

The Story.

A Fight for a Wife.

CHAPTER I.

THE MEETING.

The scene of this deadly encounter was neither gloomy nor romantic; it was fair and pastoral; and the time was May; and all the sweet influences of the spring-time were shedding a soft idyllic sweetness over our English dales. We had with us at this time a young American lady, who was on her first visit to the country; and one evening, when various plans were being proposed for her amusement and edification, one of us said to her,

"Now, wouldn't you rather get away from London, and go straight down into one of our quiet valleys, and see a real old English town that has been slumbering there for many centuries, and is likely to sleep for as many more? You will see a strange old place, with quaint houses of red and white, and here and there a garden between the gables. Then you will go down to the side of a broad and smooth river, flowing by under some beautiful woods. You will live in an old-fashioned inn—called the 'Complete Angler'—and just outside your window you will see the smooth blue river break white over a long weir, and you will see the trees, and lawn, and veranda of the miller's house on the other side; and beyond that again the soft low hills and hanging woods of one of our English counties."

Our young friend was much pleased with the notion; but hesitated. Of course, she said, this quiet and beautiful place must be far away and difficult to reach. When she was told that it was something less than fifty miles from London, she at once agreed to go; and hence it was that the desperate conflict which I have to describe took place in one of the most peaceful nooks of Berkshire, at a time of the year when the human bosom should have been full, not of angry passions, but of the singing of nightingales.

For this was the secret of it—two men had overheard this proposal; and each of them had inwardly resolved to outwit the other by immediately telegraphing to the "Complete Angler" for rooms, so that he should be installed there when this young lady and ourselves, her guardians for the time, should arrive. One of them was a slender young gentleman, fair-haired, large-eyed, and rather petulant in manner, who had just made some stir in literary circles by the publication of a volume of metaphysical verse; the other was considerably his elder, inclined to be stout, comely of face, and made welcome among us chiefly by a sort of sly good humor which sometimes led him into saying good things, but in any case and at all times seemed to make him very well contented with himself. This Mr. Humphreys was understood by some to be in a Government office; but no one could ever precisely say what it was, and his duties certainly never interfered with his pleasures. His rival, who had the privilege of being styled by the Court newsmen the Honorable Philip Sturmer Maurice, was the youngest son of an impetuous nobleman, and was believed to be waiting for some colonial appointment.

Now, these two men, from the moment that our pretty Amy Newton came among us, began to pay her a series of more or less occult attentions, all in a friendly sort of way, of course, and generally through the small and gentle lady who was her hostess. By this means they could present her with boxes for the opera, they could lend her new books, they could even offer to escort her and her two companions to an exhibition of pictures. All this was smooth sailing. Little did we perceive in it the elements of a tragedy. The young lady, accepted these marks of friendliness with a sweet impartiality; doubtless they were merely little acts of courtesy extended to a stranger from a distant land.

And of the young American lady herself? Well, she was neither very wise nor very learned; but she was exceedingly pretty, and she had a curiously winning and fascinating manner that drew women as well as men toward her. Perhaps it was the softness of her voice; perhaps it was a kind of pitious look in her dark gray eyes; but anyhow, people liked to get near her, and when they got interested in her they immediately went and asked everybody else what was her story. No one present knew. It was supposed to be rather a painful affair, and she had not been married to a young man who had been drowned within sight of shore. Paul and Virginia fashion?—but in any case she always referred to it in a vague way, and apparently wished to keep her sorrow a secret. For the rest, Miss Amy was rather tall and pale; she wore a good many rings, and when she traveled she displayed to the other inhabitants of the railway carriage a bag filled with all sorts of curiosities in the way of scents and other toilet requisites. One might have laughed at the fashion in which she played with these; only she was so pretty and child-like one had not the heart to laugh at her. She seemed only to pet herself because everybody else petted her.

We drove to Paddington Station. There was a young man there, looking furtively up and down the platform. He came to us and said, with an amount of confusion in his face that seemed to make him a trifle sulky:

"Oh, are you going into the country? Really! What beautiful weather! I took it suddenly into my head to run down to see Marlow—it must be looking so pretty just now."

Miss Newton said nothing at all, though she seemed surprised; but the small lady beside her—who manages all such things with an infinite tact and discretion—smiled demurely, and remarked:

"What an odd coincidence! We are going to Marlow also. We shall make quite a little party—how very nice!"

When once the awkwardness of the meeting was over, Mr. Maurice was apparently highly delighted with his good fortune; and he did his best all the way down to make himself an agreeable companion, taking care to address himself mostly to the elder lady. You would have fancied that he meant to leave me all the talk with our pretty Miss Amy; those young men are so transparently cunning.

Well, we got down at length to the small country station, and here there was a humble carriage in waiting to drive us to the river-side. We passed along through the sweet-smelling fields. We drove through the quaint little town, which was all shining now in the warm light of the evening sun. We passed the church and got down to the bridge, and there, beyond the miller's house on the other side of the stream, stood the old-fashioned inn of red brick amidst its trim plots of flowers and shrubs.

"Did you ever see anything more beautiful?" Queen Tita says; and, indeed, it would be difficult to compose a prettier

picture than we beheld at this moment—the solitary, quaint, red old building by the side of the river, the smooth water reflecting the drooping trees, the white line of the weir, and behind all these some rich meadows leading over to a low rampart of hills, the thick woods on which were burning red in the sunset.

It was, in truth, a peaceful spot, and we drove over the bridge, and round and down to the inn, with something of a notion that here, for a space, we should shut out all the cares and stormy passions of the world, and dream ourselves back into a condition of primeval peace and innocence. We got down from the carriage. The solitary waiter was at the door to receive us. We hoped that we should be the only occupants of the famous old hostelry.

Just at this moment the face of the young gentleman who had come with us was observed to change color, and a most unchristian gleam of anger shot from his eyes. Who was this little and bixom person who, dressed in a fishing-costume of gray, came gayly along the passage, and seemed overwhelmed with amazement and joy at seeing us?

"What?" said he, "can it be possible? Bless my soul, now! What a fortunate thing! But who could have dreamed of meeting you here, of all places in this sinful but delightful world?"

Who, indeed? It has been the lot of the present writer to have been present at dramatic performances in the capitals of various countries, but he has never witnessed a more beautiful piece of acting than that which was performed by a stout and middle-aged gentleman on the threshold of an inn in Berkshire. We were very nearly imposed on. For a moment it shone, and we knew that this sly old dog had quietly slipped down here and taken up his quarters in anticipation of our coming, while the most we could hope for was that the green and fertile plains of Berkshire might not be stained with blood before the week was out.

CHAPTER II.

THREATS.

They behaved themselves pretty well at dinner. We dined together in the coffee-room, a queer, low-roofed old place, with an abundance of windows looking out on the river, and with colored pictures of the Thames hung round the walls. The other occupant of the room was an austere and elderly maiden lady, dining all by herself, of whom Mr. Humphreys rather cruelly remarked that, considering the number of leap-years she must have seen, it was curious she had not taken advantage of any one of them. On this Mr. Maurice rather indignantly retorted that there was certain spectacles which deserved sympathy rather than ridicule; and we all agreed with that sentiment. The incident passed by. No bones were broken.

After dinner we went outside; there was still some warm color in the sky, and the smooth river caught a faint glow as it stole away under the dark green trees. The woods were quiet now in the twilight there was no sound but the soft rushing of the water over the weir; one began to wish that these young people might sing in the gathering darkness, down here by the side of the rushes. They were thinking of other things.

"Of course, Miss Newton," says the taller and younger of the two gentlemen, "you will go for an excursion on the river to-morrow? The fact is, a man I know has put a little toy steamer at my disposal—it is down at Cookham just now—I could have it up here for you at any hour you choose."

"A steamer?" says our young American friend; "what a shame it would be to bring a steamer into this quiet place!"

The barometer of the young man's face falls ten degrees; that of his rival jumps up a hundred.

"And that isn't the worst of it," says Mr. Humphreys, eagerly. "Oh, no, not at all. The joys of a trip in a small river steamer are most multifarious. First you run aground. Then your waves upset a skiff, and the two men in it make use of the most awful language. And so on, and so on, until you wish you had never been born; and, indeed, when you go ashore, your own mother wouldn't believe you ever had been, for your identity is completely lost and smothered up in the coal dust that has been showered on you. No, no, Miss Newton, don't you be a— I mean, don't you go in a river steamer. Now, if you really want to enjoy the river, I'll show you how. We shall get a big flat punt and poor it below the weir, and we shall have lunch on board, and plenty of books, and a box of water colors. If you like to sit and read, well. If you like to sketch, you have all the scenery about you. Now that is how you ought to spend a nice, idling, enjoyable day on the Thames."

Mr. Humphreys was quite pleased with this burst of oratory. "Do you like the picture?" he might have asked, in the words of the romantic Claude Melnotte. And she did like the picture. She said it was charming. She hoped we should have that boat.

"And the water-colors?" said Mr. Maurice, with something of a sneer. "Where do you propose to get them about here?"

"I brought them with me," replied his rival, with a certain majestic calm.

"Oh, do you paint, Mr. Humphreys?" Miss Amy said, directly.

"No, Miss Newton, I don't. But I knew that you did, and so I brought the colors."

It was not for a second or two that any of us observed how this unblushing person had tripped. He had brought colors for her. But had he not vowed and sworn that he was never so surprised in his life as when he saw that carriage drive up to the door of the "Complete Angler"?

"Perhaps you have brought with you the trout for which Miss Newton is to fish?" said the younger man, with a ghastly grin on his face.

"Oh, dear, no. There are good trout about here."

"Never saw any."

"Perhaps not—not at the end of your own line anyway. But if you will take the trouble to look through *Land and Water* for April 1873, you will find a description of a trout taken here which turned the scale at six pounds—there?"

"And the happy fisherman?"

"Was your humble servant."

Now, whether this was true or not, no one could say; for files of *Land and Water* are not so common in the country as buttercups. The bold assertion, however, scored one for Mr. Humphreys, and pretty nearly put the finishing touch to his

rival's resentment and chagrin. We began to wonder when these two would rush at each other.

"Now, young people," said the lady who looks after us all, "don't keep lounging about the river-side, or you will get chilled. You must go off for a short walk before bed-time, all except myself. I am going in doors to unpack."

In one moment the young man had darted forward. He would show Miss Newton the shortest way round to the road. Was it not a delightful evening for a stroll?—and how differently situated one was in the country!

Humphreys and I walked after these two, and our light-hearted friend was most uncommonly morose. Sometimes he whistled; but that form of gaiety sounded strangely in the silence of the evening. He had his eyes fixed on the two figures before him, and kept pretty close upon them.

So very still and calm was the evening that we could not but overhear what Miss Amy and her companion were talking about. Perhaps the silence and the sweet twilight over the woods had somewhat impressed them; but, at all events, they were speaking in rather a sad way of the occurrences of their life, and of the fashion in which hopes sprang up only to be life, and of the sympathy that was so valuable in healing these wounds, and that was so rarely to be met with. Young Maurice had a gentle and pleasant voice; he was talking in an under-tone; these two, as they walked together along the quiet country road, looked very like lovers.

My companion whistled another bar of "The Minstrel Boy," and then began to yawn.

"I think I shall go back and have a cigar before going to bed," said he.

"Very well," said I. "But you don't mean to leave those two walking on by themselves?" said he, sharply. "Why, that long-legged idiot would go stalking on to the crack of doom—till he tumbled over the edge of the universe. Call him back. Does he want to drag the girl to the shores of the German Ocean?"

I called them, they turned and met us; and there was for a moment a little confusion. Mr. Humphreys was equal to the occasion. He immediately said to her, "Oh, Miss Newton, I want to tell you what you must do about to-morrow," and then, before the poor girl knew where she was, he had walked her off, and deposited the wrathful and fuming Maurice with me. It was a pleasant walk back to the inn—one's companion being a young man whose chief desire was to dispatch somebody or other on a voyage to another world.

"Now," said the genial Mr. Humphreys to me that night, when he had lighted his second cigar and mixed his parting glass, "now that that spindle-shanked grudge has gone to bed, I will tell you all that happened as we came back this evening. By Jove, what a sweet and engaging creature that girl is—what a fine thing it would be to have to talk to her about always—to picture exhibitions, you know, where your friends were—to dinner-parties, drums, and all that; and then, when you were tired, to take a run down to this quiet little spot and have a good time all by yourselves. She is a little taller than I am, to be sure—"

"I thought you were going to tell me a story."

"Ah, yes. Well, no sooner had we started to walk home than I found that that milk-faced wisp of straw had been making the girl wretched by talking of troubles and misfortune, and the sympathy of unhappy people with each other. Now, you know, that isn't my line; and I didn't see the fun of it; and says I to myself, 'Just let's see what this girl is really unhappy about? You know, not one of you would tell me—'

"Surely it was not our business, even if we had known her rather unhappy?"

"Well," said I, "dear Miss Newton, I hear you have been rather unhappy?"

"She sighed at this. Then I went on to tell her that it was very impertinent of me to ask about her private affairs, but she must excuse the interest which I, in common with everybody else, felt in her; and would she tell me something of the young gentleman who was lost?"

"Well," said she, "there's no fear of your drowning."

"Oh, my dear fellow," remarked the complacent gentleman in gray, with a quiet grin on his face, "I know how to treat one of your very sentimental girls. She told me at once. He was her cousin. I said his being drowned must have been a great shock to her; and she said that was so; and yet she didn't seem to make much of it. So I said that people sometimes exaggerated the concern you ought to have in your relations; and that there were cousins and cousins. She said that was true, almost in a cheerful voice; and admitted that she did not know much about the young man. 'I suppose,' said I, 'that your relatives rather looked forward to your marrying him as a sort of family affair—you know what I mean?'

"She said that was so, too; and added, 'Poor young man? Now, I'll tell you honestly I had come by this time not to believe in the depth of her misery about the elegant young gentleman who was supposed to play *Pad* in her Virginia; and I ventured to hint as much. She was rather inclined to poke fun at my curiosity, which she said was the thing that Americans were blamed for. 'But what was he like?' said I, wanting to see what she really felt about that hero of a sentimental past. Would you believe it—would you believe it, sir?—she never even saw him! Moreover, it wasn't in coming to see her that he was drowned. Why, bless you, I laughed; then she was hurt, and said that the drowning of any body was not a thing to be ridiculed; to which I assented with such eagerness that we immediately became very good friends again. Silent sorrows! Why, sir, I will undertake to have her skipping about like a lamb in a couple of days! Regrets, and buried sort of stuff! As for that two yards' length of attenuated dumpling, I will duck him in the river if he tries to stuff her head full of such trash—I will—I will, indeed. Let that young man beware!"

With this the truculent fellow tossed the end of his cigar into the fireplace, just as if he had been heaving his rival into the Thames; and then he went off determined to have a good sleep to prepare him for the great events of the morrow.

(To be concluded in our next.)

EXPERIMENT.—A Canadian farmer says that, in order to ascertain the gain in weight in growing cattle, he tried an experiment, as follows: he weighed a Short-Horn bull calf on the 12th April, 1874, when he was just four months old, and found his weight to be 503 lbs. May 12th, he weighed 692 lbs.; June 12th, 703 lbs.; July 12th, 801 lbs.; August 12th, 881 lbs.; and September 12th, 966 lbs.; a total gain in five months of 463 lbs., or 92½ lbs. per month.

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