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BY CELIA'S ARBOUR.

A NOVEL.

BY WALTER BESANT AND JAMES RICE, AUTHORS OF "READY-MONEY MORTIBOY,"
"THE GOLDEN BUTTERFLY," &c.

CHAPTER XV.

LA VIE DE PROVINCE.

The twenty-fourth of May was not only the Queen's birthday, and therefore kept a holiday in the port, with infinite official rejoicings and expenditure of powder, but also Celia's as well. On that account it was set apart for one of the Tyrrells' four annual dinners, and was treated as a church festival or fast day. This was the period of early Christianity, when any ecclesiastical days, whether of sorrowful or joyful commemoration, were marked by a better dinner than usual, and the presence of wine. On Ash Wednesday and Good Friday we had salt fish, followed, at the Tyrrells', by a sumptuous repast, graced by the presence of a few guests, and illustrated, so to speak, by a generous flow of port, of which every respectable Briton then kept a cellar, carefully labelled and laid down years before. The *novus homo* in a provincial town might parade his plate, his dinner service, his champagne—then reckoned a very ostentatious wine. He might affect singularity by preferring claret to port, and he might even invite his guests to drink of strange and unknown wines, such as Saunterne, Bucellas, Lisbon, or even Hock. But one thing he could not do: he could not boast of his old cellar, because everybody would know that he had bought it. Mr. Tyrrell was conscious of this, and being himself a *novus homo* he evaded the difficulty by referring his wine to the cellar of Mr. Pontifex, the husband of Mrs. Tyrrell's aunt. Now Mr. Pontifex was a man of good county family, and his port, laid down by his father before him, was not to be gainsaid by the most severe critic. Criticism, in our town, neglecting literature and the fine arts, confined itself to port in the first instance, municipal affairs in the second, and politics in the third. As the two latter subjects ran in well-known grooves, it is obvious that the only scope for original thought lay in the direction of port. Round this subject were grouped the choicest anecdotes, the sweetest flowers of fancy, the deepest yearnings of the Over-soul. A few houses were rivals in the matter of port. The Rev. Mr. Broughton, our old tutor, was acknowledged to have some '33 beyond all praise, but as he gave few dinner parties, on the score of poverty, there were not many who could boast of having tasted it. Little Dr. Roy had a small cellar brought from Newfoundland or New Brunswick, whither, as everybody knows, the Portugal trade carries yearly a small quantity of finer wine than ever comes to the London market. The Rev. John Pontifex inherited, as I have already said, a cellar by which Mr. Tyrrell was the principal gainer. There were two or three retired officers who had made good use of their opportunities on the Rock and elsewhere. And the rest were nowhere. As Mr. Broughton said, after an evening out of the "best" set, that is, the set who had cellars worth considering, the fluid was lamentable. Good or bad, the allowance for every guest at dinner was liberal, amounting to a bottle and a half a head, though seasoned toppers might take more. It was port, with rum and water, which produced those extraordinary noses which I remember in my childhood. There was the nose gurnished like Bartholp's with red blossoms; there was the large nose, swollen in all its length; there was the nose with the great red protuberance, wagging as the wearer walked, or agitated by the summer breeze; and there was the nose which paled while it grew, carrying in its general appearance, not a full-voiced song and pean of rum, like its brothers of the ruddy blossom and the ruby blob, but a gentle suspicion of long evening drinks and morning drams. Some men run to weight as they grow old; some dry up. It is matter of temperament. So some of those old toppers ran to red and swollen nose, rubicund of colour and bright with many a blossom; while some ran to a pallid hue and shrunken dimensions. It is true that these were old staggers,—the scanty remnant of a generation most of whom were long since tucked up in bed and fallen sound asleep. The younger men—of George Tyrrell's stamp—were more moderate. A simple bottle of port after dinner generally sufficed for their modest wants; and they did not drink rum at all. The Captain, for his part, took his rations regularly: a glass of port every day, and two on Sunday; a tumbler of grog every night and two on Sunday. To Sundays, as a good churchman, he added, of course, the feasts and festivals of the church.

Let us return to these occasions. On Good Friday, it was—it is still, I believe—*de rigueur* to make yourself ill by eating Hot Cross Buns, which were sold in the streets to the tune of a simple ditty, sung by the vendors. On Whitt Sunday, who so poor as not to have gooseberry-pie, unless the season was very backward? Lamb came in with the season. Easter eggs were not yet invented; but everybody put on something new for the day. The asceticism of Lent had no terrors for those who, like ourselves, began it with more than the customary feasting, conducted it without any additional services, broke its gloom by Mothering Sunday, and ended it by two feasts, separated by one day only. The hungriest Christian faced its terrors

with cheek unblanched and lips firm; he came out of it no thinner than when he went in; as for the spiritual use he made of that season, it was a matter for his conscience to determine, not for me to resolve. We marked its presence in church by draping the pulpit, reading desk, and clerk's desk with black velvet, instead of red. The Rev. Mr. Broughton always explained the bearings of Lent according to the ordinances of the church, and explained very carefully that fasting, in our climate, and in the northern latitude, was to be taken in a spiritual, not a carnal sense. It was never meant, he said, that Heaven's gifts were to be neglected, whatever the season might be. Nor was it intended by Providence, in the great Christian scheme, that we were to endanger the health of the body by excessive abstinence. This good shepherd preached what he practised, and practised what he preached. During Lent the hymns, until I became organist, were taken more slowly than at other seasons, so that it was a great time for the old ladies on the triangular brackets. The Captain, who had an undeveloped ear for music, said that caterwauling was not singing praises, but it was only fair to let every one have his watch, turn and turn about, and that if the commanding officer—meaning Mr. Broughton—allowed it, we had to put up with it. But he gave out the "tools" with an air of pitiful resignation. On Trinity Sunday, Mr. Broughton, in a discourse of twenty minutes, confronted the unbeliever, and talked him down with such an array of argument that when the benediction came there was nothing left of him. It is curious that whenever I, which is once a year, read that splendid encounter between Greathart and Apollyon, I always think of Mr. Broughton and Trinity Sunday. When Apollyon was quite worsted and we were dismissed, we went home to a sort of Great Grand Day dinner, a Gaudy, a City Feast, a Commemoration Banquet, to which all other Christian festivals, except Christmas, were mere trifles. For on Trinity Sunday, except when east winds were more protracted than usual, there were salmon, lamb, peas, duckling, early gooseberries, and asparagus.

From Trinity Sunday to Advent was a long stretch, unmarked by any occasions of feasting. I used to wonder why the church had invented nothing to fill up that space, and I commiserated the hard lot of dissenters, to whom their religion gave no times for feasting.

The influence of custom hedged round the whole of life for us. It even regulated the amount of our hospitalities. Things were expected of people in a certain position. The Tyrrells, for instance, could hardly do less than give four dinner-parties in the year. Others not in so good a position might maintain their social rank with two. Retired officers were not expected to show any hospitality at all. To be sure this concession was necessary unless the poor fellows, who generally had large and hungry families, were allowed to entertain, after the manner of Augustus Brambler, on bread and cheese. Mrs. Pontifex, again, who had very decided Christian views, but was of good county family, admitted her responsibilities by offering one annual banquet of the more severe order. A bachelor, like Mr. Verney Broughton, was exempt from this social tax. He gave very few dinners. To make up for this, he would ask one man at a time, and set before him such a reminiscence of Oriol in a solid dinner, with a bottle of crusted port after it, as to make that guest dissatisfied with his wife's catering for a month to come.

The guests were divided into sets, with no regard for their special fitness or individual likings, but simply in accordance with their recognised social status. The advantage of this arrangement was that you knew beforehand whom you would meet, and what would be talked about. I knew all the sets, because at most of these entertainments I was a guest, and at some a mere *ombra*, invited as *ami de famille* who would play and sing after dinner. On these occasions my profession was supposed to be merged in the more credible fact of my illustrious birth. When strangers came I never failed to overhear the whisper, after the introduction, "Count Pulaski in Poland, but refuses to bear the title in England. Of very high Polish family." One gets used to most things in time. Mr. Tyrrell divided his dinner guests into four sets. In October we had lawyers, one or two doctors, perhaps a clergyman, and their wives. At the summer feast (which was the most important, and was fixed with reference to the full moon for convenience of driving home), there were the important clients, who came in great state, in their own carriages. In February we entertained a humbler class of townspeople, who were also clients. And in December we generally entertained the Mayor and officers of the borough, a thing due to Mr. Tyrrell's connection with the Municipality. The May banquet was wholly of a domestic character. The dinners were solid and heavy, beginning early and lasting an immense time. After dinner the men sat for an hour or two consuming large quantities of port. "If this," Celia used to say, "is Society, I think, Laddy, that I prefer Solitude." She and

I used to sing and play duets together, after dinner, occasionally giving way to any young lady who expected to be asked to sing. The songs of the day were not bad, but they lasted too long. It is more than possible to tire, in the course of years, of such a melody as "Isle of Beauty" or "Love Not," (a very exasperating piece of long drawn music), or the "Sweet Young Page," a sentimentally beautiful thing; the men, some of whom had red faces after the port, mostly hung about the doors together, while the ladies affected great delight in turning over old albums and well-known portfolios of prints. Photographs began to appear in some provincial drawing-rooms in the early fifties, but they were not yet well established. It was a transition period. Keepsakes and books of beauty were hardly yet out of fashion, while portrait albums were only just beginning. Daguerreotypes, things which, regarded from all but one point of view, showed a pair of spectral eyes and nothing else, lay on the table in red leather cases. Mural decoration was an art yet in its infancy, and there must have been, now one comes to think of it, truly awful things to be witnessed in the shape of vases, jars, and ornamented mantel-shelves: the curtains, the carpets, the chairs, and the sofas were in colours not to be reconciled on any principle of art. And I doubt very much whether we should like, now, the fashion in which young ladies wore their hair, dressed their sleeves, and arranged their skirts. Fashion is the most wonderful of all human vanities; and the most remarkable thing about it is that whether a pretty girl disguises herself in Queen Anne's hoops, Elizabethan petticoats, immense Pompadour *coiffure*, Victorian crinoline, or Republican scantiness, whether she puts patches and paint on her cheek, whether she runs great rings through her nose, whether she wears a coal-scuttle for a bonnet, as thirty years ago, or an umbrella for a hat, as last year, whether she displays her figure as this year, or hides it altogether as fifteen years ago, whether she walks as nature meant her to walk or affects a stoop, whether she pretends in the matter of hair and waist, or whether she is content with what the gods have given her—she cannot, she may not, succeed in destroying her beauty. Under every disguise, the face and figure of a lovely woman are as charming, as bewitching, as captivating, as under any other. When it comes to young women who are not pretty—but, perhaps, as the large-hearted Frenchman said,—*il n'y en a pas*—there are no young women who are not pretty.

We were, then, ignorant of art in my young days. Art in provincial towns as commonly understood did not exist at all. To be sure, we had an art speciality of which we might have been proud. There was no place in the world which could or did turn out more splendid ship's figure heads. There was one old gentleman in particular, a genius in figure-head carving, who had his studio in the dockyard, and furnished Her Majesty's Navy with bows decorated in so magnificent a style that one who, like me, remembers them, is fain to weep in only looking at the figure-headless ironclads of the present degenerate days.

As for conversation after dinner, there was not much between the younger men and the ladies, because really there was hardly anything to talk about except one's neighbours. In London, probably, people talked much as they do now, but in a country town, as yet unexplored by Mudie or Smith, there could be very few topics of common interest between a young man and a girl. The great exhibition of 1851 did one great thing for country people; it taught them how easy it is to get to London, and what a mine of wealth, especially for after memory and purposes of conversation, exists in that big place. But remember that five and twenty years ago, in the family circle of a country town, there were no periodical visits to town, no holidays on the Continent, no new books, no monthly magazines; even illustrated newspapers were rarely seen; there was no love of art or talk of artistic principles, or art schools; there were no choral societies, no musical services; no croquet, or Badminton or lawn tennis. And yet people were happy. Celia's social circle was too limited to make her feel the want of topics of conversation with young men. No young man except myself was ever invited to the house, and of course I hardly counted. When the formal dinner parties were held, the guests at these banquets were principally old and middle-aged people. At our birthday dinner only the very intimate friends and relations were invited. Mr. Tyrrell had no relations; or at least we never heard of them, but his wife was well connected; the Pontifexes are known to be a good old county family, and Mrs. Pontifex, Mrs. Tyrrell's aunt, often asserted the claims of her own ancestry, who were Topplings, to be of equal rank with her husband's better known line.

Of course, the Pontifexes always came to the dinners.

Mrs. Pontifex—Aunt Jane—was fifteen years older than her husband, and at this time, I suppose, about sixty-five years of age. She was small in person, but upright and gaunt beyond her inches. It is a mistake to suppose—I learned this from considering Mrs. Pontifex as a leading case—that gauntness necessarily implies a tall stature. Not at all. "If," I said to Cis one day, "if you were to wear, as Aunt Jane wears, a cap of severely Puritanic aspect, decorated with a few flowers which might have grown in a cemetery; if you were to arrange your hair, as she arranges it, in a double row, stiff curls, set horizontally on each side of her face; if you were to sit bolt upright, with your elbows square, as if you were always in a pew; if you were to keep

the corners of your lips down—as Aunt Jane does—so—Cis—why even you would be gaunt. John of Gaunt, so called because he resembled Aunt Jane, was, I believe, a man under the middle height."

She married the Rev. John Pontifex, or rather they married each other, chiefly for money. They both had excellent incomes, which united made a large income; they were both desperately careful and saving people; they held similar views on religious matters (they were severe views), and I suppose that Aunt Jane had long learned to rule John Pontifex when she invited him—even Cis used to agree that he would never have invited her—to become her husband.

Mr. Pontifex was a man of lofty but not commanding stature. Another mistake of novelists and people who write. You have not necessarily a commanding stature because you are tall. No one could have seen anything commanding in Mr. John Pontifex. He was six feet two in height, and, although by nature austere, he looked as meek as if he had been only five feet; the poor man, indeed, never had the chance of looking anything but meek; he had a pale face and smooth cheeks, with thin brown hair, a little grey and "gone off" at the temples. His features were made remarkable by a very long upper lip, which gave him a mutton-like expression as of great meekness coupled with some obstinacy. In fact, she who drove John Pontifex had at times to study the art of humouring her victim. Since his marriage he had retired from active pastoral work, and now passed his time in the critical observation of other men at work in his own field. He held views of the most Evangelical type, and when he preached at St. Faith's we received without any compromise the exact truth as regards future prospects. He spoke very slowly, bringing out his nouns in capitals, as it were, and involved his sentences with parentheses. But in the presence of his wife he spoke seldom, because she always interrupted him. He was fond of me, and, for some reason of his own, always called me Johnny.

In strong contrast with his clerical brother was the Perpetual Curate of St. Faith's, my old tutor, Mr. Verney Broughton. The latter was as plump, as rosy, as jolly, as the former was thin, tall, and austere. Calvin could not have looked on the world's follies with a more unforbearing countenance than the Rev. John Pontifex; Friar John could hardly have regarded the worldliness of the world with more benignity than the Rev. Verney Broughton. He was a kind-hearted man, and loved the world, with the men, women, and children upon it; he was a scholar and a student, consequently he loved the good things that had been written, said, and sung upon it; he was a gourmand, and he liked to enjoy the fruits of the earth in due season. Perhaps he loved the world too much for a Christian minister; at all events he enjoyed it as much as he could; never disguised his enjoyment, and inculcated both in life and preaching a perfect trust in the goodness of God, deep thankfulness for the gifts of eating and drinking, and reliance on the ordinances of the church. Mr. Pontifex amused him; they were close companions, which added to the pleasures of life; and he entertained, I should say, dislike for no man in the world except Herr Rümer, whom he could not be brought to admire.

"He is a cynic," he would say. "That school has never attracted my admiration. He delights in the *double entendre*, and is never so much pleased as when he conveys a hidden sneer. I do not like that kind of conversation. Give me honest enthusiasm, admiration, and faith. And I prefer Englishmen, Ladislav, my boy, though you are only an Englishman by adoption."

CHAPTER XVI.

There were several other people who entertained similar views with regard to Herr Rümer. Mrs. Pontifex disliked him excessively for one. Everybody began with distrust of this man; then they grew to tolerate him; some went on to like him; all ended with cordial hatred—it would be hard to say why. His eyes, without the blue spectacles, which he put off indoors, were singularly bright, though rather small. He had a way of turning their light full on to a speaker without speaking, which was as embarrassing a commentary on what you had just said as you can imagine. It conveyed to yourself, and to everybody else, which was even more humiliating, the idea that you were really, to this gentleman's surprise, even a greater fool than you looked. Perhaps that was one reason why he was so much disliked.

You noticed, too, after a time, that he saw everything, heard everything, and remembered everything. When he spoke about his personal reminiscences, he showed an astonishing recollection of detail as if he preserved photographs of places and persons in his mind. He was always about Mr. Tyrrell's office, and kept there a fire-proof safe, with his name painted on it in white letters. He carried the key in his own pocket. Of course I knew nothing of the nature of his business, but it was generally understood that he was a German who had money, that he chose to live in our town for his own pleasure and convenience, and that he invested his funds, by Mr. Tyrrell's help and advice, in local securities.

The Captain and little Dr. Roy always made up the party. Everybody liked the little doctor, who stood five feet nothing in his boots, a neat and well-proportioned abridgment of humanity, with a humorous face and a twinkling eye. He was an Irishman; he had been in America; and it was currently reported that if he ventured his foot on Canadian soil he would infallibly be