

## THE EYES OF PRIDE

To A. F.

“Pluck out the eyes of pride; thy lips to mine?  
Never, though I die thirsting! Go thy ways!”

GEORGE MEREDITH.

### I

“DO as you please—it’s all one to me: yet I think you will live to regret it.”

He spoke sullenly, with well-affected indifference, standing on the hearth-rug, his hands in his pockets, looking down at her; and yet there was a note of irresolution, of potential suffering in his voice, which was absent from her reply:

“If I do, I will tell you.”

“That is just what you will never do.”

“Perhaps not.” She was actually indifferent, or her dissimulation was more profound than his, for the blank coldness of her speech lit a spark of irritation in him.

“And, all the same, I think you will regret it—every day of your life. . . . By God! you are making a great mistake, Rosalind!”

“Is it all coming over again?” murmured the girl, wearily. “And, after all, it’s your own choice.”

He flushed angrily. He was in evening dress, and he fidgeted with his tie for a moment, before he held out his hand with stiff courtesy.

“Good-bye,” he said; and “Good-bye, Mr. Seefang!” the girl answered, listlessly. He dropped her impassive hand, and went slowly towards the door. Then he remembered he had brought his hat with him into the drawing-room, and he came back again, and placed it mechanically under his arm. “Well, good-bye, Rosalind!” he said again. This time she made no response, and he was really gone when she raised her eyes again. . . .

When he opened the hall door, emerged into the square, he paused to light a cigar before he plunged into the fog, rank and yellow and raw, which engulfed him. A clock struck eleven. It was actually so late; and he began to look round, vaguely, for a hansom, reflecting that their rapid talk—certainly, it had been fruitful in momentous consequences—had lasted for over an hour. He decided that all the cabs would have disappeared; the square railings, ten yards in front of him, were invisible; he shrugged his shoulders—a gesture habitual with him, in which, just now, lassitude and a certain relief were mingled—and, doggedly and resolutely, he set his face eastwards, to accomplish on foot his return journey to the Temple. . . . As he went, his mind was recasting his past life, and more especially the last six months of it, during which he had been engaged to Rosalind Lingard. Well! that was over at last, and he was unable to add that it had been pleasant while it lasted. Pleasant? Well, no! but it had been an intoxicating experience—a delirious torture. Now he was a free man, and he tried to congratulate himself, reminding himself of all the phrase implied. Yes; he was free again—free to his old pleasures and his old haunts, to his friends and his former wandering life, if he chose; above all, free to his art—his better passion. . . . And, suddenly, into his meditation there floated the face of the girl on the sofa, impassively beautiful and sullen, as it had been framed to his vision when he last held her hand, and he ground his teeth and cursed aloud.

He began to remember how, all along, he had forecasted this end of his wooing. What an ill-omened affair it had been from the first! He was yet uncertain whether he loved or hated her most. That he had loved her at all was the miracle. But, even now, he knew that he had loved her, with a love that was not child's-play—it had come too late for that—but, like his genius, faulty yet tremendous.

There was a great deal of Seefang; even the critics of his pictures admitted it; and everything about him was on a large scale. So that when he had fallen in love with Rosalind Lingard, after three days' acquaintance, he had done so supremely, carried away by a strange hurricane of sensual fascination and spiritual rapture. Meeting her first at a sparsely-attended *table d'hôte* in a

primitive Breton village where he was painting, he had promptly disliked her, thought her capricious and ill-tempered. Grudgingly, he had admitted that she was beautiful, but it was a beauty which repelled him in a girl of his own class, although he would have liked it well enough in women of less title to respect, with whom he was far too well acquainted.

If he had ever thought of marriage—and it must have been remotely—during his fifteen years of manhood, spent so pleasantly in the practice of an art in which his proficiency had met recognition and in the frank and unashamed satisfaction of his vigorous appetites, he had dreamed of a girl most unlike Rosalind Lingard; a girl with the ambered paleness and the vaguely virginal air of an early Tuscan painting, who would cure him of his grossness and reform him. For he had, still, intervals of depression—generally when he had spoiled a canvas—in which he accused himself of living like a beast, and hankered, sentimentally, for the love of a good woman. And yet, Rosalind Lingard, with her ambiguous charm, her adorable imperfection, had been this woman—the first to dominate him by something more than the mere rose and white of her flesh. Masterful as he had been with the others, he was her slave, if it was still his masterfulness which bound her to him, for a pliant man would have repelled her, and she had dreamed of being loved tyrannically. A few days had sufficed. A juxtaposition somewhat out of the common—a slight illness of her aunt, Mrs. Sartorys, with whom she was travelling—having thrown them together, a discovery which he made suddenly, that if she was capricious she could yet be charming, and that her audacity was really the perfection of her innocence—these were the material agents of his subjection. To the lovers, as they became speedily, inevitable fate and the god who watches over little lovers were held alone responsible. The best of Seefang's character, in which the fine and the gross were so strangely mingled, leapt to meet the promise in her eyes. Their vows were exchanged. . . .

He crossed Piccadilly Circus, debating whether he should go home at once or turn into his club and have an hour's poker; finally, he decided to make for the Temple. . . . And he told himself again that it was over. In retrospect, their love seemed like a long quarrel, with a few intervals of reconciliation.

But there had been a time, at the very beginning, when life was like Eden; when he was so buoyant that he felt as if his head must touch the sky. He left his easel and wandered with them through Morbihan; his knowledge of the country, so sad and cold and poor, and yet so pictorial, made him their *cicerone* to nooks which elude the ordinary tourist. Actually, they were not betrothed, but they anticipated the official sanction; and, indeed, no opposition was expected even by Mrs. Sartorys; though, formally, Rosalind's guardian, a learned lawyer—an abstract idea, even, to his ward—was to be consulted. Seefang had his fame, his kinship with the peerage, to set off against the girl's fortune, which was considerable. Had he been less eligible, Mrs. Sartorys, a weak, placid woman, professionally an invalid, would have been equally submissive. As it was, she allowed them the license of an engagement, stipulating merely for a postponement which was nominal. They rambled alone together over the ruddy moorland as it pleased them. Once he said to her:

“If your guardian damns me, will you make a curtsy and dismiss me, Rosalind?”

They had come to a pause in their walk; the sun was merciless, and they had wandered off the road to seek shade; the girl had seated herself on a bank under a silver-birch tree, Seefang was standing over her. She shook her head.

“No! if I've ever wanted anything since I was a child, I've cried and stormed till I got it.”

“You give yourself a fine character.”

“I'm not a nice girl, I've told you so before.”

“Nice!” he looked at her gravely. “I don't care about niceness.”

“What do you care for?”

“You as you are,” he said deliberately; “proud, capricious, not very sweet of temper, and—I suspect——”

Her eyes challenged him, he completed his phrase: “A bit of a flirt!”

“And yet you ——”

“And yet I love you; good God! what am I myself?”

She glanced at him with a sort of mocking tenderness.

"You are very proud," she said; "capricious, I don't know; but stubborn and headstrong; I think you can be very cruel, and I am sure you have been very wicked."

"And yet? —" he imitated her phrase softly. They were quite alone with the trees and the birds, and instinctively their lips met. Presently she resumed, a trifle sadly, her eyes contemplating vaguely the distant valley.

"I'm only a girl—not twenty. You are thirty-eight, thirty-eight! You must have kissed so many, many women before me."

He touched her hand very softly, held it while he went on: "Never mind the past, Rosalind. I've lived as other men. If I've been stupid, it was because I had never known you. When a man has been in heaven he is in no hurry to get back anywhere else. I'm yours, and you know it—body and soul—and they are a poor bargain, my child! ever since—since Ploumariel." She flushed and her head drooped towards him; at Ploumariel they had crossed the great climacteric. When she looked up, the sun, moving westwards, lit up the valley opposite them, illuminated the white stones of a village cemetery. Her eyes rested upon it. Presently she said:

"Oh, my dear, let us be kind to each other, bear and forbear . . . . That's the end of it all."

For a moment he was silent; then he leant over and kissed her hair.

"Rosalind, my darling, I wish we were dead together, you and I, lying there quietly, out of the worry of things."

It was a fantastic utterance, an odd and ominous mood to interrupt their foolish talk of plighted lovers; it never recurred. But just now it came back to him like an intuition. It is so much easier to die for the woman you love than to live with her. They could talk of bearing and forbearing, but much tolerance was in the nature of neither. They were capable of generosity, but even to themselves they could not be just. Both had known speedily how it must end. He was impatient, tyrannical; she, capricious and utterly a woman; their pride was a great Juggernaut, beneath whose car they threw, one by one, their dearest hopes, their happiness and all that they cared most for in life. Was she a coquette? At least she cared for

admiration, encouraged it, declined to live her life as he would have it. His conviction that small sacrifices which he asked of her she refused, not from any abiding joy the possession gave her, but in sheer perverseness, setting her will against his own, heightened his estimation of the offence. That his anger was out of all proportion to her wrongdoing he knew, and his knowledge merely inflamed his passionate resentment. She, on her side, was exacting, jealous of his past life; he was faithfully her lover, and he felt aggrieved, perhaps unjustly, that woman-like she took constancy too much for granted, was not more grateful that he did not lapse. And neither could make concessions: they hardened their hearts, were cold of eye and tongue when a seasonable softening would have flung them each in the other's arms. When they were most divided, each was secretly aware that life without the other would be but a savourless dish. For all that, they had ended it. She had flung him back his liberty, and he had accepted it with a bitter word of thanks. They had said, if they had not done, irrevocable things . . . .

Seefang let himself into his chambers and slammed the oak behind him; the room smelt of fog, the fire had gone out, and, just then, the lack of it seemed the most intolerable thing in life. But he sat down, still in his ulster, lighting the candle to dispel the gloom, and faced his freedom more deliberately than he had done before. He began to think of his work, and he was surprised at discovering how utterly he had neglected it during the last six months. There is nothing so disorganising as a great passion, nothing so enervating as a virtuous one. He went to bed, vowing that he would make amends. His art! that he should ever have forgotten it! None of the other women had interfered with that, the women who had amused him, satisfied the animal in him, but whom he had not loved. She alone had made him forget it. He had a sense of ingratitude towards his art, as to a person who has always stood by one, whom at times one has not valued, and whom one finds, after some calamity, steadfast and unchanged. His art should stand him in good stead now; it should help him to endure his life, to forget her and be strong. Strength! that was the great thing; and he knew that it appertained to him. He fell asleep murmuring that he was glad he

was strong . . . . strong . . . . Two months later Seefang went abroad ; he had made arrangements for a prolonged absence. He had not seen Miss Lingard ; if an acquaintance, who was ignorant of the rupture, asked after her, he looked vacant, seemed to search his memory to give the name a connotation. Then he remarked indifferently that he believed Mrs. Sartorys was out of town. He was working hard, contemplated work more arduous still. Every now and then he drew himself up and reminded himself that he had forgotten her.

For two years he was hardly heard of : he was believed to be travelling in Spain, living in some secluded village. Then he was in London for a month : he exhibited, and critics were unanimous in their opinion that he had never done better work—at which he smiled. They declared he had not been in vain to the land of Velasquez and Goya. It was at this time that he heard of Miss Lingard's marriage with Lord Dagenham ; that nobleman had carried away his bride to an obscure Scandinavian capital, where he was diplomatically engaged. Seefang was curious enough to turn over the pages of *Debrett*, and discovered that the bridegroom was sixty ; it enabled him to credit the current rumour that he was dull. He went on smiling and was abroad for another three years.

## II

HE had known they would meet when he first heard that the Dagenhams were in town. Lord Dagenham had abandoned diplomacy with stays and any semblance of being young ; he was partly paralysed, and was constantly to be seen in a bath-chair in Kensington Gardens. But the lady went everywhere, and Seefang made much the same round ; their encounter was merely a question of time. He faced it with equanimity, or its tolerable imitation ; he neither feared it nor hoped for it. And the season was but a few weeks old when it came about. At the dinner-table he faced her almost directly.

Five years ! Her beauty was richer, perhaps ; it had acquired sombre tones like an old picture ; but she was not perceptibly altered, hardly older. She was straight and tall, had retained something of her slim, girlish figure ;

and, as of old, her beauty had a sullen stain on it; in the languid depths of her dark eyes their fate was written; her full mouth in repose was scornful. He finished his soup, talked to his neighbour, mingled in the conversation; one of his remarks sent a little ripple of well-bred laughter down the table, and he noticed that she joined in it. But her eyes avoided him, as they had done when she bowed to him formally in the drawing-room. They had not spoken. A vague feeling of irritation invaded him. Was there another woman in the world with hair like that, so dark and multitudinous? He had promised himself to forget her, and it seemed to him that the promise had been kept. Life had been amusing, full of experience, lavish and expansive. If one supreme delight were impossible, that had not seemed to him a reason for denying himself any lesser joys which offered—joys, distractions. How successful he had been! And the tide of his irritation rose higher. His mind went back to the days when he had first known her. She had forgotten them, no doubt, but they were good while they lasted—yes, they were good. But what a life they would have led!—how thankful he should have been for his escape! From time to time he fidgeted nervously with his tie. Like a great wave of anguish his old desire swept over him.

To Lady Dagenham, if she had not seemed to notice him, his presence there, facing her, was the one fact which possessed her mind during that interminable dinner-party. She had to perfection the gift of being rude urbanely, and she had begun by repressing any intentions of her neighbour on the right to be conversational. Her neighbour on the left talked for three; she preserved appearances by throwing him smiles, and at mechanical intervals an icy monosyllable. "Yes," and "Yes," said her lips, and her eyes, which looked everywhere else—above, below, beside him—saw only Seefang. . . . He was changed; older, coarser, bigger, she thought. Large he had always been; but to-night he loomed stupendous. Every now and then his deep voice was borne across to her—that remained the same, his voice was always pleasant. And she missed no detail—his hair was thinner, it was streaked, like his moustache, with gray; his eyes were clouded, a trifle blood-shot; his laugh was cynical and easy. She noticed the one ring

he wore, a curious, absinthe-coloured opal, when he moved his left hand, large, but well-shaped and white. She remembered the ring and his affection for opals. Had that been the secret of his luck—their luck? He was not noticeably pitiable, but instinctively she fell to pitying him, and her compassion included herself. Skeleton fingers groped out of the past and throttled her. At a familiar gesture, when his hand went up to his tie, a rush of memories made her giddy. Was the past never done with? And why wish things undone or altered? He was a cross, brutal fellow; stupid and self-indulgent. Why had they ever met? They were too much alike. And she was sorry for him, sorry if he still cared, and sorrier if, as was more likely, he had forgotten; for she was aware that the strength which puts away suffering is more costly than acquiescence in unhappiness. A sudden tenderness came over her for him; it was not with the man she was angry, but with fate, the powers which had made them what they were, self-tormentors, the instruments of their own evil. As she rose from the table with the other women, she dropped one glance at him from her sombre, black eyes. And they met his in a flash which was electric.

When he came upstairs, rather tardily, it was with a certain relief that he failed to discover in either of the two large rooms, which opened into one another, the face which he sought. In the first of them, a young Hungarian musician of note was just taking his seat at the piano. The air was heavy with the smell of flowers, full of soft vibrations—the *frou-frou* of silken skirts, the rustle of posturing fans. He moved into the second room. It was a parched, hot night, and the windows had been left open; the thin lace curtains protecting them were stirred imperceptibly. With a strange, nervous dread on him that was also an intuition, he pushed them aside and stepped on to the spacious balcony. Half-a-dozen people were sitting or standing there, and he distinguished her profile, marble white and strangely cold, in the subdued shine of the electric lights. An elderly-looking young man with a blonde moustache was talking with her. He took his station by them, joined mechanically in the conversation, looking not at her, but at the long, low line of the park in front of them with its background of mysterious trees.

Presently a crash of chords came from within—the Hungarian had begun his performance. People began to drift inside again; Lady Dagenham and the blonde young man—a little anxious, for he was due in the House, concerned for a division—were the last loiterers. For the second time their eyes met, and there was a note of appeal in them.

“Please don’t let me keep you, Mr. Rose . . . Mr. Seefang . . . We are old friends, and I haven’t seen him for years . . . Mr. Seefang will look after me.”

When they were alone together he came over to her side, and they stood so for a moment or two in silence; he was so close to her that he could smell the misty fragrance of her hair, hear the sighing of her bosom. The tense silence preyed on them; to break it at any cost, he said, at last: “Rosalind!” Her white face was turned towards him, and he read the passion in it as in a book. And, “Rosalind!” he said again, with a new accent, more strenuously.

“So you have come back”—her rich voice was under control, but there was a vibration in it which spoke of effort—“come back to England? Your fame preceded you long ago. I have often heard of you, and wondered if we should ever meet.”

“Did you ever wish it?”

“It is always pleasant to meet old friends,” she answered, mechanically.

“Pleasant!” He laughed harshly. “There is no pleasure in it, Lady Dagenham.” She glanced at him uneasily, for, unconsciously, he had raised his voice. “And friends, are we friends—how can we be friends, you and I?”

“At least—not enemies,” she murmured.

He was silent for a moment, looking out at the blurred mass of the park, but seeing only her face, the face of her youth, softened and idealised, so that five years seemed as yesterday, and the anger and bitterness, which had driven them apart, chimeras.

“At Ploumariel, up the hill to Sainte-Barbe”; he spoke softly, as it were to himself, and the natural harshness of his voice was modulated. “Do you remember the wood, the smell of pines and wild thyme? The

pine-needles crackled under your little feet. How warm it was! You were tired at the end of the climb; you sat on a boulder to rest, while I fetched you milk from the cottage by the chapel—fresh milk in a big, yellow bowl, too big for your little fingers to cling to. You laughed; and I held it to your mouth, and you made me drink too, and I drank where the print of your lips had been, and your lips were sweet and fresh —”

“Seefang!” she laid a white finger on his mouth, beseechingly, and he trembled; then let her hand rest on his with something of a caress. “What is the use, Seefang?—what is the use? Do you think I have forgotten? . . . That was over and done with years and years ago. It is no use maddening ourselves. We have so little, little time. Even now, someone may interrupt us at any moment; we may not meet again—tell me about yourself, your life, all these years. I know you are a great artist; have you been happy?”

“I have made a name,” he said, shortly, “in more than one sense. If I were to speak, my voice might lie to you. Look me in the face—that will answer you.”

Almost childishly she obeyed him, scrutinised the dark, strong face, harsh and proud, with engrained lines of bitterness and ill-temper set upon it even in repose.

“You have answered me,” she said, with a little moan.

“I have always longed for you, Rosalind, even when it seemed I had forgotten you most . . . And you —?”

She cut him short quickly.

“I have not been over happy,” she said.

“Then your husband —?”

“My husband has been kind to me. I have done—tried to do my duty to him.”

A fresh silence intervened, nervous and uneasy: each feared to dissipate it, for each was instinctively conscious of what gulfs of passion lay beneath it, irretrievable chasms into which one unstudied phrase, one word at random, might hurl them both. She was the first to make the venture.

“Can we not be friends, you and I?” And, innocently as she had spoken, the words had not fallen before she was conscious of her error; and his arms were round her, crushing the frail lace of her bodice, and their lips had joined, and the thrill in her blood had belied her protest.

“Oh, why did we do it, what was the good of it, why did we ever meet?” she moaned, when the passionate moment had passed, and they were left face to face together, stupefied, yet with the mask of convention upon them once more, if set a little awry.

“Because,—because—” he faltered. “Oh, my darling, how can we ever be friends? Oh, my love, my one love, anything but that! . . . There is only one end of it—or two—one of two, and you know that, Rosalind! My clever, cross darling, you were always clever—always understood. That is why I liked you.”

She stood free of him again; her hands deftly, nervously restored one of her black, ruffled tresses.

“How little you liked me, after all!” she said at last.

And she saw, with a keen delight in her power to hurt him, with more pain at the hurt she did herself, the harsh and sneering lines round his mouth and nostrils darken into prominence, the latent brute in his face accentuate.

“There was little enough to like in you, was there, Rosalind? But, by God! I did—I loved you, yes, I love you . . . Look at the park, Rosalind! It’s a mist, and dark; you can guess at the trees, believe in the grass; perhaps it’s soft—and new there,—it’s vague and strange . . . would you plunge into it now with me, darling—into the darkness? How this music and people tire me since I’ve seen you . . . would you? Cool and vague and strange! . . . No, you wouldn’t—nor would I, even if it were possible. You need not answer. It would not do. There, or here, we should hurt each other as we always have—and shall, this side of the grave. That is why I said there was only one end of it, or two, and *this* is the one you choose.”

Once more, she laid her hand on his, and went on, her fingers caressing, absently, the opal of his ring.

“Don’t be angry, Seefang, we have so little time—if it must be so. Life is so short. Besides, we’ve changed, grown older; we might be kinder to each other now. What are you going to do?”

“I shall live as I have done—go abroad, perhaps, a little sooner—what else?”

“Oh, why?” she cried instinctively. “What is the good?”

“Would you have me come and see you? When are you at home? What is your day?” he asked, with an inflection, the irony of which escaped her.

“If you are reasonable, why not?” she queried.

He took up her hand and kissed it very gently, and, as it might have been a child’s, retained it in his own.

“Because I am not that kind of man,” he said; “because I know myself, and the world, and the world’s view of me; because of my other name, out of paint; because ——”

She pulled herself away, petulantly; withdrew from him with a sullen gesture.

“How little you must respect me! You need not have told me that your reputation is infamous: I have heard of it: is it true, then?”

“It is true that I love you. As for what they say ——” he broke off with a little suppressed laugh. “You see we are beginning to quarrel, we are generating a misunderstanding—and, as you said, there is so little time. The music is quite over, and we may be invaded any moment.”

“And I begin to feel chill,” she said.

He helped to arrange her cloak around her, lifted aside the curtain to allow her passage.

“So this is the end?” she said, lightly; and her subtle voice had grown expressionless.

“Yes,” he replied, dully; “this is the very end.”

ERNEST DOWSON.