

AT A WAYSIDE STATION

*L'adorable hasard d'être père est tombé
Sur ma tête, et m'a fait une douce fêlure.*

HUGO

"GOOD-BYE, my darling!"

The voice shot out cheerily from the window of a second-class carriage at a small suburban station. The speaker evidently did not care a pin who heard him. He was a bustling, rubicund, white-whiskered and white-waistcoated little man of about sixty. As I glanced in his direction I saw that his wife—a faded blue-eyed woman, with a genius for reserve—was placidly settling herself in her seat.

Perception of these details was instantaneous.

"Good-bye, my darling!"

"Good-bye, papa!"

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The reply, in a clear, fresh voice, was almost startling in its promptitude.

I looked round; and then for the next minute and a half, I laughed quietly to myself.

For, first of all, the bright little girl, the flower of the flock, the small, radiant beauty to whom that voice should have belonged, was a maiden of five-and-thirty, hopelessly uncomely, and irredeemably high-coloured.

The unmistakable age, the unprepossessing appearance, were thrown into ludicrous contrast by the girlish coyness and bashfulness of her demeanour. When her eyes were not raised to her father's face, they were cast down with a demureness that was altogether irresistible.

The little man mopped his bald scalp, hurriedly arranged some of

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his belongings in the rack, abruptly darted out another bird-like look, and repeated his farewell.

"Good-bye, my darling!"

"Good-bye, papa!"

It was as though he had touched the spring of a dutiful automaton.

The carriage doors were slammed, the guard whistled, the driver signalled, the train started.

"Good-bye, my darling!"

"Good-bye, papa!"

Comic as the whole scene was, its conclusion was a relief. One felt that if "Good-bye, my darling," had been repeated a hundred times, "Good-bye, papa," would have been sprung out in response with the same prompt, pleasant inflection, the same bright, ridiculous, mechanical precision.

She tripped, with the vivacity of coquettish maidenhood, for a few

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paces along the platform beside the carriage window, stood still a moment, watching the carriages as they swept around the curve, and then, resuming her air of unapproachable reserve, ascended the station steps.

The reaction was as sudden as it was unexpected. The ripple of her white muslin dress had scarcely vanished before I felt both ashamed and sorry that I had been so much amused. The whole situation assumed a different aspect, and I acknowledged with remorse that I had been a cruel and despicable onlooker. The humour of the incident had mastered me; the pathos of it now stared me in the face.

As I thought of her unpleasing colour, of her ineligible uncomeliness, of her five-and-thirty unmarried years, I wondered how I could have ever had the heart to laugh at what

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might well have been a cause for tears.

The pity of it! That sweet fresh voice—and it *was* singularly sweet and fresh—seemed the one charm left of the years of a woman's charms and a woman's chances. The harmless prim ways and little coy tricks of manner, so old-fashioned and out of place, seemed to belong to the epoch of powder and patches. They were irrefutable evidence of the seclusion in which he had lived—of the little world of home which had never been invaded by any rash, handsome, self-confident young man.

As I thought of the garrulous pride and affection of her father, I knew that she must be womanly and lovable in a thousand ways that a stranger could not guess at. If no one else in the world had any need of her, she was at least *his* darling; but, ah! the

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pity of the unfulfilled mission, of the beautiful possibilities unrealised, of the honour and holiness of motherhood denied. She would never have any little being to call "*her darling*," to rear in love and sorrow, in solicitude and joy; never one even to lose

*"When God draws a new angel so
Through a house of a man up to His";*

—to lose and yet know it is not lost, to surrender and yet feel it is safe for ever; preserved beyond change and the estrangement of the years and the sad transformations of temperament—a sinless babe for evermore.

"Good-bye, my darling!" How strangely, how tranquilly, with what little sense of change must the years have gone by for father and daughter! One could not but conjecture whether he saw her now as she actually appeared in my eyes, or whether she

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was still to him the small, inexpressibly lovely creature of thirty years ago. Love plays curious tricks with our senses. No man ever yet married an ugly woman, and time is slow to wrinkle a beloved face. To him, doubtless, she was yet a child, and at forty or fifty she would be a child still.

Then I thought of her as an infant in her cradle, and I saw the faded, reserved woman and the florid little man, a youthful couple, leaning over it, full of the happiness and wonder that come with the first baby. I thought of the endearing helplessness of those early weeks; of the anguish of the first baby troubles; of the scares and terrors, of the prayers and thankfulness; of the delight in the first smile; of the blissful delusions that their little angel had begun to notice, that she had tried to speak, that she had recognised some one; of

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the inexplicable brightness which made their home, the rooms, the garden, the very street seem a bit of heaven which had fallen to earth ; of the foolish father buying the little one toys, perhaps even a book, which she would not be able to handle for many a day to come ; of the more practical mother who exhausted her ingenuity in hoods and frocks, bootees, and dainty vanities of lace and ribbon.

I thought of the little woman when she first began to toddle ; of her resolute efforts to carry weights almost as heavy as herself ; of her inarticulate volubility ; of the marvellous growth of intelligence—the quickness to understand, associated with the inability to express herself ; of her indefatigable imitative faculty ; and of the delight of her father in all these.

Then, as years went by, I saw how

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she had become essential to his happiness, how all his thoughts encompassed her, how she influenced him, how much better a man she made him ; and as still the years elapsed, I took into account her ambitions, her day-dreams, her outlook into the world of men and women, and I wondered whether she, too, had her half-completed romance, of which, perchance, no one—not even her father, had an inkling. How near they were to each other ; and yet, after all, how far apart in many things they might still be !

Her father's darling ! Just Heaven ! if we have to give account of every foolish word, for how much senseless and cruel laughter shall we have to make reckoning ? For, as I let my thoughts drift to and fro about these matters, I remembered the thousands who have many children but no dar-

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ling ; the mothers whose hearts have been broken, the fathers whose grey hairs have been brought down in sorrow to the grave ; and I mused on those in whom faith and hope have been kept alive by prayer and the merciful recollection of a never-to-be-forgotten childhood.

When I reached home I took down the volume in which one of our poets* has spoken in tenderest pathos of these last in the beautiful verses entitled—

TWO SONS.

*I have two sons, Wife—
Two and yet the same ;
One his wild way runs, Wife,
Bringing us to shame.*

*The one is bearded, sunburnt, grim, and
fights across the sea ;
The other is a little child who sits upon
your knee.*

* Robert Buchanan.

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*One is fierce and bold, Wife,
As the wayward deep ;
Him no arms could hold, Wife,
Him no breast could keep.
He has tried our hearts for many a year,
not broken them ; for he
Is still the sinless little one that sits upon
your knee.*

*One may fall in fight, Wife—
Is he not our son ?
Pray with all your might, Wife,
For the wayward one ;
Pray for the dark, rough soldier who
fights across the sea,
Because you love the little shade who
smiles upon your knee.*

*One across the foam, Wife,
As I speak may fall ;
But this one at home, Wife,
Cannot die at all.
They both are only one, and how thankful
should we be
We cannot lose the darling son who sits
upon your knee.*

This one cannot die at all ! To
how many has this bright little

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shadow of the vanished years been an enduring solace and an undying hope! And if God's love be no less than that of an earthly father, what mercies, what long-suffering, what infinite pity may we grown-up, wilful and wayward children not owe to His loving memory of our sinless infancy! But for those happy parents who, as the years have gone by, have never failed to see the "sinless little one," now in the girl or boy, now in the young man or maiden, and now in these no longer young but still darlings, what a gracious providence has encompassed their lives!

When I had smiled in witless amusement I had not thought of all this; and even now it had not occurred to me that this could have been no rare and exceptional case—that there must be many such dar-

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lings in the world. That same evening, however, as I glanced over the paper, I came across the following notice in the column of "Births, Deaths, and Marriages":

"In memoriam, Louisa S——, who died suddenly on August 22, aged 40; my youngest, most beloved, and affectionate daughter."

PRINTED AT THE PRESS OF
FLEMING, SCHILLER AND CARRICK,
NEW YORK, FOR STONE AND KIMBALL,
PUBLISHERS, NEW YORK.
OCTOBER: MDCCC XCVI

