LOVE AMONG THE RUINS

By ROSEMARY REES

"Oh heart! oh blood that freezes, blood that burns!
Earth's returns
For whole centuries of folly, noise and sin!
Shut them in
With their triumphs and their glories and the rest!
Love is best.

Robert Browning.

WHEN Miss Nancy Mackintosh, leading lady of "The Hypocrite" Touring Company, paid her penny for admission to the old keep of Dudley Castle and ascending the spiral staircase came out upon the sun-warmed battlements, she found herself to her own infinite relief, in sole possession of the ruin.

Except in the theatre Miss Mackintosh detested crowds; and on this glorious September morning—a morning of warm sunshine, blue sky and big moving clouds—with the whole wide country spread out below the Castle Hill, she could forget the discomforts of a tour in the heart of the Black Country, forget her dingy little lodgings in a back street of the town, and be conscious only of the glory of the view before her. She had turned her back upon the great plain, studded with towering chimneys and hazy with smoke, stretching from Wolverhampton to Birmingham, and was gazing out over the tree-tops below the keep, beyond the hillside where the smoke wreaths floated above the clustered roofs of Dudley town, until at last far in the distance her eyes rested upon the line of the Malvern Hills.

In the air was the fresh scent of the first fallen autumn leaves; the song of a bird came clear to her; the sound of a shunting engine at the station; a horse trotting on the Birmingham road. She seemed to be above the world, alone with the sunshine, the wind, the green of the tree-tops and the distant hills. With a little sigh of contentment she opened the book she had brought with her, and sitting upon the wooden plank, with her back against the warm stonework, began to read.

A step sounded on the spiral stair; someone was evidently ascending. Miss Mackintosh felt slightly injured, it seemed that the joy of her solitude upon the ruin was destined to be short-lived. She kept her eyes upon her book until a figure emerged into the sunlight and then she looked up.

A wave of colour swept over her pretty pale face but she did not rise. She sat perfectly still regarding in silence a clean-shaven, irregular-featured young man, who clad in a rough tweed suit and overcoat, stood before her murmuring something indicative of greeting. His cap was in his hand, and his eyes which were remarkable for nothing beyond their honest kindliness and a certain shrewd humour, beamed down upon her. But Miss Mackintosh did not beam in return; it would be nearer to the truth to relate that she glared.

"So it's you," she remarked at last; "you've followed me here."

"Not at all," he rejoined easily; "I came up to look at the view."

"I am not included in the view," she retorted icily, returning to her book.

"My dear Nancy—"

"I am not your dear Nancy, Mr. Brayshaw."

The light in the man's eyes changed and softened suddenly. "Yes, you are dear," he answered quietly; "always—my dear Nancy."

The girl closed her book with a little exasperated movement.

"Just now you said you came up to look at the view."

"Perhaps that wasn't altogether the truth."

"Why have you come to Dudley?"

"Well, the fact is I was out trying the new car early this morning. I told you I'd bought a 40 h.p. Napier, didn't I? I've never driven a Napier before, and we had one or two trifling disagreements to start with. She's a lady whose opinions one has to treat with respect; and when she finally settled down and headed straight for Dudley, I thought it wiser not to argue and—well here I am."

"And has the Napier decided on the date of her return to London?"

"I don't think she's quite made up her mind yet. It depends on circumstances."

"Meaning me?" Miss Mackintosh looked up at him from beneath the brim of her shady hat. Her clear brown eyes under their pretty brows gazed at him steadily. "In other words you knew that I was playing in Dudley this week, and in spite of what I told you only ten days ago, and against my wishes, you followed me here."

"What was it you told me ten days ago? My memory's shocking."

"So it appears," returned Miss Mackintosh, opening her book once more.

Brayshaw seated himself beside her. "You don't mind my sitting down to—to look at the view do you?"

There was no reply. Brayshaw watched her for a moment and then putting out one brown hand covered the open page. "Nancy," he said; "don't be unkind. I want to go over the old ground once more."

But the girl had risen. She was trembling a little.

"I think it is you who are unkind," she replied quickly; "you've had my answer. I won't give up the stage to marry you. Now would you mind going and leaving me in peace."

"But I want to look at the view," he objected.

"Very well then," returned the girl; "there is the view. Good-bye." She walked along the battlements to the head of the stairway and then turned uncertainly.

"You promise not to follow me?" she asked.

Brayshaw nodded. "I promise," he answered. His eyes were fixed on her as she stood for a moment looking back at him, her brows drawn together slightly with a half-puzzled expression; her slight figure in its blue frock outlined against the grey stone. There was a little pause.

"Good-bye then," she said at last.

"Good-bye," returned Brayshaw.

The puzzled look had deepened in the girl's eyes. She hesitated for a moment longer as though expecting him to speak; then the expression of her face changing to one which suggested some slight indignation, she abruptly turned and made her way down the winding staircase.

Left to himself in the sunshine Brayshaw appeared anything but a forsaken and disconsolate lover. He picked up a guide book which Miss Mackintosh in her flight had left behind and appeared to derive much interest and amusement from its perusal. Indeed so absorbed was he a few minutes later that he seemed oblivious to the sound of returning foo'steps. When he did at last raise his eyes it was to discover that Miss Nancy Mackintosh was standing upon the battlement, regarding him fixedly.

"So you've come back," he remarked; rising with all the appearance of one greatly astonished.

"How much did you give that child to lock the door and go away" queried Nancy in return.

"What child?"

"Don't pretend you don't know. The child who sat at the door to take the pennies. I've banged and banged until I've bruised my hands all over." She put out her hands with a little unconscious gesture and the man promptly took possession of them.

"Don't be so hateful Jim—Mr. Brayshaw," she said, drawing away from him quickly.

"I only wanted to look at the bruises," he answered with untruthful readiness.

"Why did you send the child away and let her lock the door?"

"I didn't send her away. She went. I'll tell you exactly what happened. When I applied for admission she remarked that it was close upon her dinner time, and explained that the tower was usually locked up during the hour necessary for her partaking of that meal. I've heard of nothing but this view since I reached Dudley and thought an hour spent up here contemplating it would do me good and——"

"And you had also heard from the child that I had received permission to read up here during her absence."

"I believe she did mention something about a young lady who was already in possession, but I didn't pay much attention to her. I was thinking of something else at the moment."

"The view?"

"Probably."

Miss Mackintosh turned away. She had no intention of smiling—openly at any rate.

"I'm not going to stay here," she remarked at last.

"Suppose we call for help?" he suggested. "There's sure to be someone prowling round somewhere with a ladder. If we jumped we might manage to swing ourselves down by the branches of the trees. I'm afraid though they might call that wilfully injuring the shrubs and trees 'which' the guide-book says 'no respectable right-minded person would ever think of doing.' Are you a respectable right-minded person Nancy?"

Miss Mackintosh's shoulder moved slightly, but when she turned to him a moment later her face was quite grave.

"Is there no way of getting out of this tower until that child returns?" she asked.

"None at all, I believe," he answered cheerfully.

"Then I shall go on with my book." She seated herself once more and began to read.

Brayshaw sitting beside her studied the guide-book aloud. "The erection of the Castle is ascribed to Dud, Dudo or Dodo, a Saxon lord about the year 700. I hope you've read all this Nancy. It's very improving. 'The Eastern Moat Terrace was at one time a very favourite meeting place for young people desirous of indulging in merry games.'"

Miss Mackintosh continued her book in silence.

"'The view from the battlements on a clear day is extremely grand.'" Brayshaw looked up. "It's clouding over. I believe the rain isn't far off."

Still no reply from Miss Mackintosh. A long silence and then the man suddenly put out his hand, took Nancy's book and closed it.

"Nancy," he said; "I didn't come here to sit and watch you read. I've only half an hour more before that child comes back and I want to ask you something."

The girl gave a quick glance into his face and then looked away. She made no attempt to regain her book, and he laid it down beside him.

"You're still convinced that you wouldn't be happy if you gave up the stage?"

"Haven't I told you that already?"

"Then marry me and continue with your work. Oh I should hate your going on with it, of course, but if it makes you happier——"

"That wouldn't make me happier," returned the girl. "If I married you I should have to give it up. I know myself well enough to realise that I couldn't do both. I couldn't be a success as a wife and a success as an actress at the same time."

"Then why not make up your mind to be the former. You've been on the stage now for six years and you've reached the Theatre Royal, Dudley." He waved his hand to where the slate roof of the pretty red brick theatre showed among the trees down by the station.

"That is unkind," said the girl.

"No," he answered, "it isn't meant unkindly. I don't want to disparage the company you're with now, nor the theatre. I only mean this isn't the goal for which you're striving. In the future you hope to become a recognised London 'star.' Well, if that's your idea of happiness marry me. You can have a London theatre and 'star' yourself."

The girl turned to him with a little flash in her brown eyes. "You know that I wouldn't buy a position," she said. "I'll work my way up, and if I get to the top I'll do it on my own merits as an actress. Not because I happen to have married a man with money."

"Then say you'll marry me and give it all up."

"I've answered that before."

"Yes, but not in a satisfactory way. At least not satisfactory to me. Answer it differently this time dear."

The girl shook her head in silence and Brayshaw went on: "What guarantee have you that you will ever succeed?"

"None."

"You may have talent. I believe you have, but after six years on the stage you know as well, better, than I do—that talent doesn't necessarily ensure success. How can you tell whether you are to be one of the lucky ones?"

"I can't tell—yet," answered the girl; "but I'm willing to work on for a few years longer to find out."

"Willing to work on, wasting all your youth and freshness in this sort of drudgery; week after week in dreary lodgings, weeks of loneliness in smoky manufacturing towns with uncongenial surroundings and often uncongenial work—playing parts you hate. I've your own word for it, you've told me of it all yourself. Wasting the best part of your life for what—for the chance of success which after all may never come to you."

"You're not very cheering," said the girl. She tried to smile but a little wistful look had crept into her eyes.

"Do you think it makes me feel cheerful to know that while I've more money than I know what to do with, I can't make one of those weeks pleasanter or brighter for you?"

"At least you've made one morning brighter," she said smiling round at him rather wickedly; "you've treated me to an hour's delightfully encouraging conversation with regard to my future, on the battlements here."

The man smiled in spite of himself. "Yes, that is something," he agreed.

"But you evidently haven't a very high opinion of my powers. You seem to have made up your mind that I am to fail."

"No," he admitted honestly. "I haven't. I believe that given a fair chance you'll succeed in the end. But it's what lies between you and success that I hate to think of. The heart-breaking disappointments and the struggle of it all. Do you think that knowing you for all these years as I have done I don't understand how you suffer. It makes me——" He broke off abruptly, and after a moment went on, trying to speak more coolly. "And when you've gained the position that you want, do you think that the life will satisfy you if you're alone. You're too much woman Nancy to find your work and the excitement and the flattery surrounding it enough to fill