

The Turmoil

By
BOOTH TARKINGTON

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SYNOPSIS.

Sheridan's attempt to make a business man of his son Bibbs by starting him in the machine shop ends in Bibbs going to a seafaring, a nervous wreck. On his return Bibbs is met at the station by his sister Edith. He finds himself in an inconsiderable and unconsidered figure in the "New House" of the Sheridans. He sees Mary Vertrees looking at him from a summer house next door. The Vertreeses, old town family and impoverished, call on the Sheridans, newly-rich, and afterward discuss them. Mary puts into words her parents' unspoken wish that she marry one of the Sheridans boys.

Here is a young woman, one of the poor aristocrats, deliberately setting forth to capture a rich husband. Perhaps Mary will honestly fall in love with Jim Sheridan and be happy in her marriage. Do you think she is waging her "warfare" in a manner that will bring her success?

CHAPTER V.

It was a brave and lustrous banquet; and a noisy one, too, because there was an orchestra among some plants at one end of the long dining room, and after a preliminary stiffness the guests were impelled to converse—necessarily at the tops of their voices. The whole company of fifty sat at a great oblong table, a continent of damask and lace, with shores of crystal and silver running up to spreading groves of orchids and lilies and white roses—an inhabited continent, evidently, for there were three marvelous, gleaming buildings; one in the center and one at each end, white miracles wrought by some inspired craftsman in sculptural idling. They were models in miniature, and they represented the Sheridan building, the Sheridan apartments, and the pump works. Nearly all the guests recognized them without having to be told what they were, and pronounced the likenesses superb.

The arrangement of the table was visibly baronial. At the head sat the great Thane, with the flower of his family and of the guests about him; then on each side came the neighbors of the "old" house, grading down to cashiers and retainers—superintendents, vassals, heads of departments, and the like—at the foot, where the Thane's lady took her place as a consolation for the less important. Here, too, among the thralls and bondmen, sat Bibbs Sheridan, a meek Banquo, wondering how anybody could look at him and eat.

Nevertheless, there was a vast, continuous eating and the talk went on with the eating, incessantly. It rose over the throbbing of the orchestra and the clatter and clinking of silver and china and glass, and there was a mighty babble.

And through the interstices of this clamoring Bibbs could hear the continual booming of his father's heavy voice, and once he caught the sentence, "Yes, young lady, that's just what did it for me, and that's just what 'I did it for my boys—they got to make two blades of grass grow where one grew before!" It was his familiar flourish, an old story to Bibbs, and now joyfully declaimed for the edification of Mary Vertrees.

It was a great night for Sheridan—the very crest of his wave. His big, smooth, red face grew more and more radiant with good will and with the simplest, happiest, most boyish vanity. He was the picture of health, of good cheer, and of power on a holiday.

getting these, would renew his friendly ralleries, or perhaps, turning to Mary Vertrees, who sat near him, round the corner of the table at his right, he would become autobiographical. Gentlemen less naive than he had paid her that tribute, for she was a girl who inspired the autobiographical impulse in every man who met her—it needed but the sight of her.

The dinner seemed, somehow, to center about Mary Vertrees and the jocund host as a play centers about its hero and heroine; they were the rubicund king and the starchy princess of this spectacle—they paid court to each other, and everybody paid court to them. Down near the sugar pump works, where Bibbs sat, there was audible speculation and admiration. "Wonder who that lady is—makin' such a hit with the old man." "Must be some heiress." "Heiress? Golly, I guess I could stand it to marry rich, then!"

Edith and Sibyl were radiant; at first they had watched Miss Vertrees with an almost haggard anxiety, wondering what disastrous effect Sheridan's pastoral gayeties—and other things—would have upon her, but she seemed delighted with everything, and with him most of all. She treated him as if he were some delicious, foolish old joke that she understood perfectly, laughing at him almost violently when he bragged—probably his first experience of that kind in his life. It enchanted him.

As he proclaimed to the table, she had "a way with her." She had, indeed, as Roscoe Sheridan, upon her right, discovered just after the feast began. Since his marriage—three years before, no lady had bestowed upon him so protracted a full view of brilliant eyes; and, with the look, his lovely neighbor said—and it was her first speech to him—

"I hope you're very susceptible, Mr. Sheridan!"

Honest Roscoe was taken aback, and, "Why?" was all he managed to say.

She repeated the look deliberately, which was noted, with a mystification equal to his own, by his sister across the table. No one, reflected Edith, could imagine Mary Vertrees the sort of girl who would "really flirt" with married men—she was obviously the "opposite of all that." Edith defined her as "thoroughbred," a "nice girl," and the look given to Roscoe was astounding. Roscoe's wife saw it, too, and she was another whom it puzzled—though not because its recipient was married.

"Because," said Mary Vertrees, replying to Roscoe's monosyllable. "And also because we're next-door neighbors at table, and it's dull times ahead for both of us if we don't get along."

Roscoe was a literal young man, all stocks and bonds, and he had been brought up to believe that when a man married he "married and settled down."

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the gentleman at her left, the name, "Mr. James Sheridan, Jr." And from that moment Roscoe had little enough cause for wondering what he ought to reply to her disturbing coquetries.

Mr. James Sheridan had been anxiously waiting for the dazzling visitor to "get through with old Roscoe" and give a bachelor a chance. "Old Roscoe" was the younger, but he had always been the steady wheel-horse of the family. As their father habitually boasted, both brothers were "capable, hard-working young business men." Physically neither was of the height, breadth or depth of the father. Both wore young business men's mustaches, and either could have sat for the tailor-shop lithographs of young business men wearing "rich suitings in dark mixtures."

Jim, approving warmly of his neighbor's profile, perceived her access of color, which increased his approbation. "What's that old Roscoe saying to you, Miss Vertrees?" he asked. "These young married men are mighty forward nowadays, but you mustn't let 'em make you bluish."

"Am I blushing?" she said. "Are you sure?" And with that she gave him ample opportunity to make sure, repeating with interest the look wasted upon Roscoe. "I think you must be mistaken," she continued. "I think it's your brother who is blushing. I've thrown him into confusion."

"How?"

She laughed, and then, leaning to him a little, said in a tone as confidential as she could make it, under cover of the uproar, "By trying to begin with him a courtship I meant for you!"

This might well be a style new to Jim; and it was. He supposed it a nonsensical form of badinage, and yet it took his breath. He realized that he wished what she said to be the literal truth, and he was instantly snared by that realization.

"By George!" he said. "I guess you're the kind of girl that can say anything—yes, and get away with it, too!"

She laughed again—in her way, so that he could not tell whether she was laughing at him or at herself or at the nonsense she was talking; and she said:

"But you see I don't care whether I get away with it or not. I wish you'd tell me frankly if you think I've got a chance to get away with you?"

"More like if you've got a chance to get away from me!" Jim was inspired to reply. "Not one in the world, especially after beginning by making fun of me like that."

"I mightn't be so much in fun as you think," she said, regarding him with sudden gravity.

"Well," said Jim, in simple honesty, "you're a funny girl!"

Her gravity continued an instant longer. "I may not turn out to be funny for you."

"So long as you turn out to be anything at all for me, I expect I can manage to be satisfied." And with that, to his own surprise, it was his turn to blush, whereupon she laughed again.

"Yes," he said, plaintively, not wholly lacking intuition, "I can see you're the sort of girl that would laugh the minute you see a man really means anything!"

"Laugh!" she cried, gayly. "Why, it might be a matter of life and death! But if you want tragedy, I'd better put the question at once, considering the mistake I made with your brother."

Jim was dazed. She seemed to be playing a little game of mockery and nonsense with him, but he had glimpses of a flashing danger in it; he was but too sensible of being out-classed, and had somewhere a consciousness that he could never quite know this giddy and alluring lady, no matter how long it pleased her to play with him. But he mightily wanted her to keep on playing with him.

"Put what question?" he said, breathlessly.

"As you are a new neighbor of mine and of my family," she returned, speaking slowly and with a cross-examiner's severity, "I think it would be well for me to know at once whether you are already walking out with any young lady or not. Mr. Sheridan, think well! Are you spoken for?"

"Not yet," he gasped. "Are you?"

"Not!" she cried, and with that they both laughed again; and the pastime proceeded, increasing both in its gaiety and in its gravity.

Observing its continuance, Mr. Robert Lamborn, opposite, turned from a lively conversation with Edith and remarked covertly to Sibyl that Miss Vertrees was "starting rather picturesquely with Jim." And he added, languidly, "Do you suppose she would?"

looking at him steadily. "You've talked to her for—"

"For heaven's sake," he began, "keep the peace!"

"Well, what have you just been doing?"

"Sh!" he said. "Listen to your father-in-law."

Sheridan was booming and braying louder than ever, the orchestra having begun to play "The Rosary," to his vast content.

"I count them over, la-la-tum-tedum," he roared, beating the measures with his fork. "Each hour a pearl, each pearl tee-dum-tum-dum—What's the matter of all you folks? Why'n't you sing? Miss Vertrees, I bet a thousand dollars you sing! Why'n't—"

"Mr. Sheridan," she said, turning cheerfully from the ardent Jim, "you don't know what you interrupted! Your son isn't used to my rough ways, and my soldier's wooing frightens him, but I think he was about to say something important."

"I'll say something important to him if he doesn't!" the father threatened, more delighted with her than ever. "By gosh! if I was his age—or a widower right now—"

"Oh, wait!" cried Mary. "If they'd only make less noise! I want Mrs. Sheridan to hear."

"She'd say the same," he shouted. "She'd tell me I was mighty slow if I couldn't get ahead of Jim. Why, when I was his age—"

"You must listen to your father," Mary interrupted, turning to Jim, who had grown red again. "He's going to tell us how, when he was your age, he made those two blades of grass grow out of a teacup—and you could see for yourself he didn't get them out of his sleeve!"

At that Sheridan pounded the table till it jumped. "Look here, young lady!" he roared. "Some of these days I'm either goin' to slap you—or I'm goin' to kiss you!"

Edith looked aghast; she was afraid this was indeed "too awful," but Mary Vertrees burst into ringing laughter.

"Both!" she cried. "Both! The one to make me forget the other!"

"But which—" he began, and then suddenly gave forth such stentorian trumpeting of mirth that for once the whole table stopped to listen. "Jim," he roared, "if you don't propose to that girl tonight I'll send you back to the machine shop with Bibbs!"

And Bibbs—down among the retainers by the sugar pump works, and watching Mary Vertrees as a ragged boy in the street might watch a rich little girl in a garden—Bibbs heard. He heard—and he knew what his father's plans were now.

CHAPTER VI.

Mrs. Vertrees "sat up" for her daughter, Mr. Vertrees having retired after a restless evening, not much soothed by the society of his Landseers. But Mrs. Vertrees had a long vigil of it.

She sat through the slow night hours in a stiff little chair under the gaslight in her own room, which was directly over the "front hall." There, book in hand, she employed the time in her own reminiscences, though it was her belief that she was reading Madame de Remusat's.

Her thoughts went backward into her life and into her husband's; and the deeper into the past they went, the brighter the pictures they brought her—and there is tragedy, like her husband, she thought backward because she did not dare think forward definitely. What thinking forward this troubled couple ventured took the form of a slender hope which neither of them could have borne to put in words, and yet they had talked it over, day after day, from the very hour when they heard Sheridan was to build his new house next door. For—so quickly does any ideal of human behavior become an antique—their youth was of the innocent old days, so dead!

"Breeding" and "gentility," and no craft had been more straitly trained upon them than that of talking about things without mentioning them. Herein was marked the most vital difference between Mr. and Mrs. Vertrees and their big new neighbor, Sheridan, though his youth was of the same epoch, knew nothing of such matters. He had been chopping wood for the morning fire in the country grocery while they were still dancing.

It was after one o'clock when Mrs. Vertrees heard steps and the delicate clinking of the key in the lock, and then, with the opening of the door, Mary's laugh and, "Yes—if you aren't afraid—tomorrow!"

The door closed, and she rushed upstairs, bringing with her a breath of cold and bracing air into her mother's room. "Yes," she said, before Mrs. Vertrees could speak, "he brought me—"

She let her cloak fall upon the bed, and, drawing an old red-velvet rocking chair forward, sat beside her mother, after giving her a light pat upon the shoulder and a hearty kiss upon the cheek.

"Mamma!" Mary exclaimed, when Mrs. Vertrees had expressed a hope that she had enjoyed the evening and had not caught cold. "Why don't you ask me?"

gorguous and deafening and tectotal. We could have lived a year on it. I think the orchids alone would have lasted us a couple of months. There they were, before me, but I couldn't steal 'em and sell 'em, and so—well, so I did what I could!"

She leaned back and laughed reassuringly to her troubled mother. "It seemed to be a success—what I could," she said, clasping her hands behind her neck and stirring the rocker to motion as a rhythmic accompaniment to her narrative. "The girl Edith and her sister-in-law, Mrs. Roscoe Sheridan, were too anxious about the effect of things on me. The father's worth a bushel of both of them, if he knew it. He's what he is. I like 'em." She

paused reflectively, continuing, "Edith's interested in that Lamborn boy; he's good-looking and not stupid, but I think he's—"

She interrupted herself with a cheery outcry: "Oh, I mustn't be calling him names! If he's trying to make Edith like him I ought to respect him as a colleague."

"I don't understand a thing you're talking about," Mrs. Vertrees complained.

"All the better! Well, he's a bad lot, that Lamborn boy; everybody's always known that, but the Sheridans don't know the everybodies that know. He sat between Edith and Mrs. Roscoe Sheridan. She's like those people who wondered about at the theater last time we went—dressed in ballgowns; bound to show their clothes and jewels somewhere! She flatters the father, and so did I, for that matter—but not that way, I treated him outrageously!"

"Mary?"

"That's what flattered him. After dinner he made the whole regiment of us follow him all over the house, while he lectured like a guide on the Palatine. He gave dimensions and costs, and the whole 'bills' of 'em listened as if they thought he intended to make them a present of the house. What he was proudest of was the plumbing and that Bay of Naples panorama in the hall. He made us look at all the plumbing—bathrooms and everywhere else—and then he made us look at the Bay of Naples. He said it was a hundred and eleven feet long, but I think it's more. And he led us all into the ready-made library to see a poem Edith had taken a prize with at school. They'd had it printed in gold letters and framed in mother-of-pearl. But the poem itself was rather simple and wistful and nice—he read it to us, though Edith tried to stop him. She was modest about it, and said she'd never written anything else. And then, after a while, Mrs. Roscoe Sheridan asked me to come across the street to her house with them—her husband and Edith and Mr. Lamborn and Jim Sheridan."

Mrs. Vertrees was shocked. "Jim!" she exclaimed. "Mary, please—"

"Of course," said Mary. "I'll make it as easy for you as I can, mamma. Mr. James Sheridan, Jr. We went over there, and Mrs. Roscoe explained that 'the men were dying for a drink,' though I noticed that Mr. Lamborn was the only one near death's door on that account. Edith and Mrs. Roscoe said they knew I'd been bored at the dinner. They were objectionably apologetic about it, and they seemed to think now we were going to have a 'good time' to make up for it. But I hadn't been bored at the dinner, I'd been amused; and the 'good time' at Mrs. Roscoe's was horribly, horribly stupid."

"But, Mary," her mother began, "is—"

—is— And she seemed unable to complete the question.

"Never mind, mamma, I'll say it. Is Mr. James Sheridan, Jr., stupid? I'm sure he's not at all stupid about business. Otherwise—Oh, what right have I to be angering people 'stupid' because they're not exactly my kind? On the big dinner table they had enormous icling models of the Sheridan building—"

"Oh no!" Mrs. Vertrees cried. "Surely not!"

"Yes, and two other things of that kind—I don't know what. But, after all, I wondered if they were so bad. Well, then, mamma, I managed not to feel superior to Mr. James Sheridan, Jr., because he didn't see anything out of place in the Sheridan building in sugar."

Mrs. Vertrees' expression had lost none of its anxiety and she shook her head gravely. "My dear, dear child,"

she said, "It seems to me— It looks— I'm afraid—"

"Say as much of it as you can, mamma," said Mary, encouragingly. "I can get it, if you'll just give me one keyword."

"Everything you say," Mrs. Vertrees began, timidly, "seems to have the air of— It is as if you were seeking to— to make yourself—"

"Oh, I see! You mean I sound as if I were trying to force myself to like him."

"Not exactly, Mary. That wasn't quite what I meant," said Mrs. Vertrees, speaking direct untruth with perfect unconsciousness. "But you said that—that you found the latter part of the evening at young Mrs. Sheridan's unentertaining—"

"And as Mr. James Sheridan was there, and I saw more of him than at dinner, and had a horribly stupid time in spite of that, you think I—"

And then it was Mary who left the deduction unfinished.

Mrs. Vertrees nodded; and though both the mother and the daughter understood, Mary felt it better to make the understanding definite.

"Well," she asked, gravely, "is there anything else I can do? You and papa don't want me to do anything that distresses me, and so, as this is the only thing to be done, it seems it's up to me not to let it distress me. That's all there is about it, isn't it?"

"But nothing must distress you!" the mother cried.

"That's what I say!" said Mary, cheerfully. "And so it doesn't. It's all right." She rose and took her cloak over her arm, as if to go to her own room. But on the way to the door she stopped, and stood leaning against the foot of the bed, contemplating a threadbare rug at her feet. "Mother, you've told me a thousand times that it doesn't really matter whom a girl marries."

"No, no!" Mrs. Vertrees protested. "I never said such a—"

"No, not in words; I mean what you meant. It's true, isn't it, that marriage really is not a bed of roses, but a field of battle? To get right down to it, a girl could fight it out with anybody, couldn't she? One man as well as another?"

"Mary, I can't bear for you to talk like that—" And Mrs. Vertrees lifted pleading eyes to her daughter—eyes that begged to be spared. "It sounds—almost reckless!"

Mary caught the appeal, came to her, and kissed her gayly. "Never fret, dear! I'm not likely to do anything I don't want to—I've always been too thorough-going a little pig."

She gave her mother a final kiss and went gayly all the way to the door this time, pausing for her postscript with her hand on the knob. "Oh, the one that caught me looking in the window, mamma, the youngest one—"

"Did he speak of it?" Mrs. Vertrees asked, apprehensively.

"No. He didn't speak at all, that I saw, to anyone. I didn't meet him. But he isn't insane, I'm sure; or if he is, he has long intervals when he's not. Mr. James Sheridan mentioned that he lived at home when he was 'well enough'; and it may be he's only an invalid. He looks dreadfully ill, but he has pleasant eyes, and it struck me that if— if she were in the Sheridan family—she laughed a little ruefully—'he might be interesting to talk to sometimes, when there was too much stocks and bonds. I didn't see him after dinner.'"

"There must be something wrong with him," said Mrs. Vertrees. "They'd have introduced him if there weren't."

"I don't know. His father spoke of sending him back to a machine shop of some sort; I glanced at him just then and he was pathetic-looking enough before that, but the most tragic change came over him. He seemed just to die, right there at the table!"

"Mr. Sheridan must be very unfeeling."

"No," said Mary, thoughtfully. "I don't think he is; but he might be uncomprehending, and certainly he's the kind of man to do anything he once sets out to do. But I wish I hadn't been looking at that poor boy just then! I'm afraid I'll keep remembering—"

"I wouldn't," Mrs. Vertrees smiled faintly, and in her smile there was the remotest ghost of a genteel roughness. "I'd keep my mind on pleasanter things, Mary."

Mary laughed and nodded. "Yes, indeed! Plenty pleasant enough, and probably, if all were known, too good—even for me!"

And when she had gone Mrs. Vertrees drew a long breath, as if a burden were off her mind, and, smiling, began to address in a gentle reverie.

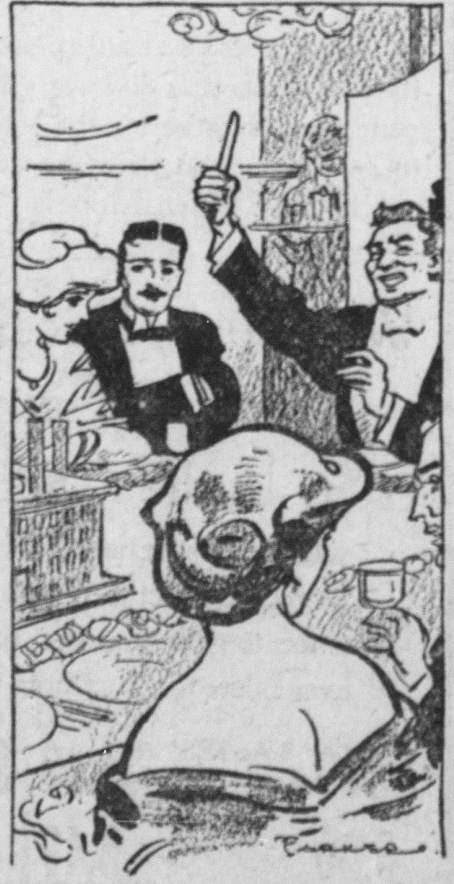
CHAPTER VII.

Edith, glancing casually into the "ready-made" library, stopped abruptly, seeing Bibbs there alone. He was standing before the pearl-framed and gold-lettered poem, musingly inspecting it. He read it:

FUGITIVE.
I will forget the things that sting:
The lashing look, the barbed word,
I know the very bands that fling
The stones at me had never stirred
To anger but for their own scars.
They've suffered so, that's why they strike.
I'll keep my heart among the stars
Where none shall hunt it. Oh, like
These wounded ones I must not be,
For, wounded, I might strike in turn!
So, none shall hurt me. Far and free
Where my heart flies no one shall learn.

Does it seem to you that Edith Sheridan has enough fine stuff in her soul to write such verse—even though it was written when she was seventeen and now she's past twenty and rather hard?

(TO BE CONTINUED.)



He Pounded the Table and Boomed His Echoes of Old Songs.

He knew that young married people might have friendships, like his wife's for Lamborn; but Sibyl and Lamborn never "flirted"—they were always very matter-of-fact with each other. Roscoe would have been troubled if Sibyl had ever told Lamborn she hoped he was susceptible.