

One Of The Six Hundred

spread those reports concerning what she lone knew or could affect an interest in. I knew his subtle and crooked mode of working; and his ultimate object was undoubtedly that this rumour against me should ere long reach Chillingham Park.

Yet, removed as I was from headquarters, I could do nothing in the matter, and for the present had only "to grin and bear it."

Morning parade over, in obedience to Colonel Berkeley's order, I was putting the troop through a course of sword and lance exercise personally, and was so earnestly engaged in the work of the moment, that I did not perceive a dashing phaeton, drawn by a pair of spanking grey ponies, attended by an outrider in livery, on a showy bay horse that entered the barrack-yard, and drew up close by, as if its occupants wished to observe the progress of the drill.

After the lapse of a few minutes, Troop Sergeant-Major Staplyton, trotted his horse forward, and said—"Beg pardon, Captain Norcliff, but some friends of yours are waiting for you, sir."

Turning in my saddle, how great was my surprise to see Lady Louisa and Cora in the phaeton, which was driven by Berkeley, who was attired in a very accurate suit of forenoon muff. Dismounting, I sheathed my sword, threw my reins to Staplyton, and saying to my lieutenant, Jocelyn—

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"How interesting this is," said Lady Louisa, presenting her carefully-gloved little hand, with a brilliant smile, as she proceeded to imitate my last order, "Prepare to dismount one; the lance to be raised out of the bucket, by the right hand sliding down to the extent of the arm; two—ah! I forget two; you are quite an enthusiast."

Under this banter I detected, or thought so, a deep glance of anxiety and hidden meaning, more especially as she added, "You evidently think none of this drill-sergeant's work than of me."

My heart was so filled with sudden joy that I knew not what I said; but I kissed Cora's hand to conceal my confusion.

"And what of good Sir Nigel, Cora?" I asked.

"Papa comes to England to see you go away, and to take me home," replied my cousin, in a calm voice; "home to Calderwood, when all is over."

"All is over?"

"I mean when the army departs."

"And you are on leave, I perceive, Berkeley?"

"Aw—haw—yes, for a day or so. Doooid bore the work at Maidstone," he drawled out.

I was obliged as yet to dissemble though there was an ill-concealed air of smiling triumph upon my comrade that gave me considerable uneasiness.

"And now, sir, what have you to say for yourself?" said Lady Louisa, tapping me on the epaulette with her parasol, and speaking with an air of mock severity. "So the rules of society are to be inverted to suit your lancer tastes the ladies are to wait upon the gentlemen? Quartered actually in Canterbury, and yet you never came near us."

"Lady Louisa," I was beginning, yet not knowing what to say, as I could never imagine that she doubted the reason of my non-appearance at Chillingham.

"What am I to think of it?" she continued, smiling.

Berkeley laughed. I believe the fellow thought we were on the eye of a cooless.

"Remember my constitutional timidity," I urged.

"Timidity in a captain of lancers?" she exclaimed, laughing.

"I ventured to hope that the ear at least, might have remembered me. You knew that I was at Chillingham Park, it appears?" she observed, with a pretty air of pique.

"Yes," said I, soothed by her glance of fond reproach; "Sir Nigel's letter told me so."

"Yet you never came even once to visit us, and I longed so much to see you, for I had a good deal of gossip and about concerning our residence at Calderwood."

"But the earl omitted to leave a card and your mamma never wrote; and then the rules of society—" I urged, still harping on my grievance.

"The rules of fiddlesticks! When did lovers ever heed them?" she asked, in a rapid whisper, while Berkeley addressed a few words to Jocelyn, and while her dark and sparkling eyes flashed a glance that made me forget all.

"Well, here are the cards of papa and mamma, with an express invitation to Chillingham. You will dine with us this evening, won't you?"

"With pleasure."

"Papa and mamma are to dine at the Priory, but on another day you shall see them."

"And the hour?"

"Eight."

"Eight!" I repeated, for that was the very hour of my appointment with Agnes Auriol, and the park lay in an opposite direction from the barracks. Here was a dilemma. But I resolved, if possible, to keep faith with both, and said—

"Excuse me, pray; but on reflection I find it impossible to be present at that hour."

"Indeed?"

"But I shall present myself soon after in the drawing room."

"What prevents you?" she asked, raising her dark eyebrows.

"Duty, unfortunately."

"In that case I must excuse you. Allegiance to me should not precede that which you owe to the Queen. Till this evening, then, adieu."

She presented her hand, and bowed I took it in mine, and lingering, would, I am sure, have kissed it, but for the troop close by, and dozens of idlers who were looting at the barrack windows in the shell-jackets shirt sleeves. There was a smile on her bright face that contrasted strongly with the sad and wistful glance of Cora's soft dark eyes; and, as the phaeton swept away from the barrack-square, I forgot to bid adieu to Berkeley, though I wished him in very warm quarters indeed.

I forgot even to address Cora, or rejoin the troop. I forgot all about Studhome's letter and its import; and, leaving Jocelyn to finish the drill as he pleased, walked mechanically to my quarters, filled by a great revulsion of feeling, and remembering only that Agnes loved me—loved me still. Of that day's close could I have foreseen the end I counted the hours that intervened between the time that I should be at the park. I resolved, if possible, to leave nothing undone to gain the good opinion of the earl and countess; and, on after thought, I regretted that I might have paid my last visit to the cottage at the Reculvers an hour or so earlier, and performed my task of philanthropy, even at the risk of being seen; though, sooth to say, I rather dreaded that event, circumstanced as I was with Louisa; and since the clouds that lowered upon my horizon were dispersed now, the unfortunate victim of Berkeley could be of no further use to me.

Berkeley had been watching my interview with Louisa narrowly, and to in our whole situation at a glance, or thought he did so.

He feared that Lady Louisa's gaiety was a little too spasmodic to be real, in one who was usually calm and reserved; and, hence, that it cloaked some deeper emotion than met the eye. My sensation at her appearance, and during the whole interview, must have been apparent even to a less interested spectator than Berkeley, and his whole soul became stirred by emotions of jealousy, rivalry, and revenge.

Having had the full entree of Chillingham Park for the last month and more, he had, as he conceived, made a fair lodgment, to use a military phrase, in the body of the place—that he had the cards in his own hands, and should lose no time in discovering how Lady Louisa was affected towards him.

Cool, vain, insolent and unimpassioned, this blase pervent thought over his plans while the phaeton rolled along the Canterbury Road; and the aristocratic aspect of the coroneted gate and castellated lodge, the far extent of green sward stretching under the stately elms, closely shorn and carefully rolled—sward that had never been ploughed since the days, perhaps, when the Scot and Englishman measured their swords at Flodden and Pinkie, kindled brighter the fire of ambition with him, and made him resolve at all hazards to supplant me.

One fact he had resolved on—that, though the days of bodily assassination had gone out of English society, or existed only in the pages of sensational romance, if he failed to obtain Louisa Loftus, that I should never succeed.

CHAPTER XX.

Not thus the shade may pass,
That is upon thy heart,
There is no sun in earthly skies
Can bid its gloom depart;

For falsehood's stain is on it,
And cruelty and guile—
And these are stains that never pass,
And shades that never smile.

Miss London.

The mansion of Chillingham is one of the stateliest in that part of England. It consists of a great central block and peristyle, with two wings coming forward, forming a species of quadrangle. Detailed in the taste that existed about 1690, and erected by the second peer

of the house, who had been created an earl at the Restoration, it was built entirely of red brick, save the eight Corinthian columns of the peristyle, the great flight of steps that ascended thereto, the elaborate cornices, cornices balustrades, and vases, which were all of white freestone, and in the style that is denominated Palladian.

Elaborately carved within the central pediment are the arms of the Loftus family—a chevron engrailed between the treflois, supported by two eagles; the crest a hand grasping a battle-axe, with the motto, *Prend moi tel-ne je suis*, or "Take me as I am."

It occupies a gentle eminence in the centre of the spacious park, and every embellishment has been added around to make the natural beauties of the somewhat flat and peaceful scene to harmonize. Though equally aristocratic in tone, it is very different in aspect from the bold and quaint, gloomy, embattled, and romantic mansion of Calderwood, with its turrets and loopholes for bullet or arrow; and is, in fact a style of edifice almost entirely peculiar to England and Holland.

Cora and Berkeley were as yet the only guests at the park, and on hand begged a few minutes' interview with Lady Louisa, in the library or the conservatory, whichever, she pleased, after luncheon.

She coloured deeply, almost with annoyance, at a request so odd, and looking at her watch, said—

"We lunch at two. Papa and mamma are at Canterbury; I have letters to write, but shall be in the library at six—that is, two hours before dinner."

"Thanks; after we have dined then."

"What on earth can the man have to say in such a solemn fashion?" whispered Louisa.

"I cannot conceive," replied my cousin, thinking of something else.

The luncheon, at which those three were present, with a great white-headed and white-waistcoated butler, an three powdered and liveried servants in attendance, passed over almost irksome silence, for all were fully occupied by their own thoughts or plans.

Berkeley who gazed at Louisa from time to time with ill-concealed admiration and gratified vanity, felt that the absence of the earl and countess this interesting juncture boded well for his success, opportunities for a tete-a-tete in that usually numerous and always aristocratic household being few and far between.

Lady Louisa who more than half divined her admirer's hopes, was full of her brief and hurried interview with me, and, in anticipation of a scene, felt bored and worried; while poor Cora's thoughts were all her own; a little, as it was a great sorrow, which none could know or sympathize with, filled her heart in secret, for she was not communicative, and thus, while she shared all the confidences and gossip of my Lady Louisa, gave but little of her own in return.

So the progress of tiffin was "dooiced slow," as Berkeley thought it, and he felt somewhat relieved when Lady Louisa rose, and with a smile, said to Cora—

"Excuse me, I am now going to write my letters;" adding to him, "I shall not forget," with another smile that could have read it aright, boded but little success to his cherished plans.

Punctually to the time, Lady Louisa sailed into the library, where Berkeley, whose courage had been alternately ebbing and flowing, was in waiting. He handed her a seat, and, after a few deprecatory remarks, by way of preface, took her right hand between his own, and as she did not immediately withdraw it, he assumed fresh courage and made a formal declaration of his love and admiration of her, and then, before she could speak, he rambled on about his finances, his social habits, his income—some six thousand per annum—his further expectations, and a great deal more to the same purpose.

Lady Louisa, remained perfectly silent, and this silence, as he had nothing more to say, caused him infinite confusion.

"You do not speak—you do not answer, dear Lady Louisa. Do you not understand me? I tell you that I love you with all the devotion of which the human heart is capable, and I pray you to pardon the—aw, aw—presumption of one in every respect so unworthy of you, in venturing to address you in the language of love but who can control the—aw—emotions of the heart."

Still she did not speak.

"Say that you pity—say that you—aw—understand me?" he urged.

"I understand, but cannot pity you," replied Louisa; calmly, and without betraying the slightest flutter or embarrassment. "And I beg to assure you that—that, in this matter, you must—"

"Address the earl, your father, dearest Lady Louisa—aw, aw—in writing or verbally?" was the cool and rapid question.

"Neither verbally nor in writing, said she, rising, and assuming a dignified bearing that made Berkeley feel himself intolerably little.

"Aw, aw—the dooce! Then how?" he asked, having recourse to his eyes.

"I was about to say that I thank you, Mr. Berkeley—thank you very much indeed—for the great honour you do me in addressing me thus, and in mak-

ing me such an offer; but you must give me time to think, as I could never, never lose you. Pardon me an avowal so very painful, and permit me to leave you."

Her coolness, and almost unmoved bearing, piqued Berkeley and wounded his self-esteem, which was inordinate.

"Your bridal flowers," said he with a bitter smile, "must be blended with the faded strawberry leaves of some Anglo-Norman line, I presume. Not so, sir. I have hopes, ma'ld, I but they are not quite so high," she replied, with a calm and steady glance, though her short upper lip quivered with suppressed pride and anger.

"Indeed!" sneered Berkeley, as his habitual insolence came now thoroughly to his aid; "and so you once and for all actually refuse me, Lady Loftus?"

"I grieve to say, sir that I do—once and for ever. Let us endeavor to forget this very unpleasant scene, and if possible, be as before—friends."

"And for whom do you refuse me?" he demanded, as pride and jealousy rendered him blind to all future consequences.

"For whom, sir, matters not to you."

"I think it matters very much to me." "Perhaps, but permit me to remind you, Mr. Berkeley, that I am unused to be questioned thus."

"Oh," said he, bowing low, "dooiced good. I—aw—crave your pardon; but if you will not tell me your preference, Lady Louisa, shall I have the honor of telling you?"

"If you please," she replied, turning half away, and shrugging her shoulders, while her colour deepened, and her dark eyes gleamed with sudden anger.

"It is for one who is even now, perhaps, with a worthless creature, whose society he prefers to yours—aw how the cast-off mistress of a brother officer."

"It is false, Sir!" she exclaimed, in a agitated voice, as she turned her flash eyes full upon him, and drew her tall and glorious figure up like a tragedy queen; "it is false, and cannot be."

"Oh no, it is not false, my dear madam, but unfortunately, is—aw—too true."

There was a pause, during which they regarded each other steadily.

"Why could he not dine here at eight this evening?" asked Berkeley.

"Because duty required his attendance elsewhere, if it is Captain Norcliff to whom you refer, sir; but I shall no longer bandy words here with you."

"Duty—dooiced good! good! At that very hour this evening—eight—we shall find them together, if you choose to accompany me."

"I, sir, accompany you?" she repeated, disdainfully.

"Yes."

"To where he is—with her?"

"Yes."

"Dare you make such a proposition to me?"

"I do dare," he replied, with blind fury; "and I tell you further, Lady Louisa Loftus, that this fine and moral young gentleman, Captain Norcliff, has an affair with a girl well known to all our mess; as the French, happily would term her, une femme entretenue of a brother officer—one who has a dooiced flaw in her fair fame, and most decided kick in her gallop," he added coarsely and maliciously, determined at all hazards to ruin me with Louisa, and even with my uncle and cousin, though he could gain nothing thereby.

"And you, his friend, tell me of this?" exclaimed Louisa, with withering scorn in her manner, as she played nervously with the rose diamond ring I had given her.

"Will you and Miss Calderwood accompany me this evening to the cottage near the Reculvers, and I shall have the pleasure of showing you how our modern Captain Bailey solaces himself in 'country quarters'."

At the mention of this cottage Lady Louisa started, and changed colour visibly, and it was then Berkeley's turn to smile, for certain odd rumours con- had reached her through the servants at the park, and more particularly her own attendant; but recollecting her position, she said, loftily and decidedly, while cresting up her haughty head.

"This false sir! I am indisposed to act the spy, and he will not be there."

"Oh yes, he will be there, be true as a turtle-dove—exact as—haw—the clock at the Horse Guards. We shall find him mingling his tears with those of the Traviata; a philanthropic Howard in a lancer uniform—a very Joseph—haw—haw—a man of snow?"

"Sir!" exclaimed Lady Loftus, stamping her little foot.

"He's been devilish hard up of late—got fifty pounds this morning from the paymaster—so his man told mine; the girl's a dancer, and every one knows they are dooiced expensive cattle to keep and shoe."

"Sir, you forget yourself!" exclaimed Lady Louisa, while her eyes flashed with an expression of rage, which even her long lashes failed to soften. "Papa and mamma are to dine at the Priory—so this evening I am free, and you shall drive us, that is, Miss Calderwood and me—to that odious cottage, and with my own eyes I shall prove who is false, you or he!"

"Agreed, I am quite at your disposal," said he, bowing low.

And so ended this singular interview. So ended Berkeley's hopes of all but gratified malice, and they separated, each with anger against the other sparkling in their eyes, and burning in their hearts.

Louisa at once sought Cora, and related all that had passed—the abrupt proposal and its singular sequel—little knowing that the latter portion of her narrative, like a double-edged sword, cut two ways at once, and how her words stabbed poor Cora to the heart; for the good girl would rather have heard that I was steady and faithful in my regard for her brilliant rival than that I was the creature Berkeley had striven to make me appear.

I have loved your cousin Newton too much to cease doing so now, unless unworthy, when I shall thrust his image from my heart as if I had never seen or known him! and I feel, Cora Calderwood, that I must either love or hate him!" exclaimed Louisa, with a strange energy that quite startled the quiet Scottish girl. "I have a craving to learn his truth or his falsehood, personally and undoubtedly. So you shall come with me Cora. 'Tis only your Cousin you seek!"

"Louisa Loftus," she exclaimed, "I cannot, and will not, believe, in this duplicity or depravity of my cousin Newton."

"We shall go to this vile woman's cottage, dear, in secret, and learn the truth for ourselves."

"Even at the risk of appearing guilty of espionage?"

"At all risks?" was the impetuous reply. "That cottage by the Reculver Aha! I remember that mamma's sottobrete said something about the young person who resides there with an old woman, her mother, or aunt, or something equally veritable and creditable; and added that no one was ever known to visit her, save a gentleman like an officer—mark that, like an officer—who usually came on horseback, and at night."

"Oh, Louisa, you do not—you cannot—you shall not believe all those slanders about dear Newton," said Cora, vehemently, in a passion of tears, as she threw herself on the heaving bosom of her more fiery and energetic friend, who, however, wept also. "Did you not remark how pale, almost haggard, poor Newton looked when we saw him with his troop today?"

"Well, perhaps nocturnal rambles and late rides from the Reculvers—"

"Now peace, Lady Loftus, if you would not break my heart," exclaimed Cora, arresting a cutting remark by a kiss on her rosy and tremulous lips.

About twilight the pony phaeton gain set forth from Chillingham Park with two young ladies. There was no outrider in attendance on this occasion; and their well-cloaked charioteer was Mr. De Warr Berkeley, who was very silent, to whom they never spoke and who, to tell the truth, felt somewhat ill at ease now, and scarcely knew where the whole affair would end.

One fact he was certain of. He knew from past experience and my general character when serving in India, that I was not to be trifled with.

He would, perhaps, have backed out of the whole matter, could he have seen how to do so. Then Louisa was inflexible, though Cora was almost passive.

The ladies felt that, even were the information true, they should not the less hate and despise the informant who gratified his spite and malice the expense of a friend on the one hand and of their peace on the other.

"We're doing wrong, dearest Louisa," Cora whispered, as the ponderous park gates clanked heavily behind them, and they bowed along the darkening road, towards where the spires of Canterbury were visible against the westward.

"I know that in one sense we are replied Lady Louisa, through her clenched teeth and closely drawn veil; but I am not the less determined to solve this matter, to probe it to the utmost, and to convict Captain Norcliff or Mr. Berkeley of Perfidy. So take courage and allons, my love!"

As they proceeded the April twilight deepened. Once or twice Cora spoke of returning and then it was Berkeley who urged them to proceed.

"Aw—haw, dooiced absurd—dooiced hang fire now, ladies, please!" said he. "We shall draw the cover directly."

Yes he was not without unpleasant misgiving as to how he might figure after "the cover" was drawn, unless he could convey the ladies away instantly, before explanations took place and this was a part of his intended programme.

"After having convincing proof that Captain Norcliff is here, you will, of course, not remain—aw—to upbraid and all that sort of thing, Lady Louisa?" he asked, rather nervously.

"Proceed, sir, but do not question me," was the haughty response, which made his cheek flush with rage in the shade. For now Lady Loftus remembered, and felt fully, that in her anger and confusion she had been completely thrown off her guard; and that she had revealed and acknowledged our mutual engagement, and her passion for me, to Cora Calderwood (who had always suspected it), and, worse than all, to Berkeley, whom she heartily despised, and who, she feared, might make a

dangerous use of the information he had won.

She had also been lured into committing an act of espionage, far from proper or becoming. But, nevertheless she resolved to go through it, now, and to probe the ugly affair to the end at all hazards—even to facing the fiery anger of her mother, the lofty indignation of the earl, and the vacant and senile astonishment of my Lord Slubber.

"How strange it is, Cora," she whispered, as they sat hand in hand, "that one impulse leads me still to love Newton, and yet another impulse lures me to hate him! Where is my constitutional and where are my family pride and womanly modesty, when I stoop to an act like this, and drag you, poor child, into it, too? Oh, I must love him very much surely—and you, Cora, you—"

"I love him, too," was the calm and fearless response, under the closely-brown veil.

"Of course you do—he is your cousin, and your old playmate."

Cora assented only by a little sigh.

They both, it appeared afterwards, hoped desperately that Berkeley might yet be mistaken in the whole affair, so far as I was concerned, for they felt bitterly the truth of the maxim, that "faith once destroyed is destroyed forever, unless in a heart which is in itself intrinsically faithless."

In the dusk tears rolled unseen down the gentle face of Cora; but Louisa suppressed all appearance of emotion by biting her nether lip, and clenching her little white teeth, like the heroine of a French melodrama.

"Here we are at last! Hush! let us approach softly," said Berkeley, as they drew near the little cottage where Miss Auriol resided; and he turned the phaeton into a grassy lane, and between high hedges close by; they open a private wicket, and assisted Cora to alight; but disdainful the assistance of his proffered arm, Lady Louisa sprang to the ground alone.

"This way—follow me, and softly, if you please," said Berkeley, as he drew forth a private latch-key for the back door—a means of entrance possessed by himself alone—and they traversed the little flower-garden which lay around the cottage.

My horse stood at the front door, with his bridle fastened to the porch; and to this circumstance he took care to draw their attention.

"It is Norcliff's black nag—his cove's hack with the white star on the countenance. You—aw—recognize it, ladies?" he whispered.

"A present to him from my poor papa," said Cora, reproachfully, as her heart beat painfully, and Louisa bit her lips as the agony of conviction stole upon her.

"Proceed, sir," said she, haughtily; "what next?"

"Voices in the parlour—it is there our birds must be; this way," said Berkeley, who, after a rapid inspection of the interior, between the green trailers, scarlet-runners, and white muslin curtains, had satisfied himself as to who were within, and felt assured that if he lost Lady Louisa, I, at least, should never win her, and that if, on one hand, he made me an enemy, on the other, he got handsomely rid of the unhappy girl of whose caresses he had long since grown weary, and whose importunities and reproaches bored and fretted him now.

Between him and me there would be no friendship wasted, no love lost; so he consoled himself by the dangerous maxim, "that all is fair in love or war," as he opened the door softly with his latch-key, and led his now agitated companions into the interior of the cottage.

CHAPTER XXI.

Such men are always the most unscrupulous in revenge. I have seen murder in his eyes a score of times in the last fortnight. If our lines had fallen in the pleasant Italian places, he would have invested twenty scudi long ago in hiring a dagger. As it is, civilization and the rural police stand our friends.

Guy Livingstone.

The day wore away, the shadows of evening came, and all unaware of the rod, that was in pickle for me, and the awkward surprise that was preparing after making a most careful toilet at the barracks, that I might keep my cherished appointment at the park, I stuffed Mr. Goldrick's remittance into my porte-monnaie, and set out in muffi for the cottage near the Reculvers. As I entered along, anxious to perform my duty there, and without loss of time to turn my bride towards Chillingham Park, I contrasted the happiness and the hopefulness of Louisa's love and mine with the futile passion which the poor lost Agnes Auriol, cherished for the worthless Berkeley; and while my heart, inspired by new and joyous impulses since the morning interview, sincerely mourned for her, it was at the same time smothered by the conviction that I could enable her to depart on that melancholy-

To be continued.