

MISS MILNE AND I.

CHAPTER XVII—Continued.

Fortunately for me the eyes of the colonel were still fixed upon the fire, or my rapid change of color must have awakened his suspicions. As it was, I do not, judging from what followed, think he noticed the change in my voice and manner.

"I think I know to whom he refers; she is a nurse in the inclosure who has obtained, by her kindness, a great hold over Warren."

"But why should she interest herself in our behalf?"

(Now for a lie, or the truth—which? A little of both.)

"From what I hear, simple goodness of heart prompted her."

"Really, really!"—this musingly; then aloud: "If you get the opportunity, I should be deeply grateful to you if you would convey our thanks to her."

"Indeed, I shall be very glad to do so."

"Now," said the colonel, in a different voice, and as though beginning a new chapter, "now about yourself. I will rake up no more of the past than is absolutely necessary. I felt it to be my duty, while in England, to place myself in opposition to certain hopes of yours, Doctor Rigby, and, if I remember, you admitted, after you had had time to think the matter over, the justice of the course I had adopted. Your manner at the quarantine station, and certain remarks and actions of yours led me to suppose that those hopes of yours are not dead. May I ask is that so, Doctor Rigby?"

My elbows were on the table and my face hidden in my hands. Without looking up, I replied, "It is so, sir."

"Well, now, Dr. Rigby, I have given this matter my most anxious thought, with this result: We like this new country; the warm climate suits my old bones, and Edith's health is better; the people, as far as we have seen them, are pleasant and agreeable. The one or two friends we have made we like extremely, and then there are now neither associations nor attractions nor ties of any kind in the old country that bind us to it. I am not anxious to influence you unfairly, but it does appear to me that you are likely to succeed in your profession here. Just now you are very unfortunately situated, but after your great service to the colony, it is extremely improbable that the government will allow you to go unremunerated, and I might perhaps mention that, owing to a recent death, if our hopes are realized, my daughter would not come to you portionless. But, of course, the whole question centers, as far as I know, on that terrible woman and her vengeance. Now you will forgive me for having told all I know of the matter to our mutual friend, Doctor May. He has proved himself a staunch and trustworthy friend, and even a short acquaintance has given me a very high opinion of his judgment and ability. Neither he nor I think it within the bounds of possibility that her influence ever can reach you here, so that, my dear boy,—he had risen to his feet, and was now walking across the room to me—"It now only remains for me to congratulate you on this satisfactory ending of what has been for all of us a time of terrible anxiety. And Edith, poor child,—she has been very constant to you, Rigby,—her happiness will be very great."

He had, during the last few words, put his hand with great tenderness upon my shoulder, and I, all the time,—what shall I say for myself? No struggle had gone on within me; I had lost the power of struggling; every sense was in abeyance. Dazed and stupid, I rose to my feet, and my bloodless face told its own tale. The room went round and round, the pictures on the wall danced before me like little hills seen through the morning mist.

I seized the table to support myself. The colonel made some exclamation of astonishment, and stepped back from me; then I sank again into my chair, and covered my face in my hands. Then the colonel came up behind me, and putting both hands on my shoulders, asked with all kindness what it all meant.

"Are you not happy? Are you not pleased? Have I not granted you the wish of your heart? Is there more I could do for you, Doctor Rigby—will you not speak to me?"

"Give me a second, give me a minute; for God's sake, give me a minute!" was all the reply I could make. Then he walked up and down the room, and I tried to collect myself. At length, when I had wasted some minutes in the vain endeavor, the colonel lost patience. Resting his hands on, and leaning over the side of the table opposite me, he asked: "Doctor Rigby, is there another hastily secret involved? If so, be brave and tell me straight out; I can bear this suspense no longer."

"Colonel Pelham, Miss Milne is in Sydney; she is at the quarantine station; she sent Warren with you. She saved your life—but she's there."

"Good God, Rigby! Is this—can this be so?" Then, after a moment's pause: "Did the woman know whom she was saving?"

"She did."

"Is it possible that she will now forego her vengeance? But why do I ask? What woman of that order ever did?" Then half aloud and half to himself, he groaned out: "Edith, Edith, my poor, poor girl, back to your melancholia, back to your terrible melancholia!"

The mention of Edith's name, and the probable effect of this new trouble upon her, brought me back to my senses; by a supreme effort I regained command of myself, and as steadily as I could I walked across the room to him.

"This new black cloud, Colonel Pelham, has one little bit of silver lining that the other had not. I can never forget that I have regained your confidence, and that but for this woman Edith would have been mine, and your blessing would have been on

us. But, sir, we must try and think of her—of saving her from the knowledge of this woman's presence. I heard you mutter something of her going back to melancholia; that must not be, though the gods seem pitted against us. I have a feeling in my heart that things will come right."

"Never, Rigby; the gods are against us, and it seems to me they cannot recall their curses. But must you not be going? It is very late; daylight will be breaking before you get back. For your safety's sake, you—"

"Safety—my safety! What do I care for my safety now? I almost shouted, and for the first time my eyes filled with helpful tears."

"You had better go, Rigby. You spoke, just now, of a hope you had. For its sake, go!"

Mechanically, and as in a dream, I put on my hat. The good, thoughtful old fellow poured me out a large glass of beer and made me drink it. Then we silently shook hands and parted. I did not awaken May—I had had enough trouble without repeating that night's story to him—but made straight for the road Warren had recommended. I had neither the strength nor the energy to dodge the police; I marched boldly and firmly on, with the careless desperation of one who knows that the worst has happened. I think I must have had some kind of hysteria, for I remember holding a conversation with the Fates as I walked along, and stopping to laugh aloud as I got the best of the argument. I lost all feeling of tiredness, and went half a mile out of my way to see the big rock over which I clambered the night Edith was wrecked; I stood on the top of it, and said aloud (still addressing the superior powers): "Look, gentlemen! one jump and I could stop all your fun. Then I laughed again; then I sat down on the rock and burst into tears—mad, hysterical tears; then the madness was over and gone, and a new and better feeling awoke within me."

CHAPTER XVIII.

"You will find it too damp to sit there, I am afraid, Miss Milne; the foam has been breaking over these rocks."

"Oh, thank you, but I don't mind. I am not a hot-house plant, and then I thought one could not catch cold from sea water. Now, can you spare me half an hour?"

"Yes, if we are safe?"

"We're perfectly safe here; that's why I chose this spot. I have walked here for hours; before Warren came I used to come here every night."

"You must have found it horribly lonely."

"It was neither lonely nor horrible. These great rocks were my companions, and the waves were by orchestra; there is scarcely one of them I have not made a friend of and told my troubles to. The poets talk of 'sermons in stones,' now," said Miss Milne, turning sharply round on me, "that's exactly what they are not. They never preach at you, and that's why I like them. Lonely, indeed! Look at that flat rock down below there, with your bath in the center. I have pictured it swarming with water-nymphs—spirits, or whatever else you choose to call them. But you are wondering what made me ask you to come here to-night. Well, I hardly know myself; I wanted to have a talk with you before I go."

"Go! Where are you going?"

"I am going from here; I have applied to be removed."

"But we all have, and none of us can get away."

"But I can, and if you want to go very much I can get you sent for. But, then," she added, thoughtfully, "what about Warren? He can't be left here."

"I don't see how he can possibly get away."

"Oh, he can get away easily enough; but the question is, will he leave his wife?"

"If his wife were under me, instead of old Moore, I would report her as well as, of course, she is perfectly well, and so get her off. But how could Warren get away?"

"Easily," said Miss Milne. "He has been to Sydney four or five times with letters for me."

"To Sydney?"

"Yes," she replied, with a little laugh; "via Manley, by the steamer, and waved a handkerchief to me as he sailed by. But I think your idea is a good one; I will get the doctor to report Mrs. Warren well from smallpox, but ill from the loss of her husband. Then I want him to go up country with her and the children, and take up a selection; I can find the necessary funds."

"Yes; I have fifty pounds in the bank at Sydney, and I have forty due to me from the Government. Now, it is very unlikely that I shall be able to go to either, so tomorrow I will get conveyed to you, if you will allow me, a letter containing an order on the Government, and a check on the bank. You must arrange to meet Warren somewhere and give him the ninety pounds; that will make him safe from detection."

"But, Miss Milne, why give him all your money? Why can't you go yourself for it? And why all this mystery with me?"

"I don't know," she said. "I did not mean to be mysterious when I came down here tonight. The fact is, I am intensely miserable. My life has been one gigantic failure, and now I am beginning to feel it. I am absolutely alone in the world. When society kicked me out I swore society should regret it. Since then my hand has been against every man's, and every woman's too, for the matter of that—and they are the harder of the two. But society has had the better of it. Since my boy died—" (She paused for some seconds.) "Ah, I had great schemes for him; he would have advanced his mother. I read night and

day the sneers of atheists, the dreams of the republicans, the plottings and arguments of the dynamiters. I would have saturated him with them, had he lived, and he would have been a thorn in society's side."

"Then it was well he died," I could not help saying.

"Perhaps—perhaps; but I don't know. He would have been a man, and a man only requires a moderate amount of sense, and the pluck to think differently to other people, to be successful."

"Then, after a pause, and very seriously: 'I wish I was with him without the shock of getting there.'"

"But, tell me, have you no fear of death apart from the momentary shock?"

"None. Had there been half the despair in the world that religious people believe in, I should have been dead long since."

"Why?"

"Because I have failed as a woman, and ought to have been taken back to the factory again years ago, to begin at the other end—the potato end. Possibly I should make good potatoes."

"It's strange to hear a woman talk like this!"

"Why? Have you such a wonderful fear of death, Dr. Rigby? Do you think it a thing to be avoided by everybody?"

"No, not by everybody. Now, for instance—who shall I save? Take Warren, before he came under your influence. I thought, when I heard he had committed suicide, that it was for everybody concerned (himself included) a very wise and politic step."

"I thought so, too; but let us change this interesting subject; I want to talk to you of something else. Now, you must not mind telling me—this Miss Phillips, or Pelham, or whatever she calls herself, are you still in love with her?"

Miss Milne did not look up; if she had done so the moonlight would have been sufficient to show her the tell-tale blood rushing to my face, and no reply would have been necessary. But she sat with her hands on her knees, gazing out to sea.

"Why do you ask? Why broach the subject, when you know as much as I do?" I said, taking no notice of the covert insolence of the question.

"I ask," she said, "not because I want to know, for I do know, but because it was a convenient and conventional way of opening a conversation that I must have with you, however painful it may be to both of us."

"It can not be other than painful to us, and if you will excuse me I would much rather not continue it."

I had risen to my feet, and was fully determined to leave her if she continued. The same feeling that used to take possession of me in London, when she was announced—an almost superstitious dread of her—came back to me with double force.

She rose to her feet and spoke very deliberately. "Wait," she said. "We have agreed that the capacity for doing evil go hand in hand. On these grounds, especially if I assure you that it is not my intention to injure you, I think you ought to sit down and listen to me."

I have, throughout my narrative, tried to give some faint idea of this many-sided woman, but at every eventful turn I have had—if I would be correctly understood—to throw myself upon the sympathetic help of my reader's imagination; and now that I am approaching the most critical part of it, I find myself more than ever dependent upon his assistance. When Miss Milne rose to her full height, and, in a deliberate, characteristic speech of hers, there was, I felt, nothing for me but to sit down; not that I feared her, though I did that, but because she had, as I have hinted, some supernatural hold over me—the result, perhaps, of the memory of her successful persecution of me in the past, perhaps of some congenial peculiarity. At any rate, I sat down again to listen, with something of the feeling with which a criminal awaits his sentence.

(To be continued.)

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