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THE CHANCES OF WAR

AND HOW ONE WAS MISSED.

There were certain conditions in the life of my hero, whom I shall call Rex, which made it easy for him to live out a certain romance that came to him when he was just twenty-five.

These conditions were an adored and adoring mother, and a widowed sister with two small people who felt as free to borrow his knife and suggest their favorite sweetmeats to him as if they had been his own. So his family was quite complete. It filled his days with cheerful work, and his evenings were not at all like those of the typical bachelor. His home was as merry and noisy and turbulent, and his nights just "as devoid of case" as if he had been a Benedict. For his sister had come home before his nephew and namesake, little Rex, had weathered through his first three months of colic; and many a night had he risen from his comfortable bed in response to the wails that came from his sister's room, and he and little Rex had made a procession of themselves, the good uncle sturdily singing, "Where, oh, where, is good old Daniel?" his dangling suspenders flapping soberly above his slipped feet, as he trudged contentedly up and down the hall. The conquered Rex junior would finally sink heavily and more heavily against his shoulder, until, when just about to learn the fate of the Hebrew children, he would succumb to the combined effect of warm flannels, the charms of music, and the solace of camomile, and with a weary final wail pass into that oblivion where colic is unknown.

Sometimes on these night marches his old soldiering days would come back to him with great vividness, and with them his romance. At such times Rex junior would be treated to a long walk, so long, indeed, that his mother would sink into such a profound slumber that when she was awakened to have him returned to her, she always roused up to the firm conviction that Rex senior was a burglar intent upon stealing her precious boy. As if any burglar in his right mind would steal a three-months-old baby, when there were spoons or anything else in the house to be taken. His romance he had never told in words, but somehow his mother and sister knew that there had been one, and they arranged it to suit themselves. He was treated with additional tenderness because it had failed, and so, doubtless, were they. Often one or the other said, "Poor Rex, I wonder who she was—that a pity!" But in her deceitful heart she did not think so, for this dream of his did not disturb their hold on him, and a realization of it might have done so. Altogether it was much nicer for things to be just as they were.

The tender mystery which shrouded a certain time of his life offered an excuse for the tide of motherly and sisterly love to ebb and flow in constant waves, the reason d'être for the ebb being only to gather fresh strength for the flow.

I've no doubt that they invested the romance with more magnitude than it deserved. They even at times detected a sad shade lingering around their hero's admirable mouth, or giving a far-off look to his eyes, as he sank into the easy chair which his adoring small relatives tugged forward for him. Later, when these small relatives, who had fattened upon gory giant stories from their uncle's lips until they were appeased, and afraid of their own shadows, were being put to bed, the daughter would say, suggestively, to her mother, "Poor dear Rex looks tired to-night;" then, severely, to her children: "You children have no mercy upon your uncle. You are always riding him when he is in the house. I do wish you would not forever worry him for stories. I could tell you just as nice ones."

This would raise a derisive laugh; and backed up by the fact that there was not only a lamp burning brightly, but a mother and a grandmother in the room, the audacious small ones would suggest to each other topics for "mother's stories," which, after the substantial fare in that line which their uncle had accustomed them to, they regarded as very weak diet indeed.

"Yes, the dear boy is not in his best spirits to-night. I dare say he has been thinking. I must hurry back to him, so he will not be too lonely, poor fellow!"

It had come to have a perfectly clear meaning to those good ladies when either of them accused this interesting man of having "been thinking," and was in no wise an intimation that, save periodically, he existed without thought. They simply meant that natural regrets were filling his mind and oppressing his heart.

It is true that, as he walked home from his office the very night in question, he had "been thinking" but his thoughts ran something in this fashion: "If I could see through the game Sharp and Swindle are playing, I'd feel better. That stupid old Fresh, to let himself be trapped so! If clients only knew how much gold there is in silence, their lawyers wouldn't find out so often how much money there is in their pockets." And his mind had flown back to these legal worries when the niece and nephew, ceasing to act as counter-irritants, had flown to bed. But when his mother re-entered the room, and he caught her look of sympathy, he threw his cares to the wind once more, and dispelled her solicitude by saying, cheerily, "Well, mother, which of us is to beat at chess to-night?"

"The dear unselfish soul does make such an effort to be gay!" she had consequently remarked to her daughter.

If Rex had set about writing out this experience, which was supposed to have been his whole life, being one of the concise lawyers, he would very probably have put it all into six lines. But he never had written it out; he had only

thought about it very often. At first the recollection had been full of a tantalizing regret, because it seemed to him unnecessary that the episode should have been left unfinished. When he first had come to know why he had been so ruthlessly snatched out of Paradise, and to find that "some one had blundered," and made it imperative for the Union army to draw in its lines, he had raged and called the general hard names. Then later he had consoled himself by saying that he was at present but enduring the fortunes of war; and being a determined man, he promised that when once the war was ended he would fly back to Paradise.

This promise he kept. But though the magnolias flooded the place with the rich perfume which he had always associated with it, and roses grew rampant, hanging great masses of bloom heavily over the garden fence, the fence was a ruin, and the house which the magnolias had shaded was gone.

Of the fate of its former occupants he could learn nothing. And as he sat on the pile of slanting stone which had once formed the steps, he laughed bitterly to himself, and exclaimed: "What a fool's errand I've come on! what a fool I was to expect to find a trace! Why, a battle has been fought over the very lawn; cavalry has rushed through the garden, and torn up the flowers and crushed the life out of them; cannon-balls have crashed through the windows; perhaps in the very room where I lay and watched her some infernal shell has shattered all the sweet daintiness out of existence; and the rain of shot has battered the dear old house into dust."

But he sat and looked at the dust until it gathered itself together once more and rose into the stately house he had remembered. It was almost as real now as then. Why or how he had ever been taken into it he did not know. He remembered the utter weariness with which the last few miles had been made, how his head ached under the merciless sun, and how he had stumbled blindly along the glaring road. And he remembered vaguely a halt, in which he was being discussed, but to which discussion he was utterly indifferent, and allowed himself to drop a helpless burden upon his comrades' hands, glad that the time had come when he had become irresponsible.

After that there were days when he was conscious of nothing but pain. Then there was one day when toward evening he opened his tired eyes, and looked about once more. He had closed them upon a burning heat which shimmered over the fields, framing in a hot, dusty column of men moving steadily into an enemy's land. It was a silent procession to his dulled ear, only the monotonous tramp of heavily clad feet came with muffled sound from the earth. Even when his eyelids drooped over his red eyes, they did not seem to shut out the sight. The men still filled on ahead of him and behind, and the heat still shimmered in waves over the empty fields. When he opened them, a cool white curtain was swaying fitfully to and fro before an open window. As it would blow back, he could see the boughs of trees dripping and glistening with rain-drops. He lay and refreshed himself with the sight; then he looked at the clean matting with which the floor was covered, then at the simple sweetness of the room, and attempting to raise himself upon his elbow, he asked, "Where am I?"

At his question some one on the veranda came, and gathering the curtain aside, looked in.

"Oh, you are awake," said a girlish voice, and a moment later a young girl came into the room. She came close to his bedside, and looked at him with almost a professional eye, then she laid her hand upon his forehead, and said, triumphantly, "Your fever is all gone. You feel much better, I am sure." He gradually sank back upon his pillow.

"Yes, you had better lie down again. We mustn't try to get well too soon;" then slipping her arm under his head, she took a glass from a stand, and lifting his head, placed it to his lips. "Of course you are better, still you must take your medicine or you may have a relapse, you know, and I can't have that," and she smiled brightly at him.

The draught she had offered him was as bitter as only a thorough army surgeon could prepare, but no nectar ever tasted sweeter.

He had allowed himself to be put gently back, still content to be irresponsible, and made no reply, not even to thank her. She settled his pillow, smoothed out the quilt, then brought a chair, and sat down beside him. After regarding her patient critically while with the loveliest dark eyes he had ever seen, she began:

"Do you know how sick you have been?"

"I don't know," he echoed.

"You have had a fever," she informed him.

"Yes?"

"You do suffer now, do you?"

"No."

"And it doesn't make your head ache when I talk?"

"No, indeed. I'm glad to hear you."

You are the first white woman who has spoken to me for two years."

"Humph! That is because you were on the wrong side. But I must not excite you, so we won't talk politics; besides, we are within the enemy's lines now."

"The enemy's?"

"Yes, your lines."

"Then you are a rebel?"

"Yes; but I have taken care of you; that is, I've given you your medicine. And now if you feel like taking anything to eat, I'll go and prepare it."

"No, don't go," he said, reaching out and taking hold of her sleeve. "I don't want to eat."

She settled herself in her chair again, and gazed at him in the most unembarrassed manner.

Then leaning forward, she placed her hand on his forehead once more to note its temperature. Evidently she was accustomed to looking upon him simply as a "case" and she held her head upon one side, and then said, rather reprovingly, "Your talk has made you feverish. Now you must go to sleep."

"Very well; only don't go away."

"I may have to; perhaps mamma will call me. However, you shall not be neglected. Mamma will be glad to know that you have come to yourself again."

"And are you glad?" he asked idly.

"Oh, you think, because I am a rebel, I would have been glad to have you die. Now I think that is very unkind of you; and the dark eyes were filled with indignant protest."

"No, I couldn't think that. How did I come to be thrown upon your kindness?"

"You were brought here and left, and although mamma and I hated the sight of your uniform, you looked so sick that we were willing to take care of you."

"How good you were!" And he lay silently staring at her a long time without speaking. She was dainty and sweet enough to charm any man, but to Rex, who had for years looked only upon men's weather-beaten faces, she seemed an angel. Her dress was coarse, for fine fabrics were hard to get in the heart of the Confederacy at that time, but it photographed itself upon his memory. At length he put out his hand and took a fold of the sleeve between his fingers. It was a calico of a dull dark ground, over which were sprinkled dots of a brilliant red. He felt it thoughtfully, and said, "That is a beautiful dress you have on."

She glanced over it inquisitively and then burst into a merry laugh. "I don't think you know much about dress if you call this beautiful," and taking a fold between her thumb and finger, she held it off and regarded it scornfully. "Why, it is simply an old cotton dress; but—well, we are poor now," she added, in explanation, with a defiant toss of her head.

"No, not proud."

"No; very, very humble." Then, after a pause, she said, "But if you are well enough to try to tease me, you are well enough to eat," and she flitted from the room. Almost immediately an elderly lady entered, whom Rex easily recognized as his mother. She came directly to his bedside, and took his hand, telling him, in a pleasant voice, how glad she was to learn from her daughter that he was so much better.

To her hero tried to express in a more conventional manner than to the daughter his thanks, and his apprehension that he had given them a great deal of trouble.

"We are glad to have been of service to you," the lady answered, gravely. "I have a poor boy of my own in our army, and he may be glad to find friends amongst enemies some day. It is a terrible war;" and her face grew sad.

He was trying to find a suitable reply, when his first friend returned to the room, bearing a tray upon which were spread such dainties as could be procured.

"You might have had some broiled chicken," began the young lady, as she drew a light table up to his bedside, "if—"

"Florence!" said her mother, reprovingly.

The negress chuckled herself out of the room, murmuring something about Mars Linkum's sojers liking chickens mightily well.

The two ladies ministered most gracefully and kindly to him as he ate; and when the evening settled down with its flood of moonlight, they came again and sat beside him. Naturally the war was a subject to be ignored between them, and as total strangers they had few topics in common without intruding into each other's lives; so after a while conversation lagged. The sick man feeling the restlessness of returning health, nervously fingered the spray of roses which had been laid upon his pillow, then dropped his arms beside him, and sighed.

"We have talked too much, and tired you," his hostess said, regretfully. "We will go now, and you had better sleep; or would it give you pleasure if my daughter would sing for you?"

"Oh, I would like to hear her sing," he answered, eagerly.

"Bring your guitar then Florence, dear, and sing." The daughter willingly obeyed, and a moment later looked in through the window to say, "You know I cannot sing, mamma, if you look at me, so I will sit here, and you can hear me just as well."

After running her skillful fingers over the strings, calling forth a soft melody, she began a song full of rhythm and sweetness. Her voice was fresh as the night air and she sang with unfeigned pleasure. Rex lay with closed eyes, listening to the music, and resting in body and soul. For him had come one of those delightful pauses in life in which is no care or thought for the morrow, which so seldom come to a man or woman after the cares of life are taken up. He did not even enjoy the music; in an aesthetic mood he listened to it, and accepted it with an invalid's selfishness. It was sweet; and he knew how lovely the singer must look, sitting with the moon shining down into her dark eyes. He even pictured her slim, white hands flitting about over the strings. He hoped she would sing a long, long time; he wondered why the music sounded so low, so far away; he—slept.

Far away a clock struck three. The house was dark and silent. The curtains were drawn closely across the window, through which showed vaguely the light of the declining moon. A delicious sense of security and comfort hovered about him. The echo of the music seemed to linger, and the room was full of the presence of the singer.

As he had fallen asleep, she and her song had drifted away from him, with moonlight and the sweetness of the roses upon his pillow; but now with the coming day she was real to him once more. How beautiful she was, and how strong the wish was to see her again! He would not have long to wait, for already the darkness which precedes dawn had come. Again the clock struck, and so warm shafts of light shot up from the horizon, and all nature awoke.

Presently a negro came silently into the room to see if he could do anything for him. But he wanted nothing but the thought of the bewitching girl until the time when she would come. How would she meet him, now that he was no longer a helpless invalid? Would she fit in and out as she had done yesterday, perhaps reproach him for falling asleep while she was singing? He planned out the day, and thought of what he would say, and of her replies. As he began to grow impatient at the slowness of time, he became conscious that the stillness of morning was being broken by the sound of horses and wheels coming swiftly toward the door. There were hurried inquiries and responses, and footsteps crossed the veranda, and the negro led the way into the room, followed by two soldiers.

"Hello, Rex, I'm glad to see you so much better, old man," and his hand was caught in the strong palm of a former comrade. "It's lucky you're well enough to be moved, for our lines are having to fall back, and we are hurrying to get you sick fellows into the hospital as soon as possible. We have orders to have you all in the hospital at—"

—before night. We haven't a moment to lose, either. The ambulance is at the door, and we'll have you into it in a twinkling."

He was agast. "I can't be moved; it would kill me," he began, almost believing him. "I'll take my chances. There would not be much left of me if I were to have a relapse now."

"There would be more than if you were sent to convalesce in Andersonville. We will look out for you. Poor old fellow! this fever has taken the courage out of you."

Rex groaned. "Are there no other fellows you could pick up first? An hour or so might make a great difference with me."

"Yes, I am pretty sure an hour or so would make a mighty difference, returned the comrade, looking at him. "Where are his comrades?" he asked of the negro. "We must get him into the ambulance at once."

The clothes were produced, and the unwilling man helped tenderly into them by the soldiers.

"Do you think," he asked of the negro when all was ready, "that I could see your mistress a moment? I would like to thank her," he added, turning to his friends. "She and her daughter have been very kind to me, and I can't go without seeing them."

"We will not dare to wait long; but of course it will be only civil to thank the ladies."

The negro was not gone long, when he returned, almost immediately followed by his mistress, who seemed greatly excited over the reason for his hurried departure. Offering her hand she wished him a friendly good-by.

"I could almost have wished that our army had held back for a few days longer, until you were better able to be moved; but I hope you will not suffer from the change. If your friends will leave you, I promise to use my influence in your behalf."

He looked appealingly at his comrades; but none answered. "It would not do to expose you to the trouble of having a Union soldier in the house, and I am afraid, madam, you could hardly save him from arrest. We all appreciate your offer, though."

"I do, more than I can tell you, my kind friend," Rex answered, bending and respectfully kissing her hand. "Will you please give my thanks to your daughter, and say good-by for me? I'll never forget either of you so long as I live."

"My daughter," she exclaimed, "Why, she must come to see you off. Go quickly, Jerry, and tell Miss Florence not to lose a moment." "Ah! this is one of the sad things of war! To think how gladly we would protect you; but we might not be able to, and I could never forgive myself if I left you in my house."

The soldiers grew visibly impatient, and at last reluctantly said, "We will not dare take any more time, Rex."

"Then good-by—forever, I suppose," he said, looking at them. "Why do you take that poor sick man?" turning indignantly upon the soldiers. "Our friends would not touch him. They are too brave to touch the helpless."

The soldiers smiled and said, "We have our orders, miss."

"Orders indeed! It is a disgrace to your officers to issue such orders. Mamma, why don't you interfere?"

"Florence, my dear,











