

CHAPTER XXII

DR. ROB TO THE RESCUE

INTO the somewhat oppressive silence which followed the addressing and closing of the envelope, broke the cheery voice of Dr. Rob.

"Which is the patient to-day? The lady or the gentleman? Ah, neither, I see. Both flaunt the bloom of perfect health and make the doctor shy. It is spring without, but summer within," ran on Dr. Rob gaily, wondering why both faces were so white and perturbed, and why there was in the air a sense of hearts in torment. "Flannels seem to call up boating and picnic parties; and I see you have discarded the merino, Nurse Gray, and returned to the pretty blue washables. More becoming, undoubtedly; only, don't take cold; and be sure you feed up well. In this air people must eat plenty, and you have been perceptibly losing weight lately. We don't want *too* airy-fairy dimensions."

"Why do you always chaff Miss Gray about being small, Dr. Rob?" asked Garth, in a rather vexed tone. "I am sure being short is in no way detrimental to her."

"I will chaff her about being tall if you like," said Dr. Rob, looking at her with a wicked twinkle, as she stood in the window, drawn up to her full height, and regarding him with cold disapproval.

"I would sooner no comments of any kind were made upon her personal appearance," said Garth

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shortly; then added, more pleasantly: "You see, she is just a voice to me — a kind, guiding voice. At first I used to form mental pictures of her, of a hazy kind; but now I prefer to appropriate in all its helpfulness what I *do* know, and leave unimagined what I do not. Did it ever strike you that she is the only person — bar that fellow Johnson, who belongs to a nightmare time I am quickly forgetting — I have yet had near me, in my blindness, whom I had not already seen; the only voice I have ever heard to which I could not put a face and figure? In time, of course, there will be many. At present she stands alone to me in this."

Dr. Rob's observant eye had been darting about during this explanation, seeking to focus itself upon something worthy of minute examination. Suddenly he spied the foreign letter lying close beside him on the table.

"Hello!" he said. "Pyramids? The Egyptian stamp? That's interesting. Have you friends out there, Mr. Dalmain?"

"That letter came from Cairo," Garth replied; "but I believe Miss Champion has by now gone on to Syria."

Dr. Rob attacked his moustache, and stared at the letter meditatively. "Champion?" he repeated. "Champion? It's an uncommon name. Is your correspondent, by any chance, the Honourable Jane?"

"Why, that letter is from her," replied Garth, surprised. "Do you know her?" His voice vibrated eagerly.

"Well," answered Dr. Rob, with slow deliberation, "I know her face, and I know her voice; I know her figure, and I know a pretty good deal of her character.

I know her at home, and I know her abroad. I've seen her under fire, which is more than most men of her acquaintance can claim. But there is one thing I never knew until to-day, and that is her handwriting. May I examine this envelope?" He turned to the window;—yes, this audacious little Scotchman had asked the question of Nurse Rosemary. But only a broad blue back met his look of inquiry. Nurse Rosemary was studying the view. He turned back to Garth, who had evidently already made a sign of assent, and on whose face was clearly expressed an eager desire to hear more, and an extreme disinclination to ask for it.

Dr. Mackenzie took up the envelope and pondered it.

"Yes," he said, at last, "it is like her,—clear, firm, unwavering; knowing what it means to say, and saying it; going where it means to go, and getting there. Ay, lad, it's a grand woman that; and if you have the Honourable Jane for your friend, you can be doing without a few other things."

A tinge of eager colour rose in Garth's thin cheeks. He had been so starved in his darkness for want of some word concerning her, from that outer light in which she moved. He had felt so hopelessly cut off from all chance of hearing of her. And all the while, if only he had known it, old Robbie could have talked of her. He had had to question Brand so cautiously, fearing to betray his secret and hers; but with Dr. Rob and Nurse Gray no such precautions were needed. He could safely guard his secret, and yet listen and speak.

"Where — when?" asked Garth.

"I will tell you where, and I will tell you when,"

answered Dr. Rob, "if you feel inclined for a war tale on this peaceful spring morning."

Garth was aflame with eagerness. "Have you a chair, doctor?" he said. "And has Miss Gray a chair?"

"I have no chair, sir," said Dr. Rob, "because when I intend thoroughly to enjoy my own eloquence it is my custom to stand. Nurse Gray has no chair, because she is standing at the window absorbed in the view. She has apparently ceased to pay any heed to you and me. You will very rarely find one woman take much interest in tales about another. But you lean back in your own chair, laddie, and light a cigarette. And a wonderful thing it is to see you do it, too, and better than pounding the wall. Eh? All of which we may consider we owe to the lady who disdains us and prefers the scenery. Well, I'm not much to look at, goodness knows; and she can see you all the rest of the day. Now that's a brand worth smoking. What do you call it. 'Zenith'? Ah, and 'Marcovitch.' Yes; you can't better that for drawing-room and garden purposes. It mingles with the flowers. Lean back and enjoy it, while I smell gunpowder. For I will tell you where I first saw the Honourable Jane. Out in South Africa, in the very thick of the Boer war. I had volunteered for the sake of the surgery experience. She was out there, nursing; but the real thing, mind you. None of your dabbling in eau-de-cologne with lace handkerchiefs, and washing handsome faces when the orderlies had washed them already; making charming conversation to men who were getting well, but fleeing in dread from the dead or the dying. None of that, you may be sure, and none of that allowed in her hospital; for Miss

Champion was in command there, and I can tell you she made them scoot. She did the work of ten, and expected others to do it too. Doctors and orderlies adored her. She was always called 'The Honourable Jane,' most of the men sounding the *h* and pronouncing the title as four syllables. Ay, and the wounded soldiers! There was many a lad out there, far from home and friends, who, when death came, died with a smile on his lips, and a sense of mother and home quite near, because the Honourable Jane's arm was around him, and his dying head rested against her womanly breast. Her voice when she talked to them? No, — that I shall never forget. And to hear her snap at the women, and order along the men; and then turn and speak to a sick Tommy as his mother or his sweetheart would have wished to hear him spoken to, was a lesson in quick-change from which I am profiting still. And that big, loving heart must often have been racked; but she was always brave and bright. Just once she broke down. It was over a boy whom she tried hard to save — quite a youngster. She had held him during the operation which was his only chance; and when it proved no good, and he lay back against her unconscious, she quite broke down and said: 'Oh, doctor, — a mere boy — and to suffer so, and then die like this!' and gathered him to her, and wept over him, as his own mother might have done. The surgeon told me of it himself. He said the hardest hearts in the tent were touched and softened. But it was the only time the Honourable Jane broke down."

Garth shielded his face with his hand. His half-smoked cigarette fell unheeded to the floor. The hand that had held it was clenched on his knee. Dr. Rob picked it up, and rubbed the scorched spot on the

carpet carefully with his foot. He glanced towards the window. Nurse Rosemary had turned and was leaning against the frame. She did not look at him, but her eyes dwelt with troubled anxiety on Garth.

"I came across her several times, at different centres," continued Dr. Rob; "but we were not in the same departments, and she spoke to me only once. I had ridden in, from a temporary overflow sort of place where we were dealing with the worst cases straight off the field, to the main hospital in the town for a fresh supply of chloroform. While they fetched it, I walked round the ward, and there in a corner was Miss Champion, kneeling beside a man whose last hour was very near, talking to him quietly, and taking measures at the same time to ease his pain. Suddenly there came a crash — a deafening rush — and another crash, and the Honourable Jane and her patient were covered with dust and splinters. A Boer shell had gone clean through the roof just over their heads. The man sat up, yelling with fear. Poor chap, you couldn't blame him; dying, and half under morphine. The Honourable Jane never turned a hair. 'Lie down, my man,' she said, 'and keep still.' 'Not here,' sobbed the man. 'All right,' said the Honourable Jane; 'we will soon move you.' Then she turned and saw me. I was in the most nondescript khaki, a non-com's jacket which I had caught up on leaving the tent, and various odds and ends of my outfit which had survived the wear and tear of the campaign. Also I was dusty with a long gallop. 'Here, serjeant,' she said, 'lend a hand with this poor fellow. I can't have him disturbed just now.' That was Jane's only comment on the passing of a shell within a few yards of her own head. Do you

wonder the men adored her? She placed her hand beneath his shoulders, and signed to me to take him under the knees, and together we carried him round a screen, out of the ward, and down a short passage; turning unexpectedly into a quiet little room, with a comfortable bed, and photographs and books arranged on the tiny dressing-table. She said: 'Here, if you please, serjeant,' and we laid him on the bed. 'Whose is it?' I asked. She looked surprised at being questioned, but seeing I was a stranger, answered civilly: 'Mine.' And then, noting that he had dozed off while we carried him, added: 'And he will have done with beds, poor chap, before I need it.' There's nerve for you! — Well, that was my only conversation out there with the Honourable Jane. Soon after I had had enough and came home."

Garth lifted his head. "Did you ever meet her at home?" he asked.

"I did," said Dr. Rob. "But she did not remember me. Not a flicker of recognition. Well, how could I expect it? I wore a beard out there; no time to shave; and my jacket proclaimed me a serjeant, not a surgeon. No fault of hers if she did not expect to meet a comrade from the front in the wilds of — of Piccadilly," finished Dr. Rob lamely. "Now, having spun so long a yarn, I must be off to your gardener's cot in the wood, to see his good wife, who has had what he pathetically calls 'an increase.' I should think a *decrease* would have better suited the size of his house. But first I must interview Mistress Margery in the dining-room. She is anxious about herself just now because she 'canna eat bacon.' She says it flies between her shoulders. So erratic a deviation from its normal route on the part of the bacon, un-

doubtedly requires investigation. So, by your leave, I will ring for the good lady."

"Not just yet, doctor," said a quiet voice from the window. "I want to see you in the dining-room, and will follow you there immediately. And afterwards, while you investigate Margery, I will run up for my bonnet, and walk with you through the woods, if Mr. Dalmain will not mind an hour alone."

When Jane reached the dining-room, Dr. Robert Mackenzie was standing on the hearth-rug in a Napoleonic attitude, just as on the morning of their first interview. He looked up uncertainly as she came in.

"Well?" he said. "Am I to pay the piper?"

Jane came straight to him, with both hands extended. "Ah, serjeant!" she said. "You dear faithful old serjeant! See what comes of wearing another man's coat. And my dilemma comes from taking another woman's name. So you knew me all the time, from the first moment I came into the room?"

"From the first moment you entered the room," assented Dr. Rob.

"Why did you not say so?" asked Jane.

"Well, I concluded you had your reasons for being 'Nurse Rosemary Gray,' and it did not come within my province to question your identity."

"Oh, you dear!" said Jane. "Was there ever anything so shrewd, and so wise, and so bewilderingly far-seeing, standing on two legs on a hearth-rug before! And when I remember how you said: 'So you have arrived, Nurse Gray?' and all the while you might have been saying: 'How do you do, Miss Champion? And what brings you up here under somebody else's name?'"

"I might have so said," agreed Dr. Rob reflectively; "but praise be, I did not."

"But tell me," said Jane, "why let it out now?"

Dr. Rob laid his hand on her arm. "My dear, I am an old fellow, and all my life I have made it my business to know, without being told. You have been coming through a strain, — a prolonged period of strain, sometimes harder, sometimes easier, but never quite relaxed, — a strain such as few women could have borne. It was not only with him; you had to keep it up towards us all. I knew, if it were to continue, you must soon have the relief of some one with whom to share the secret, — some one towards whom you could be yourself occasionally. And when I found you had been writing to him here, sending the letter to be posted in Cairo (how like a woman, to strain at a gnat, after swallowing such a camel!), awaiting its return day after day, then obliged to read it to him yourself, and take down his dictated answer, which I gathered from your faces when I entered was his refusal of your request to come and see him, well, it seemed to me about time you were made to realise that you might as well confide in an old fellow who, in common with all the men who knew you in South Africa, would gladly give his right hand for the Honourable Jane."

Jane looked at him, her eyes full of gratitude. For the moment she could not speak.

"But tell me, my dear," said Dr. Rob, "tell me, if you can: why does the lad put from him so firmly that which, if indeed it might be his for the asking, would mean for him so great, so wonderful, so comforting a good?"

"Ah, doctor," said Jane, "thereby hangs a tale of

sad mistrust and mistake, and the mistrust and mistake, alas, were mine. Now, while you see Margery, I will prepare for walking; and as we go through the wood I will try to tell you the woeful thing which came between him and me and placed our lives so far apart. Your wise advice will help me, and your shrewd knowledge of men and of the human heart may find us a way out, for indeed we are shut in between Migdol and the sea."

As Jane crossed the hall and was about to mount the stairs, she looked towards the closed library door. A sudden fear seized her, lest the strain of listening to that tale of Dr. Rob's had been too much for Garth. None but she could know all it must have awakened of memory to be told so vividly of the dying soldiers whose heads were pillowed on her breast, and the strange coincidence of those words, "A mere boy — and to suffer so!" She could not leave the house without being sure he was safe and well. And yet she instinctively feared to intrude when he imagined himself alone for an hour.

Then Jane, in her anxiety, did a thing she had never done before. She opened the front door noiselessly, passed round the house to the terrace, and when approaching the open window of the library, trod on the grass border, and reached it without making the faintest sound.

Never before had she come upon him unawares, knowing he hated and dreaded the thought of an unseen intrusion on his privacy.

But now — just this once —

Jane looked in at the window.

Garth sat sideways in the chair, his arms folded on the table beside him, his face buried in them. He was

sobbing as she had sometimes heard men sob after agonising operations, borne without a sound until the worst was over. And Garth's sob of agony was this: "*Oh, my wife — my wife — my wife!*"

Jane crept away. How she did it she never knew. But some instinct told her that to reveal herself then, taking him at a disadvantage, when Dr. Rob's story had unnerved and unmanned him, would be to ruin all. "*If you value your ultimate happiness and his,*" Deryck's voice always sounded in warning. Besides, it was such a short postponement. In the calm earnest thought which would succeed this storm, his need of her would win the day. The letter, not yet posted, would be rewritten. He would say "*Come*" — and the next minute he would be in her arms.

So Jane turned noiselessly away.

Coming in, an hour later, from her walk with Dr. Rob, her heart filled with glad anticipation, she found him standing in the window, listening to the countless sounds he was learning to distinguish. He looked so **slim and tall** and straight in his white flannels, both hands thrust deep into the pockets of his coat, that when he turned at her approach it seemed to her as if the shining eyes *must* be there.

"Was it lovely in the woods?" he asked. "Simpson shall take me up there after lunch. Meanwhile, is there time, if you are not tired, Miss Gray, to finish our morning's work?"

Five letters were dictated and a cheque written. Then Jane noticed that hers to him had gone from among the rest. But his to her lay on the table ready for stamping. She hesitated.

"And about the letter to Miss Champion?" she said. "Do you wish it to go as it is, Mr. Dalmain?"

"Why certainly," he said. "Did we not finish it?"

"I thought," said Jane nervously, looking away from his blank face, "I thought perhaps — after Dr. Rob's story — you might —"

"Dr. Rob's story could make no possible difference as to whether I should let her come here or not," said Garth emphatically; then added more gently: "It only reminded me —"

"Of what?" asked Jane, her hands upon her breast.

"Of what a glorious woman she is," said Garth Dalmain, and blew a long, steady cloud of smoke into the summer air.