The Graven Image
Hornung, E. W., Rowland, Peter

Published by ELT Press

Hornung, E. W. and Peter Rowland.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/44264.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/44264
Chapter IX

Two Girls Together

“Won’t you tell me, dear?” Jeanette at last whispered; and these were her first words, after a silence broken only by the sounds of Daisy’s distress.

But Daisy was grown calmer now. “No—no—I can’t!” she cried passionately, but with no break in her voice.

“Yet you two have quarrelled?”

“Quarrelled! You see well enough it’s more than a mere tiff! Yes, we’ve quarrelled, if you like—but for good!”

She was brimming over with indignation, and it was only to be expected that Jeanette should come in for a little of it. She fell back on strenuous wrenching at her ring; but it would not slide over the joint; and suddenly she presented that finger to Jeanette, for her to try, but Jeanette took the whole hand instead, and then the other hand, and gazed earnestly at the tearful, angry eyes.

“Do you mean to tell me, Daisy,” said she, very gravely, “that it is all over between you?”
“For ever and ever and ever!” cried Daisy vehemently; the fire in her eyes had dried the tears; whatever had happened, whosoever was to blame, it was plain that Daisy was too furious now for direct dealing. To have said “nonsense,” for example, simply because one felt or hoped that it was nonsense, would have done much more harm than good; fresh and stronger accusations would have followed on Daisy’s part; and there is nothing like repeating a protestation for giving it an air of truth—when the blood has cooled upon many repetitions the point is practically established. Jeanette had some shrewd instincts, the case not being her own, and she felt that Daisy must not be allowed to convince herself of the eternal character of this rupture—so she at once appeared convinced of it herself.

“I was sure of it,” she said calmly.

“How could you be?” asked Daisy, much startled. “And since when?”

“Since a few minutes ago.”

“You saw him then?”—eagerly.

“Yes.”

“Of course he has gone?” said Daisy, effecting indifference, but playing the part very ill.

“Of course; that is, he will be gone by now; or at any rate” (Jeanette could not leave well alone, she was absolutely conscientious) “he is now running up his horse.”
“Did he say anything?” asked Daisy.

“Yes; he said you had asked him to go, so he was going.”

“I did! And I am thankful he is gone.”

Her voice and manner had swiftly changed; they seemed now alarmingly sincere; and Jeanette was deceived, at the moment, and in genuine distress. For it seemed as if she could do no good after all. She thought of Henry Flood, with his head held high, and the fog in his honest eyes, and the tremor in his voice—she could see and hear him then—and her heart throbbed with pity as it filled with fear. She had not answered Daisy, whose last words were indeed unanswerable; and the time was flying while Henry was running up his horse, no doubt as fast as he could. There was no time for pauses, and Jeanette was combing her wits for the wisest tack to try next, when Daisy relieved her by another question of the ostentatiously careless kind:

“Did he seem to feel it at all?”

“Is he the kind of man to show his feelings, dear?” queried back Jeanette.

“I am asking if he did,” said Daisy petulantly.

“Well, then, it was easy to see that something serious was the matter. But he was very strict over it; his head was held high; and he did not forget to be polite even to me, whom he never saw before and was never to see—”
“Ah!” broke in Daisy, with uncontrollable bitterness, and with a dash of jealousy too. “It will not b-b-break his heart!”

Jeanette took courage, and nearly asked her if she wanted it to break his heart, but instead said tenderly: “Dearest Day! I do so wish you would tell me something about it, if only the least bit! You will have to tell somebody, you know; for it is all so sudden, so extraordinary; and you might find it easier to tell me.”

Daisy this time complied with unnatural alacrity; it was no secret, she began; but then she hesitated, and then began again, with tears starting into her voice, and all the affectation gone out of it. It was he who had begun it, she said—she who had made it worse. He thought she had not been writing to him as often or as nicely of late as formerly—never considering that her time had been more taken up. (Here Jeanette winced, and might have taken offence at a less stressful moment—when the thing would not have been said.) Then he thought that she had not been quite kind to him that morning—just because she had kept him waiting a little bit. So he had got a grievance—and Jeanette could have no idea what a terrible thing a man with a grievance was. Jeanette had some such conception, however. Moreover she was beginning to have some conception of the case before her. It was as she suspected, Flood had been too humble a lover, and Daisy accordingly had been treating him lightly; and this morning he had shown that his humility was not servility by complaining. According to Daisy, his remon-
strance, though tender, had been too stupid for words. She had wanted him to amuse her and make her happy—he had been terribly disagreeable instead. And here Daisy stopped to exclaim very bitterly that he never had amused her since their engagement. He had been most entertaining when first she knew him—up to the day that he proposed—but ever since, at all their meetings, he had been grave and sad and perfectly stupid.

“My dear child,” said Jeanette, out of the wisdom of her own experience, of which here was yet another echo, “that is because he loves you so!”

“Then I won’t be loved like that!” cried Daisy passionately.

“But it must be partly your own fault that it is like that. Think how easily you could have made him happy today! I am sure he came prepared to be happier than he had ever been before in his life. And even if he was a little too touchy, and inclined to scold you, well, you don’t know how sensitive some men are, and it was only a question of taking him the right way.”

“No man ought to require any particular way!” cried Daisy with vigour; and there was certainly some force in the remark. “And how could I easily have made him happy? Men ought not to want making happy, but pray how could I have done it?”

“Oh, in a hundred little ways. You must know for yourself! You should have remembered how long it is since he
saw you; and how hard he has been working—all for you! You should have been kind; a little kindness goes so far with a man in love. You should have owned you had been a little bit to blame—he’d have taken every scrap if you had shown him the least sorrow.”

It came pathetically easy to Jeanette to preach what she herself, in her time, had conspicuously omitted to practise.

“Instead of which,” said Daisy, much softened, “I got very indignant; not without cause, either; he had no business to feel ill-treated because my letters had fallen off a little—as if a girl had nothing better to do than write love-letters—as if there was ever any news on a station! I was very angry, and I said something sharp and horrid. I knew it was horrid the moment it was out; yet when he got up—from where you are sitting—and stood over there; and asked me, with something odd about his voice, if I meant that—oh, Jeanette! I said I did!”

Jeanette, in her time, had said the selfsame thing!

“And then,” continued Daisy, choking and inarticulate now, “he said that this sort of thing could not go on. He didn’t say it as if he was half sorry! I was sorry then, but that made me all the wilder, and I said, ‘No; the sooner it comes to an end the better!’ That hurt him, I could see it, and I was glad. He went to the door and said that perhaps I would like him to go; and I said I wished to goodness he would go—back to his station—and for ever! Then he came back,
and stood quite close to me, and said he had not meant that. And I said, ‘But I did!’ And he went without another word.”

That was all; and it had not been either quickly or easily said; for in addition to her natural impediment (which was at its worst) she had quite broken down long before the end. The end of all was a paroxysm of tears most distressing to witness. Yet when this subsided, and Daisy made another effort to hold up her head, there was Jeanette smiling!

Daisy looked cruelly hurt. “Oh, how can you? How can you?”

“Forgive me, dear!” Jeanette kissed her tenderly. “But to think that it is no worse than this! How glad and thankful I am! Why, you little goose, it has only been a tiff after all—a horrid little lovers’ quarrel that can still be made up. There’s nothing radical in it. Can’t you see that?”

“No, I can’t,” said Daisy, very dismally. “It is all over between us. I can see that.”

“What! While he cares for you so? While you care for him, only not quite so fiercely? Would you give up one another for a few cruel words? Oh, you can’t know what you are doing!” cried Jeanette, with sudden intensity. “You don’t know what you are laying up for yourself! If only you knew as I do—” Jeanette paused to consider. The length of time—a few seconds—which it took her to make up her mind is no criterion of the effort which her new and sudden determination cost her. That effort was intense; for she had deter-
mined to tell to Daisy what she had never yet told to a soul, the story of her own heart. “Daisy,” she said, in an altered, hardened tone, “may I tell you something—something that once happened?”

“Tell away! You can do no good. We shall never, never forgive each other!”

“I never meant to tell you. I said I would never tell a single soul! But it may open your eyes in time. It is about myself!”

For many minutes Jeanette spoke without ceasing. Her eyes were fixed steadily in front of her the whole time; her voice soon varied and her tone was utterly dispassionate; only, as she went on, her face seemed to pale visibly, and all the while her hands lay in her lap tightly locked—so tightly that the skin was all blotches of rose pink and dead white.

Daisy, taken out of herself, hearing that which she had certainly been curious to hear, and watching intently the other’s profile, saw the lines harden gradually—saw an expression of acute pain settle perceptibly on Jeanette’s face—and impulsively interrupted her.

“Darling Jeanette! Don’t, don’t go on. It is paining you so!”

“It is paining me no more than it pains me every day—very nearly every hour—of my life. It is always with me!”

So Jeanette went on, while the anguish sharpened in her face, until she had told all.
“And you never saw anything more of him—of David?” said Daisy.

“I have never heard of him from that day to this.”

“And you don’t know what he is doing?”

There was a minute’s silence in the close, quiet, half-lit room.

“I think I know,” said Jeanette, musingly; and she spoke in so sweet and low a tone that Daisy leant away from her, to stare. The hard, suffering look had vanished from her face; the half-closed eyes were peering thoughtfully into the darkest corner of the room; her face shone as from an unseen glory; it was as though she saw in that corner something that no other eyes could see.

“I think I know,” she said again, very softly; “somewhere or other, he is quietly, steadily at work. He is as ardent and ambitious, as hopeful and as hard-working, as he was in the days before he knew me. His entire soul is in his work, and it ought to be that way with an artist. Perhaps he has long ago forgotten me; perhaps my place is more worthily filled; I could not complain in either case—I ought to be very glad. It is no good speculating, however”—she had sighed involuntarily at these two possibilities—“for I shall never see him any more. But some day—perhaps before long—I shall hear of him. All the world will hear of him, one day! He is climbing to fame. When he knew me he was trying to jump to fame, for he was working for a woman, and not for his art.
But the love that he gave me has all gone back into his art; for that alone he has been working—ever since!"

She spoke with the quiet confidence of conviction, yet with reference to a man of whom she had heard not a word for four years. Daisy was slightly puzzled. “But have you never heard of his pictures, Jeanette?”

“No; but I am not likely to do so. He used to say that if it was not for me he would not paint pictures for years; he would wait until he could paint a good one, so long as he could make enough to exist on by black and white sketches and little odd commissions. He was learning his art, laboriously and lovingly, when he met me—I made him impatient. But you see that did not last for long; so he went back to the old groove, you may be sure; and we shall all hear of him before long. He was so sure, so very sure, to succeed; for his soul was in his work; and when he has succeeded—ah, Daisy!” cried Jeanette sharply. “I only want to hear that he has succeeded! That would be worth living for; for I love him now, I must love him for ever; and now—and now you know how you may feel one day!”

Her voice, slightly raised, sounded sharp and staccato; but there were no tears in it. She turned to Daisy a white face, but a dry one, and her eyes were unnaturally large and lustrous.

“Daisy, I need not tell you never to breathe a word of this; but I must ask you never to speak of it to me; for I cannot
bear it, and as you are the first to whom I have told one syllable, so you will be the last. He is always with me. He is a part of my life. At home I used to be ready to see him or hear his voice—to be looking and listening for him—whenever I stirred outside; but here it’s different; he is in my heart only. And now just think: I did this myself, it was not his doing, it was all mine. That is the worst of it! Had he been the one to play false it would have been easier to bear. Pity me if you like—but first be warned by me. A true man’s love is worth having; cherish it, for it is worth holding to; and should Henry come back—"

"He will never come back!” sobbed Daisy, brought swiftly back to herself and her own troubles. "I cannot recall him, I cannot say or do anything; and Jeanette!” (with sudden suspicion), “you must not, do you hear?”

“I hear,” said Jeanette, getting up and wandering about the room, with apparent aimlessness.

“I have some pride, though not much, and I cannot be the first to speak or to write.”

“Of course not,” said Jeanette, pausing in front of the window.

“Now what are you doing, Jeanette”—Daisy was watching the operation with a pathetic interest—“putting the blind outside the window?”
“You’ll find it has some advantages,” said Jeanette coolly, though not quite sure what they were; “it must have some, for I have seen them do it on the Continent; do give it a trial, Daisy.”

“Very well—but you are not going, Jeanette? Oh, don’t leave me now!”

“Yes, dear, I am going. I think I must leave you, for my head is aching very badly.” Certainly she looked strangely pale. “Daisy! Never want me to speak again of what I have spoken this morning—yet never, never forget it! Let it make you different to Henry—if you get the chance!”

“If I get the chance!” Daisy repeated bitterly to herself. “I never shall, and I don’t deserve to, but if I do—”

Jeanette was gone. Her headache was no sham: it kept her in her room for the rest of that Sunday; it made the little evening service a rather tame affair. But the contingent from the main hut was handsomely compensated by the presence of someone else well worth staring [at]—a back-block hero, Henry Flood.