

A BATTLE

BY HARRY OLMORE.

"I declare I feel as light as a bird," Stella Markham observed, as she stood before the mirror, combing out her soft brown tresses with the utmost deliberation. "Your Canadian air is as exhilarating as champagne. No wonder in England means fog, damp and general disagreeableness. Here it is simply the perfection of weather. Quite too lovely, isn't it?"

And Stella, who had gone out to Montreal on a visit to her uncle—Gen. Markham, commanding the garrison there—only a month before, gave a deep sigh of pleasure as she gazed out of the window at the glorious prospect before her.

Her cousin Nora sat at the window, looking out upon the same view, with perhaps as much of admiration, but hardly the same amount of enthusiasm, for she had been nearly two years in Montreal, and the novelty was of course worn out in her case.

"Oh, I don't know," she said with a covert smile of deep significance. "I had two lovers always in attendance, I suppose even a desert might be made tolerable."

A dead silence fell upon the room; then Stella went on placidly arranging several rows of ringlets over her forehead, wondering what had started Nora on the war path, but venturing no remark until her cousin said, with abrupt emphasis:

"What do you suppose will be the end of all this, Stella?"

"Of what, pray? Put it in plain English."

"You know perfectly well what I mean, and you ought to be ashamed of yourself. You have no right to trifle with such men as Alan Douglas and Major Valcour."

"My dear Nora, you are, without exception, the most absurdly inconsistent person of my acquaintance."

"Do not deny that I have had various little affairs in my time, but I never carried a flirtation beyond my bounds, as you have done."

"Indeed?"

"I am really in earnest, Stella. I refuse to be a party to any such performance; and if this sort of thing is to continue, I shall leave you to end the affair as you see fit."

"Dear me! what a fuss about nothing! I don't think they intend to murder each other just yet."

"Perhaps not; but you know they both love you devotedly, and why do you keep them hovering round? You can't marry them both, and I doubt very much whether you mean to marry either."

"I don't know that I do," she answered, but the color in her cheeks deepened somewhat, and she did not meet her cousin's questioning glance.

"Then you are worse than I thought you were!" cried Nora with righteous wrath. "I never would have believed you capable of such wickedness, Stella. It's a sin and a shame for any girl to act as you have done! It's what I call contemptible!"

"Is it, though? I answered with a little embarrassed laugh. "Don't get in such a rage with me, Nora. It isn't my fault that I can't make up my mind. I am sure I would be perfectly willing to oblige you by marrying one of the gentlemen, but I can't for the life of me, find out which one to prefer."

"You had better not have either if you've any doubts about it," Nora said bluntly.

"Now you are going back to what you said before."

"I wish you would have done with this trifling."

"Nothing was further from my thoughts," Stella answered so gravely that Nora said, in quite a different tone: "You are not in love with either of them then?"

"I—I don't think I am. I believe I like Mr. Douglas best; but the Valcour fortune and family are quite balance my preference. So you see I am in a dilemma. Ah, there they are, now! It's a sin and a shame for any girl to act as you have done! It's what I call contemptible!"

Nora went to the wardrobe and got out her hat and furs. As she put them on, preparatory to a ride with her cousin's rival suitors, she vented her feelings in the brief remark that Stella was the queerest girl she had ever met.

The gentlemen were waiting for them in the sleigh at the front door, and it was not long before the robes were wrapped about them, and they were off at a rattling pace on the road leading out of the quaint old town.

It was a clear, breezy day, but not too cold for pleasure, and the two boats—those swift-winged sleighs so common on the Canadian rivers in winter—were skimming over the frozen surface of the water like beautiful white gulls.

To see those dainty little vessels, mounted on runners, cutting along so gracefully at a rate of sixty miles an hour, thrilled Stella's venturesome soul with envy.

"Oh, I would give anything in the world for a ride on one of those boats," she cried with girlish extravagance, and her sparkling eyes followed the graceful movements of the trim little ice fleet.

"Have you never ridden in one?" Eugene Valcour asked in surprise.

"No; but I have always wanted to. I should think it would be perfectly delightful."

"It is," Valcour answered. "We have a boat, Miss Markham. It's a very dangerous sport, but I can take you on a ride, if you like. You may dive into an air hole, or capsize at any moment."

"So they say," Valcour answered carelessly. "But I've been out on the river scores of times, and have never met with a single accident. It's all in the management of the boat. I wouldn't be afraid to take half a dozen people in the Victoria."

"That's a man has occupied a hundred times as no indemnity against possible accidents," Douglas said tersely. "I wouldn't care to take anyone with me in the Victoria—certainly not a lady."

"Oh, I wouldn't be a bit afraid!" Stella cried. "Major Valcour, do take me? I am dying to go!"

"Certainly I do!" Stella cried, he said laughingly: "only you must promise me immunity from prosecution in case anything dreadful happens to you."

Alan Douglas's face was overspread with a sudden pallor.

"Major Valcour," he said sternly. "I hope you have no serious thought of doing anything so foolhardy."

The color rushed an angry spark.

"I am at Miss Markham's service," he said shortly. "I shall take her if she wishes to go."

"Certainly I do!" Stella cried. "If there is any real danger, it will only add zest to my enjoyment. I would like to above all things—wouldn't you, Nora?"

"No, thanks!" her cousin answered, nervously. "I would rather be excused."

"What are you afraid of too?" Stella exclaimed, with an accent that brought a resentful flush to Alan's face.

"She might as well have called him a coward."

"Whether we are afraid or not, Miss Markham," he said with quick, cutting emphasis, "I feel it my duty to inform you

that ice-boating is not a suitable sport for a lady. In the first place, the boats are mere skeletons, and the only way to accommodate oneself to them is to lie down flat in the stern. There are no seats, no cushions, nothing—in fact there are only the bare ribs of timber to hold on by. No lady can ride in one without real discomfort, and—no lady discredits to herself."

"What do you mean to insinuate, sir?" Valcour exclaimed angrily.

"I insinuate nothing," Douglas replied coolly. "I state the case without equivocation."

Then he turned to the coachman and said in a low tone:

"Stop here, please! Ladies, I am obliged to leave you. Good morning, Major Valcour!"

"Drive on!" Valcour cried as he muttered something under his breath.

Alan Douglas had leaped lightly out of the sleigh, and lifting his hat, began to retrace his road back to Montreal.

"Well, of all the petty exhibitions I ever did see!" Stella exclaimed with a look of scorn.

"He was afraid we'd ask him to join us," whispered Valcour. "His needs! He has disturbed himself."

"The idea of a man of his age being so superstitiously cautious!" Stella added derisively. "I call that downright cowardice."

Valcour was, of course, not ill pleased to find his rival in disgrace, but Nora looked back at the retreating figure of Alan Douglas with a different feeling.

"I will take me, won't you, Major Valcour?" Stella asked coquettishly.

To which Valcour, of course, replied that he would take her anywhere she wished to go.

"We might go this afternoon," he said reflectively; "the ice looks pretty sound, and there's a fine breeze blowing."

"Yes, yes! do let us go this afternoon!" Stella urged eagerly.

And so it was arranged.

The Victoria, a splendid little ice yacht, lay just off the landing. Valcour had provided cushions and robes for her, but Stella was somewhat surprised to learn that Alan Douglas had come pretty near the truth.

They had met him on their way down to the river, but he passed on with the slightest of formal salutes.

"Is there no one else going with us?" Stella asked in surprise, as Eugene Valcour tucked the robes about her, and seated himself in a half-reclining posture at her side.

"No," he answered with a smile. "I can manage the boat myself, and the Victoria is so small there is hardly room for more besides," he added in a lower and more tender tone, "would not another person be too much?"

"Oh, no!" Stella answered were height ened color.

Then the sails caught the wind as it went whistling by, and away they sped over the smooth, glittering surface of the ice.

Lying in the stern of the boat, Stella looked up at the clear blue sky, and out at the snow-clad mountains which skirted their path on either side.

Every object she fixed her eyes upon appeared to vanish as if by magic. The boat seemed to skim through the air. Even the express train which came howling along on the east bank of the river was left far in the rear.

The wind fluttered Stella's hair, and fanned the color in her cheeks into a bright flame; her eyes sparkled with enjoyment, and laughter fairly bubbled to her lips.

"Isn't this perfectly splendid?" she cried for the sixth or seventh time, as the Victoria circled and tacked in a lively breeze.

"There is another boat making this way," Valcour observed. "It must be a poor sailor. With only one man in it, it ought to have passed us long ago."

Stella watched it for awhile, and then lay back in the stern of the Victoria with her eyes closed.

"She is catching up with us," Valcour exclaimed presently; but Stella was not the least bit interested in the chase.

"I feel as if I were drifting away into dreamland somewhere," she said; and then she felt a firm hand held softly over her own.

This brought her to her senses; she opened her eyes with a start and found Eugene Valcour looking down at her with an expression she could not mistake.

"I wished we could drift on in this way for ever," he said passionately, "you and I darling."

For the moment his hold on the rudder had relaxed, and he forgot that constant vigilance was required of him.

"Look out!" was the clear ringing shout that came from the boat in the rear, but it came too late.

The Victoria had borne down upon one of those treacherous air-holes. In an instant she had capsized, and both Stella and Valcour were struggling in the water.

A cold and frightful plunge was all that she remembered till hours had passed, and she found herself lying in bed, while Nora shared her wine and temples with alcohol.

"Thank God!" Nora cried fervently, as Stella opened her eyes. "Tell Mr. Douglas she is safe."

"Where is Mr. Valcour?" Stella asked feebly.

Nora's face flushed indignantly.

"At home!" she answered shortly. "He has behaved shamefully. Stella. When he last upset her just left you to drown and tried to save himself. If it hadn't been for Alan Douglas you wouldn't be here now."

"Did Alan save my life?" Stella asked tremulously.

"Yes. Oh, he has acted like a hero to-day. He saw you set out and felt so fearful for your safety that he took another boat and followed you. He was right near at hand when the accident occurred."

Stella had nothing to say just then; but when evening came she met Alan Douglas face to face.

"I sent for you," she said, holding out her hands to him. "I owe you my life, Mr. Douglas."

"You owe me nothing," he interposed, hastily.

"You make it very hard for me," she said, looking down. "If I may not offer you my life in payment for a debt, will you accept it as a gift?"

He looked at her incredulously for a moment, and then he caught her hand with passion and eagerness.

"Stella," he cried, "you cannot mean that, after all—"

"I have made up my mind to marry you," she answered shyly.

"I cannot accept such a sacrifice," he said, with a sudden revulsion of feeling; "this is gratitude."

"No, Alan," she whispered, nestling in his arms; "it is love. Won't you believe me when I tell you so? I think I ought to know."


"How can I believe you?" he said, and yet he folded her to his heart; "My life, my love, it is too good to be true."

"I have done with such injustice," he murmured penitently; "can you ever forgive me?"

"I can forgive you now," he answered rapturously.

And so their peace was made.

It was a year after they were married

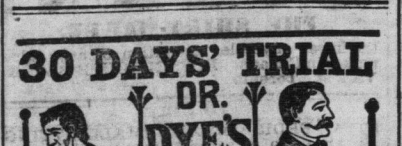


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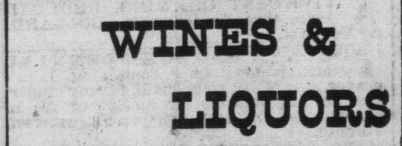
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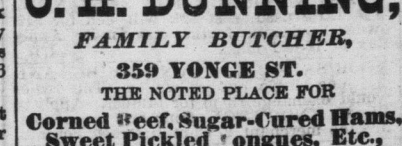
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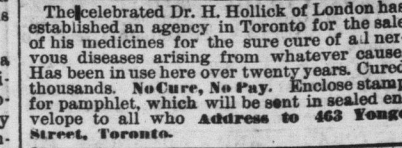
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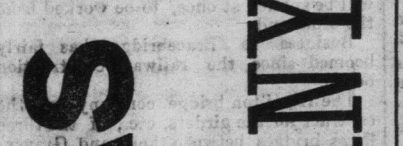
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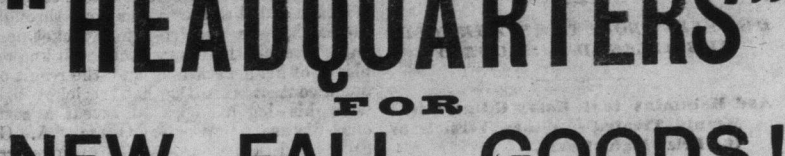
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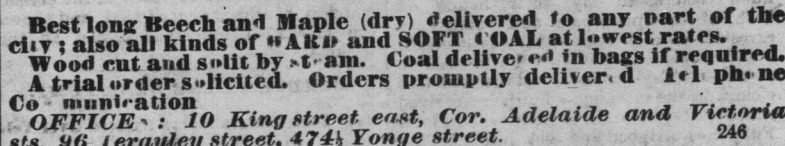
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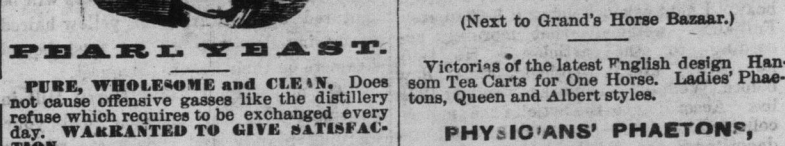
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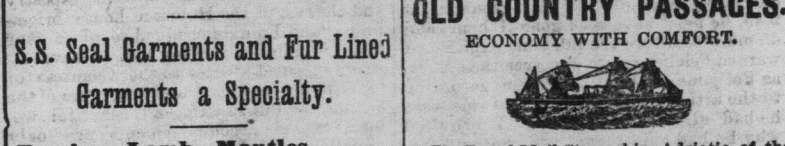
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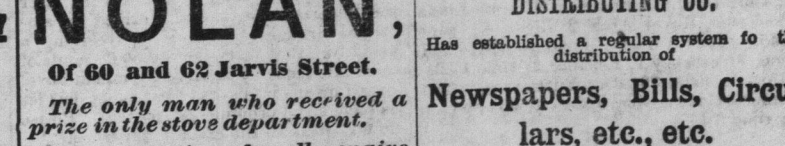
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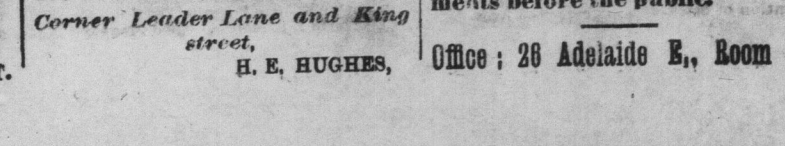
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