

CHAPTER XX

Which relates a most extraordinary conversation

IN the days which now ensued, while Anthea was busied out of doors and Miss Priscilla was busied indoors, and Small Porges was diligently occupied with his lessons, — at such times, Bellew would take his pipe and go to sit and smoke in company with the Cavalier in the great picture above the carved chimney-piece.

A right jovial companion, at all times, was this Cavalier, an optimist he, from the curling feather in his broad-brimmed beaver hat, to the spurs at his heels. Handsome, gay, and debonair was he, with lips up-curving to a smile beneath his moustachio, and a quizzical light in his grey eyes, very like that in Bellew's own. Moreover he wore the knowing, waggish air of one well versed in all the ways of the world, and mankind in general, and, (what is infinitely more), — of the Sex Feminine, in particular. Experienced was he, beyond all doubt, in their pretty tricks, and foibles, since he had ever been a diligent student of Feminine Capriciousness when the "Merry Monarch" ruled the land.

Hence, it became customary for Bellew to sit with him, and smoke, and take counsel of this "preux chevalier" upon the unfortunate turn of affairs. Whereof ensued many remarkable conversations of which the following, was one:

BELLEW: No sir, — emphatically I do not agree with you. To be sure, you may have had more experience than I, in such affairs, — but then, it was such a very long time ago.

THE CAVALIER: (Interrupting, or seeming to)!!!

BELLEW: Again, I beg to differ from you, women are not the same to-day as they ever were. Judging by what I have read of the ladies of your day, and King Charles's court at Whitehall, — I should say — not. At least, if they are, they act differently, and consequently must be — er — wooed differently. The methods employed in your day would be wholly inadequate and quite out of place, in this.

THE CAVALIER: (Shaking his head and smirking, — or seeming to)!!!

BELLEW: Well, I'm willing to bet you anything you like that if you were to step down out of your frame, change your velvets and laces for trousers and coat, leave off your great peruke, and wear a derby hat instead of that picturesque, floppy affair, and try your fortune

with some Twentieth Century damsel, your high-sounding gallantries, and flattering phrases, would fall singularly flat, and you would be promptly — turned down, sir.

THE CAVALIER: (Tossing his love-locks, — or seeming to)!!!

BELLEW: The “strong hand,” you say? Hum! History tells us that William the Conqueror wooed his lady with a club, or a battle-axe, or something of the sort, and she consequently liked him the better for it; which was all very natural, and proper of course, in her case, seeing that hers was the day of battle-axes, and things. But then, as I said before, sir, — the times are sadly changed, — women may still admire strength of body, and even — occasionally — of mind, but the theory of “Dog, woman, and wal-nut tree” is quite obsolete.

THE CAVALIER: (Frowning and shaking his head, — or seeming to)!!!

BELLEW: Ha! — you don’t believe me? Well, that is because you are obsolete, too; — yes sir, as obsolete as your hat, or your boots, or your long rapier. Now, for instance, suppose I were to ask your advice in my own case? You know precisely how the matter stands at present, between Miss Anthea and myself. You also know

Miss Anthea personally, since you have seen her much and often, and have watched her grow from childhood into — er — glorious womanhood, — I repeat sir glorious womanhood. Thus, you ought to know, and understand her far better than I, — for I do confess she is a constant source of bewilderment to me. Now, since you do know her so well, — what course should you adopt, were you in my place?

THE CAVALIER: (Smirking more knowingly than ever, — or seeming to)!!!

BELLEW: Preposterous! Quite absurd! — and just what I might have expected. Carry her off, indeed! No no, we are not living in your bad, old, glorious days when a maid’s “No” was generally taken to mean “Yes” — or when a lover might swing his reluctant mistress up to his saddle-bow, and ride off with her, leaving the world far behind. To-day it is all changed, — sadly changed. Your age was a wild age, a violent age, but in some respects, perhaps, a rather glorious age. Your advice is singularly characteristic, and, of course, quite impossible, alas! — Carry her off, indeed!

Hereupon, Bellew sighed, and turning away, lighted his pipe, which had gone out, and buried himself in the newspaper.

CHAPTER XXI

*Of shoes, and ships, and sealing wax, and the
third finger of the left hand*

So Bellew took up the paper. The house was very quiet, for Small Porges was deep in the vexatious rules of the Multiplication Table, and something he called "Jogafrey," Anthea was out, as usual, and Miss Priscilla was busied with her numerous household duties. Thus the brooding silence was unbroken save for the occasional murmur of a voice, the jingle of the housekeeping keys, and the quick, light tap, tap, of Miss Priscilla's stick.

Therefore, Bellew read the paper, and let it be understood that he regarded the daily news-sheet as the last resource of the utterly bored.

Now presently, as he glanced over the paper with a negative interest his eye was attracted by a long paragraph beginning:

At St. George's, Hanover Square, by the Right Reverend the Bishop of —, Silvia Cecile Marchmond, to His Grace the Duke of Ryde, K. G., K. C. B.

Below followed a full, true, and particular account of the ceremony which, it seemed, had been graced by Royalty. George Bellew read it half way through, and — yawned, — positively, and actually, yawned, and thereafter, laughed.

"And so, I have been in Arcadia — only three weeks! I have known Anthea only twenty-one days! A ridiculously short time, as time goes, — in any other place but Arcadia, — and yet sufficient to lay for ever, the — er — Haunting Spectre of the Might Have Been. Lord! what a preposterous ass I was! Baxter was quite right, — utterly, and completely right! Now, let us suppose that this paragraph had read: 'To-day, at St. George's, Hanover Square, Anthea Devine to —' No no, — confound it!" and Bellew crumpled up the paper, and tossed it into a distant corner. "I wonder what Baxter would think of me now, — good old faithful John. The Haunting Spectre of the Might Have Been, — What a preposterous ass! — what a monumental idiot I was!"

"Posterous ass, isn't a very pretty word, Uncle Porges, — or continental idiot!" said a voice behind him, and turning, he beheld Small Porges somewhat stained, and

bespattered with ink, who shook a reproving head at him.

“ True, nephew,” he answered, “ but they are sometimes very apt, and in this instance, particularly so.”

Small Porges drew near, and, seating himself upon the arm of Bellew’s chair, looked at his adopted uncle, long, and steadfastly.

“ Uncle Porges,” said he, at last, “ you never tell stories, do you? — I mean — lies, you know.”

“ Indeed, I hope not, Porges, — why do you ask? ”

“ Well, — ’cause my Auntie Anthea’s ’fraid you do.”

“ Is she — hum! — Why? ”

“ When she came to ‘ tuck me up,’ last night, she sat down on my bed, an’ talked to me a long time. An’ she sighed a lot, an’ said she was ’fraid I didn’t care for her any more, — which was awful’ silly, you know.”

“ Yes, of course! ” nodded Bellew.

“ An’ then she asked me why I was so fond of you, an’ I said ’cause you were my Uncle Porges that I found under a hedge. An’ then she got more angrier than ever, an’ said she wished I’d left you under the hedge — ”

“ Did she, my Porges? ”

“ Yes; she said she wished she’d never seen you, an’ she’d be awful’ glad when you’d gone away. So I told her you weren’t ever going away, an’ that we were waiting for the Money Moon to come, an’ bring us the fortune. An’ then she shook her head, an’ said ‘ Oh! my dear, — you mustn’t believe anything he says to you about the moon, or anything else, ’cause he tells lies,’ — an’ she said ‘ lies ’ twice! ”

“ Ah! — and — did she stamp her foot, Porges? ”

“ Yes, I think she did; an’ then she said there wasn’t such a thing as a Money Moon, an’ she told me you were going away very soon, to get married, you know.”

“ And what did you say? ”

“ Oh! I told her that I was going too. An’ then I thought she was going to cry, an’ she said ‘ Oh Georgy! I didn’t think you’d leave me — even for him.’ So then I had to s’plain how we had arranged that she was going to marry you so that we could all live happy ever after, — I mean, that it was all settled, you know, an’ that you were going to speak to her on the first — opportunity. An’ then she looked at me a long time an’ asked me — was I sure you had said so. An’ then she got awful’ angry indeed, an’ said ‘ How dare he! Oh, how

dare he!' So a course, I told her you'd dare anything — even a dragon, — 'cause you are so big, an' brave, you know. So then she went an' stood at the window, an' she was so angry she cried, — an' I nearly cried too. But at last she kissed me ' Good night ' an' said you were a man that never meant anything you said, an' that I must never believe you any more, an' that you were going away to marry a lady in London, an' that she was very glad, 'cause then we should all be happy again she s'posed. So she kissed me again, an' tucked me up, an' went away. But it was a long, long time before I could go to sleep, 'cause I kept on thinking, an' thinking s'posing there really wasn't any Money Moon, after all! s'posing you were going to marry another lady in London! — You see, it would all be so — frightfully awful, wouldn't it? "

" Terribly dreadfully awful, my Porges."

" But you never *do* tell lies, — do you, Uncle Porges? "

" No! "

" An' — there *is* a Money Moon, isn't there? "

" Why of course there is."

" An' you *are* going to marry my Auntie Anthea in the full o' the moon, aren't you? "

" Yes, my Porges."

" Why then — everything's all right again, — so let's go an' sit under the hay-stack, an' talk 'bout ships."

" But why of ships? " enquired Bellew, rising.

" 'Cause I made up my mind, this morning, that I'd be a sailor when I grow up, — a mariner, you know, like Peterday, only I'd prefer to have both my legs."

" You'd find it more convenient, perhaps."

" You know all 'bout oceans, an' waves, and billows, don't you Uncle Porges? "

" Well, I know a little."

" An' are you ever sea-sick, — like a 'land-lubber? ' "

" I used to be, but I got over it."

" Was it a very big ship that you came over in? "

" No, — not so very big, but she's about as fast as anything in her class, and a corking sea-boat."

" What's her name? "

" Her name? " repeated Bellew, " well, she was called the — er ' Silvia. ' "

" That's an awful' pretty name for a ship."

" Hum! — so so, — but I have learned a pret-

tier, and next time she puts out to sea we'll change her name, eh, my Porges?"

"We?" cried Small Porges, looking up with eager eyes, "do you mean you'd take me to sea with you,—an' my Auntie Anthea, of course?"

"You don't suppose I'd leave either of you behind, if I could help it, do you? We'd all sail away together—wherever you wished."

"Do you mean," said Small Porges, in a suddenly awed voice, "that it is—your ship,—your very own?"

"Oh yes."

"But,—do you know, Uncle Porges, you don't look as though you had a ship—for your very own, somehow."

"Don't I?"

"You see, a ship is such a very big thing for one man to have for his very own self. An' has it got masts, an' funnels, an' anchors?"

"Lots of 'em."

"Then, please, when will you take me an' Auntie Anthea sailing all over the oceans?"

"Just so soon as she is ready to come."

"Then I think I'd like to go to Nova Zembla first,—I found it in my jogafrey to-day, an' it sounds nice an' far off, doesn't it?"

"It does, Shipmate!" nodded Bellew.

"Oh! that's fine!" exclaimed Small Porges rapturously, "you shall be the captain, an' I'll be the shipmate, an' we'll say Aye Aye, to each other—like the real sailors do in books,—shall we?"

"Aye, aye Shipmate!" nodded Bellew again.

"Then please, Uncle Por—I mean Captain,—what shall we name our ship,—I mean the new name?"

"Well, my Porges,—I mean, of course, shipmate,—I rather thought of calling her—Hallo!—why here's the Sergeant."

Sure enough, there was Sergeant Appleby sitting under the shade of "King Arthur"—but who rose, and stood at attention as they came up.

"Why Sergeant, how are you?" said Bellew, gripping the veteran's hand. "You are half an hour before your usual time, to-day,—nothing wrong, I hope?"

"Nothing wrong, Mr. Bellew, sir—I thank you. No, nothing wrong, but this—is a—memorable occasion, sir. May I trouble you to—step behind the tree with me—for half a moment, sir?"

Suiting the action to the word, the Sergeant led Bellew to the other side of the tree, and there, screened from view of the house, he, with

a sudden, jerky movement, produced a very small leather case from his pocket, which he handed to Bellew.

“Not good enough — for such a woman — I know, but the best I could afford, sir!” said the Sergeant appearing profoundly interested in the leaves overhead, while Bellew opened the very small box.

“Why — it’s very handsome, Sergeant!” said Bellew, making the jewels sparkle in the sun, — “anyone might be proud of such a ring.”

“Why, it did look pretty tidy — in the shop, sir, — to me, and Peterday. My comrade has a sharp eye, and a sound judgment in most things, sir — and we took — a deal of trouble in selecting it. But now — when it comes to — giving it to *Her*, — why it looks — uncommon small, and mean, sir.”

“A ruby, and two diamonds, and very fine stones, too, Sergeant!”

“So I made so bold as to — come here sir,” pursued the Sergeant still interested in the foliage above, “half an hour afore my usual time — to ask you, sir — if you would so far oblige me — as to — hand it to her — when I’m gone, sir.”

“Lord, no!” said Bellew, smiling and sha-

king his head, “not on your life, Sergeant! Why man it would lose half its value in her eyes if any other than you gave it to her. No Sergeant, you must hand it to her yourself, and, what’s more, you must slip it upon her finger.”

“Good Lord! sir!” exclaimed the Sergeant, “I could never do that!”

“Oh yes you could!”

“Not unless you — stood by me — a force in reserve, as it were, sir.”

“I’ll do that willingly, Sergeant.”

“Then — p’raps sir — you might happen to know — which finger?”

“The third finger of the left hand, I believe, Sergeant.”

“Here’s Aunt Priscilla now,” said Small Porges, at this juncture.

“Lord!” exclaimed the Sergeant, “and sixteen minutes afore her usual time!”

Yes, — there was Miss Priscilla, her basket of sewing upon her arm, as gentle, as unruffled, as placid as usual. And yet it is probable that she divined something from their very attitudes, for there was a light in her eyes, and her cheeks seemed more delicately pink than was their wont. Thus, as she came toward them, under the ancient apple-trees, despite her stick, and her white hair, she looked even younger, and more girlish than ever.

At least, the Sergeant seemed to think so, for, as he met her look, his face grew suddenly radiant, while a slow flush crept up under the tan of his cheek, and the solitary hand he held out to her, trembled a little, for all its size, and strength.

“Miss Priscilla, mam—” he said, and stopped. “Miss Priscilla,” he began again, and paused once more.

“Why—Sergeant!” she exclaimed, though it was a very soft little exclamation indeed,—for her hand still rested in his, and so she could feel the quiver of the strong fingers, “why—Sergeant!”

“Miss Priscilla,—” said he, beginning all over again, but with no better success.

“Goodness me!” exclaimed Miss Priscilla, “I do believe he is going to forget to enquire about the peaches!”

“Peaches!” repeated the Sergeant, “Yes, Priscilla.”

“And—why?”

“’Cause he’s brought you a ring,” Small Porges broke in, “a very handsome ring, you know, Aunt Priscilla,—all diamonds an’ jewels, an’ he wants you to please let him put it on your finger—if you don’t mind.”

“And—here it is!” said the Sergeant, and gave it into her hand.

Miss Priscilla stood very silent, and very still, looking down at the glittering gems, then, all at once, her eyes filled, and a slow wave of colour dyed her cheeks:

“Oh Sergeant!” she said, very softly, “Oh Sergeant, I am only a poor, old woman—with a lame foot!”

“And I am a poor, old soldier—with only one arm, Priscilla.”

“You are the strongest, and gentlest, and bravest soldier in all the world, I think!” she answered.

“And you, Priscilla, are the sweetest, and most beautiful *woman* in the world, I *know*! And so—I’ve loved you all these years, and—never dared to tell you so, because *of* my—one arm.”

“Why then,” said Miss Priscilla, smiling up at him through her tears, “if you do—really—think that,—why,—it’s this finger, Sergeant!”

So the Sergeant, very clumsily, perhaps, because he had but the one hand, slipped the ring upon the finger in question. And Porges, Big, and Small, turning to glance back, as they went upon their way saw that he still held that small, white hand pressed close to his lips.