

by saying once more those last "good-byes," which people always feel impelled to speak when leaving their native country. Hugh, therefore, saw little of his brother officers all that day, and embarked next day hugging his secret closely to his own breast.

But there was never a man in love who did not crave to impart his madness to somebody, and few amongst us have not some friend who, though to some extent the confidant of our hopes and aspirations, is still oftener a recipient of our follies and vexations. It was so with Hugh, and by the time they had "rolled through the gut of Gibraltar," Tom Byng was fully acquainted with the story of his subaltern's love.

"Well, you've done it now," he remarked; "and all I have got to do is to offer you my hearty congratulations. Please to forget all I ever said to you on the subject; what one says to a man before he does a thing is totally inapplicable after he has done it. If this wind lasts, we shall be at Malta in no time. I wonder where they will put us up."

"From what those fellows told us at Gib., they must be pretty full there."

"Full!" exclaimed Byng. "Packed like sardines in a box, I am told; and tents in the open will most likely be our lot. Never mind; it's all on the way to the Crimea, and as for tents! why, there's nothing like getting used to them while we have leisure."

Malta, indeed, was as full just then as it could hold. Its hotels were thronged with people curious to hear the latest rumours from the seat of war—women anxious about sons and husbands. Sick and wounded officers invalided down from the front told direful tales of the difficulties of getting up provisions to the plateau still grimly held by the Allies. Both sides seemed to have stopped for breath after the furious struggle of Inkerman, and it was now rather an open question as to which were besiegers and which were besieged—whether we were investing Sebastopol, or whether the Russians had not invested the entrenched camp of the Allies. At Malta, of course, supplies were plentiful, and it really seemed almost a mockery that men were living well on that sun-baked rock, while their brethren a little way off were near starving on the storm-swept plateau of the Chersonese. That half-dozen miles of almost trackless mire between Balaklava and the front quite explained why it was so.—*Dum vivimus vivamus*.—And Malta was never gayer than it was that winter. Even those most anxious to join their comrades already in front of Sebastopol were fain to confess that there was nothing doing up there at present. As far as the English were concerned, it was the same weary, monotonous trench work, only relieved by an occasional sortie. With our Allies it was different. Stronger handed than ourselves, the French persistently continued to sap up to the Bastion de Mât—a proceeding to which the enemy offered fierce and jealous opposition.

Still everyone knew that nothing of any consequence could be attempted till the spring. Whenever British regiments are gathered together, they are sure to develop three of our national particularities, they are certain to start cricket, racing, and theatricals. If it was the wrong time of year for cricket and racing, private theatricals were just the thing, and no less than two companies were organized, that winter. Hugh Fleming greatly distinguished himself in one of these, and his Crepin in "The Wonderful Woman," was pronounced to have soared quite above the range of the ordinary amateur. But though Hugh's face flushed with pleasure at seeing himself favourably noticed in print, yet there was mingled with it a half-contempt that he should be engaged in such frivolities. This was not what he came out to do. Such pinchbeck laurels were not the things he had promised himself to lay at Nell Lynden's feet. He had yet to learn that the more you can combine relaxation with the serious business of fighting, the better for everyone; take your men out of themselves, let their trade be what it will if you want to get the maximum of work out of them. And the successful representative of Acres will most likely be well to the front in a hand to hand mêlée not forty-eight hours afterwards.

Those were halcyon days for Hugh; nearly every mail brought him letters from Nellie, in which passionate love was mingled with all the chit-chat about those he knew in Manchester. "I hear constantly," she said in one of her letters, "from Frances Smerdon. What have you, or at all events, some of you done to her. She is so bitter against you all. I heard from her only the other day and she made me quite angry. 'As for the poor —th,' she said, 'we need not fret about them, there is always a cessation of hostilities when they appear upon the scene. Papa says that he thinks nothing more will take place, and that a peace will be patched up in the spring. No, we needn't be anxious about the —th; they are very nice fellows, but they are not a fighting regiment, my dear.'"

Now if this had angered Nellie Lynden, it had stung Hugh Fleming to the quick. It was a gibe about which all the men of the corps were very sensitive. They were as smart a regiment as there was in the service, and one of the seniors of the Army List, but there remained the bitter fact that they had hardly the name of a battle emblazoned on their colours. It was luck; while some regiments seemed always in the way when hard fighting was going on, others, from no fault of their own, seemed never to be on hand on such occasions; the same with individuals, and though having once gained distinction, a man can to some extent force himself forward, yet many a young soldier has panted for the opportunity never vouchsafed him. The oburgation that escaped from Hugh's lips as he read this was anything but complimentary to Miss Smerdon. Although they had made jests in Manchester, of the premature way in which they had been *fêted*, yet there had always been a tinge of soreness at the bottom of their hearts, arising from this very subject, and had anybody thought of connecting the two, and chaffing them about it, he would have aroused the wrath of the corps with a vengeance. Hugh pondered for a little as to what could have drawn forth Miss Smerdon's sarcasm. Her father had been very hospitable to the regiment during their stay at Newport, and she herself had been popular with all of them. What could have made her turn round and taunt her old friends in this fashion?

However, spring at last made its appearance and despite Mr. Smerdon's prophecy brought with it neither dove nor olive branch, but an order for Her Majesty's —th to proceed amongst the very first reinforcements, to the front. The sun shone brightly as they steamed out of Valetta harbour. And all signs of that dreary winter seemed to have vanished. As Tom Byng said, "By Jove, how those fellows before Sebastopol must revel in this! How they must kick up their heels after all they have gone through."

Across the bright dancing waters of the Mediterranean the good ship rapidly makes her way; up the sea of Marmora, through the Dardanelles, looking perfectly lovely in all the glory of the early spring; has a good passage up the usually stormy Euxine, and as they near Balaklava a dull, monotonous boom breaks upon their ears and informs them that the belligerents have woke from their winter torpor, and though as yet somewhat leisurely are recommencing hostilities.

"Ah, Miss Smerdon will have to take back her speech I fancy, before long," said Byng, as they threaded their way into the crowded and landlocked harbour, (Hugh had read him that extract from Nellie's letter.) "I wonder whether she'd feel it should she chance to see that we've been in a big fight, and that some of us had gone under in adding another blazon to the colour."

"Ah, she's been rather severe lately on our want of laurels."

"Yes, a girl who speak of us as she does is not likely to cry for us," said Byng, sulkily.

Hugh eyed his chum queerly for a moment, and then, as he knocked the ashes out of his pipe, rejoined:

"Don't think you quite understand women—there was a lady called Beatrice and a man called Benedick."

"Never—except in Shakespeare," said Byng.

Hugh Fleming shrugged his shoulders and walked away without reply.

CHAPTER VI.—THE TAKING OF THE QUARRIES.

"Hulloa, young un," exclaimed Tom Byng as he thrust his head into the door of Fleming's tent, "if it was some time before we got introduced to the trenches, I'll be bound to say the big wigs are doing their best to make us quite at home in them now."

"Why, you don't mean to say we go in there again to-night?"

"Indeed we do, my boy, and if you've got nothing ready to eat you'd better come and feed with me at once. I don't know yet what's in the wind, but the Brigade Major, who is an old pal of mine, told me we were likely to have a very lively night of it."

"All right, I'm your man, Tom; I shall be ready in two minutes, and then I'll come with you."

"Yes, it's sharp practice," said Tom Byng as they sat down to dinner. "I only came out of the trenches myself this morning, but all fair enough. These regiments that bore the brunt of the winter are reduced almost to shadows. I met a fellow the other day whose regiment is in the left attack; he told me that they hadn't two hundred men fit for duty; so of course the turn comes heavy upon strong regiments like ourselves. That's the sherry, help yourself and pass it on. By the way, did I tell you my adventure on the Woronzoff Road this morning?"

"No, what was that?" enquired Fleming.

"Well, I don't know whether you've ever been down there. The left attack fellows generally take care of it. However, for some inscrutable reason we were told off for it last night. The trench crossed the road, and we have an advanced picket of a subaltern and thirty men covered by a *cheval de frise*, some eighty yards or so in advance. I was afraid it was a bit my fault, but I was new to the post, and a trifle anxious. You see when you're told to withdraw at daybreak, it becomes rather a nice point."

"I was warned that the Russian rifle pits commanded my trench and would make themselves deuced unpleasant as soon as they could see. It was my anxiety not to quit my post too soon, I stayed a little too late. As I withdrew my advanced picket, two or three fellows had a snap at us, but no sooner did I fall in my men and leaving the main trench proceed to march them up the road than the rifle pits at the top here in front of the right attack, commenced squibbing. To retreat leisurely may be dignified, but it's not what I wasn't going to lose men if I could help it, so I gave the order to double. You know that Irishman, Mickey Flinn; he was doubling alongside me when he suddenly exclaimed, 'I'm shot, Captain Byng—I'm shot.'"

"Come along, my good fellow, come along," cried, as I turned round to look at him. He was doubling as steady as any man in the company and gave no sign of being wounded.

"I'm shot, sorr," he reiterated, and without slackening his gait.

"Where, my good fellow?" I inquired, as we still doubled side by side. "Where, my good fellow?—where? Come on!" I once more cried.

"Right through the body, sorr," he rejoined, without in the least relaxing his pace.

"Come on!" I cried; "come on!" And how the deuce a man shot through the body succeeded in keeping up the steady double like Flinn, astonished me greatly.

"Yes, sorr," he exclaimed continuously, "I'm shot; shot clean through."

"Well I continued my exhortation to keep it up in short, keep it up was the sum total of my advice and the responses to my litany on Flinn's part were—'I'm shot, sorr—I'm shot clean through!' As soon as we turned the bend in the road and were out of fire, I halted my party, that Flinn's wound might be attended to. There was the bullet mark certainly, going straight through his great coat in front, and a hole where it had come out behind, and if ever you would have said a man had been shot through, it was Flinn."

"When we came to his tunic it was the same, but when we came to himself, there was nothing but a red mark running round his ribs. The bullet must have struck a button of his great coat in front."