

### **‘The Father: An Episode in the Life of a Nobleman’**

It was about twenty years ago, ere I succeeded to my present title, that I was returning one evening to my father’s house from that of a friend with whom I had been dining. Oh ! the fatal evening ! I remember it but too well – ‘twas in the winter time – thick clouds enveloped the planets of the night, while their sombre hue threatened the earth with deluging rain. A low wind scarcely disturbed them in the boundless regions of space; but fruitlessly the moon essayed to pierce their density and cast her rays upon the world. Yet the lamps were bright in Bond Street, and I hardly regretted not having ordered a carriage to call for me: but I walked hastily onward, till something glittering on the pavement attracted my attention. I stooped and picked it up; ‘twas a beautiful ring, with a black stone, and on that stone was a name. Five yards before me two individuals were anxiously looking about for an object they had apparently lost. I accosted them; and by the glare of the lamp discovered the features of the most lovely girl in the world. She was leaning on the arm of an old gentleman, sixty years of age at least, who afterwards proved to be her father. The ring I had found was the cause of their search; and as I tendered it to the young lady, she smiled on me with so much sweetness, that she ravished my soul – although at the same moment a large tear stole down her cheek; for the lamp cast its rays direct on her bewitching countenance.

‘A thousand thanks, Sir,’ she said, in a melting tone of voice. ‘That ring was my poor mother’s: she is no more; – but her memory is dearly cherished by me. In pulling off my glove, I inadvertently dropped that precious relic. We thought we might have lost it at the theatre whence we are come.’

The father cut short his daughter’s explanation by thanking me again with uncommon civility; and having wished me ‘a good night’, he moved rapidly on. I, however, heard him gently chide his daughter for having kept ‘the stranger standing in the cold.’ Those were his words.

That night no sleep visited my pillow: the transitory view I had had of so lovely a creature’s face chased away slumber, and dwelt perpetually in my mind. I then discovered that, if there be not love at first sight, there is frequently a deep impression made on the heart, which may often essentially control our actions in after years.

A fortnight elapsed, and I still dreamt of nought save her with whom I had only exchanged two words: but at length I met her again. It was at a theatre – no matter which – and she was again accompanied by her father. I was welcomed with a smile when I addressed her, and with an excess of politeness by the old man, who was rather profuse and cringing in his civilities, as if he did not feel precisely on the same level as myself. The reason for this, however, soon developed itself; for, during a brief conversation, I ascertained that his name was Benson, he was a tradesman, and that pecuniary misfortunes had frequently embarrassed him in the prosecution of his business. I also learnt the place of his residence: it was Oxford Street.

‘Tradesman – shop !’ were the words that rang in my ears all night long. ‘Tradesman – shop !’ was all I uttered, when my father, next morning at breakfast, put some common-place questions to me.

‘You were at the theatre last evening, William, were you not ?’ said he. ‘Why –you tell us nothing about the performance, the play, or the spectators. Who was there ?’

‘The tradesman.’

‘Indeed ! And what piece was performed ?’

‘The shop,’ was my reply: and I left the room to retire to my own chamber, where I sate down for the purpose of pondering more at liberty on the lovely Miss Benson. A strange sentiment of curiosity filled my mind. I was desirous of ascertaining whether so innocent a girl served in the shop herself, and whether she was exposed to the rude gaze of her customers. To Oxford Street I accordingly hurried. ‘BENSON, HABERDASHER’ in large letters over a door met my eyes: with fear and trembling I entered, and discovered Mr Benson, assisted by two or three boys, very busily engaged in attending to the wants of those who went thither to make purchases. I inquired for his daughter, and was shown to a neat little parlour at the back of the shop, where she was sitting; for she did *not* serve in the shop.

‘You are very kind, very kind,’ said she, ‘thus to remember individuals who are under obligations to you.’

‘Obligations, Miss Benson !’ I exclaimed: ‘for finding and returning a valuable jewel to its owner.’

‘Oh ! Sir – that ring was my mother’s, and you know not how I value it ! But, by the bye,’ she added, in a lively tone of voice, ‘this is the third time I have had the pleasure of seeing you, and not yet do I know the name of him to whom I am deeply indebted.’

Now for my first weakness. Should I confess my real rank, and never visit Miss Benson again ? or should I conceal my position in the world, and associate with her as an equal ? I had already discovered, that, were she acquainted with my high expectations, her lofty and independent spirit would cause her manners to become distant, reserved, and embarrassed. And another thing: – I did not wish Mr Benson to be able to tell his friends – this cobbler, or that tailor – how the only son and heir apparent of Lord – visited him constantly, and courted his daughter. Nor less was I influenced by a dread of my intimacy with the Bensons becoming known to my father, who would have adopted most summary measures to put an end to it for ever. I therefore yielded to the weight of these reflections, and invented a name to conceal my own. This was my first deceit !

Daily did I visit the lovely Miss Benson; and daily did I become more enamoured of her. The father deemed me to be a young gentleman of small independent fortune; and as he himself was not only poor, but was also considerably advanced in years, he was naturally glad to have before him a prospect of seeing his daughter established in a respectable manner. And she returned my love – and we were happy; and we appeared to live, as it were, only for each other; and we cared not for the world without.

Eliza Benson was about nineteen years of age. She was stout – even inclined to *embonpoint*: but the delicacy of her hand and her foot and ankle was such, that they seemed to partake of infantine proportions. Her bust was voluptuous and well-formed, and was rather that of a woman of mature years than of a female of her tender age. Her complexion was of the purest white and red – her mouth red and pouting – her teeth even and white – her eyes dark blue and languishing – her hair of chestnut hue – and her forehead high and pale, though slightly freckled. On the whole she was as lovely and faultless a creature as woman can be in this world of ours.

But to continue my narrative. One afternoon I entered the shop, and found all in confusion. Ill-looking men were standing about – the desk was unoccupied by the clerk – and Mr Benson was not there. Determined to ascertain the meaning of such disorder from the fountain-head, I pushed my way to the parlour, and found Miss Benson lying on the sofa, just recovering from a swoon into which she had ere now fallen: the only servant left in the house was attending her.

‘Good God, Miss Benson!’ I cried, ‘what is the cause of this unaccountable posture of your affairs?’

‘O heavens!’ she exclaimed, a deep sense of her misery rushing to her soul, ‘they have taken away my father – he is gone, gone to a prison! My father – my poor old father is gone to a gaol: and it was in vain that I told them he was my father! They heard me not – or if they did, they would not heed me. And I am alone – alone in all the world: – my mother is dead – and they have taken away my father, I repeat – they have taken away my father! But I will follow him whithersoever he shall go –’

And she rose from the sofa, but only to fall into my arms, for she was weak and feeble. I re-assured her – implored her to remain where she was till my return – and I then proceeded to the shop to learn the particulars of the case. It appeared that a harsh creditor had arrested Mr Benson for four hundred and odd pounds, and that the poor old man had been taken to a lock-up house. I found out which it was, and hurried thither. Mr Benson was in tears, raving after his daughter: it went to my heart to witness the distress of venerable old age. When I entered the room of that preparatory gaol, he cried like a child.

‘Be tranquil, my dear Sir,’ I exclaimed: ‘tomorrow morning you shall be free. I have the money at your service – that is, I can get it – but not before to-morrow morning’ – for I did not dare to ask my father for so considerable a sum towards the end of the quarter: and I knew that my

friend, Mr H— , would not be at home till late that night. I, however, succeeded in relieving Mr Benson's mind, and he sent me away with these words: – 'Go – my dear boy – and console my daughter. She loves you – you love and respect her – and I can trust you.'

I bade him adieu, promised that by eight o'clock next morning he should be free, and then returned to comfort the afflicted girl.

And I succeeded in comforting her: for I repeated over and over again, not only my ability to release her father, but also my determination so to do; and thus I made her happy. The servant retired – the shop was soon cleared – and we sate down in the little parlour, alone together on the sofa. It was nine in the evening and a lamp burned near us. Eliza called me the preserver of her father—her poor father: she invoked blessings upon my head – and I then laid open to her the sentiments of my secret soul. I declared my love: she made a reciprocal confession – I caught her in my arms – and we lingered in a long – a lasting – a fervent embrace. I placed my arms around her, and she suffered me to inhale the fragrance of her breath: but she was pondering on my affection, on my promises, on my conduct towards her aged father; – in fine, she threw herself upon my honour – she relied on my justice – she yielded herself to me, to do with her as I chose, to dispose of her as I desired – she trusted me as much as a confiding girl, who sees all, all in her lover, *can* trust to him. And I clasped her closer in my arms; and I whispered tender things in her ear; and I talked of future happiness. She listened –

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'my dishonoured daughter !' cried the old man, frantic with rage. 'Return her to me, my lord,' he continued more coolly; 'return me my daughter. Give me back my daughter – give me back my daughter, I say – and, O God ! I will forgive you ! Yes, my lord – for so you are *now*– you wear a mourning dress – that mourning is for your parent ! You know how to weep for a parent: believe then that a parent can weep for a child – and give me back my dishonoured daughter !'

'By the high heavens above us I know not where she is !'

'Some time ago, she was at the gay lodgings your *generosity* provided for her,' pursued Benson, with a bitter smile, and a sarcastic accent. 'I traced her out *there* – I wrote a note to her – I said I would see her that day – and she was gone: you have hidden my daughter from my sight. I am a poor old man – I am stricken in years – cares are multiplying thickly upon my head. Oh ! my lord, can you see these hoary locks – the hoary, grey locks – can you contemplate them, my lord – those almost whitened locks – and then refuse to give me back my daughter ?'

Vainly did I declare my ignorance of the route she had taken, so precipitate had been her flight: but bitterly did I reproach myself in secret for the harshness of my conduct towards her. The unfortunate father continued his lamentable appeal.

‘My lord, the vengeance of an offended Heaven will fall upon your head. You have robbed me — an old man — of the support of my years; you have ruined the little happiness that awaited the miserable; remnant of wearied existence that was mine; you have destroyed the prop that held up a tottering fabric; you have filled the dregs of my life’s cup with poignant gall; and you now refuse me the only amends you can possibly make. You came, my lord, to a humble dwelling — I did not seek you — and you were regardless of my grey hairs, and you thought not of my infirmities; but selfish lusts were to be gratified, and the price was ruin ! I was poor — I was embarrassed — I was in difficulties: but my daughter loved me — my daughter consoled me — my daughter shared all my misery. You envied me that solitary bliss. Oh ! yes — you were jealous of my felicity — and you robbed me of my dear, dear daughter ! — you robbed me of my daughter !’

Great God ! how galling were these reproaches. I would not have encountered them for worlds, had I dared eject the author of them from my dwelling: but his hair was whitened with age and with affliction; and I could not have harshly used him. Indeed, there was a moment, amongst the many that were dissipated during this scene, when I was ready to fall at his feet, and confess how deeply I had wronged him, and supplicate his pardon: pride alone checked me. At length he departed, and he left his curse behind him, and well did I merit that malediction; for —

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In Bethlehem Hospital there is a mad old man, who decks his white locks with straws, and who frantically cries after his dishonoured daughter ! Alas ! He little knows who sobs and moans for her heart-broken father in the adjacent cell !