

MAITLAND'S MYSTERY.

(Continued.)

It was fifteen minutes' more, however, before the evening duties were complete; and when at last the men went swinging homeward in their white canvas frocks and Perry could return to his quarters to dress for his eagerly anticipated call, the first thing that met his eyes as he came in sight of officers' row was a huge, bulky, covered travelling carriage in front of Sprague's. Two or three ladies were there at the gate. Mr. Ewen, the English manager, was just mounting his horse; Dr. Quin, too, was there and already in saddle; and before poor Perry could get half-way across the parade, and just as the trumpets were sounding mess-call for supper, the bulky vehicle started; the ladies waved their handkerchiefs and kissed their hands, and, escorted by Ewen and the doctor, saluted by Colonel Brainard and the adjutant with raised forage-caps, Gladys Maitland was driven slowly away,—and Mrs. Belknap stood there in the little group of ladies smiling sweetly upon him as he hastened toward them. For many a long day afterwards mess-call always made him think of Mrs. Belknap's smile, and Mrs. Belknap's smile of mess-call. He shuddered at sound of one or sight of the other.

It was Mrs. Sprague who stepped forward to greet him, her womanly heart filled with sympathy for the sentiment she suspected. She had to push by Mrs. Belknap to reach him; but, this time, no consideration of etiquette stood in the way.

"It couldn't be helped," she said, in low, hurried tone, her kind eyes searching his, so clouded in the bitterness of his disappointment. It couldn't be helped. The news of her accident—or something—brought on a seizure of some kind. Mr. Maitland was taken very ill, and they sent for her. The manager came, and with him her old nurse, Mrs. Cowan, and Dr. Quin said she could be moved without trouble: so she had to go. I hated to have her, too, for I've hardly had a word with her: Mrs. Belknap has been there most of the afternoon, even when she had a guest of her own just arrived, too." And Mrs. Sprague could not but show her vexation at this retrospect.

Perry stood in silence, looking yearningly after the retreating vehicle. It would take him but a few minutes to hasten to stables and saddle Nolan; he could easily catch them before they had gone two miles; but there was parade, and he could not ask to be excused. Not until he suddenly looked around and saw that Mrs. Belknap's dark eyes were fixed in close scrutiny upon his face did he realize how he was betraying himself. Then he rallied, but with evident effort.

The colonel was standing but a few paces away, chatting with Mrs. Lawrence and his faithful adjutant. Mrs. Sprague stepped quickly towards him and spoke a few words in a low tone, while Mrs. Belknap remained looking straight into Perry's eyes. Before the young fellow could gather himself, Colonel Brainard, as though in reply to a suggestion of Mrs. Sprague's, suddenly started, exclaiming, "Why, by all means!" and then called aloud,—

"Oh! Perry, why not gallop down and overtake the Dunraven carriage and say good-by? Here's my horse all saddled now right in the yard. Take him and go: I would."

There was something so hearty and genial and sympathetic in the colonel's manner that Perry's face flushed despite his effort at nonchalance. The thought of seeing her again and hearing her sweet voice was a powerful incentive. He longed to go. The colonel's invitation was equivalent to an excuse from parade. There was no reason why he should not go. He was on the very point of thankfully accepting the tempting offer, when Mrs. Belknap's words arrested him. Clear and cutting, but still so low that none but he could hear, she spoke:

"Take my word for it, you are not wanted—nor any other man, when Dr. Quin is with her."

Perry's hesitation vanished. "Thank you, colonel. I believe I don't care to go," he answered, and, raising his cap to the ladies, turned on his heel and hurried to his quarters. Mrs. Belknap stood watching him one moment, then calmly rejoined the party at the gate.

"Well," said she, with the languid drawl that her regimental associates had learned to know so well, "this has been a day of surprises, has it not? Only fancy our having a beautiful English heiress here within reach and never knowing it until to-day!"

"But you had a surprise of your own, had you not?" interposed Mrs. Sprague, who was still chafing over the fact that her lovely and dangerous neighbour should have so monopolized the guest she considered hers by prior right, and who meant to remind her thus publicly of the neglect of which she had been guilty.

"Mrs. Page, you mean?" responded Mrs. Belknap, with the same languid, imperturbable manner. "Yes,—poor Jennie! She is always utterly used up after one of those long ambulance-journeys, and can only take a cup of tea and go to bed in a darkened room. All she wants is to be let alone, she says, until she gets over it. I suppose she will sleep till tattoo and then be up for half the night. You'll all come in and see her, won't you? *Au revoir.*"

And so, calmly and gracefully and victoriously, the dark-eyed dame withdrew, leaving her honest-hearted antagonist only the sense of exasperation and defeat.

It was full quarter of an hour after parade, and darkness was settling down on the garrison, when Captain Lawrence's orderly tapped at the door of Mr. Perry's quarters, and, being bidden "Come in," pushed on to the sitting-room, where he found that young officer plunged deep in an easy chair in front of the fireplace, his attitude one of profound dejection.

"Beg pardon, lieutenant," said the man, "but Mrs. Lawrence and the captain's waitin' dinner for you."

XV.

Two days passed without event of any kind. Socially speaking, the garrison was enlivened by the advent of Mrs. Page, and everybody flocked to the Belknap's quarters in order to do her proper homage. When Perry called he asked Parke to go with him, and, when the latter seemed ready to leave, the former, disregarding a very palpable hint from the lady of the house, picked up his forage-cap and went likewise. For two days the one subject under constant discussion at the post was the event of Miss Maitland's sudden appearance, her perilous run, and her daring and skilful rescue. Everybody maintained that Perry ought to be a very proud and happy fellow to have been the hero of such an occasion; but it was very plain that Perry was neither proud nor anything like happy. No one had ever known him so silent and cast down. The talk with Lawrence had helped matters very little.

In brief, this was about all the captain could tell him, and it was all hearsay evidence at best. The officers of the Eleventh and their ladies had, with a few exceptions, taken a dislike to Dr. Quin before Belknap and Lawrence with their companies of infantry had been ordered to Fort Rossiter. The feeling was in full blast when they arrived, and during the six or eight months they served there together, the infantry people heard only one side of the story,—that of the Eleventh,—for the doctor never condescended to discuss the matter. After he was forbidden to leave the post by his commanding officer, and after the announcement of the "blockade" of Dunraven, it was observed that signals were sometimes made from the ranch at night: a strong light thrown from a reflector was flashed three times and then withdrawn. Next it was noted, by an enterprising member of the guard, that these signals were answered by a light in the doctor's windows, then that he mounted his horse and rode away down the valley of the Moneo. He was always back at sick-call; and, if any one told the commanding officer of his disobedience of orders, it was not done until so near the departure of the Eleventh that the doctor was not actually caught in the act. Things would undoubtedly have been brought to a crisis had the Eleventh been allowed to remain.

Now as to the story about Mrs. Quin and her going. It was observed during the winter that she was looking very badly, and the story went the rounds in the Eleventh that she was stung and suffering because of her husband's conduct. Unquestionably there was some fair enchantress at Dunraven who lured him from his own fireside. She had no intimates among the ladies. She was proud and silent. It did not seem to occur to them that she was resentful of their dislike of her husband. They were sure she was "pining" because of his neglect—or worse. When, therefore, without word of warning, she suddenly took her departure in the spring, there was a gasp of gossip-loving cronies in the garrison: all doubts were at an end: she had left him and taken her children with her.

"The more I think of it," said Lawrence, "the more I believe the whole thing capable of explanation. The only thing that puzzles me now is that Quin hides anything from your colonel, who is one of the most courteous and considerate men I ever served with. Perhaps he has told him, by this time: we don't know. Perhaps he thought he might be of the same stamp as his predecessor, and was waiting to find out before he made his confidences. As to Mrs. Quin's going away when she did, it may have been simply that her health was suffering, she needed change, and went with his full advice and by his wish, and he simply feels too much contempt for garrison gossip to explain. Very probably he knows nothing of the stories and theories in circulation: I'm sure I did not until a very few weeks ago. You know, Perry, there are some men in garrison who hear and know everything, and others who never hear a word of scandal."

But Perry was low in his mind. He could not forget Quin's sudden appearance,—his calling her Gladys; and then he hated the thought that it was Quin who saw him having that confounded tender interview with Mrs. Belknap. Was there ever such a streak of ill luck as that? No doubt the fellow had told her all about it! Perry left Lawrence's that night very little comforted, and only one gleam of hope did he receive in the two days that followed. Mrs. Sprague joyfully beckoned to him on Wednesday afternoon to read him a little note that had just come from Miss Maitland. Her father had been very ill, she wrote; his condition was still critical; but she sent a world of thanks to her kind entertainers at Rossiter, and these words: "I was sorry not to be able to see Mr. Perry. Do not let him think I have forgotten, or will be likely to forget, the service he—and Nolan—did me."

Of Dr. Quin he saw very little. With the full consent and knowledge of Colonel Brainard, the doctor was spending a good deal of time at Dunraven now, attending to Mr. Maitland. Indeed, there seemed to be an excellent understanding between the commandant and his medical officer, and it was known that they had had a long talk together. Upper circles in the garrison were still agitated with chat and conjecture about Gladys Maitland and her strange father; Perry was still tortured with questions about his one visit to Dunraven whenever he was so incautious as to appear in public; but all through "the quarters," everywhere among the rank and file, there was a subject that engrossed all thoughts and tongues, and that was discussed with feeling that seemed to deepen with every day,—the approaching court-martial of Sergeant Leary and Trooper Kelly.

As a result of his investigation, Captain Stryker had preferred charges against these two men,—the one for leading and the other for being accessory to the assault on his stable-sergeant. Gwynne was still at the hospital, though rapidly recovering from his injuries. Not a word had he said that would implicate or accuse any man; but Stryker's knowledge of his soldiers, and his clear insight into human motive and character were such that

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