

HIS HAIR WAS RED.

(Continued.)

What I say is that, as long as I know that she loves me, I want nothing more; and what do I care if Tom, Dick, and Harry are fools enough to think that they have made a conquest of her because she finds them useful as partners at a ball? That's the way I look at it; I don't know whether you agree with me."

I said I did most thoroughly, and that my wife, if ever I had one, should be allowed any amount of rope. It was no hard matter to guess where the poor fellow had got those precious maxims from, and it was also easy enough to see that they were far from representing his personal views.

"It's an insult to your wife," he continued, "to treat her as though you couldn't trust her out of your sight. Now my motto is, 'Trust me all in all, or—'"

The words died away upon his lips; for while he had been speaking a couple had stepped through one of the French windows on to the gravel—which couple, coming forward in the bright moonlight, became clearly visible to us as Miss Neville and Lacy; and this was an *argumentum ad rem* for which my philosopher had perhaps hardly bargained.

I regret to say that Florry had clasped her hands round her partner's arm, and was looking up into his face in a very reprehensible manner, while he bent over her till their noses almost touched. I made so bold as to give a loud "Ha hum!" but the bench upon which we were sitting was in the shade, and the music was in full blast in doors; so Florry didn't hear the danger-signal, I presume. She and Lacy advanced serenely, and when they were nearly within speaking distance of us, what did that little wretch do but take a rose out of the front of her dress and hand it to her companion, who kissed it fervently before popping it into the pocket nearest to his heart. I shook in my shoes, for Heaven only knew what she might not do next; but Percival waited to see no more. He bounded off the bench like an India rubber ball, and away he went into the darkness as if the devil were after him. I hesitated for a few minutes, and then decided to follow him, but he went at such a pace that I only caught him up on the doorstep of the hotel. He was as white as chalk, and I could see that he was in a towering rage.

"Come now, Percival," I said soothingly, taking him by the arm, "don't make mountains out of molehills. Remember what you said yourself just now about the innocent pastimes of women."

He turned round and glared at me. "Shut up!" he roared, giving me a shove that sent me spinning to the otherside of the hall, and presently I heard him mounting the staircase three steps at a time.

Rude, but perhaps not unpardonable. I forgave him, and went to bed, consoling myself with the reflection that, if murder or suicide came of this, I had at least done my little best to avert bloodshed.

III.

About six o'clock the next morning I was roughly awakened by Percival's coming into my room and pulling the pillow from under my head.

"What is the matter now?" sitting up and rubbing my eyes; and I dare say I added some strong expressions, for there is nothing in the wide world that I hate so much as being roused from my slumbers in the middle of the night.

Percival sat down on the bed. "Look here, Oliver," he said, "I must get out of this. After what you saw last night I needn't tell you why. I'm not the first man who has been made a fool of by a woman, and I'm not going to break my heart about it—no fear!" Here he pumped up a hollow laugh. "But it won't do for me to stop in this place," he went on. "I should be breaking somebody's neck if I did, and I'm off to the Pyrenees this morning to shoot bears and *bouquetins*. After a week or two of that I shall be able to pull myself together I expect."

"Quite right," I said sleepily. "Best thing you can do."

"I don't want to go alone, though. Now, Oliver, will you do a fellow a good turn, and come with me? I left the tent and everything else that we shall want out there last year, and I've telegraphed to the natives to say that I'm coming. It would do you all the good in the world to camp out in the mountains for a bit. Of course I pay all expenses, and I'll guarantee you some sport."

I hardly knew what answer to make. Life at Cannes was monotonous, to say the least of it, I had never seen a bear in my life, except at the Zoo, and I had never seen a *bouquetin* at all. On the other hand, life in the wilds with so uncertain tempered a companion as Percival might not prove an unmingled delight. He watched me eagerly while I was balancing these considerations one against the other, and forestalled my reply by exclaiming, "For heaven's sake, Oliver, don't say you are going to refuse! I don't mind telling the truth to you: I'm hard hit—I am devilish hard hit."

His voice shook a little, and, upon my word, I believe there were tears in his eyes.

"I daren't go alone," he went on. "So long as I'm shooting I'm all right, and I don't care a snap for any woman in the world; but I couldn't face the long evenings all by myself. Hang it, man! can't you understand? It's a case of something very like life or death, I can tell you."

I think I mentioned before that I am extremely good natured. This piteous appeal of Percival's turned the scale, and I said I would see him through.

Florry's face, when we made our adieux to her and her mother before starting for the station, was a very amusing study, and if Percival noticed

it he must have felt himself fully entitled to score one. But I am not sure that he looked at her at all. He said, in an off-hand way, "Good-bye, Miss Neville. Meet you again some day, I hope," and plunged into the omnibus head first, without waiting for her to make a reply.

I don't think Florry half liked it. Whether she had intended to marry Percival or not, I am very sure that she had never contemplated his bolting after so unceremonious a fashion; but, of course, it was too late to think of stopping him then. She took quite an affectionate farewell of me, begging me to be sure and let her know what sport we had, and asking what my address was to be.

"*Poste Restante Bagnères de Luchon*," growled out Percival from the recesses of the omnibus. "We shan't be much in the way of getting letters for the next fortnight, though. Come along, Oliver; there's no time to lose."

Now will it be believed that, after all that had come and gone, that red-headed idiot sulked for a matter of four-and-twenty hours because my cousin had expressed her intention of writing to me? I couldn't make out what was wrong with him at first, but by degrees it transpired, and I had all the trouble in the world to persuade him that, putting my own blameless innocence out of the question, it was utterly illogical of him to be at the same time jealous of Lacy and of me. Indeed, it was only by threatening to abandon him to his fate at Toulouse that I managed to bring him to his bearings. After that he became more reasonable, and both his spirits and his manners improved as soon as we had left civilization behind us.

We spent ten days very pleasantly and successfully, upon the whole, in the wild Spanish valley where Percival had chosen to pitch our tent. No bears came our way, but we killed a lot of *isards*, and I was lucky enough to bring down the only *bouquetin* that I got a shot at. Percival shot two, which was just as well, for it would have been quite enough to upset his equanimity that the larger number should have fallen to my share. With his removal from the chastening influence of Florry's society his queer, gusty temper had reasserted itself to some extent, and we had more than one absurd little scene with the guides and porters who accompanied us; but taking him altogether, he was not a disagreeable companion. In point of fact, we had so few opportunities for conversation that there was not much fear of our falling out. Our days were naturally given up entirely to sport, and when we returned to our encampment in the evening, dead beat and as hungry as hawks, neither of us wished for anything more than to partake of the savory stew which the guides prepared for us, and to lie down afterwards with our feet to the blaze of the bonfire, listening to their long yarns or to the melancholy, dirge-like songs that they sang, until we were overtaken by sleep. I don't think Florry's name was once mentioned, but Percival alluded to her indirectly every now and again, and from some hints which he let fall I gathered that he had not yet given up all hope. Very likely he had meant to renounce her forever when he left Cannes; but, upon more deliberate reflection, he may have found that it was in his heart to forgive her, and may also have argued, from what he knew of her character, that she would be sure to want him back as soon as he was well out of reach.

We had more than a week of magnificent warm days and clear, frosty nights, but then the weather suddenly changed, and the rain began to come down as it only knows how to come down in the mountains. Neither Percival nor I wanted to give the thing up without having fired a single shot at a bear; but we could not manage to keep the water out of our tent, and there was no other shelter within reach, except a wretched little hut about four feet high, used in summer by the Spanish shepherds, so we agreed to take advantage of this opportunity to cross into France and get newspapers and letters.

We had a long, toilsome trudge across the snow, and did not reach Luchon until it was too late to think of anything but bed; but the next day we went to the post-office, where a large bundle of letters was delivered to each of us. Percival glanced hastily at his, and then slung them down with a malediction. Obviously he was disappointed for some reason or other; but it did not occur to me until afterwards that he might have cherished a wild hope of finding a communication from Florry among them. I was more favored. My budget contained two letters bearing the Cannes postmark, and the first of these I read aloud to Percival as we walked away—not on account of its intrinsic interest, which was small, but because I thought it as well to lose no occasion of convincing him that my relations with Florry were of a most correct and cousinly kind. But when I proceeded to open the second I was obliged to be seized with a terrific fit of coughing, for the very first words that caught my eye were, "You may congratulate me, if you like, on my engagement to Mr. Lacy." Here was a nice piece of business! I stuffed the fatal missive into my pocket, and slipped away as soon as I could to finish it in private. There was no mistake about it. The horrid little woman had really gone and engaged herself to Lacy, and, with her usual want of consideration, had left me the agreeable task of announcing the news to Percival "Love to Carrots," she added in a postscript. "I hope he is enjoying himself and that he won't receive too warm a hug from one of his kindred bears."

I haven't the least doubt that, when she wrote those words, there was a malicious grin on her face, and that she flattered herself she had paid Carrots off that time. But if she imagined that I should carry this epistolary slap in the face to its destination she was sadly mistaken in me. "No, indeed!" I thought, "I am not going to expose myself to the risk of being eaten up alive to please anybody," and I determined that Percival's sport should not be spoiled by any unwelcome communication from me.

The unlucky part of it was that I had aroused his suspicions by letting him hear the content of the first letter and stopping so suddenly upon the point of reading him the second; and all that day and the next, when we set out to return to our encampment, he went on bothering me about it.