

Peace With Honour

By
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DEDICATION.

PEACE WITH HONOUR.

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EPILOGUE.

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DEDICATION.

TO
E. FG. L.,
IN GRATEFUL ACKNOWLEDGMENT
OF MUCH KIND ADVICE
AND HELP.

PEACE WITH HONOUR.

CHAPTER I.

“SHOULD AULD ACQUAINTANCE BE FORGOT?”

“Now, Dick, I want to trot you out this afternoon, so please put on your smartest clothes, and your best company manners, and your most winning smile.”

“Has your majesty any more commands? I was under the impression that I was excused further duty to-day, on condition of dining out with you to-night and to-morrow night.”

“This is not duty, it is pleasure—or ought to be.”

“That sounds more inviting. Who gets the pleasure?”

“I do, if you will come, and I will promise you some as well.”

“Your generosity exceeds my highest expectations, but I should like particulars before I make any rash promises. I have just settled down here comfortably for the afternoon.”

“Dick!”—Mabel North dashed at her brother, robbed him of his cigar, and, snatching away his newspaper, set her foot upon it—“if you imagine I allow you to smoke in the conservatory merely in order that you may shirk coming out with me, you are mistaken. Now, will you come? Quick, or I shall let this thing go out!”

“I give in. Allow me to rescue that cigar. Now, perhaps, you will graciously intimate what it is you want me to do?”

“I want you to see something of the serious side of my life. What do you really know about me? You would be sorry some day if

you didn't come this afternoon. When you heard I was no more, you would shake your head and say, 'Ah, poor girl; what a frivolous butterfly she was!' I wish to guard against misconceptions of that kind."

"Oh, well, I only hope your conscience will prick you when I am gone again. When you think of me at Kubbet-ul-Haj, sweltering all day and freezing all night, you will say, 'Ah, poor fellow! I wish I had treated him better while he was here. Never a moment's peace did I give him; it was nothing but drive and rush from morning to night.'"

"Don't pretend to be bored and *blasé*, Dick. You know that you have come back from the wilderness with a very healthy appetite for innocent gaiety. If you wanted us to think that seven years on the Khemistan Frontier had made you a misanthrope, your face would belie you. I do like to see a young man enjoying himself thoroughly at a social gathering, and that pleasure I have whenever I take you out."

"This is adding insult to injury, Mab. Can't you let a man alone?"

"Not when he's my brother, and I have got him all to myself after not having seen him for years. Do come with me, Dick, there's a good boy; I want you particularly. Besides, you owe a duty to other people. Society looks favourably upon you, and it is only grateful for you to bask in its smiles. All the girls I know have said to me, 'Mornin'. Brother's comin' home, isn't he? Awf'ly plucky chap! Bring him in on our "at-home" day. Just adore soldiers.' Then their mothers come up purringly, and say, 'And so your *dear* brother is coming home, Miss North? You must be *sure* and bring him round

to see me. I am *so* much interested in young men. And *will* he wear his Victoria Cross? It is the *dream* of my life to see one.”

“I hope you don’t expect me to take the precious thing with me in my pocket and exhibit it? There are some things a man can’t bring himself to do, even for your sake, Queen Mab.”

“No, dear boy; I won’t try you so far. I am not a despotic monarch. That means that you are going to be good and come with me, doesn’t it? Then I will reward you by saying that I don’t want you to go to an ‘at-home’ or anything of that kind this afternoon, but merely to the hospital.”

“The hospital?”

“Yes, the Women’s Hospital, to which I go twice a-week to read and sing to the patients. It is a great occasion there to-day—the anniversary of the opening, so that I can take you in, and the poor things are all longing to see you.”

“Why, what do they know about me?”

“What I have told them, of course. Do you know, Dick, I sometimes feel as though I had no business to be so well and rich and happy among so many sufferers. It seems as though they must hate me, or, at any rate, feel that I can’t sympathise with them. And then, when you were shut up in Fort Rahmat-Ullah, and uncle and I were so fearfully anxious, I really couldn’t go on just as usual, and I told the women about you, and they *were* so nice. Of their own accord they asked the clergyman, who comes and holds a service in the wards on Sundays, to mention your name in the prayers, and they watched the papers for every scrap of news about you. When at last we heard how you had got through the enemy and brought

help, I took the paper to the hospital, but I couldn't read a bit. I simply broke down and cried like a great baby, and the women were in a dreadful state of anxiety. At last I gave the account to one of them, and she read it aloud in a high, cracked voice, making the most horrible hash of the names, and the rest all cried too. They have regarded you as their personal property ever since, and when they heard of all your honours, they were as much pleased as I was. 'Your brother 'ave gort permoted, miss!' was what they all called out to me when I came in one day, and I never had such a piece of work in my life as when I tried to explain to them what brevet rank was. I'm afraid even now they are under the impression that you have been very badly treated, and defrauded of the promotion you ought to have received, and they sympathise with you very deeply. Several of them have pictures of you, cut out of the illustrated papers, folded up in their lockers, and bring them out to show people, and all the new patients are carefully instructed in the history of the presiding genius. 'That's our Miss North's brother,' the old ones tell them, and then all the details follow. Now, Dick, you will come, won't you?"

"If you really want me, old girl," and Dick threw down his paper without a murmur. "I feel as if I owed you something for the horrible scare you got when you heard we were cut off, and so I'll do violence to my natural modesty to the extent of coming and exhibiting myself to your old women."

Mabel North was not a little proud of her brother as she conducted him into the hospital an hour or so later. He looked such a splendid manly fellow, she thought, with the glamour of his past exploits surrounding him like an aureole, that she wondered how other women could care to display their wretched dandified relatives beside him. In the fulness of her satisfaction, she marched him

through various rooms and corridors, and presented him to a number of resplendent ladies who appeared to be receiving the guests, before there was any question of going up-stairs to visit the wards. Then she was seized upon by a suave person of business-like appearance, who turned out to be the secretary, for a few minutes' confidential talk, and Dick, rather bewildered by his experiences, and wondering why a hospital should employ a lady as secretary, took refuge in the society of a man he had met at his club.

“Isn't this gathering slightly—er—informal?” he asked. “Don't the doctors, or governors, or whatever they call the authorities of the place, show up at all? All the men here look as though they had been brought by their lady friends.”

“Brought?” said the other man, “that's it exactly. My wife brought me, your sister brought you, and Mountchesnay and the Archdeacon have been brought by their female relatives in just the same way. We are here on sufferance, don't you know, just to open our minds and enlarge our views.”

“Is it a ladies' day, then?”

“No, but the ladies boss the show here. Don't you know that this is the hospital of the future, manned entirely by women? The tyrant man is in his rightful sphere here, quite at a discount. They think nothing of him. Why, there's not a man on the premises but the porter, and he is there rather to overawe the relations of the patients than to help the ladies. But do you mean to say that Miss North brought you here without explaining the state of things? It wasn't fair; she might have given you a shock.”

“But who are the *burra mems*—the great ladies—in the other room?”

“The doctors, ladies of European reputation. The one who shook hands with you first fought the whole battle for the medical women.”

“I didn’t know that you were mixed up with all this kind of thing, Mab,” said Dick, as Mabel, having finished her talk with the secretary, turned to look for him.

“All what kind of thing?”

“Why, all this rot about lady doctors, and women’s hospitals, and so on.”

“Then you don’t read my letters, Dick. I have told you about it again and again. But I have another surprise for you presently. Let us come up-stairs now.”

In the wards Dick made a very good impression. None of the patients would be satisfied without a close view of him, and Mabel conducted him from bed to bed, and introduced him to all her friends. When he had duly admired the decorations, congratulated the patients on their healthful looks, promised to send in some illustrated papers, and inquired whether he could possibly obtain admittance to the hospital himself if he fell ill, he was in high favour. This inquiry was the stereotyped jest, which was expected as a matter of course from all the male visitors to the hospital, and none of them ever failed to make it, so that its utterance was received with approving laughter.

“Ah, you gentlemen don’t know what a blessin’ this ’ere ’ospital is to us, a-makin’ your jokes, and all,” said an old woman, with a

high cracked voice, the patient, as Mabel explained, who had read aloud to the rest the account of Dick's solitary expedition for the relief of Fort Rahmat-Ullah. "Not but what I ain't been as well treated as I 'ad reason to expeck. My doctor's agoin' out to furrin parts, to the pore 'eathens, she says. 'You may as well stay and see the last of me, miss,' I says to 'er; but she says, 'You can go to a gentleman doctor when you are ill, Mrs Wake, but them pore 'eathen women can't, so I'm wanted there wuss.' Oh, there you are, miss! I was a-tellin' this gentleman about you."

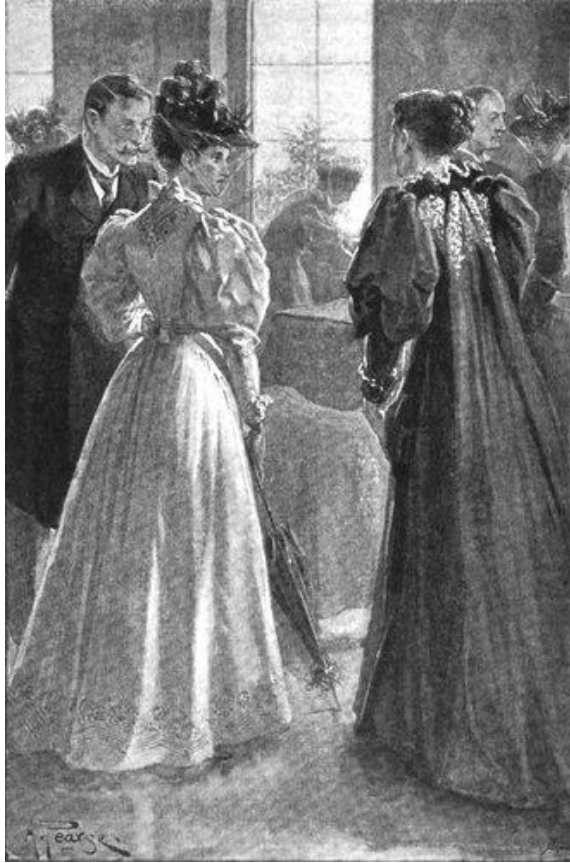
Mabel looked up quickly as a lady in soft flowing robes of wine-red cashmere glanced in at the begarlanded doorway, and nodded to Mrs Wake.

"We shall meet to-morrow evening, Mab," she said, seeing the visitors.

"Wait a minute, Dr Georgie," said Mabel, hastily; "I want to introduce my brother afresh. I am afraid he is forgetting old friends. Major North, Miss Georgia Keeling, M.D."

"Miss Keeling! Is it possible?" Dick met the gaze of a pair of frank dark eyes, which were scanning his face with a look of friendly interest, and his thoughts flew back to the time which had elapsed between his leaving Sandhurst and obtaining his appointment to the Indian Staff Corps years ago. He had spent some months at home, to the great disgust of his uncle, the general, who vowed that this spell of idleness would ruin him for life, but he did nothing worse than fall in love with his sister's greatest friend. Georgia lived only a few doors off, and she and Mabel always walked to the high school together, a fact of which Dick was fully aware when he took it into his head to offer Mabel his escort

morning by morning. The offer was accepted with some hesitation, for both Mabel and Georgia had reached what might be called the age of pure reason, and objected on principle to "boys and nonsense," but Dick was useful in carrying their books, and they could always snub him if he talked too much. Mabel was not without pride in the effect produced on the other girls by Dick's attendance, but Georgia was absolutely indifferent to the honour conferred upon her, and Dick left England at last with the rueful conviction that the lady of his love was still quite heart-whole, and never regarded him in any other light than that of Mabel's brother. Now he saw her again, and her eyes met his as calmly and freely as of old.



“Miss Keeling! Is it possible?”

“You have not forgotten the old days, then?” she said, pleasantly.

“I am afraid you haven’t,” he answered. “I must have bored you horribly. I know you and Mab always wanted to discuss your lessons, or the methods of the different masters, and momentous subjects of that kind, whereas I used to try to intrude my own little

frivolous interests, which were invariably frowned down. It served me right.”

Poor Dick! He had not spoken so lightly when he bade Georgia farewell, after a vain attempt to obtain from her a flower, a glove, anything she had touched, as a keepsake. She had looked him through with her clear eyes and observed chillingly that she disliked foolishness, and he broke away from her with a heart full of pain and anger, and on his lips the Disraelian prophecy, “Some day I will make you listen to me!” To work for Georgia, to make himself more worthy of Georgia, had been his ruling impulse during his early years in India, and there was always before his eyes the faint possibility that when he returned home great and famous, his stubborn lady’s heart might be touched at last. And now he had returned, not only famous, but also free from the trammels of his early and hopeless adoration—and Georgia was not at all affected by the fact. Years of unremitting work had turned Dick’s thoughts into a different channel. He was a soldier now, and his professional instincts were paramount, but still, he would have liked Georgia to recognise the change. She did not appear to notice anything, and he had a lurking suspicion that if she had done so, the realisation would not have troubled her.

“And so you are going to India, like all the young ladies in these days?” he said, carelessly, recalling what he had just heard from Mrs Wake, not without some idea of piquing Miss Keeling by the suggestion that her latest development had not surprised him in the least.

“No, not to India,” she answered. “I am going to Kubbet-ul-Haj.”

“What, with Sir Dugald Haigh’s Ethiopian Mission? So am I.”

“Yes, Mabel has told me. What a pity she can’t come too!”

“Oh, Mab hasn’t set up as a free-lance yet.”

“Have you, then? I had an idea that you were going as one of the Mission. Even I have a professional status.”

“I am the military member—aide-de-camp to the Chief, or something of the kind, I believe. You are the surgeon, I presume?”

“Not exactly. The King of Ethiopia’s principal wife is nearly blind, and he has begged that a lady doctor may accompany the Mission to Kubbet-ul-Haj, and attend the Queen while Sir Dugald Haigh remains there. Lady Haigh is rather glad to find a companion, and I am delighted to have such a chance.”

“The Mission is highly honoured,” said Dick, not quite pleasantly.

Miss Keeling looked at him in some surprise.

“It makes it much pleasanter that you are going too,” she said. “My short Indian experience has taught me how delightful it is to find old friends in a foreign country.”

“You are too kind,” said Dick, stiffly. “I’m afraid you overrate my powers of—er—entertainment; but, of course, I shall be delighted to do all I can to make the journey less tedious.”

She looked at him again. Was it possible that the man was such an arrant coxcomb as to imagine that she was doing her best to lead up to a resumption of the old state of affairs between them? Could he be trying to warn her off, or were his infelicitous remarks due only to ill-temper? But why should he be ill-tempered? In any case, it was clear that Major North, V.C., was a very different person from the boy who had gone to India fifteen years before, and the

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