

BENJAMIN DISRAELI

SKETCHES

Benjamin Disraeli

Sketches

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Содержание

THE CARRIER PIGEON	5
CHAPTER I	5
CHAPTER II	7
CHAPTER III	8
CHAPTER IV	10
CHAPTER V	11
CHAPTER VI	12
CHAPTER VII	14
THE CONSUL'S DAUGHTER	15
CHAPTER I	15
CHAPTER II	17
CHAPTER III	19
CHAPTER IV	21
CHAPTER V	24
CHAPTER VI	26
CHAPTER VII	28
CHAPTER VIII	30
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	31

Earl of Beaconsfield Benjamin Disraeli

Sketches

THE CARRIER PIGEON

CHAPTER I

Charolois and Branchimont

ALTHOUGH the deepest shades of twilight had descended upon the broad bosom of the valley, and the river might almost be recognised only by its rushing sound, the walls and battlements of the castle of Charolois, situate on one of the loftiest heights, still blazed in the reflected radiance of the setting sun, and cast, as it were, a glance of triumph at the opposing castle of Branchimont, that rose on the western side of the valley, with its lofty turrets and its massy keep black and sharply defined against the resplendent heaven.

Deadly was the hereditary feud between the powerful lords of these high places—the Counts of Charolois and the Barons of Branchimont, but the hostility which had been maintained for ages never perhaps raged with more virulence than at this moment; since the only male heir of the house of Charolois had been slain in a tournament by the late Baron of Branchimont, and the distracted father had avenged his irreparable loss in the life-blood of the involuntary murderer of his son.

Yet the pilgrim, who at this serene hour might rest upon his staff and gaze on the surrounding scene, would hardly deem that the darkest passions of our nature had selected this fair and silent spot for the theatre of their havoc.

The sun set; the evening star, quivering and bright, rose over the dark towers of Branchimont; from the opposite bank a musical bell summoned the devout vassals of Charolois to a beautiful shrine, wherein was deposited the heart of their late young lord, and which his father had raised on a small and richly wooded promontory, distant about a mile from his stern hold.

At the first chime on this lovely eve came forth a lovelier maiden from the postern of Charolois—the Lady Imogene, the only remaining child of the bereaved count, attended by her page, bearing her book of prayers. She took her way along the undulating heights until she reached the sanctuary. The altar was illumined; several groups were already kneeling,—faces of fidelity well known to their adored lady; but as she entered, a palmer, with his broad hat drawn over his face, and closely muffled up in his cloak, dipped his hand at the same time with hers in the fount of holy water placed at the entrance of the shrine, and pressed the beautiful fingers of the Lady Imogene. A blush, unperceived by the kneeling votaries, rose to her cheek; but apparently such was her self-control, or such her deep respect for the hallowed spot, that she exhibited no other symptom of emotion, and, walking to the high altar, was soon buried in her devotions.

The mass was celebrated—the vassals rose and retired. According to her custom, the Lady Imogene yet remained, and knelt before the tomb of her brother. A low whisper, occasionally sounding,—assured her that someone was at the confessional; and soon the palmer, who was now shrived, knelt at her side. ‘Lothair!’ muttered the lady, apparently at her prayers, ‘beloved Lothair, thou art too bold!’

‘Oh, Imogene! for thee what would I not venture?’ was the hushed reply.

‘For the sake of all our hopes, wild though they be, I counsel caution.’

'Fear naught. The priest, flattered by my confession, is fairly duped. Let me employ this golden moment to urge what I have before entreated. Your father, Imogene, can never be appeased. Fly, then, my beloved! oh, fly!'

'Oh, my Lothair! it never can be. Alas! whither can we fly?'

'Sweet love! I pray thee listen:—to Italy. At the court of my cousin, the Duke of Milan, we shall be safe and happy. What care I for Branchimont, and all its fortunes? And for that, my vassals are no traitors. If ever the bright hour arrive when we may return in joy, trust me, sweet love, my flag will still wave on my father's walls.'

'Oh, Lothair! why did we meet? Why, meeting, did we not hate each other like our fated race? My heart is distracted. Can this misery be love? Yet I adore thee—'

'Lady!' said the page, advancing, 'the priest approaches.'

The Lady Imogene rose, and crossed herself before the altar.

'To-morrow, at this hour,' whispered Lothair.

The Lady Imogene nodded assent, and, leaning on her page, quitted the shrine.

CHAPTER II

A Pert Page

‘DEAREST Lady,’ said the young page, as they returned to the castle, ‘my heart misgives me. As we quitted the shrine, I observed Rufus, the huntsman, slink into the adjoining wood.’ ‘Hah! he is my father’s most devoted instrument: nor is there any bidding which he would hesitate to execute—a most ruthless knave!’

‘And can see like a cat in the dark, too,’ observed young Theodore.

‘I never loved that man, even in my cradle,’ said the Lady Imogene; ‘though he can fawn, too. Did he indeed avoid us?’

‘Indeed I thought so, madam.’

‘Ah! my Theodore, we have no friend but you, and you are but a little page.’

‘I would I were a stout knight, lady, and I would fight for you.’

‘I warrant you,’ said Imogene; ‘you have a bold heart, little Theodore, and a kind one. O holy Virgin. I pray thee guard in all perils my bright-eyed Lothair!’

‘Lord Branchimont is the finest knight I ever set eyes upon,’ said Theodore. ‘I would I were his squire.’

‘Thou shalt be his squire, too, little Theodore, if all goes well.’

‘Oh! glorious day, when I shall wear a sword instead of a scarf! Shall I indeed be his squire, lady sweet?’

‘Indeed I think thou wilt make a very proper squire.’

‘I would I were a knight like Lord Branchimont; as tall as a lance, and as strong as a lion; and such a fine beard too!’

‘It is indeed a beard, Theodore,’ said the Lady Imogene. ‘When wilt thou have one like it?’

‘Another summer, perchance,’ said Theodore, passing his small palm musingly over his smooth chin.

‘Another summer!’ said the Lady Imogene, laughing; ‘why, I may as soon hope to have a beard myself.’

‘I hope you will have Lord Branchimont’s,’ said the page.

‘Amen!’ responded the lady.

CHAPTER III

Love's Messenger

THE apprehensions of the little Theodore proved to be too well founded. On the morning after the meeting of Lady Imogene with Lord Branchimont at the shrine of Charolois, she was summoned to the presence of her father, and, after having been loaded with every species of reproach and invective for her clandestine meeting with their hereditary foe, she was confined to a chamber in one of the loftiest towers of the castle, which she was never permitted to quit, except to walk in a long gloomy gallery with an old female servant remarkable for the acerbity of her mind and manners. Her page escaped punishment by flight; and her only resource and amusement was her mandolin.

The tower in which the Lady Imogene was imprisoned sprang out of a steep so precipitous that the position was considered impregnable. She was therefore permitted to open her lattice, which was not even barred. The landscape before her, which was picturesque and richly wooded, consisted of the en-closed chase of Charolois; but her jailers had taken due care that her chamber should not command a view of the castle of Branchimont. The valley and all its moving life were indeed entirely shut out from her. Often the day vanished without a human being appearing in sight. Very unhappy was the Lady Imogene, gazing on the silent woods, or pouring forth her passion over her lonely lute.

A miserable week had nearly elapsed. It was noon; the Lady Imogene was seated alone in her chamber, leaning her head upon her hand in thought, and dreaming of her Lothair, when a fluttering noise suddenly roused her, and, looking up, she beheld, to her astonishment, perched on the high back of a chair, a beautiful bird—a pigeon whiter than snow, with an azure beak, and eyes blazing with a thousand shifting tints. Not alarmed was the beautiful bird when the Lady Imogene gently approached it; but it looked up to her with eyes of intelligent tenderness, and flapped with some earnestness its pure and sparkling plume. The Lady Imogene smiled with marvelling pleasure, for the first time since her captivity; and putting forth her hand, which was even whiter than the wing, she patted the bright neck of the glad stranger, and gently stroked its soft plumage.

‘Heaven hath sent me a friend,’ exclaimed the beautiful Imogene; ‘Ah! what—what is this?’

‘Didst thou call, Lady Imogene?’ inquired the harsh voice of acid Martha, whom the exclamation of her mistress had summoned to the door.

‘Nothing—nothing—I want nothing,’ quickly answered Imogene, as she seized the bird with her hand, and, pressing it to her bosom, answered Martha over her shoulder. ‘Did she see thee, my treasure?’ continued the agitated Imogene, ‘Oh! did she see thee, my joy? Methinks we were not discovered.’ So saying, and tripping along on the lightest step imaginable, the captive secured the door; then bringing forth the bird from its sweet shelter, she produced a letter, which she had suddenly detected to be fastened under its left wing, and which she had perceived, in an instant, to be written by Lord Branchimont.

Her sight was dizzy, her cheek pale, her breath seemed to have deserted her. She looked up to heaven, she looked down upon the letter, and then she covered it with a thousand kisses; then, making a vigorous effort to collect herself, she read its strange and sweet contents:—

Lothair to Imogene.

‘Soul of my existence! Mignon, in whom you may place implicit trust, has promised me to bear you this sign of my love. Oh, I love you, Imogene! I love you more even than this bird can the beautiful sky! Kiss the dove a thousand times, that I may steal the kisses again from his neck, and catch, even at this distance, your fragrant breath. My beloved, I am planning your freedom and our happiness. Each day Mignon shall come to tell you how we speed; each day shall he bring back some testimony of your fidelity to your own

Lothair.’

It was read—it was read with gushing and fast-flowing tears—tears of wild joy. A thousand times, ay, a thousand times, Imogene embraced the faithful Mignon; nor could she indeed have ever again parted with him, had she not remembered that all this time her Lothair was anxiously awaiting the return of his messenger. So she tore a leaf from her tablets and inscribed her devotion; then, fastening it with care under the wing, she bore Mignon to the window, and, bestowing upon him a last embrace, permitted him to extend his beautiful wings and launch into the air.

Bright in the sun glanced the white bird as it darted into the deep-blue sky. Imogene watched it until the sparkling form changed into a dusky shade, and the dusky shade vanished into the blending distance.

CHAPTER IV

A Cruel Dart

IT WAS now a principal object with the fair captive of Charolois, that her unsympathising attendant should enter her chamber as little as possible, and only at seasons when there was no chance of a visit from Mignon. Faithful was the beautiful bird in these daily visits of consolation; and by his assistance, the correspondence with Lothair respecting her escape was actively maintained. A thousand plans were formed by the sanguine lovers—a thousand plans were canvassed, and then decided to be impracticable. One day, Martha was to be bribed; another, young Theodore was to re-enter the castle disguised as a girl, and become, by some contrivance, her attendant; but reflection ever proved that these were as wild as lovers' plans are wont to be; and another week stole away without anything being settled. Yet this second week was not so desolate as the first. On the contrary, it was full of exciting hope; and each day to hear that Lothair still adored her, and each day to be enabled to breathe back to him her own adoration, solaced the hours of her captivity. But Fate, that will often frown upon the fortunes of true love, decided that this sweet source of consolation should flow on no longer. Rufus, the huntsman, who was ever prowling about, and who at all times had a terribly quick eye for a bird, one day observed the carrier-pigeon sallying forth from the window of the tower. His practised sense instantly assured him that the bird was trained, and he resolved to watch its course.

'Hah, hah!' said Rufus, the huntsman, 'is Branchimont thy dovecot? Methinks, my little rover, thou bearest news I long to read.'

Another and another day passed, and again and again Rufus observed the visits of Mignon; so, taking his cross-bow one fair morning, ere the dew had left the flowers, he wandered forth in the direction of Branchimont. True to his mission, Mignon soon appears, skimming along the sky. Beautiful, beautiful bird! Fond, faithful messenger of love! Who can doubt that thou well comprehendest the kindly purpose of thy consoling visits! Thou bringest joy to the unhappy, and hope to the despairing! She shall kiss thee, bright Mignon! Yes! an embrace from lips sweeter than the scented dawn in which thou revelest, shall repay thee for all thy fidelity! And already the Lady Imogene is at her post, gazing upon the unclouded sky, and straining her beautiful eyes, as it were, to anticipate the slight and gladsome form, whose first presence ever makes her heart tremble with a host of wild and conflicting emotions.

Ah! through the air an arrow from a bow that never erred—an arrow swifter than thy swiftest flight, Mignon, whizzes with fell intent. The snake that darts upon its unconscious prey less fleet and fatal!

It touches thy form—it transfixes thy beautiful breast! Was there no good spirit, then, to save thee, thou hope of the hopeless? Alas, alas! the blood gushes from thy breast, and from thine azure beak! Thy transcendent eye grows dim—all is over! The carrier-pigeon falls to the earth!

CHAPTER V

Another Message

A DAY without hearing from Lothair was madness; and, indeed, when hour after heavy hour rolled away without the appearance of Mignon, and the Lady Imogene found herself gazing upon the vanishing twilight, she became nearly frantic with disappointment and terror. While light remained, an indefinite hope maintained her; but when it was indeed night, and nothing but the outline of the surrounding hills was perceptible, she could no longer restrain herself; and, bursting into hysteric tears, she threw herself upon the floor of her chamber. Were they discovered? Had Lothair forgotten her? Wearied with fruitless efforts, had he left her to her miserable, her solitary fate? There was a slight sound—something seemed to have dropped. She looked up. At her side she beheld a letter, which, wrapped round a stone, had been thrown in at the window. She started up in an ecstasy of joy. She cursed herself for doubting for an instant the fidelity of her lover! She tore open the letter; but so great was her emotion that some minutes elapsed before she could decipher its contents. At length she learned that, on the ensuing eve, Lothair and Theodore, disguised as huntsmen of Charolois, would contrive to meet in safety beneath her window, and for the rest she must dare to descend. It was a bold, a very perilous plan. It was the project of desperation. But there are moments in life when desperation becomes success. Nor was the spirit of the Lady Imogene one that would easily quail. Hers was a true woman's heart; and she could venture everything for love. She examined the steep; she cast a rapid glance at the means of making the descent: her shawls, her clothes, the hangings of her bed—here were resources—here was hope!

Full of these thoughts, some time elapsed before she was struck at the unusual mode in which the communication reached her. Where was Mignon? But the handwriting was the handwriting of Lothair. That she could not mistake. She might, however, have observed that the characters were faint—that the paper had the appearance of being stained or washed; but this she did not observe. She was sanguine—she was confident in the wisdom of Lothair. She knelt before an image of the Virgin, and poured forth her supplications for the success of their enterprise. And then, exhausted by all the agitation of the day, the Lady Imogene sunk into a deep repose.

CHAPTER VI

Flight and Discovery

MORN came at length, but brought no Mignon. 'He has his reasons,' answered the Lady Imogene: 'Lothair is never wrong. And soon, right soon, I hope, we shall need no messenger.' Oh, what a long, long day was this, the last of her captivity! Will the night never come—that night she had once so much dreaded? Sun, wilt thou never set? There is no longer gladness in thy beams. The shadows, indeed, grow longer, and yet thine orb is as high in heaven as if it were an everlasting noon! The unceasing cry of the birds, once so consoling, now only made her restless. She listened, and she listened, until at length the rosy sky called forth their last thrilling chant, and the star of evening summoned them to roost.

It was twilight: pacing her chamber, and praying to the Virgin, the hours at length stole away. The chimes of the sanctuary told her that it wanted but a quarter of an hour to midnight. Already she had formed a rope of shawls: now she fastened it to the-lattice with all her force. The bell struck twelve, and the Lady Imogene delivered herself to her fate. Slowly and fearfully she descended, long suspended in the air, until her feet at length touched a ledge of rock. Cautiously feeling her footing, she now rested, and looked around her. She had descended about twenty feet. The moon shone bright on the rest of the descent, which was more rugged. It seemed not impracticable—she clambered down.

'Hist! hist!' said a familiar voice, 'all is right, lady—but why did you not answer us?'

'Ah! Theodore, where is my Lothair?'

'Lord Branchimont is shaded by the trees—give me thy hand, sweet lady. Courage! all is right; but indeed you should have answered us.'

Imogene de Charolois is in the arms of Lothair de Branchimont.

'We have no time for embraces,' said Theodore; 'the horses are ready. The Virgin be praised, all is right. I would not go through such an eight-and-forty hours again to be dubbed a knight on the spot. Have you Mignon?'

'Mignon, indeed! he has not visited me these two days.'

'But my letter,' said Lothair—'you received it?'

'It was thrown in at my window,' said the Lady Imogene.

'My heart misgives me,' said little Theodore. 'Away! there is no time to lose. Hist! I hear footsteps. This way, dear friends. Hist! a shout! Fly! fly! Lord Branchimont, we are betrayed!'

And indeed from all quarters simultaneous sounds now rose, and torches seemed suddenly to wave in all quarters. Imogene clung to the neck of Lothair.

'We will die together!' she exclaimed, as she hid her face in his breast.

Lord Branchimont placed himself against a tree, and drew his mighty sword.

'Seize him!' shouted a voice, instantly recognised by Imogene; 'seize the robber!' shouted her father.

'At your peril!' answered Lothair to his surrounding foes.

They stood at bay—an awful group! The father and his murdering minions, alike fearful of encountering Branchimont and slaying their chieftain's daughter; the red and streaming torches blending with the silver moonlight that fell full upon the fixed countenance of their entrapped victim and the distracted form of his devoted mistress.

There was a dead, still pause. It was broken by the denouncing tone of the father, 'Cowards! do you fear a single arm? Strike him dead! spare not the traitress!'

But still the vassals would not move; deep as was their feudal devotion, they loved the Lady Imogene, and dared to disobey.

‘Let me, then, teach you your duty!’ exclaimed the exasperated father. He advanced, but a wild shriek arrested his extended sword; and as thus they stood, all alike prepared for combat, yet all motionless, an arrow glanced over the shoulder of the Count and pierced Lord Branchimont to the heart. His sword fell from his grasp, and he died without a groan.

Yes! the same bow that had for ever arrested the airy course of Mignon, had now, as fatally and as suddenly, terminated the career of the master of the carrier-pigeon. Vile Rufus, the huntsman, the murderous aim was thine!

CHAPTER VII

The Dove Returns to Imogene

THE bell of the shrine of Charolois is again sounding; but how different its tone from the musical and inspiring chime that summoned the weary vassals to their grateful vespers! The bell of the shrine of Charolois is again sounding. Alas! it tolls a gloomy knell. Oh! valley of sweet waters, still are thy skies as pure as when she wandered by thy banks and mused over her beloved! Still sets thy glowing sun; and quivering and bright, like the ascending soul of a hero, still Hesperus rises from thy dying glory! But she, the maiden fairer than the fairest eve—no more shall her light step trip among the fragrance of its flowers; no more shall her lighter voice emulate the music of thy melodious birds. Oh, yes! she is dead—the beautiful Imogene is dead! Three days of misery heralded her decease. But comfort is there in all things; for the good priest who had often administered consolation to his unhappy mistress over her brother's tomb, and who knelt by the side of her dying couch, assured many a sorrowful vassal, and many a sympathising pilgrim who loved to listen to the mournful tale, that her death was indeed a beatitude; for he did not doubt, from the distracted expressions that occasionally caught his ear, that the Holy Spirit, in that material form he most loves to honour, to wit, the semblance of a pure white dove, often solaced by his presence the last hours of Imogene de Charolois!

THE CONSUL'S DAUGHTER

CHAPTER I

Henrietta

AT ONE of the most beautiful ports in the Mediterranean Major Ponsonby held the office of British Consul. The Parliamentary interest of the noble family with which he was connected had obtained for him this office, after serving his country, with no slight distinction, during the glorious war of the Peninsula. Major Ponsonby was a widower, and his family consisted of an only daughter, Henrietta, who was a child of very tender years when he first obtained his appointment, but who had completed her eighteenth year at the period, memorable in her life, which these pages attempt to commemorate. A girl of singular beauty was Henrietta Ponsonby, but not remarkable merely for her beauty. Her father, a very accomplished gentleman, had himself superintended her education with equal care and interest. In their beautiful solitude, for they enjoyed the advantage of very little society save that of those passing travellers who occasionally claimed his protection and hospitality, the chief, and certainly the most engaging pursuit of Major Ponsonby, had been to assist the development of the lively talents of his daughter, and to watch with delight, not unattended with anxiety, the formation of her ardent and imaginative character: he had himself imparted to her a skilful practice in those fine arts in which he himself excelled, and a knowledge of those exquisite languages which he himself not only spoke with facility, but with whose rich and interesting literature he was intimately acquainted. He was careful, also, that, although almost an alien from her native country, she should not be ignorant of the progress of its mind; and no inconsiderable portion of his income had of late years been expended in importing from England the productions of those eminent writers of which we are justly as proud as of the heroes under whose flag he had himself conquered in Portugal and Spain.

The progress of the daughter amply repaid the father for his care, and rewarded him for his solicitude: from the fond child of his affections she had become the cherished companion of his society: her lively fancy and agreeable conversation prevented solitude from degenerating into loneliness: she diffused over their happy home that indefinable charm, that spell of unceasing, yet soothing excitement, with which the constant presence of an amiable, a lovely and accomplished woman can alone imbue existence; without which life, indeed, under any circumstances, is very dreary; and with which life, indeed, under any circumstances, is never desperate.

There were moments, perhaps, when Major Ponsonby, who was not altogether inexperienced in the great world, might sigh, that one so eminently qualified as his daughter to shine even amid its splendour, should be destined to a career so obscure as that which necessarily attended the daughter of a Consul in a distant country. It sometimes cost the father's heart a pang that his fair and fragrant flower should blush unseen, and waste its perfume even in their lovely wilderness; and then, with all a father's pride, and under all the influence of that worldly ambition from which men are never free, he would form plans by which she might visit, and visit with advantage, her native country. All the noble cousins were thought over, under whose distinguished patronage she might enter that great and distant world she was so capable of adorning; and more than once he had endeavoured to intimate to Henrietta that it might be better for them both that they should for a season part: but the Consul's daughter shrunk from these whispers as some beautiful tree from the murmurs of a rising storm. She could not conceive existence without her father—the father under whose breath and sight she had ever lived and flourished—the father to whom she was indebted, not only for existence, but all the attributes that made life so pleasant; her sire, her tutor, her constant company, her dear, dear friend. To part from him, even though but for a season, and to gain splendour, appeared to her pure, yet

lively imagination, the most fatal of fortunes; a terrible destiny—an awful dispensation. They had never parted, scarcely for an hour; once, indeed, he had been absent for three days; he had sailed with the fleet on public business to a neighbouring port; he had been obliged to leave his daughter, and the daughter remembered those terrible three days like a frightful dream, the recollection of which made her shudder.

Major Ponsonby had inherited no patrimony—he possessed only the small income derived from his office, and a slender pension, which rewarded many wounds; but, in the pleasant place in which their lot was cast, these moderate means obtained for them not merely the necessities, but all the luxuries of life. They inhabited in the town a palace worthy of the high, though extinct nobility, whose portraits and statues lined their lofty saloons, and filled their long corridors and graceful galleries; and about three miles from the town, on a gentle ascent facing the ocean, and embowered in groves of orange and olive trees, the fanciful garden enclosed in a thick wall of Indian fig and blooming aloes, was a most delicate casino, rented at a rate for which a garret may not be hired in England; but, indeed, a paradise. Of this pavilion Miss Ponsonby was the mistress; and here she lived amid fruit and flowers, surrounded by her birds: and here she might be often seen at sunset glancing amid its beauties, with an eye as brilliant, and a step as airy, as the bright gazelle that ever glided or bounded at her side.

CHAPTER II

A Fair Presentment

ONE summer day, when everybody was asleep in the little sultry city where Major Ponsonby, even in his siesta, watched over the interests of British commerce—for it was a city, and was blessed with the holy presence of a bishop—a young Englishman disembarked from an imperial merchant brig just arrived from Otranto, and, according to custom, took his way to the Consul's house. He was a man of an age apparently verging towards thirty; and, although the native porter, who bore his luggage and directed his path, proved that, as he was accompanied not even by a single servant, he did not share the general reputation of his countrymen for wealth, his appearance to those practised in society was not undistinguished. Tall, slender, and calm, his air, though unaffected, was that of a man not deficient in self-confidence; and whether it were the art of his tailor, or the result of his own good frame, his garb, although remarkably plain, had that indefinable style which we associate with the costume of a man of some mark and breeding.

On arriving at the Consul's house, he was ushered through a large, dark, cool hall, at the end of which was a magnificent staircase leading to the suite of saloons, into a small apartment on the ground floor fitted up in the English style, which, although it offered the appearance of the library of an English gentleman, was, in fact, the consular office. Dwarf bookcases encircled the room, occasionally crowned by a marble bust, or bronze group. The ample table was covered with papers, and a vacant easy-chair was evidently the consular throne. A portrait of his Britannic majesty figured on the walls of one part of the chamber; and over the mantel was another portrait, which immediately engaged the attention of the traveller, and, indeed, monopolised his observation. He had a very ample opportunity of studying it, for nearly a quarter of an hour elapsed before he was disturbed. It was the full-length portrait of a young lady. She stood on a terrace in a garden, and by her side was a gazelle. Her form was of wonderful symmetry; but although her dress was not English, the expression of her countenance reminded the traveller of the beauties of his native land. The dazzling complexion, the large deep blue eye, the high white forehead, the clustering brown hair, were all northern, but northern of the highest order. She held in her small hand a branch of orange-blossom—the hand was fairer than the flower.

'Signor Ferrers, I believe,' said a shrill voice. The traveller started, and turned round. Before him stood a little, parched-up, grinning, bowing Italian, holding in his hand the card that the traveller had sent up to the Consul.

'My name is Ferrers,' replied the traveller, slightly bowing, and speaking in a low, sweet tone.

'Signor Ponsonby is at the casino,' said the Italian: 'I have the honour to be the chancellor of the British Consulate.'

It is singular that a mercantile agent should be styled a Consul, and his chief clerk a chancellor.

'I have the honour to be the chancellor of the British Consulate,' said the Italian; 'and I will take the earliest opportunity of informing the Consul of your arrival. From Otranto, I believe? All well, I hope, at Otranto?'

'I hope so too,' replied the traveller; 'and so I believe.'

'You will be pleased to leave your passport, sir, with me—the Consul will be most happy to see you at the casino: about sunset he will be very happy to see you at the casino. I am sorry that I detained you for a moment, but I was at my siesta. I will take the earliest opportunity of informing the Consul of your arrival; but at present all the consular messengers are taking their siesta; the moment one is awake I shall send him to the casino. May I take the liberty of inquiring whether you have any letters for the Consul?'

'None,' replied the traveller.

The chancellor shrugged his shoulders a little, as if he regretted he had been roused from his siesta for a traveller who had not even a letter of introduction, and then turned on his heel to depart.

The traveller took up his hat, hesitated a moment, and then said, 'Pray, may I inquire of whom this is a portrait?'

'Certainly,' replied the chancellor; 'tis the Signora Ponsonby.'

CHAPTER III

The Mysterious Stranger

IT WAS even upon as ignoble an animal as a Barbary ass, goaded by a dusky little islander almost in a state of nudity, that, an hour before sunset on the day of his arrival, the English traveller approached the casino of the Consul's daughter, for there a note from Major Ponsonby had invited him to repair, to be introduced to his daughter, and to taste his oranges. The servant who received him led Mr. Ferrers to a very fine plane-tree, under whose spreading branches was arranged a banquet of fruit and flowers, coffee in cups of oriental filigree, and wines of the Levant, cooled in snow. The worthy Consul was smoking his chibouque, and his daughter, as she rose to greet their guest, let her guitar fall upon the turf. The original of the portrait proved that the painter had no need to flatter; and the dignified, yet cordial manner, the radiant smile, and the sweet and thrilling voice with which she welcomed her countryman would have completed the spell, had, indeed, the wanderer been one prepared, or capable of being enchanted. As it was, Mr. Ferrers, while he returned his welcome, with becoming complaisance, exhibited the breeding of a man accustomed to sights of strangeness and of beauty; and, while he expressed his sense of the courtesy of his companions, admired their garden, and extolled the loveliness of the prospect, he did not depart for a moment from that subdued, and even sedate manner, which indicates, the individual whom the world has little left to astonish, and less to enrapture, although, perhaps, much to please. Yet he was fluent in conversation, sensible and polished, and very agreeable. It appeared that he had travelled much, though he was far from boasting of his exploits. He had been long absent from England, had visited Egypt and Arabia, and had sojourned at Damascus. While he refused the pipe, he proved, by his observations on its use, that he was learned in its practice; and he declined his host's offer of a file of English journals, as he was not interested in their contents. His host was too polished to originate any inquiry which might throw light upon the connections or quality of his guest, and his guest imitated his example. Nothing could be more perfectly well-bred than his whole demeanour—he listened to the major with deference, and he never paid Miss Ponsonby a single compliment: he never even asked her to sing; but the fond father did not omit this attention. Henrietta, in the most unaffected manner, complied with his request, because, as she was in the habit of singing every evening to her father, she saw no reason why he should, on this occasion, be deprived of an amusement to which he was accustomed. As the welcome sea-breeze rose and stirred the flowers and branches, her voice blended with its fresh and fragrant breath. It was a beautiful voice; and the wild and plaintive air in which she indulged, indigenous to their isle, harmonised alike with the picturesque scene and the serene hour. Mr. Ferrers listened with attention, and thanked her for her courtesy. Before they withdrew to the casino he even requested the favour of her repeating the gratification, but in so quiet a manner that most young ladies would have neglected to comply with a wish expressed with so little fervour.

The principal chamber of the casino was adorned with drawings by the Consul's daughter: they depicted the surrounding scenery, and were executed by the hand of a master. Mr. Ferrers examined them with interest—his observations proved his knowledge, and made them more than suspect his skill. He admitted that he had some slight practice in the fine arts, and offered to lend his portfolio to Miss Ponsonby, if she thought it would amuse her. Upon the subject of scenery he spoke with more animation than on any other topic: his conversation, indeed, teemed with the observations of a fine eye and cultivated taste.

At length he departed, leaving behind him a very favourable impression. Henrietta and her father agreed that he was a most gentlemanlike personage—that he was very clever and very agreeable; and they were glad to know him. The major detailed all the families and all the persons of the name

of Ferrers Of whom he had ever heard, and with whom he had been acquainted; and, before he slept, wondered, for the fiftieth time, what Ferrers he was.

CHAPTER IV

Mr. Ferrers Dines with the Consul

THE next morning, Mr. Ferrers sent his portfolio to Miss Ponsonby, to the Consuls house, in the city; and her father called upon him immediately afterwards, to return his original visit, and to request him to dine with them. Mr. Ferrers declined the invitation; but begged to be permitted to pay his respects again at the casino, in the evening. The major, under the circumstances, ventured to press his new acquaintance to comply with their desire; but Mr. Ferrers became immediately very reserved, and the Consul desisted.

Towards sunset, however, mounted on his Barbary ass, Mr. Ferrers again appeared at the gate of the casino, as mild and agreeable as before. They drank their coffee and ate their fruit, chatted and sang, and again repaired to the pavilion. Here they examined the contents of the portfolio:—they were very rich, for it contained drawings of all kinds, and almost of every celebrated place in the vicinity of the Mediterranean shores; Saracenic palaces, Egyptian temples, mosques of Damascus, and fountains of Stamboul. Here was a Bedouin encampment, shaded by a grove of palms; and there a Spanish Señorita, shrouded in her mantilla, glided along the Alameda. There was one circumstance, however, about these drawings, which struck Miss Ponsonby as at least remarkable. It was obvious that some pencil-mark in the corner of each drawing, in all probability containing the name and initials of the artist, had been carefully obliterated.

Among the drawings were several sketches of a yacht, which Mr. Ferrers passed over quickly, and without notice. The Consul, however, who was an honorary member of the yacht club, and interested in every vessel of the squadron that visited the Mediterranean, very naturally inquired of Mr. Ferrers, to whom the schooner in question belonged. Mr. Ferrers seemed rather confused; but at length he said: ‘Oh, they are stupid things: I did not know they were here. The yacht is a yacht of a friend of mine, who was at Cadiz.’

‘Oh, I see the name,’ said the major; “‘*The Kraken*.” Why, that is Lord Bohun’s yacht!’

‘The same,’ said Mr. Ferrers, but perfectly composed.

‘Ah! do you know Lord Bohun?’ said Miss Ponsonby. ‘We have often expected him here. I wonder he has never paid us a visit, papa. They say he is the most eccentric person in the world. Is he so?’

‘I never heard much in his favour,’ said Mr. Ferrers. ‘I believe he has made himself a great fool, as most young nobles do.’

‘Well, I have heard very extraordinary things of him,’ said the Consul. ‘He is a great traveller, at all events, which I think a circumstance in every man’s favour.’

‘And then he has been a guerilla chieftain,’ said Miss Ponsonby; ‘and a Bedouin robber, and—I hardly know what else; but Colonel Garth, who was here last summer, told us the most miraculous tales of his lordship.’

‘Affectations!’ said Mr. Ferrers, with a sneer. ‘Bohun, however, has some excuses for his folly: for he was an orphan, I believe, in his cradle.’

‘Is he clever?’ inquired Miss Ponsonby.

‘Colonel Garth is a much better judge than I am,’ replied Mr. Ferrers. ‘I confess I have no taste for guerilla chieftains, or Bedouin robbers. I am not at all romantic.’

And here he attracted her attention to what he called an attempt at a bull-fight; the conversation dropped, and Lord Bohun was forgotten.

A fortnight passed away, and Mr. Ferrers was still a visitant of our Mediterranean isle. His intimacy with the Consul and his daughter remained on the same footing. Every evening he paid them a visit; and every evening, when he had retired, the major and his daughter agreed that he was a most

agreeable person, though rather odd; the worthy Consul always adding his regret that he would not dine with him, and his wonder as to what Ferrers he was.

Now, it so happened that it was a royal birthday; and the bishop, and several of the leading persons of the town, had agreed to partake of the hospitality of the British Consul. The major was anxious that Mr. Ferrers should meet them. He discussed this important point with his daughter.

‘My darling, I don’t like to ask him: he really is such a very odd man. The moment you ask him to dinner, he looks as if you had offered him an insult. Shall we send him a formal invitation? I wonder what Ferrers he is? I should be gratified if he would dine with us. Besides, he would see something of our native society here, which is amusing. What shall we do?’

‘I will ask him,’ replied Miss Ponsonby. ‘I don’t think he could refuse me.’

‘I am sure I could not,’ replied the major, smiling.

And so Miss Ponsonby seized an opportunity of telling Mr. Ferrers that she had a favour to ask him. He was more fortunate than he imagined, was his courteous reply.

‘Then you must dine with papa, to-morrow.’

Mr. Ferrers’ brow immediately clouded.

‘Now, do not look so suspicious,’ said Miss Ponsonby. ‘Do you think that ours is an Italian banquet? Is there poison in the dish? Or do you live only on fruit and flowers?’ continued Miss Ponsonby. ‘Do you know,’ she added, with an arch smile, ‘I think you must be a ghoul.’

A sort of smile struggled with a scowl over the haughty countenance of the Englishman.

‘You will come!’ said Miss Ponsonby, most winningly.

‘I have already trespassed too much upon Major Ponsonby’s hospitality,’ muttered Mr. Ferrers; ‘I have no claim to it.’

‘You are our countryman.’

‘Unknown.’

‘The common consequence of being a traveller.’

‘Yes—but—in short—I—’

‘You must come,’ said Miss Ponsonby, with a glance like sunshine.

‘You do with me what you like,’ exclaimed Mr. Ferrers, with animation. ‘Beautiful—weather,’ he concluded.

Mr. Ferrers was therefore their guest; and strange it is to say, that from this day, from some cause, which it is now useless to ascertain, this gentleman became an habitual guest at the Consul’s table; accepting a general invitation without even a frown; and, what is more remarkable, availing himself of it, scarcely with an exception.

Could it be the Consul’s daughter that effected this revolution? Time may perhaps solve this interesting problem. Certainly, whether it were that she was seldom seen to more advantage than when presiding over society; or whether, elate with her triumph, she was particularly pleasing because she was particularly pleased; certainly Henrietta Ponsonby never appeared to greater advantage than she did upon the day of this memorable festival. Mr. Ferrers, when he quitted the house, sauntered to the mole, and gazed upon the moonlight sea.—A dangerous symptom. Yet the eye of Mr. Ferrers had before this been fixed in mute abstraction on many a summer wave, when Dian was in her bower; and this man, cold and inscrutable as he seemed, was learned in woman, and woman’s ways. Shall a Consul’s daughter melt a heart that boasted of being callous, and clear a brow that prided itself upon its clouds?

But if the state of Mr. Ferrers’ heart were doubtful, I must perforce confess that, as time drew on, Henrietta Ponsonby, if she had ventured to inquire, could have little hesitated as to the state of her own feelings. Her companion, her constant companion, for such Mr. Ferrers had now insensibly become, exercised over her an influence, of the power of which she was unconscious,—only because it was unceasing. Had for a moment the excitement of her novel feelings ceased, she would have discovered, with wonder, perhaps with some degree of fear, how changed she had become since the

first evening he approached their pleasant casino. And yet Mr. Ferrers was not her lover. No act, —no word of gallantry,—no indication of affection, to her inexperienced sense, ever escaped him. All that he did was, that he sought her society; but, then, there was no other. The only wonder was, that he should remain among them; but, then, he had been everywhere. The vague love of lounging and repose, which ever and anon falls upon men long accustomed to singular activity and strange adventure, sufficiently accounted for his conduct. But, whatever might be his motives, certain it is, that the English stranger dangerously interested the feelings of the Consul's daughter; and when she thought the time must arrive for his departure, she drove the recollection from her mind with a swiftness which indicated the pang which she experienced by its occurrence. And no marvel either, that the heart of this young and lovely maiden softened at the thought, and in the presence of her companion: no marvel, and no shame, for nature had invested the Englishman with soul-subduing qualities. His elegant person; his tender, yet reserved manners; his experienced, yet ornate mind; the flashes of a brilliant, yet mellowed imagination, which ever and anon would break forth in his conversation: perhaps, too, the air of melancholy, and even of mystery, which enveloped him, were all spells potent in the charm that enchants the heart of woman. And the major, what did he think? The good Consul was puzzled. The confirmed intimacy between his daughter and his guest alike perplexed and pleased him. He certainly never had become acquainted with a man whom he would sooner have preferred for a son-in-law, if he had only known who he was. But two months, and more than two months, had elapsed, and threw no light upon this most necessary point of knowledge. The Consul hesitated as to his conduct. His anxiety almost mastered his good breeding. Now he thought of speaking to Mr. Ferrers, and then to his daughter. There were objections to each line of conduct, and his confidence in Mr. Ferrers was very great, although he did not exactly know who he was: he was decidedly a gentleman; and there was, throughout his conduct and conversation, a tone of such strict propriety; there was so much delicacy, and good feeling, and sound principle, in all he said and did, that the Consul at length resolved, that he had no right to suspect, and no authority to question him. He was just on the point, however, of conferring with his daughter, when the town was suddenly enlivened, and his attention suddenly engrossed, by the arrival of two other English gentlemen.

CHAPTER V

A Tender Avowal

IT MUST be confessed that Captain Ormsby and Major M'Intyre were two very different sort of men to Mr. Ferrers. Never were two such gay, noisy, pleasant, commonplace persons. They were '*on leave*' from one of the Mediterranean garrisons, had scampered through Italy, shot red-legged partridges all along the Barbary coast, and even smoked a pipe with the Dey of Algiers. They were intoxicated with all the sights they had seen, and all the scrapes they had encountered, which they styled 'regular adventures': and they insisted upon giving everyone a description of what everybody had heard or seen. In consequence of their arrival, Mr. Ferrers discontinued dining with his accustomed host; and resumed his old habit of riding up to the casino, every evening, on his Barbary ass, to eat oranges and talk to the Consul's daughter.

'I suppose you know Florence, Mr. Ferrers?' said Major M'Intyre.

Mr. Ferrers bowed.

'St. Peter's, of course, you have seen?' said Captain Ormsby.

'But have you seen it during Holy Week?' said the major. 'That's the thing.'

'Ah, I see you have been everywhere,' said the captain: 'Algiers, of course?'

'I never was at Algiers,' replied Mr. Ferrers, quite rejoiced at the circumstance; and he walked away, and played with the gazelle.

'By Jove,' said the major, with elevated eyes, 'not been at Algiers! why, Mr. Consul, I thought you said Mr. Ferrers was a very great traveller indeed; and he has not been at Algiers! I consider Algiers more worth seeing than any place we ever visited. Don't you, Ormsby?'

The Consul inquired whether he had met any compatriots at that famous place. The military travellers answered that they had not; but that Lord Bohun's yacht was there; and they understood his lordship was about to proceed to this island. The conversation for some time then dwelt upon Lord Bohun, and his adventures, eccentricities, and wealth. But Captain Ormsby finally pronounced 'Bohun a devilish good fellow.'

'Do you know Lord Bohun?' inquired Mr. Ferrers.

'Why, no!' confessed Captain Ormsby: 'but he is a devilish intimate friend of a devilish intimate friend of mine.'

Mr. Ferrers made a sign to Miss Ponsonby; she rose, and followed him into the garden. 'I cannot endure the jabber of these men,' said Mr. Ferrers.

'They are very good-natured,' said Miss Ponsonby.

'It may be so; and I have no right to criticise them. I dare say they think me very dull. However, it appears you will have Lord Bohun here in a short time, and then I shall be forgotten.'

'That is not a very kind speech. You would not be forgotten, even if absent; and you have, I hope, no thought of quitting us.'

'I have remained here too long. Besides, I have no wish to play a second part to Lord Bohun.'

'Who thinks of Lord Bohun? and why should you play a second part to anyone? You are a little perverse, Mr. Ferrers.'

'I have been in this island ten weeks,' said Mr. Ferrers, thoughtfully.

'When we begin to count time, we are generally weary,' said Miss Ponsonby.

'You are in error. I would willingly compound that the rest of my existence should be as happy as the last ten weeks. They have been very happy,' said Mr. Ferrers, musingly; 'very happy, indeed. The only *happy* time I ever knew. They have been so serene, and so sweet.'

'And why not remain, then?' said Miss Ponsonby, in a low voice.

‘There are many reasons,’ said Mr. Ferrers; and he offered his arm to Miss Ponsonby, and they walked together, far away from the casino. ‘These ten weeks have been so serene, and so sweet,’ he continued, but in a calm voice, ‘because you have been my companion. My life has taken its colour from your character. Now, listen to me, dearest Miss Ponsonby, and be not alarmed. I love you!’

Her arm trembled in his.

‘Yes, I *love* you; and, believe me, I use that word with no common feeling. It describes the entire devotion of my existence to your life; and my complete sympathy with every attribute of your nature. Calm as may be my speech, I love you with a burning heart.’

She bowed her head, and covered her face with her right hand.

‘Most beautiful lady,’ continued Mr. Ferrers, ‘pardon me if I agitate you; for my respect is equal to my love. I stand before you a stranger, utterly unknown; and I am so circumstanced that it is not in my power, even at *this* moment, to offer any explanation of my equivocal position. Yet, whatever I may be, I offer my existence, and all its accidents, good or bad, in homage to your heart. May I indulge the delicious hope that, if not now accepted, they are at least considered with kindness and without suspicion?’

‘Oh, yes! without *suspicion*,’ murmured Miss Ponsonby—‘without suspicion. Nothing, nothing in the world shall ever make me believe that you are not so good as you are—gifted.’

‘Darling Henrietta!’ exclaimed Mr. Ferrers, in a voice of melting tenderness; and he pressed her to his heart, and sealed his love upon her lips. ‘This, this is confidence; this, this is the woman’s love I long have sighed for. Doubt me not, dearest; never doubt me! Say you are mine; once more pledge yourself to me. I leave our isle this night. Nay, start not, sweet one. ‘Tis for our happiness; this night. I shall return to claim my bride. Now, listen, darling! our engagement, our sweet and solemn engagement, is secret. You will never hear from me until we meet again; you may hear *of* me and not to my advantage. What matter? You love me; you cannot doubt me. I leave with you my honour: an honour *never sullied*. Mind that. Oh no, you cannot doubt me!’

‘I am yours: I care not what they say: if there be no faith and truth in you, I will despair of them for ever.’

‘Beautiful being! you make me mad with joy. Has fate reserved for me, indeed, this treasure? Am I at length loved, and loved only for myself!’

CHAPTER VI

The Famous Lord Bohun

He has gone; Mr. Ferrers has departed. What an event! What a marvellous event! A revolution has occurred in the life of Henrietta Ponsonby: she was no longer her own mistress; she was no longer her father's child. She belonged to another; and that other a stranger, an unknown, and departed being! How strange! And yet how sweet! This beautiful young lady passed her days in pondering over her singular position. In vain she attempted to struggle with her destiny. In vain she depicted to herself the error, perhaps the madness, of her conduct. She was fascinated. She could not reason; she could not communicate to her father all that had happened. A thousand times her lips moved to reveal her secret; a thousand times an irresistible power restrained them. She remained silent, moody, and restless: she plucked flowers, and threw them to the wind: she gazed upon the sea, and watched the birds in abstraction wilder than their wing: and yet she would not doubt her betrothed. That voice so sweet and solemn, and so sincere, still lingered in her ear: the gaze of that pure and lofty brow was engraven on her memory: never could she forget those delicate adieus!

This change in his daughter was not unmarked by the Consul, who, after some reflection, could not hesitate in considering it as the result of the departure of Mr. Ferrers. The thought made him mournful. It pained his noble nature, that the guest whom he so respected might have trifled with the affections of the child whom he so loved. He spoke to the maiden; but the maiden said she was happy. And, indeed, her conduct gave evidence of restlessness rather than misery; for her heart seemed sometimes exuberantly gay; often did she smile, and ever did she sing. The Consul was conscious there was a mystery he could not fathom. It is bitter for a father at all times to feel that his child is unhappy; but doubly bitter is the pang when he feels that the cause is secret.

Three months, three heavy months passed away, and the cloud still rested on this once happy home. Suddenly Lord Bohun arrived, the much talked-of Lord Bohun, in his more talked-of yacht. The bustle which the arrival of this celebrated personage occasioned in the consular establishment was a diversion from the reserve, or the gloom, which had so long prevailed there. Lord Bohun was a young, agreeable, and somewhat affected individual. He had a German chasseur and a Greek page. He was very luxurious, and rather troublesome; but infinitely amusing, both to the Consul and his daughter. He dined with them every day, and recounted his extraordinary adventures with considerable self-complacency. In the course of the week he scampered over every part of the island; and gave a magnificent entertainment on board the *Kraken*, to the bishop and the principal islanders, in honour of the Consul's daughter. Indeed it was soon very evident that his lordship entertained feelings of no ordinary admiration for his hostess. He paid her on all occasions the most marked attention; and the Consul, who did not for a moment believe that these attentions indicated other than the transient feelings that became a lord, and so adventurous a lord, began to fear that his inexperienced Henrietta might again become the victim of the fugitive admiration of a traveller.

One evening at the casino, his lordship noticed a drawing of his own yacht, and started. The Consul explained to him, that the drawing had been copied by his daughter from a sketch by an English traveller, who preceded him. His name was inquired, and given.

'Ferrers!' exclaimed his lordship. 'What, has Ferrers been here?'

'You know Mr. Ferrers, then?' inquired Henrietta, with suppressed agitation.

'Oh yes, I know Ferrers.'

'A most agreeable and gentleman-like man,' said the Consul, anxious, he knew not why, that the conversation would cease.

'Oh yes, Ferrers is a very agreeable man. He piques himself on being agreeable,—Mr. Ferrers.'

‘From what I have observed of Mr. Ferrers,’ said Henrietta, in a firm, and rather decided tone, ‘I should not have given him credit for any sentiment approaching to *conceit*.’

‘He is fortunate in having such a defender,’ said his lordship, bowing gallantly.

‘Our friends are scarcely worth possessing,’ said Miss Ponsonby, ‘unless they defend us when absent. But I am not aware that Mr. Ferrers needs any defence.’

His lordship turned on his heel, and hummed an opera air.

‘Mr. Ferrers paid us a long visit,’ said the Consul, who was now desirous that the conversation should proceed.

‘He had evidently a great inducement,’ said Lord Bohun. ‘I wonder he ever departed.’

‘He is a great favourite in this house,’ said Miss Ponsonby.

‘I perceive it,’ said Lord Bohun.

‘What Ferrers is he?’ inquired the Consul.

‘Oh, he has gentle blood in his veins,’ said Lord Bohun. ‘I never heard his breeding impeached.’

‘And I should think, nothing else,’ said Miss Ponsonby.

‘Oh, I never heard anything particular against Ferrers,’ said his lordship; ‘except that he was a *roué*, and a little mad. That is all.’

‘Enough, I should think,’ said Major Ponsonby, with a clouded brow.

‘What a *roué* may be, I can scarcely be supposed to judge,’ said Henrietta. ‘If, however, it be a man remarkable for the delicacy of his thoughts and conduct, Mr. Ferrers has certainly some claim to the title. As for his madness, he was our constant companion for nearly three months: if he be mad, it must be a very *little* indeed.’

‘He was a great favourite of Henrietta,’ said her father, with a forced smile.

‘Fortunate man!’ said the lord. ‘Fortunate Ferrers!’

Lord Bohun stepped into the garden with the Consul: Miss Ponsonby was left alone. Firm as had been her previous demeanour, now, that she was alone, her agitated countenance denoted the tumult of her mind. A *roué*! Could it be so! Could it be possible! Was she, while she had pledged the freshness of her virgin mind to this unknown man, was she, after all, only a fresh sacrifice to his insatiable vanity! Ferrers a *roué*! That lofty-minded man, who spoke so eloquently and so wisely, was he a *roué*, an eccentric *roué*; one whose unprincipled conduct could only be excused at the expense of the soundness of his intellect? She could not credit it; she would not credit it: and yet his conduct had been so strange, so mysterious, so unnecessarily mysterious: and then she recollected his last dark-muttered words: ‘*You may hear of me, and not to my advantage.*’ Oh, what a prophecy! And *from* him she had never heard. He had, at least, kept this sad promise. Very sorrowful was the Consul’s daughter. And then she bethought herself of his pledge, and his honour that had been *never sullied*. She buried her face in her hands,—she conjured up to her recollection all that had happened since his arrival, perhaps his fatal arrival, in their island; all he had said and done, and seemed to think. She would not doubt him. It was madness for a moment to doubt him. No desolation seemed so complete, no misery so full of anguish, as such suspicion: she could not doubt him; all her happiness was hope. A gentle touch roused her. It was her gazelle; the gazelle that he had so loved. She caressed it, she caressed it for his sake: she arose and joined her father and Lord Bohun in the garden, if not light-hearted, at least serene.

CHAPTER VII

More Mystery

THERE must have been something peculiarly captivating in the air of our island; for Lord Bohun, who, according to his own account, had never remained in any place a week in the whole course of his life, exhibited no inclination to quit the city where Major Ponsonby presided over the interests of our commerce. He had remained there nearly a month, made himself very agreeable, and, on the whole, was a welcome guest, certainly with the Consul, if not with the Consul's daughter. As for the name of Mr. Ferrers, it occasionally occurred in conversation. Henrietta piqued herself upon the unsuspected inquiries which she carried on respecting her absent friend. She, however, did not succeed in eliciting much information. Lord Bohun was so vague, that it was impossible to annex a precise idea to anything he ever uttered. Whether Ferrers were rich or poor, really of good family, or, as she sometimes thought, of disgraceful lineage; when and where Lord Bohun and himself had been fellow-travellers—all was alike obscure and shadowy. Not that her noble guest was inattentive to her inquiries; on the contrary, he almost annoyed her by his constant devotion: she was almost, indeed, inclined to resent his singularly marked expressions of admiration as an insult; when, to her utter astonishment, one morning her father astounded her by an announcement that Lord Bohun had done her the honour of offering her his hand and heart. The beautiful Henrietta was in great perplexity. It was due to Lord Bohun to reject his flattering proposal without reservation: it was difficult, almost impossible, to convince her father of the expediency of such a proceeding. There was in the proposal of Lord Bohun every circumstance which could gratify Major Ponsonby. In the wildest dreams of his paternal ambition, his hopes had never soared higher than the possession of such a son-in-law: high born, high rank, splendid fortune, and accomplished youth, were combined in the individual whom some favouring destiny, it would seem, had wafted to this distant and obscure isle to offer his vows to its accomplished mistress. That his daughter might hesitate, on so brief an acquaintance, to unite her eternal lot in life with a comparative stranger, was what he had in some degree, anticipated; but that she should unhesitatingly and unreservedly decline the proposal, was conduct for which he was totally unprepared. He was disappointed and mortified—for the first time in his life he was angry with his child. It is strange that Lord Bohun, who had required a deputy to make, a proposition which, of all others, the most becomes and most requires a principal, should, when his fate was decided, have requested a personal interview with Miss Ponsonby. It was a favour which she could not refuse, for her father required her to grant it. She accordingly prepared herself for a repetition of the proposal from lips, doubtless unaccustomed to sue in vain. It was otherwise: never had Lord Bohun conducted himself in a more kind and unaffected manner than during this interview: it pained Miss Ponsonby to think she had pained one who was in reality so amiable: she was glad, however, to observe that he did not appear very much moved or annoyed. Lord Bohun expressed his gratitude for the agreeable hours he had spent in her society; and then most delicately ventured to inquire whether time might, perhaps, influence Miss Ponsonby's determination. And when he had received her most courteous, though hopeless answer, he only expressed his wishes for her future happiness, which he could not doubt.

'I feel,' said Lord Bohun, as he was about to depart; 'I feel,' he said, in a very hesitating voice, 'I am taking a great, an unwarrantable liberty; but believe me, dear Miss Ponsonby, the inquiry, if I could venture to make it, is inspired by the sincerest desire for your welfare.'

Speak with freedom, Lord Bohun; you will ever, I am sure, speak with kindness.'

'I would not willingly despair then, unless I believed that heart were engaged to another.'

Miss Ponsonby bent down and plucked a flower, and, her brow covered with blushes, with an agitated hand tore the flower to pieces.

'Is this a fair inquiry?' she murmured. 'It is for your sake I inquire,' answered Lord Bohun.

Now an irresistible conviction came over her mind that Lord Bohun was thinking of Ferrers, and a desire on her part as strong to learn at length something of her mysterious lover.

‘What, indeed, if I be not mistress of my heart?’ She spoke without raising her head.

‘In that case I will believe that it belongs to one worthy of such a treasure.’

‘You speak of Edmund Ferrers?’ said Miss Ponsonby.

‘The same.’

‘You know him?’ she inquired, in a choking voice.

‘I know and honour him. I have long believed that the world did not boast a man more gifted; now I know that it does not possess a man more blessed.’

‘Shall you see him?’ she inquired in a quick tone.

‘Probably you will see him first; I am sufficiently acquainted with his movements to know that he will soon be here. This Greek boy whom you have sometimes noticed is his page; I wish him to join his master again; and methinks the readiest way will be to leave him in this isle. Here, Spiridion, bow to your new mistress, and be dutiful for her sake, as well as that of your lord’s. Adieu! dearest Miss Ponsonby!’

CHAPTER VIII

A Welcome Message

THIS strange conversation with Lord Bohun at parting, was not without a certain wild, but not unpleasing influence over the mind of Henrietta Ponsonby. Much as it at first had agitated her, its result, as she often mused over it, was far from being without solace. It was consoling, indeed, to know that one person, at least, honoured that being in whom she had so implicitly relied: Lord Bohun, also, had before spoken of Ferrers in a very different tone; but she felt confidence in the unusual seriousness of his last communication; and with satisfaction contrasted it with the heedlessness, or the levity, of his former intimations. Here, too, was the page of Ferrers, at her side—the beautiful and bright-eyed Spiridion. How strange it was! how very strange! Her simple life had suddenly become like some shifting fairy-tale; but love, indeed, is a fairy, and full of marvels and magic—it changes all things; and the quietest domestic hearth, when shadowed by its wing, becomes as rife with wonders and adventure as if it were the passionate theatre of some old romance. Yes! the bright-eyed Greek page of her mysterious and absent lover was at her side—but then he spoke only Greek. In vain she tried to make him comprehend how much she desired to have tidings of his master. The graceful mute could only indulge in airy pantomime, point to the skies and ocean, or press his hand to his heart in token of fidelity. Henrietta amused herself in teaching Spiridion Italian, and repaid herself for all her trouble in occasionally obtaining some slight information of her friend. In time she learned that Ferrers was in Italy, and had seen Lord Bohun before the departure of that nobleman. In answer to her anxious and often-repeated inquiries whether he would soon return, Spiridion was constant to his consoling affirmative. Never was such a sedulous mistress of languages as Henrietta Ponsonby. She learned, also, that an Albanian scarf, which the page wore round his waist, had been given him by his master when Spiridion quitted him; and Henrietta instantly obtained the scarf for a Barbary shawl of uncommon splendour.

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