

ELLA DIES

Harris Merton Lyon

A YEAR and a half before, her baby had died at birth. And now she was dying, at the age of thirty.

The doctor said it was Bright's disease.

For fourteen years she had been married to Mike, and for the last two she had been ailing, as her family put it, "dreadfully." The family was present now, expecting the death: her father, a bricklayer with a solemn, puzzled expression; her mother, a matter-of-fact Scotch immigrant, already thinking of the casket and of the mourning she should wear; one sister, highly nervous, who did nothing but wring her hands, and another, deeply phlegmatic, who did all the nursing, cleansing, laundering.

The dying woman was by far the most attractive one of the lot and gave a sense, possibly due to her nearness to eternity, of possessing a depth of spirit which none of the rest of them had. Her dark eyes lay like pools of mourning in her face, seldom moving, staring at the ceiling above, while her puffed hands worked in passion over her crucifix.

Rarely did her lips move, even in prayer. She never spoke—never in the early days showed a sign of emotion, save once. That was when her husband tried to enter the sick room. With a horror all the more potent because it was mute, she fixed her moribund eyes on him.

He stammered: "Why, Ella—"

She beckoned her nurse sister and said, harshly, in a dry whisper through cracked lips: "Get that man out of here and never let him near me as long as I live."

Mike Dugan was a good looking young Irishman with, however, none of the Irish gaiety in him. He belonged to the other sort—the "tough" young Irishman, stolid, treacherous. Before his marriage he had "run with a tough gang." And he kept it up after his marriage. He never looked straight at you. Even if he was talking to you, he would stand at an angle away from you and gaze straight ahead. You received his conversation in corners and out of corners—the corners of his mouth. For a young man, his nerves seemed stricken with a curious palsy. Another curious detail was his inability to stand still, as if he were driven by a continual itching. Among the bricklayer's family into which he had married he passed for a peculiarly neat man: he even allowed no one but himself, since his wife was ill, to wrap up his wash and take it to the laundry. He had a boil on his neck which constantly troubled him. By trade, he was a street car conductor.

"Why don't Ella want you 'round, Mike?" asked the bricklayer, heavily.

"Aw, I don't know," said Mike, from where he stood looking out the window.

"Seems funny," pursued the father, "and her dyin'." Not that the oddness was suspicious, but that it was something to talk about.

"Women has their tantrums that way," announced his wife, crisply, without a shade of feeling. "I remember Aunt Katharine, in Paisley, when she was dying—" and she went clicking off a dull narrative to which neither man paid any attention. This woman bored anybody when she talked. She knew nothing, she felt nothing. Neither did any of the rest of them, for that matter.

"Here's the doctor," announced Mike, and he rushed out into the hall to meet him. There they could be heard mumbling in low voices.

"Why does he always run out and meet the doctor first?" asked the bricklayer.

"Oh, I spose the poor boy is worried to death," said his wife.

"Seems funny"; and he resumed his puzzled, solemn look, sitting there dumbly without a thought in his head.

The doctor was a little, greybearded, bushy headed fellow. Doubtless he did really know enough . . . but there was something essentially tawdry and

mean about him. He was unkempt, lacked precision, averted his eyes behind his spectacles. He was querulous, nervous, jerky and seemed continually in a position of not being sure of himself in that particular menage. He made little childish mumbling sounds with his lips. He rubbed his grey green, knotted old hands hastily together; and, ducking and toddling, disappeared into the inner room where the dying woman lay.

He spoke entirely to the nurse, and his phraseology was the common phraseology of the people and not the technical phraseology of the profession. The nasty mumbling of his chops punctuated his questions.

"How is she to-day? No better, of course. Of course. How air them sweats?"

The nursing sister in a dull monotone replied, fumbling for hope.

The doctor took her pulse, applied his stethoscope . . . needless routine; then, his head askew, combed his gritty beard with a shaking hand. "Well, there's nothing much to do," he said. "Hope for the best, of course. Well, lemme see . . . Continue the treatment—" and toddled out. The

treatment consisted of administering in capsule form a mixture of mercury and potassium iodide, technically known as KI, and of giving an occasional dose of digitalis. This doctor had got this case because Mrs. Clancy, of the floor below, had recommended him as "a good doctor." And Mike, after first making a cautious visit to him, had called him in.

Out in the outer room the bricklayer stopped him. In the pride of his ignorance he wanted to display himself as conversing with the doctor; also, he thought he might pick up some free information which would save calling in a doctor some day. "Doctor," he asked, with the quizzical pucker of the eyelids of one who is putting a stiff question, "Bright's disease don't generallly attackt people so young as Ella, does it?"

"Well, of course there are exceptions—exceptions. Yes, young folks younger'n Ella can have it and have had it. I must be going."

"I've seen cases—Uncle Andrew, you remember, ma"—he addressed his wife, but detained the man of medicine. "Wasn't anything like Ella's. So I just wanted to get the straight of it. You'd say for sure it was a Bright's attackt?"

The doctor exhibited impatience, anxiety, restlessness. He talked over the head of the stupid bricklayer, in order to get rid of him. "Your daughter has contracted—er—something special, I should say, of a sort; of a sort. And a sort of spinal par-



Drawing by Glenn O. Coleman

End of Carmine St

alysis has resulted with you might say a sort of loss of control of the bladder and so forth. And, of course, certain organs of her body have undergone . . . process of degeneration . . . lesions . . . some intercurrent infection . . . quick death very possible." He shook hands suddenly and popped out the door, leaving the old man staring in a bewildered fashion.

"Lor," he said slowly, "so that there's Bright disease."

Inside, the dying woman moaned and clutched her sister's hand: "If I could only tell you! I know that it wouldn't do any good now; it's too late . . . I guess. But I want to tell—I want to tell somebody."

"Tell me, Ella."

"No. It's a secret between Mike and me. Nobody else knows but Father Ryan."

"What makes Mike give Father Ryan money all the time? Every day he hands him a dollar or two and says, 'Here, father, is that money I owe you.'"

"I don't know. He don't need to. But I guess Mike's afraid. May God forgive him, he's afraid for his mortal soul!" She lay back exhausted.

Toward six o'clock in the evening, three days later, she startled her sister by saying:

"Send for Mike."

When he came in, "Lock the door," she said to her sister, "and prop me up higher." When it was done she began:

"Mike, I'm going to die." Her voice broke, and for the first time in her illness the tears ran from her

big dark eyes. "Me—at thirty—at thirty! Going to die. Oh, God, God, God. And I wanted to live so much. I don't want to die. I'm too young to die. And what did I do that I should be made to die? Nothing, except that I loved you, Mike, and married you. I was a pure, clean girl all my life, Mike—you know that. Why couldn't you have told me about this sooner? You were older than me and you know how innocent I was. I didn't know what it was—and you kept letting it go on year after year. Then when you did tell me, and I didn't quite understand, you kept saying, 'the shame, the shame, the shame'—d'you think that if I'd known it was killing me I'd have cared about the shame part of it? I'd rather have had the shame than be dead at thirty, just when I love life so. To think—to think that I could have been cured!" She stopped and burst out wailing, in a ghastly voice: "I don't want to die! I want to live! Oh, I don't want to die!"

Her sister wiped her tears away and patted her shoulder. She looked at her husband in fury and shouted: "There ought to be a law against your kind ever getting married! There ought to be a law against it! A priest ought never to marry you off—a doctor ought never to let you out amongst people. What business has the likes of you having babies?" At the notion she broke out into a vicious laugh and cried: "Thank God, my baby's dead! Thank God for that. Thank God for that. Oh, thank God my baby's dead."

The sister moved over to him and whispered:

"You'd better get out. This is just making her worse."

As he unlocked the door the sick woman raised herself with difficulty on her elbow and shrieked:

"You never cared for me or you would have helped me. All you wanted me for was to use me. And you did use me. I was clean and you made me rotten. More than that, you've killed me! You've killed me, d'you hear, you—"

He slammed the door viciously behind him.

She fell back among her pillows, moaning: "Oh, I don't want to die—I don't want to die." Later she called her sister closer and hissed in a harsh, dry whisper: "I heard him out there telling what all he was going to do with the furniture. Mind you, he don't get a thing; not a solitary stick of it. Tell father that it's all mine and I want him and mother to have it. And . . . if Mike asks for my wedding ring tell him I said I'd be buried with it."

She became slightly incoherent. Later she lost consciousness.

Several days later, at dusk, the dull-eyed sister stepped out and commanded: "Send for Father Ryan."

At seven-thirty she died.

As the priest came out of the death chamber, Mike took him aside nervously and began talking to him in an eager tone. He wanted a solemn high mass of requiem for Ella. It would cost him maybe fifty dollars, but, as he put it, he wanted to do the square thing by her.

THE LAUGHERS—By Louis Untermeyer

SPRING!

And her hidden bugles up the street.
Spring—and the sweet
Laughter of winds at the crossing;
Laughter of birds and a rountain tossing
Its hair in abandoned ecstasies.
Laughter of trees.
Laughter of shop-girls that giggle and blush;
Laugh of the tug-boat's impertinent fife.
Laughter followed by a trembling hush—
Laughter of love, scarce whispered aloud.
Then, stilled by no sacredness or strife,
Laughter that leaps from the crowd;
Seizing the world in a rush.
Laughter of life. . . .

Earth takes deep breaths like a man who had
feared he might smother,
Filling his lungs before bursting into a
shout. . . .
Windows are opened—curtains flying out;
Over the wash-lines women call to each other.
And, under the calling, there surges, too clearly
to doubt,
Spring, with the noises
Of shrill, little voices;
Joining in "Tag" and the furious chase
Of "I-spy," "Red Rover" and "Prisoner's
Base";
Of the roller-skates whir at the sidewalk's
slope,

Of boys playing marbles and girls skipping
rope.
And there, down the avenue, behold,
The first true herald of the Spring—
The hand-organ gasping and wheezily mur-
muring
Its tunes ten-years old. . . .
And the music, trivial and tawdry, has fresh-
ness and magical swing.
And over and under it,
During and after—
The laughter
Of Spring! . . .

And lifted still
With the common thrill,
With the throbbing air, the tingling vapor,
That rose like strong and mingled wines;
I turned to my paper,
And read these lines:
*"Now that the Spring is here,
The war enters its bloodiest phase. . . .
The men are impatient. . . .
Bad roads, storms and the rigors of the winter
Have held back the contending armies. . . .
But the recruits have arrived,
And are waiting only the first days of warm
weather. . . .
There will be terrible fighting along the whole
line—
Now that Spring has come."*
I put the paper down. . . .

Something struck out the sun—something un-
seen;
Something arose like a dark wave to drown
The golden streets with a sickly green.
Something polluted the blossoming day
With the touch of decay.
The music thinned and died;
People seemed hollow-eyed.
Even the faces of children, where gaiety lin-
gers,
Sagged and drooped like banners about to be
furled—
And Silence laid its bony fingers
On the lips of the world
A grisly quiet with the power to choke;
A quiet that only one thing broke;
One thing alone rose up thereafter
Laughter!
Laughter of streams running red.
Laughter of evil things in the night;
Vultures carousing over the dead;
Laughter of ghouls.
Chuckling of idiots, cursed with sight.
Laughter of dark and horrible pools.
Scream of the bullets' rattling mirth,
Sweeping the earth.
Laugh of the cannon's poisonous breath. . . .
And over the shouts and the wreckage and
crumbling
The raucous and rumbling
Laughter of death.
Death that arises to sing,—
Hailing the Spring!