

# ERNEST HARRINGTON'S REWARD.

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## CHAPTER VII.

'ONCE MAD ALWAYS MAD, I SAY'—MAGGIE TAKES THE MATTER INTO HER OWN HANDS.



At this stage of the conversation recorded in the previous chapter, the din of a dozen half-drunken bushmen in the bar parlour holding forth on various topics at one and the same time in loud and discordant tones, suddenly ceased. Those of them whom the power of movement was not yet confined to their tongues issued forth. The yellow-painted express wagon which conveyed Her Majesty's mails and any chance passengers from the neighbouring township of Balclutha had clattered up to the door. It was the event of the day, and the inhabitants of the little township gathered round to hear the news, and see if they could claim sufficient acquaintanceship with a passenger to reasonably expect to be invited to join in the drink which is a necessity after a long cold drive, or get their letters and papers, as the case might be. The two gossips before referred to did not cross the street to join in the throng. I know not why; whether from wholesome fear of their husbands, or that their attire showed to better effect in shadow than in the glare of lamps.

'Law! did you ever see the like? If that ain't Dick Porter! Talk of the devil and he's sure to appear! I declare I feel all of a creep like,' exclaimed one, as Master Dick unquestionably clothed, and to all appearance in his right mind, jumped off the vehicle.

'Yes; and what's more, he got a young woman with him, and he's positively taking her in his arms in the middle of the street. Poor, poor Maggie, things is getting wus and wus,' replied the other.

It was true. Dick had a young woman with him, and, as a matter of fact, he had no sooner reached the ground himself than he turned round, and, with his usual courtly grace—for Dick was nothing if not gallant—he assisted her to alight. The vehicle was constructed rather with the view of carrying heavy loads over rough roads than for the convenient discharging of lady passengers. The lady in question, whose movements were somewhat impeded by wraps, looked with dismay at the awkwardly placed steps, whereupon Dick coolly took her in his arms without even consulting her inclination, and lifted her lightly to the ground. She did not raise the slightest objection, but yielded herself to the strong clasp of his arms as readily as if she had often been there before.

'Well, if this doesn't beat all! Now she's standing in the light of the door I see it's Maggie Porter, looking as happy and as proud as Punch; and there really doesn't look much amiss with Dick after all. He's thinner and paler certainly, but he must have got right or they'd never have let him out.'

'Oh, I don't know so much about that,' answered her companion. 'They let her have him on because they were only too glad to get rid of him I expect. Anyways, if he was my husband I'd never be able to rest quiet by his side of nights. I'd be scared to death he'd go wrong again and murder me. I wouldn't be in Maggie's shoes not for worlds, for if he does seem all right at present, she must remember there's many a one has broke out again afore now. They're never safe. Once mad always mad, I say. But here's our men drunk as usual. We must be off.'

Maggie certainly did not look as if she required the pity which these two had wasted on her. Nor did she. She had no such fears regarding her husband. When she was summoned to Inneudin to receive him, the doctors assured her that there was not the slightest fear of a recurrence of his mania, for they had successfully removed the cause of it, and she believed them implicitly. The result subsequently justified her confidence. They took some considerable trouble to explain the case to her, but in her joy at his recovery it is very doubtful if she understood their long-winded explanations. At any rate she invariably cordially refused to gratify the morbid curiosity and questionable taste for elaborate detail of her afternoon tea acquaintances when they sought for information on this point.

Ernest gathered a few facts from her, as, for instance, that her husband's ailment originated from a block of stone falling on his head at the gold fields; that the wound was improperly treated at the time; that it nevertheless healed itself after a fashion; but the fall from his horse had augmented the old trouble. Simple and proper treatment had, however, removed all trace of the evil, and Dick Porter was pronounced as good a man as ever he was.

It can very easily be understood that no more welcome guest than Ernest ever entered the Porters' door. Husband and wife vied with one another in idolising him, and as to the baby, one would really imagine he thoroughly comprehended what his mother so often sought to impress upon him in the choicest baby language, the reproduction of which is entirely beyond my modest powers, that, but for the bravery of that noble man, her darling little sonnie would have never known what it was to have a father to romp with or a father's beard to tug at and tangle, these being, in her opinion, the advantages of possessing a male parent, which would prove the least incomprehensible to his infantile mind. Whether he appreciated what the noble man had done for him or not, it is a well-authenticated fact that Ernest's appearance was invariably welcomed by him with the most pronounced ebullitions of delight, such as vociferous crowings, profuse slobbering, and precocious baby antics generally.

Ernest took all this in extremely good part; but if either of the parents chanced to allude to the incalculable service he had rendered them he became intensely uneasy, remarked that 'it was only a trifle, only a trifle, and that if another word was said about it he would leave the house never to return.' Any reference to that day painfully reminded him of sundry awful temptations, and the mere hint's breadth by which he had resisted them.

Maggie from the first vowed that she would some day reward him for his heroism, but he swore that she should not; that the pleasure of contributing to her happiness had been a very simple reward. A year or so afterwards, however, he had to allow that she had beaten him, that the balance was now all on her side. But how had she affected this? In a simple, womanly way. One day when Ernest called the servant said that her master was out about the farm, but that missus was in the garden. He strolled out to find her. By her side was a young girl, whom she introduced as a cousin just arrived on a visit from Auckland. Ernest was at once struck with a certain resemblance between the two, and more so with the charms of the fair stranger. She was taller and sligher than Maggie, who had grown stouter and more matronly in figure since her first meet her. Her hair, although dark, was not of the deep raven blue that Maggie's was, but she had the same expressive lustrous eyes, the same sweet country bloom, her dimpled cheeks, the same full daintily-curved lips, and, Ernest really believed, even a more fascinating manner. She had travelled more, and her conversational powers, although perhaps not quite equal to Maggie's in volume, were more varied, and to quote Ernest's opinion again, even at this early stage, vastly more entertaining. As to which possessed the greatest claims to beauty it would be a very hard question to decide. Dick and his friend had many arguments on the point, but never agreed, except in the conviction each possessed that the other had no taste in this respect.

Miss Florrie, for that was her name, was an orphan, for she had lost her mother while quite young, and her father but recently, and was left poorly provided for. Hearing this, Maggie at once wrote and asked her down on a visit. She gladly accepted, for country life was her delight. Her father had been a farmer, though not a very successful one.

Ernest's visits became much more frequent, and Maggie soon began to hope that the dearest wish of her heart might perhaps some day be gratified. This was, of course, a marriage between her old lover and her cousin. If a married woman takes a strong sisterly interest in a single man, she invariably thinks matrimony the very best thing for him, and never rests till she gets some friend to marry him. But if her interest in him is otherwise than sisterly she considers him the last man on earth who should get married. Matrimony would not suit him at all. If by any chance he should marry a friend of hers, the friendship ceases on the spot, or rather resolves itself into dire enmity. But Maggie's was purely a sisterly interest, therefore she soon became annoyed at Ernest for not bringing matter speedily to a climax. She wanted the thing fixed up right away. She was vexed that he did not exhibit more confidence. The miscarriage of his two previous love affairs had worked him harm. He shrank from a third similar experience, and hesitated in coming to the point. He felt assured he loved Florrie infinitely more dearly than he had loved either of the others, and to lose her would be more bitter than death, or losing them. As far as he could tell she did not appear to care for him much, but, as it happened, he knew very little about it.

Out of all patience with him, Maggie at last determined to take the matter into her own hands. She cunningly managed that Miss Florrie should be generally out of the way when he called. He did not like this. While he saw her frequently he was perfectly satisfied; now that he did not he was perfectly miserable. One day in an awkward and diffident way he complained to his hostess that somehow or other he did not appear to see enough of her cousin to please him. She always seemed to be out when he called.

'Marry her, then,' replied Maggie, bluntly and practically. 'But I suppose you are afraid you'll see too much of her altogether then. It would, I daresay, hardly be a safe experiment after all.'

'Too much of her! How could I possibly see too much of her? But she'd never dream of taking a simple fellow like me,' returned the modest Mr. Ernest half indignantly.

'I'm not at all so sure about that,' was the laughing answer.

Ernest forthwith tried the experiment proposed. Florrie stood the test admirably. It is more than many do, I have been given to understand, but it may not always be their faults. Too much is doubtless often expected of them.

Ernest always affirmed that he owed his wife to Maggie—that Florrie had not taken him on his own merits, but on her cousin's representations of his virtues and qualities, which were entirely fictitious, as she would eventually discover to her cost. Florrie's reply was that as far as that was concerned she was quite willing to chance it.

I have little more to add. Life in out-of-the-way country settlements is uneventful, and not particularly interesting to the general reader. But there is a quiet, easy-going charm about it, an entire absence of the restless hurry, the deafening noise, the wear and tear of life in crowded cities or feverish goldfields, which, cheered as they are by one another's love, amply satisfies those with whom we have had to do, and in their deep content we can fittingly bid them adieu.

THE END.

## WAIFS AND STRAYS.

No matter how small the scandal, there's always enough of it to go around.

It is as easy to tell a lie as it is to tell the truth, but it is not half so lonesome.

A toper said: 'If water rots the boots, what effect must it have on the coating of the stomach?'

An American woman has shocked the Prince of Wales. She is the electric girl. No one else could.

The longer a man lives the less condemnation he has for the suspicious fellow who mistrusts every body.

'Oh, dearest Emma, may I row you through the river of life?' 'Yes, but you must let me manage the rudder!'

The efforts a young girl makes to find out who her husband will be, a married woman makes to find out where hers is.

As no roads are so rough as those that have just been mended, so no sinners are so intolerant as those who have just turned saints.

A bachelor, upon reading that 'two lovers will sit up all night with one chair in the room,' said it could not be done unless one of them sat on the floor. Such ignorance is painful.

### THE CONCEALED MARRIED MAN.

Lives there a married man with soul so dead,  
Who never to himself hath smiled and said:  
'Had I but single lived till now, you see,  
Those pretty girls would bid me to capture me.'

A young and handsome man was once asked why he had married a rich old woman. 'My friend,' he replied, 'let me ask you what poor young man, in a hurry to get an enormous bank-note cashed, troubles himself to look at the date of it?'

The greatest novelty in dolls has now been invented in Nuremberg, the great German town for dolls and playthings. A machine in the doll causes it to move its hand and write neat little letters on a slate or on paper. Whole sentences can be written to the great amusement of children.

A Yorkshire vicar once received the following notice regarding a marriage from a parish home: 'This is to give you notice that I and Miss Jimima Arabella Bready is comin' to your church on Saturday afternoon nex, to undergo the operation of matrimony at your hands. Please be prompt, as the cab is hired by the hour.'

PECULIAR ACCIDENT.—A young man in Berlin, Germany, stepped upon a cherry, slipped, fell against a window and had his nose almost severed from his face. A young lady came forward and acknowledged that she had carelessly thrown the accessorial fruit upon the side walk, and her parents promptly defrayed the bill of the surgeon who stitched on the young man's nose, amounting to 450 marks.

A certain clergyman of Halifax, Nova Scotia, while addressing his congregation on the subject of the Prodigal Son, is said to have affected his hearers even more than he anticipated when, with tears in his eyes and pathos in his voice, he pictured the aged father, overjoyed at the return of his long-lost boy, commanding them to bring forth and kill the little calf which had been fattening for years and years and years.

A STRANGE CRIME.—An extraordinary case is reported from a village in Western Hungary. A man, aged about thirty, asked for shelter over night from a peasant woman whose husband was absent at the time. He said that he had come from America, and displayed a heavy purse containing about seven thousand florins. The woman, whose cupidly was aroused, cut his throat during the night and concealed the money. When her husband returned he recognised in the murdered man their own son, who had emigrated sixteen years before.

A PATHETIC INCIDENT.—When the uniforms worn in 'The Soudan' arrived at New York, a touch of pathos was added to their unpacking by the following incident:—They had been bought from the English War Department, those uniforms that had been used by the soldiers in the African campaign. From the pockets of one of the coats fell the photograph of a cherry-faced, light-haired English girl. The corner of the picture was gone, as if torn away by a bullet. Across the lowest part of the picture was a dark red stain, through which could be faintly seen the written words: 'Your loving Nellie.' Nobody knows who she was.

AN ARTIST'S REMONSTRANCE.—Here is a characteristic story about Worth, the great Parisian man-milliner:—A lady of high position once ventured to remonstrate with the great man because he had charged her one hundred and twenty pounds for a ball dress. 'The material,' she said, 'could be bought for twenty pounds, and surely the work of making up would be well paid with five pounds more.'

'Madame,' replied the milliner, in his loftiest manner, 'go to M. Meissonier, the painter, and say to him, "Here is a canvas, value a shilling, and here are colours value four shillings. Paint me a picture with these colours on that canvas, and I will pay you one and threescore." What will he say?' He will say, "Madame, that is no payment for an artist." I say more. I say, if you think my terms too high, pay me nothing and keep the robe. Art does not descend to the pettiness of the bigger.'

A HUSBAND'S MISTAKE.—A highly amusing scene was enacted one day in the usually solemn atmosphere of the office of the Commissary of Police for the Faubourg Montmartre, Paris. A few minutes previously a policeman had, at the request of a gentleman, arrested a well-dressed young lady, who declared that she was his wife, who had run away from and robbed him three years ago. The constable did his duty in spite of the angry protests of the lady, who declared that she not only had never seen her self-styled husband before, but was not married at all. 'How dare you deny that you are my wife?' continued the man. 'You think you can have me because you have dyed your hair.' At this imputation the young lady, who gave her name, and described herself as 'an actress' at the Varieties, became furious, and threatened to deprive her accuser violently of the means of dyeing his cranial adornment by leaving him none to operate upon. The Commissary, acting as a peacemaker, sent to the Prefecture for the photograph of the real wife, and on finding no resemblance between the two women, told the gentleman to go about his business, warning him to be more careful in the future.