



The Family Circle.

"Home, Sweet Home."

THE DOCTOR'S NIECE.

BY K. W. P.

"Women must either love or hate; the difficulty is to find which is their humor. So, Master Ned, I advise you to have nothing to do with them!" smiled the Doctor, as he rose from his seat.

"I'll wager, sir," laughed the gentleman addressed, "if it's not an impertinence, that you were not of that opinion in your younger days."

The white-headed Doctor bent his kindly face towards the handsome, youthful speaker.

"Youth and age, my dear Ned," he said, "commit the same errors in each generation. Yes; from the days of our first parents! Yet, if you can, take my advice, and leave Isa in peace. She will have nothing to do with you!"

The Honorable Edward Chesterton received the announcement with a clear genial laugh as the Doctor quitted the room. He glanced he had read Isa Pomeroy better.

"What a dear, noble old fellow it is!" he remarked, sipping his claret, and addressing his fellow-student, Dick Mortmain, a dark, gentlemanly young man of twenty. "Talk as he may, I'd swear he has experienced 'la grande passion,' bachelor though he be."

"My doubt rests on any woman refusing him, Ned."

"Bah! Recollect what the gentle knight, Don Quixote, said of the sex!"

And the speaker sighed.

"Prithce, why so pale, fond lover," laughed the other, "when the doctor's niece so encouragingly smiles on you?"

His companion, flushing, laughed.

"There, come to the library, Dick. I've promised to master that portion of Æschylus, and I never break my word to the Doctor."

The private pupils of Doctor Pomeroy had moved to the door, when they were arrested by an imperative tap at the window.

Striding to it, Edward Chesterton drew aside the heavy curtain, and was lost in admiration.

Outside, standing in the snow, and beneath the arching ivy, covered by the same fleecy material, with a scarlet cloak thrown about her head and shoulders, was a girl of scarcely eighteen, brunette of complexion, with black, sparkling, saucy eyes, and a rosy, vermilion mouth.

"Little Red Riding Hood, by Jove!" exclaimed Dick Mortmain.

"How charmingly bewitching!"

"Why do you not open the window?" cried the girl, impatiently rattling the glass. "Mr. Chesterton, a life may depend upon delay! Pray let me in!"

Already the bolt was drawn, the French window flung wide, and the young man's hand extended to assist her enter. Then, the reflection of the red fire flashing on the panes being no longer between them, he saw she was considerably agitated.

"Good gracious, Miss Pomeroy!" he ejaculated; "what has happened? Something has distressed you!"

"Yes; much to exult in!" she answered, rapidly.

"There is a woman lying by the roadside, a few yards from the gate. I saw her as I came from the Trennions. She was so still I thought she slept, and tried to rouse her, but she groaned, and did not move. Oh, Mr. Chesterton!"—and Isa shivered with that fearsome awe the young experience at the presence of death—"I fear she is dying of cold!"

And, clasping her tiny hands, she looked imploringly at him.

Had she asked him to start that instant to release an ice-bound bear at the North Pole, he would have gone, much less have traversed those few yards to save, perhaps, a fellow-being's life.

"In what direction is she, Miss Pomeroy?" he asked, already half out of the window.

"I will show you," said Isa.

Nothing loth to have such a guide, he drew her hand through his arm, and set out, Dick Mortmain joining them after lighting a cigar, and remarking, with the air of one grown gray in worldly knowledge, "Enthusiasm—youthful philanthropy. No doubt it's a case of juniper."

On reaching the miserable being lying there in the snow, stiff, almost frozen, the idea of "juniper" was banished, though the woman was very poorly attired. Kneeling with a gentleness that would have won him Isa's heart if it had not been his already, Edward Chesterton raised the woman's head on his arm, and placed his hand on her wrist.

"I wonder whether we are in time," he said. "I fear not. She seems to be cold—dying!"

At the words the woman looked up and gazed upon the speaker. She had large, brilliant eyes—larger, more brilliant from contrast with the well-shaped, but pinched, pallid features.

"Dying!" she gasped, almost inaudibly. "Yes! I do not wish to live; but oh! do not let me die like this—a beggar on the road-side! Save me from a pauper's grave!"

The soft voice, though faint, spoke with singular entreaty, while she gazed piteously at Edward Chesterton.

"Be comforted," he said tenderly. "I will take care it shall not be so bad as that."

"Bless you, whoever you are!" murmured the woman, again losing consciousness.

"What a strange dislike these people have to pauper funerals!" said Dick Mortmain.

"Strange!" exclaimed the other sharply. "In so rich a country as England the word pauper should hardly be known. Come Dick, drop the philosopher, and take up your natural self. Help me with this poor thing, while Miss Pomeroy kindly goes in advance and announces our coming."

The girl was off instantly, her red cloak flashing over the snow, and filling Edward Chesterton with admiration.

Despite Dick Mortmain's assumed worldliness, his heart was in the right place, and with every care he assisted the

other to raise the wanderer on to his shoulder, when, together, they proceeded to the house.

At the hall door Isa met them. The bed-room was ready. It was Isa's own. The elderly upper servant, part house-keeper, had expostulated in vain. The apartment was the only one with a fire, and Isa persisted.

So the young gentlemen, ascending the stairs with reverend step, entered the pretty bed-chamber, bright with winter flowers, and laid the woman on the snowy-curtained bed, with its dainty white counterpane, against which the poor, dark clothes, wet with melted ice, looked strangely, making dirty patches on its purity.

"Who can tell the life this poor creature has led?" said Dick Mortmain, in a whisper. "That soiled attire and that spotted drapery may be taken typically of herself and Miss Pomeroy."

"Confound your remarks!" exclaimed Edward Chesterton, drawing him from the room. "Dick, it belies your nature, which is generous enough. But if sin has brought the poor creature to this state—and her features as her voice speak of something once better—the presence of death should make us forget everything—death, a greater purifier than the furnace fire."

While the students went to the library—Edward Chesterton to apply himself to that certain portion of Æschylus, and while the Doctor was enjoying a controversial chat with a fellow Cambridge man, at whose house he was spending the evening—Isa busied herself about the poor invalid. She made up the fire until it blazed so fiercely as to put the place in imminent peril. She covered the numb figure with blankets, chafed the cold hands in hers, so soft and dainty, and administered stimulants, until vitality was quickened, and the sufferer fell into a deep sleep, when, banishing the servant—after a sharp reprimand for an overheard speech that "She didn't care to wait on the likes of that, if her mistress did!"—she seated herself on a low, comfortable chair by the bedside, a book in her hand, waiting the wanderer's waking.

An hour must have elapsed, when, turning, Isa found the woman intently regarding her. Her expression showed reason had come back. Leaning forward, she inquired softly, "Are you better?"

"Thank you, yes," was the faint rejoinder. "I am as well as I ever shall be on earth. But where am I?—how did I come here? I recollect I was walking—cold, cold unto death—then I remembered nothing else."

"You fainted," replied Isa. "Fortunately I found you, and had you brought here. You will soon, now, be well. Drink this, then sleep again if you can. You must, you know, keep quiet."

The woman swallowed the warm negus, then, lying back upon the pillow, said gratefully, "How beautiful you are! you are an angel! Bless you!"

Sighing, she closed her eyes, and appeared again to slumber.

At that instant a gentle tap called Isa to the door. She found, standing outside, Edward Chesterton, his handsome countenance full of sympathy.

"How is she now, dear Isa?" he inquired.

When these young people were alone the prefixes Miss and Mr. were abandoned.

"Better; yet, Edward, I fear. Her features are so wasted. The hand of death seems on them."

"Shall I fetch a doctor? I'll go anywhere or do anything you wish," he remarked affectionately. "Only speak!"

She rewarded him with a smile, and gave him her hand.

"I scarcely think it necessary. Let us wait Uncle's coming home."

"Yes. Perhaps it's as well. I am sure nothing better could be done than what you are doing, dear Isa!"

There was a brief silence; then, yet holding her hand, he whispered, "Isa, dearest, I expect to receive my father's answer to-morrow."

The girl blushed, trembled, and grew restless.

"Oh, Edward," she murmured, "if he refuse? In the world's opinion your position is so—so different to mine!"

"He will not refuse," rejoined the lover, putting his arm round her. "Are you not the doctor's niece—the niece of his dear and valued friend? Oh, Isa, you do not know Lord Arenstane! When he accompanied me here he said you were the prettiest, best little lass he had ever beheld. Do you think, then, that he would have exposed me to such temptation if the natural result could displease him? He will consent, Isa, and so—"

He brought his lips very near the girl's cheek; but laughingly she sid from his grasp.

"It does not give you a right, sir, to be impertinent."

She smiled saucily as she shut the door upon him.

Isa resumed her chair, and also tried to read her book. The woman apparently still slept, yet the young nurse had a vague sensation that she was frequently looking at her; though if she glanced round the eyes were closed, and she labored breathing came through the lips as in slumber.

Near eleven, when the house was quiet, Isa heard the Doctor's key in the hall door: Noiselessly rising, she left the room, and flew down stairs to meet him.

"Well, Rosebud," said the Doctor, rubbing his shoes and pinching the provoking little chin. "Why, how is this? For shame! York and Lancaster have changed sides. It's the white rose to-night!"

"Oh, uncle!" she answered, taking his arm and drawing him into the study, where a little kettle boiled cheerily on the fire, and sugar and a decanter stood on the table, suggestive of elderly gentlemen's night-caps. Such a sad thing has happened—oh, so very sad!"

"Why, Rosebud, what is it?" he inquired, seating himself in the cosy chair by the fire, with the air of a man feeling particularly comfortable.

In a few words she told him, being far too impatient for delay.

"What!" he exclaimed, his brows slightly contracting. "A tramp, dying by the roadside, and is now in possession of your own bed-room, pet? Charity is all very well and amiable my love; but such impulsive charity is rather dangerous. How do you know, my dear, what this woman is? A disreputable tramp, perhaps, who may rend the hand that fosters her."

"I only knew she was dying, uncle, and did not wait to question further."

"You are a good fairy, Rosebud," said the Doctor, kissing her. "The fault was Ned's; he, a man, should have known better."

"He did not, man as he is, Uncle," remarked Isa, with a roguish twinkle; for he promised the poor thing he would see she did not have a pauper's funeral."

"Did anyone hear the like? Why, if he is going to make such promises, he had better turn gratis undertaker at once!"

"Uncle dear," and Isa slipped her arm about his neck, "if

you were to see the poor sufferer you would agree with Ed—Mr. Chesterton and me, Uncle, think," and the young voice trembled, "she is dying."

"Tut tut! We won't say that, pet. But there, I will see her. Make me my grog, Rosebud, while I step up; and remember the night is very cold."

"Therefore I am not to forget the water," laughed Isa, as he left the study.

"What perfect children they are," muttered the Doctor. "I pray their hearts may ever be green, bless them! The woman, I do not doubt, is but of her class, and a plainer couch than my Rosebuds' would have suited."

The Doctor, despite his words, was proud of Isa's charity. He mounted the stairs, and softly entered the room. The fire had sunk together in a rich, red glow, while the lamp on the table shed a mellow light on the bed's occupant. The Doctor marked the worn, dragged dress, and reflected, pursing his lips.

"A veritable tramp, that is clear; I wonder what account she can give of herself."

Approaching, he drew back the curtain; then with a face paler than that he looked upon, uttering a cry, recoiled, and caught the curtain for support.

"Eleanor!" he gasped.

At the sound the invalid, starting up, leaned forward on her elbow, and fixed her gaze upon the Doctor. Almost recognition shone in it, and she exclaimed, "Everard! Merciful power! is it to your house that I have been brought?"

There was a painful silence. Both required some moments to recover composure. Then the Doctor, sitting on the chair Rosebud had used, bent his face on his hands and wept.

"Oh, Eleanor, I thought you dead!" he groaned. "Why, why do I find you thus?"

The thin cheeks flushed as the head sank abashed on the laboring bosom.

"Ah, Everard; I have had cause to repent the past bitterly!" she murmured, mournfully. "Mine is, however, so sad a history that even you will pity me."

"Pity you! I pity you from my soul, without hearing that history, the sadness of which your present aspect but too plainly proclaims. Still, may I not hear it?"

"To tell it you was what brought me into this neighborhood, and—another cause."

The Doctor started and turned away.

"I wished to let you know all from my own lips before I died; for I am dying, Everard. I shall never see another sun."

Before he could answer he caught the sound of Isa's light step upon the stair. Hastily rising, he met her in the passage, and bade her return to the sitting-room, as her patient was awake, and desired to see him alone, to relate why they had found her in so pitiable a condition.

On re-entering the apartment he took the precaution of locking the door; afterwards, resuming his seat, he listened with much pain, sorrow and compassion to the promised recital.

"When it was ended a brief silence ensued. The woman was the first to break it. Leaning forward, she said, eagerly, 'And Isa! Oh, Everard—Isa—tell me—'

"In mercy—no, no!" he interrupted. "Eleanor, be merciful to her! To me—to the world—to herself, she is my niece!"

"Your niece! But, Everard—think—of me."

"I do. Yet, Eleanor, in kindness let us both think of her. In pity be self-denying; do not rend the veil, and disclose the wretched past to her. Do not let its weight fall on her soul to burthen it. Let her continue my niece. It is hard to ask it, I know—terrible to grant; but for her—I implore it for her. If you have owed me anything in the past, let your silence now be its payment."

Sinking on his knees he raised his trembling hands in supplication, while the tears flowed down his cheeks.

The patient mutely regarded him. A struggle was evidently taking place within her. She breathed painfully, and pressed her hands to her forehead. Finally she spoke—

"Everard, it is terrible, after all these long, long years. Nevertheless, you are right. It shall be so."

Springing up joyfully the Doctor took the wasted hand and kissed it.

"It is a noble sacrifice, Eleanor," he exclaimed. "Surely it will obliterate the past!"

"Let her come. Let her keep by me—until—until—ah!"

She fell back insensible upon the pillow.

With considerable nervousness the Doctor summoned Isa, also medical advice. The latter brought no hope. The worn-out, weary existence would never behold another dawn.

It was near three in the morning when the dying woman, after gazing eagerly around, rested her glance upon Isa, and whispered—

"Will you kiss me, my child?"

Isa, tears swimming in her bright eyes, bent down, when, with an effort, the woman's arms clasped her tightly to her breast.

"You are an angel?" she murmured. "If anything could have saved me it could have been your presence. But it is impossible. Better it is so. Kiss me again; let my lips touch yours."

Isa, sobbing, complied; then the weary head fell back on her arm. Tenderly she supported it; finally the faint voice murmured the same request, "Kiss me, dear."

Isa obeyed. When she arose the Doctor's arm was about her, and he led her from the room. The outcast's troubles in this world were over.

Bright and glorious rose the sun the next morning, but its radiance scarcely rivalled that of Edward Chesterton's genial countenance, as an open letter in his hand, he entered Doctor Pomeroy's study, and requested a few moments' private conversation.

"Certainly, Ned—certainly," answered his tutor, drawing his thoughts from the sad event of the previous few hours.

"First, sir, respecting that poor woman," said the pupil. "I made her a promise; I wish to keep it."

The Doctor quickly averted his face.

"We will talk of that afterwards, Ned," he rejoined. "Be assured she shall have no pauper's interment. What is the subject which makes you so cheerful this morning?"

Edward Chesterton tried to speak cheerfully, but his pleasant voice would tremble and stumble as the words came forth.

"It is this letter, sir. My father has consented."

"Consented to what?" asked the Doctor, surprised, though the truth began to break in upon him.

"Why, sir, he consents to my asking your permission to address Isa as my future wife."

Doctor Pomeroy's brow clouded, and, before answering he perused the letter.

"It is kind, it is generous of Lord Arenstane," he said. "It is like his old true self. May I ask if Isa is aware of this?"

"Why, yes, sir; I trust I have acted neither wrongly nor