The Two Destinies

By

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The Prelude.

THE GUEST WRITES AND TELLS THE STORY OF THE DINNER PARTY.

MANY years have passed since my wife and I left the United States to pay our first visit to England.

We were provided with letters of introduction, as a matter of course. Among them there was a letter which had been written for us by my wife's brother. It presented us to an English gentleman who held a high rank on the list of his old and valued friends.

"You will become acquainted with Mr. George Germaine," my brother-in-law said, when we took leave of him, "at a very interesting period of his life. My last news of him tells me that he is just married. I know nothing of the lady, or of the circumstances under which my friend first met with her. But of this I am certain: married or single, George Germaine will give you and your wife a hearty welcome to England, for my sake."

The day after our arrival in London, we left our letter of introduction at the house of Mr. Germaine.

The next morning we went to see a favorite object of American interest, in the metropolis of England--the Tower of London. The citizens of the United States find this relic of the good old times of great use in raising their national estimate of the value of republican institutions. On getting back to the hotel, the cards of Mr. and Mrs. Germaine told us that they had already returned our visit. The same evening we received an invitation to dine with the newly married couple. It was inclosed in a little note from Mrs. Germaine to my wife, warning us that we were not to expect to meet a large party. "It is the first dinner we give, on our return from our wedding tour" (the lady wrote); "and you will only be introduced to a few of my husband's old friends."

In America, and (as I hear) on the continent of Europe also, when your host invites you to dine at a given hour, you pay him the compliment of arriving punctually at his house. In England alone, the incomprehensible and discourteous custom prevails of keeping the host and the dinner waiting for half an hour or more--without any assignable reason and without any better excuse than the purely formal apology that is implied in the words, "Sorry to be late."

Arriving at the appointed time at the house of Mr. and Mrs. Germaine, we had every reason to congratulate ourselves on the ignorant punctuality which had brought us into the drawing-room half an hour in advance of the other guests.

In the first place, there was so much heartiness, and so little ceremony, in the welcome accorded to us, that we almost fancied ourselves back in our own country. In the second place, both husband and wife interested us the moment we set eyes on them. The lady, especially, although she was not, strictly speaking, a beautiful woman, quite fascinated us. There was an artless charm in her face and manner, a simple grace in all her movements, a low, delicious melody in her voice, which we Americans felt to be simply irresistible. And then, it was so plain (and so pleasant) to see that here at least was a happy marriage! Here were two people who had all their dearest hopes, wishes, and sympathies in common--who looked, if I may risk the expression, born to be man and wife. By the time when the fashionable delay of the half hour had expired, we were talking together as familiarly and as confidentially as if we had been all four of us old friends.

Eight o'clock struck, and the first of the English guests appeared.

Having forgotten this gentleman's name, I must beg leave to distinguish him by means of a letter of the alphabet. Let me call him Mr. A. When he entered the room alone, our host and hostess both started, and both looked surprised. Apparently they expected him to be accompanied by some other person. Mr. Germaine put a curious question to his friend.

"Where is your wife?" he asked.

Mr. A answered for the absent lady by a neat little apology, expressed in these words:

"She has got a bad cold. She is very sorry. She begs me to make her excuses."

He had just time to deliver his message, before another unaccompanied gentleman appeared. Reverting to the letters of the alphabet, let me call him Mr. B. Once more, I noticed that our host and hostess started when they saw him enter the room alone. And, rather to my surprise, I heard Mr. Germaine put his curious question again to the new guest:

"Where is your wife?"

The answer--with slight variations--was Mr. A's neat little apology, repeated by Mr. B.

"I am very sorry. Mrs. B has got a bad headache. She is subject to bad headaches. She begs me to make her excuses."

Mr. and Mrs. Germaine glanced at one another. The husband's face plainly expressed the suspicion which this second apology had roused in his mind. The wife was steady and calm. An interval passed--a silent interval. Mr. A and Mr. B retired together guiltily into a corner. My wife and I looked at the pictures.

Mrs. Germaine was the first to relieve us from our own intolerable silence. Two more guests, it appeared, were still wanting to complete the party. "Shall we have dinner at once, George?" she said to her husband. "Or shall we wait for Mr. and Mrs. C?"

"We will wait five minutes," he answered, shortly--with his eye on Mr. A and Mr. B, guiltily secluded in their corner.

The drawing-room door opened. We all knew that a third married lady was expected; we all looked toward the door in unutterable anticipation. Our unexpressed hopes rested silently on the possible appearance of Mrs. C. Would that admirable, but unknown, woman, at once charm and relieve us by her presence? I shudder as I write it. Mr. C walked into the room--and walked in, alone.

Mr. Germaine suddenly varied his formal inquiry in receiving the new guest.

"Is your wife ill?" he asked.

Mr. C was an elderly man; Mr. C had lived (judging by appearances) in the days when the old-fashioned laws of politeness were still in force. He discovered his two married brethren in their corner, unaccompanied by their wives; and he delivered his apology for his wife with the air of a man who felt unaffectedly ashamed of it:

"Mrs. C is so sorry. She has got such a bad cold. She does so regret not being able to accompany me."

At this third apology, Mr. Germaine's indignation forced its way outward into expression in words.

"Two bad colds and one bad headache," he said, with ironical politeness. "I don't know how your wives agree, gentlemen, when they are well. But when they are ill, their unanimity is wonderful!"

The dinner was announced as that sharp saying passed his lips.

I had the honor of taking Mrs. Germaine to the dining-room. Her sense of the implied insult offered to her by the wives of her husband's friends only showed itself in a trembling, a very slight trembling, of the hand that rested on my arm. My interest in her increased tenfold. Only a woman who had been accustomed to suffer, who had been broken and disciplined to self-restraint, could have endured the moral martyrdom inflicted on her as this woman endured it, from the beginning of the evening to the end.

Am I using the language of exaggeration when I write of my hostess in these terms? Look at the circumstances as they struck two strangers like my wife and myself.

Here was the first dinner party which Mr. and Mrs. Germaine had given since their marriage. Three of Mr. Germaine's friends, all married men, had been invited with their wives to meet Mr. Germaine's wife, and had (evidently) accepted the invitation without reserve. What discoveries had taken place between the giving of the invitation and the giving of the dinner it was impossible to say. The one thing plainly discernible was, that in the interval the three wives had agreed in the resolution to leave their husbands to represent them at Mrs. Germaine's table; and, more amazing still, the husbands had so far approved of the grossly discourteous conduct of the wives as to consent to make the most insultingly trivial excuses for their absence. Could any crueler slur than this have been cast on a woman at the outs et of her married life, before the face of her husband, and in the presence of two strangers from another country? Is "martyrdom" too big a word to use in describing what a sensitive person must have suffered, subjected to such treatment as this? Well, I think not.

We took our places at the dinner-table. Don't ask me to describe that most miserable of mortal meetings, that weariest and dreariest of human festivals! It is quite bad enough to remember that evening--it is indeed.

My wife and I did our best to keep the conversation moving as easily and as harmlessly as might be. I may say that we really worked hard. Nevertheless, our success was not very encouraging. Try as we might to overlook them, there were the three empty places of the three absent women, speaking in

their own dismal language for themselves. Try as we might to resist it, we all felt the one sad conclusion which those empty places persisted in forcing on our minds. It was surely too plain that some terrible report, affecting the character of the unhappy woman at the head of the table, had unexpectedly come to light, and had at one blow destroyed her position in the estimation of her husband's friends. In the face of the excuses in the drawing-room, in the face of the empty places at the dinner-table, what could the friendliest guests do, to any good purpose, to help the husband and wife in their sore and sudden need? They could say good-night at the earliest possible opportunity, and mercifully leave the married pair to themselves.

Let it at least be recorded to the credit of the three gentlemen, designated in these pages as A, B, and C, that they were sufficiently ashamed of themselves and their wives to be the first members of the dinner party who left the house. In a few minutes more we rose to follow their example. Mrs. Germaine earnestly requested that we would delay our departure.

"Wait a few minutes," she whispered, with a glance at her husband. "I have something to say to you before you go."

She left us, and, taking Mr. Germaine by the arm, led him away to the opposite side of the room. The two held a little colloquy together in low voices. The husband closed the consultation by lifting the wife's hand to his lips.

"Do as you please, my love," he said to her. "I leave it entirely to you."

He sat down sorrowfully, lost in his thoughts. Mrs. Germaine unlocked a cabinet at the further end of the room, and returned to us, alone, carrying a small portfolio in her hand.

"No words of mine can tell you how gratefully I feel your kindness," she said, with perfect simplicity, and with perfect dignity at the same time. "Under very trying circumstances, you have treated me with the tenderness and the sympathy which you might have shown to an old friend. The one return I can make for all that I owe to you is to admit you to my fullest confidence, and to leave you to judge for yourselves whether I deserve the treatment which I have received to-night."

Her eyes filled with tears. She paused to control herself. We both begged her to say no more. Her husband, joining us, added his entreaties to ours. She thanked us, but she persisted. Like most sensitively organized persons, she could be resolute when she believed that the occasion called for it.

"I have a few words more to say," she resumed, addressing my wife. "You are the only married woman who has come to our little dinner party. The marked absence of the other wives explains itself. It is not for me to say whether they are right or wrong in refusing to sit at our table. My dear husband--who knows my whole life as well as I know it myself--expressed the wish that we should invite these ladies. He wrongly supposed that his estimate of me would be the estimate accepted by his friends; and neither he nor I anticipated that the misfortunes of my past life would be revealed by some person acquainted with them, whose treachery we have yet to discover. The least I can do, by way of acknowledging your kindness, is to place you in the same position toward me which the other ladies now occupy. The circumstances under which I have become the wife of Mr. Germaine are, in some respects, very remarkable. They are related, without suppression or reserve, in a little narrative which my husband wrote, at the time of our marriage, for the satisfaction of one of his absent relatives, whose good opinion he was unwilling to forfeit. The manuscript is in this portfolio. After what has happened, I ask you both to read it, as a personal favor to me. It is for you to decide, when you know all, whether I am a fit person for an honest woman to associate with or not."

She held out her hand, with a sweet, sad smile, and bid us good night. My wife, in her impulsive way, forgot the formalities proper to the occasion, and kissed her at parting. At that one little act of sisterly sympathy, the fortitude which the poor creature had preserved all through the evening gave way in an instant. She burst into tears.

I felt as fond of her and as sorry for her as my wife. But (unfortunately) I could not take my wife's privilege of kissing her. On our way downstairs, I found the opportunity of saying a cheering word to her husband as he accompanied us to the door.

"Before I open this," I remarked, pointing to the portfolio under my arm, "my mind is made up, sir, about one thing. If I wasn't married already, I tell you this--I should envy you your wife."

He pointed to the portfolio in his turn.

"Read what I have written there," he said; "and you will understand what those false friends of mine have made me suffer to-night."

The next morning my wife and I opened the portfolio, and read the strange story of George Germaine's marriage.

The Narrative.

GEORGE GERMAINE WRITES, AND TELLS HIS OWN LOVE STORY.

CHAPTER I. GREENWATER BROAD

LOOK back, my memory, through the dim labyrinth of the past, through the mingling joys and sorrows of twenty years. Rise again, my boyhood's days, by the winding green shores of the little lake. Come to me once more, my child-love, in the innocent beauty of your first ten years of life. Let us live again, my angel, as we lived in our first paradise, before sin and sorrow lifted their flaming swords and drove us out into the world.

The month was March. The last wild fowl of the season were floating on the waters of the lake which, in our Suffolk tongue, we called Greenwater Broad.

Wind where it might, the grassy banks and the overhanging trees tinged the lake with the soft green reflections from which it took its name. In a creek at the south end, the boats were kept--my own pretty sailing boat having a tiny natural harbor all to itself. In a creek at the north end stood the great trap (called a "decoy"), used for snaring the wild fowl which flocked every winter, by thousands and thousands, to Greenwater Broad.

My little Mary and I went out together, hand in hand, to see the last birds of the season lured into the decoy.

The outer part of the strange bird-trap rose from the waters of the lake in a series of circular arches, formed of elastic branches bent to the needed shape, and covered with folds of fine network, making the roof. Little by little diminishing in size, the arches and their net-work followed the secret windings of the creek inland to its end. Built back round the arches, on their landward side, ran a wooden paling, high enough to hide a man kneeling behind it from the view of the birds on the lake. At certain intervals a hole was broken in the paling just large enough to allow of the passage

through it of a dog of the terrier or the spaniel breed. And there began and ended the simple yet sufficient mechanism of the decoy.

In those days I was thirteen, and Mary was ten years old. Walking on our way to the lake we had Mary's father with us for guide and companion. The good man served as bailiff on my father's estate. He was, besides, a skilled master in the art of decoying ducks. The dog that helped him (we used no tame ducks as decoys in Suffolk) was a little black terrier; a skilled master also, in his way; a creature who possessed, in equal proportions, the enviable advantages of perfect good-humor and perfect common sense.

The dog followed the bailiff, and we followed the dog.

Arrived at the paling which surrounded the decoy, the dog sat down to wait until he was wanted. The bailiff and the children crouched behind the paling, and peeped through the outermost dog-hole, which commanded a full view of the lake. It was a day without wind; not a ripple stirred the surface of the water; the soft gray clouds filled all the sky, and hid the sun from view.

We peeped through the hole in the paling. There were the wild ducks--collected within easy reach of the decoy--placidly dressing their feathers on the placid surface of the lake.

The bailiff looked at the dog, and made a sign. The dog looked at the bailiff; and, stepping forward quietly, passed through the hole, so as to show himself on the narrow strip of ground shelving down from the outer side of the paling to the lake.

First one duck, then another, then half a dozen together, discovered the dog.

A new object showing itself on the solitary scene instantly became an object of all-devouring curiosity to the ducks. The outermost of them began to swim slowly toward the strange four-footed creature, planted motionless on the bank. By twos and threes, the main body of the waterfowl gradually followed the advanced guard. Swimming nearer and nearer to the dog, the wary ducks suddenly came to a halt, and, poised on the water, viewed from a safe distance the phenomenon on the land.

The bailiff, kneeling behind the paling, whispered, "Trim!"

Hearing his name, the terrier turned about, and retiring through the hole, became lost to the view of the ducks. Motionless on the water, the wild fowl

wondered and waited. In a minute more, the dog had trotted round, and had shown himself through the next hole in the paling, pierced further inward where the lake ran up into the outermost of the windings of the creek.

The second appearance of the terrier instantly produced a second fit of curiosity among the ducks. With one accord, they swam forward again, to get another and a nearer view of the dog; then, judging their safe distance once more, they stopped for the second time, under the outermost arch of the decoy. Again the dog vanished, and the puzzled ducks waited. An interval passed, and the third appearance of Trim took place, through a third hole in the paling, pierced further inland up the creek. For the third time irresistible curiosity urged the ducks to advance further and further inward, under the fatal arches of the decoy. A fourth and a fifth time the game went on, until the dog had lured the water-fowl from point to point into the inner recesses of the decoy. There a last appearance of Trim took place. A last advance, a last cautious pause, was made by the ducks. The bailiff touched the strings, the weighed net-work fell vertically into the water, and closed the decoy. There, by dozens and dozens, were the ducks, caught by means of their own curiosity--with nothing but a little dog for a bait! In a few hours afterward they were all dead ducks on their way to the London market.

As the last act in the curious comedy of the decoy came to its end, little Mary laid her hand on my shoulder, and, raising herself on tiptoe, whispered in my ear:

"George, come home with me. I have got something to show you that is better worth seeing than the ducks."

"What is it?"

"It's a surprise. I won't tell you."

"Will you give me a kiss?"

The charming little creature put her slim sun-burned arms round my neck, and answered:

"As many kisses as you like, George."

It was innocently said, on her side. It was innocently done, on mine. The good easy bailiff, looking aside at the moment from his ducks, discovered us pursuing our boy-and-girl courtship in each other's arms. He shook his big

forefinger at us, with something of a sad and doubting smile.

"Ah, Master George, Master George!" he said. "When your father comes home, do you think he will approve of his son and heir kissing his bailiff's daughter?"

"When my father comes home," I answered, with great dignity, "I shall tell him the truth. I shall say I am going to marry your daughter."

The bailiff burst out laughing, and looked back again at his ducks.

"Well, well!" we heard him say to himself. "They're only children. There's no call, poor things, to part them yet awhile."

Mary and I had a great dislike to be called children. Properly understood, one of us was a lady aged ten, and the other was a gentleman aged thirteen. We left the good bailiff indignantly, and went away together, hand in hand, to the cottage.