

[WRITTEN FOR THE CRITIC.]

A CRITICAL AND PUZZLING CASE.

(Continued.)

Then they talked of the old times, Dr. Cairns and the children occasionally asking questions or laughing at some ludicrous reminiscence, while the firelight flitted among them, shedding a ruddy glow on the happy circle, and dancing with uncouth weird shadows on the walls and ceiling.

The entrance of a servant interrupted their pleasant talk. "Shall I light the gas, please marm? Its after your tea time."

"Yes, Ellen, you can light the gas, please, and set the table. We'll have tea right away."

"Rick," said Dr. Hannaford, "what is the name of your patient that we found asleep this afternoon? That cur yelped so I couldn't hear the name when you introduced me to her sister. I have been puzzled with Miss Millicent's face. That's what troubles me. I have had a chapter of recognitions this afternoon. I am prepared for anything in that line."

"Please, sir, Mrs. Burton has sent for some more of the medicine—the child's worse to-night."

Dr. Cairns and his friend consulted together in an undertone and then withdrew to the surgery, where the former prepared a vial of the medicine.

When they returned to the sitting room tea was ready and waiting, and the haunting face and the question about the name were forgotten, to return again to Dr. Hannaford's mind as he sat gazing into the fire after supper.

"You were going to tell me the name of your lady patient," he said to his friend.

"That young lady's name is Nancy Prior."

Dr. Hannaford started as if shot. He could scarcely restrain an exclamation or the impatience that seized him, yet what could he do? What was that name to him? Why should he feel any interest in Nancy Prior? Why does he call her *Prior*? These thoughts rushed through his mind.

"Did you say *Prior*?" he said, turning to Dr. Cairns.

"I believe that is her name."

"Is she not a married lady?"

"Why, no! at least, I know her as *Miss* Nancy Prior. But why do you ask? You appear to take a remarkable interest in my patient."

"I am mystified. I feel like one in a dream, and to tell you the truth, I can hardly await the interpretation that time or investigation might bring."

"Come, Ned, tell us all about it. Marian! Dr. Hannaford has a story of real life to tell us with a mystery, and love, and disappointment and all that."

"That will be just delightful!"

"Oh, yes, Dr. Hannaford, do tell us a story," cried Mabel, and the other children turned from the table where they had been variously employed, and chimed in with earnest solicitations as they gathered around the fire.

"Well, it looks as though I was in for a story, *volens volens*."

"That's the way to look at it. Now go on," said Dr. Cairns.

"Story telling is not in my line. I doubt if I can even give you a chapter or two of personal history in an interesting way."

You know that after I got my diploma I was quite used up, and concluded to take the tail end of a long prescription, which, as is too frequently the case with prescriptions, is the part that does not carry the poison and that *does* carry the jewel hope. I determined to abjure books and study and seek recreation and change of scene and air.

Having arrived at this determination, the next consideration was one of ways and means. I had worked my way through and my purse was empty.

While thinking this matter over I stumbled upon an old friend and schoolmate who had a general agency for an American nursery.

"I wish you could tell me where I can get a few good active, intelligent men to take orders," said he.

"How will I suit for one?" said I.

"You! Well that is a good one," said he.

But when he saw that I was in earnest he consented.

"Why, my dear fellow, what can you be thinking about? Such an unprofessional thing you know. You would never get over it! Never!"

"I shall have to do a still more unprofessional thing if I mope about much longer," said I.

"What's that?"

"Die!" said I.

"Die! Why Hannaford, you don't mean to say that you are as bad off as that? You don't look very robust, but there must be any amount of stuff in your *materia medica* that would fix you up all right."

"Hang the *materia medica*!" said I. "Pardon me Mrs. Cairns, I am forgetting that there is no necessity for going over conversations minutely, and am getting off the regular 'said he' and 'said I,' and naughty expletting besides. What you want to know is my connection with this puzzling and critical case of Rick's."

"Go on, Ned, tell your story in your own way, we're much interested," said Dr. Cairns.

Well, I made a bargain with my friend, and it was decided that we should start on the following Monday for the scene of action. In the meantime he succeeded in getting two others to suit him, and on the appointed day we all started together.

My friend had a light express wagon with two comfortable seats, we stowed ourselves and our luggage into this and the huge horse trotted off as though he had no load behind him. We had a jolly time, I assure you, and when we arrived where we were to commence work, I already felt fifty per cent. better.

My friend's plan of campaign was to drive his crops to some suitable centre, assign each of us a territory which we were expected to canvas thoroughly, and when the country within a convenient distance of our centre had been thoroughly canvassed, gather up his men and drive to another centre of action or base of supplies.

I really enjoyed the work. Before many days I felt strong and hearty. I hardly ever failed to take an order wherever I called. There was a prevailing prejudice against "yankee tree pedlers," so I refrained from making known my business until I had ingratiated myself with mine host or hostess, or both and particularly the latter.

Many pleasant acquaintances I made. I generally managed to give some information that was regarded as being valuable. Many an aching tooth I extracted, many a free prescription gave. Frequently was I urged to set up in practice.

One evening about sunset—I wish I could paint for you the picture that memory unveils—I cannot. Who *could* paint those glorious hues of cloud and sky and foliage? A peculiar blush prevailed the air and tinted everything. The effect was weird, almost ominous. I had paused at the top of a hill to enjoy the picture I would fain reproduce for you. Behind me was a dense wood, whose recesses were already gloomy. Over the wood, high up in the sunlight, a pair of hawks wheeled in graceful circles. Among the tree tops a gang of noisy crows discussed the hawk question or some equally exciting topic. Before me was a long slope, at its foot a cosy valley, through which meandered a river, here and there visible between tall trees that skirted it on either side. The road wound down the hill, crossed the river on a long bridge and wound up the hill that bounded the valley on the other side. Clusters of buildings dotted the hill sides, and in the hollow appeared to be quite a village.

"Here's several days' work in sight," said I. "Now where shall I put up and make headquarters." Seating myself upon a boulder at the roadside I proceeded to inspect the homestead in view, and while thus employed was startled by a sudden frightened "Whoa," and turning round saw a horse running away with a waggon, which was swaying from side to side of the road and in imminent peril of being upset in the ditch. The occupant of the waggon, a young woman, was endeavoring to stop the horse. In an instant the team would have passed me on its way to almost certain destruction. Dare I risk my own life to save that of an unknown woman? I saw that the shaft bolt had come out, permitting one shaft to drop down and strike the horse's heels. I jumped on to the road ready to catch the horse as he swayed from me, calculating that I would thus stand a better chance of escaping injury. In another instant they were upon me and I was struggling with the frantic animal. I have a confused dreamy recollection of being under the horse's hoofs, of seeing the wagon pass over me, of hearing a soft pleading agonized voice, and my next recollection is of waking in a strange room. If I were writing a yarn that I had to spin out, I would describe this room, the view from the windows at my right side, and my sensations and speculations. As I am not, I will simply tell you that after a few moments of inspection and speculation and endeavor to make out where I was, how I came there, how long I had been there, what was the matter with me, etc., etc., during which moments I instinctively shrank from moving; I tried to lift my head, cried out and relapsed into insensibility. When I again become conscious it was night. A man sat at the table, upon which his arms rested and his head upon his arms. A lamp burned dimly upon the table and a fire blazed in an open grate. I lay watching the man, the lamp and the fire for some time, endeavoring to recall how I came there, but I could not. Presently the man lifted his head, got up and came softly to my side, and that man was your patient, Mr. Burton. The sad woe begone dreamy look his face had worn when I first saw it, gradually gave place to one of pleasure and almost womanly tenderness, as he exclaimed, "You are better."

"Where am I? How did I get here? How long have I been here?" I asked.

"You must not talk. You must keep still and quiet," he said.

I told him that it would do me most harm to wonder about and puzzle over it, and he informed me in few words that I had stopped the horse long enough for his wife to jump out, that the horse had thrown, trampled upon and rushed over me, and in turning up into the road leading to his home at the mill, had upset the wagon and himself over and over, down a steep bank into the river. The wagon was smashed to pieces and the horse killed. He had seen the horse running away with the empty wagon and had, with an awful dread at his heart, run up the roadside until he found his wife, herself uninjured, sitting by the roadside pillowing my head on her lap and endeavoring to staunch the blood that was flowing freely from wounds in my head. He had obtained assistance from the nearest house, to which he had me conveyed. When the doctor arrived he dressed my many wounds and remained by me all night, as also did Burton and his wife. From day to day I had lingered unconscious, almost lifeless, the end momentarily expected. He was very, very grateful. He could never, oh, he could never repay me. He would call his wife at once to tell her the good tidings that I had at last returned to consciousness, but she had slept very little and needed rest.

A month and more had gone out of my life. Would I ever see mother again? How long would I live? These were the thoughts that now filled my mind until I fell asleep—not now a dreamless sleep. I dreamed of a beautiful soft-voiced woman, of runaway horses, of being in that wagon when it rolled over and over into the river, and of struggling in the water, and awoke to find the woman of my dream bending over me and bathing my forehead and face. Hers was a beautiful face indeed, as it was lit up with such a glad grateful smile when my gaze rested upon it. My heart seemed to bound to meet hers, but the next instant I remembered that she was a wife, and I tried to close my eyes and my heart. I do not mind