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THE TALK OF THE TOWN

VOL. I.

Miss Margaret lifted her eyes from her plate with a smile of welcome.

THE TALK OF THE TOWN

BY

JAMES PAYN

AUTHOR OF ‘BY PROXY’ ETC. ETC.

IN TWO VOLUMES

VOL. I.

SECOND EDITION

LONDON

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THE TALK OF THE TOWN.

CHAPTER I.

AUNT MARGARET.

HEN I was a very young man nothing used to surprise me more than the existence of a very old one—one of those patriarchs who, instead of linking the generations 'each with each,' include two or three in their protracted span; a habit which runs in families, as in the case of the old [2] gentleman of our own time whose grandsire (once or twice 'removed,' it is true, but not nearly so often as 'by rights' he should have been) gathered the arrows upon Flodden Field. Such persons seemed to me little inferior in interest to ghosts (whom indeed in appearance they greatly resembled), and I was wont to listen to their experiences of the past with the same rapt attention, (unalloyed by the alarm), that I should have paid to a denizen of another world. There are, it seems to me, very few old persons about now, absolutely none (there used to be plenty) three or four times my age; and this, perhaps, renders the memory (for she did die at last) of my great-aunt Margaret a thing so rare and precious to me.

She was born, as we, her young relatives, were wont to say, 'ages and ages ago,' but as a matter of fact just one age ago; that is to say, if she had been alive but a few years back, she would have been exactly one hundred years old. Think of it, my young friends who are about to be so good, in your turn, as to give her story your attention [3] —think of it having been possible that you yourselves should have met this very personage in the flesh (though the poor dear had but little of it)—you perhaps in your goat carriage, upon the King's Parade, Brighton, and she in her wheeled chair—the two extremities (on wheels) of human life!

To things you have read of as history, matters as dead and gone to you, if not quite so old, as the Peloponnesian war, she was a living witness. She was alive, for example, though not of an age to 'take notice' of the circumstances, when the independence of America was acknowledged by the mother country, and when England was beginning to solace herself for that disruption by the acquisition of India. If Aunt Margaret did not know as much about Hyder Ali as became a contemporary, with matters nearer home, such as the loss of the 'Royal George,' 'with all her crew (or nearly so) complete,' she was very conversant. 'I saw it,' she was used to say, 'with my own eyes;' and it was only by the strictest cross-examination that you could get her to confess that she was but a child in arms when that catastrophe took place. [4] As to politics, indeed, though we were at war with everybody in those times, the absence of special correspondents, telegraphs, and even newspapers, made public matters of much more limited interest than it is nowadays easy to imagine. Aunt Margaret, at all events, cared almost nothing about them, with the exception of the doings of the pressgang—an institution of which she always spoke with the liveliest horror. On some one, however, chancing to say in her hearing (and by way of corroboration of her views) that it was marvellous how men who had been so infamously treated should have been got to fight under the national flag, she let fly at him like the broadside of a seventy-gun frigate, and gave him to understand that the sailors of those days had never had their equals. On that, as on all other subjects, she

exercised the right of criticism upon the institutions of her time to an unlimited extent, but if they were attacked by others she became their defender.

Her chief concern, however, was with social matters, when speaking of which she seemed entirely to forget the age in which she was living: it was as though some ancestress, in hoop and farthingale, had stepped down from her picture and read us a page of the diary she had written overnight. She seemed hardly like one of ourselves at all, though it was obvious enough that she was of the female gender, from the prominence she gave to the topic of costumes. She confessed that she preferred the hair 'undressed'—a phrase which misled her more youthful hearers, who imagined her to be praising a dissolute luxuriance of love-locks, which was very far from her intention; on the other hand, she lamented the disuse of black satin breeches, which she ascribed to the general decay of limb among the male sex. There was nothing like your top-boots and hessians, she would say, for morning wear, but in the evening, every man that had a leg was, in her opinion, bound to show it. [5]

I have reason to believe that my aunt Margaret was the last person who ever journeyed from London to Brighton in a post-chaise —a mode of travel, she was wont to remark, justly eulogised by the wisest and best of men and Londoners. If he had been spared to see a railway locomotive, she expressed herself as confident that he would have considered it the direct offspring of the devil; and that conjectural opinion of the great lexicographer she herself shared to her dying day. Like him, she was a Londoner, and took an immense interest, not municipal of course, but social, in the affairs of the great city. 'My dear,' she often used to say reprovingly, when speaking of some event of which I was obliged to confess I had never so much as heard, 'it was the topic of every tongue.' [6]

Although she had never been the theme of London gossip herself, she had been very closely connected with one who had been; and to those who were intimate with her he was the constant subject of her discourse. Her thoughts dwelt more with him, I am sure, than with all the other personages together with whom she had been acquainted during her earthly pilgrimage; and yet she always thought of him in his adolescence, as a very young man. [7]

'He was just your age, my dear,' she was wont to say to me, 'when he became the "Talk of the Town."'

Perhaps this circumstance gave him an additional interest in my eyes; but certainly her account of this one famous personage was more interesting to me than everything else which Aunt Margaret had to tell me. It has dwelt in my mind for many a year, and when this is the case with any story, I have generally found that I have been able to interest others in its recital. In this particular case, however, my way is not so plain as usual. The story is not *my* story, nor even Aunt Margaret's; in its more important details it is common property. On the other hand, not even the oldest inhabitant has any remembrance of it. The hearts that were once wounded to the quick by the occurrences which I am about to describe can be no more pained by any allusion to them; they have long been dust. No relative, to my knowledge, is now living of the unfortunate young man whose memory—execrated by the crowd—was kept so green and fresh (watered by her tears) by one living soul for nearly eighty years. Why should I not tell his 'pitiful story?' [8]

A second question, however, presents itself at the outset concerning him. Shall I give or conceal his name? I here frankly confess that in its broad details the tale has no novelty to recommend it: it is not only true, but it has been told. The bald, bare facts have been put before the public by the youth himself nearly a hundred years since. There is the rub. To a few 'persons of culture,' as the phrase goes nowadays, the main incident of his career will be familiar; though, however cultured, it is unlikely they will know how it affected my great-aunt Margaret; but to tens of thousands (including, I'll be bound, the upper ten) it will be utterly unknown.

Now I have noticed that there is nothing your well-informed person so much delights in as to make other people aware of his being so. Indeed, the chief use of information in his eyes is not so much to raise oneself above the crowd (though a sense of elevation is agreeable), as to have the privilege of imparting it to others with a noble air of superiority and self-importance. I will therefore call my hero by such a name as will at once be recognised by the learned, whom I shall thus render my intermediaries—exponents of [9]

the transparent secret to those who are in blissful ignorance of it. I will call him William Henry Erin.

I must add in justice to myself that the story was not told me in confidence.

How could it be so when at the very beginning of our intimacy the narrator had already almost reached the extreme limit of human life, while I had but just left school? It was the similarity of age on my part with that of the person she had in her mind which no doubt, in part at least, caused her to make me the repository of her long-buried sorrow. She judged, and rightly judged, that for that reason I was more likely to sympathise with it. Indeed, whenever she spoke of it I forgot her age; as in the case of the pictured grandmamma so felicitously described by Mr. Locker, I used to think of her at such times—

[10]

As she looked at seventeen
    As a bride.

Her rounded form was lean,
And her silk was bombazine,
    Well I wot.
With her needles she would sit,
And for hours would she knit,
    Would she not?

Ah, perishable clay!
Her charms had dropped away,
    One by one.

Yet when she spoke of the lover of her youth, there seemed nothing incongruous in her so doing. I forgot the Long Ago in which her tale was placed; her talk, indeed, on those occasions being of those human feelings which are independent of any epoch, took little or no colour from the past; it seemed to me a story of to-day, and as such I now relate it.

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[11]

CHAPTER II.

OUT IN THE COLD.

A few years ago it would have been almost impossible for modern readers to imagine what a coach journey used to be in the good old times; but, thanks to certain gilded youths, more fortunate than persons of a higher intellectual type who have striven in vain to—

> Revive old usages thoroughly worn out,
> The souls of them fumed forth, the hearts of them torn out,

it is not now so difficult. Any one who has gone by one of our ‘summer coaches’ for a short trip out of town can picture the ‘Rockets’ and ‘Highflyers’ in which our ancestors took their journeys at the end of the last century. Those old mail-coaches were, in fact, their very counterparts; for the ‘basket’ had already made way for ‘the hind seat;’ only, instead of our aristocratic driver, there was a professional ‘whip,’ who in fair weather came out in scarlet like the guard, though in wet and winter-time he was wrapped in heavy drab, as though a butterfly should become a grub again. The roads were good, the milestones in a much better condition than they are at present, and the inns at which the passengers stopped for refreshments greatly superior to their successors, or rather to their few ghastly survivors, all room and no company, which still haunt the roadside. The highwaymen, too, were still extant, which gave an opportunity to young gentlemen of spirit to assure young female fellow-passengers of their being under safe escort, if not of displaying their own courage. Still, after eight hours in a stage-coach, most ‘insides’ felt that they had had enough of it, and were glad enough to stretch their legs when the chance offered. [12]

This feeling was experienced by two out of the three passengers in the London coach ‘Tantivy,’ which on a certain afternoon in May, at the end of the last century, drew up at the ‘White Hart’ in the town of Banbury: it was their last ‘stopping stage’ before they arrived at their destination—Stratford-on-Avon; and they wished (at least two of them did) that they had reached it already. [13]

Mr. Samuel Erin, the senior and head of the little party, was a man of about sixty years of age, but looked somewhat older. He still wore the attire which had been usual in his youth, but was now pronounced old-fashioned: a powdered wig of moderate dimensions; a plain braided frock coat, with waistcoat to match, almost as long; a hat turned up before and behind, and looking like a cross between a cocked hat and the head-gear of a modern archdeacon; knee-breeches, and buckled shoes. Upon his forehead—their ordinary resting-place when he was not engaged in his profession (that of a draughtsman), or poring over some musty volume—reposed, on a bed of wrinkles, a pair of gold spectacles. His eyes, which, without being very keen, were intelligent enough, appeared smaller than they really were, from a habit he had of puckering their lids, engendered by the more delicate work of his calling, and also by frequent examination of old MSS. and rare editions, of which he was a connoisseur. [14]

As he left the coach with slow, inelastic step, he was followed by his friend Frank Dennis. This gentleman was a much younger man, but he too, though not so retrograde in attire as his senior, paid little attention to the prevailing fashion. He wore, indeed, his own hair, but closely cut; a pepper-and-salt coat and waistcoat, and a neckcloth, that looked like a towel, tied carelessly under his chin. Though not in his first youth, he was still a young man, with frank and comely features; but an expression habitually thoughtful, and a somewhat slow delivery of what he had to say, made him appear of maturer years than belonged to him. He was an architect by profession, but had some private means; his tastes were somewhat similar to those of his friend and neighbour Erin, and he could better afford to indulge them. His present expedition was no business of his own, but undertaken, as he professed, that he might enjoy the other’s society for a week or two in the country. It so happened, however, that Mr. Erin was bringing his niece, Miss Margaret Slade, with him; and, to judge by the tenderness of Mr. Dennis’s glance when it rested on her, it is probable that the prospect of her companionship had had some attraction for him. [15]

Last of the three, she tripped out of the coach, declining, with a

pretty toss of her head, the assistance the younger man would have rendered her in alighting. She could trip and toss her head like any fairy. No tower of hair ‘like a porter’s knot set upon end’ had she; her dress, though to modern eyes very short-waisted, was not, as an annalist of her time has described it, ‘drawn exceeding close over stays drawn still closer;’ her movements were light and free. Her lustrous brown hair fell in natural waves from under a beaver hat turned up on the left side, and ornamented with one grey feather. A grey silk spencer indicated, under pretence of concealing—for it was summer weather, and she could not have worn it for warmth— [16] the graces of her form. Her eyes were bright and eager, and her pretty lips murmured a sigh of relief, as she touched ground, at her release from durance.

‘How I wish this was Stratford-on-Avon’! cried she naïvely.

‘That would be wishing that Shakespeare had been born at Banbury,’ said her uncle, in a tone of reproof.

‘Banbury is it?’ she said; ‘then this is where the lady lived who went about with rings on her fingers and bells on her toes, and therefore had music wherever she goes—I mean went.’

Mr. Dennis smiled, and murmured very slowly that other young ladies brought music with them without the instruments of which she spoke, or indeed any instruments; they had only to open their mouths.

‘I am hungry,’ observed Miss Margaret, without any reference to that remark about opening her mouth at all—in fact, she studiously ignored it.

Mr. Dennis sighed. [17]

He was that minority of one who would rather have remained in the coach—that is, if Miss Margaret had done likewise; he would not in the least have objected to Mr. Samuel Erin getting out. A circumstance over which he had no control, the fact of his having been born half a century too early, prevented his being acquainted with the poem in which Mr. Thomas Moore describes the pleasure he felt in travelling in a stage-coach with a fair companion; but he had experienced it all the same. He was not displeased that there was another stage to come yet.

If he was satisfied, however, with the opportunities that had been afforded to him of making himself agreeable to Miss Margaret on the road, he must have been a man thankful for small mercies. She had given him very little encouragement. His attempts to engage her in conversation had been anything but successful. When a young lady wishes to be tender, we know that the mere offer to open or shut a coach window for her may lead to volumes of small-talk, but [18] nothing had come of his little politenesses beyond the bare acknowledgment of them. Even that, however, was something. An ‘I thank you, sir,’ from the pretty lips of Margaret Slade was to Mr. Frank Dennis more than the acceptance of plan, elevation, and section of any proposed town-hall from a municipal council. It is strange how much harder is the heart of the female than the male under certain circumstances. If a young lady obviously endeavours to make herself agreeable to a young gentleman, he never repulses her, or at least I have never known an instance of it. ‘But suppose,’ I hear some fair one inquire, ‘he should be engaged to be married to some one else?’ ‘Madam,’ I reply to that imaginary questioner, ‘it would not make one halfpennyworth of difference. If the other young woman was not there, you would never guess from his behaviour that she was in existence.’

It must not, however, be concluded from this observation that Miss Margaret Slade was in love with anybody else. She was but [19] seventeen at most; an age at which among well-conducted young persons no such idea enters the head, nor indeed, in her case, as one would think, had there been any opportunity for its entrance. She had been brought up in the country in seclusion, and only a few months ago, upon the death of Mrs. Erin, had been sent for by her uncle to keep house for him. His establishment in Norfolk Street, Strand, was a very simple one, and the company he entertained numbered none of these who, in the language of the day, were called ‘the votaries of Cupid.’ No young beaux ever so much as crossed the threshold. Mr. Erin’s visitors were all grave elderly gentlemen, more interested in a binding than in a petticoat, and preferring some old-world volume to a maiden in her spring-time. There was indeed, ‘though,’ as the song says, ‘it is hardly worth while to put that in,’ a son of Mr. Erin’s, of her own age, who dwelt

in his father’s house. But the young man was out all day engaged in his professional avocation—that of a conveyancer’s clerk; and even when he returned at eve, mixed but little with the family. It seemed [20] to Margaret that his father did not treat him very kindly.

There had been only one mention of him in the long coach journey from town. Mr. Dennis, addressing himself as usual to Margaret, when a chance offered of interrupting Mr. Erin’s interminable talk upon antiquarian subjects, had inquired after her cousin William Henry; and she had replied, with the least rose tint of a blush, that he had gone, she believed, on some business of his employer to Bristol. A statement which her uncle had corroborated, adding drily, ‘The boy has asked to have his holiday with us now instead of later in the year, so I have told him to come on to Stratford; he may be useful to me in collecting information upon Shakespearean matters.’

The remark scarcely breathed the spirit of a doating parent, but then that was not Mr. Erin’s way.

‘Your son has made a good choice of locality,’ said Mr. Dennis, in his rather ponderous manner. ‘It is not every young fellow who [21] would choose Stratford-on-Avon to disport himself in, in preference to Tunbridge Wells, for instance; his taste for antiquities is certainly most remarkable. He will prove a chip of the old block, I’ll warrant,’ he added, with a side-long smile at Margaret. Margaret did not return his smile, though she did not frown as her uncle did. The fact was, though neither Margaret nor Mr. Dennis had the faintest idea of it, the latter could hardly have paid the old gentleman a more objectionable compliment.

‘I do not think,’ he replied coldly, after an unpleasant pause, ‘that William Henry cares much about Shakespeare; but he has probably asked for his holiday thus early, in hopes that, by hook or by crook, he may get another one later on.’

To this there was no reply from either quarter. Mr. Dennis, though a good-natured fellow enough, did not feel called upon to defend William Henry’s want of Shakespearean feeling against his parent, while Miss Margaret not only closed her mouth, but shut her eyes. If she slept, to judge by the expression of her face she had [22] pleasant dreams; but it is possible she was only pretending to sleep, in order to chew the cud of some sweet thought at greater leisure. She disagreed with her uncle about the motive that was bringing William Henry to Stratford, but was quite content to accept the fact —of which she had previously been ignorant—without debate. She herself did not, I fear, care so much about Shakespeare as it behoved Mr. Samuel Erin’s niece to do; but from henceforth she looked forward with greater pleasure than she had done to this visit to his birthplace. Hungry as she had professed herself to be, she would no doubt have done justice to the ample, if somewhat solid, viands that were set before the coach passengers, and on which her uncle exercised his knife and fork like a man who knows he will be charged the same whether he eats much or little, but for an unlooked-for circumstance.

Hardly had the meal commenced when the cheerful note of the horn announced the approach of a coach from some other quarter, the tenants of which presently crowded into the common dining- [23] room. Among them was a young gentleman who, without a glance at beef or pasty, at once made up to our party of three.

His first salutation, contrary to the laws of etiquette, was made to Mr. Erin.

‘Hollo!’ said that gentleman, unwillingly relinquishing his knife and holding out two fingers to the new-comer, ‘what brings *you* here, sir?’

‘The Banbury coach, sir. I came across country from Bristol in the hopes of catching you at this stage, which I have fortunately succeeded in doing.’

‘Humph! it seems to me you must have come miles out of the way; however, since you *are* here, you had better set-to on the victuals and save your supper at Stratford.’

Mr. Dennis shook hands with the young man cordially enough, and recommended the meat pie.

Miss Margaret just lifted her eyes from her plate and gave him a smile of welcome, but at the same time she moved a little towards the top of the table, so as to leave a space for him on the other side [24] of her, an invitation which he lost no time in accepting.

A scornful poet, whose appetite was considerably jaded, has expressed his disgust at seeing women eat; but women, I have noticed, take great pleasure in seeing men, for whom they have any regard, relish a hearty meal. The new-comer ate as only a young gentleman who has travelled for hours on a coach-top can eat, and Margaret so enjoyed the spectacle that she neglected her own opportunities in that way, to watch him. 'The ardour with which you attack that veal, Willie,' she whispered slily, 'reminds me of the Prodigal Son after his diet of husks.'

'Did you think the manner in which my arrival was welcomed in other respects, Maggie,' he inquired bitterly, 'carried out the parable?'

'Never mind; you are out for your holiday, remember, and must only think of enjoying yourself.'

'Well, I hope *you* are glad to see me, at all events.'

'Well, of course I am; it's a very unexpected pleasure.' [25]

'Is it? I should have thought you might have guessed that I should have managed to join you somehow.'

'I have not your genius for plots and strategies, Willie; it is so great that it sometimes a little alarms me,' she answered gravely.

'The weak must take up such weapons as lay to their hand,' he replied drily.

This conversation, carried on as it was in a low tone, was drowned by the clatter of knives and forks; before the latter had ceased the notes of the horn were once more heard, the signal for the resumption of their journey.

The party rose at once, Mr. Erin leading the way. He took no notice of his son as he pushed by him, but the neglect was more than compensated for by the attention of the female members of the company.

William Henry was a very comely young fellow; his complexion dark, but not swarthy; his eyes keen and bright; a profusion of black curling hair was tied by a ribbon under his hat, which gave him a [26] somewhat feminine appearance, though it was not unusual so to wear it; his attire, though neat, was far from foppish—a dark blue coat with a short light waistcoat; a neckcloth by no means so large as was worn by many young persons in his station of life; and nankeen breeches.

If it is difficult for us to suppose such a costume becoming, it was easy for those who were accustomed to it to think so. His figure, it was observed, as he walked rapidly to overtake his father, was especially good.

'I have made inquiries, Mr. Erin,' he said respectfully, as the old man placed his foot on the step, 'and find there is plenty of room in the coach.'

'You mean *on* the coach,' was the dry reply; 'surely a young man like you—leaving out of question the ridiculous extravagance of such a proceeding—would never wish to be an inside passenger on an afternoon like this.' And with a puff, half of displeasure, half of exhaustion, caused by the effort of the ascent, the antiquary sank into his seat.

'Do you not ride with us?' inquired Mr. Dennis good-naturedly, as [27] he came up to the door with Margaret upon his arm.

The young man's cheeks flushed with anger.

'You do not know William Henry,' said the girl, interposing with a smile; 'he does not care for the nest when he can sit upon the bough.'

'It is pleasanter outside—for some things—no doubt,' assented Mr. Dennis as he assisted her into the coach. She cast a sympathising glance over her shoulder at William Henry, as he swung himself up to the hind seat, and he returned it with a grateful look. She had saved him from a humiliation.

It was a warm evening, as his father had observed, but in one sense he had been turned out into the cold, and he felt it bitterly.

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[28]

CHAPTER III.

A RECITATION.

There is one spot, and only one, in all England, which can in any general sense be called hallowed—sacred to the memory of departed man. Priests and kings have done their best for other places, with small effect; here and there, as in Westminster Abbey, an attempt has been made to make sacred soil by collecting together the bones of our greatest men—warriors, authors, divines, statesmen; but these various elements do not kindly mix: the devotion we would pay to our own particular idol is chilled perhaps by the neighbourhood of those with whom we feel no especial sympathy. In all cathedrals, too, there is a certain religious feeling, artificial as the light which finds its way through the ‘prophets blazoned on its panes;’ it is difficult in them to feel enthusiasm. In [29] other places, again, exposed to the free air of heaven, association is weakened by external influences. I, at least, only know of one place where Nature, as it were, effaces herself, and becomes the setting and framework to the epitaph of a dead man. It is Stratford-on-Avon.

There, save once a year, when Shakespeare’s birthday is commemorated, fashion brings but few persons to simulate admiration. It is not as at some great funeral, where curiosity or official position or other extraneous motive brings men together to do honour to the departed; they come like humble friends, to pay tribute to one whom they not only admire, but revere, to this little Warwickshire town. It is too remote from the places where men congregate to entice the thoughtless crowd; nor has it any attractions save its associations with that marvellous mind, of which the crowd has but a vague and cold conception. It is, to my poor thinking, a very comfortable sign of the advance of human intelligence that, year after year, in hundreds and in thousands, but not in crowds—for they arrive alone, or in twos or threes together— [30] there come, from the uttermost parts of our island, and even from the ends of the earth, more and more pilgrims to this simple shrine.

In the days of which I write, Stratford, of course, had far fewer visitors than at present; but those it did have were certainly not inferior in enthusiasm. Indeed, it was a time when Shakespeare, if not more read than now, was certainly more talked about and thought about. His plays were much oftener acted. The theatre occupied a more intellectual position in society. Kemble and his majestic sister, Mrs. Siddons, trod the boards; quotations from Shakespeare were as common in the mouths of clerks and counter-jumpers as are now the most taking rhymes from a favourite burlesque; even the paterfamilias who did not ‘hold by’ stage plays made an exception in honour of the Bard of Avon. In literary circles an incessant war was waging concerning him; pamphlet after pamphlet—attack and rejoinder—was published almost every week by this or that partisan of a phrase, or discoverer of a new reading. [31] Mr. Samuel Erin was in the fore-front of this contest, and, as a rule, a stickler for the text. He opposed the advocates for change in the same terms which Dr. Johnson used to reformers in politics. The devil, he was wont to say, was the first commentator. The famous Shakespearean critic Malone was the object of his special aversion, which was most cordially reciprocated, and often had they transfixed one another with pens dipped in gall.

It was curious, since the object of Mr. Erin’s adoration has taken such pains to instil gentleness and feeling among his fellow-creatures, that his disciple should have harboured the sentiments he sometimes expressed; and yet it is hardly to be wondered at when one remembers that the advocates of Christianity itself have fallen into the same error, and from the same cause. Mr. Samuel Erin was not only a devotee, but a fanatic.

As the coach crossed the river, near their journey’s end, Mr. [32] Dennis broke a long silence by a reference to the beauty of the scenery, which his friend had come professionally to illustrate.

‘Here is a pretty bit of river for your pencil, Mr. Erin.’

‘Hush! hush!’ rejoined that gentleman reprovingly; ‘it is the Avon. We are on the threshold of his very birthplace.’

It was on the tip of Mr. Dennis’s tongue, who had been thinking of nothing but Margaret for the last half-hour, to inquire, ‘Whose birthplace?’—which would have lost him the other’s friendship for

ever. Fortunately he recollected himself (and Shakespeare) just in time, and in some trepidation at his narrow escape, which his friend took for reverential awe, murmured some more suitable reply.

William Henry, on the other hand, was not so fortunate. At the instigation of the guard (who had a commission from the innkeeper on the guests he brought him), he leant down from the coach-top to inquire which house Mr. Erin meant to patronise, suggesting that the party should put up at the 'Stratford Arms,' as being the best accommodation. [33]

'You fool!' roared the old gentleman; 'we put up at the "Falcon," of course. The idea,' he continued indignantly, 'of our going elsewhere, when the opportunity is afforded us of residing under the very roof which once sheltered our immortal bard!'

'Shakespeare did not live in an inn, did he, uncle?' inquired Margaret demurely. She knew perfectly well that he had not done so, but was unwilling to let this outburst against her cousin pass by without some kind of protest.

'Well, no,' admitted Mr. Erin; 'but he lived just opposite to it, and, it is supposed—indeed, it may be reasonably concluded—that he patronised it for his—ahem—convivial entertainments.'

'I suppose there is some foundation for the story of the "Topers" and the "Sippers,"' observed Dennis, 'and for the bard being found under the crab-tree *vino et somno*.'

'There may be, there may be,' returned the other indifferently; 'but as for Shakespeare being beaten, even in a contest of potations, that is entirely out of the question. It was not in the nature of the man. If he ran, he would run quickest; if he jumped, he would jump the highest; and if he drank, he would undoubtedly have drunk deeper than anybody else.' [34]

The Falcon Inn had no great extent of accommodation—it was perhaps too full of 'association' for it—but Margaret had a neat chamber enough; and, since it looked on the Guild Chapel and Grammar School where Shakespeare had been educated, and on the walls which surrounded the spot where he had spent his latter days, the niece of her uncle could hardly have anything to complain of. The young men had an attic apiece. As to what sort of a room was assigned to Mr. Samuel Erin, he could not have told you himself, for he took no notice of it. His head was always out of the window. It was his first sight of the shrine of his idol, and the very air seemed to be laden with incense from it.

To think that that long, low tenement yonder, with the projecting front, was the very house in which Shakespeare had 'crept unwillingly to school,' that his young feet had helped to wear those very stones away, and that that ancient archway had echoed his very tones, sent a thrill of awe through him such as could only be compared with that felt by some mediæval beholder of 'a bit of the true cross.' But, in that case, faith—and a good deal of it—had been essential to conviction; whereas in this the facts were indisputable. Behind yonder walls, too, stood the house to which, full of honour though not of years, he had retired to spend that leisure in old age which he had desiderated more than most men. [35]

> The aim of all is but to crown the life
> With honour, wealth, and ease in waning age,

were the words Mr. Erin repeated to himself with mystic devotion, as a peasant mutters a Latin prayer. He had no poetic gifts himself, nor was he even a critic in a high sense; but his long application to Shakespearean literature had given him some reflected light. What he understood of it he understood thoroughly; what was too high for his moderate, though by no means dwarfish intelligence, to grasp, or what through intermediate perversion was unintelligible, he not only took on trust, but accepted as reverentially as did those who were wont to consult her, the utterances of the Sibyl. In literature we have few such fanatics as Samuel Erin now; but in art he has many modern parallels—men who, having once convinced themselves that a painting is by Rubens or Titian, will see in it a hundred merits where there are not half a dozen, and even discover beauties in its spots and blemishes. [36]

While the head of the little party was thus in the seventh heaven of happiness above-stairs, the junior members of it had assembled together in the common sitting-room; the landlady had inquired what refreshments they would please to have, and tea had been ordered rather with a view of putting a stop to her importunities

[37] than because, after that ample meal at Banbury, they stood in need of any food.

'If your uncle were here, Maggie,' said William Henry, not perhaps without some remembrance of the snubbing he had just received from the old gentleman, and from which he was still smarting, 'he would be ordering "sherrie sack," or "cakes and ale."'

Margaret glanced at him reprovingly, but said nothing. She regretted that he took such little pains to bridge the breach that evidently existed between his father and himself, and always discouraged his pert sallies. William Henry hung his head: if he did not find sympathy with his cousin, he could, he thought, find it nowhere.

Frank Dennis, however, came to his rescue. He either did not look upon the penniless, friendless lad as a real rival, or he was very magnanimous.

'And how did you enjoy your trip to Bristol?' he inquired. 'St. Mary's Redcliffe is a fine church, is it not?'

[38] 'Yes, indeed; I paid a visit to the turret, where the papers were stored to which Chatterton had access, and from which he drew the Rowley poems.'

'How interesting!' exclaimed Margaret; it was plain by her tone that she wanted to make amends to the young fellow. 'Are any of his people still at Bristol?'

'Oh yes, his sister lives there, a Mrs. Newton. I had a great deal of talk with her. She told me how angry he was with her on one occasion when she cut up some old deeds and other things he had brought home with him, and which she had thought valueless, to make into thread-papers; he collected them together, thread-papers and all, and carried them into his own room.'

'Considering the use the poor young fellow made of them,' observed Dennis gravely, 'she had better have burnt them.'

'Still, they did give him a certain spurious immortality,' put in Margaret pitifully. 'The other was out of his reach.'

'Surely, my dear Miss Slade, you cannot mean that?' remonstrated Dennis gently.

[39] 'At all events, everybody was very hard upon him just because they were taken in,' argued Margaret. 'If he had acknowledged what they admired so much to have been his own, they would have seen nothing in it to admire. I think Horace Walpole behaved like a brute.'

'That is very true,' admitted Dennis. 'Still, the lad was a forger.'

'People are not starved to death, as *he* was, even for forging,' rejoined Margaret. 'His own people, too, did not care about him. He had no friends, poor fellow.'

Dennis listened to her with pleasure—though he thought her too lenient—because she took the side of the oppressed. William Henry was even more grateful, because he secretly compared his own position with that of Chatterton—for *he* too had written poems which nobody thought much of—and guessed that Margaret had his own case in her eye.

'Amongst other things that Mrs. Newton told me,' continued William Henry, 'was that her brother was very reserved and fond of [40] seclusion. On one occasion he was most severely chastised for having absented himself for half a day from home. He did not shed a tear, but only observed that it was hard indeed to be whipped for reading.'

'It was certainly most unfortunate,' admitted Dennis, 'that the boy was amongst persons who did not understand him.'

'And who, though they were his own flesh and blood, treated him with contempt and cruelty,' added Margaret, with indignation. 'Did this sister of his never give him credit for possessing talent even?'

'She thought him odd as a child, it seems,' answered William Henry. 'He preferred to be taught his letters from an old black-letter Bible rather than from any book of modern type. He seems to have had a natural leaning for the line that he took in life.'

'In other words, you think he was born with a turn for forgery,' observed Dennis drily. 'That is not a very high compliment to him, nor indeed to Providence either.'

'But how else could he have become celebrated?' argued the young man impatiently.

[41] 'Is it necessary then, my lad, to become celebrated?' inquired

Dennis, smiling.

‘I don’t say necessary, but it must be very nice.’

‘The same thing may be said of most of our vices,’ answered the other reprovingly. Frank Dennis often spoke the words of wisdom, but spoke them cut and dried, like proverbs from a copy-book. He was an excellent fellow, but not quite human enough for ordinary use. Margaret would have liked him better, perhaps, if he had been a trifle worse. The pedagogic tone in which he had spoken to her cousin, and his use of the words ‘my lad,’ which, as she argued to herself (quite wrongly), he *must* know were very offensive to him, irritated her a little. She felt that William Henry had been schooled enough, and wanted encouragement.

‘Did you get any inspiration from the turret of St. Mary Redcliffe?’ she inquired.

‘Well, yes.’ he answered, blushing, and a blush very well became his handsome face; ‘I did perpetrate—— ‘

[42] ‘Some mischief, I’ll warrant,’ exclaimed a harsh, disdainful voice. It was that of Mr. Samuel Erin, who had entered the room unobserved. ‘And what was it you perpetrated, sir?’

William Henry looked abashed and annoyed. Margaret, though she stood in no little fear of her uncle, could hardly restrain her indignation. Frank Dennis as usual interposed with the oil can.

‘Your son has perhaps only written a poem, Mr. Erin, which in so young a man can hardly be considered a crime.’

‘I don’t know *that*, if the poem—as it probably was—was a bad one. If he has committed it’—here the old gentleman’s face softened, as under the influence of the infrequent and home-made joke the grimmest face will do—‘he has doubtless committed it to memory. Come, sir, let us have it.’

Now as, of all the pleasant moments which mitigate this painful life, there are none more charming than those passed in the recital of a poem of our own composition to (one pair of) loving ears, so there are none more embarrassing than those which are occupied in [43] doing the same thing before an unsympathetic audience. Imagine poor Shelley condemned to recite his ‘Skylark’ or Keats his ‘Nightingale’ to a vestry meeting! That would indeed be bad enough; but if the bard himself is conscious that he has no skylark nor nightingale, but only a tomtit or yellowhammer, to let fly for their edification, how much more terrible must be his position! Poor William Henry was in even worse case, for one of his audience, as he well knew, was not only not *en rapport* with him, but antagonistic, a hostile critic. I once beheld a shivering schoolboy compelled to make an extempore ode to the moon to a circle of his fellow-students armed with towels knotted at the end, to flick him with if his muse should be considered unsatisfactory. Except that he was not in his night-shirt, as my young friend was, poor William Henry’s position was almost as bad, and yet he dared not refuse to obey the paternal mandate.

‘There are only a very few verses, sir,’ he stammered.

[44] ‘The fewer the better,’ said Mr. Erin. He meant it for an encouragement, no doubt, a sort of ‘so far the Court is with you,’ but it had not an encouraging effect upon his son. It seemed to him that he had just swallowed a pint of vinegar.

‘Leave off those damnable faces and begin,’ exclaimed Mr. Erin. It was only a quotation from his favourite bard, and not an inappropriate one, but it did not sound kind.

‘It is brutal,’ murmured Margaret under her breath, and at the same time she cast a glance of ineffable pity at the victim. It was like a ray of sunshine upon a chill day, at sight of which the bird bursts into song.

‘The lines are on Chatterton,’ he began by way of prelude:—

Comfort and joys for ever fled,
  He ne’er will warble more;
Ah me! the sweetest youth is dead
  That e’er tuned reed before.
The hand of misery laid him low,
  E’en hope forsook his brain;
Relentless man contemned his woe,
  To him he sighed in vain.
Oppressed with want, in wild despair he cried,
‘No more I’ll live!’ swallowed the draught, and died.

[45] Mr. Samuel Erin looked as if he had swallowed a draught; one of

those recommended to persons suffering from the effects of poison.

‘Shade of Shakespeare!’ he cried, ‘do you call that a poem?’

William Henry murmured something in mitigation about its being an acrostic. The old gentleman’s sense of hearing was not acute, and led him to imagine he was being reproached for his surliness. He turned as red as a turkey-cock.

Margaret also flushed to her forehead; she too had misunderstood what her cousin had said, and the more easily because the words she thought he had used (a cross stick) were so appropriate. But how could he, *could* he, be so foolish as thus to give reins to his temper!

Lastly, Frank Dennis became a brilliant scarlet. He was half suffocated with suppressed laughter. Still, true to his mission of peacemaker, he contrived to splutter out that when a poem was an acrostic, such perfection was not to be looked for as when the muse was unfettered.

‘Oh, that’s it, is it?’ said Mr. Erin grimly. ‘I’ve heard of young men wasting their time, and, what is worse, the time of their employers, in many ways; but that they should take to writing acrostics seems to me the *ne plus ultra* of human folly. Bah! give me a dish of tea.’

CHAPTER IV.

A REAL ENTHUSIAST.

I am afraid it is rather taken for granted by parents in general, as regards any behaviour they may adopt towards their offspring, that religion is always upon their own side. And yet there is a very noteworthy text about ‘provoking our children to wrath,’ which it is a mistake to ignore. Wise and reverend signors may well have learnt by experience to take trifling annoyances with equanimity; but the *amour propre* of the young is a tender shoot, and very sensitive to rough handling.

The most sensitive plant of all is the lad with a turn for literature; and, as a rule, parents have the least patience with him. When the turn is not a mere taste, but a natural gift, this does not much matter; no true flame was ever put out by the breath of contempt: [48] but when it halts midway the youth has a bad time of it. He shivers at every sneer, without the means of giving it the lie. ‘Like a dart it strikes to his liver,’ because his armour, unlike that of true genius, is not arrow-proof. He knows that he is not the fool that his folk take him for, but he has an uneasy consciousness that they are partly right; that his powers are not equal to his pretensions. This was the case with William Henry Erin.

He had a turn for literature, and, if an uncommon facility for writing indifferent verses is any proof of it, even for poetry; and he found nobody to admit it, not even Margaret. ‘It is very good, Willie, for a first attempt,’ was the fatal eulogium she once passed upon the most cherished of his poetical productions; and his father, as we have seen, made no scruple of ridiculing his literary efforts. If the boy’s predilection for such matters had interfered with his professional duties, it might have been excusable enough; but the conveyancers to whom William Henry was articled were quite [49] satisfied with him. He was very careful and diligent, and though he had come to years of indiscretion, far from dissipated. If he loitered on his way to his employers’ chambers in the New Inn, it was to turn [50] over the leaves of some old poem on a book-stall, rather than to

gaze on the young woman who might be behind it. Still, not being perfection, it was natural that he should feel resentment at his father’s harshness, and at the slights to which his muse was exposed at his unsympathising hands. He had never had any one to sympathise with his poetical aspirations except his friend Reginald Talbot, a fellow-clerk of his own age, who was also devoted to the Muses; and Talbot’s praise had its drawbacks. First, he did not think it worth much; and secondly, it could not be obtained without reciprocity; and it went against William Henry’s conscience to praise Talbot’s poems.

‘Well,’ thought the young man, as he looked out of his attic window, which commanded a distant view of Stratford Church, ‘there lies a man who was as little appreciated at my age as I am; and yet he made some noise in the world. He, too, some say, was a scrivener’s clerk. He, too, was called Will—which is at least an interesting coincidence. He, too, fell in love at my age.’ Here his [51] reflections ended with a sigh, for the parallel extended no further. Shakespeare had not only wooed, but—with a little too much ease, indeed—had won; whereas Margaret Slade was far out of his reach. He had a shrewd suspicion that Mr. Erin intended her to marry Dennis, and had brought him down with him to Stratford ‘to throw the young people together,’ as he would doubtless express it. Young people, indeed! why, Frank Dennis was old enough—well, scarcely, to be her father, unless he had been unusually precocious, but certainly to know better. ‘Crabbed age’—the man was thirty if he was a day—‘and youth cannot live together.’ It was a most monstrous proposition! On the other hand, what could he, poor William Henry, do? If he could persuade Maggie to run away with him to-morrow, they must literally run, for he had hardly money enough, after that Bristol trip, to pay the first pike out of Stratford, and far less a post-chaise.

As he thought of his unacknowledged merits, and of the many obstacles to his union, he grew bitter against the whole scheme of [52] creation. If poetic impulse could have projected him fifty years forward, he would doubtless have exclaimed, with the bard of Bon Gaultier,—

> Cussed be the clerk and the parson,
> Cussed be the whole concern!

but not having that vent for his feelings, he only loosened his neckcloth a bit and looked moody. Poor fellow! he had but two wishes in the world—to marry Margaret, and to get into print; and both these desires, just because he had no money, were denied him.

At that very time, Margaret at her window was thinking of him. She was not—she was certain she was not, the idea was quite ridiculous—in love with him; but, thanks to his father’s conduct, she felt that pity for him which is akin to love. And he was certainly very handsome, and very fond of her. He had been foolish to come down to Stratford when it was clear her uncle didn’t want him; but it was ‘very nice of him,’ too, and since he was there and upon his holiday —his one holiday in the year, poor fellow—it was cruel to snub him! [53] Frank Dennis didn’t snub him, that she would say for Frank: he was a kind, honest fellow, though rather old-fashioned, and just a trifle heavy in hand. She wished William Henry would talk like him when addressing his father; though when addressing *her*, she confessed to herself that she preferred William Henry’s way. It was really distressing to see her uncle and his son together; they mixed no better than oil and vinegar. She was well pleased to remember that Mr. Jervis, the Stratford poet, was coming that morning to breakfast with them, since his presence would prevent anything unseemly; moreover, he would probably take her uncle and Frank Dennis away with him to investigate antiquities, which would leave William Henry and herself to themselves.

John Jervis was but a carpenter in a small way of business, but he was much respected in the town, and had made himself a name beyond it, on account of the interest he took in all Shakespearean matters. The gentry in the neighbourhood spoke of him as ‘a civil and inoffensive creature,’ but he was ‘corresponded with’ by men of [54] letters and learning in London. His position would have been better than it was had he not been so foolish as to publish a volume of poems—to be paid by subscription. This had subjected him to something much worse than criticism—to patronage. Every one who had advanced a few shillings for the appearance of that unfortunate

volume became in a sense his master, and some of them exacted interest for their investment in advice, remonstrance, and dictation. It was a foolish thing of John Jervis to set up his trade—not carpentering, but the other—in Stratford-on-Avon. In Paisley there are, I have heard say, at this present moment fifty poets, all complaining that the world which will give them a monument after their death, in the meantime permits them to starve; but Paisley is a place which is scarcely poetic to begin with, whereas to be a local poet in Stratford was like setting up a shed for small coal in Newcastle. The good man had become quite aware of this by this time; he was very dissatisfied with his published productions (it is a common case; what we have in our desk seems as superior to what lies on our table as that which moves in our brain is to what lies in our desk). He would have given as much to suppress his little volume as William Henry would have given to get *his* own broadcast over an admiring land. And yet there was no question of comparison between them as respected merit. John Jervis was, within certain narrow limits, a true poet: what he saw he noted, what he noted he felt; so far he followed his great master. He even emitted a modest light of his own, which was not reflected: he was not a star, but he was a glow-worm. Most of us are but worms without the glow. [55]

Every one who came to Stratford at that time for Shakespeare's sake—and no one came for any other reason—was recommended to apply to John Jervis for information. On receiving any summons of this nature he put aside his carpenter's tools, took off his apron, and donned his Sabbath garb. A carpenter in his Sunday clothes in these days is a sad sight; he represents one branch of his business only, that of the undertaker: but in the times of which we write it was not so. Wigs were not yet gone out of fashion in Warwickshire, but John Jervis could not afford what was called the 'Citizen's Sunday Buckle' or 'Bob Major,' because it had three tiers of curls. He had too much good taste to use the 'Minor Bob' or Hair Cap, short in the neck to show the stock buckle, and stroked away from the face so as to seem (like Tristram Shandy) as though the wearer had been skating against the wind. He wore his own grey hair and a modest grey suit, in which, however, none but a flippant young fellow like Master William Henry Erin could have likened him to a master baker. His face was homely but pleasant, and had a certain dignity; his manner retiring but not reticent. It was his business to answer questions, but he did not volunteer information. He had, indeed, a secret contempt for the majority of his clients; they had more appetite for the Shakespearean husks, the few dry details that could be picked up concerning their Idol, than for the corn—what manner of man he had been in spirit, or how the scenery about his home had affected his writings. Jervis found Mr. Erin to be no better than his other visitors: hungry for facts, greedy for particulars, and combative. He talked of the Confession of Faith found in the roof of the house in Henley Street, and rubbed his hands, notwithstanding that his enemy had since retracted his belief in it, over Malone's credulity. [56] [57]

'"An unworthy member of the Holy Catholic religion," indeed! It is monstrous, incredible.'

'That phrase had reference to the father, however,' observed Jervis.

'True, but that was the art of the forger, himself of the old faith, no doubt. He wished to make our Shakespeare a born Papist. Now, that he was a good Protestant is indubitable. "I'd beat him like a dog," says Sir Andrew. "What! for being a Puritan?" returns Sir Toby. What irony! You are of my opinion, I hope, Mr. Jervis?'

'I have scarcely formed an opinion upon the matter,' was the modest reply. 'Shakespeare was Catholic in one sense, but I agree with you that he was not one to be much comforted by the "holy sacrifice of the mass," as the so-called Confession put it.' [58]

'I should think not, indeed. He was not partial to priests. "When thou liest *howling*,"' quoted Mr. Erin triumphantly.

'Still, being a stage-player, I doubt if he was partial to the Puritans. No; such things moved him neither way; religious controversies he looked upon as on other quarrels, as "valour misbegot." If he could not see into the future, he saw five hundred years ahead of his contemporaries, who were burning Francis Kett for heresy at Norwich.'

Mr. Erin was not certain whether Kett was a Protestant or a Catholic (on which depended his view of the circumstance), so he only shook his head.

‘You mean, Mr. Jervis,’ said Margaret timidly, ‘that in Shakespeare’s eyes there were no heretics?’

The man in grey looked at his gentle inquirer and bowed his head assentingly. [59] ‘None, as I think, young lady, save those who disbelieved in good.’

‘That is not established,’ said Mr. Erin argumentatively.

‘I am afraid your uncle thinks *me* a heretic,’ said Mr. Jervis, smiling. Then, perceiving that Margaret looked interested, he told her of the marvellous boy—name unknown, but whose fame still survived—who had been Shakespeare’s contemporary at Stratford. How, so the legend ran, he had been thought his equal in genius, and his future greatness been prophesied with the same confidence, but who had died in youth, a mute, inglorious Shakespeare.

‘I often picture to myself,’ said the old man dreamily, ‘the friendship of those two boys.’

‘Do you think they went out poaching together?’ inquired William Henry demurely. He was not without humour, and was also perhaps a little jealous of the attention Margaret paid their visitor.

‘Poaching!’ exclaimed Mr. Erin angrily, ‘how gross and contemptible are your ideas, sir!’

[60] ‘Still,’ interposed Dennis, his sense of justice aiding his wish to stand between Mr. Erin’s wrath and its object—Margaret’s cousin—‘Shakespeare did transgress in that way. It is not likely that he strained at a hare if he swallowed a deer.’

‘No doubt he poached,’ admitted Jervis gravely. ‘He was very human, and did all things that became a boy. But I was thinking rather of the companionship of the two boys than their pursuits. Their talk was not of hares nor of rabbits. How one would like to know their boyish confidences! what were their ambitions, their aspirations, their views of life; which one was about to leave, and in which the other was to fill so large a space in the thoughts of man—for ever. It was in this little town they lived and talked together; learnt their lessons from one book perhaps, in yonder school, each without a thought of the other’s immortality, albeit of such different kinds.’

The solemnity of the speaker’s manner, and the genuineness of feeling which his tone displayed, had no little effect upon his audience, [61] but on each in a different way. Margaret’s mind was stirred to its depths by this simple dream-picture, and seeing her so the two young men felt a touch of sympathy with it.

‘Is there any sure foundation to go upon as to this playmate of Shakespeare’s?’ inquired Mr. Erin, note-book in hand—‘any record, any document?’

The visitor shook his head. ‘Nothing, but wherever, in the country round, Shakespeare’s youth is alluded to, this story of his friend is told. It is a local legend, that is all; but it seems to me to have life in it. The world outside knows nothing of it. It interests itself in Shakespeare only, and but little in his belongings; but with us, breathing the air he breathed, walking on the same ground he trod, things are different; we still fancy him amongst us, and not alone. There is Hamnet, too; we still speak of Hamnet.’

It was fortunate for William Henry that he repressed the observation that rose to his lips. He was about to say, ‘You don’t mean Hamlet, do you?’

[62] The same idea I am afraid occurred to Mr. Dennis, but for even a briefer space; he felt that there must be some mistake somewhere; but also that he himself might be making it.

‘Buried here, August the 11th, 1596,’ observed Mr. Erin, as though he was reading from the register itself.

‘Just so,’ continued Jervis, ‘only a little over two hundred years ago. He was eleven years old, too young to understand the greatness of him who begat him, yet old enough to have an inkling of it. Once a year or so, as it is believed, his father came home to Stratford fresh from the companionship of the great London wits and poets—Jonson, Beaumont, Fletcher, Camden, and Selden. What meetings must those have been with his only son; the boy whom he fondly hoped, but hoped in vain, would inherit the proceeds of his fame! I wonder how his mother used to speak of her husband to her children? Did she excuse to them his long absence, his dwelling afar off, or did she inveigh against it? [63] Did she recognise the splendour of his genius, or did she only love him? Or did she not love him?’

‘Let us hope she was not unworthy of him,’ said Mr. Erin, his

enthusiasm, stirred by the other’s eloquence, rising on a stronger wing than usual.

‘As a wife she was sorely tried,’ murmured Mr. Jervis. ‘I love to think of her less than of Hamnet, so lowly born in one sense, and in the other of such illustrious parentage. The news of his father’s growing fame must have reached the boy, and the contrast could not fail to have struck him. Then to have seen that father bending over his little bed, to have kissed that noble face, and felt himself in his embrace; to have known that he was the child whom Shakespeare’s soul loved best in all the world, what a sensation, what an experience!’

‘Some mementoes of the immortal bard are, I hope, still to be purchased?’ observed Mr. Erin curtly. He had engaged Mr. Jervis’s services for practical purposes, and began to resent this waste of time—which was money—upon sentimental hypothesis. Shakespeare’s wife was a topic one could sympathise with; there was documentary evidence in existence concerning her, but over little Hamnet’s grave there was not even a tombstone. [64]

‘Mementoes? Yes, there is mulberry-wood enough to last some time,’ said Mr. Jervis slily; ‘you shall have your pick of them.’

‘But no MSS.?’

‘Not that I know of. There has been a report, however, of late, that Mr. Williams, of Clopton House, has found some that were removed from New Place at the time of the fire.’

‘Great heavens!’ exclaimed Mr. Erin, with much excitement, ‘what, from New Place, Shakespeare’s own home? Let us go at once; all other things can wait.—William Henry, come along with us, and bring your little book.—You can stay here with Maggie, Dennis, till I come back.’

If he could have dispensed with the presence of John Jervis himself, he would have been glad to do so; for what is true of a feast is also true of treasure-trove, ‘the fewer (the finders) the better the fare.’ [65]

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CHAPTER V.

THE OLD SETTLE.

ILLIAM HENRY, far from sharing his father’s enthusiasm at any time, was on this occasion less than ever inclined to applaud it. If Clopton House should be found full of Shakespearean MSS., it would not afford him half the pleasure he would have [67] derived from a *tête-à-tête* with his cousin Margaret; a treat which, it seemed, was to be thrown away upon Frank Dennis. Why didn’t Mr. Erin select *him* to take notes for him from the musty documents? A question the folly of which only a high state of irritation could excuse. He knew perfectly well that his own dexterity and promptness in copying had caused himself to be chosen for the undesirable task, and that knowledge irritated him the more. It was only when he could be of some material use to him, as in the present instance, that his father took the least account of him. If he could bring himself to steal one of those precious documents, was his bitter reflection, and secrete it as some wretched slave secretes a diamond in the mines of Golconda, then, perhaps, and then only, he might be permitted to marry Margaret. For a bit of parchment with Shakespeare’s name upon it, most certainly for a whole play in his handwriting, Mr. Samuel Erin, it was probable, would have bartered fifty nieces, and thrown his own soul into the bargain. Our young friend, however, was quite aware of what a poet of a later date [68] would have told him, that ‘an angry fancy’ is a poor ware to go to market with; so, with as good a grace as he could, he put on his hat and accompanied Mr. Erin and his cicerone to Clopton House, which was but a few yards down the street.

It was a good-sized mansion of great antiquity, but had fallen into disrepair and even decay. Its present tenant, Mr. Williams, was a farmer in apparently far from prosperous circumstances. Half of the many chambers were in total darkness, the windows having been bricked up to save the window tax, and the handsome old-world furniture was everywhere becoming a prey to the moth and the worm. As a matter of fact, however, these were not evidences of poverty. Mr. Williams had enough and to spare of worldly goods, only of some of them he did not think so much as other people of more cultivated taste would have done. A Warwickshire farmer of to-day would have considered many things as valuable in Clopton House which their unappreciative proprietor had relegated to the cock-loft. It was to that apartment, indeed, that Mr. Erin was led as [69] soon as the nature of his inquiries—which he had stated generally, and to avoid suspicion of his actual object, to be concerning antiquities—was understood. The room was filled with mouldering household goods of remote antiquity, chiefly of the time of Henry VII., in whose reign the proprietor of the house, Sir Hugh Clopton, had been Lord Mayor of London. Among other things, for example, there was an emblazoned representation on vellum of Elizabeth, Henry’s wife, as she lay in state in the chapel of the Tower, where she died in child-birth.

‘You may have that if you like,’ said Mr. Williams to his visitor carelessly. He was a fat, coarse man, but very good-natured. ‘For,

being on vellum, it is no use to light the fire with.’

‘You don’t mean to say you light your fire with anything I see here?’ gasped Mr. Erin.

‘Well, no, there’s nothing much left of that sort of rubbish; we made a clean sweep of it all about a fortnight since.’

‘There were no old MSS., I hope?’ [70]

‘MSS.! Heaps on ’em. They came from New Place at the time of the fire, you see, though Heaven knows why any one should have thought them worth saving. They were all piled in that little room yonder, and as I wanted a place for some young partridges as I am bringing up, I burnt the whole lot of ‘em.’

‘You looked at them first, of course, to make sure that there was nothing of consequence?’

‘Well, of course I did. I hope Dick Williams ain’t such a fool as to burn law documents. No, they were mostly poetry and that kind of stuff.’

‘But did you make certain about the handwriting? Else, my good sir, it might have been that of Shakespeare himself.’

‘Shakespeare! Well, what of him? Why, there was bundles and bundles with his name wrote upon them. It was in this very fireplace I made a regular bonfire of them.’

There was a solitary chair in the little chamber, set apart for the partridges, into which Mr. Samuel Erin dropped, as though he had been a partridge himself, shot by a sportsman. [71]

‘You—made—a—bonfire—of—Shakespeare’s—poems!’ he said, ejaculating the words very slowly and dejectedly, like minute guns. ‘May Heaven have mercy upon your miserable soul!’

‘I *say*,’ cried Mr. Williams, turning very red, ‘what the deuce do you mean by talking to me as if I was left for execution? What have I done? I’ve robbed nobody.’

‘You have robbed everybody—the whole world!’ exclaimed Mr. Erin excitedly. ‘In burning those papers you burnt the most precious things on earth. A bonfire, you call it! Nero, who fiddled while Rome was burning, was guiltless compared to you. You are a disgrace to humanity. Shakespeare had you in his eye, sir, when he spoke of “a marble-hearted fiend.”’

Mr. Samuel Erin had his favourite bard by heart, and was consequently in no want of ‘base comparisons,’ but he stopped a moment for want of breath. Annoyance and indignation had had the same effect upon Mr. Williams. He had never been ‘bully-ragged’ in his own house for ‘nothing’—except by his wife—before. Purple and speechless, he regarded his antagonist with protruding eyes, a human Etna on the verge of eruption. [72]

Mr. John Jervis knew his man. Up to this point he had taken no part in the controversy; but he now seized Mr. Erin by the arm, and led him rapidly downstairs. Their last few steps were accomplished with dangerous velocity, for a flying body struck both of them violently on the back. This was William Henry, who, unable to escape the wild rush of the bull, had described a parabola in the air.

‘If there’s law in England, you shall smart for this,’ roared the infuriated animal over the banisters.

‘Perhaps I ought to have told you that Mr. Williams was of a hasty disposition,’ observed Mr. Jervis apologetically, when they found themselves in the street.

‘Hasty!’ exclaimed Mr. Erin, whose mind was much too occupied with sacrilege to concern himself with assault; ‘a more thoughtless and precipitate idiot never breathed. The idea of his having burnt those precious papers! I suppose, after what has happened, it would be useless to inquire just now whether any scrap of them has escaped the flames; otherwise my son can go back—— ‘ [73]

‘I am sure that wouldn’t do,’ interposed Mr. Jervis confidently.

William Henry breathed a sigh of relief. The impressions of Stratford-on-Avon seemed to him indelible; they had left on him such ‘local colouring’ as time itself, he felt, could hardly remove. Fortunately for his *amour propre*, not a word was said by his father of their reception at Clopton House. His whole mind was monopolised by the literary disappointment. The inconvenience that had happened to his son did not weigh with him a feather.

The whole party now proceeded to Mr. Jervis’s establishment, where the remains of the famous mulberry tree were kept in stock. [74] Mr. Erin was haunted by the notion that some Shakespearean

fanatic might step in and buy the whole of it before he could secure some mementoes, whereas the birthplace in Henley Street could 'wait;' an idea at which, for the life of him, the proprietor of the sacred timber could not restrain a dry smile. It was the general opinion that enough tobacco stoppers, busts, and wafer seals had already been sold to account for a whole grove of mulberry trees. Mr. Erin was very energetic with his new acquaintance on the road, about precautions against fire (insurance against it was out of the question, of course), but when he had possessed himself of what he wanted, and the matter was again referred to as they came away, it was noticeable that he had not another word to say upon the side of prudence.

'He declaimed against Mr. Williams' rashness,' whispered William Henry to Margaret; 'but my belief is that he would now set fire to that timber yard without a scruple in order to render his purchases unique.'

Maggie held up her finger reprovingly, but her laughing eyes belied the gesture. [75]

Both these young people, indeed, had far too keen a sense of fun to be enthusiasts.

To Mr. Hart the butcher (who at that time occupied the house in Henley Street), as an indirect descendant of the immortal bard, through his sister, Mr. Erin paid a deference that was almost servile. He examined his lineaments, in the hopes of detecting a likeness to the Chandos portrait, with a particularity that much abashed the object of his scrutiny, and even tried to get him to accompany him to the church, that he might compare his features with those of the bust of the bard in the chancel.

But it was in the presence of the bust itself that Mr. Erin exhibited himself in the most characteristic fashion. Standing on what was to him more hallowed ground than any blessed by priests, and within a few feet of the ashes of his idol, he was nevertheless unable to restrain his indignation against the commentator Malone, through whose influence the coloured bust had recently been painted white. Instead of bursting into Shakespearean quotation, as it was his wont to do on much less provocation, he repeated with malicious gusto the epigram to which the act of vandalism in question had given birth:— [76]

> Stranger, to whom this monument is shown,
> Invoke the poet's curses on Malone,
> Whose meddling zeal his barbarous taste displays,
> And daubed his tombstone as he marred his plays.

His rage, indeed, so rose at the spectacle, that for the present he protested that he found himself unable to pursue his investigations within the sacred edifice, and proposed that the party should start forthwith to visit Anne Hathaway's cottage at Shottery.

There was at present no more need for Mr. Jervis's services, so that gentleman was left behind. Mr. Erin and Frank Dennis led the way by the footpath across the fields that had been pointed out to them, and William Henry and Margaret followed. It was a lovely afternoon; the trees and grass, upon which a slight shower had recently fallen, emitted a fragrance inexpressibly fresh. All was quiet save for the song of the birds, who were giving thanks for the sunshine. [77]

'How different this is from Norfolk Street!' murmured Margaret.

'It is the same to me,' answered her companion in a low tone, 'because all that makes life dear to me is where you are. When you are not there, Margaret, I have no home.'

'You should not talk of your home in that way,' returned she reprovingly.

'Yet you know it is the truth, Margaret; that there is no happiness for me under Mr. Erin's roof, and that my very presence there is unwelcome to him.'

'I wish you would not call your father Mr. Erin,' she exclaimed reproachfully.

'Did you not know, then, that he was not my father?'

'What?' In her extreme surprise she spoke in so loud a key that it attracted the attention of the pair before them. Mr. Erin looked back with a smile. 'Shakespeare must have taken this walk a thousand times, Maggie,' he observed. [78]

She nodded and made some suitable reply, but for the moment

she was thinking of things nearer home. She now remembered that she had heard something to the disadvantage of Mr. Erin's deceased wife, one of those unpleasant remarks concerning some one connected with her which a modest girl hears by accident, and endeavours to forget. Until Mr. Erin had become a widower Margaret had never been permitted by her mother to visit Norfolk Street. Mrs. Erin had been a widow—a Mrs. Irwyn—but she had not become Mr. Erin's wife at first, because her husband had been alive. It was probable, then, that what William Henry had said was true; he was Mrs. Erin's son, but not Mr. Erin's, though he passed as such. This was doubtless the reason why her uncle and he were on such distant terms with one another, and why he never called him father. On the other hand, it was no reason why her uncle should be so harsh with the young man, and treat him with such scant consideration. Some women would have despised the lad for the misfortune of his birth, but Margaret was incapable of an injustice; her knowledge of his unhappy position served to draw him closer to her than before. [79]

By the blush that, in spite of her efforts to repress it, spread over her face, William Henry understood that she gave credit to his statement, and by the tones of her voice he felt that it had done him no injury in her eyes. It was a matter, however, which, though necessary to be made plain, could not be discussed.

'What your uncle says is very true, Maggie,' he quietly remarked. 'This must have been Shakespeare's favourite walk, for love never goes by the high road when it can take the footpath. The smell of that bean-field, the odour of the hay of that very meadow, may have come to his nostrils as it comes to ours. His heart as he drew nigh to yonder village must have beat as mine beats, because he knew his love was near him.'

'There is the cottage,' cried Mr. Erin excitedly, pointing in front of him, and addressing his niece. 'Is it not picturesque, with its old timbers and its mossy roof?' [80]

'It will make an excellent illustration for your book,' observed Frank Dennis the practical.

'It has been illustrated already pretty often,' returned the other drily, 'or we should not recognise it so easily.'

'Let us hope it's the right one,' muttered William Henry, 'for it will be poor I who will have to suffer for it if it is not.'

Fortunately, however, there was no mistake. They stepped across the little brook, and stood in the garden with its well and its old-world flowers. Before them was the orchard 'for whispering lovers made,' and on the right the low vine-clad cottage with the settle, or courting-seat, at its door.

Here Shakespeare came to win and woo his wife; whatever doubt may be thrown on his connection with any other dwelling, that much is certain. On the threshold of the cottage Mr. Erin took off his hat, not from courtesy, for he was not overburdened with politeness, but from the same reverence with which he had doffed it at the church. He entered without noticing whether he was followed by the others or not. A descendant of Anne Hathaway's, though not of her name, received him; fit priest for such a shrine. That he had not read a line of Shakespeare in no way detracted from his sacred character. Frank Dennis, himself not a little moved, went in likewise. As Margaret was following him, William Henry gently laid his hand upon her wrist and led her to the settle, which was very ancient and worm-eaten. [81]

'Sit here a moment, Maggie; this is the very seat, as Mr. Jervis tells me, on which Shakespeare sat with her who became his wife. Here, on some summer afternoon like this, perhaps, he told her of his love.'

Margaret trembled, but sat down.

'It is amazing to think of it,' she said; 'he must have looked on those same trees, and on this very well.'

'But he did not look at *them*, Maggie,' said the young man tenderly; 'he looked at the face beside him, as I am looking now, and I will wager that it was not so fair a face.' [82]

'What nonsense you talk, Willie! Why do you not give yourself up as your—as Mr. Erin does—to the associations of the place? They are so interesting.'

'It's just what I am doing, dear Maggie. It was here they interchanged their vows; a different pair, indeed, though not

altogether so superior, since to my mind you excel Anne Hathaway as much as I fall short of her marvellous bridegroom. That I am no Shakespeare is very true; yet it seems to me, Maggie, that when I say, "I love you," even he could have said nothing more true and deep. I love you, I love you, I love you—do you hear me?' continued the young man passionately.

'You frighten me, Willie,' answered Maggie in trembling tones. 'And then it is so foolish, since you know, that even if I said—what you would have me say—it could be of no use.'

'But you think it, you *think* it? That is all I ask,' urged the other earnestly. 'If matters were not as they are; if I got Mr. Erin's consent; if I had sufficient means to offer you a home—not indeed worthy of you, for then it must needs be a palace—but comfort, competence, you would not say "Nay?" Dearest Maggie, my own dear darling Maggie, give me hope. "The miserable," as Shakespeare tells us, "have no other medicine:" and I am very, very miserable; give me hope, the light of hope.' [83]

'It would be a will-of-the-wisp, Willie.'

'No matter; I would bless it if it led me to my grave. If I had it, I could work, I could win fortune, even fame perhaps. You doubt it? Try me, try me!' he continued vehemently, 'and if after some time, a little, little time, no harvest comes of it, and my brain proves barren, why, then I will confess myself a dreamer: only in the meantime be mine in spirit; do not promise yourself to another; let us say a year; well, then, six months; you can surely wait six months for me, Maggie?'

'It would be six months of delusion, Willie.'

'Let it be so; a fool's paradise, but still for me a paradise. I have not had so many happy hours that fate should grudge me these. I know I am asking a strange thing; still I am not like those selfish lovers who, being in the same pitiful case with me as to means, exact, like dogs in the manger, vows of eternal fidelity from those whom they will, in all probability, be never in a position to wed. I ask you not for your heart, Maggie, but for the loan of it; for six months' grace, probation. If I fail to show myself worthy of you—if I fail to make a name—or rather to show the promise of making it within that time, then I return the loan. I do not say, as was doubtless said by him who sat here before me, "Be my wife!" I only say, "For six months to come, betroth yourself to no other man." Come, Maggie, Frank Dennis is not so very pressing.' [84]

It was a dangerous card to play, this mention of his rival's name, but it won the game. Dennis was as true as steel, but through a modest mistrust of his own merits—a thing that did not trouble William Henry—he was a backward lover. He had had opportunities of declaring himself which he had neglected, thinking of himself too lowlily, or that the time was not yet ripe; or preferring the hope that lies in doubt, to the despair that is begotten of denial; and this, I think, had a little piqued the girl. She liked him well enough, well enough even to marry him; but she liked William Henry better, and other things being equal, would have preferred him for a husband. They were not equal, but it was possible—just possible, for the moment she had caught from her reputed cousin some of that confidence he felt in his own powers—that they might be made so. At all events, six months was not a space to 'delve the parallels in beauty's brow;' and then it was so hard to deny him. [85]

'You shall have your chance, Willie,' she murmured, 'though, as I have warned you, it is a very poor one.'

He drew her nearer to him, despite some pretence of resistance, and would have touched her cheek with his lips, when the cottage door was suddenly thrown open behind them, and Mr. Erin appeared with an old chair in his hands, which he brandished like a quarter-staff above his head. He looked so flushed and excited that William Henry thought his audacious proposal had been overheard, and that he was about to be separated from his Margaret for ever by a violent death. [86]

'It is mine! It is mine!' cried the antiquary triumphantly. 'I have bought Anne Hathaway's chair.'

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[87]

CHAPTER VI.

AN AUDACIOUS CRITICISM.

In the case of crime, every person who is concerned in its detection looks very properly to motive: the law, indeed, in its award of punishment, disregards it, but then, as a famous authority (and himself in authority), namely, Mr. Bumble, observes, 'the law is a hass.' Where mankind falls into error is in looking for motive in all cases, whether criminal or otherwise. A very large number of persons are actuated by causes for which motive is far too serious a term. They are often moved by sudden impulse, nay, even by whim or caprice, to take very important steps. When interrogated, after the mischief has been done, as to why they did this or that, they reply, 'I don't know,' and are discredited. Yet, as a matter of fact, the motive was so slight, or rather so momentary (for it was probably strong enough while it lasted), that they have really forgotten all about it.

William Henry Erin, of whose character the world subsequently took a very different and erroneous view, was essentially a man of impulse. He had attributes, it is true, of another and even of an antagonistic kind. He was very punctual and diligent in his habits, he was neat and exact in his professional work; though a poet, his views of life, or at all events of his own position in it, were practical enough, yet he was impatient, passionate, and impulsive. His proposition to Margaret Slade had been made with such stress and energy that it was no wonder (albeit she knew his character better than most people) that she thought it founded upon some scheme for the future already formed in his own mind. Of its genuineness there could be no shadow of doubt, but she also took it for granted that he had some ground for expectation, which, at all events to his own mind, seemed solid, that within the space of time he had mentioned, something would occur to place him in a better social position. Her impression, or rather her apprehension (for she did not much believe in his literary talents—a circumstance, by-the-bye, which showed that she was by no means over head and ears in love with him), was that he trusted to the publication of his poems to place him on the road to prosperity; his use of the words 'fame and fortune' certainly seemed to point to that direction, and what other road was there open to him?

Whereas, as a matter of fact, there was not even that poor halfpennyworth of substratum for his hopes. Circumstances—the finding himself alone with her he loved on Shakespeare's courting-seat—had, of course, been the immediate cause of his amazing appeal, but they were also the chief cause. The knowledge that Frank Dennis was of the party and could gain her ear at any moment, with the certainty of Mr. Erin's advocacy to back him, had, moreover, made the young man madly jealous. To secure his beloved Margaret, even for a little while, from so dreaded a rival, was something gained; and then there was the chapter of accidents. We know not what a day may bring forth, how much less what may happen within six months! William Henry was but a boy, yet how many a grown man trusts to such contingencies! In the city, 'twenty-four hours to turn about in' is often considered time enough for a total change of fortune. It might be added that, unless Margaret should turn traitress and reveal his secret (which was impossible), he had nothing to lose and everything to gain by his delay; but, to do the young man justice, that idea had not entered into his mind. Passion with the bit between her teeth had run away with him.

As to precocity, it must be remembered that he lived in reckless days, when men did not wait as they do now till they were five-and-forty years of age to marry; by that time, with enterprise and luck, many a gentleman was in the enjoyment of his third, or even his fourth honeymoon.

Still, William Henry was not unconscious that he had taken an audacious step, and felt a genuine sense of relief on finding that Mr. Samuel Erin had provided himself in that armchair with a relic and not a weapon.

This invaluable acquisition—which, when it was brought to London, was placed on a little elevation made on purpose for it in his study, with a brass plate at its foot (after the manner of chairs in our Madam Tussaud's) with the words 'Anne Hathaway's Chair'

upon it—had the effect of putting its possessor into good humour for the remainder of his stay at Stratford, a circumstance which had the happiest results for those about him. William Henry, for his part, was in the seventh heaven. It is not only our virtues which have the power of bestowing happiness upon us—at all events, for a season. Shakespeare himself makes a striking observation on that matter in one of his sonnets; having spoken plainly enough of certain errors, gallantries of which he has repented, he adds, with an altogether unexpected frankness,—

> But, by all above,
> These blenches gave my heart another youth.

[92] He does not put his tongue in his cheek at morality, far from it; but he rolls the sweet morsel, the remembrance of forbidden pleasure, under his tongue. It is one of the mistakes that our divines fall into to deny to our little peccadilloes any pleasure at all, whereas the fact is that the blossom of them is often very fair and fragrant, though the fruit is full of ashes, and, like the goodly apple, rotten at the core.

And thus it was with William Henry, who, without, indeed, having committed any great enormity, had certainly not been justified in obtaining the loan of his cousin's love; the consciousness of his temporary possession of it made a very happy man of him for a season. He made no ungenerous use of his advantage, he did not take an ell because he had gained an inch; but he hugged himself in that new-found sense of security as one basks in the summer sunshine. Those days at Stratford were the happiest days of his life. Considering the means by which they were obtained, one can hardly apply to them the usual phrase 'a foretaste of heaven;' but they were happy days snatched from a life which was fated to hold few [93] such. It was, perhaps, out of gratitude to him whose memory had helped him to this happiness, that the young man really began to take an interest in Shakespearean matters; and this again reacted to his advantage, since it gratified Mr. Erin, whose good-will, difficult to gain by other means, was approached by that channel with extraordinary facility.

In association with Mr. Jervis the young man ransacked the little town for mementoes of its patron saint, and was fortunate enough to discover a few, which, though of doubtful authenticity, were very welcome to the enthusiastic collector. If they were not the rose, *i.e.* actual relics, they were near the rose, as proximity is counted in such cases. No doubt it is the same with more sacred relics—in a deficiency of toe-nails of any particular saint it must be something, though not of course so rapturous, to secure a toe-nail of some saint in the next century. As regards Shakespeare, it is certainly one of the marvels in connection with that marvellous man that not a scrap of the handwriting, save his autograph, of one who wrote so much [94] ever turns up to reward the pains of the searcher; nay, there is only one letter extant, even of those that were written to him—a commonplace request for a loan from the man who afterwards became his son-in-law; under which circumstances, when one comes to think about it, there may be some excuse for the language used by Mr. Samuel Erin to that reckless incendiary, Mr. Williams, of Clopton House.

If to be indifferent, as William Henry had been suspected of being, to the charms of Shakespeare was a crime in Mr. Erin's eyes, it may be easily imagined how he resented the least imputation of any portion of his idol having been composed of clay. There were circumstances connected with his union with Anne Hathaway, and also with that little adventure of his with Justice Shallow's deer, which were dangerous to allude to in Mr. Erin's presence; and if the moral qualities of his hero (albeit, we may have gathered, Mr. Erin was himself, though Protestant, by no means Puritan) could not in [95] safety be called in question, any suggestion of weakness in him as a writer was still more unendurable. Nevertheless, even prudent Frank Dennis contrived to put his foot in it in this very matter, and thereby narrowly escaped falling out of Mr. Erin's good graces for the term of his natural life. It was during an expedition to Charlecote; the little party, having left their vehicle at the gate, were walking through the park, Mr. Erin wrapped in contemplation —endeavouring perhaps to identify the very oak (in 'As You Like It') where the poor sequestered stag had 'come to languish'—while the young people a few paces behind were indulging in a little quiet banter upon the forbidden subject of deer-stealing.

‘I suppose that he did steal that deer?’ observed Margaret slily in a hushed whisper.

‘There is no doubt of it,’ answered Frank; ‘he had to fly from Stratford to London for that very reason, to get out of Sir Thomas’s way.’

‘Nay, nay,’ put in William Henry, I am afraid with some slight imitation of his father’s solemn manner when dealing with the sacred topic; ‘let us not say steal, it was what “the wise do call convey.” We do a good deal of it in New Inn ourselves.’ [96]

‘Yonder are our “velvet friends,”’ said Mr. Erin, pointing to a herd of deer in the distance.

The allusion caused some trepidation in his companions, as chiming in only too opportunely with their late disloyal remarks; and it was much to their relief that Mr. Erin proceeded, as was his wont, to indulge himself in quotation.

> ‘And indeed, my lord,
> The wretched animal heaved forth such groans
> That their discharge did stretch his leather coat
> Almost to bursting; and the big round tears
> Coursed one another down his innocent nose
> In piteous chase.’

‘What a graphic picture! “His innocent nose.” Who but Shakespeare would have dared to write “his innocent nose?”’

‘Very true, sir,’ said William Henry gravely. ‘“His innocent nose.”’

Not a muscle of his face betrayed the drollery within him. He certainly possessed some tricks of the actor’s trade. Margaret stooped to pluck a daisy, an action which sufficed to account for the colour rushing to her cheeks. Frank Dennis, whose wits were not of the nimble sort fitted for such sudden emergency, felt he was about to suffocate. It seemed to him he had no alternative between speech—the act of saying something, no matter what—and an explosion. [97]

‘With regard to deer shedding tears,’ he observed, ‘I have a friend who is a great naturalist, who tells me, as a matter of fact, that they can’t do it.’

‘Can’t do what?’ inquired Mr. Erin curtly.

‘He says that from the peculiar formation of the ducts of the deer, or perhaps from the absence of them—— I know nothing about the matter myself, sir,’ put in the unhappy Frank precipitately, for the antiquary was looking daggers at him.

‘You know quite as much about it as your friend then,’ thundered Mr. Erin. ‘Great heavens! that a man like him, or you, or anybody, should venture to pick a hole in one of the noblest descriptions of the language: to find faults in Shakespeare himself! You remind me, sir, of the sacrilegious fellow in France, the other day, who gave it as his opinion that if he had been present at the Creation, he could have suggested improvements.’ [98]

‘But indeed, sir, it was not my opinion.’

‘It is quite as bad to quote those of infamous persons as to originate them yourself.’

Mr. Frank Dennis had very little of the serpent in him, not even its prudence; his sense of justice was shocked by this outrageous speech.

‘But it is a mere question of fact and science—— ‘

‘Science,’ interrupted the other vehemently, ‘that is the argument of the Atheist against the Scriptures. Science, indeed! what is science when compared with the genius of Shakespeare? He told you, sir, that deer shed tears, and if they don’t, why—damn their eyes—they ought to!’

‘Science:’ interrupted the antiquary, vehemently. ‘That is the argument of the atheist against the Scriptures.’

[99] The argument was, at least, conclusive; nothing more remained to be said, or was said. Mr. Erin stalked on like a turkey-cock ruffled; his idol had been insulted, and he felt that he had done well to be angry. Every deer he saw stimulated his wrath. ‘Confound the fellow!’ he murmured as he passed the antlered herd, ‘it would serve him right if they tossed him.’ It even crossed his mind perhaps that Margaret was right after all in receiving Dennis’s attentions so coldly; that he was certainly a very pig-headed young man.

Frank Dennis, too, good-natured as he was, was not a little put out. For the moment he felt almost as disrespectful towards Shakespeare as Sydney Smith’s friend was to the Equator; but his eye fell on Margaret, and he put a bridle on his tongue.

His sense of annoyance soon faded away, but with the antiquary it was not so easily effaced. This incident was of considerable advantage to William Henry and his little plan. In a company of three, when one of them has fallen out of our favour, one naturally rather ‘cottons’ to the other, if it is only to show the offender what [100] he has forfeited by his misconduct; and from thenceforward Mr. Erin showed himself at least less severe towards the young man who bore his name. Nay, what was of more consequence, the symptoms he had exhibited of favouring Frank Dennis’s pretensions to his niece’s hand manifestly slackened; he no longer troubled himself to throw the young people together. On the other hand, though of course with no idea that there was risk in it (for he both despised him and ‘despised his youth’), he suffered William Henry and Margaret to ‘foregather’ as much as they pleased. He still felt so resentful to Frank’s sacrilegious ideas as respected the customs of deer when under emotion, that it was distasteful to him to be shut up with him as a companion; and in order to mitigate his society he took an inside place for William Henry (notwithstanding that, except in the matter of MSS. and first editions, he had a frugal mind) in the coach to town.

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CHAPTER VII.

A COLLECTOR’S GRATITUDE.

The effects of a prolonged holiday upon the human mind are various. Like other things much ‘recommended by the faculty,’ it does not suit every one. It is the opinion of an eminent physician of my acquaintance that little comes of it in the way of wholesomeness except sunburn; and that when that wears off, the supposed convalescent looks as he feels—satiated and jaded. To William Henry, the conveyancer’s clerk, that week or two at Stratford-on-Avon was what the long vacation is to many lawyers. He found a great difficulty in setting to work again at his ordinary duties. His fellow-clerk had left his employer’s service, so that he had his room to himself—a circumstance that became of much more importance [102] than he had at that time any idea of—but business was slack at Mr. Bingley’s office. The young fellow had plenty of leisure, though among old mortgage deeds and titles to estates, it might be thought he had small opportunities of spending it pleasantly. Under ordinary circumstances this would not, however, have been the case with him. He had been brought up in an atmosphere of antiquity; the satisfaction expressed by his father at the acquisition of any ancient rarity had naturally impressed itself upon his mind; the only occasions on which he had won his praise had been on his bringing home for his acceptance some old tract or pamphlet from a bookstall; and in time he had learnt to have some appreciation of such things for their own sake, albeit, like some dealer in old china, without much reverence. His turn for poetry, such as it was, was due, perhaps, to the many old romances and poems in Mr. Erin’s library rather than to any natural bent in that direction; a circumstance, indeed, which was pretty evident from the young poet’s style; for style is easy enough to catch, whereas ideas must [103] come of themselves. His holiday had grievously unsettled him. He had brought back his dream with him, but, once more face to face with the facts of life, he perceived the many obstacles to its realisation. The only legitimate road to success—that of daily duty—would never lead thither; but there might be a short cut to it through his father’s favour. Hitherto he had sought this by fits and starts to mitigate his own condition; he now resolved to cultivate it unintermittingly, and at any sacrifice.

He consequently devoted all his spare time (and ‘by our Lady,’ as his father would have said, also no little of his employer’s) to the discovery of some precious MS. Instead of the spectacled and wizened faces which they were wont to see poring over their old wares, the bookstall-keepers of the city began to be haunted by that of William Henry, eager and young. They could not understand what his bright eyes came to seek, and certainly never dreamed that it was love that had sent him there—to my mind a very touching episode, reminding one of the difficult and uncouth tasks to which [104] true knights in the days of romance were put, in order to show their worthiness to win those they wooed. The lady of his affections, however, was far from being sanguine of his success; she could hardly fail to appreciate his exertions, but she refrained from encouraging them. ‘My dear Willie,’ she said, ‘it is painful to me to see you occupied in a search so fruitless. It is only too probable that what you seek has absolutely no existence. It is like hunting for the elixir of life, or the secret of turning base metals into gold.’

‘But, my dear Maggie, some such literary treasure *may* exist,’ he answered tenderly; ‘and if I can discover it, what is the elixir of life to me will be found with it.’

It was impossible to reason with a young man like this, and Margaret tried to comfort herself with the reflection that his madness had but five months more to run. But it was very, very difficult. Her life was now far from being a cheerful one. She was not so vain as to take pleasure in a wasted devotion, and she bitterly [105] repented of the momentary weakness that had inclined her to feed its flame.

The house in Norfolk Street was more frequented by the learned than ever. They came to discuss Mr. Erin’s late visit to the Shakespearean shrine, just as faithful Moslems might come to interview some pious friend who had recently made his pilgrimage to Mecca. While they talked of relics and signatures her mind

reverted to the sweet-smelling old garden at Shottery, with its settle outside the cottage door. Frank Dennis came as usual, and was made welcome by his host, if not quite with the same heartiness as of old. Not a word of love passed his lips, and he was even more reserved and silent than of yore; but Margaret could not conceal from herself what he came for. Nay, his very reticence had a significance for her; she had a suspicion that he had noticed some change of manner between herself and her cousin which for the present sealed his lips. When he had quite convinced himself that her heart was in another's keeping she felt that he would go away, [106] and that place by the window, where he usually sat a little apart from the antiquarian circle, would know him no more. She pitied him as she pitied Willie, though in another way. She recognised in him some noble qualities—gentleness, modesty, a love of truth and justice, and a generosity of heart that extended even to a rival. If she had not known William Henry, it might have been possible to her, she sometimes thought, to have loved Frank Dennis. But this was only when the former was not present. At the end of the day, when her cousin came in fagged and dispirited, and took his place at the supper-table with little notice from any one, her whole soul seemed to go forth to meet him in her tender eyes.

Matters thus continued for some weeks, till, rather suddenly, a change took place in William Henry. In some respects it was not for the better; the unrest which his features had hitherto displayed disappeared, and was succeeded by an earnest and almost painful gravity. Once only she had seen such an expression—on the face of [107] a juggler in the street, one evening, who had thrown knives into the air and caught them as they fell. But with it there was a certain new-born hope. She recognised it in the looks he stole at her when he thought himself unobserved, and in his talk and manner to others, especially to Mr. Erin. They suggested confidence, or at least a purpose. That he said nothing of what he had in his mind to her was in itself significant. The conclusion she drew was that he was on the track of some discovery which might or might not prove of great importance. Poor fellow! she had too often seen her uncle and his friends led by wildfire of this sort to the brink of disappointment to put much faith in it. They were old and used to failures, and with a little grunt of disappointment settled their wigs upon their foreheads, and started off again at a jog-trot in search of another mare's-nest. Whereas to Willie—he was but seventeen—Repulse would seem like Ruin.

One evening—it was a Saturday, on which day Mr. Erin was accustomed to entertain a few friends of his own way of thinking— [108] William Henry made his appearance later than usual. The guests had already sat down to table, and were in full tide of talk, which was not in any way interrupted by his arrival. Margaret as usual cast a swift furtive glance at him, and at once perceived that something had happened. His face was pale, even paler than usual, but his eyes were very bright and restless; a peculiar smile played about his mouth. 'He has found something' was the thought that flashed at once across her mind. Even if he had, she felt it would not really alter matters, and would only tend to nourish false hopes. Her uncle's heart would never soften towards him in the way that he hoped for. A compelled expression of approbation, an unwilling tribute to his diligence and judgment, born of self-congratulation on the acquisition of some literary treasure, would be his reward at best, but still—but still—her heart went pit-a-pat. She knew that no good fortune of the ordinary kind could have happened to him. Mr. Bingley, though he liked the boy, could hardly have promised to [109] make him his partner; nor indeed, if he had, would it have mattered much, since his business was so small as to require but a single clerk. That he had found a publisher for his poems was not less unlikely, while the result of such a miracle would be of even less material advantage.

Throughout the meal William Henry scarcely touched bit or sup; his air, to the one observer of it, gave the impression of intense but suppressed excitement.

It was the custom of Mr. Erin's company on Saturday nights to share after supper a bowl of punch between them, and for those who affected tobacco to light up their long days. Both the drinking and smoking were of a very moderate kind; while of song-singing, very common at that date, there was none. There was only one toast, given by the host in reverent tones, 'To the memory of the immortal Shakespeare,' and then they began to wrangle over

disputed readings. On these occasions it was William Henry's habit to quietly withdraw and seek Margaret in the withdrawing-room. As often as not, Frank Dennis did the like, when he would petition for a tune on the harpsichord, a thing the other never did. Margaret's voice was music enough for him, especially in a *tête-à-tête*. But on this particular Saturday both young men remained with the rest, William Henry for a reason of his own, and Dennis out of courtesy to his host, who had promised to give his friends that night an antiquarian treat, consisting of the exhibition of a rare tract he had recently acquired. It was entitled 'Stokes, the Vaulting Master,' and full of engraved plates, to the outsider as destitute of interest as dinner-plates with nothing on them, but to this little band of antiquarians as the 'meat' of turtle to an alderman. If they didn't say grace afterwards, it was because this precious gift had been vouchsafed to another and not to themselves; they sighed and murmured to themselves that 'Erin ought to be a happy man.' Having received their compliments with much complacency, their host, like an old man congratulated upon the possession of a young wife, locked the extract in his bookcase and put the key into his pocket, which was taken by the rest as a signal for departure. When they had all gone save Dennis, who, as a friend of the house, was always the last to go, William Henry drew from his breast pocket a piece of parchment with two seals hanging from it on slips.

'I think, sir,' said he modestly, 'I have something rather curious to show you.'

'Eh, what?' said Mr. Erin, knitting his brow in the depreciating manner peculiar to the examiner of all curios before purchase, 'some old deed or another, I suppose.'

Then he turned very white and eager, and sat down with the document spread out before him. It was a note of hand of the usual kind, though of ancient date, and dealing with a very small sum of money; but if it had been a letter from a solicitor's office acquainting him with the fact that he had been bequeathed ten thousand pounds, it could not have aroused in him greater interest and astonishment.

It ran as follows:—'One month from the date hereof I doe promyse to paye to my good and worthy friend John Hemynge the sum of five pounds and five shillings, English Moneye, as a recompense for his great trouble in settling and doinge much for me at the Globe Theatre, as also for hys trouble in going down for me to Stratford.—Witness my hand,

'William Shakespere.

'September the Nynth, 1589.'

'Received of Master William Shakespeare the sum of five pounds and five shillings, good English Money, this Nynth day of October, 1589.

'John Hemynge.'

'This is indeed a most marvellous discovery, William Henry,' said Mr. Erin, breaking a long silence, and regarding his son with a sort of devout amazement, such as might have been exhibited by some classic shepherd of old on finding the Tityrus he had been treating as a chawbacon was first cousin to Apollo. 'You are certainly a most fortunate young man.—Maggie' (for Maggie, learning that the visitors had departed, had joined them, full of vague expectancy), 'see what your cousin has brought home with him.'

This appeal of Mr. Erin to his niece was significant in many ways. It would have been most natural in such a matter to have turned to Dennis, but for the moment he could not brook incredulity, nor even a critical examination of the precious manuscript. Moreover, he had said 'your cousin,' a relationship between the two young people to which he had never before alluded. It was plain that within the last five minutes William Henry had come nearer to the old man's heart than he had been able to get in seventeen years.

What followed was even still more expressive, for it took for granted an intimacy between his son and niece, which up to that moment he had studiously ignored.

'Did you know anything,' he added, 'my girl, of this surprise which your cousin had in store for us?'

'I knew that there was something, uncle, though not from his lips. That is,' she continued, with a faint flush, 'I felt for days that there has been something upon William Henry's mind, which I

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judged to be good news.—Was it not so, Willie?’

The young man bowed his head. The colour came into his face also. ‘How she must have watched him, and how rightly she had read his thoughts!’ was what he was saying to himself.

Mr. Erin took no notice of either of them; his mind had reverted to the new-found treasure.

‘Look at it, Dennis,’ he cried. ‘The seals and paper are quite as they should be. I have no doubt of its being a genuine deed of the time. Then the signature—there are only two others in all the world, but I do think—just take this microscope (his own hand trembled so that he could scarcely hold it)—there can be no mistake about it. It is without the “a,” but it can be proved that he spelt it indifferently; and again, the receipt *has* the “a,” an inconsistency which, in the case of a forgery, would certainly not have been overlooked. There can be no doubt of its being a genuine signature, can there?’ [115]

‘That is a matter on which you are infinitely better qualified to judge than I am, Mr. Erin,’ was the cautious rejoinder. ‘Perhaps you had better consult the autograph in Johnson and Steevens’s edition.’

‘Tush! Do you suppose that I have not every stroke and turn of it in my mind’s eye? Reach down the book, Maggie.’

Margaret, who knew where to lay her hand upon every book in her uncle’s library, made haste to produce the volume.

‘There, did not I tell you?’ said Mr. Erin triumphantly. ‘Look at the *W*, look at the *S*.’

Dennis did look at them very carefully. ‘Yes,’ he admitted, ‘there is no doubt that they are fac-similes.’

‘Fac-similes!’ exclaimed the old man angrily; ‘why not frankly say that they are by the same hand at once?’

‘But that is begging the whole question,’ argued Dennis, his honest and implastic nature leading him into the selfsame error into which he had fallen at Charlecote Park. ‘It is surely more likely upon the whole that an autograph purporting to be Shakespeare’s should be a fac-simile than an original.’ [116]

‘Or, in other words,’ answered Mr. Erin, with a burst of indignation, ‘it is more likely that this lad here, poor William Henry’ (the ‘poor’ sounded almost like ‘poor dear’), ‘should have imposed upon us than not.’

‘Oh no, oh no,’ interposed Margaret earnestly; ‘I am sure that Mr. Dennis never meant to suggest that.’

‘Then what the deuce did he mean by his fac-simile?’ ejaculated the antiquary, with irritation. ‘Look at the up-strokes; look at the down-strokes.’

‘You have made an accusation against me, Mr. Erin,’ said Frank Dennis, speaking under strong emotion, ‘which is at once most cruel and undeserved. If I thought myself capable of doing an injury to William Henry, or especially of sowing any suspicion of him in your mind, I—I would go and drown myself in the river yonder.’

Mr. Erin only said, ‘Umph,’ in such a tone that it sounded like ‘Then go and do it.’ [117]

‘How is it possible that in throwing any doubt upon the genuineness of that document,’ continued the other, ‘I should be imputing anything to its finder? Nor, indeed, have I cast any doubt on it. I know nothing about it.’

‘Then why offer an opinion?’ put in the old man implacably.

‘At all events, sir, I hazarded none as to how the thing came into William Henry’s possession.’

‘Tut, tut,’ replied the antiquary, once more reverting to the precious document, ‘who cares how he got it? The point is that we have it here; not only Shakespeare’s handwriting, but a most incontestable proof, to such as ever doubted it, of his honour and punctuality in discharge of his just debts. William Henry, I have been mistaken in you, my lad. I will honestly confess that I had built no such hopes upon you. When I lost my poor Samuel [a son that died in infancy], I never thought to be made happy by anything a boy could do again. This is the proudest moment of my life—to have under my own roof, to see with my own eyes, to touch with my own fingers, the actual handwriting of William Shakespeare.’ [118]

Then, with a sigh like one who returns to another something he himself fain would keep, as knowing far more how to value it, he folded up the document, and returned it to William Henry.

‘Nay, sir,’ said the lad, gently breaking silence for the first time,

'it is yours, not mine. My pleasure in acquiring it—for, to say truth, it cost me nothing—would all be lost if you refused to accept it.'

'What, as a gift? No, my boy, that is impossible. I don't mean that you must take cash for it,' for William Henry looked both abashed and disturbed, 'but something that will at least show you that I am not ungrateful.'

For one wild instant the young man believed that, like a stage father, Mr. Erin was about to place Margaret's hand in his and dower them with his blessing, but he only walked to his bookcase, [119] and took from the shelf, where it had just been reverently laid, 'Stokes, the Vaulting Master,' and pushed it into his hands.

'But, sir, you have not heard how I gained possession of the deed,' exclaimed the astonished recipient of this treasure.

'To-morrow, to-morrow,' answered the antiquary as he left the room with the document hugged to his heart; 'to-morrow will be time enough for details.'

In his heart of hearts he feared lest there should be some flaw in the young man's story which might throw discredit upon the genuineness of his discovery: and, for that night at least, he wished to enjoy his acquisition without the shadow of a doubt.

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CHAPTER VIII.

HOW TO GET RID OF A COMPANY.

When Mr. Erin had closed the door behind him there was silence among those he had left; Dennis and Margaret naturally looked to William Henry for an explanation of so singular a scene, but he only turned over the leaves of 'Stokes, the Vaulting Master,' with an amused expression of countenance.

'This reminds me,' he observed presently, 'of what one of Mr. Bingley's female clients did the other day. She had a favourite cat, which one of her toadies used to extol in order to curry favour with her; and when she died she left him *that*, as being the richest legacy she could think of; her mere money went to a hospital.'

[121] Margaret gave him a look which seemed to reproach him for his frivolity, and Dennis remarked gravely enough, 'I do hope there is no mistake about that deed of yours, my lad; for I am afraid it would be a terrible blow to your father.'

'Deed of mine!' exclaimed the young man indignantly. 'How on earth can I tell whether it is genuine or not?'

'That is very true,' said Margaret, 'how can he? We must hope for the best. Now tell us where you found it, Willie, and all about it.'

'Well, it's a queer story, I promise you, and I can only give you my word of honour for the truth of it.'

'I should hope that would be enough,' said Margaret confidently.

'It will be enough for you, Maggie,' said the young man quietly, 'but I am very doubtful whether it will be sufficient for others, since even to myself it would still seem like a dream save for the documentary evidence. If that is right, as Mr. Erin seems to think, all is right.'

'And for that you are not responsible,' put in Margaret eagerly.

[122] 'Just so; I know no more about it being Shakespeare's genuine signature than you do. How the thing came into my hands was this way. You know the Horn Tavern in Fleet Street, Dennis?'

'Well, of course. Did I not dine with you ten days ago there?'

'Nay; let us be accurate throughout. I dined with *you*,' said the young man, smiling. 'And that reminds me of what I had forgotten before; it was on that very day that I first met my friend. Did you notice an old gentleman with a flaxen wig dining by himself in the corner?—indeed, I know you did, for we remarked that it was rather early in the day for a man to be drinking port.'

'I remember your making the observation,' answered Dennis; 'but I cannot recall the gentleman; I did not notice him with any particularity.'

'Nor I. But it seems that he noticed *me*. I took my mid-day meal there the next day, and there he was again. We sat at adjoining tables, and he entered into conversation with me. [123] His manner was at first a little stiff and reticent, like that of an old bachelor who lives alone; but something I said about Child's bank seemed to attract his attention. He was not aware that the accounts for the sale of Dunkirk had been found among their papers, and seemed more astonished that I should know it. Again, it amazed him to find that I knew about Chaucer's having beaten the Franciscan Friar in Fleet Street. Being ignorant, of course, of the set of people I have been brought up amongst here, it doubtless astonished him that so young a man should take any interest in such matters. He said he was but an indifferent antiquary himself, from an incurable habit of indolence, which had grown upon him during years of seclusion, but that his tastes had at one time lain in that direction; that he possessed a considerable collection of manuscripts bequeathed to him by a cousin, and that if I liked to look in upon him at his chambers in the Temple, I might perhaps find something worthy of my attention.

[124] 'Of course I availed myself of this invitation. I found my friend in an unusually large set of chambers, but which had the appearance of great neglect. The rooms he occupied himself were well cared for enough, though he informed me that he saw no company; but the others were used as lumber-rooms. They were filled with old books, old armour, old manuscripts, piled up on the floor in the greatest confusion. There were heaps of law documents, relating to his own

affairs, which had no better treatment. I suppose my new friend saw by the expression of my face that I thought him a very eccentric personage, for he suddenly observed, "I have taken a strong fancy to you, young gentleman, and I am not easily pleased; but there is one thing which you must beware of if you want our friendship to continue. I cannot be troubled with questions. The man who left me all these things was worried to death by the curiosity of other people. 'Where did you get this? How did that come into your hands?' and so on, There are some things here my possession of [125] which would be so envied by some people, that I should never have a moment's peace from their importunities. If you should come across any such treasure, and should reveal the place where you found it, you and I part company. Let that be thoroughly understood between us." Of course I promised never to mention his name or address to any one.'

As William Henry paused a moment to take breath, 'That will be rather awkward,' observed Dennis gravely; 'of course there was no help for it, but your inability to give a reference as to the discovery of the deeds will give rise to suspicion.'

'Suspicion of what?' inquired Margaret, with a flush on her cheek.

'Of the authenticity of the document. I should rather have said would strengthen suspicion, for that there will be objectors to it is certain.'

'My cousin has nothing to do with them,' said Margaret; 'surely he is not personally answerable for the genuineness of the deed.'

'Certainly not,' answered Dennis gently.

[126] 'Pray go on, Willie,' said Margaret. It was plain that what Dennis had said had annoyed her in some way; not only was he himself, however, quite unconscious of the cause of offence, but William Henry appeared equally in the dark. He glanced from one to the other with a puzzled look before he took up his tale.

'I have paid several visits to the Templar, as I will call him, since then, and he has been most kind and hospitable. As my time is not my own, and I can only occasionally leave the office, he has lent me a latch-key, so that I may enter his chambers when I please, and pursue my researches. In order, as I believe, to remove from me any unpleasant sense of obligation, he has asked me to catalogue his library for him; which is, of course, a labour of love.'

'Why, my good lad, it is evident the old gentleman intends to adopt you, and will make you his heir,' exclaimed Dennis.

Though he spoke laughingly Margaret thought to herself that such an event was by no means out of the range of possibility. Her [127] cousin was certainly very attractive; had excellent manners, and, as it happened, the somewhat exceptional tastes that were most likely to recommend him to such a patron. Perhaps the future that Willie had proposed to her in the garden at Shottery might not turn out so wild a dream after all.

'I think my new friend has done enough for me as it is,' said William Henry modestly. 'In turning over some deeds yesterday I found that document which I brought home to-night. Mr.——, I mean the Templar—was not at home, so that I had to wait till I could see him this afternoon. You may imagine what a twenty-four hours I passed.'

'I noticed, as I told my uncle, that you had something on your mind,' said Margaret; 'but that has been for some days. No doubt it was this making acquaintance with your new friend, and the possibilities that might arise from it.'

'No doubt. I confess I allowed myself to indulge in certain hopes,' returned the young man with a smile, but keeping his eyes fixed on the ground. 'What has happened, however—always supposing that [128] the document is genuine—has been far beyond my expectations. When I met my patron and told him what I had found he was surprised enough, but by no means in that state of elation which we have just seen in Mr. Erin; the reason of which was, I am convinced, that he at once made up his mind to give me the thing.

'"It is very curious," he said. "My cousin always set great store by those old manuscripts, but I did not know there was anything among them so interesting as this. Perhaps you may find some more; at all events, since but for you this discovery would certainly not have been made, or at least not in my lifetime, it is but fair that you should reap the benefit of it. This note of hand is yours."'

‘What a gracious gentleman!’ exclaimed Margaret enthusiastically. ‘It was not as if he did not know the value of what he was giving away.’

‘Just so. I am afraid, though I begged him to reconsider the matter, that I was not very urgent that he should do so. I could not help picturing to myself how Mr. Erin would receive such a treasure, and how it might be the means’—here he hesitated a moment—‘of—making myself more acceptable to him.’ [129]

Dennis patted the lad on the shoulder approvingly. He understood that in his presence it was painful to the young fellow to allude to his father’s habitually cold and unpaternal behaviour. What he did not understand was that William Henry should resent this friendly encouragement as being the manner of a mature man to a junior.

Margaret for her part attributed her cousin’s hesitation to another cause. She felt that if they had been alone together he would have ended that last sentence—‘how it might be the means of’—in a different way.

‘In the end, of course,’ continued William Henry, smiling, ‘I took what the gods had given me without much scruple, but even if nothing more should come of it, I hope I shall never forget the old gentleman’s kindness.’

Nothing under the circumstances could be more moderate, or in better taste, than the speaker’s manner. [130] Not only was there no exultation, such as might easily have been excused in a man so young, and moreover, so unaccustomed to good fortune, but he seemed to have resolutely determined not to encourage himself in expectation; and yet there was a confidence in his tone which to one at least of those who listened to him was very significant. If it is too much to say that pretty Margaret had repented of that promise given to her cousin at Anne Hathaway’s cottage, she had certainly thought it very unhopeful; or rather it would be more correct to say she had abstained from thinking of its possible results at all; but that night she could not shut them out from her dreams.

Mr. Samuel Erin would probably have also had his dreams—not less agreeable, though of quite another kind—but unfortunately he never went to sleep. Like Belshazzar, he beheld all night a writing on the wall, which, albeit it was not in modern characters, needed in his case no interpreter. It was Shakespeare’s autograph. It seemed to him to be inscribed everywhere, and, as though the secret of luminous paint had already been discovered, to shine miraculously [131] out of the darkness.

He came down to the morning meal with a face of unwonted paleness, but which, when it turned to William Henry, wore also an unwonted smile. He listened to his narration of how he became possessed of the deed with interest, but without much comment, and yet not a word did he say about the precious document itself. His silence, however, was well understood. There would that day be a gathering of his Shakespeare friends, who would decide upon its genuineness; but in the meantime it was clear that he had a firm and cheerful faith in it such as men pray for so often in vain. For the first time for years he addressed his conversation almost wholly to his son, and even recalled events connected with the young man’s childhood. On later matters perhaps it was scarcely safe to venture, lest memories of a less cheerful kind should be raked up with them.

‘Do you remember, my boy, the days when we were wont to spout Macbeth together, [132] and how you had to hold up the paper knife in your little hand and say, “Is this a dagger that I see before me?”’

William Henry remembered them very well, and said so. It was curious enough that Shakespeare should be the one common ground they had discovered on which to meet on terms of amity.

Then presently, ‘Have you heard anything of young Talbot lately?’

Talbot had been that schoolfellow of William Henry already spoken of, who was a poetaster like himself. More fortunate, however, in worldly circumstances, he had succeeded to a small estate in Ireland, where he lived, save when he occasionally came to London for a week or two for pleasure. On one occasion William Henry had ventured to bring the young man to Norfolk Street, but he had been received with such scant civility by the master of the house that the visit had not been repeated. That Mr. Erin should have given himself the trouble to recall his name spoke volumes of Shakespearean autograph.

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‘Thank you, sir; Talbot is to be in town for a few days at the Blue Bear in the Strand, I believe.’

‘I beg if you see him, then, that you will give him my compliments,’ said Mr. Erin graciously.

The transformation was quite magical. It was as though some humble wight dwelling in the shadow of King Bulcinoso’s displeasure had suddenly become first favourite, and, instead of receiving buffets, had been given his Majesty’s hand to kiss.

Margaret had never liked her uncle so much as in this new character, and was indignant with her cousin that he did not respond to his father’s kindness with more enthusiasm.

‘If he had behaved so to me, Willie, I should have met him half way,’ she afterwards said reprovingly.

‘Yes,’ answered the young man gravely, ‘because you would have known that he loved you for your own sake.’ Then with a gentle sigh he added, ‘Why don’t *you* meet *me* half way, Maggie?’

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She did not indeed reply as he would have had her, but her tender glance betrayed that if she had not got half way, she was on the road to meet him.

He went away to his work as usual, but by no means in his usual frame of mind. Nor were those he left behind him less moved by his late proceedings than himself.

Before midday the parlour in Norfolk Street was the reception room of quite a throng of dilettanti, some summoned that very morning by Mr. Erin’s special invitation. The new-found deed was handed round among these enthusiasts as a new-born babe, heir to millions, but about whom there are some doubts as to its legitimacy, might be received by a select circle of female gossips, while the proprietor, like a husband confident in his wife’s fidelity, regards their investigations with a complacent smile. They examined it tenderly but with great caution, through spectacles of every description, and in silence befitting so momentous an occasion; yet by their countenances, lit by a certain ‘fearful joy,’ it was easy to see that upon the whole they were satisfied—nay glutted—by the inspection.

The Dilettanti.

[135]

‘Well, gentlemen?’ inquired Mr. Erin with mock humility—a mere pretence of submission to a possible adverse opinion. ‘What say you, my dear Sir Frederick, what is your verdict?’

He had appealed to one Sir Frederick Eden, a Shakespearean critic of no mean distinction, and who, being the only titled person present, might naturally be considered as the foreman of the jury.

‘It is my opinion, Mr. Erin,’ replied that gentleman with great solemnity, ‘that this most interesting document is valid.’

A hushed murmur of corroboration and applause broke from the little throng. ‘That is my view also,’ said one; ‘And mine,’ ‘And mine,’ added other voices.

If Mr. Erin had just been elected King of Great Britain and Ireland (with the Empire of India thrown in by anticipation), and was receiving the first act of allegiance from the representatives of the nation, he could not have looked more gratified and serene.

[136]

‘That is certainly the conclusion,’ he observed with modesty, ‘which I myself have arrived at.’

Then he told how William Henry had become possessed of the document, a narration which redoubled their interest and excitement.

‘Sir,’ said Sir Frederick with emotion, ‘I felicitate you on the possession of such a son.’

There were reasons, as we know, which made this congratulation a mere matter of compliment, and, up to this time, by no means an acceptable one; but it was with no little pride and satisfaction that Mr. Erin now acknowledged it.

‘He is a good lad,’ he said, ‘a discreet and well-ordered lad: and, of course, it is very gratifying to me that he has found favour in the eyes of this gentleman—whoever he may be—to whom we are indebted for this—this manifestation.’

It was a strange word to use, but, under the circumstances, not an inappropriate one. To Mr. Samuel Erin the occurrence in question seemed indeed little less than a miracle, and William [137] Henry the instrument through which it had been vouchsafed to his wondering eyes.

‘What we have to consider,’ he continued, dropping his voice in hushed solemnity, ‘is that, in all probability, other papers connected with the immortal bard may be produced from the same source.’

The company nodded their wigs in unison. It was as though in their mind’s eye a dish of peaches had been placed on the table before them; their very mouths watered.

‘There is one circumstance,’ said Sir Frederick, who still held the document in his hands, rather to his host’s discomfort, who well knew what temptation was, and had become anxious for the return of his property, ‘which I think has hitherto escaped our notice: in examining the document we have neglected the seals. I have just discovered by close scrutiny that they represent that ancient game the quintin. Here is the upright beam, here is the bar, here is the bag.’

The company crowded round, most of them with magnifying [138] glasses, which gave them the appearance of beetles who, with projecting eyes and solemn looks, investigate for the first time some new and promising article of food.

‘At the top of the seal, if I am not mistaken,’ continued Sir Frederick in pompous tones, and with the air of a man without whose intelligence a great discovery would have passed unnoticed, ‘you will recognise the ring, to unhook which with his lance was the object of the tilter; if he failed to accomplish it, the bar, moving swiftly on its pivot, swung round the bag, which striking smartly on the tilter’s back, was almost certain of unhorsing him.’

‘We see it—it is here; there is no doubt of it,’ gasped the excited company.

‘Now, mark you, this is not only curious,’ resumed the knight, ‘but corroborative of the genuineness of the document in a very high degree. Observe the very close analogy which this instrument bears to the name of Shakespeare. Is it not almost certain, therefore, that [139] this seal belonged to our immortal bard, and was always used by him in his legal transactions?’

‘Then rose the hushed amaze of hand and eye.’ For some moments no voice broke the awful silence; but presently, under deep emotion, Mr. Erin spoke.

‘A revelation,’ he said, ‘always needs an expounder, and in our friend Sir Frederick we have found one. Thanks to your keen intelligence, sir, the value of this deed has been placed beyond all question.’

‘I am very glad to have been of some slight service to the cause of literary discovery,’ returned Sir Frederick modestly. ‘Perhaps some other lights may strike me if you will allow me to take the document home with me.’

‘Indeed I will do nothing of the kind,’ put in Mr. Erin precipitately; ‘not, of course, my dear friend, that I have the least doubt of your good faith,’ he added in gentler tones, ‘but in justice to my son—unhappily absent, and to whom it belongs—I can hardly suffer the deed to leave my custody. Perhaps at another time’—for [140] his friend was looking anything but pleased—‘your request shall be complied with, but at present it must be here for the satisfaction of doubters. Such a person, I have reason to believe, is among us even now.’

A murmur of indignation arose from all sides. They cast at one another such furious glances as the Thracian nymphs may have done before tearing Orpheus to pieces.

‘Yes, Mr. Dennis,’ continued the host sarcastically, addressing the unhappy Frank, who had hitherto remained unnoticed and quiescent, ‘I have reason to believe from the expression of your features, when I connect it with certain remarks that fell from you in Shottery Park the other day, that you are our only sceptic.’

If to an assembly of divines in Convocation ‘the Infidel,’ so often alluded to in the abstract in their discourses from the pulpit, had been suddenly presented to them in the concrete, they could not have looked at him with a greater horror than that with which the [141] company regarded the young man thus thrust upon their attention.

‘Indeed, indeed, Mr. Erin,’ pleaded Dennis, ‘I have never uttered a syllable that could be construed, or even perverted, into doubt.’

‘One may look daggers and yet speak none,’ returned Mr. Erin with severity (and that he should thus venture to misquote his favourite bard showed even more than his tone the perturbation of his mind). ‘The document, however, will be left here—*here*,’ he repeated significantly, ‘for your private scrutiny and investigation; I only trust that you may find cause to withdraw your aspersions, groundless in themselves, as they are disparaging to my dear son William Henry, and offensive to this respectable and learned company, about, as I see with regret, to take their leave.’

If Mr. Erin had suddenly seized a hammer and smote him on the forehead, Mr Dennis could hardly have been more astonished than at this gratuitous onslaught. He resolved to wait till the company had dispersed, which, at that broad hint received from its host, it [142] proceeded to do, and then demand an explanation.

Mr. Erin, however, anticipated him. ‘I was somewhat more vehement, Dennis,’ he said, ‘in the remarks that I addressed to you just now than the occasion demanded; but the fact is, some sort of diversion was imperatively demanded. My friends, I saw, were getting turbulent; the discovery of the quintin on the seal was too much for them, already excited as they were by the exhibition of this extraordinary document. Sir Frederick in particular, under circumstances of such extreme temptation, I knew to be capable of any outrage. I made you—I confess it—the scapegoat, by means of which the safety of the precious manuscript has been secured. In compensation, take it and look at it as long as you like. What I said about your incredulity, though somewhat justified by the past, you must admit, was in the main but a pious fraud. Like any man of intelligence, you cannot but revere the document. It is yours, say, [143] for the next five minutes. Then it goes into my iron case, for “Who shall be true to us,” as he whose honoured name lies there before you, in his own handwriting, has observed, “if we be unsecret to ourselves?”’

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CHAPTER IX.

AN UNWELCOME VISITOR.

Although it may be very true that kings can affect but little the happiness of their subjects, the petty kings of every household—from Paterfamilias the First down to his latest descendants—have a very important influence in that way. The difference which a morose or cheerful parent makes in the lives of those beneath their roof is incalculable. In the one case the atmosphere of existence is all cloud, in the other, all sunshine. It must be confessed that up to this period the Jupiter of the little household in Norfolk Street had been something of a Jupiter Pluvius. There were storms, there were tears; and even when it was not so, the domestic sky was sullen. From the date of the discovery, however, of that note of hand, from William Shakespeare to John Hemynge, the weather cleared. Moreover, matters looked all the brighter by contrast. It is one of the many advantages that selfish persons of strong will possess, that when they do condescend to be genial, people are prone to believe that they always were so, or at all events that they have misjudged them in setting them down as churlish. [145]

> So in the Orient, when the gracious light
> Lifts up his long-hid head, each under eye
> Doth homage to this new appearing sight,
> . . . .
> And mortal looks adore his majesty.

Mr. Erin’s domestics began to acknowledge that their master was not half a bad fellow; and his niece, to whom, however, it is but fair to say he had always been kind, was quite triumphant over his new-found good nature. ‘Now, Willie, did I not always tell you so?’ &c., while Frank Dennis had reason to believe that he had at last been quite forgiven his heretical doubts as to whether deer could shed tears as easily as their antlers.

As to William Henry himself, the strides he had made in Mr. Erin’s favour, thanks to that ‘find’ of his in the ‘Templar’s’ chambers, was something magical, as if he had got seven-league boots on. His father even called him Samuel, as though he were verily and indeed that son he had lost with all the hopes that were wrapped up in him. It must be confessed, however, that this may have been partly owing to the birth of new hopes; William Henry, indeed, though he had twice visited his friend in the Temple since that one momentous occasion, had found nothing very new—or rather very old—there; but on the other hand, what Mr. Erin justly thought a great piece of good fortune, and one that showed promise of much more, had befallen him. On looking over his patron’s papers he came across a deed of no great antiquity in truth, but which to that gentleman himself was especially valuable, since it established his right to a certain property that had long been the subject of litigation. For this, something was certainly due to the young man himself, since, but for his legal learning and knowledge of the nature of the document, he might easily have passed it over as being of no importance. It was, therefore, not so very surprising that the old gentleman, in a sudden glow of gratitude, for which his mind, from its natural leaning towards the young fellow was, as it were, ‘ready laid,’ had given him a promise that whatever he might henceforth discover among his papers of general interest should, by way of recompense for the service he had rendered him, become his own. [146] [147]

Gladly as William Henry himself doubtless received this mark of his patron’s favour, his joy could hardly have exceeded that of Mr. Erin when the news was communicated to him. It must need be confessed, however, that his gratitude was not wholly dissociated from a sense of favours to come.

‘Why, my dear lad,’ he cried, ‘this note of hand of Shakespeare’s, priceless as it is, may be yet outdone by what remains to be discovered. In this strange treasure-trove of which you speak, of the contents of which, both as to their nature and value, their owner seems to be wholly ignorant, there may be, for all we know, whole letters in Shakespeare’s handwriting, copies of his plays, a sonnet or two, possibly even the skeleton of some play which he never filled in with flesh-and-blood characters, the hint of some divine tragedy— [148]

gracious Goodness!' and Mr. Erin threw up his hands in speechless ecstasy, as though a glimpse of heaven had been vouchsafed to him of which it was not lawful for him to discourse further.

'Of course it is possible, sir,' returned William Henry gravely. 'But for my part I dare not trust myself to think of what may be lying in yonder lumber rooms. Just now, indeed, I am giving my attention solely to my patron's library, arranging the bookshelves and making out the catalogue. After his generous promise I purposely forego the pleasure of investigation lest I should be considered grasping.'

'Fire!' interrupted the old man suddenly with tremulous anxiety. 'Think of fire! You know what happened at Clopton House; and though of course your patron would never wilfully destroy a scrap of paper with any antiquity about it, yet who can guard against accident—carelessness? One spark from a candle and the world may be robbed of we know not what. Oh, my dear lad, for the world's sake, if not for mine, I pray you lose no time. Never mind your work; I'll settle all that with Bingley. Stick to the lumber-room—I mean the precious manuscripts. [149]

'Dull not device by coldness and delay.'

The eagerness of the old man was in its intensity quite touching. No lover entreating his mistress for the momentous monosyllable could have been more earnest, or even more passionate. William Henry himself, who, throughout the late stirring incidents, which promised to affect his future so nearly, had kept himself studiously calm and quiet, was deeply moved.

'I will do my best, sir,' he replied in agitated tones; 'nothing pleases me better than to give you pleasure.'

'That is well said,' returned the old man graciously. Margaret looked on with approving eyes. Supposing even what the young man had so rashly set his heart on should bear no fruit—if his dream should not be realised—it was surely well that such friendly relations should be established between him and the man who, if not his own flesh and blood, was his natural protector. It was very satisfactory also to see that Willie was responding to Mr. Erin's overtures of good-will. [150]

As to these last there could be no doubt as to her uncle's change of front towards her cousin (to whom indeed he had hitherto shown no front at all, but had turned his back upon him); and that very evening there was another proof of it. As the three were sitting down to supper, William Henry noticed that the table was laid for four. Under ordinary circumstances he would have taken it for granted that Dennis was coming, but he knew that the architect was out of town on business. He was not yet on such intimate terms with the master of the house as to inquire who was the expected guest, and supposed him to be one of the Shakespearean literati who were now dropping in at all times. [151]

Presently there was a knock at the door, whereat Margaret looked at her uncle with a significant smile, and her uncle looked at William Henry.

'I have got a pleasant surprise for you, my lad,' he said gaily. 'Some time ago—indeed it was before Maggie came to live with us—you had a friend whose companionship I thought was doing you no good, and I gave him the cold shoulder. It is never too late to own oneself in the wrong; he certainly did you no harm and perhaps intended none. It is only natural that you should have friends of your own age, and that they should be made welcome in your father's house; so, as you told me he was in town, I sent round a note to him to ask him to drop in to-night to supper.'

Before William Henry could reply the door opened and the servant announced Mr. Reginald Talbot.

The new-comer was a fresh-complexioned young gentleman of about eighteen or so, rather clumsily built for his age, with long, reddish-brown hair and bold eyes. They did not look at all like near-sighted eyes, but he wore round his neck what was then called a quizzing-glass, held by the hand, through which he now surveyed the present company. His attire, if not more fashionable than Mr. Erin's guests were wont to wear, showed a much greater taste for colours. His waistcoat was heavily laced, and the buckles on his shoes, if, as was probable, they were not made of real diamonds, shone by candlelight as though they had been. [152]

'It is very kind of you, Mr. Erin,' he said, ''pon honour, to let me

drop in in this way. If I had known that there were ladies present'—here he glanced at Margaret and bowed like a dancing master—'I would have put on more suitable apparel.'

'Pooh, pooh! you're smart enough,' said Mr. Erin in a tone in which contempt and politeness struggled ludicrously for the upper hand. 'This is only my niece, Margaret Slade; there's your old friend, William Henry. Didn't I say, my lad'—here he turned to his son and clapped him on the shoulder—'that I had got a surprise for you?' [153]

Of course Mr. Erin had meant it well, just as he had done when he had made him that priceless present of 'Stokes, the Vaulting Master,' but, as in that case, it would have seemed to a close observer that he had not exactly hit upon the meed of merit most to William Henry's fancy. That young gentleman shook hands indeed with the new-comer cordially enough, but, whether from surprise or some other cause, could at first find no better topic to converse upon than the weather.

'I suppose,' he said, 'you have not been having much more sun where you have come from than we have had.'

'Sun!' echoed the other drily. 'I suppose there is not much difference in the weather of Norfolk Street and that of the Strand. I have been in London, as I wrote to you I should be, these ten days, and not a hundred yards away, if you had cared to come and see me.'

'I didn't understand that from your letter,' stammered William Henry. 'I thought—— ' [154]

'I think I can explain this matter, Mr. Talbot,' interposed Mr. Erin; 'satisfactorily as far as William Henry is concerned, if somewhat to my own disadvantage. Under a misconception which it is unnecessary to explain, I had tacitly forbidden my son to visit you. I am sorry for it. I hope you will now make up for it by seeing a good deal of one another while you remain in town.'

'You're very good, I'm sure,' said Talbot. He looked from father to son in a vague and puzzled way, and then he looked at Margaret through his spyglass. The young lady, annoyed to be so surveyed, cast down her eyes, and Mr. Erin, with some revival of his old caustic tone, inquired, 'Do you propose to deprive your friends at home of your society for any length of time?'

'A week or two, perhaps more,' returned the other, without a shade of annoyance; he had evidently taken his host's remark *au sérieux*. 'I am come up on business of my own,' he added grandly; 'for as to old Docket, though my articles are not yet run out, I treat him as I please.' [155]

'You are in the fortunate position of having a competence of your own, I conclude.'

'Well, yes; that is, I come into it on my majority. Something in land and also in hand. I shall then leave the law and pursue the profession of a man of letters.'

'Heaven deliver us!' ejaculated Mr. Erin.

'Sir?' exclaimed the visitor.

'And make us thankful for all its mercies,' added his host, bending over his plate.

'I beg pardon; grace,' muttered Mr. Talbot, growing red to the roots of his hair.

Margaret reddened too, for it was not usual with her uncle to say grace; and William Henry reddened also with suppressed laughter. He had not given his father credit for so much dexterity.

'And now I daresay, William Henry, you would like a talk with your old friend in your own room,' observed Mr. Erin; 'you must make Mr. Talbot quite at home here.'

The young gentleman looked as if he would quite as soon have remained in the society of Miss Margaret, who had obviously attracted his admiration, while William Henry could hardly repress a groan. But so broad a hint could scarcely be ignored, and the two young men retreated together accordingly. [156]

'I hope William Henry is pleased, my dear,' said the old gentleman, when he found himself alone with his niece. 'He cannot say that I have not made some little sacrifice. But why had he not been to see this fellow—I gave him leave.'

'Nay, sir, you did not give him leave implicitly; you said that if he met Mr. Talbot he was to give him your compliments. Willie is

always so very particular not to overstep your permission in any way.'

Mr. Erin muttered an articulate sound such as a bumble-bee makes when imprisoned between two panes of glass. It was not exactly 'hum,' but it resembled it. William Henry was now all that he could wish him to be, but there had been occasions—though to be sure there was now no need to think of them—when he had not been so very careful to obey the paternal commands. [157]

'Well, I hope he appreciates my little surprise,' he murmured; '"a man of letters," forsooth! Never, never, was I so pestered by a popinjay.'

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CHAPTER X.

TWO POETS.

HAT on earth is the meaning of all this?' was the first question that Reginald Talbot put to his friend, when they found themselves alone together.

'Of all what?' returned William Henry indifferently. 'Here are pipes, by the way; will you smoke a little tobacco?'

'There it is again,' cried Talbot; 'I say once more, what is the meaning of it? The [159] idea of your respectable father permitting us to smoke under his roof. Why, it was only, as it were, under protest that he was wont to permit you to breathe. Then, as for me, he used to think me something worse than one of the wicked; an anomalous emanation from Grub Street; a sort of savage with cash in his pocket: whereas his tone to me now is as the honey of Hybla. What magic has wrought this change in the old curmudgeon?'

'Well, perhaps of late he has got to understand me better, and consequently my friends, suggested William Henry.

'Oh, *that* can't be it,' replied Talbot contemptuously; 'I should say if he knew as much about you as I did he would behave worse to you than ever. I don't mean anything offensive to you, my dear fellow,' added the speaker, for his companion's face had grown very troubled; 'on the contrary, I compliment you. It's just those qualities I admire most in you which would least recommend you to his good graces. On the other hand, if you have a fault in my eyes, it is an [160] excess of caution. Come, be frank with me, what is the tune which has set this rhinoceros a dancing?'

'I have had the good fortune to find an old manuscript which has put my father in high good humour.'

'And the young lady, your cousin, is she, too, enamoured of old manuscripts?'

'Well, not that I am aware of,' laughed William Henry.

'Then I congratulate you,' was the quick rejoinder; 'it is now obvious to me that she is enamoured of *you*. That her affections were bespoken in some direction from the first was plain from the manner in which she received my advances.'

'Your advances?'

'Yes; you have heard of the power of the human eye over the brute creation. Well, that is nothing to the effects of this,' he tapped his spy-glass, 'upon the sensibilities of angelic woman. I have never known it fail, except when their minds are preoccupied with another object. I am writing an epic, to be entitled "The Spy-glass," the [161] views of which, though founded on personal experience, will be quite novel. And that reminds me, how often have we not read our poems to one another? Why have you never come to see me since I have been at the "Blue Boar?"'

'My dear fellow, as you heard my father say—— ' began William Henry persuasively.

'Tut, tut, I mean your *real* reason,' put in the other scornfully. 'We used to meet often enough when the rhinoceros did not dance, when he was very far from dancing. Yet now—— '

'The fact is, my dear fellow,' interrupted William Henry earnestly, 'there *is* a reason.'

'I have reached that point already without a guide,' observed the other drily.

'The truth is—— ' pursued William Henry.

Mr. Reginald Talbot took the pipe from his mouth and laughed aloud. Certainly no diplomatic explanation could have been conducted under greater difficulties. 'Some people yearn for fame, my dear Erin,' he said; 'to others it is very undesirable to be well [162] known, even by a single individual.'

'If you imagine I wish to deceive you, Talbot, you are quite wrong,' said William Henry firmly, 'but it is true that I cannot be so

frank with you as I could wish. I have a secret which is not my own, or you may be sure that you should share it. Listen.' Then he told him the whole story of his acquaintance with the Templar and its singular result. Talbot listened to him with great attention.

'It is very curious,' he remarked when the narrative was finished, 'and certainly a great stroke of luck. But it is like a tale from the "Arabian Nights." Nay, I don't mean on the score of veracity,' for William Henry had flushed crimson, 'but from its parenthetic nature. It is a story within a story; for if you can stretch your memory so far, you began with the intention of telling me why you never came to see your old friend at the "Blue Boar?"'

'It was because I had no time, Talbot. I have to do my work at the office, and also to attend upon my new acquaintance at the Temple.' [163]

'You must be occupied indeed; not a moment in which to say, "How-d'ye-do? Good-morrow!"'

'There were also my father's injunctions. I thought such a fleeting visit as you speak of would be worse than nothing, and would cause you more annoyance than being neglected; but now my father and you are friends I will certainly find time to renew the ancient days.'

'Come, that is better. Now shall I fill up what is wanting in your explanation and make all clear?'

'If you please,' said William Henry indifferently, 'though I am not aware that there is anything more.'

'Yes, there is your cousin Margaret,' said Talbot, with a cunning air; 'you would have braved the anger of the rhinoceros and followed your own inclinations—which I flatter myself would have led you to come and see me—had his favour been no more important to you than of yore. But he holds in his hand another hand, of which [164] he has the disposal, and therefore it behoves you to be on your best behaviour.'

'You have guessed it,' exclaimed William Henry with admiration. 'If I thought you could have sympathised with me, as I see you do, I should have saved you the trouble of guessing.'

'Sympathise with you? When was son of the Muses indifferent to the love wound of his friend? Have we not always sympathised with one another? Does any one except yourself admire your poetry as much as I do? Can I anywhere find a friend more capable of appreciating the higher flights of mine than *you*? I have done a good deal, by-the-bye, in that way since I saw you last, Erin; not to mention six cantos of "The Spy-glass," I have written one-and-twenty songs; some of them may be useful to you if your inspiration has flagged of late, for they are all to my mistress—whose name, like yours, is fortunately in three syllables—a madrigal or two, and a number of miscellaneous pieces, chiefly satirical. To-morrow—you [165] said to-morrow, I think—we will devote to recitation.'

William Henry's countenance fell. He had heard Mr. Reginald Talbot's recitations before. They were not extempore, but they had one fatal attribute in common with extemporaneous effusions—there was no knowing where they would end. If he had been invited to recite his own poetry, that would have been a different thing.

'Nothing would be more agreeable to me, my dear fellow, but how am I to excuse my absence from chambers?'

'Then I'll come to your chambers instead of your coming to me; I shall thus have the opportunity of seeing how *your* muse has progressed; we will compare notes together. To be sure, it is not as if you had your room to yourself; there's that disagreeable fellow-clerk of yours, a most unappreciative and flippant person.'

'Yes, he would spoil everything,' put in William Henry eagerly. 'It is better we should be alone together, even for a less time, at the [166] "Blue Boar."'

'Very good; then give me as long as you can to-morrow. I want your advice, for the fact is, the business on which I am come up to town is about the publication of my poems. The publisher and I cannot agree about terms, which seems strange, since what we both want is money down. Perhaps you wouldn't mind my selecting a few of your very best—you and I could rig out a twin volume together, like Beaumont and Fletcher.'

'Perhaps,' observed William Henry dubiously.

He had private and pressing reasons for conciliating Mr. Reginald Talbot, but to such a monstrous proposition as had just been made to him he felt he could never consent. It would be like

yoking his Pegasus to a dray horse. As regarded other matters, it was true that Talbot and he were old friends—or rather it would be more correct to say that they had for years of boyhood been thrown into one another's company; the bond of school-friendship is, however, soon weakened under the influence of other conditions, as hothouse flowers fade and fail in the open air; and moreover, when angered, Talbot, who piqued himself on his knowledge of human nature, had a habit of saying what he thought of his antagonist, which was not the less intolerable if it happened to be correct. Their tastes, it was true, were similar, but involved some rivalry, and each perhaps was secretly conscious that the other did not admire his verses so much as he pretended to do. With the Irish Channel between them, they would doubtless have continued to get on capitally together, but, as intimates, the path of friendship had pitfalls. It must be added that Mr. Reginald Talbot's arrival in town had taken place at a most inconvenient season, and was, in a word, unwelcome to his former crony. That this was not perceived by Talbot was not so much owing to the other's tact as to his own conceit, which was stupendous; but fortunately it was not seen. Perhaps our young friend did not quite believe in the Irish gentleman's sympathy with him in respect to Margaret, and misdoubted his 'Spy-glass;' perhaps he thought him, if not too wise, too cunning by half. At all events he greatly regretted that his brother bard had just now come to London, and especially about the remunerative production of his poems, which he had reason to believe would be a protracted operation. [167] [168]

The next afternoon, when he paid his promised visit to the 'Blue Boar,' a circumstance occurred which caused him increased annoyance.

'I say, my astute young friend,' were Talbot's first words, delivered in that half morose, half bantering way which was habitual to him when ready primed for a quarrel, 'where have you been to these last three hours?'

'To the Temple. Did I not tell you that I generally went there in the afternoon? As to the exact locality, you must perceive the impropriety of my mentioning it even to you.'

'Still you might speak the truth about other matters. Why did you not tell me that old Bingley had dismissed his second clerk?'

'What possible interest could the circumstance have for you?' [169]

'Only that you allowed me to conclude that he was still there, in order that I should not come to New Inn.'

'Very good; then you know the reason.'

Mr. Reginald Talbot grew very red, and his stout frame grew visibly stouter. William Henry, however, though more slightly built, was not his inferior (as he had more than once had the opportunity of discovering) either in courage or in the art of self-defence.

'After behaving in so false a manner to me, sir,' said Talbot, pointing to a very considerable heap of MSS. written in parallel lines, 'I shall not read you my poems.'

'Thank you; that is returning good for evil,' said William Henry coolly. 'Read them to yourself and not aloud, or you will set the cats a caterwauling,' and with that he clapped his hat on and marched out of his friend's apartments.

It was not one of those quarrels described as the renewal of love; it was a deadly feud. A woman, even if she is not as fair as Venus, may forgive an imputation on her good looks, but a poet, conscious of an inferiority to Shakespeare, does not forgive a slight inflicted on his muse. [170]

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CHAPTER XI.

THE LOVE-LOCK.

Whether William Henry’s short method with Mr. Reginald Talbot was to be satisfactory or not remains to be seen, but for the present it had all the effect intended. The inmate of the ‘Blue Boar’ confined himself to his own quarters, or, at all events, did not take advantage of the general invitation given to him by Mr. Samuel Erin to visit Norfolk Street. Nor did that gentleman make any inquiry into the cause of his absence. He had done his best to pleasure his son and encourage him in his discoveries, but was well content that ‘the popinjay’ kept away. With William Henry—and this was, perhaps, even a greater proof of the change in the old man than his more active kindnesses—he was very patient and unimportunate. He would cast one look of earnest inquiry on the young fellow as he came home every evening, and, receiving a shake of the head by way of reply, would abstain from further questioning. Such was his admiration for the nameless inmate of the Temple that he respected his wish for silence, even as it were at second hand. This behaviour was most acceptable to its object, and the more so, since the reticence Mr. Erin thus observed in his own case he imposed upon his visitors, who would have otherwise subjected William Henry to the question, *forte et dure*, half a dozen times a day. He had persuaded himself that if once the mysterious visitor should get to know that a fuss was being made about that note of hand, he would withdraw his favours from his protégé altogether. [172]

One evening William Henry came home a little earlier than usual, and in return to his father’s inquiring look returned a smile full of significance.

‘I have found something, father,’ he said, ‘but you must be content, in this case, with the examination of it.’

‘Then your friend has gone back from his word,’ replied the old man; ‘well, it was almost too much to expect that he should have kept to it.’ [173]

‘Nay, you must not misjudge him, father, for the very restrictions he has placed upon me mean nothing but kindness. The treasure trove is this time for Margaret.’

‘Margaret! what does he know about Margaret? Well, at all events, it is in the family.’

This reflection alone would hardly have been sufficient to smooth away disappointment from the old man’s brow, had it not also struck him that his niece had no great taste for old MSS., and that a new gown, with a fashionable breast-knot, or some Flanders lace, would probably be considered an equivalent for the original draft of Hamlet.

‘Come, come, let us hear about it?’

‘But if you please, sir, we must wait for my cousin, my patron said—— ‘

‘Maggie, Maggie!’ exclaimed the old man, running out into the little hall and calling up the stairs, ‘come down this moment; here is a present for you.’ [174]

At the unwonted news Maggie ran downstairs, arranging the last touches of her costume upon the way, and arriving in the parlour in the most charming state of flush and fervour. Entranced with her beauty, and conscious of having made another step towards the accomplishment of his hopes, William Henry devoured her with his eyes. It was seldom, indeed, that he committed such an imprudence—in company—but if he had kissed her, it is probable, under the circumstances, Mr. Erin would have made no remark, or set it down to Shakespearean enthusiasm.

‘Another MS., Maggie!’ he cried triumphantly.

‘Come, that is better than fifty presents,’ answered Maggie, beaming. ‘I forgive you for your trick upon me, uncle, with all my heart.’

‘But what I have found is for *you*,’ said William Henry, firmly.

‘Just so,’ exclaimed Mr. Erin, hurriedly, ‘the MS. or something of equal worth, that you would like vastly better. Let us see; now, let us see.’

‘Maggie, Maggie, here is a present for you.’

[175] William Henry took out of his pocket an ancient, timeworn piece of paper, carefully unfolded it, and produced from it a lock of brown straight hair.

‘I thought you said it was a MS.,’ exclaimed Mr. Erin, in a tone of extreme disappointment. ‘Why, this is only hair, and if I may be allowed to say so, not a very good specimen even of that.’

‘Nevertheless, sir, such as it is, it is Shakespeare’s hair!’

‘Shakespeare’s hair!’ echoed Mr. Erin, falling into rather than sitting down on the nearest chair; ‘it is impossible—you are imposing on me.’

William Henry turned very white, and looked very grave and pained.

‘Oh, uncle, how can you say such a thing!’ cried Margaret, plaintively: ‘poor Willie!’

‘I did not mean that, my lad, of course,’ gasped Mr. Erin; ‘I scarcely know what I say. It seems too great a thing to be true. *His* [176] hair!’ He eyed it with speechless reverence, as it lay in his son’s open palm; his trembling fingers hovered round it, like the wings of a bird round the nest of its little ones, but did not venture to touch it.

‘Where was it found?’ he murmured.

‘Wrapped up in this paper, a letter to Anne Hathaway, which mentions the fact of his sending her the lock, and encloses some verses.’

‘Is it possible?’ exclaimed the old man, with intense excitement; ‘oh, happy day! Read it, read it! I can see nothing clearly.’

The letter ran as follows:

> ‘Dearesste Anna,—As thou haste alwaye founde mee toe my worde moste
> treue, so thou shalt see I have stryctlye kept mye promyse. I praye
> you perfume thys mye poore Locke withe thye balmye eyess, fore thenne,
> indeede, shalle Kynges themmeselves love and paye homage toe itte. I doe
> assure thee no rude hand hath knottedde itte, thye Willys alone hath
> done the worke. Adewe sweete love.
>
> ‘Thyne everre,
>
> ‘Wm. Shakespeare.’

[177]

‘Most tender, true, and precious!’ exclaimed the antiquary, ecstatically; ‘and now the verses?’

‘There are but two, sir,’ said the young man, apologetically:—

‘“Is therre in heavenne aught more rare
Thane thou sweete nymphe of Avon fayre,
Is therre onne earthe a manne more treue
Thanne Willy Shakespeare is toe you?”’

William Henry read very well, and with much pathos, and into the last line he put especial tenderness which did not need the covert glance he shot at her to bring the colour into Margaret’s cheek.

‘“Though deathe with neverre faylinge blowe,
Doth manne and babe alyke bringe lowe;
Yet doth he take naught butte hys due
And strikes not Willy’s heart still treue.”’

‘What simplicity, what fidelity!’ murmured the antiquary; ‘a flawless gem indeed! Whence did you unearth it?’

‘I found it where I found the other deed, sir, amongst my patron’s [178] documents; I took it, of course, to him at once. He was greatly surprised and interested, and fully conscious of the value of the godsend; yet he never showed the least sign of regret at the gift he made me, of what he was pleased to call the jetsam and flotsam from his collection. ‘“If I were a younger man,” he said, “I think I should have grudged you that lock of hair. It is just the sort of present a young fellow should give to the girl he has a respect for. A thing that costs nothing, yet is exceedingly precious, and which speaks of love and fidelity. It is too good for any antiquary.”’

‘Your patron is mad, my lad,’ said Mr. Erin, in a tone of cheerful conviction; ‘he *must* be mad to talk like that; and, indeed, he would never give away these things at all if he were in his sober senses. The idea of bestowing such an inestimable relic upon a girl! Why, it should rather be preserved in some museum in the custody of trustees, to the delight of the whole nation for ever.’

‘Nevertheless, sir, such was my patron’s injunction. He asked of me if I knew any pure and comely maiden, well brought up, and who [179] would understand the value of such a thing. I had therefore, of course, no choice but to mention Margaret; whereupon he said that the lock of hair was to be hers.’

‘I’ll keep it for you, Maggie, in my iron press,’ said Mr. Erin considerately. ‘You shall look at it—in my presence—as often as you like; and then we shall both know that it is safe and sound. As for the letter and verses, Samuel, it will be better to put them for the present, perhaps, in the same repository.’

‘You may put them where you like, sir,’ answered William Henry smiling, as he always did when addressed by that unwonted name; ‘they are yours.’

‘A good lad, an excellent lad,’ murmured the antiquary; ‘now let us with all due reverence inspect these treasures. This is the very hair I should have looked for as having been the immortal bard’s, just as the engraving by Droeshart depicts it in the folio edition. Brown, straight, and wiry, as Steevens terms it.’

‘I should not call it wiry, uncle,’ observed Margaret, ‘though to [180] be sure it has no curl nor gloss on it; it seems to me soft enough to have been a woman’s hair.’

‘It is, perhaps, a trifle silkier and more effeminate than the description would warrant,’ returned the antiquary, ‘but that is doubtless due to the mellowing effects of time. It may be so far looked upon as corroborative evidence. In that connection, by-the-bye, let me draw your particular attention to the braid with which the hair is fastened. This woven silk is not of to-day’s workmanship. I recognise it as being of the same kind used in the reigns of Mary and Elizabeth for attaching the royal seal to patents: a most interesting circumstance, and one which, were there any doubt of the genuineness of the hair, might, like the impress of the quintin in the case of the Hemynge deed, be reasonably adduced as an undesigned coincidence. Then to think that we have it under his own hand that Shakespeare’s fingers have knotted it. Read his words once again, my son, before we put the priceless treasure by.’

‘“I doe assure thee no rude hand hath knottedde itte, thye Willys [181] alone hath done the worke.”’

‘How tender, how touching!’ exclaimed the antiquary. ‘We seem

to be in his very presence. What a privilege has this day been vouchsafed to us, my children!’

The two young people glanced at one another involuntarily as the old man addressed them by this title.

It is probable that Mr. Erin attached no particular meaning to it. It may have been only the expression of the measureless content he felt with both of them; with his son for what he had brought him, and with his niece for the readiness with which she had resigned what he had brought to his own custody. But to their ears it had a deep significance.

As their looks met, that of William Henry was so full of tender triumph that Maggie’s face became crimson, and she cast down her eyes. For the first time she began to believe in the possibility of the realisation of the young man’s dream. Notwithstanding what had passed between them, she had hitherto felt more like a sister towards him than a lover; it was not that she feared to risk the wreck of her own happiness by trusting it to so slight a bark, but that, while matters were so uncertain, a natural and modest instinct prevented her from regarding him as he regarded her. There had been a sort of false dawn of love with her, but, now that her uncle seemed to give such solid ground for hope, the sun which had long lain in wait behind those clouds of doubt came out with all the splendour of the morn. Love arose within her.

As Mr. Erin reverently placed his treasures in the iron safe, William Henry stole his arm round Margaret’s waist:—

> ‘Is there on earthe a manne more treue
> Than Willie Erin is to you?’

he whispered softly: and for the first time she did not reprove him.

CHAPTER XII.

A DELICATE TASK.

Great as had been Mr. Erin’s joy when he first looked on Shakespeare’s love-lock and love letter, it by no means wore off—as our violent delights are apt to do—as time went on. What was wanting in the way of novelty was made up to him perhaps—for we may be sure Margaret did not insist upon her rights in the matter—by the sense of possession. For what was the position of the man who had in his cupboard some unique pieces of china, or even in his coffers the biggest ruby or diamond in the world, as compared with his own? Only, as in the latter case, he grew not a little nervous for the safety of his unrivalled treasure. He was a *virtuoso* and antiquary himself, [184] and therefore recognised the full extent of his danger. In his iron press he caused a little well to be sunk, in which the lock of hair was placed under glass, for the contemplation of the faithful, and none was ever permitted to behold it save in his presence. Even then he did not feel safe, but compelled himself to adopt a plan to ensure security which galled him to the quick. Just as in old times black mail was wont to be given by the rich to leading and powerful robbers as an insurance on their goods, so Mr. Samuel Erin did not hesitate to offer to the more audacious and formidable of his learned brethren bribes, and those of the most precious kind imaginable. Though every thread taken from Shakespeare’s lock gave him a pang infinitely keener than the drawing out of his own beard with pincers would have done, he actually distributed a few of these precious hairs among his friends, which they placed reverently in rings and lockets. We may be sure that Sir Frederick Eden had a genuine hair or two; but it was whispered by the envious (who were many) that upon applications becoming numerous Mr. Erin’s favours grew in proportion, [185] which, as the lock did not diminish, could only arise from some other source of supply.

Among the recipients who entertained this doubt, or among those who received no such sacred relic at all, there were some who had the hardihood to assert that no human hair could have resisted the lapse of time since Shakespeare’s days. They even produced a Mr. Collett, a hair merchant, who came to inspect the lock—from a distance of several feet, however—and who had the hardihood to express this opinion in the proprietor’s presence. To describe the effect of anger in aged persons, especially when accompanied with personal violence, is painful to one who, like the present writer, has a respect for the dignity of human nature, so we will draw a veil over what ensued, but it is certain that Mr. Collett left Norfolk Street on that occasion with much precipitation—taking the four steps that led to the front door at a bound: he also left his hat behind him, which was thrown after him into the street. It must be admitted that his objections were as absurd as they were [186] impertinent, since it is well known that human hair has survived many centuries of burial; indeed, when the vault of Edward IV., who died in 1483, was opened at Windsor, the hair of the head was found flowing, and as strong as hair cut from the head of a living person. This Sir Frederick Eden privately assured Mr. Erin to be true, since he was not only present at the exhumation, but had been so fortunate, by means of a heavy bribe to the sexton, as to get some of the said hair for his private collection.

Partly from reasons that have been suggested, but chiefly from William Henry’s remonstrance upon his patron’s account—who he felt confident would lay an embargo upon all future treasure troves, if he should find the report of what had happened to interfere with his own ease and privacy—Mr. Samuel Erin took little pains to circulate the news of his son’s second discovery; but nevertheless it oozed out, and in spite of himself William Henry found himself to be in some respects a public character. [187] Whoever called to see the manuscripts inquired also if the young gentleman was at home, to receive from his own lips the oft-told tale of their discovery. This was exceedingly irksome to him; he would much rather have been reading and talking to his fair cousin, and let his father have all the glory of exhibition and explanation to himself. But Maggie never grudged him to these inquirers; she was pleased to find he was so much sought after, and took a greater pride in it than even her

uncle. William Henry went to New Inn, as usual, but it was well understood that the time he spent there was of little consequence, as compared with his visits to the Temple. Mr. Erin ever thirsted for new discoveries, not only on their own account, but because, as he justly observed, the greater the bulk of them, the more probable would their genuineness appear to those inclined to question it. The antiquary demands not only treasure but credit, and though Mr. Erin himself entertained no doubts, he would rather that other people had none; just as the gentleman who kept the thousand-pound note framed and glazed upon his mantelpiece, not content with knowing it was from the Bank of England, resented the imputation from his friends of its having been issued from the Bank of Elegance. [188]

Moreover, Mr. Erin was secretly troubled at the continued absence of Frank Dennis. He could, as we have seen, on occasion, and even when there was no occasion, give him the rough side of his tongue, but in his heart he greatly respected him. The old man, thanks to himself, or rather to his temper, had few friends; the bond that united him to those he possessed was itself a source of rivalry and disagreement. But Dennis's father and himself had been as brothers, and after the former died, Mr. Erin had allowed the young man some familiarity, to which certainly none of his years had been admitted before or since.

He professed just now to be absent on business, but business had never detained him from Norfolk Street so long before. Mr. Erin reproached himself with having driven him away by his harsh behaviour, and even went so far as to confess as much to his niece.

[189] 'Of course it annoyed me, wench, to see Frank so obstinate in his incredulity, for that he was incredulous about that note of hand I am certain.'

'I can only say that he never breathed a word of doubt to me, uncle.'

'Nor to me, yet I know he harboured doubts,' was the confident reply. 'He stuck to them even after Sir Frederick found out the quintin on the seals.'

'Still, it's only a matter of opinion, uncle.'

'Opinion! it's what the believers in the Scarlet Woman call inveterate contumacy—they used to burn people for it.'

'Well, but you don't agree with *them*, you know,' smiled Margaret. 'You were always a stickler for the rights of private judgment.'

The antiquary shook his head and pursed his lips, the only reply possible to him under the circumstances; he could not say, 'But when I mean private judgment, I mean the judgment that coincides with my private views.'

[190] 'Perhaps I have been a little hard on him, Maggie, and that is what keeps him away. I wish he were back again.'

This confession from the mouth of such a man was pathetic. What it conveyed, as Margaret partly guessed, was, that in the crowd of flatterers and secret detractors by whom her uncle was surrounded he felt the loss of his honest, if somewhat too outspoken, friend. She felt remorse too, as well as compunction, for in her heart she suspected that she herself was the cause of Frank's absence.

He had doubtless noticed the changed relations between herself and William Henry, and withdrawn himself, but without a word of complaint, from her society. He recognised the right she had to choose for herself, nor did he grudge her the happiness she found in her choice, but he could not endure the contemplation of it. It was out of the question, of course, that she should reveal this to Mr. Erin; but she was too straightforward to corroborate a view of the matter which she knew to be incorrect.

[191] 'I don't think Frank is one, uncle, to take offence at anything you may have said to him about the Deed. He is too sensible—I mean,' she added with the haste of one who withdraws his foot from a precipice, 'his nature is too generous to harbour offence.'

'You really think that, do you?' returned the old man in a tone of unmistakable relief. 'Well, in that case, just drop him a line and let him know how the matter stands. You need not put it upon me at all, but say you miss his society here very much, as, of course, you do.'

Margaret was greatly embarrassed; the task thus proposed to her was almost impossible. She had never written to the young man before, and to do so now in her peculiar circumstances, and for the

purpose of asking him to return to town, would be very painful to her and might be misleading to him.

'I like Mr. Dennis very much, uncle,' she stammered, 'but—— '

'Just so,' interrupted the antiquary; 'this scepticism of his, as you were about to say, is a serious drawback; still, if *I* can get over it, *you* can surely make allowance for him. Moreover, when he sees the [192] lock of hair and the love letter—and perhaps there may be other discoveries by the time he returns—he must be a very Thomas not to believe such proof. Now if it had been he instead of William Henry who had found these precious relics, all would have indeed been well.'

'I don't think we should grudge poor Willie his good fortune, sir,' returned Margaret reprovingly, She was quicker than ever now to take her cousin's part, and her uncle's tone of regret had touched her to the quick. It made it evident to her that his new-found regard for his adopted son was but skin-deep—or rather manuscript-deep. The pity for him that she had always felt had become a deeper and more tender sentiment, and given her more courage to defend him.

'Grudge him? Of course I do not grudge him,' returned the antiquary, fuming. 'I only meant that if Frank Dennis had William Henry's gifts he would be a perfect man; you can tell him *that* if you like.'

[193] For a single instant Margaret saw herself telling Mr. Dennis 'that,' and felt the colour rise to her very forehead. Her uncle noticed that there was a hitch somewhere, and became naturally impatient at finding his wishes interfered with by the scruples of a 'slip of a girl.'

'Well, write what you will,' he continued with irritation, 'only see that it brings him.'

Poor Margaret! She liked Frank Dennis, as she had said, very much; but, as she had only too good reason to believe, not so much as he wished her to do. What she had to say to him was: 'Come to me, but not for my sake.' It was a parallel to the nursery address to the ducks, 'Dilly, Dilly, come and be killed;' only he was not to be killed, but tortured. What were the use of compliments? It was like asking a young gentleman to be best man when he wants to be the bridegroom himself. She could thoroughly depend upon Willie to avoid all appearance of triumph, but there was no getting over the fact that he was Frank's successful rival; though he would never say like the boastful schoolboy to his less fortunate companion, 'Do you like cakes? Then see me eat them!' yet he had the cake, and it was a [194] cake that could not be divided. However, there was no help for it, so she sat down to write her letter.

It was a very difficult and delicate task. She had learnt to call him Frank, but could she address him so on paper? 'Dear Mr. Dennis' was too formal, and 'My dear Mr. Dennis' was, under the circumstances, not to be thought of. She eventually wrote, 'Dear Frank' (how dreadfully familiar it looked—yet a fortnight ago it would have seemed natural enough), 'what delays the wheels of your chariot? If it is business I am sure you must have had time to build a cathedral. My uncle misses you very much'—this sounded unkind; it suggested that no one else regretted his absence, so she added—'as we all do.' Here with a little sigh she underlined *all*, so as to make it appear that she regretted him only as William Henry did, no more and no less. 'I hope, for my uncle's sake, you will come back less of an infidel in Shakespearean affairs. The lock of hair, of the discovery of which you have doubtless heard, has, by-the-bye, [195] thanks to the chivalry of "The Templar," been given to me, so you will understand that any aspersion cast upon its genuineness is a personal matter. The weather is wet—though it should make no difference to an architect, since he can roof himself anywhere—so there is no excuse for your lingering in the country for pleasure's sake.'

Had she dared to say so, she might have hinted very prettily that with him the sunshine would return to Norfolk Street; but she was no longer fancy free. Even as it was, sisterly as she had endeavoured to make the tone of her letter, she feared she might have given him some involuntary encouragement. It was terrible to her to feel so confident as she did that on the receipt of it Frank Dennis would start for London.

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[196]

CHAPTER XIII.

THE PROFESSION OF FAITH.

Two days after Margaret's letter was despatched there was great news from the Temple. Not even on the first day, when William Henry had won Mr. Erin's heart by Shakespeare's note of hand, had the young man's face been so full of promise as when he came in that evening. On the former occasion, anxiety and doubt had mingled with its expectancy, but now it was flushed with triumph. The difference of manner with which he produced his new discovery was also noticeable. It was not only that he felt as sure of the assent of his audience (who were, indeed, but his uncle and Margaret) as of his own, but he displayed a certain self-consciousness of his own position. He was no longer an unknown lad, seeking for the favour [197] of one who should have been his natural protector, for he had already won it. It was true he was still dependent upon him for the means of livelihood, and for something that he prized as highly as existence itself; but Mr. Erin had in some sort, on the other hand, become dependent on him. His reputation as a Shakespearean collector and critic, which was very dear to him, had been immensely increased by his son's discoveries. The newspapers and magazines were full of his good fortune; and even those which disputed the genuineness of his newly acquired possessions made them the subject of continual comment, and added fuel to his notoriety. If such a metaphor can be used without offence in the case of a gentleman of years and learning, Mr. Samuel Erin gazed at William Henry with much the same air of expectation as a very sagacious old dog regards his young master, whom he suspects of having some toothsome morsel in his pocket; he has too much respect for his own dignity to 'beg' for it, by sitting up on his hind legs, or barking, but he moves his tail from side to side, and his [198] mouth waters.

The young gentleman did not, at first, even produce his prize, but sat down at table with a cheerful nod, that seemed to say, 'I have found it at last, and by the sacred bones that rest by Avon's stream, it is worth the finding.'

'Well, Willie,' exclaimed Margaret, impatiently, 'what is it?'

The young man gravely produced two half-sheets of paper.

At the sight of it, for he knew that it was not the new Bath Post, the antiquary's eyes glistened.

'Mr. Erin—— ' began William Henry.

'Why not call me "father," Samuel?' put in the old man, gently; if it was the sense of favours to come that moved him, it was at least a deep and genuine sense of them. Margaret's fair face glowed with pleasure.

'I have often heard you say, father, that you wished above all things to discover what were, in reality, Shakespeare's religious convictions.'

The antiquary nodded assent, but said nothing; the intensity of [199] expectation, indeed, precluded speech; the perspiration came out upon his forehead.

'It distressed you, I know, to believe it possible—as, indeed, the language used by the Ghost in "*Hamlet*" would seem to imply, that he was of the Catholic persuasion. In the profession of faith found at Stratford—— '

'Spurious,' put in Mr. Erin, mechanically; 'that fool, Malone, believed in it, nobody else.'

This was not quite in accordance with fact; for many months the whole Shakespearean world had admitted its authenticity.

'If it had been true, however, it would have offended your sense of the fitness of things.'

'No doubt; still we must take things as they really were.'

Even if it should turn out that Shakespeare was not so good a Protestant as he ought to be, the value of a genuine manuscript was not to be depreciated.

'Well! I have been this day so fortunate as to discover what will [200] put all doubts at rest upon this point. Shakespeare was a Protestant.'

'Thank Heaven!' murmured Mr. Erin, piously. 'If you have done

this, my son, you have advanced the claims of true religion, and quickened the steps of civilisation throughout the world.'

Margaret's eyes opened very wide (as well they might), but they only beheld William Henry. She had been wont to rally him upon his vanity, and especially upon the hopes he had built upon his poetical gifts. Yet how much greater a mark was he making in the world than his most sanguine aspirations had imagined! And how quiet and unassuming he looked! The modest way in which he habitually bore his honours pleased her even more than the honours themselves.

'After all, Maggie,' he would say, after receiving the congratulations of the dilettanti, 'it is nothing but luck.'

As he straightened out the half-sheets of paper on the table, where their homely supper stood untouched and unnoticed, he only permitted himself a smile of gratification. [201]

'It is too long,' he said, 'to read aloud, and the old spelling is difficult.'

His uncle drew his chair close to him, on one side, and Margaret did the like on the other, so that each could read for themselves. Their looks were full of eagerness; the one was thinking of Shakespeare and Samuel Erin, the other of William Henry—and *longo intervallo*—of William Shakespeare.

The MS., which was headed 'William Shakespeare's Profession of Faith,' ran as follows:—

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE'S PROFESSION OF FAITH.

I beynge nowe offe sounde Mynde doe hope thatte thys mye wyshe wille, att mye deathe, bee acceded toe, as I nowe lyve in Londonne, and as mye soule maye perchance, soone quittee thys poore bodye, itte is mye desire thatte inne suche case I maye bee carryed toe mye native place, ande thatte mye Bodye bee there quietlye interred wythe as little pompe as canne bee, and I doe nowe, inne these mye seryouse moments, make thys mye professione of faythe, and which I doe moste solemnlye believe. I doe fyrste looke toe oune lovynge and Greate God [202] and toe his glorious sonne Jesus. I doe alsoe beleyve thatte thys mye weake and frayle Bodye wille returne to duste, butte for mye soule lette God judge thatte as toe himselfe shalle seeme meete. O omnipotente and greate God I am fulle offe synne, I doe notte thinke myeselfe worthye offe thye grace and yette wille I hope, forre evene thee poore prysonerre whenne bounde with gallying irons evene he wille hope for Pittye and whenne the teares of sweete repentance bathe hys wretched pillowe he then looks and hopes for pardonne thenne rouse mye soule and lette hope, thatte sweete cherysher offe all, afforde thee comforte also. O Manne whatte arte thou whye consideres thou thyselfe thus gratelye, where are thye great, thye boasted attrybutes; buryed, loste forre everre in colde Death. O Manne whye attemptest thou toe searche the greatnesse off the Almyghtye thou doste butte loose thye laboure. More thou attempteste, more arte thou loste, tille thye poore weake thoughtes arre elevated toe theyre summite and thenne as snowe from the leffee tree droppe and dystylle themselves tille theye are noe more. O God, manne as I am frayle bye nature, fulle offe synne, yette great God receyve me toe thye bosomme where alle is sweete contente and happyness alle is blyss where dyscontente isse neverre hearde, butte where oune Bonde offe freyndeshippe unytes alle Menne forgive O Lorde alle our synnes, ande withe thye greate goodnesse take usse alle toe thye Breaste; O cheryshe usse like the sweete chickenne thatte under the coverte offe herre spreadynge wings Receyves herre lyttle Broode and hoverynge overre themme keepes themme harmlesse and in safetye.

Wm. Shakespeare.

[203]

Margaret finished the perusal of the MS. before her uncle; her quicker and more youthful eye would probably have done so in any case, but his reverence for the matter forbade rapid reading; she waited respectfully, but also with some little apprehension, for the expression of his opinion.

'This is a godsend!' he exclaimed at last, with a sigh that had almost as much relief as satisfaction in it. 'There can be no longer any doubt about Shakespeare's creed. Is it not beautiful, and full of humility, my child?'

'Yes, uncle.' She knew that the least fault-finding would be resented, yet she could not shut out from her tone a certain feeling of disappointment; 'it is hardly, however, so simple as I should have expected.'

'Not simple!' exclaimed the antiquary in amazement; 'I call it the most natural effusion of a sincere piety that it is possible to imagine.

The diction is solemn and dignified as the subject demands. There are, indeed, some minute particularities of phraseology, and the old spelling to one unaccustomed to it may, as William Henry has observed, be a little difficult; but of all the accusations you could bring against it, that of a want of simplicity, my dear Maggie, is certainly the most frivolous and vexatious.’ [204]

‘I know I am frivolous,’ replied Margaret, with a sly look at her smiling cousin, ‘but certainly did not intend to be vexatious, uncle.’

‘Nay, nay, I was only quoting a legal phrase,’ said Mr. Erin; he had gently drawn the two precious MSS. to himself, and placed an elbow on each of them, in sign of having taken possession. ‘In a case of this kind I need not say that anything in the way of criticism, as to ideas or style, would be out of place, and indeed blasphemous; but no one can blame you for seeking in a proper spirit for enlightenment on this or that point.’

Margaret looked up at William Henry, and with a half-roguish and wholly charming smile inquired ‘May I?’

‘My dear Maggie,’ returned the young man, laughing outright, ‘why, of course you may. Even if you detected the immortal bard in an error it would be no business of mine to defend him.’ [205]

‘I should think not, indeed,’ muttered Mr. Erin.

‘What I was thinking,’ said Margaret, ‘was that if you, Willie, or Mr. Talbot (who informed us the other night, you know, that he was a poet) had written those lines about spreading her wings over her little brood, it would have been considered plagiarism.’

‘What then?’ inquired Mr. Erin contemptuously. ‘It is the peculiar province of a genius such as Shakespeare’s to make everything his own. He improves it by addition.’

‘The idea in question, however, is taken from the New Testament,’ observed Maggie.

To most people, this remark, which was delivered with a demureness that did the young lady infinite credit, would under the circumstances have been rather embarrassing. It did not embarrass Mr. Samuel Erin in the least.

‘What piety it shows! What knowledge of the Holy Scriptures!’ he ejaculated admiringly. ‘How appropriate, too, when we take the subject into consideration—a confession of faith!’ [206]

‘True. I am not quite sure, however, whether the substitution of a chicken for a hen is an improvement.’

‘Now, there I entirely differ from you,’ exclaimed Mr. Erin; ‘just mark the words “O cheryshe usse like the sweete chickenne thatte under the coverte offe herre spreadynge wings receyves herre lyttle Broode and hoverynge over themme keepes themme harmlesse and in safetye.” What tenderness there is in that “sweete chickenne.” Whereas a hen—a hen is tough. We must understand the expression of course as a general term for the female species of the fowl. None, to my mind, but the most determined and incorrigible caviller can have one word to say against it. I have settled that matter, I think, my dear, to your satisfaction; and do not suppose that what you say has annoyed me. If anything else strikes you, pray mention it. Objections from any source—provided only that they are *reasonable*’—a word he uttered very significantly—‘will always have my best attention; I welcome them.’

The Profession of Faith.

'Indeed, uncle, I am not so audacious as to propound objections. There was one thing, however, that seemed to me a little incomprehensible.' [207]

'Possibly, my dear,' he said, with a smile of contemptuous good-nature, which seemed to add, 'I am not so rude as to say "probably."'

He took his elbows off the MS., though he still hovered above it (like the chicken) while she ran her dainty finger over it, taking care, however, not to touch the paper.

'Ah! here it is, "As snowe from the leffee tree." Now, considering that snow falls in winter when the trees are bare, don't you think the word should have been "leafless?"'

'An ordinary person would no doubt have written "leafless,"' admitted Mr. Erin—an ingenious observation enough, since, in the first place, it suggested that an extraordinary genius could have done nothing of the kind, and secondly, it demanded no rejoinder; it gave the antiquary time to cast about him for some line of defence. [208] He produced his microscope and examined the word with great intentness, but it was 'leffee' and not 'leafless' beyond all doubt. 'It is probable,' he presently observed, 'that Shakespeare's minute attention to nature may have caused him, when writing these most interesting words, to have a particular tree in his mind; when, indeed, we consider the topic on which he was writing—death—what is more likely than that his thoughts should have reverted to some churchyard yew? Now the yew, my child, is an evergreen.'

Here Frank Dennis's well-known voice was heard in the little hall without. He must have started for London, therefore, on the instant that he received Margaret's letter. Her heart had foreboded that it would be so, notwithstanding the pains she had taken to make it appear otherwise; she knew that it was her wish that had summoned him, and that he had been sent for, as it were, under false pretences. Much as she esteemed him, she would have preferred the appearance of any one else, however indifferent, such as Mr. Reginald Talbot. [209]

Strange to say, Mr. Samuel Erin, though it was at his own express desire that Frank Dennis had been invited, was just at that moment of the same way of thinking as his niece. If that little difficulty about the epithet, 'leffee,' had not occurred, all would have been well. This new discovery of the Confession, had it been flawless, must needs have converted the most confirmed of sceptics, and, in his crowning triumph, he would have forgiven the young fellow all his former doubts; but, though to the eye of faith this little

flaw was of no consequence, it would certainly give occasion not only for the ungodly to blaspheme—for that they would do in any case—but to the waverer to cling to his doubts. If, on the spur of the moment, Mr. Erin could have explained the matter to his own satisfaction, he would have felt no qualms, but he was secretly conscious that that theory of the evergreen tree would not hold water. It might satisfy a modest inquirer like Margaret, but a hard-headed, unimaginative fellow like Frank Dennis would not be so easily convinced. [210]

As for William Henry, although Frank and he were by no means ill friends, it was not likely that he should have been pleased to see this visitor, whose presence must needs interrupt the *tête-à-tête* with which he now indulged himself every evening with Margaret; and, though he was no longer jealous of his former rival, it was certain that he would much have preferred his room to his company.

The welcome that was given by all three to the new comer was, however, cordial enough. 'You are come, Dennis,' cried Mr. Erin, taking the bull by the horns, 'in the very nick of time. William Henry has to-day found a treasure, beside which his previous discoveries sink into insignificance, "A Profession of Faith," by Shakespeare, written from end to end in his own hand.'

'That must indeed be interesting,' said Frank. His tone, however, was without excitement, and mechanical. His countenance, which had been full of friendship (though when turned to Margaret it had had, she thought, an expression of gentle melancholy), fell as he uttered the words; a gravity, little short of disapproval, seemed to take possession of it. [211]

'Hang the fellow!' murmured Mr. Erin to himself, 'he's beginning to pick holes already.' 'It is the most marvellous and conclusive evidence,' he went on aloud, 'of Shakespeare's adherence to the Protestant faith that heart can desire; but there's a word here that we are in doubt about. Just read the MS. and see if anything strikes you as anomalous.'

Frank sat down to his task. The expression of the faces of the other three would have required the art of Hogarth himself to depict them. That of Margaret's was full of sorrow, pain for herself, and distress for Frank, and annoyance upon her uncle's account. How she regretted having made that stupid objection, though she had done it with a good motive, since she foresaw that it would presently be made by much less friendly critics! Why could she not have been content to let matters take their own course, as Willie always was?

On *his* brow, on the other hand, there sat a complete serenity. From the very first his attitude with respect to his own discoveries had been one of philosophic indifference. Nothing ever roused him from it, not even when the scepticism of others took the most offensive form. He had not, he said, 'the learning requisite for the defence of "the faith" that was in him,' and moreover it did not concern him to defend it. He was merely an instrument; the matter in question was in the hands of others. [212]

This was of course by no means the view which Mr. Erin took. He had not only the confidence but the zeal of the convert. If he would not himself have gone to the stake in defence of the genuineness of his new-found treasure, he would very cheerfully have sent thither all who disputed it. He was regarding his friend Dennis now, as he plodded through the Profession, with anything but amicable looks, but when he marked his eye pass over that weak point in its armour with which we are acquainted, without stoppage, his brow cleared a little, and he gave a sigh of relief.

'Well,' he inquired gently, 'what say you? Have you found the error, or does it seem to you all straight sailing?' [213]

'I had really rather not express an opinion,' said Dennis quietly. 'But if you press me, I must needs confess that the whole composition strikes me as rather rhapsodical.'

'Does it? Then I on my part must needs confess,' returned the antiquary with laborious politeness, 'that I have the misfortune to disagree with you.'

To this observation the young man answered not a word; his face looked very grave and thoughtful, like that of a man who is in a doubt about some important course of conduct, rather than of a mere literary inquiry; nevertheless his words, when they did come, seemed to concern themselves with the latter topic only.

'I doubt,' he said, 'whether the word "accede"'—here he pointed to the phrase 'after my deathe be acceded to'—'was in use in

Shakespeare's time.'

[214] 'And what if it was not?' broke in the antiquary impatiently. 'How many words in old times are found in the most correct writers which it would be vain to hunt for in any dictionary; words which, though destitute of authority or precedent, are still justified by analogy and by the principles of the language. And who, I should like to know, used new words with such licence as Shakespeare himself? As to the matter of fact which you dispute, however, that can be settled at once. The antiquary stepped to his bookcase and took down a volume. 'This is Florio's dictionary, published in 1611. See here,' he added triumphantly, '"Accedere, to accede, or assent to." If Florio mentions it, I suppose Shakespeare may have used it. Your objection, young sir, is not worthy of the name.'

Dennis hung his head; he looked like one who has suffered not only defeat but humiliation. The criticism offered on the spur of the moment had been, in reality, advanced by way of protest against the whole document, and now that it had failed he was very unwilling to [215] offer anything further in the way of disparagement.

He had his reasons for absolutely declining to fall in with Mr. Erin's views in the matter; but it would have given him great distress to quarrel with him. Unhappily, an antiquary the genuineness of whose curios has been disputed, is not often a chivalric antagonist. It is his habit, like the wild Indian and the wilder Irishman, to dance upon his prostrate foe.

'The obstinacy of the commentator,' resumed Mr. Erin, 'is proverbial, and is on some accounts to be excused, but the strictures suggested by ignorance and malignity are mere carping.'

'But it was yourself, sir,' pleaded Dennis, 'who invited criticism: I did not volunteer it.'

'Criticism, yes; but not carping. Now there is a word here,' continued Mr. Erin, not sorry to be beforehand with his adversary in pointing out the blot. 'Here is the word "leffee" where one would have expected "leafless." Now we should be really obliged to you if your natural sagacity, which is considerable, could explain the [216] reason of the substitution. I have already given expression to a theory of my own upon the subject, but we shall be glad of any new suggestion. Why is it "leafy" instead of "leafless?"'

'I should think it was simply because the writer made a mistake,' observed Dennis quietly.

Everybody, the speaker included, expected an outburst. That Shakespeare could have made a mistake was an assertion which they all felt would to Mr. Erin's ear sound little less than blasphemous. To their extreme astonishment he nodded adhesion.

'Now that is really very remarkable, Dennis,' he exclaimed; 'a new idea, and at the same time one with much probability in it. He was writing *currente calamo*—there is scarcely a break in the composition, you observe, from first to last—and it is quite likely that he made this clerical error. What is extremely satisfactory is, that your theory—supposing it to be the correct one, as I think it is—puts the genuineness of the document beyond all question, for if a [217] forger had written it, it is obvious that he would have been very careful to make no such departure from verisimilitude!'

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CHAPTER XIV.

THE EXAMINERS.

OTWITHSTANDING the powerful motives in connection with its munificent but unknown donor that impelled Mr. Samuel Erin to keep ‘the Profession of Faith’ a secret confined to his antiquarian friends, the thing was obviously impossible. It would have been almost as difficult, had the Tables of the Law been verily discovered upon Mount Sinai, to restrict the news to a few members of the religious public. [219] The discovery, and the discoverer, William Henry Erin, became ‘the Talk of the Town.’ It seemed to Margaret impossible that the meritorious though fortunate young fellow could ever become more famous; but the possibilities of greatness are infinite; his foot, as it turned out, was only on the first rung of the ladder. The modest house in Norfolk Street became a sort of metropolitan Stratford-on-Avon; it was absolutely besieged by the antiquarian and learned world. Mr. Malone the commentator, indeed (who had not been invited), publicly announced his intention of not examining the MSS., ‘lest his visit should give a countenance to them, which, from the secrecy that was observed relative to their discovery, they were not entitled to.’ Mr. Steevens took the same course, as did also Dr. Farmer, Lord Orford, and the Bishops of Durham and Salisbury. The air was thick with their pamphlets and loud with their denunciations. But there were more fish than these in the Shakespearean seas, and quite as big ones, who were of a different opinion. [220] Some of them came to scoff, but remained to admire and believe; others, calm and critical, examined and were convinced; others again, arriving in a reverent spirit, were filled with satisfaction and affected even to tears.

Under these circumstances, his own good faith being attacked, as well as these precious treasures maliciously denounced, Mr. Samuel Erin took a bold course. On a table in his sanctuary, side by side with the new discovery, was placed another ‘profession of faith’ in the validity of the MS. in question, which visitors were invited to sign. They were not, of course, compelled to do it; but, having expressed their belief in the genuineness of the document, it seemed not unreasonable that they should commit it to paper. In some cases there were rather humorous scenes. Antiquaries as a rule are not very eager to permanently endorse with their authority the treasures which are not in their own possession; they have been known even to express a cheerful belief in that or this, and afterwards, when unpleasant evidence turns up, to deny that they ever did believe in it; [221] and Mr. Erin, who knew Latin, was an admirer of the ancient line, ‘litera scripta manet,’ which literally translated means, ‘One can’t well wriggle out of one’s own handwriting.’ As pilgrims did not pay for the privilege of admission to view these sacred relics, they were naturally inclined to be civil to their custodians, and, when sufficiently convinced of the genuineness of what they saw, to express themselves with much effusion and enthusiasm. As the paper in question was worded very modestly, but with extreme distinctness, there was no alternative for the impulsive person but to sign it.

‘Delighted to have seen you,’ Mr. Erin would say, as he pressed the hand of his departing guest; ‘your unsought-for and enthusiastic testimony has been most gratifying to me.’

‘Don’t mention it, my dear sir, it is I who have been delighted. It has been a privilege indeed to have set eyes upon so valuable and absolutely authentic a document.’

[222] ‘Then just as a matter of form, be so good as to add your name to this already lengthy roll of Shakespearean critics; it will be the very keystone of the edifice of our faith.’

The faces of some of these enthusiasts, at this modest and reasonable request, would fall from zenith to nadir. They could not eat their own words, but they looked as if they would like to have

eaten Mr. Samuel Erin.

William Henry, who had a strong sense of humour, was sometimes compelled to rush from the room, and hide his face, bedewed with tears of laughter, upon Margaret's shoulder.

These paroxysms used rather to distress her. 'Oh, Willie, Willie, how can you be so frivolous,' she would say, 'on a matter too that is so fraught with good or evil to both of us?'

'Oh, but if you could only *see* them, my darling,' he would reply, 'so civil, so beaming with courtesy and enthusiasm, and then all of a sudden—like a sportsman in a small way, who, boastful of his prowess, finds himself face to face with a wild boar—alarmed, astounded, and without the least hope of escape, you would laugh too. Then, when they *won't* sign, it is almost even better fun. Porson was here this morning; the great Dr. Porson, who knows as much Greek as Troilus did, and certainly can write it better. He drank half a bottle of brandy, a pint of usquebaugh, and all the miscellaneous contents of your uncle's spirit case, and, though he had said but little, was taking his leave in what seemed a state of complete good humour and satisfaction, when Mr. Erin requested the honour of his signature. Then he drew himself up as stiff as a pointer at a partridge. [223]

'"I thank you, sir," he said, "but I never subscribe to anything, much less to a profession of faith." The disbelieving old heathen! I really thought your uncle would have kicked him into the street.'

'Oh, but I am so sorry about Dr. Porson.'

'Why, my darling? He was not really kicked, you know. Don't be sorry for Porson; be sorry for me. If I didn't find some amusement in these people, I believe I should go mad. You have no idea what I suffer from them, their examinations and their cross-examinations—for when they are sceptical they *are* cross-examinations—their pomposity and pretence, are well-nigh intolerable. I don't know whether their patronage or their contempt is the most offensive.' [224]

It was quite true that these investigations were not always a laughing matter to William Henry. On one occasion there was a regular committee of inquiry, composed of what might well be called bigwigs, folks of the highest reputation in matters of erudition, and most of them in full-bottomed perukes. The Rev. Mr. Warton, the commentator, was one of them, solemn as Porson had been, and much more sober; Dr. Parr, the divine and scholar, pompous yet affable, in ecclesiastical apparel, with shovel hat and apron; Pye, the poet laureate, combining the air of a man of letters with the importance belonging to a Government official; and half a dozen other grave and reverend signors. The room was specially arranged for their reception. Mr. Samuel Erin sat at the head of the table in the Shakespearean chair that he had purchased at Anne Hathaway's cottage. The Profession of Faith was spread before the learned epicures as though it was something to eat. Their eyes devoured it. William Henry had a chair to himself a little removed, ready to answer all inquiries. It was by far the most serious examination to which he had been subjected, but he acquitted himself very well. He had nothing, he said, to tell them but the simple truth. As to the genuineness of the document in question, he knew nothing, and had not even an opinion to offer on the subject. [225]

These visitors were not Mr. Erin's personal friends; they did not fall into raptures, or affect to do so; they were by no means so courteous as the ordinary folks who came from curiosity; they had been invited for the special purpose of having their minds satisfied, or of coming to an adverse conclusion. It was like the Star Chamber, and they did not (as it seemed to William Henry) spare the thumbscrew or the boot. After an hour or two of this gentle pressure, Mr. Warton observed, 'Your testimony, young man, so far as it goes, is satisfactory to us, while your behaviour does you great credit.' [226]

'Yes,' assented Dr. Parr, 'I think, Mr. Erin, you have a son of whom you may be justly proud. I heard you address him as Samuel; it is a gratifying coincidence to me that it is also my baptismal name.' Mr. Erin felt that it would be discourteous as well as embarrassing to undeceive him.

Then Mr. Pye was asked to read the Profession of Faith (which had by this time been fully investigated and discussed) aloud, which he did in a solemn and sonorous voice, with the company reverently upstanding as during Divine Service. Then, amid a profound silence, Dr. Parr delivered himself as follows:—

‘Sir, we have very fine passages in our Church Services, and our Litany abounds in beauties; but here, sir, is a man who has distanced us all.’

Most of the learned company bowed assent, and two, who were nonconformists, murmured ‘hear, hear.’ The tears trickled down Mr. [227] Erin’s cheeks; it was the proudest moment, so far, in the old man’s life.

Later on in the day another gratifying circumstance took place. A visitor called who either had not received his invitation in time, or, what was more probable, not wishing his personal importance to suffer by comparison with that of others, had preferred to come alone. His face was fat and puffy, and exhibited an unparalleled self-sufficiency. He had a sharp nose, a double chin, and eyebrows superciliously elevated; he carried a gold-headed cane in his hands, clasped behind him, and spoke in a thick, slow voice. Mr. Erin received him with great respect, and submitted his literary treasure for examination with an unwonted humility. The investigation was a prolonged and apparently an exhausting one, for the visitor called three times (as though he had been in a public-house) for hot whisky and water! As Dr. Porson had drunk all there was in the case, Margaret herself, who kept the key of the cellar, took him in a fresh bottle, and curiosity compelled her to remain. Her presence seemed [228] somewhat to distract the attention of the guest from the precious manuscript.

‘No doubt authentic,’ he murmured, ‘and devilish pretty; antiquity is stamped upon it.’

‘And the right sort of antiquity,’ suggested Mr. Erin. ‘It has the stamp of the time.’

‘Just so. I should think twenty years of age, at most.’

‘Sir!’ ejaculated his host.

‘I mean the usquebaugh,’ explained the visitor. ‘Twenty years in bottle at least—did I say at most? and plump.’

Here Margaret was about to beat a retreat, when the gentleman rose. ‘One moment, young lady,’ he said, ‘you do not know who I am. It will be something to tell your children’s children that James Boswell, of Auchinleck, Esq.’ (here he suited the action to the word) ‘chucked you under the chin.’

William Henry felt greatly inclined to resent this liberty, but Mr. Erin only smiled approval.

‘Another glass!’ said Mr. Boswell, and proceeded with his [229] investigations.

Presently, without a word of warning, he threw himself on his knees and pressed his lips to the MS.

‘I kiss these invaluable relics of our bard,’ he said, ‘and thank Heaven that I have lived to see them. Would that my late revered friend, the great Lexi—the great Lexicog—— ’ Emotion of various kinds prevented his completion of the sentence, and Mr. Erin led him with a gentle violence to the table on which lay the list of signatures; to which he added his name, though, it must be confessed, in a handwriting that was rather illegible.

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CHAPTER XV.

AT VAUXHALL.

The members of the little household in Norfolk Street were now in great content. That word, indeed, scarcely describes the state of mind of the head of the house, who was literally transported with joy. It was difficult to identify the jubilant and triumphant old fellow with the grudging, smileless, and to say truth, somewhat morose individual he had been a few months before. His regard for William Henry began to be quite troublesome, for, though he had not the least objection to Margaret and his son being alone together, he would often interrupt their little interviews from excess of solicitude upon his account. That somewhat flippant young gentleman used to compare his parent on these occasions to the 'sweete chickenne' of [231] the Shakespearean profession, which was always 'hoverrynge over herre broode,' and, indeed, this affectionate anxiety was partly due to a certain apprehension the old gentleman experienced when the goose that laid the golden eggs for him was out of his sight. At present, however, as Margaret reminded her cousin, there were not enough of them—though so far as they went they had a very material value—to become nest eggs; they could not be considered as savings or capital to any appreciable extent. They were not, indeed, theirs at all, having been made over to Mr. Erin; but for the object the young people had in view that was all one as though they had remained their own. If a play of Shakespeare's, or even part of a play, should chance to turn up among those treasures of the Temple, that would indeed be a fortune to them, or at all events would procure the antiquary's consent to everything, and ensure his favour in perpetuity.

These ideas occurred to Margaret only in the vaguest way, nor even in William Henry's mind did they take any well-defined shape. [232] His nature, to do him justice, was by no means mercenary, and, if he could only have called Margaret his own, he would have been content. As to being able to maintain her he had always had a good opinion of his own talents; and though the praise with which he was now overwhelmed from so many quarters had, of course, no reference to them, it helped to increase his self-confidence.

In this comparative prosperity, and being of a disposition that was by no means inclined to triumph over an unsuccessful rival, it somewhat distressed him to find Frank Dennis standing somewhat aloof. He visited the house, indeed, but not so frequently as had been his wont, and, as regarded William Henry at least, not upon the same terms. He had always been friendly to the younger man under circumstances when it would have been excusable if he had been otherwise, but now he avoided him; not in any marked manner, but certainly with intention. If he had avoided Margaret also, the explanation would have been easy, but it was not so. He was not, [233] indeed, on the same terms with that young lady as he had been; he did not, as of old, seek her society; his face did not brighten up as it was wont to do when she addressed him; but he treated her with a respect which, if it was not tender, was full of gentleness: whereas, to William Henry he was even cold.

It was a significant proof of the transformation that had taken place in Mr. Erin that he not only noticed this, but in a manner apologised for it to William Henry.

'I am sorry to see that Dennis and you, my lad, don't seem to get on together so well as you used to do. But you must not mind his being a little jealous.'

At this the young man's face flushed, for 'jealousy' had just then with him but one meaning: he thought that his father was about to talk with him about Margaret, but his niece was not in the old man's thoughts at all.

'It is not every one,' he went on, 'who can bear to see the good fortune of his friends with equanimity; especially when it takes the form of such a stroke of luck, as in your case. What Dennis says to [234] himself is: "Why should not I have discovered these MSS. instead of William Henry?" And not having done so, he is a little bit envious of you, and is inclined to decry them. It is a pity, of course, but he can do you no more harm by it than he can harm Shakespeare by discrediting the work of his hand.'

But the young man was sorry nevertheless, and Margaret was

still more grieved. Since Dennis had tacitly consented to her changed relations with her cousin, or at all events had made no opposition to them, she thought he might have forgiven him as he had forgiven her. It was a subject on which she could not speak to him, but occasionally there was something, or to her sensitive eye and ear seemed to be something, in his tone and manner, not resentful, but as though he pitied her for her choice, which annoyed her exceedingly.

This feeling was in no way reciprocated; it was impossible for Margaret to ruffle Frank Dennis, but he rarely came to Norfolk Street now, unless by special invitation. It had been proposed by [235] Mr. Erin that they should all four go to Vauxhall together upon a certain evening—a very unusual dissipation, for except the theatre, of which when Shakespeare was acted (which in those days was very frequently) he was a pretty constant patron, the antiquary had no love for places of amusement—but Frank Dennis had declined to accompany them. He professed to have a previous engagement, which, as he went out very little, seemed improbable; indeed, it was understood by the others that he did not wish to go. This was a cause of sincere regret to them, not excluding William Henry, for if Dennis had come he would have paired off with Mr. Erin and left Margaret to himself. The expedition, however, was looked forward to with pleasure by both the young people even as it was: it had the charm of novelty for them, for William Henry was almost as great a stranger to what had now begun to be called 'life' in London as his cousin. The little trip to the place by water was itself delightful, while the Gardens, with the coloured lamps and music and gaily [236] dressed company, seemed to them like a dream of Paradise.

Mr. Samuel Erin was not indeed a very good cicerone to such a spot, for folks of their age; though he would have been invaluable to some distinguished foreigner with a thirst for information. He reminded them (or rather informed them, for they knew very little about it) how for more than a century the place had been the resort of all the wit and rank and gallantry of the town; how Addison had taken Sir Roger de Coverley there, and Goldsmith the Chinese philosopher, and Swift had gone in person to hear the nightingale; and how much more attractive it was than its rival Ranelagh, of which, nevertheless, as Walpole humorously writes, Lord Chesterfield was so fond that he ordered all his letters to be directed thither. It was with difficulty the old gentleman was persuaded not to take them away from the radiant scene to a neighbouring street to see the lodgings where the poet Philips had breathed his last; and, by way of reprisal for their preference for such gauds and tinsel, he quoted to them (after Dr. Johnson) Xerxes' [237] remark about his army, that it was sad to think that of all that brilliant crowd not one would be alive a hundred years hence. The Scriptures themselves admit that there is a time to laugh and a time to play, and these literary reminiscences, and much more these didactic reflections, were felt by the young people to be a good deal out of place. If Mr. Erin could have been induced to visit the lodgings of Mr. Philips by himself, or to meditate on the Future alone, and in the Maze, then indeed they would have applauded him, but as it was, his company was a trifle triste.

Vauxhall Gardens.

They were presently relieved from it, however, in a wholly unexpected manner. They had explored the walks, promenaded the ‘area,’ and listened to the band to their hearts’ content, and had just sat down in one of the arbours to a modest supper, when who should pass by, with his hat on one side and an air of studied indifference to the commonplace allurements around him, but Mr. Reginald Talbot. His few weeks’ residence in London had effected a revolution in him, which nevertheless could scarcely be called a reform: from an inhabitant of Connemara, or some other out-of-the-way spot, he had become a citizen of the world; but the dissipations of the town had not improved his appearance. His face, though still full, had lost its colour, and he had a lack-lustre look which so ably seconded his attempts at languor that it almost rendered him idiotic. [238]

William Henry drew involuntarily back in the box to avoid recognition, but Mr. Talbot’s eye, roving everywhere, though with a somewhat fish-like expression, in search of female beauty, had already been attracted by Margaret’s pretty face. He did not quite recognise it, probably owing to the doubtful aid he derived from his spy-glass, but it was evident that he was struggling with a reminiscence.

‘Why, surely that is our young friend Talbot, is it not, Samuel?’ exclaimed Mr. Erin with effusion; and he held out his hand to the young man at once, not because he was glad to see him, far from it, but because he thought he was making a friend of his son welcome.

[239] William Henry, however, was well convinced that Talbot was no longer his friend, a circumstance that had not hitherto distressed him. Indeed, he had by no means regretted their little tiff, since it had been the means of keeping Talbot away from Norfolk Street; but now that they had met again he had reasons for wishing that they had not quarrelled. The very cordiality with which the other addressed him aroused his apprehensions, for he knew that it was feigned; he would much rather indeed have seen him, as on the occasion when he had last met her, make advances to Margaret herself. Of her he was sure; no dandy, whether metropolitan or provincial, could, he knew, ever rival him in her affections; but this fellow, smarting from the slight that had been put upon his muse, might injure him in other ways. He knew from experience Mr.

Reginald Talbot was capable of being what at school was termed ‘nasty,’ *i.e.* malignant. It has been said of the great Marlborough that whenever he permitted himself a noble phrase it was a sure [240] sign that he was about to commit a baseness; and similarly, the fact of Mr. Talbot’s being upon his best behaviour was a symptom dangerous to his friends. On the present occasion he was studiously genteel.

His manner to Margaret—very different from that he generally adopted towards the fair sex—was distantly polite, while to Mr. Samuel Erin he was respectful to servility. What especially marked the abnormal condition of his mind, and showed his feelings to be. under severe restraint, was that he never alluded to his own poetical genius. In speaking to William Henry the subject might well indeed have been avoided as a painful one; but that he should exercise this reticence with respect to the antiquary—to whom on a previous occasion, it will be remembered, he had mentioned within the first five minutes that he was ‘a man of letters’—was something portentous. He did not indeed talk much, but he did what was a thousand times more difficult to him—he held his tongue and listened.

This circumstance, joined to his demure behaviour, caused Mr. [241] Samuel Erin to take a much more favourable view of his son’s friend than that he had originally entertained, and, finding him deeply interested in the country of his birth and in its early history, related to him at considerable length the story of the disruption of the Knight Templars, and the escape of the survivors to Ireland, of which he happened to have an account in black letter, which he hoped, as he said, at no distant date to have the pleasure of showing Mr. Talbot under his own roof. This naturally led on to some conversation respecting the labours of Mr. Erin in the Shakespearean field, concerning which the young man paid him several compliments, wherein what was wanted in appropriateness (for the young gentleman laboured under the disadvantage of knowing nothing whatever of the subject) was more than compensated for by their impassioned warmth. Then by an easy gradation they fell to talking on the new-found manuscripts. It amazed Mr. Erin to find that Talbot had not yet seen the Profession of Faith.

[242] ‘I have been out of town, sir,’ he replied, for falsehood to this son of Erin was as natural as mother’s milk, and laid on like water, on the perpetual supply system, ‘and have not had the opportunity of seeing it, though, as you may well imagine, I have heard of little else. And that reminds me that I have a favour to ask of you. There is an old friend of mine, or rather of my late father’s, Mr. Albany Wallis—— ‘

Mr. Erin frowned. ‘I have heard of the gentleman,’ he put in stiffly, ‘and in a sense I know him.’

‘I trust you know nothing to his disadvantage, sir,’ said Talbot with humility. ‘I can only say that he has always spoken to me of yourself, and of your extraordinary erudition and attainments, with the greatest regard and consideration.’

‘Indeed,’ returned the other, still drily, but with some relaxation of stiffness in his tone, ‘I am only acquainted with Mr. Wallis myself by hearsay; and judging him by the company he keeps—for he is known to be a friend of one Malone, of whom in Christian charity I will say no more than that he is a fellow whose shallow pretence and [243] pompous ignorance would disgrace the name of charlatan—I have certainly hitherto had but a bad opinion of him.’

‘Of that, sir, he is aware,’ said Talbot, ‘and it troubles him just now exceedingly. The sense of your ill-will has prevented him, although a near neighbour, from calling in Norfolk Street; and knowing that I was a friend of your son’s, he has earnestly entreated me, in case I had the opportunity, to beg permission for him to pay you a visit.’

‘From twelve to one, sir, the Shakespearean manuscripts are open to the inspection of all comers,’ said Mr. Erin, with a grand air. ‘We invite investigation, and even criticism.’

‘Any time, of course, you choose to appoint will suit my friend,’ said Talbot; ‘but, as he led me to understand, he has a matter of importance connected with the manuscripts to communicate to you, and somewhat of a private nature.’

‘Then let him come to-morrow evening, when we shall be alone. Perhaps he would like to see William Henry.’

‘I think he would, sir,’ returned Talbot, and as he spoke he put his hand up to his mouth, to conceal a demoniacal grin such as one sees on a gargoyle carved by the piety of some monkish architect. ‘I’ll bring him to-morrow.’ [244]

During all this time William Henry and Margaret, in the opposite corner of the arbour, had carried on a smothered conversation with one another on quite a different subject, or rather, as the manner of young people is under similar circumstances, on no subject at all. It was enough to them that their hands met under the table and their hearts met under the rose. The scene they looked upon was not more bright than their hopes, nor the music they listened to more in tune than their tender fancies. When Mr. Erin pulled out his watch and pronounced it time to set out for home, it seemed to them that they had only just arrived. As for Mr. Reginald Talbot, for the last hour or so they had been totally unconscious of his presence; but when he took his leave of them, which he did with much politeness, there was something of suppressed triumph in his voice that [245] aroused William Henry’s suspicions. A shudder involuntarily seized him; he felt like a merrymaker at a festival who suddenly looks up into the sky, and perceives, instead of sunshine, ‘the ragged rims of thunder brooding low.’

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CHAPTER XVI.

A BOMBSHELL.

It was significant of the sensitiveness of Mr. Erin's feelings in regard to his new-found treasures, though it by no means indicated any want of soundness in his faith, that he ignored as much as possible all attacks upon their authenticity. This by no means involved his shutting his eyes to them; indeed he had privately procured and read all that had been written about the MSS., even to that terrible letter of Lord Charlemont to Malone, in which he had said, 'I am only sorry that Steevens (the rival commentator) is not the proprietor of them,' in order (as he meant) that they might have had the additional pleasure, derived from private enmity, of exposing them. The sensations the antiquary endured from these things were something like those of Regulus rolling down a hill in [247] his barrel stuck full of nails and knives, but he could not resist the temptation of reading them any more than a patient with hay-fever in his eyes can resist rubbing them.

I have known young authors afflicted with the same mad desire of perusing all the disagreeable criticisms they can lay their hands on; but these things were much more than criticisms, they were personal imputations of the vilest kind, which at the same time no law of libel could touch. They ate into the poor antiquary's heart, but he never talked about them. If he had, perhaps they would have been made more tolerable by the sympathy of his friends and the arguments of his partisans; but, except to himself, he ignored them. He did not even mention to William Henry that one Mr. Albany Wallis, whom he had reason to believe was little better than an infidel, was coming to Norfolk Street, by permission, to examine the Shakespeare papers. It weighed upon his own mind nevertheless, and he actually regretted that Frank Dennis chanced to drop in that [248] afternoon—loyal though he knew him to be in all other matters—lest in his lukewarm faith, if faith it could be called at all, he should let fall anything to encourage the sceptic.

Thus it came to pass that when the servant announced Mr. Reginald Talbot and Mr. Albany Wallis it was only Mr. Erin himself who felt no astonishment. William Henry was amazed, for though he had parted from his quondam friend on the previous evening on what were outwardly good terms, there had been no pretence of a renewal of friendship between them; their meeting at Vauxhall had, as we know, been accidental, and Talbot had not dropped a hint of renewing his visits to Norfolk Street. The young man had a smiling but scarcely a genial air; his manner was constrained, a thing which, being contrary to his habit, sat very ill upon him; and he addressed himself solely to his host, for which indeed his errand was a sufficient excuse.

'Permit me, sir, to introduce to you my friend, Mr. Albany Wallis; a gentleman, like yourself, well versed in Shakespearean lore.'

'Mr. Wallis's name is not unknown to me,' answered the [249] antiquary coldly; 'I have the pleasure of speaking to the late Mr. Garrick's man of business, have I not?'

The visitor, a thin grey man, with sharp, intelligent features, by no means devoid of kindliness, bowed courteously.

'I had that honour,' he replied gravely; 'I have also been acquainted all my life with many who take an interest in the drama, especially the Shakespearean drama. That some of them differ from you, Mr. Erin, on the subject on which I have called to-day, I am of course aware, but, believe me, I come in no unfriendly spirit. I take it for granted that you and I are equally interested in the establishment of the truth!'

'It is to be hoped so,' returned the antiquary, with dignity; 'you would like, I conclude, to see the Profession.'

'Well, no, sir, not immediately. You have other documents, as I am informed, in one of which I am more particularly concerned.'

'Very good. Margaret, this is your affair, it seems,' said the [250] antiquary, smiling: it was a relief to his mind that the Profession at least was not about to be impugned. 'Here is the key of the chest; bring out the Shakespeare letter and verses, with the lock of hair.' For a moment or two Mr. Wallis remained silent. His eyes followed Margaret as she rose to obey her uncle's request, with a curious

look of gentle commiseration in them.

'I did not know that this young lady had anything to do with these discoveries,' he answered.

'Nor has she, sir. The hair and the verses have become in a manner her own property, that is—er—under my trusteeship; but they were disinterred from a mass of ancient materials by my son here, William Henry.'

Mr. Wallis turned his face on the young gentleman thus alluded to much as a policeman flashes his dark-lantern on a suspected stranger. There was no commiseration in it now; it was a keen, and even a hostile glance.

'I see; but besides the reputed epistle to Anne Hathaway, there was, I think, a note of hand purporting to be written to Shakespeare from John Hemynge.' [251]

'I don't know as to "reputed" and "purporting," sir,' returned the antiquary stiffly, 'which are adjectives not usually applied to documents professedly genuine, at all events under the roof of their possessor.'

'You are right; I beg your pardon, Mr. Erin,' put in the visitor apologetically. 'One has no right to prejudge a case of which one has only heard an *ex-parte* statement. It is, however, that particular document which I ask to look at; a gentleman upon whose word I can rely has seen it, and assures me that the signature of John Hemynge appended to the receipt is—not to mince matters—a forgery.'

The antiquary started to his feet. 'Do you come here to insult me, sir?' he inquired angrily.

'No, Mr. Erin, far from it,' returned the other firmly. 'No one would be better pleased both on your own account and on that of those belonging to you'—here his eye lit once more on Margaret, who had flushed to her forehead—'if I should find my informant [252] mistaken. But the fact is, I possess a deed with the authentic and undoubted signature of John Hemynge, which my friend, who has seen both of them, assures me is wholly different from that attached to this new-found document. Assertion, however, as you may reasonably reply, is out of place in this matter. The question is merely one of comparison. Have you any objection to my applying that test?'

'Most certainly not, sir. Margaret, this gentleman wishes to see the note of hand.'

Margaret brought it from the iron safe and gave it to Mr. Wallis. Her face still retained some trace of indignation, and her eyes met those of the visitor with resolution and even defiance.

'If there is fraud here,' he said to himself, 'this girl has nothing to do with it.' The behaviour of Mr. Erin had also impressed him favourably; with that of William Henry he was not so satisfied, it seemed to him to have too much *sang-froid*; but then (as he frankly confessed to himself) he had been prejudiced against him. Mr. [253] Wallis was a man accustomed to 'thread the labyrinth of the mind' in matters more important, or at all events more serious, than literary investigation, and had a very observant eye, and the conclusion he came to was that, if there was one person in the present company more guilty than another as regards the Shakespearean fabrications (as Malone had called them), it was Mr. Frank Dennis. He had not indeed uttered one word; but when the girl had approached the safe there had been unmistakable signs of trouble in his face, while at this moment, when, as he (Mr. Wallis) knew, and as the other must needs suspect, a damning proof of the worthlessness of one of these vaunted discoveries was about to be produced, he exhibited an anxiety and apprehension which, to do them justice, were absent from the rest.

'This is a mortgage deed executed by John Hemynge,' observed Mr. Wallis, drawing a document from his pocket, 'concerning the genuineness of which there is no dispute. It was found among the papers of the Featherstonehaugh family, to whom the nation is [254] indebted (through my late client, David Garrick) for the Shakespeare mortgage now in the British Museum. If the signature of yonder deed tallies with it, well and good; I shall, believe me, be pleased to find it so; but if it does not do so, there can be no question as to which is the spurious one.'

He threw the mortgage on the table, and stood with an air, if not of indifference, of one who has no personal concern in the matter on

hand, while Mr. Erin compared the two signatures with minuteness. Presently he beckoned to his son in an agitated manner: ‘Your eyes are better than mine,’ he said: ‘what do you make of this?’

William Henry just glanced at the two documents in a perfunctory manner, as though he had been asked to witness some signature of a client of his employer, and quietly answered: ‘They are very dissimilar; whichever is the wrong one, it can hardly be called an imitation, for it has not a letter in common with the other.’

[255] ‘There is no question, young man, as to which is the wrong one,’ remarked Mr. Wallis, severely; ‘and as to imitation, it is clear enough that such a deception, however clumsily, has been seriously attempted. The only doubt we have to clear up is, “Who is the forger?”’ Mr. Wallis’s glance flashed for an instant upon Frank Dennis. He was standing apart, with his hand over the lower part of his features, and his eyes fixed on the ground. He looked like one upon whom a blow, long expected, has at last fallen.

It was strange, thought Mr. Wallis, that Talbot, who had seemed so convinced of the younger Erin’s guilt, had had not a word to say about this other fellow. His own impression—one of those sudden convictions to which men of his stamp are especially liable, but which they would be the last to call inspirations—was that the affair was a conspiracy, in which these two young men were alone concerned, and that its moving spirit was Dennis. Suddenly the silence was broken by Margaret’s clear tones:— [256]

‘Mr. Wallis himself has not examined the deeds,’ she said.

‘There is no need, young lady, since your uncle and cousin have already admitted the discrepancy,’ returned the visitor. ‘I am only following the example of that gentleman yonder’—here he indicated Frank Dennis with his forefinger—‘in taking the matter for granted.’

Frank removed his hand from his mouth, showing a face ghastly pale, and quietly answered, ‘I am no judge of these things; but if I had made such a charge as you have done, sir, I think, as Miss Slade suggests, that I should give myself the trouble of seeing with my own eyes whether it was substantiated.’

‘Nay,’ said Margaret, quickly, ‘I spoke not of any charge. If I thought that Mr. Wallis was making any personal accusation, I should not have addressed him at all.’

‘But really, young lady,’ protested Mr. Wallis, ‘there must be something wrong somewhere, you know.’

‘I should rather think there was,’ observed Mr. Reginald Talbot, with a snigger.

[257] ‘And who the devil asked your opinion?’ inquired Mr. Erin, with the eager shrillness of a steam boiler which has just discovered its safety-valve. He did not forget that it was to this young gentleman’s good offices that he was indebted for this unsatisfactory state of things.

‘Well, I thought it was a matter of criticism,’ murmured the young Irishman.

‘That was the very reason, sir, you should have held your tongue,’ was the uncompromising reply.

‘I really don’t know,’ observed William Henry, who had been idly turning over the leaves of the mortgage deed during this discussion, ‘why any bitterness should be imported into this discussion. We are all equally interested, as Mr. Wallis has remarked, in the establishment of the truth; and I, for my part, have nothing to fear from it. I am in no way responsible, as he must be aware, for the genuineness of the documents in question, but only for their discovery. What has happened to-day is no doubt as disagreeable as it is unlooked for; but it is no fault of mine. The only course open to [258] me is, I suppose, to go to my friend in the Temple and acquaint him with what has happened. Perhaps he may have some explanation to offer upon the subject.’

‘I should very much like to hear it,’ said Mr. Wallis, with a dry smile.

Mr. Reginald Talbot also began to smile—aloud, but he caught Mr. Frank Dennis’s eye, which had so unmistakably menacing an expression in it that the snigger perished in its birth.

‘Shall I go, father?’ inquired William Henry. For the antiquary sat like one in a dream, turning over the note of hand, once so precious to him, but which had now become waste paper.

‘Yes, go! We will wait here till you come back,’ he answered.

The words dropped from his lips like lead.

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CHAPTER XVII.

THE MARE’S NEST.

A GREAT poet has sung of a certain tea-party as sitting ‘all silent and all damned,’ which is going pretty far as a description of social cheerlessness; but they were at tea, and had presumably bread and butter, and possibly even muffins, before them; whereas the little party in Norfolk Street, who sat awaiting the return of William Henry from his problematical patron (for Mr. Albany Wallis, for one, did not believe in his existence), had not even such material comforts to mitigate their embarrassment and ennui. On the table there were only the two deeds, and one of them was in all probability a forgery. Mr. Erin sat drumming his fingers upon it and endeavouring to hide the anxiety which consumed him—a most [260] depressing spectacle. The company, too, were on anything but good terms with one another or with themselves. Mr. Albany Wallis was a just but kind-hearted man; he knew he was right, but he was equally certain that he was uncomfortable. Margaret’s beauty had touched him, and her indignation, however undeserved, distressed him. He felt convinced that she at least was innocent of any confederation with the evildoers, whoever they were.

Now that he had once put hand to the plough, there was no possibility of drawing back; he must needs lay the whole conspiracy bare; but in his heart he cursed the officious malignity of Reginald Talbot, who had set him to work on so unpleasant a task. It was plain that that young gentleman knew how it was all to end. He lay back in his chair, tapping his boot with his cane, and with a grin on his face such as a Cheshire cat might wear who feels a mouse well under her claw. To Mr. Wallis it seemed equally clear that Mr. Frank Dennis also knew. He sat very pale and quiet, but with a face expectant of ill. Every now and then he stole a glance at Margaret, [261] full of ineffable shame and sorrow. As for her, she looked neither to the right nor to the left, but always at the door; her ears were on the stretch for William Henry’s return from the moment that his departing footstep died away. In her face alone was to be seen unshaken confidence; a woman’s faith—so often wasted, as Mr. Wallis thought to himself, upon false and worthless objects.

Presently Mr. Erin glanced at her, and, seeming to gather comfort from her calmness, observed:—

‘I am sorry to detain you, Mr. Wallis, but I think it better for both our sakes that you should remain here till this matter has, one way or another, been settled. It will convince you, at all events, that there is no collusion.’

‘A very proper arrangement, sir, and one that does you infinite credit,’ returned the other courteously. ‘One word from your son’s friend—that is, if, as I believe, he must needs give up his case—will be all that is necessary, so that we shall not have to wait long.’

‘The gentleman may not be at home,’ suggested Margaret. [262]

‘True,’ answered Mr. Wallis with a bow. In his heart he thought that the gentleman was not at all likely to be at home, but there was nothing in his tone that implied it.

‘Perhaps,’ said Mr. Erin, ‘in order to pass the time, you would like to examine the other Shakespearean documents in my possession?’

There was a world of significance, had the other only known it, in the manner in which the antiquary thus expressed himself. The idea of looking at these treasures ‘in order to pass the time’ would, an hour ago, have seemed to him little short of blasphemy.

‘As you please, sir,’ returned Mr. Wallis indifferently; ‘though you will pardon me for saying that if the note of hand turns out to be—a—that is, unauthentic, it will destroy the credibility of all the rest.’

‘It will affect it, no doubt,’ admitted the antiquary.

‘On the other hand,’ observed Margaret in her clear tones, ‘if the evidence should be the other way, it will proportionately strengthen their claims.’

A very cheerless proceeding.

[263] ‘Undoubtedly,’ replied Mr. Wallis. He could offer that modicum of encouragement with perfect safety, and he was well pleased to have the opportunity of doing so. ‘Believe me, young lady,’ he went on with earnest gentleness, ‘that it would give me the sincerest gratification to find your confidence justified by the result.’

Then he sat down, indifferent-eyed, but with a pretence of interest, to the Profession that Mr. Erin had spread out upon the table. It was a cheerless proceeding. The very exhibitor himself, it was plain, had but little heart for the performance; instead of expatiating with an unction that might well have been called ‘extreme’ on the precious revelation, he only put in a word or two. If he had apprehensions such as he had never before experienced of a visitor’s criticism, they were, however, unfounded. Mr. Wallis perhaps did not think it worth while to make objections, since a few [264] more minutes at most must needs see the imposture out; it would have been like quarrelling with a man upon his deathbed. He even allowed that the document was ‘interesting,’ though, as he made the observation to Margaret and not to her uncle, it is probable that it rather expressed his wish to please her than his real sentiments. His position was somewhat similar to that of Eloise when taking the veil.

> Yet then to those dread altars as I drew,
> Not on the Cross my eyes were fixed, but you,
> Not grace, nor zeal, love only was my call.

For though, of course, the old lawyer was not in love with Margaret, he had a much greater admiration for her than for the sacred relic. Still, in spite of himself, habit induced him to give some considerable attention to the document; even if it was a forgery it was curious, and, at all events, anything was better than sitting with his hands before him watching those uncomfortable faces. That of Mr. Samuel Erin was at present particularly so, for his visitor’s eye was travelling towards the ‘leaffee tree,’ a weak point, which he felt under the circumstances in a very ill condition to defend, when [265] suddenly there was a knock at the door.

‘There is Willie!’ cried Margaret, starting to her feet.

She felt assured, since so short a time had elapsed, that he had found his friend of the Temple at home; but what was the news he had brought with him?

One glance at the young fellow as he entered the room was sufficient for her. It was good news.

The eye of love is an auger that can pierce the heart, if not the

soul; but to the other members of the party William Henry's face told nothing. It did not indeed wear the expression of defeat, but still less did it exhibit triumph or exultation. It had the same quiet, almost indifferent air that it habitually wore when the Shakespearean discoveries were under discussion; but the pallor which anxiety had caused in it when he left the house upon his apparently hopeless errand was gone; with a quiet smile he drew forth a paper from his pocket, and handed it to Mr. Wallis.

[266] 'You are quite right, sir,' he said, 'and yet you have not put my friend in the wrong. It is the case of the chameleon.'

'What is this?' asked Mr. Wallis, a question which, having unfolded the paper, he proceeded to answer himself, in tones of the greatest amazement. 'Why, this is John Hemynge over again—the real John Hemynge!'

'And yet, I suppose, not more real than the other,' said William Henry quietly. 'The simple explanation is that there were two of them.'

'Two of them!' exclaimed Mr. Erin, looking much like the 'gay French mousquetaire' (only not 'gay') when he saw the ghost of his victim on one side of his bed, and her twin sister in the flesh on the other.

'This paper, I see, is an account of some theatrical disbursements,' observed Mr. Wallis, biting his lips in much perplexity. 'That reminds me that the note of hand was upon a similar subject. You don't mean to tell me that these Hemynges were, not only both of the same name, but of the same calling—actors?'

[267] 'I tell you nothing, sir, of my own knowledge,' answered William Henry drily, 'for I know nothing about the matter. I went to my patron with the story you bade me tell him, that you possessed an authentic signature of Shakespeare's friend Hemynge; that it was altogether different from the one appended to the note of hand I had found in his keeping, and that therefore the latter was a forgery. He only smiled, and said, "How very like a commentator!" Then he opened a little chest filled with theatrical memoranda. "There is nothing here of much value," he said, "for I have examined them; but, as it happens, there is something to put the gentleman's mind at rest as to any question of fraud." Then he gave me this paper, the signature of which he bade me to ask you to compare with that on your mortgage deed. It is identical, is it not?'

'It certainly appears to be so,' admitted Mr. Wallis.

'Well, according to my patron's account, there were in Shakespeare's time two John Hemynges: the one—*your* John Hemynge—connected with Shakespeare's own theatre, "The Globe;" [268] the other, whose receipt is appended to the note of hand, the manager of the "Curtain" Theatre. The former, it seems, was called the Tall John Hemynge, the latter the Short. If you care to know more about them, I am instructed to say that my friend is prepared to give you every information.'

As his eye fell upon the lawyer's chap-fallen face, William Henry could not deny himself a smile of triumph; but as regarded his uncle and Margaret, Mr. Wallis observed that the young fellow did not so much as even glance at them—a circumstance which the lawyer attributed to a very natural cause; it was not they, but he, who had doubted of his good faith, so that in their case he had nothing to exult over. He felt very much abashed and disconcerted; nor was his embarrassment decreased when Margaret thus addressed him:—

'You will not forget, Mr. Wallis,' she said gravely, 'what was said just now of the change which would take place in your opinion of us, [269] in case this matter should not turn out so unfavourably as you expected.'

'Nay, pardon me, young lady,' returned the lawyer, gallantly, 'I have never harboured any opinion of you otherwise than favourable; my observation referred to these other documents, which indeed, I frankly confess, I am now prepared to consider in a much less prejudiced light. For the present I must take my leave, but in the meantime let me express my thanks to you, Mr. Erin, for the kind reception I have met with, and to withdraw, without reserve, any expression I may have let fall which may be construed into a reflection upon your good faith, or upon that of any member of your family.'

For a moment it occurred to Mr. Erin that here was an opportunity for snatching an ally from the enemy's camp, by getting

Mr. Albany Wallis to add his name to the list of believers, but on the whole he decided not to do so, upon the ground of the danger of the experiment. If Miss Margaret Slade, however, had asked Mr. Wallis the favour, it is doubtful whether he would not have acceded to her request. He felt such a brute at having given her distress of mind by his unmannerly suspicions that he would have made almost any sacrifice in reparation of them. He retired with a profusion of bows and excuses, while Mr. Reginald Talbot followed in silence at his heels like a whipped dog, who, professing to find a hare in her form, has only found a mare's nest. [270]

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CHAPTER XVIII.

‘WHATEVER HAPPENS, I SHALL LOVE YOU, WILLIE.’

It was not till his visitors had gone that their host seemed to become fully conscious of the gravity of their errand. While the mind is clouded with doubt it is impossible for it to entertain any emotion very acutely, but now that the accusation of the literary lawyer had been shown to be groundless, Mr. Erin became at once alive to its great wickedness and impertinence.

‘The man must have been mad—stark, staring mad!’ he exclaimed, ‘to have come here, and upon the ground of that trumpery deed of his to have made such abominable imputations! I know that Malone is burning to see my manuscripts, though he has not the honesty to confess it, and I should not wonder if he had sent that fellow here as a spy.’

[272] ‘Nay, I am sure Mr. Wallis was no spy,’ said Margaret.

‘Well, at all events, instead of reporting “All is barren,” as was hoped, ‘continued the antiquary, ‘he will have to speak of “milk and honey.” Upon my life, I believe I could have got him to sign our Profession of Faith if I had only pressed it; for by nature, however, warped by evil communications, he struck me as an honest man.’

‘Not only honest, but kind, uncle,’ observed Margaret gently.

‘He was very civil to *you*, I noticed,’ returned her uncle grimly. ‘I am sure you could have got him to sign. What a thorn it would have been in that scoundrel’s side if one of his lieutenants could have been seduced so far from his allegiance!’

When Mr. Erin said ‘that scoundrel’ he always meant Malone. It was not necessary for him—as in the case of the gentleman who had married three times, and was wont to observe, ‘When I say “my wife” I mean my first wife’—to explain whom he meant.

[273] ‘I don’t blame Mr. Wallis at all,’ said Margaret. ‘He came upon a disagreeable errand, in the interests of truth, and has frankly acknowledged himself to be in the wrong. The person I do feel indignant against is that horrid Mr. Talbot.’

‘“The man of letters,” as he called himself,’ remarked Mr. Erin contemptuously. ‘He never even asked to look at the manuscripts: I don’t believe he can read. What do you think of your young friend now?’ he inquired turning to William Henry.

‘Well, sir, I think he has made a fool of himself and knows it.’

‘You are much too good-natured, Willie,’ observed Margaret indignantly. ‘I am sure, Frank, you agree with me that Mr. Talbot’s conduct has been most treacherous and malignant.’

Dennis had not opened his lips since William Henry’s return; he had watched for it with at least as much anxiety as the rest, but the refutation of what had been alleged seemed to have given him rather relief than satisfaction. [274] He was too good a fellow to wish any disgrace to happen even to a rival; but (as Margaret read his behaviour) he could hardly exult in that rival’s victory, which could but result in Mr. Erin’s having greater confidence in the young fellow than ever, and consequently in the bettering of his chance of gaining his cousin’s hand.

‘Yes,’ said Dennis quietly, ‘William Henry has made the great mistake of allowing an Irishman of low type to be on familiar terms with him. The men of that nation, when they are of sterling nature, are among the best, as they are undoubtedly among the most agreeable, men in the world; but there are a great many counterfeits—men who, like Talbot, under the mask of *bonhomie*, conceal a morose and malignant disposition; they belong, in fact, to the same class of their fellow-countrymen who shoot men from behind a hedge.’

‘Quite true,’ observed Mr. Erin approvingly. ‘I have never heard that type of man—to which Malone, for one, belongs—so graphically described.’

[275] ‘I do hope, Willie, you will have nothing more to do with him,’ said Margaret, earnestly.

‘You may depend upon it he will have nothing more to do with *me*,’ answered the young fellow, laughing. ‘He already knows what I thought of his verses; indeed, it was my telling him my honest opinion of them which has so set him against me; and now he knows

what I think of himself.'

'Well said, my lad,' said the antiquary, rubbing his hands and smiling with the consciousness of triumph. 'One need not fear any malice when we are conscious of no ill-doing on our own part. My good Dennis, you look so exceedingly glum that, if one didn't know you, one would think that you had not that cause for confidence.'

'As regards what we were just talking of, that Irish gentleman,' observed Dennis, sententiously, 'I have no confidence in him at all. There is always reason to fear a man who carries a knife under his waistcoat.'

'Pooh, pooh, Dennis! you take such sombre views of everything.'

'At all events,' put in Margaret, gently, 'Frank is not alarmed upon his own account.' [276]

'Gad! that's true,' observed the antiquary, drily: 'he takes care to let us know that these matters are no concern of his. If all these wonderful discoveries that have been vouchsafed to us these last few months should turn out to be so much waste paper, I don't think he would sleep a wink the worse for it.'

Dennis coloured to his temples, but said nothing. Perhaps he was conscious of shortcoming in Shakespearean enthusiasm, or was aware that he had not shown much exultation over the recent rout of the enemy. Margaret thought he might have said a word or two in self-defence; but what she deemed to be the cause of his silence—namely, that the whole subject of the discoveries was distasteful to him, as being associated, as it certainly was, with William Henry's success in another matter—was also an excuse for him, and she pitied him with all her heart.

To have defended him in his presence to Mr. Erin would, she felt, have been a cruel kindness, since it might have suggested a feeling [277] more tender than pity; but a certain remorse—it was almost an act of penance—compelled her to speak of the matter afterwards to William Henry.

'My uncle is very hard upon poor Frank,' she said, 'about these manuscripts. I am sure that anything that concerns us concerns him, but he cannot be expected to feel exactly as we do in the matter.'

'No, I suppose not,' said William Henry.

'Well, of course not. It is his way to take things more philosophically than other people. I am sure he looked pleased enough when you confuted Mr. Wallis.'

'Pleased, but surprised,' returned the other, drily.

'Oh, Willie, that is ungenerous of you!'

'I am only stating a fact. His face did not, I admit, exhibit disappointment, but it expressed extreme astonishment. I don't think as Mr. Erin does about these things, but I think a man should stick to his friends, especially in the presence of those by whom their honesty is called in question. Mr. Wallis noticed it, I promise [278] you.'

'There was surely no harm in Frank looking astonished, even if he did,' said Margaret; then in a more tender tone, as though she had done enough for friendship, she added, 'I confess, however, I was not looking at him. I was looking at *you*, Willie. How marvellously you kept command of yourself, even when things seemed to be at the worst. Now confess, dear, did you not really know that you would find that document, or something like it, when you went off to the Temple?'

'What makes you say that?' he inquired quickly.

'Well, only because I seemed to read it in your face. Oh, Willie, you don't know what I went through while you were away. For though, as you often say, it is no affair of yours whether the manuscripts are genuine or not, yet—— ' She hesitated; she evidently found it difficult to put her thought into words.

'You mean that the question is one that, after all, seriously affects us,' he put in gently.

'Well, yes, because you and I are one. Perhaps it was the [279] presence of that scheming Mr. Talbot which made you look so, but the matter seemed somehow to affect you personally. Your own honour appeared to be almost called in question.'

He shook his head, but she went on—

'And that is why your parting look, though you didn't look at me, Willie, gave me courage to face them. I felt that you would come

back to clear yourself, and to triumph over them. Of course I did not know how it would be effected, but I had faith—or perhaps,' added the girl, dropping her voice, 'it was love.'

'Yes, it was love,' said the young man, fondling her hand in his own and speaking in the same low tones, while he gazed thoughtfully before him. 'Love is better than faith, for it endures. What we no longer believe in we despise, but what we have once loved we love always.'

There was silence between them for a little—the lovers' silence, which is more golden far than that of which philosophy speaks; then he addressed her with a lighter air. [280]

'And were you really pleased,' he said, 'when I brought the deed back and made that old curmudgeon look so foolish?'

'Nay, he was no curmudgeon, Willie, and I felt as much for him as I could afford to feel; but your bringing such good news was delightful. It showed that what others prize so highly, such as this man Hemynge's signature, was for you quite a commonplace possession. It almost seemed that you have only to hold up your finger and beckon to her, as it were, and Good Luck comes to you.'

'Then the good luck I have had, and the estimation in which it has caused me to be held by others, makes you happy, Margaret?'

'Of course, it makes me proud and pleased,' she answered earnestly. 'How can it be otherwise when you are "the talk of the town?" But what gives me the greatest pleasure of all is to see that it has not spoilt you, Willie; that you take it all so quietly and prudently, which shows that you deserve these gifts of Fortune.' [281]

'She has more in store for me yet,' he answered confidently; 'I feel it—I am sure of it, Maggie!'

'But, my dear Willie, are you not talked about enough already, and you but a lad of seventeen? You must be a glutton, a very glutton, for fame.'

'I am,' he answered vehemently, 'for fame, but not for notoriety only. I wish to be thought well of on my own account—not as the mere channel of another's thoughts. I have stuff within me which the world shall sooner or later recognise—I swear it!'

Margaret looked at him with amazement. She had hitherto had no great opinion of his talents, as we know; but now either his enthusiasm carried her away with it, or, what was more probable, the atmosphere of love which surrounded him made him appear larger than of old. In her mind's eye she already beheld him a second Dryden, that monarch of letters of whom she had so often heard her uncle speak. [282]

'But you will always be the same to me, Willie?' she murmured timidly.

Her humility, perhaps, touched him, for at her words he became strangely agitated, and his face grew pale to the very lips.

'Nay,' he said, 'I must ask *that* of *you*. Whatever happens, will you never cease to love me?'

'Whatever happens, Willie,' she answered softly, 'I shall love you more and more.'

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