

TWO

THE RED ASCENT

BY ESTHER W. NEILL

CHAPTER XIV—CONTINUED

"Oh! hear that," cried Betty tarting from her seat. "Women are screaming—something dreadful must have happened. Go on, Mr. Wilcox. Let us go and see."

"We're on the wrong road. I'll have to go around. Machine will never get across that stubble field; there's a ditch in the way."

"Oh! look—look!" cried Betty. "There's a woman running to meet us. It's Jess Fielding. I wonder where is Dick?"

Jefferson was heedless of her question. He was out of the car hastening to meet the girl who came flying toward them. Her blue dress was soiled with coal dust; her heavy hair, shedding all hair pins in her mad flight, hung about her shoulders.

"Dick—Dick is down there," she cried breathlessly, pointing to the mine. "What can we do? Oh, God! how can we save him?"

Jefferson held out his arm to support her. She was trembling with terror. "Down—down where?" and even as he asked the question, he had guessed at most of the truth.

"He—went—down—save a boy!" he sobbed. "The mine is on fire—the other men—are out—and they are dead, burned alive, and Dick—Dick—is down there. Don't let them seal the mine—don't let them bury him alive. Oh, come—come quickly, they say there is no hope—that he is dead!"

"Dead," repeated the Colonel, and he seemed to shrivel suddenly into a feeble old man. "Dick dead in that hole?"

Betty sank down in the coarse grass and covered her face with her hands. "You're dreaming, Jessica. Oh, tell us it is not true."

"Come—come," she said wildly, pulling Jefferson by the hand. "You must not let them shut the mine—they will not listen to me. Come—come."

Jefferson moved mechanically. He could not speak. His throat was choked; his feet were leaden weights. Jessica leaned upon him for support, sobbing pitifully, her explanation growing more and more incoherent. They had nearly reached the shaft when they heard a glad shout break from the wailing crowd, and they saw Richard rise, as if by a miracle, from the earth itself. He staggered from the escape shaft, which was about two hundred yards distant, with Peter, the mule boy, strapped on his back.

With a wild cry of exultation, Jefferson rushed forward. The crowd surged around him. For a moment Richard stood like one bewildered, blinded by the sudden glare of the sunlight, then, falling down upon the ground, he murmured weakly:

"Unstrap the boy. I—cannot—help."

The ropes were cut by eager hands, the mine doctor hurried to his aid, glad of an opportunity to show his skill after his ineffectual efforts to revive life in those stricken bodies on the hillside. Peter's mother was pushed to her son's side. She knelt beside him inarticulate in her joy. After the suspense, the dread, the certainty of death, she was emotionally exhausted.

The little foreign doctor bent over Richard solicitously, and administered his restoratives. "He will live, thank God," he said triumphantly. He is a hero, and he will live." Then as he turned to Peter, the boy sat up.

"I'm all right," he said in his shrill, quavering voice, "twas my foot. What yer cryin' about mother?—'tain't nothin' but my foot. It got twisted somehow and I fell. He got the cage goin' up and I hollered. He came back; he roped me on his back; said 'twan't no other way of gettin' up them steps."

The crowd pressed closer to hear. Here was some one at last who could tell them how the tragedy had occurred—some one who could reveal his resurrection. The boy wanted to talk. After the blackness, the isolation of the mine, he found relief in the sound of his own voice.

"I went to sleep—must have fallen asleep—forgot about the holiday. That that torch must have dripped kerosene on to the hay car. First thing I knew it was as if tried to push the car to the pump near the mule stable to get water, but the car was too heavy; then I saw the timbers were afire. I was a-runnin' for the escape shaft to hike up them steps when my foot turned. Reckon it's broke, Doc. Reckon I'd been burned same as a wisp of straw if that man hadn't heard me when I hollered."

He went on talking all the time the doctor was bandaging the foot, crying out once or twice with the pain, and he watched anxiously as course, on my digestion! Then, of some of the men improvised a litter to carry Richard to the automobile.

Jessica suggested that they bring Richard to her house, but the Colonel, once assured that his son was alive, took command of the situation. He did not propose to accept the Fielding hospitality if he could avoid it.

"We will take him home," he said. "I will ride Spangles, Mr. Wilcox, drive the car as slowly as you can. Doctor, will you go with us?"

The doctor assented willingly. Patient as such apparent distinction was a rarity in his professional experience. The dead men lay in a rigid line beyond his help; Richard was the only one left in need of his service.

Jessica watched the automobile as it disappeared in the black dust of the beaten roadway. She felt weak and faint, but, in Richard's greater need, no one had given a thought to her. She seemed to stand alone and desolate in the midst of the crowd. Had she the strength to mount her horse and go home, away from this scene of horror, far away, where she could not hear the convulsive sobbing of the three women who had been widowed by their husbands' heroism? Or were there more than three who had joined Richard in his work of rescue? Some one had told her, even in the midst of the excitement, that the Italians had no one here to mourn them; they were newcomers. Somewhere perhaps in the purpling vineyards of their native land mothers and sisters waited hopefully for glad tidings that would never come.

Some compelling force drove Jessica back to the group that surrounded the dead men. The bodies, so strong and full of health half an hour ago, now lay impotent in their stillness, their blackened faces upturned to the smiling summer sky. The three wives, one with a baby at her breast, were now sobbing softly. Life for them had held little else than tragedy; the lines around their youthful mouths showed power to suffer and endure.

Tenderly Jessica lifted the baby from the aching arms of the mother. "Come home with me," she said to the weeping women. "We can do nothing here. You and the little children come home with me."

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"We will take him home," he said. "I will ride Spangles, Mr. Wilcox, drive the car as slowly as you can. Doctor, will you go with us?"

"The Colonel's blooming under all this publicity. You've been a great political asset to the Colonel. You know old Senator Wurth is dead, and he'd burned if they haven't asked the Colonel to go to Washington and fill out his unexpired term."

Dick turned weakly on his pillow. "Is he going?" he asked. "Going! Of course he's going. The Colonel may not agree to what his party demands, but he's got very definite views that the country is going to the bowwows, and he wants to tell a few of the Senators what he thinks of them. I think I'll spend the winter in Washington, and engage a permanent seat in the Senate gallery."

Richard closed his eyes wearily, and was silent for a long time. Then he said: "If the Colonel is provided for we can drop that Texas claim."

"Drop it!" Jefferson ran his fingers through his yellow hair until it bristled. "I'd like to tell you a thing or two, if I wasn't afraid you would have a relapse."

"I'm not relapsing." "Well, just settle down there and keep calm. Think you'll get a fever if I tell you that the Texas claim is settled? That we compromised for half a million out of court?"

Richard's fingers tightened on those of his friend. "Oh, Jeff, you didn't—don't when I was—like this? I don't think it was fair."

TO BE CONTINUED

THE TENOR'S CHRISTMAS

The idol worshippers who had fallen prostrate before Norman Valenta when, on the opening night of the opera, he had been declared one of the world's greatest tenors, would have been astounded the next day had they seen him ringing for admission to the Home for Aged Poor. He was a handsome man. That alone made him admired, but nobility of bearing, joined to those half-mythical regions where the public makes its great artists seem quite divine.

He stamped his feet impatiently. The biting December air made every moment of delay almost unbearable. Besides, the great Valenta was accustomed to being obeyed promptly, owing to his reputation of being a czar even with his superiors.

At last the door was opened, and a little old Sister stepped aside to let in the visitor. "Good morning, Sister. Will you be kind enough to tell Sister Hildegarde I would like to see her?"

It was the tone of a dictator to which the little Sister did not take too kindly. "Sister is very busy," she replied, her French accent predominant. "She is getting ready for Christmas. Is it important?"

"Yes; tell her that Mr. Norman—here—he drew out his card—hand this to her, please."

The Sister took the card, showed the visitor into the reception room, and silently slipped away, delighted at being freed from this regal personage in his fine cloth and fur coat as he took in at a glance the simplicity of the room, its plain furniture, its extraordinary white walls, whose whiteness was even intensified by the several gaudy prints that were meant to adorn it. Valenta sneered at it involuntarily. It was oppressive to him, who was accustomed to the luxury of the best hotels, who was continually besieged by society to accept of his hospitality, and who had as his companions artists of world-wide celebrity. Little wonder if after five years of such continued adoration he was rather bored at being compelled to wait in a narrow cell which was dignified by the name of reception room. A feeling of relief came to him as he heard footsteps in the corridor without. One would have thought the handsome face took a smile, if the singer could smile in such environments. He "I'm glad you've waked up at last."

"Have you been here all the time?" "Didn't expect me to leave you in this fix? I've been running the farm."

Richard smiled faintly. "Universal genius, eh?" "Jefferson grinned. "You've guessed it. Now don't talk, or that nurse will blame me for a relapse."

"Then you do the talking," said Richard. "Tell me what has happened all this time. Is that mule boy all right?"

"Jefferson took a chair beside the bed, and began to smooth Richard's bare arm soothingly. "Couldn't kill him with an axe," he answered. "Been here every day since you've been sick; brought all kinds of messy dishes that his mother cooked for you. Nurse wouldn't let you eat them, so she gave some of them to me—don't know why! Has done signs on my digestion! Then, of some of the neighbors have hovered round. Sometimes I've felt I was in the midst of a county delegation—just like a presidential candidate shaking hands with the gentry. You've had a carload of jellies sent you, and a hot-house of flowers. You're a hero, you know, though your heroism isn't your fault. It's inherited from your father, and your great-grandfather, and the Lord knows who! This is a great part of the country—nothing seems worth while unless it's inherited."

"And the Colonel?" "You don't forget, John. Yet you were young, then, and you've been away from home so long."

"Ten years abroad. It's a long time. How strange you do look in that regalia. And to think of your coming to a place like this. Why Kitty, I was dumfounded. It's eight years now and I'm not used to it yet. How can you stick to it, taking care of old men and women, doing all that is disagreeable, oftentimes disgusting, and saying you are happy at it? It's beyond me."

"It's the vocation, John. We all may be old some day and abandoned. It's a blessed work to do for these poor old souls. If our humble dwelling receives His own will He not also come and make it a New Bethlehem?"

"What a preacher you are, Kitty. If it runs in the family that way I think I've mistaken my vocation."

"I hope not. Yours is to be a good representative layman. How do you like our churches?"

Valenta laughed. "Well, done, Sister. Which means 'Did you go to Mass?' Candidly no. Traveled long, tired, slept all last Sunday."

"Do you ever go, John?" Sister Hildegarde's voice trembled with emotion. "I'm not relapsing."

"To make an open confession—something I have not done in any shape for a long time—no. Oh, it's a long way off, my piety. Art has taken all my time. Feted and fettered I have been obliged to put off all my duties. I'm a had pill. Sister, so people say, but I never denied my Faith."

"I hope it isn't that bad, John, but you are near to it."

She was pained at the indifference of one who to her was not the great Valenta but ever the boy whom a dying mother had confided to her care. Had she done her best? When he had been a clerk at Marston's she had been successful in making him attend to his duties before the fatal voice! Even as a boy he had had a phenomenal voice, and it beauty which captivated everyone. So it was that old Marston had sent him to study abroad. She had objected, but the boy was determined. Then came to her the call of religion, and she created the second sensation by leaving all, and entering the humble quarters of the Little Sisters. From time to time she heard of her brother's success. He was the rage in Berlin. Besides, the great Valenta was accustomed to being obeyed promptly, owing to his reputation of being a czar even with his superiors.

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Hildreth walked swiftly down the avenue, endeavoring to escape his thoughts. It was a bitter season for him, full of cheer as it might be to others. In his heart he wished that he too might enter into the spirit of giving and receiving, but there was no one now, except possibly the employees at his club, and that was more a matter of business than sentiment.

"Uxtree! Uxtree! Last edition! Wish you a Merry Christmas, Mister," cried a newsboy holding a paper before him. Hildreth felt an impulse to give the boy a quarter, but it was two much trouble and he passed on. Half way down the block, however, he thought better of it and turned back. As he fumbled in his pocket an automobile whirled around the corner. There was a shout, a shrill cry and then a rush of feet. The car came to a quick stop, and as Hildreth reached the curb he saw beneath the wheels a small crumpled form, while a white-faced chauffeur was protesting that it was not his fault. Ready hands raised the victim and carried him to the sidewalk, and Hildreth saw that it was the same boy whose "Merry Christmas" had caused him to turn back. A mounted officer galloped up and a patrolman pushed his way through the crowd.

What followed seemed to Hildreth very business-like and strangely lacking in feeling, yet, as he watched, he had to admit that these men knew what to do better than he did. In a short time the boy was in an ambulance, and the driver of the car under arrest on the way to the station-house. The crowd melted away, and Hildreth turned to a policeman who was jutting something down in his note-book.

"Can you give me that boy's name?" he asked. "The officer looked up. "See how it happened?" he asked in turn. "No," said Hildreth. "I thought perhaps I might be able to do something for him—or his family. It's Christmas Eve, you know, and besides I owe him a quarter."

"His name's Johnny Dugan and he says he hasn't any folks," said the officer, glancing at Hildreth. "There's a lot like him. You'll find him at the hospital tomorrow if you want to. His leg's broke."

"It was nonsense, he knew, but he could not help feeling that he was in a way connected with the accident. Had he stopped to buy a paper the boy would probably have escaped. And absurd as it was, he felt that he was entitled to his quarter."

When Hildreth awoke the next morning it was with the feeling that he had something of importance on hand. Then he smiled a little bitterly as he realized that all he had before him for the day was the payment of his self-imposed debt to the boy. However, he resolved to see it through, and after he had breakfast he walked over to the hospital. It was not an hour when visitors were admitted to the wards, but as it happened, the children's ward was overcrowded, and Johnny Dugan had been assigned a private room, where he lay in solitary state.

As Hildreth saw the small, white face with its look of evident suffering, a great wave of pity surged over him. The boy was so young and so little—he could not have been more than ten—and he was so alone on this Christmas Day.

"Well, old man," he said kindly, "how are you feeling this morning?" "Pretty bum," answered the boy, glancing at Hildreth shrewdly. "Who you from—the insurance? I won't sign nothin' till I see me lawyer. He run me down and broke me leg, an' some one'll have to pay good."

Hildreth smiled at this evidence of worldly wisdom. "I'm not from the insurance," he said; "I'm a lawyer, but I didn't come to talk that sort of business with you today. Don't you remember wishing me a Merry Christmas last night just before you were hurt?"

The boy shook his head. "You ain't one of my reg'lers," he answered, "an' I wished a lot of folks Merry Christmas yesterday."

"Well," said Hildreth, "you did, and I had turned back to give you something, but it was too late, and I felt sorry and made up my mind to look you up today."

"What was yer goin' to give me?" said the boy eagerly, alert for any material gain. "Why, what do you usually get under the circumstances?" asked Hildreth.

"Sometimes they buy a paper an' give me a nickel and sometimes it's a dime," said the boy. "Once a feller give me a quarter, but he was crazy. Wish't there was more like him," he added regretfully.

As Hildreth did not care to be catalogued in the "quarter" class he produced a new silver dollar. "How about that?" he asked. "Gee!" said the boy, a smile breaking over his face, "that's the

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