Braddon Mary Elizabeth

Mohawks: A Novel. Volume 2 of 3

Mary Elizabeth Braddon

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CHAPTER I
"IN OPPOSITION AGAINST FATE AND HELL."

"Herrick," said Lavendale suddenly next day, when the two friends were alone together in the Abbey hall, a spacious chamber, half armoury, half picture-gallery, rich alike in the damascened steel of Damascus and Toledo and in the angular saints and virgins of the early Italian painters; "Herrick, you are making love to my heiress; you are cutting off my advance to El Dorado; you are playing the part of a traitor."

"'Tis a true bill, Jack. I confess my crime, my treachery – what you will. I adore Irene Bosworth, for whom you care not a straw. I should love her as fondly were she a beggar-girl that I had found by the roadside – 'tis for herself I love her, and for no meaner reason. I loved her before you ever saw her face."

"Ho, ho! how secret you can be!"

"There are some things too holy to be canvassed with one who is seldom serious. Had I told you of my passion, you would have laughed at the love and the lover. I met that sweet girl in the wood one morning, met her again the next, adored her in the first hour we met, and went on loving her deeper with every meeting. And then you came home with your story of an heiress, and strutted like a peacock before her, irresistible, all-conquering, deeming it impossible that any other man could be loved while you were by. Was I to warn you of my silent rivalry? It is but within the last week I have told her of my love."

"And does she return it?"

"She tells me as much."

"Then, by Heaven, Herrick, I will not cross your loves. For no joining of lands and bettering of my estate will I be false at once to love and friendship. If Mr. Bosworth has a mind to extend his property, he can wait till I am dead and buy Lavendale Manor from the Jews. I doubt it will be deeply dipped by that time."

"Why talk of death in the flush of health and vigour?"

"Flushes are deceitful, Herrick; there is a kind of bloom that augurs more evil than Lord Hervey's sickly pallor, though I doubt if he prove long-lived. A short life and a merry one has ever been my motto. No, friend, I will not cross you; and if I can help your suit, I will."

"You may help me to some kind of preferment which may help my suit, if you have a mind."

"What, in the Church? Would you turn literary parson, like the Irish dean?"

"No; I have been too much a student of Toland and Tyndal to make a good priest. I want you to help me to the first vacant seat in which you have an interest. I believe I could be of some use to the Whigs."

"Then I will move heaven and earth to get you elected whenever the chance arises. Yes, you are a glorious speaker. I remember how you startled the infidels at the Hell Fire Club when you rose in your strength one midnight, and thundered out a peal of orthodoxy which would have done honour to a High Church bishop; not Tillotson himself, that orthodox bully, as Bolingbroke called him, could have been more eloquent. Yes, I will help you, Herrick, if I can. There's my hand upon it."

"You were ever generous," said his friend gravely, as they shook hands; "but, alas, I fear you would hardly give up your heiress-hunt so readily if – "

"If I had not another quarry in view, eh, Herrick?" interrupted Lavendale, with that kind of feverish gaiety which in his nature alternated with periods of deep despondency. "Well, perhaps you are right, old friend. I am not a practised schemer, and can hardly hide my cards from one so familiar as my Herrick."

"Jack, I am afraid you are going to the devil."

"True, lad, and have been travelling on that journey for the last five years; ever since the Chichinette business. I might have pulled up just then, Herrick. I was tired of my old follies, sick to death of all our extravagances, smoking porters, breaking windows, beating watchmen, cock-pit and bear-garden, dicing and drinking. I meant to become a better man, and Judith Walberton's husband. But Wharton and his gang jeered at my reformation – twitted and taunted and teased and exasperated me into a braggadocio wager, and I lost her who should have been my redeeming angel."

"Nay, Jack, methinks that lady was never so angelic as you deemed her, and that she has too much of Lucifer's pride to rank with seraphs that have not fallen. She is a fine creature, but a dangerous friend for you; and you are a fatal companion for her. In a word, you ought not to be in this house. The same roof should not shelter you and Lady Judith."

"Grateful, after I have brought you here to play the traitor and court my mistress – vastly grateful, after I have surrendered the lady and her fortune!"

"Dear Jack, I was never your flatterer – should I flatter when I see you on the road to perdition?"

"What matter, if it be the only way to happiness? O, for some occult power by which I could read and rule the thoughts of her I love! There are moments when I fancy that I do so rule her – that I can creep into her heart, stir her bosom with the same fire that thrills my own, transfer every thought of my brain to hers. Our eyes have met in such moments – met across the babble and folly of the crowd, and I have known that we were reading each other's mind as plainly as in an open book. And then came that sleek profligate Bolingbroke, with his false handsome face and honeyed tongue, and her vanity or her caprice was at once engaged. Pleasant to have so great a man in leading-strings. She would as readily take fox-hunting, heavy-jowled, beef-eating Walpole for her flirt. She is made up of extravagance and vanity."

"She is a woman of fashion. What else would you have her but vain and extravagant? They are all cast in the same mould. Vanity, extravagance, and coquetry in youth; envy, malice, white lead, and ratafia in age. Believe me, Jack, thou hadst best go back to town!"

"Why, so I will, Herrick, when the *Craftsman* goes. They tell me that is the name of the new paper which Bolingbroke and Pulteney are plotting. I will not leave Henry St. John master of the field."

"He is old enough to be her father."

"He is handsome enough and seductive enough to be her lover. I swear I will not leave him on the ground. Ah, here comes our dilettante host, with his usual semiquaver and diminished-seventh air."

"What, gentlemen!" exclaimed Mr. Topsparkle, "is it possible two Englishmen can spend a morning without cock-fighting, donkey-racing, or some other equally national entertainment? Do you know that there are races at Stockbridge to-day, and that most of my friends have gone off on horseback or in coaches to see the sport? Shall I order another coach for you two?"

"I am profoundly obliged for the offer," said Lavendale, "but I had enough of horse-racing when I was in my teens. I contrived to lose a small fortune and exhaust the pleasures of the Turf before my majority. I have not the staying power of my Lord Godolphin, who frequented the racecourse to his dying day. But I could suggest an amusement, Mr. Topsparkle, if you have a spare half-hour to bestow upon me."

"All my hours are at your lordship's service."

"You are vastly kind. My friend Durnford and I are both burning with impatience to see your library – that is to say, those choicer books which are not shown to the outer world, the crypto-jewels of your collection."

"I shall be delighted to exhibit those gems to such fine judges. I always think of a rare book or curio as if it were a living thing, and could feel a slight. To an appreciative friend I am ever charmed to unlock my choicest cases: those in my own study, for instance, where I keep my private collection. Will you walk that way? I have been spending a wearisome hour there with my land-steward, and your presence will be an agreeable relief."

Lavendale and Durnford followed their host along a corridor to the further end of the house, where there was a spacious room fronting the south, but shaded by the old Gothic cloister upon which the windows opened. There was a glass door also opening into the cloister, and here on sunny mornings, and sometimes even in rainy weather, Mr. Topsparkle walked up and down, sometimes with a book, sometimes in meditative solitude.

The room was handsome and picturesque: the bookcases which lined the walls on all sides were of richly carved oak – the spoils of Flemish churches, the wreckage of old choir-stalls and demolished pulpits. The ceiling was also of oak, heavily bossed. The floor was polished oak, covered in part by a large Oriental carpet. Mr. Topsparkle had not been quite such a Goth as that Lord Westmoreland who built a Grecian front to one side of a fine old cloistered court at Apethorpe; but his taste was of the rococo order, and he had not altogether spared the monastic building which caprice, rather than veneration for antiquity, had tempted him to buy. He had built out an alcove at one end of the room, and had lighted it with painted windows from the wreck of an Italian palace – a patch of renaissance art stuck like a wen upon a purely mediæval building. This alcove Mr. Topsparkle loved better than any other part of his house. It was his own secret cell, in which he delighted to read or meditate, write letters, or survey his financial position, alone or with the attendance of his man of business. Rich as he was, Mr. Topsparkle was not above making more money. He had his dabblings and speculations on 'Change, and was, like Roland Bosworth, in advance of his contemporaries in clearness of insight and breadth of view.

To-day the appearance of this alcove indicated that he had lately been at work there. A large old-fashioned Dutch bureau stood open, the secrétaire littered with papers. It was a wondrous old piece of furniture which filled one side of the recess. The double doors were richly ornamented with the story of the Crucifixion and Entombment carved in high relief. These doors stood open, and the light from the painted window on the opposite side of the recess shone with prismatic hues upon the writing-desk, with its scattered papers and innumerable drawers and pigeon-holes.

"I fear we are intruders here at an awkward time, Mr. Topsparkle," said Lavendale, noting that appearance of recent occupation.

"No, upon my veracity. I have dismissed my man of business; I mean to work no more to-day."

"Hard that Crœsus should have to labour," said Herrick lightly.

"My dear Durnford, be assured that if Crœsus was as rich as we are told, he had been obliged to toil in the maintenance of his fortune, to look to the collection of king's taxes, and see that his people did not plunder him. 'Tis almost as hard labour to keep a fortune as to win one, and I doubt if any man is as happy as the miser who keeps his money in a hole under his pallet, and counts it every night. That, for pure enjoyment, is your true use of money. But let me show you my books."

He unlocked a case and displayed some of his treasures, – curious hooks in all languages, from classic Greek to modern French; from Anacreon to the author of the "Philippiques," those terrible lampoons upon the late Regent, published but a few years earlier in Paris. They were strange and unholy books some of them, the possession of which could not give any man the slightest pleasure, were it not the foolish pride of owning something rare and costly and unparalleled in wickedness. Mr. Topsparkle was intensely proud of them.

"You could never imagine the pains it has cost me to collect these rarities," he said, "and upon my soul I know not if they are worth having. 'Tis like those dulcimers in the music-room which belonged to Marguerite of Valois – Clément Marot's Marguerite, you understand – and for which I gave a small fortune to a Jew dealer in Paris. What do you want, man, that you stand staring there?"

This abrupt question was addressed to a footman, who stood statue-like, just within the doorway, as if he dared not approach nearer his master's august presence. He had murmured some communication which had been unheard.

"Sir, my Lord Bolingbroke is in the billiard-room, and begs particularly for a few minutes' speech with you. He will not detain you longer. He has had some news from London which he would like to tell you."

"Tell his lordship I will be with him instantly. If you will excuse my brief absence, gentlemen? The books may amuse you while I am gone, but my choicest gems are yet to be shown. Or if you would like to defer to another morning – " he added, with an uneasy glance towards the alcove, which Lavendale was too preoccupied to perceive.

"No, no, my dear sir, we will wait for your return. There are books and pictures and curios here to amuse us for a week."

"I'll not be long," said Topsparkle, hurrying away.

The two young men strolled about the room, in which there was indeed plenty to interest and enchain the connoisseur in art-curiosities. Bronzes, medallions, coins, porcelain, loaded the tables, and adorned every available inch of space which was not filled by the books. The collector's passion for amassing specimens of every art and every school was exhibited in its fullest development.

Lord Lavendale came presently to the alcove. It was curtained off at times from the rest of the room by a fine old piece of Indian embroidery, a thick and heavy fabric in which gems of all kinds were embedded upon a ground of silken brocade mingled with a curious golden tissue. Lavendale and Durnford admired the curtain, which was drawn back to about a third of the opening, and then his lordship's quick glance lighted on the old oak cabinet.

"It is a shrine," he cried, "the back portion of an old Dutch altar, I take it, with some rare old picture for the reredos. That central panel is a door with a picture behind it. Did you ever see finer carving?"

"These doors are magnificent," said Durnford, looking at the two outer doors which had been flung back.

"Yes, the carving there is bold and spirited, but this is finer work. Here is the story of the Nativity, and the four kings with their offerings – the manger and the three beasts. You remember the old legend – how the ass brayed *eamus*, and the ox answered in his deep bass roar, *ubi*, and the lamb ba-ad 'Bethlehem.' Yes, here is the Virgin, and the humble cradle of Divinity."

"Let us see the picture behind the panel, if there is one. A Vandyke, perhaps," suggested Durnford. "Look, there is a key."

He pointed to a very small key in the outer moulding which framed the storied panel. Lavendale turned the key and drew back the door.

"My God!" cried Durnford; "Irene's portrait!"

It was no Vandyke – no sad and solemn picture of the Crucifixion, or the Descent from the Cross, no pale divine head with its coronal of thorns. It was only a woman's face, beautiful exceedingly, with golden-brown hair, and dark violet eyes under black lashes; a pale, sweet, almost perfect face, and the image of Irene Bosworth. And yet it was not Irene's portrait. A more deliberate inspection showed points of difference in the two faces. There was a startling resemblance, but not identity.

"What, you have discovered another of my secret treasures?" asked a soft and legato voice at Lavendale's elbow.

It was Mr. Topsparkle, who had reëntered the room so quietly that neither of his guests had been aware of his approach. He was paler than usual under his paint, and had a somewhat troubled air, Durnford thought; but if he were vexed at finding them before the hidden picture, he gave no utterance to his vexation.

"A very beautiful head and very tolerably painted, eh, gentlemen?" he asked lightly.

"A lovely head and very finely painted," replied Lavendale; "but there is something that strikes me more forcibly than the beauty of the face or the skill of the painter." He looked fixedly at Mr. Topsparkle as he spoke.

"Indeed! And pray what is that?"

"Can't you guess?"

"No, upon my honour."

"The very remarkable likeness between that head and Mrs. Irene Bosworth."

Mr. Topsparkle put on his eyeglasses, and scrutinised the picture almost as if it were the first time of seeing it. While he looked, Lavendale was also looking, and his keen eye discovered the painter's signature, Paulo Villari; Venice, 1686.

"Your lordship is right," said Mr. Topsparkle, after a lengthy inspection. "There is certainly a something in outline and feature – and even in expression – which resembles Mrs. Bosworth. Strange that I should not have perceived it before; but although I write at this cabinet nearly every day, I very seldom open yonder door. I bought the picture in Italy so many years ago that I would, if possible, forget the date of the purchase."

"Did you know the original? It is obviously a portrait."

"Yes, I believe it was the portrait or a study of a very handsome model – the Fornarina of some young painter who never became as famous as Raffaelle. No, I did not know the lady. Those chance likenesses are very curious. I have half a mind to make Mrs. Bosworth a present of the picture – and yet I could hardly bring myself to rob this old cabinet of even a hidden treasure. You have been admiring the carving, I hope. It is the finest I ever discovered in nearly half a century of curio-hunting."

"Yes, it is exquisite," Lavendale answered absently.

He had been thinking of the date of the picture, and the place where it was painted. There was no doubt in his mind that this was the portrait of Topsparkle's Italian mistress, the unfortunate lady who had died mysteriously at the house in Soho Square. Topsparkle's pale and troubled look suggested the darkest memories.

The likeness to Irene was of course only a coincidence. Such chance resemblances are common enough. Yes, the face was a lovely one; and this was the face which John Churchill had admired in his dawn of manhood, he himself beautiful as a Greek god, full of strength and genius, a born leader and captain of men, a man of whom it was justly said that since the days of Alexander there had been no greater soldier.

Topsparkle closed and locked the door upon the picture, and put the key in his pocket.

"And pray what was his lordship's news, Mr. Topsparkle?" asked Durnford. "If it be not secret news, which it were an impertinence to ask."

"It is news all Europe must know before the week is out," answered Topsparkle, "although it reaches Bolingbroke by a private hand. He has correspondents all over the Continent, and is ever *au courant*."

"Your news, Mr. Topsparkle!" cried Lavendale. "Do not dally with our impatience. Has the Pretender landed on the rugged Scottish coast? Is Gibraltar taken?"

"No; 'tis but one unlucky old woman less in the world, one poor feeble light extinguished. Sophia of Zell, she who should have been Queen of England – the Electress Dowager of Hanover they call her – has died in her prison-house at Ahlen, and his lordship's informant tells him a curious story of her death-bed."

"Prithee, let us have it. I have a morbid passion for death-bed stories."

"'Tis said that in her last hour, after a long interval of silence and seeming unconsciousness, the dying woman lifted herself up suddenly in her bed, and in a firm clear voice called upon the spirit of her cruel husband to meet her before the judgment-seat within a year. Those round her were as

scared as if they had seen a ghost from the grave. She lived but to speak those words, and fell back expiring with that summons on her lips."

"I do not envy his Majesty's feelings should he be told of that invitation," said Lavendale. "Whatever his virtues as a king, as a husband he has been pitiless. Never was girlish indiscretion atoned by so terrible an expiation as that living death of thirty desolate years. 'Tis a dastardly story."

"'Twas not altogether his fault. 'Twas his father's mistress, the Countess of Platen, who was at the root of the mischief. 'Twas she who set her spies upon the young Princess, and murdered Königsmark. 'Twas said the fury stamped her heel upon his face as he lay dying."

"The rage of slighted beauty has various ways of showing itself," said Durnford. "But if George as a young man was led into cruelty and injustice by others, his riper age might have inclined to mercy, and were it but for the sake of his daughter, Queen Sophia of Prussia, he should have had compassion upon his wife."

"I have heard the Prince's friends say that should his mother survive her tyrant, 'twas his design to restore her to honour and her title of Queen Dowager; but whatever good intentions his Royal Highness may have entertained on her account are now cut short by death."

"I believe he only gave out such an intention to tease his father," said Topsparkle. "There is an hereditary hatred between the fathers and sons of that house. Here is Prince Frederick, for instance, kept out of England, and frankly detested by both parents."

"Were George wise he would marry his grandson out of hand to his cousin the Princess Wilhelmina, and so fulfil one-half of the Quadruple Alliance. Frederick William is an unmannerly brute, and a miser withal; but he has a long head, and Prussia is steadily rising in the scale of power. England should buckle herself to that nation by every link possible."

CHAPTER II
"I STAND UPON THE GROUND OF MINE OWN HONOUR."

Lavendale left Ringwood Abbey more than ever in love with his former mistress, and savagely jealous of her other admirers, from Bolingbroke downwards. But it was against her husband that his hatred was deadliest. Those dark stories of Mr. Topsparkle's youth and ripening years had taken a strong grip upon Lavendale's mind. He had been a profligate himself, and his own wild youth gave him but little justification for setting up as a moralist; but Lavendale's sins had been the vices of an accomplished gentleman, sunning his follies in the full blaze of notoriety, parading his amours, his gambling adventures and duels, advertising all his laxities of conduct and opinion, glorying in his shame; while Topsparkle's vices had been dark and secret, obscure as the rites of an antique religion, only guessed at dimly by the multitude.

To Lavendale the very presence of the man inspired loathing, albeit Mr. Topsparkle was generally esteemed a very pretty fellow, and a wonder of careful preservation and artistic treatment.

"By lamplight our dear Topsparkle might pass for forty-five," said Bolingbroke, discussing his late host at White's one evening after the opera, "and yet I have reason to know that he is nearer seventy than sixty – and upon my soul, gentlemen, it is a very meritorious thing for a man of seventy to pass for young. 'Tis not so easy as you young gentlemen think."

"There is a quiet elegance about Topsparkle which is very taking," said Mr. Chevenix, a prosperous barrister; "and when one remembers that his father made his money in the City, and that he is only one generation removed from hides and tallow – "

"There you are mistaken, my dear Chevenix," interposed Asterley; "the elder Topsparkle was a drysalter."

"And pray does not that mean hides and tallow? I thought they were all one," said Chevenix, with a languid fine-gentleman air.

"Alderman Topsparkle was a very clever fellow," said Bolingbroke. "You are not to suppose that he made his vast fortune all in the beaten way of trade, out of pickles and saltpetre. 'Tis said he speculated largely on 'Change; and it is also said that before the Peace of Utrecht he used to buy up all the spoiled gunpowder in the country and sell it again to a very great man, whose name I would be the last to mention for two good reasons. He is dead; and he was once my friend."

"Nothing like a long war for enriching clever tradesmen," said Chevenix. "Now, I really think it very estimable in Topsparkle, considering his low origin, that he manages to pass for almost a gentleman."

"I know he is much genteeler than many of us, and far more courteous," said Bolingbroke.

"Ah, that is his chief mistake. He overdoes the courtly air. He is monotonous in his gentility, and has none of the easy variety which belongs to high breeding. He has all the faults of a novice in the art of good manners."

That refined air and superficial polish, which satisfied society at large, revolted Lord Lavendale. He hated mincing manners in any man, but most of all in Vyvyan Topsparkle. He hated the man's small white hands and smooth feminine tones of voice, hated his pencilled eyebrows and white-lead complexion, his slim waist and attenuated legs.

He told himself that this aversion of his was but a natural instinct, an innate revulsion of the mind at the aspect of hidden sin; yet in his heart of hearts it was as Judith's husband he hated this man. He thought of him as her owner, the wretch who had bought her with his fortune, who held her captive by the malignant power of his ill-gotten wealth – who in the privacy of domestic life might insult and

bully her, for anything Lavendale knew to the contrary. That smooth Janus countenance had doubtless its darker side; and he who in public was ever the adoring husband might be a tyrant in private.

Stimulated by this ill-feeling, Lavendale was more than ever bent on ferreting out the secret of Mr. Topsparkle's early life, and the fate of that Italian mistress whom he had for a little while acknowledged as his wife. He had exhausted all his own and Philter's powers of research, and had come by no proof or even circumstantial evidence of guilt. There was but one person likely to know all Mr. Topsparkle's secrets, and he would be unlikely to reveal them. That person was Fétis, the confidential valet, whom Lavendale had met sometimes in the corridors at Ringwood Abbey, looking the very essence of discretion and respectful dumbness.

"Difficult to get a man to speak when all his interests are in favour of silence," thought Lavendale.

He communicated his perplexities to his friend Durnford. Since his lordship's renunciation of Irene they were more brotherly together than ever they had been.

"And I, too, am devoured with curiosity about Topsparkle's past life," said Herrick; "that hidden picture with its strange likeness to the girl I love has mystified me consumedly. 'Tis but a chance likeness, of course, since we can trace Irene's lineage into the remote past without coming upon any track of an Italian marriage. I have examined the Bosworth family-tree – you must have noticed it framed and glazed in the dining-parlour – and there is not a foreign twig in all its ramifications. Yet when I ponder on my dear one's passion for music, her ardent impulsive temperament, her southern style of beauty, I am at a loss to comprehend how that sober British tree can have put forth so bright a flower. In any case I should like to know more about that lovely girl whose picture is hidden in Mr. Topsparkle's sanctum. By his pallor when he caught us looking at the portrait, one might guess he has painful memories of the original."

Lady Tredgold carried her niece back to London, and Irene reëntered the glittering circle of fashion and folly, and mixed with women among whom high principles and virtuous inclinations were as exceptional as the Pitt diamond among gems. The rage for play had spread like a leprous taint through the whole fabric of society. Women sat night after night squabbling over cards, and were ready to stab each other with the golden bodkins they wore in their hair, if Spadillio was unkind, or Manillio in the hand of an adversary. Lady Tredgold was an inveterate gamester, but dared not play high, and was fain to affect the society of ladies of limited means, who could only afford to ruin themselves and their families in a small way. Yet if her losses were not large, her temper suffered as severely as if she had been losing thousands; while she was careful not to parade her winnings before her lean and hard-featured daughters, who had something of the harpy in their natures, and were always pestering their mother for new clothes or pocket-money. They, too, were fond of cards, despite the awful example furnished by their parent; they, too, had their losses, which had to be supplied somehow. Card-money was in those days a necessity of fashionable existence. Better to be buried alive in some rustic vicarage, combing lap-dogs and reading Mrs. Behn or Mrs. Manly, than to be launched in a London drawing-room with an empty purse.

Rena, whose purse was always full, declined to play, whereupon she was characterised as cold and proud and witless, a beautiful nonentity, a woman altogether wanting in spirit.

"You should gamble, child; 'tis the only excitement in life," said Lady Judith, tapping the heiress on the cheek at a fine house in Gerard Street, where the tables were set for ombre and basset.

"It is an excitement that seems to make nobody happy, madam," answered Rena quietly. "So I would as soon be dull."

"What a prude your heiress is!" Judith said to Lavendale, a few minutes after: "she glides about a room looking as if she were a being of superior mould, and had nothing in common with mortals."

"She is but a child just escaped from the nursery," answered Lavendale lightly, "and doubtless her soul is overwhelmed with wonder."

"Nay, I would not mind if she were shy and abashed among us," retorted Judith, "for I admit that we are somewhat startling to a novice. It is her impertinent assurance which annoys me. That calm half-unconscious air of superiority would provoke a saint."

"If there were any saints in our set to be provoked," said Lavendale; "but I don't think there is anything saintly to be met with in a West End card-room."

"Look at her now, as she stands with her elbow leaning on yonder mantelpiece, not deigning even to pretend to listen to Mr. Dapperwit's compliments. I wonder, for my part, that he wastes his cleverness upon a creature of ice. Where did she get that cold impregnable air?"

"From the gods, whose daughter she should be, if looks could vouch for a pedigree," answered Lavendale, delighted to tease the woman he adored.

"O, I beg your lordship's pardon," said Judith, with a curtsy. "I forgot for the moment that I was criticising the future Lady Lavendale."

"Don't apologise. We are not plighted yet, and that impregnable air of Mrs. Bosworth may keep me off as well as her other lovers."

"What, are you not engaged yet?"

"No, nor ever likely to be, Judith, as you know very well."

They were in a doorway between a secondary drawing-room and a third room still smaller – jostled and hemmed in by the crowd. He could snatch her hand and clasp it for a moment unperceived. Their eyes met as the crowd drifted them nearer, met in fond entanglement, and Judith's alabaster bosom glowed with a sudden blush like the crimson light of a winter dawn reflected upon snow. It was but an instantaneous betrayal of passionate feeling on either side; yet from that moment the possibility of pretence or concealment was over. Each knew that the old fires still burned. Light words and lighter laughter and all the studied arts of coquetry could henceforward avail nothing.

The crowd which had drifted them together speedily jostled them apart; Lady Judith passed on in a bevy of fashion and chatter, talking as loud as her friends, and with just as much elegant inanity.

Everybody decided that evening that Irene was dull. A pity that so much beauty and wealth should be thrown away upon a simpleton. She had not even that hoydenish audacity, that knack of saying improper things innocently, which could alone make simplicity interesting to well-bred people. She was not in the least amusing. She was only beautiful: and one might say as much of a statue.

Irene looked with dreamy eyes upon that strange and brilliant crowd, caring very little what anybody thought of her. Already she was tired of that gay world which had dazzled her so at first: or rather it seemed only fair to her when her lover was near. When Herrick came into one of those crowded rooms – approaching her suddenly, perhaps, and unawares – her eyes shone out like twin stars. But if he were not there, all was dull and dreary, and the company seemed to her no better than an assemblage of grimacing puppets, moving on wires. She liked Lord Lavendale because he was Herrick's friend, and she always brightened when she talked to him, a fact which Judith's keen eye had noted.

It was not always that Herrick received a card for the assemblies to which Lady Tredgold and her girls were bidden. He was too proud to go into society as Lavendale's satellite, so he only frequented those houses where he was asked on his own account as a young man of parts and much promise; and it was in the best houses that he was oftenest seen. His letters in the Whig journals had attracted attention, and his talent shone out all the more conspicuously because most of the best writers had gone over to the Opposition, disgusted by Walpole's neglect of literature. His name was becoming familiar among the ranks of journalists; but journalism was then in its infancy, and was but poorly paid, while the writers of books, unless the book was as famous as *Gulliver's Travels* or Pope's *Iliad*, might count upon years of toil and privation before they attained even a competence.

Herrick's outlook, therefore, was far from hopeful, and he delayed the avowal of his passion to Irene's father with a hesitation which he himself denounced as cowardly.

He felt that love once avowed, hands and hearts pledged for life, there should be no more secrecy. Concealment was a dishonour to his innocent mistress.

"I must beard the lion," he said to himself; "come the worst, I can but steal her by a Mayfair marriage. He can never lock her up so close, or carry her so far away, or hide her so cunningly that love would not follow and find her. I will at least give him the chance of acting generously."

So one morning, in cold blood, Mr. Durnford waited upon Squire Bosworth at his lodgings in Arlington Street, at an hour when he knew, by private information obtained from Irene over-night, that the gentleman would be at home.

He was shown into a parlour where Mr. Bosworth was drinking chocolate and reading the *St. James's Weekly Journal*, a Tory paper; for he was still at heart attached to the exiled family, although self-interest and the Stock Exchange made him a zealous adherent to Walpole. To that great financier he could not refuse his allegiance.

He received Herrick with a cold civility which was not encouraging. Lady Tredgold had hinted her suspicions about Durnford, and put the Squire on his guard.

"Can I do anything in the City for you, sir?" asked Bosworth; "I should be glad to oblige any friend of my friend Lord Lavendale."

"Nothing, sir, unless you could put me up to some trick of winning a fortune suddenly, without any capital to speculate with. But I take it that it is beyond even your power, and I must trust such poor talents as I may possess, backed by industry, to make my way in the world. Mr. Bosworth, it is ill beating about the bush when a man has a weak cause to advocate. In four words, sir, I love your daughter."

"Indeed, sir! You are vastly civil and mightily candid. And may I ask do you design to maintain Mrs. Bosworth by your pen, as a political pamphleteer, and to lodge her in a three-pair back in Grub Street?"

"I think we could both be happy, sir, even in a garret, with no better view than the chimney-stacks, and no better fare than bread and cheese."

"What, sir! you have dared to steal my daughter's heart – you, an arrant pauper?"

"There was no stealing, Mr. Bosworth. Our hearts came together unawares – flew towards each other like two young birds on St. Valentine's Day. Let me have her, sir, because she loves me, and because there is no other man on this earth who can ever love her more truly than I do. Forget that she is a great fortune, and remember that if I am poor I am well-born, and that the world says I am not without ability. The arena of public life is open to all comers. Lavendale has promised me his interest at the next election. In the House of Commons I should be at least a gentleman – "

"You are not there, sir, yet. Why, you talk as if you were a Pelham, and had but to ask and have! Let there be no more fooling between us, I beg. I don't want to lose my temper if I can help it. My daughter *is* a great fortune, as well as a very handsome girl, and I mean her to marry either rank or wealth. I want the fortune which I have made – slowly, laboriously in part, and in part by sudden strokes of luck – to remain behind me as an enduring monument when I am dust. I want the security of a great name and a large landed estate. I can afford to buy them both, and my daughter is handsome enough to marry well, were she only a milkmaid. I have been disposed to look kindly on Lavendale, because our estates join; but his fortune is shattered, his reputation is bad, and his title a paltry one. Such a girl as mine should mate with a duke, and could I find a respectable duke a bachelor, I would offer her to him. These are my views, Mr. Durnford. You have been candid with me, and I am pleased to reciprocate your candour."

"You give me no hope, sir?"

"None. And mark you, sir, you may think it a clever thing to run away with my daughter, as Wortley Montagu did with the Duke of Kingston's girl. Remember that in such a case your wife will be penniless. I will leave every shilling and every acre I own to a hospital; and I will never look upon

my disobedient daughter's face again. If you love her, as you pretend, you will not attempt to reduce her to beggary."

"No, sir. It would be a cowardly thing to do. But if ever the day come when I am secure of five hundred a year, you may be very sure that I shall ask her to choose between love and fortune. Perhaps she will renounce her inheritance just as willingly as Lady Mary Pierrepoint renounced hers."

"If she is as crackbrained a person she may perhaps oblige you," answered the Squire, "but until this morning I have had reason to consider her a sensible girl. And now, sir, as I am due in Change Alley before noon, I must ask you – "

"I have the honour to wish you good-morning, sir."

They saluted each other stiffly and parted. Herrick felt that he had injured his chance of winning Irene by stealth, yet his conscience was relieved from a burden. He could face the world better. And who can separate youth from hope? He trusted to the unforeseen. Something would happen, some kindly chance would favour him and Irene. Mr. Bosworth would lose his head, perhaps, and ruin himself on the Stock Exchange. What could be greater bliss than to see his beloved reduced to poverty by no fault of his?

CHAPTER III
"THEY WERE BORN POOR, LIVED POOR, AND POOR THEY DIED."

Squire Bosworth sent his daughter back to Fairmile under close guardianship, and gave up the Arlington Street lodgings, much to the disgust of Lady Tredgold and her daughters, who enjoyed their free quarters at the West End, and the fever of London drawing-rooms.

Even the gaieties of Bath, balls public and private, in Harrison's great room, breakfasts of fifty and sixty people, and card-tables nightly, morning parade upon the Gravel Walk or in the Abbey Gardens, the afternoon lounge in the galleries of the tennis-court, the ever-changing company at the White Hart lodgings, the high play, and all the other diversions of that delightful city, which had been characterised by a puritanical contemporary as "a valley of pleasure and a sink of iniquity" – even these dissipations of the rich and idle were as nothing to that concentrated blaze of pleasure and polite profligacy which illumined the little world of Leicester Fields, Soho, Golden Square, and St. James's.

Before he left town Mr. Bosworth called on Lord Lavendale in Bloomsbury Square, and charged him with having screened his friend's underhand pursuit of Irene.

"When I admitted Mr. Durnford to my house I believed that, as your lordship's friend, he must needs be a man of honour," said the Squire. "He rewards my confidence by making surreptitious love to my daughter and heiress!"

Lavendale warmly defended his friend; praised his talents; assured Mr. Bosworth that Durnford was likely to do well in the world; to win fame and fortune before he reached life's meridian.

"I shall not be here to see him at the top of the ladder, my lord," answered the Squire grimly. "I want to marry my daughter to a man who has no such troublesome ascent to make; I want something better than castles in the air in return for solid guineas and broad acres. My daughter's husband must bring his share of good things. If he has not wealth he must at least have rank and high birth."

"Durnford is of a good old west-country family."

"A beggarly parson's penniless son. My dear lord, the matter will not bear discussion. Warn your friend that I am adamant, and that 'twere but to waste time and thought to try to move me. There may be other good matches more attainable than my daughter. Let him look about him, and find another outlet for his enterprise in heiress-hunting."

"You insult me, Mr. Bosworth, when you insult my friend. He is a man of honour, and his passion for your daughter is entirely independent of her fortune. He deplores the ill-gotten wealth that parts him from her."

This was a home-thrust for the Squire, who clapped his hand upon his sword-hilt as if he would have challenged his host there and then, but thought better of it instantly, and bade Lord Lavendale a stiff good-morning.

Herrick rode down to Lavendale Manor next day, reached his friend's house by nightfall, passed a sleepless night, and went prowling round the fence that divided Fairmile Park from the Manor grounds all next day. He loitered and rambled from sunrise till sundown, hanging about in likely spots where he and Irene had met last summer; but there was no sign of his mistress. She was under close watch and ward, poor soul, Lady Tredgold and her daughters being her gaolers for the nonce. They were to stay till the Squire relieved guard; and then the old family coach, which had been built for Lady Tredgold when she married, was to carry them on towards Bath. Weary and heart-sick after that disappointing day, Herrick stole to the lodge at dusk, and dropped in upon the old gardener's wife. He had been crafty enough to make friends with her last summer, and had dropped more than one of his hard-earned guineas into her horny palm; so he was welcome. She told him all the news, and promised to convey a letter to Miss Bosworth, if he would only give her leave to wait for an opportunity.

"My eldest boy works in the garden," she said, "and Mrs. Bosworth always takes notice of him. He'll find a time for giving her your letter."

Herrick wrote his letter that night, a long and exhaustive letter, entreating his beloved to stand firm, to believe in the potency of true love, and to refuse to yield her heart or her hand to any man till he should come forward to win it.

"So soon as I am sure of a modest competence, Rena, I will find the way to make you my wife, and we will laugh at your father's fortune. I will not ask you to wed beggary; but it shall go hard if within two years I am not secure of an income that will suffice for wedded lovers. Two years will not seem an eternity, even though we are forced to dwell apart. Your image will be the companion of all my hours; 'twill stand at my elbow and guide my hand as I write; 'twill flit beside me as I trudge about the town; 'twill comfort, and inspire, and guide, and protect me. It will be to me as an armour against all evil."

He waited about at Lavendale, haunting the park-rails by day, and visiting the gardener's lodge at sundown for full five days. It took the gardener's boy all that time to find an opportunity for delivering his letter. Then there were two more days before Irene could see the boy alone and return her answer. But at last that blessed reply came, full of assurances of fidelity.

"I shall never be an undutiful daughter, or cease to think with love and gratitude of my father," she wrote in conclusion; "but my hand and my heart are my own, and those I will give to none but you."

Comforted and sustained by this letter, Herrick went back to London, and established himself there in a modest lodging of his own in a court leading out of Russell Street, Covent Garden, hard by those classic coffee-houses where all the wits and politicians of the day were wont to meet in rooms which but lately had echoed the laughter of Steele and the quieter sallies of Addison. The greatest of Queen Anne's wits had passed away; but the world of letters was still illumined by Pope, and Bolingbroke, and Swift, and Warburton, and Berkeley, and a whole galaxy of wit, erudition, and natural genius. Chief among them all perhaps was that lively Frenchman, whose vivid pen touched perfection in every line of literature, who was by turns poet, philosopher, historian, political economist, trifler, critic, and theologian, and with whom an airy grace, a supreme audacity, and an incomparable clearness of style, served instead of the deeper thought and wider erudition of Clarke or Berkeley.

In such society no intellectual man could be unhappy, and Herrick Durnford was frankly accepted in this charmed circle. He was on good terms alike with the Ministry and with the Opposition. He dined and slept at Dawley at the beginning of the week, and drank Sir Robert's port on a Saturday evening. He loved Bolingbroke as a noble specimen of highly gifted humanity, despite his many faults; but he honoured Walpole as a master of statecraft, the minister who had the interests of the people and the country most at heart, and who knew how to maintain the prestige of England without plunging her into war. Walpole had been struck by Herrick's letters in the *Flying Post*, had asked him to dinner, and had even introduced him to Mrs. Skerritt. This last honour meant real friendship. Molly Skerritt had read the letters to her dearest friend Lady Mary, and the two had agreed that they were clever enough to have been written by Swift. Mrs. Skerritt suggested that dear Sir Robert should give Mr. Durnford the very next vacant borough. A man who could write so well ought to be a good speaker, and good speakers were wanted now that all the best orators had gone over to the Opposition.

"The finest of them all is that poor fellow you keep muzzled yonder in his fancy farm at Uxbridge," said Mrs. Molly, somewhat pertly.

She was beautiful, and her admirer was stout, clumsy, and commonplace-looking; so she could afford to take liberties.

"Would to God I could muzzle his pen as easily as I can keep him out of the House of Lords!" answered Walpole. "The fellow is an arrant traitor, and this *Craftsman* of his will wreck the country, unless I can be a match for him and that renegade Pulteney."

When Molly Skerritt put in her word in an aspirant's favour his chances of promotion were no longer chimerical. The borough was soon found, and within six weeks of Mrs. Skerritt's recommendation Herrick Durnford was elected for Bossiney in Cornwall, a charming little nomination borough, then in the disposal of Sir John St. Aubyn, a staunch Whig and Walpolian. The late member had been a ponderous Cornish squire who always voted as he was told, and rarely spoke. His vote was useful, his speech might have been damaging. This worthy member having expired unpretentiously of an apoplexy, Walpole sent his young friend Durnford down to Bossiney with a letter of introduction to Sir John St. Aubyn. That gentleman took his young friend round to the half a dozen tenant farmers who constituted the free and independent electors of Bossiney; Herrick drank their cider, which was nearly as bad as that he had tasted in Brittany, kissed their wives, who were buxom and fresh-complexioned, praised their horses, patted their dogs, and was returned unanimously at the polling-place, which was on a hillock beside the high-road, the central point of an imaginary village. Tradition averred that Bossiney had once been an important town, but its streets and market-place, church and chapel, had disappeared as completely as the submerged city of Lyonesse.

Herrick entered the House determined that the member for Bossiney should no longer rank among dumb-dogs. Despite his success at the University as an after-supper speaker, he was not a great orator, not a man to thrill the House, but he was a clever debater, and he knew when and how to raise a laugh against his antagonist. He was skilled in all the passes of senatorial fence; for as some men are by instinct orators, so are some by instinct debaters. He had a knack of asking damaging questions, and seemed almost as keen on financial subjects as his illustrious chief.

His contributions to the *Flying Post* were as frequent as before he became a senator, and were more telling, for he had now the knowledge which he had lacked before. It was high treason in those days to report the proceedings of the House; but a man who knew what was happening there could give the public some benefit from his knowledge without infringing that mysterious law which protected the senate. He answered those brilliant diatribes against the government which Bolingbroke and Pulteney were daily contributing to the *Craftsman*; and his answers, though they may have lacked the matured style and lofty grace of him who wrote the *Patriot King*, were neither insignificant nor impotent. Men read them and talked about them, and the writer who signed himself "An Honest Englishman" was fast becoming a recognised power in the world of politics.

Neither senate nor literature kept Herrick from thinking of his betrothed. He rode down to Lavendale at least once in a fortnight, saw the friendly lodge-keeper, fee'd her useful son, and exchanged letters with Irene. On one occasion he was so happy as to see her by the old moss-grown park-rail. The watch and ward over her, kept scrupulously by kind old Mademoiselle Latour, had been relaxed so far as to allow of her riding her pony about the park; and so the lovers met, clasped hands, touched lips, and vowed to be true to each other till death. And again, as he looked at the lovely face, Herrick was struck by Irene's likeness to that hidden portrait in Mr. Topsparkle's cabinet.

"If it is an accidental likeness, 'tis the most wonderful accident that ever came within my knowledge," he said to himself, as he sauntered back to the Manor; "but there are times when I doubt if it can be an accident. It is not a likeness in feature only, but there are characteristic points in each face which match exactly – family marks, as it were, which indicate a particular race."

Upon his next visit he chanced for the first time to find company at the gardener's lodge, in the person of Mrs. Bridget, the nurse, who had been to Kingston in the coach for a day's holiday, and whom the return coach had just deposited at the lodge.

The nurse was loquacious, and inclined to be confidential towards one whom she knew as the beloved of her adored young mistress. From her, for the first time, Herrick heard the exact story of the finding of the dead man and the living child on the common, and how the foundling and the heiress had played together like twin cherries on one stalk till death parted them.

Herrick was deeply interested in those points of the story which were new to him. He had heard of that infantine companionship from Rena, but she, who but vaguely remembered it, could

only describe vaguely, and the story so told had been dim and shadowy. He questioned Mrs. Bridget closely, and encouraged her to dwell with a morbid diffuseness on the particulars of the orphan's illness and death. She described how both children had been brought to death's door.

"'Twas lucky the heiress recovered, and not the nameless waif," said Herrick, looking at her closely.

She returned his gaze with equal steadfastness; but he noticed that her lips whitened.

"'Twould have been a hard thing for Squire Bosworth to lose his only daughter," he went on, "while the orphan's death could matter very little to any one."

"It mattered to the poor little dear that was left behind," answered Mrs. Bridget. "She fretted sorely for her playfellow."

Herrick went back to town that night with a fixed belief and a fixed determination. He felt that he had now one more business added to the multitude of his pursuits; and that business was to find out the parentage of the nameless orphan and the history of her unlucky father. It would be no easy task, since he had to start from zero. He had no clue to the man's identity save the place and date of his death, and Mrs. Bridget's description, derived at secondhand through Farmer Bowman, of the dead man's appearance.

It was to Tom Philter, that living register of other people's business, that he applied himself in the first instance on the very next occasion of their meeting at the Roebuck. They dined at adjacent tables, and Herrick invited Mr. Philter to join him in a pint of claret when his steak was despatched.

Philter had lived by his pen from the age of eighteen to a well-preserved nine-and-forty; and if the waif's father were, as it was supposed, a political scribbler, it was likely Philter would know something about him.

"If I know of one such starving wretch as you describe, I know of fifty," said Philter, when he had heard all that Durnford could tell him. "They were hatched on the hotbed of the Revolution, and swarmed like emmets on a nest in the Queen's time, which has been called the golden age for men of letters, because a lucky few had rich patrons, and made fortunes by venal pens. For one man that could live by literature there have always been ninety-nine that have narrowly escaped actual starvation. And it seems that this one man of yours did verily die of want on the Queen's highway. A hard case undoubtedly. A young, well-looking man, tramping about the country with a year-old baby; a strange spectacle. No, I can recall no man of my acquaintance that would have burdened himself so over-conscientiously with his domestic obligations while there was an unguarded doorstep on which he could deposit them. Truth to tell, Mr. Durnford, I have been tolerably successful as wit and journalist for the last twenty years, and I have given the hungry brotherhood a wide berth. They are bloodsuckers, my dear sir, bloodsuckers of the most tenacious order. Your vampire cannot hold a candle to them for voracity. 'Twas only yesterday afternoon I refused a crown to that hotheaded sot Savage, whose fine-lady mother ought to keep her brat out of the gutter.' 'Go to mamma, my dear fellow,' says I: 'a man of your rank, with a mother who *is* a fortune and *has been* a countess should not be hard up for five shillings.' I think I hit him pretty hard there, Durnford."

"I think you had more than five shillings' worth without paying your score," answered Herrick. "I am very sorry for Dick Savage, who has talents, and is about the hardest-used wretch I ever met with. The worst stepmother in a fairy tale was never crueller than Colonel Brett's wife, and yet I daresay she will fatten and prosper, and live to a ripe old age."

"She was a bold hussy," said Philter: "a woman who would brazen her shame before the House of Lords, in order to divorce herself from a husband she hated, can at least claim credit for strength of character."

"Which she shows now in denying herself to her son, the innocent witness of her dishonour, and the avowed ground for her divorce."

"I doubt by the time she had survived her passion for Lord Rivers she had exhausted her regard for his offspring," said Philter carelessly.

"Nay, she betrayed her indifference from the hour of his birth, handed him over at once to his grandmother, Lady Mason, who immediately transferred him to a foster-nurse, with whom he languished in obscurity through his joyless boyhood, until his mother had him apprenticed to a cobbler in Holborn, having previously, by a most malignant lie, deprived him of a provision which Lord Rivers on his death-bed desired to bequeath him. Poor Dick has told me the story at least a dozen times."

Durnford parted with the journalist in disappointment and disgust. He knew not to whom else he could apply for help in his investigation of an unknown past. He knew not where else to turn for information, was altogether at a loss how to proceed, when a chance glimpse of Jemmy Ludderly's ferret-face in the eighteenpenny gallery at a revival of Steele's *Conscious Lovers* reminded him that here was one who belonged to a lower grade of letters, or, at all events, to a less prosperous group of scribblers and artists, than that pseudo-fashionable circle which Mr. Philter adorned. Ludderly claimed no acquaintance with modish beauties or elderly demi-reps, waved no clouded cane, affected no mincing walk, flourished no amber snuffbox, neither scented himself with pulvilio nor expended a month's pay on a periwig. Mr. Ludderly wore the same suit of clothes from January to December, and on to a second January and a second December, would they but endure as long. Whatever money he earned he spent upon the inner rather than the outer man, drank deep in cosy tavern parlours when he was in funds, and toasted his herring or his rasher in the solitude of his garret when he was hard up, and managed to maintain a contented spirit at all times. Nothing short of absolute hunger could have spoilt his temper.

Durnford called in May's Buildings next day, and unearthed the caricaturist and lampooner in his kennel. It was Mr. Ludderly's usual breakfast-hour, and he was meekly cooking his morning rasher in an easy attire of shirt and breeches, with ungartered stockings, and the most dilapidated slippers Herrick had ever seen off a dust-heap. But the man of letters was in no wise embarrassed by his unsophisticated surroundings. He received his visitor with a friendly air, and insisted on vacating the one serviceable chair for his accommodation, while he balanced himself adroitly upon a seat from whose wooden framework the worn-out rushes hung in a picturesque fringe.

"Don't mention it," said Jimmy, when Herrick apologised for disturbing him. "There is the bed yonder," pointing to the disordered pallet with its ragged patchwork coverlet, "a most comfortable seat at all times. Pardon me if I am for the moment preoccupied by the preparation of my modest meal," laying down his toasting-fork, and filling a little black teapot from the steaming kettle. "I am no sybarite or epicure, but I can offer you a cup of the choicest tea in London. 'Tis bohea, at a guinea a pound, from the Barber's Pole in Southampton Street. 'Twas given me t'other day by a dear creature whose latest adventure offered particular attractions to the comic Muse, but for whose sweet sake I restrained my wit."

"Boileau could not have been more gallant. And was Thalia gagged for a pound of bohea?"

"O sir, I do not say there was no solider consideration. The tea was the tilly in. I beg you to taste a dish of it."

He brought a second cup and saucer from a corner cupboard, which was at once larder, cellar, and pantry, and poured out some tea for his guest.

"I thought you were addicted to somewhat stronger liquor, Mr. Ludderly," said Durnford. "Burgundy, Champagne, or Hollands, for instance."

"My dear sir, over-night I will steep myself in an ocean of Burgundy, and will sing you that fine old French drinking-song;" and he trolled in a worn-out baritone,

"'Beau nez, dont les rubis ont cousté mainte pipe
De vin blanc et clairet,
Et duquel la couleur richement participe
De rouge et violet.'

"But I am no morning dram-drinker. 'Tis from the teapot I take my noontide inspiration. Yet I know not if bohea be not as fatal to the nerves as Hollands. I have heard that Lord Bristol attributes his son Hervey's ill-health to the use of that detestable and poisonous plant tea. Those were his very words, as told me by no less a person than Lord Hervey's valet, who frequents my favourite tavern. Well, if 'tis poison, 'tis a pleasant poison, and keeps the brain alive while it kills the body. I learnt the habit of bohea-bibbing from a sprig of good family who chummed with me twenty years ago in this very garret. He was a delicate effeminate creature, brought up gingerly by a widowed mother, and then flung upon the world to waste a small patrimony and starve when it was gone."

Durnford put down his cup hastily and stared the speaker in the face.

"A friend of twenty years back!" he said. "What became of him?"

Ludderly shrugged his shoulders, and shook his head.

"I know not, unless he went as sailor or soldier, and flung away a life which he could not maintain as a civilian. He had sunk pretty low when he became my fellow-lodger, and was trying to live by his pen. He had inherited a strong attachment to the King over the water, and wrote on the losing side, a fatal mistake, till he turned his coat at my advice, and scribbled for the Whigs. I am at heart a friend to the Stuarts, but I have got my bread by abusing them. Half my living at one time was made out of Father Peter and the warming-pan."

"How long is it since you saw this gentleman?"

"He disappeared from my ken in the autumn of the year nine, the year of Malplaquet. He left London on a pilgrimage to a wealthy relative in Hampshire, whom he fancied his destitution might move to pity; but I thought that if the gentleman were a man of the world, he was more likely to set his dogs at my poor friend than to take him in and feed him. He was very low by that time, and he had an impediment to a relation's hospitality which I should deem fatal."

"What kind of impediment?"

"A motherless baby of a year and a half old – you need not blush, sir, 'twas born in wedlock – the offspring of a foolish runaway match made abroad, where my friend was bear-leader to a young nobleman."

"By heaven, it is the very man!" cried Herrick. "I thought as much from the beginning. Was not your friend's wife called Belinda?"

"That was her name. Many a night have I heard him utter it, half-strangled in a sob, as he lay dreaming. The poor girl died in childbirth at Montpellier, where they were living for cheapness. What do you know of him?"

"Nothing – except that if he was the man I think, he died on the Portsmouth road, died of want and exhaustion, and was found lying stark and cold, with his baby daughter beside him."

"Do you know the date of his death?"

"Yes, 'twas the twenty-eighth of September."

"And it was on the fifteenth he took his child from her nurse at Chelsea, over against Mrs. Gwynne's Hospital, and started on his wild-goose chase after a kinsman's benevolence. He thought his relative would melt at sight of the child, which shows how little he knew of the world, poor wretch! Doubtless he arrived at his destination, had the door shut upon him, civilly or uncivilly – 'twould be the same as to result – and turned his face Londonwards again, to tramp back to his den here, where he knew there was at least shelter for him. He was weak and ill when he left London, and he was all but penniless, and intended to make the journey on foot. I am not surprised that he died on the road. I am not surprised; but even after eighteen years, I am sorry."

Honest Jemmy wiped a tear or two from his unwashed cheek with the back of a grimy hand.

"Where did they find him, sir?" he asked, after a brief silence.

"On Flamestead Common, thirty miles from London."

"He had come all the way from his kinsman's seat on the other side of Winchester. The man was a distant cousin of his father's. 'Twas not a close tie; but common humanity might have afforded him at least a temporary shelter."

"My dear Mr. Ludderly, common humanity is the most uncommon virtue I know of; 'tis rarer than common sense. Pray let me hear more of your friend. Did he ever tell you of his wife's family and origin?"

"Very little. He was strangely silent about her, and as I knew he lamented her death with an intensity of grief that was singular in a young widower, I shrank from irritating an open wound by any impertinent questions. All I ever heard of the lady is that she was an Italian, and that if she had had her rights she would have enjoyed a handsome fortune. It is my private opinion that he stole her from her father's house, and so blighted her chance of wealth and favour."

"You do not know where they met, or where they were married?"

"No; I cannot tell you the where, but I have heard the how. They were united by an English parson whom Chumleigh met on his travels; a scamp, I take it, of your Parson Keith stamp. They were married in the house of a British consul. 'Twas a legal ceremonial; the knot could scarce have been more securely tied. Unhappily Death snapped it before the rich father could relent."

"Were pardon likely upon his part, surely the widower would have sued for it for the sake of his motherless infant?"

"Whether he sued and was refused, or never sued at all, I know not," answered Ludderly; "the man could hardly have been more secret than he was about his wife's history."

"Was he a friend of long standing?"

"No; he and I were only poverty's strange bedfellows. I picked him up one night sleeping under an archway in Holborn, penniless, dispirited, and took him home to my garret. I saw that he was a gentleman and a man of parts. I was just rich enough to give him a shelter from the wind and rain, and a supper of bread and cheese, and I had just influence enough to get him a little journeyman's work in the way of translation, as I found he was a linguist. 'Twas the year I brought out my *Adventures of Fidelia, a Young Lady of Fortune*, modelled upon Mrs. Manly's *New Atalantis*. 'Twas one of my prosperous years, and I would have kept that poor devil all the winter, could he but have pocketed his independence, and been content to share my loaf. But when I could get him no more work he grew restless and impatient, and nothing would serve him but he must go off to try his luck with his Hampshire relation. I doubt what pierced him sharpest was that he could not pay the nurse at Chelsea, and she was growing clamorous, and bade him provide otherwise for his orphan. That decided him, and he trudged off one fair September morning with the little girl nestling on his shoulder. I bore him company as far as Putney village, and there parted with him, little thinking 'twas for ever."

"He may have been more communicative to the child's nurse than to this friendly babbler," thought Durnford; and then he asked the nurse's name, which Ludderly happened to remember, because it reminded him of his favourite paper the *Tatler*, at that time being issued thrice weekly, and its wit and humour in all men's mouths.

"The creature's name was Wagstaff," he said, "which puts me in mind of Isaac Bickerstaff and his lucubrations. I had thoughts of starting a journal upon the same model, and flatter myself that with a smart fellow like Philter to help me, as Addison helped poor Dick, I could have run the *Tatler* hard. But I could not budge for want of capital. Your printer is such an inquisitive devil, always eager to see the colour of his employer's money."

"Her name was Wagstaff," repeated Durnford, not even affecting an interest in Mr. Ludderly's blighted ambitions, "and she lived at Chelsea, facing the Hospital for old soldiers?"

"Lived, and lives there to this day, for aught I know to the contrary," answered Ludderly.

"My dear sir, I am deeply beholden to you for so much information given with such friendly frankness. We must see more of each other. Will you dine with me at the Roebuck at four this

afternoon, or will you honour me with your company at Drury Lane to see *The Conscious Lovers*, and sup at White's after the play?"

Herrick knew that to a man of Ludderly's stamp a dinner or a supper is ever a welcome attention.

"The play and the supper, by all means. I revel in the select company at White's, and though I am no gamester, there is an atmosphere in a place where they play high that flutters my breast with an emotion akin to rapture. I feel all the fever of the players without their risks."

"Mr. Ludderly, you are at once a wit and a philosopher. I shall look for you in the box-office at six o'clock. Till then, adieu."

Durnford hurried off, delighted to be free until evening. He had to go down to the House at three o'clock. There was no measure of importance in hand, but as a tyro he was eager to watch the progress of the session. He could not afford to neglect politics even for a day, but he was bent on discovering Belinda's nurse as early as possible.

It was not quite one by the clock in the newly-finished church of St. Martin's-in-the-Fields, which stood out spick and span in all the brightness of stone and marble not yet discoloured by London smoke or London weather. He set out to walk across St. James's Park and the Five Fields to Chelsea, and was in front of the Hospital within an hour. Chelsea had a pleasant rustic air, a country road thinly fringed with houses. The village was a holiday resort for the idle, famous for its Bun House, and for Barber Salter's museum of curiosities. Facing the broad open space in front of the Hospital, and at some considerable distance from that new and handsome edifice – begun by Charles II., but only finished under William and Mary – there was a row of old-fashioned cottages, including two or three of the humblest kind of shops. The corner house nearest the country was adorned with a sign setting forth that Mary Wagstaff, widow, was licensed to sell tea and tobacco; and the unpretending lattices exhibited a small assortment of elecampane, peppermint, clay pipes, pigtail tobacco, peg-tops, battledores, worsteds, and red-herrings.

"If Mary Wagstaff be not gathered to her fathers, and yonder sign the inheritance of a stranger, I am in luck," thought Durnford.

A gray-haired matron of obese figure waddled out of a little parlour at the back of the shop on the summons of a cracked bell which dangled from the half-door. Herrick did not waste time upon preliminaries, but at once stated his business.

Was the obese lady Mrs. Wagstaff? Yes. Did she remember a certain Mr. Chumleigh who left an infant girl at nurse with her nineteen years ago?

This question was like the opening of a sluice. Mrs. Wagstaff let loose a torrent of angry speech, which sounded as if she had been brooding upon her wrongs for all those nineteen years, and had never till this moment relieved herself by uttering them. Yet doubtless she had treated her gossips to many a lengthy disquisition upon the same theme over a supper of tripe or cow-heel.

"Well do I remember him, and with good cause," she began. "An arrant swindler as ever lived, yet with all the grand airs of a fine gentleman. And the care I took of that baby! and the money I laid out upon bread and milk to feed it!"

"But did Mr. Chumleigh never pay you anything?"

"O, he brought me dribs and drabs of money sometimes – a crown-piece or a half-guinea once in a way. There was never such a pauper; he looked half-starved; and would come with his long face and paltry excuses, when I had kept his brat till my patience was worn out – she was a sweet child, I will not deny, and I was very fond of her."

Mrs. Wagstaff rambled on with an air of being inexhaustible in speech, and Herrick listened with admirable patience. He wanted to hear all that she could tell him about the child's father, and was therefore content to listen to a great deal of extraneous matter respecting the nurse and her charge's infantine maladies.

"Ah, and bad work I had with her, for she was cutting her teeth all the time, and used to keep me awake night after night, walking up and down with her and singing to her. But she throve with

me wonderful, and she was a fine healthy baby as ever was, though I doubt she'd been ill-used before she came to me."

"Ill-used, do you think?"

"Yes, sir, that was my very word, and I'm not going to take it back again," answered Mrs. Wagstaff defiantly. "I don't mean that her father ill-treated her, or her mother; but the poor little thing had been put out to one of those French nurses," with ineffable disgust, "a nice pack of trumpery, no better than your Leaguer ladies for morals. Mr. Chumleigh told me how he found out that the hussy who suckled his child was no better than she should be, and drank like a fish. And one night that she was nursing the baby, and making believe to rock it to sleep, when she was half asleep herself with Burgundy wine, she tilted her chair forward a little too far and tumbled over into the fire, baby and all, she did. The nurse was burnt worse than the child, and it's a wonder she lived to tell the tale: but the baby struck her poor little shoulder against a red-hot iron bar, and if she's alive she carries the scar to this day. 'Twas a deep brand just where the arm joins the shoulder, and I take it 'twill never wear out."

"How long was the little one with you?"

"Between nine and ten months. I kept her as long as I could, but my poor husband was living at that time, and he was a man of his word. Mr. Chumleigh was to pay me three-and-sixpence a week for the child, and he owed me over three pounds, when my good man lost patience, and threatened to throw the child into the street if I didn't get rid of it civilly. I was to deliver it back to its father, or take it to the constable. So I had no help but to tell Mr. Chumleigh he must fetch the child away, and I told him so point-blank the next time he came to see the little one. He was shabbier than ever, poor soul, and he looked pinched and hungry. I'd rather have offered him a dinner than flung his child upon his hands, but my good man was sitting in the parlour there, listening to every word I said; so I just told Mr. Chumleigh I could hold out no longer, he must just take the child and go about his business. He looked very sorrowful, and then he seemed to recover himself in a minute, and threw up his head with a proud air, as if he had been a nobleman. 'Very well, Mrs. Wagstaff,' he said: 'I grant you have been ill-treated, but it might have been better if you'd had more patience with me. Fortune must turn at last for the most miserable of us. I've a rich relation in the country. I must plod down to him and ask for a home for my motherless one. Sure he can't resist these sweet eyes.' I was almost crying when he shook hands and bade me good-bye, though I tried to be hard with him. 'If ever I can pay you my debt, madam, be sure I will,' says he; and so he went out at that door, with the child cooing in his arms, and I never saw more of him from that day to this."

"And never will, madam, on this side of Eternity," said Herrick gravely; "the poor creature sank upon that cruel journey on which your husband sent him."

"O sir, don't blame my husband! Remember, the poor gentleman owed us over three guineas. 'Tis a good deal for people in our station."

"Yet I'll warrant you had a few guineas in a stocking somewhere. 'Twould not have broken you if you had kept the child a little longer."

"No, sir, I don't say that it would have broken us – "

"Then it must go hard with you to remember how cruelly you dealt with an unfortunate gentleman. But I am not here to reproach you, madam. I came for information, and I thank you for having given it me so freely."

He tried to learn more of Chumleigh's character and circumstances, but here Mrs. Wagstaff's information was of the most limited order. The broken-down gentleman had been singularly silent about his past life. Mrs. Wagstaff only knew that he was a gentleman, and this knowledge she had by intuition, not being versed in the ways of gentlefolks, but finding in this one something that was not in the commonality.

Herrick went back to London feeling very well satisfied with his morning's work, though it would not seem that he had learnt much from nurse Wagstaff.

"There is at any rate the means of settling one doubt," he told himself, as he walked back by the Five Fields, a place of unhappy notoriety as a favourite duelling-ground; and duelling was still a prevailing fashion, though Steele and Addison had done their best to write it down in the *Tatler*, and though the mutual murder of the Duke of Hamilton and Lord Mohun in Hyde Park had not long ago given a shock to polite society.

CHAPTER IV
"YOU STOP MY TONGUE, AND TEACH MY HEART TO SPEAK."

The tamest lover would hardly endure prolonged severance from his mistress without making some efforts to see her, were it but for the briefest space; and although Herrick did not intend to steal the heiress from her father's custody, he was, on the other hand, determined not to languish in perpetual absence. By fair means or foul he must contrive a meeting; and he had by this time placed himself on such a friendly footing with the gardener's wife, Mrs. Chitterley, that he was sure of allegiance and help from all her family. So, one fair May morning, there came a pedlar, with his pack of books on his shoulders and a stout oak sapling in his hand, thick shoes whitened by dust, a shabby suit of linsey woolsey, and brown worsted stockings – a pedlar of swarthy complexion, and eyes obscured by green spectacles in heavy copper rims. The pedlar turned into the lodge at Fairmile before approaching the house, and conversed for some minutes with Mrs. Chitterley, who was very much at her ease with him; for scarcely had he spoken three words before she discovered that this dusty hawker was the London gentleman, Lord Lavendale's friend, who had been so liberal in his bounties to her and her children.

"You knew my voice, Mrs. Chitterley; but do you think the good people up at the house yonder will recognise me?"

"Not unless they hear you talk, sir; I took you for a stranger when you came in at the door just now. I never dreamt 'twas you."

"And now if I were to change my voice, and speak so?"

He had excelled as a mimic in days gone by, and now he adopted the manner of an old college chum, whose peculiar utterance he had been wont to imitate.

"Lord, sir, nobody will ever know you if you talk like that!"

"Then I'll venture it. But I hope to find Mrs. Bosworth in the garden with her *gouvernante*, and then I need not go to the house at all."

"She almost lives in the garden, sir, this fine weather."

"Then I'll try my luck," said Herrick, shouldering his pack, which he had brought from no further than Lavendale Manor, where he had put on his pedlar's clothes and stained his complexion. He tramped along the avenue, struck off to the right hand before he reached the house, and made his way by a by-path to a little gate in a holly hedge, by which he entered the garden. All Squire Bosworth's old family plate was laid up in safe keeping at his goldsmith's, and the approaches to Fairmile Court were not over-jealously guarded. Herrick knew his way about the gardens. He had walked there last summer in the sweet sunset leisure of after dinner, when he and Lavendale were the Squire's honoured guests, Mr. Bosworth never suspecting that his lordship's companion could be his rival. He knew all Irene's favourite nooks and corners, and where to look for her.

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