

A PROFFERED HEROINE

By George Buchanan Fife

ILLUSTRATION (FRONTISPIECE) BY WALTER APPLETON CLARK

A SOFT, quick, bird-like little run high into the treble as an impromptu finale, and Alicia turned from the piano.

"I wonder why it is," she said, "that when you write, you always go so far afield for your womenfolk."

Back to earth I came with a bump. Heaven only knows where I had been, but it was somewhere beyond the rim of the world, on that uncharted isle whence the glowing arch of the rainbow springs from its pot of gold, and where we come suddenly upon ourselves in the full, searching sunlight and talk of Might Have Been and Hope To Be. Alicia's music often takes me thither.

I was all save breathless from my quick return, and as I gathered my vagrant wits, I said "Far afield; what do you mean?" which possessed none of the elements of an answer. Alicia, with a hand still lingering on the keys, in apparent token that if I should prove unsatisfactory she could return to her music instantler, spread her net a trifle wider.

"I have been inspecting some of your heroines rather critically this afternoon," she said. Her tone was far from reassuring, especially as she supplemented the announcement with two carefully selected notes.

It has always been my plan and my pleasure, to submit my womenfolk, as Alicia bucolically termed them, to her for critical inspection. I do not profess, even to myself, to know a great deal about women, *other* women, and several times I had introduced mine to Alicia with undeniable timorousness. But, as well as I remembered, all had passed muster, some, even, had been patted very prettily on the cheek. Therefore, I did not quite understand why she had driven the poor things together that afternoon for a general overhauling. However, as the subject was woman, I approached it strategically.

"What did you find wrong with their clothes?" I asked. Alicia is, by special appointment, modiste and milliner to my womenfolk.

As soon as I spoke she folded her hands in her lap and looked at me with a strange little smile which told me I had struck a discord.

"I was not thinking of their frocks," she said; "but of them—and of how far you have gone to get them. I knew you wouldn't understand."

She arose abruptly from the piano, and I heard her laughing softly as she searched along the book-shelves. Presently she returned to the piano-seat with two or three volumes in which markers were conspicuous. I recognized them as my own books and wondered in what wise they were to be used against me, because I did not understand Alicia at all. That which gave me greatest concern was her strange, only half-happy smile.

"You seem to be making this a very serious affair," I said lightly, as Alicia, after some deliberation, selected one of the books and opened it at a marked place.

"If you think that," she looked up with sudden alarm, "I'm sure you'll *never* understand; you'll only think me silly." Her gaze wandered over my shoulder—"Perhaps I am"—and returned, bringing something of merriment with it—"but you mustn't tell me so."

"Then it *is* a serious affair?"

Alicia did not raise her eyes from her book as she replied, "No-o-o, not very." She read awhile in silence, and I, uncomprehending still, awaited her royal pleasure, I even fell to admiring her shining hair—we were fast making for my Rainbow Isle, hand in hand, when she spoke.

"I want you to listen very carefully while I read your description of Frances Trevor in 'Castleton.' It's where Barron meets her, you remember?"

I nodded. Of course I remembered. I had rewritten it at least three times, and even now I confess to a longing to try my hand at it again. Without acknowledging my nod, Alicia began to read:

Barron desired simply to look at her, not to talk to her just then, only to stand a little apart from the others and from her and wonder at her. Coming back to his own country, to his own people was like being born into the fulness of a new being with the clamor of the glistening, toiling blacks, the monotonous cha-cha-cha of the hoisting engines, the ring of the riveters, even the bridge itself, the thing for which he had seemed to live so long, faint in the background. He recalled the countless visions of home-coming which had kept him company in the restless nights, of the pictures he had patched together in his mind. He remembered, too, that from many fragments he had constructed a woman who had been the object of countless imaginary gallantries and the sole romance of that God-forgotten region—the only woman to whom he owed allegiance. She had stood at his side and watched the bridge crawl from pier to pier, had even clambered after him along the swaying false-work the day he rescued McLaughlin, and her hand had been the first to grasp his when the centre-pin was driven. And he had brought her over-seas with him, enchanted with her companionship, wondering when she would choose to bid him farewell and whether he would have the temerity to raise her hand to his lips.

Alicia paused a moment, long enough I hoped, to permit me an inquiry as to how much of the book she intended reading, and what bearing this had upon—but I was peremptorily told that it was still her turn and she continued, deigning me no further notice:

But she had never left him and he had grown to recognize her as an inseparable part of himself and his life. The home-coming, which had driven much of the remembrance of the labor and anxiety from his mind—because the bridge did not seem to him such an achievement after all—had dimmed no light nor line of her.

I realized that it was high time for me to interpose, so, braving certain displeasure, I said, "Alicia, my dear, you are only recalling an agonizing struggle by reading that. I thought you said you wished me to hear my description of Frances Trevor."

"Yes; but first I'm reading the part I like. Now I'll read *your* part, if you wish."

"Certainly, if you are not tired." I smiled—and failed.

This was the first time the book had even been apportioned between us, and I was really anxious to hear how *my* part sounded. Also I wanted to learn how much of the

other books had been allotted to me, but I was determined that there should be no such extensive reading of the respective shares. Alicia ran her eyes down the page.

"Now, here's *your* part," she said, jarring me somewhat with the insistence of the "your."

"Then you don't like what you're pleased to call *my* part?"

"Yes, I think it's perfectly lovely; just listen to it." A woman says "perfectly lovely" in as many ways as the French cook eggs.

And as he watched Frances Trevor the Lady of the Bridge came and stood close beside her. She had done this with other women, and her eyes had been full of questioning of his faithfulness. Now they were looking into his without reproach. Suddenly, to his bewilderment, she spoke to him, and in that instant the Lady of the Bridge became a living creature. It was Frances Trevor who had built the bridge with him; it was her gold-brown hair which had whipped across his face as they leaned upon the steamer's rail; it was her dark, compelling eyes which had searched his heart in the hours of unreasoning dread, her tall, strong figure which had always seemed a challenge to his own.

"There you are!" The book was closed with a clap. "So much for Miss Frances Trevor! now I'll show you some of your other women."

Alicia took up a second volume and I protested. "This is really awfully good of you, my dear, but to what end? You say, 'So much for Miss Trevor;' are the others to have that much?"

"Goodness, what disloyalty! You know you like it."

"Yes, I think it's—'perfectly lovely.' Go on with it." I could have drawn Alicia's broadside with one "I don't," and I am sure I disappointed her. That she was determined to keep me well within range, however, was entirely clear from the next manœuvre. This was the production, from between the leaves of the second volume, of a sheet of note-paper. Alicia was crowding on canvas.

"I'll not read about the other women," she said, dividing her look of amusement between me and the bit of paper, "since you seem so bored. I've written here all that's necessary." The new sail caught the wind and she came racing after me.

"I've read your description of Miss Trevor, tall with gold-brown hair and dark eyes and athletic figure; now here's Mar-

garet Wingate in 'The Rector of St. John's': decidedly light hair—yellow hair, quite natural, though—gray eyes, brilliant color; rather a small woman, one of the fluffy type, plays bridge, decidedly attractive in her own way—no, don't thank me, I rather like her—and here's Rachel Dayne, in your first book: black hair, black eyes, pale and cold as ice, an imperious woman."

Alicia put down the paper looking as if she had just read a recipe to the cook. "Now," she said, arising from the piano-seat, the books tumbling noisily, "will you be kind enough to describe *Alicia Rushton* to me?"

For one instant I was confounded and stared dumbly at the graceful, black-clad figure, with round, white shoulders, glowing cheeks, and shining crown of hair, which stood before me, hands clasped, awaiting answer. Then I leaned forward in my chair and laughed unnaturally, which is the transparent way some men have of pulling themselves together. The advantage was decidedly with Alicia, and she knew it, because she said not a word; she smiled and waited.

"Well, let me see——" I had to begin somehow. "You are amiable, affectionate, and——"

"You know that's not what I mean; what's the color of my hair?" She could no more have restrained the hand that rose to her brow than she could have flown.

"Your hair?—auburn." What an aureole it was!

"You're sure I'm not—red-headed; not even if I were someone else's wife?"

I bowed my denial, hand on heart, and she continued, "My eyes?"

"Gray." How many times I had heard her declare them green!

"And my color, my figure, my general appearance?" Had I not known Alicia I should have considered this consummate vanity.

"Your color is, I should say, variable; your figure, slender, that's why you ride so well, and as for your general appearance—add to what I have already related a height of about five feet six, and you will have your truthful slave's most queenly mistress, Alicia Rushton, whom the gods preserve."

With a gesture which I construed to mean "I told you so," she sank back upon the seat. "And I do not bear the slightest

resemblance to any of those women, do I?" she asked.

"No, you do not, but——" Alicia spared me recourse to the unnatural laugh by interrupting. "Now will you tell me why it is you have gone so far afield for them? This is neither vanity nor jealousy, simply curiosity." She imagined she had divined my thoughts. "You seem to have gone to such extremes to avoid auburn hair, gray eyes, and slender figures."

Alicia will probably never know the magnitude of my discomfort as she smiled down upon me. Had I detected in her manner the slightest trace of pique or exultation, I might have been provoked to the incivility of combat, but I saw nothing save amused inquiry; the sword I had looked for had its hilt toward me.

"This is the first time you have ever charged me with disloyalty," I said, with studied seriousness. "To attempt a defence would be to discount the attractiveness of a very dear relative of the accused, and to plead guilty would be high treason."

As an example of explanation I was rather pleased with this, but Alicia evidently was not.

"If she be so dear and attractive," she said, "why has she been so utterly ignored? Certainly, she would not have marred a tale. If a man admires his wife—or deludes her into the belief that he admires her, is there any reason why he should not put her in a story?" She was looking very earnestly at her foot. "I should think it rather nice to be a heroine."

I arose and went to the piano. "There are several reasons," I said. "Women are put into stories to make them love stories; they are put in to love and be loved, to be happy or to suffer. To him who fashions them they mean much. He has done his utmost to make them human, and, for him at least, they *do* live." Alicia had begun to play softly, first a little random triplet of notes, then another and another, until she was adrift in one of the nameless melodies of our Rainbow Isle. "He makes their lives what they are, to them he is Clotho, Lachesis, and Atropos; he plans all their pleasures and their plights; he leads them into love and through it, and sometimes beyond it. When they are wooed he is there in his invisible cap guiding heart and eyes and lips. It is he who sends the blood

flaming joyously to their cheeks—he who first lets their hands linger in an eager clasp; he who, at last, bids them yield heart and lips—and opens their account with Cupid. You ask me why in my stories there is no woman like you. Because such a woman *would* be you. The hair, the eyes, the slender figure would be yours, however I named her, however I contrived her lot. And being you, I would have her blithe and winsome, for that is you. Then she would love, for that is you, too.” Alicia’s face was turned partly from me and the slow, poignant melody which rose beneath her loitering touch seemed to come from a great distance. “I should feel her heart quicken and glow with the new-found happiness; I, who know her so well, should read her love in her lightest smile, and should know it to be love. It would be like sharing her, sharing you—more than that, like giving you up, if only to one whom others would see as nothing more than a lover in a book. Am I foolishly selfish to want to keep you only in our own unwritten story?”

The melody was hushed for a moment as Alicia laid her hand upon my arm. “Why will *you* not come and be the lover in the book?” she said with sweet seriousness. “Then there could be no thought of sharing.”

Her hand crept lower until it found mine and sought its clasp, and I, gazing at her in the fanciful half-light, seemed suddenly to gather her in my arms and speed with her down the years to the first season of our love, the first chapter of our story. “Why will you not come and be the lover in the book?” I heard Alicia ask, and somewhere above me the nameless melody began anew.

“Once upon a time,” I said slowly, my eyes following the white hands rippling over the keys, “there was a woman who

was much beloved. She was straight—and slender—with red-gold hair—and the man who loved her lived in the sunlight she made, and he stood before her worshipping. And although he did not know it then, a bud in her heart was growing and unfolding slowly, slowly. One day it bloomed, and that day she gave it into his keeping, not to pluck, but to cherish it and nurture it where it grew.

“So it was that he entered the garden of her love and pledged his life for the flower she had given him.

“All went well for a season or two; the gardener had never relaxed his watchfulness, and not a petal of the flower had fallen. In reward his wage was raised and all confusion, cap in hand, he bowed and stammered his protest that he was already overpaid—and overdrawn.” A smile, like a ray of light, shone for a moment on Alicia’s lips. “But the mistress of the garden had a sister and that sister a husband, and into the lives of the sister and the husband a crisis had come. The gardener had known of its coming and the dread of it had weighed upon him. When it did come he alone could help, because he alone knew. He had been so careful for his mistress’s sake to keep it from her and she—she misunderstood and took the flower from him. Being only the gardener——”

Alicia ceased playing abruptly and rose to my side. There were tears in her eyes as she caught my hand and pressed it to her breast.

“No, no, dear,” she said, “that’s our own story-book, ours.”

“It’s the only book in which I can picture you,” I replied. “And yet you ask why——”

“No, not now.” She came close to me and raised her face to mine. “I understand. I am quite content.”



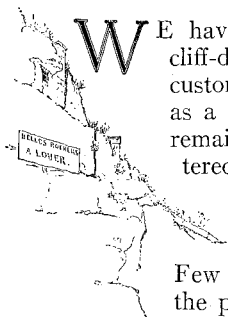


A street among the cliff-dwellers. A wall on the left.

CLIFF-DWELLERS

By E. C. Peixotto

ILLUSTRATIONS BY THE AUTHOR



WE have often heard of the cliff-dwellers and are accustomed to think of them as a pre-historic race, the remains of whose few scattered dwellings are a matter of curiosity to tourists and a prize to antiquarians. Few people know that, at the present day, there are whole communities in France whose only habitations are hollowed in the rocky hill-sides and whose entire business life is carried on in caves.

We had seen in Normandy isolated instances of people living in habitations half house and half cave. But they were in far-away towns and villages, and only the very

poorest class of people lived in them. Our first real cave city came as a great surprise, for we had just left Tours, one of the most highly civilized cities in France. We were riding on the road to Vouvray when suddenly, at a turn near Rochecorbon, this first town of cliff-dwellers burst upon us.

High above us towered a huge mass of overhanging rock, strata upon strata, bearing upon its summit a most peculiar tower, supposed to have been a watch-tower in ages gone by. Its foundations hung over the rock upon which they were built, and it seemed as though it would crash down at any moment upon the village beneath.

Scattered over the face of the cliff, doors and windows, narrow stair-ways and little belvederes could be seen, habitation upon habitation, in most picturesque disorder.