HER HUMBLE LOVER

The conversation is to match. Signa's affairs, past, present and future, are avoided with nervous particularity, and beyond remarking that the trains are faster now than they used to be, and asking if she liked coming express, the rector and his wife treat her as if they had been accustomed to sitting at dinner with her for months.

Signa is a strange girl; the laughter and the tears are never very far apart in her, and at times, as she listens to the mournful twaddle which these two people talk, and reflects that they are her uncle and aunt, and that she will probably spend the remainder of her life with them, a sense of the grotesque and the ridiculous take possession of her, and she feels a wild desire to look up from her plate and laugh aloud, a reckless laugh of despair.

But she does not; she sits, that wonderful look of calm self-possession which Mrs. Podswell "doesn't like" on her lovely face, and replies as best she can to the various questions which her aunt puts to her now and again, always in the thin, querulous voice of mournful resignation.

The dinner drags its weary length to a close, and Mrs. Podswell rises, slowly and solemnly.

"You will not be long, Joseph?" she remarks, gravely.

"No—no, my dear," assents the rector, nervously. "I will join you in a minute," and he drinks his one solitary glass of port with more than his usual timidity, and glides in after them almost before the drawing room door has closed.

The "martyr" goes to the sofa as a matter of course, and Signa, as the tea comes in, says, in her quiet, musical voice:

"Shall I pour out the tea for you—auntie?"

She pauses a little before the term of relationship rather doubtfully; but Mrs. Podswell inclines her head graciously, and Signa seats herself at the gypsy table.

The old rector takes up his cup and goes to the fireplace, fronting the rest as if he were in the pulpit, then he clears his throat, and says, in his clerical voice:

"You may go, Mary."

Signa looks up; she feels instinctively that her melancholy uncle is about to address her, and waits patiently.

The rector clears his throat, and assumes the blandly severe expression which is always so effective in the pulpit, and begins.

"I have chosen the earliest opportunity which presents itself, my dear Signa, to address a few remarks to you," he says.

The martyr sighs heavily.

"Ahem, I need scarcely say that both your aunt and myself are sincerely glad to see you, and to welcome under our humble roof the daughter of ——" a faint moan from the sofa pulls him up in time, and with a little cough he changes it to "our niece."

The dark grey eyes raise themselves to his face with a patient yet calm attention, which slightly embarrasses him.

"You are very kind," she says, quietly.

"No, my dear, no," he responds, waving his hand. "It is our duty simply, and I trust that we do not shrink—I mean, that we shall discharge it cheerfully."

A pause for a moment, then the low, clear voice says:

"That is what my—father said."

"He was quite right — quite," assents the rector, a little touched, perhaps, by the sudden clouding of the dark eyes at the mention of the dearly loved name. "Quite right! Indeed, where should you go but here? But though we are sincerely glad to have you, I feel that it is right we should—er—er—come to some understanding. I will ask you, my dear, if you have—er—any views respecting your future?"

"Any views?" doubtfully, with a faint knitting of the darkly-pencilled brows.

"You have none, I see. It is scarcely to be expected that you would have—you are too young. By the way, how old are you, my dear Signa?"

CHAPTER. II.

"I am twenty-one," she replies.

"Twenty-one!" echoes the thin voice of the martyr; "I thought you were much older."

Signa shakes her head.

"Well, if not too young at any rate, your loss is so recent that you can scarcely have made any plans. It is my duty to tell you, my dear Signa, that you are your own mistress."

A faint smile crosses the pale face. Her own mistress, and alone in the world!

"You can choose your own path in life; you are—er—not altogether dependent; in fact, if I am rightly informed, you have a small but not altogether insufficient income."

He pauses, as if expecting a reply, and Signa looks up.

"Have I?" she says. "I did not know. Mr. Brown and the lawyer told me something about it, but I did not pay much attention. I—I was thinking of—of something else."

The rector nods sympathetically.

"Just so; when the heart is overwhelmed with sorry, the head is not capable of comprehending business. Ahem, where was I? Firstly—I mean, to continue—" he correct himself. "I merely remind you of your independent position, so that you may understand that you are free to accept or refuse the home which your aunt and I most cheerfully offer you, my dear," and he sighs heavily, by way of emphasizing his cheerfulness.

"I don't know whether you would care to remain with us?" says the voice from the sofa, solemnly.

The rector nods and smiles blandly.

"Do you think you would like to share our home, my dear?"

For a moment Signa is silent. Truth, welling up in her heart, touches her lips, and nearly forces its way out, exclaiming, "I certainly should not!" but she stops Truth in time, and says instead, "You are very kind and I am very grateful. I will stay if you will have me. My father wished that I should come to you. He said"—a pause for a moment, but though the dark eyes fill, the heart struggles bravely, and the voice falters a very little only—"he said that though you and he had not met for years, you were great friends as boys, and that there was no one closer to him, and that you would take care of me for—for his sake."

The rector, hen-pecked and thin-souled, had some heart left, and his head droops a little as the words, "poor Jack," form on his lips inaudibly.

"He was quite right, my dear, quite right," he says, rather falteringly. "We will look after you. I am glad you have made your choice. You will find us very quiet people——"

"Very quiet," echoes the voice from behind, solemnly.

"Quiet, but I trust not unhappy or discontented."

"A useful life is never an unhappy or a discontented one," remarks the solemn voice of Aunt Podswell, who never does a stroke of work of any kind whatever.

"I am sure I shall be very happy, and I shall be very glad to be useful."

"My father," —even now she cannot speak the word without wincing—"used to say that I was useful to him, but—but that was his goodness."

"What did you do for him, my dear?" asked the rector, for the sake of saying something.

It is an unlucky question. Signa summons up all her fortitude as she looks back upon days that are no more; the happy days when she and he wandered, hand in hand, as it were, through the valley of life, both loving hearts attuned in harmony, with a hindred spirit beating in each bosom; all in all to each other, father and daughter, brother and sister, almost lover and mistress.

"What did I do?" she asks tremulously; "ah, it was very little, now I think of it! very little! I tuned his violin: do you remember his famous violin, uncle?" The tears well up, and the dimly-lit room fades and vanishes as the vision rises of that beloved head bent over the rare instrument, of the thin, white hand calling up the divine melodies which even now ring in her ears. "I tuned his violin, and dusted his books, and cleaned his palette sometimes."

Aunt Podswell groans. Tuning fiddles and cleaning palettes! and this is the sort of child's play that the girl has been used to.

The rector coughs apoiogetically.

"I am afraid our ideas of usefulness are rather different, my dear. But do not be discouraged. I am sure that you will find pleasant occupation in tending the sick, and—er—assisting your aunt looking after the parish."

Assuredly if Signa's work is limited to assisting her aunt in everything, she will not be overworked; Mrs. Podswell's superintendence of the parish consisting chiefly of riding through it once a week, if the weather be fine, in a basket chaise, and stopping to scold some bedridden old woman for absence from church.

"I will no anything you like," says Signa, cheerfully, "only let me do something."

"That's right," says the rector, rubbing his chin: "the spirit is willing, evidently, my dear. We will talk about it to-morrow."

Signa rises; she looks pale and worn; strangely beautiful in the faint light of the few wax candles.

"I think I will go to bed if I may," she says. "I am rather tired, I think," and she goes across to her aunt, and bending over her, touches the forehead with her lips. The rector shakes her hand with nervous effusion that is really meant to be kindly, and she goes out.

Wearily she drags her way up the broad stairs, and to her own room, and with a sense of relief sinks down on to the bed and feels that she is alone.

Does the reader, I wonder, consider me too severe, or charge me in his mind with untruthful exaggeration? If I have erred at all in describing Northwell's Rectory and its master and mistress, it is an error on the side of moderation. Believe me, the place is ten-fold more grim and dreary than I have painted it, for I have spared the reader from a feeling of sympathy and mercy.

Realise for a moment how it struck upon the heart of the young girl, as she sat in her silent room thinking of all she had lost and reflecting that her future was cast in this abode of boredom.

She sat thinking it over, wondering how on earth people managed to exist under such conditions as those that ruled the lives of her uncle and aunt, and with a shudder she prepared for rest, devoutly hoping that she should not dream of the rector's sombre countenance or the martyr's gloomy voice.

"Perhaps in time," she murmured, viewing her face in the glass, wreathed in the silken hair that flowed over her shoulders—"perhaps in time I, too, shall talk like that. Who knows? The dropping of water will wear away a stone, and—ah, dear me! I am not a stone. I know, now, why he sighed when he said, 'Poor Signa!' But there is no one else—no one else; and as there is not, I am doomed to Northwell Rectory, and must make the best of it."

The best of it seemed so poor that she laughed faintly, with a sense of the grotesque; but suddenly the laugh fell short on her lips, as she heard a soft tapping at the door. Thinking it might be the servant—possibly coming to tell her the breakfast hour—she went to the door, and opening it a little, asked the usual question.

For answer the door was pushed softly open, and, to her amazement, a diminutive figure in a night shirt came through the opening, and stood staring up at her with solemn, childish eyes.

The apparition was so sudden, and so unexpected, that Signa stands, with the door in her hand, staring down at the solemn eyes, with eyes almost as grave. Then she recovers herself, and closing the door, bursts into a low, musical laugh.

"What are you?" she says; "an angel—or what?" and she puts her thin white hand under his chin, and turns up the face for examination. A pretty face, for all its paleness and precocious gravity, and with something in the large, dark eyes that goes straight to Signa's tender heart, for the laughter changes to a heavenly smile of girlish sympathy; and, drawing him to her, she asks again:

"Who are you, dear? Where did you come from? What do you want?"

"I want to see you," he answers, with steady gaze.

Signa laughs and sweeps him a courtesy in her long dressing-gown.

"I am much flattered, my dear; that's as pretty a speech as I have heard for—oh, for a long time. But you haven't told me where you come from."

"I sleep at the end of the passage, by myself," he says.

The pity springs up in Signa's bosom, and she bends her head and kisses him.

"You are a brave little fellow to sleep by yourself."

"Am I?" he says. "I don't like it; but mamma says I must. She says that I am a coward. Does a coward always dream big dreams?"

"No; little ones generally," says Signa, caressing the fair hair pitifully. "But never mind, a time will come when you won't mind dreaming—oh, not at all."

"I don't believe that," he says, calmly.

"Oh, yes, it will. But you haven't told me your name yet, you know."

"Archie," he says. "What is yours?"

"Archie," says Signa. "And you are the little boy of the lady I saw downstairs?"

"You mean mamma—yes. You haven't told me your name yet, you know."

Signa laughs softly.

"My name is not such a pretty one as yours," she says. "It is Signa."

"Signa. It is a funny one, but I think it is a prettier one than mine. Signa. Yes, I like it. If I have a puppy," with a sigh, "but I shan't have. Mamma doesn't like animals."

"I can believe that—I mean," says Signa, hastily, go on. If you had a puppy?"

"I should call it Signa."

"That's another pretty speech," laughs Signa. "And pray what made you come to my room? How did you know I was here?"

"I saw you through the banisters," replies the child. "I often creep out quietly, and sit on the stairs while they are at dinner; no one finds me. You won't tell mamma?"

"No, oh, no; I never tell tales, Archie."

"I saw you come in, or I shouldn't have known you had come. Nobody tells me anything."

Signa draws him nearer to her, too full of pity for speech.

"What have you come for?" he demands, fingering her dressing-gown with a quaint thoughtfulness.

Signa laughs again.

"I—I really don't know. Yes"—with sudden gravity—"because I was told."

"Told! Who told you? It must have been a very foolish person," with awful gravity.

"You mustn't say that, dear," says Signa, gently, "because I loved that person, oh, so dearly."

"Why didn't he come with you?" he asks, his dark eyes fixed on her face.

"Because——"

"Never mind," he says, "don't tell me if you don't like; and you don't like, I know. Are you going to cry?"

"No," she says, bravely, and with a little laugh even—"no, I am not, because little boys don't like to see people cry."

Silence for a moment, then he looks up.

"How long are you going to stay here, Signa?"

"Oh a long time; forever and a day," she answers, as lightly as she can.

He stares at her, then his eyes drop.

"I am sorry for you," he says, with slow emphasis, "but I am glad for myself."

"Why are you sorry?" she asks, getting absorbed in the elfish ways of the child.

"Because you will be sure to be unnappy. Everybody is. I don't know why. Are you going to learn lessons? I suppose not. You are grown up, aren't you? I say!"

"Well?" inquires Signa, smiling at the sudden exclamation, made with the air of one about to communicate a most important scientific fact. "Well?"

"You are very pretty—you are beautiful!"

Signa laughs and leans against the back of the bed to enjoy this strange child at her ease.

"Thank you again, Archie, but though I accept the compliment, allow me to remark——"

"Now you are talking like papa," he breaks in, thoughtfully, and laughing for the first time at her laughter.

"Am I? Then I won't. It must be catching, I suppose. I must be very careful. But, Archie, you must not get into the habit of expressing your opinion of a person's looks to their faces; behind their backs is another thing."

He is puzzled for a moment, then his face clears.

"I see. I beg your pardon. I'm glad you told me, because I was going to say, if you hadn't told me, what lovely hair this is," and with the deepest gravity he takes up a thick lock in his tiny hand and eyes it admiringly.

"Well, we will suppose that you haven't said it, Archie," says Signa, keeping her countenance. "And now, hadn't you better go back to bed?"

He puts the sheaf of hair carefully on the white coverlet, and looks up with a sigh.

"I suppose I had. Though nobody will know. You are not angry with me for coming, are you?"

"No, no, dear," she answers, kissing him. "I am seldom, very seldom, angry."

"You will be if you live here, though," he says, with an air of conviction. "Everybody is."

"Then I will be the exception, Archie," she says. "And now, will you go back to bed? You are not afraid, are you? I will hold the light until you are at the end of the passage."

"I am not afraid," he says; "not now. For now I shall dream of princesses, if I dream any big dreams. Oh, I wanted to tell you! When I saw you through the banisters, I thought you were a princess!"

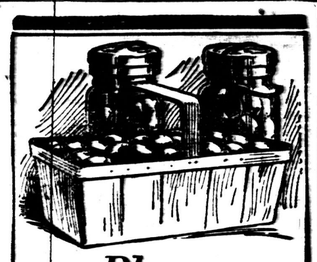
"Yes?" says Signa. "What do you know about princesses, Archie?"

"I read about them," he answers, nodding, his eyes fixed dreamily on the open window through which the moonlight is pouring. "I read about them in a book in the library. There are lots of books there; not many good ones, though; mostly sermons and that sort of thing. Do you know any good stories about knights in armor, and ladies shut up in castles, and fights with dragons? I know there are no dragons now, but that doesn't matter."

"Not in the least," says Signa. "Yes, I'll try and remember some stories by to-morrow."

"And I'll come here and hear you tell them," he says. "I often come here. Do you know why?"

(To be continued.)



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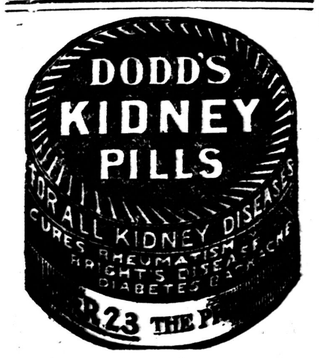

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Louis Philippe Was Wanting When the Crisis Came.

Baroness Bonde wrote in her diary the following account of the abdication of Louis Philippe of France on the day of that remarkable occurrence:

"An aide-de-camp of the Minister of War who was in the King's Cabinet when he abdicated gave me a detailed account of this most signal piece of cowardice. He had reviewed the troops in the Carrousel on horseback, highly rouged, when a cry was raised. 'Voici des faubourgs!' No one had any orders; no one gave any. The mob rushed forward, shouting, 'Vive la garde nationale—vivent les troupes!' and shook hands with the outposts.

"The King retreated precipitately with his sons and a sub-lieutenant of the national guard rushed into the palace asking to see him. He was admitted, and in the greatest agitation said:

"'Your majesty must abdicate.'

"'Very well,' says the King. 'In favor of my grandson.'

"'No, unconditionally,' says the young and self-elected mouthpiece of public opinion.

"Would you believe it? Of all who were congregated around the royal person, Pisccatory alone said: 'Go down and head your troops. Fight for your crown and your dynasty.' He was overruled, and they all marched out of the palace except the Duchesse d'Orleans, her children and the Duc de Nemours."

"How much does it cost you to run this yacht, old chap?" "If I knew, I wouldn't do it."—Life.

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A TRUE LADY.

A Kindly Frenchwoman's Courtesy to a German Frau.

In the hour of need we may turn to the anecdote which supplies the concrete illustration of the essential fact. And it would not be easy to find an anecdote more significant than one which has been told in New York in the course of this terrible war. A Frenchwoman, engaged as a teacher in an important school of the city, was so ardent an advocate of the cause of her country, that when she heard a casual acquaintance make a slighting remark about France, she up and boxed his ears. This, you may say, was all the evidence needed to prove that she was not a lady, in any exact use of the word. But even if under temptation she fell from grace on this one occasion, none the less did she possess the indisputable instinct which is the vital factor.

Riding in a subway car in the uncrowded noon hours, this Frenchwoman could not help seeing that a woman seated opposite to her was in distress. Finally, when this woman began to sob, the French lady crossed over and sat down beside her, and said: "You seem to be in trouble. Can I do anything for you?"

With a strong German accent, the weeping woman replied: "Nobody can do anything for me. This letter has come to-day; and my eldest son has just been killed in the trenches. This makes three in the past month, and I have no more."

The Frenchwoman put out her hand. "Nobody can help you," she answered —"except by sympathizing with you. And perhaps you will be willing to accept my sympathy when I tell you that my only son is now in the trenches. I have not heard from him in six weeks, and at any moment a letter may come to me, as it has just come to you, telling me that I have no longer a son."

The German woman dried her eyes and took the hand held out to her. She looked into the face of the unknown comforter, and said: "So you are a German, too?"

And the Frenchwoman unhesitatingly replied: "Yes."

It took a woman to make that noble answer, and perhaps it could have been made only by a woman of France, a country where the social instinct is cultivated from the cradle.—From "The Point of View," in the September Scribner.