Little Nan

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by Caroline Conrad

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Digby Mainwaring was what people call a real good fellow—clever, handsome, good-hearted. He smoked and he betted a little; he drove a fast team—as any one might, whose jolly, rich, old uncle footed the bills; and he gave delicious quiet suppers that nobody else could match quite, even with such a backer as Digby's Uncle Phil. An ambitious mother had deliberately taught him, and an easy-tempered uncle had never contradicted, the assumption that he was to be his Uncle Mainwaring's heir.

It was natural, then, that he should feel it as something of a blow when, most unexpectedly, that uncle, in old age, took him a young and pretty wife. Careless, good-natured Digby might not have minded it much of himself, if his mother had not filled his ears with such eloquent picturing of his wrong and his loss.

Mrs. John Mainwaring, Digby's mother, was a regular Tartar. She made Mrs. Phil.'s house pretty hot for her sometimes; but, though Mrs. Phil. might have banished her from her husband's house with a word, she was a gentle, loving soul, and could better bear to be stung than to harm a fly.

That was the way matters stood when the baby was born—the baby which cut off Digby's hopes of heirship by just so much as the thread of its little life was strong and vital.

Mrs. Phil. and Digby were good friends; and Digby liked the baby in spite of his mother, and the baby liked Digby.

The baby was a darling—a lovely child, with soft, golden, curly hair, and eyes like wild violets. Uncle Phil. was just as completely infatuated with that baby; and poor Digby, whom the little creature had ousted, would sit dandling it on his knee by the hour. Even Mrs. John condescended to notice it, and was by no means so insensible to its cunning, endearing ways as one might have expected *she* would be under the circumstances.

And so matters went on until Baby Nanny was between four and five years of age. Digby, under tolerably strong pressure, had been induced to frame himself, like some huge jewel, in a setting of law-books; and had crammed to sufficient purpose to entitle him to hang out his shingle, and rather liked it; and Uncle Phil. made great show of employing him at a round salary, to do business that he could have done much better himself, and was his sole client.

Mrs. Phil. and Mrs. John got on just tolerably. Nobody but Mrs. Phil. would ever have borne and forborne to the extent that she did—and she was only human after all! One day the storm burst, in this wise:

Baby Nanny—there had never been but the one—was suddenly without a nurse; and Mrs. Phil. not having succeeded in supplying the vacancy satisfactorily, was going into the country a few miles, to inquire about a woman who promised well, but of whom she was still a little doubtful. Baby Nanny was to have gone with her; but at the last moment, the child, in a fit of willfulness cried to stay with Uncle Digby; and, amid laughter, kisses, and multitudinous charges to him to watch her pet, mamma drove off.

She accomplished her errand agreeably, and returned about sundown. Just out of town, she met a beggar-woman tramping along, covered with rags, and trooped about with some half-dozen children of all sizes, also ragged—a dirty, forlorn-looking crew; and Mrs. Phil. had a very soft heart—so she made the driver stop, and she called the woman to her to give her some money.

The woman hesitated, and finally sent one of the children to the carriage, standing aloof herself and hushing to her bosom the form of a child, so wrapped and enveloped in various soiled, ragged coverings, that it would have been difficult to guess what it was but for the violent movement apparent in the mass.

Mrs. Phil's curiosity was excited, and she called again to the woman to come nearer; but she shook her head, "I'm afeard the baby has the small pox," she stammered, only shrinking farther away, and in a sudden panic, thinking of the danger to little Nan, Mrs. Phil. ordered the driver to go on. Ah, me, if she could have only pierced the apparent mass of rags and uncleanliness, if she could have known what tender little mouth was crying "mamma, mamma," through the cruel bandages that bound it. But how could she dream of such a thing.

Arrived at home she stole in the back way and changed her clothes, to be safe, before she saw her baby. Then she went down to the sitting room. Digby was still lounging there in an easy chair, but fast asleep, Baby Nan was not in sight.

"Digby, you bad fellow, where's Nanny?" exclaimed Mrs. Phil., shaking him.

Digby roused himself lazily, "why isn't she here, she was a minute ago, I'll look on the porch?"

Mrs. Phil. followed him swiftly, and sped past into the yard.

"You look as if you had been asleep every blessed moment since I left you," she said a little crossly, as she beheld no signs of her darling.

"Well, I [haven't], upon my honor," declared Digby. "Nan was by me, playing like a little mouse, not ten minutes ago. She's been as good as she could be. Nan, little Nan, Uncle Digby's Nanny, where are you?" he called lightly, running up stairs and along the passages, looking into the nursery and his mother's room, as he went, and coming back by the kitchen, and taking a glance at the back yard, where Nanny's mamma met him with a very blank face, and almost ready to cry at her pet's non-appearance.

“Oh, where can she be, Digby, I begin to be afraid something has happened to her. What if she has slipped through the gate while you were sleeping?”

“I guess not,” said Digby, cheerfully, and ran up stairs, and through the house and both yards again, calling, “Nanny, little Nan;” but listening in vain for the laughing little voice that was wont to respond, “Here I, [Uncle] Digby.”

“One thing is sure,” he said, coming back to mamma, with a slightly discomposed countenance, “She’s too pretty a darling to get lost easily. Anybody would bring her home for love of her sweet face, if they found her on the street.”

“Oh, Digby, I feel as if I should die, I wish Phil. would come home, why don’t he?”

“Don’t fret, dear, I’ll go for him directly and set all the policemen in this quarter to looking for Nanny; she can’t be far. The servants might be looking for her too, you know.”

“Yes, yes, and I must go with you, Digby, I can’t stay here. Oh, baby! baby!”

But Digby persuaded her to stay where she was, just for a little, and hurried away.

Phil. Mainwaring, with his sister-in-law, came in, before Digby had much more than got out of sight, and his wife fell, half fainting, into his arms.

Mrs. John heard the news with great composure, and declared she had no doubt the child was safe enough; there was no occasion for any one losing their senses about it, she was sure.

Mrs. Phil. curved herself out of her husband’s arms at that, and turned upon her sister-in-law, for the first time, in a passion of anger.

“You always hated my poor darling, you and Digby, and I believe you’re glad she’s lost. I presume you hope I shall never see her again,” she cried, excitedly. “Send her away, Phil., I won’t bear the sight of her any more.”

And then catching sight of Digby coming back *alone*, she flung a few hot words at him that drove every particle of blood from his face, and made him shrink from her speechless.

“You, too,” she said, her blue eyes blazing, “I believe you’ve done something with my baby, and you think you’ll get all my husband’s money now; but you shall never, never have it. He shall make a will *tonight* that shall cut you off. Oh, Phil., Phil., make him give me back my baby?”

It was useless to reason with her. The gentle, quiet, loving woman was changed, for the time, to an infuriated madwoman. She would not see or hear, or suffer to approach her, Digby or his mother, and insisted so wildly upon their leaving the house, that the two went, at Phil.'s grave request, before morning.

Meanwhile, and for days and weeks after, the search went on for the lost child, but without avail. Mrs. Phil. remained bitter as ever in her hostility to Digby and his mother, and Uncle Phil., himself, met them coldly.

Digby had sold his fast horses, his law library, his curiosities, his pictures, he had turned every available thing he possessed in the world into money, and dividing that with his mother, who had beside some means of her own, he had devoted himself to the search for little Nan, as he had never in all his life devoted himself to anything before.

He had tried all the purlieus of New York, he had penetrated its highways and its low ways, he had gained much more discipline of head and heart in the search, than a lifetime as an amateur lawyer would have given him.

But nowhere had he found golden-haired, sweet-voiced Nanny. The more he searched through those ways of sorrow and iniquity, the more vividly he realized what the fate of the pretty child might have become, and the more sternly he resolved that he would live only to find and rescue her, till she was found.

He had nothing whatever to guide him but the merest suspicion and conjecture.

That she had been stolen, he believed; either from the house or the street, whither she might have wandered. Her beauty would have made her very valuable to any one of those beggars who live upon the compassion which the sight of a starving child is wont to excite in the passer, or she might be hidden away somewhere being taught forgetfulness of old associations, and prepared for some life that should be remunerative to the stealer.

But that evening, there came to Digby a little note from Mrs. Phil.

"I don't want to be hard on you, Digby," she wrote, "and I know I'm too wretched to be just, but I want to tell you something because it seems to me I must, bitterly as I feel toward you. That awful day, when I was returning from inquiring about a new nurse you know, I met a very strange beggar woman with a child in her arms so hidden away in rags, and of which she was so curiously careful, that I questioned her. She would not come near the carriage, and she scared me so with a story about the little one being ill of a contagious disorder, that I came off and left her. It could not have been *my* darling, *she* would have heard my voice and called to me. I should have heard the very breath of her sweet voice, but somehow though I had strangely forgotten it at first, that beggar woman's face has come before me like a dream. I don't believe in you Digby, for my baby's head would be here in my bosom now, if it had not been for you, but I tell you my dream."

Digby studied the note carefully. He would have given much to ask Mrs. Phil. some questions, but he shrank from making the attempt in her present state of mind. True, she had written to him, but she had said at the same time that she did not believe in him, and her jealous and distracted mind would very possibly be only irritiated by his attempting to learn more than she had told him.

In this emergency, he bethought himself fortunately of the coachman who had driven for Mrs. Phil. that afternoon.

He found the man of good wits and fine memory. He remembered the incident perfectly, and that the child had seemed large to be in arms, and struggled some, though it made no noise. "But hey, sir," said he, "it might of had a something into its little mouth that wouldn't let it make a loud noise." And Digby thought so, too, with a shudder.

The coachman remembered, farther, one fact that Digby could have hugged him for. The beggar woman had *red hair*.

"*Man proposes, but God disposes*."

Digby Mainwaring set out upon his renewed search with a courage he had never felt before. Fifty miles from New York a telegram found him, summoning him to his mother's bedside. She was not expected to live from one hour to another.

Digby had always been a good son. He retraced his steps at once, as rapidly as the route, which was partly by stage, would permit.

Unused to fretting as good-natured Digby was, he found his temper somewhat tried in that tedious journey. Half way between two large towns, the stage broke down, and left him no resource but unendurable delay, or the pursuit of his way afoot. He chose the latter course, and when night came he stopped to rest for a few hours at a farm-house.

Sitting in the farm-house kitchen that evening, he discovered that some one lay sick in an inner room, and later, as a light was taken into the apartment, that the sick person was a woman and that she had *red hair*.

It was very foolish to let his heart leap as it did, when presently the farmer's wife explained to him that the invalid was a stranger to her, a poor woman who had chanced along there ill, and whom she had taken in out of compassion.

"The doctor says," she added, "that she's not like to live the night through, and I don't know how to tell her of it."

"I will tell her," said Digby, quickly, rising and passing at once to the woman's bedside.

She stared at him wildly as he addressed her in fine, quiet words, telling her the truth.

“If you have anything on your mind,” he added, “that needs attending to, it is full time you were doing it.”

She was tolerably calm again after the first shock, and expressed herself with much collectedness.

“I have not been a good woman,” she said, slowly, “but there aint none of my bad doin’s can be undone now, unless it be one.”

Digby Mainwaring felt his heart almost stop beating as she spoke. She waited a moment and went on.

“I stole a child out of the street about six months ago, that I’d give the little life that’s left me if I’d never touched. Her face is never out of my sight, her cries are always in my ears. ‘Mamma, mamma,’ was all she said, till we made her stop talking at all, and then she just sat and looked at us with eyes that have haunted me every minute I’ve laid here.”

“She is not dead?” Digby exclaimed, with a suddenly quaking heart.

The woman lifted her dying eyes slowly to his.

“I hope not, as I hope for mercy where I’m going. I sold her to a man who said he was going to make her a dancer, by the time she’d forgotten enough to be trusted. I wish somebody would find her and take her back to her mother.”

“I will,” said Digby, “only tell me how.”

The woman lived long enough to give him an address in New York, but she died before morning.

Long before morning, however, Digby, having partially refreshed himself with a few hours’ rest, had resumed his journey in the farmer’s wagon. Torn with two anxieties, he sought his mother’s bedside first, and finding her out of danger, to his great relief, hurried away to a magistrate, where, having obtained the necessary assistance, he sought the address the sick woman so strangely found had given him.

It was on a respectable street, a respectably appearing house from the outside, and no obstacle was offered to their entrance.

A small, heavy-browed, black-eyed foreigner received them, and changed countenance very slightly upon learning their errand. But he led the way at once to an upper chamber, protesting that the woman had given him, not sold him, the child as her own. As they approached the room in which the foreigner said the child was, Digby said afterwards, he could distinctly hear his own heart beat. What if after all it should not be little Nan? Children were stolen every day. His hand shook so, as, after unlocking the door his conductor stood back for him to open it, that it almost refused its office.

He swung the door wide, motioning the others to stand back. A child stood by the window across the room, with her back to them. But as the door opened, instead of turning toward them, she crouched suddenly upon the floor like one in a fright, and Digby saw that her hair was short where Nanny's had been long, yellow curls. A second glance showed him that it had been purposely cropped as closely as possible, and he breathed rather than spoke. "Baby Nan!"

She threw up her head with a wild cry; and Uncle Digby had her in his arms the next moment, and everybody in the room was crying, policemen and all.

Little was said. She lay like a dead child in Uncle Digby's arms but for her restless eyes, poor timid, tortured baby. Once she put a little thin hand on his cheek, and said "mamma," and he kissed her, and said she should go to mamma directly, and never, never leave her again, as long as she lived.

It never entered honest Digby's head, that it might be too much for Mrs. Phil. to see her lost baby without warning, and it was not. Joy seldom kills. But such a scene as that was between baby Nan and mamma; it is entirely beyond the power of this pen to describe. How Mrs. Phil. clung to Nanny, and how Nanny clung to her, as if afraid, every instant, some one would part them again; how Nanny told, in childish talk, of her wanderings, her terrors, her hurts; how mamma cried over each pang, till Nanny, with wondrous wisdom, announced that she shouldn't make mamma cry any more, and refused to talk of it again.

They had a grand re-union at Uncle Phil.'s when everybody resolved to turn over a new leaf. Digby went into law in earnest, and made him a fortune of his own, that even Mrs. John, his mother, could appreciate.

The foreigner, who had little Nan in possession, was arrested, but nothing really illegal could be proved against him, and he was finally set at liberty.

It is hard telling, today, who of the Mainwaring family think most of Digby; but between him and little Nan the bond is fine as silk, and strong as steel.

The New York Ledger, January 30, 1869