

MISS MILNE AND I.

CHAPTER XVI—Continued.

The first part of the above speech I hardly heard, for I was watching intently for Edith, but when she uttered her terrible prophecy, I turned sharply round, and seeing close to me the white face of her, with a shadow of scorn and triumphant wickedness, I asked in no very peace-letting accents, what she meant, what she dare insinuate.

"I dare anything," she replied, as she drew herself to her full height. "As for knowing—but look, there goes Miss Pelham—now I'll tell you what I know. If they have only ten minutes rough weather they will go under. I know that."

"How do you know that?" "Because the boat is rotten." "How do you know the boat is rotten?"

"We thought at one time of sending Warren away in her and a friend of mine examined her and found her to be rotten."

"Then how dare Warren—?" "I did not say Warren examined her; he knows nothing about it."

While this heated conversation was going on, we were, as I said, standing on a ledge of rock well hidden in the shadow of the cliff that overhung us, while below, and to the left of us, the colonel and his party, in single file, were slowly picking their way from point to point toward the boat that lay half hidden beneath my table-rock.

I watched them, half dazed, for some seconds, wondering what next would happen and what was to be done. With this terrible woman about anything in the way of misfortune was possible. Then, as dazed men will, I folded my arms and stared at the ground, and tried to decide what was the duty lying nearest me; but decide I could not; thinking at all in the halo of superstition that I had built about this woman, was out of the question. When next I looked up, the two sailors were on board, and the others preparing to join them. Something must be done, and at once; what that something was could be better decided out of the range of this woman's influence, and so I decided, promises to the contrary, notwithstanding, to make with all haste to the beach. She, from my movements, or by intuition, divined my intention, and as I was just starting, put out her hand, and holding my sleeve, asked: "What are you going to do?"

"My duty—ston them." "And then—?" "I don't know; but please release me; there is not time to—"

The sentence was never finished, for as I quickly turned round to release myself from her firm grasp, I, forgetting the narrow ledge of rock on which we were standing, took one step backward and fell, how far I don't know; I only remember going from bush to bush, from rock to rock, until at last I landed upon a bed of soft sand on the sea level. Almost before I had recovered consciousness she was at my side and lifting me into a sitting position, and then, finding I was all right, she was gone again.

Then, in the misty dawn of returning consciousness, I saw two women talking hurriedly, and one, the younger, gesticulating and pointing to the boat; then the other ran across the sand toward the man who held the rope. The boat I could not see for she was beneath the level of the rock. Then, still half stunned, I remember the man and woman embracing each other, and then the man disappeared and the woman was left standing alone, with both hands held up to shade her eyes that she might see the most of the man just gone from her, and perhaps forever. Gradually, and at first as events that had occurred long ago, the history of the last hour repeated itself; and then, as the blood currents grew stronger and stronger, they (these events) came nearer and nearer, until the history of them, the details and the date of them, were close to me—within my reach, and yet I could not quite grasp them. To better my chance I buried my head in my hands, and held my eyelids tightly closed, and shut out the world and the restless waves, and waited for the coming of memories that even in that state of semi-consciousness I felt were pregnant with painful interest to me. How long I sat thus I don't know—neither time nor space has any existence to the semi-conscious—it was probably only a few seconds, when a voice that was well known to me brought back with a rush, as well known sounds and scents will all the memories I had been waiting for.

"Are you better?" "Thank you—yes." "Can you walk?" "I think so." "Let us see."

Then she half lifted me, and half carried me, up and down the little patch of hard sea washed sand upon which I had been lying, and so rapidly did health and strength return, that within ten minutes I was myself again."

"Now, are you quite strong?" "Indeed, yes." "Strong enough to walk a long distance?" "Quite."

"Strong enough to understand me?" "Certainly."

"Well, let us sit down here and I will tell you what I want you to do." We sat down, and for several seconds we were silent and thoughtful; then looking round to me, she said: "Dr. Reby, you love that simpliciton in the boat yonder, don't you?"

"Miss Milne!" "Now, now, don't get excited; there is no time to weep and no time to laugh even. If you love Miss Pelham, you will readily risk something for her, I presume."

"Risk! I would risk my life, my soul, rather than a hair of her head should be injured. But how can I be of service? For God's sake, tell me that!"

"That's what I am going to tell you, but I am not going to ask you to risk your soul—no woman's life is worth the risk of a man's soul—his only in pursuit of his pleasure that such a sacrifice would be justifiable. You see, Warren has gone with them. I have sent him. That man would sacrifice his soul for me, because I saved him from a crime, and have been more or less kind to his wife. Well, he is the only trustworthy man in the boat; the two sailors are villains, and will only think of their own lives; the colonel is a pompous old fool, and the girl—well, she will make but very little effort to save herself. Now your duty I think, is clear. It will certainly be a squally night, and the coast is dangerous. Now you must take this rope, get past the police as best you can, and follow the boat along the shore. If they get safe to Manly, you have done no harm; if they are wrecked, you will be the means of saving them; and it might end romantically—who knows?"

"Miss Milne, from my heart, I thank you. I will follow your advice to the letter. There is no time to express my gratitude as I might, but some day I will try."

"No, no," she said, with a laugh that came from the bitter side of her. "Don't trouble to do that; put it down on the other side of the ledger, you know—credit account, or debit, I forget which they call it. Now remember, keep close to the sea."

And with that she left me. The first part of my journey was well known and easily traveled, and I could keep the boat within sight, but after that I had often to leave the coast to avoid rocks and precipices; then when I returned she was, in the semi-darkness, difficult to pick up.

I had gone about two miles and was pretty well done up, when I was suddenly confronted by a stupendous overhanging rock that, from its smooth, steep sides, entirely defied all efforts at climbing; there was nothing for it but to go round, and that meant another half mile. I stooped down and took one more look at the little craft against the horizon. I could see that nearly all her sails had been taken in, and yet she was beating fast before the wind. There was not a moment to lose. Desperately I dashed on, and after tearing for a quarter of an hour through the most terrible piece of scrub and bowlders I had yet had to contend with, I found myself on the coast again, and to my horror here was the boat close to me, so close that I could almost throw a stone on the deck. I could hear the men talking wildly; I could hear the colonel now giving pompous orders, now beseeching; I could see some one, Warren, I think, lying down over the bows and peering ahead; I could take in the whole scene, and hear every voice but Edith's and yet it all happened in a moment.

"Keep her out! Keep her out for fifty yards, and you are safe!" I shouted.

Warren rushed to the helm and for a moment she obeyed, but then the rising waves were too strong for her, and she was rapidly being washed ashore. I saw all this from a ledge of rock that ran for many miles along the coast, about eight or nine feet above the narrow strip of sand that remained uncovered by the incoming tide, and this not for long. In the rock I found a narrow crevice, and into this I forced my rope, after tying a good knot in the end; then I jumped down and threw off my boots, coat, and shirt; my trousers I tied firmly around me, and then waited the moment for action. It came soon enough, for two big waves brought the boat within thirty yards of me, and there between two hidden rocks she stuck, as motionless as the rocks themselves. Thanks to old school days on the south coast, I was a good swimmer. In a moment I had fastened the rope around my body and plunged in. I do not know if the hope of saving Edith helped or hindered me; all I remember is the waves, mountain high, knocking me almost back to the shore, and then desperately swimming up the side of a wave that followed; then I remember a strong hand clasping me by the arm and dragging me on board.

I recognized the face of Warren, as he stooped over me to untie the cord from my waist; then he whispered: "Is the shore end firm?" I had as yet no breath to reply, but nodded emphatically; then he collected ropes and tied them into a cradle. By the time he had finished I was restored. Now came the question, who would go ashore? The first must swim and carry with him the end of a small cord wherewith to drag the cradle. Warren volunteered; but no, he was too valuable here. The sailors hesitated, evidently thinking they had gone through enough; so I decided to go myself. Swimming ashore was nothing to swimming from shore. I took one last look at Edith, who had no opportunity of recognizing me, for she was tied to the mast, and then I dived into the sea. With but about half a dozen strokes I was ashore, but the narrow strip of sand was now covered.

"A sailor first!" I shouted, and soon the rope jerked with his weight. "I hope the brute goes under for awhile," I muttered, as I pulled him ashore, and while the cradle was back again we found a tree higher up, where the rest could be landed above the high water mark.

"The other sailor came next, to test the new landing place.

"The lady," I made the sailor shout.

And then, with but half the weight on the rope, I was a million times more anxious. I insisted on one man

standing down below up to his knees in water, and then we hauled away. The rope creaked and groaned, like a thing of life; conscious of its precious burden, it trembled and shook; and then in another moment she was in my arms, cradle and all. Warren—how I loved the man for it!—had placed his coat beneath her to keep the ropes from chafing. I disentangled her and laid her, half dead and wholly unconscious, in the matted ferns behind, and as I laid her there I kissed her.

"Twas but a moment, but in that moment my soul, like an instantaneous photographic plate, absorbed all the picture, and time has but developed and intensified it.

Her pale, peaceful face, her closed lids, her well marked eyebrows, and those jutting roots of hair, and then those clammy lips of hers! Oh, if I could have stayed to kiss them back to warmth and life again! But no, the shout of the sailors told me that something had happened. I rushed up to find the rope broken, and Warren, who had dived from the boat, struggling with the colonel in the water. The three of us joined hands, ultimately reached them, and dragged them ashore. Once on the ledge of the rock, I asked for brandy, and found to my intense relief the colonel had a flask in his pocket. Regardless now of promises, for her life was in danger, I took it to Edith, and gently lifting her head, I poured some of it into her mouth; a gurgie followed, and then she swallowed; her pulse quickened, and then I knew she was right. I returned to the colonel and gave him some, and then offered some to Warren, but he told me to save it for the lady.

After a short consultation with Warren, we decided to throw away our big rope and take with us the smaller one, destroy what traces we could of our landing, and then trust to the incoming tide to wash the boat to pieces. And while the sailors were carrying out these details, Warren and I hunted among the undergrowth for some saplings, that we might make a stretcher for Edith.

Half an hour from the time of our landing we had started our strange funeral cavalcade, and a stranger one has seldom been seen, I think. In front marched a sailor, whose duty it was to pick the road for us; then came the other sailor and myself, walking side by side, and alternately carrying the front of the stretcher, then Warren carrying the rear, with the colonel, who by this time was quite childlike and stricken down, by his side.

As near as I can judge we had about a mile to travel before we came into the piece of "common," where the Manly children played, that separates the village from the quarantine scrub; then all difficulty would be over; but until then our progress must of necessity be very slow and painful.

We rested about every fifty yards, and occasionally gave Edith a few drops of brandy. I say we, as I dared not, for the bracing breeze that always follows a "southerly buster" was rapidly restoring her to consciousness.

Suddenly the light broke through the thick underwood, and told us that the end of our journey was reached. Then the colonel saw Edith comfortably laid beneath a wide-spreading gum tree, and motioning to Warren to take care of her, touched me on the shoulder as he passed me, as an invitation to follow him. Mechanically I obeyed; he had lost all his old military bearing; the night just passed had added twenty years to his age; his face was white and gaunt; but what was most remarkable of all was the alteration in his manner toward me. He was almost paternal now in his kindness, and as I rested myself on a mound by the side of him, just out of ear-shot of the other group, he put his hand gently on my knee, and in a voice that startled me, so unlike was it to anything I had heard before from him, commenced: "Here, then, Dr. Rigby, I suppose we must separate. I am not going to try and thank you now for all you have done for me and my daughter. I am too unstrung for that, and please God," he added with a firmer grasp of my knee that sent a glad echo through every nerve of my body, "I shall have other opportunities of doing so; but I should like to say one word with reference to the others, especially Warren, his wife, and the owner of the boat. Their noble efforts to save us must not go unrewarded."

(To be Continued.)

Where Knowledge Blisters. "Do you know, Tommy," said the minister who was helping the family to dispose of their Sunday dinner, "that, no matter how insignificant a thing may seem, it has its use? Now, take flies, for example; you wouldn't think they were good for anything, yet—"

"Oh, yes, I would," interrupted the youthful Thomas. "Pa says they are good to keep folks awake when you are preaching."

Two Good Reasons. I heard the other day of an inscription contributed by Lord Rosebery to a lady's album. The guests at a ducal country house were invited each to put down the reason why they were staying there. Lord Rosebery gave as his reason: "To please their graces and to shoot their grouses."—British Weekly.

Willie's Query. Little Willie—Say, pa, this book says nature never wastes anything. Pa—I guess that's right, my son. Little Willie—Then what's the use of a cow having two horns when she can't even play on one?—Chicago News.

Not Her Forte. "She says she would like to get away somewhere where she would have time to think." "Well, I always feared she wasn't cut out for a society girl."—Life.

A Perpetual Praisor. "So he writes poetry for a living?" "No, for a dead. His specialty is epitaphs."—Philadelphia Bulletin.

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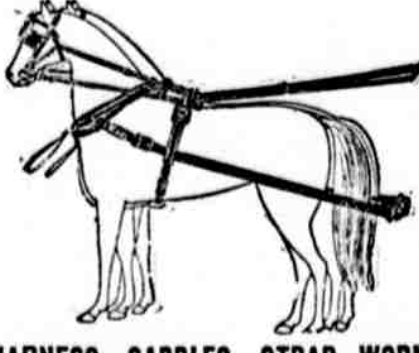
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