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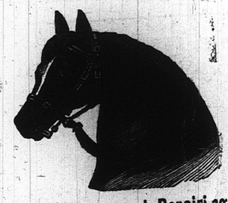

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AUTHOR OF "THE COLONEL'S DAUGHTER," "FROM THE RANKS," ETC.

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One anxiety had oppressed him since his voluntary entrance upon the task of training Stella, a duty which need have occupied but a few days had it not been for that untoward mishap. She fought shy of the bar for several lessons thereafter, connecting it and the flapping blanket unerringly with her violent fall. Hunter's anxiety was that any afternoon when so occupied he might find Mrs. Mainwaring and her niece among the lookers on, and he shrank from recognition. He had even sought to get his captain to change the hour to morning, but there had been fine, open weather, and Atherton lost no opportunities for battalion drills. Hunter took to these, despite the crowding and squeezing when in line, like a duck to the water, but all the same he would have preferred giving Stella her lesson when he knew Miss Leroy to be engaged at the hospital, for the fame of that benevolent young lady's work had spread throughout the barracks as well as the quarters.

And it was of her and that odd introduction he was thinking now, as he briskly tramped up and down, peering among the haystacks and stables. Just before the midnight call his post had been visited by the sergeant of the guard, who inquired as to his orders and bade him look out any moment for Captain Blake or Lieutenant Brady. The midnight call of the sentries went round in rather slipshod fashion, thanks to the wind, but no sooner had Hunter heard the prolonged "All's well" than he wished he could recall it. Not a suspicious sight or sound had he noted after the sergeant went his way, but now, before he could realize or dodge, something came spinning through midair, over his head, settled down on his shoulders with a jerk; then a blanket was whirled about his face, and, with his breath fairly choked out of him, with only time for one startled, stifled cry, the loop of a lariat was suddenly drawn taut, hurling him violently to the frozen ground, and in another second two or three men had thrown themselves furiously upon him.

Despite mad struggles he was bound, gagged and kicked behind the haystack. His carbine was whisked away. He lay there, helpless and half strangled, but they had removed the blanket, so that he at least could breathe and see. And then from beyond the stable of his troop came two more men with a cart. Into this was swiftly loaded box after box of some weighty substance, the boxes being dragged from underneath the very stack that had caused the colonel's censure—the stack that interposed between Ray's stable and the little domicile of Sergeant Merriweather under the low bluff. Loaded with all it could safely carry, the cart was swiftly trundled off into the darkness, three burly forms propelling, two remaining close at hand. Not a word was spoken that Hunter could hear. The cart came back for another load in less than five minutes, and this time, in addition to heavy little boxes which he could almost swear contained ammunition and possibly revolvers, they dragged sacks of oats from underneath the stack and loaded them, too, upon the cart. Three trips were made in all; then every man vanished, and he was utterly alone.

Raging at his plight, powerless to help himself in any way, and suffering not a little from the sharpness of his cords and the brutal manner in which he had been gagged, Hunter managed to keep cool and think. At the utmost he probably would not be left there more than 20 minutes. When the call was passed at 12:30, his voice would be missed. The corporal would have to come down and, not finding him on his post, would institute search; then he would be released and could tell his story.

Even as he lay there he could swear he heard the sound as of hoofs and heavy laden wheels crashing through the ice on the little shallow stream beyond the stables. Presently the bitter cold of the frozen ground seemed to penetrate through his heavy clothing, and he began to suffer keenly. The wind blew but lightly where he lay in the lee of the stack, and, though he knew it was not time for the sentries to call off, he strained his ears to catch the sound of footfalls—Blake or Brady, and the sergeant, too, might be along again. He prayed indeed they might be, for robbery had been committed before his very eyes. He had heard rumors of the disappearance of forage. He had heard the men talk of the exposed situation of the brick magazine out there on the prairie, southeast of the post. Only on bright moonlit nights could the sentry see it from the east gate, while from the south gate it was hidden entirely. He knew that most of the ammunition—pistol, carbine and cannon—was kept there and at one time quite a lot of small arms. The ordnance sergeant slept in the garrison, his keys in a strong box under his bed, yet thieves had plundered both the magazine and the stables, and hidden their booty underneath the big haystack, awaiting opportunity to run it away to some reliable customer in town. That they were members of the garrison was evident from that very fact. Townsfolk would have come with wagons in the first place.

Fifteen minutes at least had he still to wait and suffer, possibly more, if no officer of the guard chanced to inspect right after 12, or if the corporal should be slow running to ascertain why the 12:30 call was not repeated. Fifteen minutes, and already he was enduring torment. Then came sudden hope—the sound of a swift, light footfall—then a woman's voice.

"Dan, Danny, where are you? Come home quick, for God's sake. They're hunting for you now."

No answer.

Again the plaintive cry was repeated. A woman's slender form sped swiftly by, turned the corner of the huge stack, and then, as though recoiling at sight of danger, darted back, shuddering, stumbled over his prostrate body, and only with difficulty saved itself from falling. Quick as thought the woman whirled upon him, one half stifled, nervous cry escaping from her lips.

"Scully, you beast! Why are you lying there? You are not drunk. The liquor he gave you wouldn't do this. Where's he gone? Answer, I say. Ah-h!" And the cold hands that had seized and shaken him fell away in fright at touch of the gag. Quickly she recovered herself, fumbled in her pocket, found a pair of scissors and slashed the bands that were strangling him. "What, fool work is this?" she whimpered. "Sure Dan shouldn't have gagged you, Scully. Who was with him? Who did it? Answer," she implored, shaking him vehemently. "Get up, Scully, quick! For the love of God find him. They've been to the house already—the guard. Somebody's peached. Somebody— Who tied this lariat? It's knotted like— Wait till I get a knife. Lie still, Scully." And away she sped, leaving him to wonder, bound as he was, how he could lie otherwise. She was back in a moment, panting, breathless. She sawed at the thick cordage until it snapped, then stared wildly one instant as the tall figure straightened up, then with a cry of horror started back. "Scully— No! What—you? Hunter? Oh, blessed saints, have mercy."

But the instant he was released and had gained his feet, unarmed though he was and half numbed, the tall, athletic soldier sprang away into the darkness and ran like a deer across the open space and on past the stables toward the stream, shouting as he ran at the full strength of his powerful lungs: "Corporal of the guard, No. 6! Corporal of the guard, No. 6!"

Out on the low bank across the narrow stream he could see, outlined against the sky, two dark, shadowy figures go scurrying swiftly by, running from the direction of the old magazine. It stood only a few yards beyond the crest. Again he set up his powerful shout, "Corporal of the guard, No. 6!" and away off to the northeast, although farther than himself from the guardhouse, Duffy on No. 5 at the east gate, sure that something was dreadfully amiss, was repeating the cry. Hardly knowing what he should do if he overtook them, Hunter dashed into the shallow stream, in hopes of reaching the opposite bank and overhauling the marauders, but the broken, slippery ice trapped and threw him again. Down he went splash into the chilling waters; up he scrambled, only to slip and go down a second time; then staggered to his feet, breathless, almost exhausted now; tumbled up the opposite bank; clambered on all fours to the crest; gazed hurriedly about in search of friend or foe; peered into the darkness to the south and southwest, but the runners had disappeared; then gazed to the east and sprang to his feet, startled. Not 20 yards away loomed the black bulk of the old brick magazine, and, hissing and sputtering, a fiery serpent seemed dancing in front. It bounded to the doorway, now in the ruddy light dimly seen to be open, disappeared within a little cloud of sulphur smoke, and then the heavens lit up with an awful glare. He felt himself hurled violently backward. For one instant he seemed to see a million stars crisscrossing through the skies. His ears were stunned and deafened by a thunderous roar. The air was filled with flying bricks and beams and sheets of flame that scorched and seared and blinded him. Then something crashed upon his skull, and he toppled over the bank and went plunging down to the icy flood beneath.

CHAPTER XI.

November had given way to a still more wintry month, and December, cold, clear, snow white and sparkling, chained the streams in icy fetters and spread abroad its fleecy blanket. The holidays were drawing nigh, and garrison children were reveling in hope and whispered rumors of the great times to come. There was to be a Christmas tree in the post hall, with presents for all the little ones. Miss Leroy was managing everything, and what Miss Leroy undertook went with a dash. The afternoons now were given up to all manner of sewing and stitching and contriving, dressing dolls and filling cornucopias and parceling out gifts so that no child should be overlooked or forgotten, but never once did Miss Leroy neglect her morning Bible class, for such it had become, and into the fold were gladly drawn not only convalescent patients in hospital, but volunteers from barracks and quarters who had no bodily ills, but who rejoiced in souls in need of saving. Ransom had no chap lain in those days, or sectarian piety might have taken alarm at the rapid increase in Miss Leroy's weekday Sunday school. Two of the most devout and regular attendants of late were Sergeant and Mrs. Merriweather. Drills were suspended, it being now too cold and snowy, and Miss Leroy's hospital services began regularly at 10. She would enter, bright, smiling, happy faced, go at once to her little desk and open the hall. Now, the Scriptures came first—there was no longer doubt as to the main object of her charitable enterprise—but when the lessons of the day were disposed of and a brief sermon read from the collection of some famous divine the barrack squad and Sudstown people would retire, and she could then devote another hour to lighter reading for the benefit of her patients exclusively, some of whom were still in the ward with the graver cases.

And among these latter, with bandaged eyes and burned and blistered face and hands, an unrecognizable bundle of bandages, lay Trooper Hunter, over whose head, unseen, unknown, there was hanging a sword.

For some days and nights concussion of the brain was feared. The magazine had been blown into a thousand fragments, and how many of these, beams or bricks, had felled him, no one ever knew. He was hauled out of the stream, feet first, like poor Pat Shea, bleeding, burned and senseless. He began to mend in a few days, however, and by the 8th of December was occasionally sitting up in an invalid chair, his eyes and cheeks still under cover. But from the time his convalescence began Trooper Hunter had spent two hours each morning listening to the voice of the charmer who charmed so wisely, and there came a day when she bent over his couch and laid her cool soft white hand on his forehead and asked him if there were nothing she could do, no friends or relatives to whom he would like her to write, and he murmured that he couldn't think of any just then, but might if she'd come again to ask him on the morrow. She came, and on the next and the next day, too, marveling not a little at the voice, the intelligence, the language of this particular patient. She strove to study his features, but without success, for when the doctor thought to remove the bandages the patient declared the morning light was altogether too much for his weakened eyes. He would be bandaged in the morning, though the afternoon sunshine was really more brilliant, and he didn't seem to mind it then. Miss Leroy took to sitting by Hunter's bedside as much as 10 minutes at first; then the 10 began to lengthen to 15 and even 20, and other patients waxed impatient and said things about Hunter and thought things about her that proved how jealous is the human heart, even when it beats beneath a flannel shirt. The surgeon said Hunter could soon return to his troop, as far as his health was concerned, but there were reasons to fear his health might suffer after he got there, for Major Mainwaring, now in temporary command of the post, was making frequent and impetuous inquiries. Colonel and Mrs. Atherton had gone east on two months' leave; Major and Mrs. Stannard had gone to Russell for a fortnight to visit old friends in another regiment, and here, to his huge delight, was Mainwaring in command of an eight company post. Then the surgeon asked why Mainwaring was so anxious to have the patient out, and learned something that proved a painful shock.

"Well, major," said he after a solemn silence, "of course you're commanding officer, but I find it mighty hard to believe that story, and I protest against its being made known to him until he is strong enough to bear it, which he isn't now."

There had been much talk at the hospital among the stewards and attendants and patients who could talk at all as to the result of the board of survey promptly convened at Colonel Atherton's request to ascertain the cause of the mysterious explosion which had wrecked the magazine and ruined its contents, and it did not take long for such keen scouts and trailers as Ray, Blake and old Wilkins to make up their minds. Coupled with what had occurred at the south gate that night, just a little while before the explosion, there was no doubt that an extensive robbery had taken place and that the object of the destruction of the magazine was the obliteration with it of evidences of the crime.

It seemed that shortly before 11:30 that night two veteran sergeants of Truscott's troop returning from Butte on pass became aware of a wagon driving ahead of them as they left town and soon disappearing out on the prairie east of the road. Now, there was not a ranch or house to which it could have gone. Everything of that kind lay farther down the stream, where it swept

"Among these was Trooper Hunter."

in bold curve, first to the south, then eastward again. Rumors of forage stealing they had heard, and therefore decided to find where the wagon went, but after searching awhile in the gale and the darkness they gave it up, yet warned the sergeant of the guard as they alighted at the south gate, and their hack driver returned with his rig to town.

Captain Blake was notified, and a patrol was ordered out to scour the right bank of the little stream that flowed back of the stables. They hadn't gone 50 yards before they stirred up a squad of troopers that scattered at their approach, but one was captured—Ray's rapscallion of a trumpeter, the Kid—and the Kid refused flatly and characteristically to say who the others were. A privileged character was the Kid. He had been ten years or more in the regiment and ten dozen times in scrapes. A better little soldier on campaign or a worse one in garrison couldn't be found in all the —th, and as the regiment had spent more of those ten years in the field than in the fort the Kid had still a small balance to his credit. He had a medal of honor from congress for heroism in fierce, savage battle and a record for devilitry of every conceivable kind. Ray was the only man, except Atherton, he either feared or loved. Grinning from ear to ear, he told Blake that there wasn't any officer in the regiment smart enough to scare him into giving away a fellow soldier, and Blake sent for Ray. Something told him there was mischief afoot, and Ray and the explosion came almost together.

Only two men in all Fort Ransom, however, were found to have anything to explain as to their whereabouts that night. First, Sergeant Merriweather, whom the sergeant of the guard had inquired for just after visiting sentries, and solely because a light was burning so late in his window. The second was the new trooper, Hunter, found nearly 300 yards away from his proper post, blinded, senseless, bleeding and half drowned. The Kid had told the plausible tale that "him and three other fellers was sneaking off to town for a lark" when detected. Merriweather declared that he had heard horses stamping and snorting in the stables and had considered it his duty, though no longer stable sergeant, to go and investigate, and that he saw no sentry on No. 6, but hunted up and down for him, wondering where he could be, and was so occupied when the explosion occurred. But Hunter had not yet been approached. There were reasons why it was deemed best to let him suppose no suspicion attached to him.

For, no sooner was it light enough to see, the morning after the explosion, than Atherton had some of his best officers scouring the prairie for traces. They found bricks, bullets and unexploded boxes of cartridges all over the neighborhood, but not one of the 40 revolvers and only 20 of the 80 boxes of carbine, rifle and revolver cartridges that should have been there. Of the barrel of rifle powder and half barrel of cannon cartridges not a vestige, of course, remained. All this was brought out by the board, and, the board's findings having been sent to department headquarters, Atherton, as has been said, had gone off on leave; so had Stannard, and this left Mainwaring in command.

"Not a word, not a hint to that fellow until I tell you," said Mainwaring to the post surgeon, who, an older man and a major senior in rank by several years, was nevertheless his inferior in the eyes of military law and regulation, he being debarred from assuming command. And so, as Hunter grew stronger every day and watched with eagerness for the coming each morning of the young devotee, there dawned upon him no ray of suspicion of the toils that were surrounding him, for Miss Leroy, who used to talk at home of her pupil patients, had become silent as to one at least and uncommunicative as to all, for Mrs. Mainwaring of late had expressed her disapprobation in no measured terms, and there was no longer that sweet accord which should obtain between aunt and niece.

One bright morning the doctor bade Hunter lay aside the shrouding bandages entirely and wear only a green shade over the eyes. Orders were orders, but when Miss Leroy entered and, as usual, spoke to him a dainty handkerchief was pressed to his face. The light, he said, was still too dazzling.

"But you are much better," said she in her clear tones. "The doctor says you can soon return to light duty, probably before Christmas."

Then as she took her seat to read, her side face toward him, he slipped the kerchief a little to one side that he might gaze undisturbed.

The men had asked that she should give 15 minutes at least to the leading events of the day, and a Chicago paper was selected for their edification. From this she chose such items as she thought might prove of interest, and to these Hunter listened in spite of himself. First she read of the political news; then the doings of great dignitaries, foreign and domestic, and then came accidents by flood and field and another railway hold up on a small scale. To all these he lent but languid ear. He was watching with eager eyes the movements of those soft, sensitive, curved red lips. He hardly paid even faint attention to what she was saying until something in the names struck him as familiar. All the foremost part of the paragraph had passed unheard, unheeded, but now—now only by strong effort could he restrain himself from sitting bolt upright in bed and reaching out and seizing the paper and reading for himself, for what she read, when once again he became conscious of her words, was this:

"The overturned yacht now lies in 40 feet of water, her taper masts and upper rigging all that remain visible. Mr. Hunter is doing well, carefully attended by Dr. Lambert at the Hotel des Ambassadeurs. The bodies of Mrs. Hunter and her unfortunate friends will doubtless be recovered this morning. The ladies were caught in the cabin when the Amorita was struck, and escape was impossible. She went to the bottom like a shot. English and American residents are in deep grief. The ballroom at the Casino last night was almost deserted. Many New York and Philadelphia families are at Nice for the winter, and the tragic fate of Mrs. Hunter has cast a gloom over the community. Mr. Hunter had greatly improved in health, but it is feared this bereavement may again prostrate him. They have no children."

The Amorita? That yacht was owned by a wealthy English admirer of his uncle's wife. For more reasons than one Hunter Gray had never fancied him, and even his easy going uncle seemed to hold aloof. But Mrs. Hunter, so much her husband's junior in years, loved society, adored yachting, and what was more necessary for her belovéd invalid's recovery than the soft sea breezes of the Riviera and the idyllic dolce far niente days and nights under those incomparable Mediterranean skies and on the Amorita's dainty deck? There was a late supper going on one joyous night aboard, just as she was coming in from a day's dancing over the blue waters. There was misunderstanding between her skipper and that of a steamer over the right of way—signals or God knows what—for when the Amorita rounded to the cruel black prow struck her amidships and ground her underneath the iron keel. Through the devotion of the crew Mr. Hunter and one or two friends with him were rescued. They were on deck. But nothing could save the hapless banqueters still below. Darcy Hunter had survived the wreck of his business, the wreck of the Amorita—had survived even his young, light hearted wife, with whose remains, said the paper, he would return to America at once.

CHAPTER XII.

That evening when the surgeon was making his visit to the hospital the steward told him Trooper Hunter desired to speak with him, and, halting somewhat in his gait and looking very pallid still, but otherwise little the worse for wear, the tall soldier was ushered into the dispensary.

The junior medical officer, for reasons the senior could not quite fathom, had on several occasions recently asked the senior if he did not think Hunter fit to return to light duty and gave his opinion that he was getting soft and lazy there. The post surgeon, for reasons the junior could not fathom at all, replied that he thought it might be several days before he should permit Hunter to return to his troop. This in nowise added to Jayne's good will toward his gentlemanly and attractive patient. Hunter was fortunate in having won the sympathy of the senior. Tonight he won something more.

Standing bolt upright at the door, he said:

"May I speak one moment with the colonel in private?"

The surgeon almost blushed as he whirled toward the speaker. All through the war of the rebellion he had served, a gallant, skillful, devoted officer, ever seeking duty at the front, ever ready night or day to brave peril, hardship or fatigue to go with his regiment into action. Time and again he had dashed with them into battle. More than once he had cheered them in headlong charge until recalled to himself and duties that bade him sheathe the sword for the scalpel. Scorning to leave his wounded, he had fallen with them into the hands of the enemy and had starved with them at Andersonville. Once he had been seriously wounded as he knelt beside a stricken comrade on the battle line. Twice he had been offered hospital duty at Annapolis and Washington and declined. From one end of the war to the other he had been known among the men as the fighting doctor, and the fame had followed him to the far frontier, where in one long and fierce campaign against the Sioux he had spared himself no hardship that the humblest soldier had to endure, and the cavalry swore by him—aye, and the lithe, sinewy, hard marching, hard fighting doughboys, too—and loved him for the love he bore them. With all he was a student of his trade and gloried in it, but most he gloried that he was a soldier. He looked it, lived it, deserved it and everything the name implied, but he had one weakness, if weakness be called. "I've been a soldier 20 years of my life. I've won the brevets of major and lieutenant colonel on the

"May I speak one moment with the colonel in private?"

battlefield and colonel for the war, but never have I been called or can I look to be called anything but doctor. Here are your paymasters, commissaries, quartermasters—fellows that never heard a hostile bullet whistle or saw the smoke of battle—lots of 'em. You call them captain or major, as though they were soldiers, but you snub, by God, the one staff corps that never leaves the fighting line when the fighting begins."

Now, the surgeon had come but lately to Ransom. He had served but a few weeks with the —th, yet Truscott and Ray had discovered his sensitiveness and gladly hailed him as colonel. Blake promptly followed suit, but when Mainwaring heard it Mainwaring bristled. "What right's a d——d doctor to expect to be called anything but doctor?" he asked, explosively, and he no more meant to be offensive or thought he could be considered offensive in his language than did the doctor in claiming recognition as a soldier. And then, as Mainwaring prided himself on "never saying behind a fellow's back what he wouldn't say to his face," and the Lord only knew what he hadn't said to people's faces—what did the major do, only that very day, but, in attempted jocularity, pitch into the post surgeon at the morning gathering of the officers and try to chaff him about wanting to be called colonel! It stung the honest old soldier surgeon to the quick. It hurt him sore, and he left the room disgusted.

And so, when from the lips of this tall trooper came the title he valued, the post surgeon fairly blushed, for he had been thinking intently over the events of the morning, and, if the truth must be told, was wondering how he could get square with Major Mainwaring and here was a possible opportunity.

Obedient to his superior's nod, the hospital steward went out, closing the door behind him.

"What is it, Hunter?" asked the surgeon kindly.

"I have come to ask, sir, if it would be possible for me to return to my troop tonight, and if the colonel could aid me in any way to get a furlough of 20 or 30 days."

Colonel Connell looked up, perplexed, even troubled. Both requests were unusual from old soldiers and never heard of from recruits.

"I fear not, Hunter. You see, there are reasons why you ought not to attempt to return to duty yet, and what can you allege as reason for a furlough so soon after enlistment?"

"Urgent personal affairs, sir," was the answer, a half smile twitching at the corners of the handsome mouth. "Even a trooper may have them, you know."

"Hunter," said the surgeon after a moment's pause, "be advised by me. Don't think of going back to duty for two or three days yet and don't let any one know you wish to leave Ransom on any account just now."

For a moment there was silence. The soldier still remained respectfully at attention, standing close to the door. The surgeon had spoken impressively, earnestly, significantly, and Hunter could not but notice it, could not but realize that behind it there was some urgent meaning or reason, yet he persisted.

"I hope the colonel will pardon me," he said. "I will not refer to the furlough again until I can explain more fully, which will be possible after I have talked with Captain Ray, but, as to returning to the troop, I beg that I may not be detained here through—another morning."

The surgeon was seated in a wicker bottom office chair, which he twisted round, and so squarely faced his visitor, looking keenly yet not unkindly into the pale, handsome face. It was a moment before he spoke.

"I thought you greatly appreciated those morning readings," said he at last. "I'm sure the young lady has done very much to make hospital life bearable."

It was Hunter's turn to color, but before he could speak he had to spring aside. Into the outer hall came banging a burly form enwrapped in cavalry circular. "Where's Dr. Connell?" brusquely demanded a loud, unmodulated voice. Then, slap bang, with all his characteristic impetuosity, Mainwaring burst into the room.

Direct as ever, never noting or caring who was present, he went straight to the point. "Hello, doc!" said he, loud, gruff, yet hearty. "Just the man I'm looking for. Say, Truscott tells me I hurt your feelings this morning, and I've come to 'pologize. I didn't mean a d——d thing. It's all right. If you want to be called colonel, why, colonel it shall be. I'll issue orders calling the attention of the whole command to it, if you like."

And then for the first time he became aware of the tall soldier, now trying to slip quietly behind him so as to leave the room. Mainwaring whirled on him in a trice. "Hello, you're up again, are you? Well, this man's able to answer for himself now, I see, doc—cr—colonel?"

But the post surgeon had risen from his chair and held up a hand appealingly.

"He is still a patient under my charge, sir, and is not restored to health or duty as yet. I protest"—

"Oh, you needn't protest. I'm done for the present. I'm giving way to everybody this evening, all on your account." Here the surgeon signaled significantly to the soldier, and, silently, wonderingly, Hunter withdrew. "'Tisn't only Truscott. My wife's jumped on me with both feet; says I've insulted you—done nothing but make enemies ever since I came into the —th. Why, I've been catching it right and left, doc—colonel; haven't had a moment's peace. What d'you think that flash dashed long legged lath of a man Blake says to me not an hour ago, begad! I asked him if he thought you had any right to feel offended, and he said if you didn't it was only because everybody agreed that no notice was to be taken of anything I ever said. I never know whether he's in earnest or joking. If I thought he meant what he said, by God, he'd be in arrest this minute."

Again the post surgeon held up a warning hand. "Pray do not speak quite so loud, Mainwaring," said he. "Some of my patients are trying to sleep. I beg you will think no more of this morning's incident. What you have said is more than sufficient. I am possibly hypersensitive."

And then it was the doctor's turn to be abruptly silenced. Form second time the outer door was hurriedly opened, silvery voices and soft laughter were heard in the corridor, and then, marshaled by Blake, there at the entrance stood Mrs. Mainwaring, and behind her, silent and a trifle pale and anxious looking, Kate Leroy.

"I knew he'd be coming right over here," laughed Mrs. Mainwaring. "But really, Colonel Connell, my husband is even more impatuous in rushing to make amends than he is in treading on people's tender spots. No, don't go wandering off to the wards, Kate," she cried, for Miss Leroy looked anxiously up the corridor and showed a tendency to follow her eyes. "Come now, major, if you have finished what you were saying to the colonel, we want you to come home. Indeed," she persisted, as she saw how angrily his eyes were regarding Blake, "you've got to come and make your peace with us now, for you were simply unbearable all through dinner, and we had to ask Captain Blake to escort us in search of you." Then, as Mainwaring still held back as though striving to speak, she seized his arm. "Come. Indeed," lowering her voice, "I must speak with you before you go any further in that case." And then did Connell feel sure she spoke of Hunter.

An instant later he was surer still, for in came an attendant, alarm on his face.

"Did the post surgeon give Hunter permission to leave hospital? He's picked up his coat and gone, sir."

[To be continued.]

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