Under the Red Dragon: A Novel

James Grant

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UNDER THE RED DRAGON.

A Novel.

By JAMES GRANT,

AUTHOR OF "THE ROMANCE OF WAR," "ONLY AN ENSIGN," ETC.

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UNDER THE RED DRAGON.

CHAPTER I.--THE INVITATION.

"And _she_ is to be there--nay, is there already; so one more chance is given me to meet her. But for what?--to part again silently, and more helplessly bewitched than ever, perhaps. Ah, never will she learn to love me as I love her!" thought I, as I turned over my old friend's letter, not venturing, however, to give utterance to this aloud, as the quizzical eyes of Phil Caradoc were upon me.

"A penny for your thoughts, friend Harry?" said he, laughing; "try another cigar, and rouse yourself. What the deuce is in this letter, that it affects you so? Have you put a pot of money on the wrong horse?"

"Been jilted, had a bill returned, or what?" suggested Gwynne.

"Neither, fortunately," said I; "it is simply an invitation from Sir Madoc Lloyd, which rather perplexes me."

At this time our regiment was then in the East, awaiting with the rest of the army some movement to be made from Varna, either towards Bessarabia or the Crimea--men's minds were undecided as to which, while her Majesty's Ministers seemed to have no thought on the subject. Our depôt belonged to the provisional battalion at Winchester, where Caradoc, Gwynne, two other subalterns, and I, with some two hundred rank and file, expected ere long the fiat of the

fates who reign at the Horse Guards to send us forth to win our laurels from the Russians, or, what seemed more probable, a grave where the pest was then decimating our hapless army, in the beautiful but perilous vale of Aladdyn, on the coast of Bulgaria. We had just adjourned from mess, to have a quiet cheroot and glass of brandy-and-water in my quarters, when I received from my man, Owen Evans, the letter the contents of which awakened so many new hopes and tantalising wishes in my heart, and on which so much of my fate in the future might hinge.

The bare, half-empty, or but partially-furnished single room accorded by the barrack authorities to me as a subaltern, in that huge square edifice built of old by Charles II. for a royal residence, seemed by its aspect but little calculated to flatter the brilliant hopes in question. Though ample in size, it was far from regal in its appurtenances--the barrack furniture, a camp-bed, my baggage trunks piled in one corner, swords and a gun-case in another, books, empty bottles, cigar-boxes, and a few pairs of boots ostentatiously displayed in a row by Evans, making up its entire garniture, and by very contrast in its meagreness compelling me to smile sadly at myself for the ambitious ideas the letter of my old friend had suggested; and thus, for a minute or so ignoring, or rather oblivious of, the presence of my two companions, my eye wandered dreamily over the far-extended mass of old brick houses and the gray church towers of the city, all visible from the open window, and then steeped in the silver haze of the moonlight.

Sipping their brandy-and-water, each with a lighted cheroot between his fingers, their shell-jackets open, and their feet unceremoniously planted on a hard wooden chair, while they lounged back upon another, were Phil Caradoc and Charley Gwynne. The first a good

specimen of a handsome, curly-haired, and heedless young Englishman, who shot, fished, hunted, pulled a steady oar, and could keep his wicket against any man, while shining without effort in almost every manly sport, was moreover a finished gentleman and thorough good fellow. Less fashionable in appearance and less dashing in manner, though by no means less soldier-like, Gwynne was his senior by some ten years. He was more grave and thoughtful, for he had seen more of the service and more of the world. Already a gray hair or so had begun to mingle with the blackness of his heavy moustache, and the lines of thought were traceable on his forehead and about the corners of his keen dark-gray eyes; for he was a hard-working officer, who had been promoted from the ranks when the regiment lay at Barbadoes, and was every inch a soldier. And now they sat opposite me, waiting, with a half-comical expression, for farther information as to their queries; and though we were great friends, and usually had few secrets from each other, I began to find that I had _one_ now, and that a little reticence was necessary.

"You know Sir Madoc's place in North Wales?" said I.

"Of course," replied Caradoc; "there are few of ours who don't. Half the regiment have been there as visitors at one time or other."

"Well, he wishes me to get leave between returns--for even longer if I can--and run down there for a few weeks. 'Come early, if possible,' he adds; 'the girls insist on having an outdoor fête, and a lot of nice folks are coming. Winny has arranged that we shall have a regimental band--the Yeomanry one too, probably; then we are to have a Welsh harper, of course, and an itinerant Merlin in the grotto, to tell every one's fortune, and to predict your promotion and the C.B., if the seer

remains sober. While I write, little Dora is drawing up a programme of the dances, and marking off, she says, those which she means to have with _you_.'"

Here I paused; but seeing they expected to hear more, for the writer was a friend of us all, I read on coolly, and with an air of as much unconsciousness as I could assume:

"Lady Estelle Cressingham is with us--by the way, she seems to know you, and would, I think, like to see more of you. She is a very fine girl, though not pure Welsh; but that she cannot help--it is her misfortune, not her fault. We have also a fellow here, though I don't quite know how he got introduced--Hawkesby Guilfoyle, who met her abroad at Ems, or Baden-Baden, or one of those places where one meets everybody, and he seems uncommonly attentive--so much so, that I wonder her mother permits it; but he seems to have some special power or influence over the old lady, though his name is not as yet, or ever likely to be, chronicled by Burke or Debrett. In lieu of the goat which your regiment lost in Barbadoes, Winifred has a beautiful pet one, a magnificent animal, which she means to present to the Welsh Fusileers. Tell them so. And now, for yourself, I will take no refusal, and Winny and Dora will take none either; so pack your traps, and come off so soon as you can get leave. You need not, unless you choose, bring horses; we have plenty of cavalry here. Hope you will be able to stay till the 12th, and have a shot at the grouse. Meanwhile, believe me, my dear Hardinge, yours, &c., Madoc Meredyth Lloyd.'"

"Kindly written, and so like the jolly style of the old Baronet," said Gwynne. "I have ridden with him once or twice in the

hunting-field--on a borrowed mount, of course," added poor Charley; who had only his pay, and, being an enthusiast in his profession, was no lounger in the service.

"But what is there in all this that perplexes you?" asked Caradoc, who, I suppose, had been attentively observing me. As he spoke, I coloured visibly, feeling the while that I did so.

"The difficulty about leave, perhaps," I stammered.

"You'll go, of course," said Caradoc. "His place--Craigaderyn Court--is one of the finest in North Wales; his daughters are indeed charming; and you are certain to meet only people of the best style there."

"Yet he seems to doubt this--what is his name?--Guilfoyle, however," said I.

"What of that? One swallow--you know the adage. I should go, if I had the invitation. His eldest daughter has, I have heard, in her own right, no end of coal-mines somewhere, and many grassy acres of dairy farms in the happy hunting-grounds of the midland counties."

"By Jove," murmured Gwynne, as he lit a fresh cigar; "she should be the girl for me."

"But I have another inducement than even the fair Winny," said I.

"Oho! Lady--"

"Sir Madoc," said I hastily, "is an old friend of my family, and having known me from infancy, he almost views me as a son. Don't mistake me," I added, reddening with positive annoyance at the hearty laugh my admission elicited; "Miss Lloyd and I are old friends too, and

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