

# One Of The Six Hundred

Continued from last issue.

really now?"  
"Yes, please," returned the young girl, in tears.

"Well, I sha'n't then—not till I've overhauled your pockets, and rummaged yer a bit, and that's all about it."

In a moment his ruffianly hands were upon her; the girl uttered a shrill scream and he a ferocious oath. I spurred forward my horse, reined him in with dragon-like precision, and with the butt-end of my riding-whip death would be thief a blow which tumbled him in a heap at the foot of the stile.

With a terrible malediction, while the blood poured over his face, he staggered up, and stopped his head, and thrusting his battered hat well over his eyes, was rushing on with uplifted cudgel, when I dexterously dealt him cut "one" full on the face, and made my horse rear for the purpose of riding him down. On he this he uttered a yell, forced his way through the hedge, and taking a flight, disappeared, with his bull terrier barking furiously at his heels.

The young lady whom I had saved by such timely succour was still standing, pale and trembling, on the summit of the stile, irresolute which way to turn, when I dismounted, and throwing the reins over my arm, lifted my hat, and expressing the great satisfaction it afforded me to have been of such timely service, I offered my hand and assisted her to descend.

She thanked me in an agitated voice, and with a hurried manner, in language which was well chosen, but seemed perfectly natural to her.

I now perceived that she was older than her slender figure at first suggested. She seemed to be about five-and-twenty years of age, with a softly feminine and purely English face, long, tremulous eyelashes, and a perfect nose and chin. She was almost beautiful; but with an air of sadness in her charming little features, which, when her alarm subsided, was too apparent to fail to interest me.

"If you will not deem me intrusive," said I, lifting my hat again, and drawing back respectfully one pace, "I shall be most happy to escort you home."

"I thank you, sir."

"It is almost dark now, and your friends may be anxious about you."

"Friends?" she repeated, inquiringly in a strange voice, while a cough of a most consumptive sound seemed to rack her slender form.

"Or permit me to escort you to where you were going. It was in this direction luckily, or I could only have taken my horse over the stile by a flying leap!"

"But, sir—" she began, and paused.

"Consider that fellow may be within ear-shot, and he may return again."

"True, sir. I do thank you very much. There was a time when I was not wont to be so unprotected; but I am so loth—"

"To incommode me; is it not so?"

"Yes, sir."

"Oh, do not say so. I am from the barracks at Maidstone, though in mufti, as you see, and trust you will permit me to be your escort. My time is at present completely at your disposal."

"I live about half a mile on this side of the village; and if you will be so very kind—"

"I shall have much pleasure," I replied, with a respectful bow; and leading my horse by the bridle, I walked on ward by her side.

She conversed with me easily and gracefully on many subjects—the oddness of her being abroad at such an hour alone; but in the country folks thought nothing of it. She had been visiting a sick fisherman's wife, or child or something, at Herne Bay, and was detained on the roads were not unsafe thereabouts in general; but she must be careful for the future.

The we remarked, of course, the beauty of the evening, the romance the scenery along the coast, and its associations, by Herne Bay, the Reculvers, and Bitchington; and my fair companion seemed well read, for she knew all about the told kings of Kent, and, pointing seaward, showed me that where now the ocean rolled, there stood in other times a goodly Saxon town, with something about a king named Ethelbert, whose palace was close by the Reculvers; and so, chatting away pleasantly in a tone of which that was very alluring, for there was a musical chord in it, we proceeded along the highway, until she suddenly paused at the iron gate of a pretty little rustic cottage that stood within a garden plot, back some fifty paces or so from the highway.

"Here sir," said she, "is the gate to my home; at least, that which is now so; and, with my best thanks, I must bid you adieu."

The girl's voice, air, and manner were certainly charming, and there was a plaintive sadness about her that was decidedly interesting; but my mind was too full of a pure passion, an exalted love for Louisa Loftus, to

have much enthusiasm about pretty girls then, or to have any taste for running after them, as in the days when I first donned my lancer trappings. Thus, quite careless of cultivating her acquaintance, I was about to withdraw with a polite bow, when she added—

"After the great service you have rendered, and so bravely too, I hope you do not deem me ungrateful in not having you to rest for a few minutes; but,—but—"

"Papa might frown, and mamma have some fears of a light dragoon," said I, laughing. "Is it not so?"

"My papa!" she replied in a voice that was extremely touching. "Sir, of course you cannot know; but he is dead, and my dear mamma has lain by his side these seven years."

"Pardon me," said I, "if by a heedless speech I have probed a hidden wound—a sorrow so deep. But your friends, perhaps, might wish to discover the sturdy beggar from whom I saved you, and if I can be of any service, by sending a note to Maidstone barracks, address—"

At that moment the door of the cottage opened, and a comely old woman, dressed in good matronly taste, appeared with a lighted candle in her hand, and with an expression of alarm in her good-humoured face, as she exclaimed:

"La, miss! how late you are! I was quite alarmed for fear you had returned, as you often do, by the seashore, and met with an accident among the rocks."

"No, my dear friend, I am here in intervention I might have had a very different thing to say."

I bowed; but of course remained silent.

"She is, perhaps, a governess—some useful young person, some victim of a stenographer," thought I.

"I perceived that you were an officer though out of uniform, and—"

"You don't take every officer for a sad rake, I hope?" said I, laughing.

"Nay, nay, sir; the scarlet coat is very dear to me!"

"Your father, perhaps, was in the army?"

"My poor father was a man of peace, and a man after God's own heart, sir. No, no; you mistake me," she replied, with an air of annoyance and wounded pride; "but you belong, I presume, to the cavalry?"

"Yes, said I, as her manner puzzled her more and more.

"The lancers?" she asked, impetuously.

"Yes, the lancers."

I could see, even in the twilight, that her colour deepened, while a painful sigh escaped her.

"Do you know any one in my corps?"

"Yes—no; that is, I never saw it; but I did know a—"

Who, or what she knew, I was not destined to learn, for, just at that moment, the postman passed with a lantern glimmering in his hand, a bag slung over his back.

"A letter! You have one for me, have you not?" she asked, in a clear and piercing voice, while holding forth her hands.

"No, miss, I am sorry to say," stammered the man, touching his cap, and passing abruptly on; "better luck in the morning I hope."

"No letter, Nurse Goldsworthy, no letter yet," she muttered. "How cruel, how very cruel or, nurse dear, is this but the way of the world—the world that he has lived in? Oh, it is cold—cold and selfish!" and, pressing her hands upon her breast, she tottered against the iron gate, and then a violent fit of coughing ensued.

"My good woman," said I, "the chill evening air is unsuited to such a cough as your young lady seems afflicted with."

"Yes, sir, yes, I know it," replied the nurse, while supporting the girl with one hand, she closed and locked the iron gate with the other; and, kissing her forehead the while, said, "Patience, my poor suffering angel, thou wilt get a letter in the morning I tell thee."

"Pray tell me if I can assist you. I am Captain Norcliff, of the Lancers; do please say if I can be of service?"

"Oh, no, sir, you cannot serve me in that which afflicts me most," replied the girl, weeping; "but a thousand thanks to you; and now, good evening!"

"Good evening," I replied, and rode away, feeling strangely puzzled and interested in this girl, by her beauty, grace, and singular manner.

At the village inn, the signboard of which I may mention by the way actually bears the head of King Ethelbert, whose spirit seems somehow to hover still about his Anglo-Saxon ham of the Reculvers, I drew up on pretence of obtaining a light for my cigar, but in reality to make some inquiry concerning the pretty enigma who dwelt in the cottage on the Margate road.

Just as I reined in, a man on horseback passed me at full speed, and from his figure, seat, and dress, I could have

sworn that he was—Berkeley! And he was riding in the direction of Chillingham Park too.

From two to three Kentish yokels, in hobnailed shoes and canvas frocks, I endeavored, after the distribution of a few shillings for beer, extract some information, and it was yielded cunningly and grudgingly, and after much leering, grinning, and scratching of uncombed heads.

One informed me that she was "thout to be, somehow, the wife o' yun o' them cavalry chaps at Maidstone?" another "thout as she was the vidder of a sea hoffer;" and a third, who thrust his tongue into his fat cheek, remarked "that as I had paid my money I might take my choice," on which I gave him a cut over the head with my whip, and rode away, followed by a shout of derisive laughter from these Anglo-Saxon chawbacons, who, as far as civilization was concerned, were pretty much as if his Majesty King Ethelbert were still upon his throne.

It seemed to me also that I heard among their voices that of the fellow Potkins, whom I had so recently thrashed at the stile.

## CHAPTER XVI.

Still as a moonlight ruin is thy power, Or meanness of carved marble, that hath prayed

For ages on a tomb; serenely laid As some fair vessel that hath braved the storm.

And passed into her haven, when the noise That cheered her home hath all to silence died,

Her crew have shoreward parted, and no voice, Troubles her sleeping image in the tide.

Alford.

My mind was a prey to great inquietude—shall I term it undefined jealousy as I galloped back to my hotel

if any letters came for me during the two days I was to be absent from barracks, he was to mount my spare horse and bring them on the spur direct to Canterbury; but none had come, in my solitary room at the Royal, reflecting on the evening's adventures.

Was the horseman who has passed me really Berkeley?

If so, he was riding to Chillingham Park, and would just be in time for dinner—a fact that, if he was uninvited, argued considerable familiarity with that proud and exclusive family.

Then there was the girl whom I had rescued at the stile. What a puzzle she was! I reviewed all her conversation with me, and her strange bearing. Her literary information and education seemed to be of a very superior kind, and her manner was unexceptionable. She seemed gentle, too, and to have been on an errand of charity or mercy.

Why was she so agitated when our corps was mentioned! Her love for a red coat might be natural enough; but who was "the captain" to whom the ruffian referred when threatening her? Then there was undisguised anxiety for a letter. That was natural also; and it was an emotion in which I could fully share.

Those yokels in frocks and hobnailed shoes had called her wife, and even widow; but the servant, or nurse, only named her as "miss."

What if she and her nurse, the old spider-brusher, were but a delusion and a snare? What if her modesty and trepidation, and the old woman's love and anxiety were but a specious piece of acting!

Prudence suggested that such things were not common in this good land of Britain.

Next morning I was up and break-asted betimes, and the sunny hours of the forenoon saw me mounted, and, after passing the gate of Chillingham Park at a quick canter, I now trotted why, unless to soothe my mental irritation, slowly walking my horse in the neighborhood of the Reculvers, and inhaling the pleasant breeze that came from the sea, whilom, as my companion of last night said, ploughed by the galleys of Caesar, and along the same shore where the Kentish barbarians gathered, in their war paint, to oppose him.

The sunshine fell redly on the quaint spires of the old church and picturesque cottages of the secluded village. I passed the sign of King Ethelbert, and hovered for a moment at the gate of the cottage ornee, where I had been overnight. Its blinds were closely drawn; but a bird singing gayly in a gilt wire cage that hung in the porch, which was covered with climbing trailers, already in full flower.

I passed on, and soon reached the rustic stile—the scene of last night's encounter—with that interesting individual who had solicited alms with the aid of a black beard and a cudgel. It led to a narrow pathway through the fields and coppice to the sea. The birds were chirping, and some of the trees were already budding. The yellow blaze of noon streamed between their stems upon the green grass, and I could see the blue waves of the sea glittering in the glory of the sunshine far away.

On the summit of the moss-grown stile fancy conjured up the figure of the young girl and I had a vague, undefined longing to meet her again, and learn something of her history, if she

had one.

What was this girl to me, or I to her? Yet I had the desire to see her once more, and, as luck or fate would have it, something glittering among the grass caught my eye, and, on dismounting, I found it to be a little gold locket, containing a lock of brown hair, attached to a black velvet ribbon.

bore the initials "J. D. B." and the date, 1st June."

It had, no doubt, fallen, or been torn from the young lady's neck in the struggle of the night before. I resolved at once to restore it, and turned my horse's head towards the cottage.

Not without the unpleasant reflection that this was the 1st of April—All Fool's Day—and I might simply be courting a scrape of some kind.

Leaving my horse at the gate, I rang the bell, and the door was promptly opened by the old woman (whose face expressed such evident disappointment that I saw someone else had been expected), and whom I may as well introduce by name as Mrs. Goldsworthy.

She curtsied very low, and eyed me doubtfully, as if the words of the mess-room song occurred to her—

"The scarlet coats! the scarlet coats! They are a graceless set, From shoulder-strap of worsted lace To bullion epaulette.

The deuce is in those soldiers' tongues; What specious fibs they tell! And what is worse, 'tis so perverse, The women list as well.

If such were her speculations, I remembered that the lancers were blue, and the alleged seductions of the scarlet were inapplicable to one who was in mufti.

"My dear madam," said I, in my most insinuating tone, "pasing by the stile this morning, where, last night, I had the pleasure of rescuing your young lady, I found this trinket, which, perhaps, belongs to her?"

"It do, indeed, sir, it do. Lawkamery! she has well nigh cried her poor eyes out about it, the dear soul! Ah, me, don't you hear her a coughing now!" said the worthy woman, sinking her voice. "Ow' appy she will be to get it back again! ay, main' appy!

For whether it was lost by the seashore, or in the fields, or whether the thief had taken it, she never could ha' guessed by no means. Oh, sir, 'ow she would be thankful' you!"

"I hope she has not suffered from her alarm last night?"

"No, sir," said the woman, eying me earnestly through a great pair of spectacles, which she carefully wiped with her apron, and put on for that purpose; "but she do have such a terrible cough, poor thing! Please sir, just wait a minute."

She hurried away, and returning almost immediately, invited me to enter saying—

"My young missus will see you, Mr. Hossifer."

I was ushered into a prettily-papered and airy little parlour, the open windows of which looked seaward over the green fields. Another bird in a gilt wire cage hung chirping at the opposite, where the spotless white muslin en swayed to and fro in the soft breeze of the April morning.

Everything was scrupulously neat and clean, though plain. There were a number of books, chiefly novels on the side-table; a few landscapes in water-color, in gilt frames, evinced the taste of the proprietor; an open workbook of elegant design stood on the centre table and very tiny kid gloves with a few shrews of ribbon, showed that a worker had recently been busy there.

On the wall a garland of artificial flowers encircled the miniature of a lovely little golden-haired boy, whose face, somehow seemed familiar to me.

On a small pianette, which was open lay a pile of music. The two upper pieces were "La Forza del Destino," and "La Pluie de Perles," which were inscribed "To Agnes. From her dear Papa."

Everything bespoke the presence of a neat, brisk, and tidy female resident of elegant tastes; but in one corner I detected a cavalry forage cap, pretty well worn, and on the end of the mantelpiece, where it had evidently eluded Mrs. Goldsworthy's duster, the fag-end of a cigar.

I had just made this alarming discovery when my friend of the last evening entered, and frankly presented me with her hand, half-smiling, and thanking me for the locket, which she at once proceeded to suspend at her neck, saying, as she kissed and hid it in her bosom that for worlds she would not have lost it!

Unghogled now, I could perceive the delicate beauty of her small hands, and moreover, that on the third finger of the left hand there was no marriage ring. Her face was very pale, but singularly beautiful, and her tightly-fitted dress revealed the full symmetry of her arms, waist, and bosom. Her eyes expressed extreme gentleness, and sadness, and consorted well with the delicacy of her pure complexion. The extreme redness of her lips seemed rather unnatural, or at least unhealthy; but she coughed frequently, and the consumption, under which I greatly feared she was labouring, made her delicate loveliness still more alluring, and the earnest and searching gaze of her dark eyes more interesting and touching.

The common phrases incident to

first introductions and everyday conversations were rapidly despatched, and, while I lingered, hat and whip in hand, I repeated that, but for the purpose of returning her locket, I, as a total stranger, would not have ventured to intrude upon a lady. I begged to be assured of that.

"Be certain, sir," said she, nervously smoothing the braids of her rich, thick hair, and adjusting the neat white collar that enriched her delicate throat, and edged the neck of her plain grey dress; "be certain that it is no intrusion, but a great kindness, though I do live here almost alone, and—"

She paused, and coloured deeply.

"You were anxious about letters last night. I hope this morning has relieved your mind?"

"Alas, no, sir," said she, shaking her pretty head sadly. "The postman has always letters for every one but me. I have been forgotten by those who should have remembered me."

"I can fully share your feelings," said I, with a made-up smile. "I, too, am most anxious for letters that seem never likely to come."

"I am sorry to hear this; but I thought that you gay young men of the world had no sorrows—no troubles, save your debts, and your occasional headaches in the morning; the first to be cured by post-obits, and the second by brandy and seltzer-water."

"Is such your idea?" said I, smiling.

"Yes."

"Well, I have other and more heartfelt sorrows than these."

"How often have I wished that I were a man—a strong one to fight with the world in all its wiles and strength; to wrestle and rattle with it, and to feel that I was powerful, great—greater than even destiny—instead of being the poor and feeble thing I am! Then could I show mankind—"

What she was about to say I know not. Her eyes were sparkling, and her cheek flushing as she spoke; but a violent fit of coughing came on. She put her handkerchief to her lips, and when she took it away it was stained with blood.

"Permit me," said I, with kindness, and handed her to a chair.

This access of coughing so promptly brought Mrs. Goldsworthy in that I think she must have been listening outside the door. Her caresses and care soothed the young lady, though she lapsed into a flood of nervous tears, and, for a minute or so, withdrew.

"Your mistress seems extremely delicate?" I observed.

"Yes, poor thing! She will never again be the girl she was."

"Are you, may I ask, her mother?"

"Her mother? Lawkamery, no! I ain't worthy to be more than what I am."

"And what is that, my friend?"

"Her servant, poor angel! Her mother is, I am sure, in Heaven."

"Pardon me. I remember that she told me last night that she was an orphan."

"Ay, poor child, a orphan indeed—a orphan of the 'eart,'" she added, shaking her head, as she became unintentionally poetic.

"I fear my visit excites you," said I, moving towards the door, as the young girl reappeared, and seemed to have quite recovered her composure.

"Your cough requires the greatest care, and those open windows—"

"Oh, I should die without air," she exclaimed, while her eyes sparkled; "for there are times when even my own thoughts seem to stifle me."

"La, miss!" said her attendant, warningly, and glancing impatiently at me. "A strange girl," thought I; "but can she be subject to flights of fancy—insane?"

"If I can at any time be of service pray command me, though we shall not be long in Britain now, as we soon start for the Crimean."

"Very soon?" she asked, with her eyes and voice full of earnest inquiry.

"I cannot say exactly when; but soon, certainly."

She pressed her left hand upon her breast, as if to restrain her cough, and cast down her eyelashes. At that moment she seemed remarkably bewitchingly, soft, modest, and Madonna-like.

I was again about to go, and yet stayed, for I longed to learn, at least, her name.

"And you go cheerfully forth to face danger and death?" she asked, looking with a mournful smile in her pleading eyes.

"Not cheerfully, for my path is not without its thorns; but for all that I don't dread death, I hope."

"Death!" she said, musingly, as if to herself, while looking at the blood spot on her handkerchief. "Daily I feel myself face to face with him, and shall bid him welcome when he comes nearer, for death has no terrors for me!"

"Don't 'ee talk so, darling," said her follower, with a mixture of sorrow and irritation in her manner; "though he you weeps for is had 'un at 'art and I know it."

"Oh, don't break mine by saying so nurse."

"I trust that you only fancy yourself worse than you really are," said I, with genuine sympathy in my tone and manner. "Remember, the long and sweet season of summer is before us. You are so young, and life must still be full of hope to you."

"Hope! oh, no, not of hope! My

destiny has already been fulfilled!" she replied, with a strong bitterness of manner; "so hope has done with me."

"Pardon me; but may I ask your name—I told you mine," said I, laying my hand on hers.

She coloured deeply, almost painfully. It was but the hectic flush of a moment, and when it passed away she became pale as marble.

"Captain Norcliff, I think you said! To be Continued

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