

HIS SOMBRE RIVALS.

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"OPENING: CHESTNUT BURN,"

"WITHOUT A HOME," ETC.

Still, whosoever he went he awakened interest in all natures not dull or sodden. He was felt to be a presence. There was a consciousness of power in his very attitudes; and one felt instinctively that he was far removed from the commonplace,—that he had a history which made him different from other men.

But before this slight curiosity was kindled to any extent, much less satisfied, his leave of absence expired; and with a sense of deep relief he prepared to say farewell. His friends expected to see him often in the city; he knew they would see him but seldom, if at all. He had made his visit with his aunt, and she understood him. His quiet poise was departing, and he longed for the stern, fierce excitement of active service.

Before he joined his regiment he spent the day with his friends, and took occasion once, when alone with Hilland, to make an appeal that was solemn and almost passionate in its earnestness, adjuring him to remain employed in duties like those which now occupied him. But he saw that his efforts were vain.

"No, Graham," was Hilland's emphatic reply: "just as soon as there is danger at the front I shall be with my regiment. Now I can do more here."

With Grace he took a short ride in the morning while Hilland was engaged in his duties, and he looked at the fair woman by his side with the thought that he might never see her again. It almost seemed as if Grace understood him, for although the rich color mantled in her cheeks and she abounded in smiles and repartee, a look of deep sadness rarely left her eyes.

Once she said abruptly, "Alford, you will come and see us often before the campaign opens? O, I dread this coming campaign. You will come often?"

"I fear not, Grace," he said, gravely and gently. "I will try to come, but not often." Then he added, with a short, abrupt laugh, "I wish I could break Hilland's leg." In answer to a look of surprise he continued, "Could not your father procure an order that would keep him in the city? He would have to obey orders."

"Ah, I understand you," and there was a quick rush of tears to her eyes. "It's of no use. I have thought of everything, but Warren's heart is set on joining his regiment in the spring."

"I know it. I have said all that I could say to a brother on the subject."

"From the first, Alford, you have tried to make the ordeal of this war less painful to me, and how well you have succeeded! You have been our good genius. Warren, in his impetuous, chivalrous feeling, would have gone into it unadvisedly, hastily; and before this might—O, I can't even think of it," she said with a shudder. "But years have passed since your influence guided him into a wiser and more useful course, and think how much of the time I have been able to be with him! And it has all been due to you, Alford. But the war seems no nearer its end. It rather assumes a larger and more threatening aspect. Why do men not think of us poor women before they go to war?"

"You think, then, that even your influence cannot keep him from the field?"

"No, it could not. Indeed, beyond a certain point I dare not exert it. I should be dumb before questions already

asked. Why should I shrink when other husbands do not? What would be said of me here? What by my comrades in the regiment? What would your brave father think, though he might acquiesce? Nay, more, what would my wife think in her secret heart? Alas! I find I am not made of such stern stuff as are some women. Pride and military fame could not sustain me if—if—"

"Do not look on the gloomy side, Grace. Hilland will come out of it all a major-general."

"O, I don't know, I don't know. I do know that he will often be in desperate danger; what a dread certainty that is for me! O, I wish you could be always near him; and yet 'tis a selfish wish, for you would not count the cost to yourself."

"No, Grace; I've sworn that on the sword you gave me."

"I might have known as much." Then she added earnestly, "Believe me, if you should fall it would also embitter my life."

"Yes, you would grieve me sincerely; but there would be an infinite difference—an infinite difference. One question, however, is settled beyond recall. If my life can serve you or Hilland, no power shall prevent my giving it. There is nothing more to be said; let us speak of something else."

"Yes, Alford, one thing more. Once I misjudged you. Forgive me," and she caused her horse to spring into a gallop, resolving that no commonplace words should follow closely upon a conversation that had touched the most sacred feelings and impulses of each heart.

For some reason there was a shadow over their parting early in the evening, for Graham was to ride toward the front with the dawn. Even Hilland's genial spirit could not wholly dissipate it. Graham made heroic efforts, but he was oppressed with a despondency which was well-nigh overwhelming. He felt that he was becoming unmanned, and in bitter self-censure resolved to remain with his regiment until the end came, as he believed would be the case with him before the year closed.

"Alford, remember your promise. We all may need you yet," were his aunt's last words in the gray of the morning.

CHAPTER XXVI.

AN IMPROVISED PICTURE GALLERY.

Much to Graham's satisfaction, his regiment, soon after he joined it, was ordered into the Shenandoah valley, and given some rough, dangerous picket duty that fully accorded with his mood. Even Hilland could not expect a visit from him now; and he explained to his friend that the other officers were taking their leaves of absence, and he, in turn, must perform their duties. And so the winter passed uneventfully away in a cheerful interchange of letters. Graham found that the front agreed with him better than Washington, and that his pulse resumed its former even beat. A dash at a Confederate picket post on a stormy night was far more tranquilizing than an evening in Hilland's luxurious rooms.

With the opening of the spring campaign Hilland joined his regiment, and was eager to remove by his courage and activity the slightest impression, if any existed, that he was disposed to shun dangerous service. There was no such impression, however; and he was most cordially welcomed, for he was a great favorite with both officers and men.

During the weeks that followed, the cavalry was called upon to do heavy work and severe fighting; and the two friends became more conspicuous than ever for their gallantry. They seemed, however, to bear charmed lives, for, while many fell or were wounded, they escaped unharmed.

At last the terrific and decisive campaign of Gettysburg opened; and from the war-wasted and guerilla-infested regions of Virginia the Northern troops found themselves marching through the

friendly and populous North. As the cavalry brigade entered a thriving village in Pennsylvania the people turned out almost en masse and gave them more than an ovation. The troopers were tired, hungry and thirsty; and, since, from every doorway was offered a boundless hospitality, the column came to a halt. The scene soon developed into a picturesque military picnic. Young maids and venerable matrons, gray-bearded fathers, shy, blushing girls, and eager-eyed children, all vied with each other in pressing upon their defenders every delicacy and substantial viand that their town could furnish at the moment. A pretty miss of sixteen, with a peach-like bloom in her cheeks, might be seen fitting here and there among the bearded troopers with a tray bearing goblets of milk. When they were emptied she would fly back and lift up white arms to her mother for more, and the almost equally blooming matron, smiling from the window, would fill the glasses again to the brim. The magnates of the village with their wives were foremost in the work, and were passing to and fro with great baskets of sandwiches, while stalwart men and boys were bringing from neighboring wells and pumps cool, delicious water for the horses. How immensely the troopers enjoyed it all! No scowling faces and cold looks here. All up and down the street, holding bridle-reins over their arms or leaning against the flanks of their horses, they feasted as they had not done since their last Thanksgiving Day at home. Such generous cups of coffee, enriched with cream almost too thick to flow from the capacious pitchers, and sweetened not only with snow-white sugar, but also with the smiles of some gracious woman, perhaps motherly in appearance, perhaps so fair and young that hearts beat faster under the weather-stained cavalry jackets.

"How pretty it all is!" said a familiar voice to Graham, as he was dividing a huge piece of cake with his pet May-burn; and Hilland laid his hand on his friend's shoulder.

"Ah, Hilland, seeing you is the best part of this banquet *à la militaire*. Yes, it is a heavenly change after the dreary land we've been marching and fighting in. It makes me feel that I have a country, and that it's worth all it may cost."

"Look, Graham,—look at that little fairy creature in white muslin, talking to that great bearded par of a sergeant. Isn't that a picture? O, I wish Grace, with her eye for picturesque effect, could look upon this scene."

"Nonsense, Hilland! as if she would look at anybody or anything but you! See that white-haired old woman leading that exquisite little girl to yonder group of soldiers. See how they doff their hats to her. There's another picture for you."

Hilland's magnificent appearance soon attracted half a dozen village belles about him, each offering some dainty; and one—a black-eyed witch a little bolder than the others—offered to fasten a rose from her hair in his button-hole.

He entered into the spirit of the occasion with all the zest of his old student days, professed to be delighted with the favor as she stood on tiptoe to reach the lapel of his coat; and then he stooped down and pressed his lips to the fragrant petals, assuring the blushing little coquette, meanwhile, that it was the next best thing to her own red lips.

How vividly in after years Graham would recall him, as he stood there, his handsome head thrown back, looking the ideal of an old Norse viking, laughing and chatting with the merry, innocent girls around him, his deep-blue eyes emitting mirthful gleams on every side! According to his nature, Graham drew off to one side and watched the scene with a smile, as he had viewed similar ones far back in the years, and away in Germany. He saw the ripples of laughter that his friend's words provoked, and recognized the old, easy grace, the light, French-like wit, that was wholly free from the French double entendre, and he thought, "Would that Grace could see him now, and she would

fall in love with him now, for her nature is too large for petty jealousy at a scene like that. O Hilland, you and the group around you make the finest picture of this long improvised gallery of pictures."

Suddenly there was a loud report of a cannon from a hill above the village, and a shell shrieked over their heads. Hilland's laughing aspect changed instantly. He seemed almost to gather the young girls in his arms as he hurried them into the nearest doorway, and then with a bound reached Graham, who held his horse, vaulted into the saddle, and dashed up the street to his men who were standing in a line.

Graham sprang lightly on his horse, for in the scenes resulting from the kaleidoscopic change that had taken place he would be more at home.

"Mount!" he shouted; and the order repeated up and down the street, changed the jolly, feasting troopers of a moment since into veterans who would sit like equestrian statues, if so commanded, though a hundred guns thundered against them.

From the farther end of the village came the wild yell characteristic of the cavalry charges of the Confederates, while shell after shell shrieked and exploded where had just been unaffected gaiety and hospitality.

The first shot had cleared the street of all except the Union soldiers; and those who dared to peep from window or door saw, with dismay, that the defenders whom they had so honored and welcomed were retreating at a gallop from the rebel charge.

They were soon undeceived, however, for at a gallop the national cavalry dashed into an open field nearby, formed with the precision of machinery, and by the time that the rebel charge had well-nigh spent itself in the sabring or capture of a few tardy troopers, Hilland, with platoon after platoon was emerging upon the street again at a sharp trot, which soon developed into a furious gallop as he dashed against their assailants; and the pretty little coquette, bold not only in love but in war, saw from a window her ideal knight with her red rose upon his breast leading a charge whose thunder caused the very earth to

tremble; and she clapped her hands and cheered so loudly as he approached that he looked up, saw her, and for an instant a sunny smile passed over the visage that had become so stern. Then came the shock of battle.

Graham's company was held in reserve, but for some reason his horse seemed to grow unmanageable; and sabres had scarcely clashed before he, with the blade on which was engraved "Grace Hilland," was at her husband's side, striking blows which none could resist. The enemy could not stand the furious onset, and gave way slowly, sullenly, and at last precipitately. The tide of battle swept beyond and away from the village; and its street became quiet again, except for the groans of the wounded.

Mangled horses, mangled men, some dead, some dying, and others almost rejoicing in wounds that would secure for them such gentle nurses, strewed the street that had been the scene of merry festivity.

The pretty little belle never saw her tawny, bearded knight again. She undoubtedly married and tormented some well-to-do dry goods clerk; but a vision of a man of heroic mould, with a red rose upon his breast, smiling up to her just as he was about to face what might be death, will thrill her feminine soul until she is old and gray.

That night Graham and Hilland talked and laughed over the whole affair as they sat by a camp fire.

"It has all turned out as usual," said Graham ruefully. "You won a victory, and no end of glory; I reprimand from my colonel."

"If you have received nothing worse than a reprimand you are fortunate," was Hilland's response. "The idea of any horse becoming unmanageable in your hands! The colonel understands the case as well as I do, and knows that it was your own ravenous appetite for a fight that became unmanageable. But