

The Doctor's Wife

BY MISS M. E. BRADDON



CHAPTER XXVI.—(Continued.)

He told Gwendoline how, from being half amused, half gratified, by Mrs. Gilbert's unobscured admiration of him, so naively revealed in every look and tone, he had, little by little, grown to find the sole happiness of his life in those romantic meetings; and then he spoke of his struggles with himself, real earnest struggles—his fight—his return—his presumptuous belief that Isabel would freely consent to any step he might propose—his anger and disappointment after the final interview, which proved to him how little he had known the depths of that girlish sentimental heart.

"She was only a child playing with fire, Gwendoline," he said, "and had not the smallest desire to walk through the furnace. That was my mistake. She was a child, and I mistook her for a woman—a woman who saw the grief before her, and was prepared to take the desperate leap. She was only a child, pleased with my pretty speeches and town-made clothes and perfumed handkerchiefs—a school girl; and I set my life upon the chance of being happy with her. Will you try and think of her as she really is, Gwendoline—not as these Graybridge people see her—and be kind to her when I am dead and gone? I should like to think she was sure of one wise and good woman for a friend. I have been very cruel to her, very unjust, very selfish. I was never in the same mind about her for an hour together—sometimes thinking tenderly of her, sometimes upbraiding and hating her as a trickster and a coquette. But I can understand her and believe in her much better now. The sky is higher, Gwendoline."

If Roland had told his cousin this story a week before, when his life seemed all before him, she might have received his confidence in a very different spirit to that in which she now accepted it; but he was dying, and she had loved him and had been loved by him. It was by her own act that she had lost that love. She, of all others, had least right to resent his attachment to another woman. She remembered that day, nearly ten years ago, on which she had quarreled with him, stung by his reproaches, insolent in the pride of her young beauty and the knowledge that she might marry a man so high above Roland Lansdell in rank and position.

She saw herself as she had been in all the early splendor of her beauty, and wondered if she really was the same creature as that proud, worldly girl, who thought the supremest triumph in life was to become the wife of a marquis.

"I will be her friend, Roland," she said, presently. "I know she is very childish, and I will be patient with her and befriend her, poor, lonely girl."

Gwendoline was thinking, as she said this, of that interview in the surgeon's parlor at Graybridge—that interview in which Isabel had not scrupled to confess her folly.

"I ought to have been more patient," Gwendoline thought; "but I think I was angry with her because she dared to love Roland. I was jealous of his love for her, and I could not be kind or tolerant."

CHAPTER XXVII.

Isabel found Gwendoline tender and compassionate to her. She only raised her eyes to the lady's face with a grateful look. She forgot all about the interview at Graybridge; what could she remember in that room, except that he was ill?—in danger, people had told her; but she could not believe that. The experience of her husband's death had impressed her with an idea that dangerous illness must be accompanied by terrible prostration, delirium, raging fever, dull stupor. She saw Roland in one of his best intervals, reasonable, cheerful, self-possessed, and she could not believe that he was going to die. She looked at him and saw that his face was bloodless, and that his head was bound by linen bandages, which concealed his forehead. A fall from his horse! She remembered how she had seen him once ride upon the dusty road, unconscious of her presence, grand and self-absorbed; but among all her musings she had never imagined any danger coming to him in that shape. She had fancied him always as a dauntless rider, taming the wildest steed with one light pressure of his hand upon the curb.

She never guessed the truth. The medical men who attended Roland Lansdell knew that the injuries from which he was dying had never been caused by any fall from a horse; and they said as much to Charles Raymond, who was unutterably distressed by the intelligence. But neither he nor the doctors could obtain any admission from the patient, though Mr. Raymond most earnestly implored him to reveal the truth.

"Cure me if you can," he said; "nothing that I can tell you will give you help in doing that. If it is my fancy to keep the cause of my death a secret, it is the whim of a dying man, and it ought to be respected. No living creature upon this earth, except one man, will ever know how I came by these injuries. But I do hope that you gentlemen will be discreet enough to spare my friends any useless pain. The gossips are at work already, I dare say, speculating as to what became of the horse that threw me. For pity's sake, do your best to stop their talk."

Isabel had lost all count of time since

the sudden shock of her husband's death; and she did not even know the day of the week. She only knew that the world seemed to have come to an end, and that it was very hard to be left alone in a deserted universe.

For a long time she knelt by her bedside praying that Roland Lansdell might live—only that he might live. She would be contented and happy, she thought, to know that all the world lay between her and him, if she could only know that he lived. Childishly, ignorantly, as a child might supplicate for the life of its mother, did this girl pray for the recovery of Roland Lansdell. No thought of her new freedom, no fore-shadowing of what might happen if he could be restored to health, disturbed the simple fervor of her prayers. She only wanted him to live.

The sun shined westward, and still shone upon that kneeling figure. Perhaps Isabel had a vague notion that the length of her prayers might prevail. They were only rambling, unorthodox petitions. It is not every mourner who can cry, "Thy will be done." Pitiful and weak and foolish are some of the lamentations that rise to the Eternal Throne.

At last, when Isabel had been some hours alone and undisturbed in that silent chamber, an eager yearning to see Roland Lansdell once more came upon her—to see him, or, at least, to hear tidings of him; to hear that a happy change had come about; that he was sleeping peacefully, wrapped in a placid slumber that gave promise of recovery. Ah, what unspeakable delight it would be to hear something like this! And sick men had been spared before today.

Her heart thrilled with a sudden rapture of hope. She went to the door and opened it, and then stood upon the threshold listening. All was silent as it had been before. No sound of footsteps, no murmur of voice, penetrated the massive old walls. There was no passing servant in the corridor whom she could question as to Mr. Lansdell's state. She waited with faint hope that Gwendoline or the sick-nurse might come out of Roland's room; but she waited in vain.

The western sunlight shining redly through a lantern in the roof of the corridor illumined the somber faces of the dead Lansdells with a factitious glow of life and color; pensive faces, darkly earnest faces—all with some look of the man who was lying in the chamber yonder. The stillness of that long corridor seemed to freeze Isabel's childish hopes. The flapping of a linen blind outside the lantern sounded like the fluttering of a sail at sea; but inside the house there was not so much as a breath or a whisper.

The stillness and the suspense grew unendurable. The doctor's wife moved away from the door, and crept nearer and nearer the dark oaken door at the end of the corridor—the ponderous barrier that shut her from Roland Lansdell. She dared not knock at that door, lest the sound should disturb him. Some one must surely come out into the corridor before long—Mr. Raymond, or Gwendoline, or the nurse—some one who could give her hope and comfort.

She went toward the door, and suddenly saw that the door of the next room was ajar. From this room came the low murmur of voices; and Isabel remembered all at once that she had seen an apartment opening out of that in which Roland Lansdell lay—a large, pleasant looking chamber, with a high oaken mantelpiece, above which she had seen the glimmer of guns and pistols, and a picture of a horse.

She went into this room. It was empty, and the murmur of voices came from the adjoining chamber. The door between the two rooms was open, and she heard something more than voices. There was the sound of low convulsive sobbing; very subdued, but very terrible to hear. She could not see the sick man, for there was a little group about his bed, and a group of bending figures, that made a screen between her and him. She saw Gwendoline on her knees at the bottom of the bed, with her face buried in the silken coverlet, and her arms thrown up above her head; but in the next moment Charles Raymond saw her, and came to her.

"Come away, my dear," he said, softly; "come with me, Isabel."

"Oh, let me see him! let me speak to him! Only once more—only once!"

"Never again, Isabel—never upon this earth any more! You must think of him as something infinitely better and brighter than you ever know him here. I never saw such a smile upon a human face as I saw just now on his."

She had no need of any plainer words to tell her he was dead. She felt the ground reel suddenly beneath her feet, and saw the gradual rising of a misty darkness that shut out the world and closed about her like the silent waters through which a drowning man goes down to death.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

Gwendoline kept her promise; she repented her jealous anger against her cousin; she bitterly lamented those occasions upon which she had felt a miserable joy in the probing of his wounds. She looked back, now that the blindness of passion had passed away with the passing of the dead, and saw herself as she had really been—uncharitable, intolerant, possessed by a jealous anger.

She never knew that she had sent the man she loved to his death. Indefinable, to the last, Roland Lansdell had kept the secret of that fatal meeting in Nessborough Hollow. The man who had caused his death was Isabel's father. If Roland had been vindictively disposed toward his enemy, he would, for her sake, have freely let him go; but so very venal an impulse had stirred the fading pulse of his heart. He was scarcely angry with Jack the Scriber; but rather recognized in what had occurred the working of a strange fatality, or the execution of a divine judgment.

In spite of that murderous threat uttered by him in the dock, in spite of the savage violence of his attack upon Roland Lansdell, Sleaford had not perhaps meant to kill his enemy. Mr. Sleaford had only intended to "punish" the "languid swell" who had borne witness against him; to spoil his beauty for the time being; and, in short, to give him just cause for remembering that little amateur detective business by which he had beguiled the elegant idleness of his life. Isabel's father had scarcely intended to do more than this. But when you beat a man about the head with a loaded bludgeon, it is not so very easy to draw the line of demarcation between an assault and a murder, and Mr. Sleaford did go a little too far, as he learned a few days afterward, when he read of the sudden death of Roland Lansdell, of Mordred Priory.

The strong man, reading this announcement in the parlor of a low public house, felt an icy sensation of fear that he had never experienced before amid all the little difficulties attendant upon the forging of negotiable autographs. This was something more than he had bargained for. This business was murder, or something so nearly resembling that last and worst of crimes, that a stupid jury might fail to recognize the distinction. Jack the Scriber, armed with Roland Lansdell's fifty pounds, had already organized a plan of operations which was likely to result in a very comfortable little income, without involving anything so disagreeable to the feelings of a gentleman as the illegal use of other people's names. It was to the science of money lending that Mr. Sleaford had turned his attention; and during the enforced retirement of the last few years he had woven for himself a very neat little system, by which a great deal of interest, in the shape of inquiry fees and preliminary postage stamps, could be extorted out of simple-minded borrowers without any expenditure in the way of principal on the part of the lender. With a view to the worthy carrying out of this little scheme, Mr. Sleaford had made an appointment with one of his old associates, who appeared to him a likely person to act as clerk or underling, and to double that character with the more dignified role of solicitor to the Mutual Co-operative Friend-need and Friend-Indeed Society; but after reading that dismal paragraph respecting Mr. Lansdell Jack the Scriber's ideas underwent a considerable change. It might be that this big pleasant metropolis, in which there is always such a nice little crop of dupes and simpletons ready to fall prone beneath the sickle of the judicious husbandman, would become, in vulgar parlance, a little too hot to hold Mr. Sleaford.

He obtained all information about speedily departing steam vessels, and early the following morning, burdened only with a carpet-bag and the smallest of portmanteaus, Jack the Scriber left, unattended and unobserved, bound for Africa. And here he drops out of my story, as the avenging goddess might disappear from a classic stage when her work was done. For him, too, a Nemesis waits, lurking darkly in some hidden turning of the sinuous way along which a scoundrel walks.

"If any calm, a calm despair." Such a calm fell at last upon Isabel Gilbert, but it was slow to come. For a long time it seemed to her as if a dreadful darkness obscured all the world, a darkness in which she groped blindly for a grave, where she might lie down and die. Was not he dead? What was there left in all the universe now that he was gone?

Happily for the sufferer, there is attendant upon all mental anguish a kind of numbness, a stupefaction of the senses, which in some manner deadens the sharpness of the torture. For a long time Isabel could not think of what had happened within the last few troubled weeks. She could only sit helpless and tearless in the little parlor at Graybridge.

It was on the second day after the surgeon's funeral, the day following that infinitely more stately ceremonial at Mordred church that Mr. Raymond came to see Isabel. He had been with her several times during the last few days; but he had found all attempts at consolation utterly in vain, and he, who had so carefully studied human nature, knew that it was wisest and kindest to let her alone.

But on this occasion he came on a business errand; and he was accompanied by a grave-looking person, whom he introduced to Isabel as the late Mr. Lansdell's solicitor.

"I have come to bring you strange news, Mrs. Gilbert," he said, "news that cannot fail to be very startling to you."

She looked up at Charles Raymond with a sad smile, whose meaning he was not slow to interpret. It said so very plainly: "Do you think that anything that can happen henceforward upon this earth could ever seem strange to me?"

"When you were with—him—on the last day of his life, Isabel," Mr. Raymond continued, "he talked to you very seriously. He changed—changed wonderfully with the near approach of death. It seemed as if the last ten years had been blotted away, and he was a young man again, just entering life, full of no-

bit yearnings and aspirations. I pray God those ten idle years may never be counted against him. He spoke to you very earnestly, my dear; and he urged you, if ever great opportunities were given you, which they might be, to use them faithfully for his sake. I heard him say this, and was at a loss to understand his full meaning. I comprehend it perfectly now."

He paused; but Isabel did not even look up at him. The tears were slowly pouring down her colorless cheeks. She was thinking of that last day at Mordred; and Roland's tenderly earnest voice seemed still sounding in her ears.

"Isabel, a great charge has been intrusted to you. Mr. Lansdell has left you the bulk of his fortune."

It is certain that Mr. Raymond expected some cry of surprise, some token of astonishment, to follow this announcement; but Isabel's tears only flowed a little faster, and her head sank forward on the sofa cushion by her side.

"Had you any idea that Roland intended to leave his money in this manner?"

"Oh, no, no! I don't want the money; I can do nothing with it. Oh, give it to some hospital, please; and let the hospital be called by his name. It was cruel of him to think that I should care for money when he was dead."

"I have reason to believe that this will be made under very peculiar circumstances," Mr. Raymond said, presently; "when Roland was laboring under a delusion about you—a delusion which you yourself afterward dispelled, Mr. Lansdell's solicitor fully understands this; Gen. Ruydale and his daughter also understand it; and no possible discredit can attach to you from the inheritance of this fortune. Had Roland lived, he might very possibly have made some alteration and modification of this will. As it stands, it is as good a will as any ever proved. You are a very rich woman, Isabel, Gwendoline, her father and myself are legatees to a considerable amount; but Mordred Priory and the bulk of the Lansdell property are left to you."

Gwendoline had promised to be the friend of Isabel; and she kept her word. There was no bitterness in her heart now; and perhaps she liked George Gilbert's widow all the better on account of that foolish, wasted love that made a kind of link between them.

So Mrs. Gilbert was permitted to possess her new wealth in peace. She went away with Gwendoline and the general to those fair foreign lands for which she had plied in the weedy garden at Chamberwell. Even during the first bitterness of her sorrow she was not utterly selfish. She sent money to Mrs. Sleaford and the boys—money which seemed enormous wealth to them; and she instructed her solicitor to send them quarterly installments of an income which would enable her half-brothers to receive a liberal education.

And now Isabel Gilbert passes away into a higher region than that in which this story has lain—useful, serene, almost happy, but very constant to the memory of sorrow—she is altogether different from the foolish wife who neglected all a wife's duties while she sat by the mill stream at Thurston's Craig reading poetry.

(The end.)

A Profession for Mice.

Not long ago the children of a well-known reformer had the misfortune to lose some of their white mice by a cruel stroke of death. They found some consolation, however, by arranging a funeral, and after the services were over, the mother of the young mourners saw a gravestone carefully erected at the head of the little mound.

On this monument was scrawled in childish letters, "To the memory of our white mice. 'Of such is the Kingdom of Heaven.'" "Oh, I hope not!" groaned the mother. "It's bad enough to have them on earth. I never could see what they were made for, anyway."

It has been difficult to regard white mice seriously. One hears of their performing tricks, but that is not a sufficient excuse for their being. Some sing sweetly, but they are rare, and almost any one would prefer a bird.

But with modern inventions comes a profession for mice so important that it commands government pay in the English navy. Every submarine vessel carries a cage of white mice. At the least leakage of gasoline the little creatures feel uncomfortable, and begin to squeal. This serves as a warning, which is quickly heeded.

The mice are regularly enrolled on the books, as the seamen are, and the government allows them one shilling a week for food.

She Was a Prize.

They stood in the deep gray shadows of an autumn twilight.

"Darling," he whispered, tenderly, "last night I pressed your hand, and now I press your lips. Do you appreciate it?"

"Indeed I do," replied the beautiful girl, "and after our marriage I shall return it."

"In what way?"

"I will press your coat."

With a wild thrill of joy he pressed her to his bosom.

A Novice.

Ethel—Has he ever loved before? Edith—I think not, he seems surprised to think it is costing him anything.

When a man is long on energy and short on the ability to use it he is to be pitied.

TWO OPEN LETTERS

IMPORTANT TO MARRIED WOMEN

Mrs. Mary Dimmick of Washington tells how Lydia E. Pinkham's Vegetable Compound Made Her Well.

It is with great pleasure we publish the following letters, as they convincingly prove the claim we have so many times made in our columns that Mrs.



Pinkham, of Lynn, Mass., is fully qualified to give helpful advice to sick women. Read Mrs. Dimmick's letters.

Her first letter:

Dear Mrs. Pinkham:

"I have been a sufferer for the past eight years with a trouble which first originated from painful periods—the pains were excruciating, with inflammation and ulceration of the female organs. The doctor says I must have an operation or I cannot live. I do not want to submit to an operation if I can possibly avoid it. Please help me."—Mrs. Mary Dimmick, Washington, D. C.

Her second letter:

Dear Mrs. Pinkham:

"You will remember my condition when I just wrote you, and that the doctor said I must have an operation or I could not live. I received your kind letter and followed your advice very carefully and am now entirely well. As my case was so serious it seems a miracle that I am cured. I know that I owe not only my health but my life to Lydia E. Pinkham's Vegetable Compound and to your advice. I can walk miles without an ache or a pain, and I wish every suffering woman would read this letter and realize what you can do for them."—Mrs. Mary Dimmick, 56th and East Capitol Streets, Washington, D. C.

How easy it was for Mrs. Dimmick to write to Mrs. Pinkham at Lynn, Mass., and how little it cost her—a two-cent stamp. Yet how valuable was the reply! As Mrs. Dimmick says—it saved her life.

Mrs. Pinkham has on file thousands of just such letters as the above, and offers ailing women helpful advice.

Whoever says little has little to answer for.

Worth Knowing

—that Alcock's are the original and only genuine porous plasters; all other so-called porous plasters are imitations.

It is an equal failing to trust every body, and to trust nobody.

Every man thinks his own burden the heaviest.

Married people would be happier if wives and husbands would take some pleasure as they go along, and not degenerate into mere toiling machines. Recreation is necessary to keep the heart in place, and to get along without it is a big mistake.

Natural Politeness: The secret of good manners is unselfishness. Those who live a life of service for their fellow men have no trouble about their politeness. Women must themselves set the example of courtesy to each other if they wish men to treat them courteously. The specious arguments, "It is healthful," "doctor's orders," and kindred excuses employed by followers of fads to justify reprehensible habits manners are too transparent to have any weight with sensible people.

Natural politeness springs from a kindly heart. The polish that is acquired from education is but a veneer, and cannot well stand the wear and tear of life. No amount of education in courtesy, either at home or in school, will enable the average person to bear patiently an unjust criticism or a disagreeable remark. Only the patience of a kindly spirit can do that.

THE EDITOR

Explains How to Keep Up Meats and Physical Vigor.

A New Jersey editor writes:

"A long indulgence in improper food brought on a condition of nervous dyspepsia, nearly three years ago, so severe that I had to quit work entirely. I put myself on a strict regimen of Grape-Nuts food, with plenty of outdoor exercise, and in a few months found my stomach so far restored that the process of digestion gave me pleasure instead of distress.

"It also built up my strength so that I was able to resume my business, which is onerous, as I not only edit my own paper but also do a great deal of 'outside' writing.

"I find that the Grape-Nuts diet enables me to write with greater vigor than ever before, and without the feeling of brain-fag with which I used to be troubled. As to bodily vigor—I can and do walk miles every day without fatigue—a few squares used to weary me before I began to live on Grape-Nuts!" Name given by Postum Co., Battle Creek, Mich.

There's a reason. Read the little book, "The Road to Wellville," in pkgs.