

MY LAST PROPOSAL.

I had made other declarations of love, all of them unsuccessful. I was glad to think, and yet here I was at forty—well, let us say between thirty and forty—shivering on the brink of another proposal. I had just come home to my rooms in Kings Bench Walk after dining at the Barndores. Of course I had met Mrs. Winterton there; of course I had taken her into dinner—the world we both lived in was always bringing us together in that sort of way—and equally, of course, I was soon dreaming over the fire of her slim, tall little figure in its dainty black setting. I had always liked the name of Kate; I thought it was homely, comfortable, and yet not commonplace. Yes, it would do very well. Neither had I any narrow-minded aversion to widows. I felt that if Mrs. Winterton, who had tried the holy estate of matrimony once, cared to try it again, it was scarcely for me, who had no experience, to raise objections. I had always regarded Weller the elder as a dull man of blunted sentiments, who somewhat deserved his fate. The exigencies of his profession, too, were not calculated to promote comfort and bliss. In legal slang, his case was not on "all fours" with mine, and I knew that Mrs. Winterton and I could easily refute what one may call fallacy, if we wished to do so. But did we wish to? and why should we wish to? These were the questions troubling my mind at that moment.

I was too old to pretend to a mad, despairing passion, Kate was too sensible. But we were both almost alone in the world, and this, I think, brought us closer together and made us rather like old friends than new acquaintances. She was bright, witty, cheerful, and—yes, I think, she was pretty. She had a nice little fortune, too, people said, but I had charged myself a hundred times with caring for that, and always acquitted myself honorably with cheers in court. I did not lack money; my wants were few, and I could supply them without painful or anxious labor. No; I was in love with Kate Winterton, that was the fact, let me face it bravely.

Lighting a candle, for the shaded lamp was insufficient for my purpose, I rose and looked into the mirror over the mantelpiece. The candle made the worst of things, I thought; it seemed to bring out all the lines in my face, and there certainly were a good many firmly etched on my forehead.

But where is the harm in a few lines in a man's face? They give it character. And when I looked at my features, there was no doubt about it; they were clean-cut, shapely—well, I might almost say, handsome. My mother had said it—I was her only child—over and over again, and there are things one learns from one's parents that are never forgotten in after life. So far I was passing my examination creditably, if not with honors; but when I lifted the candle above my head it shone upon a wider parting than was either necessary or ornamental. Jackson, the hair dresser, used to say, with a professional snuff of sympathy, "Ay, sir, them barretts wigs do bring the air off; but he knew as well as I did that I did not put my wig on twice a year, having, indeed, no occasion to do so. I lowered the candle hastily, and then stepping back a few paces, took a long look at myself, deciding that my moustache fairly cancelled the parting, and that I felt happier with my figure in the middle distance than I had in the foreground. I have heard people call me modest; others I know said I was dull, one or two—chiefly those whose books I had reviewed—said I was stupid, meaning by that honest. Well, well, I said to myself, taking a last look in the glass, things might have been worse for a man who is over forty—I mean between forty and fifty.

Kate liked tobacco, I thought to myself with a smile, or the thing would never do. Then I began to dream again. Yes, I would propose to Kate. "Propose?" The very word called up a host of memories. I had proposed before this, I began to recollect, and had been rejected. Well, that, too, might have been worse. I might have been accepted, and then I should never have seen Kate. I shut my eyes and traveled in memory through strange scenes of the past. I was at Lady Habery's standing in the large conservatory that leads out of the drawing room—it must have been at least fifteen years ago—with a tall, bright girl of two and twenty. I could see her brown, honest eyes and trusting face. Had she led me on, dangling about my quiet paths, or had I rushed out of my native element and jumped at her open-mouthed like a well-made West-end fly? Never mind now! I shall never forget her haughty indignation, her superb astonishment, and she was only an earl's grand daughter. I don't think I ever had a pedigree, and I know I cut a very poor figure on that occasion in consequence. She married a wealthy American soon afterward. I wonder what sort of a pedagogue he had! As for me, I kept a lock of her hair, and wrapped it up in a newspaper cutting two years after her marriage, when she was the heroine of some sad legal proceedings that many will remember. But it was a cruel, ugly way of keeping the foolish relic, and I burnt it long ago. I am glad to say, I saw her at Brighton quite recently. Her eyes were still brown and beautiful, still honest, perhaps, to those who did not know her story. Why should I recall it? I escaped.

These old memories and dreams were scattered into thin air by a rap at my outer door. I knew the knock, it was Harold Etheridge's. I saw a good deal of Harold at that time.

"I noticed your light, old fellow, and just dropped in." "You don't intrude," I said, for I was always pleased to see him in those days. "I've only been dreaming over the fire. Sit down and have a last pipe; I must turn in in half an hour."

Harold sat down opposite to me on the other side of the fire-place. He was ten or maybe fifteen years younger than I was, and a good looking, dashing, straightforward man, both in face and manner. There never was such an open-hearted, honest-looking fellow as Harold to all appearances. I had nick-named him "The Saxon," and the

name stuck to him, for it was appropriate. He lived a gay, reckless sort of life, and was always talking of marrying money, or going out to the Cape, as the only alternative to the bankruptcy court; but I believe he was comfortably off. I liked him. I thought him as one of my few friends. I like to remember him as I thought he was, even now, for I believe he was my friend in those days, as far as such a man could be anybody's friend.

I do not know what there is about the small hours of the morning, or whether sympathy is an absolute necessity to a lover, but within five minutes we were talking of Kate Winterton.

"A fine woman?" I should think she is," cried Harold enthusiastically, "and a fine fortune too."

"Bright, witty, good-tempered and pleasing, if not pretty," I added, continuing my description.

Why, you might be in love with her, Penrose, to hear you talk."

It was very foolish of me I know; but lovers are foolish, and it was early in the morning, of course I did not know then that Harold was my rival. Had I suspected it I think I should have entered a nolle prosequi and dropped my suit, leaving him a clear field. After all it was, perhaps, only a natural effect of my ailment that I should long to tell some one my secret. The glory of a secret lies in imparting it. Keeping a secret is very poor fun, and I have no secrets at 2 o'clock in the morning; it is a sympathetic hour. I rose and stood by the fire.

"Harold, old boy, I've something to tell you. I am in love with Kate Winterton!"

The Saxon nearly dropped his pipe. He gave a long whistle and said nothing. He was disappointed; I expected congratulations, pleasant laughter, good wishes—something.

After a moment's silence he said, with hesitation, "You haven't actually proposed, eh? Have you?"

"No, no." Not one knows but you, and why the mischief I told you I don't know," I added testily. His coolness irritated me.

"By George! old fellow, I'm sure I wish you much joy. Ben-dict Redivivus!" He laughed heartily and shook me by the hand. The Saxon was himself again and so was I.

"Ah! Harold," I said, "I hardly know now whether I shall ever tell her. Let me see, this is Monday night."

"Tuesday evening, you mean."

"Yes, yes. I shall not see her until Sunday; I have a week before me yet. Ah, my boy, give me your good wishes. Sunday, the better the day, you know." I shook him by the hand again. He was not very enthusiastic, but he listened to my garrulous ravings and that was all I wanted then.

"I feel young again," I continued, "and when I think of her loving face and sweet gray eyes 'Slasher'."

"Gug! gug! gug!" It was that confounded lamp; it went, and put a period to my rhapsody.

"Let us take it as a gentle hint to me, and not as a lover's omen," laughed Harold pleasantly. I dropped the candle, and he and I had good-night. Then I sought repose and dreamed real dreams, haunted by Kate's bright eyes and silver treble laugh.

I think I have said that I reviewed for the "Slasher" in those days. It was true, and I had long ceased to be proud of it; but it provided my daily bread, or rather my daily cutlet and pint of claret, and I was at least honest about it. I certainly worked very hard at my learned reviews, and crammed my subjects thoroughly. I was always at work. Etheridge used to say, "I worked like the devil, but without his intelligence." The truth is they were a little jealous of my position. For I was the "we" who taught Darwin science, instructed Tennyson in the laws of meter, and patronized George Eliot. It was admitted, too, on all hands that I was excellent at turning out those readable reviews that the public enjoys, and that used to drive weak-minded authors to early graves in my time. Nowadays weak-minded authors are difficult to drive; more's the pity. I was writing something the next evening for Saturday's "Slasher," when Harold came in with a merry smile on his face. I saw no devilry in it then.

"Do you want a subject for one of your real good things?" he asked. "Here is a new volume of poems just out; they are screamingly funny."

"Where did you get them?" I asked.

"I found them in a fellow's rooms and borrowed them for a few days. No one you know, he added hastily."

He handed me the volume, daintily got up in a white and gold border binding, lettered in scarlet on the cover, "Sighs From My Heart," by Sappho.

"Modest young lady, isn't she?" suggested the Saxon, quizzically.

"It is a lady," I replied solemnly, only, with the air of one who was too old to jump at obvious conclusions.

"Listen to this, then," cried Harold, snatching the book from my hand, and reading with very comic effect a poem addressed to 'My Hero,' each verse of which ended thus:

"His looks are gold,
His looks are bold,
My Hero!"

"Just suits you, Penrose," he said as he finished. "You have red hair and your looks are perfectly brassy."

"Who publishes it?" I said, smiling at his vagaries. "Ah, I see. Well, I'll run through it, and if it is all like that stuff it will come in useful. I've a lot of dull, solemn things here, nothing to make fun of."

"Now, do write a good one. Let us have a specimen of your cayenne pepper papers, as Crofts calls them. I shall come in and keep you up to it."

"His looks are gold,
His looks are bold,
My Hero!"

Etheridge struck an attitude as he recited this, laughed aloud at me in his merry, high-spirited way, and went off leaving me the volume.

I read the poems, and found them just the worst sort of rubbish I expected, and I knocked off a notice of them. I sent down to the publishers to find out why we had not got a copy for the "Slasher," was told that it would come in on Friday. I wanted something light for half a page, so I did the ordinary kind of sneering, snarling review that the public chuckles over and enjoys. Even as I wrote it I sighed to myself, as I often did, for I never grew calous about other people's feelings, and I always blame an author's friends as much as an author for the nonsense he publishes. I shall never forget that review, every wretched word of it burnt deep into my heart, and when I remember the hundreds of equally cruel and equally just notices—I must be fair to myself—that I had written, I feel happy to have left the trade to others who have less

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