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MAJESTIC

The Passionate Snake

BY ELLA HIGGINSON

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If any man supposes that snakes do not understand the speech of human tongues, I—being a snake—will, in this short story, convince him that he is mistaken. I may convince him of some other truths also.

We are the accursed of the earth. We have only to be seen to be straightway killed. Every man's hand is against us, not because of his own hate, for men are not cowards, but because of the hate of his women.

We have learned, therefore, through ages of cruel treachery, to make our blows swift and sure; yet I say to men, with scorn, that we are more honorable and more merciful than they; we give warning before we strike. We give each man one chance, at least, for his life. More, we strike only when our lives are threatened, or our privacy invaded.

I, being a female thing, have known love. Ay, most beautiful and graceful have I been from my birth. My form is slender and supple; my movements are sinuous and alluring. The grasses sway in languid undulations, caressing me, as I slide through them. My markings are of rich and unusual beauty and brilliancy. It is said that my eyes take on the color of my moods and passions. When I lie basking in the sunlight, they have the pale blue content of the skies. When I lift myself erect, suspecting danger or treachery, they are like two glittering, green emeralds. When I am jealous—what female thing has not been?—they are a pale amber-yellow. Once it was said to me that they were—but that must wait.

I was born in a pile of stones on a hill in the lovely Grande-Ronde valley, in Oregon. From my father, a rattlesnake, I inherited my strong will and fierce passions; from my mother,

through all the spring, and summer, and fall. When winter drew on, how glad was I to curl myself in a dark, warm place for my long sleep. I recall that my last thought was of how dreary and heart-breaking my awakening would be in the spring. Yet when the awakening came—well, I am a female thing, and that must be sufficient explanation.

It was on a warm and lovely day in April that I languidly uncoiled and slid out to lie upon the stones. Never shall I forget how the beauty of that day thrilled me! I was glad, I exulted, only to live once more. My memories of love and sorrow seemed vague. Had I ever wished to die? Well, now I longed to live.

The valley stretched before my eyes, green and shining like a great emerald. There were splashes of yellow where the buttercups grew, and there were shooting stars, and all the sweet winds of spring.

I remember my first glimpse of myself in a still pool that spring. You may have observed a woman, reft of her love, in your own life, you human things. You may have seen her tears, her anguish, her garb of woe. Then when a few months have gone by, you must have one day had your eyes dazzled by her sudden blossoming out into a new and wonderful beauty. You must have marveled at the color in her cheeks, the brilliancy of her eyes, the warmth of her mouth, the subtle grace of her movements. So it was with me. Life throbbled once more through all my being.

The loneliness grew unbearable. One day as I lay curled, half-asleep, I heard a step. A moment later a man came close to my heap of stones. I sprang erect, hissing and swelling, for I had not time to escape. He paused and looked at me.

"Beautiful thing!" he said, in a tone of sadness. "Strike, if you will. I shall not harm you."

He threw himself on the ground near me. He was unarmed. Ashamed, but incredulous, I dropped back into a coil, and lay watching him, motionless, save for the slow sliding of my head from side to side. He looked at me steadily.

"That a snake could be so beautiful!" he said, in the same sad tone. He reached out his hand with a caressing motion. "Come," he said, "we are alone. Let us be friends."

His eyes drew me with an irresistible fascination. A new, strange feeling stirred me. I uncoiled, and slid to him with graceful undulations. He laid his hand upon me, and both of us were without fear.

Days passed. I learned gradually that he had come there to forget a woman. He pitched a tent near the stones and dwelt there. I followed him everywhere. I never permitted him to get out of my sight.

One night when the moon hung large and yellow on the violet breast of the sky, he threw himself upon his blankets, and held his hands out to me.

"I am sorrowful to-night, Lillith," he said—he called me that. "Come close, closer, my beautiful. Make me forget—other nights."

In that hour, as I slid into the warmth of his breast, I knew that sometime, somewhere, I had been a woman. What had been my sin, then, when I was a woman, that I should have been recreated in this form? Beautiful, oh, beautiful! Yes; but unfitted for any save the lower loves, and this love was of the highest; the love of woman for man.

I shrank, quivering, from the memory of that other love. So must a woman shrink, loathing and shuddering, from the memory of such a love when, through some great, exalting passion, a new and noble soul has been born in her.

Having no arms and no lips, I curled close, close, into his breast, and around his splendid throat I drew my throbbing coils. Then it was that he said: "Lillith, what eyes you have! They are like two little lamps of crimson fire, glowing in the dusk."

All that night and many, many others, I slept there.

In the gorgeous pomp of an August dawn the man awoke, with the snake twined about him. The woman he had been trying to forget stood beside him. He flung the snake from him and stretched out trembling arms to the woman.

"Dearest!" she cried. "Did you think I could bear it? I knew better, I have followed you, and I shall never leave you again!" She sank to him, sobbing, and laid her mouth upon his.

He put his arms around her and held her there silently.

Suddenly she screamed and sprang erect.

"A snake! Kill it! Kill it!" It was coiled, hissing, to spring at her. Already his hand was on his revolver. There was a flash. The woman screamed again. The snake was dead. In a moment the man had flung it outside the tent, and caught her, sobbing and trembling, to his breast.

"O, my dearest," he cried, "if the reptile had struck you, I should have turned the revolver on myself. O, my beloved, this accursed time without you! Give me your arms, your lips. Let us make up for this awful time apart!"



There Was a Flash.

a blue-racer, who had been lured away from her kin down in the green valley, my beauty and grace.

Before I was three months old I had tasted fame. All the male snakes on the hill came to watch me as I coiled and uncoiled my magnificent length over the stones of my home. And, oh, I used to wish that the mated ones would not come, for their mates said such evil things of me! But they would come.

One day in spring, when I was a year old, the king of all the rattlesnakes himself came to see my beauty, and he desired me greatly, although I was so young and he so old. My father was proud and flattered. But I—well, there was a young and bold blue-racer who used to climb the hill from the valley; and on soft, moonless evenings, when my father slept and my mother pretended that she did not hear, I slid down and met him among the deep grasses that grew half way up the hill.

Ah, those hours of first love! Poor human beings, who pass your nights within the four walls of a room, I pity you!

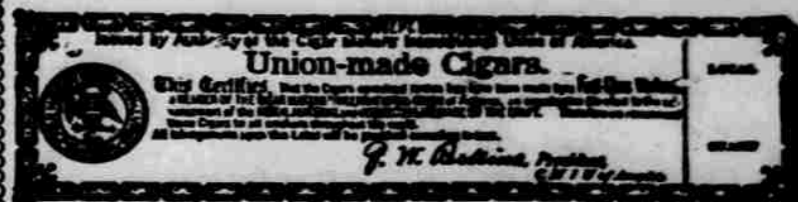
We were only snakes. But we had the night and all its sweets woven forever through our love. Soft winds, scented with the pines on the crest of the Blue mountains, rippled the grasses above us, as we tasted the bliss of loving companionship. The night hawk sank to blow his shrill bugle-like note beside us; the stars glowed redly through the breathing dusk; from the canyons far up in the hills came the mournful cry of a coyote. Down under the velvet grasses it was dark and sweet, and we were alone, and we loved.

When at length I stole home and coiled myself on the smooth stones I could not sleep. I lay motionless until the pale greens and yellows came marching up the east, and the trees on the mountain's crest turned, one by one, to gold, and the meadow-larks sang, oh, so sweetly, in the valley where I knew he lay as motionless as I, dreaming of joys that had been and longing for those that were to be.

There was a month full of such bliss. But a day came when my father knew; and that night the king of rattlesnakes went down the hill in my stead, and lay in wait for his rival.

When I was convinced that they had killed him, I stole away in the night and made my way to the other side of the valley, and dwelt alone on another hill and mourned. There were no snakes and there were no human things. And, oh, the days were long, and, oh, the nights were lonely. Deep and passionate was my grief

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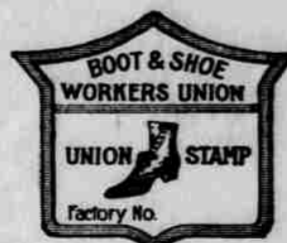
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