

All is Fair in Love and War.

BY LEE RUFF.

I thought they were the two prettiest sisters I had ever seen. Beatrix was the taller and more striking-looking of the two, with her bright color and her hair, but I thought Julia, with her slighter, smaller figure and pale complexion, was quite as pretty.

And then carriage after carriage began to arrive. The voice of the pompous butler became hoarse from announcing each new arrival. The band scraped, groaned, and finally struck up a spirited waltz. In a moment I was claiming the first dance which Julia had promised me for dinner, and we were dancing as only youth, blest with a light heart, can.

Oh! what a ball it was! No ball will ever come near that one in my estimation. The brilliant lighting, the throng of people, all of whose faces were familiar to me, the floor, the band—Hornblow's band—Lady Merivale's exquisite, beaming face, as she received her guests, and gazed complacently at the perfection of all her arrangements, and, last not least, a pair of soft, sparkling eyes that met mine, and danced to the time of the little minuet. Dear me! I see it all as clearly as if it were before me at this instant. And Gresham! I see him as I saw him a few dances later, with his bright eager face, claiming his dance with Beatrix; and I see her, shy, radiant, playing with her fan.

What a ball it was to be sure! A few dances later, when all the guests had arrived, the somewhat exhausted Lady Merivale came into the tea-room, and allowed me to bring her a cup of coffee. As she sipped it, she said suddenly—

"You must think it very odd, Mr. Mostyn, that you should not meet any of our relations here to-night?"

It did not strike me as at all odd, but I said it did.

"It seems so unnatural, does it not?" she continued. "Of course I asked them all—the Chetwinds, the Brookes—but no, they could none of them come. They were all going to a ball at Mrs. Beresford Green's on the same night. It seems so odd they should be giving a ball the same night as ourselves. Anyhow it has not thinned our rooms," and she took another sip with a complacent air.

I thought as I led Lady Merivale back to the ball-room that she was the most wonderful woman I had ever met. If Gresham had done his best, she had done better. He had counted on her to do much, and she had done more.

And so the evening wore on, and I took Julia to supper, and secured a little table for two, and felt very happy, and took her back just as the band struck up afresh.

No. 15, a polka. I examined my shirt cuff with profound attention. What on earth was the name? Why could not I have written it legibly. Beatrix, of course!

I looked round the room. I glanced into the supper room. Beatrix was nowhere to be seen. I went through to the hall to the conservatory; I looked into the billiard-room, with its soft lights and quiet shadows, from which you could hardly distinguish the sounds of music and dancing. I saw the glimmer of a white dress in a far corner, and dimly distinguished the outline of two figures sitting in the shadow, the taller bending forward, and speaking in low fervent tones.

I stole away as quietly as I had come, and returned to the blaze and whirl and babel of tongues of the ball-room.

The last vase was beginning when Gresham and Beatrix returned to the ball-room. They began dancing, and methought a pleasant smile stole over Lady Merivale's face as she watched them, and she nodded slightly to her husband, who was standing by her. Sir Thomas stared, frowned, and smiled blandly. Lady Merivale was thinking of her daughter's partner, for whom she had an evident liking; Sir Thomas was thinking of that partner's income, which he liked still more.

And so the ball, Gresham's ball, came to an end at last, and we bade each other good morning, and slowly dispersed to our rooms. I followed Gresham into his, and stood gazing at him, as he slowly lit the candles on the dressing table.

He turned toward me at last, his face grave, but with a look in it which I shall never forget.

"Well?" he said, and held out his hand.

"Well?" I returned, and somehow we neither of us said anything more, only I took his hand and wrung it, and then bolted away into my own room.

The next day was the most confused, unreal day I ever passed. We breakfasted late, went out shooting, and I suppose we lunched and dined and talked afterwards, but I remember little of it, save when now and then I could talk with Julia, which made everything seem afterwards still more unreal.

Late in the evening, when the ladies had gone to bed, (that is, Tower, Butler, Sir Thomas, Gresham, and myself) all repaired to the billiard-room. Tower and Butler had found themselves very evenly matched, and having each won two games out of four were intent upon the conqueror. Sir Thomas marked with grim interest. After watching a few moments Gresham sauntered into the smoking-room, which adjoined the billiard-room, and lighting his pipe, installed himself comfortably in an easy chair by the fire. I followed his example, and we puffed away in silence for some moments.

At last Gresham spoke.

"Well, it's all settled. I had an interview with the Governor in the study this afternoon, and there seems to be no just cause or impediment, none at least that he is aware of."

"Of course not," I said.

"No of course in the matter," returned Gresham, "as I found out when I saw Lady Merivale in the conservatory after tea. Of course Beatrix had told her all about it, and she spoke so kindly that really my heart quite warmed to her, and I felt such a brute for having taken advantage of her, as it were, and played her and her old husband such a trick, that, hang it if I did not make a clean breast of the

whole concern. I could not stand her talking like that, and not knowing. She could not believe it at first, and then when she saw I was really in earnest she quite collapsed for a minute or two, and stood staring at me as if I were some wild animal. Well, I got her a camp-stool out of a corner, and sat her down on it, and then, without giving her time to get out a word, I told her how it was all on account of Beatrix (as it was, you know, in a way), and how I had tried in vain to find other opportunities of meeting her, and in short, I went on in a way I should never have thought myself capable of, and finished up with saying that, after all, it was an execrable folly, and I wished I could regret it as much as I felt I ought, but that was impossible.

"She is a little bit Irish, is Lady Merivale. You can see it. She looked puzzled when I had finished, as if she were not sure whether she ought to be angry or not, and then she said suddenly—

"I do think of all the men in the world Sir Thomas is the most provoking. He's enough to wear out the patience of a saint; and if I, who have had nine worn out these two-and-twenty years, don't know, I should like to know who does. If you had seen him, my dear (I knew she would not be very hard on me if she called me her dear), if you had seen him as I saw him this morning the letters came in, fussing and storming round the table, till Beatrix got so frightened she burnt her mouth with her tea, and could hardly eat anything for a week; if you had seen him that morning you would not have forgotten it in a hurry. And since that day," continued Lady Merivale emphatically, "when I told him point-blank that I would not write round to put everybody off, and I would give the ball, whether he liked it or not, since that day, every morning has his buttered toast been cut too thick or too thin, or had too much or too little on it, and his newspaper not ironed properly, or not folded right, or not put on the right side of his plate. I am not a saint, and Lady Merivale looked as if she meant it, 'no saint could have stood it.'"

She stopped for want of breath, and so I got in edgewise something about fearing after all she had gone through she would never forgive me.

"I think she began to see the whole thing in its ludicrous light, for she laughed, and said, 'Forgive you, my dear! Why, of course I do. Not that it was not the most shameful trick, but dear me! I never was so pleased myself in my life. The times I have wanted to give a ball; and I didn't do it badly, did I?'"

"First-rate," I said, enthusiastically. "And he," continued Lady Merivale appealingly, "now did he not look nice when he found he must go through with it, sitting at the head of his own table, and entertaining his guests like a sensible man? And so you were the person who did it? How we racked our brains to find out who it was. But don't," she added, in sudden alarm, "don't mention this to Sir Thomas for anything in the world. You are in favor at present, and it is most important you should remain so. He is perfectly rabid on the subject, and if he came to know, I would not answer for the consequences. You have made your confession to me, and let that suffice. And, besides all that, added her ladyship, mysteriously, "if once he found out from what quarter the letter came, I should never be able to keep him up to a ball every year in future, as I firmly intend to do."

"And then I told her of all the mistakes I had made, and we compared notes, and oh! how she laughed. What amused her most was Lady Di's note, which puzzled her dreadfully at the time, because Lady Di said that, not being much of a marksman, she was not bringing a gun, though she was bringing a footman if Lady Merivale pleased.

"Dear me!" and Gresham slowly knocked the ashes out of his pipe, "how strange it all seems. And I never thought of proposing when I came. I thought it would be long enough before I should dare to come to that. Yet, somehow or other, in the billiard-room I was in for it before I knew where I was. I have hardly been able to believe it all day. Ah, Mostyn! when I think what a lucky—"

His sentence was cut short by the entrance of Sir Thomas.

"They have actually begun another game," he said, pointing over his shoulder. "Tower won't own himself beaten. Well, they are welcome to play, but they may mark for themselves."

He lit a cigar as he spoke, and drew a chair to the fire.

"I wonder you young men are not tired," he said, "dancing till five o'clock this morning?"

"By jove, sir, we are tired," said Gresham. "Why, sir, if you will insist on having such polished floors, and such a band, dancing is irresistible—at least, to me it is."

Sir Thomas cleared his throat ominously.

"Gresham," he said, "I have great confidence in you, especially since you them—our interview this afternoon. Mostyn, too, I believe to be perfectly trustworthy."

I bowed, wondering what was coming next.

"Well, then, would you believe—would you believe, and Sir Thomas struck his thin hand on the table, his whole face working with suppressed anger, "that to that ball given in this house last night not one of the people were invited by myself. Not one I say!"

Gresham's stare of surprise was only equal to my look of horror, the sole difference being that the one was artificial, the other genuine.

"I say this in the strictest confidence," continued Sir Thomas, "and to no one else have I breathed a syllable on the subject. The first moment we became aware of the plot—for a plot it certainly was—was when a score of notes of acceptance arrived for the ball here on the 10th."

"A score! Nine-and-twenty!" murmured Gresham, under his breath.

"What was I to do?" said Sir Thomas, wrathfully. "What could I do to baffle the malice of the author of those letters, who evidently wished to put me in a ridiculous position? I would not gratify that person's malice! I would not appear in a ridiculous light! I immediately insisted on Lady Merivale's giving the ball."

I thought Gresham was going to

choke. However, he recovered himself sufficiently to say huskily, "The very best thing you could do, Mr. Mostyn, is to let me find out the name of the culprit. No means shall remain untried, no stone shall be left unturned until I have wreaked vengeance for the insult he has put upon me. I beg you will not mention this conversation to Lady Merivale," he added uneasily.

"We both bowed.

"It will not be difficult to trace the culprit; in fact, I think I have my eyes upon him now," continued Sir Thomas sternly, looking Gresham full in the face. "I can attribute it to nothing else than the malice of Mr. Tyrrell, who, though he might dare to invite all the neighborhood to my house, takes very good care to be engaged himself to Mrs. Beresford Green, not daring to meet my eye."

Sir Thomas's eye was still fixed so intently on Gresham's countenance that my heart failed me.

Gresham slowly uncrossed and recrossed his legs, and then said composedly, "He must have the effects of your just indignation."

"He shall feel them, too," continued Sir Thomas. "What makes me doubly sure it was he, the vulgar, underbred way in which some of these letters seem to have been written, the misdirections the vulgar jargon of Lady Di about her gun, and then the idea of asking you two, both within easy distance, to stay in the house. He thought you were both particularly disagreeable to me. That is why he did it. The pleasure you visit, Gresham, has given me I need say nothing, and Mostyn, too, has been most welcome."

Never had I heard such gracious words from the lips of Sir Thomas. Gresham was very uneasy, and said, "But how can you be sure Tyrrell—"

"I am perfectly sure," said Sir Thomas decidedly. "If he had not been the author of the whole thing himself, then the other person, who was, would have written to him among all the other neighbors, and I should have received a note from him to say he was engaged to Mrs. Beresford Green. I received no such note."

Sir Thomas got up, and repeating once more that he begged this conversation should not be mentioned to Lady Merivale, said he should go to bed. Gresham and I followed his example, and, leaving the billiard-players still intent on their game, tramped weary upstairs.

"I must drop a hint to Lady Merivale about Tyrrell," said Gresham thoughtfully; "but no, she'll put him off the scent somehow. I can trust her for that. 'Well, it is a wonderful world, and I am a lucky dog, and no mistake; and when Beatrix and I are married we shall have Julia staying in the house for weeks together, and you must come and keep her company, eh, Mostyn?'"

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