A WOMAN'S LOVE

OR, A BROTHER'S PROMISE

CHAPTER XV.

Happy is the playwright who can achieve his moment of Achilles-heel dullness, his inevitable mauvais quart d'heure of yawn before he opens the fifth act of the drama; happy the seeker after romance in daily life who does not compress all his thrills into one week, thereafter to tail off into the doldrums of domesticity or the fatuousness of folded hands on paunch; happy he, I say, to whom comes the quiet hour early, fortifying him for the run to the big scene just before the curtain falls!

Whether such notions as these ever drifted lazily through the brain of Hector Grant is matter of little moment. They might well have done so; yet it is more than likely that they did not, for in life the times of greatest stress begin without blare of trumpets or roll of drums and the chief actor, though he can not but take his cue, knows next to nothing of how his part is to expand, or with what supreme consummation it is to end.

Thus, when Don Miguel asked for an interview, Hector did not foresee that what the old general had to say was the first speech of the last act in the drama—the drama that began so like a fragment from Faerie in the palace in Bloomsbury yon rainy night in August; did not foresee that this last act would set the whole world agog with a nine days' wonder, and bring sorrow to be sister of Maddalena for ever.

Don Miguel stood heavy and bowed with the weight of his years. His mild eyes were lack-lustre, and below them were swart puffs of weariness. His hands drooped nerveless, and about his whole figure hung an air of depression that was subtly pervading. The sight of him thus altered touched Hector's heart: he rose, and with his free hand—the wounded limb was still in a sling—grasped the old man's with impulsive sympathy. The simple act of reconciliation made tears in the voice when Don Miguel spoke.

"Senor Grant, you forgive me, then?"

"Yes, yes, if my forgiveness is needed. Her Majesty forgave you. That cleared all accounts, and we began afresh."

"But I must offer you all the apologies and make all the reparation a man can. You must let me, too, offer such justification for my conduct as is possible. It was useless to attempt to make any excuse to her Majesty; but you will understand—you, who know something of my daughter."

Hector was keen to avoid any discussion of Asunta; but the old man was all the more insistent because, while his dignity was in arms against disclosing the slur on his honor, his sense of justice stimulated him to make complete avowal of all the sad business. The resolve once made, he could not be swayed, to abandon it.

"Senor Grant, once I thought I was blessed in my daughter, now I know that I have been cursed in her. A father's love must be grievously wounded ere he can say such a hard thing as that. When I remember all the tender care that surrounded her, and the watchfulness with which she was guarded from every air of heaven, I cannot conveive how, from a woman of gentle heart and warm soul, she should have changed into a devil. But a devil she now is. I am her father, and I say it.

"She deluded me, sir; she played upon me, she led me into disgracing the name that has come down unsullied for three hundred years. But that pales before the insult she offered, and made me offer, to the Queen.

"I know the despicable light in which I must have appeared to the Queen, to you, to my comrades: but however contemptuously you and all these may regard me——"

Hector made a gesture of depreciation.

"It is as nothing to the loathing I have for myself.

"No, no, Don Miguel, you must not allow yourself to be so carried away. We see that you were the victim of circumstances. You took the word of a daughter you loved, and—with not unnatural precipitation—sprang to the conclusion that seemed most plausible. You were hasty in speaking. As her Majesty said, you should have gone to her first. Beyond that fault, beyond that mistake, you have not been culpable. Let as shake hands again, and agree to forget that this ever happened."

"I cannot forget it, senor. It is burnt into my life, and the old take their fresh scars to the grave—there is no time for them to be smoothed away. When youth goes, the youth of the heart, the thorns, stick, and only God's hand beckoning deathwards can draw them out."

"Let us speak no more of this, Don Miguel; let us not keep the sore open."

As regards the aspersions I cast on your character——"

"Not another word. I will not hear another word."

"Ah! senor, if I had only trusted to my first impressions of you, my first impressions of the Queen. I came to them now only to find them heightened by your wonderful generosity, by her unparalleled clemency." And then he added with that touch of charming exaggeration so common in the Southerner, "What return can I make to you both? My life—what is left of it—is already the Queen's. If I had it free to offer, it would be yours."

"All the return I ask for, Don Miguel, is confidence and friendship until the work here is done, and after that a memory of me not ungracious. Now, let us talk of other things."

"But one thing more, senor. You have not inquired what dispositions I have made regarding my daughter. You ought to know. Let me tell you. I took her back to Friganeta, and placed her under the charge of my brother's widow, Dona Concepcion. Again and again I strove with her to make submission to her Majesty, but I found her hard in hate and evil spirit. I was compelled at last to signify my will to the effect that as soon as Palm City was in our hands she should enter the Convent of the Pierced Hands. My object was to remove all possibility of her injuring the Queen or you. She agreed to this, not without some demur, yet readily enough to satisfy me. But I had reckoned without the devils that possessed her, that still possess her. She had fled from Friganeta, and at the same time, Major di Borja, one of the Hispaniolan prisoners quartered at Friganeta, has achived his freedom. Circumstances show that they went together. I have made all possible inquiries, for while she is at liberty I fear for your safety, senor—I fear for the Queen's. God! That I should have to acknowledge such a fiend as my daughter! I fear, senor—O! how I fear! how I fear!"

"You had better report this to Don Augustin. He will see to it that her Majesty's, safety is not endangered."

And so, innocently enough, the last act was opened.

* * * *

Whatever else he was, Major Don Pedro Santiago di Borja y Montanar was no dissembler of his sentiments and opinions. Of noble family, ancient lineage, and incorrigible arrogance, he held Hispaniola to be the only great country in the world (in this, curiously like the Englishman in his attitude towards the cradle of Empire-makers), and her every deed, if not perhaps worthy of poetic perpetuation, at least inevitable and justifiable. Her treatment of Aruba and her tigerish lust for blood as especially personified in Stampa, he applauded with both hands; and he added to her blazoned infamy deeds that paralleled the darkest of the papal branch of his house. As Aruba had been served, so should Palmetto. On this point he scorned to keep silence, and even when by Palmetto's clemency a favored prisoner, he tossed the head and curled the lip at the newest seekers after liberty.

While Maddalena's troops were investing Palm City closely, and aggressive operations were for the moment somewhat slackened, Don Miguel frequently visited his home at Friganeta on his mission of suasion. On these occasions di Borja, a prisoner but a guest, delighted in sparing his already tortured host no whit of humiliation; he poured out streams of futile but corrosive prophecy, foretelling with acrid tongue failure direct and calamitous retribution. It stands to Don Miguel's honor that his courtesy stood the strain, and that when he had a thousand opportunities for poisonous retort, he forebore to utter one word that might prick the Hispaniolan's susceptibilities. He listened to sneer and gibe, calumny and contempt, with unruffled politeness, although in his heart he cursed the unwelcome guest deeply and blackly.

Asunta listened, too—and took heart.

When she found herself to all intents a prisoner at Friganeta, her evil courage drooped, her infernal hope dimmed. But this man—so contemptuously cruel, so venomously vindictive, such a thorough hater—surely, surely, she should be able to make him her helper. If she could not succeed in fashioning him into a weapon of destruction to Palmetto—but she laughed: she could do it, she was not Asunta for nothing, and she would do it. True, she loved Hispaniola and the Hispaniolans little; but now she loved Palmetto even less—and in revenge there is no country, no race; and revenge, revenge, revenge, was the only thing for which she lived, the only thing for which she desired to live.

Once, and once only, a glint of sanity pierced the thick clouds that overshadowed her reason, and she saw that all her humiliation and all her shame were of her own creation—she saw that even if she took Hector from Maddalena she could not have him to herself, and if she took Maddalena she had still less chance of bringing Hector to her feet. If she achieved revenge, the price would be life. That was too much, she thought: and the next second the glint was gone, seething fogs of passion swept up and wrapped her round again, her only lamp in the darkness the red light of revenge. Hector or Maddalena, or both—the death, the death!

None can be so blind or so easily blinded as a duenna. Our British maidens, with half the wiliness and half the wilful blood of the Southerner, can fool the skilfullest British chaperon. Asunta, with the grimmest of purposes for goad, had but small difficulty in hoodwinking Dona Concepcion. Thus it came to pass that Asunta and di Borja lacked no opportunity for meeting. He found no fault with the chance that gave him a handsome young woman for companion: time hung heavy on his hands, and an Hispaniolan delights in the payment of subtle if somewhat wholesale homage to a mantilla. From trifling with compliments and drawing-room airinesses, Asunta led him on by easy but swift stages to darker themes: and little by little they reached a common plane of ugly confidence, that, had Don Miguel so much as suspected it, would have meant a silk faja about Asunta's neck, or a navaja in her breast.

Asunta stood in the dark before the door at which she had waited such a little while before—waited with tumultuous hopes and passions rioting in her blood. There was no unrest in her demeanor now; her breast rose and fell with the regularity of calm breathing and her hand, as she raised it to tap on the door, was steady as steel. Only in the flush of her cheeks and the glitter of her eyes did the turmoil of emotion make itself visible, and that only when, in answer to her summons, di Borja swung wide the door with almost painful caution.

"Enter, senorita!"

"Better not—it is for to-night. The guard is well plied with wine, and Captain Cassavellino——"

"Ah! I hear his swine snore—in the dining-room, is it not?"

"Yes. He will not wake till daybreak——"

"In heaven."

"It was a poison you gave me?"

"Dear lady, we cannot allow trifles to interfere. One has to make sure. The little sleeping-draught was made from a prescription my reverend relative Alexander found useful in Italy!"

"You have made me do murder!"

"Tush! one can see you are lily-livered. You propose to do something big—in which I am to help you—and you boggle at such a tiny thing as a fat captain of rebels. If you are as weak as this, senorita, all white lips and quaking hands, I really don't know that I shall trouble you to accompany me. I shall be more comfortable by myself."

"You would go back on your word?"

"Why not? You go back on your purpose."

"I? Never!"

"Captain Cassavellino was the first stone in the path. You forget your goal when you regret having to remove him."

The cool half-cynical tone of di Borja acted on her excited nerves like a charm: her sudden resumption of quiet and a steady gaze showed him that he was her master. In that moment he discovered how to control her, guide her, make her the slave of his will. He had but to remind her of her purpose, to persuade her that the thing he desired done was for the furtherance of her revenge, and it was already done.

"You acknowledge that it was necessary?"

"Surely."

"You would do it again?"

"Without hesitation."

"Ah! well— you may come with me. Have you brought the pistols?"

"They are here."

"Good! Ah!—my own—better and better."

"In half an hour, then——"

"The horses?"

"I go to the stables now."

"Very well. When you are ready, I shall be ready."

Without a word she left him, gliding along the dark corridor and down the stair like a shadow, making a sound, scarcely breathing.

She passed into the dining-room. On a couch lay a stout man in the Palmetto uniform, snoring stertorously. His face was purple and the veins of his temples were swollen and obtrusive. His glazed eyes bulged half-open, but they saw not; and his teeth shone white through the tangle of brown moustache and beard. The arm hung down, the hand on the floor.

Moved by some swift prompting to make certain that he was really beyond awakening, Asunta kicked the inert hand with the point of her Parisian shoe. It swung in the air at the impact, and then fell back to the floor as if lead. Asunta smiled, and passed through the great open window into the grounds on her way to the stables.

At the end of the prearranged half-hour Asunta was riding through the night with di Borja. Almost at the moment of their setting out from Friganeta, one of Mr. Thomas Smith's steamers was completing the discharge of her cargo of ammunition and stores at Espoleto; and Mr. Thomas Smith himself was helping from a launch a nervous, shaking, very perturbed little woman with strangley resolute eyes—Judith Frere.

(To be Continued.)

Talk is cheap—unless you are using a long-distance telephone.

CROSSING LAKE BAIKAL

RUSSIA'S GREAT INLAND SEA IN WAR TIME.

The Soldiers Suffered Intensely From the Cold While Making the Journey.

Lake Baikal, the frozen barrier that cuts the great Siberian line in two, is indeed a remarkable body of water, says the London Express. In length it would stretch from London to Edinburgh, yet its breadth is only from twenty to fifty-three miles. From where I stood to the town of Baikal, on the other side, was a little over forty miles; but it is this distance, over the frozen floor of which stores and men have to be transported to the front, that will cause the Russian Government more trouble and anxiety than the entire route from the Ural Mountains to Port Arthur.

The track has not yet been completed around the end of the lake. As an engineer explained to me the southern end of the lake, which is the only possible route for the line, is imbedded in mountains. Sheer granite cliffs rise from the surface of the water to a height of 1,500 feet. Through these cliffs tunnels to the number of twenty-seven are being laboriously cut, but in my engineer friend's opinion it will be long before this strip of rails will be opened.

During the summer two great steamers cross the lake with the trains on board but in the winter the ice is far too thick for the Baikal or her consort, which I saw firmly

ANCHORED IN THE ICE.

There was a great rush for the sledges which awaited us. With some difficulty I secured a place in one, and with all the wraps I posessed about me started on my ride. Once out on the lake, however, there came upon us a steady, piercing blast that seemed to penetrate my furs as if they were so much paper.

I had never suffered so intensely from cold in my life before; indeed, for five minutes I was almost insensible. And yet the cruel gale was at my back, and the long lines of troops packed in their sledges met it face to face.

It was a curious spectacle, this endless advance of the Russian reinforcements across this arctic sea. The route was staked out by telegraph posts placed about two hundred yards apart. As we swung along at a good eight miles an hour, our driver crooning to the horses an odd chant, the advancing sleighs seemed to mount into hundreds and even thousands.

In those carrying troops, six men were crowded into a sleigh built for three How they were able to endure that terrible weather passed my duee that terrible weather passed my understanding. They wore their greatcoats, it is true, but other wraps were few among them.

Sometimes I met an empty sleigh with its soldier passengers tramping along by its side striving to warm their frozen limbs. Blue with cold and utterly miserable they seemed, and when a Russian with whom I travelled assured me that many of them must be badly frostbitten or even die from exposure before they reached the other side I could not but believe him.

ON THE OUTSIDE TRACKS

moved the provision and store sleighs, the majority with five horses apiece, dragging slowly forward in long lines. I saw several sledges with rails sticking out behind them, but at that time (Feb. 15) there was no sign of any railway track being laid across the ice. If such a feat has been accomplished, it must have been at a later date than was announced in the Russian press.

The surface of the ice was very irregular and uneven. In places there were foot wide crevasses and fissures while here and there the ice had risen into hummocks, which nearly jarred me out of my sleigh. Despite the wind, there was around us a curious driving mist that hid the distances.

After two and a half hours we sighted the great rest-house, of wood and felt and brick, that is built yearly in the middle of the lake. A very palace it seemed to us weary travellers. Not until after two plates of soup and some steaming coffee could I find my legs and feet again. Yet the poor soldiers passed it by, making no break in their journey from shore to shore.

It was with lingering regret that I left the hospitable rest-house and again disappeared beneath my wraps But even the crossing of Lake Baikal comes to an end some time, and about six hours after I had started I arrived at the little town where my journey was to recommence.

More troop trains and ever more met us as we passed westward. After my second day the soldiers that they carried changed in type. They were no longer young recruits, but the reserves—well-built, middleaged men, who behaved themselves

AS VETERANS SHOULD.

For the first time I noticed cannon, each train having two trucks containing one gun apiece fastened behind it.

In the whole course of my journey I saw no horses being hurried forward, though I understood that there were several thousand expected.

War prices were beginning to be felt at the buffets where we halted for our meals. The peasants had long ceased to bring in fresh supplies, and the cost of necessaries steadily rose. Bread doubled, sugar and coffee trebled. At the same time I noticed in sidings the ordinary trains of commerce lying half hidden in snowdrifts.

Several Russians on the train who came from the east of Baikal were talking very gravely about the situation. The native tribes grind their own corn, but the Europens in the towns send their grain to Moscow, from which it returns as flour.

If these flour trains are stopped prices will soon be rising famine high in eastern Siberia. Peculation and the bribery of officials will give the civilians supplies taken from the war stores, but I can well understand why Russia has sent her convicts into the army. She wants no spare mouths to feed.

BESTS.

The best law—the golden rule.

The best education—self knowledge.

The best philosophy—a contented mind.

The best war—to war against one's weakness.

The best theology—a pure and beneficent life.

The best medicine—cheerfulness and temperance.

The best music—the laughter of an innocent child.

The best science—extracting sunshine from a cloudy day.

The best telegraphy—flashing a ray of sunshine into a gloomy heart.

The best biography—the life that writes charity in the largest letters.

The best engineering—building a bridge of faith over the river of death.

The best navigation—steering clear of the lacerating rocks of personal contention.

The best mathematics—that which doubles the most joys and divides the most sorrows.

PICK A PUG-NOSED PUSS.

A good cat—the kind you want in the house, if any—will have a round, stubby pug-nose, full, flat cheeks and an upper lip, and a well-developed bump on the top of the head, between the ears, betokening good nature. A sleepy cat that purrs a good deal is good-natured. By all means to be avoided is a cat with thin, sharp nose and twitching ears. It must be remembered, also, that a good mouser is not necessarily a gentle or desirable pet. Although any good cat will catch mice if she is not overfed, quick, full, expressive eyes generally betoken a good mouser. The greatest mistake, and probably the most common one, in the care of domestic cats is overfeeding, particularly with too much meat. In wild life the cat has exercises which enable her to digest her food. In the lazy house-life the same full feeding leads to stomach troubles and to fits.

MACS WITH MANY TARTANS.

Many Scotch clans have several tartans, such as a common tartan, a hunting tartan, and a full-dress tartan. Early in the day a Highlander of position dons a kilt of plain tartan, and in the evening for dinner he puts on his full-dress tartan, with sporran and richly jewelled dirk. For example, the Macpherson dress tartan is black and white, with a narrow red line, and the hunting Macpherson is a small blue and black and red check. The Stuarts have three tartans, and the design of their hunting tartan in dark blue and green is particularly fine. Each clan has its own badge. The Duff men wear holly, the Gordons an ivy-leaf, the Stuarts an oak leaf, and so on.

REMARKABLE SALVAGE FEAT

One of the sights of the Shwe Dagone Pagoda in Burma is a gigantic bell of bronze weighing forty-two and a quarter tons, and said to be the third largest bell in the world, the largest being in Moscow and the next largest in Mingin, also in Burma. After conquering Burma the British undertook to carry the great Rangoon bell to Calcutta as a trophy, but dropped it overboard in the Rangoon river, where it defied all the efforts of the engineers to raise it. Some years later the Burmese, who had not ceased to mourn its loss, begged to be allowed to recover it. Their petition was granted, and by attaching to it an incredible number of bamboo floats the unwieldy mass of metal was finally lifted from its muddy bed and triumphantly restored to its place.

BACK TO THE DUTCH.

A leading citizen of the city of Toledo is exhibiting a most peculiar condition of things. He is an old man of ninety and was born in Amsterdam, but went to America when he was a child, and through disuse soon forgot his native tongue. Since he has become insane he has forgotten every word of English, which he habitually spoke, and speaks nothing but Dutch, which he now remembers as perfectly as when he first left Holland.

HONEYMOON CARS.

The Kursk-Zarkoff Railroad, of Russia, advertises a special car for the newly married, designed and furnished with the latest comfort. The decorations are in the best Parisian style, and polite female attendants look after the comfort of the happy couple. None but couples on a honeymoon are allowed to use this magnificent car. The partitions are removable, and the car can be used as a series of small compartments or as a couple of roomy saloons.