

"Well, it's so long since I've seen a pretty woman that I'm hardly a fair judge, but she's about as good-looking as they make 'em. And now I'm off to roost, for I'm dog-tired. Good-night all of you."

Nothing much in all this, but idle gossip travels a long way at times.

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Hugh Fleming is quite conscious that he had rather got himself into a scrape of late, it had come about so naturally and so gradually that he really, to this minute, could not say how it had all happened. In those early days, when he lay badly wounded and burnt up with fever, when the fires of life were flickering day by day, and when it was doubtful that he would ever see a morrow's sun, he was only dimly sensible of a soft hand that bathed his brow and smoothed his pillow, of a gentle presence that hovered around his bedside, and seemed to bring with it rest and quietness. As his strength and powers of observation returned, it was soothing to lie there and watch the tall, slender figure of his nurse as she busied herself about her ward, and he became aware that in spite of the unbecoming costume, Sister Marie was a young and good-looking woman with brilliant dark eyes and a particularly sweet smile. During that tedious convalescence, her assiduity was unwearied. She encouraged him to talk to her about himself, checked him quietly but firmly whenever she thought he was over-tiring himself, and in short, in those days of weakness, drew from Hugh pretty well his whole history. Not a very eventful one, nor had she any particular interest in learning it, but previous training had rendered this almost intuitive with Marie Ivanhoff. As he got better and stronger and was able to leave his sick bed, it was Sister Marie's arm that supported his tottering steps, the dark eyes softening marvellously when she was employed in his service, and before three months had elapsed from the storming of the Redan, Hugh Fleming awoke to the fact that he was on very sentimental terms with the nurse. The Russian sick, like the English, now the hardships of campaigning were relaxed, improved rapidly. If supplies were not so plentiful as in the British lines, still, at Batchi Serai there was no lack of sufficient food. Nature, that mighty assistant of all doctors, was having fair play, and now lending her powerful aid with a will. The consequence was, the hospitals were rapidly vacated, and at length the number of patients became so few, that Marie Ivanhoff and one or two more of the younger ladies resigned their posts, threw off their dresses as nurses, and once more appeared radiant in their ordinary apparel.

Hugh was much struck when his late nurse presented herself, no longer, as she haughtily informed him, in that capacity, but as Mademoiselle Ivanhoff come to visit M. le Capitaine Fleming and congratulate him on his recovery from his late serious illness. It is possible that Hugh rather overdid the gratitude on this occasion, and thanked Mademoiselle more effusively and affectionately than was absolutely necessary; but one thing is quite certain, that Fleming found he had slipped imperceptibly from the rôle of a patient into that of a lover. And if soft smiles and sweet glances went for anything, into that of a favoured one too—Mademoiselle Ivanhoff was no innocent girl, but a worldly young lady, who had seen men and cities; but she was also of an imperious disposition, and one who gave free rein to her caprices—one of those women who indulge in those small whirlwinds of passion which their imagination so magnifies. Flirtations with them, while they last, always assume the dignity of a *grande passion*. Mademoiselle on this occasion had become, in the first instance, interested in the man she had nursed back to life. She had wound up by falling in love with him after her fashion.

As they were dull, these provincial towns, this young Englishman would serve to amuse one here in the spring-time; and from this point of view Marie had appropriated Hugh in the beginning. However, it could not be said from want of competition Mademoiselle Ivanhoff had allowed herself to be more infatuated about this new lover than she usually permitted herself. There were plenty

of her compatriots quite willing to enliven Batchi Serai for the capricious lady. She never lacked admirers, let her go where she would, but she elected the Englishman her cavalier, and all endeavours to shake his position proved hopeless.

It was awkward for Hugh, but it was not very easy to say how he could extricate himself. He was a prisoner, and so could not run away from temptation. He could not quarrel with the woman who had nursed him unweariedly through that terrible illness. It was not that he was false to his English love, though there were passages in his flirtation with Marie Ivanhoff that would have scarcely met her approval. Still, when a young man of about six and twenty, as in Hugh's case, is exposed to all the fascinations of a pretty woman, who makes no attempt at concealing a *tendresse* for himself, it is small wonder if he gives occasion for the coupling of their names in the gossip of a small country town.

It was very singular, Hugh thought, that no news should have come to him of Nellie Lynden; of course he didn't get his letters with the regularity he would have done in his own lines, but still, they did come to him; at uncertain intervals a few were forwarded by his own regiment, so that had Nellie written he most certainly ought to have received anything there might be from her. His promotion too, he had ceased to think about that, he was out of it now, and it little signified what regiment bore him on its strength. He supposed that it was all over, that they would be all on their way home soon; in Batchi Serai they seemed just as convinced that the war was finished, as they were in the Allied Camps. Hugh could not but admit that there was some truth in what a Russian Colonel had said to him:

"Yes, you have taken Sebastopol, but to the defence belongs all the glory. When that siege becomes history, it is not your side that will be most talked about, and among all the chiefs engaged in it, Todleben will stand out a head and shoulders above the rest."

But what did Hugh care about history. The present was what he had to do with, and very pleasant he found it. It was *lotos* eating if you will, this dangling at the skirts of Mademoiselle Ivanhoff, it was not behaving quite fairly perhaps to his fiancée; but then, what could he do? It might not be quite right, but it was very pleasant; if his conduct was not exactly what it ought to be, he, at all events, couldn't help it, and because a man was engaged to be married to one woman, he wasn't justified in behaving like a brute to all the

rest. It would all come to an end now in a few weeks, and Marie and he would part dear good friends. He certainly did have occasional misgivings, that parting might be an unpleasant business; he had not promised marriage to Marie Ivanhoff, neither had he informed her that he was pledged to another. But that young lady undoubtedly regarded him as quite her own property, and Hugh knew full well that those dark eyes of hers could lighten on occasion, and that she was no woman to take a wound to her *amour propre* tamely.

There were two things that certainly ought to have occurred to Hugh had his mind not been pre-occupied, namely, that taking all the circumstances into consideration it would be as well that he should return to England, and secondly, that if he set to work in earnest there would probably not be much difficulty in doing so. He was a prisoner *par-ole* at present, and the peace he regarded as almost certain. It was not likely that the Russians would refuse him permission to go home if he would simply give his word not to serve against them in case of a resumption of hostilities. But if all this failed to cross the mind of Hugh Fleming, Tom Byng and his old brother officers were considerably struck by it. Why Hugh lingered at Batchi Serai was inexplicable, except upon the grounds of his having fallen deeply in love with this fair Russian. That would account for everything, otherwise it was so very odd that he didn't come to spend the last few weeks of the Crimean campaign with them. None of them doubted that he had only to apply for such permission to obtain it, and one would have thought that he would have enjoyed having a last look at the old places where they had fought and suffered in the society of the old comrades, who had fought and suffered with him.

"Hang it," as Brydon said, "he ought to be anxious to see us, but when a fellow gets in that way he loses all sense of regard for his fellow creatures bar one. I'm blest if I don't think he looked upon Tom and me as rather *de trop* at Batchi Serai the other day."

It may easily be supposed that Fleming had no monopoly of the correspondence from Manchester. The regiment had been stationed there for some months, and one or two of his brother officers, although not circumstanced as Hugh was, exchanged a few letters with friends they had made there. And so it came to pass that though Hugh did not go to England, the news of his entanglement with Mademoiselle Ivanhoff did, and in due course it came to the ears of Frances Smerdon.

(To be continued.)



AN ICEBERG THAT DRIFTED INTO THE ENTRANCE TO THE HARBOUR OF ST. JOHN'S, Nfld.