The Romantic Comedians

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I

FOR thirty-six years Judge Gamaliel Bland Honeywell had endured the double-edged bliss of a perfect marriage; but it seemed to him, on this sparkling Easter Sunday, that he had lived those years with a stranger. After twelve months of loneliness, one impulse of vital magic had obliterated the past. As he arranged his tribute of lilies over Cordelia's grave, he tried with all the strength of his decorous will to remember her features and mourn for her as sincerely as she deserved.

"I am a bird with a broken wing," he sighed to himself, as he had sighed so often into other ears since the day of his bereavement. And while this classic metaphor was still on his lips, he felt an odd palpitation within the suave Virginian depths of his being, where his broken wing was helplessly trying to flutter.

It is astonishing, he reflected, with the slow but honourable processes of the judicial mind, what Spring can do to one even at sixty-five—even at a

young sixty-five, he hastened to remind himself. Beyond the impressive marble angel, the sky was of a glimmering April blue; fresh young leaves were sprinkling the gnarled old trees in the cemetery; a joyous piping and twittering of birds enlivened the feathery crests of the evergreens; and in his soul as well, beneath the gloom of his sorrow, there was this miracle of budding and piping and twittering, as if winter woods had awakened to spring.

Standing there, with his head bowed reverently over the grave, he searched his memory in vain for a living image of his Cordelia. To mourn was distressing, but to endeavour to mourn and fail was worse than distress. Yet to the casual passer-by, ignorant of this April burgeoning within, he was merely an inconsolable widower of fine presence at the grave of his happiness. Through jewelled branches, the sunshine wove a golden filigree from his silken gray head to the wide black band on the sleeve of his coat. Tall, lean, angular, a little dry and inelastic in thought, a trifle stiff when he moved, he had remained sprightly in speech while he became ceremonious in manner. Behind rimless glasses, his benevolent brown eyes were visited in moments of wistful longing by the bright flicker of youth. Over his full yet austere lips, with their splotches of dusky red, the ends of his still dark moustache tapered down into his trim silver beard. For the rest, his features conformed to the aristocratic Honeywell pattern. The beetling gray eye-

brows, the thin Roman nose, the mottled stains under the eyes that flowed into the sallow flush of the high cheek-bones, the corded folds of the throat where his beard ended;—all these marks of character were subdued to the family inheritance of prudence, integrity, and reserve. Polygamous by instinct, like other men, he had confined his impetuous desires within the temperate zone of monogamy, where sober habit had preserved both his health and his appearance.

In the eighteen eighties, when his opinions were formed, he had determined to become one of the advanced minds of his age; and at sixty-five, he considered that he had kept well abreast of his time. An upright, even a religious man, with a rich Episcopal flavour of temperament, he was disposed to encourage liberty of thought as long as he was convinced that it would not lead to liberal views. Though he had lived all his life in Queenborough, where society had never outgrown an early stage of arrested development, his reputation as a lawyer had extended beyond his native Virginia, and many well-spent summers abroad had cultivated in him what he was fond of calling "an international attitude of mind." At least he had not, like the community of which he was a part, lost the faculty of self-criticism, and stiffened into a gelatinous mould of complacency. Southern in sentiment, yet not provincial in thought, he had attached himself to the oppressed minority

which represented, he felt, the urbane and unprejudiced South.

In his ardent though fastidious intercourse with life, he had seldom failed to respect women, even those who had shown themselves to be unworthy of the sentiment. For a man who had been desperately in love with one woman and safely married to another, he had kept the grosser temptations outside of his thoughts. Sex as a topic for speculation was little more than a virgin wilderness in his mind, except those well-cultivated fields of sex that have yielded such abundant harvests to history.

A devoted wife, he was musing sadly; for this was as keenly as he could force himself to regret the estimable but ashen old lady who had scorned the temporary repairs of the toilet. For thirty-six years he had been genuinely attached to her. For thirty-six years, partly for her sake, he had resisted temptation. It was a consolation to remember to-day that he had resisted even in the case of that alluring young French girl who had returned with them as a maid, and who, he had soon discovered, was far from being the serious person described, with Gallic inaccuracy, in the letters she brought. Well, even then, though not without a struggle, he had resisted.

Yes, the phrase slipped more easily than the thought in the groove of his mind, he was as helpless without Cordelia as a bird with a broken

wing. Bending over her grave, on this flower-scented, thrush-haunted Easter Sunday, he passionately invoked, not the Cordelia of faithful wifehood, but the immortally young and fair Cordelia, fragrant as the rose of desire, whom he had married. For he needed youth. His sorrow needed the memory of youth to keep it alive. So urgent was this craving of the withered heart to be green again, that he would have given all the thirty-six years, when Cordelia and he were one flesh and spirit, for a single hour of her lost rose-coloured innocence.

Not only one flesh and one spirit, but one presence as well. Except in his office and in his profound judicial decisions, he had barely possessed an inviolable life of his own. Even on his professional journeys she had accompanied him; and upon the rare occasions when the illness of one of the children had prevented her, she had never failed to greet him at the station upon his return. A remarkable character, a wonderful mother, he murmured softly, with his gaze on the Italian tombstone, where even the marble angel, he observed with a wanton flight of fancy, wore the enchanting contour of youth. If only she had had a dozen children instead of the two who had married and gone to live in other parts of the world, her life, he felt, might have been as abundant and as satisfying as she had deserved. Yet, with a dozen children on her hands, she could scarcely have

taken such excellent care of him and his health. For thirty-six years, he had eaten only food that was wholesome for him; yet so skilfully was it prepared, under her vigilant eyes, that he could not have enjoyed it more had it been indigestible. From the day of her marriage she had trained herself to eradicate the taint of nervous dyspepsia that had been for generations the hereditary curse of his family; and as long as she had been his housekeeper, he had indulged his appetite with both pleasure and impunity. He remembered now, in one of those trivial but tender recollections, which bring a pang, that after he had been made ill by mushroom sauce, Cordelia, who had a preference for it, had never allowed it to be served again at their table.

"You have to thank your wife for your health and happiness," Doctor Buchanan had said to him at the beginning of her last illness. "She has been a perfect wife to you, and has worn out herself in your service."

It was all true, he acknowledged gratefully. It was all true; and it made no difference evidently either to the doctor or to Cordelia that he had not wanted her to wear out herself in his service, that he had not, when all was said, wanted a perfect wife.

"Yes, a wonderful wifely devotion," he murmured under his breath, while he was attacked by a curious pricking sensation—could it be one of

relief?—because he should never again be obliged to sit opposite to that unselfish solicitude.

He turned away to his car, walking stiffly because he moved with his stubborn muscles instead of his agile spirit. As he drove through the cemetery, several elderly ladies enfolded him in the benevolent look with which women of every age survey the spectacle of a mourning widower. Though he bowed with suitable deference, Judge Honeywell's glance travelled rapidly over them; for he had reached the romantic period of life when elderly ladies are depressing. Not only do women break sooner than men, he reflected, with the fortitude we reserve for the afflictions of the opposite sex, but they are disposed far more readily to settle into a rut at the end, and the only difference between a rut and a grave, as someone had observed before him, is in their dimensions. And if elderly ladies are depressing when they settle, they are, as he had reason to know, even more painful to behold when they refuse either to step into a rut or to stay there after they are once safely entrenched. For example, there was his twin sister, Edmonia Bredalbane, an intrepid woman of liberal views and loose behaviour. After one early scandal, she had indulged herself through life in that branch of conduct which was familiar to ancient moralists as nature in man and depravity in woman. Moreover, she had lost her character, not quietly, as was the custom in such

matters, but with a loud explosion that had startled Queenborough and involved her innocent family. Deaf alike to the whispers of conscience and the thunders of tradition, she had declined to remain a picturesque ruin in company with other damaged virgins of quality. While the rumble of her fall was still in the air, she had detached her loosened foundations and sailed by the next boat for Paris: a city that was regarded in Queenborough as little better than an asylum for determined profligates of both sexes. There, according to transatlantic gossip, she had pursued the downward path with four lawful husbands and a long procession of anonymous but affluent lovers. As he advanced farther away from the discredited Victorian era, Judge Honeywell's opinions were less outraged by her open avowal of infidelity at a period when religious doubt was more condemned, as well as more distinguished, than it is to-day. Yet even after a world war, which had shaken everything but the unalterable laws of biology, he could find no milder word than reprehensible for Edmonia's flourishing career.

In his melancholy review of her past, he had forgotten that she was not only undesirable but imminent, and he was stung to resentment by the thought that she was probably awaiting him in his library, with the intention, no doubt, of remaining to lunch. A few days before, she had arrived in Queenborough, with her old effrontery but fortu-

nately without her fourth husband. Ralph Bredalbane, an impecunious young mooncalf, who had been tracked down while he was suffering from the idealistic interpretation of war, had lingered on in Paris to enjoy his negligible share of Edmonia's tainted millions.

"That is what happens when a woman loses her modesty," Judge Honeywell mused, as his car passed through the gate of the cemetery. After all, the orthodox beliefs and the conventional standards were safest; and he recalled that his father, one of the last of the old school, had remarked at the close of his life: "If there is anything wrong with the Episcopal Church or the Democratic Party, I would rather die without knowing it."

II

TOO democratic to live contentedly in a street or even a road, the modern inhabitants of Queenborough preferred the grandiose style of an avenue or a boulevard.

The Age of Pretence, The Age of Hypocrisy, The Age of Asphalt, Judge Honeywell reflected, while his car skirted a plebeian park, where the best taste of politicians was commemorated in concrete walks and triangular beds of canna. What, he wondered gloomily, was the peculiar merit in the middle-class mind? In what particular was the tyranny of the inferior an advance upon the tyranny of the superior? Beyond the few ancient elms, which had been threatened but not destroyed by the political axe, he could see the once aristocratic and now diminished length of Washington Street merging into the ostentatious democracy of Granite Boulevard.

The Easter stream, which he had left a little earlier at the door of Saint Luke's, had subsided into rippling pools on the pavement. Here he caught the outline of familiar gestures, and recognized faces he had parted from after the morning service. Where else on earth, he sighed, could

people know as little and yet know it so fluently?

Framed in her doorway, he saw, not without a faint inner disturbance, the still handsome, still regal figure of Amanda Lightfoot. Fifty-eight, if a day, but marvellously preserved, with the bright blue eyes, the rich colour, the foamlike hair, of a woman who had consecrated all her resources to a losing battle with time. He wondered why she did not darken her hair, and acknowledged the next instant that he respected her more for disdaining the subterfuge. Most women and a few men professed to admire gray hair when it crowned so youthful a face as Amanda's; but he had always disliked it, and now, with the essence of spring filtering into his mind, the vision of his first love aroused the obscure despondency with which he stood apart and surveyed the passage of years. In his early youth, the youth of another century, he had adored Amanda Lightfoot to the edge of delirium. At that picturesque period, she had been what he and other gallants of his day were fond of calling his ideal; and though ideals had changed perceptibly since the eighteen eighties, he realized, with a vague sense of reproach, that Amanda had retained the earlier pattern unaltered. In outline, she was to-day precisely what she had been when he loved her; but it was the outline, he felt, of a pressed leaf that has grown faded and brittle. Yet he could not banish com-

pletely the feeling that he was, in some inexplicable way, to blame for his own unfaithfulness to his ideal as well as for the embalmed perfection of his Amanda.

Thirty-seven years ago, for a few blissful months, he had been engaged to her. His ecstasy was as antiquated now as her curving waist. There was to-day even a tinge of irony in his thoughts, as if he were ashamed of having been so hopelessly in love with a woman who was now no longer young. But in his youth, before and even after his marriage, he had been consumed by the white fire of his passion. She was then, and she remained for twenty years afterward, the crowned belle and beauty of Queenborough. In a city famed for beautiful women, no later belle had approached her in loveliness. Three blissful months, and then suddenly, without warning, they had quarrelled. After thirty-seven years, he was obliged to search his memory before he could recall the occasion. Had they actually quarrelled because Amanda—the middle-aged lady he had just observed holding her prayer-book—had danced too often with a young man of attractive appearance but undesirable progenitors? The episode was a comedy when he rehearsed it now in his mind; but thirty-seven years ago it had been tragic enough. Immediately after the quarrel, Amanda, who was a mettlesome beauty, had broken her engagement and had fled to Europe, when the Atlantic

Ocean was wider and Europe farther away than they appear to the far-sighted vision of the Twentieth Century. Had her flight been merely a coquettish gesture, he had since wondered, and had she expected him to follow in pursuit by the next boat that sailed? Well, whatever she had expected, he had intended to follow her. It was on shipboard some months later, in the very act of pursuing Amanda, that the versatile emotions of man had entangled him in an affair with Cordelia; and almost automatically, it appeared when he looked back, he had found himself engaged to her. He had been happy with Cordelia, as a man may be happy in a marriage with any agreeable woman when he stops thinking about it; and yet his happiness had not extinguished his desire for Amanda. For a year or two, before his first child was born, there was a period of madness which, with his natural aptitude for evading unpleasant truths, he had dismissed from his memory. This morning, however, for the first time in years, as if the resurrection of Spring had summoned it from the grave, he recalled the April night when he had rushed to Amanda and implored her to go away with him.

Only her steadfast virtue (though this was the easiest part for him to forget) only her unswerving devotion to duty, had saved them both from disaster. To-day, in sudden poignant longing, he lived over again the old torment of his passion. Well, he was still in love with Amanda; he would

be always in love with her; but it was with an ageless Amanda of the mind, not with the well-preserved lady of the tarnishing years.

Afterward, even when his children had grown up and married, his knowledge of her hopeless love for him had run like a scarlet thread through his life. That she had remained unmarried for his sake was at first a hope, then a belief, and at last, as her hair began to whiten, a source of tender regret. Only recently, since his wife's death, had this regret become faintly flavoured with bitterness. He could not fail to perceive that, in the twelve months of his bereavement, public opinion had been firmly but delicately pushing them together; and the firmer the push toward Amanda, the more obstinately he thrust his will into the ground and refused to advance. It was true, as he reminded himself so often, that Amanda was his ideal. Patience, sweetness, serenity, all the Victorian virtues had flowered in her mind and heart. And that queenly pride, which like most men he admired more than any other attribute, had left him as free to follow his later fancies as if she had not been the one great love of his life. Never, he knew, would she make the slightest gesture of allurement. Never would she reveal by the faintest quiver of an eyelash that he had ruined her life. Yes, there was much to be said in favour of the womanly woman. At least men felt safe with her.

As he rolled past her gently expectant gaze, he found himself thinking impatiently that it was a pity she had never married. Some man missed happiness, was the way the phrase shaped itself in his reverie. A wonderful woman, but, with her silver-gray hair and her fifty-eight years, she must have put the thought of love outside of her life. During the war she had become prominent, he was aware, in work for devastated France; and now, since distance robes even Armenians in an azure hue, she was gazing romantically at the Near East.

A few blocks away stood his house, of which he was inoffensively proud; a collection of brownstone deformities assembled, by some diligent architect of the early 'eighties, under the liberal protection of Queen Anne. In front of the stone steps, as they flowed down from a baptismal font of a porch, he recognized the heavily built figure of his twin sister, who was engaged in a dramatic monologue for the benefit of two restless listeners.

"Bella Upchurch and her daughter Annabel," he thought before he passed, with fraternal lack of enthusiasm, to his sister. "This reminds me that I ought to have sent the girl a present at Easter. Bella must have a hard time managing on her small income, and she hasn't asked for help recently. What was it I heard about the child's unfortunate love affair? Wasn't she engaged to that scamp Angus Blount, who went abroad to study and married some French hussy? Well, whatever it