

THE RED ASCENT

BY ESTHER W. NEILL

CHAPTER IV—CONTINUED

And so it happened that Jefferson Wilcox, seated in his new, ornate office, saw an advertisement that attracted his attention. He was not in the habit of reading advertisements, but this morning he felt particularly idle. Having exhausted the sporting page and the political news, he started reading the miscellaneous column, wondering at the strange things that people offer for sale—old magazines, shoes, half-worn evening dresses, baby carriages, canaries, rubber plants, antique silver. The initials R. M. and the post office address made Jefferson suspicious. He pushed the ivory button on his desk for his stenographer.

She came, patting her elaborate coiffure with the unmistakable feminine gesture born of fear that false puffing may fall away; she was chewing gum, and that fact, added to her general look of stolidity, made even optimistic Jefferson Wilcox pause before addressing her. Heretofore he had not demanded a vast intelligence from his secretary. He had engaged her because she had been his first applicant, and because it had been the easiest and most obvious way of terminating the interview.

"Didn't you ring?" she asked, storing her gum somewhere above her front teeth so that her jaw projected.

"Yes," said Jeff. "Sit down, please." He had been well trained in small acts of courtesy, and his little stenographer, who was unused to deference of any sort, could not understand him. Sometimes she vaguely hoped that his politeness predicted a lively interest in her. She had even gone so far as to write "Mrs. Jefferson Wilcox" several times on her typewriter, just to see how it looked. The spasmodic work of her employer left her much time for dreaming.

"I want to write a letter," said Jeff. "I want you to sign your name to it. You—you see, I want to answer an advertisement."

"What kind?" asked the girl suspiciously.

"This kind," said Jeff, handing over the paper.

"Half-worn evening dress," read the girl incredulously.

"No, Lord, no! This—antique silver. I don't know anything about silver, do you?"

"The girl's face grew pathetic. 'Never had any,' she said.

"But you can inquire about some," said Jeff hopefully. "I want to buy some—antiques you know, the kind this person has for sale. I'll pay any price. Fact is, I want to pay a big price. If a person were buying antiques, what kind would be most expensive?"

She stared at him in bewilderment. The frugality of her life made his announcement seem preposterous. "Why should you want to pay such a lot? Are—are you going to be married?"

"Lord, no," said Jefferson. "I've done many a fool thing in my life, but that's not one of them. You write the letter for me, and sign it."

"What shall I say?"

His broad tolerance encouraged this confession of incompetence.

"Say? Can't you work it out? What do you women want when you buy silver?"

She sucked the rubber on her pencil meditatively. "Coffee pots, I reckon," she said at last.

"That's it, but you call them urns. Urns, tea service, platters, waiters, everything he has for sale."

"You're going to buy them without seeing them?"

"How can I see them when they are a thousand miles away?"

"But how will you know they are genuine?" she anxiously suggested.

"I won't know it. Yes, I will know it. If—if Dick is advertising them as solid, they'll be as heavy as bricks."

afford to cultivate its keener sensibilities. Collectors, installment men, loan sharks, broke down all barriers of pride. Pianos came and went in her neighborhood with magical rapidity; rugs were whisked off dusty floors and resold to more prosperous neighbors; men bargained and wrangled and parted with their possessions openly, and when there were no possessions left, friends and relatives came forward and fed and clothed and housed them with that generous improvisation that keeps them forever poor.

The letter was finished at last, and she brought it to Jefferson for inspection.

"Won't do," he said. "It sounds like a fake."

"It is one," she said defensively. Jefferson ran his long fingers through his yellow hair.

"Here, give me another pen. I'll see what my imagination is worth. Suppose that I'm a rich woman with a passion for antiques. Hand me that encyclopedia, and I'll trump up the names of some old silversmiths that will put Dick off my track. I am particularly anxious to buy an urn for my daughter's debut, also a silver platter—gravy dish. Jove! that won't do. They don't serve gravy at afternoon teas, but they do have plates—silver plates. Let me see—I am desirous of purchasing any odd pieces that will decorate a table. Send description and prices to—"

He pushed the paper from him, exhausted by his efforts.

"I'm afraid Dick Matterson would call that a lie," he said.

CHAPTER V

JESS FIELDING

When the imaginary lady, with the "passion for antiques" had completed her purchase of the Matterson plate, Richard received five hundred dollars by express. Four hundred of this paid the interest on the mortgage. The remaining hundred was expended with infinitesimal care, every cent so carefully guarded that the Colonel was openly disgusted. Economy was an abstract virtue that he condoned only in the abstract. Penuriousness had never been practiced under his roof before.

For three long evenings, from supper until bedtime, Richard sat with pencil and paper planning how he could spread out that hundred dollars to cover his immediate needs, trying to decide which of all his necessities were most essential.

The list read: "Horse, plow, harness, seed, bricks, shingles, fence wire, lumber." Then, halting for a moment in his work, he would go to the bookcase, and getting out a number of farm journals, begin to study the cheapest and best fertilizers to add to his compost heaps.

True to his habit of concentration, he would spend an hour poring over these old magazines, his scientific instinct roused by new methods, modern devices. Then he would begin another list of necessities: "Incubator, rubber roofing, tool grinder, gasoline engine, fruit sprayer." But smiling at the impossibility of securing these desirable appliances, he would throw that list in the fire, and begin again with the most rudimentary tools:

"Spade, hoe, ax, hammer."

"Betty," he said one night, "I don't believe I am very practical after all."

The Colonel, who was half-dozing in his chair, roused at the words.

"Has that fact just dawned upon you?" he asked.

"It's dawning," replied Richard good-naturedly. "I am just trying to decide what we had better do with that hundred dollars."

"God have mercy!" said the Colonel.

Richard regarded his offending members with smiling unconcern. The palms had blistered and then grown hard; the nails were broken. The Colonel's hands were as soft and smooth as a woman's; the nails pink and polished; attention to them had always been his one weakness.

"Yes, we must have that chimney repaired," said Richard reflectively.

"It's dangerous as it is."

"And I need a pair of slippers dreadfully," said Betty. "Satin slippers—here they are advertised in this department store catalogue; French heels, chiffon bows, five dollars! Oh, Dick! I must have a pair."

"All right, Betty," he said, and to his credit he did not for a moment falter about the five dollars which would buy them.

"I believe it's one of our traditions to dance when our fortunes have failed us."

"It is, sir," said the Colonel. "Your great-aunts who lived in Richmond were impoverished by the war. They gave away all their money and clothes to help the cause; they had nothing left but their ball-gowns. I found them dressed in white satin sitting in the drawing-room, playing their guitars, and, by heaven, sir, they hadn't a crumb in the larder."

"I suppose it's in the blood," said Richard a little wearily. "Now we have a race horse—"

"I'll not sell her at any price," said the Colonel on the defensive at once. "If we can't get a living off five hundred acres of land, then we don't deserve to live, sir—we don't desire to live."

"Perhaps I don't," said Richard humorously.

The discussion had ended there. After a few evenings of filial consideration of the Colonel's wishes, Richard found that all the old gentleman's ideas, with the exception of the chimney, were impractical.

If he could wrest a bare living off the farm this year, it must be by his own initiative and by his own manual labor. The small debt that he was obliged to contract for dry groceries and feed for the horses worried him. He could not agree to hire hands when he had no money to pay them for their time.

Meanwhile he sought advice from the farmers who worked their truck gardens in his vicinity, and he listened eagerly to any suggestions offered by the loungers at the village store; he read all the books he could borrow on horticulture, and he sent to Washington for the bulletins that are issued here from the Bureau of Soils. When he spent his hundred dollars the items read: "One pair of satin slippers, repairing chimney, plow, seeds, spade, hoe, hammer, nails, hinges, window glass."

After two months of untiring effort, Matterson Hall began to recover some appearance of past prosperity; the shutters swung on strong new hinges; the window-panes had been put into place; the pillar of the porch had been repaired; the chimney bricked to its normal height; the roses bloomed with wild profusion in the carefully bordered garden beds; in the kitchen garden some of the earlier vegetables were ready for the picking, and the green blades of corn in the moist, brown fields promised an abundant harvest.

But Richard had paid. He was tired, physically exhausted by the unaccustomed labors of a day. Too tired for anything but a hurried prayer at night as he sank into a dreamless sleep; too tired for any intellectual relief that he might have found in books; too tired to think, to reason about anything except the clamoring work for the morrow—currying the horses, milking the cow, plowing, digging, planting, grubbing up stumps, blasting away rocks, chopping wood, drawing water, working with old tools that broke in his energetic grasp, working feverishly like a prisoner trying to file his way out of his cell.

The Colonel was of no assistance. He viewed the changes in his home with some satisfaction, but disapproved entirely of Richard's methods. A gentleman did not plow his own fields when the country was full of worthless niggers; a gentleman did not clean his own stable; a gentleman did not do his own milking; a gentleman gave up some time to social intercourse with his neighbors.

Richard found it wiser not to take the Colonel too seriously.

"You have to do the social stunt for both of us," he said. "I'm too busy, and I haven't any clothes."

The lack of fresh clothes was a real trial to him. He did not mind cheapness or shabbiness, but the few suits he owned were mud-stained, and he had always craved cleanliness. It seemed to him that he was always in the dirt. A grime had crept under his finger nails that he could not remove; the pores of his face seemed clogged with dust. It was when he realized that he was growing half-indifferent to these facts that he took his first real recreation.

About half a mile from the Hall there was a small stream, that bubbled briskly over rocks and roots, and emptied itself into a hollow. In this cool-shaded swimming pool Richard had spent many hot afternoons as a boy, but the pool had become shallow with the years, or perhaps the difference was in his own height. He determined to widen and deepen it. Whenever he could spare an hour out of his busy day, he worked like a beaver scooping out the dead leaves, dredging out the stones and mud, digging away the bank on one side, and building a dam with the refuse on the other. When the work was finished and the water had cleared, the pool seemed a priceless luxury.

Anxious to share it with some one, he improvised a little bath house on the fern-grown bank, and garbed in a bathing suit that he had left over from one of his summer outings, he brought Betty out to watch him disport himself in the water. She was enthusiastic about the place, and ran home to hunt a bathing dress for herself, making him promise that he would teach her to swim.

After she had gone he finished his bath, dressed himself, and then lay for a few moments outstretched in the shade, his body so still that some inquisitive robin fluttered over him unafraid of the big sun-burned hand that seemed so important in its stillness. A dozen duties left undone came into his mind to plague him, and destroy the perfect peace of this brief interim of rest. Perhaps next year the farm would pay and permit a breathing space; perhaps he could introduce some of the modern time-saving devices;

perhaps he might dare to go into debt if a crop was assured. Now his farming was all experimental. He had no faith in the outcome.

His seminary life seemed drifting into a dim background. He had put all thought of it away from him purposely. He never could go back. The Colonel needed him; Betty needed him, and, believing that he was facing the inevitable, the keenness of his disappointment lessened, and even his desire to return seemed dulled. After all, if the grind of the work could be lifted, he could find vast satisfaction in the life of a scholar. He could supervise the farm with an intelligence that would make it a paying proposition; he could live the calm, peaceful life of the old-time planter and he could write. It might be possible that his pen would prove more powerful than his preaching. His day-dream was interrupted by some one lifting his hand, and a woman's voice said:

"I thought you were dead or hurt. You always were provoking."

He looked up lazily. A girl stood leaning against one of the tree trunks, dressed in a black riding-habit, which was covered with mud. She wore no hat; her hair, plaited in two thick braids, fell across her shoulders; her riding-boots were muddy to the ankles. One cheek bore a daub of dirt that made the rest of her face look all the fairer by contrast. Her appearance was so startling that Richard rose hastily, oblivious to any conventional greeting.

"Where did you come from?" he asked.

She laughed with no trace of embarrassment. "I came over my horse's head into that mud puddle, if you must know."

"And where is the horse?"

"He has run away."

"Which way?"

"I'm sure I don't care. Please don't think of catching him. I never want to see him again."

"But why didn't I hear him breaking through the bushes?"

"I'm sure I don't know that either."

"Are you hurt?"

"Now isn't that a foolish question? Do you suppose if I had been hurt that I would have been so solicitous about you?"

"I didn't know you were solicitous."

"Didn't I cross that stream on stepping-stones, and climb up that slippery bank, to discover if you were dead or not?"

"And having discovered that I was alive you said, 'How provoking!'"

"Of course. Don't you know who I am?"

"A friend of the coroner's I should suppose," he said humorously.

She met this remark by pulling off her mud-caked gloves, and shutting her eyes until they were mere slits, she pulled down the corners of her mouth.

"Now don't I look more familiar?"

He laughed at the absurdity of the grimace. "I don't think I ever saw you before," he said frankly.

"Unless—"

"Go on."

"Unless you're—Jess Fielding."

"Am I I thought you would remember I used to make faces at you over the fence. I was poor white trash dressed in a gingham apron, and a sunbonnet, snub nose, freckle face. Now—"

"You don't look like that now," he said awkwardly.

"Think I've improved?"

"Why, yes, I suppose so."

intuition she had comprehended the struggle he was making.

"I'll send you some."

"I'll have to pay for them with radishes."

"Haven't you any money?"

The question would have seemed preposterous in a drawing-room. Here in the woods, in the strangeness of their meeting, the conventions did not seem to count.

"No," he said.

"I have too much."

"Too much?" he repeated. "I did not know people ever had too much."

"But they can. We have too much now. We used to have too little. You remember how poor we were. I had to go to bed when mother washed my dress. I only had one. Poor mother died in the struggle; then father struck oil. Now we have silver mines, coal mines, oil wells, railroads; I've been everywhere. I went to school in Paris, Germany, Italy. I've been around the world three times; I've studied art and music and the languages. I haven't a particle of talent for anything. I've motored, and driven and ridden on camels and elephants; I've climbed mountains, crossed deserts, met all kinds of people. Now I've come back. I know you will laugh, but I wanted to come back here where everybody snubbed me in the old days—back here to make good."

But Richard did not smile, and she went on: "Father has bought the old Hedricks' coal mines five miles from here. You remember old Mr. Hedricks had so much trouble with negro labor? Father has brought all sorts of men down. Such a conglomerate mass. They live like pigs."

"I know," he said, "I was over there yesterday. But I think that is partly your fault."

"My fault?"

"You own the mines. You could build them decent houses, give them higher wages; I think the owner ought to help."

"H'm," she said reflectively. "Suppose you were the owner? I hear the Colonel declares you are; he's going around the county telling people that my grandfather forged the papers giving him the title to the Texas lands. Without the Texas lands we would be nowhere. I'd still be wearing my sunbonnet and my outgrown gingham dress."

"What does your father say?"

"Father? He's not here. He's out West looking into copper mines. I shouldn't think it would be his mission to go to work to prove himself a pauper, and your father—well, please pardon me, but everybody knows that the Colonel is too lazy to work for anything."

She got up and tried to beat some of the mud off her skirt with her riding crop. "I must be going," she said. "Miss Pruney Prims will see my horse and get worried about me."

"And who is she?" he asked.

Miss Fielding laughed. "Haven't we asked each other a lot of questions? Very bad form to ask questions. Miss Pruney would be scandalized, but being polite is one of the things I'm tired of. Miss Pruney is a pet name I have for my good governess. She lives with me. She comes from New England, and is very punctilious. I call her Pruney Prims partly on that account, and partly because I found her in a cheap boarding-house in Boston, the kind of boarding-house that has one prismatic chandelier in the parlor, and that feeds you on prunes three times a day. I'm very fond of Pruney; she chaperones me, and I mother her. She's not very practical; she's spooky."

"Spooky?"

"Believes in ghosts. Hopes to see one some day. Makes a study of the occult. If it weren't for her religion and her rheumatism I believe she would go live in a graveyard and try to chum with disembodied spirits, but since I've adopted her she's grown quite cheerful and normal. Now I'm really going. Come and see me, won't you?"

He shook his head.

"I won't have the time," he answered.

She held out her hand to him.

"Why, that's the only reason I want you," she smiled.

TO BE CONTINUED

MARY MALONEY'S AWAKENING

"Good morning, Mary. It's a fine day."

kindly Bridget O'Donnell. "For all she goes with such grand folk, and seems to be having such gay times, I've seen the sadness in her eyes."

The woman who had not yet spoken raised a toll-worn, unglowed hand, and brushed back a wisp of greying hair that had strayed from under her rusty bonnet.

"I'm afraid it's the faith she's losing," she said softly. "She used to be day after day at the Communion rail, and now she's there not at all. High Mass on Sunday is all she ever comes to. Agatha Dederich was telling me she's dropped out of the sodality and she has even given up her work as league promoter. She needs a few of our prayers, I'm thinking. It's that crowd she goes with—they travel over-fast for a young girl like her, with no anchor to hold her. Margaret Maloney, God rest her soul, was a good anchor."

"That she was!" returned Mrs. O'Donnell, heartily, and the other woman murmured assent.

Meanwhile the object of their conversation had arrived at home. As she turned the brass knob, she heard the shrill peal of the telephone bell. She made an involuntary grimace of the sound of the voice that spoke her name as she took down the receiver—and yet it was a pleasant voice, deep and resonant.

"Hello, Mary," it said.

"Hello, Jack," she replied coolly, and without evident reluctance, "What is it?"

"That's a fine, enthusiastic reception to give a fellow who has spent the entire morning trying to telephone you," was the mocking rejoinder. "What on earth do you do on Sunday morning—camp in that meeting house of yours? I just called to ask you if you will go to the Caruthers' dance with me Thursday evening. We are all going to motor down and stay for the week-end—they are making a party of it. I'm going out of town on a business trip this evening, and I wanted to ask you before somebody else got ahead of me. Won't you go?" his tone was entreating.

She hesitated a moment and then answered in the affirmative. Friday was the first Friday, she had thought of going to the sacraments, but a week-end party at the wealthy Caruthers was not to be despised, and good-looking, prosperous Jack Hammerstein was her most persistent suitor. It was true that he was a divorced man, but every one knew that the fault had lain with his silly empty-headed wife, and Mary had told herself over and over again that the intimacy between Jack and herself was friendship—nothing more. The old adage about "He who approaches too near a precipice," she persisted in putting from her mind, and she replaced the receiver and slowly ascended the stairs. Every time she accepted an invitation from Jack Hammerstein she suffered from depression afterward. The house was so still and lovely—Aunt Myra, who was her housekeeper, had gone to her son's home for Sunday dinner, and Mary, yielding to an unaccountable desire to be alone, had refused an invitation to dine with Caroline Luscombe. She did not feel in the mood to listen to Caroline chatter today.

The papers on her desk were scattered about, and she started to put them in order; a little calendar had fallen over, and as she picked it up the date caught her eye; May 28—May 28th! She gave a start—May 28th, her mother's birthday! Her mother—her gay, cheery little invalid mother, who had been her chum and her pal and her confidant. She thought of the same date two years ago when they had such a jolly time. She had baked a cake with forty-seven candles, and there had been half a dozen women of the Altar Society there, and as many sodality girls, her friends, and they had feasted and chatted and laughed and her mother's pale cheeks had glowed pink, and her blue eyes sparkled. And that had been her last birthday.

Mary shuddered as she remembered the utter blackness of the days that came after—the cruel sickness—the frail little body writhing and twisted with pain, and the lips that gasped in agony. How well she remembered every detail of that illness. How she had knelt by her mother's bed and prayed—oh, how she had prayed that she might be spared! A few more years, she had asked for her, and they had been denied. Her mother's sufferings had passed, and with them the frail, brave spirit—and Mary had grown harsh and bitter in mind and heart.

"It is not right!" her rebellious young self had protested. "God might have let her live. She was all I had, and He took her. I prayed, and He would not hear me."

She would not pray again, she said, and yet some strange potent power drew her, Sunday after Sunday, to High Mass at St. Aloysius. At first, it was torture for her to go, but time caloused her. She was not unaware of the things that were being said about her, but she did not care. In her frame of mind, nothing mattered.

As time passed, she flung herself into a whirlpool of gaiety. She had voluntarily dropped all her old friends, and the new ones were the worldliest of the worldly. None of them were Catholics and few of them attended a church of any kind. She was pretty and gifted and popular, and there seemed no limit to the "good times" she shared, and no end to the young

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