

IX

A CONFIRMED SPINSTER

I AM in danger, I see, of being included among the whimsical fellows, which I so little desire that I have got me into my writing-chair to combat the charge. but, having sat for an unconscionable time with pen poised, I am come agitatedly to the fear that there may be something in it.

So long a time has elapsed, you must know, since I abated of the ardours of self-inquiry that I revert in vain (through many rusty doors) for the beginning of this change in me, if changed I am ; I seem ever to see this same man until I am back in those wonderful months which were half of my life, when, indeed, I know that I was otherwise than I am now ; no whimsical fellow then, for that was one of the possibilities I put to myself while seeking for the explanation of things, and found to be inadmissible. Having failed in those days to discover why I was driven from the garden, I suppose

I ceased to be enamoured of myself, as of some dull puzzle, and then perhaps the whimsicalities began to collect unnoticed.

It is a painful thought to me to-night, that he could wake up glorious once, this man in the elbow-chair by the fire, who is humorously known at the club as a 'confirmed spinster.' I remember him well when his years told four-and-twenty; on my soul the proudest subaltern of my acquaintance, and with the most reason to be proud. There was nothing he might not do in the future, having already done the biggest thing, this toddler up club steps to-day.

Not, indeed, that I am a knave; I am tolerably kind, I believe, and most inoffensive, a gentleman, I trust, even in the eyes of the ladies who smile at me as we converse; they are an ever-increasing number, or so it seems to me to-night. Ah, ladies! I forget when I first began to notice that smile and to be made uneasy by it. I think I understand it now, and in some vague way it hurts me. I find that I watch for it nowadays, but I hope I am still your loyal, obedient servant.

You will scarcely credit it, but I have just remembered that I once had a fascinating smile of my own. What has become of my smile? I swear

I have not noticed that it was gone till now ; I am like one who, revisiting his school, feels suddenly for his old knife. I first heard of my smile from another boy, whose sisters had considered all the smiles they knew and placed mine on top. My friend was scornful, and I bribed him to mention the plebiscite to no one, but secretly I was elated and amazed. I feel lost to-night without my smile. I rose a moment ago to look for it in my mirror.

I like to believe that she has it now. I think she may have some other forgotten trifles of mine with it that make the difference between that man and this. I remember her speaking of my smile, telling me it was my one adornment, and taking it from me, so to speak, for a moment to let me see how she looked in it ; she delighted to make sport of me when she was in a wayward mood, and to show me all my ungainly tricks of voice and gesture, exaggerated and glorified in her entrancing self, like a star calling to the earth : ' See, I will show you how you hobble round,' and always there was a challenge to me in her eyes to stop her if I dared, and upon them, when she was most audacious, lay a sweet mist.

They all came to her court, as is the business of young fellows, to tell her what love is, and she

listened with a noble frankness, having, indeed, the friendliest face for all engaged in this pursuit that can ever have sat on woman. I have heard ladies call her coquette, not understanding that she shone softly upon all who entered the lists, because with the rarest intuition she foresaw that they must go away broken men and already sympathised with their dear wounds. All wounds incurred for love were dear to her; at every true utterance about love she exulted with grave approval, or it might be with a little 'ah!' or 'oh!' like one drinking deliciously. Nothing could have been more fair, for she was for the first comer who could hit the target, which was her heart.

She adored all beautiful things in their every curve and fragrance, so that they became part of her. Day by day, she gathered beauty; had she had no heart (she who was the bosom of womanhood) her thoughts would still have been as lilies, because the good is the beautiful.

And they all forgave her; I never knew of one who did not forgive her; I think had there been one it would have proved that there was a flaw in her. Perhaps, when good-bye came she was weeping because all the pretty things were said and done with, or she was making doleful confessions

about herself, so impulsive and generous and confidential, and so devoid of humour, that they compelled even a tragic swain to laugh. She made a looking-glass of his face to seek woefully in it whether she was at all to blame, and when his arms went out for her, and she stepped back so that they fell empty, she mourned, with dear sympathy, his lack of skill to seize her. For what her soft eyes said was that she was always waiting tremulously to be won. They all forgave her, because there was nothing to forgive, or very little, just the little that makes a dear girl dearer, and often afterwards, I believe, they have laughed fondly when thinking of her, like boys brought back. You ladies who are everything to your husbands save a girl from the dream of youth, have you never known that double-chinned industrious man laugh suddenly in a reverie and start up, as if he fancied he were being hailed from far away?

I hear her hailing me now. She was so light-hearted that her laugh is what comes first across the years; so high-spirited that she would have wept like Mary of Scots because she could not lie on the bare plains like the men. I hear her, but it is only as an echo; I see her, but it is as a light among distant trees, and the middle-aged man can draw

no nearer ; she was only for the boys. There was a month when I could have shown her to you in all her bravery, but then the veil fell, and from that moment I understood her not. For long I watched her, but she was never clear to me again, and for long she hovered round me, like a dear heart willing to give me a thousand chances to regain her love. She was so picturesque that she was the last word of art, but she was as young as if she were the first woman. The world must have rung with gallant deeds and grown lovely thoughts for numberless centuries before she could be ; she was the child of all the brave and wistful imaginings of men. She was as mysterious as night when it fell for the first time upon the earth. She was the thing we call romance, which lives in the little hut beyond the blue haze of the pine-woods.

No one could have looked less elfish. She was all on a noble scale, her attributes were so generous, her manner unconquerably gracious, her movements indolently active, her face so candid that you must swear her every thought lived always in the open. Yet, with it all, she was a wild thing, alert, suspicious of the lasso, nosing it in every man's hand, more curious about it than aught else in the world ; her quivering delight was to see it

cast for her, her game to elude it ; so mettlesome was she that she loved it to be cast fair that she might escape as it was closing round her ; she scorned, however her heart might be beating, to run from her pursuers ; she took only the one step backward, which still left her near them but always out of reach ; her head on high now, but her face as friendly, her manner as gracious as before, she is yours for the catching. That was ever the unspoken compact between her and the huntsmen.

It may be but an old trick come back to me with these memories, but again I clasp my hands to my brows in amaze at the thought that all this was for me could I retain her love. For I won it, wonder of the gods, but I won it. I found myself with one foot across the magic circle wherein she moved, and which none but I had entered ; and so, I think, I saw her in revelation, not as the wild thing they had all conceived her, but as she really was. I saw no tameless creature, nothing wild or strange. I saw my sweet love placid as a young cow browsing. As I brushed aside the haze, and she was truly seen for the first time, she raised her head, like one caught, and gazed at me with meek affrighted eyes. I told her what had been revealed to me as I looked upon her, and

she trembled, knowing she was at last found, and fain would she have fled away, but that her fear was less than her gladness. She came to me slowly; no incomprehensible thing to me now, but transparent as a pool, and so restful to look upon that she was a bath to the eyes, like banks of moss.

Because I knew the maid, she was mine. Every maid, I say, is for him who can know her. The others had but followed the glamour in which she walked, but I had pierced it and found the woman. I could anticipate her every thought and gesture, I could have flashed and rippled and mocked for her, and melted for her and been dear disdain for her. She would forget this and be suddenly conscious of it as she began to speak, when she gave me a look with a shy smile in it which meant that she knew I was already waiting at the end of what she had to say. I call this the blush of the eye. She had a look and a voice that were for me alone; her very finger-tips were charged with caresses for me. And I loved even her naughtinesses, as when she stamped her foot at me, which she could not do without also gnashing her teeth, like a child trying to look fearsome. How pretty was that gnashing of her teeth! All her tormentings of me

turned suddenly into sweetnesses, and who could torment like this exquisite fury, wondering in sudden flame why she could give herself to any one, while I wondered only why she could give herself to me. It may be that I wondered over-much. Perhaps that was why I lost her.

It was in the full of the moon that she was most restive, but I brought her back, and at first she could have bit my hand, but then she came willingly. Never, I thought, shall she be wholly tamed, but he who knows her will always be able to bring her back.

I am not the man, for, mystery of mysteries, I lost her. I know not how it was, though in the twilight of my life that then began I groped for reasons until I wearied of myself; all I know is that she had ceased to love me; I had won her love, but I could not keep it. The discovery came to me slowly, as if I were a most dull-witted man; at first I knew only that I no longer understood her as of old. I found myself wondering what she had meant by this and that; I did not see that when she began to puzzle me she was already lost to me. It was as if, unknowing, I had strayed outside the magic circle.

When I did understand, I tried to cheat myself

into the belief that there was no change, and the dear heart bleeding for me assisted in that poor pretence. She sought to glide to me with swimming eyes as before, but it showed only that this caressing movement was still within her compass, but never again for me. With the hands she had pressed to her breast she touched mine, but no longer could they convey the message. The current was broken, and soon we had to desist miserably from our pretences. She could tell no more than I why she had ceased to love me; she was scarcely less anxious than I that I should make her love me again, and, as I have said, she waited with a wonderful tolerance while I strove futilely to discover in what I was lacking and to remedy it. And when, at last, she had to leave me, it was with compassionate cries and little backward flights.

The failure was mine alone, but I think I should not have been so altered by it had I known what was the defect in me through which I let her love escape. This puzzle has done me more harm than the loss of her. Nevertheless, you must know (if I am to speak honestly to you) that I do not repent me those dalliyings in enchanted fields. It may not have been so always, for I remember a black

night when a poor lieutenant lay down in an oarless boat and let it drift toward the weir. But his distant moans do not greatly pain me now ; rather am I elated to find (as the waters bring him nearer) that this boy is I, for it is something to know that, once upon a time, a woman could draw blood from me as from another.

I saw her again, years afterwards, when she was a married woman playing with her children. She stamped her foot at a naughty one, and I saw the gleam of her teeth as she gnashed them in the dear pretty way I can't forget ; and then a boy and girl, fighting for her shoulders, brought the whole group joyously to the ground. She picked herself up in the old leisurely manner, lazily active, and looked around her benignantly, like a cow : our dear wild one safely tethered at last with a rope of children. I meant to make her my devoirs, but, as I stepped forward, the old wound broke out afresh, and I had to turn away. They were but a few poor drops, which fell because I found that she was even a little sweeter than I had thought.