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THE FIGHTER

By ALBERT PAYSON TERHUNE Author of "Caleb Conover, Railroadier," "Dr. Dale," "On Glory's Trail," etc. NEW YORK FRANK F. LOVELL COMPANY 1909 Copyright, 1909, by Albert Payson Terhune

(Continued.)

For some unknown reason, Caleb felt happier than he had for days. He was ashamed of the feeling, but so strong was it that he made no further demur. People were starting for the music. Caleb made it perfectly clear to divers and sundry youths, en route, that she was quite content to remain with her present escort) Conover found himself at last, enthroned on a maddeningly uncomfortable camp-stool; with the girl at his left side. The music opened with a long, intricate piano solo; played with splendid persistence by a short young man with long hair. The night was hot. The bright-lit, overcrowded room was hotter. Caleb had eaten largely and had drunk more than was his wont. There is something very soporific to the Philistine outlander in a rendition of ultra-classical music long sustained. Conover shook himself impatiently, aware of the drowsiness that threatened to enmesh him. Desiree glanced at him with merry encouragement as the tireless pianist, in a reluctant note, was followed by a ripple of civil applause. The clapping and Desiree's look combined to bring Caleb's drowsy senses back to normal wakefulness. "That chap," he whispered, "can't play anywhere near as good as you do. Lord, he hit that old pianer some cruel ones!" After he had said that, he so it couldn't get back at him. I bet them keys wish they had your white little fingers pecking 'em instead of that blasted piano. What's this next turn going to be?"

"A tenor solo," she answered. "It's the 'Siciliana' from Cavalleria Rusticana. Oh, good! It's to be accompanied by the harp. It always ought to be, I think. Don't you?" "Sure!" responded Caleb, with an air of loyal certainty. "But Desiree was too much enraptured in the prelude to admonish him. A few staccato chords; then began the song. At first restrained dignity of phrase; then passion bursting starkly through the convention of stilted word and melody; rising at last to a crescendo where speech failed and the hot-gasped "A-ah!" broke off the strain. To Caleb, listening impassive on the other side of Desiree from Conover the air conjured up its picture as vividly as though the scene lay before his eyes. Gray the air, the gray-walled Sicilian village, high on the mountain top. Graw dawn of Easter above the sleeping hamlet. One figure half hidden by the abutting angle of the stone house, the only human being abroad. One figure—a man, gular in hand, singing that mad love song beneath the cascading waterfall. He had won—lost—and wrongfully won again. Turiddu, the returned soldier serenading Lola, fickle wife of Alfio the absent tenant. The woman whose knife-thrust Turiddu was destined to fall, before the yet unrisen sun should stand at high noon above their sordid little village. And, conspicuous of his half-suspected fate, the wooer was singing to the woman whose love was to bring him death. Mad, undisciplined, lawless adoration now moaned, now cried aloud, in both air and words. What mattered the holy day, the evening husband's steel, the forsaken Santuzza, who was sobbing alone somewhere in that huddle of blind houses? Love was king. The pirate love who makes the life is death; and, unafraid, tempts its fate.

"Ce scrito sangue so prala tua porta— Ma di restarci a me non me n'importa!" Then in a last burst of gloriously insane protestation: "Si per te muoje e vado in Paradiso. Non c'altro se non vedo il turo bel viso!" And that yearning, wordless passion-fraught cry wherein supreme longing rushed beyond the bounds of speech. A rumbling murmur of the harp-struck, and silence. "The sublimated howl of a backfence tom-cat!" muttered Caleb, to himself; the garish brain-picture fading. A momentary, tense hush fell over the audience as the final chords trailed off into nothingness. Then, as the singer's stillness could be broken by the burst of ensuing applause, another sound—loudly distinct, vibrant, long-drawn, cut ragedly through the breathless quiet. The sound of a full-lunged, healthy snore. Caleb Conover was sleeping like a child.

CHAPTER XIII

Moonlight and Mistakes. The music was over. The first floor of the Standish house looked as though a devastating army had camped there. Caleb, who had lingered for a good-night word with Letty, glanced over the empty music room. "I wonder," he said, "if there is anything else on earth quite so vacant as the place a crowd of guests have just departed. They always seem to have carried away with them whatever local atmosphere there was and to have left behind a vacuum of desolation." Letty did not answer. She was a tired, nerve-worn, relaxed, after the evening's strain. Characteristically, she was aware of a mild desire to make someone else uncomfortable. Someone who cared for her enough to be hurt. Caleb suited her purpose to perfection. Hence the receipt of a grievous silence that always brought him hastening to the anxious seat. The ruse prevailed now, as ever. "You aren't unhappy about anything are you dear?" he queried solicitously. "Oh, no!" she replied, a throaty quaver in her voice. "I haven't done anything, have I?" came the second stereotyped question in love's catechism. "Oh, no!" she returned briefly with full feminine power of making the answer read, "Oh, yes!" "But what?" he begged. "Oh, nothing with the rarefied fortitude that precedes a plunge into the vale of tears. 'Nothing! Nothing at all.'" "Nor was it until he had rung all the traditional changes on the query and had worked himself into a state of pitiable humility that she would consent to burst forth into the flood tide of her grievances. "You made me so unhappy," she wept. "It was all your fault! Why did you do it? How could you?" "Please—please tell me!" he urged. "I don't understand. How?" "That disgusting man! That brute you brought here!" "Conover? I didn't bring him. Your father—"

"He is your friend, though," she insisted. "And he frightened me and he behaved so abominably. And everybody laughed when he went to sleep. I could have died of mortification." "But why?" he reasoned. "You weren't responsible for him. If anyone had caused to feel mortified, it was Miss Shevlin who sat beside him. Yet she—"

"Please don't talk about her!" demanded Letty with a flash of watery misery. "I have enough to bear without that. If she chose to sit up, looking unconcerned, and talking to him as if nothing had happened, and keeping the brute wide awake and inter-

ested all the rest of the evening—it was probably because she knew no better. I suppose her sort of people—"

The girl's quick laugh flashed out and she clasped her hands together. "Beautiful!" she cried. "How did you ever think of it?" "Struck me the first time I saw her," he replied, flattered. "I told her about it to-night at dinner." "Caleb! You didn't!" "Honest, I did!" he reiterated. "I—"

"You— you care for her?" asked Desiree very quietly. Caleb, full as he was of his own aspirations, noticed how dull and lifeless her voice had all at once grown. "You're kidding me!" he cried, all remorse. "Here I keep you up, listenin' to my fool talk when you ought to be sound asleep! Nice sort of guardian I am! I'm goin'!"

"No, wait!" she ordered with a pitiful shadow of her wonted dainty imperiousness. "I'm not tired. Tell me, are you in love with her?" "In love with her?" scoffed Caleb. "With that little rabbit-faced bunch of silliness? No, me! But she comes out about the biggest family here. She's popular ev'rywhere. If I was to marry her, I'd get with the best crowd in town. He'll be placed as sure as your shirt when you marry that gold-shirt chap— whoever he turns out to be—that we was talkin' about the other day. I was speakin' of the idee to Caleb, only to-night, an' he says—"

"Oh!" The furious monosyllable snapped through his rambling talk like a pistol shot. Caleb paused in amazement. The girl had risen. Her tiny fists were clinched, her face hard as a statue's. The mouth that gave back cold fire from her great eyes. "How dare you?" she panted. "How dare you! You speak of marrying Letty Standish as you would speak of buying a horse! You even talk it over with the man she has promised to herself over your barroom cunnings in getting an opinion from him without letting him know it was his sweetest who planned to steal. You sneer at her as a 'rabbit-faced little bunch of silliness' and you speak in the same breath of making her your wife. Do you realize you are not only insulting her by such a thought, but you are insulting me by speaking so in my presence?"

"Oh!" gasped the bewildered man. "You must be crazy, child! I never saw you like—"

"Be still!" she commanded, her silver voice ringing harshly. "I forbid you to speak to me, now or any time. A man who can plan what you are planning, and who can boast of it, isn't fit to be a man. You are planning to marry a man who is planning to separate her from a man she really loves—and to compel her to marry you. Why, you aren't fit to marry her chambermaid. There isn't a grove in her stable that hasn't higher, holier ideals. Now go! This is the last time I want to see you as long as I live!"

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