

CHAPTER XVIII

When Gertrude found herself beside Trefusis in the Pullman, she wondered how she came to be travelling with him against her resolution, if not against her will. In the presence of two women scrutinizing her as if they suspected her of being there with no good purpose, a male passenger admiring her a little further off, her maid reading Trefusis's newspapers just out of earshot, an uninterested country gentleman looking glumly out of window, a city man preoccupied with the "Economist," and a polite lady who refrained from staring but not from observing, she felt that she must not make a scene; yet she knew he had not come there to hold an ordinary conversation. Her doubt did not last long. He began promptly, and went to the point at once.

"What do you think of this engagement of mine?"

This was more than she could bear calmly. "What is it to me?" she said indignantly. "I have nothing to do with it."

"Nothing! You are a cold friend to me then. I thought you one of the surest I possessed."

She moved as if about to look at him, but checked herself, closed her lips, and fixed her eyes on the vacant seat before her. The reproach he deserved was beyond her power of expression.

"I cling to that conviction still, in spite of Miss Lindsay's indifference to my affairs. But I confess I hardly know how to bring you into sympathy with me in this matter. In the first place, you have never been married, I have. In the next, you are much younger than I, in more respects than that of years. Very likely half your ideas on the subject are derived from fictions in which happy results are tacked on to conditions very ill-calculated to produce them--which in real life hardly ever do produce them. If our friendship were a chapter in a novel, what would be the upshot of it? Why, I should marry you, or you break your heart at my treachery."

Gertrude moved her eyes as if she had some intention of taking to flight.

"But our relations being those of real life--far sweeter, after all--I never dreamed of marrying you, having gained and enjoyed your friendship without that eye to business which our nineteenth century keeps open even whilst it sleeps. You, being equally disinterested in your regard for me, do not think of breaking your heart, but you are, I suppose, a little hurt at my apparently meditating and resolving on such a serious step as marriage with Agatha without confiding my intention to you. And you punish me by telling me that you have nothing to do with it-- that it is nothing to you. But I never meditated the step, and so had nothing to conceal from you. It was conceived and executed in less than a minute. Although my first marriage was a silly love match and a failure, I have always admitted to myself that I should marry again. A bachelor is a man who shirks responsibilities and duties; I seek them, and consider it my duty, with my monstrous superfluity of means, not to let the individualists outbreed me. Still, I was in no hurry, having other things to occupy me, and being fond of my bachelor freedom, and doubtful sometimes whether I had any right to bring more idlers into the world for the workers to feed. Then came the usual difficulty about the lady. I did not want a helpmeet; I can help myself. Nor did I expect to be loved devotedly, for the race has not yet evolved a man lovable on thorough acquaintance; even my self-love is neither thorough nor constant. I wanted a genial partner for domestic business, and Agatha struck me quite suddenly as being the nearest approach to what I desired that I was likely to find in the marriage market, where it is extremely hard to suit oneself, and where the likeliest bargains are apt to be snapped up by others if one hesitates too long in the hope of finding something better. I admire Agatha's courage and capability, and believe I shall be able to make her like me, and that the attachment so begun may turn into as close a union as is either healthy or necessary between two separate individuals. I may mistake her character, for I do not know her as I know you, and have scarcely enough faith in her as yet to tell her such things as I have told you. Still, there is a consoling dash of romance in the transaction. Agatha has charm. Do you not think so?"

Gertrude's emotion was gone. She replied with cool scorn, "Very romantic indeed. She is very fortunate."

Trefusis half laughed, half sighed with relief to find her so self-possessed. "It sounds like--and indeed is--the selfish calculation of a disillusioned widower. You would not value such an offer, or envy the recipient of it?"

"No," said Gertrude with quiet contempt.

"Yet there is some calculation behind every such offer. We marry to satisfy our needs, and the more reasonable our needs are, the more likely are we to get them satisfied. I see you are disgusted with me; I feared as much. You are the sort of woman to admit no excuse for my marriage except love--pure emotional love, blindfolding reason."

"I really do not concern myself--"

"Do not say so, Gertrude. I watch every step you take with anxiety; and I do not believe you are indifferent to the worthiness of my conduct. Believe me, love is an overrated passion; it would be irremediably discredited but that young people, and the romancers who live upon their follies, have a perpetual interest in rehabilitating it. No relation involving divided duties and continual intercourse between two people can subsist permanently on love alone. Yet love is not to be despised when it comes from a fine nature. There is a man who loves you exactly as you think I ought to love Agatha--and as I don't love her."

Gertrude's emotion stirred again, and her color rose. "You have no right to say these things now," she said.

"Why may I not plead the cause of another? I speak of Erskine." Her color vanished, and he continued, "I want you to marry him. When you are married you will understand me better, and our friendship, shaken just now, will be deepened; for I dare assure you, now that you can no longer misunderstand me, that no living woman is dearer to me than you. So much for the inevitable selfish reason. Erskine is a poor man, and in his comfortable poverty--save the mark--lies your salvation from the baseness of marrying for wealth and position; a baseness of which women of your class stand in constant peril. They court it; you must shun it. The man is honorable and loves you; he is young, healthy, and suitable. What more do you think the world has to offer you?"

"Much more, I hope. Very much more."

"I fear that the names I give things are not romantic enough. He is a poet. Perhaps he would be a hero if it were possible for a man to be a hero in this nineteenth century, which will be infamous in history as a time when the greatest advances in the power of man over nature only served to sharpen his greed and make famine its avowed minister. Erskine is at least neither a gambler nor a slave-driver at first hand; if he lives upon plundered labor he can no more help himself than I. Do not say that you hope for much more; but tell me, if you can, what more you have any chance of getting? Mind, I do not ask what more you desire; we all desire unutterable things. I ask you what more you can obtain!"

"I have not found Mr. Erskine such a wonderful person as you seem to think him."

"He is only a man. Do you know anybody more wonderful?"

"Besides, my family might not approve."

"They most certainly will not. If you wish to please them, you must sell yourself to some rich vampire of the factories or great landlord. If you give yourself away to a poor poet who loves you, their disgust will be unbounded. If a woman wishes to honor her father and mother to their own satisfaction nowadays she must dishonor herself."

"I do not understand why you should be so anxious for me to marry someone else?"

"Someone else?" said Trefusis, puzzled.

"I do not mean someone else," said Gertrude hastily, reddening. "Why should I marry at all?"

"Why do any of us marry? Why do I marry? It is a function craving fulfilment. If you do not marry betimes from choice, you will be driven to do so later on by the importunity of your suitors and of your family, and by weariness of the suspense that precedes a definite settlement of oneself. Marry generously. Do not throw yourself away or sell yourself; give yourself away. Erskine has as much at stake as you; and yet he offers himself fearlessly."

Gertrude raised her head proudly.

"It is true," continued Trefusis, observing the gesture with some anger, "that he thinks more highly of you than you deserve; but you, on the other hand, think too lowly of him. When you marry him you must save him from a cruel disenchantment by raising yourself to the level he fancies you have attained. This will cost you an effort, and the effort will do you good, whether it fail or succeed. As for him, he will find his just level in your estimation if your thoughts reach high enough to comprehend him at that level."

Gertrude moved impatiently.

"What!" he said quickly. "Are my long-winded sacrifices to the god of reason distasteful? I believe I am involuntarily making them so because I am jealous of the fellow after all. Nevertheless I am serious; I want you to get married; though I shall always have a secret grudge against the man who marries you. Agatha will suspect me of treason if you don't. Erskine will be a disappointed man if you don't. You will be moody, wretched, and--and unmarried if you don't."

Gertrude's cheeks flushed at the word jealous, and again at his mention of Agatha. "And if I do," she said bitterly, "what then?"

"If you do, Agatha's mind will be at ease, Erskine will be happy, and you! You will have sacrificed yourself, and will have the happiness which follows that when it is worthily done."

"It is you who have sacrificed me," she said, casting away her reticence, and looking at him for the first time during the conversation.

"I know it," he said, leaning towards her and half whispering the words. "Is not renunciation the beginning and the end of wisdom? I have sacrificed you rather than profane our friendship by asking you to share my whole life with me. You are unfit for that, and I have committed myself to another union, and am begging you to follow my example, lest we should tempt one another to a step which would soon prove to you how truly I tell you that you are unfit. I have never allowed you to roam through all the chambers of my consciousness, but I keep a sanctuary there for you alone, and will keep it inviolate for you always. Not even Agatha shall have the key, she must be content with the other rooms--the drawing-room, the working-room, the dining-room, and so forth. They would not suit you; you would not like the furniture or the guests; after a time you would not like the master. Will you be content with the sanctuary?" Gertrude bit her lip; tears came into her eyes. She looked imploringly at him. Had they been alone, she would have thrown herself into his arms and entreated him to disregard everything except their strong cleaving to one another.

"And will you keep a corner of your heart for me?"

She slowly gave him a painful look of acquiescence. "Will you be brave, and sacrifice yourself to the poor

man who loves you? He will save you from useless solitude, or from a worldly marriage--I cannot bear to think of either as your fate."

"I do not care for Mr. Erskine," she said, hardly able to control her voice; "but I will marry him if you wish it."

"I do wish it earnestly, Gertrude."

"Then, you have my promise," she said, again with some bitterness.

"But you will not forget me? Erskine will have all but that--a tender recollection--nothing."

"Can I do more than I have just promised?"

"Perhaps so; but I am too selfish to be able to conceive anything more generous. Our renunciation will bind us to one another as our union could never have done."

They exchanged a long look. Then he took out his watch, and began to speak of the length of their journey, now nearly at an end. When they arrived in London the first person they recognized on the platform was Mr. Jansenius.

"Ah! you got my telegram, I see," said Trefusis. "Many thanks for coming. Wait for me whilst I put this lady into a cab."

When the cab was engaged, and Gertrude, with her maid, stowed within, he whispered to her hurriedly:

"In spite of all, I have a leaden pain here" (indicating his heart). "You have been brave, and I have been wise. Do not speak to me, but remember that we are friends always and deeply."

He touched her hand, and turned to the cabman, directing him whither to drive. Gertrude shrank back into a corner of the vehicle as it departed. Then Trefusis, expanding his chest like a man just released from some cramping drudgery, rejoined Mr. Jansenius.

"There goes a true woman," he said. "I have been persuading her to take the very best step open to her. I began by talking sense, like a man of honor, and kept at it for half an hour, but she would not listen to me. Then I talked romantic nonsense of the cheapest sort for five minutes, and she consented with tears in her eyes. Let us take this hansom. Hi! Belsize Avenue. Yes; you sometimes have to answer a woman according to her womanishness, just as you have to answer a fool according to his folly. Have you ever made up your mind, Jansenius, whether I am an unusually honest man, or one of the worst products of the social organization I spend all my energies in assailing--an infernal scoundrel, in short?"

"Now pray do not be absurd," said Mr. Jansenius. "I wonder at a man of your ability behaving and speaking as you sometimes do."

"I hope a little insincerity, when meant to act as chloroform--to save a woman from feeling a wound to her vanity--is excusable. By-the-bye, I must send a couple of telegrams from the first post-office we pass. Well, sir, I am going to marry Agatha, as I sent you word. There was only one other single man and one other virgin down at Brandon Beeches, and they are as good as engaged. And so--"

"Jack shall have Jill, Nought shall go ill, The man shall have his mare again; And all shall be well."

LETTER TO THE AUTHOR FROM MR. SIDNEY TREFUSIS.

My Dear Sir: I find that my friends are not quite satisfied with the account you have given of them in your clever novel entitled " An Unsocial Socialist." You already understand that I consider it my duty to communicate my whole history, without reserve, to whoever may desire to be guided or warned by my experience, and that I have no sympathy whatever with the spirit in which one of the ladies concerned recently told you that her affairs were no business of yours or of the people who read your books. When you asked my permission some years ago to make use of my story, I at once said that you would be perfectly justified in giving it the fullest publicity whether I consented or not, provided only that you were careful not to falsify it for the sake of artistic effect. Now, whilst cheerfully admitting that you have done your best to fulfil that condition, I cannot help feeling that, in presenting the facts in the guise of fiction, you have, in spite of yourself, shown them in a false light. Actions described in novels are judged by a romantic system of morals as fictitious as the actions themselves. The traditional parts of this system are, as Cervantes tried to show, for the chief part, barbarous and obsolete; the modern additions are largely due to the novel readers and writers of our own century--most of them half-educated women, rebelliously slavish, superstitious, sentimental, full of the intense egotism fostered by their struggle for personal liberty, and, outside their families, with absolutely no social sentiment except love. Meanwhile, man, having fought and won his fight for this personal liberty, only to find himself a more abject slave than before, is turning with loathing from his egotist's dream of independence to the collective interests of society, with the welfare of which he now perceives his own happiness to be inextricably bound up. But man in this phase (would that all had reached it!) has not yet leisure to write or read novels. In noveldom woman still sets the moral standard, and to her the males, who are in full revolt against the acceptance of the infatuation of a pair of lovers as the highest manifestation of the social instinct, and against the restriction of the affections within the narrow circle of blood relationship, and of the political sympathies within frontiers, are to her what she calls heartless brutes. That is exactly what I have been called by readers of your novel; and that, indeed, is exactly what I am, judged by the fictitious and feminine standard of morality. Hence some critics have been able plausibly to pretend to take the book as a satire on Socialism. It may, for what I know, have been so intended by you. Whether or no, I am sorry you made a novel of my story, for the effect has been almost as if you had misrepresented me from beginning to end.

At the same time, I acknowledge that you have stated the facts, on the whole, with scrupulous fairness. You have, indeed, flattered me very strongly by representing me as constantly thinking of and for other people, whereas the rest think of themselves alone, but on the other hand you have contradictorily called me "unsocial," which is certainly the last adjective I should have expected to find in the neighborhood of my name. I deny, it is true, that what is now called "society " is society in any real sense, and my best wish for it is that it may dissolve too rapidly to make it worth the while of those who are " not in society "to facilitate its dissolution by violently pounding it into small pieces. But no reader of "An Unsocial Socialist " needs to be told how, by the exercise of a certain considerate tact (which on the outside, perhaps, seems the opposite of tact), I have contrived to maintain genial terms with men and women of all classes, even those whose opinions and political conduct seemed to me most dangerous.

However, I do not here propose to go fully into my own position, lest I should seem tedious, and be accused, not for the first time, of a propensity to lecture --a reproach which comes naturally enough from persons whose conceptions are never too wide to be expressed within the limits of a sixpenny telegram. I shall confine myself to correcting a few misapprehensions which have, I am told, arisen among readers who from inveterate habit cannot bring the persons and events of a novel into any relation with the actual conditions of life.

In the first place, then, I desire to say that Mrs. Erskine is not dead of a broken heart. Erskine and I and our wives are very much in and out at one another's houses; and I am therefore in a position to declare that Mrs. Erskine, having escaped by her marriage from the vile caste in which she was relatively poor and artificially unhappy and ill-conditioned, is now, as the pretty wife of an art-critic, relatively rich, as well as pleasant, active, and in sound health. Her chief trouble, as far as I can judge, is the impossibility of shaking off her

distinguished relatives, who furtively quit their abject splendor to drop in upon her for dinner and a little genuine human society much oftener than is convenient to poor Erskine. She has taken a patronizing fancy to her father, the Admiral, who accepts her condescension gratefully as age brings more and more home to him the futility of his social position. She has also, as might have been expected, become an extreme advocate of socialism; and indeed, being in a great hurry for the new order of things, looks on me as a lukewarm disciple because I do not propose to interfere with the slowly grinding mill of Evolution, and effect the change by one tremendous stroke from the united and awakened people (for such she--vainly, alas!--believes the proletariat already to be. As to my own marriage, some have asked sarcastically whether I ran away again or not; others, whether it has been a success. These are foolish questions. My marriage has turned out much as I expected it would. I find that my wife's views on the subject vary with the circumstances under which they are expressed.

I have now to make one or two comments on the impressions conveyed by the style of your narrative. Sufficient prominence has not, in my opinion, been given to the extraordinary destiny of my father, the true hero of a nineteenth century romance. I, who have seen society reluctantly accepting works of genius for nothing from men of extraordinary gifts, and at the same time helplessly paying my father millions, and submitting to monstrous mortgages of its future production, for a few directions as to the most business-like way of manufacturing and selling cotton, cannot but wonder, as I prepare my income-tax returns, whether society was mad to sacrifice thus to him and to me. He was the man with power to buy, to build, to choose, to endow, to sit on committees and adjudicate upon designs, to make his own terms for placing anything on a sound business footing. He was hated, envied, sneered at for his low origin, reproached for his ignorance, yet nothing would pay unless he liked or pretended to like it. I look round at our buildings, our statues, our pictures, our newspapers, our domestic interiors, our books, our vehicles, our morals, our manners, our statutes, and our religion, and I see his hand everywhere, for they were all made or modified to please him. Those which did not please him failed commercially: he would not buy them, or sell them, or countenance them; and except through him, as "master of the industrial situation," nothing could be bought, or sold, or countenanced. The landlord could do nothing with his acres except let them to him; the capitalist's hoard rotted and dwindled until it was lent to him; the worker's muscles and brain were impotent until sold to him. What king's son would not exchange with me--the son of the Great Employer--the Merchant Prince? No wonder they proposed to imprison me for treason when, by applying my inherited business talent, I put forward a plan for securing his full services to society for a few hundred a year. But pending the adoption of my plan, do not describe him contemptuously as a vulgar tradesman. Industrial kingship, the only real kingship of our century, was his by divine right of his turn for business; and I, his son, bid you respect the crown whose revenues I inherit. If you don't, my friend, your book won't pay.

I hear, with some surprise, that the kindness of my conduct to Henrietta (my first wife, you recollect) has been called in question; why, I do not exactly know. Undoubtedly I should not have married her, but it is waste of time to criticise the judgment of a young man in love. Since I do not approve of the usual plan of neglecting and avoiding a spouse without ceasing to keep up appearances, I cannot for the life of me see what else I could have done than vanish when I found out my mistake. It is but a short-sighted policy to wait for the mending of matters that are bound to get worse. The notion that her death was my fault is sheer unreason on the face of it; and I need no exculpation on that score; but I must disclaim the credit of having borne her death like a philosopher. I ought to have done so, but the truth is that I was greatly affected at the moment, and the proof of it is that I and Jansenius (the only other person who cared) behaved in a most unbecoming fashion, as men invariably do when they are really upset. Perfect propriety at a death is seldom achieved except by the undertaker, who has the advantage of being free from emotion.

Your rigmarole (if you will excuse the word) about the tombstone gives quite a wrong idea of my attitude on that occasion. I stayed away from the funeral for reasons which are, I should think, sufficiently obvious and natural, but which you somehow seem to have missed. Granted that my fancy for Hetty was only a cloud of illusions, still I could not, within a few days of her sudden death, go in cold blood to take part in a grotesque and heathenish mummerly over her coffin. I should have broken out and strangled somebody. But on every other point I--weakly enough--sacrificed my own feelings to those of Jansenius. I let him have his funeral,

though I object to funerals and to the practice of sepulture. I consented to a monument, although there is, to me, no more bitterly ridiculous outcome of human vanity than the blocks raised to tell posterity that John Smith, or Jane Jackson, late of this parish, was born, lived, and died worth enough money to pay a mason to distinguish their bones from those of the unrecorded millions. To gratify Jansenius I waived this objection, and only interfered to save him from being fleeced and fooled by an unnecessary West End middleman, who, as likely as not, would have eventually employed the very man to whom I gave the job. Even the epitaph was not mine. If I had had my way I should have written: "HENRIETTA JANSENIUS WAS BORN ON SUCH A DATE, MARRIED A MAN NAMED TREFUSIS, AND DIED ON SUCH ANOTHER DATE; AND NOW WHAT DOES IT MATTER WHETHER SHE DID OR NOT?" The whole notion conveyed in the book that I rode rough-shod over everybody in the affair, and only consulted my own feelings, is the very reverse of the truth.

As to the tomfoolery down at Brandon's, which ended in Erskine and myself marrying the young lady visitors there, I can only congratulate you on the determination with which you have striven to make something like a romance out of such very thin material. I cannot say that I remember it all exactly as you have described it; my wife declares flatly there is not a word of truth in it as far as she is concerned, and Mrs. Erskine steadily refuses to read the book.

On one point I must acknowledge that you have proved yourself a master of the art of fiction. What Hetty and I said to one another that day when she came upon me in the shrubbery at Alton College was known only to us two. She never told it to anyone, and I soon forgot it. All due honor, therefore, to the ingenuity with which you have filled the hiatus, and shown the state of affairs between us by a discourse on "surplus value," cribbed from an imperfect report of one of my public lectures, and from the pages of Karl Marx! If you were an economist I should condemn you for confusing economic with ethical considerations, and for your uncertainty as to the function which my father got his start by performing. But as you are only a novelist, I compliment you heartily on your clever little pasticcio, adding, however, that as an account of what actually passed between myself and Hetty, it is the wildest romance ever penned. Wickens's boy was far nearer the mark.

In conclusion, allow me to express my regret that you can find no better employment for your talent than the writing of novels. The first literary result of the foundation of our industrial system upon the profits of piracy and slave-trading was Shakspeare. It is our misfortune that the sordid misery and hopeless horror of his view of man's destiny is still so appropriate to English society that we even to-day regard him as not for an age, but for all time. But the poetry of despair will not outlive despair itself. Your nineteenth century novelists are only the tail of Shakspeare. Don't tie yourself to it: it is fast wriggling into oblivion.

I am, dear sir, yours truly,

SIDNEY TREFUSIS.