

She had expected him to be revealed by this time as the admirer who had been playing a part in his apparent acceptance of the situation of the last two days; she expected to be accused of coquetting with Dana, of neglect, coldness, insult towards himself; and this she would have welcomed: it would have shown him still a victim in her toils, a mouse she might toy and play with indefinitely before bestowing the final *coup de grâce*. But instead of it, or anything like it, here stood the tall, handsome young fellow, utterly ignoring the possibility of her having wronged him, and only begging to be told how he had affronted her, that he might make immediate amends. It was simply exasperating. She turned suddenly upon him, hiding her face, in her hands, almost sobbing:

"And I thought we were such—such friends!"

Even that suggestive tentative did not lay him prostrate. Fancy the utter inadequacy of his response:

"Why, so did I!" This was too much. Down came the hands, and were laid in frantic appeal upon his breast. He did not bar the way; she could have slipped from the corner without difficulty; but the other method was more dramatic.

"Let me go, Mr. Perry," she pleaded. "I—I might have known; I might have known." The accents were stifled, heart-rending.

"Don't go yet, Mrs. Belknap; don't go without telling me what—what I've done." And poor Ned imploringly seized the little hands in both his and held them tight. "Please tell me," he pleaded.

"No, no! You would not understand; you do not see what I have to bear. Let me go, I beg,—please. I cannot stay." And her great dark eyes, swimming in tears, were raised to his face, while with faint,—very faint—struggles she strove to pull her hands away, relenting in her purpose to go the moment she felt that he was relaxing the hold in which they were clasped, but suddenly wrenching them from his breast and darting from his side, leaving Perry in much bewilderment to face about and confront the doctor.

A little opening had been left in the railing at the south end of the veranda,—the same through which the post surgeon had passed the night Mrs. Lawrence had shown to Perry the answering signal-light: it was the doctor's "short cut" between the colonel's quarters and his own side-door, and soft, unbetraying turf lay there between. Absorbed in her melodrama, Mrs. Belknap had failed to note the coming of the intruder; absorbed in his own stupefaction and his fair partner's apparent depth of woe, Ned Perry heard nothing but her soft words and softer sighs, until a deep voice at his shoulder—a voice whose accent betrayed no apology for the discovery and less sympathy for the discovered—gave utterance to this uncompromising sentiment:

"Mrs. Belknap, this is the thirtieth—not the first—of April."

"And what has that to do with your sudden appearance, Dr. Quin?" answered the lady, with smiling lips but flashing eyes. She rallied from the shock of sudden volley like the veteran she was, and took the brunt of the fight on her own white, gleaming shoulders, needing no aid from the young fellow who stood there, flushing, annoyed, yet too perturbed to say a word even had there been a chance to get one in edgewise. Blunt as he was, he could not but realize the awkwardness of the situation. And to be so misjudged by such a man as Dr. Quin! All this was flashing through his mind as the doctor answered,—

"Nothing with my appearance, Mrs. Belknap: it was *yours* I remarked upon. You seemed to think it All Fools' Day."

"Far from it, doctor, when I thought you miles away."

"Well, well, Mrs. Belknap," said Quin, shrugging his broad shoulders and laughing at her undaunted pluck, "I've known you fifteen years, and never have found you at a loss for a sharp retort."

"In all the years you have known me, doctor, as child, as maid, as woman, you are the only man in the army who ever put me on the defensive. I see clearly that you would taunt me because of this interview with Mr. Perry. *Honi soit qui mal y pense*, Dr. Quin! You are the last man in this garrison—cavalry and all—who can afford to throw stones."

"Whew-w-w!" whistled the doctor. "What a little spitfire you always were, to be sure!—Mr. Perry," said he, turning suddenly on the young officer, "let me at once apologize for a very misleading observation. When I spoke of having known Mrs. Belknap fifteen years she instantly thought I meant to make her out very much older than she is; and hence these recriminations. She always objected to me because I used to tease her when she was in her first long dresses,—the prettiest girl at Fort Leavenworth,—and she's never gotten over it. But her father and I were good friends, and I should like to be an honest one to his daughter. Good-night to you both."

"One moment, Dr. Quin," said Perry, springing forward. "You have seen fit to make comments and insinuations that have annoyed Mrs. Belknap at a time when she was under my escort—"

"Oh, Mr. Perry, no! no!" exclaimed Mrs. Belknap, laying her hand on his arm. "Not a word of that kind, I implore! Hush! here comes my husband."

"Ah, Belknap," said the doctor, blandly, as the big captain came hurriedly forth with searching glance along the dark gallery, "here you find me as usual, trying to be devoted to Mrs. B. whenever I can get you out of the way. Why the jeuce can't you stay?"

"Oh, it's you, is it doctor?" answered the captain, in tones of evident relief. "It is far too chilly for this young woman to be sitting here without a wrap, is it not? Come inside, Dolly. Come, doctor.—Halloo! what's that?"

A cavalry trumpeter came springing through the gate and up on the cranda.

"Is Captain Stryker here?" he panted.

(To be Continued.)

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