

CHAPTER XXIII.

"Be still."

"I want to leave Tony, but I can't speak of it. He could find out."

"He must help himself before he can help me."

"I discovered my loss and in my grief I must work."

"I was uneasy. It was getting on me."

"I had come. What had happened?"

"I had heard a cautious footstep."

"I saw in the starlight the form of a human form in front of me."

"Looking closer, but keeping still, he saw a woman's face."

"I believe she's here, Susie. Where you saw her coming?"

"I did at supper time."

"I grewled warningly."

"Hunt, for the Lord's sake!"

"A woman was just ready to go."

"I was women will, when Max, forward, pressed his hand over his head."

"At the same time he spoke to me."

"Please, Ma'am. Be still, and you why. I am not going to you."

"You may be sure of that."

"I was, boyish voice reassured the woman, and she stood still with the light to her skirts."

"I was a turkey that we came to see."

"I had only just got the baby."

"I is a new turkey, and the thought they saw her coming."

"I had no idea that any one would come."

"I thought there has been a sort of a party."

"I just now that the men have been out against the robbers."

"I was sure of what I did."

"I see you are only a boy."

"I'm all, Ma'am, and I'm waiting for my mother."

"I am you?"

"I am Max Poindexter."

"I am one of the children."

"I am so much interested in you."

"I am Mrs. Hunt?"

"Dear, brave Tom, he was so about you. You are the one who sick so long."

"I am sick so long."

"I am sick so long."

"I am sick so long."

"I am sick so long."

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"I am sick so long."

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"I am sick so long."

learning many truths from experience, had this lesson impressed upon her, for thoughts of the twins would come between her and the enjoyment of the great show.

The Irishman's jolly hopefulness was not a very lasting influence. It was good in its way, but its staying qualities were poor. He had to keep it up.

The side shows and outside affairs generally interested Tony until she was taken by her new friend to a seat in the great tent.

"It's meself that's been laughing the blues away this 30 year an' more, fur I was a lad of 20 when I began. Yez must laugh an' be more happy, fur it's foine ye look in the foiney shure."

And for a while Tony was happy. Fairlyland had opened before her.

"If I had a dozen pairs of eyes and ears they'd all be busy," she exclaimed.

The people clapped their hands, and the band played and the horses dashed around the ring with women poised like gay butterflies on their backs and Tony scattered with simple delight.

She came to the conclusion that life was of very little value outside of a circus, and began to build vague plans for joining the company. She believed that she could soon learn to perform some of the feats.

But nobody seemed to make acquaintance with her. When she thought of this she began to look around with an eye to making a new friend or two, for she was a social little soul, but she was not pretty and no one cared to look closely enough to see that she was bright and odd and sorry in need of friends.

To her surprise, she found that some of the women were rude and disrespectful to her, and all seemed to take her as a good joke. This was not what Tony liked or expected, for she was a genuine little lady, and she knew it.

But she was patient and persistent and not easily put down, so she kept on trying to be sociable, but, not knowing the rules of polite etiquette, she went about it queerly.

"I wonder where Pat picked up his curious little protegee?" she heard Mlle Adelle Celeste ask one of the other women, as she lounged idly on a pile of pillows and puffed at a bad smelling cigar.

"He didn't pick me up, ma'am," Tony said, with great dignity.

"No! I quite thought you had the look of having been picked up. Are you just floating round catching what you can?"

"I am here to the circus," Tony said, not knowing but a sharp reply might cause her friend trouble.

Another of the women laughed loudly.

"One would think that the circus was here for you."

She was fat and frowsy and not in the least ladylike, so Tony tried not to mind. The child was turning away when another woman said:

"Don't I seem to know that skirt and waist? At first I thought it was a dim memory of an old picture of the Queen of Sheba, but—Lest, doncher know the skirt?"

And then Tony felt like rending her garments, and clothing herself in sackcloth and ashes, and was only able to refrain from so doing by recollecting that there was no sackcloth available, and that the dear little Quaker gown was really past putting on.

She ran quickly away, utterly disgusted with showing herself friendly. If she went to her grave without a friend she would not try it again.

The next day she rode on the wagon with Mr. Monnagan, though she felt a little remorseful and ashamed when she met the look of simple, kindly welcome of the Irishman's eyes, for it had been her secret intention to abandon the box wagon and ride with the ladies in one of the carriages, as part of the circus procession.

But to make up for this she entertained the clown by telling him stories of the Lowries. Now and then she was obliged to stop and cry when the thought of the twins came to her, and this was often that had been the case yesterday, for Mr. Monnagan was not so jolly to-day.

He seemed to be troubled and an Irishman with a trouble on his mind is like a butterfly with a burden on its wings.

Care sits queerly on the Irish face as if there was not the proper accommodation for it.

It was not that Tony found her friend unkind or even indifferent. His face was just the same with the happy gleam of it, like a pleasant landscape when a cloud has slipped under the sun.

Now and then the fat clown sighed ponderously, and his upper lip lengthened.

The truth was the boys had been laughing at him and the heart that was so easily moved to pity was equally sensitive to ridicule.

"Pat's Kid" had furnished many a jest and "Pat's Ugly Duckling" many a fine joke, and poor Pat was sorry indeed that the little waif had settled on his particular wagon for a lighting place.

But there she was, and there were her eyes, blue as the water of Killarney—blue as Kathleen's own. It was true that he had not seen the lake in more than 30 years, and Kathleen had come to be only a memory, but the Irish heart never grows old, and, fickle as it is, the lake and the blue eyes of an Irish girl hold it secure.

Now, Tony was a far-seeing maiden, and she read aright the trouble on her friend's face.

"I think you are tired of having me, Mr. Monnagan," she said, as a mighty sigh rose from his heart or his lungs, or from wherever it is that sighs begin.

"Niver a bit, by the howly Mither herself," he exclaimed with elaborate surprise.

"It looks like it, and I don't see why you wouldn't be."

"It's the teasing of the boys, in-tole-er-ly, an' the devil a bit of anything else, shure."

"Oh, never mind. You are not to tell stories; that's next to cursing! I expect you can get me off at the next farm house. It is enough for you to have brought me away. I do thank you, and I don't want to lose you. I suppose I can keep up with as big a thing as a circus."

Mr. Monnagan was too honestly at his wits' end to keep up his conversation of delight at having the child in his wagon.

He looked at the next moment.

Tony saw that a change of some sort was inevitable. She felt like a leaf drifting in the wind.

They turned into a road that somehow looked familiar. She did not really remember any such place, but it did not look strange.

It was in the forenoon of the next day that this began to trouble her, and she tried to think where she had seen a road like it.

In eastern North Carolina the towns are not near to each other, and in the early days few of them were large enough to attract the attention of a circus. So the great shows used to come and break themselves up in convenient pieces. These, for the want of railroad to the smaller towns went through the country from place to place coming to a head at certain intervals in the larger towns.

It was one of these detachments that Tony had fallen in with. And it was fortunate that the circus was broken to her gently, for something must have given way if the strain had been greater.

But her respect for circuses was changing to contempt, as mildest milk changes to sharpest acids.

After all Auntie was right, and a circus was a vain and glittering snare. She confided this to Mr. Monnagan, who agreed with her, and drove solemnly on.

Tony turned her attention to the tantalizing landscape. If there was only a hill to measure by. But there were only flat fields and forests that seemed to run out to the very rim of creation.

Suddenly she sprang up, clapping her hands.

"Oh, oh, oh!" she cried, waving her hands wildly. "Oh, Medy alive, Oh!"

"Sit ye down. Sit ye down. Howly Mither, she's mad. It's loony she's been all the tolm, shure. Sit ye down!" Mr. Monnagan screamed excitedly.

"Murder! Thave!" Pat Monnagan leaned toward her and shouted the awful words in her ear, trying to reduce her to good behavior.

Two or three men in front stood up and laughed at the queer show.

Back to the Irishman floated the hated song.

Patty had a little kid, And took her to the show, And everywhere that Patty went That kid was sure to go.

He bought the kid a silken gown, When she began to droop; He fed her with a silver spoon On Mullagatavny sough.

"Don't hold me! It's awful! I can't stand it!" And she shook her little fist at the laughing men like a small fury.

"If ye could kape cool ye wouldn't be so warrum, shure," Pat suggested.

"Oh, I know it—I tell you to let loose of me. I'm so glad—so glad!"

"Yes, take hit modit, ye'll excite the nerves of ye," pleaded the uneasy clown.

"Let me go! O, those horrid men, Put me down! I'm going here, don't you see?" And Tony burst out crying like a big, scared baby.

She was scrambling over the seat and crawling to the back of the wagon, while the clown gazed at her in wild alarm and never thought once of stopping the horses.

All at once there was a flash of crimson, a flutter of royal purple, and Tony was on the ground. She had jumped from the wagon!

"Howly Moses, she's kilt herself intirely, an' it's a cripple she'll be for the rest of her life, or my name's not Pat Monnagan!"

And the fat clown looked down at the child and up at the house they were slowly passing.

"They are her friends, and it's glad I am that she's found herself for them."

And, dismissing the whole matter from his mind as he saw the odd little figure on its feet, the clown drove on.

Now, a day or two of chafing and the end of it all would come, he thought, as the boys broke into another and to him pleasanter song. The wagon turned a curve and Tony was to Mr. Monnagan a thing of the past.

An unpleasant little memory that would be called up to his mind until the boys found new fun.

But in reality Tony was something more substantial than a memory.

"Medy!" she exclaimed, when the dust she had stirred up settled a little. "I didn't know how heavy I was. I most knocked the breath out of me."

She went on, rubbing the dust out of her mouth and eyes.

Standing on one foot she carefully dusted her silk skirt.

"I reckon they'll—oh, it hurts—be awful glad to see me—ouch, my foot hurts. It won't go down. Oh!"

She put her foot down, and tried to bear her weight on it. Her face whitened and back she sank into the sand and then danced off together, and sunshine grew blacker and blacker, while the fields and sky went spinning round like a double tetotum and the poor little Tony had fainted.

CHAPTER XXV.

Maty's Adventure.

"It was only Maty that Max saw limping feebly to the wagon, but it was a very white, weak Maty. Max ran to meet him."

"But how did you happen?"

"I was out of my head!"

"Well, you see, he snatched the boots and was just turning his attention to me again, when I heard a rustling about the man. I yelled and so did he, and the hand with the pistol went down, and my leg and not my heart made a pocket for the ball."

"Maty, what was it?"

"I'm coming to that. You must allow a fellow to go slow when he's shot in the leg."

"Yes, of course. I wonder the child can tell it at all. It put me in mind of Tom. He was never afraid of anything." Mrs. Hunt said, wiping her eyes.

"The robber ran—he ran like Tam O'Shanter, only he was afoot. Oh, how he did run, and that white thing flapping like a mad ghost behind him. I started to run, too, when I heard a second hiss, and my heart choked me when I thought that there was one of the things for me!"

"But I looked down and there under the wire grass sat an old gray goose. Her husband had whipped a robber! I didn't stay to congratulate her."

"A gander?"

"Exactly. I felt like—like—well, like the army that was saved by the cackling of the geese. And was there a thistle in it? My leg reminded me of that. How it did sting."

"Maty, you are a case. If I ever meet your ghost I shall expect it to tell me some supernatural joke."

"I shouldn't at all wonder. You see I am not cut out of hero cloth, but I tell you I did some heroic running."

"With that leg?"

"Yessum. I wished I'd had a spare one."

"It wouldn't have matched the other." Max said, dryly, and even Mrs. Hunt laughed at the quaint pun.

After this Maty was told of the new plan and was delighted to be of use to Mrs. Hunt. He insisted upon starting at once.

"But Uncle Emerson has not come," Max said.

"He isn't coming, Max. I couldn't get him to. It has been his intention all along to stay and I could not induce him to come. He just wouldn't, that's all."

"Why didn't he tell me?"

"He said he could not have resisted you. I told him about everything, and, Max, he knew."

"I'd better go back and bring him."

"No, Max, you shall not go. You owe you'd never get back. I will not let you go!"

Mrs. Hunt serenade with Max. He could do nothing for the old man now. Maty described his parting with the negro, and Mrs. Hunt thought it was likely that he would go to his old friends. It was natural for him to want to stay near his old home.

They got Maty and the little ones into the wagon, and Mrs. Hunt brought out such things as she thought they might need and packed them into the wagon, while Maty watched the children, and Max went to get the mules.

He was sorry to take them so unceremoniously, but there was no other way. The stable was not locked, for the outlaws were bold enough to take what they wanted, anyway, and a lock more or less was a trifling matter.

Max found the harness after some search, and with as little noise as possible put the mules to the wagon.

Altogether it was nearly daylight when they drove out of town, and they went with fear and trembling. It seemed hardly possible that they could escape unnoticed.

They were well aware that their dangers were not passed, by any means, and the boys knew that the risk was now greater than the widow of Mr. Hunt was with them. But this did not affect their determination to help her. Maty was especially glad to have her now that he was "under the weather." She was old enough to have been the mother of a taller boy than he was, and her hands were tender and helpful. She had done him a world of good already.

The little folks were all asleep and Max was driving slowly along. It was just at day dawn. Suddenly a hand was laid upon each of the mules and Max saw half a dozen dark forms in the road.

"Stop!" one of the men said, and there was a gleam of pistols and a flash of lantern.

"Who's in that wagon?"

CHAPTER XXVI.

Old Friends.

"Why, father, did you ever?"

"Well, I just never did."

"If there ain't one of 'em split right out into the road. I never did believe in young women racing about over the mind, father, you'll fall over yourself. Do take it easy! How she is dressed. It is a wonder to me that they all don't get their necks broke. Now, who'd a thought she'd have been shining round out here in the big road?"

These circuses are awful things!"

Tony had already settled down in the wagon when from the curve of the road around which the easy minded clown had disappeared came an old gray horse of sober mien drawing a high seated, old-fashioned buggy.

This equipage had stopped short at sight of a gorgeously clad young woman spread across the road.

The old horse looked down with an expression of mild amazement.

"Why, for the land sake, Mother! It's why, Mother, it's—"

The old man looked up in blank wonder.

"I know; it's a circus woman, but something's wrong with her, they've left her, Father."

"Mother, you just let Nelly stand, and you come here."

The old lady scrambled down briskly.

And that was how it happened that Tony opened her eyes to see bending over her a sweet, withered old face, with a crumpled ruff all around it, and a soft white bow under its chin.

Only this time an immense black straw bonnet over-topped and surrounded it all.

"Why, actually, it's that child! She beats them all to drop about! Do you reckon she dropped from the sky—or the circus?"

"Looks more as if she was rigged out for a circus."

"Hush, Father, don't say anything, and she may be dying."

And she just opened up after the circus was past—But what is this bringing? A child! Let me help thee!"

And Phoebe's strong arms were about the little form, and Ann, seeing that something was amiss, dragged a mattress out into the big, cool hall, and presently poor, tired Tony was stretched out on the quickly made bed, and she looked up to see—could it be? Yes, there it was, a quiet, white face with far away eyes and a patient mouth, and on either side of the face smooth hair was looped back like window curtains and fastened over the ears that seemed to have been made on purpose.

"Auntie, Oh, my own dear Auntie!" Tony cried faintly, but Auntie heard and with a small, mouse-like squeal, she fell down upon the mattress, for until now she had only known that a hurt child had been brought in, and her heart was so full of her own trouble that she had not thought of making room for her.

"Tony! I thought you were dead."

And then the four fussed over her like kindly bees over a drop of very sweet honey. And there was such explaining and such an exclaiming, such a chattering and questioning that it is a wonder how anybody did ever come to understand all at the last, but somehow they did, and at last they quieted down and everybody stopped to wonder how all this confusion ever managed to get itself together in the quiet Quaker home.

"And these ran away?" Phoebe exclaimed, as she tied the last string that had the poultice on Tony's foot.

"Yessem, we did."

"But, why, Tony? You must have known that we'd think—"

"We'd started before that. It was all planned, Auntie, before you left."

"Why did you want to do it?"

"Because the boys couldn't help being bad—that is Maty could not—and Uncle Gaston said he'd bind them out if they were any more, and they could not be slaves."

"O, Tony!"

"Yes and you know I couldn't leave the twins, but oh—"

She turned her face to the pillow and cried.

"Tony Uncle Gaston only meant to put the boys out as apprentices to some one who knew more about managing boys than he did."

"Then I am all to blame," Tony wailed.

"He was quite gentle at the last and seldom spoke crossly," Auntie went on sadly.

"At the last?" Tony gasped.

"He died a month ago," Auntie said, lifting her handkerchief to her eyes.

"O, Auntie, and the twins are—"

"Dead!"

Auntie went down into the handkerchief again, and Mrs. Outlaw bent over Tony. "Well, child, let's get some of this snuffery off and give you a chance to tell us how you got so much of it on. Silk, every strand of it! Father, you go and see to Nelly. She'll think you've lost your mind, and you do look it, gapping there."

And again Tony felt the soothing touch of Mrs. Outlaw's motherly hands. And after a while, when she was all dainty and sweet in a little Quaker night gown, Tony told all the strange story.

"We knew who you were," she said to Phoebe, "and I was awfully afraid you'd know us, after we'd told you our name."

"But thee sees I had no notion of my sister's children running away, though I mied thee kept me thinking of Bernice. I have known many of the names, and did not connect the travelling children with my niece. But somehow I felt to write to thy Auntie and that is how she came to turn to us in her bereavement."

Mr. Outlaw came back when he hoped that he would not be sent away again, and listened to Tony's story.

"I might have known them boys was up to something—brightest boys I ever seed. What became of the little one?"

Tony shook her head. "I don't know, sir."

"Poor thing. And now, Tony, if you feel well enough, we'd better go home," Mrs. Outlaw said.

"Thee forgets, friend, she is ours. Her mother's sisters and her father's are here. This is the child's home."

"I beg your pardon, Ann, I'm sure. It was thinking so much about keeping the little thing when she was here before. But we'll be passing freer, now, I hope."

"But thee cannot go to-night. It is getting late. Stay with us."

And the Outlaws stayed not only that night, but many afterward.

Tony was terribly tired and worn. Her little freckled face was pinched and thin, and her foot painful. The quiet and rest of the Quaker home was delightful.

After this the Outlaws came often and remained over night. Father was never tired of asking questions, and Mother Outlaw understood the art of concocting innumerable dainties for sick folks, so Tony fared well, indeed.

It was on one of these visits that Mr. Outlaw was walking over the place, wishing that there was a man about to entertain him. Women were nice, in their way; but they could not talk about the things he liked, and so many of them together made poor listeners. He was almost lonely when he heard the rumble of wheels.

He looked over the gate. Presently he stepped outside. A cloud of dust surrounded the approaching vehicle, and the after glow from the sunset and the thought of the chariot of fire, Outlaw thought of the chariot of fire.

But this was only an ordinary carriage. The old gentleman looked closely at the horses and picked up his ears.

"Why, I wonder—it ain't here—well, now may be!"

The carriage stopped and some one sprang out.

The horses started and