

THE BETTER PART

By Nora Anderson

SHE stood among the roses, singing faintly heartily as she gathered great fragrant clusters of them. For she was young, and all life lay before her, and her heart was full of dreams, her head of ambitions. But when her quick ear caught the sound of a man's approaching footsteps, a faint shadow fell across the brightness of her face, and a vague trouble crept into her eyes, born of the knowledge that her greeting of today would be different from the greeting of other days. To the man, however, the little, unaccustomed touch of gravity seemed only to lend an added charm to the childlike beauty of her face.

"Dreaming again?" he asked, with a little, half tender, half quizzical smile. Then, as she lifted her eyes to his, he added, with an impulsiveness rare in him, "Dear, do you ever, among your dreams, dream of how much I love you? Do you guess sometimes how life means just a time to make you happy, and death only a time to lose you? Do you know, little girl, that for me this great world holds—just you—only you? Can you understand yet a love that—"

The roses fell suddenly unheeded to her feet, and she put out her hands with a half frightened gesture. "Ah, don't," she whispered, "don't say that!"

"Why not?" he questioned gently, "since you must already know? I ask you little—only for the right to love you, and take care of you, to do what you are too young yet to know—all that love may mean. Dear, have you only dreamed that your eyes have told me you cared—O! not a great deal, I know, but just a little?"

Her hands dropped to her sides, and her eyes wandered past the garden of roses to the bare purple moor beyond. "I do care," she said slowly, at last. "I do care for you—a great deal—more, I think, than for any one else in the world, and not any less today than yesterday, or all other yesterdays, only—I care for other things—for the other things—more."

He smiled down on her serious youthfulness. "You dear little stage-struck mortal!" he said. "And is that the only obstacle between us?"

"It is an obstacle," she said, and he recognized with a swift pang a new quality in her voice, a certain suggestive stillness in her attitude, the stillness that spells purpose. "I suppose," she went on dreamily, "we all come into the world with some one great want, the need to express ourselves in some one particular way. And the failures in life are those who never learn to voice that want."

"Or who voice a wrong one," he amended. "Ah, but," she took him up swiftly, "I know that this is right. I feel it deep down in my heart. It's like a voice that keeps saying insistently, 'Go! Go! Go!'"

"It's all very sudden," he suggested. "Are you—?"

"O, I know," she interrupted. "But I've always wanted to do it, you know, and then it came to me all in a flash at the last that I must. Yes, that doesn't necessarily mean it's any less true, does it? Truth comes to us all differently. To me it came that way."

His heart, as he looked down on her, was heavy within him, heavy with fear for her. Yet what could he say to her, to this child of the radiant eyes, across whose young life the shadow of a distant fame had fallen? He wanted only to get her into his arms and hold her there, away from the battle and the struggle and the bitterness of life, but he was wise enough to know it would avail nothing. Yet, knowing it, he made one effort.

"And you think that the stage will satisfy you—will fill your life?" he questioned.

"It is not work enough to fill one's life?" she questioned back. "It may be, for some women. Not, I think, for you. Child, are you sure of yourself? Have you counted the cost? Is it indeed to be fame and only fame?"

"O!" she cried. "I can't bear to hurt you, Hilary, and yet—I must go."

perhaps of his great love, that some day she would come back to him—some day, when she had learned that the best thing in life often lies nearest; that the greatest human need is not success, but love.

With a deep drawl, a sigh, a slight of infinite aspirations, she came back at last from her dreamland. "Poor Hilary!" she said softly.

"Why poor?" he questioned.

"Because you have no vocation to fill your life."

"But I have," he objected.

She opened her eyes, her wonderful eyes, whose color was as the changing color of the sea.

"My vocation is to love you."

"That is hardly a vocation," she smiled.

"It is enough for me," he answered quietly. "And, some day—"

"Some day?" she echoed.

"It may be enough for you, too."

She stared unseeingly, and again that faint shadow fell across her face, that vague trouble crept into her eyes. It was as though some dim premonition of the ill awaiting her out yonder in the great world had come to her. But she shook it off impatiently.

"No, no," she cried. "It never will be. Forget me, Hilary. Don't ever think that. I—I want to live and to do. I don't want to be just absorbed—absorbed by love and all the commonplaceness of every day things. I want—I stretched out her rounded young arms towards the crimson tinted moors—"I want life."

"And life is love," he finished softly. "the best of life, that is."

"No, no," she answered swiftly, with all the self-sufficiency of youth.

"Dear," he said, and his voice and the words he spoke came back to her afterwards across long years of silence—afterwards, when she had learned too late the truth, "dear, there is just one thing I would say to you. Go; and all good so with you. Live your own life, and win the success that I know awaits you. Work your hardest, and give your whole self, your self that is so dear—a sudden tenderness stole into the gravity of his voice—"to your vocation. But if ever it fails you, if ever a time comes when you realize that success and fame and honor are not all, but only a part of life, if ever you grow tired, and stretch out these little hands for the gift you care nothing for today, then remember, it is yours, my Iris—for all time and eternity."

"Don't," she whispered unsteadily. "O, Hilary, you—you make me afraid—afraid of myself—of whether, after all, I have chosen the better part—"

"Don't be afraid, little one. I think you have not chosen at all yet. You are too young to choose. You are only experimenting."

"I shall wait until your experimenting is over."

"Do you—care—so very much?" she asked wistfully.

He put a hand under her chin, and, lifting her face, looked down into her troubled eyes.

"It will be many years, little girl, I think, before you understand how much," he answered quietly.

SHE rose slowly from her chair, and the great man rose, too, and his eyes were pitiful. For he had told her a hard thing—perhaps the hardest thing in life, and though she was facing it with the courage and self-restraint ten years of strenuous work had taught her, yet he knew that to her it spelled an end more bitter than death. So his grip on the dimly gloved hand she held out to him said much that his lips left unaided, since he was very human, in spite of his greatness.

"Thank you, doctor," she said, a little unsteadily.

Then she turned away, and a moment later she had crossed the sunshiny pavement and stepped into the waiting carriage.

"Home, please," she said.

And, though her face was white her voice was perfectly steady.

But, once there, she turned into the little study, where she had known so much of joy, and, locking the door, lived out her hour of agony alone.

This, then, was the end, the end of all her dreams and ambitions, this horrible thing that she hardly dared to name even to herself. In thought she went back over the years that had begun with bitter poverty and unceasing struggle, and ended, she threw out her hands with a sudden, bitter cry.



For a moment she swayed unsteadily.

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"Blind! Blind! O, God, I can't bear it!"

And the fame, and the wealth, and the things of this world that she had gathered around her seemed suddenly to slip from her like a cloak, and leave her shivering in a great, cold loneliness—a loneliness that sometimes before had made itself felt, but that she had always been able to throw off or to call by some other name. Now she knew that she could never throw it off again, never call it by any other name, that it was hers for all the long, long empty years that stretched before her; for fate had taken her work from her, and she had nothing else, no tie in all the world beside.

"Three months!" she whispered at last. "Only three months, and then darkness!"

And on her soul the darkness had already fallen, as she covered in the grip of an ironical fate that, out of all other possible fates, had chosen just this one to strike her down—this night that she had dreamed of ten years ago among the roses, and worked for ever since.

She put up her hands to her head, and pushed back the heavy, waving hair.

"But I must not think now. There will be time enough afterwards. Tonight—" Then suddenly her hands fell to her lap. "O, God," she moaned, "tonight I—I shall not need to act, only to remember."

It was over at last, the play that all New York had talked of and anticipated for months beforehand, and the woman whose magnetic spell had held the densely packed houses in the thrilled silence only genius may compass, lay, her head fallen forward on her arms, every line, every curve of the supple, nerveless figure echoing the despair of those last tragic, unfinished words.

Then, as the curtain slowly descended, through the

A MAIDEN AND A MOUSE. By W. J. Crosbie.

THE great civil war was raging. Royalist and roundhead—such in the belief that he was battling for the right—were leaping like famished wolves at one another's throats.

Things of a royalist victory had just reached Elmleigh hall, and, to celebrate the event, Sir Geoffrey Marston—heedless of the strict injunctions of his doctor—had ordered a second bottle of wine to be brought to him.

"The king! God bless him! And confusion to his enemies!" And the old man drained his glass.

"O, father!"

"Glancing round, he beheld Laura, the elder of his daughters—a bonny maid of 18—standing in the doorway.

"Drinking wine again? Truly I am ashamed of you."

The old gentleman began to fidget in his high backed chair. "But the occasion, sweet heart," quoth he, "the occasion! His majesty—"

"I know, I heard your toast. But drinking his majesty's health will assuredly not improve your own."

cause must therefore suffer. I would give my sword hand to regain his letter!"

So saying, he closed his eyes and sank back wearily upon the pillows.

"Will he die?" she asked, her voice trembling a little, as they stood together in the spacious hallway.

"Die! My dear young lady, he will be fit for duty in a week or so, month at the farthest."

Briefly, then, he acquainted her with the circumstances attending her lover's misadventure, which were these: The moon, he said, had already risen when the report of firearms came to the ear of Aikin, the porter of the house. Hastening out, he had almost reached the gate when he perceived a horseman galloping past—a royalist, apparently, judging by his plumed helmet and flowing cavalier locks. So soon as he was out of hearing, Aikin quickly walked in the opposite direction, and ere long discovered, lying in a wayside ditch, the unconscious form of Philip Winram. As speedily as might be, he carried the stricken man to the lodge, and there proceeded to bandage the wound, having meanwhile sent his little son for the doctor.

"I gather," concluded the man of medicine, "that Master Winram had received imperative orders to carry with all possible dispatch the king's letter to the general (whose name I have forgotten) commanding his majesty's forces quartered at Hatton. As you perceived just now, the loss of that letter is troubling him grievously. His mind, I need scarcely say, must be diverted from the matter, for, albeit the wound is not a dangerous one, constant brooding may bring on a fever."

"I will do all I can," said Laura; but her heart sank because of the doctor's concluding words.

The knowledge that he was a traitor did not trouble Richard Orgill overmuch. Indeed, in the matter of ethics his conscience—if he ever possessed such a thing—was exceedingly elastic.

his ruse was doomed to fail, for here was Bainbridge close upon his heels.

"You are right after all, Master Calvert," said the young cavalier, quietly, as they stood by the threshold of the outer door. "Here comes your horse."

His host now appeared, and five minutes later Orgill, flinging the servant the promised guinea, sprang into the saddle and hastened to overtake Bainbridge, who was already upon the highway.

The corners of the two men as they rode together in the moonlight for the most part was one sided.

In front of the tall sign post they drew rein. "Here we part," said Orgill. "Your way lies to the left; mine—"

He paused, for Bainbridge's pistol was leveled at his head.

"Your way, my friend, lies to the left also. Move hand or foot and I pull the trigger!"

Orgill laughed a trifle uneasily. "And this be a joke, 'tis a sorry one." And as he spoke his right hand stole downwards towards his pistol. "Come, young sir, what means this?"

proves to be Richard Orgill, the notorious renegade. Poor Winram! I trust his wound is not a serious one. He lies at Elmleigh hall, I understand. Tomorrow I will ride over there. He will not know she has heard what has happened."

"And now, Master Bainbridge," he went on, "permit me to congratulate and thank you for the signal service you have rendered to our cause. I trust you will join us. I can offer you a cornetcy; there is a vacancy just now in Capt. Landon's troop."

"I cannot accept your offer."

Judging by the expression on the general's face, this was hardly the answer he expected.

"I am sorry," he said. "We need such men as you. Will nothing tempt you?"

"Nothing, sir."

"Remember, there is a brilliant career open to you. His majesty—despite what his enemies may say—never forgets those who have served him well."

"Again, sir, I thank you; but I cannot alter my decision."

"Well, well, so be it. And now we will drink his majesty's health." From the floor he lifted to the table a small hamper of rare old wine. "I have here—"

and then he stopped suddenly. For as he raised the lid, out from the hamper sprang a mouse. Instantly, with a faint scream, Bainbridge rose to his feet; then sat down again, and lay back with closed eyes.

"By heaven!" "To a woman," muttered the general, amazement and conservatism depicted on his weather beaten face, as, with nervous fingers, he began to unfasten the cloak at the neck.

The girl's bosom softly rose and fell, the blue eyes slowly unclosed, whereon the general, turning away, hastened to pour some wine into a cup.

"Forgive me," he said, and though he knew it not, his voice had softened. "I was thoughtless. I ought to have known that you were weary, hungry, perchance."

He paused; and in silence the girl took a cup from his hand.

Her secret, she knew, was a secret no longer. His voice and manner told her as much. "General," she began, falteringly, "you look just now of Elmleigh hall." She paused. "That is my home," she added, and the long lashes fell upon her cheeks.

"Your home?" he cried, in sheer bewilderment. "Then you are—"

"Sir Geoffrey Marston's daughter." The old soldier bowed. "I am betrothed to Philip Winram."

"My child," he said kindly, "your secret is safe with me. Cornet Winram shall be told tomorrow of the capture of Orgill—by a cavalry picket."

And now, in haste to go, Laura gratefully but firmly declined his offer of refreshment and an escort. And so once more she rode through the moonlight. Meanwhile the general, sitting over his wine, drank several toasts. And the first was not "The King!" but "Mistress Laura Marston!"

Not until a twelvemonth after his wedding day did Philip Winram learn the truth concerning the recovery of the king's letter.

"And so, sweet heart," he said at length, "it was for my sake you faced all those perils?"

"Nay, sir," said she, "for the king's sake."

"Happy king!" and he laughed good humoredly. Then softly he said his arm around her waist. "My brave, true, bearded little woman!"

"Brave!" she cried. "Nay, dear, I was a coward. I was afraid of the darkness, and of that poor wretch, Orgill. And, O, Philip, that horrid mouse!"

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