

His Ministering Angel.

CHAPTER II.

"You have been with us a year to-morrow, Margaret," said the comely matron of an East-End union, as she folded some fine white linen work, fresh from the fair hands of a sweet-looking little woman who sat busily working by the window, bending her pretty head close to the pane to catch the fading light.

It was a cozy homely scene. A fine baby boy crawled after a black kitten. The kettle sang on the polished hob, and all the warm tints of the dark crimson curtains and soft carpet were lighted up by fire-glow.

Margaret's hands lay in her lap upon the snowy folds of her work, as she said: "A year ago, and you are not tired of me yet, Mrs. Winter. Oh, how good you have been to poor baby and me."

"Nonsense, child; why, we could not do without you. Some one must do the needle-work; why not you as well as another? It was never done so well before. Besides, we are all so fond of the boy."

She picked up the boy as she spoke, and tossed him above her sleek white head, smothering his fresh firm flesh with kisses, as she talked pretty baby nonsense to him in a voice that bespoke the sincerity of her affection.

"Put the work away, Margaret, and make the tea. Ted will be home in a minute or two, and 'tis such a dismal night out, we must make it cheery at home as compensation."

That night Margaret, in the same cozy room, stood alone with a big broad-shouldered pleasant-looking man under the glow of the gas-light, saying in a tone of quiet, yet earnest entreaty:

"You know my whole story now, Ted. Will you do all this for me?"

"Oh, darling, I would die for you." There was unutterable despair and patience in the low-spoken words; for he had dared to put his fate to the touch, and had lost all, but the courage to endure.

Months passed and Richard Dean lived with his father. There was some talk of the old doctor taking the young surgeon into partnership. Father and son seemed to have come to a better understanding; at any rate, there was peace in the gloomy home, a peace and quietude that seemed to be part and parcel of Richard Dean's punishment—for to his troubled restless heart quietude seemed the most maddening thing on earth.

Intercourse between Lawyer Patmore's and Dr. Dean's households had been interrupted years before by Richard refusing to marry the lawyer's heiress, a handsome and whole-hearted girl, who had allowed all the love of her life to go out to the man who had refused her.

Love is a lesson hard to unlearn, and while she despised herself for the clinging fondness of her faithful heart, she loved on and suffered.

The old doctor guessed at her heart-yearning, by the warmth of her welcome to the young widower, and chuckled; for in it he found hope to indulge his old long-cherished scheme of uniting the fortunes of the two houses, and seeing his son settled in his birthplace, content in his father's plans for him.

But Dick was wretched, for he could not forget that dark hour when despair had mastered him, and caused him to sacrifice his heart's dearest to the madness of his bitter feeling of defeat.

He grew old, haggard, and seemed to live within himself, in dismal dreams of what might have been.

Dr. Dean saw his son's sickness and sorrow over it as he had never thought to sorrow over any striking out of himself.

He dreaded death or madness for the only offspring of his unhappy marriage.

Out of the father's dread came a resolve to ask Ethel Patmore to save her old sweetheart.

One day he sought her among her flowers. She was a noble-looking woman, with great earnest grey eyes, soft dark hair, and the grace of a Grecian goddess.

She received the old man kindly; all old people loved Ethel, she was so gracious to them; her sweet womanly compassion towards all who were drawing near to the end of life, made her patient and forbearing with their failings.

Truly there was but little to like in Dr. Dean, but he was the father of the man she loved with all the strength and purity of her loyal brave heart; so her voice was gentle and her greeting kind, so kind that Dr. Dean felt it would be sweet to have her to chase the dull echo of a dead past out of his dismal home.

"Ethel, you will forgive an old man if he presumes too much on your indulgence for his son's sake, his only son, whom he believes will die or go mad if he is not carried out of himself by some new interest in life, some call upon him made by another's need. Have I been mistaken all these years, my girl, in supposing you hold this scapegrace son of mine in greater regard than is good for your peace?"

Ethel's face flushed, her hands trembled among the flowers she was binding into a nosegay. Her heart seemed to beat in her throat and stifle her; for some seconds she was silent; then with quick resolve and courage, she uplifted the light of her honest eyes to the old man's face and said steadily:

"It is true, I love your son, have loved him all my life, I think; I love him too well to become his wife, knowing he had only such affection as one gives to a sister, to repay the whole devotion of my life."

"But, Ethel, does it not strike you that you could win him were you his wife? Marriage gives a woman such a hold over a man; if she has force and fire in her nature that can kindle responsive warmth in him she may by surrendering herself wholly to his pleasure, winning him to new hopes, and holding his heart at first through his children, at last through herself alone."

Ethel's face lighted up. All the suppressed passion of long years leapt to new strength life at his words.

Oh, to make happiness for him, when he found life a joy's past!

To teach his heart to answer hers; to be the mother of his children.

Then seeing her humble rapture, the whole yielding sweetness of her face, the old man continued:

"If there is power in loving, you must win him. Once his wife, dear, all will be well with both. It is his only chance. Can't you let him see you love him beyond all pride, prejudice, or self? Surrender all your sweetness for his acceptance; he were more than mortal to refuse."

Ethel bowed her face amid the dewy blossoms, and said softly like one who fears, yet yearns to dare Fate:

"It shall not be my fault if your plan for Dick's recovery fails."

"I have persuaded Ethel to make tea for us, Dick, and give us some music afterwards. Mr. Patmore is coming to take a turn at cribbage with me. I declare we shall soon be getting quite gay."

Richard Dean looked up wearily from his book, then rose to greet the regal woman with the softened glorified face. He marvelled to see her so stirred out of the grand calm he had looked upon as the barrier between her and the attractiveness of womanhood. A strange thrill passed over his heart as he met the clear questioning gaze of her love-lit eyes. He had been less than a man if he had not responded to so kind a look of interest. So he smiled a wan, soulless smile, that showed Ethel only too clearly the great alteration in him.

"You look ill, Dick. I fancy you study too much. Father says that last book of yours has made quite a stir in your profession."

"A clever book, my dear, a clever book. I did not think the lad had it in him to compose so great a work in so short a time," said Dr. Dean, rubbing his bony yellow hands together.

Richard sighed. Even fame, that seemed very sure just now, had no interest for him because of the haunting past, and his never ceasing regret for that young life lost in the dark waters.

Tea passed pleasantly. It seemed sweet and homely to see a woman at the head of the table; still more pleasant to hear the old songs sung in her rich soft voice, that told of a life of brave self-containment.

The two old men soon left the young folks and went to their favourite pastime—cribbage. Ethel sang on, flooding the quaint old room with rare sweet melody.

Richard sat back behind the shadow of the curtain listening. Somehow her songs recalled his boyhood, and the only pleasurable companionship he had known after his dear indulgent mother had gone to rest. Presently the music ceased, and Ethel stood beside him. As she laid a firm soft hand on his arm he looked up. The subtle scent of some faint perfume came from her garment, the vivid rose at her breast rose and fell softly; the calmness of her stately beauty was broken up by a strange glow and gladness, like the joy of a freed spirit.

Her star-like eyes looked into his, as she said in a shaken voice:

"Dick, dear old boy, you are unhappy, won't you share your trouble with me, as you used when we were two lonely loving little youngsters. You used to trust me then, and love me, too, a little. Cannot you do so now?"

Her voice had a pleading ring in it as she recalled their childhood. His hand closed over hers as he said kindly:

"Thank you for your sympathy, dear, but my trouble is an unshareable load that I must carry all the days of my life; a burden that no one can lift from me, something that can never cease till life is over."

"Can nothing comfort you, Dick?"

"Nothing, dear, unless the dead could live again, and life be lived afresh."

"But those who love you suffer in your sorrow, so your grief is selfish."

"Ah, who is not selfish, dear? As to those who love me, why I am the most lonely, desolate creature under the sun; there is not one person upon the face of the wide world that loves me."

Ethel bent over his chair, her head drooped over his upturned face. A crimson tide swept up to the ripples of her hair, as she bent all the power of her perfect lips to his, and kissed him quickly, saying in a tone of passionate appeal:

"I love you, Dick; can my love avail you nothing?"

"Hush, you are moved by your compassion for me; to forget my unworthiness. Your love is such as kings would go uncrowned to win. Hush, sweet, I am unworthy—Heaven knows how unworthy of your pure affection."

Ethel drew his head upon her breast with a beautiful abandonment, and her low passionate speech, combined with the power of her rare beauty, stole away his senses, like strong wine.

Ethel left the gloomy old house Richard Dean's betrothed wife. And as she knelt beside her bed in the pure moonlight, that seemed to be characteristic of her pure pale loveliness, she prayed that the future might be blessed with peace and contentment; love seemed beyond the reach of even her prayers; for she felt further from happiness to-night than she had ever done.

Yet such was the power of her great love, that she counted the cost of Dick's well-being light, even if it was bought by her life.

So the months passed on, and Richard Dean found pleasure in the calm presence of his future wife; for she was too sensible to weary him with any display of affection more than friendship would warrant, still more to vex him with an exacting love.

She was not quite unhappy, though her heart often ached with a sense of the bitter void in her life that his love alone could fill. Sometimes she mistrusted the future so much that she was inclined to regret her promise, not for her own sake, but because she feared for Dick.

He tried hard to shake off his despondency, tried to respond to her gentle unassuming affection; but the shadow of his lost wife came between them.

And as the day drew nearer for him to put another in her place all his old passionate love for his girl-wife flamed up afresh and filled him with a wild unrest, a longing to be free, to love the dead alone.

His father came out of his seclusion and became quite liberal in his arrangements for his son's future. The old place was brightened up, and everything that a wife could wish would be Ethel's except that summit of her hopes, a husband's love.

Dick could not think how different his life might have been if Peggy had been so received, and out of the bitterness of his regret grew a jealousy for the dead who had suffered so much for his sake.

He brooded more and more over her death; grew more gaunt and sombre daily, till his father, fearing all his plans would fail, hurried on the marriage, hoping that change and travel would rouse his son.

The day before the one fixed for the wedding, Dick tramped about all day trying to still the strange pain at his heart. In the evening he sought Ethel in her garden, white and travel-stained.

She looked up with a little cry of amazement. He held both her hands in his, while his eyes held hers with an earnest look of enquiry.

"Will this marriage really be for your happiness, Ethel? Can you content yourself with such poor affection as is left in me, after spending all the passion of my heart upon another? Are you not afraid of your future with me?"

"No, I am not; I am only afraid you will regret your union with me. I love you, Dick, loyally and with all the love of my life, yet I will give you freedom even now, if it would be better for you, dear."

She lifted her face to him in the moonlight, with a rapt look of undying love, and so vanquished him afresh, that he drew her to his heart and kissed her gravely, saying:

"May God so fail me in my direst need if I prove unworthy of your trust, darling."

He had never spoken so kindly to her before, never so bestowed the treasure of his lips in such quick caressing.

Ethel's heart leapt with such a new-born hope; surely he would learn to love her some day in the dark mistrusted future, where she was to live but to win his love.

A woman paused on the dusty roadway in the shadows while they parted, saw the clinging kindness of their last caress, and cursed them both behind her breath, in hot aching resentment. She waited until Ethel's a fit gray garment had melted into the night shadows; then she hurried after Dick, catching him up by the riverside. The night was light as day; the water spread itself away between the dewy meadows of silver. The small slender figure stepped before Dick, lifted a wild white face, and a shadowy hand, and motioned him to pause.

"Good God! Peggy, is it you?" burst from Dick's white lips in a tone of mortal fear and agony. He thought the spirit of his last love looked through the eyes of this familiar shape, that he believed lived alone in his imagination. "I am gone mad!"

He moved shudderingly and would have walked on, but still he felt that she stirred not. His hand touched hers; she was a living breathing woman. He fell at her feet and wept out a passionate plea that she would speak and break the awful spell of suspense.

"Do not kneel to me, Richard Dean. Kneel and supplicate high Heaven to pardon your fearful sin. You are right; it is I, your wife, who lived even after the horror of feeling the husband sent her and her unborn child to their death. I said 'love me,' I did not mean that. You did not love me, or it would not have been in your heart to murder me, so that you might be free to marry as your father wished, and become a wealthy man here, while I lay in the cold water, a woman unwept, a wife forgotten. Oh, Dick! what did I do to deserve this at your hands—whom I loved before Heaven, you whom I thought loved me? Oh, my heart is broken, I wish I were indeed dead! I only came to you to prevent your wronging another, perhaps as loving and trustful as I have been. Do not touch me; your hands hold death, and we are near the water, near as we were that awful night when you tried to send me to my death."

Dick had knelt at her feet, a great relief and joy growing strong in his heart now he realized she lived, lived, but with a heart dead to him, because of her fear of him.

In swift passionate speech he told her that he had meant to die with her. Told her of his pain and remorseful sorrow afterwards, and how his father had rescued him; begged her for the love they had borne each other, to forgive his momentary madness and return to make his happiness.

His voice trembled with joy at seeing her. The gratitude of being spared a soul-killing sin gave rapture to his speech. But the wife had seen another woman in his arms, a woman that she knew was to become his wife on the morrow, if she did not interfere. So she shut him out of her heart, closed credulity against him, and spurned him as only a jealous outraged suffering woman can spurn a man she loves.

He rose to his feet roused by her bitter taunting speech, rose into his old command, though now a painful pleading seemed to blend unfully with its force, and told her the law would compel her to return to him.

"Not if the law knew of your murderous attempt upon my life."

His head drooped again. He pleaded with her patiently, lovingly, all the yearning of his soul finding voice, and knocking upon the portals of her heart.

"How dare you ask me to believe you, when I saw you with these poor eyes that should be blind for weeping, saw you hold another to your heart, where I had lain; caress another, with the lips that swore fidelity to me before God's altar? Even had I died, surely it were over soon to fill my place. Let me go, or I shall go mad, and seek the death to which you once condemned me. For, oh, I have loved you with all the power of my being! Let me go! Oh, do not touch me! Can't you see I fear you?"

"Have pity, wife, for God's sake, and hear me. You are the only woman I ever loved; my heart is loyal to you, though these accursed lips have given you cause to mistrust me. Oh, you are not going; you shall not leave me! Wife, wife, have mercy! You shall not go!"

He took her into his arms. She, overwrought, gave a great cry, and someone came rushing out of the shadow, and said in a stern tone of command:

"Release that lady, you have forfeited all right over her. She shall return home with me, where she has found shelter during all these months that she has been absent from you."

"Oh, Heaven! what new horror is this? Tell me, Margaret, what is this man to you?"

"The truest, noblest friend that ever woman had; he saved the life you cast away as worthless."

How long Margaret's bitter speech would have gone on none knew, but it was cut short by her husband falling headlong at her feet insensible. Then all the wife and woman in her awoke. She wept over him, pouring out all the pent-up love and longing of her stricken heart. And the man she called friend stood silently beside her with a weary pain at his heart, to see how dear this man was to her.

That night Dick was taken to his father's house raving like a madman. Some one had found him by the river, who, the doctor did not quite understand; it was enough to know his only son lay near to death upon the eve of his bridal, and to feel that he had helped to bring him to that bitter pass.

Ethel met all this misery with brave fortitude worthy of her noble womanhood; laid aside her wedding finery with set white looks; for when she shut them out of sight,

she felt she had looked her last on all hopes of a future with the only man she could ever love. With the devotion of unselfish love, she nursed Dick through the fever that followed; heard all the cruel ravings about his past and Peggy; save his mad exultant look when he whispered:

"The dead lives," and Ethel knew her heart's best blossom would never live again; felt she must lay it up as a treasure in heaven, and let it guide her to happiness there.

Ethel's face, pitiful and passionless as an angel's, was the first that Dick's hollow eyes looked upon when reason returned to him. He shrank from her ministering touch, and hid his face from her; all the fearful knowledge of that awful night, when his wife had returned to haunt him by the moonlit river, came back to him again with cruel clearness. He begged Ethel to listen to his confession.

She held his hand in her cool strong palms, while she listened with dilated eyes to his story. It was worse than she imagined it could be; yet a great compassion swallowed up all condemning thought. How her idol had suffered! She heard him out silently, then her head sank on the pillow beside him, that he might not see her pain, and she said softly:

"And loving your wife as you say you do, can you mistrust her so cruelly? Perfect love casteth out fear; and surely she were spotless, or she would not have power to hold your heart. I will seek her out, and learn whether or not she is innocent; something tells me she must be. And some day when you are both very, very happy together, dear, you must get her to forgive my part in this miserable misunderstanding. Now you must try to sleep, dear, you have talked too much; yet if your heart is eased it will do no harm."

She pressed his hand to her cheek, and left him to wonder over her perfect womanhood, his ministering angel. Three days later, Dick lay in the gloaming alone with only his weary thoughts for company. He was very weak, so weak that tears came into his eyes, as his trouble came, renewed to him by loneliness. Presently he fell asleep, and dreamt a dream of joy that lent a fleeting radiance to his gaunt haggard looks as he slept. He was awakened by feeling something soft and warm laid in his arms. His wondering eyes unclosed to look upon a lovely dimpled darling of a baby, who lay asleep nestled on his heart.

Ethel was standing over him with a smile in her eyes.

"Whose child is this?" he asked, gravely.

"Do you not know, Dick? Does not your heart cry out, and claim its own? It is your own little child, dear, come to draw you to the mother."

She lifted a little fist like a doubled-up daisy, and laid it against Dick's lips. He kissed it passionately and said:

"But what of Peggy?"

"All is well with her, as I supposed. You know, Dick, I hold your happiness too dear to give it into another's keeping if I were not quite, quite sure that—that other were worthy."

Ethel slipped into the shadow, and someone's arm stole about his neck and a dear voice begged between sobs of joy for him to take his wife to his heart again, and he did with great gratitude to God, for his merciful deliverance from the misery of the past year.

And Ethel, what of her? The noble heart secured happiness and prosperity to the man she loved, and lived on in the reflected light, content to be called "His Ministering Angel."

A Bird's-Eye View of the Earth.

If we imagine an observer contemplating the earth for a convenient distance in space and scrutinizing its features as it rolls before him, we may suppose him to be struck with the fact that eleven-sixteenths of its surface are covered with water, and that the land is so unequally distributed that from one point of view he would see a hemisphere almost exclusively oceanic, while nearly the whole of the dry land is gathered in the opposite hemisphere. He might observe that the great oceanic area of the Pacific and Antarctic Oceans is dotted with islands—like a shallow pool with stones rising above its surface as if its general depth were small in comparison with its area. He might also notice that a mass or belt of land surrounds each pole and that the northern ring sends off to the southward three vast tongues of land and of mountain chains, terminating respectively in South America, South Africa and Australia, toward which feebler and insular processes are given off by the Antarctic continental mass. This, as some geographers have observed, gives a rudely three-ribbed aspect of the earth, though two or three ribs are crowded together and form the European mass or double continent of America. He might also observe that the northern girdle is cut across, so that the Atlantic opens by a wide space into the Arctic Sea, while the Pacific is contracted toward the north, but confluent with the Antarctic Ocean. The Atlantic is also relatively deeper and less embayed with islands than the Pacific, which has the higher ridge near its shores, constituting what some visitors to the Pacific coast of America have not inaptly called the "back of the world," while the wider slopes face the narrower ocean, into which, for this reason, the greater part of the drainage of the land is poured.

The Dance of the Crane.

The last time I went hunting I witnessed a scene which I had often heard of but never seen. It was the dance of the sand-bill crane. My companion was a well-known hunter, and though he is a physician, finds much time—helves in Northern Manitoba—to study the ways and haunts of wild fowl. "Now," said he, "I will show you within an hour the famous dance of the sand-bill crane." We swept over the prairie in a way which I shall never forget; the two ponies seeming to enjoy the out-door sport. At last we came in sight of a crowd whose noise had saluted our ears for an hour. They were on a slope, which came down near to a lake. All at once two stepped out from the crowd, faced each other and began clapping their wings, jumping up and down as Indians do for a war dance. All this time they were uttering cries which boys would understand very soon to be cries of merriment. Their companions greeted them with shouts of laughter, and the one jumping highest and longest was acknowledged champion of the day. When these two became exhausted two others went through the same performance. We watched them for about an hour.

The First Watch.

At first the watch was about the size of a dessert plate. It had weights, and was used as a "pocket clock." The earliest known use of the modern name occurs in the record of 1552, which mentions that Edward VI. had "one larum or watch of iron, the case being likewise of iron gilt, with two plummetts of lead." The first watch may readily be supposed to be of rude execution. The first great improvement—the substitution of springs for weights—was in 1560. The earliest springs were not coiled, but only straight pieces of steel. Early watches had only one hand; they could not be expected to keep the time nearer than fifteen or twenty minutes in twelve hours. The dials were of silver and brass; the cases had no crystals, but opened at the back and front, and were four or five inches in diameter. A plain watch cost more than \$1,500, and, after one was ordered, it took a year to make it.

A Little Off on Chickens.

"I'll take a leg of the chicken," said Miss Lollepp, just from boarding-school. "You have one, and I have the other," said her admirer. "Oh! yes. I forgot a chicken has but two legs. It's a duck that has four. Excuse me."

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