

Short Story Thursdays Presents...

Friday

(1914)

By

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Hempel had watched the hands of the clock make all the motions of the hour, from the trim segment of eleven to the lazy down-stretch of twenty minutes past, the slim erectness of the half-hour, the promising angles of the three quarters, ten, five to twelve, and last the unanimity and consummation of noon.

Before all the whistles had ceased he was on the street. It was Thursday, but he was going home; he had told them that he must get home. He had even told one of them why he must get home. "Look alive!" he wanted to shout to somebody. "She may be going through it now." Only of course there was nobody to whom a man could shout a thing like that, so he sent the message flooding through all the little secret cells that faithfully worked to let him hurry. Thus he dashed through West Twenty-eighth Street, and came to a halt at Fifth Avenue.

A procession was passing.

"Hold on, young fellow," an officer said, serene in the law's backing of constituted authority for easy familiarity. "Can't you see the doin's?"

"But I must—I must! I tell you I must!" Hempel cried. And when the thick neck continued to shake the great, faintly smiling face, Hempel, the boy, stepped close to the policeman and said something to him, man to man.

The officer lifted his chin in the first half of a nod, passed the business on to his eyebrows, and threw his glance down the avenue.

"Set tight, then," he said, "till I tip you the go."

So Hempel waited on the curb. For the first time his eye took in the procession passing, and he saw that the paraders were women. At first this fact made on him small impression. Then he found himself thinking:

"These women here are well and strong, and she may be dying." But that thought he put violently away, and seized on something, anything, to crowd it back. So he fixed his mind on the women.

Some were young, ruddy, erect; some were young, narrow-chested, stooped; some were old, and dragged their feet; one who passed near Hempel scuffled at every step. But, decently or shabbily or showily dressed, all were looking up, intent on something.

"What's the matter with 'em?" Hempel asked.

"That there big fire," the policeman answered—"that there last factory fire. It et into 'em some. These are striking; a grand sight o' good it 'll do 'em."

Hempel looked at them now with a new impression. He too had shuddered at that thing—the flimsy loft, the locked doors, the broken bodies, the charred remains. Poor things, trying to earn their living! He straightened his young shoulders. She didn't have to do that. Thank God! he had saved her from this kind of thing. That poor young creature there, carrying the heavy pole of a rude banner: GIVE US THE CHANCE TO SAY HOW WE WORK, it said. Already the girl was dropping with weariness. Every

day must be to her weariness. But the girl's face was intent on something, as the faces of all were intent. And Letty was there in the flat, just waiting. But she might be going through it now, and he three miles away from her. Even as he turned fiercely on the policeman, he saw the gray helmet execute a mighty nod.

"Skin!" said the officer, and through a break in the ranks Hempel tore across the avenue and fled toward the subway.

As he ran, a sickening thought swept him. It was true that Letty need never march like that,—she was safe, with him to work for her,—but suppose it should be a girl—Hempel shrank abashed from "daughter"—suppose it should be a girl, and she should go to work sometime!

"O God!" something in him said as he ran, "I wanted a boy. Here's another reason. Let it be a boy!"

The little flat was very still as Hempel fitted his key. He had dreaded finding some alien confusion. Now the silence seemed more ominous. He ran tiptoeing across the passage and turned the knob. The afternoon sun flooded the sitting-room. In the willow rocker his wife sat sewing.

"Letty!" he cried. "I thought maybe—"

"Not yet," she said, and one moment smiled up at him, the next caught at a button of his coat with a whimpering breath. "Hempel, I'm so glad you've come!" he heard her say.

Instead of going into the dark dining-room, the noisy, loud-voiced, kindly maid, a luxury which they had never known until of late, brought a covered dish or two to Letty's sewing-table, and they ate by the window, in the sun. A book lay open on the window-sill. Some one had sent in a pink hyacinth. A child in a red dress was playing with two colored balls in the street below. When luncheon was finished, the well-being in the small, bright room, and the thrilling suspense of the time, possessed Hempel as the chief fact in life. He looked at his wife in her gray gown and cap of lace, at her soft, white work. She was so little! He stretched out his big, brown hand, and laid it on her knee.

"Letty," he said, "see me, strong as an ox; and it doesn't help any."

She looked at him strangely, beautifully.

"Strength isn't the only thing," she said. "I was thinking that just when you came in. I'd found something—"

She took up the book on the window-sill. Sometimes the things which she read to him from books had made Hempel uneasy with the sense that he was not seeing in them what she saw; then gradually he had grown to feel that very likely she saw more than was really there. But now he felt that in this hour whatever she had found would be there for him, too. He followed her, even when he began to perceive that what she was reading aloud was verse, which somehow always confused him, like several exposures on the same film. But this, he understood quickly, was man's verse, man's talk, straight from the shoulder:

"Force rules the world still. Has ruled it, shall rule it; Meekness is weakness, Strength is triumphant, Over the whole earth Still it is Thor's Day!"

"Bully!" said Hempel, spontaneously.

She shook her head, smiling.

"It isn't true," she said.

"What isn't?" asked Hempel.

"Well," she said, "there's something else. It isn't just strength that's going to pull me through to-night, if it's to-night. It's something else—something that's weak and great and small, not a bit like strength, Hempel."

He wondered what she meant. He reached out, and took in his somewhat roughened fingers a hem of the soft, white stuff of her work. He saw that it was a little skirt. A strange sweetness ran current with his blood.

"Strength is the greatest thing in the world though, I guess, Letty," he was saying.

She laughed, and for a moment leaned her face close to his. Then she met his puzzled eyes gravely, sweetly.

"Men don't know it," she said. "They don't know how to know it. Women know; I know now, and I 'll know to-night."

Abruptly, as he looked at her, Hempel saw something in her face that he had never seen there before—a strange intentness, a strangely uplifted, radiant intentness. He had seen faces intent like that only a little while before in a marching line. It gave him the instance that he needed.

"Why, look here," said Hempel. "Talk about strength not being the biggest thing ever. If you'd seen what I saw to-day—the whole street full of miserable, half-starved women, some of 'em left out o' that last factory fire, some of 'em striking out o' sympathy and on account o' their own troubles. And a grand sight o' good it 'll do 'em," Hempel repeated. "Look at 'em, what they are, just because they've got no strength. All they can do, the poor things, is to get out there and go marching."

"Ah," Letty said, "but they were marching. They were marching. And they'll get what they 're after in the end. And without strength."

She dropped her sewing and put out her hand.

"Listen, Hempel," she said, "and hear about me. You know—I've almost hoped it would be a boy. Well, when I read that to-day, of that big old god shouting around about strength being the thing, I remembered to-day is his day, the day they named for him—Thursday:—Thor's day. And I don't want it to be a boy, born to-day. Because if it is, I'm afraid it won't ever know but that force is the thing still—just as that says."

Hempel looked apprehensively round. Were women like this at such a time, he wondered. He recalled vague things which he had heard of them.

"Ain't you—ain't there something you're taking?" he said. "Can't she beat you up an egg?"

At this his wife further alarmed him by laughing softly and long. Then abruptly she kissed him, and he saw that there were tears in her eyes.

"I'll tell you what," he said nervously, "you let me run over to the drug store and get you a little bottle of lime-juice. You liked that other."

He rushed out like a boy. She watched him hurrying down the street. Her smile was brooding, maternal, as if already the maternity were hers, for him.

"Not a boy," she was thinking, "born on Thor's day; but a girl, born on Friday, Freia's day—the day of the goddess that held the apples of new life. On Friday," she said, "the new day. The day of something better than strength."

In the dining-room the loud-voiced maid met Hempel on his return.

"She's took to talking to herself, sir," she told him. "I dunno but what—"

Hempel nodded. These two worried faces perfectly understood each other. He swung briskly into the sitting-room and set down the bottle.

"Now, then," he cried cheerily, "two nice glasses of lime-juice, and we'll be all right."

Once more Hempel's look dragged round the clock with the hour: the grim segment of eleven; the strained down-stretch of twenty minutes past; the horrible, waiting attention of the half-hour, like a man standing listening, listening; the

warning angles of the three quarters, ten, five to twelve; last the solemn inevitability of midnight.

He stood leaning against the glass of the sitting-room window; the sickish smell of the hyacinth that he was brushing rose protestingly. People loitered in the street, extinguished lights, went to sleep; and in there, where the nurse and the doctor had her, she might be dying. Sometimes he heard something, and then he crumpled against the window-frame, his magnificent body as weak as that of a child.

Pale against the black sheet of the buildings opposite, he could see his wife's face, not laughing, not looking at him, not turned to him as at his home-comings, but remote and intent. That was it: she was amazingly intent on something. It was as if, in this hour of hers, was occurring the whole creation of a new being. And on it she was unspeakably intent.

He shut his eyes, and there on the imminent black was Letty's face in the midst of a thousand faces. They were the faces of women, the faces of women marching. And each one was as intent on something as was Letty. Each one was as intent as if this were to her the hour of the creation of new beings, somewhere ahead there in a time that Hempel didn't know anything about. And if it was a girl, if it was a daughter, that daughter might be somewhere, sometime, with women like those, marching, too. And he, as strong as an ox, could do nothing to help either of them, Letty in there, or his daughter down there in the street.

Hempel pulled himself up, and he smiled foolishly. What was the matter with him? Was he going to pieces like a baby? He squared his shoulders and started toward the kitchen. He'd better eat a little something, he told himself, to keep up his strength. If his strength went back on him—But he came to Letty's willow chair, and he sank down in it, and took his head in his big, helpless hands.

Interminably thereafter the nurse came to him.

"It's all right," she said, "and she's all right. She asked me, before, not to tell you which it is."

Hempel glared at her, and did his best to roar in a whisper.

"Which it is?" he said. "What do I care which it is? Is she safe? Is she?"

A little while later Hempel sat trying to read the morning paper. He read the same things over a great many times. One of these things was an obscure head which he kept reading for a long time before it fixed his attention.

MARCH OF THE WOMEN

Thin Line of Agitators Parade Fifth Avenue for Half an Hour

Hempel thought back to the line as he had seen it, those lifted, determined, intent faces. Think of their starting out to get something, weak as they were! He sat fingering at something within his reach, a soft, white hem of his wife's sewing in her basket. Think of Letty going through that thing alone, almost as weak as a child! He stared out the window, past her plant and her book on the sill. How in the world did women do these things, anyway?

He was still sitting so when they came to tell him that he could go into the room. Now that the time had come, he found, when he rose, that he was trembling.

There she lay, the same Letty, yet incalculably different. In some mysterious way she was nearer to him than ever he had known that she could be; in some way, more mysterious, she was as remote as she had seemed to him at midnight.

"Hempel," she whispered, "I wouldn't let them tell you. See your son!"

He stooped awkwardly, got to one knee, and looked. Then he bent his look on her.

"But you—" he said. "Letty, how—"

She did not hear him. She was speaking softly, eagerly.

"And it wasn't on Thor's day, either," she said. "He came Friday, the day of something better than strength."

He kissed her.

"There! there! there!" he kept saying.

"Hempel, it's coming," she tried to make it clear. "Can't you tell? The time when men will know—something better than strength. And use it. O Hempel, maybe our little man will know it—in his life-time!"

"There! there! there!" Hempel went on, and patted her arm.

At last he stumbled out of the room. Indeterminately it smote him that to be in the little chamber, which he knew so well, was like being in some other place.

"Better than strength," he heard her insisting as he closed the door.

He turned to the nurse, who stood waiting in the passage.

"I guess she's a little delirious yet, ain't she?" he said, much shaken.