

## \* \* \* The Story Page \* \* \*

### Rufus.

BY THE HON. LADY AGLAND.

One hot July afternoon, a Victoria was waiting in front of an old country-house; and a few paces off under the cedar on the lawn sat two young women, each with a baby on her lap, while two nurses in white stood and talked together at a little distance.

"I must be getting home before it is too cool for Rufus," said one lady to the other. "I am so glad to have seen your sweet little daughter, and I think you are very lucky beginning your family with a girl."

"I don't at all agree, Katie, dear—boys are much nicer. However, it will be great fun for our two growing up so near each other. Why do you call him Rufus, when his name is James?"

"Because it would have been so hard on Jim to become 'old Jim' at five and twenty! Besides, Rufus is so appropriate to his carrot hair and rosy cheeks. He is going to be very handsome, don't you think so, Gracie?"

"Four months' superiority in beauty," laughed the other mother, "I allow it is great."

"Oh! I didn't mean to make comparisons!" said Lady Katherine. Petronilla is lovely too. Come, Willis, will you take baby? We must be going. Isn't it curious to think of these little creatures' destinies?" she added, as the small burden was transferred to the nurse's arms.

"It frightens me to think of bringing one up, but you'll do it better than I shall, at any rate," replied Mrs. St. John smiling—"you are so learned and clever."

"I shall have to make my novels pay if Rufus is ever to go to Eton! The first letter I wrote was to put his name down at his house. All his forebears were Eton-boys; it would be too bad if he were not. Just think! His grandfather would give in a minute, for a pair of horses he doesn't want, more than it would cost to pay for that boy's schooling! Well, it's no use grumbling. I married a poor man and Rufus will have to work. Good-bye Gracie, and get strong soon."

Petronilla St. John became the eldest of a numerous family, while James Fitz Gerald Ormiston, commonly called Rufus, remained an only child; but, as he grew older, he spent so much time in the St. John nursery and garden that he hardly knew the meaning of loneliness, and when he went to school he thought quite as much of seeing "Aunt Gracie" as he called her, and Petronilla, as of meeting his own parents.

The respective mothers smiled at first over the extreme attachment of these two young creatures, but when Rufus became a public schoolboy, and still preferred an afternoon with Petronilla to any other amusement, they began to wonder how it would end. "No man ever does marry his first love," said Lady Katherine. "And it's a pity to separate them while they are happy together." So matters were allowed to drift and the first cloud on the boy-and-girl friendship came when they were both about sixteen. It was the fourth of June at Eton, and Mrs. St. John brought Petronilla to see the cricket match and the procession of boats. Rufus, of course, was in attendance. His mother was too busy to come—a frequent occurrence—but, with his waistcoat and pale blue tie, he was radiant, as he conducted Aunt Gracie and Petronilla round the sights of Eton. He was a "wet bob," and therefore looked down on cricket, as indeed he did more or less on all games, perhaps because he did not play them well. Petronilla, however, was interested in the cricket, and her enthusiasm was particularly excited by the batting of one tall boy, who made by far the highest score of the eleven.

"Who is he, Rufus?" she cried.

Rufus rather grudgingly gave the required information. "That chap? He was my tag-master once. He is at Tutor's. His name is Hammond. His father is an Earl or something. Oh yes! he can play cricket, but he's an awful fool. He is only two Runs ahead of me, and he's leaving this half."

"He is batting beautifully," said Petronilla; and Rufus raged.

The worst of it was that, at tea in his tutor's garden, Mrs. St. John met Lady Fordyce, Hammond's mother, whom she had known years before, and Petronilla and the object of her admiration were introduced to each other, and for quite ten minutes Rufus was left out in the cold.

Who shall picture the rage and despair of a boy, on the verge of manhood, when he discovers that the being whom nature herself teaches him to reverence above all others—his mother—has descended to the level of the gutter women from whom one turns shuddering away! Yet it has come to this. Lady Katherine—brilliant, witty, married to a husband who knew better how to spend money than to make it fond of society, very nervous and excitable, craving incessant movement and variety—took first to drugs, and then to dram-drinking, and at length was discovered one day by her son in such a

condition that no doubt was possible as to its cause. Rufus wandered about for hours in his misery, and at length found his way, almost unconsciously, to Mrs. St. John's house, but even Petronilla's society was more than he could bear. "Aunt Gracie" soon guessed the cause of his trouble, though he could not talk of it, and soothed and comforted him as much as she dared. Poor Lady Katherine's falling had long been no secret to her, and she had often wondered whether the boy would find it out. But he was on the eve of starting for Oxford, and it was in an evil mood that he took up his residence as an undergraduate.

It was so easy for people to tell him to be good, and work! Why should he be good? Even his mother wasn't. Why should he work? His father never did a stroke. He was much cleverer than heaps of other chaps. He could enjoy himself first, and perhaps work later if he chose. His grandfather had paid for him at Eton and was paying for him at Oxford; well, his grandfather was rich and could afford it. As for him, he meant to have a good time.

It must be remembered he was a very handsome lad, with bright blue eyes, a winning smile and the graciousness of a Prince. He could pull a good oar, ride anything you like to put him on, and drive a team, and he could tell you the odds on any big race you chose to name. Yet for a while he kept straight. He loved Petronilla—loved her as a sister, perhaps, or did not think yet of anything else—and her influence shielded him from harm, while the remembrance of happy days with her took the taste out of coarser pleasures.

Mrs. St. John brought Petronilla to see Oxford, when Rufus had been there about a year, during the summer term, as owing to the South African war there were no commemorative festivities. They had various cousins and friends there besides Rufus, scattered about in different colleges, but the boy was jealous of none of them, until young Lord Hammond re-appeared one day, claiming acquaintance with Mrs. St. John and her daughter.

Petronilla at sixteen had been a tall strip of a girl who had outgrown all her frocks and did not quite know how to manage her limbs; at nearly twenty she had grown rounded and graceful, and though not strictly pretty, had the charm that is so undefinable yet unmistakable, of perfect purity and simplicity. Hammond was no longer an undergraduate, he had scraped through somehow, Rufus said, and taken his degree a year before; but he was back in his old haunts to look at the eights and to take part in a cricket match. Petronilla went to see that match, and discovered that his batting had improved, and his bowling made immense strides, since she had watched him play at Eton, four years before. She told him so, and he was pleased. Rufus heard, and was not pleased. Poor Rufus! Petronilla was coming to the age when maidens like something older than themselves. Four months was not sufficient difference. Petronilla, with all her innocence, was more mature than he. So he struggled to be a man, and in the effort, his innocent boyhood passed away.

Rufus did not pass his Moderations. He hardly pretended to try. The college authorities remonstrated with him, his tutor reasoned with him, but all to no purpose. If Petronilla had cared, he said to himself it would be different, but she was always about in London with that fellow Hammond—he supposed she was going to be married to him soon, and then he (Rufus) did not care what became of him. His home was unhappy, and with his second home bereft of its chief charm, he might as well go straight to the dogs at once. So he missed his chapels, was out late at night, went to race meetings, joined the rowdiest set in the university, and after one or two warnings was finally requested to depart, and not to reappear. Formerly, excuses rose glibly to his tongue; now he swallowed his disgrace in silence and apparent indifference, packed his traps and went straight up to his grandfather's in London. The old gentleman was very indignant, and after a stormy interview Rufus strolled into the park, very pale, and with dark lines under his eyes and dark thoughts in his heart. He was walking along, looking at no one, his hat pressed down over his eyes, when Petronilla's voice arrested him. She was crossing the road with her mother and passed close to Rufus, who raised his head and met her eyes.

"Oh Rufus!" she cried, gladly, "where have you been?"

He did not answer at first, but turned and walked beside her; then he said: "Is it true about you? Am I to congratulate you?"

She lifted a radiant face. "Who told you? It was only settled last night. And isn't it funny? Don't you remember when we were children, I used always to say I would either be an army sister and nurse you when you were wounded, or I would marry an Earl with an historic castle? Well, I am doing the nearest I can to the second," and she laughed gaily.

"You might do the first, too," he said "for I am going to South Africa."

"You are? Why? Have you left Oxford?"

"Yes, Oxford and I have had enough of each other. They told me clear out!"

"Oh, Rufus! have you been naughty?"

"Very naughty, so I am going to exile myself, and try and get killed, and a good riddance too."

"Nonsense! don't talk like that. You will come back a hero with medals and ribbons," she answered.

Her voice trembled a little, but, as he thought bitterly, she did not ask him to stay; yet he softened as he looked at her, and wondered if it was not worth while to pull himself together, so that Petronilla might remain his friend, even if she were never his wife.

Before many weeks had passed Rufus was in the Transvaal. The need for men was urgent, and a well-grown lad who could ride and shoot was eagerly accepted. For two years he lived the hard but healthy life of troops in the open, under discipline, with the stimulus of possible fighting to keep them keen, and the occasional experience of a skirmish to keep them steady. His correspondence with home was irregular; his father never wrote; his mother at first scrawled an occasional somewhat incoherent letter, then ceased writing altogether. Mrs. St. John and Petronilla wrote now and then. The marriage had not come off quite so soon as was expected. Something, apparently, had not been quite satisfactory, and Lord Hammond had gone off on a voyage round the world. Meanwhile, Petronilla seemed somewhat depressed, and her letters were short and did not tell Rufus much of what was passing in her mind.

As for Rufus, the change, the hard work and hard fare, was just what he needed. He learnt to think of others instead of himself; his old boyish spirits revived and he was soon the idol of his comrades. He escaped fever, and the end of the war was in sight before he received even a scratch, but his turn came at last; a bullet, fired at short range from behind a kopje which his company was just about to occupy, shattered his ankle and left him helpless on the veldt, and while he was lying there another shot caught him and passed through his lung. The lung healed with wonderful rapidity, but the ankle was more troublesome; more than once the doctors feared it would be necessary to amputate, and at last he was sent home, in order that the London surgeons might see what could be done.

By this time, he was very ill, and when he was landed at Southampton he was only half-conscious and quite incapable of asking any questions. Lady Katherine—though he did not know it—had died two or three months before, and Mr. Ormiston had been forced to exert himself and correspond with the War Office authorities, and now went down to meet the transport and see his son taken to a London hospital. It was there decided that the removal of the injured foot was indispensable, and Mrs. St. John, who was in London with her daughter, received permission to see him a day or two after the operation had been performed. She could hardly keep back her tears when she recognized in the sunburnt, hollow-cheeked man who lay silently gazing at her, with a smile in his blue eyes, but too weak to speak, the fair, ruddy, talkative lad who had left England two short years before; but she sat by his bed, and spoke cheerily to him for a few moments, and as she rose to go he laid his thin hand on hers, and whispered "Petronilla."

"Petronilla shall come tomorrow," she said, and the blue eyes dilated.

Rufus did not sleep that night, and his fever was so high that the nurse was inclined to forbid visitors, but the piteous contraction of the eyes and mouth at the suggestion made her relent, and Petronilla was admitted for five minutes.

Petronilla, too, had suffered. The radiant freshness of her early youth was gone, but she seemed lovelier than ever in Rufus' eyes as she came and stood by his pillow. There was one question he dared not ask. "Take off your gloves," he whispered. She obeyed, wondering, and stroked his hot forehead with her right hand, while he stared at her left. She wore no wedding ring. "Where is Hammond?" he gasped. Now she understood.

"Married to a girl in Australia," she said, between smiles and tears.

"Thank God," said Rufus. "Kiss me, Petronilla," and he turned and went to sleep.—Sel.

\* \* \*

### Dog Stories.

The following stories are all from a wonderfully interesting book called "My dogs in the Northland." This is certainly a volume that every boy will want to read, describing, as it does, the various dogs of different breeds