

THE RED ASCENT

BY ESTHER W. NEILL

CHAPTER VIII—Continued

"Perhaps—because—maybe," she said provokingly. "Don't you like it?"

"Take off your mask."

"Never."

There was a sound of tearing gauze, and she had fled from him, leaving a portion of her train impaled on the point of his sword. He watched her passing through the moon-light waving her arms.

"I'm Fire—Fire—Fire," she intoned. He saw her cutting her way through the crowd that had again poured from the porch. Red Riding Hood gave a little scream of mock terror: Boy Blue huddled in a corner and begged her to go away; Queen Elizabeth caught her in her arms, and cried, "Fire and bloodshed! You are part of my reign. Yours is the most beautiful costume in the room." Then Oliver Cromwell came forward and claimed her for a dance.

Richard stood in front of the low window, still watching her as she danced lightly in the arms of the smiling Roundhead. He had to confess that she had piqued his curiosity, roused his interest. For the first time in his life he was experiencing that world-old charm that lies in the subtlety of womanhood. He had heard some one say that there would be a general unmasking after the next dance, and, as he waited, he was surprised at his own curiosity. But before the next dance began, Fire had disappeared, Cromwell had sought another partner, and when the masks were taken off amid shouts of laughter and surprise, Fire was nowhere to be seen.

Richard, dressed like several others in the room in the trailing gowns of a Greek goddess, greeted her guests. A little lady with bobbing curls and spectacles followed her around, adding her welcome to that of the young hostess.

Richard, remembering the conversation by the swimming-pool, recognized Miss Prunsey Prisms at once, but the whole scene had suddenly lost interest for him. He did not want to acknowledge his disappointment even to himself. He had wanted to identify Fire, she had eluded him. Now that the young people had unmasked, he felt himself to be more than ever an alien. In such a throng his hostess would not miss him; he would steal away somewhere into the garden, and lie down on one of the many benches that were scattered about the stars. Then, when it was time for leave-taking, he would call for Betty, and they would go home.

As he moved from the shadow of the window shutter, he did not see that little Miss White was standing in the doorway, looking for scattered guests that she might invite them in to supper. As the moonlight fell upon his face, the old lady's eyes were riveted upon him in a stare that seemed almost sightless, she fell fainting to the floor.

He was beside her in a moment. Most of the merry-makers had passed through the hallway into the hospitable dining-room in the western wing of the house, but as Richard stood over the frail little lady he heard Miss Fielding say with a calm, steady voice that was undismayed by the emergency: "Can you lift her? Will you bring her upstairs?"

The old lady's frame was as spare as a sparrow's; her nerves and her energy had burned up any surplus flesh that she might have acquired in her late years of luxurious living. Richard lifted her in his arms with that rare reverence that youth and sometimes offers old age, and carrying her easily up the broad stairs, he placed her in her high four-poster.

"Now go ask the butler for the brandy and bring it here yourself," commanded Miss Fielding, loosening the old lady's dress. "Don't tell any one. We don't want to cast a pall over the party. Prunsey has fainted once or twice before."

Richard retraced his steps, and finding the grizzled-headed butler gathering chairs from the hall, he ordered him to bring the decanter at once. The butler was too well-trained to exhibit either surprise or hesitation. He had been brought up in a region where a "gentleman's thirst" was to be regarded, not deplored.

Richard carried the heavy decanter back to the bedroom, and helped Miss Fielding force some of the liquor between her old friend's pale lips. Miss Prunsey gasped and opened her faded eyes.

"Jessica, Jessica, dear," she said feebly, clinging to the girl's strong hand, "I—I saw a ghost upon the porch."

"Nonsense," said the girl, kneeling beside the bed and gathering the little lady in her arms until the bobbing curls were hidden in her warm embrace. "Prunsey, you are dreaming."

"I saw him distinctly," said the old lady, trembling now. "I saw him in the moonlight."

"Who?" asked the girl, stooping to kiss the wrinkled cheek.

"He—he was once a soldier," said the old lady dreamily. "I suddenly remembered his presence. Of course he was," she said soothingly. "I've always suspected, Prunsey, that your lover was killed in the war."

"But he was not killed."

"Then how can you see his ghost?"

"He died! He died many years ago."

"Prunsey! Prunsey! Your ghost was quite alive. I'll show him to you some day. Here, take another sip of brandy—you're better now. All these years you've been longing to see a ghost, and when you come across a real substantial one, you haven't strength to question him. Come, I'm going to send Martha to undress you and put you to bed. You will be all right in the morning. Sure you feel better now? Then I'll go downstairs, back to my guests."

Richard had retreated as soon as he realized that he was the direct cause of the old lady's fright; he stood waiting to see if he could do any further service. As soon as Miss Fielding had summoned a neat negro maid from one of the nearby dressing-rooms, she joined him upon the stairs.

"I believe Prunsey was in love with your grandfather," she said. "I think I remember her hinting at it one day; and you have borrowed his clothes. I know, for you look so different from when I saw you last. Or, perhaps, we are all dreaming dreams tonight."

"I believe we are," he admitted slowly.

"What! You?"

"The whole thing has seemed very unreal," he said.

"And you care only for realities?"

The old look of weariness came into his eyes.

"I'm tired of realities."

She leaned slightly on his arm as they descended the wide steps together.

"Some realities are not to be despised. Food for instance. Let us go and hunt for some ice cream together."

CHAPTER IX

RICHARD MAKES A DECISION

ON the way home Richard was very silent. But Betty, chattered volubly. "Didn't the knight in armor look like a frying pan? How could he dance in all those clattering clothes? Wasn't Boy Blue a dear? Would you believe that Bob Fairfax could look beautiful? Where did Queen Elizabeth buy that absurd ruff? Wasn't the house gorgeous? Didn't the grounds look like fairyland? Wasn't Jess Fielding an ideal hostess? Wasn't the supper elaborate? A special car? What was the salad made of? Did the punch have champagne in it? Which costume was the most mysterious?"

"At last she paused for a response. "Since I did not know the people, they all seemed mysterious to me."

"You know Bob Fairfax, and Jim Peyton, and Tom Bird."

"I hadn't seen any of them for twelve years."

"Didn't you see any of them when you were here two years ago?"

"No, they were all away—trying to make a living, I guess."

"They come and visit their old homes in the summer. Then the county wakes up. I suppose we shall be very gay for a month or two, and then we shall stagnate again. Some one told me that Jess Fielding means to give a series of parties, but I don't suppose they will be as beautiful as this one. Why, every man there was a picture, and the girls—I have never seen so many lovely girls. Which one did you like best?"

"I don't know."

"Couldn't you guess? Didn't you see her when she unmasked?"

"She wasn't there."

"Why, Dick, she must have been there. No girl would have missed the fun of unmasking; no girl would leave before the refreshments were served."

"She did."

"What did she have on?"

"She was dressed as Fire."

Betty laughed softly. "Don't you know who that was?"

"No."

"She changed her dress."

"What for?"

"To fool you, I guess. Her costume was so extraordinary, she should think she would have liked to keep it on."

"Who was she?"

"Men are stupid," said Betty. "I've always believed you were wonderfully clever, but I'll have to change my mind. Did you have a good time?"

"I don't know whether I did or not."

"But it wasn't quite the bore that you thought it would be. I believe I can truthfully admit that."

"Did you find Fire interesting?"

"She was surprising."

"What did you talk about?"

He hesitated. "I believe we talked about ourselves."

"All men enjoy that," said Betty sagely. "I begin to have hopes of you, Dick. Jess Fielding seemed to go out of her way to see you. There were two or three men there who were insanely jealous because she chose you to bring her to supper."

"She didn't choose me. It was an accident. The party had a serious side. The little old lady who chaperoned Miss Fielding fainted on the porch. I had to carry her upstairs."

"Dear me! How romantic! What made her?"

"I believe I frightened her."

"Oh, Dick!"

"Why, it was the old, worn story of a soldier lover or something. She seems very old for that sort of nonsense; but I believe she has made a study of spiritualism until she half believes she can see ghosts. And in this case it wasn't so absurd because she took me for my grandfather."

"You do look like his picture," said Betty with conviction, "and I suppose the uniform ever lives can't get the one desired."

Richard laughed. "Whom does one marry then, Betty, dear? Somebody one doesn't want?"

"Somebody that asks her," answered Betty solemnly. "I don't think it's quite fair that girls are not given the choosing."

"I thought they were," he said, without much interest.

"Some people have so few opportunities," she went on reflectively; "of course there are girls like Jess Fielding who can travel everywhere, meet all sorts of men, entertain lavishly, and dress like princesses. I'm sure they can pick and choose. That dress she had on tonight must have cost five or six golden like it."

"I thought she had on white."

"Why, Dick, she was dressed as Fire. Don't tell me that you are such a stupid as not to guess that before? You certainly will never make a ladies' man."

"I guess not," he said after a long pause.

Betty was right. He had been "stupid." What other girl except Jess Fielding would have talked to him in that amazing way? She had tried to disguise her voice, but her conversation tonight seemed a part of that other interview he had had with her at the swimming-pool. He found himself rehearsing every remark she had made. What had she meant by saying that he always forgot her? Was it true? Did she really mean that he had always held a place in her memory, or had she talked only to tease and bewilder him?

As they drove along in silence under the steely glitter of the stars, fragments of his grandfather's love letters came back to him, and he began to understand vaguely that it was possible for a woman to command a man's whole mind until she actually absorbed him.

But when they reached home he put all thought of her aside. The whole evening had seemed unreal—a page from his half-forgotten fairy books that had charmed his imagination, but which had no part in a utilitarian world where restless forces chain down the spirit of the dreamer.

Betty jumped out of the buggy, and ran into the house, while he continued on his way to the stable; old Pedro had to be unhitched and watered, and by the time Richard entered his own bedroom it was after two o'clock. He threw himself upon the bed to rest for a moment, and he slept soundly until morning, dressed in his full uniform. The prophecy of Fire had partly failed. He had been too tired to remember.

The days began again monotonously. The garden beds must be weeded and sprayed; all kinds of living things seemed to spring up to devour the fresh green leaves of the vegetables. He sent to the nearest manufacturing town and bought a sprayer, darning to purchase it upon the installment plan, and he began to make a study of chemical solutions, endeavoring to find the most economical, as well as the most efficacious, for his needs. He was trying some experiments in intensive farming, and he was becoming interested in spite of the labor it entailed.

One morning when he was hard at work in one of the outlying fields he saw Miss Fielding come riding on horseback down the unfrequented road. He pulled his battered straw hat over his eyes, hoping that she would pass him by, for his clothes were mud-daubed and his shoes showed a long rent in the side; but she stopped at the fence and called: "May I come in for a moment?"

He answered her with what cordiality he could, and started toward her to open the gate. Before he reached it she had urged her horse to the high jump, and Richard trembled for her safety even while he admired her skillful horsemanship as he saw her clear the five bars of the sagging gate.

"I just wanted to prove to you that I can ride," she said laughing. "I don't always land in mud puddles. Warm weather for that sort of thing. I know you are busy, but I want you to look at these plans for a moment, and tell me what you think of them. I call them my Christmas tree village."

She held out a roll of papers to him, and he took it gingerly in his dusty hands. "Christmas?" he repeated. "It's nearer Fourth of July."

"Please don't be so exact," she entreated.

"Didn't you ever have Christmas trees when you were a boy, and didn't they have green moss gardens underneath, and neat little white houses perched on the edge of a looking-glass lake? I am building some homes for those poor creatures at the mines. I'm sure you put the notion in my head. I drew the plans roughly, and gave them to an

architect to work out for me. Those are the blue prints. I want to know what you think of them."

He opened them with eagerness. He was forgetful now of his own personal appearance. "I am so glad to hear it," he said enthusiastically. "I see you have planned for detached houses—that's fine; they can all have flower gardens. This kitchen seems very practical; stationary tubs and running water will save lots of labor. But I don't like the roof, it's too flat."

"Why, what's the matter with a flat roof?"

"Makes the house too hot in summer, unless it has some sort of an air chamber above."

Then put a peak on it."

He took the handle of his hoe and began drawing a plan in the dust of the roadway. "That would be my idea; I don't believe it would add greatly to the expense."

"I don't care if it does," she said. "Give me the blue prints and I'll get home. This sun is terrible. I must get home. You had better stop work for the day."

"I can't do that," he said hopelessly.

After she had gone he wondered why he had not tried to keep her. Why had he not, at least, offered her the hospitality of the house? Betty would have been glad to see her, and the big darkened parlor promised cool and comfort after the glare of the sun on the roads. He might have joined her there at luncheon time. Perhaps she would have played for him on the old piano that had belonged to his mother—perhaps she could sing. It had been so long since he had heard any good music, and he had learned to appreciate the best during his brief sojourns in Europe, until the lack of it, whenever he allowed himself to think about it, was a distinct privation.

The day grew warmer. The sun shone, a red-eyed monster, threatening to wither and burn the far-reaching acres of corn where lay Richard's only hope of a harvest. The ground was gray and cracked, thirsting for moisture, and when a breeze came it whistled across the tips of the stalks like a hot fog of whirling dust. Richard prayed for rain. The heat had become intense, and he had been at work ever since sunrise; toward noon he turned suddenly sick and giddy, and fell face downwards in the cornfield, cutting himself upon the barbed wire which he had been repairing the fence.

Then the rain came; great sheets of water that brought renewed life to all growing things, rousing Richard from his semi-conscious state. He crept back to the house, hardly knowing how he accomplished the journey. Betty and the Colonel were sitting on the porch.

"I believe I have had a slight sunstroke," he said, holding to the porch-railing for support. "I think I shall have to go to bed."

Betty helped him up the stairs with some show of sisterly sympathy, and wetting cloths, bound them around his head.

"We really ought to have ice," she said as she busied herself with the bandages.

"Perhaps we will—next year," he murmured drowsily.

There was always something lacking—some necessity. Would he ever be able to provide the simple comforts of life?

Betty stayed beside him for an hour. Then the sun came out. "You won't mind if I leave you now?" she asked. "I promised Bob Fairfax I would go riding with him this afternoon. He has brought a horse for me from his father's stables." She went to the window and opened the blinds. "There he is now. Oh, Dick, you won't care if I go?"

"Of course not."

After she left him the room seemed unbearably warmer, the light from the unshuttered window came directly in his eyes, and he felt too weak to walk that far to close the blinds. Flies buzzed about him in their maddening monotony, and alighted on his face, his hands, until in sheer desperation he covered himself entirely with the long linen sheet. Then he felt that he was smothering. The bandages grew hot upon his head, he took them off and dabbed them feebly in the bucket that stood on a chair by the bed, but, after an hour or two, even the well water lost its cool freshness, the mere wetness alone was little comfort. The drippings from the bandages soaked his pillow and attracted more flies. He had screened the other windows of the house and neglected his own. Why had Betty left those shutters open? Must he go on forever exerting every energy, and asking for no gratitude or service in return?

"C-o-w—cow, p-l-o-w—plow," he began to spell words mechanically. His mind refused to worry itself further about his bodily neglect. "C-o-w," the word brought no image, "p-l-o-w," the letters were repeated over and over again; it was only thing troubling him now was the arranging of those few letters: "c-l-o-w—no, that was not right, p-o-w—no, where had he begun; there ended? Over and over again the words reiterated themselves. Every now and then the vague fear came that he was losing his mind; then the letters returned again to plague him, and he would begin to spell anew, "c-l-o-w, p-o-w."

AN IDYL IN FRANCE

She knelt there alone, Rosary in hand, in the gloom of the shell-pierced church. Through those very doors she had brought him, her little babe, in her arms. His great blue eyes had rounded, when she knelt with him before the shrine. His little face lit up at the wonder of it all. His baby voice had hushed, and he had kept very still; it had seemed as though he knew that he was in the house of God.

This holy place, filled with happy memories, brought back to her mind dim pictures of the past; the cherubic smile of her little one; his prattle throughout the long, happy days; his lisping prayers at her knee when night had come, peasant prayers they were, generation, and generation to countless children before the great open fireplaces of the poor; trustful prayers, sanctified and consecrated by the faith and the hope and the love of a thousand years.

All too soon had passed the years of helplessness. All too soon came the day when he left the protection of her loving arms, and manfully, yet unsteadily, went forth to seek for him in the unexplored nooks and corners of the little garden. Yet, his footsteps grew sure all too soon. Oh, that he could always have been but a little child!

Those were joyous years, of mutual love and adoration. He filled her lonely life. She saw in him a gift, as it were, from God, her greatest blessing, her one mission in life. As she grew older, hours of separation had to come. He went to school with the other children of the town; but, then, his absence made her delight more and more in his company. He would come running home to her, and they would greet each other as if they had been parted for a week. He would tell her the story of his day, and she would listen and marvel at his simple little tale. How good God had been.

Through those arched doors they used to come to pay homage to their Lord, often in the afternoon, and sometimes in the falling dusk of evening. On Sunday mornings he would take her by the hand and together they would join the solemn procession of the good country folk on their way to Holy Mass. And then, perhaps, the good Cure would meet them, and would stop and lay his hand on the little golden head, and tell her what a man her son was going to be. How proud of him she was, her little Joseph! How she thanked God for the comfort of her life! And now—

These broken walls had witnessed many happy moments. At this altar railing, now bruised and broken by the desecrating hand of war, had come to her and to him the greatest joy of all. Here God had come and dwelt with them. The day of First Communion—the happiest and most memorable day in the life of the French Catholic; she remembered it as though it were only yesterday—the little boys and girls receiving for the first time the Sacred Host from the hands of the priest, and among them her Joseph. He had confided to her that he wished always to serve his Eucharistic King; and she had smiled at his ardor, and her heart was glad. She knew now that Joseph loved Him more than her, but she was content.

And then, not long after, he came home one day to tell her that the Cure was going to teach him to serve Mass. Together they puzzled over the strange Latin words she learned the responses for the Mass with him. She began to feel in earnest now that he was growing to need her less and less.

One bright Sunday, in the spring-time of the year, she sat in her time-stained pew, here in the church, and watched her little son, her little Joseph, enter the sanctuary with the silver-haired priest, to serve Mass for the first time. He fluttered. Perhaps he would forget! But no! With the solemn gravity of boyhood he performed his simple duties without mistake. She watched him, hopeful, and yet half fearful of what the coming years might bring. All was so bright then—

Then came the sickness. He was very near death. His face was flushed and wasted with the fever. The doctor came, shook his head sadly, and turned away from the bedside; he told her that God alone could save Joseph for her. Then the venerable Cure had come, bringing with him the Bread of Life and the sacred oils. Oh, how she had watched and suffered and prayed! If God would only spare him to her!

A change came one day. The doctor said it was a miracle. From that time on he grew steadily better. He was given back to her, as it were, as one from the dead. Many weeks passed before the ruddy glow of health returned to his cheeks. How good it was to have him well again!

But now, it seemed, he was no longer the merry, care-free little fellow of old. It was true, and he continued to do a thousand little things to lighten her duties; but in some way he seemed to be less and less the child, and more and more the man.

She never would forget—he was thirteen then—he came to her one evening shortly after the Bishop

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