

Slavery of Freedom

By Sara Lewis

London, England, 1852

Rueben glanced with impatient dark eyes at the women surrounding her. She didn't know why she had agreed to lend her famous name and stunning success to this pitiful little gathering in the first place. The small feminist group had ideas aligned with hers, to be sure—that women could do everything men could and deserved a higher place in society— but the organization seemed comically short on action. All the women wore long dresses trailing along the floor as they walked, all sported stylish hair and fashionable gloves, none had done anything with their lives save to marry and bear children.

She was not one of them. She had done something with her life, and won something with it too. She had succeeded in transforming herself from an unwanted fifth child, little Susannah Margaret Brock, into General Sir Rueben Brock, a brilliant military commander and the first woman to serve in the British military. She had fought her way up through a sexist society and she had won. Forty years ago she had been an uncontrollable fourteen-year-old, determined to make her name fighting with the English in the War of 1812—now, she was a legendary inspiration for ambitious women everywhere and a symbol for change and equality.

That was why she was here, she realized sheepishly, to show herself off. Handsome though she still remained, her once striking beauty of the old 1812 days had faded considerably, but she knew she had simply come to overawe the women with her amazing achievements and strong personality. To prove to them what they could be, if they had the courage, to prove the sweet taste of independence and its rewards of happiness and freedom. And, she admitted, to prove to herself that independence was sweet and had given her those things.

Rueben's attention was drawn away from this uncomfortable conclusion by the presence at her elbow of one of the women she had been so ridiculing, a young lady bearing the name of Henrietta. "Oh, General Brock," she simpered, "I do so envy you."

Something in the other's earnest passion stayed Rueben from her usual prideful response. She knew Henrietta to be married, happily, and to have two small children. For a moment Rueben completely forgot the glory of her own accomplishments. "Do you?" she said with a bitter smile. "Well, I envy you."

II

His name was August. Lieutenant Augustus Hatfield, really, but she called him August. He was American, she was English; perhaps they were always Romeo and Juliet. It began innocently enough with friendship, in the summer of 1812 when Rueben was young and beautiful and determined to beat the world in single combat, created mostly out of Rueben's desire for rebellion by any means. How it grew she never knew, but over the two years the war between their countries stumbled onward, it did. August's hazel eyes resting on her in a lingering way; her own eyes analyzing the colour of his hair, the shape of his face, the build of his body after a fashion that shamed her; little things he said, sharp answers she never made. And so it happened, that Rueben, who valued freedom above all else, and who believed marriage to be opposed to this, fell in love.

The night in 1814 when she had to tell August that she was leaving for England and abandoning him—and "them"—was one of the hardest nights of her life. He took it very quietly—his eerie calm frightened her—but when she had stumbled through her explanations he fixed her with a piercing gaze and said sadly, "You'll go far in this world, Rueben, woman though you

are. You're a genius and a leader; you've ounces of charisma and a character of unstoppable success. You know that; but tell me, straight out, do you love me?"

She wanted to lie, but knew it would change nothing. "Y-yes."

He smiled, sadly, cruelly. "And I love you. What's to stop us?" He put his arms around her and drew her to him; her mind protested, her body cooperated. She kissed him, again and again; couldn't stop, didn't want to. Finally she pushed away, but he still held her hands.

"It wouldn't work," she told him.

"No," he agreed, wistfully, "it wouldn't. Your self consumes you, Rueben; your character devours you. I love you and want to marry you; you love me but won't marry me because that would wreck those high-wrought dreams of yours. You're smart enough; you'll win the world one day, but you'll regret this choice. My absence will be all that impedes your happiness; but you're stuck, because if you did marry me, you'd be miserable because your future wasn't as glorious as you dreamed it."

He was still holding her hands; she needed to leave. "August," she pleaded helpless though she could have jerked away, "please, let me go."

He released her and held up his hands dramatically, "You're free, Rueben," he announced, "you always were. But remember, I've reached inside you and plucked out your heart, and you'll never be whole without it."

III

She didn't see him for twenty-five years after that night, so it was a shock when she saw him in London one day while he was there on American business. Rueben was proud of her steely nerves, but seeing him—nearly the same, though his face was older, wearier—literally stopped her in her tracks.

“Hello, Rueben,” he greeted her, his eyes mocking her discomfiture as he fell into step beside her, “as beautiful as ever,” he added, bitterly.

Rueben didn’t know what to say to him, those few days they spent together. She showed him her career, her reputation, her life, but through all its grandeur she saw him asking one question—“Do you regret it?” and she knew he knew she did, far as she was from confessing it. And when the time came for him to return to America, she knew by one glance that she was in for another grueling conversation.

“I know why you did it,” he told her as he sat beside her, “and it’s all very nice—worth fighting for. But it didn’t make you happy, did it? I know the answer”—his voice got hard and cold and Rueben felt guilty—“but why did you have to wreck two lives for this?”

Out of her guilt came her anger. “Because I wouldn’t have been your slave—just trot behind you, Mrs. Lieutenant Augustus Hatfield, a stuffy little officer’s wife.”

“I never asked you to be her.”

“But I would have inevitably conformed to her if I were stuck in her. And if I didn’t conform I would have destroyed your career—everybody would look at you and think of your crazy wife. And I could never stay Rueben there, you know that. If I tried, they—your people, your friends—would have pitied me and scorned me and tried to make me change until I really did go mad.”

“So I was right then.” His voice held no triumph. “You’re caught at last. Your old nemesis, society, has finally outwitted you—your own opposition has ensnared you. Admit it, Rueben, for all your ideals—you’re caught in a net of freedom.”

Net of freedom. Freedom to her had been so everlasting, but now this net seemed to expand over it. She looked at him, loving him for being him and hating him for trapping her.

Almost feeling the wiry net around her, she could bear it no more. She flung herself at him, kissing him as she had before, but even his kisses untangled not the net and soothed not her loss.

IV

Another twenty-five years passed. Rueben's youth and beauty faded imperceptibly to perish irrevocably. She was left an old woman, still with proud, fine features, left with her fame and hard-won glory, left with the ghost of Augustus Hatfield. Ever she saw the Mrs. Susannah Hatfield who had never existed mocking her, flaunting the impossible happiness Rueben had forbid her, but she thought her love, poignant though it remained, buried forever in the chasms of her past. But she would see him one more time.

In 1861 the American Civil War broke out and August, Lieutenant no longer, was a Major for the North. In 1862 Rueben went to America, under the slim pretext of assessing the state of affairs for the British Government, but in reality for a wild hope that meeting him once more would bring about something other than a painful remembering of broken dreams.

A report reached her that he had been wounded. It couldn't be true! Rueben flung aside the Government and thought only of him. She found his regiment, rode all night to find him. Oh, it was mad, all of this! Why couldn't she forget? What did it matter, if he did die, she had already lost everything she could have had with him! She had to find him. But suppose he was already dead? Then she would kill herself. Only mildly aware she was panicking, Rueben's brain held only a single echo of a thought: August, August!

But he was not dead. It was only a minor blow to the head; he was fully conscious and hardly hurt; she found him recovering in a miserable little shed. She stood in the doorway as he recognized her; their memories came flooding between them and she could go no further.

"Rueben." His voice was flat, not surprised.

“Oh, August.”

“Stop,” he ordered, as she stepped forward, in a tone more pained than hard.

Her wall of emotion destroyed, she almost cried for the first time in years. “August, forgive me, please, I’m sorry!”

“Do you regret it?” Sorrow was creeping into his expressionless voice.

“Yes!”

“The life we could have had, the children we could have raised?”

She forgot everything she had argued so logically since she was a girl of sixteen. “Yes – yes!”

“Then come here.” His voice was still sad, but tinged with a tenderness that made her know he still loved her, would always love her, no matter what the world threw between them.

She went. It was a miserable building, on the edge of a battlefield, but it was the most beautiful place in the world. She could be happy here, for a little while, happier than she had ever been with her life. She gave herself away to love; let it consume her wholly as the other things had for so long. Would it last? Probably not. But for this moment she was his and he was hers and they were the only people in existence. But for this moment, love was stronger, and she was sixteen again, tasting what she had never had and always longed for. Maybe, just maybe, in this miserable place, she could finally—just for a little while—be free of freedom.