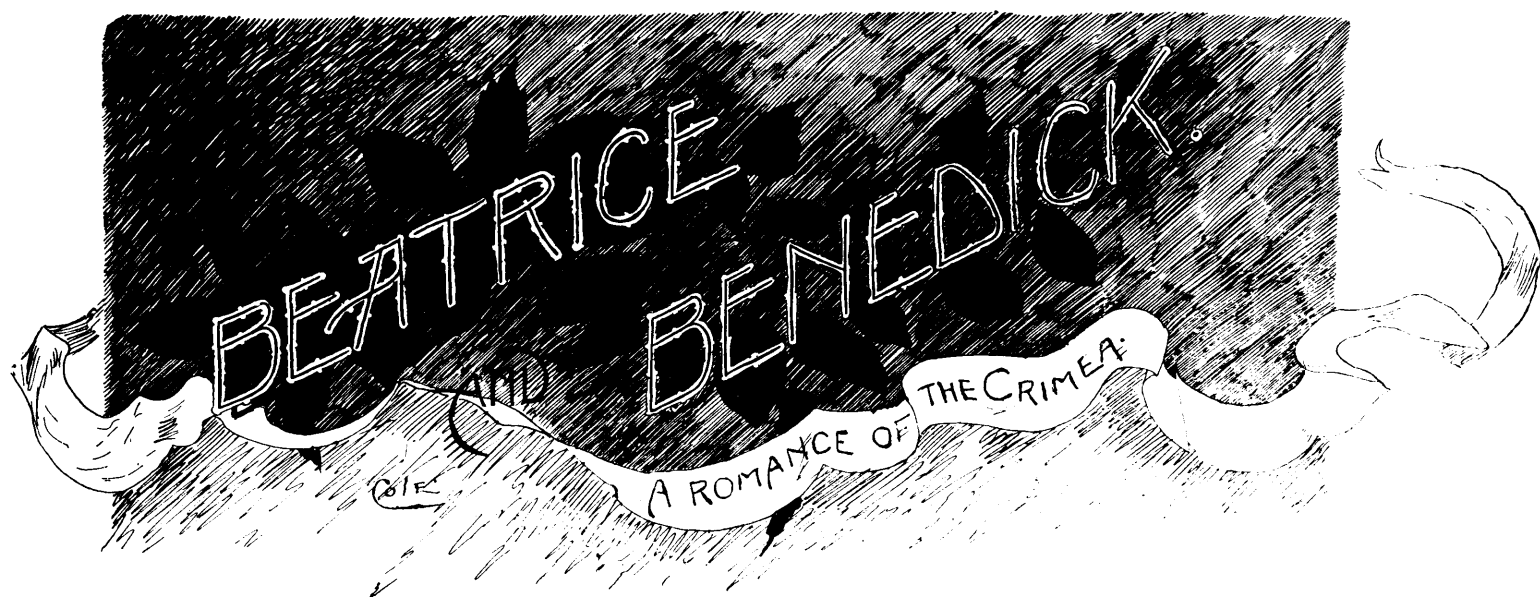




BY HAWLEY SMART.

Author of "Breezie Langton," "At Fault," "Tie and Trick," "Long Odds," "Without Love or Licence," &c., &c.

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CHAPTER V.—MISS SMERDON GROWS
SARCASTIC.

"They have given at last, as you always said they would," exclaimed Hugh Fleming, as he entered the Lynden's drawing-room one gloomy day about the middle of November, "our orders for the East."

"Yes, I thought so," replied the young lady, as she shook hands, but in by no means the exultant tones with which people usually greet the fulfilment of prophecies. Who of us have not suffered from that ever recurring, usually detestable, "I told you so." How is it that our accession to the rewards of this life are never announced beforehand, while its evils and misfortunes are so industriously foretold to us?

Hugh Fleming should have been in high spirits at having attained his heart's desire, but somehow he was not. He had come to pay a farewell visit—he had had a good many to pay, and had put saying good-bye to the Lyndens off to the last. Good-bye, when it is for an indefinite period, is often a painful thing to say, even though it is mercifully veiled from us that it is good-bye for ever. Still no such thought as this oppressed Hugh's mind on this occasion.

He was off to the Crimea, of course; everyone who wore a sword was bound to go there now, he would come back again in due time, a captain, perhaps a major, who knows? But he was quite conscious that saying farewell to Nellie Lynden was the hardest task that had ever fallen to his lot yet. He knew that he loved her dearly, he knew that he ought not to tell her so, and yet he was guiltily conscious that, if not in words, he had been telling her so for some weeks past, as if a genuine love story is not told long before it is put into matter of fact words. "I love you," requires no speech to proclaim it, and put what guard we may upon our tongues, no woman needs their assistance to learn it. After the first conventional speeches, a silence fell upon those two. It was not that as a rule they had not plenty to say to each other, but of late they had found the keeping up the ordinary stream of talk wearisome. Both were conscious that there was a barrier which had not been broken; but what they had both known it must end in, had come at last. The word "good-bye" had to be spoken; the initiative was with Hugh, and he was sore puzzled how to begin.

Once heard a well-known soldier who had won for himself countless decorations, asked in a club room what was the nastiest bit of work he had ever had. He paused a little before he answered, and it was easy to see that he was recalling the scene to his mind's eye. "Breaking to a lady," he replied at last, "that her husband had been killed at the head of the stormers that morning." Bidding good bye to the woman he loves is

the hardest thing for a soldier when ordered on active service.

"I suppose they have given you very short notice, to finish with," said Miss Lynden, woman-like the first to relieve the awkwardness of the situation.

"Yes," rejoined Hugh; "we are all supposed to be ready to go now at a moment's notice. We embark at Liverpool the day after to-morrow. Of course, we're glad to go; but we're sorry to say good-bye to so many who've—who've been kind to us."

"We shall miss you all very much. I hear we're to be left quite forlorn for the present, as you are not to be replaced. Is that so?"

Hugh felt the situation was intolerable.

"I don't know, and I don't care," he replied passionately. "I know I oughtn't to say it, Nell—you will let me call you Nell for the last time—won't you?"

Her lips moved slightly, but she made no reply.

"I ought not to say it, Nell, I know," he continued, "but I cannot go out there without telling you I love you. I am not going to ask you to promise yourself to me, I will only ask you to think of me, and to think kindly of me. Remember, when you read any accounts of our doings out there—remember, there is one amongst us who can never forget you, and if ever I do anything that brings me into notice, promise to send me just one line of congratulation."

It has been before mentioned that Nell Lynden was a quiet, self-possessed, self-reliant young woman, but it is just these self-reliant heroines who disappoint one so cruelly at the crucial moment. If she was self-reliant she was also a warm-hearted girl, and (I apologise for her) all she did at this critical moment was to burst into a flood of tears and gasp out—"Oh, Hugh!"

For a moment Hugh Fleming was dismayed—tears usually do discompose a man—and deeply repented him of his rash avowal, but when he saw Nellie smile through her tears it gave him the courage to become practical, and passing his arm round her waist he did what was obviously his duty under the circumstances—kissed them away.

"It was very foolish of me I know, Hugh," said the girl at last, "I know you must go, but it seems bitter to part from you just now, and then no doubt there are scores of women in my place; still, remember what those terrible lists are to us. Ah, it was bad enough to read them after the Alma and Inkerman, but when you are out there, my own, the very rumours of fighting will make my heart turn sick."

"Nell, this will never do; remember, my darling, you are a soldier's sweetheart now."

"I know," she replied, smiling, "and I am not going to be foolish any longer. But Hugh, I've

hardly had time yet to get used to the position. You will let me come to Liverpool and see you off, won't you?"

"No, I think not; you see there is no time to announce our engagement now, and I can't bear to think of you in the turmoil there's sure to be, all by yourself."

"I don't care who knows of our engagement," exclaimed the girl proudly.

"No, Nell," replied Fleming, "but that's just where it is, they will see you down at the docks and won't know of it."

"Nor do I care about that, but I do care very much about seeing the last of you."

"I can't help it," replied Hugh, "you must be guided by me in this matter. No, Nell, my dear, we will say our good-byes here. There is one thing, you know, we can write to each other by every mail."

"Ah, yes, and mind you do so. I may keep you to myself the whole afternoon now, may I not?"

"Willingly," rejoined Fleming. "I am your prisoner for the rest of the day if you choose. I suppose I had better tell your father."

"That shall be as you think best. If you don't, I must; but Hugh, what will your own people say about it?"

"Well you see," he replied, "I've kept pretty straight and never given them any trouble since I joined, and further than saying that I ought to wait till I have got higher in my profession, what can they do except congratulate me? besides if, instead of the sweetest girl in England, I was about to introduce a Gorgon to the family they couldn't say anything to me just now; why the most peccant amongst us are voted white as snow nowadays; the most uncompromising fathers have granted plenary absolution."

"It will be a sore trouble to me if your people are very much opposed to our engagement," said the girl, thoughtfully.

"But you will stick to me, Nell, won't you," he asked, anxiously.

"Yes," she replied. "I'm yours for ever; let it be as long as it may before you come to claim me; but I own I am nervous about what your people will think of it."

Hugh now set himself earnestly to dispute any misgivings Miss Lynden might have upon that score. It is unnecessary to follow the conversation of the lovers further; suffice it to say that Hugh Fleming was absent from the temporary mess which the —th had established at the Queen's Hotel, nor did any of his brother officers set eyes on him that night.

The next day was their last in Manchester, and what time they could snatch from duty was filled