

THE HEARTHSTONE

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For the "Hearthstone."

THE NIGHTINGALE'S SONG.

BY H. PATTERSON.

Comes my sweet love this way to night?
She comes—O I am glad!
The moon is up, the stars shine bright;
The heav'n's in glory's dress are clad.

All silently they downward look,
The beautiful pure stars;
And gem the waters of the brook
With golden studs and silver bars;

The nightingale begins her song
A sweet though sad and dirge;
That pierce through my brave heart's strong
Like lovely woman's soothing pity.

The melancholy of her strain
Awakes in me such answer
As scares away the spectre—Pain;
Yet leaves a something like in transfer.

Yes, leaves in me a mournful sense
Of something sadder still,
Than any of the pains intense
That make the sum of human ill.

Such feelings as I've never known
From immemorial days,
Come in her strain so soft and low
Beneath that old Oak's charmed spray:

Such echoes to her plaintive cries,
As melancholy sweet
As ever came to the tears to rise
From out the heart's embosom'd seat!

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COLONEL BENYON'S ENTANGLEMENT.

BY MISS M. E. BRADDON.

CHAPTER IV. (Continued.)

It was upon a Sunday, a mild October day, towards sunset, that he felt himself for the first time able to speak to his patient nurse. A broad bay-window in his room looked westward, and he saw the evening sky with a warm rosy light in it, and heard the rooks cawing in the avenue, and the church-bells ringing for evening service.

Mrs. Chapman was sitting by the window reading, with her head thrown back, and her dark brown hair only shrouded by her muslin cap. She did not wear the hood always, though Mrs. Johns had never happened to see her without it. She had a habit of throwing it off at times.

The Colonel lay quite motionless, looking at the sky and at that quiet figure at the window, wondering dreamily who this woman was. Her profile was clearly defined against the soft light, as she sat there, unconscious that he was watching her; and Herbert Benyon thought that he had never seen a lovelier face.

It was a spiritualized beauty, sublimated by some great sorrow, the Colonel fancied. The glory and bloom of youth were gone, though the woman was evidently young; but with the loss of these she had gained in the charm of expression. It was a face that went to one's heart.

She turned from the window presently, hearing her patient stir, and came towards the bed. He saw that her eyes were gray, large and dark, with a plaintive look in them.

"I did not know that you were awake," she said gently. "Let me alter your pillows a little, and then I will bring you some tea."

It was the voice that had been with him in all his foolish dreams. It seemed as if he had come back to life out of a living grave, bringing only this memory with him. She bent over him, arranging the pillow, which had slipped to a position of torture on the edge of the bed. The dexterous hands made all comfortable in a few moments, while the lovely face looked down upon him.

"How good you have been to me all this time!" he said. He had uttered protestations of gratitude and regard many times during his delirium, but these were the first thoroughly sensible words he had spoken to her.

The surprise overcame her a little. Sudden tears started to her eyes, and she turned her head aside to hide them.

"Thank God!" she exclaimed earnestly; "thank God!"

"For what?" asked the Colonel.

"That you are so much better."

"I have been very ill, then, I suppose?"

"You have been very ill."

"Oh my head, haven't I? Yes, I know I thought myself up the country, and that I could hear the jacksaws screaming outside. And I am really in Cornwall, down at Hammersley's place—poor Hammersley!—and you have been nursing me for I don't know how long! You see I am quite rational now. I thought once you were my sister—a girl who died nearly twenty years ago."

"For you are much better; but pray do not talk. You are very weak still, and the doctors would be angry with me for letting you talk so much."

"Very well. I will be as quiet as a lamb; indeed I don't feel capable of disobeying you. But there is one question that I must ask."

"I do not mind answering one question, if I can."

"To what beneficent influence do I owe your cure of me? What freak of fortune brought such a ministering angel to my sick bed?"

"I am here to perform a work of charity, that is all," she answered quietly. "I am a nurse by profession."

"But you are a lady!" he exclaimed, surprised.



"HAVE PITY UPON ME, COLONEL BENYON, I AM THAT WRETCHED WOMAN."

"That does not prevent my nursing the sick."

"Then you do not mean that you are a hospital nurse—a person to be engaged by any one who needs your services?"

"You are asking more than one question. No; I am not a hospital nurse, nor do I take payment for my services."

"I thought not," murmured the Colonel, with a faint sigh of relief.

It would have shocked him, somehow, to discover that the patient nurse whom he had mistaken now for his dead sister—anon for his false love—was only a hireling after all.

"I wished to perform some duty in the world, being quite alone, and I chose that of attendance on the sick poor. I have never wearied of it yet."

"And have you been long engaged in this good work?"

"Not very long; but you must not talk any more. I must positively forbid that."

The Colonel submitted very reluctantly. He was so eager to know all about this woman—this ministering angel, as he called her in his own mind. He repeated Scott's familiar lines in a low voice as she moved softly about the room making preparations for his evening meal.

Betsy Jane, the housemaid, brought the tureen.

Mrs. Johns had avoided all actual attendance on the sick-room of late, offended by the nurse's stand-offishness. The Colonel did not want her, she said. He had that fine lady with her popish headgear.

Mrs. Chapman arranged the tea-things on the table by the bed—the small, home-baked loaf, the tiny tins of rich yellow butter, and a noble block of honeycomb on a glass dish. There was a nosegay of autumnal flowers, too, for the embellishment of the table; and altogether Herbert Benyon fancied that innocent repast the most tempting banquet that had ever been spread for him.

"Please sit there, and pour out my tea," he said, in his weak voice. "But see, you have forgotten your own cup and saucer," he added, looking at the table.

"I will drink my tea presently."

"You must drink it now, with me, or I will drink none."

She complied; it was not worth while arguing with him about such a trifle. "He brought the second cup and saucer, and sat where he ordered

her. He looked at her very often as he sipped the tea she had poured out for him, and also broad and honey, like the queen in the famous nursery rhyme. He looked at her, wondering what her life had been, with an intense curiosity only possible to a prisoner in a sick-room. He would have given the world to question her further; but that was forbidden, to say nothing of the impertinence of such a proceeding. He was fain to lie there with fixed dreamy eyes, speculating wildly about her and her history.

The patient had taken a turn, and the doctors rejoiced exceedingly; but his progress even now was very slow. He lay for four long weeks as helpless as a child, attended upon day and night by Mrs. Chapman and a young man out of the stables, a handy young fellow, whose genius had been developed by the exigencies of the case, and who made a very decent amateur valet. How he should have endured this dreary time without Mrs. Chapman's care and companionship, Herbert Benyon could not imagine. She brightened the dismal monotony of the sick-room, and lightened his burden for him more than words could tell; and yet she was by no means what any one would call a lively person. Indeed, after that close companionship of many weeks, Colonel Benyon could not remember ever having seen her smile. But her presence had an influence upon him that was better than commonplace cheerfulness. She read to him, and the low sweet voice was like music. She talked to him, and every word helped to reveal the wealth of a highly-cultivated mind. With such a companion life could not be irksome, even in a sick-room.

Before the fourth week of that first stage of his convalescence was ended, Colonel Benyon had made many efforts to learn his nurse's history; but had utterly failed in the endeavor.

"My story is common enough," she told him once, when he said that he was convinced there was some romance in her life. "I have lost all that I ever loved, and am obliged to interest myself in strangers."

"You are very young to be a widow," said the Colonel. "Had you been long married when Mr. Chapman died?"

A sudden look of pain came into her face.

"Not very long. Please do not ask me to recall my past life. My history is the history of the dead."

After this he could not push his curiosity farther; but he was not a little tormented by his

desire to know more. In the dead of the night he lay awake saying to himself, "Who the deuce could this Chapman lady be? and what has become of her own relations? and what stake my chances of promotion that she is a lady by birth; but how comes a lady to be left to carry out such a quietude scheme as this sick-nursing business? For to the Colonel's mundane mind the nursing of the sick poor seemed an eccentric and abnormal employment for a well-bred young woman—above all, for a beautiful young woman like this widow, with the classic profile and luminous gray eyes."

As soon as the Colonel was strong enough to totter from his bed to a sofa, Dr. Matson suggested a change of quarters.

"You must get nearer the sun," he said; "this flowery dell is all very well in its way; and you certainly do get a sniff of the Atlantic mixed with the perfume of your roses. But I should like to plant you somewhere on the very edge of the ocean. There is a decent inn at Penjulah now, directly facing the sea, built almost upon the beach; a homely place enough, but where you would get very good treatment. I think you might move you there with advantage."

The Colonel granted.

"I don't feel strong enough to be moved from one room to another," he said.

"I despatch you. There's a good deal of prostration still, no doubt; but the change would do you a world of good. We must manage it somehow—contrive some kind of ambulance, and carry you in a reclining position. Mrs. Chapman will go with you, of course."

The Colonel's face brightened at this suggestion.

"Would you go?" he asked, looking at his nurse.

"Of course she would. She's not done with you yet, by any means. You are not going to slip out of our hands for some little time, I assure you, Colonel Benyon," said Dr. Matson, with professional jocosity.

"I do not wish; I am quite content to remain an invalid," replied the Colonel, looking at his nurse and not at his doctor.

The physician saw the look.

"Bless my soul!" he said to himself, "is that the way the cat jumps? The Colonel's friends won't think me for getting him such a good nurse, if he winds up by marrying her. That look was very suspicious."

The doctor had his way. The chief inn at Penjulah was quite empty at this late period of the year; and the best rooms, old-fashioned capacious chambers facing the sea, were at the patient's disposal. So one fine morning, in the beginning of November, while the red-tailed leaves in this mild western country still hovered on the trees, Colonel Benyon left Trowardell, which had been a somewhat unlovely shelter, it seemed.

Even on that last morning busy Mrs. Johns scarcely caught so much as a glimpse of the nurse's face; but just at the final moment, when the Colonel had been made comfortable in the carriage, wrapped up to the eyes in woollen rugs and tiger-skins, Mrs. Chapman turned and held out her hand to the housekeeper. She had her veil down, a thick black veil, and she wore a close black bonnet of a somewhat bygone fashion.

"Good-bye, Mrs. Johns," she said, in her low, plaintive voice. "This is the last time I shall ever see Trowardell. Please shake hands with me before I go."

There was something that seemed almost humility in her tone. The housekeeper drew herself up rather stiffly, quite taken by surprise; and then, in the next moment, her good nature got the better of her resentment, and she took the proffered hand. What a slender little hand it seemed in the grasp of Sarah Johns' stout fingers!

"I'm sure I hear you no matter, mum," she said, "though you have kept yourself so much to yourself, as if other folks weren't good enough for you; and if you like to walk over from Penjulah any fine afternoon to take a cup of tea with me and my husband, you'll be heartily welcome. There's always a bit of cold meat and an apple-pasty in the house."

"You are very kind; but I feel somehow that I shall never see Trowardell again. May I author one of those late roses? Thanks; I should like to take one away."

She went to one of the standard rose-trees on the lawn, and gathered one solitary tea-rose—a pale primrose-coloured flower—a melancholy-looking blossom, the Colonel thought, when she took her seat in the carriage with this rose in her hand.

"I don't like to see you with that pale yellow flower," he said; "it reminds me of asphodel, and seems symbolical of death. I should like to do away with that ugly black bonnet, and crown you with a garland of bright tea-roses, the emblem of renewed youth and hope."

She looked at him with sad earnest eyes.

"I have done with youth," she said, "and with hope, except—"

"Except what?" he asked, eagerly.

"Except a hope that I do not care to talk about—the hope of something beyond this earth."

After this the Colonel was silent. There was something in those grave words that sounded like a reproach.

Mrs. Johns stood in the porch watching the carriage drive away with a thoughtful countenance. "What was it in her voice just now that gave me the shivers?" she said to herself, perplexed in spirit.

CHAPTER V

So many one read his weird, and reason,
And with vain drugs assuage no pain;
For each man in his loving season
Fools and is fooled of these in vain.

Charms that ally not any loaming,
Spells that appease not any grief,
Time brings us all by handiwork, wronging
All hurts with nothing of relief.

Colonel Benyon was in love. That right disciplinarian, that battered soldier, who had hoast for the last fifteen years of his freedom from anything approaching what he called "an entanglement," now awoke to the consciousness that he was the veriest fool in the universe, and that unless he could win this woman, of whose antecedents he knew nothing, for his wife, he was a lost man. That he could return to the outer world, that he could go back to India and begin life again without her seemed impossible. His world had narrowed itself into the sick chamber where she ministered to him. All the voices of this earth seemed to have melted into that one tender voice that rang to him or talked with him in the long tranquil evenings. Until now he had scarcely known the meaning of a woman's companionship. Never had he lived in such close intimacy with any one, not even a masculine friend. But now he looked back at his hard commonplace life, the conventional society, the stereotyped pleasures, and wondered how he had endured so many years of such a barren existence. He loved her. For a long time—his idle weeks in that sick room had seemed so long, giving him so much leisure for thought—he struggled against this folly, if folly it were; but he had struggled in vain. He loved her. Her, and none other, would he have for his wife; and he told himself that it was, after all, no great sacrifice which he contemplated making. That she was a lady he never doubted from the first hour when, restored to his sober senses, he had looked at her face and heard her voice. It was just possible that she was born of a less noble race than his own, though he could scarcely bring himself to believe even this; it was more than probable that she was very poor. The Colonel was glad of this last fact. It pleased him to think that his wealth might give her a new and brighter life, surrounding her with all those luxuries and elegances which seemed the natural attributes of her beauty.

Was there any hope for him? Well, yes, he was inclined to believe his case far from desperate. There was a subtle something in her looks and tones at times that made him fancy he was not quite indifferent to her, that he was more than the mere object of her charity. Nothing could be more vague than these signs and tokens, for she was the most reserved of wo-