A Charmed Life

Richard Harding Davis

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She loved him so, that when he went away to a little war in which his country was interested she could not understand, nor quite forgive.

As the correspondent of a newspaper, Chesterton had looked on at other wars; when the yellow races met, when the infidel Turk spanked the Christian Greek; and one he had watched from inside a British square, where he was greatly alarmed lest he should be trampled upon by terrified camels. This had happened before he and she had met. After they met, she told him that what chances he had chosen to take before he came into her life fell outside of her jurisdiction. But now that his life belonged to her, this talk of his standing up to be shot at was wicked. It was worse than wicked; it was absurd.

When the Maine sank in Havana harbor and the word "war" was appearing hourly in hysterical extras, Miss Armitage explained her position.

"You mustn't think," she said, "that I am one of those silly girls who would beg you not to go to war."

At the moment of speaking her cheek happened to be resting against his, and his arm was about her, so he humbly bent his head and kissed her, and whispered very proudly and softly, "No, dearest."

At which she withdrew from him frowning.

"No! I'm not a bit like those girls," she proclaimed. "I merely tell you YOU CAN'T GO! My gracious!" she cried, helplessly. She knew the words fell short of expressing her distress, but her education had not supplied her with exclamations of greater violence.

"My goodness!" she cried. "How can you frighten me so? It's not like you," she reproached him. "You are so unselfish, so noble. You are always thinking of other people. How can you talk of going to war−−to be killed−−to me? And now, now that you have made me love you so?"

The hands, that when she talked seemed to him like swallows darting and flashing in the sunlight, clutched his sleeve. The fingers, that he would rather kiss than the lips of any other woman that ever lived, clung to his arm. Their clasp reminded him of that of a drowning child he had once lifted from the surf.

"If you should die," whispered Miss Armitage. "What would I do. What would I do!"

"But my dearest," cried the young man. "My dearest ONE! I've GOT to go. It's our own war. Everybody else will go," he pleaded. "Every man you know, and they're going to fight, too. I'm going only to look on. That's bad enough, isn't it, without sitting at home? You should be sorry I'm not going to fight."

"Sorry!" exclaimed the girl. "If you love me−−"

"If I love you," shouted the young man. His voice suggested that he was about to shake her. "How dare you?"

She abandoned that position and attacked from one more logical.

"But why punish me?" she protested. "Do I want the war? Do I want to free Cuba? No! I want YOU, and if you go, you are the one who is sure to be killed. You are so big−−and so brave, and you will be rushing in wherever the fighting is, and then−−then you will die." She raised her eyes and looked at him as though seeing him from a great distance. "And," she added fatefully, "I will die, too, or maybe I will have to live, to live without you for years, for many miserable years."

Fearfully, with great caution, as though in his joy in her he might crush her in his hands, the young man drew her to him and held her close. After a silence he whispered. "But, you know that nothing can happen to me. Not now, that God has let me love you. He could not be so cruel. He would not have given me such happiness to take it from me. A man who loves you, as I love you, cannot come to any harm. And the man YOU love is immortal, immune. He holds a charmed life. So long as you love him, he must live."

The eyes of the girl smiled up at him through her tears. She lifted her lips to his. "Then you will never die!"

she said.

She held him away from her. "Listen!" she whispered. "What you say is true. It must be true, because you are always right. I love you so that nothing can harm you. My love will be a charm. It will hang around your neck and protect you, and keep you, and bring you back to me. When you are in danger my love will save you. For, while it lives, I live. When it dies−−"

Chesterton kissed her quickly.

"What happens then," he said, "doesn't matter."

The war game had run its happy−go−lucky course briefly and brilliantly, with "glory enough for all," even for Chesterton. For, in no previous campaign had good fortune so persistently stood smiling at his elbow. At each moment of the war that was critical, picturesque, dramatic, by some lucky accident he found himself among those present. He could not lose. Even when his press boat broke down at Cardenas, a Yankee cruiser and two Spanish gun−boats, apparently for his sole benefit, engaged in an impromptu duel within range of his megaphone. When his horse went lame, the column with which he had wished to advance, passed forward to the front unmolested, while the rear guard, to which he had been forced to join his fortune, fought its way through the stifling underbrush.

Between his news despatches, when he was not singing the praises of his fellow−countrymen, or copying lists of their killed and wounded, he wrote to Miss Armitage. His letters were scrawled on yellow copy paper and consisted of repetitions of the three words, "I love you," rearranged, illuminated, and intensified.

Each letter began much in the same way. "The war is still going on. You can read about it in the papers. What I want you to know is that I love you as no man ever−−" And so on for many pages.

From her only one of the letters she wrote reached him. It was picked up in the sand at Siboney after the medical corps, in an effort to wipe out the yellow−fever, had set fire to the post− office tent.

She had written it some weeks before from her summer home at Newport, and in it she said: "When you went to the front, I thought no woman could love more than I did then. But, now I know. At least I know one girl who can. She cannot write it. She can never tell you. You must just believe.

"Each day I hear from you, for as soon as the paper comes, I take it down to the rocks and read your cables, and I look south across the ocean to Cuba, and try to see you in all that fighting and heat and fever. But I am not afraid. For each morning I wake to find I love you more; that it has grown stronger, more wonderful, more hard to bear. And I know the charm I gave you grows with it, and is more powerful, and that it will bring you back to me wearing new honors, 'bearing your sheaves with you.'

"As though I cared for your new honors. I want YOU, YOU, YOU−−only YOU."

When Santiago surrendered and the invading army settled down to arrange terms of peace, and imbibe fever, and General Miles moved to Porto Rico, Chesterton moved with him.

In that pretty little island a command of regulars under a general of the regular army had, in a night attack, driven back the Spaniards from Adhuntas. The next afternoon as the column was in line of march, and the men were shaking themselves into their accoutrements, a dusty, sweating volunteer staff officer rode down the main street of Adhuntas, and with the authority of a field marshal, held up his hand.

"General Miles's compliments, sir," he panted, "and peace is declared!"

Different men received the news each in a different fashion. Some whirled their hats in the air and cheered. Those who saw promotion and the new insignia on their straps vanish, swore deeply. Chesterton fell upon his saddle−bags and began to distribute his possessions among the enlisted men. After he had remobilized, his effects consisted of a change of clothes, his camera, water−bottle, and his medicine case. In his present state of health and spirits he could not believe he stood in need of the medicine case, but it was a gift from Miss Armitage, and carried with it a promise from him that he always would carry it. He had "packed" it throughout the campaign, and for others it had proved of value.

"I take it you are leaving us," said an officer enviously.

"I am leaving you so quick," cried Chesterton laughing, "that you won't even see the dust. There's a transport starts from Mayaguez at six to−morrow morning, and, if I don't catch it, this pony will die on the wharf."

"The road to Mayaguez is not healthy for Americans," said the general in command. "I don't think I ought to let you go. The enemy does not know peace is on yet, and there are a lot of guerillas−−"

Chesterton shook his head in pitying wonder.

"Not let me go!" he exclaimed. "Why, General, you haven't enough men in your command to stop me, and as for the Spaniards and guerillas−−! I'm homesick," cried the young man. "I'm so damned homesick that I am liable to die of it before the transport gets me to Sandy Hook."

"If you are shot up by an outpost," growled the general, "you will be worse off than homesick. It's forty miles to Mayaguez. Better wait till daylight. Where's the sense of dying, after the fighting's over?"

"If I don't catch that transport I sure WILL die," laughed Chesterton. His head was bent and he was tugging at his saddle girths. Apparently the effort brought a deeper shadow to his tan, "but nothing else can kill me! I have a charm, General," he exclaimed.

"We hadn't noticed it," said the general.

The staff officers, according to regulations, laughed.

"It's not that kind of a charm," said Chesterton. "Good−by, General."

The road was hardly more than a trail, but the moon made it as light as day, and cast across it black tracings of the swinging vines and creepers; while high in the air it turned the polished surface of the palms into glittering silver. As he plunged into the cool depths of the forest Chesterton threw up his arms and thanked God that he was moving toward her. The luck that had accompanied him throughout the campaign had held until the end. Had he been forced to wait for a transport, each hour would have meant a month of torment, an arid, wasted place in his life. As it was, with each eager stride of El Capitan, his little Porto Rican pony, he was brought closer to her. He was so happy that as he galloped through the dark shadows of the jungle or out into the brilliant moonlight he shouted aloud and sang; and again as he urged El Capitan to greater bursts of speed, he explained in joyous, breathless phrases why it was that he urged him on.

"For she is wonderful and most beautiful," he cried, "the most glorious girl in all the world! And, if I kept her waiting, even for a moment, El Capitan, I would be unworthy−−and I might lose her! So you see we ride for a great prize!"

The Spanish column that, the night before, had been driven from Adhuntas, now in ignorance of peace, occupied both sides of the valley through which ran the road to Mayaguez, and in ambush by the road itself had placed an outpost of two men. One was a sharp− shooter of the picked corps of the Guardia Civile, and one a sergeant of the regiment that lay hidden in the heights. If the Americans advanced toward Mayaguez, these men were to wait until the head of the column drew abreast of them, when they were to fire. The report of their rifles would be the signal for those in the hill above to wipe out the memory of Adhuntas.

Chesterton had been riding at a gallop, but, as he reached the place where the men lay in ambush, he pulled El Capitan to a walk, and took advantage of his first breathing spell to light his pipe. He had already filled it, and was now fumbling in his pocket for his match−box. The match−box was of wood such as one can buy, filled to the brim with matches, for one penny. But it was a most precious possession. In the early days of his interest in Miss Armitage, as they were once setting forth upon a motor trip, she had handed it to him.

"Why," he asked.

"You always forget to bring any," she said simply, "and have to borrow some."

The other men in the car, knowing this to be a just reproof, laughed sardonically, and at the laugh the girl had looked up in surprise. Chesterton, seeing the look, understood that her act, trifling as it was, had been sincere, had been inspired simply by thought of his comfort. And he asked himself why young Miss Armitage should consider his comfort, and why the fact that she did consider it should make him so extremely happy. And he decided it must be because she loved him and he loved her.

Having arrived at that conclusion, he had asked her to marry him, and upon the match−box had marked the date and the hour. Since then she had given him many pretty presents, marked with her initials, marked with his crest, with strange cabalistic mottoes that meant nothing to any one save themselves. But the wooden matchbox was still the most valued of his possessions.

As he rode into the valley the rays of the moon fell fully upon him, and exposed him to the outpost as pitilessly as though he had been held in the circle of a search−light.

The bronzed Mausers pushed cautiously through the screen of vines. There was a pause, and the rifle of the sergeant wavered. When he spoke his tone was one of disappointment.

"He is a scout, riding alone," he said.

"He is an officer," returned the sharp−shooter, excitedly. "The others follow. We should fire now and give the

signal."

"He is no officer, he is a scout," repeated the sergeant. "They have sent him ahead to study the trail and to seek us. He may be a league in advance. If we shoot HIM, we only warn the others."

Chesterton was within fifty yards. After an excited and anxious search he had found the match−box in the wrong pocket. The eyes of the sharp−shooter frowned along the barrel of his rifle. With his chin pressed against the stock he whispered swiftly from the corner of his lips, "He is an officer! I am aiming where the strap crosses his heart. You aim at his belt. We fire together."

The heat of the tropic night and the strenuous gallop had covered El Capitan with a lather of sweat. The reins upon his neck dripped with it. The gauntlets with which Chesterton held them were wet. As he raised the matchbox it slipped from his fingers and fell noiselessly in the trail. With an exclamation he dropped to the road and to his knees, and groping in the dust began an eager search.

The sergeant caught at the rifle of the sharpshooter, and pressed it down.

"Look!" he whispered. "He IS a scout. He is searching the trail for the tracks of our ponies. If you fire they will hear it a league away."

"But if he finds our trail and returns−−"

The sergeant shook his head. "I let him pass forward," he said grimly. "He will never return."

Chesterton pounced upon the half−buried matchbox, and in a panic lest he might again lose it, thrust it inside his tunic.

"Little do you know, El Capitan," he exclaimed breathlessly, as he scrambled back into the saddle and lifted the pony into a gallop, "what a narrow escape I had. I almost lost it."

Toward midnight they came to a wooden bridge swinging above a ravine in which a mountain stream, forty feet below, splashed over half−hidden rocks, and the stepping stones of the ford. Even before the campaign began the bridge had outlived its usefulness, and the unwonted burden of artillery, and the vibrations of marching men had so shaken it that it swayed like a house of cards. Threatened by its own weight, at the mercy of the first tropic storm, it hung a death trap for the one who first added to its burden.

No sooner had El Capitan struck it squarely with his four hoofs, than he reared and, whirling, sprang back to the solid earth. The suddenness of his retreat had all but thrown Chesterton, but he regained his seat, and digging the pony roughly with his spurs, pulled his head again toward the bridge.

"What are you shying at, now?" he panted. "That's a perfectly good bridge."

For a minute horse and man struggled for the mastery, the horse spinning in short circles, the man pulling, tugging, urging him with knees and spurs. The first round ended in a draw. There were two more rounds with the advantage slightly in favor of El Capitan, for he did not approach the bridge.

The night was warm and the exertion violent. Chesterton, puzzled and annoyed, paused to regain his breath and his temper. Below him, in the ravine, the shallow waters of the ford called to him, suggesting a pleasant compromise. He turned his eyes downward and saw hanging over the water what appeared to be a white bird upon the lower limb of a dead tree. He knew it to be an orchid, an especially rare orchid, and he knew, also, that the orchid was the favorite flower of Miss Armitage. In a moment he was on his feet, and with the reins over his arm, was slipping down the bank, dragging El Capitan behind him. He ripped from the dead tree the bark to which the orchid was clinging, and with wet moss and grass packed it in his leather camera case. The camera he abandoned on the path. He always could buy another camera; he could not again carry a white orchid, plucked in the heart of the tropics on the night peace was declared, to the girl he left behind him. Followed by El Capitan, nosing and snuffing gratefully at the cool waters, he waded the ford, and with his camera case swinging from his shoulder, galloped up the opposite bank and back into the trail.

A minute later, the bridge, unable to recover from the death blow struck by El Capitan, went whirling into the ravine and was broken upon the rocks below. Hearing the crash behind him, Chesterton guessed that in the jungle a tree had fallen.

They had started at six in the afternoon and had covered twenty of the forty miles that lay between Adhuntas and Mayaguez, when, just at the outskirts of the tiny village of Caguan, El Capitan stumbled, and when he arose painfully, he again fell forward.

Caguan was a little church, a little vine−covered inn, a dozen one− story adobe houses shining in the moonlight like whitewashed sepulchres. They faced a grass−grown plaza, in the centre of which stood a great

wooden cross. At one corner of the village was a corral, and in it many ponies. At the sight Chesterton gave a cry of relief. A light showed through the closed shutters of the inn, and when he beat with his whip upon the door, from the adobe houses other lights shone, and white−clad figures appeared in the moonlight. The landlord of the inn was a Spaniard, fat and prosperous−looking, but for the moment his face was eloquent with such distress and misery that the heart of the young man, who was at peace with all the world, went instantly out to him. The Spaniard was less sympathetic. When he saw the khaki suit and the campaign hat he scowled, and ungraciously would have closed the door. Chesterton, apologizing, pushed it open. His pony, he explained, had gone lame, and he must have another, and at once. The landlord shrugged his shoulders. These were war times, he said, and the American officer could take what he liked. They in Caguan were noncombatants and could not protest. Chesterton hastened to reassure him. The war, he announced, was over, and were it not, he was no officer to issue requisitions. He intended to pay for the pony. He unbuckled his belt and poured upon the table a handful of Spanish doubloons. The landlord lowered the candle and silently counted the gold pieces, and then calling to him two of his fellow−villagers, crossed the tiny plaza and entered the corral.

"The American pig," he whispered, "wishes to buy a pony. He tells me the war is over; that Spain has surrendered. We know that must be a lie. It is more probable he is a deserter. He claims he is a civilian, but that also is a lie, for he is in uniform. You, Paul, sell him your pony, and then wait for him at the first turn in the trail, and take it from him."

"He is armed," protested the one called Paul.

"You must not give him time to draw his revolver," ordered the landlord. "You and Pedro will shoot him from the shadow. He is our country's enemy, and it will be in a good cause. And he may carry despatches. If we take them to the commandante at Mayaguez he will reward us."

"And the gold pieces?" demanded the one called Paul.

"We will divide them in three parts," said the landlord.

In the front of the inn, surrounded by a ghostlike group that spoke its suspicions, Chesterton was lifting his saddle from El Capitan and rubbing the lame foreleg. It was not a serious sprain. A week would set it right, but for that night the pony was useless. Impatiently, Chesterton called across the plaza, begging the landlord to make haste. He was eager to be gone, alarmed and fearful lest even this slight delay should cause him to miss the transport. The thought was intolerable. But he was also acutely conscious that he was very hungry, and he was too old a campaigner to scoff at hunger. With the hope that he could find something to carry with him and eat as he rode forward, he entered the inn.

The main room of the house was now in darkness, but a smaller room adjoining it was lit by candles, and by a tiny taper floating before a crucifix. In the light of the candles Chesterton made out a bed, a priest bending over it, a woman kneeling beside it, and upon the bed the little figure of a boy who tossed and moaned. As Chesterton halted and waited hesitating, the priest strode past him, and in a voice dull and flat with grief and weariness, ordered those at the door to bring the landlord quickly. As one of the group leaped toward the corral, the priest said to the others: "There is another attack. I have lost hope."

Chesterton advanced and asked if he could be of service. The priest shook his head. The child, he said, was the only son of the landlord, and much beloved by him, and by all the village. He was now in the third week of typhoid fever and the period of hemorrhages. Unless they could be checked, the boy would die, and the priest, who for many miles of mountain and forest was also the only doctor, had exhausted his store of simple medicines.

"Nothing can stop the hemorrhage," he protested wearily, "but the strongest of drugs. And I have nothing!"

Chesterton bethought him of the medicine case Miss Armitage had forced upon him. "I have given opium to the men for dysentery," he said. "Would opium help you?"

The priest sprang at him and pushed him out of the door and toward the saddle−bags.

"My children," he cried, to the silent group in the plaza, "God has sent a miracle!"

After an hour at the bedside the priest said, "He will live," and knelt, and the mother of the boy and the villagers knelt with him. When Chesterton raised his eyes, he found that the landlord, who had been silently watching while the two men struggled with death for the life of his son, had disappeared. But he heard, leaving the village along the trail to Mayaguez, the sudden clatter of a pony's hoofs. It moved like a thing driven with fear.

The priest strode out into the moonlight. In the recovery of the child he saw only a demonstration of the efficacy of prayer, and he could not too quickly bring home the lesson to his parishioners. Amid their murmurs of

wonder and gratitude Chesterton rode away. To the kindly care of the priest he bequeathed El Capitan. With him, also, he left the gold pieces which were to pay for the fresh pony.

A quarter of a mile outside the village three white figures confronted him. Two who stood apart in the shadow shrank from observation, but the landlord, seated bareback upon a pony that from some late exertion was breathing heavily, called to him to halt.

"In the fashion of my country," he began grandiloquently, "we have come this far to wish you God speed upon your journey." In the fashion of the American he seized Chesterton by the hand. "I thank you, senor," he murmured.

"Not me," returned Chesterton. "But the one who made me 'pack' that medicine chest. Thank her, for to−night I think it saved a life."

The Spaniard regarded him curiously, fixing him with his eyes as though deep in consideration. At last he smiled gravely.

"You are right," he said. "Let us both remember her in our prayers."

As Chesterton rode away the words remained gratefully in his memory and filled him with pleasant thoughts. "The world," he mused, "is full of just such kind and gentle souls."

After an interminable delay he reached Newport, and they escaped from the others, and Miss Armitage and he ran down the lawn to the rocks, and stood with the waves whispering at their feet.

It was the moment for which each had so often longed, with which both had so often tortured themselves by living in imagination, that now, that it was theirs, they were fearful it might not be true.

Finally, he said: "And the charm never failed! Indeed, it was wonderful! It stood by me so obviously. For instance, the night before San Juan, in the mill at El Poso, I slept on the same poncho with another correspondent. I woke up with a raging appetite for bacon and coffee, and he woke up out of his mind, and with a temperature of one hundred and four. And again, I was standing by Capron's gun at El Caney, when a shell took the three men who served it, and only scared ME. And there was another time−−" He stopped. "Anyway," he laughed, "here I am."

"But there was one night, one awful night," began the girl. She trembled, and he made this an added excuse for drawing her closer to him. "When I felt you were in great peril, that you would surely die. And all through the night I knelt by the window and looked toward Cuba and prayed, and prayed to God to let you live."

Chesterton bent his head and kissed the tips of her fingers. After a moment he said: "Would you know what night it was? It might be curious if I had been−−"

"Would I know!" cried the girl. "It was eight days ago. The night of the twelfth. An awful night!"

"The twelfth!" exclaimed Chesterton, and laughed and then begged her pardon humbly. "I laughed because the twelfth," he exclaimed, "was the night peace was declared. The war was over. I'm sorry, but THAT night I was riding toward you, thinking only of you. I was never for a moment in danger."