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A Strange Case of Trio

Story Told by a Red Cross Nurse.

By EILEEN BRENNAN

Soon after the breaking out of the great world's war I left my home to go abroad to engage in Red Cross work, spending nearly a year in that service. Shortly before returning for recuperation—for I was entirely incapacitated—I stopped one day to rest in the cottage of a peasant. The only occupant was a young woman about twenty-two years of age, whom I took for a maiden. She was dressed in what mourning she could afford, which was not much. She told me that she wore it for a lover.

Two photographs hung side by side on the wall. Each represented a fine looking young man in the uniform of a French soldier. One of the pictures was wreathed in flowers.

"Is that," I asked, pointing to the one decorated, "a picture of your lover?"

"Yes, madame."

"And the other?"

"That is my husband."

I looked at her surprised.

"I presume you married for some other reason than love?"

"No, madame; I love my husband."

"And your lover?"

"I love him, too, though he is dead."

"I see. He died. You gave your heart to another who lives."

"No, madame. I married one lover, giving him my heart. Then the other lover died, and I gave him my heart too."

"And was not your husband jealous?"

"No, madame; he loves Henri as much as I."

Hearing a stamping on the floor behind, I turned and saw a man with a wooden support for a missing leg.

"This is my husband," said the woman. "He will tell you why we both love one who loved me. Tell her, Victor."

She placed a chair in position for the poor fellow, who had evidently not long been without his missing leg; arranged his underpinning so that it would give him the least discomfort, filled a pipe with tobacco and poured out a glass of red wine for him. Taking a sip of the wine, he looked at the picture that was decorated, evidently drinking to it. Then he told me the story:

"Henri and Clochette and I were brought up together, playmates and schoolmates. Henri and I were chums and loved each other, and when we grew to manhood we both loved Clochette, but neither knew that of the other. I did not suspect that Henri loved her, for he was a very unemotional man and did not tell his secrets. But I have believed since his death that he loved her from boyhood. Whether he suspected that I loved her I do not know to this day.

"One day I told Henri that Clochette was my betrothed. I fancied I saw a pallor stealing over his face, but it disappeared so soon that I thought little about it. Afterward Clochette told me that he had proposed to her the day before I asked her to be my wife. I can now see what a shock my announcement must have been to him.

"But neither of us could have Clochette then, for suddenly the war broke out, and Henri and I were both called to the colors, going to the front in the same regiment. By this time I had learned that Henri had met with a great disappointment in losing Clochette, and I told him the day we were entrained for the front that in case I was killed it was my wish that he should marry Clochette; that I had expressed this wish to her and she had promised me she would accede to it.

"You see, madame, by this time I made it the interest of Henri that I should be killed. Had he been a villain he could have shot me in battle, and no one but himself would have known that he was a murderer. But I knew he was not that kind of man.

"Henri and I joined that army which extended southward through Belgium and along the border of France and were in the battles occurring while we were being driven back toward Paris. Then came the battle of the Marne and the subsequent fighting for the possession of Calais. During all this time neither Henri nor I received a scratch. When later we were struck Henri received his death wound and I lost my leg.

"You remember, madame, when late in September, in the second year of the war, we and the British, after four weeks sending a storm of missiles against the German trenches, moved forward along the whole line. Well, in that movement, in which it seemed to us and our enemies as if the end of the world had come, Henri advanced with the rest, and, being not only in the same regiment, but in the same company, we were near together. Once through the horrible surroundings, when I was stumbling over dead and wounded, the din of 10,000 thunderstorms beating on my eardrums, I caught sight of Henri. His eyes were momentarily fixed on me as if fearful that I would never come out of the tempest alive.

"We followed the retreating foe too fast for the rest of the line, and a number of us were cut off. Henri and I took refuge in a deserted trench. It was not a time for taking prisoners.

In the first place, the enemy, as was as ourselves, were war mad, and in the second there was no way of bringing prisoners behind the lines. It became evident that Henri and I must leave our hiding place and get back to our men or be shot down.

"But the chances were so rapid that before we could make up our minds to take our chances in sight a gentle breeze from the southeast wafted a noxious cloud upon us that drove us down into the very bottom of the trench and held us there with our faces buried, our eyes closed, in the soil. Then the enemy charged upon our men, and down came the bodies of those who were shot while crossing the trench, burying us under a pile of dead and wounded.

"To be thus crushed was no better than to inhale a noxious gas, and, struggling against our covering, we reached a point where we could look about us. The gas had been blown to our own trenches and had been followed by a bayonet charge of the enemy, who had been thinned to nothingness by rapid fire guns.

"Let us run for it," I said to my chum.

"No," replied Henri. "We would never make our lines. Do you see the enemy tumbling into those trenches not a hundred yards from us? We would have to run the gantlet of their rifles. Let us stay where we are for the present. Our men may push forward and cover us."

"There was not now a living man in the trench where we were, though there were many dead. And yet I cannot be certain of this, for there was such a din that if there were wounded I could not hear them groan. It seemed that Satan had brought hell with him to the air as well as on the land, for, being exhausted, I lay down in the trench, and there above me I saw two aeroplanes carrying on the sight far above the heads of those murdering one another on the land. I dared not rise to get any other view, for above the trench missiles were flying so thick that not a spear of wheat would have been left standing if in the way.

"Presently the firing from our lines died down, and we heard orders given in the enemy's ranks indicating that they were about to make a charge. We knew that we must go down in that rush if we remained where we were and we must get out. There was a possibility that we might reach our lines alive, though we could not hope to do so unhit.

"Come," said Henri; "we must be off. Something tells me that I shall be killed and that you will be saved. If I can do anything to insure your being spared to Clochette I shall die content. Go."

"He pushed me out of the trench, and we ran as swiftly as our legs would carry us toward our men. During that brief flight I was conscious that Henri was running directly behind me, covering me with his body. What could I do to prevent this? Nothing. To stop and protest would only have brought death to us both. I ran on till I came within a few yards of our lines; then one of my legs was knocked from under me, and I fell. I was conscious of being picked up and carried away, but after that for some time knew nothing.

"When I came back to consciousness I asked if Henri had escaped. I was told that he had protected me from the enemy's fire till just before I fell, when he was shot through the body. Then a surgeon came and amputated my leg.

"And now you see me with a life before me that has been given Clochette by Henri. Do you wonder that we decorate his picture with flowers? Do you wonder that Clochette loves him dead as well as she loves me living? What use for me to say that I would rather have—"

The sentence was not finished, for his wife put her arms around her husband and stopped the words with a kiss.

"Now, madame," said the wife, "you understand how it is possible for an honest woman to have a lover and a husband. How could I help loving the man who gave his life that my dear husband might be returned to me?"

She brought out some simple cakes that she had made with her own hands and poured a glass of wine for each of us. We stood, about to quaff the wine, when both the husband and the wife turned to the picture of the man who had died that they might be happy with each other, and I joined them in drinking to his memory.

The episode revealed to me how imperfect is language. There are no words to express how a woman can have a lover and a husband without reproach. And yet here was a case. I left the couple not only with respect, but with heartfelt sympathy and thankfulness that the poor mutilated soldier had such a woman to cheer him.

Incidents I saw during my military move more than this, for I took the last message of many a dying soldier, but no episode affected me in the same way. There was in the sacrifice as well as in the situation something unique. And who can tell how many such sacrifices worthy of angels have occurred in that war where the feud reigned supreme? Well may we wonder how it can come about that the manhood of many nations is going down into the earth, and for what? Who knows?

The acquaintance I had formed, the story I had heard, seemed to me a fit climax to my ministrations to war victims. I left the couple with but one comfort—that if the man must go mutilated through life there was one to give him a happiness that perhaps would balance his misfortune. In bidding them goodbye I breathed a prayer for that "federation of the world" which will pass judgment on the nations' quarrels instead of leaving them to be settled as they have been settled since the world began.

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