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CHAPTER XXII

"What!" cries Moll starting to her feet. "He whom I have treated thus is— And here she checked herself as if recoiling, and for the first time from false pretense in a matter so near the heart."

"He is your cousin, Richard Godwin," says the wise woman. "Simon knew this from the first, for there were letters showing it in the pocketbook he found after the struggle in the park, but for his own ends he kept that knowledge secret until it fitted his ends to speak. Why your cousin did not reveal himself to you may be more readily concluded by you than I can say."

"Why, 'tis clear enough," says Moll. "Pressing by his necessities, he came hither to claim assistance of his kinsman, but finding he was dead and none here but me, his pride did shrink from begging of a mere girl that which he might with justice have demanded from a man. And then, for shame at being handled like a rope."

"Surely there is something in the blood of a gentleman that tempers his spirit to a height scarcely to be comprehended by men of meaner birth," thinks I.

"When did Simon urge him to dispute my rights?" asks Moll.

"On Sunday—in the wood out there. I knew by his look he had some treacherous business in hand, and matching my talk with his I found means to overhear him, creeping from thicket to thicket, as noiseless as a snake, to where they stood, for, be assured, I should not otherwise have learned one word of this."

"How did he receive these hints at my ill doing?" asks Moll.

"Patiently till the tale was told. Then, taking your steward by the throat with sudden passion, he cries: 'Why should I not strangle you, rascal? 'Twould be a service to humanity. What have I done to deserve your love or this lady your hatred? Nothing. You would pit me against the other merely to keep your hold upon these lands and gratify your insatiable love of possession. Go, get you gone, beast! I'll fling him off.' 'This punishment enough for you to live and know you've failed, for had you proved your case to my conviction I'd not stir a hand against this lady, be she who she may. Nay,' adds he, with greater fury, 'I will not stay where my loyalty and better judgment may be affected by the contagion of a vile suspicion. Away while you may. My fingers itch to be revenged on you for sundering me from one who should have been my closest, dearest friend!'"

"Moll clasps her hands together with a cry of joy and pain mingled, even as the smile played upon her lips while tears filled her eyes."

"Sunday," cries she, turning to me and dashing the tears that blinded her from her eyes. "Sunday, and 'twas Monday he refused to stay. Oh, the brave heart!" Then, in impetuous haste: "He shall be found. We must overtake him."

"That may be done if you take horse," says Anne Fitch, "for he travels afoot."

"But which way shall we turn?"

"The way that any man would take, seeking to dispel a useless sorrow," answers the wise woman, "the way to London."

"God bless you!" cries Moll, clasping the withered old woman to her heaving breast and kissing her. Then the next moment she would be gone, bidding me get horses for our pursuit."

So, as quickly as I might, I procured a couple of nags, and we set out, leaving a message for Don Sanchez, who was not yet afoot. And we should have gone empty but that while the horses were preparing, and Moll, despite her mighty haste at this business, took the precaution to put some store of victuals in a saddlebag.

Reckoning that Mr. Godwin, as I must call him, had been set out two hours or thereabouts, I considered that we might overtake him in about three at an easy amble. But Moll was in no mood for ambling, and no sooner were we started than she put her nag to a gallop and kept up this reckless pace up hill and down dale, I sailing behind and expecting every minute to be out and get my neck broke, until her horse was spent and would answer no more to the whip. Then I begged her for mercy's sake to take the hill we were coming to and walk, and break her fast. "For," says I, "another such half hour as the last on an empty stomach will do my business, and you will have another dead man to bring back to life, which will advance your journey nothing and so more haste, less speed." Therewith I opened my saddlebag, and sharing its contents we ate a rare good meal and very merry, and indeed it was a pleasure now to look at her as great as a few hours before. For the exercise had brought a flood of rich color into her face, and a lively hope sparkled in her eyes, and the sound of her voice was like any peal of marriage bells for gayety. Yet now and then her tongue would falter, and she would strain a wistful glance along the road before us as fearing she did hope too much. However, coming to an inn, we made inquiry and learned that a man such as we described had surely passed the house barely an hour gone, and one adding that he carried a basket on his stick we felt this must be our painter for certain.

Thence on again at another tear, as if we were flying from our reckoning, until, turning a bend of the road at the foot of a hill she suddenly drew rein with a shrill cry, and coming up I perceived close by our side Mr. Godwin, seated upon the bridge that crossed a stream, with his wallet beside him.

He sprang to his feet and caught in an instant the rein that had fallen from Moll's hand, for the commotion in her heart at seeing him so suddenly had stopped the current of her veins, and she was deadly pale.

"Take me, take me!" cries she, stretching forth her arms with faint voice. "Take me, or I must fall," and slipping from her saddle she sank into his open, ready arms.

"Help!" says Mr. Godwin quickly and in terror.

"Nay," says she, "I am better. 'Tis nothing. But," adds she, smiling at him, "you may hold me yet a little longer."

The fervid look in his eyes as he gazed down at her sweet, pale face seemed to say, "Would I could hold you here forever, sweetheart!"

"Rest here," says I, pointing to the little wall of the bridge, and he, complying not too willingly, withdrew his arm from her waist, with a sigh.

And now, the color coming back to her cheek, Moll turns to him and says: "I thought you would have come again. And since one of us must ask to be forgiven, lo, here am I come to ask your pardon!"

"Why, what is there to pardon, madam?" says he.

"Only a girl's folly, which, unforgotten, must seem something worse."

"Your utmost folly," says he, "is to have been overkind to a poor painter, and if that be an offense 'tis my misfortune to be no more offended."

"Have I been overkind?" says Moll, abashed as having unwittingly passed the bounds of maiden modesty.

"As nature will be overbounteous in one season, strewing so many flowers in our path that we do not recognize them till they are lost, and all the world seems stricken with wintry desolation."

"Yet, if I have said or done anything unbecoming to my sex—"

"Nothing womanly is unbecoming to a woman," returns he. "And, praised be God, some still live who have not learned to conceal their nature under a mask of fashion. If this be done less to your natural free disposition than to an ignorance of our enlightened modish arts, then could I find it in my heart to rejoice that you have lived a captive in Barbary."

They had been looking into each other's eyes with the delight of reading there the love that filled their hearts, but now Moll bent her head as if she could no longer bear that searching regard, and unable to make response to his pretty speech she twining her fingers in her lap, silent, with pain and pleasure fluttering over her downcast face. And at this time I do think she was as near as may be on the point of

confessing she had been no Barbary slave, rather than deceive the man who loved her, and profit by his faith in her which had certainly undone us all, but in her passion, a woman considered the welfare of her father and best friends very lightly. Nay, she will not value her own body and soul at two straws, but is ready to yield up everything for one dear smile.

A full minute Mr. Godwin sat gazing at Moll's pretty, blushing, half hid face, as if for his last salute, and then, rising slowly from the little parapet, he says: "Had I been more generous, I should have spared you this long morning ride. So you have something to forgive, and we may cry quits!" Then, stretching forth his hand, he adds, "Farewell."

"Stay," cries Moll, springing to her feet, as he was about to turn away, suddenly again. "I have not eased myself of the burden that lay upon me. Oh!" cries she passionately, casting off all reserve, "I know all—who you are and why you first came hither, and I am here to offer you the half of all I have."

"Half, sweet cousin?" answers he, "Aye, for if I had not come to claim it all would have been yours by right, and 'tis no more than fair that, owing so much to fortune, I should offer you the half."

"Suppose that half will not suffice me, dear?" says he.

"Why, then I'll give you all," answers she, "houses, gardens—everything."

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"Then what will you do, coz?"

"Go hence, as you were going but just now," answers she, trembling, "and if you took the diamond from its setting and left me nothing but the foil," says he. "Oh, I would order it another way. Give me the gem and let who will take what remains. Unless these little hands are mine to hold forever I will take nothing from them."

"They are things, dear love," cries she in a transport, "things that about his neck, 'and my heart as well.'"

At this juncture I thought it advisable to steal softly away to the bend of the road, for surely any one coming this way by accident and finding them locked together thus in tender embrace on the king's highway would have fallen on some gross conclusion, not understanding their circumstances, and so might have offended their delicacy by some rude jest. And I had not parted myself here a couple of minutes ere I spied a team of four stout horses coming over the brow of the hill, drawing the stage wagon behind them which plies betwixt Sevenoaks and London.

This prompting me to a happy notion, I returned to the happy, smiling pair, who were again seated upon the bridge, hand in hand, and says I:

"My dear friends—for so, sir, I think I may now know you, sir, as well as my Mistress Judith here—the wagon is coming down the hill, by which I had intended to go to London this morning upon some pressing business, and so, sir, I would give her a hint that should make her profit by my folly. And then he tells me how, in the heyday of courtship and the flush of confiding love, he did confess to his wife that he had carried gallantry somewhat too far for Sukey Taylor and might have added a good half dozen other names beside her, but for her sudden outcry, and how, though she might very well have suspected other amours, she did never reproach him therewith, but was forever to her dying day a-fingering Sukey Taylor in his teeth, etc."

"Lord, Kit!" cries he in conclusion. "What would I give to save her from such torment! You know how obedient she is to my guiding, for I have ever studied to make her respect me, and no one in the world hath ever empire over her. Could it not be contrived anyhow that we should meet for half an hour secretly?"

"Not secretly," says I. "But there is no reason why you should not visit her openly. Nay, it will create less surprise than if you stay away. For what could be more natural than your coming to the court on your return from a voyage to see the lady you risked so much to save?"

Now God bless you for a good, true friend! I was clasp my hand, for I could not, but to stay no great length. Not a drop will I touch that day, and a fool indeed I must be if I can't act my part without bawling for a few hours at a stretch, and I listening every night in the parlor of the Spotted Dog to old seamen swearing and singing their songs. And I'll find an opportunity to give Moll a hint of my past folly and to rescue her from a like pitfall. I'll abide by your advice, Kit, which is the wisest I ever heard from your lips."

But I was not so sure of this, and remembering the kind of obedience Moll had used to yield to her father's commands my mind misgave me.

CHAPTER XXIII

I returned to Hurst Court the following day in the forenoon, and there I found Mr. Godwin, with Moll clinging to his arm, in an upper room commanding a view of the northern slopes, discussing their future, and Moll told me with gleeful how this room was to be her husband's workshop, where he would paint pictures for the admiration of all the world, saying that he would not, nor would she have him, renounce his calling to lead the idle life of a country gentleman.

"If the world admire my pictures, the world shall pay to have them," says he, with a smile. Then, turning to her, he adds very tenderly: "I will owe all my happiness to you, sweetheart. Yet guard my independence in more material matters. No necessary question shall ever suspicion on my love."

Seeing I was not wanted here I left them to settle their prospectives and sought Don Sanchez, whom I found reading in a room below, seated in a comfortable chair before a good fire of apple logs. To please me he shut up his book and agreed to take a stroll in the park while dinner was a-dressing. So we slipped on our hats and gloves and set forth, talking of indifferent matters till we had come into a fair open glade, which sort of place the prudent don did ever prefer to holes and corners for secret conference, and then he told me how Moll and Mr. Godwin had already decided they would be married in three weeks.

"Three weeks?" says I. "I would it were to be done in three days." To which desire the don coincides with sundry grave nods, and then tells me how Moll would have herself cried in church, for all to know, and that nothing may be wanting to her husband's dignity.

"After all," says I, "three weeks is no such great matter. And now, senor, do tell me what you think of all this."

"If you had had the ordering of your own destiny, you could not have contrived it better," answers he. "'Tis a most excellent game, and you cannot fail to win if (here he pauses to blow his nose) 'if the cards are played properly.'"

This somehow brought Dawson into my thoughts, and I told them of my visit to him, and how he did purpose to come down to see Moll, whereas the don, skipping short, looked at me very curiously with his eyebrows raised, but saying nothing.

"'Tis no more than natural that a father should want to see what kind of man is to be his daughter's husband," says I in excuse, "and if he will come, say we are to do?"

"Ah, honest man nevertheless—in his peculiar way," observes the don.

In mine, but I'll not be tempted to it, for I perceive clearly enough by what you tell me that my wayward tongue and weakness have been undoing us all and ruining my dear Moll's chance of happiness. But tell me, Kit," straightening himself up, "how this affair of this marriage will touch them, for now our prosperity is assured, which otherwise might have lacked security."

"Aye, to be sure, for now shall we be all in one family with these Godwins, and this cousin, profiting by the estate as much as Moll, will never begrudge her giving us a hundred or two now and then for rendering him such good service."

"'Twill appease Moll's compunctions into the bargain," says I heedlessly.

"What compunctions?"

"The word slipped me unintended," stammers I. "I mean nothing."

"But something your word must mean. Come, out with it, Kit."

"Well," says I, "since this fondness has possessed her, I have observed and greater compunction to telling of lies than she was wont to have."

"'Tis my fault," answered he sadly. "She gets this leaning to honesty from me."

"This very morning," continues I, "she was, I truly believe, of two minds whether she should not confess to her sweetheart that she was not his cousin."

"For all the world my case!" cries he, slapping the table. "If I could only have five minutes in secret with the dear girl, I would give her a hint that should make her profit by my folly. And then he tells me how, in the heyday of courtship and the flush of confiding love, he did confess to his wife that he had carried gallantry somewhat too far for Sukey Taylor and might have added a good half dozen other names beside her, but for her sudden outcry, and how, though she might very well have suspected other amours, she did never reproach him therewith, but was forever to her dying day a-fingering Sukey Taylor in his teeth, etc."

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"Ah, honest man nevertheless—in his peculiar way," observes the don.

"I know what I should do in your place, Mr. Hopkins," says he quietly.

"Pray, senor, what is that?"

"Squeeze all the money you can out of old Simon before he comes," answers he. "And it wouldn't be amiss to make Mr. Godwin a party to this business by letting him have a hundred or two for his present necessities at once."

Acting on this hint, when Moll left us after supper and we three men were seated before the fire, I asked Mr. Godwin if he would permit me to speak upon a matter which concerned his happiness no less than his cousin Judith's.

"Nay, sir," replies he, "I do pray you to be open with me, for otherwise I must consider myself unworthy of your friendship."

"Well, sir," says I, "my mind is somewhat concerned on account of what you said this morning—namely, that no pecuniary question shall ever be discussed betwixt you and your wife, and that you will owe nothing to her but happiness. This, together with your purpose of painting pictures to sell, means, I take it, that you will leave your wife absolute mistress of her present fortune."

"That is the case exactly, Mr. Hopkins," says he. "I am not indifferent to the world's esteem, and I would give no one reason to suspect that I had married my dear cousin to possess her fortune."

"Nevertheless, sir, you would not have thought it that she begrudged you an equal share of her possessions. Your position will necessitate a certain outlay. To maintain your wife's dignity and your own you must dress well, mount a good horse, be liberal in hospitality, give largely to those in need, and so forth. With all due respect to your genius in painting, I can scarcely think that art will furnish you at once with supplies necessary to meet all these demands."

"All this is very true, Mr. Hopkins," says he, after a little reflection. "To tell the truth, I have lived so long in want that poverty has become my second nature, and so these matters have not entered into my calculations. Pray, sir, continue."

"Your wife, be she never so considerate, may not always anticipate your needs, and hence at some future moment this question of supplies must arise, unless they are disposed of before your marriage."

"If that could be done, Mr. Hopkins," says he hopefully.

"It may be done, sir, very easily. With your cousin's consent and yours, as her elected guardian, at this time will have a deed drawn up to be signed by you and her, settling one half the estate upon you, and the other half on your cousin. This will make you not her debtor, but her benefactor, for with this deed all this, now hers, becomes yours by legal right upon your marriage, and she could not justly give away a shilling without your permission, and thus you assure to her the same independence that you yourself would maintain."

"Very good," says Don Sanchez in a sonorous voice of approval as he lies back in his high chair, his eyes closed and a digram in the corner of his mouth. "I thank you with all my heart, Mr. Hopkins," says Mr. Godwin warmly. "I entreat you have this deed drawn up if it be Cousin Judith's wish."

"You may count with certainty on that," says I, "for my arguments lacked power I have but to say 'tis your desire, and 't would be done, though it took the last penny from her.'"

He made no reply to this, but bending forward he gazed into the fire, with a rapture in his face, pressing one hand within the other as if it were his sweetheart's.

"In the meantime," says I, "if you have necessity for a hundred or two in advance, you have but to give me your note of hand."

"Can you do me this service?" cries he calling. "Can you let me have £500 by tomorrow?"

"I believe I can supply you to the extent of six or seven."</