The Story of Ralph Miller

Dorothy Canfield

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I

THE Miller family was a devotedly united one, and family councils were common things with them, but never had they assembled with such anxious faces and earnest, apprehensive voices. As usual, Mrs. Miller dominated the group, striking the key customary firmness. "Something must be done to save the boy from an irreparable mistake. We may thank Heaven for the lucky chance by which we discovered what is going on. It is not too late to rescue him."

She looked about the little circle with a determined expression on her aquiline face. As usual, they all responded in the key which she had begun, running up and down the gamut of agreement, from Aunt Caroline's doubtful "Yes, but Fanny, what can be done? I think as you do, but — — " to Mr. Miller's hearty "I depend on you, Fanny! You'll know how to manage it."

Only Cousin Richard was silent. One never knew whether he was joining in the common harmony or was executing a melody of his own, so consistently did he, as a rule, keep his grim mouth closed. On that account Mrs. Miller passed him over in the fervor of her explanations and plans.

"It's a common enough mistake," she went on. "He has no conception of the nature of social distinctions, and, besides that, I suppose scarcely any boy grows up without fancying he's in love with a woman old enough to be his mother. I dare say the woman has made him believe she's desperately in love, and Ralph's generosity has betrayed him into responding to a fancied claim on him."

Aunt Caroline threw in a fluttered protest. "Perhaps, Fanny, dearest, she is fond of him. I've always heard her so well spoken of by the other teachers."

Mrs. Miller snorted. "Do you suppose for a moment that if Ralph hadn't inherited his uncle's money she would have done anything but laugh at him?"

Cousin Dick flicked the ash from his cigar with an expressionless face, but Mrs. Miller instinctively turned toward him as if he were about to speak. However, he put the cigar back in his mouth, ran his finger through his wiry white hair, and regarded her in silence with steady eyes. Fanny went on with her monologue:

"I should be a recreant mother if I weren't willing to exert myself in every possible way — even the most painful one. I mean to go and see this absurd old maid, and — and — I mean to go and see her! I think I can put an end to the whole nonsense. The idea! She must be twelve years older than he! She used to correct his little compositions in the high school. It was a mistake not sending him East to college, just as I wished at the time. He must go away now. Richard shall take him to Europe when he sails next week."

Mr. Miller protested. "Oh, Fanny, do you think that is necessary? It will keep him from graduating from college this spring with his class."

His wife swept aside all obstacles. "What's that to saving our only son from a foolish infatuation? A boy with his brains and wealth and social position doesn't need to graduate."

Cousin Richard seemed to be preparing to say something. He took his cigar out of his mouth, ground the end in the ash−tray until the last red spark was gone, and then stood up, drawing his coat about his spare, upright figure.

"You'll make a mistake if you interfere in this, Frances," he said, in a dry, colorless way. "I'll take the lad abroad, if you say, but you'll be making a mistake if you go to Miss Wilson or try and bully Ralph. I think, from what he said to me, he is in love with her. Ralph is a man, almost — he'll be twenty−one in a few months, and in his own way he's mature for his years. You can't run his destiny the way you run your chapter of the D. A. R."

Mrs. Miller broke out in a passion of protest. Dick was crazy — she hoped she knew her duty to protect dear, generous, impulsive, ignorant Ralph, her only son — her only child. She would have tact; she knew Miss Wilson was a perfectly respectable person; but how preposterous! The difference in their station, if there was nothing else — Ralph Miller, only son of the Millers of Millerstown, and Rachel Wilson, teacher of English in the public high school! Why, her father was a carpenter, and her mother used to go out as nurse before she was married!

"They're both dead," remarked Cousin Richard, his hand on the knob of the door.

"As if that made any difference!" cried Fanny to his retreating back.

II

MRS. MILLER was a brave woman, accustomed to the command not only of others but of herself; but she felt an odd dryness in her throat as she stood waiting for a response to her ring at the bell over which was fixed an old−fashioned brass plate marked "Wilson." Since the death of her parents Mary Wilson had lived on alone in the house where she was born, a little white cottage with a quaint, prim garden about it, redolent of old−fashioned perfumes and filled with memories of her mother's mild, faded presence. The flower garden had been the gentle passion of the older woman's life, and Mary could not look out upon the neat beds and luxuriant old shrubs without a momentary vision of her mother's stooped shoulders bending over the roses, or hearing her slow, light footfall in the now so empty gravel paths.

Inside, the low−ceilinged rooms were as sensibly filled with her father's simple, kindly spirit. The thousand ingenious contrivances for lightening the work of the household, the shelves and brackets here and there, the windows lowered to the floor so that her little mother could look out on the garden as she sat sewing, the window−seat box for Mary's toys when she was a child — all surrounded the lonely woman with a sense of remembered affection and care.

Mrs. Miller rang the bell again. It resounded through a house patently empty. She drew out her watch and noticed that she was ahead of time. The high school, two squares away, would not be dismissed for five minutes. She looked about for a place to wait, and sank down on a bench under an arbor of wistaria, just then in full bloom, in the leafless luxuriance of early spring. Fanny relaxed, in spite of herself, in the quiet perfumed silence of the little garden. She was fond of flowers herself, and noticed with an absently approving eye the healthy vigor of the lilacs and peonies, beginning to leaf. Rows of sweet peas were just thrusting green bowed heads through the brown earth.

For a moment the mother knew an instant's rest from the turmoil of anxiety about her son. But it surged up in her at the sound of the gate clicking behind her. She turned and saw Mary Wilson walking up the path, her fair uncovered head shining in the sunlight. Mrs. Miller rose, her knees shaking under her, her mouth parched, but with the determination of a mother fighting for her young gleaming from her dark eyes. The other woman stopped, surprised and hesitating.

Mrs. Miller came forward. She knew the teacher by sight, remembering her from the days when the family had laughed at Ralph's boyish admiration for her. "This is Mrs. Miller," she said in a neutral voice, and then, with a sudden flash, "I am Ralph Miller's mother, and I have come to talk to you about him!"

Mary Wilson flushed a slow, painful red up to the roots of her blond hair, but she commanded her voice enough to say evenly: "Won't you come into my house, Mrs. Miller?"

She opened the door, stood on one side to let the older woman pass, and they both entered the little living−room in a complete silence. A canary swinging in the open window burst into a roulade of joyful welcome to his mistress. Mary carried him into another room, and, returning, found Mrs. Miller seated in the cretonne−covered chair her father had made her mother. The school−teacher sat down across the room and waited, her hands tightly clasped.

Mrs. Miller hesitated at first for words, but when she began they came in a rush: "Miss Wilson, you see in me a very unhappy woman. I have just learned of my son's engagement to you, and I have come to reason with you about it; to use every inducement I can think of to induce you to break so absurd, so unnatural a relationship. You may ask me why I do not go to my son. I have done so, and I come here with a heart aching from the first quarrel with my only child, from the first harsh words my boy has ever given me."

Her voice trembled, but she set her lips together firmly for a moment and went on: "You are an intelligent woman, of some experience. You cannot have lived to your age" — Mary winced at this — "without knowing how preposterous a marriage between you and my son would be, how it would expose you both to ridicule and humiliation, and how it would mean unhappiness in the end for you. Ralph is not yet twenty−one, and you must be over thirty — — "

Mary interrupted her. "I am thirty−four, Mrs. Miller; but your son loves me."

The mother gave an impatient gesture. "Love! What does a child his age know about love! He is the victim of

an ordinary foolish infatuation. He undoubtedly does admire you greatly and respect you, and probably he has a great affection for you, but as for loving you — he doesn't know, he can't know, the meaning of the word."

Mary's clasped hands tightened. "What you say would be true in all cases but one out of a thousand, but this is the one time it is not true. Ralph has always been an unusual boy. You must not think, Mrs. Miller, that I have not tormented myself over the difference in our ages and stations as much as you, but I know Ralph through and through" — her face paled with a sudden exaltation of certainty — "and he is unlike others of his age. He is a man, in spite of his youth, and he loves with a man's love."

Mrs. Miller's countenance wore the half−shocked, half−scornful expression of middle−aged Puritans when a passion is spoken of. "I didn't suppose you still clung to those immature, romantic ideas of life. I should think you were old enough to see more clearly, but I suppose an unmarried woman, no matter how old she is, is always a child. Marriage is not a matter of romance. Love must be at the bottom of it all, of course, but married life is made up of a thousand prosaic details where weightier matters than passion decide the course of things. You say Ralph 'loves' you. Perhaps he does now; but think, if the unsparing light of the intimacy of married life were thrown on you! Think! When he is finished with his medical course he will be twenty−five — a young man of twenty−five — and you will be nearly forty."

Mary groaned and hid her face in her hands. The mother went on, encouraged, her eyes glowing with the holy cruelty of fanatics.

"You don't look your age now, it is true, at least to men's eyes; but you know, and every woman who sees you knows, how near you are to middle age. Think what anguish it would be for you to see Ralph suddenly conscious of your first gray hairs or the wrinkles deepening about your mouth! Think what humiliation it would be to have people pointing at you and to know that they were saying, 'There goes the sentimental old maid who married one of her high−school pupils!'"

Mary cried aloud in pain and stood up, throwing her arms above her head. "Do you think I care for an instant what people would say? Why, I love Ralph. I love him! He is the only man in the world for me. I, who would die to serve him — would I care what gossiping people say?"

So intense, so unreserved an ardor rang in her voice that for a moment the mother was silenced, though her courage rose as Mary, with a sudden lapse into miserable uncertainty, said brokenly, "It is only for his own sake that I hesitate — — "

Mrs. Miller was quick to see the opening. Her voice softened as she laid her hand on Mary's shoulder. "My dear," she said, almost kindly, "no one knows how terribly I pity you. I believe you wholly. When I came here, I confess I had a different conception of your character. I even thought it might be Ralph's independent fortune which — — "

At Mary's scornful, blazing look she choked and hurried on: "But I see you are a good woman, who really loves my son. And it is in the name of that love that I appeal to you now. I do not speak of the difference in station between you, although I believe honestly that is almost impossible to cross, but I appeal to you to save the man you love from wrecking his life. You know — you must know — as I do, that in spite of all pretty phrases your plan is an insane one. You must feel that he cannot know himself yet. If you know him so intimately as you say, you must be aware how wildly and impulsively generous he is. If he thought the shadow of an obligation to you rested on him he would give himself eagerly to living up to what you expected. Be as generous as he! Don't take advantage of his youth, his utter inexperience — — " She was pleading as for her life.

Mary Wilson looked at her with smoldering eyes, and caught her up with an eagerness as intense as her own. "You don't know what you're asking. It must be you have never loved. It is like asking me to hold my breath until I die — it is superhuman. Think!" she cried in quivering appeal — "think of what it would mean to the Ralph we both know, the sensitive, exquisitely honorable, self−doubting soul, to have always with him a love like mine, a steady, enduring, understanding affection, sure with the certainty of maturity, always to be a shield between him and the world which is so cruel to gentle and delicately organized beings such as he is! Think what I could be to him — how I could guard him and steady him in his belief in himself! I would give every atom of my heart and intelligence to making him happy and strong — — " She was choked with tears, and stopped, sobbing.

Mrs. Miller shook her head. "That is a mother's love you are describing. He has one mother; he does not need another. The common lot should be his. He should not be shielded and guarded, even by a great affection. He should shield and guard another. Only so could he ever grow. He must marry, not some one who has lived

through the experience he must have, but some one young, ignorant, like himself, with whom he can grow in power, whose very mistakes will be strengthening to him, whom he must lead and uphold."

Through the strong, firm body of the younger woman there was running a series of convulsive shudders. She sank into a chair and laid her head in her hands. Mrs. Miller talked on and on, sure that she had hit upon the right line. She was surprised at the depth of pity she felt for the motionless figure before her, shaken from time to time with a dry sob, but she was fighting for the happiness of her child, and conviction grew within her as she talked. Finally there was a long silence, significant and portentous, throbbing with the premonition of a decision. Mary lifted her head and looked about her with tired eyes.

"You are right," she said in a low tone, quite steady. "I will do as you say. It is best for Ralph."

Mrs. Miller broke down for the first time, and wept loudly in her handkerchief. "You are a noble woman!" she said between her sobs. "I can never be grateful enough to your generosity."

The other said quietly: "It is not for you I am doing it. It is for Ralph" — and then, with a sudden return to her white exaltation — "for Ralph, whom I love as no one was ever loved before, since for his good I am willing to sacrifice his belief in me." Her fervor subsided again, and she was only very pale and still as she closed the door on her visitor, saying: "You need have no fear. Ralph will never come back to me."

III

IT was a long, still summer in Millerstown. Mary Wilson worked in her garden, her shoulders beginning to be stooped, as her mother's had been. Mrs. Miller walked about the park−like setting to her large house — the "mansion," as it was called by the inhabitants of Millerstown, who admired and envied the Millers with a curious mixture of respect for rank and jealous fear of condescension.

Mrs. Miller lived on the letters of Cousin Richard, the grim, devoted man to whom they had confided the utterly crushed boy who had returned to them from Mary Wilson's cottage. The old cousin wrote, on the whole, encouragingly. Ralph was looking better, had more color, seemed to be going about and sightseeing. He had been examined lately by a doctor, who said he was as sound as a bell. He — Dick — thought that Ralph seemed listless and preoccupied, but perhaps that was natural under the circumstances. At any rate, he was well, and grew handsomer every day. All the women in the street turned and looked after him.

"He is well — he is well!" Mrs. Miller said it over and over to herself, extracting every drop of comfort possible out of it. Her heart yearned over her son's sorrow, but she was jubilant in her rescue of him. So long as the sensitive lad, as delicate as a girl, did not fall ill with his foolish worry, she could hope for nothing better. The medicine was working as she had hoped. The change, the new experiences, the acquaintance with other people of wholly different views — all would make a new creature of him and bring him back to her to laugh at his idle romance.

The last news received before they started home in the fall was quite as reassuring as the rest had been. Dick was obliged to stay in London over one sailing, but Ralph was to come on alone and visit New York while he waited for his cousin before they began the journey west to Millerstown. Ralph was well, and seemed more like himself than for some time.

The eight days of the silence of the ocean voyage passed quietly in Millerstown, and then came a thunderclap, a telegram from Ralph, in New York, the day he landed:

I was married this morning to Dottie Coster, of London. We will go to Millers−town in two weeks. She was a member of the chorus of the Alhambra in London. She is eighteen years old.

The savage brutality of the announcement and the keen thrust of the last sentence made Mrs. Miller's heart stand still. In an anguish beyond words she showed the telegram to her husband. When cousin Richard arrived alone, a week later, he found a broken and aged woman waiting to hear what he had to say. Trusting in her old self−confident strength and hard courage to bear the truth, he did not spare her. He told the story in his dry, concise way, his weather−beaten old face twisted with a sorrow which made it almost grotesque.

"Yes, I saw them. Yes, she is an actress, a chorus−girl, rather — not even an actress — a common cockney chorus−girl, with a foolish, pretty face, if she wouldn't spoil it with paint. She's respectable enough, I fancy; too young to be anything else. Ralph met her on the steamer. The first night out they sighted an iceberg, and all the passengers were called up to see it. The girl got things twisted somehow — thought there was a wreck and that they were all going to the bottom, and when she found there was no danger burst out crying and saying she'd hoped she was going to die; there was nothing for her to do but die.

"You can guess how that would stir Ralph's chivalrous spirit of protection, and he made her tell what her story was. It seems she'd embarked with an engagement with a chorus in New York, and after the steamer had sailed a delayed letter had been handed to her canceling the contract. She had no money, no friends, nowhere to go when she landed in New York, nowhere to return even in London, since her father, a scene−shifter in the Alhambra, had died just before she sailed. You can imagine the rest of the journey — Ralph and his impetuous chivalry and sore heart, and this clinging, helpless, pretty creature looking up to him as to a beautiful young god of strength and wisdom.

"Ralph told me he didn't love her. 'How can I ever love again?' he said. 'But she loves me, and it is something to do with a disabled and wrecked life to make her happy and protect her against herself. Mary told me I was a hopelessly immature boy whom no grown woman could really love. Dottie is more immature than I — I am of importance to some one, at least.'"

Cousin Dick stopped short. His voice had been growing harsher and harsher, till it broke suddenly. "Damn it!"

he exclaimed, "I wish I could cry as you're doing, Fanny; it seems to me I'll have a stroke if I don't!" He got up and strode out of the room, his hand at his wrinkled old throat. At the door he paused and said the final thing in his miserable message. "Ralph told me to say: 'I hope my parents think Dottie is young enough.'"

In the storm of the family council, afterward, Fanny Miller's clear mind failed her. She was utterly confused and broken, a rudderless ship adrift on the raging torrent of condemnation. Her husband could not find words bitter enough to characterize Ralph's conduct and the disgrace he had brought upon them.

"He may come home!" he raged. "I'll never forbid my house to my only son; but greet the girl he's married I will not, nor shall any of you! What it is to have a child who overwhelms you with shame!"

Aunt Caroline murmured agitatedly: "Oh, what will people think! We can't introduce her to any one. I don't want to speak to an actress!"

Only Cousin Dick was silent. He looked at Fanny as if he expected some action from her, but she was too distraught to plan or do anything but shudder as wave after wave of realization of what she had done swept over her. Suddenly there rose before her distracted mind the vision of Mary Wilson's shining face. "Oh!" she cried to herself, "she loved Ralph; she will tell me what to do!"

Into the white tranquillity of the little living−room she rushed like one seeking sanctuary, and poured out to the tall, strong woman the pitiable story, sobbing convulsively and clinging to her like a child. Mary sat for a time in a silence only broken by the trills and sweet high notes of the canary. When she spoke it was with a still desolation of wo that frightened Mrs. Miller into quiet.

"Between us we have ruined his life — we have utterly ruined his life — — "

Fanny broke in with eager self−reproach: "No words can tell how I blame myself for what I did in — — " But Mary's even voice went on: "I do not blame you; I blame myself. I knew Ralph. I knew in my heart that this was a time when your worldly wisdom was the maddest folly. I should have been strong enough to stand between you and your son and save him from your pharisaical self−confidence — but that is past! I cannot endure to think what I should have done. What we must think now is that we must in some miraculous way save some little, little remnants of his happiness. To give our whole lives to doing that is a miserably small return for the injury we have done him. No — oh, no!" she cried suddenly, rising and throwing off Mrs. Miller, who was still clinging to her, "I may not have even that poor consolation. I may not come near to him. He must never see me. He has loved me, he may love me yet, he may always love me, and the only thing I can do for him is to stand far off!"

"But you!" — she took the mother by the shoulders with an almost savage grip — "you must work for both of us! You must at least give me that small satisfaction — that you will do everything I would do in your place. You must give your every breath to shielding him from the consequences of this step, you must welcome his wife, you must make her happy in this wretched town of gossips, you must love her, you must transform her by a sheer passion of desire into a fit companion for your son! You must sustain him in fidelity to her, you must make him love her, if only for her weakness!"

The grip of her hands was so tense that the other woman almost cried out. Fanny looked at the white face, again glowing with an exaltation of devotion. She did not dare embrace her. She felt a solemn awe of her.

And it was with this awe still in her heart that she went down to the train to meet Ralph and his wife. It was Fanny Miller's body that moved, but Mary Wilson's spirit animated it. She smiled at Ralph's drawn, unhappy face; she smiled at the awkward, half−shy, half−bold creature by his side; and it was with Mary Wilson's own love shining in her eyes that she drew Dottie to her and kissed the slack mouth, stained and disfigured with rouge.