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KATE ASHWOOD.

CHAPTER VII.

"Si vedria che i lor nemici Hanno in seno; e si reduce Nel parere a noi felici Ogn' lor felicità."

Metast. io.

While the proceedings we have detailed were taking place in Ireland, we must take a glance at Kate. She was on a memorable winter's evening, sitting in her dressing-room, arranging her toilette for a ball to take place at Warrinstown. Her maid was placing on her head a lovely wreath of pink roses. She had the very prettiest of white tarlatan dresses, made with puffs innumerable from the floor to her waist, ornamented here and there with pink roses. You, ladies, I hope, sufficiently appreciate my description. The dress must have been 'the thing,' as it came that very morning from Madam La Follette's splendid establishment in Regent Street. I know this much—every one considered the *tout ensemble* perfect. Hoops were not then the fashion, or else I am sure she would have worn them. On her neck was a lovely little diamond cross. Fanny and Maria came in just as the last touch was put to the whole arrangement.

'Well,' said Maria, with a laugh, 'I'll tell you this, Kate—Sir George will propose to-night. I know well what he is about; and really, my dear girl, if you would take a friend's advice, you would give up dreaming of that unfortunate O'Brien. You know well it is all nonsense; the man has no money, and people can't get on without it—dross though it be. You would do well to forget him altogether; it would be so pleasant to be Lady Fasten. Just think; you would be taken into dinner first every where in the county. If the man proposes, you must have him. The idea of starving at the back of God speed, when you might have every thing—such a place, horses *ad libitum*, and a beautiful lake—company every day of your life. The idea of giving up such happiness, when it is within your grasp! I know I should be glad to be in your place.'

'My dearest Maria,' answered Kate, 'let me inform you, in the first instance, that Sir George has not proposed.'

'As yet,' interrupted Maria; 'but you won't say that to-morrow.'

'Besides,' continued Kate, 'I can't bear him. He wants my £10,000 and not myself. I know a good deal about him. He first proposed to Miss Stout, the brewer's daughter, with £30,000—then for Miss Jones, with £20,000;—and now he thinks £10,000 is better than nothing. People say he gambles every thing. That may not be true; but we all know he is an unprincipled, extravagant spendthrift. Then one can't stand his impudence—he is so conceited. I don't think he possesses one real friend in the world. Now, if you consider, after all this, that he is a good match, I can only say your opinion and mine differ; but I bear a noise below, as if the company were beginning to arrive. Let us go down stairs.'

The ball-room was exquisitely decorated. There were wreaths of ivy in every available place, exotics placed at intervals in the passages and hall, the floor well waxed, the music the best that could be procured. The dancing was in the drawing-room, which was, from its size, admirably adapted for the purpose. A greenhouse adjoined, which was brilliantly illuminated, and where some of the party promenaded occasionally when overpowered by the heat of the rooms.

Mrs. Ashwood and her daughters received their guests in an easy graceful manner. Now Mrs. Ashwood was essentially unamiable; but so completely versed was she in the ways of the world, that every one considered she did the honors of her house perfectly. She would not for any consideration have failed in her attentions to the least-important personage in that assembly; and her house passed everywhere for being the most agreeable in the county; but she often indulged in sarcasms at the expense of her guests the day after these reunions, and many cutting remarks were made on the very persons perhaps towards whom she had been the most attentive.

When the room was sufficiently filled with guests, dancing commenced. Kate and her sisters were busy securing partners for the innumerable young ladies that wanted such. There were the Miss Evergreens, who had been at every ball in the county for the last twenty years, and whose declining charms found few admirers; the Miss Newcomes, who had never been any where, and knew nobody. They were rather elderly young ladies, but had only just been emancipated from the nursery; their elderly sisters having been a long time on hands, and only very lately disposed of. These two parties demanded no end of attention. It was next to impossible to find a sufficient supply of partners. The youngest men were generally captured in such emergencies; older ones, long accustomed

to keep clear of such snares, generally replying, 'Many thanks; I am engaged.'

Then there was Lady Flannit and the three Miss Flannits—Honourables of course, and decidedly the swells of the evening. They looked superciliously at the different gentlemen presented to them, and considered for a few moments whether they would condescend to honor the aspiring applicant. Mr. and the Miss Points, pretty lady-like girls; but they were not looked on, as the *creme de la creme* of the company.—Mr. Point had made his fortune by a needle-manufactory, and his needles had prospered enough to allow of his buying an estate. Mr. Point, good honest soul, saw no harm in his needles. *Honi soit qui mal y pense*, thought he; and over his dining-room chimney-piece was an ornament like an escutcheon done in needles, very much in the same way as officers decorate their mess-rooms with bayonets on festive occasions. The Miss Hawkes attracted general attention. Their dresses excited great admiration. Many people remarked, however, that they did not cost much. Mr. Hawk was well known as a screw.

The waltzing began. Miss Evergreen had been a great dancer, and her reputation for such was long established; and though she had become old and ugly, her light step could not fail to be admired. Kate Ashwood remarked upon her dancing to Miss Flannit, who good-naturedly answered, 'Long practice.'

There were several people worth watching, and of course they each attracted a due amount of consideration. Old Mr. Plum, who had long admired pretty Fanny Barton, and whom she laughed at unceasingly. He had no end of thousands a year, and was quite captivated by the graces of lovely Fanny; but she, contrary to the sage advice of various matrons, determined not to doze through life with him, till all chance of securing a better match was passed;—thereby running a great risk of losing him irremediably.

Many had their share of amusement in watching poor Captain Need, who had long been in love with the *beaux yeux* of rich Miss Coffers' cassette, and who tried to forget the deficiency of attraction in the lady in the contemplation of the beauties she owned. He literally worshipped the ground she walked upon, and loved the very animals that ate her grass. What greater or more superlative amount of affection would you want? He walked to Woodvale every day, whether wet or dry, and gardened if she garden-ed, trotted after her all round the village with baskets full of tracts, and tried to look happy under the infliction. He had been all the Saturday at this work, and tried hard to swallow the pill. Miss Coffers was, by the way, no juvenile, neither was she a Venus. He was, on the night we are recording, very near declaring when his courage forsook him, and he put off the proposal *sine die*.

Mr. Hunt was also there, a very fast young man, who really loved Maria Fitzroy; but she was a Catholic—worse even, a convert—and what would his father say to such an alliance?—No, he could not marry her; much as he longed to do so. To face his stern parent with a Papist wife, was an impossibility. Early in the evening Sir George went to ask Kate to dance a quadrille with him.

'Impossible,' she answered. 'I'm engaged for nearly every quadrille already.'

'The next valse?'

'I have promised that too.'

'Have I no chance then?' he inquired.

Kate saw her mother's stern eye fixed upon her, and replied,—

'Well, then, the one following; and she walked off with her cousin, little Johnny Lindsay. After taking one or two turns of a valse with him, he said, in a consequential manner,

'Kate, I have a great secret. Charles sent me a letter, which he desired me to give to no one but yourself; and the youth's color heightened with pleasure at the idea that he was considered worthy of such a trust.'

'Come with me,' said Kate, 'as soon as this dance is over, into the greenhouse, and I can look at it quietly.'

When the time arrived for the valse, for which Sir George had been longing, he searched every where for Kate. He tried the ballroom, refreshment room, corridors, all in vain; but at last found her in a corner of the conservatory, reading a letter. This was the one Charles sent through Johnny Lindsay, as he sometimes feared to correspond directly with Kate, lest the parental ire might be too much roused at his constant reference to his friend.

'Miss Ashwood,' began Sir George—'I beg pardon, I perceive you are engaged. Pray let me not disturb you.'

'Indeed, Sir George,' answered Kate. 'I am quite ready to dance with you; and crumpling up the note, she placed it under a plot of flowers, and accompanied her admirer to the ballroom.'

The valse over, Sir George asked her to walk about with him a little. He led the way to the billiard-room, which had been lighted up in case any of the party might prefer the game to dancing. It was empty.

Kate had remarked very fairly that she did not consider Sir George cared for her. He certainly was not romantic, but he at least felt as much genuine affection for her as for any one in the world. This does not say much, however. He had proposed for several ladies, but was refused; for besides his extravagance, many people said (but, then, the world is malicious) that he had been married privately by a Catholic priest, and that though the lady in question was dead, an heir to the title might start up at any moment. Others, again, peep-pooed these uncharitable remarks and did not believe them.

On the present occasion Sir George felt embarrassed. Kate's nonchalant manner in his regard discomposed him. He talked, however, of all sorts of things, hunts, dances, &c.; all to gain time. At last Kate, tired out, remarked that she would be glad to go into the dancing-room.

'Stay yet a little longer,' he replied; 'I have something very important to say to you.—Fact is, by the way, have you noticed any alteration in me these last few days?'

'I can't say I have,' answered Kate. 'Perhaps, however, it was my stupidity; I have been very busy, sending invitations, settling flowers, &c., which have occupied my thoughts.' This was said with a slight shade of irony.

'But, Miss Ashwood, I have been very unhappy; I am excessively anxious for an opportunity of explaining myself. Have you ever seen my demesne?'

'Yes,' replied Kate; 'I passed it in the train.'

'Well, now, if you had—that is, if you thought you could—would you like to become head of that establishment—in short, what would you think—consider—of—being Lady Fasten?'

He turned to look at Kate, who was amusing herself with her bouquet with an air of supreme indifference, and who was doing her utmost to control her risible faculties.

'Sir George,' she replied, 'I must decline positively the high honors you wish to confer on me; you may hereafter find some one more worthy of such distinctions. I wish you to understand that I could not for one moment think of being the recipient of such favors.'

Having said this she rose to leave the room. Sir George was actually stupefied with astonishment. He could scarcely believe he heard aright. He, the great Sir George Fasten, of Castle Fasten, to be refused by a young lady whose father bore no title!—she to decline being his wife!

While this conversation had been taking place, several people had entered the room, and Kate saw her mother's eye fixed on her in an inquiring manner. She doubted not that the long-wished-for proposal had come: and doubted not, or at least hoped, that her daughter had accepted. She was so practical herself she could not comprehend any person giving affection the preference over carriages and grand apartments.—However, there was now no further time for reflection. Mrs. Ashwood was too finished a hostess to allow her own feelings to prevent her attending to her guests, so she was obliged to stifle her curiosity, which prompted her to go at once to Kate and ask her if the proposal had really taken place.

Sir George was too much a man of the world to allow his exterior to betray what he inwardly suffered—mortification and rage at being slighted; I may say that he now felt hatred for Kate. He however composed himself outwardly, and going up to the first lady whom he met, asked for the pleasure of a quadrille. He suddenly remembered how annoyed Kate was at being interrupted while reading the conservatory.—'There must,' thought he, 'be some mystery here. Can she have a lover, whose affections she values more than mine? If so, I will try to make mischief. I will show her that Sir George Fasten's anger, once roused, is not to be so easily calmed. I should like very much to have that letter, and why should not I, either.'

After the quadrille alluded to was over, Sir George conducted his fair partner to the conservatory, and affecting great admiration for flowers, led her to the spot where he had seen Kate put the letter. Then directing her attention to some beautiful and curious shrub near, he contrived to take the letter from under the pot, coolly slipped it into his waistcoat pocket, and left the greenhouse. He danced several times; but was anxiously looking forward to the end of the ball, that he might be enabled to indulge his curiosity by the perusal of the letter. He did not wish to go up to his room, lest some might suppose he had been refused by Kate, and that he felt the mortification. Sir George was but a very recent acquaintance of the family, and consequently he had not heard of the O'Brien affair, as some called Kate's engagement.

But country balls last a long time. People come great distances. The event has been anxiously looked forward to for a long while, and it does not compensate to have merely two or three hours' amusement. On this occasion, the winter season prevents daylight frightening away the company. Four o'clock struck before many of the company had left, and at five the last of the dancers took their departure. Kate, as soon as the last visitor left, rushed to the greenhouse, searched everywhere for the letter. It was gone. She raised every flower-pot in succession, in the hope that she might have made a mistake. Could she have been dreaming? Had she not put the missive there? The bare suspicion crossed her mind that Sir George, in his anger and indignation, might have tried to discover the secret of the letter. She instantly repelled the thought, and was almost angry with herself for allowing such an idea to remain for one moment in her mind. She continued her search in vain. Fearful of being discovered she returned to the drawing-room, determined to renew the search on the morrow. She hastened to her bedroom, and there found her mother waiting impatiently for her. She came over to her at once, and kissing her affectionately, said—

'Kate, my love, I am quite up to everything; I know all about it, and must congratulate you. You are a good dutiful girl to have done as you were desired, and now you will be rewarded; I am indeed a happy mother. He is all that I could wish for as a son-in-law.'

'But, my dear mother,' interposed Kate.

'Now, Kate, you need not tell me anything; I am quite aware of it. I guessed he would do it to-night. You know when there are so many people in a house, it is hard to obtain a quiet *tete-a-tete* with a young lady. You will have such a lovely place. Oh, Kate I am so very happy.'

'But, mamma,' interposed Kate, as soon as she could put in a word, 'you make a great mistake. That odious wretch did certainly make me an offer of his place and his hand, not of his heart; but I have disdainfully rejected him.—I could not for one moment think of accepting him.'

'What?' began Mrs. Ashwood; 'you don't mean to say you have refused so brilliant an offer, let slip this opportunity of getting yourself respectably married? The connection would have been so useful to your family. He is just elected member for Shepstone, and parliamentary influence would have been of so much use to your brothers. Oh, you are an ungrateful foolish girl. Am I to be continually thwarted in this manner? Are you throwing over the best match in the country, all for love of that Irish paper, who could scarcely give you enough of the wretched potatoes he and his countrymen feed upon? There! this baronet is refused all on his account.'

Here Mrs. Ashwood burst into a torrent of tears.

'No, indeed, mamma,' replied Kate; 'I can tell you such is not the case. I would not have married him; he is so conceited and stupid and odious. He considered, indeed, that he was doing me such a favor, and I listened to his conversation till I could stand it no longer. Every one knows he wants a few thousands to pay his debts. He has tried to obtain larger fortunes, and, failing in his efforts, is satisfied with mine. His character is so bad no one will have him. Believe me, dearest mother, you will yet rejoice at what no grieves you.'

'Of course,' returned Mrs. Ashwood, 'you are prejudiced against him; it is therefore useless for me to attempt to reason with you. His mother, whom I knew in London many years ago, often told me how excellent he was; how, when his brothers wished to go in the evening to the gambling-house, he would throw his arms round their necks and implore of them to remain at home. His mother often expatiated to me on his goodness; and depend upon it she would not have said all this without good reason. Kate, I repeat, you are a disappointment to me.' Mrs. Ashwood left the room.

Poor Kate sat down by the fire. 'I can't,' said she, 'give up every chance of happiness for life to gratify a whim of my mother's; and if even the sacrifice of all enjoyment could benefit my family. I would submit; but I know well what misery would be the result. They know not what misery such an alliance would bring upon them.'

Daylight came, and the sun peeped in upon a lonely figure still sitting by an extinguished fire; and the sun said, 'What brings that watcher there, with pale wan face and swollen eyes, and habited in a costume that I know not?' And the moon whispered from behind a cloud, 'I know all, and can tell you; for I have watched that figure the whole night long, and well am I acquainted with the habit which you recognise not.'

For Kate was still in her ball dress, and had

never stirred from the seat she had taken when her mother left,—thinking, thinking, thinking—and sleep was far from her weary eyes.

CHAPTER VIII.

'Let business vex him, ay, rice blind; Let doubt and knowledge rack his mind; Let error act, opinion speak, And want afflict, and sickness break, And anger burn, dejection chill, And joy distract, and sorrow kill, Till, arm'd by care, and taught to mow, Time draws the long destructive bow.'

Parnell.

We shall now see how Sir George spent the time from the moment he left the ball-room till the bell rang to summon all to a very late breakfast. When he went to his room he leisurely took the stolen letter out of his pocket, stirred the fire, and selecting the most comfortable arm-chair that lay in his way, composed his weary limbs, and read as follows:

'She, ganadhá Cártaic.'

'My dearest Kate,—I send this letter through Johnny Lindsay, as I don't quite like making allusions to Fitz-James in communications, which naturally, are read by other members of the family.'

'I have gone through a good deal of uneasiness since last I wrote to you. O'Brien exerted himself strenuously in endeavoring to secure the guilty and horrible perpetrators of the Wilcox tragedy. One night lately a little girl, to whom Fitz-James had shown kindness, came in at night, and warned him that a plot was being made against his life. The Irish are a cunning race; that child's gratitude evinced itself very strongly. She knew she was running great risk, as, if her proceedings were discovered she would meet with terrible chastisement. She dared all obstacles; and when offered a reward by Fitz-James, indignantly refused. Our friend, however, resolved that fear should never impede him in his progress, towards any laudable end. He communicated to me, however, the event I have just recorded, and I did my part by him. I never let him stir outside the door without me. And another curious trait of these people is, that they will rarely attempt one man's life (notwithstanding that their hearts may be boiling with revengeful feelings) if they run a risk thereby of shooting or wounding what they term an innocent man. I therefore acted as a shield.'

'One of the great reasons for apprehension about Fitz-James is this:—Father Murphy—one of the priests near here—is sparing of his disapprobation of the part taken by Fitz-James. He used often to say of Wilcox, from the altar, that he was a bad man; and the mischief such remarks cause is fearful. These expressions have fomented a very unpleasant feeling against Fitz-James in his Rathcorn parish. The priest of Kilmoye is, however, a great friend of Fitz-James; and one of the best men the world ever produced. I have not words to describe my admiration of his goodness, his Christian forbearance, and benevolence. He is a great protector to Fitz-James.'

'But now my darling sister must not fret; the worst is, I feel, quite over. Kate dearest, I admire and appreciate your devoted love more than I can express. How I wish I could see a prospect of your being married! I see no chance at present of his fortune being improved; but changes take place every day. Is there any hope of altering my father's and mother's views on the subject of matrimony?'

'Has the bart. in question left home yet?—What you tell me of him—only confirms the bad opinion I have always entertained of him; not that he and I ever had much personal intercourse. I met him a few times in London; but I became very intimate with some of his relations; and I know he was neither loved nor respected by them. It he torments you any more, show him very decidedly that you are not anxious for his attentions; and if he has a spark of gentlemanly feeling left (which, however, I doubt), he will return. Love to all.—Your very affectionate brother,

'CHARLES ASHWOOD.'

'Humph!' said Sir George; 'I am the bart. in question. Listeners never hear good of themselves; and I suppose I may consider myself one, in this instance. Here is a nice business. I'll do these people some harm yet; I'll not let the man to be insulted with impunity,—to be scorned in the way I was. I'll be revenged; I will show I am not to be put aside for a begging drawing Irishman. And so papa and mamma don't approve. Wheugh! It might not be a bad joke to set papa at my young lady. I'll see the stern parent, and insinuate, just delicately how the land lies. Perhaps I might stop young Merton, too, on his road to matrimony. The family are rather inclined for that affair. I'll make a little mischief between him and Miss Fauny. But now for the letter. It must be left in the hiding-place,—the place deemed, I daresay, secure enough from its very openness. No one would dream of secrets hidden under a flower-pot.'