DAME THE EIGHTH--THE LADY PENELOPE

By the Man of Family

In going out of Casterbridge by the low-lying road which eventually conducts to the town of Ivell, you see on the right hand an ivied manor-house, flanked by battlemented towers, and more than usually distinguished by the size of its many mullioned windows. Though still of good capacity, the building is much reduced from its original grand proportions; it has, moreover, been shorn of the fair estate which once appertained to its lord, with the exception of a few acres of park-land immediately around the mansion. This was formerly the seat of the ancient and knightly family of the Drenghards, or Drenkhards, now extinct in the male line, whose name, according to the local chronicles, was interpreted to mean Strenuus Miles, vel Potator, though certain members of the family were averse to the latter signification, and a duel was fought by one of them on that account, as is well known. With this, however, we are not now concerned.

In the early part of the reign of the first King James, there was visiting near this place of the Drenghards a lady of noble family and extraordinary beauty. She was of the purest descent; ah, there's seldom such blood nowadays as hers! She possessed no great wealth, it was said, but was sufficiently endowed. Her beauty was so perfect, and her manner so entrancing, that suitors seemed to spring out of the ground wherever she went, a sufficient cause of anxiety to the Countess her mother, her

only living parent. Of these there were three in particular, whom neither her mother's complaints of prematurity, nor the ready raillery of the maiden herself, could effectually put off. The said gallants were a certain Sir John Gale, a Sir William Hervy, and the well-known Sir George Drenghard, one of the Drenghard family before-mentioned. They had, curiously enough, all been equally honoured with the distinction of knighthood, and their schemes for seeing her were manifold, each fearing that one of the others would steal a march over himself. Not content with calling, on every imaginable excuse, at the house of the relative with whom she sojourned, they intercepted her in rides and in walks; and if any one of them chanced to surprise another in the act of paying her marked attentions, the encounter often ended in an altercation of great violence. So heated and impassioned, indeed, would they become, that the lady hardly felt herself safe in their company at such times, notwithstanding that she was a brave and buxom damsel, not easily put out, and with a daring spirit of humour in her composition, if not of coquetry.

At one of these altercations, which had place in her relative's grounds, and was unusually bitter, threatening to result in a duel, she found it necessary to assert herself. Turning haughtily upon the pair of disputants, she declared that whichever should be the first to break the peace between them, no matter what the provocation, that man should never
be admitted to her presence again; and thus would she effectually stultify the aggressor by making the promotion of a quarrel a distinct

bar to its object.

While the two knights were wearing rather a crest-fallen appearance at her reprimand, the third, never far off, came upon the scene, and she repeated her caveat to him also. Seeing, then, how great was the concern of all at her peremptory mood, the lady's manner softened, and she said with a roguish smile--

'Have patience, have patience, you foolish men! Only bide your time quietly, and, in faith, I will marry you all in turn!'

They laughed heartily at this sally, all three together, as though they were the best of friends; at which she blushed, and showed some embarrassment, not having realized that her arch jest would have sounded so strange when uttered. The meeting which resulted thus, however, had its good effect in checking the bitterness of their rivalry; and they repeated her speech to their relatives and acquaintance with a hilarious frequency and publicity that the lady little divined, or she might have blushed and felt more embarrassment still.

In the course of time the position resolved itself, and the beauteous Lady Penelope (as she was called) made up her mind; her choice being the eldest of the three knights, Sir George Drenghard, owner of the mansion aforesaid, which thereupon became her home; and her husband being a pleasant man, and his family, though not so noble, of as good repute as her own, all things seemed to show that she had reckoned wisely in

honouring him with her preference.

But what may lie behind the still and silent veil of the future none can foretell. In the course of a few months the husband of her choice died of his convivialities (as if, indeed, to bear out his name), and the Lady Penelope was left alone as mistress of his house. By this time she had apparently quite forgotten her careless declaration to her lovers collectively; but the lovers themselves had not forgotten it; and, as she would now be free to take a second one of them, Sir John Gale appeared at her door as early in her widowhood as it was proper and seemly to do so.

She gave him little encouragement; for, of the two remaining, her best beloved was Sir William, of whom, if the truth must be told, she had often thought during her short married life. But he had not yet reappeared. Her heart began to be so much with him now that she contrived to convey to him, by indirect hints through his friends, that she would not be displeased by a renewal of his former attentions. Sir William, however, misapprehended her gentle signalling, and from excellent, though mistaken motives of delicacy, delayed to intrude himself upon her for a long time. Meanwhile Sir John, now created a baronet, was unremitting, and she began to grow somewhat piqued at the backwardness of him she secretly desired to be forward.

'Never mind,' her friends said jestingly to her (knowing of her humorous remark, as everybody did, that she would marry them all three if they would have patience)--'never mind; why hesitate upon the order of them?

Take 'em as they come.'

This vexed her still more, and regretting deeply, as she had often done, that such a careless speech should ever have passed her lips, she fairly broke down under Sir John's importunity, and accepted his hand. They were married on a fine spring morning, about the very time at which the unfortunate Sir William discovered her preference for him, and was beginning to hasten home from a foreign court to declare his unaltered devotion to her. On his arrival in England he learnt the sad truth.

If Sir William suffered at her precipitancy under what she had deemed his neglect, the Lady Penelope herself suffered more. She had not long been the wife of Sir John Gale before he showed a disposition to retaliate upon her for the trouble and delay she had put him to in winning her. With increasing frequency he would tell her that, as far as he could perceive, she was an article not worth such labour as he had bestowed in obtaining it, and such snubbings as he had taken from his rivals on the same account. These and other cruel things he repeated till he made the lady weep sorely, and wellnigh broke her spirit, though she had formerly been such a mettlesome dame. By degrees it became perceptible to all her friends that her life was a very unhappy one; and the fate of the fair woman seemed yet the harder in that it was her own stately mansion, left to her sole use by her first husband, which her second had entered into and was enjoying, his being but a mean and meagre erection.

But such is the flippancy of friends that when she met them, and secretly

confided her grief to their ears, they would say cheerily, 'Lord, never mind, my dear; there's a third to come yet!'--at which maladroit remark she would show much indignation, and tell them they should know better than to trifle on so solemn a theme. Yet that the poor lady would have been only too happy to be the wife of the third, instead of Sir John whom she had taken, was painfully obvious, and much she was blamed for her foolish choice by some people. Sir William, however, had returned to foreign cities on learning the news of her marriage, and had never been heard of since.

Two or three years of suffering were passed by Lady Penelope as the despised and chidden wife of this man Sir John, amid regrets that she had so greatly mistaken him, and sighs for one whom she thought never to see again, till it chanced that her husband fell sick of some slight ailment. One day after this, when she was sitting in his room, looking from the window upon the expanse in front, she beheld, approaching the house on foot, a form she seemed to know well. Lady Penelope withdrew silently from the sickroom, and descended to the hall, whence, through the doorway, she saw entering between the two round towers, which at that time flanked the gateway, Sir William Hervy, as she had surmised, but looking thin and travel-worn. She advanced into the courtyard to meet him.

'I was passing through Casterbridge,' he said, with faltering deference, 'and I walked out to ask after your ladyship's health. I felt that I could do no less; and, of course, to pay my respects to your good

husband, my heretofore acquaintance . . . But oh, Penelope, th'st look sick and sorry!'

'I am heartsick, that's all,' said she.

They could see in each other an emotion which neither wished to express, and they stood thus a long time with tears in their eyes.

'He does not treat 'ee well, I hear,' said Sir William in a low voice. 'May God in Heaven forgive him; but it is asking a great deal!'

'Hush, hush!' said she hastily.

'Nay, but I will speak what I may honestly say,' he answered. 'I am not under your roof, and my tongue is free. Why didst not wait for me, Penelope, or send to me a more overt letter? I would have travelled night and day to come!'

'Too late, William; you must not ask it,' said she, endeavouring to quiet him as in old times. 'My husband just now is unwell. He will grow better in a day or two, maybe. You must call again and see him before you leave Casterbridge.'

As she said this their eyes met. Each was thinking of her lightsome words about taking the three men in turn; each thought that two-thirds of that promise had been fulfilled. But, as if it were unpleasant to her

that this recollection should have arisen, she spoke again quickly: 'Come again in a day or two, when my husband will be well enough to see you.'

Sir William departed without entering the house, and she returned to Sir John's chamber. He, rising from his pillow, said, 'To whom hast been talking, wife, in the courtyard? I heard voices there.'

She hesitated, and he repeated the question more impatiently.

'I do not wish to tell you now,' said she.

'But I wooll know!' said he.

Then she answered, 'Sir William Hervy.'

'By G--- I thought as much!' cried Sir John, drops of perspiration standing on his white face. 'A skulking villain! A sick man's ears are keen, my lady. I heard that they were lover-like tones, and he called 'ee by your Christian name. These be your intrigues, my lady, when I am off my legs awhile!'

'On my honour,' cried she, 'you do me a wrong. I swear I did not know of his coming!'

'Swear as you will,' said Sir John, 'I don't believe 'ee.' And with this he taunted her, and worked himself into a greater passion, which much

increased his illness. His lady sat still, brooding. There was that upon her face which had seldom been there since her marriage; and she seemed to think anew of what she had so lightly said in the days of her freedom, when her three lovers were one and all coveting her hand. 'I began at the wrong end of them,' she murmured. 'My God--that did I!'

'What?' said he.

'A trifle,' said she. 'I spoke to myself only.'

It was somewhat strange that after this day, while she went about the house with even a sadder face than usual, her churlish husband grew worse; and what was more, to the surprise of all, though to the regret of few, he died a fortnight later. Sir William had not called upon him as he had promised, having received a private communication from Lady Penelope, frankly informing him that to do so would be inadvisable, by reason of her husband's temper.

Now when Sir John was gone, and his remains carried to his family burying-place in another part of England, the lady began in due time to wonder whither Sir William had betaken himself. But she had been cured of precipitancy (if ever woman were), and was prepared to wait her whole lifetime a widow if the said Sir William should not reappear. Her life was now passed mostly within the walls, or in promenading between the pleasaunce and the bowling-green; and she very seldom went even so far as the high road which then skirted the grounds on the north, though it has

now, and for many years, been diverted to the south side. Her patience was rewarded (if love be in any case a reward); for one day, many months after her second husband's death, a messenger arrived at her gate with the intelligence that Sir William Hervy was again in Casterbridge, and would be glad to know if it were her pleasure that he should wait upon her.

It need hardly be said that permission was joyfully granted, and within two hours her lover stood before her, a more thoughtful man than formerly, but in all essential respects the same man, generous, modest to diffidence, and sincere. The reserve which womanly decorum threw over her manner was but too obviously artificial, and when he said 'the ways of Providence are strange,' and added after a moment, 'and merciful likewise,' she could not conceal her agitation, and burst into tears upon his neck.

'But this is too soon,' she said, starting back.

'But no,' said he. 'You are eleven months gone in widowhood, and it is not as if Sir John had been a good husband to you.'

His visits grew pretty frequent now, as may well be guessed, and in a month or two he began to urge her to an early union. But she counselled a little longer delay.

'Why?' said he. 'Surely I have waited long! Life is short; we are

getting older every day, and I am the last of the three.'

'Yes,' said the lady frankly. 'And that is why I would not have you hasten. Our marriage may seem so strange to everybody, after my unlucky remark on that occasion we know so well, and which so many others know likewise, thanks to talebearers.'

On this representation he conceded a little space, for the sake of her good name. But the destined day of their marriage at last arrived, and it was a gay time for the villagers and all concerned, and the bells in the parish church rang from noon till night. Thus at last she was united to the man who had loved her the most tenderly of them all, who but for his reticence might perhaps have been the first to win her. Often did he say to himself; 'How wondrous that her words should have been fulfilled! Many a truth hath been spoken in jest, but never a more remarkable one!' The noble lady herself preferred not to dwell on the coincidence, a certain shyness, if not shame, crossing her fair face at any allusion thereto.

But people will have their say, sensitive souls or none, and their sayings on this third occasion took a singular shape. 'Surely,' they whispered, 'there is something more than chance in this . . . The death of the first was possibly natural; but what of the death of the second, who ill-used her, and whom, loving the third so desperately, she must have wished out of the way?'

Then they pieced together sundry trivial incidents of Sir John's illness, and dwelt upon the indubitable truth that he had grown worse after her lover's unexpected visit; till a very sinister theory was built up as to the hand she may have had in Sir John's premature demise. But nothing of this suspicion was said openly, for she was a lady of noble birth--nobler, indeed, than either of her husbands--and what people suspected they feared to express in formal accusation.

The mansion that she occupied had been left to her for so long a time as she should choose to reside in it, and, having a regard for the spot, she had coaxed Sir William to remain there. But in the end it was unfortunate; for one day, when in the full tide of his happiness, he was walking among the willows near the gardens, where he overheard a conversation between some basket-makers who were cutting the osiers for their use. In this fatal dialogue the suspicions of the neighbouring townsfolk were revealed to him for the first time.

'A cupboard close to his bed, and the key in her pocket. Ah!' said one.

'And a blue phial therein--h'm!' said another.

'And spurge-laurel leaves among the hearth-ashes. Oh-oh!' said a third.

On his return home Sir William seemed to have aged years. But he said nothing; indeed, it was a thing impossible. And from that hour a ghastly estrangement began. She could not understand it, and simply waited. One

day he said, however, 'I must go abroad.'

'Why?' said she. 'William, have I offended you?'

'No,' said he; 'but I must go.'

She could coax little more out of him, and in itself there was nothing unnatural in his departure, for he had been a wanderer from his youth. In a few days he started off, apparently quite another man than he who had rushed to her side so devotedly a few months before.

It is not known when, or how, the rumours, which were so thick in the atmosphere around her, actually reached the Lady Penelope's ears, but that they did reach her there is no doubt. It was impossible that they should not; the district teemed with them; they rustled in the air like night-birds of evil omen. Then a reason for her husband's departure occurred to her appalled mind, and a loss of health became quickly apparent. She dwindled thin in the face, and the veins in her temples could all be distinctly traced. An inner fire seemed to be withering her away. Her rings fell off her fingers, and her arms hung like the flails of the threshers, though they had till lately been so round and so elastic. She wrote to her husband repeatedly, begging him to return to her; but he, being in extreme and wretched doubt, moreover, knowing nothing of her ill-health, and never suspecting that the rumours had reached her also, deemed absence best, and postponed his return awhile, giving various good reasons for his delay.

At length, however, when the Lady Penelope had given birth to a still-born child, her mother, the Countess, addressed a letter to Sir William, requesting him to come back to her if he wished to see her alive; since she was wasting away of some mysterious disease, which seemed to be rather mental than physical. It was evident that his mother-in-law knew nothing of the secret, for she lived at a distance; but Sir William promptly hastened home, and stood beside the bed of his now dying wife.

'Believe me, William,' she said when they were alone, 'I am innocent--innocent!'

'Of what?' said he. 'Heaven forbid that I should accuse you of anything!'

'But you do accuse me--silently!' she gasped. 'I could not write thereon--and ask you to hear me. It was too much, too degrading. But would that I had been less proud! They suspect me of poisoning him, William! But, oh my dear husband, I am innocent of that wicked crime! He died naturally. I loved you--too soon; but that was all!'

Nothing availed to save her. The worm had gnawed too far into her heart before Sir William's return for anything to be remedial now; and in a few weeks she breathed her last. After her death the people spoke louder, and her conduct became a subject of public discussion. A little later on, the physician, who had attended the late Sir John, heard the rumour,

and came down from the place near London to which he latterly had retired, with the express purpose of calling upon Sir William Hervy, now staying in Casterbridge.

He stated that, at the request of a relative of Sir John's, who wished to be assured on the matter by reason of its suddenness, he had, with the assistance of a surgeon, made a private examination of Sir John's body immediately after his decease, and found that it had resulted from purely natural causes. Nobody at this time had breathed a suspicion of foul play, and therefore nothing was said which might afterwards have established her innocence.

It being thus placed beyond doubt that this beautiful and noble lady had been done to death by a vile scandal that was wholly unfounded, her husband was stung with a dreadful remorse at the share he had taken in her misfortunes, and left the country anew, this time never to return alive. He survived her but a few years, and his body was brought home and buried beside his wife's under the tomb which is still visible in the parish church. Until lately there was a good portrait of her, in weeds for her first husband, with a cross in her hand, at the ancestral seat of her family, where she was much pitied, as she deserved to be. Yet there were some severe enough to say--and these not unjust persons in other respects--that though unquestionably innocent of the crime imputed to her, she had shown an unseemly wantonness in contracting three marriages in such rapid succession; that the untrue suspicion might have been ordered by Providence (who often works indirectly) as a punishment for

her self-indulgence. Upon that point I have no opinion to offer.

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The reverend the Vice-President, however, the tale being ended, offered as his opinion that her fate ought to be quite clearly recognized as a punishment. So thought the Churchwarden, and also the quiet gentleman sitting near. The latter knew many other instances in point, one of which could be narrated in a few words.