

MISS MILNE AND I.

CHAPTER XVIII—Continued.

"It is no business of mine," she said, "that you choose to marry a girl of Miss Pelham's—"

"Miss Milne!" I said, sternly. "I have no objection, I say, to your marrying Miss Pelham," she continued.

"What do you mean?" I said. "What fresh devilry are you brewing? Are you not satisfied?"

"For, as though the blight of her existence were not sufficient, the horrible thought crossed my mind that she had yet another curse in store for me."

"Do you think," she asked, turning to me and speaking in a strangely gentle, piteous tone—"do you think I am such a fool as not to know that while I live Colonel Pelham will never allow you to marry his daughter?"

"I guessed part, I dreamed the rest. Am I right? Why do you hesitate? Am I never again to have an atom of your confidence?"

"I did not stay to inquire how she knew, for my belief in her powers of divination was, at this time, ingrained into me. She was always either sub or superhuman, and not to be doubted, and therefore I merely said: 'You are right, but—'"

"But what?" "But although your motives may be, and, I think, are charged, you can not help me; you can not possibly—"

"I am not so sure of that," she replied; and then, with a little laugh: "I can do a good deal when I try."

Then she rose to her feet, and holding out her hand, said: "I am going to think this matter over very seriously; I will let you know the result in a day or two. There must be some road of escape; in such a genuine love affair, the gods themselves ought to interfere; they are adepts at this sort of thing, and a fellow feeling should make them kind."

Then she put out her hand to go. "Good-night, Dr. Rigby. Do you believe me sincere?"

"I do—I do," I could not help replying. "Are we friends again?"

"We are." "As much as we were that night when—here her voice faltered perceptibly—"you came to see my little boy, the first time you saw Arthur?"

Again another metamorphosis, and, ye heavens, such a one! My Nemesia, the Miss Milne of today, of yesterday, of many and many a long, sad day—was dead, gone, lost perhaps forever. In the birth of the new woman from the ashes of a mother's love there suddenly arose the mother again.

"We are as good friends as we were then, perhaps better," I replied, in all sincerity. "And I would have added something to mend, if it were possible, her broken heart. But she was gone, lost in the darkness, carrying her broken heart with her."

CHAPTER XIX.

The few days following the interview just recorded were monotonous and uneventful. I got through the little work I had, sent in my daily report, ending as usual with the request that three-fourths of the people should be removed, did my little all toward helping any I could help, and throwing oil on very troubled waters, read the paper in the morning, a book in the afternoon, and at night spent an hour with Warren.

One evening—I think it was the second after the interview—I found him morose and miserable and altogether unlike himself. I felt confident that something had happened, and naturally connected it with Miss Milne. After several failures to start a conversation I said:

"Have you seen Nurse Emily since I was here?"

"I ain't seen 'er," replied Warren, without looking up, "but I've heard from 'er."

"Bad news, Warren?" "There's the letter," throwing it to me. "I reckon ye can read it."

I opened, and read half aloud: "My dear Warren: I think it very probable that I shall have to leave here in a few days. Now, I shall try and see you again before I go, but I might not be able to do so. Therefore I write to tell you what I want you to do when you go away."

"If you are found you may get Dr. Rigby into a good deal of trouble, and be punished yourself, so you had better avoid the following plan: It will try and get your wife and children removed at once; then you must arrange to follow them. I need not tell you how to disguise yourself—you have had too much experience to need any advice on that point. But when you get to Sydney you must keep away from your wife, as she will be the center of a good deal of vulgar curiosity. The best plan, I think, will be for you to get at once the money (about ninety pounds) which Dr. Rigby will provide you with, go straight up the country and take up a selection under an assumed name."

"Settle down and as soon as it is safe let the family follow. If you should find that kind of life disagreeable, in a year or two you can sell, perhaps at a good profit, your land, and come down again to some country town. Sydney will not be safe for you for some time to come."

"As it is just possible I shall not see you again, I must thank you now for what you have done for me. You have been a brave, good fellow, and I thank you very sincerely."

"I am not going to give you any advice as to the future, because I hate advice myself, and then I don't think I could give you any that would do you any service. I never tried to train myself. If I did now, I should try to be good without being religious. Most people try the other system—to be religious without being good. I am so sorry for the loss of your child. Your wife, I am sure, is a much better woman than when she came down, and both of you have learned things down here that will alter your characters and make you very fond of each other. If in times to come you should ever want a friend, Dr. Rigby will do all he can for you."

"Now, good-bye, and may all good luck attend you! Your sincere friend always. NURSE EMILY."

I threw the letter down with a vague, indefinable suspicion of its meaning. For several seconds Warren and I sat in silence. At length he looked up and said:

"What does it all mean, doctor?" "I don't know any more than you do, Warren."

"Where is she going to?" "Again I don't know."

"What about this money?" "It's money she has saved."

"But why does she want to give it to me?" "I think she feels she owes you something."

"Owes me something? I reckon it's me as owes her something."

"But you have gone through a great deal for her, Warren."

"What, I'd like to know?" quite indignantly. "Well, you went to Sydney three times."

"An' what's that aside what she's done for me? No," he continued, with a shake of his head, "no, I ain't a-goin' to take that money. But, doctor, where's she off to?"

"I don't know, Warren. Has your wife said anything?" "Yes; she told me as 'ow nurse 'ad been down in the mouth lately, and miserable like, and 'ow she's set about a good deal by 'erself."

Then Warren and I sat silent for awhile. The same ill-defined thought was probably running through both our minds, but neither of us could or dared give expression to it. Then I rose to go.

"Well, there's nothing for it but to wait and see what turns up, Warren?" "I s'pose not," he replied, and, as I left the cave, added: "But I ain't a-goin' to take that money."

At the bottom of my heart, as I stroled home, lay a feeling of still (i. e., non-effervescent) gladness. She who had never lied to me had promised with her strange omnipotence to remove the impediments that separated Edith and myself. But above and all around that gladness lay a vague fear of something that must come before. At my home I was glad to find Charley, who met me with his everlasting salutation:

"Well, doctor, is life worth the livin'?" "Seriously, Charley, why did you come up? I am sure there's something wrong."

"No nothing wrong; but there's news; the dispatch boat came down just now with orders for the superintendent. He got me to read them, as he had lost his glasses. Well, the nurse is to be sent away at once; Mrs. Warren and her children are to go with her. I have the option of going back to town or staying here. You are to be told that arrangements will be made to fill your post within the next few days, if you wish it. Now, doctor, there's something at the bottom of this, and I believe it is that nurse."

"What makes you think that?" "Well, in the first place, it is just those going that she knows and likes; then I know from something she let drop that she lived as housekeeper for a time with one of the members of the government, and has some influence that I think it's that tall one that wears a great frock-coat and says, 'yes, ma'am,' and 'No ma'am,' when he speaks to a lady; I forget his name. Will you go, sir?"

"Of course I shall go; shan't you?" "Well, I was dying to go the other day, but now I am not so anxious."

"In love again, eh?" "Well not exactly; but that girl—damn it, sir!—she's getting so kind and nice again now, that upon my life I should be in love with her as much as ever if I saw much more of her."

"But, then, she's going, Charley." "Yes; that's why I think I ought to stop. You see, doctor, there are some sorts of spirits that one ought not to get too fond of, and there are some sorts of women that it's just as well to keep away from. Women, if you come to think of it, doctor, are just like spirits, and they have the same different influences over a fellow. You know that book you lent me, 'David Copperfield'?"

"Well, there's a girl in there that always reminded me of Old Tom gin and soda water—that Dora, her name was. Well, now, she was a pretty, sparkling, innocent girl that you could see through at once, that cheered a fellow without hurting him a bit, too sweet, perhaps; but you could get very fond of her without going mad. Then there's another girl in that book; what's her name?"

"Agnes?" "That's her; now she's like lager beer, wholesome, supporting, but free from sugar and other adulterations. There are some women like colonial beer, nearly all sugar; they neither cheer nor inebriate much; don't drive you on to work, but keep you hanging about the caulk. Then there are some women—and, sir, don't we police see a lot of them!—that are like cheap whiskey; they get hold of you and you can't give them up, and yet they are constantly getting you into trouble. You know how this stuff gnaws away at you—what did you call it?"

"Solar plexus."

"Ah, that's it—until the fellow gets mad; then he shies the bottle down

and he swears off. Well, there's a kind of woman that naggles away at the poor devil, her husband, until he goes mad, knocks her down and clears out. She comes to us, we take him before the court, where he is called all sorts of bad names, and fined as well for knocking a woman down."

"Serves him well right, I think, for hitting a woman."

"I don't agree with you, sir. I've seen a good deal of it; and though I ain't the sort of man to hit a woman, yet I never saw one of these devils that I would not have given ten times the walloning their husbands gave them. Why, bless your soul, doctor, neither you nor the magistrate that passes sentence, nor one out of ten in the court knows to what a pass these women have brought the art of nagging."

CHAPTER XX.

There was quite a crowd around the pier as the Pinacore came slowly in to take away her first load of convalescents. They were gathered in little knots about the beach, and as I passed through them I heard the same old murmurs of discontent, but now mingled with loud complaints of the injustice of sending a woman and her children, who had the smallpox, straight from the hospital inclosure, while they, only suspects, had been kept week after week, and, for all they knew, would be kept for weeks to come.

"Who are going?" I asked as I came up with our old superintendent, whose thirty years' reign here was closed so suddenly and so ignominiously by the Royal Commission three months later.

"Mrs. Warren and her family, Charley and the nurse," replied he, with a grunt that expressed his dissatisfaction at the whole arrangement, and added: "There's some favoritism going on, doctor, I know."

In a few moments, Mrs. Warren, who had throughout acted well the part of a widow, and her supposed orphans, appeared in sight. Notwithstanding their jealousy, there were but four people looking on whose hearts were not moved by the mournful procession, as it wended its way down the steep cliff that led from the hospital inclosure. The Government had sent down an outfit of mourning for each of them, and as they flourished their white handkerchiefs (the mother, as an affective feature in the part she was playing, the eldest girl, I am sure, from real sorrow, the rest probably from the force of example, every heart (but four) was moved, and some of the women and children to actual tears. And the four exceptions were: First Miss Milne, who saw the embarkation, I had no doubt, but from what outlook I had no idea; Warren, who from the early morning had taken up his position amid some rocks well away toward the Heads; Charley, who on the veranda of the police station was washing his mates good-bye; and myself, standing with one foot on the boat and one foot on the pier, waiting to help them on board.

When the children were comfortably settled, I drew Mrs. Warren aside to the top of the pier.

"Are you going back?" I asked, "to your old quarters in Sussex street?" "I think so, doctor; I have nowhere else to go."

"Well, at any rate," I said, after a pause, "you had better, directly you are settled, send me a note to the Australian Club, saying where you are, and stay quiet until I come, which will be within a week. If the Government agent calls on you, take nothing in final settlement until I have seen you; take enough, though, to keep you going; Warren will not be able to come near you."

"All aboard!" the captain shouted, as I led her back to the boat.

Just then Charley came rushing down and jumped over the side. "All aboard!" again shouted the captain, and then Charley, with a hurried glance around, stepped on to the pier again.

"Where is she doctor?" he whispered. "I don't know, Charley; have you heard nothing of her?"

"Well," said Charley, "I can't say I haven't heard of her, for I saw her late last night, over at the ocean side. Just as she left she gave me three letters, and a beautiful ring to wear in memory of her; one letter for me, which I am not to open till I get over to Sydney, one to be posted in Sydney to you, and one to go to a Colonel Pelham. I'll give you yours now, doctor, but you mustn't read it now."

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