

A Box of Dead Roses

Ethel Mills

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THE old lady was a most amusing creature, and she had a past which was a record amongst pasts. Only that she was rich enough to buy the whole district, its "society" would have "cut" her long ago; as it was, people only talked about her with meaning looks and whispered condemnation. At least, the generation to which she belonged did that; the younger one only looked and wondered. Bent with rheumatism, bushy-browed., fierce-eyed and hard-featured — there remained no trace of the beauty and charm which (so report said) had sent more than one good man to the devil.

On sunny days she would have her chair moved on to the wide, vine-sheltered verandah. She liked to see what was going on; and she said that in Australia most things happened on verandahs. This particular one had been planned and built in early pioneering days, and had, no doubt, seen many ups and downs of varied incident.

One could listen to her by the hour when she was in the vein for remembering pages from her own life or from other lawless lives of early days, when all country west of the station was unknown Australia. Like most old people, she was given to repetition, but she told me a story once which neither I nor anyone else could ever induce her to tell again.

It was about a young wife — the most innocent of brides, who thought the world of her husband, and had no wish or look for other men. Yet the house was full of other men in those days, and they all gave thoughts or looks, more or less, to the prettiest woman in the district. Every evening she used to stand at her bedroom door, looking along the verandah, until she saw her husband returning from his work; and every evening he brought her a rose from the big bush by the steps. That was during the first months of her marriage. Next year, the rose-bush bore as abundantly as ever, but the man often forgot to pick a flower for her; and, after a time, he forgot altogether.

The young wife was painfully ideal and long-suffering, and never gave him a word of reproach; she was still so much in love with him that she was shy, and blushed like a girl when he came near her unexpectedly. "Fancy: after two years of married life!"

And the old lady smiled wickedly, and continued:

"She was tired one night, and went to bed early, leaving her husband smoking and reading in the dining-room; but it was so hot that she presently got up, threw on a gown, and strolled along the verandah in the shadow for a breath of cool air. The sultriness of the air brought out the strongest scent of the moonflowers. Just there, at the corner near the rose-bush, she saw her husband with his arms round a woman, kissing her lips over and over again — they were full, very red lips, such as men like to kiss.

"The woman was one of the housemaids — the soft-voiced, self-contained, velvet-footed one who usually brought in the tray for supper, and whose eyes never left the floor as she did so — a girl who seemed to have no thought beyond her duties.

"The wife heard enough to show her that the woman had thoughts for many things besides — enough to tell her that those kisses were not the first by any means; that the man's life had been a long lie, except, perhaps, during the very early days of marriage. She liked to think that he was all hers then. A delusion also, possibly; but a harmless one.

"As it was, she stole off to bed without saying a word. I call that a 'verandah tragedy,' my dear; because her whole nature changed in a few moments. Not that there was much to notice one way or the other at first — except that

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she said she could not bear the scent of the moonflowers, and had the creeper taken up at the roots. She did not even send away the housemaid. Why should she? But things were a great deal more pleasant for the 'other men' afterwards — a great deal, my dear! She used to sing and play to them, and dance with them, and flirt with them, and fill the house with visitors, and so on — in fact, she was a beauty, and had only just awakened to a knowledge of her power. You see, the station and money belonged to her; so she was freer than most wives.

"There was the baby, of course — a lovely, soft-faced little thing that used to take its mid-day sleep in a string hammock, swung up there by the trellis. She was fond of the child; yet, when it died and was buried by the lagoon in the garden, she used to sit dry-eyed, looking at the hammock that swung loosely in every breeze without its accustomed burden. She even said she was not sorry; because the boy might have grown up to break some woman's heart, and the world was well rid of the breed. Perhaps it was best so; though — looking at the other side of the question — he might have lived to blush for his mother.

"One day her husband was brought in, dead-kicked by the horse he was trying to catch in the yard. They carried him straight up the verandah to the big spare-room, and the blood was dripping, dripping all the way.

"She was a tidy, methodical woman always, and she sent for the housemaid — the velvet-footed one — and bade her wash the boards. The girl had a wonderful power of self-command usually, yet, at sight of that blood, she shivered and trembled like one with the palsy. Sentimental people said the wife was perfectly inhuman to think of the state of her verandah at such a time — and, of course, a kind friend told her. She laughed as she said, 'No! I am not heart-broken. I went through that experience two years ago.'

"Well, my dear" (and the old lady's voice sounded a little tired), "she lived a long, long life, and rather a varied and interesting one, from an outsider's point of view, at any rate. I often sit and think of her and of many things that happened on this old verandah, but of late years I forget a great deal. I like best to remember the days when the young wife used to stand listening, listening for the husband's step — the sweetest music in the world to her.

"No doubt she was an arrant little fool and bored him to death. I think, now, that he was no worse than the majority of men: a clever, interesting woman could have managed him. She became all that afterwards — for other men; but, as I said before, she was a totally different woman. Live every inch of your life, my dear!" finished the old lady, impressively. "One life, one love! — the idea is perfectly absurd."

Two years later I saw the old lady again — feebler, worn in body and mind. She still sat in sunny weather on the verandah, but now she always had a little cardboard box on her lap, caressing it with her withered fingers.

"Look, my dear!" she said; "this box is full of dead rose-leaves — they all came off that bush by the corner, years ago. Young people are so careless and forgetful. I may die at any moment, and unless I had it with me they would never remember to bury it in my grave. They are the dearest things I possess; the reason why they are so dear I shall carry a secret to my grave also."

The old lady had forgotten that she had ever told me a story with roses in it.

ETHEL MILLS