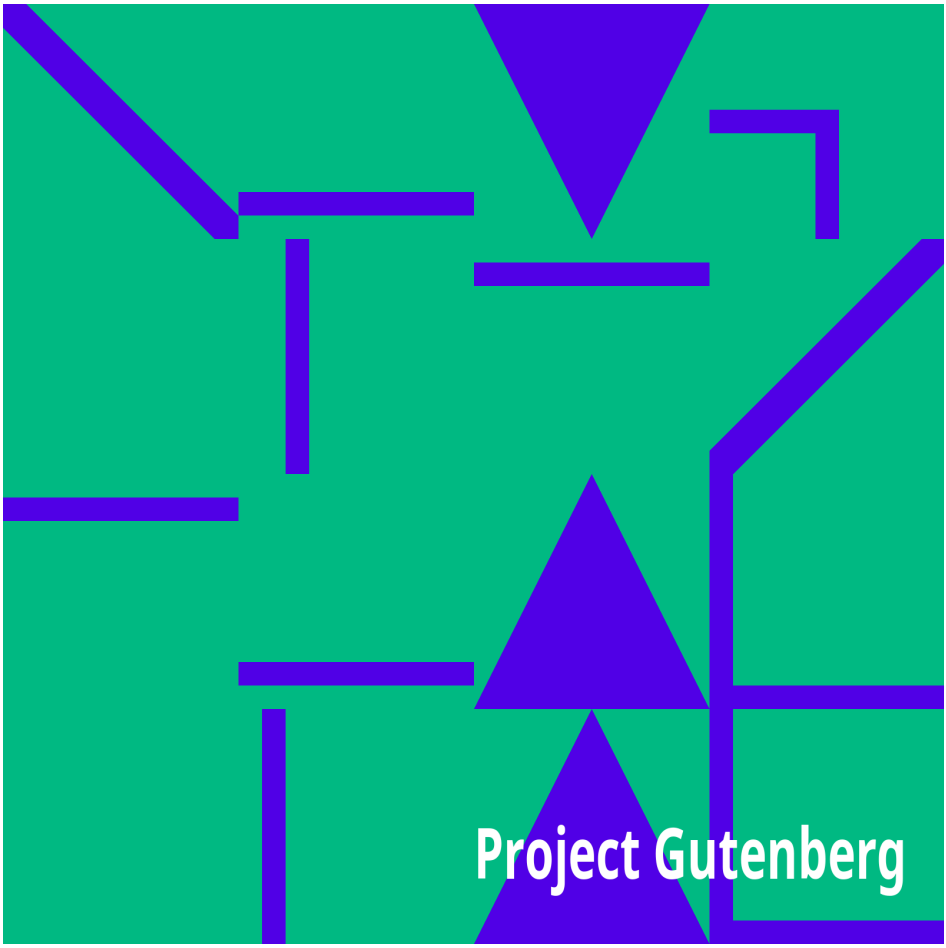
Mrs. General Talboys

Anthony Trollope



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MRS. GENERAL TALBOYS.

WHY Mrs. General Talboys first made up her mind to pass the winter of 1859 at Rome I never clearly understood. To myself she explained her purposes, soon after her arrival at the Eternal City, by declaring, in her own enthusiastic manner, that she was inspired by a burning desire to drink fresh at the still living fountains of classical poetry and sentiment. But I always thought that there was something more than this in it. Classical poetry and sentiment were doubtless very dear to her; but so also, I imagine, were the substantial comforts of Hardover Lodge, the General’s house in Berkshire; and I do not think that she would have emigrated for the winter had there not been some slight domestic misunderstanding. Let this, however, be fully made clear,—that such misunderstanding, if it existed, must have been simply an affair of temper. No impropriety of conduct has, I am very sure, ever been imputed to the lady. The General, as all the world knows, is hot; and Mrs. Talboys, when the sweet rivers of her enthusiasm are unfed by congenial waters, can, I believe, make herself disagreeable.

But be this as it may, in November, 1859, Mrs. Talboys came among us English at Rome, and soon succeeded in obtaining for herself a comfortable footing in our society. We all thought her more remarkable for her mental attributes than for physical perfection; but, nevertheless, she was, in her own way, a sightly woman. She had no special brilliance, either of eye or complexion, such as would produce sudden flames in susceptible hearts; nor did she seem to demand instant homage by the

form and step of a goddess; but we found her to be a good-looking woman of some thirty or thirty-three years of age, with soft, peach-like cheeks,—rather too like those of a cherub, with sparkling eyes which were hardly large enough, with good teeth, a white forehead, a dimpled chin and a full bust. Such, outwardly, was Mrs. General Talboys. The description of the inward woman is the purport to which these few pages will be devoted.

There are two qualities to which the best of mankind are much subject, which are nearly related to each other, and as to which the world has not yet decided whether they are to be classed among the good or evil attributes of our nature. Men and women are under the influence of them both, but men oftenest undergo the former, and women the latter. They are ambition and enthusiasm. Now Mrs. Talboys was an enthusiastic woman.

As to ambition, generally as the world agrees with Mark Antony in stigmatising it as a grievous fault, I am myself clear that it is a virtue; but with ambition at present we have no concern. Enthusiasm also, as I think, leans to virtue's side; or, at least, if it be a fault, of all faults it is the prettiest. But then, to partake at all of virtue, or even to be in any degree pretty, the enthusiasm must be true.

Bad coin is known from good by the ring of it; and so is bad enthusiasm. Let the coiner be ever so clever at his art, in the coining of enthusiasm the sound of true gold can never be imparted to the false metal. And I doubt whether the cleverest she in the world can make false enthusiasm palatable to the taste of man. To the taste of any woman the enthusiasm of another woman is never very palatable.

We understood at Home that Mrs. Talboys had a considerable family,—four or five children, we were told; but she brought with her only one daughter, a little girl about twelve years of age. She had torn herself asunder, as she told me, from the younger nurslings of her heart, and had left them to the care of a devoted female attendant, whose love was all but maternal. And then she said a word or two about the General, in

terms which made me almost think that this quasi-maternal love extended itself beyond the children. The idea, however, was a mistaken one, arising from the strength of her language, to which I was then unaccustomed. I have since become aware that nothing can be more decorous than old Mrs. Upton, the excellent head-nurse at Hardover Lodge; and no gentleman more discreet in his conduct than General Talboys.

And I may as well here declare, also, that there could be no more virtuous woman than the General's wife. Her marriage vow was to her paramount to all other vows and bonds whatever. The General's honour was quite safe when he sent her off to Rome by herself; and he no doubt knew that it was so. Illi robur et æs triplex, of which I believe no weapons of any assailant could get the better. But, nevertheless, we used to fancy that she had no repugnance to impropriety in other women,—to what the world generally calls impropriety. Invincibly attached herself to the marriage tie, she would constantly speak of it as by no means necessarily binding on others; and, virtuous herself as any griffin of propriety, she constantly patronised, at any rate, the theory of infidelity in her neighbours. She was very eager in denouncing the prejudices of the English world, declaring that she had found existence among them to be no longer possible for herself. She was hot against the stern unforgiveness of British matrons, and equally eager in reprobating the stiff conventionalities of a religion in which she said that none of its votaries had faith, though they all allowed themselves to be enslaved.

We had at that time a small set at Rome, consisting chiefly of English and Americans, who habitually met at each other's rooms, and spent many of our evening hours in discussing Italian politics. We were, most of us, painters, poets, novelists, or sculptors;—perhaps I should say would-be painters, poets, novelists, and sculptors,—aspirants hoping to become some day recognised; and among us Mrs. Talboys took her place, naturally enough, on account of a very pretty taste she had for painting.

I do not know that she ever originated anything that was grand; but she made some nice copies, and was fond, at any rate, of art conversation. She wrote essays, too, which she showed in confidence to various gentlemen, and had some idea of taking lessons in modelling.

In all our circle Conrad Mackinnon, an American, was, perhaps, the person most qualified to be styled its leader. He was one who absolutely did gain his living, and an ample living too, by his pen, and was regarded on all sides as a literary lion, justified by success in roaring at any tone he might please. His usual roar was not exactly that of a sucking-dove or a nightingale; but it was a good-humoured roar, not very offensive to any man, and apparently acceptable enough to some ladies. He was a big burly man, near to fifty as I suppose, somewhat awkward in his gait, and somewhat loud in his laugh. But though nigh to fifty, and thus ungainly, he liked to be smiled on by pretty women, and liked, as some said, to be flattered by them also. If so, he should have been happy, for the ladies at Rome at that time made much of Conrad Mackinnon.

Of Mrs. Mackinnon no one did make very much, and yet she was one of the sweetest, dearest, quietest, little creatures that ever made glad a man's fireside. She was exquisitely pretty, always in good humour, never stupid, self-denying to a fault, and yet she was generally in the background. She would seldom come forward of her own will, but was contented to sit behind her teapot and hear Mackinnon do his roaring. He was certainly much given to what the world at Rome called flirting, but this did not in the least annoy her. She was twenty years his junior, and yet she never flirted with any one. Women would tell her—good-natured friends—how Mackinnon went on; but she received such tidings as an excellent joke, observing that he had always done the same, and no doubt always would until he was ninety. I do believe that she was a happy woman; and yet I used to think that she should have been happier. There is, however, no knowing the inside of another man's house, or reading the riddles of another man's joy and sorrow.

We had also there another lion,—a lion cub,—entitled to roar a little, and of him also I must say something. Charles O'Brien was a young man, about twenty-five years of age, who had sent out from his studio in the preceding year a certain bust, supposed by his admirers to be unsurpassed by any effort of ancient or modern genius. I am no judge of sculpture, and will not, therefore, pronounce an opinion; but many who considered themselves to be judges, declared that it was a "goodish head and shoulders," and nothing more. I merely mention the fact, as it was on the strength of that head and shoulders that O'Brien separated himself from a throng of others such as himself in Rome, walked solitary during the days, and threw himself at the feet of various ladies when the days were over. He had ridden on the shoulders of his bust into a prominent place in our circle, and there encountered much feminine admiration—from Mrs. General Talboys and others.

Some eighteen or twenty of us used to meet every Sunday evening in Mrs. Mackinnon's drawing-room. Many of us, indeed, were in the habit of seeing each other daily, and of visiting together the haunts in Rome which are best loved by art-loving strangers; but here, in this drawing-room, we were sure to come together, and here before the end of November, Mrs. Talboys might always be found, not in any accustomed seat, but moving about the room as the different male mental attractions of our society might chance to move themselves. She was at first greatly taken by Mackinnon,—who also was, I think, a little stirred by her admiration, though he stoutly denied the charge. She became, however, very dear to us all before she left us, and certainly we owed to her our love, for she added infinitely to the joys of our winter.

"I have come here to refresh myself," she said to Mackinnon one evening —to Mackinnon and myself; for we were standing together.

"Shall I get you tea?" said I.

"And will you have something to eat?" Mackinnon asked.

“No, no, no;” she answered. “Tea, yes; but for Heaven’s sake let nothing solid dispel the associations of such a meeting as this!”

“I thought you might have dined early,” said Mackinnon. Now Mackinnon was a man whose own dinner was very dear to him. I have seen him become hasty and unpleasant, even under the pillars of the Forum, when he thought that the party were placing his fish in jeopardy by their desire to linger there too long.

“Early! Yes. No; I know not when it was. One dines and sleeps in obedience to that dull clay which weighs down so generally the particle of our spirit. But the clay may sometimes be forgotten. Here I can always forget it.”

“I thought you asked for refreshment,” I said. She only looked at me, whose small attempts at prose composition had, up to that time, been altogether unsuccessful, and then addressed herself in reply to Mackinnon.

“It is the air which we breathe that fills our lungs and gives us life and light. It is that which refreshes us if pure, or sinks us into stagnation if it be foul. Let me for awhile inhale the breath of an invigorating literature. Sit down, Mr. Mackinnon; I have a question that I must put to you.” And then she succeeded in carrying him off into a corner. As far as I could see he went willingly enough at that time, though he soon became averse to any long retirement in company with Mrs. Talboys.

We none of us quite understood what were her exact ideas on the subject of revealed religion. Somebody, I think, had told her that there were among us one or two whose opinions were not exactly orthodox according to the doctrines of the established English church. If so, she was determined to show us that she also was advanced beyond the prejudices of an old and dry school of theology. “I have thrown down all the barriers of religion,” she said to poor Mrs. Mackinnon, “and am looking for the sentiments of a pure Christianity.”

“Thrown down all the barriers of religion!” said Mrs. Mackinnon, in a tone of horror which was not appreciated.

“Indeed, yes,” said Mrs. Talboys, with an exulting voice. “Are not the days for such trammels gone by?”

“But yet you hold by Christianity?”

“A pure Christianity, unstained by blood and perjury, by hypocrisy and verbose genuflection. Can I not worship and say my prayers among the clouds?” And she pointed to the lofty ceiling and the handsome chandelier.

“But Ida goes to church,” said Mrs. Mackinnon. Ida Talboys was her daughter. Now, it may be observed, that many who throw down the barriers of religion, so far as those barriers may affect themselves, still maintain them on behalf of their children. “Yes,” said Mrs. Talboys; “dear Ida! her soft spirit is not yet adapted to receive the perfect truth. We are obliged to govern children by the strength of their prejudices.” And then she moved away, for it was seldom that Mrs. Talboys remained long in conversation with any lady.

Mackinnon, I believe, soon became tired of her. He liked her flattery, and at first declared that she was clever and nice; but her niceness was too purely celestial to satisfy his mundane tastes. Mackinnon himself can revel among the clouds in his own writings, and can leave us sometimes in doubt whether he ever means to come back to earth; but when his foot is on terra firma, he loves to feel the earthly substratum which supports his weight. With women he likes a hand that can remain an unnecessary moment within his own, an eye that can glisten with the sparkle of champagne, a heart weak enough to make its owner’s arm tremble within his own beneath the moonlight gloom of the Coliseum arches. A dash of sentiment the while makes all these things the sweeter; but the sentiment alone will not suffice for him. Mrs. Talboys did, I believe, drink her glass of champagne, as do other ladies; but with

her it had no such pleasing effect. It loosened only her tongue, but never her eye. Her arm, I think, never trembled, and her hand never lingered. The General was always safe, and happy, perhaps, in his solitary safety.

It so happened that we had unfortunately among us two artists who had quarrelled with their wives. O'Brien, whom I have before mentioned, was one of them. In his case, I believe him to have been almost as free from blame as a man can be whose marriage was in itself a fault. However, he had a wife in Ireland some ten years older than himself; and though he might sometimes almost forget the fact, his friends and neighbours were well aware of it. In the other case the whole fault probably was with the husband. He was an ill-tempered, bad-hearted man, clever enough, but without principle; and he was continually guilty of the great sin of speaking evil of the woman whose name he should have been anxious to protect. In both cases our friend Mrs. Talboys took a warm interest, and in each of them she sympathised with the present husband against the absent wife.

Of the consolation which she offered in the latter instance we used to hear something from Mackinnon. He would repeat to his wife, and to me and my wife, the conversations which she had with him. "Poor Brown;" she would say, "I pity him, with my very heart's blood."

"You are aware that he has comforted himself in his desolation," Mackinnon replied.

"I know very well to what you allude. I think I may say that I am conversant with all the circumstances of this heart-blighting sacrifice." Mrs. Talboys was apt to boast of the thorough confidence reposed in her by all those in whom she took an interest. "Yes, he has sought such comfort in another love as the hard cruel world would allow him."

"Or perhaps something more than that," said Mackinnon. "He has a family here in Rome, you know; two little babies."

“I know it, I know it,” she said. “Cherub angels!” and as she spoke she looked up into the ugly face of Marcus Aurelius; for they were standing at the moment under the figure of the great horseman on the Campidoglio. “I have seen them, and they are the children of innocence. If all the blood of all the Howards ran in their veins it could not make their birth more noble!”

“Not if the father and mother of all the Howards had never been married,” said Mackinnon.

“What; that from you, Mr. Mackinnon!” said Mrs. Talboys, turning her back with energy upon the equestrian statue, and looking up into the faces, first of Pollux and then of Castor, as though from them she might gain some inspiration on the subject which Marcus Aurelius in his coldness had denied to her. “From you, who have so nobly claimed for mankind the divine attributes of free action! From you, who have taught my mind to soar above the petty bonds which one man in his littleness contrives for the subjection of his brother. Mackinnon! you who are so great!” And she now looked up into his face. “Mackinnon, unsay those words.”

“They *are* illegitimate,” said he; “and if there was any landed property—”

“Landed property! and that from an American!”

“The children are English, you know.”

“Landed property! The time will shortly come—ay, and I see it coming—when that hateful word shall be expunged from the calendar; when landed property shall be no more. What! shall the free soul of a God-born man submit itself for ever to such trammels as that? Shall we never escape from the clay which so long has manacled the subtler particles of the divine spirit? Ay, yes, Mackinnon;” and then she took him by the arm, and led him to the top of the huge steps which lead down from the Campidoglio into the streets of modern Rome. “Look down upon that countless multitude.” Mackinnon looked down, and saw three groups of French soldiers, with three or four little men in each group; he saw, also,

a couple of dirty friars, and three priests very slowly beginning the side ascent to the church of the Ara Cœli. "Look down upon that countless multitude," said Mrs. Talboys, and she stretched her arms out over the half-deserted city. "They are escaping now from these trammels,—now, now,—now that I am speaking."

"They have escaped long ago from all such trammels as that of landed property," said Mackinnon.

"Ay, and from all terrestrial bonds," she continued, not exactly remarking the pith of his last observation; "from bonds quasi-terrestrial and quasi-celestial. The full-formed limbs of the present age, running with quick streams of generous blood, will no longer bear the ligatures which past times have woven for the decrepit. Look down upon that multitude, Mackinnon; they shall all be free." And then, still clutching him by the arm, and still standing at the top of those stairs, she gave forth her prophecy with the fury of a Sybil.

"They shall all be free. Oh, Rome, thou eternal one! thou who hast bowed thy neck to imperial pride and priestly craft; thou who hast suffered sorely, even to this hour, from Nero down to Pio Nono,—the days of thine oppression are over. Gone from thy enfranchised ways for ever is the clang of the Prætorian cohorts and the more odious drone of meddling monks!" And yet, as Mackinnon observed, there still stood the dirty friars and the small French soldiers; and there still toiled the slow priests, wending their tedious way up to the church of the Ara Cœli. But that was the mundane view of the matter,—a view not regarded by Mrs. Talboys in her ecstasy. "O Italia," she continued, "O Italia una, one and indivisible in thy rights, and indivisible also in thy wrongs! to us is it given to see the accomplishment of thy glory. A people shall arise around thine altars greater in the annals of the world than thy Scipios, thy Gracchi, or thy Cæsars. Not in torrents of blood, or with screams of bereaved mothers, shall thy new triumphs be stained. But mind shall dominate over matter; and doomed, together with Popes and Bourbons, with cardinals, diplomatists, and police spies, ignorance and prejudice

shall be driven from thy smiling terraces. And then Rome shall again become the fair capital of the fairest region of Europe. Hither shall flock the artisans of the world, crowding into thy marts all that God and man can give. Wealth, beauty, and innocence shall meet in thy streets—"

"There will be a considerable change before that takes place," said Mackinnon.

"There shall be a considerable change," she answered. "Mackinnon, to thee it is given to read the signs of the time; and hast thou not read? Why have the fields of Magenta and Solferino been piled with the corpses of dying heroes? Why have the waters of the Mincio ran red with the blood of martyrs? That Italy might be united and Rome immortal. Here, standing on the Capitolium of the ancient city, I say that it shall be so; and thou, Mackinnon, who hearest me, knowest that my words are true."

There was not then in Rome,—I may almost say there was not in Italy, an Englishman or an American who did not wish well to the cause for which Italy was and is still contending; as also there is hardly one who does not now regard that cause as well-nigh triumphant; but, nevertheless, it was almost impossible to sympathise with Mrs. Talboys. As Mackinnon said, she flew so high that there was no comfort in flying with her.

"Well," said he, "Brown and the rest of them are down below. Shall we go and join them?"

"Poor Brown! How was it that, in speaking of his troubles, we were led on to this heart-stirring theme? Yes, I have seen them, the sweet angels; and I tell you also that I have seen their mother. I insisted on going to her when I heard her history from him."

"And what is she like, Mrs. Talboys?"

"Well; education has done more for some of us than for others; and there are those from whose morals and sentiments we might thankfully draw a lesson, whose manners and outward gestures are not such as custom has

made agreeable to us. You, I know, can understand that. I have seen her, and feel sure that she is pure in heart and high in principle. Has she not sacrificed herself; and is not self-sacrifice the surest guarantee for true nobility of character? Would Mrs. Mackinnon object to my bringing them together?"

Mackinnon was obliged to declare that he thought his wife would object; and from that time forth he and Mrs. Talboys ceased to be very close in their friendship. She still came to the house every Sunday evening, still refreshed herself at the fountains of his literary rills; but her special prophecies from henceforth were poured into other ears. And it so happened that O'Brien now became her chief ally. I do not remember that she troubled herself much further with the cherub angels or with their mother; and I am inclined to think that, taking up warmly, as she did, the story of O'Brien's matrimonial wrongs, she forgot the little history of the Browns. Be that as it may, Mrs. Talboys and O'Brien now became strictly confidential, and she would enlarge by the half-hour together on the miseries of her friend's position, to any one whom she could get to hear her.

"I'll tell you what, Fanny," Mackinnon said to his wife one day,—to his wife and to mine, for we were all together; "we shall have a row in the house if we don't take care. O'Brien will be making love to Mrs. Talboys."

"Nonsense," said Mrs. Mackinnon. "You are always thinking that somebody is going to make love to some one."

"Somebody always is," said he.

"She's old enough to be his mother," said Mrs. Mackinnon.

"What does that matter to an Irishman?" said Mackinnon. "Besides, I doubt if there is more than five years' difference between them."

"There must be more than that," said my wife. "Ida Talboys is twelve, I know, and I am not quite sure that Ida is the eldest."

“If she had a son in the Guards it would make no difference,” said Mackinnon. “There are men who consider themselves bound to make love to a woman under certain circumstances, let the age of the lady be what it may. O’Brien is such a one; and if she sympathises with him much oftener, he will mistake the matter, and go down on his knees. You ought to put him on his guard,” he said, addressing himself to his wife.

“Indeed, I shall do no such thing,” said she; “if they are two fools, they must, like other fools, pay the price of their folly.” As a rule there could be no softer creature than Mrs. Mackinnon; but it seemed to me that her tenderness never extended itself in the direction of Mrs. Talboys.

Just at this time, towards the end, that is, of November, we made a party to visit the tombs which lie along the Appian Way, beyond that most beautiful of all sepulchres, the tomb of Cecilia Metella. It was a delicious day, and we had driven along this road for a couple of miles beyond the walls of the city, enjoying the most lovely view which the neighbourhood of Rome affords,—looking over the wondrous ruins of the old aqueducts, up towards Tivoli and Palestrina. Of all the environs of Rome this is, on a fair clear day, the most enchanting; and here perhaps, among a world of tombs, thoughts and almost memories of the old, old days come upon one with the greatest force. The grandeur of Rome is best seen and understood from beneath the walls of the Coliseum, and its beauty among the pillars of the Forum and the arches of the Sacred Way; but its history and fall become more palpable to the mind, and more clearly realised, out here among the tombs, where the eyes rest upon the mountains whose shades were cool to the old Romans as to us,—than anywhere within the walls of the city. Here we look out at the same Tivoli and the same Præneste, glittering in the sunshine, embowered among the far-off valleys, which were dear to them; and the blue mountains have not crumbled away into ruins. Within Rome itself we can see nothing as they saw it.

Our party consisted of some dozen or fifteen persons, and as a hamper with luncheon in it had been left on the grassy slope at the base of the tomb of Cecilia Metella, the expedition had in it something of the nature of a picnic. Mrs. Talboys was of course with us, and Ida Talboys. O'Brien also was there. The hamper had been prepared in Mrs. Mackinnon's room, under the immediate eye of Mackinnon himself, and they therefore were regarded as the dominant spirits of the party. My wife was leagued with Mrs. Mackinnon, as was usually the case; and there seemed to be a general opinion among those who were closely in confidence together, that something would happen in the O'Brien-Talboys matter. The two had been inseparable on the previous evening, for Mrs. Talboys had been urging on the young Irishman her counsels respecting his domestic troubles. Sir Cresswell Cresswell, she had told him, was his refuge. "Why should his soul submit to bonds which the world had now declared to be intolerable? Divorce was not now the privilege of the dissolute rich. Spirits which were incompatible need no longer be compelled to fret beneath the same cobbles." In short, she had recommended him to go to England and get rid of his wife, as she would, with a little encouragement, have recommended any man to get rid of anything. I am sure that, had she been skilfully brought on to the subject, she might have been induced to pronounce a verdict against such ligatures for the body as coats, waistcoats, and trowsers. Her aspirations for freedom ignored all bounds, and, in theory, there were no barriers which she was not willing to demolish.

Poor O'Brien, as we all now began to see, had taken the matter amiss. He had offered to make a bust of Mrs. Talboys, and she had consented, expressing a wish that it might find a place among those who had devoted themselves to the enfranchisement of their fellow-creatures. I really think she had but little of a woman's customary personal vanity. I know she had an idea that her eye was lighted up in her warmer moments by some special fire, that sparks of liberty shone round her brow, and that her bosom heaved with glorious aspirations; but all these feelings had reference to her inner genius, not to any outward beauty.

But O'Brien misunderstood the woman, and thought it necessary to gaze into her face, and sigh as though his heart were breaking. Indeed he declared to a young friend that Mrs. Talboys was perfect in her style of beauty, and began the bust with this idea. It was gradually becoming clear to us all that he would bring himself to grief; but in such a matter who can caution a man?

Mrs. Mackinnon had contrived to separate them in making the carriage arrangements on this day, but this only added fuel to the fire which was now burning within O'Brien's bosom. I believe that he really did love her, in his easy, eager, susceptible Irish way. That he would get over the little episode without any serious injury to his heart no one doubted; but then, what would occur when the declaration was made? How would Mrs. Talboys bear it?

"She deserves it," said Mrs. Mackinnon.

"And twice as much," my wife added. Why is it that women are so spiteful to each other?

Early in the day Mrs. Talboys clambered up to the top of a tomb, and made a little speech, holding a parasol over her head. Beneath her feet, she said, reposed the ashes of some bloated senator, some glutton of the empire, who had swallowed into his maw the provision necessary for a tribe. Old Rome had fallen through such selfishness as that; but new Rome would not forget the lesson. All this was very well, and then O'Brien helped her down; but after this there was no separating them. For her own part she would sooner have had Mackinnon at her elbow. But Mackinnon now had found some other elbow.

"Enough of that was as good as a feast," he had said to his wife. And therefore Mrs. Talboys, quite unconscious of evil, allowed herself to be engrossed by O'Brien.

And then, about three o'clock, we returned to the hamper. Luncheon under such circumstances always means dinner, and we arranged ourselves for a very comfortable meal. To those who know the tomb of

Cecilia Metella no description of the scene is necessary, and to those who do not, no description will convey a fair idea of its reality. It is itself a large low tower of great diameter, but of beautiful proportion, standing far outside the city, close on to the side of the old Roman way. It has been embattled on the top by some latter-day baron, in order that it might be used for protection to the castle, which has been built on and attached to it. If I remember rightly, this was done by one of the Frangipani, and a very lovely ruin he has made of it. I know no castellated old tumble-down residence in Italy more picturesque than this baronial adjunct to the old Roman tomb, or which better tallies with the ideas engendered within our minds by Mrs. Radcliffe and the Mysteries of Udolpho. It lies along the road, protected on the side of the city by the proud sepulchre of the Roman matron, and up to the long ruined walls of the back of the building stretches a grassy slope, at the bottom of which are the remains of an old Roman circus. Beyond that is the long, thin, graceful line of the Claudian aqueduct, with Soracte in the distance to the left, and Tivoli, Palestine, and Frascati lying among the hills which bound the view. That Frangipani baron was in the right of it, and I hope he got the value of his money out of the residence which he built for himself. I doubt, however, that he did but little good to those who lived in his close neighbourhood.

We had a very comfortable little banquet seated on the broken lumps of stone which lie about under the walls of the tomb. I wonder whether the shade of Cecilia Metella was looking down upon us. We have heard much of her in these latter days, and yet we know nothing about her, nor can conceive why she was honoured with a bigger tomb than any other Roman matron. There were those then among our party who believed that she might still come back among us, and with due assistance from some cognate susceptible spirit, explain to us the cause of her widowed husband's liberality. Alas, alas! if we may judge of the Romans by ourselves, the true reason for such sepulchral grandeur would redound little to the credit of the lady Cecilia Metella herself, or to that of Crassus, her bereaved and desolate lord.

She did not come among us on the occasion of this banquet, possibly because we had no tables there to turn in preparation for her presence; but, had she done so, she could not have been more eloquent of things of the other world than was Mrs. Talboys. I have said that Mrs. Talboys' eye never glanced more brightly after a glass of champagne, but I am inclined to think that on this occasion it may have done so. O'Brien enacted Ganymede, and was, perhaps, more liberal than other latter-day Ganymedes, to whose services Mrs. Talboys had been accustomed. Let it not, however, be suspected by any one that she exceeded the limits of a discreet joyousness. By no means! The generous wine penetrated, perhaps, to some inner cells of her heart, and brought forth thoughts in sparkling words, which otherwise might have remained concealed; but there was nothing in what she thought or spoke calculated to give umbrage either to an anchorite or to a vestal. A word or two she said or sung about the flowing bowl, and once she called for Falernian; but beyond this her converse was chiefly of the rights of man and the weakness of women; of the iron ages that were past, and of the golden time that was to come.

She called a toast and drank to the hopes of the latter historians of the nineteenth century. Then it was that she bade O'Brien "Fill high the bowl with Samian wine." The Irishman took her at her word, and she raised the bumper, and waved it over her head before she put it to her lips. I am bound to declare that she did not spill a drop. "The true 'Falernian grape,'" she said, as she deposited the empty beaker on the grass beneath her elbow. Viler champagne I do not think I ever swallowed; but it was the theory of the wine, not its palpable body present there, as it were, in the flesh, which inspired her. There was really something grand about her on that occasion, and her enthusiasm almost amounted to reality.

Mackinnon was amused, and encouraged her, as, I must confess, did I also. Mrs. Mackinnon made useless little signs to her husband, really fearing that the Falernian would do its good offices too thoroughly. My wife, getting me apart as I walked round the circle distributing viands,

remarked that “the woman was a fool, and would disgrace herself.” But I observed that after the disposal of that bumper she worshipped the rosy god in theory only, and therefore saw no occasion to interfere. “Come, Bacchus,” she said; “and come, Silenus, if thou wilt; I know that ye are hovering round the graves of your departed favourites. And ye, too, nymphs of Egeria,” and she pointed to the classic grove which was all but close to us as we sat there. “In olden days ye did not always despise the abodes of men. But why should we invoke the presence of the gods,—we, who can become godlike ourselves! We ourselves are the deities of the present age. For us shall the tables be spread with ambrosia; for us shall the nectar flow.”

Upon the whole it was very good fooling,—for awhile; and as soon as we were tired of it we arose from our seats, and began to stroll about the place. It was beginning to be a little dusk, and somewhat cool, but the evening air was pleasant, and the ladies, putting on their shawls, did not seem inclined at once to get into the carriages. At any rate, Mrs. Talboys was not so inclined, for she started down the hill towards the long low wall of the old Roman circus at the bottom; and O’Brien, close at her elbow, started with her.

“Ida, my dear, you had better remain here,” she said to her daughter; “you will be tired if you come as far as we are going.”

“Oh, no, mamma, I shall not,” said Ida. “You get tired much quicker than I do.”

“Oh, yes, you will; besides I do not wish you to come.” There was an end of it for Ida, and Mrs. Talboys and O’Brien walked off together, while we all looked into each other’s faces.

“It would be a charity to go with them,” said Mackinnon.

“Do you be charitable, then,” said his wife.

“It should be a lady,” said he.

“It is a pity that the mother of the spotless cherubim is not here for the occasion,” said she. “I hardly think that any one less gifted will undertake such a self sacrifice.” Any attempt of the kind would, however, now have been too late, for they were already at the bottom of the hill. O’Brien had certainly drunk freely of the pernicious contents of those long-necked bottles; and though no one could fairly accuse him of being tipsy, nevertheless that which might have made others drunk had made him bold, and he dared to do—perhaps more than might become a man. If under any circumstances he could be fool enough to make an avowal of love to Mrs. Talboys, he might be expected, as we all thought, to do it now.

We watched them as they made for a gap in the wall which led through into the large enclosed space of the old circus. It had been an arena for chariot games, and they had gone down with the avowed purpose of searching where might have been the meta, and ascertaining how the drivers could have turned when at their full speed. For awhile we had heard their voices,—or rather her voice especially. “The heart of a man, O’Brien, should suffice for all emergencies,” we had heard her say. She had assumed a strange habit of calling men by their simple names, as men address each other. When she did this to Mackinnon, who was much older than herself, we had been all amused by it, and, other ladies of our party had taken to call him “Mackinnon” when Mrs. Talboys was not by; but we had felt the comedy to be less safe with O’Brien, especially when, on one occasion, we heard him address her as Arabella. She did not seem to be in any way struck by his doing so, and we supposed, therefore, that it had become frequent between them. What reply he made at the moment about the heart of a man I do not know;—and then in a few minutes they disappeared through the gap in the wall.

None of us followed them, though it would have seemed the most natural thing in the world to do so had nothing out of the way been expected. As it was we remained there round the tomb quizzing the little foibles of our dear friend, and hoping that O’Brien would be quick in what he was doing. That he would undoubtedly get a slap in the face—

metaphorically—we all felt certain, for none of us doubted the rigid propriety of the lady's intentions. Some of us strolled into the buildings, and some of us got out on to the road; but we all of us were thinking that O'Brien was very slow a considerable time before we saw Mrs. Talboys reappear through the gap.

At last, however, she was there, and we at once saw that she was alone. She came on, breasting the hill with quick steps, and when she drew near we could see that there was a frown as of injured majesty on her brow. Mackinnon and his wife went forward to meet her. If she were really in trouble it would be fitting in some way to assist her; and of all women Mrs. Mackinnon was the last to see another woman suffer from ill-usage without attempting to aid her. "I certainly never liked her," Mrs. Mackinnon said afterwards; "but I was bound to go and hear her tale, when she really had a tale to tell."

And Mrs. Talboys now had a tale to tell,—if she chose to tell it. The ladies of our party declared afterwards that she would have acted more wisely had she kept to herself both O'Brien's words to her and her answer. "She was well able to take care of herself," Mrs. Mackinnon said; "and, after all, the silly man had taken an answer when he got it." Not, however, that O'Brien had taken his answer quite immediately, as far as I could understand from what we heard of the matter afterwards.

At the present moment Mrs. Talboys came up the rising ground all alone, and at a quick pace. "The man has insulted me," she said aloud, as well as her panting breath would allow her, and as soon as she was near enough to Mrs. Mackinnon to speak to her.

"I am sorry for that," said Mrs. Mackinnon. "I suppose he has taken a little too much wine."

"No; it was a premeditated insult. The base-hearted churl has failed to understand the meaning of true, honest sympathy."

"He will forget all about it when he is sober," said Mackinnon, meaning to comfort her.

“What care I what he remembers or what he forgets!” she said, turning upon poor Mackinnon indignantly. “You men grovel so in your ideas—” “And yet,” as Mackinnon said afterwards, “she had been telling me that I was a fool for the last three weeks.”—“You men grovel so in your ideas, that you cannot understand the feelings of a true-hearted woman. What can his forgetfulness or his remembrance be to me? Must not I remember this insult? Is it possible that I should forget it?”

Mr. and Mrs. Mackinnon only had gone forward to meet her; but, nevertheless, she spoke so loud that all heard her who were still clustered round the spot on which we had dined.

“What has become of Mr. O’Brien?” a lady whispered to me.

I had a field-glass with me, and, looking round, I saw his hat as he was walking inside the walls of the circus in the direction towards the city. “And very foolish he must feel,” said the lady.

“No doubt he is used to it,” said another.

“But considering her age, you know,” said the first, who might have been perhaps three years younger than Mrs. Talboys, and who was not herself averse to the excitement of a moderate flirtation. But then why should she have been averse, seeing that she had not as yet become subject to the will of any imperial lord?

“He would have felt much more foolish,” said the third, “if she had listened to what he said to her.”

“Well I don’t know,” said the second; “nobody would have known anything about it then, and in a few weeks they would have gradually become tired of each other in the ordinary way.”

But in the meantime Mrs. Talboys was among us. There had been no attempt at secresy, and she was still loudly inveighing against the grovelling propensities of men. “That’s quite true, Mrs. Talboys,” said

one of the elder ladies; “but then women are not always so careful as they should be. Of course I do not mean to say that there has been any fault on your part.”

“Fault on my part! Of course there has been fault on my part. No one can make any mistake without fault to some extent. I took him to be a man of sense, and he is a fool. Go to Naples indeed!”

“Did he want you to go to Naples?” asked Mrs. Mackinnon.

“Yes; that was what he suggested. We were to leave by the train for Civita Vecchia at six to-morrow morning and catch the steamer which leaves Leghorn to-night. Don’t tell me of wine. He was prepared for it!” And she looked round about on us with an air of injured majesty in her face which was almost insupportable.

“I wonder whether he took the tickets over-night,” said Mackinnon.

“Naples!” she said, as though now speaking exclusively to herself; “the only ground in Italy which has as yet made no struggle on behalf of freedom;—a fitting residence for such a dastard!”

“You would have found it very pleasant at this season,” said the unmarried lady, who was three years her junior.

My wife had taken Ida out of the way when the first complaining note from Mrs. Talboys had been heard ascending the hill. But now, when matters began gradually to become quiescent, she brought her back, suggesting, as she did so, that they might begin to think of returning.

“It is getting very cold, Ida, dear, is it not?” said she.

“But where is Mr. O’Brien?” said Ida.

“He has fled,—as poltroons always fly,” said Mrs. Talboys. I believe in my heart that she would have been glad to have had him there in the middle of the circle, and to have triumphed over him publicly among us all. No feeling of shame would have kept her silent for a moment.

“Fled!” said Ida, looking up into her mother’s face.

“Yes, fled, my child.” And she seized her daughter in her arms, and pressed her closely to her bosom. “Cowards always fly.”

“Is Mr. O’Brien a coward?” Ida asked.

“Yes, a coward, a very coward! And he has fled before the glance of an honest woman’s eye. Come, Mrs. Mackinnon, shall we go back to the city? I am sorry that the amusement of the day should have received this check.” And she walked forward to the carriage and took her place in it with an air that showed that she was proud of the way in which she had conducted herself.

“She is a little conceited about it after all,” said that unmarried lady. “If poor Mr. O’Brien had not shown so much premature anxiety with reference to that little journey to Naples, things might have gone quietly after all.”

But the unmarried lady was wrong in her judgment. Mrs. Talboys was proud and conceited in the matter,—but not proud of having excited the admiration of her Irish lover. She was proud of her own subsequent conduct, and gave herself credit for coming out strongly as a noble-minded matron. “I believe she thinks,” said Mrs. Mackinnon, “that her virtue is quite Spartan and unique; and if she remains in Rome she’ll boast of it through the whole winter.”

“If she does, she may be certain that O’Brien will do the same,” said Mackinnon. “And in spite of his having fled from the field, it is upon the cards that he may get the best of it. Mrs. Talboys is a very excellent woman. She has proved her excellence beyond a doubt. But, nevertheless, she is susceptible of ridicule.”

We all felt a little anxiety to hear O’Brien’s account of the matter, and after having deposited the ladies at their homes, Mackinnon and I went off to his lodgings. At first he was denied to us, but after awhile we got his servant to acknowledge that he was at home, and then we made our

way up to his studio. We found him seated behind a half-formed model, or rather a mere lump of clay punched into something resembling the shape of a head, with a pipe in his mouth and a bit of stick in his hand. He was pretending to work, though we both knew that it was out of the question that he should do anything in his present frame of mind.

“I think I heard my servant tell you that I was not at home,” said he.

“Yes, he did,” said Mackinnon, “and would have sworn to it too if we would have let him. Come, don’t pretend to be surly.”

“I am very busy, Mr. Mackinnon.”

“Completing your head of Mrs. Talboys, I suppose, before you start for Naples.”

“You don’t mean to say that she has told you all about it,” and he turned away from his work, and looked up into our faces with a comical expression, half of fun and half of despair.

“Every word of it,” said I. “When you want a lady to travel with you, never ask her to get up so early in winter.”

“But, O’Brien, how could you be such an ass?” said Mackinnon. “As it has turned out, there is no very great harm done. You have insulted a respectable middle-aged woman, the mother of a family, and the wife of a general officer, and there is an end of it;—unless, indeed, the general officer should come out from England to call you to account.”

“He is welcome,” said O’Brien, haughtily.

“No doubt, my dear fellow,” said Mackinnon; “that would be a dignified and pleasant ending to the affair. But what I want to know is this;—what would you have done if she had agreed to go?”

“He never calculated on the possibility of such a contingency,” said I.

“By heavens, then, I thought she would like it,” said he.

“And to oblige her you were content to sacrifice yourself,” said Mackinnon.

“Well, that was just it. What the deuce is a fellow to do when a woman goes on in that way. She told me down there, upon the old race course you know, that matrimonial bonds were made for fools and slaves. What was I to suppose that she meant by that? But to make all sure, I asked her what sort of a fellow the General was. ‘Dear old man,’ she said, clasping her hands together. ‘He might, you know, have been my father.’ ‘I wish he were,’ said I, ‘because then you’d be free.’ ‘I am free,’ said she, stamping on the ground, and looking up at me as much as to say that she cared for no one. ‘Then,’ said I, ‘accept all that is left of the heart of Wenceslaus O’Brien,’ and I threw myself before her in her path. ‘Hand,’ said I, ‘I have none to give, but the blood which runs red through my veins is descended from a double line of kings.’ I said that because she is always fond of riding a high horse. I had gotten close under the wall, so that none of you should see me from the tower.”

“And what answer did she make?” said Mackinnon.

“Why she was pleased as Punch;—gave me both her hands, and declared that we would be friends for ever. It is my belief, Mackinnon, that that woman never heard anything of the kind before. The General, no doubt, did it by letter.”

“And how was it that she changed her mind?”

“Why; I got up, put my arm round her waist, and told her that we would be off to Naples. I’m blest if she didn’t give me a knock in the ribs that nearly sent me backwards. She took my breath away, so that I couldn’t speak to her.”

“And then—”

“Oh, there was nothing more. Of course I saw how it was. So she walked off one way and I the other. On the whole I consider that I am well out of it.”

“And so do I,” said Mackinnon, very gravely. “But if you will allow me to give you my advice, I would suggest that it would be well to avoid such mistakes in future.”

“Upon my word,” said O’Brien, excusing himself, “I don’t know what a man is to do under such circumstances. I give you my honour that I did it all to oblige her.”

We then decided that Mackinnon should convey to the injured lady the humble apology of her late admirer. It was settled that no detailed excuses should be made. It should be left to her to consider whether the deed which had been done might have been occasioned by wine, or by the folly of a moment,—or by her own indiscreet enthusiasm. No one but the two were present when the message was given, and therefore we were obliged to trust to Mackinnon’s accuracy for an account of it.

She stood on very high ground indeed, he said, at first refusing to hear anything that he had to say on the matter. “The foolish young man,” she declared, “was below her anger and below her contempt.”

“He is not the first Irishman that has been made indiscreet by beauty,” said Mackinnon.

“A truce to that,” she replied, waving her hand with an air of assumed majesty. “The incident, contemptible as it is, has been unpleasant to me. It will necessitate my withdrawal from Rome.”

“Oh, no, Mrs. Talboys; that will be making too much of him.”

“The greatest hero that lives,” she answered, “may have his house made uninhabitable by a very small insect.” Mackinnon swore that those were her own words. Consequently a sobriquet was attached to O’Brien of which he by no means approved. And from that day we always called Mrs. Talboys “the hero.”

Mackinnon prevailed at last with her, and she did not leave Rome. She was even induced to send a message to O’Brien, conveying her forgiveness. They shook hands together with great éclat in Mrs.

Mackinnon's drawing-room; but I do not suppose that she ever again offered to him sympathy on the score of his matrimonial troubles.

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