

THE COMET OF A SEASON

By JUSTIN MCGARTRY, M. P.

He went home that night in a doubtful mood, unusual to him. He began to feel that his way was slipping from beneath him, or at least that he himself was slipping away from the path he had marked out. He found that there were emotions which could disturb him still, and which had nothing to do with his own career and public work. He had been hitherto absolutely unimpressionable, master of all his emotions, capable of controlling not only every look, but every thought, and already he found himself distracted from the straight path by the strange and almost fatal admiration he felt for Geraldine Rowan. And now for his father's confusion came the cross-light of a new sensation, far inferior in intensity and very different in color, but strong enough to perplex and dazzle for the moment—a flame of patient emotion toward a pretty, saucy, young, aristocratic woman; a fear of hers, and a longing to obtain some sort of mastery over her.

Montana began to think it would be well for him to set about his great scheme, to put it in motion, and make a grand triumphant departure from London with the close of the season, carrying Geraldine Rowan with him as his wife and as the companion of his expedition, his associate in the foundation of the sublime colony beyond the seas, out of which a new world and a new life for the old world were gradually to arise.

Did Montana really believe in this scheme? That, we suppose, no one can ever know. It is not likely—at least, from what was afterward discovered, it does not seem likely—that he had ever thought the matter deliberately over, or had done more than allow the idea to grow upon him from day to day. He believed very thoroughly in himself, and believed that anything he started must come to a success. He had worked himself into a Napoleonic faith in his star, and in Heaven's special protection of him. This faith may have been born of sheer vanity, or of prolonged mental strain almost approaching to a condition of intellectual derangement, but, at all events, it supplied him with any quality of earnestness which he could be said to have possessed.

Whatever the strength of his faith, either in his project or himself, it does not appear that at this time he was making any preparation to carry his great scheme into effect. He listened to people's suggestions concerning it, and answered all manner of inquiries and letters. He gave every one to understand that the scheme was growing into active movement day by day, and that he had all its details under his own eye and in his own hands; but nobody was ever admitted to genuine confidence with him, nor did he tell anybody what his preparations were. He was merely at present enjoying his success in his own fashion. He had found a career, and this was his zenith and its consummation. His strongest ambition all his life through had been to play to one great audience, that of London; to fashionable, aristocratic, wealthy London in the stalls and boxes, and at the galleries. Now he had reached the height of his hopes. With one hand he grasped the West End and with the other the East. His vanity ought to have been almost satisfied. If he was capable of deliberately thinking over a difficulty or a crisis of any kind, we might assume that he went calmly and fully into counsel with himself, reviewed his position, and set his plans out before him to look at them. We might assume that, having done this, he had come to the conclusion that the zenith of his London career had in any case been reached; that even if nothing out of the common had arisen, his object now must be to avoid the risk of a descent or an anticlimax; and that the incident in the church had hastened the necessity of bringing the London episode to a conclusion. On the other hand, anything like a hasty departure from London would give the appearance of probability to the most improbable story—Montana and now really worked himself into a mood to regard Mr. Varlowe's story as monstrously improbable—and make people lose faith in him. The conclusion to which Montana came was that he must stay in London to the close of the season and then depart. But it is not likely that this conclusion came by virtue of any slow and careful process of thought. It came to Montana by instinct, as most of his conclusions did. That was his way. He had no thought of a resolution one moment, and it was a fixed resolve the next. It pleased and comforted him to think that these instinctive and somewhat feminine conclusions were a species of revelation, the voices of oracles speaking within his breast and guiding him aright.

The little incident in the Church of Free Souls did seem likely to have a certain influence over public opinion. It got about in all manner of more or less distorted versions. In no case did it amount to anything much more than the fact that there had been a scene in the church when Montana spoke there, and that some old man, whom nobody knew, had professed to recognize Montana as his son, and that Montana had disclaimed him. There was not much in that, perhaps, and very few people went into the question seriously enough to ask themselves whether the old man was sane or insane, or whether there was the slightest foundation for the idea he had taken up. Still, the incident was of a certain importance. It called sharp attention to the fact that there was some mystery about Montana's career, which might not be a great and superb thing after all. The stream might, if traced back to its source, be found to arise in a commonplace little well in a stable yard, instead of a dark and sacred spring among the solemn trees of some historic and haunted grove. The story set curiosity and inquiry going in that direction, and that in itself was not ominous of good for Montana. It indicated a new turn in public opinion. Up to that time, people who disputed about him had only disputed as to the man himself, his earnestness, his sincerity, his eloquence. Now they began to ask, "What is he after all? Where does he come from? Is his own account of himself the true one?"

Lady Vanessa told the story wherever she went, embellishing it with heedless humor here and there. From her lips it became a story of grotesque and Hudibrastic drollery. It told of a whole service suddenly disturbed, an entire congregation startled, first stricken with amazement, and then convulsed with laughter; of an orator and a prophet interrupted in the full flood of his discourse by a maniac, who insisted on rushing into the pulpit with him, clinging round his neck, sobbing on his bosom, and clashing him as his long-lost son. Lady Vanessa admitted Montana in her own peculiar way, which had nothing whatever of coyness about it, but she delighted in making fun of him and trying to make him look ridiculous. It was a real pleasure to her, this sense of power which she felt when

she could succeed in making so conspicuous a man—such an idol of society and of the people—seem an object of laughter. It gave her the same sort of delight that some people get from amovng a favorite dog, or from putting ridiculous ornaments on a pet cat.

If things went on like this people would soon begin to insist on questioning themselves and their friends as to the exact meaning of some of Montana's sayings, and the precise, practical nature of that scheme for a new world which he was understood to have in hand. Vaguely, strangely, a sense of the growing danger appeared to creep in upon Montana's mind. He began to feel it as even in a well warmed and curtained room grows to be conscious of the presence of the east wind. He became impressed with the necessity for doing something—what, he did not yet exactly know. Montana was a man who, when brought face to face with a difficulty and compelled to act, would always act with wonderful quickness, energy, and courage. As indolent men of a certain class are surprisingly energetic when they have to shake off their indolence and do something, so Montana, a born dreamer of the unimaginative order—a man who could dream about himself for hours and days, and contemplate himself, his career, and his soul, as an Indian fakir contemplates his body—had, when brought face to face with the necessity for action, the instinct of a commander and the eye of a pilot. He was therefore never troubled himself, and therefore never troubled himself about decisions and plans till the necessity brought the moment of making the decision and announcing the plan.

The incident in the Church of Free Souls had much disturbed some of the inmates of Captain Marlon's household. Geraldine kept silent about it. She would not give any opinion. Melissa regarded and bled against the silly old man who had presumed to interfere with Mr. Montana, and the somehow seemed to take Clement Hope into her wrath, and to regard the whole thing as a device in which that luckless young man had been directly and malignantly engaged. Katherine was on the same side, but she was more timid about expressing her opinions. She seemed almost an unusual thing for her—and cast furtive, almost fearful, glances every now and then at her husband, as if she were actually beginning to be afraid of him. Mr. Trescoe, indeed, came out also in a new light. He spoke with an energy that no one ever before had supposed him to have. He boldly and bluntly denounced Montana as a "genuine humbug," declared that he had not the slightest doubt the old fellow was his father, and a duced deal too good a father for such a charlatan, and prophesied that before three months were over Montana would be known to everybody as a quack and a sham. These fearful opinions were combated with such anger and contempt by Melissa, that Captain Marlon had to beg of Trescoe to discontinue his attacks, in order to save Melissa's temper and spare the nerves of the company. Captain Marlon himself was clear and satisfied in his mind. Montana said the old man was not his father, and there was an end of the matter. The old man had been such a long time hoping and praying for his son's return, that he was ready to accept any good-looking stranger as the long-lost heir. The wonder was, Captain Marlon said, that he had not found somebody to take the place of his vanished son long ago. Whatever Montana said must be true. Captain Marlon was not even annoyed or offended by those who did not agree with him on this point. It was settled and certain.

Mr. Aquitaine came suddenly up from the North, and heard the description of the whole incident with very different coloring, and even given different facts, by the various people round Captain Marlon's table. Aquitaine looked grave. He did not put away the whole affair as a trivial and unmeaning incident. In the North he had been making special inquiries about the young man who had once been employed in his house, and who was undoubtedly Mr. Varlowe's son. There were some clerks in the offices who still remembered young Varlowe clearly enough. They all bore testimony to one set of facts: that he was very tall, dark, singularly handsome, with strange, abstracted manners, and apparently an inordinate self-conceit and belief in himself. These statements set Aquitaine thinking. Now, when he heard that Mr. Varlowe had actually claimed Montana for his son, it did not impress his mind as absolutely certain that the old lively stable keeper was laboring under an hallucination. This seemed to him to suggest some terribly momentous possibilities. If Montana was a deceiver in this, in what else might he not be a deceiver? He was now certain that, besides the hundreds and thousands in all quarters who had faith in him, and would trust anything to him, some of Aquitaine's own nearest and dearest personal friends were ready to put their property, their lives, their happiness, almost their very souls, at his disposal. Up to this time Aquitaine had not the faintest notion how things were going with his own hapless little daughter. It was only when they discussed the question in Captain Marlon's house at luncheon, and when he saw the girl's flashing eyes and quivering lips as she maintained Montana's perfect nobleness and integrity, it was only then that a suspicion shot into his mind, and made him ask himself bitterly why he had felt so much surprised that Marlon took so little heed of his daughter Katherine and her too open devotion to Montana.

Aquitaine was prompt in action. He went at once to Melissa. He found the girl in her room, and opened his subject with a certain sternness very unusual for him in his dealings with her. "Look here, Melissa," he said, "I want you to be more careful than you are in the way you talk about Mr. Montana." Melissa started, and turned her eyes upon the carpet. Her lips trembled. "I don't like to hear any girl," he said, "talking with such open admiration and rapture about a man, and making herself his champion and his devotee. Besides, there is something I have heard about Montana—well, no, I won't say that; not that I have heard anything against him, but something has come to my mind that makes a sort of doubt—and it may be right, or it may be wrong—but anyhow it is not well, in the mean time, that you should get your name mixed up with his."

"Oh, papa," said Melissa, "what are you saying?" "Well, my dear, I am saying exactly what I think. Anybody who heard you raving about him to-day, before all those people, would think you were some silly girl who had fallen in love with the man and had not sense to conceal it."

She covered her eyes with her hands, and only sobbed out, "I never saw you angry like that with me before. Do not say that."

"Well, well, my dear, I don't mean to be unkind to you; but I want to impress upon you with some sense of the necessity of being a little careful. I quite understand a girl's admiring a man like Montana, and of course he is twenty years at least older than you are, and I dare say you don't think any harm about going into raptures about a man of that age. But don't do it, my dear; be a little cautious. I can't tell you exactly what I am thinking of, and there is not very much to tell; but I am not quite certain about Montana, and I have given Marlon a caution, though it won't do him any good, and his daughter Katherine makes exhibitions of herself almost as bad as"—he was going to say "your own," but he stopped out of tenderness for poor Melissa's feelings. He was a resolute man, however; when he clearly saw his way to anything, and he now saw his way very clearly to the necessity for checking Melissa's public displays of her admiration for Montana.

"Fact is, Mel," he said, "if you don't be a little more careful, I should think the best thing would be for you to come back with me to the North as soon as possible." She started at the words. Aquitaine saw with pain that the suggestion was a terror to her. She did not want to go home. It had come to that. Well, he must make allowances. London in the season is London in the season, to be sure, and girls will like parties and balls, and the opera, and visits, and all the rest of it as long as grass grows and water runs, and the best of parents must be content to put up with the knowledge that his daughter can get on very well without him, and be very happy away from home, when her home is not in London. So he only winced, and pulled himself together, and was good-humored as before.

"If you like to stay till the end of the season, Mel," he said, "you shall do so, my dear, but only on this condition, remember. Just bear my warning in mind. Don't make a display of your admiration for our friend. It is a very natural admiration, I am sure, and in one way I am glad to find that you can admire anybody so much as that; and I did not know it, somehow, once; and I ought to be glad of it, and I am glad of it in a way; only don't show it, my dear, don't show it so much."

CHAPTER XVII.

Now, there was nothing in all this conversation, one would think, that ought to have brought positive terror to the girl's breast. Nobody could know better than Melissa how little likely Mr. Aquitaine was to treat her with harshness; and, after all, even the most audaciously and modest of girls need not feel utterly humbled because her father has given her a caution not to talk too rapturously of a distinguished public man. One can easily imagine a very well regulated and orderly little girl losing herself in wide avowals of admiration for Mr. Gladstone, or Mr. Browning, or Dean Stanley, or Sir Frederick Leighton, and being bidden by her father to rave an octave or so lower in general company, and not feeling utterly crushed by the rebuke. But the man who was about to be rebuked was not so low in general company, and not feeling utterly crushed by the rebuke. But the man who was about to be rebuked was not so low in general company, and not feeling utterly crushed by the rebuke. But the man who was about to be rebuked was not so low in general company, and not feeling utterly crushed by the rebuke.

"Let me in! Quick! quick! Let me in!" Geraldine opened the door, and let the alarmed girl in. "Oh, Geraldine!" she exclaimed, "I have done a dreadful thing. You must help me; you must do something—I don't know what; but you must get me out of this scrape. I am in such a fix! Oh, why did I ever do it?"

"What have you done, dear?" Geraldine asked, really alarmed at the girl's manner. "Such a dreadful thing! Oh, how can I tell you? But I had better tell you than anybody else. You must get me out of it. You must! you must!"

"But what have you done, my child?" "I have written to Mr. Montana. I have written a mad love-letter, I have put my name to it; and I have told him I'll love him, follow him as long as I live, if he'll let me, people did such things in books, didn't they? I'll—'I'll marry him, if he likes—' If he will!"

"You have not written this dreadful stuff to Mr. Montana?" "Oh, haven't I, though? Yes, but I have; and I have signed it with my name. Oh! I've been and done it this time, Geraldine; and won't there be a row in the building when my father comes to know?"

"What on earth possessed you to do such a piece of madness? Why did not Mr. Aquitaine take you home long ago, or stay here to look after you? Why did not you tell me what you were going to do?" "Well, it's partly your fault," said Melissa, flashing up; "and so you are bound to get me out of this fix."

and I walked out to-day, and I just stayed a moment behind her at the corner of the street, and dropped it into the letter-box there."

"Good gracious!" said Geraldine, "what desecrations and dodges are you getting into?" "Never mind what one gets into," said Melissa; "get me out of this now; that is more to the point."

A wave of inspiration tumbled upon a purpose in Geraldine's mind. "He may not have got it yet," she said. "We'll get it back from him, Melissa. I will go myself and get it back."

"Oh, will you?" said Melissa, her eyes brightening up with hope and wonder. "Will you have courage? Will you do it? Give you the nerve? I know you American girls will do anything; but can you do this?"

"I have never enough when I want to help a friend out of trouble," said Geraldine; "and I am not an American girl, Melissa, but I have learned in America not to be ashamed or afraid of doing anything—that is right. Girls in America are slow and free, and they are only thought to be afraid or ashamed of doing what is wrong."

Even in all her gratitude to Geraldine she could not subdue her mischievous inclination, and would not be preached at. "I am afraid preaching does not do you any good," Geraldine said, softly; "perhaps you are not much worse than many of your neighbors in that way. Anyhow, Melissa, I will run the risk. I will go to Mr. Montana. I will not trust to sending anybody. Nobody must know about this but you and I and he, and, if I can, he shall not know your name."

"Yes," Geraldine thought to herself, "I will go. What does it matter? It is not anything wrong. What if people do think I am American in my ways, and that I venture to do things that English girls would not do? I don't care. This is not venturing very far, after all, to put a friend out of trouble; and if any one finds out that I have done so, and is angry with me, or thinks badly of me, well—I can bear it—I'd do no more than that to help poor Melissa."

One hour and a half in the day Montana kept for himself and his few special friends. That was the time from half-past five to seven. The general public was shut out at this time, and Montana was shut in. Those who were able to see him then were the favored intimates to whom he had given the *consigne*, and who would come and talk to him in a friendly way about anything or nothing, and smoke a cigar with him. It was a great privilege to be among those who were admitted to Montana's hour of privacy. Montana took care to give admittance in such a manner as to make it evident that he was now distributing his favors only among the powerful and the great. Some of the poorest and humblest followers had the password. Women as well as men were privileged. It was not long before Lady Vanessa established for herself and her husband the right of entry, and she sometimes came even without her husband, and talked with Montana and whoever happened to be there, and occasionally smoked a cigarette in her affable and familiar way. Young men who could get admittance at this special hour were proud of it, and talked of it a good deal among their friends.

Now, as chance would have it, this was the very time of the day when Geraldine had to make her visit to Montana. She thought she could get to him easily, speak to him, and go back again before it was time to dress for dinner. There was not a moment to be lost. She hurried down-stairs, and went her way with heart high-beating, it must be owned, but very resolute and quiet, determined to put the thing through, and not to let poor Melissa get into trouble because of any fearfulness or hesitation on her part. Montana had just entered his little reception-room to wait for any of his friends who might come, when he was told that a lady wanted to see him. He replied that he was engaged, and at that hour could see no one. The servant came back with a still more pressing request from the lady, to spare her a few moments.

Montana asked, would the lady favor him with her name? "Reply," he said, "the lady would rather not; but she could say that he knew her very well."

Perhaps it is an act of justice. It ought to be. But I don't know, I am quite willing to put it as a favor."

"I only hope it is something hard to do, so that I may do it, and show that I am not unworthy of being asked."

"It is not hard to do. I ought not to be hard to any man, and I should think it ought to be least of all hard to you. I put it as a favor. I don't come to you willingly, Mr. Montana; I don't admire you, and you know it. I don't believe in you, whatever other people may do."

"You will believe in me one day," said Montana, composedly; "and you will help me, and join with me." "That is as certain as the rising of the sun to-morrow," she said. She looked at him with something like contempt. "I don't believe in you now, at all events," she said, "and I am more than ever convinced that I am right by things that have lately happened. I don't believe you are what you say you are; at least, I believe you are what you say you are not."

Geraldine looked straight into his eyes to see if any sign of embarrassment or surprise might be found there as she spoke these audacious words. But the eyes returned her look with the calm, grave, sweet expression which was always in them. "If Montana is an impostor," she thought, "he is well made up, for his part."

The truth was, that Montana had prepared himself again and again for every possible utterance of this kind from every conceivable person, and was as little likely to be put out now as a trained actor on the stage is put out by the speech of the theatrical opponent which gives him his cue.

"Tell me," he said, gently, "what is the favor you want of me? If it is in my power, you shall have it all the same, whether you believe in me or not. How you act toward me could not be any guide for my acting toward you. The less you think well of me, the greater is my anxiety to show that I don't deserve to be thought badly of."

"Well," she said, "I want to get from you a letter which you must have got to-day. I want to get it from you unread, if you will give it to me; but, read or not, I want it back again."

Montana now looked a little surprised. "Certainly," he said, "you shall have any letter that I have received which concerns you in the least. But I have read scores of letters this morning already, and I don't remember one of them in which you could have the slightest interest. However, I give you my promise that you shall have any of them, or all of them; if you are in the least inclined."

"Perhaps you have not read this one yet," she said. "You have letters still remaining, perhaps, unopened?" "A good many," he said, with a melancholy smile. "The opening and reading of letters is one of the weariest occupations of my life. I sometimes feel inclined to wish there were no post-office. See, there is a heap of letters already lying on this table by the last post, which my secretary has not touched as yet, nor I. Will you look among them? Do you know the handwriting of the letter you speak of?"

Barnes and her husband. The tall, handsome lady seemed to fill the pretty little reception room as she came in with her strong, graceful movement, every motion as she walked seeming to tell of careless, unconscious strength, and her face lighted with animation high spirits, and curiosity.

Mr. Barnes, her husband, was a young-looking, slender, somewhat timid man, who always seemed as if he were trying to escape from notice behind his wife's petticoats. He was a man of intelligence and ability in his own way, a keen financier, a reader, and almost a scholar; but his business in life now was to be overshadowed by his wife, and it was his pleasure too. To rest in her shade made him happy. She was very fond of him, and he knew it, and liked her to have her own way in everything.

Lady Vanessa fixed her eyes intently on Geraldine, and after the interchange of a few words with Montana, she turned to the girl and said: "I always remember any face. I see, and I have seen this young lady somewhere—at the Church of Free Souls, or whatever you call it. Am I right, Mr. Montana?"

Montana presented Geraldine. He was glad Lady Vanessa had come. Her coming prevented Geraldine from replying to his declaration. It compelled her to receive it without a protest. "That was something."

"Yes, I thought as much," said Lady Vanessa. "You are the young American girl, ain't you?—some one told me you were." "No," said Geraldine, "I am not an American. I have lived in America, but I am an Irish girl." She usually had to explain about three times a day that, although she had lived for many years in America, she was nevertheless not an American.

"Oh, an Irish girl!" Lady Vanessa said. "I see—yes, exactly; that is why you are so good-looking. They say all Irish girls are good-looking, don't they?" "I don't know," said Geraldine. "But you know that you are good-looking," said the pertacious lady.

"I don't," said Geraldine. "Come, now, is that true?" "Quite true," replied Geraldine, boldly. "There are different ideas about good looks. I don't admire myself."

"Oh, you don't? Mr. Montana does, I dare say." "Every one does," said Montana. "All who know Miss Rowan admire her."

"Well, I am sure I admire you already," Lady Vanessa said. "But where did you get that petname look in your eyes? You look as if you were dreaming."

"I am short-sighted, and I suppose that gives me a dreamy look." "Then I wish you were short-sighted," said Lady Vanessa. "That is exactly the sort of look I should like to have. Don't you think so, Albert? Do look at Miss Rowan's eyes, dear. Isn't there a wonderful expression in them?"

CHAPTER XVII.

What Geraldine might have said in answer to his declaration she did not herself know; for at that moment the conversation was interrupted by the entrance of Lady Vanessa.

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