

MISS MILNE AND I.

CHAPTER IV.

Eight months have passed since the close of the last chapter, and things are much as they were.

Of Miss Milne I have seen nothing. Her shop was closed the week after I last saw her there, and although various reports have come to me of her terrible goings-on, I have myself seen nothing of her.

One Monday evening I was sitting after dinner, reading the evening paper, when Ann came in with a note; a child was waiting in the hall, she said, to take me somewhere.

"Dear Dr. Rigby—I am sure that under the circumstances you will forgive me for troubling you. I have this morning been sent for to the most wretched house imaginable, and found there a girl in the most utter state of poverty, and in need of your help.

As I hurriedly as I could, I collected in my bag the few things I might need, and putting on my coat—the night was bitterly cold—I joined my little guide in the hall.

As we hurried along the pavement I tried to learn something of the case I was going to see, but the girl knew nothing of it. She had, she told me, been hailed by the lady while walking down Arlington street, and requested to bring me the letter and show me the house.

Before the door of the most miserable of all the miserable tenements of that wretched quarter my guide stopped. "It's up them steps, sir," she said, and up them I went as rapidly as their rickety condition would allow.

On landing at the very top I found the lady who had sent for me. "I am afraid," she said, "I have brought you to a very terrible place, but you must forgive me; I could do nothing else. But come; will you follow me?"

She led me into a room, the stench, the misery and the absolute squalor of which no one but those who have visited the slums of London can possibly imagine.

From the broken panes pulled out the pieces of carpet, old linen and newspapers that did duty for glass. With the little light thus obtained I saw in one corner a mass of straw, and over and about it soiled underclothing and old dresses.

On the back of the door other dresses were hung, but these were of a very different character; they were gaudy, if not expensive, and carried a world of meaning to me—I recognized by them not only the kind of room I was in, but also the kind of patient I had to deal with.

"Two?" I asked. "Where's the other?" She pointed to another bundle in the other corner of the room, and walking over to it, I threw off a piece of sacking, and exposed to view an infant that, though but a few hours old, had the wrinkled skin, troubled expression and monkey-like cast of features peculiar to some of the aged poor.

"I couldn't come down before, sir," she said, "for the lady is not so well; she's raving. I think you ought to see her."

I thought a moment, and decided to omit her to the care of a medical friend of mine. It was utterly useless for me to try and do anything for her. I had little difficulty in securing his help, and a promise to report in the evening as to her condition.

"You see," he said, "she's not like anybody else; she'll neither speak to you nor take food."

"Well, as a matter of fact, she has now, but it was not until I had gone home and got the stomach pump and actually opened her mouth with the object of forcing her, that she consented to swallow it. What a strange character she is! Do you know her well?"

"Yes, I know a good deal about her, and am much interested in her welfare, and anything you can do for her I shall take as a very great favor to myself."

"You may depend upon my doing everything I can. But what about that nurse?"

"Oh, she's a brute; but then they all are."

"But she's worse than any of them. She's actually wearing the woman's dresses; she drinks all the brandy, and at 11 o'clock this morning the baby was neither washed nor dressed. When I remonstrated with her she said, 'Oh, he's all right; he's too well, I expect to please his father.' Do you know the father?"

"But what has happened to her? Is she mad?"

"No, I don't think she is mad, and I don't think she is sane. But I will tell you more about her some day. We ought to be seeing now what we can do for her—that is, if anything can be done; but you will find it exceedingly difficult; bringing her food is a simple thing, but making her take it is a different one. I warn you that girl will go everything in the world to starve herself and her infant. It's very unfortunate that I should have been sent for; of course you know I like to come, but I am certain you will do nothing with her with me in the room; the girl has a great horror of my seeing her in this condition. Didn't you see how she drew away from me?"

"Yes, I noticed it and wondered what it meant."

"You will allow me to suggest, I think the wisest course to follow would be this: I will leave her—she needs no medical care—and send you at once as good a nurse as I can get about here, some food and wine from my house, and a few old things in the way of clothing."

To this suggestion Mrs. Carpenter assented, and on my road home I called upon the only woman I could think of as available. She was a widow, a Mrs. Best, who, although better than the majority of her class, belonged to a very distinct and very low natural order. I must pause here a moment to say one word about this order. I had christened them "the vultures." They were very common in every street in my district, and, I presume, in all parts of London; not necessarily widows, though widows predominate; not necessarily drunkards, although they have a great weakness for "Old Tom."

I found Mrs. Best at liberty, and very glad to undertake the duty. I told her as much as but no more than was necessary of my relationship with Miss Milne. I found afterward that what I had told her was just enough to awaken her woman's curiosity, and on the basis of her surmises she built conjectures and theories that in after days gave me much trouble.

"I want you, if you will," I said, "to take the entire charge of her; pay no regard to any remonstrance or protest; get food for her and make her take it. As to the child, it's a wretched specimen, but do what you can to save it. I will meet you each day at 11 at the street door."

The first day that I met Mrs. Best she told me that Miss Milne had neither eaten anything nor spoken to her.

"She's a rum woman," she said, "and I think she's trying to kill herself; but the child's all right."

The second day I learned that Miss Milne was in the same condition, and on the third day Mrs. Best did not appear at all. I just caught sight of her as I entered the street; she was peeping round the corner of the door, watching for my coming; the moment she saw me she withdrew her head and disappeared. I was waiting at the bottom of the stairs, wondering what I should do, when a woman who lived opposite came over to me.

"Is it Mrs. Best you wanted to see, sir?" she asked.

"Yes—why? Do you know where she is?"

"She's upstairs, sir; she went but a moment since. Shall I run and fetch her?"

I thanked her, and, although I knew that her only motive was her wretched curiosity, I was very glad of her help, for I was very anxious to hear something of Miss Milne. In a few moments she returned, followed by Mrs. Best. The moment she appeared I saw why she had not kept her appointment. She was wearing one of Miss Milne's showy dresses, and the color of her cheeks showed the consciousness of her guilt.

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ling her into conversation." "And," he added, "her conversation interests me immensely."

"I don't know; she's such an awful cynic. She believes in nothing, in neither man nor woman, churches nor chapels, hell nor heaven. I should think she must be pretty hard-hearted when she's well, from what I see of her sick."

"Perhaps," I replied; and then, to his astonishment, I added, "and yet, do you know that girl nursed me through my attack of typhoid with a devotion almost maternal?"

"Really! Well, she's a puzzle then."

"I almost regret I ever saw her; 'tis strange, too, that one can regret doing good."

The speaker was Mrs. Carpenter. She had called upon me with reference to Miss Milne.

"I don't see why you should regret it."

"Not when one is the means of restoring a girl only that she may go back to her career of vice?"

"Are you sure she has?"

"Yes, quite sure; and not only that, but she has enticed the nurse to join her; they are out every night, and all night, and the poor, wretched baby is left to the care of heartless neighbors at so much the hour."

"Have you seen her?"

"Yes; yesterday afternoon I saw her, and tried to reason with her, but she is far too clever for me."

"Was she defiant, or simply careless as to her future?"

"Well, neither; she simply contended that she was making the most of her life, getting the most pleasure obtainable. But I called about the baby; just now it is being left each night in the care of the woman opposite, herself a wretch, and it appears the child does not sleep, and the woman, to make it sleep, gives it gin. Now, the probability is that the child is ill, and I want you tonight, when they're gone, to run in and see it if you will."

"I shall be very glad, and I'll try and substitute something for the gin that will be less harmful."

Half-past eleven found me standing by the side of this woman, and over the wretched and woe-begone specimen of humanity I had come to see.

"But it'll die if you continue to give it gin," I was saying.

"And what matter? She doesn't want it to live, nor he either," she added, significantly.

It was no use talking to the woman; there was no sense of morality that I could awaken, and so I left her with the promise that I would send her something to take the place of the gin, and I went home to put up something from my own surgery.

It is one of the unwritten laws of the profession that no narcotic drugs shall be given to children; but in cases like that of the infant of whom I have just been writing, this law has constantly to be broken; but for them the cruelty of mothers and foster mothers to sleepless infants would know no bounds. And, therefore, I unhesitatingly sought in the chlorodyne bottle a substitute for the woman's gin, and, having written the necessary instructions, I sent it to the house and went to bed.

At four in the morning my bell rang, and in reply to my question down the speaking tube, there came the hoarse, unsteady, spirit-laden voice of a half-drunken woman, requesting me to come instantly to Miss Milne's lodgings. I dressed hurriedly and made for the house, a messenger having gone on before. When I reached the room, a sight never to be forgotten presented itself.

On the bundle of straw that represented Miss Milne's bed lay the dead body of the infant; it had been "laid out" in the usual way, but was still clothed in the dirty rags in which I had last seen it. At the bedside and leaning over it stood Miss Milne. She had dressed on all her war paint, her gaudy dress, many ribbons and much jewelry, but from her face there was a marked absence of that levity that one usually associates with such a costume. She was looking unutterably sad, and unless I am very much mistaken was reviewing her life, especially her life of late, and finding it wanting. The death of the child had evidently awakened her older and better self—if permanently or only temporarily, remained to be seen.

(To be continued.)

Some Short Sermons.

Supreme.—Jesus was supreme in religion because he was supreme in love. He can take me nearer to my heavenly father than any other of whom I have ever heard. He can make me surer of heaven than any other.—Rev. Dr. Harris, Universalist, Worcester, Mass.

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