

MISS MILNE AND I.

CHAPTER XX—Continued.

The crowd growing excited on the beach, the shouts of the superintendent to Dr. Moore, who was leaning over the fence, the rage of the captain at being kept waiting, all combined to keep away any chance of reading my letter, anxious as I was to do so.

"It's no use waiting, captain," said the superintendent, who he hobbled up the pier. "Dr. Moore says the nurse is out in the inclosure and has not been seen since 7 o'clock this morning. Tell the authorities I sent you off, and, if she is found she can go tomorrow, on with the next boatload."

"Come, Charley, jump on board; they are just starting."

"I don't think I'll go," replied Charley.

"Not go! not go!" exclaimed the old man full of astonishment. "I thought everybody was so anxious to go away, and here, in the very first boatload, there are two missing; come, jump aboard!"

"No; I'll wait till the next."

"Perhaps you will not be allowed to go by that," said the Ancient Mariner, with an ominous shake of his head.

"I'll chance it," was the only reply; and with that Charley strode back toward the police quarters.

Then amid half-hearted cheers from the crowd the boat moved slowly away, and we, sick at heart, stood watching her until she became indistinguishable amid the incoming steamers. Then we turned each to our several homes, they to discuss among themselves the altered aspect of affairs, and I to read the letter which, like a boy's first sovereign, was burning in my pocket. At the end of the pier the superintendent was waiting for me.

"This is a strange business, doctor. She couldn't have got out, and yet she isn't in the inclosure. Where can she be?"

"I am sure I don't know; spirited away, perhaps," I replied, laughing.

"You may laugh, doctor, but nothing would astonish me about that woman; she comes down here as a common nurse, and yet she corresponds with a member of the government. Why, I've sent the doctor, the grave diggers, the patients, and everybody in that inclosure, as she likes; and I don't much wonder, for when she has sent for me sometimes to ask for things over the fence, why, bless your heart, she does as she likes with me. I wonder where she is?" he added, after a pause.

"I don't know, but I suppose she will turn up," I replied, anxious beyond measure to get away and read my letter.

Once out of sight of the people, some of whom I knew had seen the letter passed to me, I hurried out of the path into the scrub, and sitting down, pulled the bulky envelope from my pocket. It contained three separate documents. The first was an order on the government to pay to me the salary—forty pounds—due to her for services rendered; the second was an order on the bank with a check (both signed and witnessed) for fifty pounds deposited there; and the third was the letter that was to explain all. Though written in a bold, firm hand, I experienced the greatest difficulty in deciphering the words. The throbbing of my heart and brain made my eyes unequal to their duties; the words were blurred and ran together. At length, after many efforts, I read as follows:

"Dear Doctor Rigby—You will find inclosed the documents I promised to send you; please do with them as I asked. You will, I fear, have some difficulty in making Warren take the money, but when he learns that I have no further use for it he will, I believe, no longer hesitate. I have told him that in the event of his wanting a friend in the future, you will do what you can. In this I am sure I am not making a mistake.

"Now, there is only one thing left to do, and that is to wish you good-bye. I have been a thorn in your side; I have done you great injuries; there is no hope for you while I live. Therefore, I have decided to take the only course open to me. That is, to open the door myself, and let myself out of a world that has been for me anything but a success. You must not praise me or blame me for this, nor think it wicked or cowardly, kind or heroic. Believe me, it is neither. I am sick of life; and even if I had not your happiness to think of I should, I think, have taken the same course; and as far as its being wicked from my point of view it is the exact reverse. Wickedness means something opposed to what you used to call the divine and kindly order of things, and I have found myself opposed to this kindly order, surely the best thing for myself and everybody concerned is to take myself out of the way. For days past I have thought of you as you were when you came to see Arthur. Will you think of me in the future as I was then? I know I don't deserve this. I deserve, if you are just and just only, to be thought of as a woman driven mad by the possession of love she did not want, and the want of love she could not get. Has not my life been made up of the stuff they make tragedies of—a big heart soured with disappointments, a little life of great sorrows, ended with a crime—if it is a crime, which I doubt; and if it is—well,

"Better sin the whole sin, sure that God observes. Than go live my life out—life would try my nerves."

"And my nerves have been tried enough.

"I am sorry to see by this morning's paper that Mr. and Miss Phillips have left for Adelaide; but you can telegraph to them to come back, can't you? Now, good-bye! My first rest of your life be as happy as it deserves to be! And will you sometimes in

your leisure speak to your wife of the better side of me? M. MILNE."

CHAPTER XXI.

It was four o'clock in the afternoon, and I was standing at the mouth of Warren's cave, afraid to enter. For there, on the bed of dry ferns, just visible in the semi-darkness, I could discern an ominous bundle—the outline of a woman's form. All day I had wandered about the grounds, endeavoring to obtain some trace of the lost nurse. My people, I, e., those outside the inclosure, had seen nothing of her, but those inside were unanimous in their belief that she had gone to Manly, some said by the road, in the early morning, and some believed that with her strange omnipotence she had obtained the use of a boat and been taken away. The only actual evidence of her movements was obtained from the grave-digger; he had seen her walking right away toward the Heads. Though it might be that she had intended to throw any one that was watching her off the scent, I decided to start in that direction. I had no doubt in my own mind that she had destroyed herself, but experience taught me that no woman dies by her own hand without leaving traces behind. If a man drowns himself his hat is found floating down stream; a woman's will be carefully hidden in a recess of the bank, out of the wind's way, with the strings and her gloves neatly rolled up and packed inside. 'Twas some such evidence as this I was hunting for, but from rock to rock, from cliff to cliff I clambered without finding a trace of her. I had been searching the coast from the extreme point of the Heads right around, missing neither cave nor promontory, for two hours, when suddenly I found myself upon my flat rock, with my bath in the center. I sat down to rest myself upon the very stone behind which I had hidden that morning when Warren's cave first became known to me. As I looked along the rough outline of the hill above, over which I had watched the moving head of Mrs. Warren, and so learned her husband's hiding place, suddenly the thought struck me—Warren's cave. Was it possible that she had chosen that as her last resting place? An indescribable horror of that place, and yet an irresistible fascination for it, seized me. There was no longer any hope of saving her; if she had sought death she was long since dead; however, I must see; and so waking up the remnants of my courage, I started, with my heart now throbbing against my ribs and now motionless, to clamber up the face of the cliff.

And there she lay like a child asleep, with her head upon her outstretched arm and without a muscle distorted; for it was opium she had taken—taken long hours since—and the empty bottle was beside her. A book had fallen from the other hand; it was a copy of Browning, that I had given her years ago (when Browning was my mania); it was open at "Before and After," the poem from which she had quoted in her last letter to me, only now it was "After" that had been last read. I had to kneel to get the light on the book. And so, close down to her, and now without dread of her, or of death, I, too, read "After;" and if you change a word or two was anything more fit and appropriate? Was ever poem more applicable? "Take the cloak from his face and at first

Let the corpse do its worst!

"How he lies in his rights of a man! Death hath done all death can. And absorbed in the new life he leads. He reck's not, he heeds Nor his wrong nor my vengeance; On his senses alike, And are lost in the solemn and strange Surprise of the change.

"Ha! What avails death to erase His offense, my disgrace? I would we were boys as of old, In the fields by the fold, His courage, God's patience, man's scorn, Were so easily borne.

"I stand here now, he lies in his place. Cover the face."

I did not cover the face; for now, robbed of its wickedness and its capacity for wickedness, clothed with a calm, restful peacefulness, it was very beautiful to look upon, now, and only now, could I realize what this woman was with her devils cast out.

"You will think of me as I was the first time you came to see Arthur?" she had asked. "No," I said aloud, as I smoothed down her hair, "I will think of you as you are now; I will think of you as I see how you might have been had your surroundings been different, you poor child, wrecked not because you were unseaworthy, but because your little sea was unship-worthy."

The reader will, perhaps, think it strange that, as I sat there, no thought crossed my mind of the trouble this woman lying dead at my side had caused me.

The fact is, I had freely and fully forgiven her, even as God forgives. More than that, I had ceased to hold her responsible, and even if I had not forgiven her before, it was time I did now. For had she not died for me? Yes, died for me, and with a broken heart, too. "Can't we touch these bubbles but they break? Love is so different with us men!"

"But you have solved the great mystery now, my child," I thought. "You have gone through the shock of it, and the pain of it, felt the fog in your throat, the mist in your face, and I almost envy your knowledge." Then I kissed her and rose to go.

I stood for a moment at the mouth of the cave, wondering what I should do next. My first impulse was to leave her hidden there, and build up with rocks the front of the cave.

What good could come of an inquiry? I asked myself. And what fitter grave could she have than that, the scenes of so much of her goodness and close to the sea she loved so dearly? But a moment's consideration told me that such a course would not only be fraught with danger, but would also destroy the very purpose of her whole sacrifice of herself; for how could Colonel Pelham tell if she were dead or not, unless some publicity were given to the fact? With the thought of Colonel Pelham came the memory of her mentioning that they had gone to Adelaide, bound for England. Her sharp eyes had seen the announcement that mine had missed. With one last look at her, I hurried back to the telegraph office, where two circumstances—my having charge of the stimulants, and the operators weakness for them—gave me unlimited sway.

Hurriedly I wrote out four messages, all worded in the same way: "The nurse has taken poison, and her dead body has been found in a cave on the ocean side." One, and the first, I sent to Adelaide, directed to Colonel Pelham, to meet the vessel in which I found he had taken passage; one I sent to Dr. May, adding to his: "Tell Phillips," and so insuring Colonel Pelham's receiving the news; the third I sent to the Treasury; and the fourth to the senior government medical officer, adding to this last request that I might hear at once what steps were to be taken.

Then I went to the store, with the object of telling the superintendent. I heard Charley's voice as I neared the place; he was speaking loudly, and had evidently had some misunderstanding with the old man. As I entered, he said, addressing me: "The superintendent declares he will report me for not returning to Sydney when ordered to, sir, and I say that by doing so he will only get me into a great row without doing himself any good; it can't do him any good, can it?"

"I don't think he will report you, Charley; but won't you go away now? I want to talk to the superintendent."

When Charley left the store I followed him and told him to go up to my hut and wait till I came, and on no account to go away. Then I came back and told the old fellow my news, and the steps I had taken to inform the authorities.

"There is nothing to be done, I suppose," he said, "but to wait the government reply; and when it comes will you kindly have it sent up to me?"

Then I walked quietly in the direction of my house, wondering how the news would affect Charley. From the window he saw me approaching, and came down to meet me.

"What's the news, sir?" "She is dead, Charley." "Dead, doctor, dead! Ah! well I knew it; but where is she? Where is it?"

"In Warren's cave. Will you go and see her?" "Not alone." "Well, I will come with you."

And together we went silently across the hill, with the jealous eyes of the old man upon us. The sun was setting now in all those majestic splendors, and with that luxuriance of colors that this country, and this country only, sees with any frequency; the winds were hushed; the sleep of the ocean only broken by little waves leaping restlessly in their dreams of bygone days; when they had been made to dance to the wind's piping. The absence of all life on my rock below and in the caves around, the hushing and silent mournfulness of everything, formed a fit setting for the sadness that hung around our hearts and made even breathing difficult. Not a word was exchanged between us till we reached the mouth of the cave; then Charley, putting his hand on my shoulder, said: "I won't go in, doctor; I can't stand it."

"Nonsense, my good fellow! I will go first; you follow."

And so we entered the presence of the dead, the great frame of the man near me shaking like that of a child. The rays of the setting sun lighted up the cave, and danced upon the wall above her head like a thing of life.

For several seconds we stood without a movement or a word. Then I looked up into Charley's face, and saw the tears streaming down his cheeks. Half ashamed of them, he wiped them hurriedly away with the back of his hand, and shook himself from head to foot, to regain, if possible, his self-possession.

The following morning I instituted an inquiry into the cause of death of Miss Milne, alias Nurse Emily. Charley administered the oath to the witnesses, and as he enjoined them to tell "the whole truth," I said to myself: "The whole truth? No man but myself knows, or will know that, and I—I will hold my peace."

That afternoon the best of the coffins was selected, and Charley and I, with loving hands placed her, still in her sleeping attitude, into it, and covered her for a shroud with the sea-scented ferns that she had chosen for her last bed. And then, when the men had lowered her into the grave and gone again, I took from my pocket the prayer book that now for the sixth time was called into requisition, and with Charley for chief and only mourner, standing at the foot of the grave with head bent and arms folded, I read those solemn words, the divine inspiration of which is proved by their never-failing applicability, and Charley's heart gave out a little groan of assent as I read: "We give Thee hearty thanks for that it hath pleased Thee to deliver this our sister out of the miseries of this sinful world."

P. S.—Upon the last proof-sheet of the last chapter of this book (which, with the rest, has been sent to a friend in the country to look over), I find the following cutting from the Sydney Morning Herald, pasted diagonally:

On the 5th inst. at All o' saints', Manly, N. S. W. by the Rev. Dr. May, A. A. Rigby, M. R. C. S. E., to Edith, only child of Colonel Pelham, R. A.

THE END.

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