

Chapter 11

The younger sister then put in. 'We must be fools indeed,' says she, 'in my brother's opinion, that he should think we can believe he has seriously asked Mrs. Betty to marry him, and that she has refused him.'

'Answer, and answer not, say Solomon,' replied her brother. 'When your brother had said to your mother that he had asked her no less than five times, and that it was so, that she positively denied him, methinks a younger sister need not question the truth of it when her mother did not.'

'My mother, you see, did not understand it,' says the second sister. 'There's some difference,' says Robin, 'between desiring me to explain it, and telling me she did not believe it.'

'Well, but, son,' says the old lady, 'if you are disposed to let us into the mystery of it, what were these hard conditions?' 'Yes, madam,' says Robin, 'I had done it before now, if the teasers here had not worried my by way of interruption. The conditions are, that I bring my father and you to consent to it, and without that she protests she will never see me more upon that head; and to these conditions, as I said, I suppose I shall never be able to grant. I hope my warm sisters will be answered now, and blush a little; if not, I have no more to say till I hear further.'

This answer was surprising to them all, though less to the mother, because of what I had said to her. As to the daughters, they stood mute a great

while; but the mother said with some passion, 'Well, I had heard this before, but I could not believe it; but if it is so, they we have all done Betty wrong, and she has behaved better than I ever expected.' 'Nay,' says the eldest sister, 'if it be so, she has acted handsomely indeed.' 'I confess,' says the mother, 'it was none of her fault, if he was fool enough to take a fancy to her; but to give such an answer to him, shows

more respect to your father and me than I can tell how to express; I shall value the girl the better for it as long as I know her.' 'But I shall not,' says Robin, 'unless you will give your consent.' 'I'll consider of that a while,' says the mother; 'I assure you, if there were not some other objections in the way, this conduct of hers would go a great way to bring me to consent.' 'I wish it would go quite through it,' says Robin; 'if you had a much thought about making me easy as you have about making me rich, you would soon consent to it.'

'Why, Robin,' says the mother again, 'are you really in earnest? Would you so fain have her as you pretend?' 'Really, madam,' says Robin, 'I think 'tis hard you should question me upon that head after all I have said. I won't say that I will have her; how can I resolve that point, when you see I cannot have her without your consent? Besides, I am not bound to marry at all. But this I will say, I am in earnest in, that I will never have anybody else if I can help it; so you may determine for me. Betty or nobody is the word, and the question which of the two shall be in your breast to decide, madam,

provided only, that my good-humoured sisters here may have no vote in it.'

All this was dreadful to me, for the mother began to yield, and Robin pressed her home on it. On the other hand, she advised with the eldest son, and he used all the arguments in the world to persuade her to consent; alleging his brother's passionate love for me, and my generous regard to the family, in refusing my own advantages upon such a nice point of honour, and a thousand such things. And as to the father, he was a man in a hurry of public affairs and getting money, seldom at home, thoughtful of the main chance, but left all those things to his wife.

You may easily believe, that when the plot was thus, as they thought, broke out, and that every one thought they knew how things were carried, it was not so difficult or so dangerous for the elder brother, whom nobody suspected of anything, to have a freer access to me than before; nay, the mother, which was just as he wished, proposed it to him to talk with Mrs. Betty. 'For it may be, son,' said she, 'you may see farther into the thing than I, and see if you think she has been so positive as Robin says she has been, or no.' This was as well as he could wish, and he, as it were, yielding to talk with me at his mother's request, she brought me to him into her own chamber, told me her son had some business with me at her request, and desired me to be very sincere with him, and then she left us together, and he went and shut the door after her.

He came back to me and took me in his arms, and kissed me very tenderly; but told me he had a long discourse to hold with me, and it was not come to that crisis, that I should make myself happy or miserable as long as I lived; that the thing was now gone so far, that if I could not comply with his desire, we would both be ruined. Then he told the whole story between Robin, as he called him, and his mother and sisters and himself, as it is above. 'And now, dear child,' says he, 'consider what it will be to marry a gentleman of a good family, in good circumstances, and with the consent of the whole house, and to enjoy all that he world can give you; and what, on the other hand, to be sunk into the dark circumstances of a woman that has lost her reputation; and that though I shall be a private friend to you while I live, yet as I shall be suspected always, so you will be afraid to see me, and I shall be afraid to own you.'

He gave me no time to reply, but went on with me thus: 'What has happened between us, child, so long as we both agree to do so, may be buried and forgotten. I shall always be your sincere friend, without any inclination to nearer intimacy, when you become my sister; and we shall have all the honest part of conversation without any reproaches between us of having done amiss. I beg of you to consider it, and to not stand in the way of your own safety and prosperity; and to satisfy you that I am sincere,' added he, 'I here offer you #500 in money, to make you some amends for the freedoms I havetaken with you, which we shall look upon as some of the folliesof our lives, which 'tis hoped we may repent of.'

He spoke this in so much more moving terms than it is possible for me to express, and with so much greater force of argument than I can repeat, that I only recommend it to those who read the story, to suppose, that as he held me above an hour and a half in that discourse, so he answered all my objections, and fortified his discourse with all the arguments that human wit and art could devise.

I cannot say, however, that anything he said made impression enough upon me so as to give me any thought of the matter, till he told me at last very plainly, that if I refused, he was sorry to add that he could never go on with me in that station as we stood before; that though he loved me as well as ever, and that I was as agreeable to him as ever, yet sense of virtue had not so far forsaken him as to suffer him to lie with a woman that his brother courted to make his wife; and if he took his leave of me, with a denial in this affair, whatever he might do for me in the point of support, grounded on his first engagement of maintaining me, yet he would not have me be surprised that he was obliged to tell me he could not allow himself to see me any more; and that, indeed, I could not expect it of him.

I received this last part with some token of surprise and disorder, and had much ado to avoid sinking down, for indeed I loved him to an extravagance not easy to imagine; but he perceived my disorder. He entreated me to consider seriously of it; assured me that it was the only way to preserve our

mutual affection; that in this station we might love as friends, with the utmost passion, and with a love of relation untainted, free from our just reproaches, and free from other people's suspicions; that he should ever acknowledge his happiness owing to me; that he would be debtor to me as long as he lived, and would be paying that debt as long as he had breath. Thus he wrought me up, in short, to a kind of hesitation in the matter; having the dangers on one side represented in lively figures, and indeed, heightened by my imagination of being turned out to the wide world a mere cast-off whore, for it was no less, and perhaps exposed as such, with little to provide for

myself, with no friend, no acquaintance in the whole world, out of that town, and there I could not pretend to stay. All this terrified me to the last degree, and he took care upon all occasions to lay it home to me in the worst colours that it could be possible to be drawn in. On the other hand, he failed not to set forth the easy, prosperous life which I was going to live.

He answered all that I could object from affection, and from former engagements, with telling me the necessity that was before us of taking other measures now; and as to his promises of marriage, the nature of things, he said, had put an end to that, by the probability of my being his brother's wife, before the time to which his promises all referred.

Thus, in a word, I may say, he reasoned me out of my reason; he conquered

all my arguments, and I began to see a danger that I was in, which I had not considered of before, and that was, of being dropped by both of them and left alone in the world to shift for myself.

This, and his persuasion, at length prevailed with me to consent, though with so much reluctance, that it was easy to see I should go to church like a bear to the stake. I had some little apprehensions about me, too, lest my new spouse, who, by the way, I had not the least affection for, should be skillful enough to challenge me on another account, upon our first coming to bed together. But whether he did it with design or not, I know not, but his elder brother took care to make him very much fuddled before he went to bed, so that I had the satisfaction of a drunken bedfellow the first night. How he did it I know not, but I concluded that he certainly contrived it, that his brother might be able to make no judgment of the difference between a maid and a married woman; nor did he ever entertain any notions of it, or disturb his thoughts about it.