

Veillantif felt that he could fling himself through the air, over his jumps, like a shot from a catapult, without fear of having his jaws lacerated and his head jerked nearly off by iron hands. Yes, he felt he could go freely with the lady on his back that day. He was a perfect hunter, as Lennox had said.

Light and built for speed. His hoofs were neat, his legs were clean. His thigh was short, his flanks were lean. His rump was large, his back full height. His mane was yellow, streaked with white. With little ears and tawny head. No steed like him was ever bred! And Lennox had named him after Roland's horse, of which he was the counterpart.

So all day Eleanor D'Aubigny rode well to the front, and all day Mrs. Guise rode a parallel line to her, jealousy going for the highest fences, and risking her pretty neck a dozen times, in order to show Jim Lennox that although Eleanor D'Aubigny was on so fine a hunter as Veillantif, Jessie Guise on Culloden could out rival her over a stiffer country. Riding hard with Bourke and Probyne some 40 yards behind the Te Nui ladies, Lennox could not but admire the superb horsemanship of the handsome widow. She rode with an elan that was electrical; and her hunter, as if imbued with his rider's slashing spirit, took dyke and post-and-rails and wire fences in faultless style. Nevertheless, Jim Lennox paired with the rider of Veillantif returning homeward that evening, and they were so unaffectedly happy that the most impartial observer could not fail to see that both were satisfied with their surroundings. Then did Pluto run amok through the heartstrings of Mrs. Guise, and she cried herself to sleep that night in bitterness of heart over her non-success with Jim Lennox. Yet once more, in spite of her belief that he loved Eleanor D'Aubigny, she essayed to storm the stronghold of Jim Lennox's heart.

"Nita, dear, do your sister a good turn. I want half an hour alone with Jim, and that D'Aubigny girl sticks to him like a leech. Get her to sing something to amuse Mr. Probyne—he loves music—and I'll not forget you," said Mrs. Guise to her sister after dinner the following evening.

Nita was only too glad to oblige her sister, especially as it gave her the chance to be alone with Ackland Bourke. Soon Eleanor D'Aubigny was singing in a rich, sweet voice at the piano, and Probyne was bending over her with rapture in his eyes. Nita Muirhead and Bourke sat on a sofa, side by side, in the alcove at the end of the room. Mrs. Muirhead contentedly knitted by the fire, and her husband dozed over a newspaper, opposite to her. Out on the verandah, under the palm trees that spread their feathery branches wide out from their stems, sat Jim Lennox, listening with mingled feelings to the song "The Danube River" floating out through the open French windows. By his side sat Jessie Guise, watching every quiver of his mobile face with a responsive thrill at her heartstrings. Tragedy had put on her mask.

"How well matched they are!" remarked Mrs. Guise, alluding to the pair at the piano, whom they could easily see from where they sat. "His is an artistic soul, nothing materialistic in it; she is ethereal. They were created for each other. I wonder if he has proposed yet!"

Lennox shivered.

"Why so interested in Probyne's fate?" he asked, fencing the question. "Are you afraid he may propose?"

The widow laughed musically.

"There is but one man in the world that I care so much for, Jim, and Prince Probyne is not that man. But he has found his affinity—that feeble, hothouse flower is made for him, and he for her. His artistic temperament, his fair face, and beautiful hands and feet, his accomplishments, his distinguished manner, are just what she thinks the world of. A bushman, a strong, athletic, dark-skinned sportsman, though as handsome as a god, would have no charm for her. See! He is pressing her hand. I wonder if he is whispering the magic question to her at this moment?"

Lennox laughed sardonically, and the widow passed her arm through his, saying:

"Why is it that you have never married, Jim?"

She gazed into his vacant eyes as if to force an answer.

"Too poor," answered Lennox laconically.

"How would you like an income of thousands a year?" she almost whispered, trembling, quivering so much that he felt her agitation.

He glanced quickly at her face; his own went white. "Jessie, dear one," he said, "I would never marry for money, nor would I ever marry a woman I did not really love. It would break my heart to think that any woman loved me without return. I say this to you, because you have been almost a sister to me. There is one woman that I could love, and she sits there at the piano singing."

He did not dare to look at her. The silence became almost oppressive.

Inside, Eleanor D'Aubigny was singing the exquisite cavatina from the "Gazza Ladra" of Rossini: "Joy now reigns, my heart doth bound; why should I its bliss restrain?"

The widow laughed, a scornful, rippling laugh as she rose, and walked slowly along the verandah, followed by Lennox. She walked erect and firmly, almost regal in her height and beautifully-moulded figure.

"Je le payerai!" she murmured fiercely between her cherry lips. She had heard the prima donna in an opera use the phrase, and she had learnt its meaning. As they reached the French window that led from the drawing-room to the verandah, Lennox drew aside the flimsy curtain, saying:

"Coming in?"

As she passed him their eyes met, and she laughed. He laughed too.

"What a good sort you are, Jess?" he said.

"I am glad you think so, Mr. James Lennox," she replied, as she sailed majestically into the room.

Two days after the lovely widow was down at 5.30 in the morning, cooking breakfast for Jim Lennox who was going away with a mob of sheep to the Palmerston sheep sales. She had learnt this fact from the housemaid overnight, and had told the cook that she would get the breakfast herself for Mr. Lennox. When Jim Lennox walked into the kitchen to take pot-luck before he started, to his surprise he found Mrs. Guise, fresh and fragrant, making coffee for him.

"Good morning, your lordship! See how much I think of you," she cried laughingly. "I even get up at this early hour to provide you with a breakfast. Am I not good to you?"

"By Jove! you are," he answered, sitting down to some beautifully grilled chops and bacon. "You always are too good to me. The man who gets a wife like you will be a lucky fellow!"

"You flatter me, Mr. Lennox," she curtseyed gravely. "Will you be back in time for the meet?"

"Not for the first run. I am going to try and pick up the hounds between here and Sandon some time in the afternoon. Muirhead will take the sheep on from the Travellers' Rest, and I expect to get back to Awahuri about 1 o'clock. I'll have Veillantif there to meet me; so you may possibly see me with the hounds some time this afternoon. Now I must be off. That breakfast was delicious. Let me give you a kiss for it," said Lennox.

"Jim!" There was a world of surprise in her voice as the widow stood tremblingly facing him. Lennox looked at her for a long moment then clasped her in his arms. To his great surprise she passively suffered his embrace. He felt her quivering and trembling, and she kissed him passionately and long before she left his embrace. And they stood dumbly looking at each other.

"I suppose I ought to ask you to marry me?" he stammered at last.

"No!" She flushed crimson, and a passionate light flashed in her eyes. "Go and ask the girl you love—the girl at the piano the other night." She turned away and looked out of the window at the crimson dawn. Lennox quitted the kitchen in a savage humour; he could have kicked himself for his folly, the more so since he found more than a passing charm in the embrace of beautiful Jessie Guise. He discovered he had left his stockwhip behind in the kitchen, and he returned for it. The widow sat at the table, her head on her arms, sobbing with a very agony of grief. The whole table shook with the violence of her emotion. Lennox stopped spellbound. Then he walked up to her and placed his hand on her arm.

"Oh, Jess, my girl, what is the matter?"

She rose with a start, hid her face in her handkerchief, and hurried from the kitchen, sobbing as if her heart would break. Jim Lennox picked up his stockwhip, and walked out to the sheepyards with a strained, white face. He felt like a murderer.

"What horse is Nell to ride?" asked Nita Muirhead anxiously that morning

at breakfast. "There are only Doubloon and Dolly Mops to pick from. We are badly off for spare mounts to-day."

"You must ride Dolly Mops yourself, Nita," said Eleanor D'Aubigny. "I will try and make shift with Doubloon."

Acland Bourke looked across at Probyne. It was the last day of their visit, and they both meant to have a five minutes' conversation with Miss D'Aubigny somewhere alone. What better opportunity than the hunting field?

"You could have Fairyland, and welcome," said Bourke; "but she has never carried a habit."

"I am afraid to trust the Bounder with you," said Probyne. "He pulls like one o'clock when the hounds are giving tongue."

"What is the matter with Rupee?" asked Mrs. Muirhead.

"Rupee has cut his stifle, mother," answered Miss Nita. "Jack Gorse took him through the furze in the deadwood spinney yesterday morning, and he played up and cut himself."

"I think I can manage with Doubloon," said Eleanor D'Aubigny. "I'll keep to the roads."

"Oh, I say!" cried both Bourke and Probyne.

Mrs. Guise, who had been silent during the above conversation, now spoke in a sweet, low voice.

"Nell, will you ride Culloden? Jim has made a perfect hunter of him."

All eyes were turned on her. Culloden, a beautiful grey thoroughbred, was her favourite hunter, broken in and perfected by Lennox.

"But what will you ride?" asked Miss D'Aubigny.

"I am going to ride Red Hussar to-day," was the reply.

"Red Hussar! Why, I heard Jim say he would never allow you to get on his back again," said Nita.

"I am going to ride him nevertheless. The horse is mine. I suppose I can do what I please with my own property?" said Mrs. Guise calmly.

They all tried to persuade her not to ride the horse, but Mrs. Guise was obdurate. Red Hussar she would ride and no other. They consoled themselves with the reflection that Mrs. Guise was the finest horsewoman in the North Island, if not in all New Zealand; and so it was arranged that Eleanor D'Aubigny should ride Culloden.

Mrs. Guise rode to the meet on Red Hussar—a fractious, ill-tempered, washy chestnut of immense bone and substance, beautifully bared, long of rein and deep of quarter—an otherwise ideal lady's mount; but he constantly showed the whites of his eyes. The widow kept him well under control, and a gayer party did not ride to the meet that day. The men cast many an approving glance at the lovely widow, their fancy being taken by the superb manner in which she handled her young hunter. Probyne, finding himself by her side, talked brilliantly and well, and made himself preux chevalier with his compliments. Acland Bourke did not let the opportunity pass. Gradually he and Miss D'Aubigny fell behind, until the others were a quarter of a mile or more ahead. When they all came together again Bourke was preternaturally silent; he had played his hazard and lost. Eleanor D'Aubigny, usually sweet-tempered, seemed much put out, and scarcely concealed the jealous glances she flashed towards Probyne and Mrs. Guise. As the hounds threw off Mrs. Guise and Miss D'Aubigny came together in a crush at a gate.

"He's a willing fencer, Nell," said Mrs. Guise. "Take him over the side rails and get away!"

The younger woman hesitated, looking round for Probyne.

"Pshaw! And he loves you!" cried the widow, wildly scornful. "Here, let me pass!"

She thrust Red Hussar through the crowd, faced him at the rails, and gave him a smart cut with her whip. He immediately reared straight up on end, only to be brought down again by a sounding smash between the ears. He snorted with temper and dashed at the fence, crashed through the top rail, and landed on his nose on the other side. The widow, sitting prettily back, picked him up smartly when he pecked, and was rewarded by a loud "Bravo!" from the M.F.H. Eleanor D'Aubigny followed, and was alongside Mrs. Guise immediately.

"He does love me!" she panted; "and you will never get him, try how you may." She dashed on after the hounds with Mrs. Guise hard after her.

When Jim Lennox, riding along the Awahuri-Sandon road, met old Burgoyne, of Romata, placidly driving home from the meet, he shouted to him:

"Which way have they gone?"

Burgoyne pulled up leisurely.

"If you wait about here I fancy they'll come out just above. They made for McKenzie's in a half-circle, and I rather think the cast will lie through McDonald's and James's across Petersen's to here. My word, that's a dangerous brute Mrs. Guise is riding! Miss D'Aubigny is up on Culloden, the hunter you made for Jessie. I fancy they are riding 'jealous' for they are going at everything like two mad women. The young girl is safe enough, but I'm afraid Mrs. Guise will get smashed up to-day."

A sharp twinge of conscience pricked Lennox, and he was turning away up the road when the music of the pack broke on his ears, and just as Burgoyne had prophesied, the hounds crossed the road not a hundred yards above them, the scent breast high, and went racing on towards Carnarvon and the Rangitikei River. Shortly after a foam-covered chestnut, with wild, white eyes, ridden by a lady, plunged through the hedge behind the pack, took the road in three strides, flew the gorse hedge into the paddock beyond, and raced away like a demon possessed after the hounds. Then followed a beautiful iron grey, also ridden by a lady, jumping faultlessly, and racing away as furiously after the first horse.

Burgoyne jumped on to the seat of his buggy to get a better view.

"Jess and Miss 'Aubigny," cried Lennox, astonished.

"That brute's botted with Mrs. Guise!" yelled Burgoyne; then suddenly cried, "My God—the river! They're heading straight for the river!"

Veillantif had never been so roughly handled before. He felt the spurs rip his sides as he sprang at the fence before him. In two strides he was over and racing across country like the wind. The ground seemed to disappear from under him as he thundered on after the two horses, now nearly half a mile ahead. Behind them came the rest of the hunt, plodding hopelessly in the rear.

Lennox thanked his good luck in having a fresh horse under him. Veillantif closed on the leaders with incredible speed, hard ridden by his master. Far ahead the hounds dashed over the high bank of the river, and splashed into the water. Veillantif passed Culloden like the wind, and Lennox shouted a brief injunction to Miss D'Aubigny to "pull up." Just ahead of him Mrs. Guise sat firmly on her maddened runaway, and scientifically sawed at the bit, gripped between his jaws as in a vice. That she knew her danger Lennox did not doubt. Yet she sat cool and collected, trying all she knew to stop Red Hussar before he plunged into the river, which was almost at its deepest thereabouts. For the first time since he had known Jessie Guise Lennox experienced a thrill of agonising emotion. There before him he knew now, was the one woman in the world for him. He drove the spurs into his horse, and raced up alongside of her. They were within a dozen yards of the river bank. He saw Mrs. Guise free her foot from the stirrup, and, passing his arm round her waist, he lifted her out of the saddle, and brought Veillantif round with a "prop" that only the finest of stockmen are capable of. They turned within a yard of the edge of the river bank. Red Hussar went over the bank into the water with a tremendous splash. The ducking seemed to do him good, for he calmly swam across the river and stopped on the further bank to graze.

Jim Lennox looked with hungry eyes on the widow's face. Her blue eyes, like heaven opening to him, laughed into his face.

"Bravo, Jim! Well done, sir!" she said saucily.

"Oh, thank God! Thank God I was in time," stammered Lennox, shaking with emotion. "You would have been drowned by that mad brute."

"You saved my life, Jim. Why did you do it?" asked Mrs. Guise, flushing at the strong pressure of his arms.

"Because I love you. Oh, Jess, how blind I have been. Tell me you forgive me for this morning," answered Lennox, as he slipped from his saddle after placing Mrs. Guise on terra firma.

"Forgive you, Jim!" cooed the pretty widow. "I must forgive you now, for you saved my life." She seemed to become so suddenly shy; a new light had entered her life.

"Will you have me now, Jess?" asked Lennox, grasping her hand. "I have a right to ask you now."

"Don't Jim. There are Nell and Mr. Probyne. Why, bless my heart, what's the man doing? Jim, he's kissing her! Oh, I see it all now. We've both been on a false scent. She