

Chapter 9

It was near five weeks that I kept my bed and though the violence of my fever abated in three weeks, yet it several times returned; and the physicians said two or three times, they could do no more for me, but that they must leave nature and the distemper to fight it out, only strengthening the first with cordials to maintain the struggle. After the end of five weeks I grew better, but was so weak, so altered, so melancholy, and recovered so slowly, that they physicians apprehended I should go into a consumption; and which vexed me most, they gave it as their opinion that my mind was oppressed, that something troubled me, and, in short, that I was in love. Upon this, the whole house was set upon me to examine me, and to press me to tell whether I was in love or not, and with whom; but as I well might, I denied my being in love at all.

They had on this occasion a squabble one day about me at table, that had like to have put the whole family in an uproar, and for some time did so. They happened to be all at table but the father; as for me, I was ill, and in my chamber. At the beginning of the talk, which was just as they had finished their dinner, the old gentlewoman, who had sent me somewhat to eat, called her maid to go up and ask me if I would have any more; but the maid brought down word I had not eaten half what she had sent me already.

'Alas, says the old lady, 'that poor girl! I am afraid she will never be well.'

'Well!' says the elder brother, 'how should Mrs. Betty be well? They say she is in love.'

'I believe nothing of it,' says the old gentlewoman.

'I don't know,' says the eldest sister, 'what to say to it; they have made such a rout about her being so handsome, and so charming, and I know not what, and that in her hearing too, that has turned the creature's head, I believe, and who knows what possessions may follow such doings? For my part, I don't know what to make of it.'

'Why, sister, you must acknowledge she is very handsome,' says the elder brother.'

'Ay, and a great deal handsomer than you, sister,' says Robin, 'and that's your mortification.'

'Well, well, that is not the question,' says his sister; 'that girl is well enough, and she knows it well enough; she need not be told of it to make her vain.'

'We are not talking of her being vain,' says the elder brother, 'but of her being in love; it may be she is in love with herself; it seems my sisters think so.'

'I would she was in love with me,' says Robin; 'I'd quickly put her out of her pain.'

'What d'ye mean by that, son,' says the old lady; 'how can you talk so?'

'Why, madam,' says Robin, again, very honestly, 'do you think I'd let the poor girl die for love, and of one that is near at hand to be had, too?'

'Fie, brother!', says the second sister, 'how can you talk so? Would you take a creature that has not a groat in the world?'

'Prithee, child,' says Robin, 'beauty's a portion, and good-

humour with it is a double portion; I wish thou hadst half her stock of both for thy portion.' So there was her mouth stopped.

'I find,' says the eldest sister, 'if Betty is not in love, my brother is. I wonder he has not broke his mind to Betty; I warrant she won't say No.'

'They that yield when they're asked,' says Robin, 'are one step before them that were never asked to yield, sister, and two steps before them that yield before they are asked; and that's an answer to you, sister.'

This fired the sister, and she flew into a passion, and said, things were some

to that pass that it was time the wench, meaning me, was out of the family; and but that she was not fit to be turned out, she hoped her father and mother would consider of it as soon as she could be removed.

Robin replied, that was business for the master and mistress of the family, who where not to be taught by one that had so little judgment as his eldest sister.

It ran up a great deal farther; the sister scolded, Robin rallied and bantered, but poor Betty lost ground by it extremely in the family. I heard of it, and I cried heartily, and the old lady came up to me, somebody having told her that I was so much concerned about it. I complained to her, that it was very hard the doctors should pass such a censure upon me, for which they had no ground; and that it was still harder, considering the circumstances I was under in the family; that I hoped I had done nothing to lessen her esteem for me, or given any occasion for the bickering between her sons and daughters, and I had more need to think of a coffin than of being in love, and begged she would not let me suffer in her opinion for anybody's mistakes but my own.

She was sensible of the justice of what I said, but told me, since there had been such a clamour among them, and that her younger son talked after such a rattling way as he did, she desired I would be so faithful to her as to answer her but one question sincerely. I told her I would, with all my heart,

and with the utmost plainness and sincerity. Why, then, the question was, whether there way anything between her son Robert and me. I told her with all the protestations of sincerity that I was able to make, and as I might well, do, that there was not, nor every had been; I told her that Mr. Robert had rattled and jested, as she knew it was his way, and that I took it always, as I supposed he meant it, to be a wild airy way of discourse that had no signification in it; and again assured her, that there was not the least tittle of what she understood by it between us; and that those who had suggested it had done me a great deal of wrong, and Mr. Robert no service at all.

The old lady was fully satisfied, and kissed me, spoke cheerfully to me, and bid me take care of my health and want for nothing, and so took her leave. But when she came down she found the brother and all his sisters together by the ears; they were angry, even to passion, at his upbraiding them with their being homely, and having never had any sweethearts, never having been asked the question, and their being so forward as almost to ask first. He rallied them upon the subject of Mrs. Betty; how pretty, how good-humoured, how she sung better than they did, and danced better, and how much handsomer she was; and in doing this he omitted no ill-natured thing that could vex them, and indeed, pushed too hard upon them. The old lady came down in the height of it, and to put a stop it to, told them all the discourse she had had with me, and how I answered, that there was nothing between Mr. Robert and I.

'She's wrong there,' says Robin, 'for if there was not a great deal between us, we should be closer together than we are. I told her I love her hugely,' says he, 'but I could never make the jade believe I was in earnest.' 'I do not know how you should,' says his mother; 'nobody in their senses could believe you were in earnest, to talk so to a poor girl, whose circumstances you know so well.'

'But prithee, son,' adds she, 'since you tell me that you could not make her believe you were in earnest, what must we believe about it? For you ramble so in your discourse, that nobody knows whether you are in earnest or in jest; but as I find the girl, by your own confession, has answered truly, I wish you would do so too, and tell me seriously, so that I may depend upon it. Is there anything in it or no? Are you in earnest or no? Are you distracted, indeed, or are you not? 'Tis a weighty question, and I wish you would make us easy about it.'

'By my faith, madam,' says Robin, 'tis in vain to mince the matter or tell any more lies about it; I am in earnest, as much as a man is that's going to be hanged. If Mrs. Betty would say she loved me, and that she would marry me, I'd have her tomorrow morning fasting, and say, 'To have and to hold,' instead of eating my breakfast.'

'Well,' says the mother, 'then there's one son lost'; and she said it in a very mournful tone, as one greatly concerned at it.

'I hope not, madam,' says Robin; 'no man is lost when a good wife has found him.'

'Why, but, child,' says the old lady, 'she is a beggar.'

'Why, then, madam, she has the more need of charity,' says Robin; 'I'll take her off the hands of the parish, and she and I'll beg together.'

'It's bad jesting with such things,' says the mother.

'I don't jest, madam,' says Robin. 'We'll come and beg your pardon, madam; and your blessing, madam, and my father's.'

'This is all out of the way, son,' says the mother. 'If you are in earnest you are undone.'

'I am afraid not,' says he, 'for I am really afraid she won't have me; after all my sister's huffing and blustering, I believe I shall never be able to persuade her to it.'

'That's a fine tale, indeed; she is not so far out of her senses neither. Mrs. Betty is no fool,' says the younger sister. 'Do you think she has learnt to say No, any more than other people?'

'No, Mrs. Mirth-wit,' says Robin, 'Mrs. Betty's no fool; but Mrs. Betty may be engaged some other way, and what then?'

'Nay,' says the eldest sister, 'we can say nothing to that. Who must it be to, then? She is never out of the doors; it must be between you.'

'I have nothing to say to that,' says Robin. 'I have been examined enough; there's my brother. If it must be between us, go to work with him.'

This stung the elder brother to the quick, and he concluded

that Robin had discovered something. However, he kept himself from appearing disturbed. 'Prithee,' says he, 'don't go to shame your stories off upon me; I tell you, I deal in no such ware; I have nothing to say to Mrs. Betty, nor to any of the Mrs. Bettys in the parish'; and with that he rose up and brushed off.

'No,' says the eldest sister, 'I dare answer for my brother; he knows the world better.'

Thus the discourse ended, but it left the elder brother quite confounded. He concluded his brother had made a full discovery, and he began to doubt

whether I had been concerned in it or not; but with all his management he could not bring it about to get at me. At last he was so perplexed that he was quite desperate, and resolved he would come into my chamber and see me, whatever came of it. In order to do this, he contrived it so, that one day after dinner, watching his eldest sister till he could see her go upstairs, he runs after her. 'Hark ye, sister,' says he, 'where is this sick woman? May not a body see her?' 'Yes,' says the sister, 'I believe you may; but let me go first a little, and I'll tell you.' So she ran up to the door and gave me notice, and presently called to him again. 'Brother,' says she, 'you may come if you please.' So in he came, just in the same kind of rant. 'Well,' says he at the door as he came in, 'where is this sick body that's in love? How do ye do, Mrs. Betty?' I would have got up out of my chair, but was so weak I could not for a good while; and he saw it, and his sister to, and she said, 'Come, do not strive to stand up; my brother desires no ceremony, especially now you are so weak.' 'No, no, Mrs. Betty, pray sit still,' says he, and so sits himself down in a chair over against me, and appeared as if he was mighty merry.