

THE LONELY MAN - AND THE LONELY GIRL.

Touching Little Story of how a Deaf and Dumb Girl
Found Love and Happiness.)

by Alice C. Burnett.

"Very lonely soldier would be glad to receive friendly letters." Such was the announcement in the Personal Columns of "The Daily Telegraph" that rivetted Muriel Wentworth's eyes, as she sat at the breakfast table in her father's house, one glorious summer morning. The advertisement differed in no respect from a host of similar ones of its class, appearing at this time in the daily press; saving, perhaps, for a certain peculiarly pathetic note in it. And, yet, somehow, it seemed to hold a subtle appeal to the girl who read it, which caused her to linger over its simple wording with a fascination which she could not well have explained.

As the day went on, Muriel found herself pondering vaguely about this lonely soldier and his life, out there, in the trenches. To the tender girlish heart it appeared as almost unbelievable that any man facing death out there should be driven to advertise in the newspapers for letters to be written to him. Even supposing him to be an orphan without relations, there must surely be many friends who were glad, and proud, to write to him - and, probably, someone, as well, who was more than friend!

As she reached this point in her meditations, she sighed vaguely.

Our heroine, herself, formed as perfect a picture of sweet and fair young girlhood as an artist's eye would have loved to rest upon.

"Who is that beautiful girl?" strangers would often ask, as she appeared at her father's side, at some society function.

"Ah! that is Miss Wentworth," would be the inconsequent reply. "Yes, she is lovely, but you had better not speak to her, she is deaf-and-dumb."

And, thenceforward, as a rule, the questioner's interest in Muriel Wentworth ceased.

The girl's mother having died while she was yet an infant, our heroine was the idol of a wealthy and devoted father, who lavished upon her all the poor consolations that his money could buy - and the greatest sorrow of whose life was the affliction of his beautiful only daughter. He endowed her with a wardrobe fit for a princess, and had engaged a pleasant girl of her own age, to live with her, as companion, interpret what callers said to her, and relieve her of those household duties which would naturally have fallen to the share of the daughter of the house.

At the advice of a rather obtuse family doctor, it was insisted that Muriel should accompany him everywhere in the social world. He failed to realise the refinement of torture inflicted by this farce of gaiety upon the sensitive perceptions of the deaf girl, as she stood there, unutterably lonely, in the midst of a crowd; or that, in fact, such scenes merely caused her to shrink more deeply into herself than anything else would have done.

Muriel's really happy hours were spent before an easel, in a dainty little studio devoted to her use at home, where, under the pseudonym of Violet Vane, she painted pictures, with a tenderness of poetic conception which, already, had won her a considerable amount of recognition for so young an artist. In those creations of her mind, it was, that our heroine forgot her sorrow.

Morning after morning this advertisement of the very lonely soldier continued to re-appear, just as it had been when she first remarked it - and, yet, it seemed to her incredible that, all this time, the appeal contained in it had received no answer.

Surely - surely, someone must reply to him soon!

But apparently no one did so.

Then the thought came to Muriel which, at first, startled her by its own temerity:

Why should she not reply to the advertisement herself?

Might not, even letters from a deaf-and-dumb girl be better than letters from no one at all? she considered with sweet humility.

And there was no need for him to be aware of her affliction; probably, they would never meet.

There seemed to be so little that the deaf could do as their part in this terrible war. In striving her best to cheer the loneliness of a soldier who was serving his country, might she not find a way of "doing her bit", like the hearing women?

The result of Muriel's meditations was that, during the hour usually devoted to her painting, she sat in her studio and penned a letter to the very lonely soldier. This, she signed with her pseudonym, Violet Vane, and then sensitively concealed it in her desk until an hour when she could post it herself.

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"Somewhere in France" the mails had just arrived, and the eager young soldiers were being paraded for the distribution of the contents of the post bag.

But amongst this cheerful scene there was one man who stood in the jovial crowd of his fellows with no special air, or feeling of anticipation. The postbag never chanced to hold anything of special interest for him. Thus, letter-parade proved, to him, a matter of indifference. The only letters which he received were letters that he did not care about. Who, on earth, was there to write to him? Saving the valetudinarian maiden aunt, who penned him a duty-epistle, precisely once a fortnight, and urging the ailments of herself, her dog, or her parrot, and attributing the importance of avoiding wet feet, and upon her soldier-nephew the importance of avoiding wet feet, and of wearing flannel next his skin - besides his lawyer and a few business, or indifferent, acquaintances. For, somehow, he was not a man with the happy knack of making easy and familiar friends. Possibly, because of a rather reserved and thoughtful nature, and because his main interests in life were of the quiet and intellectual, rather than the popular type.

Suddenly someone clapped him on the shoulder.

"Letter for you, Barton."

"Eh!"

"You're dreaming, man."

An envelope was thrust into his hand.

Aunt! he supposed dully. But it wasn't her usual time for writing. And that calligraphy on the dainty little envelope was distinctly not Aunt's. Opening the missive, he read:-

"Dear Sir,- You say, in your advertisement, that you are a very lonely soldier who would like friendly letters written to you. But, perhaps, by this time, you have had so many answers that you will not find this one interesting enough to reply to. Still I write it, in case no one has answered yet; as I have seen your advertisement in the "Daily Telegraph" for such a long time, and I do not like to think of any-one where you are as being very lonely.

I am a rather lonely girl of twenty-two, and I live with my father in London. But, soon, we will be leaving for our house in the country, and I like that much better. I am fond of taking long walks by myself amongst the woods and flowers and hills, and enjoying what is beautiful. And, sometimes, I try to put down what I see in little pictures. My father takes the "Strand", the "Windsor", and nearly all these magazines every month. I enjoy reading them, or a really interesting book. Books make good companions for those who are much alone. Would you care to have the magazines sent out to you? I do some knitting for the Red Cross, and I could send you a scarf, and a pair of socks, if you cared to accept them.

If you answer this, you might tell me the things that interest you, so that I should know better what to write about. But I daresay this is a very stupid letter."

The writer signed herself "Yours faithfully, Violet Vane."

A stupid letter!

Not answer this, indeed!

Would not he just.

So that old advert had, actually, brought him luck, at last. It had occupied its present position for months without receiving a solitary reply, and he had, long since, resigned hope of it. Here, at last, was something human, something of an improvement upon Aunt's formal fortnightly epistles.

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The writer must be a dear little soul. She wrote a frank, sensible, and straightforward letter, such as shewed her to be the sort of girl whose friendship was worth having; not one of that giggling, empty-headed, feminine type, whom he so particularly avoided and disliked. It had never been his privilege before to possess a lady correspondent, excepting Aunt Sarah. The idea of receiving letters from this unknown girl, therefore, invested the former dulness of post days with a novel and piquant interest.

Certainly, he would write a reply which notified his appreciation.

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"Dear Miss Vane," was what Muriel read in her studio, with a pretty pink flush on her cheeks.

"I thank you very much for the kind thought of a lonely soldier expressed in your letter, which, I assure you, was a real pleasure to receive.

May I venture to look forward to hearing from you once a week?

No, saving yours, I have had no reply to that advertisement, and, really, I haven't any-one to write to me the sort of letters one cares about out here, being an orphan with no relations, saving a valetudinarian old auntie, whose missives are hardly inspiring. They contain such thrills as the narrative of her last bronchial attack, or of her poll parrot's sufferings under the pip, and they're packed with much excellent advice to me to be a good boy, wear plenty of flannel, and keep out of the wet etcetra. But yours was one of a different sort. I should enjoy reading the magazines you speak of extremely, and I value your kindness in offering them. One of my favourite pastimes is, like yours, good reading. The beauties of nature hold, I may say, a deep fascination for me - although, I'm afraid, I've no talent to draw, or paint them, but, now and then, I've tried my hand at verses.

Might I be allowed to see some of your sketches? and I should very much like to have a scarf, or a pair of socks, you had knitted, if you were so kind as to send them.

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I wanted to get right out here as soon as I could, so I did not trouble to wait for a commission. Please address me as Private Barton, No. 6702, 1st Battalion, -----shire Regiment, B.E.F., France.

My age is twenty-seven.
Hoping soon to have the pleasure of hearing from you again, Believe me, Yours sincerely,
Ted Barton."

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Long since, Muriel and the lonely soldier had exchanged photographs, through the post. His likeness was that of a manly quiet-faced young man, with earnest eyes, clean-cut features and dark hair which tended towards a wave on the forehead. Somehow, it was a face that appealed particularly to our heroine - although she could not exactly have said why.

"The face of an angel!" was what Private Barton exclaimed under his breath. His eyes softened, as he held up Muriel's portrait to the light, and placed it reverently in a pocket of his service tunic.

The days and weeks, for the deaf girl, had now come to centre mainly round the receiving and answering the lonely soldier's letters. Lacking that experience of life which, but for her deafness, would certainly have been hers, she was not self-centred enough to pause to analyse the nature of this strange new happiness which this novel interest had suddenly brought into her shadowed life; as another woman, who was in the world and of it, would certainly have done. Merely, she felt sunnily conscious of a spiritual contentment, a self-fulfilment, as it were, that added inspiration to her paintings, brightness to her eyes, and lightness to her step. Content in the present, she accepted it as a child might have done, with no effort to probe into the future.

But, in the midst of this period of elation, came a time of sudden chill depression, which ought to have offered her warning, when the young soldier's letters ceased - leaving a blank in her life.

Three weeks passed without a word to her from "somewhere in France!"

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She grew pale and sad-eyed, but mentioned nothing of her anxiety to the father who adored her, and had been her confidant from babyhood, or to her girl companion. They imagined her to be merely run-down in health. Her painting, even, lost its interest during those weeks.

And then, at last, this letter came from a base hospital in France:-

"My dear Violet," Muriel's heart fluttered strangely. It was the first time Private Barton had addressed her thus familiarly.

"Thank you so much for all your dear sympathetic little letters, written to me when I was lying helpless. I cannot well say what they were to me. Yes, you have guessed the truth. I've been wounded, badly winged in the chest. And do you know, dear, they say it was your photograph, carried in my tunic-pocket, that saved me from going west. It's quite spoilt, I'm afraid, and I'm so sorry. I wish I might have another one!

Now, I have great news, which, I hope, may please you. They're sending me to England on convalescent leave; and you may be sure that, of course, I mean to look you and your father up, as I have something very important to say to you.

Cannot you guess what it is, dear? I feel sure that you can; with your sweet understanding of me.

Yours ever, Ted Barton."

Guess that which he had to say to her!

What woman, even if she were a cloistered nun, could fail to understand the inference conveyed in those words.

Muriel's eyes were opened, too late, to the fool's paradise wherein she had been sunning herself, in all innocence.

Oh God! - what ought - what might not - this have meant to her if - if!

Alas! that if!

If only a fall from the arms of a careless nurse, in her infancy had not closed against her the doors of hearing and speech uniting her with a kindly world!

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What had she done to have thrust upon her so cruel a fate - rendering this thing that had now happened to her (and which was what ought to have proved the crown of her woman's happiness) into a mockery of the misery of her life!

Ah! God!

What she felt was that Ted Barton must never come to see her - must never learn the truth of her infirmity. At all costs, she must save herself from the risk of such a catastrophe.

Feverishly setting pen to paper, Muriel wrote:-

"I was very glad to receive your letter. I send my best wishes for your complete and speedy recovery, and hope you will enjoy your holiday in England very much. I am so glad that my photograph saved you, as they say, and will send you another one, if you care to have it. I trust that we shall be friends always.

Now, I am sorry to have something to say to you which may appear strange, and, perhaps, unkind. You must not come to see us; I cannot tell you why. Believe me, what I say is for the best for all of us, although I am unable to explain.

I hope it will not displease you, and that I shall still continue to hear from you.

With all kind thoughts and best wishes for you,

I remain, always your friend,
Violet Vane."

Muriel's tears splashed over the envelope, blotting the address as she wrote it, so that the letter had to be placed in a fresh envelope. Then, when her task was completed, the girl's head bent down on her hands, and the slender figure was shaken with heartbroken sobs, in the lonely studio, where only God and his angels heard them, in pity!

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During the usual morning hours, about a week later, Muriel sat at her easel, striving vainly to concentrate her thoughts upon the half-finished canvas in front of her - that of a picture which had held the greatest interest for her, until this sorrow

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had come to disturb her mental tranquillity.

But now her work - the work which had been, to her, as her soul - no longer held its power to absorb, to content, her; had degenerated into something merely mechanical and technical, without life or spirit.

Alas! at such times in her life, for the artist who is also woman!

Never, now, it seemed to our heroine, might those days come back when she had, even, to a great extent, been happy in her own way; contented in her art, her books, her flowers, her pen-friendships with the people who wrote to her about her pictures, and knew her as Violet Vane, the girl-artist. Why - why could she not return to those things with her former serenity!

It was the eternal why that women ask of their fate which Muriel was asking, and knew it not.

Oh, the folly that had been hers - the madness of folly!

In the midst of sad thoughts, Muriel's eyes were suddenly raised, to note two figures framed in the studio doorway - those of her father, and of someone in hospital blue, whose earnest eye those eyes that had met hers in a cherished photograph so often were bent upon her in a tender, chivalrous, sympathy.

Muriel's face paled, as she rose tremulously to her feet.

Mr. Wentworth crossed the room, kissed his daughter tenderly and then quietly retired, closing the door behind him, and leaving the lovers together.

Ted Barton pressed her hand, then he addressed her eagerly, in finger-language: "Your father has told me all, dear," was what he said, as they stood face to face.

Then he looked at her very gently, and with a tender reproach in his glance, "Did you really think you could put me off like that?"

Muriel's eyes were lowered.

"Poor dear little girl!" he exclaimed, raising her

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face to meet his. "I love you - I feel for you, so! This only makes you seem much more to me, that is all!"

Muriel's lips trembled, and her eyes filled.

"Your father and I have talked everything over, Muriel," he wrote rapidly on a piece of paper upon her studio desk. "And he says that nothing would make him happier than our marriage. We think, also, that there is really nothing to wait for - if you are willing - Are you, dear? I know I could make you happy."

He held out his arms to her.

And she went to them.

"Oh - Ted - this seems like a beautiful dream!" she enunciated.

He seemed so strong, so kind, so good to trust in!

"It is - the dream of my life, but it's quite real," he answered on his fingers - "Before my leave is over, then?"

She nodded shyly.

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