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When the War Was Over

BY FREDERICK R. BURTON.
Author of "Her Wedding Intruder," "Josef Helmuth's Ghost," "A Pot of Gold," "The Strange Object of Thornton Wetmore," etc.CHAPTER II.
THE VISITOR RECALLED.

For a moment both Mr. and Mrs. Warren seemed prostrated by the excitement of the brief incident, and Granpa Kirk chuckled at about bears and mighty hunters to inattentive ears. The old man didn't mind. He had two moods; in one he querulously exacted the strictest attention to his remarks; this was the other, in which the memories evoked by his oft-told tales peopled his mind with faces of the past, and they and the sound of his own voice were all subservient to him.

"Granpa," said Elsie, raising her head when the pressure of her mother's hands were released; "what is the matter? Who was that man? What did he want?"

It was as if some new trouble had arisen to confront Mrs. Warren, or as if the strange trouble already before her had appeared in a new light. She looked at her daughter with fearful eyes and ashen cheeks, responding mournfully:

"I cannot tell you, Elsie, dear; I cannot tell you."

"Cannot, mamma? Why not? Is it anything about me and Will?"

Mrs. Warren shook her head, but in such a melancholy way that one might have doubted whether she intended to reply in the negative to Elsie's last question. The girl interpreted the gesture to mean that something underlay the appearance of this stranger that did concern her deeply, and her other eyes filled with tears of apprehension.

"Mamma, you must tell me what it means," she half pleaded, half insisted.

"Don't you see, here's Will waiting for you? He ought to know if there is anything wrong."

Mrs. Warren looked up at the young man who was standing near, dismayed and fearful, and again held out her hand. It shook noticeably as he took it.

"I had not forgotten you, Will," she said. "A moment ago I should have welcomed you as one of us, for I know you love Elsie and will make her a good husband. Now—I hardly know what to say, except that my feeling toward you is exactly the same. I should like to wish you joy, wouldn't you? Oh, dear! and she gave way to the vaguely-defined but very real fear that oppressed her, and burst into weeping.

Mrs. Warren arose and glancing significantly at Will, walked across the room to her husband, who was leaning against the mantel over the fireplace, his head upon his arm.

Will, the earnest, honest lover, was equal to the emergency. He stooped over Elsie, who was still upon her knees and raised her gently, folding her in his arms, pressing his lips upon her hair, and whispering:

"Elsie, my dear girl, don't you see that nothing can take you away from me?"

Elsie put her arms up to his neck, and hid her face upon his shoulder. Her sobs came more lightly, but she had been too strangely shaken to recover easily.

"Don't see," said Mr. Warren, unsteadily, "that the young folks need to be disturbed, do you, mother? Isn't this something for you and me to think about?"

"Yes," she answered, "for you and me."

She turned her face with a brave attempt at cheer and hope to Will, but even in the growing darkness he could see that she was still suffering acutely from the shock.

Mr. Warren was even more wrought upon than his wife. His brows were fearfully distorted, his eyes wandered restlessly about the room, his faculties seemed partially numbed; but he, too, tried to speak reassuringly.

"Mother and I'll think it over," he said. "You two—you're young, you've got your own lives to live, you've got a right to happiness—come, mother, let's think this over," and he opened the door into the kitchen.

"Nick," said Will, forgetting all formality in the presence of his mother, "you know me. If there's anything to do, you'll call on me, won't you?"

"Yes, lad; you're thinking of that, eh?" and he jerked his thumb toward the rifle over the fireplace.

Will nodded. Elsie had not seen her father's threatening attitude to the stranger, although she must have known from his words what he had done, and her lover was as little inclined as her father to impress upon her mind the ugly fact that murder had been imminent in the peaceful household.

"There won't be any occasion for that," Will continued Mr. Warren; "but you might wait a bit, for I may want you. I s'pose you won't mind waiting, and a ghost of a smile flitted across her husband's face.

"No; I'll wait till morning if you like," replied Will.

It was not possible for a young man in his situation to feel much depression in the presence of other's troubles. In this there was no heartlessness. Mr. Warren returns from the burial of the beloved dead to the joys of living. From the state of his own heart it may be said

that if he had been told that to obtain sweet Elsie Warren for his wife, he would have to remove Baker Mountain, he would have set about tearing it down that very evening, and would have worked cheerfully, too.

Granpa Kirk had nodded off to sleep and dreams of '25 again, and after the door had closed upon Mr. and Mrs. Warren, Will looked down at the fair head nestled upon his shoulder. How wonderful it seemed that she should be there! Of course he had known her ever since she was a baby; they had been schoolmates in the sense that when he was cutting his initials in the back row, she was dozing over her letters in the front; he had more than once had her in his arms, carrying her across mountain streams or over pools in the road; but, good gracious! that was ages ago, fourteen or fifteen years at least. She was not the same then, not merely that she was a child—she didn't seem to be the same being.

As she had grown to maturity the distance between them seemed not to be measured by years, but by something more intangible, more impressive. Then she had been away for more than a year attending the high school at Denby, the nearest large town. When she returned home Will had found the girl greater than he had known. In fact, it was not till then that he recognized it, and in the crude, honest analysis to which he subjected his emotions and the situation, he made the discovery that Elsie was now a woman.

Higher education had not made her affected—far from it. She may have acquired an indefinable repose rather lacking in Granite girls; she was certainly at ease in company, and there was no doubt, so he thought, that her learning was vast; but beneath it all lay sweet womanliness that must have thrown through any veneer of artificiality, had she taken it on. There was no evidence of veneer, even to Will Spencer's self-conscious eyes, but nevertheless Elsie was to him the rarest of acorns, perfect, the quintessence of purity, unattainable. Her very image stirred an atmosphere of worship within him, and yet—here she was, a woman, sentient, human like himself, and old wonderful yet again, seeking comfort in his arms.

The impossible had happened and the greatest prize in life that man can strive for, and Elsie strained upon his neck, "what does all this mean?"

"I guess it means that we're pretty much in love," he answered, blushing. "Don't be silly," said Elsie; but she showed no disposition to act any more wisely than her lover acted. In fact, I think she was really convinced that she was behaving with the utmost propriety.

"You know what I mean," she added a moment later.

"Yes," he responded, gravely; "but how can I tell you ought to know more about it than I do."

"Well, I don't know the first thing. It all confuses and frightens me. Just think! We were so happy, and that black man had almost to be under our feet."

"I'm happy now, dear. The black man was but the fright of a moment."

"And then this came. I can't understand it."

"No more can I; but, of course, you don't connect the black man with this man who came in?"

"I don't know. I didn't see the man who was here."

"It wasn't either of the men we saw up the mountain."

"What did he look like?"

"The man who came here? Why, he was tall, slender, very dark, and very handsome, like the man up the mountain."

"Yes, but just as other men are sunburned. I'm brown, myself, you know."

Elsie shuddered slightly.

"Don't say you are like either of them," she said. "Go on."

"Well, this man had a full beard, streaked with gray. I don't believe I noticed anything else."

"Had you never seen him before?"

"Never."

Elsie was silent a moment before she said:

"I thought of a manner of strange things. It seemed as if this man had come to take me away from you. Just as soon as I saw that there was something of some kind, I wanted to run to you, but mother held me. There was danger for me, Will, or she would not have held me so."

It was sweet to Will, this confession that Elsie turned instinctively to him for protection. How he vowed with mighty emphasis that she should never find him lacking in time of need, and how he wished that this unknown trouble should so shape itself that he could be called upon to battle with it! Some such assurances passed his lips while Granpa Kirk slept on, and when the clicking of the latch foretold the return of Mr. and Mrs. Warren from the kitchen, Elsie suddenly discovered that she was sitting down, and so was Will, and yet only two chairs and she hastily withdrew to the window, leaving Will to rise awkwardly by himself.

"Will," began Mr. Warren, while his wife set a lamp on the table, "we don't need to say, I s'pose, that his matter ought not to be spoken of in the village."

"No, sir," replied Will, "I won't say a word."

As for what I did, you must remember that I have been a soldier, lad, and the old habit of dealing shortly with an enemy came upon me when—when I thought there was danger. I shouldn't have touched that," glanced at the rifle, "if I had thought quick enough."

"It was natural enough, Nick," said the younger man. "I only thought of the danger myself, though, of course, I had no idea of what it was."

"It would sound very funny, wouldn't it, if I should say there wasn't any danger at all? Well, that's about it. Martha and I were startled, that's all. You see, I didn't see this gentleman for many years," interposed Mrs. Warren, quietly, as her husband hesitated. "We didn't know what it might mean, but we both see that we should have received him differently. Both of you, please, do not ask us about it till we ourselves know more. We'd like to have you help us. Will, like to have you help us."

"Yes, sir," exclaimed Will, eagerly. "I want to see that man again," said Mr. Warren. "Like as not he'll come back, so I don't want to leave the house just yet. We'll have to see that man among the neighbors, or see if anything has been seen of him."

"Sure," responded Will, reaching for his hat. "I'll find him easily enough."

"Tell him we beg that he will come back," said Mrs. Warren.

"Isn't there any danger?" asked Elsie, anxiously.

"None whatever," replied her father emphatically. "Do you suppose an old soldier would send another man on his errand if there was any danger in it?"

This answer was conclusive even to Elsie, and Will set forth without delay.

It was, indeed, an easy matter to get trace of the stranger. All Granite had seen him talking along the road late that afternoon, and pretty much all the male population of Granite, not counting those with whom we are acquainted, said so when Will inquired at Sam Springer's general store.

Better than that, Sam himself was next to certain that he knew where the man had gone, though not a soul knew who he was or had even seen him since. Will deduced their questions with honest success, for he knew little more than they did, and learned from Sam Springer that the stranger had tried to hire from him a deserted cabin part way up Baker Mountain for a few days' shelter.

"He said he was used to the forests and didn't tackle kindly to houses," said Sam, "and when I asked him if he was a city chap come up for fishing or shooting, he said he wasn't; and so I told him to take the cabin and welcome. I don't want no money from a man like ourselves, and he went right away up Baker Mountain for a few days' shelter."

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