



BY J. H. BROWN.



He sincerely wished McArthur would not button-hole him at this particular moment. He was even now late. He had wrestled into his top-coat and hurled himself through the street-door, when who should fasten on him but McArthur—and with the usual tale of poignant distress. McArthur was so deucedly confidential and so pathetically philanthropical, and this time it was such a peculiarly sad case. The young widow of a plasterer, with five children, whose husband had fallen from a scaffold. Though Tom explained and hinted, and edged away and moved off, still McArthur followed him up and held him. It was

no use, he must hear it all. Yet not quite all, for he at last shot away, leaving the good fellow at the climax of his tale, and both wounded and surprised by his hearer's callous haste. How could a man think of the Opera with the suffering poor all round him, and one especially piteous case as it were at his very door!

To make the matter worse there was not a solitary cab in sight. Nothing was left therefore but to walk, and make what haste he could. He feared he was very late, but he would not take time to look at his watch. The snow beneath his feet was as dry as powder, and each step was as uncertain as if made in sand. The lights in the shop windows burned with a frosty glitter. Those at the street corners took on a wintry isolation. Though he mechanically drew up his coat collar and pulled his cap more closely over his ears, he did not heed the cold. This was the second time he had been late in keeping an appointment with Olive, and he feared she might not like it.

As he turned into the Woodruffs' street he had the good fortune to meet a leisurely-jogging cab-sleigh, which he at once hailed, directing the man to drive after him to the house. A bright light in the parlour window and some scattered ones in the upper chambers seemed suggestive of preparation, and he dashed up the steps with an eager apology on his lips, expecting Olive to meet him at the door.

It was not Olive who met him, yet a chance observer, not in love, might have decided that this lady must be equally charming. She stood smiling under the lamp, in a dress of pink-white tulle, a bunch of white roses at her breast, and a welcoming glow in her dark eyes.

"O Mrs. Woodruff," Tom exclaimed, "I am so sorry. Of course I have kept you waiting. But it was not my fault—at least not altogether mine. I was detained. Is Olive—is Miss Kingston here?"

"No, Mr. Weatherley," Mrs. Woodruff replied, gracefully declining into a chair, "we have cause to be sorry too. Poor Olive is not at all well. She was here a few minutes ago complaining of a violent headache. She has gone to her room. She feared she might not be able to accompany us this evening, and even said something about our going without her. But we couldn't do that of course. She may be better in a short time."

"How unfortunate!" said Tom, seating himself also and staring at the floor. He was disappointed. "It is already late," he added. "Must we give it up?"

"O dear no!" Mrs. Woodruff ejaculated with re-assuring fervor. "Olive no doubt will come down immediately. We both counted so on seeing Carlotta. She would be grievously disappointed. We must wait a little. That is—of course—you will want to wait."

"She wished us to go without her?" Tom enquired.

"Yes—that is she suggested it, but of course you know—"

"I think it a pity you should be deprived of this pleasure since you consider it such. As Miss Kingston is indisposed, and as you probably cannot do her any good, her suggestion seems to me a reasonable one."

"O do you think so—poor Olive! She will be so disappointed."

"Then perhaps she may be sufficiently recovered to go," urged Tom.

"I must really see. I shall not be a moment, Mr. Weatherley." Mrs. Woodruff hereupon disappeared in search of the defaulting Olive, and Tom proceeded to walk about abstractedly with a somewhat impatient expression on his good-natured face.

It was little more than a moment till Mrs. Woodruff returned. To her surprise she had been unable to find Miss Kingston. Olive was not in her room. Mrs. Woodruff could not imagine where she was. She might have slipped out to meet her father, but this seemed improbable.

"Then we may as well start at once," said Tom, with a movement toward the door. He was perplexed and a trifle angry. Why had Olive done this? Who would have thought she could be so unreasonable.

Mrs. Woodruff wished to wait, to have further search made for Miss Kingston, but Tom deprecated this as a useless waste of time. They were now twenty minutes late. Within five minutes he and the young widow were tripping down the steps together, and he was helping her into the sleigh. Involuntarily he looked around for Olive, but she was nowhere to be seen. Was not that her window where the light glimmered?—but of course he would not ask Mrs. Woodruff.

Miss Olive Kingston and Mrs. Sylvia Woodruff were first cousins. Tom Weatherley was a friend of the family. Before Olive Kingston had paid this visit to the Woodruffs, he had been a more or less frequent caller at the house, and silly people had even joined his name in an interesting connection with that of the young widow. He would not deny, now that he was seriously in love with Olive, that he had once rather admired her charming cousin. Still he had never been sure about her. About Miss Kingston he was sure. Mrs. Woodruff was prettier than Olive. There was no denying that. Indeed he thought she had a little of that dangerous beauty which has wrought so much harm wherever it has appeared in his story—that fatal and mysterious charm which was possessed by Helen, by Cleopatra, by Mary Stuart, and, passing from history to modern story, by Eustasia Vye. He admitted that this had fascinated him for a time. And

then she was undoubtedly clever, her cleverness being not the less attractive that he suspected it to be dashed with a daring sort of unconventionality.

When Olive Kingston appeared on the scene, however, everything was at once changed. Tom's visits to the Woodruffs' now became if anything more frequent, but they had another object. The beautiful Sylvia had been his Rosalind; Olive Kingston was his Juliet. Though he said this, he could not but perceive that Olive was as little as possible a Juliet. She was perhaps a trifle less the queen of love, and a trifle more the goddess of wisdom. Yet he was aware that she could love too. Beneath that snow there was fire. I may add that his conscience was perfectly easy about the young widow. There had been no love passages between them. Of course he could not know what she had thought about the matter, but they certainly had never been more than the very best of friends. When her husband died, it should be explained, Mrs. Woodruff had rented the brick cottage among the trees, and come to live at the house of her father-in-law. The old people had suggested this course to her, partly in consideration for her loneliness, and partly because she had been so dear to the son whose memory they still fondly cherished.

The first act of the play was approaching its termination when our friends entered their box. Tom had secured this box for the evening with hopes of a fuller enjoyment than he now expected to reap. As they took their seats a burst of song came from the diva, which rose upon the air and held the audience in a charmed silence. An instant later there was a rapture, a passion of applause. The too tense feelings of the hearers found expression, and for a moment the very walls vibrated.

In the lull that succeeded—a lull fraught with a hushed stir, a murmur of voices, a flourish of handkerchiefs above perspiring brows and a series of relieved coughs, Mrs. Woodruff and Tom took in the scene before them. It was a brilliant night. All the boxes were filled and the pit was crowded. From various quarters lognettes were levelled at them and they had soon brought their own into requisition. Simply as a spectacle, apart from their interest in the celebrated singer, the occasion had something delightful and uncommon.

The audience was a satisfied, a happy audience. Ladies and gentlemen exchanged smiles and whispers; and the former fluttered their fans and settled into their chairs with that relaxed dignity which comes of a self-consciousness luxuriously at ease. In the sensuous spell, the effluence of all this warmth and brilliance, Tom almost forgot his disappointment. He scanned the boxes and scrutinized the pit, and, as his gaze came back to his companion, he told himself with pardonable satisfaction that he was enjoying, in a sort of public privacy, the society of the loveliest woman in the room. Then he remembered Olive. But for the moment she was in the remote distance, far from all this light and colour. She was associated with the wintry streets without, with the starlight and the snow.

The drop-scene, with its romantic German style, its inscription to Thalia and its cherubs re-ascended, and the choral drama invoked their attention. A bewitching maiden appeared, looking as if she had stepped from a landscape by Watteau, and, with coquettish steps and gestures, flung a series of trills at a picturesque shepherd, who emerged from behind a tree, and who repaid the trills in a voice of ascending passion that must have rejoiced the maiden's heart. They would certainly have arrived at an understanding, had not a gang of swarthy and ruthless banditti rushed upon