

PREFACE.

Although in the present story a boy plays the principal part, and encounters many adventures by land and sea, a woman is the real heroine, and the part she played demanded an amount of nerve and courage fully equal to that necessary for those who take part in active warfare. Boys are rather apt to think, mistakenly, that their sex has a monopoly of courage, but I believe that in moments of great peril women are to the full as brave and as collected as men. Indeed, my own somewhat extensive experience leads me to go even further, and to assert that among a civil population, untrained to arms, the average woman is cooler and more courageous than the average man. Women are nervous about little matters; they may be frightened at a mouse or at a spider; but in the presence of real danger, when shells are bursting in the streets, and rifle bullets flying thickly, I have seen them standing kitting at their doors and talking to their friends across the street when not a single man was to be seen.

There is no greater mistake than to think women cowards because they are sometimes nervous over trifles. Were it necessary, innumerable cases could be quoted from history to prove that women can, upon occasion, fight as courageously as men. Cæsar found that the women of the German tribes could fight bravely side by side with the men, and the Amazons of the King of Dahomey are more feared by the neighboring tribes than are his male soldiers. Almost every siege has its female heroines, and in the Dutch War of Independence the female companies at Sluys and Haarlem proved themselves a match for the best soldiers of Spain. Above all, in patient endurance of pain and suffering, women are immeasurably superior to men. I emphasize this point because I know that many boys, simply because they are stronger than girls, are apt to regard them with a sort of contempt, and to fancy themselves without the least justification, not only stronger but braver and more courageous—in fact superior beings in every way.

G. A. HENTY.

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CHAPTER I.

UNEXPECTED NEWS.

"I have written to ask Ralph Conway to come and stay for a time with me." The announcement was a simple one, but it fell like a bombshell in the midst of the party at breakfast at Penfold Hall. The party consisted only of the speaker, Herbert Penfold, and his two sisters. The latter both exclaimed "Herbert!" in a tone of shocked surprise. Mr. Penfold was evidently prepared for disapprobation; he had spoken in a somewhat nervous tone, but with a decision quite unusual to him. He had finished his last piece of toast and emptied his last cup of tea before making the announcement, and he now pushed back his chair, rose to his feet, and said: "Yes; I have been thinking of having him here for some time, and I suppose that as master of this house I am at liberty to ask whom I like; at any rate I would rather have no discussion on the subject."

So saying, without giving his sisters time to reply, he walked hastily to the door and went out. Miss Penfold and Miss Eleanor Penfold gazed at each other in speechless astonishment. So accustomed were they to settle everything that took place at Penfold Hall, that this sudden assumption of authority on the part of their brother fairly staggered them. Miss Penfold was the first to speak:

"This is terrible, Eleanor! To think that after all these years Herbert's thoughts should still be turning toward that woman. But it is only what might be expected. The ingratitude of men is terrible. Here we have for the last twenty years been devoting our lives to him—not only keeping his house for him, but seeing that he did not fall a victim to any of the designing women who would have insinuated themselves into his good graces, and preventing him from indulging in all sorts of foolish tastes and bringing himself to ruin; and now you see he turns again to that artful woman, and, without saying a word to us, invites her son to come here. It is monstrous, sister!"

"It is monstrous," Miss Eleanor Penfold repeated, with tears in her eyes. "It is like flying in the face of Providence, sister."

"It is flying in our faces," Miss Penfold replied sharply; "and just at the present moment that is of more importance. To think that that

man must have been brooding over this, and making up his mind to act in this way for weeks perhaps, and never to say a word to us upon the subject. I wonder he didn't ask the woman herself down!"

"He never could have done such a shameless thing, Charlotte," her sister said much shocked. "Of course, we must have left the house instantly."

"I should not have left the house," Miss Penfold said firmly. "If the woman comes—and now he has asked the boy it is quite possible that he may ask the mother—our duty will be to remain here. You know we have been uneasy ever since her husband died. Herbert's infatuation concerning her has been pitiable, and we have always believed it has been that alone which has caused him to refuse so obstinately to enter into our plans, or to pay even decent courtesy to the various excellent young women we have from time to time asked down here, and who were in every way suitable for the position of mistress of this house—women full of sense, and who, with right guidance, would have made him perfectly happy. And now he flies in our faces and asks the boy down. I have had an idea for some little time that he has had something on his mind; he has been more nervous and fidgety than usual, and several times he has seemed to be on the point of saying something, and then changed his mind. Of course, one can understand it all now. No wonder he was ashamed to look us in the face when he was meditating such a step as this. The duplicity of man is something shocking!"

It was not surprising that Herbert Penfold's sudden assertion of his will was a shock to his sisters. These ladies had so long been accustomed to rule absolutely at Penfold Hall that Mr. Penfold's assertion of his right to act as he pleased in his own house came upon them like an act of absolute rebellion. At their father's death they were women of twenty-seven and twenty-six years old respectively. Herbert was a lad of sixteen. He was of a gentle and yielding disposition; and as their father for some years previous to his death had been a confirmed invalid, and they had had the complete management of the house, it was but natural that at his death they should continue in the same position.

Owing to weak health, Herbert had not been sent to school, but had been educated under the care of a tutor. He had wished when

he reached the age of nineteen to enter one of the universities; but his sisters had been so opposed to the idea, and had represented so strongly to him his unfitness to take part in the rough sports of the young men, and how completely he would feel out of place in such companionship, that he had abandoned the idea, and had traveled on the Continent for three years with his tutor, his sisters being for most of the time of the party. Soon after his return he had fallen in love with the daughter of Colonel Vernon, an officer living on half-pay at Poole, which was the nearest town to Penfold Hall. The announcement of his engagement came like a thunder-clap upon his sisters, who had agreed that it would be in all respects desirable that Herbert should not marry for some years.

They had, however, been wise enough not to offer any open opposition to the match. Three months later the engagement was broken off. How it came about no one exactly knew. Unpleasant reports were set on foot; there were misunderstandings which should easily have been cleared up, but which grew until they gave rise to serious quarrels. Letters which might have set matters straight somehow failed to come to hand; and so at last things went from bad to worse until there was a final quarrel, a return of letters and presents on both sides, and a final breaking off of the engagement. A year later Mary Vernon married Mr. Conway, an architect, resident in London.

Mr. Penfold had before this become convinced that Mary Vernon had not been to blame in the matter, and that he had in some way or other taken an altogether mistaken view of the subject. He knew by the comments of such friends as were intimate enough to speak, and the coolness of many others, that he was considered to have behaved very badly toward her. And this thought was a most distressing one, for he was deeply attached to Mary; and had he not been convinced that from some reason or other she herself had ceased to care for him, and was anxious to break off the engagement, he would have gone any length towards healing the breach. When it was too late he bitterly regretted his own weakness in submitting to the domination of his sisters, and felt a deep though silent resentment against them for the share that he was convinced they had taken in causing the breach between himself and Mary Vernon;

but although he resented, he had neither the will nor firmness to free himself from their domination.

At times he struggled feebly against it; and on two or three occasions had suddenly gone up to town, and thence on to the Continent, and had traveled there for weeks. On one of these occasions he had written to them saying that he thought it would be for the happiness of them all if they were to leave Penfold Hall and set up an establishment of their own. But upon his return he found things going on exactly as before, and Miss Penfold had spoken somewhat severely of the silly letter he had written to them, a letter displaying at once such ingratitude and folly that it had been beneath them to notice it. As Herbert Penfold was in a way really fond of his sisters, who spared no effort in making his home comfortable for him, and who allowed him to have his own way in all minor matters, he could not bring himself to repeat when face to face with them the opinion he had expressed in writing; and so things had gone on for years.

The Miss Penfolds were really anxious to see their brother married. Provided only that it was to a lady who would be, in their estimation, fitted for him, and who would also have a feeling of gratitude towards themselves for their share in installing her as mistress of the Hall, they were quite prepared to abdicate in her favor, and to retire to some pretty house near a pleasant watering-place, paying visits once or twice a year to the Hall.

The listless life their brother led was a source of grief to them; for they were really attached to him, and believed that they had in every way been working for his happiness.

They had no shadow of regret for the part they had played in breaking off his engagement with Mary Vernon. Having once convinced themselves that she was a frivolous girl, quite unsuited for the position of mistress of Penfold Hall, they had regarded it as an absolute duty to protect Herbert from the consequences of what they considered his infatuation. Consequently, for years they were in the habit of inviting for long visits young ladies whom they considered in every way eligible as their successor, and had been much grieved at their want of success, and at the absolute indifference with which Herbert regarded the presence of these young women.

When, four years after his marriage to Mary Vernon, Mr. Conway had died suddenly they had been seized with a vague disquiet; for they believed that the remembrance of his first love was the real cause of Herbert's indifference to others, and considered it probable he might still be sufficiently infatuated with her to attempt to undo the past.

To their gratification Herbert never alluded to the subject, never, so far as they knew, made the slightest effort to renew her acquaintance. In fact, Herbert Penfold was a diffident as well as a weak man. Once convinced that he had acted badly toward Mary Vernon, he was equally convinced that she must despise him and that he was utterly unworthy of her. Had it been otherwise he would have again entered the lists and tried to recover the love he had thrown away.

Although he occasionally yielded to the entreaties of his sisters and showed himself with them at county gatherings, gave stately dinner-parties at regular intervals, and accepted the invitations of his neighbors, he lived the life almost of a recluse.

His sole companion and friend was the rector of the parish, who had been his tutor during his Continental tour, and whom he had presented with the living which was in his gift, to the secret dissatisfaction of his sisters, who had always considered that Herbert's tutor had endeavored to set him against them. This had to some extent been the case, in so far, at least, that Mr. Withers, who had left college only a short time before starting with Herbert, had endeavored to give him habits of self-reliance and independence of thought, and had quietly striven against the influence that his sisters had upon his mind. It was not until after the Mary Vernon episode that the living had fallen vacant; had it been otherwise things might have turned out differently, for Herbert would certainly have sought his friend's advice in his troubles.

After that it was too late for his interference. Mr. Withers had watched the state of matters at the Hall, and his young wife had often urged him to try to induce Herbert Penfold to rouse himself and assert himself against his sisters, but the vicar remained neutral. He saw that though at times Herbert was a little impatient at the domination of his sisters, and a chance word showed that he nour-

ished a feeling of resentment toward them, he was actually incapable of nerving himself to the necessary effort required to shake off their influence altogether, and to request them to leave the Hall.

Nothing short of this would suffice to establish his independence; for after a mere temporary assertion of authority he would, if they remained there, assuredly speedily allow affairs to lapse into their present state, and the vicar thought that harm rather than good would be caused by his interference, and that, as his influence would be sure to be suspected, there would be a breach between the Hall and the Rectory. As it was the connection was an intimate one. Herbert was always glad to see him when he came in for a talk in the course of his rounds, or when he and his wife would come up to dine quietly. The Miss Penfolds were always ready with their purses to aid him to carry out his schemes for the good of the parish, and to sympathize with his young wife in her troubles; for of these she had a large share—all her children, save one girl, having been carried off in their infancy.

Mabel Withers was as much at home at the Hall as at the Rectory. She was chief pet and favorite with Mr. Penfold; and although his sisters considered that the rector allowed her to run wild, and that under such license she was growing up a sad tomboy, they could not withstand the influence of the child's happy and fearless disposition, and were in their way very kind to her.

Such was the state of things at Penfold Hall when its owner's sudden announcement that he had invited young Ralph Conway to come to stay there had fallen like a bombshell upon his sisters.

The invitation had caused almost as much surprise to Mrs. Conway as to the Miss Penfolds. Her father had died a few months after her marriage, and at the death of her husband she found herself left with an income of about a hundred a year—the interest of the sum for which he had insured his life.

To her surprise she had a month or two later received an intimation from the lawyer who managed her business that a friend had arranged to pay the sum of a hundred pounds every quarter to her account, on condition only that no inquiry whatever should be made as to his or her identity. Mary Conway had thankfully accepted the gift, which had, however, caused her intense wonderment

and curiosity. So far as she knew neither her father nor her husband had any relations who could have afforded so handsome a gift. She knew that Colonel Vernon had been most popular with his regiment, and the supposition at which she finally arrived was that some young officer whom he had befriended in difficulties had, on coming into a large property, determined similarly to befriend the daughter of his former colonel.

Had she been alone in the world she would have declined to accept this aid from an unknown benefactor, but for her son's sake she felt that it would be wrong to do so. The idea that the money might come from Herbert Penfold had once or twice occurred to her, only to be at once dismissed, for had she really believed that it came from him she could not, even for Ralph's sake, have accepted it. He had, as she believed, quarreled with her altogether without cause, her letters had been unanswered, and she considered the quarrel to have been simply a pretext upon the part of Herbert to break off an engagement of which he was tired. Words dropped, apparently by accident, by Herbert's sisters had, before the misunderstanding commenced, favored this idea, and although she had really loved him her disposition was too spirited to allow her to take the steps she otherwise might have done to set herself right with him.

At any rate she had no ground whatever for believing that Herbert, after the breach of the engagement, entertained any such feelings toward her as would have led him to come forward to assist her in any way after she had become the wife of another; and so for twelve years she had continued to receive her quarterly income. She had established herself in a pretty little house near Dover, where several old friends of her father resided, and where she had plenty of pleasant society among the officers of the regiments stationed there. Although far from rivaling Portsmouth or Plymouth in life and bustle, Dover was a busy town during the time of the great war. The garrison was a large one, the channel cruisers often anchored under the guns of the castle, and from the top of the hills upon a clear day for months a keen lookout was kept for the appearance from the port of Boulogne of the expedition Napoleon had gathered there for the invasion of England.

The white sails of the English cruisers as they sailed up or down the channel were clearly visible, and occasionally a privateer could be seen making its way westward with a prize it had picked up off Texel. Military and naval matters were the sole topics of conversation, and by the time he was fifteen Ralph had fully determined to follow in his grandfather's footsteps and to become a soldier. Having passed almost all her life among military men Mrs. Conway had offered no objections to his wishes, and as several of her father's old friends had promised to use their influence on his behalf, there was little doubt that he would be enabled to procure a commission as soon as he reached the regulation age.

It was not often that the postman called at Mrs. Conway's with letters; for postage was expensive, and the people in those days only wrote when they had something particular to say. Mrs. Conway had just made breakfast when Ralph came in with a letter in his hand.

"Here is a letter for you, mother; but please don't open it until you have given me my breakfast. I am very late now, and shall barely have time to get through with it and be there before the gates close."

"Your porridge is quite ready for you, Ralph; so if you are late it will be your own fault not mine. The eggs will be in before you have eaten it. However, I won't open the letter until you have gone, because you will only waste time by asking questions about it."

Ralph began his bread and milk, and Mrs. Conway, stretching out her hand, took the letter he had laid beside his plate, and turning it over glanced at the direction to ascertain from which of her few correspondents it came. For a moment she looked puzzled, then, with a little start, she laid it down by the side of her plate. She had recognized the handwriting once so familiar to her.

"What is it, mother? You look quite startled. Who is it from?"

"It is from no one you know, Ralph. I think it is from a person I have not heard from for some years. At any rate it will keep until you are off to school."

"It's nothing unpleasant, I hope, mother. Your color has quite gone, and you look downright pale."

"What should be the matter, you silly boy?" Mrs. Conway said, with an attempt to smile. "What could there be unpleasant in a letter from a person I have not heard from for years? There, go on with your breakfast. I expect you will hear some news when you get down into the town, for the guns in the castle have been firing, and I suppose there is news of a victory. They said yesterday that a great battle was expected to be fought against Napoleon somewhere near Leipzig."

"Yes; I heard the guns, mother, and I expect there has been a victory. I hope not."

"Why do you hope not, Ralph?"

"Why, of course, mother, I don't want the French to be beaten—not regularly beaten, till I am old enough to have a share in it. Just fancy what a nuisance it would be if peace was made just as I get my commission."

"There will be plenty of time for you, Ralph," his mother said smiling. "Peace has been patched up once or twice, but it never lasts long; and after fighting for the last twenty years it is hardly probable that the world is going to grow peaceful all at once. But there, it is time for you to be off; it only wants ten minutes to nine and you will have to run fast all the way to be in time."

When Mrs. Conway was alone she took up the letter, and turned it over several times before opening it.

What could Herbert Penfold have written about after all these years? Mrs. Conway was but thirty-six years old now, and was still a pretty woman, and a sudden thought sent a flush of color to her face. "Never!" she said decidedly. "After the way in which he treated me he cannot suppose that now—" and then she stopped. "I know I did love him once, dearly, and it nearly broke my heart; but that was years and years ago. Well, let us see what he says for himself," and she broke open the letter. She glanced through it quickly, and then read it again more carefully. She was very pale now, and her lips trembled as she laid down the letter.

"So," she said to herself in a low tone, "it is to him after all I owe all this," and she looked round her pretty room; "and I never once really suspected it. I am glad now," she went on after a pause, "that I

did not; for, of course, it would have been impossible to have taken it, and how different the last twelve years of my life would have been. Poor Herbert! And so he really suffered too, and he has thought of me all this time."

For fully half an hour she sat without moving, her thoughts busy with the past, then she again took up the letter and reread it several times. Its contents were as follows:

"Dear Mrs. Conway: You will be doubtless surprised at seeing my handwriting, and your first impulse will naturally be to put this letter into the fire. I am not writing to ask you to forgive my conduct in the old days. I am but too well aware how completely I have forfeited all right to your esteem or consideration. Believe me that I have suffered for my fault, and that my life has been a ruined one. I attempt to make no excuses. I am conscious that while others were to blame I was most of all, and that it is to my own weakness of will and lack of energy that the breach between us was due. However, all this is of the past and can now interest you but little. You have had your own sorrows and trials, at which, believe me, I sincerely grieved. And now to my object in writing to you. Although still comparatively a young man, I have not many years to live. When last in London I consulted two of the first physicians, and they agreed that, as I had already suspected, I was suffering from heart disease, or rather, perhaps, from an enfeebled state of my heart, which may at any moment cease to do its work.

"Naturally then, I have turned my thoughts as to whom I should leave my property. My sisters are amply provided for. I have no other near relatives, and therefore consider myself free to leave it as I choose. I have long fixed my thoughts upon the daughter of a dear friend, the rector of Bilston; she is now thirteen years old, and half my property is left her. I have left the other half to your son. The whole subject to an annuity to yourself; which you will not, I trust, refuse to accept. I have never thought of any woman but you, and I hope that you will not allow your just resentment against me to deprive me of the poor satisfaction of making what atonement lies in my power for the cruel wrong I formerly did you.

"Were I strong and in health I can well imagine that you would indignantly refuse to receive any benefits from my hands, but

knowing your kindness of heart, I feel sure that you will not sadden the last days of a doomed man by the knowledge that even after his death his hopes of insuring the comfort of the one woman on earth he cared for are to be disappointed.

"I should like to know your son. Would it be too much to ask you to spare him for a while from time to time so long as I live? I have a double motive, I say frankly, in thus asking him to come here. I wish him and my little pet, Mabel Withers, to come to like each other. I wish to divide my property between them, and yet I should be glad if the whole estate could remain intact.

"I should not be so foolish as to make a proviso that two persons who are as yet so young, and who may not in any way be suitable to each other, should marry, but nothing would please me so much as that they should take a fancy to each other; and thrown together as they would be here, for Mabel is constantly at the house, it is just possible that one of those boy and girl affections, which do sometimes, although perhaps rarely, culminate in marriage, might spring up between them. Whether that may be so in the present case I must leave to fate, but I should at any rate like to pave the way for such an arrangement by bringing the young people together. I need not say that it will be best that neither of them should have the slightest idea of what is in my mind, for this would be almost certain to defeat my object.

"If the proposal is agreeable to you, I hope that you will let Ralph come to me at the beginning of his holidays; which must, I fancy, be now near at hand. I think it will be as well that he should not know of my intention as to the disposal of my property, for it is better he should think that he will have to work for his living; but at the same time there would be no harm in his knowing that it is probable I shall help him on in life. This will make him bear better what would otherwise be a dull visit. But I leave this matter entirely in your hands. You know the boy and I do not, and you can therefore better judge what will be best for him to know. And now, dear Mary, if you will pardon my once again calling you so,

"I remain,

"Your affectionate friend,

"HERBERT PENFOLD."

It was characteristic of Mrs. Conway that at the first reading of this letter she thought rather of the writer than of the bright prospects which his offer opened to her son. She thought rather of Herbert Penfold, her first love, now ill, if not dying, of the days of their engagement and its rupture, than of the fact that her son was to inherit half the Penfold estates. She had been sorely hurt at the time; and even after all these years it was a pleasure to her to know that the quarrel was not as she had often thought at the time, a mere pretext for breaking off the engagement, but that Herbert had really loved her, had cared for her all these years, and had been the mysterious friend whose kindness had so lightened her cares.

"I did not throw away my love after all," she said to herself, as with her eyes full of tears she stood at the window and looked out towards the sea. "He cared for me enough to be faithful all this time and to think of me constantly, while I had almost forgotten the past. I ought to have known all the time that he was acting under the influence of others—those sisters of his, of course. I was always certain they hated me—hated the thought of my becoming mistress of Penfold Hall. I knew the influence they had over him. Herbert had no will of his own—it was the only fault I ever saw in him—and they could twist him round their little fingers. And now he is going to make Ralph his heir, or at least his heir with the girl he speaks of. It is a grand thing for Ralph; for the estates were worth, he told papa, eight thousand a year, and if Herbert's little romance comes off Ralph will have all."

Then she thought over the years he had been befriending her, and wondered what she should do about that. Finally, being a sensible woman, she decided to do nothing. Had she known it before, or learned the truth by other means, she would have refused absolutely to touch Herbert Penfold's money; but it would be indeed a poor return for his kindness were she now, when he was ill and feeble, and was about to bestow still further benefits upon her, to refuse to permit him any longer to aid her. She wished, as she read the letter over again, that he had expressed some desire to see her. She should have liked to have thanked him in person, to have told him how