

AN ORIGINAL GIRL.

By Christine Feber. CHAPTER XVI.

Dr. Burney was obliged to go up to the city, but as Miss Burrum was in no immediate danger, and the nurse had very full and explicit directions, the doctor felt he could safely remain away for several hours, and even the entire night, if he found it necessary. Rachel also had her instructions—instructions which the physician felt he need not repeat, so attentively did she listen and so promptly and obediently she had she carried out every direction. But Dr. Burney had hardly gone when both Sarah and Mrs. McElvain were startled by a ring at the upper bell.

"May I never be burned nor drowned alive?" was Sarah's response. "I can predict that you never will be either burned or drowned alive, if you will take to the making of good salads; and if you'll bring me down to the kitchen I'll put you in possession of a few valuable facts relative to the making of salads, that will set you up, Sarah, as a benefactor of mankind, as a helper of humanity, as a benefit to the whole human race."

"May I never be burned nor drowned alive?" she said again, and then she braced herself against the wall in order to relieve the weight of the heavy dishes in her arms, and to take in more fully Tousseil's big words.

"You had better give him his way, Sarah," said Rachel, still laughing, "it will amuse Mr. Tousseil, and perhaps amuse you and Mrs. McElvain."

"Amuse! oh, Miss Rachel, how can you use so light a word in connection with such a serious subject? I am entirely in earnest, as everybody ought to be who has anything to do with the making of salads. And you, Tousseil looked so dejected that Rachel at once checked her mirth and said, as gravely as she could:

"You see, Mr. Tousseil, we do not feel about this subject as you do; we do not understand it as you do."

"That's just it, Miss Rachel," he said, his face brightening again, "and that's just what I want to do for you; I want to show Sarah, here, this wonderful art; and then I'll know, Miss Rachel, that the salads you get to eat will be just right."

"Very well, then, Mr. Tousseil; Sarah will show you to the kitchen," and Rachel made a sign to the woman to lead the way, which that odd woman did with a violent inward protest at being obliged to have that "loon" in any part of her special domain.

Her feelings were entirely shared by Mrs. McElvain, and when the young gentleman insisted on explaining to her in his most learned way why such ingredients were used, she could only stare at him and say in reply:

"Law me, young gentleman! who'd have took all them big words to make a salad. Now, Sarah and me—we makes a salad with no words at all."

"That's where your fault lies, my good woman; words are what move the world, and you can't have a salad if you don't have words to begin with."

CHAPTER XVII. On the morning of the day that Dr. Burney was called to the city, Herrick received a very bulky letter from London. Of late his communications thence had not been so frequent, nor so lengthy, owing, as Mrs. Hubrey wrote, to the indisposition of Mr. Gasket, which kept him from making his usual visits to her, and consequently left her without news, but this letter, if its contents were true, more than made up for any recent dearth of information. Five times Herrick read it, and each time every word in it brought to him renewed hope and courage; that is, if he could entirely believe the astonishing statements. He felt he had no reason to doubt them, for they were all set down with convincing earnestness and conciseness; indeed, so determined did the writer seem to be in performing well just the task she had in hand, that she had actually forborne her usual vehemence, and devoted herself alone to the work of setting down exactly what she had heard from Mr. Gasket's lips.

"Extraordinary!" Herrick thought, that Gasket should pour his tale into the ears of such a woman; "but then," he said to himself with a sneer, "most men are fools."

"Did not impose any secrecy upon me— he told me his tale, he said, to relieve his mind, because he feared ever since the first time I have told him all I knew of Miss Burrum's Charge that she was the same Rachel Minturn his brother had told him about; he was still more convinced of it when his cousin, fresh from his tutorship of Miss Burrum's Charge, came to live with him; and when I put before him the published accounts pertaining to the storm and to Rachel herself, he was quite convinced, and he became so unhappy and so easy that it made him ill."

He did not confide in his cousin, because, as he told me, his cousin is so impulsive and blunt that his visits are once set out on a tour of discovery, and, strange to say, that is just what the elder Mr. Gasket does not want; he has a morbid dread of anything like publicity, and he feared that, as Miss Burrum and her Charge had already become such public property, worse his name to be attached to theirs would be the talk of two continents. And yet, the inconsistency of the man's nature; he raved to me for an hour of his remorse for not having kept his pledge to his brother, and of the expectation he would have to make should Mr. Burrum's Charge be the Rachel Minturn of his brother's commission.

"That she is the Rachel Minturn, I have no doubt; nor can you doubt it when you have read all my letter. I have transcribed for you as nearly as I could remember it, the document which proves her to be such, and which document Mr. Gasket only suffered me to read, but I read it slowly, and more than once, so as to impress it on my memory."

"Now, I send you these facts to make what use of them you choose. As you know, I owe Miss Burrum a big grudge—I may say, a deep and bitter grudge—for her treatment of me, and any disgrace you can put upon her, or her Charge, will be gratefully hailed by me."

"Yours sincerely, KITTIE HUBREY."

Herrick smiled—the most expansive smile he was accustomed to bestow upon all his acquaintances; he felt that that letter in his possession, he could afford to be jocular with himself. In that letter he had a weapon before which Miss Burrum must cower, or else show that she cared not a shred for respectability. She must now be priced at a distance which he, Herrick, felt he could easily manage with Mr. Gasket, and by some addressiveness even with Mrs. Hubrey, he was willing to sell her property; but he must get her decision speedily, or there was no knowing what change of mind Mr. Gasket might suffer. All the morning he pondered over the matter, wondering how many days, according to the latest official report, which had Miss Burrum almost out of danger, it would be, before he could make sure of any communication reaching her. Suddenly, it flashed upon him to see Rachel and give her a message for Miss Burrum. It could be so touched that Miss Burrum alone would understand it; and Miss Burrum would listen to Rachel; at least he, Herrick, would make the message so singular and impressive that Miss Burrum would have to listen to her, and he could call at another time for the answer. Acting upon that thought, he determined to see Rachel that very day, and before the afternoon had waned he was at Miss Burrum's door, giving Sarah another start when he rang the bell. This time, however, Sarah was positive it was the doctor, and leaving Tousseil still in the midst of his wondrous explanations to Mrs. McElvain, she promptly seized with horrified consternation when she saw Herrick. She could not do as she had done to Tousseil, try to bar him out; there was too much determination in Herrick's manner, besides a something that caused her to be more in awe of him than ever.

"Ah, Sarah!"—it was the same bland, oily voice he had used on former occasions,—"my visit at this time naturally surprises you, also my courage in actually coming into the house; but I have none of the silly fears of most people about this disease—in fact I have no fears at all."

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"By this time he was quite within the hall, and seeing Sarah's irresolution about closing the door, he shut it fast himself; then he went on:

"My object in coming to-day is to see Miss Burrum's Charge; I have most important business with her. Perhaps you had better tell Dr. Burney that I am here, and for what purpose, so that if necessary he will be witness to the open manner in which I have come upon my errand."

"Dr. Burney isn't in; he went to the city this morning and he hasn't got back."

"Ah! that is perhaps unfortunate for me; but in some one, of course, he takes his place, as I understand he has been indefatigable in his care of Miss Burrum. Is there another physician in the house?"

"No; there ain't anybody but the nurse, and she went to her room a half hour ago to get a rest. Miss Rachel takes her place—she's with Miss Burrum now."

A sudden thought broke upon Herrick's mind—a thought that made him seem to smile all over.

"Sarah," he said, "it has just suggested itself to my mind to go up to Miss Burrum's apartments. I should like to see for myself how far recovered she is; but it is with difficulty she managed to hear what I intend to say to Miss Rachel, for my communication concerns her as nearly as it does Miss Rachel."

"Mr. Herrick," burst from Sarah, "no one is allowed into Miss Burrum's room only the doctor and the nurse and Miss Rachel—even Mrs. McElvain and I don't go in there."

"Probably not, Sarah; and that is a very commendable precaution where you and Mrs. McElvain are concerned, but not with me. I am going to Miss Burrum's apartment, and I wish you to lead the way. You may knock at the door and say my name, so that I shall not thrust myself upon them without due announcement."

His smile had entirely disappeared, and in its place had come a look that frightened Sarah to her soul, and that warned her to obey. She turned without a word and preceded him up the stairs, her very knees shaking in such a manner that it was with difficulty she mounted the steps. Herrick followed her closely, standing directly at her elbow when she knocked at the door of Miss Burrum's bedroom. She happened not to know, or else she had forgotten, that entrance to and exit from that apartment were made, not through that door, but through the door of Miss Burrum's private sitting-room, which was connected with her bed-chamber and opened also on the hall, and from that room Rachel emerged in answer to Sarah's knock.

"Mr. Herrick wants to see you," chattered Sarah, hardly able to speak from the trembling that had extended from her knees to her whole person; "he wants to see Miss Burrum, too."

By this time Rachel had come quite into the hall, and she looked with startled wonder from Sarah to Herrick, recovering herself in time to say, as Herrick approached her and as he was opening his mouth to speak:

"Mr. Herrick cannot see Miss Burrum. Even Sarah, in her own unaccountable fright, was impelled to wonder at the determined, courageous manner of Miss Rachel. She stood so erect that her height seemed greater than it was, and she looked into Herrick's face with a steadiness that appeared to disconcert him, for his own eyes dropped for an instant; then he said blandly:

"Certainly not, Miss Minturn, if you do not think it proper that I should; but having a communication for her which it is most important that she should learn at the earliest possible moment, and hearing that she was out of danger—in fact, in the convalescent state—I thought I might venture to try to see her. Since you decide otherwise, I shall leave a message with you for her; I cannot give you the communication, that is alone for Miss Burrum; but I can and shall give you some statements which you will be good enough to tell her as soon as possible. And now, Miss Minturn, as the nature of my message to you is exceedingly private

and confidential, could you give me a few moments in some room where we shall be undisturbed?"

He looked round at Sarah, who was gazing at them both, her hand still a picture of ludicrous fright.

As Rachel did not want to disturb the nurse, and as she herself could not go beyond Miss Burrum's call, she felt there was no other resource than to ask Mr. Herrick into Miss Burrum's private sitting-room. As she had left Miss Burrum apparently asleep, and as the door between the rooms was almost entirely closed, she felt that a brief whispered conversation would hardly disturb the patient.

And Herrick, following the initiative set by Rachel, who whispered very softly when they were both well within the apartment, began also in a very soft whisper:

"Tell Miss Burrum at the very earliest opportunity you can find, Miss Minturn, that I am in possession of a document which sets forth clearly and fully everything that Miss Burrum now fancies is entirely hidden. Tell her that it lies with herself whether these things shall remain hidden, or be made so public that her name will be in every public print on this side of the Atlantic Ocean, and perhaps even on the other side. Tell her that she knows the price demanded for silence—the same price that has been asked from her before, and that she refuses to give, not thinking, of course, how unexpected events would bring into my hands the absolute proofs of everything."

Rachel's lip curled with involuntary scorn, and she shrank from the speaker; unconsciously to himself he was betraying even to her, little as she knew of the evil characters in the world, his own despicable traits; he, seeing her action, was goaded by it into raising his voice, and into saying much more than he had intended to say:

"Possibly you will be more intensely concerned, Miss Minturn, when I tell you the document is about you? She shrank still farther from him, and he, goaded into further admissions, took a step forward, saying as he did so, in a loud voice that his words reached Sarah where she still lingered in the hall—the words were not distinct enough for her to make out all of them, but the high pitch of the voice was enough in itself to add to her fright, and she was undecided whether to go boldly into the room and remain with Miss Rachel for the purpose of protecting her, or to go below stairs and summon help."

"Do you know who you are, Miss Minturn?" Herrick said hotly, and as if he had lost all of his former self-control. "I know—I have it here," slapping his breast-pocket, "and I can tell you the name of the man who has it."

"I do not want you to tell me, Mr. Herrick," said Rachel, forgetful of his former low tones, and in her excitement speaking almost as loudly as he did; "it is sufficient for me to know that I am Miss Burrum's Charge—what ever else I may be, I leave to Miss Burrum—entirely to Miss Burrum."

Herrick was beside himself with rage: "You will leave it to her to tell you, then, that you are—"

"Best! how dare you intrude here?" Both Herrick and Rachel turned as if they were shot; it was Miss Burrum at the door of the room, she had managed to wrap the coverlet of the bed over her night-dress, but beneath were shown her bare, red, swollen feet, while above the coverlet was a distorted visage that Herrick never forgot—putrid spots were all over the face and she was swollen beyond all proportion; her jet black hair, hanging in a disheveled mass down to her eyebrows, added to the horror of her appearance, and Rachel felt for the first few moments as if she herself were stricken dumb. Even the voice with which Miss Burrum had spoken was enough to produce a fright; it was louder than Herrick's had been, but so hoarse, and at the same time so savage, that, penetrating to the still listening Sarah, it sent her in hot haste below to summon help for Miss Rachel.

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