Intrigues and Adventures...

Another snappy Story fresh from the author's pen

A Tragic Disappearance

Here is the story of the infatuation of a man and the schemes of a cold-blooded calculating woman. Love finally breaks its reserve and enlightens the sorely tried victim of the woman's wiles and "all live happily ever after."

The price of the UNION remains as before, $1.00 per year if paid in advance, and at this price you get several times your money's worth in every year.

R. C. DUNN, Publisher.

Arms and The Woman

By Harold MacGrath

Copyright, 1900, By Harold MacGrath.

CHAPTER XV—Continued.

"Patience, count," said the prince, shaking off the hand which the count had placed upon his shoulder. "Decidedly this fellow is worth consideration. Since we have no swords, sir, and they seem to be woman's weapons these days, we will use pistols. Of course, you have come prepared. It is a fine time for shooting. This first light of twilight gives us equal advantage. Will it be at 10 or 20 paces? I dare say, if we stand at 20 in the center of the road, we shall have a good look at each other before we separate indefinitely."

"Your highness insists?" murmured the count.

"I not only insist; I command." The prince took off his coat and waistcoat and deposited them on the grass at the side of the road. Hillars did likewise. There was a pleased expression on his face. "I do believe, count," laughed the prince, "this fellow expects to kill me. Now the pistols."

"If you will permit me," said the innkeeper, taking an oblong box from under his coat. "These are excellent weapons."

The prince laughed. "I suppose, innkeeper, if the result is disastrous to me it will please you?"

The innkeeper was not lacking in courtesy. "It would be a pleasure, I assure you. There are certain reasons why I cannot fight you myself."

"To be sure."

"It would be too much like murder," continued the innkeeper. "Your hand would tremble so that you would miss me at point blank. There goes the last of the sun. We must hurry."

With a grimace the count accepted the box and took out the pistols.

"They are old fashioned," he said.

"A deal like the innkeeper's morals," supplemented the prince.

"But effective," said the innkeeper.

The count scowled at the old fellow, who met the look with phlegm. As an innkeeper he might be an inferior, but as a second at a duel he was an equal. It was altogether a different matter.

The count carefully loaded the weapons, the innkeeper watching him attentively. In his turn he examined them.

"Very good," he said.

The paces were then measured out. During this labor the prince gazed indifferently toward the west. The aftermath of the sun glowed on the horizon. The prince shaded his eyes for a spell.

"Gentlemen," he said, "I believe the princess is approaching. At any rate, here comes the coach. Let us suspend hostilities till she has passed."

A few minutes later the coach came rumbling along in a whirlwind of dust. The stoical cavalrymen kept on without so much as a glance at the quartet standing at the side of the road. Hillars looked after the vehicle till it was obscured from view. Then he shook himself out of the dream into which he had fallen. He was pale now, and his eyebrows were drawn together as the count held out the pistol.

"Ah, yes!" he said as though he had forgotten. "There goes the woman who will never become your wife."

"That shall be decided at once," was the retort of the prince.

"She will marry the gentleman back at the inn."

"A fine husband he will make, truly!" replied the prince. "He not only deserts her, but forsakes her champion. But that is neither here nor there. We shall not go through any polite formalities," his eyes snapping viciously.

The two combatants took their places in the center of the road. The pistol arm of each hung at the side of the body.

"Are you ready, gentlemen?" asked the count, the barest tremor in his voice.

"Yes," said the prince. Hillars simply nodded.

"When I have counted three, you will be at liberty to fire. One!"

The arms raised slowly till the pistols were on the level of the eyes.

"Two!"

The innkeeper saw Hillars move his lips. That was the only sign.

"Three!"

The pistols exploded simultaneously. The right arm of the prince swung back violently, the smoking pistol flying from his hand. Suddenly one of the horses gave a snort of pain and terror and bolted down the road. No attention was given to the horse. The others were watching Hillars. He stood perfectly motionless. All at once the pistol fell from his hand. Then both hands flew instinctively to his breast. There was an expression of surprise on his face. His eyes closed, his knees bent forward and he sank into the road a huddled heap. The prince shrugged, a sigh of relief fell from the count's half parted lips, while the innkeeper ran toward the fallen man.

"Are you hurt, prince?" asked the count.

"The cursed fool has blown off my elbow!" was the answer. "Bind it up with your handkerchief and help me on with my coat. There is nothing more to do. If he is not dead, he soon will be, so it's all the same."

When the prince's arm was sufficiently bandaged so as to stop the flow of blood, the count assisted him to mount, jumped on his own horse and the two cantered off, leaving the innkeeper, Hillars' head propped up on his knee, staring after them with a dull rage in his faded blue eyes. The remaining horse was grazing a short distance away. Now and then he lifted his head and gazed inquiringly at the two figures in the road.

"Is it bad, herr?" the innkeeper asked.

"Very. Get back to the inn. I don't want to peter out here." Then he fainted.

It required some time and all the innkeeper's strength to put Hillars on the horse. When this was accomplished, he turned the horse's head toward the inn. And that was all.

"Dan?" said I.

The lids of his eyes rolled wearily back.

"Is there anything I can do for you?"

"Bury me."

It was very sad. "Where?" I asked.

"Did you see the little cemetery on the hill, across the valley? Put me there. It is a wild, forgotten place. 'Tis only my body. Who cares what becomes of that? As for the other, the soul, who can say? I have never been a good man. Still I believe in God. I am tired—tired and cold. What fancies a man has in death! A moment back I saw my father. There was a wan, sweet faced woman standing close beside him; perhaps my mother. I never saw her before. Ah, me, these chimeras we set our hearts upon, these worldly hopes! Well, Jack, it's curtain and no encore. But I am not afraid to die. I have wronged no man or woman. I have been my own enemy. What shall I say, Jack? Ah, yes! God have mercy on my soul! And this sudden coldness, this sudden ease from pain, is death!"

There was a flutter of the eyelids, a sigh, and this poor flotsam, this driftwood which had never known a harbor in all its years, this friend of mine, this inseparable comrade, passed out.

There were hot tears in my eyes as I stood up and gazed down at this mystery called death, and while I did so a hand, horny and hard, closed over mine. The innkeeper, with blinking eyes, stood at my side.

"Ah, herr," he said, "who would not die like that?"

And we buried him on the hillside just as the sun swept aside the rosy curtain of dawn. The wind, laden with fresh morning perfumes, blew up joyously from the river. From where I stood I could see the drab walls of the barracks. The windows sparkled and flashed as the gray mists sailed heavenward and vanished. The hill with its long grasses resembled a green sea. The thick forests across the river, almost black at the water's edge, turned a fainter and more delicate hue as they receded till far away they looked like mottled glass. Only yesterday he had laughed with me, talked and smoked with me, and now he was dead. A rage pervaded me. We are puny things, we who strut the highways of the world, parading a so called wisdom. There is only one philosophy; it is to learn to die.

"Come," said I to the innkeeper, and we went down the hill.

"When does the herr leave?"

"At once. There will be no questions?" I asked, pointing to the village.

"None. Who knows?"

"Then remember that Herr Hillars was taken suddenly ill and died and that he desired to be buried here. I dare say the prince will find some excuse for his arm, knowing the king's will in regard to dueling. Do you understand me?"

"Yes."

I did not speak to him again, and he strode along at my heels with an air of preoccupation. We reached the inn in silence.

"What do you know about her serene highness the Princess Hildegarde?" I asked abruptly.

"What does herr wish to know?" shifting his eyes from my gaze.

"All you can tell me."

"I was formerly in her father's service. My wife"— He hesitated, and the expression on his face was a sour one.

"Go on."

"Ah, but it is unpleasant, herr. You see, my wife and I were not on the best of terms. She was handsome—a cousin of the late prince. She left me more than 20 years ago. I have never seen her since, and I trust that she is dead. She was her late highness' hairdresser."

"And the Princess Hildegarde?"

"She is a woman for whom I would gladly lay down my life."

"Yes, yes!" I said impatiently. "Who made her the woman she is? Who taught her to shoot and fence?"

"It was I."

"You?"

"Yes. From childhood she has been under my care. Her mother did so desire. She is all I have in the world to love. And she loves me, herr, for in all her trials I have been her only friend. But why do you ask these questions?" a sudden suspicion lighting his eyes.

"I love her."

He took me by the shoulders and squared me in front of him. "How do you love her?" a glint of anger mingling with the suspicion.

"I love her as a man who wishes to make her his wife."

His hands trailed down my sleeves till they met and joined mine.

"I will tell you all there is to be told. Herr, there was once a happy family in the palace of the Hohenphalians. The prince was rather wild, but he loved his wife. One day his cousin came to visit him. He was a fascinating man in those days, and few women were there who would not give an ear to his flatteries. He was often with the princess, but she hated him. One day an abominable thing happened. This cousin loved the princess. She scorned him. As the prince was entering the boudoir this cousin, making out that he was unconscious of the husband's approach, took the princess in his arms and kissed her. The prince was too far away to see the horror in

He took the princess in his arms and kissed her.

his wife's face. He believed her to be acquiescent. That night he accused her. Her denials were in vain. He confronted her with his cousin, who swore before the immortal God himself that the princess had lain willing in his arms. From that time on the prince changed. He became reckless; he fell in with evil company; he grew to be a shameless ruffian, a man who brought his women into his wife's presence and struck her while they were there. And in his passions he called her terrible names. He made a vow that when children came he would make them things of scorn. In her great trouble the princess came to my inn, where the Princess Hildegarde was born. The prince refused to believe that the child was his. My mistress finally sickened and died broken hearted. The prince died in a gambling den. The king became the guardian of the lonely child. He knows but little or he would not ask her highness"— He stopped.

"He would not ask her what?"

"To wed the man who caused all this trouble."

"What! Prince Ernst?"

"Yes; I prayed to God, herr, that your friend's bullet would carry death, but it was not to be."

"I am going back to London," said I. "When I have settled up my affairs there, I shall return."

"And then?"

"Perhaps I shall complete what my friend began."

I climbed into the ramshackle conveyance and was driven away. Once I looked back. The innkeeper could be seen on the porch; then he became lost to view behind the trees. Far away to my left the stones in the little cemetery on the hillside shone with brilliant whiteness.

CHAPTER XVI.

There were intervals during the three months which followed when I believed that I was walking in a dream and waking would find me grubbing at my desk in New York. It was so unreal for these days—mosaic romance in the heart of prosaic fact! Was there ever the like? It was real enough, however, in the daytime, when the roar of London hammered at my tears, but when I sat alone in my room it assumed the hazy garments of a dream. Sometimes I caught myself listening for Hillars, a footstep in the corridor, and I would take my pipe from my mouth and wait expectantly. But the door never opened, and the footsteps always passed on. Often in my dreams I stood by the river again. There is solace in these deep, wide streams. We come and go—our hopes, our loves, our ambitions. Nature alone remains. Should I ever behold Gretchen again? Perhaps. Yet there was no thrill at the thought. If ever I beheld her again, it would be when she was placed beyond the glance of my eye, the touch of my hand. She was mine—aye, as a dream might be; something I possessed, but could not hold. Heigho! The faces that peer at us from the firelight shadows! They troop along in a ghostly cavalcade, and the winds that creep over the window sill and under the door—who can say that they are not the echoes of voices we once heard in the past?

I was often on the verge of sending in my resignation, but I would remember in time that work meant bread and butter—and forgetfulness. When I returned to the office, few questions were asked, though my assistant looked many of them reproachfully. I told him that Hillars had died abroad and that he had been buried on the continent at his request, all of which was true, but only half of it. I did my best to keep the duel a secret, but it finally came out. It was the topic in the clubs, for Hillars had been well known in political and literary circles. But in a month or so the affair subsided. The world never stops very long, even when it loses one of its best friends.

One late October morning I received a note which read:

John Winthrop:
Dear Sir—I am in London for a few days, homeward bound from a trip to Egypt, and as we are cousins and "orphans, too," I should like the pleasure of making your acquaintance. Trusting that I shall find you at leisure, I am, your humble servant,
PHILIP PEMBROKE.

"Ah," said I, 'that Louisianian cousin of mine, who may or may not live the year out," recalling the old lawyer's words. "He seems to hang on pretty well. I hope he'll be interesting. Few rich men are. He writes like a polite creditor. What did the old fellow say was the matter with him? Heart trouble or consumption? I can't remember." I threw the note aside and touched up some of my dispatches.

Precisely at 10 o'clock the door opened, and a man came in. He was fashionably dressed, a mixture of Piccadilly and Broadway in taste. He was tall, slender, but well formed, and his blond mustache shone out distinctly against a background of tanned skin. He had fine blue eyes.

"Have I the pleasure of speaking to John Winthrop of New York?" he began, taking off his hat.

I rose. "I am the man." He presented his card, and on it I read, "Philip Pembroke."

"Philip Pembroke!" I exclaimed.

"Evidently you are surprised?" showing a set of strong white teeth.

"Truthfully I am," I said, taking his hand. "You see," I added apologetically, "your family lawyer—that is—he gave me the—er—impression that you were a sickly fellow—one foot in the grave or something like. I was not expecting a man of your build."

The smile broadened into a deep laugh, and a merry one, I thought enviously. It was so long since I had laughed.

"That was a hobby of the old fellow," he replied. "When I was a boy, I had palpitation of the heart. He never got rid of the idea that I might die at any moment. He was always warning me about violent exercises, the good old soul. Peace to his ashes!"

"He is dead?"

"Yes. When I took to traveling, he all but had nervous prostration. I suppose he told you about that will I made in your favor. It was done to please him. Still," he added soberly, "it stands. I travel a deal, and no one knows what may happen. And so you are the John Winthrop my dad treated so shabbily? Oh, don't protest; he did. I should have hunted you up long ago and given you a solid bank account, only I knew that the son of my aunt must necessarily be a gentleman and therefore would not look favorably upon such a proceeding."

"Thank you," said I. The fellow pleased me.

"And then I did not know but what you cared nothing for money."

"True. A journalist doesn't care anything about money. The life is too easy and pleasant, and most of the things he needs are thrown in, as they say."

This bit of sarcasm did not pass. My cousin laughed again that merry laugh of his.

"I think we shall become great friends," he said. "I like frankness."

"My remark in its literal sense was the antithesis of frankness."

"Ah, you said too much not to be frank. Frankness is one of the reasons why I do not get on well with the women. I can't lie in the right place, and when I do it is generally ten times worse than the plain truth."

"You're a man of the world, I see."

"No; merely a spectator."

"Well, you have the price of admission. With me it's a free pass. Some day we will compare notes."

"Who is your banker?"

"Banker? I have none. I distrust banks. They take your mite and invest it in what nots, and sometimes when you go for it it is not there."

"And then again it multiplies so quickly that you have more than you know what to do with, eh?"

"As to that I cannot say. It is hearsay, rumor. So far as I know it may be so. Experience has any number of teachers. The trouble is we cannot study under them all. Necessity has been my principal instructor. Sometimes she has larruped me soundly, though I was a model scholar. You will go to luncheon with me?"

"If you will promise to dine with me this evening." And I promised.

For an hour or more we chatted upon congenial topics. He was surprisingly well informed. He had seen more of the world than I, though he had not observed it so closely. As we were about to leave the door opened, and Phyllis, Ethel and her husband, Mr. Holland, entered. For a moment the room was filled with the fragrance of October air and the essence of violets. They had been in town a week. They had been "doing" the Strand, so Ethel said, and thought they would make me a brief visit to see how "it was done," the foreign corresponding. Mr. Wentworth and his wife were already domiciled at B——, and the young people were going over to enjoy the winter festivities. Phyllis was unchanged. How like Gretchen, I thought.

While Ethel was engaging my cousin's attention I conducted Phyllis through the office.

"What a place to work in!" said Phyllis, laughing. The laugh awakened a vague thrill. "Dust, dust—everywhere dust. You need a woman to look after you, Jack."

As I did not reply, she looked quickly at me, and, seeing that my face was grave, she flushed.

"Forgive me, Jack," impulsively. "I did not think."

I answered her with a reassuring smile.

"How long are you to remain in town?" I asked to disembarrass her.

"We leave day after tomorrow, Saturday—a day or two in Paris, and then we go on. Every one in New York is talking about your book. I knew that you were capable."

"I hope every one is buying it," said I, passing over her last observation.

"Was it here that you wrote it?"

"Oh, no. It was written in my rooms under the most favorable circumstances."

"I thought so. This is a very dreary place."

"Perhaps I like it for that reason."

Her eyes were two interrogation points, but I pretended not to see.

"What nice eyes your cousin has," she said, side glancing. With a woman it is always a man's eyes.

"And his father was the man who left you the fortune?"

"Yes," I answered, with a short laugh. Of course I had never told Phyllis of that thousand dollar check.

"You must run over this winter and see us," she said. "I anticipate nothing but dinners, balls and diplomatic receptions. I have never been there. It will all be new to me. Think of seeing Egypt, the holy lands, Russia, France and Spain and yet not seeing the very heart of the continent! Thank goodness, I know the language."

"And will she not be a sensation?" joined in Ethel.

"A decided sensation," said I, scrutinizing the beautiful face so near me. What if they met, as probably they would—Phyllis and Gretchen? "Phyllis," said I suddenly, "where were you born?"

"Where was I born?" with a wondering little laugh. "In America. Where did you suppose?"

"Eden," said I. "I wasn't sure, so I asked."

"I do not know how to take that," she said, with mock severity.

"Oh, I meant Eden when it was paradise!" I hastened to say.

"Yes," put in Pembroke. "Please go back, Miss Landors, and begin the world all over again."

"Phyllis," said I in a whisper, "have you ever met that remarkable affinity of yours?" I regretted the words the moment they had crossed my lips.

"Yes, you are changed, as I said the other night," distrustfully. "There is something in your voice that is changed. You have grown cynical. But your question was impertinent. Have you found yours?"

I was expecting this. "Yes," I said. "Once I thought I had; now I am sure of it. Some day I shall tell you an interesting story."

"We came up to ask you to dine with us this evening," she said, trailing her brown gloved finger over the dusty desk. "Are you at liberty?"

"No; I have only just met my cousin and have promised to dine with him."

"If that is all, bring him along. I like his face."

We passed out of the fileroom.

"Phyllis, we must be going, dear," said Ethel.

I led Phyllis down the narrow stairs. A handsome victoria stood at the curb.

"I shall be pleased to hear your story," said she.

It occurred to me that the tale might not be to her liking, so I said, "But it is one of those disagreeable stories—one where all should end nicely, but doesn't; one which ends leaving the hero, the heroine and the reader dissatisfied with the world in general and the author, who is fate, in particular."

I knew that she was puzzled. She wasn't quite sure that I was not referring to the old affair.

"If the story is one I never heard before," suspiciously, "I should like to hear it."

"And does it not occur to you," throwing back the robes so that she might step into the victoria, "that fate has a special grudge against me? Once was not enough, but it must be twice."

"And she does not love you? Are you quite sure? You poor fellow!" She squeezed my hand kindly. "Shall I be candid with you?" with the faintest flicker of coquetry in her smile.

"As in the old days," said I, glancing over my shoulder to see how near the others were. A groom is never to be considered. "Yes, as in the old days."

"Well, I have often regretted that I did not accept you as an experiment."

Then I knew that she did not understand.

"You must not think I am jesting," said I seriously. "The story is of the bittersweet kind. The heroine loves me, cannot be mine."

"Loves you?"—with a slight start. "How do you know?"

"She has told me so," lowering my voice.

Frankness of this sort to a woman who has rejected you has a peculiar effect. The coquetry faded from her smile, and there was a perceptible contraction of the brows. Her eyes, which were looking into mine, shifted to the back of the groom. No, I shall never understand a woman. She should have been the most sympathetic woman in the world, yet she appeared to be annoyed.

"What's all this between you and Phyllis?" asked Ethel, coming up.

"There is nothing between her and me," said I.

"Well, there should be," she retorted. "That is the trouble."

My observation was: "I have always held that immediately a woman gets married she makes it her business to see that all old bachelors are lugged out and disposed of to old maids."

"I shall never forgive that," Phyllis declared; "never."

"Then I shall always have the exquisite pleasure of being a supplicant for your pardon. It is delightful to sue pardon of a beautiful woman."

Phyllis sniffed.

"Forgive him at once," said Ethel, "if only for that pretty speech."

Mr. Holland pulled out his watch suggestively.

"Well," I said, "I see that I am keeping you from your lunch. Goodby, then, till dinner, when I shall continue at length on the evils"—

"William," interrupted Ethel, addressing the groom, "drive on."

And so they left us.

"Shall we go to lunch now?" I asked of Pembroke.

"Yes," rather dreamily, I thought.