

AS HIGH AS HIS HEART.

A STORY IN WHICH THE UNUSUAL HAPPENED.

By PROFESSOR CLARENCE MILES BOUTELLE.

(CONCLUDED).

"You—you'd better. I'll not be responsible for what may happen if you remain. I love Miriam Manton better than I love my own life. I would give my soul in her service!"

"I didn't see Miriam that day, nor the next. Her father did the necessary work in the house, as well as attending to the work outside, and offered every possible attention to the young lady—said, so the old man told me, that she was sick enough to lie in bed, but not sick enough to need a doctor.

"As for me I remained in my room and wrote savagely. The desperate assaults I made on the political foes, Republicans and Democrats alike, sounded well on the platform last week. But they seemed to lack something of the fire I put into them when I wrote them. Then, I was thinking of a brute called Jack Targon, a lovely and wickedly used young lady named Miriam, and a certain fool denominated Roscoe Valentine. He would have had a sluggish brain, indeed, who would not have written strongly under the circumstances.

"The third day Miriam reappeared. She looked pale and worn. Her father, good and unsuspecting soul, evidently guessed at no reason for her state beyond some slight physical ailment. But I—I knew better. I knew the woman had passed through one of the spiritual crises of her existence. I was anxious and trembling, and morbidly anxious to know what the result had been. But I couldn't find out, no matter how hard and how cunningly I tried.

"We talked together, day after day, while she did the duties of her day in the kitchen—and while I neglected my pen and paper, forgetting that 'the people' wished me to stand between them and their enemies—Republican rout and Democratic disaster—at Washington.

"We talked together, day after day, when her work was done. We rowed on lake and river. We rode slowly down shady lanes behind her father's leisurely horse. We lingered, time and again, by lake and stream, in valley and on hill, until the night grew strong and sturdy in the sky.

"I told her of the world she had not known, of my life, my triumph, my aspirations. I gave her glimpses, fleeting, fascinating, vague, of the wisdom and culture beyond the valleys that held her—beyond the high hills that hedged her in. She listened greedily, gloatingly. She learned much from me, much. But I learned more from her, incalculably more."

"How sad so few can profit from such wisdom," said John.

"How sad," echoed Valentine.

"I am not quite certain, now, whether I had fears of any other danger than that that came from my mentality. I suppose I ought to have feared. It is so much easier, you know, to understand a story at the end of it."

"Why, I don't know about that," said John. "I worked out your story, all but the details, of course, before you began it."

"Indeed," said Valentine.

"There was danger; and we found it one night. We had walked far that afternoon; we had lingered long that evening. And, when the moon rose, we were more than a mile from home.

"We stood beside a huge tree. I leaned against the trunk. The girl, her hat off and held in her hand, her head thrown back against the rough bark of the forest giant, looked up into my face with a saucy smile, 'as high as my heart,' God help me, and almost leaning against my breast as she stood there.

"We had not spoken for many minutes. I did not know what was in her mind—her heart. I only knew how hard I was fighting fate's battle in my own; I was struggling, struggling hard against an almost irresistible impulse to take her in my arms, stoop and kiss her, and tell her that her love or its withholding would make the difference between heaven and hell for me.

Some ugly and uneasy bird of night, far away, gave a discordant cry. Some distant beast of prey uttered a hoarse note of devilish triumph, while the victim of his needs shrilled out a faltering and failing sob of agony. The frogs in the far away waters chorused their complaints. The sudden winds in the tree tops muttered moodily and mysteriously; and the tinkle of the tiny stream, near at hand, seemed preternaturally loud in the darkness.

"Something, some one stirred in the thicket yonder.

"The moonlight glistened and glinted on some shimmeringly shiny thing that was not there a minute before.

"A rifle rang out. The ball struck between the woman and me. Slivers of bark rained about us. My coat was cut and pierced, and Miriam lost a generous golden tress, cut away by the leaden messenger of jealousy and hate as clean and deftly as one could have done it with a knife. I shall keep the shining treasure as long as I live. It will be buried as high as my heart when I am dead and gone.

"Well, we hurried home. And—what could a man have done? I kissed her again, for the second time in my life, as I stood at her father's door. And, as she went in, the old man came out and took my hand in silence. He saw me give the kiss. This warm hand-clasp was his blessing."

"There are some queer characters in the world, aren't there?" asked John.

"Don't forget that Mr. Manton is not the only one," replied Valentine.

CHAPTER IV.

"Leon Kerrall has returned," said Miriam to me the next morning, when I came down late to breakfast. "Leon Kerrall has come, and so you must go. Your life will not be worth a day's purchase, now that he is here again." She came to where I sat. She looked down into my eyes. She laid her shapely hands caressingly upon my shoulders. "Promise me you will go," she pleaded; "say that you will go. For God's sake, promise me."

"But I—I knew she meant for Miriam's sake, and the sweet assurance made me so happy I could not consent. I only shook my head.

"She told me, at noon, that she had slipped into my room and packed all my belongings for me. I know how happy it had made her to be of so much service to me. I could see, in her eyes, the shadow of the coming agony of parting. But she begged me, the tears standing in her eyes, to go—go so far that the wrath of Leon Kerrall would never find me. She went down on her knees, this grandly glorious woman, and pleaded with me to go—and never come again."

"How she must have loved you," said John.

"I should say she did," agreed Valentine.

"We walked together, again that night. I hardly know why. One would have supposed the experience of a former danger would have been enough. Perhaps the sweats of the present were so great as to leave the thoughts of danger in the swiftly coming future an impossibility. I was no coward. Asked my candid opinion, I think I should have said that I believed no man would care to repeat—on the following night—the murderous attempt of the night before. As for the woman, I do not know what she thought.

"I only know that she picked the way we went. I only know we went toward the gateway between our two worlds; the gateway through which I might go out from the world of her present, alone and forever. We climbed the last hill. We stood there, under the thick shelter of the trees, and looked out and down and away. Follow the way in which I walked now, unturning, unhesitating, unrelenting, and I should never see again the home in which I had met and loved the woman who stood at my side—the fearless woman who seemed as far removed from me as though a thousand forgotten years of time, or a million miles of trackless space, stretched out between us and held us asunder. Down on the plain, a long, low-lying line, was the railroad.

"I never saw it before," she said, "I never came so far. It is your iron way out. It is the iron that bars me in. Farewell. You will go. In God's name go."

"Miriam," I said, "I will not go."

"You shall. Why will you not?"

"Because I love you. Because I love you better than anything else in the universe of God. Because I love you as no man, in all the dusty ages, dead and gone, ever before loved woman."

"She laid her hand upon my shoulder. She leaned her head against my breast.

"As you love me," she said, softly, slowly, sweetly, "so I love you. Your happiness, your triumphs—these are the dearest wishes of my soul. It is in the sacred name of this love, our mutual love, that I bid you go."

"I—I do not understand you," I said, "why may not a man, loved and beloved, stay by the side of the one he loves?"

"You do not understand us," she said slowly, "you do not understand us nor our ways. Much as you love me, you do not understand even me. You do not know Jack Targon, not in any true sense. You have no idea of the desperate wickedness of such a man as Leon Kerrall. Here, take this," and she drew a folded paper from her bosom and handed it to me, "and read it and try to understand. It came for you this morning. I took it, read it, hid it, hoping to spare you the horror of it. Believe me, friend, lover, the need is desperate, indeed, when I give you this."

"I took it. I held it near the end of my cigar. I slowly deciphered it by means of the weak and unsteady light.

"Leon Kerrall has tried once," it began, abruptly, "and has failed. He will not fail a second time. And, yet, he is not unwilling to give you a chance; your blood be on your own head if you refuse to neglect it. You will walk to-night; you will walk with Miriam. Very well.

"Walk to the railroad. Be at the station at midnight, and I give you my word you shall go in safety. I swear to you that the woman shall go home unharmed.

"Fail, in any respect, to do as I have said, and I will kill you.

"LEON KERRALL."

"P. S.—Go home again with the girl, and I will kill you both."

"Go, to save my life," she faltered, when I let the paper fall from my fingers to the ground.

"To save your life," I said, "I will go. Believe me, Miriam, nothing less could make me go."

"I—I never doubted that."

"I shall come again, soon—speedily."

"She sighed in a weary, almost a heart-broken way.

"It is better you should not, far better," she said, sadly. "We should

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