

JANET'S DIAMONDS.

A Doubtful Dowry That Was Lost at Last.

BY P. J. SMITH.

"Oh, my child," cried aunt Hetty impressively, "I would rather see you the wife of a poor bank clerk, or a half-starved curate, a man who couldn't afford to crown your pretty curls with a penny comb, than the wife of a man who'd keep that fair-haired hussy at the head of his house!"

Janet laughed lightly. "Oh, don't let that stupid creature trouble you, aunt Hetty! I'll send her about her business pretty quickly when I'm mistress. I can tell you. And I'll have in her place one of those nice old pompous family things in stiff bombazines that one reads of in novels."

It was of no use advising or remonstrating after that visit. The next day Mr. Brownrigg proposed and was accepted, and, before the end of the season, he and Janet were man and wife.

As there was some difficulty about the marriage settlements, the bridegroom finding it inconvenient to realize certain investments at the particular moment, the famous diamonds were, at Janet's own suggestion, settled upon her in lieu of hard cash—they became, in fact, her private property, so that, if she died before her husband, she could will them to whom she pleased.

"And a capital settlement I call it," Janet retorted, when there was some family demur about the arrangement, "for, if he made over five or six thousand pounds to me, as the lawyers want, I might get an extravagant fit any day and run through the money in no time. But the diamonds I can't get rid of, you know. They're property that must remain with me always."

And she was right; they did remain with her, when goodness knows they ought to have been in the hands of the Jews from whom they had come, and their value yielding interest for the education of her portionless child.

A few months after the marriage I met my sister in London on her route to Nice, where she and her husband were about to winter, and I casually asked her how she had disposed of the "consolentious" housekeeper.

"Oh, that Mrs. What-was-her-name—Jardine—I remember! I got rid of her easily enough. Netty. Why should I not, pray? I found she was quite an unsuitable person for the post, having been so long without a mistress, you know. So I paid her wages and sent her about her business. I don't know what has become of her."

The answer was given in an off-hand manner, but there was a slight access of color in Janet's cheeks, and I saw that she did not wish to pursue the subject, so I let it drop.

Well, well, the denouement of the story of our poor beauty's married life was that one winter morning, about ten years later, she returned to the old Hampshire home where our father was born, and whither the four of us had gathered together to end our days in happy respected maidenhood—returned a penniless, ill-used, deserted wife, with youth, power, beauty gone for ever, and a handsome boy of five, together with her diamond parure—not a gem missing—the only relics of her ill-fated union!

Her story, poor thing, was an ordinary one after all, and the story of many a suffering soul we have soothed and comforted in the course of our peaceful spinster lives.

Eustace Brownrigg turned out to be a brutal scamp, a drunkard and gambler, who after six months of marriage found the face of the most common monplace woman more attractive than his beautiful wife's. According to her account, she bore for years his neglect, ill-usage, and bad temper with the patience and devotion of an angel; but this statement, which at first we received with pitying credulity, we have since found reason to question; for the afflictions of the nuptial bond had not tended in the least to soften our sister's sharp tongue, to teach her sense or forbearance, or to lessen her original selfishness, as the whole household soon learned to its cost.

And then, when, after a few months' rest, kindness, and wholesome food, she actually took to patronizing us—her protectors—took to putting on airs of superiority, based, if you please, on the shameful yoke that had humbled her to the dust, and that she had shaken off so willingly—when she took to issuing orders and giving us advice from the dignity and experience of her matronhood—why, you know, it was too much for us, and so we rose, the whole four of us, and crushed her for a week. No one could crush Janet for longer! I do not believe that even her husband did, though he was trying night and day for nine years, according to her account.

Janet's boy was, I think, the most tempestuous specimen of humanity ever introduced into a trim maiden household. He seemed to have the arms and legs of nine boys instead of one, to be in every room of the house at once, to have a finger in every piece of mischief perpetrated in the neighborhood. Before we had got over the shock of finding him lying slumped at the bottom of the stairs through falling over the balusters, he would be heard bellowing at the top of the house with his fingers squeezed in a drawer, or out in the paddock, having been thrown upon by the pony. I never knew or heard of such a terrible child!

And as for destructiveness—but on that subject I should never finish if I once began, so I had better leave it alone altogether. And yet, for all that, before the child had been six weeks among us, we would not have let him go for all the wealth of the world! Little Phil became the darling as well as the torment of our lives, and his mother's most provoking habit was to complain of him.

Chapter II.
Trot, the second in order of the old nursery, came to us a year after Little Phil, and in a rather romantic manner. She was not of our kind and kin at all, but the orphan daughter of a man to whom our Peggy had been engaged when she was a very young girl. They had quarrelled on some foolish pretext or other, and then parted for ever, each believing the other to be entirely at fault. He went to India, and she did not hear of him for years, until she was quite a middle-aged woman, when one day she was summoned to his death bed in a London hotel, where a tragic *clairvoyance* took place, and they found that each had been the one love of the other's life. He left her no money to bring up her own, appointing a cousin of his, Colonel Maitland, joint guardian with her, and from that day Trot had been the sunshine of our lives.

By what tantalizing anomaly of character we four pronounced marriage hateful, though self-satisfied old maids were seized with the absurd and most reprehensible mania of matchmaking the moment we saw those children's only heads bumping together on the nursery floor, I should never be able to explain or understand, were I to puzzle over the matter to the day of judgment. I think, but certain it is that the manna did seize us and never let us from that hour; and the desire of our hearts, gaining strength with every day, was that Janet's boy and Peggy's girl should find themselves in love with one another, make a very early match of it, and fill for us before we died the old nursery where we had all been reared. Our desire seemed to color every trivial act of the children's lives; we watched them constantly with eager steady eyes; we were continually nodding and hinting and wagging with foolish fatuity to bring about a desirable consciousness of our wishes. We made Trot call Phil "my little husband," and Phil dub Trot "my pretty wife," and we made her wear a ring—very reluctantly purchased out of the boy's pocket money—before she knew the first three letters of the alphabet; and yet all our plotting and tender suggestions did not in the least prevent Trot from snatching any coveted treasure from the hand of her "little husband" whenever infant greed prompted, or Phil from kicking his "pretty wife" out of his way, and even trampling upon her prostrate form, in moments of excitement.

And, when at the age of fourteen not a symptom of the tender passion was discernible in the boy, when one day in our very hearing he spoke in a brutally slighting way of the being he should have worshipped, called her "a wretched miff of a girl" because she could not scrub a tin wall which secretly afforded grip enough for a cat's claw, when she replied, with crimson cheeks and swimming eyes, that she "hated him," that she would rather die twenty times than marry a boy who would outstrip a poor robin on the window-sill, and when he retorted with stringing vulgarities, his fingers outstretched from his nose, "Marry me, indeed! Just wait till I ask you first, miss!" we came unanimously to the conclusion that something must be done, or our dearest wishes would be hopelessly frustrated. Absence, we decided was the best remedy—in fact, the only remedy to be tried at present—and the boy, of course, should be the one to make the move. We could not, in any case, have let Trot go, for we were all too dependent upon her.

The question of Phil's education and subsequent establishment in life had been often mooted among us before. We had schemes for giving the boy a University course, and afterward letting him choose for himself a profession that would give scope for his undoubted talents; but, most unfortunately, just at the very time when we wanted it, the little sum of money we had set aside for this purpose was swept away by the failure of the bank in which it had been deposited.

After a long discussion of the difficulty, we decided to appeal to Philip's mother and try to induce her to part with the diamonds, which, connoisseurs said, would probably realize between five and seven thousand pounds, the interest of which sum, safely invested, would enable her to provide her son with the means of securing a university degree and to give him a fair start in some profession. We all knew that it was a ticklish subject to broach to Janet, but, considering the issue at stake, we were not hopeless of success. The poor woman stuck to her valuable baubles even more closely than she had done in the bloom of life; and their display at Lord Jarmouth's annual dinner-party, and the notice they attracted even from the leaders of metropolitan fashion assembled there, were, we knew, anticipated and gloated over for months before and after the festivity. Three or four times a year at most had Janet the opportunity of exhibiting her grandeur to the county, and in the intervals between these occasions they were deposited for safety with the manager of the County Bank.

We approached the subject as cautiously and temperately as we could, but I saw almost from the start that our appeal was in vain, that no argument or inducement would make Janet consent to part with her precious property.

"Oh, how cruel you are!" she cried hysterically, when we tried to drive the case home with the plea of her maternal responsibility. "How cruel and unjust! As if I had any interest or pleasure in this world but my dear boy's welfare; as if I were not clinging for his sake alone to that one bit of property left to me! And you want to drag it from me now, after the weary struggle I've been through, the desperate fight I had to preserve it untouched! I tell you that, during the last five years of my married life, scarcely a day passed but I had to go through a scene like this with my wretched husband. I tell you with a ring, an article, a threat, an entreaty that good could inspire was I spared. And I had the courage to defy him, to defy him with the steel of a loaded pistol grazing my forehead, for I was a mother. Oh, little old you, my sisters, understand the

sublime courage, the might of resistance, that motherhood confers even upon the weakest, the most helpless of woman-kind; little can you—"

"Oh, stuff and nonsense, Janet!" I interrupted, not knowing whether to burst out laughing or to fly into a temper at the outrageous way in which she was turning the tables upon us. "How can you go on like that? As if you didn't know perfectly, as if you hadn't a thousand proofs that our only motive in urging this sacrifice upon you is Phil's welfare! And you must admit that a boy of his talents and ambition ought to have a University education and be provided with a fair start in life, both of which, I tell you, the interest on the property to which you cling so determinedly would ensure to him if converted into cash, and not a penny of the capital need be touched."

"Oh, dear, oh, dear," moaned my sister, closing her eyes, and with a martyred prostrate air, leaning back on her chair—"the old, old story that his father dimmed into my ears for years! How could I be so foolish, so imprudent, so heartless—ha, ha!—to let six thousand pounds lie in a box, not yielding a penny to our income, when he was half-starving, when our boy's toes were coming out through his little shoes, and he couldn't afford expense to a cobbler to mend them? The old story—how well I know the jargon!"—suddenly starting up and facing us with sparkling eyes. "And, if I had not been so foolish, so imprudent, so heartless, if my mother had not sustained me, and I had handed my diamonds to my husband, would my boy or should I have been one shilling the richer for it this moment—would a penny have been spared to us?"

"But—but, Janet," protested two of the others angrily, "you are wandering from the point altogether! You surely don't mean to imply, sister, that handing the money over to us is to trust for yourself and our boy's good the same as handing it to your supposed husband?"

"No, no, of course not! How stupid you all are! How could you imagine that I would imply such nonsense? What I mean is—what my poor boy, who, I see, has a little of his father's spendthrift blood in him—how could he entirely escape such temptations as he is, without money or respect of money, while the fever of young life lasts. What I mean is that a certain intuition, a maternal instinct, would cause my dear sisters, cannot understand, urges me to keep the money in my hands, dependent on his own enormous and undeniable talents, to make a start in life as so many young fellows do without half his promise manage successfully to do. For something tells me—a conviction I would battle against in vain—that if I complied with your wishes and handed over such a sum of money to him, the inherited disease—dissipation—would break out in my poor child, and the fair promise of his youth be blasted forever. Now I beg to hear of more of this matter. You know my mind and my unalterable conviction, so let it never be revived in my hearing, please. And bear this in consideration, that I am acting on an experience, an intuition of nature that your sisterhood has denied to you, my sisters. Now leave me for I am much exhausted."

We left her, as may be imagined, in a towering rage and with an air of defiance, which she escaped by turning over on her pillow and muffling her exasperated wrath with her handkerchief.

For a whole week after this scene we were sore and hot that we could talk and think of nothing else, and spent our days devising ways and means to send the boy to college in spite of his mother, and get him out of the destructive groove of his intercourse with Trot. But not until eighteen months later, when an elder sister of his father's, dying unexpectedly, left him a legacy of two thousand pounds, were we able to effect our purpose. Philip gaily entered an Oxford college, promising to distinguish himself as quickly as he could, and to keep well within his income, both of which promises the dear had kept, to our great triumph and delight.

After the lapse of two years—for during his first vacation Peggy and I had spirited Trot away to the Rhine for a finishing course of music and German—the young people met again. Phil was now a full grown and very handsome young fellow, skilled in all branches of athletic sports, and Trot, who had only tucked up her bonny brown hair and lengthened her skirts six weeks before, gave herself most charming little airs of young ladyhood, and was, in our united opinion, an object to carry the heart of any young man, with the ordinary weaknesses of humanity, by storm almost at first sight. She was a round-faced rather baby-faced little person, with a very bright complexion, deep gray eyes, and curly brown hair slightly tinged with gold; she had the sweetest voice and the prettiest laugh I ever heard.

"Trot! Good gracious, is that you? Why, what's happened to you?" as our nephew's rather unpromising greeting, as the young lady, with erect head and outstretched hand, advanced to meet him. "Shouldn't he have known you if I had met you in the street, by Jove!" He was stooping to bestow his usual fraternal salute, but suddenly became aware that the girl's hand was closer to him than her cheek, so he drew back with a blush and a frown and stood at some distance, contemplating her with an expression that certainly did not convey dumb-founded approbation and delight.

"So you've been and gone and grown up altogether, have you? Why, I thought the aunties meant to keep you in pantaloons and pigtails for the next ten years, Miss Trot!"

At which Miss Trot gave him a sharp answer and, turning her head, novered towards the door opening into the garden.

For a couple of days a certain appearance of reserve and slight *malaise* seemed to cloud their companionship; but this cleared away quickly—much too quickly—and, before the end of the week, the young people were on the friendliest and easiest of terms again, enjoying hurried summer pleasures with the full zest of their healthy energetic youth. But the subtle, the deliriously disturbing atmosphere that was to envelop their renewed intercourse—alas, no sign of its existence could our anxious eyes discover! And in dismal family conclave we had to admit, after comparing weekly notes, that the young pair had not wandered from the promised path we wished them to tread, that Phil was certainly not carried away by Trot's charms, which to us appeared so overwhelming. And, as for Trot, well, she actually, under his unconscious or indifferent eyes, started a rather lively flirtation with young Bertie Manners, a good looking, but empty-headed boy just six months out of Sandhurst, but who was as full of barrack-yard swagger and military experience as if he had been a Crimean veteran.

It was the hottest, driest July I remembered for years, and, what with the blinding sun, the dust, the midges, and those aggravating children, we became just four of the crankiest, most unbearable old maids in England. Old maids, indeed! I assure, as far as temper was concerned, we might have been four deserted wives or denuded widows like poor Janet.

One afternoon—I think about three weeks after the boy's return—Hetty and I were standing at the open lobby window, abstractedly watching a set of tennis going on immediately underneath between Trot and young Manners. After a few rather lazy games, I became aware that they were not conscious of our observation, for, on Miss Trot throwing away her racket and sitting down upon the grass, her companion came up, cast himself sentimentally at her feet and began to petition for a gift of some of the roses she wore at her throat.

"What an affected little bore that fellow is!" remarked Phil's voice suddenly behind us. "What is he bothering her about now?"

"He is only asking for a few other roses," I answered lightly.

"Such nonsense! There are plenty of the same kind about. Why doesn't he pick some for himself?"

"Why?" I retorted, no longer able to retain myself. "Because he is not a salami-maker like you, Phil! Because, I expect, he would rather have the gift of a few faded buds worn by such a sweet and pretty girl as our Trot than the biggest and freshest bouquet the grounds could give him."

"Oh," exclaimed Phil, bursting into a loud rough laugh that made the couple under the tree look up hastily. "I see! I see! That's the meaning of the touching little scene, by Jove! I am a God, a salamander, not to have taken it before! And what a confoundedly dander-headed donkey I have been to be sure—always in the way, spoiling sport from morning until night! Well, I'll take good care to efface myself for the future. Why—why the deuce, aunt Netty, didn't you tell me that Trot went in for that style of thing? I hadn't the faintest idea that it was the least in her line. Trot, of all the girls in the world, sporting a swagging little idiot like that!" I heard him mutter as he moved scornfully away.

After that, Philip avoided the girl's society as ostentatiously as he had sought it hitherto, and treated her with a coldness and distant politeness that seemed to hurt and puzzle her deeply. At first she stooped to ask for an explanation of his sudden change, begged to be informed in what way she had incurred his displeasure; but he assured her that she was laboring under a delusion, that she had in no wise offended him, and refused any further explanation, at which Trot became more determinedly cold than he, being quite bitter and repellent in her manner to him, and days would pass without their exchanging a word even at breakfast or dinner. It became so very terrible and trying that we were longing for the time of Phil's return to Oxford.

One afternoon at lunch he announced that he had accepted an invitation to spend a week with some friends a couple of miles up the river, and afterwards we stood at the window, the four of us abreast, sadly watching the young people start for the tennis-club together. For about half a dozen yards they kept side by side, then, Phil stopping to light his cigar, Trot moved quickly on, and he, instead of attempting to overtake her, struck across the lawn at right angles, and thus they disappeared from our view.

Neither of them returned to dinner, and about nine o'clock, as we were sitting in the dusk waiting for tea, Trot came in very quietly, knelt down between Peggy and me, and asked us to prepare ourselves for a bit of news that would, she felt sure, surprise us very much—just the latest bit of news in the world that we should expect to hear! And the news was that she had that afternoon promised to marry a man who said he loved her very, very dearly, but only on condition of course that she had our unanimous consent and approval. After a few moments, as nobody spoke, she laid her cheek against Peggy's trembling hand and asked, in a whisper—

"Well, dear, what do you say? Have I any chance of your consent, your approval?"

"Oh, Trot, Trot, he is very young—you are both very young!" Peggy answered, half in tears.

"That is not much against him or me, mammy. That is a fault which will be mending itself every day."

"You love him then, Trot?"

The answer came falteringly, after a few seconds' silence.

"I—I don't know yet, mammy; I haven't had time to think about it. I—I suppose I do like him just a little, you know."

"He does? What—what inducements, child?"

"The inducement of never, never having to leave you all—the inducement of owing you as much as I owe you myself, of loving you all almost as well as I do myself."

"Trot, Trot!" our four voices quavered forth together. "What are you talking about? What does Bertie Manners owe us? Why should he love us?"

"Bertie Manners? Oh, oh, aunties, how do you think I could mean that—that silly boy? How could I—"

"Then you mean—you mean—"

"I mean—why, Phil, of course!"

We gave a big dance the following week as a slight outlet for the exuberance of our delight, and everybody said it was the pleasantest dance that had been given in the place for years, and that our boy and girl were the happiest-looking and most interesting pair of lovers it had ever been their pleasure to congratulate.

Janet, who wore her diamonds, of course, really looked quite handsome, and had such a spirited flirtation with old Sir Hugh Manners, Bertie's uncle, that several of our friends slyly hinted that we ought to make serious inquiries as to the fate of the absent spouse, of whose existence she had not heard for over fifteen years.

It was nearly a fortnight after the happy denouement before any one thought of acquainting Colonel Maitland with the fact of his ward's engagement. The one brought him upon the spot at once, and his action, which of course we all had to agree was perfectly fair and just, was the first blow to the general felicity. After mastering all the facts of the case, he showed us that it was incompatible with his duty to his dead friend to allow any acknowledged engagement between the young couple until Phil had means sufficient to support a wife, until he had at least the same amount of capital to start with as the girl herself had—five to seven thousand pounds.

Five to seven thousand pounds! The very sum that lay unproductive in his mother's hand! There came a faculty about those diamonds. Once again, on the spur of the excitement produced by this decree, we banded the owner, but with as little success as on the first occasion. No power on earth, it would seem, would loosen our sister's grasp on those tantalizing gems.

Colonel Maitland, whom we all liked greatly, remained a week with us, during which time he and Phil had many long consultations as to the quickest ways and means of increasing his modest legacy to the stipulated amount of capital for these young lovers, who six weeks before had not an ideal spending to live together, the idea of waiting until Trot was of age to marry whom she liked—the idea of waiting four never-ending years—appeared a probability or contingency too painful and absurd to be entertained seriously for a moment. The result of these consultations we learned to our general dismay the day before our guest took his departure. Phil had made up his mind to give up the University course upon which we had all set our hearts and to start fortune-making at the other end of the world almost at once. By the end of the month, he would enter into partnership with a smart nephew of the Colonel's, who, after eighteen months' exile in New South Wales, had made more money than his elder brother had made at the end of eleven years' allying at the bar, though the barrister had left Oxford with the highest academic honors of his year.

After the first outbreak of protest and disapproval, I saw that it was of no use to oppose the boy, that he was determined to go; so, I with great difficulty making the others come round to my conclusion, the family council was at last obtained, and, after a parting between the young lovers that was heart-rending enough even to satisfy our high emotional requirements, Phil sailed, and for nearly two years after his departure we received by every mail reports of his success—success not so rapid as he had anticipated, but still rapid enough to give fair promise of his return before the close of the third year with Colonel Maitland's required capital safe in hand.

Then the terrible hitch came. In a short letter to me, enclosing seven sheets to his sweetheart, Philip informed us that he was starting the next day up-country to view some property that was for sale, and on which scientific friend had reported the strong probability of the existence of copper. If he had sufficient grounds for believing his report, he would require us to realize his second thousand, invested in the Funds, and send out the money to him without delay, as even a modest find of copper would run him up to the top of the tree at once and send him home to Trot before the end of the year probably.

After this came a silence that was heart-rending—a silence that lasted three months, until the dear letter that suddenly surrounded us with a flood of sunshine was laid in my hands. And now I arrive at the point where we were left sitting at the top of the stairs waiting for the expiration of the ten minutes that Janet's nerves exacted.

"Time's up—time's up!" cried two of the girls, starting to their feet. "Now we can hear the news!"

We entered the drawing-room together, and found our sister standing by the open window with her son's letter in her hand, and looking so very strange and startled that we all cried out together:

"Janet, what's the matter? What has happened to him? Tell us—quick!"

She looked at us for a moment, opened her lips, then closed them again without speaking.

"I know what it is," said Doty—"he has lost all his money! He has been spec—"

"No," said Janet heavily—"no, it is not that! He has lost no money; but—but he gives me strange news—news that has upset me cruelly. He writes to tell me—you, sisters—that he is married!"

(To be continued.)

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