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BY CELIA'S ARBOUR.

A NOVEL.

BY WALTER BESANT AND JAMES RICE, AUTHORS OF "READY-MONEY MORTIROY,"
"THE GOLDEN BUTTERFLY," &c.

CHAPTER XXII.

A NIGHT UP THE HARBOUR.

(Continued.)

"Tell me now," she whispered, "tell me the good tidings of the bells."

I thought of Leonard's last secret which he told me when he left me on the platform of the station. "Tell Cis," he said, "that would spoil all." Yet I did tell Cis. I told her that night.

"The bells said, Cis, that there only wanted a fortnight to Leonard's return. He will come back brave and strong."

"And he will make all right," she cried, eagerly, clasping my hand in hers. "Go on, Laddy dear."

"He will make all right. The German shall be sent about his business, and—"

"And we shall go on just as we used to, Laddy."

"N—not quite, Cis. When Leonard went away, he told me a great secret. I was not to tell anybody. And I should not tell you now, only that I think it will do good to both of us, that you should know it. Tell me, my sister, have you not forgotten Leonard?"

"Forgotten Leonard? Laddy, how could I?"

"You think of him still. You remember how brave and true he was; how he loved—us both—"

"I remember all, Laddy."

"When he left me, Cis—he told me—Hush! let me whisper—low—low—in your ear—that his greatest hope was to come back in five years' time, a gentleman—to find you free—and to ask you, Cis—to marry him."

She did not answer, but as she lay in the boat, her hands holding mine, her face bent down, I felt a tear fall on my finger; I did not think it was a tear of sorrow.

"You are not offended, Cis dear," I whispered, "I have not done wrong, in telling you."

"Let it be a secret between you and me, Laddy," she said, presently. "Do not let us ever speak of it again."

"Cis, you told me once that you would hide nothing from me. Tell me—if Leonard asked you—"

She threw her arms around my neck, and hid her face upon my shoulder. "Laddy," she whispered, "there is no day, in all these five years, that I have not prayed, night and morning, for Leonard."

Then we were silent.

The hours sped too swiftly, marked by the bells of the ships in commission. About two in the morning the tide began to turn, and the day began to break. First, the dull black surface of flats became wet and glittered in the light. Then the water slowly crept up and covered all; it took time to reach us, because we were on a bank. And all the time we watched, the grey in the east grew tinged with all colours; and the wild fowl rose out of their sleeping-places by the shore, and flew screaming heavenwards in long lines or arrow-headed angles. And presently the sun arose, splendid.

"Laddy," whispered Celia, for the Captain still slept, "this is more glorious than the evening."

At six bells, which is three in the morning, we floated. I noiselessly stepped over the sleeping form of the Captain and took the sculls, dipping them in the water as softly as I could. He did not wake till half an hour later, when our bows struck the beach, and at the noise the Captain started up. It was nearly four o'clock; no boats were in the harbour; the stillness contrasted strangely with the light of the summer morning.

"Laddy," grumbled the Captain, "you've kept double watch. You call that sailor-like?"—Celia, my dear, you have not caught cold?"

When we reached home, the Captain insisted on our going to bed.

"We have passed a night I shall never forget, Laddy," said Celia at her door.

"A sacred night, Cis."

She stooped down, my tall and gracious lady, and kissed my forehead.

"What should I do without you, Laddy? To have some one in the world to whom you can tell everything and not be ashamed, nor be afraid. To-night has brought us very close together."

I think it had. After it we were more as we had been when children. My Celia, the maiden of sweet reserve, came back to me a child again, and told me all.

No need now to speak again of Leonard. It remained only to look forward and hope and long for the weary days to pass away.

CHAPTER XXIII.

MRS. PONTIFEX ASKS WHAT IT MEANS.

That was a night consecrated to every kind of sweet memories. It was quite in the nature of things that it should be followed by one of a more worldly kind. In fact, the next day, to put the matter in plain English, we had a great row, a family row.

It began with Aunt Jane. She came to tea accompanied by her husband; and she came with the evident intention of speaking her mind. This made us uneasy from the beginning, and although Mrs. Tyrrell attempted to pour oil on the troubled waters by producing her very best tea service, an honour which Mrs. Pontifex was certain to appreciate, she failed. Even tea services in pink and gold, with the rich silver teapot accompanied by a lavish expenditure in seed-cake, and Sally Lunn's, and muffins, failed to bring a smile to that severe visage. Mrs. Pontifex was dressed for the occasion, in a pyramidal cap trimmed with lace, beneath which her horizontal curls showed like the modest violet peeping between April leaves of grass. She wore her most rustling black silk robes, and the most glittering of her stud-clasps in the black velvet ribbon which girt her brow. She sat bolt upright in her chair; and such was her remarkable strength of character, testimony to which has already been given by her husband, that she struck the key-note to the banquet, and made it joyless.

Who could be festive when Mrs. Pontifex icily refused sugar with her tea, and proceeded to deny that luxury to her husband?

"No, John Pontifex," she said. "It is high time to set less store upon creature comforts. No sugar, Celia, in my husband's tea."

Mr. Pontifex meekly acquiesced. He was already in the most profound depths of depression when he arrived, and a cup of tea without sugar was only another addition to his burden of melancholy. I conjectured that he had passed the afternoon in the receipt of spiritual nagging. In this art his wife was a proficient, and although nagging of all kinds must be intolerable, I think the religious kind must be the most intolerable. The unfortunate man made no effort to recover his cheerfulness, and sat silent, as upright as his wife, the cup of unsweetened tea in his hand, staring straight before him. Once, his wife looking the other way, he caught my eye and shook his head solemnly.

Under these circumstances we all ran before the gale close reefed.

It was a bad sign that Mrs. Pontifex did not talk. If she had been critically snappish, if she had told her niece that her cap was unbecoming, or Celia that her frock was unmaidenly, or me that an account would be required of me for my idle time—a very common way she had of making things pleasant—one would not have minded. But she did not speak at all, and that terrified us. Now and then she opened her lips, which moved silently, and then closed with a snap, as if she had just framed and fired off a thunderbolt of speech. Her husband remarked one of these movements, and immediately replacing his cup upon the table, softly rose and effaced himself behind the window curtains, where he sat with only a pair of trembling knees visible. Mr. Tyrrell pretended to be at his ease, but was not. His wife was not, and did not pretend to be. As soon as we reasonably could we rang the bell for the tea-things to be removed, and began some music. This was part of the regular programme, though no one suspected Mrs. Pontifex or her husband of any love for harmony. And while we were playing came Herr Räumer, at sight of whom Mrs. Pontifex drew herself up more stiffly than before, and coughed ominously.

He looked very fresh and young, this elderly foreigner. He was dressed neatly in a buttoned frock (no one in our circle wore evening dress for a gathering under the rank of dinner party or dance), and had a rose in a button hole. A little bit of scarlet ribbon in his breast showed that he was the possessor of some foreign Order. In his greeting of Celia he showed a Romeo-like elasticity and youthfulness, and he planted himself on the hearthrug with an assured air, as if the place and all that was in it belonged to him.

In front of him, upon a small couch, sat Mrs. Pontifex, her lips moving rapidly, and her brow darker than ever. Either Herr Räumer was going to interrupt the battle, or he was himself the cause of it. Celia rose from the piano, and sat beside her great-aunt. Mr. Tyrrell was in an easy chair on one side of the fireplace, and his wife on the other, fanning herself, though it was by no means a warm night. As I said before, Mr. Pontifex was in hiding. I sat on the music stool and looked on. Had there been any way of escape I should have taken advantage of that way. But there was none.

The awful silence was broken by Aunt Jane.

"Be ye not yoked unequally with unbelievers," she said. Then her lips closed with a snap.

No one answered for a while. The curtain alone, behind which was her husband, showed signs of agitation.

"John Pontifex," said his wife. "Assist me."

He obeyed immediately, and took up a position behind her, standing opposite to the German. He looked very, very meek.

John Pontifex and I were talking this afternoon, Clara Tyrrell and George Tyrrell, and we naturally discussed the strange—the very strange—rumours that are afloat with regard to Celia

Her name, George Tyrrell, has been coupled with that of this—this foreign gentleman here." Mr. Pontifex shook his head as if more in sorrow than in anger.

"It is—alas!—the fact that such rumours are prevalent."

"You hear, George Tyrrell!" she went on.

"I hear," he replied. "The rumours are not without foundation."

Poor Celia!

"I announced to John Pontifex, this afternoon, my intention of speaking my mind on this matter, and speaking it in the actual presence of Herr Räumer himself, if necessary."

"I am infinitely obliged to you, madam," said that gentleman, with a bow. "I wish I was already in a position to ask for your congratulations."

"Flap-doodle and fudge," said Aunt Jane. I do not defend this expression, but it was her own, reserved for use on those occasions which required the greatest strength of the English language.

All trembled except the German. Celia, by the way, except that she looked pale, took no apparent interest in the conversation.

"Congratulations are useless ornaments of conversation," he said. "That, I presume, is what you mean, Mrs. Pontifex?"

She snorted.

"Pray, Sir,—will you tell us first, to what religious persuasion you belong?"

The unexpected question staggered him for a moment. I thought he was lost. But he recovered.

"My excellent parents," he said, "who are now no longer living, brought me up in the strictest school—Mrs. Pontifex is, I believe, a member of the Anglican Church—of German Calvinism."

"And what church do you attend in this town?"

"Unfortunately there is no church of my views in this town. The English churches, however, approach my distinctive doctrines near enough for me." He said this meekly, as if conscious of a superiority which he would not press.

"No blessing shall come from me on any marriage where both members are not communicants of the English establishment."

She said that with an air of determination, as if the matter was settled.

Herr Räumer laughed softly.

"If that is your only objection, my dear Madam, it is easily removed. *Mademoiselle vaut bien une messe.*"

"I do not understand French."

"I mean that love, coupled with a short conversation with your learned husband over a few doctrinal difficulties, would permit me to present myself to you in the novel character of a communicant."

He overacted the speech, and no one could fail to see the sneer behind it.

"John Pontifex."

"My dear, I am—in point of fact—behind you."

"You hear what this gentleman says. You can hold a discussion with him in my presence. If, in my opinion, he proves himself worthy of our Communion I shall withdraw that part of the objection."

"It is true," said John Pontifex, "that I am not at the present moment—alas!—deeply versed in the points which—ahem—separate us from German Calvinism. But no doubt Herr Räumer will enlighten me."

"Or," said the suitor, rolling his head, "let me refer myself to a fairer theologian. Celia herself shall convert me."

Celia made no sign.

"This is mockery," Mrs. Pontifex ejaculated. "But it is what I expected, and indeed said to John Pontifex as we drove here. That a foreigner should value Christian privileges is hardly to be looked for."

"That is, I believe," said Herr Räumer, with the faintest possible suspicion of contempt in his smooth tones, "the prevalent belief among English people. And yet no Englishman has yet publicly doubted that even a foreigner has a soul to be saved."

"Or lost," said Mrs. Pontifex sternly.

Her husband, who was still standing meekly beside her, his long arms dangling at either side, looking exactly like a tall schoolboy afraid of his schoolmaster, groaned audibly.

"Or lost," echoed Herr Räumer.

"And pray, sir, if I may ask, what are your means of existence? No doubt Mr. Tyrrell knows all about your family and the way in which you get your living, but we have not yet been informed, and we also have an interest in Celia Tyrrell."

"I have private property," he replied, looking at Mr. Tyrrell, "on the nature of which I have satisfied the young lady's father."

"Perfectly, perfectly," said Mr. Tyrrell.

"How do we know but what you have a wife somewhere else—in Germany, or wherever you come from?"

"Madam's intentions are no doubt praiseworthy, though her questions are not perhaps quite conventional. However, there is no question I would not answer to secure the friendship of Celia's great-aunt. I have no wife in Germany. Consider, Mrs. Pontifex, I have resided in this town for some twelve years. Would my wife, if I had one, be contented to languish in solitude and neglect? Would you, Mrs. Pontifex, allow your husband to live as a bachelor—perhaps a wild and gay bachelor—at a distance from yourself?"

The Rev. Mr. Pontifex smiled and sighed.

Did he allow his imagination even for a moment to dwell on the possibility of a wild and rollicking life away from his wife?

"My wild oats," he said, very slowly, with emphasis on each word, and shaking his head. "My—wild—oats—are long since—ahem!—if I may be allowed the figure of speech—sown."

"John Pontifex," said his wife, "we are not interested in your early sins."

"I was about to remark, my dear, that they have produced—alas!—their usual crop of repentance—that is all. The wages of youthful levity—"

"We will allow, Herr Räumer," Mrs. Pontifex interrupted her husband, "that you are what you represent yourself to be. You have means, you are a bachelor, and you are a Christian. Well—my questions are not, as you say, conventional, but Celia is my grand-niece, and will have my money when my husband and I are called away. It is no small thing you are seeking."

"I am aware of it," he replied. "I am glad for your sake that your money is not a small thing."

This he should not have said, because it was impolitic.

"I have one question more to ask you," said Mrs. Pontifex, drawing herself more upright than ever. "You are, I understand, some sixty years of age."

"I am sixty-two," he replied blandly. "It is my great misfortune to have been born forty-four years before Miss Celia Tyrrell."

"Then, in the name of goodness," she cried, "what on earth do you want with a young wife? You are only three years younger than I. You might just as well ask me to marry you."

"My dear," cried John Pontifex, in natural alarm.

"I cannot, madam," Herr Räumer replied,—"however much one might desire such a consummation.—I cannot ask you in the very presence of your husband."

Everybody laughed, including Celia, and Aunt Jane drew herself up proudly.

"You disgraceful man," she said. "How dare you say such things to me? If John Pontifex were not in Holy Orders I should expect him to—"

"I fear I should do so, my dear," John Pontifex interposed. "I am sure, in fact, that, without the—ahem!—the deterrent influence of my cloth, I should do so."

"I am unfortunate this evening," the German went on, still bland and smiling. "I am advanced in years. All the more reason why a young lady—of Christian principles—should assist me in passing those years pleasantly."

"Pleasantly?" she echoed. "Is all you think of—to pass the last years of your life pleasantly? Would I allow my husband to pass his time in mere pleasantness?"

"You would not, my dear," said John Pontifex, firmly.

"Mere pleasantness: a Fool's Paradise.—George and Clara Tyrrell, I am your aunt, and entitled, I believe, to be heard."

"Surely," said Mr. Tyrrell. "Pray say what you think."

Celia laid her hand on her aunt's arm.

"Dear Aunt Jane," she said, "Herr Räumer has done me the very great honour of asking me to be his wife. He has also very kindly consented not to press for an answer. I feel—I am sure he feels himself—the many difficulties in the way. And if those difficulties prove insuperable, I trust to his generosity—his generosity as a gentleman—not to press me any longer."

"To be sure," said Aunt Jane, "people can always be put off. We can tell them that Herr Räumer felt for you the affection of a grandfather."

The German winced for a moment.

"Thank you, dear Mrs. Pontifex," he said.

"You would smooth all the difficulties for us, I am sure."

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Let us have no more explanations. I have to thank Celia—Miss Tyrrell—for putting the position of things clearly. If she cannot see her way to accepting my addresses—there is an end—and things—looking at Mr. Tyrrell—must take their own course. If she can, she will have in me a devoted husband who will be proud to belong to the families of Tyrrell and Pontifex."

Aunt Jane was not, however, to be mollified. She kissed Celia on the forehead. "You are a sensible girl, my dear, and you will know how to refuse a man old enough to be your grandfather,"—then she gathered her skirts together.

"George and Clara Tyrrell, when you have got over this folly, we shall be glad to see you at our house again. If it comes to anything further I shall alter my will. John Pontifex, I am ready."

She swept out of the room, followed by her husband.

Then Mrs. Tyrrell sat up and began to express her indignation.

"When young people desire to marry," she said to her future son-in-law, who was not much more than twenty years older than herself, "they speak to each other, and then to their parents. That is regular, I believe?"

"Quite regular," said the Herr.

"When they have asked each other, and then spoken to the parents," she went on, exhausting the subject, "what else remains to be said?"

"Clearly, nothing."

"There certainly is a difference in age," said the good lady, "but if Celia does not mind that—"

"Quite so," he interrupted.

"Religion, too, the same," she went on.