

In the Wake of War

Hallie Erminie Rives

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There is nothing so elusive yet so fascinating as a chance resemblance. We walk a street crowded with thousands of human atoms like ourselves, yet each meaningless, unindividual. The mass has the consistency of a stream of water parted by a stone. Suddenly one of these atoms acquires form, color, substance, and character; its individuality strikes a chord in the brain. A thousand disassociate fragments — memory-worn strands of time and place — struggle to coalesce, to re-weave themselves into a pattern we once knew. Our thoughts give aid. Recollection puzzles itself, finds itself impotent, rages at its own powerlessness. At such a moment the mind recurs again and again with painful insistence to the problem, and the chance resemblance, by reason of aggravation, acquires an importance wholly disproportionate. The man who pursues such a will-o'-the-wisp memory does so protesting, in spite of himself.

It was in some such frame of mind that Brent Maxwell stood looking out across the desolate hillside. The landscape still mourned, in blackened stone walls and thinned forests, the devastation of Sherman's march to the sea. The bare unpromise of the scene was in his soul. He knew the gaunt poverty that follows in the wake of war. He had fought loyally for the Union. And now, after fifteen years of reconstruction, he had learned that Appomattox had dawned only upon the first chapter of defeat. The fierce patriotism which had led him, a youth of enthusiasm and dreams of the glory of sacrifice, to leave his place and portion in the North when the first call sounded, and the earnestness of intention with which he had flung himself into the newly breathing industrial life of a Southern city, had had time to cool and sober. In spite of success the very intensity of the struggle against adverse conditions had bred in him a resentment against the necessity which made green fields a desert, plantation a waste, and a smiling country a cemetery of unmarked graves. Something of the dogged sadness which hung on the people among whom he elected to dwell had centred into him. He had lived down the hatred and the sneer, but the process had made him bitter against the circumstances which had given this hatred rise.

On this early morning his thoughts, which had been busy estimating the possibilities of the farm, whose deeds he had in his pocket, and whose foreclosure had brought him from his own city, had been suddenly arrested and turned from their channel. A rattling vehicle had passed him, containing two figures — a man and a woman. The faces of both interested him. The woman's was sad and sober-sweet, surmounted by pearl gray hair. There was a little color in her cheeks. The man had dead white hair and beard, with face blue-tinged and shifting eyes of yellow. He wore a heavy butternut overcoat and a knitted nubia of childishly bright colors.

There was something in this last face that started reverberating echoes in Maxwell's brain. An intangible hand was at work tying together loose ends of recollection. He knew and yet he did not know. Wherever he looked, as he plodded over the farm land, he saw this blue face and dodging gaze. It came before him with an absurd incongruity and yet with a reiterate malevolence.

The sun was high as he walked hack toward the village, past the great, gray-columned house whose shambling porticoes pointed to a past of wealth and grandeur. As he neared the gate a sudden cry made him quicken his steps. A repeating scream — a man's, yet wolf-like, rising and falling with monotonous inflections — filled all the hollows with sound. Its note had a quality of the animal that thickened the hearer's blood. It came from the house. Maxwell broke into a run, burst open the gate and rushed toward the porch.

Rounding a clump of evergreens he saw a strange spectacle. Seated on the ground was the blue-faced man, his fingers clutching the stubble, his lips emitting the beast-like screams which had brought Maxwell from the roadway. Bending over him, with her back toward the gate, was the lady of the sad face and the pearl-gray hair. She was smoothing the thin fringe from the sunken temples, bending now and then to lay her lips caressingly and sobbingly upon his head. From under her arm the yellow eyes looked out straight toward Maxwell. He felt them pass shiftily across his face with a sense of shrinking repulsion. The volume of screams showed no abatement.

The tones with which the woman sought to soothe this outburst were exquisitely tender. "Poor Victor!" she

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was saying; "poor, poor boy!"

Maxwell had stopped short at the mad lustre of those yellow eyes; the woman had not heard his approach. With a strange tightening of the throat he shrank behind a bush and retreated to the road, looking fearfully back over his shoulder. Throughout the long walk back to the village hotel, at every turning, this picture started before him — a slight, gray-gowned figure with hands whose trembling motions suggested the settling of a dove to guard its young, and from under whose caress gleamed out topaz eyes in which lurked the devil of madness.

He stared over the table of the low-ceiled, smoky-beamed dining-room, unheeding the conversation, his mind pursuing the vagrant resemblance of the morning. He came to himself with a sort of shock to hear his neighbor say: "That's the first time I've seen ole Vic Brockman for two years. Miss Ma'y Ann took him drivin' this mornin' — you ought to seen 'em. The ole fellow had on a nubia that had as many colors as a peacock's tail. Queer how he hangs onto life all these years," he continued reflectively. "It'd be a blessin' if he'd shuffle off. Speakin' of women — there's a woman for you! Job Stacker, when he lived on the next farm, used to say that she cared for that idiot brother of hers ever since the war like a baby. If he'd got killed out and out, instead of comin' home with no top to his head and no sense in it, it'd been better for her. Then she could have married that sweetheart of hers and had troubles of her own."

He turned to Maxwell. "I was talkin'," he said, "of Miss Brockman, who owns the Pool place — that big white house over the hill. It's a pity the mortgage changed hands. I suppose Miss Ma'y Ann is going to be sold out. It's hard. Old Squire Pool, her grandfather, was the biggest man in four counties, and befo' the war her ma was the high-headest girl you ever saw. Wonder who got that mortgage?"

In the evening, as Maxwell and the village lawyer, who was Justice of the Peace, Conveyancer, and Notary Public all in one, walked in the fading light up the hill toward the property which was so soon to be sent to the hammer, there was small conversation between them. The papers requiring the final signature protruded from Maxwell's great-coat pocket. His mind was wandering through a labyrinth of recollection, pursuing the phantom of a blue face, surmounted by rough, white hair, and two eyes shot with feline yellow, which met his and wavered away in ferret uneasiness. The likeness clung to him with a wilful persistence, and he swept his hand impatiently across his eyes as if to banish the thing that baffled him.

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As the two men seated themselves in the lamplight of the great room, which yet bore the inextinguishable marks of aristocracy, Maxwell became unpleasantly aware of a huddled object on a sofa, which seemed to create in itself a centre of attraction. The errand was not a pleasant one, though relieved by the serene face and low tones that belong to the gentlewoman; but in the lax face of old Victor Brockman was another element — an element of arrested progress, of piteous recoil — the genius of unconscious despair. It drew Maxwell while it repelled him. He found himself turning his head to gaze upon it.

He realized in the midst of a genial sentence that the yellow eyes had ceased their roving, and had settled, fixed and stealthy, upon his face. The aggravating resemblance again caught his attention.

Thereafter he ceased to be himself — ceased in some inexplicable way to feel his will and intention master of the situation. The idiot's gaze had got upon his nerves. He found himself shifting in his seat, pushing his chair back by slow degrees to bring the sofa between him and it. Now and then he turned his eyes unwillingly to meet that look: the yellow eyes had ceased to twitch, and now rested with, it seemed to him, a quiet, dreamy hatred upon his own. The gaze affected him strangely; it angered him. He felt himself put out by this meaningless persistence. His smooth sentences flowed with less ease, and he felt a nervous contraction in the muscles of his throat.

Miss Mary Ann had drawn nearer to the squat occupant of the sofa, and her hand, trembling unwontedly, he thought, reached out now and then to touch the frayed sleeve. And surely the lawyer was looking at him closely. Maxwell felt himself sweating, and yet internally scoffing at this strange mood that had smitten him.

The situation was a simple one, and yet it had suddenly become impossible to him. He, Brent Maxwell, landowner, dealer in farm properties, had come to present an official paper for signature. He had done it scores of times, and yet the usual conversation with which custom softens the unpleasant alternatives of business failure into kindly and courteous agreement had become suddenly a way of pain — a chapter of indefinable reproach. A look of vacant, yellow eyes, grown steadfast, was making this hour one of loathing and horror.

As the last words were spoken and the necessary signatures were affixed, he snatched the papers from the

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lawyer's hands, crushed them into his pocket, and in sudden revulsion, his tense nerves released, sprang to his feet.

The effect upon the huddled figure opposite him was instantaneous and terrible. It cringed backward, with a shrinking gesture of fear and agony. Its palsied arms, shaking and uncertain, wavered before its face. A shriek came from its lips, but this time not the monotonous, wordless wail of habit, but an articulate cry: "My God! My head! Don't strike me again!"

Maxwell dimly heard the sobbing cry with which the sister's arms went round the cowering, abject figure, and the lawyer's abrupt ejaculation of astonishment and reassurance, as he rushed to the door and flung himself out into the frosty evening. His breath was coming heavily, and his fingers worked nervously in and out of clinched fists. As the sky opened before him, a vision hurled itself with the appalling directness of a thunderbolt before him — a vision of an acre of bloody, trampled sward, iron-sown, and blue with pungent wreaths of smoke. In the foreground a dismantled gun, prone upon whose stock a figure lay, with blackened face and tattered gray uniform, and over it a second figure swinging a clubbed musket, remorselessly cruel with the lust of war. The crest of that spattered knoll strewn with quiet forms — these two alone fiercely erect. Then the clubbed weapon descended. From the limp figure stretched across the gun rose two protesting arms; two hazel eyes looked from beneath the bloody mat of hair, and a voice shrill and terrifying: "My God! My head! don't strike me again!"

The vision blurred. Gusts of smoke came in between. Did the blue figure strike again? Did it? Did it?

Maxwell threw his hands toward the night sky that flared with that quick rose of condemnation and died again, as though appealing and inviting doom. The vision had scarce faded into the dim of the early night sky when the lawyer came down the steps. It was as though he had approached, black-robed and grotesque, from the corner of the dimming picture — a vengeance witnessing and impeaching, binding him, the Brent Maxwell of that savage battery charge, to the Brent Maxwell of this day, a strong man flying from the piteous pallor of a shrunken and deranged wreck.

The one upon whom this sudden panic of soul had crashed like a falling tower gripped him fiercely by the arms. "The man in there," he said hoarsely, "the man with the blue face and yellow eyes — the man that looked at me! Did you see him look at me?"

The other shrank back half fearfully. "Why, Maxwell," he said, "what's the matter? It was merely a fit of some sort. I thought you knew he was crazy. Why, man, you're shaking! Come along and we'll get something to warm us up."

"Did you see him put up his hands?"

The lawyer drew away his arm, almost angrily. "Heavens!" he said, "you're almost as bad as the old man himself. He's crazy, I tell you, plumb crazy, and has been ever since they brought him home from the war. He was struck in the head by a shell or something."

"Yes, yes. Where? Where was it? What battle was it?"

"I've always heard it was at Missionary Ridge." The match he struck against his boot-heel burned, sputtering, as he bit the end from a cigar."

Maxwell suddenly drew from his pocket the packet of papers; the parchment crackled as he reached forward and held a curling corner to the flame. While the lawyer stood in a maze Maxwell waved it, a flaming funnel, around his head until it scorched his fingers. As he dropped it to the ground, a mass of slowly blackening embers, a white shadow sprang out of the surrounding circle of blackness. It was Miss Mary Ann.

"Miss Ma'y Ann," cried the lawyer, "do you see what he's doing? He's burned up the mortgage! He's burned it up! That's all that's left of it there on the ground!"

Miss Mary Ann stepped forward half fearfully, her fascinated eyes on the glowing firebrand between them. She clasped her hands together. "Sir," she said, painfully, "sir" — then she stopped.

An overmastering desire seized Maxwell to take upon himself the act of that dead day — to shout to them both that he, he, had been asked mercy and had denied it. It was the right of war, but now, after all these years, it had recoiled upon him in shame. Circumstance had again put in his hand the weapon; the lust of acquisition called upon him to strike, but as he stood face to face with this new victim, out of that red mist of the stained past that cry had sounded, and his hand dropped nerveless before the same helpless, accusing eyes. He would have shouted that it was not charity, not kindness, that spared that roof, but self-accusation — a yearning for atonement and for absolution.

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He received her broken words of gratitude with a sense of shame upon his soul, and the lawyer's bluff comments upon his benefaction pierced him like swords of searing.

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As Maxwell turned again toward the village, he rested his gaze upon the hillside, sleeping under the early stars. Field and knoll were covered silvery with the sheen of hoar-frost lances. It seemed the dwarf symbol of buried armies — thousands upon thousands of the dead, who died with upthrust bayonets still standing to guard in death the integrity of homes. And standing thus, with the sorrow of his thought upon him, Maxwell cried to his own soul, no less than to his land, to glory, to power, to war, and to victory:

"What have you done? What have you done?"