OLD LOVERS

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ROMEO and Juliet hold the centre of the world's stage. For ever they are young and beautiful; their limbs are straight and lissom; their bright cheeks are unstained by care; their eyes look love. Around them is the witchery of Italian moonlight in that ageless garden where they make their vows.

Their elders look on enviously; for young love is the rose of the world, its colour, its perfume. Pitying, they listen to the murmured exchanges of eternal constancy,

"Love me for ever."

"And afterwards,—"

for they know that youth is a flower foredoomed to wither all too soon. At lovers' perjuries, they say, Jove laughs; and this lower world smiles, or sighs, or sneers, but it cannot turn its eyes away from the twain embracing, face growing to face. The last thing Jove, or the world, expects is that Romeo and Juliet will keep their vows.

Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks
Within his bending sickle's compass come.

is the vaunt of one of the great and eloquent lovers: but Time has a sad way of proving Love to be his Fool. Love passes, changes, vanishes; it is murdered, it is transmuted into hate, it fades into kindliness.

Nothing else so surprises the world as when the vows of young lovers hold firm to the last death-ruckle. Still the ideal exists. The sentimental English have a myth of old lovers, Darby and Joan, homely, wedded, cottage folk, who love until the end. The faithful pair are regarded with a certain tender humour, and also with an air of patronage. Darby and Joan have not been translated into any other language; possibly they are not translatable. When not surprised at such fidelity, the world is amused and cynical. Perhaps the best known instance of Darby is Dr. Samuel Johnson, who never wavered in his faith, whatever may have been the case with Joan. How the world regarded his devotion is admirably expressed by that typical Englishman, Thomas Babington Macaulay. "To ordinary spectators, the lady appeared to be a short, fat, coarse woman painted an inch thick, dressed in gaudy colours. . . To Johnson, however,. . . his Titty, as he called her, was the most beautiful, graceful and accomplished of her sex. . . The lover continued to be under the illusions of the wedding day, till the lady died in her sixty-fourth year." I pity the reader who can laugh at that passage. Macaulay exaggerated what he found in Boswell, and omitted the Scot's prudent qualification. The great Whig historian was prone to deepen the shadows and heighten the lights of his compositions; but this passage lays bare the streak of vulgarity in his character which made him so antipathetic to Matthew Arnold. Macaulay is quite blind to the implications of his own words. Goethe said, "Whom God deceives is deceived to his own weal." Could a man be more blessedly deceived than in preserving the illusions of the wedding day until the dying day? That Johnson remained the bridegroom throughout life, reveals his essential nobility; that he was always blind to the very patent faults of his wife is a compliment to womanhood. Gentle Elia who wrote "Modern Chivalry" would have understood this life-long love affair, but Macaulay takes the conventional attitude that, while romantic devotion to a Queen of Love and Beauty is easy, nay, inevitable, the same ardour for a woman who is neither young nor lovely becomes ridiculous, something to point the finger at and guffaw over, and can have only a gross, material explanation.

There are a few shining examples of enduring constancy, planted like towers of adamantine strength in the wide welter of human fickleness and change. Perhaps the strangest and the most beautiful of all is the constancy of Swift and Stella.

The story begins in Moor Park, the seat of Sir William Temple, diplomat, statesman, essayist. When the old grandee brought his young kinsman Jonathan Swift hither in 1689 and gave him employment and a home, the proud lonely youth of twenty-two found in the household a little girl of eight. She was Hester Johnson, the housekeeper's daughter, an interesting child, quick and clever. The young collegian taught her to read and write. An "anecdotic" picture by an English artist represents a deep bay window in that old-time manor-house; on one side is little Hester in the demure, high-waisted, long-skirted gown then fashionable, intent on her lesson, and on the other is the lean young Levite and potential author of *Gulliver's Travels*. The picture represents a fact. Essayists have dwelt on the unhappiness of Swift at Moor Park. He was proud, he was lonely, he was conscious of his genius; and he was compelled to an attitude of servility towards his patron, eating his heart out. For such a man, in such a situation, the trust freely given and the love of a little child would be as balm. When Swift returned to Moor Park after his brief incumbency at Kilroot, he found his delicate little pupil a beautiful girl of sixteen, the picture of health. The portraits of Stella justify Swift's praises. A little inclined to the partridge in figure, perhaps,—but the face is charming, alert, with eyes like a bird; she looks as if she were going to smile or speak. The rest of her story is soon told. She came into a little money; she lived with her constant friend and duenna, Rebecca Dingley, near to Swift in Dublin; she played ombre; she made little journeys to various watering-places; she had at least one offer of marriage; and she died. But she was Swift's one friend.

Goethe and Thackeray have twisted the story out of shape for the sake of a literary contrast. Here is the terrible Dean, fierce, arrogant, overbearing; there are two charming women—Vanessa is the second—with whose affections he trifles, and whose hearts he breaks by his selfishness and tyranny. The reality is very different.

To my thinking, the argument of Churton Collins is final. I believe that Stella and Cadenus were never married, that Esther Johnson stated fact when she had herself set down as "spinster" in her will, and that she was never in the least danger of breaking her heart. Their bond was pure friendship. In spite of a censorious world, it does now and then come to pass that a man and a woman can truly become friends without the usual embarrassments of sex. Such was the friendship of Swift and Esther Johnson. The record proves it.

Browning assures us, giving thanks to God, as is meet and right, that the meanest of His creatures boasts two soul-sides, one to face the world with, one to show a woman when he loves her. The lines fit Swift like a glove. The prince of English satirists, the Timon who could truly say, "I am misanthropos and hate mankind," who really thought in his heart of hearts that humanity was "the most pernicious race of little odious vermin that nature ever suffered to crawl upon the face of the earth," who bullied cabinet ministers and browbeat duchesses, was to Stella always gentle, tender, considerate, devoted, constant. Such a friendship is the rarest thing in the world. It sheds a glory round those two tombs in St. Patrick's Cathedral which hide the ashes of Stella and the man who truly loved her. "Only a woman's hair" he noted on a tress clipped from her dear head and found in his desk after his death. "Only" conveys a wealth of double meaning; only a trivial relic of the dead, to the unknowing, insignificant; but to the bereaved, surviving lover, everything,—love and tenderness, a thousand bitter-sweet memories calling, appealing, tearing asunder his very heart-strings. "Properly speaking, she has been dying these six months", is another brief memorandum of a long-drawn agony. He must look on helplessly while the light of his eyes is slowly taken from him.

Wordsworth has long been laughed at for saying that he dared not give expression to passionate love in his poetry because he would be too violent, the idea in the laughers' mind being apparently that the poet of the Lakes was born a grandfather. Now that the Annette episode has come to light, the average sensual man sniggers over the discovery that Wordsworth was once young. The sane friend of poetry perceives that Wordsworth was right, and that he knew himself. Proudly eminent among the love poetry of all time is the lyric which celebrates the Phantom of Delight. The three short stanzas trace the course of an ideal love. At the first revelation of the predestined beloved woman, she seems more than human, a light-ray incarnate, as Carlyle says,—some gay creature of the element. Concentration of language to express the magical charm of the eternal woman has rarely surpassed these ecstatic lines:

Her eyes as stars of twilight fair,
Like Twilight too, her dusky hair;
But all things else about her drawn
From May-time and the cheerful Dawn.
A dancing Shape, an Image gay,
To haunt, to startle, and way-lay.

That first glance of the true lover is the surest and deepest. It reveals the essential truth that the Beloved is a spirit. Closer acquaintance proves that she is a woman too, a human mixture like the rest of humanity; but the new knowledge brings, not disenchantment, only deeper love and reverence. The human contact gives reality to the bond between Lover and Beloved. He soon discovers that she is

A Creature not too bright or good
For human nature's daily food.
. . . .
Praise, blame, love, kisses, tears, and smiles,

like a million glowing, melting sweethearts of to-day. It matters not that the lovely Apparition had a slight cast in one eye, that she was Wordsworth's cousin, and that she was known to the world by the commonplace appellation of Mary Hutchinson. Beatrice meant no more to Dante, nor Laura to Petrarch, than Cousin Mary meant to the homely distributor of stamps for Westmoreland. Whom God deceives is deceived to his weal.

So they married, and did not live happily ever after, any more than any other wedded pair: for they lived poorly in a peasant's mountain cottage. Children were born to her in pain, and they knew the parent's agony of watching them sicken and die. Old age brought, as it must inevitably bring, change upon change, sorrow upon sorrow. But one thing did not change. Though not a beauty was left, but kindness shining through, the poet still saw his faded Phantom as a girl. The love of William Wordsworth was not Time's fool. For many a year, he was divinely deceived. His eyes were holden that he should not see what ravage the inexorable years had made in the beloved face. He could declare with perfect sincerity,

> Morn into moon did pass, noon into eve,
> And the old day was welcome as the young,
> As welcome, and as beautiful—

Then came the blank surprise when Miss Margaret Gillies, staying at Rydal Mount in 1840, painted the Lovely Apparition as an old woman. The poet would not accept the cruel facts,—that shawled figure, the gentle grandmotherly face framed by the voluminous cap, the eyes like stars of twilight now needing the aid of spectacles; and he recorded his defiance of Time in two deep-hearted sonnets. To Time's changes he refused to yield. By the habitual light of memory, he will always see

> Eyes unbedimmed, see bloom that cannot fade,
> And smiles that from their birth-place ne'er shall flee
> Into the land where ghosts and phantoms be.

Ever since that luckless excursion to the top of Kirkstone in 1816, the poet's sight had been so much impaired that he could hardly read a book. The basis of his sonnets to Mary may well have been this physical fact. His deception was divinely ordered, and it had lasted until his seventieth year. Until the end, he saw with the inward eye a far fairer picture than Miss Gillies could ever hope to paint, the real portrait of his Mary:

> O dearer far than light and life are dear.

Although it is not the popular theory that the Carlyles' was a happy marriage, the theory rests on a broad basis of popular ignorance. On both sides, jealousy is alleged. But who does not know that jealousy implies love, that jealousy is impossible without love, that jealousy is the very shadow of love? The hasty utterance of a nerve-racked invalid has been brought forth as evidence, over against life-long devotion, and other words of pride and adoration. The indiscretions of a sensation-mongering biographer have long blinded an uncritical public to the true relations of Thomas Carlyle and Jane Baillie Welsh. They were throughout essentially noble. The letters of the period of courtship are indisputable proofs. "I never saw a couple kiss more lovingly", said an old gardener who worked about the place at Craigenputtock. Carlyle's life unrolls as tragic drama. His greatest loss came at the moment of his greatest triumph. While the students of Edinburgh were thundering applause at the profound wisdom and veined humanity of the Lord Rector's address, his Jeannie was lying dead in her brougham in Hyde Park. Whistler's picture of the broken old man tells the story of Carlyle's last years, and supplements his poignant *Reminiscences* of Jane Baillie Welsh. When did the grave close over the dead, that the heart of the survivor was not wrung with remorse? We might have done more; we have left undone many things we might have done to show our love; and now there is never another opportunity to utter the kind word, to perform the loving service. In Carlyle's passionate and poetic nature, that remorse burnt like fire. The old man of seventy-one laments the old wife of sixty-seven, as the new-wed Romeo laments his banishment from peerless, glowing Juliet.

"I was rich once; had I known it, very rich. Now I am become poor unto the end." And he sorrowed as one who had no hope.

> O, lieb' so lang du lieben kannst,
> O, lieb' so lang du lieben magst,'
> Die Stunde kommt, die Stunde kommt,
> Wenn du an Gräbern stehst and weinst.

Neither Robert Browning nor Elizabeth Barrett was young when their love story began. She was older than he was, a confirmed invalid waiting for death, when he knew her first. She was buried alive in one room of a dreary, pre-Victorian, London house, "with two sets of nerves always out of order", lifted from bed to sofa and from sofa back to bed again, fearing the east wind "like a tiger", and painfully building up a little strength in the summer only to suffer an inevitable relapse in the winter. "Penelope's web" she calls the process. The first of the matchless sonnets, which she thrust silently into her husband's hand and then quitted the room, tells only the plain truth:

A mystic Shape did move
Behind me, and drew me backward by the hair;
And a voice said in mastery, while I strove,—
"Guess now who holds thee "—"Death", I said. But there
The silver answer rang,—"Not death, but Love."

But no snow-and-rose-bloom maiden, no Queen of Love and Beauty was ever loved with more intense or perdurable devotion than this sick, ageing woman by the poet of *Bells and Pomegranates*. Their love-letters should be laid up in a reliquary of gold, as priceless jewels revealing depths and heights of human love, unknown and unsuspected. Love wrought its magic. It transformed a dying woman into a happy wife and the joyful mother of a man child. It gave her years of poetry, and fame, and wide experience in lovely Florence, and it continued until the end.

And yet, to the outward view, Robert Browning was just a dapper, well-dressed, little Englishman, who "looked like a banker." Hawthorne visited the Brownings in Casa Guidi, and, to his keen Yankee vision the mistress of the mansion, "half angel and half bird", was just a little oddity, a queer, wizened wisp of a woman. Whom God deceives is deceived to his weal. Browning's blindness lasted the term of his life.

One bitter drop in Carlyle's deep draught of sorrow was that his wife died away from him. The love of the Brownings was crowned by euthanasia. The poet's own words are best, as they tell of their last hour together:

> The main comfort is that she suffered very little pain, none beside that ordinarily attending the simple attacks of cold and cough she was subject to, had no presentiment of the result whatever, and was consequently spared the misery of knowing she was about to leave us. She was smilingly assuring me that she was "better"—"quite comfortable". . . to within a few minutes of the last. . . Through the night she slept heavily and brokenly—that was the bad sign, but then she would sit up, take her medicine, say unrepeatable things to me, and sleep again. . . Then came what my heart will keep till I see her again and longer—the most perfect expression of her love to me within my whole knowledge of her. Always smilingly, happily, and with a face like a girl's, and in a few minutes she died in my arms, her head on my cheek. . . . The last word was, when I asked, "How do you feel?" "Beautiful."

But that was not the end of love. Browning mourned, as few men have mourned, in retirement and solitude. For the sake of his son, at the prompting of his normal, sane nature, he came out of his retirement in time, and he went into society, as the saying is; but he never married again. He was true to the memory of his "lyric love, half angel and half bird", whom he has celebrated in deathless verse. All Browning's best work was done during his courtship and married life; and his masterpiece was composed during his time of mourning. Pompilia, the angelic heroine of *The Ring and the Book,* was studied from the testimony of her confessor who shrived her for death, but into her creation entered also no small portion of Elizabeth Browning's soul. Put *Sonnets from the Portuguese* beside the ecstatic aftersong to *The Ring and the Book,* lay with them the letters of these two great lovers, and you will give thanks that such a man and such a woman lived certain years upon our grey earth. For them, love was not Time's fool; Time, in which their love began, was only the forecourt to Eternity.