

AN HUMBLE HERO

BY THOMAS P. MONTFORT

CHAPTER VIII. A CRUEL AWAKENING.

What did it mean?

This was the question Sim Banks asked himself as he sat there holding that note in his hands, reading over and over the few lines it contained. What could it mean, and who could have written it?

Though Sim pondered these questions long, he was able to find no answer to them. The whole affair was wrapped in a thick and impenetrable mystery which he could not solve. He felt, however, that there must be something dark and unpleasant back of it all, and a sensation of uneasiness took possession of him. After his experience of that day, which had been a day of events in his uneventful life, he was in a state of mind to expect all manner of curious and unaccountable happenings.

Could it be possible that Louisa had an important secret that she was keeping hidden from him? Could it be possible that she and some man had formed a friendship, or at least an acquaintanceship, the existence of which they had guarded so well that he had never even so much as suspected it?

That the author of the note was a man he was assured from the first. The strong, bold chirography and the language of the note convinced him of that. This much, and this much only, was clear to him.

The thought that his wife and some man should be linked together by a secret which no one else must share made his heart sick. To his mind it smacked of a dangerous and unwarranted intimacy, and it caused him to surmise the possibility of unpleasant things. For the first time in his life he felt the bitter pangs of jealousy.

It did occur to him for a moment that the note might have been written by Melvin, which was very natural considering all that had happened that day and in view of the fact that Melvin was the only strange man who had been at Beckett's Mill for weeks. A little reflection, however, decided him that he would have to look further for the author. Melvin was a total stranger there, so what could Louisa know of him or his name?

Sim said nothing to his wife that night about the note, but the next morning when they were seated at the breakfast table he took the scrap of paper from his pocket and handed it to her, remarking quietly:

"That's something I found last night, Louesey, an from what I can make out it must be your'n."

Louisa reached out and took the note, and as she glanced over it Sim was watching her. He saw the color mount to her face, while her head drooped until her eyes were fixed on her plate. She remained silent, and after a moment's wait he said:

"Louesey, is that your'n?"

There was a short pause. Then she looked up, and instead of answering his question she asked:

"Where did you get it?"

"I found it on the floor, where you'd likely dropped it. Is it your'n?"

"Yes, it is," she admitted hesitatingly.

"Then what does it mean, an who is it from?" he demanded almost sternly.

"That I cannot tell you," she answered in low tones.

"Why can't you?"

"Because I have no right to tell."

"No right to tell anything to your man, your own husband?"

"Not that. You had as well say no more about it."

Sim looked at his wife very hard for almost a minute, his face rapidly changing color and a variety of thoughts flashing through his mind.

"Louesey," he said at last, "that note was wrote by a man, an I want to know what it means. I have a right to know."

She flashed him a look full of resentment.

"Whether you have a right to know or not," she replied, "you will never know from me."

"Why?"

"Because, as I have already said, I cannot tell you."

"Can't tell me? Louesey, what am I to think of such talk as that?"

"You are to think what you please, I presume."

"But what can I think when you and some man have a secret between you that I ain't allowed to share?"

She fixed him with her eyes and with a scornful curl of her lips retorted:

"And what am I to think when you and some woman have not only one secret, but many secrets, between you that I am not allowed to share?"

He looked at her in astonishment.

"Me an some woman have secrets?" he repeated. "What do you mean by that?"

"I mean just what I say. Last night was not so long ago that you should forget what took place then."

"I don't understand you. I've never had a secret from you in all my life, much less a secret between me an any woman."

"Are you so sure of that?"

"I am."

"Then you must have forgotten Mary Mann."

Sim's face flushed instantly, and his head drooped. He had forgotten Mary Mann, but now he remembered her, as well as his meeting with her the night before. It was the memory of that meeting that made him blush, and he blushed, not for himself, but for her.

"And your meeting with her last night, Louisa added after a pause."

"Who told you about that?" Sim asked inconceivably, thus admitting the truth of the charge.

"Then you did meet her?" Louisa said.



"You will never know from me."

"Yes, but it was not my fault. Who told you?"

"It doesn't matter who told me. Although you say you have never had a secret from me, I am certain you would never have been the one to tell me that."

"You're mistaken then, Louesey. That ain't no reason on earth why I should not 'a' told you, an I'd 'a' done it. Nothing happened at that meetin, so far as I'm concerned, that I'd be ashamed to tell to the whole world."

"Not even your hanging over the fence and making love to Mary Mann?"

"I never done it, Louesey, an anybody that went an told you any such a thing told you a p'int blank lie. I never made love to nobody in all my life but you."

"That will do for you to tell, but you can't fool me. If you were not making love to Mary Mann last night, why were you with her?"

"I was jest passin along the street, an she called to me."

"And you stopped?"

"Of course. What else could I do?"

"Nothing but stop and make love to her."

"I tell you I never done any such a thing as make love to her. You ask her if I did."

Mrs. Banks tossed her head disdainfully.

"I'll be apt to ask any woman such a thing as that, and that woman in particular."

"Waal, you needn't, then. But it was jest like I say. I never dreamed of makin love to her."

"But you stopped there with her and hung over the fence and talked to her?"

"Waal, s'pose I did. I couldn't help myself. I couldn't jest walk on an leave her while she was talkin, could I?"

"Certainly not when her talk was so sweet and interesting. You must have found it real pleasant to have her assure you that I didn't love you, but that she knew some woman who did."

"I didn't find it pleasant, an if I had I wouldn't 'a' done the way I did."

"Wouldn't have staid to listen to her?"

"I wouldn't have let on that I didn't understand what she meant an discouraged her ever way I could."

"By hanging over the fence and talking back to her?"

"If I did hang over the fence an talk back to her, I never said nothin out of the way an nothin to be ashamed of, nary a word."

"Some people haven't a very keen sense of shame."

Sim paused for a moment. Then he said very soberly:

"Louesey, you don't love me. If you did, you wouldn't never believe the lies somebody's gone an told you when I tell you they are lies. A woman that loves her man ain't never a-goin to believe some old long tongued tattler as ag'in him. It's a gospel truth, if ever I spoke one in my life, when I say I never made love to Mary Mann, an I'd swear to it an a stack of Bibles a hundred feet high. You ain't got no right to accuse me of any such a thing."

"But you have a right to accuse me of something just as bad?"

"I ain't never accused you of nothin, Louesey, an you know it."

"Not exactly in so many words, perhaps, but you have intimated it pretty plainly."

"Me intimated that you made love to some other man besides me?"

"Something like that. You remember, I suppose, what you said about that note?"

"I never said an I never meant that you loved somebody else."

"I know what you think."

"If I thought such a thing as that, would I 'a' told Mary Mann yistiddy that she was a-lyin when she said what she did? An last night, when Jim Thorn hinted at the same thing, do you know what I done to him? I jest knocked him down plumb flat on his back, an if they hadn't 'a' held me I'd 'a' stamped the very daylight outen him."

Louisa looked up, a surprised and pained expression on her face.

"Did Jim Thorn dare to say such a thing as that of me?" she cried.

"He did," Sim replied, and, feeling sure of her gratitude at least, he added: "But he ain't never goin to say it no more, I bet. I done settled him for that."

"Yes," she said; "but you've gone and set everybody else to talking. I wish you had let Jim Thorn alone."

Sim was amazed, and the look on his face showed it.

"Why, my land, Louesey," he exclaimed, "you ain't a-min to say I done wrong in k ckin Jim Thorn done, are you?"

"You had better not have done it," she replied, "an I wish you hadn't."

"Waal, I'll be blamed! Why, Pap Sampson an Hicks an Jason an all the rest, they all 'lowed I done jest right, an ever 'one of 'em said he'd 'a' done jest like I did if he'd 'a' been in my place. Lord, I was countin shore on you bein pleased 'cause I tuck up for you that a-way, an now you don't think I ort 'a' done it! 'Pears like can't nothin I do please you, Louesey, an ever 'time I try to do somethin for you I seem to make a mess of it."

Sim's voice was so pathetic and his disappointment so evident that, in spite of her ill humor, Louisa was touched. She looked at him, and there was an expression of pity and something like sympathy in her eyes. Slowly and sadly she said:

"Sim, it is a sad thing to say, and you may think it cruel, but God knows it is true. It would have been better for us both if we had never met."

"Louesey!" Sim exclaimed fourfold, starting to his feet, all in a tremble. "What is that you say? Surely you don't mean them words."

"I do, and what I say is true. It would have been far better for us both if we had never, never met."

He stared at her a long time in silence, and he noticed that her face was painfully white and drawn. His, too, he knew, bore the marks of a great dread and fear.

"Louesey," he said, his voice husky and scarcely audible, "for God's sake, don't say that! Remember, you are my wife. P'ose take back them words. Say they're not so."

"I cannot, Sim; I cannot, for I would only be lying if I did."

She folded her arms on the table and dropped her head on them and began to sob. Sim stood watching her, a sickening dread stealing over him. Uncertainly he hesitated for a moment, then went to her and put out his hand and began to stroke her hair. She drew away from him, and a cold shudder ran over her. He stood aloof and looked on, his face painfully white and drawn and a hard, tense sensation clutching at his heart.

"Louesey," he said presently, "what does this mean? Why do you treat me like that?"

She made no reply, but continued to sob. He reached out his hand again and placed it gently on her head, and again she shrank from him as though his touch were poison. Her action cut him deep, and a pain, sharp and poignant, passed through his soul. When he spoke again, his voice was low and husky.

"Louesey," he said, "is it true, as Mary Mann says, that you don't love me none?"

She did not answer, and when he had waited a moment he repeated his question. This time she looked slowly up until her eyes met his. From that moment there was no need for her to speak. In her eyes he only too plainly read her answer to his question. Slowly, as one in a dream, he turned to leave the room. There was a queer sensation of emptiness about his head, and everything around him bore a strange air of unreality. At the door he stopped and put his hand up to his forehead and for a full minute stood like one dazed. Then, turning his eyes once more on his wife, he said:

"My God, Louesey, you are killin me! You have broken my heart. Oh, please, please tell me it is not true, that look I saw in your eyes, and that you do love me!"

She did not raise her head, but between her sobs he heard her murmur:

"I can't, I can't, for I don't love you!"

Without another word he passed from the room and went staggering and certainly down the walk to the street. He felt that he had received a death-blow, and in reality he had received that which was far worse, for death would have brought an end to pain and suffering, and this brought pain and suffering only.

At the yard gate he stopped, and, leaning heavily against a post, he looked back at the house.

Melvin soon observed that wherever he went the people watched him curiously and that the great majority of them showed an unmistakable disposition to avoid him. He could engage but few of them in conversation, and if he approached a group of them and undertook to show them the social side of his nature they immediately began to exchange furtive glances and presently, one by one, dropped away until he was left alone.

Of course this conduct on the part of the people was unpleasant to a stranger, for it made him feel that he was not welcome and that his company was less preferable than his absence. To Melvin it was more. It not only annoyed but it disturbed him. A man who is carrying in his bosom a dread secret is always under an apprehension that he is going to be found out, and any little peculiarity in the conduct of those about him is sure to excite his suspicions and awaken in him a feeling of uneasiness.

Several times during the two weeks Melvin had made visits to Beckett's Mill, ostensibly to make trifling purchases at the store, but in reality for a far different purpose. Each time, however, he had come back as he had gone, his purpose unaccomplished. But at last fortune favored him.

One evening he had left the village to return to Turner's, where he was still stopping, when in passing through a thick wood he came suddenly face to face with Mrs. Banks. Both started back in surprise, but Melvin recovered himself quickly, and, grasping her hands in his, he looked full into her face and cried:

"Thank God, Louisa, I have met you at last!"

Then he caressed her hands, his mind in such a tumult that he could find no further words to speak, and when after a moment she would have drawn her hands away he held them fast.

"Don't, please don't," she said in tones of soft remonstrance, looking anxiously around. "Please let me go!"

"No, no!" he replied. "Don't ask me to do that. It would be cruel after I have hungered and starved for a sight of you all this long time. Oh, Louisa, you don't know how I love you, and how I have missed you and yearned for you! Oh, my darling!"

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Recognizing the fact that there are many SO CALLED hair-growers and hair-straighteners now on the market, and knowing to a certainty that many of these are frauds pure and simple, we wish to make a straight-forward, honest statement to the colored race through this great paper. In the year 1871 our late secretary, Mrs. S. M. Moore, through a fortunate circumstance, acquired the receipt for OZONO. It was not offered for sale or purchase to any extent until 1875, when it was put upon the market and met with marked success. After a thorough test by the colored people of that time it was pronounced an honest, legitimate remedy, true to all that was claimed for it, and worthy in every respect of the confidence of every member of the colored race, and as beautiful as an April morning. Now, whenever a genuine article appears upon the market there are always a number of people who imitate and make capital out of the merits of other people's goods. Seeing our marked success, numerous firms have entered the market, offering hair-growers and hair straighteners, many of which are and scalp, and the colored people are buying these spurious compounds, which are filled with animal fats, and do the hair more harm than good. These let us sound a warning—be careful what you use on your hair. Do not be deceived by flaring advertisements and big words. Buy the King of all Hair Tonics,

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We will also include one package of our celebrated Scalp Soap, which is absolutely CHEMICALLY PURE, and no soap but a pure soap should ever be used on the scalp. And, lastly, to prove our liberality, we will put in a pint package of Anti-Odor, a positive cure for Sore Throat or Mouth, all forms of Worm Diseases, Chilblains, Sores and Frosted Feet; also removes all smells and odors arising from the human body, such as feet, arm pits, etc. The actual value of this Grand Aggregation is \$4.00, but we let you have it for \$1.00, simply to introduce honest goods. In order to protect the public in general from imitations of our goods, and to avoid mistakes, we have placed upon our coupon our Trade-Mark, one head showing Short Hair and the other head Long Hair. The U. S. Government has granted us this trade-mark, and it is registered in the Patent Office at Washington, so if the coupon has this trade-mark on it, you will make no mistake. Use only the coupon having the two heads on it. As to our responsibility, we refer you to the Editor of this paper or to the Metropolitan Bank of Richmond, Va. We have thousands of testimonials we have not space to publish. Here is a sample of one: Boston Chemical Company: Dear Sirs,—You are at liberty to state in any newspaper that I have used OZONO, and give it my most hearty recommendation. I have been troubled so often, it does me good to recommend honest goods. MAGGIE B. PROCTOR, Box 114, Fairfield, Texas. Here is another: Gentlemen,—After using OZONO a short while only, I am glad to say that my hair is already straight and growing finely. MISS BESSIE POWERS, 383 Missouri street, Toledo, O. A last word. OZONO is absolutely guaranteed to straighten hair and cause a beautiful and luxuriant growth. If your hair is already straight, you can use it to secure a glossy long growth. Buy only the genuine OZONO. Send us \$1.00 at once, and the goods will be sent the same day we receive your order. BOSTON CHEMICAL CO., 310 E. Broad St., Richmond, Va.

I enclose you \$1.00, for which please send at once the following goods: 4 Boxes of Ozono, worth \$2.00. 1 Bottle Electrical Skin Refiner, worth 50c. 1 Bottle Electrical Skin Food, worth 50c. 1 Package (1 pint) Anti-Odor, worth 50c. 1 Package Scalp Soap, worth 50c. Total, \$4.00. Name....., House, No..... Street....., City....., State..... County.....

If you want 4 lots like above, send \$3.00. If you have a friend who has no coupon, let her write her name on a piece of paper and pin to coupon when you send your order.

He made a movement to put his arm about her, but she tore herself from his grasp and, staggering back, stood leaning against a tree. She was trembling all over, her face red and white by turns and an uneasy, scared expression in her eyes.

After a momentary pause he advanced toward her, but she held up her hand to stop him. "Forget what?" he asked, his eyes fixed eagerly on her.

"That I am married," she hesitated an instant, then said slowly.

"No, I don't forget that. I wish to heaven I could and that you could forget it too. But I love you, Louisa, and if you were married a thousand times I'd love you. It may be wrong, but I don't believe it is; but, right or wrong, I love you, and I'll always love you. I can't help it."

A light of heavenly bliss swept over her features, then quickly died away. "Don't say that," she pleaded. "You have no right."

"But I have," he replied. "I have more right than any one else, for I love you more, and you love me. Isn't that true, Louisa? Don't you love me?"

She made no reply, but hid her face in her hands. Presently he repeated: "Don't you love me, Louisa?"

She waited a moment, then looked up appealingly. "You are cruel, cruel!" she cried. "If you were not, you'd spare me. You have no right to ask me that."

"Then it is true," he cried joyfully, "and you do love me."

She looked up into his face and said quietly: "God knows I do! It is wicked, but it is true, and I cannot help it. I love you with all my heart and all my soul."

"It is not wicked," he replied. "We learned to love when we had a right, before you married that man. It is not as though we had begun to love now. You were mine—your heart and your soul—before you became his. We loved each other then, and it is not wicked in us that our love will not die."

"I don't know," she answered thoughtfully. "It seems like all happiness is wrong and that we can't do right without being miserable. Oh, I don't know why we should ever have met!"

"Say rather that you don't know why we should ever have parted," he said. "Oh, Louisa, why did you go away from me when you knew I loved you and wanted you to be my wife? Why did you leave me when you loved me?"

"I didn't know then."

"Didn't know what?"

"That I loved you."

"Didn't you know it then?"

"No, I knew I liked you, and I thought at you sometimes in a different way from what I ever thought of any one else, but I was young, and I didn't



"For God's sake, don't say that!"

ed back at the house. Through the window he saw his wife sitting as he had left her, and a great yearning came over him to take her in his arms and hold her to his bosom and kiss her. But the next moment he remembered the words she had spoken and the look she had given him, and laying his head against his arm, he said sadly:

"But she is not mine! She is not mine!"

CHAPTER IX. A DANGEROUS MEETING.

Although a couple of weeks had passed since James Melvin arrived on Possum Ridge, the public had by no means lost interest in him, and neither had his curiosity regarding him been in any degree satisfied. He was still an object of wonder, and speculation concerning him—his past life and character and his purpose in coming to the Ridge—was as rife as it had ever been.

Of course his statement to old man Turner that he had come there to prospect for mineral had spread abroad among the people, but there were very few who believed for a moment that there was a word of truth in it. There were no mineral developments in that section and, so far as any one knew, no indications of mineral deposits. In view of these things, what likelihood was there of a company of capitalists sending a man there on any such mission?

Pap Sampson, so beautiful of his ability to judge people at first sight, had been compelled to admit, "He ain't

know what love was."

"Why did you marry—that other?" "My parents urged me, and I liked him. I even thought I loved him! Afterward there was an awakening, and then I knew the truth. That awakening was bitter and cruel."

"And you suffered," he said softly, placing his hand on her head. "My poor little girl!"

"Yes, I suffered," she replied wearily, "and God alone knows how much I suffered."

"I know," he said, again taking her hands in his. "But there is the future."

She shook her head slowly. "It will be the same as the past and the present. I shall go on suffering to the end."

"But you need not."

"I must."

He was thoughtfully silent for a little while. Then he said: "Louisa, you have no right to sacrifice your life and happiness, and not only your life and happiness, but mine. It would be a sin, a far greater sin than—the other."

She knew his meaning, and she drew away from him. When she spoke, there was resentment in her voice. "I don't think I have given you any excuse for saying that," she said. "If I have, I didn't mean it. You must let me go."

"Have you nothing more to say to me after all our long separation?" he asked in hurt tones.

"I have said too much already," she replied.

"I did not mean to say anything to hurt you, and I humbly and sincerely beg your forgiveness. Loving you as I do, I would not hurt a hair of your head. Won't you believe me, Louisa?"

"I—yes; I believe you. Now let me go."

"No, no, not yet! Think how long it



"Don't, please don't!"

has been since I saw you! Don't go just yet."

"I must."

"You are cruel, Louisa."

"It is you who are cruel."

"I? How?"

"Can't you understand what your keeping me here means?"

"I can understand that it means a taste of heaven to me."

"And more pain and suffering for me."

"Why should it do that?"

"Do you think I have no conscience?"

"No, but—"

"Do you think it costs an honest woman nothing to keep a thing like this a secret from her husband?"

"