

MISS MILNE AND I.

CHAPTER VII—Continued.

It was not until I had read and re-read this letter many times that I grasped anything of the devility of its meaning. At first it struck me as not being more than a huge and horrible joke. Then I read it again, and saw the care that had been bestowed upon its composition. A third reading brought out its logic and careful argument, and then I began to realize something of the hold she had over me, and between the lines of her letter I found the motives that were inspiring her.

When after an hour's study I had thoroughly compassed its full import, my first impulse was to throw it into the fire and let her do her worst; but I soon saw that such a step would certainly be followed by a good deal of anxiety, and, after reviving many projects, I decided to seek the advice of a legal friend and patient of mine who lived near me, and in whose opinion I placed the greatest confidence.

After hearing my story and reading the letter he bluntly told me that I was in a bad box, and that the best thing I could do was to square the matter with the woman at once and get off as cheaply as I could. I went home that night the saddest man in London. A terribly thick fog enveloped everything, and my heart was in my boots. The following day I consulted two other leading lawyers, and received from them exactly similar advice. And so in the evening I sent by the page boy the following note:

"Doctor Rigby would be glad to see Miss Milne this evening on business, if she could spare him a few minutes. I waited for her return with a good deal of anxiety. To my astonishment he brought back a message that Miss Milne would be with me in an hour—I was, astonishment, because I did not believe it possible that she could do other than avoid a personal interview. I busied myself in the interval reading patients, and wondering what I should say to her when she came. Presently, punctually to the moment, Miss Milne was announced.

She walked into the room with a friendly, familiar nod and a "Good evening, Dr. Rigby." Her manner was jaunty, but her expression firm and determined, and I saw that I had a herculean task before me in appeasing her or getting off, as the lawyer said, "cheaply." She spared me the difficulty of beginning the conversation by leading off herself.

"I fear my letter must have caused you a good deal of astonishment, Dr. Rigby, but now that you have had time to think it over, I am sure you will agree with me that it is better to have the matter settled."

"Certainly," I replied meekly and almost modestly, for I felt already as a child in the hands of this woman, with her damnable effrontery—"certainly, if there is any matter to settle."

"There can be no doubt of that. Surely you have been told so much by the many legal friends you have consulted."

"Legal friends," she said. "Yes; I know how you spent last evening and the greater part of today. But don't you think we had better get to business? I hate worrying people, and I am sure this interview is worrying you."

The calm, cool, Satanic confidence of the woman disarmed and unnerved me completely. In desperation I groaned out: "Have you no conscience, Miss Milne?"

"No," she replied, with perfect composure, no, thank you, none. But come, won't you get your check book, and let us close this interview? It is only paining you unnecessarily."

I was, as far as closing the interview was concerned, only too glad to fall in with her suggestion, but, half dazed as I was, I had still too much sense left to put myself (as she evidently wished) entirely into her power by writing a check. I had provided myself with change, and unlocking my drawer, I asked: "How much do you wish me to give you?"

"I have been thinking," she said, "that if you gave me ten pounds to-night, it would help me out of a few pressing difficulties, and we might settle us in the future in a few days."

broken off. However my worst fears were not realized. Nothing was said to me about the matter uppermost in my mind until Edith and I were alone in the parlor after dinner, and then she questioned me in such a gentle manner that I took heart of grace and told her the whole story of my troubles.

I ran rapidly through the story I had to tell, without evoking any sign or movement from her until I reached the fatal letter. Then a slight spasm that ran through her and the increased rapidity of her breathing told me that her native instinct had already divined the end. But she did not move until I had finished. Then she arose slowly from her seat and, looking up from the fire with a slight change of color, as the only external sign of the terrible shock she had received, said:

"I suppose if there had been any doubt about this woman's hold over you, giving her the money settles the question."

"Yes—yes, it does," I replied. "Now, Allan, tell me what is the worst thing that could happen if she did her worst?"

"The loss of you, my queen!" I groaned. And in the terror of the thought I rushed toward her. She gently pushed me back.

"There is no time for love-making, Allan. We must think how to defeat this—this—I suppose I must call her a woman. But now, Allan, answer my question definitely. What is the worst thing that could happen?"

"If a jury convicted me as they most certainly would, I should get seven or fourteen years' penal servitude."

"There is just one other question I should like to ask you, and that is, do you think that the goodness of heart, the kindness to her neighbors that you spoke of, was real or part of her diabolical scheme?"

"And that, Edith, is about the only question that I could not have made some attempt toward answering. The character of this woman is, I believe, beyond all fathoming. It appears to me that both powers of good and the powers of evil thought her worth fighting for, and the battle resulted in a compromise. There is no height of goodness that I do not believe her capable of reaching, and, as we know, there is no depth of devility to which she could not sink."

"Then the case is not a hopeless one, Allan. I think I can set this matter right myself."

"You—you, child?" "Yes, even I, Allan. You tell me there is no height of goodness to which this young woman cannot attain. You evidently believe that her good deeds were genuine. You say the spirit of good has part possession of her. If this is so, I'm sure I could make her relax this terrible hold she has over you."

"Edith, I don't understand you. Is it possible that you could dream of seeing this woman yourself, after all I have told you? I would not allow you to go into the same street with her if I could help it. And if I were black-guard enough to let you undertake such a mission, do you imagine for a moment your father and mother would give you permission?"

For a few seconds she was silent, and then apparently recognizing the impossibility of the scheme, she looked quietly up and with a sigh said: "Well, Allan, I suppose there's nothing for it but to wait for a few days and let events develop themselves."

And then coming over to me, she put a hand on each shoulder and, looking straight into my eyes, said: "You must not talk again of losing me, and you must not think this is very dreadful. Together we will devise some method of beating her, but don't let us talk any more about it to-night."

Nor did we, but held together by that firmest of all bonds—a mutual sorrow, helped by the consciousness, on her side, that I had suffered greatly, and on mine, that she of all women was the most heroic and noble, we spent an hour in the silent, or almost silent, ecstasy of love.

When, at last, a very significant "Ahem!" from upstairs told us that we must part once more, we returned for a moment to the consideration of the great question, and decided that we should await the development of events—that in the meantime neither Colonel nor Mrs. Pelham was to be told, and that, with such love as ours, neither heights nor depths, things present nor things to come, need cause us any anxiety.

President J. J. Hill said he expected that next year earnings of the Northern Securities Company would be \$15,000,000.

The big anthracite coal strike will compel householders to use the bituminous product in furnaces and grates before the winter is over.

over. Oh, that dreadful, dreadful, woman! I shall dream of her. And yet I felt all the time that she was not half so bad as she painted herself. My poor Allan, don't be angry with me, love, I tried to help you, and I am, on the whole, so glad to have seen her; 'tis a new experience altogether—a sort of education. Good-bye, and God bless you, darling. Yours more than ever, "EDITH."

Here there followed a "P. S.—Don't on any account let papa or mamma know of this."

This letter of Edith's came on Monday evening. For the rest of that week my work was done automatically, mechanically, and without a shadow of interest. When work was over I sat down miserably to think it was done, and when morning came I groaned at having work to do. Twenty times a day I took from my pocket the photograph of Edith that I carried then, and still carry.

I saw nothing more of Miss Milne; but on the Wednesday a note was brought to me from her to this effect: "Please send ten pounds (£10) by bearer—M. M."

With this request, or command, as I ought, if strictly truthful, to call it, I gladly complied. I say "gladly" because anything was better than seeing her; and knowing her first ten pounds must be spent, I felt confident that she must come or send for more within a few days; and the relief of escaping another interview was indescribable.

At last Saturday came and I started off for Cheshelhurst. When I alighted from the train I looked anxiously round for Edith. She was nowhere to be seen, but, standing near the station door and watching closely with his bleary eyes each man who passed, was my old friend the gardener. He no longer wore his round frock, but had on the coachman's coat and tall hat; he was gloved and shaved, and I gathered at once that the carriage was waiting for me. In a moment I was at his side.

"The Colonel told me to give you this note," he said. And then in a whisper, "There's a summat up."

"I'll will therefore await your arrival at the Commercial Hotel, where I have taken a private room, which kindly ask for. Faithfully yours, "W. PELHAM."

Desperately anxious for a few minutes to myself, I sent the gardener with a message that I had a telegram to dispatch to town, and would then join the colonel. With this I left for the telegraph office, but the waiting room. Through the little hole that communicated with the refreshment room in those days, I called for some brandy. It was necessary that I should have something to keep me from sinking in the whirl of wild emotions that were absolutely stupefying me. What can have happened—what can have happened? I asked myself again and again. That it was part of Miss Milne's diabolical scheme I had no doubt. "The girl you think you are going to marry," returned with terrible import now, and if I loved Edith before, my God, how I loved her now! I tried to collect my thoughts and formulate some plan, but it was useless; all the future was desolate, vague and horror stricken. But I must not linger here, I thought, and, jumping to my feet, I hastened down the street to meet my doom with the desperation of the poor unfortunate who, from the summit of Waterloo Bridge, jumps from the hell that is into the hell to come.

(To be continued.)

Things That May Interest You.

Cuba has asked to be admitted to the international postal union.

The work of demolishing Newgate prison in London has commenced.

Bishop Thomas O'Gorman brought a gift to President Roosevelt from Pope Leo.

A Prussian army edict against American lard and imported hams has been issued.

A \$50,000 observatory is to be built this year by Wesleyan university at Middletown, Conn.

The Cleveland, O., board of health has started a war on the use of dirty money in that city.

Thomas A. Edison tells a Copenhagen paper that electricity will replace steam in less than three decades.

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