

Monsieur Fini:
The Story of a
Hero's Undication

Dead-ripe lemons fell from the un-stirred boughs. I sat beneath with a gourd of sparkling water that the guide had brought me from the river. I took some lumps of sugar from my saddle bags, reached for an immense lemon and made a drink that seemed divine.

"Laurie should have come with me," I said to myself, thinking of her as she might be driving down the avenue, for it was afternoon in New York and possibly chill and stormy. I could see her shivering for all her furs and ostrich plumes, hating the wintry cold even as I should hate it when I returned. How content I felt in this gracious sunlight, with the breezeless air, faintly fragrant, amid lonely splendor, where bird and insect and river-flow made royal chorus—and human footsteps hardly came! We had crossed the ferry—the guide and I.

"On which side will the senor wait while I swim the mules?" he had asked. "Row me over and go back for them," I had answered. "If they drown and pull you under I can easier walk down to the coast than climb back to the capital."

With reproachful shrug he had obeyed. I saw him in the little boat, dragging the patient animals by their bridles, anon whacking them with his funny old paddle. They were not eager for the bath. They were mid-stream. I lowered my gourd and watched. And now I saw someone approaching the ferry, on the farther side, even as we had approached a short time since—another traveler. His pack-mule bore no luggage, nor had he a man. He dismounted, watched my guide spring ashore and drag the mules up the bank; then he put his hand up and halloed across. My guide turned and waved him a reply. "It is Fini," he said; "if the senor does not mind I will go back for him."

I said, "Of course. Is he going on this steamer?"

"Who knows? He never goes on the steamer."

I remember having heard of this foreigner who had lived many years in the country. He had no family; native servants kept his little house. He had acquired land, raised stock and sold it. He had prosperity, without ties or amours. He received no foreign visitors nor letters from the north. I had felt some curiosity about him, but not enough to be guilty of intruding. As he came up the bank I rose and met him. The animals shook themselves and

dripped. "Quite a little knack in that," I said, with a friendly nod. He glanced at me, inclined his head courteously and said with pauses between his distinct words, "I—do not—speak—English." Then, "Peut-etre monsieur parle Francais?" I answered. I had lived in Paris. We sat under the tree. The shade allured and we had ample time to make the next stopping place. The guide lay down for a nap.

"Monsieur sails by this steamer?" inquired the stranger, with a glance at my steamer trunks. I was carrying all sorts of queer stuff to Laurie.

"And you?" I asked.
"I shall not sail."
I laughed. "I don't blame you. This is a strange and glorious bit of Paradise. I wouldn't go back, only, you see—my wife."

He was silent. He put up his hand and wiped his moist brow under the Jipijapa hat. I stared at the hat enviously; it was much finer than the one I owned. And at that moment my glance fell on a scar on the man's left temple. It held my gaze fascinated for seconds that seemed many times as long. Then he drew down his Jipijapa and I looked away. Through a wood near by rang a bird note that seemed to me far off—in another world almost. The fragrance of the lemon tree was gone—or become another perfume, fainter, of a northern clime. It was a remote summer time. There were roses in the air. In the great window of an old-fashioned library sat a child of seven; myself, much indulged by my father, the dignified doctor of philosophy, who was instructing a young man of twenty. It was Sanskrit that entranced them. My father was an authority, and his pupil apt. "Run to your play," my parent had bidden me. "Oh, let the little chap stay," said Harlan Hume; "he is going for a walk with me afterward." From that day Harlan Hume was my hero. It gave me stupendous emotions to listen to his description of the accident in which he had received the terrible scar on his temple. As I grew older I was able to divine an unconfessed heroism by which he had spared a schoolmate's life and honor. Hume was fond of country walks; many an afternoon we had rested on pleasant banks. And always my gaze had stolen to that fascinating scar. * * *

How those hours of more than twenty years ago came back to me as I sat here with Monsieur Fini at my side! How those years had run away! Summer after summer Hume had come to my home for his vacation—until he finished at college. Then he had gone to live in Paris for a year or two. Later my father had watched with pride the opening of the young man's career—his early successes at his profession in the metropolis. Then

came that frightful day when the cloud of everlasting disgrace followed the leaping flame of exposure and engulfed young Hume. My father read the news with blanching lips. "The boy is innocent!" he cried, and staggered from the room. Harlan Hume would make no defense. The girl he was soon to marry implored him, but finally renounced him. Her family took her away. "He would defend himself if he could," people said, shrugging. "No sane man would do otherwise." It was a revolting crime with which they charged him. Others said, "Why didn't the fool fly?"

There were no relatives to fight for him. His fiancée's family was silent. So Hume went to his punishment. My father, already feeble, weakened by the shock, succumbed. Hume also seemed dead to us; we were doubly in mourning. Hume's term of imprisonment was not very long, yet he seemed only a shadow of the past when one day a paragraph spoke of his release and located him in the south. Months passed and again they spoke of him as having died—alone and miserably poor in an obscure lodging-house in New Orleans. Only distant relatives were left and they would not own relationship nor bring his body back. It had been buried in the same awful shadow that had blackened his bright beginning.

How the time had flown! If Harlan Hume had been living he would have been about the same age as the man who sat beside me. Monsieur Fini was darker of complexion; he did not wear glasses—Hume had been near-sighted; the doctors had told him that it would pass in time. And Hume would never have grown a beard. I hardly knew why I should think of this—or why I should say presently, "Those are peculiar bushes on the bank across the river, are they not?" and wait a little breathless for the answer.

It came after a brief pause. "There is much that is peculiar in this country." What was there evasive? Why had I expected him to say, "Which bushes?" or "I cannot tell at this distance." Forces were at work within me making my heart beat more and more rapidly. I knew not why. I glanced at the man and his eye; met mine. A look was in them that reproached me, like that of a dumb brute at bay. Of a sudden a sense of meanness overwhelmed me—the unspeakable meanness of one who robs a grave. What right had I? A desire to atone—a revulsion shook me.

"I want to ask you to excuse me—for what may have seemed rudeness. I think I have stared at you. It was because—I was reminded by the scar upon your forehead of someone I once knew. I never thought to see another scar so similar."

He did not alter visibly in color or expression. "I also," he said, "have seen two such."

"I find that curious," I said, unspeakably relieved that he showed no resentment. "And may I ask about the other person?"

"It was a man named Hume," he gravely answered.

"Ah!" I gasped, "Harlan Hume! You knew him—but where?"

"You also knew him?" he echoed dully.

"Why, yes. He was my friend. My father loved him."

Monsieur Fini did not move nor speak. "He loved him!" I cried, this time in English. Fini started. "You heard," he said, slowly, "that he died in New Orleans?"

"It was there you—knew him?"

"I was at his bedside."

"For God's sake tell me of him. If I could have known—have gone to him and told him we always knew it was not true!" I rose agitated, and walked a

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This Picture
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