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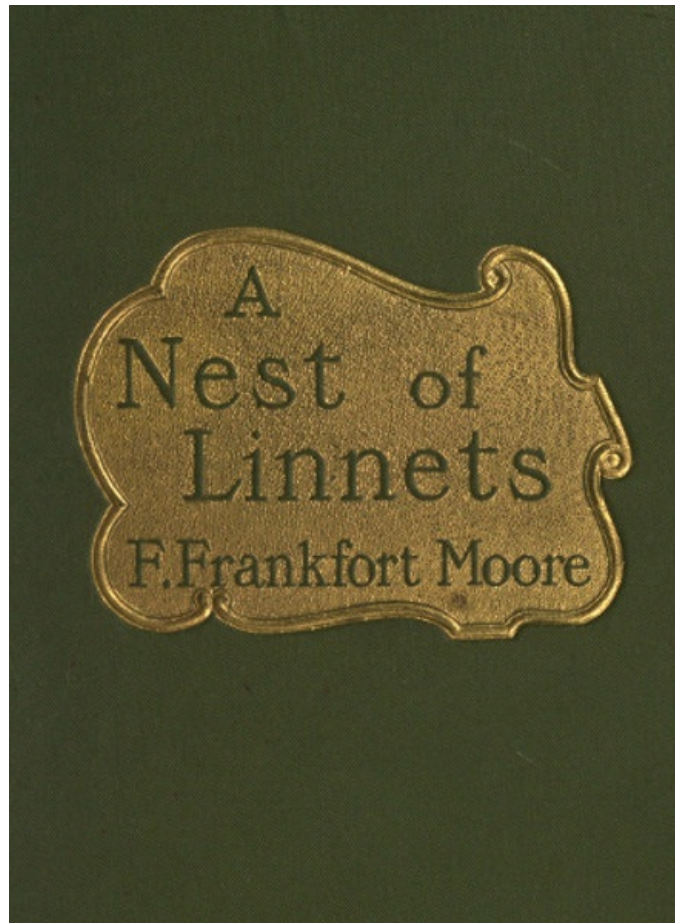
Author: Frank Frankfort Moore
Illustrator: John Jellicoe

Release date: October 25, 2014 [EBook #47195]

Language: English

Credits: Produced by Shaun Pinder and the Online Distributed Proofreading Team at <http://www.pgdp.net> (This file was produced from images generously made available by The Internet Archive)

*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK A NEST OF LINNETS ***



A Nest of Linnets

BY FRANK FRANKFORT MOORE
AUTHOR OF "I FORBID THE
BANNES," "THE JESSAMY BRIDE,"
"THE FATAL GIFT," "ACCORDING
TO PLATO," ETC., ETC.

WITH 16 ILLUSTRATIONS

BY J. JELlicOE

London: HUTCHINSON & CO
PATERNOSTER ROW 1901

PRINTED BY
HAZELL, WATSON, AND VINEY, LD.
LONDON AND AYLESBURY.



"DICK—DICK," SHE GASPED, "A DREADFUL THING HAS
HAPPENED!"

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CHAPTER I

"This will never do, Betsy," said Mr. Linley, shaking his head. "Sir Joshua calls you Saint Cecilia, but 'twere a misnomer if you do not sing the phrase better than you have just sung it. 'She drew an angel down': let that be in your mind, my dear. There is no celestial being that would move a pinion to help a maiden who implored its aid in so half-hearted a way. Let us try again. One, two, three——"

"Angels, ever bright and fair,"

sang Miss Linley.

Her father sprang from the harpsichord.

"Gracious powers, madam! the angels are not in the next room—they are not even in Pierrepont Street, take my word for it; they are in heaven, and heaven, let me tell you, is a very long way from Bath!" he cried. "Give forth the 'Angels' as if you meant to storm the ears of heaven with your cry. Think of it, girl—think that you are lost, eternally lost, unless you can obtain help that is not of earth. Stun their ears, madam, with the suddenness of your imploration, and let the voice come from your heart. Betsy, that smile is not in the music. If Maestro Handel had meant a smile to illuminate the part, take my word for it he would have signified it by a bar of demi-semi-quavers, followed by semi-quavers and quavers. Good heavens, madam! do you hope to improve upon Handel?"

"Ah, father, do not ask too much of me to-night; I am tired—anxious. Why, only last week a highwayman——"

Miss Linley glanced, eagerly listening, toward the window, as if she fully expected to see the mask of a highwayman peering between the blinds.

"Betsy, I am ashamed of you!" said her father. "What stuff is this? Is there any highwayman fool enough to collect fiddles? Do you fancy that a boy with a fiddle tucked under his arm is in any peril of a bullet?"

"But they may affright the child."

"Child? Child? Who is the child? What! Do you think that because you have not seen your brother since he was fourteen, the four years that have passed can have made no impression on him?"

"I suppose he will have grown."

"You may be sure that he will be able to defend himself without drawing either his sword or his fiddle. To your singing, Betsy. Go back to the recitative."

"It would be a terrible thing to find that he had outgrown his affection for us. I have heard that in Italy——"

"Still harping on my daughter's brother! Come, Miss Linnet, you shall have your chance. You shall fancy that your prayer is uttered on behalf of your brother."

'Angels, ever bright and fair,
Take, oh, take *him* to your care.'

Now shall the angels hear for certain. Come, child; one, two——"

"Angels——"

sang Miss Linley.

"Brava!" cried her father *sotto voce*, as the sound thrilled through the room and there was a suggestion of an answering vibration from the voice of the harpsichord.

"Angels, ever bright and fair,
Take, oh, take me——"

The harpsichord jingled alone. The girl's voice failed. She threw herself into a chair, and, covering her face with her hands, burst into a passion of sobbing.

"Oh, if he does not arrive after all—if some accident has happened—if—if——"

The apprehensions which she was too much overcome to name were emphasised in the glance that she cast at her father. Her eyes, the most marvellous wells of deep tenderness that ever woman possessed, at all times suggested a certain pathetic emotion of fear, causing every man who looked into their depths to seek to be her protector from the danger they seemed to foresee; but at this moment they appeared to look straight into the face of disaster.

"If I could translate that expression of your face into music, I should be the greatest musician alive," said her father.

In a second the girl was on her feet, uttering a little sound of contempt. She began pacing the floor excitedly, her long white muslin dress flowing from her high waist in waves.

"Ah, always this art—always this art!" she cried. "Always the imitation—always the pitiful attempt to arouse an artificial emotion in others, and never to have an hour of true emotion oneself, never an hour of real life, never an hour apart from the artifices of Art,—that is the life which you would have me to lead. I hate it! I hate it! Oh, better a day—an hour—a minute of true tenderness than a long lifetime spent in shamming emotion!"

"Shamming? Shamming? Oh, my Elizabeth!" said the musician in a voice full of reproach.

"Shamming! Shamming!" she cried. "I think that there is no greater sham than music. The art of singing is the art of shamming. I try to awaken pity in the breast of my hearers by pretending that I am at the point of death and anxious for the angels to carry me off, yet all the time I care nothing for the angels, but a good deal for my brother Tom, who is coming home to-night. Oh, father, father, do not try to teach me any more of this tricking of people into tears by the sound of my voice. Dear father, let me have this one evening to myself—to live in my own world—my own world of true tears, of true feeling, of true joy. Let me live until to-morrow the real life of the people about us, who have not been cursed by Heaven with expressive voices and a knowledge of the trick of drawing tears by a combination of notes."

She had flung herself down at his knees and was pressing one of his hands to her face, kissing it.

"Betsy, you are not yourself this evening," he said in a voice that was faltering on the threshold of a sob.

"Nay, nay; 'tis just this evening that I am myself," she cried. "Let me continue to be myself just for one evening, dear father. Let me—— Ah!"

She had given a little start, then there was a breathless pause, then, with a little cry of delight, she sprang to her feet and rushed to the window.

Her father had rushed to the second window with just such another cry.

Hearing it she turned to him in amazement, with the edge of the blind that she was in the act of raising still in her hand. She gave a laugh, pointing a finger of her other hand at him, while she cried:

"Ah, you are a father after all!"

His head was within the blind, and he was shutting off with his hands the light of the candles of the room while he peered into the darkness, so that the reproach passed unheeded.

Before she had put her face to the pane her father had dropped the blind that he was holding back.

"Good lud! how the lad has grown!" he said in an astonished whisper.

"Tom! 'tis Tom himself!" cried Betsy, turning from the window and making for the door.

There was a sound of merry voices and many shouts of children's welcome downstairs—a stamping of feet on the stairs, a stream of questions in various tones of voice, a quiet answer or two, a children's quarrel in the passage as a boy tried to run in front of a girl. Betsy flung wide the door, crying:

"Tom, brother Tom!"

In another second he was in her arms, kissing her face and being kissed by her without the exchange of a word.

The other members of the family of Linley stood by, the father slightly nervous, fingering an

invisible harpsichord, the brothers and sisters callous only when they were not nudging one another lest any detail of the pathetic scene of the meeting of the eldest brother and sister should pass unnoticed.

"Hasn't he grown!" remarked Mrs. Linley. Some of the flour of the pie which she had been making was on the front of her dress and one of the sleeves. She had transferred a speck or two to her son's travelling-cloak.

"He hasn't shaken hands with father yet," said Master Oziah with the frankness of observant childhood.

"He doesn't mind; he's too big for father to thwack!" whispered Master Willie.

"Oh, Tom!—but it was my fault—all my fault!" cried Betsy, releasing her brother, and passing him on to their father almost with the air of introducing the two.

For a moment the musician felt the aloofness of the artist.

"Father—*caro padre!*" said the boy, who had just returned from Italy.

"Son Tom," said the father, giving his cheek to be kissed, while he pressed the hand that the boy held out to him.

"What has he brought us, I wonder?" remarked little Oziah to Willie in a moderately low tone.

"Nothing that's useful, I hope," said Willie. "People have no business bringing home useful presents."

"I can't believe that these big girls are the little sisters I left at home when I set out on my travels," said Tom, when he had thrown off his travelling-cloak. "Polly? Oh, she is very pretty—yes, in her own way; and I daresay she is as pert as ever."

"And she needs all her pertness to keep her head above water in such a household!" said Polly.

"But Betsy—oh, what an English sound Betsy has—far sweeter than Bettina, I'll swear! Oh, *Bacco*, Betsy is our beauty," said Tom, looking critically at the blushing girl before him.

"Psha! everybody knows that," said Polly. "We don't stand in need of a traveller's opinion on so plain a matter."

"You, Tom, are as like Betsy now as two—two roses that have grown on the same stem," said Mr. Linley.

"Then I cannot without boasting say another word about her beauty," laughed Tom, making a very Italian bow to the sister whom he loved.

He undoubtedly bore a striking resemblance to her. His complexion was just as exquisitely transparent as hers, and his eyes had the same expression, the same timorous look, that suggested the eyes of a beautiful startled animal—the most wonderful eyes that had ever been painted by Gainsborough.

"And her voice—has it also improved?" asked Tom, turning to their father with the air of an impresario making an inquiry of a trusted critic.

"Look at her face, boy; look in her eyes, and then you will know what I mean when I say that her voice is no more than the expression of her face made audible," said Mr. Linley. "Look well at her this evening, my son; you will appreciate her beauty now that it is still fresh in your eyes; to-morrow you will have begun to get used to it. Brothers cease to be impressed with the beauty of their sisters almost as quickly as husbands do with the beauty of their wives."

"Tom is so like Betsy, there is no danger of his forgetting that she is beautiful," said Polly.

Tom gave a little frown, then a little laugh. His laugh was just as sweet as Betsy's: both suggested a campanile.

"You have made her a great singer, I hear, sir," he remarked, when he had kissed her again—this time on the hand.

"She was born a great singer: I have only made her a great artist," said the father. Then noticing her frown, he cried in quite another tone: "But how is't with you, my fine fellow? Have you proved yourself to be a genius or only an artist?"

"Ah, you remember how I replied to the bishop who had heard Betsy sing, and thought it only civil to inquire if I was musical also: 'Yes, sir, we are all geniuses?'"

"It has become the household jest," said Polly. "But my own belief is, that mother is the only genius among us; you shall taste one of her pies before you are an hour older. If you say that you tasted a better one in all Italy, you will prove yourself no judge of cookery."

"I should eat that pie even if it should contain not four-and-twenty blackbirds, but as many nightingales—or linnets. Ah, you remember, Betsy, how the name 'Miss Linnet' remained with you? Who was it that first called you Miss Linnet?"

"That were a question for the Society of Antiquaries," said Betsy, "and the bird we are all thinking of is a pie. Hurry to your room, Tom, or I vow there will not be left so much as a clove for you. You knew Polly's appetite; well, it has improved to the extent of an octave and a half since."

"*Corpo di Bacco!* I have no inclination to play second fiddle to an appetite of such compass!" cried Tom, hurrying from the room.

"I sing as Miss Cormorant in the bills when Betsy appears as Miss Linnet," cried Polly from the lobby.

And then they all talked of Tom—all except the mother, who had gone downstairs to the kitchen. How Tom had grown! How good it was of him to remember through all the stress of foreign travel and foreign study, the household characteristics of the Linleys, of 5, Pierrepont Street, Bath! It seemed so strange—just as strange as if a stranger had come into the house showing himself acquainted with the old family jests. And he had not even forgotten that Polly was pert! Polly held her head high at the thought that he had not forgotten her pertness. How noble it was of him! And yet he must have had a great many more important details to keep in his head.

Maria was thinking of the possibility of a brooch being among the luggage of her newly returned brother—a real Italian brooch, with perhaps a genuine yellow topaz in it, or perhaps a fascinating design done in mosaic, or a shell cameo of the head of Diana, or some other foreign goddess. Little Maria had been thinking of this brooch for some weeks. At times she could scarcely hope that so great a treasure should ever escape the notice of those lines of banditti, who, according to reports that had reached her, contested the passage of any article of value across the Italian frontier. But even admitting the possibility of its safe arrival in England, would not the news of its coming be passed round from highwayman to highwayman until the last chance of its reaching her had fled? Then there were the perils of innkeepers, of inquisitive postboys, of dishonest porters. She had heard of them all, and thus was for weeks in a condition of nervousness quite unusual to her. And now the dreadful thought came to her: "*Perhaps he has brought the brooch to Polly, and only a book to me!*"

She looked with eager, searching eyes at Polly, and felt sure that she detected on her sister's face the expression of a girl who has secret intelligence that a brooch is about to be presented to her. She hoped that she would be strong enough to resist the temptation to pinch Polly. She had no confidence in Polly's self-control, however, should the book fall to Polly's lot.

And thus they all trooped downstairs to supper, and the moment they had seated themselves there arose one septet of joyful exclamations, for between the knife and fork of every one lay a neat parcel wrapped up in cotton-wool and silken paper.

And Maria's was a brooch—a beautiful mosaic design of the Pillar of Trajan.

And nobody had received anything that could possibly be called useful, so every one was happy.

And when Tom entered, after a dramatic interval, he was assailed on all sides by exclamations of gratitude. But he put his fingers in his ears for a few moments, and only removed them to be able more freely to repel the attacks made upon him by the girls. He could only receive one kiss at a time, though he did make a masterful attempt to take the two elders as a *concerto allegro* movement; the others he treated as a *scherzo*. He had the lordly air of the patron who flings his mineas about: the Italian jewellery had made a deep inroad upon a lira; but he was a generous man, and he loved his family. But his mother, being a thrifty soul—Mr. Foote thought her miserly—shook her head. She felt that he had been too lavish, not knowing anything about Italian jewellery.

CHAPTER II

"'The greatest singer in England.' Yes, that is what I heard," said Tom, patting Betsy's hand, which he held affectionately in his own. He had made quite an art of fondling hands, having been for four years in Italy. The family had returned to the drawing-room after supper, but as Mr. Linley and his son had begun to talk about music, the younger members had escaped to another apartment, the better to push on a nursery quarrel as to the respective value of their presents. The novelty of a newly returned elder brother was beginning to decline; he had eaten of the pie just as they had eaten of it, and now he was beginning to talk quite easily of music, when they had fully expected him to tell them some thrilling stories of Italian brigands full of bloodshed.

"She has sung better than any singer in England," said the father; "but that does not make her the greatest singer."

"Pacchierotti is the best critic in the world, and he told a company in my hearing three months ago that there is no singer in England who can compare with Miss Linley," said Tom. "Why, the great Agujari herself allowed that in oratorio she could never produce the same impression as our Miss Linnet."

"She spoke the truth, then, though she is an Italian," said Mr. Linley.

"Ah, let us talk about something else," cried Betsy. "Why should we talk of music within the first hour of Tom's return to us? Surely we might have one evening of pleasure."

Tom ceased fondling her hand and looked seriously into her face. And now the expression in their eyes was not the same. The soft, beseeching look that she cast at him was very different from the serious glance—it had something of reproach in it—with which he regarded her.

"We talk of music because there is nothing else worth talking about in the world," said he, and she saw with dismay the strange light that burned in the depths of his eyes, while his glance passed suddenly beyond her face—passed away from her face, from the room, from the world

altogether. She knew what that light meant, and she shuddered. She had seen it in Mr. Garrick's face when he was playing in *Hamlet*; she had seen it in Mr. Gainsborough's face when he was painting the picture of her and her brother; she had seen it in the plain face of little Dr. Goldsmith when he had repeated in her hearing the opening lines of his sublime poem, "The Traveller"; she had seen it in the face of Mr. Burke when he was making a speech. She knew what it meant—she knew that that light was the light which men call genius, and she shuddered. She knew that to have genius is only to have a greater capacity for suffering than other men. What she did not know was that people saw the same light in her eyes when she was singing, "I know that my Redeemer liveth."

"What do you say?" cried the father, springing from his chair with a hand upraised. "What do you say, my son?"

"I say, sir, that we talk of music because there is nothing else in the world worth talking about," said Tom stoutly.

With a cry of delight the father threw himself into his son's arms.

"Thank God for that—thank God for that!" he murmured. "You have not worked in vain, my boy; I have not prayed in vain. The truth has been revealed to you. You are my son."

"Can any one doubt that this is the truth?" said the boy.

Betsy saw that he was careful to avoid looking in her direction. That was why she felt that he was addressing her personally.

"No, no!" she said, catching his hand again. "No, no, dear Tom; no one in this house will doubt that music is the only subject worth a word, a thought. It is our life. Is there any better life? How we can gladden the hearts of all who come near us! Even at Oxford—I have sung a great deal at Oxford, you know—I have seen the tears upon the faces of those men—the most learned men in the world. Just think of a poor ignorant girl like myself being able to move a learned man to tears! Oh, there is nothing worth a thought in the world save only music. Let me sing to you now, Tom; you will be able to say if I have improved."

Tom's face glowed.

"We have wasted an hour over supper," he said, and there was actually mournfulness in his voice. Happily his mother, the pie-maker, was not present; she had run from the room at the first mention of music. "I always think that eating is a huge waste of time. We might have been singing an hour ago. And what think you of this new instrument—the forte-piano—father? I have heard it affirmed that it will make even the harpsichord become obsolete. I laughed, having heard you play the harpsichord."

"Burney talks much about the forte-piano," said the father. "And Mr. Bach, who has been giving his concerts in the Thatched House in St. James's Street, has surprised us all by his playing upon its keyboard; but, my son, 'tis less refined than my harpsichord."

"No one will ever be able to invent any instrument that will speak to one as does your violin, Tom," said Betsy. "You need have no fear that your occupation will soon be gone."

Tom smiled.

"The violin is the only instrument that has got a soul," said he. "Only God can create a soul. Doubtless God could make another instrument with a soul, to speak direct to the souls of men, but beyond doubt He has not done so yet."

"And now you shall awaken all the soul which is in yours, and make it reveal its celestial mysteries to us," said the father. "I am more than anxious to learn how you have progressed. I dare swear that you have not wasted your time in Italy?"

"Heaven only knows if I have done all that was in my power to do," said the boy, after a curious pause.

He was staring at the furthest corner of the ceiling while he spoke. Then he got upon his feet and walked across the room and back again without speaking; then he threw himself down upon a sofa with a sigh.

"Now and again—only now and again—father, I think that I succeed in reaching the soul of the thing," he said. "After long waiting and working and longing I sometimes hear its voice speaking to me, and then I feel that I am very near to God. Surely music is the voice of God speaking to the soul of man—speaking its message of infinite tenderness—gladness that is the gladness of heaven.... I think I have heard it, but not always—only at rare intervals. And I took up the violin when I was a child as if it were a simple thing—an ordinary instrument, and not a thing of mystery—a living thing!"

"You have learned the truth since those days!" cried the delighted father.

"The truth? Who is there alive that has learned the whole truth—the whole mystery of the violin?" said the boy. "I think that I have crept a little nearer to it during these years; that is all that I dare to say."

"You are a musician," said the father, and the tears of joy that were in his eyes were also in his voice. "The true musician is the one who fears to speak with assurance. He is never without his doubts, his fears, his hours of depression, as well as his moments of celestial joy. I thank heaven that I am the father of a musician."

"I thought that I was a musician until I heard Pugnani," said the son. "Hearing him showed me

that I had not even crossed the threshold of the temple. Shall I ever forget that day? I was sent by my master with a message to his house on that hill where the olive-trees mingle with the oranges and the vines. I remember how the red beams of the sun at its setting swept across the Arno, and crept among the olives, and blazed upon the oranges till they seemed like so many lamps half hidden among the glossy foliage."

"Would that I had been with you!" said Betsy in a twilight voice.

"Ah, if you had but been with me, you would have learned more of music in half an hour than you could acquire elsewhere in a lifetime," said her brother.

"He played for you?" said the father.

"Yes, he played. The words are easily said. The villa is a lovely one, and when I reached the entrance, walking through the orange-grove, the sun had sunk, and from a solitary oleander a nightingale had begun to sing in the blue twilight. I stood listening to it, and feeling how truly Handel had interpreted the bird's song."

"Betsy shall sing you the *aria* 'Sweet Bird' when you have told us your story," said Mr. Linley.

"I entered during the first pause, for there was no bell to ring—my master had told me not to look for a bell or to call for a servant; the Maestro does not live as other men. The hall was empty; but I had received my instructions to wait there, and I waited until a man strolled in after me from the garden. He wore the common blouse of the Italian peasant, and carried a pruning-knife in one hand and a huge bunch of grapes in the other. I took him for a gardener, and the low bow which he made to me confirmed this impression. In replying to his courteous 'Buona sera, signore,' I told him that if he should chance to find Signore Pugnani in the villa, I would thank him greatly if he would let him know that I brought a message from Maestro Grassi. 'Signore Pugnani will be here presently,' said he. I thanked him, and, wishing to be civil, I said: 'His garden does you great credit—you are, I venture to think, his gardener?' 'Alas! sir,' said he, smiling, 'I am a much humbler person than his gardener. I have, it is true, dared to cut a bunch of grapes, but I am even now trembling at my boldness. I shall have to face the gardener before night, for he is sure to miss it. You are one of Maestro Grassi's pupils, sir?' he added; and when I assented, 'I, too, am learning to play the violin,' he said. 'It is very creditable to you to wish to master the instrument,' said I. 'You must have many opportunities in this household of hearing good music. Your master is, I believe, one of the greatest composers. I am overcome with admiration of his night piece—*La Voce della Notte*, he has called it.' 'I have heard him play it,' said he—'at least I think I recollect it. I fancy I should recall it fully if you were to play a few bars of the prelude.' He picked up a violin which, with its bow, was lying on a cushion on the settee of the hall, and began tuning it. When he had satisfied himself that the instrument was in tune, he handed it to me. 'Have you memory sufficient to play a few bars of the *Andante*?' he inquired. 'Oh, I can play the thing throughout,' said I eagerly. I prided myself on having mastered the *Andante*, and I did not hesitate to play it. In the dimness of that twilight in the hall, through which the scents of the orange-trees floated—I can perceive the delicate perfume of that Italian evening still—I played the *Andante*."

The narrator paused, and then, lying back in his chair, he laughed heartily. His father smiled; his sister was grave.

"You played it creditably, I hope? You were in the presence of the composer, I begin to see," said Mr. Linley.

"Of course the stranger was Signore Pugnani, but I did not know it until he had taken the instrument from me," said the son. "He was courteous in his compliments upon my performance. 'I am but a pupil of that wonderful instrument,' said he, 'but I clearly perceive that you treat it with reverence. Would I tire you if I were to submit to your criticism my recollection of *La Voce della Notte*, sir?' I replied, of course, that he should find in me an indulgent critic, and I made up my mind to be indulgent. And then—then—he held the bow for a long time over the string—I scarce knew when he began to make it speak. I scarce knew whence the sound came. All the mystery of night was in that single note; it was an impassioned cry for rest—the rest brought by night. While it sounded I seemed to hear the far-off cry of the whole creation that travaileth, yearning for the rest that is the consummation of God's promises. Again he moved the bow, and that wailing note increased.... Ah, how can I express the magic of that playing?... I tell you that in a moment before my eyes the dim hall was crowded with figures. I sat in amazement watching them. They were laughing together in groups. Lovely girls in ravishing dishevelment flung roses up to the roof of the hall, and the blooms, breaking there, sent a shower of rosy perfumed petals quivering and dancing like butterflies downward. Children ran to catch the frail falling flakes, and clapped their hands. Men old and young sang in varying harmonies, and at intervals of singing quaffed sparkling wine from cups of glass. Suddenly, while all were in the act of drinking, the goblets fell with a crash upon the pavement, and the red wine flowed like blood over the mosaics of the floor. When the crash of the glasses had rung through the hall there was a moment of deathly silence, and then, far away, I heard once more the wailing of a great multitude. It drew closer and closer until men, women, and children in the hall joined in that chorus of ineffable sadness—that cry of the world for the rest which has been promised. They lay on the pavement before my eyes, wailing—wailing...."

"Silence followed. The hall became dark in a moment; I could not have seen anything even if my eyes had been dry. They were not dry: that second wail had moved me as I had never before been moved. The darkness was stifling. I felt overwhelmed by it, but I could not stir. I remained bound to my seat by a spell that I could not break. But just as I felt myself struggling for breath, a

long ray of moonlight slipped aslant the pavement of the hall, and the atmosphere became less dense. In a few moments the hall was filled with moonlight, and I saw that, just where the light streamed, there was growing a tree—a tree of golden fruit that shone in the moon's rays. A little way off a fountain began to flash, and its sparkling drops fell musically into the basin beneath the fantastic jets. All at once a nightingale burst into rapturous song among the foliage. Ah, that song!—the soul of tranquillity, of a yearning satisfied! While I listened in delight I breathed the delicate dewy odours which seemed to come from the glossy leaves that hid the nightingale from sight.

"I do not know how long I listened—how long I tasted of the delight of that sensation of repose. I only know that I was on my feet straining to catch the last exquisite notes that seemed to dwindle away and become a part of the moonlight, when I heard a voice say:

"I find that my memory is trustworthy. I have played the whole of the *Voce*. I hope that I find in you a lenient critic, sir.'

"But I was on my knees at his feet, and unable to utter a word. Ah, it is the recollection of that playing which makes me feel that, even though I give up my life to the violin, I shall never pass beyond the threshold of the study."

"Sir," said the father, "you have told us of the effect produced upon your imagination by the playing of a great musician. But what you have proved to us is not that Signore Pugnani is a great musician, but that you are one. Give me your hand, my son; you are a great musician."

Betsy wiped her eyes and sighed.

CHAPTER III

It was some time before Tom caught up his violin and began to tune it. His father had seated himself at the harpsichord, and Betsy had astonished her brother by her singing of Handel's "Sweet Bird." He affirmed that she was the greatest singer in the world. All that Pacchierotti and the Agujari had said about her singing failed to do full justice to it, he declared. He had heard singers in Italy who were accounted great, but the greatest of them might sit at her feet with profit.

"She will sing 'Angels, ever bright and fair' with true effect now, I promise you," said the father, with a shrewd smile.

"Ah, yes! now—now!" said the girl; and before her father had touched the keys of the harpsichord she had flashed into the recitative.

Her brother clasped his hands over his bosom, and, with his eyes fixed on her face, listened in amazement. She had become the embodiment of the music. She was the spirit of the song made visible. All the pure maidenly ecstasy, all the virginal rapture was made visible. Before she had ended the recitative, every one who ever heard that lovely singer was prepared to hear the rustling of the angels' wings. It was the greatest painter of the day who heard her sing the sublime melody, and painted his greatest picture—one of the greatest pictures ever painted in the world—from her.

"Saint Cecilia—Saint Cecilia, and none other," said Sir Joshua Reynolds. "She sings and draws the angels down when she calls upon them."

But the jingling harpsichord!

"It is unworthy of her," cried her father, taking his hands off the keys before playing the prelude to the air.

In an instant her brother had caught up his violin; he had been tuning it while they had been talking—and began to improvise an obbligato with the confidence of a master of the instrument. And then with the first sound of the harpsichord came that exquisite voice of passionate imploration:

"'Angels, ever bright and fair,
Take, oh, take me to your care.'"

She had never sung it so well before. She had never before known how beautiful it was. And now, while she sang, the violin obbligato helping her onward, she became aware of distant angel-voices answering her—soft and low they were at first, but gradually they drew nigh, increasing in volume and intensity, until at the end of the first part the air was thrilling with the sound of harps, and through all the joyous confidence of the last phrases came that glorious harp-music, now floating away into the distance, and anon flashing down with the sound of mysterious musical voices in response to her singing. At the last she could see the heavens opened above her, and a flood of melody floated down, and then dwindled away when her voice had become silent.

There was a silence in the room. Even the father, who thought he knew all the magic that could be accomplished on the fourth string, was dumb with amazement and delight.

"Ah, my sweet sister," said the violin-player, "your singing has led me to perceive something of the beauty of that *aria*. I think I caught a glimpse of the country to which it leads one. Thank you, my Betsy. Neither of us can go very far



"ANGELS, EVER BRIGHT AND FAIR,
TAKE, OH, TAKE ME TO YOUR CARE!"

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beyond the point that we have reached to-night."

"That point has never been reached in the world before!" cried the father. "I know what has been done, and I give you my word that here, in this room, a point of musical expression has been reached beyond what the greatest of our musicians have ever aimed at."

"What Tom said when a child has turned out true," said Polly. "Yes, we are all geniuses, and the half of Bath may be seen outside the house enjoying a free concert."

Tom drew one of the blinds and looked out; there was a crowd of some hundreds of persons in the street. The oil lamps shone upon the rich brocades of ladies who had been in both the Assembly Rooms, and upon the gold lace of the fine gentlemen who accompanied them. Richly painted chairs had been set down on the pavement, and the roofs tilted up to allow of the sound of the music reaching the occupants, whose heads, white with powder, sometimes protruded beyond the lacquered brass-work of the brim of their chairs. The linkboys stood with their torches in the roadway, making a lurid background to the scene. The moment that Tom drew back the blind, the yellow light from without flared into the room.

"*Cielo!*" he cried, lifting up his hands, "Pierrepont Street is turned into a concert-room."

"The only marvel is that we have not had several visitors," said his father. "It was

widely known through Bath that you were to return to us this evening. I feared that we should not be allowed to have a quiet hour or two to ourselves. The good folk here are as fond of a new sensation as were the Athenians. How can we account for their considerate behaviour to-night?"

Betsy laughed.

"I think I can account for it," she cried. "Look out again, Tom, and try if you cannot see a Cerberus at the door."

"A Cerberus?" said he, peering out at the edge of the blind. "I' faith, I do perceive something that suggests one of the great hounds which I saw at the Hospice of St. Bernard—an enormous mass of vigilance, not over-steady on his legs."

"A three-decker sort of man, rolling at anchor?" suggested Polly, the pert one.

"An apt description," said Tom.

"I will not hear a word said against Dr. Johnson," cried Betsy. "He has kept his promise. When I told him that you were coming home to-day, he said: 'Madam, though your occupation as a singer entitles every jackanapes to see you for half a crown, still, in order to inculcate upon you the charm of a life of domesticity, I shall prevent your being pestered with busybodies for one night. I shall take care that no eye save that of Heaven sees you kiss your brother on his return.'"

"Dr. Johnson is not without a certain sense of what is delicate, though he may be in one's company a long time before one becomes aware of it," said Mr. Linley.

"Betsy did not tell you what he said when she thanked him," cried Polly. "But he rolled himself to one side, and pursed out his lips in a dreadful way. 'Tell the truth, Miss Linnet,' said he at last. 'Tell the truth: do you indeed welcome my offer, or do you not rather regret that the young rascals—ay, and the old rascals too—will be deprived of the opportunity of having their envy aroused by observing the favours you bestow on the cold lips of a brother?' Those were his very words."

"And his very manner, I vow," laughed her father; and indeed Miss Polly had given a very pretty imitation of the Johnsonian manner.

"Never mind," said Betsy. "If he only succeeds in keeping away Mrs. Thrale, he deserves all our gratitude."

And it was actually Mrs. Thrale whom Dr. Johnson was trying to convince that she had no right to enter the Linleys' house at that moment.

Hearing that Tom Linley was to return after an absence of four years in Italy, and knowing the spirit of impudent curiosity that pervaded the crowds of idlers in Bath, Dr. Johnson had posted

himself at the door of 5, Pierrepont Street, when he learned that Tom had reached the house, and he had prevented even those persons who had legitimate business with Mr. Linley from intruding upon the family party.

He was having a difficult task with Mrs. Thrale, for the sprightly little lady had made up her mind to visit the Linleys and have at least one *bon mot* respecting Tom circulated among the early visitors to the Pump Room before any of her rival gossips had a chance of seeing the youth. But she found herself confronted by the mighty form of Johnson a few yards from the door of their house.

"Dear sir," she cried, "you are doing yeoman's service to the family of Linley. Oh, the idle curiosity of the people here! How melancholy is the position of a public character! Every fellow who has ever heard Miss Linley sing fancies he is privileged to enter her house upon the most sacred occasion; and as for your modish young woman, she looks on the Linley family as she does upon the Roman baths—to be freely visited as one of the sights of the place."

"Madam, you exaggerate," said Dr. Johnson. "The persons in Bath whose inquisitiveness makes them disregarding of the decencies of life do not number more than a dozen."

"Ah, sir," said the lady, "you are charitably disposed."

"Madam, to suggest that I am charitable were to suggest that I am incapable of taking a just view of a very simple matter, and that, let me tell you, madam, is something which no considerations of charity will prevent my contesting."

"Dear sir," said Mrs. Thrale, "you will force me to appeal to your charity at this time on behalf of Mr. Boswell. If you do not permit him to enter the house and bring us a faithful report of young Mr. Linley, a whole day may pass before the Pump Room knows anything of him."

"Psha! madam, do you know the Pump Room so indifferently as to fancy that it will wait for any report of the young gentleman before forming its own conclusions on the subject of his return?"

"Ah, Dr. Johnson, but Mr. Boswell is invariably so accurate in his reports on everything," persisted the lady.

Little Mr. Boswell smirked between the cross-fires of the yellow lamplight and the lurid links; he smirked and bowed low beneath the force of the lady's compliment. He had not a nice ear either for compliment or detraction: he failed to appreciate the whisper of a zephyr of sarcasm.

But his huge patron was not Zephyrus, but Boreas.

"Madam," he cried, "I allow that Mr. Boswell is unimaginative enough to be accurate; but he is a busybody, and I will not allow him to cross this threshold. List to those sounds, Mrs. Thrale"—Polly in the room upstairs had just begun to sing, with her two sisters, a glee of Purcell—"list to those sounds. What! madam, would you have that nest of linnets disturbed?"

"Is Saul also among the prophets? Oh, 'tis sure edifying to find Dr. Johnson the patron of music," said the lady with double-edged sweetness.

"Madam, let me tell you that one cannot rightly be said to be a patron of music," said Dr. Johnson. "Music is an abstraction. One may be a patron of a musician or a painter—nay, I have even heard of a poet having a patron, and dying of him too, because, like a gangrene that proves fatal, he was not cut away in time."

"And just now you are the patron of the musicians, sir?" said the lady.

"Just now, madam, I am hungry and thirsty. I have a longing to be the patron of your excellent cook, and the still more excellent custodian of your tea-cupboard. Come, Mrs. Thrale, sweet though the sounds of that hymn may be—if indeed it be a hymn and not a jig; but I hope it is a hymn—take my word for it, madam, a hungry man would like better to hear the rattle of crockery."

"Dear sir, I feel honoured," cried Mrs. Thrale. "But who will take charge of your nest of linnets in the meantime?"

"Our friend Dr. Goldsmith will be proud of that duty, dear madam," said Johnson.

"Madam," said Dr. Goldsmith, "I have my flute in my pocket; if any one tries to enter this house, I swear that I shall play it, and if every one does not fly then, a posse of police shall be sent for. You have heard me play the flute, doctor?"

"Sir," said Johnson, "when I said that music was of all noises the least disagreeable, I had not heard you play upon your flute."

"No, sir; for had you heard me, you would not have said 'least disagreeable'—no, sir; *least* would not have been the word," said Goldsmith.

"Pan-pipes would be an appropriate instrument to such a satyr," said a tall thin gentleman in an undertone to another, when Johnson and Mrs. Thrale had walked away, and Goldsmith had begun to listen in ecstasy to Tom Linley's playing of Pugnani's *nocturne*.

"Ah, friend Horry, you have never ceased to think ill of Dr. Goldsmith since the night you sat beside him at the Academy dinner," said the other gentleman.

"I think no ill of the man, George," said Horace Walpole. "Surely a man may call another a scarecrow without malice, if t'other be a scarecrow."

"'Tis marvellous how plain a fellow seems when he has got the better of one in an argument,"

laughed George Selwyn, for he knew that Walpole had not a good word to say for Goldsmith since the former had boasted, on the narrowest ground, of having detected the forgeries of Chatterton, thereby calling for a scathing word or two from Goldsmith, who had just come from the room where the unfortunate boy was lying dead.

The two wits walked on toward the house that Gilly Williams had taken for a month; but before they had gone a dozen yards they were bowing to the ground at the side of a gorgeous chair carried by men wearing the livery of the Duchess of Devonshire, and having two footmen on each side.

The beautiful lady whose head, blazing with jewels, appeared when the hood was raised, caused her folded fan to describe a graceful curve in the direction of Walpole, while she cried:

"You were not at the Assembly to-night, Mr. Walpole."

"Nay, your Grace, I have scarce left it: we are on the fringe of it still," replied Walpole.

"Under Miss Linley's window," said the duchess.

"Wherever Miss Linley sings and the Duchess of Devonshire listens is the Assembly," said George Selwyn.

"I have heard of one Orpheus who with his lute drew inanimate things to listen to him," said the duchess; "Miss Linley seems to have equal powers; for were it otherwise, I should not have seen my Lord Coventry in Pierrepont Street to-night."

"Your Grace doubted whether the people flocked to Miss Linley's concerts in the Assembly Rooms to hear her sing or to feast on her beauty," said Walpole.

"Well, now I confess that I am answered," said her Grace, "for the singer did not deign to appear even at a window. But I call it a case of gross improvidence for a young woman to be so beautiful of feature, and so divine of voice at the same time. Either of her attractions should be enough for one in a humble position in life. I call it a waste. Now tell me frankly, Mr. Selwyn, is Miss Linley as beautiful as your friend Lady Coventry was—the first of them, I mean."

"Madam, there have been but three beautiful women in the world; the first was Helen of Troy, the second was Maria Lady Coventry, and the third is——"

"Miss Elizabeth Linley?" cried the duchess when George Selwyn made a pause—a pause that invited a question—the pause of the professed *raconteur* who fully understands the punctuation of a sentence. "What? Miss Elizabeth Linley?"

"Madam, the third is her Grace the Duchess of Devonshire," said Selwyn with a bow.

"Oh, sir," cried the duchess, "you are unkind to offer me such a compliment when I am enclosed in my chair. I protest that you have no right to take me at such a disadvantage. Pray consider that I have sunk to the ground at your feet in acknowledgment of your politeness. But pray note the silence of Mr. Walpole."

"'Tis the silence of acquiescence, madam," said Selwyn.

"Pray let Mr. Walpole speak for himself, Selwyn," said the duchess. "As a rule he is able to speak not only for himself, but for every one else."

"'Twas but the verse of Mr. Dryden which came into my mind when George spoke of his three beauties, duchess," said Walpole:

"The force of Nature could no further go;
To make a third she joined the other two."

"'Tis the compliment of a scholar as well as a wit," said her Grace—"a double-edged sword, keen as well as polished, which I vow there is no resisting. What return can I make for such favours—a sweet nosegay of favours in full bloom and tied with a riband of the finest brocade? The flowers of compliment are ever more welcome when tied with a riband of wit."

"O Queen, live for ever!" cried Selwyn.

"Nay, sir, that is not a reply to my question," said the duchess. "I asked you what return I can make for your compliments?"

"True, madam, and I reply, 'O Queen, live for ever!' in other words, give Mr. Gainsborough an order to paint your portrait," said Mr. Selwyn.

"Ah, now 'tis Mr. Gainsborough whom you are complimenting," said the duchess. "Alas! that we poor women must be dependent for immortality upon the pigments of a painter!"

"Your Grace is in the happy position of being independent of his pigments except on his canvas," said Walpole. "But let me join my entreaty to Mr. Selwyn's. Give to posterity a reflection of the privilege which is enjoyed by us."

"I vow that the king I feel like to is King Herod," cried the duchess.

"And with great reason, madam," said Walpole: "we are the innocents slain by your Grace's beauty."

"Nay, that was not the episode that was in my mind," laughed the lady. "Nay, 'twas t'other one: I offered you a favour, and you, like the daughter of Herodias, have demanded a human head—in pigment. But I have pledged myself, and I will e'en send a note to Mr. Gainsborough in the morning. What! the concert is over? Gentlemen, I trust that you are satisfied with your night's

work?"

"Madam, should it be known that it was George and myself who brought about this happy accident, we should rest secure in the thought that we too shall live among the immortals," cried Walpole.

"Future generations shall rise up and call us blessed," said Selwyn.

"And what will Mr. Gainsborough say?" asked the duchess.

"If he were a man like one of us, he would be in despair of ever being able to execute the task which your Grace imposes on him," said Walpole.

"True, if he were not supported from one day to the next by the thought of being for another hour in your Grace's presence," said Selwyn.

The beautiful lady held up both her hands in pretty protest, while she cried:

"If I tarry here much longer, I shall find myself promising to give sittings to Sir Joshua Reynolds and the full company of Academicians; so a good-night to you pair of flatterers. Heaven grant that I get safe home! Your *al fresco* concert-goers jostle one horribly."

The two gentlemen bowed while her Grace's chair was borne on through the sauntering crowd, for the house which had been the centre of the gathering had now become silent, and the candles in the drawing-room were extinguished. The clocks had chimed out the first quarter past eleven—an hour when most Londoners were in bed; but Bath during the eighteenth century was the latest town in England, and long after the duchess's chair had been borne away, long after Walpole and his friend had sauntered on to Gilly Williams's; long after Johnson had lectured the saturnine brewer, Mr. Thrale, on the evil of Mr. Thrale's practice of over-eating (Johnson himself was enough of an anchorite to limit himself when at Streatham to fifteen peaches before breakfast, and an equal number before dinner, and had never been known to swallow more than twenty cups of tea at a sitting); long after Dr. Goldsmith had worried poor Mr. Boswell by pretending to be taking a note of Dr. Johnson's sayings for the day, having, as he affirmed, an eye to a future biography of the great man; long after Miss Linley had knelt down by her bedside to thank Providence for having restored her dear brother to his home, even though Providence had seen fit to supplant her in her brother's affection by an abstraction which he called his Art; long after the night had closed upon all these incidents in the beautiful city of Bath, some people were still sauntering through Pierrepont Street.

From the left there sauntered a young man of good figure and excellent carriage. He wore a cloak, and he had tilted his hat over his eyes, in imitation of the prowling young man on the stage. He kept on the dark side of the street and looked furtively round every now and again. He slipped into a deep doorway when almost opposite the house of the Linleys, and stood there with his eyes fixed on the highest windows.

"Sleep, beloved, sleep," he murmured, with a sentimental turn of his head. "Sleep, knowing naught of the passion that burns in the heart of thy faithful swain, who wakes to watch over thy slumbers."

He was so absorbed in his rhapsodising that he failed to notice the approach of another young man from the opposite direction to that from which he himself had come. The other was somewhat taller, and his carriage was better displayed by the circumstance of his being uncloaked, and of his walking frankly along the street until he too had reached the dim doorway. Then with a glance up to the windows of the Linleys' house, he too slipped into that doorway.

He started, finding that another person was there—a man who quickly turned away his head and let his chin fall deep into the collar of his cloak.

"What! Charles?" cried the newcomer. "Why, I left you at home going to your bedroom half an hour ago. What, man, have you turned footpad that you steal out in this fashion and wearing a cloak?"

"I trust, brother, that one may take a quiet walk without having to give an explanation of its purport," said the first sulkily.

"To be sure—to be sure," said the other. "I suppose that Joseph, even before he became a patriarch, took many a stroll in the cool of the night through the streets of Thebes—or was it Memphis?—without reproach."

"For that matter," cried the first, with some irritation in his voice, "what was your motive in coming hither, brother Dick? Did not you say that you were going to bed also?"

"I—oh, I only came out to search for you, Joseph—I mean Charles," said the second. "Yes, Jo—Charles, hearing you leave the house by the back, I thought it the duty of a younger brother to see that you did not get into any harm. Good heavens, brother! what would become of the Sheridan family if the elder son were to fall among thieves? Do you think that our patriarchal father would be satisfied if he were shown his Joseph's cloak saturated with red claret? Come home, Joseph, come home, I entreat of you. You can compose your sonnet to Betsy Linley much more fluently at your desk at home. Besides, father has a rhyming-dictionary—an indispensable work of reference to a lover, Charles."

"What do you mean, Dick?" said Charles in an aggrieved voice—the aggrieved voice afterwards assumed by the representative of the part of Joseph in *The School for Scandal*. "Brother, I really am surprised to find you making light of so estimable a family."

"As the Linleys or the Sheridans—which?" cried Dick. "Oh, man, come home; the girl is asleep hours ago and dreaming of—of you, maybe, Charles. Think of that, man—think of that—dreaming of you! Oh, if you have any appreciation of a true lover's duty, you will hasten to your bed to return the compliment by dreaming of her."

Mr. Richard Brinsley Sheridan put his arm through his brother's, and Charles suffered himself to be led away to their house on the Terrace Walks, protesting all the time that the man who rushed hastily to conclusions was more to be execrated than the footpad, for the latter was content when he had stolen a man's purse, whereas the other....

"True—true—quite true, Joseph," said Dick. "We can make another score or two of those sentiments when we get home. Father has a copy of the 'Sentiments of all Nations' as well as a rhyming-dictionary."

CHAPTER IV

Betsy Linley awoke in the morning with a feeling of having been disappointed about something, and she was disappointed with herself for being so weak as to be conscious of such an impression. In short, she was disappointed with herself for awaking in disappointment. She should have felt gladness, only gladness, to think that the brother, who had ever been so dear to her, had escaped all the perils of the years he had spent among the artistic barbarians of Italy, all the perils of the long journey through the land of brigands to land of highwaymen. No other consideration should have produced any impression on her.

The previous morning she had awakened with the one thought dancing before her, "He will be at home when I next wake in this house!" and it seemed to her then that this was all she required to make her happy. What more than this could she need? If he returned to her side safe and well, what could anything else matter? There was nothing else in the world of sufficient importance in comparison with such an occurrence to be worth a thought. The feeling that he was near her would absorb every thought of her heart, and nothing that might occur afterwards could diminish from the joy of that thought.

Well, he had come—she had felt his kisses on her cheek, and for an hour she had felt that he was her dear brother as he had been in the old days. She felt sure that he would understand her, and, understanding her, sympathise with her. But from the moment that he had taken his violin out of its baize bag—he had nursed the instrument on his knees, as a mother carries her baby, during the entire journey from Italy—from the moment that she had seen that divine light in his eyes, when he drew his bow across the strings, she knew that there was a barrier between them. She felt as a sister feels when a well-beloved only brother returns to her with a wife by his side.

His art—that was what he had brought home with him, and she saw that it held possession of all his heart. She felt that she occupied quite a secondary place in his affections compared with music—that he loved music with the passionate devotion of a lover, while to her he could only give the cold, calculable affection of a brother. She felt all the sting of jealousy which an affectionate sister feels when her brother, in her presence, looks into the eyes of the woman whom he loves and puts his arm about her. She felt all the bitterness of the step-daughter who sees her father smiling as he looks into the eyes of his new wife.

She had hoped that Tom's home-coming would make her father less exacting than he always had been in regard to her singing—that Tom would take her part when she protested against being forced to sing so constantly in public. Her nature was one of extraordinary sensitiveness, and it was this fact that caused her to be the most exquisite singer of her day. But then it was her possession of this very sensitiveness that caused her to shrink from an audience. It was with real terror that she faced the thousands of people whom her singing delighted. The reflection that her singing delighted every one who heard her gave her no pleasure, and the tumult of applause which greeted her gave her no exultation; it only added to the terror she felt on appearing on a platform. She wept in her room, refusing anything to eat or drink for hours preceding an evening when she had to sing in public. More than once she had actually fainted on reaching the concert-room; and these were the occasions when she had thrilled every one present with the divine charm of her voice.

She was the most sensitive instrument that ever the spirit of music breathed through; but the cruelty of the matter was, that although without this sensitiveness she would never have been able to move the hearts of every man and woman who heard her sing, yet possessing it unfitted her for the *rôle* of a great singer.

This was the paradox of the life of this woman of genius. The most cruel jest ever perpetrated by Nature was giving this creature the divinest voice that ever made a mortal a little lower than the angels, and at the same time decreeing that it should be an agony for her to exercise her powers as infinitely less gifted women exercise their talents.

It is all to be seen in her face as we can see it on the canvases of Gainsborough and Reynolds—two of the greatest pictures ever painted by the hand of man. If the face of Miss Linley in Gainsborough's picture is divine, the face of Sir Joshua's "Saint Cecilia" is sublime. In both one may perceive the shrinking of a sensitive soul from anything less divine than itself.

And her father, an excellent man, who had made himself a musician in spite of many

difficulties, insisted on her singing in public as frequently as he thought consistent with the preservation of her voice. He was incapable of understanding such a nature as hers, and she had this fact impressed upon her every day. He would tell her what Handel meant to accomplish in certain of his numbers, and she would listen as in a dream, and then sing the number in her own way, going to the very soul of its mystery, and achieving an effect of which her father had never dreamed. She used to wonder how any one could be content, as her father was, to touch merely upon the surface of the matter and make no attempt to reach the soul underlying it.

Every day she startled him by her revelation of the depths of Handel's music—the blue profundity of his ocean, the immeasurable azure of his heaven; and sometimes he could not avoid receiving the impression that this daughter, whom he had taught the rudiments of his art, knew a great deal more about it than he did; and he only recovered his position as her master by pointing out her technical mistakes to her: she had dwelt too long on a certain note; the crescendo in the treatment of a certain phrase had not been gradual enough; her finish had been staccato. She must go over the air again.

So it was that he worried her. He was trying to teach a nightingale to sing by playing the flute to it. But the nightingale sang, in spite of his instruction; the nightingale sang, sang, and longed all the time for the wings of a dove, so that she might fly away and be at rest.

She knew that her father was incapable of understanding her sensitiveness, and she had looked forward to the return of her brother, who might help her father to understand. Alas! the instant she saw that strange light in his eyes she knew that she had nothing to hope for from him. And now she was putting on her clothes to begin another day which should be as all the weary days which had gone before—a day of toiling over exercises with her father at the harpsichord, so that her voice should not be wanting in flexibility when she would appear before an audience in the Assembly Rooms on the evening of the next day.

“Oh for the wings of a dove!” her heart was singing, when, pausing for a moment, with her beautiful hair falling over her shoulders, she heard the strains of her brother's violin floating from the room below. He played the violin beautifully, but.... “Oh for the wings of a dove to fly away and be at rest!”

Mr. Garrick called upon them before they had left the music-room. The children were delighted with Garrick, who could imitate, in such a funny way, their father giving a lesson, and Dr. Johnson assisting by the superiority of his lungs the excellence of his argument on some very delicate question—say, the necessity for building a hospital for spiders which had grown old and past work. This he made the subject of an animated discussion between Dr. Johnson and Sir Joshua Reynolds, keeping the whole family in fits of laughter at Dr. Johnson's polysyllabic references to the industry of the spider, and then bringing tears to their eyes at his picture of the heartlessness of allowing a grey-haired spider to be cast upon the world in its declining years. Of course the children appreciated the ludicrous mistakes made by Sir Joshua, whose infirmity of deafness caused him to assume that Johnson had said exactly the opposite to what he was saying. And then he pretended that he heard a knock at the door. He hastened to admit a gentleman with a very lugubrious face, and before he had opened his mouth there was a cry of “Mr. Cumberland! Mr. Cumberland!” In the truest style of Richard Cumberland, he hastened to decry the whole spider family. Their spinning was grossly overrated, he declared; for his part, he had known many spiders in his time, but he had never known one that was a spinster.

This sort of fooling was what Garrick enjoyed better than anything else, and he brought all his incomparable powers to bear upon it. He played this form of comedy with the same supreme perfection that he displayed in the tragedy of *Hamlet*. Even Tom Linley, who was inclined to be coldly critical of such buffoonery, soon became aware of the difference between the fooling of a man of genius and that of an ordinary person. He laughed as heartily as his younger brothers and sisters during the five minutes that Garrick was in the room.

“By the way,” cried the actor when he was taking his leave (Mr. Linley had just entered the room), “our friend Tom Sheridan goes to Ireland to-morrow. He has been released from his little difficulties which sent him to France. It seems that his chief creditor in Dublin actually petitioned the court to grant Tom exemption from any liability to pay what he owes. Is not that an ideal creditor for one to have? What persuasive letters Tom must have written to him! But for that matter, he could persuade the most obdurate man out of his most cherished belief.”

“Could he persuade you that his Hamlet is superior to yours, Mr. Garrick?” said Linley with a twinkle.

“Well, sir, he might succeed in persuading me of that, but that would be of little value to him, for he could persuade no one else in the world of it. Just now he was trying to persuade me that his elder son, Charles, is a man of parts, and that his second son, Dick, is a nincompoop.”

He gave a casual glance round the Linley circle; his eyes did not rest for a longer space of time upon Elizabeth than upon any of the others, but he did not fail to notice that a delicate pink had come to her cheeks, and that for the second that elapsed before her eyes fell there was an unusual sparkle in them. He did not need to look at the girl again. He had learned enough to make him certain that she was interested in at least one of the Sheridan family. But he was left wondering which of them it was that interested her. He had sufficient experience of the world, as well as of the Green Room, which he believed to be a world in itself, to be well aware of the fact

that a beautiful girl may be as greatly interested in a nincompoop as in his astuter brother; and this might mean that Miss Linley was interested in Charles Sheridan rather than in Dick.

"And did he succeed in persuading you?" asked Linley.

"Faith, sir, he had no trouble persuading me to believe that if it is a wise son who knows his own father, 'tis a wiser father than Tom Sheridan that knows his own sons," said Garrick, giving another glance round the circle. This time he saw Miss Linley's long lashes flash from her cheek; but her eyes were not dancing, they were full of mournfulness.

Garrick found that he would have to give time to the consideration of what this expression of mournfulness meant.

"Tom was, as usual, combining the arts of devotion and elocution in his household," continued the actor. "He holds that devotion is the handmaid to elocution. He has morning prayer in his house, not only because he is a good Churchman, but because he is an excellent teacher of elocution. He makes his children learn Christian principles and correct pronunciation at the same time."

"That is the system of the copybooks," said Linley. "By giving headlines of notable virtue, they inculcate good principles as well as good penmanship."

"I call it killing two birds with the one stone," said Polly.

"Mr. Sheridan is a copybook-heading sort of man in himself," cried Garrick. "He is an admirable sentiment engraved in copper-plate. He thinks that Heaven will pay more attention to a petition that is pronounced according to the rules of Sheridan's dictionary than to one which is founded on Johnson. This is how he says grace:—'For these and all Thy mercies——' 'Observe, children, I say "mercies," not "murcies." There is not nearly enough attention given in England to discriminating between the vowel sounds—— Observe I say "vowel sounds," not "vowil sounds." I have now and again heard Mr. Garrick say "vowil" instead of "vowel," which would almost lead me to believe that he has more Irish blood in his veins than his shocking parsimony would suggest. But for that matter, Mr. Garrick is constantly making errors in his elocution—— Pray note that I say "errors," not "errurs"—and the only wonder is that any educated audience can follow the fellow. You perceive that I say "follow the fellow," not "folly the feller,"—to be sure, it is folly to follow the fellow, but that is a matter of taste, not truth. You mark me, Richard?' 'Faith, sir,' says Richard, 'I am thinking more of swallowing than of following at the present moment; but if you begin upon the rashers, I promise you that I shall follow and say in the purest English, "For these and all Thy mercies, make us to be truly thankful."' Thereat brother Charles shakes his head, and says, 'You were remarking, sir, that the English are most careless over their quantities.' 'That is because they have not had the privilege of being born Irishmen,' says Dick; 'but we have, and for this and all Thy mercies, make us to be truly thankful. Let me help you to one of these excellent rashers, father.' Then the girls grin, looking down at their plates. Brother Charles shakes his head over Dick's levity, and the father puts on his best 'Cato' face, and remains dignified and, like the breakfast, cold. But by the Lord Harry, I am worse than Tom Sheridan; I am keeping you from your breakfast of sweet sounds. There is Master Tom tuning his violin in a suggestive way. Is it true what people say, Miss Polly, that the Linley family break their fast on buttered fugues, dine off a sirloin of sonatas, and sup off jugged symphonies, drinking mugs of oratorio, and every mug with a Handel? Farewell, dear friends—farewell! 'Oh, now for ever, farewell the tranquil mind, farewell content.'"

In a second he had become Othello, and the laughter was frozen on the face of every one in the circle. This magician carried them at will from world to world. They were powerless before him. He left them gasping, looking at one another as if they had just awakened from a dream.

"A genius!" murmured Mr. Linley, when Garrick had gone, and a long silence followed in the room. "'Tis a doubtful privilege to be visited by a genius. It unfits one for one's daily work."

"Nay, sir," cried Tom, "I would fain believe that the visits of a genius are like those of an angel—that he brings us food, in the strength of which we can face the terrors of a wilderness as the prophet did—the wilderness of the commonplace."

"True—true," said his father. "Still, I think that 'tis just as well for us all that the visits of a genius have the qualities which have been ascribed to those of an angel. Now we shall begin our studies. After all, Mr. Garrick only delayed us for twenty minutes. It might have been much worse."

"Yes, it might have been Mr. Foote," said Polly.

"That would indeed have been much worse," said her father. "Mr. Foote makes us laugh, and leaves us laughing; Mr. Garrick makes us laugh, and leaves us thinking."

And then the lessons began.

Even the delight of hearing her brother play one of Bach's most ethereal compositions for the violin and harpsichord failed to make Betsy submissive to the ordeal from which she shrank. Her father seemed especially exacting on this morning, but he was not so in reality; it was only that Betsy felt more weary of the constant references to the technicalities which her fine feeling now and again discarded, greatly to the advantage of the composition which she was set to interpret, but which her father, with all the rigid scruple of the made musician, insisted on her observing.

And Tom, whom she had trusted to take her part, believing that he would understand her feelings by considering his own—Tom stood by, coldly acquiescing in her father's judgment in all questions of *technique*; nay, he showed himself, by his criticism of her phrasing at one part of an

air from *Orfeo*, more a slave to precision than was her father. She had had some hope of Tom when he had begun to improvise that mysterious accompaniment to her singing on the previous evening. Surely any one who could so give himself up to his imagination as he had done would understand how she should become impatient of the reins of *technique*! Surely he would understand that there are moments when one can afford to sing out of the fulness of one's heart rather than in strict accordance with the suggestions of the composer!

Alas! Tom had failed her in her hour of need. He seemed to think that the privilege of improvising should be enjoyed only by a player on the violin, and that it would be the grossest presumption on the part of a vocalist so to indulge her imagination. And thus, bringing weariness and disappointment to the girl, the day wore away.

When the family dinner was over, there were numerous callers at the house in Pierrepont Street. Among them there was an elderly gentleman named Long, who was treated with marked civility by Mr. Linley.

When he had left the house, and Tom and Betsy were alone, the former, after referring to some of the visitors, inquired:

"Who is that old gentleman whom you called Mr. Long?"

"He is nothing in particular; that is why I am going to marry him," said she.

CHAPTER V

Apparently Tom was not greatly startled by the declaration which his sister had made to him. He was screwing up a new string which he had just put on his violin, and he continued twanging it with his thumb as he raised it to the proper note in the scale. She watched him, with his head slightly turned to one side, and she heard the string creep up by quarter-tones until at last it satisfied his fastidious ear. Then he played pizzicato on all the strings for a while before he said:

"He is an old man, is he not?"

"He is the man whom I am going to marry," said she.

"He must be over fifty," said he.

"He is the man I am going to marry," said she.

"I saw by the papers that were sent to me from time to time that you had many suitors," said he. "I did not pay much attention to the papers, but now I recollect that some of them made sport of an elderly admirer. I suppose Mr. Long was he?"

"I daresay. Mr. Long cannot help his age. 'Tis not more absurd for him to be old than it is for me to be young. I suppose some newspapers would think it no shame to slight me for being young."

He gave a passable imitation of an Italian's shrug—he had learned something beyond the playing of the violin in Italy.

"*Che sarà sarà*," said he, and there was a shrug in his voice. "After all, what does it matter whom one marries?"

"That's exactly what I say!" she cried, her quick ear catching his cynical tone. "What does it matter? I must marry some one, and is it not better for me to marry a man to whom I am indifferent than one whom I detest?"

He mused for a few moments, and then he said:

"I have not given much thought to the matter, but I think I should prefer marrying a woman who hated me rather than one who looked on me with indifference. Never mind. I suppose this Mr. Long is rich?"

"He is very rich. I may be able to save Maria from having to be a singer. I shall certainly save myself from continuing one."

His violin dropped upon his knees.

"What do you mean?" he cried. "It cannot be possible that it is your wish to cease from singing in public?"

"That is the only reason I have for agreeing to marry any one," she replied.

"*Dio mio!* You—you—you, who can become the greatest singer in the world; you, who have been given a voice such as might be envied by the very greatest of lyric artists; you with an intelligence that could not be surpassed, an imagination that actually stands in need of being restrained; you, who have it in your power to sway the souls of men and women as the tide of the sea sways the ships that are borne on its surface—you talk of ceasing to sing! Psha! 'tis not in your power to cease to sing. 'Tis laid upon you as a duty—a sacred duty."

"Ah, Tom—brother, cannot you understand something—a little—of what I feel?" she cried almost piteously. "I looked forward to your return with such happiness, and felt sure that you would understand how it is that I shrink from coming forward on a platform to sing for the amusement—for the gratification of every one who can afford to pay half a crown to hear me—

foolish men, and still more foolish women, caring nothing for music. You and I have always thought of music as something sacred, a gift of God, given to us as it is given to the angels—to be used in the service of God. Idle curiosity, fashion—foolish fashion, that is why they come to hear me sing. I know it. I know it. I have overheard them chattering about me. The Duchess of Devonshire, I overheard her say to Mrs. Crewe that she had come to see if I was as beautiful as she—as beautiful as Mrs. Crewe! And Mrs. Crewe said how lucky it was that they had an opportunity of judging upon this point for so small a sum as half a guinea. And there was I, compelled to stand up before them and sing, ‘I know that my Redeemer liveth,’ while they smiled, criticising me through their glasses, just as if I were a horse being put through its paces! Oh, my brother, I felt all the time that I was degrading my gift, that I was selling those precious words of comfort and joy and their wonderful interpretation into music that goes straight to the soul of men and women—selling them for money which I put into my own pocket! There they sat smiling before me, and Mrs. Crewe said she did not like the way my hair was dressed. I heard her whisper it just as I had sung the first phrase of ‘For now is Christ risen from the dead,’ just as the joy—the note of triumph that rings through the passage had begun to sound through my heart as it always does! Oh, what humiliation! I broke down; no one but myself knew it, for I sang the notes correctly to the end—the notes, but not the music. It is one thing to sing notes correctly and quite another to make music: the music is the spirit that goes to the soul of those who listen, producing its effect upon them either for good or bad. Alas! there was nothing spiritual in my singing that night. I was telling them that our Redeemer had risen from the dead, and they replied that they did not like the way my hair was dressed! Oh, brother, can you wonder that I shrink with absolute terror from coming before an audience—that all my longing is for a cottage among trees, where I may sing as the birds sing, without caring whether or not any one hears me?”

She was weeping in his arms before she had finished speaking. He was deeply affected.

“My poor sister—my poor dear sister!” he said, caressing her hair; “I feel for you with all my heart. You are too highly strung—you are over-sensitive. What can I say to comfort you? How have you come to allow yourself to be carried away by the foolishness of some members of your audience? Good heavens! Think that if Handel had suffered from such sensitiveness the world would to-day be without some of its sublimest music!”

“How did he do it? I cannot understand how he could suffer his music to be played and sung, knowing the people as he did,” she said. “It is all a mystery to me. It must have been an agony to him. But he was a genius; it may be different with a genius. A genius may be able so to absorb himself in his music that he becomes oblivious of the presence of every one. Alas! I am not a genius—I am only a girl. I cannot understand how Handel felt; I only know that I feel.”

“And I feel for you,” he said soothingly, as one addresses a frightened child.

“You do—I think that you do; and you will join your voice to mine in imploring our father to spare me the agony of appearing before an audience? Oh, surely there is something to live for besides singing to divert the people here! Surely Heaven has not given me a voice to make me wretched! Has Heaven given me a voice instead of happiness?”

“Do you indeed fancy that you could find any happiness apart from music?” said he. “If you do, you are not my sister. There is nothing in the world that is worth a thought save only music.”

“What, have you never loved?” she cried.

“Love—love! Ah, yes; ‘tis a sentiment, a beautiful sentiment. I do not say that it was created solely to give a musician a sentiment to illustrate—I do not talk so wildly; but I do say that it lends itself admirably to illustration at the hands of a competent musician; so that if Heaven had decreed that it should exist for this purpose, I would not hesitate to say that the object of its existence was a worthy one.”

She put him away from her.

“I have talked to you to no purpose: you do not understand,” she said. “It is left to me to work out my own freedom, and I mean to do it by marrying Mr. Long.”

“I do not think that your feeling for Mr. Long would lend itself to interpretation through the medium of music,” said he, smiling, as he picked up his violin.

She threw herself wearily into the chair that it vacated, and listlessly, hopelessly, watched him screwing up another of the strings.

“Listen to me, Betsy,” said he, after a pause filled up by his twanging of the catgut: “I remember how good Bishop O’Beirne called you a link between an angel and a woman. Pray do not let the link be snapped, for in that case you would be all angel; let me talk to you as if there was still something of the woman in your nature. Handel was a genius. Mr. Garrick is a genius, too; each of them is the greatest in his own art that the world has ever known. And yet you do not hear that either of them thought as you do; you do not hear that Handel ever said that he was degrading himself because he overheard some fool saying that his suggestion of the hailstones in his treatment of the Plagues was only worthy of the ingenuity of the carpenter of a theatre; we have never heard that Mr. Garrick resolved to retire from Drury Lane stage because some fools preferred Spranger Barry’s Romeo to his.”

“Ah, genius; but I am only a girl.”

“Handel was a genius, and when he found that the public did not want his operas, he showed himself quite ready to give them what they did want. And yet there were as many fools and

coxcombs in his day as there are in ours. My dear sister, it is for you and me to do what we can without minding what foolishness those who hear us may speak, being incapable of understanding us. When I was at Florence I was present one night at a great concert at which Maestro Pugnani was to play. Just before he began, one of the princes entered the theatre, and began to talk and jest in a loud tone with an officer who was in attendance. It was clear that he was not quite sober, and he continued to make himself offensive even after the Maestro had begun to play. We were all very indignant, and we felt certain that Pugnani would retire from the stage. He did not do so. When he had played his first movement, he looked up to the royal box, and then he smiled down at us. I saw the look that was upon his face, a look of determination—the look which is on the face of a master of fence when he is about to engage a tyro. In a second he had drawn his bow across the strings, and the jest that the prince was in the act of uttering remained frozen on his lips. We saw that—we saw the Maestro smile as he went on playing; he had the prince in his grasp as surely as if he had had his hand on the fellow's throat; he kept him enthralled for a quarter of an hour, and then, without a pause, he went on to the *Andante*. Before he had reached the second bar the prince was in tears. We saw that—yes, for a few bars, but after that we could see nothing, for we also were in tears. At the conclusion of that incomparable performance the Maestro left the stage, smiling his smile of triumph. He had conquered that scoffer by the sheer power of his genius. When he appeared later on he was wearing on his breast the diamond order that the prince had worn.... Dear sister, let that be an example to you. When you find that you have scoffers among your hearers, you should feel yourself stimulated, rather than discouraged. You should remember that you are the greatest singer in the world, and that to be a great singer is to be able to sway at will the souls of men. You sent me a copy of Dr. Goldsmith's lovely poem. You remember that line in it, "Those who went to scoff remained to pray"! That is how it should be when you are singing."

"How can you liken me to these men—all of them geniuses?" she cried with some measure of impatience. "Their life is their music; they live in a world of their own, and it is a world the air of which I have never breathed. It is the breath of their nostrils to face a great audience: I have been told that they feel miserable if they see a single vacant chair. But my life— Ah, if I could but be allowed to live in a cottage!"

"What folly!" he cried. "And you intend to marry this old man in order to be released from the necessity to sing?"

"Is it an unworthy reason?" she asked. "I think 'tis not so. I shall be a good wife to Mr. Long."

"Oh, what folly! You—a good wife! Heavens! a girl with such a voice as you possess talking of becoming a good wife—a good wife—in a cottage, counting the eggs, milking the cows!" He was almost fierce in his scorn. "Is it possible that this is the sum of your ambition!"

"I ask for nothing better."

"As if there were any scarcity of good wives in the world! Any girl may become a good wife, but only one in a generation can become a great singer, and I tell you that you may be the greatest singer that lives. 'Tis not I alone who have said it, though I have heard the best in Italy and I am capable of judging; no, 'tis your rivals who have said it—and Mr. Garrick. Would he have offered such sums to get you to sing at Drury Lane if he had not known that you were without an equal? And you talk about a cottage! I tell you, my sister, if you were to give up singing you would be guilty of a crime—the crime of spurning the greatest gift that Heaven can bestow upon a human being!"

"Ah, no!" she said. "If Heaven had designed that I should sing in the presence of all those frivolous people who pay their money to see me as well as to hear me, should I not have been endowed also with that talent which your maestro was able to exercise? Should I feel that shrinking from the platform which I now feel every time I have to sing? Should I not feel the pride which comes to every great musician on stirring an audience to its depths?"

"You tell me that you feel not that pride?—that you remain unmoved, no matter how greatly you have moved your hearers?"

"Weariness—only weariness, that is what I feel. My sole joy comes from the thought that it is all over. Indeed, I can honestly tell you, my brother, that when I get more applause than usual, I feel no pride, I only feel oppressed by the thought that I have pleased so well that the managers will be anxious to have me to sing soon again."

He looked at her with wonder in his eyes for a long time. Then he shook his head, saying:

"You were wrong to fancy that I would understand you. I confess that 'tis beyond my power to sympathise with you in your weakness. I could understand the nervousness of a girl such as you on coming forward to sing an exacting part in an opera or an oratorio; but for one to be endowed with such a gift as yours, and yet to feel—as you say you do— Oh, it is impossible for me to fathom such a mystery! 'Twere unjust to blame you, but— Oh, well, a girl is a queer thing. My Maestro holds that every woman comes into the world not merely as a portion of that mystery—Woman, but as an individual mystery in herself. He might have founded his theory on you. But I will not say a word of blame to you—no, not a word, unless you marry Mr. Long and then give up singing."

"I will marry Mr. Long," she said after another pause.

She walked firmly to the door, and then upstairs to her room. Before she had got to the top of the stairs she heard him play the first bars of Bach's *Chaconne* which he was practising.

CHAPTER VI

It was no new topic that found favour in the Pump Room on the morning following the concert in the Assembly Rooms. Yes, Miss Linley had never looked more beautiful and had never sung more beautifully. Most people took the view that had been expressed by the Duchess of Devonshire, and affirmed that it was quite improvident on the part of Nature to give so exquisite a voice to so exquisite a creature. It was quite a new departure, this combination of song and beauty. Nature had revealed her system in the case of the nightingale—a divine voice coming from a body that is no more attractive than that of a sparrow; and in the case of the peacock—a beautiful creature with the shriek of a demon.

But Mr. Walpole, who had a whole night to think over a reply to the suggestion made by her Grace, found himself quite equal to the task of facing such persons as were ready—as he expected they would be—to repeat the Duchess's phrase. People at Bath liked repeating the words of a Duchess, just as people like to sit on a chair in which a Prince has sat.

It seemed that her Grace had expressed her views regarding the prodigality of Nature in the case of Elizabeth Linley more than once before she had met Mr. Walpole, and more than once after that *rencontre*, so that her phrases were vieing with the sparkle of the waters the next morning.

"Have you heard what the Duchess of Devonshire said about Miss Linley, Mr. Walpole?" cried Mrs. Thrale.

"Madam," said Mr. Walpole, "her Grace forgot that even Shakespeare is enhanced when bound in fine levant."

"To be sure, sir," said the lady; "but in the case of a singer——"

"Madam, you have in your mind the nightingale and Dr. Goldsmith," said Walpole. "But I do not mean to destroy the printing-press at Strawberry Hill because a clown can read the types in the *Advertiser* without a qualm."

And Dr. Johnson, too, had his views on the subject of Nature and Miss Linley.

"Sir," said Dr. Johnson, when his friend Beauclerk made an allusion to the topic which was being turned into verse in half the garrets in Grub Street, "sir, 'twere preposterous to assume that Nature works solely for the gratification of such people as have ears. I am more gratified to see Miss Linley sing than I should be to hear a less beautiful songstress."

"Nature created Miss Linley to set my mind at rest on a matter which has been puzzling me for years," said Dr. Goldsmith, when in the company of his dear friends, the beautiful Miss Horneck and her sister, Mrs. Bunbury.

"Then Miss Linley has not been created in vain," said Mr. Bunbury, who was busy with his sketch-book.

"Nay, let us hear what is your puzzle which has been solved," cried Mrs. Bunbury.

"I never could make out whether it was my beauty or my music that so charmed the people among whom I travelled in Europe, but, listening to Miss Linley last evening, the truth was revealed to me."

And while the two beautiful ladies held up their hands and laughed merrily at the solemn face of their friend, Mr. Boswell, who had been hiding behind one of Dr. Johnson's legs, went off with another story of Dr. Goldsmith's extraordinary vanity.

The next day it became known that the beautiful Miss Linley had actually promised to marry the elderly gentleman who had been so attentive to her for some months, thereby giving quite an impetus to the business of the lampooner. Mr. Walter Long was the gentleman's name, and he was known to have large estates in Wiltshire.

The news overwhelmed Bath.

"What, a third attraction accruing to Miss Linley!" cried the Duchess of Devonshire with uplifted hands.

"Poor Miss Linley!" said George Selwyn.

"Poor Mr. Long!" said Horace Walpole.

"Pon my word," said Garrick, when the news of Miss Linley's engagement to Mr. Long was coupled with the information that she would not sing after her marriage, "Linley is thrown away as a musician. Such adroitness as he has shown in this matter should be sufficient to avert ruin from many a manager of a play-house."

Indeed, the general opinion that prevailed among the cynical people, who knew what an excellent man of business was Linley, and how thoroughly he believed in the duty of his children to contribute to their support, was either that he wished to add to the elements of interest associated with his eldest daughter in order to make her more attractive to the public who paid to hear her sing, or that he had made an uncommonly good bargain with Mr. Long in respect of the compensation which he should receive for the loss of his daughter's services. The receipts of the next three concerts, people were ready to affirm, were to be regarded as the basis of the negotiations respecting the sum to be paid to him for the loss of his daughter.

But while the cynical ones were talking the brutal truth, there were blank looks on the faces of the many admirers of Miss Linley. She had had suitors by the score in Bath, and it was understood that when she sang for the first time at Oxford, she could have married the whole University. A wit with a capacity for mensuration had calculated that the amount of verses written to her upon this occasion would, if bound in volume form, and the volumes placed side by side, be sufficient to cover the quadrangle at Christ Church, and to leave as many over as would conceal the bareness of any lobby at Magdalen.

The consternation among the poets on hearing that Miss Linley had given her word to Mr. Long, was huge; and if all who threatened—through the medium of elegiacs—to fling themselves into some whirling stream (rhyming with their “vanish’d dream”) had carried out this determination, there would not have been enough poets left to carry on the business of Bath.

The young bloods, who had been ready at any moment to throw themselves, or their rivals, at her feet—whichever would please her best—were full of rage at the thought of having been slighted by the lady, and swore fearful oaths, and made strange vows that she should never be united to Mr. Long. The elderly sparks, most of whom had been deterred by certain considerations of rheumatism and stays, and other infirmities, from kneeling to her, now looked very glum. They were full of self-reproach now that they had found how easily she had been won; and some of them were incautious enough to confide their feelings to their friends, and these friends had no hesitation in ridiculing them to other friends; and as the consciousness of a lost opportunity usually makes a man rather touchy, there was a pretty fair share of recrimination in Bath circles during these days, and more than one duel was actually fought between friends of long standing; so that Miss Linley’s triumph was complete.

“What more has the girl to wish for?” cried Mrs. Crewe, when some one had remarked that Elizabeth was looking a trifle unhappy. “She is beautiful, she has the voice of an angel, she is likely to be a rich widow before she is twenty, and she has made the best of friends ready to cut each other’s throats! Pray, what more does she look for that she is still unhappy?”

“Is it not enough to make any young woman sad to think that she must relinquish a score of suitors, and only to obtain one husband in return?” said Mrs. Cholmondeley, who was of the party upon this occasion.

“It does truly seem a ridiculous sacrifice, with very little compensation,” said another lady critic.

“The rejected suitors may find some consolation for their sufferings in the reflection that Miss Linley is said to be looking unhappy,” said Mrs. Crewe.

“What! is’t possible that she looks unhappy, although she is not yet married, but only promised? I, for one, cannot believe it!” cried another of the party.

“There goes a suitor who will need a great deal of consolation,” said Mrs. Thrale, as a small man in military undress walked past the group with a scowl and a swagger. “Lud! Captain Mathews is so fond a lover I doubt if he would feel completely happy even if he had proof that the lady was crying her eyes out!”

“What! is’t possible that the list of suitors included a person so obviously ineligible as that Captain Mathews?” cried Mrs. Cholmondeley.

“My dear, you should know better than to suggest that the ineligibility of any man is obvious,” said Mrs. Thrale. “Did not we all, up to this morning, regard Mr. Long as the most obviously ineligible of all the lady’s admirers?”

“He is certainly old enough to be her father,” said Mrs. Cholmondeley.

“And a man who is old enough to be a young woman’s father is certainly old enough to be her husband; that is what we should have said, had we made a right use of our experience of life—and love,” said Mrs. Crewe.

“And some of us have had a good deal of both,” remarked Mrs. Thrale, looking vaguely into the



THE TWO BEAUTIFUL LADIES HELD UP THEIR HANDS AND LAUGHED MERRILY.

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distance, lest any one of her hearers might fancy that her comment was meant to be personal, and not general.

But of course there was no lady within hearing who did not accept the compliment as directed against herself. And whatever Mrs. Thrale's experiences of life and love may have been, she had sufficient knowledge of her own sex to be well aware that no vagueness of generalisation on her part would prevent any one of her friends from feeling assured that the lady had some one in her eye when she spoke. That was why they all smiled consciously, and glanced down with an excellent simulation of artlessness.

Before they had raised their eyes again, the sour-faced officer who had been referred to by Mrs. Thrale as Captain Mathews, had returned from his march across the gardens. He was about to pass the group when he seemed to change his mind. He turned on his heel and swaggered up to them.

"I dare swear, ladies, that you have been, like all the rest of our friends in this place, discussing the latest freak of the beautiful Miss Linley?" he said.

"On the contrary, sir, we have been discussing the engagement of Miss Linley to Mr. Long," said Mrs. Thrale.

He stared at the lady for some moments. He had not yet mastered Mrs. Thrale's conversational methods.

"What did I say?" he inquired after a pause. "Did not I suggest that you were discussing her latest freak? Lord! 'tis a fine freak! Her father has urged her to it. I shouldn't wonder if you have heard that I was depressed by the news! Now, tell the truth, Mrs. Cholmondeley, did not you hear it said that I was in despair?"

"Why, what on earth have you got to say to the matter, Captain Mathews?" cried Mrs. Cholmondeley, with a pretty affectation of amazement. She was a capital actress, though, of course, inferior to her sister, Mrs. Margaret Woffington.

Captain Mathews looked more than a trifle upset by the lady's suggestion. His laugh was hollow.

"Of course, nothing; 'tis nothing to me—nothing i' the world, I assure you," he said. "But you know how malicious are our good friends in Bath; you know how ready they are to attribute an indiscretion to— Ah, you take me, Mrs. Crewe? You are a woman of the world."

"Oh, sir, you are a flatterer, I vow," said Mrs. Crewe. "Ah, yes, Captain Mathews, I am ready to admit that all our friends are malicious, but I give you my word that their malice never went the length of hinting anything so preposterous as that you could have expectations of finding favour in the eyes of Miss Linley."

"Preposterous? By the Lord, madam, were you a man who made use of such a word— But of course— Oh yes, 'twas a preposterous notion; and yet, madam, there are some in this town who do not think the notion of a man of family and property aspiring to the hand of a beggarly music mistress so preposterous."

Captain Mathews drew himself up, and swung his cane in long sweeps from side to side, assuming a self-satisfied smile, as though he had made a crushing reply to the lady's rather broad satire.

"True, sir," said Mrs. Crewe; "Mr. Walter Long is a man of family and a man of property; that is possibly why no one has alluded to his engagement with Miss Linley as preposterous."

"What, madam, do you mean to suggest that that old curmudgeon— Heavens! the fellow is sixty if he is a day— But I vow 'tis nothing to me—nothing i' the world, I swear!" cried Mathews, with an extravagant swagger by which he meant to show his complete indifference.

"Of course 'tis nothing to you, sir," said Mrs. Cholmondeley. "No one ever fancied that it was anything to you."

"Seriously now, Mrs. Cholmondeley," said he, striking another attitude, "can you fancy that I ever thought of that sly patriarch as my rival?"

"Indeed, sir, I could never believe that you would be so ungenerous as to allude to a rival in such terms as you have applied to Mr. Long," said Mrs. Cholmondeley.

"A rival! my rival? Oh no, no!" he cried. "He is an old fool, but no rival to me."

"Certainly no rival to you, sir," said Mrs. Thrale.

"I knew that I could depend on you, Mrs. Thrale," said Mathews warmly; but noticing how the others in the group were smiling significantly, he began to feel that he had not been quite quick enough in the attention which he had given to the lady's words. It was being forced upon him that he was not quite certain of shining in conversation with these ladies who had a reputation for brilliancy to maintain.

He burst into a loud laugh, with one hand resting on his hip: his cane was in his other; he was pointing it roguishly at Mrs. Thrale.

The ladies instantly became grave; they could not possibly continue smiling while the man was laughing. But he soon became less exuberant in his forced merriment, and it did not seem at all unnatural for the wrinkles of his laughter to assume the design of a full-bodied scowl. He struck his cane violently upon the ground, saying:

"If any man in Bath dares to say that this fellow Long took her away from me he shall eat his words. And as for Mr. Long himself—well, let him look to himself—let him look to himself. He has not yet married Elizabeth Linley!"

He raised his cane as he spoke and struck it at an imaginary foe.

He did not see how it came that the ladies were in a paroxysm of laughter; but had he been thoughtful enough to glance round, he would have been enlightened on this point, for he would have seen just behind him a small man giving a representation of one who is paralysed by fear, his face haggard, his eyes dilated, and his knees trembling.

"I protest, Mr. Garrick, that you will be the death of us yet," said Mrs. Crewe, when Mathews had stalked off, and the little man was beginning to breathe again—heavily, and with an occasional sigh of relief, though he still kept his eyes fixed upon the disappearing figure.

Mrs. Cholmondeley fanned him daintily.

"Thank Heaven he is gone, and we are all safe!" gasped the actor.

"Had he turned round for a single moment he would have killed you, Mr. Garrick, and all England would be mourning," said Mrs. Crewe.

"Why, what is this, madam?" said Garrick. "A moment ago and you were accusing me of being the death of you, and now you go still further, and accuse me of running a chance of being killed myself!"

"Were both catastrophes to occur, they would be no more than a fitting overture to the tragedy on the threshold of which we stand at this moment," said Mrs. Thrale. "Why, the tragedy of Penelope and her suitors is like to be a trifle compared with that of Elizabeth Linley and her admirers."

"I feel that slaughter is in the air," said Garrick. "Has Captain Mathews a mind to be the Ulysses of the tragedy? In that case, I would not have the suitors to be quite despondent. But beyond doubt 'tis becoming a serious matter for Bath, this engagement of the sweetest of our nest of linnets. For Bath, did I say? Nay, I might e'en have said 'for England,' for of course you have heard that this is why Tom Sheridan has fled to Ireland?"

"What do you mean, Mr. Garrick—Tom Sheridan? Oh, lud! you cannot mean to suggest that he was among the suitors?" said Mrs. Cholmondeley.

"Why should he not occupy so honourable a position, madam?" said Garrick. "He is, I have good reason to know, some years younger than Mr. Long, and he is full of gratitude to Miss Linley for having made his entertainments a success by singing at them. I ask you, Mrs. Crewe, for I know that you are well acquainted with all these delicate matters—I ask you, can a man show his gratitude to a lady in any more satisfactory way than by begging her to marry him?"

"I should have to refer to my commonplace book to answer that question, sir," said Mrs. Crewe; "but I can assure you that it has long ago been decided that if a young woman be truly grateful to an elderly man for a past kindness, she will certainly refuse to marry him when he asks her. But you are not serious about Tom Sheridan?"

"Well, I admit that I have not yet been successful in getting any one to accept my theory on this matter," replied Garrick. "But I know for sure that Tom Sheridan has gone to Ireland, and why should any man go to Ireland unless he has been refused by a lady in England? If the man have importunate creditors in Ireland, of course my argument is vastly strengthened."

"H'sh! here comes one of the sons," said Mrs. Thrale. "'Tis the younger—Dick his name is. I vow that I had an idea that 'twas he who was most favoured by the lovely Miss Linnet."

"Then take my word for it, madam, 'twas the father who was making love to her," said Garrick. "Surely, 'tis no more than natural that a right-thinking young woman should show some favour to the son of the man who hopes to marry her! But pray do not cite me as an authority on this point to Dick Sheridan. I own that I have strong hopes that Dick will one day become a great dramatist. Should his father marry Miss Linley, nothing could prevent Dick from becoming a great dramatist."

"Then let us hope that Miss Linley will marry Mr. Long, and so save Dick Sheridan from the terrible fate that you predict for him, Mr. Garrick," said Mrs. Thrale.

Before Garrick had thought out a fitting reply to the sprightly little lady, young Mr. Sheridan had sauntered up to the group. He was dressed with extreme care, and his carriage was so graceful—thanks to the early instruction which he had received from Monsieur Angelo, who had taught him to fence, as well as to dance—that he was a most attractive figure. Though his features were not handsome, his face had a winning expression, and he was entirely without self-consciousness. He had his hat in his hand when he approached the ladies, and his salutation of them was easy, but at the same time deferential.

"You have come at the right moment, Mr. Sheridan," said Mrs. Cholmondeley. "Mr. Garrick has just been saying shocking things about you."

"I am sorry that I came up, madam," said Sheridan. "Yes; for by doing so I know that I anticipated an abler defence of myself than I have at my command."

"Indeed, your reputation was quite safe in our keeping," said Mrs. Cholmondeley.

"True," said Garrick: "Mrs. Cholmondeley, Mrs. Crewe, and Mrs. Thrale are well known to constitute a medical board for an hospital for sickly reputations: one is as safe in their keeping as

one would be in a ward at St. Thomas's."

"What! no safer than that?" cried Dick. "Oh, ladies! Mr. Garrick's compliments are certainly not overwhelming."

"Nay, Dick, I exhausted my art in referring to you before you came up; for I said that I had hopes that you would one day become a great dramatist," said Garrick.

"That was going to the extreme limit of the art of flattery indeed, sir," said Sheridan. "But one cannot become a great dramatist unless one has the subject for a great drama. Can any one of you ladies supply me with such a subject?"

"Pray try your hardest, Mrs. Crewe, if only to establish my reputation as a prophet," said Garrick.

"What! are the ladies to take Drury Lane reputations into their hospital?" cried Sheridan.

"Nay, sir, we are not the Board at an hospital for incurables," said Mrs. Crewe. "But you ask for a subject for a play, do you not?"

"I am ever on that quest, madam."

"If 'tis the subject for a comedy you seek, all you have to do is to look in the direction of the entrance to the gardens, and you will find it," said Mrs. Crewe: "a charming and sprightly young woman marrying an elderly gentleman."

Dick glanced toward the entrance to the gardens. Betsy Linley was walking by the side of Mr. Long.

There was a pause before Dick said: "True, madam, there is a drama in the situation; and the beauty of it is, that it may be treated from the standpoint of tragedy, as well as comedy. Thank you, Mrs. Crewe; I shall e'en haste to write it."

He turned about and hurried away, with only the most general bow.

"Good lud!" whispered Mrs. Crewe, "the lad is in love with Betsy Linley, after all."

CHAPTER VII

Having satisfied herself on one point, the astute lady lost no time making an attempt to satisfy herself on another point quite as interesting: being convinced that Dick Sheridan had hurried away because he was in love with Miss Linley, she was anxious to learn if Miss Linley was in love with any one. The fact that Miss Linley was walking by the side of the man whom it was announced she had promised to marry, was not accepted by Mrs. Crewe as any indication of the direction in which she should look for an answer to the question. Nay, so astute an observer of life was this lady, that she made up her mind in an instant not to assume at the outset of her investigation that, because Betsy Linley had promised to marry Mr. Long, she was therefore in love with some one else. She could remember instances of young women being actually devoted to the men whom they had promised to marry. She had an excellent memory.

She turned her eyes upon Betsy coming up the garden walk, but the result of her observation was inconclusive; Mr. Long was at that instant making some remark to the girl, and she had her head slightly bent toward him, while she listened attentively—smilingly. Clearly she had not noticed the abrupt departure of Dick Sheridan. There was nothing in the attentive smile with which she was encouraging the remark of Mr. Long.

"He does not look a day over sixty," said Mrs. Thrale.

"Nor a day under it," responded Mrs. Cholmondeley. Garrick was quoting Shakespeare:

"Here comes the lady; O so light a foot
Will ne'er wear out the everlasting flint!"

And then Mr. Long and Miss Linley reached the group, and Betsy was responding with exquisite blushes to the patronising smiles of the ladies, who greeted her with effusion and Mr. Long with great self-possession.

Mr. Long was, however, the most self-possessed of the group. There was gravity as well as dignity in his acceptance of the congratulations of the party.

"I am the most fortunate of men, indeed," he said, bowing low, and touching the grass of the border with the sweep of his hat.

"Nay, Mr. Long, do not depreciate your own worth by talking of fortune," said Mrs. Thrale.

"There is philosophy in your suggestion, madam," said he. "'Twas feeble of me to make the attempt to fall in with the general tone of the comments of my friends. Still, there is but one Miss Linley in the world."

"And you are ungenerous enough, sir, to seek to deprive the world of that one," cried Mrs. Thrale.

She had failed to perceive the tendency of his remark.

"What, Mrs. Thrale! is't possible that you are weak enough to look for generosity in a lover?"

said Garrick. "Good lud, madam! the very soul of true love is the most ungenerous essence on earth."

"Ah, you see, madam, Mr. Garrick's love is of the earth earthy; but we were talking of quite another kind of love, were we not?" said Mr. Long readily, but not in a tone of badinage.

"We are very well content to be terrestrial," said Mrs. Crewe, lifting her chin an inch or so in the air.

"I am more ambitious; that is why I am by the side of Miss Linley," said Mr. Long.

"Very prettily spoke, sir," said Garrick. "Miss Linley I have always held to be celestial. Is not that so, Betsy?"

"Indeed, sir, you were good enough to offer me an engagement to sing at Drury Lane," replied Betsy, with a smile.

Every one laughed, and Garrick gave a wonderful representation of a man who is completely discomfited by an antagonist.

Mr. Long seemed to think that the moment was a favourable one for resuming his stroll with Betsy; he had just taken her hand and was in the act of bowing to the three beautiful ladies who were laughing archly at Garrick, when a loud laugh that had no merriment in it sounded at the further side of a line of shrubs, and Mathews reappeared.

Betsy, with a look of apprehension, started and took a step closer to Mr. Long. Mr. Long's face beamed with pride at that moment, for the girl's movement suggested her confidence in his power to protect her. The ladies saw the expression that was on her face, and the glance that he cast upon her, and there was not one of them who did not envy her, although Mr. Long was sixty years old.

"Ha, Miss Linley! are you never to be found except in the company of your grandfather?" cried Mathews, while still a few paces away from the group. Then, pretending to become aware of the identity of Long at the same moment, he roared with laughter.

"I swear to you, madam, I thought that you were in the company of your grandfather," he cried. "Sure, my error was a natural one! I ask you, Mrs. Thrale, if 'twas not natural that I should take this gentleman for Miss Linley's grandfather?"

"Mr. Mathews," said Mrs. Thrale, "I have no opinion on such matters, though I have my own idea of what constitutes a piece of impudence on the part of a man."

"Ha, Grandfather Long, you hear that?" cried Mathews. "Mrs. Thrale says she knows what impudence is."

"Then where is the need for you to give her examples of it, sir?" said Long.

"Any fool could see that she had in her eye the case of an old man who makes love to a young woman," said Mathews brutally.

"Only a fool would take my words in such a sense, Mr. Mathews," said Mrs. Thrale.

"Nay, good madam, 'twas but my jest," said Mathews.

"Then let me tell you, sir, 'twas a very sorry jest," said Mrs. Thrale.

"I say 'twas a jest; at the same time, should any gentleman within earshot feel himself aggrieved by my humour, he will not find Captain Mathews slow to give him any satisfaction he may demand."

The fellow pursed out his lips, and struck the ground with his cane.

Mr. Long turned his back upon the man and entered smilingly into conversation with Mrs. Cholmondeley. For a moment he was separated from Betsy, and Mathews took advantage of that moment to get beside her.

"You are never going to be fool enough to marry a man old enough to be your grandfather?" said he in a low voice.

She made a movement as if to get beside Mr. Long; but he adroitly prevented her from carrying out her intention.

"You think I am the man to stand tamely by and see you marry him or any one else?" he said, putting his face close to hers, his eyes glaring into her own (he was imitating the attitude and the language of one of the actors whom he had recently seen at the Bristol theatre).

"Why should you be so chagrined, Captain Mathews?" she said. "There are many girls far more worthy than I am who would feel flattered by your attentions. I am sure you do not wish to persecute me."

She was, woman-like, hoping by temporising with the man to prevent an open quarrel. He saw that he had succeeded in making her afraid of him.

"I set my heart on you, I set my soul on you, Betsy Linley, and you know that your father and mother favoured me; you, and you only, stood out against me." He had put his face closer to hers, causing her to shrink back an inch or two. "But you will have me yet—you must—by the Lord, you shall!" he resumed. "I swear to you that I have set my soul upon you. Murder—what is murder to such a man as I have become through you—all through the curse of your beauty! Do you think that I would hold back my knife for the space of a second from the throat of any man who was



"YOU THINK I AM THE MAN TO STAND TAMELY BY AND SEE YOU MARRY HIM OR ANY ONE ELSE?"

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going to take you away from me? I swear to you that I would kill him—kill him without mercy—and you—you too! My love is of that sort. I would account killing you the next best thing to wedding you. I'll do either the one or the other—make up your mind to that—make up your mind to that! If you would save yourself—and him—and him, mind you—you will take me; 'tis your only chance."

She was terrified, for she saw that he had reached that point in the madness of his jealousy which was reached by Othello when he cried:

"Blood, Iago—blood, blood!"

She had seen Garrick in the part, and had been thrilled by his awful delivery of the words. Even now, in spite of her terror, she did not fail to be struck with the marvellous accuracy of Garrick's art. She was now face to face with the real thing—with the man in the clutch of an overwhelming passion; and yet she was not more terrified than she had been when Garrick's voice had become hoarse while uttering those words of murder that had been put into the mouth of Othello by Shakespeare.

"What is this madness that has come to you?" she cried. "Oh, you must be quite mad! If you cared ever so little for me you would not overwhelm me with terror."

"I don't know which would be the sweeter—killing you or wedding you," he said. He kept his eyes fixed upon hers for

some seconds, and then he added in a lower tone that chilled her: "By heavens! I do know now—now!"

She gave a little cry. She had done her best to restrain it, for the dread of a quarrel taking place between the men was upon her, and in an instant Mr. Long had turned to her. Another instant and he had thrust himself between her and Mathews and had taken her hand. He was not looking at her, but straight into the face of Mathews.

"We must not be late, Miss Linley," he said quietly, "and unless we hasten onward we shall not be in time to meet our friends at Bath-Easton. Stand aside, sir, if you please."

Mathews instinctively took a couple of steps back, while Long, still holding Betsy's hand, bent his head before the ladies and young Captain Horneck, of the Guards, who had just appeared by the side of his *fiancée*, Lord Albemarle's daughter.

There was a pause in the conversation passing round that little group—an electric pause, it seemed; every one appeared to be waiting for a thunderbolt to fall, for Mathews had a reputation for being an element of the lurid in the atmosphere of Bath. For a few moments after Long and Betsy had gone, he seemed uncertain what course to adopt; but suddenly he appeared to have light granted to him. He bent his malacca cane until he made both ends meet; then, with an oath, he hurried after Long and Betsy.

He overtook them before they had gone twenty yards, but while he was still some way behind them he called out:

"A word with you, Mr. Long, if you please."

Mr. Long turned round.

"I wish no words with you, sir," he said.

"But I wish some with you, sir," said Mathews, coming up to him, "I wish to give you a word of warning. I wish you to hear me swear that the day you wed Elizabeth Linley shall be your last on earth."

Long smiled in his face, and then in the terrified face of the girl by his side.

"What a compliment Mr. Mathews pays to you, Miss Linley!" said he. "My last day on earth—true; for thenceforth I shall be in heaven. Thank you, Mr. Mathews."

"In heaven? No, by the Lord, you will find yourself not in heaven, but——"

"You scoundrel! if you utter one more word I shall hand you over neck and crop to the hangman," said Long. "You think that your braggadocio airs have weight with me? I have but to raise my finger and the handcuffs are about your wrists. I know more about your past life than

you seem to imagine, my good fellow. Now, get out of my way, or I shall subject you to the humiliation of a public caning."

He grasped his cane firmly, and there was upon his face a look of determination. Mathews took a step or two back. His jaw had fallen, and the ferocity of his expression had become tempered by the terror that appeared in his eyes. Mechanically he bowed, removing his hat while Long and Betsy walked on. Then he stood staring after them, failing to recover himself even though he could scarcely have avoided hearing the laugh that broke from one of the ladies in the group which he had just left. Some minutes had passed before he ceased gnawing the silver top of his cane and stalked off in a direction opposite to that which Miss Linley and Mr. Long had taken.

"A duel! oh no; there will be no duel," cried Garrick in reply to a suggestion made by one of his group. "Oh no; I have studied men and their motives to small purpose these thirty years if I could bring myself to believe that Captain Mathews is the man to challenge Mr. Long to a duel in such circumstances."

"What! Did not you see the way Mr. Long grasped his cane?" cried Mrs. Cholmondeley.

"To be sure I did, my dear lady; that is why I am convinced that there will be no duel," replied Garrick. "We did not hear what Mr. Long said to the fellow, but we saw how he grasped his cane, and let me assure you, madam, that the language of cane-grasping is a good deal more intelligible than the English of our friend Dr. Johnson."

"If there be no duel I am sorry for Mr. Long," said Mrs. Thrale.

Her friends stared at her.

"I should rather be sorry for the elderly gentleman if he had to stand up before a man twenty-five years his junior, with pistol or small sword," said Mrs. Crewe.

"Ah, my dear, one must take a less superficial view of men and their motives—an excellent phrase, Mr. Garrick—if one desire to arrive at a complete understanding of both," said Mrs. Thrale. "I am sure that so excellent an observer as Mrs. Crewe will, upon reflection, perceive that the best chance an elderly gentleman has of captivating the heart of a young woman is by fighting for her. Mr. Long is clearly aware of this elementary truth. He is a brave man, and he is ready to risk his life in order that he may have a chance of winning his lady."

"But he has won her already," said Mrs. Crewe.

"Nay, she has only promised to marry him," said Mrs. Thrale, with the smile of the sapient one.

"It will be time enough for him to think of winning her after he has married her," remarked Mrs. Cholmondeley.

"I would not be so sure of that," said Mrs. Thrale. "Procrastination in a lover can be carried too far. Is not that your opinion, Mr. Garrick?"

"Madam, I feel like the negro who was choked when endeavouring to swallow a diamond: I am so overwhelmed by the jewels of wisdom which you have flung before me that I am incapable of expressing any opinion," said Garrick.

"You are far from being complimentary to Mrs. Thrale if you suggest that you have failed to assimilate her precious words, sir," said Mrs. Cholmondeley.

"Nay, 'twas not the negro and the diamond that was in Mr. Garrick's mind," said Mrs. Crewe. "'Twas Macbeth and his 'Amen.' We have seen Macbeth's 'Amen' stick in your throat more than once, Mr. Garrick, and I vow that when Mrs. Thrale asked you just now to say the word that would hall-mark her wisdom, as it were, the same expression was on your face."

"Madam, I would scorn to contradict a lady unless I differed from her," said Garrick; "but I repeat, there will be no duel."

"Why, who was talking about duels, sir?" inquired Mrs. Crewe. "Lud! Mr. Garrick, duels was the topic of five minutes ago, and time at Bath is precious."

"From duels to jewels is not a huge distance," said Mrs. Cholmondeley, whose pronunciation was not quite free from the Irish brogue which increased the fascination of her sister, Mrs. Woffington.

CHAPTER VIII

While the coldly gay circle were endeavouring—as most people do who discuss the problems of life—to display their own cleverness in whirling round the topic of the moment, Mr. Long and Miss Linley were walking on through Sydney Gardens, neither of them so much as glancing behind them to observe what had become of Mathews.

The expression of apprehension which had made Betsy's face pale with the pink pallor of the blanch rose while Mr. Long was threatening Mathews, had not quite vanished. She seemed to feel that all cause for apprehension had not passed. Remembering the wild, savage way in which he had addressed her—his furious threats and his fierce passion, it seemed to her quite a miracle that he did not fly at Mr. Long's throat before the latter had completed the sentence that he uttered, while grasping his cane in that expressive way which had so appealed to the imagination

of Garrick. She had ever sought to allay by considerate words the anger which Mathews had shown upon several occasions when she had apparently favoured other suitors; her whole aim was to prevent his quarrelling openly with any of her friends, forcing them to fight him; and she had been successful in her aims to quite a remarkable degree. She was thus amazed to find that, when Mr. Long assumed the aggressive attitude, Mathews, so far from showing any disposition to fly at his throat, became absolutely passive.

It was too much for her to believe all at once, that Mathews had no intention of resenting the threats of Mr. Long; he might, she felt, be too greatly astonished at the adoption of such an attitude by an elderly man to be able to respond in his own way; but he would assuredly recover himself in a few moments, and then....

She glanced behind her and saw that the man was actually hurrying away in the direction of a distant exit from the gardens beyond the maze; and then the expression of terror which had been on her face gave way to one of astonishment. She looked at the man beside her; he was smiling quite benignly. She smiled too at his smiling.

"I cannot understand," she cried, after giving a sigh of relief—"I cannot understand how you succeeded with him. I felt sure when you had spoken that he would.... Oh, he never spoke to me unless to utter a threat, and yet—"

"And yet he became amenable in a moment to the force of one insignificant threat on my part," said he, when she made a pause. "Ah, dear child, you have no need to be astonished at so simple a matter. The one argument which the habitual biter appreciates to the full is the bite, therefore one should make one's teeth meet upon his flesh, and all will be well. There is no need to be surprised at the sudden departure of this fellow; what should cause surprise is his appearance in your society. Pray, how did he ever contrive to gain such a degree of intimacy with you as enabled him to address you as he did?"

"What! is he not an officer and a gentleman of property?" cried Betsy.

"He is both. Was no further passport necessary to obtain his admission to your father's house?" asked Long.

She shook her head.

"I am afraid that my father has never been very particular in the matter of admitting people to our house," she replied. "Ah! that is one of the most distressing things about our life—the life of people who are dependent on the good-will of the public for their daily bread: we cannot afford to offend any one."

"You are thereby deprived of one of the greatest luxuries in life—the pleasure of offending the offensive," said he, smiling. "But quite apart from being cut off from this enjoyment, I really fail to see how your father's profession—and yours—gives the right to every adventurer to your society. It is one thing to be debarred the privilege of hurting the feelings of those who should be subjected to such treatment, and quite another to admit to your house every visitor who may come thither with no further credentials than his own impudence."

"That is what I have always felt," said she. "I have felt that that is one of the greatest hardships of our life. But all our life is made up of these things from which I shrink. Ah, I told you all this long ago."

"Yes, I shall not soon forget the hour when you opened your own sweet maiden heart to me," said he. "I had long been lost in admiration of your beauty and the unspeakable charm of your singing. I fancied more than once, however, that I noticed in your manner a certain shrinking from the favours which the public are ever ready to fling upon their favourites—yes, for a time, until a fresher favourite comes before them. I felt that that expression of timidity was the one thing by which your beauty was capable of being enhanced, but I never doubted for a moment that your shrinking from the gaze of the public was part of your nature."

"It is indeed an unhappy part of my nature; but I have not been deaf to the cruel comments which some people have made upon me in that respect," said she, and her face became roseate at the recollection of how her timidity had been referred to as affectation.

"I have heard such comments too; they came from women who were overwhelmed by their jealousy of your beauty and your genius."

"Ah, no, not genius—I have no genius. My brother has genius. I know what it is to have genius. Tom tells me that he is in no way impressed by the presence of thousands listening to his playing on his violin. Mr. Garrick—he, too, has genius, and he has acted for Polly and myself quite as grandly as I have ever seen him act in his own play-house."

"Your definition of genius is founded on a somewhat arbitrary basis, my dear. Indifference to the public does not invariably indicate genius. I have heard it said by some who know, that David Garrick spends the first ten minutes of his appearance on the stage every night calculating the sum of money there is in the house. That is beside the question. If you are not in the possession of genius, you have at your command a possession even more subtle, more delicate, purer—you have the sweetest soul that ever lived in woman, and every time you sing you communicate some portion of it to your hearers."

She looked at him with some apprehension in her eyes.

"You promised me that I should never be forced to sing in public again," she said. "Oh, surely you are not now going to tell me that you take back your promise?"

"Nay, nay, let no such apprehension weigh upon you, dear child," said he. "Our conversation has drifted far from its starting-place. We were talking about that Mathews, and how easily he obtained admission to your father's house. I wonder should I be wrong if I were to suggest that he was the suitor who found most favour in the eyes of your father?"

"For a time, only for a time," she cried quickly, as if anxious to exculpate her father. "When my father became aware of how distasteful Mr. Mathews was to me, he ceased urging me to accept his proposals. Oh, I can assure you that my father has never been anxious for me to marry any one."

"I can well believe that," said Long drily. Only a day had passed since he had been sitting at a desk opposite to Mr. Linley, while the latter explained to him, by the assistance of certain memoranda on a sheet of paper, the exact amount of loss per annum, worked out to shillings and pence, that the withdrawal of Betsy from the concert platform would mean to her father. Mr. Long had been greatly interested in the calculation, for it represented the sum which he had agreed to pay to the devoted father by way of compensation for the loss of his daughter's services. "And you—you have never been anxious to marry any one?" he added.

There was a little pause before she said:

"I have never been strongly tempted. I have never had a sleepless night thinking what answer I should give to the gentlemen who were good enough to ask me to marry them."

"I feel flattered, my dear one," said he.

"Oh no, you have no need to do so," she cried almost eagerly, and he perceived that she had a conscientious fear of his assuming that she had disregarded many eligible suitors in favour of himself. "Oh no, indeed! I do not believe that there was any offer made to me that caused me a great pang to decline. Of course I was sorry—yes, once or twice, when I really felt that they truly loved me; but— Oh, why should I have accepted any of them when to do so would only mean adding to my fetters?"

"Ah, why indeed? A husband is sometimes a harder taskmaster than a father. Even with your small experience of life, you must have perceived this. Well, so much for the men who professed to love you; but you must know that when we have talked about them we have dealt with one class only; we have not yet touched upon those whom you loved."

Her face had become roseate, and it wore a troubled expression. He laughed, and she saw that the expression on his face was that of a man who is amused. Her quick ear had told her that there was no note of jealousy in his laugh.

"Pray forgive me, my dear," he said. "Be assured that I have no intention of extorting any confession from you. Believe me, my child, I am glad of the evidence which you have given me—that sweet confusion—that sweeter blush—of your having the heart of a girl. 'Tis as natural for a girl to love as it is for her to laugh. If you had assured me that you had never loved, I feel that I should not love you as I do at this moment—as I have loved you from the first moment that I looked upon your dear face."

"Ah, sir, I pray to God that I may one day love you as you should be loved!" she cried, and he saw that tears were in her eyes.

"As I should be loved—I ask nothing more," he said. "That is what has always been in my mind with regard to you. Have you marvelled that I have not yet asked you to love me? I refrained, because I had told you that my sole hope in regard to yourself was to make you happy; and I knew that I should be making you unhappy if I were to impose upon you the duty of loving me. Such curious creatures we are, that when love exists only as a duty it ceases to be love. I pray to Heaven, Betsy, that you may never come to think that it is your duty to love any one—even a husband."

"Ah, you are too good to me—too considerate!" she cried. "Every time that you speak to me as you have just spoken, you overwhelm me with remorse."

"With remorse? Does that mean that you love some one else?"

"It means that I do not love you as I should—as you expect to be loved—as you have a right to expect that I should."

"Ah, dear girl, how do you know how I expect to be loved?"

"I know well how you should be loved, and I fear that I have deceived you."

"Nay, I never asked you if you loved me. If I had done so, and you had answered 'Yes,' you would have made at least an attempt to deceive me. I do not say, mind you, that I would have been deceived. I have been speaking just now of what is natural in a girl. Do you think that I fancy it is natural in a girl who is not yet twenty to fall in love with a man who is more than thrice her age?"

"Surely 'tis not impossible?"

"Ah, the little note of hope that I detect in your inquiry shows me how conscientious a young woman you are—how determined you are to give me every chance, so to speak. But I do not wish you to think of me in that way. I do not want you to try to love me."

"Not to try to love you—not to try?"

"Even so; because love to be love must come without your trying to love. Is that too hard a saying for you, Miss Betsy?"

"It is not too hard a saying; what is hard is the matter to which it refers—you would not have me do my best to love you?"

"Even so. Do you believe that you will find it so very hard to refrain from such an attempt?"

"I have promised to marry you."

"And, believe me, I would not have you keep your promise unless you are sure that you can love me without trying. You must try not to try."

She gave a laugh, but checked it abruptly before it had run its course. She became graver than ever as she walked along by his side. She was silent, and there was a dimness over her eyes which made their liquid depths seem more profound.

"Pray tell me what there is on your mind, my Betsy," he said. "Tell me, what is the thought which weighs upon you?"

"Alas!" she cried, "I did not know that you were so good a man."

"Nor am I," he said. "Believe me, I am not nearly so good as that; but even if I were, is that any reason why the reflection should weigh you down, or cause your eyes to become tremulous?"

She shook her head, but made no attempt to speak.

He did not urge her to speak. They had reached a green lane just outside the gardens—a graceful acknowledgment of the privileges of Nature on the outskirts of artificiality. There was a warm sigh of wild thyme in the air. A bee hovered drowsily upon the scent. Two yellow butterflies whirled in their dance above a bank of primroses.

He pointed them out to her.

"The butterflies have an æry dance of their own, and so have the dragon-flies," he said. "I have watched them by my lake. Did I tell you that there is a tiny lake in my grounds? One can see its gleam from the windows of the house. It is pleasant to stand at the top of the terrace-steps and look across the greensward to the basin of my lake. Very early in the summer morning the deer come to drink there; I have seen the graceful creatures trooping through the dawn, and every now and again a hind would stop for a moment to scratch its neck with a delicate hind-foot, and then bound onward to join its brethren."

Still she did not speak. The butterflies fluttered past her face, but she did not follow them with her eyes.

"Sweet one, I grow alarmed," he said; "pray tell me all that is on your mind—in your heart. I think I can promise you that its weight will be lessened when you have told me of it."

"Alas!" she said, "nothing can lessen my fault—my shame."

"That is a word which I will not allow any one to speak in connection with you," he said. "You cannot frighten me, my dear; I have looked into your eyes."

"I have been guilty—I am ashamed. I gave you my promise, not because I loved you, or because I hoped to love you, but solely because singing in public had become so great a terror to me that I welcomed the earliest chance that came of freeing myself. Let me take back my promise. I am unworthy of so good a man."

"And that is your whole confession?"

"Ah! is it not enough? I tell you that I gave you my promise only because I was selfish. I was ready to sacrifice you so that I might gain my own ends."

"Ah, surely that were to pay too heavy a price for your freedom!" said he. "What! you were willing to submit to the rule of an elderly and arbitrary husband so that you might escape from the irksome flatteries of the crowds of discriminating people who have always delighted to do you honour? Do you wonder that I ask you if you do not think that you offered too high a price for what you hoped to gain?"

"Oh, if you could but know what I have felt, what I still feel about this life which I have been forced to lead, you would pity me and perhaps forgive me for the wrong which I offered to you! But no one seems to understand that it is just because I feel singing to be so great a gift, so divine a gift, that I shrink from exercising whatever of that gift has been given to me by God, only for the amusement of people who are incapable of understanding anything of the beauty—of the real meaning of music. Oh, I tell you, Mr. Long, I have felt, every time I have sung for such people, as if I were guilty of a great profanation of something that is quite holy. Indeed, I tell you the truth, and, knowing it, I think that you will forgive me for promising to marry you in order to escape from a life that had become quite intolerable to me."

She had put out an appealing hand to him, speaking her last sentence, and he took it in both his own hands, looking tenderly into her face.

"My child," he said, "your confession reveals nothing to me. Can you fancy for a moment that I have lived in the world for sixty years and yet believe that I could be attractive to a young girl full of a young girl's dreams of the joy of life, which is the joy of love? Some men of my age undoubtedly are capable of cherishing such an illusion. People refer to them as 'old fools.' I think that within the past two days I have noticed on many faces the expression—a mingling of amusement and indignation—worn by the faces of people who have just exclaimed, or who are about to exclaim, 'Old fool!' Well, I may be an old fool for trying an experiment which involves the assumption that looking at happiness through another man's eyes is in itself the truest form of

happiness; but however this may be, I was not so senile as to believe that when you honoured me by accepting my offer, you loved me with the natural love of a young girl for a young man. You confided in me upon one occasion when I pressed you to answer some questions which I ventured to put to you, that it was a torture to you to face the public, and that you were awaiting the return of your brother from Italy, in great hope that he would be able to persuade your father to permit your withdrawal from a career which, however brilliant it promised to be, was more than distasteful to you. I confess to you, my dear, that I thought I saw my chance in this circumstance, and I too awaited the return of your brother with great interest. I knew that I had it in my power to save you from all that you dreaded, and also to save you from all that I dreaded—to save you from becoming the victim of some such unscrupulous fellow as that Mathews. Well, I have great hope that all I thought possible will be accomplished. So far, I can assure you, I am satisfied with the progress of events toward the end which I have always had in view—that end being to make you happy.”

“But I want to make you happy; you are so good—so noble.”

“I know you do, my child, and I have let you into the secret of the only way by which you can make me happy.”

“Oh no, no! you have not said a word about your own happiness—you have talked about nothing but mine.”

“Dear child, in talking about your happiness I have talked about my own. In endeavouring to compass your happiness I have been altogether selfish, for I have been seeking to realise my own. Now, my sweet one, we shall talk no more on this subject. I only ask you to remember that my aim is to see you happy. In what direction you may find that happiness is a question which I dare not try to answer for you; you will have to work out the answer for yourself.”

He stooped over her hand and raised it to her lips. But hers lay limp in his own. She gave him the idea that she did not quite accept this closure of their conversation.

“You have not made me understand all that I think I should know,” she said. “My mind is still vague; you have not even said that you forgive me for deceiving you, for agreeing to marry you when all that I hoped for was, not to make you happy, but to escape from the life which I was forced to lead.”

“I positively refuse to say another word,” he cried.

“But you forgive me—can you?”

“I could forgive you anything, my dear, except your persistency in the belief that you stand in need of my forgiveness. Now we must hasten on to our destination; and if you see any of the modish people nudge each other whispering, ‘Old fool!’ as we pass, you will only smile, knowing as you now do that they are the fools and that I am none.”

She did not move from where she was standing, and a puzzled expression was on her face—an unsatisfied expression—not, however, quite a dissatisfied one. Once or twice her lips parted as if she were about to speak, but some minutes had passed before she found her voice; then she said:

“I do not understand more than one thing, and that is that you are the best and noblest man who lives in the world, and that I shall never deceive you.”

“It is not in your nature to deceive any one,” said he. “Some people—they are, however, few—are so gifted by nature.”

CHAPTER IX

When Richard Sheridan hastily left Sydney Gardens on the appearance of Long with Betsy Linley by his side, causing thereby all the faculties of subtle discrimination and of still more subtle deduction of at least one of the ladies of the fascinating group to be awakened, he sought neither the allurements of the gossip of the Pump Room nor the distractions of the scandal of the Assembly Rooms. He felt a longing for some place where he could hide himself from the eyes of all men—some sanctuary on an island where he might eat his heart out, far from the crowd who take a delight in making a mock of one who sits down to such a banquet.

He had left his father’s house after breakfast, determined that no one whom he might meet should be able to perceive from his demeanour anything of what he felt on the subject of Betsy Linley’s engagement to Mr. Long. He had heard the announcement of this engagement on the previous evening when leaving the Concert Rooms where Betsy had sung and her brother Tom had played, and it had come upon him with the force of a great blow—a blow from which no recovery was possible for him. That was why he had accepted the invitation of one of his friends to supper, with cards to follow. For several months he had resisted steadily the allurements of such forms of entertainment, for then the reward which he held before himself for his abstinence was the winning of the girl whom he had loved since he and she had been children together. But now that his dream was broken he felt in that cynical mood with which the plunge is congenial. He welcomed the opportunity of plunging. When the waters had closed over his head, they would shut out from his sight the odious vision which had followed his pleasant dreams of past years.

He was the merriest, the wildest, the wittiest of the little party of gay youths that night. His

was the most gracefully cynical of the banter which was directed against young Halhed—a youth who had acquired quite a reputation at Oxford as the avowed but hopeless lover of Miss Linley, and who was now rather overdoing the part of the rejected swain, going the length of quoting Horace and Juvenal on the subject of the lightness of woman's love, and being scarcely able to conceal his gratification at the distinction conferred upon him on being made the subject of the banter of his friends in general and of young Sheridan in particular. Before midnight had come and the first dozen of claret had gone, he was really not quite sure whether it conferred greater distinction on a man to be the accepted or the rejected lover of a young woman about whose beauty and accomplishments every one raved. The *rôle* of the Victim possessed several heroic elements. He was quite certain, however, that in introducing a mildly melancholy note regarding her heartlessness, he was conferring distinction upon the lady.

But when Dick Sheridan had crept upstairs to his room—somewhat unsteadily—after his bitterly merry night, he found that the bracing effects of the plunge are temporary. He found that though the plunge may alleviate, it is not curative—that the momentary alleviation which it secures has to be paid for.

He lay awake for hours, his remorse for having been so weak as to lapse from the straight path which he had laid out for himself since he became conscious of his love for Betsy Linley, adding to the bitterness of the reflection that he had lost her for ever.

When he awoke after a few hours of intermittent sleep, he had a sense of his disaster; but with it came the resolution that he would let no one suspect how hard hit he was by the announcement of Betsy's engagement to marry Mr. Long—he would not even let the girl herself suspect it. He would smile and shrug when people referred to the matter in his presence. He would not be such a poor, weak creature as Halhed, who went about bleating his plaint in every stranger's ear. He would show himself to be more a man of the world than that.

He dressed with scrupulous care—he was not going to affect the loose garters of the woeful lover—and sauntered out, swinging his cane with the ease and nonchalance of the man of fashion; and he flattered himself that the sharp and rapid repartee in which he indulged when he joined the group in the gardens, would be sufficient to convince even Garrick himself that he regarded the engagement of Miss Linley with complete indifference. The moment, however, that the girl appeared with Mr. Long at the entrance, he felt unable to sustain the *rôle* any longer: he felt that he must run away and hide himself in some secret corner where he could see no one and where no one could see him. He had not counted upon facing the girl so soon—he had not counted upon witnessing the chastened pride of her successful lover in the presence of the unsuccessful. He knew that he could not continue acting the part which he had assumed: he knew that he should break down and be shamed for evermore.

He hurried away without once glancing round, and his first impression was that he must weep. He only bore up against this appalling impulse until he reached his home. He entered the house whistling, and shouted out a line or two of a merry song when on the stairs; but before the echo of his voice had died away, he was lying on his bed in tears.

He felt that his part in the world had come to an end—that for him no future but one of misery was possible. The hope which had sustained him in the face of his struggles to make a name for himself had turned to despair. She was not to be his. She was to go to another. She had elected to go to a man who, he believed, with all a true lover's suspicion of another's merits, was incapable of appreciating her beauty—her beautiful nature—her lovely soul.

He was overwhelmed by the thought of the bare possibility of a thing so monstrous being sanctioned by Providence. He despaired of the future of a world in which it was possible for so monstrous a thing to occur. It was no world for worthy lovers to live in—so much was perfectly clear to him. He felt himself to be a worthy lover, for had he not resisted temptations innumerable, during the years that he had loved Betsy, only for her sake?

He had felt upon every occasion of resisting a temptation that he was increasing his balance, so to speak, in his banking account with Fate—paying another instalment, as it were, toward acquiring Betsy Linley. He had worked for her as Jacob had worked for Rachel, but Fate had turned out to him as unjust as Laban had been—nay, more unjust, for he had not even a Leah given to him to console him; and, besides, his Rachel was bestowed upon another.

How could he be otherwise than hopeless of a world so ill-governed as to allow of such a gross injustice taking place?

The possible joys of the many temptations which he had resisted appealed to his imagination. So one thinks what one could have done with the sums with which one's banker has absconded; and the result was to increase his bitterness. But perhaps what poor Dick felt most bitterly of all was his inability to sustain the dignified *rôle* of a cynical man of the world with which he had started the day. The reflection that he had completely broken down the moment that the girl appeared even in the distance, and that he had given way to his disappointment just as if he were nothing more than a schoolboy, was a miserable one. He wept at the thought of his own weeping, and beat his pillow wildly in vexation; and an hour had passed before he was able to control himself.

He sprang from the bed with a derisive cry of "What a fool I am!—a worse fool than Halhed! Good heavens! A girl!—she is nothing but a girl; and where's the girl who is worth such self-abasement? I am a man, and I'll show myself to be a man, even though she elect to marry every dolt in Bath!"

He felt that if she had appeared in the lobby outside his door at that moment, he would not break down. He would be able to smile upon her as Mr. Walpole was accustomed to smile when saying something very wicked and satirical. He knew that he was quite as witty and a good deal readier than Horace Walpole; but even if he lacked something of the polish which Walpole—sitting up all the night for the purpose—was able to give to a phrase, he believed that he could still say enough to let Betsy Linley learn what sort of a man he was. He would let her see that he was a man of the world looking on with a tolerant, half-amused smile and quite a disinterested manner at such incidents of life as marrying and giving in marriage. Oh, the cynical things that could be said about marriage! Some such things had, of course, already been said by the wits, but they had not nearly exhausted the subject. It would be left for him to show Miss Linley how supremely ridiculous was the notion of two people believing—or rather pretending to believe—that they could find satisfaction only in each other's society!

Oh, the notion of marriage was utterly ridiculous! What was it like? Was it not the last refuge of the unimaginative? Or should he suggest that marriage was the pasteboard façade of a palace of fools?

Oh yes, he felt quite equal to the task of saying a number of witty things on the subject of marriage in general; but when he came to think of all that might be said on the subject of a young woman's agreeing to marry an old man, he felt actually embarrassed by the wealth of cynical phrases which lent themselves to a definition of such an incident.

He kept pacing his room, becoming more cynical every moment, until he had almost recovered his self-respect, and had forgotten that singular lapse of his from the course which he had marked out for himself in the morning—that lapse into the tears of true feeling from his elaborate scheme of simulated indifference—when the dinner-bell sounded.

He cursed the clanging of the thing. He was in no humour for joining the family circle: he knew that his sisters would delight in discussing the topic of the hour, and as for his brother....

Then it occurred to him that, seeing he would have to face his relations some time, he would excite their suspicion less were he to meet them at once. He now believed himself to be quite equal to sustaining the *rôle* of the indifferent man of fashion in the presence of his relations, though he had ignominiously failed to realise his ideal after a certain point earlier in the day.

He dipped his face in a basin of water to remove every trace of his weakness—the poor fellow actually believed that tears were an indication of weakness—and he was surprised to find how easily the marks were obliterated. He was comforted by the reflection that his tears had been very superficial; they were not even skin deep,—so that he had not, after all, been so foolish as he fancied—he had been unjust to himself. He only needed a fresh ruffle to give a finishing touch to his freshness.

He descended to the dining-room lazily, and entered languidly. He found that the other members of the family had not been polite enough to wait for him for the two minutes he had taken to complete his toilet. They were deep in their leg of mutton, and the younger Miss Sheridan was calling for another dish of potatoes. The big wooden bowl which, Irish fashion, lay upon a silver ring, was still steaming, but it was empty.

"Bless my soul!" he exclaimed, entering the room, "I had no notion that I was late. Upon my life, I meant only to have a doze of ten minutes, but I must have slept for half an hour."

He yawned, and then stood before a mirror for a few moments, twitching his front into shape.

"You came in pretty late last night," said his elder sister, cutting another wedge from the already gaping wound in the leg of mutton before her.

"Nay, sweet sister, you are wrong," he said with a laugh. "Nay, 'twas not late last night, but early this morning I returned to my home. Prithee, sister, is't outside the bounds of possibility for you to provide us with a change of fare now and again? Mutton is doubtless wholesome, and occasionally it is even succulent, but after the fourth day of mutton, the most tolerant palate—"

"Have you heard that Betsy Linley is to marry old Mr. Long?" cried the girl with the air of one making an effective retort.

He was about to indicate to her his complete self-possession by inquiring what bearing Miss Linley and Mr. Long had upon the question of the advisability of substituting veal for mutton now and again, but he was clever enough to perceive that his attitude would become convincing were he to appear less nonchalant; so after only an interval of a few seconds, he dropped his fork, crying:

"What! what do you say? Betsy Linley and Mr. Long? Oh, lud!"

Then he threw himself back in his chair and roared with laughter. He was amazed to find how easily he was able to laugh heartily—nay, how greatly he was eased by his outburst of hearty laughter. He felt that he was playing his part very well, and so indeed he was.

"Oh, lud! Oh, lud!" he managed to ejaculate between his paroxysms of mirth. "Oh, lud! 'Crabbed age and youth!' Has not Mr. Linley set the lyric to music? If not, he must lose no time in doing so, and Betsy will sing it at all the concerts. I foresee another triumph for her. He is sixty-five if he is a day—I'll swear it. But are you sure that there is truth in the rumour? How many names have not been associated with Miss Linley's during the last two years? Were not people rude enough to mention Mathews's name with hers six months ago?"

"'Tis more than mere rumour this time," said his sister. "I wonder that you did not hear all

about the matter last night. Every one was talking of it in the Rooms."

"Ah, you see, I was hurried off to that supper, confound it! and, as you remarked, I did not get up in time for the Pump Room gossip," said he glibly. "Ah, I should have gone to the Pump Room, if only for the sake of studying the effect of this disastrous news upon the beaux! 'Twill be a blow to some of our friends—to some; but we need not travel beyond the limits of the Sheridan family to become acquainted with the effects of that blow." He pointed a finger toward his brother Charles, who indeed was looking very glum over his mutton. "Oh, my dear brother, you have my profound sympathy in your affliction. But, prithee, be cheered, my Charles; do not let those doleful dumps get hold of you at this time.

'Shall I, wasting with despair,
Sigh because a woman's fair?'

Surely not, sir. This is not our way, in these days—these unromantic days.

'If she be not fair to me
What care I how fair she be?
With a hey, nonny, nonny!'"

"Do not tease him, Dick," said Alicia. "Poor Charlie!"

"Poor Charlie!" cried Dick. "Nay, I never meant to go so far as to call him 'Poor Charlie!' You have a strange notion of what constitutes sympathy, my dear, if you fancy that our brother's wound is softened by his being called 'Poor Charlie!' The cruel shepherdess did not send you any softening message, Strephon?"

"She sent me no message," said Charles.

"Then she was less unkind than she might have been," said Dick. "The woman who sends a kind message to the lover whom she has discarded is as cruel as the Red Indian would be were he to scalp his victim and then offer him as a solace a box of Canada Balsam for the healing of the wound. Oh no, dear Charles, Miss Linley is not all unkind."

"Do you know, Dick, that once or twice I received the impression that 'twas you yourself, and not Charles, that Betsy favoured?" said Elizabeth.

"What! I—I? Oh, my dear, you flatter me at the expense of my elder brother," laughed Dick. "Moreover, you cast an aspersion on the taste, the discrimination, and the prudence of the young lady. Dear sisters, take the advice of your brother, who knows this world and its weaknesses, and when it comes to your turn to choose husbands, marry nice elderly gentlemen with large fortunes, as your friend Miss Linley is doing. Marriage should be regarded simply as an unavoidable preliminary to a brilliant widowhood. And let me assure you, Eliza, your widowhood will not be long averted if you provide your husband with mutton as tough as that which you set before your brothers four days out of the seven."

CHAPTER X

Dick Sheridan felt it to be a great relief to him to turn a laugh against his brother in regard to the sudden step taken by Miss Linley, which seemed to have disconcerted not only Charles, but half the population of Bath as well. Dick could not bear to be suspected of entertaining hopes on his own account as to Elizabeth Linley; he possessed a certain amount of vanity—the vanity of a young man who is the son of an extremely vain old man, and who, though gifted—or cursed—with a certain wit in conversation, is still rather uncertain about his future. It was this vanity which had caused him to keep as a profound secret his attachment to Betsy: he could not have endured the humiliation of taking a place among the rejected suitors, and he had not so much vanity as made him unable to perceive that there was always a possibility of his loving in vain.

He felt that, as his secret had hitherto escaped suspicion—and he fancied that it had done so—he could best keep it concealed by laughing at the men who, like his friend Halhed and his brother Charles, had worn their heart upon their sleeve. The man who is ready to laugh is not the man who is ready to love, most people think; and, being aware of this, he made himself ready to laugh. Before the evening had come, he had so many opportunities of laughing that he felt sure, if he were to meet Betsy and her elderly lover, he would be able to laugh in their faces.

He could not understand how it was that he had been so overcome in the morning by an emotion which was certainly not one of laughter, when he had seen Betsy in the distance.

It was really extraordinary how many young men showed their desire to confide in him in the course of the afternoon. Some were even anxious to read to him the verses which they had composed in celebration of their rejection by Miss Linley; and this showed him how well he had kept his secret. His brother, who seemed, in spite of Dick's want of sympathy, to take a very lenient view of Dick's attitude toward him, was actually the first to approach him after dinner with the story of his sufferings, and with an attempt to enshrine the deepest of them in a pastoral poem which took the form of a dialogue between one Corydon and his friend Damon, on the subject of the ill-treatment of both of them by the shepherdess Phyllis, who, they both frankly admitted, was as charming a vocalist as she was a beautiful nymph, and who dwelt on the banks of a stream, to which all the country were in the habit of flocking on account of its healing properties.

Charles inquired if his brother did not think that the allusions to the vocalism of the young shepherdess and the incident of her living in the neighbourhood of a medicinal spring were rather apt; and Dick, taking the matter very seriously now, had no hesitation in expressing the opinion that no unprejudiced critic could fail to perceive from these data that the poet meant to refer to Miss Linley and to Bath. He was not sure, however, that Miss Linley would, on reading the verses, be stung to the quick. Dick did not think that as a rule young women were deeply affected by classical allusions, however apt they might be. But undoubtedly the verses were well intentioned, and quite equal in merit to many that appeared in the *Advertiser*.

Poor Charles was forced to be content with such commendation. To be sure, he took rather a higher view of the poem himself, and he said that young Halhed had declared that some of the lines were quite equal to any that Pope had written, and that Mr. Greville had assured him that if he had not known that he, Charles, had composed the poem, he would unhesitatingly have accepted it as the work of Dryden. Still, he was much gratified by Dick's opinion that it was on an intellectual level with the material which appeared in the Poet's Corner of the *Advertiser*. He rather thought that he would go away for a while to the country. Did not Dick think that the situation of the moment necessitated his retirement from the frivolities of Bath for a month or two?

After due consideration Dick replied that perhaps on the whole a month or two in the country would do his brother some good; though, to be sure, if he were missed from Bath, some people might be found ready to say that he was overcome by the blow of his rejection by Miss Linley. Charles's eyes gleamed at the prospect of being thus singled out for distinction; and Dick knew why they were gleaming. He knew that his brother would certainly hurry away to the seclusion of the country before it would be too late—before people would cease talking of Miss Linley and the desolation that her cruelty had wrought. He knew that Charles would feel that, if people failed to associate the incident of his withdrawal from Bath with the announcement of the choice of Miss Linley, he might as well remain at his home.

"I shall go, Dick—I feel that I must go," murmured Charles. "Let people say what they will, I must go. I have no doubt that tongues will wag when it is known that I have gone. I would not make the attempt to conceal the fact that I have gone, and I hope that you will never stoop to pander with the truth in this matter, Richard."

"If you insist on my telling the truth, of course I shall do so; but I see no reason why I should depart from an ordinary and reasonable course of prevarication," said Dick, with a shrug.

"Not for the world!" cried Charles anxiously. "No, brother; the truth must be told. I lay it upon you to tell the truth."

"'Twill be a strain at first," said Dick doubtfully—musingly, as if balancing a point of great nicety in his mind. "Still, one should be ready to make some sacrifice for one's brother: one should be ready at his bidding to make a departure even from a long-cherished habit. Yes, Charles, I love you so well that I'll e'en tell the truth at your bidding."

"God bless you, Dick—God bless you!" said Charles with real tears in his eyes and a tremolo note in his voice as he turned away. He never could understand his brother's humour.

"Hasten and pack your bag, and get off at once, or people will cease to be suspicious, and disbelieve me when I tell them the true story of your wrongs," said Dick. "It would be very discouraging to me to find that my deviation into the truth is not credited. You can send your poem to the *Advertiser* from the country; mind that you append to it the name of your place of concealment."

Charles lagged. He seemed a little taken aback.

"The verses would lose half their value unless they were dated from some place of concealment," Dick insisted.

"I perceive now that that is so," said Charles. "But, unhappily, it did not occur to me when I sent the verses to the editor an hour ago."

"What! you have sent them already?" cried Dick. "Oh, dear brother, you need no instruction from me as to the acting of the *rôle* of the complete lover. I will see that your grief receives the most respectful attention in your absence. Let that thought make you happy. It will be my study to see that you are referred to in the highest circles as the unhappy swain. By the way, would you wish it to be understood that you are Damon, or do you prefer to be associated with the sentiments of Corydon?"

"I have not fully considered that question," said Charles seriously.

"What! Ah, well, perhaps it would be unreasonable to expect you to make up your mind in a hurry. But since both the shepherds express the sentiment of their grief with commendable unanimity, you cannot be prejudiced by being associated with either."

Charles went away very thoughtfully.

For the remainder of the afternoon Dick found himself advanced to the position of confidant in relation to several other young men, and at least two elderly gentlemen. He was amazed to find how closely the tale poured into his sympathetic ear by every one of the young men resembled that confided to him by his brother. And there was not one of them who had not made some

attempt to embody his sentiment in a pastoral poem. All the poems were alike in their artificiality. He felt that he was hearing, not six different poems read once over, but one indifferent poem read six times over.

The elderly discarded swains who confided in him had also endeavoured to express their views of their treatment on paper. One had written a Pindaric ode on the subject, the other, who had a vivid recollection of the earliest essays in the *Rambler*, had written an imaginary epistle in the approved Johnsonian manner, beginning: "Sir, if no spectacle is more pleasing to a person of sensibility than an artless maiden dissembling her love by a blush of innocence, none is more offensive than that of the practised coquette making the attempt to lure into her toils an unsuspecting swain. Among the ancient writers few passages are more memorable than the one in which, in sublime language, Homer describes the effect of the song of the Sirens upon Ulysses. If the right exercise of the gift of song be deserving of approval, assuredly its employment as lure to the adventurous is a fitting subject for reprobation."

The elderly gentleman, who was endeavouring to show to young Mr. Sheridan how closely Miss Linley resembled one of the Sirens, did not find a sympathetic listener.

"If Ulysses did not want to be made a fool of, why the deuce did he shape his course within earshot of the Sirens?" said Dick. "I don't suppose that they wanted him particularly, and the Mediterranean was broad enough for him to give them a wide birth."

"What, sir! Would you presume to teach Homer how to deal with his hero?" cried the interrupted author.

"I don't care a fig for Homer! You need not have paid your half-guinea, and then you would not have been made a fool of by Miss Linley's singing," said Dick.

"She has made no fool of me, sir," said the other tartly. "She did not presume so far, Mr. Sheridan."

"I suppose it would have been an act of presumption on her part to try to supplement Nature's handiwork," said Dick, with a smile so enigmatical that the gentleman was left wondering if he meant to pay him a compliment or the reverse.

Dick went away wondering also—wondering if he alone loved Betsy Linley in very truth. The artificiality of all the professed lovers was contemptible in his eyes. Was it possible, he asked himself, that not one of these men, young or old, loved her sufficiently to be able to conceal his affection within his own breast? There they were, writing their artificial verses and still more artificial essays—looking about for some one to make a confidant of in respect of the secret that each should have locked up in his own bosom! Truly a paltry set of lovers were these! Rhyme-hunters, phrase-hunters, conceit-hunters, and nothing more. He, and he only, loved Betsy.

Had he carried his secrecy too far in that he had not confided, even in her? he wondered. But had he kept his love a secret from her? Alas! he felt that although he had never told her of his love, she was well aware of its existence.

And yet she had promised to marry Mr. Long.

He began to feel very bitterly about her—about Mr. Long—about womankind and mankind generally. He endeavoured as he entered the Assembly Rooms, to recall some of the bitter things which had occurred to him earlier in the day on the subject of the institution of marriage. He would show people that he could be quite as cynical as any of the Walpole set when it came to a definition of marriage.

But before he had drawn much consolation from such a reflection, he heard behind him the most musical laugh that ever suggested to an imaginative young man a moonlight effect upon a brook that rippled through a glen. It was a laugh that had rippled through England and made all the land joyous—it was the laugh of the beautiful Mrs. Abington: and for a century it has rippled forth from the canvases of Sir Joshua Reynolds, who painted her as Miss Prue and Roxalana.

Dick turned about and faced the charming creature, who, in the midst of a sunlit cloud of iridescent satin brocade, an embroidered mist of lace swirling about the bodice, stood there in the most graceful of attitudes, her head poised like the head of a coquettish bird that turns a single eye upon one, raising her closed fan in her right hand to the dimple on her chin, the first two fingers of her left supporting the other elbow.

"Heavens! what a ravishing picture! Is Mr. Gainsborough in the Rooms?" cried young Mr. Sheridan in an outburst of admiration. He forgot all the bitter things he had on his mind. He forgot the grudge that he owed to the world: the world that included so joyous a creature as Mrs. Abington could not be in a wholly deplorable condition. This is what Mr. Sheridan thought at that particular moment, and that is what all England thought from time to time, when the same lady exercised her fascination over her audiences through the medium of a character in some new comedy. No heart could be heavy for long when Mrs. Abington was on the stage.

"Ah, sir," said she, "you are, I perceive, like the rest of your sex: you confound the effect of a new gown with that of an attractive face. You mix up a woman with her dress until you don't know which is which. Mr. Gainsborough knows the difference. Ask him to paint me. 'I will hang her brocade on a wig-stand and that will be enough for most critics,' he will answer. They say that the Duchess of Devonshire has induced him to paint her hat, and to eke out what little space remains on the canvas with her grace's brocade. Oh, Mr. Gainsborough is the only man who knows the woman from her dress!"

"Madam," said Dick, who had been whetting his wits all the time she had been speaking,

"madam, when I look at Mrs. Abington it is revealed to me that a beautiful woman is a poem; her dress is merely the music to which the poem is set."

She did not sink in a courtesy at the compliment; most women would have done so, therefore Mrs. Abington refrained. She only gave an extra tilt of an inch or thereabouts to her stately head, and allowed her fan to droop forward until it was pointing with an expression of exquisite roguishness at the young man's face.

"'Tis a pretty conceit, i' faith, Dick," said she, "and its greatest charm lies in its adaptability to so many women. A song! quite true: we have both seen women who were the merest doggerel; and as for the music—oh, lud! I have seen women dress so that it would need a whole orchestra to do them justice. For my own part, I aim no higher than the compass of a harpsichord; and I hold that one whose garments suggest a band is unfit for a private room. Music! I have seen women apparelled in a flourish of trumpets, and others diaphanously draped in the thin tones of a flute."

"'Twas a happy conceit that crossed my mind, since it has opened a vein of such wit," said Dick. "But pray, my dear madam, tell us how it is that Bath is blest."

"Bath blest! 'Tis the first I heard of it."

"Since Mrs. Abington has come hither. How is it possible that you have been able to forsake Mr. Colman and Covent Garden!"

"Mr. Colman is a curmudgeon, and Covent Garden is—not so far removed from Drury Lane."

"That means that you are not in any of the pieces this week?"

"Nan Cattley has it all her own way just now. All that she needs to make her truly happy and to make Mr. Colman a bankrupt is to get rid of Mrs. Bulkley."

"All Bath will rise up and thank her, since she has enabled Mrs. Abington to come hither. Bath knows when it is blest."

"Then Bath is blest indeed—more than all mankind. Was it not Pope who wrote, 'Man never is but always to be blest'?"

"I do believe that it was Pope who said it. Your voice sets a bald line to music."

"Lud! Mr. Sheridan, your thoughts are running on music to-day. Why is that, prithee? Is't possible that since Miss Linley has given up music and has taken to marriage—a state from which music is perpetually absent—you feel that 'tis laid on you as a duty to keep people informed of the fact that there is music still in the world, even though Miss Linley no longer sings? But perhaps you believe exactly the opposite?"

"Just the opposite, madam?"

"Yes. Do you believe that there is no music in the world now that Miss Linley has promised to marry Mr. Long?"

He felt that his time had come; he would show her that he could be as cynical as the best of them—he meant the worst of them, only he did not know it.

"Ah! my dear lady, you and I know well that the young woman who gives up singing in favour of marriage exchanges melody for matrimony."

"Subtle," said the lady, with a critical closing of her eyes. "Too subtle for the general ear. 'Tis a kind of claret wit, this of yours; claret is not the beverage of the herd—they prefer rum. Melody on the one side and matrimony on t'other."

"Madam, I am not talking to the crowd; on the contrary, I am addressing Mrs. Abington," said young Mr. Sheridan, bowing with the true Angelo air. Mr. Angelo's pupils were everywhere known by the spirit of their bows.

The beautiful lady did not respond except by a smile; but then most people with ability enough to discriminate would have acknowledged that a smile from Mrs. Abington expressed much more than the lowest courtesy from the next most beautiful woman could ever express; and they would have been right. She smiled gently, looking at him with languorous eyes for a few moments, and then the expression on her face changed somewhat as she said slowly:

"What a pity 'tis that you still love her, Dick!"

CHAPTER XI

The roseate hue that fled over the face of young Mr. Sheridan, when the lady had spoken, was scarcely that which would have tinted the features of the hardened man of the world which he had felt himself to be—for some hours. But all the same, it was vastly becoming to the face at which the lady was looking; and that is just what the lady herself thought. She would have given worlds to have been unworldly enough to be able to blush so innocently as Dick Sheridan. But she knew that the peculiarity of the blush of innocence is its innocence, whereas she was the favourite actress of the day.

She kept her eyes fixed upon him, and that boyish blush remained fixed upon his face. He was

not self-possessed enough to look at her; but even if he had been so, he would not have been able to see the jealousy which her smile indifferently concealed.

"I protest, madam," he began. "I protest that I scarce understand the force of your remark—your suggestion—"

"Ah, my poor Dick, 'tis not alone a lady that doth protest too much," said the play-actress. "What force do you fancy any protest coming from you would have while the eloquent blood in your cheeks insists on telling the truth? The eloquence of the blush, unlike most forms of eloquence, is always truthful. Come along with me to one of the quiet corners,—I dare swear that you know them all, you young rascal, in spite of that blush of yours; come along, and you shall get me a glass of ice."

She gave him her hand with a laugh, and he led her to a nook of shrubs and festooned roses at the farther end of the Long Room. The Rooms were beginning to receive the usual fashionable crowd, and the word had gone round that Mrs. Abington was present, so that she tripped along between bowing figures in velvet and lace and three-cocked hats brushing the floor. She saw that her companion was proud of his position by her side, and she knew that he had every reason to be so; she hoped that he would remain proud of her. The man who is proud of being by the side of one woman cannot continue thinking only of the other woman.

And all the time Dick Sheridan was hoping that the people who saw him conducting the beautiful lady to that pleasant place which, like all really pleasant places, held seats only for two, would say that he was a gay young dog, and look on him with envious eyes.

It was, however, of the lady that people talked.

But then, people were always talking of Mrs. Abington—especially the people who never talked *to* her.

She was wise enough to refrain from ignoring the topic which had caused him to blush.

"What a whim to take possession of such a young woman as Miss Linley!" she cried. "Have you tried to account for it, Dick? Of course I was in jest when I suggested that she had smitten you. 'Twas your elder brother who was her victim, was it not?"

He was strong enough, though he himself thought it a sign of weakness, to say at once:

"'Twas Charlie who fancied that he was in love with her; but 'twas I, alas! who loved her."

Mrs. Abington's lips parted under the influence of her surprise. She stared at him for some moments, and then she said:

"Dick Sheridan, you are a man; and a few minutes ago I thought that you were only a boy."

"I have known her since my father brought me from Harrow to Bath," said he mournfully. "She was only a child; but I know that I loved her then. I have loved her ever since, God help me!"

"My poor Dick! and you told her of your love?"

"Once; we were both children. Then we were separated, and when we met again everything was changed. I think it was her beauty that frightened me."

"I can believe that. A girl's beauty brings many men to her feet; but I am sure that those who are worthiest among men are too greatly overcome by it to do more than remain her worshipper from afar. Have you anything more to tell me?"

He shook his head. His eyes were fixed upon the floor.

"Ah, that is your history—a blank, my lord! a blank?" said she in the pathetic tone of Viola. "Ah, Dick, she cannot have guessed your secret, or she would have been content to wait until the time came for you to reveal it to her."

"Pray do not torture me by suggesting what might have come about!" he cried. "Psha! I have actually come to be one of her commonplace swains—her Damons and her Corydons—at whom I have been laughing all day."

"Laughing?"

"Well, yes, in a sort of way."

"Oh, I know that sort of laughter. 'Tis not pleasant to hear."

"Such a batch of commonplace lovers. They went about in search of a confidant. And I find that I am as commonplace as any of the crew."

"Nay, friend Dick; 'twas your confidante who went in search of you. I tell you, Dick, that when I heard two days ago that your Elizabeth Linley had made up her mind to marry Mr. Long, I gave Mr. Colman notice that I would not play during the rest of the week, and I posted down here to do my best to comfort you, my poor boy! Oh, do not stare so at me, Dick! I am as great a fool as any woman can be, and that is saying much; and I would not have confessed this to you if you had not been manly enough to tell me that you love her still. I can only respond to your manliness, Dick, by my womanliness; but I have done it now, and yet you are only bewildered."

"I am bewildered indeed," said Dick, and he spoke the truth. "I do not quite understand what—that is, I do not quite understand you."

"Oh, do you fancy that I expected you to understand me when I do not understand myself?" she cried, opening and closing her fan nervously half a dozen times, and then giving the most

scrupulous attention to the design painted on the satin between the ivory ribs. "Ah, what a fool a really wise woman—a woman of worldly wisdom—can be when her turns comes, Dick!" she said, after a rather lengthy pause.

Dick was more bewildered than ever. His knowledge of women was never very profound. He was slightly afraid of this enigma enwrapped—but not too laboriously—in brocade and misty lace.

"I think that you are a very kind woman, Mrs. Abington," said he at last. "'Twas very kind of you to come here solely because—because—well, solely out of the goodness of your own heart; and if you call this being a fool——"

He was startled by her outburst of laughter—really merry, spontaneous actress's laughter; it almost amounted to a paroxysm as she lay back on the pretty gilded sofa in the most charming attitude of self-abandonment. Joyous humour danced in her eyes—and tears as well; and once again she had closed her fan and was pointing it at him quite roguishly. And the tears that had been in her eyes dropped down upon the roseate expanse of her bosom, and two others took the place in her eyes of those that had fallen, and her bosom was tremulous.

He looked at her, and was more bewildered than ever. What did this mingling of laughter and tears and mocking gestures and throbbing pulses mean? Was the woman in earnest? Was the actress acting?

He felt himself as bewildered as he could imagine a man being whose boat is suddenly capsized when sailing in what he fancies to be smooth water, but finds to be a whirlpool.

He somehow had lost confidence in his own power of judgment. He was forced to apply to her for an explanation of her attitude. But before he had opened his lips, that whirlpool of a woman was spinning him round on another course.

"My dear friend Dick," she said—her voice had acquired something of the uncertainty of her bosom: there was a throb in it—a throb that had something of the quality of a sob,—“oh, my dear Dick, I find that I must be very plain with you, and so I tell you plainly, Dick, that the sole reason I have in coming hither at this time is my regard for your future.”

"For my future? I cannot see——"

"Ah, there are a great many things that you cannot see, Dick—thank God, thank God! Your future, dear sir, is what troubles me. Well, I frankly allow that my own ambition in this life does not extend beyond the play-house. I am an actress, that is my life; I do not want to be accounted anything else by man or woman—only an actress. And I have in my mind something of a comedy which you are to write. Have you not confided to me your hopes of some day writing a comedy—not that burletta stuff about Jupiter and the rest of them at which you have been working, but a true comedy? Mr. Garrick says he knows you have far more talent than Mr. Cumberland.”

"Mr. Garrick is not extravagant in his eulogy," said Dick, becoming interested.

"No, he does not go too far. At any rate, I believe in your powers, Dick, if they are but allowed scope, and I have posted hither with the idea I have formed of the comedy which you are to write for me without delay. What say you to the notion of a young woman marrying an old man? Oh, no! you need not start and frown, Dick, for 'tis not your charmer and her elderly choice that I have in my mind, though I allow that 'twas the hearing of them put the thing into my head. No, a young woman, who has lived all her life in the country—she is very pretty (of course I am to play the part); marries an elderly gentleman (Shuter would play the husband), and forthwith launches out into all the extravagances of town life, to the terrible dismay of the old gentleman. 'Twill give you a fine opportunity of laughing at him for an old fool, who finds out that he is married to a young wife, but not sooner than she finds out that she is married to an old husband. Dick, Dick, you don't laugh. Is it possible that you fail to catch the idea of the comedy?"

"Oh, no! I catch the idea. I wonder what sort of a life they will have? Only Betsy will never want to come to town. All that she seeks is to be left in the solitude of the country.”

"Who was talking of your Betsy?" cried the future Lady Teazle. "And who is there that can say with any measure of certainty what a young woman will be after she has married? Cannot you perceive that this must be the moral of the comedy? The young woman who appears to her elderly beau to be quite content with the joys of country life, and to entertain no longing for any dissipation more extravagant than a game of Pope Joan with the curate, becomes, when once she has secured her husband, the leader of the wildest set about town, and perhaps eventually allows herself to be led away by a plausible scoundrel——" Dick sprang from his seat with clenched hands, and before a second had elapsed Mrs. Abington was by his side, and her fingers were grasping her fan so tightly that the ivory ribs crackled.

"You cannot get Betsy Linley out of your head, although she is no longer for you," she said in a low voice. "You are living in a fool's paradise, and are delighted to live there, although some woman may be at your hand who loves you better than you have ever hoped to be loved by Betsy Linley, and who would repay your love better than your dreams of Betsy Linley ever suggested to you. Take care, sir, that in the story of Miss Linley's future, the plausible scoundrel does not enter with more disastrous effect than ever I intended him to play in my little comedy! That is my warning to you, friend Dick. And now, tell me who is that pretty fellow that is staring at us yonder? I swear that I have rarely seen a prettier!"

Some moments had passed before Dick Sheridan had recovered himself sufficiently to answer her. He glanced in the direction indicated by her, and saw that Tom Linley was standing a little way off.

"'Tis Tom Linley," said Dick.

"One of the brothers?"

"The eldest. You have puzzled me, Mrs. Abington. I should like to know just what you meant when——"

"And I should like to know that young gentleman. If you do not beckon him hither and present him to me, I shall apply to Mr. Hale to perform that friendly office for me."

"I must know what you meant by introducing the idea of a comedy——"

"And I insist on your introducing young Mr. Linley. What, sir! are you fearful lest that pretty youth may become, under my tuition, a fitting subject for another serious comedy? No, no; no further word will you get from me. I have said far too much already. Go home, Dick, and try to recall something of all the nonsense that I talked in your hearing, and if you succeed, believe me, you will know more of woman and a woman's comedy than you have acquired during all your life."

"Am I to believe——"

"You are to believe nothing except the sincerity of my desire to see you the foremost dramatic writer of our time. To become a true writer of comedy needs discipline as well as a knowledge of the world, Dick, and discipline is sometimes galling, my friend. But I have hope of you, Dick Sheridan, and that is why I mean to leave you alone just now and seek out that young Mr. Linley, who is, I vow, a vastly pretty fellow and as like his beautiful sister as Apollo was like Psyche."

She kissed the tips of her closed fan and made a motion as if she were about to hasten to where Tom Linley was still standing; but Dick laid his hand on her arm.

"You have puzzled me thoroughly," said he. "But you shall have your new toy. He will be discipline enough for you, for Tom has long ago buried his heart in his violin."



DICK SPRANG FROM HIS SEAT WITH CLENCHED HANDS.

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CHAPTER XII

Tom frowned when Dick suggested to him—in a delicate way, so that he should not be frightened—that the beautiful Mrs. Abington was greatly interested in him and had been gracious enough to give Dick permission to present him to her. Tom frowned. It was not that he placed a fictitious value upon himself; it was only that he could not be brought to take an interest in anything outside his art. Talking to a woman, however beautiful she might be, he regarded as a waste of time, unless she talked to him of his art, or, better still, listened to him while he talked of it.

"I came hither only to hear Mr. Bach's playing on the forte-piano," he said. "I think he is over sanguine of the effects that new instrument can produce, though I allow that he can do more with it than would be possible with the harpsichord. Its tones are certainly richer."

"Rich as they are, they are not to be compared to the tones of Mrs. Abington's voice," said Dick, taking him by the arm.

"Will she distract me, do you fancy? I do not like women who interfere with my enjoyment of the music," said the musician. "Most women are a great distraction."

"So it is rumoured," said Dick. "But Mrs. Abington—— Oh, you confounded coxcomb! there is not a man in the Rooms who would not feel himself transported to the seventh heaven at the prospect of five minutes' conversation with this lady. Come along, sir, and do not shame me and your own family by behaving like an insensible bear who will only dance to music."

Tom suffered himself to be led to the lady.

She had watched with an amused smile the attitude of protest on the part of the good-looking young man. She was greatly amused; but in the course of her life she had had occasion to study

the very young man, and she rather fancied that she had acquired some knowledge of him and his ways. He was an interesting study. She had found Dick Sheridan extremely interesting even during the previous half hour—though she had not begun her course of lessons with him. As a matter of fact, he had been in the nursery when she had begun to take her lessons.

She would have been greatly surprised if young Linley had acquiesced with any degree of eagerness in the suggestion made to him by Dick, and she did not feel in the least hurt to notice his frown and his general air of protest. She had once watched from the window of her cottage on the Edgeware Road the breaking-in of a spirited young colt. She had admired his protests; but before the day was done, the horse-breaker had put the bit in his mouth and was trotting him quietly round the field.

She had done something in the way of breaking in colts in her time, and they had all begun by protesting.

"I saw that you were a musician the instant you appeared, Mr. Linley," she said. "I know that you are devoted to your art. Ah, sir, yours is an art worthy of the devotion of a lifetime. Is there any art besides music, Mr. Linley? I sometimes feel that there is none."

The large eyes of the young man glowed.

"There is none, madam," he said definitely.

His air of finality amused her greatly.

"I feel pleased that you agree with me," she said. "I have no patience with such people as one meets at times—men who are ever ready to decry the art which they themselves practise. I have known painters complain bitterly that Heaven had not made them poets, and I have known poets cry out against the fate that had not created them wits. Here is our friend Mr. Sheridan, who is both a poet and a wit, and yet he is ready to complain that Heaven has not made him a successful lover as well."

Young Mr. Sheridan cast upon the lady a reproachful glance, and went off with a bow.

Mrs. Abington made room for Tom on her sofa. She sent him an invitation from her eyes. It was a small sofa; but he was entirely free from self-consciousness, and therefore he did not know what it was to be shy. He seated himself by her side. A fold of her brocade flowed over his feet. This did not embarrass him in the least.

He waited for her to talk. It did not occur to him that he should make the attempt to be agreeable to her.

"'Twas a pretty conceit that of Mr. Sheridan's," said she musingly. "But I am convinced that 'tis true. He said that you had buried your heart into your violin, Mr. Linley. Yes, I am sure that that is the truth; for were it otherwise how could the people who have heard you play declare, as some have done to me, that when you play 'tis as if you were drawing your bow across your heart-strings?"

"You have heard people say that?" he cried, leaning forward in eagerness; he had allowed the sofa to support his shoulders up to this point. "You have met some who heard me play? But I have only returned from Italy a few days. I have only played once in Bath."

"You can only be upheld when you play in public by the thought that in every audience there are some persons—few though they may be, still they are there—who are capable of appreciating your playing—who are capable of receiving the impressions which you seek to transfer to them."

He looked at her with wide eyes, surprise, admiration, in his gaze.

"I never begin to play without such a thought," he cried. "That, as you say, is the thought that upholds me, that uplifts me, that supports me. I had it first from my dear Maestro. He used to urge us daily, 'Play your best at all times; even though you fancy you are alone in the room, be assured that the true musician can never be alone. Who can tell what an audience the spirit world gives to him? He must remember that his playing is not merely a distraction for the crowd in the concert-room, it is an act of devotion—an act of worship.' That is what the Maestro said, and every day I recall his words."

"They are words which no true artist should forget," said she. "The sentiment which they convey should be the foundation of every art. We cannot all build cathedrals to the glory of God, but it is in the power of every true artist to raise a shrine—perhaps it is only a humble one of lath and plaster, but it is still a sacred place if one puts one's heart into it. That reflection is a dear consolation to me, Mr. Linley, when I reflect sometimes that I am only an actress."

The boy was delighted. His face glowed. His heart burned.

"Dear madam," he cried, "do not depreciate your calling. Why, I have heard even great musicians say that the most one could do in a lifetime was to add a single note to the great symphony which Nature sings in adoration of the Creator."

"Then I was unduly ambitious when I talked of a shrine," said she. "And I am, I repeat, only an actress. Such as I can only utter a feeble pipe—the trill of a robin. 'Tis you musicians whose works sound in the ears of all ages. Time calls aloud to time through you, until the world is girt about with a circle of glorious melody, and men live rejoicing within its clasp. Ah, sir, what am I, to talk of shrine-building? What am I in the presence of a great musician? Shrines? Oh, I can only think of Handel as a builder of cathedrals. Every oratorio that he composed seems to me comparable only to a great cathedral—glorious within and without, massive in its structure, and

here and there a spire tapering up to the heaven itself, and yet with countless columns made beautiful with the finest carving. Ah, Mr. Linley, if the music of *Messiah* were to be frozen before our eyes, would it not stand before us in the form of St. Paul's?"

"I am overwhelmed by the grandeur of the thought," said he; and indeed he spoke the truth. His eyes had grown larger and more lustrous than ever while she had been speaking, and he could scarcely articulate for emotion. So highly strung was his temperament that the force of a striking poetic image affected him as it did few men. He had, as it were, reduced all the possibilities of life to a musical scale, and his thoughts swept over him as a bow sweeps over the strings of an instrument until all are set quivering.

"A cathedral!" he murmured—"a cathedral!"

She could see that those eyes of his were looking at such a fabric as she had suggested. He was gazing in admiration from pillar to dome, and from the dome to the blue heaven above all. She had never before come in contact with so emotional a nature—with so sensitive a soul. She knew that what Dick Sheridan said was true: Tom Linley had hidden his heart in his violin, and every breeze that touched the strings caused his heart to vibrate in unison with the music they made. She had only spoken to him on the subject of music, and already his face was glowing—his heart was quivering.

Some minutes had gone by before he was able to ask her:

"When did you conceive that wonderful thought—the oratorio—the cathedral? Ah, Handel spent his life building cathedrals!"

"It was when I had heard your sister sing in the greatest of all the master's works," she replied. "Could any one hear Miss Linley sing 'I know that my Redeemer liveth,' and remain unmoved? Ah, what a gift is hers! I am certain that she is as sensible as you are of the precious heritage that is hers."

"Alas!" he cried, "she has flung it away from her. She has no thought of her responsibility. Nay, she is ready to sacrifice herself so that she may never be asked to sing again."

"Is't possible? Good heavens! you cannot mean that 'tis her intention to sing no more after she is married?"

"That is why she is marrying Mr. Long—to be saved from the necessity of singing in public; those were her words—'to be saved.' Just think of it! Oh, she can never have had any true love for music!"

"You think not? But perhaps she has given all her love to Mr. Long."

"She confessed to me—at least, she as good as confessed to me—that she intended marrying Mr. Long only because he had promised that she should not be asked to sing in public any more."

"She cannot care for this elderly lover of hers. Has she tried to make you believe that she does?"

"She professes to be grateful to him for releasing her from her bondage: those were her words also—'released from her bondage.' She has always thought of her singing in public as a cruel bondage."

"Heavens! But why—why?"

"I protest I cannot understand her. She is nervous—I think that she must be strangely nervous. She spends all the day in tears when she is to sing in the evening, and she is like to faint when she walks on the platform. And my sister Polly, who shares her room, told me that on returning from singing, Betsy has wept half the night under the influence of the thought that there were some people who remained untouched by her singing."

"Singular! Good heavens! where would we be if we all had the same share of sensibility? What, does she think that the plaudits of her audiences are not loud enough or long enough?"

"She is utterly indifferent to applause. Indeed, she acknowledged to me that she was better satisfied when she was coldly received than when she succeeded in arousing people to a frenzy of delight, because then 'twas her hope that the managers would not be so anxious to engage her again. Oh, Betsy is my despair."

"I can quite believe it. But you talked to her—reasoned with her?"

"Oh yes; I tried to make her feel as I do—that nothing in the world is worth a moment's thought save only music."

"But even that argument did not prevail with her? Did she not confide in you that she thought something else worth living for? Young girls have their fancies, as you may have heard—oh yes, their fancies and their loves. Has she been so foolish as to give her heart to any one, do you think?"

"She is going to marry Mr. Long."

"Oh yes, but I was not talking on the subject of marriage; on the contrary, I was speaking on the topic of love. She has had many suitors. Do you fancy that she may love one of them?"

He gave a shrug and smiled.

"She has had no lack of suitors, but I don't think that she set her heart on marrying any of them."

"Not even the poorest of them?"

He looked at her enquiringly.

"Do you know anything of her suitors?" he asked. "I have been in Italy for some years, and so came in contact with none of them."

"You did not put any question to her on the subject on your return?"

Once again he lapsed into the habit of shrugging, which he had acquired abroad.

"My dear madam," said he, "I was not sufficiently interested in the matter to put any question to her touching so indifferent a topic. But now that I come to think of it, I fancy she did say something to me about love being—being—being something that deserved— Let me see, was it the word 'attention' that she employed? No, *consideration*; I believe that was the word. Yes, she said that she had considered the question of love."

"And with what result, sir? I protest that you interest me greatly," said Mrs. Abington. And indeed she had now become quite interested in this boy with the large eyes so full of varying expression.

"Alas! madam, this is the point at which my treacherous memory fails me," said he, after a little pause.

"Ah, is not that a pity, seeing that the point was one that promised to be of interest?" said Mrs. Abington.

"I am afraid that I was not interested, madam," said he. "If she had come to me with the result of her consideration of Mozart's additional instrumental parts to *Messiah* I feel sure that I would remember every word; but— I wonder what view you take of the instrumental parts introduced by Mozart, Mrs. Abington? I should like to have your opinion on this subject."

"And I should like to have your opinion on the subject of love, Mr. Linley," said she in a slow voice, and letting her languorous eyes rest for a second or two on his—for a second or two—no longer. She recollected the horse-breaker; he did not force the bit into the mouth of his colt all at once. He allowed the little animal to put his nose down to the steel gradually. He did not frighten him by flashing it in his face.

"I told Betsy what I thought about love," said he. "I told her that, while I did not assert that the sentiment of love had been brought into existence solely to give a musician an opportunity for illustrating it, still it formed an excellent subject for a musician to illustrate."

"Indeed, you think well of love, Mr. Linley. Your views interest me amazingly. I should like to hear further of them. Love lends itself readily to the art of the musician? Yes, I should like to have this point further explained to me. I wonder if you chance to have by you any musical pieces by which you could demonstrate your theory."

"Oh, there is no lack of such works, I assure you."

"And I take it for granted that the only instrument that adequately interprets them is the violin. The violin is surely the lover's choice in an orchestra!"

"It is the only instrument that has a soul, madam. Other instruments may have a heart: only the violin has a soul."

"That is what I have felt—all my life—all my life; but until now my feeling was never put into words. Oh, it would be so good of you if you would play at your next concert some of the music that illustrates your theory. I wish to learn from you—indeed I do."

"I do not play in public for another week."

She gave an exclamation of impatience and then one of regret.

"'Tis too tiresome! I shall be back in London within the next day or two, and we may never meet again."

Her long lashes were resting on her cheeks as she looked down at the tip of one of her dainty shoes. He looked at her, and his artistic appreciation compelled him to acknowledge that he had never before seen such marvellously long lashes.

He followed the direction of her eyes, and his artistic feeling—he had begun to feel—assured him that he had never seen a daintier foot.

"Why should it be impossible for us ever to meet again?" he asked.

"Ah! why—why, indeed?" she cried. "It has just occurred to me that if you had half an hour to spare to-morrow, you might not grudge sharing it with an old woman whose interest you have aroused on a question of art. You shall bring your violin with you and demonstrate to me your theory that love is particularly susceptible of being illustrated through the medium of music. Oh, 'tis wholly a question of art—that is why I am so interested in its solution."

"Why, madam, nothing could give me greater pleasure!" he cried. "I shall go to you after dinner, and I promise you that I shall convince you."

"You may have a hard task, sir. I give you warning that on any question of art I am obstinate."

"Then my victory will be all the greater. Should I bring with me also a sonata illustrating the approach of autumn—'tis by a German composer of some distinction?"

"The approach of autumn?" said she. "Ah, I think we would do well to defer the consideration of

the chills as long as possible. We will content ourselves with the approach of love, for the time being."

"Perhaps you are right," he said.

"The second house from the street in the Grand Parade is where I am lodging," said she. "You will not be later than four o'clock, unless you choose to come very much later and share my humble supper?" she added.

But the boy said he thought that it would be wiser for him to go while the daylight lasted.

And perhaps he was right.

CHAPTER XIII

It was not within the bounds of possibility that the fascinating Mrs. Abington should remain for the rest of the evening seated by the side of young Mr. Linley in the Assembly Rooms. It was, as a matter of fact, thought very remarkable that she and he were permitted to have so long a conversation without interruption. This circumstance, however, did not prevent the young man's resenting deeply the intrusion of Mr. Walpole and his friend Gilly Williams upon the artistic and philosophical duologue in which he was taking, as he fancied, the prominent part. (He did not doubt that philosophy as well as art formed the subject of his discourse with the charming lady.)

He thought that he might tire out Mr. Walpole and his friend, who had the bad taste to push themselves forward—they did not even think it necessary to have philosophy and art as their excuse—to the destruction of that seclusion which he had no trouble in perceiving the lady loved dearly. He found, however, that Mr. Walpole and Mr. Williams represented merely a beginning of the obtrusive elements of the mixed society at Bath; for before they had got rid of more than a few brilliant phrases embodying some neatly turned but empty compliments—he was convinced that Mrs. Abington, the actress, was just the sort of woman to detest compliments—quite a number of men, well known in the world of art as well as of fashion (to say nothing of philosophy), were bowing before her and delivering themselves of further compliments in the ears of the lady.

There was Mr. George Selwyn, for instance, who had some coffee-house jargon for her; its delivery necessitated his putting his face very close to her ear, and when she heard it, she gave a delightful simulation of a lady who is shocked—Tom actually believed that she was shocked. And then that awkward little Dr. Goldsmith, who, strange to say, was a great friend of Lord Clare and Bishop Percy and Captain Horneck of the Guards, and others of the most fastidious people in England—people who had it in their power to pick and choose their associates—came up with some witticism so delicately tinged with irony that no one laughed for several seconds. Dr. Goldsmith had to tell her that he had received a letter from Mr. Colman in which he had promised to put his new comedy in rehearsal immediately.

"That is good news for you, doctor," said the actress.

"For me? Nay, madam, 'tis not of myself I am thinking, but of you; for the comedy contains a part—Kate Hardcastle is the name of the heroine—which will make you famous. Oh yes, indeed, 'tis entirely on your account I am gratified."

"Sir, poor Goldsmith is vainer even than I believed him to be," Tom Linley heard the foolish little Scotchman, who followed Dr. Johnson about in Bath as well as London, say to the huge man of letters; and Tom thought that he was fully justified in making such a remark. He was, therefore, all the more surprised to hear Johnson say, after giving himself a roll or two:

"Sir, Dr. Goldsmith may at times have been deserving of reproof, not to say reprobation, but it would be impossible for him to go so far as to make your remark justifiable. It is not for such as you to say 'poor Goldsmith!'"

Then quite a number of other notable people sauntered up, so that Mrs. Abington became the centre of the most distinguished group in the Long Room, and Tom, who did not see his way to protect her from these inconsiderate obtruders, felt that he would not be acting properly were he tacitly to countenance their attitude; so with a bow he stalked away. What dull-witted wits were these, who were too dense to perceive that the lady's most earnest desire was to be permitted to remain unobserved!

He hastened to his home and spent the remainder of the night practising over such musical selections as would tend, he hoped, to dissipate the philosophical doubts which Mrs. Abington appeared to have in regard to the relations existing between music and the sentiment of love.

Dick Sheridan did not leave the Assembly Rooms quite so soon. He had boldly entered the place in order to get over the meeting with Betsy Linley. He had felt sure that she would come to the Rooms this evening; for it appeared to him that Mr. Long was anxious to parade his prize—that was the phrase which was in Dick's mind—before the eyes of the many suitors whom she had discarded in his favour. Dick felt that he, for one, would not shrink from meeting her in a public place now; it was necessary for him to make up for his shortcoming in the morning.

But while she remained away, he was conscious of the fact that Mrs. Abington had given him something to think about. How was it possible that she knew that he loved Betsy Linley? he

wondered; and what did she mean by suggesting that she had come down to Bath to say something that should console him for having lost Betsy? What sudden friendship was this which she professed for him? Why should she have assumed, unasked, the part of his sympathiser? He had been frequently in her company during the previous year, both in Bath and London; for she had taken lessons in elocution from his father, and had naturally become intimate with the Sheridan family. Besides, she had more than once helped to drag his father from the brink of bankruptcy in Dublin, and lent the prestige of her presence in some of his seasons at that very fickle city; and for these favours Mr. Sheridan had been truly grateful, and had ordered his family to receive her at all times as their good angel.

Dick remembered how his father had dwelt upon the phrase, "our good angel," and he was thus led to wonder if it was her anxiety to act consistently with this *rôle* that had caused her to post to Bath without a moment's delay in order that she might offer him consolation in respect of Betsy.

He began to feel that he had not adequately expressed his gratitude to her for all the trouble which she had taken on his behalf—for the thoughtfulness which she had displayed in regard to him. He felt that she had not been merely acting a part in this matter. Whatever he may have suspected on this point at first, he could not doubt the sincerity of the note that sounded through that confession of hers—she had called it a confession, and she had called herself a fool. He did not know much about women, but he knew that when a woman calls herself a fool in earnest, she is very much in earnest.

But why should she have called herself a fool?

This was the question which had bewildered him before, and when it recurred to him now, it produced the same effect upon him.

The more he tried to recall her words the more satisfied he became that there was a good deal in the attitude of Mrs. Abington that he had not yet mastered.

He turned and looked up the room to where she was sitting. She was not looking in his direction. Her eyes were fixed upon the face of Tom Linley, and she was listening with the most earnest attention to what Tom was saying. She really seemed to be completely absorbed in Tom.

For a few minutes Dick felt jealous of the other youth. Why should this lovely creature, who confessed that she had come from London solely to say a word of comfort in his (Dick's) ear, become in a moment so deeply absorbed in Tom Linley, who had no aspiration in the world except to improve himself as a performer on the violin?

In spite of that sudden twinge—it could scarcely be called a pang—of jealousy which he felt while watching Mrs. Abington giving all her attention to Tom Linley, his bewilderment did not disperse. But to do him justice, he had already ceased to think of her as a kind woman, and this was one step—though he did not know it—toward his discovery of the truth.

He did not get a chance to give further consideration to the question of the lady's motives at that time, for his friend Halhed waylaid him with a lugubrious face and a smile of infinite sickliness.

"You observe, Dick?" he said, nodding significantly.

"I observe much—a good deal more than I can understand," said Dick. "But what do you observe—that I am observing?"

"What? Oh, you must notice it—everybody must notice it. I dare swear that remarks are being made about it in every part of the Rooms," said Halhed.

Dick frowned.

"Do you mean Mrs. Abington?" he asked. "Why, man, 'tis only her fancy to give some slight attention to Tom Linley. She is an actress, and she may be about to act the part of a boy. They are all wild to do boys' parts. My father tells me that it was Mrs. Woffington who set the fashion more than twenty years ago."

"Mrs. Abington! Who cares the toss of a penny what freaks Mrs. Abington may indulge in?" sneered Mr. Halhed.

"No one, except fifty or sixty thousand playgoers in London," said Dick. "But pray, what is on your mind, Nat? Who is there present apart from her that calls for observation?"

"You are not so acute as I believed you to be, Dick, or you would know that 'tis not of any one present people are talking. You should have noticed that Miss Linley is absent, and that every one is saying that she is ashamed to face me. She has reason for it, Dick. Do you not allow that she treated me badly? Oh, you must allow so much; she treated me cruelly, for I give you my word, Dick, that I never offended her even by a look. I was not one of those presumptuous fools who made love to her. No word of love did I ever breathe in her hearing. Do you fancy that I am not speaking the truth, sir?"

"I do not doubt it, Nat—indeed I do not doubt it."

"Give me your hand, Dick; you are my friend. That is why I am perfectly frank with you now, as I have always been. I was ever silent in her presence, and I believed that she respected my silence; she must have known that I was ready to lay my heart at her feet, I was so silent. Ah, she is afraid to face me. She stays away."

"Nat, my friend, if you ask me for my opinion," said Dick, "I will tell you without hesitation that if you saw there was great reason to maintain silence in the presence of Miss Linley, the attitude

is even more becoming in her absence. Come, sir, be a man. Think that there's as good fish in the sea as ever came out of it. Good heavens, man! am I doomed to listen to the plaint of every foolish swain who believes that he has been aggrieved by Miss Linley? I tell you plainly, Nat, you must find another confidant. What! Have you no self-respect? Do you think it is to your credit to go about, like a doctor at a funeral, advertising your own failures? Oh, I have no patience with fellows like you who have no backbone. And so good-evening to you, sir."

He turned about, leaving the young man overwhelmed with amazement, for Dick had always shown himself to be most sympathetic—a man to encourage confidences.

Strolling to another part of the Rooms, he felt himself tapped on the shoulder. Looking round, he saw that he was beside a certain Mr. Bousfield—a young gentleman of property who had been paying great attention to Miss Linley.

"You see, she is not here—she has not the courage to come face to face with me," said young Mr. Bousfield.

Dick looked at him from head to foot, and then with an exclamation ran for the nearest door, and made his way home without glancing to right or left, lest he should be confronted by some other men seeking to pour their grievances into his ear. He thought that he had exhausted the tale of the rejected lovers, but it seemed that when he had routed the main body, a company of the reserves had come up, and he did not know what strategy they might employ to force themselves upon him. He felt relieved when he found himself safe at home.

But to say the truth, he was greatly disappointed at not meeting Betsy face to face, when he felt sure of himself—when he felt sure that he would be able to offer her his congratulations without faltering. He had prepared himself for that meeting; and now he had begun to lose confidence in his self-possession, having had a proof of his weakness in the presence of Mrs. Abington. It was not satisfactory for him to reflect upon the ease with which that lady had extorted from him his confession that he was miserable because Betsy had promised to marry another man. Although he had begun talking to her in the same spirit that he had meant to adopt in regard to Betsy, yet she had only to utter a single sentence, suggesting that she knew his secret, and forthwith he had broken down, and, by confiding in her, had put himself on a level with the full band of plaintive suitors who had gone about boring him with the story of their disaster.

To be sure, Mrs. Abington had professed to stand in need of no confession from him. She had—if she was to be believed—posted down to Bath the moment she had heard that Betsy had given her promise to Mr. Long, in order to tell Dick that she sympathised with him.

And if Mrs. Abington, living in London, was aware of his secret, might it not be possible that it was known to numbers of people living in Bath, who had far more frequent opportunities than could possibly be available to her to become aware of the truth?

This question caused him a sleepless hour after he had gone to bed. He could not endure the thought of being pointed at—of being whispered at by busybodies as one of the rejected suitors. His vanity recoiled from the thought of the bare possibility of his being relegated to so ignoble a position. He made up his mind to go to Mrs. Abington the next day and beg of her to keep his secret.

But, strangely enough, he became conscious of a curious reluctance—it seemed a curious instinct of reluctance—to go to Mrs. Abington. The truth was that what she had said to him when talking unreservedly and sincerely had somewhat frightened him. He had not quite understood what she meant when she had reproached herself for being a fool, and it was because he did not understand her that he was—in a measure—afraid of her. The young animal is invariably afraid of what it does not understand. To do so is an elementary impulse of instinct. That is why a dog is cowed when it sees a ghost; ghosts are unusual—very unusual; and that is why men who have not gone through a course of astronomy are terrified at the appearance of a comet.

And the more that Dick Sheridan tried to arrive at an understanding of what the fascinating actress had said to him, the more frightened he became. She had spoken with convincing sincerity. That was just where the element of the unusual appeared, giving rise to his fears.

And then there was that little twinge—was it of jealousy?—which he had felt on looking up the Room and seeing her lavishing her attention upon Tom Linley.

He resolved that for the present, at any rate, he would not go near Mrs. Abington.

But when was he to meet Betsy face to face?

CHAPTER XIV

It was not until he had dined the next day that the thought suddenly came to him:

"Why should not I solve in the simplest way the problem of meeting Betsy Linley, by seeking such a meeting myself? Why should not I go to her at her father's house on the chance of finding her there?"

He wondered how it was that it had not occurred to him long ago to take such a step. Surely, since his aim was to show her and the rest of the world how little he was touched by the news of her having promised to marry Mr. Long, no more effective step than this could be taken by him!

Of course her father would be in the room when he should meet her—certainly Mr. Long would be there; perhaps Tom would be scraping away at his violin, and Polly would be squalling—that was the word which was in his mind when he thought of the likelihood of Mary Linley's being engaged in practising some of her songs in the music-room—Polly would be squalling at the top of her voice. But any one, or all, of these incidents would only tend to make him more at home—more at ease when meeting Betsy for the first time under the changed conditions of her life. The Linleys' house in Pierrepoint Street would not seem like the same place to him if Polly's voice were not ringing through it—if the children were not making a noise on the stairs—if Mrs. Linley was not bustling about with a kitchen apron on, or, in the moments of her leisure, with her knitting-needles clicking over half a yard of worsted hose. Yes, he felt that he would be quite at his ease under the usual conditions of the Linleys' house; and that was why he took no pains to dress himself for the visit. With an instinct of what was dramatically appropriate—he never lost this instinct—he put on the old coat which he had been accustomed to wear when he had enjoyed what Mr. Linley called the "freedom of the Guild of Linley." That would show Betsy and the rest of them—though it didn't matter about the rest of them—that, whoever had changed, he was still the same.

He got his first surprise when the door was opened for him by Mrs. Linley. She had on her working-apron, and her hands were not free from a suspicion of flour. She beamed on Dick and wiped one of her hands on her apron to greet him.

"Come within, Dick," she cried. "Come within, man; though there's no one at home but Betsy and me. These are busy days with us, Dick, and this is the first quiet hour we have had since Tom returned from Italy. Of course you have heard the news—all Bath is talking of it, and I shouldn't wonder if it had gone as far as the Wells! 'Tis great news, to be sure; but it means a deal of extra house-work, and more pastry. The children are all gone to Monsieur Badier's assembly. The boys are taking part in the minuet, and Polly is to sing for the company between the dances. Mr. Linley and Mr. Long are at Lawyer Stott's. These settlements are always a trouble, though I will say that Mr. Long is more than liberal in his views. Poor Betsy! What will the house be without her, Dick? You will find her in the music-room. She sings every day now, but not real singing—only for her own pleasure. There she goes. Oh lud! why am I standing talking like this when I should be turning my tartlets in the oven? Sniff, Dick, sniff! You have a fine nose. Do you smell the smell of burning paste, or is it only a bit over-crisp?"

Dick sniffed.

"I wouldn't be too sure of those tartlets, madam," said he. "But I don't believe there is more than a brown sniff coming from the oven."

"Oh lud! if you can sniff the brown, you may swear that the paste is black; you must make allowance for the distance the smell has to travel. Go upstairs; you'll be able to track her by the sound."

The good woman was already at the farther end of the passage to her kitchen before Dick had begun to mount the stairs.

The sound of Betsy's singing went through the house. The song was one of Dr. Arne's, which he had always loved. But had he ever loved the voice till now?

This was his thought while he stood outside the door of the music-room waiting for the song to come to an end.

It seemed to him that her singing of that song had the magical power of bringing before his eyes every day in the past that he had spent near her. The day when he first saw her she had sung that very song. It was at one of the entertainments given by his father in Bath, and he had just left Harrow. Every phrase of that song which now came from her lips renewed his boyish impressions of the girl, her beauty and the witchery of her voice. He could see himself standing before her, silent and shy, when she had come later in the day to have supper at his father's house. He had been silent and shy, but she had been quite self-possessed. It was upon that occasion that Mr. Burke referred to the Linley family as a Nest of Linnets.

Dick remembered how he had wondered why it was that he himself had not said that about the Linleys: why should it be left to Mr. Burke to say it when it was exactly what was in his own mind?

He had loved her then. He recollected how he had struggled hard all the next day to write a poem about her—a song that her father might perhaps set to music to be sung by Betsy herself.

And then ... and then ... and then....

The ghosts of the sweet past days flitted before him while the sound of that song enveloped him, and every spectral day shone white and bright in his memory. For a time he failed to realise that they were merely shadows flitting across his memory. They seemed to him full of life—a heart beating in every one of them. Alas! it was only his own heart that throbbed with those sweet recollections; for when the song faded away and closed in silence, he felt that he was alone. The beautiful creature of those old days had passed away from him and had left him lonely. He had awakened from a dream.

He felt such a sadness come over him that he could not open the door that separated them. He turned silently away, and was about to go down the stairs, when suddenly the door opened and the girl took a step into the lobby. She started, and gave an exclamation of surprise.

"What! is't you, Dick?" she cried. "Why, how was it that I failed to hear you come? How is it

that you are going down the stairs?"

His self-possession had fled at the moment of her appearance. He faltered out something.

"You were singing, that was how you did not hear me come; and then—then—well, I thought that—that maybe I should disturb you by entering. Yes, you were singing."

"Oh, Dick!" she said, and there was a note of reproach in her voice.

She turned and walked back into the room. He followed her.

"I knew you would come, Dick," she cried, giving him both her hands. "Oh, I knew that you were not one who would stay away! I looked for you all yesterday, and I waited within the house all this morning. But you have come now, Dick, and I am glad—you know that I am glad to see you. Were we not always friends—the very best friends that could be, Dick?"

"Yes, I have come, dear Betsy," he said. "I have come to wish you—to wish you happiness; indeed, I wish you all happiness—with all my heart—with all my heart and soul, dear Betsy."

He saw her white figure before him through the mist of the tears that sprung to his eyes. And at that moment there was really no desire in his heart but that she should be entirely happy. Every selfish wish—every sense of disappointment—every sense of wounded vanity—every sense of self had dissolved in that mist of tears that came to his eyes, but did not fall.

She was looking into his face, but she did not see that there were tears in his eyes. Her own tears had sprung, and they did not remain in her eyes; they were running down her face.

She could not speak. She could only hold his hands, and all the time she was making a pitiful attempt to smile, only he could not see this.

They stood there silently for a long time. At last he felt her hold upon his hands slacken. Still, there was a suddenness in her act of letting them drop finally. With a sound like that of a little sob, she turned away from him and stood before one of the windows looking out upon the street.

He did not say a word. What word was there for him to say? He had no thought of the clever, cynical things he had meant to say to her on the subject of marriage. He did not at that moment even remember that it had been his intention to say such words to her, so that he did not loathe himself until he had gone home and remembered what his intentions had been the previous day.

He stood silent in the middle of the room. Quite a long space of time had elapsed before she turned to him, and now he could see the smile that was upon her face.

"I knew you would come to see me, Dick," she said; "for I know that there is no one in the world who would be gladder to see me happy than you, Dick. And you—you will be happy too—you will give me a chance some day of seeing you happy, will you not? It would make me so happy, Dick."

He shook his head—that was his first impulse; but immediately afterwards he said:

"Oh yes; why should not I be happy—one day, Betsy? Oh, don't take any thought for me, dear; I dare say that I shall be able to—to— What is it that makes people happy, Betsy? Is it love—is it loving—is it being loved?"

"Oh, Dick, there are surely plenty of things in the world besides love!" said she.

"There are, but none of them is worth working for," said he. "There is fame; you have that—you have enjoyed it for years—"

"Enjoyed it? Enjoyed— Ah, Dick, I have promised to marry Mr. Long in order to escape from it. Now you know why I have given him my promise. It is because I cannot live the life that is imposed on me—because I feel that if I were to continue leading this life I must one day throw myself into the Avon, seeking for rest. I hate the fame which has put my name into the mouth of every one. Oh, Dick, if you could know how all these years my heart has been singing that one anthem, 'Oh for the wings of a dove—the wings of a dove, to fly away and be at rest!' I have heard the boys in the Abbey sing it, but they did not know what the words meant. I know what they mean, and my heart has been singing them all these years. My soul has been so filled with that longing that there has been no room in it for any other thought—any other aspiration. You can understand me, Dick—I know that you can understand me. My father cannot. He loses patience with me; and Tom, from whom I hoped so much, he is worse than my father. He has no thought in life apart from his violin, and he is happy only when people are applauding him."

"And Mr. Long—does he understand you?" asked Dick.

"Oh yes—yes; I feel that he does," said the girl. "Mr. Long is so good—so kind—so considerate."

"Oh yes; and you are still ready to do him the injustice of marrying him?" said Dick.

Her face flushed. She looked at him without speaking a word for some moments, then she turned away from him and faced the window, out of which she had been looking pensively.

He caught one of her hands from behind.

"Forgive me, dear Betsy, forgive me!" he cried passionately. "Oh, my Betsy, I did not come here to add to the burden which you have to bear; I did not mean to reproach you; only—you know—you know what is in my heart, dear—what has been in my heart all these years! I did not speak. What would have been the good of telling you? You knew it; you knew all that was in my heart!"

"I knew—I knew," she said, and every word sounded like a sob.

He was still holding her hand, but she had not turned to him. He was behind her.

"And I knew that you knew, and that gave me hope," he said. "I had hopes that one day—some day— Oh, why did my father treat me as he did? Why did he take me from school and bring me here to spend my life in idleness? He would not consent to my learning anything that would be of use to me, that would have enabled me to earn bread for myself. Why could not he have given me at least a chance of doing something—the chances that other boys are given?"

He had flung her hand away from him and had gone passionately to the farther end of the room, his hands clenched.

"What was the good of my hoping—dreaming—longing?" he continued, speaking across the room. "It seemed that every one was to have a chance except myself. But still, that did not prevent my loving you, Betsy—loving you as none of the more fortunate ones could love you. It was the one solace left to me, and you knew it; you knew that I loved you always; you knew—"

"Oh, Dick, Dick, do not be cruel!" she cried. "Let me implore of you. Oh, Dick, let us be to each other to-day as we used to be long ago when we were children together. You remember how frank we used to be to each other, telling each other everything? How could we be otherwise? We had not learned any language but that of frankness. Dear Dick, I know what was in your heart. You hoped, and I, too, hoped and hoped, until my life became unendurable.... Ah, can you blame me because when my chance of freedom came I accepted it? I promised to marry Mr. Long; but listen to me, Dick: I give you my word that if you tell me that I was wrong I will go to him and take back my promise."

He turned to her, and his hands instinctively clasped themselves.

"Oh, Betsy—my Betsy!" he cried; and then he was silent.

There was a long pause before she said, in a low but firm voice:

"Tell me what I am to do, Dick, and I will do it. I have given you my word."

"Oh, my beloved!" he said. His hands were clasped. He was gazing at her standing there before him in all the pathos of her beauty. He knew that if he were to speak the word to her she would keep her promise to him, and the word was trembling on his lips. The temptation to speak it—to bring her back to him—almost overcame him. He looked at her—he faltered—then, with a cry, he put up his hands to his face, shutting her out from his sight, and flung himself into a chair with his head bent and his hands still upon his face.

"God help me! God help me!" he cried through his tears.

"And me too, Dick; God help me!" she said. "Oh, I knew that I could trust you, my Dick! I knew that you were noble—that you were equal to that act of self-sacrifice: a greater act of self-sacrifice than mine. You will not say the word; I knew that you would not say it."

She was kneeling beside his chair, and she had put an arm across his shoulders—it was almost round his neck.

Still he sat there with his face down upon his hands.

"Dear Dick, the noblest life is that which is made up of self-sacrifice," said she. "Yours is the strong and the noble life. But mine— Oh, I feel that if I were strong I would be able to submit to my fate without murmuring. I would not seek to free myself from the life which I have led—the life which I abhor. But I am weak—I know it—I own it, and I feel that I cannot endure it any longer. The last time that I sang in public must be my last time to sing. I made up my mind that anything—death—would be preferable to such an ordeal. Oh, Dick, can you blame me greatly if, when Mr. Long came to me, I welcomed him as a slave welcomes the one who sets him free? I felt that he had come to stand between me and death."

He put up his hand and took the hand which was resting on his shoulder, her arm crossing his neck. He held it in all tenderness for some time, his eyes looking into hers. Their faces were close together, but he did not kiss her face. Their breath came with the sound of a sigh.

"Dear child," he said at last, "dear child—dear Betsy, I was selfish even to say so much as I did to you—to say so much as even suggested a reproach. But, thank God, I am strong enough to resist the temptation which you put before me. I dare not ask you to change anything that has happened. It has been decreed by Heaven that we are to walk in different ways, and I hope with all my heart that you will have happiness. I asked you just now whence happiness sprang to any one. Dear Betsy, that question has been answered since I heard you speak. Happiness comes by self-sacrifice. Happiness comes to those who seek not their own good, but the good of others. That is why I can hope that you will be happy, my dear one."

"Indeed, that is what is in my heart, Dick," she said. "I feel that I can now do something for the ones I love—for my sisters—for my brothers. Mr. Long is kind and generous. He will, I am assured, help us all. Poor father is obliged to work so hard, and mother is a drudge. I think that little Maria has a nature like mine, and I shall be able to save her from all that I have gone through. And then, and then—well, there is something else to take into account. You can guess what it is, Dick?"

"Yes, I think I know what is on your mind, Betsy," he said. "You have been pestered by suitors, and now you hope that you will have at least a respite."

"A respite!" she cried. "Oh, Dick, I shall be safe for evermore. You do not know what I have suffered. It would seem as if every man who ever heard me sing considered that he had a right to

send letters to me—letters full of compliments—and every compliment was an insult to me.”

“Why did you not tell me?” he cried, starting up with clenched hands. “Why did you not give me a hint of this? You know that I would have made every rascal among them answer to me with his life for every insult offered to you.”

“I know that—that was why I kept everything a secret from you,” she said. “The thought that you would be in danger on my account— Ah, I know that blood has been shed already, and even now I do not feel safe. Captain Mathews—he was the most persistent of my persecutors, and even yet ... he uttered the most terrible threats against me only yesterday. I do not feel secure.”

“I will kill him—I swear to you that you have only to hold up your finger, and I will kill him.”

“I know it, dear Dick—I know it. But do you think that I would consent to your running into danger for me? Oh, I would submit to anything sooner than that you should be put in jeopardy of your life. But I have told you all this that you may the more readily understand why I should be filled with longing to go away and hide myself in some place where there is calm and quiet—some place that has always been in my dreams. It must have come to me with the hearing of the anthem, ‘The Lord is my Shepherd.’ Oh, the vision of the green pastures beside the still waters! Now you know all that there is to be known, and you will not judge me too harshly, Dick?”

CHAPTER XV

He saw the appealing look upon her face, and he knew that he had never seen so pitiful an expression before. Her fear was that he might judge her hastily and harshly. Ah, how could she have such an apprehension so far as he was concerned? He forgot while he looked into her face that there had ever been in his heart any thought of bitterness against her. It was impossible that he could even for a moment have entertained a thought except of sympathy in regard to her.

Did there exist in all the world a girl with so gentle—so sensitive—a nature as was hers? It would, he knew, have been impossible to make most people in the world in which they lived—the shallow, cynical, artificial world of fashion—understand how this girl should shrink from everything that young women in their world hoped to achieve. He knew that Elizabeth Linley was envied even by duchesses. There was no woman too exalted to be incapable of looking on her with envy. Dick Sheridan had heard from time to time the remarks which were made upon her by the *grandes dames* who frequented the Pump Room. The Duchess of Argyll, who twenty years before, had taken St. James’s by storm, when she was only the younger of the two Miss Gunnings—she had now become Mistress of the Robes and had been made a Peeress in her own right—he heard this great lady say that Miss Linley was the most beautiful young woman in England, and almost equal in this respect to what her own sister, the Countess of Coventry, had been at her age.

And the Duchess of Devonshire—he had heard her say that she was quite content to come to Bath to hear Miss Linley sing once only.

This was the verdict of the two greatest ladies in England, and he knew that what the duchesses thought one day all England thought the next. (The commendation which Miss Linley had received from the king himself when she had sung to his Majesty and the Queen at Buckingham House was not worth considering alongside that of the two great duchesses.)

Could any one believe that such a girl, envied as she was by all the rest of womankind, should shrink from the applause which greeted her every time that she sang—from the admiration which the most distinguished people in England offered to her? Could any one but himself understand the shrinking of that pure soul of hers from the fame that was hers—the adulation of the fastidious? Could any one believe that with all the world at her feet, her dearest wish—her most earnest longing—was for the seclusion of the green pastures, for the quiet that was to be found beside the still waters.

He looked at her, and felt a better man for looking at her. She was one of those rare women who carry with them the power of making their influence for good felt by all with whom they come in contact. No one could be in her presence and remain the same. She was a garden of roses. Dick Sheridan had come to her with his heart full of bitterness—he had been treasuring up hard words to say to her—treasuring up words of keen steel as though they were soft gold; and yet before he had even come into her presence—while he was still standing leaning up against the doorway, listening to her singing—every hard word, every harsh thought had vanished. And now he was standing before her wondering how he could ever have had a thought of her except of tenderness and unselfish devotion. In her presence he had ceased to think of himself. Her happiness—that was what he thought of. He was quite content to take no account of himself in the world in which her happiness was centred. And yet she suggested that there was a possibility of his judging her harshly.

“What you have suffered!” he cried. “Is it the decree of Heaven that those who are more than half divine should have more than double the human capacity for suffering? That is the price which such as you have to pay for a nature such as yours. And you ask me not to judge you too harshly. Ah, my Betsy, you are judging me too harshly if you fancy it possible that I could have any thought about you that was not one of tenderness and affection. Tell me how I can serve you, tell me how I can stand between you and the world—the world that can never understand such a

nature as yours. The world is human, and you are half divine."

"Ah, no!" she cried. "If mine were such a nature, I should be strong enough to endure the worst that could come to me. Alas! I am very human."

"Show me some one who is very human, and I will show you some one who is very nearly divine," said he. "What Bishop O'Beirne said about you long ago is the truth; you are more than half an angel. That is why people fail to understand you. I do not think that even I, who have known you so long, have quite understood all the sweet unselfishness of your nature until now. We are being divided now, dear Betsy. We are like ships that meet and then sail separate ways; but whatever may happen, I pray of you to think of me as one who understood you. I pray of you to call for me at any time that you may stand in need of some one to help you. You know that I will come from the farthest ends of the earth to help you."

"I know it, Dick," she cried,— "I know it. A day may come when I shall have only that thought to sustain me."

There was a silence between them. It lasted for some time, each looking into the face of the other, and seeing there a very pale face—each holding the hand of the other, and finding it very cold.

Suddenly the silence was broken by the sound of voices downstairs—the voices and the laughter of children. Their feet sounded on the stairs.

In a quick impulse of the moment not to be resisted, the girl threw herself into his arms and kissed him on each cheek—rapidly—almost passionately. He held her close to him and kissed her on the lips. In another instant they had separated; the door of the room was flung wide, and the boys rushed in, followed scarcely less leisurely by Maria and Polly. They all talked together, giving some of the more striking details of the Dancing-Master's Assembly.

Polly, who was burning to make Dick acquainted with the opportunities of the newest minuet, was unceremoniously elbowed aside by one of the boys, who had a good deal to say on the subject of the refreshments. The buns might certainly have been fresher, he asserted; and Dick freely admitted his right to speak as one of the cognoscenti on the subject of the bun. But the critic was in turn pulled aside by little Maria, who had been presented with a cup of ice for the first time in her life, and was (paradoxically) burning to record her impressions on the subject of ice as a comestible. She admitted being startled at first, but she indignantly denied the impeachment of one of her frank brothers to the effect that she had been too frightened to swallow the first spoonful, but had, without a voice, borrowed a hasty handkerchief— No, she had swallowed it, she declared, with a vehemence that carried suspicion to all hearers—she had swallowed it, and if she had not taken a second it was not because she was afraid, but because she was not greedy, like—she was in no doubt as to the identity of the greedy one of the party—the one who had eaten three slices of plum cake, and had not refused, as would have been polite, the fourth tumbler of lemonade. It was Master Oziah who accused himself by excusing himself in respect of this transaction.



Only three of the group were talking together, their voices becoming somewhat shrill, when Tom entered, and in a moment silence dropped on all. Tom had, since his return, given them to understand, upon many occasions, that he would not overlook any boisterousness on their part. He talked of nerves, and the young ones had stared at him. They had never heard the word before, and at once jumped to the conclusion that it was some foreign malady—perhaps Italian, and not unlikely to be a variant on the plague or the black death—terrors which had now and again been used by a nurse as a deterrent to their boisterousness.

Silence followed the entrance of Tom—silence and a nudge or two passed faithfully round the group from rib to rib. Tom, on entering the room, had suggestively left the door open—quite wide enough to allow of the exit of all the youngsters in couples without inconveniencing themselves.

He glanced significantly at the opening, and the hint was not lost upon the children.

Only Polly remained in the room. Tom could, no doubt, have dispensed with the society even of Polly; but that young lady had no intention of being in any sense put out by her brother, though her father had hitherto taken his part in any domestic difference, on the plea that Tom was a genius.

“Tom has been visiting Mrs. Abington
these three hours,” said she, with a nod to Dick.

“She took quite a fancy to Tom last night,” said Dick. “But I had great trouble inducing Tom to let me present him to her. I think I showed some tact in excusing him by letting the lady know that he had buried his heart under the bridge of his fiddle.”

“You did not tell me that she is devoted to music—to the fiddle,” said Tom.

“’Tis the first I heard of it,” said Dick. “I have heard of some of her devotions, but the fiddle was not among the number.”

“You probably never took the trouble to find out, and she is not the sort of lady to obtrude her talents on an unwilling ear,” said Tom.

“Oh!” remarked Dick.

“She is not such a lady,” continued Tom. “But the truth is that she possesses a fine and elevated judgment on musical matters.”

“That means that she praised your playing up to the skies,” suggested Polly. “I have not lived in the house with musicians all these years to no purpose.”

Betsy and Dick laughed; but Tom ignored their laughter as well as Polly’s rudeness.

“I knew what a mind she had when she gave me her opinion on Handel last night,” said he. “‘Handel spent all his life building cathedrals,’ were her words.”

“And somebody else’s words, I daresay, before they descended to her,” remarked Polly. “But they are not true; at least, I never heard of Handel’s building any cathedral. Let us count all the cathedrals in England, and you’ll very soon see——”

Tom gave a contemptuous laugh.

“Of course, every one must know that she was alluding to the oratorios of Handel,” said he. “Has anything finer or more apt been said about the oratorios, Dick?”

“The phrase is very apt—indeed, it is striking,” acquiesced Dick.

This degree of praise by no means satisfied Tom. He gave an exclamation that sounded almost derisive.

“Apt—striking—almost striking!” he cried. “*Cielo!* have you no appreciation of perfection? I tell you that nothing finer—nothing more beautiful was ever said in the world.”

“Oh, she must have been impressed by your playing,” said Polly.

“Don’t be a goose, Polly,” said Betsy. Then she turned to her brother. “Yes, dear Tom, any one who knows anything of Handel’s methods will allow that to suggest a parallel between one of his great oratorios and a cathedral is—is—well, all that you say it is.”

“Only one who is devoted to music and who understands its mysteries could have so sublime a thought,” said Tom. “I felt it to be a great privilege to be permitted to play to such an audience this afternoon.”

“For three mortal hours,” whispered Polly.

“Three hours—immortal hours,” said Tom. “But the time was all too short.”

“I am afraid that I shall never be a musician,” said Polly, with a stage sigh.

“What did you play for Mrs. Abington, Tom?” asked Betsy.

“I took some rolls of music with me,” replied Tom; “but I found that there was no need to have gone to such trouble. She wished to have it explained to her how—how—never mind, ’twas a theory of mine—we talked together about it—she and I—last night in the Long Room. Mr. Walpole came up—Mr. Selwyn—Mr. Williams—they had fresh-made epigrams—pleasantries taken from the French. They wearied her, but she was too polite to yawn in their faces.”

“No; she would not yawn in their faces,” said Dick. “And what was the subject of your theory, Tom? And how did it come that you had no need for the rolls of music you took with you to her lodgings?”

“‘Love and its Interpretation by Music’—that was the point upon which she expressed the liveliest interest,” said Tom.

“Oh, this is no place for me; I am too young,” cried Polly demurely, as she rose from her chair and went to the door.

“Polly has become insufferable,” said Tom in a tone of irritation. “Of course, any one who has studied music knows that it is a science.”

“It is assuredly a science. Language is a science, I have often heard my father assert; and since music can interpret the language of love into phrases that can be easily understood, it must be granted a place among the sciences,” said Dick. “But is’t possible that Mrs. Abington would not listen to your demonstration of this science on your violin?”

“*Cielo!* Why do you suggest that she would not listen?” cried Tom.

"Why, man, have you not just said that you had no need of the rolls of music which you carried with you?" said Dick.

"Oh, I had no need for the printed music. I improvised for her," replied Tom.

"In the Italian fashion?" inquired Dick. "Well, I am certain that you had a most sympathetic listener to your phrases of interpretation. She is, as you say, devoted to—to—science."

"She was more than sympathetic," cried Tom. "Oh, it is a better instruction for one to play to such a listener than to receive a lesson from a Maestro."

"Mrs. Abington is undoubtedly fully qualified to give lessons," said Dick. "I am sure you will learn much from her, Tom, if you give her your attention."

And then Mr. Linley entered the room.

CHAPTER XVI

Dick stayed to supper with the Linley family; and in spite of the thought that this was probably the last of many delightful suppers at the house in Pierrepont Street—the reflection came to him often in the course of the evening after a burst of merriment from the children, in which Betsy and he joined, Tom being the only one to remain grave—he felt quite happy. To be sure his happiness was tinged with melancholy; but this fact did not cause it to be diminished—nay, his gentle melancholy seemed only to have the qualities of a tender summer mist at sunset, which makes the sun seem larger and gives it colour. The gentle sadness of his reflections only impressed him more deeply with a sense of his happiness—his happiness which arose from a sense of self-sacrifice. In the presence of Betsy he had lost sight of himself, as it were. He gave no thought to the certainty of his own lonely future. He could only think of the possibility of happiness which awaited his dear Betsy.

Mr. Long was not present at this supper: he had gone to his friends, the Lambtons, at the Circus, Mr. Linley explained; and Dick fancied that he saw a new light in Betsy's face when her father had presented Mr. Long's apologies. But he did not mistake the meaning of what he saw; he knew that whatever satisfaction she felt at that moment was due solely to her reflection that he, Dick, would not now be subjected to the restraint which Mr. Long's presence could scarcely fail to put on him. He perceived that she was anxious that this farewell supper should include no element that would interfere with his happiness. And he gave her to understand that in this respect she need have no misgivings. The children, who had always made a great friend of him, had never before found him so merry—so full of stories: he had not really met an ogre since he had last seen them; but he was in correspondence with one, and hoped, upon the next occasion of his coming to Pierrepont Street, to be able to let them know what his views were on many topics of interest. And perhaps at the same time he might be able to tell them something of the professional career of a pirate whom he knew, and who was making quite a name for himself by his many acts of cold-blooded barbarity in the Channel. Meantime he gave them a circumstantial account of the night's work of a certain Irish fairy, who had attained some amount of popularity in the old days, when the only industrious section of the inhabitants were the fairies.

The children, consulting together in a corner of the room after supper, came to Dick and communicated to him the result of a plebiscite as to whether he or Mr. Garrick was the more entertaining; and they were happy to let him know that, while opinion was divided as to which of them could make the funniest faces when telling a story, there was perfect unanimity on the question of the quality of the stories, those told by Dick being far in advance of Mr. Garrick's, on account of their seriousness. Mr. Garrick's stories were, Maria asserted, as the mouthpiece of the group, far too ridiculous to be believed. But Dick's, it appeared, were well up to the level of the nursery, being perfectly plausible, especially those dealing with the Irish fairies.

Mrs. Linley was the only one of the party who was in a mood to regret the absence of Mr. Long. She had taken special care that the pastry should be of that type which appeals to gentlemen who are as a general rule not partial to pastry. Mr. Long, she told Dick, had never avoided her pastry—no, not even when it came in such a questionable shape as an open tartlet, which Mr. Linley had often said might well make the boldest tremble.

The good woman questioned very much if Mr. Long would partake at the Lambtons' of any more wholesome fare than would have been at his service had he returned to Pierrepont Street; for though it was understood that the Lambtons had a French cook, who had once been in the employment of Lord Durham, yet for her part she did not believe that a Frenchman could cook a supper for an English palate,—palate was not the word she made use of, but in gastronomy politeness ignores precision.

After supper Betsy sang one song, her father smoked his pipe outside the music-room, and, refraining from criticism, suffered her to sing it after her own heart. He recognised the fact that she had now passed out of the sphere of serious criticism: she had become an amateur, and an amateur is one who sings for one's own satisfaction, regardless of the feelings of others. Tom was not in the room either: he had gone to his bedroom immediately after supper, and was playing on a muted violin; so that Betsy was permitted to sing without the restraint of any musical presence.

It was getting late when Dick took his leave of those members of the family who remained out of bed, and he found that only for himself and Betsy this leave-taking had any significance. They

all begged him to come back again soon—all except Betsy. She took his hand and was silent. She did not even say “good-bye.” He said “good-night” to every one but Betsy. To her he said “good-bye.”

He found that although the street was in darkness, there was a suggestion of moonlight on the rims of the hills toward the east. The moon was some days past the full and did not rise till within an hour of midnight. Pierrepont Street was lighted by only one lamp, and was quite silent. In the distance he could see the flaring links of a few belated chairs. From another direction there came to his ears the sounds of the singing of some revellers returning from supper and probably on their way to the lodgings of one of their number, where there would be a card-table.

Before these sounds had passed away into the distance he heard the music that was being played in one of the houses in the South Parade, where a dance was taking place. All the windows were lighted, and, looking up, he saw a shadow or two on the blinds—shadows moving to music—a graceful swaying with arched arms to and fro, and then the sudden sweep of the courtesy and the swing of the bow with the gold-laced hat skimming the floor. All the grace, the allurements, of that lost poem of the eighteenth century—the Minuet—came before his eyes with the motion of those shadows with the subdued blaze of a hundred candles behind them.

“Shadows,” he said, “these things are all shadows: there is no substance in all this life; shadows fluttering for an hour in the light of the candles, and then passing away to the land of shadows whence they came.”

He was in the true mood of the moralist. A gentle melancholy was upon him; and he was outside the room with the dancers. The moralist is the man who has not been asked to join in the dance. He walked on, and before he had quite gone out of hearing of the fiddles, the moon had risen above the edge of the hill and was moving among the fleecy clouds that covered the sky, making irises along their edges.

He had intended to go home, but the night was congenial with his mood; the moonlight had a touch of his melancholy: it was not garish, but tenderly softened by the swimming clouds; so, feeling as if he had a sympathetic companion, he strolled on for a couple of miles on the Gloucester road, and then turned into a lane that led up the hill. Arriving at the highest point, he seated himself on a low bank, whence he could look down upon the lovely city bathed in that milk-white moonlight.

In the moonlight it seemed to his eyes like the city of a dream. All the enchantment of the first sweet sleep of night permeated it. It was surely like a silver city of a mirage—a wonder of the desert, with towers mingling with minarets and shadowy spires.

He did not feel unhappy. How could any one feel unhappy looking down upon such a scene? And there beneath his eyes the mystery and the magic of it all was added to, for the delicate veil of vapour which had been hanging over the windings of the river began to crawl up the banks, and, under the influence of the gentlest of breezes, to spread itself abroad over the city. Looking down upon it, it seemed to be a silent sea—the sea of a dream that comes without sound and floods the visionary landscape, and then swims into the dreamy moonlight. Tower and spire remained above the surface of the river mist—silver islands rising out of a silver sea.

What was this mystery of moonlight that was spread abroad before his eyes? he asked himself. What did it mean to him? Why had he been led forth on this night to be a witness of its wonders?

Was he to learn on this night of nights something of the mystery of life? Was he to learn that the destiny of man is worked out in many phases unfamiliar to man?

One mystery of life had already been revealed to him this night: the happiness of self-abnegation. She had taught him this—the one girl who came into his life, and who would, he felt sure, ever remain a part of his life, though it might be that he and she would never meet again as they had been accustomed to meet during the previous two years—she had taught him this, at least, and he felt that his life was not the same since he had learned that lesson. He was conscious of the change. His life was better. It was purified; he was living it, not for the joy of life, not for the ambitions which he hitherto sought to realise, but for the spiritual gain; and he was content even though that gain could only be achieved at the sacrifice of all that he had once held most dear.

And all the time that he was reflecting upon the change that had come to him, the scene was changing under his eyes. The breeze that had lifted the mist from the river and spread it abroad through the by-ways of Bath, strengthened and swept those airy billows away into nothingness, and the still fleecy clouds that had been floating motionless about the moon began to feel the breath that came from the west, bringing up somewhat denser, but still fleecy, masses. The moon began to climb among the clouds, and now and again its disc was hidden as it laboured upward.

He rose from his seat on the green bank, and began to make his way down the lane to the London road. The night was very silent. The striking of the clocks of the city was less clear than that of a bell in the far distance. The barking of a dog came from one of the farms on the opposite slope of the river. The bleating of sheep came fitfully and faintly through the trees that concealed the meadow beyond the upward curve of the road.

He reached the road and made some haste homeward. Hitherto he had seen no wayfarer; but before he had gone more than a mile, he heard the rumble of a vehicle in the distance, and a few minutes after, one of the coaches came up and galloped past in a whirl of dust. Dick turned aside to avoid the dust, and stood for a few minutes in the cover of a small shrubbery. When he resumed his walk the coach was not only out of sight, it was out of hearing as well.

But before he had gone on more than a hundred yards he was startled by hearing another sound—the sound of a man’s shout as if for help. It came from the distance of the road in front of him, and it was repeated more than once.

Dick stopped at the first cry, faint though it sounded, and listened closely. After all, he thought, the sound might only come from a shepherd driving his sheep from one pasturage to another; but the next time it came his doubt vanished. He was running at the top of his speed round where the road curved, and before he had gone far he saw three men furiously lunging—the moonlight flashed on their blades—at what seemed to him to be the iron gate between the carriage drive of a house and the road. When he got closer to them, however, he saw that there was a man behind the bars of the gate, and that while he was holding the latch fast with his left hand, with the sword which he held in his right he was cleverly parrying the thrusts of the others.

Without thinking of the likelihood of the men turning upon him if he interfered with them—his Irish blood, which was now pretty hot in his veins, prevented his entertaining the thought of danger to himself—he whisked out his sword, and, with a shout to encourage the man behind the gate, made for his antagonists. He never reached them. At the sound of his voice they contented themselves with a vicious thrust or two between the bars, and then turned and ran.

But Dick’s blood was up, and he gave chase to them without pausing to see the condition of the man to whose relief he had come. The fugitives ran for some distance along the road, and then jumped the ditch where it was lowest and went headlong down the slope to the river. He followed hard upon them; but a small, though dark, cloud blotted out the moon for a couple of minutes, and he lost sight of them. When the moonlight came again he could only see two of the men; and they were still making for the river. Noting this, all his energies were strained in an effort to cut them off—he did not pause to consider the chance there was of the third man waiting in ambush to rush out on him when he should be passing.

He gained upon the fugitives when racing down the slope, and he was confident of getting within sword length of them when they should be stopped by the river. But the next dozen yards showed him that they would escape: a boat lay under the bank, and the fellows were making for it.

He gathered himself together at the brink of the river and made a rush at the hindmost man; but before Dick’s sword reached him, the fellow sprang forward and went headlong into the water. At the same instant the other man threw himself into the boat, and the force of his leap broke loose the boat’s mooring-line and sent the small craft half-way across the stream. Dick saw the man make a sudden grab over the side, and then a head appeared above the water, and an arm was stretched up to the gunwale. The boat drifted slowly across the stream, and Dick saw the two men get safely to the opposite bank, where they quietly seated themselves, the one who had been in the river squeezing the water from his hair.

“You rascals!” cried Dick, between his gasps for breath. “You rascals! I’ll live to see you hanged for to-night’s work.”

“You’ll do better if you save your breath to chase our employer,” said one of the men, and Dick knew from his speech that he was a common man.

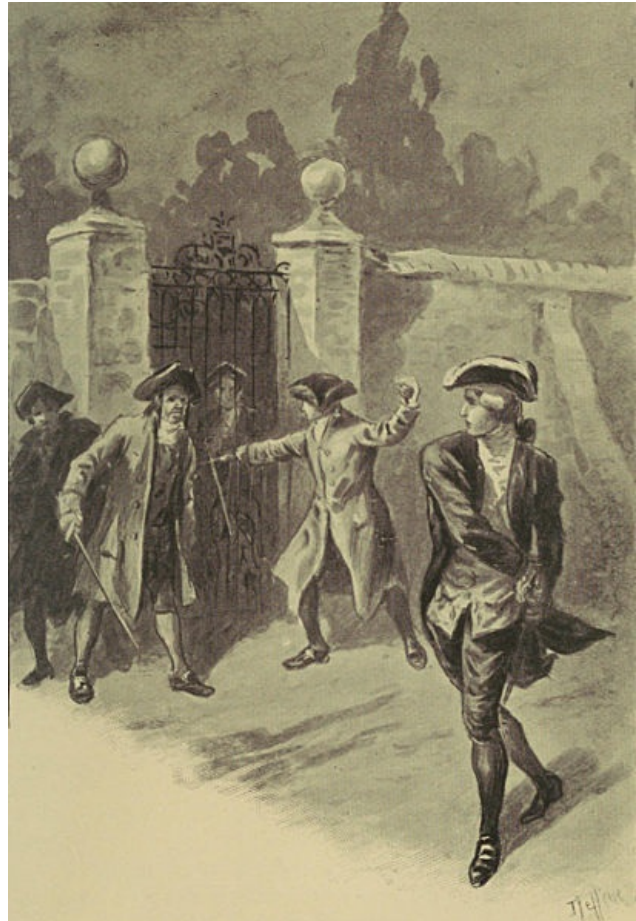
“Who is your employer?” he shouted.

The man laughed, saying:

“Find him. He can’t be very far off.”

Dick ceased parleying with the fellow, and made his way slowly up the sloping ground, looking carefully in every direction for the third man, but not going out of his way to search for him, the truth being that he began to feel that he had had his share in this adventure, the origin of which was as completely unknown to him as its meaning.

He reached the road without catching a glimpse of the third fugitive; and then he sheathed his sword and began to retrace his steps toward the iron gate where the encounter had taken place.



HE WHISKED OUT HIS SWORD, AND, WITH A SHOUT TO ENCOURAGE THE MAN BEHIND THE GATE, MADE FOR HIS ANTAGONISTS.

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Now that the affair had reached a certain point he had become sufficiently interested in it to have a desire to know what it had all been about.

Before he had reached the place, however, he came upon a man in a rather dishevelled condition, engaged in binding up his right hand with shreds of his handkerchief.

He saw that the man was Mr. Walter Long.

CHAPTER XVII

"Heavens, Mr. Sheridan, it is to you I am indebted for my preservation from those rascals!" said Mr. Long.

Dick took off his hat in acknowledgment of the compliment.

"May I venture to hope that you have not received any severe injuries, sir? Your hand——"

Dick could see that there were some dark spots on the portions of the handkerchief that Mr. Long had managed to tie about his wrist and his knuckles.

"Only flesh wounds—scratches," said Mr. Long. "But you followed the fellows, Mr. Sheridan? That was brave of you. My mind was greatly relieved when I saw you returning. I am glad that you were not so foolish as to rush into what may have been a trap. I suppose that, like rats—other vermin—they escaped by the river?"

"Two of them escaped by the river—I followed them down to the very brink, sir, and saw one of them safely into the water," said Dick. "His companion went headlong into a boat and picked him up. The third I lost sight of shortly after they turned aside from the road."

"Let them go," said Mr. Long. "'Twas God's mercy, Mr. Sheridan, that you were within earshot when I called for help. They attacked me on the road without a moment's warning."

"Footpads!" said Dick.

"H'm—perhaps footpads," said Mr. Long doubtfully.

"I never heard that they infested this road, sir," said Dick. "They must be the lowest in practice at this work. The chance passengers so far out of the city are not frequent after dusk."

"I have my suspicions," said Mr. Long. "I must have been followed by those scoundrels—or they may have lain in wait for me. I was supping with Mr. Lambton at his house on the Circus, and did not leave until late. Then I ventured to take a walk of a mile, tempted by the curiously beautiful night. I assure you I was not dreaming of an attack; but it came. Luckily the fellows rushed out upon me from the shrubbery along the carriage drive to that house, leaving the gate ajar. I had barely time to parry the thrusts of the foremost of the band, and by a disconcerting movement to get within the gate and close it. I saw that my only chance lay in keeping the bars between us. I will do them the justice to say that they also perceived that this was the case. But they only lacerated my hand and wrist."

"You fought bravely and adroitly, sir," cried Dick.

"At the same time, Mr. Sheridan, I know that if you had not come up at that instant I should now be a dead man," said Mr. Long.

"Oh no, sir; you would most probably have run some of them through the body," said Dick. "Cowardly rascals they must be! They showed themselves ready enough to run; they did not give me a chance of a single thrust at any one of them."

"I sympathise with you, Mr. Sheridan," said Mr. Long. "But your sword will be the less soiled. Five minutes—perhaps two—would have done for me. A gate with bars is no effective barrier where the small sword is concerned; and then—— Well, I'm not so young a man as I once was, sir; I was heartily glad at your coming on the scene. If you are walking back to the town I hope that I may claim your escort to my house."

"I shall feel proud to walk with you, sir," replied Dick, with alacrity. "But I venture to hope, sir, that you will see a surgeon before you retire."

"I assure you there is no need, Mr. Sheridan. I have an excellent servant; there is scarce a wound that he could not heal—he even professes to deal with those of the heart; but there, I think, he professes overmuch. I should like to put his skill to the test; so if you have a friend who is in an evil case in any matter pertaining to that organ, you have only to let me know. By the way, Mr. Sheridan, it may sound ungenerously inquisitive on my part to inquire to what happy accident I owe my life? Is it a usual custom with you to take a rural walk after midnight? Pray, sir, rebuke my impertinence as it deserves by refusing to answer me, if it so please you."

They had now begun to walk in the direction of Bath. The moon had risen high in the sky, and no cloud was visible. The night was so clear that Dick could not help feeling that the gentleman by his side saw his blushes that followed the inquiry. For the first time Dick perceived that he might have some little difficulty in explaining how it was that he came to be outside Bath on foot at that hour. When he had set out on his midnight stroll it had not occurred to him that he might be asked to give an explanation as to the impulse that had sent him forth. He hoped that Mr. Long did not notice his blush. It was only the suddenness of the question that had caused it.

"I took the walk because I had something to—to—think over," he said, without any particular readiness.

"Then you did well to walk at this hour and on such a night," said Mr. Long. "For myself, I can say that I have never yet faced any question that refused to be answered after a night's walk and a night's thoughts. And now I will place myself on a confessional level with you, by telling you before you ask—you are not so impertinent as to ask—if it be habitual with me to take a midnight walk? I will answer 'No' to that question, sir, and tell you that my walk was due to a certain want of confidence on my part in respect of Mr. Lambton's excellent—too excellent French cook. I supped at Mr. Lambton's, as I believe I mentioned?"

"Mr. Linley said you were going to Mr. Lambton's house, sir," said Dick.

"Oh, then you supped at the Linleys'?" said Mr. Long; "or did you merely meet Mr. Linley in the course of the night after he left me?"

"I supped with the family, sir. Mrs. Linley has had the kindness to treat me as one of the family. She expressed her regrets that you did not come to eat her pastry. She also expressed her want of confidence in Mr. Lambton's cook."

Mr. Long laughed.

"Our fears were not wholly groundless," he said. "I think I made as frugal a supper as is possible in a house where a French cook possessing some determination and four new dishes reigns in the kitchen. And yet I own that an hour after supper, I—I—well, I felt that a brisk walk of a mile might at least prevent my forming an unjust judgment on the cook. On the whole, however, so far as I can gather, I am inclined to believe that Mr. Lambton's cook is merciful as he is powerful. Neither you nor I, Mr. Sheridan, can know into what temptations to tyranny a first-class cook is led. He cannot but be conscious of his own power; and yet Mr. Lambton's cook is, I understand, as approachable as if he were an ordinary person like one of ourselves. Nay, I have heard that some Cabinet Ministers are infinitely more frigid to their colleagues than he is to the other members of the Lambton household. There's a man for you! And yet people say that the French nation— But I have not asked you if Mrs. Linley's pastry was as crisp as usual."

"It could scarcely be surpassed, sir, even if it had been made under the superintendence of an university of cooks," replied Dick.

"Then it was not to get rid of the thoughts impelled by your supper that you set out on your walk?" said Mr. Long. "I have heard it said that no man can be a poet who has not been subjected to a course of bad cooking. 'Tis a plausible theory. You have read the poem of the great Italian, Dante, Mr. Sheridan? Well, sir, will any one have the temerity to assert that it was not penned under the influence of a series of terrible suppers? 'Twas but one step further, you will see, from the supper to the Inferno? And there was Milton—well, he follows the Biblical account of the curse falling upon humanity owing to the indiscreet breakfast indulged in by the lady of the garden. And John Bunyan—a great poet, sir, except when he tried his hand at verse-making—his description of the terrors of that Slough of Despond was most certainly written under the influence of a dinner in Bedford gaol. But perhaps you do not think of being a poet, Mr. Sheridan?"

"I have had my dreams in that direction, sir," said Dick, and once again he was led to hope that Mr. Long would not notice his blush. He could not understand how it was that Mr. Long succeeded in getting him to confess so much—more than he had ever confessed to another man.

"You have had your dreams, sir? I am glad to hear it. I would not give much for a lad who has not, before he is twenty, had dreams of becoming a poet. As a matter of fact, Mr. Sheridan, all men who do anything in the world are poets before they are twenty. The practical men are the men who have imagination; and to be a man of imagination is to be a poet. Now you, Mr. Sheridan, will do something in the world, I fancy."

"Ah, sir, that was my hope—long ago—long ago."

"Long ago—long— Heavens! you talk of long ago, when you cannot have more than reached the age of twenty-one! Why, I am sixty, sir, and do not venture to speak of long ago. Your life is all before you, Mr. Sheridan; and permit me to say that 'twill be your own fault if it be not a noble life—a notable life 'tis bound to be, considering your parentage. Your mother was one of the most remarkable women of this period of the century. Her novels possess extraordinary merit; I say that, and I was a friend of Mr. Richardson. Your father's genius is recognised. And think of the variety of his attainments. He is not only a great actor, he is a scholar as well; but if he were neither the one nor the other, he might still claim attention as a writer. His theories respecting the importance of elocution are valuable. One has only to hear you speak to become a convert to your father's theories. If you some day obtain recognition as an orator, you will have to thank your father for his admirable training of your voice. You intend, of course, to enter yourself as a student for the Bar?"

"That was also my hope, sir; but I cannot persuade my father to give me his permission to my studying for the Bar."

"What! does he wish you to enter the Church and become as distinguished as your grandfather—one of the few friends and the many victims of the Dean of St. Patrick's?"

"He does not seem to think it necessary for me to enter any profession, Mr. Long. He says I have not sufficient ability to do credit to him and the family—'tis in my brother Charles he has placed his hopes. He has been striving for some time to secure for Charles an appointment under

the Government."

"I hope that he may be successful. And does he make no suggestion to you in regard to your future?"

"None whatever. 'Twas my dear mother who insisted on my being sent to Harrow, and I know that her intention was that I should in due time go to Oxford. Unhappily for us all, however, she died before her hopes were realised; and when my father returned from France with my sisters and brothers, I was taken from Harrow and brought here to waste my time. He seemed to think that I should be content to become a hanger-on of some fine gentleman. That is why he has always encouraged me to mingle only with people of title. Our bitterest quarrels—and we have had some, Mr. Long—have been about the Linleys. He has so exaggerated an opinion of the importance of our family, he thinks that it is not fitting that we should associate with the Linleys because they sing in public—because Mr. Linley is merely a teacher of music."

"You amaze me, Mr. Sheridan! Has your father never asked himself wherein lies the difference between a man who teaches singing and one who teaches elocution? I had no idea that he was so narrow in his views. Why, he is worse than Dr. Johnson. 'Twas Dr. Johnson who declared that if your father got a pension from the king, 'twas time that he gave up his. That was a very narrow-minded theory to pretend to have—I say 'pretend,' for when your father got his pension, the good Doctor showed no intention of relinquishing his. Still, that contemptible Mr. Boswell had no right repeating in every direction what Johnson may have said in his haste. You have heard Mr. Garrick drawing on the fool for the entertainment of a company? Every one knows that it was Dr. Goldsmith's humour to say to Johnson, 'Why do you call me "Goldy," sir—"Goldy," when you are well aware that I haven't even silver in my pocket?' And yet Garrick got Boswell to tell us the story t'other night as proof positive of Dr. Goldsmith's vanity. But this is beside the point, the point being that you would not give up the Linleys, however narrow-minded your father was. Well, Mr. Sheridan, I do not say that you were in the wrong. You have known Miss Linley for some years, have you not?"

"Ever since we were children, sir."

"What! so long ago as that?" Mr. Long laughed, but quite pleasantly—not as some people would have laughed at that moment. "Then I hope, Mr. Sheridan, that you did not fail to offer the lady your congratulations on having accepted the offer of marriage made to her a few days ago? By the way, now that I come to think on it, the one to be congratulated in this case is not the lady, but the gentleman. Is not that your view of the matter?"

"I think, sir, that Miss Linley is the sweetest girl that lives in the world, and that any man whom she loves is fortunate above all his fellows."

"And I agree with you, with all my soul. The man whom Elizabeth Linley loves is fortunate above all the rest of the world. What I am wondering just at this moment, Mr. Sheridan, is whether that man be you or I. Here we are at Millsom Street. I lodge in the last house, where I hope you will be polite enough to call to-morrow to make inquiries after my health. Pray do not forget that I owe my life to you. The man who saves the life of another accepts a fearful responsibility. You will find that out before you have done with me."

He was holding Dick by the hand. But Dick heard nothing of his invitation delivered in so unconventional a formula. A previous phrase of Mr. Long's had taken complete possession of his mind.

"I should like to know, sir, what you meant by saying—by suggesting that—that——"

Dick's stammering was interrupted.

"Good heavens, Mr. Sheridan! you cannot be in earnest in demanding an explanation of anything I say at this hour?" cried Mr. Long, with uplifted hands. "This, sir, is accepting your responsibility a little too seriously. You will be genteel enough to pay me a visit to-morrow—that is, to-day, for 'tis more than an hour past midnight. In the meantime, may I beg of you to—to ... that is, not to ... ah, on second thoughts, I will not beg anything of you. Good-night, good-night."

He took off his hat, and Dick mechanically raised his own. Mr. Long had turned down the street, but Dick still remained at the corner. Mr. Long had actually pulled the bell at the door of his house before Dick ran to his side.

"Mr. Long," he cried, "it has just occurred to me that—that it might be as well for you to say nothing to Miss Linley about the little affair that happened to-night. You know that she is nervous, and to hear that an attack was made upon you might prostrate her."

Mr. Long looked at him in a strangely penetrating way for some moments; then he said:

"You have given expression to the request which I was about to make to you just now. After a moment's consideration I withheld it: I remembered that you were an Irishman, and therefore that there was no need for me to ask you to remain silent in regard to an incident of which you were the hero. Mr. Sheridan, I will respect your wishes. Miss Linley shall not, unless I find reason to act differently, hear of your heroism through me."

"Oh, sir—heroism! that is too strong a word," said Dick.

"Perhaps it is, considering that it was only my life that you saved. Well, we shall say your good-fortune. Will you accept the compromise?"

"Gladly, sir: I shall always think of the incident as the most fortunate of my life."

"And I hope that neither of us, nor Miss Linley, will ever have occasion to think of it as otherwise; and so I wish you good-night again, my dear boy—my dear boy."

He gave Dick his hand once more, and Dick felt his fingers pressed with more warmth than he had ever received from his own father.

He rather wished that Mr. Long was his father.

CHAPTER XVIII

Dick Sheridan was conscious of a curious impression of elation while lying awake recalling the somewhat exciting incident in which he had played an important part. And when he thought over the details of the occurrence, he felt glad that he was elated. He did himself the justice to refrain from attributing his elation solely to the fact of his having put some rascals to flight, and his having followed them with a naked sword, anxious to run them through. Of course, he did not deny that he found pleasure in the reflection that he had made the rascals fly, and he was quite ready to allow that this pleasure was tinged with regret that he had not been able to get the point of his weapon in between some of their ribs. At the same time, however, he knew that he was sincerely glad that he had been able to save the life of the man who was taking Betsy Linley out of his life.

She had told him, when her hand was in his, that the joy of life was not in living for oneself, but in bringing happiness to others; and he had gone forth from her presence feeling that she had spoken the truth. It was a truth that he had often heard before from the lips of teachers of the elements of Christianity; but its enunciation had produced no greater impression on him than the words of such teachers usually do upon their hearers. All his thoughts had been for himself: seeking his own pleasure—seeking to cut a good figure before the eyes of the people who were around him. He had even gone to pay his visit to her in the same spirit. He was anxious to cut the figure of a cynical man of the world in her presence, and to show her that he was in no way touched by the announcement that she had given her promise to marry Mr. Long.

But in her presence he felt all the sweet influence of her nature; it surrounded him as the scent of a rose-garden surrounds one who comes among the flowers in June; he breathed it as one breathes the scent of the roses. The fragrance of her presence permeated his life. Her spirit became part of his spirit, and, sitting on the hill-slope, with the mystery of the moonlight about him, he felt himself to be a new man. The reality of the change that had come to him was soon put to the test. The chance had been given to him of saving the life of the man who was taking Betsy from him, and he had welcomed that chance. To be sure, when he had run upon the men with his naked sword, he had not known who it was that he was rescuing from his assailants; but he knew now, and he felt that the reflection that he had saved his life for Betsy was the greatest happiness he had ever known.

What would have happened if he had held back his hand at that time?

That question he asked of himself, and he had no difficulty in answering it. He knew that, unless some miracle had happened, nothing could have saved Mr. Long from being murdered. And in that case Betsy would be freed from the obligation which she had accepted.

He knew all this, and he thanked Heaven in all sincerity that he had been able to save the life of the man who stood between him and Betsy Linley. He shuddered at the thought of the bare possibility of his having failed to hear Mr. Long's cries for help; and he felt rejoiced at the thought that he had done an unusual thing in wearing his sword when going to pay his visit to Betsy. It was not customary to wear swords in the afternoon at Bath, though, of course, they were carried at night. But, when setting out to pay his call, Dick had fastened on his sword, the fact being—though he tried not to include it in the sequence of his thoughts while lying awake that night—that he had meant to accept an invitation to supper and cards at which one of his fashionable friends had hinted the previous evening. After offering Betsy his congratulations, and making a few worldly-wise remarks on the absurdity of marriage, it had been his intention to go to one of the Assembly Rooms, and thence to the supper-party; and, as an early return home was not among his calculations, he felt that it would be prudent to wear his sword.

What a lucky chance it was that he had been so prudent! (He had so successfully avoided thinking of his unworthy project that he had come to attribute his carrying of the sword to his own prudence and forethought.) Without a weapon, he himself, as well as Mr. Long, could hardly have escaped from the footpads, who were undoubtedly most desperate ruffians. And then, having settled the matter of his caution and forethought—two attributes which he had certainly not inherited, and which he could scarcely regard as inevitable to his nationality as an Irishman, from whatever source his intentions regarding the supper-party may have sprung—he went on to think of Mr. Long.

He had never exchanged more than half a dozen words with Mr. Long during the six months that the latter had been in Bath, and he had looked on him as quite an old fogey, possessing none of the brilliant gifts of a man of fashion. None of the *bons mots* of the dialogues of scandal which circulated in the Pump-Room in the morning and in the Assembly Rooms in the evening, having blown about the town during the day, were attributed to him. None of the dainty plums of malice—preserved in vinegar, not in sugar—which the ladies with the rouge and patches passed round in their *bonbonnières* at the card-tables, came from him; and therefore Dick had never thought of

him except as a good-natured elderly gentleman. To have a reputation for good-nature was of itself quite sufficient to exclude any one from the most fashionable set in Bath.

It was really only when it was announced that he was the successful suitor for the hand of Miss Linley, that people began to notice Mr. Long, and then the form that their attention took consisted in their alluding to him as an old fogley, if not an old fool.

Dick noticed that it was mostly the rejected suitors who so alluded to him, and he thought that it showed an amazing amount of weakness on their part: they were simply advertising their own failure—he had said so to his friend Halhed the previous evening in the Long Room, and he made up his mind that, whatever might happen and whatever he might think, he would never betray his own chagrin by calling Mr. Long an old fool.

Of course he could not but feel that it was an act of folly for a man turned sixty to make up his mind to marry a beautiful girl not yet twenty; he thought that he was equal to taking a dispassionate view of the matter. But he would never be heard alluding to Mr. Long as an old fool. He himself was not such a young fool as to give himself credit for any generosity in maintaining an attitude of reticence on this question; he was only determined not to show the same weakness as his friends, who acknowledged Mr. Long to be their successful rival.

But now, after recalling the attitude of Mr. Long when recovering from the effects of the attack made upon him by the three footpads—after recalling the easy tone of his conversation, and the adroitness with which he had obtained from Dick a good deal of information about himself and his prospects, and more particularly his lack of prospects, Dick came to the conclusion that for the first time in his life he had been speaking to one who was indeed a man of the world—a man who understood his fellow men and who could be humorously tolerant of their weaknesses and their prejudices. He could not but feel, however, that among the attributes of a man of the world which he possessed, there was in parts of his conversation a certain element of the enigmatical. For instance, when almost at the point of parting he had said— What were his exact words?

“The man whom Elizabeth Linley loves is fortunate.... I am wondering whether that man be you or I.”

Those were his very words, and they had puzzled Dick the moment they were uttered. They puzzled him much more now that he recalled them. They were certainly very strange words for such a man as Mr. Long to say at such a time as he had said them. Did they mean that he questioned whether Betsy loved him or Dick; or did he merely mean that he was uncertain whether he or Dick was the more fortunate in regard to some matter quite apart from the love of Elizabeth Linley—say, in the matter of age, or in respect of the adventure in which they had both been concerned? Did he mean that it was an open question whether the man who saves another man’s life or the one whose life has been saved is the more fortunate?

To be sure, his remark about the good-fortune of a man was connected solely with the question of the love of Elizabeth Linley, so that his saying that he wondered whether the fortunate man was himself or Dick, seemed to be simply equivalent to saying that he wondered whether Elizabeth Linley loved himself, whom she had promised to marry, or Dick, who was no more to her than other men. Still, it might be susceptible of a different meaning; for instance.... Great heavens! Could it be that Mr. Long was treating thus lightly the bare possibility that the girl whom he hoped to marry had given all her love to another man?

He could not believe this of such a man as Mr. Long. No; Dick felt that his ear had been over-sensitive. He had allowed himself to be led into a tortuous course of thought, only because Mr. Long had made a pause of perhaps two seconds instead of four between his sentences. It would, he felt, be ridiculous for him to base a theory upon so shallow a foundation. It would be absurd for him to assume that Mr. Long meant to suggest anything more than a casual reflection on a topic worn threadbare in the pulpit—namely, the uncertainty of human happiness.

It was, however, one thing to assure himself that it would be unreasonable to suppose that Mr. Long meant to suggest anything but what was trite, but quite another to convince himself that his ear had played him false; and this was how it came about that he had the first sleepless night of his life, and that he startled his sisters by coming down in good time to breakfast. His appearance was, in fact, rather embarrassing to the housekeeper for the week: Alicia had heard him enter the house at so late an hour that she took it for granted he would not come down to breakfast before noon, and had given her instructions to the cook on this basis. Dick had to face an empty plate until his fish was made ready.

He inquired for his brother—was he the late one this morning?

“What! did not Charles tell you that he meant to go to the country?” asked Alicia.

“Not he,” replied Dick. “The country? Why should he go to the country at this time?”

“Why, he said that you advised him to do so,” cried Elizabeth. “You know what is the only reason he could have for flying from Bath just now. Poor Charlie! he feels that Betsy was not considerate toward him.”

Dick laughed. He had quite forgotten that he had counselled his brother to go away for a time. He had really been more in jest than in earnest in the matter; but Charles had taken him very seriously, and had gone off without an hour’s delay to a farmhouse eight miles out of Bath, on the Wells road. He was not slow to perceive what Dick had hinted at—that a gratifying degree of prominence might be given to his name if the fact became well known that he had been so greatly overcome by the news of Miss Linley’s having promised to marry another man as to make it impossible for him to continue living in the same town with her.

"Poor Charlie!" said the elder Miss Sheridan in a tone that was meant as a reproof to Dick for his levity—"poor Charlie! But we can keep the matter a secret; we need not add to his humiliation, Dick, by talking of his having gone away on account of Betsy's treatment of him."

Dick laughed more heartily still.

"My dear girl," he cried, "your suggestion is well meant, but poor Charlie would not thank you if you were to act on it. Poor Charlie knows perfectly well that he has now got a chance of attaining such fame as may never come to him again so long as he lives. When the fickle Phyllis rejects Strephon's advances and accepts those of Damon, the Pastoral that commemorates the event confers immortality upon Strephon the rejected, just as surely as if he had been the fortunate lover. I can assure you that Bath, and Oxford too, I doubt not, are just now crowded with Strephons anxious to be handed down to posterity as the rejected swains. Take my word for it, poor Charlie would only be chagrined if he thought that no notice whatever would be taken of his forlorn condition as the rejected swain. Good heavens! wait until Friday comes, and you scan the Poet's Corner of the *Advertiser*; if you do not find poor Charlie making a bid for the immortality of the doleful Strephon, I am greatly mistaken."

The girls stared at him.

"You are wrong—quite wrong, Dick," cried the elder. "Yes, you are. Charlie begged of us to keep his departure a secret. He said he would not have it known for the world."

Dick did not laugh again: on the contrary, he became solemn. He felt that it would be heartless on his part to make the attempt to undermine the simplicity of his sisters. But the fact that Charlie had taken such elaborate precautions to give publicity to the news of his departure caused Dick to have a higher opinion than he had up to that moment possessed of his brother's knowledge of human nature.

And then, finding that Dick was silent—penitentially silent—the two girls thought that the opportunity was a fitting one to give expression to their views regarding the heartlessness of Betsy and the devotion of Charlie. They had seen Mr. Long, and were ready to assert that poor Charlie was quite as good as he was, without being nearly so old; and Miss Sheridan went so far as to suggest that the family of Sheridan were fortunate in that they were not called on to welcome Betsy Linley as a stepmother.

Dick began to think, after this remark, that perhaps he had done his sisters an injustice in assuming their entire simplicity.

CHAPTER XIX



MRS. ABINGTON WAS IN HER CHAIR.

Mrs. Abington was in her chair. She had just been to see her friends at Bath-Easton, and was hoping that she would be in time for service at the Abbey. That was why she stopped Dick in the street. What did he think? would she be in time for the service? She would be quite content to accept Dick's opinion on the subject.

Dick looked at his watch.

"Madam," he said, after calculating a moment, "you will not be in time for the Confession, which seems rather a pity; but I promise you that you will be in good time for the Absolution, if you make haste, and that will be to your advantage."

"Sir, you are a rude boor!" cried the lady very prettily.

"If so, madam, I am rude at my own expense," said he. "My words implied a '*Nunc Dimittis*'."

"Now that I come to think on't, that is so," said she. "But I am sure that you, being a man, must hold with me that the ideal Church is the one that grants absolution without insisting on confession."

"I am a sound Churchman, Mrs. Abington," said he; "I will not countenance the least suspicion of what is not orthodox."

"Psha! sir, that is equivalent to a confession that you like your salads without vinegar," said she—"your punch without

“Madam,” said he, “’tis now you who are orthodox—ay, up to the first chapter of Genesis; but for my part, I adore your sex, from Genesis until the Revelation comes.”

“The Revelation? Do you mean until the revealing of the woman or the Revelation of the Divine?”

“Mrs. Abington, I am orthodox: I cannot admit that there is any difference between the two.”

“You are a quibbler, I vow; but I would not hear your worst enemy accuse you of being orthodox.”

“You can silence such an aspersion, madam, by letting it be known that you extended your friendship to me.”

“More quibbling? I swear that ’tis a relief to have a simple chat with young Mr. Linley, after all this battledore and shuttlecock with you wits. Oh yes, Tom is a charming boy.”

“I am told that he can illustrate the progress of a passion from Genesis to the Revelation.”

“Ay, sir; but with the Apocryphal books left out.”

“You can hear passages from them read out in the Abbey.”

“He has made me wild to learn the violin. But, I fear, alas! that ’twill be too much for me.”

“Faith, Mrs. Abington, ’twill not be for want of strings to your bow,” cried Dick, dropping the tone of the man of fashion and assuming the good fellowship of the Irishman, even to his manner of raising his hat and bowing; he hoped that the hint would be taken by the Irish chairmen to lower the roof and resume their journey.

Mrs. Abington put up her hand to the roof.

“Tom is a charming boy,” she cried, smiling the enigmatical smile of Miss Prue. “Oh yes; ’twas you who said that his heart was buried in his violin.”

“I perceive that ’twas not a safe place of sepulture,” said Dick.

“You said the truth when you told me that his heart was there,” said she. “Yes, I can hear the poor thing wail to be released every time he draws his bow across the strings. You will come to see me at my lodgings, will you not, Mr. Sheridan?”

“I will wait until your heart is buried beside Tom’s within the frame of his fiddle; ’twere not safe else,” cried Dick. “Hasten to your Abbey, or you will miss even the Blessing.”

“Meantime, you will think out an epitaph to scratch into the varnish of the violin.”

“A simple *Resurgam* will do, for, by the Lord Harry, your heart will not rest long in one place, you beautiful creature!” cried Dick, standing with his hat in his hand while the roof of the chair was lowered on its hinges, and the chairmen went off with their fair burden.

Dick made up his mind that he would be in no haste to visit her at her lodgings. She had made him somewhat afraid of her two nights before, when she had lapsed into sincerity in the Assembly Rooms, and he had not yet come to regard her as free from any element of danger to his peace of mind. He felt, however, that he had accused her wrongfully of the butterfly quality of fickleness: nearly forty-eight hours had passed since she had thought it worth while to captivate Tom Linley, and yet it seemed that she was still faithful to him.

But why should she think it worth her while to captivate Tom Linley?

Dick thought out this question while walking to Mr. Long’s house, and before he pulled the bell he had come to the conclusion that Mrs. Abington was merely adapting to her own purposes the advice which Angelo, the fencing-master, was accustomed to give to his pupils. “Have a bout with the foils every day of your life, if only for ten minutes with your little brother in the nursery,” was the advice which Angelo gave to pupils when urging on them the need to keep in constant practice. Yes, Mrs. Abington must have heard him say that.

Tom Linley represented the young brother in the nursery. That was all very well, so long as the fencing was done with foils; but it would be an act of cruelty for an accomplished fencer to introduce rapiers into the nursery. He hoped that little brother Tom would come unscathed out of the encounter which represented to Mrs. Abington nothing more than a laudable desire to keep her hand in.

Dick found Mr. Long alone in his sitting-room. His left hand was rather more elaborately bandaged than it had been when Dick had seen it last. But Mr. Long assured him that the wounds were quite trifling—mere scratches, in fact, scarcely asking for the attention of a surgeon, although his valet had on his own responsibility called in an excellent young man, who could be trusted to do as little as possible to the wounds and so give them a chance of healing speedily, and who also could be trusted to hold his tongue in regard to the occurrence.

“I have been using the cudgel on my brains all the morning trying to invent some plausible excuse for carrying a bandaged hand for a day or two,” said Mr. Long; “but up to the present I cannot boast of the result. My dull ass will not mend his pace by beating. Can you come to my help in this matter, as you did in the matter that placed me in need of such a story? Come, Mr. Sheridan, you are a man of imagination and resource.”

“Alas, sir,” said Dick, “all that I can offer to do is to bear testimony to the truth of any

inaccuracy you may find needful."

"Whatever story we may invent, it will not be believed in Bath—so much is certain," said Mr. Long.

"I begin to think that, after all, we might as well tell the truth," said Dick.

"What! you think the case is so desperate as all that?" said Mr. Long.

"There is no better way of mystifying people than by telling the truth, especially when it sounds improbable," said Dick.

"I give you my word, Mr. Sheridan, you seem to speak with the authority of one who had tried what you suggest. Perhaps you may, under the stress of circumstances, have been led into the tortuous paths of the truth. Well, I think that, on the whole, we had better brazen the matter out, and give all Bath a chance of disbelieving us. But if we do so, we must also be prepared with a story to account for our being on the road at so late an hour. Ah, you will find, Mr. Sheridan, that telling the truth necessitates a great deal of tergiversation."

"I must confess, sir," said Dick, "I could scarcely hope to be believed if I were to make the attempt to account for my midnight walk on the simple ground of the fineness of the night."

"It would certainly be thought a very weak plea. Thank Heaven if I say that I supped at Mr. Lambton's and thought it prudent to have a stroll afterwards, I will be believed—at any rate, by such as know that Mr. Lambton has a French cook."

"Then I think it would be as well if we were to make an agreement not to mention my name in connection with the assault upon you; that will save the need for my thinking out a moderately plausible story to account for my presence on the scene."

"What! you would have me face all Bath with the story of having beaten off three footpads single-handed? Oh no, Mr. Sheridan! Anything in reason I am quite willing to state, but I have still some respect left for our acquaintance in Bath, and I decline to lay such a trust in their credulity. Why, sir, Falstaff's story of the knaves in Kendal Green would seem rational compared with mine! The wits would dub me Sir John the first day I appeared abroad after telling such a tale. And the lampooners—that pitiful tribe who fancy that possessing Pope's scurrility is the same thing as possessing his genius— Ah, I hear some of the doggerel—I could even make a quatrain or two myself on my own valour! Well, we shall not trouble ourselves further on this matter just now; we shall let our good friends take the first step. So soon as we hear what story they invent to account for my wounds, we shall know how much truth is needed; but we must economise our store. By the way, Mr. Sheridan, I wonder, if one of us had been killed last night, would Miss Linley be more distressed had it been you than if I had been the victim?"

The suddenness of Mr. Long's remark produced upon Dick the same effect as his remark of the previous night had done—that remark which Dick had pondered over during his sleepless hours.

He had no reply ready for such a question as Mr. Long had suggested to him—unless, indeed, Mr. Long would accept his unreadiness as a reply—his unreadiness and the confused, downcast look on his face, of which he himself was painfully conscious.

Some time had passed before Dick recovered himself sufficiently to be able to glance at Mr. Long, and then the expression which Mr. Long wore did not tend to make him feel more at ease. The smile which Dick saw on his face was a curious one—a disconcerting one.

"My poor boy," said Mr. Long, "I have no right to plague you with suggestions such as these. Still, I cannot help wondering if you are yet reconciled to the thought of Miss Linley's having promised to marry me?"

"I am reconciled, sir," said Dick in a low voice. "I was not so until I went to see her yesterday. I went, I may as well confess to you, Mr. Long, in a spirit of—of—no, not mockery; I could not think of myself falling so low as to have a desire to mock her—no; I only meant to show her that I did not mind—that I did not mind."

"And all the time you were eating your heart out? My poor boy, I can appreciate what was in your mind, not merely because I am not without imagination, but because I have an excellent memory. But you saw her, and I do not think that you were quite the same man when you left her; I cannot understand any man remaining unchanged in the presence of that divine creature."

"She changed me. She made me to look on life differently from the way in which I had previously thought of it. She made me to perceive what 'tis to have a soul. She made me see that the real life which is worthy to be lived by a man is—is—"

"You can feel what it is, that is enough," said Mr. Long when Dick paused, lacking the words to express what was in his heart. "'Tis enough for a man to feel—only to the few is it given to put these feelings into words, and those few we call poets. The poet is the one who has the power to give expression to what the man feels. 'Tis doing an injustice to men to suggest, as some people do, that all the feeling is on the part of the poet. Have I interrupted your thoughts by anticipating you, Mr. Sheridan?"

"You have said what was on my mind and in my heart—to-day," cried Dick. "I was a fool to make the attempt to define what I felt. I am not a poet."

"I am not so sure of that. Our friend Mr. Linley will tell you that the pauses in music are quite as important as the combination of notes in interpreting the emotions; and you have made some eloquent and touching pauses, Mr. Sheridan. Believe me, my friend, those pauses did not speak

in vain to me, and now ... well, you took that long walk in the mystery of the moonlight. Did that represent the final struggle with yourself, my boy? When you found out that it was I whom you had rescued from death, there was nothing in your heart but satisfaction? You were glad that you had saved me for her?"

"God knows it—God knows it!" said Dick, with bent head.

"I knew it too, my boy. I knew that you had taken the first step on that path to the new life which that sweet girl opened up before your eyes—a life in which self plays but the part of the minister to the happiness of others. And I ... it may occur to you that I can make but an indifferent preacher on this subject, since it was I who asked Miss Linley to give me her promise. There are some people who say that marriage is the most pronounced form of selfishness in existence. I fear that in addition to being called by a considerable number of persons 'an old fool,' I am also called a 'selfish old fool.' Selfish; yes, they call me selfish because, appreciating the nature of that girl, and seeing how intolerable her position had become to her, mainly through the persecution of the very people who now call me selfish and ridiculous, I had the courage to ask her to give me the privilege of freeing her from surroundings that were stifling to her nature. Is the man who opens the door of its cage for the linnet impelled by selfish motives? I think that he is not. But in any case, the carping and criticism—the playful winks which I have seen exchanged between good people when I have passed with Miss Linley by my side—the suggestive nudges which I have noticed—I daresay you noticed them too——"

"I heard the remarks that were made when you appeared with her for the first time," said Dick.

"I did not hear them; but I saw the expression on the faces of the groups—that was enough for me. I had no difficulty in translating that expression into words. But you, who know,—you who have learned something of the nature of that girl——"

"Since yesterday—only since yesterday, sir."

"Even so—you, I say, knowing something of her nature, perceiving how her father had simply come to see in her the means of filling his purse—poor man! he was only acting according to his lights, and the nest of linnets takes much feeding—you, Mr. Sheridan, recognising the shrinking of that sweet creature from the public life which was being forced upon her, will, I think, not be hard upon me because I came forward to save her from all that was changing the beautiful spirit with which she was endowed by Heaven, into something commonplace—as commonplace as the musical education which her father was forcing upon her. She did not pay full attention to the dotted quavers, he told me one day in confidence, when I noticed the traces of tears upon her face. Dotted quavers! Good heavens! think of the position of the man who found fault with the song of the linnet on account of its inattention to the dotted quavers!... Her father understood as little of the spirituality of the linnet's song as did the fashionable folk who crowded to her concerts, not because they loved the linnet's song—not because it told them of the joy of the springtime come back to make the world a delight—no, but only because Fashion had decreed that it was fashionable to attend Miss Linley's concerts."

"Poor Betsy!"

"Poor Betsy! ay, and poor, poor Fashion! The child confided in me. So terrible an effect had that life to which she was condemned upon her that—you will scarce believe it—she was ready to become the prey of any adventurer who might promise to release her from it."

"And I failed to see this—I failed to see this," said Dick. His voice sounded like a moan of pain.

"You know the men who paid her attention—who were encouraged by her father; you know some of them," continued Mr. Long. "One of them, who was reported to be the owner of a fortune, found great favour in the eyes of her father. He obtained easy access to the house, and he might actually have prevailed upon her to run away with him, for there was no lack of promises with him, if I had not come here. It was to save her from him that I asked her to give me her promise; for I knew that he had a wife already."

Dick started to his feet, his eyes blazing.

"The infamous hound!" he cried. "Who is he? What is his name? Only let me know what is his name, that I may kill him."

"There is no need for me to mention his name," said Mr. Long; "there is no immediate need for you to kill him or to give him a chance of killing you."

"Can you sit there before me, and tell me that 'tis not the duty of every man to do his best to rid the world of such a ruffian?" cried Dick passionately.

"I will not take it upon me to define what is the duty of a man in certain circumstances," said Mr. Long. "But I assure you that I should be sorry to go so far as to assert that the world would not be well rid of this particular ruffian; still, I know that the killing of him just now would be to overwhelm one who, we know, shrinks from even a publicity which is wholly honourable. There are doubtless many girls who retain so much of the feminine animal in their nature as causes them to delight to be made the subject of a fight between two men; that is—unhappily, it seems to me, but that may be because I do not understand all the principles of nature—an ordinary trait of the sex; but—you and I—ah, we know something of her, do we not?"

"But a fellow who set himself to bring about her ruin—— He is not still in Bath—you would not allow him to remain in Bath?"

"I have seen to that. I have reason to believe that he has fled. At any rate, he has not been seen

in public since I gave him a hint, the purport of which he could scarcely mistake. We will talk no more of him. I only referred to him as an instance of the dangers which, I perceived, surrounded Miss Linley, and which led me to make a move for her protection. I have been judged harshly. I was prepared for that. Sometimes in this matter I have felt disposed to judge myself much more harshly than any one else might feel. I wonder if you think that I was justified in asking Miss Linley to give me her promise when I saw that she was anxious to escape from a life which was killing her—when I saw that she was anxious to save her sisters from the necessity to appear in public and to sing for money—when I saw that she was set on this, and on helping all the other members of her family. Do you think that I was justified in asking her for her promise to marry me, seeing all that I tell you I saw, and knowing something of her pure and self-sacrificing nature?"

Dick was overcome by his own thoughts; but through all the discord in which they enveloped him there rang out clearly one note:

"You saved her," he said. "You saved her; that is all that I can think. Let me go away now."

He had spoken with his head bent, but his voice did not falter. And then he leapt up from his chair and turned to the door.

CHAPTER XX

"Do not go yet, my boy," said Mr. Long. It was his voice that was faltering. "Do not go until I have said all that is on my mind to say to you."

"Can I hear more, sir? Is there anything more to be said?"

"Not much, but still something."

He motioned Dick back to his chair, and, after a pause, Dick resumed his seat.

"I saved her, you said," continued Mr. Long. "It was in order to save her that I asked her for that promise. Is that as noble a motive as most men have when they ask a young woman to marry them? I think that it is, whatever any one who knows the facts of this matter as you and I know them may say. It may be said that it was despicable on my part to take advantage of the longing for freedom of this dear caged linnnet of ours—that I took advantage of her inexperience of life to bind her down to a marriage that would mean to her a far worse bondage than that from which she hoped to escape."

"I am not one of those who say so, Mr. Long."

"I am certain of that. Still, she is a child, and I am an old man— Ah, no! you need not be at the trouble to protest; I shall probably live for twenty years yet; but when she was born I was old enough to be her father. Can I expect to have the girl's love of that dear girl? I am not so foolish as to entertain such a dream. I have her gratitude, her respect, her regard, everything except her love. That is impossible."

"I do not know that it is impossible, sir. She is not as other girls are."

"It is impossible, my boy; I know it. It must be impossible, because I have not asked her for her love. It is impossible for me to love her with the love of a lover—with the love that is love. I did not offer her love when I asked her for her promise."

Dick looked at the man with something akin to wonderment in his eyes.

Mr. Long rose from his chair and slowly walked to and fro some half-dozen times. Then he went to one of the windows and looked out. On the pavement a large number of notable persons were strolling. Mr. Edmund Burke was there; he had arrived in Bath the previous evening, and he was walking with Sir Joshua Reynolds and Miss Theophila Palmer.

The voices of the crowd outside only seemed to increase the silence in the room.

But still Dick did not move from his place.

Then Mr. Long walked from the window to the chair which he had occupied. He looked for a long time at Dick, as if debating with himself what to say to him. The prolonged silence was almost embarrassing to the younger man; but he felt that he was not called on to speak. And still the elder man sat with his eyes fixed on him, but with his thoughts far away, and still the faint sound of the laughter and the voices in the Street came intermittently to the room.

"I have spoken somewhat enigmatically, Mr. Sheridan," said Mr. Long after this long pause. "I shall do so no longer. I told you that it is impossible for me to offer Miss Linley the love which I know you deem impossible that any man should withhold from her. Why? you will ask. My answer to you is that I have loved. It is difficult to make some people believe that there is no past tense to the verb 'To love'; but I do not think that I shall have such difficulty with you. The man who says, 'I have loved,' is saying, if he speak the truth, 'I love.' Mr. Sheridan, when I say to you, 'I have loved,' you know what I mean. It was close upon forty years ago that I found her; and time has dealt graciously with her; for while I have grown old, she is still young and joyous and sweet. The laugh of the girl still rings through my heart as it did forty years ago. There are no wrinkles on her fair face; there is in her expression nothing of that fear of growing old which I have seen and shuddered at in the faces of many women. Perpetual youth—perpetual youth. God's best gift

to any human being—it has been bestowed upon her by the goodness of God; for those who die young have been granted the gift of perpetual youth. Our wedding-day came, and on that very day she was borne to the church in her wedding-dress, and with the wedding-flowers about her. I stood beside her, and, instead of hearing the Service for the Dead spoken as it was that day, I heard the Marriage Service that was to have been said between us.... Forty years ago ... and she is still young—unchanged—untouched by the terrors of time; and I have been true to her—every day—every hour. I smile when I think of her, and I know that she is smiling in return; I am joyous at my table because I know that she is sitting opposite to me, and I can walk through the woodlands which surround my house, taking pleasure in observing all things of nature, feeling that she is by my side, sharing in my happiness.... My boy, you, I know, can understand how it is the truth that I have told you when I said that I could not ask our dear Betsy to love me because I could not offer her that love which is love."

"Do not tell her that—if you wish her to be happy," said Dick suddenly, almost bluntly.

Mr. Long laid his hand—it was his wounded hand—with great tenderness upon Dick's shoulder.

"You have shown me by that remark that what you seek to bring about is her happiness," said he. "That is what I aim at. Whatever becomes of us, she must be happy. Richard, take my word for it, this is the true love—the love that is immortal—the love in the image of which God created man, making him a little lower than the angels—this is the glory with which He crowns him. You, my dear boy, have taken one step toward that goal of glory if you have learned that love is spiritual and that its aim is not one's own happiness but the happiness of another. You love Betsy Linley; and it is left for you to show what this love can accomplish in yourself. Love for love's sake—let that be your motto. It will mean happiness to you, for it will mean everything that makes a man a man: the trampling down of all that is base in nature—the resisting of temptation—the facing of that stern discipline of life which alone makes life noble and worthy to be lived. And if she loves you—"

Dick started up.

"Ah, sir, for Heaven's sake do not suggest that to me now!" he cried. "Can not you know that that is the thought which I have been doing my best to suppress—to beat down—to bury out of sight—"

"There is no need for me to withhold what I have said; she may love you, and that thought should be a grateful one to you. It should nerve you, as such a thought has nerved many men, to do something worthy of her love. Richard Sheridan, you would not have her love some one who is unworthy of her love. You would not have her love a man who is wanting in any of those elements that make a man worthy to be loved. Richard Sheridan, if she loves you 'tis for you to determine whether she loves a true man or one who is false to his manhood, which was made in the image of Godhood. This is what a woman's love should mean to a man; and this is love's reward, which comes to a man even though he may never hold in his arms the one whom he loves—the one by whom he is beloved. Dick, let this be my last word to you: whether that girl who is so dear to us comes to me or to you, if you love her truly 'twill be a source of good to you while you live, for your constant aim will be to live worthy not only of her love, but worthy to love her. That is all I have to say to you, and it is a good deal more than I have said to any man who lives. But she must be happy, Dick; that is the bond there is between you and me. We must make her happy, whether we do so by being near her or by being apart from her."

He gave his hand to Dick, and the young man took it, and then left the room without another word. He had only a vague idea of the finality, so to speak, of what Mr. Long had said; and he knew that nothing that left him with such vagueness in his mind could be final. But Mr. Long had said enough to strengthen the impression which Dick had acquired of him the previous night.

A few days before, Dick, with his knowledge of the world, would have had no hesitation in ridiculing this principle of love for love's sake which Mr. Long had impressed upon him; but now he was sensible for the first time in his life of the reality of all that Mr. Long had said on this subject. He became sensible of the spiritual element in love. Had he not just been made aware of its existence? Had he not just come from the presence of a man who had cherished a spiritual love through all the years of a long lifetime, until it had become a part of his life, influencing him in all his actions, as though it were a living thing?

As though it were a living thing? But it was surely a living thing. This surely was the love which poets had sung of as being immortal! It was purely spiritual, and therefore immortal. It was cherished for its own sake, and the reward which it brought to one who was true to it came solely in the act of cherishing it. The consciousness of cherishing it—that was enough for such as were strong enough to cherish it for its own sake; to take it into one's life, and to guard one's life rigidly—jealously—because it is in one's life; to guard one's life for its sake as one guards the casket that contains a great treasure.

Dick felt that this was the sum of what Mr. Long had sought to impress upon him, and he also felt that this great truth had long ago been revealed to Betsy Linley. It was in the spirit of this spirit of love that she had kissed him the previous evening; and now he felt that he had no longing for any love but this. She had set his feet upon the way to this goal, and he was assured that should he falter, should he look back, she would be by his side to put a hand in his, to bid him take courage and press forward to that goal which she had pointed out to him.

He did not at that time make even an attempt to consider such questions as he would have suggested a few days before, to any one who might have come to him telling him all that Mr. Long had just said in his hearing. Mr. Long had encouraged him to love Betsy Linley—to continue

loving her; and he had not shrunk from suggesting the possibility of the girl's returning his love. A few days before Dick would have been inclined to ask any one who might have come to him telling him this, if Mr. Long was encouraging another man to love the girl whom he himself meant to marry. But now this seemed to him to be a point unworthy of a thought. So deeply impressed was he by what Mr. Long had just said to him, he could not give a thought to anything less spiritual. The splendid light that came from that heaven to which his eyes had been directed, so dazzled him with its effulgence as to make him incapable of giving any attention to matters of detail.

It never occurred to him to ask himself if it was Mr. Long's intention to marry Betsy immediately. Whatever answer might be given to such a question, it could not possibly affect the reality of the religion of love as stated by Mr. Long. Of this he was satisfied. He knew that whoever might marry Betsy Linley, his own love for her had become part of his life, and its influence upon his life was real.

He went to his home looking neither to the right hand nor the left, and when he reached his room he was conscious of very different thoughts from those which had been his a few mornings before, when he had thrown himself on his bed in a passion of tears after seeing, though but for a moment, Betsy by the side of Mr. Long in the gardens. At that time the pangs that he felt—the vexation that he felt—were due, in a large measure, to the blow which his vanity had sustained, and it was his vanity that had suggested to him, with a view of recovering its equilibrium, as it were, the advisability of his adopting the tone and playing the *rôle* of a cynical man of the world, who has seen the foolishness—the ludicrous foolishness of what is called love.

But now—

Well, now he was kneeling by his bedside.

CHAPTER XXI

Dick was greatly surprised when, on going out to take the air the next day, he was met by one of his acquaintance—a young Mr. Vere, who shook him warmly by the hand, offering him his congratulations.

“’Twas very spirited of you so to take up the quarrel of your brother, Mr. Sheridan; that is what every one in Bath is saying to-day,” cried Mr. Vere. “I give you my word, sir, there is not one who ventures to assert that you were not fully justified in sending the challenge.”

“’Tis most gratifying to me, I am sure, that people take so lenient a view of an affair of which I have heard nothing up to the present moment,” said Dick.

“I refer to your duel, Mr. Sheridan. Surely that incident, trifling though it may be to a gentleman of your experience, has not yet escaped your memory?” said Vere.

“To tell you the truth, Mr. Vere,” said Dick, “I have got a very short memory for incidents that have not taken place. Pray, what duel do you refer to, and what had I got to do with it? Pardon my curiosity, sir; ’tis rather ridiculous, I allow, but my nature is sufficiently inquiring to compel me to ask you if I was a principal in the duel or merely one of the seconds. I hope you do not consider me impertinent in putting such a question to you.”

Mr. Vere stared at him for a few moments, and then laughed.

“You carry it off very well, I must confess,” said he. “But there is no need for you to affect such complete ignorance. I give you my word that every one acquits you of blame in the matter—nay, I am assured that the meeting was inevitable; but I doubt not there is no one more ready than yourself to rejoice that your adversary was not severely wounded.”

“’Tis a source of boundless satisfaction to me to learn so much from your lips, sir,” said Dick. “And if you could see your way to add to my obligation by making me acquainted with the name of my antagonist, I would never forget your kindness.”

“Upon my soul, you carry it off very well! I dare swear that Mr. Garrick, for all his reputation, could not do it much better,” said Mr. Vere. “But your acting is wasted, Mr. Sheridan; I tell you that the general opinion in Bath is that your act was highly commendable. Pray, Sheridan, tell me in confidence what was the exact nature of the affront put upon your brother—apart, of course, from the question of the lady; I promise you that ’twill go no further!”

“Look you here, Mr. Vere,” said Dick, “I do not mind being made a fool of up to a certain point—there is no positive disgrace in being a fool in Bath, one finds oneself in such congenial company,—but I tell you, sir, I will not suffer any one to go beyond a certain distance with me, and you are going perilously close to my frontier with these compliments of yours. Come, sir, tell me plainly, what do you mean by suggesting that I have been concerned in a duel, and with whom do you suggest I have been fighting?”

“What, sir, do you mean to say that you have not just fought a duel with Mr. Long on behalf of your brother?”

“Yes, sir, I have no hesitation in affirming that I have fought no duel with Mr. Long or with any one else, either on behalf of my brother or any one else.”

“Heavens! you surprise me, sir. Why, all Bath is talking——”

"Talking nonsense—that is the mother tongue of Bath; and so far as I can gather, you do not stand in need of a course of lessons in this particular language, Mr. Vere, and so I wish you good-morning, sir."

Mr. Vere's jaw fell. His usual alertness of manner disappeared before Dick's energetic rebuff. He did not even retain sufficient presence of mind to take off his hat when Dick made such a salutation, and walked quietly on.

But when Dick had gone something less than twenty yards on his way, a sudden thought seemed to strike young Vere. Hurrying after him, he cried:

"Look here, Mr. Sheridan, if you did not fight Mr. Long, how does his arm come to be wounded,—tell me that?"

"Mr. Vere," said Dick, stopping and turning to the other,—“Mr. Vere, unless your story of Mr. Long's having sustained a wound be much more accurate than much of what you have just been telling me, it stands in great need of verification.”

He walked on, leaving the young man to recover as best he could from his astonishment.

But Dick had scarcely resumed his walk before he encountered his friend Nat Halhed, who almost threw himself into Dick's arms, so great was his emotion at that moment.

"My dear Dick—my dear Dick, you are unhurt!" he cried. "Thank Heaven for that—thank Heaven! I hear on good authority that 'tis only a flesh wound, and that he will be out of the house by the end of the week. But 'twas unkind of you not to ask me to be your friend in this affair, Dick. Sure, you might have given me your confidence."

"I was afraid of that wagging tongue of yours, Nat," said Dick; "I was afraid that you might be the dupe of some of the scandal-mongers who have become the curse of Bath."

"Nay, Dick, this is unkind," said Nat reproachfully. "You know that I am the soul of discretion, and that nothing would tempt me to talk of any matter of the accuracy of which I was not fully assured."

"I know that you have just been repeating a story which had its origin only in the imagination of some gossip-monger," said Dick.

"What—I—I? Pray, what story do you allude to?"

"To the story of my duel. I have been concerned in no duel. But mark my words, Nat, if I hear much more about this business, I shall be engaged in several duels."

"Do you mean to deny the fact of your having had an encounter with Mr. Long two days ago—a secret encounter, because of his having accused you of the attempt to turn away from him the affections of Miss Linley?"

Dick became pale with anger.

"I tell you what it is, sir," he cried; "I have had no encounter with Mr. Long on any question; and let me add, for your benefit and the benefit of your associates, that if any one wishes to provoke me to a duel, he can accomplish his purpose best by asserting in my hearing that I am capable of making such an attempt as that which you say has been attributed to me. That is all I have to say to you, my friend Nat."

Halhed gasped, and Dick walked on.

Before many seconds had elapsed he heard Halhed's voice behind him.

"If you had no duel with Mr. Long, pray, how does he come to have that ugly wound on his wrist?" cried the young man.

"Why not ask him?" said Dick. "What am I that I should be held accountable for every scratch that one receives at Bath? Are there not cats enough at Bath—in the Pump Room, and the Assembly Rooms, and other schools for scandal—to account for all the scratches upon a man's wrist or reputation that he may sustain in the course of the season?"

He hastened on, leaving young Halhed still gasping.

It now appeared quite clear to Dick that the gossip-mongers had somehow got to hear that Mr. Long had sustained a sword-wound on the wrist, and they were not slow to invent a story possessing at least some elements of romance to account for it. It seemed that a course of the waters had as stimulating an effect upon the imagination as it had upon a sluggish liver. Some of the visitors were such clever naturalists and had had so large an experience of fossilised deposits, that they had become adroit in the construction of a whole mammoth fabric if only a single tooth were placed at their disposal. Dick had heard of such feats being performed by persons who combined a knowledge of geology with an acquaintance with zoology, supplementing the two by as much imagination as was necessary to achieve any result at which they aimed. Learning that Mr. Long had his left arm bound up, these professors of social zoology had proved themselves fully equal to the task of accounting for his wound.

What Dick could not understand was why they should associate him with the imaginary duel. It was not until he heard his name called out by a lady in a splendidly painted chair—the chair is still in existence, though the splendidly painted occupant is no more than the dust of one of the pigments used in painting a bit of a picture of the brilliant society of a century and a half ago—and found that Mrs. Cholmondeley was looking eagerly through the window, beckoning to him with her fan, that he learned how it was that his name became mixed up with the story.

He bowed to the ground before the beautiful structure so elaborately built up within the cramping limits of the chair; and the bearers, at a signal from the lady, came to a halt and raised the roof on its hinges.

"Oh, Mr. Sheridan," she cried, "you gave us all such a shock! But we are so glad that you are safe!"

"Safe, madam?" said he. "Heavens! what man in Bath can consider himself safe when Mrs. Cholmondeley turns her eyes upon him? Dear madam, 'tis sure ungenerous of you to jest at the expense of one of your most willing victims."

"Jest, sir? I vow 'twould have been no jest to Bath if you had been wounded instead of Mr. Long," cried Mrs. Cholmondeley. "And you kept the whole business so secret too; you did not give any of us a chance of interfering with you, you hot-headed young Achilles! Of course, you did not inflict a severe wound upon the poor gentleman! We Irish are generous by instinct. And 'twas like you to sit with him for more than an hour yesterday, and then go straight home, never leaving the house all the night, though you must have known that you would have been well received at the Rooms had you put in an appearance there. But you ever showed good taste, sir—that is another Irish trait."

"Madam," said he, "I cannot doubt that the infatuation which, alas! I have never been able to conceal for the beautiful Mrs. Cholmondeley has gained for me a reputation for taste; I trust, madam, that I did not altogether forfeit it by omitting to visit the Rooms last night, where, I hear, she was as usual the cynosure of the most brilliant circle."

"A truce to compliments, Mr. Sheridan," said she. "Young men shaped after Apollo have no need for them. Compliments are the makeshifts of the elderly to call away attention from their spindleshanks. Confidences, and not compliments, are what we old women look for from such as you; so prithee, Dick, tell me all about the matter—'twill go no further, I promise you."

"At no more adorable shrine need I ever hope to confess my virtues, madam," said he; "but in this matter——"

"Oh, sir, the man who has only virtues to confess soon ceases to interest a confidante," said she. "But it may be that you consider fighting a duel to be praiseworthy?"

"Let any one cast an aspersion upon Mrs. Cholmondeley in my presence, and I shall prove that a duel is one of the cardinal virtues, madam," said Dick.

"'Twas not about me you fought Mr. Long at dawn yesterday," she cried.

"Madam, you may venture on that statement, being aware that Mr. Long is alive to-day," said Dick.

"I perceive that you and he have entered into a compact to keep the affair a secret," said she. "Well, though I think that you might make an exception of me, I cannot but acknowledge that you have good taste on your side."

"I have the mirror of good taste at my side when Mrs. Cholmondeley honours me by stopping her chair while I am in the act of passing her," said Dick.

"Oh, sir, you are monstrous civil. But if you think that you can keep the details of your duel secret at Bath, you compliment yourself rather than your acquaintance in this town."

"Faith, Mrs. Cholmondeley, my acquaintance seem to know a good deal more about this duel than I do," said Dick.

"You will make me lose patience with you," said she. "But I will be content if you give me your word that you will not tell Mrs. Thrale or Mrs. Crewe what has occurred. You will promise me, Dick? I should die of chagrin if either of that gossiping pair were to come to me with a circumstantial account of the duel."

"I can give you that promise with all my heart," said he. "But if you assume that my reticence will prevent either of the ladies from being able to give a circumstantial account of this incident, about which every one seems to be talking, you will show that you know a good deal less about them than you should."

"You are quite right; they are the grossest of the scandal-mongers—ay, and the least scrupulous," she cried. "Why, it was only last night that one of them—I shall leave you to guess which—asserted that she had the evidence of her own eyes to prove to her that it was the younger of the Sheridan sons, and not the elder, who was in love with Miss Linley, although the other talked most of his passion. And by the Lord, sir, she was right, if my eyesight be worth anything."

Dick was always on the alert—as, indeed, he required to be—when engaged in conversation with Mrs. Cholmondeley and the other ladies of the set to which she belonged; but the impudence of her suggestion, made in so direct a fashion, startled him into a blush. He recovered himself in a moment, however, and before her chairmen could comply with her signal to take up the chair, he was smiling most vexatiously, while he said:

"'Twere vain, dear madam, to make an attempt to dissemble before such well-informed ladies. You are fully acquainted not only with the particulars of a duel which never took place, but also with the details of a passion which exists only in the imagination. Ah, Mrs. Cholmondeley, we men are poor creatures in the presence of a lady with much imagination and few scruples."

He bowed, with his hat in his hand.

"You do well to run away, sir," said the lady, with a malicious twinkle.

"'Tis the act of a wise man," said he. "The cat that only scratches a man's hand, one may play with, but the cat that scratches a man's heart should be handed over to the gamekeeper to nail upon the door. I, however, prefer to run away."

He had gone backward, still bowing with profound respect, for half a dozen yards, before she had recovered from the strongest rebuff she had ever received.

Then she asked her chairmen, in a tone that had something of shrillness in it, if they intended leaving her in the road for the rest of the day.

She was very angry, not only because she was conscious of having received a rebuke which she had richly merited, but also because she had failed to find out whether or not there was any truth in the story of the duel between Mr. Long and Dick Sheridan, which had been discussed all the day in the least trustworthy of the many untrustworthy circles in Bath.

She herself had had her doubts as to the accuracy of the story. Mr. Horace Walpole had shown himself to be too greatly interested in it to allow of any reasonable person's accepting it without serious misgivings; for she knew that the leading precept in Mr. Walpole's ethics of scandal was, "Any story is good enough to hang an epigram on." But in spite of the fact that Walpole was highly circumstantial in his account of the duel, its origin, and its probable results, Mrs. Cholmondeley thought that there might be something in it. This was why she had stopped Dick so eagerly. She thought that she might trust to her own adroitness to find out from him enough to place her friends in the right or in the wrong in respect of the story; she would have liked to have it in her power to put them in the wrong, but hers was not a grasping nature: she would have been quite content to be able to put them in the right.

Well, it was very provoking to be foiled by the cleverness of that young Sheridan. He had been impudent, too, and had actually shown that he resented her cultured curiosity on the subject of his affairs. This she felt to be insufferable on the part of young Sheridan.

Happily, however, though she had learned nothing from him—except, perhaps, that there were in existence some young men who objected to their personal affairs being made the subject of public conversation by people who knew nothing about them—she did not despair of being able to make herself interesting to her friends when describing her *rencontre* with Dick; and, setting her imagination to work, she found that she could serve up quite a palatable and dainty dish out of the story of how she had overwhelmed him with confusion. She did not at that moment remember what were the exact phrases she had employed to compass this end, but she had every confidence in the power of her imagination to suggest to her before the time for going to the Assembly Rooms the well-balanced badinage which she had used to send him flying from her in confusion.

And Dick, as he walked homeward, without feeling that he had vastly enjoyed his walk, knew perfectly well just what was in the lady's mind. He had no illusions on the subject of her scrupulousness. He was well aware that she would not hesitate to give her circle any account that suited her, respecting her meeting with him. He had an idea, however, that the members of her circle would only believe as much of her story as suited themselves. How much this was would be wholly dependent upon the piquant elements introduced into the story by Mrs. Cholmondeley. He knew enough of the world to know that people would give credence to the more malicious of her suggestions without weighing the probability of the matters on which they bore.

But what he thought about most was the reference which she had made to Betsy and himself. Up to that time it was only the most jealous of Betsy's many suitors who had looked on him as a rival. Very few persons in Bath had discovered his secret, and it had certainly never been spoken of seriously. An exceedingly poor man has always, he knew, a better chance than the man of means of evading the vigilance of the gossip-mongers; therefore he had escaped having the compliment paid to him of being referred to as a possible suitor.

It was becoming clear to him, however, that there were some people in Bath whose experience of life had led them to believe that the lack of worldly means was not a certain deterrent to the aspirations of a young man with talent—assuming that talent means making the most of one's opportunities: a very worldly definition of talent, but not the less acceptable on that account to the fashionable people of Bath.

The reflection that his secret was no longer one annoyed him, but not greatly. His consciousness of vexation had disappeared before he turned the corner of Orange Grove into Terrace Walk.

And then he entered his house and almost walked into the arms of Mrs. Abington, who was waiting for him on the first lobby.

"Oh, Dick, Dick! safe—safe! Thank Heaven!" she cried, putting out both her hands to him and catching him by the arms.

Her form of greeting him had about it more than the suggestion of a clasp.

CHAPTER XXII

He was not angry—what was there to be angry about? The greeting of a beautiful woman (with the suggestion of a clasp) when one expects to meet only a sister may contain the elements of surprise, but rarely those of vexation.

Dick was surprised—in fact, he was slightly alarmed, but he retained his self-possession.

“Safe?” he cried. “Why should not I be safe, unless”—he recollected that not half an hour before he had been greeted by a lady with the same word, and he had replied to it with great glibness: could he do better than repeat himself? He thought not—unless— “Ah, madam, what man is safe when such beauty—”

“Do not talk to me in that way. Is this a time for compliments—empty—obvious—odious?” she cried, loosing his arms with such suddenness as almost to suggest flinging them from her.

Before she went in a whirl into the room beyond the lobby, he had seen that her face—it had come very close to his own at one moment—was white.

He followed her slowly into the room.

“Forgive me, madam,” he said. “Pray forgive me; I did not realise that you were in earnest. I cannot understand. Some one else greeted me just now with the same word—safe. Why—”

“And you made the same reply to me that you made to her, and doubtless she was completely satisfied, and you paid me the compliment of taking it for granted that the same compliment would repay me for all that I have suffered? Dick, you are—oh, I have no words—you are—a man—I know you—I know men.”

“The retort is just. I assumed, for the moment, that you were like other women. I was wrong. I see now that you were really concerned—for some reason—for my safety; Mrs. Cholmondeley was not.”

“Mrs. Cholmondeley? Who is Mrs. Cholmondeley that she should have any thought for you? Curiosity—oh, yes—tattle—scandal—the material for a pretty piece of scandal, no doubt—that’s how she looked at the whole affair. I know her—a woman—a very woman—I know women.”

“I do not. I admit that I do not understand woman. I fancied— But every woman is a separate woman. She has an identity that is wholly her own.”

“That is the first step a man should take if he seek to understand us. But philosophy—what is philosophy at such a moment as this? I cannot take your safety philosophically, Dick—thank Heaven—thank Heaven!”

“That is wherein I differ from you. I take my safety philosophically; I bear it with equanimity. Has it been imperilled? Not that I know of.”

She looked at him; a puzzled expression was on her face.

“A young philosopher shows his wisdom only if he is a young fool,” she said. “But you are not so foolish as to be a philosopher at your time of life, Dick. Equanimity—there’s a word for you! But you never felt in peril. Mr. Long is an old man. Do you fancy that Betsy Linley will forgive you for fighting him?”

“Mrs. Abington,” said Dick, “you have been like several other people in this town—the victim of a very foolish and malicious piece of gossip which seems to have been most persistently spread abroad. I have been concerned in no duel, and I swear to you that for no earthly consideration—not even if my own honour were in peril—would I fight Mr. Long. I have a greater respect—a deeper affection—for Mr. Long than I have for any living man.”

The lady stood before him speechless. She was breathing hard. The hand that she had laid upon the upper lace of her bodice rose and fell several times before the expression that had been on her face gave place to quite a different one. The new expression suggested something more than relief, and so did the long sigh that caused her hand to remain for some moments poised above her lace, like a white bird on the curve of a white wave.

She sighed.

Then she gave a laugh—a laugh of pleasant derision—the tolerant derision that one levels at oneself, saying, when things have turned out all right, “*What a fool I have been!*” Those were her very words.

“What a fool I have been, Dick! I was told that— But I was a fool to believe anything that came from such a source! Did Mr. Walpole invent the whole story merely out of malice? He is quite equal to it. Or was it a woman? Most likely it came from a woman; but, lud, if you were to try to find the woman who started the lie you would be overcome, for there’s not one of the whole set that wouldn’t take a pleasure in’t. I’m so sorry, Dick! But the story at first was that you had received an injury. What a state I was in! And then some one came with the news that ’twas your opponent who was hurt. Oh, the liars! liars all! But you are not hurt—I mean, you are in no way hurt, my Dick, by this silly story?”

“Hurt? Why, I am overwhelmed with conceit at the thought that my condition should cause so much concern to my friends,” said Dick. “’Tis a great feather in my cap that I should become all in a moment, and without doing anything for it, the topic of the day in a town which is fastidious in its choice of topics. You were talking a few nights ago of my writing a comedy. Well, here is one scene in it ready-made. Scene: A room in the house of Lady— What shall we call her—Lady Sneerwell or the Countess of Candour? The members of the Senate of the College of Scandal have met. ‘What, you have surely heard of the duel? Oh, lud! is’t possible that you have not heard

it? Where can your ladyship have been living? Oh, faith, 'tis but too true. They met in Kingsmead Fields by the light of a lovely moon last night, and, after a pass or two, Mr. Thompson's sword pierced the lungs of old Sir Simon, and——' 'No, no, sir, you are wrong there; 'twas with pistols they fought,' cries another gentleman, who enters hurriedly. 'Pistols, sir? Swords, as I heard it.' 'Nay, sir, you cannot believe all you hear. They fought with pistols, I give you my word. They exchanged seven shots apiece, and two of the seconds and one of the surgeons fell mortally wounded; it was the seventh broadside that struck a knot in the third lowest branch of a pollard ash at one side of the ground, and glancing off at an acute angle, passed through a thrush's nest in a Westphalian poplar containing four eggs, three of them speckled and one of them, strange to say, plain, all within six days and two hours of incubation. The bullet smashed one of them, containing a fine hen bird, to atoms, but without disturbing the mother, who continued sitting on the clutch, and, touching the third button on the left-hand side of the peach-coloured coat, made by Filby, of London, and not yet paid for, of one of the onlookers, glanced off to the right shoe-buckle of Sir Simon, and cut off the great toe of his left foot as clean as if it had been done under the surgeon's knife.' 'Nay, sir, you are sure in error. 'Twas Mr. Thompson who sustained the wound, and let me tell, sir, that 'twas his right ear that was cut off.' 'With respect, sir, 'twas the elder gentleman.' 'Nay, sir, I should know; 'twas the younger, I assure you.' 'Sir, you take too much upon you.' 'And you, sir, are a jackanapes!' Enter Sir Simon and Mr. Thompson, arm in arm. There's the scene ready for rehearsal. Oh, I should feel extremely obliged to my kind traducers for suggesting it all to me."

Dick had bustled through the imaginary scene with the greatest vivacity; and Mrs. Abington perceived that he did it very well and that he had acquired something of the true spirit of comedy, though he exaggerated everything, after the manner of the schoolboy who takes the clown as his mentor. But after she had greeted his performance with a laugh, she pouted and protested that he had offended her. She seated herself on the sofa, and turned her head away from him with the air of the offended lady.

Dick watched her performance critically, and fully appreciated the delicacy of her comedy—all the more as he was elated with the scene which he had just invented. He hoped that he would have a chance of introducing something like it in a comedy, and he had such a chance a few years later, nor did he forget to put Mrs. Abington on in that scene.

"Why should you be offended, you beautiful creature?" he said, leaning over her from behind.

"I am offended because you are making a mock of my concern for your safety," she replied. "Oh, Dick, if you knew what I suffered, you would not make a mock of me."

"Believe me, dear lady, 'twas not my intention to say a word in that spirit," said he. "Nay, I give you my word that, however I may be disposed to regard the remarks made by Mrs. Cholmondeley and the rest of her set in respect of this ridiculous affair, I can only feel touched—yes, deeply touched and honoured—by the concern you showed on my behalf."

"No, you do not feel touched; you only think of me as a silly old woman," she cried.

"Nay, you do me a great injustice," he said. "I was affected by what you said to me on the evening of your arrival; it showed me how good and kind was your heart, and now—well, I can say with truth that my feeling has been increased by the additional evidence you have given me of your—your kind heart."

"Ah, that is just the limit of your feeling for me!" she said in a low voice—a voice that coaxed one into contradiction—while her eyes, cast downward to the point of her dainty little shoe, coerced one into contradiction.

Most men were quite content to be coaxed, but there were an obstinate few who required coercion.

But she had a point still in reserve. She knew it to be irresistible in an emergency.

Dick yielded to the coaxing of her voice.

"Nay," he said, "I have not yet expressed all that I feel of regard for you, Mrs. Abington. I shall not make the attempt to do so."

"Regard? Regard? Regard is the feeling that a miss has for her governess," said she. "You should have no special trouble expressing your regard for me, sir. 'Tis usually done through the medium of a book of poetry—schoolroom verses writ solely for the sake of the moral in the last stanza. Will you buy me such a volume, Dick?"

"Now 'tis I who have reason to complain of being mocked," said he.

She started up and stood face to face with him. It seemed to him that she was full of eagerness to say something. She had her fingers interlaced in front of her; there was a tremulous movement about her lips suggesting a flood of emotion about to be released in words.

And the flood came.

"Good-bye!" she said.

And then he understood her.

He took the hand which she had flung out to him and bowed his head down to it.

There was a silence while he laid his lips upon it. And then she gave a derisive laugh.

"You are the greatest fool I ever met in my life!" she cried. "You are a fool, Dick. Any man is a fool who kisses a woman's hand when he might kiss her lips."

"That is not as I have read the history of the world from the days of Queen Dido of Carthage down to the days of Queen Diana of Poitiers," said Dick.

"And you call yourself an Irishman!" she cried, with affected scorn.

"As seldom as possible," he said. "Only when 'tis needful for me to make an excuse for an indiscretion. I do not feel the need to call myself one to-day."

"I have always paid you the compliment of thinking of you as very human," she said.

"And now you have proved the value of your judgment," said he.

She took a step toward the door, still keeping her eyes upon his face.

"Human?" she said sadly. "Human, and yet you drive me from your presence like this? That is where you err."

"To err is human," said he.

She was back again in a flash.

"Oh, Dick, are you not a fool?" she cried. "Why will you continue troubling yourself about a girl who has passed away from you—who treated you with indifference—when there are others within reach who would make your fortune—who would spend all their time thinking—thinking—thinking how to make you happy—and who would succeed, too? Do you prefer a dream of love to the reality, Dick?"

"I do not understand you," said Dick. "Nay, do not make any further attempt to enlighten my dulness, I entreat of you. I prefer remaining in ignorance of your meaning, because I like you so well, Mrs. Abington, and because I never mean to forget your kindness to me, and because I think the woman of impulse is the most charming of all women; I think her so charming that I hold in contempt the man who does not stand between her and her impulses."

"And I hold in contempt the man who, when a young girl has given her promise to marry another man, continues to love her and to remain in her neighbourhood instead of behaving reasonably and as ordinary self-respect should dictate. Self-respect, did I say? Let me rather say as ordinary respect for the young woman should dictate. I have a contempt for the man who fails to do the young woman the justice of giving her a chance of forgetting him, as she should when she has made up her mind to marry his rival. Richard Sheridan, if you were desirous of treating Elizabeth Linley fairly you would leave Bath to-day and not return until she has become the wife of Mr. Long and has gone with him to his home and her home. I looked on you as a man of honour, Dick—a man who liked to see fair play; but I am disappointed in you. Your brother is a truer man than you are; he had the decency to take himself off when he found that the girl had made her choice. That is all I have to say to you, Master Richard Brinsley. I have spoken in a moment of impulse, you will say, no doubt; and in that reflection you will probably find a sufficient excuse for disregarding all that I have said. Now good-bye to you, my friend. I never wish to see your face again."

She flashed through the door before he could say a word; but for that matter he had no word to say. He stood for a few moments where she had left him in the middle of the room; then he seated himself on the sofa where she had sat.

He was disturbed by what she had just said to him—more disturbed than he was by the thought of all that she had said in the early part of their interview, though that could not be said to have a tranquillising influence upon a young man whose emotions were not always under his control.

She had told him that if he had any self-respect—if he had any regard for Betsy Linley, he would hasten away from Bath and not return until she had left it.

That would be doing only what was fair to Betsy and to the man whom she had promised to marry, Mrs. Abington had said; and Dick could not but feel that there was some show of reason in this view of a matter that concerned him deeply.

He wondered if she had not spoken wisely—if she had not given him the most sensible advice possible, and at the same time the most philosophical—the two are not always the same thing. To be sure, she had assumed that Betsy Linley loved him, and that, therefore, his presence near her could not fail to be a menace to the girl's peace of mind—could not fail to tend to make her thoughts dwell upon the past rather than to look into the future; and perhaps this was assuming too much. He did not know that Betsy had ever loved him. But still Mrs. Abington's words made their impression.

And then he began to think of the bitter words which she had spoken. The room still seemed to ring with those words which had whirled from her when she had stood with her hand on the door:

"I never wish to see your face again!"

Those were bitter words; and he felt that she meant them. She meant them. He could not doubt that. Yes, she meant....

And then the door was thrown open, and before he could raise his head, which was bent forward, his chin resting on one hand, she had flung herself on her knees before him, and was kissing his face, holding a hand on each of his cheeks, sobbing at the intervals.

"Oh, Dick—my own dear Dick, forgive me for what I have said—forget all that I have said! You are the only good man that I have met, Dick, and I will not go back to London without knowing that you have forgiven me. Say that you do, Dick; I am only a poor woman—it is so easy to forgive a woman, is it not, Dick?"

He kissed her on the forehead, and then on one of her cheeks, where a tear was glistening.

"You have no business with tears," said he.

But that was just where he made a mistake.



"OH, DICK—MY OWN DEAR DICK, FORGIVE ME FOR WHAT I HAVE SAID!"

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CHAPTER XXIII

Yes, but had she not given him good advice?

This was the question which she had left him to think over, and it was one which excluded every other thought for some days.

She had suggested to him in her own way—he remembered the flashing of her eyes and her attitude in front of him, with a denunciatory forefinger pointed at him—that he was behaving basely by remaining in Bath after Betsy Linley had given her promise to marry Mr. Long. He should have shown his brother an example in this respect, rather than have allowed his brother to make the first move.

He thought again, as he had thought before—in the interval between Mrs. Abington's hasty exit from the room and her unexpected return to him—that the value of this counsel was wholly dependent on the assumption that Betsy loved him; and he felt that it would be a piece of presumption on his part to take so much for granted. He reflected that he had really no absolute proof that she had ever entertained a thought of him as a lover. To be sure, when they were children together they had been sweethearts; but since they had passed out of that period, neither of them had ever referred to the promises of constancy which they had exchanged. He could not deny to himself, nor did he make the attempt to do so, that his affection for Betsy had been continuous; but this was not a point that had any bearing upon the question of whether he was doing right or wrong in remaining in Bath.

So far as he himself was concerned, he felt that, though he loved Betsy as deeply as ever, he could trust himself to be near her. His love had been chastened, purified, exalted since that evening when she had kissed him and told him what love really was. He felt that he had acquired a share of her unselfishness, a sense of the glory of self-sacrifice.

He would stay.

He would not suggest that he had a doubt as to the stability of her purpose. He would not suggest that his vanity was so great as to make it impossible for him to conceive of her not being in love with him. His flying from Bath at such a time would certainly tend to give her pain. It would be equivalent to an impudent suggestion on his part—the suggestion that his staying would be too much for her—the suggestion that his flight would be an act of mercy shown by him to her.

He would stay.

He would not assume even in confidence with himself that Betsy loved him; and as for himself,

had not Mr. Long's parting words to him opened up before his eyes a new vista of the influence of love—that love which seeks not a reward—that love which is in itself the reward of loving? Mr. Long had not urged him to abandon as an idle dream the love that he had for Betsy Linley: he had rather exhorted him to continue steadfast in his love, since its influence upon him would be wholly for good.

He would stay.

And he did stay; and so did Mrs. Abington.

When she said good-bye to him, in a passion of repentant tears, he took it for granted that she would return to London probably the next day; but somehow, if that was her intention, she fell short of realising it. She appeared every day on the Parade, and every evening either in one of the Assembly Rooms or at a concert, with Tom Linley by her side.

Dick heard of her from day to day, and at first he was surprised to learn that she was still in Bath; and then he became positively annoyed that she should give people an opportunity of smiling as they did when they talked about her and Tom Linley. The young man, who was reported to be a most diligent student, was enlarging his course of study, they said; but they rather thought that he was too ambitious. Was it not usually thought prudent for any one who aspired to a knowledge of Latin, not to begin with Catullus or Lucretius, but with a book chiefly made up of cases and declensions? The most rational progress toward Parnassus was by a *gradus*, or step, they said. But there was the earnest young student beginning his knowledge of a language, previously unknown to him, with the beautiful Mrs. Abington. Faith, 'twas like setting Sappho before a youth who had not mastered the Greek alphabet; 'twas like offering a porter-house steak to a child before it has cut its teeth, the less refined of the critics declared.

But however wise these criticisms may have been, at the end of a week Mrs. Abington lingered on in Bath and young Mr. Linley lingered by her side; and then the men of the world began to shrug their shoulders and to talk—also in metaphors—of the whims of the actress. Had Mrs. Abington's teeth become suddenly weak, they inquired, that she was compelled to take to a diet of caudle? She had mastered many a tough steak in her time, and had never been known to complain of toothache. Surely she must find caudle to be very insipid!

The ladies were the hardest on her, of course; for every morning she appeared in a new gown, and every evening in another, and they all differed the one from the other, only as one star differs from another in glory; and it was difficult to say which was the most becoming to her, though this point was most widely discussed among the men who knew nothing whatever about the matter, and showed their ignorance by admiring a simple taffeta made for a hoop, but worn without one, quite as much as that gorgeous brocade about which foaming torrents of lace fell, called by ordinary people flounces.

The ladies sneered, for not one of these gowns could be imitated. They knew that they could not be imitated, for they had tried, worrying the life out of their maids in the fruitless attempt. They sneered. What else could they do, after they had boxed the ears of their maids in accordance with the best manners of the period before the trying days of the French Revolution? They sneered, and the more imaginative ones compared her to a confectioner's window, which is laid out with infinite pains, though it is only attractive to the immature taste of a child. That young Linley had really not got past the toffee stage, they declared; always admitting, however, that he was a pretty lad, and bemoaning his fate in being compelled to do the bidding of a lady of such experience as Mrs. Abington.

And then they called her a harpy.

But Tom Linley felt very proud to be permitted to walk by the side of so distinguished a lady; and he never seemed prouder of this privilege than when he went with her to one of the Thursday receptions given by Lady Miller at Bath-Easton, for every one of note seemed to be promenading on the lawn, and there was a flowing stream of coaches and chariots and curricles and chairs still on the road, bearing additional visitors to eat the lady's cakes and to drink her tea, before taking part in the serious business that called for their attention.

Tom had spent half the previous night in an attempt to produce a poem that might have a chance of winning the chaplet, which was the prize for the verses pronounced the best of the day. To be able to lay the trophy at the feet of the lady in praise of whose beauty and virtue he had composed his sonnet, after the fashion of the poet Petrarch, whose works he had studied in Italy, would, he felt, be the greatest happiness he could hope for in life.

The lady whose ingenuity in devising the literary contests at Bath-Easton has caused her name to live when other names far more deserving of immortality have been forgotten, has had ample injustice done to her in every diary, and in most of the letters, of the period. Of course Walpole's faun-like humour found in Lady Miller and her entertainments a congenial topic. Whenever there was a woman to be lied about, with wit and in polished periods, Walpole was the man to undertake the business. He could make the most respectable of ladies entertaining to his correspondents, and his sneers at the good women of whose hospitality he seemed glad enough to partake, must have formed very amusing reading when they were quite fresh. Even now, though the world has become accustomed to the taste of frozen meat, his wit, when taken out of the refrigerator, does not seem altogether insipid.

He ridiculed Lady Miller, after he had been entertained by her, with exquisitely bad taste. She was vulgar, and she was forty. Chatty little Miss Burney, too, believed her to be forty also,—actually forty; so that it seemed inconceivable how, with such a charge hanging over her, Lady

Miller was able to fill her house and crowd her grounds month after month with the most distinguished men and women in England.



TOOK FROM ITS DEPTHS THE VARIOUS MANUSCRIPTS AND
READ THEM ALOUD.

The estimable Mrs. Delany, who fervently hoped that no friend of hers would ever be painted by so dreadful an artist as Gainsborough—a hope which, fortunately, was not realised, or the world would have lacked one of its greatest pictures—was also unable to take a charitable view of Lady Miller's age. But still the curious entertainment took place every Thursday during the season, and was attended by every one worth talking about, and by a good many persons who were talked about without being worth it, in Bath and the region round about. Every one who was considered eligible to enter the Assembly Rooms was qualified to attend the ceremony of the urn at Bath-Easton.

This faint echo of the contests of the minnesingers originated with a Greek vase which came into the possession of Lady Miller. Having acquired this property, it seemed to have occurred to her that it would be well to put it to some practical use, so she put it to a singularly unpractical one. The vase was called an urn, and in it were deposited, on the day of the ceremony, certain rhymed couplets bearing, with varying degrees of directness, upon topics of the hour. The company having gathered round the urn, which was placed on a pedestal, Lady Miller or her husband took from its depths the various manuscripts and read them aloud. Prizes were then awarded to the poems which a committee considered best worthy of honour.

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At first the entertainment was regarded with coldness: hearing copies of verses read aloud, most of them of indifferent merit, failed as an attraction; but so soon as it became known that some highly spiced personalities were embodied in no less than three of the poems taken from the urn one day, people began to perceive that the ceremony might be well worth attending, and its popularity increased to such a degree that few of the people possessing the slender qualification for visiting Bath-Easton failed to put in an appearance every Thursday.

Dick Sheridan, who went with one of his sisters, noticed Tom Linley scowling by the side of Mrs. Abington, for on the other side of the lady was Dr. Goldsmith with his friend Lord Clare, and both were distracting her attention from what he was saying to her regarding Petrarca. She had professed an unbounded admiration for Petrarca, when his verses were quoted in the language in which they were written. But Dick saw that Tom had his revenge upon the others, for Dr. Johnson came up with Mr. Edmund Burke, and before the broadsides of such conversational frigates, what chance had a mere bumboat like Dr. Goldsmith?

In the distance Dick saw Mrs. Thrale by the side of her husband, and Dr. Burney had just joined them with Signor Piozzi—the accomplished Italian whom Mrs. Thrale had mocked with marvellous effrontery while he was playing the piano one day in Dr. Burney's house in St. Martin's Street, off Leicester Fields. Dr. Burney had gravely rebuked her for her impoliteness; but his doing so only made the little invisible imp of Fate, who had been very hilarious over the lady's mimicry, as he sat perched up on the cornice of the ceiling, almost choke himself with chuckling.

Mrs. Thrale was now very polite to Signor Piozzi, and so also was Mr. Thrale.

Then Miss Angelica Kauffmann, accompanied by Sir Joshua Reynolds and Miss Theophila Palmer, hastened to greet Garrick, who had once contributed a poem to the urn. Afterward, Mr. Richard Cumberland drew nigh, and Garrick lost no time making him contribute to the amusement of Miss Palmer.

"They tell me that Dr. Goldsmith's new play is a fine piece of work, sir," said the actor.

"Oh no, sir, no. Believe me you have been misinformed, Mr. Garrick; 'tis a wretched thing, truly," cried Cumberland, who would not admit that any one could write except himself.

"Nay, sir, I hear that it surpasses *The Good-Natured Man*, and that, you will admit, was a very fine piece of work," said Garrick.

"What! *The Good-Natured Man*? You surprise me, Mr. Garrick!" said Cumberland. "Heavens, sir, 'twas a pitiful thing. You cannot surely call to mind the scene with the bailiffs! Oh, sir, you

must be joking—yes, yes; I like to take the most charitable view of everything, so I assume that you are joking.”

“I know that your charitable views are your strong point, Mr. Cumberland,” said Garrick; “but you should not let them bias your judgment. You should not say a word against Goldsmith, for people say that he wrote *The Good-Natured Man* after he had been a good deal in your company.”

“’Tis a calumny, sir—a calumny,” said Cumberland warmly. “He was never inspired by me to write *The Good-Natured Man*.”

“Well, well, how people do talk!” said Garrick. “But I am glad to have your denial on this point, though I must say that when I produced the play I never heard it asserted that you had stood for the character.”

With his accustomed adroitness Garrick led Cumberland on to talk of many persons and their works, and for every person and every work he had some words of condemnation. Sir Joshua, standing by placidly with his ear-trumpet, saw that Miss Kauffmann was becoming indignant, so he led her away, leaving Garrick to amuse Miss Palmer to his heart’s content.

While Dick watched the little comedy, he heard a greeting laugh behind him, and, turning, he found himself face to face with Captain Mathews, whom he had known for some time, and thoroughly disliked.

He was surprised to see the man, for he heard that he had left Bath the day after it was announced that Betsy Linley was to marry Mr. Long. He certainly had not been seen in public since that day.

“Will they come, Sheridan—will they come, do you think?” asked Mathews, with a note of apprehension in his voice.

“I have no idea of whom you are speaking; but whoever they are, I think I may safely prophesy that they will come,” said Dick.

“Thank Heaven!” said Mathews. “You must know that I mean Miss Linley and her grandfather, whom she is going to marry. But do you think that the marriage will ever come off? Oh, a pretty set of lovers that girl got around her—not a man of spirit among them all, or that old fool Long would have got six inches of cold steel through his vitals! I am the only man among them all, Sheridan—I am the only man of spirit left in Bath, as you’ll see this day, whether they come or not.”

“What do you mean by that threat, sir?” said Dick quickly.

The man laughed.

“I haven’t said aught to wound your feelings, have I?” he said. “Oh no! I don’t mean to say that you’re not a fellow of spirit, Sheridan, only you never loved Miss Linley as the others pretended to do. They showed their spirit by slinking off, sir, just when they should have stayed. You didn’t see me slink off, Sheridan? No, I am here, and here I mean to stay until the end of this affair has come, and it cannot be far off after to-day. I tell you, Dick Sheridan, that I am not the man to lie tamely down, as the rest of them did, and let Walter Long and Elizabeth Linley walk over my body to the church portal!”

“You are pleased to talk in the strain of a riddle, and that, Mr. Mathews, is an infernally dull strain, let me assure you,” said Dick. “Come, sir, if you have anything to say, say it out plainly, like a man. But first I venture to remind you that Mr. Linley and his family have been for years my friends, and also that Mr. Long honours me by his friendship, and I promise you that anything you say of them that verges on an affront I shall think it my duty to resent. Now, Mr. Mathews, say what you have to say.”

Mathews looked at him for some time; then he laughed as he had laughed before.

“Your father is a play-actor, Mr. Sheridan,” said he at last. “I have seen him in more than one piece, both in Dublin and Bristol. He is a fine actor. Well, go to him, and he will tell you that the way to make a play a success is to keep the playgoers interested in it from scene to scene, and the best way to do this is to tell them only a little of the story at one time. Now, sir, consider that this scene is the beginning of a comedy—maybe it will turn out a tragedy before we have done with it—but this is the first scene; keep your eyes and your ears open, and you will find it worth your while. By the Lord, there they come at last! Curse it! the girl is getting lovelier every day—every day! Such beauty is enough to make any man mad. Look at her, Sheridan—look at her, and tell me if there is any man living that would not run a risk of all the tortures of the lost to be near her! Dick Sheridan, I don’t love her—not I, not I: I hate her! Deep down in my heart I tell you that I hate her. But there’s no human being that can tell the difference between the passion of love and the passion of hate.”

Dick saw that the man was not far removed from madness; but before he could give him the warning which was in his mind to bestow upon him, Mathews had turned about and hurried away to where people were grouping themselves round the urn.

Mr. Long, with Betsy Linley by his side, was replying to the greetings of some of their friends. He no longer carried his arm in a sling.

CHAPTER XXIV

Dick Sheridan looked on at the scene of bright colours before him on the lawn; the newly erected imitation Greek temple was at the farther end of one of the many vistas, and at regular intervals stood Greek pediments of carven stone surmounted by busts of Greek poets. Among the shrubberies were pedestals with grinning fauns, and an occasional nymph with flying drapery. An Artemis with her dogs stood in the attitude of pursuit between two laurels.

Dick felt strangely lonely, although he had frequently attended the ceremony of the urn. His sister had gone to discharge the imaginary duties of one of the priestesses of the urn, and was, with another girl, engaged in twisting twigs of bay into a practicable wreath, her companion showing her how it was necessary not to make the joining too rigid, so that the wreath could be easily enlarged or diminished in size to suit the circumference of the head of the victor; for it was not to be taken for granted that the bays must go to the largest brow.

For a short time he watched the weaving of the wreath, and then he looked across the lawn to where Betsy was talking to Dr. Burney, Mr. Long standing close by with Dr. Delap, who had come from Brighthelmstone to drink the waters. Mathews had disappeared as suddenly as he had come upon the scene, but Dick made up his mind to keep a watch for his return. The threats of which he had made use in regard to Mr. Long and Betsy were vague, but their utterance by the man at that time had startled Dick. The fellow might be mad, and yet have, with all the cunning of a madman, concocted a plot that might mean disaster to Betsy; but if he were narrowly watched his scheme of revenge could doubtless be frustrated, and Dick felt that he would never forgive himself if, after being forewarned, he should let Mathews carry out his purpose, assuming that he meant mischief.

While he was watching for a possible reappearance of the man, Mr. Linley came across the lawn to him, and drew him away in the direction of the gods and goddesses of the shrubberies. Dick saw that there was an expression of anxiety on his face. His manner, too, was nervous.

"Dick, I am in great trouble," he said in a low voice. "You can guess what is its origin, I am sure?"

Dick had just seen Mr. Long and Betsy side by side. The match had not been broken off. What trouble, then, could possess the girl's father?

"Indeed, sir, you surprise me," said Dick. "I see Betsy with Mr. Long, and——"

"Oh, 'tis not about Betsy I am troubled," said Mr. Linley, "though, Heaven knows, she has given me trouble enough in the past with her whimsies about singing in public. If I had not been firm with her, Dick, she would have given up singing a year ago. No, 'tis not about her, but Tom, that I wish to speak to you. You have seen him to-day with that woman—a play-actress?"

"I have seen him, sir. My father was a play-actor," said Dick quietly.

"Surely you know what I mean, Dick! Surely you know that it is not in my thoughts to utter a word that would assume the form of a reproach upon the theatre. No, Dick, no; that is not my intention. But you have seen them together—Tom and Mrs. Abington? I don't say a word against her, mind. She may lead a blameless life, though I have heard—— But that is not to the point."

"Mrs. Abington is a very charming lady, Mr. Linley, and as for propriety—Dr. Johnson himself has dined with her."

"Dr. Johnson—Dr. Johnson! Dr. Johnson is not to the point; he is old enough to take care of himself and to protect himself from the wiles of all the coquettes in England."

Dick laughed.

"Nature and the small-pox have given him great advantage over the majority of men, sir. They have made him practically invulnerable."

"But Nature and Italy have done just the opposite for Tom; his soul is capable of the deepest feeling, Dick, and he is open to every influence that an accomplished woman of the world has at her command. That creature—I mean that lady—Mrs. Abington—oh, she is undoubtedly a charming creature!—that's where the danger lies. You know her, Dick; tell me what it is that she means to do in regard to Tom."

"Oh, sir! she has taken a passing fancy to Tom—that's all. You know what 'tis to possess the soul of an artist, sir. So far as I can gather, that soul is full of whimsies. The only comforting thought in connection with suchlike is that none of their whims lasts long. Their inconstancy is their greatest charm. Mrs. Abington will soon have done with Tom, sir."

"Thank Heaven—thank Heaven! The sooner the better, say I. Dick, a fortnight ago Tom had no thought for anything save his violin. I felt that he was actually too deeply absorbed in it: he would scarce give himself time to take his meals, and he was at the point of falling into a rage because I had given my consent to Betsy's retirement from the concerts. He called me a traitor—a renegade—worse than a Mohammedan—for allowing her to renounce the true faith; those were his words, Dick. And yet, now, he has done nothing but improvise, and that the most sickly stuff—lovelorn; and his poetry—he has bought a rhyming-dictionary, and has turned the half of Petrarch's poems into English."

"You take this little matter too seriously, believe me, Mr. Linley. 'Tis but a bubble of feeling, sir—an airy nothing. 'Twill float away and leave not a trace behind."

"I hope so—with all my heart I hope so. You do not think that you could do something to assist its flight, Dick?"

"Dear sir, I am convinced that any interference by me—yes, or even by you, sir—would have just the opposite effect to what we hope for in this matter."

"What, don't you think that you might bring the creat—the lady, I mean—that you might bring her to reason?"

"The soul of an artist is susceptible to many influences—love, hate, jealousy, criticism, a wet day, a gown that has been made a little tight in the bodice, a gewgaw,—all these have great weight with the soul of an artist; but reason has none. You must perceive, sir, that if every one were reasonable there would be no artists. Mrs. Abington is an artist in the comedy of love; she has curiosity, but 'tis of the butterfly order—a sip here and a sip there among the flowers. Oh, the flowers are nothing the worse for the curiosity of the butterfly. Tom will be himself again when she flies off to another part of the garden."

"I have my fears, Dick. But I don't doubt that you take the most sensible view of the matter. I believe that he has sent in a sonnet in praise of her to the urn to-day. Petrarch is his model. If he is awarded the prize he will lay it at her feet; they do these things in Italy but here we are more prosaic. Are they beginning to read the stuff?"

"We must not lose the chance of applauding Tom's sonnet," said Dick, making a move toward the circle that was formed round the Greek urn, from which Lady Miller, not looking so ridiculous as might have been expected, in her white robes, as a priestess (the period was a masquerade in itself, and the painters made the most of it), had just taken one of the manuscripts, and was putting herself in an attitude to read.

Mr. Linley saw this; but what Dick saw was that Mathews had reappeared, and was standing on the outskirts of the circle, his eyes fixed upon Betsy, with a poisonous smile about their corners.

Dick hastened across the lawn, and was in time to hear the second line of the heroics which the lady had begun to read, not without a certain amount of stumbling over unfamiliar words and an over-emphasising of the epithets, which were numerous and safely commonplace.

"What is it that Mathews means to do?" that was the question which came to Dick when he perceived the evil smile of the man, for he saw that it was a smile anticipatory of triumph; and all the time that Lady Miller was meandering through the poem, with its allusions to the deities in the mythologies of Greece and Rome, and its rhymes of "fault" and "thought," "smile" and "toil," with an Alexandrine for the third rhyme of "isle," he was asking himself that question: "What is it that Mathews means to do?"

He looked across the listening circle, and saw that Mr. Long also had his eyes fixed upon the man, and that the same question had been suggested to him. Mr. Long was watching and waiting. And then he glanced away from Mathews and saw Dick. He smiled and nodded pleasantly; but Dick had no difficulty in perceiving that behind these courtesies Mr. Long was ill at ease.

And then the high-priestess extracted another poem from the urn. It was written in precisely the same strain as the first; only the rhymes were more palpably false—the same greater and lesser deities talked about the condition of society at Olympus, which every one recognised by the description as Prior Park; but just as it promised to become delightfully, spitefully, personal, and therefore interesting, the poem shuffled out on the spindleshanks of a reference to the need for clean napkins for the glasses in the Pump Room.

This was very feeble, most people thought (the author was not among them), even though the Pump Room was artfully disguised under the name of the Fount of Helicon. There was a distinct impression of relief when the third poem was found to be written as a lyric with a comfortable jolt about it, to which Lady Miller, after two or three false starts, accommodated her voice. It touched with light satire upon the question of watering the roads, and as this was the topic of the hour, it was received with abundant applause, and the general idea was, that unless something extremely good awaited reading, this lyric would carry off a prize.

The fourth poem turned out to be Tom Linley's sonnet in praise of Mrs. Abington; and as every one knew Mrs. Abington, and as she herself was present, and as no one was able to identify the translation of Petrarch's beautiful sentiments, there seemed little doubt the poet's ambition would be rewarded.

Tom flushed, and was more overcome than he had ever been when playing before his largest audience. Mrs. Abington, too, gave a very pleasing representation of the *ingénue* fluttered with compliments which she knows are thoroughly well deserved. She would have the people believe that she was overwhelmed—that she was not at all pleased with the publicity given to her in so unexpected a way, and the way she shook her head at Tom should have conveyed to him the fact that she considered him to be a very naughty boy—the result being that the crowd perceived that Mrs. Abington was a very modest lady, and that Garrick, who was something of a judge of such performances, was ready to affirm that Mrs. Abington had a very light touch.

Then Lady Miller, after a few complimentary remarks upon Mrs. Abington's style of dress, began to read the next poem. Having now read four copies of verses, that fulness of expression with which she had begun her labours, had disappeared from her voice, and she had read the greater part of the sonnet in a purely mechanical way. It became clear before she had got through more than five lines of the new rhymes, that she had not the slightest idea what they were about. The stanzas were quite illiterate and the merest doggerel; but, at the end of the first,

glances were exchanged around the circle, for the stanza was coarse in every way, and it contained a pun upon the name Long that could only be regarded as a studied insult to the gentleman bearing that name.

But it was plain that the high-priestess had not the remotest idea that anything was particularly wrong with the poem. She looked up from the paper with the smile with which she was accustomed to punctuate the periods, and then began to read the second stanza.

She did not get further than the third line. The first two contained a very gross allusion to an old man's marrying a young woman; but the third was so coarse that even the apathetic reader was startled and made a pause, during which she scanned the remainder of the manuscript, and in doing so her face became crimson. She handed the sheet to her husband, saying a few words to him, and then tried to gather up the threads of her smile, so to speak.

"I think that I had better go on to the next poem," she said aloud. "The writer of the last must have inadvertently sent us the wrong leaf. He must have designed it for his favourite pothouse."

This expression of opinion was received with general applause. Yet no one except Dick seemed to suspect Mathews of being the writer of the doggerel. But in the mind of Dick there was no doubt on the matter. He saw the triumphant leer on the man's face, and could scarcely restrain himself from rushing at him and at least making an attempt to knock him down. He only held himself back by the reflection that before the evening had come, Mathews would have received a challenge from him. He made up his mind to challenge him, as certain as his name was Mathews. It would be in vain for people to assure him that this was not his quarrel, but Mr. Long's; he would assert that, as the insult was directed against a lady, in the presence of his (Dick's) sister, he was quite entitled to take it on himself to punish the perpetrator.

He had glanced at Mr. Long when Lady Miller made her pause, and had seen him smiling, while he addressed some words to Betsy, evidently regarding the creases of her glove, for immediately afterwards she held out her hand to him, and he straightened the little ripples on the silk.

Dick wondered if Mr. Long had failed to catch the insulting lines of the doggerel before the high-priestess had become aware of what she had been reading. Certainly he gave no sign of having caught their import. Dick rather hoped that he had not; he had no desire to cede to Mr. Long the part which he meant to play in this affair.

When he glanced again across the circle, he noticed that Mr. Long had disappeared. And the voice of Lady Miller, with its wrong inflections and its exaggerated emphasis on the adjectives, went on in its delivery of the even lines of the new poem, which was all about Phoebus and Phaeton, and Actæon and Apollo, and the Muses and Marsyas, though nobody seemed to care what it was about. It was very long, and it led nowhere. The circle gave it their silent inattention. Some yawned behind polite hands; one or two whispered. The last lines came upon all as a delightful surprise, for there was really no reason why it should ever end, and for that matter there was no reason why it should ever have begun.

This was, happily, the last of the contents of the urn. Most of the *habitués* of Bath-Easton felt that the day had been one of mediocrity; the entertainment would have been even duller than ordinary if it had not been for that shocking thing to which no one referred. Of course Tom Linley was awarded the wreath of bays, which, with some ceremony, the high-priestess laid upon his brows, making him look quite as ridiculous as he felt.

"O lud!" whispered Mrs. Abington to Mr. Walpole, who had got beside her, "O lud! if young gentlemen will write prize poems, they have a heavy penalty to pay for it."

"Nay, my dear creature," said he, "'tis but fitting that the victim calf should be decorated for the sacrificial altar."

"I admit the calf," said she, "but whose is the altar?"

"'Tis dedicated to Hymen or Hades; it rests with you to determine which," said he, with one of his wicked leers. He was very like one of the marble satyrs, she perceived—a Marsyas without his music. She longed for an Apollo skilled in flaying.

The ceremony over, congratulatory smiles were sent flying around the listeners, and there was a general movement toward the house, full of spontaneity.

"Ladies and gentlemen," came a voice from one side, and the movement was arrested. People looked over their shoulders. O lud! was the dulness of the day to be increased by speeches? they enquired.

"Ladies and gentlemen, you were grossly insulted just now by a wretch who is a master of the arts of the brigand, though he meant his poisoned knife for me alone. This is the blackguard, and I treat him as such."

Before any one was aware of the fact that it was Mr. Long who was speaking, he had his hand upon the collar of Captain Mathews, and had swung him round by a certain jerk well known to wrestlers of the old school. Forcing him, staggering, backward with one hand, with a postillion's short whip, which he held in the other, he flogged the fellow as never horse had been flogged. He cut strips off his garments as neatly as if his weapon had been a pair of shears; a cut of the lash made the blood spurt from one of his calves, another took a slice off his small-clothes just above the knee—ludicrous but effective. His coat parted at the back seams in the stress of the struggle, and a few more cuts at the opening made shreds of his shirt and let free, as it seemed, all the blood in his body. There was the shriek of

females, and this brought the men to their senses. They hastened to interpose. Mr. Long sent his victim staggering against two or three of them. Mathews trod on their toes, and they cursed him unaware, Mr. Long belabouring away with a deftness that lacked neither style nor finish; and all the time his knuckles were digging into Mathew's throat, until the wretch's face became purple.

Half a dozen gentlemen launched themselves upon Mr. Long. He stepped adroitly to one side, and let them have Mathews. They fell on him in a heap, crushing out of his body whatever trifle of breath he retained.

Mr. Long politely assisted them to rise, affecting to wipe from their garments the result of their contact with the grass. He was breathing heavily, and his wig had become disordered.

He flung his whip—it was still serviceable—into a plantation, and when he found his breath he said:

“I think I should like a dish of tea.”



FLOGGED THE FELLOW AS NEVER HORSE HAD BEEN FLOGGED.

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CHAPTER XXV

“If any one says that Mr. Long was not justified in his act, I tell him he lies,” remarked Dick grandly to the group who were propping up Mathews in a sitting posture on the grass.

The wretch seemed ludicrously out of place on the lawn, and the gentlemen who saw him there did not fail to perceive that the expression on the faces of the stone satyrs was for the first time appropriate. Had he been in the middle of a field of young wheat, he might have relieved a less disreputable figure from duty.

“Who is there that says Mr. Long was not justified?” cried one of the gentlemen; he was trying to remove a stain from his sleeve. “Good lud! does the lad think that county gentlemen are to learn discrimination as well as elocution from the Sheridan family?”

“The Sheridans take too much upon them,” said another; he was unlucky enough to have his wig trampled on by the huge foot of a first-class county gentleman in the *melée*, and was inclined to be testy in consequence. “Be advised, Mr. Sheridan, leave these matters to your elders and betters.”

Dick felt that he deserved the rebuke. His scarcely veiled threat savoured of impertinence. He lifted his hat and walked away. No one took any notice of him.

“By the Lord Harry, friend Long has a pair of arms that a man thirty years younger might envy!” Dick heard one of the gentleman say.

“He will have a wife that a man forty years younger does envy,” laughed a second.

“I heard my father talk of the great strength of Mr. Long when he was at his best,” said a third. “Why, ’twas he that floored Devonshire Paul, the wrestler, early in the forties, going to Barnstaple to do it—’tis one of Sir Edmund’s stories. Well, I dare swear that we haven’t seen the last of this business. How is the fellow? Bind him over not to make a disturbance in the house.”

Dick walked slowly to the villa. He found that the ladies who had been so overcome by the sight of Mathews’ blood were being carefully attended to. Poor Tom Linley was sitting in a corner with his sister. Tom looked very sulky. He was the hero of Parnassus, and yet no one paid any attention to him. People were laughing and talking, some in a loud tone, others in a whisper, not upon the subject of the construction of the sonnet of Petrarch as distinguished from the sonnet of Shakespeare, but upon the likelihood of a duel following the exciting scene which they had witnessed. Tom sulked, and tried to avoid seeing that Mrs. Abington was the centre of a group of gentlemen of fashion, with whom she was exchanging quips, also on the subject of the

horsewhipping of Mathews.

Of course there would be a duel. Mathews held the king's commission and wore the king's uniform. If he failed to send a challenge to the man who had so publicly disgraced him, he need never show his face in society again. That was the opinion which was universal among the party in Lady Miller's drawing-room, and it was only modified by the rider which some people appended to their verdict, to the effect that it was quite surprising how Mathews had ever got a footing in Bath society.

Mr. Linley, who was by the side of his daughter when Dick entered, was looking solemn. He was greatly perturbed by what had taken place, and expressed the opinion that Mr. Long would have shown more wisdom by refraining from noticing Mathew's insult than he had displayed by avenging it, even though he had done so with remarkable success. Of course there would be a duel, he said; and Mathews was probably a first-class pistol-shot, though he had shown himself unable to contend with Mr. Long when taken by surprise.

Poor Betsy was overwhelmed by the thought of such a possibility. She appealed to Dick when he had come to her side. Was a duel inevitable? Was there no alternative? Could she do nothing to prevent such a sequel to the quarrel?

"Why should you be distressed at the possibility of a duel?" said Dick. "There is no particular reason why Mr. Long should stand up against that fellow; any gentleman who was present here to-day has a perfect right to send a challenge to Mathews."

"Oh, that is only saying that some one else may be killed—some one in addition to Mr. Long," cried Betsy. "Ah, why is it that disaster follows an acquaintance with me? Why have I been doomed to bring unhappiness upon so many people?"

Dick did not ransack his memory for an answer to her question—an answer founded upon the records of history. He did not cite any of the cases with which he was acquainted, of the unhappiness brought about by the fatal dower of beauty.

"How can you accuse yourself in such a matter as this?" he said. "If a rascal behaves with rascality, are you to blame yourself because he tries to make you the victim? I will not hear so cruel, so unjust a thing said about one who is more than blameless in this matter. Dear Betsy, I know the sensibility of your heart, and how it causes you to shrink from much that others would give worlds to accomplish; but you must not be unjust to yourself."

This was poor pleading with the super-sensitiveness of a girl who could never be brought to look on fame as the noblest of cravings—nay, who was ready to sacrifice much in order to escape being famous.

"Bloodshed—bloodshed!" she murmured in great distress. "Oh, why did we come here to-day? If we had remained at home, all might have been well. Why cannot we go away to some place where we can live in freedom from all these disturbing influences? Ah, here comes Mr. Long. How pale he looks! Pray Heaven he has not been already hurt!"

Mr. Long, who had been repairing the slight disorderliness of his dress in one of the bedrooms, had some difficulty in reaching Betsy, where she sat remote from the crowd in the drawing-rooms. He had to wait for the compliments which his friends offered to him on all sides. Every one treated him with great respect, and many with deference. There did not seem to be any difference of opinion among Lady Miller's guests as to the propriety of his recent action; the only point which had been seriously discussed was in regard to the postillion's whip. Where had he got it? It was suggested on one side that he had brought it with him; but some who knew affirmed that the whip had been hanging in the hall, and that Mr. Long had, after the reading of the insulting doggerel, hurried up to the house and got possession of the weapon while the last poem was being lilted to the audience. At first, of course, there were some people who thought that Mr. Long had acted precipitately in assuming that Mathews had written the objectionable stanzas; but Lady Miller acknowledged immediately on entering the house that the manuscript was signed by Mathews, and thus complete unanimity prevailed by the time Mr. Long had returned to the room.

Even on his way to Betsy he received a dozen offers from gentlemen to act for him in the event of his receiving a challenge. Betsy was somewhat cheered when she heard him say to one of them:

"You do me great honour, sir, but there will be no duel. I doubt if there will even be a challenge."

She heard that with pleasure.

Dick heard it with amazement.

Could it be possible, he asked himself, that Mr. Long fancied that Mathews, boor though he was, would be content to accept his public horsewhipping as the final incident in the squalid comedy of his suitorship for the hand of Miss Linley? If that was indeed his belief, all that Dick could say was that he took a rather extraordinary view of the matter.

But Betsy, not having any experience of questions of honour, but having faith in the word of a man whom she respected, was reassured.

"Do say that again," she cried, when Mr. Long had come to her.

"What do you command me to say again, madam?" he inquired. "Oh, a duel? Heavens, Mr. Sheridan, isn't possible that you are here and have not yet convinced Miss Linley that I shall not

have to fight a duel?"

"Nay, sir," said Dick, "I have done my best to impress upon her that there is no need for you to fight—that the quarrel belongs as much to any gentleman who was present as it does to you."

"You will pardon me for saying that I do not think that that suggestion would tend to place Miss Linley's mind at rest," said Mr. Long. "But now I can give you my word that there will be no duel. If any one is foolish enough to send a challenge to the rascal whom I treated to a drubbing, he will do so without my knowledge and without my consent. Dear child, I can give you my word that there will be no duel."

"I am satisfied," she said simply, with a grateful look up to his face.

"If you are satisfied, all the world is satisfactory," said Mr. Long.

But it did not appear as if Mr. Linley was quite satisfied.

"If there be no duel, sir, all that I can say is that 'tis not your fault," he cried.

"Not my fault!—nay, just the contrary: 'tis to my credit," laughed Mr. Long.

"I mean, sir, that you did your very best to provoke a duel," said Mr. Linley with severity. Mr. Long was about to become his son-in-law, and this he considered, gave him a right to object to any incident that tended to jeopardise the connection.

"Oh, my dear sir," said Mr. Long, "can you really think that so simple an incident as horsewhipping a man in a public place could be considered by him a sufficient excuse for a challenge? Nay, sir, you will find, I am persuaded, that Captain Mathews is not inclined to take your view of this business. He will, I think, be satisfied to let bygones be bygones."

Dick was dumb. The only ground on which he thought he could reconcile Mr. Long's confident assertion of what any person with experience of the world would consider incredible, was his desire to allay Betsy's anxiety.

But Betsy's father apparently did not see so much as Dick. Though a professional musician, he was not without his experience of quarrels. He shook his head when Mr. Long had spoken with that airy confidence which he had assumed, and said:

"I would fain hope that events will justify the confidence with which you speak, sir; but to my mind it would seem as if——"

"Nay, dear sir, I will give you my assurance that I shall not be called on to fight any duel over this matter," cried Mr. Long in the tone of a man who has said the last word on a matter that has been under discussion for some time. "I admit that before I took the unusual step which I thought I was justified in adopting, I saw the risk that I was running. A man who horsewhips his fellow-guest may be made to answer to his host for so doing. I ran that risk, and I am happy to say that our host did not take too severe a view of the occurrence. That puts an end to any suspicion that one may entertain as to the likelihood of swords being crossed or pistols unloaded to the detriment of my health. Let us change the subject, if you please. It seems to me that enough attention has not been given to Tom's beautiful sonnet. Dear friend Tom, you have proved by the writing of that sonnet that you have already mastered the elements of successful authorship. If all poets would choose a popular subject for their songs, they would have no need to wear hats, for they would be perpetually crowned with bays. May I ask the favour of a copy of your sonnet, sir? I should like to have it printed beneath my print of Sir Joshua's picture of Mrs. Abington?"

Tom was delighted. His mortification at the neglect which he had received—was he not really the hero of the day?—vanished. His large eyes shone with pleasure as he gave his promise to supply Mr. Long with the copy which he desired.

Mr. Long, seeing that Betsy's large eyes, so wonderfully like those of her brother, were also shining with pleasure, was quite satisfied.

Unfortunately, just as Tom was beginning to explain the difficulties in the way of any one wishing to create a sonnet which was really a sonnet, and not merely a fourteen-line poem, a number of people came up to talk to his sister and Mr. Long, thus interrupting him. But neither Betsy nor Dick failed to notice the vexed look which Mr. Long gave to the boy, by way of assuring him that his discourse on the Italian sonnet was something to be parted from only with a deep regret.

Dick, at the suggestion of Mr. Long, walked with Betsy round the gardens, Mr. Long following with Miss Sheridan.

The walk was a silent one. It did not seem as if they had any topic in common. They seemed to have nothing to talk about. But their silence was not the silence of strangers; it was that which exists only between the closest of friends. They had not had such a stroll side by side since she had given her promise to Mr. Long. But how many walks they had had together in the old days! Their thoughts flashed back to those days on the perfume of the rosebuds. They had often walked among the roses.

It was Dick who broke the silence.

"I do not think that a better man lives than Mr. Long," said he.

She sighed.

He glanced down at her in surprise. He was almost irritated by her sigh.

She did not speak.

"I do not believe that a better man lives in the world," he said with emphasis. "Surely you do not think that he is to blame for what took place here to-day, Betsy?"

"Oh, no, no! he behaved like—like a man," she replied at once. "And he has given us his assurance that there will be no duel," she added joyfully.

"Yes, he has given us that assurance," said Dick. "But even if there were to be a duel, I have no doubt that he would show himself to be as brave a man."

"But there will be no duel—he said so," she cried. "And to think of that foolish rumour that went round the town, that you and he had fought! I never believed it for a moment. It was senseless—cruel! The gossips circulated the report simply because it was known that you had been with him for more than an hour on the day after you had saved him from his assailants."

Dick was once again surprised.

"How could you know that I had been with him on that night?" he inquired.

"I know it—alas! I know it," she cried. "He is so good—so—generous—so noble! Oh, I must love him—I must! Sometimes I really think that I do love him.... And you saved his life, Dick. It would be the basest ingratitude on my part if I did not love him after that.... And the way he talks of your courage!—he told me how bravely you pursued the wretches who had waylaid him. He is full of your praises, Dick. Oh, I must love him! He is the worthiest man in the world to be loved. And I believe that I do love him. I sometimes believe that I do."

"My poor Betsy," he said, "I might give you counsel on this matter if it would be of any value to you. Alas! dear, I know that nothing that I could say to you would avail against the promptings of your own true heart. It was you who first taught me the lesson which I think I have since learned more fully—the lesson of the meaning of love. Who am I that I should offer any counsel to such as you? I can only tell you that I feel that Mr. Long is the best worthy of your love of all the men in the world. But you yourself know that already."

"I do—indeed, I do know it," she cried eagerly. "And that is why I say that I am sure, sometimes, that I do love him. I must—I must—only— Oh, Dick, I am very unhappy!"

"My poor Betsy! my poor Betsy!"

That was all he could say.

CHAPTER XXVI

Several versions of the story of the exciting occurrence at the Parnassus of Bath-Easton were in circulation during the next few days. The fact that over fifty persons had witnessed the whole affair was only a guarantee that there would be at least forty-nine different versions of it. The consequence was that before two days had passed, people in Bath were quarrelling over such details as whether Captain Mathews had or had not made an attack upon Mr. Long with his cane, or if it was really true that Miss Linley had been walking with Captain Mathews, thereby arousing the jealousy of Mr. Long, and causing him to assault the other. Before the second day had gone by, there was, of course, a report that a duel had taken place, and the result was, according to the various reports:

- (1) Captain Mathews had run Mr. Long through the body with a sword.
- (2) Captain Mathews had shot Mr. Long with a pistol.
- (3) Mr. Long had run Captain Mathews through the body with a sword.
- (4) Mr. Long had shot Captain Mathews with a pistol.
- (5) Mr. Long was dead.
- (6) Captain Mathews was dead.
- (7) Both Mr. Long and Captain Mathews were dead.
- (8) Neither of them had received a scratch.
- (9) There had been no fight, as Mr. Long had offered a handsome apology for his conduct, and had agreed to pay Mathews a thousand pounds by way of compensation.

These were only a few of the items of the Pump Room gossip, and every item found its adherents.

The lampooners took their choice. It was immaterial to them whether Mathews killed Long or Long killed Mathews; they treated the matter with the cynicism of Iago in regard to the killing of Cassio. They found that there was a good deal to be said in favour of every rumour, and they said it through the medium of some very wretched verses.

Mr. Long seemed to be the only man in Bath who remained unaffected in any way by the occurrence at Bath-Easton, about which, and its sequel, every one was talking. He refused to be drawn into the controversy as to whether he had attacked Mathews or been attacked by Mathews, and he declined to take sides in the question of the identity of the one who had been killed in the duel, though it might have been fancied that this was a question which would have a

certain amount of interest for him. He refused to alter his mode of life in any degree. He appeared in public places no less frequently, but no more frequently, than before, and those people who had heard him affirm that there would be no duel, began, when the third day had passed, to think that there was some element in the quarrel with which they were unacquainted.

Dick Sheridan was greatly amazed, but extremely well pleased, when he heard from Mr. Long's own lips that he had not received a communication on behalf of the man whom he had horsewhipped. It was when he was sitting at supper within his own house, with Dick sitting opposite to him, on the fourth day after the incident, that he so informed Dick.

"I did not speak without a full knowledge of my man, when I affirmed that there would be no duel," said Mr. Long. "I was not so sure in regard to the challenge; but you see there is to be no challenge."

It so happened, however, that before they had risen from the table, a gentleman arrived at the house on behalf of Captain Mathews, bearing a challenge, and requesting to be put in communication with Mr. Long's friend.

The gentleman's name was Major O'Teague. He was an Irishman, who lived for two months out of the year at Bath, and the remaining ten months no one knew where—perhaps in Ireland. No one knew in what regiment he served, and no one cared to know. He himself was not communicative on the matter, and he did not affect any particular uniform. He had, however, been known to talk of his father's fighting in the Irish Brigade at Fontenoy, and that led some people to believe that he had won his rank in the same service.

When questioned on this point, he had replied that he always stood by the side of Freedom and the Fair. The consensus of opinion was that this sentiment did not materially assist one to identify the corps or the country in which he had won distinction. He was, however, known to be a good swordsman, and he always paid something on account to his landlady, so Bath ceased to take an interest in his military career. That he was carefully studied by young Mr. Sheridan there can be but little doubt, though it was Mrs. Cholmondeley who pretended to forget his name upon one occasion, and alluded to him as Major O'Trigger, an accident which young Mr. Sheridan never forgot.

He was excessively polite—"No man is so polite unless he means mischief," was the thought which came to Dick when Major O'Teague was announced.

He addressed himself to Mr. Long, having declined, with a longing eye and a reluctant voice, a glass of sherry.

"Sir," he said, "I come on a delicate mission"—he pronounced the adjective "diligate," for even the stress of Fontenoy and a course of Bath waters failed to reduce the heritage of the Irish Brigade—and gave a polite glance in the direction of Dick.

"Mr. Richard Brinsley Sheridan is my friend, sir," said Mr. Long. "He is in my confidence, so that it is unnecessary for him to retire."

"Very well, sir," said the visitor. "I doubt not that Mr. Sheridan is a man of honour: his name, anyway, is illustrious" (pronounced "illustrious") "in the roll of fame of Irishmen. I mind that my father, the colonel, said that Owen Roe O'Neil Sheridan was a lieutenant in Clare's regiment, and a very divil at that."

"I have no doubt that Mr. Richard Brinsley Sheridan is duly proud of having at least one name in common with the lieutenant, sir," said Mr. Long.

"And he would have every right, sir, let me tell you," said Major O'Teague warmly. "My father knew that the boast of the Sheridans was that before the trouble came upon them in Ireland there never had been a wine-glass inside their castle."

"A family of water-drinkers, sir?" suggested Mr. Long.

"Nothing of the sort, sir; they drank their liquor out of tumblers," cried Major O'Teague. "Did y'ever hear tell"—the Major had elapsed into the French idiom—"did y'ever hear tell of the answer that Brian Oge O'Brian Sheridan made to the English officer that called at the castle when the colonel's horse had been stolen, Mr. Sheridan?"

"Sir," said Dick with dignity, "these are family affairs, and I should be reluctant to obtrude them on the attention of Mr. Long at this time—though, of course, if you came to talk to him on this topic—"

"I ask your pardon, sir," said Major O'Teague fiercely. "I come on business, not pleasure. Mr. Long, sir, I have been entrusted by my friend, Captain Mathews, with a communication which I have no doubt that, as a man of honour, you have been anticipating since that unfortunate little affair at Bath-Easton."

With a low bow he handed Mr. Long a folded-up letter.

Mr. Long turned it over in his hands without opening it. A puzzled expression was on his face. "I expected no communication from Mr. Mathews, sir," said he. "Pray, Major O'Teague, are you certain that the missive has not been wrongly directed to me?"

"What, sir," cried Major O'Teague, "do you tell me that after what happened, after whaling another gentleman within an inch of his life, and in the middle of the best company in Bath, you don't expect to hear from him?"

"Is it possible that Mr. Mathews considers himself insulted, sir?" asked Mr. Long.

The Irishman's jaw fell. He was stupefied. His lips moved, but it was a long time before a word came.

"An insult—an ins— Hivins above us, sir, where is it that y'have lived at all?" he managed to say at last. "An insult—an ins— Oh, the humour of it! Flaying a man alive with a postillion's whip; not even a coachman's whip,—there's some dignity in a coachman's whip,—but a common postillion's! sir, the degradation of the act passes language, so it does. 'Tis an insult that can only be washed out by blood—blood, sir—a river of blood! A river? A sea of blood, sir—an ocean of blood! Egad, sir, 'tis a doubtful question, that it is, if all great Neptune's ocean— Ye've seen Mrs. Yates as Lady Macbeth, I doubt not, Mr. Sheridan? A fine actress, sir, and an accomplished lady—"

"I have never had that privilege, sir," said Dick. "You were making a remark about great Neptune's ocean."

"And I'll make it again, by your leave, sir. I say that 'tis a nice question if the wounds inflicted upon a gentleman's honour by the free use of a low postillion's whip can be cauterised by all great Neptune's ocean."

"'Tis a nice question, I doubt not, sir," said Dick.

"That's the conclusion my friend the captain and me came to before we had more than talked the business half over, and so we determined that it must be nipped in the bud," said Major O'Teague, with the fluency of a practised rhetorician.

Meantime Mr. Long had opened the letter. The seal was about the size of a crown piece, and the breaking of it was quite apocalyptic.

"'Tis true, Major O'Teague," said he mournfully. "Your friend has been pleased to take offence at what was, after all, an unimportant incident."

"Pray, sir, may I inquire if your notion is that a gentleman should not take offence at anything less than getting his head cut off?" said Major O'Teague with great suavity. "You think that a gentleman shouldn't send a challenge unless the other gentleman has mortally wounded him?"

"I like to take a charitable view of every matter, sir; and I give you my word that I believed that Mr. Mathews had more discretion than to challenge me to—to—may I say?—to show him my hand," said Mr. Long.

"To show him your hand, sir? I protest that I don't understand you at all, Mr. Long," said Major O'Teague. "This is not a challenge to a friendly game of cards, sir, let me assure you. When you show your hand to my friend, I trust it's a couple of swords that'll be in it, or a brace of pistols, which form a very gentlemanly diversion on the green of a morning."

"Mr. Sheridan, I shall ask you to do me the honour of acting for me in this unfortunate affair," said Mr. Long.

"Sir," cried Dick, "if you will allow me to take this quarrel on myself I shall feel doubly honoured."

"'Tis reluctant I am to thrust forward my opinion uncalled for; but if my own father—rest his soul!—was to offer to cheat me out of a fight, I'd have his life, if he was a thousand times my father," said Major O'Teague.

"This quarrel is mine, Mr. Sheridan," said Mr. Long. "You and Major O'Teague will settle the preliminaries in proper fashion. Have you ever been concerned in an affair of this sort before, Major O'Teague, may I ask?"

Major O'Teague staggered back till he was supported by the wainscot. He stared at his questioner.

"Is it Major O'Teague that y'ask the question of?" he said in a whisper that was not quite free from hoarseness. "Is it me—me—ever engaged in an affair of honour?" He took out his handkerchief and wiped his brow. Then he shook his head mournfully and turned his eyes devotionally to the ceiling. "And this is fame!" he murmured. "Oh, my country! this is fame!"

"By the way, sir, what is your country?" asked Mr. Long.

"My father fought at Fontenoy, and my mother was called in her young days the Lily of the Loire, on account of her elegance and simplicity; and if that doesn't make me an Irishman in the sight of Heaven, you may call me anything you please. But I've been mistaken for an Englishman before now," he added proudly, "and I might have been one too if it hadn't been for my parentage."

"An Irish exile. The figure is a pathetic one, sir," said Mr. Long. "I have met several in France."

"France was overrun with them, sir. But 'tis not so bad now as it used to be," said Major O'Teague. "A good many of them have returned to Ireland, and in a short time we'll hear that Ireland is overrun with her own exiles."

"We shall be compelled in that case to withdraw our sympathy from them and bestow it upon their country," said Mr. Long. "We can only sympathise with expatriated patriots who live in banishment. With exiles who refuse to die out of their own country we can have no sympathy."

"My sentiments to a hair's breadth," cried Major O'Teague. "I declare to hivins there's some Irish exiles that have never stirred out of Ireland! But they're not the worst. Ireland has harboured many snakes in her bosom from time to time, but the bitterest cup of them all has

been the one that burst into flower on a foreign shore, and, having feathered its nest, crawled back to the old country to heap coals of fire upon the head of her betrayers."

"The metamorphoses of the Irish snake—which I believed did not exist—appear to have been numerous and confusing; but surely you will take a glass of wine now, major?" said Mr. Long. "Pray pass Major O'Teague the decanter, Mr. Sheridan."

Dick obeyed, and Major O'Teague's face, which one might have expected to brighten, became unusually and, as it seemed, unnecessarily solemn. He protested that he had no need for any refreshment—that so far from regarding as irksome the duty which he had just discharged, he considered it one of the greatest pleasures in life to bring a challenge to a gentleman of Mr. Long's position. He only accepted the hospitality of Mr. Long lest he should be accused of being a curmudgeon if he refused.

"Gentlemen," he cried, raising his glass, "I drink to your very good health and to our better acquaintance. I have been more or less intimately concerned in the death of fourteen gentlemen, but there's not one of them that won't say to-day, if y'ask him, that he was killed in the most gentlemanly way, and in a style suitable to his position. If you have anything to complain of on this score, Mr. Long, my name is not O'Teague. Here's long life to you, sir."

"Without prejudice to the longevity of your friend Captain Mathews, I suppose?" said Mr. Long.

"We'll drink to him later on, sir. The night's young yet," said Major O'Teague, with a wink that had a good deal of slyness about it.

CHAPTER XXVII

Major O'Teague did not stay late. He apologised for hurrying away from such excellent company; but the fact was that he had, in a thoughtless hour, accepted an invitation to supper from a lady who was as beautiful as she was virtuous—perhaps even more so. He hoped that Mr. Long would pardon the precipitancy of his flight, and not attribute it to any churlishness on his part.

Mr. Long did his best to reassure him on this point,—he had already stayed for an hour, and had drunk a bottle and a half of claret and half a tumbler of brandy "to steady the wine," he declared; and indeed it seemed that the claret was a little shaky.

When they were alone Dick said:

"I was afraid, sir, that letter would come to you."

He shook his head with the air of a man who has had a varied experience of men and their ways.

"I frankly confess that I was surprised to receive it," said Mr. Long. "But I had made my calculations without allowing for such a possibility as this Major O'Teague. Mathews had some remnant of discretion, and that is why three days have passed before I receive his challenge."

"You think that Mathews would not have sent it of his own accord?" said Dick.

"I am convinced of it," replied Mr. Long. "He knows something of what I know about him, and he has given me the best evidence in the world of his desire to get rid of me once and for all. But he would never have sent me this challenge had it not been that that fire-eating Irish adventurer got hold of him and talked him into a fighting mood. What chance would a weak fool such as Mathews have against so belligerent a personality as O'Teague? Heavens, sir, give the man an hour with the most timorous of human beings, and I will guarantee that he will transform him into a veritable swashbuckler. Mathews is a fool, and he is probably aware of it by now—assuming that an hour and a half has elapsed since O'Teague left him."

"If he had not challenged you, he need never have shown his face in Bath again," said Dick.

"Oh, my dear Dick, you have not seen so much of Bath as I have," said Mr. Long. "Bath will stand a great deal. Has it not stood Mathews for several years?"

Dick made no reply; he was walking to and fro in the room in considerable agitation. At last he stood before Mr. Long.

"Dear sir," he cried, "why will you not consent to my taking this quarrel on myself? Why should you place your life in jeopardy for the gratification of Mathews and his associates? Think, sir, that your life is valuable; while mine—well, I can afford to risk it."

"My dear boy, you have risked your life once for me," said Mr. Long, laying a hand on Dick's shoulder. "I cannot permit you to do so a second time. But believe me, I shall run no risk in this matter. I give you my word that I shall never stand up before that fellow. Why, when his friend the major was juggling, but without the skill of a juggler, with his metaphors just now, I was thinking out three separate and distinct plans for making a duel impossible, however well-intentioned Major O'Teague may be."

"Tell me but one of them, Mr. Long," said Dick.

"Nay, my friend, I debated the question of telling you when I had worked out my plans of campaign, and I came to the conclusion that you must know nothing of—of—of what I know," said

Mr. Long. "You hope to write a play one of these days? Well, sir, there is no discipline equal to that of one's daily life for a man who aspires to write a comedy dealing with the follies of the time. The comedy of the duel has never been rightly dealt with. Behold your chance, sir."

Dick resumed the shaking of his head.

"Ah, sir, what I dread is the play which one means to be a comedy, but which becomes in its development a tragedy."

"True, that is always to be dreaded," said Mr. Long. "And I allow that Fate is not a consistent designer of plays. She mixes up comedy and tragedy in such a tangle that her own shears alone can restore the symmetry of the piece. When Fate puts on the mask of comedy the result is very terrible. But we shall do our best to get her to play a leading part on our side, in our company, and I promise you some diversion. Now you must act in this little play as if you were no novice on the stage, but as if, like Major O'Teague, you had played the part fourteen times. At the outstart you must get rid of your nervousness. I tell you again, the play is a comedy."

"I would not be nervous if I were playing the chief part, sir."

"What, you are still willing to play the leading character? That is quite unlike a play-actor, Mr. Sheridan. Is't not very well known that an actor would submit to anything rather than play a leading character? Has your father never told you how anxious they all are to be cast for the insignificant parts?"

Dick laughed.

"Oh, that, sir, is one of the best-known traits of the profession of acting," he said. "But I should dearly like to have a shot at Captain Mathews."

"He is a soldier, but I fear that he will not meet his death by so honourable an agent," said Mr. Long. "No, if he dies by a shot it will be fired at him by a platoon of men with muskets. Now, you will arrange with Major O'Teague as to the time and place of the meeting. I have no choice in regard to the weapons; but I wish to suggest as a suitable ground the green paddock facing the iron gate where you came to my assistance when I was attacked by the footpads."

"I do not see that the man can make any objection to so suitable a place," said Dick.

"We shall see," said Mr. Long. "At any rate, it is my whim to meet him there. You see, I was once very lucky in that neighbourhood, and I have my superstitions."

Dick went home with a heavy heart. He could not understand why Mr. Long should still persist in the belief that no duel would be fought. He seemed to have acquired the idea that Mathews was a coward because he had taken his horsewhipping so quietly; but Dick, having seen how the fellow had been overpowered at the outset by the superior strength of his opponent, knew perfectly well that he had had no choice in the matter. He had displayed weakness, but not cowardice; and Dick had felt certain that he was just the man to seek an opportunity of revenging himself with the weapons of the duellist. He had believed all along that Mathews would regard the realisation of his scheme as a matter of life or death. If it became known that he had evaded calling out the man who had so publicly insulted him, he would, of course, be compelled to leave Bath. If, however, he succeeded in killing Mr. Long—and Dick felt convinced that he would do his best to kill him—he would be able to swagger about as the hero of the hour. That was the *rôle* which exactly suited him.

But would he have the chance of killing Mr. Long?

Before he slept, Dick had made up his mind that if Mathews killed Mr. Long, he himself would either prevent his playing the *rôle* of the hero, or give him a double chance of playing it. The moment this duel with Mr. Long was over he would send a challenge to Mathews. He felt that he would have every right to do so. The horsewhipping which Mr. Long had administered to the man was a sufficient punishment for his insult; but Dick did not forget that the placing of the ribald verses in the urn was a gross insult to every lady present on the lawn at Bath-Easton, and he had long ago made up his mind that he would accept the responsibility of avenging this special affront. All the sophistry of his chivalrous nature backed up this resolution of his, until he had no difficulty in feeling that he was the exponent of a sacred duty. Was it to be placed in the power of any rascal, he asked an imaginary objector, to insult a number of ladies in the shocking way that Mathews had done, with impunity? Was that entire company to have no redress for the gross conduct of the fellow?

Surely it was the privilege of every man with a spark of chivalry in his nature—ordinary chivalry, mind, the ordinary spirit of manhood—to do all that lay within his power to prevent a recurrence of such an outrage upon civilised society as had been perpetrated. If no other man thought fit to make a move toward so desirable an end, he, Richard Brinsley Sheridan, thanked God that he saw his way clearly in the matter; and the moment he had ceased to act for Mr. Long, he would take action on his own behalf as the representative of the ladies on whose fastidious ears the ribald lines had fallen. He fell asleep quite easily, having made up his mind on this point.

He had an interview the next day with Major O'Teague, and found him ready to agree to any suggestion made in regard to the meeting. The only detail to which he took a momentary exception was in respect of the ground.

"Hivins, Mr. Sheridan, aren't there many nice and tidy places more adjacent than that paddock, where our friends can have an enjoyable hour?" he said. "Faith, sir, I have always thought Bath singularly favoured by Providence in this respect. A bountiful Hivin seems to have designed it for the settlement of these little affairs. 'Tis singularly complete in this way, as you may have

remarked. Egad! you could kill your man at the corner of any street. Doesn't it seem to be spurning the gifts which Providence has laid at our very feet to go two miles out into the country?"

But Mr. Sheridan had something of the sentimental Irishman in his nature also, and so he was able to acknowledge frankly that it was on the border-line of atheism for any one to assert that it was necessary to go two miles out of Bath in order to conduct friendly hostilities; still, he thought that the whim of an old gentleman should be respected.

"Mr. Long has lived in the country all his life, you see, Major O'Teague, and that is no doubt why he makes it a point of sentiment always to fight in the midst of a sylvan landscape, free from the contaminating hand of man, you understand?" said Dick.

"'Tis a beautiful thought, sir," said Major O'Teague, raising his eyes toward the ceiling. "And 'tis one that I can appreciate to the full, Mr. Sheridan. Thank Hivin, a life of pretty rough campaigning among pretty rough characters hasn't blunted my finer sensibilities. I feel that we are bound to respect the whim of your friend just as if we were his executors. 'Twould be just the same if he had expressed a desire to be buried under a special tree—maybe one that he had climbed for chestnuts when a boy, or courted the girl of his choice under when a sthripling. He didn't say that he had a whim about being laid to rest under a special tree, sir?"

"We haven't discussed that point yet, sir," said Dick. "The fact is, I am rather a novice in this business, as you may have perceived, major."

"Don't apologise, sir; we must all make a beginning. 'Tis not your fault, I'm sure, Mr. Sheridan, that y'haven't killed your man long ago."

"You do me honour, sir," said Dick.

"Not I, sir. Can't I see with half an eye that y'have the spirit of an annihilator beating within your bosom? 'Tis only your misfortune that y'haven't been given your chance yet. But I hope that y'll mind that you must make up for lost time."

"It will be my study, sir. I intend to begin without delay by calling out your friend Captain Mathews when this little affair is over."

"Good luck to you, my boy!" cried Major O'Teague, enthusiastically flinging out his hand to Dick. "Good luck to you, sir! If you'll allow me to act for you, 'twill be the proudest day of my life."

"We shall talk the matter over when the first affair is settled. One thing at a time has always been my motto," said Dick.

"I ask your pardon, Mr. Sheridan; I was a bit premature," said Major O'Teague. "I won't inquire what your reasons are for fighting Mathews; I never preshume to pry into the motives of gentlemen for whom I act. I hold that 'twould be an insult to their intelligence to do so. Besides, if one were to inquire into the rights and wrongs of every quarrel before it takes place, all manhood would die out of England inside a year. No, sir; after the fight is the time to inquire, just as after dinner is the time for the speeches."

But when Major O'Teague called upon Dick the same evening, as courtesy demanded, a wonderful smile came over his face while he said:

"What is there about that paddock opposite the iron gate by the Gloucester Road that makes your friend insist on it as the place of meeting?"

"I give you my word that I have no notion," replied Dick. "Why should Captain Mathews object to it?"

"That's more than I can say, sir," said O'Teague. "But, by the Lord Harry, I had a long job getting him to agree to that point. You should have seen his face when I told him that we were to meet at that same paddock. He turned as white as a sheet, and said that Mr. Long meant to insult him by making such a suggestion. 'Tis not there that I'll fight,' said he, quite livid. You'll excuse me introducing the special oaths that he made use of, Mr. Sheridan?"

"I am quite sure that their omission is more excusable than their utterance would be," said Dick. "But he consented to the ground at last?"

"Ay, at last. But between the first hint of the matter and this 'at last' a good deal of conversation occurred. 'Twas pretty near my gentleman came to having a third affair pressed on him. For some reason or other he wanted to fight nearer town. Well, to be sure, it would be more homelike. I never did believe in the suburbs myself, and, besides, 'twill be very inconvenient for the spectators. Still——"

"My dear major," cried Dick, "I trust that there will be no spectators beyond those gentlemen."

"What, sir, would you propose to exclude the public from this entertainment? I hope that is not your idea of what is due to the intelligent curiosity of the people of Bath? Asking your pardon, Mr. Sheridan, I must say that you have no notion at all of fair play."

"You have had so much experience of these matters, Major O'Teague, I have every confidence that under your guidance we can manage this little business by ourselves, and without the need for the intrusion of all the busybodies in Bath," said Dick.

"That may be true enough, Mr. Sheridan," said Major O'Teague, "but let me remind you that the gentleman for whom I am acting got his horsewhipping in public—— Why the mischief wasn't I there to see it? I would have given a guinea for a place in the front row!"

Dick clearly perceived that the man was anxious to be the centre of a crowd of onlookers; he was treating the duel from the standpoint of a showman desirous of making plain his own ability as a stage-manager of experience, and nothing would have pleased him better than to have engaged Drury Lane for the spectacle.

For a moment or two Dick was annoyed; he was sorely tempted to say something that would have been hurtful to Major O'Teague's feelings. He restrained himself, however, and then he suddenly remembered—Major O'Teague had given him no reason to forget it—that he was talking to an Irishman. That was why he said in a confidential tone:

"I acknowledge the force of your argument, sir; but the fact is"—his voice became a whisper—"there is a lady in the case. You will agree with me in thinking that her feelings must be respected at any cost. Major O'Teague, if the lady—I refrain from mentioning her name in this connection—who has given Mr. Long her promise, were to hear of his danger, the consequences might be very serious to her. We are both Irishmen, sir."

"Sir," said Major O'Teague, "your thoughtfulness does you honour. No one ever yet made an appeal to me on behalf of a beauteous creature without success. The least wish of a lady is sacred in the eyes of Major O'Teague. If the lady wishes, we'll set our men to fight at midnight in a coal-cellar."

CHAPTER XXVIII

Somehow, in spite of Major O'Teague's promise of secrecy, the rumour of the impending duel went round Bath, and Dick had to use all his adroitness in replying to those of his friends who questioned him on the subject in the course of the evening. But of course people were not nearly so certain about this encounter as they had been about the previous one—the one which did not take place. Young Mr. Sheridan's imagination was quite equal to the strain put upon it by his interrogators, and he was able to give each of them a different answer. He assured some of them that he had excellent authority for believing that there was to be a meeting between Mr. Long and Captain Mathews, and that, in order to assure complete secrecy, it was to take place in the Pump Room before the arrival of the visitors some morning—he hoped to be able to find out the exact morning. Others he informed that it had been agreed by the friends of Mr. Long and Captain Mathews that they were to fight with pistols across the Avon at the next full moon; while to such persons as wanted circumstantial news on the subject, he gave the information in an undertone in a corner, that the fight was to come off on the following Thursday, on the lawn at Bath-Easton, Captain Mathews having declared that he would not be satisfied unless the same people who had witnessed the insult that had been put upon him were present to see him wipe it out. Dick even went the length of quoting the first two lines of a poem which he himself was composing for Lady Miller's urn, feeling convinced that the prize would be awarded to him on account of its appropriateness. He meant to leave a blank in the final line, he said, to be filled up at the last moment with the name of the survivor.

The result of this unscrupulous exercise of his imagination was to alienate from him several of his friends and to mystify the others; so that, when he drove out with Mr. Long the next morning to the paddock by the Gloucester Road, it was plain that the secret as to the place of meeting had been well kept. Whatever might be said about Major O'Teague, he had respected the plea for secrecy advanced by Dick, though Dick knew that it must have gone to his heart to be deprived of the crowd of spectators on whom he had reckoned.

Dick saw that the ground lent itself to secrecy. At one part of the paddock there was a small plantation, and this screened off the greater part of it from the road. Here the ground was flat, but only for about half an acre; beyond this space there was a gradual rise into a wooded knoll, which could also be reached by a narrow lane leading off the road. Opposite the entrance to the paddock was the iron gate, behind which Mr. Long had retreated on the night when he was attacked; and now that Dick saw the place by daylight, he noticed that the gate gave access to the weedy carriage drive of an unoccupied house.

"A capital covert for footpads," said Dick, when he stood by the side of Mr. Long beyond the plantation in the paddock. "I daresay it was just here that the fellows lay in wait for the approach of a victim."

"That was the conclusion to which I came," said Mr. Long. "And now here are we waiting for them."

"For them?" said Dick.

"Well, for Mathews and his friend," said Mr. Long with a quiet laugh.

"Worse than any footpads," growled Dick, examining the ground just beyond the belt of trees.

"I promise you that they shall have neither my money nor my life, friend Dick," said Mr. Long, looking round as if in expectation of seeing some one.

"We are before the appointed time," said Dick, framing an answer to his inquiring look.

"We shall have the longer space to admire the prospect from yon knoll," said his friend. "I am minded to have a stroll round the paddock. I promise you that I shall not disgrace you by running away."

He waved his hand to Dick, who accepted the gesture as an indication that he desired to be alone. He busied himself about the ground while Mr. Long strolled toward the hedge that ran alongside the narrow lane skirting the paddock.

Dick fancied that he understood his desire to be alone for the brief space left to him before the probable arrival of Mathews and O'Teague. Could Mr. Long doubt for a moment that Mathews would do his best to kill him? Surely not.

So, then, the next quarter of an hour would decide the question whether he was to live or die. Dick remembered what Mr. Long had told him respecting his early life—his early love—his enduring love. What had his words been at that time?

"Those who die young have been granted the gift of perpetual youth."

He watched Mr. Long walking slowly and with bent head up the sloping ground by the bramble hedge. He could believe that he was communing with the one of whom he had never ceased to think as his companion—the one who walked unseen by his side—whose gracious presence had never ceased to influence him throughout his life. And then, all at once the younger man became conscious of that invisible presence. Never before had he been aware of such an impression. It was not shadowy. It was not vague. It was not a suggestion of the imagination. It was an impression as real as that of the early morning air which exhilarated him—as vivid as that of the song of the skylark which had left its nest at the upper part of the green meadow, and was singing while it floated into the azure overhead. He felt as if he were standing beneath outspread wings, and the consciousness was infinitely gracious to him. All through the night and so far into the morning he had been in great trouble of thought. The shocking possibilities of this duel had suggested themselves to him every moment, and it was with a feeling of profound depression that he had taken the case of pistols from the carriage and entered the paddock.

But now, with the suddenness of entering a wide space of free air, out of a narrow room of suffocating vapours—with the suddenness of stepping into the sunlight out of a cell, his depression vanished. He felt safe beneath the shadow of those gracious, outstretched wings. Every suggestion that had come to him during the night, every thought of the likelihood of disaster, disappeared.

The dead are mightier than the living.

That was the thought which came to him now. He knew that the sense of perfect security of which he was now aware, could not have been imparted to him by any earthly presence; and looking across the green meadow to where Mr. Long was standing motionless, Dick knew that he also was living in this consciousness. And the cool scent of the meadow grass filled the morning air, and high overhead the wings of song spread forth by the ecstasy of the skylark winnowed the air. The feeling of exhilaration of which Dick Sheridan was conscious, was such as he had never known before.

Looking up the paddock, Dick fancied that he saw a figure moving stealthily among the fringe of trees; but he was not quite certain that some one was there. A few sheep were in the meadow at the other side of the hedge, and he thought it was quite possible that one of the flock had strayed through a gap and had wandered among the trees. At any rate he failed to see again any moving object in the same direction, and he did not think it worth his while going across the ground to make further investigations. He reflected that, after all, assuming that some one was among the trees, it was out of his power to insist on the withdrawal of such a person. He felt that, if it were to turn out that the owner of the ground was there, the combatants might find themselves ordered off the ground, for assuredly they were trespassers. And then his reflections were broken by the noise of carriage wheels on the road—sounds which ceased quite suddenly just when they were being heard most distinctly. After a pause came the sound of voices and a laugh or two. In a few moments Major O'Teague, with Mathews by his side, and followed by two gentlemen—one of them was recognised by him as Mr. Ditcher, the surgeon—appeared beyond the plantation.

Dick advanced to meet the party, but Mr. Long made no move. He was still on the slope of the meadow, apparently giving a good deal of attention to the distant view of the city of Bath.

"Sir," said Major O'Teague, "we're a trifle late, and an apology is due to you. I promise you that 'twill not occur again."

Dick had been extremely punctilious in the matter of taking off his hat to the party, and he declined to replace it until every one was covered. He assured Major O'Teague that no apology was necessary; he did not believe that it was yet five minutes past the appointed hour. Then Major O'Teague presented the only stranger of the party—a gentleman named MacMahon—"a brother Irishman, Mr. Sheridan," he said, in discharging this act of courtesy; "a lineal descendant of the great FitzUrse who killed St. Thomas à Becket some years back; you may have heard of the occurrence. 'Tis not every day that one has a chance of killing a saint. Faith, I'm inclined to think that the practice has become obsolete owing to the want of material. Any way, Bath is not the place for any man to come to who seeks to emulate such a feat."

Mr. MacMahon said he was modest; he sought to kill neither saint nor sinner. He hoped that Mr. Sheridan would not consider him an obtruder upon the scene; if Mr. Sheridan took such a view of the case, he would, he assured him, retire without a word of complaint.

Dick acknowledged his civility, and said that no friend of Major O'Teague's would be out of place where an affair of honour was being settled.

While these courtesies were being exchanged, Mathews stood silently by, his teeth set, and his eyes fixed upon the distant figure of Mr. Long. He turned suddenly while Dick and Mr. MacMahon were bowing to each other, hat in hand.

"Is this a *fête champêtre* or the rehearsal of a comedy?" he said. "If my time is to be wasted—Where is your man, Mr. Sheridan?—produce your man, sir, if he be not afraid to show his face."

"I trust that no suggestion will be made to that effect, sir," said Dick.

"No one will make it while I am on the ground, Mr. Sheridan," said Major O'Teague. "If anybody here sees anything inappropriate in Mr. Long spending a few minutes in meditation, that person differs from me. Come, Mr. Sheridan, 'tis only for you and me to make any remarks. Egad, sir! I compliment your friend on his choice of the ground. It seems made for a jewel, so it does. That belt of trees shuts off the road entirely, and if we place our men on the flat, that hill behind us will give neither of them an unjew advantage. Sir, for one who is unfortunate enough to have had no experience of these affairs, you have shown an aptitude for the business that falls little short of jaynius."

He glanced at the ground and its surroundings with the easy confidence of a general, and then marching to the right and left, cocked an eye in the direction of the sun.

"There's no choice of places, that I can see; what do you say, Mr. Sheridan?" he asked.

"So far as I can judge there is no question of choice," said Dick. "That is, of course, with pistols; it would be another matter with swords."

"I agree with you, sir. Then, with your leave, we will measure the ground twenty paces from the line of trees."

A considerable space of time was occupied in these formalities, and then came the question of the weapons. This was settled without discussion—Major O'Teague proving as courteous as he had promised to be; in fact, he thought it necessary to excuse his constant agreement with Dick.

"If there was anything to disagree about, you may be sure that I'd do it in the interest of Mr. Mathews, sir," he said; "but I give you my word that there's nothing to allow any side the smallest advantage. And now, sir, though it seems a pity to disturb the meditations of your friend, I am afraid that the time has come for you to take that step. I hope to Hivins that he won't think it in bad taste. But you're spared the trouble: he is coming to us."

Mr. Long was walking quickly down the meadow, and when still a few paces away, he raised his hat to Major O'Teague, but ignored Mathews, who was standing some yards off.

"Major O'Teague," he said, "I have to inform you that I have been giving the question of the projected duel my earnest thought, and the conclusion that I have come to is that I am not called on to fight Mr. Mathews."

CHAPTER XXIX

The words, spoken deliberately, but without any particular emphasis, startled Dick quite as much as they did Major O'Teague.

"You're a coward, sir, and I will force you to fight me!" shouted Mathews.

Dick took a couple of steps to the side of Mr. Long, and at the same instant O'Teague took three to the side of Mathews.

"Hold your tongue, sir; leave me to manage this affair," said Major O'Teague to his principal.

He took a step nearer Mr. Long.

"I'm afraid, sir," he said in a frigid tone and with a distinctly English accent, which sounded very much more formal than the soft Irish slur which came so easily to him—"I'm afraid that there's some misunderstanding between us; but a little explanation will, I daresay, tend to smooth away matters, and lead to such an amicable settlement that the fight will take place as originally intended. Pray, sir, state your reasons for saying that you're not called on to consummate the jewel. Come, sir, your reasons."

"My reasons? This is one of them," said Mr. Long, pointing toward the bramble hedge beside the lane.

So intent had every one been over the technicalities of the duel, none had noticed a little figure standing there waiting for a signal—the figure of a little boy. When Mr. Long raised his arm and pointed toward him, he began to run to the group, and now all eyes were turned upon him. He was a pretty child of perhaps eight or nine years of age, and while he ran he kept calling out:

"Daddy, daddy, I'se come, I'se come!"

No one in the group moved, and the little boy ran toward Mathews with outstretched arms. He had almost reached him before Mathews had recovered from the astonishment that had left his face pale. He stepped back, saying:

"Take the brat away! What demon brought him hither? Take him away, I say, before I do him a hurt."

"Tis not a demon that brings the like of that to men," said O'Teague. Then, putting out his hands to the little boy, he cried, "Come hither, my little man, and tell us what is your name."

The child stopped and gazed with wondering eyes at Major O'Teague, who was kneeling on one knee, with inviting hands stretched forth.

"Mammy said for I to run to daddy," lisped the little fellow, and he looked round, putting a tiny thumb in his mouth.

"Take the brat away, or I shall do it a hurt," shouted Mathews.

The child shrank back, and a frightened look came to his face.

"I'se good to-day, pappy," he said. "I'se very good. I'se did what mammy told. She said, 'Go to pappy,' and I'se goed."

Mathews, his hands clenched, took a step in the direction of Mr. Long, and Dick took a step in the direction of Mathews.

"Coward!" said the last named. "Coward! this is how you would shirk the fight that you owe me. You have brought them here."

"Yes, I brought them here—all your family," said Mr. Long. "And—yes, I own to being a coward; I own that I shrink from standing up with a deadly weapon in my hand before the husband of an estimable lady and the father of an innocent child. Captain Mathews, you are aware of the fact that I am acquainted with some compromising incidents in your past life. I do not wish you ill, sir. I implore of you to be advised in time. Return to your home, and make an honest attempt to redeem the past."

"I will—I will—when I have seen you lying dead at my feet," said Mathews. Then, turning to the others of the party, he cried: "Gentlemen, are we here to be made fools of? Let the affair proceed, or let Mr. Long and his friend make up their minds to be branded in public as cowards and poltroons."

"Major O'Teague," said Dick, "you cannot possibly have known that Captain Mathews, while professing honourable intentions in regard to a lady in Bath, was all the time a married man?"

"I acknowledge that that is the truth, Mr. Sheridan," said Major O'Teague; "but you'll pardon me if I say that I can't for the life of me see what that disclosure has to do with the matter before us."

"What, sir, you don't think that a gentleman should be exempted from fighting with so unscrupulous an adventurer as, on your own admission, Captain Mathews has proved to be?" said Dick.

"Upon my soul, I don't, Mr. Sheridan," said O'Teague. "On the contrary, sir, it appears to me that a man who behaved so dishonourably as my friend Captain Mathews has done, makes a most suitable antagonist for a gentleman of honour like Mr. Long or yourself, sir."

Mr. MacMahon, the stranger who had come to witness the fight, had taken the little boy by the hand, and was leading him up the meadow away from the men; and every now and again the child looked over his shoulder with big, puzzled eyes. He was asking a perpetual question.

"Sir," said Dick, with great promptitude when O'Teague had spoken—"Sir, I give you my word that I have no objection to fight Captain Mathews myself."

"No," cried Mr. Long. "No laws of honour demand that a gentleman shall stand up before a felon."

"True, sir," said Major O'Teague; "but you see, nothing that Captain Mathews has yet done can be construed as an act of felony."

"Indeed, sir, Captain Mathews and I know better than that," said Mr. Long.

"Tis a lie—I swear that 'tis a foul lie!" shouted Mathews. "I admit that years ago— But there were no proofs that the girl did not die by her own hands. She did it to be revenged upon me. Have you proofs? If you have, pray produce them."

"I have proof enough to send you to the hangman," said Mr. Long.

"Sir," said Major O'Teague, "I did not come hither to listen to such recrimination. You must be aware, Mr. Long, that you have seriously compromised your position as a man of honour by making a vague charge against your opponent a pretext for backing out of a fight with him. If a man was a fool years ago—well, which of us hasn't been a fool at some time of our life?"

"Sir," said Mr. Long, "I do not need to be instructed on points of honour by you or any one else. I did not refer to your friend's felony of four years ago, but to a much more recent act of his."

"Let us have your proofs, sir, or, by Hivins, my felonious friend will have my assistance in branding you as a coward!" cried Major O'Teague.

Mr. Long was holding between his finger and thumb a small piece of lace before the man had done speaking.

"This is my proof," he said.

Major O'Teague stared at him and then at Dick Sheridan. He saw that Dick was as much

puzzled as himself.

"In the name of all that's sensible——" he began.

"The fellow is a fool," cried Mathews. "Ay, a fool as well as a coward."

"In the name of all that's sensible, Mr. Long, tell us what it is you mean at all," said O'Teague. "What in the name of all the Hivins do you mean by showing us that rag?"

"This piece of lace is a souvenir that your friend left with me of our last encounter. Look at the torn ruffle of his right sleeve, sir. I think you will find that the rent needs for its repair this piece of lace which I hold in my hand."

"Sir, I heard of no encounter," said Major O'Teague.

"Then you would do well to get your friend to acquaint you with some of its details," said Mr. Long.

Major O'Teague, mystified to a point of distraction, turned to Mathews; but he failed to catch his eye, the fact being that Mathews was gazing at Mr. Long as a man gazes at another who has just amazed him by a sudden revelation.

"Am I asleep or awake—that's what I want to know?" cried Major O'Teague. "And I want to know it badly too, for what's the drift of all these hints and all this aimless talk baffles me. Look you here, Mr. Long, you tell me you crossed swords with Captain Mathews quite lately; well, sir, if that is the truth, will you tell me why you should object to fight with him now?"

"Sir," said Mr. Long, "Mr. Mathews was in the disguise of a footpad on that road between those trees and the iron gate opposite, and I fought for my life against him and his two confederates."

Major O'Teague did not allow any one to see how startled he was. He stroked his chin and pursed out his lips. There was a long pause before he said:

"And that is the evidence you bring forward of a very remarkable affair, sir—that scrap of rag?"

"Psha! sir, I have as much evidence of that remarkable affair as would suffice to hang the dean and chapter of a cathedral!" said Mr. Long.

"Pray give us an example of it, sir," said the major. "Juries in this country don't hang even dogs, to say nothing of deans, on the evidence of a scrap of rag."

"That's it," said Mathews; his voice was a trifle husky—he had not had much practice in speaking for some minutes. "That's it!—Major O'Teague, you are my friend: I ask no better friend. Let the fellow produce his evidence."

"I will," said Mr. Long.

He took a few steps toward the trees around the knoll where Dick had fancied he saw some figures moving. He raised a finger, and at this signal two men clad in homespun hastened down the meadow.

Mathews' jaw fell.

"One of these men was Mathews' confederate, the other is an honest man; he is the shepherd who lay concealed among the brambles yonder when Mathews and his bravos waited for me in this very place. He saw the fight, but having no weapon, he was wise enough to refrain from interfering in what did not concern him. He was fortunate enough, however, to pick up the shoe which came off Mathews' foot in his hasty flight from my friend, Mr. Sheridan, so that——"

A shout of warning came from Major O'Teague's friend, MacMahon, and the next second a sword went flashing through the air a dozen yards away, and Dick Sheridan, breathing hard, stood with his own sword in his hand. He had been just in time to disarm Mathews, who had drawn his sword and rushed with it upon Mr. Long.

And while every one stood aghast for the moment, there came forth from the plantation of trees a well-dressed lady, leading by the hand the little boy who had been on the scene before. She walked slowly across the meadow to the group, and every one looked at her.

The sword that had been jerked out of Mathews' hand remained nodding, like a reed before the wind, with its hilt in the air, for the point had penetrated the soft turf an inch or two, at such an acute angle as made the steel top-heavy at the hilt.

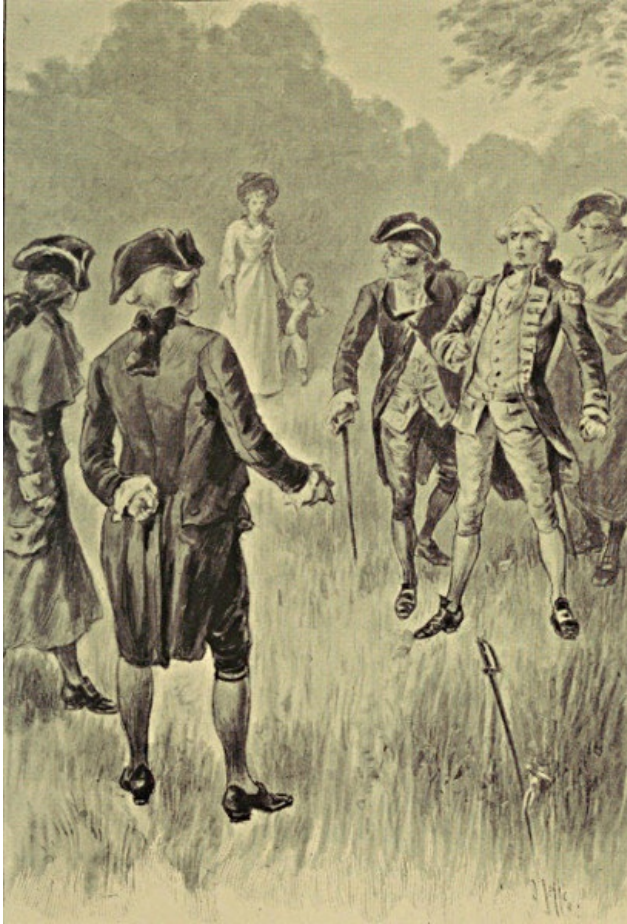
No one had the presence of mind to call Mathews an assassin, but all removed their hats at the approach of the lady.

She was smiling.

"Good-morning, gentlemen," she said, responding to their respectful salutations. "I perceive that my dear husband has been at his tricks again. He has been passing himself off at Bath as a gay bachelor, I hear, and the people were fools enough to be taken in by him; and all the time he was writing to me such loving letters, and sending them to the North to be posted. He made out that he was recruiting in Kendal, the sly rogue!"

She gave a laugh, pointing an upbraiding finger at Mathews. Clearly she was not greatly put out by anything that had yet come under her notice,—she seemed more inclined to regard the escapade of which her husband was guilty, in the light of a piece of pleasantry, to be referred to with smiles; but the only one of the party who responded to her in a like spirit was Major O'Teague.

"O madam!" he cried, "he is indeed a sad dog—quite inexcusable, madam—oh, altogether inexcusable! For I vow that, however leniently disposed his friends may have been in regard to his freak before they had seen the lady whom he forsook, they cannot condone his offence now that they have been so happy as to make her acquaintance. Madam, the man that could leave you for—for—the frivolities of Bath deserves no sympathy."



A WELL-DRESSED LADY ... WALKED SLOWLY ACROSS THE MEADOW TO THE GROUP.

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to account. Come along, captain; you have still got your grooms and your wife left to you. You know as well as I do that if you succeeded in captivating a young beauty at Bath—though I haven't seen much of this beauty—you would swear at her within the month as heartily as you do at me."

Mathews looked quite ready to swear at her at that moment. He restrained himself, however, and, after only a short pause, went hastily to where his sword was still swaying on its point. He drew it out of the wound it had made in the earth, and rammed it back into its sheath. Then he took the shortest route to the gate; only when he was passing the line of trees in the plantation did he turn and glance back at the group whom he had left. The expression upon his face was one of disappointed malice; no trace of repentance was to be seen there.

With a laugh, his wife followed him, the golden-haired little boy running by her side. She cast an apologetic glance at the gentlemen, and they all made profound bows.

"Major O'Teague, I ask your pardon, sir, for having caused you to come here on a business which I knew must prove fruitless," said Mr. Long.

"Sir," said Major O'Teague, "I think that if there's to be an apology it should come from me. But I give you my word of honour, sir, I had no idea that the fellow was such a rascal: he has only been acquainted with me for three days. I guessed that he was bad enough. But think of that last *coup* of his, sir—trying to run you through the body while you were speaking! By my soul, Mr. Long, 'tis something of a pity that he was obstructed in time, for 'twould be a pleasure to all of us to see him hanged for such an act."

"I fear that I could not have shared that pleasure," said Mr. Long.

"And pray why not, sir, when you would know that the fellow was the greatest rascal unhung?" cried Major O'Teague.

"Perhaps I am too tender-hearted, sir," said Mr. Long, "but truth compels me to assure you that I could not bear to see a man hanged merely for killing me."

"Faith, and you are mighty compassionate, sir," said Major O'Teague. "I give you my word that there's no sight I would enjoy so much as the hanging of the man that had killed me by a mortal wound when my attention was diverted elsewhere."

"Sir, you are, I protest, vastly polite," said Mrs. Mathews; "but I am sure you will not be hard upon poor Captain Mathews' frailties. 'Tis his misfortune to be over-susceptible to the charms of new faces. Who can blame him when the trait was born with him? After all, constancy is an acquired virtue."

"True, madam, quite true," said Major O'Teague. "But, Mrs. Mathews, I beg of you to permit me to say that if a gentleman who is fortunate enough to be married to so charming a lady as yourself does not acquire constancy, we may well distrust your theory."

"I vow, sir, you overwhelm a simple country-bred woman with your flattery," said she. "But I see that Mr. Long and his friends are feeling bored by our philosophy. Still, I should like to ask Mr. Long if his experience can suggest better advice to a woman married to so erratic a gentleman as Captain Mathews than to make the best of a bad bargain? Lud, sir, to spend my days weeping on a bed because of my husband's peccadilloes would only be to make myself miserable, without improving him. After all, he doesn't annoy me much. I have a fortune of my own and two sweet children, and he is a good deal from home, so that I have much to be thankful for. Come along, captain: you see that no one here wishes to fight with you. Perhaps at home you will have a better chance. A husband, if he keeps his eyes open, can always find some one at home to quarrel with. At the worst, there are always servants to be sworn at. 'Tis a great ease to a man's mind to know that he can always curse a groom or a wife or a dog without being called

CHAPTER XXX

Dick Sheridan believed that his ingenuity would be taxed to the uttermost to invent plausible answers to satisfy the curiosity of the many people who would be questioning him on the subject of Mr. Long's meeting with Captain Mathews. When he had to make up so many replies to the questions put to him regarding the duels that had never been contemplated, what would he not have to do in respect of this meeting, which had actually taken place, though without an exchange of shots? His reasoning on this basis showed that he had but an imperfect acquaintance with the methods of the good people of Bath. He should have known that, having had two duels to talk about within the previous fortnight, and having, moreover, found out that neither of these encounters had taken place, they would lose all interest in duels real or imaginary. But that was just the view the people of Bath took of the incident. If any tale of the interrupted encounter—surely a most piquant topic!—reached the ears of the gossips of the Pump Room and the Parade, they were reticent on the subject. Not one question was put to Dick respecting Mr. Long and Captain Mathews, the fact being that all Bath was talking about quite another matter—namely, the infatuation of Mrs. Abington.

What a freak it was to be sure! There was the most charming actress of the day (her day had lasted a pretty long while), at whose feet had sat in vain some of the most distinguished men then living, infatuated with that young Linley, neglecting her engagements at Mr. Colman's theatre, laughing at Mr. Cumberland, who had one of his most lugubrious comedies ready for her to breathe into it the spirit of life, and all on account of a youth who was certainly (they said) utterly incapable of appreciating her varied charms.

Mr. Colman had posted down from London to reason with her: in spite of his experience, he was still of the impression that a woman in love would listen to reason—and that woman an actress too! He made a step forward (he thought) in his knowledge of women and actresses, when he had had a talk with Mrs. Abington.

And Mr. Cumberland— But then, Mr. Cumberland knew nothing whatever about the nature of men and women; he had taken the pains to prove this by the production of a dozen comedies—so that when he tried to wheedle her by obvious flatteries, she laughed in his face, and that annoyed Mr. Cumberland greatly; for he thought that laughter was always out of place except during the performance of one of his comedies, though people said that that was the only time when laughter was impossible.

Poor Tom Linley (the men who envied him alluded to him as poor Tom Linley) was having the finishing touch put to his education, all sensible people agreed. The wits said that he would learn more of what music meant by listening to Mrs. Abington's voice, than he would by studying all the masters of harmony, from Palestrina to Handel.

Of course the scandal-mongers made a scandal out of this latest whim of Mrs. Abington, but the lovely lady was so well accustomed to be the centre of a cocoon of scandal (she had a good deal of the nature of the butterfly about her), she did not mind. She only wondered what Dick Sheridan thought of Tom Linley's being the hero of so fascinating a scandal. She wondered how long it would be before Dick Sheridan would become jealous of the position to which his friend had been advanced. She judged of Dick Sheridan from her previous knowledge of him; but as the days went on, she began to feel that a change had come over him.

And then Mrs. Abington became a little reckless; for whenever she and Tom Linley were in the same room as Dick, her laugh was a little louder than usual and a good deal less melodious; and the way she allowed her eyes to rest on Tom's face when she knew that Dick was looking, was rather too pictorial for everyday life, some people thought, and these were the people who said, "Poor Tom Linley!"

But there came a day when Tom Linley was announced to play at a concert. He was to take the violin part in a concerto, and to play in two duets with the harpsichord; but these selections had to be omitted from the programme, the fact being that Master Tom had that day gone a-driving into the country with Mrs. Abington.

It was a very pretty scene in high comedy, that in which the actress got the promise of the youth who had buried his heart in his violin, to fling his music-book to the unmelodious winds in order to take up the Book of Life and turn over its glowing pages with her. She had told him that she wished to take a drive into the country the next day, and had expressed the hope that he would act as her protector.

Of course he replied that it would be to him a trip to the Delectable Mountains to be by her side, or something to that effect; but he pointed playfully (now and again Tom could become playful, though never in the artless spirit of Mrs. Abington) at the bill of the concert in which his name figured.

What had the fact of his name being on the bill to do with the question of his coming with her? she inquired in a sweetly simple way, with artless open eyes.

"Good heavens, sweet lady, surely you must see that I cannot be at the concert and in your carriage at the same time?" he cried.

"Did I assert that you could?" she asked. "All I did was to ask you to be my protector tomorrow. I did not say a word about your going to the concert. What is the concert to me—to you

or me, Tom?"

"Nothing—oh, nothing!" he cried, and she allowed him to kiss her hand. "'Tis nothing. Have not I proved it by refraining from attending a single practice of the instruments, thereby making my father furious?"

"Then if the concert be nothing to you, am I something less than nothing?" she cried.

"Ah, you are everything—everything, only— Heavens, if I were to absent myself my prospects would be ruined!"

"Ah, 'tis the old story!" sighed the lady,—there was more indignation in her sigh than Mr. Burke could incorporate in one of his speeches on the Marriage Act,—“the old story: a man’s ambition against a woman’s affection! Go to your concert, sir, but never let me see your face again.”

"Dear child!" he cried,—he sometimes called her “dear child,” because she was not (he thought) more than two years older than himself,—“cannot you see that when my name is printed ___”

"Do you presume to instruct me on these points, sir?" she cried. "Does not all the world know that my name is down in every playbill that Mr. Colman prints, as a member of his company? and yet— But you have taught me my duty. I shall go back to London to-morrow. I thank you, sir, for having given me a lesson. O man, man! always cruel!—always ready to slight the poor, trustful creature who gives up all for your sake."

She dissolved into tears, and he was kneeling by her side, trying to catch the hand which she withheld from him, and all the time swearing that she was everything to him—his life, his soul, his hope, his future....

And so the pieces in which Tom Linley was to take part at the concert were omitted from the performance, and the manager assured Mr. Linley that his son’s career, so far as Bath was concerned, was at an end.

Mr. Linley that evening—at one moment weeping in the arms of his daughter, at another pacing the room declaring passionately that Tom need never again look near his house, that he would turn him out neck and crop into the street—said some severely accurate things about Mrs. Abington and the stage generally, and the Linley household was in a condition bordering on distraction.

But Mrs. Abington, sitting in an attitude of inimitable grace upon her little gilded sofa, passing her fingers through Tom’s curls as he sat on a stool at her feet, was in no way disturbed by the condition of things in Pierrepont Street, the fact being that she was just at that moment thinking more of Mrs. Abington than of any one else in the world. She knew that the next day every one in Bath would be talking about the completeness of her conquest of the ardent young musical genius who, it was well known, held the theory that there was nothing in the world worth living for save only music. She wondered what Dick Sheridan would think now. And she was quite right so far as her speculations in regard to Bath were concerned. Every one was talking of how she had been the ruin of Tom Linley, and most of the men who talked of it, envied Tom most heartily; all the women who talked of it, envied Mrs. Abington her taste in dress.

And as for Dick Sheridan—well, Dick was for quite an hour of that morning doing his best to comfort Betsy Linley in the grief that had overwhelmed her family. She had written to Dick to come to her, and he had obeyed. He found her alone, and, though not in tears, very close to the weeping point. He saw, when he had looked into her face, that she had not slept all night for weeping. She never looked lovelier than when bearing the signs of recent tears.

"O Dick, Dick, is not this dreadful?" she cried. "You have heard of it—of course you have heard of it? All Bath is talking of it to-day."

Dick acknowledged that he had heard of Tom’s disappointing the audience at the concert-room the previous day, and of the roars of laughter that had greeted the manager’s announcement that Mr. Tom Linley had unfortunately contracted a severe indisposition which would, the doctors declared, prevent his appearing that day. He had not heard, however, that the manager, smarting from the ridicule of the audience, had told Mr. Linley that his son was to consider his career as a musician closed, so far as Bath was concerned.

"But 'tis so indeed; father told us so," said Betsy. "Oh, poor father! what he has been called on by Heaven to suffer! How dismal his early life was! But he freed himself by his own genius from that life and its associations, and then, just when happiness seemed at the point of coming to him, he finds that he has instructed me in vain,—that was a great blow to him, Dick—oh, what a disappointment! But what was it compared to this? O Dick, Dick, something must be done to save Tom!"

"She will soon tire of his society," said Dick. "She is not a woman of sentiment: when she finds that the topic of her conquest of Tom has ceased to be talked about, she will release him."

"That is what you said to me long ago, and yet he is not released, and people are talking more than ever," she cried.

"We must have patience, Betsy."

"What! do you suggest that we should do nothing—absolutely nothing? O Dick, I looked for better advice from you! What comfort is it to the friends of a prisoner immured in a dungeon to tell them that if they have patience his prison bars will rust away and he will then be free?"

"Do you fancy that my going to Mrs. Abington to plead for him will have any effect upon her? Do you really believe that all the eloquence of man has any influence upon a woman with a whim?"

"Ah, she will listen to you—you will be able to persuade her. She cares for you, Dick—I know that."

He looked at her wonderingly. How was it possible, he asked himself, that she had found out Mrs. Abington's secret? He himself had not found it out of his own accord, and he was a man. (He ventured to assume that such secrets were more likely to be guessed by a man than by a woman.)

"She likes me—yes, I suppose—in a way," he said. "But I am not sure that this fact would make her the more ready to abandon a whim of the moment. On the contrary——"

"Ah, Dick, will you not help us?" she cried. "Surely if she cares about you——"

"Dear Betsy, I think we should do well to avoid giving any consideration to that particular point," said Dick hastily. "I will go to Mrs. Abington and make an appeal to her, but 'twill not be on the ground that she cares for me; in fact, I do not at this moment know on what ground I can appeal to her."

"But you will go? Ah, I knew that we could depend on you to do your best for us, Dick," said she, and there passed over her face a glimpse of gladness—a flash of sunshine making more transparent the azure of her eyes. "You are the one whom I can always trust, dear Dick, because I know that you can always trust yourself."

"I have learned that from you, my Betsy; I can stand face to face with you, and yet—I can trust myself."

"Ah, do not say that you learned it from me," she cried. She had turned away from him suddenly and was looking pensively at the hand which she had rested on the back of a chair. "If you could know what is in my heart, Dick, you would not talk about learning anything from me—alas—! alas!"

"You can trust your heart," he said—"you can trust your heart, for it is true."

"Oh, do not talk in that way—for Heaven's sake, do not talk in that way!" she cried. "My heart—true?—ah, I fancied that I could trust myself—I fancied that I was strong, that I could do all that I had set myself to do, but—ah, Dick, my heart, my poor heart! It is not strong, it is not true, and the worst of it is that I—I myself—I cannot be true to my heart, and I am too weak to be true to my resolution."

She was walking to and fro nervously, and now she threw herself into a chair and put her hands up to her face.

He looked at her without moving, though it was in his heart to kneel before her and, taking her hands in his own, pour out the tale of his love to her. His heart whispered to him that she would at that moment give him kiss for kiss. A month ago no power would have restrained him from kneeling to her; but now he was under the control of another power and a stronger than that which set his heart beating as it was beating. He felt the controlling influence; but—well, he thought it would not be wise to look at her any longer.

He turned away from where she was sitting; his hands were behind him and his fingers locked together. He stood looking out of the window, but seeing nothing. The room was very silent. He thought he heard a movement behind him. He thought he heard her footfalls approaching him, he thought he heard a sigh close to him—a sigh with the inflection of a sob; but still he did not move—his fingers tightened about each other. He would not turn round. His heart beat more wildly, and the rhythm of its beats made up a siren-song hard to be resisted.

But there was another power upholding him in the struggle to which he had nerved himself, and he knew that that power was love. He felt that it was his love for her that saved him—that saved her. He did not turn round.

And then there came dead silence.

He knew that she had gone.

In another moment he was kneeling beside the chair in which she had sat, kissing the place where her hand had rested. It was still warm from her touch, and he kissed it again and again, crying in a voice tremulous not with passion, but with love:

"My beloved! my beloved! You have been true—true to true love—true to the truest love!"

CHAPTER XXXI

With what story was he to go to her? What excuse was he to make for interfering between her and the carrying out of her whims? How was he to tell her that she was no longer to make a fool of the youth whom she had taken a fancy to fool?

He found no answer to any of these questions which he asked himself. But when he went on to ask himself if she would not have a right to accuse him of impudence and presumption were he to go to her for the purpose of remonstrating with her, he had no difficulty in finding an answer.

He had never set about any business for which he had less aptitude than this. He was sufficiently a man of the world to know that he was the last person who should go to Mrs. Abington to remonstrate with her. The man who interposes in a quarrel between a man and a wife is accounted a fool; but a man who interposes between an actress and her lover is much worse—he is a busybody, and he usually comes off as badly as does an arbitrator, who reconciles two of his friends in order to become the enemy of both.

Dick felt that not only would his mission be fruitless, he would be regarded by both the actress and the lover with righteous rage. And then he was a little afraid of Mrs. Abington. She had availed herself to the uttermost of her opportunities of studying men, and she had, he believed, acquired a knowledge of how to treat individual cases without risk to herself, that was little short of marvellous. A woman possessing such powers was one whom every sensible man feared; the others fell in love with her. And he had promised to go to her upon a mission that would have been odious to him if it had not been suggested by Betsy Linley.

He could not explain to Betsy that there are certain lessons in life that must be learned by all men who wish to be men, and that these lessons cannot be learned from the study of books, but only by experience, and that her brother was learning his lesson at the sacrifice only of a few weeks of his time (he did not believe that at the best—or was it the worst?—Mrs. Abington's caprice would last longer than a week or two), at a period of his life that could by no means be called critical. Betsy would not have understood, and he was glad at the thought that she would not have understood.

When he had given himself up to thinking with what wisdom on his lips he should go to Mrs. Abington, he did what a wise man would do—that is, a moderately wise man; an entirely wise man would have stayed at home—he went to her without a portfolio. He had no idea what he would say to her; he had no policy to carry out. In dealing with a capricious woman, so much depends on her caprice. About Mrs. Abington nothing was steadfast except her capriciousness; and Dick felt that, in going to her, his success would be dependent on his treatment of her caprice of the moment.

He thought that the hour of his visit to her should be immediately following the departure of Tom Linley from her presence. He took it for granted that Tom would be paying her his usual afternoon visit, and he was not astray. Passing her lodgings, he heard the long and melancholy wail of a violin in which a young man has hidden his heart, turning the instrument into an oubliette with air-holes, so that the moaning and the wailing of the immured can be heard at some distance. On and on went the moan of the imprisoned heart, until Dick felt that the lady was paying a high price for her caprice, if she was compelled to listen daily to such melodies.

No, this particular whim of hers could not possibly last longer than a few more weeks, he thought, as he strolled by and waited for Tom to leave the house. Tom stayed a long time; but Dick reflected that the longer he stayed the better chance there would be of Mrs. Abington's listening to reason. After the dolorous complaint of the catgut, even reason, though usually unpalatable, would sound grateful to her ears.

In course of time Tom went away; Dick saw him go with his fiddle tucked under his arm in its baize cover. A rapt look was on his face. He had a double inspiration: he was a musical genius, and he was in love for the first time.

"Surely you have the kindest heart of any woman in the whole world!" cried Dick, when he had kissed her hand.

"Yes," she said, "I believe that I have—at times; but how have you found me out? I fancied that I had done my best to conceal that fact from you."

"Enough that I have found it out," said he.

"'Tis not enough, sir," she cried. "What! do you make an accusation against a poor woman and then refuse to say on what grounds it is made?"

"'Tis a fault that carries its own punishment, madam," said he, "so I will reproach you no further. Faith, there are few ladies nowadays who lay themselves open to such a charge."

"All the greater reason why I should know your reasons for making me an exception," said she.

He laughed, saying:

"Well, if you must know, I passed by this house a quarter of an hour ago."

"That is evidence of your lack of a kind heart, Dick, not of my possession of such a disqualification for success in the world," said she.

"True; but I heard the wail of the catgut, and yet when I saw Tom Linley just now his face wore a look of triumph, and so far as I could see, his fiddle was intact."

"Psha! Dick, you should not cultivate that roundabout mode of speech unless you mean to be taken for a poet. I was not thinking of Tom Linley—'tis minutes since he was here. No, I had a fancy that you called me kind-hearted because I did not reproach you for failing to visit me once, though I have now been here several weeks."

"I was wrong—very wrong. But, you see, with Tom Linley——"

"Ah, poor Tom! Yes, he has certainly been here more than once. I have really become quite fond of Tom. He is such a nice boy—surely the handsomest boy that—that——"

"That was ever made a fool of," suggested Dick, when the lady paused.

"Well, we shall say that ever made a fool of himself—that frees every one else from responsibility," laughed the lady. "Dick, the man who is wise enough to make a fool of himself every now and again is indeed the wise man. But Tom is a mighty pretty fellow. He is coming up to London, too."

Dick's face became grave. He shook his head.

"That is past a jest," said he.

"Past a jest? Pray, who was talking of jesting?" she asked quite gravely.

"Would you not regard his going to London in the light of a jest?" he asked.

"Not I, sir!" she cried. "On the contrary, I have done my best to dissuade him from such a project, knowing as I do, how serious a thing it would be for him. But you boys are all equally self-willed, Dick; I can do nothing with any of you. I am as the potter's clay in your hands."

"How does Tom Linley mean to live when he goes to London?" he asked, after a pause.

"Lud, sir! how should I know?" she cried very prettily, holding up her hands.

"You do not mean to take him up to London with you to starve?" he said.

"And this is the man who swore just now that I had the kindest heart among living women!" she cried. "Mr. Sheridan, did you come hither to-day solely to talk about Tom Linley?"

"Yes," he said, "solely to talk about Tom Linley. My dear creature, I shall have to throw myself on the kindness of your heart before I have done, for I want to tell you the truth."

"You had much better refrain, sir, from venturing into such an unexplored region," said she. "I have noticed that when people threaten you with telling the truth they invariably become rude."

"It will not be rudeness on my part to suggest to you that it is not quite fair for you to stake counters in a game where the other player stakes gold."

"In other words?—pray let me have the interpretation of this fable."

"In other words, Tom Linley has staked his heart against—against——"

"Against what, sir? Against mine, do you say?—against my heart—my kind heart? And you hold that my heart is a counter—something spurious—something base?"

"Nay, madam, I was not so foolish as to fancy for a moment that your heart had any connection with this game. But that is where you do not play fair. You know that poor Tom Linley's heart is laid at your feet, and yet——"

"And yet? Pray continue your criticism of the game, sir—I vow 'tis vastly diverting. And yet—— Well, sir?"

"And yet—well, surely with your many conquests, Mrs. Abington, you cannot set any store upon the devotion of Tom Linley!"

"Why should not I?" she cried. "Why should not I do so, if it so please me? He is, I repeat, a delightful boy, and why I should not value his devotion simply because I have had conquests and he has had none—that is your argument, I think—I cannot at this moment perceive."

"If you had any real affection for him you would not seek to spoil his career at the outset. The manager of the concerts told his father that Tom need never hope to get a hearing in Bath so long as he lives. You took him out driving with you when he should have been playing at the concert. Ah, my dear madam, one who is so strong as you are should be merciful."

"You come here to tell me that, do you? O Dick, you have, after all, no true sense of comedy, though I fancied that none could surpass you in that respect. Is't possible that you fail to see how ludicrous is your appearance here to-day pleading to me for—for—what? You have not yet told me what 'tis that you plead for."

"I plead with you to send Tom Linley back to the career which will surely be his if you set him free. Dear madam, you can have no idea in what anxiety his family are about him just now."

"They have been reading the parable of the one ewe lamb. They ask if Mrs. Abington has not at her feet flocks and herds which she devours at her leisure and when she has an appetite, and demand to know why she should want their one ewe lamb. They have not the wit to perceive that one may tire of beef and mutton, and so ask lamb by way of change. They are not good housekeepers. Besides, now that I come to think on't, they have more than one ewe lamb: are they not at the point of sacrificing one of them—the flower of the flock?"

"Leaving parables out of the question, dear madam, let me ask you if you do not think that it would be to the advantage of Tom Linley to remain under the influence of his home for some years, free from the distractions of the town? I have heard that he promises to become a very great musician; but if——"

"You have some skill as a pleader, Dick. But I am thinking at this moment what it is you hope to gain by bringing me to a sense of my own iniquity in listening for an hour or two every day to the fiddling of a youth who is fresh and natural and a genius to boot."

"What do I hope to gain?"

"Yes. I take it for granted that the eldest sister of the genius implored of you to come to me: you would not be such a fool as to come of your own accord. You know too much of the nature of women, Dick, to believe that one would relinquish even the youngest and most innocent of her adorers just when she had the satisfaction of learning that she was looked on as dangerous—so few women attain the distinction of being thought dangerous, though most of them aim at it."

Dick laughed approvingly; he felt that it would never do for him to neglect any of the conciliatory arts of the pleader.

"Tom is, as you say, young and innocent, Mrs. Abington," he said indulgently. "That is why I offer to you the parable of the fisherman. A good fisherman—one who fishes for sport and not for the fish-kettle—never fails to take the hook out of the jaws of a young and innocent fish, and to send it back to its sorrowing relations."

"Faith, 'tis a pretty parable, Dick," said she. "But how if your fisherman has been angling all the day for a fish on which he has set his heart? Failing to catch it, is he to be greatly blamed if he retain the little one which he has hooked, and try to make the most of it, dangling it at the end of the line before the onlookers?"

"Nay. When he has in his basket all the fish that swim in the river—when he——"

"Dick Sheridan," whispered the actress, going close to him and putting her face closer still,—"Dick Sheridan, I will let Tom Linley go down the stream if you will take his place."

He started back and felt himself flushing all over—the woman had revealed herself; and she too was flushing through the force of her revelation.

They stood there looking at each other, separated by only a few feet. Some moments had passed before he said:

"Ah, you were born a coquette! Dangerous—you were born dangerous, you beautiful creature! You would lure me on to make a fool of myself. Nay, seriously, my dear madam——"

He did not act the part very well; she could have given him a lesson as to the exact inflection of the phrases. But just then she was not inclined to be a severe critic.

"Dick," she whispered, with tremulous tenderness, "is it so hard for you to love me—to love me a little—not as I love you, Dick—I don't expect so much as that—you are only a man, but still——"

"Stop! for Heaven's sake, stop! Ah, you do not know what you say—you do not know what you ask!" he said.

"Alas! I know it but too well," she said, her voice broken by sobs. "Dick, dear Dick, I can be a good woman for your sake. I know that I am older than you by some years—oh, what do the years matter when the heart has not grown old? Dick, there is not a grey hair in my heart. I have been vain, I know; I have loved seeing men make fools of themselves, but none of them all has ever made a fool of me. No, don't tell me that I am making a fool of myself before you now! I am not—I am not!"

"No—no, that is not what is in my heart," said he gently. The thought that was in his heart at that moment was that though he had gone to her to plead, it was she who was doing all the pleading with him.

"Am I unwomanly? Ah, my fault has been that I am too womanly."

"I do not know what it is that you suggest," he said slowly.

"Ah, Dick, do not overwhelm me with scorn. Say a word to me—speak words to me, not icicles, that cut me as icicles cut one."

"I am thinking," he said. "You give me so much to think about. My first thought is that you are a free woman. You can marry whomsoever you will?"

"I am free," she said. "I can marry—one—one."

"You would not be afraid to marry that one?" said he.

"Afraid! Ah, my only fear would be that I could not do enough to make him happy."

"Would you be afraid to marry me?" he said in a low voice.

"Ah, Dick, only for the reason that I have said!" she cried.

"You need not be afraid on that account. I shall be happy—I shall be happy. Dear madam, I kiss your hand."

"O Dick, my own dear Dick! I shall make you happy—not so happy as you have made me, but still—— No, no, Dick, not my hand, my cheeks—my lips—all are yours, Dick, and you are mine—mine—at last—at last!"

CHAPTER XXXII

It was on the evening of the next day that Tom Linley entered the house at Pierrepont Street, and ran upstairs and flung himself into the music-room, where his father was giving Polly and Maria a lesson on a part song. They had gone over the lines:

“Sigh no more, ladies:
Men were deceivers ever,
One foot on sea and one on land,
To one thing constant never.”

“Deceivers ever—deceivers ever,” came Maria’s pretty treble.

“Sigh no more—sigh no more,” whispered Polly in simple harmony, and then their voices joined with Betsy’s in the half-mocking bourdon—

“With a hey nonny, nonny—”

when Tom entered and threw himself on the sofa. The singers ceased their song and stared at him. He held his violin laid across his knees, and then a sudden horror came over the girls, paralysing them where they stood, for they saw that the violin was broken. Its long neck was severed close to the body of the instrument, and hung down, suspended by the strings, from his knees. It was as if they were looking at a strangled infant—the droop of the severed neck had about it all the limpness of death. It was ludicrously ghastly, and Tom was gazing at the wreck with unspeculative eyes.

“Heavens above us! What has happened?” cried Mr. Linley.

“I broke it—God forgive me—I broke it in my anger!” sobbed Tom. “What does it matter?” he cried, recovering himself. “’Tis not alone the fiddle that is broken; my heart is broken, and I shall never touch the instrument again!”

He flung it away from him, but Betsy saw that he took good care that it should alight on the cushion of the sofa. The moan that came from the headless trunk striking the soft place was distractingly human. Maria had lately been reading of a decapitated prince whose head, after the operation, had rolled off the sawdust, so that all could see the disdainful expression on the face; and here was the decapitated violin moaning.

She shuddered.

“It can be mended,” said Mr. Linley, examining the wreck.

“I shall never play again,” moaned Tom. “My heart is broken.”

“Thank Heaven!” murmured his father.

Betsy went to her brother’s side, and put an arm about his neck.

“You have come back to us, dear Tom,” she said; “and you will never go away from us again. We all here love you, Tom. Ah, you know that nothing can change our love for you.”

“Delilah—Delilah—traitress!” murmured Tom. “O Betsy, there has been no deception like mine since the days of Delilah! She told me plainly that she was tired of me—that she had never thought of me except as a nice boy—she actually called me a pretty boy! And my playing—she said that it was dreary—it gave her the vapours; she asked me to play a jig—an Irish jig, too—Irish! I told her that sooner than see my instrument desecrated I would break it across my knee. ‘Virginus, the Roman father!’ she cried, pointing a finger at me. I always thought her fingers shapely; but I saw then that they were not fingers, but talons—talons!... and I broke my violin before her, and yet she laughed.... O Delilah—Delilah!... But I shall set the scene to music that shall wring her heart, if she have one. I see clearly how it can be dealt with by a small orchestra. Handel fell lamentably short of the truth when he wrote the music to Delilah. I have the prelude in my mind. This is how it will go.”

He mechanically stretched across the sofa for the violin. Crash went the pegs, drooping with the neck by the catgut strings, against the hollow body of the instrument. He started up as if he had become aware of the disaster for the first time. For some moments he stood handling the wreck, and then he laid it down very gently on the sofa. He went with the bowed head of a father in the death-chamber of his child, to the door; but when he had opened it, and was in the act of departing, he turned and stood up straight like a man; his hands were clenched, his eyes were blazing, while he cried:



“CURSE DICK SHERIDAN! HE HAS DONE IT ALL!”

"Curse Dick Sheridan! he has done it all. Curse him! Curse him!"

He banged the door behind him, leaving the girls white and awed. They had never before witnessed a really tragic scene ending up with a curse, and they felt that it was very awful.

"Yes," said Mr. Linley quietly, "we can all join in his prayer and say, 'Bless Dick Sheridan! Bless Dick Sheridan!'"—that will be poor Tom's prayer in another month—perhaps another week."

"Oh, no, no! not another week," said Betsy. "I should be sorry to think that Tom could be himself within a week. Tom has too deep feeling for that."

"Let us return to our lesson," said her father. "Dwell lightly on 'deceivers ever,' Maria; and I think, Betsy, you might give full value to the minim rest before 'Sigh no more,' after the 'hey nonny!' I think I see the delicate humour of the composer's treatment of the song better now than I did ten minutes ago."

But the girls were too unnerved to be able to return to their lesson just then. They remonstrated with their father.

"Well, perhaps one lesson in the day is enough," said he, "and Tom has just had his."

It was altogether very amusing and quite infamous, Bath said. Heavens! the way in which that woman pursued her course, being on with a new love quite two days before she was off with the old, was absolutely shameless.

"A female comet with an ardent train—no fixed star in the firmament," said Mr. Walpole, when it was found that Mrs. Abington had discarded Tom Linley and had taken on Dick Sheridan. It was found that she had done so within an hour of Tom's dismissal.

"The comet has in all ages been looked on as a portent of disaster," said George Selwyn. "I wonder what does this particular heavenly body portend?"

"I am no astrologer, but I dare swear that Mr. Cumberland's new comedy will be damned," said Walpole.

"My dear Horry, the obvious needs no portent! 'Twould be a ridiculous waste of fuel to send a comet flaring through the sky merely to let the world know that Sir Joshua's macaw will lose his tail-feathers in the moulting season," said Selwyn. "Mrs. Abington has not come to Bath for a whole month solely to give Nan Cattley a chance of making the damning of Cumberland's play a certainty."

"Nay, but her acting might save it if she were to return to town," said Walpole.

"Then it must be our duty to keep her here," said Selwyn.

"'Tis two days since she found young Sheridan attractive," said Walpole; "so that she is not the fickle creature some people have called her."

"With economy she may be faithful to Dick Sheridan till the end of the week," said Selwyn. "Can Bath furnish another swain with ruddy cheeks and a glib tongue to follow him?"

The cynical pleasantries of the Walpole circle, dealing with the case of Mrs. Abington and young Sheridan, were echoed by the inferior wits of the Pump Room—for the flare of a comet affects other systems besides the solar. Dick Sheridan was in as active attendance upon the lady as Tom Linley had been even in the early days of his attachment to her. He did not play the violin to her, and this fact, some people declared, should not be lost sight of by those who were venturing to assign a duration of just one week to this new caprice on the part of the actress. There was no predicting the length of time that she might remain faithful to a good-looking youth, provided that he refrained from playing the violin to her—her constancy might even last out the fortnight.

But these were the optimists.

Dick Sheridan knew perfectly well what the people were saying when they shrugged their shoulders and smiled significantly as he went by with Mrs. Abington; but he too shrugged his shoulders, and his smile also had a significance of its own. He went everywhere with the lady, even to her own house; but this was when she entertained some of her friends to supper.

Once when by the side of Mrs. Abington in Spring Gardens he caught sight of Betsy Linley in the distance. She was looking toward him across the green lawn, and their eyes met. He fancied that there was something of gratitude in the smile which she sent to him—he knew that there was something of sadness in it; and then—he could not doubt that the expression on her face was one of reproach—reproach and indignation.

For a moment he omitted to reply to a casual question put to him by his gay companion, and she quickly followed the direction of his eyes. She saw Betsy and gave a laugh. She accepted the reproachful look in the girl's eyes as a tribute to her own powers. She was not astute enough to keep her satisfaction to herself.

"Lud!" she cried, "that young woman has strange notions of the duty of a censorship. She is e'en reproving you, Dick, for being in my company. That is like enough a woman to serve you for a lesson, my dear. A woman has no sense of gratitude for a favour done to her by a man whom she loves and whom she has discarded."

"Madam," said Dick, "it is not for such as we are to judge Miss Linley by our standards: we are only men and women."

"That is all, praise Heaven!" cried the actress. "I claim to be nothing more than a woman, and I don't know that one can be much better—ay, or worse, Dick. God made me a woman, and I don't believe that He will be hard on a woman for being womanly. If He had meant me to be an angel, He would have given me wings, and then I should be angelic—and to be angelic is to be insipid. But take my word for it, Miss Linley, though she judge us from the standpoint of an angel, is just as much a woman as the best of us—ay, or the worst of us. She is just as jealous of me, thank God, as I am of her at this moment; and that's the last word that you and I will have about Miss Linley."

Dick resolved that, so far as he was concerned, there should be no need for another word on the subject of Miss Linley to pass between them; and when he came to think over the matter, he was glad that so much had already passed between them regarding Betsy. He had been warned, from what Mrs. Abington had said, that she was under no delusion respecting Betsy and himself. That same astuteness which she had shown in reading the secret of his love for Betsy, had enabled her to perceive that the fact of his having entered into an agreement with herself did not in a moment cause him to forget Betsy Linley.

And thus, day by day, he was in attendance upon Mrs. Abington, appearing by her side in all public places, and at many private suppers and card-tables, so that a good many people looked on him as an extremely fortunate young man.

As for Dick himself, he began to feel that he was indeed fortunate. Had he not been able to do a great service to the only one whom he loved, at a sacrifice of himself? He was proving his love to Betsy Linley by marrying Mrs. Abington. Yes, he felt that he was fortunate.

But all these days he failed to call upon Mr. Long. The truth was that it now and again occurred to him that Mr. Long might not understand without more explanation than he was inclined to offer, the position which he had taken up. He shrank from the duty—if he might call it a duty—of making it plain to Mr. Long that he was marrying Mrs. Abington in order that Betsy Linley might get back her brother. But there came a day when he learned that Mr. Long was waiting on him, and he found himself in the presence of that gentleman in the room in which he had received Mrs. Abington a short time before.

Mr. Long greeted him cordially.

"You will pardon my obtruding upon you at this time, Mr. Sheridan," said he; "but I must confess that I thought it strange that we should separate good friends a fortnight ago and then remain apart. Surely our friendship promised better things than this, sir!"

Dick made up his mind to be bold. He smiled, examined the tips of his fingers, and then said:

"I assure you, sir, that I retain all the liveliest sentiments of regard for you. Dear sir, you have been kindness itself to me, and I should be most ungrateful if I were to fail in my duty to you. But the fact is, Mr. Long, that—that— Ah well, sir, you will understand my seeming neglect when I inform you that I have been successful in engaging the affections of a lady to whom I have been devoted for—for—some time. When I tell you the lady's name, sir, I know I shall be the more easily excused."

"Do not tell me that the lady's name is Mrs. Abington," said Mr. Long gravely.

"I am sorry—I mean I am glad—yes, I am glad, sir, that it is not in my power to obey you in this matter," said Dick, still smiling, but with more than a little self-consciousness. He was beginning to feel uneasy beneath the grave, searching look of his visitor. "Yes, dear sir, we are to be married very shortly, so that you will understand, I am sure, that, just now, I do not count my time my own."

"You are to marry Mrs. Abington, the actress—the actress?" said Mr. Long.

"Ah, sir, there is only one Mrs. Abington in the world, and—my father is an actor," said Dick.

"And you expect to be happy with her as your wife?" said Mr. Long.

"If I am not, sir, it will be because I am not easily made happy; 'twill not be the lady's fault."

"Then I wish you every happiness, Mr. Sheridan."

Mr. Long rose from his chair and took up his hat.

"There is a forlorn hopefulness in your tone, sir, that has a chilling effect upon me," said Dick. "May I ask why it should appear ridiculous to expect that I should be happy—at least as happy as most wedded folks are?"

"You have disappointed me, Dick, that is all I can say to you—you have grievously disappointed me. That one who had ever loved Elizabeth Linley could bring himself to marry—I ask your pardon, sir; I exceed my privileges as a friend. I have no right to express myself in such terms. I have the honour to wish you a very good day, sir."

"Mr. Long," said Dick, "I seek for your good opinion more than that of any man living. I pray of you to think the best of me—not the worst."

"And what is the best that you would have me think of?" cried Mr. Long. "Just state with some show of reason what you wish me to think of you, and I promise that I will be influenced by what you say. You talked to me of loving Elizabeth Linley."

"Nay, sir, 'twas you who talked to me of it. 'Twas you strange to say—you, to whom Miss Linley has given her promise—'twas you who talked to me of my love for her."

"I allow it. Alas! I believed—in my ignorance of men and of their motives—in my ignorance of how men regard love—I prayed of you to allow your love for her—her love for you—to urge you to achieve something noble in life. I flattered myself that I had impressed upon you the true nature of love—the sentiment that exalts, that ennobles, that leads a man into deeds of self-sacrifice and devotion to duty; and yet—you are ready to marry Mrs. Abington."

For a moment Dick was stung with a sense of the injustice that was being done to him.

"I am ready to marry Mrs. Abington," he cried, "and you, sir, are ready to marry Elizabeth Linley."

"You fool!" said Mr. Long, "I have no hope of marrying her. I knew too well that she loved you, and—as I fancied—that you loved her, ever to think of marrying her. My only hope was to see her happy—to look at her happiness through another man's eyes—through your eyes, Dick—your eyes. But now—alas! alas!"

He spoke rapidly, almost passionately, facing Dick. His breaking off was abrupt; it seemed as if he had a great deal more to say, but that words failed him unexpectedly. His lips were parted, his hand was upraised, but he stopped short, saying:

"Alas! Alas!"

Then he turned quickly and walked out of the room.

Dick dropped into a chair.

CHAPTER XXXIII

In no house in Bath was Dick Sheridan's conduct regarded in the same light as it was in the home of the Linleys. That was, of course, because only by the Linley family was his conduct regarded as a personal matter. His perfidy in professing a friendship for Tom, while all the time he was contriving to take poor Tom's place in the affections of Mrs. Abington, was referred to with great bitterness by Tom's mother, and by Polly and Maria in wrathful whispers. They referred to Tom daily as "poor Tom!"—sometimes "poor dear Tom!" All their sympathy went forth for Tom in these days, and every one in the household—not even excepting Mr. Linley and Betsy—felt that it was necessary to treat him with the greatest tenderness. He was the victim of an unhappy attachment to one who was unworthy of the inestimable treasure of his young affections; and, in addition, he had been the dupe of an unscrupulous man who had not hesitated to elbow him aside in order to take his place. Surely one would be quite heartless who failed to have the deepest sympathy with poor Tom, or to heap reprobation on the head of his perfidious friend!

To be sure, Tom's attachment to Mrs. Abington had been a terror to the household. The father had stormed about it, and the mother had wept over it. The father had threatened in no undertone to turn Tom out of the house, and the mother—with the true instincts of a woman and the experience of a wife—had made her crispest *pâtés* to tempt him to stay at home. But Tom disregarded alike threats and tartlets, and his sisters had sat daily in terror of a catastrophe. But the remembrance of those awful days did not in the least tend to mitigate their abhorrence of the perfidy of Dick Sheridan. They could not contain their anger when one day they caught sight of him flaunting his success in the face of all the people of Bath while he took the air by the side of Mrs. Abington in her chariot.

Maria, with great tact, drew Tom away from the window on some pretext. Her heart was beating in the excitement of the moment. If Tom had chanced to see that sight it would, she felt, have been impossible to predict what might happen. Tom was a man of spirit—so much was certain—and he had brought home with him from Italy a stiletto with beautiful jewels and pieces of coral set in the haft....

Mr. Linley only smiled when he was alone, and repeated in whispers those words, "God bless Dick Sheridan!" He felt truly grateful to Dick, but not quite so grateful as to make the attempt to force him upon the family as their benefactor; and as for his flaunting it with Mrs. Abington—well, that was Dick's own affair. He was not in the least offended at his triumph. It was better for Dick Sheridan to make a fool of himself than for Tom Linley to be made a fool of. That was what Mr. Linley thought; and he helped Tom to mend his violin. Tom was ready to begin the work just two days after his breaking of the instrument, and when the glue had properly dried—before the touch of varnish that he gave to the fractured part had ceased to perfume the room, he was improvising that "Elegy to a Dead Love" which, later on, caused some of his audience (women) at a concert to be moved to bitter tears. Love was dead, and a musical elegy had been played over its grave, because Tom Linley had been jilted by Mrs. Abington! And when Mr. Linley declared that nothing more classical than that composition had been produced by an English musician, Tom began to recover from the effects of his wound as speedily as his violin had done. Only once did his sister Maria hear him murmur, while he breathed hard and his eyes were alight with the true fire of genius:

"A jig—an Irish jig! O heavens! an Irish jig!"

The expression on his face was one of bitterness—bitterness tempered by the thought that he had produced an immortal work: the mortality of his love had given him immortality.

But Betsy did not speak a word. Tom was too full of himself and of setting his sorrow to rhythm to notice how often during every day her eyes filled with tears. But one of her sisters who occupied the same bedroom, had awakened once in the night hearing Betsy sob on her pillow, and had asked her what was the matter—was it toothache? “Ah, the ache! the ache!” Betsy had answered. The little girl had expressed her sympathy with her sister’s suffering, and had straightway fallen asleep, forgetting in the morning that she had ever been awakened.

But Mr. Long was not among those who were insensible of any change in Betsy. He did not fail to perceive that some trouble was upon her. He wondered if it was the family trouble in regard to Tom’s promise that oppressed her, or was it due to something more closely affecting herself?

After Tom had renounced the enchantress, and it might have been expected that Betsy would become herself again, Mr. Long noticed that she was more tristful than ever. He made up his mind that, failing to find out by chance the cause of the change, he would ask her concerning it. For some days, however, he had no chance of talking with her apart from the members of her family. But at the end of a week, he found her alone in the music-room. He had met Mr. Linley and his wife on their way to look at a house in the Circus, which their improving circumstances seemed to warrant their taking, and he perceived that there was a likelihood of Betsy’s being at home and alone. He knew that he was fortunate when he heard the sound of her voice while he rang the bell. She was singing, and he knew that now she rarely sang unless she was alone.

She sprang from the harpsichord when he entered the room, and turned away for a suspicious moment before greeting him.

“My dear child, why should you wipe the tears from your eyes?” he said, retaining her hand. “Do you fancy that I am one of those people who think tears a sign of weakness? Nay, you should know that I regard them as an indication of strength—of womanliness, which is the strongest influence that remains with us in the world.”

“Ah, no, no! with me they are a proof of weakness,” she cried quickly—“weakness—weakness! Oh, I am in great trouble, Mr. Long, because I am conscious daily of doing you a great wrong. But you will bear with me—you will forgive me when I confess it to you?”

“Before you confess—before,” he said. “But what can you have to confess?”

“It is terrible—terrible, for though I have given you my promise to marry you, I find that I cannot do it—I cannot do it.”

She remained standing before him, but put both her hands up to her face. The movement was ineffectual; her hands failed to conceal her tears.

“Why?” he asked, after a pause.

There was another and a longer pause before she said:

“Because ’twere to do you a great wrong, sir. I believed when I gave you my promise that I would be strong enough to keep it. But I find that I am too weak. Oh, I am miserable on account of it! ’Tis not that I have failed in my respect for you—in my regard—but I feel that ’twould be impossible. Oh, I cannot do it—I cannot marry you, Mr. Long.”

“You do not love me as a girl should love her lover?” said he, and he was actually smiling.

She could not answer him. The truth seemed too cruel. She could only put her hand in his. That was her instinct. She knew that she could trust him to understand her.

“Yes, I see that you do not love me,” said he; “and I too have to confess that I cannot give to you the love of a lover.”

Her eyes opened wide as she looked at him; there was deep pathos in her look of innocent inquiry.

“You have found that your love is given to some one else?” he said, with great gentleness.

A flush came to her face; she turned away her head.

“And I—I too have given all my love to another,” he said still more gently.

Quickly she turned to him again. She laid the hand which he was not holding on the hand that held hers.

He led her to the sofa, and she seated herself, wondering.

“My Betsy,” he said, “I hoped that I would never be led to do you a wrong, and I hope that I did not wrong you when I asked you for the promise which you gave me; but at that time, and before it, all my love was given to another—another even younger than yourself.”

A little coldness had come to her eyes. She drew back an inch from him. He recognised how womanly was the movement.

“You will see her—one day; but I cannot show her to you now. I can only show you her likeness.”

He took out of an inner pocket a miniature enclosed in a plain red gold case. It was attached to a black watered silk riband which he wore round his neck. He looked at the picture for a long time before handing it to her, which he did with a sigh.

She took the case in her hands, and saw that the picture was of a girl's face, lovely in its spirituality, pathetic in its innocence. The eyes were of the softest grey, and their expression had a certain indefinable sadness in it, in spite of the smile that illuminated the face.

"She is beautiful," said Betsy gently.

"Ah, she is more beautiful than that picture now," said he. "It was painted forty years ago. She is more beautiful now."

"Only an angel could be more beautiful," said Betsy.

"That is true—only an angel. She is among the angels," said he. "Dear child, it was Mr. Jackson, the organist of Exeter, who told me that when you sang your face was like the face of one who is looking at an angel. I wondered if I should think so when I saw you. I found that he spoke the truth: I have seen you when you seemed to be looking into her face. It was for her sake, my dear, that I wished to do something to help you. I hoped that this privilege might be granted to me."

"And you have helped me—no one has helped me more."

"Have I helped you to understand yourself—to understand what love means? That is sometimes the last thing that women understand."

"I think that you helped me to understand myself, and the result is, pain—self-reproach."



SHE TOOK THE CASE IN HER HANDS.

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the love of a girl for her lover. I wondered who it was you did love in that way, and I believed that the truth was revealed to me. I saw Dick Sheridan in the same room with you, and I saw the light that came into your face."

"Alas—alas!"

"The chance that I told you of when he came to my help, enabled me to see a good deal of him, and I felt sure that it would be given to me to have my dearest wish realised—to see you happy by the side of a man who adored you and who could appreciate the beauty of your nature. Alas! I was disappointed. Instead of earning my respect by his constancy to the sentiment of love—constancy to that ideal of love which I believed he could appreciate—he has earned my contempt."

"Ah, no—not contempt!" she cried almost piteously.

"Why not contempt?" he said. "I tell you that in giving himself to that woman—he confessed to me that he was going to marry her—he has earned my contempt and yours."

"No, 'tis not true. I love him and he loves me!" she cried. "Ah, you should spare him—you should spare him!"

"Why should I spare him? He is worthy only of contempt."

"There is no need for either, Betsy. There is no need for pain, even though the one whom you loved showed himself to be unworthy of you. Ah, my dear, if you mourn until you find a man worthy of your love, you will pass a melancholy lifetime. Listen to me, my sweet one, while I tell you what was my dream. When I came here for the first time and found you in the midst of danger, surrounded by unscrupulous men—men who were as incapable of appreciating your real nature as—as—well, as incapable as was your father; when I perceived that you were like a white lily that slowly withers when brought out of the gladness of the garden to be stifled by the air of a dark room; when I perceived that, in order to avoid the shame of facing the public from the platform of a concert-room, you might be led to give your hand to some one who would lead you into misery and dishonour—then, for her sake—for the sake of the angel whom I loved in my boyhood and whom I love now in the autumn of my life—I made up my mind that I would try to help you."

"And you did—indeed, you did help me. Ah, I should have known what you meant—I might have known how good and unselfish you were. 'Tis true that sometimes I fancied—something like what you have told me now. Yes, I felt that you were too fond of me to love me. That sounds absurd, but I think you understand what I mean."

"You have put the sentiment into the best phrase: I was too fond of you to be in love with you or to look for you to love me with

"No, no! he is to be pitied—only pitied. Do not be hard on him: he did it because he loved me."

CHAPTER XXXIV

And now the girl was sitting looking up with dry eyes to the face of the man who had sprung from her side the moment she had spoken, and was standing a yard or two away from her. She saw that, although the words which she had spoken had sent him to his feet in an instant, he now felt that he had perhaps been too hasty. She saw that there was a puzzled look on his face. She did not wait for him to put a question to her. She perceived that her explanation needed to be explained. It is unusual, she thought, for a man to ask a woman to marry him simply because he loves another woman.

"Indeed, he did it all for me," she said. "I sent for him more than a week ago to ask him to plead with Mrs. Abington to break with my brother, whose infatuation for her was ruining his career, and he promised to do this for me. The day that my brother returned I knew what Dick Sheridan had done—all for me—all for me!"

"Is it possible that you suggest that the woman stipulated with him to release your brother only if Dick Sheridan took his place?" he asked.

"I am as certain that she did so as if I had heard her making a compact with him," said Betsy. "She had an old infatuation for Dick; Mr. Garrick told my father so two days ago. Had I known that, I would not have brought Dick here to beg of him to help us. But he came and this is the result of his coming."

"I have treated him unjustly—God forgive me!" said Mr. Long. "I went to him and—you can imagine what I said to him. But he did not say a word about—about anything that you have told me."

"No, he would not do that. He showed me, when I stood before him, how unselfish he could be. And yet once—once—ah, how long ago it seems!—I had a feeling that his whole aim in life was to excel others—to shine as a man of fashion. Like you, I did him an injustice."

"Ah, my dear, he had not then learned what 'tis to love. You it was, my Betsy, who taught him that the spirit of love—the truest love—the only love—is self-sacrifice."

"Then would to Heaven he had never learned the lesson!" cried the girl passionately. "I have ruined his life, and my life is over! But what is my life? It matters nothing about my life."

"Dear one," he said, "I cannot hear you say that. Nay, my Betsy, I shall live to look on my happiness through his eyes. The position of affairs, though desperate, is not irretrievable. You do not know the world, my child. You do not know the sordid world. Thank Heaven that I have money enough to compensate even the most avaricious of actresses for depriving her of a caprice on which she had set her heart! Betsy, all will yet come right: 'tis merely a question of money."

But her instinct was truer than all his worldly wisdom.

"Now you are doing her a great injustice," she said.

"Not I!" he cried. "Though I am pleased to think that I have never had a proof of the exact extent of the rapacity of such as she, yet—"

She laid her hand upon his arm.

"Dear friend, remember that you are speaking of one of us," she said.

"One of you!—one of— Heaven forbid! You are as far removed from her as heaven is removed from—from Bath."

"Nay, nay, she is a woman; and indeed I think that between the best of us and the worst there is no great gulf fixed. If you go to Mrs. Abington on the errand which you have in your mind, you will be putting upon her a gross affront—yes, and upon Dick Sheridan as well, and much will be lost and nothing gained."

"Then I will not speak to her of money; I will make the appeal to her generosity to set Dick free. Now, you shall not forbid me to make an appeal to her generosity; to do so would be to put an affront on her far more gross than you perceived in my first intention!"

He rose from where he was sitting on the sofa, and began pacing the room thoughtfully. After some time he stopped before her, saying in a low voice:

"Betsy, my child, I fear that I must confess that the design which I had planned out for you, for bringing about your happiness, has been frustrated. My hope was to save you from the evil fate which I feared would overtake you, and the only way that seemed to me to promise well was the one which I took. Was I wrong, dear one, to ask you to give me that promise, knowing, as I did, that it would be a crime on my part to hold you to it?"

"No, no—a thousand times no!" she cried. "You hoped to save me from all that I abhorred, and you succeeded. Indeed you were right. If you had not come to my help, who can tell what might have happened? I knew not in what direction I had a friend who would be true to me, and you know that my father favoured that man, Captain Mathews; he urged upon me to listen to him.... Ah, you saved me!"

"But for what—for what have you been saved?" he said.

"I have been thinking much on that point for some days," she replied. "I seem to have lived through many years of life in those singing days of mine, and now the feeling that I have is a feeling of weariness. Oh, I am tired—tired to death of the struggle—the artifices—the world! How long ago is it since I heard the boys in the choir sing those words, 'O for the wings of a dove to fly away and be at rest'? That is the anthem which my heart is singing now. 'The wings of a dove.' I want to be at rest—to take no part in the struggle going on in the world—the sordid troubles—the jealousies that make life seem so petty. Dear friend, I have my heart set upon a place of rest. Elizabeth Sheridan told me of it—a place where the peace of God dwells for evermore. It is a convent at Lille, in France, and its doors are open to those wayfarers through the world whose feet have become weary, and who seek rest. Will you lead me thither? I will trust to you to lead me. I hear the voice that calls from there in the silence that follows the ringing of the Angelus, 'Come unto Me, and I will give you rest.' You will take me thither for the sake of her whom you love—her whose face I looked upon. Oh, she—she has found rest! Would to God that I had found the same rest!"

She flung herself down on her knees at the sofa, and buried her face in her hands.

The man stood by without a word. He was too greatly overcome to be capable of speech. Only now did he perceive how she had been suffering in silence for weeks—only now, when she had broken down, unable to control herself any longer. And he had no word of comfort to say to her.

He remained by her side in silence for some minutes (she had not risen from her knees), and then left the room and the house.

He went straight in search of Dick Sheridan. He did not succeed in finding him at home. Mr. Sheridan had gone out some hours before, the maid said; and forthwith Mr. Long concluded that Dick was visiting Mrs. Abington. His judgment was not at fault. Dick had been dining with the lady; but he did not stay for more than half an hour afterwards, consequently he was met by Mr. Long at the corner of York Street.

"I have been seeking you," said Mr. Long. "I have done you a great injustice, sir, and I live only in the hope of being able to make amends for my grossness of thought. You will grant me five minutes with you in private, Mr. Sheridan?"

Dick raised his hat gravely, but without speaking, and Mr. Long walked with him back to the Sheridans' house. Dick bowed him into the hall and into the room which Mr. Sheridan the elder called his study. It was obvious that the young man wished his visitor to understand that he was being received with ceremony.

"I feel honoured by your attention, sir," he said, offering Mr. Long a chair.

"O Dick, Dick," said Mr. Long, "I fear that I have made some terrible mistakes; but I hope they may not prove irretrievable."

"So far as I am concerned, sir," said Dick, "the error into which you fell need cause you no uneasiness. Indeed, I rather regret that you have discovered your mistake as to my motives in—in the matter to which you referred. I trust that you have not come hither to re-open the subject, Mr. Long?"

"But that is just why I have come," said Mr. Long. "Dick, my boy, will you not aid me to make matters come right?"

"Is there any need for one to trouble oneself in the attempt to control the inevitable, sir?" asked Dick coldly. "Have you any reason to complain of the direction in which matters have shaped themselves, Mr. Long? Because I can assure you that I see no particular reason for interference, so far as I am concerned. Here am I, a penniless man, a man without a profession, brought in contact accidentally with people of wealth and position. It was my father's wish that my brother and I should cut a figure in this world of fashion to which he led us; but unhappily, however meritorious may be one's ambition in this direction, it needs a fortune to achieve it and another fortune to maintain it. Now, sir, I trust that you perceive how great is the reason I have for feeling satisfied at the turn for the better which my affairs have taken. I am about to be married to a lady whose charms are acknowledged all over England, and whose ability enables her to earn such sums of money as should satisfy all but the most extravagant. Egad, sir! I do not think that many people would be disposed to call me unlucky or to suggest that my affairs stand in need of being shaped in a new direction. Now, sir, I will listen to you with deference."

Mr. Long looked at him and there was no feeling except of pity in his heart. He understood the impulse in which Dick had spoken. He could appreciate the bitterness underlying all that he had said. But it was also plain to him that Dick's pride would not allow him to sanction any scheme that might be proposed for his release.

Mr. Long stood before him as silently as he had stood over Betsy when she had been sobbing on her knees. What could he say to a man who took up such an attitude as Dick had assumed? How could he tell Dick that he was anxious to consult him in respect of the sum of money which he meant to offer Mrs. Abington for his release? Dick's pride would, Mr. Long knew, cause him to open the door, and to show his visitor into the street whence he had come with such a suggestion.

It was plain to him that, however bitterly Dick Sheridan might feel the humiliation of his position as the penniless young man about to marry an actress who was at least ten years older than himself, and whose reputation for beauty and taste was the only one that she retained, he

was too proud not to regard as a gross affront any suggestion to the effect that he was about to make himself contemptible in the eyes of honourable people.

"Dick," said he after a long pause—"Dick, it was Betsy who told me that you had done this for her sake, and I am here now to say to you that, whatever may happen, I honour you more than any man of my acquaintance. I take pride in being your friend, Mr. Sheridan, if you will allow me to think of myself as such."

"Sir," said Dick, "you do me great honour; but I cannot permit even so valued a friend as yourself to suggest that, in taking this step, I was actuated by any motive except of regard and esteem for the lady who is about to honour me with her hand. I will have you know that, Mr. Long."

Mr. Long looked at the younger man, who stood up before him dignified and self-respecting. But he did not fail to detect a shake in his voice and, when he had ceased speaking, a quivering about his lips.

"Give me your hand, Dick Sheridan," he cried. "You are a man!"

He grasped the hand that Dick offered him, and held it for a long time in his own, with his eyes fixed upon the young fellow's face. Dick's eyes were cast down. It was not until Mr. Long had released his hand that he said in a low tone:

"It was from you, sir, I learned what 'tis to be a man. God help me if I fall short of all that I should be! Now, sir, pray leave me to myself. Ah, will you not have pity on me and leave me? Cannot you see that this moment is too much for me? Cannot you see that in your presence the struggle in which I have taken part is telling on me? Ah, go, for God's sake, go!"

His fingers were interlaced in front of him, and he was pacing the room with bowed head.

"My poor boy—my brave boy, remember that whatever may happen I am your friend," said Mr. Long, with his hand on the door.

Dick did not seem to hear him. He had thrown himself into a chair, and his back was turned to the door. He was unaware of Mr. Long's departure.

Mr. Long was a man of courage. On leaving Dick he made up his mind that he would pay a visit to Mrs. Abington. But his bravery had its limits; he did not pay the visit. Before he had reached the actress's lodgings he had come to the conclusion that he was upon a fool's errand. What could he say to her that would have the smallest influence upon her determination to marry Dick Sheridan? It would be much more to the point to consider what he could offer her to release Dick Sheridan, and of this fact he was well aware, consequently he addressed himself to the task of calculating his resources available for this purpose.

Money—he had said to Betsy that, in regard to such women as Mrs. Abington, such a matter as he had to discuss with her was nothing more than a question of figures. But Betsy's instinct had told her that the rapacity of Mrs. Abington was something altogether different from that with which other actresses with a liking for adventure were accredited—or discredited; and Betsy was right. Mrs. Abington had never, so far as he could remember—and he knew a good many of the traits of the distinguished people of his time—been accused of having a mercenary tendency. On the contrary, she was known to be generous to a fault, and, unlike Mrs. Clive and Miss Bellamy, to refrain from clamouring for a higher salary and more liberal benefits. To be sure, she was the idol of the playgoers, and Mr. Colman paid her more than Mr. Garrick had ever paid a member of his company, so that she had little cause for complaint. But to have no cause for complaint and to refrain from complaining did not mean exactly the same thing in the minds of most actresses, Mr. Long knew; so that he could not but feel that Mrs. Abington's reputation for generosity was well founded. She would laugh at his offer of money, he now felt; and what else had he to offer her in exchange for Dick Sheridan?

He had come to the end of his resources available for negotiation with the lady when the question ceased to be one of money. He could not pretend to himself that he would have any chance of success with her were he merely to go to her with the assurance that Dick Sheridan and Betsy Linley loved each other and would be happy together if she, Mrs. Abington, were to release Dick from the promise she had obtained from him. He knew that her generosity would not be equal to such a strain as he should put upon it, were he to make such a suggestion to her. She was a woman, and he had an idea that women have a tendency to place an extravagant value upon what other women show themselves anxious to possess. The fact that Miss Linley was in love with Dick Sheridan would only cause Mrs. Abington to chuckle over the bargain she had made with Dick. It seemed clear to him that he could gain nothing beyond that chuckle by his visit to the actress. To be sure, she would take care that it was a purely artistic suggestion of something rather more than content, and it would be made worthy of the attention of the most exalted order of critics; still, it would represent to Mr. Long (he knew) something rather more humiliating than the failure of his mission, and it was his fear of this chuckle that caused him to abandon his enterprise and to shape his steps in the direction of his own house.

He opened the door of his parlour and found himself face to face with Mrs. Abington!

CHAPTER XXXV

His first thought was, curiously, of the story he had heard of the man who had left London to escape the plague and had found it waiting for him at Highbury. He bowed to the ground.

"Madam," he said, "I have never before been so honoured. My poor rooms—— But is this visit in accordance with the well-known discretion of Mrs. Abington?"

"'Tis a great risk I run, sir," she cried, with a delightful uplifting of two shapely arms and an expression of fear such as one assumes in order to make a child laugh,—“oh yes, a terrible risk!— but I am adventurous.”

"And your example is stimulating to the timid, madam; that is why I beg of you to be seated. Pray Heaven that that fiery young Mr. Sheridan be not in the neighbourhood. Still, for five minutes of Mrs. Abington's wit a more timid man than myself would run the chance of a duel with Colonel Thornton himself."

This was scarcely the style of the conversation which he hoped to have with the lady when he had been on his way to her lodgings; but one does not adopt the same style with a person to whom one is about to make an appeal, as one adopts with a person who is about to be an appellant; and he felt sure that Mrs. Abington had come to him in this character.

"Dear sir, I protest that you overwhelm me with your compliments," she cried. "The younger generation have much to learn in courtesies from the one to which you and I belong, sir."

"Madam," he said, "you prove the contrary when you couple me with yourself. What are all the compliments which my poor ingenuity could discover compared with that 'you and I' which has just come from your lips?"

"Nay, but I can prove that we belong to the same generation, sir; for are not you marrying a lady of the same age as the gentleman who is to be my husband?" she cried, with an exquisite assumption of archness.

"Against such profundity of logic 'twere vain to contend, Mrs. Abington," he said. "I yield to it, more especially as you prove what I have spent my years trying to prove to myself. Alas, madam! is it not sad that old age should come down upon a man before he has succeeded in convincing himself that he is still young?"

"Mr. Long," said the lady, "I couple myself with you for our mutual protection."

"I acknowledge the honour, madam, but appreciate the danger," said he.

"Let me explain myself, sir."

"To explain yourself, Mrs. Abington, were to supply a key to the most charming riddle of the century. Let me paraphrase Mr. Dryden:

'A dame so charming that she seem'd to be
Not one, but womankind's epitome.'

"That is the wittiest turning of satire into comedy I have ever known," she cried. "And it makes my explanation easy. Mr. Long, I desire to be your best friend; and when a woman professes a wish to be a man's best friend, you may be sure that she wants him to stand in that relationship to her. But you gathered, I know, that I was thinking at least as much of myself as of you when I made you that offer."

"I give you credit for thinking most of the one worthiest of your thoughts, Mrs. Abington," said he.

She took a step nearer to him.

"Mr. Long," she said in a lower tone, "these young people are very well, and they make delightful companions for us, but they cannot always be depended on."

"You mean that——"

"I mean that Dick Sheridan and Betsy Linley were once in love with each other, and that they fancy they love each other still."

"That means that they *are* to be depended on, does it not?"

"They may be depended on to lose no opportunity of making fools of themselves if we allow them, Mr. Long."

"Does that mean that they may be trusted to marry, the one you, t'other me?"

"It means that you would do well to keep an eye on Elizabeth Linley, or you will lose her, sir."

"What is this?"

"'Tis the truth, Mr. Long. Only to-day there came to my ears the whisper of preparations for an abduction having your Miss Linley for its object—the hiring of relays of horses along the London road, and so forth. My woman, an honest creature, gave me the hint; she had the news in confidence."

"And in confidence transferred it to you, no doubt."

"I am not the woman to credit every rumour that the gossips of Bath set in circulation; but this special rumour was so circumstantial that——"

"Ah, if 'twas circumstantial its falsity is assured," cried Mr. Long. "Dear madam, can you really believe that Dick Sheridan would make the attempt to run away with Miss Linley when he is still under an engagement to marry you?"

"Psha, sir!" she cried, "I know but too well that his heart is still with Miss Linley. Would my gentleman be so ready to answer my beck and call—would he be so desperately punctilious in his discharge of all the duties of lovership in respect to me, if he were not in love with Miss Linley? Mr. Long, the husband who is punctilious in his treatment of his wife is, you may be sure, not in love with her, and the lover who— Ah, sir! I have had my experiences, Heaven help me! and I am now in the position of the doctor who knows the condition of a patient the moment he looks into his face. Sir, I have had my finger on Dick Sheridan's pulse, so to speak, for the past week, and though he has tried hard to deceive me into the belief that he loves me, he has not succeeded. I have seen through his attentions—his constant show of devotion. O sir, I am a miserable woman! But I cannot lose him—I swear to you that I shall not lose him! And you—would you be content to lose her—to lose Elizabeth Linley?"

"I would be content to lose her if I were sure that she did not love me," said Mr. Long.

"What? what? Ah, you do not love her!" she cried contemptuously.

"I love her so well as to have implicit confidence in her," said he. "There will be no running away so far as Miss Linley is concerned—rest assured of that, my dear madam, and take my word for it, Dick Sheridan is too honourable to entertain such a design."

"Ah, honourable! what does honour mean to a man when he is in love—ay, or to a woman either?" she cried.

"You are proving one of your contentions by entertaining such suspicions," said he.

"They are well founded. Ah, when I think that he loved her so well as to give up his life only for the sake of saving her from the pang of seeing her brother made a fool of, I have a right to my suspicions. He will never love me like that. When I think of it all, I feel tempted—sometimes; the fit soon passes away, thank Heaven!—I feel tempted to let him go to her—to let him be happy with her: she would not let you stand in the way of her own happiness, you may be sure, though she has promised to marry you."

"If you loved Dick Sheridan truly, madam, you would not stand between him and happiness," said Mr. Long.

"And if you loved Miss Linley truly, you would not stand between her and happiness," responded the actress, turning suddenly upon him with the stage instinct of making an effective retort.

"Nor shall I," he cried. "Come, Mrs. Abington, let us make a compact for their happiness. I will release Miss Linley if you will do the same for Dick Sheridan."

"No—no—no!" Her voice had almost become a shriek, and it went through the room without the interval of a second. Her head was craned forward; her hands were clenched; her eyes were half closed.

So she remained for a long time after that shriek had come from her. Then she drew a long breath. She kept her eyes fixed keenly upon his face. She went back from him slowly, step by step.

Suddenly she made a quick movement toward him with her right hand outstretched, as if about to clench a compact. But when his hand went out to hers, she snatched her own back with a cry.

"No, no, I cannot do it—I cannot do it! I cannot give him up. I have made him mine—mine he shall remain. You shall tempt me no further."

"He never was yours—he never shall be yours! You know it, woman, you know it! That is the thought which is in your heart just now, and that is the thought which makes your life a curse to you. Never yours—never yours! By your side, but never yours—never yours!"

With a cry she covered her face with one hand, the other was on the handle of the door. She staggered out.

"Did ever man utter words of such cruelty?" said Mr. Long when he heard the hall door close. "Poor creature! poor creature! And I trod on her—I crushed her. God forgive me! God forgive me!"

An hour later Mrs. Abington, shining out amid her jewels as a rose is resplendent amid the diamonds of a spendthrift morning, welcomed the arrival of Dick Sheridan with smiles and a gracious white hand for him to kiss. He kissed the hand, and noticed that the lady was wearing a gown which he had never before seen—something roseate and misty—the waves of dawn, out of which the goddess Aphrodite was in the act of rising; he saw her before him, and said so; he called her the Cyprian: she had been called that so often that she understood quite well what he meant.

"You have come in good time, my dear!" she cried. "If you had not come early I would have gone to you."

"I got your note only a quarter of an hour ago," said he.

"'Twas only writ half an hour ago," she said, "and the express from Mr. Colman arrived within the hour. Dear Dick, we must fly to London post haste in the morning. They can do without me no longer. Mr. Colman implores of me to come. Ruin stares him in the face. I must have some pity for him."

"The humblest thing that crawls—even the manager of a theatre—claims one's compassion now and again," said Dick. "Will you set out in the morning?"

"At daybreak. You can pack your trunk before you sleep to-night, and the chaise will pick it up and you astride of it when we start."

"Heavens, my dear madam! I heard nothing about my departure! Mr. Colman does not venture to say that ruin stares him in the face if I remain in Bath."

"Nay, he does not go so far. 'Tis only I who claim you. I shall need your escort, Dick, and I shall make arrangements for your remaining in London—some simple arrangements, Dick."

"The simpler they are the more difficult it is for me to accept them. I do not think it would be wise for me to be your escort to London and in London, enviable though the duty would be."

She started into a sitting posture. She had been reclining on her tiny sofa.

"What is't you mean, sir?" she cried. "Surely if I find no fault with the arrangement you need not do so. Scandal? Psha! My name has been associated with more than one scandal in my time, and yet I do not think that I am greatly the worse for it to-day."

"No," he said, "but you may be to-morrow. My dear sweet creature, I perceive at once how much depends on our discretion just now; and if I were, in the absence of my father in Dublin, to desert my sisters and the household, people would call me a wretch, and they would be right, too."

"People would call you a wretch—a wretch and—a poltroon—a—a curmudgeon, and they would be right, too, were you to stay in Bath when I—I—ask your protection on my journey to London," she cried.

He was silent. He did not even shake his head. He saw her diamonds flashing ominously. Theirs was a summer lightning, denoting a storm taking place out of sight—a storm that might rise over the horizon at any moment. He became conscious of a highly charged atmosphere. A flash or two came from her eyes.

"Why do you stand there dumb?" she said. "Do you not think me worthy of a word, Dick?"

"Dear lady, you are worthy only of words that will give you pleasure; that is why I am silent now," he said.

"You have but to say one word to give me the greatest pleasure that I look for in this world, and I know that you will say it, Dick—my Dick."

"Alas—alas!" he said.

"That is not the word, Dick; you know that that is not the word I want you to speak."

"That is the word which we should both say, my dear, if I were even to breathe the word which you ask of me. Oh, you must surely see that it would be impossible for me to forsake all that my father has entrusted me with. My sisters are young. What sort of brother should I be were I to leave them alone at a moment's notice? No, no! you will not ask me to do it; you have always shown yourself to be full of sensibility. You would hate me if I were to desert my sisters at such a time as this."

She looked at him straight in the eyes for a long time—it was a searching, suspicious gaze. Then she gave a laugh—a scornful, suspicious laugh. Her scorn was not intolerable; it was tempered by the half-amused smile that flashed about the corners of her lips.

"It must be pleasant to have so strong a sense of duty, Dick," she said,—"yes, very pleasant, when your duty and your inclination go hand in hand; nay, perhaps their relationship is closer still. Inclination puts an arm round the waist of duty, and so they go dancing down the green mead—Oberon and Titania—only without a chance quarrel. But it appears to me that if Betsy Linley were not in Bath your duty to your sisters would somewhat relax. Listen to me, Dick. You are not so near a holiday as you have been led to believe, for, by the Lord Harry, if you refuse to come with me to London I shall remain at Bath, if only to frustrate your plans. Ay, sir, I know more about your plans than you may perhaps think."

"If you know anything of them whatsoever, your knowledge is wider than mine," said he.

"Oh, go away—take yourself off. I am beginning to tire of you, Dick Sheridan," she said, leaning back in an attitude of negligent *ennui* between the sympathetic arms of her sofa.

"I do not need to be told to go a second time, madam," said Dick.

But before he reached the door the capricious creature had sprung from her seat and flashed beside him.

"Dick, my Dick, I am a fool—oh, such a fool!" she cried. "But the truth is that I am too fond of you, my beloved boy! Now, don't go, Dick—or go if you please to go—you may do what you

please; I will not think anything of it. Oh, if you could only give me a little of your love! Must she have all—all—all?"

"Do not be foolish, my dear," said he. "And you know as well as I do that 'tis foolish to be jealous. Ah, you know that I am true to you. I need not protest to you of my truth."

She looked at him steadfastly once more; and now there was no scorn in her look—only a nervous anxiety.

"I think," said she, "that you are true to me, and that you detest yourself on that account; because to be true to me involves your being false to Betsy Linley. Oh, this constancy according to compact is no virtue. Honesty is no virtue on the part of a man who is cast on a desert island. But you will come with me to-morrow, Dick—my Dick?"

"Indeed, it is impossible," he replied. "I will leave you now. Think over the matter till to-morrow, and you will agree with me, I am convinced."

With an exclamation of impatience she went back to her sofa, wheeled it suddenly round, and then seated herself in it with her back turned to him.

He went behind her with a laugh.

"Good-bye, you beautiful, petulant, typical woman," he said. "Good-bye, I will come to you to-morrow, when I am sure you will be polite enough to turn your face to me."

She gave a pout and a shrug and picked up the newspaper which she had been pretending to read at his entrance. She pretended to read it again.

He responded with another laugh of good-humour, not of derision, and went to the door.

He shouted another "Good-bye!"

She made no answer. But when he had left the house she tore her newspaper to shreds and snowed them on the carpet at her feet. Then she put her face down to the pillow and wept, but only for a few minutes. She was on her feet again and tugging at the bell-pull.

Her maid was at her side before the bell had ceased to sound.

"Are you sure that 'twas the evening of to-day that was named for the rendezvous you told me of, Williams?" she asked.

"There is no mistake, madam," replied the woman. "If it were mere gossip, I should never have mentioned it. Lud! if one gave attention to all the gossip that one hears! But this is the truth. The chaise is to wait on the London road, and the young lady is to be brought to it in a chair at nine o'clock. 'Twill then be rather more than dusk."

"Good!" said Mrs. Abington. "You got the hint from your cousin—I think you said he was your cousin—who is confidential servant to Allen, the postmaster?"

"Yes, madam—cousin on my mother's side. My mother married for the second time into the Cookson family, and they thought a good deal of themselves, through Cookson having been butler to a vicar; but they really wasn't so much after all——"

"You will accompany me to the rendezvous on the London road to-night, Williams. You will hire a fly, and when we get within sight of the coach, the fly shall turn down one of the lanes, so as to excite no suspicion. We shall get out and conceal ourselves among the bushes at the roadside until the chair with my lady is brought up. I think that we shall probably surprise them, Williams."

The maid simpered.

"And I shall wear the travelling-cloak that is quilted with the pink satin. The chaise lamps will doubtless be lighted, and I have no desire to look like a guy."

"I vow 'twill be quite an adventure, madam!" said the woman, simpering very agreeably.

"You will see that nothing miscarries, my good Williams," said the actress. "The most romantic adventures have been known to break down before now through so foolish a thing as a lame horse."

"You may trust to me, madam," said the maid.

When she was alone, Mrs. Abington stood in the centre of the room, with a smile that was not a smile on her face.



"YOU WILL ACCOMPANY ME TO THE RENDEZVOUS ON THE LONDON ROAD TO-NIGHT, WILLIAMS."

"A compact—a compact!" she muttered. "He fancied that I should be blinded by his fidelity. Oh, his fidelity was touching—ay, up to that last cheery 'good-bye' that he said at that door before going home to complete the packing of his trunk. By the lud! if 'twere not for the humiliation, I could e'en bring myself to let the pair of them run away together and make fools of themselves. But I will show them that I am not one to be hoodwinked."

It was barely half-past nine that night when a fly dashed up to the door of the Sheridans' house, and a lady wearing a travelling-cloak lined with quilted pink satin sprang to the ground and battered at the door of the house. She met Dick Sheridan in the hall.

"Dick—Dick," she gasped, "a dreadful thing has happened! O Dick, he has got her in his power now—Mathews—a plot—a vile plot to abduct her! He is on his way to London with her now in a chaise with four horses."

"Woman, what do you mean? Good God! Mathews—Betsy—is it Betsy, you mean?" cried Dick.

"Yes—yes—Betsy! Oh, why do you wait here like a fool? Why are you not on your way after them? Follow them, Dick!—follow them and save her for yourself. She is yours, Dick. I never was yours! Ah, man, why do you stand there? Oh, I am dead!"

She dropped into a chair, gasping.

Dick caught her hand, and when he found that it was warm he kissed it.

She laughed, and her laugh continued long after he had rushed out of the house; it went on and on, and the two Sheridan girls stood by listening in horror to that laugh.

CHAPTER XXXVI

He rushed out of the house and up the street. He was pulling wildly at the bell-handle at Mr. Long's door in Millsom Street before five minutes had passed. He did not wait to make an inquiry of the man, but plunged into the room to the right; the door was slightly ajar, and he saw that the room was lighted.

Mr. Long was seated at the table.

"Heavens!" he cried, "what has happened?"

"Your horse—Sultan—it must be Sultan—he must be saddled—give the order—'tis life or death—nay, more—more!"

Only for a second did Mr. Long look at him. Then he was shouting to his man in the hall orders for the groom.

"Mathews has succeeded," gasped Dick. "An abduction—Mrs. Abington brought me word of it. But I shall follow them—overtake them—or I shall never return. I swear that—I swear it!"

Mr. Long's face had become white. He was supporting himself by the back of a chair. His lips moved, but the words did not come. He managed to stagger to a *garde-vin* that stood in a corner and to take out a decanter of brandy. Dick heard how the tumbler jingled against the mouth of the bottle while some of the brandy was being poured out. Mr. Long offered him a tumbler. He refused it.

"Never fear—never fear—I'll overtake them!" he cried, while he paced the room. "I knew that I was right to come to you, sir. You love her; and you—you have pistols. He escaped them once—only once."

"She heard a rumour that an abduction was to be attempted; she told me so here to-day," said Mr. Long. "She is suspicious; she fancied that you had planned it—she came to warn me. O Dick, you must be in time! By Heaven, sir, you must be in time to save her! If I were ten years younger—only ten years—but I will trust you. Here are the pistols, and you may need to reload them: you must have these bullets. Don't bring them all back, Dick; but take care of her. Aim at one of the horses. And money—you may need money for the postboys—I have never met any that were not open to bribes. Here's a purse. If fifty guineas is not enough— By heavens, the horse is at the door! You have no sword—here is mine! God bless you, my boy—God bless you! I'll look to the girths. Sultan will do his twenty miles; but spare him on the highway. You will take the short cuts through the Hampton Fields."

All the time that Mr. Long was speaking, Dick Sheridan was pulling on a pair of riding-boots, with spurs attached, which Mr. Long's servant had brought into the room.

He examined the priming of the pistols, he pocketed the leathern wallet heavy with guineas, and buckled on the sword. Not a word did he find it necessary to utter; even when he was in the saddle and felt the strong grasp of Mr. Long's right hand, he did not find words, but he returned the grasp, and looked into Mr. Long's face. Then he gave Sultan his head, and waved his hand before turning the corner.

The street was flaring with links; chairs by the score were carrying ladies and gentlemen of

fashion to their supper-parties and card-parties. The sound of post-horns was heard as the mail-coaches with their splendid teams set out on their night journeys. It did not take Dick long to thread his way among the vehicles, reaching the first slope of the London road without having allowed his horse to break into a gallop. Sultan was quite prepared to charge the hill; he was a thoroughbred Arab, with an indomitable heart in his work. Dick held him in so long as the ground sloped up; but when the summit of the hill was gained, he sent him forward; the animal responded with a will, but Dick kept him at the trot. Not until the Hampton Fields were reached did he put the horse to the gallop. But then, leaping the ditch, he got upon the green turf, and, knowing what was expected of him, the Arab stretched himself out for a race.

The two miles of the cut across the fields was not a great journey, and after a mile's trot along the highway, up the long hill through the village of Bathford, Dick took to the fields once more. Another flying gallop—*ventre à terre*—across the Downs, brought him to the Horse Jockey Inn, and Dick thought that a bucket of water would not do Sultan any harm. But he found that he could not pull him up; the horse had his head and seemed determined to keep it. By the time, however, that the vane of Atworth church gave a feeble flash in the moonlight (the moon was in her first quarter and far down in the western sky) the Arab was ready to receive a hint, and Dick brought him to a walk.

He pulled him up at the Three Cups, and awoke the elderly ostler to get a bucket of bran and water, while he himself rubbed the animal down with a damp stable-cloth.

Had the man seen a chaise and four horses going in the direction of London within the half-hour? No, no, he had seen no "shay"; but mayhap that was by reason of having been asleep since supper-time; a tedious night with the master's heifer—mayhap the young gentleman had heard of the accident to the heifer?—having deprived him of his accustomed slumber. The worst was over with the heifer, Heaven be praised; but still—

The veteran was still gazing at Dick's half-crown while Sultan was pounding away toward Melksham as fresh as he had been when taken out of his stable, although the nine miles of the journey already passed had occupied just fifty-five minutes.

And now that a long level of highway was in front of him, Dick had time to calculate his chances of overtaking the chaise. He did not know how great was the start which it had on him; but he did not think it likely that Mrs. Abington had taken longer than a quarter of an hour to come to him with the alarm. Ten minutes added to this brought him up to the moment when he had started in pursuit. Twenty-five minutes of a start!

He could not imagine the chaise travelling at the speed that Sultan had maintained. The hills along the road were in favour of a horseman. But then at the end of another seven or eight miles Sultan must be dead-beat, however willing he might be, whereas the chaise would be flying along with four fresh horses in front of it, for Mathews would certainly arrange to have relays of fresh horses at every stage, well knowing that only by this means could he evade the pursuit which he would assume must take place.

Dick perceived that he too must have fresh horses if he meant to overtake the chaise. But being well aware that some of the posting-inns on the London road had as many as a hundred and fifty horses in their stables at one time, he had no fear of a difficulty arising in the matter of getting remounts.

When he thought of Betsy Linley being in the power of that mad ruffian for another hour, he instinctively touched Sultan with the spur; and at the touch the good horse broke into a gallop, and it was in this gallop that he reached Seend Hill and climbed it as though it were level road. It needed a strong pull from Dick to bring him up at the Bear Inn.

Two coaches had just arrived from London, and the passengers were getting all the attendance the place could afford.

Dick found himself standing in the yard with Sultan's saddle on the ground beside him, while the horse stood steaming in the light that came from the stable lantern. He showed a guinea to an ancient, hurrying groom, and the sight was too much for the man.

Had a chaise with four horses from Bath changed, and how long ago?

Not half an hour ago, if it was Captain Mathews' shay his honour spoke of. Oh, ay, the captain had changed, and madam would not leave the shay—half an hour ago—barely—more like twenty minutes. A fresh saddle-horse? Ah, his honour must book that at the bar. Why, the London folk would be away in a quarter of an hour—mayhap ten minutes.

Dick rushed to the bar. Twenty people were between him and the landlord, who was responding with a fussy leisure to eighteen out of the twenty.

Dick rushed back to the stable-yard and found the groom still gazing at the guinea. Dick produced a second.

"You know Mr. Long, of Rood Ashton, my man?" he said. "This is Mr. Long's horse. Look to him and put the saddle on the freshest horse in your stable. Take this guinea and don't lose a moment. Refuse it, and as surely as you stand there like a fool, I'll put a bullet through your head."

"Your honour's a gentleman," cried the ostler, making a grasp for that hand which held the guinea as a bribe, and neglecting the one that held the pistol as a menace.

"You shall have the guinea when the horse is saddled," said Dick. "Lead the way to the stable."

But the man had had a second for reflection. He felt prepared to control his impulses. He began to scratch his head with the black tip of a forefinger.

"This may cost me my place," he muttered.

"If you refuse, 'twill certainly cost you your life," said Dick, grasping his arm. "Lead me to the stable, you rascal, and that at the top of your speed. If you try to trick me, 'twill be the last mistake of your life. Pick up the saddle and earn your guinea."

The man certainly lost no time in obeying him; he shambled across the yard and through a stable door. Dick heard the sound of halter-rings and the fitful stamp of an iron hoof.

"That's Hero, the best roadster in the stable," said the man, pointing to a big roan horse. "But your honour will need to have it out with the master."

"You'll get your guinea and your master will get double the hire. Everybody knows Mr. Long," said Dick.

Being aware of the instinctive cunning of these simple country people, Dick thought it as well to give a brief examination to the animal. So far as he could tell in the glimmer of the stable lantern the horse was a good one—broad-chested and strong.

The man flung on the saddle, and Dick saw that the girths were tight; then with a friendly nod to Sultan, who stood in one of the vacant stalls, he was mounting the roan. He threw the old man his promised guinea, saying:

"If I find that you've looked well after the Arab, you shall have another guinea to-morrow."

The ostler dropped the stable lantern with a crash on the stones.

Dick was on the road once again. He knew that he had lost quite five minutes changing horses: he could only console himself by the reflection that most likely the chaise had taken ten minutes.

He found that the roan required to be ridden. He was a strong horse and had good wind, but he had not the heart of the Arab. It was clear that he did not know all that was demanded of him this night. But when Dick put him at a low hedge he did not refuse it, and on the turf of a long meadow beyond, he showed that he could gallop. For another three miles, partly on the road and partly across country, when any saving of space was possible, horse and man went until they were breasting Roundway Hill.

Dick walked the horse to the top, and then reined in to let him recover his wind before starting on the clear five miles of level road. In a few minutes he had fallen into the steady trot of the old roadster, and Dick felt sure that he could keep it up for the five miles; but at the end of the first mile he began to be aware of a certain unevenness in his trot. The horse responded to the spur, but only for a short time; then he stumbled, nearly throwing his rider on his head. There was no ignoring what had occurred—the horse had "gone lame" and was unfit for his work; and the nearest inn where he could get a new mount was still five miles away.

What did this mean?

Nothing, except that he was beaten. The hour and a quarter that he would take going to that inn would place the chaise which he was pursuing far beyond the possibility of capture.

Dick saw it all clearly the moment that the roan halted and stretched his head forward, breathing hard. Nothing was left for him but to dismount. He was defeated, and life was worth nothing to him now. He dismounted, and examined the horse's leg. There could be no doubt about the matter now: he was badly lame.

And then Dick did the most foolish and natural thing that a man could do in such circumstances. He went mad for a time, slashing at the weeds on the roadside with his riding-whip, cursing all the earth—the ostler who had given him the horse which went lame—the horse for going lame at the worst time—the fate which had helped him up to a certain point and then deserted him. It did him good to slash and swear for a while; and when he felt better he put his horse's bridle-rein over his arm and set out upon the journey which was inevitable in the circumstances.

He had not gone more than a hundred yards when he heard the sound of a shot in the distance; then a second—a third.

"Poachers," he thought, resuming his walk. He was within a mile or two of Roundway Park, and the estate was full of game. He thought no more about the shots until, after he had trudged on for another mile, he saw on the summit of a grassy knoll a couple of men on horseback. The moon had gone down, but the night was beautifully clear, with stars overhead.

He stopped, his first thought being that he might negotiate with one of the men for the loan of his horse. But when he saw that they were making straight for him, he pulled his pistols out of the holsters and put his horse between himself and the fence of the field beyond which was the knoll. The horsemen were highwaymen, he was convinced, and he made up his mind that they should not ride off with the remainder of his guineas, if he could prevent it. He was just in the humour for tackling a pair of rascals; but for that matter, he would not have objected to fight with the honestest men in England.

Before he had more than cocked his pistols the two fellows—he now saw that they wore masks—had leapt their horses over the fence not a dozen yards from where he was standing.

"Well met, my lord!" roared one, drawing a pistol from his holster. "Well met! I'll trouble your lordship to hand over your purse, also your watch and any trifle of jewelry your lordship——"

"Come and take them," said Dick.

"And, by the Lord, we accept the invitation!" shouted the second horseman, going forward with a bound toward Dick with his pistol in his hand.

In another moment all was over. Dick slipped under his horse's nose; at the same instant that the man fired, Dick's horse lashed out, and Dick, catching at the rein of the man who was riding him down, shot him in the body. The yell that went through the air did not come from this man, however—he was past yelling; it came from his companion, whose leg Dick had heard break like a stick of barley sugar beneath the kick of the roan. The second yell came from half a mile down the road; for, not being able to control his horse, the animal had bolted with him.

Dick knew nothing of this. He had his attention fully occupied at the head of the rearing horse of the man whom he had shot. The horse reared, and when Dick tugged at the reins he plunged forward. A limp arm struck Dick in the face, and he had to be agile to evade the headlong fall of the limp body.

It was a busy half-minute. It was such a whirl of the wheels of chance that Dick Sheridan could scarcely be blamed for standing aghast for quite another half-minute. He was bewildered by the effort of trying to think what had happened. A minute before he had been a man suffering all the pangs of defeat—plunged into those depths of despair which overwhelm a man who needs to ride like a god upon the wings of the wind, but finds himself crippled with a lame horse; whereas now....

He gave a cheer and in a second was on the back of the fine horse—his mane was dripping with the blood of the rider whom he had thrown over his head—and flying along the road at a speed that he had not surpassed even when mounted on Mr. Long's Sultan. The highwaymen were excellent judges of cattle, he was bound to confess. He galloped like one of Lützow's wild huntsmen, and in the exhilaration of the moment he shouted with delight—he shouted and cheered until, swinging round a curve in the road, he saw before him Beckhampton Common, with the woods at one side and the long row of poplars at the other. But while the common was still a long way off, and he was flying past a high bank densely planted with small firs, he heard something that caused him to throw all his weight upon the reins, and almost to bring his horse upon his haunches.

What he heard, or fancied he heard, was his name called out by the most musical voice in the world:

"Dick—Dick! you have come!"

The first words struck his ears when he was beneath the high bank; before the last were uttered he was a hundred yards away, tugging at the reins. When he succeeded in bringing his horse to a standstill, he heard in front of him a hailing of voices. Peering forward beyond the shade of the bank on the white road, he saw figures moving—figures with a swaying lantern.

He responded to their hail, and saw them hurrying toward him, their lantern swinging more rapidly.

And then behind him he heard Betsy Linley's voice crying:

"Dick—Dick, come back to me—come back!"

He swung his horse round with a cry of delight.

There she stood, a white figure at the foot of the firs of a wooded slope—there she stood, waving her white arms to him—waving him back to her.

"Thank God—thank God—thank God!"

He could gasp nothing more as he flung himself from his saddle, and she sprang from the bank into his arms.

"My Betsy—my own dear Betsy!"

"Dick—Dick, you have saved me! Oh, I never doubted it, my Dick!—I knew you would be in time to save me."

He had thrown the reins on his horse's neck. But the animal was well trained: he was as faithful to the man who had just dismounted as though he were a highwayman who had left his saddle to plunder a coach. He only turned his head when the figures with the lantern came in sight beyond the curve in the road.

"Who are these—your friends or our enemy?" whispered Dick.

He had hold of her hand, and they were both gazing up the road.

"It can only be he," she cried. "We were attacked by highwaymen. A horse was shot, and when the wretch was helping the postboys, I escaped from the coach and fled hither. I was hiding among the trees!"

"Stand back among the trees again—only for a moment—only for a moment," he said in a low voice.

"You will not kill him!" said the girl piteously. "Dick, I could not bear to think of your killing him, wretch though he be."

"Perhaps I may not. Stand back among the trees."

"Found—she is found!" came the voice of Mathews on the road. He was running ahead of the

postboys with the chaise lantern. Postboys were poor things on their feet.

Dick waited with the firs behind him. He was silent. His features could not be seen—only his figure.

“Sir,” said Mathews, when still a dozen yards away—“sir, you have found the lady—my wife—I thank you.”



DICK STRUCK HIM FULL IN THE FACE WITH THE STEEL
GUARD.

[page 362.

“I have found the greatest villain that lives,” cried Dick, stepping into the road. “He shall soon cease to live.”

Back went Mathews with an oath—back half a dozen steps.

The whiz of Dick’s sword through the air was like the sudden sweep of a hailstorm.

Mathews had already drawn his weapon. In a second he had rushed upon Dick. Nothing could have resisted such an attack. Dick made no attempt to resist it. He sprang to one side and so avoided the point of the sword. He took care that Mathews should not have another such chance. The man had barely time to turn and put up his guard before Dick was upon him. With heads bent eagerly forward (the situation was not one for the punctilios of the duello), the men crossed blades—the rasp of steel against steel—the heavy breathing—the quick lunge and the deft response—a little gasp—a flash—more rasping of steel—backward and forward—flat hands in the air—a fierce lunge—a second—a third—fierce—fiercer—fiercest—a whiz and a whirl. Mathews’ sword flashed through the air. The two postboys with the lantern sprang apart to avoid its fall. The next instant Mathews had sprung upon Dick, catching him by the throat, and trying to force him back. Dick tried to shorten his sword, but failed. Mathews made a clutch for the blade, but missed it, and Dick struck him full in the face with the steel guard; a second blow made a gash on his left temple, and the man went down in a heap. He fell neither backward nor forward. His legs seemed to be

paralysed, and he went down as though a swordsman had cut him through as one does a sheep.

Dick took the man’s sword—a grinning postboy had picked it up—and snapped it in two across his knee.

“He is not dead—he cannot be dead!” cried Betsy.

“I am sorry to say that he will not die just now—vermin are not so easily killed,” said Dick.

CHAPTER XXXVII

Dick ordered the postboys to return to the chaise.

“We will return with you to Bath,” said he. “Put the harness of your horse which was shot on mine. We will join you before you have got the horse in the traces. Carry the man to the bank and lay him among the trees.”

“Not back to Bath, Dick—not back to Bath,” said Betsy, when the postboys had gone.

“Good heavens! if not to Bath—whither?” he cried.

“The thought came to me just now—an inspiration,” she said. “I will not return home. I have not the courage. Do you know what has happened? I have told Mr. Long that I cannot marry him, and when my father heard it he was furious, and gave me notice that I must begin singing once more at his concerts. I cannot do that! Oh, it would kill me, Dick!”

“Dear one,” he said, “I will do my best to carry out any plan that you may suggest—I give you my promise, dear Betsy.”

“I spoke to Mr. Long of my hope—of the one longing there is in my heart, Dick. Your sisters told me of the convent at Lille, beside where they lived. The old grey building among the ancient trees—far away from any sound of the world. Oh, surely that is the one spot in the world where rest—the divine rest—the peace of God—may be found. O Dick, Dick, if you could know how I long for

it!"

He started away from her.

"Is it possible that that is your choice, Betsy?" he cried, and there was agony in his voice. "Is it possible that you can shut yourself off from your friends—from those who love you? Ah, dear child, you know that I—"

"Do not say it—ah, do not say the words that are trembling on your lips, Dick. You will not say them when you know that they will make me miserable. Dick, I will think of you as my dear, dear brother, and you will take me away to that place of rest. Ah, I feel that all I have gone through to-day since that man sent a forged message to me at nine o'clock to the effect that my father wished me to play the harpsichord in his place at the concert, and so trapped me into the chair which he had waiting and on to the chaise, the linkmen whom he had bribed standing so close to the windows that I was quite concealed, and my cries to the passers-by were unheeded,—all that I have gone through, I say, must have been designed by Heaven to enable me to reach my goal—my place of rest."

"I will take you there, Betsy," he said in a low voice. "You may trust me to take you there, dear sister—sweet sister Betsy."

She put her arms about him and kissed him on both cheeks.

It was the scheme of a boy and a girl, that flight of Richard Brinsley Sheridan and Elizabeth Linley to France as brother and sister. It has never been explained, nor can any explanation of it be offered that is not founded upon the passionate yearning of that purest-minded girl that ever lived in the world, for a time of seclusion such as she had never known—for a period of tranquillity such as had never come to her.

Dick led her to the chaise, and gave the postboys orders to go on to the next stage at which Mathews had ordered fresh horses to await his arrival. The men grumbled. Dick threatened them with hanging. They should have trouble in proving to any jury that they were not privy to the abduction of the lady, he said; adding, that if they did not keep the secret of the change in the lady's companionship at the various stages of the journey, they would be running their heads into the hangman's noose. The men protested that they were on his side down to every rowel of their spurs, and one of them went so far, in demonstration of his good-will, as to curse soundly Captain Mathews and all his connections.

In the chaise Betsy gave Dick a circumstantial account of the attack made by the highwaymen—the highwaymen of Providence, Dick ventured to term them. The two shots which he had heard in the distance when he was assuring himself that his horse had become lame, were fired, the first by Mathews on the appearance of the highwaymen, the second by one of the highwaymen. Only the latter had taken effect; it had brought down the off-wheeler, and then, the chaise coming to a standstill, a man had stood with a cocked pistol at each of the windows until Mathews handed over his purse. The robbers had then ridden off, and while Mathews was helping the postboys to disentangle the harness of the dead horse, she had, unperceived by any one, crept out of the chaise and made her way up the bank where she had hidden among the trees.

"But I never doubted that you would come to my help, Dick," she said in conclusion. "Oh, no! I had faith in you from the very first to the very last. When we saw the figures of the two highwaymen in the distance, I cried out, 'Tis Dick—Dick and Mr. Long come to save me!' And when I heard the sound of your horse galloping on the road I said, 'Tis Dick come to save me!' I had called out your name before the horse came abreast of the bank. But how did you learn what had happened? Who could have been near us when that man dragged me from the chair and forced me into the chaise?"

He told her that it was Mrs. Abington who had come to him with the news, and she was amazed.

"But how could she—why should she be at that part of the road at such an hour?"

"Alas, my dear Betsy, she had a fancy that you were being carried off, not by Mathews, but another," said Dick. "She must have acquired by some means an inkling of the plot, and she was foolish enough to take it for granted that the man who was playing the chief part was—some one else. But we cannot refuse her our gratitude. When she had found out that it was Mathews who was the abductor, she did not falter in her purpose. It is to her that we owe your safety."

There was a long pause before Betsy said:

"She acted honourably—nobly. 'Tis for us to respond in like. We shall not fail, Dick."

At the end of the next stage Dick wrote a letter to Mr. Long acquainting him in brief with all that had occurred, and telling him of Betsy's desire to go to the convent at Lille. He ordered the letter to be posted to Bath at once. Betsy wrote to her father.

When they reached London he drove with her to the house of a friend of his—a Mr. Ewart; and Mr. Ewart and his wife assumed that Betsy was his elder sister.

"Yes, this is Elizabeth," said Dick. "I am taking her on to Lille for a holiday."

Mrs. Ewart, knowing that the Sheridan family had lived at Lille for some years, merely said:

"You must have formed many friendships in France, my dear?"

"I have got some dear friends there," said Betsy.

Mr. Ewart found out that a packet was leaving Margate in two days for Calais, and at Dick's request wrote to secure cabins aboard. After staying two nights at the Ewarts' house, the boy and girl posted to Margate, and duly set sail in the packet, which was really only a smack, but one with a reputation for making rapid passages. It acted up to its traditions by landing them at Calais in twenty-two hours.

The first person whom they met on the quayside was Mr. Long.

They were both astonished. How on earth did he contrive to reach Calais before them? they inquired.

Well, he had got Dick's letter the morning after Dick had posted it, and he had set out at once for Dover, where he had found a faster boat even than the Margate smack. He had been at Calais since the previous afternoon.

He led them to his inn, and ordered breakfast. When they were alone together after that repast, he said:

"My dear children, I do not think that this story of ours should have an unhappy ending, and every young woman of sense who has read Mr. Richardson's novels—assuming that any young woman of sense ever read novels—will tell you that a convent in a foreign land cannot possibly be regarded as furnishing a happy ending to a story. Ah, my dear Betsy, when I saw you and Dick just now walking side by side on the quay, I knew that you were meant by Heaven to walk side by side through life. Will you not consent to make me happy? I have money enough to allow of your living in some peaceful cottage until Dick gets a footing in a profession. Dear child, I know that you love him, and I think that he loves you, too."

"I will consent with joy if he consent," said she. "But I know that he will not. I do not think that I could love him if he were to consent. Dear sir, 'tis to Mrs. Abington I owe my safety, and can I act with such base ingratitude to her as to do what you suggest?"

"God help me!" said Dick. "I am weak—oh, so weak! It seems as if I should be turning my back upon all the happiness which I could ever hope for in the world, were I to refuse now what is offered to me. O Betsy, tell me what to do! Will you not raise your finger to help me, Betsy?"

"I dare not, dear. There is one who stands between us. You owe everything to her. I owe everything to her."

"You have helped me," he said in a low voice. "Mr. Long, you will take Betsy on to Lille. I shall return alone to Bath."

"No, my boy," said Mr. Long, "we shall return to Bath together. Mrs. Abington is more than generous—she is sensible. She came to me before I started on my journey. She brought with her a letter, charging me to put it into your hands. Read it, Dick."

Dick, with nervous fingers, tore open the letter which Mr. Long handed to him. He read it, but he gave no cry of gladness. Tears were in his eyes. He handed it to Betsy. She read it. It dropped from her grasp. There was a long pause. Then each looked into the face of the other.

The next moment they were in each other's arms.

L'ENVOI

(FROM THE DIARY OF MR. WALTER LONG)

October 1st.—I have just returned from paying my long-promised visit to Dick Sheridan and his wife at their cottage. During the three days that I was with them I have been looking at happiness through these young people's eyes, and indeed I think that I felt as happy as they. Betsy's few months of married life seem to have added to that half divine beauty which ever dwelt upon her face. A lovely light came to her eyes when I told her that such was my thought. "Ah, yes," she said, "when one has been living in heaven for a space, one cannot help acquiring something of a region that is all divine." No flaw in her happiness seems to exist, though I fancied that I detected a certain momentary uneasiness on her face when Dick began to talk of his plans and his hopes for the future. He has a mind to write a comedy satirising Bath society—nay, he has even progressed so far as to have found a name for his heroine—a very foolish young woman, as full of ridiculous whims as any Bath belle—Miss Lydia Languish she is to be called; but 'tis doubtful if the name will ever become familiar to playgoers, in spite of the attractive jingle there is in it. I do not say that Betsy has yet come to look upon Miss Lydia Languish as a rival, but I am sure that she does not like to hear the wench's name so often on the lips of her husband, though, like a good wife, she tries to brighten up and to discuss all the points of character which the young woman should possess. Has she a fear that Dick will some of these days tire of the blessed retirement—the sweet peace of this cottage to which she has led him? I know not. If he be wise he will perceive that the world can give him no more perfect measure of happiness than that which is his to-day; but alas! a man's ambition soon passes beyond the pure tranquillity of a wife's devotion. Alas! alas!

A REVERIE

(WRITTEN APPARENTLY ON THE SAME DAY)

Beloved, who art ever by my side, whose gracious presence, unseen by mortal eye, is ever, ever felt by me—dear Companion, ever youthful, ever lovely, come with me into the autumn woodland and let us converse together. See, my dear one, the bend of the river by which we wander has brought us within view of the wonderful tints of the hedgerow. If the summer has died it has left the autumn wealthy, and its treasury is a hedgerow. Here on this first day of autumn we see scattered in profusion the yellow gold and the mellow bronze of Nature's cunning coinage. One might be tempted not to forsake the simile, but to anticipate the coming of those bleak days when the spendthrift winds—children of the autumn—rush down in riotous mirth to disperse with prodigal fingers the wealth of the season's store, only that the tinge of melancholy which one feels when looking over the autumn landscape at the close of day quickly passes in view of the charms of mingled tints that meet the eye. The gracious warmth of green leaves whose edges are embroidered with bronze may be found when the hedgerow is sheltered by a sturdy ash from both wind and sun. Does not the full depth of rich colour at this place suggest June rather than October? but where the hedgerow bourgeons out beyond the line of straggling leafless trees, the signs of the month are apparent. Here, beneath the fringe of a dark cloud of russet leafage, shine a few stars of brilliant yellow—the Pleiades of the hedgerow—and light up the dimness with their mellow radiance. Further down the variegated forms of the crisp foliage become more fantastic. It requires no vivid imagination to see here and there a thick cluster of yellow grapes, through which the sun shines as they show themselves among the close network of vine leaves, and for a single moment one recalls a day spent in the South, where the grapes overhung the dusty roadway, and a muleteer paused to gather a splendid cluster. But quickly the vision passes, when our eyes wander on down the leafy path of autumn that was once the primrose path of spring; for there we see—is it an autumn hedgerow or an ocean on a night when the air is saturate with golden moonlight? All before our eyes is yellow—not a russet tinge appears among those gracious leaf-ripples that lose themselves in the distance. We wander along until the mellow line is broken by a forest of bramble. The purple berries are set like jewels among the golden leaves—the amethyst, the topaz, and here and there an exquisite emerald appear in profusion. Have we indeed reached the yellow strand of an ocean island where every pebble is a precious stone? Alas! a few steps onward, and we are face to face with the realities of autumn, for here the hedgerow has been exposed to the blast of a cold wind from the north, and we see nothing but a tangled network of gaunt branches. Weird skeleton fingers are stretched out at us on every side. Every leaf save one has been swept away, and as we stand looking at this desolate place—the visible boundary of autumn and winter—the sere solitary leaf flutters to the ground at our feet. The wind that comes from where the sun is setting in lurid glory sends a faint whisper through the woodland. We stand in the silence, and the touch of the spirit of autumn is upon us. We feel that every sound of the woodland is a sigh for its departed glories—the glories of blossom and leafage and days that have passed away. When the autumn winds have garnered their harvest from the boughs of the woodland, their aftermath begins in the meadow. But, my Beloved, neither you nor I can be altogether melancholy among the autumn hedgerows, for, through the signs of the year's decay, the Hope that is in us seems to break more abundantly into bloom. We feel that death is not for all things that made life beautiful; Love and Faith and Truth are not among the spoils of Time. We are lifted up and strengthened by this reflection as we retrace our steps amid the slowly gathering shadows of the evening.

THE END

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A Gray Eye or So

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