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# THE STROLLERS

By FREDERIC S. ISHAM,

Author of "Under the Rose"

seen with her."

ing down at the other.

know? The land baron has not been

"No, but you have," returned the

The silence between them lasted for

some moments. Barnes stood with his

hands in his pockets, his face down-

cast and moody. He felt that events

were happening over which he had no

control, but which were shaping the

destiny of all he loved best. In the

dim light the rugged lines of his coun-

tenance were strongly, decisively out-

lined. Turning to the trunk with a

quick, nervous step, he filled a pipe

himself. After he had lighted it he

once more contemplated the soldier,

"We have been together for some

time, Mr. Saint-Prosper," he said at

length. "We have gone through fair

and rough weather and"-he paused a

moment before continuing-"should un-

derstand each other. You asked me

when you came in if you were inter-

rupting me, and I told you that you

were not. As a matter of fact, you

And, walking to a table, Barnes took

"A garrulous single man must tell

his little secrets somewhere," he con-

tinued. "Will you look at the pages I

Saint-Prosper took the book, and

while he was turning the leaves that

were hardly dry the manager relighted

his pipe, over which he glanced nerv-

ously from time to time at his com-

panion. Finally, when the soldier had

finished the perusal of the diary,

Barnes turned to him expectantly, but

the other silently laid down the little

volume, and, after waiting some mo-

ments for him to speak, the manager,

as though disappointed by his reticence,

breathed a sigh. Then, clearing his

throat, in a voice somewhat husky he

"You will understand now why she

is so much to me. I have always

wanted to keep her from the world as

much as possible; to have her world,

her art! I have tried to keep the

shadow of the past from her. An

actress has a pretty face, and there's

a hue and cry! It is not notoriety she

seeks, but fame-fame, bright and pure

"The land baron will not cry abroad

dier gravely. "These fashionable af-

"Flimsy pretexts!" cried Barnes. "A

woman's reputation-her good name"-

From the door at the far end of the

balcony Constance had again emerged

and now approached their room. A

flowing gown of an early period sur-

rounded her like a cloud as she paused

before Barnes' apartment. At the

throat a deep falling collar was closely

fastened, the sleeves were gathered in

at elbow and wrist, and from a "cov-

erchief," set upon the dusky hair, fell

a long veil of ample proportions.

With the light shimmering on the

"Oh, you are not alone?" she said to

the former. "You look as though you

were talking together very seriously,"

"Nothing of consequence, Miss Ca-

"Only about some scenery!" inter-

posed the manager so hastily that she

glanced, slightly surprised, from the

one to the other. "Some sets that

"'Flimsy pretexts!' I caught that

much! I only wanted to ask you about

this costume. Is it appropriate, do you

think, for the part we were talking

about?" turning around slowly, with

"Charming, my dear; charming!"

"If I only thought that an unbiased

criticism!" Her dark lashes lowered;

she looked toward the soldier half shy-

ly, half mockingly. "What do you

At that moment her girlish grace

"I think it is not only appropriate,

A gleam like laughter came into her

eyes, nor did she shun his kindling

"Thank you," she said and courtesied

CHAPTER XX.

earth, and nature lay wrapped

in the rosy peace of daybreak

as the sun's shafts of gold

Beneath the spreading trees were

assembled a group of persons various-

ly disposed. A little dapper man was

bending over a case of instruments, as

merry a soul as ever adjusted a liga-

ture or sewed a wound. Beribboned

and bemedaled the Count de Propriac,

acting for the land baron, and Barnes,

consulting over the weapons, a mag-

who had accompanied the soldier, were

but"-looking at her and not at the

arms half raised.

was irresistible.

costume-"beautiful."

answered enthusiastically.

think, Mr. Saint-Prosper?"

rew!" he replied, flushing beneath her

she added, turning to Saint-Prosper.

manager and Saint-Prosper.

fairs need but flimsy pretexts."

"Hush!" said Saint-Prosper.

was writing when you came in?"

up the notebook.

went on sulkily:

as sunlight!"

thinking deeply, reviewing the past.

manager, suddenly pausing and look-

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CHAPTER XIX.

BOVE in his room Barnes, with plays and manuscripts scattered around him, was engaged in writing in his note and date book, wherein autobiography, ledger and journal accounts and such miscellaneous matter mingled indiscriminately. "Today she said to me, 'I am going to the races with Mr. Saint-Prosper.' What did I say? 'Yes.' of course. What can there be in common between Lear and Juliet? Naturally she sometimes turns from an old fellow like me. Now, if she were only a slip of a girl again, with her short frock, her disorder of long ringlets, running and romping-

"A thousand details pass through my mind, reminiscences of her girlhood, lightening a lonesome life like glimmerings of sunshine in a secluded wood; memories of her mother and the old days when she played in my New Axle Grease and Hoof York theater, for Barnes, the stroller, was once a metropolitan manager! Her fame had preceded her, and every admirer of histrionic art eagerly awaited her arrival. Then this incomparable woman fell ill.

""You see? I have ruined you,' she

"'I am honored, madam,' was all I

"She placed her hand softly on mine and let her luminous eyes rest on me. "'Dear old friend!' she murmured.

"Then she closed her eyes, and thought she was sleeping. Some time elapsed when she again opened them. "'Death will break our contract, Mr.

Barnes,' she said softly. "I suppose my hand trembled, for she tightened her grasp and continued firmly, 'It is not so terrible, after all. or would not be, but for one thing.' "'You will soon get well, madam.' I

managed to stammer. "'No. Do you care? It is pleasant to have one true, kind friend in the world-one who makes a woman believe again in the nobility of human nature. My life has been sad, as you know. I should not regret giving it up. Nor should I fear to die. My child-what will she do?-poor, motherless, fatherless girl-all alone, all

"'Madam, if I may-will you permit me to care for her? If I might regard

"How tightly she held my hand at that! Her eyes seemed to blaze with heavenly fire. But let me not dwell further upon the sad events that led to the end of her noble career. Something of her life I had heard; something I surmised. Unhappy as a woman, she was majestic as an actress. The fire of her voice struck every ear. Its sweetness had a charm never to be

A knock at the door rudely dispelled these memories. For a moment the manager looked startled, as one abruptly called back to his immediate surroundings; then the pen fell from his hand, and he pushed the book from him to the center of the table.

"Come in," he said. The door opened, and Saint-Prosper

"Am I interrupting you?" asked the soldier, glancing at the littered table. "Not at all," answered the manager, recovering himself and settling back in his chair. "Make yourself at home. You'll find some cigars on the mantel, or if you prefer your pipe there's a jar of tobacco on the trunk. Do you find it? I haven't had time yet to bring order out of chaos. A manager's trunks are like a junk shop, with everything from a needle to an anchor."

Filling his pipe from the receptacle indicated, which lay among old costumes and wigs, the soldier seated himself near an open window that looked out upon a balcony. Through a door at the far end of the balcony a light streamed from a chandelier within, playing upon the balustrade. Once the figure of the young actress stepped for a moment out upon the balcony. She leaned upon the balustrade, looked across the city, breathed the perfume of the flowers and then quickly van-

"Can you spare me a little time tomorrow morning, early, before rehearsal?" said Saint-Prosper finally. "Yes," returned the manager in sur-

prise. "What is it?" "A foolish piece of business. The

patroon is in New Orleans." Barnes uttered an exclamation of an- low. noyance and apprehension. "Here!

What is he doing here?" he said. "I thought we had seen the last of him. HE mist was lifting from the Has he followed-Constance?" "I don't know. We met today at the

"It is strange she did not tell me pierced the foliage, illumining the hisabout it," remarked the manager with- toric ground of the Oaks. out endeavoring to conceal the anxiety this unexpected information afforded

"She does not know he is here." And Saint-Prosper briefly related the circumstances of his meeting with the land baron, to which the manager listened attentively. "And so she must be dragged into it!"

exclaimed Barnes at length resentfully. nificent pair of rapiers with costly "Her name must become public propsteel guards, set with initials and a coronet. Member of an ancient society erty in a broil!" A frown darkened the soldier's face, of France which yet sought to pernet but he replied quickly: "Need any one

te the memory of the old judicial combat and the more modern duel, the count was one of those persons who think they are in honor bound to bear a challenge without questioning the cause or asking the "color of a reason." "A superb pair of weapons, count!"

observed the doctor, rising. The count laughed and turned away with a businesslike air.

"Are you ready, gentlemen?" At his words the contestants immediately took their positions. The land



He surveyed his prostrate antagonist. paron, lithe and supple, presented a picture of insolent and conscious pride his glance lighted by disdain, but smoldering with fiercer passions as he examined and tested his blade.

"Engage!" exclaimed the count. With ill concealed eagerness Mauville began a vigorous, although guarded, attack, as if asserting his supremacy and at the same time testing his man. The buzzing switch of the steel became angrier; the weapons glinted and gleamed, intertwining silently and separating with a swish. The patrooa's features glowed, his movements became quicker, and, executing a rapid parry, he lunged with a thrust so stealthy his blade was beaten down

only as it touched the soldier's breast. Mauville suddenly followed his momentary advantage with a dangerous lunge from below. Involuntarily Barnes looked away, but his wandering attention was immediately recalled. From the lips of the land baron burst an exclamation of mingled pain and anger. Saint-Prosper had not only parried the thrust, but his own blade, by a rapid riposte, had grazed the shoulder of his

Nor was the manager's surprise greater than that of the count. The latter, amazed that this unusual stratagem should have failed when directed by a wrist as trained and an eye as quick as Mauville's, now interposed. "Enough!" he exclaimed, separating

the contestants. "Honor has been satisfied." the cause of the meeting." said the sol-

"It is nothing!" cried the land baron fiercely. "His blade hardly touched me." In his exasperation and disappointment over his failure Mauville was scarcely conscious of his wound. "I tell you it is nothing," he repeated.

"What do you say, Mr. Saint-Prosper?" asked the count.

"I am satisfied," returned the young "But I'm not!" reiterated the patroon,

restraining bimself with difficulty. "It was understood we should continue until both were willing to stop!" "No," interrupted the count suavely,

"it was understood you should continue if both were willing!" "And you're not!" exclaimed the land folds of her raiment she stood looking through the open door, regarding the

you leave the army because"-"Gentlemen, gentlemen! let us ob- and COATS. serve the proprieties!" expostulated the count. "Is it your intention, sir"-to Saint-Prosper-"not to grant my prin-

cipal's request?" A fierce new anger gleamed from the soldier's eyes, completely transforming his expression and bearing. His glance quickly swept from the count to Mauville at the studied insult of the latter's words; on his cheek burned a dark

red spot. "Let it go on!"

The count stepped nimbly from his position between the two men. Again the swords crossed. The count's glance bent itself more closely on the figure of the soldier, noting now how superbly poised was his body, what reserves of strength were suggested by the white, muscular arm! His wrist moved like a machine, lightly brushing aside the thrusts. Had it been but accident that Mauville's unlooked for expedient had failed?

But the land baron's zest only appeared to grow in proportion to the resistance he encountered; the lust for fighting increased with the music of the blades. For some moments he feinted and lunged, seeking an opening, however slight. Again he appeared bent upon forcing a quick conclusion, for suddenly with a rush he sought to break over Saint-Prosper's guard and succeeded in wounding the other slightly in the forehead. Now, sure of his man, Mauville sprang at him savagely.

But, dashing the blood from his eyes with his free hand and without giving way, Saint-Prosper met the assault with a wrist of iron, and the land baron failed to profit by what had seemed a certain advantage. The wound had the effect of making the soldier more cautious, and eye, foot and hand were equally true.

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

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