THE RED ASCENT

BY ESTHER W. NELL

CHAPTER XIII—CONTINUED

"Perhaps you have distorted the facts."

"No, my mind is not acrobatic. Don't you want to hear the story?"

"I'm not quite sure."

"Story-tellers need some sort of impetus."

"Go on then," he said resignedly.

"It's all ancient history," she began again, "so I'll begin with our grandfathers. Yours was a type of the old-time aristocrat; mine seems to have been an uneducated boor from the mountains. Your grandfather was in the Mexican war, and after the war he stayed in Texas, or he went back there some years later to try cattle-raising or farming on a big tract of land he had acquired for his services in the army. Or perhaps he had bought the ranch, I don't know which. My grandfather went down there as his overseer, but they fell out. Prunesy isn't sure of the details, and she is so charitable that she never likes to mention any one's failings, but I fancy they flew at each other's throats and flourished pistols and tomahawks and bowie knives. I like to think of all the picturesque paraphernalia that seems to belong to the early days of Texas.

"Well, into this wild, woodsy place Prunesy was sent to teach school. Of course, she didn't want to go, but there weren't many positions open to women in those days, and Prunesy must have been a suffragist in embryo, for she didn't want to live with either of her two married sisters. She wanted to be independent. An old friend of her mother's was living in Texas, and he offered her the position as school-teacher. Prunesy was only seventeen; she had heard dreadful stories of cowboys and Indians, but she put her fears in her capacious pockets—they had pockets in those days—and she started on her perilous way. Prunesy says the school wasn't so bad, she liked children, and your grandfather, who happened to live in the neighborhood—I suppose twenty-five or fifty miles counted as neighborhood in those days—used to ride over quite frequently to see how she was getting on. She was the only young lady in the vicinity. 'He never actually made love to me,' Prunesy carefully explained, 'but he paid me little attentions'—and these she seems to have found most gratifying. Twice he brought her oranges from Galveston, and three times he ordered candy shipped all the way from New Orleans; she seems to have kept numerical account all these years.

"My private opinion is that Prunesy rather lost her head. She was a little Puritan, you see, not used to the ways and wiles of Southern men. If Prunesy was the only pretty girl in the neighborhood, I'm sure your grandfather said all sorts of pleasant things that she accepted literally."

Richard smiled.

"Are all Southern men like that?" he asked.

She looked him straight in the eyes, and returned his smile half-heartedly.

"Not all, but—you are an alien."

"Do you like aliens?" As soon as he had said it he wondered at his own question.

"Women need some encouragement," she began. Then she seemed confused and added: "You are very impolite to interrupt my story. Don't you want to hear the end?"

"I promise not to speak again. Go on."

"Where was I? Oh, yes, we had reached the orange and candy stage. And then there was poetry—he sent her some verses tucked away among the oranges. I know it was very sentimental. Everybody wrote poetry in the old days, even George Washington. Terrible habit, wasn't it?"

His eyes twinkled. "Was Washington a Mexican war veteran?" he asked.

"Now, Dick, don't be so accurate; the fact that two people wrote atrocious verses doesn't prove that they lived in the same generation. Let me go on. One day your grandfather came to the school and Prunesy was out. One of the children had broken its arm or leg at recess, and had to be carried home. Your grandfather wrote his name on the blackboard. Don't suppose they worried with cards down there, and he wanted her to know he had called.

"Prunesy came back some time later to straighten up the room, and close the doors and windows for the night. While she was at work sorting the children's exercises she heard a footstep, and thinking it was your grandfather she went on with her work. Why are women like that—pretending indifference?"

"I'm sure I don't know."

"Well, instead of your grandfather in walked mine. Prunesy was too loyal to me to describe him, but she did acknowledge she was frightened. He was so big, she said, and he talked as if he had a cold in his throat, and he had a six-shooter stuck in his belt in full view. He asked if she was the school-teacher, and she had to confess that she was; he said he wanted some 'learnin', but he wasn't willing' to go to school with kids.' Would she give him some lessons after hours? He would pay her well for them. I suspect that Prunesy had inherited a thrifty spirit along with her other virtues, and she wasn't averse to turning an honest dollar; so she agreed to his proposition at once. He wanted to begin that afternoon. "That's good writin' on the board, ain't it?' he said. 'I'd like you to learn me to write like that; that's the name I want to copy.'

"He came regularly after that for a month, and every day Prunesy taught him to write like your grandfather. One day she said: 'I'll set you another copy,' but he protested. 'I don't want to learn to write like a woman,' he said. 'That is the way I want to write,' and he spent hours just copying that signature. She told me that his progress in reading was 'astounding.' At the end of the month he paid Prunesy fif y dollars, and she never saw him again. The rest of the story was hazy. Your grandfather didn't make a success. Cattle all got lumpy jaw, or something, and he went East, settled down in his old home, and married and died. But he seems to have been the only romance in Prunesy's life, and you revived all the old recollections—your name, the resemblance and the old uniform. That night of the masquerade she actually believed that you were your grandfather's spirit. Now you see the point is this: My grandfather must have had some reason for wanting to copy your grandfather's signature; and our talk about the forged deed the other day at luncheon set Prunesy to thinking that perhaps she was responsible for the whole affair."

"But the story really doesn't prove anything," he said slowly.

"But it can be made to prove things. Prunesy knows the exact date—she is always exact—that your grandfather left Texas. If the deed is dated after that time, don't you see?"

"Yes, I see," he admitted reluctantly, "but where does this leave you?"

"Why I—I'll sell lollipops," she answered smiling.

He took her hand impulsively in his.

"I can't go on," he said. "I can't go on and impoverish you. I've been poor all my life. How could you give up all this?" his eyes swept the stately house, the flowering gardens. "It's worse for a girl to make her way. I have my health and strength."

"So have I."

"But it is so much easier for a man."

"The whole of life is harder for women," and the smile was gone now. "Can't you see that I want you to have things, Dick? Don't you know that I have seen the struggle you've been making?"

"But I cannot take it from you. I can't go on."

"Why not?" A wild hope was in her heart, her hands trembled a little among the honeysuckle, but he did not see. He was looking past her through the tangle of rose vines down at the blackened mining camp below.

"It is not fair," he said slowly. "It is not fair."

Her face was white.

"It is the Colonel's," she said slowly. "If you do not care for yourself, it is the Colonel's and Betty's."

"But it may all be a myth after all," he said reflectively. "The fact that Miss White taught your grandfather to write does not prove anything conclusively."

"It will help to prove something."

Apparently he did not hear her. A wail of fear had come echoing from the valley. Richard started to his feet. "What's that?" he cried. Through the rose vines they could see men and women scurrying like ants toward the mines. "There—something has happened down there! I must go—go and see if I can help."

And without a word of parting, he mounted Spangles and went galloping down the sunbaked road, leaving Jessica alone in the arbor.

CHAPTER XIV

A RESCUE

Richard dismounted on the outskirts of the crowd, and pushed his way through the human wall that surrounded the main shaft of the mine. Men, women, and little children were there, all drawn together by that pitiful cry for help that Richard had heard in the arbor.

"What has happened?" he asked of one of the onlookers.

The old miner, his face blackened by coal dust, shifted his quid of tobacco and answered calmly: "Little fire in the mine, or mebbe its only the smoke from the last shots that was fired. All the men out, thank God. Half holiday—we all come out on the one-thirty cage, but that thar woman says they ain't all out!"

"My Peter, my Peter!" cried a mother's frantic voice; "he is down there I know. He stayed to feed the mules. He is not out. He is not home."

"He's drinking whiskey in the village," said one brutal bystander.

"No—no—my Peter is but fourteen. For God's sake, mister, let down the cage. I will go myself to find him."

"I believe thar's others," said one young miner, scratching his head. "I ain't seen Costi, nor Angelo, nor Foliano. These here chaps don't know enough English to keep them alive. Boss went round notifying the diggers to quit, and I reckon they never heard him."

"Where's the superintendent?" asked Richard.

"I tell you this is a holiday."

"Where's the mine manager?"

"God knows."

"Haven't you any system of checking off the men?"

"Dunno; that thar superintendent is a young fellow, and he ain't worth his salt. Never was a mine run like this one."

"Where's the pit boss?"

"Pit boss ain't obliged to stay round here all the time. I tell you this is a holiday, and I reckon the pit boss is off on a spree. I ain't going down there to rescue no blind mules—ain't nothing but one of the mule boys been smoking in the stable."

"Maybe it ain't nothing but a hay wagon on fire, but I ain't sure," said one of the men. "Here, Jake, let down that cage. There sure is smoke; ain't anybody round here got the sense he was born with?"

"I'll go with you," said Richard quietly.

The two men stood out, leaders in the little impotent crowd, and two others came forward to join them as they stepped into the cage. There was some talk of signals. The engineer nodded as if he understood, and the careless crowd watched with some degree of interest as the cage slowly descended into the cavernous depths.

The terror-stricken mother, finding solace in this attempt at rescue, stopped crying and began to pray: "Holy Virgin—guide him—save him! God have mercy—lead him—spare him!"

"They'll have the fire out in no time," said the old miner comfortingly. "They can hitch up the hose and get water in the air pump."

"Ain't the first time a hay-wagon took fire."

"Pete's out bird-nesting."

"Bet your life no boy's goin' to stay in that hole on a holiday."

"Ain't got any business lightin' a mine with kerosene."

"Well, you can't work in the dark."

"Ain't got no electricity."

"Why?"

"Main cable's water soaked."

"Wa'n't that a signal?"

"No, they ain't belled yet."

A tense hush of expectation fell upon the crowd. On the wooded hill around them birds chirruped joyfully; bees droned in and out of the pink cups of the wild honeysuckle; the calm peace of the summer afternoon seemed to preclude calamity.

"Looks like more smoke coming out the shaft."

"My Lord! see that flame. What's the matter with Jake? Why don't he hoist that cage?"

"Stop the fan. Don't yer see yer feeding the fire?"

"For God's sake, Jake, hoist that cage."

"He's waitin' for the signal."

"Who's that comin' down the road?"

"Miss Fielding riding like mad. Wish to the Lord it was the superintendent."

"*Hoist that cage, man*—that mine's ablaze!"

The old engineer looked through the smeared window of the engine house, an agonized expression of uncertainty in his eyes.

"They said three bells—three bells," he repeated defensively. "I ain't heard 'em yet."

"Hoist that cage—you crazy fool—that rope's a-shaking. Hoist 'em, I tell you! You're cooking 'em alive."

The crowd, at first so tranquil in its disbelief of possible tragedy, was now roused to a frenzy of hysteria. As the cage ascended a sickening stench filled the soft summer air, flames shot upward from the shaft. Women shrieked. The cage itself was full of fire. Six human bodies were ablaze. The miners rushed to the rescue, but there was a scarcity of water. Men beat out the flames with their coats, with the shawls they snatched from the women's shoulders, but their comrades lay blackened and inert before them, their hands and feet drawn up in convulsive postures; one of them, in his effort to escape the flames, had climbed to the top of the cage, but he had perished like the rest. The old engineer had obeyed his orders too well—he had hesitated too long. As they lifted the six bodies, one by one, from the smoking cage and bore them past his window, he sank on the floor beside his engine, overcome by the terrible catastrophe he caused.

Peter's mother clawed at the dead men's clothes like a wild creature.

"He is not here," she cried. "My Peter is not here. They are men, all men. My Peter is but a boy!"

"And the young man?" said the old miner to whom Richard had first spoken. "Where is the young man?"

Miss Fielding was beside him, her face white with terror.

"Did—did Dick Matterson—go—down—there?"

"Yes, that was him, I recollect now—the Colonel's son. God! it's an awful way to die." Tears fell unregarded down his rugged face. "They can't have brought him out; those men are all undersized—they—three of them are dagoes."

She clasped his ragged coat sleeve and leaned heavily on his arm. "We—we—*must*—do something," she cried.

"We can't now, lady," he said with the dull resignation of age. "The timbers have caught fire. No man could live to get down there. Fire must have been burning ever since we quit work. Thar ain't no help could reach him now."

Jefferson Wilcox touring gaily along the country roads with Betty and the Colonel, stopped his machine abruptly when he saw the crowd gathered about the mine.

"Looks as if something had happened over there," he said carelessly. "I thought the men stopped work at three-thirty."

The Colonel was not much interested. "Reckon one of the niggers has fallen down the shaft and broken his good-for-nothing neck," he said.

TO BE CONTINUED

AN EAVESDROPPER'S KINDLY ACT

By Margaret Meredyth

It was exactly ten minutes till closing time. Helen Brewster was putting the finishing touches to the last business letter of the day, when the telephone bell rang. Placing her ear to the receiver she said crisply.

"Dorsey Sons & Co."

"That you, Helen?" called Binks (otherwise Brian) Brewster, a younger brother, his voice muffled by contact with the transmitter, say, hurry home — Kent's here. He's off to Muzon in a few days—what d'you think o' that?"

"Luzon? W-h-a-t?" stammered Helen, but Binks had already hung up.

Helen walked home briskly, hardly knowing what to think. At the door she was met by her mother and the expression on her face banished the hope that she had not heard aright.

Kent's here, Helen, but only for a few hours," Mrs. Brewster said tearfully; "we'll have to make the best of his going and try to be cheerful."

"You're not setting a very good example, mother mine," laughed Helen, as she hung her hat on the hall-tree and entered the big family sitting-room.

"Ah, Helen, just think of Kent—our chum—going to that horrible, half-civilized wilderness! Isn't it a-w-f-u-l?" wailed Mary and Lucille in unison, holding on to Kent Sherwin, as he came forward eagerly to meet Helen.

"What's all the trouble about?" Helen asked, slowly withdrawing her hands, "isn't this—this expedition rather sudden?"

"Sudden's the name for it," Kent Sherwin rejoined in a tone unconvincingly light. "The company notified us to be ready in ten days for several months' absence in the Philippines, so I hurried down to say good-bye. If the job on the highway turns out well, it will mean a worth-while promotion."

"Promotion!" sniffed Mrs. Brewster, indignantly, "which means, I suppose, if you're not ambushed by a kinky-headed Negrito, bitten by a venomous reptile or the tropical fever doesn't carry you off, you'll get a raise in salary. Superb generosity I'd call it!"

"It's hardly the job I'd have selected for myself," laughed Kent, "but no doubt it will be worth a small fortune in experience—and then, too, a fellow couldn't very well say he didn't want to go because he's afraid of the Filipinos—eh, Binks?"

"I'll bet there're swarms of pretty girls over there," Binks observed innocently, ignoring the question.

"Sure," agreed Kent, promptly, "beautiful brunettes with curly hair, and you know I'm rather fond of curls, even when they shade into red," with a sidelong glance at Helen's fluffy brown hair.

"Binks," scolded Mrs. Brewster, "this is no time for levity. You can't realize, you foolish boy, what a dreadful place that island is. Why, it's almost as bad as No Man's Land!"

Mrs. Brewster's dolorous description was punctuated by a chorus of wails from Mary and Lucille. But despite the lamentations and doeful predictions, when the time came to say good-bye, Helen sent Kent away with a smile. That was Helen's way.

The next day Mrs. Brewster confided to the children that Kent and Helen, would be married when Kent returned from Luzon, and added an impressive admonition to pray every day that God would protect him and bring him safely home.

And how they did pray!

Even Binks Brewster, notorious for pranks and nonsense, had brief fits of piety. Whenever he went about looking as if he had swallowed a dill pickle without sufficient mastication, it was evident that he had suspended his mischievous operations temporarily, and was doing penance for Kent's safe return.

Kent Sherwin proved to be a model correspondent. Cheerful letters came regularly, telling how finely the work on the highway was progressing and that conditions were much less disagreeable than he had anticipated. As the weeks went by, conversation in the Brewster home gradually lost its gloom and became tinged with the anticipatory pleasure of Kent's homecoming.

In addition to her regular work as stenographer for Dorsey Sons & Co., Helen occupied a position as her grandfather's "secretary," which called for an unlimited amount of tact and patience.

Several years back, financial ruin, coupled with the sudden death of his wife, had brought about a total physical and mental collapse, and Grandfather Brewster had left the hospital, after three months' illness, feeble in body and with the mentality of a six-year-old child. His gray eyes were as benevolent as ever, but the old alert intelligence had vanished.

There were two hallucinations to which Grandfather Brewster clung with all the tenacity of a diseased brain; one was that he was still in a position to exercise his old-time generosity, and the other, that his wife had gone off on a journey for her health and would return as soon as she had recuperated sufficiently. Any attempt to disillusionize him would have been cruel as well as useless, which left no alternative but to humor him.

Pityingly, uncomplainingly Helen had taken upon herself the burden of making out worthless checks for innumerable charities and the difficult and unusual task of keeping in touch with her deceased grandmother! Fortunately, Grandmother Brewster had never been fond of letter-writing and Grandfather was quite content if an occasional long-distance message brought the good tidings that her health was improving satisfactorily.

Kent Sherwin's occupation as civil engineer kept him away from home much of the time. Helen had become accustomed to his absence at irregular intervals, and almost before she realized it, two months had slipped by since his departure from Luzon.

And then the strangest thing happened!

For more than six weeks not one word came from Kent.

Helen grew pale and thoughtful, but, Brewster-like, held her head high.

"Guess he's fallen in love with one of the curly-headed beauties he told us about and is going to stay there and be a Filipino," Binks suggested consolingly.

"For shame!" said Mrs. Brewster, reprovingly. "I haven't the slightest doubt but that the poor boy is down with fever and unable to write. I shall drop the company a line and inquire about him," a resolution that she fulfilled without delay, only to receive a prompt reply stating that no sickness had been reported.

After that Mrs. Brewster refrained from defending Kent openly, though her confidence in him remained unchanged.

For a long time there had been whisperings of a surprise for Helen on her twenty-first birthday. It was to be strictly a family affair and Mrs. Brewster was to get up one of her famous dinners to top off the celebration.

Dear old Grandfather was intensely interested, and by the mysterious twinkle in his mild blue eyes it was evident that he, too, was planning a surprise for his favorite grandchild.

One evening after supper Grandfather retired to his room unusually early, leaving Helen and her mother still busy in the kitchen. Suddenly, noisy shouts of welcome came floating in from the lawn.

A moment later the door flew open and who should walk in but Kent Sherwin, flanked on either side by a jubilant Brewster. After embracing as much of Kent's five-foot-ten as was available, Mrs. Brewster looked around for Helen, but she had disappeared.

"What!" exclaimed Kent in bewilderment, when Mrs. Brewster explained the matter, "why, I've written three letters since the one you say you received last? I wondered why Helen didn't write for so long—but where is she? I can tell her in a few words."

Kent found Helen in the dining-room, clearing the table with well-feigned unconcern. In response to her constrained greeting, Kent said in a hurt tone:

"Surely you can't blame me, Helen. I sent the letters to be posted and I don't see how I could help their being lost. When our work took us farther into the interior, some of the men got sick, and then, quite unexpectedly, we were all ordered home. I didn't wire because I thought I would drop in unawares—as usual."

Helen's expression was frankly skeptical.

"You say you mailed three letters that never reached me? It seems passing strange that three should have come to grief—consecutively."

"Gad! so you think I'm a liar?" Kent said hotly, the angry flush bringing out more clearly the long saber scar on his left cheek—a souvenir of the Argonne.

"A lady would hardly express herself so badly," Helen answered with exasperating coolness. "When I was a child, I thought as a child, but at twenty a normal human being is supposed to reason as an adult.'"

"Of course, you wouldn't care to marry such an unprincipled fellow, so I'll be going." Kent flashed, rising as he spoke.

Without a word, Helen slipped his ring from her finger and held it out with a hand that was cold and slightly tremulous.

As silently Kent accepted it, dropped it into his vest pocket, and with a stiffly formal bow left the room.

Like powder that a vagrant spark has ignited, the clash had come so suddenly it had left them both dazed.

When the hall door closed and she heard Kent's quick step on the walk, Helen caught her breath sharply. What had happened? Who was to blame?

It was quite dark under the trees, and after closing the gate, Kent slackened his angry stride and tried to recall every detail of those few disastrous moments with Helen. Could it be possible that all was over between them? Kent felt in his vest pocket and sighed deeply.

"Don't turn on the gas," said a familiar voice at his elbow, as Binks Brewster stepped out from behind a big cottonwood tree. "I heard what Helen said about the letters—I know her better'n you do—she'll get over her mad spell, but you'll never know it, unless—"

"You young scamp," Kent cried angrily, grabbing the self-confessed eavesdropper by the arm, "what do you mean by—"

"Aw, cut it out and let go my arm," Binks grumbled shortly. "I want to help you. I know Helen. I'll keep a sharp lookout, and when the barometer says 'fair and warmer,' I'll put you on, see?"

"It's no use, Binks, Helen's done with me—she's lost confidence in me," Kent said dejectedly.

"Honest Injun, was that straight goods—that yarn about the letters?" Binks asked incredulously.

"So you think I'm a liar, too!" exploded Kent. "Of course, I sent those letters!"

"Aw, don't eat a feller up. You know yourself it does sound phoney."

Knowing Binks Brewster to be an unconscionable joker, it seemed worse than foolish to draw any consolation from his friendly overtures, yet in spite of this, Kent's step was lighter as he made his way to the hotel to prepare for immediate departure, after a somewhat lengthy conference with his young confederate.

Binks made a detour, via the woodshed, to the kitchen, which he entered unconcernedly with an armful of wood. Helen and her mother were sitting by the window, talking in low tones.

With a consideration that would have aroused suspicion had they been less absorbed, Binks deposited his load almost noiselessly in the woodbox behind the range. Then he quietly passed into the adjoining room, leaving the door slightly ajar.

"I think you acted very hastily," Mrs. Brewster was saying, "you didn't give the poor boy a chance to explain—Kent is the soul of honor—"

"He did explain," Helen interrupted coldly, "if you can call such a flimsy story an explanation. And he as good as asked for his ring, or at least took it unhesitatingly when I offered it to him."

"Poor boy!" Helen's mother went on in a tearfully unconvinced voice, "it does seem too bad, after all the hardships he endured in France, and then this fearfully dangerous trip on top of it all, to receive such a welcome from you. My dear, it's your duty, your solemn duty to apologize!"

"Apologize! I'll never do that," flared Helen hotly. (Whew! poor old Kent!" muttered Binks under his breath.) "And you'll do me a great favor not to mention this matter again," she went on haughtily, "and of all things, don't let Grandfather even know that Kent has been here."

As the weeks passed by Helen grew paler and more thoughtful still, but, buoyed by the Brewster obstinacy, she held her head as high as ever and at no time was there the slightest indication of surrender. Long ago she had admitted to herself that the break with Kent could have been easily averted had either of them been less quick-tempered, but pride forbade any move on her part towards a reconciliation.

The hot anger in her heart had long since cooled, and of that brief and stormy interview there remained but the poignant recollection of Kent's hurt surprise and the livid saber scar across his flushed left cheek.

The day had been unusually oppressive and Helen came home from the office fagged and listless and went directly to her room. She came down-stairs almost at once, with a magazine under her arm, and sought the seclusion of the densely-shaded, scuppernong arbor at the far end of the garden.

Binks was feasting on the fragrant white grapes, but at Helen's approach hid himself in the luxuriant foliage.

With downcast eyes Helen came down the gravel walk and entered the arbor. Little suspecting that her mischievous brother was a scant half-dozen feet away, she sat down in a big rustic chair and relaxed with a sigh of utter weariness. For some time she lay back with closed eyes and then her body slowly assumed the erect rigidity of one listening. Apparently satisfied that no one was near, she took a photograph from between the pages of the magazine and gazed at it with sad intentness. Self-reproach had almost conquered her pride. She had been at fault—she knew it—when she sent Kent away with a heartless pretence of indifference. How gladly she would meet him half-way, if only he—But why should he humble himself—he was proud, too—when she alone had been at fault? . . . How foolish it seemed to throw away their happiness for three unimportant letters—and they had boasted so often that theirs was such a deep, understanding love,