

Literature, &c.

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THE INTERCEPTED LETTERS.

A TALE OF THE BIVOUAC.

[Continued from our last.]

Thus we went on for some time. I sighing and she smiling; until at last I could no longer restrain my feelings, but fell at her feet and confessed my love. A trifling but significant circumstance impelled me to this decisive step. Going into the sitting-room one afternoon, I beheld her standing at the window, engaged in the childish occupation of breathing on the glass and scribbling with her finger upon the clouded surface. So absorbed was she in this pastime that I approached her closely before she seemed aware of my presence, and was able to read over her shoulder what she wrote upon the pane. To my inexpressible delight, I distinguished the initials of my name. Just then she turned her head, gave a faint coquettish scream, and hurriedly smeared the characters with her hand. My heart beat quick with joyful surprise, I was too agitated to speak, but, laying down the music I carried, I hurried to my apartment to meditate in solitude on what had passed. I beheld my dearest dreams approaching realization. I could no longer doubt that Jacqueline loved me; and although I was but her father's clerk, and he was reputed very wealthy, yet she was one of many children—my kind foster parent had promised to establish me in business—and, that done, there would be no very great impropriety in my offering myself as Herr Schraube's son-in-law. Upon the strength of these reflections, the next time I found myself alone with Jacqueline, I made my declaration. Thrice bitter was the disenchantment of that moment. Her first words swept away my visions of happiness as summarily as her fingers had effaced the letters upon the tarnished glass. But the glass remained uninjured, whilst my heart was bruised and almost broken by the shock it now sustained. My avowal of love was received with affected surprise, and with cold and cutting scorn. In an instant the castle of cards which for weeks and months I had built and with flowers of love and fancy, fell with a crash, and left no trace of its existence save the desolation its ruin caused. I had been the victim of an ardent coquette, whose coquetry, however, I now believe, sprang rather from utter want of thought than innate badness of heart. Her arch looks, her friendly words her wretched smiles, the very initials on the window, were so many lined twigs, set for a silly bird. Jacqueline had all the while been acting. But what was comedy to her was deep tragedy to me. I fled from her presence, my heart full, my cheeks burning, my pulse throbbing with indignation. And as I meditated in the silence of my chamber upon my own folly and her cruel coquetry, I felt my fond love turn into furious hate, and I vowed to be revenged. How, I knew not, but my will was so strong that I was certain of finding a way. Unfortunately, an opportunity speedily offered itself.

For some days I was stupefied by the severity of my disappointment. I went through my counting-house duties mechanically; wrote, moved, got up and lay down, with the dull regularity, almost with the unconsciousness, of an automaton. I avoided as much as possible the sight of Jacqueline, who, of course, took no notice of me, and studiously averted her eyes from me, as I thought, when we met at meals; perhaps some feeling of shame at the cruel part she had acted made her unwilling to encounter my gaze. My leisure time, although not very abundant, hung heavily upon my hands, now that I had no music to copy, no amorous sonnets to write. A fellow clerk, observing my dulness and melancholy, frequently urged me to accompany him to a kind of club, held at a *kneipe*, or wine house, where he was wont to pass his evenings. I suffered myself to be persuaded; and finding temporary oblivion of my misfortune in the fumes of canaster and Rhine wine, and in the boisterous mirth of a jovial noisy circle, I soon became a regular tavern haunter, and, in order to pass part of the night, as well as the evening, over the bottle, I procured a key to the house door, by means of which I was able to get in and out at hours that would have raised Herr Schraube's indignation to the very highest pitch had he been aware of the practice.

It chanced one night, or rather morning, as I ascended the steps of mingled wood and brick that led to the door of my employer's spacious but old-fashioned dwelling that I dropped my key, and owing to the extreme darkness, had difficulty in finding it. Whilst groping in the dusty corners of the stairs, my fingers suddenly encountered a small piece of paper protruding from a crack. I pulled it out; it was folded in the form of a note, and I took it up to my room. There was no address; but the contents did not leave me long in ignorance of the person whom the epistle was intended. The first line contained the name of Jacqueline, which was repeated, coupled with innumerable tender epithets, in various parts of the billet-doux. It was signed by a certain Theodore, and contained the usual protestations of unbounded love and eternal fidelity, which, from time immemorial, lovers have made to their mistresses. Whoever the writer, he had evidently found favor with Jacqueline; for again and again he repeated how happy

her love made him. Apparently, he was by no means so certain of the father's good-will, and had not yet ventured to approach him in the character of an aspirant to his daughter's hand; for he deplored the difficulties he foresaw in that quarter, and discussed the propriety of getting introduced to Herr Schraube, and seeking his consent. He begged Jacqueline to tell him when he might venture such a step. The letter did not refer to previous ones, but seemed written in consequence of a verbal understanding, and the writer reminded the witness of her promise to place her answers to his missives in the same place where she found these, twice in every week, upon appointed days which were named.

The perusal of this letter revived in my breast the desire of revenge which its possession gave me a prospect of gratifying. At that moment I would not have bartered the flimsy scrap of paper for the largest note ever issued from a bank. I did not, it is true, immediately see what way its discovery was to serve my purpose, but that, some how or other it would do so, I instinctively felt. After mature consideration, I quietly descended the stairs, and restored the letter to the hiding-place whence I had taken it. That afternoon it had disappeared, and on the following day, which was one of those appointed, I withdrew from the same crevice Jacqueline's perfumed and tender reply to her beloved Theodore. It breathed the warmest attachment. The coquette, who had trifled so cruelly with my feelings, was in her turn caught in Cupid's toils; and I might have deemed her sufficiently chastised for her treatment of me by the anxieties and difficulties with which her love was environed. She wrote to her admirer, that he must not yet think of speaking to her father, or even of getting introduced to him; for that in the first place, Herr Schraube held officers in peculiar aversion, and would not tolerate them in his house, and secondly, it had long been his intention to marry her to Gottlieb Löffel, who was rich, ugly and stupid, and whom she could not bear. She bid Theodore be patient, and of good courage; for that she would be true to him till death, and never marry the odious suitor they tried to force upon her, but purpose and incline, him favorably to the man of her choice. Whilst deploring old Schraube's cold-blooded and obstinate character, she still was sanguine that in the main he desired her happiness, and would not destroy it forever by uniting her to a man she detested, and by severing her from him with whom alone would life be worth having, from her first and only love, her dearest Theodore, &c. &c. And so forth, with renewed vows of unflinching affection. This was a highly important letter, as letting me further into the secrets of the lovers. So the lucky Theodore, who had so fascinated Jacqueline, was an officer. That the old gentleman had military men, I was already aware; and it was no news to me that his daughter entertained a similar feeling towards the booby Löffel. I had long since discovered this, although fear of my father, induced Jacqueline to treat her unwelcome suitor with much more urbanity and consideration than she would otherwise have shown him.

The next day the lady's letter, which I carefully put back in the nook of the steps, was gone, and the following Saturday brought another tender epistle from the gentle Theodore, who this time, however, was anything but gentle; for he vowed implacable hatred to his obnoxious rival, and he devoted him to destruction if he persisted in his persecution of Jacqueline. Then there were fresh protestations of love, eternal fidelity and the like, but nothing new of great importance. The correspondence continued in pretty much the same strain for several weeks, during which I regularly read the letters, and returned them to the clandestine post office. At last I grew weary of the thing, and thought of putting a stop to it, but could not hit upon a way of doing so, and at the same time of sufficiently revenging myself, unless by a communication to Herr Schraube, which plan did not altogether satisfy me. Whilst I thus hesitated, Jacqueline, in one of her letters, after detailing for her lover's amusement, some awkward absurdities of which Löffel had been guilty, made mention of me.

'I never told you,' she wrote, of the presumption of one of my father's clerks; a raw-boned monster, with a face like a Calmuck, who, because he writes bad verses, and is here as a sort of gentleman volunteer, thought himself permitted to make me, his master's daughter, the object of his particular regards. I must confess that when I perceived him smitten, I was wicked enough to amuse myself a little at his expense, occasionally bestowing a word or smile which raised him to the seventh heaven, and were sure to produce, within the twenty-four hours, a string of limping couplets intended to praise my beauty and express his adoration, but, in reality, as deficient in meaning as they were faulty in metre. At last, one day, towards the commencement of my acquaintance with you, dearest Theodore, he detected me childishly engaged in writing your beloved initials in my breath upon the window. His initials happen to be the same as yours, (thank Heaven, it is the only point of resemblance between you,) and it afterwards occurred to me he was perhaps misled by the coincidence. In no other way, at least, could I explain the fellow's assurance, when, two days afterwards, he plumped himself down upon his knees, and, sighing like the bellows of a forge, declared himself determined to adore me to the last day of his life, or some still more remote period. You may imagine my answer. I promise you he left off pestering me with bad rhymes, and from that day

has scarcely dared raise his eyes higher than my shoe-tie.'

This last assertion was false. My love and rejection were no cause for shame, but she might well blush for her coquetry, of which I could not acquit her even now the incident of the window was explained. Her injurious and satirical observations deeply wounded my self-love. I read and re-read the offensive paragraph, till every syllable was imprinted on my memory. Each fresh perusal increased my anger; and at last, my invention stimulated by fury, I devised a scheme which would afford me I was sure ample scope for vengeance on Jacqueline and her minion. A very skilful penman, I possessed great facility in imitating all manner of writing, and had often idly exercised myself in that dangerous art. I was quite sure that with a model beside me, I should not have the slightest difficulty in counterfeiting the handwriting both of Jacqueline and Theodore; who, moreover unsuspecting of deceit, would be unlikely to notice any slight differences. I resolved in future to carry on their correspondence myself, suppressing the real letters, and substituting false ones of a tenor conformable to my object. I calculated on thus obtaining both amusement and revenge, and enchanted by the ingenuity of my base project, I at once proceeded to its execution. It was fully successful, but the consequences were terrible, far exceeding anything I had anticipated.

I could not restrain an exclamation of indignation and disgust at the disclosure of this vindictive and abominable scheme. Heinzl—who told his tale, I must do him the justice to say, not vauntingly, but rather in a tone of humility and shame which I have perhaps hardly rendered in committing the narrative to paper—Heinzl easily conjectured the feeling that prompted my indignant gesture and inarticulate ejaculation. He looked at me timidly and deprecatingly.

I was a fiend, sir—a devil; deserved hanging or worse. My only excuse, a very poor one, is he violent jealousy, the mad anger that possessed me—the profound conviction that Jacqueline had intentionally trifled with my heart's best feelings. Upon this conviction I blooded till my blood turned to gall, and every kind of revenge, however criminal appeared justifiable.

He paused, leaned his head mournfully upon his hand, and seemed indisposed to proceed.

'It is not for me to judge you, Heinzl,' said I. 'There is One above us all who will do that, and to whom penitence is an acceptable offering. Let me hear the end of your story.'

'You shall sir. You are the first to whom I ever told it, and I scarcely know how I came to this confession. But it does me good to unburden my conscience, though my cheek burns as I avow my infamy.'

His voice faltered, and again he was silent. Respecting the unaffected emotion of the repentant sinner, I did not again urge him to proceed; but presently he recommenced, of his own accord, in a sad but steady voice, as if he had made up his mind to drink to the dregs the self-prescribed cup of humiliation.

According to my determination, I kept back Jacqueline's next letter, and replaced it by one of my own, whose writing the most expert judge would have difficulty in distinguishing from hers. In this supposititious epistle I gave Theodore a small ray of hope. The father, Jacqueline wrote, (or rather I wrote it for her,) was kinder to her than formerly, and had almost ceased to speak of her union with Löffel. Her hopes revived, and she thought things might still go happily, and Theodore become her husband. To obviate all probability of my manoeuvres being discovered, I strictly enjoined the favored officer to abstain in future from speaking to her (as I knew from previous letters he was in the habit of doing) on the promenade, or in other public places. I gave as a reason, that these interviews, although brief and guarded, had occasioned gossip, and that, should they come to her father's ears, they would materially impede, perhaps altogether prevent, the success of her efforts to get rid of Löffel. Her lover was to be kept informed of the progress she made in bringing Herr Schraube to her views, and to receive instant intimation when the propitious moment arrived for presenting himself in the character of a suitor. So far so good. This letter elicited a joyful answer from Theodore, who swore by all that was sacred to be quiet, and take patience, and wait her instructions. I suppressed this, replacing it by one conformable to my arrangements. And now, in several following letters, I encouraged the officer, gradually raising his hopes higher and higher. At last I wrote to him that the day approached when he need no longer sigh in secret, but declare his love before the whole world and especially before the hitherto intractable old merchant. His replies expressed unbounded delight and happiness and eternal gratitude to the constant mistress who thus ably surmounted difficulties. But in the mean while things progressed precisely in the contrary direction. Herr Schraube, more than ever prepossessed in favor of Löffel's well-stored coffers, was deaf to his daughter's arguments, and insisted upon her marrying him. In one of Jacqueline's letters, kept back by me, she mournfully informed her lover of her father's irrevocable determination, adding that she would only yield to downright force, and would never cease to cherish in her heart the ill-fated love she had vowed to her Theodore. Then and upon this, in my vindictive wickedness, I prided myself as a masterly stratagem—I caused the correspondence on

the part of the officer to become gradually colder and more constrained, until at last his letters assumed a tone of ill-concealed indifference, and finally, some weeks before the day appointed for the wedding, ceased altogether. Of course I never allowed him to get possession of the poor girl's mournful and heart broken replies, wherein she at last declared that, since Theodore deserted her, she would sacrifice herself like a lamb, obey her father, and marry Löffel. Life, she said had no longer any charm for her, her hopes deceived, her affections blighted, the man she had so dearly loved faithless to his vows, she abandoned the idea of happiness in this world and resigned herself to the lot imposed by a parent's will. Instead of these notes of lamentation, I sent to Theodore words of love and hope, and anticipations of approaching happiness. And at last, to cut short this long and shameful story, I wrote a concluding letter in Jacqueline's name desiring him to present himself on the following Sunday at her father's house, and demand her hand in marriage. She had smoothed all difficulties, the unacceptable wooer had been dismissed, her father had relented, and was disposed to give the officer a favourable reception. Theodore's reply was incoherent with joy. But the Sunday, as I well knew, was the day fixed for Jacqueline's marriage with Gottlieb Löffel. The climax approached, and, like a villain as I was, I gloated in anticipation over my long-prepared revenge. The day came; the house was decorated, the guests appeared. The bride's eyes were red with weeping, her face was as white as her dress; repugnance and despair were written upon her features. The priest arrived, the ceremony was performed, the tears coursing the while over Jacqueline's wan face; when, just at its close, the jingling of spurs was heard upon the stairs and Theodore, in the full dress uniform of a Prussian officer, his face beaming with hope and love, entered the apartment. The bride fell senseless to the ground; the officer upon learning what had just taken place, turned as pale as his unhappy mistress, and rushed down stairs. Before Jacqueline regained consciousness, I had thrown into the post-office a packet to her address, containing the intercepted letters. It was my wedding present to the wife of Gottlieb Löffel.

Since the interruption above recorded, I had listened in silence, with strong but painful interest, to Heinzl's details of his odious treachery. But the climax of his cruel revenge came upon me unexpected. A hasty word escaped me, and I voluntarily sprang to my feet.

'I deserve your contempt and anger, sir,' said Heinzl 'but, believe me, I have already been severely punished, although not to the extent I merit. Not one happy hour have I had since that day—no moment of Oblivion, save what was procured me by this' (he held up his dram bottle.) 'I am haunted by a spectre that leaves me no rest. Did I not fear judgement there, and he pointed upwards. 'I would soon leave the world—blow out my brains with my carbine, or throw myself to-morrow upon the bayonets of a Carlist battalion. But would such a death atone for my crime? Surely not, with the blood of that innocent girl on my head. No, I must live and suffer, for I am not fit to die.'

'How! her blood?' I exclaimed.

'Yes, sir, as you shall hear. Jacqueline's fainting fit was succeeded by hysterical paroxysms, and it was necessary to put her to bed and send for a physician. He ordered great care and repose, for he feared a brain fever. Her mother watched by her that night, but towards daybreak, retired to repose, leaving her in charge of a servant. I heard that she was ill, but so obdurate was my heart rendered by the vindictive feelings possessing it, that I rejoiced at the misery and suffering I had occasioned her. Early the next morning I was entering the counting-house when I met the postman with letters for the family; and I chuckled as I perceived amongst them the packet containing the correspondence between Jacqueline and Theodore. I betook myself to my desk, next to a window that looked into the street, and commenced my usual quill-driving labors, pursuing them mechanically, whilst my mind dwelt upon Jacqueline's despairing regret on perceiving the packet, conjectured her exclamations of grief and indignation when she discovered the bitter deception, her vain endeavors to guess its author. Nearly half an hour passed in this manner, when a sudden and momentary shade was cast upon my paper by an object passing before the window. Almost at the same instant I heard a heavy thump upon the pavement, and then a chorus of screams from the upper windows of the house. Throwing up the one near which I sat, I beheld, not six feet below me, the body of a woman attired in a loose wrapper. She had fallen with her face to the ground, and concealed by her hair; but my mind misgave me who it was. I sprang into the street just as passer-by raised the body, and disclosed the features of Jacqueline. They were livid and blood-streaked. She had received fatal injury, and survived but a few moments.'

A servant, it appeared, during Madame Schraube's absence, had delivered my letter, to Jacqueline, who after glancing at the address, of which the hand writing was unknown to her, (I had taken good care to disguise it,) laid the packet beside her with an indifferent air. A short time afterwards a movement of curiosity or caprice made her take it up and break the seal. The servant attending her saw her glance with surprise at the letters it enclosed, and then begin to read