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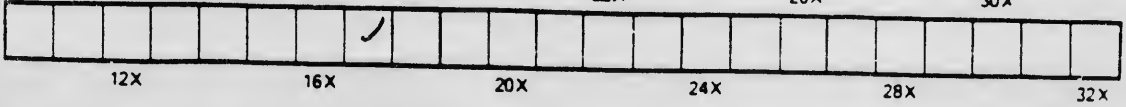

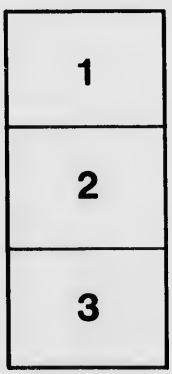

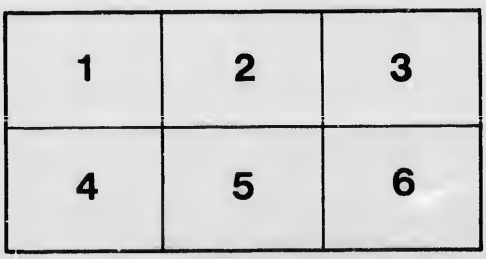

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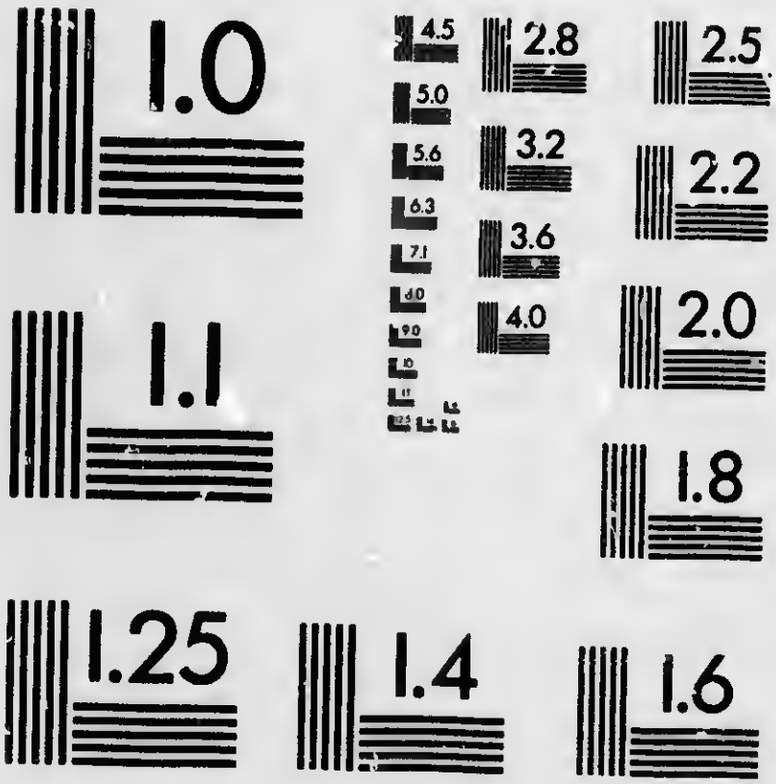

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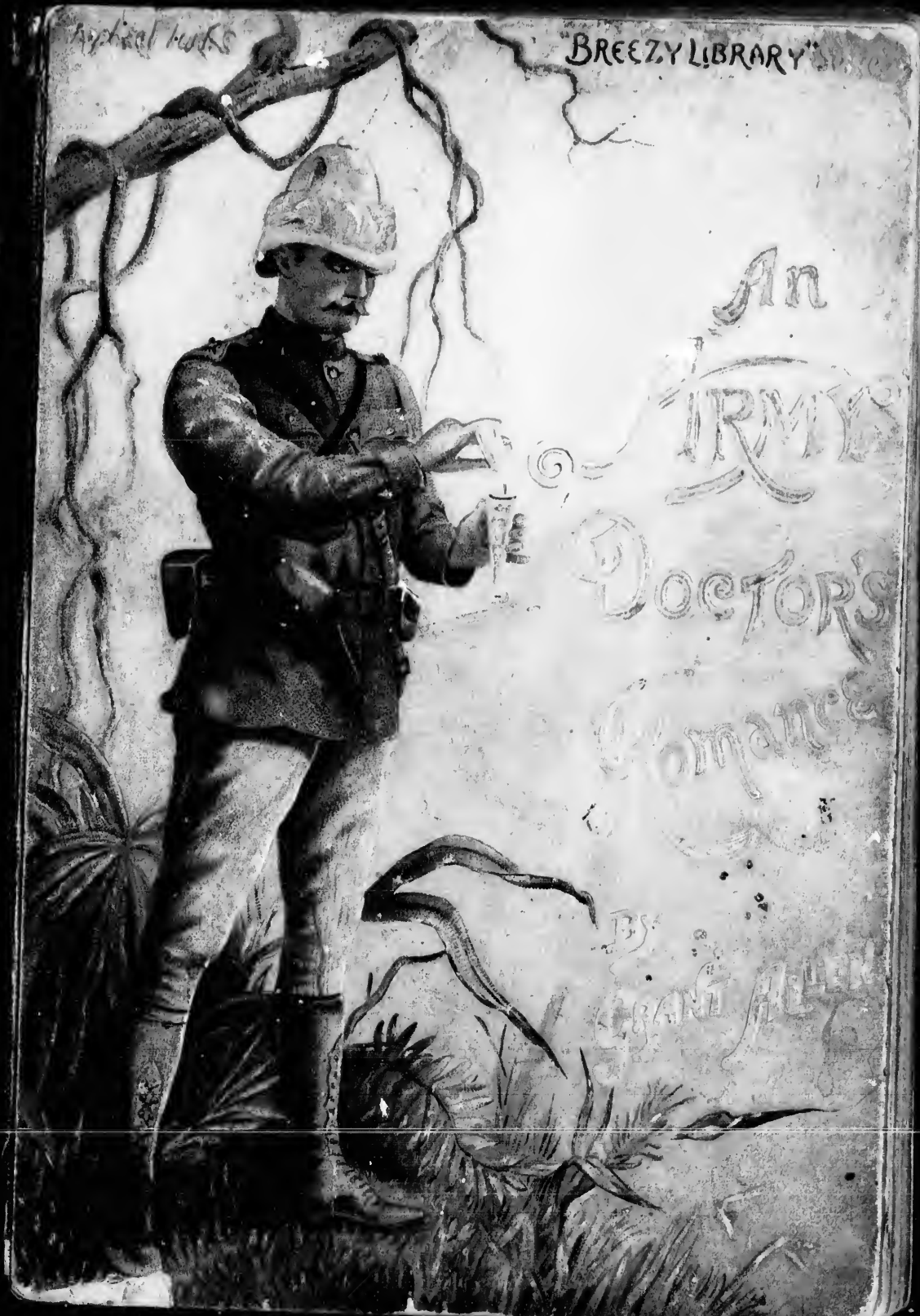

An Army Doctor's Romance

By Grant Allen

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An Army Doctor's Romance

by

Grant Allen

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AN ARMY DOCTOR'S ROMANCE.

I.

MRS. TALBOT stretched herself out on the heather luxuriously. "What a charming girl she is, to be sure!" she said, looking towards Muriel Grosvenor. "She's a real damask rose; now isn't she, Major?"

The Major was a bachelor, who posed as the regulation regimental cynic. It was his function in life to make epigrams for the battalion.

"A damask *rosebud*, you mean, Mrs. Talbot," he corrected gravely. "When she unfolds, don't you see, she'll be a full-blown cabbage-rose. Just look at her mother!"

"Now, that's one of the unkind things you middle-aged men, with all the romance in life knocked out of you, love to fling at a woman's head," Mrs. Talbot answered, with evident spirit. "I say she's a charming girl, and I choose to stick to it. She's as sweet as

new-mown hay: so don't deny it. What on earth has her mother got to do with the question? And besides, if it comes to that, I call Mrs. Grosvenor—for her age—a very handsome woman."

The Major plucked two little pink sprays of cross-leaved heath—they were lounging on a wind-swept Surrey common—and presented them to her with a slight bow as a peace-offering. Mrs. Talbot accepted the pretty bells half ungraciously, but stuck them in the bodice of her dainty print-dress for all that. She was a widow with means, not yet quite fifty, and she understood the worth of small attentions.

"You call her a handsome woman?" the Major repeated, holding his head on one side, and gazing up into his hostess's big brown eyes. "Well, *I* call her a Judgment."

"A *what?*" Mrs. Talbot echoed, in unaffected surprise.

"A Judgment," the Major repeated, very well pleased with his own phrase. "I said a Judgment. Don't you know, Mrs. Talbot, there are women who, when they marry and settle comfortably down to their niche in life, eat and drink, eat and drink, go to church on Sundays, ride out in their carriages, and never trouble their heads again to think or work about any-

thing. Then they begin to develop. They get massive in the bodice. They expand visibly. At forty, they're barrels; at fifty, as the fellow says in the play at the Haymarket, they're public buildings. And I maintain it's a Judgment on them. They've eaten and drunk too much, and thought and worked too little; and that's how they're visited for it. Whenever I see one of them tacking down Regent Street or Piccadilly in front of me, under full sail, I say to the man by my side, 'Hullo, my dear boy, here comes another Judgment.'"

Mrs. Talbot smiled serenely. Consciousness of a slim waist permitted her to do so with an easy conscience. Her own figure was as lithe and supple as a girl of eighteen's; and the Major knew it, or (wise man that he was) he would never have approached her with that subtle form of implied flattery which consists in pointing out to one the faults one doesn't share in other people.

"Well, she *is* rather massive," the owner of the slim waist admitted, with feminine candour. "But I feel that sort of thing suits her style of features. She's a Roman matron, don't you know, with a nose of command, and one doesn't expect airiness from Roman matrons."

Meanwhile, Muriel Grosvenor stepped lightly along upon the open top of the hill, unsuspicious of the running fire of adverse criticism to which she and hers were being subjected, in Mrs. Talbot's interest, by the unsparing Major. Her footfall on the smooth sward that covered the path between the purple heather was as light and springy as the turf itself on the soil beneath her. She was indeed, as the Major himself admitted, a fresh English rosebud; whether she would ever develop or not, as he averred, into a full-blown cabbage-rose, or even become in time a Judgment like her mother, I hold to have been more doubtful. At any rate, as she faced the bracing breeze that blew across the open summit of the moor, with Oliver Cameron by her side, she looked the very picture of a wholesome, sweet-natured, innocent English girl, the purest product of our age and country.

The man by her side was as handsome and as well-built in his way as Muriel herself was. He had a frank, open face, somewhat bronzed with service, for he had seen one campaign already in a tropical climate, and was now on the eve of another; but his manner was as fresh and confiding as a boy's, and his step as easy. Still, the Roman matron did not entirely approve of Oliver Cameron's advances; he was only an army

doctor, and she had better matches by far in her eye for Muriel than any of your army doctors. Captain Burgess, for example, was at the picnic as well; and Captain Burgess was rich — very rich in prospect. That first; though Captain Burgess was also good-looking, and the heir of a distinguished county family, and a capital fellow in his way, with every advantage to aid him in captivating a young girl's regard, except the fact—well, except the fact that he didn't happen to be Oliver Cameron! That's one of those fundamental difficulties in life that no amount of reasoning will ever enable any fellow to get over.

It was Mrs. Talbot's picnic, and it was given ostensibly to bid farewell to the Royal West Badenochs on their departure for "this little brush in South Africa," but really in order to afford Oliver Cameron a chance of a few last words with Muriel Grosvenor; for Mrs. Talbot, though herself not unaverse to the Major's attentions, and still ready to entertain matrimonial propositions if they arrived in due course from the proper quarters, was fast sinking into that second or vicarious stage of a woman's existence where she interests herself, mostly at second-hand, in the love-affairs of others. Love-affairs of some sort a woman *must* superintend, to keep herself from fossilizing.

When she's young, they're her own; when she reaches middle age, they're her daughters', her nieces', her friends', or her enemies'. But some one's she *must* have, else were life a mere blank to her.

Now Mrs. Talbot, being above everything a kind-hearted and good-natured woman, had taken Muriel Grosvenor under her special protection; and when Oliver Cameron said to her wistfully, three days before, "I'm sure I don't know how I'm ever to get a chance of seeing Miss Grosvenor alone again before we start for the colony," she had settled his doubt at once by answering with a bright smile of genuine kindliness, "Oh, leave that to me. I'll get up a picnic for you." Then, with an archer look still, she added in an undertone, "And I'll take care the Roman matron doesn't smuggle Muriel off into a corner all day long with Captain Burgess, to the detriment of those who have better claims on her time and society."

"Thank you," Oliver Cameron said simply; but he said it in such a tone that Mrs. Talbot saw she had judged rightly of the importance he attached to the occasion, and took good care to carry out her promise to the letter.

That was no easy matter. She had to manœuvre the best she knew against the Roman matron. They

were foemen worthy of each other's steel. It was Greek meeting Greek; it was diamond cut diamond. However, Mrs. Talbot, as she promised, was equal to the occasion. With great presence of mind and forethought she stopped the brakes and had lunch laid out, not quite on the breezy summit of the moor, where the Roman matron would have stood at no strategic disadvantage, but a couple of hundred feet or so below the actual top, which Mrs. Grosvenor could only mount, after her chicken-salad and champagne cup, with the aid of an escort. Then, as soon as lunch was over, the wise leader of the manœuvres told Oliver Cameron off by a ruse at an unobserved moment to take Muriel in tow, as far as the ridge, and left to Captain Burgess the more honourable but onerous and less agreeable task of seeing the Roman matron herself in safety to the flag-staff at the summit.

The consequence was that by the time Mrs. Grosvenor, a little out of breath with the unwonted exertion, sat down by the edge of the hill, among the bracken and heather, and, looking across the open weald towards the blue downs on the sky-line, murmured in her softest voice, "Oh, beautiful, beau-tiful!" —her daughter and Oliver Cameron had already wandered off by themselves down the slope on the

other side, and were well out of sight among the gorse and broom in Whitmore Hollow.

Captain Burgess was disappointed. He had counted upon the picnic to say a few words he wanted to that pretty Miss Grosvenor. He had something he wished to speak about before the Royal West Badenochs were finally off on their voyage to South Africa. But he swallowed his disappointment like a man—he was a fine, soldierly fellow—and proceeded to make conversation with the pretty girl's mother on the very extraordinary beauty of the day; the unusual duration and severity of the drought; the exquisiteness of the view from the edge by the flag-staff; and the singular charm of this wild upland scenery. He thought, himself, these breezy heather-clad Surrey hills were just about the most delightful and distinctive thing we'd got in the way of quiet English country. Mrs. Grosvenor, much preoccupied, thought so too—oh, charming!—but wondered what on earth could have become of dear Muriel! Their hostess, appealed to on this doubtful point, gave a warning look from under the shade of her big hat to the obedient Major, and responded demurely that just two minutes ago she had seen dear Muriel disappear with Dr. Cameron down the hill towards the big lot of larches there—which in letter

indeed was true, but in spirit quite otherwise; for, after taking that path for a second or so, Oliver Cameron had thought better of it, and decided visibly at the clump of firs that Whitmore Hollow offered a safer chance of an uninterrupted *tête-à-tête* than Sir Everard's copse did. So down Whitmore Hollow the two had finally disappeared, as Mrs. Talbot well knew, leaving the larches and the copse well away on the hill-top.

"Oh, dear; that giddy child!" Mrs. Grosvenor cried, in well-simulated maternal anxiety. "All among those horrid damp pine-needles! And she had on *such* thin shoes! Quite unfit for scrambling! She'll catch her death of cold; I know she will. Captain Burgess—*would* you mind? oh, you *are* so good! Do look for her, there's a kind friend, and bring her back safe to me!"

Captain Burgess, nothing loth, started off with alacrity on his fool's errand. The Major's eyes, turning askance, observed mutely to Mrs. Talbot's, "Well, you women *can* tell them with sweet innocence, and no mistake! A poor old soldier just stands by and admires you!" The Roman matron, still panting, sat down gingerly by their side, after looking about her with care and a prodded parasol

to reassure herself there were no adders concealed among the whortleberries. (A belief in adders dies hardest, it may be observed, among mediæval superstitions.) And the remainder of the guests, as duly marshalled by Mrs. Talbot's maternal care, marched themselves off, two and two—male and female, like the animals in the ark—as is the way of those who go up on the hill-sides among the heather to picnic.

"I love the open air," Mrs. Talbot said musingly, "for that. It's the only place left in our modern civilization where young people get a chance of making each other's acquaintance!"

"Though I think," the Roman matron interposed with marked asperity, "they ought only be allowed to do so under due supervision."

Mrs. Talbot closed her eyes, and threw herself back with her face in the sun, in a Madame Récamier attitude. The due supervision of the Roman matron had completely spoiled her own sole chance of conversation with that delightfully wicked and cynical Major!

II.

As for Oliver Cameron and Muriel Grosvenor meanwhile, those two innocent young people were strolling, supremely happy in each other's company, down Whitmore Hollow, in utter unconsciousness of the painful way their own private transgression was interfering with the comfort of four fellow-creatures —Mrs. Grosvenor, Captain Burgess, the Major, and Mrs. Talbot. Not for them was the trouble. They roamed on, all unconcerned, as maiden and youth will roam, talking all the while half shyly to one another about those nameless nothings which are better than somethings, and blushing in concert every now and again at their own futility. What occupation can be happier?

Do you know Whitmore Hollow? 'Tis the loveliest spot in Surrey—a beautiful glen or combe in the soft sandstone hills, scooped out like a basin by the meandering stream that runs bickering in the centre, and approached on every side by precipitous green slopes, half covered near the top by gorse and whortleberries. The floor of the Hollow is spongy and boggy, overgrown with lush wealth

of marshland vegetation; rank horsetails rise high there from the moss-clad soil; tall blades of cotton-grass wave their white streamers before the swaying wind; spotted orchids and ragged robins cluster thick round the oozy patches on the outskirts. All is green as early spring. By the peaty edge of the stream, huge round leaves of marsh-marigold gleam cool and fresh; while here and there among tall tussocks of sedge or reed, some great osmunda fern spreads its royal fronds in a gigantic rosette on every side unhampered. The contrast between the sandy dry heath above and the rich swampy floor of the water-logged meadow below is as charming as it is surprising. Muriel broke forth into a sudden little cry of astonished delight as they passed the last fence through a gap in the barbed wire, and her eyes fell at once upon the mass of strange blossoms that vied with one another in that enchanted valley.

"Oh, what foxgloves!" she cried, overjoyed—it takes so little to overjoy one in some people's company. "And yellow irises too; I never saw such big ones. That's purple loosestrife growing over by the hedge there; and oh, Dr. Cameron, *do* you think it would be possible to get at those buck-beans?"

Oliver Cameron, for his part, had no idea what manner of wild beast a buck-bean might be; but love, I've observed, is a mighty teacher of botany to mortals. He followed the direction of Muriel's eager eyes, and, seeing in the mid swamp a pretty violet flower that rose in great trusses on a tall forked stem—the petals all torn and frayed at the edge like lace—came at once to the conclusion this must surely be the object that aroused Muriel Grosvenor's profound admiration. The rare plant was growing in an inaccessible spot, to be sure; but when Beauty says "Go," manly courage can only answer "I will" offhand, though wet feet be the penalty of such gallant acquiescence. So Oliver Cameron dashed in, to the great detriment of his shoes, and after a noble struggle with the treacherous swamp, returned at last in triumph, bearing many big trusses of buck-bean with him. Then they turned their attention to the orchids, the ferns, the yellow irises. There's nothing more poetical than your yellow iris; nothing more intoxicating than picking wild-flowers with the girl you love in a rich green water-meadow. It's so sweetly innocent, it just suits first love—or, for the matter of that, last love either. Oliver lingered long at the task, getting his feet

wet through a dozen times over "in the cause of science," as he euphemistically phrased it, and learning far more about the English flora in that short half-hour than ever he had learnt in three long years of a medical course from a professor's lectures. But then, you see, there were such extraordinary and unusual inducements for the pupil to listen!

As for Muriel, she wandered on and on through that enchanted field, without a thought of time, or mamma, or tea, or other unpleasant reminders. She was living just for once in her life in the present. And also, it may be added, in the seventh heavens. For she and Oliver were very fond of one another; though, being two timid and modest young people, they had been far too shy ever to say so to one another. But they looked it the more. And since eyes often tell quite as much as tongues, they had somehow arrived at that silent sort of mutual understanding which is wholly independent of the resources of language.

At last, after wandering longer than I dare to chronicle in Whitmore Hollow, their hands were full of orchids and irises, and it began to strike Oliver Cameron that if he was to speak at all, the time for speaking had surely now arrived for him. So

he proposed they should adjourn to the nearest dry bank in the adjacent field, and proceed to arrange their somewhat cumbrous bouquet for greater ease of carrying. Muriel looked up at him with such a charmingly frank blush when he made this proposal, and assented so readily to the idea of sitting down, that he felt as if her answer were already half given. They moved over to the hedge, very shy and self-conscious. Oliver held out one hand to help her up the steep bank. Muriel needed no assistance, for she was light and active as a gazelle, and was a mighty lawn-tennis player; if it had been anybody else's hand, indeed, she would have rejected the proffered aid with a firm "No, thank you." But since it was Oliver Cameron's—well, there—you know them: she held out five dainty small fingers, ungloved for the flower-picking, with a delicious smile of unspoken gratitude; and Oliver felt the blood beat in them as he took them in his own. He ventured to give them just the faintest pressure. The colour mounted to her cheek, more with pleasure than shame, as she withdrew them half nervously. Then they moved over to the bank, and took their seats side by side on the fresh summer grass in tingling silence. Oliver began to sort out and arrange

the flowers without a word. So they sat for a minute or two. But 'twas the sort of silence that is a great deal more eloquent than the aptest language.

He was *such* a modest man. He hardly knew how to speak to her. He could cut off a leg with a world less anxiety than he could say what he had to say to the girl he loved—the girl that loved him. How strange that so often what we each know well we shrink from confessing openly one to the other!

At last he found words to speak, though in a very tentative way.

"It'll be a long time," he said pensively, "before I see flowers as fresh as these again. There's nothing half so beautiful anywhere in South Africa!"

But as he said it, he was looking, not at the orchids in his hand, but at Muriel Grosvenor. And it was Muriel's rosy cheeks he was really thinking of.

"Shall you be long away?" Muriel asked, trembling; and he felt her voice tremble.

The young man thrilled through and through. "How can we tell?" he answered. "Everything depends, of course, upon the success of the operations. If we settle this little question with the Matabeles at once, we may come home soon again."

"That *would* be nice," Muriel answered, pulling

an iris to pieces. 'Twas a very pretty flower, yet she lacerated it recklessly. I've seen girls commit these acts of sacrilegious destruction more than once—when their tremulous little minds were otherwise occupied.

The young man looked down at her with quick inquiry in his honest eyes. "Oh, how good of you to say so!" he interposed hastily.

Muriel's face was crimson. "I meant"—she broke in hurriedly—"how very nice for *you*—to be back so soon in England!" But her cheeks belied her.

Oliver Cameron turned upon her all at once with new-born boldness. Her very confusion encouraged him. "No, you didn't mean that, Muriel," he answered, venturing to call her, for the first time in his life, by her Christian name. "You meant nothing of the sort. You meant, you'd be glad—you yourself—to see me back again."

"I never *said* so," Muriel interposed, growing hot and tingling.

"But you *meant* it," the young man cried, seizing her hand unresisted. "Oh, Muriel, I'm so glad I've found heart to speak, for I couldn't bear to leave England without having asked you and won

you. You meant that now, didn't you? You meant you would be mine? You meant, while I was away, I might think of you and write to you?"

Muriel drew back suddenly, and passed her hand across her forehead. "Think of me, and write to me? yes, if you like," she answered very low. "But oh, Dr. Cameron, that's all. I can—I can promise you nothing else. I'm not going to say *yes* to you."

The young man raised her hand to his lips, and kissed it fervidly. Muriel did not withdraw it. Nay, a flush of pink delight rose again to her very forehead as he bent over her tenderly. But still she said once more, "To write to me; that's all. Remember I say that. You must understand quite clearly, I make you no promise."

"But you *must*, Muriel," Oliver cried, leaning forward, and now no longer shy. "I can't leave things like that. Recollect, I may be going away for heaven knows how long. Before I go, Muriel, *do* tell me you love me!"

Muriel turned her soft eyes to his, and answered at once, "Oh yes, of course I love you."

The young man seized her hand and covered it with kisses. "Then I shall go away happy," he cried. "And, Muriel, you will marry me?"

"Oh, no," Muriel answered, in much the same voice as before. "I didn't say that. I mustn't—I can't marry you."

"But you told me you loved me!" Oliver exclaimed, bending over her.

"So I do," Muriel replied. "Oh, Oliver, dear! you must have known for ever and ever so long I loved you."

"I half guessed it," Oliver whispered low; "only I was afraid it was too presumptuous of me to think you meant it. You're so much too sweet for me. But, Muriel, if you love me, why do you say you won't marry me? Why do you give with one hand and take away with the other? Only say before I go, when I come back you'll marry me!"

Muriel looked down and hesitated. It was clear she was passing through some internal struggle. "Oh, I can't say *yes*," she cried at last; "though I should love to—I should *love* to; and I can't bear to say *no*, because I don't want to hurt you. And then, you might be killed, and I should never forgive myself for not having made you happy just once before you left me."

"Then why not make me happy?" Oliver answered, with a sudden movement towards her.

The girl recoiled slightly. "Oh, what am I to do?" she cried, half tearful. "Oliver, Oliver, I think I must confess it all to you. I can't say I'll marry you—I can't say I will be yours, because—before I came out this afternoon, mamma made me promise —if you asked me, I wouldn't accept you."

"I see," Oliver answered, drawing back a little bit. "And yet, Muriel, you love me!"

Muriel clasped her hands and looked up at him. "Yes, Oliver," she replied, forgetting all her shame. "Now you're going away, and I mayn't ever see you again, I couldn't let my heart rest if I didn't tell you plainly just once before you went, I love you, I love you!"

There was a very brief interval, during which both parties to this oft-repeated dialogue seemed otherwise occupied; an interval, in fact, over which a discreet chronicler would prefer to draw a veil, its remarks being in some respects beyond the existing resources of typography; and then Oliver, drawing back his face from close proximity to Muriel's, asked once more a little pleadingly, "But why did you promise her, dear one?"

"Oh, you don't know how imperious mamma is," Muriel answered, rearranging her somewhat tumbled

hat. "She *made* me promise. When mamma orders anything, I'm not the sort of person, I'm sure you must see, who could ever stand out against her."

"And yet you look brave enough," Oliver put in, gazing admiringly at her. Then he paused for a moment. "Well, did you promise her to refuse me?" he went on, with true lover-like casuistry.

"No, I didn't promise *that*. Oh, Oliver, how could I?"

There was another brief pause of—what shall I call it?—inarticulate conversation. Then Oliver spoke again. "In that case," he said decisively, "I shall go away to Africa, knowing that if we're not engaged, at any rate you love me, and will wait till I return for me. Isn't that so, Muriel?"

"Oh, Oliver, I'd wait for you for ever and ever."

"And you'll never marry any one else?"

"No; never, never, never!"

"But still, we're not engaged!"

"No, not *engaged* exactly, you know—because I promised mamma; but—oh, however long it may be, I'll go on for ever loving you, and waiting for you."

"That'll do," Oliver answered, gathering up the fallen cotton-grass into a hasty bunch. "At any rate, I shall know now you won't accept Burgess."

"And now," Muriel said demurely, rising crimson-faced and smoothing her hair with her hands, "I think — Dr. Cameron—we ought to be going back again to find the others."

"Why this 'Dr. Cameron'?"

"Because—well, you know, it must only be 'Oliver' when we're quite, quite alone, dear, with no chance of interruption. And I *think*—yes, take care!—I see somebody coming along in a white dress behind the hedge there."

"So you do! Let's get up. It's Protheroe and Miss Wolstenholme."

"Oh dear, how lucky! They've strayed away like us. Now we can go back to the rest, all four at once, and it'll look to mamma——"

"Yes—what?"

"Well, don't you know, as if we'd all of us been picking flowers in the meadow all the time together!"

For the female heart, I fear, even in the best of cases, is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked.

III.

By the time those four truants returned safely and demurely to the maternal fold, Mrs. Grosvenor

was beginning to get seriously anxious. It was so strange dear Muriel should have wandered off so unconscionably! Not that Mrs. Grosvenor, who had the wisdom of the serpent, was foolish enough to comment overmuch with her mouth on her daughter's disappearance. If a girl comes perilously near "compromising" herself at a picnic, it certainly isn't her own mother's place to assist in calling public attention to her conduct. So Mrs. Grosvenor, looking bland and supremely unconcerned, fumed inwardly in silence, and awaited Muriel's return with no small anxiety. There was one good thing about it, though: she wouldn't get engaged to that very undesirable young man, Dr. Cameron, her mother felt certain, because she'd promised she wouldn't; and though Muriel had her faults, like most other girls—well, at least she was truthful!

So when Captain Burgess returned at the end of an hour from his fruitless hunt, somewhat hot and tired, and reported that he'd searched all through Sir Everard's woods, and couldn't catch a glimpse anywhere of Miss Grosvenor and Cameron, the Roman matron only heaved a slight maternal sigh, and smiled feebly as she answered, "She must have gone down into the meadows! And with those thin

shoes too! Silly girl! How could she? I shall have her laid up on my hands now with sore throat or something."

"Is Miss Grosvenor delicate?" Burgess asked, with a note of genuine anxiety.

And the Roman matron, reflecting on the spur of the moment that a soldier's wife should always be strong enough to stand five years of India or Canada, made answer instantly, "Oh dear, no. Quite the contrary. Muriel's constitution is just magnificent, thank heaven! She can play tennis all day, and come back, fresh as a lark, for dance in the evening. But even the strongest constitutions, you know, succumb to wet feet. They're the root of all evil. It's my belief that wet feet are really at the bottom of half the ills that flesh is heir to."

"Here they come!" Mrs. Talbot put in. "Muriel with Mr. Protheroe, and Dr. Cameron with Maud Wolstenholme! Why, Mr. Protheroe, where on earth have you four been all this time? Mrs. Grosvenor's been quite frightened what had become of her daughter."

And indeed the four young people, without in the least concerting it, had paired off in this criss-cross order and returned in a body, as a mute mode

of appealing to the merciful consideration of the respective authorities.

"We've been down in the water-meadows," Muriel answered for the rest, holding up her wild-flowers. "Oh, mamma, they're so delicious! I never enjoyed anything in my life so much" (which was perfectly true—Muriel always was truthful!). "The flowers there are just lovely; and Maud and I picked such handfuls! Only look at our irises! and, see here, that's cotton-grass!"

"And only look at your shoes!" the Roman matron interposed, with a chilling accent. "You'll catch your death of cold." Then, with a meaning glance, "I sent Captain Burgess to the larches after you, to tell you not to go where the grass was damp; but he went by mistake towards the copse, and didn't manage to find you."

"Oh, I'm so sorry," Muriel cried. "But the flowers were so lovely, we forgot all about the time. Didn't we, Maud?" And Maud Wolstenholme, equally conscious of internal guilt, nodded a blushing assent, after the transparent manner of such conspirators.

"Well, it's time to be going now," Mrs. Talbot put in, with a triumphant side-glance at Oliver

Cameron, as who should say, "There! haven't I managed things nicely for you?"

"Already?" Oliver cried, pulling out his watch. "Dear me, how time flies!" And then his eyes met Mrs. Talbot's, as augur's meet augur's.

"All right?" Mrs. Talbot's eyes asked mutely of Oliver's.

And Oliver's, hardly moving, made answer in the same language, "Oh, yes; all right; it *was* so good of you!"

As the carriages drove round to take them back to their homes, Wilfred Burgess lingered a moment near where Muriel was standing, meditative, a little away from the crowd. "I was sorry I missed you, Miss Grosvenor," he said, almost timidly. "We may go away any day now, and before we go"—he hesitated a second—"there's something I wanted so much to talk over with you."

A tell-tale blush rose quick to Muriel's cheek. She knew very well this was exactly what mamma had so long been angling for; and even when you've just told one man you love him devotedly for ever and ever, why, it isn't in female human nature not to feel a slight flutter about the region of the heart when another man is most obviously going to

make you an offer. She blushed becomingly. "Oh, I'm so sorry you didn't have a chance of talking over—anything you wanted to speak about," she said, with a pretty smile. "But perhaps some other day will do equally well for it."

Wilfred Burgess not unnaturally misinterpreted that conscious blush and that charmingly modest smile. "No, it won't," he said gravely. "We may have to go at any moment. I wanted to speak now. It's ever so pressing. Oh, Miss Grosvenor, can't you give me just three minutes while we're waiting?"

"Now, Muriel!" Mrs. Talbot called out, keeping a strict eye, as is a woman's wont when once she has espoused a cause, upon Oliver Cameron's interest. "Aren't you coming, you lazy girl? We're all eight of us waiting for you!"

"Muriel can go in the drag," Mrs. Grosvenor interposed, with a side-glance at her daughter.

"Oh, very well," Mrs. Talbot echoed blandly. "Then Captain Burgess will come with *us;* I *must* have somebody who understands horses. Oh, thank you so *much,* Captain Burgess; that'll do just splendidly. Mrs. Grosvenor, you'll sit here; and Dr. Cameron, you'll go with Miss Grosvenor and the

Protheroes. There, we're all nicely settled! Now, Watson, straight home, please!"

IV.

MURIEL saw no more of Captain Burgess that afternoon. Mrs. Talbot had shelved him. The Protheroes dropped her at her mother's door, where she murmured just a few hasty words of farewell to Oliver, who had to catch an evening train back to Aldershot. Mrs. Grosvenor, indeed, like the great strategist that she was, would have been glad to bring back Burgess for a last stray chance of an hour's talk with Muriel, but it was quite too late now. They had stopped fully as long as they dared, the young soldier said; these were doubtful times, and they might have to leave any day, whenever the Colonel got a telegram to announce that the transports were ready, so it wouldn't do to be out of camp beyond leave just then for a single minute. Mrs. Grosvenor acquiesced—she was an army widow herself, and understood discipline; but she went home fuming. What a horrid shame of that odious Mrs. Talbot to have sent Muriel off with Dr. Cameron

down the meadows, and so made it impossible for Captain Burgess to get a word in with her edgeways! However, he would be sure to ask for leave to-morrow, and come round again to propose before he left for Matabeleland—that was one comfort.

Next morning, however, as Muriel sat with her mother over her toast and coffee, in the pretty little breakfast-room where the Banksia roses peeped in coquettishly at the open window, the postman brought two letters addressed to Miss Grosvenor, both of them bearing the Aldershot postmark, and one of them conspicuously embossed on the envelope with Captain Burgess's heavily-gilt crest and initials. This last so much attracted Mrs. Grosvenor's eagle eye, that poor Muriel, blushing crimson, was enabled to smuggle its unoffending companion unperceived into her pocket. The one with the crest and initial she broke open and read. As she read it, a still deeper scarlet spread slowly over her face.

Mrs. Grosvenor watched her anxiously. It was a critical moment. "Well, what does he say, dear?" she asked, leaning over towards her daughter. "I suppose you can read it out to me?"

And in a somewhat faltering voice, Muriel began reading it.

"My dear Miss Grosvenor,

"As I told you last night, there is something which I have been wishing for weeks to speak to you about. I wished to speak to you of it again yesterday, but owing to Mrs. Talbot's stupid mistake in misdirecting me to the copse, I had then no opportunity. This proves most unfortunate. For I would greatly have liked to say what I had to say in person rather than by letter; but a most unforeseen circumstance has since occurred which renders that course impossible. The regiment has just been ordered off at a moment's notice; we are to leave Aldershot this morning, and Southampton this evening. But I can't bear to quit England, perhaps for months, or even for years, without having made a confession to you——"

"Why, Muriel," Mrs. Grosvenor cried, "what on earth's the matter with you? You're as pale as death. You really look quite ill with it."

Muriel gulped down a sob. "It's nothing, mother, —nothing," she cried, trying to repress her tears; "only—I didn't know—it would be quite so soon—that they were going so early."

Her sobs half choked her. Mrs. Grosvenor rose, moved across from her chair to where Muriel was sitting, and, suddenly bending down, kissed her daughter's forehead with unwonted tenderness. "I'm so glad, dear," she said, relaxing somewhat her stern Roman attitude, "so very, very glad. I didn't know you felt like that. I'm so pleased he has written to you."

Muriel's eyes were brimming now. What? called

away immediately? And she wouldn't see Oliver again! It was too, too dreadful.

"But at least," her mother went on, stroking the poor girl's hair, "it must be such a comfort to you, to know he's proposed in due form before leaving!"

Poor Muriel almost choked. She didn't know what to do or say. She was longing to tear open Oliver Cameron's letter, and to hear how he felt about it. Yet she didn't dare to look at it before her mother's very eyes. So she bore up bravely somehow. She wiped her eyes with her handkerchief, and proceeded to read the rest of that horrid, horrid letter in deathly silence.

Mrs. Grosvenor bent over her, overjoyed that Muriel should receive so eligible an offer in such a proper spirit. "May I read what he says, dear?" she asked at last, as her daughter laid it down. And Muriel nodded assent, too sick at heart for speaking, or almost for thinking.

"Why, you must answer him at once!" the mother cried, as she finished reading the stiffly-worded and awkward little note over Muriel's shoulder. "They'll be at Southampton to-night, and they'll sail before morning. There's not a minute to be

lost. You must accept him in due form, so as to make all certain. Dry your eyes now, there's a good girl, and sit down at once to answer him!"

"But I *can't*," Muriel exclaimed, thunderstruck. "I—mother, I don't know what to say to him."

"Don't—know—what to say to him?" Mrs. Grosvenor replied, a little taken aback by such singular recalcitrancy. "Don't know how to answer the young man's proposal! Why, tell him it's all very sudden, of course; and that it takes you by surprise; and that you had never expected it. But still, that if you trusted to your own heart—there! —sit down at once, my dear, and if *you* don't know what to say, *I'll* dictate you a letter to him."

Poor Muriel felt in her heart the hour had now come when she must speak, and speak out, or ever after be silent. "But, mamma," she cried piteously, looking up through her tears, "I don't think you understand. I don't care for Captain Burgess. I'm not the least little bit in love with him. I don't ever want to marry him."

Mrs. Grosvenor drew back with a startled and incredulous air. "Not care for Captain Burgess?" she exclaimed. "Why, what on earth are you thinking of, child? Not care for Captain Burgess? He's

a most excellent young man! He's well off; he's good-looking; he's a gentleman; he's clever; and he has most excellent principles. Your Uncle Edward tells me he has most ex—cellent principles, and your Uncle Edward ought to know, for he's a General of Division. Besides, my dear Muriel, if you didn't care for him, what on earth did you mean by turning as pale as a sheet just now, when you read he was ordered off at a minute's notice to South Africa? No, no, my dear child, don't attempt to prevaricate! Do you think I can't read what you're feeling in every line of your face? It's as plain as a pikestaff. Why, this moment you're as white as a ghost at the bare idea of losing him!"

"Mamma," Muriel said faintly, with a terrible effort to be firm, "you—you don't understand. I don't *love* Captain Burgess. I could never *possibly* marry him."

Mrs. Grosvenor turned to her sharply. "Upon my word, Muriel," she said, in her Roman matron style, "I'm sure I don't know what young people are coming to! What on earth is one to make of you? You're in love with this young man. I see it: I know it. You were absurdly agitated just now when his letter came in. I saw you last night talking with him by the brake, and looking down, and blush-

ing. Yet when he writes this morning to propose to you—such an excellent match, too—and the post's just going, and there's not a minute to lose—if you don't go and turn round upon him in this really incomprehensible way, and tell me to my face you don't want to marry him. I call it disgraceful! No well-behaved girl in my time would have led him on as you have, if she didn't mean to accept him. Why on earth did you encourage him?"

"Oh, mamma," Muriel cried, shrinking, "I—I never encouraged him!"

"My dear, don't talk to me; I've *seen* you, with my own eyes. Besides, there's no time to waste on talking about it now. Sit down at once, as I bid you, and write to say you'll accept him."

Muriel, fingering Oliver's letter in her pocket all the while, and eager to read it, protested with all her might that she didn't, couldn't, and wouldn't ever love Captain Burgess; and that as she didn't love him, she would certainly not marry him. But Mrs. Grosvenor was imperative. In the imperative mood, Mrs. Grosvenor was irresistible. She made very little fuss about it; she was bland, but peremptory. As a woman who had already married off four daughters against their wills to men whom they hated, she

thought she ought really to know something about the matter. (And as yet only one of them had openly quarrelled with her husband.) So the Roman matron persisted with true Roman imperiousness. Poor Muriel, eager to get away by herself to her own room, where she might read Oliver Cameron's letter, made faint resistance in vain. The stronger will conquered. All the Grosvenor girls had been brought up to render implicit obedience to their mother's wishes, without calling even their hearts or souls their own; so at last, overborne by that stern, maternal command, Muriel sat down to her desk and indited to dictation a formal and somewhat non-committing answer to Wilfred Burgess's almost equally formal letter of proposal. "After all," she thought to herself, "Captain Burgess is a gentleman. He won't want to marry me, if I tell him I don't and can't ever love him. As soon as I get up into my own room by myself, I'll write and explain every word of it to Oliver; and then I'll also write and tell Captain Burgess my first letter was from dictation, under mamma's orders, and against my own wishes. I'll throw myself on his mercy. I'm sure he's a great deal too nice and kind ever to think of marrying me against my own inclination!"

So, with very great reluctance, but overborne by command, she wrote the letter as her mother wished it, and handed it to the housemaid to run out to the post with.

Then, as soon as it was dispatched, she tore up to her own room, all on fire in her misery. With brimming eyes she read Oliver's letter—"called away at a minute's notice"; "might be months or years before he saw her again"; but "no fear of the climate," "and as to the enemy, why, the regimental doctor never so much as got a sight of them, worse luck! which was why promotion was so slow in the army medical department"; but one thing consoled him, and that was the thought "that he took the love of the sweetest and dearest girl in all England with him." He would live on that thought every day while he was away; it would never be absent from his mind till he was back again in England. He *would* have liked, to be sure, to have been able to give her one last kiss; but the service was the service, and she knew it was impossible. However, he would think of her endlessly till they could meet once more; till then he remained, with kisses and love, her ever affectionate and devoted Oliver.

Muriel read it with many tears. And to think

she had been afraid to tell her mother! And to think, after all that had happened yesterday, in that sweet green water-meadow, she had written to-day to promise herself in marriage to another man than Oliver! She was heartily ashamed of herself. And yet—it was not she: it was all mamma's doing. With a mother like hers, no girl on earth was responsible for a moment for her own handwriting.

However, she must do what in her lay now to repair the evil. So she sat down at once, and wrote two long, long letters—one to Captain Burgess, the other to Oliver. She explained everything and extenuated nothing. She blamed herself not a little for her moral cowardice; but then, they must remember how very difficult it was for a woman, brought up as she had been, to set herself in open opposition to her mother's wishes. The letter to Oliver in particular was one of passionate self-exculpation. She wouldn't have written so warmly, indeed, had it not been for the grievous wrong she felt she had unintentionally done him. Her burning desire to set herself right again with the man to whom she was *not* engaged, but to whom she had promised that she would never engage herself to any other, led her to speak in the heat of the moment more frankly

by far, and with more open affection, than womanly feeling would otherwise have permitted her. She opened her whole heart to him. She was all pure love and penitence.

As soon as she had finished the letters, she took them out to post. As her mother had said, there was not a moment to lose. It was with fear and trembling, therefore, that she slipped down past the drawing-room door and out into the road. Fortunately for her, Mrs. Grosvenor didn't stop her. Muriel ran quickly past the garden, by the clump of lilacs that hid the rustic seat, and down the lane to the one local post-box. It was let into the wall, by the corner near the solitary inn of the village. She slipped her letters in, trembling. Then, the moment they were out of her hand, and irrevocably committed to that inexorable office, she saw the box was already cleared. It wouldn't be opened again till evening. She had missed the first post! And Oliver would sail without ever hearing from her! And Captain Burgess would go away thinking she was engaged to him!

In an agony of terror, the unhappy girl ran back and tried to compose her mind to meet this dreadful emergency. So far as she could see, there was no

way out of it. Theirs was one of the remotest country villages in Surrey. The nearest telegraph-office was five miles off at Brook. She had missed her one chance. Not an opportunity was left her of repairing her fatal blunder.

Poor Muriel almost fainted. She passed the most miserable day of all her life. Suppose Captain Burgess were to confide the fact of his engagement to Oliver! But there! thank goodness, soldiers don't talk about these things to one another like school-girls! That was her one consolation. She would write again, and send the letter off after them on their way to South Africa. Nothing else could be done now. And, oh, how unhappy she would continue to be till she could know quite surely it was all cleared up again!

Late that evening, while Muriel was sitting crying, all alone by herself, in her own little bedroom, there came a knock at the door—"Telegram for a person of the name of Grosvenor." The Roman matron, smiling blandly, opened it without saying anything of its arrival to Muriel. It was short, but satisfactory. "Sent off from Southampton, 7.39 evening. Letter just received. Proud, grateful, and happy. Let me have a photograph before I go, directed to Burgess,

H.M. transport *Extensible*, Plymouth Harbour, to-morrow. We call there for mail on our way down Channel."

Mrs. Grosvenor, deeply musing, thought it best on the whole not to show that telegram at all to Muriel. It's no use unsettling a girl's mind when it's once made up; and she had a presentiment that if Muriel knew the *Extensible* was going to call for letters at Plymouth, the silly child might want to write something to that odious Dr. Cameron. So she contented herself by taking out one of Muriel's photographs from the drawer on her own account, putting it into an envelope, directed as Wilfred Burgess wished, and giving it to the telegraph-boy to post at Brook for her. That would ensure its going by the night post down to Plymouth; and Muriel need never know the transport was expected to call on its way there.

So the end of it all was, that Oliver Cameron went off to South Africa firmly convinced in his own mind he was as good as engaged to Muriel Grosvenor; while Wilfred Burgess went with him in the self-same ship, firmly convinced in *his* mind, too, he was actually betrothed to her. Each carried a copy of the self-same photograph in a letter-case in his pocket —for Muriel had given hers, with many blushes, to

Oliver that afternoon in Whitmore Hollow; and Mrs. Grosvenor had sent another copy to Captain Burgess, in Muriel's name, by post to Plymouth.

V.

A FEW months had passed by. It was the end of spring in the southern hemisphere. The oxen were outspanned and the horses tethered. A bronzed and sun-tanned party of the Royal West Badenochs sat clustered round the camp-fire on a South African hillside, far in the heart of Matabeleland. It was a glorious sub-tropical evening, dark as pitch in the distance, but star-lit overhead, with myriads of twinkling lamps; and the air blew soft and balmy as in an English August. That clear South African air is a sort of gaseous champagne for effervescence and buoyancy. The West Badenoch men, moreover, were in the best of training. A couple of months spent in bivouacking on the illimitable plain had put them all into that splendid condition of nerve and muscle that comes of open-air life, simple food, and wholesome hardships. Plain living and no thinking had wrought wonders for their physique. They were "tough as nails," as Burgess remarked complacently, inspecting

his bare biceps; for camping-out, it may be observed, is not exactly conducive to regimental strictness in the matter of uniform. His Royal Highness the Commander-in-Chief would have found ground for comment in the costume of the party. Indeed, the little group that gathered round the officers' camp-fire in lager that evening were most of them in their shirt-sleeves, and a good part of the remainder had discarded altogether even their last upper garment, save only a thin and sleeveless jersey. They were all in capital spirits, too; for there's nothing like camping-out to banish the blue-devils. Small discomforts disappear after a week's trekking on the Veldt; and big ones are unknown anywhere north of the Zambesi. They hadn't seen a post or a letter since they started from England; for immediately on landing they had been hurried up country into the debatable ground: and now, as they lay stretched at full length on the short brushwood of the plain, with the fire-flies flitting about in the balmy evening air, and the loud whir-r-r of the goat-suckers ringing constantly in their ears, they looked happier and jollier than they could possibly have done in a Belgravian drawing-room, with the harassing consciousness of endless engagements to be fulfilled to-morrow.

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"Stick on some more wood, Ellis," the Major said lazily to the junior sub-lieutenant. "Let's have a good old blaze. It looks so much more cheerful, and it keeps off the beasts too."

"But it draws on the mosquitoes," Burgess exclaimed somewhat savagely, killing a couple of the enemy on his forehead as he spoke with a well-directed blow. "Confound the creatures! They make one's life a nuisance!"

"For my part," the Major replied, with the philosophic calm of an old tropical hand, "I prefer mosquitoes. They're so jolly companionable. With their buzz in your ear, you never feel solitary. Where there's nothing else to do, they keep one's mind occupied. I lie awake a bit at night myself sometimes, on the open ground here; and if it weren't for the mosquitoes, I might perhaps fall into the bad habit of thinking, and suffer from my conscience. I seem to remember I did one or two little things long ago—when I was a youngster at school, you know, or a sub-lieutenant—that might trouble a delicately sensitive conscience like mine, if I'd time to think about them. School-boys and sub-lieutenants are such shocking criminals! But the mosquitoes come in, and prevent remorse; which is always a

comfort. Heap the wood on, Ellis, and never mind the insects!"

The junior sub-lieutenant piled on more wood as directed. He was a good-humoured-looking young fellow, with a round school-boy face; but he tried to make up for what he lacked in years by what he smoked in tobacco. 'Tis the way of sub-lieutenants. "What's your idea about mosquitoes, Cameron?" he asked, just to rouse the doctor, who was in a brown study. "Think 'em wholesome, eh? Recommend 'em for an aggravated and long-standing case of moral obliquity like the Major's?"

"Oh, it's no use asking Cameron," Burgess put in, looking round to him. "Don't I tell you he's in love? His heart's in England. I can see it every day we march on more clearly. He's aware he's getting always one stage further away from her. When a fellow's in that box, he doesn't need any mosquitoes to keep his mind employed. He's always got something to think of. But cheer up, old man! you needn't take on about it. We've all of us been there. Why, even the Major himself looks as grave as a judge whenever he hears the band play 'The girl I left behind me!'"

"Take care there, Ellis!" Oliver Cameron cried,

not sorry for an opportunity to turn the subject; for Burgess, drawing a bow at a venture, had come a little too near the truth to be quite agreeable: and as a matter of fact the doctor *was* just that minute engaged in thinking over the impossibility of writing to or hearing from Muriel Grosvenor. "Take care, there; drop it quick! There's a scorpion under the bark of that log you're holding. Such a jolly big fellow!"

The sub-lieutenant dropped the log rather quicker than he would have dropped a hot potato; and Oliver Cameron, pulling a pair of surgical pincers from the pocket of his fatigue-jacket, held up at once before their eyes a very fine specimen of the great African scorpion. He was six inches long at least, and had claws like a young lobster's. "If you'd had a bite from that fellow," the doctor said quietly, dropping the noxious beast into the midst of the red-hot coals, "I should have had a chance of a case—which don't seem likely otherwise in this wonderful climate."

The brute fizzled and frizzled in the cinders where he dropped. Talk turned upon scorpions, thereupon; and the Major, ever fluent, had some marvellous stories to tell of hairbreadth escapes he had had from venomous creatures in India or else-

where. That roused Captain Marshall, who was the chartered tall-story teller of the Royal West Badenochs. "Scorpions!" the captain murmured; "why, hang it all, Cameron, you should just have seen the scorpion I once saw at Rangoon! He *was* a blazer! About two feet long, I should say, or it might perhaps be twenty-three inches!"

"Make him a yard while you're about it!" Ellis exclaimed, half aside.

But Marshall was imperturbable. "He looked like a crocodile," he went on. "I'm not a cruel man, don't you know, like Cameron; and I didn't want to harm him. I've no grudge against scorpions. So I caught him in my hand by the tail, just so, quite gingerly, at the joint where the sting is, you understand, so that he couldn't hurt me. I was holding him between my finger and thumb, going to put him outside my hut, without incommoding him unnecessarily—drop him gracefully down a yellow fellow's back to make the beggar jump, or something of that sort—for Burmese, I've observed, don't relish scorpions; —when, would you believe it, that low-minded animal turned upon me like a tiger—turned upon *me*, his benefactor!—nipped me hard with one of his claws; made me let go of his tail; and then, in the most

ungentlemanly and unsportsmanlike fashion, while I was trying to shake my finger free from his beastly claw, bent over his jointed tail—so—and positively stung me. It was a disgraceful exhibition. The blackest ingratitude! Ever since that time, whenever I've caught a scorpion, I'm free to confess I almost feel inclined to treat them as Cameron does—cremate them prematurely. They're most unnatural brutes. They've no sense of gratitude!"

"I got badly stung by a snake once, up country in China," the Major began, trying to cap this adventure. "He was one of those large yellow-banded snakes—you remember them, Marshall——"

But Captain Marshall, once started, was not to be put off his own personal reminiscences so lightly or easily. "Oh, snakes are all right," he answered, with an airy, hasty wave of the hand. "I've nothing to say against snakes. I've seen whole herds of 'em. They're most noble-minded creatures, and par—ticularly grateful. A snake, my experience is, never forgets a favour. Why, I met one of them one day in a tiger-jungle up in the North-West Provinces—near Mozuffernugger, you recollect, Major, down in that deep dry nullah—a poisonous sort of snake—huge cobra or something. Well, he looked at me and

glared; he wanted to frighten me: like a general in command on inspection day at Aldershot. But I saw in a moment the fellow was shamming. He couldn't hurt a lamb. He was in trouble himself, and I had him at a disadvantage. He was sloughing his skin, that's where it was: got it half on and half off, and daren't have tackled a missionary. He looked so doosid uncomfortable that, being a kind-hearted chap, I gave him a helping hand, or rather a helping foot, and just held his skin for him under my heel till he could wriggle well out of it. I might have shot him as he stood, of course; but I preferred to be chivalrous. I don't like to take my enemy at an unexpected moment; it isn't fair fighting. Well, I assure you, Cameron—word of honour as a gentleman—as soon as ever that snake got free from his slough, what do you think he did? Why, he looked at me steadily at first, as much as to say, 'You're a brick—you are! I appreciate your friendly and soldier-like forbearance!' then he glided away for a minute quite noiselessly into the bush, climbed up a cocoa-nut tree that was growing hard by, and in less than another second was back, if you'll believe it, with a cocoa-nut in his mouth, which he laid at my feet as a mark of his esteem and consider-

ation. I must say, a snake is a most grateful animal."

"Never remember to have seen a cocoa-nut palm in the North-West Provinces," the Major murmured, half beneath his breath, as though he distrusted some minor details in this veracious narrative.

"It's a pity to quarrel with a work of imagination merely on the ground that it appears to contain discrepancies of fact," Oliver Cameron said, smiling. "If I could swallow the snake, I think I could swallow the cocoa-nut too while I was about it."

Marshall assumed at once the air of an injured innocent. "You don't mean to say," he cried, "you think a snake hasn't got sense of gratitude enough for that! I tell you what it is, Cameron, you judge other fellows, and other animals, by your own standard. You don't give 'em credit for their finer feelings. Why, I remember a jackal—he was in Ceylon, I believe—who came out one day——"

"Stop, stop," Cameron cried, interrupting him at once in a more serious tone, and shading his eyes with his hand from the flickering glare of the camp-fire. "Talking of jackals, what's that moving down yonder? Don't you see a pair of eyes, Colonel? There—below, through the gloom! Just

under the waggon! Two pair — three, four of them!"

"Hyenas!" the Colonel exclaimed; "or perhaps it's ant-eaters. The light of a fire very often attracts them."

"No, no; it's not hyenas, nor ant-eaters either!" Cameron cried, all alert. "Nor lions, too. It's natives!"

"Natives!" the junior sub-lieutenant exclaimed, rising at once in his eagerness. "Not the enemy, surely!"

"Yes, the enemy!" the Colonel cried, starting to his feet with an alacrity highly creditable to a man of his years. "It's them! The Matabeles! They've crept past our pickets without being observed. Bugler, sound the alarm! Section A, under the waggons! By Jove, boys, they've stolen a march, and now they're upon us!"

And even as he spoke, suddenly, out of the dense gloom all round, rose a whoop and a cry; a fearful yell t onset! Then a confused mass of black objects, wriggling till that moment on their bellies through the long grass, started up in concert; their white eyes alone gleamed through the starlit night like the fire-flies; only by the noise, the vague sense


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of movement, could one know that the naked African was there in his thousands.

Cautiously, cat-like, th Matabeles had crept up through the scrub under cover of the night; noiselessly, stealthily, they had crouched past the pickets, till they were close beside the camp-fire. Then they rose with one whoop. There was a fierce, short onslaught. A shower of throwing-assegais fell thick inside the lager. In the darkness and on the open plain the effect was terrible. In one second, the West Badenochs woke up from the chaff and nonsense of the bivouac to the stern realities of actual warfare. The enemy who had eluded them and fled from them so long had suddenly and unexpectedly assumed the offensive.

At the same instant, the sharp sound of rifles discharged beyond the lager fell on the officers' ears. The outpost guards, too late, had discovered that the enemy had crept past them unperceived and were swarming into the lager.

VI.

In a moment all was changed. The camp was alive with assailants and defenders. Soldiers and

officers had sprung up from their firesides, and a hand-to-hand fight had begun promiscuously between naked natives and well-armed Englishmen. Confusion reigned everywhere. The camp was untrenched, and just surrounded by a girdle of the baggage and transport waggons. Four field-guns at the corners alone defended it. Almost before the men had had time to form themselves into ranks, the natives had crept over and under the waggons, wriggling like snakes on their bellies, and were upon them with a strange medley of muskets, rifles, assegais, and knobsticks. Through the darkness of the night, Oliver could hardly make out anything. But he saw just enough to see the lank-limbed black men swarming like so many ants into the disordered camp. Horses reared and oxen lowed. All was bustle and uncertainty. Yet, in the midst of it all, in spite of noise and darkness, it was curious to note how the discipline of the white man told almost instantaneously. In less time than it takes to relate it, the West Badenochs had fallen into order at the word of command, and were standing with fixed bayonets to receive the wild onset of the yelling savages. The Matabeles broke like a billow upon that solid mass of English steel—and were shattered as a great rock shatters

foam from its surface. One wave succeeded another impetuously, and then rolled back again from the living wall, discomfited. But still the line stood, and still the surging waves rolled up afresh in relays from the outer darkness. The crack of rifles succeeded to the booming of the night-jar. Red flashes lit the camp. It was a terrible sight, rendered more terrible still by the brooding gloom, and the suddenness of the surprise which had woke them all up at a moment's notice from their easy security.

For a while the first line held out. Then stolidly, doggedly, here and there it gave way, as the Matabeles pressed on; the men fought individually, as best they might, in little squads and parties. The enemy's numbers were almost overwhelming. 'Twas no part of Oliver Cameron's duty, of course, to take a hand in the fighting; but in this unexpected assault, where every man was struggling hard for his own dear life, and struggling too against enormous odds, even the doctor had no choice but to fire and protect himself. Oliver had drawn his pistol at the first onset, and was defending his own safety as well as he could from three white-teethed assailants—for their black bodies were invisible; their eyes and teeth alone showed by the glare of the camp-fire.

Another man by his side was also fighting desperately. Whole broods of hustling blacks, creeping from under the waggons, seemed to be crowding and over-running him. It was touch-and-go for his life. Oliver tried to help his comrade. Half unconsciously at the time, he was just aware in some dim way it was Wilfred Burgess. The Matabeles, seeing a second white man come up to the rescue of their isolated victim, made a hurried dash forward. A stabbing-assegai lunged vaguely through the visible gloom towards Oliver Cameron. Another darted beside it in the direction of his companion. Oliver felt a slight graze disable his own left arm. But just at the moment, Burgess fell heavily by his side. One hand went up to his breast. Blood was flowing from his shirt. It flowed steadily, swiftly. The doctor saw at once he had got a patient.

With infinite difficulty, in the face of so many foes, he drew the wounded man half out of the dark and almost invisible scuffle. Black arms impeded him. Planting his foot firmly on the ground and thrusting aside the assegais, he hardly knew how, with his hustling elbow, as he had thrust aside other fellows many a time at a game of football in England, he lifted Burgess to his feet, and dragged rather than

carried him a little away from the hottest part of the skirmish to a place of safety. The black men followed close, and it was only by covering the foremost with his pistol, while he retired pace by pace, with Burgess grasped hard in his bleeding left arm, that Oliver could keep them at a safe distance as he retreated. Fighting his way an inch at a time, he managed somehow to get his man well under shelter of the ambulance-waggons. There, near the centre of camp, a rally had now been made, and a large body of men, under the Major's command, still preserved good order. They opened to let him pass. Oliver just succeeded in dragging in his wounded comrade, half faint himself from loss of blood, for his own left arm was bleeding now profusely. Then he sat down, exhausted, close to the ammunition and ambulance waggons, and remained for some minutes inactive and reeling before he could recover strength sufficiently to attend to Wilfred Burgess's condition.

It was no moment to delay, however. The hospital orderlies had now recovered from the surprise, and were ready to help him. Tying up his own arm loosely, Oliver Cameron began, as soon as he could, to look after his friend. A cursory examination

showed him only too well that Burgess's breast was very badly wounded. The assegai had pierced his ribs just a little above the heart, and although it had missed by a hair's-breadth any necessarily vital part, the loss of blood and proximity of the wound to the most important organs made the hurt a most dangerous one. The line outside was now recovering somewhat from the first disorder of the surprise; the West Badenochs were rallying, and the enemy were being sufficiently held at bay beyond the waggons for Oliver to attend to his patient's condition with comparative calm—though only an army doctor knows with what difficulty a man concentrates mind and hand upon a serious "case" when bullets are flying close by, and the red flash of the guns every second interrupts and interferes with the natural course of the practised operator. However, he managed after a while to staunch the open wound; and as soon as the blood had ceased flowing, he began to administer a few easy restoratives. As for Burgess, he lay stiff and faint on the ground by the ambulance, with his eyes half open; it was evident he was unconscious, and all attempts to bring him round were at first a complete failure. Nevertheless, Oliver persevered; and as other patients kept coming in, more or less

seriously wounded, he soon had his hands full. By this time the natives had been fairly driven back from the front of the camp, and were in more or less disordered retreat, while our men now took rather the offensive than merely attempting to defend their own camp and the outer circle of baggage-waggons. At last, Burgess opened his eyes and stared about him wildly. "Come here, Cameron!" he said, in a choked voice. "I have something I want to say to you."

Oliver's trained medical eye saw at once that this rally was almost more dangerous than the previous unconsciousness. It tried the patient more. 'Twas the sort of flickering return to oneself for a few last minutes that often heralds the approach of death in a seriously wounded person.

"Don't attempt to talk, my dear fellow," he cried, leaning over his comrade. "It may do you so much harm. Better try to remain quiet."

"I can't," the wounded man answered, drawing his breath with difficulty. "I *must* speak out to you about it." He took the doctor's hand. "Cameron," he said, "I've often chaffed you these last few weeks about your being in love. Well, I'm in love myself, and that's why I want to speak to you. Stoop down

here and listen. I've no wind left to talk to you with."

Oliver leant over him with a few more words of warning. "Be as brief as you can, my dear fellow," he said, in a gentle voice. "Your life may depend upon it."

The wounded man sighed. "I don't think I shall live anyhow," he answered, with an effort. "I'm very badly wounded. So I want you to do something for me if I—well, if I happen never to recover. I'm glad that fellow's spear didn't kill me outright without the chance of sending her a message at least. I want you to give something for me—to the girl I'm engaged to."

"Engaged!" Oliver exclaimed, a little surprised at the news, for he had always regarded Burgess as his one dangerous rival with Muriel Grosvenor. "What is it, my dear friend? Give it to me at once, and then keep quiet. Though I hope there'll be no necessity for me ever to carry out your wishes in the matter. If you'll only not excite yourself, and these savages 'll allow us to rest in peace for the remainder of the night, there's no reason why you shouldn't go home to deliver it in person."

"I don't think so," Burgess said simply, with

the resignation of a strong man fatally wounded. Then he tried to raise his hand so as to get at his pocket, and failed in the effort signally. "Take it out yourself, Cameron," he said, with a slight moan. "I can't bring my arm up high enough. It's here in my right breast-pocket," for he was lying on the ground, with his clothes torn hastily open, but still wearing his simple coarse Kharti fatigue-jacket.

Oliver put his hand where he was directed, and drew forth a packet. It was an envelope, addressed in a woman's hand to "Captain Burgess, H.M. transport *Extensible*, Southampton Harbour." Inside it, as he felt, was a letter with a card or photograph. He dimly recognized, without realizing its full import, the handwriting. He had seen that hand somewhere; he had even received letters in it.

"Give it to her," the wounded man said, letting his head drop back feebly. "Give it to her, and tell her I carried it with me into my last little skirmish. Tell her I thought of her as I lay here dying. Tell her I gave it to you with my last breath to give to her."

As he spoke, he dropped his head, and closed his eyes once more. The whites showed horribly.

The effort had been too much for him. Once more he had fainted.

Oliver didn't doubt he would faint away imperceptibly into death, so deathly a pallor overspread his face, and so weakened was he already by loss of blood, and the pain he had suffered from that rankling assegai.

But he had omitted to state one vital point—to whom he wished the letter delivered.

Oliver gazed at it once more. Even in that bustle and stir it interested him deeply. The writing on the envelope seemed to him strangely familiar. True, he had only once or twice received letters in that hand in all his life, and then only formal invitations to tennis-parties, beginning "Dear Dr. Cameron, My mother wishes me to ask"—but still he had treasured those up, and knew well the pretty feminine manuscript they were written in. With a sudden burst of surprise the truth broke in upon him. It was Muriel Grosvenor's hand. And the person to whom he was to give that strange message from the dead was Muriel Grosvenor. The girl to whom he himself was *not* engaged. And Burgess sent her that last dying message!

It was not curiosity that urged him to open

the packet and look at the photograph. He must obey Burgess's last wish; and in order to obey it he must know for certain to whom he must deliver the dying injunction. With trembling fingers, there, in the grey dawn, beside the great covered baggage-waggons, amid the litter of the fight and surrounded by his wounded and groaning comrades, Oliver Cameron pulled out the letter and the photograph. One look at the portrait sufficed. His head reeled round. It *was* Muriel Grosvenor! He glanced at the first line of the note, just to make the hateful certainty more certain still. It began, somewhat tremulous, "My dear Captain Burgess," and ended "Yours most sincerely, Muriel Grosvenor." Further than that he did not read; he had no right to read further; but his eye, taking in the whole letter at a glance, without will or effort—nay rather against his will, for, like a man of honour, having satisfied himself he knew where he ought to deliver the note, he strove his very hardest not to make out another word of it—his eye taking it in automatically, as often happens with affairs of great personal importance, assured him at one look it was really a letter from Muriel Grosvenor, accepting an offer of marriage from Wilfred Burgess. It was not warm in its tone; to say the truth, it was

on the contrary somewhat cold and constrained and business-like; but an acceptance it was all the same; of that he felt instantly certain. And it was dated—his brain swam; who could have believed such perfidy possible?—not twenty-four hours later than the time when Muriel had cried so earnestly in the meadow by Whitmore Hollow, where the cotton-grass grew and the orchids bloomed sweetly, "Oh, Oliver, I love you. However long it may be, I'll go on for ever loving you and waiting for you!"

His faith in human nature was very sorely tried. A bitter sense of utter recklessness came over him all at once. If Muriel could act like that—his own pure beautiful Muriel—what reason had he left for taking care of his wretched life any longer? He might as well rush out into the thick of the fight, and let some huge Matabele run him through with his assegai!

VII.

THE enemy were now in full retreat, and Oliver had time for serious reflection. As he sat there and wondered, the day broke gradually. Dawn reddened the east. It served to show up well in pink romantic

light the results of the evening's fighting. They had outspanned on the summit of a small round hillock or copje in the midst of that magnificent rolling plain. Their camp commanded every surrounding height; while away to east and west spread the great grey Veldt, smiling bright in the morning sun as if all were as usual. Miles off towards the mighty Limpopo, those pink rays of dawn were shedding a beautiful glow upon the distant forest. Nearer at hand, upon the summit of an undulating fold in the plain to westward, a herd of antelopes browsed quietly upon the scanty herbage. Their shapes and even their curved and twisted horns were silhouetted in dark brown against the pale blue background. Oliver had been busy all night long, tending the wounded and the dying; yet as he sat there and looked, he could hardly believe such terrible things could happen in the midst of such wind-swept, free, wild country. For a fresh breeze had sprung up from the west with morning, and the Veldt was looking its loveliest in the pale pink light that brooded over the sage-brush. Had it not been for the dead bodies of naked black men, and the clotted blood of his friends that stained the stony floor of the foreground in patches, Oliver might well have believed

that boundless expanse was some painter's fairyland in some enchanted picture.

Yet when men are out on campaign, even death itself seems robbed for the moment of half its solemnity and all its horror. You are in such splendid condition that nothing seems to matter. The sight of your comrades falling and dying before your eyes seems hardly to affect you. Even this terrible disclosure of Muriel's baseness and perfidy rather stunned and surprised Oliver Cameron's soul than crushed or unmanned him. He felt as if something terrible had occurred in his life; and yet—well, there was still that beautiful world spreading illimitable before him. Nature is thus kind to us in the full flush of health and strength, in the prime of manhood. As he drank in that splendid air, he could hardly believe Burgess could really die—or Muriel be untrue to him.

And yet—what was the meaning of that accusing letter?

He folded it up, and placed it reverently in his leather case. He had small time to think: he was busy with his profession. At least he would be true to his friend. Burgess could never complain he had failed to carry out a dying man's wishes.

He replaced the case in his pocket with a slight stifled sigh. Just after a battle, an army-surgeon has something else to do than brood over his own heart-affairs. Then he turned to continue his attentions to his wounded men, too strong and well to feel even the fatigue of a restless night, spent entirely under arms, among the dead and dying.

As he tended his patients, some of them seriously hurt, with the aid of the hospital orderlies, he was aware of a loud cry from the rear of the ammunition-waggons. Looking up towards the sound, he saw all was not yet over. Beyond the hill to the west, where but half-an-hour before the antelopes had been quietly and peaceably grazing, he beheld a black mass of living and moving things, half buried in long grass, advancing rapidly, steadily, towards the camp on the hill-top. The pickets in the rear raised the first alarm. In a second, Oliver realized that the living things, though they looked like ants, were men, warriors, Matabeles. The flash of arms, the glitter of battle-axes, the long gleam of serried assegais, broke at once upon his eyes. The clang of spear on ox-hide shield broke on his ears from the distance. The body that attacked them last evening as they sat around the camp-fire had been but the advance-

guard. The main battalion of their black foes was now descending upon them from the opposite direction. It is usual, indeed, with the Matabeles, to attack at daybreak. The night assault by surprise was a novelty in their tactics.

"By Jove," the Colonel said, looking across at them in astonishment. "This is a whole impi! I didn't know these fellows had so much fighting-strength left in their country after their licking last autumn."

"There are more of them than we thought," the Major answered, pursing his lips. "We'll have to fight for it yet, Colonel, before we get our breakfast."

"Yes," the Colonel answered grimly, roping his grey moustache, "and we won't all of us get it!"

He was only too right. Before Oliver was aware of it, almost, the great black mass had surged up the opposite hill in full force, like a curling billow, and was descending in good order into the intervening hollow, before rushing on to attack the now wearied Englishmen. The night assault had been a mere ruse to fatigue them by anticipation. The Colonel drew his men up above and below the waggons, and fired a volley as soon as the Matabeles came well within rifle range. But to that seething black horde,

mere numbers were nothing: a single volley of musketry was like peas from a popgun. A dozen or two fell, writhing; the rest moved on, unconcerned, taking no more notice of their wounded comrades than so many ants or wasps would do. The individual life they valued as nought. With a fearful dash, they rushed up the hill on the open, hardly taking advantage as they went of the scanty cover of the scrub-bushes; then they fell upon the camp with a wild cry of triumph. Before that terrible yell, even tried soldiers wavered.

For the next half-hour Oliver hardly knew what was happening. He remained behind in the forced inactivity of the ambulance-waggon, taking care of his patients, as they were brought in one by one, and unable to tell how the fight was going. Meanwhile, Wilfred Burgess lay with closed eyes and pallid face, as if half dead, beside the ambulance. Oliver watched him from time to time, but could do little for him. Besides, other patients dropped in every minute. He was almost glad for his own sake of this forced hurry and bustle; it served to take his mind off Muriel's incredible perfidy.

At last, he was suddenly aware that some great change was taking place in the fortunes of the day.

The clang of the spears on the ox-hide shields drew closer and closer. It was clear that the Matabeles were driving our men back, and had swarmed over the waggons. They were inside the lager! And they had surmounted the barrier with true African recklessness of life and limb. Wave after wave had hurled itself alive upon the wall of bayonets till the dead made a sort of glacis at the foot of the waggons, over which the living warriors rushed wildly inside the lager. A din of rifle-shots supervened; then a gleaming of assegais. Shower after shower fell close by Oliver's side. One of the wounded men close by rose up with a terrible cry of surprise and horror. "They're over the waggons!" he cried. "They're inside! The black devils are upon us!"

And so they were in very truth. Swarming, rushing, overwhelming. A great naked flood of unwashed humanity burst pell-mell upon the camp; a whirlwind of Matabeles swept through it like a hurricane. They came and went as the wind comes. Half attacking, half flying, they passed straight through our midst, and out again in the opposite direction upon the open Veldt. Dust rose round them in clouds. They seemed a human inundation. For one moment as they passed through, Oliver was

vaguely conscious that one of them lunged at him with a long iron spear; while another seemed to trample upon his senseless companion, Wilfred Burgess. With a wild cry the doctor rose to protect his fallen friend. He stood over him, wrathful. Though Burgess had robbed him of Muriel, yet he was a comrade-in-arms; nay, even for Muriel's sake, Oliver strove hard to protect him. But it was all of no avail. Next instant, he felt himself borne off his feet as by a sudden uplifting, and swept away with the rush. He didn't even realize for the moment that he was a prisoner. He only knew he was being whirled along, like a straw in a torrent, before a mass of shouting and whooping nakedness. It reminded him of the way he had often been whirled along in his school-days long ago, before a good burst at football. For war, when you are in the midst of it, becomes hardly more than just a terrible game, and reminds you at every turn of the innocent games of your boyhood.

The horde that swept him before it dashed away down the hollow, and then tore up the opposite hill, facing the one where he had seen the herd of antelopes. It went like the antelopes, purposeless, fitful, irresistible. Now and then for a moment it wheeled and faltered and half decided to attack

again; then a wholesome dread of the Martini-Henrys prevailed at last over the fierce savage desire of battle, and the warriors wheeled away again. At last, on the summit of the copje, they halted and took breath. Oliver halted with their halt. He seemed to form part of them. He was out of breath now with that headlong race, and half faint from his wound, which again began bleeding. But the Africans laughed a loud laugh among themselves as they looked at him, standing there, all mazed and panting.

Then the warriors conferred. After a short consultation, the Matabele leaders seemed to think further attack impossible. In point of fact, when they broke so irresistibly upon the barrier of the waggons, it was almost as much in retreat as in assault, for an English detachment sent round from the rear had attacked their flank unexpectedly. They had wavered and broken, and were trying in one desperate last effort to force their way through again into the midst of the lager. But once there, they could do nothing but burst out at the other side, enclosed between two fires and falling by hundreds. They well knew the value of an English prisoner, however, whom they could see from his dress to be at least an officer.

Two or three of them held Oliver tight, and deprived him of his arms, while the others seemed to take counsel together about his further disposition. Strange to say, with the exhilaration of so much out-of-door life, Oliver had now no fear of what the savages might do to him. Or was it that life seemed just at present of little worth, while that photograph of Muriel's burnt a hole in his pocket? He hardly knew which himself: but at any , as the half-naked warriors deliberated, with their leopard skins just hanging from their glossy shoulders, he stood and looked on, with pinioned arms, in perfect indifference as to the result of the council. Such nonchalance seemed to impress and surprise the Matabeles. One or two of them were evidently advising his instant execution. Stone dead, they appeared to say in their own tongue, had no fellow. But others, greatly struck by Oliver's perfect unconcern, seemed to come to the conclusion he was either a god or else some very great chief, who might be used with advantage as a practical hostage. While a man of such importance remained in their hands to do as they liked with, the English would not dare to proceed much further against them, without palaver and colloquy.

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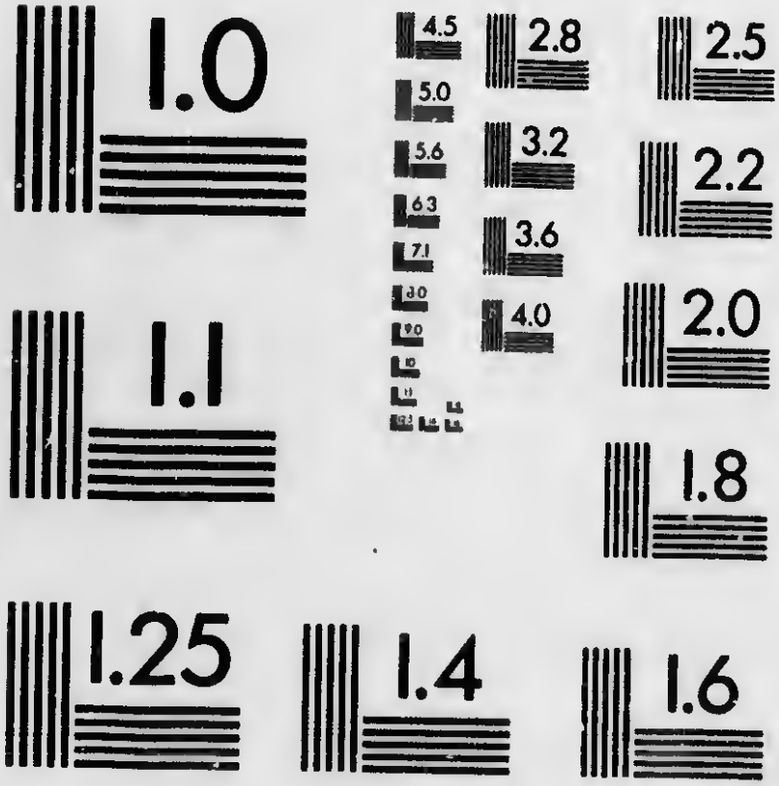

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In the end, this last opinion seemed to prevail among the chiefs, whose rank Oliver recognized by the axes in their hands and by the ox-hide rings that bound their heads like coronets. A few minutes later he found himself being carried along in another whirl of triumph by the excited natives, who evidently considered they had captured a person of the first importance.

As they hurried him over the plain, he could hardly realize as yet all that single night and day had brought to him. Burgess dead; Muriel lost; himself a prisoner in the hands of naked and blood-thirsty savages. But that was not all. The photograph and the letter were as present to his mind even then as the horde of shouting Matabele warriors who led him. He could endure the barbarous African with his iron spear: it was the cruel suddenness of that home-thrust from a woman's pen that most overwhelmed and unmanned him.

VIII.

As for Wilfred Burgess, swept over for dead by the Matabeles as they passed by, he had still, after

they whirled on, some faint flicker of life left vaguely in him. When the Colonel, wiping his forehead, came back at last to that expected breakfast, which not all of them, as he had anticipated, were there to partake of, the other doctor of the expedition, in a dry regulation voice, reported that Surgeon Oliver Cameron was missing, and Captain Burgess dangerously wounded. "Burgess must go to the rear at once as soon as transport can be organized," the doctor said with decision, staring hard at his patient. "He'll have a bad time of it."

And the Colonel, looking grave, answered only with a nod, "Ah, poor Cameron gone, is he? And Burgess dying? Well, well, it's a pity! They were both good officers." For after "a brush with the enemy," petty episodes like this come home to one but lightly. The mind has grown too much accustomed to the manifold form of death in a few short hours for one man more, either lost or saved, to count with it as better than a single item.

That very afternoon, accordingly, Burgess was sent down country, with all haste, in a jolting trek-waggon, to the nearest safe station out of reach of the fighting. Now this station, as it happened, was a famous missionary's on the banks of the Limpopo;

and here, for the time being, Wilfred Burgess was taken in and comfortably cared for. He repaid the trouble. After the hardships of a campaign, men are often so strong and so sound in constitution that a very slight return to the comforts of civilized life soon restores them with almost miraculous speed to convalescence. It was so with Wilfred Burgess. Though Oliver Cameron had thought his case quite hopeless, or worse, as he lay by the waggons in the camp that morning, before six weeks were out he was almost well again, and was recovering as if by magic under the healing influence of home comforts, sound wine, fine African air, and good English nursing.

For, as fortune would have it, he had not been left to the tender mercies of the Zulu women-servants. The mission-house whither he had been sent to convalesce was the home of a great teacher, who acted practically as prime minister to a still unannexed native state under British protection. Nobody in South Africa would have laid a hand in enmity on the Mowatts of the Limpopo. Now the missionary had a daughter, as often happens to missionaries; for a parson, I've observed, doesn't cease to be essentially and fundamentally a parson, merely because his cure happens to lie in Matabeleland and not in St.

Pancras. And when Wilfred Burgess, after jolting down country all unconscious in the rough-and-ready shelter of a covered trek-waggon, first opened his eyes in a snug British bed, delicately draped with white muslin mosquito-curtains, and lightly covered, as became that sweltering climate, with very dainty linen, the first object that met his view, as he stared blankly around him. was—what but the missionary's pretty blue-eyed daughter! She was leaning over him anxiously; for a wounded soldier is a common object for the reception of feminine sympathy all the world over; and when she gave a smile of pleasure at his first intermittent return to consciousness, Wilfred Burgess smiled faintly in answer to her smile, and then closed his eyes again wearily for another half-hour or so.

When next he awoke, he felt dimly aware of an angel in white lawn bending eagerly over him. The red rose at her bosom was not redder than her lips: her cheeks were peach-blossom. She had a very sweet face, neither too grave nor too frivolous; her eyes were the softest blue, and her hair was chestnut. Her simple morning dress looked the perfection of daintiness and coolness for a sub-tropical climate. There was something about her so fresh

and airy and natural that Wilfred Burgess took a fancy to her very much at first sight—she reminded him in so many ways of Muriel Grosvenor!

He didn't ask the angel's name; he was far too weak for that; he accepted her ministrations for the first few days with such unquestioning acquiescence as always accompanies very serious illness. The time when a man hovers between life and death is no time for propounding unpractical questions. Whether she was married or single, princess or farmer's daughter, English or Boer, he knew not and cared not. He only knew that she brought him fresh beef-tea four or five times a day in a pretty Japanese bowl; that she laid fresh flowers in a small vase by his bedside; and that she herself seemed as fresh and as fragrant and as beautiful as any of them. When she flitted in and out, he turned his head to look at her; she came like a butterfly or a beam of sunlight through the open door where the breeze blew cool; she smiled at him gently each time, and Wilfred Burgess—why, naturally, Wilfred Burgess smiled back at her.

Gradually, as time went on, and strength and spirit returned to him, he observed that an elder lady with silky white hair, very soft and motherly, alternated in the room with the vision in white

lawn; and that the vision in white lawn addressed her often as mother. Then he noted that the black women, who came in from time to time to attend to the room, spoke ever of the elder lady as Missis Mowatt, and of the vision in white lawn as Missy Miriam. The very sound of that name seemed to remind him of Muriel. For Muriel's sake, he liked Missy Miriam all the better. He asked for his fatigue-jacket one day, and felt in the pocket for Muriel's photograph, that he might compare the two secretly; but he found it was gone. Then he recollected with a start he had given it to Oliver Cameron, on the day of the skirmish, to return as a dead man's last gift to its original owner. That suggested the idea to him that surely he ought now to write and let Muriel know of his approach towards convalescence. The girl he was engaged to could expect no less of him. He asked for pen and ink, not to write himself —he was still far too weak and feeble for that—but to dictate a letter. Missy Miriam could write it for him. Miriam, however, shook her pretty head very firmly; 'twas a dainty little head, and how daintily she shook it! "Oh, no," she said, with decision. "That would never do! The doctor's orders are, on no account are you to be allowed to write a line to

any one, or think of anybody, till he sees you again and reports upon your condition."

Now, somehow, when Miriam answered him like that, she seemed so absolutely the same as Muriel herself that really Wilfred Burgess had no longer any very marked desire to write to his English sweetheart. If the doctor ordered him not, and insisted on the prohibition—why, of course, if it were only for Muriel's own sake, he must obey to the letter the doctor's orders.

"What doctor?" he asked languidly, turning round in his bed. "Has Cameron charge of me?"

"Oh dear, no," Miriam answered, smoothing his pillow as she spoke. "Dr. Cameron was killed or carried off by the Matabeles. All sorts of things have happened, you see, since you were wounded at the copje. But you're not to be told about them now. You're to keep quite quiet. It's my father who has charge of your case just at present; but he's gone away to the front to see Lobengula, and to arrange the terms of the new settlement in the territory we've just taken over from his people. He's a medical missionary. And now you mustn't ask another word about all this. His orders were strict; you must be kept *quite* quiet."

She spoke with decision. Wilfred Burgess acquiesced. This passive mode of acquiescence exactly suited his feeble state of mind for the moment; he didn't want to be bothered with thinking about anything. So he lay there and grew stronger—very rapidly stronger—within the white muslin mosquito-curtains. Who could help it, indeed, with the pure South African air floating in day and night from the boundless Veldt through the open windows; with fresh beef-tea every two hours, and fresh roses every morning; and with a fresh young vision in the whitest of white lawn flitting in every now and again with fresh fruit or fresh lily-blossoms? Certainly not Wilfred Burgess, who had a sound constitution of his own to start with, and a susceptible heart to help him to convalescence. (For my experience has been, if I dare venture to say so, that nothing tends to recover a man from the jaws of death so much as a pretty nurse to sit chatting by his bedside.)

As Wilfred Burgess grew better, however, he began gradually to take in, not by direct inquiry but by half-unconscious inference, the true nature of the situation. Miriam's father was among other things, as she had said, a medical missionary. I say "among other things," because he was also by

trade a politician, a parson, a farmer, and a landowner. He pervaded the Limpopo. He had flocks and herds of patriarchal magnificence. He was consulted by the neighbouring tribes as an oracle of wisdom. In fact, he was the earthly providence of a whole native kingdom. The very name of Dr. Mowatt was a mighty one to conjure with on the Limpopo tributaries. And Miriam, the wounded man gathered, was his only daughter.

Slowly, as convalescence proceeded, Wilfred Burgess began to reflect that—well, that duty compelled him to write to Muriel. Strange to say, as he thought it, a curious pang came over him. Wicked as it seemed to admit it, he was vaguely aware it was rather duty than inclination that urged him. Day after day he said to himself, "Now really this morning I must put it off no longer!" And day after day, when Miriam answered his demand for pen and ink with the stereotyped formula, "Papa wouldn't hear of it," he was conscious in his own soul of a certain sneaking secret satisfaction. Not that he believed himself as yet at all in love with Miriam. He was still in his own mind engaged to Muriel Grosvenor. But Miriam had been so kind to him, and was with him now so much in his convalescence, that it

somehow for the moment put him wholly out of key for writing to Muriel. If he wrote, he thought to himself, what on earth could he write about, except to tell Muriel Grosvenor what an angel on earth he had found that other girl, the African missionary's daughter? Now, however free from jealousy a woman may be, she doesn't desire (we must all admit) that her lover's love-letters should be entirely filled with the virtues and praises of an unconscious rival. Talk about another girl is not the best door to a woman's affection.

After a time, Wilfred was allowed to get up and wander at large over the farm, with the vision in white lawn to accompany and assist him. He still needed assistance. On the Upper Limpopo, Mrs. Grundy is as yet less imperative than in Middlesex. The young man and maiden sat out much together under the shade of spreading baobab trees on the grass-clad plain, and talked as they would about many things and various. The "little brush" up country had long ago been composed, Wilfred learned by degrees from his pretty companion; the Royal West Badenochs had been ordered home again to Aldershot; the Colonel had been made a K.C.B. for the campaign; and all was going well under the best of all governments with the conquered territory.

He himself had been left behind, it appeared, as unable to move; and he was to report himself to the Commander-in-Chief at the Cape as fit for travel, as soon as he was in a state to return to England. But that, Miriam answered, not without a curious undertone of anxious inquiry in her voice, would not of course be for weeks and weeks yet.

Wilfred Burgess thought otherwise. He saw no reason himself why in a fortnight or three weeks he shouldn't find himself in a proper condition of mind and body for sailing. At that, Miriam's face fell. Perhaps it was but natural. When you've nursed a handsome and intelligent young fellow through a dangerous illness to health and strength—why, you can't help feeling a certain proprietary interest in him. At any rate, Miriam looked grave; then she blushed at her own thoughts. When Miriam Mowatt blushed, she was simply irresistible. Wilfred noticed the blush, and said to himself, "How pretty!" She had been an angel to him, you see. Even Muriel herself couldn't possibly have done more for him. And even Muriel herself couldn't possibly deny it was right of him to feel grateful.

There are very few feelings more dangerous than gratitude.

So day after day passed; and, strange to say, with each new day Wilfred's desire to write and explain the cause of his long silence to Muriel grew progressively more feeble. To tell the truth, it melted imperceptibly at last into distinct disinclination. He began to be dimly aware that he himself was in no hurry to go away from Miriam. He liked her society. In point of fact, whenever he came to face the contingency consciously, he felt "it would be a pull" to go away and leave her.

One morning, about the time when it became clear to Wilfred that before long he must at least go down to Cape Town to report himself, he was strolling with Miriam through the flowery fields in her father's homestead. It was a lovely day, very clear and bright; and the blossoms in the grass grew as tall and beautiful as Miriam's own white lilies in her plot of garden.

"Just look at those scarlet geraniums, springing wild in the meadow!" Wilfred cried, plucking a few of them and half fastening them with tremulous fingers in her dress. "How brilliant they are! and though they're African flowers really, how they remind one of England!"

"Yes," Miriam answered, with half a sigh. "Of

dear old England! That's what makes them so beautiful to us. How strange it is—to us English people, there's no place on earth half so lovely as England; and everything elsewhere pleases us just in proportion as it reminds us of our own fresh English country!"

"Then you've been in England," Wilfred interposed, for he knew she had been born and largely brought up in South Africa.

"Oh dear, yes; for years. I was there at school. I went at six years old, and came out at twenty. That was only three years ago."

Wilfred was pleased at the simple and unaffected way in which she let him know her age, and at the frankness with which she treated him; for he had grown very fond of her—"in a *sisterly* sort of way, of course," he tried hard to persuade himself, but still, very, very fond of her. "And you would like to go back?" he inquired, in a low voice, looking long and hard at her. But he meant nothing by it save the abstract inquiry.

Miriam's face flushed crimson at the look and the question. She drew a deep breath; then she faltered slightly. In a second, as with a sudden wave, Wilfred saw what he had done. How natural

she should misunderstand him! He had seen for many days how fond she was growing of him; and he liked her so much he had certainly not discouraged her maidenly fondness. Indeed, he had treated her with almost brotherly affection. What more easy for her than to misunderstand the simple drift of his question—especially in that tone? And had she really misunderstood it? He himself could hardly say so.

Day after day, that tender heart, long separated from intercourse with men of our own race, had been waiting tremulously for the moment when Wilfred Burgess should say in so many words, "Miriam, I love you." And now it had come: he had determined to ask her. For she loved him herself—how could she help it under the circumstances?—and with a woman's pure faith, she felt sure he loved her. Nor was she wrong, either; the instinct of her sex had taught her to read Wilfred Burgess's heart before he himself had so much as begun to suspect its true reading. And now, when he looked deep into her trustful blue eyes, and asked her plainly, "Would you like to go back again?" her poor heart gave one wild bound, and she answered, faltering, "Oh, yes, I should love it; I should love it; I should love it!"

In a second Wilfred Burgess saw the depths of his own heart opened wide before him, and knew the impossibility of crushing that sweet soul that so frankly confided in him. It swept over him like a flash that he had ceased many days since really to love Muriel Grosvenor. Miriam Mowatt's tender face had been present in his day-dreams where Muriel's once used to be. He loved Miriam; he knew it now; loved the girl whose devoted care had restored him to life from a dangerous illness; and yet—he was bound by the most sacred promises on earth to Muriel Grosvenor! But just at that moment, it was not in human nature to think much of Muriel. What could he do, under the circumstances, but seize Miriam's hand, lean over passionately towards Miriam's blushing face, and exclaim with fervour, "Then, Miriam, will you go there with me?"

And Miriam, flushing crimson, made answer very low, "I could go with you to the world's end. I will go with you anywhere."

Wilfred Burgess lifted her delicate little hand unreproved to his lips. Miriam allowed him to kiss it. She made no false struggle. Why pretend to resist when she loved him so dearly? Nature herself supplied Wilfred with words he never knew till that

self-same second. "Oh, Miriam," he cried fervidly, "I have loved you all the time! I seem to myself to have loved you almost from that first moment I opened my swimming eyes and saw your sweet face bending tenderly over me. I wanted to ask you so much; and yet somehow I couldn't. But now that you say *yes* to me, why, you've made me as happy as the day is long, for ever and ever!"

Miriam looked back timidly into his clear true eyes. She had seldom seen an Englishman (save her father and brothers) since her return to South Africa; and she had learned very soon to feel a romantic attachment towards the handsome young officer whom her care had snatched from the very jaws of death, and restored once more to his life and his country. "And I, too, loved you almost from the first minute," she answered simply; for she was far too natural to think there could be any shame in telling her heart's secret—any merit in concealing from the man she loved her tender regard for him. "I thought you meant to speak; and when I saw just now you were going to ask me, oh, the blood seemed to tingle right through me to the finger-tips."

They sat down together under the welcome

shade of a great spreading baobab tree. There, for one short half-hour, they talked tenderly to one another the sweet nothings of love, in the first full flush of a great heart-hunger satisfied. Miriam's face glowed with pleasure; she had never before known what it was to be so happy. Wilfred, too, was thrilled through and through by some unwonted joy; but his satisfaction, it must be allowed, was somewhat marred and alloyed by the unhappy consideration that Muriel Grosvenor loomed up as a difficulty in the background. What was this dishonourable thing he had allowed himself to be dragged into by Miriam's blushing face and Miriam's trustful innocence? Could purity itself so urge a man to meanness? As each moment passed by, he grew more and more ashamed of himself. He had acted badly, very badly, to both. And yet—you, who are men, I ask you the plain truth—what man of you, put in his place, would have acted otherwise than just as he had done?

Still, the future remained; the terrible future he had now to face. He must explain to both. And how on earth could he do it?

It is still ill work "explaining" to women that love you. Briefly, he began by making a clean breast of it, then and there, to Miriam. With hesi-

tating tones but manful frankness, he told her exactly how he was situated towards Muriel Grosvenor. He didn't love her any longer, he said with candid truth, for the greater love drives out the lesser; and since he had met with Miriam, there was no room in his heart for any other goddess. But still—his duty! Muriel counted him hers, counted herself his; what could he do to explain to her? He knew he was bound in honour to marry her still; yet what sort of honour was that that made a man marry a woman he had ceased to love, merely because he hadn't the courage to tell her he now loved some one else a great deal better than ever he had loved her?

Miriam listened to all he had to say with a good woman's pang of heart and a good woman's composure. She had seen too little of men or of the world to have had her faith in human nature perverted or blinded. So she believed what he told her. Besides, it was clear from every tone of Wilfred Burgess's voice that he was telling the plain truth—that he fancied he loved Muriel till he saw Miriam Mowatt; and then, the greater love, as he said, had driven out the lesser. It was all so natural, too, so human, so comprehensible. How could he

fail, indeed, to love her? She had almost expected as much from the first day she began to nurse him; and she had loved him herself in the very anticipation of his gratitude towards her.

So Miriam, being at once a sensible girl, and a girl with a delicate sense of honour, made answer at once, "I don't blame you, dear friend; I understand your position. And perhaps I drove you to it. I was too quick to catch at your unexpressed meaning. But your one right course is clear now. Go home to England, and see Miss Grosvenor. Tell her honestly, frankly, you are still willing to marry her—if *she* still wishes it. But tell her, too, on what terms and urged by what motives of honour you would do it. Don't hurt her more than you can help; break it tenderly, gently to her; but remember, it is fate rather than *you* that hurt her. If she wishes to hold you to your promise, even so"—here Miriam's voice trembled a little, and her lips quivered, but still she went on bravely—"Well, then, in that case, marry her; and I shall know why you do it! But it would be wrong, really wrong, out of a false feeling of delicacy, to marry a woman you had ceased to love, without at least telling her beforehand how and why you were doing it—wrong

to pretend you were giving her your heart when really and truly it was your hand alone you were able to give her. No girl of spirit—no woman worth calling by that name at all, would wish to marry you if you had ceased to love her. Yet give her the chance at least; let her keep you if she wishes; and I shall know, if the worst comes, it was by my own fault alone you ever spoke to me."

"You're right, Miriam," Wilfred cried, looking admiringly into her face. "I will do as you say. And do you know, it's very curious, but I somehow feel as if, ever since I gave her photograph to poor Cameron that day, Miss Grosvenor had ceased to care for me, and all would be right again."

Miriam looked at him earnestly. "I hope it may be so," she answered, with a fluttering heart. "Yet for her sake as well as mine I advise you as I do; for I hold that a man could do a woman no greater wrong than that—to marry her without love, and never even let her know on what terms he was marrying her."

IX.

OLIVER CAMERON, meanwhile, had spent a few unpleasant weeks at the court of Lobengula, the

great Matabele king, before the negotiations were fully entered into for the settlement of the "little difficulty" on the northern frontier. And when the negotiations themselves were at last concluded, after long palaver, Oliver Cameron's name had never even been mentioned by either party to the provisional treaty. Though reported as "missing," he was believed by everybody in his old regiment to be dead; for that doubtful phrase is generally a mere euphemism in South African warfare for "mutilated by the enemy beyond all recognition." It is not often, indeed, that the Matabele in particular take any man prisoner; the playful habit of those warlike savages is rather to spear the wounded on the battle-field with their deadly stabbing-assegai, and to massacre whomsoever they capture in cold blood at the end of an engagement. Only a mistaken belief that they had got hold of an officer of the first importance had led the indunas who commanded the attack to preserve Oliver Cameron's life for a while; when they found out their mistake, they feared either to kill him on the one hand, lest Lobengula should be angry with them, or to let the English negotiators know of his existence on the other, lest he should in some way interfere or cast an evil eye over the progress

of the peace overtures. So they finally decided to send him up country under escort to Lobengula's kraal, where the great king himself was to decide in person what should be done in the last resort with the captive white man.

Had it not been for the gravity of the circumstances, and the possible seriousness of the consequences, Oliver would have found that enforced visit to the Matabele chief's head-quarters a most amusing adventure. He found the mighty king-god, before whom all his subjects grovelled abjectly in the dust, just a fat old black man, so bulky that he couldn't rise from the ground without the assistance of his servants, and so muddled with Kaffir beer for more than half the day that he could seldom attend to any matter of business. Nevertheless, the Matabeles about him seemed to revere him as a god; and the warrior who had charge of Oliver on his way up from the battle-field where he had been captured by the impi had spoken much to the white man of the king's supernatural power and wisdom. When they were first introduced before Lobengula's face, the induna warned Oliver that he must prostrate himself on the ground with the utmost humility, and not dare to raise his head from the dust, unbidden,

in the great king's presence. He himself approached Lobengula crawling on his hands and knees, and wriggling in the dirt; then he struck the earth eight times over with his long-shafted assegai, to inform the king that he had slain with his own hand in open battle no less than eight of his enemies. If he ventured to overstate the number, he told Oliver beforehand, Lobengula would instantly detect the falsehood; for he was a god and the son of a god, as well as a great chief, and could read the hearts of men, and behold the invisible. The induna himself had lived for some time at the Kimberley diamond-fields, and could speak a little English; but it was clear he respected far more the supposed supernatural powers of his own ancestral divine chief than all the science and resources of European civilization.

So when Oliver stood up boldly and walked erect towards the great king's mat, the Matabeles all about gazed at such sacrilege in blank astonishment. Had any black man dared so to affront the great king, Lobengula would have signed quietly with one hand to his executioners, "Take him off and spear him!" —and speared he would have been, without a moment's hesitation. But when Oliver stood up boldly in the fat chief's presence, the astute old Matabele, though

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sodden with native beer, had wisdom enough to perceive that he would lose respect if he allowed his followers to suppose any ordinary white man would so dare to approach him. He deemed it best to be politic and to bow graciously to the stranger, half raising himself as far as he was able on one arm to welcome him. Then he turned to his indunas. "This white man is a god, too, in his own country," he said boldly, in explanation. "A god knows at once when he comes face to face with a god; and all gods know immediately with what politeness to behave to one another. That is why, when you took this my brother prisoner, a strange feeling within you prevented you from spearing him. 'Twas I who put that into you, seeing he was a brother; and he came along fearlessly, as god to god, for he knew when I saw him I should instantly recognize him."

The indunas about, grovelling on their faces like dogs before an angry master, made answer with deep prostrations, "It is even as Lobengula says. Lobengula knows everything. When we took him, we were afraid in our hearts to spear him, though we knew not why. We felt only that we must send him up at once to Lobengula."

The sole advantage which Oliver reaped from

his imputed divinity, however, was the privilege of being kept in a sort of honourable but certainly most uncomfortable captivity for several weeks at the kraal of his brother deity. And Lobengula's fare, though good enough perhaps for a Kaffir god, proved a trifle coarse for an English gentleman. In the end, after peace had been concluded, and Oliver never even missed by his loving countrymen, Lobengula began to reflect that the best way now to save his shattered credit would be to smuggle the awkward prisoner down quietly to the nearest Portuguese port, and there let him ship himself as he would to England. So the end of it all was, that in a few weeks more, Oliver Cameron found himself, against all probability, on a coasting vessel on her way to the port of Zanzibar, whence he hoped just to catch the next mail steamer homeward bound for England.

He caught it by a few hours only, his regiment having some time earlier returned without him; and as his scanty wardrobe had grown somewhat the worse for wear during his enforced visit to Lobengula, he was entirely occupied during his short stay in Zanzibar in proving his identity, borrowing money for an outfit of clean linen from the consul, and setting himself up in the barest necessaries for the homeward

voyage. Though he learned all he could on board ship about the result of the campaign in which he had borne so unexpected a part, nobody could tell him much about the losses in the Royal West Badenochs; and the consequence was that he arrived at Southampton a week or so later, still firmly believing that Wilfred Burgess was dead, and that he had himself seen his friend's corpse rushed over by an irresistible body of savage Matabeles.

Once arrived at Southampton, Oliver reported himself forthwith to the officer in command, and proceeded direct on his way to London, to announce his return to the authorities at the Horse Guards. Then, having obtained a few days' much-needed leave, to recruit himself after the manifold hardships of the last six months, he ran down at once by the earliest possible train to a certain small country town in Surrey. Though he had almost persuaded himself by this time that he didn't feel the slightest special personal interest in Muriel Grosvenor, for his own sake or hers, yet there was a sacred duty imposed upon him, he said to himself, by Burgess's dying wish; and that sacred duty he must proceed to discharge at once, no matter at what cost to his own private feelings. Besides—though this he wouldn't

have admitted for worlds—he *did* feel glad that the sacred duty would afford him an opportunity of seeing and speaking with Muriel in person. Perhaps—but no, impossible! For perfidy like hers there could be no excuse, no explanation forthcoming. Had he not seen the envelope addressed in her own hand to Burgess at Southampton, and dated by the postmark? She was the sweetest and dearest girl that ever breathed on earth; and yet—oh, to think how incredibly, how basely she had deceived him!

All the way down from Waterloo, as the train jogged along, Oliver Cameron thought these things over to himself with exceeding bitterness; but none the less, more than once, when he found himself alone in his third-class carriage, he took out of his pocket that precious photograph—Wilfred Burgess's photograph—the photograph she had given to the man she encouraged—the photograph that man had given to him to return to her with his dying message!—and gazed at it tenderly. Ah, how he longed to kiss it! For he loved her still, in spite of her deception. But no: he wouldn't; his own pride prevented him. Perhaps, indeed, now Burgess was dead and gone—the rich man for whose sake she would have broken her word to the penniless

army doctor—she would wish to make it all up, to decline again upon the second favourite. But that Oliver Cameron's hot blood could never stand. He would play second fiddle to no man. Beautiful and bright as she was, he had found her out now, and no power on earth would ever again induce him to believe in her.

And yet—how frail is man! What was it that made his proud heart beat so fast when, at a turn of the lane on the way from the station to her mother's cottage, he caught sight quite suddenly, in a flash of the eye, of a pretty pink dress, and a retreating figure, somewhat slighter than of old, and walking with a sobered step most unusual to Muriel Grosvenor? "Why, how pale she is, the dear girl!" he thought involuntarily to himself. "After all, she must have suffered. Has she been fretting about me, I wonder? Or"—his heart sank again—"is it Burgess she's been thinking of?"

Yet the foremost feeling in his mind, for all that, was one of painful regret that Muriel should look so ill. Ill? nay, almost haggard; for as he thought it, she turned, and half fronting him for a second, displayed a pale white face he would hardly have recognized.

"Miss Grosvenor!" he said slowly. Then his heart failed him, after all, and springing forward, he added, in a very different voice, "Muriel!"

With one wild cry of mad joy, the poor girl rushed forward and flung herself fiercely upon him. She held him in her open arms. She leant over him and kissed him. For a moment her white face grew crimson, then pale as death again, with excess of pleasure. "Oh, Oliver!" she cried, clasping him. "My darling! my darling! Why do you come like this? They told us you were dead. Oh, Oliver, this is too much joy for me to endure! I will die of it!"

She pressed her hand to her heart, which was throbbing violently. Oliver could see for himself how it beat through her corset and her bodice. She was wild with delight. This was indeed no feigning. He held her hand and soothed her. His own eyes were dim now. 'Twas not in human nature not to be flattered at such a reception from a beautiful girl —even though he knew it was only because Burgess was dead, and *he* was the second string to her bow on an emergency.

He looked into her white face, and knew instinctively he was wrong. Burgess? Why, what

nonsense! Who talked of Burgess? She was faint with rush of joy. She was dying with wild delight. Her poor heart was first leaping up, and then standing still within her.

But all she could do was just to wring her thin hands and cry, "Oh, Oliver, oh, my darling, they told us you were dead; oh, Oliver, I don't mind now whether I die or not—now I know you've come back to me, my darling, my darling!"

Oliver drew her aside a little way into her mother's grounds. He led her to the seat behind the clump of lilacs. It would be awkward if anybody came and found them like this, especially considering that they were not and had never been engaged to one another, and that after all that had occurred he could never, never marry her. Never, never marry her? Why, what nonsense! *his* Muriel! He clasped her in his arms as he had never clasped her before. She was *his* now, for life. And Muriel cried silently on, and on, and on, from an overflowing bosom.

There they sat and talked hard for an hour or more together—and not a word as yet about Wilfred Burgess's message. Duty, quotha: duty! Had he come to do his duty? At last, after giving way to kisses and tears in a way quite incredible to himself,

and irreconcilable with Burgess's undoubted claims, Oliver steeled his breast suddenly, and brought forth in some shame-faced way—an envelope and a photograph. "Burgess asked me to give you these," he said, with an awkward air, "as he lay dying in Matabeleland. He begged me to return them to you, with all his love, and to tell you he carried them into his last skirmish. He thought of you as he lay half dead. His dying wish was that I should tell you he remembered you."

A sudden flush of shame broke over Muriel's face. "Oh, I forgot," she cried, drawing back. "Poor fellow; I'm so sorry for him! But of course I shall have to explain it all at full length to him now. I haven't thought of that yet. In the first joy of seeing you, I'd forgotten all about it. I must send him that letter. But, Oliver, how sweet to know, while all this was going on, *you* never mistrusted me!" And she pressed his hand tenderly.

Oliver was a man, and therefore a hypocrite. He could only murmur rather low, "Oh, yes, darling, you must have felt I could never misunderstand you. —But, still," he added after a pause, "you must feel yourself—there *was* a great deal, Muriel, that—well, that called for explanation!"

As he spoke, Muriel drew a little letter-case from her pocket. "I've carried them both about with me ever since," she said simply, "in case I should happen to meet either of you unexpectedly. And now I *have* met you. And I see you understood it. Oh, Oliver, even yet I can hardly believe it's true. Well, read them both for yourself, dear, and see what you think of them."

Oliver did as he was bid. They were the two letters that had failed to overtake them at Plymouth. When he had finished his perusal, Muriel looked up at him with all her old sweet confidingness. Already the colour had returned to those pale cheeks. "You know what mamma is," she said simply, still holding his hand in hers. "But, Oliver, this has given us both a lesson. I have learnt and suffered. I think even mamma has learnt something also. She knows this silent grief has nearly killed me—for of course nobody knew what it was I was worrying over—and she won't any longer try to make me do what I could never consent to. More than once she has said to me, 'If Dr. Cameron were alive, I really think after all that's happened I should agree to whatever arrangement you chose to make with him.'"

Just at that moment, as Oliver was clasping

her in his arms once more, and forswearing himself horribly by declaring that in his inmost heart of hearts he had never once mistrusted her, their *tête-à-tête* was suddenly interrupted by a well-known voice, exclaiming in tolerably loud accents over the bushes of the shrubbery, "Miss Grosvenor, where are you?"

Oliver gave a start of unaffected astonishment. "Why, Muriel," he cried, in alarm, "what on earth can this mean? Whose voice is that? I could have sworn it was Burgess's!"

"So it is," Muriel answered, without displaying on her part the slightest surprise. "He wrote to mamma last night to say he'd just arrived, and was coming to-day on purpose to see me."

"But—he's dead," Oliver exclaimed. "I saw him killed myself, weeks and weeks ago, in Matabeleland!"

"So were you, till to-day," Muriel answered, gazing tenderly at him. "It's all been a mistake. I think I see through it." Then, raising her voice a little, and withdrawing her hand from Oliver's too pressing attentions, she answered in a louder voice, "Here we are, Captain Burgess—come down and you'll find us—myself, and a friend of yours."

She said it quite lightly, though in her heart she knew, or thought she knew, what Captain Burgess had come for. And she felt sure her mother had sent him down alone into the grounds on purpose, in order that he might have an opportunity of speaking with her in private. Therein, so far, she was entirely right; for Burgess had said astutely to the Roman matron, "I would prefer, if I might, to have a few minutes' conversation with Miss Grosvenor by herself;" and the Roman matron, naturally enough misinterpreting the meaning of his words, had answered with her blandest and sweetest smile, "Oh, certainly; I know you would. I think you'll find Muriel somewhere down in the garden!"

So Burgess, very sheep-faced, strolled out into the grounds, wondering what he could say to break his painful news, as he thought it, very gently to Muriel.

But when he arrived at the little bench, somewhat retired from the gravel path, where those two happy lovers were sitting side by side in the first full flush of that too delicious meeting, he drew back with a start, for in a second he seemed to catch as if by instinct at everything. The first point he saw was that Muriel and this bronze-faced, bearded man at her side seemed to stand on the best possible

terms with one another; for though at the sound of his voice they had moved apart a little, and were sitting in the studiously constrained and non-committing attitudes which two young people invariably assume when interrupted at love-making, yet he could see at a glance that their faces were radiant with irrepressible delight, and that the joy of love attained was shining bright in each of them. That was all he saw just at first; but it was enough to make him draw back, exclaiming in a somewhat nervous way, "I—I'm afraid I'm intruding." Then his eye happened to light a little more distinctly upon Muriel's unknown companion. He gave a start of unmixed surprise. "Why, great heavens," he cried, "it's Cameron!"

"And it's Burgess!" Oliver answered, no less taken aback in turn at this visible resurrection.

"We thought you were dead," Burgess cried, all thunderstruck.

"And *we* thought the same of you," Oliver answered, half gasping.

"Where have you come from?" Burgess asked once more, looking more and more puzzled.

"Arrived last night from Zanzibar direct," Oliver answered, gazing nervously at him.

Their eyes met awkwardly. There was a short deep pause. Each looked inquiry at each: and then, each seemed suddenly to understand the other. Wilfred Burgess gave a quick side-glance in the direction of Muriel. His mute lips asked a question. Oliver nodded an almost invisible assent. Without one word spoken, Wilfred Burgess understood that by some happy chance fate had extricated him honourably from a most unpleasant position. It was in his power now to spare himself the pain, and Muriel the humiliation, of that dreaded explanation. He drew back a step and gazed hard at her. "Excuse me, Miss Grosvenor," he said, in a very shy voice, "I don't think I need stop now. I—I'm painfully conscious, to tell you the truth, that I've managed to arrive at a most inopportune moment. What I see for myself may spare you the trouble of telling me what's happened. I think I understand. And I think I'd better go. You and Cameron seem prepared to be quite happy without me."

Muriel's face flushed crimson, and her nervous little fingers just grasped in a tremulous clutch the letter of explanation. But for once in the world, a man's intuition was quicker than a woman's. Oliver saw by instinct from the tone of Burgess's voice

that he didn't resent very bitterly this usurpation of his supposed rights over Muriel, and read in a second all the unknown probabilities. With a quiet gesture of repression, he held back Muriel's hand. "You needn't speak, my child, I think," he said, turning gently to her. "I understand you to mean, Burgess, that you willingly and spontaneously release Miss Grosvenor from her supposed engagement."

Wilfred Burgess nodded. "Yes, willingly," he answered. "I—I see I intrude. I'm sorry to have dropped in at such an unfortunate moment. But the one thing I can do now to repair my error, is — to leave you two instantly to your own devices!"

Half-an-hour later, the two men had a few friendly words together at the little railway-station. They parted most amicably, each declaring with emphasis the other had acted throughout like a friend and a gentleman. Then Burgess returned to town. Oliver Cameron stopped on at the village inn, and determined next morning to face the Roman matron. He let Burgess know the result by wire to their common club. And in the course of twenty-four hours a telegram was speeding its way by mounted messenger up-country from Kimberley:

"Miriam Mowatt, Stein's Kloof, Limpopo. All mistake. Miss Grosvenor going to marry Oliver Cameron. Am coming back on leave by next mail to follow their good example. Congratulate me on my success. Yours eternally,

"WILFRED BURGESS."

It was a reckless expenditure at cable rates per word of the Eastern Telegraph Company; but what does a man care for that when the girl he loves is waiting eagerly at an up-country station to know whether or not he can come out and marry her?

THE END.

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