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A WOMAN'S SECRET.

A Story of the Revolution.

CONTINUED.

THE orderly-book was gone! Death and furies! What was to be done now? The prank of the night before, though, like most practical jokes, more amusing to their perpetrators than to their victims, seemed to have been but the prologue to a more serious—just one of those jests which are paradoxically, but truly, called “no joke.” As long as the ghost was content to confine the overflowings of his animal spirits to new combinations of the tables and chairs, to a novel arrangement of the bed-clothes, or to a summary divorce of the shovel and tongs, his effervescences, if not absolutely agreeable, were at least not positively mischievous. But to meddle with what was none of his business, but, on the contrary, with what was emphatically the business of his majesty’s—th regiment, was an entirely different affair. The ghost could not be a loyal ghost, that was plainly to be seen. Old Wood, to be sure, had no particular reason to love a government that intended promoting him to the yard-arm, if it could have laid hold of him; but it was not handsome in him to resort to such a pitiful revenge as this; particularly in his own house. It was hardly fair to visit the sins of Queen Anne’s Lords of the Admiralty upon an unoffending captain and adjutant in the army of King George. It is plain that he was a rebel at heart, and, had he been in the flesh, would have waged war in the name of the colonies against his liege sovereign, with as much gusto as he did against mankind in general on his own account; especially if there happened to be any rich London or Bristol ships within range of his guns. He had a natural taste for such pursuits; his only mistake lay in interfering as an amateur in what was strictly a professional monopoly. There is great virtue in a commission or letter-of-marque. A piece of sheep-skin and a pair of epaulettes make all the difference in the world in the moral qualities of actions. In many cases it makes all the difference between a hempen cord and a red ribbon round a man’s neck. Many a hero has gone out of the world in the embrace of a halter his achievements only recorded in the Newgate Calendar, who, had his noun substantive been only qualified by an adjective or two, would have received “the senate’s thanks,” have glittered with medals and orders, and been commemorated by word-famous historians and poets. Such is luck! but it is none of my business to moralize in this way. All I have to do is to relate this true passage of history with the most absolute accuracy of detail.

While we have been indulging in these profitable reflections our hero has been through a variety of evolutions. First, he stood aghast, as if, instead of gazing upon nothing at all, his sight had been blasted by some particularly ill-favored apparition. This was the only idea that his look and gesture communicated to his trusty squire, who turned his eyes with difficulty in the direction of his master’s, in the confident expectation of being rewarded by the vision of a raw-head and bloody-bones at the very least. Disappointed, however, of any such pleasing spectacle, he was by no means so ill-informed in the very rudiments of demonology, as not to know that it did not necessarily follow, because he could discern nothing beyond the common, that his master was equally unfortunate.

“What is it, sir? Where is it, sir?” inquired John, in a voice of hollow emotion.

“The orderly-book, you scoundrel! the orderly-book!” responded the captain, in a low, concentrated tone.

“The orderly-book, your honor!” returned John. “Well, sir, I never heard of the ghost of a book walking before! What does it look like, sir?”

It is evident that John was not a reading man (the march of mind had not then been taken up, nor had the school-master gone abroad) or he would have known that nothing is more common than for the ghost of a book to walk. Indeed, what is a book but the ghost of the man who writes it? O blessed necromancy of reading, mightier than that of the Governor of Glubdubdrib, or the Island of Enchanters, once visited by that only truthful traveler, Lemuel Gulliver. For whereas, his could only command the departed for the space of twenty-four hours, thine can summon them to the presence at all seasons, and for any time! But John did not know this; so he asked what the ghost of the orderly-book looked like.

“Look like, you villain!” somewhat testily answered Ingram. “It looks like nothing at all! It’s gone, you dog!”

“Gone already, sir!” exclaimed the astonished John. “And where was it, sir?”

“Exactly in the middle of the table, there, with its right cover leaning against the candlestick, its hinder end cocked up upon the inkstand.”

“Bless my soul!” shuddered John, at this picturesque description, “and how long ago is it since your honor saw it last?”

“Just as I was going to the assembly this evening,” replied his master.

“O Lord! is that all?” exclaimed the man, much relieved, “I thought your honor had just seen it, when I could see nothing at all.”

“Confound your nonsense!” returned the captain, sharply. “I only wish that I had seen it! What under Heaven I am to say about it to Lord Percy tomorrow, God knows! But light all the candles in the room, and let us have a thorough search for it; though it is not likely that it is here.”

This foreboding was but too true. His prophetic heart had told him an ower true tale. They looked above, around and underneath. They crawled over the floor on their hands and knees, and, like the serpent of old, “upon their belly did they go” under the bed. They looked into every drawer, and inspected the most impossible places. But it was all in vain. The mystic volume was not to be found in the wood-box, nor did it drop from the inverted jack-boots. The window seats were ignorant of its whereabouts, and the window-curtains wotted not of its presence. The cooking utensils knew not of it, and their basket and their store was not blessed with its possession. Where the plague could it be? It seemed as if the ghost only could tell.

There was no sign of any other disturbance in their premises. This made the matter look the more mysterious. It was a much more awful affair than if the disappearance of the book had been accompanied by any of the gambols and *fummings* of the night before. That looked like fun; this looked more like earnest. The orderly-book contained information relating to the strength and state of the royal forces, which it was of the last importance should not fall into the hands of the rebels. And beside this there were loose papers, given to our hero by Lord Percy to be copied, as he acted in some sort as his private secretary as well as adjutant, which were of a still more secret nature. Such, for example, as his lordship’s reply to the requisition of the commander-in-chief for the opinions of his principal officers, as to the state of affairs in the town, and the best course to be pursued. This, and other documents, involved an amount of intelligence, as to facts and opinions, which might be of infinite mischief if they fell into the enemy’s hands. Ingram knew too well what a mass of disaffection existed in the town, not to feel that the worst was but too probable.

After every place, probable and improbable, had been ransacked, and to no purpose, the search was abandoned for the night. The room was secured as far as locks and bolts were concerned, though they seemed to be of but little moment in this chamber of bedevilment; and Captain Ingram retired moodily to bed to seek for such rest as he could find. It was an uncomfortable night, to be sure; not from any renewal of the disturbances of the night before, for all was quiet; but from his harassing thoughts and internal vexation. His sleep was broken by visions of his interview with his commander, in which he should

communicate this provoking occurrence. Words of censure and reprimand rung in his ears. He even saw himself, in the phantasmagoria of his waking dreams, standing without his sword, before a court-martial detailed to try him for neglect of duty. In the confusion of his thoughts he could not very accurately determine what would be considered the exact measure of his military offence. But he could not help feeling that it would be no advantage to him in his professional career, even in the most favorable event. He cursed the evil hour in which he sought these unlucky quarters, and heartily wished them, and everything connected with them, at the devil. He perplexed his thoughts in vain with conjectures as to the motives and the method of the trick that had been played him; and though he resolved not to rest until he had plucked out the heart of the mystery, still he feared that the injury to the service and to his own prospects would be completed before he could accomplish his purpose. It was a miserable business, altogether. If he escaped with a reprimand from headquarters, and with a dread laugh of the mess-table, he would be a lucky fellow.

I have often wondered how much the beaming eyes and laughing mouth of Helen Clairmont mingled in these visions of the night. I am afraid that all the little loves, by whom he had been escorted down Hanover street, after he had put Miss Clairmont into the carriage, were sent to the right about by the first tempest of his astonishment and vexation. But they are volatile creatures, and though easily brushed aside for a moment, soon return again to the charge. Like flies, it is easy enough to drive them away, but before you can congratulate yourself on being rid of them, back they are again.

Be this as it may, I have the best reasons for believing that they returned before day-break, and buzzed merrily about the pillow of Ingram. The mosquito-net is not yet invented that can keep them out. I cannot depone positively to the exact proportion of his waking or of his sleeping dreams that was of their weaving. For I am scrupulous never to state any fact, or historical document like the present, which I am not prepared at any moment to authenticate by affidavit before any magistrate or justice of the peace. But I am quite certain that those soft eyes and that bewitching smile floated before his mind’s eye, mixed up even with his least pleasant anticipations. In case of the worst, youth and nature would suggest that there might be some comfort yet left him. Though his cup might be a bitter one, still there was at least one cordial drop at the bottom of it. Though censure or derision might visit his misfortune, still there was one whose soft bosom would feel with him, and who would view it with the eyes of love, and not of discipline. Perhaps the events of the day and evening had encouraged this state of feeling. For, to be candid, she had been tolerably encouraging.—He felt more sure that she loved him than he had ever done before; and although he could not exactly define his own views and intentions in the premises, still he yielded (and who can blame him?) to the delicious dream of love. If any of my readers can recall to recollection the time when he first truly believed that he was beloved by a beautiful young woman, and yet can find it in his heart to wonder that Ingram should have gilded the gloomy hours of that unlucky night with dreams of Helen Clairmont, I wish he would just do me the favor to lay this true history aside. He is not worthy to be my reader. But then it is impossible that there should be such a man.

The hours of the night wore on, and at last the morning came. It was a bleak morning to poor Ingram; but he resolved to meet the unpleasant consequences of his mishap with the best face he could. As his candle-light toilet was proceeding, the orderly-sergeant called for his book.

“I shall call myself upon Lord Percy, Williams, immediately after parade; so you need not wait.”

“The veteran stared a little at this deviation from routine, but it was his business to obey; so he bowed and retired.

It was a bitter cold morning, and the keen wind was improved in sharpness by the broad expanse of frozen water

which then separated the Common from the country beyond. But Ingram felt warm enough in the prospect of what was before him. There is no external or internal application of a more calorific tendency than the inevitable necessity of doing a particular disagreeable piece of work at a certain specified hour near at hand. It makes the heart seethe like a cauldron, and the boiling blood is sent bubbling through the veins.

The parade was over. The troops were dismissed. Ingram was moving slowly towards the mess breakfast, thinking of the duty that must follow it, when he was aroused from his reverie by hearing a horse reined up suddenly by his side. It was Lord Percy himself.

“So Williams tells me, Ingram, that you have something to say to me. Come and breakfast with me, my boy, and you will have the best of opportunities to say it. I shall be quite alone.”

“It will give me infinite pleasure, my lord,” replied Ingram, “and I will be with you immediately.”

“Right, right,” said his lordship, “punctuality at drills and at mess is a great military virtue. I shall expect you in a quarter of an hour.”

With these words he cantered along the frozen road (for it could hardly be called a street then) that led to his excellent quarters.

I am afraid my hero lied, the least in the world, when he said that it would give him infinite pleasure to breakfast with his noble friend and commander. Not that he had any fears as to the quality of his breakfast or of his society; but the thoughts of the sauce which he brought to both, plagued him in advance, and he wished that a longer time and a wider space could have elapsed before it was necessary to administer it.—But delay was useless and impossible, so he strode toward the quarters of his host with a firm tread, and ascended the long flight of steps that led to the house, and gazed upon the trees and shrubs in the court-yard, all glittering with ice, with as easy and careless an air as he could assume. The breakfast room, into which he was shown, was a spacious wainscotted apartment, with a low ceiling, but an air of great comfort. A blazing fire of logs roared up the chimney, and the breakfast-table, with all its appliances of luxury, was drawn into a comfortable proximity to it. The winter’s sun looked brilliantly through two windows of the room. Fresh plants stood in the windows, and old pictures looked down from the walls. It was not Alwick Castle, nor Lion House, to be sure, but it was a very inhabitable place for all that. An older campaigner than his lordship might have thought himself well off in worse quarters.

In a few minutes Lord Percy appeared, having exchanged his uniform coat for a brocade dressing-gown, and his military boots for Turkish slippers, and, after a cordial welcome to his young friend, rang the bell for breakfast. The tray was brought; the coffee was poured; the eggs were cracked; the toast was crunched. The breakfast was dispatched with the appetites of young men; sharpened by a daybreak parade, with the thermometer at zero. Their discussions were confined to the good things before them, and the things to which they were naturally allied, until the table was cleared and the servants withdrawn. Then Lord Percy, drawing his chair up to the fire, and, comfortably nursing his left leg placed over his right knee, turned to Ingram, with an air of comic gravity.

“Well, my lad,” thus his lordship opened the palaver, “so you have something to say to me? Faith, I thought as much last night!”

“Last night, my lord!” exclaimed the adjutant, “I don’t know that I rightly apprehend your meaning.”

“O, of course not,” replied the earl, “but you can hardly suppose that I failed to observe how carefully you followed my advice last evening. You must not suppose that Cupid has bandaged all our eyes as effectually as he seems to have done yours.”

“Ah, yes!” replied our hero, “your lordship alludes to my little flirtation with Miss Clairmont. I was only following your own advice to fall in love with two or three at the same time.—But you know, my lord, that it is necessary to begin with one. Now I begin with this one.”

“Bravo! bravo! Ingram,” said Lord Percy, laughing, “a ready answer is a good thing, in love or in war! Well, well! you understand your own affairs best, and you are old enough to manage them for yourself. Upon my honor, I can hardly blame you, young man. I was half inclined to fall in love with her myself last night. She is a fine creature!

“One does not often see a finer, indeed, my lord,” answered the lover, “but you are quite at liberty to enter the lists with me, if you choose,” he doughtily continued; “I have no pretensions to any monopoly in that quarter.”

I believe the fellow knew he lied when he said that; but these, I believe, are the sort of lover’s perjuries at which Jove laughs. Whether Jove laughed at this or not, Lord Percy did, as he replied—

“Very likely, very likely. Thank you, thank you. I do not know that I should like to run the risk, were I not armed in proof on that side. Then I suppose your business of this morning does not relate to this matter, as I thought at first it might?”

“No, my lord,” answered Ingram, plucking up his courage, and determined to have it over at once, “no my lord, I am sorry to say that my errand is of a much less pleasant character; and it relates rather to war than to love, and to me than to Miss Clairmont. It is not the loss of my heart, but of your orderly-book that is in question.”

“The orderly-book lost, Ingram!” exclaimed Lord Percy, “what the devil do you mean?” in a tone of the utmost surprise, a little mixed with incredulity.

“Exactly what I say, my lord,” replied the adjutant, waxing cooler as he went on, “the orderly-book, and all its contents, is gone; and, what is worse, I see no sort of prospect of ever recovering it again.”

“What do you mean, what do you mean?” repeated the earl in great astonishment; “you know very well that this is a serious matter, and can hardly be jesting.”

“I was never more serious in my life, I assure you, my lord,” asseverated the young officer. “I wish it may turn out to be a jest in the end. Sorry as I should be to be guilty of any disrespect to your lordship, I would willingly encounter your displeasure for an untimely jest, so that the service were in no danger of mischief from this unlucky business.”

“But how could it be lost, Captain Ingram,” his lordship replied, a little sternly, “how could it be lost, when it was in your custody; and you could not but know the vital importance of keeping it safe. How came it lost, sir?”

“I am well aware, my lord,” replied poor Ingram, “of the importance of this matter to his majesty’s service, as well as to my own honor and prospects; if I may mention them in the same breath. I beg your lordship to listen patiently to the story I have to tell you; and I beg that you will pardon the apparent nonsense of the first part of my narration, as you will see that it leads to a serious termination. I presume I need bring no other evidence of the truth of my statements before your lordship’s tribunal, than my own assertion. The evidence of my servant will be ready to corroborate them before less friendly judges, should the matter end as seriously as I fear it may.”

He then proceeded to relate to his commander the whole history of his last two nights, from the mysterious footsteps to the vanishing of the orderly-book. His lordship looked grave as the story proceeded, and, rising, walked thoughtfully about the room, after it was finished. At length he thus addressed his young friend, who sat in anxious expectation.

“This is a strange business, Ingram, a very strange business! I am afraid there is mischief in it. At first I thought it might be a mystification of some of your messmates; but they would hardly have ventured upon such an ending.”

“That is my own opinion, my lord.—The pranks of the night before were all fair, though a little rough, play; but I do not think that the *omni* of a garrison life, however much it may sharpen the wits of its victims, would hardly lead them to commit an action which might injure the service, to say nothing of the character of a brother officer.”

“That is true enough, Ingram,” resumed his lordship. “I think it must be a contrivance of some of the disguised rebels in this cursed town, to assist their rascally friends on the other side of the river. My God! I would have sooner lost the best horse in my stables than have had those papers fall into the rebels’ hands!”—To be concluded.