

The men, as a rule, showed their gratification at meeting by being slightly the worse for liquor, late for tattoo, and exchanging forage caps, than which latter mysterious ceremony, none are so significant of friendship and goodwill in the eyes of the British soldier. The officers usually celebrated their reunion by an interchange of dinners, in which they would sing the old songs, and prolong the festivities far into the night. Moreover, as it was known that the same regiment had a draught of the —th attached to it, the latter had sent their drums and fifes to meet the new comers at this point in the road, and from thence play them into camp.

"Not much of a band you know," said Hugh Fleming, "all we can say is, it's the best we have out here. Hang it, I never properly appreciated a drum and fife before."

"Yes, you're right," exclaimed the adjutant, "a little music does brighten one up here a good deal. On my word I wouldn't despise a decent barrel organ."

"That's where the French have one pull over us," said an officer of artillery, "They've managed to bring their bands out with them. By the way, I was down in your conquest last night, Fleming."

"My conquest, indeed!" laughed Hugh, "I was uncommon glad to get out of it, that's all I know. I hope you didn't find the Russians quite so touchy about it as I did."

"No, they're quiet enough over it now; we should like to get guns into it, but the ground's so confoundedly rocky I can't see how the engineers are ever to make the sap."

"Listen," cried the adjutant, "here they come, and playing their own quick step 'Warwickshire lads' as a greeting. Now fall in your drums and fifes, and as soon as you catch sight of the head of the regiment strike up their own march 'Hurrah for the bonnets of blue,' and, confound you, roll it out as if you were trying to crack the fifes and burst the sheepskins."

Another minute and the head of the new regiment appeared in sight, and then the drummers and buglers of the —th crashed out their welcome to the new-comers whose own music at once ceased. Cordial hand grips and enquiries passed amongst the officers of the two corps, for it was not two months ago since the new-comers had played the —th down the Steps of Valetta. At this point the draught of the —th branched off in the left, in the direction of the lines of their own corps, and with them rode the adjutant and Hugh Fleming. On their arrival this batch of only just drilled recruits was at once paraded and the men told off to their respective companies.

Hugh Fleming looked carelessly on while the adjutant allotted a few to his own company. The sergeant was marching these off when the sound of his own name made him turn abruptly.

"Here's one recruit, sir," said the sergeant, "says he's got a bit of a note for you."

"A note for me!" ejaculated Hugh. "How did you get it, and what's your name, my lad?"

"Peter Phybbs, sir," replied the boy. He was little more than eighteen. "My sister got it for me when she heard what regiment I'd listed in, and said I was to be sure and give it to you as soon as I had the chance."

Hugh threw one glance at the superscription of the rather crumpled missive the recruit had placed in his hands, and instantly recognized Nell Lynden's well-known writing. He at once tore it open.

"Dearest Hugh," it ran, "the young brother of Phybbs, our parlour-maid, has it seems enlisted in your regiment. The girl's in a sad taking about it, in which, alas, I can only too fully sympathise with her. She seems to think, poor thing, that your powers to protect him are boundless, and to soothe her I write this to ask you to look after him a bit if he gets sick or in trouble. I know you will, Hugh, dear, if it's only for my sake; but I also like to think that it is another link between us; that while his sister is watching and waiting by my side here, he is fighting by your side there. I have never seen him, but he sounds a mere boy to be sent out on such work. God bless and save you, my darling,—Ever your own, NELL."

"Well, Phybbs," said Hugh, "I'm asked to look after you a bit, and you may thoroughly depend upon me as long as you deserve it. Keep straight, my lad, don't flinch from your work, and be easy with the drink, and that's all I have to say to you at present. See the old hands aren't too hard upon him, Smithers," and with that Hugh turned on his heel and walked off to his tent.

"A queer letter of introduction," he said to himself with a smile, "but I must do the best I can for Nell's protege, simply because he is her protege." He little thought those few lines of recommendation were to prove of more value to him ere long than any letter to the Commander-in-Chief from the highest in the land could be.

CHAPTER VIII.—NEWS FROM THE CRIMEA.

Miss Smerdon has been making herself as unpleasant as it is possible for a vivacious young lady to do when matters are running askew with her, and that, needless to say, means that Twmbarlyn House is rendered generally uncomfortable for all therein.

"What's come to the girl?" demanded Mr. Smerdon, petulantly, of his wife. "She used to be the life and sunshine of the place, and now she just mopes and snaps like a puppy with distemper."

"I don't know," returned Mrs. Smerdon, anxiously, "she won't tell me, but there's something that worries and frets her. She's never been the same girl since her last visit to Manchester."

The good lady did not think fit to confide her thoughts to her husband, but she was not blinded; she strongly suspected that her daughter had brought a headache home with her. The very servants wondered what had come to Miss Frances, and said that there really was no pleasing her.

One morning, Miss Smerdon hastily caught up the paper, as she usually did; she was feverishly anxious to see it nowadays, though formerly the perusal of the *Times* had been either neglected or left for an idle half-hour. She was so interested, she said, in the doings of our soldiers in the Crimea. All this, though unnoticed by her father, was easy reading for a mother's eye. She could not induce the girl to give her her confidence, but Mrs. Smerdon had little doubt that Frances' heart was in a soldier's keeping. If she had thought that before, she knew it for certain that morning. No sooner had the girl torn open the paper than the head lines, "Brilliant Exploit; the Taking of the Quarries; Severe Fighting," caught her eye, and then came a graphic description of the position, of the dashing manner in which it had been carried, followed by a spirit stirring narrative of the gallant and obstinate endeavours of the Russians to recapture it during the night, and speaking in terms of unqualified praise of the bull-dog tenacity with which the —th clung to the vantage ground they had won.

Frances' colour came and went as she read; at length she came to the postscript of all glorious bulletins. "We regret to say that in the execution of this brilliant and successful operation Her Majesty's —th suffered severely, having no less than five out of the six officers engaged in it *hors de combat*. The subjoined list is a return of the killed and wounded on the occasion.

"Killed:—Lieutenant-Colonel Croker (commanding the attack); Captain Grogan, —th Regiment.

"Wounded:—Captain Byng, —th Regiment, (severely)."

The paper dropped from her hand and the blood left her cheeks. Frances turned white to her very lips, and a slight moan escaped her. Her head swam, and it was only by a supreme effort she saved herself from fainting. Her mother was by her side in an instant, while her father looked up from his letters with open-eyed astonishment, and exclaimed, "Good ———, what's the matter?"

"Nothing, Matthew; don't take any notice of her; she will be all right directly," rejoined his wife, sharply. "She's only a little faint; she has been out of sorts lately, you know."

"I think, mamma, I'll go and lie down; I don't feel very well," murmured Frances, and assisted by her mother, she left the room and made her way to her own bed-chamber. Arrived there, she broke

fairly down, burst into tears, and sobbed like a child on her mother's breast.

Mrs. Smerdon knew that this was no time for questioning. She let the girl weep passionately on her bosom for some minutes, knowing full well that she would have all her confidence a little later. Then she loosened her dress, made her lie down on the bed, and said, "You can't sleep, I know, Frances; but try and lie quiet, dear, for half-an-hour. I will come back and bring you some tea then, and you shall tell me all your trouble. Who should you come to, child, in your sorrow save to the mother who bore you?" And before an hour was over Mrs. Smerdon knew that her daughter had given her heart away unwooded, and was tortured with shame and anguish because it was so, and that the author of all this mischief was now lying in grievous case in camp before Sebastopol.

We know that Tom Byng was in no such plight, but he had been carried away from the Quarries for dead in the first instance, and had actually figured as such in the first returns of casualties. Luckily, the mistake was discovered in time, and "severely wounded" was substituted for killed. Sanguine though the doctors were about his hurt being of no great consequence, yet they were a little chary of speaking decisively about it for a few days, and hesitated to describe as "slightly" a wound which might even yet take a serious turn.

It might have been some satisfaction to Mickey Flinn had he understood that Captain Byng had no knowledge of how he was returned in that night's casualties.

"Severely wounded!" thought Frances when left to herself. Ah! how often had that word been the precursor of "Died of his wounds," of late. She had heard it said that the wretched accommodation of the field hospitals gave little chance of recovery to those once admitted into them. Oh! if she could but go out to nurse him! But that was impossible. If she could but write to him! But no, he had never spoken—he had given her no right to do that. And yet in her heart of hearts she believed that he loved her. Oh, she had been mad! She had been rightly punished! She had jeered at the regiment—sneered at him; and no doubt Nell had told Hugh Fleming, as she intended Nell should, and so all her bitter words had come round to his ears. How could she have been so wicked and so spiteful? How was he to ever know that such words escaped her lips in the agony of what she believed to be her rejected love.

No! she must go away. She could not stay at Twmbarlyn, for everybody, she felt sure, would read her secret in her face. She would go to the Lydens. She hungered to hear all about the old lot, to talk of Hugh Fleming, of Tom; and her face flushed even as her lips syllabled the name. She would hear, too, what his hurt was, whether it was likely to go very hard with him—no, if Nellie would have her she would go to Manchester at once. She would write by t at day's post, and then the return of her mother cut short the thread of her meditations.

As she had anticipated, Mrs. Smerdon found herself speedily taken into her daughter's confidence, and not only soothed the girl, but proceeded, metaphorically, to bind up her wounds forthwith. The Smerdons were good, homely, as well as self-made people, and neither of them entertained any extreme ambitions for either their sons or daughters. Smerdon had attained wealth, and with it such accent in social status as is its inevitable accompaniment. So long as Frances married a gentleman of fair repute she was free to choose where she listed, and Mrs. Smerdon knew very well that had any of the officers from Newport, who so constantly dined with them, taken the girl's fancy, her father would have made no objection. As for Captain Byng, he had always been a great favourite with the good lady, although she had never dreamed that he had found favour in her daughter's eyes. But this may very easily be accounted for. Though Frances had always liked Captain Byng, it was not till she was staying at Manchester with the Lydens that the liking had ripened into a serious attachment. There is love at first sight, no doubt, but it's more generally, I fancy, of a slower growth. Again, as Tom had observed, soldiers were "up in