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# HOMO

By F. Hopkinson Smith

1909

Dinner was over, and Mme. Constantin and her guests were seated under the lighted candles in her cosey salon.

With the serving of the coffee and cigarettes, pillows had been adjusted to bare shoulders, stools moved under slippered feet, and easy lounges pushed nearer the fire. Greenough, his long body aslant, his head on the edge of a chair, his feet on the hearth rug, was blowing rings to the ceiling. Bayard, the African explorer, and the young Russian Secretary, Ivan Petrovski, had each the end of a long sofa, with pretty Mme. Petrovski and old Baron Sleyde between them, while Mme. Constantin lay nestled like a kitten among the big and little cushions of a divan.

The dinner had been a merry one, with every brain at its best; this restful silence was but another luxury. Only the Baron rattled on. A duel of unusual ferocity had startled Paris, and the old fellow knew its every detail. Mme. Petrovski was listening in a languid way:

"Dead, isn't he?" she asked in an indifferent tone, as being the better way to change the subject. Duels did not interest the young bride.

"No," answered the Baron, flicking the ashes from his cigarette—"going to get well, so Mercier, who operated, told a friend of mine to-day."

"Where did they fight?" she asked, as she took a fresh cigarette from her case. "Ivan told me, but I forgot."

"At Surenne, above the bridge. You know the row of trees by the water; we walked there the day we dined at the Cycle."

"Both of them fools!" cried the Russian from the depths of his seat. "La Clou wasn't worth it—she's getting fat."

Greenough drew his long legs back from the fender and, looking toward the young Secretary, said in a decided tone:—

"I don't agree with you, Ivan. Served the beggar right; the only pity is that he's going to get well."

"But she wasn't his wife," remarked Mme. Petrovski with increased interest, as she lighted her cigarette.

"No matter, he loved her," returned the Englishman, straightening in his seat and squaring his broad shoulders.

"And so did the poor devil whom Mercier sewed up," laughed the old Baron, his eyes twinkling.

Mme. Constantin raised her blonde head from the edge of the divan.

"Is there any wrong, you dear Greenough, you would forgive where a woman is concerned?"

"Plenty. Any wrong that you would commit, my dear lady, for instance; but not the kind the Baron refers to."

"But why do you Englishmen always insist on an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth? Can't you make some allowance for the weakness of human nature?" she asked, smiling.

"But why only Englishmen?" demanded Greenough. "All nationalities feel alike where a man's honor and the honor of his home are concerned. It is only the punishment that differs. The Turk, for instance, bowstrings you or tries to, for peeping under his wife's veil; the American shoots you at sight for speaking slightly of his daughter. Both are right in a way. I am not brutal; I am only just, and I tell you there is only one way of treating a man who has robbed you dishonestly of the woman you love, and that is to finish him so completely that the first man called in will be the undertaker—not the surgeon. I am not talking at random—I know a case in point, which always sets me blazing when I think of it. He was at the time attached to our embassy at Berlin. I hear now that he has returned to England and is dying—dying, remember, of a broken heart—won't live the year out. He ought to have shot the scoundrel when he had a chance. Not her fault, perhaps—not his fault—fault of a man he trusted—that both trusted, that's the worst of it."

Bayard sat gazing into the fire, its glow deepening the color of his bronze cheek and bringing into high relief a body so strong and well knit that it was difficult to believe that scarcely a year had passed since he dragged himself, starving and half dead, from the depths of an African jungle.

So far he had taken no part in the discussion. Mme. Constantin, who knew his every mood, had seen his face grow grave, his lips straighten, and a certain subdued impatience express itself in the opening and shutting of his hands, but no word of comment had followed.

"Come, we are waiting, Bayard," she said at last, with a smile. "What do you think of Greenough's theory?"

The traveller pushed his cup from him, shook the ashes from his cigar, and answered slowly:—

"That there is something stronger than vengeance, Louise—something higher."

"You mean mercy?"

"Something infinitely more powerful—the Primeval."

The Baron twisted his short neck and faced the speaker. Greenough rose to his feet, relighted his cigar at the silver lamp, and said with some impatience:—

"I don't understand your meaning, Bayard; make it clear, will you?"

"You don't understand, Greenough, because you have not suffered—not as some men I know, not as one man I have in mind."

Mme. Constantin slipped from her cushions, crossed to where Bayard sat, and nestled on a low ottoman beside him.

"Is it something you haven't told me, Bayard?" she asked, looking up into his face. These two had been friends for years. Sometimes in his wanderings the letters came in bunches; at other times the silence continued for months.

"Yes, something I haven't told you, Louise—not all of it. I remember writing you about his arrival at Babohunga, and what a delightful fellow he was, but I couldn't tell you the rest of it. I will now, and I want Greenough to listen.

"He was, I think, the handsomest young fellow that I ever saw—tall, broad shouldered, well built, curly hair cut close to his head, light, upturned mustache, white teeth, clear, fair skin—really you'd hardly meet another such young fellow anywhere. He had come up from Zanzibar and had pushed on to my camp, hoping, he said, to join some caravan going into the interior. He explained that he was an officer in the Belgian army, that he had friends further up, near Lake Mantumba, and that he came for sport alone. I, of course, was glad to take him in—glad that year to take anybody in who was white, especially this young fellow, who was such a contrast to the customary straggler—escaped convict, broken-down gambler, disgraced officer, Arab trader, and other riffraff that occasionally passed my way.

"And then, again, his manners, his smile, the easy grace of his movements—even his linen, bearing his initials and a crown—something he never referred to—all showed him to be a man accustomed to the refinements of society. Another reason was his evident inexperience with the life about him. His ten days' march from the landing below to my camp had been a singularly lucky one. They generally plunge into the forest in perfect health, only to crawl back to the river—those who live to crawl—their bones picked clean by its merciless fingers. To push on now, with the rainy season setting in, meant certain death.

"The second day he paid the price and fell ill. He complained of his feet—the tramp had knocked him out, he said. I examined his toes, cut out some poisonous wood ticks that had buried themselves under the skin, and put him to bed. Fever then set in, and for two days and nights I thought he would go under. During the delirium he kept repeating a woman's name, begging her to give him a drink, to lift his head so he could look into her eyes. Once I had to hold him by main force to keep him from following this fancy of his brain into the forest. When he began to hobble about once more he again wanted to push on, but I determined to hold onto him. I was alone at the time—that is, without a white companion, Judson having gone down to Zanzibar with some despatches for the company—and his companionship was a godsend.

"What seemed to worry him most after he got well was his enforced use of my wardrobe and outfit. He had brought little of his own except his clothes and some blankets, and no arms of any kind but the revolver he carried around his waist in a holster. All his heavier luggage, he explained, was at a landing below. This objection I met by promising to send for it by the first band of carriers after the rainy season was over. In the meantime he must, I insisted, use my own guns and ammunition, or anything else that my kit afforded.

"Up to this time he had never mentioned his home or the names of any of his people, nor had he offered any explanation of his choice of Africa as a hunting ground, nor did he ever seek to learn my own impressions regarding his self-imposed exile (it was really exile, for he never hunted a single day while he was with me),

except to ask me one morning in a casual way, whether anything he had said in his delirium had made me think the less of him—all of which I laughed at, never mentioning, of course, what I had been obliged to hear.

“One night, when a tropical storm of unusual severity was passing, I found him sealing a letter at my table with the aid of a lantern held close. Presently he got up and began pacing the floor, seemingly in great agitation; then he reached over, picked up the letter from the table, lighted one end of it in the blaze of the lantern, dropped it to the floor, waited until it was entirely consumed, and then put his foot on the ashes.

“‘Rather a waste of time, wasn’t it?’ I said with a laugh.

“‘Yes, all of it has been a waste of time—and my life with it. Now and then I write these letters. They’re always burned in the end. No use—nothing to gain. Yes, waste of time. There are some things in the world that no man ought ever to ask forgiveness for.’ He threw himself into a chair and went on:—

“‘You never went crazy mad over a woman, did you? No—you’re not built that way. I am. She was different from the women I had met. She was not of my people—she was English. We met first in Brussels; then I followed her to Vienna. For six months she was free to do as she pleased. We lived the life—well, you know! Then her husband returned.’

“‘Oh, she was married!’ I remarked casually.

“‘Yes, and to a man you would have thought she would have been true to, although he was nearly twice her age. I knew all this—knew when I started in to make her love me—as a matter of pride first—as a boy walks on thin ice, believing he can cross in safety. Perhaps she had some such idea about me. Then the crust gave way, and we were both in the depths. The affair had lasted about six months—all the time her husband was gone. Then I either had to face the consequences or leave Vienna. To have done the first meant ruin to her; the last meant ruin to me. It had not been her fault—it had been mine. He sent me word that he would shoot me at sight, and he meant it. But the madness had not worked out of me yet. She clung to me like a frightened child in her agony, begging me not to leave her—not to meet her husband; to go somewhere—suddenly, as if I had been ordered away by my government; to make no reply to her husband, who, so far, could prove nothing—somewhere, later on, when he was again on a mission, we could meet.

“‘You have known me now for some time—the last month intimately. Do I look like a coward and a cur? Well, I am both. That very night I saw him coming toward my quarters in search of me. Did I face him? No. I stooped down behind a fence and hid until he passed.

“‘That summer, some months later, we met in Lucerne. She had left him in Venice and he was to meet her in Paris. Two days later he walked into the small hotel where she had stopped and the end came.

“‘But I took her with me this time. One of the porters who knew him and knew her helped; and we boarded the night train for Paris without his finding us. I had then given up about everything in life; I was away without leave, had lost touch with my world—with everybody—except my agents, who sent me money. Then began a still hunt, he following us and we shifting from place to place, until we hid ourselves in a little town in Northern Italy.

“‘Two years had now passed, I still crazy mad—knowing nothing, thinking nothing—one blind idolatry! One morning I found a note on my table; she was going to Venice. I was not to follow until she sent for me. She never sent—not a line—no message. Then the truth came out—she never intended to send—she was tired of it all!’

“The young fellow rose from his seat and began pacing the dirt floor again. He seemed strangely stirred. I waited for the sequel, but he kept silent.

“‘Is this why you came here?’ I asked.

“‘Yes and no. I came here because one of my brother officers is at one of the stations up the river, and because here I could be lost. You can explain it as you will, but go where I may I live in deadly fear of meeting the man I wronged. Here he can’t hunt me, as he has done all over Europe. If we meet there is but one thing left—either I must kill him or he will kill me. I would have faced him at any time but for her. Now I could not harm him. We have both suffered from the same cause—the loss of a woman we loved. I had caused his agony and it is for me to make amends, but not by sending him to his grave. Here he is out of my way and I out of his. You saw me burn that letter; I have destroyed dozens of them. When I can stand the pressure no longer I sit down and ask his pardon; then I tear it up or burn it. He couldn’t understand—wouldn’t understand. He’d think I was afraid to meet him and was begging for my life. Don’t you see how impossible it all is—how damnably I am placed?’”

Mme. Constantin and the others had gathered closer to where Bayard sat. Even the wife of the young secretary had moved her chair so she could look into the speaker’s face. All were absorbed in the story. Bayard went on:—

“One of the queer things about the African fever is the way it affects the brain. The delirium passes when the temperature goes down, but certain hallucinations last sometimes for weeks. How much of the queer story was true, therefore, and how much was due to his convalescence—he was by no means himself again—I could not decide. That a man should lose his soul and freedom over a woman was not new, but that he should bury himself in the jungle to keep from killing a man whose pardon he wanted to ask for betraying his wife was new.

“I sympathized with him, of course, telling him he was too young to let the world go by; that when the husband got cool he would give up the chase—had given it up long ago, no doubt, now that he realized how good for nothing the woman was—said all the things, of course, one naturally says to a man you suspect to be slightly out of his head.

“The next night Judson returned. He brought newspapers and letters, and word from the outside world; among other things that he had met a man at the landing below who was on his way to the camp above us. He had offered to bring him with him, but he had engaged some Zanzibari of his own and intended to make a shorter route to the north of our camp and then join one of the bands in charge of an Arab trader—some of Tippu-Tib’s men really. He knew of the imminence of the rainy season and wanted, to return to Zanzibar before it set in earnest. Judson’s news—all his happenings, for that matter—interested the young Belgian

even more than they did me, and before the week was out the two were constantly together—a godsend in his present state of mind—saved him in fact from a relapse, I thought—Judson’s odd way of looking at things, as well as his hard, common sense, being just what the high-strung young fellow needed most.

“Some weeks after this—perhaps two, I can’t remember exactly—a party of my men whom I sent out for plantains and corn (our provisions were running low) returned to camp bringing me a scrap of paper which a white man had given them. They had found him half dead a day’s journey away. On it was scrawled in French a request for food and help. I started at once, taking the things I knew would be wanted. The young Belgian offered to go with me—he was always ready to help—but Judson had gone to a neighboring village and there was no one to leave in charge but him. I had now not only begun to like him but to trust him.

“I have seen a good many starving men in my time, but this lost stranger when I found him was the most miserable object I ever beheld. He lay propped up against a tree, with his feet over a pool of water, near where my men had left him. His eyes were sunk in his head, his lips parched and cracked, his voice almost gone. A few hours more and he would have been beyond help. He had fainted, so they told me, after writing the scrawl, and only the efforts of my men and the morsel of food they could spare him brought him back to life. When I had poured a few drops of brandy down his throat and had made him a broth and warmed him up his strength began to come back. It is astonishing what a few ounces of food will do for a starving man.

“He told me he had been deserted by his carriers, who had robbed him of all he had—food, ammunition, everything—and since then he had wandered aimlessly about, living on bitter berries and fungi. He had, it appears, been sent to Zanzibar by his government to straighten out some matters connected with one of the missions, and, wishing to see something of the country, he had pushed on, relying on his former experiences—he had been on similar excursions in Brazil—to pull him through.

“Then followed the story of the last few weeks—the terrors of the long nights, as he listened to the cries of prowling animals; his hunger and increasing weakness—the counting of the days and hours he could live; the indescribable fright that overpowered him when he realized he must die, alone, and away from his people. Raising himself on his elbow—he was still too weak to stand on his feet—he motioned to me to come nearer, and, as I bent my head he said in a hoarse whisper, as if he were in the presence of some mighty spirit who would overhear:—

“‘In these awful weeks I have faced the primeval. God stripped me naked—naked as Adam, and like him, left me alone. In my hunger I cried out; in my weakness I prayed. No answer—nothing but silence—horrible, overpowering silence. Then in my despair I began to curse—to strike the trees with my clenched fists, only to sink down exhausted. I could not—I would not die! Soon all my life passed in review. All the mean things I had done to others; all the mean things they had done to me. Then love, honor, hatred, revenge, official promotion, money, the good opinion of my fellows—all the things we value and that make our standards—took form, one after another, and as quickly vanished in the gloom of the jungle. Of what use were they—any of them? If I was to live I must again become the Homo—the Primeval Man—eat as he ate, sleep as he slept, be simple, brave, forgiving, obedient, as he had been. All I had brought with me of civilization—my civilization—the one we men make and call life—were as nothing, if it could not bring me a cup of water, a handful of corn or a coal of fire to warm my shivering body.’

“I am not giving you his exact words, Louise, not all of them, but I am giving you as near as I can the effect untamed, mighty, irresistible nature produced on his mind. Lying there, his shrivelled white face supported on one shrunken hand, his body emaciated so that the bones of his knees and elbows protruded from his ragged clothes, he seemed like some prophet of old, lifting his voice in the wilderness, proclaiming a new faith and a new life.

“Nor can I give you any idea of the way the words came, nor of the glassy brilliance of his eyes, set in a face dry as a skull, the yellow teeth chattering between tightly stretched lips. Oh! it was horrible—horrible!

“The second day he was strong enough to stand, but not to walk. The rain, due now every hour, comes without warning, making the swamps impassable, and there was no time to lose. I left two men to care for him, and hurried back to camp to get some sort of a stretcher on which to bring him out.

“That night, sitting under our lamp—we were alone at the time, my men being again away—I gave the young Belgian the details of my trip, telling him the man’s name and object in coming into the wilderness, describing his sufferings and relating scraps of his talk. He listened with a curious expression on his face, his eyes growing strangely bright, his fingers twitching like those of a nervous person unused to tales of suffering and privation.

“‘And he will live?’ he said, with a smile, as I finished.

“‘Certainly; all he wanted was something in his stomach; he’s got that. He’ll be here to-morrow.’

“For some time he did not speak; then he rose from his seat, looked at me steadily for a moment, grasped my hand, and with a certain tenderness in his voice, said:

“‘Thank you.’

“‘For what?’ I asked in surprise.

“‘For being kind. I’ll go to the spring and get a drink, and then I’ll go to sleep. Good night!’

“I watched him disappear into the dark, wondering at his mood. Hardly had I regained my seat when a pistol shot rang out. He had blown the top of his head off.

“That night I buried him in the soft ooze near the spring, covering him so the hyenas could not reach his body.

“The next morning my men arrived, carrying the stranger. He had been plucky and had insisted on walking a little, and the party arrived earlier than I expected. When he had thanked me for what I had done, he began an inspection of my rude dwelling and the smaller lean-to, even peering into the huts connected with my bungalow—new in his experience.

“‘And you are all alone except for your black men?’ he asked in an eager tone.

“‘No, I have Mr. Judson with me. He is away this week—and a young Belgian officer—and—I—’

“Yes, I remember Mr. Judson,” he interrupted. “I met him at the landing below. I should have taken his advice and joined him. And the young officer—has he been long with you?”

“About two months.”

“He is the same man who left some of his luggage at the landing below, is he not?”

“Yes, I think so,” I answered.

“A young man with light curly hair and upturned mustache, very strong, quick in his movements, shows his teeth when he speaks—very white teeth—”

“He was smiling—a strange smile from one whose lips were still parched.

“Yes,” I replied.

“Can I see him?”

“No, he is dead!”

“Had I not stretched out my hand to steady him he would have fallen.

“Dead!” he cried, a look of horror in his eyes. “No! You don’t mean—not starved to death! No, no, you don’t mean that!” He was trembling all over.

“No, he blew out his brains last night. His grave is outside. Come, I will show it to you.”

“I had almost to carry him. For an instant he leaned against a tree growing near the poor fellow’s head, his eyes fixed on the rude mound. Then he slowly sank to his knees and burst into tears, sobbing:

“Oh! If I could have stopped him! He was so young to die.”

“Two days later he set out on his return to the coast.”

With the ending of the story, Bayard turned to Mme. Constantin:

“There, Louise, you have the rest of it. You understand now what I meant when I said there was something stronger than revenge;—the primeval.”

Greenough, who had sat absorbed, drinking in every word, laid his hand on Bayard’s shoulder.

“You haven’t told us their names.”

“Do you want them?”

“Yes, but write them on this card.”

Bayard slipped his gold pencil from its chain and traced two names. “My God, Bayard! That’s the same man I told you is dying of a broken heart.”

“Yes—that’s why I told you the story, Greenough. But his heart is not breaking for the woman he loved and lost, but for the man he hunted—the man I buried.”

\*\*\* END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK HOMO \*\*\*

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