

A LIFE FOR A LIFE.

BY MISS MULLOCK. CHAPTER VII. HIS STORY.

Hospital work, rather heavy this week, with other things of lesser moment, has stopped this my correspondence with an "airy nothing," however, the blank will not be missed—naught concerning Max Urquhart would be missed by anybody.

Fardon, fond and faithful Nobody, for whose benefit I write, and for whose good opinion I was anxious. I believe two or three people would miss me, my advice and conversation, in the hospital.

By-the-by, Thomas Hardman, to my extreme satisfaction, seems really reforming. His wife told me he had not taken a drop too much since he came out of the hospital. She says "this illness was the saving of him, since, if he had been flogged, or discharged for drunkenness, he would have been a drunkard all his days." So far, so good.

I was writing about being missed, literally, by Nobody. And, truly, this seems fair enough; for there anybody I should miss? Have I missed, or been relieved by the lost company of my young friend who had so long haunted my hut, but who, now, at an amazing expense in carriage-hire, horse-feed, and shoe-leather, manages to spend every available minute at a much more lively abode, as Rockmount probably is, for he seems to find a charm in the very walls which enclose his jewel.

For my part, I prefer the casket to the gem. Rockmount must be a pleasant house to live in. I thought, as the first night, when by Sir William's earnest desire, I took upon myself the part of "father" to that wilful lad, and paid the preliminary visit to the lady's father, Mr. Johnston.

Johnson it is, properly, as I heard from that impetuous young daughter of his, when meeting her on the moor, the idea suddenly struck me to gain from her some knowledge that might guide my conduct in the very anxious position wherein I was placed. Johnson, only Johnson. Poor child! had she known the load she lifted of me by those few words, which accident only vouchsafed for Treherne's matter had for once driven out of my mind all other thoughts, or doubts, or fears, which may now henceforward be completely set aside.

I must, of course, take no notice of her frank communication, but continue to call them "Johnston." Families which "come from nothing and nobody"—the foolish lassie! as if we did not all come alike from Father Adam—are very tenacious on these points; which may have their value—to families. Unto me, for instance, of what benefit is it to bear an ancient name, bequeathed by ancestors whom I owe nothing besides, and which I shall leave to no descendants, I, who have no abiding place on this whole earth, and to whom, as I read in the review extract yesterday, "My home is any room where I can draw a bolt across the door."

Speaking of home, I revert to my first glimpses of the interior of Rockmount, that rainy night, when, weary with my day and night journey, and struck dumb by the emptiness of Treherne Court, and the restlessness of its poor gouty old master, able to enjoy so little out of all his splendours, I suddenly entered this snug little "home."

The first tea-table, the neatly-dressed daughters, looking quite different from the dickered-out beauties, or hospital slatterns, which are the two places in which I most often see the sex. Certainly, to one who has been much abroad, there is a great charm in the sweet looks of a thorough English woman by her own fireside.

This picture fixed itself on my mind, distinct as a photograph; for truly it was printed in light. The warm, bright parlor, with a delicate-tinted paper, a flowered carpet, and amber curtains which I noticed because in the act of drawing them to screen the draught from her father's arm-chair. The old man—he must be seventy, nearly—standing on the heart-rug, met me coldly enough, which was not surprising, prior to our conversation.

Of these ladies I have before named. The first, the future Mrs. Treherne, is by far the handsomest; but I still prefer for the countenance of my earliest acquaintance, Miss Theodora—a pretty name. Neither she nor her sisters gave me more than a formal bow; shaking hands is evidently not their custom with strangers. I should have thought of that, two days before.

Mr. Johnston took me into his study. It is an antique room; with dogs for the fire-place, and a settle on either side of the hearth; many books or papers about, and a large, neatly-arranged library on shelves.

I noticed these things because, as I say, my long absence from England caused them to attract me more than they might have done a person accustomed to English domestic life. That old man, gliding peacefully down hill in the arms of his three daughters, was a sight pleasant enough. There must be many compensations in old age—in such an old age as this.

Mr. Johnston—I am learning to write the name without hesitation—is not a man of many words. His character appears to me of that type which I have generally found associated with those specially delicate and regular features; shrinking from anything painful or distasteful, putting it aside, forgetting it, if possible, but anyhow, trying to get rid of it. Thus, when I had delivered Sir William Treherne's most cordial and gentlemanly letter, and explained his thorough consent to the marriage, the lady's father took it much more indifferently than I had expected.

He said "that he had never interfered with his daughters' choice in such matters, nor should he now; he had no objection to see them settled; they would have no protection when he was gone." And here he paused.

I answered it was a very natural parental desire, and I trusted Captain Treherne would prove a good brother to the Misses Johnston, as well as a good son to himself.

"Yes—yes," he said, hastily, and then asked me a few questions as to Treherne's prospects, temper, and moral character, which I was glad to be able to answer as I did. "Harum scorum," as I call him, a young man of fortune can hold a more staid life, and so I told Mr. Johnston. He seemed satisfied, and ended our interview by saying "that he should be happy to see the young gentleman to-morrow."

So I departed, declining his invitation to re-enter the drawing-room, for it seemed that, at the present crisis in their family history, there was an indecency in any strangers breaking in upon that happy circle. Otherwise, I would have liked well another peep at the pretty home-picture, which, in walking to the camp through a pelting rain, fitted before my eyes again and again.

Treherne was waiting in my hut. He looked up, favored with anxiety. "Where the devil have you been gone to, Doctor? Nobody has known anything about you for the last two days. And I wanted you to write to the governor, and—"

"I have seen the governor," as you will persist in calling the best of fathers, "and the Rockmount father too. Go in and win, my boy, the coat is all clear. Mind you ask me to the wedding."

Truly, there is a certain satisfaction in having had a hand in making young folks happy. The sight does not happen often enough to afford my smiling even to the demonstrations of that poor lad on this memorable evening.

Since then, I have left him to his own devices, and followed mine, which have little to do with making young folks happy. I trust the whole Rockmount family are happy, and fulfilling their destiny, in which, little as I thought it when I stood watching the solitary girl in the sofa corner, Max Urquhart has been deemed of more an instrument than he ever dreamed of, or that they are likely ever to be aware of.

The matter was beginning to fade out of my memory, as one of the many episodes which are always occurring to create passing interests in a doctor's life, when I received an invitation to dine at Rockmount.

I dislike accepting casual invitations. Primarily, on principle—the bread and salt doctrine of the East, which considers hospitality neither as a business nor an amusement, but as a sacred rite, entailing permanent responsibility to both host and guest. When I sit by a man's fireside, or (Treherne's log?) "put my feet under his mahogany," I feel bound not merely to give him back the same quantity and quality of meat and drink, but to regard myself as henceforth his friend and guest, under obligations closer and more binding than one would submit to from the world in general. It is, therefore incumbent on me to be very choice in such bonds with whom I put myself under such bonds and obligations.

My secondary reasons are so purely personal, that they will not bear enlarging upon. Most people of solitary life and conscious of many peculiarities, take small pleasure in general society; otherwise to go out into the world to rub up one's intellect, enlarge one's social sympathies, enjoy the mingling of wit, learning, beauty, and even folly, would be a pleasant thing—like sitting and watching a pyrotechnic display, knowing all the while that when it was ended one could come back to see one's own fireside. In the personal warmth of one's own fireside. If not—better stay away; for one is inclined to turn cynical, and to see nothing but the smell of the gunpowder; the wrecks of the Catherine-wheels, and the empty shells of the Roman candles.

The Rockmount invitation was rather friendly than formal, and it came from an old man. The feeble handwriting, the all but illegible signature, weighed with me in spite of myself. I had no definite reason to refuse his politeness, which is not likely to extend beyond an occasional dinner-party, of the sort given hereabouts periodically, to middle-aged respectable neighbors—in which category may be supposed to come Max Urquhart, M.D. I accepted the courtesy and invitation.

Yet let me confess to thee, compassionate unknown, the ridiculous heat-treatment with which I walked up this friendly door, from which I should have certainly walked away again, but for my dislike to break any engagement, however trivial, or even a promise made only to myself. Let me own the morbid dread with which I contemplated four mortal hours to be spent in the society of a dozen friendly people made doubly socially by the influence of a good dinner, and the best of wines.

But the alarm was needless, as a little common sense, had I exercised it, would soon have proved.

In the drawing-room, lit with the warm dulceness of firelight, sat three men. The eldest received me politely; the latter apologetically.

"We are only ourselves, you see; we understand you dislike dinner-parties, so we invited nobody."

"We never do give dinner-parties more than once or twice a year."

It was the second daughter who made that last remark. I thought whether it was for my sake or her own, and that young lady had taken the trouble to give me a false impression, and the other to remove it. And how very indifferent I was to both attempts! Surely, women hold trifles of more moment than we men can afford to do.

Curious enough to me was the thoroughly feminine atmosphere of the dimly lit drawing-room, set out, not with costly splendours, like Treherne Court, but pretty home-made ornaments and, above all, with plenty of flowers. My olfactory organs are acute; certain rooms always possess to me certain associated scents through which, at whatever distance of time I revisit them, the pristine impression survives; sometimes pleasant, sometimes horribly painful. That pretty parlor will, I fancy, always carry to me the scent of orange-flowers. It came through the door of a little green-house, from a tree there, the finest specimen I had yet seen in England, and I rose to examine it. There followed me the second daughter, Miss Theodora, whom I have been making of my evening at Rockmount. I ought not to omit this young girl, or young woman, for she appears both by turns; indeed, she has the most variable exterior of any person I ever

met. I recall her successively: the first time of meeting, quite child-like in her looks and ways; the second, sedate and womanly, save in her little obstinacy about the blue-bells; the third, dignified, indignant, pertinaciously reserved; but this night I saw her in an entirely new character, neither childish nor woman-like, but altogether gentle and girlish—a thorough English girl!

Her dress, of some soft, dark color, which fell in folds, and did not rustle or spread; her hair, which was twisted at the back, without any bows or laces, such as I see ladies wear, and brought down, smooth and soft, over the forehead, formed a sufficient contrast to her sisters to make me notice her; besides, it was a style more according to my own taste. I hate to see a woman all frowns and filligees, or with her hair torn up by the roots like a Chinese Mandarin.

Hair, curved over the brow like a Saxon arch, under the doorway of which two modest, intelligent eyes stand sentinel, vouching for the worth of what is within—gray these and the rest of the features may be anything you choose, if not absolutely ugly. The only peculiarity about these was a squareness of chin, and closeness of mouth, indicating more strength than sweetness of disposition, until the young lady smiled.

Writing this, I am smiling myself to reflect how little people would give me credit for so much observation; but a liking to study character is, perhaps, of all others, the hobby most useful to a medical man.

I have left my object of remark all this while, standing by her orange-tree, and contemplating a large caterpillar slowly crawling over one of its leaves. I recommended her to get Treherne to smoke in her conservatory, which would remove the insects from the flowers.

"They are not mine, I rarely pay them the least attention."

I thought she was fond of flowers. "Yes, but wild flowers, not tame, like these of Penelope's. I only patronize those she throws away as being not 'good.' Can't you imagine mother Nature making a 'bad' flower?"

I said, I concluded Miss Johnston was a scientific horticulturist.

"Indeed she is. I never knew a girl so learnt about flowers, well-educated, practical, green-house flowers, as our Penelope."

"Our" Penelope. There must be a pleasure in these family possessive pronouns. I had the honor of taking into dinner this lady, who is very sprightly, and nothing she throws away as being not 'good.' Can't you imagine mother Nature making a 'bad' flower?"

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