

Private Brown

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CHAPTER XX.

She understood him now, and blessing him for his little ruse, went quickly to the hospital. The old father was watching her from a paring in the window curtain, and as she tripped toward the hospital an expression of satisfaction came over his face. And that is how Alice came to be installed as Brown's nurse.

Brown slept for two hours calmly and peacefully. When he at last awoke, half-dreamily, he felt a soft hand on his forehead, and opening his eyes he met those of his darling one.

"Ned, my darling, do you know me? Do you know your Alice?" she whispered, bending over him.

"Know you, my blessed angel? Of course I do," he replied, making an effort to throw his arms about her neck. She gently stopped him and with a blush upon her happy face said:

"No, Ned, not here. Someone may see you. The attendants of the hospital do not think it strange that I should nurse my noble rescuer back to health and strength again, but they might not see the propriety of me permitting his embraces. They are not aware that your nurse's heart is all yours, my darling, every little, tiny bit of it."

"Bless you for those words, my love. And you have been with me often the surgeon tells me."

"Yes, Ned, very often, but you were delirious and did not know me. The surgeon had almost given up, and oh, my darling, my poor heart was breaking. He has just told me that you have passed the crisis and will live, and I have been down on my knees by your cot thanking the Father for sparing you to me. Now Ned, dear, listen to me. You are now out of danger, and you are in my care, and the doctor has given me imperative orders, not to let you talk much. I am going to obey orders implicitly, and I am going to make you obey me. Do you hear that, Mr. Ned? Here, now, it is time for you to take your medicine. There! Be careful! Don't spill it! All over your chin. You careless fellow! You are the most awkward patient I ever had."

Thus she went on in mock reproach. The happy tones of her voice and the arch, loving smile which accompanied her words did him more good than could any medicine in the post dispensary.

"But, Alice, I must talk. I cannot lie here and—"

"No, you must not talk, you rebellious darling." Then glancing around to see that no one was near she implanted a kiss on his pale lips and continued:

"There now, see if that will seal your lips. You must just lie there and let me do all the talking. Papa says I am a little nuisance of a chatterbox anyhow, so I guess I can talk enough for both of us."

"Then tell me all that has happened since I lost consciousness behind the rocks, and I will lie as quiet as a mouse and listen," he said, taking her hand in his and pressing it warmly.

"All right, and now you forget your promise or I may punish you again by sealing your lips. You see, the people at the fort heard the firing when the Indians came upon us, and just after you fainted away a troop of cavalry came dashing up with papa at its head. He sprang from his horse with great big tears in his eyes, the very first I ever saw there in all my life, and I thought he would hug me to death. He asked me if the Indians had harmed me and I told him they had not, but he feared you were killed. He stooped down over you and looked at your pale face and the blood all over your breast, and then, O, Ned, he raved like a madman. I never saw him in such a passion before! He stamped the ground and struck the rocks with his sword and swore, oh! just awfully! He called you by name, and (now, you mustn't mind, Ned) he was only papa's bluster and I didn't mean to call you a villain and told you get up and not lie there making a fool of yourself, and said if you attempted to die he would have you drummed out of the service. He called you a brave, noble rascal, and said he'd rather lose every man in the garrison than you. Then he turned on Capt. Colby and asked him what in the—had man, you know—he was standing there for like a gaping idiot while the Indians were escaping, and ordered him to follow me. The troop dashed ahead and overtook the Indians in the sand hills across the river and had an awful fight with them, for more Indians had come after the band that chased us. Papa sent his orderly flying back to the fort after the surgeon and an ambulance, and then he fussed around and hugged me and called you good and had names until the surgeon came. Then you were lifted in the ambulance, papa sent the soldiers and telling them he would annihilate them if they hurt you. On the way in you recovered consciousness but were delirious. You kept begging me to fly to the fort and save myself and leave you to your fate, and papa asked if you had talked that way when you were fighting the Indians, and when I told him those were your very words his lips trembled, and he turned his back and began to abuse the poor driver for running over stones. And that's the whole story, dear, from a to z."

"God bless him, his heart is in the right place, if his tongue does fly the track occasionally. Oh, my darling! I—"

Her plump little hand was gently pressed over his mouth, and with a warning shake of the head she said:

"There, there! Did I not forbid you talking? You will find me a hard master, old fellow, for I will enforce obedience to my orders. Listen! I hear papa's voice in the surgeon's office."

"Come to his senses, eh? Concluded he'd made an infernal fool of himself long enough. That's right. That's right. That's sensible, and now you want to get him onto his feet again and do it quick, or, damn it, I'll shut up your drug shop and drum you out of the garrison. How would you like that, you old pill mixer? Eh, Doc?"

"It would all depend on the time I marched to, colonel. If the band would play 'See the corn-coring hero comes,' or some other air laudatory of my profession, I don't think I would

mind it much. Brown has certainly safely passed the crisis, and if nothing unforeseen occurs will rapidly recover. But it was a close call, colonel. That shot would prove fatal in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred. I can't see where his heart could have been for that ball to miss it."

"In his mouth, no doubt, or— Well, no matter. I think it will be in his possession at the time. But, papa! You can't kill an infernal rascal like him, Doc, a—a—a lion that masquerades in the skin of a dum jackass. I'll make him shed that donkey skin when he gets on his feet again. Yes, damn it, I'll make him wear his own colors. I'll go in and take a look at him."

The old man entered the ward and walked up to the wounded man's cot. There was a look of unmistakable tenderness in his face as he gazed on the pale features of the wounded man, and then on his daughter.

"How is your patient, Sunshine?" he asked in the mildest tone of voice she had ever heard him use outside of his own home.

"O, he is doing real nicely, papa, and we now feel sure he will recover from his cruel wound. The surgeon gave me strict orders not to allow him to talk, and I have just been scolding him for attempting to do so."

"That's right. Make him keep his mouth shut only when he takes his medicine, and if he refuses to obey orders, gag him." A broad smile rested on his face as he spoke. Then for a moment, again contemplating the wan face of the soldier, he said:

"Private Brown, I am a gentleman, sir, and I think I know what is due from one gentleman to another. Give me your hand, sir, and accept my warmest thanks and most hearty gratitude for your noble, gallant rescue of the light of my life, this sweet girl here, from a horrible fate at the hands of those murderous Apaches, and for your courageous defense of her life when attacked by overwhelming numbers. Your action was that of a soldier, sir, and you honor the uniform you wear."

"Col. Sanford, I—"

"Stop, sir, not a word!" the old man interrupted when Brown essayed to speak. You have orders to not talk, and a good soldier always obeys orders. Eh, Sunshine? Not a word, sir, nor an

attempt to utter a word. I hope to soon see you ready to return to duty. When you are ready to leave the hospital report to me for instructions. I will see you again, sir. Sunshine, take good care of him." And the old officer walked away.

CHAPTER XXI.

What a bright, generous flood of sunlight he left behind him. Two young hearts glowing with an encouragement that filled their souls with happiness supreme.

The days passed rapidly, and despite the pain he suffered they were happy days to Private Brown, for Alice was ever by his cot encouraging him with her devoted love. Nor was she alone in her attentions to the wounded man. Every officer and lady in the garrison called daily and bestowed upon him the kindest attention, their hearts glowing with admiration for his heroism. I said every officer. That was not true. Lieut. Vandever never came near him. That officer now kept close in the seclusion of his own quarters only when obliged to come forth on duty. When his troop was ordered hastily into the saddle to fly to the assistance of Brown in his defense of the commander's daughter. Vandever pleaded illness and took to his bed for a day. The looks of contempt which were cast at him by the other officers after that day made his life one not to be envied, and it was not long before, at his own request, he was transferred to a distant garrison, where he vowed he would begin his military career anew.

With tender, loving hands Alice administered to her lover's every want, and the roses deepened in her cheeks, her eyes grew brighter and her musical laugh took on a more joyous ring as she noted his fast increasing strength. When he was at last permitted to rise from his cot and walk slowly about the ward supported by her arm, she seemed happy and joyous as a child.

One fine morning before Alice had come to the hospital on her daily mission of love, the surgeon and Brown sat talking in the former's office. The patient had on the previous day walked to his troop's quarters, where he was given an ovation by his comrades.

"It is a lovely warm morning, Brown," the surgeon said, "and if you will walk slowly and not over-exert yourself you can go and surprise the colonel and your little nurse with a call. I am sure they will warmly welcome you."

He needed no second bidding, and leaning on a cane for support, walked slowly to the colonel's quarters. (In the way he met several officers, and warm were the congratulations poured upon him over his recovery. Again he walked the path as he had done a few weeks before, but not now with fear and trembling.)

Entering the hall he rapped lightly at the colonel's door. The same sharp, harsh "Come in," greeted his ears, but it did not now fill him with alarm. Turning the knob, he entered.

"Private Brown, by all the gods of war!" cried the bluff old soldier, arising and grasping his hand. "Out again, eh? Once more on your pins? That's right. Take a chair. I am very glad to see you."

For half an hour they conversed regarding his wound, his return to duty and various other topics, but the young soldier's thoughts were in another apartment with his loved one, and he longed to greet her for the first time in her own home. Unable to suppress this burning desire he finally said:

"Col. Sanford, before I return to the

hospital will you not permit me to pay my respects to my faithful nurse, Miss Sanford?"

"Private Brown, we may as well come to an understanding right now. You nobly risked your life to restore my beloved child to my arms, and I am deeply grateful to you for doing so. It was but her whims that led you through the long days of suffering which you were called upon to endure from a severe and dangerous wound received in her defense. She performed that duty, and with my full approval and consent. Her duties as your nurse are now at an end, and I regret that I may give you pain after all you suffered for her. In doing what I consider to be a father's duty, I use harsh language toward you. You may think it cruel and heartless, sir, when I tell you that I cannot permit her to nurse you through the long days of suffering which you were called upon to endure from a severe and dangerous wound received in her defense. She performed that duty, and with my full approval and consent. 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