

THE RED ASCENT

BY ESTHER W. NEILL

CHAPTER VII—CONTINUED

Richard sat one night on the edge of his high four-poster musing over these letters. What a tremendous power love had always been in the world. Why had he never given it any thought? Since his mother's death—and his memory of her was made up of trifling occurrences that a child's mind accentuates—he had never demanded love from any one. The Colonel had always been indifferent to him, Betty regarded him almost as a stranger. Until the last few months he had never entered into her life. Now she accepted his services as a matter of course. As long as she was provided with food and shelter, she was oblivious to the matter of his efforts. Poring over these old letters he began to speculate about himself, and to wonder idly if he were capable of great love for an individual. If he gave nothing how could he expect return? Was the fault his? If women roused men, wise, judicial men like his grandfather, to such desperate states of mind, to such foolish poems and prattle, why was he immune?

His thoughts were brought to an abrupt conclusion by Betty knocking on his door.

"Aren't you ready, Dick?"

"Ready?" he repeated, looking up bewildered.

Betty stood in the hallway dressed in her grandmother's wedding-gown, hoop-skirt, lace veil, orange blossoms, white satin slippers, her face flushed into beauty, her nervous fingers struggling with the old-time silken mitts.

"Betty child, I didn't know you."

"Isn't it great?" said Betty. "Don't I look pretty? I can't get in your door, these hoops won't let me. I'm going down in the parlor and practice moving around in them while you get ready, Dick."

"Ready for what?" he asked.

"Oh, Dick, don't say you're not going. It would just break my heart to miss the Fieldings' party tonight."

"Is it tonight?" he asked helplessly.

"Why, Dick, you can't have forgotten so soon."

"But I had, Betty. I had—my mind seems so small that I can't squeeze in more than one idea at a time. Here I am sitting up nights trying to take the Fieldings' money away from them, and they invite me to a party."

"Pooh!" said Betty, of course they invite us. Jess Fielding would rather have us than anybody in the county."

"I don't see why."

"There are times, Dick," she began smoothing her mitts over her thin arms, "when I believe you are stupid in spite of all your education."

"No doubt about it," he agreed good-naturedly.

"And this is one of the times," she continued. "Jess Fielding wants us to come because—well, it gives her a boost socially—we are the bluest-blooded people in this county."

Richard smiled. "I don't believe she is such a fool," he said.

"But she is," repeated Betty knowingly. "Women are all like that. We want the best people at our parties or none at all."

"And your definition of 'best,' Betty?"

"Grandfathers," she answered unhesitatingly, "great-grandfathers, great-great-grandfathers."

"Every man except Adam had those."

"Stupid!" said Betty, "stupid again. You know the traditions of this county as well as I do. Get into that beautiful uniform and come on. We'll make a little curtain mess. I cut up one pin cushion and one sachet bag to make them; black for you, white for me."

"But, Betty dear, upon my soul it hardly seems fair to accept the Fieldings' hospitality when I'm trying to get up a law case against them."

"Fiddlesticks!" said Betty. "What have you found out?"

"Nothing."

"Have you any kind of proof?"

"None."

"Have you the shadow of a chance of winning your case?"

"Not yet."

"Everybody's dead," said Betty with cheerful resignation; "so you'll never find out anything."

"But I'm trying."

"That makes no difference."

"Do you think she expects us?"

"Of course she does. I sent my acceptance two weeks ago. She'll be dreadfully disappointed if we don't come."

"He was very tired. He longed for some loophole of escape."

"Why should she be disappointed?" he persisted.

"I just told you," she said, beginning to lose patience. "She will think we want to snub her, and no girl enjoys being snubbed. If you don't want to go—I suppose I can stay—at-home."

Her eager little face looked so pathetic beneath the meshes of the veil that he resolved to martyr himself at once.

"Cheer up. I'll get ready. It won't take me fifteen minutes to hitch old Pedro to the buggy. I haven't had any plowing these last few days, so he may travel along with a little spirit."

"But, Dick, you will have to dress—ruffled shirt—uniform."

"I'd forgotten that, too," he said, "but I'll go the whole gait, I promise you, even if I do feel like a second-class hero in a melodrama."

Betty went singing blithely down the stairs, and passed into the blackness of the parlor. Once there she felt her way cautiously to the mantel, and, having successfully located the match box, she lighted all the candles that stood in the twisted silver sconces. Two mirrors that hung between the windows at either end of the long room reflected the flickering lights over and over again. Betty seemed to walk in a labyrinth of rooms with twenty other hoop-skirted brides pirouetting for their grooms.

At last Richard came. Betty gave a little scream of delight. "Colonel, Colonel," she called, "come and see us! Come and see! Dick, look at yourself in the mirror! I believe you are the handsomest man I ever saw. Your shoulders are so broad and you are so tall, so perfectly proportioned, and those gorgeous buttons. Oh, I don't wonder that girls go crazy over brass buttons!"

"Betty," he said laughing, putting his hand over her mouth, "you're trying to make amends for dragging me out tonight. I feel like an idiot. Don't make me look like one."

The Colonel came limping across the hall. "What's all this?" he said. "What's all this commotion about?"

Betty dropped him a curtsey, her wide skirt spread out like an inflated balloon. "We are going to the Fieldings' masquerade ball."

"Taking up with that trash, eh?"

"She invited us," said Betty defensively, the laughter dying out of her eyes. "I'm sure she is an educated girl, and she's been everywhere, seen everything, knows all kinds of nice people."

"H'm," said the Colonel, pulling at his gray goatee, "the country's money mad. The Fieldings are as common as dirt."

"I feel quite at home in dirt," said Richard.

The Colonel turned. There was no mistaking the look of startled wonder on his face.

"Where—where did you get those clothes?"

Richard stood at attention and gave the military salute.

"I am the ghost of my grandfather," he said smiling.

The Colonel's deep-set eyes filled with a suspicious moisture; he bumbled for his handkerchief and blew his nose with excited energy.

"You have on the uniform of an officer," he said at last. "You should have a sword—my sword. The color of the sword—the Yankees ever did was sending that sword back to me."

"Because of the brave fight you made and your valiant courage in defeat when you were outnumbered. I remember the words of the message. Mother taught them to me before I was eight years old."

"Did she?" said the Colonel, and there was something youthful in his eagerness. "I didn't know she cared as much as that. You must wear the sword tonight, Dick. By heaven, sir, I would have been proud to have had you in my regiment."

He reached for the sword that hung above the mantel and unsheathing it he stood for a moment as if the sword itself were the cold impact of the steel seemed to revivify his youth, the only part of his life that had seemed worth while to him: the life that had called for endurance, decisiveness, self-denial, virtues that he had not felt the necessity of practicing before or since.

The best that was in him had surrendered when a military victory was lost.

Richard was keen enough to realize this. The sword was holy in his eyes.

"I don't believe I am fit to wear it," he said humbly.

The Colonel returned to the present, irritated with himself for his useless dreaming.

"And why not?" he demanded.

"It means so much."

"How can it to you?"

"I am your son."

"You were born long after the war was over. What do you know about it?"

"But the sword! It typifies so much. Somehow it seems a sort of sacrilege to wear it to a masquerade."

"We are all maskers," said the Colonel cynically. "All the world is masquerading. Your costume must be complete, my son, I'm only arming you for the battle."

As Richard took the sword he stooped and kissed the smooth surrendering hand that held it out to him. This touch of reverence displeased the Colonel. He had no taste for anything that seemed to border on medieval ritualism.

"My Lord, boy," he said wiping his hand on his rusty coat. "I'm no potentate, and you're no knight, hysterical after an all-night vigil."

The atmosphere of idealism which had seemed to surround the Colonel was pierced by the words. Richard turned away.

"Perhaps I am hysterical," he said.

CHAPTER VIII

"I AM FIRE"

The ancient Hedrick mansion, which the Fieldings had bought and remodelled, stood on a high hill far removed from the black shaft of

the coal mines. The grimy workmen toiling in the low-roofed chambers underground had built up this palace with their products, but now the rich inmates must not be offended by the sight of the dirty, sweating mass of men who had supplied them with these luxuries. Close-branched cedars had been planted to screen off this view of the valley, trellises of roses walled in a sunken Italian garden, which in the old days had boasted only a few somber box bushes. But now it was riotously ablaze, and tonight even the trees along the driveway seemed to blossom forth miraculously, strung with tiny electric bulbs of different colors.

Betty gasped with delight as the buggy wheels, scraping the new iron gateway, passed into this wonderland.

"Did you ever see anything so beautiful in all your life?" she said clasping her brother's arm in an ecstasy. Look at the house, Dick. Why, it's twice as big as it used to be. What can one girl want with so many rooms?"

"She doesn't live alone?" he asked quietly.

"Only a governess or chaperon, a little old lady by the name of Miss White."

"Miss Fielding didn't call her that."

"I know. Jess Fielding calls her Prunty, or some such pet name. I wish we had started earlier. I believe we are the last to arrive."

As they neared the brilliantly-lit house a man in livery came forward to take charge of old Pedro, who was wheezing from his leisurely walk up the hill. Betty threw off the linen duster which she had worn over her voluminous dress, and, adjusting her little curtain mask, told Richard to do the same.

"We haven't any wraps," she said, "so there is no use going into the dressing-room. Look at all the people on the porch. If you don't put on your mask now everybody will know you."

Since nobody knows me anyhow," began Richard.

"Oh, Dick, please act a little perturbed."

"My dear Betty, what's that?"

"Act as if you were at a party. Be gay. Don't—don't act like a monk in a monastery."

He laughed.

"Did you ever see a monk in a monastery?"

But his question went unheeded. She ran lightly up the steps. A satin-coated courtier in a curly wig stood in the doorway.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"A bride without a groom answered Betty saucily.

"Then I'm the man you're looking for. Come dance with me. You can't speak to your hostess because she's masked like the rest of us. I'll propose to you if you'll tell me your name."

Betty whirled away into the maelstrom of dancers; Richard followed her as far as the hall, uncertain of himself now that he was no longer needed. This life was not foreign to Betty; these young men and girls were her friends, her neighbors. She slipped back into gayety, after the long, tiresome winter, with an ease and energy that showed Richard what the deprivation of it meant to her.

For fully half an hour Richard stood half-hidden behind some tall palms, forgetful of his awkwardness as he viewed the unusual scene in front of him. All sorts and conditions of people seemed gathered together in the big flower-decked room. Characters from his favorite fairy tales; characters from history and romance. Puritans wearing their pointed hats, austere-looking goddesses, cowboys, Indians, sailors, soldiers, devils, mingled before him with the fascinating incongruity of a dream.

Mr. Pickwick balanced himself upon a window sill, while Red Riding Hood regaled him with some cookies that she carried in a splint-bottomed basket. Robinson Crusoe was dancing blissfully with Queen Elizabeth; George Washington was pulling Bo-Peep a long wiggly curl, and Oliver Cromwell was laughing heartily at something that Cinderella had just whispered in his ear.

When the music stopped for a brief interlude, Richard heard a hissing, crackling sound at his side. He looked down. A girl in a strange red and yellow costume stood beside him. Her hair fell about her shoulders, and seemed a part of the diaphanous gauze of which her dress was made. Suddenly she threw up her arms, and by some trick he could not understand, her long flowing sleeves flew upward until she looked as if she were enveloped in a spiral flame.

"I'm Fire—Fire—Fire!" she said. "Come out on the porch. I'll blaze the way."

He was a trifle resentful that his retreat had been discovered.

"You're too dangerous," he smiled, hoping to escape her.

"I am, I am. I want to be."

"But I am prudent," he said standing still.

"You're a soldier," she retorted. "The first duty of a soldier is to obey, the next is the court danger."

He laughed and followed her, not knowing how to refuse.

"I am only the wraith of a soldier," he said.

The wide brick portico was crowded now with the merry company who had been dancing but a moment before. The spectral moonlight seemed the one thing needed

to make the phantasy complete. Richard looked around him wonderingly; he was surrounded by familiar friends. The heroes and heroines of his boyhood had conspired to meet him in this unexpected way. His strenuousness, his weariness, his disappointment fell from him. He was young again, care free; he was part of this delightful unreal world of "make believe."

The unseen orchestra began another waltz; there was a quick interchange of partners, and the porch was deserted. Richard stood alone with the flaming girl beside him.

"I can't ask you to dance because I don't know how," he began half apologetically.

"I'm glad you don't," she answered.

"I thought you liked dancing."

"I think it's silly for a man."

"Then why do you do it?"

"Because everybody does."

"Is that a reason?"

"I thought it was. Come sit down on this bench and tell me who I am."

"I don't know."

"Don't you care?"

"How can I?"

"Dear me," she sighed, "I thought you were scientific."

"What has that to do with it?"

"Doesn't science necessitate curiosity?"

"We call it the spirit of investigation," he said.

"Have you always been indifferent to women?"

"I haven't known any."

"You are not telling the truth now," she said.

"I thought I was."

"Don't you care to know any?"

"I thought I didn't."

Again her arms shot upward, the soft gauze waved about her head, she spun around until she seemed a pillar of flame. "I'm Fire—Fire—Fire," she said in a low, rhythmic voice, "and you are a man of ice. Suppose—suppose that I should try to melt you?"

The spirit of harlequin caught him at last. "I'm armed against all dangers," he cried, and drawing his sword he pinned her trailing dress to the floor. "Now you cannot get away until you tell me who you are."

"I like my mask," she said.

"I threw his from him. Mine is fearfully hot," he said.

"She caught the bit of silk before it landed in the tangled jasmine vine. "It was no disguise," she said, crumpling it in her hand.

"I have been away so long I thought I had passed beyond all remembrance."

"Not beyond mine," she whispered.

Her tone bewildered him.

"If this is flirting," he said blunderingly, "I know nothing of the game. You will find me as awkward as a Hottentot."

The girl laughed.

"Don't you find me interesting?" she asked.

"Take off your mask, and I'll tell you."

"I prefer to keep it on."

"Then you don't want your question answered?"

"I have intuitions."

"And what do they amount to?"

"They tell me that you will go home and think about me; it is a good beginning."

"The beginning of what?"

"Of your learning the game."

"But I don't want to learn it. I haven't the time."

"You think that now."

"I'll think it always."

"Your manners are not good," she admitted. "Try to forget me and see if you can."

"Why shouldn't I?"

"Because you never had a woman talk to you this way before."

"Is that why you do it?"

TO BE CONTINUED

BETTY'S BLACKMAIL

By Mrs. N. Crotty in Rosary Magazine

It was a murky February evening; a damp fog lay over the view and crept through the streets, dimming the lamplight to a dull yellow blue, and covering the pavements with sticky moisture. Yet there was no chill in the air; indeed, an old woman carrying a basket up the steep street purred to wipe her forehead. A dale too warm to be wholesome it is," she muttered, arranging the parcels in the basket, at the bottom of which a dozen unsold oranges were tumbling about.

She neared the crossing, where her own little house stood at the end of a poverty-stricken lane, and a swift, slight figure passed a gas-lamp with a swirl that struck familiarly on the old woman's eyes. The darkness blurred the figure, until there swung into the radiance of the very next lamp to Betty a girl with a black wrap drawn half over a gleaming golden head. She was passing by like a breeze, when a wiry old hand was outstretched to grasp her arm.

"Take your arm, whoever you are," protested the old woman. "If you scattered me few oranges in the gutter, maybe you'd not stoop to pick them up!"

The girl stopped. "Betty," she said dully, "I never thought 'twas you."

Any other old woman in the town would be the same relation to Betty," retorted Betty tartly. "To go whipping along like that! What brings you home at all, asthore?"

"The same old story," returned the girl suddenly. "You had better

look sharp, Mrs. Lynch, or I'll be a rival of yours. Nothing else is left to me."

"Now, now," remonstrated Betty. "That's very queer talk from a healthy youngster. If you aren't in a hurry maybe you'll turn back with me, an' set the fire going—I'm dog-tired." And Betty affected a weariness much heavier than she felt.

"Sure I will," the girl returned heartily, taking the basket. "I only ran out to be away from 'em."

Betty unlocked her door, the while a portly grey cat purred a welcome around her feet. "Small blame to you to be lonesome, Kit," she said compassionately. "But the fire an' the supper will soon be to your liking."

The girl got the fire going, and in the light Betty's little home looked very cosy. It was all red and white, white walls and brightly painted furniture; there were green plants in the window, and gay little pictures on the walls.

"I'll run for the milk now, Betty," said Annie Allen; and the kettle will be boiling when I come back."

"Ay, an' the blessing o' God be with you, asthore," returned Betty. "An' she muttered it lowly, raising her eyes to a picture over the mantel, where the Mother of Sorrows clasped patient hands over the sword that pierced her heart. "Blessed Mother of the Lord, watch over her! She's good, an' very good, if she only got a chance."

She set her tea to brew, and drew the table in front of the fire; and from the doorway, as she returned with the milk, Annie Allen viewed her old friend's comfort with wistful appreciation. "If they'd only have sense at home we could be as comfortable as you, Betty," she said sadly.

"God help us, girl, my comfort is but small," returned Betty. "Take your supper now, an' we can talk afterwards."

After supper Betty asked gently, as they sat by the fire, "Did she go after you again, asthore?"

The girl nodded sullenly. "And not a penny due to me. And when my mistress refused to advance me any more money, she turned me out and gave the woman abuse, an' round and round she goes from sending me away, she can get a girl with respectable people belonging to her any day."

Betty was silent. The girl spoke but bare truth; but oh, the pity that a child should be driven to speak so of a mother, and worse pity still that a mother should so ruin her child's prospects!

"There's the fourth place she has me out of in a year," went on Annie. "Isn't it hard? I'm so young, and healthy, and willing to work, yet I can't keep a place the third month on account of her coming in demanding money for drink!"

The old woman's eyes were moist, but there were no tears in the hard grey eyes opposite her. They blazed with resentment, and the girl's face was bright with angry color. Annie was a handsome girl, with her graceful figure and red-gold hair; but she was hot-tempered and impulsive; and her wise old friend trembled for her future.

"I think you had better stay with me tonight, Annie," she said. "I'll cover over an' tell 'em so."

"I gave 'em a piece o' my mind before I came out," returned Annie. "They won't want me back."

Betty had not far to go; the Allens owned the next house in the same lane as hers. There was a garden attached to it, and stabling, for the family were carriers, and could be in good circumstances if their income was wisely spent. Betty went in, and finding an untidy, unlighted kitchen with no one in it, left a message to the next neighbor for Mrs. Allen, saying that Annie was spending the night with Betty Lynch. The contrast that had struck Annie struck Betty herself as she opened the door of her own cosy home.

And she was so much poorer than the Allens! There were a few pounds in the savings bank, but these she was leaving for any emergency, and supporting herself by the sale of fruit and a few vegetables. It was poverty that had brought her to the lane; but though she well knew what poverty meant, she had not set her thin lips and defied it to transform her into a lanewoman. Time was when the thin lips had curved in rosy lines of beauty, but whatever else Betty found time to regret it was not the good looks of her girlhood, for had she been plain of face she would not have attracted the notice of the gay, good-for-nothing who had been her husband. He had been above her in station, and very soon Betty discovered that he also held himself above her honest work; and found reason to be thankful that she herself had been trained in laundry. She managed to secure a house with a drying-ground attached, and she set to work, trained several girls, and saved money. But advancing years stole away her strength; her husband had a long illness, and when the expense of that illness and of his funeral was paid, she saw plainly that the rent of her healthy little home would henceforth be beyond her power. So most reluctantly she moved into the town and took up a new business in her sixtieth year. She saw no degradation whatever in it. Betty was one of those sturdy souls who relegate

shame to where it belongs; and Betty Lynch selling a basket of oranges was in her eyes every whit as superior a person as would be the same Betty with ermine on her shoulders and ospreys in her bonnet, whirling by in her own car.

It might be supposed that the old woman's