

Tales and Sketches.

RACHAEL NOBLE'S EXPERIENCE.

CHAPTER XXVI.

Concealment I thought—was concealment possible? and this idea actually occupied my mind for a time, so entirely that it secured something outside the overwhelming discovery that John was drunkard, but alone as I was, it did not appear possible that I should manage it; nay, likely the truth was more than suspected already, and I again saw the look that my two visitors had exchanged, and these two men would return in a short time; indeed, I kept my eye on the garden door, dreading to see them enter, and in a few minutes it opened, but instead of them, who should enter but Dr. England! In other circumstances he would have been most welcome, and, as it was, I felt thankful to see him rather than any other person. I could see that he had long known what had burst upon me a little ago as a new discovery, but I was deeply grieved and ashamed that he should arrive to see my brother—my only brother—at such a moment.

He came quickly forward; before I could speak, he said, "What is it, Miss Noble? I dreaded this—I am afraid I did wrong in exposing you to the chance of such a trial, but I thought if anything could avert it, it would be your presence. Where is he?"

I pointed to the study windows.

"I could not rest," he went on, "till I came to see how you were doing, and I'll stay till I see him over it; try not to distress yourself more than possible; there's everything to hope—his is a very different case from many; I hope and believe that ultimately he will conquer—he has every motive."

"So he has had all along—so had his mother—so had his brother. I don't see a single spot of light, look where I like, and to think of Mary and the children."

"Mary doesn't despair—she is an angel—and we shouldn't either; even if he has to leave this place, he may—he will retrieve himself elsewhere; try to live in that faith; sadly as he has fallen, I believe he is a good man, and his remorse and struggles will not surely be in vain."

"It is so awful," I said, "and it has come upon me so suddenly, that I cannot—," and I burst into a passion of tears—I could not control myself. I had loved John well; much as I had pitied his mother, she had never cost me tears. We stood still for a time, then the doctor said, "I was a fool to send you here, but I did it for the best."

"I must have known sometime—how are the children? this has driven everything from my mind."

"Doing well; there needs be no anxiety about them."

"Come," I said, "you must be hungry."

"Not a bit," he answered, "I must see our patient."

We went in, and we saw the two men, who had called in the forenoon, coming down the stairs. Grief and concern were in their faces; still I thought they could not have got into his room as I had the key in my pocket, but they had. I had forgotten that there was another door that entered off a small side room; when the servant found she could not open the one door, and that Mr. Morgan did not speak, she supposed he had gone out, and wondering what was wrong with the lock, went in by the other to ascertain; the men accompanied her, one of them being, she said, handy about locks, and there with their own eyes they had seen their minister drunk.

The parishioners became divided into three parties; those who wished to give their minister another trial, these were few, and I did not wonder, those who thought his usefulness gone, and that to continue him in office would be a scandal, these were numerous, and I didn't wonder at that either; the third class considered this second party were the minister's enemies, they were all "ill-using" him, and they came forward with their sympathy and offered to stand to him to the last—these were all the questionable characters in the parish. This was not the least bitter drop in the cup of desperate humiliation that John had filled for himself—the being claimed as "hail fellow well met" by all the choice spirits who did not think a whit the less of the minister because he took his glass freely.

Ecclesiastical machinery was shortly put in motion against him, and the stricken man made no defence, nor attempted any palliation. The end was that he resigned his office. I never saw a man so humble, or a woman exert herself as Mary did to shield him. So far as in her lay she stood between him and every breath, or look, that could be interpreted to mean reproach; but do as she might, she could not pick the thorns from his conscience, or restore his self-respect, neither could she withdraw from his physical nature the terrible craving to struggle with which he only knew what it cost.

They did not come to Honeycomb House when they left New Broom. Mary would not expose her husband to the possibility of an upbraiding word from his father, although I don't think that knowingly Mr. Morgan would have so addressed him. This had not come so suddenly on him as it had on me; he had heard the rumours that had been current for a long time, although without giving them credit; still his mind had been familiarized to the possibility of the thing, but it must have been a dreadful blow to him, I wondered how he stood it as he seemed to do. As for

Fanny, her grief was pitiable to see when she allowed it to burst its barriers; but following Mary's example, she exerted herself to be cheerful, and hope the best. I did what I could to give the comfort to her that I could not take to myself, and Charles Brown's broad shoulders were always ready and willing to bear the heavier share of all her burdens.

Dr. England invited John and Mary to be his guests for a time, and he devoted himself to John with a brother's love, but, if John winced under reproach, he winced still more under so much delicate and unwearied kindness; and Mary hastened their preparations for leaving the country, to seek another home on the opposite side of the globe, where they would be unknown, and might begin life anew. Ah, begin life anew! Can the past be blotted out? Could he forget all that he had forfeited—all that she for his sake had forfeited, home, country, kindred? Would he enter the vessel on this side of the ocean one man, and leave it on the opposite shore another? Is there any drug that will bleach clean and white a stained and sullied memory? Such spots will finally fade away only in the light of the Sun of Righteousness.

And my sister was to be torn from me. I had rebelled sorely when, to all appearance, she was entering on as happy a lot as falls to many; how was I to bear this? The thought of her wandering in a strange land, the sole prop of a broken-spirited, jaded man, who might at any time relapse into that fearful habit which had already cost them everything that makes life dear, crushed me. And how part with the children who were, if possible, dearer to me now than ever! But all this was to be. George Myles had a brother, a respectable man, who had been a farm-steward, it was his wish to emigrate, and as John Morgan meant to turn farmer, he engaged him to go with him, and the nurse, who had always been with the children, volunteered to go also. It was in its way a great comfort to us that they had two such efficient, worthy servants along with them.

I dare not speak of the parting on the deck of that outward-bound ship. Mary stood with her arm in her husband's, and smiled to the last. We hear regularly from them, and as yet things have gone well with them. John has never preached—in time he may;—but I think it the best sign of the genuineness of his reformation that he feels himself unworthy of this privilege. It is the fashion in these days for converts from recent wickedness to raise their voices to teach their fellow-men, and I do not pass an opinion on them—temperaments differ,—but I prefer that a man go aside into the wilderness for a time, and try to know himself, before he teaches others.

If I were making a story, instead of relating one, I would say that Messrs. Morgan & Son, being so much engaged in their business, could not spare any one walking through the streets of L— will see all the shops as Morgan & Son as flourishing as ever.

I leave it to the young to imagine that the other persons of this history ever after this lived happy, and died happy when their time came; but more I cannot say at present. This is the experience of Rachel Noble; and if I were to go on a little farther, I would trench on the experience of Rachel England.

THE FIRST WOMAN IN THE FORKS

BY JOAQUIN MILLER.

From the Independent

(Continued).

Sandy removed his slouch hat, blushed behind his beard at the new dignity, and said:

"Bully for you! I raise you five ounces, and ante the dust."

Here he drew a long, heavy purse from his pocket, and passed it over to the bar-keeper, who thereby became treasurer of the enterprise, without further remarks. The Parson's eyes twinkled again.

"I see your five ounces and go you ten better."

"Called, said Sandy; and he pecked at the bar-keeper, which little motion of the head meant that that further amount was to be weighed from the purse for the benefit of the Widow. One by one the boys came forward; and, as the enterprise got noised about the camp, they came down to the Howlin' Wilderness saloon till far in the night, to contribute what they called their "widow's mite." Even the head man of the company up the Creek known as the "Gay Roosters," and who was notoriously the most rough and reckless man in the camp, jumped a first-class poker game, where he was playing at twenty dollars ante and pass the buck, to come in and weigh out dust enough to "call" the Parson and Sandy.

The Forks felt proud of itself for the deed. Men slept sounder and awoke in a better humor with themselves for the act.

Yet all this time it was pretty well conceded that the gold, and the Widow too, would very soon fall to the possession of the Parson.

"Set 'em deep, Parson! Set 'em deep!" said the head of the "Gay Roosters," as he shook hands with the Parson that night, winked at the boys, and returned to his game of poker.

There had been many a funeral at the Forks; but never a birth or a wedding. But now this last, with all its rites and mysteries, was about to come upon the Forks; and the Forks felt dignified and elated. Not one of the three thousand bearded men showed unconcern. It was the

great topic—the presidential campaign, the general conference, the Dolly Varden of the day. The approaching wedding was the morning talk. The talk at noon, and the talk at night.

And it was good for the camp. The last fight was forgotten. Monte took a back seat in the minds of these strange, strong men; and, if the truth could be told, I dare say the German undertaker, who had set up under the hill, noted a marked decline in his business.

The boys were with the Parson; and the Parson was with the boys. They all conceded that he was a royal good fellow, and that the Widow could not well do better.

The amount of gold raised by the men in their sudden and impulsive charity was in itself, for one in the Widow's station, a reasonable fortune.

"What if she gits up and gits?"

The man who said that was a narrow-minded, one-eyed, suspicious fellow, who barely escaped being kicked down by the head of the "Gay Roosters," and kicked into the street by the crowd.

Still later in the fall the Parson sat in the Howlin' Wilderness, with his back to the fire, having it all his own way at his favorite game of old sledge. He had led out his queen for the Jack just as though he knew where every card in the pack was entrenched. Then he led the king with like composure, and was just crooking his fingers up his sleeve for the ace, when a man in black, with a beaver hat and white neck-tie, rode by the window on a black horse.

"Somebody's a dying up the Creek, I speck," said Stubbs. "Maybe it's old Yaller. He allers was a kind of a prayin' eodfish-eatin' cuss, anyhow."

Here Stubbs turned and kicked nervously at the fire.

The game did not go on long after that. No one said anything. Perhaps that was the trouble. The men fell to thinking, and the game lost its interest.

There was no fight of importance at the Howlin' Wilderness that night, and by midnight the frequenters of the saloon had withdrawn. The candles were then put out, and the proprietors barricaded the door against belated drunkards, spread their blankets on a monte-table, with their pistols under their heads; and by the smoldering fire were at rest.

The ground was frozen hard next morning, and the miners flocked into the Howlin' Wilderness. The Parson was leading off gayly again, and swearing with unusual eloquence and brilliancy, when a tall, thin, sallow man, from Missouri, known as "The Jumper," entered. He looked wild and excited, and stepped high, as if on stilts.

The tall, thin man went straight up to the bar, struck his knuckles on the counter, and nodded to him. It came forward and he drank deep, alone.

When a minute or two the Sierras enters a saloon where other men are seated, and drinks alone, without inviting any one, it is meant as a deliberate insult to those present, unless there is some dreadful thing on his mind.

The Jumper, tall and fidgety, turned to the Parson, bent his back over the counter, and pushed back his hat. Then he drew his right sleeve across his mouth, and let his arms fall down at his side limp and helpless, and his round, brown butternut head roll loose and awkward from shoulder to shoulder.

"Parson."

"Well! well! Spit it out!" cried the Parson, as he arose from the bench, with a dreadful oath. "Spit it out! What's busted now?"

"Parson."

Here the head rolled and the arms swung more than ever, and the man seemed in great agony of mind.

The Parson sprang across the room and caught him by the shoulder. He shook him till his teeth rattled like quartz in a mill.

"The—the man in black," gasped The Jumper. "The black man, on the black horse, with a white choker. Sandy—the—the Widow."

The Parson sunk into a seat, dropped his face into his hands for a moment, trembled only a little, and arose pale and silent. He did not swear at all. I am perfectly certain he did not swear. I know we all spoke of that for a long time afterward, and considered it one of the most remarkable things in all the strange conduct of this man.

When the Parson arose, The Jumper shook himself loose from the counter, and tilted across to the other side of the room, to give him place.

The stricken man put his hands on the counter, pecked over the bar-keeper's shoulder at his favorite bottle, as if mournfully to a friend; but said not a word. He emptied a glass, and then, without looking right or left, opened the door, and went straight up to the Parsonage. The Parsonage was the name the boys gave to the cottage on the hill among the trees.

"Gone for his two little bull-pups," said Stubbs. That was what the Parson called his silver-mounted derringers.

"There will be a funeral at the Forks, to-morrow," gasped The Jumper.

Here the German undertaker arose cheerfully, and went down to his shop.

"Well, Sandy is no sardine. Bet your boots Sandy ain't no sardine!" said Stubbs. "And, anyhow, he's got the start just a little, if the Parson does nail him. For he's had her first; and that's a heap, I think, for wimmen's mighty precious in the mines—sumthin' to die for, you bet."

The Parson was absent for hours, and the Howlin' Wilderness began to grow impatient.

"He's a heeling himself like a fighting-cock," said Stubbs; and, if Sandy don't go to kingdom

come with his boots on, then chaw me up for a shrimp."

The man here went to the door, opened it, put his head out in the frosty weather, and peered up the Creek for Sandy, and across the Creek for the Parson; but neither was in sight.

The "Gay Rooster" company knocked off from their work, with many others, and came to town in force to see the fight. The Howlin' Wilderness was crowded and doing a rushing business.

The two bar-keepers shifted and carefully arranged the sand-bags under the counter, which in that day and country were placed there in every well-regulated drinking saloon, so as to intercept whatever stray bits of lead might be thrown in the direction of their bodies in the coming battle, and calmly awaited results.

About dark a thin blue smoke, as from burning paper, curled up from the chimney of the Parsonage, and the Parson came slowly forth.

"Blamed if he hasn't been a making of his will and a burning of his letters. Looks grummer than a deacon, too," added the man, as the Parson neared the saloon.

He spoke quietly to the boys, as he entered, but did not swear. That was thought again remarkable, indeed.

He went up to the bar, tapped on the counter with his knuckles, threw his head back over his shoulder towards the crowd, and yet apparently without seeing any one, and said:

"Boys, fall in line, fall in line. Rally round me once again."

They fell in line; or, at least the majority did. Some, however, stood off in little knots and groups on the other side, and pretended not to have heard or noticed what was going on. These it was at once understood were fast friends of Sandy's and unbelievers in the Parson.

The glasses were filled quietly, slowly, and respectfully, almost like filling a grave, and then emptied in silence.

Again it was observed that the Parson did not swear. That was considered as remarkable as the omission of prayer from the service in a well-regulated church, and I am sure contributed to throw a spirit of restraint over the whole party friendly to the Parson. Besides, it was noticed that he was pale, haggard, had hardly a word to say, and, most unusual of all, had barely touched the glass to his lips.

No one, however, ventured to advise, question, or in any way disturb him. All were quiet and respectful. It was very evident that the feeling in the Forks was strongly with the Parson.

Sandy did not appear that evening. This, of course, was greatly against him. The Forks began to suspect that he feared to take the responsibility of his act, and meet the man he had so strangely deceived and so deeply injured.

The next day the saloon was crowded more densely than before. Men stood off in little knots and groups, talking earnestly. There was but one topic—only the one great subject—the impending meeting between the two leading men of the camp, and the probable result.

The Parson was among the first present that day, pale and careworn. They treated him with all the delicacy of women. Not a word was said in his presence of his misfortune, or the occasion of their meeting. To the further credit of the Forks, I am bound to say that there was scarcely an intoxicated person present.

The day passed and still Sandy did not appear. Had there been any other way out of camp than through the Forks and up the rugged, winding, corkscrew stairway of rocks opposite, and in the face of the town, it might have been suspected that he had taken the Widow and fled to other lands.

The Parson came down a little late next morning, pale and quiet, as before. He did not swear. This time, in fact, he did not even drink. He sat on a bench behind the monte-table, with his back to the fire and his face to the door. The men respectfully left rather a broad lane between the Parson and the door, and the monte-table was not patronized.

The day passed; dusk, and still Sandy did not appear. By this time he had hardly three friends in the house.

"Hasn't got the soul of a chicken!" "Caved in at last!" "Gone down in his boots!" "Busted in the snapper!" "Lost his grip!" "Dont dare show his hand!" These and like expressions, thrown out now and then from the little knots of men here and there, were the certain indications that Sandy had lost his place in the hearts of the leading men of the Forks.

Toward midnight the bolt lifted! Shoo! The door opened, and Sandy entered, backed up against the wall by the door, and stood there, tall and silent.

His great beard was trimmed a little, his bushy hair carefully combed behind his ears, and the neck-tie was now subdued into a neat love-knot, in spite of its old persistent habit of twisting around and fluttering out over his left shoulder. His eye met the Parson's, but did not quail.

The bar-keeper settled down gracefully behind the bags of sand, so that his eyes only remained visible above the horizon.

The head of the "Gay Roosters" tilted a table up till it made a respectable barricade for his breast, and the crowd silently settled back into the corners, packed tighter than sardines in a tin box.

You might have heard a mouse, had it crossed the floor. Even the fretful fire seemed to hold for the time its snappish red tongue, and the wind without to lean against the door and listen.

The Parson slowly arose from the table. He had his right hand in his pocket, and was very pale.

Experienced shootists, one of whom was a bat with their kind, glanced from the Parson, measured every motion, every look, with intense eagerness of artists who are favored with one great and especial sight, not to be met elsewhere. Others held their heads down, and only waited a confused sort of manner for the barking of the dogs.

Neither of Sandy's hands were visible; but as the Parson took a few steps forward, and partly drew his hand from his pocket, Sandy's right one came up like a steel spring, and the ugly black muzzle of a six-shooter was in the Parson's face.

Still he advanced, till his face almost touched the muzzle of the pistol. He seemed not to see it, or to have the least conception of his danger.

It was strange that Sandy did not pull. Maybe he was surprised at the singular action of the Parson. Perhaps he had his eye on the unlifted right hand of his antagonist. At all events, he had the "drop," and could afford to wait the smallest part of a second, and see what he would do.

"I have been a wait-in'"—the Parson halted a long time at the participle. "I have been a wait-in' for you, Sandy, a long time."

His voice trembled. "The voice that had thundered above many a hundred bar-room fights, and had directed the men through many a difficulty in camp, was now low and uncertain.

"Sandy," he began again, and he took hold of the counter with his left hand, "I am going away. Your cabin is too small now, and I want you and—and—your—your family to take care of the Parsonage till I come back."

Sandy sank back closer still to the wall, and his arm hung down at his side.

"You will move into the Parsonage to-morrow morning. It's full of good things for winter. You will move in it, I say, to-morrow mornin', early! Promise me that."

The Parson's voice was a little severe here—more determined than before; and, as he concluded, he drew the key from his pocket and handed it to Sandy.

"You will?"

"Yes."

The men looked a moment in each other's eyes. Perhaps they were both embarrassed. The door was convenient. That seemed to Sandy the best way out of his confusion, and he opened it softly and disappeared. The Howlin' Wilderness was paralyzed with wonder.

The Parson looked a little while out in the dark, through the open door, and was gone. There was a murmur of disappointment behind him.

"Don't you fear!" at last chimed in the head of the "Gay Roosters." "Don't you never fear! That old sea-dog, the Parson, is deeper than an infernal gulf."

"Look here." He put up his finger to the side of his nose, after a pause, and stroking his beard mysteriously, said: "I say, look here! Shoo! Not a word! Softly now! Powder! Gits 'em both into the Parsonage and blows 'em to kingdom come together! Gay loving move that will be, won't it?"

The Howlin' Wilderness was reconciled. It was certain that the end was not yet, by a great deal. It was again struck with wonder, however; and, for want of a better expression, took a drink and settled down to a game of monte.

Early next morning—a morning full of unutterable storms and drifts of snow—Sandy, with his bride and their few effects, entered the Parsonage, as he had promised.

The Parson was not to be seen.

Men stood about the door of the Howlin' Wilderness, and up and down the single street, in little knots, noting the course of things at the Parsonage, and now and then shaking their loose blanket coats and brushing off the fast-falling snow.

After a while, when the smoke rose up from the chimney-top, and curled above the Parsonage with a home-like leisure, as if a woman's hand tended the fire below, a man, with his face muffled up, was seen making his way slowly up the rugged way that led from town across the Sierra.

It was a desperate and dangerous undertaking at that season of the year. He made but poor headway, in the face of the storm that came pelting down in his face from the fields of eternal snow; but he seemed determined, and pushed slowly on. Sometimes it was observed he would turn, shading his eyes from the snow, look down intently at the peaceful smoke drifting through the trees above the Parsonage.

"Some poor idiot will pass in his cheeks to-night, if he don't come back pretty soon," said Stubbs, as he nodded at the man up the hill, brushed the snow from his sleeves, and went back into the saloon.

Sandy soon took his old place in the hearts of the boys. His wife was the sun and moon and particular star of the camp; and the Parson was for a time almost forgotten, save by the two people at the Parsonage. Often Sandy sought him, up and down the Creek; but he was not to be found. He had evidently left the camp.

After a month or two the talk became more general and respectful about the Parson.

It was with a little surprise that the Forks discovered, one evening, while discussing his merits and recounting his achievements, that he had never really killed a man during all his stay in the camp. How a man could have maintained the reputation for courage that this man had, and have held the influence over men that he did, without having killed a single man, seemed to the Forks unaccountable. Still they spoke of this man with kindness and almost with gentleness, and missed him through all the long, weary winter more than they were willing to admit.

Spring came at last; but not the Parson. The