The Graven Image

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Chapter III

Femina Furens

A change came over Jeanette Burtrand, a change that inspired her mother beyond words. The girl, as it was, had righted herself, and that with incredible quickness. She said no more about leaving home; which showed that this had been but a passing notion, of the swifter sort. And she spoke never again of David Auburn, nor could she bear to hear his name, as Mrs Burtrand found out by probing: which showed, did it not, that she had washed her mind of him? Mrs Burtrand said so, at all costs; and Mrs Burtrand considered herself acute. But what was still more encouraging, from this lady’s point of view, was her daughter’s continued graciousness towards Pelham Warburton. This was the best sign of all; for had that last call of David Auburn caused her to waver or to repent in the slightest, Captain Warburton’s society must have been quite intolerable to her. Certainly it was not intolerable; but no more was it what Mrs Burtrand, flying to the other extreme, imagined it to be; otherwise her reasoning here was plausible.
When you do happen to score, it is difficult not to magnify the matter. But Mrs Burtrand not only added points—she multiplied the result by itself. The result of that landed her in as perfect a little paradise as fool ever inhabited. She fell into a tranquil, blissful state of complete confidence in the immediate future and enchanting visions of the more remote one. But, wise in her folly, she let things take their own course; they were going far too well to be meddled with, she thought—the very soundness of the principle giving an additional gloss to its miserable misapplication.

In a word, she made sublimely sure of the match between Jeanette and Pelham Warbuton. The family party of the future was her favourite mental picture, the conversations of days to come rang as certainly in her ears as those of yesterday.

“The Abbey grounds almost adjoin our own,” she could herself saying; “so my daughter Lady Warburton and I see a good deal of one another. It is so sweet; for at my age I could not bear to be entirely separated from Jeanette—that is Lady Warburton. Who has always been so much to me!”

Such was the stuff her dreams were made of; they included a ration of remaining life for Pelham’s father, but a short one, and the shorter the better. But it is only fair to state that Mrs Burtrand was not the only dreamer. The other was Pelham Warburton himself.

Born to a position that was second to few in the county, and a soldier for the moment only (till it bored him), this
young man had the qualities of his condition. Many of these were very good, and one was very bad. He was liked by all who knew him, and if by none quite so much as by himself, is this unusual? He was your egotistical young Briton of the frank, manly, and engaging kind.

With no immediate desire for the married state in the abstract, he had been charmed with Jeanette from the first; but he had never intended to cut out that poor devil Auburn. During the engagement he had felt on safe ground, enjoying her society in the sleepy country, and giving her the advantage of his own, with a clear conscience and no thought for the future. But when she jilted Auburn the Captain’s excellent opinion of himself supplied the reason: after all he had cut the fellow out, without meaning to, confound it! And all at once a variety of feelings drew him to her in real earnest. He considered the thing attentively over cigars and the sporting papers: she was the loveliest girl he had ever seen; she would have money enough to give the match a tone; if her people were not absolutely unexceptionable, did it very much matter? He consulted his father, and the old fellow, charmed to think of his son settling down, and himself pleased with Jeanette, thought that, on the whole, it did not matter. Ultimately he approached old Burtrand, who—very naturally—had nothing against him; while Mrs Burtrand did the cleverest thing she had ever done, by at once encouraging him and yet piquing him by seeming less keen about the match than she should have been. As for Jeanette,
he was quite certain of her feelings. He had not flirted with her because she had not let him. This was the very thing that inclined him to the earnest course. But he felt quite sure of her. That she could dream of refusing him was a conception impossible to Pelham Warburton.

The waning of the furlough brought the matter to a head. He spoke of quitting the service, after running out to India merely to settle up and say goodbye. So a few days before Christmas Mrs Burtrand said sweetly to her daughter:

“Jeanette, dear, I’m glad you’ve got that frock on. Nothing suits you quite so well as plain, tailor-built grey, and that touch of colour inside the collar is most effective. I am very glad to see you wearing that frock today.”

“Why?” asked Jeanette coldly.

Mrs Burtrand had never been half so nice to her as during the past month. Jeanette, on the other hand, had never treated her mother with greater coldness and reserve.

“Why?” echoed Mrs Burtrand pleasantly. “Because someone is likely to call this afternoon: I think Captain Warburton is coming. And—Jeanette dearest! He has seen your father; and now, dear child, he wants to see you!”

“Oh! He wants to see me, does he?”

“He does—and can you not guess what for?”

“I am not good at guesses.”
The girl’s face was set, and a little pale, but there was a vigorous light in her eyes, and the shadow of a smile upon her lips. Mrs Burtrand saw a touch of triumph in her look; and did not wonder.

They were in the drawing-room. Even as they stood, a bell rang below.

“Jeanette dear,” said Mrs Burtrand, in a manner at once flurried and impressive, “I am going to leave you!”

“Very well.”

The natural order of things was ludicrously reversed. The mother was in the flutter; the daughter was entirely composed.

“Bless you, dear Jeanette!” And Mrs Burtrand actually swooped and stopped and kissed her, before rustling from the room.

She hastened to the boudoir, and thence, from her chair before the fire, into the glittering future. She arranged the wedding. She chose the dresses—her own first. She selected the bridesmaids; she found a best man with a title; she listened to the speeches; she put on the expression she should wear while these were being made, sitting at the upper table, by the baronet’s side. The baronet might live until after the wedding. He might even live a little longer, if he liked, to complete that alluring family party of the future. But first the happy pair must come back from their honeymoon, and
have the horses unyoked and the carriage dragged up to the Abbey by a team of cheering rustics. That was one of the prettiest bits in the whole pictorial programme. And what a honeymoon it was! What a vision! What a match, too, to follow on the heels of that idiotic engagement to David Auburn! Really, Mrs Burtrand felt quite a thrill of delight in remembering the old engagement—it was *sauce piquante* to the meat.

Yet it was a mistake to remember Auburn just then. It broke the train. Even a fool’s paradise is the worse for its serpent: and as for Mrs Burtrand and David Auburn, he had been unpleasantly before her mind for some days, and it was particularly unpleasant to recall him now. In point of fact, unknown to anybody, she had heard from him more than once. In the first place he had written her a brief note, courteously begging a brief interview with Mrs Burtrand, not with Jeanette. Mrs Burtrand had put that note in the fire without dreaming of answering it; and this morning she had received a second, couched in less temperate terms. He wanted an interview of five minutes at the utmost, in which to put Mrs Burtrand a plain question and receive from her a plain answer. But he could not write it. He did not ask to see Jeanette, but if Mrs Burtrand, by her continued silence, still refused to see him, then he should be forced to apply to her daughter direct. That would pain Jeanette, and he would not do it unless driven to extremities. But what he could not do, was to live unsatisfied on a certain point. It was a moving
appeal, not unmannerly, but only emphatic. But it needed no lightning insight on Mrs Burtrand’s part to read between the lines that the reaction had come; that the young man had found it harder to keep a calm, plucky front than to show one once, in a supreme hour; that now he was everything he had meant not to be—and the later mood the likelier one to last.

“This time he shall have an answer, of one sort,” Mrs Burtrand decided. “I’ll write tonight and tell him Jeanette is engaged! That’ll settle him, perhaps, and check another appeal to her; which he evidently wants to make through me. He will have some reason to feel bitter over it, I own; only a month’s interregnum—it is quick work, one can’t deny; but then her engagement to him was never much better than a farce, as he must know well enough himself. After all, too, a good strong grievance is a great thing for a young man. A little cynicism of the kind that isn’t too cheap—that’s bought by such an experience as this—is the salt they all need to make more of them. Captain Warburton has it, I am sure; and he is all the better for it, I am convinced. Now there is a man! Such a husband—such a son! ‘Sir Pelham Warburton’—was ever name more charming on the lips or on paper? But as yet he is only plain Pelham—and to me, plain Pelham for the rest of my days, I presume. I never thought of that! I have called him ‘Captain Warburton’ for the last time!”

Suddenly Mrs Burtrand swung forward in her chair, her whole soul in her ears. The drawing-room door had opened.
It shut with a harsh snap. A man’s stride crossed the landing. The steps were hasty. They rattled down the stairs like the roll of a drum. They echoed in the tiled hall. The street-door shut.

Mrs Burtrand had held her breath. Now she gasped. She leant forward as though listening still; but she was only trying to think; and at first she tried in vain. When her stunned faculties quickened, beads broke out upon her forehead. Wonder, amazement, rage, and incredulity crossed her face in fleeting shadows. Then her expression resolved itself into grim determination. She would see for herself what had happened. She rose, and sailed from the boudoir into the drawing-room with the stately, massive motion of an old three-decker.

Jeanette was standing before the fire, one foot upon the gleaming fender, one elbow on the mantelpiece. Her fingers seemed white as lilies against her flushed face. She was looking downward, and frowning.

“Jeanette! I insist on knowing what has happened!”

It was not a good beginning. The time was bad. As Jeanette raised her eyes, she smiled faintly through her frown. The former touch of triumph was in her smile; but this was a firmer touch.

“Certainly, mother! I can tell you every word that has passed. Captain Warburton has done me the honour of asking me to marry him; and I have refused him.”
“And you have actually refused him!”

“That is all,” returned Jeanette, facing her mother’s extraordinary look without a tremor.

Mrs Burtrand clasped with both hands the back of a chair, as a preacher clasps the woodwork of the pulpit. In this position, slightly leaning over the chair, she opened fire with a force that lost nothing for a complete absence of gesture.

“Of all the false girls I have ever known or heard of, you are the most false! Of all the wicked and deceitful ones, you are the worst. False, treacherous, underhand and disgraceful—that is what you are! Explain your conduct if you can. No! Leave me! Go out of my sight! I cannot bear you near me, for I feel—I feel as though I could almost strike you, Jeanette!”

Even Mrs Burtrand’s gesture, which was generally exuberant, could not have strengthened this. And what the mother lacked in the way of feminine ferocity, the manner made up—in tone and look. But Jeanette was far enough from quailing.

I will explain my conduct first, please,” said she firmly, “Then I shall be only too thankful to go—if you do not.”

“Explain away!” sneered Mrs Burtrand savagely.

“He asked me to marry him,” then said Jeanette; “and he seemed to think I should jump at it. I see that is what you thought too. But I told him I could not dream of it, neither
now nor ever. I said I did not love him, and no more I do—not an atom. For a moment he seemed as though I had struck him senseless. Then he hinted that I had given him grounds—"

"And you have! You have encouraged him all along, most disgracefully. You may be ashamed of yourself; you may indeed!"

"I never encouraged him! Shall I tell you who did? You—and he encouraged himself! I liked his society in the country; he amused me; but he was never anything more than a friend, or less than a gentleman. Stay! I did encourage him to be friendly. I saw no harm in that—least of all just then."

A shade of pain crossed her face. "His manner never altered till quite lately. Since I broke off my engagement he has been different, but not so very different. He thought he had it all his own way, you see. He thought I had done that on his account! I had a suspicion of this at the time; now I know it; he has shown me plainly what his thoughts must have been. But who encouraged them?"

"You did!" cried Mrs Burtrand passionately. "More shame for you. When you saw him change, as you own you did, you should have changed too—the other way—and checked him then!"

"I don’t see that! It was he who advanced; I remained where I had been all along. He did all the advancing; and I have no sympathy for a man who dares and pressures to do
that without being met one fraction of the way. I never took
one step, yet on he came to his own humiliation; and I don’t
pity him; for I believe the notion that any girl could refuse
him hurt him more than the fact that I had refused him. But
I have tonight taught him a lesson, and he will be grateful to
me some day, when he has won his wife: he will have gone
about it in a different fashion!”

“You saw what was coming, yet allowed him to speak! You as good as admit it?”

“I quite admit,” returned Jeanette, coolly. “I saw it the
other day, and I allowed him to learn a lesson that he is not
likely to forget.”

Mrs Burtrand gasped. “This is the most disgraceful
confession I have ever heard In my life; and you, who at
eighteen have broken the hearts of two honest men, are the
most disgraceful girl!”

“Mother!” cried Jeanette, reddening painfully, and speak-
ing with a sudden tremor and intensity. “You know that you
yourself are to blame in both cases!”

“Thank you! Will you be so good as to explain how?”

“How!” echoed Jeanette, with a reproach too deep for
scorn. “In twenty ways that I was too blind to see at the
time—that I see now only too plainly. You hated my en-
gagement, and you set to work to undermine it. You threw
Captain Warburton and me together in the country; you
drew us together in town; and you brought poor David here to see it. Those two were always here together; and that was your cleverest, cruellest move. You had many opportunities, as hostess, of making David miserable for a whole evening; I was a fool, or I should have seen what you were doing, and would have been different to David when I thought he took little disappointments badly, and made much out of nothing. But now I can see it was not nothing. It was a systematic game, you played it, we were the pieces. You put David always at a disadvantage, made him appear at his worst, made him jealous; and Captain Warburton you made confident. I hate myself for my blindness and weakness and folly: but I was a child: the last few weeks have been years to me in thought and perception—and experience! And though I blame my own wavering heart—for it did waver once, though now fixed for ever—for the end of all things between David and me, I blame you too, who took advantage of us both. I cannot help blaming you!"

The justice of this charge, though in the main substantial, was not flawless. It was one side of the question—a woman never sees two. Mrs Burtrand saw the other side—also the flaws. She noted these, and took further advantage of an increasing tremor and hoarseness in the girl’s voice. For Jeanette, like all her soulful, sensitive kind, had no staying-power in offensives; her scorn and anger melted, not hardened, in her heat; besides, her heart was bleeding for David
Auburn. Her mother saw that she had softened—and hit out with all her might.

“Here is a nice, dutiful, ladylike girl! But you were always so, from your babyhood: it is what I should have expected of you: it is the natural outcome of something that is in you but none of the others. Thank God I have no other child like you! So you led on this young man in order to give him a lesson, for his own good; that sounds like you; you were priggish from nursery; but what you also led him on for, I can see—though you are not frank enough to admit it—was to revenge yourself on me! For what? Because you think I stepped in between the other young man and you. You and your young men! It sounds well, does it not? If you had not forgotten yourself, and that it is your mother to whom you are speaking—if you were calm, you would not need me to point out to you the absurdity of your accusation. I made no open objection to your engagement, whatever I may have thought. I made the best of it. I asked him to the house, though I never approved of him. Could I have done more? Would many mothers have done so much? Yet you dare to speak to me like this! Shall I tell you the real truth? David Auburn you never loved. You were flattered by him; you thought you loved him; but you know as well as I it was never love. I believe you are incapable of honest love for anybody—but yourself! But you are capable of spoiling honest men’s lives. Here are two; and you still in your teens! You hang your head, and well you may. Yet I am glad to see
that even still—as after speaking to me as you have spoken to-day—as a mother is seldom spoken to by child, I imagine—you can feel ashamed of yourself. But it will not unsay what you have said.”

Long ago the girl’s head had drooped; and Mrs Burtrand had hit all the harder since then. She was a woman a little given to hard hitting, as her servants knew. She changed her servants very often. Her style of abuse was hardly elegant, or even ladylike; but that was a domestic matter. It was years since she had spoken to a child of hers in this way—and then that child was Jeanette.

But Jeanette was past resentment now. Her mother had said one or two things that were true enough to wound; the half-truths cut her to the heart; when she raised her hot face and swimming eyes anger had melted into supreme anguish.

“You have said some true things—some things most bitterly, most cruelly true!” she exclaimed, in a broken voice. “It is true that I did not love David then—not as he deserved, not as he loved me. But I love him now! I have learnt to love him since all was over! When I saw him standing upright and unbent, with a brave face to the future, and no word of reproach, yet with his heart broken—I said one thing with my lips and another in my soul! He seemed not to care, his voice was so quiet, but then the fire lit up his face and I saw he was heart-broken. If I had never loved him before, I loved
him then, calm, strong, and suffering! To me he is always noble, as I saw him then, as he would have been ever, had I been different. So I love him now, though it is too late; and I shall love him till my life’s end, though I shall never see him again!"

She stood for an instant, transfixed by the most poignant pain, yet spiritually carried away by the sincere hopelessness of the passion that had come too late. She then went sobbing to the door.

Her mother laughed aloud as she passed.

Jeanette came back from the door, knelt on the chair behind which Mrs Burtrand still stood, took both the white plump hands in hers, and raised a sweet, tortured, pitiable face.

“Mother! Forgive me! I was unjust. I am your daughter. And I am sorry and ashamed!”

Mrs Burtrand freed her hands.

“Mother! You have not been quite kind to me either, you never have, you are not now. Can we not be a little more like mother and daughter—cannot there be a little more tenderness on both sides? It is my fault there has been so little, but I am heartily sorry, and ready to do better; and I am very miserable! Only say that you forgive me, mother!”

Mrs Burtrand walked out of the room.