

CHAPTER XVII.

me to the armoury, touched a hidden spring, and a panel revolved, leaving room for us to pass through to the darkness beyond. I followed her, fearing and trembling. She led me down, down, down—down stone steps which were so steep and high that, had it not been for her help, I must have fallen. We reached the bottom at last. She struck a light and lighted a small lamp she carried. I looked around, and saw we were in a great stone room. There was furniture in it, but so covered with dust that it was evident that the place had not been inhabited for years.

"Stay here until you are a little stronger," Mrs Stifle said, not unkindly. "I will bring you food once a day. From this room there is a passage which leads you along under the land for a mile, and brings you out by the sea. You shall have plenty of lights, and I will not forget to feed you."

"In the evening she came again with bedding and food."

"I have brought you enough food for twenty-four hours," she said; "to-morrow night I will come to you again. It is dangerous getting here; I cannot come too often; the revolving panel only works one way. I have to go back through the very floor of the armoury. I cannot see whether any one is there, and, if I were seen, I should be taken for a ghost, and frighten whoever saw me into fits. I have telegraphed to Mr Sifton to say you have had a relapse, and have told every one in the house that I do not think you will recover. They are afraid of all them to come near your room. To-night I shall telegraph again to say that you are dead."

"When she left me, I dragged myself after her to watch her go. She went down a passage, then stood on a sort of lift, touched a spring, and the thing moved slowly upward. When she reached what must have been the floor of the armoury a small piece of it opened outward. She stepped off it, the flooring closed, and it came slowly down again."

"In three weeks I was strong enough to get away; but where was I to go? Ralph Sifton's words came back to me—that my name was a by-word and a shame in the village."

"All believed me an unfaithful wife. Who would take me in? Who would believe my story? Many, many times I went to the end of the cavern, only to turn back. I had been so long a prisoner, I was afraid of freedom. Mrs Stifle was very good and patient, though afraid that she would be caught coming to me."

"She had given out that I was dead, suggesting to Ralph that he should write to the doctor who had attended me for a certificate."

"He sent it, demurring a little. Her son-in-law brought the coffin. It was filled with stones and buried; no one doubted but that I was dead."

"After a time Mrs Stifle ceased to visit me, and I wanted for food. For two days I was without it. But at last I could stand the horrible hunger no longer."

"I remembered that it was Ralph's fancy to sup always in the armoury; I knew that the tray was not taken away till the morning; I would go up the secret lift and help myself."

"I watched at the mouth of the cave where the sea rolled on till night came on, watched it grow darker and darker, and she stars came out; waited until I thought midnight had come, then stepped on the lift."

"Slowly it rose; slowly a portion of the polished floor lifted, and fell back noiselessly. The room was empty; the moonlight came in through the stained glass windows and gleamed upon the armoury. I moved toward the table; there was bread and meat and wine upon it. I took some of each, sitting down like a ghost among the old knights; then I filled a jug I had brought with water, took some bread with me, and went back to my hiding place again through the panel."

"For two or three months I did this without being seen; but one night, whether I was earlier, or Ralph was later, I do not know, but I came up the trap and found him sitting there."

"I stood still with fear; I forgot for the moment, till I saw him shivering with terror, that he would probably be more frightened than I; but one look at his face showed me that he took me for a supernatural being. I spoke to him in a deep, low voice, then glided across the room, and away through the panel. More than once I did this, but not intentionally; I was too much afraid of being discovered. Generally he was alone—once he had a young girl with him; he was making love to her; I heard him before he saw me—once a young man. To-night, as you know, there was Mrs Graham with him; she, I know, has helped him in all his evil ways, and now it is our duty to punish both."

"Be sure they shall not escape," Jack said, drawing Mortel close to his side. "Oh, love, love, you have a strange, dreadful past; but, if my love can make you so, you shall be happy yet, my wife!"

"BRIDGET, did you ever have a valentine?" "Did ever I have a valentine?" Bridget repeated, looking at Miapah, with half-obliterated dignity. "Me! And wasn't it twenty-three I was last February?" "Does that mean that you have had valentines?" "Sure; and if it does not, I don't know what it does mean," she returned. "Why, I've had them every year regular, since I was a girl of fourteen."

"And were you ever offended when you got them?"

"Offended! Dear Heaven bless your heart, no. Faith, it's a compliment to have one sent. I had one this morning. Maybe, someone you'd like to see it?"

"That I should," Miapah answered, "if you don't mind showing it me, Bridget."

"For answer the girl went to a drawer, from which she produced a white paper box; this contained a paper lace-work arrangement, trimmed with white satin bows, and a painting representing a bright red heart, at which a fat cupid was shooting. Under the picture was written:

To My VALENTINE.

I love thee more than words can say. I love thee better every day. My life, my love, are wholly thine: Oh, will you be my Valentine!

"And shall you send any answer?" Miapah asked.

"Faith, and I must; or it's a badly brought up, impolite girl I'd be thought," she answered.

"You know from whom it comes, then?"

"A broad smite widened the Irish girl's mouth."

"Sure and I can guess," she answered.

"And what will you say?"

"Something like this," the girl continued.

"Begorrah, and it's like your impudence, that it is, to be sending Bridget Murphy a valentine, and it's angry she'd be with you if it wasn't that you're a neat laddie; so under the circumstances she'll take you for her valentine, and you may take her for yours."

"That would be the right thing to say, would it?" Miapah asked, gravely.

"Under the circumstances—yes; but it's not well to be eager answering such things—I mean I shall not be writing till to-morrow; it is well to keep the spools in suspense a while."

"Thank you."

She left the kitchen where Bridget resided, and went up to her bed room to meditate over what the girl had said.

She, too, and for the first time in her life, had received a valentine. There was only one person who would send her one. It was not so elaborate as Bridget's, only a box of roses, with the words, "Be my valentine," written in blue forger's note.

Miapah wondered where he had managed to get such beautiful flowers even at that time of the year: she never doubted from

whom they came—her heart whispered that they were from Lord Glenferrius, and she was glad—very, very glad.

It seemed a wonderful thing to her that he should have thought of it; no other man would have—no one else would have been so kind.

She wondered vaguely, if she should consent to be his valentine, what the duties of a valentine were; she ought to have asked Bridget that.

Should she go and ask her mother. Her mother? What a wonderful and beautiful thing it seemed that she had a mother whom she could run to—a mother who had been a martyr, a saint—not a sinner, as they had thought! Should she go to her? She took up the box of roses almost shyly, and left her room once more.

In the hall she met Humpy; his eyes fell upon the flowers at once.

"What have you there, Miapah?" he said, in his sweet, deep toned voice.

"Flowers," she answered, looking up at him. "My valentine, Humpy," changing her mind, and deciding to take him into her confidence. "Did you ever have a valentine?"

"Never," he answered, a flush sweeping his face. "I never had a love-token in my life. And so," sighing softly, "you have had a valentine—little one. From whom?"

"There is no name upon it," she said, coming a little nearer to him; "but I think, I am almost sure it is from Lord Glenferrius."

"Why?" he asked, a little harshly.

"He is so kind," she said, simply, without a shade of deeper colour stealing into her face. "Will you look at it, Humpy, and tell me what you think I ought to say?"

He took it in his hands, and, under the slight weight, the strong hands trembled.

"Is there anything for you to say?" he asked.

"Yes," she returned. "You see, he asks me the question: 'Will you be my valentine?' What shall I say, Humpy?"

"A little shiver ran through him."

"Don't ask me, Miapah," he said. "I cannot advise you; and I think the lady is not meant to answer a valentine. It is enough that you accept it."

He turned and left her as he spoke. She caught a hat from the stand in the hall, and, with the flowers still in her hand, went out into the cool fresh air. The sun was shining warmly; and she scarcely felt that it was cold.

"Will he think me ungrateful," she thought, pondering to herself, "if I say nothing at all? I wish I knew what was right."

Her thoughts were interrupted; she heard footsteps coming behind her. She looked down at her flowers, and wondered if anyone passing would think it strange that she carried them. She did not look round until a voice called her by name: "Miapah!"

She turned quickly. Lord Glenferrius was at her side. She would have to speak of the valentine now; she must, since she held it in her hand.

She scarcely noticed that he had called her by her short, curious name; while she wondered what she should say he spoke again, and saved her the trouble.

"You had the flowers, then?" speaking as though he thought they would probably have miscarried. "Did you like them?"

"So much," she answered; "it is the first valentine I have ever received. Bridget has had them ever since she can remember, but I had scarcely heard of them before to-day. You ask me to be your valentine; I hardly know what that is—will you tell me?"

He grew a little pale, then took the girl's hand, flowers and all, in his. There was no one near.

They had strolled away from the cottage among the great, gaunt, lifeless trees which bordered the coast.

"What I would have led me to, he said, striving to keep calm but how should frighten her, is my lifelong companion, my second self. I would have you always near me; I would have your greatest contentment, your greatest happiness, in being my companion, as mine would be in being yours."

"And that is what you mean you wish me to be when you say, 'Be my valentine.'"

"Yes; that is what I mean."

"It means as much as that, does?" it she said, softly; and yet I fancy it cannot always mean as much as that. Bridget has valentines every year she tells me, and never answers the question with a No. How can she be a second self to so many?"

"Bridget would have different views upon the subject to yours and mine," he answered. "I have never sent a valentine before, just as you have never received one before."

"Why have you never sent one before?"

"Why," repeating the word, "because I have never loved before. Miapah, bringing her to standstill, 'did you never guess that I loved you? Sometimes, sweet, I have thought—I have hoped that you did, and I have wondered if it could be possible that you gave me a little love in return. Darling, coming a little closer. I love you with so great a love—not with a love that has been given here and there, frittered away in fleeting passions, but with the one great love of my life, the only love. Miapah, sweet, can you love me in return? Will you be my wife?'"

"Will you be my wife?" It is a question which makes most girls lower their heads and drop their eyes.

Miapah raised her head, and looked him full in the face—looked at him long and earnestly, as though she would read his very soul, her colour deepening a little.

"Will it mean so much to you?" she asked.

"It will mean everything," he answered. "Just the little word 'Yes' from you, love, will make me the happiest fellow upon earth, just as the little word 'No' would make me the most miserable. But you will not give me a 'No,' will you? You will promise yourself to me, will you not? It will please everyone—your father, your mother, Noel, and—yes, I think, even Humpy. Miapah, dearest, you will not say 'No' to me."

He put his arms around her, and bent his head close to hers; his eyes looked straight into hers, questioningly, lovingly. She gave a little half sigh; he bent his head still lower and kissed her.

"Miapah," he whispered, "Miapah, say it is 'Yes.' Kiss me back, and say it is 'Yes.'"

For a moment she was still, then the sweet lips were shyly lifted, and then there was no need for words.

CHAPTER XVIII.

It took but a little while to prove the will, by which Ralph Sifton had inherited, a forgery, and after a long search the right one was found.

Mrs Graham, under promise of pardon, confessed all she knew, and Jack and his beautiful wife and children installed themselves in the castle.

"The shock of seeing two whom he believed had robbed Ralph of his reason, and doctors despaired of his ever regaining it. Perhaps it was well. He escaped punishment, and he could work no more ill toward his fellow creatures; his punishment for evil came from God instead of man, and was just in its severity."

Muriel soon regained her health and spirits, the love and companionship of her husband and children working wonders. The romantic story became public property, and those who had spoken of her as

"THE SICK MAN" SPEAKS.

THE SULTAN OF TURKEY objects to the presence of a British fleet in the Bosphorus because he is afraid the THE EMPIRE TEA COMPANY'S BLENDED TEAS

would, in the event of an occupation by the Powers, easily oust the national beverage—coffee. Although the EMPIRE TEA COMPANY may not occupy Turkey just yet, nevertheless their blends occupy the attention of all lovers of a good cup of Tea in this colony.

Here are the names and prices of our

Superior Blended Teas

Table with 4 columns: Brand Name, Quality, Price per lb, and Price per 10 lb. Includes DRAGON, HOUDAH, KANGRA VALLEY, ELEPHANT, CRESCENT, BUFFALO, EMPIRE (in lead), MIKADO (in lead), and CEYLON (red and gold label).

EMPIRE TEA COMPANY.

W. & O. TURNBULL & CO., PROPRIETORS, WELLINGTON.

Milwards' Needles BUY MILWARDS ONLY.

Nerve, Blood, & Skin Diseases CURED BY TAKING HERR RASSMUSSEN'S ALFALINE HERBAL REMEDIES

A Permanent Cure for Nerve, Skin, and Blood Diseases. HERR RASSMUSSEN, the Celebrated Danish Herbalist and Weakness of the Spine, Brain, and Nerves. Special Powerful Course, 4/6. Ordinary Course, 2/6. Smaller Boxes, 1/6 and 6s. posted. Send for Free Pamphlet.

Speak for themselves as to the immense virtues of these Herbal Remedies. ALFALINE VITALITY PILLS Are a Certain Cure for Weak Nerves, Depressed Spirits, Debility, and Weakness of the Spine, Brain, and Nerves. Special Powerful Course, 4/6. Ordinary Course, 2/6. Smaller Boxes, 1/6 and 6s. posted. Send for Free Pamphlet. Are unsurpassed as a Blood Purifier and Blood Tonic, and will eradicate the most obstinate Blood and Skin Affections. Price, same as Vitality Pills. His Alfaline Universal Pills for Female Complaints, Rheumatic Pills, Asthma and Cough Pills, Fat Reducing Powders, Varicose Powders, Gargle Powders, Flesh Producing Powders, Worm Cakes, Rash Tablets, Eucalyptus Oil, and Jovibar, Hair Restorer and Complexion Beautifier, Laxer and Kidney Pills, are all simply wonderful. Send for Pills, Cream, Wash, and Ointment. Which contain all the particulars and many useful hints and numerous testimonials. All Correspondence Private and Confidential. Write without delay, and address— HERR RASSMUSSEN, 91 LAMBTON QUAY, WELLINGTON, N.Z.