

A Man Hater

How She Was Converted From Her Antagonism

By ESTHER VANDEVEER

There are all sorts of persons in the world, both men and women. Those who have an abnormal development of some kind are usually called cranks. Miss Clara Bedford was one of these. There was no ism too radical for her. One of her idiosyncrasies was antagonism to man. Man had kept woman under his heel for centuries, making her what she is, or, rather, what she was, for, thank heaven, she is now every day asserting herself.

"How about children?" she was asked. "There must be fathers as well as mothers. If women hate men, where will the babies come in?"

Miss Bedford had no reply for this unreasonable person. She seemed to need a reply to questions that tumble their theories about their heads; their confidence in what they believe is not a whit lessened from the want of reason. They go right on just as if they had an answer and a perfectly satisfactory one.

Nevertheless, Miss Bedford was a very human being. Down in the bottom of her heart she loved an imaginary man and yearned for a child.

However, acting upon her prejudices, she arranged for her summer to get away from men. She was wealthy and bought a tract of land in New Hampshire upon which she built a cottage. There she went with servants and a few companions of her own sex, resolved that if any man trespassed on her property she would call upon the law to eject him.

She used to get up in the morning early and take long walks. One morning on one of these walks she saw on the border of her domain a tent. What was worse than the tent was a man walking away from it. Miss Bedford started at once for the trespasser, but before she reached him he had disappeared among the trees. Reaching the tent, she pulled back the canvas in front and peeped in.

What was her astonishment to see lying on a bed of boughs a child—a little girl about two years old—awake. One chubby arm was thrown back upon the pillow—for there was some bedding—the other was under the cover. The fine hair was tumbled, the cheeks were round and rosy, in the chin was a dimple. The lips were parted and showed a few little white teeth set in pink gums.

Miss Bedford went into the tent and approached the sleeping child. The cover at the foot of the bed was disarranged and showed five little toes. Miss Bedford could not resist a temptation to take them in her fingers. The child gave a little kick, opened its eyes and frowned at the trespasser. Then, its brow smoothing, it said:

"Mamma."

Miss Bedford bent over the little girl, who put out both arms to her to be taken up. She lifted the infantile burden of flesh from the rude couch, kissing it as she did so, and, pulling its clothes about it, took a wicker chair, the only article in the tent on which to sit, and hugged the baby to her breast.

"Dindin," said the little one.

"Dindin," repeated Miss Bedford. "How am I to get you, dear little child, any dindin?" She looked about her and went on, "There's nothing here for

a grown person to eat, much less for a child." There were a cup and a saucer and a spoon, but not a morsel to eat.

"Dindin," repeated the child.

"I'd like to know where that horrid man is who left you here to starve," said Miss Bedford.

"I am here," said a voice, and a man, with a cup of milk in his hand, threw back the tent flap. Miss Bedford saw that he had gone for the baby's breakfast and forgave him.

"Where did you get the milk?" she asked.

"From one of your cows. I presume you are the owner of the cow I milked."

"That's not enough. You'd better get some more."

The man poured the milk into another cup and without a word went away. While he was gone Miss Bedford gave the little girl milk to drink, which, being warm from the cow, did not need to be heated. As she sat holding the white milk to the vermilion lips she was wondering how the man came to bring a baby on to her property and feed it with milk from her cows. Had it not been for the innocent little baby she might have upbraided him, though he wore a sad countenance. She remembered her principles and resolved to give him a piece of her mind as soon as he returned.

But by this time the child had drunk the milk and was ready for more.

"Is there not a morsel of bread in the tent?" asked Miss Bedford.

"Not a crust," replied the man sadly.

"Go to my house and tell the cook to give you some of the cereal she is preparing for breakfast and such other food as she can find that will do for a baby's food."

"You are very kind. I am surprised. I was told that you would permit no trespassing on your property, so I did not camp on it. I am just beyond your border."

"What do you mean by keeping this child in a tent with nothing to eat except what you can get by foraging?"

"Poverty," was the laconic reply.

"Where is the child's mother?"

"Dead."

"What are you going to do?"

"God knows."

There was something woeful in the words.

"I think," Miss Bedford went on, "that you had better let me take the baby to my house."

"I don't care to part with all that is left which I and my wife loved together."

A tender cord was touched in Miss Bedford's breast. She forgot her notion of hating all men in this union of a living man with a dead woman, cemented by their child. She said in a kindly voice:

"It need be only a temporary sojourn if you prefer it, till you can make other provision. You can come if you like. Have you had a breakfast?"

"No."

"Do you know where to get one?"

"No."

"I can give you one."

"You are very kind, but I can manage without your help, I think. The baby"—

"Yes, the baby. You will not let your pride stand in the way of your baby. Certainly you will carry her to my home."

"Of course."

He took the child from her arms and together they started for the house. On the way he gave her a brief explanation of the situation. He was an artist and, like most artists who have not made a name, very poor. Not being able to keep up a home, he and his wife and their child started on a sketching tour, camping here and there, the husband painting landscapes. The wife had died, and the husband, not having any other abode, stuck to his tent. It was a pathetic story, and Miss Bedford's horror for man—at any rate this particular man—melted before it. When they reached the house she said

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to him:

"It is in your power to do me a kindness. Sit down to the same breakfast table with me and your child. I shall enjoy every mouthful you eat more than you can conceive."

He gave in to this way of putting it. Miss Bedford placed herself between him and his child, and it is questionable which she the most enjoyed helping, the man or the child. He had managed to get the simple food required for his little girl. For her he would take what did not belong to him or accept it from strangers, but not for himself. He was very hungry and ate a great deal, his hostess pressing him to do so. After he had finished she said to him:

"You have done me one favor; now I wish you to do me another. Leave the child here with me while you make your sketches. You are welcome to come here to see her whenever you like, and you may feel privileged to take her away when you can provide for her."

The artist could scarcely conceal the relief this offer brought him. "Since I have only a tent for her," he said, "I have no right to deprive her of the comfort you can give her."

"And you have no right to deprive me of the happiness I shall have in taking care of her."

An hour later the artist kissed his child and took his departure. The tent disappeared, and nothing was seen of man or tent for several weeks. Then he came to Miss Bedford's home with a number of sketches. One of them, a water vista, the original being on her own ground, Miss Bedford very much fancied. She offered the artist a good price for it. He declined it on the ground that through charity she would pay him more than it was worth. But when she proposed that he should send it to a dealer in New York to fix its value he accepted the proposition. Miss Bedford privately wrote the dealer to fix a price she named herself, and this she paid the artist.

Now and again he came in from his sketching tours to see his child, and

every time he came he offered to relieve Miss Bedford of her charge. She invariably declined to be relieved unless he insisted on his right to take his baby to himself, and the longer the removal was put off the more difficult it would be for Miss Bedford to give up the child. But the father would not accept of the lady's hospitality, and this made it awkward. If he would have made his headquarters at the house when not out painting it would have been much pleasanter, for the child was constantly fretting for him.

Finally when he began to get some return for his pictures Miss Bedford proposed that if he would make her house his lodging place when not out sketching she would permit him to pay a nominal board. After much haggling as to the amount, the lady declaring what he proposed to pay nothing less than robbing him, a compromise was made, and for the rest of the summer a room in a wing of the house was at his disposal whenever he chose to use it.

The truth is nature was working in Miss Bedford, the artist and the little girl to make the three one. They were becoming necessary to one another, and a time arrived when the woman found it out. One would suppose that her antipathy to men in general would have at least troubled her at finding herself in a position to succumb. But it did not. The child stepped in to render that a thing of the past. One day when Miss Bedford was on one side of the baby's crib and the father on the other, he trying to unwind the little one's arms from his neck that he might go forth to sketch, Miss Bedford said:

"There's no use in our making ourselves uncomfortable and troubling the child any longer. You won't propose to me, that I know. 'If the mountain will not go to Mohammed, Mohammed must go to the mountain.' You can marry me whenever you like."

After that when he went on sketching tours he usually took his wife and the child with him.