



Author of 'A Rolling Stone,' 'Had He Known,' and 'On a Lee Shore.'

Sent INTO EXILE.

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CHAPTER XI.

AN URGENT MESSAGE.

For more than a year I had heard very little of Hilda and her father. I had no correspondence with them. It was from my aunt, from Mr Tomlins, or from an occasional mention in some newspaper that I heard of Hilda's success in her first appearances. She was warmly praised by the dramatic critics and great things were prophesied of her future.

Dalzell also appeared to be doing well in his profession. He had had one relapse, but Tomlins, true to his principles, had pulled him up again. The manager bore him about everywhere, even as Sinbad carried his Old Man of the Sea, but with this difference, that while the sailor of the legend would have been very glad to rid himself of his burden, Tomlins was always adjusting his upon his back, and tightening his hold upon it. It would slip down, despite his efforts. Good old Tomlins! There are not many who cling to a shabby and disreputable friend so faithfully as you have done.

The first hint of disaster came from my aunt. 'I can't make Hilda out,' she wrote to me. 'Her letters are cheerful enough, but she tells me nothing at all. There used to be a good deal about her in the papers and theatrical journals, and her father would clip the notices out and send them to me. I believe the man actually thought he was triumphing over me. As if I had ever said Hilda would not succeed! But I have seen nothing about her for some time. I don't know how she is getting on. I believe she is well; but one can't be certain when she says so little of herself. She seems to be more anxious to hear from us than to send anything in exchange. But you are no better. You think a scraggy little note quite sufficient answer to a long letter from me. That is, when you do answer. Some times you haven't even enough civility for that.'

I upologised for my sins of omission in a letter of portentous length. My aunt in reply still lamented that she knew so little of Hilda.

'I am very anxious,' she wrote. 'Perhaps it is all nonsense, but I can't help it. I have a feeling that something is wrong. I have not been quite well this last week or two, or I don't know whether I should not have started off to find Hilda. I had got so bad as that. I am sorry to say that Hilda and her father are not with Mr Tomlins now. I don't know why they parted company. Hilda didn't particularise. I didn't hear from her the last mail. I hear from no one. What a letter you sent me, Cecil! It looked like "copy" for the press, and there was no more information in it than I used to get in your little scraps. I want to hear about you, and not about all sorts of persons and things. But come and see me; that is the best way. Give yourself a holiday. I can't see why you should race through life as you do.'

This letter reached me when I was on the point of setting off for Auckland. When I arrived at that place, I found my aunt from home. She had been illing. I was told, and had accepted the invitation of some friends to spend a short time with them in the country. I had a good many acquaintances in Auckland, but no one with whom I was very intimate, except my old friend Walford, who some

few years since had settled here, and whom I encountered in the street shortly after my arrival.

'Why, Blake, how are you?' he said, with a hearty grip of my hand. 'Glad to see you back again. But you're always on the spin. You're a regular teetotum.'

'I've gone in for a holiday at last,' I said. 'I mean to stay awhile.'

'That's good news. You wouldn't find Miss Winter in town.'

'No; I am sorry for that. Her house is a home to me. But she returns very shortly.'

'Oh, my good fellow, by this time you ought to have a home of your own. Seriously, you ought. Why don't you settle down? Mrs Walford and I are always deploring your unprotected condition.'

'That's extremely kind of you and Mrs Walford,' I said, laughing. 'You married people are always deploring the condition of those who don't follow your example. But what are the facts of the case? Did you ever know a happier woman than my aunt—?'

'Or a happier man than yourself, are you going to say? Why, you don't imagine you look happy! That sardonic smile doesn't take me in. But never mind. We've hopes of you yet, and by the bye, though you don't get settled, other people do. You will have heard of Miss Dalzell's engagement.'

'No,' I said. 'I wasn't aware that she was engaged. My aunt said nothing about it, and she ought to know. But I believe she hasn't heard from Miss Dalzell lately.'

'Well, Mrs Walford was told it for a fact. Her cousin knows the gentleman.'

'Did you hear his name?' I said.

'Oh, yes. Gladwin is the name. A rich young squatter down South. I suppose Miss Dalzell will retire from the stage. It is strange you shouldn't have heard.'

I explained that I only heard of Miss Dalzell by indirect means. That afternoon I received a letter from my aunt. She did not refer to Hilda, and in a most irrational manner I began to reason that this omission of the name of one who was always mentioned in her letters proved the truth of what I had heard. She knew of the engagement, and for some reason or other would not write of it. She was displeased, or she thought I would be displeased. No; she couldn't suppose that. But there was no end to the reasons I found to account for my aunt's silence.

My aunt seemed to have written for the purpose of telling me that she was sorry to have been from home when I arrived, and that she could not return just yet. Her doctor had told her that less than a fortnight's stay at the health resort she was visiting with her friends would be of little benefit. Would I send on any letters that might have come. She was afraid she hadn't been getting all her letters. She was feeling much better, and had got to work on a new painting. The subject was to be entitled 'Parrots feeding on the honey of the scarlet kowhai flowers,' and the picture was three feet by five.

I collected several letters which through some neglect had not been forwarded. As I was putting these together I recognised Hilda's writing on one envelope. This is the announcement of the engagement, I

thought. My aunt has not heard. What Walford had told me had been confirmed by other persons, and I had no doubt of its truth.

The next day I received a letter from Hilda. I suppose, I thought a little bitterly, she considers it her duty to write to me also. The post mark was Strathalvon, some little hamlet in the extreme south, and Mr Gladwin was said to reside near that place. I would not open the letter. What could it be but a formal statement of what I had heard already? Why should that be dinned into my ears? I did not care for such continuous reiteration.

For three days I refrained from opening that letter. It began to wear a reproachful face. It stared at me from my table. The writing of the address formed itself into other words. It appealed to me, it reminded, it persuaded. Ashamed of my paltriness, I took up the letter. I would read it at once, and I would answer.

A knock at my door. 'Telegram, sir.'

I laid aside the letter to attend to this more importunate message. I had not the remotest idea of its purport, but from habit one always opens a telegram immediately.

What was this? The name at the top was the same as that on the post mark of Hilda's letter. And the telegram, the pitiful appeal I read with such eager haste, was signed Hilda Dalzell.

'My father is dying and I am quite alone. Will you not come to me?'

The letter was torn open at once. It was only a few hurried lines. Hilda had written to my aunt and received no answer. She was afraid that illness might be the cause of this silence, as in her last letter my aunt had complained of feeling unwell. She knew that only something very serious would have prevented her from replying. She had seen my name in a passenger list in an Auckland newspaper, and remembering what hotel I had been accustomed to stay at, had written this letter at a venture. Would I think it strange that she should ask for help? Ah, no; she was sure I would not. Her father was so ill that he could not be moved. She was amongst strangers; she had nothing left. She could not have made this appeal to anyone else. She would not have made it to me—to either of us—if she could have helped herself.

I folded the letter and put it inside my pocket-book. I wrote a telegram. Scarcely was this finished and sent to the office by the hotel messenger than another knock smote the panel of my door. 'Telegram, sir.'

It was a message from my aunt, which had been despatched from one of the stations on the Waikato railway line, and ran as follows:—

'Returning. Serious news from Hilda. Send telegram. Say I am coming.'

By this I knew that my aunt would be in Auckland some time during the afternoon. Accordingly, when I went to her house towards the end of the day I found her at home. Her luggage was piled in the hall, and she herself, in bonnet and cloak, was sitting in her dismantled drawing-room, which the servant had had no time to prepare for her reception, drinking a cup of tea.

'Oh, Cecil!' she cried when I entered. 'This is dreadful news! It is very unfortunate that letter of Hilda's should have been detained. That wretched Dalzell has drunk and gambled away everything He has dragged her off to that out-of-the-way place, Strathalvon—I'm sure I don't know where it is—and now he's so ill he can't be moved, and she's hardly a penny left. And, oh, what a simpleton I am! I told you to telegraph and never said where the poor girl was. And I thought myself a business woman. But my head is in a whirl!'

'Fortunately,' I said, 'I had already sent a telegram. I have later news

from Hilda than yours.' And I showed her Hilda's letter and telegram.

'I said that we were coming. I reckoned on you without seeing you,' I continued. 'Her father is dying. It is doubtful whether we shall find him alive.'

'Poor man! Poor Hilda!' said my aunt. 'We must go to her at once, Cecil. We must get her away from that place. How glad I am that you are here at this time.'

I told her what I had heard about Mr Rupert Gladwin. My aunt was contemptuous.

'Stupid Gladwin! I don't believe in any such creature. I wonder at you, Cecil. You must be very gullible. Your friend, Mr Walford, is a great deal too fond of small talk and of repeating little bits of gossip. We women don't do all the gossiping, by a long way. Why, if Hilda were engaged to this Gladwin she would not need our help. It would be his right, his duty to assist her. If he can't do that he must be an extraordinary sort of man. You know the Gladwins' place is only a few miles from Strathalvon.'

'But she would want to have you near her,' I said. 'She would be sure to write to you in her trouble.'

'True—very true,' said my aunt, tenderly. 'I am longing to be with her, poor child.' Her trouble is sorer than you think. I was too sick at heart to speak of it at first. Her father has nearly drunk himself into insanity. That's the horrible, naked truth. He has to be watched night and day, lest he should do himself an injury. She has saved him from that already. She has gone into his room and clung round him, and held him fast till help came. But she tells me that she lives in daily, hourly fear that some time he will outwit her. Life is only a torment for him, and though I would not have the wretched man die by his own hand, yet the sooner all is over now the better for him, for her, and everyone concerned.'

I felt as if stricken dumb by this terrible news. I think my mind scarcely grasped its full import; but afterwards, through long hours, I was to see in imagination the white-faced girl watching her father, stealing in upon him, shaken with deadly fear, lest she should see the awful thing which had become the terror of her dreams, the haunting spectre which never left her thoughts.

'But he is mad,' I cried, 'and she is alone with him in that place, and it will be days before we can get there. Heaven help her!'

'Heaven help her,' said my aunt. 'Even there, too, she hasn't been left without friends. The people in the house have been very good to her.'

'But in this, the last she sent, she says that her father is dying,' I said, reading over again the crumpled telegram.

'So he is—dying by slow degrees. The poor creature is only trying to hasten what is coming of itself. Mad, did you say? No, he is not mad—not altogether so. Perhaps it would be better if he were.'

CHAPTER XII.

ON THE ROAD TO STRATHALVON.

All day from morn to noon, from noon to night, our steamer had rushed along. We had crossed the great bight in the western coast, steering on nearly a straight line, and were at our first stopping place, Taranaki. Out in the roadstead, where our captain had cast anchor, a strong westerly wind was blowing, and the waves were tumbling one over the other in their efforts to reach the land. Our boat dances from crest to hollow, from hollow to crest again; she springs and bounds and flings herself upon the slippery green walls of water as with a rollicking abandon in the sport. There are people on board, however, who say this is a moderate sea. Perhaps so—for Taranaki.

We went ashore in the surf-boat, for we were to take the train here. We can waste no time on coasting steam-

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