

THE
GOLDEN VANITY

E. Barrington
1922

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THE GOLDEN VANITY

BY E. BARRINGTON

It was the year of grace 1750, and old Mother Corrigan sat outside her door in Slattern Alley, smoking her pipe with a relish; and 'twas a good day with her, for she had told his fortune that morning for Squire Tyrconnel, on his way to fight a duel in the Phoenix Park with Lawyer Daly; and when it was finished, says she to him:—'Let you count the buttons on his body-coat, your Honour, and fix the third from the top in your eye. And when you stand up to him, say a prayer and pink him with your swordeen in that very spot, and the Lord grant him a bed in heaven, the old villain, for he'll never be asking one on earth again.'

And as she said, so it was, and old Daly turned up his toes and never spoke more, when the Squire got him in the third button. And an hour after, Squire Tyrconnel sent his purse with five golden guineas in it, and a pound of the best rappee to be found in the Four Courts, and all for Mother Corrigan, and she was a proud woman that day. Her house was stuffed as full of money as an egg of meat; but no one would think it

to look at her; for she had it all hid away like an old fairy, so that no one would give a thought to it.

She was sitting at her door at the top of Slattern Alley where it turns into Britain Street, and she in the best of good tempers, when a lady came by with two young daughters beside her—a tall woman, with a fine blossoming colour in her face and an air like a peacock spreading his tail and her eyes as clear as spring water. It would be hard to see a finer woman of her age in a day's walk, and all the gentlemen going to and from the Castle must turn to have another look at the three of them. Her dress might be handsome at first sight; but, closer, you could see she had it held up with pins and stitches, and a bit of good lace fell over it to hide the wear in the front. Also, she drew her feet under her hoop, that they might not be noticed, though they were as small as a young child's. And so she minced along with steps like mice, for fear of showing the burst in her shoe.

But for all that she held up her head like the deer in the Lord Lieutenant's park, and her pride was enough for a queen, and too much for a poor lady walking the Dublin streets and holding her skirt up out of the mud.

But it was the two she had with her that any lady might be proud of. There were never two such out of heaven; and sure it may be believed, for the world has said it often enough since that day, and will say it to the end of time. For the elder was a sweet rogue, with hair like red gold clean out of the fire, and eyes like a blue June morning, and cheeks like May flowers that a rose has kissed, and lips that better than a rose

would kneel to kiss one day; and her smile lit up the street, and she tripped along as light as a spring breeze.

But the younger—sure the Lord was well pleased the day he made her face, for 'twas perfection's self. Her hair was a dark brown veined with gold, and her eyes like purple violets with the rain on them; and when she closed her long lashes 'twas like a cloud over the stars; and her mouth, and the soft smile, and the dimple that dipped when she laughed—a man would stand all day to watch her and not think long. 'Tis a strange thing that one girl will be like that, all beauty and shining sweetness, and another perhaps as good,—for better she could not be in her heart,—will be a poor sorrowful little victim that a cat would not look at in the dark!

And old Mother Corrigan saw them coming, and she took her pipe out from between her teeth, and says she:—

'Halt here, my ladies, the three of you, and hear the fortune that's waiting you—the way you'll be ready when it comes.'

'Fortune!' says the lady, stopping, a girl in each hand; 'tis the black fortune and the sad fortune that befell me since the day the gold ring was on my finger. And I don't want to hear any more, so I don't; for if I had more to bear than I have this minute I wouldn't face the morn's morrow.'

But Mother Corrigan rose up as nimbly as a woman to a dance, and she looked the lady in the eyes as if she was as tall as herself, and, 'Come in,' says she, 'for though 'tis a poor place, the beauty of the three of you will light it like candles, and 'tis here your luck begins.'

So they went in, and the lady said she had not so much as a silver bit to cross her hand with, and indeed would have pulled her daughters back; but the old woman would not have it.

'Leave it so,' says Mother Corrigan, 'what matters an empty hand to-day when you'll fill the two hands of me with gold when the luck comes that's coming? Give me your word, my lady, and I'll take it for as good as five guineas.'

So she gave her word to fill Mother Corrigan's hand with golden guineas; and the two young girls were standing by, their cheeks like burning roses for fear and hope, as the old witch caught the lady's hand, and gabbled something that was not a prayer, and the words came from her like a person talking in their sleep.

'High blood and poverty. Sure, your father had a crown on his head and no gold to gild it with.'

But the lady pulled her hand away angrily.

'Then you know who I am. What's the good of play-acting? I guessed this would be the way of it!'

'I don't know and I don't care,' says the old woman with a grin. 'I'm telling you what I see, and till this minute I never laid eye on you or yours. Don't you be speaking again, for there's no sense in that; but harken!'

So she told her her father was poor and proud, an Irish lord with a castle in a bog and an old coach with the cloth hanging off it in flitters and the plough-horses to draw it; and

that he never gave her a penny since she married, for he had it not to give. And she told her her husband was no better, but running after the cards and dice all day, so that all the world cried folly on her for taking up with him.

'But no matter!' says Mother Corrigan, 'for you did a good deed for yourself that day you stood up with him in the church.'

'A good deed!' says the lady, very angry. 'Don't you be a foolish old woman, and you so near your end. For I got nothing out of it but care and crying and pinching poverty and five children that I don't know how to put the bread in their mouths; and this minute I'm as lonesome as a widow, for my husband is off and away in the country, and here am I in Dublin; and if I know how to get bit or sup for them it's as much as I do know.'

But the old woman shook her head till her teeth rattled.

'Let you be easy and take what's coming. I see you sitting in a king's house, and the walls all gilded gold, and the carpets like moss that your foot would sink into, and riches and grandeur, and everyone bowing down to the mother of the beauties.'

'Well, if the half of it's true,' says the lady, 'the first news should come to me is that I'm a widow; for 'tis impossible it should happen as you say with a husband that hasn't one penny-piece to rattle on a tombstone.'

'You'll not be a widow for many a day, and 'tis your husband's name brings the luck.'

'You don't know what his name is. You couldn't! If you'll tell me his name, I'll engage to believe any mortal thing you tell me.'

So the three looked at the old woman; but she took another look at the hand as she might be reading a book, and:—

'Good-day to you, Mrs Gunning, and good-day to his Lordship's daughter,—my Lord Mayo,—and good-day to the mother of the two beauties that'll sweep the world.'

And she clucked and chuckled to herself, highly diverted with their astonishment. How did she know it? What that old woman did not know would make but a short story. 'Twas said she had informants over the whole countryside, like a Minister of the Crown.

They stared, for they were new come to Dublin, running from their debts in Roscommon and taking the chance to pick up husbands in the city, and there was not one there who knew them.

So she took the youngest girl's hands in hers and says she:
—

'You'll marry the highest man, bar one or two, in England. And you'll not be content with that; for when you bury him, you'll marry the highest man in Scotland; and if I sat here till to-morrow, I couldn't tell you the half of the riches and glory that's waiting for you. You'll have to crawl through the black

mud to get the first; but after that 'tis a clear course, and the mud won't stick to a duchess's gown, young Miss Elizabeth Gunning!'

A duchess! Elizabeth's eyes were like winter stars, they so sparkled—they would put out the light of diamonds. She held herself like a young poplar and says she:—

'And if you 're right, old woman, or anything like it, I'll come and see you when I get promotion, and my Lord Duke shall fill your pockets with gold.'

But Mother Corrigan grinned like a dog.

'I haven't a pocket, my Lady's Honour. My hand's good enough; but I'll not be here when you come riding back to poor old Dublin in yer coach and six—and now for the fairy of the world!'—And she took the hand of the eldest, who was shaking like a leaf and expecting to hear of a prince and his blue ribbon at the least, and her eyes fixed on the old witch like two blue lakes with the stars dipping in them.

But she shook her head.

'A great man, but not so big a man as your sister's.' (The girl looked jealous daggers at Elizabeth.) 'A fine man, and the gold lace on him, and velvet and silk stockings, and gold buckles shining in the shoes of him, and a big house to live in, and fine clothes for your back, and—'

She stopped dead, like a horse pulled up on his haunches; but the young Maria twitched her by the raggedy sleeve.

'Go on. What is it? I want to hear.'

'Don't ask me, and you so beautiful!'

'I do ask, and I'll have it out of you. I suppose you mean I'll get old and ugly like yourself.'

'You'll never be old and ugly. Them that remembers you will remember the loveliest thing God ever made when he took clay in his two hands.'

'I don't know what she means,' says Maria fretfully. 'But sure some women are handsome till they die. Tell us when will the luck come, and how?'

'With the Golden Vanity and a woman with a man's name. And now leave me, my three queens, and I'll have a drop to warm me old bones and a whiff of the pipe to put the life in me. But don't forget the old woman when the great lords is kneeling before you and pouring the diamonds out of baskets before ye—and send the golden guineas, and—'

So she went on mumbling and muttering, and that was the first and last time the old hag told a fortune for love and not for money. She had not long to tell any, for she died next May, and not a soul to cry for her.

They stepped out into the sunshine, their heads high, and scarce a word to say to each other; for all three were thinking of the promises as light and glittering as soap bubbles. And Maria would not spare a word to Elizabeth, for not a woman

but must walk after the heels of a duchess, and she was all for leading.

'The Golden Vanity!' says Elizabeth. 'Mama, what should that be? When I'm a duchess—'

'I don't know, and most likely 'tis not worth knowing.' Mrs Gunning was angry. Her fine brows were drawn together. 'Leave talking of duchesses, you silly fools, and go get the herrings for tea. I have left the children too long as it is.'

So she marched down Britain Street like a queen, for all her burst shoe,—a shabby street it was for such ladies,—and the two walked off to Fishmonger's Alley, and not a head but turned to look at them.

'Faith, they're goddesses and no mistake!' says gay Mr Councillor Egan, on the way from the Law Courts, with his mulberry face and his mulberry velvet coat. 'Twas to Lawyer Curran he said it, and in a small city like Dublin the name held, and the two were called the Goddesses from that time.

Old Corrigan's words gave them courage for a while; but what can hold up against a diet of herrings day in and day out? And that was all the poor lady could give her family. What was she to do? Mr Gunning had took himself off to Castle Coote, his beggarly place in the country, where he could dice and drink in peace with the neighboring squireens, and live off claret and the skinny fowls that pecked about the avenue; and she had the weight of the children on her spare shoulders.

'Twas about this time that young Harry Lepel, the first man they met, in a way of speaking, fell in love with Elizabeth, the younger. The way it happened was this. She was walking down Mount Street with Maria, and she let fall her purse, and nothing in it but a pocket-piece to save her gentility. Harry was strolling off to my Lord Cappoquin's, from mounting guard at the Castle (for at that time his Lordship lived in Merrion Square); and indeed Mr Lepel was as fine a figure of a young man as a girl could wish to see, in his regimentals all laced with gold and his handsome head above them—a brown man with dark eyes. And seeing a young madam drop her purse, he stooped for it and, coming up behind them, saluted very stiff and offered it, and the two turned and looked him in the face.

'Tis certain a man might come up a thousand times behind a woman's back and not be startled as Harry Lepel was when he saw them; for there never was, nor will be, two such sisters. 'Twas like a battery suddenly unmasked; and what chance had the poor devil that was marching up to it like an innocent? The only thing he could do was to surrender at discretion—but to which lady? That was the trouble. Elizabeth Gunning settled it for him.

'I thank you, Sir,' says she, with a smile that had ruined St Anthony, for she was one that smiled with her eyes as well as her mouth—a golden sunshine that the heart opened to naturally.

He was stuttering and stammering. 'Madam, I thank you for the happiness of touching anything your hand hath blessed.'

'Twas sudden, I allow; but then, so too was her beauty. At all events, he dared no more, not having the courage, though all the will, to linger, and was turning off when a queer thing happened. But 'twas to be.

A drunken poltroon of a bargeman was coming up from Liffey-side, lurching and yawing like a Dutch hooker in a gale; and seeing them in a little bunch on the cobblestones, he took an anger at them in his wooden head, and, whether purposely or not I know not, but he elbowed up against Miss Maria and drove her into the dirty kennel; and she gave a faint scream, for her shoes were destroyed with the mud, and it was the only pair she had to her name. So what does Mr Lepel do but let drive straight from the shoulder at the offender, and in a minute the shoes and the lady were out of the kennel and the bargeman lying there as snug as snug, and the oaths he let out of him blackening the air like a flight of crows. So Mr Lepel, smiling with set lips like a picture, says to the girls:—

'Ladies, permit me to escort you to your home. 'Tis much to be regretted the streets are not safe for beauty unattended, though to be sure I have the happiness to profit by the circumstance. I trust it hath been no shock to your sensibility?'

And, indeed, tears had gathered in Elizabeth's eyes; but Maria was laughing like a Hebe, and looking up in his face—the blue-eyed lovely rogue!

'We thank you, Sir. 'Tis what our own brother had done had he been more than five. But while he is in the nursery,

we must be obliged to kind strangers for protection.'

'Madam, I would not willingly remain a stranger,' says Mr Harry, very eager, and touching his cocked hat. 'Permit me to present myself for want of a better introducer. My name is Harry Lepel.'

'I thank you, Sir. 'Twill be remembered with gratitude. May we now bid you farewell?'

Miss Maria sank down, in a curtsy so well devised that it showed the littlest foot in the world, save only Elizabeth's. A fortunate bootmaker later was to make five guineas an afternoon by showing their shoes at a penny a head to the mob that gathered to stare at them; but that time was not yet come. Mr Lepel spoke earnestly:—

'Madam, you can't suppose—'t is not possible I can permit you to return alone after such an adventure. The sun sinks and the streets are mighty ill lit. If my company is disagreeable, I can walk ten paces behind; but otherwise—'

Here Elizabeth interposed, with a fine colour in her cheek:
—

'The company of our protector can't be disagreeable—'tis a favour. But, Sir, I will be frank with you: we are in Dublin incognita; our lodging is not equal to our pretensions to birth; and in short—'

She hesitated, with her eyes dropped and the lashes like night upon her cheek. The crimson bow of her upper lip trembled—a seductive picture of troubled beauty. Anyhow it

did Mr Harry's business for him. He could no more have tore himself away at that moment than he could have embraced the bargeman swearing blue murder at his feet.

'Madam, these are misfortunes that may happen to the greatest, and 'tis easy seen that in your case breeding and birth combine with—beauty. Is it indiscreet to ask the name of the ladies I have the honour to address?'

'Tis very indiscreet,' says Miss Maria, with one of her bright side-glances; 'but yet—should we withhold it, sister?'

'Surely not from so kind a friend.' Elizabeth spoke eagerly. 'Our name, Sir, is Gunning, and we are grand-daughters to the late Viscount Mayo and nieces to his present Lordship. And when I add that our parents have fallen into poverty, you will comprehend—'

Her voice paused on a silver note, which had the beginning of a sob; and when Elizabeth saddened, the world must sadden with her, so lovely were her long eyes and the drooping head. Pity poor Mr Harry! Talk of Scylla and Charybdis—he stood between the Sirens, and could he have halved his heart (and many men have that power), one half had gone to either charmer.

'Madam,' says he tenderly, 'I feel for your sorrows more than I can express. Might I but have the happiness to be presented to your mama; for 'tis the most prodigious circumstance—I am the son of Sir Francis Lepel of Tarrington in Yorkshire, and I have heard him speak of my Lord Mayo many a time. His Lordship stood second to my

grandfather in his famous duel with Lord Ayrshire thirty year since. My name will not be unknown. Permit me—'

And again he saluted, very gallant, and the three proceeded down the street, the girls on thorns for thinking of the dingy rooms, and their mother down-at-heel, and the everlasting herrings sizzling on the grate, and Lucy and Kitty screaming for their supper. 'Twas thinking thus that Maria touched Elizabeth's arm, as much as to say: 'Shall we let him go?' For indeed these girls had a perfect language of signs between them, elaborated in the shifts and devices of their life; and Miss Maria, at least, was an accomplished little schemer. But Elizabeth responded not to the pinch.

'Why, Sir,' says she sweetly, 'the name is indeed familiar. Sitting on his Lordship's knee, often have I heard him discourse of Sir Francis. You are no stranger. Yet truth is best. We are poor, Mr Lepel. My sister and I are debarred from all the pleasures of our rank, and our only concern is how to lighten our mama's burden if we could. 'Tis this makes us hesitate, for we can't offer you the hospitality we would.'

'Name it not, Madam, I entreat,' says Mr Harry, trying to look into those too seductive eyes. 'God forbid I should add to your anxieties. But had I the happiness to know your mama, whose beauty half Ireland knows by repute, sure I might be permitted to open the way to some pleasures. There is, for instance, a Birthnight ball to be celebrated at the Castle—'

'Sir, you are all goodness, but gentlemen understand little of the difficulties of poor young ladies of quality. How should they? We have no dresses fit for the eyes of his Excellency. Even shoes—'

She permitted a foot to appear beneath the edge of her petticoat and ambushed it again. But it had done its work.

'You tear my heart, Madam. But since that little marvel of a foot recalls Cinderella's, permit me to say that a fairy godmother smoothed the way for that young lady to a certain ball, and there she met the prince whose throne she afterwards shared.'

'There are no fairies in Dublin, Sir.' Her voice was like flowing honey, while the little foot so commended was bestowing a sharp kick upon the fair Maria, and thus it said:
—

'Run ahead. Turn the corner and run like a lamp-lighter, and let mama know what is toward. Hide the herrings. Bundle the children to bed. Fling mama's Irish lace over her head. I can hold him fifteen minutes. Speed!'

'Tis much to be said in one kick, and it takes a woman to say and a woman to hear; but Miss Maria was a woman, though but eighteen. She smiled like Truth's self.

'Sister, if 'tis not disagreeable to you to spare me, I have the message to leave at Mrs Flaherty's, and will go forward and meet with you at our door. Excuse me, Mr Lepel. My sister is a slow walker and I a swift. I knew not 'twas so late.'

Off went Miss Maria. Turning the corner, she picked up her petticoats and legged it along like a hare at dawn.

It may be thought that the acquaintance ripened in those fifteen minutes, which doubled into thirty. Elizabeth's step was slower, her voice more musical, even as a nightingale sings her sweetest to the moon. The shade of my Lord Mayo might hover about them to safeguard propriety, but Mr Harry drew as near as the rampart of the lady's hoop would permit, bending his head to catch her murmurs, and his nostrils inhaling the faint perfume of silken hair rolled back from the whitest brow in the world. They made a pair that many would have remarked, but for the ill-lit streets.

Maria awaited them at the shabby door in Britain Street.

'I would not go in, sister, lest mama should scold me for leaving you; and indeed I am but just arrived,' says she demurely. And since she had not entered, 'twas singular how neat was the appearance of that dingy room; for 'twas dingy, do what you would.

The fire burned brightly, and if there was a delicate odour of herrings and onions, 'twas the worst could be said, for none were to be seen. Indeed, a rich perfume fought with it, as if a hasty hand had dashed the odours of Araby here and there to discourage the herrings. A large velvet cloak, the worse for wear, disguised the rents of the sofa, whereon sat Mrs Gunning, majestic in another of faded purple satin, beneath which her dress remained conjectural. A noble square of Limerick point was flung over her head and hung

veil-like by each ear; and, indeed, with the little cherub Lucy at her feet, she might have sat for an aging Madonna.

Kitty was bundled off to the camp-bed in the back room; and sure the picture was homelike, if you studied the handsome lady rather than the ragged chairs. 'Twas the best they could do, poor souls, in fifteen minutes, and wonderful in the time. 'Tis women for quick thinking and quick acting where men are concerned; and, indeed, the look of astonishment Mrs Gunning gave as the three entered was inimitable, though already she had every particular set down in her mind. She swept the stateliest curtsy, and cast a rebuking maternal eye on her daughters ere she addressed Mr Lepel.

But, when explanations were made, how did her brow clear and a fair-weather smile efface the frost! She welcomed him with cordial kindness, with such reminiscences of his family as warmed his heart; and though no hospitality was offered save one,—a bottle of generous claret in a silver cup enriched with the Mayo arms,—'twas given with such goodwill, and served by so lovely a cup-bearer, the fair Maria, that the man does not breathe but must feel it worthy of the three ladies who tendered it. He toasted them one and all in turn, and if his bow to Elizabeth was a little lower, that circumstance did not displease Mrs Gunning.

'I leave you to judge, Mr Lepel,' says she, 'what it costs a mother to see her dear ones exiled from all the little gay scenes where it would become them to appear. But what can I do? My father's grandchildren, Mr Gunning's daughters,

can't appear except with propriety; and why should I hesitate to tell so kind a friend that 'tis beyond my power?'

'Twas discussed between them all for an hour as to the Birthnight ball; but Mrs Gunning was resolute, nor could Mr Harry dare to make the offers that trembled on his lips. He could have groaned aloud to think on the sums he wasted nightly on gaming—one half of which would have adorned these beauties and set them free to flutter their wings in the sunshine of fashion. Later Maria, half-smiling, half-sad, told how they were promised luck by the old witch of Dublin, though she gave not all the particulars. She built not on it, she declared, nor yet did Elizabeth; and she, a soft sigh parting her lips, confirmed her sister: 'the more so,' says she, 'that none of us can imagine what is the Golden Vanity. Is there such a ship, to be the ship of our fortunes? 'Tis that it sounds most like.'

He shook his head. Mrs Gunning softly remonstrated:—

'My dears, be not giddy, nor let your heads run on such follies. There is no such name and no such thing and 'tis impossible—'

More she would have said, but a man came crying somewhat down the street, and beside him went another with a flambeau, that he might read a paper in his hand, and what the man cried was this:—

'Let the fashion of Dublin, both ladies and gentlemen, take notice that there comes presently to the theatre in Aungier

Street the dramatic company which Mr Sheridan presents to his patrons in a new and luscious play, by name—'

But here was the speaker's voice drowned by a wagon passing on the cobblestones.

'What is it?' cries Mrs Gunning, running to the window; for indeed she loved the play as well as did her girls. And, as if the question had reached him, the man turned towards her and bellowed like the bull of Bashan: 'The Golden Vanity!'

The little company within stared transfixed upon one another.

For the next fortnight did the three live in a kind of rapture; and 'tis not to be wondered at, the name coming so pat on the prophecy. And sure, Mr Lepel was no less moved; for he took a deeper than brotherly interest in all that touched them, his heart being caught that day in Dublin streets; and if he then thought Elizabeth a beauty, it took not a week to rank her an angel. Before the week was out, he laid his heart and the reversion of the baronetcy at her foot, not regarding the worn little shoe that cased it. For, indeed, the sisters wore the same size, and Elizabeth being the better mistress of her wardrobe, 'tis to be feared she sought often for her own, to find them gadding abroad on Miss Maria's feet and herself left to luck. 'Twas mortifying, and her heavenly blush was as much owing to this circumstance as to the gentleman's ardour.

However, taken by Mr Harry's fine person and clothes (and which was the most potent is not known), she accepted the heart, and he set about to inform his father of his good fortune, for mother he had none. 'Twas with inward quakings, for beauty, were it Helen's own, is but a blunted arrow against a seasoned heart of seventy: and Sir Francis Lepel had reached that discreet age. 'Twas vain to tell him of celestial eyes and roseate bloom. God help us! 'tis little he cared for the like. The baronetcy was poor and Mr Harry expensive, and what Sir Francis looked to was a fat balance at Child's the banker's. Was the lady a fortune? And when Mr Harry, trembling, avowed that a single doit could not be hoped in that quarter, the old gentleman, his temper as well as his foot highly inflamed with gout, swore to disinherit him if the matter went further.

Poor Harry was in a sad quandary. He slept and ate ill, and 'twas provoking that Elizabeth bloomed like a rose and troubled not her fair head about Sir Francis. Her mind seemed possessed with but the one thought—to attend the Birthnight ball and, like the planet Venus, shine in her rightful heaven. And indeed Mr Harry could not fancy her heart so deeply engaged as he might wish; for he could scarce get a word in while the two peered into the mercers' shops, gloating on satin and muslin. Mrs Gunning, as improvident, was almost drawn in by them, when word came of a card debt that their papa owed to Sir Horatius Blake, and the unfortunate lady received not even the pittance that provided herrings for six hungry mouths; so that they were like to come down to dry bread, which event fairly ended all talk of the ball.

'Tis not to be supposed that Mr Harry did not offer to set all the mantua-makers in Dublin to work, though in his heart he knew his own credit did not stand immaculate. He stormed up and down the room, protesting, vowing, exclaiming; but Mrs Gunning would have none of it. Says she:—

'I do all justice to your kind heart, Mr Lepel, but 'tis not, because we are unfortunate, that we have no pride, and 'tis impossible Miss Gunning should accept garments from the gentleman she honours with her hand.'

And Elizabeth, lovelier than ever in grief, confirmed her mother, Maria stamping her foot like an angry goddess. 'Twill be admitted 'twas a hard case. And since misfortunes don't come alone, arrived a furious letter from Sir Francis, demanding instantly to see Mr Harry, and acquainting him that his appointment in the Guards was cancelled, and he must join his new regiment in London at a day's notice. Sir Francis had good interest with the lady whose interest with His Majesty was unquestioned, and 'tis to be thought this event did not come by chance.

Oh, then were wailings and passionate embraces on the part of Mr Lepel, Miss Elizabeth receiving them with wondering eyes. 'For London is not so far but we shall meet again, Harry,' says she, with her angelical smile.

He had preferred tears, no doubt; but a man must take what comes his way, and be thankful. He, who had never before been guilty of the like, now composed a set of verses

of atrocious demerit. Indeed, the first two lines will suffice:

If from my Chloe's snowy breast I part,
Grant me to know I bear with me her tears.

'Tis very pretty!' says Chloe. 'O Harry, I would you did not love me so! A girl's affections are cool and temperate, I think—at least 'tis so with me. Forget me a little,—though not too much, child,—and be happy.'

It might have been her mother who spoke. 'Tis certain no person ever had the appearance of sweet simplicity more than Elizabeth Gunning; but whether 'twas wholly devoid of art—Ah, well, shall we dissect the rose? 'Tis sometimes best to enjoy and ask no questions.

The day of parting he came to Britain Street, and solemnly renewed his vows in the presence of Mrs Gunning and Maria.

'And, O my Elizabeth,' cries he, 'pledge me once more that hand which is all my joy. Swear that neither raging seas' ('twas a day calm as milk and the Irish sea like a mirror) 'nor the brutish tyranny of man shall divide us, and that our constant hearts shall never change!'

Miss Elizabeth raises heavenly eyes, a glittering moisture enhancing their brilliance.

'Have I not pledged my word, Harry; and if you believe not that, what will serve? Sure 'tis you that rove and will see fairer faces' (frantic protestations from Mr Lepel) 'yet I don't doubt *you*. Farewell, dear Harry, and remember us when you are in the glitter of London.'

She covered her face with a handkerchief, and he took the last embrace, kissed Mrs Gunning's hand and Maria's, and hurried madly from the room. Elizabeth unveiled her face and folded the handkerchief for future use.

'He's gone,' says poor Mrs Gunning, seeking her own; 'and if I know where to-morrow's dinner is to come from, for you all, I'm—a Dutchman!'

They mingled their tears, and Elizabeth's were real enough now. 'Tis possible, could the matter be sifted, that many more tears have been shed for absent dinners than absent lovers; and certainly, though beauty may survive without the last, it cannot without the first. There was so much of gloomy and terrible in their mama's aspect, that Maria wept also; and Kitty and Lucy, with the little John, who had all been secreted in the bedroom during the adieux, dashed in screaming at the tops of their voices, as if the heavens were falling; and so sat the poor unfortunate family drowned in tears. 'Twas not balls they thought of then, nor departing lovers, but simply bread and herrings.

A lady came down the street, picking her way through the garbage that adorned it. Her dress was hooped in the mode,

and of a showy brocade, with much tinsel interwoven and very glittering, so that the ragged children in the gutter stood, finger in mouth, to see. She had a muslin cross-over upon an expansive bosom, and 'twas finely laced with Mechlin, not too clean, and set off with a black velvet ribbon about the throat, graced with a clasp of paste. A large tilted hat tied beneath her chin shaded an arch and sparkling pair of eyes, which, though not in their first youth, lighted up a face with striking features and an air of easy good-humour. If her critics had accused this lady of being somewhat too good-humoured with the other sex, why 'twas perhaps natural to her circumstances and needs no further excuse. Her worst detractors never denied her a good heart, and an ear open to the lament of misery. In her hand she carried a cane of fine ebony, and altogether appeared a radiant vision of a fine woman in the purlieu of Britain Street. She paused and looked about her, bewildered.

'I declare I know not where I am got to!' says she, half aloud. 'And these barbarians—'tis hard to be understood or to understand their gibberish. If now—'

And even as the words left her lips, arose a piercing wail from across the street, in which three lusty young throats united—Lucy, Kitty, and John, each outscreeching the other.

'Crimini!' says Madam, 'what's this? Is Herod abroad in Dublin?'

The screams redoubled. She added: 'Tis almost to be wished he was!' And stood half-laughing, half-unwilling to pass on.

'I will!' says she; and more doubtfully, 'I won't! 'Tis not my business. Sure I have enough stage tears and sobs to make me distrust all I hear.'

She turned resolutely away, and halted again.

'Poor lady! 'Tis a lady soothing them, and weeping herself. I will! She can but bid me exit.'

And so marched to the open door, and into the narrow passage, and rapped smartly with her cane on the door of the parlour, bringing all her natural assurance to bear.

Dead silence. The screams halted, as if a tap was turned off: whoever was inside was all ears. She rapped again. And now a scuffling; and Maria opened the door, and six pairs of astonished eyes gloated on the stranger. And no less did hers on the party within; for there sat Mrs Gunning, beautiful and maternal, with the little John's curly pate on her bosom; Elizabeth, lovely as the day, leaning on one shoulder of her mother; Kitty and Lucy, golden-curled cherubs, clinging to her gown; and Maria, like a sorrowful wood-nymph, holding the door. Sure, never was such a family, and these children seemed made of some more exquisite clay than ordinary.

'Lord, am I got into heaven, for I see the angels about me!' says Madam, advancing with a reverence lower than the paltry room demanded. 'Forgive an intruder, Madam, and confer a benefit. For being newly come to Dublin, I've lost my way returning from Smock Alley, and while I called up courage to enter and ask it from any other than these savages, I heard a cry that hastened my steps. Be pleased to pardon

me, and say if I can be of service to yourself and your sweet family; for 'tis the plain truth—I'm dazzled as I stand, by the beauty of your olive branches.'

'Tis not possible to mistake the voice of sympathy, and Mrs Gunning, rising from her chair, curtsied in her turn, and begged the visitor to be seated. 'Lord, Madam,' says she, 'you catch us very unfit for company; but so kind a heart needs no excuse, and I will be candid with you. We are of birth and breeding like yourself.' ('Twas a skilful compliment, and the lady simpered.) 'And therefore, as a gentlewoman of quality, you shall understand my grief when I present myself as my Lord Viscount Mayo's daughter, and add that I have not the wherewithal to clothe or feed these innocents! You are yourself too young to be a mother, Madam, yet will comprehend a mother's anguish. I am Mrs Gunning of Castle Coote, and such is my condition!'

She wept again. The lady applied a laced kerchief to either eye.

'Madam, a heart of marble must feel for you, and mine is not marble—far from it. But sure such beauty must open all doors. Marriage—'

'Alas, Madam, in these days of money-grubbing avarice, what is beauty? My second'—she indicated Elizabeth—'is cruelly rejected by the father of a gentleman of birth not near so high as our own, because she has no estates pinned to her petticoat.'

'Monster!' cries the lady with spirit.

Mrs Gunning proceeded: 'And, O Madam, were you in want, as a lady of quality sometimes is, of a young lady to write letters, to keep accounts, and all those little useful arts such as mending lace and the like, I can truly say that in my Elizabeth you would find solid worth. She is graver than my Maria. Sure we cannot have had the happiness to meet you for nothing. 'Twas ordained you should walk in upon us. Permit me to ask the name of our benefactress.'

The lady hummed and hawed a little; but not being easily daunted, she tossed up her head bravely enough ere she replied:—

'Gemini, Madam! We can't all be ladies of quality; and if we could, I see not who could provide the wants and amusements of the fashionable. To be plain with you, I am an actress—'

'An actress!' screams Maria, all rapture. 'Sister, do you hear? Was it not this very day I said, would I could go on the stage like the famous Mrs Woffington, and other beauties such as this lady. And then should I be happy and pour all the gold I made into my mama's lap.'

The lady shook her head, a little melancholy.

'Gold? Not much of that on the stage, young miss. 'Tis found there—true; but—but—indirectly. However, this concerns you not. Madam, I am in no need of such an attendant as you describe, having my dresser and—'

'I might have guessed it! When did luck ever come our way? Farewell, Madam. Return to your own happiness and abandon us to our misery.'

Heartrending! The lady drew nearer.

'Gemini, Madam! You misjudge me. A woman can but offer what's in her power. A good word from me to our manager, Mr Sheridan, and with such faces I doubt not small parts can be found for your daughters in one of the plays to be produced here. We even now rehearse it, and the parts of Susan and Peggy Careless go begging. But dare I mention such a proposal?'

'Madam, you are all goodness and beauty!' cries Elizabeth. And Maria fell on her knees like one distraught and kissed the pretty hand in its black mitten. 'Twas known to them that Mr Sheridan's company was from London and would return there; and indeed this came like a sunburst through the cloud, for 'twas food, clothes, admiration, money, hope—and many other charming things that set them dreaming on worlds to conquer. They swept their mama away on the wave of their delight; and indeed that poor lady was always prone to take gilding for gold so long as it glittered sufficiently.

'And what, Madam, is this play in which Susan and Peggy appear?'

'Child, 'tis "The Golden Vanity"—a play of a poor girl that weds a rich lord and—'

Heavens and earth! She could not continue, for how describe the joy and wonder of the family! Reserve fled away. Prudence borrowed the wings of Hope, and dressed her face with rainbows. Crowding around the stranger, they entreated her name, that it might grace their prayers; and she, radiant with the sunshine she dispensed, calls out:—

'Why, girls, sure you have heard it. 'Tis I am the leading lady in all Mr Sheridan produces at present. I am George Anne Bellamy.'

'George!' screams Mrs G. 'A woman with a man's name, said old Mother Corrigan. Girls, your luck's come!' And with that falls into strong hysterics and frights them all to death.

But joy is a strong cordial, and 'twas not long ere she sat up, with George Anne's hand in hers, telling her the story of Mother Corrigan. 'Tis to be supposed Mrs G. had heard that Mrs Bellamy's heart was not marble; but what was the lady to do? For my Lord Mayo spent his rents five years ahead, and though his good nature would give the coat off his back, that would neither clothe nor feed her family; while, as for Mr Gunning, that gentleman regarded his wife and children no more than the cuckoo that leaves her offspring to chance.

Mrs Bellamy was all ears. 'Twas prodigious, 'twas vastly astonishing, she vowed. Maria was sent out with half a guinea, and they had a comfortable dish of tea, with currant bread and what not; and she told them tales of the stage and the fine matches made by Mrs This and Signorina That, and, by the time the candles were lit, they were all sworn friends. They parted with embraces; for Mrs G. was as easy as

George Anne, and the girls must needs follow the example set.

She had her way with Mr Sheridan, and she returned next day to announce her success, triumphing and rattling on like a girl herself, so pleased was she with their pleasure. All was joy and gladness, and she named the hour of the first rehearsal and their introduction to Mr Sheridan, when Maria, turning archly upon her, says:—

'Look you here, dearest Mrs Bellamy! Think what it will cost us to refuse this.' And so holds up a splendid card, thick as boards and embellished with a gilt edge and the Royal Arms and the Irish Harp, and Heaven knows what braveries, inviting the Honourable Mrs Gunning, Miss Gunning, and Miss Elizabeth Gunning to the Birthnight ball at the Castle, on the part of his Excellency, the Earl of Harrington. Diamonds were never so bright as the eyes that sparkled above it; for the charming new prospect of the stage had quite effaced the ball, and poor Mr Harry's trouble in securing the invitation was like to go for nothing.

'I care nothing now for it!' cries Maria, and Elizabeth echoed her; while George Anne looked thoughtfully at the Lion and Unicorn guarding a Paradise she could not hope to enter. Maria made to tear the card across; but Mrs Bellamy caught it from her hand and did not smile.

'Children,' says she at last, 'you know not what you talk of. I would have a word alone with your mama. Take the little ones in your hand, and go out a while in the sunshine.' She thrust some cream-cakes upon them, and they did so, looking

doubtfully at her cloudy eyes; and when the door shut, she turned to Mrs Gunning.

'Madam, you know well 'tis my wish to serve you and yours. But seeing this invitation, there's thoughts comes into my head that I must needs speak out. This' (she flicked the card) 'is the life for the Miss Gunnings, and not the stage. 'Twould scarce become me to tell a lady like yourself what must be faced there, but—but—'tis much! Ask Peg Woffington—ask Kitty Clive—ask George Anne Bellamy!'

There was silence. Mrs G. stared at her, all aghast.

'Why, yesterday, all your talk was of pleasure and success. Sure, dear Mrs Bellamy, 'twas not like your kindness to draw on the poor things till they can think of naught else, and now so far otherwise.'

'Why, Madam, I thought there was no other way. But seeing this, my mind misgives me and I falter. I'm a plain-dealer, Madam, with all my faults, and 'tis easy to be seen your daughters are a world's wonder. That being so, 'tis certain the dangers are tenfold for them. They'll see the glories and grandeurs—but not through a wedding ring.'

'If you mean, Madam, that my daughters—' Mrs Gunning flamed out, furious; but George Anne was not to be turned from her purpose. She raised her hand in a fine stage attitude.

'Madam, I wish vastly to serve you. Hear my proposal. Accept this invitation.'

'Impossible. We have no dresses, no shoes, no equipage, and no means to get them. 'Tis absurd!'

"Tis not absurd. Hear me. In the theatre properties is a fine dress for Lady Modish and two more for Peggy and Susan Careless. Not perhaps what such ladies might expect, but—I know men. There's not a man will look at their gowns for looking at their faces, though the suits are well enough when all's said. I vow, Madam, you have so long lived beside the two that you forget what beauties they are. I wager my next benefit to a China orange that you'll have no more care once they are seen. Indeed, your young madams are what one reads of in romances. Give them this chance, and if it fails, I'm good for my offer; but I'm much mistook if you hold me to it. Madam, use your wits! Would you have them what I won't name, when they may be what your old witch foretold?"

She smiled her charming smile, and pressed Mrs G.'s hand. The lady pondered. 'Twas disagreeable to owe such a thing to a mere actress, and one, too, whose reputation was a trifle flyblown. The stage she might have swallowed, but an entry to the world where she and her daughters had a birthright—Fie! 'twas a very different pair of shoes. But George Anne had that in her eye that would be obeyed; and seeing it, Mrs G. dropped her high tone and returned the pressure with an air of sensibility.

"Twas said by old Corrigan that 'twas you to bring us luck, dearest Madam, and 'tis certain you are prudence itself. If you will ensure us the dresses, I accept; and, indeed, my

Lord Harrington's father was a friend of my own revered father in happier days. 'Tis possible—'

'Tis certain,' cries George Anne gaily. 'Not a word will I drop to Mr Sheridan who is a perfect Israelite where theatre matters are in hand.'

She was gone ere the girls returned, and 'tis needless to tell their wonder. They preferred the stage, yet condescended to say they would favour the ball, since Mrs Bellamy counselled it. 'But, never, never will it turn my heart from the charming footlights!' says Maria. 'What say you, sister?'

'I know not. My taste is quieter than yours. I will tell you my mind the day after the ball. Poor Harry—'tis he has given us this.'

She would say no more, but sat thoughtful.

II

'Twas the evening of the Birthnight ball when George Anne arrived, in a hackney coach, attended by her dresser, and scarce visible for mantua boxes. The three children were put away—their usual fate—in the beds within, and though not able to sleep for excitement, were mute as mice, lest they be punished by the closing of the door upon the ravishing glimpses they had of the parlour.

'Tis not for a mere scribbler to intrude upon the chaste mysteries of the toilet. Suffice it, therefore, to say that, when all was completed, George Anne and Mrs March, the dresser, stood back, breathless, to contemplate the work of their hands.

Mrs Gunning, her fine brown hair piled on her head into an edifice twisted with gauze and feathers that granted her five inches more of height, looked a Roman empress—her fine bust displayed to advantage and sustaining a necklace of stage emeralds set in pinchbeck, which could not be told from the veritable jewels, so closely were they copied for George Anne from her Grace the Duchess of Bridgewater's. Her hoop was very wide, and over it a green satin brocade flowered with gold, wherein George Anne had played Lady Modish but twenty times, and so rich that 'twould serve her great-grand-daughter. 'Twas ruffled at neck and elbow with Mechlin, and the girls gazed in awe at their splendid mama. 'Twas a changed woman. She expanded, she glided, she moved, as a swan floating through her native element differs from the same lurching along the bank.

But Elizabeth—O beautiful! Sure 'twas joy to see her! Her hair, a-gleam with gold, was rolled back and carried in massive braids that crowned and bound her head in the Grecian taste, confined by a bandeau of pearls that crossed her brow. Her Grecian robe (indeed the fair Miss Lebeau had played Calista in it) was a white satin with a fall of lace, and round her slender throat a chain of seed pearl. Mrs Bellamy knew her business. 'Twas simple, but simplicity becomes a goddess, and frills and flounces can but distract the eye from

loveliness that seems native to heaven. Her mother surveyed her in a kind of amaze and then turned to Maria.

'Twas peculiar to these two fair sisters that they adorned each other, each appearing more beautiful when both were in company. Indeed 'twas said later that this contributed much to their triumphs. Maria now appeared in a fine India muslin embroidered in gold wheat-ears, a robe which, 'tis to be feared, Mr Sidney of the East India Company, the rich nabob of Jubblepore, had laid at the feet of George Anne in pursuance of a suit not wholly disdained. No matter! On Maria it shone like the raiment of the youngest of the angels, draping yet expressing her fair limbs with a seductive reserve that was art embellishing nature. She had a row of seed pearl like her sister, and one rose of faintest pink nestled in her virgin bosom. Her hair of burning gold was dressed in curls *à la mouton*, as Mrs March expressed it, and a string of pearls wove through the rich tresses.

But 'tis useless to describe beauty. As well dry a rose in a book and look for bloom and dew. It depends on bright eye and smiling lip and wordless sweetness and the fall of exquisite lashes and the tone of music and—and this poor scribbler lays down his pen and attempts no more to paint where the great artists later owned themselves vanquished.

'And all is prepared,' cries George Anne, exulting. 'For my mother's job coach is at hand to take my three beauties; and distress not yourself, my dearest Madam, for I engage to remain with your little family and will return in the coach when it deposits you here. And now, children, peep and

whisper no longer, but come see your lovely mama and sisters before they go to conquer the world.'

'Twas the kindest heart! She clapped her hands, and in rushed the three children like Bedlam let loose, careering round and about the three, shouting, laughing, and begging to be took also. Raisins and oranges from George Anne's reticule alone restored them to their beds in peace.

'"The Golden Vanity" has sent forth two incomparable beauties,' says she at the door as they stepped into the coach. 'May it bring them the luck of its heroine and more.'

St Patrick's Hall was all of a blaze with wax candles and flambeaux, and shining mirrors set in with gilt Cupids, and twinkling of fairy lights in the great glass lustres and their glittering chains of drops and pendants. Garlands of green, with roses interspersed, were in swags and loops about the splendid walls, where hung the pictures of bygone viceroys in ribbon and star, in frames to match the mirrors that multiplied the scene a hundredfold.

And, more than all, the handsomest women in Ireland were decked out in silks and satins and all the family jewels, and they sparkling like the lustres above their heads; and all the gentlemen, in uniforms and silk stockings showing off their fine calves, and they strutting with their swords and squiring the ladies and bowing. And above it all the Throne, with the velvet canopy and the Royal Arms, and my Lord Harrington, his Excellency, sitting like a picture of himself,

with his stars and orders and his coat of sky-blue velvet laced and embroidered with gold; and as each pretty lady came up to him and swept her curtsy he lifted her by the hand and kissed her cheek; for the Viceroy has that privilege, and many a man envied him a few of the kisses, if they did not envy them all.

And now at the great doors appeared three ladies, quietly, like persons used to assemblies, though to be honest their knees were trembling under them and their little hearts quaking. So they were passed on from one golden image to another, until they arrived before his Excellency, the company politely making way, and a whisper that rose to a buzz running with them. 'Lord! who are they?'—'Who can they be?'—'Look at the girls!'—'Exquisite!'—'Beautiful!'—For my part I see nothing in them. Vilely dressed. Very far from modish.'—'Too tall.'—'Too short'—in fact, every expression of approval and disfavour. But every lady stood on the tips of her satin shoes to see, and every gentleman took the fullest advantage of his height; and had poor Harry been there, he had died of jealousy. Alas! even his fond letters were not in Elizabeth's gentle bosom, but tossed forgot on the bed in Britain Street, with George Anne casting the eye of sensibility on them.

And now the officer who performed the introduction took Mrs Gunning's gloved hand, very stately, and led her before the Throne.

'The Honourable Mrs Gunning, your Excellency.'

Down she flowed in a magnificent curtsey, her hands supporting her brocade on either side, her head bent majestic—Beauty adoring Power. Suddenly my Lord steps nimbly forward on the dais.

'What?' he cries. 'Do my eyes deceive me? Impossible! But sure I have the happiness to see the daughter of my old friend, and I am honoured beyond expression to welcome her beneath my roof. Where have you been retired? And what are these two lovely nymphs? Your daughters? No, sure it can't be and you all youth and beauty yourself. Present them.'

And while mama blushed and bridled, the magic words were spoke, and the two dropped the gentlest curtseys, and rising, received a salute more than usual warm from his Excellency on either fair blushing cheek. 'Twas observed he lingered an instant on Maria's. Viceroys, too, are human.

'Twas an instantaneous conquest—how could it be otherwise? A moment later they were the centre of a competing crowd of gentlemen, and glances of coldness and aversion raining on them from ladies only a little less fair and now deserted. That his Excellency was the first victim, none could doubt, for when he was not in company with the beauties, he was discoursing of them to others. True it is that he conducted the Dowager Rathconnel to the supper-table, but equally true, that he left the lady seated before such dainties as ensure an old age of gout, disengaging himself with a nimble wit that should have appeased her, and sought out the mother of the Graces, devoting himself to memories of old times, while Maria and Elizabeth danced and smiled on their adorers, blooming and beautiful.

'My dear Madam,' says his Lordship, 'how is it possible that you have lived so retired for fifteen years? 'Twas not justice to your admirers—of whom I was ever one. How came it about?'

'Why, your Excellency,' says the lady very serious, 'twas not with my good-will. You know well that my late father's good heart was his chief possession; and my husband—alas!'

Sure a pause and downcast eyes are more expressive than any words. His Excellency shook his majestic peruke, and echoed the lady.

'Alas! Cards, horses, the bottle—how many a wife and mother hath had cause to curse that fatal trinity! And 'tis even so, Madam?'

She applied George Anne's laced handkerchief to her eye, then smiled faintly and seeing opportunity, seized it.

'I would not cloud this festive scene, your Excellency, yet why should I reserve from a tried friend that I and my poor daughters—'

'Yes, yes!' cries his Lordship, very impatient.

'—Are here this night in borrowed dress,' continues Mrs G. solemnly, 'and are indebted even for the shoes upon our feet to the kindness of an actress, Mrs Bellamy.'

'Good God!' says Lord Harrington, genuinely shocked, and the more so that he had himself known Mrs Bellamy some

years since. 'Sure it can't be! I won't believe it. Indeed, we must discourse further of this. Come hither!'

Profoundly interested, he led her to a withdrawing-room and there they fell into so deep discussion that never had he been such a negligent host. And when Mrs Gunning left the withdrawing-room, it was with an imperial head held high, and a flush in her cheek which became her so well that the most prying female eye would not give her a day over thirty.

His Excellency led out Maria to a minuet. Twice he took Elizabeth down the country-dances. The generous wine had warmed his heart, the glow of beauty kindled it to flame, and it was plain to be seen that his eyes were only for the fair Gunnings. The world followed his example—when does it otherwise?—and a petal from Maria's rose, a look from the violet, dark-lashed eyes of Elizabeth, were the prizes of the night.

A party of noblemen escorted them to the doors on leaving, and 'twas with the utmost difficulty Mrs Gunning persuaded them it was unnecessary to ride in cavalcade about the coach to Britain Street. When the ladies were gone, they returned into the Banqueting Hall to toast 'The Irish Beauties,' and break their glasses in their honour until the floor was strewn with broken crystal, and the celebrants were most of them borne speechless to their beds. Indeed, a challenge passed between my Lords Cappoquin and Tuam upon a dispute as to which lady was the greater Venus.

Never was such a triumph! And Mrs Gunning, falling into George Anne's arms in Britain Street, declared with tears of

joy:—

'You were right, entirely right, my dearest Madam. I am promised a handsome pension on the Irish Establishment, and his Excellency counsels me to transport my girls to London, where, he considers, they may pretend to the highest matches, and promises introductions worthy of them. And, O Madam, playing at faro in the card-room, I won a milleleva—no less!—Fifty guineas!—Lord! was ever anyone so happy!'

Tears of sensibility stood in George Anne's eyes. She was one who shared to the full the griefs or triumphs of her friends. She wrung Mrs G.'s hand and embraced the fair conquerors, scorning to mention the rent in Maria's muslin gown, and the stain of wine on Elizabeth's satin. It was a generous heart, and had earned more gratitude than she afterwards received from two, at least, of the ladies.

'Twas amazing to Mrs Gunning and Maria now, that ever they had contemplated the stage—so very far below their pretensions; and it took but a week to open the former lady's eyes to the little cracks in George Anne's reputation. She saw plainly that such a friendship could be no aid to their soaring aspirations; and indeed her ambition had now spread its wings to some purpose. The Earl of Harrington having advanced the first installment of her pension, she immediately moved their lodging to the genteeler Mount Street, and Britain Street was forgot, along with George Anne. Sure a mother must be prudent! Elizabeth only forsook not her friend, going to wait upon her and carrying with her many of the posies left in daily homage to her sister

and herself. She had little in her power, for money was still none too plenty; but kindness and gratitude smell sweeter even than roses, and these she carried in handfuls straight from a grateful heart to George Anne.

It smoothed not her own path in Mount Street, for Mrs Gunning's pride grew with what fed it, and though admiration was plenty, offers were few. It might be that the enmity of the Dublin ladies stood in their way, for certain it is that Mrs G. was never a favourite. Where she judged well to flatter, she flattered too openly; where she disliked and saw no gain, she insulted; and many gentlemen would have retired from her acquaintance, but for Maria's frolicsome gaiety and the sweetness of Elizabeth. It gained ground about the city that there was much scheming in Mount Street with a view to rich husbands, and it smirched the girls as well as their mama, and put thorns in their way. It made the men bolder than they should be, and the women cold.

Maria was the hardier and took it as a necessity of their situation; but the milder Elizabeth wept often on George Anne's kind bosom over the insults (as she took it) which Mrs Gunning received with rapture, as hopeful signs of love. And, whatever the actress's own case might be, 'tis certain she showed more delicacy in dealing with the girl than did her lady mother.

Nor had she much comfort from Mr Harry's letters. His father remained adamant; and though he writ, 'twas more carelessly, and a rumour reached Dublin that coupled his name with the great fortune, Miss Hooker, and was generally took for truth. Mrs Gunning greeted it with pleasure,

regarding Mr Harry as a gone-by and much below her hopes; but though Elizabeth's heart was not wounded, her pride was pierced to the quick. It seemed that all the world conspired to humiliate her, and she asked herself what was the use of beauty, if it meant this and no more. She sighed and left his last letter unanswered.

Miss Maria too had her troubles. My Lord Errington pursued her with ardour, and his handsome rakish face and gallant impudence drew the pretty moth towards the heat and flame of a dangerous candle. Folly, no more; but his lady took her vengeance in scandals that spread about the town, and a duel was fought that did Maria no good and kept off worthier pretenders to her hand; and indeed it was not a day too soon when the family packed up their belongings and changed the air to London. The girls outshone all others—true! but 'twas thought more in beauty than discretion, for Elizabeth must needs sink with her family. The world draws not nice distinctions.

But to say they were courted in London is to say little. They broke triumphant upon the town, supported by letters from his Excellency, and the town received them with frenzy, as it might the great Italian singer or the new lions at the Tower, or what not. Amongst the greatest, the Duke of Hamilton put himself at their disposal, urged thereto by a particular letter from my Lord Harrington and his own love of beauty. He dangled about them daily, and it must be owned that, from the first moment of meeting, Mrs Gunning fixed the eye of cupidity on his Grace. For of all of the matches of the Kingdom, James Hamilton was the greatest available. Duke of Brandon in England, of Chatelherault in

France, of Hamilton in Scotland, of vast possessions, of suitable age and gallant presence, a princess need not have disdained his hand. A great prince, indeed, and knowing it possibly too well, 'twas he to dazzle a girl's eye and carry her heart by storm! As for hearts, it was never supposed his Grace possessed one; at least, he wore it not on his sleeve, but was ever cold and haughty, though it was well known he liked a pretty woman as well as any—short of the wedding ring. He hung about the new beauties as a gentleman will, until wagers began to be laid at White's as to which had caught his favour, and where would fall the handkerchief of the Grand Bashaw.

Meanwhile, his attentions made them more than ever the mode, and the town gallants swarmed about them like bees at the Assemblies where they figured, attended by my Lord Duke in ribbon and star. As the days went by, however, the anxious mother observed that his preference was for Elizabeth, and that he had no thought to interfere with my Lord Coventry, who could not keep his eyes off Maria, though he committed himself no further than the Duke. Indeed, stories were now freely circulated concerning Britain Street and the poverty and shifts of the family, and wagers were laid that neither the one nobleman nor the other looked for more than a few months' amusement with the two loveliest girls in England. Mrs Gunning was openly called the Adventuress, and it was a favourite sport with some ladies to imitate her Irish accent and carying ways with those she would please; and doubtless Maria angled a little too openly for her lord. They were, in short, easy game for the mockers, and Elizabeth shrunk daily more into the shade. It appeared as if it would be the Dublin story over again.

Mr Harry came at once to their lodging on his return from Yorkshire, and, to be sure, had not a word to say of Miss Hooker. He would have saluted Elizabeth, but she drew back with a curtsey, her manner sweet and cold as an autumn dawn with a touch of winter in the air. He found her changed, and no wonder, and said as much with some anger.

'It should not surprise you, Harry,' says she serenely. 'I am now eighteen, and have seen the world, as you have also. Our betrothal was a child's game. I like you too well to be your ruin. Marry Miss Hooker, of whom I hear. 'Tis your best way, and obedience to parents a plain duty.'

'You were not so wise in Dublin,' replies Mr Lepel, casting a jealous eye on the fair monitress. If her looks had changed it was to a more radiant sweetness, and there was that in the way her long silken lashes lay on her fair cheek that dwarfed Miss Hooker's fortune. He had better have kept his distance from the siren, he thought with bitterness. But sure a little pleasant dallying could hurt neither Miss Hooker nor his father—a summer pastime and no more; and if the tales flying about town were but the half of them true, he might hope for this, especially with the past pleading for him in Elizabeth's tender heart. Sure there was a softening in her glance. He pushed his chair somewhat nearer and took her hand. She withdrew it, and removed her seat farther away.

'Is my Elizabeth angry with her Harry?' cries he with a fine dramatic air. 'Does she forget those happy days when we were all to one another? What is Miss Hooker or Miss Any-person to come between us? What—'

'Your future wife, as I understand,' says Elizabeth, perfectly calm. 'No, Mr Lepel—I know the world now, better than I could wish' (she sighed), 'and I desire not your attentions. I—'

But Mr Lepel broke in, pale and furious.

'And is it thus you speak, you heartless jade? Clothes, jewels, balls, 'tis these you value. Is there a woman alive that will not sell her soul for the like? O God, why are fair faces made to madden us? Now I have seen you once more, how can I return to that flat-faced—'

She rose, with a wave of her hand that dismissed him; but he ranted on in a towering passion of wrath and grief. It had all burst up anew in his heart, in and for a moment. He believed himself hardly used indeed.

'Could I bury my father and inherit his land, you would not use me thus. It is all a cursed thirst for gold, and you are for sale like an Eastern slave. Who is the highest bidder? But I know well. What am I to compare with—'

'His Grace the Duke of Hamilton!' announces Mrs Abigail, very demure in her pinnars at the door; and in walks his Grace, magnificent in manners and dress, and Mr Lepel's fury stopped on a breath, though he could not regain countenance as readily as Elizabeth. She rose to meet the visitor—a rose in June; and he might take the blush of anger which was due to Mr Lepel for a welcome to himself.

What could Mr Harry do but draw back, stammering and looking foolish under the cold glance Duke Hamilton bestowed on him. Prudence counselled, 'Withdraw. What do you here?' Angry Love retorted, 'Here I stay. What! Shall I leave the field to a rival?' And so, he flung himself in a chair glaring defiance, Elizabeth palpitating between the two. 'Twas not surprising that she drew nearer to the Duke, as if for protection; that there was an imploring softness in her face as she looked up to him; that she saw him greater, handsomer, stronger than ever, beside this idle and futile young man who had reviled her. The carelessness of his glance at Mr Lepel seemed to fling his pretensions in the mud—his haughty coolness to degrade the young man; and to such thoughts women are responsive. If her heart was touched before, the dart went deeper now. She held her head higher, deerlike, and wasted no words on the unwelcome guest.

The two gentlemen, seeing neither could outstay the other, departed presently together, Mr Lepel saying with assumed lightness as he bowed, hat in hand, at the door: 'We had not the pleasure to see *madame la mère* your Grace, and no doubt but she is slipped away on some hunting errand. I wonder what new fox is broke cover. Half the world bets on my Lord Coventry still!'

The duke returned not his salute, and Lepel could not tell whether or no his arrow had gone home through the armour of chilly pride and silence. He himself strode angry and ashamed down the street.

That same evening a council of three was held in the lodging: Mrs Gunning with her mask of smiles laid by, Maria fretful, Elizabeth grave and retired in her own thoughts. The ladies had but the one bedroom, with a little closet for the youngest adjoining.

'Girls,' says Mrs Gunning, 'Tis time I spoke plain. This six weeks in town hath reduced my purse till I am frightened to look in it; and what have we to show? Young women with not half your looks are married and settled since we came hither. We have had a vast deal of froth and flutter, but nothing solid. Were it possible to live on sweetmeats and dress in posies, we have a fine prospect, but not else. I see naught before us but Britain Street—or worse.'

Maria shrugged her white shoulders. 'What more can we do, mama? Sir James Ramsden has offered marriage, and Captain Golightly; and Mr Lennox has asked Elizabeth, and Mr Lepel—'

'What signifies all that?' cries Mrs Gunning. 'Don't let them slip. They'll serve for the future perhaps, if all fails. Elizabeth, I command you on your duty that you please Mr Lepel, though not more than sufficient to content him. If we can't better him—But Maria, what said my Lord Coventry to you at Lady Lowther's ball? I saw him very earnest.'

'Nothing that mightn't be in the news-prints, mama. His breed of black shorthorns filled his thought and tongue. I protest I loathed the man's folly. 'Tis an insipid creature when all's said.'

'No man with a coronet is insipid. He is grave and reserved, and I would he had been Elizabeth's admirer rather than yours, for they could have sat silent in a corner together. But what of the Duke, child? My hopes are sadly sunk.'

Elizabeth flamed in a blush, less beautiful than painful. A sore heart was behind it. She replied not. Mrs Gunning frowned.

'Well, girls, you're easy enough, but so am not I. Now therefore listen while I speak my mind.'

'Tis needless to be particular in recording the lady's speech, which was much to the point in dealing with their needs and stratagems. She spoke for many minutes and at the end tears of shame and anger were in Maria's lovely eyes. If Elizabeth wept, 'twas behind a sheltering hand.

'What signifies grumbling?' finishes Mrs Gunning. "Tis as plain as the nose on your face. Elizabeth's is the best chance, and if she makes her match, my Lord Coventry will kiss your slipper, Maria. The Duchess's sister can marry where she will.'

'Twas vain to interrupt. Mrs Gunning sailed on, maternal, imperative, and took no heed. It would be impertinence to intrude on the talk that followed, and the plan laid for the entrapping of his Grace, of whom it may be said that he could protect himself against even the assaults of beauty better than Mrs Gunning supposed. But Elizabeth, borne down by two to her one, fought a losing game.

'I hate the man,' she cried with spirit, and knew 'twas false as she said it. 'I'd sooner sweep a crossing—'

Mrs Gunning smiled contemptuous.

'Not you! You came pretty near it in Britain Street, and 'tis known how you relished it. Beggars, my dear, can't be choosers. The Duchess of Hamilton may have as much delicacy as she pleases. Miss Elizabeth Gunning can't afford it. There's no more to be said.'

Yet Elizabeth said it furiously, and in vain.

A subdued light of wax candles—the most flattering light in the world—made the parlour enchantment when his Grace sauntered in one evening, later. Posies were in the bowpots, and a delicate scent of violets in the air. On a table by the window lay a magnificent chicken-skin fan sent by my Lord Coventry for Maria's birthday: it was covered with rosy figures of Cupids swinging garlands in blue air, the mother-of-pearl sticks latticed with gold. It lay beside a lace handkerchief, as if a fair hand had flung it careless down. A decanter of purple Burgundy with two glasses was hard by, and a small painting of the lovely sisters from the hand of Neroni, who had asked the favour to depict them as wood-nymphs. They advanced, smiling and bearing a garland between them down a forest glade, while two Cupids concealed behind a tree aimed a dart at each fair breast.

The Duke contemplated this work of art, smiling at his own thoughts, and not pleasantly. Presently the door opened and Mrs Gunning and Maria entered, in hats and capes, followed by Elizabeth, dead pale and in a negligee with blue ribbons, her hair falling in long tresses to the knee, confined only with a fillet of ribbon. She looked not even her eighteen years in this dress, and had a most touching beauty. His Grace kissed Mrs Gunning's hand, yet with the half-contemptuous air of the great man. Some might resent such a kiss as an insult, but the lady's armour was defensive as well as offensive. Says she, curtseying:—

'I beg a thousand pardons, your Grace, but we are disturbed with an unexpected call. 'Tis what we never imagined, but can't refuse. Good Mrs Acton, a friend of our Dublin days, is took ill and hath sent for us to Harbour Street. She is unattended in London, and I know your Grace's sensibility will excuse us.'

'Why, Madam, friendship is so rare a virtue that 'tis worth proclaiming at the Exchange. I will give myself the pleasure to wait on you another evening.'

His hat was beneath his arm; he picked up his clouded cane.

'I thank your Grace.' Mrs Gunning's voice was stately. It changed as she turned to Elizabeth. 'And now, my flower, my dove, repose yourself on the couch, and Mrs Abigail will bring you the lavender drops, and let me find my treasure well and smiling on my return.'

'What? Does not Miss Elizabeth accompany her mama?'
The tone was alert.

'By no means, your Grace. She has ailed all day with her head, and is not fit for a sick chamber. Farewell, child. I wait your Grace.'

He took Mrs Gunning's hand to conduct her to the coach; 'twas as pretty a comedy as ever George Anne Bellamy played. He laughed inwardly leading her to the door, and on the stairs discoursed charmingly on the last masquerade at Vauxhall. Without the hall door he paused.

'Is Miss Elizabeth Gunning too ailing, Madam, to receive a friend for a few moments? Permit me to assist you.'

And before the lady could reply, he bundled the two into the coach, and was halfway up the steps ere Mrs Gunning could cry: 'I know not, your Grace. A moment perhaps—'

He bowed from the door.

'Be easy, Madam. I will myself administer the lavender drops if needful.'

It was impossible for the Duke to hasten himself, for this he had never done within the memory of man; but 'twas scarce a minute since he had left the room when he reëntered, half fearing to find his pretty bird flown. Not so, however. She leaned against the shutter, her eyes fixed on the evening sky. It seemed she had forgot his Grace, for her expression was sorrowful and quiet, unlike the female trifling he expected, and he heard a faint sigh. She turned, startled.

'Forgive me, my Lord Duke. I think I can't stay. My head
—'

She would have glided to the door. 'Twas provocative, however meant, and he put himself in her way. She tried the other side of the table. He blocked that also, and was before her again. Finally she ceased the attempt and stood with eyes cast down.

'Child, don't hasten. Give me a few minutes. I see you alone for the first time and never so lovely as now. Is it your long hair, or what is it? Sure the angels have locks like this.'

He lifted a heavy tress as if marveling. She snatched it from him like an aggrieved queen; then, seeming to recollect herself, stood silent again. 'Twas but a schoolgirl, with trembling lips and veiling hair. He took her hand like a man accustomed to be obeyed, as indeed he was.

'Child, your mama hath left you in my care, and you can't desire I should relinquish the pleasure. Such an opportunity no gentleman could resist. Be seated, Madam, and let us discourse.'

'Twas all on one side, for she had not opened her lips. But she obeyed him, and sat in the chair he handed her to, as passive as a marble lady. He seemed at a loss to continue, and stood looking at her where she drooped, then took a chair beside her.

'You are pleased to be less cordial than I have known you, Madam. Is it whim or anger? I like a woman's pretty

coquetries as well as any man, but this silence—'

It still continued. She was snow and marble. Not a word. Only the dark lashes like fans on her cheek. Not a gleam rewarded him.

'A sullen beauty!' says his Grace languidly, 'but yet a beauty beyond all others. So here we sit!' He drew out his jeweled timepiece. 'I give you a minute, Madam—nay, two. And if by then you have not spoke, I will try if the warmth of a kiss on those sweet lips won't thaw the ice. I swear it!'

He laid the sparkling toy at her elbow on the table, and stared in her face. 'Tis certain his Grace had dined. He was not wont to treat any woman thus unless where it was asked for. A minute went by—the tick was audible, but she moved not. And now a slow hot tear scorched its way down her cheek. If this followed mama's instruction, it bettered it. The time was scarce out when he springs up and cries with triumph:—

'I was not mistook. Your silence asks a kiss, child, and James Hamilton was never the man to refuse a woman's challenge. Give me your lips, and more.'

His swashbuckling Border-ancestors were stirring in his veins, and for a moment his face coarsened and his eyes were gross. He caught her by the two arms and bent his mouth upon hers.

In a flash the fair statue was living and dangerous. He was a strong man, she a wisp of a girl; but she flung him off and

stood glaring at him.

'How dare you?' she panted, and could no more. The eyes were unveiled at last and rained fire on him. Never had any person seen her look thus; she faced him gallantly. He applauded as if it had been the Woffington or any other fair game.

"Tis prettily done—but I see your drift, Madam. If a young lady is left by her friends and her own desire to sit alone with one of the best-known men in town, she takes the consequences. Yet I would not have missed Lucretia—she lacked only the dagger in her hand. But the comedy may end. Give me your lips, child, and coquet no more.'

'Sir—if you are a gentleman—'

'Madam, I am a lover.'

'Oh, 'tis too much—too much!' she cries. 'I have undertook what was beyond me, and I can't—I can't carry it through. I would if I could—I cannot!'

The strange words, the despair in her face was no stage-play. The Duke knew sincerity when it cried aloud. Still grasping her hands, he stood at arm's length, staring in her face.

'You cannot, Madam? What mean you? Are you in earnest?'

Not withdrawing her hands, fast held and quivering, she kept silence. He could feel the pulses flutter in her wrists,

and the fumes of wine cleared slowly out of his brain and carried the brutality with them.

'Have the condescension to explain yourself. You are safe in my company now. Possibly I was mistook, but I supposed you not unwilling for our tête-à-tête. Accept my apologies if this is not the case. I thrust no attentions on women who dislike them.'

'Sir, I will explain and go, and never see your face again. I die of shame.'

He could still feel the pitiful flutter in her wrists. He relaxed his grip and handed her to her chair,—a gentleman again,—James, Duke of Hamilton and Brandon. 'I see myself gravely in error, Madam. I await your words.'

She would not sit, nor he. They stood apart now, and he could scarce hear the silver tremble of her voice.

'Sir, we are poor. You know this. And last night my mother did ask me whether I supposed your Grace had any feeling for me beyond careless good-will. I knew not. What could I say? And she then revealed to me—oh, how reveal it now!—that our little means is all but spent, and that gone, we must retire into poverty and misery again. Also that there are debts, and prison for debtors. Also that any match for my sister is impossible to hope for—No—how can I tell it! And she did say that if we could hope—could but know that—'

Her voice died on her lips. She hung her head in agony. He took her up.

'The task is too hard for you. Let me continue. Your mama said that, if she and your sister withdrew and left you with me, if you put forth your charms (and God knows there were never such!), 'twas possible you might set the sweetest trap for the rich man, and with his aid clamber out of the mud and sit secure beside him. Confirm me if I don't err. Confess!'

'I confess.' The words scarce broke the silence.

'And love was not in the bargain,' the cruel voice persisted. 'Mama did not enquire whether James Hamilton was distasteful to you or the reverse. He was a moneybag—no man. Confess again.'

'I confess. Sir, we have used you very ill. I ask your pardon. I was a fair mark for insult.'

Her head dropped lower. She could not otherwise hide her face, but the shame overflowed it in waves of crimson.

'To be frank, Madam, I have never found your mother congenial company. 'Twas not for her I sought this house. Tell me, was this her plot only? Was it acceptable to you?'

'At least, I followed it. She is my mother. I am one flesh and blood with her. If she is a plotter, so too am I. I bid your Grace farewell, and pray for so much pity as that you will never come this way again, nor see me, lest I die at your feet.'

'Madam, do I owe you no apology?'

'I think none, your Grace. You acted as the woman you took me for might, I suppose, expect. Let me go.'

A singular thing happened here. The Duke, the haughtiest and coldest of men, bent his knee and carried her hand to his lips. So on Birthnights he kissed the late Queen's hand, she standing before the Throne. Then stood very grave. 'Madam, I entreat your pardon. I have shown you a side of a man's character very unfitting for your eyes and you but the child you are. Forgive me and, ere we part for ever, answer me one question, in token of your pardon. Had I been but James Hamilton, the lowest of my clan—could you have honoured me with any regard?'

She stammered—trembling before this melancholy gentleness.

'I know not.'

He persisted, gentle but firm:—

'We have perhaps something to pardon each other. I ask again—would this have been possible?'

Constrained, she sought for breath. Because a cold handsome face softens, and because distrust is melted, shall a woman let her heart fly like a bird to a man's bosom?

'Sir, you ask more than I can answer.'

Still the eyes insisted, and now the strong hand held hers.

'Sir—I think—I believe—it had not been impossible.'

'What—not James Hamilton—no more?—with a shealing on the moors, and the heather-cock for food, and a Hamilton plaid to wrap his heart's darling, and a fire of peats to sit by, and this hand empty but for love and his claymore?—Would the beauty of the world have come to his breast?'

His voice was a strong music—a river in spate. His eyes caught hers and held them.

"Tis not impossible. But oh, how should I prove it—prove it? There's not a word I say but rings false now. Leave me—leave me. I have said too much.'

'You can't prove it? But you can, and if you prove it, I will distrust God's mercy before I will distrust my girl. All you have told me was known to me—known to all the town. It rings through the streets that the fair Gunnings and their mother are schemers; that they love none and seek only the best price for their charms. Marry me now, this hour, Elizabeth, and face the world that will call you plotter and adventuress. For they will so! There's no club in town but will ring with the story of how the beauty was cunningly left to a half-drunk man's advances. That's how Horry Walpole and all the old women of both sexes will have it! All this will be known through your mother's folly and your Abigail's chatter, and they will tell how you trapped me, how I would have escaped and could not for the snares about my feet. Marry me and face this, if you will, and I will believe you love me, for you will stand a disgraced woman for all time. Marry me not, and I will make your way easy with gold, and your mother shall tell her own tale, and not a smirch on your name, and fear not but another rich man will give you all I

could, and not a spot on it. Choose now once and for all. I have seen and I know how my coronet will sting you with shame—with shame set in it.'

He did not embrace her. 'Twas the strangest wooing. The clock pointed to eleven. The house was dead silent. Her eyes widened with pain and fear. She looked piteously at him.

'They will say you caught me drunk, whom you could not catch sober. They will say you forced the marriage, lest I escape. There is nothing they will not say but the truth—that my sweetheart is the sweetest, the purest, the proudest woman alive. Your delicacy will be trod in the mud, Madam. Will you take your man at that? Will you crawl through the dirt to his heart?'

His fire kindled hers. Her eyes glittered.

'And if they believed me worthless—that is not what I ask. What would your Grace think?'

He smiled with peculiar sweetness.

'Child, you know. Look at me.'

And still she trembled.

'Beloved, adored!' he cried. 'Think you I knew not 'twas death to you to tell the truth? Shall a man find a pearl in the dirt and not set it over his heart. I have loved you since first I saw your fair face, and now I honour you. Come to me and bless me; and when these fools cackle and gibber, I shall know how to protect my wife.'

His arms went round her.

'I will do it,' she said.

The minutes passed in an exquisite joy, plucked out of shame like a rose from a torrent. He left her and went to the door, and leaning over the balustrade, called down the stair:
—

'Armitage!'

A young man, handsomely dressed and something of a fop after his valet-fashion, sprang up the stair, his Grace's gentleman. His master, very tranquil and haughty, was by the door—the fair Miss Gunning erect in her chair.

'Armitage, proceed at once to my house, and acquaint my chaplain, Mr MacDonald, that this lady and I are to be married immediately. Desire him to come hither with all that is necessary, and lose not a moment.'

And seeing Armitage hesitate like a man wonderstruck, the duke stamped his foot and set him flying down the way he came, calling after him:—

'Desire Mrs Abigail to come up this moment.'

They heard the door shut violently, and Mrs Abigail came up, very demure and curtsying to the ground.

'Be seated, good woman. Your lady will excuse you. We wait the Reverend Mr MacDonald, with ring and licence, and

you and Armitage shall serve for witnesses to the marriage. Now I think of it, call also the woman of the house.'

He carried it masterfully, and Elizabeth, no more than any other woman, could be insensible to that charming tyranny. He stood behind her chair while the woman called for Mrs Mann—who came, mortally afraid of her company.

'Shall Mrs Abigail braid my hair?—it tumbles all about me,' says Elizabeth, questioning her master timidly.

'Tis so great a beauty I will not have it hid,' he cries, standing behind her chair where the long locks lay on the ground.

Silence again, and the time passing.

At last, a sound as if Armitage propelled somewhat before him up the stair, and into the room walks his Grace's gentleman, and before him a stout personage in bands and cassock, so breathless from haste as to be incapable of any speech.

'Hath he the licence?'

'He hath, your Grace, but he declares that the occasion being so great, and the incumbent of Mayfair Chapel, Dr Keith, being at home and the chapel open, for the greater solemnity 'twere well to have the marriage solemnised there. 'Tis but ten minutes, and I have brought the chariot, if it please your Grace.'

And now, puffing sore, the clergyman put in his plea, not for delay,—the Duke's face forbade that,—but that all be done with ceremony.

'If a word more be said, I send for the Archbishop!' swears his Grace, flushed and handsome. 'My chariot's at the door. Bundle in all who can. Madam, allow me.'

He drew the bride's hand to his, and preceded them down the stair, holding it high as in a minuet. The women followed without a word. Elizabeth went in a dream, half enchantment, half nightmare.

The chapel was dark and musty—no time to light the lamps; but Mr Armitage, the facile, the adroit, a perfect Mercury and old in experience, called in four linkmen waiting by their ladies' empty chairs in the street outside. These grimy fellows stood upon the altar steps, two at a side, lighting the book the parson opened, his voice resounding through the silent place with startling loudness. Behind the bridal pair huddled the women.

'Dearly Beloved, we are met together—' and so to the close. But his voice was muffled beside the clear ring of James Hamilton's. His 'I will' fell like a sword on the air. He was never a man to show his heart but to the one in whose hand it lay, and his tone disdained all but the woman who stood by him. He put his signet ring on her finger, and they turned from the altar man and wife.

'Give each of these men five guineas, and bid them light her Grace to her chariot, Armitage. Take you the women

back to Mrs Gunning's lodging, where we follow. I thank you, Mr Keith, for the best service man ever did me. It shall not go unrewarded.'

He handed her into the chariot with the utmost ceremony; and when the door was closed, flung himself on his knees before her, clasping her waist.

'My dear—my girl, how shall I thank you? Think you I don't know what it hath cost you—and the proof you have given me that your heart is mine. My wife—my sweetheart!'

'Twas half after twelve when Mrs Gunning returned with Maria, being a prudent woman, and resolved that, if the criminal did not hang himself, it should not be for want of rope.

'The chariot's at the door and the light still in the parlour!' she whispered; 'sure, he can't be there still? Heaven send he be not drunk and asleep. 'Twas mere folly to leave the wine!'

Not a sound. They approached as it were on tiptoe up the stair, and softly opened the door.

My Lord Duke, attended by Armitage, stood before them, splendid in his dark red velvet laced with silver, the blue ribbon crossing his breast. He held Elizabeth by the hand, she pale as ashes but perfectly composed.

Mrs Gunning gave a fine dramatic start, Maria advancing behind her, devoured with curiosity.

'What—what can this mean? Little did I expect to find your Grace here at this hour. Elizabeth, I fear you have been vastly imprudent. Your good name—'

She might have said more, but the Duke came forward, very magnificent.

'Madam, permit me to introduce a stranger' says he, with emphasis on the word, 'Her Grace the Duchess of Hamilton.'

'Lord! Then 'tis to be!' cries Mrs Gunning, all radiant, and mistaking his meaning. 'O my sweet child, my Elizabeth—how have you took me by surprise! When shall it be, your Grace?'

'Madam, it is done. Miss Gunning became my bride in the Mayfair Chapel—was it twenty minutes since, Armitage?'

'Fifteen, your Grace.'

'Twas all in order—a clergyman?—'twas legal?' pants Mrs Gunning, her hand to her heart.

'Assuage your maternal fears, Madam.'

His lip was disdainful; he set her a world away.

'All was as you could have wished. Permit the Duchess and myself to wish you farewell and good night—or rather good morning.'

He led Elizabeth to the door, which Armitage held open. It closed behind them, and their steps were heard descending.

The Duchess had not said a word.

There was silence until the chariot had rumbled away, when Mrs Gunning found her voice.

'I did not credit her with such skill. She hath played her cards well indeed. I would give the world to know what passed.'

'That we shall never know,' says Maria. 'He's not the man to tell his secrets, nor she neither. Sure, they're a pair.'

'Well, Heaven send you show the like skill with my Lord Coventry. You can't do better. Lord, how my heart beats for joy!'

'I shall not need, Madam,' says Miss Maria coolly. 'She has ensured my match with her own. The Duchess of Hamilton's sister won't go begging for a husband. 'Tis now but to choose my wedding silk. Come, let us to bed. These late hours hurt my bloom. Let us however drink a toast in this wine to old Mother Corrigan and the Golden Vanity. 'Tis the least we can do. Blow out the candles.'

(Elizabeth, later Duchess of Argyll, bore her honours with dignity and became a very great lady. Maria, Countess of Coventry, died aged twenty-seven, not untouched by scandal, and a victim to her own frivolity. Mrs Gunning received a valuable appointment as Housekeeper at one of the royal palaces. 'The Luck of the Gunnings' became a proverb.)

[The end of *The Golden Vanity* by Elizabeth Louisa Moresby (as E. Barrington)]