

BRET HARTE

THANKFUL

BLOSSOM

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I

The time was the year of grace 1779; the locality, Morristown, New Jersey.

It was bitterly cold. A northeasterly wind had been stiffening the mud of the morning's thaw into a rigid record of that day's wayfaring on the Baskingridge road. The hoof-prints of cavalry, the deep ruts left by baggage-wagons, and the deeper channels worn by artillery, lay stark and cold in the waning light of an April day. There were icicles on the fences, a rime of silver on the windward bark of maples, and occasional bare spots on the rocky protuberances of the road, as if Nature had worn herself out at the knees and elbows through long waiting for the tardy spring. A few leaves disinterred by the thaw became crisp again, and rustled in the wind, making the summer a thing so remote that all human hope and conjecture fled before them.

Here and there the wayside fences and walls were broken down or dismantled; and beyond them fields of snow downtrodden and discolored, and strewn with fragments of leather, camp equipment, harness, and cast-off clothing, showed traces of the recent encampment and congregation of men. On some there were still standing the ruins of rudely constructed cabins, or the semblance of fortification equally rude and incomplete. A fox stealing along a half-filled ditch, a wolf slinking behind an earthwork, typified the human abandonment and desolation.

One by one the faint sunset tints faded from the sky; the far-off crests of the Orange hills grew darker; the nearer files of pines on the Whatnong Mountain became a mere black background; and, with the coming-on of night, came too an icy silence that seemed to stiffen and arrest the very wind itself. The crisp leaves no longer rustled; the waving whips of alder and willow snapped no longer; the icicles no longer dropped a cold fruitage from barren branch and spray; and the roadside trees relapsed into stony quiet, so that the sound of horse's hoofs breaking through the thin, dull, lustreless films of ice that patched the furrowed road, might have been heard by the nearest Continental picket a mile away.

Either a knowledge of this, or the difficulties of the road, evidently irritated the viewless horseman. Long before he became visible, his voice was heard in half-suppressed objurgation of the road, of his beast, of the country folk, and the country generally. "Steady, you jade!" "Jump, you devil, jump!" "Curse the road, and the beggarly farmers that durst not mend it!" And then the moving bulk of horse and rider suddenly arose above the hill, floundered and splashed, and then as suddenly disappeared, and the rattling hoof-beats ceased.

The stranger had turned into a deserted lane still cushioned with untrodden snow. A stone wall on one hand—in better keeping and condition than the boundary monuments of the outlying fields—bespoke protection and exclusiveness. Half-way up the lane the rider checked his speed, and, dismounting, tied his horse to a wayside sapling. This done, he went cautiously forward toward the end of the lane, and a farm-house from whose gable window a light twinkled through the deepening night. Suddenly he stopped, hesitated, and uttered an impatient ejaculation. The light had disappeared. He turned sharply on his heel, and retraced his steps until opposite a farm-shed that stood a few paces from the wall. Hard by, a large elm cast the gaunt shadow of its leafless limbs on the wall and surrounding snow. The stranger stepped into this shadow, and at once seemed to become a part of its trembling intricacies.

At the present moment it was certainly a bleak place for a tryst. There was snow yet clinging to the trunk of the tree, and a film of ice on its bark; the adjacent wall was slippery with frost, and fringed with icicles. Yet in all there was a ludicrous suggestion of some sentiment past and unseasonable:

several dislodged stones of the wall were so disposed as to form a bench and seats, and under the elm-tree's film of ice could still be seen carved on its bark the effigy of a heart, divers initials, and the legend, "Thine Forever."

The stranger, however, kept his eyes fixed only on the farm-shed and the open field beside it. Five minutes passed in fruitless expectancy. Ten minutes! And then the rising moon slowly lifted herself over the black range of the Orange hills, and looked at him, blushing a little, as if the appointment were her own.

The face and figure thus illuminated were those of a strongly built, handsome man of thirty, so soldierly in bearing that it needed not the buff epaulets and facings to show his captain's rank in the Continental army. Yet there was something in his facial expression that contradicted the manliness of his presence,—an irritation and querulousness that were inconsistent with his size and strength. This fretfulness increased as the moments went by without sign or motion in the faintly lit field beyond, until, in peevish exasperation, he began to kick the nearer stones against the wall.

"Moo-oo-w!"

The soldier started. Not that he was frightened, nor that he had failed to recognize in these prolonged syllables the deep-chested, half-drowsy low of a cow, but that it was so near him—evidently just beside the wall. If an object so bulky could have approached him so near without his knowledge, might not she—

"Moo-oo!"

He drew nearer the wall cautiously. "So, Cushy! Mooly! Come up, Bossy!" he said persuasively. "Moo"—but here the low unexpectedly broke down, and ended in a very human and rather musical little laugh.

"Thankful!" exclaimed the soldier, echoing the laugh a trifle uneasily and affectedly as a hooded little head arose above the wall.

"Well," replied the figure, supporting a prettily rounded chin on her hands, as she laid her elbows complacently on the wall,— "well, what did you expect? Did you want me to stand here all night, while you skulked moonstruck under a tree? Or did you look for me to call you by name? did you expect me to shout out, 'Capt. Allan Brewster—'"

"Thankful, hush!"

"Capt. Allan Brewster of the Connecticut Contingent," continued the girl, with an affected raising of a low, pathetic voice that was, however, inaudible beyond the tree. "Capt. Brewster, behold me,—your obleeged and humble servant and sweetheart to command."

Capt. Brewster succeeded, after a slight skirmish at the wall, in possessing himself of the girl's hand; at which; although still struggling, she relented slightly.

"It isn't every lad that I'd low for," she said, with an affected pout, "and there may be others that would not take it amiss; though there be fine ladies enough at the assembly halls at Morristown as might think it hoydenish?"

"Nonsense, love," said the captain, who had by this time mounted the wall, and encircled the girl's waist with his arm. "Nonsense! you startled me only. But," he added, suddenly taking her round chin in his hand, and turning her face toward the moon with an uneasy half-suspicion, "why did you take that light from the window? What has happened?"

"We had unexpected guests, sweetheart," said Thankful: "the count just arrived."

"That infernal Hessian!" He stopped, and gazed questioningly into her face. The moon looked upon her at the same time: the face was as sweet, as placid, as truthful, as her own. Possibly these two inconstants understood each other.

"Nay, Allan, he is not a Hessian, but an exiled gentleman from abroad,—a nobleman—"

"There are no noblemen now," sniffed the trooper contemptuously. "Congress has so decreed it. All men are born free and equal."

"But they are not, Allan," said Thankful, with a pretty trouble in her brows: "even cows are not born equal. Is yon calf that was dropped last night by Brindle the equal of my red heifer whose mother come by herself in a ship from Surrey? Do they look equal?"

"Titles are but breath," said Capt. Brewster doggedly. There was an ominous pause.

"Nay, there is one nobleman left," said Thankful; "and he is my own,—my nature's nobleman!"

Capt. Brewster did not reply. From certain arch gestures and wreathed smiles with which this forward young woman accompanied her statement, it would seem to be implied that the gentleman who stood before her was the nobleman alluded to. At least, he so accepted it, and embraced her closely, her arms and part of her mantle clinging around his neck. In this attitude they remained quiet for some moments, slightly rocking from side to side like a metronome; a movement, I fancy, peculiarly bucolic, pastoral, and idyllic, and as such, I wot, observed by Theocritus and Virgil.

At these supreme moments weak woman usually keeps her wits about her much better than your superior reasoning masculine animal; and, while the gallant captain was losing himself upon her perfect lips, Miss Thankful distinctly heard the farm-gate click, and otherwise noticed that the moon was getting high and obtrusive. She half released herself from the captain's arms, thoughtfully and tenderly—but firmly. "Tell me all about yourself, Allan dear," she said quietly, making room for him on the wall,— "all, everything."

She turned upon him her beautiful eyes,—eyes habitually earnest and even grave in expression, yet holding in their brave brown depths a sweet, childlike reliance and dependency; eyes with a certain tender, deprecating droop in the brown-fringed lids, and yet eyes that seemed to say to every man who looked upon them, "I am truthful: be frank with me." Indeed, I am convinced there is not one of my impressible sex, who, looking in those pleading eyes, would not have perjured himself on the spot rather than have disappointed their fair owner.

Capt. Brewster's mouth resumed its old expression of discontent.

"Everything is growing worse, Thankful, and the cause is lost. Congress does nothing, and Washington is not the man for the crisis. Instead of marching to Philadelphia, and forcing that wretched rabble of Hancock and Adams at the point of the bayonet, he writes letters."

"A dignified, formal old fool," interrupted Mistress Thankful indignantly; "and look at his wife! Didn't Mistress Ford and Mistress Baily, ay, and the best blood of Morris County, go down to his Excellency's in their finest bibs and tuckers, and didn't they find my lady in a pinafore doing chores? Vastly polite treatment, indeed! As if the whole world didn't know that the general was taken by surprise when my lady came riding up from Virginia with all those fine cavaliers, just to see what his Excellency was doing at these assembly balls. And fine doings, I dare say."

"This is but idle gossip, Thankful," said Capt. Brewster with the faintest appearance of self-consciousness; "the assembly balls are conceived by the general to strengthen the confidence of the townfolk, and mitigate the rigors of the winter encampment. I go there myself rarely: I have but little taste for junketing and gavotting, with my country in such need. No, Thankful! What we want is a leader; and the men of Connecticut feel it keenly. If I have been spoken of in that regard," added the captain with a slight inflation of his manly breast, "it is because they know of my sacrifices,—because as New England yeomen they know my devotion to the cause. They know of my suffering—"

The bright face that looked into his was suddenly afire with womanly sympathy, the pretty brow was knit, the sweet eyes overflowed with tenderness. "Forgive me, Allan. I forgot—perhaps, love—perhaps, dearest, you are hungry now."

"No, not now," replied Captain Brewster, with gloomy stoicism; "yet," he added, "it is nearly a week since I have tasted meat."

"I—I—brought a few things with me," continued the girl, with a certain hesitating timidity. She reached down, and produced a basket from the shadow of the wall. "These chickens"—she held up a pair of pullets—"the commander-in-chief himself could not buy: I kept them for MY commander! And this pot of marmalade, which I know my Allan loves, is the same I put up last summer. I thought

[very tenderly] you might like a piece of that bacon you liked so once, dear. Ah, sweetheart, shall we ever sit down to our little board? Shall we ever see the end of this awful war? Don't you think, dear [very pleadingly], it would be best to give it up? King George is not such a very bad man, is he? I've thought, sweetheart [very confidently], that mayhap you and he might make it all up without the aid of those Washingtons, who do nothing but starve one to death. And if the king only knew you, Allan, —should see you as I do, sweetheart,—he'd do just as you say."

During this speech she handed him the several articles alluded to; and he received them, storing them away in such receptacles of his clothing as were convenient—with this notable difference, that with HER the act was graceful and picturesque: with him there was a ludicrousness of suggestion that his broad shoulders and uniform only heightened.

"I think not of myself, lass," he said, putting the eggs in his pocket, and buttoning the chickens within his martial breast. "I think not of myself, and perhaps I often spare that counsel which is but little heeded. But I have a duty to my men—to Connecticut. [He here tied the marmalade up in his handkerchief.] I confess I have sometimes thought I might, under provocation, be driven to extreme measures for the good of the cause. I make no pretence to leadership, but—"

"With you at the head of the army," broke in Thankful enthusiastically, "peace would be declared within a fortnight."

There is no flattery, however outrageous, that a man will not accept from the woman whom he believes loves him. He will perhaps doubt its influence in the colder judgment of mankind; but he will consider that this poor creature, at least, understands him, and in some vague way represents the eternal but unrecognized verities. And when this is voiced by lips that are young and warm and red, it is somehow quite as convincing as the bloodless, remoter utterance of posterity.

Wherefore the trooper complacently buttoned the compliment over his chest with the pullets.

"I think you must go now, Allan," she said, looking at him with that pseudo-maternal air which the youngest of women sometimes assume to their lovers, as if the doll had suddenly changed sex, and grown to man's estate. "You must go now, dear; for it may so chance that father is considering my absence overmuch. You will come again a' Wednesday, sweetheart; and you will not go to the assemblies, nor visit Mistress Judith, nor take any girl pick-a-back again on your black horse; and you will let me know when you are hungry?"

She turned her brown eyes lovingly, yet with a certain pretty trouble in the brow, and such a searching, pleading inquiry in her glance, that the captain kissed her at once. Then came the final embrace, performed by the captain in a half-perfunctory, quiet manner, with a due regard for the friable nature of part of his provisions. Satisfying himself of the integrity of the eggs by feeling for them in his pocket, he waved a military salute with the other hand to Miss Thankful, and was gone. A few minutes later the sound of his horse's hoofs rang sharply from the icy hillside.

But, as he reached the summit, two horsemen wheeled suddenly from the shadow of the roadside, and bade him halt.

"Capt. Brewster, if this moon does not deceive me?" queried the foremost stranger with grave civility.

"The same. Major Van Zandt, I calculate?" returned Brewster querulously.

"Your calculation is quite right. I regret Capt. Brewster, that it is my duty to inform you that you are under arrest."

"By whose orders?"

"The commander-in-chief's."

"For what?"

"Mutinous conduct, and disrespect of your superior officers."

The sword that Capt. Brewster had drawn at the sudden appearance of the strangers quivered for a moment in his strong hand. Then, sharply striking it across the pommel of his saddle, he snapped it in twain, and cast the pieces at the feet of the speaker.

"Go on," he said doggedly.

"Capt. Brewster," said Major Van Zandt, with infinite gravity, "it is not for me to point out the danger to you of this outspoken emotion, except practically in its effect upon the rations you have in your pocket. If I mistake not, they have suffered equally with your steel. Forward, march!"

Capt. Brewster looked down, and then dropped to the rear, as the discased yolks of Mistress Thankful's most precious gift slid slowly and pensively over his horse's flanks to the ground.

II

Mistress Thankful remained at the wall until her lover had disappeared. Then she turned, a mere lissom shadow in that uncertain light, and glided under the eaves of the shed, and thence from tree to tree of the orchard, lingering a moment under each as a trout lingers in the shadow of the bank in passing a shallow, and so reached the farmhouse and the kitchen door, where she entered. Thence by a back staircase she slipped to her own bower, from whose window half an hour before she had taken the signalling light. This she lit again and placed upon a chest of drawers; and, taking off her hood and a shapeless sleeveless mantle she had worn, went to the mirror, and proceeded to re-adjust a high horn comb that had been somewhat displaced by the captain's arm, and otherwise after the fashion of her sex to remove all traces of a previous lover. It may be here observed that a man is very apt to come from the smallest encounter with his dulcinea distraught, bored, or shame-faced; to forget that his cravat is awry, or that a long blond hair is adhering to his button. But as to Mademoiselle—well, looking at Miss Pussy's sleek paws and spotless face, would you ever know that she had been at the cream-jug?

Thankful was, I think, satisfied with her appearance. Small doubt but she had reason for it. And yet her gown was a mere slip of flowered chintz, gathered at the neck, and falling at an angle of fifteen degrees to within an inch of a short petticoat of gray flannel. But so surely is the complete mould of symmetry indicated in the poise or line of any single member, that looking at the erect carriage of her graceful brown head, or below to the curves that were lost in her shapely ankles, or the little feet that hid themselves in the broad-buckled shoes, you knew that the rest was as genuine and beautiful.

Mistress Thankful, after a pause, opened the door, and listened. Then she softly slipped down the back staircase to the front hall. It was dark; but the door of the "company-room," or parlor, was faintly indicated by the light that streamed beneath it. She stood still for a moment hesitatingly, when suddenly a hand grasped her own, and half led, half dragged her, into the sitting-room opposite. It was dark. There was a momentary fumbling for the tinder-box and flint, a muttered oath over one or two impeding articles of furniture, and Thankful laughed. And then the light was lit; and her father, a gray wrinkled man of sixty, still holding her hand, stood before her.

"You have been out, mistress!"

"I have," said Thankful.

"And not alone," growled the old man angrily.

"No," said Mistress Thankful, with a smile that began in the corners of her brown eyes, ran down into the dimpled curves of her mouth, and finally ended in the sudden revelation of her white teeth,— "no, not alone."

"With whom?" asked the old man, gradually weakening under her strong, saucy presence.

"Well, father," said Thankful, taking a seat on a table, and swinging her little feet somewhat ostentatiously toward him, "I was with Capt. Allan Brewster of the Connecticut Contingent."

"That man?"

"That man!"

"I forbid you seeing him again."

Thankful gripped the table with a hand on each side of her, to emphasize the statement, and swinging her feet replied,—

"I shall see him as often as I like, father."

"Thankful Blossom!"

"Abner Blossom!"

"I see you know not," said Mr. Blossom, abandoning the severely paternal mandatory air for one of confidential disclosure, "I see you know not his reputation. He is accused of inciting his regiment to revolt,—of being a traitor to the cause."

"And since when, Abner Blossom, have YOU felt such concern for the cause? Since you refused to sell supplies to the Continental commissary, except at double profits? since you told me you were glad I had not politics like Mistress Ford—"

"Hush!" said the father, motioning to the parlor.

"Hush," echoed Thankful indignantly. "I won't be hushed! Everybody says 'Hush' to me. The count says 'Hush!' Allan says 'Hush!' You say 'Hush!' I'm a-weary of this hushing. Ah, if there was a man who didn't say it to me!" and Mistress Thankful lifted her fine eyes to the ceiling.

"You are unwise, Thankful,—foolish, indiscreet. That is why you require much monition."

Thankful swung her feet in silence for a few moments, then suddenly leaped from the table, and, seizing the old man by the lapels of his coat, fixed her eyes upon him, and said suspiciously. "Why did you keep me from going in the company-room? Why did you bring me in here?"

Blossom senior was staggered for a moment. "Because, you know, the count—"

"And you were afraid the count should know I had a sweetheart? Well, I'll go in and tell him now," she said, marching toward the door.

"Then, why did you not tell him when you slipped out an hour ago? eh, lass?" queried the old man, grasping her hand. "But 'tis all one, Thankful: 'twas not for him I stopped you. There is a young spark with him,—ay, came even as you left, lass,—a likely young gallant; and he and the count are jabbering away in their own lingo, a kind of Italian, belike; eh, Thankful?"

"I know not," she said thoughtfully. "Which way came the other?" In fact, a fear that this young stranger might have witnessed the captain's embrace began to creep over her.

"From town, my lass."

Thankful turned to her father as if she had been waiting a reply to a long-asked question: "Well?"

"Were it not well to put on a few furbelows and a tucker?" queried the old man. "'Tis a gallant young spark; none of your country folk."

"No," said Thankful, with the promptness of a woman who was looking her best, and knew it. And the old man, looking at her, accepted her judgment, and without another word led her to the parlor door, and, opening it, said briefly, "My daughter, Mistress Thankful Blossom."

With the opening of the door came the sound of earnest voices that instantly ceased upon the appearance of Mistress Thankful. Two gentlemen lolling before the fire arose instantly, and one came forward with an air of familiar yet respectful recognition.

"Nay, this is far too great happiness, Mistress Thankful," he said, with a strongly marked foreign accent, and a still more strongly marked foreign manner. "I have been in despair, and my friend here, the Baron Pomposo, likewise."

The slightest trace of a smile, and the swiftest of reproachful glances, lit up the dark face of the baron as he bowed low in the introduction. Thankful dropped the courtesy of the period,—i. e., a duck, with semicircular sweep of the right foot forward. But the right foot was so pretty, and the grace of the little figure so perfect, that the baron raised his eyes from the foot to the face in serious admiration. In the one rapid feminine glance she had given him, she had seen that he was handsome; in the second, which she could not help from his protracted silence, she saw that his beauty centred in his girlish, half fawn-like dark eyes.

"The baron," explained Mr. Blossom, rubbing his hands together as if through mere friction he was trying to impart a warmth to the reception which his hard face discountenanced,— "the baron visits us under discouragement. He comes from far countries. It is the custom of gentlefolk of— of foreign extraction to wander through strange lands, commenting upon the habits and doings of the peoples. He will find in Jersey," continued Mr. Blossom, apparently appealing to Thankful, yet really evading her contemptuous glance, "a hard-working yeomanry, ever ready to welcome the stranger, and account to him, penny for penny, for all his necessary expenditure; for which purpose, in these troublous times, he will provide for himself gold or other moneys not affected by these local disturbances."

"He will find, good friend Blossom," said the baron in a rapid, voluble way, utterly at variance with the soft, quiet gravity of his eyes, "Beauty, Grace, Accomplishment, and—eh—Santa Maria, what shall I say?" He turned appealingly to the count.

"Virtue," nodded the count.

"Truly, Birtoo! all in the fair lady of thees countries. Ah, believe me, honest friend Blossom, there is mooch more in thees than in thoss!"

So much of this speech was addressed to Mistress Thankful, that she had to show at least one dimple in reply, albeit her brows were slightly knit, and she had turned upon the speaker her honest, questioning eyes.

"And then the General Washington has been kind enough to offer his protection," added the count.

"Any fool—any one," supplemented Thankful hastily, with a slight blush—"may have the general's pass, ay, and his good word. But what of Mistress Prudence Bookstaver?—she that has a sweetheart in Knyphausen's brigade, ay,—I warrant a Hessian, but of gentle blood, as Mistress Prudence has often told me,—and, look you, all her letters stopped by the general, ay, I warrant, read by my Lady Washington too, as if 'twere HER fault that her lad was in arms against Congress. Riddle me that, now!"

"'Tis but prudence, lass," said Blossom, frowning on the girl. "'Tis that she might disclose some movement of the army, tending to defeat the enemy."

"And why should she not try to save her lad from capture or ambuscade such as befell the Hessian commissary with the provisions that you—"

Mr. Blossom, in an ostensible fatherly embrace, managed to pinch Mistress Thankful sharply. "Hush, lass," he said with simulated playfulness; "your tongue clacks like the Whippany mill.—My daughter has small concern—'tis the manner of womenfolk—in politics," he explained to his guests. "These dangersome days have given her sore affliction by way of parting comrades of her childhood, and others whom she has much affected. It has in some sort soured her."

Mr. Blossom would have recalled this speech as soon as it escaped him, lest it should lead to a revelation from the truthful Mistress Thankful of her relations with the Continental captain. But to his astonishment, and, I may add, to my own, she showed nothing of that disposition she had exhibited a few moments before. On the contrary, she blushed slightly, and said nothing.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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