

Edith Norton

One of Life's Tangles

By Josie R. Nicholls

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CHAPTER I.

A PARTING AND A SECRET. "Train for the south." The words rang out clear and distinct, falling with varied meaning upon the ears of those assembled in little groups in the ladies' waiting-room of the Central depot at Westbury, O. To some it was the signal of departure and separation, to others a warning that their time would come next, and a momentary hush ensued such as ever attends a similar announcement by night where numbers are waiting in breathless expectation. To a disinterested observer it would have been amusing to note the effect of these few words and to follow it through all its stages from the subdued bustle commencing in the ladies' room, increasing in volume in the adjoining apartment, where footstep after footstep came, and the muffled murmur of the carpet, on through the different divisions of the depot, till the noisy confusion culminated beyond the railing where a hissing locomotive stood ready to depart. Among the crowd pressing towards the sleepers of the southern-bound train was an elderly gentleman, accompanied by a young girl, who clung to his arm, evidently bewildered by the noise, as her eyes were dazzled by the numerous lights of the depot. Her unconscious beauty, added to an air of unsophisticated simplicity, shed a refining charm even over her common-place guardian, as with a haughty swinging gait he forced his way regardless of whom he inconvenienced. His cautious nervous shrinking seemed a source of annoyance to the bustling gentleman, and having hurried her into the car he seemed anxious to avoid as far as possible any scene of parting. It was not a man of many words, and he was only directions about her journey that he was addressing to the girl as she sat with her hands clasped tightly together and looking up into his face with eyes that seemed to plead against the inevitable. When the last moment came and the warning cry "All aboard," sounded outside, she started to her feet, the tears she had resolutely kept back burst forth, and she threw her arms about his neck with more demonstration of affection than he had ever dared to expect towards her stern father before. Mr. Norton was both surprised and touched. He soothed her with a tenderness quite foreign to his rude nature, and for one sweet

moment of mutual understanding both realized what they might have been to each other had the one been less timid and fearful. It was too late now, and with one fond embrace Mr. Norton hastened from the moving train. Ten minutes later the heavy doors of the depot swung behind him and he stood once more in the street, no trace of sorrow on his broad countenance, which had regained its habitual hard expression, and he was again to start on his journey, a banked-up one of the richest men in Westbury. But as he settled back in the cab which was conveying him to his lonely mansion his forehead contracted more than once with a troubled expression, and he ran his fingers through the thin gray locks of hair that shaded his brow as if in doubt or perplexity. Perhaps the distressing memory of the manifold changes that had occurred in his household during the past few months, culminating in the death of his wife and separation from his only daughter, called that look of trouble to his brow; or perhaps the thought of some disagreeable business transaction harassed him. Meanwhile the train was pulling slowly out of the depot and the young girl had sunk into a despondent attitude, her head resting upon her hand, and the sweet face wore an expression of sadness, of premature thoughtfulness, of pain. No exciting anticipations of travel or interest in the present novelty of her situation broke the still repose of very feature. What deep affliction it had aged her so, or had soiled that solemn look from infancy?



Leaving Home.

Edith Norton had been sent to boarding school at an early age, and rarely visited her home during the holidays. Her knowledge of her parents was an ideal one rather than one founded upon fact. Of her father she stood in awe because of the quick temper and loud voice which he had displayed occasionally in her presence, while the vision of her mother, a fashionable society woman, floated before her imagination like a fairy princess in full evening dress. Perhaps some intimation from an unhappy past over shadowed the child. For often in the quiet of play or when engaged upon her daily lessons, a dark, intangible cloud seemed to gather about her, and her mother's handsome face would break through the gloom as if to solve the mystery. Outside of these illusions, which many would have interpreted as a precognition of the future, Edith was

neither approach that his real youth became apparent. He passed down the car, once more people with wide awake passengers, with an air of indifference to their existence, and on taking his place among them drew a newspaper from his pocket and glanced up and down its sheets, then threw it from him, and let his eyes wander vacantly up and down the aisle. Presently they fell upon the figure of the young girl two seats in advance of himself, on the opposite side, and were arrested in involuntary admiration. Something in the pretty drooping figure, the deep, sad eyes, stirred a latent chord in his heart, which vibrated responsive to the touch; the bitter expression of his countenance relaxed; he watched her with increasing interest, smiling sarcastically at himself meanwhile that he could become absorbed in any human being; yet the appearance of this girl was so unlike the ordinary finished young lady of the day that he found himself speculatively glancing at her with the tenor of her past life, where she was going, who were her friends, and especially why she should be thus unprotected and alone.



The girl through route had brought them much further on their way in crossing Tennessee; and all day long the stranger kept his watch while the train was rushing at immense speed through deep ravines, which caused the windows to clatter almost deafeningly, emerging at intervals upon some town or village, giving the traveler a flying glimpse of order and civilization, occasionally affording him also a far-off vista of mountains as the landscape shifted its various shades of scenery. It was evening when their swift, ever progress received a sudden check. There came a succession of jerks, as if efforts were being ineffectually made to slacken speed; the cars jarred and rattled, then closed in a precipitate cessation of motion. No harm, however, seemed to result from this incongruous course of action. People looked at each other in bewildered silence. An instant of dead stillness, as if awaiting the anticipated calamity; then a general commotion ensued. The car in which Edith was seated was quickly vacated, the passengers hurriedly making their way to the door, and a general commotion ensued. The car in which Edith was seated was quickly vacated, the passengers hurriedly making their way to the door, and a general commotion ensued.

ed his attention to the dark object or ruin, which, ere they had proceeded many steps, loomed up through the gloom, all the more hideous and imposing in its blackness against the wild scenery of that picturesque uninhabited spot. A collision had taken place, and a long line of empty freight cars, numbering about a hundred, had telescoped on the opposite track, about fifty feet in advance of the coming engine, forming a gigantic pile, while others had been thrown completely off, some strewn in fragments near by, one having been buried ten feet in the plowed ground of an adjoining field. The first efforts were being made to clear away encumbering debris. Men with lanterns were passing to and fro, throwing a weird illumination upon the scene, while overhead the stars were stealing forth faintly one by one, and the voices of men were assembled in various positions discussing the late event. The engineer, so it was reported, on looking out had beheld the demolished train and put the brakes on at the time to save his own engine from plunging into the ruins. Had there been any dilatory conduct on his part no human power could have prevailed to avert a fearful catastrophe. There was something so unusual, so unaccountable about this chance acquaintance that he found himself enquiring the situation immensely, and ere he was aware he was engaged explaining to her scientifically the cause of the accident and guiding her steps among trucks, wheels and one vast mass of confusion to obtain a closer view of the wreckage. He was charmed by the unadvised pleasure she evinced in his company and her intelligent appreciation of the information he communicated.

To the girl it was so novel an experience to find any one taking special interest in her that she shared his willingness to prolong their stay together, and ere he was aware he was engaged explaining to her scientifically the cause of the accident and guiding her steps among trucks, wheels and one vast mass of confusion to obtain a closer view of the wreckage. He was charmed by the unadvised pleasure she evinced in his company and her intelligent appreciation of the information he communicated.

"The first time I ever travelled at all," she asserted naively. "Indeed? Then it must be quite a novel and interesting affair." "I don't know," she answered wearily, the weight which his entertaining converse had temporarily dispelled from his mind returning with her usual allusion, and a shadow flitted over her face which puzzled him. "Let me see your wrist," he said presently, observing a movement of the left hand, and he pointed to the contraction of her brow, and connecting the pain in her face with physical suffering; "I am sure you were more hurt than you let me see." "Oh, no," she cried, drawing back from him. "But I am a doctor," he urged, "and acknowledged as rather impudently by my own family, assuming that attitude of treating her like a wilful little girl."

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Viewing the Wreck.

death," she said with a slight smile, little aware what a revelation of her knowledge and experience in life she was unwittingly eliciting. "I was thinking all night," she continued, "how soon it might all have been over. One wrench and there would have been an end of it all." "An end of what?" he queried softly. "Of all the wretchedness of life. There is so much trouble. Do you know I watched the people all day yesterday, wondering how many of them were concealing an aching heart, and I found that trouble was written on all their faces. Yes, every one, for I studied them all." "So that is what you were doing?" he said, half amused, half pained at this pathetic occupation of a young girl in classifying humanity under the guise of suffering. "I should like to hear your method or analysis."

"Oh, I haven't any," she interrupted bashfully. "It was only something to keep my mind off myself." "I was looking at her now with the same commiseration in his face that she had coveted so the preceding day, and like one in a reverie she continued: "I suppose there is a certain amount to be borne by us all. It might as well be one sort as another." "No, it need not necessarily be borne," he said between his set teeth, as though the most delicate of his senses roused him to combativeness. "There is happiness in this world. There is goodness if we but know how to seek it. What do you read in my face now?" he broke off abruptly, and leaning towards her he looked earnestly into her eyes.

He regarded him half shyly, half searchingly, for a moment. "You are good," she said simply. "He drew back as if she had inflicted a wound, shrinking as from under-estimated praise at the innocent verdict he had so unwittingly elicited. "No, I am not good," he said. "You must not believe that. I would not have you. But that was not the question for which I submitted my face to examination," he added more cheerfully.

"How can you do it? I wish you would teach me how—how to forget." She spoke eagerly, looking up with an appealing countenance. He moved uneasily under her inquiring, earnest eyes. "You are too young to know sorrow that requires to be crushed by personal grief," he said. "At all events I am not the one to guide you in anything. Perhaps you will find something there to help you, and drawing out a pocket edition of Wordsworth's poems he placed it in her hands and rising abruptly, left her. The trusting look of the young face asking him for instruction smote him like a reproach; and passing her head on her hand, she dropped her head on her hand, and he left her to her desolate loneliness. It was sweet to meditate upon, and the volume of poetry lay neglected while she indulged her first day dream of romance. Time passed, and the country had changed considerably since early morning. They were sweeping past endless forests of pine trees now, impressing the mind with an infinite idea of monotony, and in the prolonged absence of her newly found comforter the old feelings of despondency were threatening to return. She dropped her head on her hand. The door slamming for the sixth time during that hour did not sound upon her ears above the din of the cars, and it was not till a deep, clear voice spoke beside her that she started.

"Well, have you found anything?" asked Dr. Egerton, and his eyes rested at the title page at which she had held the book open so long. She flushed upon being discovered in thus ignoring his kind offer of diversion, but he returned her smile unheeding, apparently well satisfied with the subject of her meditation. "Are you near the end of your journey?" he asked in his softest tone. "I believe so, Dr. Egerton," she interrupted.

"The next station," he asserted; then he spoke again in the same low tone, as if to himself: "I hope you are going among happier influences than your young life has hitherto known." "Perhaps it might not be as well for me," she answered. "Maybe trouble is good for people. I am going among strangers, and I do not see much chance of happiness." "Study them," he suggested with a bright smile, "and my best wishes attend your metaphysics. Little one," he added abruptly, "I want to thank you for asking me to stay. You made me think to-day, and I have enjoyed our conversation—our little aside on the current of human life. These moments are not frequent, and let me warn you that you will not find many who will care to indulge in them."

"You are young and inexperienced; you are craving sympathy and kindness. With your impulsive temperament you are aware you will disclose more than you desire, more than you can ever recall. Beware whom you trust. Take the advice of one who knows the world. I have found it best to put my heart on the outside by sad experiments." She looked down abashed, accepting his warning as reproof. "I don't talk much," she began despondently. "I don't know how I was led to say all I did to-day."

"Don't be uneasy," he returned. "I am not of those against whom I warned you. I am not a deprecating little one in a while. God forbid," he continued with increasing fervor, "that I should betray the faith you repose in me. You don't know how you moved me, child, when you conversed with me. I have not heard the hint of such a thing in years, and that a pure young soul should read the possibility of goodness in this curfew, hardened face, scarce to be enough to make a man better the rest of his life. Don't let new surroundings spoil you," he added tremulously; "you are too lovely just as you are."

He ceased, and both were silent with intense feeling. The shrill shriek of the engine, a hoarse voice calling in the door "Dayton," and Egerton drew together the couple that had been slowly forming to make a request. "Little friend," he said, "I shall retain this day long in remembrance as one bright spot in an otherwise gloomy life. Something tells me we shall meet again; but if I should be mistaken, let the memory at least have a definite association. I beg pardon for the liberty, but may I have your name?"

He drew from his pocketbook a card and presented it to her with his pencil. She took it nervously and wrote in trembling characters, "Edith Norton," scarcely knowing what she did. He was gone, and in a dream she rose and followed the conductor from the car.

To be Continued.

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