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MADAME FLIRT

A ROMANCE OF
"THE BEGGAR'S OPERA"

BY

CHARLES E. PEARCE

"Why how now Madam Flirt"—Lucy.

AUTHOR OF
"STIRRING DEEDS IN THE GREAT WAR," "A QUEEN OF THE PADDOCK,"
"CORINTHIAN JACK," ETC.

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MADAME FLIRT

CHAPTER I

"IF YOUR NAME ISN'T POLLY IT OUGHT TO BE"

"As pretty a wench as man ever clapped eyes on. Wake up, Lance, and look at her."

The portly man of genial aspect sitting in the corner of the bow window of the Maiden Head Inn at the High Street end of Dyott Street in the very heart of St. Giles, clapped his sleeping friend on the shoulder and shook him. The sleeper, a young man whose finely drawn features were clouded with the dregs of wine, muttered something incoherently, and with an impatient twist shifted his body in the capacious arm-chair.

"Let him alone, Mr. Gay. When a man's in his cups he's best by himself. 'Twill take him a day's snoring to get rid of his bout. The landlord here tells me he walked with the mob from Newgate to Tyburn and back and refreshed himself at every tavern on the way, not forgetting, I warrant you, to fling away a guinea at the Bowl, the Lamb, and the 'Black Jack' over yonder, and drink to

the long life of the daring rogue in the cart and the health of the hangman to boot."

"Long life indeed, my lord. A couple of hours at most. Not that the length of life is to be measured by years. I don't know but what it's possible to cram one's whole existence into a few hours, thanks to that thief of time," rejoined John Gay pointing to the bottle on the table.

The poet's placid face saddened. John Gay had always taken life as a pleasure, but there is no [Pg 10] pleasure without pain as he had come to discover. Maybe at that moment a recollection of his follies gave his conscience a tinge. Of Gay it might be said that he had no enemies other than himself.

"Oh, the passing hour is the best doubtless, since we never know whether the next may not be the worst," laughed Henry St. John, Lord Bolingbroke. "I'll wager Jack Sheppard's best was when the noose was round his neck. The rascal will trouble nervous folks no more. After all he was of some use. See that drunken rabble. But for the brave show he made at Tyburn yesterday, would those ladies and gentlemen be merry making, think you, and would the tavern keepers and the gin sellers be putting money in their pockets?"

Gay turned his eyes to the open window.

"I don't want to think of the rascally knave or the rabble either. My thoughts are on yonder pretty little jade. Look for yourself, Bolingbroke. You're not so insensible to beauty as Lance Vane is at this moment."

"Faith, I hope not. Where's the charmer?" said Bolingbroke walking to the window.

"Stay. She's going to sing. She has the voice of a nightingale. I've heard her before. Lord! to think she has to do it for a living!"

"Humph. She has courage. Most girls would die rather than rub shoulders with that frousy, bestial, drunken mob."

"Aye, but that little witch subdues them all with her voice. What says Will Congreve? Music has charms to soothe a savage breast? Listen."

A girl slight in figure but harmoniously proportioned had placed herself about two yards from the bow window. She fixed her eyes on Gay and her pretty mouth curved into a smile. Then she sang. The ditty was "Cold and Raw," a ballad that two hundred years ago or so, never failed to delight everybody from the highest to the lowest. She gave it with natural feeling and without any [Pg 11] attempt at display. The voice was untrained but this did not matter. It was like the trill of a bird, sweet, flexible and pure toned.

"A voice like that ought not to be battered about. It's meant for something better than bawling to a mob. What says your lordship?"

Bolingbroke's face had become grave, almost stern. His high, somewhat narrow, slightly retreating forehead, long nose and piercing eyes lent themselves readily to severity. Twenty-five years before it was not so. He was then the gayest of the gay and in the heyday of his career. Much had happened since then. Disappointed political ambitions and political flirtations with the Jacobite party had ended in exile in France, from which, having been pardoned, he had not long returned.

Meeting Gay, the latter suggested a prowl in St. Giles, where life was in more than its usual turmoil consequent upon the execution of Jack Sheppard; so Viscount Bolingbroke revisited the slums of St. Giles, which had been the scene of many an orgy in his hot youth.

The nobleman returned no answer to Gay's question. His thoughts had gone back to his early manhood when he took his pleasure wherever he found it. In some of his mad moods St. Giles was more to his taste than St. James's. So long as the face was beautiful, and the tongue given to piquant raillery, any girl was good enough for him. He was of the time when a love intrigue was a necessary part of a man's life, and not infrequently of a woman's too.

Successful lover though he had been he was not all conquering. The ballad singer's tender liquid tones carried his memory back to the low-born girl with the laughing eyes who had captured his heart. She sold oranges about the door of the Court of Requests, she sang ballads in the street, she was a little better than a light of love, yet Bolingbroke could never claim her as his own. It [Pg 12] angered him sorely that she had a smile for others. But he bore her no malice, or he would hardly have written his poetical tribute commencing:—

> "Dear, thoughtless Clara, to my verse attend,
> Believe for once the lover and the friend."

So Gay's words were unheeded. A heavy step sounded on the sanded floor. A big man with features formed on an ample mould had entered. Gay was entranced by the singer and did not hear him. The newcomer stood silently behind the poet. He too, was listening intently.

The girl's voice died into a cadence. Gay beckoned to her and she came up to the window.

"Finely sung, Polly," cried Gay. "Who taught thee, child?"

"I taught myself, sir," said she dropping a curtsey.

"Then you had a good teacher. There's a crown for you."

"Oh sir ... it's too much."

"Nay, Polly—if your name isn't Polly it ought to be. What does your mother call you?"

"Mostly an idle slut, sir."

Her face remained unmoved save her eyes, which danced with sly merriment.

The men at the window burst into a roar of laughter. He who had entered last laughed the loudest and deepest, and loud and deep as was that laugh it was full of music. At its sound Gay turned sharply.

"What? Dick Leveridge? You've come at the right moment. We need someone who knows good music when he hears it. What of this pretty child's voice. Is it good?"

"Is it good? I'll answer your question, Mr. Gay, by asking you another. Are you good at verses?" [Pg 13]

"'Tis said my 'Fables' will be pretty well. The young Prince William will have the dedication of it and if his mother, the Princess of Wales approves, methinks my fortune's made," cried Gay buoyantly.

"Glad to hear it," replied Leveridge, dryly. "If I know anything about His Royal Highness you'll gain a fortune sooner by writing a ballad or two for this pretty songster. Make her famous as you made me with 'All in the Downs' and 'T'was when the seas were roaring.'"

Gay's face brightened.

"Faith, Dick, you've set my brain working. I'll think on't, but that means I must keep my eye on the wench."

"Oh, I'll trust you for that," rejoined Leveridge, the ghost of a smile flitting across his solemn visage.

Meanwhile the girl had retreated a yard or two from the window, her gaze fixed wistfully on Gay and Leveridge. She knew from their looks that she was the subject of their talk.

Gay turned from his friend Richard Leveridge, the great bass singer of the day, and rested his hands on the window sill. Bolingbroke had sunk into his chair, and buried in his thoughts, was slowly sipping his wine. Lancelot Vane continued to breathe heavily.

"Come here, child," said Gay through the open window and sinking his voice. The crowd had pressed round her and were clamourous for her to sing again. Some had thrown her a few pence for which a couple of urchins were groping on the ground.

The girl approached.

"Now Polly——"

"My name's Lavinia—Lavinia Fenton, sir," she interrupted.

"Too fine—too fine. I like Polly better. Never mind. If it's Lavinia, Lavinia it must be. What's your mother? Where does she live?"

"At the coffee house in Bedfordbury." [Pg 14]

"Does she keep it?"

"Yes, sir."

"And what do *you* do?"

"Wait on the customers—sometimes."

"And sometimes you sing in the streets—round the taverns, eh?"

"Only when mother drives me out."

"Oh. She ill treats you, does she? That bruise on your shoulder—was it her work?"

The girl nodded.

"You wouldn't mind if you left your mother and did nothing but sing?"

"Oh, that would be joy," cried the girl squeezing her hands tightly together to stifle her emotions. "But how can I?"

"It may be managed, perhaps. I must see your mother——"

He was interrupted by a deafening roar—hoarse, shrill, raucous, unmistakably drunken. A huge, ragged multitude had poured into the High Street from St. Martin's Lane, jostling, fighting, cursing, eager for devilment, no matter what. They rushed to the hostelries, they surrounded the

street sellers of gin, demanding the fiery poisonous stuff for which they had no intention of paying.

The landlord of the "Maiden Head" hurried into the room somewhat perturbed.

"Best shut the window, gentlemen," said he. "This vile scum's none too nice. Anything it wants it'll take without so much as by your leave, or with your leave."

"What does it mean, landlord?" asked Bolingbroke.

"Oh's all over Jack Sheppard. The people are mad about the rascal just because the turnkeys couldn't hold him, nor prison walls for the matter o' that. He was clever in slipping out o' prison I grant ye. Well, sirs, his body was to be handed over to the surgeons like the rest o' the Tyburn gentry, but his friends would have none of it. A bailiff somehow got hold of the corpse to make [Pg 15] money out of it—trust them sharks for *that* when they see a chance—an' smuggled it to his house in Long Acre. It got wind afore many hours was past and the mob broke into the place, the Foot Guards was called out an' there's been no end of a rumpus."

"Faith, my poor Gay," said Bolingbroke with a sardonic smile, "the people make more fuss over a burglar than over a ballad maker. And what's become of the noble Sheppard's body, landlord?"

"It's hidden somewhere. They say as it'll be buried to-night in St. Martin's Churchyard. So the people'll get their way after all."

"As they mostly do if they make noise enough," rejoined Bolingbroke refreshing himself with a pinch of snuff.

"Yes, your honour, and——"

The sound of a loud high pitched, strident voice floated into the room through the open window. Gay, whose eyes had never shifted from the girl outside, saw her cheeks suddenly blanch. She looked round hurriedly like a frightened rabbit seeking a way of escape.

"Bring the girl in, landlord," exclaimed the poet hastily. "She'll come to harm else. Lord! Look at those drunken beasts. No—no"—the landlord was about to shut the latticed windows—"run to the door, child. Quick."

A howling sottish mob mad with drink, clamouring, gesticulating, men and women jostling each other, embracing vulgarly, their eyes glassy, their faces flushed, was approaching the inn.

The mob was headed by a handsome woman. She was in the plenitude of fleshly charms. Her dress, disordered, showed her round solidly built shoulders, her ample bust. Some day unless her tastes and her manner of life altered she would end in a bloway drab, every vestige of beauty gone in masses of fat. But at that moment she was the model of a reckless Bacchante, born for [Pg 16] the amusement and aggravation of man.

Her maddening eyes were directed on the Maiden Head inn. Her full lips were parted in a harsh boisterous laugh; her white teeth gleamed; the blood ran riot in her veins; she was the embodiment of exuberant, semi-savage, animal life. She danced up to the open window. The sight of the sleeping Lance Vane had drawn her thither.

Up to that moment Lavinia Fenton's back was towards the woman. Lavinia tried to get away without notice, but the Bacchante's escort was too numerous, too aggressive, too closely packed. They hoped for some fun after their own tastes.

"Mercy on me," muttered Gay apprehensively, "that impudent hussy, Sally Salisbury. And drunk too. This means trouble. Dick," he whispered hurriedly to Leveridge, "you can use your fists if need be. I've seen you have a set-to in Figg's boxing shed. That girl's in danger. Sally's bent on mischief. There's murder in her eyes. Come with me."

Leveridge nodded and followed his friend out of the room.

Gay's action was none too prompt. No sooner had Sally Salisbury—destined to be, a few years later, the most notorious woman of her class—set eyes on the girl than her brows were knitted and her lips and nostrils went white. Her cheeks on the other hand blazed with fury. She gripped the shrinking girl and twisted her round. Then she thrust her face within a few inches of Lavinia's.

"What do you mean by coming here, you squalling trollop?" she screamed. "How dare you poach on my ground, you——"

How Sally finished the sentence can be very well left to take care of itself. [Pg 17]

Lavinia despite her terror of the beautiful virago never lost her self-control.

"You're welcome to this ground every inch of it, but I suppose I've as much right to walk on it as you have," said she.

"Don't talk to me, you little trull, or you'll drive me to tear your eyes out. Take that."

With the back of her disengaged hand she struck the girl's cheek.

CHAPTER II

"GO YOUR OWN WAY YOU UNGRATEFUL MINX"

The mob roared approval at the prospect of a fight, and though the combatants were unfairly matched some of the ruffians urged the girl to retaliate.

"Go for her hair, little un," one shouted. "There's plenty of it. Once you get a fair hold and tear out a handful she'll squeak, I'll warrant."

The advice was not taken and maybe nobody expected it would be. Anyway, before Sally could renew the attack her arm was seized by a man, slight in stature and with a naturally humorous expression on his lean narrow face and in his bright twinkling eyes.

"Enough of this brawling, mistress. If you *must* fight choose someone as big and as strong as yourself, not a lambkin."

The crowd knew him and whispers went round. "That's Spiller—Jemmy Spiller the famous play actor." "No, is it though. Lord, he can make folks laugh—ah, split their sides a'most. I see him last Saturday at Master Rich's theayter in the Fields, and I thought I should ha' died." [Pg 18]

Spiller was better at making people laugh than at holding an infuriated woman. But he had two friends with him, stalwart butchers from Clare Market, and he turned the task over to them with the remark that they were used to handling mad cattle.

At this point Gay and Leveridge forced their way through the crowd. Gay saw the red angry mark on the girl's pallid face and guessed the cause. He drew her gently to him.

"Run inside the house. I'll join you presently," he whispered.

She thanked him with her eyes and vanished. Gay turned to Spiller.

"You deserve a double benefit at Drury Lane, Jemmy, for what you did just now. That wild cat was about to use her claws," said he.

"Aye, and her teeth too, Mr. Gay."

"You'll need a mouthful of mountain port after that tussle. And your friends as well, when they've disposed of Mistress Salisbury."

The butchers had removed her out of harm's way. Some of her lady friends and sympathisers had joined her; and a couple of young "bloods" who had come to see the fun of an execution, with money burning holes in their pockets, being captured, the party subsided into the "Bowl" where a bottle of wine washed away the remembrance of Sally Salisbury's grievance. But she vowed vengeance on the "squalling chit" sooner or later.

Meanwhile the object of Sally Salisbury's hoped for revenge was sitting in a dark corner of the coffee room of the Maiden Head tavern. She felt terribly embarrassed and answered Bolingbroke's compliments in monosyllables. He pressed her to take some wine but she refused. To her great relief he did not trouble her with attentions. [Pg 19]

Then Gay entering with Spiller and his butcher friends, and Leveridge, as soon as he could, approached her.

"Tell me, Polly,—my tongue refuses to say Lavinia—how you have offended that vulgar passionate woman?"

"I don't know. Jealousy, I suppose. She's burning to sing but she can't. Sing, why she sets one's teeth on edge! It might be the sharpening of a knife on a grindstone. She would be a play actress, and Mrs. Barry at Drury Lane promised to help her, but they quarrelled. Sally wanted to be a great actress all at once, but you can't be, can you, sir?"

She looked at the poet earnestly. Her large grey eyes were wonderfully expressive, and Gay did not at once answer. He was thinking how sweet was the face, and how musical and appealing the voice.

"True, child, and that you should say it shows your good sense. Wait here a few minutes and then you shall take me to your mother."

Gay crossed the room to his friends, and they talked together in low voices. Spiller and Leveridge had much to say—indeed it was to these two, who had practical knowledge of the theatre, to whom he appealed. Bolingbroke sat silently listening.

Gay's project concerning his new found protégée was such as would only have entered into the brain of a dreamy and impecunious poet. He saw in Lavinia Fenton the making of a fine actress—not in tragedy but in comedy—and of an enchanting singer. But to be proficient she must be taught not only music, but how to pronounce the English language properly. She had to a certain extent picked up the accent of the vulgar. It was impossible, considering her surroundings and associations, to be otherwise. But proper treatment and proper companions would soon rid her of this defect.

Both Spiller and Leveridge agreed she was fitted for the stage. But how was she to be educated? And what was the use of education while she was living in a Bedfordbury coffee house! [Pg 20]

"She must be sent to a boarding school and be among gentlefolk," declared Gay energetically.

"Excellent," said Bolingbroke, speaking for the first time, "and may I ask who will pay for the inestimable privilege of placing her among the quality?"

The irony in St. John's voice did not go unnoticed by Gay, but he continued bravely.

"I will, if her mother won't."

"You? My good friend, you can scarce keep yourself. But 'tis like you to add to the burden of debt round your neck rather than reduce it. Have you been left a fortune? Have your dead South Sea Shares come back to life?"

"Nay, Bolingbroke, don't remind me of my folly," rejoined Gay, a little piqued. "We can't always be wise. Thou thyself—but let that pass, the future is the foundation of hope. Before long I shall be in funds. The 'Fables' will be in the booksellers' hands ere the month is out."

"Oh, that's well. But the booksellers, though eager enough to sell their wares, are not so ready to pay the writer his due. Moreover if I know anything of John Gay, of a certainty all the money he puts in his pocket will go out of the hole at the other end."

"I know—I know," rejoined the poet hastily. "But I'm not thinking alone of the booksellers. It is a 'place' I shall have and an annual income that will sweep away all my anxieties."

"Then you're in favour with the Princess and her obedient servant Sir Robert—or is Walpole her master? What will the Dean of St. Patrick and Mr. Pope say to your surrender?"

"No, no. I will never write a word in praise of either. There's not a word in the 'Fables' that can be twisted into bolstering up the Government." [Pg 21]

"And you think to receive your comfortable 'place' out of pure admiration of your poetical gifts? My poor Gay!"

"No. Friendship."

"Well, well, you must go your own way or you wouldn't be a poet. I leave you to your commendable work of rescuing damsels in distress."

And after refreshing himself with a pinch of snuff Bolingbroke with a wave of the hand to Gay and his friends strode from the room leaving the poet with his pleasant face somewhat overcast.

But his chagrin did not last long. His natural buoyancy asserted itself and he beckoned to Lavinia who was sitting primly on the edge of the hard chair, her folded hands resting on her lap. Before she could cross the room Spiller and Leveridge took up Bolingbroke's argument, and urged Gay not to meddle further in the matter.

"Nay, why should I not? It would be a shame and a pity that so much good talent should be wasted on the groundlings of St. Giles. Besides, there is the girl herself," Gay lowered his voice. "You wouldn't have her be like Sally Salisbury, Jemmy, would you? She has a good and innocent nature. It will be torn to tatters if she be not looked after now. No. Neither you nor Dick Leveridge will talk me out of my intent. Do you see what misguided youth may easily come to? Look at your friend Vane."

Gay pointed to the sleeping young man.

"I know—I know. The young fool," returned Spiller a little angrily. "Wine is Lancelot Vane's only weakness—well, not the only one, any pretty face turns his head."

"He's not the worse for that provided a good heart goes with the pretty face."

"Aye, *if*."

"Look after him then. When he awakens from his drunken fit he'll be like clay in the hands of the potters." [Pg 22]

"Faith, you're right, Mr. Gay, but there's one thing that'll protect him—his empty purse. I doubt if he has a stiver left. I know he drew some money from the *Craftsman* yesterday."

"What, does he write for that scurrilous, venomous print?" cried Gay, visibly disturbed.

"Not of his own will. He hates the paper and he hates Amherst, who owns it. But what is a man to do when poverty knocks at the door?"

"That may be. Still—I wish he had nothing to do with that abusive fellow, Nicholas Amherst, who calls himself 'Caleb D'Anvers,' why I know not, unless he's ashamed of the name his father gave him. Do you know that the *Craftsman* is always attacking my friends, Mr. Pope, Dr. Swift, Dr. Arbuthnot? As for myself—but that's no matter."

"Oh, Amherst's a gadfly, no doubt. But your friends can take care of themselves. For every blow they get they can if it so pleases them, give two in return."

"That's true, and I'll say nothing more. I wish your friend well rid of the rascally D'Anvers. Look

after him, Jemmy. Come Polly—let us to your mother."

Both Spiller and Leveridge saw that Gay was not to be turned from his resolution to help the girl, and presently she and her new found friend were threading their way through a network of courts and alleys finally emerging into the squalid thoroughfare between New Street and Chandos Street.

The dirt and the poverty-stricken aspect of the locality did not deter the poet from his intention. Bedfordbury was not worse than St. Giles. The girl led him to a shabby coffee shop from the interior of which issued a hot and sickly air.

"That's mother," she whispered when they were in the doorway.

A buxom woman not too neatly dressed, whose apron bore traces of miscellaneous kitchen work, [Pg 23] scowled when her eyes lighted on her daughter.

"So you've come home, you lazy good-for-nothing hussy," she screamed. "Where have you been? You don't care how hard I have to work so long as you can go a pleasuring. There's plenty for you to do here. Set about washing these plates if you don't want a trouncing."

Mrs. Fenton was in a vile temper and Gay's heart somewhat failed at the sight of her. Then he glanced at the girl and her frightened face gave him courage.

"Madame," said he advancing with a polite bow, "I should like with your permission to have a few words with you in private. My business here concerns your daughter in whom I take an interest."

"Oh, and who may you be?" asked the woman ungraciously.

"My name is Gay—John Gay—but I'll tell you more when we're alone."

He cast a look around at the rough Covent Garden porters with which the place was fairly full. One of the boxes was empty and Mrs. Fenton pointed to it, at the same time ordering her daughter to go into the kitchen and make herself useful. Then she flopped down opposite Gay, separated from him by a table marked by innumerable rings left by coffee mugs.

Gay put forward his ideas and painted a glorious future for Lavinia. Her mother did not seem particularly impressed. It was doubtful indeed if she believed him.

"You'll find the wench a handful. She's been no good to me. I'd as lieve let her go her own way as keep her. A young 'oman with a pretty face hasn't got no need to trouble about getting a living. Sooner or later she'll give me the slip—but—well—if you takes her and makes a lady of her what do I get out of it?"

This was a view of the matter which had not occurred to the poet. He felt decidedly embarrassed. His project appeared to be more costly than he had at first imagined. [Pg 24]

"It is for the benefit of your daughter," he stammered.

"Her benefit, indeed. Fiddle-de-dee! Your own you mean. I know what men are. If she was an ugly slut you wouldn't take no notice of her. Don't talk rubbish. What are you a going to give me for saying, yes. That's business, mister. Come, how much?"

The poet saw there was no other way but talking business. This embarrassed him still more for he was the last man qualified to act in such a capacity.

"I'll see what I can do," said he nervously, "but you mustn't forget that Lavinia will have to be quite two years at school, and there is her music master——"

"Oh I dare say," rejoined the lady scoffingly, "and the mantle maker, and the milliner, and the glover, and the hairdresser. That's your affair, not mine. Name a round sum and I'll try to meet you. What d'ye say?"

"Would five guineas——?"

"What!" shrieked Lavinia's mother. "And you call yourself a gentleman?"

"The sum I admit is a small one, but as you seemed anxious to get your daughter off your hands I thought I was doing you a service by putting the girl in a way to earn a good living."

"I dare say. I'm not to be taken in like that. Fine words butter no parsnips. While Lavinia's in the house I'll go bail I'll make her work. If she goes away I've got to pay someone in her place, haven't I? Twenty guineas is the very lowest I'll take, and if you was anything like the gentleman you look you'd make it double."

The haggling over such a matter and the coarse mercenary nature of the woman jarred upon the poet's sensitive soul. The plain fact that he hadn't got twenty guineas in the world could not be gainsaid. But he had rich friends. If he could only interest them in this protégée of his something [Pg 25] might be done. And there were the "Fables."

"Twenty guineas," he repeated. "Well, I'll do my best. In two days' time, Mrs. Fenton, I will come and see you and most likely all will be settled to your satisfaction."

"Two days. Aye. No longer or maybe my price'll go up."

"I shall not fail. Now, Mrs. Fenton, before I go I'd like to see Lavinia once more."

"No, this business is between you an' me, mister. The hussy's naught to do with it. She'll have to behave herself while she's with me. That's all I have to say about *her*."

So Gay rose and walked out of the box feeling as though he'd been through a severe drubbing. He might have been sufficiently disheartened to shatter his castle in the air had he not seen Lavinia's big sorrowful eyes fixed upon him from the kitchen. He dared not disobey her mother's behest not to speak to her so he tried to smile encouragingly, and to intimate by his expression that all was going well. Whether he succeeded in so doing he was by no means sure.

On leaving the coffee house Gay walked towards Charing Cross and thence along the Haymarket to Piccadilly. His destination was Queensberry House to the north of Burlington Gardens. Here lived Gay's good friends the Duke and Duchess of Queensberry, and indeed Gay himself, save when he was at Twickenham with Pope.

At dinner that evening Gay broached the subject of the phenomenal singer whom he had discovered in the streets of St. Giles and his scheme concerning her. The duke laughed at the poet's visions, but the duchess was fascinated. Anything of the unusual at once appealed to the warmhearted, impulsive, somewhat eccentric, lady. Her enthusiasm where she was interested always carried her away, and her impatience and energy would not let her rest until her object was accomplished. [Pg 26]

"I would vastly like to hear Mr. Gay's pretty nightingale. You must bring her to-morrow. I am dying to see if she is really the wonder you pretend she is. You know that the best judge of a woman is another woman. A man is apt to be partial."

"And a woman to be prejudiced," said Gay smilingly.

"Faith, Kitty," laughed the duke, "our poet has thee there."

"I deny it. But we will discuss the question after we've seen the paragon. When shall she come?"

Gay for once was shrewd.

"Not until we've settled with the mother. She's a harpy. If she knows that your grace has anything to do with the affair she'll double her price."

"Why, our Gay is teaching us something," said the Duke banteringly. "He is giving us a lesson in financial economy. Duchess, you must keep your eye on the next post vacant in the Exchequer."

"Pish!" retorted her grace. "Mr. Gay is only exercising commonsense. We all of us have a little of that commodity. If we could only have it handy when it's wanted how much better the world would be."

Neither of the men disputed the lady's proposition, and the duchess rising, left them to their wine.

Armed with the twenty guineas, Gay presented himself the following day at the Bedfordbury coffee house. Mrs. Fenton was still ungracious, but the sight of the little pile of gold and the chink of the coins mollified her humour.

"Where and when are you going to take her?" she demanded.

Gay had arranged a plan with the duchess and he replied promptly.

"She will stay here for a few days while her wardrobe is being got ready, then she is to go to Miss Pinwell's boarding school in Queen Square." [Pg 27]

"Carry me out and bury me decent," ejaculated Mrs. Fenton. "Then I'm to be the mother of a fine lady, am I?"

"I don't say that, but a clever one if I'm not mistaken."

"Clever! Oh la! Much good will her cleverness do her. Clever! Aye in always having a crowd o' sparks a dangling after her. That Miss What's-her-name in Queen Square'll have to get up early to best Lavinia when there's a man about."

"A mother shouldn't say such ill-natured things of her own child," said Gay reprovingly. "She's hardly a woman yet."

"But she knows as much. Well, you've got your bargain. Make your best of it. What about her clothes? She's but a rag-bag though it's no fault o' mine. Pray who's going to buy her gowns, her hats, her petticoats, her laces and frills. You?"

"I? Bless me! no, woman. I know nothing about such things," rejoined Gay colouring slightly. "I will send a woman who understands the business."

"It's all one to me. Maybe you'd better tell your tale to Lavinia with your own lips. I've done with her."

"By all means. I should like to see her."

Mrs. Fenton, whose eyes all the while had been gloating over the gold on the table now swept it

into her pocket. It was a windfall which had come at the right moment. She was tired of Bedfordbury. She aimed at a step higher. There was a coffee house business in the Old Bailey going cheap, the twenty pounds would enable her to buy it.

As for her daughter, she had no scruple about letting her go with a man who was quite a stranger. The girl's future didn't trouble her. Since Lavinia had entered her teens, mother and daughter had wrangled incessantly. Lavinia was amiable enough, but constant snubbing had roused a spirit which guided her according to her moods. Sometimes she was full of defiance, at others she would run out of the house, and ramble about the streets until she was dead tired. [Pg 28]

Lavinia was shrewd enough to discover why her mother did not want her at home. Mrs. Fenton, still good-looking, was not averse to flirting with the more presentable of her customers, and as Lavinia developed into womanhood she became a serious rival to her mother, so on the whole, Gay's proposition suited Mrs. Fenton admirably, and she certainly never bothered to find out if he spoke the truth. She was not inclined to accept his story of the boarding school as a stepping-stone to the stage, but to pretend to believe it in a way quieted what little conscience she possessed. If the scheme turned out badly, why, no one could say *she* was to blame.

Lavinia, tremulous with excitement and looking prettier than ever, came into the room where the poet was awaiting her. Her face fell when Gay talked about the boarding school and of the possibility of her having to remain there a long time, but she brightened up on his going on to say that the period might be considerably shortened if she made a rapid improvement.

"And do you really think, sir, I shall ever be good enough to act in a theatre like Mrs. Barry and Mrs. Oldfield, and—oh, and Mrs. Bracegurdle?" cried the girl, her eyes blazing with anxious ambition.

"I don't say you'll act like them. You'll act in your own way, and if you work hard your own way will be good enough. If you succeed the friends who are now helping you will be more than rewarded."

"Ah, I will do anything to please you, sir."

She caught his hand and impulsively raised it to her lips.

Gay was a little embarrassed at this outburst. Did it mean that the girl had fallen in love with him? He checked the rising thought. Yet there was nothing outrageous in such a possibility. Lavinia was only sixteen, it is true, and romantic sixteen might see nothing incongruous in thirty-seven, which was Gay's age. [Pg 29]

"What pleases me, child, doesn't matter," he returned hastily. "I want to see you please others—in the play house I mean."

She looked at him wistfully.

"But," he continued, "it will be time enough to talk of that when I see how you get on. Now is it all settled? You're leaving this place and your mother of your own free will—isn't that so?"

Lavinia said nothing, but pinched her lips and nodded her head vigorously. The action was sufficiently expressive and Gay was satisfied.

Three days went by. Her Grace of Queensberry's maid, a hard-faced Scotswoman who was not to be intimidated nor betrayed into confidences, superintended Lavinia's shopping and turned a deaf ear to Mrs. Fenton's scoffs and innuendoes.

The girl was transformed. Her new gowns, hats, aprons, and what not sent her into high spirits and she bade her mother adieu with a light heart.

"Go your own way, you ungrateful minx," was Mrs. Fenton's parting shot, "and when you're tired of your fine gentleman or he's tired of you, don't think you're coming back here 'cause I won't have you."

Lavinia smiled triumphantly and tripped into the hackney coach that was awaiting her.

CHAPTER III [Pg 30]

"OH, MISTRESS MINE, WHERE ART THOU ROAMING?"

"Lavina! Have done!"

It was a whispered entreaty. The victim of the feather of a quill pen tickling her neck dared not raise her voice. Miss Pinwell, the proprietress of the extremely genteel seminary for young ladies, Queen Square—quite an aristocratic retreat some two hundred years ago—was pacing the school-room. Her cold, sharp eyes roamed over the shapely heads—black, golden, brown, auburn, flaxen—of some thirty girls—eager to detect any sign of levity and prompt to inflict summary punishment.

"Miss Fenton, why are you not working?" came the inquiry sharply from Miss Pinwell's thin lips.

Lavinia Fenton withdrew the instrument of torture and Priscilla Coupland's neck was left in peace. It was done so swiftly that Miss Pinwell's glance, keen as it was, never detected the movement. But the lady had her suspicions nevertheless, and she marched with the erectness of a grenadier to where Lavinia Fenton sat with her eyes fixed upon her copy book, apparently absorbed in inscribing over and over again the moral maxim at the top of the page, and, it may be hoped, engrafting it on her mind.

The young lady's industry did not deceive Miss Pinwell. Lavinia Fenton was the black sheep—lamb perhaps is a more fitting word, she was but seventeen—of the school. But somehow her peccadilloes were always forgiven. She had a smile against which severity—even Miss Pinwell's—was powerless. [Pg 31]

"What were you doing just now when you were not writing?"

The head was slowly raised. The wealth of wavy brown hair fell back from the broad smooth brow. The large limpid imploring eyes looked straight, without a trace of guilt in them, at the thin-faced schoolmistress. The beautiful mouth, the upper lip of which with its corners slightly upturned was delightfully suggestive of a smile, quivered slightly but not with fear, rather with suppressed amusement.

"Nothing madam," was the demure reply.

"Nothing? I don't believe you. Your hand was not on your book. Where was it?"

"Oh, *that*. Yes, a wasp was flying near us. I thought it was going to settle on Priscilla Coupland's neck and I brushed it away with my pen."

Miss Pinwell could say nothing to this, especially as she distinctly heard at that moment the hum of some winged insect. It *was* a wasp, a real one, not the insect of Lavinia's fervid imagination. The windows were open and it had found its way in from Lamb's Conduit Fields, at a happy moment allying itself with Lavinia.

Others heard it as well and sprang to their feet shrieking. The chance of escaping from tiresome moral maxims was too good to be lost.

"Young ladies——" commanded Miss Pinwell, but she could get no further. Her voice was lost in the din. The lady no more loved wasps than did her pupils. She retreated as the wasp advanced. The intruder ranged itself on the side of the girls and circled towards their instructress with malevolence in every turn and vicious intent in its buzz.

The only one not afraid was Lavinia Fenton who, waving a pocket handkerchief met the foe bravely but without success. The enemy refused to turn tail. Other girls plucking up courage joined the champion and soon the school-room was in a hubbub. Probably the army of hoydenish [Pg 32] maidens were not anxious the conflict should cease—it was far more entertaining than maxims, arithmetic and working texts on samples—and Miss Pinwell seeing this, summoned Bridget, the brawny housemaid, who with a canvas apron finally caught and squashed the rash intruder.

It was sometime before the excitement died down, and meanwhile Lavinia Fenton's remissness of conduct was forgotten—indeed her intrepidity singled her out for praise, which she received with becoming graciousness.

But before the day was out she relapsed into her bad ways. She could or would do nothing right. Miss Pinwell chided her for carelessness, she retorted saucily. As discipline had to be maintained she was at last condemned to an hour with the backboard and there she sat in a corner of the room on a high legged chair with a small and extremely uncomfortable oval seat made still more uncomfortable by it sloping slightly forward. As for the back, it was high and narrow. It afforded no rest for the spine. The delinquent was compelled to sit perfectly upright. Thus it was at the same time an instrument of correction and of deportment.

Whatever bodily defects the early Georgian damsels possessed they certainly had straight backs and level shoulders. The backboard was admirable training for the carriage of the stately sacque, the graceful flirting of the fan and for the dancing of the grave and dignified minuet.

The day was nearing its end. The hour for retiring was early, and at dusk the head of each bedroom took her candle from the hall table and after a low curtsy to the mistress of the establishment preceded those who slept in the same room up the broad staircase. The maidens' behaviour was highly decorous until they were safe in their respective bed-chambers, when their tongues were unloosed.

Oddly enough Lavinia, who was usually full of chatter, had to-night little to say. Her schoolmates [Pg 33] rallied her on her silent tongue.

"Oh, don't bother me, Priscilla," she exclaimed pettishly. "I suppose I can do as I like when Miss Pinwell isn't looking."

"My dear, you generally do that when she *is*. I never saw such favouritism. I declare it's not fair. You were terribly tormenting all day. Anybody but you would have been sent to bed and kept on bread and water. What's the matter with you, miss?"

"Nothing. I'm tired, that's all."

"First time in your life then. You were lively enough this afternoon when you nearly got me into a

scrape trying to make me laugh with your tickling. It was as much as I could do to keep from screaming," exclaimed Priscilla angrily.

"Well, you can do your screaming now if it pleases you, so long as it doesn't bring Miss Pinwell upstairs. Let me alone. I'm thinking about something."

"Some *one*, my dear, you mean," put in a tall fair girl, Grace Armitage by name. "Confess now, isn't it the new curate at St. George's? He seemed to have no eyes for any one but you last Sunday evening. How cruel to disturb the poor man's thoughts."

"Console yourself, Grace dear—*you're* never likely to do that."

The girls tittered at Lavinia's repartee. All knew that Grace Armitage was the vainest of the vain and believed every man who cast his eyes in her direction was in love with her. She went white with anger. But she was slow witted. She had no sarcastic rejoinder ready and if she had it was doubtful if she would have uttered it. Lavinia Fenton, the soul of sweetness and amiability, could show resolute fight when roused. Miss Armitage turned away with a disdainful toss of her head.

The others knew this too, for they ceased to irritate Lavinia and continued their talk among themselves. All the same, the principal topic was Lavinia Fenton. She was so strangely unlike herself to-night. [Pg 34]

Half an hour later the room was in silence save for the whispering between the occupants of those beds sufficiently close to each other to permit this luxury. When the neighbouring clock of St. George's, Bloomsbury, chimed half-past nine even these subdued sounds had ceased.

At half-past ten the moon was at the full. The pale light streamed through the small window panes and threw the shadows of the broad framework lattice-wise on Lavinia's bed which was next the window. In daylight she had but to lie on her right side and she could see across the fields and the rising ground each side of the Fleet river to the villages of Islington and Hornsey.

Gradually the latticed shadow crept upwards. It at last reached Lavinia's face. She was not asleep. Her eyes very wide open were staring at the ceiling with a vague, wistful expression. She gave a long sigh, her body twisted, and leaning on her right elbow, her left hand insinuated itself beneath the pillow and drew forth a letter which she held in the moonlight and read. Her forehead puckered as though she were in doubt. Her steadfast eyes seemed to contradict the smile curving her upper lip. The paper slipped from her limp fingers and she pondered, her colour deepening the while. Nothing short of a love letter could have caused that delightful blush. What she read was this:—

"My Dearest Little Charmer,—

"My soul is full of expectancy. I can think of nothing but you—the divinest being that ever tortured the heart of man. But the torture is exquisite because I know when I fold you in my arms it will change to bliss. You will keep your promise and meet me at the 'Conduit Head' to-morrow midnight, will you not? I can scarce contain myself with thinking of it. If you come not what remains for me but death? Without you life is worthless. Come. My coach will be in readiness and the parson waiting for us at the Fleet. [Pg 35]

"When we are married, as I've told you, my family cannot refuse to receive my wife, but until we are made one they will do all they can to keep us apart. My father insists upon my marrying a rich city madam, but I'll none of her. I will only have you, my beauteous Lavinia. I swear to you by all the gods that you shall be back at school before dawn, as on the night of the dance when I first saw my adorable divinity. No one will know but us two. It will be a delicious secret. After I have seen you safely to Queen Square and have parted from my dearest—it will be misery to bid thee adieu—I shall ride post haste to my father and tell him everything. He will at first be angry, but he will relent when he sees your loveliness. We shall be forgiven and Heaven will be ours.

"Panting with impatience, ever your most devoted humble servant,

Archibald Dorrimore."

Present taste would pronounce this effusion to be extravagant, rhapsodical, high-flown, super-sentimental, but it did not read so to Lavinia. It was in the fashion of the times—indeed it approached nearer modern ideas than the majority of love letters of that day which generally began with "Madam" without any endearing prefix. Lavinia liked it none the less because it was not so formal as the letters which some girls had shown her in all pride and secrecy.

But it troubled her all the same.

"I wonder if I really—really love him," she mused. "I suppose I do or I shouldn't be continually thinking about him. But to be married—oh, that's a different thing. Perhaps he'd want to live in the country. That would be horribly dull, especially if he had to come to London often. He hopes to be a great lawyer some day he says. I don't think I'd like him in a wig and gown and white bands. He would look so horribly old. Oh, but I wouldn't let him have his rooms in the Temple after we're married. He'll have to burn his musty old books. He won't need them. His father's very rich. He's told me so hundreds of times." [Pg 36]

A half dozen times would have been nearer the mark and this would probably represent the number of their meetings, once at a ball at Sadler's Wells Gardens and afterwards at stolen opportunities which the ingenious Lavinia contrived to bring about.

To tell the honest truth, Lavinia's gallant Archibald Dorrimore, the young Templar, served only to amuse the young lady. She was not blind to the fact that he was a fop and not blessed with too much brain. She had seen many of his sort before and did not trust them. But Dorrimore struck her as more sincere than the rest. Besides, he was very good looking.

Lavinia couldn't help having admirers. Nature should not have endowed her with such alluring, innocent looking eyes, with so sweet a mouth. She had always had some infatuated young man hovering about her even when she was her mother's drudge at the coffee house in Bedfordbury. Perhaps she inherited flirting from that buxom, good-looking mother who had the reputation of knowing her way quite well where a man was concerned.

"Archibald Dorrimore will be *Sir* Archibald some day," she mused. "It would be rare to be called her ladyship. I can hear the footman saying: 'Your coach is waiting, my lady.' Lady Dorrimore—how well it sounds! Archibald loves me...."

May be this conviction settled the matter. The girl slid out of bed and dressed herself hurriedly, though eleven o'clock had only just struck and she had plenty of time. Perhaps she thought that if she hesitated any longer she might alter her mind and not be married after all. [Pg 37]

Despite her haste she was not neglectful of herself. Now and again she glanced at the little mirror over which the girls squabbled daily, smoothed her rebellious hair and settled the Nithsdale hood of her cloak coquettishly. Then she noiselessly crept from the room, flitted down the staircase and was at the hall door shooting back its heavy bolts—fortunately always kept well greased—and lifting the massive chain which stretched across the centre. Street doors were well guarded and ground floor windows barred in those days, and not without reason.

The moon was still shining brightly and Lavinia drew her hood closer over her face, though there was little need, for the fields were deserted. She turned to the east, keeping in the shadow, slight as it was, of the school garden wall. When the "Conduit Head" at the top of Red Lion Street (the northern end now known as Lamb's Conduit Street) was reached she paused and her heart went pit-a-pat. If Dorrimore should not be there!

She stopped, overcome by sudden scruples. In a flash her life at the school, its monotony and discipline, the irksomeness of regular work, rose before her! She had been some months at Miss Pinwell's establishment and her restless soul pined for a change. Though she looked back to her vagabond life in the streets with a shudder, she yearned for its freedom, but without its degradations.

The step she was about to take, so she persuaded herself, meant freedom, but it also meant ingratitude towards Gay and the duchess. For the latter's opinion she did not care much. The imperious manner of her grace was not to her taste. But Mr. Gay—that was a different thing. She looked upon Gay as a father—of her own father she had but a shadowy recollection—though sometimes she thought she detected in him signs of a warmer affection than that which a father usually bestows on a daughter. She did not want this. She liked his visits. She was glad to have [Pg 38] his praise. She laughed when he persisted in calling her Polly—why she knew not—but she was sure she could never endure his making love to her.

In her heart of hearts she was afraid of this. The dread had much to do with her encouragement of Dorrimore. Of course if she married it would mean an estrangement between her and Gay and his powerful friends, and most likely the end of her ambition to be a great actress. Her mind had long been torn, and at the eleventh hour when she was on her way to meet her fate in Dorrimore she still hesitated. If she really loved Dorrimore there would have been no hesitation. But she had never met any man who did more than flatter her and gratify the pleasure she felt at being admired.

Her decision was in the balance. The weight of a feather would turn the scale one way or another. The feather came in the shape of Dorrimore himself. There he was in three cornered hat and cloak, his powdered wig white in the moonlight, pacing up and down, his hand resting on his sword hilt. He caught sight of the shrinking figure in the shadow and the hat was doffed in a profound bow. Undoubtedly a good looking young man, but as undoubtedly a fop of the first water with his ruffles and bosom of Mechlin lace, red heels to his shoes, gold clocks on his silk stockings and the whiff of scent which heralded his coming.

When near enough his arm went round her and he drew back her hood. He kissed her closely, so closely indeed that his ardour almost frightened her, though she knew not why. He withdrew his lips and gazed into her face, his own paling under the violence of his passion.

"Dearest Lavinia," he murmured. "You are the loveliest creature in the world and I protest I am the luckiest of men. Have you no words of love for me? Why so silent?" [Pg 39]

She had not uttered a word. The rise and fall of her bosom showed her agitation.

"I'm here. I'm here. Isn't that enough?" she faltered.

"Faith you're right, sweetheart. Then let us waste no time. My coach is yonder."

He slid her arm within his and drew her forward. He was not unconscious of a certain reluctance in her movements and a shyness in her manner, but he put both down to maiden modesty. Her restraint made her all the more enchanting and he quickened his pace. She was compelled to accommodate her steps to his, but she did so unwillingly. A sudden distrust whether of him or of herself she could not quite determine—had seized her. She was repenting her rashness. She would have run from him back to the school but that he held her too tightly. Within another minute they had reached the heavy lumbering coach.

The coachman had seen them coming and descended from his box to open the door. He was a big fellow who held himself erect like a soldier. His swarthy complexion had a patch of purplish bloom spreading itself over the cheek bones which told of constant tavern lounging. A pair of hawk's eyes gleamed from under bushy beetling brows; wide loose lips and a truculent, pugnacious lower jaw completed the picture of a ruffian.

Lavinia glanced at him and that glance was enough, it deepened her distrust into repugnance. But she had no time to protest. She was hurried into the coach, Dorrimore in fact lifting her inside bodily with unnecessary violence for she was almost thrown into a corner of the back seat. Dorrimore followed, turned, shut the door and almost immediately the carriage moved. The coachman must have sprung to his box with the quickness of a harlequin. The whip cracked and the horses broke into a gallop.

CHAPTER IV

[Pg 40]

"IF WE'RE NOT TO BE MARRIED TELL ME"

The rattle of the wheels over the loose, roughly laid cobble stones, and the swaying carriage hung on leathers, forbade talking. Lavinia heard her companion's voice but she did not know what he was saying. Not that it mattered for she was in too much of a flutter to heed anything but her own emotions, and these were so confused that they told her little.

Then Dorrimore's arm stole round her waist. Well, this was not unnatural. Would they not be soon man and wife? The puzzle was that she had no feeling of response. She would rather that he did not embrace her. She did not want to be noticed. Yet she could not find it in her heart to be unkind, so she allowed him to draw her nearer, to let her head droop on his shoulder. She tried to think it was pleasant to be so loved and she lowered her eyelashes when he kissed her again and again.

Two or three minutes of oblivion. The coach had raced down Red Lion Street. It was in Holborn going eastwards and here the din and clatter were heightened by the shouts of drunken roisterers. The overhanging houses cast deep shadows and the coach was travelling in the gloom. It was past midnight and the lamps hung at every tenth house were extinguished. This was the rule.

Then Lavinia became conscious that the carriage was going down hill. It had passed Fetter Lane into which it should have turned and was proceeding towards Holborn Bridge. Why was this? Fetter Lane led into Fleet Street and so to the Fleet. Had the coachman misunderstood his instructions? She wrenched herself free and looked out of the window. She recognised St. [Pg 41] Andrew's Church in Holborn Valley. She turned swiftly and faced Dorrimore. The coach had crossed the bridge and had commenced the steep ascent of Holborn Hill on the other side. The horses had slackened their pace. The noise was less loud.

"You said we were going to the Fleet, but we're not. Where are you taking me?"

"Don't trouble about such a trifle, darling little one," he cried gaily. "Aren't you with me? What more do you want? Come, kiss me. Let us forget everything but our two selves."

He would have embraced her but she repulsed him angrily.

"No. If you've altered your mind—if we're not to be married tell me so, and I'll leave you to yourself," she cried agitatedly.

"Leave me? And d'you think I'll let you go when you're looking handsomer than ever? Faith, what d'you take me for? You dear fluttering little Venus. Why, you're trembling? But hang me, it must be with joy as I am."

Both his arms were round her. She struggled to free herself; pushed his face away and panting, strove to reach the window, but he was strong and prevented her.

"I'll go no further with you," she cried. "Set me down at once or I'll scream for help."

"You pretty little fool. Much help you'll get here. Oh, you shall look if you want to, but your wings must be clipped first."

He gripped both her wrists and held them fast. Her frightened eyes glanced through the window. She heard a confused thud of hoofs, now and again the deep bellowing of cattle, in the distance dogs barking, drivers yelling. She could see horned heads moving up and down. The coach was

now moving very slowly. It was surrounded by a drove of bullocks from the Essex marshes going to Smithfield. [Pg 42]

"You see?" laughed Dorrimore. "D'you suppose I would set you down to be tossed and gored by vulgar cattle. Why the sight of your red ribands would send them mad, as it's nearly sent me."

"I don't care. I'd rather be with them than with you. I hate you," she screamed with tears in her voice.

"Really? I'll warrant your hate'll turn to love before we part," he jeered. "I'm not going to see you come to harm, so I shall hold your pretty wrists tightly. How round and slender they are! So, you're my prisoner."

"I'm not and I won't be."

Somehow she dragged her right wrist away and dealt him a smart blow on his cheek.

"You would fight, would you? What a little spitfire it is! No matter. I love you all the better. For every smart you give me you shall be repaid with a dozen kisses. If that isn't returning good for evil may I never handle a dice box again. There, do as you like. Lay your white hand again on my face. The bigger debt you run up the better."

Despite his banter he was very savage and he flung her hands from him. She at once laid hold of the strap to open the window. He burst into a loud laugh.

"So the bird would escape," said he mockingly. "I thought as much."

She tugged at the strap but tugged in vain. The window refused to budge. Then it flashed across her mind that it was all part of a plan. She was to be trapped. The story of a Fleet marriage was a concoction to bait the trap. She flung herself in the corner, turned her back upon her captor and pulled her hood over her face.

She knew that for the time being she was helpless. What was the good of wasting her strength in struggles, her spirit in remonstrance and be laughed at for her pains? So she sat sullenly and turned a deaf ear to Dorrimore's triumphant endearments.

That wrestle with the window strap had done one thing. It had told her where she was. Lavinia [Pg 43] knew her London well. Her rambles as a child had not been confined to Charing Cross and St. Giles. She had often wandered down to London Bridge. She loved the bustling life on the river; she delighted in gazing into the shop windows of the quaint houses on the bridge which to her youthful imagination seemed to be nodding at each other, for so close were some that their projecting upper storeys nearly touched.

She decided in that confused glance of hers through the window that the coach was nearing the extreme end of the Poultry. She recognised the Poultry Compter with its grim entrance and wondered whether the coach would go straight on to Cornhill and then turn northward towards Finsbury Fields, or southward to London Bridge.

For the moment all she thought of was her destination, and when she was able without attracting her companion's, attention again to peep out of the window she saw the coach was at the foot of London Bridge. The driver had been compelled to walk his horses, so narrow and so dark was the passage way.

The nightbirds of London were on their rambles looking out for prey; the bridge was thronged. The people for the most part were half drunk—they were the scourings from the low taverns in the Southwark Mint. Lavinia had been revolving a plan of escape, but to launch herself among an unruly mob ready for any devilry might be worse than remaining where she was. But in spite of all that she did not cease to think about her plan and watched for an opportunity when the worst of the rabble should have passed.

Suddenly the coach came to a standstill. Shouts and oaths—more of the latter than the former—were heard, and Dorrimore after fretting and fuming lowered the window on his side and put out his head.

"What the devil's hindering you?" he demanded angrily, of the coachman. [Pg 44]

"That monstrously clumsy waggon; the stubborn knave of a waggoner has gotten the middle of the road and there he sticks. He'll draw neither to the left or the right. I've a mind to get down and baste the surly bumpkin's hide."

"Don't be a fool. Keep where you are. We must wait. Speak him fair."

Two things struck Lavinia. One was the open window. Evidently Dorrimore had thought it only necessary to secure one window—that on the side where she was sitting. If she were on the opposite side how easy to slip her hand through the opening and turn the handle of the door. But this was impossible. She could not hope to succeed.

The other thing which fixed itself in her mind was the familiar tone of the coachman towards Dorrimore. It was more that of an equal than of a menial. This impression confirmed her suspicion that she was trapped. Dorrimore had doubtless enlisted the services of a confidential friend rather than trust to a servant whose blabbing tongue might serve to betray him.

Meanwhile Dorrimore's head was still out of the window. He was calling to the waggoner and offering him a crown to pull his horses and load to one side, but it was no easy task to move the gigantic lumbering wain with its tilt as big as a haystack and its wheels a foot thick. Lavinia had her eyes fixed at the window on her side, intent on watching a little group of persons who were curious to see the result of the deadlock. They were quietly disposed apparently.

Swiftly she bent down, slipped off one of her high heeled shoes and straightened her body. The next moment there was the crash of broken glass. She had struck the window with the heel of her shoe and had thrust her hand through the jagged hole, turned the handle, opened the door and had jumped out. Dorrimore, intent upon parleying with the waggoner, had either not heard the [Pg 45] smash or had attributed the cause to anything but the real one.

The group were startled by the flying figure. In her haste and agitation she had stumbled on alighting and would have fallen but for a man who caught her.

"S'death madam, are you hurt?" she heard him say.

"No, no. For Heaven's sake don't stay me. I'm in great danger. I'm running from an enemy. Oh, let me go—let me go!"

"But you're wounded. See."

Blood was on her arm. A drop or two had fallen on the man's ruffles. She had cut herself in her wild thrust through the jagged hole in the door.

"It's nothing," she breathed. "Oh, if you've any pity don't keep me."

The man made no reply. He whipped out his handkerchief, tied it round the cut and holding her arm tightly, forced a way through the crowd towards the Southwark side of the bridge.

He might have got her away unobserved had it not been for Dorrimore's coachman. The fellow uttered a yell and leaving his horses to take care of themselves leaped from the box.

"A guinea to any one who stops that woman," he shouted.

Lavinia and her companion had nearly reached the obstructive waggon. A dozen persons or so were between them and the yelling coachman. If they succeeded in passing the waggon there might be a chance of escaping in the darkness. But the onlookers crowding between the obstruction and the shops—there were in those days no pavements—were too much interested in what was going on to move, and the two found themselves wedged in a greasy, ragged mob.

Then came a rush from behind by those eager to earn a guinea and things became worse. The girl, helped by the young man—she had seen enough of him to know that he was both young and [Pg 46] good-looking—urged her way through the crowd, and those in front, seeing she looked like a gentlewoman and knowing nothing of the guinea offered for her capture stood back and she passed through. At that moment she felt her companion's grasp relax. Then his fingers slipped from her arm. Some one had struck him.

"Run to the stairs and take a boat," he whispered. "Perhaps you haven't any money. Here's my purse," and he pushed it into her hand.

"No, I won't have it," she faltered.

"You must. Quick! Fly!"

"But what of you?"

"I shall stay here, face the mob and give you time to get away."

She would have refused. She would have remained with her champion, but the swaying mob ordered otherwise. She found herself separated from him and carried onward whether she would or not. She was terribly frightened and knew not what to do. Hoarse shouts pursued her; she heard the sound of blows. Somehow no one seemed to notice her. Probably the fighting was more to their taste. Suddenly she found herself alone. The archway called the Traitors' Gate which then formed the entrance to the bridge from the Surrey side was behind her. Crowds were pouring through the Gate eager to see what the rumpus was about or to take part in it on the chance of plunder, and they did not heed the shrinking figure in the deep doorway of a house close to the bridge.

Lavinia was torn with anxiety. The young man whose purse she was holding tightly—how was he faring? She could not help him by staying. Dorrimore and Dorrimore's coachman with the guinea he had offered for her capture had to be thought of. Her danger was by no means over. The roadway was comparatively clear. Now was her chance if she was ever to have one. She stole [Pg 47] from the doorway; the stairs leading to the river were close at hand and down these she sped.

The tide was at low ebb. She was standing on the shingle. But she looked in vain for a waterman. There were plenty of boats on the river, most of them loaded with merry parties returning from Spring Gardens, Vauxhall, and no boats were plying for hire. She dared not ascend to the Borough. Bullies and thieves abounded in the southern approaches to the bridge. She crept down to one of the abutments of the bridge and tremulously listened to the turmoil going on above.

Meanwhile the man who had come to her rescue was being hardly pressed. He was surrounded

by a mob led by Dorrimore's coachman. It was not the leader who had struck the blow which made him lose his hold of Lavinia's arm, but one of the mob for no motive other than a love for brutality. The coachman had forced his way to the front a minute or so afterwards. Almost at the same time a stone hit Lavinia's champion in the cheek, cutting it and drawing blood.

"Cowards!" he shouted. "If you're for fighting at least fight fair. Who did that?" and he laid his hand on the hilt of his sword.

"At your service, sir. Give me the credit of it. Captain Jeremy Rofflash isn't the man to let the chance of a little pretty sword play go by."

The speaker was the man who acted as Dorrimore's coachman. He was every inch a braggadocio. There were many such who had been with Marlborough and had returned to their native country to earn their living by their wits and by hiring out their swords.

The fellow who called himself Jeremy Rofflash had not time to draw his sword; the fist of the man he had thought to frighten had shot out swift as an arrow, catching him between the eyes and tumbling him backwards.

At the sight of the young gallant's spirit a number of the mob instantly ranged themselves on his side. Others came on like infuriated animals on the off chance of Captain Jeremy Rofflash rewarding them for their services. [Pg 48]

"You'd better show these ruffians a clean pair of heels," whispered a friendly voice in the young man's ear. "To Winchester Stairs—now's your chance before yonder bully's on his feet."

It was good advice and Lancelot Vane, the young man, budding poet and playwright, who had found himself involved in a dangerous squabble, which might mean his death, over a girl whom he had only seen for a few minutes, had the sense to take it. But it was no easy task to extricate himself. A burly ruffian was approaching him with arm uplifted and whirling a bludgeon. Vane caught the fellow a blow in the waist and he immediately collapsed. Before the prostrate man could get his wind, Vane darted through the Traitors' Gate and racing towards the Borough with a score or so of the rabble after him, darted into the first opening he came to.

CHAPTER V

"MANY A MAN WOULD GIVE A HANDFUL OF GUINEAS FOR A KISS FROM SALLY SALISBURY"

The fugitive found himself in a narrow ill-smelling, vilely paved alley to the east of the Borough. Tall, ugly, dirty houses bordered it on each side, a thick greasy mud covered the uneven stones. Dimly he was conscious of the sound of a window being opened here and there, of hoarse shouts and shrill screams, of shadowy beings who doubtless were men and women but who were more like ghosts than creatures of flesh and blood. [Pg 49]

But no one molested him. This might be explained by the fact that those who saw him running took him to be some criminal fleeing from justice to take sanctuary in the Southwark slums, an impression quite sufficient to ensure their sympathy. At least, this was what at first happened. Afterwards the mob took it into their heads to pursue him and for no particular reason save devilry.

The seething crowd poured into the narrow alley. Like a hunted deer the young man ran up one court and down another, stumbling now and again half from exhaustion and half from the greasy mud covered stones. He could hear his pursuers coming nearer and nearer, but his strength was gone. He dragged himself a few steps further and staggered into a doorway, sinking on the steps in an almost fainting condition.

The next moment the door behind him opened, a hand gripped his shoulder and a woman's voice whispered:—

"Come inside. Make haste before you're seen."

The young man raised his head. He was dimly conscious of a handsome face, of a pair of bold eyes staring into his.

"Come. Why are you waiting? Do you want to be murdered?" she cried imperiously.

He struggled to his feet and she dragged him into the passage and closed the door. Scarcely had she done so when the clatter of feet and a confused sound of voices told that his pursuers were approaching. Had they tracked him to the house? The point was at once settled by a loud hammering at the door.

The woman half turned her head and cast a scornful look over her shoulder.

"Knock away, you devils. You won't break those panels in a hurry. For all that, the place isn't safe for you, Mr. Vane."

"What, you know me?" [Pg 50]

She laughed. Her laughter was loud rather than musical.

"Haven't I seen you with many a merry party at Spring Gardens? Don't you remember that mad night when one of your friends was full of wine? Didn't I cut off the end of his periwig and throw it to the mob to be scrambled for?"

Lancelot Vane's pale face flushed slightly. He hadn't a very precise recollection of what had happened on that night of frolic and revelry. Like the rest he had had his bottle or two. The full blooded handsome woman whom nothing abashed, who could take her liquor like a man, whose beauty fired the souls of the gallants hovering about her wrangling for her smiles, was part of the confused picture that had remained in his memory. He had some vague remembrance of having kissed her or that she had kissed him—it didn't matter which it was, nothing mattered very much when the wine was in and the wit was out.

Yet now when both were sober and her round, plump arm was round his shoulders on the plea of supporting him he felt embarrassed, ashamed.

"I thank you, madam, for your help," he said hurriedly. "But I won't bring trouble upon you. Those rascals are still clamouring for my blood—why I know not—and if they once burst into the house you'll suffer."

"They won't frighten me, but I wouldn't have you come to harm. There's a way of escape. I'll show it you."

With her arm still round him though there was no necessity for his strength was gradually returning, she led him up the first flight—some half dozen steps—of a narrow staircase to a small window which she threw open.

"That's the Black Ditch. It leads to the river and is fairly dry now that the tide is out. You can easily find your way to Tooley Street."

"Thanks—thanks," he murmured.

He clambered on to the window sill and gradually lowered himself. While his head, slightly [Pg 51]
thrown back, was above the sill she bent down swiftly and kissed him full on the lips.

"Many a man would give a handful of guineas for a kiss from Sally Salisbury. You shall have one for nothing. It mayn't bring you luck, but what of that?"

He let go his hold, alighted safely on his feet and ran along the ditch, every nerve quivering in a tumult of emotion, and with Sally Salisbury's strident, reckless laugh ringing in his ears.

Sally leaned her elbows on the sill and craning her head watched the receding figure of the young man. Then she straightened her body and walked leisurely from the room into one at the front of the house on the first floor. The hammering at the entrance door had never ceased. She threw open the window and looked down upon the swaying crowd.

"What do you want?" she called out.

"The man you're hiding," was the reply in a hoarse voice.

"You lie. There's no man here."

"No man where Mistress Sally Salisbury is? Ho-ho!"

She knew the voice. It was that of Captain Jeremy Rofflash.

Seizing a lamp Sally Salisbury ran down the stairs and opened the door. Holding the lamp high over her head the light fell with striking effect upon her luxuriant yellow hair clustering down upon a neck and shoulders that Juno might have envied. The resemblance did not stop here. Juno in anger could have found her double in Sally Salisbury at that moment. Evidently the visitor was unwelcome.

"What does this silly masquerade mean?" she demanded, her eyes roaming over the coachman's livery in high displeasure. "Have you turned over a new leaf and gone into honest service?"

"Honest service be damned! Honesty doesn't belong to me or to you either, Sally. Where's the [Pg 52]
man I'm looking for? I twigged the fellow just as you shut the door upon him."

"Did you? Then you're welcome to go on looking."

He strode in, muttering oaths. When the door was closed he turned upon her.

"Hang me, Sally, if I know what your game is in sheltering this spark. Anyhow you wouldn't do it if you didn't see your way to some coin out of him."

"I don't, so shut up your sauce."

"More fool you then. Look here, Sal. I've got hold of a cull or I shouldn't be in this lackey's coat. The fool's bursting with gold and he wants someone to help him to spend it. I'll be hanged if there's another woman in London like you for that fun. Now's your chance. He's sweet on a wench—a raw boarding school miss—he ran off with her an hour or so ago. The little fool thought

she was going to be married by a Fleet parson, but somehow she took fright and jumped out of the coach on London Bridge. How the devil she did it beats me, though to be sure when one of your sex makes up her mind to anything she'll do it and damme, I believe Beelzebub helps her. Now then——"

"What's this gabble to do with me?" broke in Sally, disdainfully.

"Wait a minute. The wench had a friend in the crowd—a man who got her away—damn him. I jumped from the coach and we had a set to. See this?"

Scowling ferociously Rofflash pointed to a lump beneath his eye which promised to become a beautiful mouse on the morrow.

"The jackanapes got me on the hop; my foot slipped and s'life, I was down. But for that I'd ha' spitted him like a partridge. By the time I was on my legs the mob were after him. I joined in the hue and cry and we ran him down to your house. Now then, where's his hiding hole? It'll mean a [Pg 53] matter o' twenty guineas in your pocket to give him up."

"Blood money! I don't earn my living that way. You could have spared your breath, Rofflash. The man's not here. I'll show you how he escaped. Come this way."

Sally led the fellow to the window overlooking the Black Ditch and told him the story.

"Are you bamboozling me, you jade?" growled Rofflash. "It would be like you."

"I daresay it would if it were worth my while but it isn't. Look for yourself. Can't you see the deep foot-prints in the mud?"

The waning moon gave sufficient light to show the black slimy surface of the ditch. An irregularly shaped hole immediately below the window showed where Vane had alighted. Footprints distinct enough indicated the direction taken.

"If you're not satisfied search the house."

"I'll take your word. Who's your friend? You wouldn't lift your little finger to save a stranger."

"Who's the girl?" Sally parried in a flash. "What's she like?"

Rofflash had sharp wits. Cunning was part of his trade.

"Ho ho," he thought. "Sits the wind in that quarter? I'll steer accordingly."

"The girl? As tempting as Venus and a good deal livelier, I'll swear. 'Faith, she's one worth fighting for. I'll do her gallant justice. If he's as handy with his blade as he is with his fists he'll be a pretty swordsman. He'll need all he knows, though," added Rofflash darkly, "when I meet him."

"Yes, when!" echoed Sally sarcastically. "You'll get no help from me."

"What! Sally Salisbury handing over the man she fancies to another woman? Is the world coming to an end?" [Pg 54]

Rofflash burst into a jeering laugh. It irritated Sally beyond endurance as he intended it should. But it did not provoke the reply he hoped for.

"Mind your own business," she snapped.

"Why, that's what I'm doing and *my* business is *yours*. But if you're fool enough to chuck away a handful of guineas, why do it. All I can say is that *my* man would give you anything you like to ask if you'd open your mouth and tell him where *your* man is."

"Then I won't. That's my answer, Jeremy Rofflash. Put it in your pipe and smoke it."

Rofflash made her a profound bow and smiled mockingly.

"Have your own way, mistress. What about this? Something more in your line, I'll warrant."

He thrust his hand beneath the upper part of his long flapped waistcoat and drew out a necklace. The pearls of which it was composed were suffused with a pinkish tinge, the massive gold clasp gleamed in the lamplight. Sally's eyes flashed momentarily and then became scornful.

"I'm not going to be bribed by *that* either," she cried.

"Wait till you're asked, my dear. This is my business alone. It has nought to do with t'other. A week ago these pearls were round the fair neck of my Lady Wendover. I encountered her in her coach on the Bath Road near Maidenhead Thicket—my favourite trysting place with foolish dames who travel with their trinkets and fal-lals. At the sight of my barkers her ladyship screamed and fainted. This made things as easy as an old glove. Click! and the necklace was in my pocket and I was galloping back to Hounslow as if Old Nick himself was behind me."

"Well, and what have your highway robberies to do with me?"

"Just this, pretty one. My Lord Wendover's offered £1,000 reward for the return of her Ladyship's jewels. I dursn't hand 'em about. I've no fancy for the hangman's rope. But *you* can get rid of [Pg 55] them and no one be the wiser."

It was true. Sally had been very useful to Rofflash in disposing of some of the trophies of his exploits on the Bath Road. The highwayman never grumbled at whatever commission she chose to take and the arrangement was to their mutual advantage.

Sally took the pearls and stroked their smooth surfaces lovingly.

"It's a shame to part with 'em."

"Aye, they'd look brave on your neck, sweetheart."

"No. I'm as loth to travel to Tyburn as you. Every fine woman of quality knows the Wendover pearls. I'd be marked at the first ridotto or masquerade I showed my face in. I'll do my best to turn 'em into money."

"You're a jewel yourself, Sally. That's all I want. Adieu, mistress, and good luck go with you."

Rofflash swaggered out and as he made his way to the bridge he pondered deeply over the mystery of woman. Here was Sally Salisbury, a "flaunting extravagant quean," always over head and ears in debt, refusing a chance to put money in her purse just because she had a fancy for a man who maybe was as poor as a church mouse. Yet, as regarded men generally, Sally was a daughter of the horseleech!

"Humph," muttered Rofflash, "so much the better. The end on't is I pocket Dorrimore's gold and no sharing out. If Sally likes to be a fool 'tis her affair and not mine. I've only got to keep my eye on her. What a woman like her wants she'll get, even if it costs her her life. Sooner or later, madam, you'll find your way to the fellow's lodgings, and it'll go hard if I'm not on the spot too."

By the time Rofflash was at the bridge the obstructing waggon had been got out of the way. Dorrimore's coach was drawn to one side and Dorrimore himself was striding impatiently up and down, occasionally refreshing himself with a pinch of snuff and indulging in oaths more or less elegant. [Pg 56]

"Where the devil have you been, Rofflash?" he cried, testily. "And where the devil's the girl?"

"She'll be safe in your hands shortly, Mr. Archibald, never fear."

"What, have you got her?"

"Not quite, but almost as good. The spark whose arms she jumped into is her gallant, you may lay your life, and——"

"By thunder, if that's so I'll—I'll run him through, I will, by God!"

"Softly—softly. All in good time. By a bit of luck I came across a friend who knows him and has engaged to run him to earth. It only means a few guineas and I made free to promise him a purse. Within a week you'll be face to face with your rival and you'll have your revenge."

"To the devil with my revenge. It's the girl I want, you blundering idiot."

"And it's the girl you shall have, by gad. Can't you see, my good sir, that when you clap your hands on the fellow you clap your hands on the girl too?"

"S'life! Do you mean to say she's with him?"

"I'd go to a thousand deaths on that."

"I'll not believe it. The girl's a pretty fool or I shouldn't have made her sweet on me with so little trouble, but she's not that sort."

"If she isn't, all I can say is that St. Giles and Drury Lane are the places where innocent and unsuspecting maids are to be found. Ask Sally Salisbury."

"Damn Sally Salisbury," cried the fine gentleman in a fury. "D'ye think I don't know gold from dross? I'll take my oath no man had touched the lips of that coy little wench before mine did."

"By all means keep to that belief, sir. It won't do you no harm. Now if you'll take my advice you'll let me drive you to Moll King's and you'll finish the night like a man of mettle and a gentleman." [Pg 57]

Dorrimore was in a morose and sullen mood. He wanted bracing up and he adopted Rofflash's suggestion. The coach rattled to Mrs. King's notorious tavern in Covent Garden, where thieves and scoundrels, the very dregs of London, mingled with their betters; and amid a bestial uproar, with the assistance of claret and Burgundy, to say nothing of port "laced" with brandy on the one hand, and gin and porter on the other, all differences in stations were forgotten and gentlemen and footpads were on a level—dead drunk.

CHAPTER VI

MOTHER AND DAUGHTER

A London night in the first quarter of the eighteenth century had very little rest. Until long past

midnight a noisy, lawless, drunken rabble made the streets hideous. It was quite three o'clock, when as physiologists tell us the vital forces are at their lowest, before it could be said that the city was asleep. And that sleep did not last long. Soon the creaking of market cart and waggon wheels, the shouts of drovers and waggoners, tramping horses, bellowing cattle and bleating sheep would dispel the stillness and proclaim the beginning of another day.

Business in the approaches to the markets was in full swing before four o'clock. Carters and waggoners were thirsty and hungry souls and the eating houses and saloop stalls were thronged. The Old Bailey, from its nearness to Smithfield was crowded, and the buxom proprietress of [Pg 58] Fenton's coffee house was hard put to it to serve her clamorous customers and to see that she wasn't cheated or robbed.

Mrs. Fenton had improved in appearance as well as in circumstances since she had come from Bedfordbury to the Old Bailey. She was a good-looking woman of the fleshly type, with a bosom such as Rowlandson loved to depict. She was high coloured, her eyes were deep blue, full and without a trace of softness. Her lips were red and well shaped, her teeth white and even. She was on the shady side of forty, but looked ten years younger. Her customers admired her and loved to exchange a little coarse badinage in which the good woman more than held her own.

There was a Mr. Fenton somewhere in the world, but his wife was quite indifferent to his existence. He might be in the West Indian plantations or the hulks for what she cared. She had always gone her own way and meant to do so to the end of her days.

Apparently she was not in the best of tempers this morning. A drover who attempted to jest with her was unmercifully snubbed, and so also was a master butcher from Marylebone, who as a rule was received with favour. But the lady was not in an ill temper with everybody—certainly not with the stolid farmer-like man who was plodding his way through a rumpsteak washed down by small beer.

The coffee shop was divided into boxes and the farmer-like man was seated in one near the door which opened into the kitchen. Mrs. Fenton had constantly to pass in and out and his seat was conveniently placed so as to permit her to bestow a smile upon him as she went by or to exchange a hurried word.

"The mistress is a bit sweet in that quarter, eh?" whispered a customer with a jerk of the head and a wink to Hannah the waitress, whom Mrs. Fenton had brought with her from Bedfordbury. [Pg 59]

"I should just think she was," returned the girl contemptuously. "It makes one sick. She ought to be a done with sweetheartin'."

"A woman's never too old for that, my girl, as you'll find when you're her age. She might do worse. Dobson's got a tidy little purse put by. There aren't many in the market as does better than him. He's brought up twenty head o' cattle from his farm at Romford an' he'll sell 'em all afore night—money down on the nail, mind ye. That'll buy Mistress Fenton a few fallals if she's a mind for 'em."

"An' if she's fool enough. Why, he isn't much more than half her years and she with a grown up daughter too."

"Aye. May be the gal 'ud be more a match for Dobson than her mother."

"Don't you let my mistress hear you say that. Why she's that jealous of Lavinia she could bite the girl's head off. My! Well I never!"

Hannah started visibly and fixed her eyes on the entrance.

"What's the matter, wench?" growled the man.

"I don't believe in ghosts," returned the girl, paling a little and her hands trembling in a fashion which rather belied her words, "or I'd say as I'd just seen Miss Lavinia's sperrit look in at the door. If it isn't her ghost it's her double."

"Why don't you run outside and settle your mind?"

"'Cause it's impossible it could be her. The girl's at boarding school."

"What's that got to do with it? You go and see."

Hannah hesitated, but at last plucked up her courage and went to the door. She saw close to the wall some few yards away a somewhat draggle-tail figure in cloak and hood. Within the hood was Lavinia's face, though one would hardly recognise it as hers, so white, so drawn, were the cheeks.

"Saints alive, surely it isn't you, Miss Lavvy?" cried Hannah, clasping her hands as she ran to the fugitive.

"Indeed it is, worse luck. I'm in sad straits, Hannah. I wouldn't have come here—I know what [Pg 60] mother is—but I couldn't think what to do."

"But good lord—the school—mercy on us child, they haven't turned you out, have they?"

"No, but they will if I go back. I dursn't do that. I couldn't get in. I've been robbed of the key. It was inside my reticule that a rogue snatched from my wrist on London Bridge."

"London Bridge! Gracious! What mischief took 'ee there and at this time o' the mornin'?"

"I don't know," sighed the girl, half wearily, half pettishly. "I can't tell you. Don't bother me any more. I'm tired to death. Take me inside Hannah, or I'll drop. I suppose mother'll be in a fury when she sees me, but it can't be helped. I don't think I care. It's nothing to do with her."

Hannah forebore pestering the girl with more questions and led her to the open door. The waitress had been with Mrs. Fenton in the squalid days of six months before at the Bedfordbury coffee shop and she well knew how Lavinia was constantly getting into a scrape, not from viciousness, but from pure recklessness and love of excitement. Her mother's treatment of her "to cure her of her ways," as the lady put it, was simply brutal.

Hannah was not a little afraid of what would happen when Mrs. Fenton set eyes on her wilful daughter. At the same time, Lavinia was not the same girl who at Bedfordbury used to run wild, half clad and half starved, and yet never looked like a beggar, so pretty and so attractive was she. Six months had developed her into a woman and the training of Miss Pinwell, the pink of gentility, had given her the modish airs of a lady of quality. True, her appearance just now had little of this "quality," her walk being in fact somewhat limping and one-sided. But there was good reason for this defect. She had lost one of her high-heeled shoes, that with which she had battered the coach window. [Pg 61]

In spite of her protest of not caring, Lavinia's heart went pit-a-pat when she entered the hot, frowsy, greasy air of the coffee house. Customers were clamouring to be served and there was no Hannah to wait upon them. Mrs. Fenton, her eyes flashing fire, was bustling up and down between the rows of boxes and denouncing the truant waitress in vigorous Billingsgate.

Mrs. Fenton had her back turned to the door when Hannah entered with Lavinia and the two were half way down the gangway before the lady noticed them. At the sight of her daughter she dropped the dish of eggs and bacon she was about to deposit in front of a customer and stared aghast.

Every eye was turned upon Lavinia who, shaking herself free from Hannah's friendly support, hastened towards her astonished mother, anxious to avoid a scene under which in her shattered nerves she might break down.

"Devil fetch me," Mrs. Fenton ejaculated before she had recovered from the shock. "Why, you hussy——"

Lavinia did not wait to hear more. She brushed past her mother and then her strength failing her for a moment, she clutched the back of the last box to steady herself.

This box was that in which Dobson, the young cattle dealer was seated. Dobson was human. He fell instantly under the spell of those limpid, imploring eyes, the tremulous lips, and he rose and proffered his seat.

The act of courtesy was unfortunate. It accentuated Mrs. Fenton's rage. Her heart was torn by jealousy. That Lavinia had shaken her head and refused the seat made not the slightest difference. The girl had become surpassingly handsome. Despite her fury Mrs. Fenton had eyes for this. Her own daughter had attracted the notice of *her* man! The offence was unpardonable.

Lavinia knew nothing about this. All she wanted was to escape observation and she darted into the kitchen, Betty the cook receiving her with open mouth.

A narrow, ricketty staircase in a corner of the kitchen shut in by a door which a stranger would take for that of a cupboard led to the upper part of the house. Lavinia guessed as much. She darted to this door, flung it open and ran up the creaking stairs just as her mother, shaking with passion, entered and caught sight of her flying skirt. [Pg 62]

"Good laux, mistress," Betty was beginning, but she could get no further. Mrs. Fenton jumped down her throat.

"Hold your silly tongue. Don't talk to me. I—the smelling salts! Quick, you slut, or I'll faint," screamed the lady.

No one could look less like fainting than did Mrs. Fenton, and so Betty thought, but she kept her thoughts to herself and fetched the restorer at which her mistress vigorously sniffed, after sinking, seemingly prostrate, into a chair. Then she fell to fanning her hot face with her apron, now and again relieving her feelings with language quite appropriate to the neighbourhood of the Old Bailey.

Meanwhile Hannah wisely kept aloof and only went to the kitchen when necessary to execute her customers' orders. Directly the fainting lady inside saw the waitress she revived.

"What's this about Lavinia? Tell me. Everything mind," she cried.

"What I don't know I can't tell, mistress. Ask her yourself," returned Hannah.

"Don't try to bamboozle me. You *do* know."

"I say I don't. I found her outside more dead than alive, and I brought her in. I wasn't going to let her be and all the scum of Newgate about."

"Oh, that was it. And pray how did you come to learn she was outside?"

"Because she'd looked in at the door a minute afore and was afeared to come in 'cause of you, mistress. Give me that dish o' bacon, Betty. The man who saw his breakfast tumbling on the floor is in a sad pother." [Pg 63]

This was a shot for Mrs. Fenton. Hannah rarely sought to have words with her mistress, but when she did she stood up to her boldly. Mrs. Fenton was discomfited and Hannah, snatching the dish Betty handed to her, vanished to appease the hungry customer, leaving the angry woman to chew over her wrath as best she might.

Mrs. Fenton gradually cooled down. In half an hour's time the market would be in full swing and most of her customers would be gone. Though she was dying to know what had brought her daughter home, the story would not spoil by keeping. Besides, though she was in a pet with Dobson, she did not want to give him offence and she tried to make amends for her angry outburst by bestowing upon him extra graciousness.

Before long Hannah was quite able to attend single-handed to the few lingerers, and Mrs. Fenton went upstairs, eager to empty her vial of suppressed temper on "that chit," as she generally called Lavinia.

She entered her own bedroom expecting to find the girl there, but Lavinia had no fancy for invading her mother's domains and had gone into the garret where Hannah slept. Dead with fatigue, mentally and bodily, she had thrown herself dressed as she was on Hannah's bed and in a few minutes was in a heavy sleep. But before doing so she slipped under the bolster something she was holding in her left hand. It was the purse forced upon her by Lancelot Vane.

Mrs. Fenton stood for a minute or so looking at her daughter. She could not deny that the girl was very pretty, but that prettiness gave her no satisfaction. She felt instinctively that Lavinia was her rival.

"The baggage is handsomer than I was at her age, and I wasn't a fright either or the men wouldn't ha' been always dangling after me. With that face she ought to get a rich husband, but I'll warrant she's a silly little fool and doesn't know her value," muttered the lady, her hands on her hips.

Then her eyes travelled over the picturesque figure on the bed, noting everything—the shoeless foot, the stockings wet to some inches above the small ankles, the mud-stained skirt, the bedraggled cloak saturated for quite a foot of its length. Her hair had lost its comb and had fallen about her shoulders. Mrs. Fenton frowned as she saw these signs of disorder. [Pg 64]

Then she caught sight of a piece of paper peeping from the bosom of the girl's dress. The next instant she had gently drawn it out and was reading it. The paper was Dorrimore's letter.

"Of course, I knew there was a man at the bottom of the business. And a marriage too. Hoity toity, that's another pair of shoes."

She threw back a fold of the cloak, and scrutinised Lavinia's left hand.

"No wedding ring!" she gasped. "I might ha' guessed as much. Oh, the little fool! Why, she's worse than I was. *I* wasn't to be taken in by soft whispers and kisses—well—well—*well*!"

The lady bumped herself into the nearest chair, breathed heavily and smoothed her apron distractedly. Then she looked at the letter again. Her glance went to the top of the sheet.

"So, no address. That looks bad. Who's Archibald Dorrimore? May be that isn't his right name. He's some worthless spark who's got hold of her for his own amusement. Oh, the silly hussy! What could that prim Mistress Pinwell have been about? A fine boarding school indeed! She can't go back. But I won't have her here turning the heads of the men. That dull lout, Bob Dobson, 'ud as lieve throw his money into her lap as he'd swallow a mug of ale. What'll her fine friends do for her now? Nothing. She's ruined herself. Well, I won't have her ruin me."

Mrs. Fenton worked her fury to such a height that she could no longer contain herself, and seizing her daughter's shoulder she shook her violently. The girl's tired eyelids slowly lifted and she looked vaguely into the angry face bending over her. [Pg 65]

"Tell me what all this means, you jade. What have you been up to? How is it you're in such a state? Who's been making a fool of you? Who's this Dorrimore? Are you married to him or not?"

The good lady might have spared herself the trouble of pouring out this torrent of questions. The last was really the only one that mattered.

"Married? No, I'm not," said Lavinia drowsily. "Don't bother me, mother. Let me sleep. I'll tell you everything, but not—not now. I'm too tired."

"Tell me everything? I should think you will or I'll know the reason why. And it'll have to be the truth or I'll beat it out of you. Get up."

There was no help for it. Lavinia knew her mother's temper when it was roused. Slowly rubbing her eyes she sat up, a rueful and repentant little beauty, but having withal an expression in her eyes which seemed to suggest that she wasn't going to be brow-beaten without a struggle.

"I ran away from school to be married," said she with a little pause between each word. "I thought I was being taken to the Fleet, but when I saw the coach wasn't going the right way I knew I was being tricked. On London Bridge I broke the coach window, opened the door and escaped."

"A parcel of lies! I don't believe one of 'em," interjected the irate dame.

"I can't help that. It's the truth all the same. I cut my arm with the broken glass. Perhaps that'll convince you."

Lavinia held out her bandaged arm.

"No, it won't. What's become of your shoe?"

"I took it off to break the window with the heel and afterwards lost it."

Mrs. Fenton was silent. If Lavinia were telling false-hoods she told them remarkably well. She spoke without the slightest hesitation and the story certainly hung together. [Pg 66]

"After I jumped from the coach I ran to the river, down the stairs at the foot of the bridge. The water was low and I stood under the bridge afraid to move. A terrible fight was going on above me. I don't know what it was about. The shooting and yelling went on for a long time and I dursn't stir. I would have taken a wherry but no waterman came near. Then the tide turned; the water came about my feet and I crept up the stairs. I was in the Borough, but I dursn't go far. The street was full of drunken people and I crept into a doorway and hid there. I suppose I looked like a beggar, for no one noticed me. Then when the streets were quieter I came here."

It will be noticed that Lavinia did not think it necessary to mention the handsome young man who had rescued her.

While she was recounting her adventures her mother, though listening attentively, was also pondering over the possible consequences. The story might be true or it might not, whichever it was did not matter. It was good enough for the purpose she had in her mind.

"Why didn't you go back to Miss Pinwell's?" Mrs. Fenton demanded sharply. "I see by this scrawl that it isn't the first time you've stolen out to meet this precious gallant of yours."

And Mrs. Fenton, suddenly producing the letter which she had hitherto concealed, waved it in her daughter's face. Lavinia flushed angrily and burst out:—

"You'd no right to read that letter any more than you had to steal it."

"Steal it? Tillyvalley! It's my duty to look after you and I'm going to do it. Why didn't you go back to the school as you seem to have done before?"

"Because the key of the front door was in my reticule, and that was snatched from me or it slipped from my wrist in the scuffle on the bridge."

"A pretty how de do, my young madam, upon my word. Miss Pinwell'll never take you back. [Pg 67] Goodness knows what may happen. What'll Mr. Gay, who's been so good to you, think of your base ingratitude?"

Lavinia's eyes filled with tears. She broke down when she thought of the gentle, good-natured poet. She could only weep silently.

Mrs. Fenton saw the sign of penitence with much satisfaction and while twirling her wedding ring to assist her thoughts, suddenly said:—

"You haven't told me a word about this spark of yours. Who is he? What is he? Some draper's 'prentice, I suppose, or footman, may be out of a place for robbing his master and thinking of turning highwayman."

"Nothing of the kind," cried Lavinia, furious that her mother should think she would so bemean herself. "I hate him for his falseness, but he's a born gentleman all the same."

"Oh, is he? Let's hear all about him. There's no address on his letter. Where does he live?"

"I shan't tell you."

"Because you're ashamed. I shouldn't wonder if he wasn't a trull's bully from Lewknor's Lane or Whetstone Park. The rascals pass themselves off as sparks of fashion at ridottos, masquerades and what not and live by robbery and blood money. I warrant I'll soon run your fine gentleman to earth. He talks about telling his father. Pooh! That was but to bait the trap and you walked into it nicely."

Her mother's insinuations maddened poor Lavinia. The mention of Lewknor's Lane and Whetstone Park, two of the most infamous places in London, was amply sufficient to break her spirit, which indeed was Mrs. Fenton's intention. The worst of it was that after what had happened she had in her secret heart come round to the same opinion so far as the baiting of the trap was concerned. She was far too cast down to make any reply and wept copiously, purely [Pg 68] through injured pride and humiliation.

"You must leave me to deal with this business, child," said Mrs. Fenton loftily. "If the young man

really belongs to the quality and what he writes about his father is true, then his father must be made to pay for the injury his son's done you. I suppose he's told you who his father is and where he lives, and *I* want to know too. If I'm to get you out of the mess you're in you must help me."

"I won't," gasped Lavinia between her sobs. "I don't want to hear anything more about him or his father either. I wish to forget both of them."

"Humph! That won't be so easy as you'll find, you stubborn little fool. Keep your mouth shut if you like. I'll ferret out the truth without you."

And stuffing the letter into her capacious pocket, Mrs. Fenton stalked out of the room and directly she was outside she turned the key in the lock. Lavinia, too exhausted in body and too depressed in mind to think, sobbed herself to sleep.

CHAPTER VII

"I WISH I WERE A RICH LADY FOR YOUR SAKE"

Lavina awoke to find Hannah in the room. The maid had brought in a cup of chocolate and something to eat.

"I'm a dreadful sight, Hannah," said she dolefully.

"You'll be better when you've had a wash and done your hair. Your cloak's spoilt. What a pity! Take it off and let me brush away the mud and see if I can smooth out the creases." [Pg 69]

Lavinia stretched herself, yawned and slowly pulled herself up, sitting on the side of the bed for a minute or two before she commenced her toilette. Hannah helped her to dress to the accompaniment of a running commentary on the state of her clothing.

"What am I to do about shoes?" asked Lavinia, when this part of her wearing apparel was reached.

"You won't be wanting any for a time I'm thinking, Miss Lavvy."

"Not wanting any shoes? Whatever do you mean?"

"Your mother means to lock you in this room for a while. She was for keeping you for a day or two on bread and water, but I talked her out of it."

Lavinia started in dismay. Then she burst out:—

"I won't endure such treatment. I won't, Hannah! You'll help me to run away, won't you?"

"Not till I know what's going to become of you."

"But if I'm a prisoner you're my gaoler and you can let me out whenever you choose."

"No I can't. I've to hand over the key to your mother."

"So you can after I'm gone."

"And what do you suppose I'm to say to her when that happens?"

"Oh, what you like, Hannah. I don't believe you're afraid of anybody. You're so brave," said Lavinia, coaxingly.

"Well, well, we'll see. But I warn you, child, I'm not going to let you come to harm."

Lavinia laughed and shrugged her plump shoulders. After what she had gone through the night before she felt she could face anything. She knew she could talk over the good-natured Hannah and she heard the latter lock the door without feeling much troubled.

For all that Lavinia had a good deal to worry about, and she sat sipping the chocolate while she pondered over what she should do. She could think of no one she could go to besides Mr. Gay. [Pg 70] How would he receive her after her escapade?

"He knows so many play actors," she murmured,—"didn't he say I had a stage face? I wonder—I wonder."

And still wondering she rose and straightened the bed. Shifting the pillow she found beneath it the purse she had placed there before going to sleep. Excitement and exhaustion had driven it out of her head. She felt quite remorseful when the remembrance of the chivalrous young man came into her mind.

"Ah me," she sighed. "I'll warrant I'll never set eyes on him again. I do hope he wasn't hurt."

Lavinia looked at the purse wistfully. She had not had the opportunity of seeing what it contained. It was of silk with a silver ring at each end to keep the contents safe, and an opening between the rings. One end had money in it, in the other a piece of paper crackled. She slipped

the ring at the money end over the opening and took out the coins—a guinea, a crown and a shilling.

"I don't like taking it. He gave it me to pay the waterman and I hadn't the chance. It isn't mine. I ought to return it to him. But how can I? I don't know where he lives. I don't even know his name."

Then she fingered the other end. She slid the ring but hesitated to do more. To look at the paper seemed like prying into the owner's affairs. It must be something precious for him to carry it about with him. Suppose it was a love letter from his sweetheart? She blushed at the idea. Then curiosity was roused. Her fingers crept towards the papers, for there were two. One ran thus:—

"The Duke's Theatre,
"Lincoln's Inn Fields.

"SIR,—

"I have read your play and herewith return it. I doubt not it has merit but it will not suit me.

"I am your obedient humble servant,

"JOHN RICH."

Lancelot Vane, Esq.

"Poor fellow—so he writes plays. How aggravating to have such a rude letter. 'Obedient—humble—servant,' forsooth! I hate that John Rich. He's a bear." [Pg 71]

Then Lavinia unfolded the second letter. It was more depressing than the first.

"Lancelot Vane, 3, Fletcher's Court, Grub Street," Lavinia read; "Sir,—I give you notiss that if you do nott pay me my nine weeks' rent you owe me by twelve o'clock to-morrer I shall at wunce take possesshun and have innstruckted the sheriff's offiser in ackordance therewith. Yours respeckfully, Solomon Moggs."

"Oh, a precious lot of respect indeed," cried Lavinia angrily.

The date of the letter was that of the day before. The money had consequently to be paid that very day and it was already past twelve o'clock. If the poor young man could not pay he would at that moment be homeless in the street and maybe arrested for debt and taken to the Fleet or even Newgate. Hadn't she seen the poor starving debtors stretch their hands through the "Debtors' door" in the Old Bailey and beg for alms from the passers-by with which to purchase food? She pictured the poor young man going through this humiliation and it made her shudder. He was so handsome!

And all for the want of a paltry twenty-seven shillings! Twenty-seven shillings? Was not that the exact sum of money in the purse?

"Oh, that must have been for his rent," cried Lavinia, clasping her hands in great distress. "And he gave it to me!"

She was overwhelmed. She must return the money at once. But how? She ran to the door. It was locked sure enough. The window? Absurd. It looked out upon a broad gutter and was three storeys from the street. If it were possible to lower herself she certainly could not do so in the daytime. And by nightfall it would be too late. She sat down on the side of the bed, buried her face in her hands and abandoned herself to despair. [Pg 72]

But this feeling did not last long. Lavinia sprang to her feet, flung back her hair and secured it. Then she went once more to the window and clambered out into the broad gutter. She hadn't any clear idea what to do beyond taking stock of her surroundings. She looked over the parapet. It seemed a fearful depth down to the roadway. Even if she had a rope it was doubtful if she could lower herself. Besides, rarely at any hour even at night was the Old Bailey free from traffic. She would have to think of some other way.

She crept along the gutter in front of the next house. Dirty curtains hung at windows. There was no danger of her being seen even if the room had any occupants. She crawled onward, feeling she was a sort of Jack Sheppard whose daring escapes were still being talked about.

At the next window Lavinia hesitated and stopped. This window had no curtains. The grime of many months, maybe of years, obscured the glass. One of the small panes was broken. Gathering courage she craned her head and looked through the opening. The room was empty. The paper on the walls hung in strips. There was a little hole in the ceiling through which the daylight streamed.

If the house should, like the room, be empty! The possibility opened up all kinds of speculation in Lavinia's active brain. Why not explore the premises? Up till now she had forgotten her lost shoe. To pursue her investigations unsuitably dressed as she was would be absurd. Supposing she had a chance of escaping into the street she must be properly garbed.

She did not give herself time to think but hastened back to Hannah's room. She tried on all the shoes she could find. One pair was smaller than the rest. She put on that for the left foot. It was a [Pg 73]

little too large but near enough. Then she hurried on her hooded cloak and once more tackled the gutter. She was able to reach the window catch by putting her hand through the aperture in the broken pane. In a minute or so she was in the room, flushed, panting, hopeful.

A long, long time must have passed since that room had been swept. Flue and dust had accumulated till they formed a soft covering of nearly a quarter of an inch thick. A fusty, musty smell was in the room, in the air of the staircase, everywhere.

She feared that only the upper part of the house was uninhabited but it was not so. The place was terribly neglected and dilapidated. Holes were in the walls, some of the twisted oak stair-rails had been torn away, patches of the ceiling had fallen. But Lavinia hardly noticed anything as she flew down the stairs. The lock could not be opened from the outside without the key, but inside the handle had but to be pushed back and she was in the street. She pulled her hood well over her head and hastened towards Ludgate Hill. It was not the nearest route to Grub Street which she knew was somewhere near Moorfields, but she dared not pass her mother's house.

Lavinia knew more about London west of St. Paul's than she did east of it, and she had to ask her way. Grub Street she found was outside the city wall, many fragments of which were then standing, and she had to pass through the Cripples Gate before she reached the squalid quarter bordering Moor Fields westward, where distressed poets, scurrilous pamphleteers, booksellers' hacks and literary ne'er-do-wells dragged out an uncertain existence.

Lavinia found Fletcher's Court to be a narrow passage with old houses dating from Elizabethan times, whose projecting storeys were so close together that at the top floor one could jump across to the opposite side without much difficulty. With beating heart she entered the house, the door of which was open. She met an old woman descending a rickety tortuous staircase and stopped her. [Pg 74]

"Can you tell me if Mr. Vane lives here?" said she.

"Well, he do an' he don't," squeaked the old dame. "Leastways he won't be here much longer. He's a bein' turned out 'cause he can't pay his rent, pore young gentleman. We're all sorry for him, so civil spoken and nice to everybody, not a bit like some o' them scribblers as do nothing but drink gin day an' night. Street's full of 'em. I can't make out what they does for a livin'! Scholards they be most of 'em I'm told. Mr. Vane's lodgin's on the top floor. You goes right up. That's old Sol Moggs' squeak as you can hear. Don't 'ee be afeared of 'im, dearie."

The old woman, who was laden with a big basket and a bundle, went out and Lavinia with much misgiving ascended the stairs. She remembered the name, Solomon Moggs. He was the landlord. If his nature was as harsh and discordant as his voice poor Lancelot Vane was having an unpleasant time.

"Ill, are ye?" she heard Moggs shrieking. "I can't help that. I didn't make you ill, did I? Maybe you was in a drunken brawl last night. It looks like it with that bandage round your head. You scribbling gentry, the whole bunch of ye, aren't much good. I don't see the use of you. Why don't ye do some honest work and pay what you owes? I can't afford to keep you for nothing. Stump up or out ye go neck and crop."

Lavinia ran up the next flight. The landing at the top was low pitched and dark. The only light was that which came from the open door of a front room. In the doorway was a little man in a shabby coat which reached down to his heels. His wig was frowsy, his three-cornered hat was out of shape and he held a big stick with which he every now and then thumped the floor to emphasise his words.

Beyond this unpleasant figure she could see a small untidy room with a sloping roof. The floor, the chairs—not common ones but of the early Queen Anne fashion with leathern seats—an old escritoire, were strewn with papers. The occupant and owner was invisible. But she could hear his voice. He was remonstrating with the little man in the doorway. [Pg 75]

Lavinia touched the man on the shoulder. He turned, stared and seeing only a pretty girl favoured her with a leer.

"How much does Mr. Vane owe you?" said Lavinia, chinking the coins.

"Eh, my dear? Are you going to pay his debt? Lucky young man. Nine weeks at three shillings a week comes to twenty-seven shillings. There ought to be a bit for the lawyer who wrote the notice to quit. But I'll let you off that because of your pretty face."

Lavinia counted the money into the grimy outstretched paw. Moggs' face wrinkled into a smirk.

"Much obleeged, my young madam. I'll wager as the spark you've saved from being turned into the street'll thank you more to your liking than an old fellow like me could."

Solomon Moggs made a low bow and was turning away when Lancelot Vane suddenly appeared. His face was very pallid and he clutched the door to steady himself. What with his evident weakness and his bandaged head he presented rather a pitiable picture.

"What's all this?" he demanded. "I'm not going to take your money, madam."

"It's not mine," cried Lavinia in a rather disappointed tone. She could see he did not remember her.

"Faith an' that's gospel truth," chuckled Moggs. "It's mine and it's not going into anybody else's pocket." And he hastily shuffled down the staircase.

Lavinia turned to Vane a little ruffled.

"You don't recollect me," she said. "The money's ours. I didn't want it but you did and so I brought it back. I'm so glad I was in time and that you're rid of that horrid man." [Pg 76]

Lancelot Vane stared fixedly at her. The events of the night before were mixed up in his mind and he had but a dim remembrance of the girl's face. Indeed he had caught only a momentary glimpse of it.

"Was it you, madam, who were pursued by those ruffians?" he stammered. "I'm grateful that you've come to no harm."

"Oh, it was all your doing," cried Lavinia, eagerly, "you were so brave and kind. I was too frightened last night to think of anything but getting away and I didn't thank you. I want to do so now."

"No, no. It's you who should be thanked. Don't stand there, pray. Do come inside. It's a frightfully dirty room but it's the best I have."

"But I—I must get back."

"You're in no hurry, I hope. I've so much I would like to say to you."

"What can you have? We're such strangers," she protested.

"Just now we are perhaps, but every minute we talk together makes us less so. Please enter."

His voice was so entreating, his manner so deferential, she could not resist. She ventured within a few steps and while he cleared a chair from its books and papers her eyes wandered round. One end of the room was curtained off and the opening between the curtains revealed a bed. The furniture was not what one would expect to find in a garret. It was good and solid but undusted and the upholstery was faded. The general appearance was higgledy-piggledy—hand to mouth domesticity mixed up with the work by which the young man earned, or tried to earn, his living. No signs of a woman's neatness and touches of decoration could be seen.

Lavinia's glances went to the owner of the garret. After all it was only he who was of real interest. She noticed the difficulty he had in lifting a big folio from the chair. He could hardly use [Pg 77] his right arm. She saw his hollow cheeks and the dark circles beneath his eyes. She hadn't spent years in the streets amongst the poorest not to know that his wistful look meant want of food—starvation may be.

"Won't you sit down?" he said.

She shook her head.

"This belongs to you," she said, holding out his purse. "I'm so sorry it's empty."

"I'm sorry too. You haven't spent a farthing on yourself and I meant it all for you."

"It was very foolish when you wanted money so badly."

"That doesn't matter. You wouldn't have been here now if I hadn't given it you."

Her eyes lighted up. The same thought had crossed her mind.

"How did you know I lived here?" he went on.

"Well I—I opened the other end of the purse and read what was on the papers inside. It was very wrong. You'll forgive me, won't you?"

"I'd forgive you anything. You descended upon me like an angel. Not many young ladies of your station would have had the courage to set foot in Grub Street."

A smile trembled on Lavinia's tempting lips.

"My station? What then do you think is my station?"

"How can I tell? I take you to be a lady, madam. I don't want to know any more."

At this Lavinia laughed outright. Her clothes were of good quality and of fashionable cut—the Duchess of Queensberry's maid had seen to that—her manner and air were those of a lady of quality—thanks to Miss Pinwell—but apart from these externals what was she? A coffee shop waitress—a strolling singer—a waif and stray whose mother would not break her heart if she got her living on the streets! [Pg 78]

When she thought of the bitter truth the laughing face was clouded.

"I wish I were a lady—a rich one, I mean—for your sake," said she softly. "You look so ill. You ought to have a doctor."

"I ought to have a good many things, I daresay, that I haven't got. I have to do without."

Her eyes drooped. They remained fixed on a little gold brooch fastening her cloak. The brooch

was the gift of Dorrimore. The wonder was her mother had not discovered it.

"I must go. I—I've forgotten something."

"But you'll come again, wont you?" said he imploringly. "Though to be sure there's nothing in this hovel to tempt you? Besides, the difference between us——"

"Please don't talk nonsense," she broke in. "Yes, I'll come again soon. I don't know how long I shall be—a couple of hours perhaps."

"Do you really mean that?" he cried, joyfully.

"Yes, if nothing happens to prevent me. Good-bye for a while."

She waved her hand. He caught the tips of her fingers and kissed them. One bright smile in response and she was gone.

With her heart fluttering strangely—a fluttering that Dorrimore had never been able to inspire—Lavinia flew down the staircase and sped through the streets in the direction of London Bridge.

CHAPTER VIII

[Pg 79]

"YOU'VE A MIGHTY COAXING TONGUE"

The shop on London Bridge of Dr. Mountchance, apothecary, astrologer, dealer in curios and sometimes money lender and usurer, was in its way picturesque and quaint, but to most tastes would scarcely be called inviting. Bottles of all shapes and sizes loaded the shelves, mingled with jars and vases from China, Delft ware from Holland and plates and dishes from France, which Dr. Mountchance swore were the handiwork of Palissy, the famous artist-potter. Everything had a thick coating of dust. Dried skins of birds, animals and hideous reptiles hung from the walls and ceiling; a couple of skulls grinned mockingly above a doorway leading into a little room at the rear, and it was difficult to steer one's way between the old furniture, the iron bound coffers and miscellaneous articles which crowded the shop.

In the room behind, chemical apparatus of strange construction was on one table; packets of herbs were on another; a huge tome lay opened on the floor, and books were piled on the chairs. The apartment was a mixture of a laboratory and lumber room. A furnace was in one corner, retorts, test tubes, crucibles, a huge pestle and mortar, jars, bottles were on a bench close handy.

The room was lighted by a window projecting over the Thames, and the roar of the river rushing through the narrow arches and swirling and dashing against the stone work never ceased, though it varied in violence according to wind and tide. The house was a portion of the old chapel of St. Thomas, long since converted from ecclesiastical observances to commercial uses.

Dr. Mountchance, who at this moment was at a table in the centre examining a silver flagon and muttering comments upon it, was a little man about seventy, with an enormous head and a spare body and short legs. His face was wrinkled like a piece of wet shrivelled silk and his skin was the colour of parchment. His eyes, very small and deep-set, were surmounted by heavy brows once black, now of an iron grey. His mouth was of prodigious width, the lips thin and straight and his nose long, narrow and pointed. He wore a dirty wig which was always awry, a faded mulberry coloured coat, and a frayed velvet waistcoat reaching halfway down his thighs. His stockings were dirty and hung in bags about his ankles, his feet were cased in yellow slippers more than half worn out.

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Dr. Mountchance's hearing was keen. A footfall in the shop, soft as it was, caused him to look up. He saw a slight girlish figure, her cloak pulled tightly about her, a pair of bright eyes peering from beneath the hood.

The old man gave a grunt of dissatisfaction. Many of his customers were women but he liked them none the more because of their sex. They generally came to sell, not to buy, and most of them knew how to drive a hard bargain. He shuffled into the shop with a scowl on his lined yellow face.

"What d'ye want?" he growled.

Most girls would have been nervous at such a reception. Not so this one.

"I want to sell this brooch. How much will you give me for it?" said she, undauntedly.

"Don't want to buy it. Go somewhere else."

"I shan't. Too much trouble. Besides, you're going to buy it, dear Dr. Mountchance."

The imploring eyes, the beseeching voice, soft and musical, the modest yet assured manner, were too much for the old man. Unconscious of the destiny awaiting her, Lavinia was employing the same tenderness of look, the same captivating pathos of tone as when two years later she, as Polly Peachum, sang "Oh ponder well," and won the heart of the Duke of Bolton.

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"H'm, h'm," grunted Mountchance, "you pretty witch. Must I humour ye?"

"Of course you must. You're so kind and always ready to help others."

The doctor showed his yellow fangs in a ghastly grin that gave a skull-like look to his dried face.

"Hold thy wheedling tongue, hussy. This trinket—gold you say?"

"Try it, you know better than I."

Dr. Mountchance took the brooch into the inner room, weighed it, tested the metal and returned to the shop.

"I can give you no more than the simple value of the gold. 'Tis not pure—a crown should content ye."

"Well, it doesn't. Do you take me for a cutpurse? I'm not that sort."

"How do I know? You use thieves' jargon. Where did you pick it up?"

Lavinia gave one of her rippling laughs.

"That's my business and not yours. I tell you it's honestly come by and I want a guinea for it. You know it's worth five and maybe more. The man who gave it me—I don't care for him you may like to know—isn't mean. He'd spend a fortune on me if I'd care to take it but I don't." She tossed her head disdainfully.

"Oh, 'tis from your gallant. Aye, men are easily fooled by bright eyes. Well—well——"

Lavinia's ingenuous story had its effect. Not a few of Dr. Mountchance's lady customers preferred money to trinkets and he did a profitable trade in buying these presents at his own price. Some of these flighty damsels were haughty and patronising and others were familiar and impudent. The old man disliked both varieties. Lavinia belonged to neither the first nor the second. She was thoroughly natural and the humour lurking in her sparkling eyes was a weapon which few could resist. Dr. Mountchance unclasped a leather pouch and extracted a guinea. [Pg 82]

"You've a mighty coaxing tongue, you baggage. Keep it to yourself that I gave you what you asked, lest my reputation as a fair dealing man be gone for ever."

"Oh, you may trust me to keep my mouth shut," said Lavinia with mock gravity.

A sweeping curtsey and she turned towards the door. At the same moment a lady cloaked and hooded like herself entered. They stared at each other as they passed.

Lavinia recognised Sally Salisbury, though the latter was much more finely dressed than when they encountered each other outside the Maidenhead Tavern in St. Giles. Sally was not so sure about Lavinia. The slim girl was now a woman. She carried herself with an air. She had exchanged her shabby garments for clothes of a fashionable cut which she knew how to wear. Still, some chord in Sally's memory was stirred and she advanced into the shop with a puzzled look on her face.

Mountchance received his fresh customer obsequiously. He had made a good deal of money out of Sally; she never brought him anything which was not valuable and worth buying. Sometimes her treasures were presents from admirers, sometimes they were the proceeds of highway robberies. The latter yielded the most profit. The would-be sellers dared not haggle. They were only too anxious to get rid of their ill-gotten gains.

The old man bowed Sally Salisbury into his inner room. He knew that the business which had brought her to him was one that meant privacy. He ceremoniously placed a chair for her and awaited her pleasure.

The lady was in no hurry. She caught sight of the gold brooch lying on the table, took it up and examined it. On the back was graven "A.D. to Lavinia." Sally's dark arched eyebrows contracted.

"Lavinia," she thought. "So it *was* that little squalling cat. I hate her. She's tumbled on her feet—like all cats. But for the letters I'd say she'd flung herself at the head of *my* man." [Pg 83]

Sally was thinking of her encounter with Lavinia outside the Maiden Head tavern. Lancelot Vane was then sitting in the bow window of the coffee-room. True he was in a drunken sleep but this would make no difference. Lavinia, Sally decided, was in a fair way to earn her living, much as Sally herself did—the toy of the bloods of fashion one day, the companions of highwaymen and bullies the next.

"Where did the impertinent young madam get her fine clothes and her quality air if not?" Sally asked herself, and the question was a reasonable one.

"Have you brought me ought that I care to look at, Mistress Salisbury?" broke in the old man impatiently. "You haven't come to buy that paltry trinket, I'll swear."

"How do you knew? It takes my fancy. Where did you get it?"

"I've had it but five minutes. You passed the girl who sold it me as you came in. A pretty coaxing wench. She'd make a man pour out his gold at her feet if she cared to try."

Sally's lips went pallid with passion and her white nostrils quivered.

"A common little trull," she burst out. "She should be sent to Bridewell and soundly whipped. 'Tis little more than six months she was a street squaller cadging for pence round the boozing kens of St. Giles and Clare Market. And now—pah! it makes me sick."

Sally flung the brooch upon the table with such violence it bounced a foot in the air.

"Gently—gently, my good Sally," remonstrated Mountchance, "if you must vent your fury upon anything choose your own property, not mine."

It was doubtful if the virago heard the request. She was not given to curbing her temper, and leaning back in the chair, her body rigid, she beat a tattoo with her high-heeled shoes and clenched her fists till the knuckles whitened. [Pg 84]

Mountchance had seen hysterical women oft times and was not troubled. He opened a stoppered bottle and held its rim to the lady's nose. The moment was well chosen, Sally was in the act of drawing a deep breath, probably with the intention of relieving her feelings by shrieking aloud. The ammonia was strong and she inhaled a full dose. She gasped, she coughed, her eyes streamed, the current of her thoughts changed, she poured a torrent of unadulterated Billingsgate upon the imperturbable doctor who busied himself about other matters until Sally should think fit to regain her senses.

That time came when after a brief interval of sullenness, accompanied by much heaving of the bosom and biting of lips she deigned to produce the pearl necklace, the spoil of Rofflash's highway robbery on the Bath Road.

Mountchance looked at the pearls closely and his face became very serious.

"The High Toby game I'll take my oath," said he in a low voice. "Such a bit of plunder as this must be sent abroad. I dursn't attempt to get rid of it here."

"That's *your* business. My business is how much'll you give."

Dr. Mountchance named a sum ridiculously low so Sally thought. Then ensued a long haggle which was settled at last by a compromise and Sally departed.

As she hurried back to her lodgings in the Borough, Sally was quite unaware that Rofflash, disguised as a beggar with a black patch over his eye and a dirty red handkerchief tied over his head in place of his wig, was stealthily shadowing her.

CHAPTER IX

[Pg 85]

"YOU WERE BRAVE AND FOUGHT FOR ME"

Meanwhile Lavinia was hastening to Grub Street. On her way she bought a pair of shoes which if not quite in the *mode* were at least fellows. She also cleverly talked the shopkeeper into allowing her something on the discarded odd ones and thereby saved a shilling.

The girl's old life in roaming about the streets had sharpened her wits. Adversity had taught her much. It had given her a knowledge of persons and things denied to those to whom life had always been made easy. She had had sundry acquaintances among the pretty orange girls who plied their trade at Drury Lane and the Duke's theatres and had got to know how useful Dr. Mountchance was in buying presents bestowed upon them by young bloods flushed with wine, and in other ways. Hence when in want of money she looked upon her brooch she at once thought of the old man's shop on London Bridge.

The taverns in those days were real houses of refreshment. Food could be had at most of them as well as drink. Still a girl needed some courage to enter. The men she might meet were ready to make free in far too familiar a fashion. Lavinia stopped in front of the "Green Dragon" near the Cripples Gate, but hesitated. Many months had passed since the time when she would have boldly walked into the galleried inn-yard and asked for what she wanted. The refining influence of Miss Pinwell's genteel establishment had made her loathe the low life in which her early years had been passed.

"They can't eat me," she thought. "Besides, the poor fellow is starving." [Pg 86]

The place was fairly quiet. One or two men of a group drinking and gossipping winked at each other when they caught sight of her pretty face, but they said nothing and she got what she asked for, a cold chicken, bread and a bottle of wine.

Lavinia hastened to Grub Street. She ran up the dirty narrow ricketty stairs, her heart palpitating with excitement, and she knocked at the garret door. It was opened immediately, Lancelot Vane stood in the doorway, his fine eyes beaming. He looked very handsome, Lavinia thought, and she blushed under his ardent gaze.

He had washed, he had shaved, he had put on his best suit and his wig concealed the cut on his forehead. He was altogether a different Lancelot from the bedraggled, woe-begone, haggard

young man whom she had found in the last stage of misery two hours ago. He had moreover, enlisted the help of the old woman whom Lavinia had met on the stairs at her first visit and the place was swept and tidied. The room as well as its occupant was now quite presentable.

"I've brought you something to eat," stammered Lavinia quite shyly to her own surprise. "You don't mind, do you?"

"Not if you'll do me the honour to share it with me."

"Oh, but it will give you so much trouble. And I'm not hungry. I bought it all for you."

Lavinia was busy emptying the contents of a rush basket which the good-natured landlord of the "Green Dragon" had given her.

"Have you a plate and a knife and fork? You can't eat with your fingers, you know."

"I've two plates and two knives and forks, but the knives are not pairs. I apologise humbly for my poverty stricken household."

"That doesn't matter. I'm not going to touch a morsel."

"Neither am I then. And it isn't my hospitality, remember, but yours. Why are you such a good Samaritan?" [Pg 87]

"You were brave and fought for me. I shall never forget last night—never."

"It will always be in my memory too, and I want our first meal together to be in my memory also. Alas! I have no tablecloth."

"But you have plenty of paper," Lavinia laughingly said. "That will do as well."

Lancelot laughed in unison and seizing a couple of sheets of foolscap he opened and spread them on the table.

"One for you and one for me, but you see I've put them together," said he with a roguish gleam in his eye.

"No, they must be separate."

But he had his way.

Soon the banquet was ready and it delighted Lavinia to see how ravenously the young man ate. At the same time it pained her for it told of days of privation. Before long they were perfectly at ease and merrily chatting about nothing in particular, under some circumstances the best kind of talk. Suddenly he said:

"I'm wondering where my next meal is to come from. I can't expect an angel to visit me every day."

"Perhaps it will be a raven. Didn't ravens feed Elijah?" said Lavinia mockingly.

"I believe so, but I'm not Elijah. I'm not even a prophet. I'm only a poor scribbler."

"You write plays, don't you?"

"I've written one but I'm afraid it's poor stuff. I meant to show it to Mr. Gay the great poet. I was told he was often to be found at the Maiden Head in St. Giles, but unluckily I was persuaded by some friends to see Jack Sheppard's last exploit at Tyburn. I drank too much—I own it to my shame—and when I reached the inn where I hoped to see Mr. Gay I fell dead asleep and never saw him. He had gone when I awoke."

Lavinia clasped her hands. A shadow passed over her bright face leaving it sad and pensive. The red mobile lips were tremulous and the eyes moist and shining. She now knew why Lancelot Vane's features had seemed so familiar to her. But not for worlds would she let him know she had seen him in his degradation. [Pg 88]

Besides she too had memories of that day she would like to forget—save the remembrance of her meeting with Gay and his kindness to her, a kindness which she felt she had repaid with folly and ingratitude.

"Then you know Mr. Gay?" said she presently.

"I was introduced to him by Spiller the actor one night at the Lamb and Flag, Clare Market—I'll warrant you don't know Clare Market; 'tis a dirty greasy ill-smelling place where everyone seems to be a butcher——"

Lavinia said nothing. She knew Clare Market perfectly well.

"Mr. Gay was good enough to look at some poems I had with me. He praised them and I told him I'd written a play and he said he would like to see it. And then—but you know what happened. I feel I daren't face him again after disgracing myself so. What must he think of me?"

"He'll forgive you," cried Lavinia enthusiastically. "He's the dearest, the kindest, the most generous hearted man in the world. He is my best friend and——"

She stopped. She was on the point of plunging into her history and there was no necessity for doing this. She had not said a word to Lancelot Vane about herself and she did not intend to do so. He must think what he pleased about the adventure which had brought them together. He must have seen her leap from Dorrimore's carriage—nay, he may have caught sight of Dorrimore himself. Then there was the ruffian of a coachman who had pursued her. The reason of the fellow's anxiety to capture her must have puzzled Vane. Well, it must continue to puzzle him.

"Mr. Gay your friend?" returned Vane with a pang of envy. "Ah, then, you're indeed fortunate. I—you've been such a benefactor to me, madam, that I hesitate to ask another favour of you." [Pg 89]

All familiarity had fled from him. He seemed to be no longer on an equality with her. He was diffident, he was respectful. If this girl was a friend of Mr. Gay the distinguished poet and dramatist whose latest work, "The Fables," was being talked about at Button's, at Wills', at every coffee-house where the wits gathered, she must be somebody in the world of fashion and letters. Perhaps she was an actress. She had the assured manner of one, he thought.

"What is it you want? If it's anything in my power I'd like to help you," said Lavinia with an air of gracious condescension. The young man's sudden deference amused her highly. It also pleased her.

"Thank you," he exclaimed eagerly. "I would ask you if you have sufficient acquaintance to show him my play? I'm sure he would refuse you nothing. Nobody could."

"Oh, this is very sad," said Lavinia shaking her head. "I'm afraid, Mr. Vane, you're trying to bribe me with flattery. I warn you it will be of no avail. All the same I'll take your play to Mr. Gay if you care to trust it to me."

"Trust, madam, I'd trust you with anything."

"You shouldn't be so ready to believe in people you know nothing of. But—where's this play of yours? May I look at it?"

"It would be the greatest honour you could confer upon me. I would dearly love to have your opinion," he cried, his face flushing.

"My opinion isn't worth a button, but all the same the play would interest me I'm sure."

He went to a bureau and took from one of the drawers a manuscript neatly stitched together.

"I've copied it out fairly and I don't think you'll have much difficulty in deciphering the writing."

Lavinia took the manuscript and glanced at the inscription on the first page. It ran "Love's Blindness: A Tragedy in Five Acts. By Lancelot Vane." [Pg 90]

"Oh, it's a tragedy," she exclaimed.

He read the look of dismay that crept over her face and his heart fell.

"Yes. But the real tragic part doesn't come until the very last part of the fifth act."

"And what happens then?"

"The lovers both die. They do not find out how much they love each other until it is too late for them to be united, so Stephen kills Amanda and then kills himself."

"How terribly sad. But wasn't there any other way? Why couldn't you have made them happy?"

"Then it wouldn't have been a tragedy."

"Perhaps not. But what prevented them marrying?"

"Amanda, not knowing Stephen loved her, had married another man whom she didn't care for."

"I see. There was a husband in the way. Still it would have been wiser for her to have left him and run away with Stephen. It certainly would have been more in the mode."

"Not on the stage. People like to see a play that makes them cry. How they weep over the sorrows of Almeria in Mr. Congreve's 'Mourning Bride!'"

"Yes, so I've heard. I've never seen the play. The title frightens me. I don't like the notion of a mourning bride."

"Not in real life I grant you. But on the stage it's different. I'm sorry you don't care for my tragedy," he went on disappointedly.

"I never said that. How could I when I haven't read a line? That's very unjust of you."

"I humbly crave forgiveness. Nothing was further from my thoughts than to accuse you of being unjust. I ought to have said that you didn't care for tragedies, and if so mine would be included. Pray pardon me."

"How serious! You haven't offended me a bit. After all it isn't what I think of your play that's of any consequence. It's what Mr. Gay thinks and I'll do my best to take it to him." [Pg 91]

"You will? Madam, you've made me the happiest of mortals. Let me wrap up my poor attempt at

play writing."

"Why do you call it poor? And am I not to read it?"

"No, no. Not a line. You would think it tedious. I'll wait for Mr. Gay's opinion, and if that's favourable I would like with your permission to introduce a part for you."

"What, in a tragedy? I can't see myself trying to make people weep."

"But it wouldn't be a tragic part. While we've been talking it has occurred to me that the play would be improved by a little comedy."

"Yes," rejoined Lavinia eagerly, "by a character something like Cherry in the 'Beaux Stratagem?'"

"H'm," rejoined Vane. "Not quite so broad and vivacious as Cherry. That would be out of keeping."

"I'd dearly love to play Cherry," said Lavinia meditatively.

"You'd be admirable I doubt not, but——"

"Would the part you'd introduce have a song in it?"

"H'm," coughed the dramatist again. "Hardly. There are no songs in tragedies."

"I don't see why there shouldn't be. I love singing. When I'm an actress I must have songs. Mr. Gay says so."

"Then you've not been on the stage?"

"No, but I hope I shall be soon. I dream of nothing else."

Vane looked at her inquiringly. To his mind the girl seemed made for love. Surely a love affair must have been the cause of the escapade on London Bridge. How came she to be alone with a gallant in his carriage at that time of night? But he dared not put any questions to her. Her love affairs were nothing to him—so he tried to persuade himself. [Pg 92]

He was now busy in tying up the manuscript in a sheet of paper and Lavinia was thinking hard.

The question was, what was to become of her? She had no home, for she had made up her mind she would not go back to her mother and Miss Pinwell was equally impossible. This impeccable spinster would never condone such an offence as that of which she had been guilty. Neither did Lavinia wish the compromising affair to be known in the school and talked about. She felt she had left conventional schooling for ever and she yearned to go back to life—but not the same life in which her early years had been passed.

Another worry was her shortness of money. She had but a trifle left out of the guinea her brooch had fetched. In the old days she could have soon earned a shilling or two by singing outside and inside taverns. But what she had done as a beggar maid could not be thought of in her fine clothes. And during the last six months, with good food, regular hours and systematic drilling, she had shot up half a head. She was a grown woman, and she felt instinctively that as such and with the winsome face Nature had bestowed upon her, singing outside taverns would be considered by men as a blind for something else. In addition she looked back upon her former occupation with loathing. It could not be denied that she was in an awkward plight.

She was so absorbed that she did not hear Vane who finished tieing up the packet speaking to her. Suddenly she became aware of his voice and she turned to him in some confusion.

"I beg your pardon. You were saying——"

"Pardon my presumption, I was asking whether I might have the privilege of knowing your name."

"Oh yes. Lavinia Fenton. But that's all I can tell you. You mustn't ask where I live." [Pg 93]

"I'm not curious. I'm quite contented with what you choose to let me know."

"And with that little are you quite sure you'll trust me with your play? Suppose I lose it or am robbed?"

"I must take my chance. I've a rough draft of the whole and also all the parts written out separately. I wouldn't think of doubting you. But do you know where to find Mr. Gay?"

"Oh yes. He lives at the house of his friend, Her Grace the Duchess of Queensberry."

"That is so," rejoined Vane in a tone of evident relief. Her answer convinced him that what she said about knowing Gay was true.

"I can only promise to deliver it to him and if possible place it in his own hands. Do you believe me?"

"Indeed I do. And will you see me again and bring me an answer?"

"Why, of course," said she smilingly.

He insisted upon attending her down the staircase and when they were in the dark passage down

below they bade each other adieu, he kissing her extended hand with a courteous bow which became him well.

Vane watched her thread her way along poverty-stricken Grub Street, and slowly ascended the staircase to his garret sighing deeply.

CHAPTER X

IN THE CHAPTER COFFEE HOUSE

It was nearly six o'clock when Lavinia stood on the broad steps of Queensberry House behind Burlington Gardens. Now that she was staring at the big door between the high railings with their funnel shaped link extinguishers pointing downward at her on either side her courage [Pg 94] seemed to be slipping from her. The grotesque faces supporting the triangular portico seemed to be mocking her, the enormous knocker transformed itself into a formidable obstacle.

The adventures of the last forty-eight hours had suddenly presented themselves to the girl's mind in all their enormity. It occurred to her for the first time that she had not only thrown away the chance of her life, but that she had been guilty of black ingratitude to her benefactors. And her folly in permitting the fancy to rove towards Archibald Dorrimore, for whose foppishness she had a contempt, simply because he was rich! The recollection of this caused her the bitterest pang of all.

How could she justify her conduct to Mr. Gay! Would he not look upon her as a light o' love ready to bestow smiles upon any man who flattered her? Well, she wouldn't attempt to justify herself. Mr. Gay was a poet. He would understand. But the terrible duchess—Kitty of Queensberry who feared nothing and in the plainest of terms, if she was so minded, expressed her opinion on everything! Lavinia quaked in her shoes at the thought of meeting the high-born uncompromising dame.

"But I've promised the poor fellow. I *must* keep my word. I don't care a bit about myself if I can do that," she murmured.

Lavinia had a sudden heartening, and lest the feeling should slacken she seized the heavy bell-pull and gave it a violent tug.

The door was opened almost immediately by a fat hall porter who scowled when he saw a girl instead of the footman of a fine lady in her chair.

"What d'ye want? A-ringing the bell like that one would think you was my Lord Mayor."

"I'm neither the Lord Mayor nor the Lady Mayoress, as your own eyes ought to tell you. I wish to see Mr. Gay." [Pg 95]

"Well, you can't," said the porter gruffly. "He's not here. He's staying with Mr. Pope at Twitnam."

"Twitnam? Where is Twitnam?"

"Up the river."

"How far? Can I walk there?"

"May be, but you hadn't better go on foot. It's a goodish step—ten or a dozen miles. You might go by waggon, there isn't no other way save toe and heel. An' let me give you warning, young 'oman, the roads aren't safe after dark. D'rectly you get to Knightsbridge footpads is ten a penny, let alone 'ighwaymen. Not that you're *their* game—leastways by the looks o' you."

"Thank you. I'm not afraid, but you mean your advice kindly and I'll not forget it. Mr. Gay's at Mr. Pope's house you say?"

"Mr. Pope's villa—he calls it. Mr. Pope's the great writer."

"I've heard of him. Which is the way after I've left Knightsbridge?"

"Why, straight along. Don't 'ee turn nayther to the right or the left, Kensington—'Ammersmith—Turn'am Green—Brentford—you goes through 'em all, if you don't get a knock on the 'ead on the way or a bullet through ye. One's as likely to 'appen as the other. I wouldn't answer fer your getting safe and sound to Twitnam unless you goes by daylight."

"That's what I must do then," said Lavinia resignedly. "Thank you kindly."

"You're welcome, I hope as how that pretty face o' yours won't get ye into trouble. It's mighty temptin'. I'd like a kiss myself."

"Would you? Then you won't have one. As for my face, I haven't any other so I must put up with it."

Dropping a curtsey of mock politeness Lavinia hastened away and did not slacken her pace till she reached Piccadilly and was facing the large open space now known as the Green Park. [Pg 96]

It was a lovely evening and the western sun though beginning to descend, still shone brightly. The long grass invited repose and Lavinia sat down on a gentle hillock to think what her next step must be.

She was greatly disappointed at not finding Mr. Gay. She was sure he would have forgiven her escapade; he would have helped her over the two difficulties facing her—very little money and no shelter for the night. Of the two the latter was most to be dreaded.

"A year ago," she thought, "it wouldn't have mattered very much. The Covent Garden women and men from the country are kind-hearted. I'd have had a corner in a waggon and some hay to lie upon without any bother, and breakfast the next morning into the bargain. But now—in these clothes—what would they take me for?"

These reflections, all the same, wouldn't solve the problem which was troubling her and it *had* to be solved. She must either walk about the streets or brave the tempest of her mother's wrath. This wrath, however, didn't frighten her so much as the prospect of being again made a prisoner. Her mother, she felt sure, had some deep design concerning her, though what it was she could not conceive.

Tired of pondering over herself and her embarrassing situation Lavinia turned her mind to something far more agreeable—her promise to Lancelot Vane which of course meant thinking about Vane himself.

She couldn't help contrasting Vane with Dorrimore. She hated to remember having listened seriously to the latter's flatteries. By the light of what had happened it seemed now to her perfectly monstrous that she could ever have consented to marry him. It angered her when she thought of it—but her anger was directed more against herself than against Dorrimore.

"I suppose I ought to go back to Mr. Vane. He'll be waiting anxiously to know how I've fared, but no—I'll go to Twitenham first." [Pg 97]

She sat for some time watching the sunset. She wove fanciful dreams in which the pallid face and large gleaming eyes of the young poet were strangely involved. With what courtly grace and reverence he had kissed her hand! Vane was a gentleman by nature; Dorrimore merely called himself one and what was more boasted of it.

But what did it matter to her? Vane had done her a service and it was only right she should repay him in some sort. This was how she tried to sum up the position. Whether Mr. Gay befriended him or not, their acquaintance would have to cease. He was penniless and so was she. If she confessed as much as this to him he would be embarrassed and distressed because he could not help her.

"I dursn't tell him," she sighed. "I'll have to do something for myself. Oh, if I could only earn some money by singing! I would love it. Not in the streets though. No, I could never do that again. Never!"

She clasped her hands tightly and her face became sad. Then her thoughts went back to Vane and she pictured him in his lonely garret perhaps dreaming of the glorious future awaiting him if his tragedy was a success, or perhaps he was dejected. After so many disappointments what ground had he for hope? Lavinia longed to whisper in his ear words of encouragement. She had treasured that look when his face lighted up at something she had said that had pleased him. And his sadness she remembered too. She was really inclined to think she liked him better when he was sad than when he was joyful. But this was because she gloried in chasing that sadness away. It was a tribute to her power of witchery.

Dusk was creeping on. She must not remain longer in that solitary expanse. She rose and sped towards Charing Cross. In the Strand citizens and their wives, apprentices and their lasses were taking the air. The scraps of talk, the laughter, gave her a sense of security. But the problem of how to pass the night was still before her. She dared not linger to think it out. She must go on. [Pg 98] Young gallants gorgeously arrayed were swaggering arm in arm in pursuit of adventure, in plain words in pursuit of women, the prettier the better. Lavinia had scornfully repelled the advances of more than one and to loiter would but invite further unwelcome attention.

The night was come but fortunately the sky was clear, for the Strand was ill lighted. St. Mary's Church, not long since consecrated, St. Clement's Church, loomed large and shadowy in the narrow roadway, narrowing still more towards Temple Bar past the ill-favoured and unsavoury Butcher's Row on the north side of the street, where the houses of rotting plaster and timber with overhanging storeys frowned upon the passer-by and suggested deeds of violence and robbery.

Butcher's Row and its evil reputation, even the ruffians and dissolute men lurking in the deep doorways did not frighten Lavinia so much as the silk-coated and bewigged cavaliers. The days of the Mohocks were gone it was true, but lawlessness still remained.

Lavinia was perfectly conscious that she was being followed by a spark of this class. She did not dare look round lest he should think she encouraged him, but she knew all the same that he was keeping on her heels. Along Fleet Street he kept close to her and on Ludgate Bridge where the traffic was blocked by the crowd gazing into the Fleet river at some urchin's paddling in the muddy stream he spoke to her. She hadn't the least idea what he said, she was too terrified.

In the darkness of St. Paul's Churchyard she had the good luck to avoid him and she darted into

Paternoster Row, and took shelter in a deep doorway. Either he had not noticed the way she went or he had given up the chase, for she saw no more of him.

The doorway in which she had sought refuge was a kind of lobby with an inner door covered with green baize. From the other side came the sound of loud talking and laughter, and the clinking of glasses. It was the Chapter Coffee House, the meeting place of booksellers, authors who had made their names, and struggling scribblers hanging on to the skirts of the muses. [Pg 99]

The air was close. Inside the revellers may have found it insufferable. The door was suddenly opened and fastened back by one of the servants. The man looked inquiringly at the shrinking figure in the lobby. Evidently she was not a beggar and he said nothing.

Lavinia glanced inside from no feeling other than that of curiosity. At the same time she was reluctant to leave the protection of the house until she was sure her persecutor was not lurking near.

The candles cast a lurid yellowish light; the shadows were deep; only the faces of those nearest the flame could be clearly distinguished. One table was surrounded by a boisterous group in the centre of which was a fat man in a frowsy wig. He had a malicious glint in his squinting eyes and was evidently of some importance. When he spoke the others listened with respect.

This pompous personage was Edmund Curll, bookseller, whose coarse and infamous publications once brought him within the law. Curll, we are told, possessed himself of a command over all authors whatever; he caused them to write what he pleased; they could not call their very names their own. Curll was the deadly enemy of Pope and his friends, and his unlimited scurrility drew from the poet of Twickenham a retaliation every whit as coarse and as biting as anything the bookseller's warped mind ever conceived.

Had Lavinia been told this was the notorious Curll, the name would have conveyed nothing. The quarrels of poets and publishers were to her a sealed book. All that she knew was that she disliked the man at first sight, while his vile speech made her ears tingle with shame. Despite the danger possibly awaiting her in the gloom of Paternoster Row she would have fled had not the sight of one of the group at the table rooted her to the spot. [Pg 100]

This was Lancelot Vane whom her maiden fancy had elevated into a god endowed with all the virtues and laden with misfortunes which had so drawn him towards her. Vane—alas that it should have to be written—had taken much wine—far too much!

Lavinia knew the signs. Often in the old days in St. Giles had she seen them—the eyes unnaturally bright, the face unnaturally flushed, the laugh unnaturally empty. And she had pictured Vane so sad, so depressed! The sight of him thus came upon her as a shock.

At first she was angry and then full of excuses for him. It was not his fault, she argued, but that of his companions and especially of the squint-eyed, foul-tongued man who no sooner saw that the bottle was getting low than he ordered another one.

What could she do to help him? Nothing. He was out of her reach. She remembered how he looked when she first saw him at the Maiden Head inn. He would probably look like that again before the night was ended. She could not bear to gaze upon him as he was now and she crept away with the old wives' words in her mind—Providence looks after drunken men and babes.

She stole from the lobby sad at heart. She had no longer the courage to face the dangers of the street. The deep shadow of great St. Paul's, sacred building though it was, afforded her no protection; it spoke rather of cut-throats, footpads, ruffians ready for any outrage. The din of voices, the sounds of brawling reached her from Cheapside. The London 'prentices let loose from toil and routine were out for boisterous enjoyment and may be devilry. She dared not go further eastward.

The only goal of safety she could think of was the coffee house in the Old Bailey. Why should she be afraid of her mother?

"She won't lock me up again. I'll take good care of that. I suppose she thinks I'm still a child. Mother's mistaken as she'll find out." [Pg 101]

So she wheeled round and went back to Ludgate Hill, keeping close to the houses so that she should not attract attention.

CHAPTER XI

LAVINIA'S PILGRIMAGE

It was past nine when Lavinia turned into the Old Bailey. The chief trade done by the coffee house was in the early morning. After market hours there were few customers save when there was to be an execution at Tyburn the next morning, and those eager to secure a good sight of the ghastly procession and perhaps take part in it, assembled opposite the prison door over night. Mrs. Fenton in the evenings thought no more of business, but betook herself to the theatre or one

of the pleasure gardens in the outskirts of London.

Lavinia remembered this and hoped for the best. At such a time Mrs. Fenton with her love of pleasure would hardly stay at home.

Lavinia hurried past grim Newgate and crossed the road. The coffee house was on the other side. Hannah was standing in the doorway in a cruciform attitude, her arms stretched out, each hand grasping the frame on either side. She was gossipping with a man and laughing heartily. Lavinia decided that her mother must be out. If at home she would never allow Hannah this liberty. Lavinia glided to the woman and touched one of the outstretched hands. Hannah gave a little "squark" when she felt the girl's cold fingers. [Pg 102]

"It's only me Hannah," whispered Lavinia.

"Only me—an' who's me?... Bless us an' save us child, what do you go about like a churchyard ghost for? Where in 'eaven's name have ye sprung from? I never come across anybody like you, Miss Lavvy, for a worryin' other people. I've been a-crying my eyes out over ye."

"And mother, has she been crying too?"

"Your mother? Not she," returned Hannah with a sniff of contempt. "Catch her a-cryin' over anything 'cept when she hasn't won a prize in a lottery. But come you in. I've ever so much to tell you. You'd best be off Reuben. I'll see you later."

Reuben who was one of the men employed at Coupland's soap works in the Old Bailey, looked a little disappointed, but he obeyed nevertheless.

"You've given us a pretty fright and your lady mother's been in a mighty tantrum. I tell you it's a wonder as she didn't tear my eyes out. She swore as it was all my fault a lettin' you go. But what have you come back for?"

"I had to. But don't bother, it's only for a few hours. Mother's out I know."

"Course she is. Simpson the cattle dealer's a-beauing her to Marybone Gardens. They won't be back this side o' midnight. Now just tell me what you been a-doin' of. You're a pretty bag o' mischief if ever there was one. Who's the man this time? T'aint the one as you runned away with, is it?"

"No, indeed," cried Lavinia, indignantly. "I don't want ever to see him again."

"Well, your mother does," returned Hannah with an odd kind of laugh.

"Whatever for?"

"I'll let you have the story d'rectly, but you tell me your tale first."

By this time they were in the shop and Hannah caught sight of Lavinia's white, drawn face and her tear-swollen eyes. [Pg 103]

"You poor baby. What's your fresh troubles?"

"Nothing—that is, not much. I'm tired. I'm faint. Give me some coffee—cocoa—anything."

Faint indeed she was. At that meal with Lancelot Vane she had eaten very sparingly. She was too excited, too much absorbed and interested in seeing him so ravenous to think of herself. In addition she had gone through much fatigue.

"Coffee—cocoa—to be sure," cried the kindly Hannah, "an' a hot buttered cake besides. You shan't say a word till I've gotten them ready."

The cook had gone. There was no one in the house save Hannah. The two went into the kitchen where the fire was burning low—with the aid of the bellows Hannah soon fanned the embers into a flame and she was not happy until Lavinia had eaten and drank.

Then Lavinia told the story of her adventures, hesitatingly at first and afterwards with more confidence seeing that Hannah sympathised and did not chide or ridicule.

"An' do 'ee mean to tell me you're going to Twitenham to-morrow?"

Lavinia nodded.

"What, over a worthless young man who gets drunk at the first chance he has?"

Lavinia fired up.

"He's not worthless and he wasn't drunk."

"Hoity-toity. What a pother to be sure. Well, I'll warrant he is by this time."

"How do you know? If he is it won't be his fault. The others were drinking and filling his glass. I saw them, the wretches," cried Lavinia with heightened colour. "But it is nothing to me," she went on tossing her head. "Why should I bother if a man drinks or doesn't drink?"

"Why indeed," said Hannah ironically. "Since you don't care we needn't talk about him." [Pg 104]

"No, we won't, if you've only unkind things to say."

"Eh, would you have me tell you how well you've behaved and how good you are? First you run away to be married to a man you don't care for, and in the next breath you take no end of trouble and tire yourself to death over another man you say you don't care for either. Are you going through your life like that—men loving you and you leaving them?"

"You're talking nonsense, Hannah. You know nothing about it," cried Lavinia angrily. "Let me manage my own affairs my own way and tell me what mother's doing. You read me a riddle about her just now."

"'Tisn't much of a riddle. It's just what one might guess she'd do when she's on the scent for money. You've become mighty valuable to her all of a sudden."

"I! Valuable? Oh la! That's too funny."

"You think so, do you child? Wait till you hear. *I* call it a monstrous shame an' downright wicked. A mother sell her own child! It's horrible—horrible."

"What are you talking about, you tiresome Hannah?" cried the girl opening her eyes very wide.

"Ah, you may well ask. After you was locked up she pocketted that letter from your spark and off she went to his lodgings in the Temple. She well plied herself with cordials an' a drop o' gin or two afore she started, an' my name's not Hannah if she didn't repeat the dose as she came back. I knowed it at once by her red face an' her tongue a-wagging nineteen to the dozen. She can't keep her mouth shut when she's like that. It all comed out. She'd been to that Mr. Der—Dor—what's his name?"

"Dorrimore. Yes—yes. Go on. I want to hear," exclaimed Lavinia breathlessly.

"I wouldn't ha' said a word agen her if she'd insisted upon the fine young gentleman paying for his frolic a trying to fool you—which he didn't do an' you may thank yourself for your sperrit Miss Lavvy—that was only what a mother ought to do, but to sell her own child to make money out of her own flesh an' blood—well I up an' told her to her face what I thought of her." [Pg 105]

"Make money out of *me*, good gracious Hannah, how?"

"The fellow offered her fifty guineas if she'd hand you over to him. He swore he'd make a lady of you."

"What! Marry me?"

"Marry you! Tilly vally, no such thing. He'd spend money on you—fine dresses, trinkets, fallals and all that, but a wedding ring, the parson—not a bit of it. An' when he tired of you he'd fling you away like an old glove."

"Would he?" cried Lavinia indignantly. "Then he won't."

"No, but it means a tussle with your mother. What a tantrum she went in to be sure when she found you was gone. She fell upon poor me an' called me all the foul names she could lay her tongue to. Look at these."

Hannah pushed back her cap and her hair and showed four angry red streaks down the side of her face. Mrs. Fenton had long nails and knew how to use them.

Lavinia was horrified. Throwing her arms round the honest creature's neck she kissed her again and again. Then she exclaimed despairingly:—

"What am I do to do to-night? I dursn't stay here."

"I'm not so sure about that. I'm thinking it can be managed. Your mother's gone to Marybone Gardens with Dawson, the Romford cattle dealer. They won't be home till latish an' I'll go bail as full o' strong waters as they can carry. It's not market day to-morrow and your mother'll lie in bed till noon. You can share my bed an' I'll let 'ee out long afore the mistress wakes."

"Oh thank you—thank you Hannah. How clever you are to think of all this."

"Not much cleverness either. Trust a woman for finding out a way when love's hanging on it."

"Love?" rapped out Lavinia sharply. [Pg 106]

"Aye, it's love as is taking you to Twitenham with the young man's rubbishy play."

"You've not read it, Hannah. It's not fair to call it rubbishy."

"Not read it, no, nor never shall, and may be I'll never see it acted either. But I hope it will be, Lavinia, for your sake. But take care, it's ill falling in love with a man who's fond of his cups."

Lavinia made no reply. Her face had suddenly gone grave.

Hannah ceased to tease her and bustled about to get supper—something warm and comforting, stewed rabbit and toasted cheese to follow.

The bedroom shared by Lavinia and Hannah was in the front of the house. About two o'clock both were awakened by the champing of a horse and the squeaking and scraping of wheels followed by a loud wrangling in a deep bass growl and a shrill treble.

"That's the mistress—drat her," grumbled Hannah from under the coverlet. "She's a-beatin' down the coachman. She always does it."

The hubbub was ended, and not altogether to the satisfaction of the hackney coachman judging by the way he banged his door. Mrs. Fenton stumbled up the stairs to her room rating the extortion of drivers, and after a time all was silence.

Daylight was in the room when Lavinia awoke. She slipped quietly out of bed not wanting to disturb Hannah, but the latter was a light sleeper.

"Don't you get up," said Lavinia. "I can dress and let myself out without bothering you."

"What, an' go into the early morning air wi'out a bite or sup inside you? I'm not brute beast enough to let you do that."

And Hannah bounced out of bed bringing her feet down with a thump which must have awakened Mrs. Fenton in the room below had the lady been in a normal condition, which fortunately was not the case. [Pg 107]

Within half an hour the two stole out of the house, and on reaching the Ludgate Hill end of the Old Bailey turned eastwards. Their destination was the Stocks Market occupying the site where the present Mansion House stands. The Stocks Market was the principal market in London at that time, Fleet Market was not in existence and Covent Garden, then mainly a fashionable residential quarter, was only in its infancy as to the sale of fruit and vegetables.

But the Stocks Market eastwards of St. Paul's was not in the direction of Twickenham, or Twitenham as it was then called. Why then were Lavinia and Hannah wending their way thither?

It was in this wise. Hannah was quick witted and fertile in resources. Moreover she was a native of Mortlake, then surrounded by fruit growing market gardens and especially celebrated for its plums, the fame of which for flavour and colour and size has not quite died out in the present day. Hannah had had her sweethearting days along by the riverside and in pleasant strolls on Sheen Common, and not a few of her swains cherished tender recollections of her fascinating coquetry. She knew very well she would find some old admirer at the Stocks Market who for auld lang syne would willingly give Lavinia a seat in his covered cart returning to Mortlake with empty baskets. And Mortlake of course, is no very long distance from Twickenham.

So it came about. The clock of St. Christopher le Stocks struck five as the two young women entered the market. The Bank of England as we now know it did not then exist. St. Christopher's, hemmed in by houses, occupied the site of the future edifice, as much in appearance like a prison as a bank. Sir Thomas Gresham's Exchange then alone dominated the open space at the entrance of the Poultry. [Pg 108]

The market was in full swing. Shopkeepers, hucksters and early risen housewives keen on buying first hand and so saving pennies were bargaining at the various stalls. Hannah went about those set apart for fruit and soon spotted some one she knew—a waggoner of honest simple looks. His mouth expanded into the broadest of grins and he coloured to his ears when he caught sight of Hannah.

"Ecod Hannah, my gal, if the sight o' 'ee baint good fur sore eyes. I'm in luck sure-ly. Fi' minutes more an' 'ee'd ha' found me gone. Dang me if 'ee baint bonnier than ever."

"Don't 'ee talk silly, Giles Topham. Keep your nonsense for Hester Roberts."

"Hester Roberts! What be that flirty hussy to I?" retorted Giles indignantly.

"You know best about that, Giles. What be 'ee to me? That's more to the purpose I'm thinking."

"I be a lot to 'ee Hannah. Out wi' the truth now, an' tell me if I baint."

Lavinia was beginning to feel herself superfluous in the midst of this rustic billing and cooing, and was moving a few steps off when Hannah having whispered a few words to Giles which might have been a reproof or the reverse beckoned to her, and without further ado told her old sweetheart what she wanted.

"I'd a sight sooner take 'ee Hannah—meanin' no offence to 'ee miss—but if it can't be, why——"

"Of course it can't, you booby. You know that as well as I do."

"Aye. Some other time may be," rejoined Giles grinning afresh. "So 'ee be a-goin' to see the great Mr. Pope? 'Ee'll have to cross by the ferry and 'tis a bit of a walk there from Mortlake but I'll see 'ee safe."

"I should think you would or I'll never speak to you again."

Giles gave another of his grins and set to work arranging the baskets in his cart so as to form a seat for Lavinia, and having helped the girl to mount, bade Hannah adieu, a matter which took some few minutes and was only terminated by a hearty kiss which Hannah received very demurely. Then Giles after a crack of his whip started his horse, at the head of which he marched, and with waving handkerchiefs by Hannah and Lavinia the cart took the road to London Bridge. [Pg 109]

The nearest way to Mortlake would have been the Middlesex side, crossing the river at

Hammersmith, but Hammersmith Bridge had not been thought of and the cart had to plod through Lambeth, Vauxhall, Wandsworth, Putney and Barnes.

At intervals Giles climbed into the cart and entertained Lavinia with guileless talk, mainly relating to Hannah and her transcendent virtues. Nor did he stop at Hannah herself but passed on to her relatives, her mother who was dead and her grandmother who was ninety and "as hale an' hearty as you please."

"A wonnerful old dame she be an' mighty handy with her needle, a'most as she used to be when she was a girl a-working at the tapestry fact'ry by the riverside. It were a thunderin' shame as ever the tapestry makin' was done away with at Mortlake an' taken to Windsor. It was the King's doin's that was. Not his Majesty King George, but King Charles—long afore my time, fifty years an' more agone. Lords an' ladies used to come to Mortlake then I'm told an' buy the wool picture stuff, all hand sewn, mind ye, to hang on the walls o' their great rooms. Some of it be at 'Ampton Palace this very day."

Thus and much more Giles went on and Lavinia listened attentively. The cart rumbled through the narrow main street of Mortlake and reached Worple way where Giles and his mother lived in a cottage in the midst of a big plum orchard.

The old woman was astonished to see a pretty girl seated in her son's cart but the matter was soon explained, and she insisted upon Lavinia having a meal before going on to Twickenham. [Pg 110]

Then Giles volunteered to show Lavinia the way to the ferry, the starting point of which on the Surrey side was near Petersham Meadows, and in due time she was landed at Twickenham.

CHAPTER XII

"ARE WORDS THE ONLY SIGNS OF LOVE?"

Lavinia easily found her way to Pope's villa. The first man of whom she inquired knew the house well and guided her to it.

The house was somewhat squat and what we should now call double fronted. The back looked on to a garden bordering the river, the front faced a road on the other side of which was a high wall with a wooded garden beyond.

"That be Mr. Pope's house, young madam, an' that be his garden too, t'other side o' that wall. He be but a feeble shrivelled up whey-faced little gentleman, thin as a thread paper an' not much taller than you yourself. I'm told as he baint forty, but lor, he might be ninety by his looks. We folk in the village don't see much of him an' I doubt if he wants to see us."

"Gracious! Why is that? What makes him so unsociable?"

"He's always ailing, poor gentleman. Why, if ye went by his face he might have one foot in the grave. When he fust comed to live here he hated to have to cross the road to get to that there garden t'other side, so what do'e do but have a way dug under the road. It be a sort o' grotto, [Pg 111] they say, with all kinds o' coloured stones and glasses stuck about an' must ha' cost a pile o' money. I s'pose rich folk must have their whims and vapours an' must gratify 'em too, or what be the good o' being rich, eh? Thank 'ee kindly young madam."

Lavinia, upon whom the good Hannah had pressed all the coins that were in her pocket, gave the man a few coppers and summoning her courage she grasped the bell-pull hanging by the door in the wall fronting the house. Her nerves were somewhat scattered and she could not say whether the clang encouraged or depressed her. May be the latter, for a sudden desire seized her to run away.

But before desire had become decision the door in the wall had opened and a soberly attired man-servant was staring at her inquiringly. Lavinia regained her courage.

"I want to see Mr. Gay please. I'm told he's staying with Mr. Pope."

"Aye. What's your business?"

"That's with Mr. Gay, not with you," rejoined Lavinia sharply.

The man either disdained to bandy words or had no retort ready. He admitted the visitor and conducted her into the house. Lavinia found herself in a small hall, stone paved, with a door on either side. The hall ran from the front to the back of the house and at the end a door opened into a wooden latticed porch. Beyond was a picturesque garden and further still the river shining in the sun. She heard men talking and apparently disputing. The shrill tones of one voice dominated the rest.

The servant bade her wait in the hall while he went to Mr. Gay. He did not trouble to ask her name.

While he was gone Lavinia advanced to the open door, drawn thither by curiosity. A garden grateful to the eye was before her. It had not the grotesque formality of the Dutch style which

came over with William of Orange—the prim beds with here and there patches and narrow walks of red, flat bricks, the box trees cut and trimmed in the form of peacocks with outstretched tails, animals, anything absurd that the designer fancied. Close to the river bank drooped a willow, and a wide spreading cedar overspread a portion of the lawn. [Pg 112]

Underneath the cedar four men were sitting round a table strewn with papers. Lavinia easily recognised the portly form of her patron, Gay. Next to him was a diminutive man, his face overspread by the pallor of ill-health. He was sitting stiff and bolt upright and upon his head in place of a fashionable flowing wig was a sort of loose cap.

"That must be Mr. Pope, the queer little gentleman the countryman told me of," thought Lavinia.

She saw the servant in a deferential attitude standing for some time between Mr. Pope and Mr. Gay waiting for an opportunity to announce his errand. For the moment the discussion was too absorbing for anyone of the four to pay attention to the man.

"Mr. Rich no high opinion has of either music or musicians," said one of the disputants, a lean, dried-up looking man who spoke with a strong guttural accent. This was Dr. Pepusch, musical director at John Rich's theatre, the "Duke's," Portugal Street, Lincoln's Inn Fields.

"Dr. Pepusch is right," rejoined Gay. "That is why I favoured Cibber. But from his reception of me I doubt if he'll take the risk of staging the play."

"Cibber likes not you, Mr. Gay, and he hates me," said Pope with his acid smile. "He's a poet—or thinks he's one—and poets love not one another. Nothing is so blinding to the merits of others as one's own vanity."

"Nay, Mr. Pope, is not that assumption too sweeping?" put in the fourth man, of cheerful, rubicund countenance and, like Gay, inclined to corpulency. "What about yourself and Mr. Gay? Is there anyone more conscious of his talents and has done more to foster and encourage them than you? Who spoke and wrote in higher praise of Will Congreve than John Dryden?" [Pg 113]

"Your argument's just, Arbuthnot," rejoined Pope. "And that's why I rejoice that the King, his Consort and the Statesman who panders to her spite and lives only for his own ambition have insulted our friend. Their taste and their appreciation of letters found their level when they considered the author of the 'Trivia' and the 'Fables' was fittingly rewarded by the appointment of 'gentleman usher' to a princess—a footman's place, forsooth!"

It was too true. George the First was dead, George the Second had succeeded and with the change of government Gay hoped to obtain the "sinecure" which would have kept him in comfort to the end of his days. He was bitterly disappointed. The post bestowed upon him was a degradation.

"Say no more on that head," exclaimed Gay hastily, "I would forget that affront."

"But not forgive. We're all of us free to carry the battle into the enemy's camp and with the more vigour since you are fighting with us, John Gay. The 'Beggar's Opera'—'tis mainly the Dean's idea—the title alone is vastly fine—will give you all the chance in the world. Pray do not forget the Dean's verses he sent you 't'other day. They must be set to good music, though for my own part I know not one tune from another."

Snatching a sheet of paper from the table Pope, in his thin, piping voice, read with much gusto:—

"Through all the employments of life
  Each neighbour abuses his brother,
Trull and rogue they call husband and wife,
  All professions be-rogue one another.

"The priest calls the lawyer a cheat,
  The lawyer be-knaves the divine,
And the statesman because he's so great
  Thinks his trade as honest as mine."

"Aye; that should go home. Faith, I'd give my gold headed cane to see Sir Robert's face when he hears those lines," laughed the cheery physician. "Who will sing them, Mr. Gay?" [Pg 114]

"I know not yet; we've settled upon very few things. Our good musician, Dr. Pepusch, is ready whenever I hand him the verses and the tunes to set them to. Why, I've not decided the names of the characters, and that let me tell you, doctor, is no easy matter. I call the first wench Peggy Peachum, but it doesn't please me. I——"

At that moment Pope caught sight of his man fidgetting first on one foot and then on the other.

"What d'ye want sirrah?" demanded the poet irritably.

"A young girl, sir, desires to see Mr. Gay. She couldn't tell me her business with him."

A roar of laughter was heard, in the midst of which Gay looked puzzled and a trifle foolish.

"Oh poor Gay, to think thy light damsels cannot let thee alone but must follow thee to my pure Eve-less abode," said Pope mockingly.

"Nay, 'tis nothing of the kind. You accuse me unjustly. I know no light o' love. To prove it your servant shall bring the girl here and you may see her for yourself. I've no love secrets."

"What if you had, man? No one would blame you. Not I for one. Get as much enjoyment as you can out of life, but not in excess. 'Tis excess that kills," said Arbuthnot laying his hand on Gay's.

There was a meaning in the contact which emphasised the doctor's words. Self indulgence was Gay's failing as all his friends knew.

"Well—well," rejoined Gay somewhat embarrassed. "Be it so, I—conduct the girl hither—have I your permission, Mr. Pope?"

"With all my heart—provided she's worth looking at." [Pg 115]

"I know nothing of her looks. Quick, Stephen, your master and these gentlemen are impatient."

The man hastened away to the house and presently was seen crossing the lawn with Lavinia by his side.

"'Faith, you've good taste, Mr. Gay," said Arbuthnot with a chuckle. "A trim built wench, upon my word. And she knows how to walk. She hasn't the mincing gait of the city madams of the Exchange nor the flaunting strut of the dames of the Mall or the Piazza."

Gay made no reply. The girl's carriage and walk were indeed natural and there was something in both which was familiar to him. But he could not fix them. He would have to wait until the sheltering hood was raised and the face revealed.

This came about when Lavinia was a couple of yards or so from the man. Gay bent forward and rose slightly from his chair. An expression half startled, half puzzled stole over his face.

"Gad! Polly—or am I dreaming?"

"Lavinia sir," came the demure answer accompanied by a drooping of the long lashes and a low curtsey.

"Lavinia of course, but to me always Polly. Gentlemen, this is Miss Lavinia Fenton, the nightingale I once told you of."

"Aye," rejoined Pope, "I remember. She was flying wild in the fragrant groves of St. Giles and you limed her. Good. Now that she's here she must give us a sample of her powers. I pray that your nightingale, Mr. Gay, be not really a guinea fowl. Your good nature might easily make you imagine one to be the other."

"I protest. You are thinking of yourself. I'll swear you cannot tell the difference. You put all the music you have into your verse. I doubt if you could even whistle 'Lillibulero,' though there's not a snub nosed urchin in his Majesty's kingdom who can't bawl it."

"That may be, but I can neither whistle nor am I a snub-nosed urchin. I apologise for my defects," [Pg 116]
retorted the poet.

A general laugh followed at this and Gay, somewhat discomfited, turned to Lavinia.

"Now, Polly, what has brought you here, child? But looking at you I doubt if I ought to call you child. 'Tis months since I saw thee and I vow in that time you've become a young woman."

"I'm very sorry, sir. I could not help it," said Lavinia meekly.

"Help it! Faith, no! 'Tis very meritorious of you. But tell me. Has the admirable Miss Pinwell granted you a holiday, or is it your birthday and you've come for a present, or what?"

"Neither the one nor the other, sir. I—I rather think I've left school."

"Left school! And without apprising me who am, you know, in a way sponsor for you? But may be you've written the duchess?"

Lavinia shook her head and cast down her eyes.

"Left school," repeated Gay lifting his wig slightly and rubbing his temple. "Surely—surely you haven't misbehaved and have been expelled. Miss Pinwell I know is the perfection of prim propriety, but——"

"Quite true, sir, so she is," burst out Lavinia impetuously, "and I've done nothing wicked—not really wicked—only silly, but I'm sure Miss Pinwell wouldn't take me back. You see, sir, I—oh well, I suppose I must confess I ran away—I meant to return and nobody would have been the wiser—but things happened that I didn't expect and—and oh, I do hope you'll forgive me."

Lavinia's pleading voice quivered. Her eyes were fixed imploringly on Gay. Tears were glistening in them, the pose of her figure suggested a delightful penitence. The susceptible poet felt his emotions stirred.

"Forgive you? But you haven't told me what I am to forgive. You ran away from school you say. [Pg 117]
What made you? Had you quarrelled with anyone?"

"Oh no—not then—the quarrel was after I left the school."

"After—hang me if I understand. Whom did you quarrel with?"

"The—the person I—I ran away with."

Lavinia's confession was uttered in the softest of whispers. It was inaudible to anyone save Gay. Her face had suddenly become scarlet.

"The per—oh, there's a mystery here. Mr. Pope—gentlemen," Gay went on turning to the others, "will you excuse me if I draw apart with our young madam. She has propounded to me an enigma which must be solved."

"And if you fail—as you will if the enigma is a woman's—call us to thine aid," said Arbuthnot laughingly.

Gay shook his head and he and Lavinia paced the lawn.

"It's no use asking you to tell me everything, Polly, because you can't do it. Your sex never do. You're like spendthrifts who are asked to disclose all their debts. They always keep the heaviest one back. Tell me as much or as little as you please or nothing at all, if it likes you better."

Lavinia hesitated, and at first her tale was a halting one enough, but seeing no sign of anger in Gay's amiable countenance, she became more courageous, and substantially she said all that was necessary to make her companion acquainted with her list of peccadilloes.

"Zooks, my young miss," quoth Gay after the solace of a pinch of snuff. "It seemeth to me that you've begun to flutter your pinions sufficiently early. Two love affairs on your hands within twenty-four hours. Mighty fine, upon my word."

"Oh, but they are *not* love affairs," protested Lavinia. "I didn't love Mr. Dorrimore a bit. I never want to see him again. And as for Mr. Vane, never a word of love has passed between us." [Pg 118]

"Bless your innocence. Are words the only signs of love? Permit me to inform you, Polly, that I look upon your love adventure with Lancelot Vane as a much more serious business than your elopement with a profligate fop."

"Indeed, it is serious, Mr. Gay. It's worse than serious—it's tragic. If you could see the wretched place poor Mr. Vane lives in, if you knew how he is wanting for food——"

"And drink—is he wanting for that too?" interposed Gay sarcastically.

Lavinia made no answer. She thought of Lancelot at the Chapter Coffee House the night before and her face clouded.

"I'll give you a word of advice, Polly. If you're going to be a nice woman and want to keep your peace of mind, never fall in love with a poet, a playwright or indeed any man who takes his pen in hand for a living."

"But, sir—aren't you a poet and don't you write plays?"

"Exactly, and that's why I'm warning you. *Ex uno disce omnes*, which you may like to know means, we're all tarred with the same brush."

"And do you drink too much, sir?" inquired Lavinia with an engaging simplicity.

"Gad, not oftener than I can help. But we were talking about falling in love and that has nothing to do with my drinking habits. About Mr. Vane's—well, that's a different matter. You haven't fallen in love with me and you have with a clever young man who's going as fast as he can to the deuce."

"I don't know, sir, whether you're laughing at me or telling me the truth, but—Mr. Vane risked his life for me."

"And to reward him you're thinking of trusting him with yours. A pretty guardian—a man who can't take care of his own!" [Pg 119]

"Oh, you're wrong, Mr. Gay—indeed, you are. Mr. Vane is nothing to me. I'm only sorry for him."

"Of course—of course. That's the first step. You begin by being sorry for your sweetheart and you end by being sorry for yourself. Well—well, a woman must go her own way or she wouldn't be a woman. What have you there?"

Lavinia was holding out a parcel.

"'Tis a play, sir, that Mr. Vane has written."

"And why did he write it? Who asked him? Who wants plays?"

"I—I don't know," Lavinia stammered dismally. She felt her ardour was being damped. "Mr. Vane begged me to bring it to you, sir, and I couldn't refuse, could I? It was this way. I told him you were my friend—and you are, aren't you?—and he was overjoyed."

"Overjoyed? What in the name of Heaven about?"

"Mr. Vane thought that if I took the play to you and asked you to read it you would be sure to say you would."

"Mr. Vane had no business to think anything of the kind. Doesn't he know that nothing in this world can be taken for granted? I've committed the folly myself too often not to know that placing faith in other people is vanity and vexation."

"Yes, sir. But you'll read Mr. Vane's play all the same, won't you?"

"What a wheedling baggage it is," muttered Gay.

And he held the parcel and resisted the impulse to give it back to Lavinia and to tell her that he had neither time nor inclination to read other men's plays. His own play was sufficient for him at that moment.

CHAPTER XIII

[Pg 120]

"I'M FIXED ON POLLY PEACHUM"

Lavinia saw she had nearly conquered and cried:—"Let me untie the knot. I was sure you would not say no."

Gay was like wax in her hands. He permitted her to snatch the parcel and attack the knot. Between her deft fingers and pearly teeth she had the string off and the parcel open in a trice. She held the manuscript under Gay's nose. He could not help seeing the title, writ large as it was.

"Love's Blindness: A Tragedy in Five Acts. By Lancelot Vane," he read with a rueful look. "Mercy on me, Polly, you never told me it was a tragedy. Oh, this is very—very sad."

"But Mr. Gay, aren't all tragedies sad?"

"Oh, I confess some are comic enough in all conscience. But that was not in my mind. It was that any sane man should waste time in writing a tragedy. The worst thing about a tragedy is that the playwright's friends are pestered to read it and audiences tired by sitting it out. Aren't there tragedies enough in real life without men inventing 'em?"

"Indeed, I can't say, sir."

"I suppose not. You're not old enough. Tragedy doesn't come to the young and when it does they don't understand and perhaps 'tis as well. But I'll have to humour you or I shall never hear the last of it. Put the parcel up again and I'll look at the contents at my leisure. Now to a much more entertaining matter—yourself. Have you practised your singing? Have you attended to the instructions of your music master? I doubt it. I'll vow you've often driven the poor man half [Pg 121] frantic with your airs and graces and teasing and that he hasn't had the heart to chide you."

"Oh, indeed he has," cried Lavinia, pouting, "though really I haven't given him cause and yet he was tiresome enough."

"I dare say. But you must let me hear. I want to be sure the good duchess hasn't thrown her money away. My friends, too, are curious to have a taste of your quality. I've told them much about thee. You mustn't put discredit upon me."

"No sir, I wouldn't be so ungrateful. What would you have me do?"

"I want to hear one of your old ballads such as showered pennies and shillings in your pocket when I've heard you sing in Clare Market and St. Giles High Street. But first let us go back to Mr. Pope and the others."

Lavinia looked a little frightened at the idea of singing before musical judges who doubtless were accustomed to listen to the great singers at the King's Theatre—Signor Senesino, Signor Farinalli, Signora Cuzzoni, Signora Faustina, and may be the accomplished English singer Anastasia Robinson, albeit she rarely sang in the theatre but mainly in the houses of her father's noble friends among whom was the Earl of Peterborough, her future husband.

Perhaps Gay saw her trepidation, for, said he laughingly:

"You needn't fear Mr. Pope. He hasn't the least idea what a tune is and won't know whether you sing well or ill. Dr. Arbuthnot sitting next him is the kindliest soul in the world, and will make excuses for you if you squawl as vilely as a cat on the tiles. As for Dr. Pepusch—ah, that's a different matter. Pepusch is an ugly man and you must do your best to lessen his ugliness. He's all in all to Mr. Rich when Rich condescends to let the fiddles and the flutes give the audience a little music. If you capture Pepusch you may help me." [Pg 122]

"Oh, I'd do that gladly Mr. Gay. Tell me how," cried Lavinia eagerly.

"Softly—softly, 'tis all in the clouds at present. Pepusch must hear you sing. Then—but I dare not say more."

Lavinia surveyed the hard face and the double chin of the musical director disapprovingly.

"I don't take to him," said she. "Is he an Englishman?"

"No—he comes from Germany. Like King George and Queen Caroline."

Lavinia frowned.

"Some of the people in St. Giles I've heard call the Royal Family Hanoverian rats," she exclaimed indignantly, "and those German women who pocketted everything they could lay their hands upon—the 'Maypole' and the 'Elephant,' the one because she's so lean and the other because she's so fat—they're rats too. Fancy the King making them into an English duchess and countess. 'Tis monstrous. Why—"

"Hush—hush," interrupted Gay with mock solemnity and placing his finger on her lips. "You're talking treason within earshot of the 'Maypole,' otherwise her Grace the Duchess of Kendal. Don't you know that she is a neighbour of Mr. Pope? Kendal House on the road to Isleworth is but an easy walk from here."

"Then I'm sorry for Mr. Pope. I hate the Germans."

"Oh, then you're a Jacobite and a rebel. If you would retain your pretty head on your shoulders keep your treason to yourself," laughed Gay. "But I confess I like the Germans no more than you do. Yet there are exceptions. Pepusch has made his home here—his country turned him out—and there's clever Mr. Handel. The English know more about his music than do his countrymen. I would love to see you, Polly, applauded in the Duke's Theatre as heartily as was Mr. Handel's opera 'Rinaldo' at the King's." [Pg 123]

Something significant in Gay's voice and face sent the blood rushing to Lavinia's cheeks.

"I applauded!—I at the Duke's! Oh, that will never be."

"May be not—may be not. But one never knows. A pretty face—a pretty voice—an air—faith, such gifts may work wonders. But let us keep Mr. Pope waiting no longer."

They approached the table beneath the cedar tree.

"Sir," said Gay with a bow to Pope, "I've prevailed upon my young madam here to give us a taste of her quality. I trust your twittering birds won't be provoked to rivalry. Happily their season of song is past."

"I warn you Mr. Gay, the age of miracles is *not* past. What if the work you're toiling at sends the present taste of the town into a summersault? Would not that be a miracle?"

"You think then that my 'Beggar's Opera' won't do," broke in Gay, his face losing a little of its colour.

"You know my views. It is something unlike anything ever written before—a leap in the dark. But for Miss's ditty. We're all attention."

"What shall I sing, sir?" Lavinia whispered to Gay.

"Anything you like, my child, so long as you acquit yourself to Dr. Pepusch's satisfaction."

"But I would love to have your choice too. What of 'My Lodging is on the Cold Ground?' My music master told me this was the song that made King Charles fall in love with Mistress Moll Davies. So I learned it."

"Odso. Of course you did. Then let old Pepusch look out. Nothing could be better. Aye, it is indeed a sweet tune."

Lavinia retired a few paces on to the lawn, dropped naturally into a simple pose and for a minute or two imagined herself back in the streets where she sang without effort and without any desire to create effect. She sang the pathetic old air—much better fitted to the words than the so-called Irish melody of a later date—with delightful artlessness. [Pg 124]

"What think you, doctor?" whispered Gay to Pepusch. "Can you see her as Polly—not Peggy mind ye—I'm fixed on Polly Peachum."

"De girl ver goot voice has. But dat one song—it tell me noting. Can she Haendel sing?"

"That I know not, but I'll warrant she'll not be a dunce with Purcell. And you must admit, doctor, that your George Frederick Handel is much beholden to our Henry Purcell."

"Vat?" cried Pepusch a little angrily. "Nein—nein. Haendel the greatest composer of music in de vorld is."

"I grant you his genius but he comes after Purcell. Have you heard Purcell's setting of 'Arise, ye subterranean winds?' If not, I'll get Leveridge to sing it. Has not your Handel helped himself to that? Not note for note, but in style, in dignity, in expression? Ah, I have you there. But we mustn't quarrel. You must hear the girl again. Look 'ee here. Have we not agreed that 'Virgins are like the Fair Flower' in the first act shall be set to Purcell's 'What shall I do to show how much I love her?' I would have you play the air and Polly shall sing it."

"Sing dat air? But it most difficult is. It haf de trills—de appogiaturas. Has she dem been taught?"

"You will soon see. For myself I hold not with the Italian style and its eternal ornament and repetitions."

"Aha—ha Mistare Gay, I haf *you* now," chuckled Pepusch. "Your Purcell Engleesh is. He copy de Italian den."

"Oh, may be—may be in his own style," rejoined Gay hastily. "But here is my verse. Oblige me with the music."

During the discussion Gay had been turning over a pile of manuscript on the table. This manuscript was a rough draft of the "Beggar's Opera." Pepusch had before him the music of a [Pg 125] number of tunes, most of them well known, selected by Gay and himself as suitable for the songs in the opera. Poet and musician had had repeated differences as to the choice of melodies but things had now fairly settled down.

Lavinia meanwhile was watching the proceedings with no little interest and with not less nervousness. She had heard the talk and saw quite well that she was about to be put to a severe test. She was to sing something she had never sung before and possibly written in a style with which she was unfamiliar. Gay approached her with a sheet of manuscript which he put into her hand.

"You did very well, child," said he encouragingly. "But I want you to do better. Dr. Pepusch will play the music for these verses on the harpsichord. You must listen closely to the melody and take particular note of the way he plays it. Then you will sing it. Here are the words and the music. Study them while the doctor plays."

Lavinia looked at both in something like dismay. The music being engraved was plainer than Gay's cramped handwriting. She knew she had imitative gifts and that most tunes she heard for the first time she could reproduce exactly. But that was for her own pleasure. She at such times abandoned herself to the power of music. But for the pleasure of others and to know that she was being criticised was a different matter. Already she felt distracted. Could she fix her attention on the music and think of nothing else?

There was no time for reflection. Dr. Pepusch had gone into the house and the thin but sweet tones of a harpsichord were floating through the open window. He was striking a few preliminary chords and indulging in an extemporised prelude. A pause, and then he commenced Purcell's song.

The plaintive melody with its well balanced phrasing took Lavinia's fancy, and absorbed in the music she forgot her audience. She saw how the words were wedded to the notes and watched [Pg 126] where the trills and graces came in. Pepusch played the air right through; waited a minute or so and recommenced.

Lavinia began. She sang like one inspired. Her pure and limpid tones gave fresh charm to the melody. She never had had any difficulty with the trill, so flexible was her voice naturally, and the graces which Purcell had introduced after the fashion of the day were given with perfect ease. As the final cadence died away the little audience loudly applauded. Pepusch came out of the house and wagged his head as he crossed the lawn. His somewhat sour look had vanished. He went up to Lavinia and patted her shoulder.

"Dat vas goot, young laty—ver goot," he growled.

"What did I tell you doctor?" cried Gay exultantly. "Why, she can sing everything set down for Polly—I pray you don't forget it is to be Polly—Peachum. She *is* Polly Peachum. What do you think, Mr. Pope?"

"Polly Peachum by all means since you will have it so. If an author has a right to anything it is surely the right to name his offspring as he will. He need not even consult his wife—if he have one. But though you call your work an opera Mr. Gay, it is also a play. The songs are not everything—indeed, Mr. Rich would say they're nothing. Can the girl act?"

"She can be taught and I'll swear she'll prove an apt pupil. 'Twill, I fear, be many months before it is staged. Rich has not made up his mind. I hear Mr. Huddy who was dispossessed of the Duke's Theatre contemplates the New Theatre in the Haymarket. I must talk to him. He hasn't yet found his new company. An indifferent lot of strolling players I'm told was his old one. Polly probably won't have a singing part but that's of no great matter just now."

"You're bound to build castles in the air Mr. Gay," said Dr. Arbuthnot, taking his churchwarden from his lips. "Suppose you come down to *terra firma* for a brief space. The girl is a singer—that [Pg 127] cannot be gainsaid. She may become an actress—good. But now—who is she? Her father—her mother——"

"They can hardly be said to exist," broke in Gay. "I will tell you the story later on. 'Twould but embarrass her to relate it now. The duchess has been good enough to charge herself with the cost of her keeping—her schooling and the rest."

"Oh, that alters the case. If she is a protégé of her grace I need not say more. Her future is provided for."

"Why, yes," but Gay spoke in anything but a confident tone. Inwardly he was troubled at what view Mat Prior's "Kitty" might take of Polly's escapade. The Duchess might be as wayward as she pleased, but it did not follow that she would excuse waywardness in another woman.

Gay turned to Pepusch and the two conversed for some little time, the upshot of the talk being

that Pepusch promised, when the proper time came, to say to John Rich all he could in favour of Lavinia, always supposing she had acquired sufficient stage experience.

This settled, the poet drew near Lavinia who all this time was waiting and wondering what this new adventure of hers would end in.

"Now Polly, my dear," said Gay, "if you behave yourself and don't have any more love affairs——"

"But did I not tell you, sir, I'd had none," interrupted Lavinia.

"Yes—yes, I remember quite well. We won't go into the subject again or we shall never finish. The varieties and nice distinctions of love are endless. A much more pressing question is nearer to hand—where are you going to live?"

"Hannah, my mother's servant—a dear good kind creature—it was through her I was able to come here—will find me a lodging. I can trust her but—but——" [Pg 128]

She stopped and much embarrassed, twisted her fingers nervously.

"I understand. You've but little money."

"I have none, sir, unfortunately."

"Well—well—never mind. Here's a guinea."

"Oh, you're too generous, sir. But I shall pay you back."

"Don't worry about that. Now go into the house. I will ask Mr. Pope to tell his housekeeper to give you a dish of tea or a cup of cocoa. Good-bye. You must let me know where you are living. I may have good news for you within a few days."

Lavinia between smiles and tears hurried off after curtseying to the gentlemen under the cedar tree and on her way across the lawn was met by the man-servant who took her to the housekeeper's room. The woman had heard the singing and was full of admiration. She wanted to hear more, she said, so while the tea was being got ready Lavinia sent her into thrills of delight by warbling the universal favourite "Cold and Raw."

After a time came the question of returning to London and how. Lavinia could have crossed the ferry and so to Richmond and Mortlake, but that would not help her on the journey unless Giles was going to market, which was hardly likely. Besides she did not wish to burden him. And then—there was Lancelot Vane.

Lancelot, she thought, must be anxious to know the result of her mission. That result was not so encouraging as she had hoped. True, Mr. Gay had the precious tragedy in his pocket and had promised to read it, but his opinion of dramatists generally and his hints concerning Lancelot Vane's weakness had considerably damped her ardour. In spite of this, she determined to get to London as quickly as possible and to hasten to Grub Street that same night.

"You can catch the Bath coach at Hounslow," said the housekeeper. "It's but just gone five and the coach be timed to stop at the 'George' at six, but it's late more often than not." [Pg 129]

"And how far is it to Hounslow?"

"May be a couple o' miles or so, but it's a bit of a cross road—say two mile an' a half. Stephen'll put you in the right way."

"Oh thank you—thank you kindly," cried Lavinia. "But it will be giving Stephen a deal of trouble. I dare say I can find my way by myself."

"Oh, you may do that. I should think you were sharp enough, but there are no end of beggars and rapscallions of all sorts on the Bath road and some of 'em are bound to wander into the by-ways on the look out for what they can steal. No, Stephen must see you through the lonely parts."

CHAPTER XIV

"I WISH YOU GOOD NIGHT AND MORE SENSE"

Lavinia and her protector set out. Stephen was inclined to be garrulous and Lavinia had not much occasion to put in a word. He entertained her with choice bits of information, such as how he remembered when the coach ran between Bath and London only three times a week.

"But that was nigh twenty years ago. It were Mr. Baldwin as keeps a inn at Salthill as started to run 'em daily. The coach stops at the Belle Savage, Ludgate. Be that near where you want to go, miss?"

"Ludgate Hill? Oh, yes."

Hounslow in Stephen's opinion was getting to be quite a big place.

"When I was a boy it hadn't more'n a hundred houses—it's double or treble that now, but they're [Pg 130]

pretty well all inns an' ale houses an' mighty queer ones, some of em are. Hand in glove with highway robbers an' footpads. Not much good a-tryin' to catch a highwayman if he once gets to Hounslow. He's only got to run in one of the houses where's he known an' you might as well try to foller a fox as has darted into a drain. Some o' them ale houses an' boozin' kens has got passages a-runnin' one into the other."

"That's very terrible Mr. Stephen. You quite alarm me," cried Lavinia.

But she was not so alarmed as she would have been had she been brought up a fine lady. She had had highwaymen pointed out to her in Drury Lane and Dyott Street and knew that the majority were boasting, bragging fellows and cowards at heart. But there were others of a different quality who did their robberies with quite a gentlemanly air.

They took the way through Whitton Park. As the housekeeper said, the journey was cross-country so far as roads were concerned, but Stephen knew the short cuts and they reached the long, straggling, mean-looking Hounslow High Street—the future town was at that time little more than a street—at about a quarter to six.

They entered the "George"—a house of greater pretensions than the rest—and Lavinia found she was in plenty of time for the London coach.

"She'll be late," said the landlord. "A chap as just come in says he rode past her t'other side o' the heath an' she was stuck fast on a nasty bit o' boggy road and one o' the leaders—a jibber—wouldn't stir a step for whip or curses."

"That's bad," said Stephen. "Still it would ha' been far worse if some o' them High Toby gentry had stopped the coach."

"Aye," rejoined the landlord dropping his voice. "We had a fellow o' that sort in about half an hour ago. He was on a mare as wiry an' springy as could be, could clear a pike gate like a wild cat I'll [Pg 131] bet. I didn't like the scoundrel's phizog and I'll swear he didn't want to know for naught what time the London coach passed the George. I wouldn't wonder if he was hanging about Smallbury Green at this 'ere very minute. But don't 'ee let the young leddy know this. She might be afeared, an' after all I may be wrong."

Stephen nodded.

"The High Toby gen'elmen are gettin' monstrous darin'. I'm told as they've been stickin' up bills on the park gates of the Quality a-warnin' their lordships not to travel with less than ten guineas in their pocket an' a gold watch an' chain, on pain o' death. What think 'ee o' that for downright brazenness?"

Stephen could only raise his hands deprecatingly, but as Lavinia was drawing near him he made no reply.

"I've booked my seat," said she, "so please don't stay any longer. I'm quite safe now and all I have to do is to wait for the coach. Thank you kindly for coming with me."

"Ye're quite welcome, miss. I don't know as I can be of more sarvice, so I'll get back to Twitenham. I wish 'ee a pleasant journey to London."

Lavinia again thanked him, Stephen departed and Lavinia prepared herself to exercise what patience she possessed. And well she needed patience for it was past eight and quite dark before the coach appeared at little more than a walking pace. Then the horses had to be changed, the coachman roundly anathematising the sinning jibber as the brute was led in disgrace to the stables; the passengers descended to refresh themselves and so nearly another hour was wasted.

At last all was ready. Lavinia had booked an inside place and found that her only fellow passenger was a gouty old gentleman who had been taking the waters at Bath. The outside [Pg 132] passengers were but few, a woman and a couple of men.

Hounslow was left behind and in due time they entered the road across Smallbury Green, beyond which was Brentford. The travelling was very bad and the coach on its leather hangings swung about in all directions. The conversation—if conversation it could be called—consisted of fragmentary ejaculations of mingled pain and annoyance from the old gentleman when his gouty foot was jerked against some part of the coach.

They had not passed over the Green when the clatter of a galloping horse was heard and almost immediately the coach was pulled up.

"Body o' me," cried the old gentleman in dismay. "What's happened?"

He had an answer in a very few seconds. A big pistol, its barrel gleaming in the moonlight, was thrust through the coach window and behind the pistol was a masked horseman.

"A thousand apologies for putting your lordship to such inconvenience," growled the highwayman with affected humility. "I'm sure your lordship has too much sense not to perceive the force of an argument which you will own is entirely on my side."

And he advanced the muzzle of the pistol a little nearer the head of the old gentleman and then came an unpleasant click.

"What d'ye want, you scoundrel?" stammered the victim.

"Nay, a little more politeness, if you please. I simply want your watch and chain, the rings on your fingers and any money you may chance to have about you—gold in preference. Permit me to add that if you don't turn out your pockets before I count ten I shall put a bullet in your skull first and do the searching myself afterwards."

This command, uttered in fierce threatening tones, brought the unlucky gentleman from Bath to book at once. Trembling, he turned out his pockets and a number of guineas fell beside him on the seat. The highwayman grabbed them at once. [Pg 133]

"Your lordship is most generous and complaisant. Now for your trinkets. Quick! Time is of great importance."

All the valuables the old gentleman possessed were yielded and pocketted rapidly by the highwayman.

"Thanks, my lord, for a most agreeable interview. I trust your lordship will reach your journey's end without further mishap."

Then to Lavinia's terror the highwayman turned towards her. She shrank into her corner of the coach.

"Pray don't be alarmed, madam. I never rob women unless they tempt me very much. Some are so foolish as to wear all the gewgaws they possess. But you have more sense I see. Yet a diamond would vastly set off the whiteness of that pretty little hand. Your gallant must be very dull not to have ornamented your charming fingers."

In spite of the man's fair words Lavinia's terror was not diminished. His eyes glinted savagely through the holes of his mask and a mocking note in his raucous voice plainly sounded an insincerity. Apart from this there was something in his voice which was strangely, disagreeably familiar, but she was too agitated just then to try to trace the association.

The highwayman stared at her for some few seconds without speaking, then his coarse, wide lips, which the mask did not come low enough to conceal, parted in a grin showing big yellow, uneven teeth and an ugly gap in the lower jaw where two of the front teeth had once been.

"Adieu, madam. Let us hope we shall meet again under happier circumstances."

And wheeling round his horse he took off his hat with a sweeping bow. Then he set out at a gallop and did not draw rein until he reached the "Red Cow" at Hammersmith. Apparently he was well-known, for in response to his shout an ostler ran from the yard and at his imperious order took his horse to the stables. Then the highwayman strode into the bar parlour. [Pg 134]

His mask, of course, was now removed, and the features were revealed of Captain Jeremy Rofflash.

Here he sat drinking until the rumble of the London coach was heard. Then he quitted the bar and went to the stable, where he remained during the stay of the coach which occupied some little time, for the story of the highway robbery had to be told.

No one about the inn was in the least surprised. Highwaymen haunted Hammersmith and Turnham Green, and had the landlord of the "Red Cow" chosen to open his mouth he might have thrown a little light upon the man who had stopped the Bath coach.

Once more the coach was on its way and following it went Captain Rofflash, dogging it to its destination at the Belle Savage. He watched Lavinia alight and wherever she went he went too. Could she have listened to what he was saying she would have heard the words:—

"By gad, it's the very wench. I'll swear 'tis. Perish me if this isn't the best day's work I've done for many a day. If I don't make Mr. Archibald Dorrimore fork out fifty guineas my name isn't Jeremy Rofflash."

Shortly after Lavinia set out on her way to Grub Street. Lancelot Vane was pacing Moor Fields—a depressing tract of land, the grass trodden down here and there into bare patches, thanks to the games of the London 'prentices and gambols of children—in company with Edmund Curll, the most scurrilous and audacious of writers and booksellers who looked upon standing on the pillory, which he had had to do more than once, more as a splendid form of advertisement than as a degradation.

"You can write what I want if you chose—no man better," he was saying. Vane was listening not altogether attentively. His thoughts were elsewhere. [Pg 135]

"And supposing I don't choose."

"Then you'll be an arrant fool," sneered Curll angrily. "You're out at elbows. You haven't a penny to bless yourself with. You don't eat, but you can always drink provided you run across a friend who by chance has some money in his pocket. What'll be the end of it all? You'll go down—down among the dregs of Grub Street and you'll never rise again."

"Not so, Mr. Curll," cried Vane hotly. "I've great hopes. I've a tragedy——"

"A tragedy! *That* for your tragedy."

Curll snapped his fingers scornfully.

"Why, my young friend, supposing you get your tragedy staged, it will be played one night—if extraordinarily successful two nights, or three at the most. What do you think you will get out of it? Nothing. But perhaps you fancy yourself a Congreve or a Farquhar?"

"Neither Congreve nor Farquhar wrote tragedies, sir," retorted Vane stiffly.

"Indeed! What about Mr. Congreve's 'Mourning Bride?'"

"I prefer his comedies, sir."

"And so do I, but that's nothing to the point. May be you consider that you're equal to Mr. Otway or even Mr. Cibber, I leave Mr. Gay out of the count. He's written nothing that's likely to live and never will. He's too lazy."

"You dislike Mr. Gay, 'tis well known, because he's Mr. Pope's friend. I do not and that's my objection to writing for you. I doubt not you would ask me to attack the most talented men of the age simply because you hate them or you want to air some grievance."

"You're wrong. I do it to sell my books and put money in my pocket. If you write for me you won't be called upon to express your own opinions. All you have to do is to express mine and keep your body and soul together comfortably. You can't do that now and the two'll part company before long unless you alter. You were not so squeamish last night at the Chapter Coffee House." [Pg 136]

"There was a reason for that. I was full of wine and hardly knew what I was saying."

"I'll warrant you didn't. That same wine, let me tell you, will be your undoing. Now that your head is clear you'd better think over my offer. It will at least provide you with a more decent coat and wig than those you're wearing. A young man should dress smartly. What's his life worth to him unless women look kindly upon him? Do you expect they care for a shabby gallant?"

Vane was silent. Some of Curll's words had gone home.

"I'll think it over," said he at last.

"That's right. Think over it and if you're in love, as you ought to be, ask your girl if I'm not right. Have a night's consideration and come and see me to-morrow. I wish you good-night and—more sense."

CHAPTER XV

"A MAN SHOULD FIGHT HIS WAY THROUGH THE WORLD"

Vane left alone, strolled onward moodily, his eyes bent on the ground.

"In love, as I ought to be, said that scoundrel," he was muttering. "How does he know I'm not? But what's the good? Faith, I believe I'm the poorest devil in London and the unluckiest. Some people would say that it is my own fault and that I've no need to be. Anyhow, my worthy father would hold that view. I doubt if he'd kill the fatted calf if I went back to him.... Go back! I'd rather go to the devil to whose tender mercies he consigned me. Well, let it be so.... I've had some of the joys of life—though maybe I've also had a good slice of its disappointments.... It was worth being poor to have the pity of that dear delightful girl.... God, what eyes! How sweet the tones of her voice! I feel I love every hair of her pretty head. But to what purpose? She's not for me. She never could be. Yet—well I shall see her again. That's a joy to live for ... anyway. But it's too late to expect her now. There's nothing left but to dream of her." [Pg 137]

While thus soliloquising, kicking the pebbles as an accompaniment to his thoughts, Vane neared the corner of Moor Fields leading to Cripples Gate and was pounced upon by a couple of noisy fellows, friends of his, who, newly sprung with wine, would have him go with them to the "Bear and Staff" close to the Gate.

"No—no," protested Vane, "I'm not in the mood."

"The very reason why you should drink," quoth one.

"But I've sworn not to touch a drop of anything stronger than coffee or chocolate for a week. I had too much port last night."

"Worse and worse. Hang it man, whatever you may have been at Oxford University you are no disputant now. Your resolution to be virtuous for a week won't last a day unless you strengthen it. And what strengthens the wit more than wine?"

"Get thee gone Satan. I'm not to be tempted by a paradox."

Vane did not speak with conviction. His spirits were low. Curll's offer was worrying him. To be in the service of such a man, whose personal character was as infamous as some of the books he published, was a humiliation. It meant the prostitution of his faculties. He shuddered at the prospect of becoming one of Curll's slaves to some of whom he paid a mere pittance and who

were sunk so low they had no alternative but to do his bidding.

Meanwhile the second man had thrust his arm within Vane's and had led him along a few paces, when suddenly the imprisoned arm was withdrawn and Vane pulled himself up. He had caught sight of a Nithsdale cloak with the face he had been dreaming about all day peeping from beneath the hood. [Pg 138]

"Jarvis—Compton—let me go," he exclaimed, "another time."

He violently wrenched himself free. They followed his eyes and instinctively guessed the reason of his objection. The figure in the cloak had turned but there was an unmistakeable suggestion of lingering in her attitude.

"Man alive," laughed Jarvis, "your argument's unanswerable. We give you best. Woman has conquered as she always does. Good luck."

Vane did not stay to listen to the banter of his friends but hastened towards the cloak.

"You're my good angel," he whispered holding out both his hands.

"I'm afraid I've come at a wrong moment. I'm taking you from your friends," said the girl in the cloak a little coldly.

"You're offended. Pray forgive me if I've done anything wrong."

"Not to me. Perhaps to yourself. But I ought not to say ... no, what you do is nothing to me."

"Do you really mean that?"

"Why not? You know it as well as I do—may be better."

"Indeed, I don't. Forgive me if I've allowed myself to think that I was of some interest to you. Of course I was foolish to have such fancies. Still, you've been so kind.... I hardly like to ask you if you have seen Mr. Gay ... and ... and ... my tragedy...."

Vane could not conceal his agitation. Lavinia took pity on him and her manner softened in that subtle inexplicable way which women have.

"Yes, I've seen him and I gave him your play." [Pg 139]

"Ah, I can never thank you sufficiently. And what did he say?"

"He put the play in his pocket and promised to read it. He could not do any more, could he?" Lavinia quickly added seeing disappointment written in the young dramatist's face.

"No, indeed. But did he give hopes that he would speak to Mr. Rich at the Duke's Theatre or to Mr. Cibber at Drury Lane?"

"I don't think he did. I can't remember. He told me he was himself writing a play—an opera—but he was not sanguine he should get it performed."

"An opera? It is a waste of time. Operas are written by foreigners and the music and the singers are foreign too. What do the English care about operas written in their own tongue? It's not wonderful that Mr. Gay should be doubtful. Now a tragedy is a different thing. That's something everybody understands!"

"Do they? I fear then I'm very stupid. I saw a tragedy once and I'm not sure I knew what it was about. The people on the stage made such long speeches to each other they tired me to death. But I'm sure yours would not be like that."

"Ah, you say that because you want to put me in good heart. We'll talk no more about it, nor about myself either."

"Oh, but I do want to talk about you. I've something to say and I don't know how to say it without hurting you," said Lavinia, hesitatingly.

"You don't mean you're going to bid me good-bye?" he burst out. "I won't say *that*. You're the only one I've ever met who's encouraged me out of pure good nature. When I've had money to spend on them, friends have sought me out fawning and flattering. After they'd emptied my purse they vanished."

"Yes, yes, and that's why I want to talk to you. Aren't you easily led to take too much wine?" [Pg 140]

"Perhaps—perhaps, but no more than other men."

"I hope so, at least not more than the men I saw you with last night."

"You saw me! Where?"

"In a coffee house near St. Paul's. The man who left you a few minutes ago was making you drink and the others were helping him. Your glass was never empty save when you yourself had emptied it. I don't like that white-faced squinting man. His voice is horrid. His vulgar talk—oh, it made me put my fingers to my ears and run out of the house. He doesn't mean you well."

"I—I like him no more than you," stammered Vane. "But he wants me to write for him. It would

put money in my pocket. How could I refuse to drink with him?"

"Why not? He would not employ you if he did not think it was to his own good. And have you promised?"

"No—not yet. He was persuading me just now but I've not consented."

"Then don't. He's a bad, a wicked man I feel sure. Have nothing to do with him."

"I swear to you I've no desire. But a penniless scribbler has no choice if he has to live—that is if life be worth living, which I sometimes doubt."

"You shouldn't think like that. It's cowardly. A man should fight his way through the world. Now a woman...."

"She's armed better than a man. Her charm—her beauty—her wit. Nature bestows on her all conquering weapons."

"Which she as often as not misuses and turns against herself. But Mr. Vane," the note of bitterness had vanished; her voice was now earnest, almost grave, "you weren't despondent when you were facing an angry mob after doing me a service I shall never forget. You underrate yourself."

"Oh, I admit that when alone I'm like a boat at the mercy of wind and wave, but with some one to inspire—to guide—bah, 'tis useless talking of the unattainable." [Pg 141]

Vane uttered the last words in a reckless tone and with a shrug of the shoulders. His eyes gazed yearningly, despairingly into hers, and there had never been a time in Lavinia's life when she was less able to withstand a wave of heartfelt emotion.

Her nerves at that moment were terribly unstrung. She had had a most exhausting day lasting from early dawn. The strain of the trying interview at Twickenham; the anxious ordeal of singing before such supreme judges as she deemed them; the jubilation of success and the praise they had bestowed upon her, and Gay's promises as to her future had turned her brain for the time being. Then the episode of the highwayman—that in itself was sufficiently disturbing.

As a matter of fact the girl's strength was ebbing fast when she reached Moor Fields, but she nerved herself to go on, confident of her reward in relieving the young author's anxiety and his joy at the success—up to a point—of her errand. Things had not quite turned out as she had pictured them. The sight of the coarse speeched, malevolent-looking man with his squinting eye and unhealthy complexion, brought back the scene of the night before which she would willingly have forgotten, and down went her spirits to zero.

While she had been talking with Vane her heart was fluttering strangely. She had eaten nothing since she had left Twickenham and she was conscious of a weakness, of a trembling of the limbs. That passionate, yearning look in Vane's eyes had aroused an excess of tenderness towards him which overwhelmed her. She suddenly turned dizzy. She swooned.

When consciousness came back she was in his arms. He was as tremulous as she and was looking at her pallid face with eyes of terror—a terror which disappeared instantly when he saw life returning. [Pg 142]

"My God," he cried, "I thought you were dead. I'd have killed myself had it been so."

Lavinia gazed at him mutely. It was pleasant to have his arms round her, and the feel of them gave her a sense of peace and rest. In her fancy she had gone through an interminable period of oblivion—in reality it was but a few seconds—and the struggle into life was painful. But she was strengthened by his vitality and she gently withdrew herself from his embrace, smoothed her hair and drew forward her hood which had fallen back. Despite her pallor, or may be because of it, she never looked more fascinating than at that moment with her hair tumbled, her large dreamy eyes, and the delicious languor so charmingly suggestive of helplessness, and of an appeal to him for protection.

"Are you better?" he whispered anxiously.

"Yes, thank you. It was very silly to faint. I don't know what made me."

"Take my arm; do, please. Why, you can hardly stand."

It was true, and the arm which went round her waist was not wholly unnecessary. She submitted without protest and they slowly walked a few paces.

"Though it's hard to part from you 'tis best you should get home quickly. Have you far to go? Shall I call a coach?"

These pertinent questions threw the girl into a sudden state of confusion. She had no home. She had but little money, for Gay's guinea was nearly gone after she had paid her fare from Hounslow and the incidental expenses of the journey. But she dared not say as much to her companion. He thought her a fine lady. It might be wise to keep him in this mind. If he knew she was as poor as he, there would be an end to the pleasure of helping him. She felt sure he would accept nothing more from her.

What was she to say? She could think of nothing. She felt bewildered. At the same time the effort [Pg 143]

to face the difficulty did her good. It revived her energy.

"Indeed there's no necessity for me to ride. I can walk quite well and it is but a little distance to my home. You may see me across the fields if you will and then we will say good-night."

"I'd better walk with you beyond the fields," he urged. "The streets are just as dangerous for you as this desolate place."

"Oh no. There are sure to be plenty of people about! You shall go as far as Cheapside, but not a step further."

Vane accepted the compromise, but when Cheapside was reached it was full of a noisy throng and most of the crowd, both men and women, were the worse for drink. He easily overcame her protest that she could proceed alone and they went on to St. Paul's. Here it was comparatively quiet, and she flatly refused to permit him to accompany her beyond the Cathedral.

They passed the Chapter coffee house. Lavinia's thoughts reverted to her warning to Vane on Moor Fields.

"You've not given me your promise to have nothing to do with that man—I don't know his name and I don't want to—who made you drink too much last night in there."

"I'll promise you anything," he cried pressing the arm which was within his.

"Thank you, but that's not all. Swear that you will never drink too much again. It makes me sad."

"On my honour I never will. I'd rather die than hurt you by word or deed."

"Are you sure?" she returned with more concern in her voice than she suspected.

"Sure? If I don't keep my word I should fear to face your anger."

"I shouldn't be angry, only sorry."

"I'd rather have your anger than your pity. I might pacify the first but the second—while you are pitying me you might also despise me. I could never endure that." [Pg 144]

His voice trembled with genuine emotion. Lavinia put out her hand and he caught it eagerly and raised it to his lips.

"You've made me happy," he cried, "you've given me fresh hope. I'll promise you all you've asked. You must promise me one thing in return. I can't lose sight of you. It would be eternal torment. When and where shall we meet?"

"I don't know. Perhaps not at all," said Lavinia slowly and lowering her eyes.

"Don't say that. I've told you why. Not at my miserable lodgings, I grant you, but at some other place. What say you to Rosamond's Pond?"

Lavinia darted him a swift glance. The ghost of a smile played about her lips.

"The Lovers' Walk of London! Oh, no."

"But indeed yes. What have you to say against Rosamond's Pond? Its reputation justifies its romance."

"Neither its reputation nor its romance has anything to do with us."

"That is as it may be," he rejoined with an ardent glance. "But you haven't said no. Rosamond's Pond then to-morrow at sunset—seven o'clock?"

Lavinia was too exhausted in mind and body either to refuse or even to argue. She felt as she had felt many a time in her childhood that she was simply a waif and stray. Nothing mattered very much. It was easier to consent than to object.

"To-morrow at sunset," she faltered.

"It's a bargain," he whispered. "You won't disappoint me?"

"Haven't I given you my word? What more do you want?"

She held out her hand and he pressed it between both his, his eyes fixed earnestly on her face.

"I don't like leaving you," he pleaded. "You're pale. Your hand's cold. You look as if you might faint again. Please ..." [Pg 145]

"No—no—no," exclaimed Lavinia vehemently. "We must part here. Good-night."

Vane was loth to let her hand go but she snatched it away and ran off, turning her head and throwing him a smile over her shoulder—a picture of natural grace and charming womanly wile and tenderness which dwelt in his memory for many a long day.

Vane stood watching the fleeting figure until it vanished in the obscurity of Ludgate Hill and then with a deep sigh turned towards Cheapside.

"That settles it. I won't write a line for that rascal Curll. I've promised my divinity and by God, I'll

keep my promise."

But the next instant came the dismal reflection that apart from Curll he hadn't the slightest notion where his next shilling was to come from.

"Tush! I won't think of the dolefuls," he muttered. "'Tis an insult to the loveliest—the kindest—the warmest hearted—the ..."

He suddenly ceased his panegyric and wheeled round swiftly, his hand on the hilt of his sword.

Absorbed though he had been in his thoughts of Lavinia, in some sub-conscious way the sound of footsteps behind him keeping pace with his own reached his ear. It was no unusual thing for foot passengers to be set upon and Vane was on the alert. His suspicions were confirmed by the sight of a man cloaked and with his slouch hat pulled over his forehead gliding into a narrow passage leading into Paternoster Row.

"Just as well, my friend, you've taken to your heels. I've nothing to lose and you'd have nothing to gain, save may be a sword thrust."

Congratulating himself on his escape from what might have been an ugly encounter, Vane plodded back to Grub Street. He lingered in front of a Cripples' Gate tavern where he knew he should find some of his friends, but he thought of Lavinia's words and he resisted temptation. That night he did that which with him was a rarity—he went to bed sober. [Pg 146]

He had forgotten the cloaked man whom he had taken for an ordinary footpad. The fellow must have altered his mind if his intention was to follow Vane. No sooner was the latter past the passage than he darted back into St. Paul's Churchyard and hastened westward. He overtook Lavinia just as she was turning into the Old Bailey and cautiously followed her.

CHAPTER XVI

"THEY'RE TO MEET AT ROSAMOND'S POND"

A masquerade was in full swing at a mansion in Leicester Square. The air of the ball-room was hot and stuffy. Ventilation was a thing of little account. The light, albeit there were a hundred candles or so in the sconces, on the panelled walls, and in the chandelier hanging from the decorated ceiling, and despite the assiduous snuffing by the servants, was dim. The subdued illumination was not without its advantage. It was merciful to the painted faces and softened the crudity of their raw colouring. A mixture of odours offended the nostrils. Powder came off in clouds, not only from the hair of the belles but also from the wigs of the beaux. Its peculiar scent mingled with a dozen varieties of the strong perfumes in vogue, and the combination was punctuated by a dash of oil from a smoky lamp or two in the vestibule and an occasional waft of burnt tallow and pitch from the torches of the link boys outside. [Pg 147]

The masquerade was public and the company was mixed. The establishment provided punch, strong waters and cordials and some of the visitors had indulged themselves without scruple. The effect was seen in the cheeks of matrons and damsels where they were not daubed. It added brilliancy to many an eye—it gave a piquancy and freedom to talk, greatly appreciated by the gallants. As for the dancing, in that crowded room owing to the space monopolised by the prodigious hoops and the general exhilaration, the stately minuet and sarabande were out of the question, and the jig and country dance were much more in favour.

In a side room cards and dicing were going on and the gamblers were not to be drawn from the tables while they had money in their pockets. Most of them were women, and when the grey dawn came stealing between the curtains of the long narrow windows, overpowering the candlelight and turning it of a pale sickly yellow, the players were still seated, with feverish hands, haggard faces and hawk-like eyes, pursuing their race after excitement. A silence had come over the party. The play was high and the gamesters too absorbed to note anything but the game. From the ball-room came the sound of violin, flute and harpsichord, shrieks of shrill laughter, oaths from drunken wranglers and the continual thump of feet.

Then the servants brought in coffee, extinguished the candles and drew back the curtains.

"Good lord, we're more like a party of painted corpses than creatures of flesh and blood," cried a lady with excessively rouged cheeks, bright bird-like eyes and a long, thin hooked nose. "I declare positively I'll play no more. Besides the luck's all one way, but 'tis not my fault. I don't want to win every time."

"How generous—how thoughtful of your ladyship," sarcastically remarked a handsome woman on the other side of the table. [Pg 148]

"What do you mean, madam?" fiercely inquired the first speaker who was now standing.

"Oh, nothing madam," was the retort accompanied by a curtsey of mock humility. "Everybody knows Lady Anastasia's pleasant way of drawing off when she has won and the luck's beginning to turn against her."

"I despise your insinuations madam," loftily replied Lady Anastasia, her face where it was not rouged turning the colour of putty. "So common a creature as Mistress Salisbury—I prefer not to soil my lips by addressing you as *Sally* Salisbury—I think that is the name by which you are best known among the Cheapside 'prentices and my lord's lackeys—ought to feel vastly honoured by being permitted to sit at the same table with a woman of my rank."

"Your *rank*? Indeed, you're quite right. It *is* rank. Foh!"

The handsome face was expressive of contemptuous abhorrence and her gesture emphasised the expression. Lady Anastasia was goaded to fury.

"Why, you impudent, brazen-faced Drury Lane trull! A month at Bridewell would do you good, you ——"

Her ladyship's vocabulary of abuse was pretty extensive but it was cut short. A dice box with the ivories inside flew across the table hurled with the full strength of a vigorous shapely arm. This was Sally Salisbury's retort. A corner of a dice cut the lady's lip and a drop of blood trickled on to her chin.

Beyond herself with rage, Lady Anastasia seized a wine glass—a somewhat dangerous projectile, for the wine glasses of the time were large and thick and heavy—and would have dashed it at her antagonist but one of the players, a man, grasped her wrist and held it.

"Let her ladyship have her chance. She's entitled to it. A duel at a masquerade between two women of fashion! Why, it'll be the talk of the town for a whole week," and Sally Salisbury laughed derisively. [Pg 149]

But so vulgar a *fracas* was not to the taste of Lady Anastasia's friends, besides which the attendants were alarmed and ran to prevent further disturbance. They abstained, however, from interfering with Sally Salisbury. Her ungovernable temper and her fear of nothing were well known. If she once let herself go there was no telling where she would stop. At this moment, however, her temper was under perfect control and indeed she was rather enjoying herself.

She rose, pushed away her chair with a backward kick to give room for her ample hoops, and curtseying low to the company marched out of the room without so much as a glance at her rival who was on the verge of hysterics.

Mistress Salisbury entered the ball-room, now tenanted by the dregs of the company most of them more or less stupefied or excited, according to their temperaments, by drink. In one corner was a young man whose richly embroidered silk coat of a pale lavender was streaked with wine, whose ruffles were torn and whose wig was awry. To him was talking in a thick growling bass a man arrayed in a costume hardly befitting a ball-room, unless indeed he wore it as a fancy dress. But his evil face, dark, dirty, and inflamed by deep potations, the line of an old scar extending from the corner of his mouth almost to his ear showing white against the purple of his bloated cheek forbade this supposition.

Captain Jeremy Rofflash in point of fact was very drunk. He had for the last three or four hours been industriously engaged in getting rid of some of the guineas of the old gentleman from Bath, in a boozing ken in Whitefriars. Seasoned toper as he was he could carry his liquor without it interfering with his head. About the effect on his legs he was not quite so sure and at that moment his body was swaying ominously, but thanks to his clutching a high backed chair he maintained his equilibrium fairly well. [Pg 150]

"Idiot," snarled the young gentleman whose temper inebriation had soured, "why the devil didn't you come here earlier? The coup might have been brought off to-night. Gad, I want rousing. I'm just in the mood, and the sight of that pretty, saucy, baggage—oh, you're a damned fool, Rofflash!"

"If Mr. Dorrimore will condescend to await my explanation," swaggered Rofflash with drunken dignity, "he will admit that I've done nothing foolish—nothing not permissible to a man of honour."

"Devil take your honour."

"Granted sir. The subject is not under discussion at the present moment. Now, sir, what happened? As I've already informed you, I came across the young poppinjay and the girl sweethearting on Moor Fields. She was in his arms...."

"In his arms! S'death! I'll run the impudent upstart through for that. The girl's mine, by God. Where's the fellow to be found?"

"All in good time, sir. Have a little patience. Aye, she was in his arms but it's only fair to say that she had gone into a swoon."

"A swoon? What the devil made her swoon? She's never swooned in *my* arms and I've clipped her close enough. She giggled and tittered I grant you, but never the ghost of a swoon."

"There's no rule for the mad humour of a woman, as you must know, Mr. Dorrimore."

"But swooning—that's a sign she was in earnest. She was never in earnest with me—just a hoyden asking to be won."

"I crave your honour's pardon. The girl was in earnest enough when she smashed your carriage window with the heel of her shoe and leaped out like a young filly clearing a five barred gate." [Pg 151]

"Pest! Don't remind me of that. It makes me sick when I think how I was fooled and that you were such an ass as to let her slip."

"Sir, I did my best and but for the spark who had the impudence to thrust his nose into what didn't concern him, I'd have had her safe. But I've made amends. I've run her to earth."

"Satan's helped you then. Where is she?"

"At her mother's house in the Old Bailey."

"That's a lie."

"Sir!"

"I tell you it's a lie. Her mother visited me at my chambers yesterday. She'd got the story pat of Lavinia's running away with me from school and all the rest of it. The old woman's not much better than Mother Needham. Faith, she's a shade worse. She agreed to let me have the girl for fifty guineas. She'd got the chit locked up she said. I went to her Old Bailey hovel to-day—gad, I've got the smell of the cooked meats and boiled greens in my nostrils at this minute—and damn it, she said the girl had run away. And now you tell me she's there."

"I do, sir. With these eyes which I flatter myself don't often mistake when they rest on a well turned ankle, a trim waist and a pretty face. I swear I saw her go into the house."

"Ecod, I suppose I must believe you," rejoined Dorrimore sullenly. "But what do you make of it all? Did the old woman lie?"

"Without a doubt she did. If she's of Mother Needham's tribe she can lie like truth. Lies are half of the trade and the other half is to squeeze the cull of as much gold as he can be fooled out of. Can't you see sir, that her trick is to spring her price? I'll wager her fifty guineas has swollen to a hundred when next you see her. With traffickers in virgins the price grows as rapidly as Jonah's gourd." [Pg 152]

"Aye, it may be so. Well, what then? Have you got a plan?"

Captain Jeremy Rofflash placed a dirty forefinger by the side of his nose, slowly closed one eye and a greasy smile widened his thick, red moist lips.

"Have I a plan, sir? Trust Jeremy Rofflash for that. By God, sir, I'll swear there's no man in the world readier with a plan when its wanted. Look ye here, Mr. Dorrimore, I've the whole thing cut and dried in the hollow of my hand. To come to the point. The old harridan means to fleece you. *I* don't. Damme sir, I'm a man of my word. For a hundred guineas I'll let you into a secret and if I fail I won't ask you for a stiver. Is that fair or isn't it?"

"I'll swear you're no better than Mother Fenton, but I'd rather deal with a man than a woman. Done with you for a hundred. Say on."

"It's just this. I was within earshot when the loving pair were in Paul's Churchyard. They're to meet at Rosamond's Pond to-morrow evening at seven. Now what's to prevent you being beforehand with the spark? The park's lonely enough for our purpose and you have but to have your coach ready and a man or two. A gag whipped over her mouth and we'll have her inside the coach within a second and not a soul be the wiser."

"Sounds mighty well, faith. But will she come? What of her mother? Will the woman trust her out of sight?"

"I'll back a wench against her dam for a thousand guineas if she's set her heart on a man. Odds bodikins, if she comes not you won't lose. *I* shall and it'll be the devil's own bad luck. No have, no pay. D'ye see that my young squire?"

Dorrimore could offer no contradiction. All that remained to be discussed was what would follow supposing fortune favoured them, and they subsided into a whispered conference which was after a time interrupted by some of Dorrimore's boon companions, who carried him off to a wild revelry in the Covent Garden taverns with the last hour at the "Finish," the tavern of ill-repute on the south side of the market. [Pg 153]

Rofflash would have accompanied the party but that a hand was laid on his arm and a masked lady whispered:—

"One moment, captain, I want you."

He turned. He recognised the speaker by the lower part of her face, the round, somewhat prominent chin, the imperious mouth with its sensual lower lip, the bold sweeping contour from the chin to the ear.

"Sally Salisbury—the devil!" he ejaculated.

"Not quite, but a near relative may be," rejoined Sally with a sarcastic laugh. "Who's the spark you're so thick with?"

"The fool who's mad to get hold of the prettiest wench in town—Lavinia Fenton."

"That little trollop! I hate the creature. But there's no need to talk of her. What of the man I paid you to track? Have you found him?"

Rofflash watched her face, what he could see of it, for she had not unmasked, and noted the slight quiver of the lips and the rise and fall of her bosom.

"Faith mistress," he chuckled with a drunken leer, "if you're not as crazy over the beggarly scribbler as my young gallant is over the Fenton girl who lives in the Old Bailey—at a coffee house, forsooth! Why, to see the pother you're in one would think the hussy had put your nose out of joint. Perhaps she has. She's fetching enough."

Sally seized the captain's arm with a vigorous grip that showed the intensity of her feelings. He winced and muttered an oath.

"S'life," he burst out, "save your nails for the girl who's cut you out with the scribbler."

"She? You lie. What has he to do with the minx?"

"As much as he need have to start with. Didn't he help her to escape from Dorrimore's arms when the fool thought he had her safe?" [Pg 154]

"What!" screamed Sally, "Was *he* the man?"

"Aye. I've not yet plucked the crow between him and me for that, but by gad, I mean to pluck it."

"It won't be by fair means then. You're too much of a coward. See here, you devil. Lance Vane's mine, and if you dare so much as to lay a finger on him you will know what *I* can do. There's but one road for gentry of your profession—the road to Tyburn—and you'll take it if you cross me. It'll be as easy as *that*."

She dealt the braggart a blow across the nose and eyes with her closed fan. The sticks snapped and in a white heat of passion she broke them again and again and flung the fragments in the discomfited captain's face.

Her fury and his smarting nose somewhat sobered Rofflash. He knew well enough that when Sally was in her cups she was capable of any deed of violence. Years after, indeed, her temper led to her undoing when inflamed by drink and jealousy she stabbed the Honourable John Finch at "The Three Tuns" in Chandos Street.

Rofflash hastened to mollify the enraged beauty, and did so effectually when he suggested a plan by which she could mortify her rival.

Sally heard him almost silently. Jeremy's plan was so much to her taste that in a measure she was able to control herself, though her arms, rigid by her sides, and her tightly clenched hands showed that her nerves were still unstrung.

"You see, mistress, you did me an injustice," growled Rofflash. "I have worked for you, aye and right well. What do *I* get for doing it?"

"You shall have all the coin that old miser Mountchance gives me for your next haul of trinkets. I won't touch a farthing for my trouble."

Rofflash stipulated for money down.

"You won't get a stiver," retorted Sally. "I'm as cleaned out as a gutted herring. That cheating cat Anastasia bagged every shilling I had." [Pg 155]

Rofflash had no reason to doubt Sally's word. He knew the phenomenal luck which attended Lady Anastasia's play and he had to be contented with promises.

Thus they parted.

CHAPTER XVII

"THERE ARE SO MANY WAYS OF MAKING LOVE"

Rofflash was right. He *had* seen Lavinia enter the Old Bailey coffee house. Hannah was sitting up expecting her—she had arranged as much with Lavinia—and she became terribly uneasy when midnight sounded from half a dozen church clocks and the girl still absent.

Hannah's bedroom overlooked the Old Bailey and now and again she leaned out of the window, her eyes towards Ludgate Hill. Lavinia was bound to come in this direction. Sure enough about half-past twelve Hannah caught sight of a cloaked figure stealing along in the centre of the roadway. It was the safest way; the overhanging storeys and the sunk doorways offered lurking places for ill-conditioned fellows on the scent for mischief. Hannah indeed caught sight of a man in the deep shadow of the houses who looked very much as if he were following Lavinia, and she raced softly down to the shop, opened the door and beckoned the girl to hasten.

"Merciful Heaven, what a fright you've put me in to be sure," she whispered, throwing her arms about Lavinia. "Come in you truant. Lord, I do believe you was born to plague me out of my seven [Pg 156] senses. You look tired to death. What have you been a-doing of? But don't worry to tell me now. You must eat something first. Why, you're all of a tremble. Was you frightened of that rascal as was dogging you?"

"Was there one? I didn't know it."

"One? I wonder there wasn't a dozen. A pretty young thing like you to be in the streets at this ungodly hour. There he is a stopping now and looking this way. Let him look. He won't see nought."

And Hannah shut to the door with more noise than she intended, much to Lavinia's alarm lest her mother should be aroused.

"No fear o' that, child. Your mother's had as much gin an' beer as she can carry. It was as good as I could do to get her up the stairs to her bedroom. Sure she's mad about your running away out of reach. I've had a nice time with her. But it 'ud take all the trumpets as blowed down the walls of Jericho to wake her now."

When the door was securely locked and bolted there was more hugging, and Hannah's strong arms half led, half carried the girl into the kitchen where a fire was smouldering which a bellows soon fanned into a blaze. Eggs and bacon were put on to cook and Lavinia, curled in a roomy chair, watched the kindly young woman's proceedings with great contentment.

Lavinia told Hannah her story in fragments, saying nothing about Lancelot Vane. Hannah's mind was a blank as to Pope and Gay and she was more interested in the encounter with the highwayman. She did not ask much about Giles, but Lavinia guessed it was a subject dear to her heart and she did not forget to describe his mother, his cottage, and everything about them very minutely. Nor did she omit to praise his respectful civility and his good heart.

"And now all's said and done, Hannah," she cried, "what's to become of me?" [Pg 157]

"Aye, bless your heart, that's the trouble. This morning I put on my considering cap an' was a-thinking and a-thinking when who should pop her face in but my cousin Betty Higgins as lives at Hampstead. 'La, Betty,' I says, 'where have you dropped from?' 'Ah,' says she, 'you may well say that. I've been a-comin' for goodness knows how long knowin' as my clothes line was a-gettin' as rotten as rotten could be. Yesterday the wind caught the sheets and blankets as I'd just hung out an' down they all plumped on a muddy patch an' had to be dropped in the tub again. I wasn't a-goin' to have that happen a second time so I've come up to buy a new line in Long Lane an' some soap at Couplands an' here I be as large as life.' That put a notion in my head, Lavvy, my dear. I told her about you and she's promised me a little room as she don't use much, an' that's where you're going when you've had a sleep."

"Oh, Hannah, how good you are," cried Lavinia between her kisses. "But Hampstead! Why, that's where all the fashion goes! The Hampstead water cures everything they say."

"May be," rejoined Hannah dryly. "But there's other things besides as I'll warrant the quality like better than the well water—nasty stuff it is. I once drank a glass at Sam's coffee house at Ludgate where it's brought fresh every morning and it nearly turned my stomach. There's music an' dancing in the Pump Room and dicing and cards at Mother Huff's near the Spaniards, aye an' lovemaking in the summer time by moonlight. I dunno if it's a safe place for a mad young thing like you to be living at when the sparks are roaming about."

"Pooh!" retorted Lavinia tossing her head. "I ought to know how to take care of myself."

"Yes, you ought. But can you?"

"You silly old Hannah. Hampstead can't be worse for me than London."

"Perhaps not. If you couldn't be guarded at the Queen Square boarding school with a female [Pg 158] dragon as can use her eyes, why there's no place in the world where the men won't chase you."

"Well, it's not my fault. *I* don't chase *them*."

"There's no need for you to do that, you baggage. You've only got to give any one of them a glance and he gallops after you."

"What am I to do if I can't alter myself?"

"Goodness knows. Things must go their own way I suppose. You can't stop here, that's sure. It'll have to be Hampstead. But don't forget I've warned you."

Then they both crept up to Hannah's room, and at six o'clock the next morning they were astir, Lavinia making a hurried breakfast and preparing to set out on her long walk. There was no conveyance as the stage coach on the Great North Road through Highgate and Finchley did not start until later in the day, and Hannah, a good hearted soul never so happy as when helping others, gave Lavinia all the money she could spare with which to pay her sister-in-law a small sum every week.

"I don't know what I should do but for you, Hannah dear," said Lavinia gratefully. "It's shameful to take your money, but I swear I'll pay back every penny, and before long too."

"Yes, when you've married a rich man."

"No, no. I'm not thinking of being married. I shall be earning money soon."

"Tilly vally! How, miss, may I ask?"

"Ah, that's a secret. Mr. Gay says so and he ought to know."

"It's well if he does. Your Mr. Gay seems to be taking a mighty deal of notice of you. I only hope it'll all end well," said Hannah with a solemn shake of the head.

"End well? Indeed it will. Why shouldn't it?"

Lavinia laughed confidently, and her joyful tone and her face so bright with its contrast with her desolate condition brought a furtive tear to Hannah's eye, but she took care not to let the girl see it. [Pg 159]

The morning had broken fair and by seven o'clock Lavinia was trudging along Holborn on her way to Hampstead through what is known now as Tottenham Court Road, then little more than a wide country lane.

At Great Turnstile she lingered and her eyes wandered down the narrow passage. Great Turnstile led to Lincoln's Inn Fields, and in Portugal Row on the south side of the "Fields" was the Duke's Theatre. Association of ideas was too strong to be resisted. Thinking of the theatre, how could she help also thinking of Gay's encouragement as to herself—of Lancelot Vane and his tragedy?

Another thought was lurking at the back of her mind. She had gone to sleep dwelling upon her promise to meet Vane at Rosamond's Pond. Did she mean to keep that promise? She could not decide. She had given her consent under a sort of compulsion. Was it therefore binding? At any rate if she went to Hampstead the meeting was impossible.

It was this last reflection which made her linger. Reasons for altering her plans chased each other through her brain. The poor fellow would be so disappointed if he did not see her. How long would he wait? How wretched his garret would appear when he returned disconsolate! His despondency might drive him to break *his* promise to her. Where was the harm in keeping her appointment instead of going to Hampstead? No harm at all save that she would be behaving ungratefully to Hannah. But Hannah would understand. Hannah was never without a sweetheart of a sort.

A sweetheart? That was the important point for Lavinia. Was Lancelot her sweetheart? She wondered. She blushed at the idea. It agitated her. She had not felt agitated when she ran away with Dorrimore—just a pleasant thrill of excitement, a sense of adventure; that was all. Dorrimore had made downright love to her; he had called her all the pet names in fashion. His admiration flattered and amused her, nothing more. Vane hadn't made love—at least it didn't seem to her that he had. But there are so many ways of making love! [Pg 160]

"Hampstead's miles away," she mused. "If I go there we shall hardly ever see each other. At all events I ought to tell him where I shall be living. It won't be a surprise. He thinks I'm a fine lady and it's the fashion for fine ladies to go to Hampstead at this time of the year. It might make him jealous though," she added thoughtfully, "if he knows of the lovemaking by moonlight Hannah talked about."

She could decide upon nothing, and rather than loiter in Holborn while trying to solve the problem she entered Great Turnstile passage and presently was in the quietude of Lincoln's Inn Fields. At night she would not have ventured to cross this big open space haunted as it was after dark by footpads and pickpockets, but at that early hour of the morning there was nothing to fear. Only a few people were about and in the enclosure railed off from the roadway by posts was a horse being broken in. The theatre was a link between her and Lancelot Vane and thinking of him she walked towards it.

The Fields were crossed by two roads running diagonally from opposite corners and intersecting each other at the centre. Lavinia took the road which led to the southwestern angle. Close by this angle was the Duke's Theatre.

Lavinia reached the plain unpretending structure which looked at from the outside might be mistaken for a warehouse, and she gazed at its blank front wondering if fate meant to be kind and give her the chance her soul longed for. But in spite of Mr. Gay's encouraging hints it seemed impossible that she would ever sing within its walls.

She turned away sorrowfully and came cheek by jowl with a slenderly built thin-faced man whose eyes twinkled humorously, and with mobile lips that somehow suggested comicality. He stopped and stared; apparently trying to recall some remembrance of her. She recognised him at once. He was Jemmy Spiller the most popular comedian of the day. Everybody who had any acquaintance with Clare Market knew Jem Spiller. So much so that a tavern there was called after him. [Pg 161]

"Faith, young madam, I've seen you before," said he. "Where, pray, was it?"

"I've sung inside the 'Spiller's Head' more than once a year and more ago," returned Lavinia with the demure look which was so characteristic and at the same time so engaging.

"What, are you that saucy little baggage? By the Lord, let me look at you again."

Spiller's laughing eyes roamed over her from head to foot and his shrewd face wrinkled into the quizzical expression which had often times sent his audience into a roar. Lavinia laughed too.

"Aye, you haven't lost the trick of sending a look that goes straight as an arrow to a man's heart. Tell me, was it not you that Mr. Gay took under his wing? At the 'Maiden Head,' wasn't it?"

"Yes. I've much to thank Mr. Gay for and you as well, Mr. Spiller. You and your friends from the market saved me from a clawed face."

"Why to be sure. That fury Sal Salisbury had her spurs on. She'd have half killed you but for us coming to the spot at the right time. But, child, what have you been doing? Hang me if you haven't sprung into a woman in a few months."

It was true. When Spiller last saw her she was hardly better than a waif and stray. She was thin and bony, her growth impeded by insufficient food, irregular hours and not a little ill usage. At Miss Pinwell's she had lived well, she was happy, she had had love illusions and Nature had asserted its sway.

Lavinia coloured with pleasure. To be complimented by Spiller, the idol of the public—an actor—and she adored actors—was like the condescension of a god. She dropped him a low curtsey. [Pg 162]

"Oh, and you're in the fashion too. How long have you been a fine lady?"

Spiller's voice and manner had become slightly serious. Lavinia was too familiar with London life not to understand the inference.

"I owe it all to Mr. Gay," she answered quickly. "He is the kindest hearted man in the world. You see he spoke to her Grace the Duchess of Queensberry about me and she sent me to school in Queen Square."

"What, you've rubbed shoulders with the quality, have you? How comes it then that you talk to me—a rogue and a vagabond?"

"You a rogue and a vagabond! Indeed you're not. I—I'm afraid, though, I'm one. I doubt if her grace would notice me now."

"The devil she wouldn't! What's happened then?"

"Oh, it's a long story. I should tire you if I were to tell you."

"A pretty girl tire me? What do you take me for, Polly? It is Polly, isn't it?"

"Mr. Gay called me Polly, but it isn't my right name."

"Good enough for me, my dear. But what have you done? A harmless bit of mischief when all's said, I'll swear."

"I don't know," rejoined Lavinia slowly. "I didn't mean any harm but I suppose I was very silly."

"Well, let me have the catalogue of your sins and I'll be judge."

CHAPTER XVIII

[Pg 163]

"SOME DAY YOU'LL BE THE TALK OF THE TOWN"

As the two paced up and down in front of the playhouse Lavinia told the actor the whole story. Spiller smiled indulgently at the love portion of the narrative, but was impressed by the test Lavinia had gone through at Pope's Villa and by Gay's belief in her future.

In Spiller's opinion there was no reason why Lavinia should not succeed as a comedy actress. Her want of experience was nothing. Her natural vivacity and intelligence were everything. Experience would soon come. What actress who in those days became celebrated had had much training before she went on the boards? Where was the opportunity with but four theatres in London and one of them devoted to opera?

People were still living who could remember Kynaston the beautiful youth as the sole representative of women's parts before actresses were known on the stage. Nell Gwynne came from the gutter, and Nance Oldfield from a public house in St. James's Market. Mrs. Barry had possibly had some training under Davenant, who secured her an engagement, and she was at first a failure. She was destined for tragedy and tragic actresses are not made in five minutes, but comedy demanded little more than inborn sprightliness and high spirits. Lavinia had both, and she could sing.

Spiller, comedian as he was, possessed what we now call the artistic temperament. He was not contented with the mannerisms which provoke a laugh and because they never vary—the characteristic of many comedians who like to be recognised and applauded directly they step upon the stage. Spiller bestowed the greatest pains upon his "make up", and so identified himself with the part he was playing as completely to lose his own personality, and bewildered his audience as to whether he was their favourite they were applauding. He had the art of acting at [Pg 164]

his fingers' ends.

"Child," said he when Lavinia had finished, "Mr. Gay and Dr. Pepusch did not mistake. You've but to observe and work and some day you'll be the talk of the town."

"Do you really mean that, Mr. Spiller?"

The girl's voice was tremulous with delight. Spiller's praise was of greater value than Gay's. He was an actor and knew.

"I shouldn't say so if I didn't. I mustn't lose sight of you. A pity you'll be staying at Hampstead. I'd like to take you to Mr. Rich. You ought to be near at hand."

"But I don't want to go to Hampstead. I hate the very notion," cried Lavinia breathlessly. "If I could only find a lodging in town!"

"That might be managed. There are lodgings to be had in the house in Little Queen Street where Mrs. Egleton lives. But have you any money?"

"Enough to keep me for a week. Maybe Mr. Rich would find something for me to do. I can dance as well as sing."

"I'll warrant you, but John Rich does all the dancing himself, and as for singing—he doesn't think much of it. But we'll see. Wouldn't your friend the duchess help you?"

"I don't know. I'm afraid I'm out of her grace's favour," said Lavinia dolefully. "Besides, she might want to send me back to Queen Square. Lud, I couldn't bear that. Miss Pinwell wouldn't have me, though," she added in a tone of relief.

"I'll wager she wouldn't," said Spiller dryly. "She'd be in mortal fear of the whole of her young ladies following your example and running away with the town sparks. Well, we'll see what can be done for you, Polly, though I fear me I'm going to have a sad pickle on my hands." [Pg 165]

"Oh, pray don't say that, Mr. Spiller. What's happened was not my doing."

"Of course not. But let us to Little Queen Street. If Mrs. Egleton is in the mood she may be of use to you. But take care not to ruffle her plumes. You've heard of her I doubt not?"

"Oh, yes. I saw her once at Drury Lane. She sings does she not, sir?"

"Aye, so mind and not outsing her."

They walked along the western side of the Fields to Little Queen Street, where the houses were substantial enough, though not nearly so imposing as those in Great Queen Street where many noblemen and rich people lived.

Spiller was well known to the proprietor of the house, where Mrs. Egleton lodged and was received with effusion. Mrs. Egleton was not up, as indeed Spiller expected, nor would she be until past mid-day. But this did not matter. The landlady had a front attic vacant which she was willing to let to anyone recommended by Mr. Spiller for a very small sum, and here Lavinia installed herself.

"Have a rest, Polly, and something to eat," said Spiller. "I shall call for you about eleven o'clock. I want you to look your best. We're going to see Mr. Rich. Heaven give us luck that we may find him in good humour."

"Do you mean this morning?" cried Lavinia, in dismay.

"Well, I don't mean this evening. You're not afraid, are you?"

"No, I don't think I am, but—but I would that I had a new gown and cloak. See how frightfully draggled they are."

"Odds bodikins, Mr. Rich doesn't want to see how you're gowned. Mrs. Sanders will lend you a needle and thread and help you patch yourself."

Lavinia would have protested but Spiller laughed away her objections, and departed with a final injunction to be in readiness when he called. [Pg 166]

When the girl was alone she looked around her new abode with interest and curiosity. The room was small; it had a sloping roof coming so low at one end where the bed was that she would have to take care not to strike her head against the ceiling when she sat up. The furniture was scanty and plain but the place was clean. For the first time in her life she was completely her own mistress. She sank into a roomy arm-chair, and surveyed her domain with much satisfaction; then she half closed her eyes and indulged in a day dream.

Everything in the most wonderful way had turned out for the best. She dreaded being banished to Hampstead. It had threatened insuperable obstacles in the way of her love and her ambition. She had felt that she was going into exile. But all was now smooth. Her scruples about keeping her promise to Vane vanished. If only her visit to Mr. Rich proved successful, her happiness would be complete.

The time sped in her roseate musings. She had had a rest as Spiller advised and springing up she attacked her ragged attire with renewed energy. When Spiller called, she looked so fresh and

animated the comedian laughed and complimented her.

"Gadsooks," he exclaimed, "you clever hussy! It's well our plans are altered. If Rich not only offered thee an engagement but made love into the bargain then the fat would be in the fire. He hath a termagant of a wife. She'd as lief scratch your face as look at you. But thank the Lord you're safe."

"Safe? I don't understand," cried Lavinia a little flustered. "Am I not to see Mr. Rich then?"

"Not yet. Didn't I say our plans are altered? The Duke's is in turmoil. Rich let the theatre to Huddy and his company of strolling players—at least Huddy says he did—and has now cried off the bargain and Huddy is turned out. Rich hasn't any play ready so it's no use taking you to him." [Pg 167]

"Oh, how unlucky! I shan't have any chance after all."

Poor Lavinia almost broke down. The shattering of her castle in the air was more than she could endure.

"Not with Rich just yet. But don't despair. Huddy has taken his company to the New Theatre and it'll go hard if I don't talk him into putting you into a part. It may be all for the best. You'd only get a promise out of Rich whereas Huddy might be glad to get you. He's in a mighty hurry to open the theatre. We'll go at once to the Haymarket."

Lavinia was a little disappointed, but not dismayed. After all an immediate entrance into the magical stage world was the important point. She had to begin somewhere, and to play at the New Theatre was not like playing in an inn yard or mumming booth.

They reached the stage door of the New Theatre, afterwards called the Little Theatre in the Haymarket, which it may be said in passing was not quite on the site of the present Haymarket Theatre. The entrance was small, the passage beyond was dark and they had to grope their way to the stage, which lighted as it was by half a dozen candles or so was gloomy enough. The daylight struggled into the audience part through a few small windows above the gallery. A rehearsal was going on, and a red faced man with a hoarse voice was stamping about and shouting at the performers. When he saw Spiller he stopped and came towards the comedian. Compared with Huddy, Spiller was a great man.

Spiller stated his business and introduced Lavinia. The manager stared at her, shifted his wig, scratched his head and grunted something to the effect that he couldn't afford to pay anybody making a first appearance.

"Look 'ee here, Mr. Spiller. It's my benefit and my company don't expect a penny. D'ye see! I've been used in a rascally fashion by that scoundrel Rich, and I'll have to raise a few guineas afore I [Pg 168] can start in the country."

Spiller saw the position and said that the young lady who he was careful to point out was a "gentlewoman" was quite willing to appear on these terms and so the matter was settled.

"She won't have much of a part. We're playing 'The Orphan' and all I can give her is Serina. I've had to make shift with the young 'oman as carries the drum and looks after the wardrobe. It's likely as the young gentlewoman'll do as well as her, a careless, idle slut as don't know how to speak her words decently."

Nor did Mr. Huddy, Lavinia thought. But this was nothing. The owner of a travelling play acting booth was as a rule an illiterate showman.

"When do you rehearse 'The Orphan?'" asked Spiller.

"We're a-doing of it now. It's just over or the young gentlewoman—you haven't told me her name ——"

"Fenton—Lavinia Fenton."

"Oh, aye. I was a-going to say that if we hadn't finished Miss Fenton might stay and get some notion of the play. Let her come to-morrow—half-past ten, sharp, mind."

"Do you hear that, Polly?" said Spiller in an undertone.

"I shan't fail, sir, you may be sure," replied Lavinia joyfully.

Spiller knew some of the company and he introduced Lavinia to the leading lady, Mrs. Haughton, who was to play the mournful, weeping Monimia in Otway's dismal tragedy. But for Spiller the "star" actress would hardly have deigned to notice the girl; as it was she received Lavinia with affability marked by condescension. Mrs. Haughton was a "star," who did not care to associate with strolling players.

Lavinia left the theatre in the seventh heaven of delight. Everything she had wished for was coming to pass. She longed for the evening. She saw herself telling the wonderful tale of her [Pg 169] good luck to Lancelot. She was sure of his warm sympathy and she pictured to herself his smile and the ardent look in his eyes.

Spiller suggested a walk in the Mall so that he might give the novice a few practical hints. Huddy had handed Lavinia her part written out, but it did not tell her much, as everything the other characters in the play had to say was omitted and only the cues for Serina left.

"Just sixteen lines you've got to learn. That won't give you much trouble. I'll show you how to say them. Don't forget to listen for the cues and come in at the proper place."

The lesson did not take long. Lavinia soon had a grasp of the character (Serina figures in the play as a bit of padding and has very little to do); her articulation was clear and she could modulate her voice prettily. Spiller said she would do very well, and wishing her good luck, took his departure and left her in St. James's Park.

He could not have done Lavinia a better turn. Rosamond's Pond was at the south-west corner of the Park and Rosamond's Pond was in Lavinia's mind. It had occurred to her that Lancelot had not fixed any particular spot as the place of meeting. The pond was of a fair size, it would be dark and it might so happen that while he was waiting for her on one side she might be on the other. Still, this was scarcely likely, for they would both approach the Pond from the east.

However, there would be no harm in fixing the bearings of the pond in her mind and so she crossed the park and skirting the formal canal now transformed into the ornamental water, reached the pond which was at the end of Birdcage Walk near Buckingham House, an enlarged version of which is known to us to-day as Buckingham Palace.

The pond was amidst picturesque surroundings. There was nothing of the primness which William III. had brought with him from Holland. The trees had been allowed to grow as they [Pg 170] pleased, the shrubs were untrimmed, the grass uncut. The banks of the pond were steep in places, shelving in others. Here and there were muddy patches left by the water receding after heavy rains. But the wildness and the seclusion had their attractions, and little wonder was it that love had marked Rosamond's Pond as its own.

There was something like a promenade on the higher ground to the east. Here it was dry and Lavinia decided that this was the most likely spot which Lancelot would select. Moreover, a path from the Mall near St. James's Palace led direct to the Pond and by this path Vane would be sure to come.

The crisp air was exhilarating and the young grass gave it sweetness. The twittering of the birds suggested a passage of love. The mid-day sun shone upon the distant Abbey and very romantic did its towers look against the blue sky.

Lavinia's spirits rose. She felt very happy. Her real life was beginning. All that had happened, her mad escapade with Dorrimore, the baseness of her mother, her escape from the house in the Old Bailey, her many trials and tribulations were mere trifles to be forgotten as soon as possible. But her thoughts of Lancelot Vane—oh, they were serious enough. There was no pretence about them. And to fill her cup of joy would be her first appearance on the stage!

For a brief space this overpowered everything. Coming to a bench she sat down, drew out the manuscript of the play and read over her part and recalled everything Spiller had said about the various points. When she rose she knew the lines and the cues by heart. Then it occurred to her that she was hungry and she pursued her way back to her lodgings in Little Queen Street.

CHAPTER XIX [Pg 171]

AT ROSAMUND'S POND

In the course of the day Lavinia made the acquaintance of Mrs. Egleton. The landlady had told the actress how Spiller had brought Lavinia and how the latter was to appear at the New Theatre. Mrs. Egleton, a dark young woman somewhat pallid and with eyes which suggested that she had a temper which she would be ready to show if put out, was languid and patronising. Though it was past noon the lady had not long got out of bed, and her dress was careless, her hair straggling, her complexion sallow and the dark half circles beneath her eyes were significant of nerve exhaustion. She had in fact the night before sat up late gaming, dancing, eating, drinking—especially drinking—with a party of friends. The time was to come when she and Lavinia would be closely associated, but at that moment it was the last thing that entered into the heads of either.

Mindful of her appointment Lavinia set out early. She had taken great pains over her toilet and she looked very attractive. She had no need of paint and powder. Excitement had brought a flush to her cheek. The fluttering of her heart, the impatience at the lagging time were new sensations. She had experienced nothing like this disturbing emotion when she set out on a much more hazardous enterprise to meet Archibald Dorrimore. The difference puzzled her but she did not trouble to seek the reason. It did not occur to her that she was really and truly in love with Lancelot Vane.

She had plenty of time to reach the trysting place, but to walk slowly was impossible. Her nerves were in too much of a quiver. It hardly wanted a half hour of seven o'clock when she entered upon the path, leading from St. James's Palace to the pond. [Pg 172]

Vane was not less desirous of being punctual than Lavinia, and he had indeed arrived at Rosamond's Pond some five minutes before her. While he was impatiently pacing by the side of

the water and anxiously looking along the path by which he expected she would come, a lady whose dress was in the height of the mode and masked approached him. In those days a mask did not necessarily imply mystery. A mask was worn to serve as a veil and a woman with her features thus hidden did not excite more attention than that of mere curiosity. Vane had noticed her turning her face towards him as she passed, but thought nothing of it.

Suddenly she stopped, stepped back a pace and whispered softly:—

"Mr. Vane, is it not?"

"That is my name, madam."

"Ah, I hoped I was not mistaken. You don't remember me?"

"I beg your forgiveness if I say I do not."

"Nor a certain night not long ago when you were flying from a ruffianly mob and you sought the shelter of my house? But may be you've a short memory. Mine isn't so fleeting. Men's kisses are lightly bestowed. Women are different. I shall never forget the tender touch of your lips."

She sighed, lifted her mask for a moment and replaced it. To Vane's infinite confusion he recognised Sally Salisbury.

"Madam," he faltered, "I—I venture to suggest that you're under a misapprehension. It was not I who kissed."

Sally drew herself up with a disdainful air. She had a fine figure and she knew how to display it.

"What?" she cried. "Do you dare to deny your farewell embrace?"

"Madam—really I——"

He was more embarrassed than ever. It was untrue to say that he had kissed her. The kisses were hers and hers alone, but it would be ungallant to tell her so. He cursed the evil star which had [Pg 173] chanced to throw her against him at such a crisis. Lavinia might make her appearance at any moment and what would she think?

But the stars had nothing to do with the matter, nor chance either. It was a ruse, a worked out design between Sally and Rofflash to secure Vane and spite Lavinia whom she hated more than enough.

Meanwhile Lavinia was drawing near. Mistress Salisbury had shifted her position and had manoeuvred so as she could glance down the path to St. James's Palace and perforce Vane had his back towards it. Sally's sharp eyes caught sight of a figure which she shrewdly guessed was Lavinia's.

Preparing herself for a crowning piece of craft, Sally suddenly relaxed her rigidity and inclined langorously towards Vane who had no alternative save catching her. No sooner did she feel his arms than she sank gracefully into them, her handkerchief to her eyes.

"Madam," stammered the troubled young man, "pray recollect yourself. I protest——"

"Protest! Oh, how cruel—how hard hearted! I love you. Can you hear me make such a confession and be unmoved? I throw myself at your feet."

"For God's sake, madam, don't do anything so foolish."

He could feel her slipping gradually to the ground and he could not but hold her tighter, and so did exactly what she was angling for.

"It's Heaven to feel your embrace," she murmured. "Dear—dearest Lancelot. Oh, if you only knew how I've longed and prayed we might meet! I never thought to see you again, and here, without a moment's warning, I'm face to face with you. Can you wonder I'm unable to control myself? I know it's folly—weakness—anything you like to call it. I don't care. I love you and that's all I know. Kiss me, Lancelot!"

The unhappy Vane was at his wits' end. The more he tried to release himself the closer she clung [Pg 174] to him. Who seeing them could doubt that they were ardent lovers? Sally's last words were uttered in a tone of reckless passion, partly stimulated, partly real. She had raised her voice purposely. She knew its penetrating accents would reach the ears for which the loving words were really intended. She saw Lavinia who was hastening towards them stop suddenly, then her figure swayed slightly, her head bent forward, and in a few moments there was hesitation. Finally she wheeled round and fled.

Sally Salisbury had secured a complete victory so far as her rival was concerned, but she had not won Lancelot Vane. She did not delude herself into the belief that she had, but her triumph would come.

Vane succeeded in wrenching himself free, but not for some minutes. On one excuse or another she detained him and it was only on his promising to meet her the following night at Spring Gardens that he managed to make his escape. It was too late. In vain he waited for Lavinia, but she came not. He was plunged in the depths of disappointment.

"She never meant to keep her word," he muttered savagely and strode along the path towards St. James's Palace, hoping against hope that he might chance to meet her.

Lancelot Vane was not the only man in the park at that moment who was angered at Lavinia's non-appearance. When Vane was trying to repel Sally's embarrassing caresses a coach stopped on the western side of the Park at the point nearest to Rosamond's Pond. The coach could have been driven into the Park itself, but this could not be done without the King's permission. Two men got out and walked rapidly to the pond.

"A quarter past seven," said one drawing his watch from his fob. "The time of meeting, Rofflash, you say was seven."

"Aye, and they'll be punctual to the minute, I'll swear." [Pg 175]

"Then we ought to find the turtle doves billing and cooing. A thousand pities we couldn't get the coach nearer. Damn His Majesty King George, say I."

"Talk under your breath, Mr. Dorrimore, if you must air your traitorous speeches," whispered Rofflash. "You don't seem to know that what you've been saying is little short of 'God save King James,' which is treason in any case and doubly dyed treason when uttered in the Royal Park."

"Treason or not, I vow that if my coach were more handy it would help us vastly. Carrying the girl a few yards were an easy matter and a squeal or two of no consequence, but five hundred yards—pest take it."

"S'blood, sir, she's no great weight and with so precious a burden in your arms 't'would be but a whet to appetite. Still, if you're unequal to the task, pray command me. I'd take her and willing."

"That I'll swear you would. Wait till I call on you. What of that pair by the pond? Curse it, but I believe they're our quarries. She has two arms round his neck. The wanton baggage! And she once protested she loved me! On to 'em, Rofflash. Engage the fellow while I handle the wench. Eh?—Why—look ye there, captain. He's thrown her off. He's going. A tiff I'll swear. What a piece of luck! She's by herself. Now's our time. Bustle, damn you."

Rofflash made a show of bustling, but it was nothing but show. The mature damsel from whom Vane had hurried was half a head taller than Lavinia. He knew who she was perfectly well, for had he not plotted with Sally Salisbury to meet Lancelot Vane, to the discomfiture of Lavinia Fenton?

The crafty Rofflash had contrived to have two strings to his bow. Dorrimore would pay him to help abduct Lavinia, and Sally would do the same for his good offices concerning Vane. He had certainly succeeded in the latter case, but as to Lavinia, the certainty was not so evident. She was [Pg 176] nowhere to be seen. Dorrimore, however, for the moment was under the impression that the woman who was standing gazing at Vane's retreating figure was Lavinia and it was not Rofflash's game to undeceive him.

Dorrimore soon discovered his mistake.

"Sally Salisbury! The devil!"

Of course he recognised her. What fashionable profligate young or old would not?

"Why Archie," rejoined the lady laughingly and making him a mocking curtsey, "were you looking for me? Faith, I'm glad of it. A bottle of Mountain port would be exactly to my taste."

"Was that your gallant who left you just now?"

"One of them," said Sally coolly.

Dorrimore turned angrily to Rofflash.

"What the devil does this mean? Have you tricked me?"

"I'll swear I haven't. If anybody's been playing tricks it's that crazy cat Sally," returned Rofflash in a low voice. "Your bird can't have flown very far. Her man was here, you see. Let's follow him. We're bound to light upon them together."

The suggestion was as good as any other. Dorrimore refreshed himself with a string of the latest oaths in fashion and set off with the scheming captain, leaving Sally somewhat provoked. She had had many a guinea from Dorrimore, and was in the mood to get more now that her spite against Lavinia was gratified.

The two men raced off at the double, Dorrimore's rage increasing the further he went. It looked as if his plan to kidnap Lavinia had broken down. The idea had been to waylay her before she joined Vane. As the thing was turning out, she promised, when found, to be at so great a distance from the coach that to convey her there would be difficult.

Before long they hove in sight of Lancelot Vane. He too was hurrying and looking right and left as [Pg 177] he went. And he was alone.

"The girl's fooled him," muttered Dorrimore between his set teeth. "That wouldn't matter a tinker's curse, but she's fooled us as well. Rofflash, I've a mind to pick a quarrel with the fellow and pink him."

"And get yourself landed in Newgate. Don't you know, sir, it's against the law to draw a sword in the Park? If you're going to be so mad, I'll say good evening. I'll have nought to do with such folly. We'll find some other way to lay the spark by the heels and have the girl as well. My advice is not to show yourself or you'll put him on his guard."

Dorrimore, whose head was not particularly strong, had had a couple of bottles with his dinner to give him spirit for the enterprise, and he allowed himself to be persuaded. He and Rofflash betook themselves to the coach which landed them at a tavern in St. James's Street, where Dorrimore drank and drank until he fell under the table and was carried out by a couple of waiters, put in a hackney coach and conveyed to his chambers in the Temple.

Rofflash left his patron at the tavern long before this period arrived. He was on the search for Mistress Salisbury and knowing her haunts pretty well, he ran her to earth at a house of questionable repute in the neighbourhood of Charing Cross. Sally had had more to drink than the bottle of Mountain port her soul had craved for and was inclined to be boisterous, but her temper was apt to be uncertain. It was a toss up whether she laughed, cried or flew into a passion. She was inclined to the first if she thought of her triumph over Lavinia and to the last when Lancelot Vane and her failure to seduce him from his allegiance came into her mind.

Sally often boasted she could win any man if she gave her mind to the task, but Vane had escaped her toils. Perhaps it was that she had a genuine passion for him and so had not used her powers [Pg 178] of fascination. The more she drank, the more she cursed herself for having allowed Vane to slip through her fingers, and being in a reckless mood, she said as much to Rofflash. Otherwise she would hardly have made a confidant of a fellow who combined swash-buckling with highway robbery.

"What!" jeered Captain Jeremy, "Sally Salisbury own herself beaten over a man. I'd as lief believe my old commander the great Duke Marlborough crying he couldn't thrash the mounseers. I'll swear you didn't let him go without getting the promise of an assignation out of him."

"A promise? Don't talk of promises. It's easier to get a promise out of a man than his purse."

"Lord, madam, if it's the purse of that vapouring young spark you're after, you'll be wasting your labour. You'll find it as empty as yonder bottle. I'll swear now that you set greater store by his heart."

Rofflash glanced shrewdly at Sally's face. Her lips were working convulsively. He knew he was right.

"You're a cunning devil, captain. You've the wheedling tongue of Satan himself and his black soul, too, I doubt not. You're all ears and eyes when money's to be picked up. Take that for what you did for me to-night."

Sally drew five guineas from her pocket and flung them on the table. A couple would have rolled on to the floor, but Rofflash grabbed them in time. Sally burst into one of her hard, mirthless laughs.

"Trust you for looking after coin. See here, you Judas. Vane promised to meet me at Spring Gardens to-morrow night. When I see him I shall believe him, not before. You must work it so that he comes."

"Hang me, Sally, but that's a hard nut to crack."

"Not too hard for your tiger's teeth. I'll double those five guineas if you bring it off."

Rofflash relished the proposition, but he pretended to find difficulties and held out for higher pay. To Sally money was as water. She agreed to make the ten into fifteen. Rofflash swearing that he'd [Pg 179] do his best, took his departure and left the lady, like Archibald Dorrimore, to drink herself into insensibility.

"The devil looks after his own," chuckled Rofflash as he swaggered down the Strand. "It'll go hard if I don't squeeze fifty guineas out of that idiot Dorrimore over to-morrow night's work! He'd give that to have the pleasure of running the scribbler through the body. Lord, if I'd breathed a word of *that* to Sally! No fool like an old fool, they say. Bah! The foolishest thing in Christendom is a woman when she's in love."

And Captain Jeremy Rofflash plodded on, well pleased with himself. He took the road which would lead him to Moorfields and Grub Street.

CHAPTER XX

"WHAT DID I TELL THEE, POLLY?"

Lavinia went to her first rehearsal in a strange confusion of spirits, but came through the ordeal successfully. She was letter perfect, and she remembered all Spiller's instructions. Mr. Huddy was pleased to say that he thought she would do.

She left the theatre for her lodgings in Little Queen Street in a flutter of excitement. Otway's "Orphan" might be dull and lachrymose, the part of Serina might be insignificant, but to Lavinia the play was the most wonderful thing. It meant a beginning. She had got the chance she had longed for. She saw herself in imagination a leading lady.

But when she returned to her lodgings a reaction set in. She was depressed. Life had suddenly [Pg 180] become drab and dull. She was thinking of Lancelot Vane, but not angrily, as was the case the previous night when she walked away her head high in the air after seeing Sally Salisbury—of all women in the world!—in his arms. She was in a tumult of passion, and when that subsided tears of indignation rushed to her eyes. She made no excuses for her recreant lover, no allowances for accidents and misadventures. She did not, indeed, think he had set out to insult her, but the unhappy fact was patent that he knew the wanton Sally, and that he had a tender regard for her. Lavinia's reading of the thing was that in her anxiety she had arrived at the trysting place too soon. Ten minutes later and Vane would have got rid of his old love and taken on with his new one. Oh, it was humiliating to think of!

Lavinia walked away in her rage. By the time she reached Little Queen Street, the storm had passed. She had arrived at the conclusion that all men were faithless, selfish, dishonourable. For the future she would have naught to do with them.

The excitement of the rehearsal, the sense of independence she felt when all was got through with credit, lent her buoyancy, but it did not last. The dream she had once had of playing to an audience and seeing only Lancelot Vane in the first row of the pit applauding and eager to congratulate her, was gone. She was done with him for ever. So she told herself. And to strengthen this resolve she recalled his weaknesses, his vacillation, his distrust in himself, his lapses into inebriety. Yet no sooner had she gone over his sins than she felt pity and inclined to forgiveness. But not forgiveness for his faithlessness. That was unpardonable.

Mrs. Egleton, her fellow lodger, had the night before gone to bed sober and was inclined to be complaisant and to interest herself in Lavinia. She was pleased to hear that Huddy had praised her. [Pg 181]

"If he asks you to join his company, don't you refuse," said Mrs. Egleton. "He's got a rough tongue when he's put out, but he knows his business. Three months' experience will do wonders. I must come and see you on *the* night. When is it to be?"

Lavinia said she hadn't the least idea.

"Oh, well, you'll soon know."

Mrs. Egleton was right. In the next issue of the *Daily Post* appeared this advertisement:—

> "At the desire of several persons of quality for the benefit of Mr. Huddy, at the New Theatre in the Haymarket. To-morrow being Thursday, the 24th day of February, will be presented a tragedy called 'The Orphan; or, the Unhappy Marriage,' written by the late Mr. Otway, with a new prologue to be spoken by Mr. Roger, who plays the part of Chamont. The part of Acasto by Mr. Huddy; Monimia, Mrs. Haughton; the page, Miss Tollet; and the part of Serina by a gentlewoman who never appear'd on any stage before. With singing in Italian and English by Mrs. Fitzgerald. And the original trumpet song of sound fame, as set to musick by Mr. Henry Purcel, to be performed by Mr. Amesbury."

Lavinia read this over twice and thrilled with delight. She ran with the paper to Mrs. Egleton.

"Mercy on me, child!" cried the actress. "So you're a gentlewoman, are you?"

"The paper says I am, so I suppose it's true," said Lavinia, casting down her eyes demurely.

"If you are, it'll be a wonder. Not many women players are, I may tell you for your satisfaction. Who was your father?"

"I don't know. I can't remember him."

"Well, you're in the fashion there. Few of us are better off than you. But what matters father or mother? You're in the world, and after all that's as much as you need trouble about. As for your [Pg 182] mother—but I won't bother you about *her*. A mother's not much good to her daughter. She mostly looks to make money out of her by a rich marriage, not that she's over particular about the marriage so long as there's plenty of coin."

Lavinia did not contradict Mrs. Egleton's cynical views. From her own experience she knew it was very often true.

The 24th was a fortnight ahead—plenty of time for the play to be in readiness. Huddy had no fear about the performance. What concerned him more nearly was his "benefit" money. He busied himself in canvassing his patrons and the disposal of tickets.

The night came. Lavinia was wrought to a high pitch of excitement, but her excitement was pleasurable. The scenery, albeit it would be scoffed at nowadays, was to her magnificent. The costumes were gorgeous. It was nothing that they smelt musty from having laid long in the theatre wardrobe. The incongruity of many of the garments gave her no pang of uneasiness. "The Orphan" was of no particular period. Dresses which had done duty in Shakespearean tragedies,

in classical plays of the Cato type, in the comedies of the Restoration dramatists, were equally admissible. The circumscribed space afforded the players by the intrusion on the stage of the seats for the "quality" did not embarrass her. The combined odours of oranges and candle snuff had their charm.

The house was full, but in the dim and smoky candlelight the faces of the audience were little better than rows of shadowy masks. The pit occupied the entire floor of the house right up to the orchestra. Here the critics were to be found. The pit could make or mar the destiny of plays, and the reputation of players. Dozens of regular playgoers knew the traditions of the theatre better than many actors and actresses. They were sticklers for the preservation of the stage "business" to which they had been accustomed. They knew certain lines of their favourite plays by heart, [Pg 183] and how those lines ought to be delivered.

The curtain rose. Acasto, Monimia, Chamont mouthed their various parts, and did exactly what was expected from them. Curiosity was excited only when Serina, the daughter of Acasto, in love with Chamont, made her appearance. Lavinia's winsome face, her eyes half tender, half alluring, her pretty mouth with not an atom of ill nature in its curves, her sympathetic voice, at once attracted the audience. It was a pity, everyone felt, she had so little to say and do. Her few lines expressed but one sentiment—her love for Chamont.

Lavinia played the part as if she felt it, which was indeed the fact, for she was thinking of Lancelot Vane all the time. When she came to her final words in the fifth act—

> "If any of my family have done thee injury,
> I'll be revenged and love thee better for it"

the house thundered its applause, so naturally and with such genuine pathos were they delivered.

The curtain fell. The gallants who had seats on the stage crowded round the "young gentlewoman" and showered compliments. A few privileged people from the front of the house who found their way behind were equally enthusiastic. Even Mrs. Haughton—the Monimia of the play—deigned to smile approvingly.

"What did I tell thee, Polly?" she heard a pleasant if somewhat husky voice whisper in her ear.

She knew the tones and turned quickly. John Gay's kindly eyes were beaming upon her. He had come with Jemmy Spiller, and with a stout man from whose broad red face a look of drollery was rarely absent. This was Hippisley, a comedian with a natural humour which was wont to set an audience in a roar. [Pg 184]

Lavinia blushed with pleasure and cast a grateful look at Spiller, whose hints had proved so valuable.

"Was I not right, Spiller?" went on Gay. "You've read my opera, what there is of it that's finished. Won't Polly Peachum fit her like a glove?"

"Aye, if she can sing as prettily as she acted to-night," said Spiller, with a quizzical glance at the girl.

"Sing? My lad, she has the voice of a nightingale. Pepusch agrees with me. I'll swear there's no singing woman outside the King's Theatre—or inside, for the matter of that—who can hold a candle by the side of her. Have you forgotten the pretty baggage who so charmed us at the Maiden Head?"

"Not I, faith. I was but jesting. And so you've fixed upon her. But I hear that Mr. Rich has set his face against so many songs. He won't take your Polly merely because she can sing."

"Mr. Rich is a fool—in some things," rejoined Gay hastily. "He can dance, I grant you, and posture as no other man can, and he thinks he can act! I heard him once at a party of friends. My good Spiller, if his vanity ever prompted him to air his voice on the stage, the people would think he was mocking them, and one half would laugh and the other half boo and hiss."

"I know—I know. Still, he holds command, and he likes his own way, no man better."

"No doubt, but whatever a man wills he has to give up when a woman says yea or nay. My good duchess means to have a word with him over the songs."

"If that's so John Rich had better capitulate at once. He's as good as beaten."

Lavinia could only catch a word of this talk here and there. She was being pestered by half a dozen sparkish admirers who were somewhat taken aback when they discovered that the "gentlewoman who had never appear'd on any stage before" could more than hold her own in repartee and give the fops of fashion as good as or better than they gave. How could they tell [Pg 185] that the sprightly young budding actress had graduated in the wit and slang of the streets?

But she was pestered and peeved all the same, for she dearly wanted to talk to Gay and Spiller. At last the modish gadflies got tired of having their smart talk turned against them, and one by one fell off, especially as Huddy, whose blunt speech was not much to their taste, came up and intruded without apology into their vapid banter.

"The gal's done well, Spiller," said Huddy, "and I'm obleeged to ye. Now I want to get on the road and waste no time about it. I ought to be at Woolwich afore a fortnight's over, then Dartford,

Gravesend, Rochester, Maidstone, and so away on to Dover. What d'ye say, miss? I can give ye a good engagement—no fixed salary in course—sharing out, that's the rule with travelling companies—Mr. Spiller knows what I'm a'telling you is right."

Lavinia hardly knew what to say to this, and she turned to Spiller for advice. Huddy saw the look of doubt on her face, and went on with his argument.

"It's this way, miss. I don't say as you didn't play to-night to my satisfaction—thanks to my rehearsing of you—but you've got a lot to learn, and, by God, you won't learn it better anywhere in the world than with me. Ask Mr. Spiller—ask Mr. Hippisley. They know what's what, and they'll tell you the same."

Spiller nodded.

"You've made a good beginning, but the more practice you have the better. Isn't that so, Mr. Gay? Mr. Gay has great hopes of you, my dear and—but you'd better hear what he has to say."

"Oh, I should dearly love to," murmured Lavinia.

They were now in the green room. Mrs. Fitzgerald was on the stage singing "in English and French," and her shrill tones penetrated the thin walls greatly to Gay's discomfort. The lady's voice was not particularly sweet. [Pg 186]

"Let us walk apart, Polly," said he. "We shan't hear that noise so keenly."

He took her arm and placed it beneath his.

"Spiller's right, my dear. I have great hopes of you, but your chance won't come for months. The time won't be lost if you work hard at everything Huddy puts in your way. You'll have plenty of variety, but you won't earn much money. The sharing out system puts the lion's portion into the manager's pocket. But that can't be helped. Still, if you want money—the duchess——"

"Oh, Mr. Gay," broke in Lavinia anxiously, "I've been sorely worried thinking of her grace. Have you told her?—I mean about me running away from school and—and——"

Gay laughed and playfully pinched her cheek.

"The love story, eh? Yes, I told the duchess, and she was vastly entertained. She's a woman of infinite spirit and she likes other women to have spirit too. She's not without romance—and I wouldn't give a thank-you for her if she were. If you'd run off out of restlessness or a mere whim or fit of temper, I doubt if she'd troubled about you further; but love—that was another thing altogether. Oh, and your courage in escaping from that dissolute rascal—that captured her. My dear, Queensberry's Duchess is your friend. She's as desirous as I am that you should be Polly Peachum in my 'Beggar's Opera,' and when I tell her about to-night she'll be overjoyed. You need not fear about the future save that it depends upon yourself. But Polly, what of the young playwright, Lancelot Vane?"

"I don't want to hear anything about him!"

"What! Have you and he tiffed? Well, 'tis a way that true love works. But let me tell you I've handed his play to Mr. Cibber, though much I doubt its good fortune. Honestly, my child, though some of the lines are good, others are sad stuff." [Pg 187]

"I don't wish Mr. Vane any ill will, but it is no affair of mine whether his play be good or bad."

"Mercy on me! But you told me he wanted to write in a part for you."

"If he does I won't play it. Mr. Vane is nothing to me."

"Oh, so *that* love's flown away, has it? Was there anybody in this world or any other so full of vagaries and vapours as Master Cupid?"

Lavinia was in a tumult of doubt and contrary inclinations. She hated to discuss Lancelot Vane! She wanted to talk about him! She was suffering from the most puzzling of emotions—the mingled pain and pleasure of self-torture.

Gay neither gratified nor disappointed her. He simply remarked that it was well she now had nothing to distract her mind and that she would be able to devote herself entirely to her new life, and after counselling her not to argue about terms with Huddy, he led her back to the manager, and it was settled that she should join his travelling company.

Lavinia was overwrought, and that night slept but little. It was hard to say whether the thoughts of her future on the stage, her dreams of distinction with Gay's opera, or her wounded love and pride occupied the foremost place in her mind. She resolved over and over again that she would forget Lancelot Vane. She meant to steel herself against every kind of tender recollection. She was certain she hated him and dropped off to sleep thinking of the one kiss they had exchanged.

The next morning she was fairly tranquil. She had not, it is true, dismissed Vane entirely from her thoughts, but she had arrived at the conclusion that as it was all over between them it really was of no consequence whether he had jilted her for Sally Salisbury. That he should bestow even a look on so common a creature was a proof of his vulgar tastes. Oh, he was quite welcome to Sally [Pg 188] if his fancy roamed in so low a direction. She felt she was able to regard the whole business with perfect equanimity.

Her landlady that day bought a copy of the *Daily Post* and she sent it upstairs to Lavinia. Newspaper notices of theatrical performances were rarities in those days. Lavinia did not expect to see any reference to Mr. Huddy's benefit, and her expectations were realised. What she *did* see sent the blood rushing to her face and her hands fumbled so that she could hardly hold the paper. Then she went deadly pale, she tore the paper in half and—a rare thing for Lavinia to do—she burst into tears.

CHAPTER XXI

"IF WE FIGHT.... WHAT SAY YOU TO LAVINIA FENTON?"

The big room of the "Angel and Sun" hard by Cripples Gate was the scene of loud talk, louder laughter and the clank of pewter mugs on the solid oaken table. The fat landlord, divested of his wig, which he only wore on high days and holidays, was rubbing his shiny pate with satisfaction. The Grub Street writers were his best customers, and when they had money in their pockets they were uneasy until it was gone.

The room was low pitched; its big chimney beams projected so much that it behoved a tall man to be careful of his movements; it was full of dark shadows thrown by the two candles in iron sconces on the walls; a high settle was on either side of the fire in front of which stood the bow-legged host, his eyes beaming on the rapidly emptying bottles. [Pg 189]

A slight sound, a movement, caused the landlord to glance towards the door. A stranger had entered. He was not of the Grub Street fraternity. He had too much swagger. His clothes were too fine, despite their tawdriness, his sword hilt too much in evidence. What could be seen of his dark face, the upper half of which his slouched hat concealed, was rather that of a fighter than of a writer. The landlord summed up the signs of a swashbuckler and approached him deferentially.

"Good evenin', sir. What's your pleasure?"

The stranger cast a rapid glance over the revellers sitting round the long, narrow table before he replied.

"Half a pint of gin, landlord," said he, in the deep, husky voice of Captain Jeremy Rofflash, and he strode towards the chimney corner of one of the settles, whence he could see the noisy party of drinkers and not be seen himself very well.

The landlord brought the gin in a pewter pot and set it down on a ledge fixed to the chimney jamb.

"See here, landlord," growled Rofflash, "d'ye know Mr. Jarvis?"

"Sure, sir; 'tis he yonder with the lantern-jawed phizog."

"Aye. Watch your chance when he's not talking to the rest and bid him look where I'm sitting. There's a shilling ready for you if you don't blunder."

The landlord nodded and waddled towards the man he had pointed out.

Jeremy Rofflash, it may be remarked, was a born spy and informer. His blood was tainted with treachery. Ten years before he had been employed by the Whig Government of George of Hanover to ferret out evidence—which not infrequently meant manufacturing it—against the Jacobites. Posing as a Jacobite, Rofflash wormed himself into the secrets of the conspirators, and he figured as an important witness against the rebel lords Derwentwater, Nithsdale, Carnwath and Wintoun. [Pg 190]

It was nothing for him to serve two masters and to play false to both, according as it best suited his own pocket. Sally Salisbury and Archibald Dorrimore were working in two different directions, and the ingenious Jeremy accommodated both. His scheming in Sally's interest had turned out to his and to her satisfaction, but not so that on behalf of Dorrimore. The captain had not reckoned upon Lavinia taking flight before he and his employer arrived on the scene.

The plot of which she was the objective was common enough in those days of free and easy lovemaking. Merely an abduction. Rofflash had an intimate knowledge of Whitefriars, not then, perhaps, so lawless a place as in the times of the Stuarts, but sufficiently lawless for his purpose. Its ancient privileges which made it a sanctuary for all that was vile and criminal had not been entirely swept away. Rofflash knew of more than one infamous den to which Lavinia could be conveyed, and nobody be the wiser.

The abduction plot had failed—for the present—and Rofflash, to pacify Dorrimore, went on another tack. In this he was personally interested. He saw his way to make use of Dorrimore to punish Vane for the humiliation Vane had cast upon him when they encountered each other on London Bridge. This humiliation was a double one. Vane had not merely knocked him down, but had rescued Lavinia under his very nose.

The insult could only be washed out in blood, and the captain had been nursing his wrath ever since. But he was as great a coward as he was a braggart, and a fair fight was not to his taste. He

was more at home in a stealthy approach under the cover of night, and a swift plunge of his sword before the enemy could turn and defend himself.

With Dorrimore it was different. To do him justice, fop as he was, he did not want for courage, and, moreover, he was a good swordsman. So when Rofflash made out that he could bring Vane [Pg 191] to Spring Gardens, where Dorrimore could easily find an excuse for provoking his rival to a duel, the Templar eagerly approved the idea.

It was to carry out this plan practically that Rofflash, after quitting his patron in St. James's Park, made his way to Moorfields. Though he knew that Sally had extracted a promise from Vane to meet her in Spring Gardens, he was by no means certain that Vane would keep his word. But Rofflash was never without resources, and he thought he could devise a plan to bring the meeting about. His scheme proved easier to execute than he expected. Vane unconsciously played into his hands.

After his bitter disappointment through not meeting Lavinia at Rosamond's Pond, Vane walked back to his Grub Street lodgings plunged in fits of melancholy, alternated with moralisings on the faithlessness of women. He did not believe Lavinia had kept the appointment. As for Sally Salisbury, well, it was unfortunate that he should run across her at a wrong moment, but he never imagined that the meeting with her was one of design and not of accident.

Vane had the poetic temperament. He was human and emotional and—he was weak. Had he lived two centuries later he might have fancied, and may be with truth, that he suffered from neurasthenia. In the full-blooded days of the early Georges the complaint was "vapours," otherwise liver, but no one troubled about nerves. The ghastly heads of Jacobite rebels stuck on Temple Bar were looked upon with indifference by the passers-by. The crowds which thronged to Tyburn to witness the half hangings and the hideous disembowelling which followed, while the poor wretches, found guilty of treason, were yet alive, had pretty much the sensation with which a gathering nowadays sees a dangerous acrobatic performance.

Vane had none of this brutish callousness. He was more susceptible to sex influences. Despite his [Pg 192] worship of Lavinia, whom he elevated into a sort of divinity, and who satisfied the more refined part of his nature and his love of romance, he was not insensible to the animal charms of Sally Salisbury. The cunning jade was familiar with all the arts of her profession. She knew how to kiss, and the kiss she bestowed upon him in the park haunted him just as did the kiss he had received whether he would or not on the night when she sheltered him in her house.

Thus it came about that the despondent young man was torn between varying emotions, and by the time he was within hail of Grub Street he was without will of his own and at the mercy of any who chose to exercise influence over him.

Chance led him to encounter a party of boon companions whose company he had vowed to relinquish. One of these was in funds, having abandoned political pamphleteering for the writing of biographies of notorious personages, both men and women—the latter preferably—in which truth and fiction were audaciously blended, and the whole dashed with scandalous anecdotes which found for such stuff a ready sale.

Jarvis and his friends having had their fill of liquor at one tavern, were proceeding to another when they met Lancelot Vane, and they bore him away without much protest. It was by no means the first time that Vane had drowned his sorrows in drink.

Meanwhile Rofflash was on the prowl. He was not unacquainted with some of the Grub Street scribblers. One man he had employed three or four years before, when Jacobitism was rampant, in running to earth the writers of seditious pamphlets and broad sheets. The man was Tom Jarvis. Rofflash knew Tom's favourite haunts, and after looking in at various taverns, lighted upon him at the "Angel and Sun." He also lighted upon Vane. Vane he could see was well on the way towards [Pg 193] forgetfulness, but Captain Jeremy wasn't one to run any risks, so he held aloof from the party, and waited while the landlord went about his errand.

Presently Jarvis looked in the direction of the fireplace, and Rofflash beckoned him and laid his fingers on his lip in token of silence. Jarvis quietly slipped away and joined Rofflash.

"Devil take it, my gallant captain!" growled Jarvis, "but you look in fine feather. Hang me if you haven't tumbled on your feet, and that's more than Tom Jarvis can say. Since the Jacks have swallowed King George and his Hanoverian progeny things have been precious dull for the likes o' me."

"Aye, though it mayn't be for long. Meanwhile, I can put you in the way of a guinea. Are you friendly with that young fool, Lancelot Vane?"

"Friendly? Why, to be sure. He's always good for a bottle if he chance to have the wherewithal about him. And he's the best company in the world when that comes about. A couple o' glasses knocks him over, and you can finish the rest of the bottle at your ease."

"Gad! He's one of your feather-brained, lily-livered fellows, is he? So much the better for my purpose. Look you here, Tom; bring Vane to-morrow evening to Spring Gardens, and there's a guinea ready for you."

Jarvis looked down his long nose and frowned.

"Not so easy as you think, captain. I know Vane. To-morrow he'll be chock full of repentance. He'll be calling himself all the fools he can lay his tongue to. How am I to get him to Spring Gardens in that mood?"

"'Tis as easy as lying, Tom. When a man's down as Peter Grievous, he's ready to get up if he have but a couple of hairs of the dog that bit him."

"I grant you that, bully captain. But Vane's pocket's as empty as mine. Where's the coin to come from?"

"You're a damned liar and an ingrained rogue by nature, Tom Jarvis, but I'll have to trust you for once. Here's half a guinea. It should more than pay for the wine and the wherry to Spring [Pg 194] Gardens. Keep faith with me, you rascal, or I'll half wring your head from your shoulders and give you a free taste of what's bound to come to you some day—the rope at Tyburn."

Jarvis grinned in sickly fashion and swore by all that was unholy to carry out his orders strictly. Rofflash then strode away.

How Jarvis contrived to lure Vane to Spring Gardens is not of much consequence. The fellow had a soft, slimy tongue and an oily manner. Moreover, Rofflash's shrewd guess at Vane's absence of will power after a drinking bout was verified to the letter.

The passage up the river from St. Paul's Stairs was pleasant enough. The wherry made its way through a crowd of boats bound for the Gardens, though the season had hardly begun. Not a few of the craft had for their passengers fashionable ladies masked and unmasked, with their cavaliers more or less noisy with wine. Numberless and not particularly refined were the jests exchanged between the occupants of the various boats. Sometimes the watermen struck in and masters of slang and coarse wit as they were, and possessed of infinite impudence, the journey was marked by plenty of liveliness.

Well did Spring Gardens—afterwards known as Vauxhall, or Fauxhall, years later—deserve the patronage bestowed upon them. Delightful groves, cosy little arbours, lawns like velvet, rippling fountains were among its attractions, music albeit it was confined to the limited instruments of the day—singing came about afterwards—aided the enchantment.

A dose of hot brandy and water before starting had renewed Vane's drooping spirits and had dissipated his headache and nausea. A glass of punch prescribed by Jarvis when inside the Gardens sent him into a mood of recklessness which made him ready for any adventure amorous or otherwise. He looked upon Lavinia as lost to him. He would like to kill his remembrance of her. [Pg 195] What better way than by thoughts of some other woman? His brain had become so bemused by his potations of the previous night that he had at first only vague recollections of Sally Salisbury and how he had engaged to meet her. But now that he was in the Gardens association of ideas brought her handsome, enticing face to his mind. She would do as well as another to entertain him for the moment, and his eyes roved restlessly towards every woman he passed.

The orchestra was playing a dance tune, and Vane eagerly scanned the dancers, but saw no woman resembling Sally Salisbury. Meanwhile Jarvis had left him with a parting drink, which by no means helped to clear his muddled brain. Then suddenly Sally stood before him, unmasked and looking more fascinating than ever.

"You wicked man," said she with reproachful eyes, the dark silky lashes drooping momentarily on her painted cheeks. "I've been searching for you everywhere. But my heart told me you would come, and my heart rarely deceives me."

Sally spoke in a tone of sincerity, and maybe for once she was sincere. Vane did not trouble one way or the other. He was in that condition of nervous excitement to be strongly affected by her sensuous beauty. He was stammering something in reply when a man in a puce satin coat and a flowered brocaded waistcoat thrust himself rudely between them.

"I fear, sir, you don't know all the transcendent virtues of this *lady*. Permit me to enlighten you."

He spoke in an insolent tone, and Sally turned upon him in fury and bade him begone.

"Mind your own business, Mr. Dorrimore, and don't thrust your nose into what doesn't concern you," she cried, her eyes blazing with wrath.

"Oh, I've no quarrel with you, madam. I only wish to warn your poor dupe——" [Pg 196]

He wasn't able to finish the sentence. Vane had struck him a violent blow in the face.

Vane's sudden attack fairly took Dorrimore by surprise. He stared blankly at Vane, and then apparently seized by some ludicrous idea, he burst into a sarcastic laugh.

"Faith, sir—you must excuse me—you really must. Ha—ha—ha! The idea of your championing this wanton jade! It's too good a joke—'pon honour, it is—but since you will have it so—why——"

His hand went to his side, and the next moment his sword flashed in the crimson light of the coloured lamps. Just then Jarvis and another man interposed, and the latter caught Dorrimore's sword arm.

"Forbear, gentlemen!" cried Jarvis. "If you must fight, don't let it be here. In public 'twould be little better than a vulgar brawl."

"Let me alone," shouted Dorrimore. "He struck me and in the devil's name he shall answer it."

"Whenever you please. I did but defend the lady whom this coward insulted," said Vane, pale, and speaking in a voice low and vibrating with passion.

He felt a pressure on his arm and heard in soft tones:

"Thank you, but you mustn't risk your life for me. Come away."

"What, and leave the fellow's challenge unanswered. Never! Sir, I am at your command. When and where you please."

"Don't be a fool, Vane—Sally's not worth it," whispered Jarvis. "Don't you know she's any man's money?"

For a moment Vane wavered as though Jarvis had convinced him. In the meantime Dorrimore had sheathed his sword and stepping close to Vane in front of Sally Salisbury, he said, dropping his voice so that Sally should not hear:

"Your friend's right. If we fight it should be over somebody better than a common trull. What say you to Lavinia Fenton?" [Pg 197]

Vane staggered as though Dorrimore had struck him.

"Lavinia Fenton?" he faltered. "What—what do you know—about her? What is she to you?"

"Simply this—she's mine, and I'll have the blood of any man who attempts to rob me of her. You tried once, and this follows."

Dorrimore tapped the hilt of his sword.

"I never saw you before, sir, but I take you at your word. I can see now you've forced this quarrel on me, and for aught I know Mistress Salisbury may be in the plot. But that doesn't matter. If Miss Fenton is the cause, I shall fight with a better heart. Jarvis—please arrange this affair for me. You've a friend at hand, sir, I presume."

Dorrimore dropped his insolent, foppish air. He recognised that Vane, poverty stricken scribbler though he might be, was a gentleman. He bowed and turned towards the man who, with Jarvis, had interposed in the early stages of the altercation. This man was Rofflash. He had dragged Sally Salisbury some three or four yards away probably to prevent her interfering and persuading Vane not to fight. Whatever their talk might have been about, just as Dorrimore turned Vane saw Sally tear herself from Captain Jeremy's grasp and hurry away, and he became more than ever persuaded that she had betrayed him. What did it matter? One woman or another—they were all the same.

He walked apart while Jarvis and Rofflash arranged the preliminaries. His brain was numbed. He did not care whether he lived or died. Five minutes later Vane was joined by Jarvis.

"We've settled the business very comfortably," said Jarvis. "Seven o'clock at Battersea Fields. It's now nearly midnight. We'll get a rest at the nearest tavern; have a few hours sleep, and you'll wake as fresh as a lark."

Vane made no reply, and Jarvis sliding his arm within that of his companion, led him out of the [Pg 198] gardens. They took the direction of Wandsworth, keeping by the river bank, and Jarvis made a halt at a tumbledown rookery of a waterside tavern—the "Feathers." Vane was so overwhelmed by the prospect of a possible tragedy that he scarcely noticed the dirt, the squalidness, the hot and fœtid air and the evil-looking fellows who stared at them when he and Jarvis entered.

On the strength of the order of a bottle of wine the landlord gave them the use of his own room, and Vane threw himself on a hard settee, but not to sleep. He was worn and haggard when it was time to rise, and Jarvis called for brandy. It was vile stuff, and Vane swallowed scarcely a mouthful.

The bill paid, they got into a boat moored off the bank opposite the tavern.

It was only just daylight. A slight mist hung upon the river, and the marshy land on the south side and the scattered houses leading to Chelsea on the north side looked dreary enough. The only sound was the plash of the waterman's sculls and the grinding of the rowlocks. At last they came upon Battersea Fields.

"The pollard oaks, waterman," said Jarvis. "Do you know 'em?"

"Right well, your honour. You're not the first gentlemen I've took there. More'n than have come back, I'll swear."

The fellow's words weren't encouraging, but Vane did not seem affected by them. He felt strangely calm. Before he started his head was hot; now it was as cold as ice. Jarvis asked him how he was.

"Feel my pulse and tell me," said he.

"Steady as a rock, but devilish cold. A little thrust and parry'll warm you. Here we are, and there's your man and his second waiting."

The boat scraped the rushes and the waterman held it while the two men scrambled on to the bank. [Pg 199]

The ground was fairly well chosen for the purpose. It was a tolerably firm piece of turf about a hundred yards long by some twenty broad and almost as smooth as a bowling green. It was the only solid piece of earth for some distance, all around being at a lower level and boggy.

Not forgetful of the usual courtesies, the combatants bowed and took off their coats and vests. It was then that Vane caught sight of Rofflash.

"You're the fellow whom I knocked down on London Bridge on a certain night some little time ago," said he.

"The very same," rejoined Rofflash with a grin which made his ugly face still uglier. "You took me unawares. If you've the mind to try conclusions a second time, fair and square and no surprises, by God, sir, I'll be pleased to oblige you when you've despatched Mr. Dorrimore."

The bully's braggart manner and sneering voice made no impression on Vane. The suspicion that he was the victim of a plot was strengthened by the presence of Rofflash and his words. For ought he could tell Jarvis might be in the conspiracy too. But there was no way out of the trap, and turning on his heel, he walked to his ground.

The duel began. The combatants were about equal in youth, height and build; in skill they were unfairly matched. Vane was comparatively a novice in the use of the "white arm." Dorrimore, on the other hand, was a practised swordsman, though he was not so accomplished as he fancied he was.

The two, after the preliminary salute, advanced to the attack. Dorrimore handled his weapon with a slightly contemptuous air, as if he did not think it worth while to take much trouble over so inferior an opponent.

To a certain extent he was right. Vane, however, was shrewd enough to see that this carelessness was but assumed, and he did not take advantage of one or two opportunities of thrusting given him by Dorrimore, evidently with the intention of leading him into a trap. [Pg 200]

So they went on cautiously, their blades rasping against each other, and neither man gaining any advantage, although once or twice Vane found his antagonist's weapon perilously near his body. Then all at once Dorrimore changed his methods. He began fencing in earnest, and so rapid was the play of his sword that the eye could scarcely follow it. Suddenly he muttered an oath as a red stain appeared on his arm. Vane had been lucky enough to scratch him, probably more by accident than dexterity.

Dorrimore roused himself and his fencing became more vigorous. Vane was being pressed very closely, and Dorrimore's thrusts were becoming more and more difficult to parry. Moreover, Vane's nerves were unsteady and his movements were flustered. The gleaming steel danced, he grew confused, faltered, and then came a cold biting sensation in his chest, he fell and knew no more.

"An ugly thrust, Mr. Dorrimore," growled Rofflash five minutes afterwards. "What's to be done?"

"Is he dead?" asked Dorrimore anxiously. "I'd no intention of going as far as that, but it was the fool's own fault. He was rushing upon me when my point touched him. I couldn't withdraw it in time."

Rofflash, while with Marlborough's army, had acquired some rough knowledge of surgery. His hands had gone over Vane's chest in the region of the heart. The wound was on the right side.

"There's life left," said the captain, "but he won't last long without a surgeon. The blade's touched the lungs, I'll swear. Look ye here, sir. If the man dies it'll be awkward for us all round. The fight was fair enough, but the devil only knows what a dozen fools in a jury box may think. Besides, [Pg 201] there's Sally—she'll have something to say, I'll swear."

"Sally? What the deuce has she to do with us?"

"More than you think, Mr. Dorrimore. She's as like as not to make out that the quarrel was forced upon the fellow to get him out of the way. You see, she's set her heart on him."

"Sally Salisbury's heart? What, has the saucy jade got one?" demanded Dorrimore derisively.

"She thinks so, and with Sally that's as good as having one. You might find it prudent to take refuge in France for a while till the affair blows over. It would be bad enough to kill the man right out, but a thousand times worse to leave him to bleed to death. I'm not so sure what Jarvis might say to save his skin. You see, he was paid to bring his man to Spring Gardens, so that you might affront him and get him to fight you," added Rofflash dropping his voice significantly.

"Devil take it! Where's a surgeon to be got?" returned Dorrimore in alarm.

"Leave it to me, sir. I can take him to a doctor who'll attend him and who'll hold his tongue, which is more to the purpose. It'll mean a few guineas, but 'twill be money well spent."

"See to it, then, Rofflash. Where's the man to be found?"

"His house is on London Bridge. The tide's running down fairly, and the waterman ought to get us

to the bridge in half an hour."

Dorrimore assented gloomily. He was thinking that the gratification of his spite would cost him a pretty penny. Not only would the doctor, Rofflash and Jarvis have to be paid for their silence, but the waterman also.

Vane's wound was roughly bandaged, and he was taken to the boat still unconscious. The journey by water was made, and he was landed safely at the foot of London Bridge and consigned to the care of Dr. Mountchance, whose scruples at taking charge of a wounded man who might probably die in his house were easily overcome. [Pg 202]

A few days later the following paragraph appeared in the *Daily Post*:

> "We learn that an affair of honour has taken place between A——d D——e, Esqr., of the Temple, and Mr. L——t V——e, a young gentleman lately come from Cambridge University, in which the said young gentleman made the acquaintance of the Templar's sword, causing him temporary inconvenience. The cause of the difference was the fair S——y S——y, well known to many men of fashion."

It was this paragraph which sent Lavinia into a paroxysm of emotion and made her tear the newspaper in twain.

CHAPTER XXII

"MOLL'S SINGIN' BROUGHT HER LUCK AND MAY BE YOURS WILL TOO"

The months went over. Huddy's "travelling" theatrical troupe had been paying a round of visits to various towns in the home counties, performing in innyards, barns, any place suitable for the purpose and where no objections were raised by the justices. Actors and actresses were "rogues and vagabonds" when it suited prim puritans to call them so, and more than once Huddy and his company had to take a hurried departure from some town where play-acting was looked upon as ungodly and a device of Satan to ensnare the unsuspecting. [Pg 203]

All this was in the day's work. Lavinia thought nothing of it. She had been in her youthful days harried from pillar to post and knew what it meant. The important thing to her was that she was getting a vast amount of stage experience, and as she was a quick "study" she had no difficulty in taking on a new role at a day's notice.

Lavinia remained with Huddy's until she had all the devices of the stage at her finger's ends. In a way theatrical training was easier then than now. Acting was largely a question of tradition. What Betterton, Wilks, Barton Booth, Mrs. Bracegirdle, Mrs. Barry, Mrs. Oldfield did others had to do. Audiences expected certain characters to be represented in a certain way and were slow to accept "new readings." Comedy, however, had more latitude than tragedy, and as comedy was Lavinia's line her winsome face and pleasing smile and her melodious voice were always welcome, and when she had a "singing" part she brought down the house.

Of course the life was hard—especially when the share of the receipts which fell to the minor members was small—but it was full of variety and sometimes of excitement. If the work did not entirely drive away the remembrance of Lancelot Vane it enabled her to look upon the romance of her early maidenhood with equanimity. Her love affair had become a regret tinged with a pleasureable sadness.

She was beginning to be known in the profession. Now and again she wrote to her old friend Gay and he replied with encouraging letters. His opera was finished, he told her, Colley Cibber had refused to have anything to do with it and it was now in the hands of John Rich. [Pg 204]

"I can see thee, my dear, in Polly Peachum. I've had you in mind in the songs. You're doing well, I hear, but I'd have you do better. The duchess has forgiven you. She is on your side against Rich, who does not care a farthing for the music. He would alter his mind could he but hear you. Huddy must let you go. The Duke's Theatre is waiting for you."

In all Gay's letters there was not a word about Lancelot Vane. Lavinia would like to have known the fate of his play and the next instant was angry with herself for still feeling an interest in her faithless swain.

"Let him waste himself on Sally Salisbury if he likes," she cried scornfully. "He's nothing to me."

Gay's assertion that Rich's theatre in Lincoln's Inn Fields waited for her was soon verified. One of Rich's staff waited upon her when Huddy's company was playing at Woolwich, and she went off with him in high spirits and amid much growling from Huddy. Rich was pleased to express his approval of her appearance.

"I'll put on a play for you and that'll tell me if you knows your business," grunted the ungrammatical Rich.

The play was a poor thing—"The Wits," one of D'Avenant's comedies. The best part about it to

Lavinia's fancy was the advertisement in the *Daily Post* where she read "Ginnet by Miss Fenton." Ginnet was but a stage waiting maid and Lavinia had little to do and less to say. "The Wits" ran but one night, quite as long as it was worth.

"You'll do pretty well," said Rich, "but I can't say more'n that. My theatre shuts for the next three months. When the season starts I'll find you summat else."

"Three months!" exclaimed Lavinia ruefully. "And what am I to do all that time, Mr. Rich?" [Pg 205]

"That's your business, miss. If I was you I'd try one of the summer theatres. There's the Little Theatre in the Haymarket. May be you might get a part. But mind this, you're to come back here in October. I'll put you into something as'll soot you."

What could Lavinia say to this? It was at once sweet and bitter. She had made good her footing at Rich's theatre and could she only tide over the summer months she would be on the stepping stones of success. But meanwhile? She took Rich's advice and went to the Little Theatre. She found she had not the ghost of a chance of an engagement. Drury Lane and the Duke's Theatres were closed (Covent Garden Theatre was not then built), and actors and actresses of established reputation were clamorous for something to do. Lavinia retired discomfited.

She had to go back to Huddy's, to the mumming booth and the innyard. There was no help for it. The summer passed, Rich opened the Lincoln's Inn Fields playhouse and sent for Lavinia. He gave her quite an important part and Lavinia was elated, albeit the play was one of Wycherley's most repulsive productions, "The Country Wife." But all through the winter season this part was her only opportunity for distinction. John Rich, like most actor managers, had but an eye for himself as the central figure and in his own special province—dancing and posturing. His "Harlequin" entertainment "The Rape of Proserpine" proved to be one of his biggest successes and ran uninterruptedly for three months.

Lavinia's line in the piece was simply to "walk on" among the "lasses" but she had the gratification of seeing her name announced in the advertisements—a sufficient proof that she was rising in Rich's estimation. She had at last a chance of showing what she could do. Her old acquaintance, Mrs. Egleton, took her benefit along with Hippisley, one of the best low comedians of the day, and selected Farquhar's "The Beaux' Stratagem"—partly so she said, for Lavinia's [Pg 206] sake.

"You were made for Cherry, my dear," said she. "The part'll fit you as easily as an old glove."

And so it did, but the next night Rich went back to "The Rape of Proserpine" and the piece continued to run until the summer, and then the theatre closed as usual for three months.

"Whatever am I to do Mrs. Egleton?" she cried despairingly. "I suppose I could join Huddy's company again. Huddy I know would be glad enough to have me but——"

"Pray don't be silly," put in the experienced Mrs. Egleton. "It would be lowering yourself. Rich would think you're not worth more than he's been paying you and that's little enough—fifteen shillings a week. Good Lord, how does he imagine a woman of our profession can live on that?"

"It's because of our profession that he parts with so little. He has a notion that we can make it up," rejoined Lavinia sarcastically.

"You never said a truer word than that, my dear. Thank God I've my husband, but *you*—well you'd better take a husband too or as nearly as you can get to one."

Lavinia shrugged her shoulders disdainfully.

"Why not go to Hampstead? Heaps of money there and plenty of life. Bless my heart alive, with that taking face of yours the men would be after you like flies round a honey-pot."

"I've no fancy for figuring as a honey-pot, thank you."

"Well, I can think of nothing else."

The mention of Hampstead was suggestive, but not in the way insinuated by Mrs. Egleton. Half fashionable London flocked to Hampstead in the summer, ostensibly to drink the water of the medicinal spring, but really to gamble, to dance and to flirt outrageously. There was plenty of [Pg 207] entertainment too, of various sorts.

Then she thought of Hannah's cousin, Betty Higgins at Hampstead. Lavinia had saved a little money while with Rich and Huddy and she could afford a small rent for lodgings while she was seeking how to maintain herself. Concerts were given at the Great Room, Hampstead Wells. She might appear there too. She would love it. She had seldom had an opportunity of singing in any of the parts she had played, and singing was what her soul delighted in.

She made her way to Hampstead. The heath was wild enough in those days—clumps of woodland, straggling bushes, wide expanses of turf, vast pits made by the gravel and sand diggers, the slopes scored by water courses with here and there a foot path—all was picturesque. The ponds were very much as they are now, save that their boundaries were not restrained and after heavy rains the water spread at its own free will.

The village itself on the slopes overlooking the heath was cramped, the houses squeezed together in narrow passages with openings here and there where glorious views of the Highgate Woods

and the country beyond delighted the eye.

Lavinia inquired for Betty Higgins in the village, but without success. Indeed, the houses were not such as washerwomen could afford to live in. Then she went into the quaint tavern known as the Upper Flask and here she was told that a Mrs. Higgins who did laundry work was to be found in a cottage not far from Jack Straw's Castle on the Spaniards' road and thither Lavinia tramped, footsore and tired, for she had walked all the way from London.

Betty, a stout, sturdy woman was at her clothes lines stretched from posts on a patch of drying ground in front of her cottage. She opened wide her round blue eyes as Lavinia approached her. [Pg 208]

"Are you Betty Higgins?" asked Lavinia.

"Aye, that's me sure enough; an' who may you be, young woman?"

"I'm Lavinia Fenton, a friend of your Cousin Hannah, who works for my mother at the coffee house in the Old Bailey."

"So you're the young miss as she told me of! Why, that be months an' months agone. An' you never comed. It put me about, it did."

"I'm very sorry. I never thought of that. But so many things I didn't expect prevented me coming."

"Have you seen Hannah? She's been a-grievin' about you, thinkin' as you might ha' come to harm."

"No, I haven't been near the Old Bailey," said Lavinia hesitatingly. "Perhaps you'll guess why. I dare say Hannah's told you about me and my mother."

"Oh, to be sure she has. May be you don't know then that your mother's got another husband?"

"I'm glad of it. She won't bother any more about me now."

"May be not. But what d'ye want?"

"I'd like to know if you can let me have a lodging. It'll suit me to live at Hampstead for a while."

"But s'posing as it don't suit me to have you?"

"Then I must go somewhere else. I think Hannah would be glad if I was with you."

"Aye, but you've been away from her goodness knows how long. What have you been a-doin' of all that while?"

"Play-acting. I had a part last week in a play at the Lincoln's Inn Theatre and Mr. Rich has promised me an engagement when the theatre opens for the winter season."

"Oh," said Mrs. Higgins with a sniff which might have signified pity or contempt, or both. "I dunno as I hold with play-actin'. Brazen painted women some o' them actresses is and the words as is put in their mouths to say—well—there——" [Pg 209]

"I know—I know," returned Lavinia hurriedly and with heightened colour. "But that isn't their fault, and after all, it's not so bad as what one hears in front—in the gallery——"

"What, the trulls and the trapes and the saucy footmen! It made my ears tingle when Hannah took me to Drury Lane. I longed to take a stick in my hand an' lay it about 'em. So you're a play-actin' miss are ye? I'm sorry for it."

"I can't help that, Mrs. Higgins. One must do something—besides there's good and bad folk wherever you go."

"Aye, an' ye haven't got to go from here neither. A pack o' bad 'uns, men and women, come to Hampstead. They swarm like rats at Mother Ruff's, dancin' an' dicin, an' drinkin', an' wuss. I won't say as you don't see the quality at the concerts in the Great Room, but the low rabble—well, thank the Lord they don't come *my* way."

Then Betty Higgins, who all this time had been eyeing the girl and apparently taking stock of her, suddenly harked back to the all important business which had brought Lavinia to her cottage.

"If I let ye a lodging what are ye a-goin' to do till October?"

"You spoke about the concerts at the Great Room just now," said Lavinia meditatively. "Do they have singing?"

"Singin'? Ah, an' such singin' as I never heard afore. I've never been inside, it's far too fine fur the likes o' me, but the windows are sometimes open an' I've listened an' paid nothin' fur it neither."

"I want to sing in that room, Mrs. Higgins. If I had a chance I believe I could please the fine gentlemen and their ladies and earn some money." [Pg 210]

Betty Higgins stared aghast.

"What are ye a-talkin' about, child? *You* sing? Where's your silk gown, your lace, your furbelows to come from?"

"I don't know, but I think something might be contrived."

Lavinia had Mrs. Houghton, who had been the leading lady in "The Orphan" and in "The Wits," in her mind. Mrs. Houghton was very friendly towards her and had no end of fine dresses.

"Oh, but singin'. Goodness me, child, you haven't heard 'em in the Great Room, all tralalas and twists and turns up and down, sometimes soft as a mouse and sometimes so loud as 'ud a'most wake the dead. I'd like to hear ye do all that, not mind ye, as I understand what it means, but its pure grand."

"I'll sing something to you Betty that you *can* understand. What of 'My lodging, it is on the Cold Ground.' Would you like to hear that?"

"Wouldn't I! My mother was maid to Mistress Moll Davies, as King Charles was mad over, though for the matter o' that he was always a runnin' after the women. Anyway, it was that song and the way Moll sung it as won his heart. Ah, them days is past an' I'm afeared as I mustn't speak well of 'em or I'd be called a 'Jack,' clapped into Newgate or sent to Bridewell and lashed. But give me 'Lodging on the Cold Ground' an' I'll tell ye what I think. But I warn ye, mother copied Mrs. Davies an' 'll know how it ought to be sung."

Lavinia laughed to herself. She was quite sure if she could satisfy Mr. Gay and Dr. Pepusch she could please Betty Higgins.

"Them old songs," went on Betty, warming to her subject, "touches the 'eart and makes the tears come. But you don't hear 'em at the fine concerts. I'll go bail as there beant a woman now-a-days as can make a man fall in love with her 'cause of her singin'." [Pg 211]

"I wonder," said Lavinia musingly.

"Well now, let me take in the clothes an' we'll have a dish o' tea an' a bite and then you shall sing your song."

"Yes, and I'll help you with the clothes."

Lavinia's offer pleased Betty, and the two were soon busy pulling the various garments and bits of drapery from the lines and gathering from the grass others that had been set to bleach in the wind and sun. This done they entered the cottage. The window was small and the light dim. A white-haired old woman was warming her hands and crooning over a wood fire.

"Eh, mother," cried Betty, "I've brought someone to sing to ye. 'Lodgin' on the Cold Ground,' do ye remember that old ditty?"

"Do I mind it? Why, to be sure. But who sings it now-a-days? Nobody."

"Well, ye're going to hear it, and ye'll have to say if this young miss here trolls it as well as Moll Davies used to."

"What stuff ye be talkin', Betty," retorted the old woman. "Nobody can. I can remember my mistress a-singin' it as well as if it was only yesterday."

"Do ye hear that—I've forgotten what name Hannah told me yours was?"

"Lavinia Fenton. But please call me Lavinia."

"So I will. Now sit ye down, Lavinia, and talk to mother while I brew the tea."

Lavinia was rather dismayed at finding she was to pit herself against the fascinating Moll whose charms had conquered the Merry Monarch—possibly no very arduous task.

The old lady was past eighty, but in possession of all her faculties. When she said she remembered Moll Davies' singing perfectly well she probably spoke the truth. [Pg 212]

Tea was over. Betty cleared away and Lavinia at her request—to be correct—at her command, sang, keeping her eyes fixed on the old lady and so to speak singing *at* her.

Before long the aged dame was mopping her eyes, and when Lavinia had finished the pathetic ballad she stretched out both her wrinkled hands towards the girl and in a quivering voice said:—

"Thank you, my dear. Lor' ha' mercy, it takes me back sixty year. I haven't heard that song since Mistress Davies sung it, an' lor' bless me, it might be her voice as I were a-listin' to. Aye, an' you're like her in face, though not in body. She was short an' a bit too plump, but she was the prettiest of wenches. Moll's singin' brought her luck and maybe yours will too."

Lavinia heard the old lady's praise with delight. Betty could say nothing. She was gazing spellbound at the nightingale. The charm of the girl's melodious and expressive voice had swept away all her prejudices. Lavinia should have a lodging and welcome. Betty went further. She did the laundry of Mrs. Palmer, the wife of the director of the concerts at the Great Room, and she undertook to tell the lady of the musical prodigy living in her cottage, and promised Lavinia to beg her ask her husband to hear the girl sing.

CHAPTER XXIII [Pg 213]

And so it came about. Lavinia was sent for by Mr. Palmer, and she sang to him. He was highly pleased with her voice, but he was afraid her songs would not be to the fancy of his fashionable patrons.

"One half are mad to have nothing but Mr. Handel's music and t'other half cry out for Signor Buononcini's. Your songs are like neither. There's no taste for English ballads. They're out of fashion. Scales, ornaments, shakes and flourishes are now the mode. For all that, I'd like to make the venture with you just for once."

"Thank you, sir. If the people don't care for my songs, there's an end on it. I'll have to wait as best I can till Mr. Rich opens his theatre. I may have a singing part in Mr. Gay's opera. Mr. Gay has promised me. Have you heard about his opera?" cried Lavinia eagerly.

"Oh, it's being talked of in the coffee houses, I'm told. But if Mr. Rich has his way, it won't do. Maybe he'll cut out the songs. Mr. Rich knows nothing about music. He can't tell 'Lilibullero' from 'Lumps of pudding.' Still, it's something to be taken notice of by Mr. Gay."

Palmer was evidently impressed by Lavinia's talk, especially after she had mentioned that she had sung to Dr. Pepusch at Mr. Pope's Villa. It occurred to him that though Lavinia Fenton might be unknown now, a day might come when she would be famous, and he could then take credit for having recognised her talents. [Pg 214]

Besides, the manager happened to know that Gay and Arbuthnot were at that moment staying at Hampstead to drink the waters—the first to cure his dyspepsia, and the second to ease his gout. Palmer decided to send word to the poet-dramatist intimating that a young lady in whom he had heard Mr. Gay was interested was about to sing at one of the Great Room concerts and begging for the honour of his patronage. But he said nothing to Lavinia about this. All he remarked was that she should sing at his concert on the following Wednesday, and Lavinia went away in a dream of pleasurable anticipation.

The eventful night came. Lavinia was full of enthusiasm but horribly nervous. She felt she was competing with the two greatest composers of music in the world. What if the audience hissed her? Audiences, as she well knew, were not slow to express their likes and dislikes—and especially their dislikes—in the most unmistakeable fashion.

The difficulty of her dress had been overcome. Palmer was shrewd. He had an eye for contrast. He would have no finery and fallals, he said.

"Your songs are simple, so must your gown be. If the people take to you in the one they will in t'other."

So Lavinia made her appearance in a plain dress, apron, mob cap, and of course prodigious hoops. Her hair was arrayed neatly and not powdered. There was powder enough and to spare on the wigs of the beaux in front, and on the elaborate head-dresses of the belles.

Lavinia's unadorned dress suited her natural and easy carriage and made her doubly attractive. Not a hand was raised when she bowed, but she could see that every eye was turned upon her with expectancy and curiosity. But there was also a certain amount of indifference which provoked her. It could hardly be supposed that anything out of fashion would be of interest to such modish folk. [Pg 215]

Lavinia chose her favourite—"My lodging it is on the cold ground."

There were not a few aged bucks, painted and powdered and patched, aping the airs and graces of younger gallants, who could remember Charles II. and Moll Davies. They were startled when they heard Lavinia's liquid notes in the old ballad—they felt that for a brief space they were recovering their youth.

As for the rest, they were conscious of a pleasant surprise. Against the simplicity and pathos of the old ballad Buononcini's stilted artificialities sounded tame and monotonous. When Lavinia finished applause filled the room. She had to sing again.

"You've caught 'em, my dear," said Palmer enthusiastically. "Before a week's over you'll be the talk of Hampstead. You must stay here and sing whenever I want you. Not every night—that would make you common. Only now and again, just as a novelty. Do you understand?"

Lavinia knew the ways of showmen quite well. She smiled and nodded, and her eyes wandering towards the door of the ante-room in which she and Palmer had been talking, whom should her gaze light upon but Mr. Gay! Palmer was very well acquainted with Gay by sight, and hastening towards the visitor made him a low bow.

"I am highly honoured, sir, by your presence here to-night," said Palmer, "I hope you did not think my sending you a ticket was taking a liberty."

"Tut, tut, man! 'Twas very polite of you," returned Gay good-humouredly. "I'm glad to be able to congratulate you on the success of your new acquisition, especially as the little lady interests me greatly—as, indeed, you mentioned in your note, though how you came to know of that interest I'm at a loss to conceive, unless she told you so herself." [Pg 216]

"Not directly, sir, I confess. But she chanced to remark that she had sung to you and to Dr. Pepusch, whom I am fortunate in numbering among my friends."

"Aye, aye. Well, she *can* sing, eh? What d'ye think?"

"Admirable, sir, admirable. She has been gifted both by nature and art."

"And those gifts should put money in her pocket and yours too, Mr. Palmer. I hope you'll reward her on a liberal scale."

"Why, certainly, sir. I shall be happy to oblige you."

"Oh, obliging me has nothing to do with the matter. But we will talk of that later on. Pray pardon me."

With a slight bow Gay turned away and walked to where Lavinia was standing, her cheeks glowing and her eyes glistening with pleasure at the sight of the genial poet who had done so much to encourage her.

"Why, Polly," said Gay, extending his hand, "how came you here? I left you making your way on the stage, and now I find you a songstress. Faith, my dear, are you thinking of going back to your early days when you did nothing but sing songs?" he added laughingly.

"Not quite that, sir, but I always did love singing, as you know. And so do you, sir, or you would never have persuaded the good duchess to spend so much money on me."

"Oh, maybe I was thinking of myself all the while," rejoined Gay. "I admit I saw in you the very young woman I'd had in my mind for a long time, for Polly Peachum in my opera. Did I not call thee Polly from the very first?"

"Yes, indeed, sir. I've never forgotten it. I hope you'll always call me Polly." [Pg 217]

"Make your mind easy as to that. Why, if my dreams come true, half London will some day be calling you Polly, too."

"I don't know what you mean, sir."

"Of course you don't. I'm not always sure that I know what I *do* mean. But never mind. Let us take a stroll on the heath. On such a summer night as this it is a shame to be cooped up betwixt four walls. Besides, I want to talk with you."

Manager Palmer bade Lavinia good-night with an air very different from that with which he met her earlier in the evening. Her success and Gay's evident friendship had worked wonders. He was quite deferential.

As Lavinia and Gay passed through the dimly lighted vestibule to the entrance a man from among the audience stole after them. He was very pale and his pallor accentuated his projecting cheek bones and the hollows above, from the depths of which his large eyes gleamed with a glassy light. Evidently in ill health, he could hardly have kept pace with the couple he was shadowing had they not been walking very slowly.

"Everything is in our favour," Gay was saying. "Fortune has sent you here at the right moment. You can act and you can sing. *I* know it, but John Rich and the Duchess of Queensberry must know it as well. Both your acting and singing must be put to the proof, and you must show her grace that she hasn't wasted her money."

"That's what I'm most anxious to do, sir."

"Aye, aye. Well, to-morrow I shall bring you some of the songs you'll have to sing in my 'Beggar's Opera'—that is if we can talk that curmudgeon Rich into the ideas that I and my friends have in our minds. Are you lodging in Hampstead?"

"Oh, yes. I'm staying with Hannah's cousin. You remember Hannah, don't you, Mr. Gay? I told you what a good friend she was to me and how she saved me from my wicked mother and the [Pg 218] designing fellow I was so silly as to run away with. I shall never forget my mad fancies—never!"

"Best forget them, my dear, though I fear you'll be apt to drive out one fit of madness by taking on another. 'Tis the way love has, and——"

"Oh," interrupted Lavinia hastily, "I don't believe it. I'm not going to bother about love any more."

"Every woman has uttered those words, and has had to eat them. How many times have you eaten yours, my pretty Polly, since last you resolved to forswear love?"

"Not once. I've learned my lesson. I know it now by heart."

"So it doesn't interest you now to know anything about poor Lance Vane?"

It was not the pale moonlight that made Lavinia's cheeks at that moment look so white. Gay, who was gazing fixedly at her, saw her lips quiver.

"Poor Lance Vane? Why do you speak of him like that? Has he had his play accepted and has it made his fortune?" she exclaimed ironically.

"Neither the one nor the other. Ill luck's dogged him. I fear he wasn't born under a prosperous

star."

"I'm sorry if he's been unfortunate. Perhaps though it was his own fault."

A note of sadness had crept into her voice as Gay did not fail to note.

"Well, it's hard to say. To be sure, his tragedy would not have taken the town—neither Rich nor Cibber would have aught to do with it, but he had worse misfortunes than that. He was denounced as a traitorous Jacobite and thrown into Newgate."

"That horrible place! Oh, I can't believe it," cried Lavinia, clasping her hands. "Mr. Vane was no traitor, I'm sure—although——" [Pg 219]

She paused. Politically Lancelot Vane might be incapable of treason, but where love was concerned—well, had he not acted traitorously towards her?

"That's true. Vane was no traitor. He was accused out of spite. I went to see him in Newgate. They had thrust him in the 'lion's den,' the most filthy and abominable of infernos, and he was loaded with fetters. That was because he hadn't a penny to 'garnish' his sharks of gaolers. You know what 'garnish' means, child?"

"Yes, indeed—money to bribe the gaolers with."

"Aye, from the Governor downward, and not forgetting the chaplain. I was able by flinging about a few guineas to better his condition, and as the gaol fever was creeping upon the poor fellow, they were glad enough to get rid of him. While I was there, he told me the whole story. It began like most other stories with a woman."

"Oh, I know," burst out Lavinia, "you needn't tell me. The woman was that worthless creature, Sally Salisbury."

"You're wrong there," returned Gay gravely, "the woman's name was Lavinia Fenton."

"That's not so. It couldn't be so. The newspaper said that Vane fought with Archibald Dorrimore, and that the quarrel was about Sally Salisbury."

"The quarrel was part of the plot. It was concocted to hold up Vane to your scorn. Dorrimore wanted revenge because he thought Vane had succeeded where he had failed. True, Sally was present when the quarrel began, but that might have been an accident. Indeed, it's possible she was in the plot. Vane doesn't know one way or t'other."

Lavinia was silent for a few moments. Then she said:

"And is Mr. Vane in Newgate now?"

"No. He was brought to trial after innumerable delays. The evidence against him amounted to nothing. The witnesses—one of them a lying wretch who ought to be whipped at the cart's tail from Newgate to Charing Cross, by name Jeremy Rofflash—were scoundrelly common informers of the lowest type. Lancelot's father, a Whig clergyman and strong supporter of King George, appeared in court to speak on behalf of his son's character, and the lad was acquitted. But I fear he's broken in health, and I doubt if he'll be the man he was before." [Pg 220]

Again Lavinia was silent. It was all very sad, and she felt full of pity for Lance. But at the back of her thoughts lurked the remembrance of Sally Salisbury's mocking face, of her vulgar spite. She was not altogether convinced that Lancelot Vane was insensible to Sally's undoubted attractions. She sighed.

"To-morrow, then," went on Gay, "I shall bring you the songs I want you to learn."

They had now come in sight of Betty's cottage. Lavinia pointed it out to her companion, and Gay, bidding her adieu, turned in the direction of Hampstead village.

Pensively Lavinia walked towards the cottage. She had told herself over and over again that she cared no more for Lancelot—that she had blotted him out of her life—that she wanted neither to see him nor to hear of him. Yet now that he had gone through so terrible an ordeal she had a yearning to offer him her sympathy, if not to forgive him.

"No, I can't do that," she murmured. "Accident or not, that vile woman was with him—his arms were round her. I'll swear my eyes didn't play me false."

Suddenly she heard a halting step behind her. The heath at night was a favourite haunt of questionable characters from dissolute men of fashion to footpads, and a lone woman had need to dread one as much as the other. Betty's cottage was but a few yards away, and Lavinia quickened her pace. [Pg 221]

"Miss Fenton—one moment, I entreat," came in a panting whisper. "I—I am Lancelot Vane. I must speak with you."

CHAPTER XXIV

Lavinia stopped and turned, not completely round but half way. She was in a flutter, though outwardly calm. She made no attempt to recognise Vane, and indeed had Lancelot not announced himself, recognition would have been difficult, so greatly had he changed.

"You've forgotten me. You're right," he went on agitatedly. "I deserve to be forgotten, though if you knew of the dastardly plot to crush me I believe even *you* would forgive me."

"Even *I*? Am I, then, so hard-hearted?"

"No, I don't believe you are, but everything looked so black against me I could scarce hope that you would listen to what I have to say. And there's so great a difference between our fortunes. Mine's blighted. Yours—I heard you sing to-night. 'Twas ravishing. You're destined to be famous. Mr. Gay confided to me his hopes about you. Did he say how good he was to visit me in Newgate—that hell upon earth?"

"Yes, Mr. Gay is the best man living. I owe everything to him." [Pg 222]

"I know—I know. He went over your story. You're wonderful. But I always thought that, though I knew so little about you."

He paused. His glistening eyes scanned her face eagerly. He would have given worlds to know what was in her mind and heart. But she gave him no chance. She remained impassive.

"You've been very unfortunate, Mr. Vane. I'm truly sorry for you."

"That's something," said he gratefully. "It consoles me for what I've gone through. The lies told by Rofflash and Jarvis, who I thought was my friend, nearly sent me to Tyburn."

"And Mistress Salisbury?"

Lavinia's manner was as cold as ice. It was only by a great effort that she forced her lips to utter Sally's name. She knew it meant a deadly thrust for Vane, but a woman has no mercy where another woman is concerned.

Vane hung his head.

"I don't know what to think about her," said he huskily. "I can hardly believe she was in the conspiracy to consign me to the gallows."

"Why not? Is she in love with you?"

"How can I tell? I—I—well, I suppose I may say in justice to her that she did her best to nurse me through the fever that followed my wound."

"Then she does love you," cried Lavinia roused out of her coldness. "I can't imagine the creature doing a good action without a strong motive."

"I've heard say she's generous and is always ready to put her hand in her pocket to help anybody in distress."

"Very likely. It's easy to be generous with money that comes so lightly. Every guinea she spends is tainted," exclaimed Lavinia passionately. "And so you accepted her help?"

"Not in money. She found me grievously ill at Dr. Mountchance's on London Bridge. [Pg 223] Mountchance is a quack and a charlatan, and she had me carried to her own lodgings else I must have died. I'd scarce recovered from my wound when I was arrested at Rofflash's instigation and thrown into Newgate."

"I suppose she did right and you, too, Mr. Vane," rejoined Lavinia with a toss of her head. "It is naught to do with me. Let us talk of other matters. Mr. Gay tells me your father's a clergyman."

"Yes. He would have had me be one too, but I hated everything to do with the Church. We parted in anger, and I went my own way. Ill luck followed me. I've made a mess of my life. Everything went wrong. I thought Fortune was coming my way when I met you, but she turned her back."

"That wasn't my fault, Mr. Vane."

"Great heaven, no! 'Twas entirely my own folly and accursed fate. I've no one to blame but myself. Wine was an easy way of drowning my troubles."

"You've no need to remind me of that, Mr. Vane," put in Lavinia hastily.

"I beg your pardon for going over my sins, but open confession's good for the soul, they say."

"I'd rather not hear about your sins, Mr. Vane. I don't want to listen when you talk like that. Tell me something of the other side."

"I doubt if there is another side," he rejoined in deep dejection. "I've had to come back to my father. He's vicar of a parish not far from here. You see my stay in Newgate and my trial ruined me. The publishers refused me employment and even my old companions turned their backs upon me."

"That was no loss."

"Perhaps not, but it convinced me I was done for in London."

"What do you intend to do, then?"

"I can't tell. Nothing, I suppose. I had my tragedy returned, and I've no heart to write another—except, maybe, my own, and that will have to be the task of somebody else." [Pg 224]

"What do you mean? You're talking in riddles. How can anybody else write your tragedy?"

"Anybody who knew the facts could do it. You could. No one better. The end's the difficulty—for you, not for me. But sooner or later you'd hear what the end was."

Lavinia grasped his wrist tightly, and looking into his face, saw his lips twitching convulsively.

"I understand," she burst out, "you mean to take your own life. Oh...."

"A tragedy must have a tragic finish or it isn't a tragedy. What have I left but for the curtain to come down?"

"You're talking nonsense. Think of your father—your mother, if you have one."

"The best in the world, poor soul."

"Very well, that settles it. You're more fortunate than I am. My mother's about the worst."

"Anyhow, one must die sooner or later. I was within an ace of death two months ago. The gallows wouldn't have been worse than a Hampstead pond."

"You're more foolish than ever. I won't listen to you. Swear to be sensible and think no longer of the miserables. I don't believe you're much more than a year older than me. Life's all before you."

"Life? A very little bit of it, and what a life! Waiting for death. Shall I tell you what Dr. Mead, the great physician, told my father who asked him to see me? 'That young man hasn't long to live. I give him a year. Killed by the Newgate pestilence.' Now, what do you say, Miss Fenton?"

"Don't call me Miss Fenton," cried Lavinia, her voice quivering. "It makes us seem miles apart. You poor fellow! But doctors aren't always right." [Pg 225]

"This one is. I feel it. But I don't care so long as you forgive me and make me believe I'm no longer a stranger. You do pardon me, don't you, Lavinia?"

"Oh, yes—yes—let us forget everything but our two selves," she cried impulsively. Her heart was overflowing with pity. She held out both her hands. He seized them and raised them to his lips.

"May I meet you to-morrow?" he whispered. "The only thing I would live for is the joy of seeing you, of hearing your voice. It will be but for a short time."

"Oh, you mustn't say that. You don't know," she cried tremulously.

A wistful smile stole over his wan face. Silently he held her hands for a few seconds, pressed them spasmodically and the next moment they were free. He had crept away.

A wave of emotion swept over Lavinia. Her temples throbbed. A lump rose in her throat. Her eyes were streaming. She was inexpressibly sad. Jealousy, resentment, every harsh feeling had disappeared. Though she had tried to combat Vane's dismal forebodings a conviction was gradually forcing itself upon her that he was right. He was a doomed man.

It was quite ten minutes before she was composed enough to enter the cottage. Betty and her mother were tiptoe with excitement. The old woman was too feeble to walk as far as the concert room, but her daughter had gone and listened outside, and as it was a hot night and the windows were open, she heard Lavinia's song perfectly.

"Mercy on me, child, why, an angel couldn't ha' sung more beautiful. La, if it only be like that in Heaven! I'd ha' given anything for mother to ha' been there. I see you come out with a gentleman, but I know manners better than to stare at others as is above me."

"That was Mr. Gay, the poet. It was he who took me to the Duchess of Queensberry. I told you how kind she was to me, didn't I?" [Pg 226]

"Aye, so you did. Well, but sure how the folk did clap their hands and roar for you to sing again. They loved to hear you purely an' no wonder. I never heard anything like it. But bless me, Lavinia—beggin' your pardon, which I ought to say Miss Fenton—you don't seem overjoyed."

"The girl's a-tired out," put in the old lady. "I mind it was just the same with my poor mistress Molly. She sometimes couldn't move one foot in front o' t'other when she comed off the stage."

"That's true enough," said Lavinia wearily. "It's the excitement. I shall be myself again after a night's rest."

"Aye, to be sure. Some supper, as is all ready, and then to bed," cried Betty.

The prescription was good enough, but so far as the supper was concerned Lavinia could not, to use Betty's words, "make much of a fist of it." She was glad enough to escape the clack of

tongues and the fire of questions and crawl to her room.

Slowly the hours crept by, and when the early summer dawn broke Lavinia was still awake watching the faint streaks of pale gold through the little latticed window.

The rest in bed had not brought repose. Her mind was troubled. Lancelot Vane's unexpected appearance and the story of his persecution strove for mastery with the recollection of her triumph at the concert and had overpowered it. All the old tenderness, the joy of being near him revived. It was useless to ask why, useless to call herself weak and silly to be drawn towards a man who had no force of character, whose prospects were remote, whose health was undermined. The impression she once had that he was faithless had not wholly disappeared, and she tried to banish it. Her imagination found for him all manner of excuses. Yet she could not decide that she wanted to see him again. One moment it seemed as though the blank which had [Pg 227] come into her life since their rupture had been filled up now that he had come back, the next that it would have been better if he had not. She had gradually come to regard her profession and all it meant to her in the future as the only thing that mattered, and now in a flash at the sight of him all was uncertainty and distraction.

But for the second time Vane had risked his life for her! Mr. Gay said it was on her account that he had fought with Dorrimore, and Mr. Gay would not tell an untruth. After all, this was everything. How could she think otherwise than kindly of a man in spite of his faults, who was ever ready to champion her? And she dropped off to sleep no longer saying that she would not meet him.

CHAPTER XXV

"MR. RICH HAS GIVEN ME AN ENGAGEMENT"

Lavinia slept late and was only aroused by Betty hammering at her door.

"Get up—get up, Miss Lavvy. A fine gentleman's a-waiting to see 'ee. 'Tis him as I see go out with 'ee last night from the concert."

"Mr. Gay," said Lavinia to herself. Then aloud: "I won't be long. What's the time?"

"Pretty nigh mid-day. I didn't wake 'ee afore 'cause I knowed you was tired. He's a nice pleasant gentleman, sure. I wanted to hurry granny out o' the room, but he wouldn't hear of it. I left 'em a-talking about play matters. Once get mother on to *that* she'll go on fur ever." [Pg 228]

Lavinia sprang out of bed and hurried over her toilet. She presented herself quite flushed and flustered. Gay received her with a smile and noted her animation with pleasure. He unrolled a number of sheets of music. The paper was rough and the notes, engraved and not printed as to-day, were cramped and scratchy.

"You know some of these tunes may be, Polly; those you don't know you'll soon learn. I'm going to speak to Mr. Palmer about your singing two or three just to see how the people take 'em. The words will be the old ones, not my new verse. You won't have to trouble about my words yet awhile."

Gay ran over the titles of the old ballads—Purcell's "What shall I do to show how much I love her?" "Grim King of the Ghosts," "Thomas I cannot," "Now ponder well ye parents dear," "Pretty parrot say," "Over the hills and far away," "Gin thou wert my ain thing," "Cease your funning," "All in the Downs."

"Those are the principal songs," went on Gay.

"Yes, I know a few, but I've never heard of the others," cried Lavinia a little dismayed. "How shall I learn the tunes?"

"You must come to my lodgings in the village and I'll play them over to you on the flute. My friend, Dr. Arbuthnot, will be pleased to hear you sing 'em. It will do him good—perhaps charm away his gout. The doctor knows you."

"Does he, sir? I don't remember him."

"He was at Mr. Pope's villa the day you sang to us. I must have a harpsichord and we must have Dr. Pepusch to tell us what he thinks."

Lavinia heard all this with great delight. She felt she was really not only on the ladder of success but was climbing upwards safely.

Gay then fell to talking of other matters, and incidentally mentioned that John Rich was back from Bath where he had been taking the waters, and that he must be talked into engaging [Pg 229] Lavinia permanently when the season opened in October.

"It won't be singing yet awhile Polly, so don't be disappointed if you have to continue to walk on the stage and come off again. I'm told his 'Harlequin' hasn't finished its run so he'll open with that and go on till my opera's ready. I'm all impatience to see you in it."

Then patting her cheek and chucking her under the chin Gay took his leave.

It would have been hard for Lavinia to say how the day passed. She walked on the heath for no other purpose, so she said, save to revel in the sunshine and pure air. She had a secret hope that she might encounter Lancelot Vane, but embarrassment was mingled with that hope. It would be better not, she felt, yet she was disappointed all the same when after strolling about for half an hour she saw nothing of him, and banishing her vain thoughts she went on to the concert room to inquire if she were wanted to sing that night.

"Yes, to be sure," said Palmer. "You're all the talk. I've seen Mr. Gay, and he tells me he's given you some songs he would like you to sing. Suppose you go over a couple now for me?"

A harpsichord was in the room and Palmer asked her to sing what she liked and he would fill in an accompaniment as best he could as she had not brought the music. She selected "Now ponder well ye parents dear," the tender pathos of which had always appealed to her, and "Thomas I cannot," a merry ditty which she knew from her old experience as a street singer would be sure to please. Palmer was delighted with both. The first he said brought tears to his eyes and the second put him in good humour.

"My dear, you could not have made a better choice. I expect a crowded room and you'll conquer 'em all."

And so she did. There was no longer coldness—no longer indifference. Everybody was agog with expectation, everybody was pleased. Lavinia's triumph was complete. Night after night it was the same. Palmer had never had so successful a season. He put money in his pocket and he paid his new star fairly well. [Pg 230]

Two or three times a week for over a month Lavinia went to Gay's lodgings and rehearsed the songs she did not know and those also with which she was already acquainted. The words Gay gave her to sing were not those to which she was accustomed and she found the change confusing. Moreover, at each rehearsal some alterations in the words were made, occasionally by Gay, occasionally at the suggestion of Dr. Arbuthnot. But she never wearied, and so she was sufficiently rewarded for her trouble when Gay bestowed upon her a word of praise.

But Lancelot Vane?

He came not in spite of his earnest entreaty that she would meet him. At first she was wounded, then she was indignant. She remembered how faithless he had proved, and all her bitterness against him and Sally Salisbury revived. Then came a revulsion of feeling. Why should he not be ill? Nay, he might even be dead. Perhaps worse. If he had carried out his despairing threat? She pictured him floating on the surface of a Hampstead pond and a shudder went over her at the gruesome thought. Finally she subsided into dull resignation and strove to think no more about him.

It was September; with the colder weather came the waning of the Hampstead season, the fashionable folk were returning to London and preparing for masquerades, ridottos, the theatres and the opera. The Great Room concerts were but thinly attended and for a whole fortnight Lavinia had not sung twice. But this did not matter to her. She had been written to by John Rich, and he had engaged her at a little higher salary than he had hitherto paid.

Lavinia sang for the last time at Hampstead and quitted the Great Room not without regrets and doubts. Would she be as successful at the Duke's Theatre? Would she have her chance? She well knew the rivalries a rising actress would have to encounter. But what disturbed her most was that Gay's enthusiasm over his opera did not seem so keen as it had been. She dared not ask him the cause of his depression. She could only watch his varying moods and hope the melancholy ones would pass. [Pg 231]

Hitherto Betty had always been waiting for her to accompany her across the heath, but this last night she was not in her usual place at the door. Lavinia was not surprised as Betty had a bad cold. She hurried out, anxious to get home. Some one a yard or so from the entrance shrank into the darkness as she passed out but not so rapidly that he was not noticed and recognised.

Lavinia was full of generous impulses that evening. Everything had gone so well with her, and the future in spite of her doubts was so bright.

"Mr. Vane," she cried and moved a step towards him. "Do I frighten you that you don't want to see me?"

"No," she heard him say, but it was with difficulty for his voice was so low. "I'm not frightened but I'm afraid of what you might say or think."

"You don't give me a chance of the one or the other," she retorted. "You don't keep your own appointments. 'Tis a bad habit of forgetfulness with women, it's worse with men."

"You're right, but in my case 'tis not forgetfulness. I've seen you every time you've sung. I've not missed once."

"And you've never acknowledged my presence! Thank you."

"I was at fault there, I suppose. I kept my happiness to myself. I ought to have thanked you for the joy of seeing and hearing you but I was doubtful whether I should not be intruding."

"It would have been no intrusion," rejoined Lavinia her tone softening.

"Then I hope my admiration is not an impertinence." [Pg 232]

"Oh, you're too modest, Mr. Vane. You've no confidence in yourself—save when you've need to strike a blow."

"I've no confidence that I'm acceptable to you and—but may I accompany you across the heath? I notice that your usual bodyguard is absent to-night."

"Oh, you've noticed *that*. May be that bodyguard prevented what you're pleased to call your intrusion."

"It made no difference. Had you been alone I should have taken care that you reached home safely but you would not have known that I was within call. May I?"

He had offered his arm. She accepted it. Now that he was close to her she could see that he had vastly improved. His unhealthy pallor was gone, his eyes had lost their glassiness, his step was firm, his body more elastic.

They set out. For a few yards not a word was said. Lavinia was the first to speak.

"I hope the Hampstead ponds have lost their attraction," said she lightly.

"Indeed yes—thanks to you. My mother says it is due to the Hampstead air, but I know better. Is it true that I'm no longer to drink of the elixir that is restoring me to health and sanity? Are you going to leave Hampstead?"

"Yes, I'm returning to London. Mr. Rich has given me an engagement."

"I congratulate you. You're fortunate, but your fortune's not more than you deserve. You're going to be famous. I'm sure of it."

"Well—and you? You'll be writing something soon, won't you?"

"I think not. I've no mind to court failure a second time. My father has secured me a post at a mercers in Ludgate Hill. I'm still to mingle with books but they're not of the sort which used to interest me. They have to do with figures. I've undertaken to keep the accounts." [Pg 233]

"I wish you success. Mind you keep 'em correctly. I've my doubts about that," rejoined Lavinia with a little laugh. "But I mustn't discourage you."

"You'll never do that. I love even your chiding."

"That's nonsense."

"It's true. I swear it."

The talk was drifting into a personal channel and Lavinia swiftly changed the subject. The rest of the way was occupied in friendly chat. At parting Lancelot would have kissed her hand but she adroitly avoided his homage. Not because she was averse but because she thought it discreet.

Lavinia went to bed that night content with the world and with herself. She felt a secret pleasure that she had in a way brought Vane back to life though how she had done it she could not explain. At any rate, there was no magic about it. It was a very ordinary thing—no romance—and certainly no love. So at least she argued and ended by thinking she had convinced herself.

In London Lavinia went back to her old lodgings in Little Queen Street, and revived her acquaintance with Mrs. Egleton. The latter received her with much effusion, which puzzled Lavinia not a little. The cause, however, was revealed when the lady explained how she had heard from John Rich that when "The Beggar's Opera" was put into rehearsal he was going to give her the part of Lucy.

"And you, my dear, are to play Polly."

"So Mr. Gay says, but I don't know for certain."

"Have you read the play?"

"No, I've only learned my songs."

"And the duet with me?"—"I'm bubbled."

"No. I know nothing about that."

"It's terribly hard, but there's plenty of time to get it by heart. I'm dreadfully nervous though. We have to sing it without any instruments, not even a harpsichord. All the songs are to be like that."

"Oh.... Won't it all sound very poor?" [Pg 234]

"Of course it will. You see that mean hunks Rich won't go to the expense of a band. He doesn't know how the opera will take the people. It may be hissed off the stage the first night. I don't trouble my head about politics—I can't say I know what the rubbish means—but I'm told there's a good deal in the opera that's likely to give offence."

"I can't think Mr. Gay would write anything likely to offend anybody."

"Can't you? Well, if the Church can easily give offence, much more likely a playwriter. Why, wasn't the Bishop of Rochester sent to the Tower for what he said, and isn't he at this very moment in Paris and afraid to show his nose in England? Oh, you can't call your soul your own now-a-days. We poor playfolk may bless our lucky stars that we've only got to say the words set down for us and not our own. Mr. Gay who writes 'em for us'll have the worry and he's got it too, what with Rich's scraping and saving and his insisting upon Mr. Quin playing in the opera."

Lavinia now saw why Gay had been depressed. But Mr. Quin the surly, who only played in tragedies, what had he to do with Gay's opera? She put the question to Mrs. Egleton.

"Nothing at all. He hasn't any more idea of singing than an old crow. It's ridiculous, but Rich will have his way. I tell you flatly, Lavinia, if Quin plays the part of Captain Macheath he'll be laughed at and so shall we, and the piece will be damned."

Lavinia thought so too. She had, as Mrs. Squeamish in Wycherley's play, once acted with Quin on the occasion of his benefit and she well remembered his stiff, stilted style and how he domineered over everybody. She felt rather dismayed but she could only resign herself to the situation. There was the consolation that the opera was not likely to be staged for some time and things might alter. In the theatre any sudden change was possible. [Pg 235]

For weeks, indeed to Christmas, Lavinia remained one of the "lasses" in "The Rape of Proserpine," but she was quite contented, for Lancelot Vane was permanently in London in his new post and they were constantly together. Every night he was waiting for her outside the stage door and saw her across the Fields to Little Queen Street. It was not safe, he protested, for her to be in that dark dreary waste alone at night and he was right. Lincoln's Inn Fields was one of the worst places in London. The most daring robberies even in daylight were of common occurrence.

Despite the short days of winter they took long walks together. On the day "betwixt Saturday and Monday," like the lad and the lass of Carey's famous ballad at that time all the rage, to them Sunday was the day of days. Sometimes they strolled to the pleasant fields of Islington and Hornsey; sometimes they revisited Hampstead, and occasionally by way of the Westminster and Lambeth ferry to the leafy groves of Camberwell, and the Dulwich Woods. They never talked of love; they were contented and happy, may be because both were conscious they *were* in love.

CHAPTER XXVI

"POLLY IS TO BE MY NAME FOR EVER AFTER"

The new year brought the first rehearsal of "The Beggar's Opera." Hippisley with his rich, unctuous humour was Peachum, and not less well suited to Lockit was Jack Hall's quaint face and naive manner. James Spiller, the favourite of the gods, was Mat o' the Mint, and the solemn visaged Quin essayed Macheath. Lavinia as Polly was both excited and nervous, and Lucy (Mrs. [Pg 236] Egleton) not less so. The rest of the cast comprised actors and actresses of experience, and they went through their parts philosophically and without enthusiasm. The motive and the plot and the many songs made up a play which was to them quite novel, and they were somewhat bewildered to know what to do with it. Gay hovered about unable to decide whether his opera was going to be a thumping success or a dismal failure. The general impression was in the direction of the latter, but no one save Quin gave vent to his or her sentiments.

"Well, what d'ye think, Mr. Quin?" asked Gay anxiously when the rehearsal was over.

Quin refreshed himself with a pinch of snuff before he answered.

"Humph—can't say—can't say. It'll be a riddle to the audience. Bad thing to puzzle 'em, eh?"

"Surely it's plain enough. But if it's amusing, what else matters?"

"I won't put my opinion against yours, Mr. Gay and Mr. Pope's, but——"

Quin shrugged his shoulders and stalked away, and Lavinia, who was watching the two from a distance, ran across the stage, her face a little troubled. She had interpreted Quin's gesture correctly.

"Oh, Mr. Gay——" she stopped. Gay was looking so sad.

"Mr. Quin doesn't like the opera, Polly. What do you say?"

"Mr. Quin doesn't like it because he can't act the part," cried Lavinia indignantly. "None of us like him in it any more than he does himself. He's not my idea of a highwayman."

"Why, what do you know about highwaymen? But I forgot, of course. Wasn't the coach that brought you to London from Mr. Pope's villa stopped by one?" [Pg 237]

"Yes," rejoined Lavinia hastily, "but he was a brutal ruffian. Not your Captain Macheath at all. Mr. Quin chills me. I can't fancy myself in love with him. Nor can Mrs. Egleton. She says she could no more quarrel over him than she could over a stick. His singing and his voice give us the 'creeps.'"

"Faith, both are bad enough, but Mr. Rich seems bound to him."

"Why doesn't he try Tom Walker? When Tom isn't drunk, he sings like an angel."

"I know—I know. Well, we'll see."

But nothing was done, and at the second rehearsal Quin's Captain Macheath was more droningly dismal than ever. A dead silence followed the dance with which the last act concludes, and amid the stillness came from somewhere behind the scenes the sound of a mellow tenor voice trolling Macheath's lively melody, "When the heart of a man's depressed with care."

"By the lord," quoth Quin, "that's the voice of Tom Walker. He's the man for Macheath. Mr. Rich, I resign the part. It was never meant for me. Give it to Walker."

John Rich grunted, but he made no objection. It so happened that Walker could act as well as sing, and that made all the difference in Rich's estimation. So one great obstacle to success was removed. But there were others. The duets and the choruses sounded terribly thin without an instrument to support them. The "tricky" duet between Polly and Lucy, "I'm bubbled," broke down constantly, and both declared they would never sing it properly. But Rich was not to be talked out of his whim to have no accompaniments.

One morning in the midst of the rehearsal, who should walk on the stage but the stately Duchess of Queensberry. Lavinia, in quite a flutter, whispered to Walker the name of the distinguished visitor. John Rich received her with great deference and conducted her to a seat. [Pg 238]

"Go on, please, Mr. Rich, don't let me interrupt your business," said the great lady affably.

The rehearsal went on and eyes of the company furtively wandered to the face of the duchess, anxious to know what so powerful a personage and so keen and outspoken a critic thought of the performance. But the serene face of her grace never changed.

The rehearsing of one act was over, and there was an interval before commencing the next one. The duchess turned to Gay.

"How is this, Mr. Gay? Where are the instruments? Don't you have them at rehearsals?"

"Mr. Rich means to do without a band for the singing. He says it isn't necessary."

"Rich is a fool," retorted her grace with much emphasis. "He knows nothing about it. Send him to me."

Gay went about his errand half pleased, for he quite agreed with the duchess, and half in trepidation. A quarrel between Rich and the lady autocrat might cause the opera to end in disaster.

Rich dared not offend Queensberry's duchess whose opinion went for so much among the aristocracy. The stage was practically dependent on its noble patrons. Without them a "benefit," which every notable member of a theatrical company looked forward to as making good the insufficiency of their salaries, would be nothing without the support of the nobility, who, when in the mood, would readily unloose their purse strings. Rich therefore made but feeble resistance and the impetuous Kitty had her way.

The band, small as it was, just half-a-dozen instruments, could not be called together at a moment's notice. Rich accordingly invited his visitor to come the following day, when all would be in readiness. He was as good as his word, and the duchess was graciously pleased to express her satisfaction. Polly and Lucy went back to their lodgings in high spirits. [Pg 239]

January 29th was fixed for the production of the opera, and the days sped rapidly. Everybody concerned was on tenterhooks. Who could say how the audience would take a play the like of which they had never seen? There was also danger in the political allusions contained in many of the verses. Sir Robert Walpole, England's most powerful minister of state, had taken a box and would be present with a party of his friends. What would *he* think? A riot was not beyond the bounds of possibility. The play might be suppressed. A prosecution for seditious proceedings might follow. Anything might happen.

Meanwhile the house was packed. Every seat on each side of the stage reserved for the "quality" was occupied. There was just room for the actors and no more. The gallery was crammed with a mob—a host of footmen prone to unruly behaviour, butchers from Clare Market ready to applaud their favourite Jemmy Spiller, Covent Garden salesmen and porters—a miscellaneous rabble that might easily become turbulent.

In the pit were well to do tradesmen and their wives cheek by jowl with well seasoned playgoers who had seen every stage celebrity and every famous tragedy and comedy for the past quarter of a century, who were well versed in all the traditional "business" of the boards, who in fact were the real critics to be pleased—or offended. Into the second row Lancelot Vane had squeezed himself all expectation, with eyes and ears for no one but Polly Peachum.

Gay's friends filled a box next to that occupied by the Duke of Argyll, an enthusiastic patron of the stage. Gay himself was there supported on either side by Pope, Dr. Arbuthnot, Bolingbroke and others. Dean Swift, who had had so much to do with the inception of the opera and who had contributed to it some of the most stinging verse, would have been present had he not been in Ireland at the death-bed of his beloved Stella, and so also would have been Congreve but that he [Pg 240]

was blind and in feeble health.

It was seen at the very commencement that the audience was not disposed to accept the innovations of the "Beggar's Opera" without protest. To begin with there was no time-honoured prologue, and worse, there was no preliminary overture. They could not understand the dialogue between a player and the beggar, introduced as the author, with which the opera opens. They grumbled loudly. They thought they were to be defrauded of their usual music and they wouldn't allow the dialogue to proceed. Jack Hall who as a comedian was acceptable all round was sent on by the troubled manager to explain.

Hall advanced to the edge of the stage. There were no footlights in those days. Favourite though Jack Hall was not a hand nor a voice was raised to greet him. Jack Hall lost his nerve—which, however, as it turned out was the most fortunate thing which could have happened—and this is what he stammered out:

"Ladies and gentlemen, we—we—beg you'll not call for first and second music because you all know there is never any music at all at an opera!"

A roar of laughter followed this unique apology accentuated by the unconsciously comical twist of Hall's face with which the audience were so familiar; good humour was restored, the dialogue was permitted to be finished and the grumblers were further appeased by the playing of Dr. Pepusch's overture.

More pitfalls had to be got over safely. Every eye was turned on Sir Robert's heavy rubicund, impassive face when Peachum sang the verse:

"The priest calls the lawyer a cheat,
  The lawyer be-knaves the divine,
And the statesman because he's so great,
  Thinks his trade as honest as mine!"

The statesman in the box, whatever he might have felt, was far too astute to show any sign of ill temper. His eternal smile was as smug as ever and so also was it over the duet in the second act: [Pg 241]

"When you censure the age
Be cautious and sage
Lest the courtiers offended should be;
If you mention vice or bribe,
'Tis so pat to all the tribe,
Each cries 'That was levelled at me.'"

The audience were somewhat timid in applauding this, though all felt how apt it was, until they saw Walpole actually clapping his hands, and then they followed suit right heartily.

Still success was not assured. True Polly captivated her hearers with her sweet natural delivery of "Can love be controlled by advice?" and afterwards with the tender pathos of "Oh ponder well," and there were roars of laughter and half suppressed chuckles from the men and titters from the women at the witty talk and the cynical hits at love and matrimonial felicity, but it was not until Spiller led the rousing choruses, "Fill every glass," and "Let us take the road," the latter adapted to the march from Handel's opera of "Rinaldo," then all the rage, that they were won over. The experienced Duke of Argyll cried out aloud enough for Pope in the next box to hear him, "It'll do—it must do—I see it in the eyes of 'em." And the duke was right.

When all was said and done pretty Polly Peachum was the pivot around which success revolved. Within twenty-four hours all the town was talking of her bewitching face, her artless manner, her sweet voice. The sordid surroundings of Newgate, its thieves, male and female, its thieve takers, gave zest to her naturalness and simplicity. Moreover she was not in a fashionable dress, she wore no hoops (and neither did Lucy) and this in itself was a novelty and a contrast.

It was some time after the performance that Lavinia—whom everyone now called Polly—left the theatre. The noblemen who had seats on the stage crowded round her overwhelming her with compliments and looks of admiration. One of their number, a man of portly presence at least twice her age, whose face suggested good nature but little else, was assiduous in his attentions. Lavinia accepted his flattery as a matter of course, and thought nothing more about him. She was told he was the Duke of Bolton, but duke or earl made no difference to her. Some of her titled admirers offered to escort her home but she shook her head laughingly and refused everyone. She knew very well that Lancelot Vane would be waiting for her as usual at the stage door, and she did not intend either to disappoint him or make him jealous. [Pg 242]

She joined him, her cheeks flushed and her eyes shining with excitement. Vane looked eagerly and anxiously into her face and gave a little sigh.

"Well," said she, "are you disappointed with me?"

"Disappointed! Good heavens, no. Why Lavinia—"

"Lavinia," she cried tossing her head coquettishly. "Polly if you please. Polly is to be my name for ever after. Everybody knows me now as Polly, though dear Mr. Gay called me so long and long ago. Isn't it wonderful how his words have come true?"

"Mr. Gay is a clever man—a great man. I wish—"

"Yes, and what do you wish? Something nice I hope."

"I don't know about that. My wish was that I had been born a real poet and dramatist and had written 'The Beggar's Opera' for you. But my wits are dull—like myself."

"Please don't be foolish. I want you to tell me how I sang—how I acted. You didn't mind Tom Walker making love to me?"

"No, I wished my arm had been round you instead of his, that was all."

"Wishing again! Can't you do something beyond wishing?" [Pg 243]

She flashed a swift look at him and then the dark silky lashes drooped. He must have been dull indeed not to have understood. His arm was about her. He drew her closer to him passionately. It was the first time, though he had over and over again longed to do so.

"I love you—don't you know I do?" he whispered.

"I've sometimes thought as much but you've been very slow in telling me," she murmured lightly.

"Ah, I was afraid what your answer might be. Ridicule and a reproof for my impertinence. Even now I don't realise my happiness."

"Then you *must*," she cried imperiously. "How do you know I shan't be whirled away from you unless you hold me very tight? Oh, Lance, I've a misgiving—"

She stopped. She shivered slightly and he drew her cloak tightly about her and kissed the cherry lips within the hood.

"You're cold, dearest. Let us hurry. I ought not to have lingered," said he.

"No, no. I'm not a bit cold. I only had a sort of feeling that—kiss me again."

He was quick to obey and her kisses were as fervent as his.

"See me to my door and go quickly," she murmured.

"To-morrow, dear love, we shall meet each other again," was his reply.

"Why yes—yes."

"Many times more."

She nodded. Something seemed to choke her utterance. One more kiss and she vanished into the house.

Vane remained for a minute or two gazing at the dwelling that enshrined his divinity and lost in rapture. Then he slowly wandered to his lodgings marvelling at the glimpse of heaven which to his imagination had been revealed to him.

CHAPTER XXVII [Pg 244]

THE CURTAIN FALLS

Before the week was out the only topic in which the town took any interest was "The Beggar's Opera," and the "all Conquering Polly," as an advertisement setting forth the attractions of a miniature screen designed as a memento of the opera, had it. In a score of ways enterprising tradesmen adapted the scenes and the songs to their wares and in all Polly was the principal feature. Polly became the fashion everywhere. Amateur flautists played her songs, amateur vocalists warbled them. Hardly a week passed without one daily journal or the other burst into verse in her praise.

As for Polly herself she was inundated with love letters, some written seriously, others purely out of admiration. Offers of marriage came both personally and through the post. The world of gallants was at her feet. She laughed at most of her would-be lovers and listened to none. The good natured Duke of Bolton approached her constantly and was never tired of going to the opera. Seated as he was on the stage it was easy enough for him to express his adoration. He was also ever ready with presents which he proffered with so respectful an air that she could hardly refuse them. But what did the duke mean? Had he not a duchess already? True, he was not on the best of terms with her. He had been forced into marriage by his father and he and his wife had been separated some six years. But this made no difference. The duchess was still in the world.

Polly—henceforth she dropped the Lavinia—heard what his grace had to say but gave him no encouragement beyond smiling bewitchingly now and again. She did not dislike him, but she did [Pg 245] not care for him. Lancelot Vane was still the hero of her romance and that romance would never die. Sometimes she amused herself and Lancelot too by telling him of the offers of marriage she

had received and how she had refused them, but she never mentioned the Duke of Bolton.

One night—it was the twenty-second performance of the opera—Lancelot Vane was in his accustomed place at the end of the second row in the pit. There was a vacant seat on the other side of his, and half way through the third act a late comer was heard growling and without saying by your leave or with your leave attempted to force himself past Vane into the empty seat.

Lance looked up angry at the rudeness of the fellow. He started. He recognised Jeremy Rofflash-Rofflash very much the worse for the drink, very much the worse in every way since Vane had last set eyes upon him.

Things had gone very badly with the swashbuckler. Archibald Dorrimore, his old patron, was dead, killed by dicing, drinking and other vices. Rofflash had had to take to the "road" more than ever and he'd had very bad luck. A bullet from a coach passenger's pistol had struck his knee and he now limped. He was nearly always drunk and when drunk all his old hatreds were uppermost. Directly he saw Vane, his bleary eyes glistened and his lips tightened over his uneven teeth and the ugly gaps between.

"Devil take me, if it isn't the cockerel whose feathers I've sworn to pluck. Come to ogle the young trollop on the stage, I'll swear. If I know anything about the hussy, she'll turn you down for the first spark who flings a handful of guineas in her lap."

Jeremy's gruff rasping tones were heard all over the house. Polly and Lucy were singing their duet "Would I might be hanged," and both cast indignant looks at the side of the pit whence the interruption came. But they could only hear, not see, so dimly was the theatre lighted. Meanwhile [Pg 246] Vane had sprung to his feet.

"You lie you ruffian," he shouted and his hand went to his sword.

The people in the front and back benches rose; the women screamed; one of the theatre attendants who chanced to be near seized Rofflash who struggled violently and swore loudly. Some of the audience came to the attendant's assistance and the fellow was flung out. The uproar soon subsided—it had not lasted more than a couple of minutes, the music went on and Polly thought no more about it. She had not the slightest idea that the chief actors in it so nearly concerned herself.

The sequel to the discomposing interruption was totally unpremeditated. Polly was the "toast of the town," the idol of the sparks of fashion. Their applause was uproarious when she and Lucy recommenced the duet, but this sympathetic encouragement was not enough for the more ardent spirits. When she issued from the stage door she found awaiting her a bodyguard of young aristocrats dressed in the height of the mode and in the gayest of colours. At her appearance every man's sword flashed from its scabbard and was uplifted to do her honour.

Never was such a triumph. No wonder her heart bounded and her cheeks flushed with pleasure. She smiled right and left and bowed; the rapiers on either side crossed each other over her head and formed a canopy under which she walked with a dainty grace. She was not permitted to pass from beneath its shelter. The canopy kept pace with her, closing behind. And in this way the procession set out to cross Lincoln's Inn Fields amid cheers and shouts of "Pretty Polly Peachum!"

It would seem as though the services of Polly's protectors were not wholly unneeded. As she emerged from the door and the gallants closed round her there was a sudden movement in the mob, a fellow forced his way through, hurling curses at anyone who tried to stop him. Apparently [Pg 247] his object was to get to a man standing close to the bodyguard. Anyway, when the intruder was behind this man a woman's scream pierced the din of voices, then came the report of a pistol and the man staggered. Those nearest him, seized with panic, fell back and he sank to the ground.

A woman was seen to fling herself on her knees, bend over the body and gaze into the face already becoming ashen. The next instant she sprang to her feet, her features drawn, her eyes blazing. Pointing to the assassin who was rushing through the crowd she begged someone to stop him, but the big pistol he was flourishing deterred them.

"Cowards!" she screamed in fury. "Will no one seize a murderer? If you're men you'll help me."

She made a wild rush in the direction the ruffian had taken and a score or so of apprentices and a handful of Clare Market butchers recovering from their surprise joined her.

Meanwhile Polly and her escort gaily went on their way. They were dimly conscious of the affray but such occurrences at night and especially in Lincoln's Inn Fields were frequent, and not one of the party heeded. How indeed could Polly imagine that her romance had ended in a tragedy, that the man lying so still, his white face upturned to the moonlit sky, was her lover, Lancelot Vane—that the man who had done him to death was Jeremy Rofflash—that the woman in hot chase of his murderer was Sally Salisbury?

Rofflash had made for the network of courts and allies of Clare Market hoping to double upon his pursuers and gain the Strand, and then hurry to the Alsatia of Whitefriars. But some of those following knew the intricacies of Clare Market better than Rofflash, and he twisted and turned like a hunted hare, his difficulties momentarily increasing, for as the excited mob fought their [Pg 248] way through the narrow lanes their numbers swelled. True, Jeremy Rofflash made his way to the Strand without being captured, but he failed to reach Whitefriars. The Strand and Fleet Street

gave his pursuers a better chance. But because of his pistol none dared touch him.

Despite his limp he could run. Along Ludgate skirting St. Paul's, he was soon in Cheapside. By this time Sally Salisbury was nearly exhausted, and in St. Paul's Churchyard she jumped into a hackney coach and shaking her purse at the driver bade him join in the pursuit. The Poultry, the Royal Exchange were left behind, but the coach—with Sally inside continually calling upon the driver to go faster, at the same time promising him any reward he liked to ask—gradually drew upon the fugitive. The latter was close to the road leading to London Bridge, and turning, he fired his second barrel at the horse and the animal stumbled and fell.

Rofflash thought he was safe, but he was not aware that the leader of his pursuers was Sally Salisbury and that she knew perfectly well why he was running towards the bridge. She sprang from the now useless coach and called upon the crowd to follow her. Meanwhile Rofflash had distanced his pursuers.

"The apothecary's shop on London Bridge," she screamed.

Dr. Mountchance at that moment was engaged in what to him was his greatest pleasure in life—counting his gold. He was in the midst of this absorbing occupation when he heard three separate knocks at his outside door given in a peculiarly distinctive way. He knew Jeremy's signal and he hurried his gold into an iron bound coffer which he locked.

"If the captain's made a good haul so much the better," he muttered. "It's time he did. He's had the devil's bad luck of late." [Pg 249]

The old man shuffled to the door and shot back the bolts. Rofflash precipitated himself inside with such haste and violence that he nearly upset Mountchance.

"Lock the door," he gasped. "Quick. I've a pack of hungry wolves at my heels."

He leaned against a heavy piece of furniture hardly able to speak while the apothecary hastily fastened the door. Scarcely had he finished than yells and heavy footsteps were heard; there came heavy thuds and fierce kicks followed by repeated hammering. The door was well protected by iron panels and besides its bolts a stout iron bar from post to post helped to make it secure.

The two men looked at each other and Mountchance trembled. The crowd outside were not officers of the law, neither were they soldiery. What had caused them to hunt down Rofflash? Not because he had committed a robbery on the King's highway. The rabble had a secret sympathy with highwaymen.

"What have you done?" whispered the old man through his white lips.

"Shot a man. It was a fair fight—or might have been had it come to a tussle."

Mountchance knew Rofflash to be a hardened liar. The truth probably was that he had committed a murder. But there was no time to argue the point. To judge by the terrific blows which came at regular intervals something much more formidable than an ordinary hammer was being used. Then there was the sound of splintering wood. The door sturdy as it was would not stand much more. As a matter of fact the mob had procured a stout wooden beam from somewhere, twelve or fourteen feet long and were making it serve as a battering-ram.

"Damnation! I'm not going to be trapped," roared Rofflash, "I know the secret way to the chapel. You stay here and face 'em." [Pg 250]

"No. If that murderous mob doesn't find you they'll turn upon me. I'm an old man but they'll have no mercy," whined Mountchance.

"You fool. Can't you see that some one *inside* the house must have bolted and barred the door? If they don't find you they'll search until they do. You must tell them that I'm not in the place—that you haven't seen me. That'll satisfy 'em and they'll go away quickly."

"It's you that's the fool. Somebody must have seen you enter—how else did they know you were here?"

Another ominous splintering noise, then the sharp crack of ripping wood.

"No more of this damned nonsense," muttered Rofflash, and swinging his arm he gave Mountchance a blow with the flat of his hand, toppling him over. Without waiting to see what injury he had inflicted Rofflash rushed to a tall cabinet, entered it and closed the doors after him just as a yell of savage joy was raised outside. The iron bar was still across the entrance but there was a jagged aperture above and below. A couple of seconds more and the cabinet was empty. Rofflash had disappeared through a secret door at the back.

Mountchance's house, as already mentioned, was really an adjunct of St. Thomas's chapel, so far at least as the foundation was concerned. This foundation had once formed the lower chapel or crypt and was then the only distinctive relic of the bridge built by Peter of Colechurch, in the thirteenth century. Rofflash descended the uneven loose bricks of the narrow winding staircase into the dungeon-like apartment. The stone floor was not much above the level of the river at high tide and a lancet window on each side of the bridge admitted a glimmer of light in the day time. It was now pitch dark.

Rofflash groped his way over the slimy floor to a small door which he knew opened on to an

abutment between two arches. He only did this by feeling the wall as he went. He hoped when [Pg 251]
outside to hail a passing wherry. At any rate it was unlikely his hiding place would be discovered by any of the mob.

In the meantime the shop and room above were filled with a rabble more than half of which was out for plunder. Mountchance was lying on the floor unconscious, but no one bothered about him. In the opinion of some it was perhaps as well, as he would be unable to prevent them doing as they liked. This opinion was not held by Sally Salisbury. She was convinced Rofflash was in the house though she had not seen him actually enter. It angered her to think that Mountchance who could have told her anything was as good as dead. She called upon the crowd to search for the murderer but they turned a deaf ear to her entreaties. They were much more interested in looting the place; and finding the iron bound coffer and hearing the chink of coin within, they attacked it savagely and succeeded in smashing the lock.

The sight of gold was too much for them. They scrambled, they fought, they trampled upon each other. The yellow metal acted upon them like strong drink. In the midst of the pandemonium came a deafening explosion, a vivid flash of red, a volume of acrid suffocating vapour. Another explosion and men came rushing from Mountchance's laboratory—terror written in their faces. Helter-skelter the crowd darted from the house forcing Sally Salisbury with them whether she would or not. In the mad fight for gold large glass bottles filled with acids, alcohol and other inflammable liquids had been upset and smashed, and the smouldering fire in the furnace did the rest. What with the bundles of dried herbs which burnt like so much tinder and the woodwork, the panelled walls and furniture, nothing could save the house.

In the hurry and scramble Sally had been wedged against the wall surmounting the central and largest arch. Upon this arch no house had been built. Below the spot where she was held a prisoner the river was rushing with its monotonous roar as if rejoicing at or indifferent to the [Pg 252]
terrible tragedy above. At first she saw nothing but clouds of suffocating smoke pouring from the windows, then showers of sparks floating downwards and vanishing in the water, and finally tongues of fire hissing and roaring from within the house and mingling in one huge flaring flame.

Looking over the parapet she caught sight of a gaunt figure on the abutment now strongly illuminated, now in deep shadow according to the height and strength of the flames and the wayward wind. So fantastic, so grotesque was this figure, his gesticulations, his waving hands, he suggested a demon rather than a human being. Now and again he put a curved hand to his mouth. Doubtless he was shouting but the roar of the fire and the howling of the mob smothered every sound.

It was Rofflash—his true character revealed, nerve stricken, a coward at heart. Yet he was in no immediate danger. The fire could not reach him. The only thing he had to fear was the rising tide should it chance to wash over the abutment and sweep him off his feet.

But it is always the unexpected that happens. Some receptacle with inflammable contents which the fire had overlooked—probably it was stored in one of the upper rooms—exploded with terrific violence. Roof, rafters, tiles, brickwork, shot into the air and fell in every direction. Sally with many others was sent prostrate by the shock, but was uninjured. When she was able to rise and look over the parapet no one was on the abutment. Jeremy Rofflash had met his fate.

"The Beggar's Opera" continued on its triumphant way. Night after night the theatre was packed. Night after night Polly was listened to with increasing delight. She had never sung her plaintive ditties with such pathos. No one suspected the reason. No one knew that she had given her heart to the poor young man killed in a brawl—so the newspapers described it—in Lincoln's Inn Fields. [Pg 253]
Polly's love for Lancelot Vane was a secret sacred to herself. She gave her confidence to nobody—not even to Gay. She had been happy in her love dreams, happier perhaps than if they had become realities. Her roaming life had not brought romance to her until she met Lancelot Vane. The sweethearting of others had always seemed sordid and commonplace. Had Vane been presumptuous she would have had nothing to say to him, but she was drawn towards him because he was drifting to his ruin and she yearned to save him. That she should see him no more deadened her heart and numbed her brain. So she made no effort to find out the why and wherefore of his death and the story never reached her.

Sally Salisbury could have told her, but Sally, to her credit, be it said, did not seek to inflict a wound for the mere satisfaction of witnessing the agony of her rival. Vane was dead and retribution had swiftly overtaken his assassin. What was left? Nothing. Sally had also found romance, and some tender womanly instinct—an instinct too often blunted by her life and temptations—sealed her lips. She had avenged the death of the only man she ever loved with anything like purity. Let that suffice.

The opera had an unprecedented run of sixty-two nights. Every one marvelled. Such a thing had never happened before and when the next season the run was continued its attractions were undimmed, save in one particular—the original Polly Peachum was no longer to be seen or heard. Gradually it became gossipped about that the Duke of Bolton's suit had succeeded. The Polly over whom everybody, rich and poor, high and low, for nearly five months had lost their heads and their hearts, had quitted the stage for ever. Twenty-three years later the duke was able to prove his devotion by making her his duchess. Even then she rarely took part in fashionable functions.

Her simple tastes and dislike of display never deserted her. Yet she was not and is not forgotten, though nearly two hundred years have passed away since she burst into the full flush of fame. [Pg 254] Her memory is preserved in every one of her innumerable successors who have succeeded in reproducing in any degree her charm and artlessness. This memory is not attached to Lavinia Duchess of Bolton, but to "Pretty Polly Peachum."

THE END.

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