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The Second Chance

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IT was in the May of 1681 that the Earl of Pevensey went into the country to marry the famed heiress Mistress Araminta Vining, as he had previously settled with her father, and found her, to his vast relief, a very personable girl. She had in consequence a host of admirers, pre-eminent among whom was young William Minifie of Milanor. Lord Pevensey, a noted stickler for etiquette, decorously made bold to question Mr. Minifie's taste in a dispute concerning waistcoats. A duel was decorously arranged, and these two met upon the narrow beach of Teviot Bay.

Theirs was a spirited encounter, sustained through some ten energetic minutes. Then Pevensey pinked Mr. Minifie in the shoulder, precisely as the Earl, a favorite pupil of Gérard's, had planned to do; and these four gentlemen parted with every imaginable courtesy.

More lately Pevensey walked in the direction of Ouseley Manor, whistling *Love's a Toy*. Honor was satisfied, and happily, as he reflected, at no expense of life. He was a kindly-hearted fop, and more than once had killed his man with perfectly sincere regret.

But in putting on his coat he had overlooked his sleeve-links; and he did not recognize, for twenty-four eventful hours, the full importance of his carelessness.

For in the heart of Figgis Wood the incomparable Lady Ormerod, aunt to Lord Pevensey's betrothed, and a noted leader of fashion, had presently paused at sight of him—laughing a little—and with one tiny hand had made as though to thrust back the staghound which accompanied her.

"Your humble servant, Mr. Swashbuckler," she said; and then, "But, oh, you have not hurt the lad?" she demanded, with a tincture of anxiety.

"Nay, after a short but brilliant engagement," the Earl returned, "Mr. Minifie was very harmlessly perforated; and

in consequence I look to be married on Thursday, after all."

"Let me die, but Cupid never meets with anything save inhospitality in this gross world!" cried Lady Ormerod. "For the boy is heels over head in love with Araminta—oh, a second Almanzor! And my niece does not precisely hate him, either, let me tell you, Robin, for all your month's assault of essences and perfumed gloves and apricot paste and other small artillery of courtship. La, my dear, was it only a month ago we settled your future over a couple of Naples biscuit and a bottle of Rhenish?"

"Egad, it is a month and three days over," Lord Pevensey retorted, "since you suggested your respected brother-in-law was ready to pay my debts in full, upon condition I retaliated by making your adorable niece Lady Pevensey. Well, I stand to-day indebted to him for an advance of fifteen hundred pounds, and am no more afraid of bailiffs. We have performed a very creditable stroke of business; and the day after to-morrow, Clarinda, you will have fairly earned your five hundred pounds for arranging the marriage. Faith, I already begin to view you as undoubtedly the most desirable aunt in the universe."

Nor was there any unconscionable stretching of the phrase. Through the quiet forest, untouched as yet by any fidgeting culture and much as it was when John Lackland wooed Hawisa under its venerable oaks, old even then, the little widow moved like a light flame. She was clothed throughout in scarlet, after her high-hearted style of dress, and carried a tall staff of ebony; and the gold head of it was farther from the dead leaves than was her mischievous countenance. The staghound lounged beside her; and to the last detail Pevensey found her, as he phrased it, "mignonne et piquante."

Lady Ormerod observed, "Fiddle-dee!" Lady Ormerod continued, "Yes,

I am a fool, of course, but then I still remember Bessington, and the boy that went mad there—"

"Because of a surfeit of those dreams 'such as the poets know when they are young.' Sweet chuck, beat not the bones of the buried; for when he breathed he was a likely lad," Lord Pevensey declared, and with a singular gravity.

"Oh, la, la!" she flouted him. "Well, in any event you were the first gentleman in England to wear a neck-cloth of Flanders lace."

"And you the first person of quality to eat cheese-cakes in Spring Garden," he not half so mirthfully retorted. "So we have not entirely failed in life, it may be, after all."

She made of him a quite irrelevant demand. "D'ye fancy Esau was contented, Robin?"

"I fancy he was fond of pottage, madam; and that, as I remember, he got his pottage. Come, now, a tangible bowl of pottage, piping hot, is not to be despised in such a hazardous world as ours is."

She was silent for a lengthy while. "Lord, Lord! how musty all that brave, sweet nonsense seems!" she said, and almost sighed. "Eh, well! le vin est tiré, et il faut le boire."

"My adorable aunt! Let us put it a thought less dumpishly; and render thanks because our pottage smokes upon the table and we are blessed with excellent appetites."

"So that in a month we will be back again in the playhouses and Hyde Park and Mulberry Gardens, or nodding to each other in the New Exchange—you with your debts paid, and I with my five hundred pounds—?" She paused to pat the staghound's head. "Lord Remon came this afternoon," said Lady Ormerod, and with averted eyes.

"I don't approve of Remon," he announced. "Nay, madam, even a siren ought to spare her kin and show a certain cousinly consideration toward the more stagnant-blooded fish."

And Lady Ormerod shrugged. "He is very wealthy, and I am lamentably poor. One must not seek noon at fourteen o'clock or clamor for better bread than was ever made from wheat."

Lord Pevensey laughed, after a pregnant silence.

"By heavens, madam, you are in the right! So I shall walk no more in Figgis Wood, for its old magic breeds too many day-dreams. Besides, we have been serious for half an hour. Now, then, let us discuss theology, dear aunt, or rope-dancing, or, if you will, the last Spring Garden scandal."

She was a woman of eloquent silences when there was any need of them; and thus the fop and the coquette traversed the remainder of that solemn wood without any further speech. Modish people would have esteemed them unwontedly glum.

Pevensey discovered in a while the absence of his sleeve-links, and was properly vexed by the loss of these not unhandsome trinkets. But he knew the tide filled Teviot Bay and wondering fishes were at liberty to muzzle the toys, by this, and merely shrugged at his mishap, mid-course in toilet.

Lord Pevensey, upon mature deliberation, wore the green suit with yellow ribbons, and both his orders as well, since there was a ball that night in honor of his nearing marriage, and a confluence of gentry to attend it. Miss Vining and he walked through a minuet to some applause; the two were heartily acclaimed a striking couple, and congratulations beat about their ears as thick as sugar-plums in a carnival. And at nine you might have found the handsome Earl alone upon the East Terrace of Ouseley, pacing to and fro in the moonlight, and complacently reflecting upon his quite indisputable and unmerited good fortune.

There never was any night in June which nature planned the more adroitly. Soft and warm and windless, lit by a vainglorious moon and every star that ever shone, the beauty of this world caressed and heartened its beholder like a gallant music. Our universe, Lord Pevensey conceded willingly, was excellent and kindly, and the Arbiter of it too generous; for here was he, the wastrel, like the third prince at the end of a fairy-tale, the master of a handsome wife and a fine house and fortune. Somewhere, he knew, young Minifie, with his arm in a sling, was pleading with Mistress Araminta for the last time; and this reflection did not greatly trouble Lord Pevensey.

sey, since incommunicably it tickled his vanity. He was chuckling when he came to the open window.

Within a woman was singing, to the tinkling accompaniment of a spinet, for the delectation of Lord Remon. She was not uncomely, and the hard, lean, stingy countenance of the attendant nobleman was almost genial. Pevensey understood with a great rending shock, as though the thought were novel, that Clarinda Ormerod designed to marry this man, who grinned within fingers' reach—or rather to ally herself with Remon's inordinate wealth—and without any heralding a brutal rage and hatred of all created things possessed the involuntary eavesdropper, and shook and tore at every fibre of his being.

She looked up into Remon's face and, laughing with such bright and elfin mirth as never any other woman showed (thought Pevensey), she broke into another song. She would have spared Lord Pevensey that had she but known him to be within ear-shot. . . . Oh, it was only Lady Ormerod who sang, he knew—the seasoned gamester and coquette, the veteran of London and of Cheltenham—but the woman had no right to charm this haggler with a voice that was not hers. For it was the voice of another Clarinda, who this fine and urban lady had once been, and was not any longer; it was the voice of a soft-handed, tender, jeering girl, whom he alone remembered: and a sick, illimitable rage grilled in each vein of him, as liltingly the woman sang, for Remon, the old and foolish song that Pevensey alone remembered likewise, and of which he might not ever forget the most trivial word.

Men, even beaux, are strangely constituted; and so it needed only this—the sudden stark brute jealousy of one male animal for another. That was the clumsy hand which now unlocked the dyke; and like a flood, tall and resistless, came the recollection of their common past and of its least dear trifle, of all the aspirations and absurdities and splendors of their common youth, and found him in its path, a painted fellow, a spendthrift king of the mode, a most notable authority upon the set of a peruke, a peniless spent connoisseur of stockings, essences, and new cosmetics.

He got but little sleep this night. There were too many plaintive memories which tediously plucked him back, with feeble and innumerable hands, so often as he trod upon the threshold of sleep. Then, too, there were so many dreams, half-waking, and not only of Clarinda Chichele, naïve and frank in divers rural circumstances, but rather of Clarinda Ormerod, that perfect piece of artifice: of how exquisite she was! how swift and volatile and elvish in every movement! how airily indomitable, and how mendacious to the tips of her polished finger-nails! and how she always seemed to flit about this world as joyously, alertly, and as colorfully as some ornate and tiny bird of the tropics.

But presently parochial birds were wrangling underneath my lord's window, while he tossed and assured himself that he was sleepier than any saint who ever snored in Ephesus; and presently one hand of Moncrieff was drawing the bed-curtains, while the other carefully balanced a mug of shaving-water.

Pevensey did not see her all that morning, for Lady Ormerod was fatigued, or so a lackey informed his lordship, and as yet kept her chamber. His Araminta he found deplorably sullen. So the Earl devoted the better part of this day to a refitting of his wedding-suit, just come from London, for Moncrieff, an invaluable man, had adjudged the pockets to be placed too high.

Thus it was as late as five in the afternoon that, wearing the peach-colored suit trimmed with scarlet ribbon, and a new French beaver, the exquisite came upon Lady Ormerod walking in the gardens with only an appropriate peacock for company.

She was so beautiful and brilliant—so like a famous gem too suddenly disclosed—that his decorous, pleasant voice might quite permissibly have shaken a trifle when the Earl implored Clarinda Ormerod to walk with him to Teviot Bay, on the off-chance of recovering his sleeve-links.

And there they did find one of the trinkets, but the tide had swept away the other, or else the sand had buried it. So they rested there upon the rocks, after an unavailing search, and talked of

many trifles, amid surroundings oddly maladroit.

For this Teviot Bay is a primeval place, a deep-cut, narrow notch in the tip of Carnrick, and is walled by cliffs so high and so precipitous that they exclude a view of anything except the ocean. The bay opens due west; and its white barriers were now developing a violet tinge, for this was on a sullen afternoon, and the sea was ruffled by spiteful gusts. Everywhere was a gigantic peace vexed only when high overhead a sea-fowl jeered at these modish persons as he flapped toward an impregnable nest.

"And by this hour to-morrow," thought Lord Pevensey, "I shall be chained to that good, strapping, wholesome Juno of a girl!"

So he fell presently into a silence, staring at the vacant west, not thinking of anything at all, but longing poignantly for something which was very beautiful and strange and quite unattainable, with precisely that exquisite anguish he had sometimes known in awaking from a dream of which he could remember nothing save its piercing beauty.

"And thus ends the last day of our bachelorhood!" said Lady Ormerod upon a sudden. "You have played long enough—la, Robin, you have led the fashion for ten years, you have laughed as much as any man alive, but you have pulled down all that nature raised in you, I think. Was it worth while?"

"Why, look you," Pevensey philosophized, "have you never thought what a vast deal of loving and painstaking labor must have gone to make the world we inhabit so beautiful and so complete? For it was not enough to evolve and set a glaring sun in heaven, to marshal the big stars about the summer sky, but even in the least frequented meadow every butterfly must have his pinions jewelled, very carefully, and every lovely blade of grass be fashioned separately. The hand that yesterday arranged the Himalayas found time to glaze the wings of a midge! Now, most of us could design a striking Flood, or even a Last Judgment, since the canvas is so big and the colors so virulent; but to paint a snuff-box perfectly you must love the labor for its own sake, and not with even an under-thought of the performance's ulti-

mate appraisalment. People do not often consider the simple fact that it is enough to bait, and quite superfluous to veneer, a trap; indeed, those generally acclaimed the best of persons insist this world is but an antechamber, full of gins and pitfalls, which must be scurried through with shut eyes. And the more fools they! For to enjoy a sunset, or a glass of wine, or even to admire the charms of a handsome woman, is to render the Artificer of all at least the tribute of appreciation."

But she said, in a sharp voice, "Robin, Robin—!" And he saw that there was no beach now in Teviot Bay, except the dwindling crescent at its farthest indentation upon which they sat.

His watch showed five o'clock; and presently Lord Pevensey laughed, not very loudly.

"Look now," said Pevensey, "upon what trifles our lives hinge! Last night I heard you singing, and the song brought back so many things done long ago and made me so unhappy that—ridiculous conclusion!—I forgot to wind my watch. Well! the tide is buffeting at either side of Carnrick; within the hour this place will be submerged; and, in a phrase, we are as dead as Hannibal or Hector."

She said, very quiet, "Could you not gain the mainland if you stripped and swam for it?"

"Why, possibly," he conceded. "Meanwhile, you would have drowned. Faith, we had as well make the best of it."

Little Lady Ormerod touched his sleeve, and her hand (as the man noted) did not shake at all, nor did her delicious piping voice declare her will uncertainly. "You cannot save me. I know it. I am not frightened. I bid you save yourself." "Permit me to assist you to that ledge of rock," Lord Pevensey answered, "which is a trifle higher than the beach; and I pray you do not mar the dignity of these last passages by talking nonsense."

For he had spied a ledge, not inaccessible, some four feet higher than the sands, and it offered them at least a respite. And within the moment they had secured this niggardly concession, intent to die, as Pevensey observed, like hurt mice upon a pantry shelf. The business smacked of disproportion, he considered, for here was a big ruthless league 'twixt



Painting by Howard Pyle

“WHO ARE WE THAT HEAVEN SHOULD MAKE OF THE OLD SEA A FOWLING NET?”

earth and sea; and with no loftier end than to crush a fop and a coquette, whose speedier extinction had been dear at the expense of a shilling's worth of arsenic!

Even the sun came out to peep at these trapped comely people, and doubtless to get appropriate mirth of the spectacle. He hung low against the misty sky; and for the rest, the rocks, and all these treacherous and lapping waves, were very like a crude draught of the world, dashed off conceivably upon the day before creation.

These arbiters of social London did not speak at all; and the bleak waters crowded toward them as in a fretful dispute of precedence.

Then the woman said: "Last night Lord Remon asked me to marry him, and I declined the honor. For this place is too like Bessington—and, I think, the past month has changed everything—"

"I thought you had forgotten Bessington," he said, "and long ago."

"I did not ever quite forget— Oh, the garish years," she wailed, "since then! And how I hated you, Robin—and yet liked you, too—because you were never the boy that I remembered, and people would not let you be! And how I hated them—the huzzies! For I had to see you almost every day, and it was never you I saw— Ah, Robin, come back for just a little, little while, and be an honest boy for just the moment that we are dying, and not an elegant fine gentleman!"

"Nay, my dear," the Earl composedly answered, "an hour of naked candor is at hand. Life is a masquerade where Death, it would appear, is master of the ceremonies. Now he sounds his whistle; and we who went about the world so long as harlequins must unmask, and for all time put aside our abhorrence of the dishevelled. For this is Death who comes, Clarinda—though I had thought that at his advent one would be afraid."

Yet apprehension of this gross and unavoidable adventure, so soon to be endured, thrilled him, and none too lightly. It was grotesque, unfair, that it draw near thus sensibly, with never a twinge or ache to herald its arrival. Why, there were fifty years of life in this fine, nimble body, but for any contretemps like that of a deplorable present!

"Oh, Robin," Lady Ormerod bewailed, "it is all so big—the incurious west, and

the sea, and these rocks that were old in Noah's youth—and we are so little—!"

"Yes," he returned, and took her hand, because their feet were wetted now; "the trap and its small prey are not commensurate. The stage is set for a Homeric death-scene, and we two profane an over-ambitious background. For who are we that Heaven should have rived the world before time was, to trap us, and should make of the old sea a fowling-net?"

Their eyes encountered, and he said, with a strange gush of manliness: "Yet Heaven is kind. I am bound even in honor now to marry Mistress Araminta; and you would marry Remon in the end. Clarinda— Ah yes! for we are merely moths, my dear, and luxury is a disastrously brilliant lamp. But here are only you and I and the master of all ceremony. And yet—I would we were a little worthier, Clarinda!"

"You were the first gentleman in England to wear a neck-cloth of Flanders lace," she answered, and her smile was sadder than weeping.

"And you the first person of quality to eat cheese-cakes in Spring Garden. There you have our epitaphs, if we in truth have earned an epitaph, who have not ever lived."

"No, we have only laughed—Laugh now, for the last time, and hearten me, my handsome Robin! And yet could I but come to God," the woman said, with a new voice, "and make it clear to Him just how it all fell out, and beg for one more chance! How heartily I would pray then!"

"And I would cry Amen to all that prayer must of necessity contain," he answered. "Oh!" Pevensey said, "just for applause and bodily comfort and the envy of innumerable other fools we two have bartered a great heritage! I think our corner of the world will lament us for as much as a week, but I fear lest Heaven may not condescend to set apart the needful time wherein to frame a suitable chastisement for such poor imbeciles. Clarinda, I have loved you all my life, and I have been faithful neither to you nor to myself! I love you so that I am not afraid even now, since you are here, and so entirely that I have forgotten how to plead my cause con-

vincingly. And I have had practice, let me tell you. . . ."

He showed her where his finger-nails had torn his velvet palms. "See, now, to what outmoded and bucolic frenzies nature brings even us at last!"

She answered only, as she motioned seaward, "Look—!"

And what Lord Pevensey saw was a substantial boat rowed by four of Mr. Minifie's attendants; and in the bow of the vessel sat that wounded gentleman himself, regarding Pevensey and Lady Ormerod with some disfavor; and beside the younger man was Mistress Araminta Vining.

It was a perturbed Minifie who broke the silence. "This is very awkward," he said, "because Araminta and I are eloping. We mean to be married this same night at Milanor. And deuce take it, Lord Pevensey, I can't leave you there to drown, any more than in the circumstances I can ask you to make one of the party."

"Lord Pevensey," said his companion, with far more asperity, "the vanity and obduracy of a cruel father have forced me to the adoption of this desperate measure. Toward yourself I entertain no ill feeling, nor indeed any sentiment at all except the most profound contempt. My aunt will, of course, accompany us; for yourself you will do as you please; but in any event I solemnly protest that I spurn your odious pretensions, release myself hereby from an enforced and hideous obligation, and, in a phrase, would not marry you in order to be Queen of England."

"Miss Vining, I had hitherto admired you," the Earl replied, with fervor, "and I now adore you." Then he turned to his Clarinda. "Madam, you will pardon the awkward but unavoidable publicity of my proceeding. I am a ruined man. I owe your brother-in-law some fifteen hundred pounds, and, oddly enough, I mean to pay him. I must sell Jephcot and Skene Minor, but while life lasts I shall keep Bessington and all its memories. Meanwhile there is a clergyman waiting at Milanor. So marry me to-night, Clarinda; and we will go back to Bessington to-morrow."

"To Bessington—!" It was as though she spoke of something very sacred.

Then, very musically, Lady Ormerod laughed, and to the eye she was all flippancy. "La, Robin, I can't bury myself in the country until the end of time," she said, "and make interminable custards," she added, "and superintend the poultry," she said, "and for recreation, play short whist with the vicar."

And it seemed to Lord Pevensey that he had gone divinely mad. "Don't lie to me, Clarinda. You are thinking there are yet a host of heiresses who would be glad to be a countess at however dear a cost. But don't lie to me! Don't even try to seem the airy and bedizened woman I have known so long. All that is over now. Death tapped us on the shoulder, and, if only for a moment, the masks were dropped. And life is changed now,—oh, everything is changed! Then come, my dear! let us be wise and very honest. Let us concede it is still possible for me to find another heiress, and for you to marry Remon; let us grant it the only outcome of our common sense! and for all that, laugh, and fling away the potage, and be more wise than reason."

She irresolutely said: "Matters are altered now. It would be madness—"

"It would undoubtedly be madness," the Earl assented. "But then I am so tired of being rational! Oh, Clarinda!" this former arbiter of taste absurdly babbled, "if I lose you now it is forever; and there is no health in me, save when I am with you. Then alone I wish to do praiseworthy things, to be all which the boy we know of should have grown to. . . . See how profoundly shameless I am become when, with such an audience, I take refuge in the pitiful base argument of my own weakness! But, my dear, I want you so that nothing else in the world means anything to me. I want you; and all my life I have wanted you!"

"Boy, boy—!" she answered, and her fine hands had come to Pevensey, as white birds flutter homeward. But even then she had to deliberate the matter—since the habits of many years are not put aside like outworn gloves—and for innumerable centuries her foot tapped on that wetted ledge.

Presently her lashes lifted. "I suppose it would be lacking in reverence to keep a clergyman waiting longer than was absolutely necessary?" she hazarded.