The Canadian Champion

And County of Halton Intelligencer.

VOLUME 32. MILTON, THURSDAY, MARCH 23, 1893. NO. 41

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(Continued)

CHAPTER V.

SOMETHING HAPPENS.

So far a truly enjoyable Sunday. To sit in church beside her angry mother, both going through the forms of repentance, charity, and forgiveness: and to dine together, going through the ordinary forms of kindliness while one at least was devoured with wrath. Waste of good roast lamb and gooseberry tart!

Elsie spent the afternoon in her studio, where she sat undisturbed. People called, but her mother received them. Now that the last resolution had been taken: now that she had promised her lover to brave everything and to live the simplest possible life for love's sweet sake, she felt that sinking which falls upon the most courageous when the boats are burned. Thus love makes loving hearts to suffer.

The evening, however, made amends. For then, like the housemaid, who mounted the area stair as Elsie went down the front-door steps, she went forth to meet her lover, and in his company forgot all her fears. They went to church together. There they sat side by side, this church not having adopted the barbarous custom of separating the sexes—a custom which belongs to the time when women were monkishly considered unclean creatures, and the cause, to most men, of everlasting suffering, which they themselves would most justly share. This couple sat hand in hand; the service was full of praise and hope and trust: the Psalms were exultant, triumphant, jubilant: the sermon was a ten minutes' ejaculation of joy and thanks: there was a Procession with banners, to cheer up the hearts of the faithful—what is Faith without a Procession? Comfort stole back to Elsie's troubled heart: she felt less like an outcast: she came out of the church with renewed confidence.

It was still daylight. They walked round and round the nearest square. Jane the housemaid and her young man were doing were doing the same thing. They talked with confidence and joy of the future before them. Presently the rain began to fall and Elsie's spirits fell too.

'George,' she said, 'are we selfish, each of us? Is it right for me to drag and keep you down?'

'You will not. You will raise me and keep me up. Never doubt that, Elsie. I am the selfish one because I make you sacrifice so much.'

'Oh! no—no. It is no sacrifice for me. You must make me brave, George, because I am told every day by Hilda and mother the most terrible things. I have been miserable all day long. I suppose it is the battle I had with my mother yesterday.'

'Your mother will be all right again as soon as the thing is done. And Hilda will come round too. She will want to show you her new carriage and her newest dress. Nobody admires and envies the rich relation so much as the poor relation. That is the reason why the poor relation is so much courted and petted in every rich family. We shall be the poor relations, you know, Elsie.'

'I suppose so. We must accept the part and play it properly.' She spoke gaily, but with an effort.

'She will give you some of her old dresses. And she will ask us to some of her crushes; but we won't go. Oh! Hilda will come round. As for your mother——' He repressed what he was about to say. 'As for your mother, Elsie, there is no obstinacy so desperate that it cannot be softened by something or other. The constant dropping, you know. Give her time. If she refuses to change—why—then'—again he changed the words in time—'dear child, we must make our own happiness for ourselves without our own folk to help us.'

'Yes; we will. At the same time, George, though I am so valiant in talk, I confess that I feel as low as a schoolboy who is going to be punished.'

'My dear Elsie,' said George, with a little exasperation, 'if they will not come round, let them stay flat or square, or sulky, or anything. I can hardly be expected to feel very anxious for a change of temper in people who have said so many hard things of me. To-morrow, dear, you shall get through your talk with Mr. Dering. He's as hard as nails; but he's a just man, and he is sensible. In the evening, I will call for you at nine, and you shall tell me what he said. In six weeks we can be married. I will see about the banns. We will find a lodging somewhere, pack up our things, get married, and move in. We can't afford a honeymoon, I am afraid. Then shall come afterwards when the ship comes home.'

'Yes. When I am with you I fear nothing. It is when you are gone: when I sit by myself in my own room, and know that in the next room my mother is brooding over her wrath and keeping it warm—that I feel so guilty. To-night, it is not that I feel guilty at all: it is quite the contrary; but I feel as if something was going to happen.'

'Something is going to happen, dear. I am going to put a wedding ring round this pretty finger.'

'When one says something in the language of superstition one means something bad, something dreadful, something that shall stand between us and force us apart. Something unexpected.'

'My child,' said her lover, 'all the powers of all the devils shall not force us part.' A daring and comprehensive boast.

She laughed a little, lightened by words so brave. 'Here we are, dear,' she said, as they arrived at the house. 'I think the rain means to come down in earnest. You had better make haste home. To-morrow evening at nine, I will expect you.'

She ran lightly up the steps and rang the bell: the door was opened: she turned her head, laughed, waved her hand to her lover, and ran in.

There was standing on the kerb beneath the street lamp a man apparently engaged in lighting a cigar. When the girl turned, the light of the lamp fell full upon her face. The man stared at her, forgetting his cigar-light, which fell burning from his hand into the gutter. When the door shut upon her, he stared at George, who, for his part, his mistress having vanished, stared at the door.

All this staring occupied a period of at least half a minute. Then George turned and walked away: the man struck another light, lit his cigar, and strode away too, but in the same direction. Presently he caught up to George and laid a hand upon his shoulder.

'Here, you sir,' he said gruffly; 'I want a word with you before we go any further.'

George turned upon him savagely. Nobody likes a heavy hand upon the shoulder. In the old days it generally meant a writ and Whitecross Street and other unpleasant things.

'Who the devil are you?' he asked.

'That is the question I was going—' He stopped and laughed.—'No—I see now. I don't want to ask it. You are George Austin, are you not?'

'That is my name. But who are you—and what do you want with me?'

The man was a stranger to him. He was dressed in a velvet coat and a white waistcoat: he wore a soft felt hat; and with the velvet jacket, the felt hat, and a full beard, he looked like an artist of some kind. At the end of June it is still light at half-past nine. George saw that the man was a gentleman: his features, strongly marked and clear cut, reminded him of something—but vaguely; they gave him the common feeling of having been seen or known at some remote period. The man looked about thirty, the time when the physical man is at his best: he was of good height, well set up, and robust. Something, no doubt, in the art world: or something that desired to appear as if belonging to the art world. Because, you see, the artists themselves are not so picturesque as those who would be artists if they could. The unsuccessful artist, certainly, is sometimes a most picturesque creature. So is the model. The rags and duds and threadbarity too often enter largely into the picturesque. So with the ploughboy's dinner under the hedge, or the cotter's Saturday night. And the village beorshop may make a very fine picture; but the artist himself does not partake in those simple joys.

'Well, sir, who are you?' George repeated as the other man made no reply.

'Do you not remember me? I am waiting to give you a chance.'

'No—certainly not.'

'Consider. That house into which you have just taken my—a young lady—does it not connect itself with me?'

'No. Why should it?'

'Then I suppose that I am completely forgotten.'

'It is very strange. I seem to recall your voice.

'I will tell you who I am by another question. George Austin, what in thunder are you doing with my sister?'

'Your sister?' George jumped up and stared. 'Your sister? Are you—are you Athelstan come home again? Really and truly—Athelstan?'

'I am really and truly Athelstan. I have been back in England about a fortnight.'

'You are Athelstan?' George looked at him curiously. When the reputed black-sheep comes home again, it is generally in rags with a long story of fortune's persecutions. This man was not in the least ragged. On the contrary, he looked prosperous. What had he been doing? For, although Elsie continued passionate in her belief in her brother's innocence, everybody else believed that he had run away to escape consequences, and George among the number had accepted that belief.

'Your beard alters you greatly. I should not have known you. To be sure it is eight years since I saw you last, and I was only just beginning my articles when you—left us.' He was on the point of saying 'when you ran away.'

'There is a good deal to talk about. Will you come with me to my rooms? I am putting up in Half Moon Street.' Athelstan hailed a passing hansom and they drove off.

'You have been a fortnight in London,' said George, 'and yet you have not been to see your own people.'

George asked no more questions. Arrived at the lodging, they went in and sat down. Athelstan produced soda and whiskey and cigars.

'Why have I not called upon my own people?' Athelstan took up the question again. 'Because, when I left home, I swore that I would never return until they came to beg forgiveness. That is why. Every evening I have been walking outside the house, in the hope of seeing some of them without their seeing me. For, you see, I should like to go home again; but I will not go as I went away, under a shameful cloud. That has got to be lifted first. Presently I shall know whether it is lifted. Then I shall know how to act. To-night, I was rewarded by the sight of my sister Elsie, walking home with you. I knew her at once. She is taller than I thought she would become when I went away. Her face hasn't changed much, though. She always had the gift of sweet looks, which isn't quite the same thing as beauty. My sister Hilda, for instance, was always called a handsome girl, but she never had Elsie's sweet looks.'

'She has the sweetest looks in the world.'

'What are you doing with her, George Austin, I ask again?'

'We are engaged to be married.'

'Married? Elsie married? Why—she's—well—I suppose she must be grown up by this time.'

'Elsie is very nearly one-and-twenty. See will be twenty-one to-morrow.'

'Elsie going to be married. It seems absurd. One-and-twenty to-morrow. Ah!' He sat up eagerly. 'Tell me, is she any richer? Has she had any legacies or things?'

'No. How should she? Her *dot* is her sweet self, which is enough for any man.'

'And you, Austin. I remember you were an articled clerk of eighteen or nineteen when I went away—are you rich?'

Austin blushed. 'No,' he said; 'I am not. I am a managing clerk at your old office. I get two hundred a year, and we are going to marry on that.'

Athelstan nodded. 'A bold thing to do. However—— Twenty-one to-morrow—we shall see.'

'And I am sorry to say there is the greatest opposition—on the part of your mother and your sister. I am not allowed in the house, and Elsie is treated as a rebel.'

'Oh! well. If you see your way, my boy, get married, and have a happy life, and leave them to come round at their leisure. Elsie has a heart of gold. She can believe in a man. She is the only one of my people who stood up for me when they accused me without a shadow of proof of—— The only one—the only one. It is impossible for me to forget that—and difficult,' he added, 'to forgive the other thing.—Is my sister Hilda still at home?'

'No. She is married to Sir Samuel, brother of your Mr. Dering. He is a great deal older than his wife; but he is very rich.'

'Oh!—and my mother?'

'I believe she continues in good health. I am not allowed the privilege of calling upon her.'

'And my old chief?'

'He also continues well.'

'And now, since we have cleared the ground so far, let us come to business. How about that robbery?'

'What robbery?' The old business had taken place when George was a lad just entering upon his articles. He had ceased to think of it.

'What robbery? Man alive!'—Athelstan sprang to his feet—'there is only one robbery to me in the whole history of the world since men and robberies began. What robbery? Look here, Master George Austin, when a man is murdered, there is for that man only one murder in the whole history of the world. All the other murders, even that of Abel himself, are of no concern at all—not one bit. He isn't interested in them. They don't matter to him a red cent. That's my case. The robbery of eight years ago, which took a few hundred pounds from a rich man, changed my whole life; it drove me out into the world; it forced me for a time to live among the prodigals and the swine and the husks. It handed me over to a thousand devils; and you ask me what robbery?'

'I am very sorry. It is now a forgotten thing. Nobody remembers it any more. I doubt whether Mr. Dering himself ever thinks of it.'

'Well, what was discovered after all? Who did it?'

'Nothing at all has been discovered. No one knows to this day who did it.'

'Nothing at all?—I am disappointed. Hasn't old Checkley done time for it? Nothing found out?'

'Nothing. The notes were stopped in time, and were never presented. After five or six years the Bank of England gave Mr. Dering notes in the place of those stolen. And that is all there is to tell.'

'Nothing discovered! And the notes never presented? What good did the fellow get by it, then?'

'I don't know. But nothing was discovered.'

'Nothing discovered!' Athelstan repeated. 'Why, I took it for granted that the truth had come out long since. I was making up my to call upon old Dering. I don't think I shall go now. And my sister Hilda will not be coming here to express her contrition, I am disappointed,'

'You can see Elsie if you like.'—

'Yes—I can see her,' he repeated.—'George'—he returned to the old subject—'do you know the exact particulars of that robbery?'

'There was a forged cheque, and the Bank paid it across the counter.'

'The cheque,' Athelstan explained, 'was made payable to the order of a certain unknown person named Edmund Gray. It was endorsed by that name. To prove that forgery, they should have got the cheque and examined the endorsement. That was the first thing, certainly. I wonder how they began.'

'I do not know. It was while I was in my articles, and all we heard was a vague report. You ought not to have gone away. You should have stayed to fight it out.'

'I was right to give up my berth after what the chief said. (How could I remain drawing his pay and doing his work, when he had calmly given me to understand that the forgery lay between two hands, and that he strongly suspected mine?'

'Did Mr. Dering really say so? Did he go so far as that?'

'So I walked out of the place. I should have stayed at home and waited for the clearing up of the thing, but for my own people—who—well—you know—— So I went away in a rage.'

'And have you come back—as you went—in a rage?'

'Well—you see, that is the kind of fire that keeps alight of its own accord.'

'I believe that some sort of a search was made for this Edmund Gray; but I do not know how long it lasted or who was employed.'

'Detectives are no good. Perhaps the chief didn't care to press the business. Perhaps he learned enough to be satisfied that Checkley was the man. Perhaps he was unwilling to lose an old servant. Perhaps the villain confessed the thing. It all comes back to me fresh and clear, though for eight long years I have not talked with a soul about it.'

'Tell me,' said George, a little out of sympathy with this dead and buried forgery—'tell me where you have been—what have you done—and what you are doing now.'

'Presently—presently,' he replied with impatience. 'I am sure now that I was wrong. I should not have left the country. I should have taken a lodging openly, and waited and looked on. Yes; that would have been better. Then I should have seen that old villain, Checkley, in the dock. Perhaps it is not yet too late. Still—eight years. Who can expect a commissionaire to remember a single message after eight years?'

'Well—and now tell me,' George asked again, 'what you have been doing?'

'The black-sheep always turns up, doesn't he? You learn at home that he has got a berth in the Rocky Mountains; but he jacks it up and goes to Melbourne, where he falls on his feet; but gets tired, and moves on to New Zealand, and so home again. It's a regular round.'

'You are apparently the black-sheep whose wool is dyed white. There are threads of gold in it. You look prosperous.'

'A few years ago I was actually in the possession of money. Then I became poor again. After a good many adventures I became a journalist. The profession is in America the refuge of the educated unsuccessful, and the hope of the uneducated successful. I am doing as well as journalists in America generally do. I am over here as the representative of a Francisco paper. And I expect to stay for some time—so long as I can be of service to my people. That's all.'

'Well—it might be a great deal worse. And won't you come to Pembridge Crescent with me?'

'When the cloud is lifted: not before. And—George—not a word about me. Don't tell—yet—even Elsie.'

CHAPTES VI.

SOMETHING MORE HAPPENS.

Checkley held the door of the office wide open, and invited Elsie to enter. The aspect of the room, solid of furniture, severe in its fittings, with its vast table covered with papers, struck her with a kind of terror. At the table sat her guardian, austere of countenance.

All the way along she had been imagining a dialogue. He would begin with certain words. She would reply, firmly but respectfully, with certain other words. He would go on. She would again reply. And so on. Everybody knows the consolations of imagination in framing dialogues at times of trouble. They never come off. The beginning is never what is expected, and the sequel, therefore, has to be changed on the spot. The conditions of the interview had not been realised by Elsie. Also the beginning was not what she expected. For her guardian, instead of frowning with a brow of corrugated iron, and holding up a finger of warning, received her more pleasantly than she had imagined it possible for him, bad her sit down, and leaned back, looking at her kindly.

'And so,' he said, 'you are twenty-one—twenty-one—to-day. I am no longer your guardian. You are twenty-one. Everything that is past seems to have happened yesterday. So that it is needless to say that you were a baby only yesterday.'

'Yes; I am really twenty-one.'

'I congratulate you. To be twenty-one is, I believe, for a young lady at least, a pleasant time of life. For my own part, I have almost forgotten the memory of youth. Perhaps I never had the time to be young. Certainly I have never understood why some men regret their youth so passionately. As for your sex, Elsie, I know very little of it except in the way of business. In that way, which does not admit of romance, I must say that I have sometimes found ladies importunate, tenacious, exacting, persistent, and even revengeful.'

'Oh!' said Elsie, with a little winning smile of conciliation. This was only a beginning—a prelude—before the unpleasantness.

'That, Elsie, is my unfortunate experience of women—always in the way of business, which of course may bring out the worst qualities. In society, of which I have little experience, they are doubtless—charming—charming.' He repeated the word, as if he had found an adjective of whose meaning he was not quite clear. 'An old bachelor is not expected, at the age of seventy-five, to know much about such a subject. The point before us is that you have this day arrived at the mature age of twenty-one. That is the first thing, and I congratulate you. The first thing.'

'I wonder,' thought Elsie timidly, 'when he will begin upon the next thing—the real thing.'

There lay upon the table before him a paper with notes upon it. He took it up, looked at it, and laid it down again. Then he turned to Elsie and smiled—he actually smiled—he unmistakably smiled. 'At twenty-one,' he said, 'some young ladies who are heiresses come into their property—'

'Those who are heiresses. Unhappily I am not.'

'Come into their property—their property. It must be a beautiful thing for a girl to come into property, unexpectedly, at twenty-one. For a man, a temptation to do nothing and to make no more money. Bad! Bad! But for a girl already engaged, a girl who wants money, a girl who is engaged—eh?—to a penniless young solicitor——'

Elsie turned crimson. This was the thing she expected.

'Under such circumstances, I say, such a stroke of fortune would be providential and wonderful, would it not?'

She blushed and turned pale, and blushed again. She also felt a strong disposition to cry—but repressed that disposition.

'In your case, for instance, such a windfall would be most welcome. Your case is rather a singular case. You do not belong to a family which has generally disregarded money—quite the reverse—you should inherit the love of money—yet you propose to throw away what I believe are very good prospects, and——'

'My only prospect is to marry George Austin.'

'So you think. I have heard from your mother, and I have seen your sister Hilda. They object very strongly to the engagement.'

'I know, of course, what they would say.'

'Therefore, I need not repeat it,' replied Mr. Dering drily. 'I learn, then, that you are not only engaged to this young gentleman, but that you are also proposing to marry upon the small income which he now possesses.'

'Yes—we are prepared to begin the world upon that income.'

'Your mother asked me what chance he had in his profession. In this office he can never rise to a considerable salary as managing clerk. If he had money, he might buy a partnership. But he has none, and his friends have none. And the profession is congested. He may remain all his life in a position not much better than he now occupies. The prospect, Elsie, is not brilliant.'

'No—we are fully aware of that. And yet——'

'Allow me, my dear child. You are yourself—we will say for the moment—without any means of your own.'

'I have nothing.'

'Or any expectations, except from your mother, who is not yet sixty.'

'I could not count upon my mother's death. Besides, she says that, if I persist, she will not leave me anything at all.'

'So much I understand from herself. Her present intention is to remove your name from her will, in case you go on with this proposed marriage.'

'My mother will do what she pleases with her property,' said Elsie. 'If she thinks that I will give way to a threat of this kind, she does not know me.'

(To be continued.)

ITEMS.

A noteworthy feature in connection with the parade of the Toronto Irish Catholic societies on Friday in celebration of St. Patrick's day was the fact that it was headed by the union jack for the first time in the history of such parades, the change being admittedly due to the present attitude of the British government towards Ireland.

"A Temperance Syndicate" is what Rev. Fred. Willet, in an article in the Church Times—copied appropriately by the Temperance Chronicle—desires above all things, as the most effective means of promoting temperance. He would have a body composed of influential Churchmen buy up every tavern site that could be purchased, and 'run' the houses on such lines as he has done with one of his own in his parish in Sussex. Experience has led him to this conclusion.