

MISS MILNE AND I.

CHAPTER I.

I had been sitting for six long weeks behind my doorplate waiting for the patients that, in the first hopeful days of my new venture, were most confidently looked for. Contrary to everyone's advice, I had decided upon making a practice in preference to buying one; but so far they—the patients—were conspicuous by their absence.

It was, I say, the end of my first six weeks—the longest and weariest six weeks I had ever passed. Each hour dragged out its sixty minutes, and each minute saw the death of a hope, until now of all hope I was nearly bankrupt when the consulting room bell gave out at length its first wild peal.

The instantaneous result was simply indescribable. The good old soul who kept house for me—nay, did everything from cooking to praying for me—and who shared to the fullness of her warm old heart in all my hopes and fears, hastened to smooth the hair and clothes of the Buttons, and hurry him to the door. He—the Buttons—assumed a dignity and importance that I shall never forget, while I rushed to my bedroom to put on my frock coat and call up my professional attitude.

When I entered the "insulting room," as the Buttons persisted in calling my well arranged sanctum, I found a tall, slender girl standing there, with clear-cut, well-proportioned features, a prominent chin and large luminous eyes, having dark shadows beneath. She was dressed in a dark gray waterproof that fitted her perfectly, a hat of the fashion of two years ago, and a pair of much-mended slate-colored gloves. Her manner was quiet but thoroughly self-possessed; she rose as I entered, and told me that she kept a tobacco and paper shop in Arlington street, close by.

She had, she said, been far from well of late, and would be glad if I would give her something that would enable her to get through her work. Upon sounding her chest I found that she was suffering from pleurisy, and advised her to go home and to bed for a day or two, adding that if she continued to get about in her present condition she would probably have a severe illness.

The following day I visited her at her little shop, at the back of which was a small apartment that did duty as a sleeping, sitting and eating room. I found her lying on the sofa, breathing painfully and heavily, and as I asked automatically the stock questions, and at the same time took in the contents of the room, I rapidly realized that I had anything but an ordinary patient to deal with. The girl's manner, the neatness of her dress, the perfect cleanliness of the tiny room, the character of the few books on the shelf, which were partly theological and partly well-chosen novels, contrasted most markedly with the startling absence of every comfort—nay, almost every necessity of life. Having given her all necessary directions and prescribed the necessary medicine, I rose to go, and as I did so asked if she would allow me to send her a bottle of some wine I had, that I thought applicable to her case. She thanked me, and from that day until she had recovered, not wine only, but soup, and other necessities were daily supplied her from my house. In a fortnight she was quite herself again and busy in her little shop.

From that date the whole aspect of my practice was changed; the surgery bell got no prolonged rest; the old housekeeper became exultant; the Buttons found the place anything but the sinecure he had at first anticipated, and I, from the crest of the rising wave, saw a great professional career just ahead of me. But the strangest part of this strange turn events had so suddenly taken, was that every patient, or nearly every patient, could be traced, either directly or indirectly, to my friend in Arlington street. "Miss Milne," said many of them, "has advised me to consult you with reference to my child's health. Miss Milne tells me, sir, that you are great on joints."

I called several times to thank her for the energetic way in which she was more than repaying me for my efforts to be of service to her.

I ordered my morning paper and tobacco from her, and often ran in to see if I could in any way forward her interests, but every effort and offer was firmly but gratefully declined. She would look up with a sad but unaffected smile, and assure me in a perfectly natural way that there was nothing that I could do beyond what I was doing that would in any way lighten her burden.

The nature of the strange circumstances that had combined to bring a girl of such manners, good looks and evidence of past respectability in to such a poverty-stricken position was to me a constant source of wonderment. I made her the center of a hundred plots and the heroine of a score of romances, but all from the shallows of my own imagination, for she neither by direct nor indirect allusion gave me the slightest clue to her past.

But one Saturday morning when I called to pay my weekly bill, all my well and laboriously worked out day dreams of her were dispelled by the sudden appearance of a beautiful little golden-haired child upon the scene. He was about two years of age, and when I entered was shouting for his mother to come and see a house he had built from the packets of cigarettes he was playing with as he sat upon the counter.

For the first time the equality of my mysterious friend was entirely upset. She blushed as she entered, to the very roots of her hair, and in a very confused way stammered out: "This little fellow is a nephew of mine, doctor, and I have adopted him and taught him to call me mamma."

He is a great comfort to me in my loneliness."

For a second neither of us spoke, but in that second every possible solution of this new mystery, this little golden-haired mystery (that was already playing with my watch chain), resulted through my mind. I came out of my maze confident of but one thing, and that one thing was that in calling the little fellow her nephew she had lied. I could only stammer "What a lovely child!" Then I proceeded to business and soon left her.

A week subsequently I was hurriedly sent for to see "Miss Milne's nephew." I went at once, and found the bright little fellow in a fit of convulsions, which turned out to be the premonitory symptoms of a severe attack of inflammation of the lungs, that kept him hanging between life and death for many days. Miss Milne was standing over him, wringing her hands with an intensity of emotion that was altogether unaccountable and from that moment I was confirmed in my conviction that the child was her own.

When I called to see my little patient the next day I found the inflammation firmly established, and having altered his prescription, I dispatched her to a neighboring room to borrow some boiling water, that we might make a poultice for the little fellow's chest. Directly she left, the thought struck me that very likely there was no material to be had whereon to spread the linseed, and seeing a bundle of clothing on the top shelf, I proceeded to unpack it, hoping to find something suitable.

On how minute a thread a destiny may hang! "Throw a stone," said an old scientist, "and you alter the earth's axis."

I pulled down a bundle of apparently old clothing, and I ruin two lives.

This fateful bundle was loosely wrapped up in a piece of black lining material, from the corners of which peeped out what I had taken to be some old calico; but I had no sooner untied the parcel than I found, first, a white lawn surplice, then an exquisitely worked stole, an Oxford hood, a long black cassock and a photograph of the gentleman who had evidently owned and had been photographed in this costume.

When Miss Milne returned she found me staring into this, to me, inexplicable collection of mysteries. She started back with an exclamation of painful astonishment, and then, instantly recovering herself, she said, with no betrayal of the emotion that was welling from every pore of her: "I have got the water you require. Is there anything more I can get, doctor?"

I thanked her and said I wanted an old piece of stuff whereon to spread my linseed, and had been turning over what I had mistaken for a bundle of old linen.

"You will find nothing there that is suitable," she said, with assumed composure; "but this handkerchief may do." And together we made and applied the poultice.

I called the next night to see how my little patient was progressing, and finding him better, I was about to leave, when Miss Milne asked me if I could spare a few moments in which she would tell me "something of her past life, which she would like me to know." With this request, I need scarcely say, I willingly complied.

Miss Milne began by telling me that her father was a small farmer in Blankshire, and as he was poor and blessed with a large family, of which she was the eldest, it was her father's wish that she should earn her own livelihood.

With this object in view, she had applied for and obtained a situation in a large drapery establishment at the west end of London, where she was not only very happy, but very successful.

Four months after her entry into this establishment she caught cold, and her persistent cough awakened the anxieties of the proprietor, who further sent her to a leading physician. After making a careful examination of her chest, the physician told her that if she had been in a position to spend the coming winter in the south of France her recovery would be easily insured; but as it was she would have to take the greatest possible care of herself to prevent a spread of the fatal disease that had already taken considerable hold upon her lungs.

A few weeks subsequent to her visit to him, the same physician was consulted by Lady M—, who was suffering from exactly the same symptoms, and whose wealth rendered a stay abroad an easy matter. As the latter was leaving her consulting room, the kind-hearted old doctor said: "If you do decide to go to Italy, Lady M—, I would take it as a great privilege to be allowed to recommend a girl to you as lady's maid to whom the voyage would be an unmistakable boon."

Lady M— readily agreed, and it was arranged that Miss Milne should call upon her the following morning.

The interview ended by her being engaged and in a few weeks they started for Mentone, and together they wandered through the south of France and Italy. In the early summer months they returned to England. Miss Milne at Lady M—'s request still holding her position as lady's maid. The position was an easy one and exactly suited to her requirements, the only, to her, objectionable condition being that every member of the household was expected to attend matins each morning at the little church in the park and confession once a week.

The clergyman of this little church was paid entirely by Lady M—, and his whole time was taken up in fulfilling the requirements of a High Church ritual.

"One morning," said Miss Milne—and here her voice lowered and he

came if possible, sadder—"I finished my work, and as it was the morning for confession, I set out for the church to fulfill this, at first, to me a terrible task, but now a comforting duty. As I entered, the clergyman, the Rev. John Carlosso, who, though of English education, was an Italian nobleman, poor but of extremely ancient lineage, about thirty years of age and exceptionally gentlemanly and clerical in his manner, was pacing up and down the aisle.

"Upon seeing me he hurried into the confessional, while I hastened to divest myself of my load of little sins. His voice carried more than usual comfort to me, and I left the little recess, hallowed by many memories, with a light step and my heart solemnly glad. When I reached the church door, to my astonishment I found my confessor had gone round the other way, and was awaiting me in the porch. On his face he carried the evidence of great excitement, and his manner was altogether unlike anything I had noticed in him before, but notwithstanding his emotion, he asked me, with perfect self command, if I would mind stepping into the vestry a moment, as he had something of importance he was anxious to communicate to me.

"Mechanically I walked in, and he, closing the door, took a chair, and placing it exactly and closely in front of mine, sat down. He paused as though to collect himself, and then taking a deep breath, he blurted out, 'Miss Milne, I love you,' then clasping one of my hands between both of his again, 'I love you.'

"He then bounded from his chair, and apparently regretting his expression of his passion, folded his arms across his breast, and for a second or two paced the room in silence; then suddenly stopping in front of me, and I felt, looking at my bent head, in a voice far more self-contained, he said: 'The church of my fathers, the church of my present faith, as I read them, invoke, insist upon celibacy in a priest. But, Miss Milne,' he continued, 'I am human. I have fought hard and long against this weakness until I am no longer able to continue the battle.' Then sinking on his knees before me and taking both of my hands in his, and wringing them in the depth and strength of his passion, he poured forth, with a favor brotten of his nationality, the story of his love and his fight against it. When he had finished his terrible story, I asked him in a voice far less audible to me than the throbbings of my own heart: 'What do you wish me to do?' He asked me under some pretext to go to Brixton, and he would follow and meet me there. 'The day following we will be married, and then—and then—' here Miss Milne folded her face in her hands and continued: 'He drew such a picture of our after life, its sweets, its love, its happy contentment, that I too, being human, consented. The following day we were married at Brixton, and that day saw the last of all happiness and all hope in my life.

"We took two rooms in a quiet street in Brixton, and I had not been married twenty-four hours before I found that in my husband there were two men distinct and utterly dissimilar—the clergyman that I had known, and the husband that I had yet to learn. The one had all the capacity for making men and women, especially women, love and revere him; in the other was combined every attribute that goes to the making of bad men.

"I lived with him for two months. The greater part of his time was, of necessity, expended in clerical duty; he would return once or twice a week, and when he came in would often kiss me, and that quite fondly; then he would put off his clerical suit and put on a suit of tweed, and with the change of clothes the whole man would alter as if by magic.

Miss Milne looked up from the fire and added: "You may know, sir, something of the science of this sudden change of character, but I only know that it happened—and the horrors of it."

(To be continued.)

To Frustrate Letter Thieves.

Experiments are being made in France with one invention and in England with another for the purpose of preventing thieves from extracting letters from public letter boxes. In the French invention steel teeth are placed close to the mouth of the box, while the British invention consists of a wire invention inside the pillar box. The weight of the letters carries them through the cage, but they cannot be pulled up with a piece of string or something sticky, the usual means adopted by the letter thief.

Missed the Whiskers.

Representative Babcock of Wisconsin shaved off his luxuriant black beard during the last session of congress and the doorkeepers refused to admit him to the floor of the house until he had been identified. Mr. Babcock had not been shaved before in 15 years and as he walked down the aisle toward his seat the members looked searchingly at him, many failing to recognize their colleague because of the absence of his whiskers.

Butter Exports of Australia

Australia has become an important exporter of butter and other products of the dairy. The province of Victoria alone exported to Great Britain in 1899 17,000 tons of butter, representing a value of \$8,000,000. The butter export of Victoria was 369 tons in 1889, and 759 tons in 1890. For the last ten years the export has been not less than 80,000 tons.

Enough.

Clerk (referring to telegram)—Is this correct, sir? "Twins arrived. More by post."

Father (for the first time)—Yes, what more do you want?

(Hideous truth flashes on him after telegram has been dispatched to relatives.)—Moonshine.

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