

POETRY.

DON'T STOP AT DESPAIR.

We must trust the conductor, most surely; Why millions of millions before Have made this same journey securely...

SELECT STORY.

BERYL BRENTANO

THE SAPPHIRE OF THE SOUTH.

CHAPTER XXV.

"No, I am not willing. Go back upstairs, and stay there," said the warden. "Why may I not assist in working?"

"In the first place you are not fit to mix with those poor creatures in yonder; their outcups would urdle your blood; and in the second, you are not strong, and would be sure to take the disease at once."

"I am perfectly well; my lungs are now as healthy as yours, and I am not afraid of diphtheria. You detailed nurses, who refused to serve; I volunteer; have you any right to reject me?"

"Yes, the right to protect and save your life, which is worth twenty of those already in danger," replied Mr. Singleton, pausing in his task of filling capsules with quinine.

"Who made you a judge of the value of souls? My life belongs first to God, who gave it, next to myself; and if I choose to jeopardize it, in working among my suffering comrades in disgrace, you must not usurp the authority to prevent me."

"Has it become so intolerable that you desire to commit suicide under the specious plea of philanthropic martyrdom?" said Dr. Moffat, whose keen black eyes scanned her closely from beneath eagle grey brows.

"I think I may safely say, no such selfish motive underlies my resolution. My heart is full of pity and of dread for some women here, who admit their guilt, yet have sought no pardon from the Maker their sins insult. Sick souls cry out to me, and I feel the privilege of ministering to both."

"The parable of the sparrows is no fable to me; and if, while trying to comfort my unhappy associates, I should meet me out of this dark, stony vineyard, I will alone overrule all, and I can meet His face in peace. We say, 'Lord, what wilt Thou have us to do?'"

"During almost eighteen months, both men had studied her character as manifested in the trying phases of prison existence, finding no flaw, to-day they looked up reverently at the graceful form in his homespun uniform, at the calm, colorless face, wearing its crown of meekness, with an inalienable, proud air of cold repose.

"To keep you here is about as sacrilegious as it would have been to thrust St. Catherine among the chain gang in the galleys," muttered the doctor.

"No doubt duty called her to much worse places; therefore, when she died, the angels buried her on Sinai," answered the prisoner; before whose wistful eyes drifted the memory of Lina's picture.

"You have set your heart on this; nothing less will content you?" "While the necessity continues, nothing less will content me."

"Remember, you voluntarily take your life in your own hands; I assume the entire responsibility for any risk incurred."

"Then, I wish you God speed; for the harvest is white, the laborers few."

"Why, doctor? I relied on you to help me keep her out of reach. If anything happens, how shall I pacify Susie?" She made me promise every possible care for her favorite. Look here, only an hour ago I received a letter and this package marked, 'One for Ned; the other for Miss Beryl.' Two little red flannel sally bags, cure-alls, to be tied around one's necks, close to our noses, as if we could not smell them in a dark mill? Asafetida, garlic, camphor, 'jimson weed,' valerian powder—phew! What not? Mixed as a voodoo chowder, and a scent twice as loud!"

"Be thankful your wife is not here to enforce the wearing of the sanitary sachet," said the doctor, allowing himself a grimace of contemptuous disgust.

"So I am; but being a bachelor, answerable only to yourself, you cannot understand how absence does not exonerate me from the promise made when she started away. I would sooner face an army with banners, than that little brown-eyed woman of mine when she takes the lapel of my coat in one hand, raises the forefinger of the other, turns her head sideways like a thrush watching a wriggling worm, and says, in a voice that rises as fast as the sound a mouse makes racing up the treble of the piano keys: 'Ump! whew! Didn't I tell you so? The minute my back was turned, of course you made ducks and drakes of all my promises. Show me a "Flying Jenny," that the tip end of any idiot's finger can spin around, and I'll christen it Edward McTawdiddle Singleton!'"

"I will assure Mrs. Singleton that you endeavored to dissuade me; and that you faithfully kept your promise to shield me from danger."

When he came back, and took up the needle, he spoke with solemn emphasis: "This is the most malignant type of an always dangerous disease that I have ever encountered; and constant exposure to it, without the careful, persistent use of tonic and disinfectant precautions, would be tantamount to walking unvaccinated into a pest house, where people were dying of confident small-pox. I have no desire to frighten, but it is proper that I should warn you; and insist upon the duty of watching your own health as closely as the symptoms of the victims you are dispenser of nursing. Will you follow the regimen I shall prescribe for yourself?"

"Implicitly." The warden finished filling the capsules, rose, and looked at his watch. "As far as the chances go, it is 'heads I win, tails you lose'; and sorry enough I am to see you come down and dare the pestilence; but since here you are, I might well say what I was asked to tell you last night. For your sake I kept silent; now, since you persist, I wash my hands of all responsibility for the consequences. You have heard the history of the woman Ira Le Bougeois, better known in the 'walls' as the 'Bloody Duchess.' Two days ago she scourge struck her down; she is very ill, the most symptoms have appeared, and she is almost frantic with terror. Last night, at twelve o'clock, I was going the rounds of the sick wards, and found her wringing her hands, and running up and down the cell like a maniac. I tried to quiet and encourage her, but she paid no more attention than Istone deaf; and when I started to leave her, she seized my arm, and begged me to ask you to come and stay with her. She thinks if you would sing for her, she could listen, and forget the horrible things that haunt her. It is positively sickening to see her error at the thought of death. Poor, desperate creature."

"Yet you withheld her message when I might have comforted her?" "It was a crazy whim. In hardened cases like hers, death bed remorse counts for very little. Her conscience is hailing her; could you quite that? Could you bleach out the blood that spots her soul?" "Yes, by leading her to One who can."

"Remember, you asked me as a special favor to keep you as far apart as possible from all of her class."

"At that time, overwhelmed by the misery of my own fate, I was pitiless to the sufferings of others. The rod that smote me was very cruel then; but by degrees it seems to bud like Aaron's with precious promises, that may expand into the immortal glow of souls redeemed. I dwell too long in the east of the Pharisee; I shall live closer to God, walking humbly among the publicans. Will you show me the way to the woman who wishes to see me?"

"Not yet. There are some instructions that must be carefully weighed before I can install you as nurse in that dismal mire of moral and physical corruption. Singleton, send the hospital to me."

There are spectacles which brand themselves so ineffaceably upon memory, that one has no power to impair their vividness; and of such were some of the scenes witnessed by the new nurse.

Sitting on the side of her cot, from which the grey blanket had been dragged and folded half across her shoulders, where one hand held it, while the other clutched savagely at her throat, her hair and delicate feet beating a tattoo on the white-sanded floor, and her thin nostrils dilated in the battle for breath, Ira Le Bougeois moaned in abject terror. The course unbleached "domestic" night gown that fell to her knees, was streaked across the breast with some dark brown fluid; and similar marks stained the pillow where her restless head had tossed. The hot eyes and parched red lips seemed to have drained all the tainted blood from her olive cheeks, save where, just beneath the eyes, a few black, rounded, and discolored, were piled selfishly around the low brow, and thrown up with the swift movement of some startled fury animal, alert even in the throes of death.

"Is all hope over? Did they tell you there is no chance for me?" The voice was hoarse and thick, the articulation indistinct and smothered.

"No. They think you very ill, but still hope the remedies will save you. The doctor says your fine constitution ought to conquer the disease."

"I am beyond the remedy—because I can not swallow any longer. Since the doctor left me, I have tried and tried. See—"

From a bench within she lifted a small yellow bowl, which contained a dark mixture, put it to her lips, and chafing swollen glands, attempted several times to swallow the liquid. A gurgling sound betrayed futility of the effort, the medicine gushed from her nose, the eyes seemed starting from their sockets, and even the husky cry of the sufferer was strangled as she covered down.

"Compose yourself; nervousness increases the difficulty. Once I had diphtheria, and could not swallow for two days, yet I recovered. Be quiet, and let me try to help you."

Knelling in front of her, Beryl turned up the wick of the lantern, and with a small brush attached to a silver wire, finally succeeded in cauterizing and removing a portion of the poisonous growth that was rapidly narrowing the avenues of breath. The span of coughing that ensued was nature's auxiliary effort, and temporarily relieved the tightening clutch.

After a few moments, a dose of the medicine was successfully administered; and then the slender, shapely brown hand of the woman grasped the nurse's blue homespun dress.

"Don't leave me! Save me. Oh, don't let me struggle here alone—in the dark; don't let me die! I'm not fit. I know where I shall go. It's not the devil I dread. I have known many devils in this world,—but God. I am afraid of God!"

"Lie down, and cover your shoulders time in laying the blame on you."

"I will assure Mrs. Singleton that you endeavored to dissuade me; and that you faithfully kept your promise to shield me from danger."

"Which she will not believe, because she knows that I have the power to lock you up indefinitely. Besides, if you live to explain matters, there will be no necessity; but suppose you do not? You are running into the jaws of an awful danger, and if—"

His frank, pleasant countenance clouded, he gnawed his mousethroat, and the question ended in a long sigh. After a moment, a low, sweet voice completed the sentence:

"If I should die, your tender hearted wife is so truly and faithfully my friend, that she could not regret to hear I have entered into my rest."

There was a brief silence, during which the physician crossed the floor, opened a glass door, and surveyed the stock of drugs.

It back in his face, and inhaled him. One Saturday they came to sweep out and dust the chapel, and when I finished, I laid down on one of the benches to rest. You went in to practice, not knowing I was there, and began to sing. As I listened, something seemed to stir and wake in my heart, and somehow the music shook me out of myself. There was the hymn, so solemn, so thrilling, and the end of every verse was, 'O Lamb of God, I come!'—and you sang it with a great cry, as if you were running to meet some one. I had not wept—for I don't know how long—not since—"

"The Sweet By-and-By," and the tears started, and I seemed but a leaf in the wild storm. That was the song my little boy used to sing! There was a Sunday school in the basement of a church next to our house, and he would stand at the window, and listen till he caught the tune, and learned the words. Oh, that hymn! Every note stung me like a whip lash, since you persist, I wash my hands of all responsibility for the consequences. You have heard the history of the woman Ira Le Bougeois, better known in the 'walls' as the 'Bloody Duchess.' Two days ago she scourge struck her down; she is very ill, the most symptoms have appeared, and she is almost frantic with terror. Last night, at twelve o'clock, I was going the rounds of the sick wards, and found her wringing her hands, and running up and down the cell like a maniac. I tried to quiet and encourage her, but she paid no more attention than Istone deaf; and when I started to leave her, she seized my arm, and begged me to ask you to come and stay with her. She thinks if you would sing for her, she could listen, and forget the horrible things that haunt her. It is positively sickening to see her error at the thought of death. Poor, desperate creature."

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things seem to be pouring upon me; dreadful shapes laugh, and beckon to me, and I see—oh! pity me! I see my murdered child, with the blood spouting, foaming; the velvet brown eyes I loved to kiss, staring and glazed, as I dragged his little body to—"

"It is a feverish dream. Your child is safe in heaven; ask your Father to let you see his face among the angels."

"It's not fever; it's the past, my own crimes that come to follow me to judgment and accuse me. The hand of the first born pointing over the last bar at the mother who killed him! Do you wonder I am afraid to die? I don't deny my bloody deeds; but, after all, it was a foul wrong that drove me to desperation; and, God knows, no injustice brought me to my sin. I was spoiled, motherless child, married at sixteen to a man whose family despised me, because my pretty face had ruined their scheme of a match with an heiress, whose money was needed to retrace the marriage, and after a few years my chief began to brow."

"I loved my husband, but his nature was too austere to deal patiently with my freakish, petulant, volcanic temper; and when he lectured me for my frivolity, ordinary plunges me into excesses of gaiety, that at heart I did not enjoy. His mother and sister shunned me more and more, poisoned his mind with wicked and unfounded suspicions, and so we grew mutually distrustful. He tired of me, and he showed it. I loved him. Oh! I loved him better, and better, as I saw his drifting away. He neglected me, spent his leisure where he met the woman he had once intended to marry. I was so saddened with jealous heart ache, some evil spirit prompted me to try and punish him with the same pang. That was my first sin of deception; I pretended an attachment I never felt, hoping to rekindle my husband's affection. Like many another barren wife, I was caught in my own snare; and while I was an innocent of any wrong as my own baby boy, his father was that same pang. 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