

MERLE'S CRUSADE.

BY ROSA HACHETTE CARY.

Author of "Barbara Heathcote's Trial," "Queen's Whim," "The Search of Basil Lyndhurst."

CHAPTER XXIV.—"HEARING THE HARVEST."

I wished Mr. Hawtry would sit down and talk to me in his usual friendly fashion; but he kept fidgeting about the room, talking up books and laying them down all the time that I was sitting with question about Marshlands and Gay, and Mr. Romiter.

After the first moment of blank astonishment I was really very pleased to see him. I could hardly now believe it was Mr. Hawtry who was moving so restlessly from the table to the window. He looked broader than ever, and very strong and well, and I nearly forgot to ask after his broken leg.

"Oh, it is all right now," he answered, absently. He was certainly very absent, very unlike himself. I think I talked all the faster, because in my heart I felt nervous too.

"You are coming down to Marshlands next week, I hear," he said at last, stopping straight before me.

"Yes, we are all coming," I answered, joyously. "Mrs. Morris and the new baby, and Mrs. Morris."

"Who in the world is Mrs. Morris?" he asked, rather impatiently. It was a droll sort of impatience, but I thought he looked anxious.

"Mrs. Morris is baby's nurse at present. She is going to stay until September, and then I shall take her place, and baby will be in my charge."

"Oh, that is nonsense!" he said, quite gruffly. "I cannot allow that for a moment, Miss Fenton!" And then, as I looked astonished at this, he said, in an old sort of choked voice, "I think I need you more than Mrs. Morris does, don't you?"

"Are we capable of any feeling at all when some shock comes to us, upheaving our former world, and overwhelming us with sudden chaos? The numb intensity that seizes upon us seems to deaden all sensation."

My first conscious thought was that I had known all the time what this meant, that it did not surprise me in the least; but this was an entire falsety on my part, arising from complete incredulity. Never had I imagined in my wildest dreams that life held such a gift for me; but I was too much stunned to accept it unconditionally.

I put aside Mr. Hawtry's earnest solicitations that I should try to care for him sufficiently to be his wife, and wasted much precious time in pointing out to him my apparent unfitness for such a position. I remember that there were cold hands and burning face, arguing against myself and lamenting my deficiencies, till I broke down at last, and could not find voice to tell him more.

He heard me with a sort of tender impatience visible in his manner, but he did not interrupt me as long as my voice and courage lasted. When my shamefaced remarks were ended, he said, very gently:

"What nonsense you have been talking! I should hardly have believed that such a sensible girl could say such things. Do you want a list of my deficiencies and shortcomings also? Shall we make out a tabular demonstration of each other's defects? No, Merie, this is not the question before me. I respect and honor you more than I can tell you, and nothing you have said can influence me in the least. What I want to know now is, can you care for me sufficiently to be willing to marry me?"

After that there was only one answer possible. I did care for Mr. Hawtry, and I told him so.

His gratitude seemed overwhelming. But I am afraid I was rather stupid and irresponsible. My sudden happiness dazzled and bewildered me; but I think he understood how I felt. He told me he had cared for me almost the first time he spoke to me, and his interest had been excited by my choice of work; that I had seemed to him more real and earnest and self-denying than other girls, but he had respected me too much to intrude himself so suddenly on my life. He had loved me so reluctantly, hoping to see me soon again, but his cousin's illness and his own accident had kept us long apart.

"I had plenty of leisure time for thinking about you, Merie, and your work. I was lying up with my broken leg. But I did my best for me, but with all his good nursing, poor fellow, I thought a woman's hand would have been better about me. Do you remember my telling you, dear, that I wished Agnes could have known you? I meant to try and win you for my wife then."

I wanted to grow calmer and quieter with my own mind, and in this way, I was so very gentle that I soon grew less shy with him; but still it seemed to me wonderful, almost a miracle, that any one so good and kind should care for me. We had forgotten Aunt Agatha until Mr. Hawtry—but he told me that I should have to call him Roger—spoke of her. It seems he was telling her all about his hopes when I rang at the bell. He was so very gentle that I soon grew less shy with him; but still it seemed to me wonderful, almost a miracle, that any one so good and kind should care for me.

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taken to me about the bridled cow? I had crossed the bridge so carelessly that afternoon in the sunshine, never dreaming that it would lead me to a new life.

The moon had risen when we crossed it an hour later; the whole world seemed bathed in its pure white radiance. Everything was transformed, even the silent cranes and pulleys and blocks of stone were touched with radiance or emitted strange shadows. The gray towers of All Saints stood out clearly against the blue sky. Ripples of iridescent light played on the river—silvery gleams of brightness with a margin of blue-blackness. I remembered that we talked little, but that our silence held a world of meaning in it. When Mr. Hawtry spoke, it was of his mother and Agnes. He had clearly loved them, and his was a faithful nature; it did not bury its dead out of sight and cease to lament them. There were household niches left vacant, where the tenderest memories were enshrined.

"I promised well for my future that this was the case. The loving son and brother would surely be a faithful husband. I know that I listened to him with a full heart, and all sorts of tender vows and silent prayers and inaudible thanksgivings seemed to frame themselves. As I talked beside him I thought of Gay's artless speech, 'Do we any of us deserve our happiness?' Oh, no; she was right; it is a free gift received from the All-Father."

"Mr. Hawtry bade me good-bye at the door, but our parting was not for long. I should see him in the morning. Hannah seemed a little startled when she saw me. 'What late you are, Miss Fenton!' was just what she said. 'I had become of you,' and then her eyes opened rather widely. 'Has anything happened, for you look different somehow?'

"I had not meant to tell anyone that night; but Hannah was trustworthy and faithful, and I was very fond of her. 'Nothing has happened,' I returned, 'I am just as usual, except that I have assumed carelessness, except that Mr. Hawtry was at Aunt Agatha's.' 'Mr. Hawtry, miss!' with a shrill crescendo of astonishment.

"Yes; I was very much surprised to see him, as you may imagine; and Hannah, I expect I shall surprise her too, because I am going to marry Mr. Hawtry."

"I shall never forget the girl's look; her rosy face turned quite pale; her eyes were distended with wonder. 'You are going to marry Squire Hawtry, Miss Fenton!' And then in her excitement she kissed me heartily, and a moment afterward begged my pardon for taking such a liberty. 'You must forgive me, miss, for I was almost beside myself with the news.'"

"Nonsense, Hannah, I have nothing to forgive," I returned, blushing. "Oh, but you will be Madame Hawtry some day, replied Hannah, humbly, 'and Luke's only a farm servant, and Lyddy also. I must not forget the difference between us. I wish you joy, Miss Fenton, indeed I do. Squire Hawtry is the finest gentleman I know, and Molly says the same. She will be proud and glad when she hears the news that you are coming to the Red Farm.'"

Hannah's words almost took my breath away. I was glad when she bade me good-night and left me alone with the sleeping children.

I crept softly to the window, and sat for some time looking over the moonlit garden. I felt, with a sudden thrill at the remembrance of Hannah's words, that I had not realized it yet. I had only the thought of Mr. Hawtry's of his wonderful goodness and kindness. It had not entered my mind that I should spend my life at the Red Farm.

It seemed almost too good to be true. I closed my eyes and tried to imagine it all. Should I ever spend long happy days in that drawing-room, looking out on the beautiful garden? Should I sit in the porch and see the peacocks and the doves, and the tree with the circular seat, and smell the jasmine and clover?"

Squire Hawtry's wife at the Red Farm! No, I could not believe it yet. I remembered how I had met in the old nursery at Marshlands, dreaming of all sorts of things in the moonlight, until I had fallen asleep. Such a thought as this had never occurred to me. I had imagined myself an old woman, sitting by a solitary fireside; but there had been no Squire Hawtry riding up on brown Peter then.

It was long before I could sleep that night. Many a girl in my position has felt as I did, but I do not know of any that happy day. One speaks heavily for sorrow; but joy seems only to keep our hearts from resting. I wondered the next morning when I should be announced at the nursery. I knew Mr. Hawtry would come early and bring Gay's flowers with him, but he would not ask for me at once.

Presently a message came up to the nursery that Hannah was to take the children into the public garden. I knew what this meant—Mr. Hawtry had told my mistress. I dressed the children as quickly as possible, thinking that I should not be away for every minute; but it was some time before I heard anything; then my mistress came up to me herself, with Gay's basket of flowers in her hand. I saw she was much moved. Her lovely eyes were full of tears as she came up to me. "Roger has told me, Merie. Perhaps I ought not to have been so surprised. It is not strange, after all, that he should love you; he must have seen for himself that you were a good girl. I like him all the better for loving you." And then she kissed me.

She said a great deal more to me, holding my hand. She was so glad for my sake, so sorry for her own, but she would not speak of that.

"Roger is waiting for you in the little drawing-room," she said at last. "I ought not to detain you any longer. Tomorrow we will have a long talk. But he will see you at the Red Farm. Do not keep him waiting any longer, Merie."

I went down at once, for I knew he could not wait long, as he had other business. It was strange and yet familiar, to see him again; but he soon thawed my shyness, and we had a nice long talk. He was going to dine there that night, but he would be obliged to me to go to the Red Farm to see him. He would be glad to see me, and he would return to Netherton the next morning.

Never mind, I shall see you very often there," I replied, cheerfully, for I understood the difficulty of seeing each other under my mistress's roof.

Indeed I hope so," he returned, with rather a strange smile. "If the Red Farm is to be my home."

But, of course, I was speaking of my visit to Marshlands, but he seemed as if he would not understand; he only assured me very politely that he would see me as often as I would like. His manner toward me was a little, until he begged me not to disturb myself about any future arrangements, as he and him, Mr. Romiter were consulting with the doctor, and I was only to be of use to him.

It certainly was rather strange sitting in the nursery that evening, and knowing that Mr. Hawtry was down stairs; but he would be obliged to me to go to the Red Farm to see him, and he would return to Netherton the next morning.

And I was so very gentle that I soon grew less shy with him; but still it seemed to me wonderful, almost a miracle, that any one so good and kind should care for me.

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conscious makes things rather difficult. It is quite true, as Alice says, that in marrying you he is marrying a creature made by the Netherton and Orton folk and not quite so comfortable as you both."

"I do not wish to put Mr. Hawtry in an uncomfortable position," I said, with a touch of my old pride, but she shook her head at me, still smiling.

"You need not be afraid of what Roger says; he simply glories in your work. He is quite willing to publish the whole thing to the Netherton world at once. He told me quite seriously just now. I know was not a lady in the place to compare with you. He honors you as only a true man can honor a woman."

The tears came into my eyes. Yes, I knitted with a good grace at last, when I found even Aunt Agatha was against me; but neither she nor Mr. Hawtry knew what it cost me to part so soon with my mistress and the children. It almost broke my heart to see them go without me.

"I loved you first because you were so brave and unconventional—because you were my only other girl. I only should you say such things to me, Merie."

"Then, if you are so generous, Merie," she said, quietly, "you will not come to me in all sorts of perplexing difficulties; or, at least, if you come it must be as my guest, and not as my nurse."

"Oh, no," I returned, shrinking back; "I was not prepared for that. I only should you say such things to me, Merie."

"Then, my dear Merie, will you act as a sensible woman? Stay with Mrs. Keith during our absence, and quietly prepare for your wedding. Roger thinks in October both you and he might be ready."

The idea startled me. What would Aunt Agatha say? But I very soon found Aunt Agatha was quite of my mistress's opinion, and was almost as eager as Mrs. Morris to see me in my new position. It was a relief for Mr. Hawtry. After the first shock of my surprise, I came gradually to the same conviction. Mr. Hawtry said very little to me on the subject; on the contrary, he laughed to scorn the notion that my service was derogatory to him.

"I loved you first because you were so brave and unconventional—because you were my only other girl. I only should you say such things to me, Merie."

"And after that I ceased to say them; but how I honored him for that manly expression of opinion! But his very generosity was almost too much for me. With home was solitary, and that he needed my companionship. He was too unselfish to press his wishes on me, but he evidently saw no reasons for delay."

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Mrs. Morris had promised to remain until Christmas; but Hannah would be married before then, and I wondered sadly, as I packed my luggage to see the cottage who would replace me at Prince's Gate.

"In the morning sow thy seed, and in the evening withhold not thy hand." How those words came to me a month later, when one of my school-fellows, Helen Transome, wrote to me and begged me to use my influence with my mistress and procure the situation for her.

I knew her circumstances would appear to my mistress as being very good. Helen had been a trying life. Her family had suffered great reverses; from wealth they had been reduced almost to indigence. Her father had died, worn out by the melior and another's care. Helen had given her up for a richer bride.

Helen had borne her troubles with a patience that bordered on heroism; but it had broken the springs of youth. She looked far older than her years warranted, and much of her beauty had faded; but she was fair and gentle-looking, with soft manners, that seemed to win my mistress. Her love of children was evident; she had a quiet influence with them that no little girl could have.

"Miss Transome will never be married, Merie. My mistress would be a very good wife for her. I will do my best for her. But she is very nice, and the children, and Mrs. Morris says she shall be able to trust her to her. I do believe the poor thing looks a little happier already. I went in just now, and heard her laughing and joking with her father. She has such a silvery, pretty laugh."

I knew that my mistress would soon take poor Helen into her heart, and I was glad to think she had found such a kind friend. We did not speak much of Helen then; I was paying my good-bye visit to Prince's Gate, for two days later I was to be married.

They had loaded me with beautiful gifts suited to my new position; but I was not thinking of them or of my mistress's last loving speech as I walked across the bridge. It was October again, and the red and yellow leaves were floating on the water, like the melior and another's care. Harvested garnered in while the earth rested after her labors.

My harvest had come already, and yet the laborer had worked but a short time in the vineyard, while others would toil until evening. I had done so little, and reaped so much. Through the slanting sunbeams I looked to the distant home where Roger was waiting for me, in that home with the blue sky and the yellow fields, together, not leading idle lives, but sharing with others a little of our happiness, and where, out of our full hearts, we should surely give praise continually. A new thought came into my mind, I seemed to hear Roger's deep voice saying, "Amen."

THE END.

Scene in a Restaurant.

Woman alone at a table. Enter two men. One of them in possession of a reticule accompanied by that sort of inartistic which, strange to say, some women possess, or, it may be, as it were, a woman's order is served, soup and omelette. The man described stares at a woman and says to his companion:

"Did you ever notice that a woman always orders soup when she comes into a restaurant?"

The woman's face is red clear through the cosmetic. Just then her companion, another woman, comes in. The man has finished his first course and ordered pie.

The woman who had blushed, still smarting under the man's impertinence, turns to her companion and observes: "Did you ever notice that when a man comes into a restaurant he always orders pie?"

A strict observance of the code of etiquette would not have required the woman to say anything. One breach of propriety does not call for another in return. The woman, probably, never felt this. The point in this story is that the woman mirrored a truism. Men invariably order pie in a restaurant, although they never eat it at home—Gibson Tribune.

Byring in Prunella Station.

It is dangerous to let a man die in a hotel in Paris. A queer French law makes the landlord responsible for his bill to the waiter for the drink. Several hundred francs was the loss recently sustained by a Frenchman who had been drinking in a hotel in Paris.

Coal Ashes on a Walk.

For peash tress, currents and gooseberries coal ashes make one of the best materials that can be used as a mulch. They not only aid materially to retain moisture in the soil, but they also will aid to keep down the weeds and repel locusts and other insects. They must not be deposited upon a surface that is to be planted, but they will prove a valuable aid, Coal Tribune.</