

remember that I whistled with happiness when I opened it—and then the whistle stopped in the midst of unfinished bars. A chill of pity had gripped me and sent the blood back to my heart. It was like reading the death sentence of Lepard, and I found my fingers trembling. I sat down frowning at those sheets of paper as if they were enemies of ours, and my mind ran fast and hard. What was I to do? How could I give it to him?

"But there was no alternative. He had surmised by my attitude that some tragedy had been thrust before me, and when I looked up was standing with folded arms, erect and frowning.

"What is the trouble?" he asked.

"For reply I gave him the letter and, unwilling to witness the blow, retired to my own room while he read it. Its contents were so seared into my mind that I could have repeated it word for word then, as now. I read:

DEAR OLD GASTON.—I have read our poor friend's letter. For God's sake it must not be, and I thank him that you are there to prevent, to soften the news to him and step in to ward off the ruin of his life! He must not marry Countess Olga Charitonoff, as he values his honor! You who know that I never speak lightly of a woman, can appreciate how reluctantly I write these lines and know that I would not do so did I love our comrade less. I am not surprised that the name of Countess Olga is unfamiliar to Jules, for he has never been a reading man, preferring the play of the sword and those athletic exercises in which he excels; but I am astonished that you, the studious, thoughtful and observant, have not remembered.

"The lady to whom our Lepard pays his attentions, the Countess Olga Charitonoff, abandoned her husband and became an adventuress. In St. Petersburg her very name was proscribed, and in Europe she was finally forgotten and regarded as dead. Her presence in America is logical, as in this continent she was too well known to continue her existence. That she has impressed upon some member of the Russian Legation and accredited herself is not beyond her capacity, particularly when she is dealing with men who have been absent from their native country for more than a decade.

"You must deal with Jules tactfully; for his wound will be sore and his fearless impulses are too frequently dictated from a great and forgiving heart. Had this news come to me but a week later, when I shall have leave of absence for a month, I should have brought it in person. It required a week for me to gather and confirm the deplorable intelligence by which I become the moving instrument to hurt—yet to protect—a friend. Pray Heaven it is not too late!"

I SAT alone in my room, mentally reviewing that dreadful missive until Lepard

had had sufficient time to grasp its import, and then went to him. He had dropped into the depths of a chair, a collapsed figure of misery. Villalon's letter was crumpled in the palm of one hand which hung listlessly over the arm of a chair, and the front of his dress shirt was wrinkled. He appeared to have shriveled in size, and his face was white and set. His brown eyes lifted, displaying in their brown depths such a look as men may feel but once in life. His wounds were deeper than those of savage, cruel blades I had seen him bravely bear on a sand swept, corpse strewn plain. I went over beside him and put my hand on his shoulder. He tried to speak; but the words refused to pass his dry and inflexible lips. He was a man stricken to dumbness through a thrust in his soul.

"I stepped to the sideboard, poured a glass to the brim with brandy, and held it to his lips; for his fingers trembled so when he attempted to grasp it that the task would have been beyond the power of his nerves.

"Another, please," he whispered, and I obeyed his desire.

He straightened up at last and leaned forward in assumption of that poise which we who live in uniforms never lose for more than a moment. The room was very still, and the evening outside, resplendent with early spring and mellow with the light of a new-moon, seemed to have joined the quietude of tragedy. The only sounds that came to us were the wailing calls of the boats far over on the Potomac, like voices of departing friends shouting farewell, a faint sound for the soldier bidding farewell to a dying love.

"I wish—I wish—to be alone for a little while!" he gasped. "You won't feel—that is you—you will understand?" he questioned.

"I appreciated that he was undergoing a torment which he alone could suppress, and obeyed his bequest and sought the streets, and walked to and fro in the pale light of the young night for more than an hour, suffering with him that strange telepathy which binds those of kindred souls.

WHEN I returned he was still in the room, which was lighted only by the rays of the moon through the open windows, and was walking backward and forward, once more master of his emotions and capable of repression. I turned on the lights, and in their glare read the story of his struggle in the old-young face and receded eyes, now suddenly become clouded with that shadow of despair which the conquered wear.

"It was not a time for speech, and I seated myself in silence, waiting for him to bare his thoughts if he felt so inclined, or willing that neither of us might ever again mention the disastrous name of this woman who had brought sorrow into our lives. He spoke at last in the dull tone of one who has made a repugnant but unalterable resolution.

"I have but one course," he said. "I must not only crush my affections, but must do more. Were our informant of this sad history other than Villalon, I should hesitate; but his word is truth and makes my duty clear."

"He stopped and leaned against the window sill,



"We Captains Three Found Ourselves Facing Three Fine Americans."

staring out but not seeing the splendor of the American night. I looked at him, and my own gaze wandered absently to where, white in the moonlight, the great gray Capitol stood, the majestic flag of the country lifting softly in the upper breeze. It was so hard in the midst of all this foreign beauty that Lepard should have met defeat and disillusionment!

"Colonel North," he said, turning sharply, "is one of the finest gentlemen I have ever met. Rival that he has been of mine, I like him, and cannot see him ruined as I might have been had not this—this terrible letter come. I shall not read its contents to another; but he must be told. A man may make his own choice. Perhaps he will—but that is for him to decide. It will be difficult."

"The distant shape of the building and the billowing of the flag again caught me while I weighed his decision. It was plain that he was right. My impulse—but I was not in love with her—had been to drop the affair, after exposing her past to the Russian Legation, that it might take such action as it thought best for the protection of the unwary. Yes, he was right.

"Come!" he said in that same dull voice. "We will seek him!"

TOGETHER we passed out and, arm in arm, in speechless companionship, went to the Army and Navy Club, of which we knew he was a member. We sent our cards up, found him in, and were admitted. Obeying our suggestion, he took us to a private room, where, when we were seated, he looked at us, evidently wondering why we had sought him.

"Lepard took from his pocket the crumpled letter and handed it to him. 'Monsieur le Colonel,' he said, 'favor me by reading it.'

"I watched the young man not without sorrow as his face became perplexed, paled, and then slowly hardened. I saw a wonderful exhibition of self control. It was the first time I had ever had a chance to see the American tested to the extreme, and he was a thoroughbred, a man such as I respect and always shall.

"He handed the letter back. 'I cannot accept your friend's word,' he said calmly, coldly, and decisively.

"Habit is strong. Lepard and I were on our feet together; Colonel North also, as if expecting attack.

"It is a pity, monsieur," Lepard burst out, "that we are in a country where one may not represent one's friends!"

"It is," Colonel North answered, and then, as if weighing his words, "I respect your friend's intentions, and the fact that you have come to me wishing that I may possibly be spared the loss of reputation; but can you not perceive that, admitting the veracity of the letter and the excellence of your intention, I could not, in the circumstances, permit you to traduce Countess Olga, whom I love? In America, gentlemen, our code is as severe, though perhaps differing from your own, and no man may speak in derogation of a woman whom he has called his friend, even though the proof is all convincing."

"Respecting his sentiment and admiring him the more, we bowed. We had expected reproof from such a man. His next words amazed us.

"You have twitted me with the fact that we do not fight duels in this country. Having served abroad, I am not ignorant of affairs of honor, and, regardless of custom, shall meet you in your own way. I shall find some friend who will act as a second to convey my message to you."

"The man was but a sleeping volcano, after all. His cold face masked a fine temper, and the hand that rested so still on the chair beside which he stood was hot and ready. My admiration grew.

"He may visit me," I said, handing him my card, and after a formal exchange of courtesies Lepard and I withdrew.

THE American acted quickly; for before we had breakfasted on the following morning his friend Captain Selkirk waited upon us. Lepard sat silently by. I accepted the challenge in his behalf and chose swords as our weapons. And the choice was easy, because I knew that Lepard wielded the most redoubtable blade in all France, not excepting myself. Selkirk, as fine an officer as the man he represented, was yet more outspoken.

"Let it be understood," he said, "that I accept the full responsibility of this affair."

"I looked at him questioningly.

"Ah," he continued, "you do not know that this duel may break both my principal and me in the service; but honor where women are concerned, though it end careers!"

"I nodded assent. There was something fine in his declaration. Lepard appeared for the first time to note the conversation and moved restlessly. He opened his lips as if to speak, and then closed them again and waited for our visitor to depart, which he did but a moment later.

"Frankly, I was troubled and could see no way out of the predicament, the American idea and ours are so different in affairs of honor. You are such a strong, muscular, and quick acting race that you partake of the Briton's slowness of mind and the Gascon's quickness of hand. You have been too busy to resort to the Code since your aristocracy of the South succumbed to a more practical generation and thereby forgot the niceties. That is a point, however, on which one of your countrymen and a Frenchman would never be able to agree, so I pass it by.

"My perturbation was voiced by Lepard, who had been studying a pattern of the rug. 'What a pity!' he said in a tone of annoyance. 'What a pity! Gaston, there is but one way out of it. I knew you would choose swords, and had in mind the lightest disabling possible of *monsieur le Colonel*; but now it is in a muddle. I can do nothing to ruin the man whom I would shield. I went to him hoping to save his honor. I can do nothing that would irrevocably take it from him. He has done as either you or I would, cast everything quickly to the winds in defense of his own code of chivalry. If he is wounded, an investigation will be sure to follow. If I am wounded—'

"He flung his hands wide in a gesture indicating that it would be of small moment, and calmly lighted a cigarette. Between puffs he said, 'Peccavi! I must be wounded. Thus my friend's honor is satisfied and no reputations are lost.' The word clung to him in a more tragic meaning, and he faltered, 'Lost! Lost as is—as is that of Olga!'

"It was beyond sufferance, and I seized my hat and left him to grief, returning late at night and