

# Meadow Brook

MARY J. HOLMES

## CHAPTER XXII.

It was early morning. The windows of my room were open, admitting the fresh, cool air, which had been purified by one of those terrific thunder storms so common in a southern clime. For many weeks I had lain in a state of unconsciousness, save at intervals when I awoke in a dazed, delirious condition, with a physician who was called in. Dr. Clayton's steady hand more than once lifted the curtain of my eyes, and I saw in the white gleam of his eyes, I that bright August morning, awoke from a refreshing sleep, with perfectly restored faculties. At first I thought I was alone, for there was a deep silence in the room, and from the hall below I distinctly heard the ticking of the clock, reminding me of the time, years ago, when once before I had hovered between life and death. Now, as then, I experienced the delicious feeling of returning health, but I missed the familiar faces of my friends, and as I thought how far I was from home and all who loved me, I said aloud, "I am alone, alone."

"Not alone, Rosa, for I am with you," answered a deep voice near me, and the next moment the dark form of Richard Delafield bent over me. Eagerly scanning my face, he said, "Do you know me?" "Yes," I answered. "Mr. Delafield." Then as a dim remembrance of the past came over me, I lifted my hand and looked round the room for one who I knew had not long since been there. Divining my thought, he said very gently, as if the announcement would cause me pain. "He is not here, Rosa. He was obliged to go home, but I will take care of you. Don't feel so badly," he continued, as tears of genuine joy at Dr. Clayton's absence gathered in my eyes.

"When I spoke to him," he said, "concerning your illness. After telling me all that he thought proper, he took the letter from his pocket, and said, 'Dr. Clayton left this for you. Have you strength to read it now?'" "Yes," I replied, eagerly, at the same time stretching out my hand to take it. There was a blur upon my eyes as I read, and I pitied Dr. Clayton, who had thus laid me under a great obligation. I mingled with this was a feeling of relief to know that I was free. He told me what he had written to Mr. Delafield, and when I came to that portion of the letter, I involuntarily uttered an exclamation of delight. "But he made no sign," he said, "but he made no sign. The letter which had explained all was safely lodged behind the bureau, and with a gloomy brow he watched me while I read, interpreting my emotions into the saddest of meanings. He would feel in hearing from my lover. With me the revelation was too great, for I fancied I saw in the expression of his face contempt for one who had presumed to love him, and bursting into tears, I cried, 'I am not worthy of you.' He tried to soothe me, but I would not be comforted by him—he hated me, I knew, and very pettily I told him at last 'to let me alone and go away—I was better without him than with him.' I cried, and he would oblige me by leaving the room."

The next moment I repented my harshness, which I knew had caused him pain, for there was a look of sorrow upon his face as he complied with my request. But I was too proud to call him back, and when he next half hurriedly and retraced alone, first at him for making Dr. Clayton think he loved me when he didn't; secondly, at Dr. Clayton for meddling with what didn't concern him; and lastly, at myself, for being so foolish as to care whether anybody loved me or not. The end of that time Richard came back. The cloud had disappeared, and very good-humoredly he asked "if I had not over my pet, and if I wanted anything." Before night I was as much better as that Ada, Lina, and Halbert came in to see me, each expressing their pleasure at my convalescence. But one there was who came not to greet me, and at whose absence I greatly marvelled. She had never been the first to meet me, and she was the last to leave me at night. Why, then, did she tarry now, when I wished so much to see her? Alas! I did not know that never again would her home be gladdened by the sunshine of her presence, for it was Jessie whom I missed—Jessie for whom I longed—straining my ear to catch the sound of her ringing laugh or bounding footsteps.

"At last, as the day wore on and she did not come, I asked for her, and she stayed so long away. Wringing her hands, Mrs. Lansing exclaimed, 'Tell her, Richard, I cannot. It will kill me. Oh, Jessie, Jessie!'" But I had no need for further knowledge. I saw what I had not before observed, the mournful gaze which she cast upon me, and in tears of anguish I cried: "My darling is dead!" "Yes, Jessie is dead," answered Richard. "We shall never see her again, for she is safe in the happy land of which you so often talk to me." I could not weep. My sorrow was too great for tears, and covering my face, I thought for a long, long time. "Why was it, I asked myself, 'that always when death came near me, I saw in the death of another taken,' for, as in the case of Jessie, so had it been with brother Jamie—they had died, while I had lived, and with a fervent thanksgiving to heaven, which had dealt thus mercifully with me, I prayed that it might not be in vain.

Gradually, as I could bear it, Mr. Delafield told me the sad story—how she had hung fearfully over my pillow when all else had deserted me; how she had come for him, and how he had taken her from my side. As he talked, there came back to me a vague recollection of a fair form—a scrap I thought it to have been—which, when she was running fast at my feet, had bowed near, whispering to me words of love, and bidding some one bury me beneath the tall magnolia. Then he told me how she had stood like a ministering spirit by the rude couch of the poor African, who with their dying breath had blessed her, calling her "the Angel of the Pines." From her head he himself had shorn her beautiful shining curls, one of which he gave to me, and which I prize as my most precious treasure; for often as I look upon it, I see again the little gleam of my "Georgia rose," who for a brief space dwelt within her fair Southern home, and was then transported to her native soil, where she blooms, the fairest, sweetest flower of all which deck the fields of heaven.

The shock of her death very naturally retarded my recovery, and for many

weeks more I was confined to my room. About the middle of October, Charlie, whose coming I had long expected, arrived, bringing to me the sad news that death had again entered our household, that by my father's and Jamie's grave was another mound, and at home another vacant chair, that of my dear grandmother, whose illness, he said, had prevented him from coming to me sooner, and her sickness that they had purposely left her sickness from me, fearing the effect it might have. Of Dr. Clayton's coming, he said nothing, but he had visited Sunny Bank at all; but immediately after his return to Boston he had written to them, saying I was out of danger, and Charlie must go for me as soon as the intense heat of summer was over. This was all they knew, though with words of ready tact, both my mother and my sisters conjectured that something was wrong, and Charlie's first question after telling me what he did, was to inquire into the existing state of affairs between me and my doctor, and if it were my illness alone which had deferred the marriage.

"Don't ask me now," I replied, "not until we are far from here, and then I will tell you all." This silenced Charlie, and once when Mr. Delafield questioned him concerning Dr. Clayton, and why he, too, did not come for me, he replied evasively, but in a manner calculated still further to mislead Mr. Delafield, who had no suspicion of the truth, though he fancied there was something wrong. One day Charlie, with his usual abruptness, said to me, "Rosa, why didn't you fall in love with Mr. Delafield? I should much rather have him than a widower?" "I suppose you mean the difference," I replied quickly. "He is engaged to Miss Montrose. They were to have been married this fall. Mrs. Lansing said, but the marriage is, I presume, deferred on account of their recent affliction. At least, he is not coming here."

"If I am any judge of human nature," returned Charlie, "Mr. Delafield cares far more for you than for Miss Montrose, even if they are engaged. But then you are poor, while she is rich, and that, I suppose, makes the difference." "I know Mr. Delafield too well to suspect him of mercenary motives in marrying Ada, and so I said, 'He loved her, of course, and it was natural that he should, for though she has some faults, she is probably as good as her good qualities to overbalance the bad.'" At last the morning dawned on which I was to say good-by to the scenes I loved so well. I was to leave the "aunt's South," with its dark evergreens, its tall evergreen trees, and the next autumn leaves were falling, would take to his beautiful home a bride. Then I thought of little Jessie's grave, which I had not seen, and on which my tears would never fall, and I hid my face in my hands, and wept for the first time since my last adieu. It was later than usual when Mr. Delafield appeared, and as he came in I saw that he was very pale.

"Are you sick?" he asked, as he wiped the perspiration from his face. "No, no," he hurriedly answered; at the same time crossing over to a side table, he poured out and drank two large goblets of ice water. Then resuming his former seat near my bed, he looked at me and looking earnestly in the face, said: "Rosa, shall I ever see you here again?" Before I could answer, Ada chimed in, "Of course we shall. Do coax the doctor to bring you here some time, and let us see how you bear the honors of being madame!" Instantly the earnest look passed away from Mr. Delafield's face, and was succeeded by a smile, which remained until the carriage was taken to take me to the depot, where he announced. Then the whole expression of his countenance changed, and for a brief instant my heart thrilled with joy, for I could not mistake the deep meaning of his looks as he bent over my lips, and whispered, "God bless you, Rosa." "My Rosa, I once hoped to call you. But it cannot be. Farewell!"

There was one burning kiss upon my lips, and the next moment he was gone, leaving me to the depot and the arms of his sister, as he was leaving the room. "No, no, no," he replied; and then as Charlie again bade me come, I rose bewildered to my feet, hardly realizing when Mrs. Lansing, Ada and Lina bade me adieu. Halbert went with me in the carriage, and together with Charlie looked wonderingly at me, as I unconsciously repeated in a whisper, "My Rosa, I once hoped to call you. But it cannot be. Farewell." "I said to myself, and once upon my free with my veil, I wept as I thought of all I had lost when Richard Delafield offered his heart to another. He did love me. I was sure of that, but what did it avail me? He was too long to break his engagement with Ada, so henceforth I must walk alone, bearing the burden of an aching heart."

In the meantime, a far different scene was being enacted in the apartment which had just vacated. Scarcely had the whistle of the engine died away in the distance, when a troop of blacks, armed with boiling suds and scrubbing brushes, entered my chamber for the purpose of scrubbing it. They had carried from it nearly every article of furniture, and nothing remained save the matting and the bureau, the latter of which they were about to remove when they were surprised at the unexpected appearance of Mr. Delafield, who could not resist the strong desire which he felt to stand once more in the room where Rosa had spent so many weary weeks. For a moment the blacks suspended their employment, and then Lina, who seemed to be leading, took hold of the bureau, giving one and another a shove toward the center of the room. The movement dislodged the long chest, which, covered with dirt and convulsed, fell upon the floor at her feet. She was the same woman who, weeks before, had carelessly knocked off the letter, which she now picked up, and handed to Mr. Delafield, saying, as she wiped off the dirt, "It must have laid there a heap of a while, and now I think on't, 'pears like ever so long ago, when I was breshin' the bureau. I hearn some-thing 'bout it, but I couldn't find nothin', and it must have been there."

Glancing at the perscription, and recognizing the handwriting of Dr. Clayton, Mr. Delafield broke the seal, and read. From black to white—and from white to red—from red to speckled—and from speckled back again to its natural color, grew his face as he proceeded, while his eyes grew so dazzingly bright with the intensity of his feelings that the negroes, who watched him, whispered among themselves that he "must be gwine stark mad."

His active, quick-seeing mind took in the meaning of each sentence, and even

before he had finished the letter he understood everything just as it was—why Lina had scribbled so strongly upon the road Dr. Clayton's letter to herself, and realized perfectly what her feelings must have been as day after day went by and he still "made no sign."

"But she is mine now, thank heaven!" and finding she had no more words to exclaim, and unmindful of the presence of the negroes, who, confirmed in their impression of his insanity, looked curiously after him as he went down the stairs, down the walk, and out into the street, proceeding with rapid strides toward the depot.

CHAPTER XXIII.—(Continued.) Mr. Delafield's great object now was to reach Charleston before the boat in which Rosa was to sail should leave the harbor. Suddenly he remembered that the express train left Augusta about four o'clock p. m. It was now ten, and he could easily reach it in time for the cars, provided there had been no change in the time table. To ascertain this, therefore, he hastened to the depot, where, to his dismay, he learned that the train left Augusta at two.

But with him to will was to do. Flying rather than walking back to his house, he called out Bill, his coachman, starting him with the inquiry as to whether it would be possible, with his best horses—a span of beautiful spotted grays, which were valued at a thousand dollars—to drive to Augusta in less than four hours.

Besides being naturally lazy and unwilling in execution of any kind, Bill was also remarkably tender of said grays, who were his pride, and whom he had named Fred and Ferd. On hearing his master's inquiry, therefore, he looked perfectly aghast, and diving behind the wheel, he said, "I'll try to do it, but I'll be obliged to you to let me have a couple of extra horses. I can't think of it for a minute, and as if this were conclusive, and his word the law, Bill stuffed his hands into his bagging trousers, and was walking quickly away, when Mr. Delafield stopped him, and said, "I'll try to do it, but I'll be obliged to you to let me have a couple of extra horses. I can't think of it for a minute, and as if this were conclusive, and his word the law, Bill stuffed his hands into his bagging trousers, and was walking quickly away, when Mr. Delafield stopped him, and said, "I'll try to do it, but I'll be obliged to you to let me have a couple of extra horses. 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