tenement, and pushing one of the bell buttons, stepped into the musty hallway. At once Dr. Rast's door was flung open, and I saw the Doctor himself shadowy in the twilight of his office.

"Well, of all people!" he cried. "In with you!"

I laughed. It was always a mightily good thing to see that man—young, tall, handsome, and overflowing with warmth for his fellows. He made me sit down in the big comfortable chair he reserves for patients, and he himself sat in the revolving chair at his desk. The neat small room had the clean smell of antiseptics and was so cosy and comfortable that I felt myself expanding, relaxing, loosening out as it were.

He offered me the special pipe he keeps reserved for me, and we both lit up and filled the room with the sweet clinging smell of the tobacco.

"Well," he said "how go the stories?"

I sighed heavily.

"They don't go. I've been drained dry, and there's not a story in my head."

"Strange!" he muttered absently, "and you a New Yorker! Man, you can't look at the lighted window of a tenement at night, without seeing the outline of a whole novel—a whole tragedy or comedy. Why the city is simply flooded with material. Every face that goes by is marked up by a whole history. Every day there are greater dramas unfolded right down East Broadway than Shakespeare even got the scent of. I sometimes wish I could write."

Dr. Rast has the philosophic habit; he sees things religiously and socially; he is forever endeavoring to sum up the life about him, to give it meaning, to feel the tendencies of it; and somehow I like it. Possibly this is so because I know that he isn't a theorizer, but one of our social experimentalists—a man who when he grasps what he believes is a truth, at once puts it in action, tests it out in actual living, and abides by the results. He lives in the scientific spirit.

"Morris," I replied, "you may be right—but remember, not all of us are sensitive to the facts about us. But, listen—" I leaned forward, "there is one story I haven't written yet."

"And that?" He looked at me queerly.

"The Doctor Rast story."

"G'wan!" he shouted, with mock anger. "None of that! None of that!—Nell!" He arose, and raised his voice, "Nell!"

From the darkness beyond the inner waiting room, came a sweet clear answer:

"Morris? Do you want me?"

"Come, quick!"

She came right in—exquisite as ever—the olive-tinted face, the large brown eyes, the soft brown hair, the same graceful little woman.

"Oh!" she cried, "I didn't know—"

We shook hands.

"What do you think," roared the Doctor, "Nell, what do you think! The man actually wants to put us in a story of his! That's the way he uses his friends! What do you say to that, Nell?"

Nell laughed.

"It wouldn't be much of a story, I'm afraid—and really, I don't think

you could even sell it! So—don't waste your time!"

I smiled my craftiest.

"It all comes down to this—do you want the facts given, or shall I leave it to my imagination? If you want the facts, you've got to help me. Otherwise I'll write something very romantic, with a Don Quixote Doctor and a princess wife starving in a garret, murder, burglary, hair's-breadth escapes, and a few other things. Which shall it be?"

They looked at each other and burst out laughing. Then Nell sat down on the arm of his chair, and I vowed to myself that the story should be written.

"It's this way," I argued, "you have had some splendid experiences, some unusual adventures in life. You have no right to hoard them up, to greedily enjoy them for yourselves alone. If a man wins a battle he goes down in a biography; and just because you are buried here on the East Side, unknown and unknowable, working alone and obscure—why for that reason alone you ought to be put down in writing—just to show," I added vehemently, "that the common, the everyday, the private hero-life is as great as any other. Honestly, it would do me good to write about you, and maybe it would do some others good to read about you. It's my plain duty to do it—so you've got to help me."

They both looked at me with shining eyes.

"Tush!" murmured the Doctor, "if you lived one day of my life with me, you'd forget all about the hero-life, and get very busy over dirt and dust and people with rheumatism and bad English. Nicht wahr, little Nell?"

"Don't you believe him!" she cried fondly. "If you only knew," she went on fervently, "what this man of mine does! If you only knew! Why, only a couple of years ago I almost persuaded him to give up his work here and go to the country—"

"Shuh! Not a word!" the Doctor put in.

"Why didn't you go?" I asked of Nell.

"Well, you see it was this way—" and despite the Doctor's muttering she unwound a tale that thrilled me.

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I smiled.

"We could call that the Battle," I exclaimed. "It would make a capital beginning for the book."

The Doctor tried to make us believe he was angry, by rapping the table with his fist.

"There, Nell," he roared, "now you've gone and done it!"

A wicked gleam appeared in her eyes; she frivolously kissed the Doctor, and I could see that she had fallen in with my scheme.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, "I could tell you some stories more exciting than that—there was the fight with pneumonia, the story of the boy who had consumption, and the exciting adventures—"

"Nell!" cried the Doctor, putting a hand over her mouth, "are you going to disgrace the family?"

"And the search for the typhoid serum," Nell blurted through his fingers, "and the woman who tried suicide—"

The Doctor leaped up, pulled dramatically at his hair, and stamped up and down the room.

"Take out your note-book," he cried to me, "take it out! Nell, dictate it! Tell every word! Shout it from the housetops! But, really, for a wife to talk that way about her husband—"

He looked at her, and she at me, and suddenly the three of us set the room trembling with our laughter. Then the Doctor spoke seriously:

"There's no material for a novel—really. I guess there isn't in most lives. A novel ought to be one big story, with a beginning, a rise, a climax, a descent, an end—close-knit, all of a piece, dramatic. But look at any ordinary life, and what will you find? Why, only a series of episodes. Some one gets married—much excitement—wedding feast—and then the next morning, the day's work begins again. Years later some one dies. Life goes on again. Understand? Most lives run along the same from day to day, and only once in a great while do things come to a dramatic crisis. And it's so with us—we are just having a series of disconnected experiences, plus washing dishes and curing the grip, and cursing the bill-collectors. So you can't do it, after all!"

He added that "that settled it," and looked much more comfortable. But Nell was still in a wicked mood.

"Does it though," she piped, "does it, Doctor-man? Eh? For my part I think it would be mightily interesting to show up that very fact—that the ordinary life is a series of episodes, and just give those episodes. Strung together they'd make a comfortable sort of book."

The idea seized on me, and I knew it would never let go of me until I had written out the last episode of all.

"Good!" I cried. "I'll write one at a time, and come down and get the material in between. Good!"

And we all laughed again.

It was months, however, before Dr. Rast would let me go ahead. And that's how it all began.

Chapter II

The Battle

Dr. Rast returned home at eleven P.M. He found his wife in his office—the front room—sorting papers at his desk beneath the brilliant blaze of a Welsbach light. She wheeled in the revolving chair to get his kiss.

"Are you tired, Morris?" she asked. Her face was unusually thoughtful.

"Why—anything wrong, Nell?" He dropped wearily into a large, soft armchair.

"Nothing wrong," she said slowly, "except that you *are* tired—" and then she added wistfully, "but are you too tired?"

He smiled.

"Not too tired, little wife. Swing out on me."

She drew her chair nearer his. Her hands were full of papers.

"I've been reckoning all evening," she said, slowly, as he fondled her free hand, "and it's terrible."

"I know," he acknowledged sympathetically. "It *is* awful. I'm a wretch."

"But you really are, Morris," she said, softly touching her lips to his hand. "You've worn my husband out, and worried his wife to pieces, and we are getting poorer every day. Now listen," she went on. "How much rent do we pay?" And then she added in a guilty undertone, "I know it's mean of me to bother you."

He smiled.

"Thirty-five dollars a month. What else?"

"Five dollars a month for gas," she went on, with slow deliberateness; "five dollars for laundry; forty-five dollars for table; twelve dollars for help—how much is that?"

"Guess!" he exclaimed, his eyes twinkling.

"Don't, Morris," she cried, inwardly hurt. "You must think of money to-night. You must."

"Poor little wife!" he exclaimed, remorsefully, "I always put the whole burden on you! How much is it?"

She looked at him gravely.

"It's one hundred and two dollars."

He whistled.

"Think of it," she went on. "And between us we need five dollars a week for little things—that's twenty dollars a month—and three hundred dollars a year for clothes—twenty-five dollars more a month. Altogether," she said very soberly, emphatically, "one hundred and forty-seven dollars a month. And that doesn't count going to theater, and presents to our relatives, and vacation money, and dentist bills, and things for your office, and books, and a hundred other things. We really use about one hundred and eighty dollars a month."

He took out his pipe, filled it and lit it.

"One hundred and eighty dollars, little manager!" he cried. "Well, you're a trump!"

"Now listen," she said, glowing with pride at his words. "Here's what my doctor-man earns." She picked up a bunch of carefully compiled index cards. They were in her handwriting. "Three months back, one hundred and thirty-two dollars and fifty cents; two months back, one hundred and ninety-eight dollars; last month, one hundred and seventeen dollars and fifty cents; this month, one hundred and eighty dollars."

"Pretty good, isn't it?" he smiled cheerfully.

"Wait," she warned him. "That's what you earned—but you didn't get that. Three months back ninety-five dollars were paid in; two months back, exactly one hundred; last month, exactly eighty; this month—so far—twenty-five dollars. But you'll get more, of course."

He puffed silently.

"Well, what have you to say?" she demanded. She seemed greatly troubled.

"H'm! That's pretty bad! How much have we drawn from the bank?"

"Three hundred and sixty-five dollars. In other words, we're running eighty dollars behind each month."

She sat back. They were silent for a full minute.

The world outside and above them—the night and the human beings asleep in it—was intensely silent. Their nickeled alarm-clock throbbed as if it had palpitation of the heart. The white light fell sideways on their faces, making them stand out in vivid relief—they were two very fine faces, the woman's oval-shaped and olive-tinted, with large, dark eyes and soft-rolling hair; the man's strong and dark and determined, his firm lips without moustache, his hair bushy and black.

In the silence, the light seemed to sleep upon them, pervading the room with a weird atmosphere—thick and full of the feel of home. Every motion then was full of meaning—the slight puff of the pipe, the quiver of the hands, the vibration of their breathing. So thickly charged was the air that Morris almost hesitated to whisper.

"Oh, Nell," he said at length, "it is blessed to be with you. I love you so tremendously."

"It's wonderful," she breathed quickly. They caught the meaning in each other's eyes and became steeped in happiness. It was good for

them to sit there, in their home, late at night, and know each other's presence.

"But, Morris," she said at length, smiling, "won't you worry a little? We must—we must! Don't you see it's impossible?"

He tried hard to see.

"Is anything impossible to my little manager?"

She forced a frown.

"Now, no more of that," she said sternly. "Listen, dear. Please listen sensibly. Here's the whole secret of it—you have a perverted sense of duty. What could you ever have done if your father hadn't left you four thousand dollars after he saw you through college and the hospital? Morris, if you quit charity, and set yourself to it, you could earn a decent living."

"Charity?" His eyebrows went up.

"Yes, charity!" she continued with great emphasis. "You had me come down here with you—why? To make money? You know you didn't, dear! You thought you owed a service to your own people, and—and"—she made a grimace—"they seem to think so too. Why, they've been sponging on you."

"Sponging?" He knit his forehead.

"Yes—sponging. Haven't I seen it a thousand times?" She was fully aroused now. "You only charge fifty cents apiece for the office patients, and time and again I've heard some old *schnorrer* (sponger) say, 'Ach, gentlemans, dear gentlemans, Doktor, you would to please wait. *Ich habe kein geld* (I have no money).' "

Her imitation was so lively, with such life-like grimaces and gestures, that he laughed uproariously.

"Do that again!" he commanded.

She seemed a little angry.

"And what do you do?" she continued, ignoring his amusement. "Why, you pat him on the shoulder and say, 'Never mind—I understand!' "

He laughed uncontrolledly.

"You actress!" he mocked.

"Now, Morris, that won't do! The whole neighborhood is fleecing you. And, worst of all, it is wearing us both out—these incessant calls, these bad hours, these money troubles, this overwork—and these vile people."

He stopped smoking; he suddenly felt how tired and worn he was.

"It's true, Nell," he said bitterly. "I'm tired to death—work, work, work—all work and no life."

"That's it!" she exclaimed. "All work and no life! This isn't life, to be on a never-stopping treadmill! It's a deadly grind—it's killing all the good there is in us! What will we be in five years? And is it doing any good? Do you think that you, single-handed, can accomplish anything in this square-mile sore-spot? Why, you don't do anything! A lifetime of work won't do anything! You can't change conditions—or human nature."

His face looked white and dejected.

"I've felt that lately, too," he said slowly. "I've been going through a reaction. Oh, I'm sick—sick—sick of it—the nauseous crowds, the dirty streets, the stinking tenements, the grind. I guess, after all," he added, weighing each word, "if a fellow looks out for his wife, and brings up a family decently, and does his duty toward relatives and friends, and does his work thoroughly, and votes with a clean conscience, he's doing the State a better service than to neglect these and potter away at the infinite, eternal disease."

"Oh, you're right! Thank God you say that!" she said fervently.

"Oh, Nell," he burst out suddenly, "if we could only get away from it all—get out to clear skies and clean meadows—and home—and find peace! Peace! That's what we need! Peace! This clamor and rush and excitement drain a man of his very soul. It is—it is killing us!"

She suddenly looked radiantly happy.

"I wanted you to say that ever since you came home! I knew you felt that way. Now, listen," she went on excitedly. "Just as you left this evening a letter came from Minnie—Minnie Shansky—you know her—she moved up to Hartley, Connecticut, a couple of years ago, and I've written her often. Listen—oh, this is great news!"

She pulled out a letter, and he sat forward as she read it.

"DEAR LITTLE NELL:

"Here's some good news—our old Doctor's dead! Now don't be shocked, little Nell—I mean good news for you! You see he was the only Doctor for miles around, and he made a fortune—or rather a fortune fell into his lap—for all he had to do was to sit at home and wait till people got sick. Then he hitched up his horse and buggy—and later his automobile—and took a pleasant drive. It didn't matter whether he killed people or cured them—he was a Trust. Now

here's a proposition. I guarantee that if you and your handsome husband come out here now—right now—the fields will be yours. Your husband can't help making money. Of course, even if there were competition, he's so darkly handsome that we would all prefer him. But there isn't competition, and there won't be—I'll see to that. So he can step into a fortune. Make him come; do make him come. You are simply stuck in the mud where you are; you can't even imagine what country life means—how glorious, sane, sweet, complete it is! You're bound to be happy here—think of it—ten acres of ground, a dear little cottage, fresh vegetables, delightful woods and brooks, beautiful days, stormy or clear, plenty of books, and lovely neighbors who are never in a hurry and are peaceful and happy. Besides, the Doctor is so highly respected. He's the first man in the county; his word is law.

"Now think the minute you get this—and act quickly. The least delay may spoil all. You must come.

"YOUR LOVING MINNIE."

Morris glowed with a new excitement.

"Oh, that's a tremendous opportunity! That's great! That's my outlet!"

Nell stood up, triumphant.

"And that's why I made my poor tired husband stay up with me until"—she glanced at the alarm clock—"one o'clock! I knew you wouldn't mind!"

He leaped up, and clutched her in his arms, and kissed her fervently.

"Oh, Nell, you're a trump—a brick! You're a great manager! We'll take it—we'll take it! Write her—sit down and write her—tell her we're coming! Oh, everything will be all right! We'll get something out of life yet! Isn't it glorious?"

"Perfectly glorious!" she cried in her full-hearted delight. "Yes, I shall have my husband now, and we'll be young lovers in the wilderness! Oh, if you knew how happy I am!"

And then came the electric bell—shrill, long, insistent—and three times. They broke from each other.

"There—there—listen to that!" Nell cried fiercely. A great anger welled up in her.

Morris uttered a groan, and opened the door. A little wide-eyed boy, in loose, ragged clothing, came in.

"Say," he said in a shrill, frightened tone, "Mrs. Iliowisi's gittin' a kid!"

"I'll be right over," Morris said, somewhat too strongly. "Now lis-

ten, boy. Tell her husband that she's to do exactly as I told her—understand?—exactly!"

"I run all the way," said the boy breathlessly, and was gone.

"Oh—and you're all tired out!" cried Nell angrily. "I can't stand it! There—there's the same old story! And I bet you won't get a cent for it."

He was packing his instruments in his grip.

"It's tough, kid, isn't it?" he muttered. "Drat it!"

He kissed her.

"But, oh, Morris," she said, looking at him, "this will all change! We'll be so happy."

"Yes—yes, indeed! Now go to bed, kid! It's an all-night job! You'll go?"

"To please you, Doctor-man!"

"That's right." He kissed her and she closed the door after him.

He walked very briskly through the keen air. The streets were empty and absolutely silent. He seemed to move through a Deserted City where the footprints of the extinct people still showed in the thin mud on pavement and gutter. A moon glowed coldly overhead, and the stars were faint and far. Most of the windows were tight shut, and very black and very still.

He buttoned up his coat, turned up his collar, and tried to forget how tired he was. This he soon did by reviewing the case of the Iliowisis. They were a very unfortunate family—the husband a semi-idiot, a sweat-shop wreck, unfit for even trivial labor. He was blear-eyed and frail and a-tremble, and the Earth and her people glimmered but dimly and in waterly flashes through his brain. But he had a good heart; he never complained. The oldest child—there were two—was also semi-idiotic. She was thirteen, and was still learning the A-B-C rudiments in the Atypical Class in the Public School—a sweet, good-tempered girl, who loved needlework and her teachers—a sore trial to her mother, who sometimes beat her unmercifully. For if her mother sent her on a simple errand that required the returning of change for a purchase, the poor, half-brained, fat, cherub-faced little girl would come back penniless. And this to utter Poverty was a terror, and beyond endurance. The second child, also a girl, was very young and too small to help. Hence all the burden of the family fell on the fat, stout-hearted mother. She did washing—and undoubtedly continued it, despite incessant ag-

ony, up to the last hour. She was a great, noble Soul, fitted out with weak flesh and bad brain, and the world had unconsciously made a bad job worse by over-weighting her with care and labor and pain. She struggled down at the sea bottom through tons of black ocean, and yet through all the years never once struck her head above the waters—never once got the release, the sun and wind, the glory of vista and scenery, the health of the sea. But she was noble and very great—she rarely cried out, she bore her husband patiently, she washed vigorously, she beat the girl only when the last limit had been passed, she was sober, she endured pain. Her only real joy was Dr. Rast. He was the one human being who was human with her—who encouraged her, who held her up, who sometimes put his hand in his pocket to pay the grocer's bill, who was always to be had when the need came. As he walked along, his eyes clouded. He knew every fact in the case, and, not least, just what he meant to the woman.

And finally he said, though immediately afterwards he hated himself for a sentimentalist:

"These are my helpless little ones."

The tenement was in a dark, blind, miserable street. As he climbed five flights of stairs toward the cries on the top floor, the women on each floor opened doors and bobbed their heads out to watch him.

"Ach, the sweet doctor," he heard several times, but paid no attention.

The atypical child waited for him at the top. She came forward shyly, smiling sweetly, and put her hand in his, and her arm timidly about him.

"Good Doctor," she sighed happily.

She didn't seem to notice the piercing screams from the back room.

He patted her head.

"And my girl's all right?" he asked softly.

"Good," she said.

"There!" He leaned and kissed her, his throat thick, and passed in to the Battle.

At five—with the streets gray, the cold, dull Dawn swirling up from the river, with smells of mixed salt—Dr. Rast walked rapidly home. His face was white, his eyes red. He showed the marks of the struggle, for he trembled as he hurried along. It had been a very great fight—the victory shifting to and fro. Time and again he hurled himself in with all

the strength of his soul, and recoiled, dazed, baffled, half conquered. It seemed at times that the child must surely die, or the woman be crippled for life. The first of these he refused to tolerate—he would not shut a Soul out of life; the last was too terrible to think of—for if the woman were crippled the whole family would at once sink as into quicksands and be among the débris of Society. So he got, as it were, his second wind, and with every nerve alive, his head clear, his hands precise and quick, he fought face to face with the enemy. He had to win—so he did win! He came out of it, as from a swing from star to star down Eternity, as from a furnace, but he came victoriously. Hence he trembled, and was white and feverish, when Nell let him in.

"Oh!" she cried, in a wild fright. "You've been killing yourself."

She helped him to his chair, and he dropped into it heavily. She crowded over him as a mother over a sick child—quick, anxious, stricken.

"Shuh!" he said feebly. "No fuss, Nell. I couldn't stand it! No fuss. Listen," he smiled faintly; "I won!"

And he made her sit down in the revolving chair while he told her the story of the night. As she listened, she thrilled through and through—the color rushed to her cheeks and as suddenly disappeared—she breathed quickly—she held herself taut and tense.

"It was war," she cried at length, "but a new kind—glorious! And you are a great general—you're a great Napoleon! Oh, I'm proud of you, Morris."

"Yes," he smiled sadly; "and I didn't leave a hundred thousand dead on the field—I saved one child's life."

They sat in silence.

"Now won't you take some coffee?" she asked anxiously.

"I suppose I will," he said very weakly, trying to smile again. But he didn't smile; he lay back limp.

She got him to bed then, and he drank the coffee, feebly telling her all the time how he hated "fussing."

Then at last she put her arm under his head.

"So the doctor's not going to the country," she said, very sadly, with tears in her eyes. "Oh, you needn't tell me—I see it all over you. And I know just what you are going to say."

His smile was a radiant one.

"Nell," he said huskily, "you're the wife I want and need. Now

listen. This state of things down here is a great Battle, isn't it? A terrible battle—no battle in history—no Gettysburg or Austerlitz as awful, as fruited with death and mangling and slaughter—no battle ever fought so horrible, just because this is an invisible battle—hidden away—behind walls—in cellars—in garrets—in factories! Isn't that true?"

"Shuh! Don't get so excited," she warned him, kissing him.

"But it's so, little wife—it is so! And I'm a trained soldier—I'm fitted to fight—I know these people—I understand all—and—they love me, they love me!"

"We all love you," she cried fervently, and a tear splashed on him.

"Oh, and I think, Nell, I think"—he paused, and then spoke in a voice of awe—"that maybe God is in this too. Our modern men of God perhaps are the settlement workers, the magazine writers, the doctors. And you see it's so effective—we don't preach to them. We go and do something; take God to them—give them Revelation—by giving them a big let-up—and a let-up means an up-lift—and backing it with love, with service, with—with"—he smiled—"I'm afraid I'm getting churchy—yes, with renunciation."

There was a silence; Nell was crying softly.

"Now listen," he continued. "Here's the Battle—here am I, the trained Fighter—I've been in it, I know it all, I'm needed—now shall I fight, or fly?"

She spoke tremulously through sobs.

"And I—am not I a fighter?"

"Yes, Nell," he said fervently. "I couldn't fight without you. You're the General—you manage things—you do the brain-work—I'm only the fighter."

"Oh, you dear boy!" she cried, flinging her arms about him. "We won't desert."

"That's it," he said at length. "And as for money—well, I'll be stricter after this, for charity's the worst thing on Earth, and only help when it isn't charity. I will, and you'll manage the rest."

"Morris," she cried, with sudden gayety, "weren't we fools last night? Selfish, mean, despicable backwaterers?"

And she kissed him soundly, and they laughed softly.

Chapter X

The East Side

Rarely did Dr. Rast's face look more haggard and white than that noon, when Nell by mere chance found him in the front office. East Broadway outside was in the dusty squalor of the day's glare, and the meanness of man and his streets was laid naked. When Nell in her working apron, her hair toweled up, her arms bare, tripped in, she found the big Doctor doubled up in a chair by the window.

"Morris!" she cried—her voice streaked with alarm—"I didn't hear you come in! What's the matter?"

She rushed to him, knelt on the floor, and seized his hand. They looked like two beautiful children—he, leaning over, his big black head sunlit, his clean-shaven face dark and drawn, his eyes luminous with pain—and she, the wife, glancing up, her whole face trembling.

"Nell—" the man behind that voice was surely struggling—"I'm in hell again."

Her frightened words came in a blurt:

"Morris! Morris! You're not sick? You didn't catch anything? You're not hurt?"

He put an arm about her and drew her up close.

"Nell—forgive me—it's nothing—just my old moods!"

She laughed softly; it was nearly a sob.

"Oh! a mood! Well! A mood! I thought—but never mind, Morris, tell me about your mood!"

"Oh, Nell!" he groaned, "I'm not fit to be a Doctor."

"Tush!" she cried. "You are the only Doctor I ever met—the only real one! The rest are quacks!"

She laughed nervously, and he suddenly raised up his face, and she saw, through tears, that a little sad smile touched the drawn corners of his lips.

"That's the wife talking," he murmured. "The dear wife, the dear, dear little wife!"

"My man!"

He kissed her tenderly; he sat back; he breathed deeply and freely.

"What would I do," he cried, patting her hand, "without my safety-valve!"

"And you won't tell me about the mood?" she asked fondly. "Doctor-man, be there secrets?"

His face went haggard again.

"Nell!" he said fiercely, "a Doctor has no business to have moods. There's that dirty Polinsky goes about sucking the blood from these miserable streets and—it works! No moods, no ideals—he minds his business! And the idiots swarm around his office like hornets. But I—I—"

"Morris! don't!"

"Nell! I'm a damned fool!"

"You are—*now*," she said with a touch of anger. "Morris! stop!"

"Listen!" he cried. "I go around with my fancy faith in men, my rainbow dreams of brotherhood, and how does it hit my job? Does it sharpen my knives or strengthen my medicines? I tell you, if a man comes round with a bankrupt appendix, it's up to me to cut it out, and thunder take his soul, if he has any!"

In spite of herself, she loosened a sharp little laugh. But her voice had anger in it.

"Morris! drop that language!"

"Oh, Nell," he cried miserably, "don't you understand? I go around as if I were soothing syrup for the East Side; I yank people up to my own idiotic pitch. And what's the result?" he cried sharply. "How do I know? It may make things worse than before. And as for me—every other day I get a reaction. Ideals?—bosh!"

She was very angry; her face flushed.

"Morris! I won't hear such language from you! It's an insult to—yourself—yes, and to me! Now you tell me what's the matter!"

He put his head in his hands, and sighed deeply.

"Nell! Nell! Nell! Just look at me. Just see what my work does to me! If my patients could see me now, would they have any more faith in me? A Doctor?" he groaned bitterly. "A weakling! I tell you I fly too high—that's why I fall so hard! Polinsky is right! I ought to be as impersonal as a butcher cutting meat—for it's meat after all!"

Nell suddenly arose.

"You make me tired!" she cried.

She turned and started to leave the room. He leaped up.

"Nell—come here! Come here!"

She faced him, her eyes filled with pity.

"Morris!"

He strode over, and gathered in the aproned body and the toweled head.

"Little wife—forgive me a little bit. I had to pour it out to some one!"

She put her arms about his neck.

"You poor husband!" she cried. "Won't you tell me now? Even if I sit on your lap?"

"Come!" he said.

He sat down again; and she settled herself upon his knees. She laughed softly.

"I'm not too heavy, am I?"

"Never in the world!" he cried.

"Surely?"

"Surely!"

"Then—'fess up!"

He could not help but speak sadly.

"Nell—this morning I met young Dr. Brahm—you know he's a Public School Doctor, and they send him around through the neighborhood; they're taking a report of every family in the district—name, ages, number, hereditary diseases, present health, and so forth. Well—he wanted to know if I wouldn't run through a few houses for him; he's behind in his work. And I was fool enough to do it!"

"That was foolish!" she cried fiercely. "That's the way you always get yourself in trouble! What business had he to ask you, any way? Oh, I suppose you ran yourself to death!"

"Pretty near!" he growled. "I must have climbed miles of stairways—I went through two blocks—two blocks of rats' nests—cellars, attics, and seven-in-a-room sweat-holes! There's not a smell in New York I missed. And it was a bad morning, too."

"Bad? Why, bad?"

"Because the whole East Side is out on an excursion—mothers, babies and girls and boys."

"What excursion?"

"You know—the big Tammany Hall outfit—thousands went all in that rotten old hull of an excursion boat—what's her name?"

"Oh!" she cried, "the 'Old Glory'—the big three-decker."

"Yes—the 'Old Glory,'" he went on. "Well, kid, I struck those two

blocks just in the midst of preparations, and somehow the thing turned me sick. Somehow I never saw all this squalor and misery and nastiness so in the mass—the bulk! I wish you could have been there! The noise—the squabbles— Families were fighting families—mothers were screaming at children—girls and boys were tearing at each other! Bah—" he shuddered—"the East Side is overrun with vermin."

There was a moment's silence; then she stroked his face sympathetically.

"I know," she said slowly and sadly. "I always told you that, Morris, and you never believed me!"

They were silent again, and to both at once hateful became the loud jarring noises of the street—the chatter of some near-by women—the nasty clanging of some old clothes man's bell—the jangling of the horse-car—the rattling of a delivery wagon. The world of noon is the hardest to find good in.

"Oh, Morris," she went on slowly, "it's all crass—squalid—choked with dust!"

He became more dejected than ever.

"Do you see, Nell?" he asked. "Like the word or not, these ideals *are* bosh. Where's the brotherhood of man in *this* world—here—out in that street—in those old tenements—in that Jew-jammed 'Old Glory' tooting up the river? Oh, it's easy enough at night when things are hidden a bit to work up steam and go through it all like a drive of fire; but that's a spree—a spiritual spree. It's just not so. It's a lie! *Here's* the fact!"

"Yes," said Nell bitterly, "these people are—well, I'm sick of it!"

"Oh, you should have seen them!" he cried out. "Brotherhood? God? Souls? A mess of vermin! They haven't a touch of the brother in them—they grub in the mud—they tear each other in the filth, and then I—I—" he mocked himself,—"I—the grand Doctor–go among them with my vision. By heavens, Nell, even if I jammed it down their throats, and they went off into a holy fit, it would only sink them deeper—deep, by God, as I am! I! I!"

The silence that followed, with its harsh outer rind of street and tenement noise, its noonday glare, was as terrible as they had ever endured. Nell felt broken and defeated. She got up wearily and started to trudge to the kitchen. The Doctor arose and went to the window.

The telephone suddenly rang desperately. Nell turned back.

"No, I'll answer it!" cried the Doctor.

He stalked over, and snapped off its endless ringing by picking up the receiver. Nell stood by, watching him listlessly.

"Hello!" he muttered.

"Is this Dr. Rast?"

"Yes."

"This is Downtown Settlement: we need every worker in the District: please take the block east of Grand at Clinton. You have heard of the accident?"

"No! What?"

"Excursion boat burned up on East River: thousand dead. The 'Old Glory.' Good-by."

The Voice in the darkness, the Unseen, was shut off. The Doctor stood as if he were frozen. He felt as if the heart in his breast had exploded. Every blood-drop in his cheek shrank tingling back. He half-turned, choked—

"Nell—the—the 'Old Glory'—"

"What?" she cried in a voice of sudden agony, rushing to him. His face was chalky and knotted.

"Nell—God!—burned up! The 'Old Glory' burned up!"

They stood staring at each other.

"And the people?" she cried shrilly, "the mothers and children—?"

"One thousand dead!"

"Oh, God, it can't be true!" she cried, clutching her heart.

The man in him seemed to faint in horror; but suddenly the Doctor burst through and took hold. His voice rang out passionately.

"Nell! if I send people over, take care of them! Don't worry!"

He snatched hat and grip, and swung back the door.

"Nell, you'll face this?" he cried.

She rushed to him and kissed him.

"Trust me, Morris! Run!"

He bent into the street, turned east and ran. It was Doom's Day. All these trivial facts of human beings and houses and cars, with their painted surfaces, went up into a ghastly dream. He heard the newsboys and newsmen hoarsely shrieking their terrible alarm, as they sowed the city with the Word of Death. Every other syllable was drowned, but the news poured from every corner, each jumbled powerful word falling like a slow crashing sledge hammer.

"Extra — extra! — 'Old Glory' — Flames — Thousand — Dead! — Scenes — Horror —"

He dimly saw people clustering in quick crowds; he heard cries and exclamations of terror, and now and then a wail as of some one stricken. He pushed his way through groups; he tore madly across the open Playground Park through hordes of children. The City, which a moment before had been commonplace, bestial, squalid, now seemed to swim through a space of sublime and terrible tragedy. The Doctor was but playing some part in the last act of a Shakespeare play. And yet how real—how living—he himself, truly there, and tearing, alive, over the hard pavement.

At Grand Street he hauled up a newsboy. His voice did not seem to belong to him. His fingers, as he told out the pennies, were cold and trembling. Then he found that he could hardly hold the sheet steadily.

For a moment he caught phrases—"their charred bodies dropped in the water"—"the screams of the women trampling each other"—"children crushed to death"—"As Old Glory went flaming up the river, one could hear the screaming from the Long Island shore"—"Terrible scene on the river bank; men waded in, and towed in bodies by their hair; whole bank piled with dead children and women"—"Heroism of mothers"—"Scene of holiday joy turned into a charnel-house"—

He threw the paper from him, drunk and stupefied. Where was God? Who had smashed a peaceful city so? Who had made these poor children scream and die in fire? Something was wrong at the heart of things.

And then came strength. The battle was on: he was one of the Captains: they were waiting for him. He dashed frantically by the Grand Street push-carts and turned into Clinton Street. He enterd a strange dark world. Men were sobbing in the street: women were embracing each other: there was a frantic rushing to and fro. He made quick inquiries, and from souls mad he learned that half of the street was away seeking its dead and half was home in agonies of uncertainty. Even at that moment strange children, strange men, strange women, drifted in from the corners. Eyes were still wide with that gaze into bottomless Realities; clothes were in shreds; flesh was scratched and torn. A little boy tottered along, up the middle of the muddy gutter, with one arm burned to the elbow. How he had gotten home was a

wonder. Evidently he had been left aside by the rescuers who were dealing with more palpable horrors. Dr. Rast turned, burst through a crowd of wailing women, and caught up the crying waif. Up the long red row of tenements—under the wash-loaded fire escapes—a fat woman was gazing up and down. She saw the tall Doctor pick up the child. She gave a scream heard by the whole block and rushed down through the people.

"My baby!" she shrieked, as she smothered him up, and madly bore him through a black hall and up the blind broken stairs, while she kissed him and cried over him. The Doctor humbly followed to a scene of unspeakable torture.

And then the great fight began. It lasted for thirty hours. With some fifty other capable workers, Dr. Rast was hurried hither and yon, shuffled back and forth among a hundred human tragedies. The pathos, the agony, the despair, the desolation were too awful to think through. Dr. Rast could only busily work—work—work. But it was not Doctor-work. The physical suffering was small. Most of the badly burned or exposed were in the hospitals. It was largely priest's work, done in disguise. He forced people to eat some supper, to take a swallow of whisky, to get out in the fresh air. He sent men on errands. He drafted in recruits to help him in his work. He said what miserable words he could to souls paralyzed and maimed. Whole families had been wiped out. There only remained their empty rooms, full of the articles of daily use.

There were some incidents that Dr. Rast never forgot. Late that night, as he hurried out of a tenement doorway he almost stumbled over a tall man who sat on the steps. In the blue-white light of the electric street-lamp, he got a vivid picture of this human being. The man was a very skeleton—the wrists mere bones, the legs above the shoes mere hard sticks, the neck naked and wried, the face shrunken in—a thin film of flesh over the death's head—the eyes lifeless and stupid. Dr. Rast noticed curiously the little straggling curling red hairs on his chin, and the yellow egg-spots on the old shreds of clothing hanging scarecrow-wise on the body. The man sat very still.

"Brother," whispered Dr. Rast in Yiddish, one hand on the man's thin hard shoulder, "have you lost any one?"

A thin rasping voice cut the air.

"I was in the massacre at Kishineff—but saved my wife and five

children. We came to this free land."

"And now?" Dr. Rast could scarcely speak. "And now?"

"My wife and five children are dead in this free land. They lived this morning: I kissed them goodby; they were happy to go out and make a holiday. I come home, and they are all dead. I am alone."

"Brother!" cried Dr. Rast, putting an arm about him, "can I do anything?"

"Yes," said the man with a bitterness that seemed to cut to the heart of things, "bring them to life again."

No words, after that, reached this man. The Doctor left him, a living skeleton, staring stupidly into the blue-white radiance of the naked arc-light.

In one little back room he found a young man sobbing on the bed. He pulled him up roughly, and the young man flung his arms about the Doctor's neck.

"Minnie," he sobbed, "my wife—we were married three months—"

And then in the early gray of the morning—up the cold street with its mockeries of lights still lit in the dawn—the carts with their blanket-covered corpses! The return of the dead to the shattered tenements! The battlefield scene! The rush of frantic women and broken men! The shrieks—the howls—the tearing of hair, the ripping down of shirts from the neck to the waist in sign of mourning— Through all this swirl of horror the Doctor toiled on terribly, never once losing his grip on himself. He was all there. Now and then he seemed to be at some Waterloo—in the smoke, the flames, the carnage, the spray of bullets. He was half-suffocated, and had to charge madly against a sea of faces and of bayonets. But he fought on in this modern city-battle in such homely ways as he could.

Several times he took enough thought to step into a drugstore and telephone Nell. Each time she said:

"Come home, as soon as it is right to. Don't forget to eat something."

And then he flung back into the raging fight.

It was not until eight o'clock that evening that Nell heard the key fumbling in the lock. She rushed to the door and swung it open. She caught the Doctor in her arms. He sobbed like a little child.

"Nell," he moaned, "our people are stricken—our East Side is stricken!"

"Oh!" she cried, "Morris! Get to bed!"

He struggled back and leaned against the door. The glow of the Welsbach fell on his face. It was white, the lips blue, the tear-stained eyes starting from their sockets.

"Nell," he groaned, "put on your hat. There are funeral services in the Park."

"Morris," she cried, "you get to bed! You're killing yourself! You've done enough for those people!"

"Those people?" he said softly, his blue lips trembling. "Our brothers, our children, Nell! Come!"

"But Morris—"

"Come!"

Her heart stood still. The thirty hours had been a terror to her, too. A terror of pacing up and down, of listening for steps or bell or turning of key, of reading papers, of talking with neighbors. She felt as if she could not stand another moment of this intensity, this torture. But she saw that her husband was on the verge of utter breakdown. How he kept on his feet she dared not think. She put on the hat; she took his arm.

"All right, Morris," she whispered, "we'll go!"

He bumped against her many times as they walked in silence through deserted streets. The street-car tracks lay the length of East Broadway empty of traffic; the lonesome lights splashed blue on dark and blinded shop windows; the tenements were vacant and hollow. And then they came out on the little park, with its circle of man-crowded tenements gazing down upon it. It was filled with a black crowd of people—a calm ocean washing through its walks and playgrounds and eddying out to every radiating side-street. And such silence! Not a soul spoke, not a whisper breathed up through the clear air; a dead hush held all these human beings. The world was stilled and expectant. But yesterday morning and this had been a chaos of selfish animals, lustily alive, Earth-anchored. Tonight, as the spent Doctor and the worried wife stood together in that throbbing crowd, under the cold glitter of careless stars and beneath the far-spaced electric lights, startlingly vivid were the faces about them—vivid were the calico waists falling full over the fat breathing bodies—vivid the upheld gnarled hands—vivid the straining lamp-starred eyes of children and the hands that held their hands. It was a breathing mass of human-

ity—breathing, living, thinking—the old mothers and fathers, the men and women, the children—the common human stuff suddenly stilled by the Unseen Hand—and waiting!

And then suddenly, like the blasting and ripping open of human hearts, in the distance and through the clear air, came the long dead-roll of the drums! There were the long rolling throbs—silence—then the long rolling throbs again! Dr. Rast seized his wife's hand. They both went hot and cold—hot and cold! Nearer and nearer came the dull rolling of the drums! And then, suddenly, and very near, the wails of anguish from the brass horns tore through the air. It seemed to break the heart of the East Side. The people, as in one family, heard the sobbing of their Mother over her Dead—it rent the air, it cried to the stars. It was Man's cry to Nature, accepting Death, and yet— Forward they came—those pitiless musicians—and then, lo, the rank after rank of silent men in black—rank after rank—silent, white, bowed,—rank after rank—the fathers, the brothers, the sons, the husbands. The vast crowds swayed as one man; the ranks marched as one man; women openly sobbed; and the Doctor leaned heavily on Nell. She put an arm about him. She could not see. Her heart was pumping wildly.

"Nell," he whispered in a faint, awed voice, "these are all Brothers—this is a hint of Brotherhood."

And oh—those rolling drums—that anguished music—the noise in human throats—those human faces. Nell turned and sobbed on her husband's breast: Her heart seemed broken in two.

Truly the East Side had risen. All the layer of mean man—the talk, the clash, the greed, the pavement pettiness—had for a moment melted in the flames of the 'Old Glory'—and there was bared—one could see it with the eyes—the Human Deeps—the power behind faces—the love that breathes through all—the hint, the reminder of the common man to be, the Brotherhood to be. The night laid bare Man's possibilities.

"Morris," Nell whispered, "we must not lose faith in these people again."

"It took a thousand lives," he cried low, "to bring this love into our streets. But, Nell, it's here! Look! The love is in these people—the love, the power, the glory—God!—and now I know the work of this age—"

"What?"

His voice seemed to mix in with the drums and the music.

"To bring God out—to take God down into the dust of things—to get God into the day's work—the commonplace! He's here—He's in each one. We must turn Him on! The race is going out to glory—look—look—"

And then suddenly he seemed to sway limp at her side and she led him off through the crowd. The drums rolled afar; the music sobbed itself away. A wind of glory had blown through the street, and passed.

"It's too glorious—too keyed up," the Doctor whispered. "Nell, take me home—let me go to sleep!"

How she ever got him home she did not remember. But she kissed him good-night as a Mother kisses a child who falls to sleep after a week of delirium and fever. She sat in the darkness sobbing, and the husband slept.