

The Herald-Advance.

MILBANK, S. D., FRIDAY, JULY 18, 1890.

Consolidated April 11, 1890

HERALD VOL. XI, NO. 48.
ADVANCE VOL. VIII, NO. 49.



OLD MAN GILBERT

A Beautiful War-Time Story
By ELIZABETH W. BELLAMY.
Flourish of "Four Oaks" Toilet
"Joanna" Etc.

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CHAPTER XIX. MASQUERADING.

When Furnival had left the office he crept to her father's side. He was still staring out of the window, and the first intimation of her approach was a twitch of her fingers upon his hand. Happily, Col. Thorne was not demonstrative of affection, especially toward children, and just now, while he was struggling for the mastery of his feelings, he wished to be alone, and he shrank from her touch saying, coldly: "Go play, Winifred; you interrupt me."



Yet, even as he spoke, he was conscious of a yearning for the sympathy expressed in the clasp of those small fingers, and he had so impulsively withdrawn, put it out in an unobtrusive way, but it is the fate of reticent natures to be misunderstood. His ingratitude had led him to slight opportunity, and Missy's nascent tenderness, once rebuffed, was not easily to be won anew. She saw in her father's stretched hand only a signal for her to retire, and her indignant spirit uttered its protest as she turned and left him.

"I don't seem as you're so mighty busy looking out of the window," and she went to her father, muttering to herself: "I can't go to try to no to be father, and one of these days I mean to have Brer Nicholas and stay with him days. Brer Nicholas is glad when I tell him that."

Angry and sore, Missy sat her down on the knife block under the magnolia tree, glowing green in the wintry sun, and wept for the brother who was soiled with the genial gift of expression. Col. Thorne sighed, and looked the part, and thus secured against unwelcome intrusion, he sat before the fire with his feet in his hands, and gave himself up to his regrets. His little world seemed slipping from his grasp. In the sum of his joys and sorrows, his submissive, obedient and never contented for much; even by that hateful marriage was lost him; he would remember Nicholas no more, and now that Flora was the wife of Alex Gage she could never again be the same Flora; there remained only Missy, and her he had driven away! The Colonel's desire to have her with him at that moment was just not strong enough to make him willing to risk a refusal by letting her back, so he consoled himself by making plans for her future. His daughter's education was a problem that had vexed his soul not infrequently of late, and knowing well Missy's incompetency he resolved to tutor himself.

And now began an era miserable alike to Missy and her father. It lasted three months. At the end of that time the Colonel, although in favor of such a long vacation, determined that for a girl of 22 years old a vigilant governess was an imperative necessity, to be sought for diligently and secured at any cost. Meantime Missy and the Colonel enjoyed a rest.

June had come again, but Nicholas had not been heard from, nor had old Gilbert returned. The two names were instinctively avoided in the Colonel's presence, and otherwise life at Thorne Hill had resumed its accustomed course. Company came and went; Miss Elvira brought new dresses and gave parties, paid and received visits, and went to dinners, and though it all read her daily allotment of Bishop Ken. Every Sunday, if the weather was fine, she drove to church with Missy. At long intervals she went to see Mrs. Herry, for the Colonel had withdrawn his prohibition when Flora was married; but the intercourse was not so frequent as of old, and on a certain day near the end of June—it was the anniversary of Nicholas' departure, though Missy made no allusion to this—she insisted upon going to Mrs. Herry's to spend the day but to remain all night. Miss Elvira sighed and submitted; she was looking forward to that old time coming, when the inexorable

governess should be discovered. To Lottie and Bess, Mrs. Herry's two young granddaughters, Missy was always a welcome guest, and she herself desired nothing better than to be "turned loose," as Glory-Ann phrased it, in the lumber room upstairs. Here Missy had contrived a stage on which she personated her favorite heroes and heroines, with Lottie and Bess Herry and their little twin brothers, sometimes an audience, sometimes a coadjutor. As audience they could not be more appreciative than Amy, who often fled in terror from Missy's realistic impersonations, but as coadjutors they were ungrudgingly more satisfactory.

The children had manufactured a theatrical wardrobe and "properties," but these had long since been used, and on this particular day Missy was just about over the discovery of a faded and shrunken-up nankeen suit that had been Paul Herry's—the eldest grandson—in years long past, and had since been lying forgotten in an unexplored closet.

Amid much tittering and expostulation from Lottie and Bess, Missy attired herself in this suit, and as if suddenly endowed with the fire of genius proceeded to improvise a drama based on the adventures of a lost boy.

It was already late in the afternoon when this performance opened, and Lottie, when she saw the light beginning to fade, reminded the protagonist that she ought to hurry the catastrophe in order to be dressed for tea.

"Yes, 'cause Brer Paul is comin' home this very night for his vacation, he's comin' in the stage," piped one of the twins.

Missy had heard this news before, but at this moment it seemed to have gained a painful significance for her.

"Do you s'pose I want to see him?" she cried. "And my Brer Nicholas far away?"

Down she sprang from the little stage, thus bringing her performance to an abrupt conclusion.

But Missy's drama was not yet over; before the children could divine what she would do, she had seized a pair of shears, and with two or three swift strokes, had severed her tangled, red-brown locks from her head.

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threaten the child.

This thought had not long occurred to her when there was heard a shuffling of many feet on the back piazza, a murmur of many voices in subdued lament, and Larkin, the carriage driver, followed by every negro on the place, came hurrying in, to announce solemnly:

"Somethin' is happened, mist'ah; prepar yo' mind."

Then the front gate was heard to slam; some one ran up the front steps, rushed in at the open door, and Mrs. Herry was clasped in her beloved grandson's strong young arms. He, at least, was safe. No harm had befallen Paul, this glorious boy of 17, on whom her fond old eyes rested with proud delight.

But this was no moment for rejoicing. "Something is happened, dear grand-mother," said Paul, gravely, before he stooped to kiss his clamorous brothers and sisters. "Something has happened to Winifred Thorne; they are bringing her in here."

CHAPTER XX. WHAT HAD HAPPENED.



"Dat chile is Mawse Jasper Thorne's darter,"

The impulse that directed Missy's flight was but the culmination, under a favoring suggestion, of that agony of longing and regret which had possessed her soul for a year past. The mention of Paul Herry's return had been like a match to a train of powder; Missy's resolve was fixed instantly; this opportunity, her disguising dress—all invited. It was but the work of a few seconds to cut off her hair. Desperation lent wings to her feet, and soon she was out of sight—and out of breath, behind the quince bushes, where she paused an instant, striving to devise some plan by which to elude the children; for here in Tallahassee, Missy felt herself, more miles on the road to Tampa, and her fear of the great, unknown world that lay outside the familiar limits of her life was proportionately intensified.

Fortune favored her; the children gave up the pursuit, and Missy, having climbed over the fence, ran down a back street, as laughable a little figure as ever appeared in unaccustomed clothes four sizes too large for her; but in the gathering dusk she passed unseen. Her aim was to overtake the stage in which Paul Herry was expected and by some means to hide herself therein. Once away from Tallahassee, Missy felt sure of her route, for with her all roads led to Tampa.

By dint of wandering she came at last to the postoffice, in front of which the stage had just stopped. The sight of it thrilled her with exultation. She felt herself at last on the way to rejoin her brother. There could be no hindrance now, she felt sure, to her journey. She dashed across the street and reached the stage coach unobserved, for all the bystanders were gathered around the postoffice, expectant of the mail. A quartet of young lads were dragging another lad from the coach with hilarious greeting as Missy climbed up by the hind wheel on the opposite side and established herself on top.

There a terrible sense of isolation possessed her. She stretched herself out, face downward, and to keep from wallowing about, stuffed the skirt of her nankeen blouse in her mouth, loathing her cowardice. But her purpose gave way at last. After all, she was only pretending to be a boy; how could she, a poor, quaking little girl, ever hope to find Brer Nicholas unaided and alone?

In despair and self-contempt she began to climb down with perilous haste; the driver cracked his whip, the coach gave a lurch, Missy lost her hold and fell, with a wild scream, between the wheels.

The horses were checked instantly, and there was a rush to the spot whence that frantic cry proceeded. Paul Herry, who had started to walk home accompanied by his young friends, turned back to join the little crowd assembled around Missy, lying unconscious in the sand.

No one recognized the child, and a looker on had just hazarded the conjecture that the outlandish little creature must have arrived on the stage, unknown to the driver, when Larkin came upon the scene.

"Lemme see!" he shrieked. "Fur de love o' heben, mawsters, dat chile is Mawse Jasper Thorne's darter, little Miss Winifred Thorne."

There was a murmur of incredulity, but Larkin insisted, apologetically. "Tubbe sho, hit dean look lak hit, but hit's so. Hakkom she's in sich a rig; she been playin' success. Lawd! Lawd! Is she killed, mawsters?"

They lifted Missy from the ground and carried her into a neighboring drug store, where she recovered consciousness. "In Winifred Thorne," she said, and essayed to move, but fainted again.

"Any bones broke?" Larkin asked anxiously of the doctor bending over her.

The doctor thought not; but there was

probably serious injury somewhere, and Larkin was ordered to return and inform Mrs. Herry.

Paul Herry had hardly told his grand-mother what he knew of the accident when Missy was brought in on a litter, where she lay, deadly pale, with her eyes closed, and moaning piteously.

Miss Elvira came and looked at her. "Oh, Winifred!" she lamented. "what will your father say?"

"Hush!" Mrs. Herry warned her; but Missy heard and opened her eyes.

"I was—tryin' to find—Brer Nicholas," she panted.

"Poor child!" Mrs. Herry sighed, with tears falling over her cheeks like rain.

Miss Elvira staggered back to the sofa in the parlor and wept and wrung her hands.

"Some one must go for the colonel," Mrs. Herry said.

One of Paul's young friends, who had helped to bear the litter, offered to ride to Thorne Hill, and sometime past mid-night Col. Thorne alighted at Mrs. Herry's gate.

He had ridden hard and he had ridden alone, for he would not allow the breathless messenger who brought the tidings of Missy's fall to return with him; nor was it so much the instinct of hospitality that made him insist upon the young fellow remaining the night at Thorne as the desire to escape all witness of the anguish he could not hide. He had ordered Griffin Jim to make ready the double buggy and follow immediately with Glory-Ann, but he himself rode out in the night as furiously as his son had ridden away just one year before. The colonel remembered this and groaned aloud; he remembered, too, with a shudder his declaration that he would never again cross Mrs. Herry's threshold save in case of some calamity; and the calamity had come, but not to Mrs. Herry.

The lights were still burning in the parlor and in the hall, and there was a light also in one of the rooms upstairs. The colonel, as he dismounted, scanned the windows of that room with a covered effort to read there some sign of his child's condition, before he stooped up the path.

His violent ride had not subdued his excitement, though to the physician who met him at the door he presented the impervious, distant demeanor that had always characterized him; the only sign of feeling he showed was his utter inability to frame in words the questions that burned in his eyes.

"I am of the opinion that the injuries will not necessarily prove fatal," the doctor said, and paused.

The colonel bowed.

"But lameness may be the result."

An angry flush darkened the colonel's face, but he heard all the doctor said in silence, and then, turning abruptly away, went upstairs.

At the door of the room where Missy lay Mrs. Herry met him.

"What is the matter?" he demanded.

"Has not Dr. Lane told you?" Mrs. Herry said, glancing at the child on the bed.

"One doctor!" exclaimed the colonel, wrathfully. "I will have all the doctors in the state! I don't believe the injury will result in lameness; I won't believe anything of the kind."

"My dear cousin," said Mrs. Herry, "we must hope for the best. Let me give you some coffee after your long night ride? Or a glass of wine?"

The colonel refused; he wanted nothing, he said; but he would see the child now.

He stood by the bedside and looked long at Missy. The doctor had given an anodyne, and she lay asleep, with her hands crossed on her breast; and her father, overpowered by the sight, turned away and left the room.

In the morning he came again. Missy had not stirred. "When will she wake again?" he asked, despairingly. But when Missy awoke his distress increased. She had been so little caressed by him, so seldom noticed except to be reprimanded for some childish fault, that he was the last person she wished now to see.

"Take him away!" she entreated. "Don't let him touch me! It hurts me to touch me, and it won't do a mite of good to scold me."

"Winifred, I will not touch you; I will not scold you," the colonel assured her.

For answer Missy covered her face with her hands and screamed and sobbed, so that it became necessary to take the colonel away.

But remain away the colonel could not and would not. When she was quieted he came again and sat down with his hands behind him, in order to show that he did not mean to touch her. If she would only smile! But the troubled look he wore was not calculated to win smiles. "Where hurts you, Winifred?" he asked. "Don't you feel better?"

"Nowhere hurts," answered Missy. "And I don't feel better."

The colonel sighed. "Is there anything you would like to have?" He struggled for some term of endearment, but his lips, long unused to affectionate utterance, refused to frame the words he sought. "You shall have anything you ask, Winifred," he declared, pathetically.

Missy closed her eyes and did not answer. She was silent so long that her father thought her asleep, and he was growing uneasy at what he fancied might be a fatal symptom, when she suddenly opened her eyes, and looked at him with great earnestness. "No, you won't," she said, "no, you won't."

(Continued next week.)

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