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Author: David Christie Murray

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CRUEL BARBARA ALLEN.

By David Christie Murray

From Coals Of Fire And Other Stories
By David Christie Murray
In Three Volumes Vol. II.

Chatto & Windus, Piccadilly 1882

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CHAPTER I.

Christopher was a fiddler and a man of genius. Educated people do not deny the possibility of such a combination; but it was Christopher's misfortune to live amongst a dull and bovine-seeming race, who had little sympathy with art and no knowledge of an artist's longings. They contented themselves, for the most part, with the belief that Christopher was queer. Perhaps he was. My experience of men of genius, limited as it may be, points to the fact that oddity is a characteristic of the race. This observation is especially true of such of them as are yet unrecognised. They wear curious garments and their ways are strange. The outward and visible signs of their inward and spiritual graces are familiar to most observers of life, and the aesthetic soul recognises the meaning of their adornments of the hair and their puttings on of apparel. Genius may be

said in these cases to be a sort of mental measles exhibited in sartorial form, and it may be supposed that but for their breaking out there would be some fear of their proving fatal. There are reasons for all things, if we could but find them; yet where is the social philosopher who will establish the nexus between a passion for Beethoven and the love of a bad hat? Why should a man who has perceptions of the beautiful fear the barber's shears? There were no social philosophers to speak of in the little country town in which Christopher was born and bred, and nobody in his case strove to solve these problems. Christopher was established as queer, and his townsfolk were disposed to let him rest at that. His pale face was remarkable for nothing except a pair of dreamy eyes which could at times give sign of inward lightnings. His hair was lank; his figure was attenuated and ungraceful; he wore his clothes awkwardly. He was commonly supposed to be sulky, and some people thought his tone of voice bumptious and insolent. He was far from being a favourite, but those who knew him best liked him best, which is a good sign about a man. Everybody was compelled to admit that he was a well-conducted young man enough, and on Sundays he played the harmonium gratis at the little Independent chapel in which that pious and simple pair, his father and mother, had worshipped till their last illness. Over this instrument Christopher—let me admit it—made wonderful eyes, sweeping the ceiling with a glance of rapture, and glaring through the boarders at the ladies' school (who sat in the front of the gallery) with orbs which seemed to see not. The young ladies were a little afraid of him, and his pallor and loneliness, and the very reputation he had for oddity, enlisted the sympathies of some of them.

Whatever tender flutterings might disturb the bosoms of the young ladies in the galleries, Christopher cared not. His heart was fixed on Barbara.

Barbara, who surely deserves a paragraph to herself, was provokingly pretty, to begin with, and she had a fascinating natural way which made young men and young women alike unhappy. She bubbled over—pardon this kitchen simile—with unaffected gaiety; she charmed, she bewitched, she delighted, she made angry and bewitched again. The young ladies very naturally saw nothing in her, but a certain pert forwardness of which themselves would not be guilty, though it should bring a world of young gentlemen sighing to their feet. Barbara was nineteen, and she had a voice which for gaiety and sweetness was like that of a throstle. Christopher had himself taught her to sing. His own voice was cacophonous and funereal, and it was droll to hear him solemnly phrasing 'I will enchant thine ear' for the instruction of his enchantress. But he was a good master, and Barbara prospered under him, and added a professional finish and exactness to her natural graces. She lived alone with an old uncle who had sold everything to buy an annuity, and she had no expectations from anybody.

Christopher had no expectations either, except of a stiff struggle with the world, but the two young people loved each other, and, having their choice of proverbs, they discarded the one which relates to poverty and a door and love and a window, and selected for their own guidance that cheerful saying which sets forth the belief that what is enough for one is enough for two. Christopher, therefore, bent himself like a man to earn enough for one, and up to the time of the beginning of this history had achieved a qualified failure. Barbara believed in his genius, but so far nobody else did, and the look-out was not altogether cheerful. Barbara's surname was Allen, but her godfathers and godmothers at her baptism had been actuated by no reminiscences of ballad poetry, and she was called Barbara because her godmother was called Barbara and was ready to present her with a silver caudle-cup on condition that the baby bore her name. Christopher knew the sweet and quaint old ballad, and introduced it to his love, who was charmed to discover herself like-named with a heroine of fiction. She used to sing it to him in private, and sometimes to her uncle, but it was exclusively a home song. Christopher made a violin setting of it which Barbara used to accompany on the pianoforte, a setting in which the poor old song was tortured into wild cadenzas and dizzy cataracts of caterwauling after the approved Italian manner.

The days went by, days that were halcyon under love's own sunshine. What matter if the mere skies were clouded, the mere material sun shut out, the wind bitter? Love can build a shelter for his votaries, and has a sun-shine of his own. Still let me sing thy praises, gracious Love, though I am entering on the days of fogeydom, and my minstrelsy is something rusty. I remember; I remember. Thou and I have heard the chimes at midnight, melancholy sweet.

'Barbara,' said Christopher, one evening, bending his mournful brows above her, 'we must part.'

'Nonsense!' said Barbara smilingly.

'There is no hope of doing anything here,' continued Christopher. 'I must face the world, and if there is anything in me, I must force the world to see it and to own it. I am going up to London.'

'To London?' asked Barbara, no longer smiling.

'To London,' said Christopher, quoting Mrs. Browning; 'to the gathering-place of souls.'

'What shall you do there, Christopher?' asked Barbara, by this time tremulous.

'I shall take my compositions with me,' he answered,' and offer them to the publishers. I will find out the people who give concerts and get leave to play. I will play at first for nothing: I can but try. If I fail, I fail. But there is nothing here to work upon. There is no knowledge of art and no love for it. I must have more elbow-room.'

Elbow-room is indispensable to a violinist, and Barbara was compelled to agree to her lover's programme. She was a brave little creature, and though she was as sorry to part with her lover as even he could wish her, she accepted the inevitable. Christopher finished his quarter's instructions where he had pupils, declined such few further engagements as offered themselves, packed up his belongings in a tin box somewhat too large for them, said farewell, and went his way to London. Barbara went with him by coach into the great neighbouring town five miles away, and saw him off by train. The times and the place where these two were bred were alike primitive, and this farewell journey had no shadow of impropriety in it even for the most censorious eyes. The coach did not return till evening, and little Barbara had three or four hours on her hands. She walked disconsolately from the station, with her veil down to hide the few tears which forced themselves past her resolution. Scarcely noticing whither her feet carried her, she had wandered into a retired and dusty street which bore plainly upon its surface the unwritten but readable announcement of genteel poverty, and there in a parlour window was a largeish placard bearing this legend: 'Mrs. Lochleven

Cameron prepares pupils for the Stage. Enquire Within.' A sudden inspiration entered Barbara's heart. She had seen the inside of a theatre once or twice, and she thought herself prettier and knew she could sing better than the singing chambermaid whom everybody had so applauded. Christopher had often defended the stage from the aspersions cast upon it by the ignorant prejudices of country-bred folk, who looked on the theatre as a device of the Arch-Enemy and an avenue to his halls of darkness. In pious varyings from church she had heard the Eeverend Paul Screed compare the theatrical pit with that other pit of which the Enemy holds perpetual lease, but she respected Christopher's opinion more highly than that of the Eeverend Paul. There was yet a sense of wickedness in the thought which assailed her, and her heart beat violently as she ascended the steps which led to Mrs. Lochleven Cameron's door. She dried her eyes, summoned her resolution, and rang the bell. A pale-faced lady of stately carriage opened the door.

'I wish,' said little Barbara, with a beating heart, 'to see Mrs. Cameron.'

'Pray enter,' returned the lady in tones so deep that she might have been a gentleman in disguise.

Barbara entered, and the deep-voiced lady closed the door, and led the way into a scantily furnished parlour, which held, amongst other objects, a rickety-looking grand piano of ancient make.

'Be seated,' said the deep-voiced lady. 'I am Mrs. Lochleven Cameron. What are your wishes?'

There was just a suspicion of Dublin in Mrs. Cameron's rich and rolling tones.

'You prepare pupils for the stage?' said Barbara. Her own clear and sweet voice sounded strange to her, as though it belonged to somebody else, but she spoke with outward calm.

'Do you wish to take lessons?' asked the lady.

'If I can afford to pay your terms,' said little Barbara.

'What can you do?' asked Mrs. Cameron with stage solemnity. 'Have you had any practice? Can you sing?'

'I do not know what I can do,' said Barbara. 'I can sing a little.'

'Let me hear you,' said the deep voice; and the lady, with a regal gesture, threw open the grand piano.

Barbara drew off her thread gloves and lifted her veil, and then, sitting down to the piano, sang the piteous ballad of the Four Marys. Barbara knew nothing of the easy emotions of people of the stage, and she was almost frightened when, looking up timidly at the conclusion of the song, she saw that Mrs. Cameron was crying.

'Wait here a time, my dear,' said Mrs. Lochleven Cameron, regally business-like in spite of her tears, but with the suggestion of Dublin a trifle more developed in her voice.

She swept from the room, and closed the door behind her; and Barbara, not yet rid of the feeling that she was somebody else, heard Mrs. Cameron's voice, somewhat subdued, calling 'Joe.'

'What is it?' asked another deep voice, wherein the influences of Dublin and the stage together struggled.

'Come down,' said Mrs. Cameron; and in answer to this summons a solemn footstep was heard upon the stair. Barbara heard the sound of a whispered conference outside, and then, the door being opened, Mrs. Cameron ushered in a gentleman tall and lank and sombre, like Mrs. Cameron, he was very pale, but in his case the pallor of his cheeks was intensified by the blackness of his hair and the purple-black bloom upon his chin and upper lip. He looked to Barbara like an undertaker who mourned the stagnation of trade. To you or me he would have looked like what he was, a second or third-rate tragedian.

'I have not yet the pleasure of your name,' said Mrs. Lochleven Cameron, addressing Barbara.

'My name is Barbara Allen,' said Barbara, speaking it unconsciously as though it were a line of an old ballad.

'This, Miss Allen,' said Mrs. Cameron with a sweep of the right hand which might have served to introduce a landscape, 'is Mr. Lochleven Cameron.'

Barbara rose and curtsied, and Mr. Lochleven Cameron bowed. Barbara concluded that this was *not* the gentleman who had been called downstairs as 'Joe.'

'Will you' sing that little ballad over again, Miss Allen?' asked Mrs. Cameron, gravely seating herself.

Barbara sang the ballad over again, and sang it rather better than before.

Mrs. Cameron cried again, and Mr. Cameron said 'Bravo!' at the finish.

'Now,' said Mrs. Cameron, 'do you know anything sprightly?' she pronounced it 'sproightly,' but she was off her guard.

Barbara, by this time only enough excited to do her best, sang 'Come lasses and lads,' and sang it like herself, with honest mirth and rural roguishness. For without knowing it, this young lady was a born actress, and did by nature and beautifully what others are taught to do awkwardly.

'You'll have to broaden the style a little for the theatre,' said the tragédienne, 'but for a small room nothing could be better.'

'I venture to predict,' said the tragedian, 'that Miss Allen will become an ornament to the profession.'

'I am afraid,' said Barbara, rising from the piano, 'that after all I may be only wasting your time. I have not asked your terms, and—I am—I have not much money.'

'Miss Allen,' said the tragedian, 'unless I am much mistaken, you will not long have to mourn that unpleasant condition of affairs.'

'Are your parents aware of your design, Miss Allen?' This from the lady.

'I have no parents,' faltered Barbara. 'I am living with my uncle.'

'Does he know your wishes in this matter?'

'No,' said Barbara, and the feeling of guilt returned.

'If he is willing to entrust you to my tuition,' said Mrs. Lochleven Cameron, 'I should be willing to instruct you without charge on condition that you bound yourself to pay to Mr. Cameron one-third of your earnings for the first three years.'

This opened up a vista to Barbara, but she was certain that her uncle would give his consent to no such arrangement.

‘You had better lay the matter before your uncle, Miss Allen,’ said the tragedian. ‘Without his consent, Mrs. Lochleven Cameron could not see her way to an arrangement. She is; aware—as I am—of the undeserved stigma which has been cast upon the profession by bigotry and ignorance. She has no respect for the prejudice—nor have I—but she will not violate the feelings of those who are so unfortunate as to suffer under it.’

‘Ye’re quite right, Joe,’ said Mrs. Cameron colloquially, and then, with added grandeur, to Barbara, ‘Mr. Lochleven Cameron expresses me own feelings admirably.’

Barbara made no reply. It would have been sweet to work for Christopher even by so audacious a means as going on the stage. But the vision crumbled when she thought of her uncle. She dropped her veil and drew on her gloves slowly, and as she did so a rapid step ascended to the front door, there came the click of a latch-key, the slam of the street door as it closed, and then, with an imperative knock which awaited no answer, a young man rushed into the room and shouted,

‘Done at last!’

There was triumph in this young man’s eyes, and the flush of triumph on his cheek. He was a handsome young fellow of perhaps five-and-twenty, with a light curling beard and a great blonde moustache. His clothes were a little seedy, but he looked like a gentleman. He did not notice Barbara, and the tragedian and his wife apparently forgot her presence.

‘You don’t mean———?’ began Mrs. Lochleven

Cameron.

‘But I do mean it,’ cried the new-comer.

‘Rackstraw has taken it. It is to be put in rehearsal on Monday, and billed for Monday-week. How’s that for high, eh?’

‘Good, dear boy, good!’ said the tragedian, and the two shook hands.

‘But that’s not all,’ said the new-comer. ‘Milford was there.’

‘The London Milford?’ asked Mr. Cameron.

‘The London Milford,’ said the other. ‘Milford of the Garrick. He heard me read it, prophesied a great run for it, has promised to come down again and see it, and if it fulfils his hopes of it, means to take it up to town. In fact, it’s as good as settled.’

‘I congratulate ye, me boy,’ said Mr. Cameron. ‘I knew ye’d hit ‘em one of these fine days. I knew ut.’

Through all this, which she only half understood, Barbara was silent. She took advantage of the lull which followed the tragedian’s expression of friendly triumph to recall Mrs. Cameron to the knowledge of her presence.

‘I will speak to my uncle,’ she said, ‘and I will write to you.’

The stranger looked round when she spoke, and snatched his hat off. Barbara bent her head in general salutation and went her way. When she left the street, she could scarcely believe that it had not all been a dream. It was so unlike herself to do anything so bold-She felt more and more guilty as she waited for the coach, more and more afraid of confiding to her uncle such a scheme as that she had so hastily formed. When she reached home she made one or two inward overtures towards the attempt, but her courage failed her, and she kept silence. Yet she used to think sometimes that if she had the power to shorten poor Christopher’s struggles, it was almost a crime not to do it.

CHAPTER II.

We who live in London know well enough that its streets are not paved with gold. If one had asked Christopher his opinion on that point, he would no doubt have laughed at the childishness of the question, yet he came up to London with all the confidence and certainty which the old childish belief could have inspired. He was coming to make his fortune. That went without saying. He was brim-full of belief in himself, to begin with. ‘The world’s mine oyster,’ he thought, as the cheap parliamentary train crawled from station to station. The world is *my* oyster, for that matter, but the edible mollusc is hidden, and the shell is uninviting. Christopher found the mollusc very shy, the shell innutritive.

Publishers did not leap at the organ fugue in C as they ought to have done. They skipped not in answer to the adagio movement in the May-day Symphony. The oratorio conjured no money from their pockets—for the most part, they declined to open the wrapper which surrounded it, or to see it opened. Poor Christopher, in short, experienced all the scorn which patient merit of the unworthy takes, and found his own appreciation of himself of little help to him. His money melted—as money has a knack of melting when one would least wish to see it melt. Oxford Street became to him as stony-hearted a step-mother as it was to De Quincey, and at melancholy last—while his letters to Barbara became shorter and fewer—he found an enforced way to the pawnbroker’s, whither went all which his Uncle’s capacious maw would receive; all, except the beloved violin which had so often sung to Barbara, so often sounded Love’s sweet lullaby in the quiet of his own chamber. *That* he could not part with, for he was a true enthusiast when all was told. So he went about hungry for a day or two.

I have hurried a little in telling his story in order that I might get the worst over at once.

Two months before he came to this sad pass he was standing one cold night in front of the Euston Road entrance to the great terminal station, when the sound of a violin struck upon his ears, played as surely a

violin was never played in the streets before. The performer, whoever he might be, slashed away with a wonderful merry abandonment, playing the jolliest tunes, until he had a great crowd about him, on the outskirts of which girls with their arms embracing each other swung round in time to the measured madness of the music. The close-pent crowd beat time with hand and foot, and sometimes this rude accompaniment almost drowned the music:—

An Orpheus! An Orpheus! He worked on the crowd; He swayed them with melody merry and loud.

The people went half wild over this street Paganini. They laughed with him and danced to his music until their rough acclamation almost made the music dumb. Then suddenly he changed his theme, and the sparkle went out of the air and left it dim and foggy as it was by nature, and by-and-by added a deeper gloom to it. For he played a ghostly and weird and awful theme, which stilled merriment and chilled jollity, and seemed to fill the night with phantoms. It made a very singular impression indeed upon Christopher's! nerves. Christopher was not so well nourished as he might have been, and when a man's economy plays tricks with his stomach, the stomach is likely to pass the trick on with interest. He stood amazed—doubtful of his ears, of the street, of the people, of his own identity. For that weird and awful theme was his own, and, which made the thing more wonderful, he had never even written it down. And here was somebody playing it note for note, a lengthy and intricate composition which set all theory of coincidence utterly aside. Nobody need wonder at Christopher's amazement.

The street fiddler played the theme clean out, and then passed through the crowd in search of coppers. It furnished a lesson worth his learning that, while he abandoned himself to mirth, the coppers had showered into the hat at his feet in tinkling accompaniment to his strains; and that now the weird and mournful theme had sealed generosity's fountain as with sudden frost. The musician came at last, hat in hand, to Christopher. He was a queer figure. His hair was long and matted, his eyes were obscured by a pair of large spectacles of darkened glass, and his coat collar was turned up to the tops of his ears. A neglected-looking beard jutted out from the opening in the collar, and not a feature but the man's nose was visible. The crowd had gone; looking round, one could scarcely have suspected that the crowd had been there at all a minute before.

'That was a curious theme you played last of all,' said Christopher. 'Was it your own?'

'No,' said the musician, chinking together the coppers in his felt hat as a reminder of the more immediate business in hand.

'Whose was it?' asked Christopher, ignoring the hat.

'Don't know, I'm sure,' the musician answered shortly, and turned away.

There was nobody left to appeal to, so, putting his fiddle and bow under his arm, he emptied the coppers into his trousers' pockets, and, putting on his hat, made away in the direction of King's Cross. Christopher followed at a little distance, wonder-stricken still, and half disposed to return to the charge again. The musician, reaching the corner of Gray's Inn Road, turned. This was Christopher's homeward way, and he followed. By-and-by the fiddler made a turn to the right. This was still Christopher's homeward way, and still he followed. By-and-by the man stopped before a door and produced a latch-key. The house before which he stood was that in which Christopher lodged. He laid a hand upon the fiddler's shoulder.

'Do you live here?' he said.

'What has that to do with you?' retorted the fiddler.

'That was my theme you played,' said Christopher; 'and if you live here, I know how you got hold of it. You have heard me play it.'

'You live on the third floor?' said the other in a changed tone.

'Yes,' said Christopher.

'I'm in the attics, worse luck to me,' said the street player. 'Come into my room, if you don't mind.'

He opened the door and went upstairs in the darkness, with the assured step of custom. Christopher, less used to the house, blundered slowly upwards after him.

'Wait a minute,' said the occupant of the attic, 'and I'll get a light.'

There was a little pause, and then came the splutter of a match. The pale glow of a single candle lit the room dimly. Christopher jumped at the sight of a third man in the room. No! There were but two people there. But where, then, was the man who had led him hither? Here before him was a merry-looking youngster of perhaps two-and-twenty, with a light brown moustache and eyes grey or blue, and close-cropped fair hair. The hirsute and uncombed genius of the street had vanished.

'Don't stare like that, sir,' said the transformed comically. 'Here are the props.' He held up a ragged wig and beard.

'The what?' asked Christopher. 'The props,' returned the other. 'Props are properties. Properties are theatrical belongings. There's nothing diabolical or supernatural about it. Wait a minute, and I'll light the lamp and set the fire going.'

Christopher stood in silence whilst his new acquaintance bustled about the room. The lamp cast a full and mellow light over the whole apartment, and the fire began to crackle and leap merrily.

'Sit down,' said the host, and Christopher obeyed. 'I always like to take the bull by the horns,' the host continued with a little blush. 'I didn't want to be found out at this game, but you have found me out, and so I make the best of it, and throw myself upon your confidence.'

He took up the wig and beard lightly between his finger and thumb and dropped them again, laughing and blushing.

'You may rely upon me,' said Christopher in his own dogged and sulky tones. 'If I wanted to tell of it, I know nobody in London.'

'That was your theme, was it?' said the host, throwing one leg over the other and nursing it with both hands.

'Yes,' said Christopher; 'you played it very accurately, you must have a very fine memory.'

‘I suppose I have,’ said the other, with a little laugh. ‘But it’s a wonderful thing.’

‘Do you think so?’ asked Christopher, blushing with pleasure.

‘I do indeed,’ his new acquaintance answered. ‘Play something else of yours.’

There was a bed in one corner of the room, and on this he had laid the instrument and the bow when he came in. He arose now and proffered them to Christopher. Christopher took them from his outstretched hand and played. The other listened, nursing his leg again, and nodding at the fire, in time to the music.

‘You write better than you play,’ he said at length, with more candour than was altogether agreeable. ‘Not that your playing isn’t good, but it misses—just misses—the real grip—the real royal thing. Only one player in a million has it.’

‘Do you think you have it?’ asked Christopher, not sneeringly, though the words might imply a sneer, but speaking because he was shy and felt bound to say something.

‘I?’ said the other, with a merry laugh.

‘O Lord no! A man can’t bring out more than there is in him. There’s no divine melody in *me*. Good spirits now and then, a bit of sentiment now and then, a dash more or less of the devil now and then—that’s all I’m equal to. If I could have written that gavotte you played a minute ago, I could knock sparks out of people with it. Here! lend me the fiddle.’

He played it through with the grave-faced merriment proper to it, and here and there with such a frolicking forth of sudden laughter and innocent fun as gave gravity the lie and made the pretence of it dearly droll.

‘That’s it,’ he said, looking up with naïve triumph when he had finished.

Yes, that was it, Christopher confessed, as he took back the violin and bow and laid them on the table.

‘What brings a man who plays as you do, playing in the streets?’ he asked a little sulkily.

‘That eternal want of pence which vexes fiddlers,’ said the youngster ‘I lost an engagement a month ago. First violin at the Garrick. Rowed with the manager. Nothing else turned up. Must make money somehow.’

‘What have you made to-night?’ Christopher asked. ‘I beg your pardon,’ he said a second later; ‘that is no business of mine, of course.’

‘About seven or eight shillings,’ said the other, disregarding the withdrawal of the question. ‘And I won’t ask you,’ he went on, ‘what brings a man who writes like you living near the clouds in a street like this?’

‘Are you an Englishman?’ asked Christopher.

‘No,’ said the other. ‘No fiddler ever was. I beg your pardon. I oughtn’t to have said that, even though I think it. No. I am a Bohemian, blood and bones, but I came to England when I was eight years old, and I have lived in London ever since.’

They went on talking together, and laid the foundations of a friendship which afterwards built itself up steadily. In two months’ time Carl Rubach was restored to his old place at the Garrick, and poor Christopher was beginning to find out in real earnest what it was to be hungry. He was too proud to ask anybody for a loan, and Rubach was the only man he really knew. ‘When things are at their worst,’ says the cynical bard, ‘they sometimes mend.’ Things suddenly mended for Christopher. The Bohemian turned up one afternoon with an Englishman in his train, a handsome young fellow of perhaps five-and-twenty, with a light curling beard and a blonde moustache.

‘Allow me to introduce to you Mr. John Holt,’ said the Bohemian. ‘This, Mr. Holt, is Mr. Christopher Stretton, a musician of great genius. This—Stretton—is Mr. John Holt, a dramatist of great power. Gentlemen, know each other. Mr. Holt writes charming songs. Mr. Stretton writes beautiful music.’

He flourished with mock gravity as he said these things, turning first to one and then to the other. Mr. John Holt’s eyes were keen and observant; and one swift glance took in the knowledge of the composer’s hungry pallor, his threadbare dress, the bare and poverty-stricken aspect of the room.

‘I have two songs for a new play of mine,’ he said; ‘I want them set to music.’

Christopher’s hand, thinner and more transparent than a healthy man’s hand should be, reached out for the offered manuscript.

‘When do you think you can let me have the music?’ asked the dramatist.

Christopher read the songs through, and looked up.

‘To-morrow?’ he said.

‘So soon!’ said the other. ‘At what time to-morrow?’

‘Will midday suit you?’

‘Can you bring them to that address?’ ‘I will be there,’ responded Christopher.

His visitors left him and he sat down to think. He was weak, and the pains of hunger gnawed him, but as he sat over one of the songs the words built themselves into a tune almost without his knowledge or effort. Then he turned to write, and found that he had no music-paper. He laughed bitterly at this discovery, and looking round the bare apartment sighted his violin-case, and rising, took the violin and bow out of it, put on his hat, and, with the case under his arm, made for the pawnbroker’s. There he realised half-a-crown, one halfpenny of which was confiscated in payment for the pawn-ticket. He bought paper and pen and ink, and having taken them home, went out again and ate cold sausage at the bar of a public-house, and came back with a few pence still in his pockets. There was a nausea upon him, and he could not recall the air he wished to write. He had eaten nothing for three days and he felt at once sick and drowsy.

He was fain to lie down, and he fell asleep, to awake in two hours’ time a little strengthened and refreshed. The tune came back again, and he set it down, and then attacked the second one with like success.

Morning came, and after a meagre breakfast which finished his resources, he went weakly to the address the dramatist had given him. Mr. Holt had left behind him apologies for unavoidable absence. Would Mr. Stretton call again at three? He wandered desolately home, and; waited, and when the time drew near set out again. This time the dramatist was ready to: receive him.

‘The lady who will sing the songs is here,’ he said, ‘and with your permission I will ask her to try them over now. Will you come with me?’

‘I would rather await you here,’ said Christopher. The tunes he had written were running riot in his head, and he thought them puerile, vulgar, shameful. He would have torn the papers on which they were written if he had not already surrendered them. He had liked them an hour ago, and now he thought them detestable.

‘As you please,’ said the dramatist, and added ‘poor beggar!’ inwardly as he went upstairs.

The composer sat in a sick half-dream and faintly heard a piano sounding in a distant room. It played the prelude of one of his songs. Now and then the sound of a female voice just touched his ears. He was so fatigued and weak that, in spite of his anxiety, he glided into a troubled doze in which he dreamed of Barbara. The dramatist returned, and Christopher came back to the daylight at the sound of the opening door.

‘Mademoiselle Hélène and myself,’ said Mr. Holt, ‘are alike delighted with your setting of the songs. I shall ask you, Mr. Stretton, to read my comedy and to write the whole of the incidental music, if you will accept the commission. We can talk over terms afterwards. In the mean time, shall I offer you a cheque for ten guineas?’

‘Thank you,’ said Christopher. He took the cheque and walked to the bank, which was near at hand in Pall Mall, received his money, and plunged into an eating-house, whence he emerged intoxicated by the absorption of a cup of coffee and a steak. If you doubt the physical accuracy of that statement, pray reduce yourself to Christopher’s condition and try the experiment. You are respectfully assured that you will doubt no longer.

CHAPTER III.

Christopher wrote the incidental music for the new comedy and composed an overture and entr’actes for it —work for which he was paid pretty liberally. He wrote to Barbara of his better fortunes, and promised to run down and see her so soon as the business strain was over. But the business strain was over and he did not go. He finished his music, rehearsed it once with the orchestra of the Garrick Theatre, and then fell ill of a low fever through which Rubach most kindly nursed him. The Bohemian himself was busy, rehearsing half the day and playing at the theatre at night, but he gave all his spare time to his friend. I had forgotten to tell you that, for convenience’ sake, they had quitted their old lodgings, and had taken chambers off the Strand, within three minutes’ easy walk of the house. It was here that Christopher fell ill.

When he grew a little better, the Bohemian rather began to aggravate him. Rubach talked of the new piece and its heroine, and of nothing but the new piece and its heroine. He was enraptured with her. He confessed himself overhead in love. So charming, so dainty, so sweet, so piquante, so lovable was Mademoiselle Hélène. Rubach, half in earnest, half in jest, confessed himself hopeless. Mademoiselle was engaged to Mr. Holt the dramatist.

‘And even if she were not,’ he said, ‘is it likely she would look at a poor wretch of a fiddler? She is going to make her fortune. She is going to be the rage. She has never played before, but she sings like a lark, like a linnet, like a nightingale; and she walks the boards as naturally as if she had been born upon them. She is English too, in spite of her foreign name. Why on earth do professional English people take foreign names?’

‘I don’t know, I’m sure,’ said Christopher wearily. ‘I should like to go to sleep.’

While the sick man slept or made believe to sleep, Rubach was quiet as a mouse; but when he awoke the ecstatic praises began again, until, before the public knew more of the new actress than her name, our poor invalid was sick of her and of her praises to the very soul.

He tried, however, to take some interest in the piece, and as he became stronger he began to grow a little anxious about his own share in its success. When the eventful night came he was able to sit up for an hour before the piece began, and Rubach had to leave him. It was midnight before the faithful chum returned, and after looking in on the invalid, who seemed to slumber calmly, sat down for a final pipe by his own bedside. But Christopher was only ‘playing ‘possum,’ as our playful American cousins put it, and, his anxiety over-riding his desire for quiet, he called out,

‘Is that you, Carl?’

‘Yes,’ said the other, hastening into his room on tiptoe. ‘I thought you were asleep.’

‘How did the music go?’

‘Capitally. Both the songs repeated. The overture and the second entr’acte would have been redemanded at a concert, but of course the play was the thing. Such a success, Stretton! Such a furore! She is a little goddess, a queen. You should see her and hear her! Ah me!’—with a comic ruefulness—‘Holt should be a happy man.’

Christopher, warned by his outbreak, which he knew by old experience to be the merest exordium, ‘played ‘possum’ again, with such success that Rubach left him and he went to sleep in earnest.

Holt came to see him next day, and brought the morning papers with him. The musician and he began to talk about writing an English opera together, and Christopher brightened at the scheme, which opened up the road to all his old ambitions.

‘You are getting stronger now,’ said Holt. ‘We shall have you in to see the piece by-and-by.’

‘I shall come in a day or two,’ said Christopher; and when his visitor had gone, sat down to read over and over again the reviews of his own work. How they would gladden Barbara, he thought. How proud she would be of his success! how eager to hear the music! He laid-a romantic little plot for her pleasure. He would run down when he got stronger, and compel Barbara and her uncle on a visit to town. He would convey them to the theatre and when Barbara was quite in love with the music he would tell her that he himself had written it. How well the songs would suit her voice, and how charmingly she would sing them to him! Pleasant

fancies, such as lovers have, floated through his mind. He took up his violin for the first time for a month, and played through the old tune, ‘Cruel Barbara Allen.’ Rubach came in and found him thus employed.

‘You are getting on, my boy,’ said the good Bohemian. ‘Can you come and see the piece to-night? Are you strong enough?’

‘Not to-night,’ Christopher returned. ‘In a day or two.’ And he went oh playing ‘Cruel ‘Barbara Allen’ dreamily.

‘What is that?’ said Rubach with a wry grin. ‘Is not twice or thrice of it enough?’

Christopher laid down the instrument with a smile. When Carl had left him he took it up again and played over to himself the songs Barbara used to sing. He was weak and could not play for any great length of time together, but he played every now and then a melody, and in a while he got back again to ‘Cruel Barbara Allen.’ Back came Carl as he played it.

‘That tune again? what is it?’

‘An old ballad,’ answered Christopher. “Cruel Barbara Allen.”’

He found a pleasure in speaking her name aloud in this veiled way.

‘Let the girl alone,’ said Carl. ‘I am tired of her.’

‘I am not,’ said Christopher with a weak little chuckle, ‘and I have known her since she was a child.’

He began to play the air again, and Carl took away the violin with simulated theatric anger. But Carl’s treatment of the name of the ballad as though it were the name of a girl still extant gave Christopher a temptation, and he played the air once or twice again in Carl’s presence.

‘You are passionately attached to Miss Allen,’ said Carl.

‘She is the only sweetheart I ever had, responded simple Christopher with shy merriment.

Rubach sat down at the piano and sang this song:—

Through all the green glad summer-time
Love told his tale in dainty rhyme,
And sighed his loves out one by one,
There lives no echo of his laugh,
I but record his epitaph,
And sigh for love worn out and gone.

For love endures for little time,
But dies with every change of rhyme,
And lives again with every one.
And every new-born love doth laugh
Above his brother’s epitaph,
The last light love worn out and gone.

‘That is not your doctrine, mon ami,’ he said as he turned round on the music-stool. ‘You are faithful to Miss Allen?’

‘I am faithful to Miss Allen, certainly,’ said Christopher, reaching out his hand for the violin, and again chuckling weakly.

‘No,’ said Carl, rising and confiscating the fiddle. ‘You shall sing her virtues to that tune no more. Write a new tune for her.’

Anybody who has been in love, and I do not care for any other sort of reader, may fancy for himself the peculiar enjoyment which shy Christopher extracted from this homely badinage.

Two or three days later he was almost reestablished, and had indeed begun to write a little. He would not yet go to the theatre, however, having some fear of the excitement. He sat alone in the sitting-room which he and his chum occupied in common, dreaming of Barbara over a book, and building cloud palaces. It was ten o’clock in the evening, and Carl would not be home till midnight. Then ‘who was this dashing tumultuously up the stone steps after Carl’s accustomed fashion? Carl himself, it seemed, but unlike himself, pale and breathless, and with an ugly scratch across his forehead which looked at first sight like a severe wound.

‘What’s the matter?’ cried Christopher, rising hastily.

‘I have had a fall,’ said Carl. ‘There is nothing to be alarmed at, but,’ holding out his left hand, ‘I have sprained my wrist and I cannot play.’

‘How did it happen?’ asked Christopher, following him into the bedroom, where Carl had already begun to twine a wet handkerchief round the injured wrist.

‘I was crossing the stage between the acts,’ said Carl; ‘a plank had been moved, and I set my foot in the hole and fell—voilà tout I want to ask you to play for me. There is not a man in the band who can do justice to “When Love has flown.” It will be no trouble to you. You will simply have to stand in the flies and play the air whilst a man on the stage appears to play it, sawing away with a soaped bow. Will you come?’

Christopher stood irresolute. ‘They can do without me in the orchestra,’ said Carl, ‘but I have been playing your song as it deserves to be played. Mademoiselle Hélène looks forward to its being played so. It gives her aid, I know. The people look to hear it well played, and if you do not go it will be given to Jones—to Jones, Gott in Himmel! who plays as a mason cuts stone. Do come. It will cost you no trouble.’

Christopher took up his violin-case, long since extracted from My Uncle’s maw, and followed Carl from the chambers into the street.

‘You play only the first movement, very low and soft,’ said Carl as they went along. ‘I will stand by you and tell you when to begin.’

They entered the theatre—a terra incognita to Christopher—and found their way through a chaos of disused dusty scenery. A great burst of applause sounded through the unseen house.

‘That is for Mademoiselle,’ said Carl, ‘We are just in time to get breath comfortably. Stay here. I will be with you directly.’

He left Christopher standing in the flies, looking on the stage. There were two or three people on the boards, but Christopher had not the key to their talk, and had little interest in them. By-and-by all but one left the stage. The light dwindled and faded. The sun-sets on the English stage are as rapid as in any tropic region. The player played his part. He was in love, and true as true could be, but the empress of his soul had her doubts about him. How could she doubt him? That was the burden of his speech as he sat at the table, and murmured the loved one's cruelty with a broken voice and his whole function suiting with forms to his conceit. It was almost dark when the first rays of the silver moon fell athwart the chamber. Christopher felt that the dead silence of the house betokened the coming of the crisis in the play, and he was strung to the expectation of something out of the common. Watching from his own dark standing-place, he could see the actor draw towards him a violin case, and he silently drew forth his own instrument to be in readiness. Whilst he waited and watched, Carl's stealthy footstep sounded behind him.

'You will see her in a minute or two,' whispered Carl. 'I will touch you once, when you shall make ready, and once when you shall begin.'

For half a minute or nearly, everything was still on the stage and in the house. Then the player's voice, passionate and low, broke again upon the silence, and in a second or two Carl touched Christopher upon the shoulder. There was a curiously *crisp* feeling in the-composer's nerves, and he was a little excited. He tucked his violin under his chin, and stood prepared. Into the definite band of moonlight which crossed the stage glided suddenly a white figure.

'Now,' whispered Carl, and touched the musician on the shoulder, and straight from the violin soared a voice, not soft and low, but clear and loud, and the air was 'Cruel Barbara Allen.' Carl fell back a step or two in his amazement. The white figure on the stage turned round, and for a moment peered into the darkness of the flies—then glided on again. The air once played, the composer cast his violin upon the stage beneath his feet and trampled it, hurled the bow from him, and with one cry, eloquent of agony and rage, turned and dashed past his companion, and, tumbling through the dark and unaccustomed ways, reached the street. Carl followed him and caught him up.

'What is it, Stretton? What is the matter?' he cried, and seized his friend by the arm. Christopher answered nothing, but hurried on like one distracted. 'He's mad,' said Carl within himself—'quite mad.'

They came together to their chambers, and Christopher sank into an arm-chair and moaned, unconscious of Carl's presence, 'Barbara! Barbara!'

'It is madness,' said Carl, tossing his hands tempestuously towards the ceiling, 'mere midsummer madness. Poor fellow! Stretton! Stretton! Listen to me! What is it? Don't you know me?'

For Christopher glared at him like one who had no knowledge of him, and then again hid his face within his hands.

'What on earth made you play that tune?' cried Carl.

'She was there, man! She was there!' groaned Christopher, rising and pacing the room with unequal steps.

'Who was there?' said Carl, almost as wildly.

'Barbara,' groaned Christopher again, 'Mademoiselle Hélène is Barbara Allen.'

'"Angels and ministers of grace defend us!"' murmured the theatrical Carl. 'I must humour him. Never mind, old man. Suppose she is! what does it matter?'

'Oh, Carl! Carl!' cried the other, turning upon him and gripping him by both shoulders. 'I never loved another woman, and I never can. I would have built my hopes of Heaven upon her truth.'

Carl began to think there was something in it.

'You mean that Mademoiselle Hélène is Miss Allen?'

'Yes, I said so.'

'And that you knew her?'

'We were sweethearts when we were children. We were engaged to be married two years ago. Would you believe it, Carl? would you believe it? I had a letter from her only this morning dated from the old place in the country. Think of the cunning perfidy of it!'

'How long can she have known Holt?' asked Carl, rather to himself than Christopher.

'Why, how can I tell?' said the musician, groaning. 'She has deceived me all along.'

There was no present consolation possible, and Carl had the sense to see it. He lit a pipe and watched his unhappy friend sympathetically. Christopher went up and down the room exclaiming here and there against the perfidy of woman. There came an imperious summons at the door.

'Don't let him in, whoever it is,' said Christopher.

Somebody kicked the door and roared 'Rubach!'

'It's Milford,' said Carl; 'the manager. There's going to be a row. A bit of a row will do you good, my poor fellow. I shall let him in.'

So said, so done. Enter Milford the lordly, in a towering rage, followed by Holt, evidently disposed to appease his manager's wrath.

'I have called,' said the manager, blowing hard and fixing a savage eye on Carl, 'to know what the devil you mean, sir, by turning the theatre into a bear-garden?'

'My good sir——' said Carl with Continental affability.

'Don't "good sir" me, sir,' cried the manager. 'What the devil do you mean, sir?'

'This is a matter for commiseration, sir, not for anger,' Carl began.

Then the great man began to swear, and did it well and fluently, with gusto. When he had done, he collected himself and shook his fist at Carl with a final admonition.

'Don't you come near my theatre again, you—you foreign rascal.'

'It is I who am to blame,' said Christopher, 'and not he. It was I who played for him, and who—in short, I am

to blame.'

The manager glared speechlessly for a moment, and then gasped,

'Explain, sir.'

'Mr. Rubach,' said Christopher, 'had sprained his wrist by a fall this evening. He came to me and requested me to play for him behind the scenes in the last act. You know what happened. *That* I cannot explain.'

The situation was awkward for everybody. If Barbara's perfidy had sullied his own life and left him desolate, Christopher could still speak no evil of her in the presence of the man for whom she had jilted him. Carl's tongue was tied by his regard for Holt's feelings. The manager naturally wanted to get at the bottom of the situation, and the dramatist felt that a friend whom he was learning to value had somehow imperilled his play. All four stood silent, and footsteps came leisurely up the stone stairs, and were heard very distinctly in the stillness. The door had been left open, but one of the new-comers stopped to tap at it.

'Come in,' cried Carl, ready to welcome any diversion.

A red face and a grey head came round the door.

'Does Mr. Stretton———? Oh! Chris, my boy, how are you?'

No other a person than Barbara's uncle.

'I've brought Barbara to see you. Come in, Barbara. Why, what's the matter?'

Christopher turned away from Barbara, as she approached him, veiled, and walked to the window, through which he looked on the night, seeing nothing.

'Chris!' said Barbara, in a pathetic, wounded voice. 'Chris!' Mechanically she raised her veil and looked round upon her uncle with a pale scared face.

'Stretton!' roared Carl, leaping at him and laying forcible hands upon him, forgetful of his own sprained wrist. 'Is this Miss Allen?'

'Yes,' said Christopher, with a sob which would have way in spite of him.

'Then it isn't Mademoiselle Hélène,' said Carl.

Christopher turned with bewildered looks.

'Tell me,' he said to Barbara wildly, 'are you playing at the Garrick Theatre?'

'You've been a-drinking, Christopher,' said Barbara's uncle plaintively.

'No,' said Barbara, frightened as she well might be at the presence of strangers at this curious scene, and at the scene itself. 'Uncle had business in London, and he brought me with him this afternoon. We heard that you had written the music to a play, and we went to hear it. We—we thought you would be conducting, and that I should see you there.'

Little Barbara put up her hands and began to cry.

'Sir,' said Carl to the manager, 'I ask you, as the first step towards the understanding of this business, to admit that the likeness between this young lady and Mademoiselle Hélène is very remarkable and close.'

'Very remarkable!' said the manager.

'Wonderful!' said Mr. Holt.

'Me and my niece have been a-laughing at it and a-noticing of it all the evening,' said Barbara's uncle.

Carl told the story.

'I'll have it in the papers,' said Milford the manager. 'Stunning good advertisement; Eh? No names, of course. Oh dear, no; no names!'

Then the manager and the dramatist suddenly felt themselves de trop, and Carl, catching the infection, went with them.

'Can you forgive me for doubting you?' said Christopher. 'It was I who suffered by it.'

'Poor Chris!' said Barbara, and quite regardless of her uncle she put her arms round her lover's neck and kissed him like the tenderhearted, unsophisticated child she was. 'Am I cruel Barbara now?' she asked, nestling to him, and looking up with a smile half audacious, half appealing.

'No,' said Christopher a little sheepishly. But as she slipped away from him he recovered himself and took her in his arms and kissed her tenderly.

And so, shortly thereafter—to finish in the style of the best of all story-tellers who entertained us in our childhood—they married, and lived happily.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK CRUEL BARBARA ALLEN ***

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