

THE LIEUTENANT'S STORY.



The windows of the dining room stood open, and the soft summer night wind fluttered the candles under their crimson skirts. There was a low murmur of talk and laughter.

The lieutenant had just come home from the Philippines. He had come back to the beating of drums, the clash of castanets, and had been received into the arms of an admiring people—a hero.

The lieutenant took the feting and dining calmly enough, meeting Mrs. Trezevant he took not so calmly. But the lines of dissipation and recklessness had given place to the bronzed look of the warrior. If unuttered thoughts whirled in his brain, if unbidden words crowded his throat, the soldier's self-restraint held them in leash.

Mrs. Trezevant sat across the table from the lieutenant. In the rosy light her face was pale and pure. Her eyes were carefully guarded by the long lashes that swept her cheeks.

Just before dinner the lieutenant had been presented to Mrs. Trezevant.

He ate his soup in silence, and the neglected woman who sat beside him decided that heroes were very stupid creatures indeed.

Two years before the lieutenant had been plain Jimmy Livingston, and a dissipated chap, who had lost faith in everything—no matter why.

It was a little thing that changed the current of his life, and if you knew him in those old reckless days, reform your memory of him, please.

One morning as he waited in a livery stable for a mount he saw a girl standing in the doorway. She asked for a mount and a trust-worthy attendant, and he unhesitatingly offered his services.

He knew that the girl had mistaken him for the livery man, but it wasn't in the nature of Jimmy to let such a lark escape him.

The lark, though, was not forthcoming. The girl was accompanied always by an older woman. They rode together many mornings. Livingston rode a little in advance of them or just behind, and a longing for ties he had relinquished, for the world of his old friends, old habits, old ambitions came to him.

Sometimes the girl gave him a moment's grave looking over, while her brow knotted not so much in disapproval of him as of his calling. Once Livingston's heart leaped, for her eyes had paid him unwilling tribute—young, clear eyes that brought him the restfulness of quiet, harbored waters after a stormy sea.

Strange that the earth had grown sweet once more, that it was good to be young and strong, and to believe again in a woman's white innocence. But this had come to a fellow who had heard only a few quiet words from the lips of a girl who regarded him as little more than an upper servant, who sometimes looked straight into his eyes with a cool, keen glance that stung like a whiplash.

A morning came when the ladies rode alone; Jimmy Livingston was going as fast as steam could carry him to serve his country—and this is how he came to enter the army.

The hostess of the dinner party glanced at the silent lieutenant with much disapproval—she had never thought him stupid before. The lieutenant looked at Mrs. Trezevant.

He was a gentleman and he had left her without a word, but having redeemed the past he had hurried across the world to find her and lay his best at her feet—and she was married! Perhaps she had been married all the time.

There had been a night at sea when the men had given up, they were tired out, it seemed useless to prolong their agony, for they were going to die. But out of the blackness and the night, the waste of water and swift death that loomed, her face shone like a star. The lieutenant towered above the men, he called on them in the name of her that each one loved to fight for life, to refuse to drown like rats in a hole; then he rushed below and his voice came to them, clear and strong—he was singing Annie Laurie. To a man they responded. The dawn brought a ship in sight—and life.

The dinner moved on through its courses. The ices were brought in.

"You are very silent, lieutenant," a sparkling debutante leaned across the table, in her flashing eyes and in her smile a challenge, "tell us a story. There must have happened something of

intense interest in two years of war."

"A story," the lieutenant turned the stem of his wine glass and looked at her with smiling eyes. "Except in the novelists' hands the stories end badly."

"You are thinking of one," said the debutante; "tell it."

"I was thinking of a fellow, of a youngster I met one winter at Mardi Gras," the lieutenant said. "It's a sad little story—it could only be lightened by a story teller's art."

The guests had settled themselves in listening attitudes and were waiting for him to begin.

Seeing the story was forced upon him, the lieutenant spoke reluctantly:

"He was a handsome, generous fellow. I helped him out of trouble that winter, he was always in trouble and he was grateful."

"I met him in the Philippines and knew that something had gone wrong with his life—all the boyish impulsiveness was gone. He was reckless, as if life wasn't worth the fight."

"It was after a sharp skirmish that he sent for me. His face lighted when he saw me, he stretched out his hand hungrily—poor boy—in a foreign land, and with death in his face. I sat down beside him, and he told me his story between long pauses of weakness. He had been attracted by a girl's youth and beauty. There was opposition by both families—opposition with a not unusual result—a fight and marriage."

"At first they were happy, but both were spoiled and too young for much forbearance—they separated within the year."

The lieutenant lifted his eyes to meet Mrs. Trezevant's troubled ones.

"The girl had ideals. He could not reach them. Poor fellow, he did not spare himself—he said that he was intemperate—brutal—he took all the blame. He drifted from Cuba to Manila. He told me, with a pitiful attempt at a smile, that he was always a vagabond at heart."

"The girl was impressionable, and he entered her life unexpectedly."

"He loved her at the last—I think he loved her always. I know that he was glad that he could give her freedom."

"Poor girl," the debutante said softly. Her eyes were full of unshed tears. "Didn't he send her a message or some little token?"

"No," said the lieutenant. "I wish he had." There was a note of pain in her soft voice.

"I am sure he wanted to send her a locket that held their pictures, sure that he wanted me to tell her of his death, but he died just as I took the locket. There wasn't time for an address."

"And you carry the locket with you, and hope to find her some day?" The debutante's voice was very gentle.

"Yes," the lieutenant smiled into her eyes. "I carry the locket with me. The wife is hardly more than a child—the loveliest child."

"Will you let me see it?" asked the debutante.

The lieutenant hesitated—the debutante's smile was hard to resist—he took the locket from his pocket and leaned across the table to give it to the girl.

There was a little stir at the table. The women bent forward.

The lieutenant's eyes fell on Mrs. Trezevant. Her face was white and tense, and her eyes, fixed on him, were full of passionate entreaty.

His hand fell, he drew it back suddenly.

"I can't," he said. "I feel that I have broken faith with a dead man."

How young and strange Mrs. Trezevant's eyes were, a trembling smile just touched her lips as she gave back the lieutenant's wondering look.

In the drawing room Mrs. Trezevant dropped her fan, and the lieutenant returned the pretty trifle.

"Oh, I am grateful, grateful," she whispered. "It was good of you to understand, and not to show the locket." How her dear lips trembled. "I could not have borne it."

With a rustle of soft draperies, she passed on.

The lieutenant had not understood. Out there he had loved a woman whose name he did not even know. He had simply obeyed her appeal.

Now, with an inrush of knowledge, a leap of his heart, he understood.

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