

# IN EXPIATION

By William McLeod Raine, Author of "A Daughter of Raasay."

Bob Bremerton had shouted in the market place, "I go a-whooping," his purpose had not been a whit plainer to his friends. It was patent in his manner, it was eloquent in his face. He made love as a college boy goes out to see his team win a football game, hilariously and happily. He took his friends into his confidence and they clapped him on the back and told him to go in and win. To Carol Delaine he was a new thing in lovers, for he was quite unashamed and unabashed. He wanted both her and the world at large to know it and to include themselves in his happiness.

Good-looking Bremerton was withal, and his manner was a potent charm of affection. He radiated a boyish confidence and good-will that made men's hearts warm to him as to a younger brother of whom they are both fond and proud. Jim Alkire used to say cynically that it was a mystery to him why women had let Bob go unmarried as long as they had.

When Bob first declared himself Miss Delaine hardly knew how to take him. Most men in love are shy and diffident, but young Bremerton did not seem to know the first principles of the accepted method of love-making. She told him with a little laugh what was in her mind, but Bob made light of it.

"Oh, that's all right. Maybe I don't understand the proper frills, but I care tremendously just the same. It doesn't matter how you take me. Any old way will do, providing you do take me," he assured her in his boyish slangy way.

Miss Delaine had never been in doubt as to her answer with other men but this time she was full of hesitations. Undoubtedly Bob was a charming fellow, and—well, he did tug at her heart strings sometimes. She wasn't at all sure of herself, and she lacked conviction that Bob was sure of himself. He took the matter too lightly; certainly he did not fill the role of lover according to her preconception of how it should be filled.

"You talk as if I were buying a pair of gloves, or making an appointment to go out to the links with you. This is rather more serious than that," she told him.

His genial smile beamed on her. "You know the old story of the girl whose mother was exclaiming on the seriousness of getting married. The girl answered that it was a good deal more serious not to. Them's my sentiments," he concluded ungrammatically.

"It isn't quite a joke, Bob. I dare say you mean what you say, but I'm not going to assume you mean it till you have given me better evidence of the fact," she said, a little coldly.

And Bremerton had to take that rather ambiguous statement for an answer. But the more he thought about it the greater encouragement he found in it. If she hadn't cared for him a bit Carol would not have left it that way. She wasn't a girl to keep a man dangling out of coquetry. Within an hour he had persuaded himself from deepest gloom to a happy tolerance of the situation. About that time Alkire caught sight of his radiant face. He looked at him from his chair in the club house.

"If it will relieve your mind I'm ready to receive confidences," he suggested.

Bob shook his head, smiling at him. "Oh, come! It's written all over your face, boy. Please accept my heartiest, and all that sort of thing."

"You'll have to guess again, Alkire." "H'm! I wish you wouldn't carry that happiest-man-in-the-world face about with you if it doesn't mean anything. You stalk about like a god just down from Olympus. My son, you're not the first lover that has trod the primrose path and come to grief in the end."

Bremerton lapsed into a chair and pushed a button.

"I move we have something on you for a too vivid use of the imagination. You're frank, you old cynic. Wow, wow! All bark, no bite!"

It was perhaps fortunate for the peace of mind of both men that neither of them knew that Bremerton's Nemesis was waiting in the shadow to touch him on the shoulder and summon him to almost the worst thing that can befall a man in life.

The curtain had rung down after Bernhard's dying "L'Aliglon," and

people were smiling and bowing to each other from box to box of the Metropolitan. In the midst of the cheerful bustle preparatory to departure there suddenly rang out the heart-stopping cry of "Fire!" Young fellows leaning debonairly over well-gowned women straightened themselves abruptly with blanched faces. Countenances of men of the world, grown immobile from thirty years of repression, revealed as by a veil snatched aside a raw, livid agony of fear. Laughter fled the red, curving lips of famous beauties and robbed them of their sparkling charm. For just a heart-beat, an awful shuddering silence held the house entranced. Then a scream rang out—and another—and another. The audience got to its feet in mad terror. With the wild beast instinct of self-preservation men trod down dainty women, who stood between them and escape. It was all dreadful, horrible, impossible, yet true.

For what followed Bremerton could never afterwards account. He was exchanging some banter with Carol at the moment of the panic, and Mrs. Delaine was smiling at them both from the background. At the first cry there came a fierce contraction of his heart. Everything slipped his mind except a blind, unreasoning terror. A ghastly fear took him by the throat. He was no longer a civilized man, but a trapped beast, stifling for air, and with the primeval instinct he flung aside Mrs. Delaine and bolted from the box. Once in the aisle he fought madly for his own hand to win a way to safety.

How long this madness lasted he could not tell. When at last he came to sanity he was in the cool night air, hatless, without his overcoat, still in the beady perspiration his terror had brought out.

He saw himself again a quivering mass of fear, flying from the death which he had left the woman he loved to meet alone. A wave of abject humiliation shivered through him. He could still see Carol Delaine's first instinctive look of appeal to him in that moment of pulsing fear, and he cursed himself for a miserable coward that he had not responded to it. In his heart he knew that he had forfeited not only any claim he might have established to the girl he loved, but also the friendship of his clubmates and his own self-respect.

Slowly he made his way back into the theater. Fortunately the fire had been smothered and the stampede stopped in time to avoid the terrible catastrophe which had been threatened. A few women had been seriously hurt, but there were fortunately no casualties. As he passed in people were still gathered in excited groups, discussing how it had happened. He found the Delaines in the box where he had left them, and Alkire was helping them into their wraps. Bremerton remembered that he had seen Alkire in the parquet during the performance.

Mrs. Delaine turned on the young man a white face of scorn. One sentence of contemptuous irony fell from her lips before she could repress it.

"I suppose you have been calling the carriage for us, Mr. Bremerton."

The boy attempted no apologies and no explanations. He knew that his crime was without palliation. Excuses were the one degree of infamy to which he could not stoop. He had shown the white feather; he had been proved a poltroon of the worst sort; at least he would have the spirit enough to accept the punishment of his condemnation without whining.

And the extent of that punishment was already beginning to come home to him. Jim Alkire, who had flown to help the Delaine's at his desertion, felt Bob's degradation so keenly that he could not look him in the face. He seemed to feel something indecent in the nakedness of the young man's terror. When he was forced to speak directly to him there was in his voice a studied gentleness, as though he were talking to a child in a delirium. And Carol—the hopelessness in her face cut him to the quick. He did not need to be told now that she had loved him. The pain of his self-preservation stared out of her beyond concealment or denial. He felt that it would have been kinder of him to have struck her with a knife.

His fall was whispered that night at the club. It rained in a subdued murmur from lip to lip next day. Men

lunching at downtown restaurants spoke of it with a kind of secret shame. Women retailed it over their tea. Whenever Bremerton met his kind he brought with him to them a blended curiosity and embarrassment. Three days later he relieved the situation by disappearing totally and absolutely. The places which had known him knew him no more. He left neither good-byes nor any future address. So far as his associates knew he might have been swallowed up by some kindly earthquake. As the years passed his name fell less frequently from the lips of former friends. There were occasional rumors that he had been seen in different cities on the Western frontier, but though Alkire always ran down the rumors he never found his man. There came a time when only Jim and one other remembered him with any frequency.

Long months of waiting had dragged themselves away and still Bullen was on the other side of the Tugela. The frayed and dragged rag that stood for England still hung jauntily above the beleaguered town. Gaunt, hunger and fell disease had joined hands with the shells of the besiegers to make life intolerable to those within the stricken camp. The water supply was fast beyond description and entele fever swept away men, women and children alike. There was nursing to be done as well as fighting, and the men that did both went about their work quietly and cheerfully with the Anglo-Saxon reticence of feeling. They never thought of surrender. It had been appointed them "to sit tight and keep the flag flying," and the work that had been set them they would do. Only three days before there had been a grand assault along the line. The fighting had been hard to hand and desperate. At one part of the line the fortifications had been taken three times by the Boers and as many times won back by the Gordon Highlanders. The dean and wounded numbered many hundreds before the enemy was finally repulsed. All this had been but three days before, but the young American war correspondent wandering despondently through the streets could hear the sound of gay voices chanting from the officers' quarters the well-known refrain:

"Jolly good song, jolly well sung,  
Jolly good comrades every one."  
He envied these tall gaunt broad-shouldered fellows their light hearts. Many a time he had seen them in a spitting zone of fire, so confident, so easy, and so recklessly brave. There was an inspiring quality in their gallantry that lifted their men forward in spite of themselves when they wanted to in their alignment back before the scattering fragments of a bursting shell. If they had much to learn about scouting and generalship, at least malingering was a word not in the dictionary for them. With that thought, by contrast, the young man's memory took him back again to the fateful night that had changed him from a laughing boy to a man done with grief.

A soldier in khaki roused him from his reverie by stopping in front of him. It was Simmons, the body servant that had been assigned him to care for his wants.

"Please, sir," said Simmons, "that 'ere scouting party under Lieutenant Hastings is a-ready to leave, sir."

The American joined Hastings' little squad and slipped out with them on the veldt. The night was black, though it would be moonlight later on, and the half dozen men picked their way noiselessly across the open plain. They were detailed to find out whether a certain eminence in the distance was yet occupied by the enemy. Once one of the men, stumbled against an ant hill, grumbled out a complaint at "the bloomin' country" but Hastings called back in a sharp low voice:

"Silence in the ranks."

The moon came up and presently flooded the veldt with light so that their advance became necessarily more slow and cautious even than before. They had reached some rising ground close to the foothills when a shot rang out.

"Oh, cried the man in front of the correspondent, put both hands to his head, and toppled over with a bullet through his brain. There was a scattering volley converging toward them, and Hastings rushed his men to the top of the nearest hill. There was

shelter here of a kind, boulders and scrub brush piled together indiscriminately, and the young lieutenant made the most of it. Occasionally the sound of a shot reached them from different points below to let them know they were surrounded, but except for that they were unmolested till morning. From where they were trapped the correspondent could see fairly well the lay of the land about Ladysmith. He could see the dust and the hydite fumes hanging over various points of the Boer lines, and could head the booming forty-pounders, the hurrying three-inch crossbats, and the "Piff-piff-piff" of the fussy pom-poms. Presently there was a snipping and popping of rifle closer at hand. A red-haired Tommy turned grinning to his officer. The American noticed the odd look of shame-faced embarrassment that came over him, just as if he had been caught in some boyish prank by a teacher.

"They've 'it me, sir."  
"That's bad, Jones. Is it serious?" asked Hastings quietly.

"More than I can carry," answered the man. Then he laid his rifle carefully on the ground, picked a soft place among the sharp outcropping rocks and presently died without any fuss.

The downy-lipped lieutenant kept his men under cover all day, though he exposed himself without hesitation whenever he wanted to look through his field glasses or to help one of his wounded troopers. In this the correspondent seconded him ably. Yet the two seemed to bear charmed lives, for though before sunset all of the men had been hit these two were still unscathed. Hastings was one of those officers who bear their men on their conscience as a personal charge. He felt much drawn toward this correspondent, for during the past two weeks of the inferno through which they had all been passing he had come across him again and again caring for the wounded under fire or nursing the sick in the hospitals, and always with a certain gentle deferential humility that had seemed to him a curious quality to go with such a strikingly handsome presence. It was as if a man were apologizing for his presence even when that presence was indispensable. He took the greatest pains to obliterate himself, and if you spoke to him was as shy as a schoolgirl. But the thing which had struck Hastings more than anything else was that Bremerton though he seemed to seek the most dangerous places by choice, was constitutionally as timid as a rabbit. Whenever he put his life in peril he did it on sheer nerve. Unless his face lied the man was in torment. A ghastly fear stared out of his livid face, but he never hesitated to expose himself when the call came for volunteers to undertake a forlorn hope. He would drive himself forward relentlessly as a slave is driven by the lash, or as a high-spirited horse is sent quivering past some object in the roadway that it fears. He would go headlong into the teeth of danger with a fluttering heart and jangling nerves all in protest.

So it had been all day Bremerton was sweating blood in his agony, but it was a point of honor between him and his conscience that every man on the little plateau should be in such shelter as the place afforded before he would seek cover himself.

The Boers who had the surrounded, contented themselves with picking them off as they warily exposed themselves. The men were trapped without hope of rescue, and the position could not be rushed without loss to the attackers. At intervals during the day, as they broiled on the sunbeated gridiron of their hill-top, the handful of doomed men could hear the big guns at work on the neighboring heights as they fung their shells towards Ladysmith.

Wheugh-bang! Orrgh-crash! Piff-piff! went the long range guns and occasionally the big naval guns fung back their eighty-pound shells in defiant answer.

After dark had fallen Lieutenant Hastings came across to Where Bremerton lay crouched behind two jutting boulders.

"I say, Bremerton, old man, we're in a devil of a hole, you know. Tonight they'll occupy that hill behind us and then they'll pick us off to-morrow morning like rats in a corn bin. Wonder if you couldn't slip away in the darkness. Even if they get you—

well, you're no worse off than if you stay here."  
"I suppose you are going to stay?" asked Bremerton.  
"Me? Oh, I've got to." He lowered his voice, "Smithers and Cunningham are both alive yet, you know. But that doesn't keep you at all. You're quite free to go, and good luck to you!"

Bremerton sat with his face turned away into the night. There was a long silence, then "What are you going to do in the morning?" he asked. "Sit tight," he answered.

The silence this time was shorter than before.

"Think I'll stay too."

Hastings lifted a long breath of relief, but he felt it his duty to protest energetically.  
"Oh, that's rot, Bremerton! The thing that keeps me doesn't bind you at all. Our duties are quite different. I'm officially bound to sit here and let the beggars pot at me. You're officially bound to get back with the news for your paper. Tell 'em that Lieutenant Hastings let himself get ambushed with a scouting party and ought to be court-martialed if enough of him ever gets back for a board to sit on. Pitch it in strong!"

Bremerton set his jaw. "No, I'm going to stay," he said definitely.

The lieutenant's hand went out impulsively. "I know there's no use arguing with you when you've made up your mind. It's dashed good of you, Bremerton."

"Oh, that's all right," returned the American. Then he felt impelled to add, "I'm staying for a private reason of my own."

They shivered with cold all night, just as in day time they had sweated with the heat. Their hunger was insistent, and before the sun had been up an hour their throats were lime-kills again. Bler sharpshooters were hidden on the hill behind them and made their position untenable. A bullet flattened against the boulder behind Hastings. He jumped up and ran crouching to another rock. Half way across the open he dropped his rifle and fell, but immediately tried to crawl across, dragging a shattered leg behind him. He had to give it up.

"Clean bowled in the off stump," he called across to Bremerton.

The latter ran across the rifle-swept open toward the wounded man. He was hit twice before he reached him, and once again in the side before he had got his burden back to the scant shelter.

"Not badly hurt, are you?" asked the officer.

"It might be worse. They punctured my arm twice, and fished me in the ribs. How about you?"

The young officer touched his chest. "The end of the passage," he answered feebly. "The beggars got me as you were bringing me back. I say, Bremerton, this is a heastly hole

I've led you into!"  
"Don't worry about that. Is there anything I can do for you—anything that—?"

The boy officer nodded. "You'll find a letter in my pocketbook. If you get out of here I wish you would forward it to the address on the cover."

Hastings fell back in exhaustion and shut his eyes.

Bremerton promised huskily just as one of the Boers craned his head over a boulder cropping from the shoulder of the hill. He carried in his hand a flag of truce. The Englishman opened his eyes for the last time and caught sight of the waving rag. The boyish schoolboy enthusiasm leaped to his eyes. Bremerton propped him up and he tried to wave his hand.

Faintly the words of England's jaunty battle-song fell from his lips, "Rule Britannia, Britannia . . ." The words died to a murmur. He fell back exhausted. Only once more he spoke. Just before he died a happy smile touched his white lips.

"Tell the colonel—we sat tight—old man."

Fifteen minutes later, when the Boers came creeping stealthily to the hilltop they found alive one wounded civilian propped against a bare face of rock. In his lap was the head of a dead officer.

How Bremerton recovered of his wounds and was a wise days hero is another story, and how he went back to the woman who had believed in him and waited for him cannot be told here. He went back humbly and thankfully, with a fine restraint born of the bitter days he had endured in explanation of his sin, and the woman he won thought him the greater hero because there was no blare of trumpets in his manner. She knew that there must always be a strain of sadness running through his life, and woman-like she loved him more because of the weakness he had conquered at such cost.

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