

WHEN THE ICE WAS BROKEN

How a Picture Started an Interesting Romance

By M. de L. BARTLETT

THE pitiless glare of the hot Indian sun made the distant plain quiver; even the white of the tents was too dazzling to contemplate for long. The heat in the small hill station was so great that even the insects were still. There seemed no life anywhere.

Out in the shady verandah in his long cane chair lay Captain Maurice, a long iced drink fixed firmly in the arm ready to hand, a pile of letters and newspapers reposed on the table drawn up close to his lounge. His sun-hat was tilted over his tired eyes; he lay still and inert as though fast asleep. Presently, however, one hand stole out towards the glass, he raised it to his parched lips and drank long and deep.

"Oh! for old England, and a climate in which one can live!" he sighed as he set the glass down empty. "Here existence is merely a foretaste of hereafter! What wouldn't I give to be in England now, out of this sweltering heat and eternal monotonous drill." He stretched himself wearily, and as he did so his eye caught the gleam of the letters and newspapers by his side.

"The English mail—in already! Oh, joy and rapture, this is indeed corn in Egypt!"

He pounced upon the pile by his side, as a starved man flings himself upon the food that has been so long withheld. For a long time no sound was heard but the rapid ripping open of envelopes, and the rustling of the paper turned by eager hands. Suddenly a long expressive whistle issued from the dry, parched lips.

"My conscience! what a lovely face—what a vision to meet a weary man in a hole like this!"

In his hand he held a small watercolour sketch that showed some skill and knowledge of the painter's art—a young girl's head thrown back, with wide dreaming eyes, a small, straight nose, and a beautiful sensitive mouth, which dropped slightly at the corners.

He gazed long and earnestly at the small picture; for the moment the burning sun and his own strong discomfort were forgotten. A curious expression crept into his thin bronzed face; he looked like one who gazes afar into the future and sees a beautiful dream, a dream far too beautiful ever to meet with fulfilment in this contrary world.

"Ah! if it could only be!" he murmured softly. His own voice aroused him from the spell that the picture had woven around him, he laughed hoarsely, and poured out another cooling draught.

"Bobby, my lad!" he said grimly, "there's no luck in store for you like that, old man. Don't you believe it, no, not for one delicious moment; life holds nothing but grim and rude awakenings for you, you may lay your bottom dollar on that! But who in the world so kindly sent me this radiant vision of all that a woman ought to be?"

He picked up the sketch again, very gently, and scrutinized it closely, then he turned it round and saw some writing on the back.

"Isn't she just too lovely? I am writing to you about her!—Your loving sister, Lucy."

He laughed, almost in spite of himself, long and loud, the heat was slowly sapping his usual self-control.

"When will Lucy learn not to drop this kind of bombshell around?" he wondered, as he sought her letter from amongst those that still remained unopened. "Isn't life hard enough among these fierce precipices and under such a scorching sun, without her throwing such a vision as that at my head to give me a tangible something to ache for?"

He sighed wearily and opened his sister's letter. As he finished reading it, a step rang out on the verandah, and another white-clad figure hove in sight.

"Hullo! Maurice, old man!" cried out the newcomer. "The mail is in for a wonder! Any news from home?"

"Any news from Lucy, I suppose you mean!" Captain Maurice answered drily, but with a merry gleam in his eyes as he sleepily regarded his amorous friend. "No, don't, Jack, old man! don't waste good liquor," as his friend raised the long glass threateningly in his hand. "If you will sit down, and be a very good boy, I will read you extracts from her letter. Help yourself, old man, and make yourself at home. Isn't the heat awful to-day? It really gets more and more unbearable every moment—yes, I know you did not come here to discuss the weather, don't be impatient. What

do you think of that—did you ever see such a beautiful face in your life?"

He handed the small sketch carefully across to his friend as if it were something too sacred for ordinary everyday use. Jack Hunter examined it carefully, turned it over, and saw the writing on the back.

"She ought to make a name for herself," he said, tenderly; "yes, it is beautifully painted," he added, as an afterthought.

Maurice leant over and snatched the sketch out of his hand. "I didn't ask you, you idiot, for the expression of your useless criticisms on the subject of art, I asked you if you had ever seen a more beautiful face!"

"I know one more beautiful," Jack Hunter said, sententiously.

"My dear Jack," Maurice cried, angrily, "Lucy may be a dear girl, she is of course one of the best, but even her best friend could not call her a beauty. She simply cannot hold a candle to this girl."

His eyes devoured the sketch once more—greedily, absolutely absorbed.

At first Jack looked furious, then he smiled broadly. "Old friend of yours?" he asked, laconically.

MAURICE flushed up under the tan, and laughed a little awkwardly. "You got home there all right!" he said. "No, I have never seen her; she is a friend Lucy met in Florence while studying art there. She says she is many times more beautiful than the sketch both in face and character—quite the most charming person she has ever met."

"Lucy's geese always were swans!" Jack Hunter remarked, with all the tender prejudice of a fond lover.

"Yes, that must be why she thinks such a lot of you," Maurice rejoined with some acerbity. "But, seriously, old chap, that sketch has knocked me right out; of course, it may be only the effect of this awful glare or slight sunstroke, but I feel I have at last seen the woman I should like to make my wife."

Jack rose slowly from his chair, gravely drew out his watch, and laid his finger gently on Captain Maurice's wrist.

"Going like a race pond!" he cried. "I might have known it. You had better go off to bed at once, and have ice put on your head to cool your brain, my poor friend and brother warrior."

Maurice closed his eyes and sighed heavily. "If it wasn't so hot," he said, "I'd kick you, Jack, hard and long. Sit down, for goodness' sake, and keep quiet. Here's Lucy's letter: you may read it for yourself, as I know you are pining to—one would think you had never received eight pages by this very mail, written across and yet again, by the way you settle on to it, like a bee to the honey-suckle. You've got it very badly, old man; I'm sorry for you—"

The voice died off into a sleepy drawl. In another moment the heat and even the picture were forgotten. Captain Maurice had fallen into a long, deep sleep.

"It seems so heartless to leave you, Bobby, all alone, lying there looking such a shadow of yourself; I do not think I can go to the 'At Home' after all. All possible patrons or patronesses, of the future Mrs. Joshua Reynolds (meaning myself, you understand), must go to the wall, like my unsold pictures do, when my darling soldier brother lies stretched on a bed of sickness, brought on by too stern a devotion to the call of duty."

The low, caressing voice soothed the invalid. He opened his eyes lazily, and smiled lovingly at his sister, perched insecurely on the end of the sofa.

"A sofa isn't a bed exactly, my dear Lucy; it's a great deal more cheerful and comfortable. You may go with an easy mind to your Tamasha. I shall probably sleep all the afternoon, which you will spend equally profitably in winning people with more money than wit, by your wicker little airs and graces, to come and see your artistic productions. It will be the old case of he came, he saw, she conquered! Put the little sketch of your friend Monica where I can see it, and you can leave me with a perfectly clear conscience in far better society than you can possibly meet anywhere else."

He spoke lightly; but there was a ring in his voice that betrayed him to Lucy's loving ears.

She bent over his prostrate form, and turned his

face up for closer inspection.

"Bobby, do you know, I am getting quite jealous of that sketch of Monica. You are always inventing excuses to get me out of the way, so that you can lie and look at it and dream about the original. Well, you shall see her soon; she is coming to town almost immediately, and she promised to come and see me at once, and for once in your life I can promise you with perfect safety that you will not be disappointed! Good-bye; sweet, pleasant dreams."

Left alone, Captain Maurice opened his eyes, no longer heavy with sleep, and gazed long and earnestly at the sweet face in the sketch, propped up on an easel, exactly in his line of vision.

"No," he said, reflectively, "it was not only the sunstroke that bowled me over so completely—you had your share in it, you innocent-looking witch. The sunstroke I am recovering from, your dart is fatal. Never, till I meet you, shall I recover my peace of mind, perhaps not then. Who knows, the last state, will most probably be worse than the first."

The small face seemed to smile at him in lofty disdain, poised like a lily on its long white throat. He sat up suddenly, reached across, and took the sketch in his hands.

"Is it only Lucy's art, or are you really a subtle, elusive sprite, wandering here below by mistake and seeking an outlet to escape back to the world of spirits? Do you always wear that mocking smile, or are you sometimes more human, you little witch?" He raised the sketch to his lips, and kissed it long and passionately.

"Oh, I am so very sorry! I think the maid must have made a mistake, this is not Miss Maurice's flat."

The clear, low voice, that had such a suppressed ring of laughter in it, roused Maurice from his reverie. He raised his eyes, and there, unless he were still dreaming, stood the original of the sketch he had been kissing so ardently. The same, and yet not the same—the living, breathing woman in her agitation was a thousand times more charming, more alluring, and desirable.

She stood half-turned towards the door, alarm and suppressed mirth struggling for expression in her face. Masses of red-gold hair gleamed from beneath her hat. Her large black eyes regarded him doubtfully.

"Monica!" he cried, and leaped from the sofa towards her.

"Oh!" she gasped, really terrified at last, and backed hastily towards the door. She seized the handle in a vigorous, convulsive grasp, and it came away in her hand!

For one moment she stood appalled, then her sense of humour came to her rescue, she sank helplessly into a chair, and laughed as Captain Maurice had never heard a woman laugh before. Peal after peal of ringing silvery laughter rang through that sunny room. She crossed her slender arms on the back of the sofa and shook helplessly from head to foot. In spite of the turmoil he was in, and the violent shock he had received, her example proved too contagious to resist for long. Captain Maurice joined in till, from sheer weakness, the tears poured down his cheeks.

"I AM afraid I am behaving very badly," she gasped at last, as she unsteadily wiped her eyes. "Might I ask you to ring the bell, so that I may not be prosecuted for my trespassing—oh, what is that?" She stooped suddenly over the sketch that Captain Maurice had dropped face upward on the carpet.

"My picture!" she said, wonderingly. "Then I am right after all, and you must be Captain Maurice, the brother Lucy loves so much."

"She doesn't love—I mean, yes, I am Captain Maurice. I am home unexpectedly on sick leave, the result of a bad sunstroke. I really am fairly sane now—though you might not think it. I hope that I did not alarm you just now, but you startled me so! I was just thinking about you—I mean I didn't expect you so soon—oh! you must think me quite mad, what I really mean is you came in so unexpectedly."

"I was afraid I had rather startled you when I was shown in." She stood as if waiting to go. Her lips twitched once more, a most fascinating dimple played hide-and-seek on one cheek; he watched it absolutely absorbed.

"I know a shock is very bad for sunstroke!" She laughed again helplessly; in spite of himself he joined in her merry mirth.

"Oh, you must think me very rude and ill-behaved—but you look so funny, just like a maiden aunt of mine—you have an anti-macassar hanging down your back."

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