

CHAPTER XXIV

AN EXPLANATION

Morn came. They had heard or seen nothing of the prince and his men. Mr. Heatherbloom walked back for a cold plunge in a stream that had whispered not far from their camping spot throughout the night. He and Betty Dalrymple breakfasted together on an old log; it wasn't much of a meal--a few crackers and crumbs that were left--but neither appeared to mind the meagerness of the fare. With much gaiety (the dawn seemed to have brought with it a special *allegrezza* of its own) she insisted upon a fair and equitable division of their scanty store, even to the apportioning of the crumbs into two equal piles. Then, prodigal-handed for a castaway who knew not where her next meal might come from, she tossed a bit or two to the birds, and was rewarded by a song.

All this seemed very wonderful to Mr. Heatherbloom; there had never before been such a breakfast; compared to it, the *dejeuner à la fourchette* of a Durand or a Foyot was as starvation fare. It was surprising how beautiful the dark places of the night before looked now; daylight metamorphosed the spot into a sylvan fairyland. Mr. Heatherbloom could have lingered there indefinitely. The soft moss wooed him, somewhat awary with world contact; she filled his eyes. The faint shadowy lines beneath hers which he had noted at the dawn had now vanished; the same sun-god that ordered the forest flowers to lift their

gay heads commanded the rosebuds to unfold their bright petals on her cheeks. Her lips were as red berries; the cobwebs, behind, alight with sunshine, gleamed no more than the tossed golden hair. She had striven as best she might with the last, not entirely to her own satisfaction but completely to Mr. Heatherbloom's. His untutored masculine sense rather gloried in the unconventionally of a superfluous tangle or two; he found her most charming with a few rents in her gown from branch or brier. They seemed to establish a new bond of camaraderie, to make blithe appeal to his nomadic soul. It was as if fate had directed her footsteps until they had touched and lingered on the outer circle of his vagabondage. Both seemed to have forgotten all about his excellency.

"Rested?" queried Mr. Heatherbloom.

"Quite," she answered. There was no trace of weariness in her voice.

"And you?"

"Ditto," he laughed. Then, more gravely, "You see, I fell asleep while watching," he confessed.

"I'm glad."

"You'd make a lenient commanding officer. Shall we go on?"

"Where?"

"I don't exactly know," he confessed.

"That's lovely." Then, tentatively, "It's nice here."

"Fine," he assented. There was no hardness in the violet eyes as they rested on him. He did not pause to analyze the miracle; he only accepted it. A moment he yielded to the temptation of the lotus-eater and continued to luxuriate in the lap of Arcadia. Then he bestirred himself uneasily; it was not sufficient just to breathe in the golden gladness of the moment. "Yes; it's fine," he repeated, "only you see--"

"Of course!" she said with a little sigh, and rose. "I see you are going to be very domineering, the way you were yesterday."

"I? Domineering?"

"Weren't you?" she demanded, looking at him from beneath long lashes.

"I'm sure I didn't intend--" He stopped for she was laughing at him.

They went on and her mood continued to puzzle him. Never had he seen her so blithe, so gay. She waved her hand back at the woodland spot.

"Good-by," she said.

Then they came upon the little town suddenly--so suddenly that both appeared bewildered. Only a hillock had separated them from the sight of it the night before. They looked and looked. It lay beneath an upward

sweep of land, in a cosy indenture of a great circle that swept far around and away, fringed with cocoanut trees. Small wisps or corkscrews of smoke defiled the blue of the sky; a wharf, with a steamer at the end, obtruded abruptly upon the curve of the shore. Mr. Heatherbloom regarded the boat--a link from Arcadia to the mundane world. He should have been glad but he didn't seem overwhelmed at the sight; he stood very still. He hardly felt her hand on his sleeve; the girl's eyes were full of sparkles.

"What luck!" he said at length, his voice low and somewhat more formal.

"Isn't it?" she answered. And drawing in her breath--"I can scarcely, believe it."

"It's there all right." He spoke slowly. "Come." And they went down. A colored worker in the fields stared at them, but Betty nodded gaily, and asked what town it was and the name of the island. He told them, growing wonderment in his gaze. How could they be here and not know that; where had they come from? To him they were as mysterious as two visitants from Mars. Regardless of the effect they produced on the dusky toiler they walked on. The island proved to be larger than they had thought and commercially important. They had, the day before, but crossed a neck of it.

Soon now they reached the verge of the town and stood on its main artery of traffic; the cobblestone pavement resounded with the rattling of

carts and rough native vehicles. At a curb stood a dilapidated public conveyance to which was attached a horse of harmoniously antique aspect. Miss Dalrymple got in and Mr. Heatherbloom took his place at her side.

"The cable office," said the girl briefly, whereupon a lad of mixed ancestry began to whack energetically the protuberant ribs of the drowsy steed. It woke him and they clattered down the narrow way. Mr. Heatherbloom leaned back, his gaze straight ahead, but Betty Dalrymple looked around with interest at the people of divers shades and hues, and, for the most part, in costumes of varying degrees of picturesque originality. After having narrowly escaped running over a small proportion of the juvenile colored population overflowing from odd little shops and houses, they reached the transportable zinc shed that served as a cable office. Here Miss Dalrymple indited rapidly a most voluminous message, paid the clerk in a businesslike manner, and, unmindful of his amazed expression as he read what she had written, tranquilly re-entered the carriage.

"Miss Van Rolsen will be relieved when she gets that," observed Mr. Heatherbloom mechanically. "It'll be a happy moment for her," meditatively.

"And won't she be gladder still when she sees us?" answered the girl gaily.

The use of the plural slightly disconcerted Mr. Heatherbloom for the

moment, but he dismissed it as an inadvertence. "Where now?" he asked.

"Where do you think?" with dancing eyes. "Shopping, of course. Fortunately I drew plenty of money before starting for California."

An hour or so later Mr. Heatherbloom sat with parcels in his arms and bundles galore around him. He accepted the situation gracefully; indeed, displayed an almost tender solicitude for those especial packages she herself handed him.

"What next?" She had at length exhausted the somewhat limited resources of the thoroughfare.

"Drive to the best hotel," was her command. She laughed at the picture he made, or at something in her own thoughts. She had unconsciously assumed toward him a manner in the least proprietary, but if he noticed he did not resent it. They went faster; her voice was a low thread of music running through an accompaniment of crashing dissonances. She wore a hat now--the best she could find. He considered it most "fetching", but her thrilling derision overwhelmed his expression of opinion. Though the way was so rough that they were occasionally thrown rather violently one against another, they arrived in high spirits at their destination, Mr. Heatherbloom having performed the commendable feat of preserving intact the parcels and bundles en route. In the "best hotel" they were given two rooms overlooking a courtyard redolent with orchids. The girl nodded a brief farewell to him from the threshold of her room.

"In about an hour, please, come back."

He did, brushed up and with shoes shined, as presentable as possible. She wore the same gown, but the sundry rents were mended and there had occurred other changes he could divine rather than define. He brought her information--not agreeable, he said. He was very sorry, but the next boat for the United States would not call at the island for a fortnight. He expected her to show dismay, but she received the news with commendable fortitude, if not resignation.

"I can cable aunt every day--so there can be no cause for worry--and she will only be the more pleased when we actually do arrive."

Again the plural! And once more that prophetic picture which included Mr. Heatherbloom within the pale of the venerable and austere Miss Van Rolsen's jubilation. He looked embarrassed but said nothing. During the hour of his exclusion from Miss Dalrymple's company he had sallied forth on a small but necessary financial errand of his own. Francois had placed in the basket of biscuits a revolver, and this latter Mr. Heatherbloom, rightfully construing it as his own personal property in lieu of the weapon his excellency had deprived him of, had exchanged for a bit of cardboard and a greenback. The last named, reinforced by the small amount Mr. Heatherbloom had left upon reaching the Nevski and of which the prince had not deprived him, would relieve his necessities for the moment. After that? Well, he would take up the problem presently; he

had no time for it now. This day, at least, should be consecrated to Betty Dalrymple.

He had an inkling that on the morrow he would see less of her; the girl's story would get around. The American consul would call and tender his services. The governor, too, Sir Charles Somebody, whose palatial residence looked down on the town from the side of the hill, might be expected to become officially and paternally interested. The little cable office, despite rules and regulations, could not long retain its prodigious secret; moreover Mr. Heatherbloom, in an absent-minded moment, had inscribed Miss Dalrymple's name on the register, or visitors' book. He recalled how the eyes of the old mammy, the proprietress, had fairly rolled with curiosity. No; he would not be permitted long to have her to himself, he ruminated; better make the most of his opportunity now. Besides, his present monetary position forbade his presence for more than a day or two at the "best hotel"; its rates were for him distinctly prohibitive. The exigencies of financial differences would soon separate them; she could draw on Miss Van Rolsen for thousands; he had but five dollars and twelve cents--or was it thirteen?--to his name.

He kept these reflections, however, to himself and continued to bask in the sunshine of a fool's paradise. They rode, walked and explored. They went to the fruit and the flower market. He bought her a great bunch of flowers, and she not only took it but wore it. For a time he stepped on air; his flowers constituted a fine splash of color on the girl's gown.

Her heart beat beneath them; the thought was as wine.

"Shall we?" They had partaken of tea (or nectar) in a small shop, and now she paused before that most modern manifestation of a restless civilization, a begilded, over-ornamented nickelodeon. "Think of finding one of them way off here! Just as at home!"

"More extraordinary your wanting to go in!" he laughed.

"Why not? It will be an experience."

They entered; the place was half filled and they took seats toward the back. There were films, and songs of the usual character; it was very gay. Gurgles of merriment from Creoles and darkies were heard on all sides. They, too, yielded freely, gladly to its infection. Happy Creoles! happy darkies! happy Betty Dalrymple and Horatio Heatherbloom--heiress and outcast! There is a democracy in laughter; yon darky smiled at Miss Dalrymple, while Mr. Heatherbloom laughed with her, with them, and the world. For was she not near, right there by his side? To Mr. Heatherbloom the tinsel palace had become a temple of felicity and wonder. Suddenly he started and his face changed.

"The Great Diamond Robbery," one of the films, was in progress, and there, depicted on the canvas, amid many figures, he saw himself, the most pronounced in that realistic group. And Betty Dalrymple saw the semblance of him, also, for she gave a slight gasp and sat more erect.

In the moving picture he was running away from a crowd.

"Shall--shall we go?" The face of the flesh-and-blood Mr. Heatherbloom was very red; he looked toward the door.

She did not answer; her eyes continued bent straight before her, and she saw the whole quick scene of the drama unfolded. Then the street became cleared, the fleeing figure had turned a corner as an automobile, not engaged for the performance, came around it and went by. A big car--her own--she was in it. She caught, like a flash on the canvas, a glimpse of herself looking around; then the scene came to an end. Betty Dalrymple laughed--a little hysterically.

"Oh," she said. "Oh, oh!"

He became, if possible, redder.

"Oh," she repeated. Then, "Why"--with eyes full of mingled tragedy and comedy--"did you not explain it all that day, when--"

Of course she knew even as she spoke why he could not, or would not.

"You had cause to think so many things," he murmured.

"But that! How--how strange! I saw you, and--"

He laughed. "And the manager told me I was a 'rotten bad' actor! Those were his words; not very elegant. But I believed him, until now--"

"Say something harsh and hard to me," she whispered, almost fiercely. "I deserve it."

The violet eyes were passionate. "Betty!" he exclaimed wonderingly.

"Do you call that harsh?" she demanded mockingly. "You--you should be cross with me--scold me--punish me--"

"Well," he said calmly, "you haven't believed that, lately, anyhow."

"No; I just set it aside as something incomprehensible, not to be thought of, or to be considered any more. I believed in you, with all my soul, since last night--a good deal before that, yes, yes!--in my innermost heart! You believe me, don't you?"

He answered, he hardly knew what. Some one was singing Put on Your Old Gray Bonnet. Her shoulder touched his arm and lingered there. "Oh, my dear!" she was saying to herself. The pianist banged; the vocalist bawled, while Mr. Heatherbloom sat in ecstasy.