



"The boy lay smiling in his sleep with the letter clasped closely in his hand."

CONCERNING THE BOY.

BY VIOLET SNAGGE.

ILLUSTRATED BY F. PEGRAM.

THE Boy whistled softly as he moved about the room, picking up one thing and another, and putting together those of his possessions which were to be left behind. It was early yet. The dawn had just come in, chill and grey with foreboding of rain, and the wind sounded gently disconsolate as it sighed amongst the trees and round the angles of the house on that October morning. The weather might have made an effort to be a little less depressing, the Boy thought, for as it was it would not be much of a day, and a little sunshine might have helped things through. There were so many good-byes to be said before another dawn came in, and he hated saying good-bye. There was the mater, the best mater in the world; she would feel it rather just at first, though she had always wanted him to apply for this special billet, and had not said a word even when some ass at the War Office told her that it was "a two years' job in a deadly climate." Still it was bad to say good-bye. There were the horses to leave behind, his own hunters and the others, the dogs, and all the people about the place, the keepers and the grooms, good sorts all of them. And the old place itself. Altogether it was not going to be a nice day, but still the Boy whistled softly under his breath, and did not feel too depressed, because, after all, the "good-bye" that mattered most had been said the day before, and, though the thought of it had cast a shadow over his last few days at home, yet he had come away from saying it happier than he had thought it possible for any man to be, and had wondered, as he rode home through the lanes, why he had never realised before what a glorious place the world was, how good it was to live, and how quickly two years in West Africa would pass; for had he not now something to live for, some one to think of when the hours went slowly?

From all of which it may be gathered that he was in love, and, because he was very young and because he had never had the complaint before, he took it badly; so badly, that his mother, from

whom he fondly imagined that he had concealed every sign of it, but who had recognised the fact long before he was aware of it himself, watched the symptoms anxiously and tried to hide her heartache when she realised that some one else, and that a stranger, had taken her Boy from her in the last few weeks which she had thought would belong to herself. He was as anxious as ever to make her happy, and still every morning at breakfast put at least half his day at her disposal, so that she had nothing to complain of; and if she could not help noticing the relief with which he heard that he was not wanted, still, she felt that that was as it should be, and only what might have happened long before. For the Boy was twenty-four, and being good to look upon and of an honesty and chivalry above the average, might, had he been so minded, have placed his heart, which was worth having, and his possessions, which were great, at the disposal of more than one amongst the daughters of his mother's old friends without fear of refusal. But he danced with them and hunted with them, and enjoyed life generally with a gay friendliness to all alike that was distinctly discouraging, and went on his way in blissful ignorance of the heartaches he left behind him. There had been no one whose coming or going had made the smallest difference to him, and his mother had secretly rejoiced until one short month ago. Six weeks exactly before the date of his sailing, the Boy heard that the property which marched with his own had at last found a tenant; two weeks later Sir John Pleydell and his daughter Mary had entered into their new possessions; three days later, the Boy's mother, dragging him, an unwilling victim, with her, had felt it her duty, as their nearest neighbour, to call upon them, and from that moment his world was changed.

Looking back on these four weeks he could not have told how it began, but somehow after this first visit, from which he had come away feeling unaccountably pleased with life in general, and with his share of it in particular, there had been few days which had not found him spending

at least some hours at Kingsmede. There was so much to show them—the best pools for finding trout, the short cut through the woods to his own place; as he explained to his mother, it was “only doing the civil thing to newcomers to show them round a bit.”

So the golden September days flew by, and found the Boy developing a faculty for worship which astonished even his mother, though, after the manner of mothers, she had always endowed him with every good gift, and, if he lost something of his spontaneous gaiety in the process, that was only natural; he had been a boy too long, and now that she had come, the lady of his dreams, he was waking up to a new world, not so happy-go-lucky as the old perhaps, but more wonderful, much more wonderful. The day before he was to sail he had ridden over to Kingsmede late in the afternoon and had had tea by the great open fireplace in the hall with Mary and her father. They had sat on afterwards talking in the firelight, as they always did, and it had all been just as usual except that, like a dead weight at the back of the Boy's mind, lay the chilling thought that it was for the last time. He had tried not to think that the next evening and for all the evenings to come Mary would sit there pouring out tea, with the firelight playing on her hair as it was now, and with Sir John coming in with his cheery account of the day's doings, while the dogs sat round in a sedate circle waiting for what a lucky chance might bring their way; that it would all be just the same, only that he would not be there; and, though he had wanted to make the most of this last visit, and had thought that there would be so much for him and Mary to talk about, somehow a silence had fallen between them, and after Sir John had gone off for his evening pipe the room had grown very still, so still that the Boy had found himself wondering whether Mary too could hear the beating of his heart, which to himself sounded so painfully loud, and he started almost with relief when a log shifted and fell, breaking the silence, and sending a shower of sparks up the wide chimney. He had risen then, and she had risen too, and they had stood together by the hearth, and he had held out his hand to say good-bye and had said, “Mary, you will

not forget me?” and she had said, “No, I don't think I can forget.” Something in her voice had made him pause and look down into her eyes, and he had seen that they were misty and soft, and looked a little sorry, and had lost some of their sparkle; and it had been more than he could bear, and before he knew it he had found himself telling her that she must not mind his going away, for that he could not bear to see her unhappy; but that, if she did mind, he was the happiest man in the world, for he loved her and could not live without her, and if she could ever think of him that was all that mattered, for, though he had nothing to offer her that was worthy of her, still, all his life was hers to do with as she would.

She had been a little frightened at first: his voice had sounded so gruff, and he had seemed so different from the light-hearted Boy she knew; but she had left her hands in his, and had listened while he had told her that he would come back for her when his two years of special service were over, and that after that nothing in the world would ever separate them again. At the end she had turned to him and had said the words that had sung in his heart as he had ridden home under the stars that evening, and that were ringing there still as he moved about his room on that cold October morning: “I don't think I can forget—I will wait.”

“So you see how it is, major. One can't help making an effort when there is some one at the other side of the world expecting tremendous things of one, and I can't disappoint her, can I? I don't know if you know what it is like to have the best woman in the world waiting for you, but, by heaven, it is worth having.”

The major, whose experiences had not lain altogether in that direction, grunted by way of reply, and drew the papers on the table towards him.

A year and a half of the Boy's two years' service had gone by, and the end was not so immeasurably far off, and after all it had been a grand time!—hard work and plenty of it, and the climate none too good, but the best men in the world to work under, and a fair measure of success to reward their efforts. Even the major, who, every one had told him, was a surly brute, had been uncommonly good to him, and the Boy had gone to the length

of endowing him with his confidences: not that he would understand, for he was well known to be a woman-hater, but a good chap for all that and one to be trusted. Eighteen months under African suns had done little to change the Boy, beyond making him a little leaner and a good deal browner, and there was the old eagerness and joy of life in his eyes as he leant across the table which had been drawn outside the major's tent.

"I should be awfully glad if you could see your way to letting me go," he said. "Piggott is really not fit to go. The doctor vetted him this morning and says he hasn't a two-mile walk in him, let alone two hundred miles, or I wouldn't have applied for the job. It would be a chance for me to do something on my own account, and you see I have reasons for wanting to show that I am not such an ass as I look. I should be back in camp inside of three weeks, and you may trust me not to make a hash of the show."

Major Dallison frowned. It was true what the Boy said. Piggott was still too weak, after his turn of fever, to think of going, and some one was wanted to take an expedition into the interior with a message of warning, polite but firm, to the chief of a tribe which had, of late, shown a tendency to become more than a little unruly. There would be no fighting, though the feeling was not altogether friendly; but the mission required tact, and Marriot, the only other officer at his disposal at the moment, was a blundering ass where diplomacy was concerned, and as likely as not to ruin the whole scheme. Besides, though he would not own it, the Boy had a way with him which the major found it difficult to resist. He was always absurdly pleased when any one did him a good turn.

"All right, you can go. You had better start to-morrow morning. Take Blackett and twenty-five men; come over this evening after mess, and I will give you your instructions—and don't be such an astounding ass," he added, as the Boy sought energetically to express his gratitude; and turning abruptly away the major went into his tent.

A low, continuous moaning from the narrow camp bedstead, and the irritatingly persistent creak of the ropes as the improvised punkah swung heavily back-

wards and forwards in the still, hot air, now fainter as sleepiness overcame the punkah-boy sitting crouched against the side of the tent, and now stronger as the major's foot stirred him to consciousness again, but nothing else save the droning hum of insects to break the stillness of that burning afternoon. The major sat as though carved in stone, his face turned to the bed, his eyes fixed upon the still, straight figure lying upon it. He had sat thus ever since they had carried the Boy into camp the evening before, and stirred only after each visit of the doctor to follow him out and learn his verdict.

He rose now as the latter entered, and for ten minutes or so the two men stooped over the bed, while with deft, strong fingers the doctor moved the bandages and made his examination. Then he looked up, and shook his head.

"No change," he said. "We must wait. It is not the wound that is so serious; that in itself is nothing; but the fever is taking it out of him so, and I am afraid of the reaction when it leaves him. There is nothing more to be done until that happens. He has youth and clean living on his side, and we will make a fight of it; and, believe me," he added, as he caught sight of the other's face, "I will do my best." And with an encouraging nod the little man, with the biggest heart and cleverest hands in the Service, went out, leaving Dallison to his silent watching of the figure on the bed.

It had all been the very worst luck. The mission had been successfully accomplished, and the expedition was within four days of home with none sick or sorry, when, without warning, as the party defiled through a narrow pass in the hills, a shot had rung out, and the sergeant riding in front had turned in time to see the Boy reel in his saddle and fall heavily sideways, with a bullet wound in the side of his head. It was always the way, the major thought bitterly, as he sat there waiting for the first sign of returning life—always the best allowed to suffer. It was some comfort to know that the fanatic who fired the shot was now in chains, that early dawn would bring a just retribution and the grimmest penalty of the law; but the sacrifice of that life would not bring back the other that seemed to be slowly ebbing away in the burning

heat of that heavy, still afternoon; and the major thought of the "some one at the other side of the world," and swore softly and comprehensively under his breath, and wondered whether the incessant moaning would ever cease, and at the unspeakable cruelty of it all.

For four days and nights the Boy lay, while the fever took its course, and wasted the strong, straight limbs, and took the tan from his face, and carved out his cheeks into two big hollows with a burning patch in each; and now and again there would be a pause in the moaning, and the major would bend over to catch the hurried words that came tumbling out in a hoarse whisper: "It is all right—tell her it is all right—I am coming—only there is something round my eyes and I can't see—why won't they let me come? Say it, Mary, say it again; say you will wait," and then again at intervals, "Mary—Mary." But after four days the fever subsided suddenly, and left him weak, so weak that the major, whose eyes never left the face of the hastily summoned doctor, was suddenly so reassured by what he saw there, that the reaction was almost greater than he could stand, and he administered a kick of more than usual violence to the punkah-boy by way of relief to his feelings, and took the doctor's hand in his in a grip of iron when he left the tent, but could find no words to express what he felt.

All that night the Boy lay quiet, sleeping at intervals, and hardly moving, except just at first to pluck feebly at the bandages round his eyes; but after the doctor had explained their meaning to him, he did not make even that effort, but lay still until late into the following morning. Even then it was not until the doctor had come and gone that he made an effort to speak, and beckoned the major to his side.

"There should be a letter," he half whispered. "Will you see? In a blue envelope. It didn't come last mail—I am afraid something may be wrong."

The words came in hurried gasps and the hands clenched and unclenched themselves nervously until the major put a letter into them. Then the strained position relaxed, and the Boy sank comfortably into the pillows.

"Read it," he said. "Just read enough to see if she is all right. I can't see with

these things round my eyes—and I must know. You don't mind?"

And then the major took the letter and opened it, and his eye ran down the page and caught the words written there. "It is best that I should tell you before you come back," it said, "and you will understand. You will, I know, feel as I do, that we made a great mistake in taking our friendship for anything more serious. I shall always look back on those days at Kingsmede as some of the very best. You will let me be your friend still, and some day you will come to know, as I have, the meaning of a great love and the difference between that and the boy-and-girl friendship which we so foolishly mistook for it, and you will be glad that I have written this."

The major read no further. There was a dead silence in the room. Then the Boy's voice, louder this time and with a note of anxiety in it.

"Well?" he said. "What is it? Tell me. Is she all right? Why don't you tell me?"

There was a hardly perceptible pause before the major answered. "Everything is splendid," he said. "It is a grand letter."

Then as the Boy evidently expected to hear more he pulled himself together and went on: "She—she says she often thinks of the days at Kingsmede"; then—with a brilliant flight of imagination—"she is counting the days till you get back."

The Boy sighed contentedly. "Thank you," he said. "If you will give me the letter I think I could sleep now."

And the other laid the letter on the bed and went out, and what he suffered need not be told here, for it does not concern the story of the Boy: but, when the major went back into the tent and moved to the side of the narrow bed, where the Boy lay smiling in his sleep with the letter clasped closely in his hand, he thanked God for the lie that he had told; for as he looked he saw that the Boy would be spared the bitterness of awakening, and that the strong, faithful spirit had gone out into the Unknown.

And so the Boy died, with no thought for the mother whose heart would break, or for the friend who would gladly have given his life for him; but with a smile on his lips for the woman who forgot.