

THE BATTLE WON.

CHAPTER XXXII.

NESSA REALIZES THAT SHE IS ONLY AN ORDINARY GIRL.

One morning when Sweyn came to see Nessa, he held her wasted hand in his after their customary greeting, and a look of trouble and anxiety came into his eyes as he looked down into her thin face. There was nothing of her, poor little thing! She was not getting on at all. She must be fretting about something, he said to himself. He seated himself, still holding the slight, soft fingers that seemed to cling to his broad palm in mute appeal for help to recover strength.

"Do you sleep well?" he asked in a tone mellowed by sympathy.

"Yes, it seems to me that is all that I can do now," she replied, feebly.

"Down on her luck!" he said to himself. "No wonder—lying here inactive week after week without change after such a life of activity and excitement."

"Mustn't lose heart, Blue and White. Pluck has won you many a race," he said.

"I don't think it will win me any more." Her voice quivered as she spoke.

"Oh, that is what troubles you. I've been wondering what it was."

"No; it does not trouble me now as it did. At first I thought I could not live unless I went back to the arena; but now I think I may live, and yet not wish to run another race. I can think of that life as gone forever, now, without pain."

He looked at her in silence, unable to understand this assertion, for her voice, her eyes, her lips belied it by their signs of suffering.

"I have lost heart because I have lost strength—that is all," she continued, adding, with deeper dejection, "I am only an ordinary girl."

"Only an ordinary girl," he repeated to himself. "There's not such another in the world." Then after a pause he said aloud, "It would be an extraordinary creature who didn't lose her courage with her strength—something more than human."

"No; not more than human," she answered. "If I had lived for others and not for myself—if I had some greater object in life than the mere gratification of vanity—I should not lose heart. Miss Arnold would never lose courage; it is only my ordinary girl who give in like this."

"If you were only an ordinary girl you wouldn't say such a thing as that," involuntarily his hand closed upon her fingers, and its warmth seemed to be imparted to her and send a thrill to her heart.

He drew in a chair to the bedside and seated himself, rapidly diagnosing her case the while.

"And how long has this been going on?" he asked, when he fixed his eyes again on the pillowed face turned toward him.

"When did it first occur to you that you were only an ordinary girl?"

"It has been growing upon me gradually, since I have been able to think and reason."

"Not quite so long as that."

"I cannot tell."

"I can. These ideas have been growing upon you ever since Mrs. Blount came—not quite a fortnight ago. I could tell you the exact day by looking at my note-book, for I should find there a little mark against your name indicating the appearance of symptoms that I could not account for. I can account for them now, and Mrs. Blount must answer for it."

"Oh indeed you are mistaken. She is a dear old soul. She has been most kind to me."

"She is a kind-hearted old soul, I know, but her tongue leads her into all sorts of indiscretions, and like most of us, she prides herself upon the possession of what she lacks; in her case it's judgment. She has a mother's admiration for the children she has nursed which blinds her to their faults; and as no one can pretend to equal her paragon, you cannot expect to be as good as you should be in her opinion. I dare say she has told you so."

"She has told me nothing but the truth. Nothing. What am I?" she asked, with an appealing gesture.

"A child with a future yet to be shaped," he answered, gravely. "What we may become, no one can tell, happily; but it is a step onward, some assurance of a higher life, to know what, with Heaven's help, we will not be, and I think you have settled that."

"Do you think that I may have refined tastes and delicate feeling, and a noble object to live for?"

"The wish for such things is next to the possession. We are blessed or we are cursed as our ardent desires lead us to the good or to the bad. Nothing is beyond hoping for."

"Oh it is good to think that!"

"It is the gospel of nature—a gospel applicable as well in physical as in moral cases. It is better than all the physics I can give. Unless you believe it I hardly see how I am to get you strong and well again."

"It seems so far away," Nessa said, after a pause. "to think that I may be as lovable and good as she." She was comparing herself with Grace.

"Not so far away as you think," he said, in a low tone of conviction.

A conflict between hope and fear rendered Nessa silent for some minutes; then she said, in a tone of hesitation:

"I think I could nurse anyone who was nice; but I suppose I ought to be quite as ready to undertake nasty cases?"

"There's no necessity to nurse at all," he replied, smiling. "Nurses, like poets, are born, not made. You might go back to the International and be lovable and good there in spite of doubtful influences."

Nessa replied with a little movement of her head in dissent.

"It is a question of vocation. We should all do that which we do best. In the humblest station there is scope for noble action. Nothing is needed but the desire to do right, and that desire you have."

A frivolous, pleasure-loving child she exalted Grace to a position quite beyond that of even the best of women. A great gulf lay between them which it appeared, could not be crossed without presumption on her part.

It was not entirely Nessa's fault that they stood apart. There was an instinctive repulsion on both sides. With the most earnest endeavor to efface herself and exercise charity in its broadest meaning, Grace could not overcome certain antipathies due to her birth and the training of early life. She conscientiously sought to beat down the barrier of conventional prejudices which separated the refined and sensitive lady from the public favorite of a vulgar exhibition. She neglected no opportunity of putting herself on the same level with Nessa, and treating her as if they were equal in all respects. Her intentions were sincere, but her kindest words lacked warmth of expression. Her most generous actions showed thought and care rather than the spontaneity which wins love.

But there was something besides social differences—something more than fear—on Nessa's side, and natural prejudice on the part of Miss Arnold that kept them apart—something as yet unrecognized by either even in her heart of hearts.

Sweyn could not make out how it was that Grace did not warm toward Nessa. It seemed to him that pity alone should produce an affection for the poor, broken girl such as he felt for her. Her lack of generous feeling disappointed him, and irritated him also. He could account readily enough for Nessa's attitude. It was impossible for her to feel any real human affection for one whose imaculate qualities inspired a thing but a chilling awe. But he could find no excuse for Grace, and his feeling of irritation grew stronger as he observed that the constraint in her manner rather increased than diminished as time went on. And as time went on his visits became more frequent, and he lingered by Nessa's side, Grace herself encouraging him, for it was evident to her that under his influence Nessa was making rapid progress to recovery. He seemed to breathe some of his own exuberant gaiety and redundant health into her. By the end of March she was able to rise from her bed and walk into the adjoining sitting-room. And now she no longer dreaded to look in the glass, for her cheek was less hollow and the color was coming back to it, and she looked pretty again.

There was no constraint between her and the doctor. They talked as if they had known each other for many years. Sweyn talked to her as freely as he talked to Grace, and as kindly but for a few terms of endearment. Nessa scarcely noticed that he called Grace "dear," and that he avoided addressing herself by name. He was still her dear friend—the dearest friend she had ever known, nothing more.

They talked on all sorts of subjects—light, everyday matter mostly. Only now and then when Grace joined the conversation it took a somewhat severe tone, and Nessa found it necessary to think a good deal before committing herself to any expression of opinion; but when Grace withdrew into the next room, the gossip became very lively and pleasant, and Nessa rarely without any effort whatever. As for the serious consideration of self-sacrifice in a hospital or elsewhere, that seemed to be shelved for the present altogether.

Grace was too painfully conscious of her inability to make general conversation light and interesting. She was neither morbid nor severe. It was not her wish to talk about grave subjects.

Alone with Sweyn, she too could gossip cheerfully. She enjoyed a good joke, and liked to treat trifles playfully; but some of the presence of Nessa tied her tongue and made her miserable, with a sense of her own incapacity for genial expansiveness. It grieved her deeply that this was so, and that she could not love Nessa as Nessa deserved to be loved, that her heart would not expand to her will, but, like a zoophyte, contracted the more when she tried to open it.

It needed a slighter power of observation than hers to perceive that Sweyn and Nessa were more at ease when she left them. It was a relief also to her to escape, and so the distance grew greater between them, but by such imperceptible degrees that neither Sweyn nor Nessa noticed it particularly. They both less happy in themselves. All three were blind in a certain sense.

There was one person in the house though, who saw what was going on clearly enough, and with growing dissatisfaction, and that person was Mrs. Blount. She set a good deal of her natural good temper by not being able to speak her mind out on the subject. She went about with her lips pursed tightly up, as if she feared to open them lest the truth might come out. Whenever she found anything she might find fault with, she let off her displeasure on that. She grumbled at West Kensington, but she refused to go back to Brixton, though Grace assured her there was no longer any need of her.

"She's not the only one who needs looking after," said Mrs. Blount. And only hope I may not be wanted to nurse you. Smile as you like—and I wish it was a happier smile—you are not right. You're thinner than ever, and more serious and sad, and," with pronounced decision—"you don't laugh natural."

She was not unpleasant with anyone at this time, but she was noticeably less amiably disposed toward Nessa than she had been at her first coming. One afternoon she came into the room, where Nessa was sitting alone, in a particularly ill-humor. Nessa could get no more than a nod or a shake of head in reply to her observation; yet it was obvious by her manner that he had brought her knitting with the set purpose of staying there.

It had occurred to Nessa on this very afternoon that she had never told her friends who she really was, and how she had come to be an equestrienne. It struck her now that they must attribute her reticence to a want of confidence in them, or to her having done something which she was ashamed to reveal. The possibility of being so misunderstood made her cheeks burn, and she resolved that, on the very first occasion, she would tell the whole truth about herself. She expected that Grace would be dreadfully shocked to hear that she had run away from school and got into trouble with the police at St. John's Wood, and been hunted out of Brighton; but she felt sure that Dr. Mrs. Blount—that dear, generous friend—would

make allowance for her ignorance and simplicity, and see that she was not really guilty of dishonesty. And in her heart of hearts she was elated with the hope that he would like her better for knowing that she was well born, and the victim of cruel persecution, and heir to a large fortune.

This pleasant reflection was brightening her cheek when Mrs. Blount broke silence.

"I've sent 'em out for a drive," she said. Nessa looked up from the page on which her eyes had been resting whilst her thoughts wandered elsewhere, and, seeing the sun on the window, said she was glad: it was such a lovely afternoon for a drive.

"Yes; but he'd have been sitting in this room as if it was raining cats and dogs if I hadn't spoken out," said the old lady, in a tone of vexation. "It's the first time I've ever had to tell him what he ought to do. He'd have found it out for himself a month ago."

Nessa, wondering, looked with wide, inquiring eyes at her companion.

"Oh, I suppose you have not noticed any more than he has."

"Noticed what?" inquired Nessa.

"That my dear Grace is growing quieter and quieter, more thoughtful, more gentle even than she ever was. You haven't noticed that she doesn't watch by the window for her sweetheart out, that she slips away from the room when he is here, that she is growing old-maidish in her ways. I have."

And it made my heart ache when I see 'em through the blinds as they started off in the pony chaise, for they didn't look smiling into each other's face; but he looked up at this window, and she looked straight before her as if she had no lover in the world."

"Oh, do they not love each other now?" Nessa asked, with a trembling voice.

"What is the matter?" echoed the old nurse, laying down her knitting. "Well, my dear, if you don't know—and I will say this, I believe you are innocent—if you don't know, it's my duty to tell you before things get past mending. You're taking Sweyn's heart away from my poor Grace! He's fallen in love with you—that's what's the matter!"

CHAPTER XXXIII.—BREAKING AWAY.

It was nearly midnight when Grace, on her return, entered Nessa's room. The lamp was turned low, shedding a feeble glimmer of light on the bed where the girl lay. A movement of the bed-clothes showed her that Nessa was awake.

"You have come to say 'good-night' to me," said Nessa.

"Yes. It is very late. Did you think I had forgotten you?"

"I couldn't think that, unless I was very stupid. Are you tired?"

"Not at all. We have been to the theatre, and that has charmed away my dullness."

Nessa could understand now why she had been dull—why she was brighter and happier than usual to-night. She could perceive and understand many things, her eyes being opened which previously had passed unheeded.

"Not too tired to talk to me a little while," she asked. "I should like to hear about the theatre and your ride."

"Nothing will please me more than to tell you. Shall I turn the light up?"

Nessa checked her quickly.

"No, no! Leave it as it is, dear," she said. "It is like the twilight, which is the very best time for gossiping. She had been crying, and feared the light would betray her swollen eyes."

Grace agreed that the half light was pleasant, and seating herself beside the bed, described at length the incidents of her favorite divertissement, where they dined, and the subsequent entertainment at the theatre, with an uncustomary vivacity and freedom from restraint which surprised Nessa. She narrated the story of the comedy, described the dresses she had seen, and entered into all those details which interest—Nessa stimulating the conversation with occasional questions and observations—and ended the pleasant retrospect with a sigh of pleasure.

Then, after a little pause, she said:

"But I think the drive was the most delightful part of all. I seemed to grow younger the moment we got clear of the houses. The air was so soft and genial. I almost wish you had been in my place."

"Do you think I shall be able to get out soon?"

"That is the very question I asked as we were coming home. And now I must tell you what your doctor promised: if it is fine to-morrow he will come and take you for a drive."

"I am so glad."

"Only for an hour or two for the first time."

Nessa lay silent for a few moments, then she said:

"Do you think it would take more than an hour or two to go to Brixton?"

"Oh, no. Less than two hours, certainly. But why should you wish to go to Brixton? There is nothing but houses all the way."

"I want to go to Brixton, and I think this is the best time to tell you why," Nessa replied, speaking carefully, for she felt that the least slip might reveal what she would not for the world that Grace should know.

"Mrs. Blount is going home to-morrow, and she has asked me to stay with her for a little while."

There was an interval of absolute silence after this that seemed very long to Nessa; then Grace, bending down, said, in a low tone of distress:

"My dear Viola, I know that I have been very silent and dull lately. I cannot tell why, and I feel my unkindness is the cause of your going away."

"No, no, no. Could anyone in all the world be kinder to me than you have been—than you are now?" She raised her arms and drew Grace's cheek down to hers, which was wet with tears; then she said, "You cannot think now that I want to go away because I have been unhappy here."

Grace was so touched by this proof of affection that she could do no more than kiss the wet cheek, and Nessa continued, in a broken whispering voice:

"I am going away because I feel I ought to go, and knowing that you will not ask me to stay, will you? While I was helpless, I could accept your kindness as freely as it was offered; but now that I am able to move about almost without aid—with no more help than Mrs. Blount can give me—it is quite different, isn't it. I can never repay you for all you have done on my behalf, but I may be able to repay another for what I take."

Grace would have spoken, but Nessa hurried on with the argument she had prepared as she lay waiting for her friend's return:

"It is not an caprice or a hasty decision arising from foolish pride; it is no more than the feeling of independence which might exist even between two sisters. And there is still another reason: I am keeping you from helping others who need your help more than I do. It is not right that I should do that."

"You shall go, dear, if Sweyn will agree to it."

Nessa thanked her, crying, and then after a pause, she said, impulsively:

"Let me kiss you again, for I cannot tell you what is in my heart."

Long after Grace had left her, Nessa lay awake, her mind crowded with a host of turbulent ideas, which she had not the will to dispel. Shaped into words, and put in some kind of sequence, her thoughts ran thus:

"He loves me—Sweyn loves me! He seemed to be perfect—a man quite above all men in all respects and all ways—strong and brave and not at all selfish, with none of the frailties and faults of others. I thought a man looking so loyal and true, seeming so generous and gentle, could do no wrong. But he has broken faith with poor Grace—abandoning her to be known so long for one he hardly knows at all. He cannot love us both: one cannot cut one's heart in two. No hero ever gave his heart to one and his hand to another. No; he is not a hero. Many men are worthier than he and I must not admire him, and treasure his words, and listen for his steps, and try to see his face when I shut my eyes at night, Oh! I must never do that again. I don't think anyone is good except Grace. I cannot be good, or I could despise him now, and wish never to see him again in all my life. But I cannot do that yet awhile. Perhaps I shall a I grow stronger, and realize that he is really weak and base. I am sorry. I am sorry. Why can't we be dear friends for ever without any of that other love, as we were at first? I have never wanted him to be more to me than he was then. My feeling is nothing but gratitude and admiration and friendship. And it was because I have never had a real friend before that I valued him so much. He must have filled a great place in my heart for me to feel such a void now that he has gone out of it. He took the place of all I had lost by my accident. I ceased to regret the applause of all the spectators when I had his smile. What have I now to think of? I wonder whether I shall forget him when I go back to the International. Oh, what a pity that he should be!"

But I ought to have seen this before. What a little fool I have been! Grace said that he was growing fonder of me than of her. I cannot doubt that now. It explains the change in her. I might have seen the change and guessed why it was if I had been well and had my wits about me. It's scarcely an excuse that I did not. But he has not even that extinction. He is a man more experienced in the world: much older than I. Poor Grace! Poor Grace! How she must have suffered. What should I feel if I really loved such a man, and found that he was gradually ceasing to love me, and thinking more of some one else? Oh! it would kill me. I could not live then. I could not kiss that other one as she kissed me, for I am not good—not good, not good! I don't hate him as I ought to. Happily, I may yet be able to undo the mischief I have caused. He will not see me when I am at Brixton, and little by little he will forget all about me—never wish to see me, never think of me, and I must be just as if we had never met. Why am I crying? Why does my heart ache? Oh! I am wicked. How shall I meet him in the morning? I must not be different, or he will suspect the truth. Yet how am I to seem natural, feeling like this?"

The next morning she snuggled herself in the part she had to play, when Sweyn came into the room, she steadied her nerves and held out her hands to him as usual.

"This won't do," he said, slipping his fingers from her hand to the wrist; "you're feverish this morning." He sat down before her, still holding her hand, and looked in her face.

She had purposely placed her chair with the back to the light and drawn the blinds, and she now tried to meet his eyes and maintain a semblance of composure; but she felt the hot blood in her face, and knew that her smile was unnatural.

"Don't be frightened," he said; "I know what you have been thinking about all night."

Had he guessed the truth, she asked herself in alarm?

He laid her hand caressingly on the arm of her chair, still looking at her with a smile in his eyes, and continued:

"Next to Grace, I think you are the most conscientious little lady in the world. The moment you learn that you are strong enough to leave the house, you make up your mind to relieve your friends of a possible burden; you lay awake half the night devising some scheme for paying Mrs. Blount for your board and lodging; and now you are terrified with the notion that I am going to order you to stay here another fortnight. It's all right, my dear little patient; you shall go for your drive this afternoon, and I will leave you with Mrs. Blount and her bandbox, at Brixton. There, I know how it is with you," he added, as Nessa smiled with a sigh of relief. "Though I dare say your symptoms would have put me to my wits' end if I hadn't had five minutes' chat with Grace beforehand. We both agree it will be a good thing for you. You've seen enough of these rooms, and Mrs. Blount is a dear old soul, who will take care of you like a mother when she gets you into her own hands. And I am sure you will feel easier with the notion of being able to pay your way. Fortunately, I think you will be able to do that without bothering your mind about ways and means for some time to come. Your old friend, Mr. Ferguson, wants to settle up with you. He called on me yesterday about it."

"I don't think he owes me anything. I was paid on the Saturday before."

"Yes, but unfortunately your engagement did not end on the Saturday; something is due for what followed. That never entered your head, I suppose?"

"I thought you told me that Mrs. Redmond—I mean Mrs. De Vere—had taken all that belonged to me except the clothes you were good enough to have brought here."

"Yes, she did take everything except compensation for the injury she had inflicted upon you. She didn't wait for that. Ferguson is a capital sort of fellow, but not one to be imposed on greatly. He wouldn't be very sure that he was indebted. The fact is, the International people fear a lawsuit, and will be glad to make a reasonable payment as some sort of compensation for what you have suffered."

"Do you think I ought to take anything from them?" she asked.

"Oh, undoubtedly. The only question is how much: now, what would you say?"

He leant back in his chair, enjoying the look of perplexity in the girl's face, and chuckled with her unworried simplicity.

"I cannot say," she replied, with a despairing shake of the head. "But if Mr. Ferguson thinks it was not my fault, and that I ought to be recompensed, he knows how much he should give me."

"Well, you see his position hardly permits him to be an impartial judge on that point. I would rather employ a solicitor to arrange the affair, but that might involve something which you would wish to avoid. You see, Ferguson is firmly convinced that it was not an accident; and if he thought we were going to law, it is probable that he would find Mrs. De Vere and prosecute her for the injury done to the horses as a means of shifting from his own shoulders responsibility for the injury done to you. I do not think he would take this course unless he feared that by employing a solicitor you intended to get ruinous damages. For, in the first place, it is not a thing the International wish to make public, and in the second, Ferguson has too much feeling for you to escape his obligations manly. We have not talked about this matter, you and I, but I feel pretty sure, from what I have observed in your character, that you have no vindictive feeling against Mrs. De Vere. You would not like Ferguson to hunt her down; he'd be only too happy to do it."

"Oh, no, no, no," Nessa cried, quivering. "I am sure she did not intend to do it."

"I think you are right. At first I believed with Ferguson, that she had caused the collision purposely—for some mad prompting of jealousy; but knowing now as I do that she appropriated nearly all that you gained as jealousy would lead her to such a sacrifice of her own interests, for she must have foreseen that the consequences would in all probability be fatal to you."

To Nessa this charge seemed monstrous. Her own observation had compelled her reluctantly to admit that Mrs. Redmond was selfish and mercenary and ungenerous; but though she might accept the fact that the woman was not good, she could not conceive her capable of such an enormity as that imputed to her.

"Why, she saved my life once!" she said, feeling that this fact alone was conclusive evidence of Mrs. Redmond's innocence.

"Saved your life," he said, with deep interest in his look and voice as he leant forward, resting his elbows on his knees. Clearly he expected her to confide in him, but she shrank now from encouraging intimacy with the man who had pledged to give all his love to another, feeling as if it were a treachery on her part toward Grace.

"Yes," she said; "she saved my life, and I will do nothing that can bring trouble upon her."

"Of course not, if that is the case. We will say no more about a lawyer. Still some body ought to represent you. It is scarcely an affair that you could settle for yourself, I think. Is there any relative you would like to communicate with?"

"I have no relatives."

"Then you must fall back on your friends. Which shall it be?"

"I have no friends," Nessa replied, trying to believe that Sweyn was nothing to her.

"None," he said, with unmistakable significance in his low, soft voice. "Not one whom you may trust to do the very best he can to serve you?"

"None whose service I have any right to claim." Her embarrassment was painful, but the man was yet too honest to see the real cause.

"Then you regard me simply as your medical adviser, hey? and you will desire me to discontinue my visits when you get to Brixton. That's carrying independence to greater lengths than I will agree to. I shall come every day," he said, with a laugh as he rose to his feet. "I shall continue my visits till you are convinced that I am—he took her hand and held it in silence a moment as he looked down with warm affection into her troubled face—"what I pretend to be—something more than your doctor; ever so much more—your friend."

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

The St. Clair Tunnel.

The tunnel under the St. Clair river at Sarnia is at length an accomplished fact. Considering the peculiar difficulties that had to be overcome, difficulties that would have utterly discouraged ordinary men, and the fact that subsequent tunnelling has not been particularly successful in the past, this latest achievement must be reckoned among the greatest triumphs of modern engineering science. A detailed account of all that has happened since the work was first begun, of the experiments that have been tried, and the difficulties that have been encountered, while interesting as a romance would be sufficient to fill a volume. The following facts are gleaned from the account as furnished by the Mail:

"The total length of the tunnel is 6,000 feet, of which 2,290 feet are under the river and the remainder under dry land. The maximum depth of the river is forty feet. The length of the tunnel under dry land on the Canadian side is 1,994 feet, on the American side 1,716 feet. The length of the open cutting and approaches on the Canadian side will be 3,100 feet, on the American side 2,500 feet, making the tunnel and approaches a total length of 11,600 feet. The amount of soil excavated is 2,196,400 cubic feet. The cast iron lining will weigh 55,963,600 pounds, secured by 2,000,000 steel bolts seven-eighths of an inch in diameter. The walls of the tunnel are constructed of cast-iron segments, thirteen of which and a key form a circle. The dimensions of each cast iron segment are, length 4 feet 10 inches, width 18 inches, thickness 2 inches, with langes inside 6 inches deep and 1½ inches in thickness. These segments are cast with 32 holes in them, 12 on each side and four on each end. The edges are planed in the workshops at the works. They are then heated and dipped in coal tar, from which they come out black and shining. They are bolted together with ½ steel bolts, and the external diameter of the tunnel is 21 feet and the inside 20 feet. No brick or stone was used in its construction, and when fully ready for use it will be simply an iron tube made of plates; 6,000 feet long and 20 feet in diameter, perfectly round and water-tight; as dry as a street in summer time, lighted by electric light, ventilated by air engines, and kept at the right temperature with steam pipes."