

Myra

by

Beatrice Redpath

Illustrated by

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Hard's sensations were not those of pleasure. It was more a sense of curiosity that was bringing him back, a desire to see for himself what things had come to pass in the ten years that he had been away. It was strange to be returning, he thought, as he stood watching the foam churned up in the wake of the ship; spreading upon the black water like delicate white lace. Some of his friends would have married, some marriages would be dissolved; others of his friends would undoubtedly be dead. He had not kept in touch with the old life, he had had no inclination to do so.

He had possessed neither the will nor the aptitude to create a new world for himself. The time had gone by and he had stood aside, as though with his back to the wall, with a curious smile, watching life, as it flowed past. He had named himself a failure the day that he had left Montreal, and he had since then found no reason to change this opinion. He had busied himself with trivialities, for after all one must live, even though the seeds of bitterness are sown too deep to be ever eradicated in this world. Still . . . one goes on.

He had no illusions concerning himself. A stronger nature, in the first place, would not have fallen into his temptation, and later, even if he had so succumbed, would assuredly have taken up the gage which life had flung to him, would have gathered his forces together to face his reverses. But he had not done so. Since he had been robbed of his happiness, he would make no effort in pursuit of amelioration. He would stand aside and let the world go on, but he would not deny himself the satisfaction of proclaiming that it was an unjust world.

On the following morning Montreal's unkempt waterfront would rise out of the mists, and he felt a sudden nostalgia for the crowded thoroughfares, the shops and the theatres, the absurd dazzling signs, the whole roar and

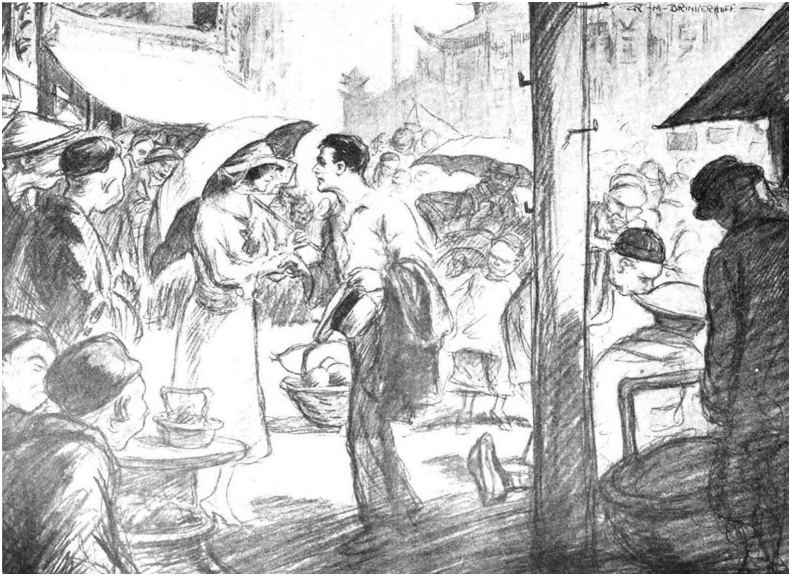


dear familiar glitter of it all. He had seen much that was more beautiful, many spots on the earth's surface that for the moment, by their unparalleled perfection, had seemed to set right again a world gone raspingly out of tune. Still, there was nothing that stirred one so poignantly as the spot where one had been born, seen after long absence, however embittered one might have become.

If it had not been for his uncle having named him amongst his heirs, a sort of death-bed forgiveness, he would not have been here at all. He would be . . . well, Heaven knows where he would have been. He had never been successful enough at anything to have kept at it for very long. He had been too restless to stick at things, to carry them through. What had been the use?

"Well," Huard suddenly felt a hand laid on his shoulder, "thinking of the lights of St. Catherine Street?"

Huard turned about swiftly, rousing himself from his thoughts to respond to the greeting. Wallace Farrell had rather forced his companionship upon Huard at the beginning of the trip, ignoring Huard's distant manner. Huard had stood aloof for so long, especially from Farrell's type who exuded a sense of prosperity, that he found it difficult now to make friends easily. But a certain charm of manner, a sense of dominating power in the man, had beaten down his defenses. He had been more than fully repaid, for Farrell's well-stocked mind and broad outlook had made him an absorbing companion. They had spent the greater part of their time together, walking the decks, battling over a chess board, or entering into long discussions until it seemed as though an enduring friendship had grown up between them. Farrell was perhaps the younger of the two, but massive shoulders and a large frame had made him appear the senior, for Huard had the trained down appearance of an athlete.



As I wiped the blood from my knuckles, she held out her hand to me.

“The lights of St. Catherine Street,” Huard repeated, as though tasting the flavor of the words and finding them to his liking.

They stood smoking in silence, looking out across the distances of water. From the saloon below they could hear the strains of a popular air which Farrell began to whistle softly to himself. Just behind them a port hole was ajar, and they could hear the sound of a man’s angry voice, followed by the high mocking laughter of a woman. With one accord they moved away, and commenced pacing the deck, while Huard’s lean face twisted into a harsh and cynical expression.

“As usual,” he said, “a woman making trouble. There’s always a woman somehow at the bottom of every man’s failure.”

Farrell gave a quick glance at Huard’s face, and then laughed as though quietly and simply amused by this cynicism.

“Is that what you really think?”

“Think? I know. At least it’s what I have always found to be the case.”

Farrell struck a match and the light flamed up on his face for an instant, revealing an expression of intense gravity. Huard noticed how deep were the lines on either side of Farrell’s mouth. This man had suffered. Well, who escaped? In some form or other we all went down into the ruck of things, only the patterns of our vicissitudes were different, that was all.

The match sputtered and went out, and Farrell's voice came quietly from the accentuated darkness.

"I've found the reverse of that," he said slowly, "I would say that there is always a woman responsible for every man's success."

Huard shrugged his shoulders while the cynical expression left his face. He felt, instead, all at once, very tired.

"I'm glad you can say that," he said, "I've knocked about a good deal, seen something of life in one way and another, but I don't know that I've ever seen the woman yet who had actually helped a man to succeed. He's done it in spite of her, or she has been merely a zero mark. Perhaps I've been unfortunate in the cases I've run across . . . it seems to me I've seen many a man ruined by a woman's hand in his fate."

Farrell appeared to smile incredulously.

"I suppose there may be women of the kind you speak about," he said, "women who can wreak havoc in a man's life, but it has never been my lot to meet that kind. I, myself, owe all I am to the woman I married."

Huard regarded his companion thoughtfully as he loomed up beside him in the darkness.

"I should not have thought that you would have required much help," he said slowly, "but then you are the generous kind . . . I think you would perhaps give the credit where it wasn't altogether due. I may be a cynic: life has made me so. And yet, usually, I suppose we have only ourselves to blame in the long run. Some of us are apt to try and cast the blame on others."

"Still," put in Farrell, "I sometimes wonder whether those who take a hand in our lives, take into account sufficiently our individual weaknesses in their dealings with us. We must take the measure of the effect after all. What is one man's meat might be another man's poison. Good and evil have always appeared to me to be rather mixed."

Huard did not reply. He had scarcely allowed himself to think of Myra in all these years, and now he felt a curious sensation in speaking of her. It was a fever that was not to die out. Because of her he had been an outcast for the best ten years of his life. He had toiled and sweated and labored, and for no end save that a man must live . . . and yet when he thought of her he felt his head swim and his heart leap to the vision his brain conjured up of her. Even ten years had not sufficed to rid him of that fever. He knew that were she to

stand before him now the years would drop away as though they had not been, and he would be staring into her face with the old passionate intensity, oblivious to everyone, of everything, except of her. That was the sort of thing that it had been.

He was tempted to speak of it all to Farrell and to hear this man's comments. He had kept it shut up within himself so long that speech would be a relief.

"I ran across a man once in the East," he began slowly, "whose story rather goes to substantiate what I have been saying. He had lost his head over a woman, and he didn't seem able to forget. It had been six years of madness; you can't erase the impression easily."

He paused and Farrell responded.

"I prefer the kind that can't forget."

"I don't know that there's much merit in remembering the past," Huard remarked shortly, "I suppose in this man's case it was pretty well stamped in. It's not a long story and a very commonplace one. Just such things are happening all the time."

Oh, how memory was flooding back, intolerably vivid. He spoke jerkily, in short clipped sentences.

"The woman was married to a man whom she loathed. Apparently he was every kind of a beast. When she saw how this man felt about her, she naturally turned to him. It went on with no possibility of any outcome. He had nothing to offer her, and he didn't feel that he could urge her to break up her life and go with him, unhappy as she was. She was the kind of woman who, when once a man cared for her, intended that he should care for her till the end. She couldn't let him go. Naturally, in this case, he never had any desire to drop out of her life, but it was the only sane, the only reasonable thing to do. He cared too much to be sane . . . he hadn't the strength of will to resist her. He would try to keep away and then she would send for him, arrange to meet him at the house of a friend, call for him at his office, contrive a meeting in some way or other. You can imagine how impossible it became. He was so mad about her that he would have committed murder if there had been any chance of getting her by doing so. He used to tell her that there was nothing ahead, in his saner moments, and beg her to look at the situation squarely. He said that they must give each other up, that it could not go on.

“But she would not have it so. She told him that she could not bear her life if he went out of her existence. She inferred to him that if there was only money enough she would go with him to the ends of the world. She told him that there was only need of patience to wait, and something would turn up he would get his chance and then their road to happiness would be straight and clear before them.

“And then it was that it seemed as though his chance had come. He heard of a big deal of his uncle’s, that seemed to make it all easy. He forged his name to a cheque to get the ready money that was necessary. He was too mad about her to see the utter folly of what he was doing. It failed of course and you can imagine what followed.

“His uncle was more decent than he deserved, but the old man insisted that he should clear out of the country. I think it was probably with an idea of cutting him adrift from her influence. The stipulation was that as long as the uncle lived, he was not to show his face in Canada. You may imagine that he had no desire to do so. He was finished he was through.

“You see,” Huard continued with a shrug, “it’s a common enough story, an everyday affair. I don’t suppose she was altogether responsible for it all. He was a fool of course. But it goes to show what I was saying. That many a man is ruined by a woman’s hand in his fate.”

“Did he ever see her again?”

“Once. Her husband died some months later and she went abroad. She found out where he was and she sent him a note to ask him to come and see her. And she found out just what she wanted to know. He was just the same sort of fool as he had always been. There was of course no longer any question of there being anything between them. He was an outcast beyond the pale. But she could not resist seeing if he were still under the spell. So for the sake of her vanity she dragged him back again to his hells of longing and desire.”

Farrell’s expression was one of incredulous surprise.

“I suppose that she never realised what she was doing,” he remarked.

Huard gave a short laugh.

“I know that women hold men when they haven’t the right, when nothing can come of it but the slow crumbling of the man’s life under the strain. And a man is safer with a cobra than with a woman of that description. At least the cobra would finish off his work, and when all’s said the dead are only dead.”

There was silence between them as they paced slowly up and down, each intent on his own thoughts. The music below had stopped and there was only the silken sound of the swishing water, the low monotonous thud of the machinery, and the noise of their feet on the deck. Before Huard's eyes was the vision of Myra . . . Myra, with the little widow's peak on her forehead from which the hair was so daringly drawn back; Myra in white on a summer's day, with all the flowers in her sloping garden contributing to the sure and perfect excellence of the picture; Myra, as he had last seen her, cool and serene in her black, watching him with that impenetrable expression which he had never been able to fathom. The eyes of the Mona Lisa looked out of her frame with the same elusive impenetrability.

Myra! The fever was not yet out of his blood . . . ten years had not dissipated it, nor had all the pits of darkness through which his spirit had travelled, lessened or destroyed it. She was the woman he cared about in spite of everything. There had never been any other for him, there never could be any other to supplant her. Oh, he had no illusions left concerning her, but even that knowledge did not abate the fever, the old longing to hear the sound of her voice was with him yet as surely as it had ever been.

Mentally he shrugged away these thoughts. Usually he did not allow his mind such license. And then Farrell's voice broke in upon him, demanding his attention.

"I want to tell you a very different tale," he said suddenly, "to bear out my side of the question.

"I want you to give some rein to your imagination," he began, in his leisurely, pleasant voice, "and see a youngster of about eighteen, being brought up by a foolish, priggish woman, who was neither kith nor kin to him. It's too long to go into the reason for that, and anyway it has nothing to do with the story. Suffice it that I fretted like a colt under the bit. Then a question arose; I was to have a tutor instead of going to college. My aunt, she was only aunt by courtesy, in her foolish, weak way, thought that I might be led into temptations . . . there was some wild blood back of me . . . and she was all for keeping me carefully done up in cotton wool. Well, the outcome was that I broke loose, ran away, got out altogether.

"This only comes as a preface to what I want to tell you. But I must pass over it briefly, just to let you see the kind I was, and how far I had gone in the wrong direction. I don't think I was wholly to blame. If I had a son, and there was bad blood behind him, I'd throw him out, to sink or swim; I

wouldn't make a hypocrite of him. Sink or swim, that is all there is to it. But the trouble was that I had been kept in cotton wool too long."

I shipped as a stoker going across the Atlantic. It's not a pretty job, and the men who go in for it are not exactly the companions one might choose for a boy straight out of the nursery. Perhaps you can imagine the psychological effect it had on a lad who had been a species of hot-house plant up till then. I was mad clear through with all that had driven me to it, and I just let myself go. I found that I couldn't keep to the old decencies of conduct without putting out too much effort; and what was the use? I rebounded in the opposite direction. I made friends with the toughest of the lot, and soon there wasn't very much left for them to teach me. There was a great big brute of a Swede . . . I chummed up with him. After we landed I managed to get a job on a freighter going East. By the time I arrived in Shanghai my education was pretty well completed.

"I found, during that time, that I had a certain facility for dealing with men, and after a while I got to be overseer of a gang of coolies. There were ups and downs in plenty after that. I went from one thing to another, and when I wasn't working I was sitting around making myself just as beastly drunk as I possibly could. When I had used up all my earnings I'd go back to work again.

"I had no sort of ambition, no aim, no particular desire. I had a grudge against life. I felt that it had given me a pretty raw deal, and that the only way to get even was to live as rotten a life as the law allowed. And the law allows a good bit of license in those quarters.

"Well, this sort of life went on for a number of years, and then, just by chance, I fell into a job in a shipping office. It gave me enough at least to have a decent suit of clothes. And then it was that the incident occurred which was to change the whole course of things.

"I was walking along a street in Shanghai one blazing hot afternoon, strolling along with just one desire in the world . . . a long cool drink with ice in it. Suddenly I saw something that pulled me up short. A great brute of a man was beating a miserable specimen of a horse, that could scarcely carry itself along, much less the load. The senseless cruelty of it maddened me, and taking a run into the road I hit the brute square in the jaw, and he toppled over like a nine pin. Of course in a second or so he was up again, and then there was as nice a kind of little street row as you can well imagine. I had had some practice at that kind of thing; anyway, the end of it was that

he was led off with a black eye, vowing vengeance on all damned foreigners, and I turned back, wiping the blood off my knuckles, to run full tilt into a woman who had been standing watching the whole affair. She held out her hand to me, and before I knew what I was doing, I was shaking hands with her as though I had known her all my life.

“‘Thank you,’ she said looking straight at me, ‘you did what I had been longing to do.’”

Try and picture it if you can! All the riot and confusion of a street in Shanghai, the swinging gold and scarlet signs, the painted dragons, the noise and the brilliancy, the clatter of foreign tongues, the intense heat and the swarming yellow faces . . . the throngs of gaudily dressed natives, and then this woman in white, looking for all the world as though she had stepped right out of an old English garden, seeming even to carry about her the fragrance of heliotrope. I hadn’t spoken to anyone of her sort since I had left England. She stood for all the old decencies of living that I had near forgotten. She took me back twelve years at a leap, and I was a boy again, with all my old enthusiasms for life, and in addition there was the passionate intensity of a man who has been starved . . . starved without knowing it.

“And there we stood, in the midst of the crowded street, with Chinese and Orientals jostling our elbows, there we stood looking at one another, without speaking a word. I had got one or two blows on the head and was feeling rather light-headed, and began to say some quite preposterous things to her, which she didn’t seem to mind. She stood there with a quiet smile on her face, listening until I had finished.

“‘I think we might find that we have a lot to say to one another?’ she said in her soft slurring tone, and then she asked me to come and see her at her hotel.

“I think, perhaps, that of all that has ever come into my life, I shall remember most clearly how she looked when she came toward me that day, with her hand outstretched and that wonderful intimacy in her manner, in her face and voice, as though we two in all that noisy chattering crowd understood one another with a wonderful completeness. It was as though the intimacy had grown up long before ever we met, and we were merely being just a shade conventional in our attitude, because of all the people passing along the street.

“Our friendship progressed rapidly; there did not seem to be any lingering advances or slow stages. Every moment I could spare away from

my work we were together. Life seemed to have blazed out into new colors; I was caught up into something so different from what I had ever known, ever dreamed of. Women had been merely flesh and blood to me before that time I had never looked for spirit never cared to know whether it was there or not. It was only when I came to think of what I had to offer her that I sank to despair. I had flung my life away like a thing of no value, wasted it, smeared it with evil living. How could I offer it to her now . . . how could I offer myself, seeing I was only what I was?

“I remember one evening sitting with her in the garden of her hotel, stumbingly trying to tell her something of this. She sat in a deep willow chair, her face cupped in one hand, staring at me steadily with that strange burning look in her eyes, as though there were a fire lighted within.

“‘Together,’ she said, ‘together you and I could take the world as though it were putty, and mould it to our wish.’

“Oh, it all sounds too romantic, too full of moonlight and fantasy, to make it seem possible in the telling, that a man who had fallen as low as I had fallen could have the supreme audacity even to look at a woman like she was. Looking back on it now and seeing what I was at that time, it scarcely seems possible.

“I didn’t hide anything from her. I told her just what I was, I spoke the entire truth and told her of the beastly life I had lived since I had come to the East. And she listened with that same expression and once she put out one hand and stopped me.

“‘Oh, what does it all matter?’ she said, ‘since you are you. I feel as though all my life up to this time I had lived among shadows you are the only real thing that has ever come into my life. I have only been playing at living till now. What has the past to do with us? We have all the future to think about.’

“And then later she spoke with that wonderful ring in her voice. Often, afterwards, I would repeat over to myself what she had said. It gave me courage to go on, it gave me the confidence I lacked.

“‘You’ she said, ‘are made for success. It is only the technique you lack. You have all the genius for it.’

“But she was seeing me in the glamour of her own light. I was less than nothing in myself, could have become nothing if it had not been for her belief, her inspiration. It was like holding up a lamp to a stumbling man in the dark. Without that lamp I would have fallen, utterly and inevitably.

“Well, finally we settled how it was to be. I was to look out for a better job, make good, not in any sense of making a fortune, but just put myself in the way of earning a decent living, earning a decent living, and in a year I was to go back to Canada for her. A year seemed like an eternity to me, but there was nothing for me to do but to agree with her plan.

“She sailed soon after this. That time before she sailed was like nothing but a delirious dream of happiness. It was as though I had been lifted right out of the slime and the ugliness of my life and given a place among the stars. The memory of that week stayed with me in the time that followed, every moment of it unforgettable.

“After she had gone I went to work and plugged away as hard as I could for a month or so, but gradually the reaction set in: I became despondent, lost confidence, felt that I had set myself an impossible task. I slipped back gradually to the old ways.

“I felt that if I could have seen her I might have been able to gather myself together again, I might have been able to make a fresh start, to begin anew. And then strangely enough I found that only with the aid of my own particular devil could I visualise her. At other times her face was just a fleeting blur, I could not get more than just an impression, but under the influence of wine I could see her as though she were there before me.”

I remember so well one night, sitting in a vile little restaurant by myself. I suppose I was very drunk indeed, and suddenly she loomed up before me, but looking at me with such cold, quiet scorn. I sat there for a long time, immovable. I couldn't lift the glass to my lips, and then finally stumbling to my feet, I threw the glass on the floor, and went home to bed. I was back at work two days later with the fixed determination that that would be the very last time that I should fail her.

“But of course it wasn't. Not by any means. It continued pretty much the same all through that year. I struggled and failed and struggled and failed, but always I managed to come up again, for I felt that she was holding fast. It was as though each time it was over I heard her say . . . ‘I am not letting go.’

“That was what she had said to me once: ‘I'll never let go. I'm that kind. I can't let go whether it be for good or evil. I must keep everything that I have ever had. I'm not going to let you slip back, I'm not going to lose you. Once a thing is mine it's mine forever. That's the kind I am.’ ”

You can imagine how the knowledge of that would help. That she wasn't letting go no matter what happened. I could never sink to quite the old depths of shame. Oh, bad as it was it was nothing like it had been, and all the time I was able to go a little longer without falling back. Often I would see her eyes in the smoke-laden rooms, seeming to pour shame like a fiery metal down into my soul. And I would get up, leaving my glass unfinished, and go home and lie in an agony of remorse on my bed, tossing the entire night through, in a hell of self-condemnation because I had failed her again. For it was hell, if anyone ever suffered hell, and yet there were times when I pulled myself up short and said that I would succeed. In the light of her confidence everything seemed possible.

"Well, the year somehow came to an end and I wrote and told her that it was no use, I hadn't done what I said I would . . . it was finished. And then I let myself sink down to the blackest despair a man had ever known. I had seen Heaven itself within my grasp, and it was only through my own cursed weakness that I had failed to grasp it.

"In a while her letter came. 'I am not letting go,' is what she wrote. 'You are going to win. You must win. You shall win. I can't let you go.'

"Perhaps you can imagine what that letter was to me after the black despair that had taken possession of me. She said I was to have another chance, another year. She was ready to wait . . . to give me my second chance.

"It seemed as though after that letter that I began to wake up from that hideous nightmare that I had been living through. And that year was different. Oh, I don't say that there wasn't a struggle, but just the feeling that she was there, defying the devil for me, well, I can't tell you what that meant to me. Most women would have thrown me over, seen that I was no use, refused to wait any longer. But she only said . . . 'I can't let go.'

"I'm not going into the details of that year. It was all work, hard grinding work, but there was success with it . . . anyway a minor sort of success. I sailed for Canada when the year was up and we were married quietly a few weeks later. We met as we had met that day in Shanghai . . . with the same consciousness of a perfect understanding.

"From that time on it was just a struggle upward to success. I don't say that there weren't plenty of stumbling blocks. But she was there beside me, and I never fell back again. She was my inspiration, my religion, my salvation. I can't say more than that."

Farrell paused, and a silence followed his long recital. Huard glanced at the man's profile with an increased measure of respect. Here was a man who had been down in the depths a man who had climbed up step by step the long hard way a man he was proud to know. On a sudden impulse he stretched out his hand to Farrell.

"I shall have to amend my statement somewhat," he said as the other gripped his hand.

"I'd like to show you her photograph," Farrell continued, taking a pocket book from his coat. He passed Huard the small slip of paper, and Huard paused in the light of a port hole to look down at the pictured face.

Myra! He stared down at the photograph, startled and uncomprehending. Myra! What had Myra to do with it? Why had Farrell given him this photograph to look at? the same one as he had in the back of his own watch.

He stood staring at it, afraid to look up, afraid to speak, lest he should reveal the truth to the man before him. It was so difficult to grasp. It passed belief. It was one of those things that are baffling in their strangeness. Farrell's voice broke in upon him.

"It's only a very poor resemblance. It's an old one, but it just fits in this little case. You can't see what she is really like."

"I think perhaps I can imagine," Huard said, scarcely conscious of what he was saying.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

Illustrations have been relocated due to using a non-page layout.

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[The end of *Myra* by Beatrice Redpath]