

MISS MILNE AND I.

CHAPTER XII—Continued.

The day following this conversation I was sitting in my room, reading the morning paper, when the old woman who did my cooking and bedmaking for me looked up from the pail she was scrubbing, preparatory to boiling some beef, and said: "Do you know what they are saying down below, sir?"

"No, Mrs. Keats; you don't mean to say that they have at last found something to talk about?"

"Yes, and it's you, sir."

I knew well what was coming, but pressed ignorance.

"They say as how that man Warren has sworn to murder you, and they would not be in your boots for something."

"Really! But he's leg-ironed."

"My man says that's nothing to a man like him; he'll find a file on board and get them Chinamen to help him file it through. But see, sir, here's the boatman with his arm in a sling. I hope nothing's happened."

"Why, John," I exclaimed as the big fellow presented himself at the door, "what's the matter?"

"Sprained my arm, sir, I think; but would you mind coming outside a moment?"

"Now what is it?" I asked, as we turned the corner, well away from the house.

"Nothing, sir, nothing," and he slapped his leg with his bad hand.

"That's only a blind. It's just this: I and Charley and two others have arranged for a bit o' fishing tonight, and we thought as how you might join us."

"But you know how some of them would like to catch me," I said laughing.

"I've ain't no fear o' that, sir. You go for a walk after tea, and stroll down to the little bay; we'll be there with the boat, and I'll show you some fun."

I thought a moment and then said: "All right, John, I'll be there. You bring some glasses and some water, and I'll bring something to dilute it with."

That memorable night's fishing had all these additional attractions, and more; there was the delightful contrast of a night of glorious liberty with a day of irksome restraint and enforced idleness—reform, root and branch—the ridiculous regulations of the place, I couldn't move a finger in any single matter. The wonder is we were not caught, for as the night wore on we lost our reserve, growing more and more boisterous; now in the water up to our necks, driving the fish from under the rocks into the nets, now in the boat disentangling them from the meshes.

Suddenly, as though by magic, the fun ceased; for o'er the wings of the gentle ocean breeze that had crept in through the heads there came the ominous and to us most terrible sound of the "Far Away's" alarm bell. It had never been heard before, and meant either fire, murder, or something equally desperate. In a moment we were in the boat and pulling as madly as silence would permit for the station.

We dared not land at the pier, or near it, for the bell was certain to have awakened the whole settlement, and they would be congregated about the beach, so we rapidly decided to pull for the little bay and make our way by a circuitous route across country.

Never while breath is in me shall I forget that journey. From the moment I landed I had to contend with bowlders, dense scrub and small precipices at every step, for away from the coast, (which I had to avoid) there was no road and the night was dark. At length, after innumerable falls and sore from head to foot, I reached my hut, "a thing of shreds and patches," and in terrible anxiety to boot, and from there I strolled down to the beach as though nothing had happened.

"Where on earth have you been, doctor?" exclaimed the Ancient Mariner, as he emerged from the crowd to meet me. "We have been looking everywhere for you."

the whisky bottle, and for safety's sake, mixed a good, strong glass. Then, as I undressed, I thought of Warren. I felt most desperately sorry for him. He had, not only from his own point of view, but from every humane man's, been treated most shamefully. At the same time I could not help feeling a touch of relief. The man was a desperate character and undoubtedly meant me mischief. And then his threats could have been so easily carried out. I had no protection of any kind, not even a bolt on the door, and there was no other house within earshot. He would have had but to swim ashore at night, walk up and into my house, and undisturbed work his will.

However, it was all over now, I thought, though the thought was not very consoling, considering the circumstances, and pulling up over me the coarse blanket, marked in each corner with a big G. A. B., which, being interpreted, means "Government Aboriginal Blanket," I prepared to go to sleep.

But sleep was out of the question, and so I lay awake and listened to the iguanas and handcoats; then I listened to something else, something very like a footfall—it could be nothing else, and it was getting nearer and nearer to the house. In a moment I was out of bed and had my boots and trousers on, and, stick in hand, was standing at the front door.

CHAPTER XIII.

The step comes nearer and nearer, and then pauses in front of the door; then there is a hurried, impatient knock, followed quickly by another.

"Who's there?" I asked.

"A friend. Open quickly."

In a moment the door is thrown open, and all I can distinguish in the darkness is the figure of a woman dressed in a black waterproof, with the hood of it pulled over her head.

"I am the nurse," she said, "from the inclosure," and in her intense excitement her words came hurriedly and were sometimes barely audible. "I have come to tell you that you must leave this place at once—this very moment!"

"Leave! Why should I?"

"Don't stop to ask why," she said, alternately approaching and receding from me, as though tempting me to follow. "Don't stop to ask why. I will tell you all that presently; only come—come at once. Your life depends on it!"

"It's very good of you, nurse, but won't you give me some reason why I should leave this place?"

"Haven't I promised to do that after? You must—you shall come! You have friends to live for; for their sake do as I ask you!"

During this last desperate entreaty she drew close up to me, an then exclaiming in a hoarse whisper, "My God; it's too late!" she came close up to me, and taking my elbow in her hand, with the strength of desperation dragged me from where I was standing across the path to some scrub not six yards from the door.

"Down! Down!" she whispered imperatively, and I obeyed her as I had obeyed but one woman before in my life, and she was sixteen thousand miles away. We were not a second too soon. We were barely out of sight—she and I together so close that her heart, throbbing now wildly, was distinctly audible to me—when round the corner of my house a man came stealing furtively. In the light of the moon I could distinctly catch the gleam of an axe in his hand, and as he paused in front of the bedroom window to examine it and its fastenings, I could see that it was none other than Warren.

And, my God, how mad, how desperate he appeared! A pair of ragged trousers was all the clothing of his own that covered him; his feet were bare and blood-stained from the cruel iron rings he still wore. One link only had been filed through, and the rest of the chain was suspended to his trousers by a piece of string. Around his body was thrown an old skirt of his wife's, that left one—his right—arm and shoulder bare; his hair was long, wet and matted and without covering.

He stood for a moment with his back to the house, facing us, as though undecided as to his next movement. Then he crept toward the door and, to his evident astonishment, found it open. With one look at his ax, his clothing and the string that held his chain suspended, he went on all fours, and so into the house, and was lost to us.

Once or twice I grasped my stick with the impulse of rushing at him, but the firm hand of the nurse restrained me.

In another moment a light appeared through my bedroom window. Warren had found the matches at my bedside. I could distinctly see him move about. He felt my bed and found it still warm, then carefully examined my boots and clothing. Suddenly a happy thought struck him, and he walked to the bed and looked under it; finding no one, he stood irresolute, and the match went out.

He was too cunning to light the candle, so struck another, and with less stealth made for the other room. As soon as he caught sight of the whisky bottle he made for that, and pouring out half a tumbler, drank it at a draught, and then dashing the empty tumbler into the fireplace, gave out his first utterance, a hearty, deep-throated "Damn!" Then he came to the door.

There he stood irresolute for several

moments. I knew he was wondering where his victim could be hidden and how he could best effect his purpose. He rapidly decided, so I gathered from his movements, too lie in wait for me in the clump of bushes just to the right of those in which we were hidden. Into the middle of these he walked, and taking one last look round, slowly stooped and hid himself.

There was no longer any doubt in my mind as to the course I should adopt, and as I clutched my stick for the fight that I knew must follow, and the nurse no longer restrained me, I concluded that she, at last, was of the same opinion.

The man's back was toward me, but he was on a higher level than we were, and on the side most distant from us the hill sloped rapidly. It was toward this point I crept, and had approached to within six feet of him without making the slightest noise, when a dry stick broke beneath my feet. It was too risky to leave it longer. So I, taking a deep breath, made my bound—one tremendous bound that landed me at his back. Instantly catching him by the shoulders, I rolled him over onto the steep incline. Then I sprang to him, and with my knees held down his arms, especially the arm that had the ax in it, for it still gleamed in the moonlight. He fell more easily than I had anticipated; my taking him by surprise had probably robbed him of his strength, or, on the other hand, the knowledge that my life was in danger may have added to mine. At any rate, he fell easily enough; but the question was, could I hold him down? Could I master him in the end?

As the man writhed and curled and cursed under me, I felt that, notwithstanding his privation, he still had the strength of a bullock. Twice he nearly succeeded in getting from under me, and twice I got him back in his old position; the third time he made a gigantic effort, and would have succeeded had not the chain which was tied to his knee got caught by a stump in his efforts to throw me off.

Some idea of the man's strength may be gathered from the fact that with one kick he broke the string and freed himself. The difference in our weight, our build and muscular development was now rapidly telling in his favor, and I knew that unless help came a few more minutes would see him victorious. But help did come, and again from my friend, the nurse. She had watched the struggle unseen by Warren, but when she saw that we were so unevenly matched she rushed up and threw herself across his feet. In a moment she had found the chain hanging from one foot with its string attached, and the iron ring still clasping the other; another moment and they were firmly tied together; then moving up to his head, she caught the head of the ax with a piece of her waterproof, to save her hands, and as I held his arm down, she twisted the ax from him and threw it away.

The man's face, when he found himself beaten and baffled, I shall never forget; he cursed and clenched his teeth like a maniac, and his eyes rolled like some inhuman monster's. He clutched first at me and then at the nurse, apparently without any definite object in view, but as an outlet for his rage; at length he caught her by the leg of her waterproof and tugged so violently that every moment I thought she must have fallen over him; but it was impossible for me to release her, for all my time and strength were taken up in meeting and combating his many attacks on me, first with his hands and then with his teeth, now with his knees banging against my back, and the next moment curling from under me. My strength was rapidly failing me, and the sweat was streaming from every pore.

How the struggle would have ended had events taken their natural course I know not; probably the man, chained though he was, would have gained the victory, for his strength seemed simply inexhaustible. But events did not take their natural course. Just as I was wondering how I should release the nurse from his grasp, Warren gave one desperate tug at her waterproof, and with a smart snap the button gave way and the garment, hood and all, came from her. Then for the first time I saw the face of the woman who had helped me. It was Miss Milne.

(To be continued.)

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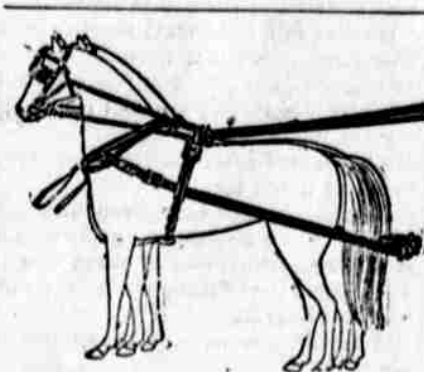
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