

"Ha! the *galopé finale*," remarked one of the other officers. The band struck up the "Stürm Marsch," and Tom could hardly repress a slight start as the well-known air once more fell upon his ears. It recalled the night of that ball at Manchester, when he had first thought that he had good hopes of winning Frances Smerdon's love. How the thought had grown stronger week by week during his stay in that place, and how before he had made up his mind to speak, the *routé* had come, and he had determined that was no time for such nonsense. How he had sternly resolved that no love-making should escape his lips but that he would sail for the East leaving the girl unfettered, and put his fate to the test! should he come safe home again. It was well, he thought, that he had made that decision when he first heard of Miss Smerdon's sarcastic remarks. He was not quite so sure about that now; that letter she had written to him, when she thought he was seriously wounded, had made him take a more modified view of her conduct.

We know that he was sorry he had sent such an answer as he did to Frances' missive; he was not at all certain that he had not made a confounded fool of himself by his Spartan reticence. You can't expect a girl to take the initiative in an affair of this kind.

"Do you suppose, sir,
That the rose, sir,
Picks itself to deck your breast?"

However it is all over now, and here his reflections were suddenly interrupted by Brydon's ejaculating—"by Heavens, Tom, look there." Following the direction of Brydon's gesture, Tom's eyes fell upon a pretty young lady, smartly dressed, with the most coquettish of bonnets upon her head, who was exchanging salutations right and left with the Russian officers, and having for her cavalier no other than Hugh Fleming, looking as well as ever he had done in his life.

"Ah, Monsieur recognises some one," said one of the Russians talking to Brydon, turning round. "Ah, yes, your compatriot, you know him I presume."

"Yes, he belongs to my own regiment," said Brydon, he's a *camarade*, a brother officer—what do you call it, *frère* officer."

"Ah, brother officer," replied the Russian politely in English.

"Oh lord, Tom," said Brydon in an undertone, "it's very convenient but rather humiliating; all these fellows speak better English than we do."

"Yes," said Byng "Captain Fleming is one of ourselves. May I ask who is the very pretty lady with whom he is walking?"

"That is Mademoiselle Ivanhoff. Captain Fleming has been very fortunate. Many of us would have taken his wound to have so fair a nurse."

"Well, he certainly don't look as if he had anything the matter with him now," said Brydon.

"Oh, no," rejoined the Russian, "he's as well as any of us, but he's a prisoner on *parole*. *Ma foi*," he added with a slight sneer, "they need not have asked for his *parole*, Mademoiselle's chains would be quite sufficient."

"Well, we must go across and shake hands with Hugh," said Byng. "Mademoiselle Ivanhoff, you said. I once had the honour of meeting her brother under rather peculiar circumstances."

"*Sacré tonnerre*," exclaimed the Russian, "then it was you, you who took Alexis Ivanhoff prisoner before the eyes of the whole army. It was *superbe*, *magnifique*, but I should think, Monsieur, the exploit would hardly recommend you to Mademoiselle Ivanhoff," and so saying, the Russian slightly raised his hat and turned on his heel.

But by this, Hugh had caught sight of them, and was springing forward to meet them, when he was momentarily checked by his fair companion. Glancing at the English officers she said something rapidly to him, and in another moment Hugh was cordially shaking hands with Byng and Brydon.

"By Jove," he exclaimed, "how glad I am to see you fellows again. Of course you've heard all about me, how I was taken prisoner and should have died I verily believe, if it hadn't been for Marie—Mademoiselle Ivanhoff I mean, she called

herself Sister Marie you know," he added a little confusedly, "during the time she was an hospital nurse."

"And you're all sound again now," said Brydon. "Fit as a fiddle," rejoined Hugh.

"But come and be introduced to my kind nurse, she is very anxious to see you Tom, as you may well imagine."

Now this was just a point upon which Tom had considerable misgivings. He had had his doubts beforehand, even when he had read that letter of "Sister Marie's," and as he looked at the haughty, resolute face of the lady, it struck him there was a strong dash of her brother's spirit about her, and that the remark of his late Russian acquaintance was probably a good deal nearer the truth. However, he had no time for further reflection, for by this, Hugh was introducing him to Mademoiselle Ivanhoff. That lady extended her hand graciously to him as she said with a smile, "Ah, Major Byng and I are not like people meeting for the first time. Is it not so? I have heard much of him, not only from Captain Fleming but also from my brother. Alexis owes his life to you, Monsieur."

Tom murmured some common-place remark to the effect that any one else in his place would have done the same, but even as he spoke he thought there was a slight curl in Mademoiselle's lip, a wicked flash in her eye and though she had naturally a very sweet voice, its tones jarred upon his ear, as if fair though the words, they were spoken in mockery. Still, the young lady could be very winning when she chose, and for the next few minutes, there was no doubt, she exerted all her fascinations to subjugate Tom, and at the end of that time he had come to the conclusion that he was a suspicious old beast and beginning to lose faith in everyone. He had forgotten that Hugh in ordinary courtesy could not indulge his thirst for information concerning letters, camp news, &c., until Mademoiselle had, so to speak, finished with himself, and Mademoiselle entirely monopolised him till the band was over and the gardens rapidly thinning. Then she turned to address a few courteous words to Brydon and explain that she was *désolée* at hearing that they were returning to their lines that night.

"I was in hopes that you were about to pass a few days here, when I should have had the opportunity of really making your acquaintance, but you will come up again in a week or two, won't you? Major Byng says it's to be so, and I shall hope to see more of you then."

"No letters for me," exclaimed Hugh, "and yet like the dear good fellow you are, you say you wrote to Nellie and told her that I was all right."

"There is no letter for you from Miss Lynden," replied Byng. "She wrote to me as I tell you in the first instance, but I've not heard from her since I wrote to tell her you were all right. I can tell you no more."

"It's deuced odd," said Hugh as he knit his brows, "I can't understand it."

"Captain Fleming," said Mademoiselle Ivanhoff, "I must once more claim your services. You promised to be my escort to Madame Radski's tea."

"Yes, it's time to say good-bye," remarked Brydon, "you see, Tom, our friends are waiting for us."

"Ah, some of our officers are going to entertain you," said Mademoiselle Ivanhoff. "I will therefore say good-bye. Remember you are not to be long before you come to see us again," and she bowed to the two Englishmen.

"Well, good-bye Hugh," said Byng, "I had hoped you'd have seen us through this *ponche*."

"Ah, if that's it," laughed Mademoiselle, "I'll release you, Captain Fleming. I cannot well go to this tea without an escort, but that is of no consequence."

"Ah, no," replied Hugh laughing, "we cannot have your tea sacrificed for a *ponche*. I will take you to Madame Radski's and I shall have lots of time to say good-bye to my old comrades here afterwards," and with that Hugh walked off with Mademoiselle Ivanhoff.

"Fancy that Russian fellow's about right," said Brydon grinning, "and that Master Hugh is in the toils. We live and learn, Tom, and it strikes me

that being taken prisoner is a long way off the worst thing that can happen to one in campaigning."

"Hugh looks like making a confounded fool of himself," rejoined Byng, sulkily. "As you know, he is engaged to as nice a girl as ever stepped, at home, and as for 'Sister Marie' forsooth, she's a deal too good-looking a young woman to have prancing about an hospital. I could laugh outright when I think of the mental picture I drew on her at Vanoutka, when I got her letter. There's not much of the hospital nurse left about her now. Well, come on, Heaven send us safe through this *ponche*, for we've a long ride before us, and these Russian fellows can drink vodka by the gallon without its affecting their heads."

CHAPTER XX — BATCHI SERAI.

Byng's anticipations, however, proved groundless, their entertainers quite recognised that they had a good many miles to ride that night, and had no intentions of challenging them to a drinking bout. There was no attempt to press them to do more than drink a stirrup cup. Caviare and brandy were scattered about the tables of the restaurant, but the staple of the entertainment of Byng and Brydon consisted of bottled stout, which was dispensed to them in wine glasses, and forcibly recalled to their minds Mr. Swiveller's celebrated dictum on the tasting of malt liquors. It was not till they had purchased their experience on a subsequent visit that they realised the delicate intentions of their entertainers. In the eyes of a foreigner, an Englishman is regarded as a beer drinking creature. At all events he was in the days of which I am writing, and the Russians when they produced the stout were producing the choicest vintage. Bottled stout was dearer in their lines than champagne, and sold currently at twelve shillings a bottle. However, the *ponche* was soon over and the pair were once more jogging along on their homeward way. Each man was smoking and immersed in his own reflections. Tom could not help thinking of his parting with Alexis Ivanhoff. He had not thought so much of it at the time, but the sister recalled the brother's manner so vividly to his recollection. Ivanhoff had asked him his name, declared that he owed him his life, and that though it was not likely it might chance to be in his power sometime to repay the obligation; in the hurly-burly of a big war like this there was no knowing what might happen, still Tom thought there had been a *souffçon* of mockery in his tones as he spoke. If he had saved his life, Tom had most certainly disappointed the ambitions based on his successfully carrying out his hazardous enterprise and Tom could but reflect that but for himself, the Russian might have regained his own lines unhurt. No, it was open to question whether the Ivanhoffs owed him much gratitude. However, he was not likely to see much more of them even if it should chance that he met Mademoiselle again in their proposed trip up the country. There was great curiosity to hear their report, when, at a late hour, they made their appearance in the mess-room. Everyone was delighted to hear such a flourishing account of Hugh Fleming; but what explanation did he give for not writing? and now it flashed across the two travellers, that in that brief conversation with Hugh that point had never been touched upon. It was odd, Byng admitted, but they had so much to talk about he had quite forgotten to ask Hugh that question.

"I suppose he hadn't time," at length said Brydon, "Fleming's got his hands pretty full just now, I should say," he continued with a mischievous glance at Tom. Brydon invariably discountenanced marrying amongst his brother officers. He held that it spoiled the mess, and that soldiers had no business with wives, holding I am afraid to the slack breezy old adage of a fresh quarter and a fresh flame. Byng resolutely declined to be drawn upon this point, but some of the others were not so reticent, and were much amused with Brydon's account of "Sister Marie." "Nobody but a born fool," he concluded, "would ever dream of coming off the sick list with such a nurse as that."

"Was she so very handsome then?" enquired a susceptible subaltern.