

In Peace and War

Or, The End of It All

CHAPTER XI.

One fine day late in the autumn of eighteen hundred and seventy-six, a steamer emerged from the haze that lay over the Atlantic and the northern waters of the Bay of Biscay.

The captain of this splendid steamer was a gentleman as well as a good sailor, and he endeavored to make his passengers feel at home while under his care. Therefore he now walked aft and stood beside the chair of a beautiful woman who was always alone, always indifferent, always repelling.

"This is a pretty sight, Mrs. Huston," he said pleasantly, without looking down at her, but standing beside her chair.

"Yes," was the indifferent answer; and the sailor's keen gray eyes detected the fact that the fair lashes were never raised.

"It brings the fact before me," he continued, "that we are getting near home."

"Yes," with pathetic indifference. She did not even make the pretense of looking up, and yet there was no visible interest in the book that lay upon her lap.

The sailor moved a little, and leant his elbows upon the rail, looking round his ship with a critical and all-seeing eye.

"I hope," he said cheerily, "that there is no one on board to whom the sight of Eddystone will not give unmitigated pleasure. We shall be there before any of us quite realize that the voyage is drawing to an end."

She raised her head and smiled somewhat wanly, and there was in the action and in the expression of her eyes a sudden, singular resemblance to Brenda Gilholme. But it was a weak copy. There was neither the invincible pluck nor the unusual intellectuality to be discerned.

"I shall be glad," she said, "to see England again. Although the voyage has been very pleasant and very . . . peaceful. Thanks to you."

"Not at all," he answered, with breezy cheerfulness; "I have done remarkably little to make things pleasant. It has been a quiet voyage. We are, I think, a quiet lot this time. Invalids mostly—in body, or mind!"

The mariner looked down into the sad face, and smiled in a comprehensive way which seemed in some inexplicable manner to bring them closer together.

"Then," said the lady, "as I am in the enjoyment of rude health and likely to last for some years yet, I may infer that you know all about me."

The captain looked grave.

"I know," he answered, "just little enough to be able to reply that I know nothing when people do me the honor of inquiring; and just sufficient to feel that your affairs are better left undiscussed by us."

"I suppose," she murmured, "that gossips have been thrashing the whole question out with their customary zest."

"I think," he said coolly, "that you have done perfectly right in keeping yourself quite apart from the rest of them."

"I am glad," she said humbly, "that my sister will be at Plymouth to meet me."

"Did you," inquired the sailor, "write from Port Said to Miss Gilholme?"

She raised her head with a questioning air, but did not look up.

"Miss Gilholme," she repeated—"how do you know her name?"

"Oh," laughed the captain, "I am a sort of walking directory. There is a constant procession of men and women passing before me. Many of them turn aside and say a few words. Sometimes we find mutual acquaintances, sometimes only mutual interests. Sometimes they pass by again, and on occasion we become friends."

"Then you have not met her?"

"No—I have not had that pleasure."

"It is a pleasure," said the beautiful woman very earnestly. Had she only known it, her face was infinitely lovelier in grave repose than in most piquante bouderie.

"I can quite believe it," replied the sailor, with a gallantry which even Mrs. Huston could not take as anything more than conventional.

"She is my guardian angel!" murmured she, pathetically.

"I hear," the captain went on to explain, in his cheery impersonal way, "scraps of family histories here and there, and then am rather surprised to meet members of these families, or persons connected with them."

Mrs. Huston bravely quelled a desire to talk of her own affairs, and smiled vaguely.

"I have no doubt," she said with mechanical pleasantness, "that we have a great many mutual acquaintances—if we only knew how to hit upon the vein."

"Of course we have—the world, and especially the Indian world, is very small."

"I wonder who they are?" murmured Mrs. Huston, raising her eyes to her companion's face.

"Mention a few of your friends," he suggested, looking down into her eyes somewhat keenly.

"No—you begin!"

He changed his position somewhat, and stood upright, free from the rail, but his glance never left her face.

"Theodore Trist!"

Instantly she averted her eyes. For a moment she was quite off her guard, and her fingers strayed in a nervous, aimless way among the pages of her open book. To her pale cheeks the warm color mounted as if a glowing ruby reflection had suddenly been cast upon the delicate skin.

She expressed no surprise by word or gesture, and there was a pause of considerable duration before at length she spoke.

"Where is he now?" she asked in a low voice.

The captain stroked his grizzled mustache reflectively. He acted his part well, despite her sudden and lamentable failure.

"Let me think . . . He is in Constantinople to the best of my knowledge. He is engaged in watching

"Do you know him well?" she asked at length, after a second pause.

"Yes. He is a friend of mine."

"A great friend?"

"I think I may say so."

"He is also a friend of ours—of my sister and myself," said Mrs. Huston calmly.

She had quite recovered her equanimity by now, and the pink color had left her cheeks.

"I have known him," said the captain conversationally, "for many years now. Soon after he made his name he went out to the East with me, and we struck up a friendship. He is not a man who makes many friends, I imagine."

"No," murmured Mrs. Huston, in a voice which implied that the subject was not distasteful to her, but she preferred her companion to talk while she listened.

"But," continued the sailor, "those who claim him as a friend have an unusual privilege. He is what we vaguely call at sea a 'good' man—a man upon whom it is safe to place reliance in any emergency, under all circumstances."

"Yes," said the lady softly.

The sailor was interrupted by the sound of the first dinner bell, and a general stir on deck. At sea, meal times are hailed with a more visible joy than is considered decorous on land, and no time is lost in answering the glad summons.

Mrs. Huston rose languidly from her seat and moved forward toward the spacious saloon staircase.

"Yes," she answered thoughtfully. "Theo is very clever. It is difficult to realize that one's friends are celebrated, is it not?"

The captain walked by her side, suiting his crisp, firm step to her languid gait, which was, nevertheless, very graceful in its rhythmic ease. Her voice was clear, gentle, and somewhat indifferent. On her face there was no other expression than the customary suggestion of pathetic apathy.

"I suppose," she continued in a conventional manner, "that he will not be home for some time."

"No. There will be a big war before this question is settled, and Trist will be in the thick of it."

With a slight inclination of the head she passed away from him and disappeared down the saloon stairs. The captain turned away and mounted the little brass ladder leading to the bridge with sailor-like deliberation.

"And, young woman," he muttered to himself, "you had better go down to your cabin and thank your God on your bended knees that Theodore Trist is not in England, nor likely to cross your path for many months to come."

He looked round him with his habitual cheery keenness, and said a few words to the second officer who was on duty. Could he have seen Theodore Trist standing at that moment on the deck of a quick dispatch boat, racing through the Bosphorus and bound for England, he would not, perhaps, have laughed so heartily at a very mild joke made by his subordinate a few moments later.

"And yet," he reflected, as he made his way below in answer to the second dinner bell—"and yet, she does not seem to me to be the sort of woman for Trist—not good enough! Perhaps the gossips are wrong, after all, and he does not care for her!"

More than one idler in Plymouth Station, one morning in October, turned his head to look again at two women walking side by side on the platform near to the London train. One, the taller of the two, was exceptionally beautiful, of a fair, delicate type, with an almost perfect figure and a face fit for a model of the Madonna, so pure in outline was it, so innocent in its meaning. The younger woman was slightly shorter. She was clad in mourning, which contrasted somewhat crudely with the brighter costume of her companion. It was evident that these two were sisters; they walked in the same easy way, and especially notable was a certain intrepid carriage of the head, which I venture to believe is essentially peculiar to high-born English women.

The sisters had met on the steamboat landing a few moments previously. A rattling drive through the town had followed, and now they were able to speak together alone for the first time. There had been no display of emotion.

"My dear," Mrs. Huston was saying, "he will be home by the next boat if he can raise the money. We cannot count on more than a week's stay."

"And," inquired Brenda, "can he raise the money?"

"Oh, yes! If he can get so far as the steamboat office without spending it."

Brenda looked at her sister in a curious way.

"Spending it on what . . . Alice?"

"On—drink!"

Mrs. Huston was not the woman to conceal any of her own grievances from quixotically unselfish motives.

"For Admiral Wylie," replied Brenda patiently.

"But it is two months—is it not?—since his death, and he was no relation. I think it is unnecessary. Black is so melancholy, though it suits your figure."

"I am living with Mrs. Wylie," Brenda explained with unconscious irony. "Are you still determined that you cannot live with your husband, Alice?"

"My dear, he is a brute! I am not an impulsive person, but I think that if he should catch me again, it is very probable that I should do something desperate—kill myself, or something of that sort."

"I do not think," observed Brenda serenely, "that you would ever kill yourself."

The beautiful woman laughed in an easy, lightsome way, which was one of her many social gifts. It was such a pleasantly infectious laugh, so utterly light-hearted, and so ready in its vocation of filling up awkward pauses.

"No, perhaps not. But in the meantime, what is to become of me? Will Mrs. Wylie take me in for a day or two, or shall we seek lodgings? I have some money, enough to last a month or so; but I must have two new dresses."

"Mrs. Wylie has kindly said that you can stay as long as you like. But, Alice, it would never do to stay in London. You must get away to some small place on the seacoast, or somewhere where you will not be utterly bored, and keep in hiding until he comes home, and I can find out what he intends to do."

"My dear, I shall be utterly bored anywhere except in London. But Brenda, tell me . . . you have got into a habit of talking exactly like Theo Trist!"

Brenda met her sister's eyes with a bright smile.

"How funny!" she exclaimed. "I have not noticed it."

"No, of course; you would not notice it. When will he be home?"

"I don't know," she replied indifferently.

"We," continued Mrs. Huston, following out her old train of thought, "are so helpless. We want a man to stand by us. Of course papa is of no use. I suppose he is spouting somewhere about the country. He generally is."

"No," replied Brenda, with a wonderful tolerance. "We cannot count on him. He is in Ireland. I had a post-card from him the other day."

"What we require," continued Mrs. Huston, "is an energetic man with brains."

"I am afraid that energetic men with brains have in most cases their own affairs to look after. It is only the idle ones with tongues who have time to devote to other people's business."

"The 'brute,' my dear, is clever; we must remember that. And he is terribly obstinate."

"We must be cool and cunning, and brave to fight against him," said Brenda practically.

At this moment the guard came forward, and held the door of their compartment invitingly open. They got in, and found themselves alone. They were barely seated, opposite to each other, when the train glided smoothly away.

"Theo," said the elder woman significantly, "is brave and cool and cunning, Brenda."

"But," suggested Brenda, "Theo is in Bulgaria."

Mrs. Huston smiled with all the conscious power of a woman who, without being actually vain, knows the market value of the moral weight of her beauty.

"Suppose I telegraphed to him that I wanted him to come to me at once."

Brenda fixed her eyes upon her sister's face. For a second her dainty lip quivered.

"You must not do that," she said, in such a tone of invincible opposition that her sister changed color, and looked somewhat hastily in another direction.

"I suppose," murmured the elder woman after a short silence, "that it is quite impossible to find out when he may return?"

"Quite impossible. This 'Eastern Question,' as it is called, is so complicated that I have given up trying to follow it—besides, I do not see what Theo has to do with the matter. We must act alone, Alice."

"But women are so helpless," Brenda smiled in a slightly ironical way.

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of brains who have their own affairs to attend to," said Brenda, in her cheery way. "We are not his affairs; besides, as I mentioned before, he is in Bulgaria—in his element, in the midst of confusion, insurrection, war."

"But," repeated Mrs. Huston, with aggravating unconsciousness of the obvious vanity of her words, "suppose I telegraphed for him?"

Brenda laughed, and shook her head.

"I have a melancholy presentiment that if you telegraphed for him he would not come. There is a vulgar but weighty proverb about making one's own bed, which he might recommend to our notice."

"Then Theo must have changed!"

Brenda raised her round, blue eyes, and glanced sideways out of the window. She was playing idly with the strap of the sash, tapping the back of her hand with it.

"Theo," she observed indifferently, "is the incarnation of steadfastness. He has not changed in any perceptible way. But he is, before all else, a war correspondent. I cannot imagine that any one should possess the power of dragging him away from the seat of war."

Mrs. Huston smiled vaguely for her own satisfaction. Her imagination was apparently capable of greater things. It was rather to be deplored that, when she smiled, the expression of her beautiful face was what might (by a true friend behind her back) be called a trifle vacuous.

"He wrote," continued the younger sister, "a very good article the other day, which came just within the limits of my understanding. It was upon the dangers of alliance; and he showed that an ally who, in any way, might at some time prove disadvantageous, is better avoided from the first part. It was apropos of the Turkish-Christian subjects welcoming a Russian invasion. It seems to me, Alice, that our position is rather within the reach of that argument."

"Being a soldier's wife, I do not know much about military matters but it seems to me that a retreat should be safely covered at all costs."

"Not at all costs," said Brenda significantly. Her color had changed, and there was a wave of pink slowly mounting over her throat.

Mrs. Huston smiled serenely, and shrugged her shoulders.

(To Be Continued.)

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