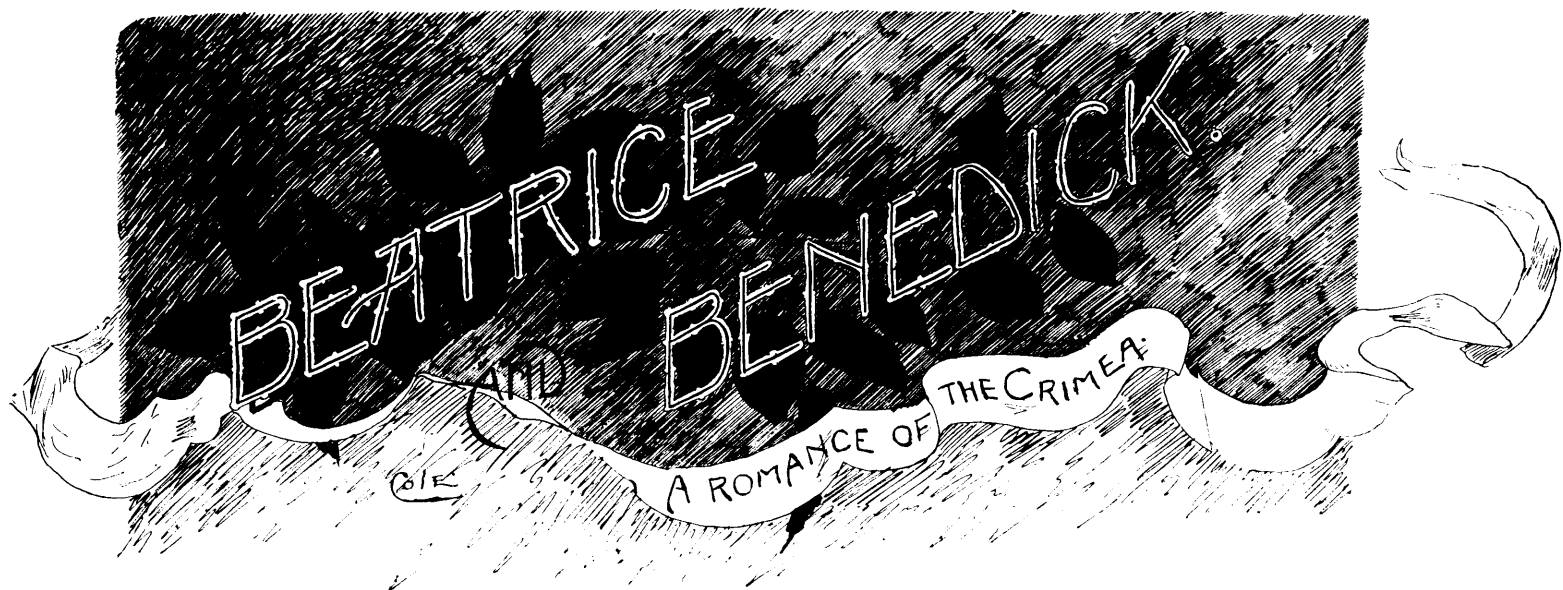




BY HAWLEY SMART.

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

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CHAPTER VII.—MISS SMERDON'S PRIDE BREAKS DOWN.

A well-known novelist, who has not long since left us, ascribed the rather moderate success of one of his earlier stories to the Crimean war. It was the first time we had been engaged in a European struggle of this sort, since the invention of steam, telegraphs, and if I may be pardoned the expression, newspaper correspondents. Then again, the great battle between Russia and the Allies was practically fought out in a cock-pit and the famous correspondent of the *Times*, then in the hey-day of his youth, was enabled to keep that paper supplied with such an accurate, I may almost say microscopic, account of the great siege as made it easy for those at home to follow it in all its details. It might have been headed after the manner of these times, "The Crimea day by day." It was close upon a twelve month from the time the Western powers first sat down in front of the place, before the Muscovite, after gloriously half-repulsing an assault all along the line succumbed to his assailants. Small wonder that those who were there from first to last compared it to the siege of Troy. One thing it proved conclusively, and that was that like Sebastopol, Troy was only half invested, or starvation must have compelled its capitulation long before ten years.

That several of his brother officers should gather round Hugh, on his arrival in camp, was but natural. They were all anxious to hear his account of his last night's fighting, how poor Grogan came by his death, and so on.

"No doubt you're pretty well played out, old man, but beyond that you took the Quarries with a rush, and have been fighting for them all night, we know nothing; whether the wounded fellows could tell us anything we don't know; the doctor won't allow them to talk just yet, he is so afraid of fever. Byng might no doubt if they'd let him."

"Tom Byng?" ejaculated Fleming, "Why he's dead. Shot through the head."

"Not a bit of it," exclaimed two or three voices at once.

"Why, I saw him carried away myself."

"Not a bit of it," rejoined the others. "It was a mighty close shave, but Tom Byng is no more dead than you are. He was stunned and was a good bit coming to, but has escaped, the doctor says, by about an eighth of an inch."

"Thank God," said Fleming. "I'm sure I thought he was killed. How about the others?"

"Badly wounded, all three of them; still the doctor says if he can only keep the fever within bounds they will all pull through. Poor Joyce must lose his arm. You're not touched, Hugh, are you?"

"No, but I'll tell you what. I'm just froze for a drink, a wash, and a sleep."

"All right, old man, we'll bother you no more. Bustle off to your tent and we'll see nobody disturbs you. We were all turned out and kept under arms for two or three hours in case you wanted us down there," and the speaker jerked his thumb in the direction of Sebastopol.

After the excitement and fatigue of the night Fleming slept soundly for some hours. He had rapidly adopted the habits of the old campaigner, who thoroughly understands that sleep is a thing to take when you can get it. It sometimes happened that men only came out of the trenches to be marched back again before they could get their belts off in consequence of a sudden alarm. The contending armies were like two gladiators ever keeping a keen eye for an opening, and, notably on the side of the Russians, taking speedy advantage of it. He was awakened by a roar of laughter just outside his tent, and hastily putting on a few things and a pair of slippers, stepped outside and found a small knot of his brother officers gathered round Tom Byng, who, seated in an easy chair, with a bandaged head, and propped up by pillows, had apparently finished the narration of some story which had thoroughly tickled his audience. He silently extended his hand to Fleming as he came forward, and as Hugh clasped it, he said:

"Thank God; I was afraid it was all over with you."

Byng gave a queer smile, and rejoined with a slight motion of the head:

"Natural density saved me, old fellow. I'm all right, but have rather an earthquaky feeling to-day."

"What's the joke," continued Fleming, as he warmly pressed his friend's hand. "I was roused from my slumbers by ribald laughter."

"Tell him, some of you," said Byng.

"Well, it's all Mickey Flinn. Seeing Tom outside his tent he came across to congratulate his Captain for not being kilt dead intirely, and Tom was unwise enough to chaff him."

"Last night was worse than the Woronzoff, eh, Flinn," said Tom.

"'Deed, sorr, and it was, and it's glad I am to see your honour about again, for it's kilt dead entirely I feared you was when I put you on the stretcher."

"Ah, being shot through the head is worse than being shot through the body."

"'Deed, I don't know, sorr, it's much a muchness it strikes me, only you get the credit of being wounded for the wan and you don't for the other, and with that Mickey Flinn saluted, and stalked back to his company in supreme dudgeon."

"It's all the old villain came to see me about," said Byng, still laughing at the recollection. "I

believe he was glad I wasn't killed; but he's very angry because I have been returned as wounded, and he wasn't."

"Yes," laughed the adjutant, who was one of the group; "that's a good healthy grievance that ought to be a comfort to Flinn, whenever the rations run short, to the end of the campaign. He's a fine old soldier, but, as we all know, you may trust the old soldier to have his grievance."

"Yes," said Fleming, "he'll go through any amount of hardship, hard work, and fighting; but he must have his grievance—generally about the veriest trifle."

And then there suddenly arose a shout from the orderly room tent of "Mail in from England!" followed by the sharp bugle call for orderly sergeants, and the group of officers, with Fleming amongst them, rushed off to see after their letters.

"Yes," thought Tom Byng, as he looked after Fleming: "I counselled him not to speak, but he has the best of it now. Letters from home! Yes, we're all glad to get them—ah, very glad no doubt most of us; but don't tell me Hugh wouldn't give up all his letters from home, and the whole correspondent of the regiment to boot, for that one letter he's expecting from Nell Lynden! I hope the young 'un 'll come through all safe; and after last night it does seem as if Providence was watching especially over him. I fancy he was right not to take my advice." And if one might judge from Hugh's face as he passed a few minutes later with an open letter in his hand, Byng was right in his conclusion.

Few things could have been more harrassing to a romantic and imaginative young woman of those days than to discover that she had let her heart go out of her keeping before she was aware of it, to be uncertain whether her feelings were reciprocated or not, and that the man who had won her affections should sail for the East without making any avowal was hard.

Frances Smerdon was in this position, and all Nell Lynden's burst of girlish confidences about her love dream were gall and wormwood to her friend, and "Detestable Gush," Frances Smerdon called it, and revenged herself by saying the most spiteful things of the Regiment collectively, which were intended to be repeated for the benefit of the one individual who was the object of both her love and her hate. But when, with the Springtime, came the news that the fighting had begun again, and also that the Regiment had reached the Crimea, Frances Smerdon's heart began to quail and soften. She could not speak bitterly of men she had known well but such a short time ago, and the finish of whose lives she might see announced in any morning paper. There was one man she hated, there was one man she declared she would never speak to again. He could not have been blind to her love. He must