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REAL CONVERSATION;

OR, RECOLLECTION OF THE PAST.

By Mrs. Hofland.

"The circumstance of your being *detenu* in France so long, my dear Madam," said I to an elderly lady in 1815, "has made you half a Frenchwoman, or you would not have said so positively that our laws were unjust towards women. I really do not consider myself in any way aggrieved by them."

"They have not pressed upon you," she replied with a smile. "You judge wrong in the conclusion as to myself also; for I am really proud of being an Englishwoman, and thankful that my last days will be spent in my native country. Nevertheless, I must assert, that the Law here is hard, even to cruelty, upon a class of meritorious women. *Par exemple*, let a woman be ever so industrious, and successful in a business, or in the exercise of art—let her maintain and educate her children, support an unworthy husband, or give valuable employment to the poor: extend the commerce of her country, or do it honor by the talents she displays; and yet the laws of the land allow the creditors of a known profligate, and dishonest husband, to wrest from her the hard earnings and self-denying accumulations of her life. It takes, in fact the bread from her children's lips, (drawn from the heart-strings of a tender mother) to squander it upon an extravagant mistress, bestow it on a gambling companion, or in any way uphold the means of wickedness in a wretch who has already proved himself such—who, in the Apostle's language, "provided not for his own household and was worse than an Infidel."

"It is certainly a very hard law, but I do not believe it is ever acted upon—in fact we have few women in this country capable of the energies, or gifted with the courage requisite for business of any kind, distinct from that pursued by the husband, in which case there can be no division of property." To this the lady replied.

"Our conversation reminds me of a circumstance which happened many years ago, about the subject of which I must make enquiry, for she was a most interesting woman. I must tell you her history.

"Some five, or six, and twenty years since, two very fine girls, who had lately become orphans, came from my native town, Rutlandshire, to visit a friend in London. In a short time each made what is called a *conquest*, and in the course of the year one was married to an apothecary, who resided in a street leading into Smithfield, the other to a very eminent tea dealer at Ludgate Hill.

"The latter was, in person, delicate, almost to fragility, and so gentle, and modest in manner, yet with so much good sense and quiet observation, that I was sorry to lose sight of her. It so happened that a short time after her marriage I had the pleasure of seeing her, and I shall never forget the manner of her husband, he appeared so fawningly fond of her, so over-and-above civil to me as her friend. I said to myself, 'either this man is a great hypocrite, or my amiable countrywoman is a cold-hearted woman after all, for certainly his fondness, though not repulsed, was not affective.' I fear she is unhappy, flourishing as all around her appears."

"My visit was not returned, but this did not surprize me, for we lived then in the country, and my own large family, and subsequent trouble, might be said 'to engross me wholly.' Some years after, however, I found myself one day near Mr. Elliott's, and I gladly availed myself of the opportunity. On entering the warehouse I saw, with great surprise my former elegant acquaintance seated at a raised desk, with a pen in her hand, arrayed in plain and matronly clothing, and although surrounded by that press of business which indicated the power of wealth, apparently stripped of all those attributes of it which I had seen her formerly possessing. As my own appearance was altered, both by time and sorrow, I approached her slowly, and I remember asked her if she recollected me.

"Oh, yes, yes!" she exclaimed, exceedingly agitated, and taking my hand she led me with trembling haste out of the warehouse, first into an adjoining parlour, and afterwards up stairs, as if she desired to retire from every eye, to secure to herself the sad luxury of weeping freely over a tale of sorrow, to which she yet supposed I was no-stranger, for the causes of her misery were known to many.

It appeared that a very short time after her marriage, her husband had shewn himself tyrannical, mean, and full of dissimulation abhorrent to her nature, but which she hoped (for wives have

a knack at hoping) no one save herself had discovered. She had reason also to believe him unfaithful, but it was not until after the birth of her second child that she discovered what the world had long known, that an illicit connexion with an extravagant and profligate woman, at once estranged him from home, and rendered him when there, a miser to his dependants, a sycophant to his customers, and a drainer of the money produced by the exertions of the former, and the confidence of the latter.

At this period there became a great falling off in their hitherto extraordinary trade, in the management of which he had once shown great abilities. Distressed as she was by contemptuous neglect, and even studied cruelty, she found refuge from her own feelings, by occasionally seeing those whom it was his duty to see, and when she had by mere chance transacted some matter of business with an ability for which he had not given her credit, he positively insisted on her entering into the most arduous duties. And for the last two years she had been a slave and a most successful one. She said her children (young as they were) had been sometime at school, her husband lived almost wholly at the other end of the town, but his returns had been of late more frequent, in order to inspect the progress of some workmen who had been fitting up an adjoining room according to his order.

As she spoke she threw open the door of her bed-room, and I perceived a tolerable large room in which the windows were bricked up, allowing only small apertures at the top, guarded by iron stanchions, and that a stove was the substitute for a grate.

"I believe," said she, "it is to be a repository for choice teas, but he never condescends to mention any intention to me, though I have proved myself (strange as you may think it) a better judge than himself. I am treated as the most despicable menial—but my children (my innocent children) must never know the pangs I suffer, nor the exertions I make—I trust after all, that before they grow up he will be an altered man."

"Alas!" thought I, "their mother is an altered woman.—She was tall, and her frame was attenuated to very leanness, her fine features were sharpened, but their expression was full of meekness and sweetness. I left her with all the sympathy of an aching heart, and about three months afterwards I called again.

"Imagine my astonishment, when evidently unemployed, yet sitting on the same seat, I beheld in the warehouse a stout, handsome woman, about ten years older than Mrs. Elliott, dressed in the most expensive and flaunting manner, and bearing alike in mien and manners a character that could not be mistaken. I looked round—there was not a creature in mourning—the woman's eye pursued me, I hastily asked for a pound of tea, and as my recollection returned in paying for it, enquired what was become of Mrs. Elliott?

"The young man who served me, with a most intelligent look pointed to a direction which he had already written, at the same time took my money to the presiding lady. One other customer alone appeared—the place was changed from a fair to a desert."

"The direction was 'Mrs. Elliott, N—street,' and thither I sped—there were three carriages at the door, and to my astonishment I found their owners in a small store, behind the counter of which stood my poor friend, with a smiling countenance and a handsome cap. I bustled through into a little parlour, and in the course of a few minutes she joined me, and welcomed me with tears of joy. I intreated her to compose herself and tell me what had happened? "You remember that odd room I showed you the Saturday you were so good as to sit with me an hour?" "Perfectly well, it was for a tea store."

"I had a bad cold and intended to lie late in bed the next day, but was called by the maid who said a lady wanted to see me. I was not without hope that it was you, and hastened into the parlour, where I found an elderly woman, who of course I saluted with respect, and concluding she was come to ask the character of a servant who had recently left me, I began to speak on that subject.

"The woman replied not, and her eyes were fixed on me in a manner really distressing. I began to make my breakfast in order to relieve myself from her looks, which fell on me as a spell. After enduring this above an hour I ventured to enquire, by what right, and for what purpose she had paid me so unaccountable a visit, and fixed upon me regards so scrutinizing?"

"I am a nurse from St. Luke's, and am engaged by your husband to take care of you."

"Take care!—you do not think me mad?"

"I know you to be so, but it is better not to talk of this."

"Instantly the whole horrible scheme burst upon me—the

strange room up stairs, the looks and words, of my husband which had sometimes struck me as so incomprehensible,—my heart sunk in my bosom—I covered my face with my hands, and tried to pray—in my stillness required self-possession, remembered that I was very near the outer door, the numerous fastenings of which were familiar to me—hope sprang in my breast, by a strong effort I stilled the beating of my heart, and braced my trembling limbs. When I was capable of a plunge, I did not look towards that fearful eye, which was still bent on me—I sprang into the passage—reached the door before my pensive attendant could quit her chair, and had withdrawn five heavy bolts ere she reached me. As her hand seized my gown I sprang into the street, and her grasp, though strong, failed to detain me—we went forward together.

"The streets were nearly empty. I bent my steps towards my sister's house, and walked with such rapidity, the woman followed me with difficulty—on reaching Snow-hill, a stream of people from the different churches appeared—the sight of so many of my fellow creatures (coming, too, from the worship of God) seemed to ensure my safety, and I lift, as it were, a great weight from my heart. I burst into tears—I sobbed convulsively, but yet I pressed forward—it was happy that I did so, for had I dared to appeal to the pity of any one, the strangeness of my appearance, and the wildness of my looks, might have satisfied them in thinking me deranged, and in assisting the really respectable looking person who followed me, to regain that power over me she would naturally have asserted—once secured I should unquestionably have become a prisoner for life.

"The moment I beheld my sister's face I fainted, and whilst Mr. Holmes my brother-in-law applied the usual remedies, my attendant (ignorant of our relationship) explained to him our relative situations.

"Mr. Holmes had long observed Mrs. Elliott, and conceived him capable of many things bad—he retained the nurse as a witness, and after giving me some restoratives and putting on me my sister's bonnet, we proceeded in a coach to the Lord Mayor, who immediately received our depositions, and treated me with the kindness of a brother. The next day Elliott was summoned, and if shame and confusion of face, could have restored my tranquillity, as clearly as it established his base intentions, I might have been happy. But I must not complain, for all except him have been kind to me. The first lawyer in the kingdom (even Lord T—himself) hearing of my situation, have consulted on my case, and procured me a separation, but I am still, I believe, a good deal in Elliott's power. However, the result of all this is, that Mr. Holmes has taken this shop of which I am sole mistress, but we are equal partners—two of my late servants are come to me, the merchants voluntarily have offered me credit to any amount. The money which could not be dispensed with was found by my partner, of course, my poverty being extreme, for I was really unable to gain even a portion of my worthless wardrobe from Elliott. No matter—I am blest by the possession of my children, for the wretch who has usurped my place would not receive the poor lambs at the holidays. As their bills followed them, I am for the present pressed a little, but that is a trifle, for my success is really unparalleled. The gentlemen of the long robe have taken up my case with a warmth of heart, for which I can never be grateful enough. In fact it is a fashion for their ladies, as you may perceive, to come here in their own carriages, to give me advice."

"Well, ma'am," continued my friend, "you will be aware how happy I felt to witness this relief, and that I did not intrude long on the time of one so valuably employed. It was perhaps a year and more, before circumstances enabled me to call again upon her in N—g—e Street—she was no longer visible. In answer to my enquiries I was told, 'no such person was known,' yet when I anxiously asked if my friend was dead, (seeing the words, late Elliott, was on the cheek of the door) no answer was obtained."

"A little girl (the only customer) observed the look of surprize and sorrow I naturally assumed on quitting the spot, and following me out, said 'the lady was gone to the end of the street she believed.' Thither I too went, pondering on the wayward destiny of one so little fitted apparently to meet it, but who endured it so wisely and so well. In a low, dark shop which I descended by a step, I again found her—pale, harassed, yet to a certain degree busy, but with persons of a far inferior description to the late ones."

"After some preliminary and mournful observations, she now told me, 'that at the end of her first year's exertions, in her new