

**KENNETH
GRAHAME**

THE
HEADSWOMAN

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The Headswoman

I

It was a bland, sunny morning of a mediæval May, – an old-style May of the most typical quality; and the Council of the little town of St. Radegonde were assembled, as was their wont at that hour, in the picturesque upper chamber of the Hôtel de Ville, for the dispatch of the usual municipal business. Though the date was early sixteenth century, the members of this particular town-council possessed considerable resemblance to those of similar assemblies in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and even the nineteenth centuries, in a general absence of any characteristic at all – unless a pervading hopeless insignificance can be considered as such. All the character in the room, indeed, seemed to be concentrated in the girl who stood before the table, erect, yet at her ease, facing the members in general and Mr. Mayor in particular; a delicate-handed, handsome girl of some eighteen summers, whose tall, supple figure was well set off by the quiet, though tasteful mourning in which she was clad.

“Well, gentlemen,” the Mayor was saying, “this little business appears to be – er – quite in order, and it only remains for me to – er – review the facts. You are aware that the town has lately had the misfortune to lose its executioner, – a gentleman who, I may say, performed the duties of his office with neatness and dispatch, and gave the fullest satisfaction to all with whom he – er – came in contact. But the Council has already, in a vote of condolence, expressed its sense of the – er – striking qualities of the deceased. You are doubtless also aware that the office is hereditary, being secured to a particular family in this town, so long as any one of its members is ready and willing to take it up. The deed lies before me, and appears to be – er – quite in order. It is true that on this occasion the Council might have been called upon to consider and examine the title of the claimant, the late lamented official having only left a daughter, – she who now stands before you; but I am happy to say that Jeanne – the young lady in question – with what I am bound to call great good-feeling on her part, has saved us all trouble in that respect, by formally applying for the family post, with all its – er – duties, privileges, and emoluments; and her application appears to be – er – quite in order. There is, therefore, under the circumstances, nothing left for us to do but to declare the said applicant duly elected. I would wish, however, before I – er – sit down, to make it quite clear to the – er – fair petitioner, that if a laudable desire to save the Council trouble in the matter has led her to a – er – hasty conclusion, it is quite open to her to reconsider her position. Should she determine not to press her claim, the succession to the post would then apparently devolve upon her cousin Enguerrand, well known to you all as a practising advocate in the courts of this town. Though the youth has not, I admit, up to now proved a conspicuous success in the profession he has chosen, still there is no reason why a bad lawyer should not make an excellent executioner; and in view of the close friendship – may I even say attachment? – existing between the cousins, it is possible that this young lady may, in due course, practically enjoy the solid emoluments of the position without the necessity of discharging its (to some girls) uncongenial duties. And so, though not the rose herself, she would still be – er – near the rose!” And the Mayor resumed his seat, chuckling over his little pleasantry, which the keener wits of the Council proceeded to explain at length to the more obtuse. “Permit me, Mr. Mayor,” said the girl quietly, “first to thank you for what was evidently the outcome of a kindly though misdirected feeling on your part; and then to set you right as to the grounds of my application for the post to which you admit my hereditary claim. As to my cousin, your conjecture as to the feeling between us is greatly exaggerated; and I may further say at once, from my knowledge of his character, that he is little qualified either to adorn or to dignify an important position such as this. A man who has achieved such indifferent success in a minor and less exacting walk of life,

is hardly likely to shine in an occupation demanding punctuality, concentration, judgment, – all the qualities, in fine, that go to make a good business man. But this is beside the question. My motive, gentlemen, in demanding what is my due, is a simple and (I trust) an honest one, and I desire that there should be no misunderstanding. It is my wish to be dependent on no one. I am both willing and able to work, and I only ask for what is the common right of humanity, – admission to the labour market. How many poor, toiling women would simply jump at a chance like this which fortune, by the accident of birth, lays open to me! And shall I, from any false deference to that conventional voice which proclaims this thing as ‘nice,’ and that thing as ‘not nice,’ reject a handicraft which promises me both artistic satisfaction and a competence? No, gentlemen; my claim is a small one, – only a fair day’s wage for a fair day’s work. But I can accept nothing less, nor consent to forgo my rights, even for any contingent remainder of possible cousinly favour!”

There was a touch of scorn in her fine contralto voice as she finished speaking; the Mayor himself beamed approval. He was not wealthy, and had a large family of daughters; so Jeanne’s sentiments seemed to him entirely right and laudable.

“Well, gentlemen,” he began briskly, “then all we’ve got to do, is to – ”

“Beg pardon, your worship,” put in Master Robinet, the tanner, who had been sitting with a petrified, Bill-the-Lizard sort of expression during the speechifying: “but are we to understand as how this here young lady is going to be the public executioner of this here town?”

“Really, neighbour Robinet,” said the Mayor, somewhat pettishly, “you’ve got ears like the rest of us, I suppose; and you know the contents of the deed; and you’ve had my assurance that it’s – er – quite in order; and as it’s getting towards lunch-time – ”

“But it’s unheard of,” protested honest Robinet. “There hasn’t ever been no such thing – leastways not as I’ve heard tell.”

“Well, well, well,” said the Mayor, “everything must have a beginning, I suppose. Times are different now, you know. There’s the march of intellect, and – er – all that sort of thing. We must advance with the times – don’t you see, Robinet? – advance with the times!” “Well, I’m – ” began the tanner.

But no one heard, on this occasion, the tanner’s opinion as to his condition, physical or spiritual; for the clear contralto cut short his obstinations.

“If there’s really nothing more to be said, Mr. Mayor,” she remarked, “I need not trespass longer on your valuable time. I propose to take up the duties of my office to-morrow morning, at the usual hour. The salary will, I assume, be reckoned from the same date; and I shall make the customary quarterly application for such additional emoluments as may have accrued to me during that period. You see I am familiar with the routine. Good-morning, gentlemen!” And as she passed from the Council chamber, her small head held erect, even the tanner felt that she took with her a large portion of the May sunshine which was condescending that morning to gild their deliberations.

II

One evening, a few weeks later, Jeanne was taking a stroll on the ramparts of the town, a favourite and customary walk of hers when business cares were over. The pleasant expanse of country that lay spread beneath her – the rich sunset, the gleaming, sinuous river, and the noble old château that dominated both town and pasture from its adjacent height – all served to stir and bring out in her those poetic impulses which had lain dormant during the working day; while the cool evening breeze smoothed out and obliterated any little jars or worries which might have ensued during the practice of a profession in which she was still something of a novice. This evening she felt fairly happy and content. True, business was rather brisk, and her days had been fully occupied; but this mattered little so long as her modest efforts were appreciated, and she was now really beginning to feel that, with practice, her work was creditably and artistically done. In a satisfied, somewhat dreamy mood, she was drinking in the various sweet influences of the evening, when she perceived her cousin approaching.

“Good-evening, Enguerrand,” cried Jeanne pleasantly; she was thinking that since she had begun to work for her living she had hardly seen him – and they used to be such good friends. Could anything have occurred to offend him?

Enguerrand drew near somewhat moodily, but could not help allowing his expression to relax at sight of her fair young face, set in its framework of rich brown hair, wherein the sunset seemed to have tangled itself and to cling, reluctant to leave it.

“Sit down, Enguerrand,” continued Jeanne, “and tell me what you’ve been doing this long time. Been very busy, and winning forensic fame and gold?”

“Well, not exactly,” said Enguerrand, moody once more. “The fact is, there’s so much interest required nowadays at the courts that unassisted talent never gets a chance. And you, Jeanne?”

“Oh, I don’t complain,” answered Jeanne lightly. “Of course, it’s fair-time just now, you know, and we’re always busy then. But work will be lighter soon, and then I’ll get a day off, and we’ll have a delightful ramble and picnic in the woods, as we used to do when we were children. What fun we had in those old days, Enguerrand! Do you remember when we were quite little tots, and used to play at executions in the back-garden, and you were a bandit and a buccaneer, and all sorts of dreadful things, and I used to chop off your head with a paper-knife? How pleased dear father used to be!”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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