

Flower o' the Corn

A Romance of the Seventeenth Century Religious War

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CHAPTER XLIII.

"Kiss Me, My Husband!"

PERHAPS it was that the Spider had had enough of watching the game which she herself played so matchlessly well.

So without more thought than the mere resolution Yvette drew her hood over her head, assumed (as easily as she had donned the hood) an air of anxiety and haste, and descended into the chamber of Maurice Raith's imprisonment.

She entered to find Maurice and Flower-o'-the-Corn with their positions unchanged. Flower-o'-the-Corn was still in Maurice's arms, and he was mourning over her, kissing her passionately the while, a method of recovery from temporary syncope, which, though indubitably ancient, is not in accordance with modern medical treatment nor recommended by the faculty.

At the entrance of Yvette, Maurice Raith turned upon her, hot with wrath and fury, holding Frances still closer in his arms, and looking as if he would have rent the intruder limb from limb.

Yvette stood smiling in the doorway. "What is the matter with my friend," she said, "with the dear Mademoiselle Wellwood?"

"What is the matter with her?" he cried, indignantly. "That is not for you to ask. No—stand off—do not touch her! She is too pure for such hands as yours. Do not even look at her! Do not breathe upon her. I would rather see her dead than saved by you!"

He fairly hissed the words in his wrath. Yvette affected a kind of humorous terror.

"Please, Monsieur the Englishman, do not kill me with your glance! Ah, I remember the time, not so long ago either, when I knew a young English soldier who thought quite otherwise of me. But at any rate, if I am not worthy to touch her, would it not be better if you yourself laid her down on a bench or on the couch yonder, and poured a little cold water over her face and neck?"

She paused a moment to let her words sink in and then she added:

"Or perhaps you would prefer (and indeed it would be much more proper) that the fiancé of Mademoiselle Wellwood, Colonel Jean Cavalier of the king's army, should be sent for to recover her."

She laughed impishly, and at that very moment Maurice felt Flower-o'-the-Corn move in his arms. Was it the name which stirred her? Had it reached through the glamour of faintness which still left her heart deathly sick within her?

She stared about her wildly and when she saw Yvette she trembled from head to foot with something of the same approach to rigor without which John Cavalier never approached the wife of Nicholas de Baume. Yvette smiled at this evidence of her power.

Maurice laid Flower-o'-the-Corn down on his couch, but she rose up, put Maurice Raith to the side with a movement of the hand and confronted Yvette.

"I have told him!" she said. "Well, and what does he say?" smiled Madame la Marchale; "glad to escape on such easy terms, I should say! A soldier is a soldier all the world over!"

It was hardly playing the game. Yvette knew that very well, but the sight of Frances Wellwood in the arms of Maurice had aroused in her all the baser angers of her nature.

"You think," she said, contemptuously, to Maurice Raith "that it is for the sake of your beaux yeux, my friend, that I have brought this to pass. Not at all! I am married to a man who is worth a dozen of you any day. But because I would save this girl from death—and worse—because I would save her father—a good man—according to his lights and his thoughts (which are not mine), and because I desire to save all this people of the Cevennes from a bloody and desolating war to the death."

Then she turned toward Flower-o'-the-Corn.

"Frances Wellwood, will you come with me, who alone have gone out of my way to save from death and dishonor both you and those I thought dear to you? Or do you desire to hear a certain crackling detonation tomorrow morning, and a few minutes afterward to see the agreeable carcass of this young man carried past to the Protestant cemetery of Millau?"

Maurice gripped his finger nails into his palms, and only the knowledge that a call from Yvette would bring up the soldiers of the marshal prevented his springing upon the girl and clamping that fair white throat once and for all in a grip of steel.

Then Flower-o'-the-Corn turned her about to Maurice, and all the anger died sharply out of his eyes.

"Dearest," she said, smiling at him through a mist of tears, "do your part—yours is soon done. Mine will be longer in the doing, but I will do it! She—(Frances pointed with open contempt to where Yvette stood, smiling her ironic smile) she speaks part of the truth. I do this for your sake, because I love you. How much—only a true woman can know—not a woman like her!"

Here Yvette caught herself up from hasty speech with a rapid intake of breath.

She went on without giving him time to answer.

"Good-bye, beloved! I shall not see you again. You shall go far away, but you will not forget me. No, not ever. Though I am wedded to another, till the day, the marvelously glad day when I am taken. And God, who orders all things will know better than any. He will not be angry that I think of you, that I continue to love you. For in the soul and spirit I shall be your wife, and keep all that is eternal of me, all that is immortal, all that does not go back to the worm and the sod, virgin for you—yes, for you alone, my love and my life!"

As she spoke she had clasped him about the neck with both hands, oblivious even

way, hot-foot from Aigues Mortes, whither he had come by ship from Barcelona, with a letter from Maurice Raith, dated on board Her Majesty's ship the Royal Dane, announcing his safe arrival and reception by the officers. So at least the news went.

It was the hour for the sacrifice, and Yvette who had schemed and worked so keenly to bring this about had for one moment a spasm of remorse, when she looked upon the pale, resigned countenance of Flower-o'-the-Corn.

And because there was still a barrier to be removed. Yvette watched more and more nervously for the coming of Billy Marshall as the hour of the wedding drew near. No bride ever was more eager.

nothing could be done without him. So, he explained in villainous French, like the man whom the crowd had come to see hanged, he could afford to take his time.

"Hanged you will be without a doubt!" cried the exasperated sergeant of the Red House, who had been sent as an escort to bring him in. "When you get there the marshal will be in a temper to skin you alive and eat you without salt!"

"Set a marshal to catch a Marshall!" said Billy oracularly. "I jaloose that a gypsy is likely to come out well ahead of the best Frenchman that ever drew the breath of life!"

The upper part of the great military pavilion had been cleared, a table covered



"THEN I, MARTIN FOY, HAVE SHED INNOCENT BLOOD, IT IS HERE UPON THIS BLADE!"

to the presence of Yvette and of her smile, which, indeed, had become less pronounced and ironical.

Flower-o'-the-Corn looked up at Maurice and her eyes were deep wells of love and faith.

"Kiss me—my husband!" she said.

CHAPTER XLIV. Good Catholics.

Down on the broad swards by the Tarn side was the stir and bustle of preparation. To the left were the royal regiments, foot grenadiers of the Red House of the King.

To the right, on the wider straths was the local levies.

Between these encampments apart from both were the recently recruited and still far from dependable regiments of Jean Cavalier. It was among these last that the stir was most pronounced. And when a haughty stalking sergeant of the Royal House met a private of the new corps with the gloss yet on his buttons, he inquired what was the mighty pothor in the encampments of the Psalm-singers.

"Our commander is to be married today, and by the king's own orders!" said the man interrogated, as soon as he was assured that no insult was intended—adding immediately, "to the best, the most beautiful and most accomplished girl in the world."

In the great tent in the hollow the ceremony was to be begun. Afterward, to please the king, they were to repair to the church along with the cure-doyen on Milau and the civil authorities of the High Cevennes, and first (to the wonder of all) they were to be united according to the true Calvinist ritual, and by the father of the bride.

Maurice Raith was up and over the frontier six good days ago, and every moment till that morning his messenger had been expected. But apparently Billy the Gypsy, was now really on his

Yvette it was who had ordered and seen to the arrangement of the marriage banquet. She it was who had provided the plenitude of flowers, an unusual feature at that time, with which the tables were decorated. She had even obtained rare fruits from a distance, and the idea that all these combinations of genius should be spoiled by the nonarrival of a mere gypsy with a letter sufficed to make her fretful and difficult to please.

CHAPTER XLV. The Night Looks into the Pavilion.

They had waited long. Billy Marshall, though often reported on the way, had not arrived. Hope deferred was making hearts sick—not, indeed, as might have been expected, those of the personages principally concerned, the bride and bridegroom, but rather those of the guests of the marriage feast, who, with hourly improved appetites, eyed the preparations in the kitchens and the cooks, who, white-aproned and white bonneted, rushed this way and that, or with hands held horizontally above their brows, looked down the road into the setting sun.

Meantime the marshal had dispatched courier after courier. They were instructed to bring a letter, if they could not bring Billy. But the gypsy was more clever than them all. He would go himself and deliver the letter to the young lady, or she should not have it at all. In which case, there would be no marriage. They might please themselves.

"Search him, gentlemen of the Red House!" and they searched him, finding tobacco, snuff and other contraband of war, but not so much as a scrap of writing concealed about his rags.

Being released Billy Marshall laughed in their faces. Yes, he would accept a horse and set forward, but at his own pace. He was coming, but he was well aware that with a rich purple velvet cloth, brought,

strictly under the rose, from the sacristy of Our Lady of Milan by the complainant cure-doyen. The thing would please the marquis, and, what would you, a little holy water and a dash of incense would fumigate any lurking Protestantism out of the tissues of velvet and gold.

This thrown over a plain deal table made the altar before which Flower-o'-the-Corn and Jean Cavalier were to kneel. Patrick Wellwood had already taken up his position behind it, tall, spare, his white hair falling reverently over his black Geneva gown. Flower-o'-the-Corn, with a sad particularity, had spent the last days mending the rents and holes in it.

Brilliant and distinguished the company, beyond the wont of even the headquarters of a marshal of France, drawn by curiosity, as well as by a desire to witness the marriage of so distinguished a camisard (now rallied to the service of the king), according to the rites of the Protestant church.

A part of the pavilion had been curtained off, making an entrance to a smaller marquee, and there Flower-o'-the-Corn was waiting, with an actual impatience, that which, according to promise, was to come to her from the man whom for one brief moment she had clasped in her arms and called her husband.

This impatience, however, was not of the sort which may be supposed to distinguish brides. Yvette did not leave her even for a moment, and followed with no little curiosity the direction of Frances Wellwood's glances.

Through the curtains which separated their marquee from the great pavilion there came a yellowish haze of illumination.

"They are lighting up," said Yvette. "I had not thought it was so dark. I wish the gypsy would come! It is infinitely annoying!"

"I wish so, too!" said Flower-o'-the-Corn, very quietly.

"You have changed your mind, then?"