

The Valley Between

By Owen Oliver

ghost of a smile, of a satisfied, comprehending smile.

The ambassador regarded him. "Caught," he said, "and I acknowledge it. You have caught me fairly. You have earned your recommendation and you shall have it. Is there anything else I can do for you?"

"If it is not asking too much, sir," said the greenhorn, "I should like another for a friend of mine."

"Also a pupil of Leschetizky?" the ambassador asked.

"Yes, sir," said the greenhorn.

"And what is your friend's name?" asked the ambassador.

"Lucy Maitland, sir," the greenhorn replied, his raw complexion pinkish.

The ambassador coned his visitor afresh, viewing him with new eyes and pondering. How much foresight, economy, and saving, he wondered, how much pinching of himself and others had been necessary to equip the greenhorn with even that incongruous garbing. Was not his uncouth appearance the result of poverty and privation rather than defects of personality? He imagined him well-fed, well-groomed, well-clad, and seemed to see a not impersonable being. Even in his uncouthness, except for his hands, he was not uncouth. The ambassador fancied he could see possibilities of winning expressiveness in the lustreless eyes. How much soul, after all, might not be hid behind that boyish face? It had given him no hint of the ingenuity of mind it masked. Perhaps it concealed potentialities of companionship unguessable from its owner's exterior. And of what witcheries of melody and harmony might not those spidery fingers be capable?

"Lucy Maitland," mused the ambassador. "Is she related to the Lucy Maitland who married Jim Hollis?"

"She is her niece, sir," said the greenhorn.

"Jack Maitland's daughter?" the ambassador inquired.

"Yes, sir," the greenhorn answered.

"Is she as pretty as her aunt?" the ambassador queried.

"Much prettier, I believe," said the greenhorn, his face unquestionably pink.

"And has she a specialty, too?" asked the ambassador.

"If I have my way, sir," he said, "I am going to be her specialty, sir."

The ambassador beamed, chuckled, and stood up. The greenhorn, deferentially rising as his elder rose, felt his hand clasped in two warm, friendly ones.

"She shall have her card, too," said the kindly old man. "I congratulate you, and I congratulate her also. Since the world began a lover or a husband has been the ordained specialty for a woman. It is old-fashioned but natural; and not only human but divine. The right man is the only proper specialty for the right kind of woman."

THE Spur Mountains belonged to the Macdonalds, and the Lonnon Mountains to the McAllisters. The valley between them was no man's land, for they were too busy fighting over it to keep out the thieves from the hills. They had fought year in and year out for longer than the memory of man, and neither boasted long of advantage, till the days when Robert McAllister, seventh of the name, grew old. Then an ill time happened to the clan. His eldest son slipped over a crag and was killed. His second and third sons were slain, away in the wars; and the youngest son died in his bed of some womanish complaint—a hard fate for a brave man. Since Robert McAllister was too old for arms the name of the clan grew small, and the more daring of the tribesmen took service abroad under the King of France; for Mary McAllister had the spirit of a man, but only the body of a maid.

Alan, the young chief of the Macdonalds, had won great renown in arms, and he had the way of leading men; and those who are born for leading never lack men to lead. He drove the McAllisters from the valley, and built little fortresses there to hold it, and when he had held it for a full year he sent a message to Robert McAllister saying that further strife was vain, and offering terms of peace if they would own that the valley was his. Thereupon the McAllisters gathered together and made a great raid, taking away cattle and sheep in hundreds that were in the valley to graze, and razing one of the little forts to the ground. The week after, Alan Macdonald fell upon them and took back fourfold. And afterward he sent a piper with a letter, which read like this:—

"From Alan Macdonald to Robert McAllister, most courteous greetings.

"The fortune of war has given us advantage which you cannot resist. When strife is useless, strife should cease. If you will own that the valley is mine I shall be honored by your using it. It is said that good foes make good friends, and I am wishful to try; for there is none who honors your name more than I."

Robert McAllister, being a wise old man, was minded to consent.

"It is a generous offer from a gallant enemy," he said.

But his daughter pleaded with him in her dead brothers' names and prevailed. So he made answer thus:—

"Robert McAllister sends all courteous greetings to Alan Macdonald. The fortune of the moment changes. For those who come after, I hold to what I have held and my forefathers before me. If

our numbers are lessened our courage is not."

Then came another message from Alan Macdonald.

"If you rely on courage, let one of your tribe meet me in single combat, the valley to belong to the victor's clan."

"Alan Macdonald."

Many of the McAllisters volunteered for the fight; but there was no great man of arms among them, and the elders would not consent.

"It were giving Macdonald the land," they declared. "There is no man in Scotland who can stand before him." For he was a large, powerful man, and withal quick as smaller men are; and he had a curious cunning of fence which he had learnt in France.

So they sent no answer at all, and Mary McAllister locked herself in her room for two days, and brooded over the dishonor of her clan. Presently she made a deep plan, as women will, and rode out in the gray dawn to the castle on the Spur Mountains; and when Macdonald's outposts challenged her in the valley, she answered:—

"I am Mary McAllister, and I have come to answer the challenge of your chief." Then they sent a guide to conduct her the easiest way to the castle, and when the chief warder came to the gate and asked her pleasure, she made him the same answer as before.

After he had stared at her once for her daring, and twice for her beauty, he conducted her to the great hall; and Alan Macdonald rose and came to meet her, and set a chair, and stood with his cap in hand marveling that any woman should be so fair; for she had pale-blue eyes and red-gold hair, and her face was like a wild spring flower.

"You honor me greatly," he told her. "Have no fear." She laughed carelessly.

"I had no fear," she said, and he bowed.

"Fair lady, you honor me more."

"It was not for your honor that I came, but for the honor of my clan, and my own." He bowed again.

"There is no dishonor in peace," he said.

"Neither have I come in peace." He caught a look in her eyes that he had seen in the face of a foe before, and he knew that she spoke no light word. Wherefore he became very grave.

"War is not for women," he told her.

"I had not come if any of my brothers had lived; but perchance"—she tossed back her hair that was like red-gold—"you had not challenged us then?"

He flushed hotly. "Think you so?"

Their eyes met for a moment, and she smiled suddenly. There was a year's

spring, it seemed to him, in her smile.

"Nay," she owned. "I think not so. Alan Macdonald, you fear no man." He laughed a soft laugh.

"I have feared no woman till now." She put her head back and looked up at him.

"Fear you me?"

"As a man may fear."

"Fear you my challenge?" He knitted his brows in thought before he spoke.

"Name what champion you will," he said, at last. "I will meet him, if he is not your lover. Believe me"—there was a sudden depth in his voice—"I would not earn your hate." She laughed scornfully.

"Is it yet to earn?"

"His blood be upon your head," he said sternly. "I will meet him." She laughed.

"I have no lover. The challenge is my own."

There was a quick murmur of laughter among the retainers, but their chief checked it with a glance.

"I am dull-witted, lady; help my lack of brains."

She drew a deep breath.

"You sent a challenge to our clan, that one should contend with you. It was not an equal wager, yet there were those who would have died, had they not been over-ruled." Her eyes flashed.

"Also I took the risk," he reminded her.

"It was not an equal risk, as you knew." He frowned.

"Who shall deny his strength to the stronger man?" he asked.

"Shall he use it against a weaker?" she demanded. He frowned again.

"It is the way of these things."

"That he should take advantage against the weak? Would he then use his strength against a woman?"

"No!" said Macdonald heartily.

"Surely not."

"Wherefore," said she, "I bring to you an equal challenge." She looked him straight in the eyes.

"If your challenge is such as a man may meet," he answered steadily, "I accept it unheard."

"It is an even risk," she said calmly.

"Your life against mine."

"Never!" She shrugged her shoulders.

"It is not your habit to fight on equal terms?"

"It is not my habit to fight with a woman on any terms at all." She laughed scornfully.

"A woman is not so much to fear!"

The gray-bearded Hector, who was reckoned wise, rested his trembling old hands on the table and leaned forward.

"A woman of all things is most to fear," he said.

She turned haughtily to Alan.

"Before age has brought wisdom, do you fear?"

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