

The Family Circle.

"Home, Sweet Home."

The Ship's Doctor.

BY MRS. OLIPHANT.
(Continued.)

"Nora," cried the young man, desperate, "this is the moment that's to settle my life. It's little matter for you, but for me it's life or death. I'm not asking you to take me now—say a year, say even two years, I'll be content; but I have to know—Nora, bide a moment; if you turn me away without any hope—by—! There's the Pretty Peggy sails from Anster on Saturday. I'll go to Greenland in her, and never see you more."

"And why should I want to see you more?" said Nora. "What do I care for your Pretty Peggy? It will do you a great deal of good, Mr. Erskine. It will teach you that you can't have everything your own way."

"Is this your last word, Nora?" cried the poor fellow, with glistening eyes. If she had looked him in the face, Nora's heart would have given way. But she felt her weakness, and would not look him in the face. She stood by the table, turning over and over in her hand an Indian toy of carved ivory, with her eyes fixed upon it as if it was the intricacies of the pattern that involved life and death—and then she said slowly, while the blood seemed to ebb away from her heart, "I have nothing more to say."

In another moment the door shut violently, and Willy Erskine was gone. The sound went through the house like a thunderclap, and threw down with its violent concussion the castle of cards in which Nora had been entrenching herself. She sank down upon a chair, stupefied, and listened to the step that went echoing along the street. Was he gone? Was he really gone, and for ever? Gone to Greenland in the Pretty Peggy, into the ice where men and ships perished, into the whaling boats where they sank and were lost for ever—should she never see him more?

"You've made the bed, and you must lie on it," said Mrs. Sinclair, when she heard all, with an indignation that was soon lost in sympathy. But Nora would not give way either to the sympathy or the indignation. She declared steadily that she would do the same over again if it was in her power. "What right had he to come making claims, and speaking of his rights to me?" she said. "If a lad follows a girl, does that give him a right to her whether or no?" This was said with burning eyes into which tears refused to come. But yet Nora shed tears enough over it. She took immense pains privately to find out when the Pretty Peggy sailed, and to know if she had shipped a doctor before she sailed from Anster pier. Not for her life would she have asked the doctor's name, but she satisfied herself so far. And when the fact could no longer be doubted, her heart grew so sick that she could not go home. The Sinclairs had friends in England—a vague sort of expression used by the untraveled Scotch then, as untraveled islanders nowadays talk of the Continent. Nora persuaded her mother that it would be pleasant to go south and pay the long-promised visit. She was glad to go away, glad to be anywhere out of the range of those people and places with which Willy Erskine's name was so closely connected. But the other day it seemed he had been so joyful, so full of good prospects and high hopes. Now he was out upon the Northern seas, surgeon in a whaling ship, like any poor student or broken man. And he Drumthwacket's son! and whose fault was it all? Nora was ashamed to confront even the familiar rocks that knew him so well—that knew how she met him (by accident), and strayed with him along the sea verge, with the salt spray now and then dashed into their fresh faces, and the surge rising to their feet. She dragged her home-loving mother about from one connection to another all the summer through, enjoying the visits but little, poor child. As for Mrs. Sinclair, a British matron of the present day would not be more disconsolate, nor feel herself more alien in the heart of French society than was the Scottish gentlewoman among her southern connections. Their ways, their accent, their mode of living, were all discordant to her. "If I were to live all my life among those English," she said, "I think I would rather die." Her soul longed for the tents of Jacob and the dwellings of Jerusalem. "But if I were not to humor my own bairn," added Mrs. Sinclair, with pathos, "who should humor her?" Nora was her only child; somehow or other she had made a mistake in her young life. Clouds had come up over the sun at the moment when that sun should have been brightest. Her mother could have given her the best of good advice, but she chose to give her something better instead—she humored Nora. She was her tender partisan, right or wrong. She took up her cause and supported her silently against her own reproaches and all the world. And that is the best way of healing the wounded, if their friends but knew.

It was the end of summer before they returned to the Gushat-house. And then, whether it was that they were unexpected, or whether from her misdeeds towards Willy Erskine, as Nora thought, few people came to see them at first, and nobody so much as mentioned the Drumthwacket family. The name of Erskine was never, as Nora thought, named before her; and she felt herself more guilty still as she seemed thus to read her own condemnation in the eyes of others. But now the turn of the season had arrived; when she cast wistful looks from the corner of the garden up the long country road, "going north," as those geographical, seafaring populations described it. A leaf would now and then flicker down through the sunny air, a sign that autumn had come. A few weeks more, and the Pretty Peggy might flutter up the Firth with all her sails set, like a fine lady coming into a ball-room, as the sailors delighted to say; and if Nora, penitent, with softness in her eyes, were by, could any one doubt that the eager face of the ship's doctor would expand too, and that the evil days would come to an end? No one could have doubted it but Nora. It was as certain that it would all be made up as that the Pretty Peggy would come safe out of the icy seas. To be sure, ships were lost there sometimes, sometimes detained

among the ice. But look what a season it had been! Even the men's wives were easy in their minds, and sung by their wheels, or mended their nets at the cottage doors, and looked over the smooth Firth with contented hearts. A week or two more, and the seamen, with their wages, and their curiosities, and their rejoicings, would have come home.

There was not a man's wife in the Pretty Peggy who was so anxious as Nora. But then it was her fault. It was she who had sent him to sea—he who was no seaman, he whom a wealthier lot awaited. And perhaps he would look bitterly upon the woman whose caprice had wrought him so much harm. This was the thought that made her heart ache, and made the days so long to her. She used to walk out to the pier to watch the sunset reflections, and listen in silence to the prognostications of the fishers and seamen about. When they prophesied a gale, Nora's heart beat wild with alarm; when they gave their word the storm was past, a hush as of a speck on the horizon, upon which all those ancient mariners fixed their telescopes. They exchanged opinions about her rig, and her hull, and her manner of sailing, till Nora, standing by, was half crazed with suspense. At last the news flew through the town, waking up all the wynds and cottages. It was the Pretty Peggy at last.

It would be vain to describe the excitement into which Nora, like many another woman, rose at the news. The other women were the sailors' wives, who had a right to be moved. She had no such right. She had never spoken even to her mother of the Pretty Peggy. She had been too proud at first to betray the smallest interest in the movements of her lost love; and she did not even know whether Mrs. Sinclair was aware that Willy was coming with the returning seamen out of the icy seas. She had to invent a reason for her anxiety as the ship drew near the port. "Willy Morrison is in her, mamma," said Nora. "I'd like to go down and see them come in. His mother will be so happy." Willy Morrison's mother had been Nora's nurse, and that was her excuse.

"Well, well," said Mrs. Sinclair, with an impatience unusual to her, "I wanted you at home this afternoon; but Nancy will be proud to see you have a warm heart to your foster-brother. Be home as soon as you can. I would not be surprised if some friend was to look in to tea."

Nora gave her mother a startled look, of which Mrs. Sinclair took no notice. She looked as if she had her secret too; and most probably she knew as well as her daughter did who was coming up the tranquil Firth in the returning ship. Did her mother expect him too? Could it be possible, after all the tragic hours that were past, that things should fall so calmly into the old routine, and Willy Erskine, after his voyage, look in to tea? She did not know if she walked on air or solid ground when she made her way down again to the pier. If that were to be the end of it, of what use had been all the agonies of those silent months? Life seemed to swim before her like a dream, and confused phantasmagoria, as she thought but yet a subtle sense of happiness was gathering at her heart. He was coming so soon; he was so near; and all those ghosts would roll up their gloomy wings and disappear out of sight, when Willy Erskine once more looked in at the Gushat-house. She went quickly down along the half-deserted road to the pier, where the women were all crowding. The Pretty Peggy could not reach the harbor yet for more than an hour, but still to be so much nearer her, to be ready to meet the men and hear that all was well, five minutes earlier, was compensation enough for the wives. They made pleasant little speeches to Nora as she came down among them.

"Ah, Miss Nora, the day will come when you'll be looking out for a man of your ain," said one.

"And I hope with a my heart it'll be a good man and a pleasant day," added another.

"But Miss Nora's man will never be a seafaring man like ours, to make her heart stair," said a third.

"Unless it was a grand captain of a frigate in a' his gold lace," was the ambitious aspiration of Nancy Morrison. — "Sure I am, I didna bring up a winsome young lady for less than that."

She was a favorite, and this was the pleasant chatter that passed from lip to lip as she went among them.

"I want to see Willy come in from his first voyage, nurse," said Nora. What a lying, wicked little speech it was! and what a true one! but before Nora had time to answer, one of the men threw down his telescope with a groan—rather the glass slid out of his hands.

"Go out of my way, women, wi' your cackling," he said, as he stumbled down.

"Oh, Lord, and their mother that canna stir a foot from her bed!" With this the old sailor turned his back on the advancing ship, and sat down on the edge of the pier, and hid his face in his hands.

This action alarmed the entire community, for Peter Rodger was well known to have two sons on the Pretty Peggy.

Two or three of the women crowded around him to ask what he meant, when another of the men gave a sudden cry—"My God, the flag's at half-mast!"

A sudden horror fell upon the group. It fell upon the town instinctively in the twinkling of an eye; the news flew by that strange electricity which is quicker than the telegraph. It was a sunny afternoon, the Firth was like glass, the sky was blue—nothing but the white clouds above and the soft-gliding sails below disturbed the glistening surface of the sea. The ship, with its white sails, came softly on before a slight but favorable breeze; but the faces of the little crowd grew pale in the sunshine, and a shudder ran through them. There was a pause and every heart stood still.

"She's got the garland on the topmast; she's made a good voyage," said a younger sailor under his breath.

"Oh, lad, how dare ye speak," cried one of the women, "when she's bringing death maybe to your mother or to me?"

The strain of the suspense was terrible as they stood and watched; some of the poor wives fell on their knees and prayed aloud, as if that would bring to life the dead man, probably long ago committed to the safe-keeping of the sea; some began to rock themselves, crying silently as if their individual fate had been sealed. As for Nancy Morrison, she stood rigid as a stone, and with big dilated eyes watched the ship that was bringing her life or death. Nora was shocked and disturbed, as was natural. Her heart went forth in a certain passionate pity for the one, whoever it was, upon whom the blow was to fall, but she did not feel the same over-softly to her old nurse, and put her arm around the poor woman—"Oh, Nancy, take courage," she cried; "don't think it's him!"

"Let me be! oh, let me be!" cried Nancy.

There was no one there in a condition to take comfort or give attention to anything but one.

And the ship came on slowly, as it seemed to everybody now. The Firth lit up with all the glorious reflections of the sunset; the May rose dark upon the blazing water with the iron skeleton that held at night its fire signal; the Bass lay like an uncouth shell against the dim outline of land on the other side, and the long sun-rays slanted and fell tenderly across the water. Then the horrible excitement of the watchers was roused into a sharper crisis still. A boat darted forth from the shore with six stout oarsmen, to the slowly gliding ship. Could it be a ship of death, like that one that the Ancient Mariner saw against the sun? Could there have been pestilence on board? It came on gliding, as the other vessel must have done when "the men all light, the seraph men," brought her near the port. These wild thoughts passed through Nora's mind alone. There came into it a curious vague wonder whether it might have been Providence, and not she, that sent Willy Erskine into such a ship. She seemed to see him on the deck with all, or almost all, the authority in his hands—the saviour of most of the disabled crew; healer, ruler, hero; such was the strange vision that glided before her eyes as she too, eagerly watched the boat. The thought of his supposed devotion made Nora unselfish too. She ceased to tremble about their personal meeting. She kept eye and hand firm, to be ready to give help and succor to her who might be smitten, whosoever she might be.

When the boat came back, and got within hailing distance, the excitement grew terrible. Some of the poor wives threw themselves among the rocks to get the news a moment earlier. Peter Rodger stood on the highest ledge, with his broad hand curved like a trumpet round his eager ear. Nora placed herself behind her nurse, instinctively, for she loved the woman. But the awful strain of all their ears and senses made the first cry unintelligible to them. Twice the vague shout came over the waters before it could be comprehended. Then it was caught up and echoed by a hundred voices—"Only the doctor!" That was what they said.

Only the doctor! There was a shout, and then a cry, sharp with joy, from all these women. Joy! though it was still death that was coming. They clasped each other's hands; they wept aloud; they cried out, in the relief of their deliverance. The whole community, every living creature about began to breathe, and babble, and sob forth thanksgiving. One figure alone fell forward against the wall on which Nancy Morrison had been leaning. Nora was stupefied. It was like a great rock falling suddenly down upon her out of the peaceful sky. She shrank, and gave one wail and shudder, and then it came, crushing the heart and flesh. The doctor! He had said true—she was never to see him more.

"Miss Nora, cheer up," said Nancy, crying, and laughing, and shivering with joy. "Dinna take it so sair to heart. It's her nerves, my bonnie woman. But they're a' safe, noo, baith lads and men. It's but the doctor—do ye no hear what they say?"

Then Nora rose up desperate, and turned her stony face upon them. "Do you think there's none to break their hearts for him?" she cried with a wild indignation. "Do you think there's no mother, no woman watching? Be silent, ye cruel woman! How dare you to tell me it's only him?"

Then they all looked at her with pathetic faces, gathering round her where she stood—she who did not know who she was saying. Impatiently she turned from their looks. What could sympathy, or anything, do for her? What did it matter? "Let me be!" she cried, as Nancy had cried. Let her alone! that was all she could say.

"Eh, Miss Nora, if we had kent the doctor was coming to you!" cried one of the pitiful women. Nora turned round with a certain wild fierceness almost before the words were said.

"And who said he was anything to me?" she asked, with a strange scorn of herself, and then; he was nothing to her. She could not even wear black for him, or let anybody know she mourned. She shook herself clear of the pitying people she could not tell how. Like a blind creature, seeing nothing, with an instinct only to get home anyhow, she went straight forward, not knowing where she placed her foot; and thus walked sightless, open-eyed, and miserable—into Willy Erskine's arms.

The cry she uttered rang in the ears of all the watching population for years after. They forgot the ship and the men who were so near at hand to gather round this curious group. Nora fell forward into her lover's arms like an inanimate thing. One shock she had borne, and it had taken all her strength—the other she could not bear. The light had first time in her life she lost consciousness. For the first time of her life before—now her very breath died on her lips. Mrs. Sinclair, who had come down to the pier with him to find her child, could never be sufficiently thankful that Willy was a doctor and knew precisely what to do. He carried his love all the way along the pier, hampered by eager offers of help, and still more anxious comments of sympathy, to Nancy Morrison's cottage on the shore, his heart full of remorse and exultation. Though he had long forgotten that threat about the Pretty Peggy, still it was quite true that he had come, like a conspirator, to surprise from Nora's honest eyes, from her candid face, some revelation of her true feelings. She had so revealed them now, as that they never could be denied again; and though it was not Willy's fault, he was remorseful in his tenderness. He had never set foot on the Pretty Peggy. He had forgotten so entirely even the use he had made of her name, that he believed, like Mrs. Sinclair, that it was kindness to her foster-brother which had taken Nora to the pier. Instead of an unprofitable visit to Greenland seas, he had been setting himself very advantageously in an inland town, where his "connections" in the county were sure to be of use to him; and after this interval, with the mother's concurrence, had come with sober determination not to be discouraged, to know what Nora meant, and what his fate was to be. All this Nora learnt afterwards by degrees with wrath and happiness. The doctor who had died was a dissipated old man, of a class too common in the Greenland ships. "I kent weel that doited body could never be anything to Miss Nora," cried Nancy Morrison, drying her eyes. The mystery was cleared up in a fashion to all the admiring and sympathetic population round when Willy Erskine appeared on the scene; and yet nobody knew what it meant but Nora and he.

She was very angry and she was very happy, as we have said. But she had taken all power of resistance, had she wished to resist, out of her own hands. And the story came to the usual end of such stories, and there is nothing more to say.

THE END.