The Man

By

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The Man

Fore-Glimpse

'I would rather be an angel than God!'

The voice of the speaker sounded clearly through the hawthorn tree. The young man and the young girl who sat together on the low tombstone looked at each other. They had heard the voices of the two children talking, but had not noticed what they said; it was the sentiment, not the sound, which roused their attention.

The girl put her finger to her lips to impress silence, and the man nodded; they sat as still as mice whilst the two children went on talking.

The scene would have gladdened a painter's heart. An old churchyard. The church low and square-towered, with long mullioned windows, the yellow-grey stone roughened by age and tender-hued with lichens. Round it clustered many tombstones tilted in all directions. Behind the church a line of gnarled and twisted yews.

The churchyard was full of fine trees. On one side a magnificent cedar; on the other a great copper beech. Here and there among the tombs and headstones many beautiful blossoming trees rose from the long green grass. The laburnum glowed in the June afternoon sunlight; the lilac, the hawthorn and the clustering meadowsweet which fringed the edge of the lazy stream mingled their heavy sweetness in sleepy fragrance. The yellow-grey crumbling walls were green in places with wrinkled harts-tongues, and were topped with sweet-williams and spreading house-leek and stone-crop and wild- flowers whose delicious sweetness made for the drowsy repose of perfect summer.

But amid all that mass of glowing colour the two young figures seated on the grey old tomb stood out conspicuously. The man was in conventional hunting-dress: red coat, white stock, black hat, white breeches, and top-boots. The girl was one of the richest, most glowing, and yet withal daintiest figures the eye of man could linger on. She was in riding-habit of hunting scarlet cloth; her black hat was tipped forward by piled-up masses red-golden hair. Round her neck was a white lawn scarf in the fashion of a man's hunting-stock, close fitting, and sinking into a gold-buttoned waistcoat of snowy twill. As she sat with the long skirt across her left arm her tiny black top-boots appeared underneath. Her gauntleted gloves were of white buckskin; her riding-whip was plaited of white leather, topped with ivory and banded with gold.

Even in her fourteenth year Miss Stephen Norman gave promise of striking beauty; beauty of a rarely composite character. In her the various elements of her race seemed to have cropped out. The firm- set jaw, with chin broader and more square than is usual in a woman, and the wide fine forehead and aquiline nose marked the high descent from Saxon through Norman. The glorious mass of red hair, of the true flame colour, showed the blood of another ancient ancestor of Northern race, and suited well with the voluptuous curves of the full, crimson lips. The purple-black eyes, the raven eyebrows

and eyelashes, and the fine curve of the nostrils spoke of the Eastern blood of the far-back wife of the Crusader. Already she was tall for her age, with something of that lankiness which marks the early development of a really fine figure. Long-legged, long-necked, as straight as a lance, with head poised on the proud neck like a lily on its stem.

Stephen Norman certainly gave promise of a splendid womanhood. Pride, self-reliance and dominance were marked in every feature; in her bearing and in her lightest movement.

Her companion, Harold An Wolf, was some five years her senior, and by means of those five years and certain qualities had long stood in the position of her mentor. He was more than six feet two in height, deep-chested, broad-shouldered, lean-flanked, long-armed and big- handed. He had that appearance strength, with well-poised neck and forward set of the head, which marks the successful athlete.

The two sat quiet, listening. Through the quiet hum of afternoon came the voices of the two children. Outside the lich-gate, under the shade of the spreading cedar, the horses stamped occasionally as the flies troubled them. The grooms were mounted; one held the delicate-limbed white Arab, the other the great black horse.

'I would rather be an angel than God!'

The little girl who made the remark was an ideal specimen of the village Sunday-school child. Blue-eyed, rosy-cheeked, thick-legged, with her straight brown hair tied into a hard bunch with a much- creased, cherry-coloured ribbon. A glance at the girl would have satisfied the most sceptical as to her goodness. Without being in any way smug she was radiant with self-satisfaction and well-doing. A child of the people; an early riser; a help to her mother; a good angel to her father; a little mother to her brothers and sisters; cleanly in mind and body; self-reliant, full of faith, cheerful.

The other little girl was prettier, but of a more stubborn type; more passionate, less organised, and infinitely more assertive. Black- haired, black-eyed, swarthy, large-mouthed, snub-nosed; the very type and essence of unrestrained, impulsive, emotional, sensual nature. A seeing eye would have noted inevitable danger for the early years of her womanhood. She seemed amazed by the self-abnegation implied by her companion's statement; after a pause she replied:

'I wouldn't! I'd rather be up at the top of everything and give orders to the angels if I chose. I can't think, Marjorie, why you'd rather take orders than give them.'

'That's just it, Susan. I don't want to give orders; I'd rather obey them. It must be very terrible to have to think of things so much, that you want everything done your own way. And besides, I shouldn't like to have to be just!'

'Why not?' the voice was truculent, though there was wistfulness in it also.

'Oh Susan. Just fancy having to punish; for of course justice needs punishing as well as praising. Now an angel has such a nice time, helping people and comforting them, and bringing sunshine into dark places. Putting down fresh dew every morning; making the flowers grow, and bringing babies and taking care of them till their mothers find them. Of course God is very good and very sweet and very merciful, but oh, He must be very terrible.'

'All the same I would rather be God and able to do things!'

Then the children moved off out of earshot. The two seated on the tombstone looked after them. The first to speak was the girl, who said:

'That's very sweet and good of Marjorie; but do you know, Harold, I like Susie's idea better.'

'Which idea was that, Stephen?'

'Why, didn't you notice what she said: "I'd like to be God and be able to do things"?'

'Yes,' he said after a moment's reflection. 'That's a fine idea in the abstract; but I doubt of its happiness in the long-run.'

'Doubt of its happiness? Come now? what could there be better, after all? Isn't it good enough to be God? What more do you want?'

The girl's tone was quizzical, but her great black eyes blazed with some thought of sincerity which lay behind the fun. The young man shook his head with a smile of kindly tolerance as he answered:

'It isn't that--surely you must know it. I'm ambitious enough, goodness knows; but there are bounds to satisfy even me. But I'm not sure that the good little thing isn't right. She seemed, somehow, to hit a bigger truth than she knew: "fancy having to be just."'

'I don't see much difficulty in that. Anyone can be just!'

'Pardon me,' he answered, 'there is perhaps nothing so difficult in the whole range of a man's work.' There was distinct defiance in the girl's eyes as she asked:

'A man's work! Why a man's work? Isn't it a woman's work also?'

'Well, I suppose it ought to be, theoretically; practically it isn't.'

'And why not, pray?' The mere suggestion of any disability of woman as such aroused immediate antagonism. Her companion suppressed a smile as he answered deliberately:

'Because, my dear Stephen, the Almighty has ordained that justice is not a virtue women can practise. Mind, I do not say women are unjust. Far from it, where there are no interests of those dear to them they can be of a sincerity of justice that can make a man's blood run cold. But justice in the abstract is not an ordinary virtue: it has to be considerate as well as stern, and above all interest of all kinds and of every one--' The girl interrupted hotly:

'I don't agree with you at all. You can't give an instance where women are unjust. I don't mean of course individual instances, but classes of cases where injustice is habitual.' The suppressed smile cropped out now unconsciously round the man's lips in a way which was intensely aggravating to the girl.

'I'll give you a few,' he said. 'Did you ever know a mother just to a boy who beat her own boy at school?' The girl replied quietly:

'Ill-treatment and bullying are subjects for punishment, not justice.'

'Oh, I don't mean that kind of beating. I mean getting the prizes their own boys contended for; getting above them in class; showing superior powers in running or cricket or swimming, or in any of the forms of effort in which boys vie with each other.' The girl reflected, then she spoke:

'Well, you may be right. I don't altogether admit it, but I accept it as not on my side. But this is only one case.'

'A pretty common one. Do you think that Sheriff of Galway, who in default of a hangman hanged his son with his own hands, would have done so if he had been a woman?' The girl answered at once:

'Frankly, no. I don't suppose the mother was ever born who would do such a thing. But that is not a common case, is it? Have you any other?' The young man paused before he spoke:

'There is another, but I don't think I can go into it fairly with you.'

'Why not?'

'Well, because after all you know, Stephen, you are only a girl and you can't be expected to know.' The girl laughed:

'Well, if it's anything about women surely a girl, even of my tender age, must know something more of it, or be able to guess at, than any young man can. However, say what you think and I'll tell you frankly if I agree--that is if a woman can be just, in such a matter.'

'Shortly the point is this: Can a woman be just to another woman, or to a man for the matter of that, where either her own affection or a fault of the other is concerned?'

'I don't see any reason to the contrary. Surely pride alone should ensure justice in the former case, and the consciousness of superiority in the other.' The young man shook his head:

'Pride and the consciousness of superiority! Are they not much the same thing. But whether or no, if either of them has to be relied on, I'm afraid the scales of Justice would want regulating, and her sword should be blunted in case its edge should be turned back on herself. I have an idea that although pride might be a guiding principle with you individually, it would be a failure with the average. However, as it would be in any case a rule subject to many exceptions I must let it go.'

Harold looked at his watch and rose. Stephen followed him; transferring her whip into the hand which held up the skirt, she took his arm with her right hand in the pretty way in which a young girl clings to her elders. Together they went out at the lich-gate. The groom drew over with the horses. Stephen patted hers and gave her a lump of sugar. Then putting her foot into Harold's ready hand she sprang lightly into the saddle. Harold swung himself into his saddle with the dexterity of an accomplished rider.

As the two rode up the road, keeping on the shady side under the trees, Stephen said quietly, half to herself, as if the sentence had impressed itself on her mind:

'To be God and able to do things!'

Harold rode on in silence. The chill of some vague fear was upon him.

1. Stephen

Stephen Norman of Normanstand had remained a bachelor until close on middle age, when the fact took hold of him that there was no immediate heir to his great estate. Whereupon, with his wonted decision, he set about looking for a wife.

He had been a close friend of his next neighbour, Squire Rowly, ever since their college days. They had, of course, been often in each other's houses, and Rowly's young sister--almost a generation younger than himself, and the sole fruit of his father's second marriage--had been like a little sister to him too. She had, in the twenty years which had elapsed, grown to be a sweet and beautiful young woman. In all the past years, with the constant opportunity which friendship gave of close companionship, the feeling never altered. Squire Norman would have been surprised had he been asked to describe Margaret Rowly and found himself compelled to present the picture of a woman, not a child.

Now, however, when his thoughts went womanward and wifeward, he awoke to the fact that Margaret came within the category of those he sought. His usual decision ran its course. Semi-brotherly feeling gave place to a stronger and perhaps more selfish feeling. Before he even knew it, he was head over ears in love with his pretty neighbour.

Norman was a fine man, stalwart and handsome; his forty years sat so lightly on him that his age never seemed to come into question in a woman's mind. Margaret had always liked him and trusted him; he was the big brother who had no duty in the way of scolding to do. His presence had always been a gladness; and the sex of the girl, first unconsciously then consciously, answered to the man's overtures, and her consent was soon obtained.

When in the fulness of time it was known that an heir was expected, Squire Norman took for granted that the child would be a boy, and held the idea so tenaciously that his wife, who loved him deeply, gave up warning and remonstrance after she had once tried to caution him against too fond a hope. She saw how bitterly he would be disappointed in case it should prove to be a girl. He was, however, so fixed on the point that she determined to say no more. After all, it might be a boy; the chances were equal. The Squire would not listen to any one else at all; so as the time went on his idea was more firmly fixed than ever. His arrangements were made on the base that he would have a son. The name was of course decided. Stephen had been the name of all the Squires of Normanstand for ages--as far back as the records went; and Stephen the new heir of course would be.

Like all middle-aged men with young wives he was supremely anxious as the time drew near. In his anxiety for his wife his belief in the son became passive rather than active. Indeed, the idea of a son was so deeply fixed in his mind that it was not disturbed even by his anxiety for the young wife he idolised.

When instead of a son a daughter was born, the Doctor and the nurse, who knew his views on the subject, held back from the mother for a little the knowledge of the sex. Dame Norman was so weak that the Doctor feared lest anxiety as to how her husband would bear the disappointment, might militate against her. Therefore the Doctor sought the Squire in his study, and went resolutely at his task.

'Well, Squire, I congratulate you on the birth of your child!' Norman was of course struck with the use of the word 'child'; but the cause of his anxiety was manifested by his first question:

'How is she, Doctor? Is she safe?' The child was after all of secondary importance! The Doctor breathed more freely; the question had lightened his task. There was, therefore, more assurance in his voice as he answered:

'She is safely through the worst of her trouble, but I am greatly anxious yet. She is very weak. I fear anything that might upset her.'

The Squire's voice came quick and strong:

'There must be no upset! And now tell me about my son?' He spoke the last word half with pride, half bashfully.

'Your son is a daughter!' There was silence for so long that the Doctor began to be anxious. Squire Norman sat quite still; his right hand resting on the writing-table before him became clenched so hard that the knuckles looked white and the veins red. After a long slow breath he spoke:

'She, my daughter, is well?' The Doctor answered with cheerful alacrity:

'Splendid!--I never saw a finer child in my life. She will be a comfort and an honour to you!' The Squire spoke again:

'What does her mother think? I suppose she's very proud of her?'

'She does not know yet that it is a girl. I thought it better not to let her know till I had told you.'

'Why?'

'Because--because--Norman, old friend, you know why! Because you had set your heart on a son; and I know how it would grieve that sweet young wife and mother to feel your disappointment. I want your lips to be the first to tell her; so that on may assure her of your happiness in that a daughter has been born to you.'

The Squire put out his great hand and laid it on the other's shoulder. There was almost a break in his voice as he said:

'Thank you, my old friend, my true friend, for your thought. When may I see her?'

'By right, not yet. But, as knowing your views, she may fret herself till she knows, I think you had better come at once.'

All Norman's love and strength combined for his task. As he leant over and kissed his young wife there was real fervour in his voice as he said:

'Where is my dear daughter that you may place her in my arms?' For an instant there came a chill to the mother's heart that her hopes had been so far disappointed; but then came the reaction of her joy that her husband, her baby's father, was pleased. There was a heavenly dawn of red on her pale face as she drew her husband's head down and kissed him.

'Oh, my dear,' she said, 'I am so happy that you are pleased!' The nurse took the mother's hand gently and held it to the baby as she laid it in the father's arms.

He held the mother's hand as he kissed the baby's brow.

The Doctor touched him gently on the arm and beckoned him away. He went with careful footsteps, looking behind as he went.

After dinner he talked with the Doctor on various matters; but presently he asked:

'I suppose, Doctor, it is no sort of rule that the first child regulates the sex of a family?'

'No, of course not. Otherwise how should we see boys and girls mixed in one family, as is nearly always the case. But, my friend,' he went on, 'you must not build hopes so far away. I have to tell you that your wife is far from strong. Even now she is not so well as I could wish, and there yet may be change.' The Squire leaped impetuously to his feet as he spoke quickly:

'Then why are we waiting here? Can nothing be done? Let us have the best help, the best advice in the world.' The Doctor raised his hand.

'Nothing can be done as yet. I have only fear.'

'Then let us be ready in case your fears should be justified! Who are the best men in London to help in such a case?' The Doctor mentioned two names; and within a few minutes a mounted messenger was galloping to Norcester, the nearest telegraph centre. The messenger was to arrange for a special train if necessary. Shortly afterwards the Doctor went again to see his patient. After a long absence he came back, pale and agitated. Norman felt his heart sink when he saw him; a groan broke from him as the Doctor spoke: