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Milly Darrell and Other Tales

M. E. (Mary Elizabeth) Braddon

Imprint

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Mary Elizabeth Braddon (4 October 1835 - 4 February 1915), Milly Darrel (serialised in *Belgravia* November 1870 - January 1871), here taken from *Milly Darrel and other stories* Asher's Collection Emile Galette Paris 1873

TO
DR. AND MRS. BEAMAN,
THE AUTHOR'S OLD AND VALUED FRIENDS,
THIS BOOK
IS AFFECTIONATELY INSCRIBED.

CONTENTS.

MILLY DARRELL —

OLD RUDDERFORD HALL —

THE SPLENDID STRANGER —

MILLY DARRELL

CHAPTER I.

I BEGIN LIFE.

I was just nineteen years of age when I began my career as articled pupil with the Miss Bagshots of Albury Lodge, Fendale, Yorkshire. My father was a country curate, with a delicate wife and four children, of whom I was the eldest; and I had known from my childhood that the day must come in which I should have to get my own living in almost the only vocation open to a poor gentleman's daughter. I had been fairly educated near home, and the first opportunity that arose for placing me out in the world had been gladly seized upon by my poor father, who consented to pay the modest premium required by the Miss Bagshots, in order that I might be taught the duties of a governess, and essay my powers of tuition upon the younger pupils at Albury Lodge.

How well I remember the evening of my arrival!—a bleak dreary evening at the close of January, made still more dismal by a drizzling rain that had never ceased falling since I left my father's snug little house at Briarwood in Warwickshire. I had had to change trains three times, and to wait during a blank and miserable hour and a quarter, or so, at small obscure stations, staring hopelessly at the advertisements on the walls—advertisements of somebody's life-sustaining cocoa, and somebody else's health-restoring cod-liver oil, or trying to read the big brown-backed Bible in the cheerless little waiting-room; and trying, O so hard, not to think of home, and all the love and happiness I had left behind me. The journey had been altogether tiresome and fatiguing; but, for all that, the knowledge that I was near my destination brought me no sense of

pleasure. I think I should have wished that dismal journey prolonged indefinitely, if I could thereby have escaped the beginning of my new life.

A lumbering omnibus conveyed me from the station to Albury Lodge, after depositing a grim-looking elderly lady at a house on the outskirts of the town, and a dapper-looking little man, whom I took for a commercial traveller, at an inn in the market-place. I watched the road with a kind of idle curiosity as the vehicle lumbered along. The town had a cheerful prosperous air even on this wet winter night, and I saw that there were two fine old churches, and a large modern building which I supposed to be the town-hall.

We left the town quite behind us before we came to Albury Lodge; a very large house on the high-road, a square red-brick house of the early Georgian era, shut in from the road by high walls. The great wrought-iron gates in the front had been boarded up, and Albury Lodge was now approached by a little wooden side-door into a stone-flagged covered passage that led to a small door at the end of the house. The omnibus-driver deposited me at this door, with all my worldly possessions, which at this period of my life consisted of two rather small boxes and a japanned dressing-case, a receptacle that contained all my most sacred treasures.

I was admitted by a rather ill-tempered-looking housemaid, with a cap of obtrusive respectability and a spotless white apron. I fancied that she looked just a little superciliously at my boxes, which I daresay would not have contained her own wardrobe.

'O, it's the governess-pupil, I suppose?' she said. 'You was expected early this afternoon, miss. Miss Bagshot and Miss Susan are gone out to tea; but I can show you where you are to sleep, if you'll please to step this way. Do you think you could carry one of your trunks, if I carry the other?'

I thought I could; so the housemaid and I lugged them all the way along the stone passage and up an uncarpeted back staircase which led from the lobby into which the door at the end of the passage opened. We went very high up, to the top story in fact, where the housemaid led me into a long bare room with ten little beds in it. I was well enough accustomed to the dreariness of a school dormitory, but somehow this room looked unusually dismal.

There was a jet of gas burning at one end of the room, near a door opening into a lavatory which was little more than a cupboard, but in which ten young ladies had to perform their daily ablutions. Here I washed my face and hands in icy-cold water, and arranged my hair as well as I could without the aid of a looking-glass, that being a luxury not provided at Albury Lodge. The servant stood watching me as I made this brief toilet, waiting to conduct me to the schoolroom. I followed her, shivering as I went, to a great empty room on the first floor. The holidays were not quite over, and none of the pupils had as yet returned. There was an almost painful neatness and bareness in place of the usual litter of books and papers, and I could not help thinking that an apartment in a workhouse would have looked quite as cheerful. Even the fire behind the high wire guard seemed to burn in a different manner from all home fires: a fact which I attributed then to some sympathetic property in the coal, but which I afterwards found to be caused by a plentiful admixture of coke; a slow sulky smoke went up from the dull mass of fuel, brightened ever so little now and then by a sickly yellow flame. One jet of gas dimly lighted this long dreary room, in which there was no human creature but myself and my guide.

'I'll bring you some supper presently, miss,' the housemaid said, and departed before I could put in a timid plea for that feminine luxury, a cup of tea.

I had not expected to find myself quite alone on this first night of my arrival, and a feeling of hopeless wretchedness came over me as I sat down at one end of a long green-baize-covered table, and rested my head upon my folded arms. Of course it was very weak and foolish, a bad beginning of my new life, but I was quite powerless to contend against that sense of utter misery. I thought of all I had left at home. I thought of what my life might have been if my father had been only a little better off: and then I burst out crying as if my heart were breaking.

Suddenly, in the midst of that foolish paroxysm, I felt a light hand upon my shoulder, and looking up, saw a face bending over me, a face full of sympathy and compassion.

O Milly Darrell, my darling, my love, how am I to describe you as you appeared before my eyes that night? How poorly can any

words of mine paint you in your girlish beauty, as you looked down upon me in that dimly-lighted schoolroom with divine compassion in your dark eloquent eyes!

Just at that moment I was so miserable and so inclined to be sulky in my wretchedness, that even the vision of that bright face gave me little pleasure. I pushed away the gentle hand ungraciously, and rose hastily from my seat.

'Pray don't cry any more,' said the young lady; 'I can't bear to hear you cry like that.'

'I'm not going to cry any more,' I answered, drying my eyes in a hasty, angry way. 'It was very foolish of me to cry at all; but this place did look so cheerless and dreary, and I began to think of my father and mother, and all I had left behind me at home.'

'Of course it was only natural you should think of them. Everything does seem so bleak and dismal the first night; but you are very happy to have so many at home. I have only papa.'

'Indeed!' I said, not feeling deeply interested in her affairs.

I looked at her as she stood leaning a little against the end of the table, and playing idly with a bunch of charms and locketts hanging to her gold chain. She was very handsome, a brunette, with a small straight nose, hazel eyes, and dark-brown hair. Her mouth was the prettiest and most expressive I ever saw in my life, and gave an indescribable charm to her face. She was handsomely dressed in violet silk, with rich white lace about the throat and sleeves.

'You will find things much pleasanter when the girls come back. Of course school is always a little dreary compared with home; one is prepared for that; but I have no doubt you will contrive to be happy, and I hope we shall be very good friends. I think you must be the Miss Crofton I have heard spoken of lately?'

'Yes, my name is Crofton — Mary Crofton.'

'And mine is Emily Darrell. Milly I am always called at home, and by any one who likes me. I am a parlour-boarder, and have the run of the house, as it were. I am rather old to be at school, you see; but I am going home at the end of this year. I was brought up at home with a governess until about six months ago; but then papa took it

into his head that I should be happier amongst girls of my own age, and sent me off to school. He has been travelling since that time, and so I have not been home for the Christmas holidays. I can't tell you what a disappointment that was.'

I tried to look sympathetic, and, not knowing exactly what to say, I asked whether Miss Darrell's father lived in that neighbourhood.

'O dear, no,' she answered; 'he lives nearly a hundred miles away, in a very wild part of Yorkshire, not far from the sea. But Thornleigh—that is the name for our house—is a dear old place, and I like our bleak wild country better than the loveliest spot in the world. I was born there, you see, and all my happy memories of my childhood and my mother are associated with that dear old home.'

'Is it long since you lost your mother?'

'Ten years. I loved her so dearly. There are some subjects about which one dare not speak. I cannot often trust myself to talk of her.'

I liked her better after this. At first her beauty and her handsome dress had seemed a little overpowering to me; I had felt as if she were a being of another order, a bright happy creature not subject to the common woes of life. But now that she had spoken of her own sorrows, I felt that we were upon a level; and I stole my hand timidly into hers, and murmured some apology for my previous rudeness.

'You were not rude, dear. I know I must have seemed very intrusive when I disturbed you; but I could not bear to hear you crying like that. And now tell me where you sleep.'

I described the room as well as I could.

'I know where you mean,' she said; 'it's close to my room. I have the privilege of a little room to myself, you know; and on half-holidays I have a fire there, and write my letters, or paint; and you must come and sit with me on these afternoons, and we can be as happy as possible together working and talking. Do you paint?'

'A little—in a schoolgirlish fashion kind of way.'

'Quite as well as I do, I daresay,' Miss Darrell answered, laughing gaily, 'only you are more modest about it. O, here comes your supper; may I sit with you while you eat it?'

'I shall be very glad if you will.'

'I hope you have brought Miss Crofton a good supper, Sarah,' she went on in the same gay girlish way. — 'Sarah is a very good creature, you must know, Miss Crofton, though she seems a little grim to strangers. That's only a way of hers: she *can* smile, I assure you, though you'd hardly think so.'

Sarah's hard-looking mouth expanded into a kind of grin at this.

'There's no getting over you, Miss Darrell,' she said; 'you've got such a way of your own. I've brought Miss Crofton some cold beef; but if she'd like a bit of pickle, I wouldn't mind going to ask cook for it. Cold meat does eat a little dry without pickle.'

This 'bit of pickle' was evidently a concession in my favour made to please Emily Darrell. I thanked Sarah, and told her that I would not trouble her with a journey to the cook. I was faint and worn-out with my day's pilgrimage, and had eaten very little since morning; but the most epicurean repast ever prepared by a French chef would have seemed so much dust and ashes to me that night; so I sat down meekly to my supper of bread and meat, and listened to Milly Darrell's chatter as I ate it.

Of course she told me all about the school, Miss Bagshot, and Miss Susan Bagshot. The elder of these two ladies was her favourite. Miss Susan had, in the remote period of her youth, been the victim of some unhappy love-affair, which had soured her disposition, and inclined her to look on the joys and follies of girlhood with a jaundiced eye. It was easy enough to please Miss Bagshot, who had a genial matronly way, and took real delight in her pupils; but it was almost impossible to satisfy Miss Susan.

'And I am sorry to say that you will be a good deal with her,' Miss Darrell said, shaking her head gravely; 'for you are to take the second English class under her—I heard them say so at dinner to-day— and I am afraid she will fidget you almost out of your life; but you must try to keep your temper, and take things as quietly as you can, and I daresay in time you will be able to get on with her.'

'I'm sure I hope so,' I answered rather sadly; and then Miss Darrell asked me how long I was to be at Albury Lodge.

'Three years,' I told her; 'and after that, Miss Bagshot is to place me somewhere as a governess.'

'You are going to be a governess always?'

'I suppose so,' I answered. The word 'always' struck me with a little sharp pain, almost like a wound. Yes, I supposed it would be always. I was neither pretty nor attractive. What issue could there be for me out of that dull hackneyed round of daily duties which makes up the sum of a governess's life?

'I am obliged to do something for my living,' I said; 'my father is very poor. I hope I may be able to help him a little by and by.'

'And my father is so ridiculously rich. He is a great ironmaster, and has wharves and warehouses, and goodness knows what, at North Shields. How hard it seems!'

'What seems hard?' I asked absently.

'That money should be so unequally divided. Do you know, I don't think I should much mind going out as a governess: it would be a way of seeing life. One must meet with all sorts of adventures, going among strangers like that.'

I looked at her as she smiled at me, with a smile that gave an indescribable brightness to her face, and I fancied that for her indeed there could be no form of life so dull that would not hold some triumph, some success. She seemed a creature born to extract brightness out of the commonest things, a creature to be only admired and caressed, go where she might.

'You a governess!' I said, a little scornfully; 'you are not of the clay that makes governesses.'

'Why not?'

'You are much too pretty and too fascinating.'

'O, Mary Crofton, Mary Crofton—may I call you Mary, please? we are going to be such friends—if you begin by flattering me like that, how am I ever to trust you and lean upon you? I want some one with a stronger mind than my own, you know, dear, to lead me right; for I'm the weakest, vainest creature in the world, I believe. Papa has spoiled me so.'

'If you are always like what you are to-night, I don't think the spoiling has done much mischief,' I said.

'O, I am always amiable enough, so long as I have my own way. And now tell me all about your home.'

I gave her a faithful account of my brothers and my sister, and a brief description of the dear old-fashioned cottage, with its white-plaster walls crossed with great black beams, its many gables and quaint latticed windows. I told her how happy and united we had always been at home, and how this made my separation from those I loved so much the harder to bear; to all of which Milly Darrell listened with most unaffected sympathy.

Early the next day my new life began in real earnest. Miss Susan Bagshot did not allow me to waste my time in idleness until the arrival of my pupils. She gave me a pile of exercises to correct, and some difficult needlework to finish; and I found I had indeed a sharp taskmistress in this blighted lady.

'Girls of your age are so incorrigibly idle,' she said; 'but I must give you to understand at once that you will have no time for dawdling at Albury Lodge. The first bell rings a quarter before six, and at a quarter past I shall expect to see you in the schoolroom. You will superintend the younger pupils' pianoforte practice from that time till eight o'clock, at which hour we breakfast. From nine till twelve you will take the second division of the second class for English, according to the routine arranged by me, which you had better copy from a paper I will lend you for that purpose. After dinner you will take the same class for two hours' reading until four; from four to five you will superintend the needle-work class. Your evenings – with the exception of the careful correction of all the day's exercises – will be your own. I hope you have a sincere love of your vocation, Miss Crofton.'

I said I hoped I should grow to like my work as I became accustomed to it. I had never yet tried teaching, except with my young sister and brothers. My heart sank as I remembered our free-and-easy studies in the sunny parlour at home, or out in the garden under the pink and white hawthorns sometimes on balmy mornings in the early summer.

Miss Susan shook her head doubtfully.

'Unless you have a love of your vocation you will never succeed, Miss Crofton,' she said solemnly.

I freely confess that this love she spoke of never came to me. I tried to do my duty, and I endured all the hardships of my life in, I hope, a cheerful spirit. But the dry monotony of the studies had no element of pleasantness, and I used to wonder how Miss Susan could derive pleasure—as it was evident she did—from the exercise of her authority over those hapless scholars who had the misfortune to belong to her class. Day after day they heard the same lectures, listened submissively to the same reproofs, and toiled on upon that bleak bare high-road to learning, along which it was her delight to drive them. Nothing like a flower brightened their weary way—it was all alike dust and barrenness; but they ploughed on dutifully, cramming their youthful minds with the hardest dates and facts to be found in the history of mankind, the dreariest statistics, the driest details of geography, and the most recondite rules of grammar, until the happy hour arrived in which they took their final departure from Albury Lodge, to forget all they had learnt there in the briefest possible time.

How my thoughts used to wander away sometimes as I sat at my desk, distracted by the unmelodious sound of Miss Susan's voice lecturing some victim in her own division at the next table, while one of the girls in mine droned drearily at Lingard, or Pinnock's *Goldsmith*, as the case might be! How the vision of my own bright home haunted me during those long monotonous afternoons, while the March winds made the poplars rock in the garden outside the schoolroom, or the April rain beat against the great bare windows!

CHAPTER II.

MILLY'S VISITOR.

It was not often that I had a half-holiday to myself, for Miss Susan Bagshot seemed to take a delight in finding me something to do on these occasions; but whenever I had, I spent it with Milly Darrell, and on these rare afternoons I was perfectly happy. I had grown to love her as I did not think it was in me to love any one who was not of my own flesh and blood; and in so loving her, I only returned the affection which she felt for me.

I am sure it was the fact of my friendlessness, and of my subordinate position in the school, which had drawn this girl's generous heart towards me; and I should have been hard indeed if I had not felt touched by her regard. She soon grew indescribably dear to me. She was of my own age, able to sympathize with every thought and fancy of mine; the frankest, most open-hearted of creatures; a little proud of her beauty, perhaps, when it was praised by those she loved, but never proud of her wealth, or insolent to those whose gifts were less than hers.

I used to write my home-letters in her room on these rare and happy afternoons, while she painted at an easel near the window. The room was small, but better furnished than the ordinary rooms in the house, and it was brightened by all sorts of pretty things,—handsomely-bound books upon hanging shelves, pictures, Dresden cups and saucers, toilet-bottles and boxes, which Miss Darrell had brought from home. Over the mantelpiece there was a large photograph of her father, and by the bedside there hung a more flattering water-coloured portrait, painted by Milly herself. It was a powerful and rather a handsome face, but I thought the expression a little hard and cold, even in Milly's portrait.

She painted well, and had a real love of art. Her studies at Albury Lodge were of rather a desultory kind, as she was not supposed to belong to any class; but she had lessons from nearly half-a-dozen different masters—German lessons, Italian lessons, drawing lessons, music and singing lessons—and was altogether a very profitable pupil. She had her own way with every one, I found, and I believe Miss Bagshot was really fond of her.

Her father was travelling in Italy at this time, and did not often write to her—a fact that distressed her very much, I know; but she used to shake off her sorrow in a bright hopeful way that was pecu-