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C. SMITH & SONS

THE STROLLERS

By **FREDERIC S. ISHAM,**
 Author of "Under the Rose"

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CHAPTER XXIV.

A SUPPER was given the company after the performance by the manager, to which representatives of the press—artful Barnes—had been invited. Of all the merry evenings in the bohemian world that was one of the merriest. Next to the young girl sat the Count de Propric, his breast covered with a double row of medals. Of the toasts drunk to Constance, the manager, Straws, etc., unfortunately no record remains.

So fancy must picture the devotion of the count to his fair neighbor, the almost superhuman pride of noisy Barnes, the attention bestowed by Susan upon Saint-Prosper, while through his mind wandered the words of a French song:

Adieu, la cour, adieu les dames;
 Adieu les filles et les femmes.

Intermixed with this sad refrain the soldier's thoughts reverted to the performance, and amid the chatter of Susan he reviewed again and again the details of that evening. Was this the young girl who played in schoolhouses, inns or town halls, he had asked himself, seated in the rear of the theater? When she won an ovation he had himself forgotten to applaud, but had sat there looking from her to the auditors, to whom she was now bound by ties of admiration and friendship.

"Don't you like her?" a voice next to him had asked.

"Like her! He had looked at the man blankly.

"Yes," he had replied.

Then the past had seemed to roll between them—the burning sands, the voices of the troops, the bugle call. In his brain wild thoughts had surged and flowed as they were surging and flowing now.

"Is he not handsome—Constance's new admirer?" whispered Susan. "What can he be saying? She looks so pleased! He is very rich, isn't he?"

"I don't know," answered Saint-Prosper brusquely.

Again the thoughts surged and surged and the past intruded itself, reaching for his glass, to drink quickly.

"Don't you ever feel the effects of wine?" asked the young woman.

His glass chilled her, it seemed so strange and steady.

"I believe you are so—so strong you don't even notice it," added Susan, with conviction. "But you don't have half as good a time."

"Perhaps I enjoy myself in my way," he answered.

"What is your way?" she asked quickly. "You don't appear to be wildly hilarious in your pleasures." And he ended bitterly.

She shrank back before his vehement words; something within her appeared violated, as though his plea had penetrated the sanctity of her reserve.

"Would it not be well to say nothing about deception?" she replied, and her dark eyes swept his face. Then, turning from him abruptly, she stepped to the window and, drawing aside the face curtains mechanically, looked out.

The city below was yet teeming with life, lights gleaming everywhere and shadowy figures passing. Suddenly out of the darkness came a company of soldiers who had just landed, marching through the streets toward the camping ground and singing as they went.

The chorus, like a mighty breath of patriotism, filled her heart to overflow. It seemed as though she had heard it for the first time; had never before felt its potency. All the tragedy of war swept before her; all that inspiring, strange affection for country, kith and kin suddenly exalted her.

Above the tramping of feet the melody rose and fell on the distant air, dying away as the figures vanished in the gloom. With its love of native land, its expression of the unity of comradeship and ties stronger than death, the song appeared to challenge an answer, and when the music ceased and only the drum beats still seemed to make themselves heard, she raised her head with out moving from her position and looked at him to see if he understood. But though she glanced at him, she hardly saw him. In her mind was another picture—the betrayed garrison, the soldiers slain—and the horror of it threw such a film over her gaze that he became as a figure in some distressing dream.

An inkling of her meaning—the mute questioning of her eyes, the dread evoked by that revolting vision of the past—was reflected in his glance.

"Decided you?" he began, and his voice to her sounded as from afar.

"How—what?"

"Must it be—could it be put into words?"

The deepest shadows dwelt in her eyes, shadows he could not penetrate, although he still doggedly, yet apprehensively, regarded her. Watching her, his brow grew darker.

"Why not?" he continued stubbornly.

"Why?" The dimness that had obscured her vision lifted. Now she saw him very plainly indeed—tall and powerful, his face harsh, intense, as though by the vigor of physical and mental force he would override any charge or imputation.

Why? She drew herself up as he quickly searched her eyes, bright with the passions that stirred her breast.

"You told me part of your story that day in the property wagon," she began, repugnance, scorn and anger all mingling in her tones. "Why did you not tell me the rest?"

His glance, too, flashed. Would he

still profess not to understand her? His lips parted; he spoke with an effort.

"The rest?" he said, his brow lowering.

"Yes," she answered quickly—"I stain upon your name, the garrison sold, the soldiers killed, murdered!"

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I have received my warning. Soon I shall join those dark specters which once gayly traversed this bright world. A little brandy and soda, Francois."

The servant brought it to him. The marquis leered awfully over his shoulder once more. "Your health, my guest!" he exclaimed, laughing harshly. "But my hat, Francois. I have business to perform, important business!"

He ambled out of the room. On the street he was all politeness, removing his hat to a dark brunette who rolled by in her carriage and pausing to chat with another representative of the sex of the blond type. Then he gayly sauntered on until, reaching the theater, he stopped and made a number of inquiries. Who was the manager of Constance Carew? Where was he to be found? At the St. Charles hotel? He was obliged to monsieur, the ticket seller, and wished him good day.