

HER PASSING  
ACQUAINTANCE

VIRNA SHEARD

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# Her Passing Acquaintance

By Virna Sheard

New England Magazine, January, 1902

THE vast draughty station was filled with impatient people waiting for the Express from the West; it had been held up a few miles back by a snow-slide, and was now exactly two hours and thirty minutes behind time. The hands of the great unsympathetic clock traveled slowly towards four, and outside the day drew on to darkness.

Men growled, children fretted, women with restless babies wore upon their tired faces that look of white strained patience they alone ever wear.

There is no more intolerable place to wait, at the best of times, than a station—but on Christmas eve, when the silver has dropped to zero, and the close, over-heated rooms are suffocatingly full, it is only the truly virtuous who control their feelings.

For half an hour an old, old gentleman and a small child had been tramping briskly up and down the platform: he, with his cheery wrinkled face, colored by the cold to the redness of a winter apple, she with her dimpled cheeks tinted like a wild rose.

They—at least the little maid—talked incessantly, while now and again her happy laugh rang out on the frosty air like a peal of sweet bells. She did not walk, she danced along beside him, and the North wind that caught them as they turned at the corner of the platform would swing her light figure against his and blow her yellow hair in a flying mist about her eyes.

“Five minutes more, Granddaddy; only five minutes more, and then we’ll see the big red light turning the bend.”

“Yes, Dolly, yes,” he answered, “but everything will be crowded to-night so there’ll be ten minutes more unpleasantness before we’re settled; after that, though, it will be hey! and away for Aunt Maud’s and the lads and lassies. Well, sweetheart, we won’t see one of them to-night; they’ll all be packed off in bed with their blessed stockings hanging from the bed posts.”

She laughed gaily. “I think they will wait up—I don’t believe Bob and Nina could sleep a wink till we got there; O see, granddaddy,” running ahead, “see, there she comes now! there she comes, and all the people are out to meet her.”

The huge, panting engine steamed swiftly in, breathing hard and heavily like a living thing that was worn with toil. Soon the passengers had collected their many mysterious parcels and were thronging into the already half-filled carriages.

The old gentleman was right, and it was an uncomfortable ten minutes, for sleeper and Pullman were full, but he was more fortunate than some, for,

boarding the last car, he found room enough—and a little to spare.

He arranged his luggage, which consisted of uncouth and oddly-shaped brown packages, on one seat, unbuttoned his fur-lined overcoat and sank heavily down on the familiar red plush cushions opposite Dolly with a sigh of mingled contentment and relief—for he had reached that age when material things are of most important consideration—*happiness*, he felt, might be an illusion, but *comfort* was real. “I believe every other car is entirely filled, Dolly,” he remarked, complacently.

“They always considered me good at running things when travelling, dear—there is nothing like experience in these matters—that, and keeping a stiff upper lip. One must firmly assert one’s right to accommodation. You heard what I said to the guard at the door? These companies have no right to pack people into their confoundedly uncomfortable carriages. See! this one is filled now; we’re like herrings, my love, like herrings! There should be Pullmans—plenty of them—particularly at such a time of the year.

“Ah!” looking over his spectacles uneasily, “here come three men, huge fellows, by Jove! three too many of that size; probably one of them will expect to quarter here, Dolly.”

Two of the men, broad-shouldered and of a strongly-built, mechanic type, stood glancing up and down the car eagerly; the third, who was slighter and quite different in appearance, allowed them to arrange things while he leaned wearily against the arm of Dolly’s seat. He was singularly handsome, although on one side of his face, down the cheek, across the forehead and running into his thick blond hair, was a strip of black court plaster, held in place by tiny bars of the same. About his mouth were set unpleasant lines and he was very white. Dolly thought, glancing up at him.

He waited indifferently enough till one of his companions had reconnoitered the position and returned.

“There is nothing further down,” said the man, “so perhaps,” turning to Dolly, with an apologetic glance at her grandfather, “perhaps this little lady will share her seat with one of us; this ’ere young gentleman,” indicating the one standing with such apparent indifference, “this gentleman has lamed his foot. We two others can easily get places behind.”

“I shall be most happy to accommodate you here, sir,” said the old gentleman, gathering aside his coat. “Sit down by me; indeed, we are hardly entitled to as much room as we have taken,” smiling benevolently.

“Thank you,” said he of the lame foot and injured head, taking the proffered place, “you are awfully good.”

“Not at all, not at all. If your foot would be easier, lift it up across there; Dolly won’t mind. Once had a sprained ankle myself; got a fall riding across country at home in Ireland. Bad thing a sprained ankle is; kept me a prisoner for weeks. Is yours painful?”

The man’s face had blanched whiter and his lips twitched.

“Somewhat,” he answered, “thank you.” Then bowing gravely to Dolly, “with your permission I will put it up.”

“Oh! I would rather you did,” she said, eagerly, her violet eyes full of sympathy; “much rather.”

They were moving swiftly now through the darkened country, the train swinging from side to side, making up for lost time. Against the windows came a steady rataplan of frozen snow: here and there over the dreary fields would sparkle the light from some lonely farm house. The porter came through and turned up the lamps, so the car was flooded with a yellow, restful glow.

The old gentleman leaned his head against the crimson roll behind and dozed gently. Those near talked in monotonous undertones. The man opposite Dolly pulled his soft hat down over his eyes and folded his arms.

She herself sat open-eyed, wide, wide awake, for was it not Christmas eve, and where is the child that so far forgets itself as to be sleepy on that dear night, no matter what its environment? So she looked about brightly, then rose and kneeled upon the seat to discover what baby it was that was crooning away at the end of the car, singing to itself that little song without beginning or end that all babies know and sing. After finding it and listening for a little while, she settled herself down in her corner again and looked at her fellow-traveller opposite. She fancied at first that he was asleep—like her grandfather—but after a few moments changed her mind. He was certainly awake and watching her. After making sure of that, she only glanced over shyly now and then.

He was very nice to look at, she thought, very nice; oftener and oftener her eyes strayed across.

Presently an idea struck her. Granddaddy had told her not to talk to strangers, but surely this was different; this man was almost a visitor. They had invited him into their seat, but he was so quiet and stern there was some difficulty in addressing him. She waited, trying to overcome her feelings, then curiosity conquered. Leaning over, she touched him lightly on the coatsleeve, glancing first down at his bandaged foot and from that to his forehead.

“Have you—have you been in a battle?” she asked softly, with a little quiver in her voice.

“Yes,” he answered, taking off his hat, “*Waterloo*.”

“Oh!” replied she, turning to her grandfather, who slept placidly. “Granddaddy said that was long and long ago, but there might be another, I suppose?” with an inquiring lift of her dark eyebrows.

“Yes,” he answered, “there was another.”

“And were you shot?” she inquired.

He pointed to his forehead.

“Oh! I am so sorry!” she cried softly; “so very, very sorry.”

“I am sorry, too,” he said, grimly, “sorry that the fellow did not take better aim.”

The lovely face turned up to his seemed puzzled. “And your foot?” she questioned.

“No, that wasn’t shot,” he said, with a bitter half laugh, “but it should have been—for playing the fool.”

Again she failed to understand, but the sorrow in her heart for anything wounded and suffering rose in a floodtide. Her eyes filled and her rosy lips trembled.

“I’m afraid I can’t do much to help you but be sorry,” she answered again; “but I am truly that.”

“You are awfully good,” he said; “it’s the best help I’ve had so far—no one has said that much but you.”

Then, changing his tone. “Tell me about yourself, and about your grandfather; don’t worry about me,” smiling a little. “I’m all right.”

“Why, we are going to Aunt Maud’s, at Kingston, for Christmas,” she answered, winking the tears out of her eyes and smiling back at him, “and there are Bob and Nina and little Maud and Harold, Rex and Molly (those are the twins), and Toddles and the baby. It’s a new one—we haven’t seen her yet—but we always go to them at Christmas—granddaddy and me. We live together, granddaddy and me, for I haven’t any mother or father, you know. Aunt Maud wants us to live with her always but we couldn’t, of course, and I’d rather stay with granddaddy. Now, tell me about *yourself*, with a bewitching smile, and where *you’re* going to spend Christmas.”

“You’re not the least afraid of me, are you?” he asked abruptly.

“Why no,” she cried, with a little laugh; “why no, indeed I like you already; one isn’t afraid of people one likes, and there are only a few, few things I really am afraid of anyway—just wobblers and mice, and a little wee bit of the dark prison; we can see it from Aunt Maud’s windows.”

“Ah,” he said in an odd voice, “most people would be—that is, afraid of the robbers, and the prison—perhaps not of the mice—not so much at least.” Then, changing his tone:

“Won’t you tell me your name?”

“Dolly Blake,” she answered; “Dorothea Blake, it is in the big Bible. Do you like it?”

“Yes,” said the man, “I had a little sister named Dorothea.”

“Where is she?” asked the child.

“She is dead.”

“And where is your mother and father?” went on the questioning voice.

“With her,” he replied, softly.

“Then who did you live with—your grandfather?”

“No,” he answered; “Oh, no; I lived with a very dear relative—an uncle.”

“Was he as dear as granddaddy?”

“I’ll show you what he was like,” said the man, and, taking a small folio from his pocket, he began to draw rapidly.

The child watched him with great interest, and in perfect silence. After a quarter of an hour’s work he handed her the picture.

She bent her golden head over it, and studied it closely, then she looked up and met his eyes.

“No,” she said; “no—he isn’t like granddaddy—he doesn’t look—so kind—you don’t mind my saying so?”

“I don’t mind,” he answered grimly.

She folded her fingers over the picture. There was a thoughtful look in the depths of her eyes.

Outside the storm beat. Inside the lamps swung, throwing strange shadows.

The old gentleman, wrapped in his furs, slumbered peacefully, the silver of his ruffled hair making a sort of nimbus about his head.

“We are nearly there,” said the child, “are we not?”

“It will be another hour,” he answered.

She smiled back at him. “We have had quite a long talk, haven’t we; and after to-night I may never see you again. Sometimes I tell granddaddy,” she continued quaintly, “sometimes I tell granddaddy that I find this a very queer world.”

He answered her with a sad look—it was a sort of smile, too, she thought.

“We certainly never will see each other again, Miss Dorothea,” he said.

“Except in heaven,” she answered quietly. “Then I’ll come up to you and say, ‘It’s Dolly Blake! We went down together one Christmas eve in the train, don’t you remember?’ and you will say, ‘Why, yes, of course, I do.’ People always remember things that happen on Christmas eve. And now if I could only say my prayers I believe I could go to sleep,” with a stifled yawn. “It’s ever so long past bed-time, but even in the cars one ought to say one’s prayers, don’t you think so?”

“Yes,” he answered gravely. “I certainly think one ought.” Then in a low voice, “Let me hear you say them, Dolly,” and looking at her with a certain wistfulness, “and say a word for me. I’m afraid you won’t see me when you reach Heaven, little one. I’m not one of the lucky fellows that’ll get there, but I’ll always remember you when this night comes round, wherever I am—wherever I am.”

“And I will remember you,” said she. “Now I’ll say my prayers,” folding her small hands and bending down her head.

Some of the words were too low for him to catch, but he heard, “Now I lay me——,” and afterwards a great many names said lovingly, the names of the children where she was going.

Then she raised her head and half opened her eyes.

“What is your name,” she asked, “you forgot altogether to tell me that.”

“Jack,” he replied, huskily, “Jack Melbourne.”

The white lids dropped again—“And,” she continued softly, but so he caught the words—“and please bless—very much, poor Mr. Jack Melbourne, for he has been in a *battle*, and I’m afraid his side must have been beaten, and please let me see him some time or other again—if not, if not in this place—then in Heaven—Amen!”

“Amen!” he said soberly, “Amen!”

“Now I think I’ll really go to sleep for a little while; if you are awake will you watch granddaddy?”

“I will be awake,” he replied, “and will gladly watch you both.”

She smiled sleepily and trustingly at him, then curling herself up, shut her eyes.

How lovely she was, he thought, how sweet. How like a flower. Such a prayer as hers surely would reach its destination. He had said “Amen” to it. Ah! it was many months since Jack Melbourne had said that to any prayer.

On rushed the train. On and on—still he watched the sleeping child. By and by a new thought came to him, and from his little finger he took a small gold ring set with a single heart-shaped turquoise.

Lifting one warm dimpled hand, whose fingers still held the picture he had drawn, he slipped the tiny ring on the first finger. Then he wrote rapidly on the back of the picture:

“From J. M. It belonged years ago to that other little Dolly.  
Remember me when Christmas eve comes round.”

When the train slowed up in the brightly lit station, and the child awoke and roused her grandfather, they were quite alone, and soon were met and warmly welcomed by Aunt Maud and Uncle Rob—who had long been waiting for their belated travellers.

Next morning when Dolly found herself in Nina’s pretty bedroom, the journey of the night before seemed but a dream. She made merry with her little cousins over their well-filled stockings and her own—and they were all very, very gay together—granddaddy being apparently the youngest and liveliest of them all. They told her that it must have been Santa Claus himself who slipped the small turquoise ring on her finger—she only smiled and answered nothing.

It was the following morning at breakfast that Uncle Rob looked suddenly over the top of his paper at granddaddy.

“Why, you and Dolly came down with a notorious character,” he said. “No less than young Melbourne! They brought him down to the Penitentiary on Christmas eve—he managed to escape after the trial, you know, and was recaptured at considerable trouble and expense—tried to shoot himself, I believe—and was otherwise damaged in the fray.”

“Dear me! Dear me!” said the old gentleman. “Young Melbourne. Now I do remember reading of that trial—robbed the bank, or embezzled. What was it?”

“Oh, he sowed a crop of wild oats of one kind or another, and wound up with forgery—signed his uncle’s name for some good round sum. I used to know them both years ago in Windsor; never dreamt the boy would turn out so badly. The old man was a hard one to live with, I fancy, and the lad needed a lighter hand. It’s a pity, a great pity!”

“A great pity,” echoed the old gentleman. “No, we didn’t see him, Dolly and I; doubtless he was in some other carriage. There were no desperadoes in ours.”

She listened with eyes growing wider and wider, while the soft pink faded slowly out of her face. The voices of the children talking merrily around the table sounded a long, long way off. She could see the tiny blue heart-shaped stone gleaming on her little finger.

After breakfast she stole away to a silent room above, whose windows looked across towards the great solitary stone building, and as she gazed at it her eyes were full of tears.

THE END

## TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[The end of *Her Passing Acquaintance* by Virna Sheard]