

On a False Scent.

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The winter evening had closed in rapidly, and outside the weather was clear, crisp and cold. In the drawing-room at Te Nui the large back log burnt bravely, with the cheering crackle and sputter of a squadron on the firing line; the blinds had not yet been drawn, for the housemaid had not as yet appeared to light the lamp, and but for the blaze from the fire the room would have been in darkness.

A tall man, booted and bearded and burned to a brick, lay lazily stretched out in a big, soft-cushioned armchair by the fire. He was looking curiously at the broad, symmetrical back of a man seated at the farther end of the room, at a piano, playing softly a seductive bass movement reminiscent of "The old folks at home." The player also was breeched, booted, and spurred. His hands gleamed snow-white in the sparkle of the huge rata log and the end of his curly moustache silhouetted a giant shadow on the white wall above the piano. There was witchery in the magic of his fingers, for, though but an indifferent instrumentalist, there was soul in Probyne's music; and the plaintive melody, pronounced yet subdued in the bass where the air rolled out, stirred his listeners more than a little.

"Probyne," suddenly said the third man in the room, "for heaven's sake sing us a hunting song. You will give me the blue-devils if you go on with that!"

The speaker sat right back from the fire, in the darkest corner. He was glad of it, for Acland Bourke had tears in his eyes, that he would not have had his rival see for anything.

"Right you are, ord man!" replied the hunter-poet of New Zealand. "Here's one the idea of which I got from dear old Harry Crawford."

A few brilliant arpeggios, a carefully-modulated change of key, and the player trolled out his hunting song in a rich, merry, jovial voice:

When the air is keen and bracing,
And the dappled darlings racing
To the front, across the meadows, going strong;
Ride your line, and ride to keep it,
Never mind the wire, leap it,
Send 'em along, my boys! Send 'em along!
Send 'em along through field and furrow,
Over bush, and burn, and burrow;
Such rare moments seldom last for very long;
With your horses pulling double,
Banish thoughts of grief or trouble,
Send 'em along, boys! Send 'em along!
Send 'em along!

"Yoicks! Whoop—whoop! Worry! Worry! Worry! Worry!" yelled the bearded listener in the chair, leaping to his feet as if electrified.

"Send 'em along! Tally-ho! Gone away! Gone away! Gone away! Go—ne away!" screamed Bourke hysterically from his dark corner.

While the second verse was in progress three ladies in riding habits walked quickly on to the verandah and looked in through the big French window.

"Mr. Probyne at the piano, Jim, and Mr. Bourke," said Nita Muirhead, explaining the situation to her two companions.

"Full of whisky, I suppose!" sneered beautiful Mrs. Guise with ill-disguised contempt.

"Oh, no! How can you say so?" answered Eleanor D'Aubigny. "Why, Mr. Probyne is playing faultlessly."

"I was not referring to him," said Mrs. Guise, with a marked inflection on the last pronoun.

"Oh!" said Nita Muirhead.

Miss D'Aubigny remained silent.

The man at the piano commenced a third verse:

There's a babbling penny-a-liner
Who thinks no girl's deviner
Than a charming little Geisha at Hong-kong;
If you know of other fairies
Then your duty to him there is
To send 'em along, my boys! Send 'em along!
Send 'em along, he'll stand the racket,
Silken hose or sealskin jacket,
Gloves of Normandy or bracelet of Shillong;
Life is short, and Time is fleeting,
Here's a very merry meeting,
Oh! send 'em along, boys! Send 'em along!
Send 'em along!

"Send 'em along! Send 'em along!" shouted the other two men with infinite gusto.

The handsome widow outside said: "Hum! How elevating! Mr. Probyne is in a remarkably liberal frame of mind; let us effect a climax!"

She quickly raised the latch and stepped into the room, followed by her two companions.

"We have returned!" she said sweetly, and swept the three men a mocking curtsey.

"Great Scott!" said Jim Lennox, the bearded man, springing from his chair.

"To help us pass the desert!" said Probyne, rising quickly and shaking hands with the ladies. "The house was empty, but for Jim, when Bourke and I rode over!" He dwelt a long moment over Eleanor D'Aubigny's hand.

"We have had a glorious run!" said Nita Muirhead. "Dad and mother will be back soon; we passed the drag a couple of miles back." She looked straight at Bourke but he had no eyes for anyone but Eleanor D'Aubigny.

"Well?" said Jim Lennox to Mrs. Guise.

"Well?" pouted the young widow, tantalisingly.

"What is it now?" asked Lennox.

"What? Well, let me think! I want some gloves from Normandy, a sealskin jacket, and a bracelet—from—er—Hongkong!" said Mrs. Guise.

There was general laughter.

"Nothing else!" asked Lennox pointedly.

"What a fine time you men have when we're not with you!" said Mrs. Guise.

"Think so," asked Lennox. "We have to console ourselves somehow!"

"Poor men!" sighed little Nita. "How awfully bored you must get!"

More laughter followed. Then the general barking of the dogs at their kennels announced the return of the Muirhead drag.

"Here comes mother," said Nita. "I am going to help her in. Coming, Jessie" to Mrs. Guise (nee Jessie Muirhead).

"No. Take Eleanor. I want to tell Jim all about the run."

She had learnt much of the world since her marriage, four years ago, and during two years of widowhood she had become clever. She knew that Probyne would follow wherever Eleanor D'Aubigny went; Bourke would follow, too, and she would be alone with Jim Lennox. Everything happened as she anticipated—she was left alone with Jim Lennox.

Matchless Jim Lennox was a cousin three times removed to the Muirhead girls. He had been overseer, under Muirhead, senior, at Te Nui, for nearly six years. An Australian by birth, of good Scotch parentage, Jim Lennox had passed the whole of 20 years in Queensland on his father's station. There he learned everything that could be learned about stock, and there he became the finest rider in Australia. There had never been a horse foaled that could throw him, nor had the man been born who could teach him anything about riding. When his father died, brokenhearted, ruined by drought and rabbit pest, Jim Lennox gathered his few belongings together and joined his relations in New Zealand. Muirhead, senior, soon found how useful a man he had in his young relative, and Jim Lennox remained on as overseer at a salary of £120 a year and his keep. This, together with the £80 a year he got from his father's estate, kept him handsomely as a bachelor. Jessie Muirhead had fallen in love with Jim Lennox at first sight and though she pursued him for two years with unflagging energy, Jim Lennox never proposed. He flirted with her, but there he stopped. When Dick Guise, an Englishman, wealthy and handsome, came out to New Zealand for his health, Jessie Muirhead was introduced to him in the hunting field, and within two months of the introduction had become Mrs. Richard Guise. Two years afterwards her husband died of consumption, and Mrs. Guise found herself sole successor under his will to the Guise estates in Kent, which produced a rent roll of over £4000 a year.

As a girl Jessie Muirhead had been a scrawny, freckled, and badly-groomed hobbledehoy, whom Jim Lennox could never look at with the eye of admiration. But matrimony and travel had made a most marvellous difference. Mrs. Guise returned to Te Nui after the death of her husband, a tall, svelte woman, with a beautiful figure, a halo of auburn hair, and a complexion like fresh cream and cher-

ries. Her 24 years sat lightly on her, and only the plain gold ring on her marriage finger showed that she was anything more than a magnificent, full-blooded girl of 17. She set about the captivation of her old flame with a determination that pointed to almost certain reward.

After Nita Muirhead, Miss D'Aubigny, Probyne, and Bourke had left the room, the lovely widow turned to Lennox, who was once more ensconced in the big arm-chair.

"Well?" she queried.

"Well?" answered Lennox gazing abstractedly into the fire.

"A penny for your thoughts!" she said, going quickly over to the arm-chair, and taking a seat on one of its padded arms.

"Not for sale!" answered Lennox, recovering himself. "How did you enjoy the run?"

"Immensely! Everybody was there!"

"Ah! Create a sensation?"

"H'm—yes; I think so!"—dubiously.

"I felt sure of it. How did Cullen carry you?"

"Beautifully! Oh, Jim, what a magnificent hunter you have made out of him!" she gushed.

"Did you go straight?" he asked, again abstractedly.

"As the crow flies! Only Pelly, Jim Stanway, Jack Rayneford, and a man from Hawke's Bay—Medicis, I think his name is—saw it out with me."

"I knew you would get thereabouts. Er—where did Nita finish?" There was a masterly indifference in the tone.

"Oh, with the field. Nelly D'Aubigny craned at the first fence and then took to the roads. Oh, Jim, how can I thank you enough for finding me such a perfect hunter?" Her hand strayed to the brown curls over his forehead, which she toyed with lovingly. His face was curiously flushed. Under the tan of 20 years a smouldering fire was burning. He seemed uncomfortable, almost shrinking from her touch.

"Oh, nothing to worry about. Er—what horse did Nita ride? I was away with the sheep before you started this morning."

"Nita rode Dolly Mops, Jean's old hunter, and he went fairly well, I think." She rolled a curl round her finger, and patted it on his forehead.

"And Miss D'Aubigny?" he falteringly asked.

"She rode the brown steeplechaser—that old Grand National winner you men always make such a fuss about. He's clean gone in front. He got over the first fence with a terrible scramble; then he pecked, and very nearly stood on his head. I thought he was going to turn a somersault—"

"Good heavens!" It was almost a groan, with a sting of pain in it there was no mistaking. Lennox had betrayed his concern for fair Eleanor D'Aubigny. For one moment the widow's heart stood still.

"It would have been an awful thing if Miss D'Aubigny had met with an accident on a Te Nui hunter! Who on earth put her up on Doubloon? They might have provided a safer conveyance for our visitor. But I don't think old Dub so unsafe after all. He's as clever as a cat; he has never fallen with me." His tone was so natural that she was almost deceived by it.

"With you? Oh, you could ride a clothes-horse over fences without coming to grief! But Nelly has no hands. She thinks reins were made to hang on by, and she sits on her saddle like a monkey sticking to a dog in a circus steeplechase—"

"I will see that Miss D'Aubigny has a safer mount next time. What a pity it is that all women cannot ride like you." He looked up smilingly into her face. Her dashing horse-womanhood always appealed to him. She bent fondly over him.

"I can only ride horses that have been 'made' by you, Jim."

Bourke's voice was heard outside on the verandah.

"Come through the window, Miss D'Aubigny; it is much shorter."

The pretty widow discreetly left her seat on the arm of Lennox's chair, and sat herself down in the dark corner formerly occupied by Bourke. The window opened, and Eleanor D'Aubigny entered, shepherded by Bourke and Probyne.

"We are off to dress for dinner, Lennox," said Probyne. "Muirhead has put us up in the barracks. Miss D'Aubigny, I shall count the moments until we meet again."

"You gentlemen will spoil Nelly," said Mrs. Guise. "Flattery is so insincere."

"I am sure no flattery would ever affect Miss D'Aubigny," said Bourke eagerly. "She is too much above the seductive powers of compliment."

"If you don't go at once, Mr. Bourke, you will keep us all waiting for dinner," said Miss D'Aubigny archly. "Then you will learn how cross I can be, for really I am dreadfully hungry."

Bourke hurried from the room without any further hesitation.

"I must go, too," said Lennox.

"Ladies also have to dress," said Mrs. Guise. "Are you not afraid of being late, Nelly?" very pointedly.

"No; I can dress very quickly," replied Miss D'Aubigny, with a significant look at Probyne.

"I hear you were badly mounted to-day," said Lennox to Miss D'Aubigny, his tall form towering over the slight and fragile girl before him. "I will see that you have a far more comfortable conveyance next time!"

A jealous pang shot through the observant widow's heart. Lennox had never looked at her with that air of humble adoration; he had never stood beside her with such a semblance of protection.

"Thank you!" replied Miss D'Aubigny. "I am not much of a horse-woman. I really do not know why I am not afraid; but I am not strong enough to ride well. I think that is why I cannot ride over country like Mrs. Guise."

"You shall have no trouble next time, for I will put you up on Veillantif, the most perfect lady's hunter in the colony!" said Lennox.

"Oh, Jim! surely you would not trust Veillantif with Nelly!" cried the widow.

The oracles at Delphi were wont to give obscure replies, that often had a double meaning. The lovely widow was as ambiguous in her question.

"Why not? Don't you consider him perfectly safe?" asked Lennox calmly.

"Oh! you had better go and dress for dinner!" said Mrs. Guise crossly. "You will be so late!"

Lennox bowed and went out, followed by Probyne. The widow was fuming with jealous rage. She knew that Lennox prized Veillantif above either of his three magnificent hunters.

The horse had won nearly every championship for lady hacks in the country. Even she had only been asked to ride him once. A feeling of a deadly jealousy towards this slim, flaxen-haired, blue-eyed doll, with her oval face and tiny mouth came over the widow. She recalled with an angry start the pained voice with which Lennox had spoken of Eleanor D'Aubigny's apparent danger in riding the infirm steeplechaser at that day's hunt meeting. Could it be possible that he loved this overgrown child? Her heart almost ceased beating at the idea!

"Well, I'm going to dress for dinner; it is getting late!" said she, and left the room with a curt nod to her supposed rival.

Eleanor D'Aubigny sat down by the fire, in the chair that Lennox had but lately quitted. She spread her slender fingers to the blaze, her elbows resting lightly on her knees. The firelight played on her coils of flaxen hair, that flashed like flakes of yellow silk in the light, as she sat there deep in thought. At length she rose with a sigh.

"No! She has £4000 a year; I have only £400! She is tall and graceful and handsome! Ah! I have no chance—none! He would only love a queen like her!" she thought to herself, as she walked dejectedly to her room to dress for dinner.

Two days later the Te Nui party turned out to the meet of the Rangitikei Hunt Club at Carnarvon. Lennox had carefully mounted Miss D'Aubigny on his magnificent hunter Veillantif. The widow looked on askance. But after the cavalcade had started they fell into couples—Nita Muirhead and Bourke leading, Miss D'Aubigny and Probyne next, Jim Lennox and Mrs. Guise, and the Te Nui drag, loaded with visitors, bringing up the rear. There was no doubt about Miss D'Aubigny's position in the hunting field that day. As soon as the hounds gave tongue, Jim Lennox cantered up to her side.

"Just take a firm hold of him," he said to the beautiful girl on Veillantif, "and let him follow the hounds. Those who pass you to-day will have to be good indeed!"

She flashed him with a grateful smile.

Lennox was riding Skyscraper, a magnificent roan hunter, and a tremendous big jumper. But it took him all his time to keep with Miss D'Aubigny. When Veillantif felt the gentle pressure on his bit he discovered a congenial spirit. That tender yet firm touch was just what he liked. Though several women had ridden him before, they none of them had had hands like his master—tender, yet firm, and so supporting that