

PROPOSING IN THE DARK.

ARAMINTA JOHNSON, without question, was a lovely creature. She is just twenty, of the middle height, and a blonde; she has a profusion of fair hair worn in coils, and thrown back to show to its fullest extent her broad, high forehead; her nose is aquiline; a rich natural color glows upon her cheek, and her blue eyes seem to possess the peculiar faculty of being able to penetrate into one's innermost thoughts. At least such was the opinion formed of Araminta when she came with her mamma for the first time to the fashionable church of St. Magnus-cum-Little-Benjamin, and the pew-opener ushered them to the pew immediately in front of that in which I sat.

They were new-comers to the neighborhood, and being unprovided with the proper hymn books, it was my supreme felicity to hand them those I possessed. Never shall I forget the glance with which my divinity favored me when, the service being over she returned me the books. I fell desperately in love with the fair creature, and mentally vowed that the remainder of my life should be dedicated to her.

As fortune would have it, Araminta and her mamma decided upon occupying the pew into which they had at first been shown, and Sunday after Sunday my eyes drank of my beloved's beauty, whilst my ears were strained to catch the sound of that sweet voice, which joined in all the responses and with religious fervor carolled forth its songs of praise.

Araminta and her mamma being uppermost in my thought, I felt compelled to speak of them ere introducing myself. As the reader's intelligence will have noted, the writer of this narrative is at heart and by nature a poet—a lover of the beautiful and true; but a relentless fate has made him clerk to a stockbroker, and, as though that were not sufficient to drown the minstrel's song, he has been dubbed by his god-fathers and godmothers Urian.

Yes, Urian Quick—such is the name I bear among my fellows; but neither they nor the world in general estimate the poetic ardor and lofty aspiration which lift me, eagle-like, above the common herd. Morning and midday I am a grub delving among Consols, New Threes, Turks, Reduced, Italians, Peruvians, and other sordid substantialities; but, with the closing of the office door behind me, and the echo of my footsteps upon the pavement outside, I divest myself of worldly associations, and extending my broad pinions, take my flight. Higher and higher soars my soul, as though 'twould reach the other pole; then, with a sigh that shows my dearth, it sinks again to vulgar earth. For a time I am lost to all that is passing around me, and not until I enter my humble lodging do I become aware that a scanty and hurried dinner necessitates my lingering over the fragrant Bohea.

Proud am I to say that the heavenly music which has swept my lyre has not been withheld from the breathing, struggling mass around me. To my credit be it said, that I have afforded the public an opportunity of listening to the sweetest harmonies mind ever conceived. Yes, I have been in print. My work had for its title "Mute Heart-burnings," which was at once catching and appropriate to the matter of the poems. With respect to the sale I was somewhat disappointed. Though more than two years have elapsed since the public outpouring of my music, not more than twenty copies have been sold.

But enough has been said upon this subject. I am neither vain or egotistic, and I shrink from the task of further personal description of myself and my attributes. To posterity I leave a legacy that, some day or other will be considered priceless; and to that pleasant happy time, when my soul—But to resume,

Having fallen madly in love with Araminta, it was not long before I found an opportunity of being introduced to her and her mamma. I found that Mrs. Johnson was a widow who had moved in a far superior circle to that she now occupied, and that Araminta, her only child, was, through the eccentricity of a deceased uncle, the happy possessor of £300 per annum, which dowry was to be taken from her and given half to her mother and half to an asylum for disabled and homeless cats, should she wed without Mrs. J.'s consent. Oh, how I loved the fair being! How I sympathized with her under the trying circumstances in which she was placed! Naturally Mrs. Johnson would look with distaste upon every suitor. To inherit a fortune and then to lose it by the caprice of a mother! Oh, this must not be. Araminta should not risk such a disappointment. I was the gallant knight to rescue her from thraldom; Araminta and her £300 per annum should be mine. Worldly wisdom told me that first of all I ought to conciliate the mamma. My soul despised artifice, but it was for her—for Araminta's sake. And the poor girl was grateful. In the presence of Mrs. Johnson I was cold and distant to my beloved, but I felt sure that Araminta saw the ruse.

I had not long been a frequent visitor at the little Canonbury villa ere I began to fear that in the pursuit of Araminta's affection I had a rival. At first I only heard of Mr. John Smith through Mrs. Johnson,

who informed me that he was a most desirable young man to know, and that she hoped we should shortly become acquainted. Smith, it was said, was a handsome young fellow; Smith was an accomplished man, his vocal ability being something marvellous; Smith was well-to-do; Smith was of good family—in short, Smith was everything desirable and my ears tired of his name ere I once set my eyes upon him.

One night he accompanied my friends to church, and with disgusting impertinence placed himself next to Araminta. They shared the same hymn book, and seemed to be on the most agreeable terms.

I could have struck my rival to the earth when, on issuing from the church, Araminta gave me a nod of recognition and immediately took the proffered arm of Smith. But I was true to my purpose; I showed no spleen; I was resolved to conciliate Araminta's mamma, and I flattered myself that already she was beginning to regard me as a suitable son-in-law.

Steadily pursuing the plan I had formed in my mind, and of which I felt my charmer was cognisant, I offered my arm to Mrs. Johnson, and all the way from the church to the dwelling blessed by the presence of my beloved, we spoke of poetry and the arts. A very clever appreciative woman is Mrs. Johnson. In stature there was scarcely an inch difference 'twixt her and her daughter, and when she spoke it seemed the very echo of Araminta's voice. Therefore when I avoided looking into Mrs. Johnson's face, and refrained from the mental calculation of how far she had advanced on the wrong side of forty, I was able to fancy that I had Araminta by my side. This gave me poetic inspiration, and I felt little of the embarrassment which usually accompanies a young man's conversation with his future mother-in-law.

"O, you must come in and take a little supper with us," said Mrs. Johnson, when we reached the gate. "I want to introduce you to our friend, Mr. Smith."

Throughout our walk Araminta and her bated companion kept well ahead. They started with a lead, and maintained it so well that they had entered the house ere we were in sight. I did not want to become acquainted with Smith, but I did wish to bid Araminta a good night, and to indicate by a stronger pressure of the hand than usual, that I was making the way smooth with her mamma.

Smith was, as I had imagined, a shallow-brained coxcomb. 'Twas Hyperion to a Satyr over again; I being Hyperion, of course, and he the distorted monster. They said he was a musician. Well, if loud growling among the lower F's in the bass, in the attempt to drown everybody else's voice, constitutes a claim to be considered a musician, then Smith should at the very least have put 'Mus Doc.' at the end of his name.

It was a welcome release when supper was announced. Then offering my arm to Mrs. Johnson we left her offspring and Smith to follow. Of course, all this time my heart was with Araminta, although I let no desires of my own interfere with my purpose of rescuing her from the thraldom of her mother. Taking furtive glances at Araminta on the other side of the table, I could not but compare her to Andromeda. Yes, she was the beautiful creature tied to the rock of single blessedness; her mother was the monster, I was the gallant Perseus, resolved upon rescuing my beloved, and Smith—well, he was an officious on-looker, a sort of theatrical "supe"—nothing more.

"Ah!" exclaimed Mrs. J., during an interval of cold beef and salad, "my Algy was so fond of music. Often and often has he called me to his side and insisted upon my joining him in 'Meet me by moonlight alone.' Do you know that song, Mr. Quick?"

I became all attention at the mention of this Algy, of whom I had never heard before. Was he among the living? If so, he must be Araminta's brother. Perhaps he, too, would have to be conciliated ere the divine creature and the three hundred pounds per annum became mine! My experience with Mrs. J., and the fear that a similar process would have to be gone through with this Algy, completely took away my appetite, and I had barely strength to gasp out—

"No, ma'am, I do not know the song. Pray, does Algy live?"

"Live?" certainly not, Mr. Quick. Poor dear Algy; he died in 1848."

A weight was lifted off my mind; but never having previously heard of "poor dear Algy," my curiosity was stimulated and I determined to pursue my inquiries further.

"Dear me," I said, moving my chair closer to Mrs. Johnson, "pray what was the nature of Algy's complaint?"

"Oh, Mr. Urian," she murmured, placing one hand in mine, while the other held her handkerchief to her eyes. "You have a sympathizing heart, Mr. Urian, is it not so?"

I admitted the fact, upon which she gave my hand another squeeze. Araminta and the annuity could not be far off now.

"He was my second, and I think I loved him better than the rest."

"Indeed," I replied. "Why, I thought, Mrs. Johnson, you never had but one."

"O, yes, Mr. Urian, I have had three," answered the grief-stricken woman.

Determined not to be daunted in my investigation, I asked, "Were they girls or boys, Mrs. Johnson?"

The widow's hand was suddenly withdrawn from mine; then bending upon me a look in which pity and indignation seemed to be strangely mingled, she said:

"I do not understand you, Mr. Quick?"

The blood rushed to my cheeks, and I know I blushed horribly at the consciousness that somehow or other I had, vulgarly speaking, "put my foot in it." What made the matter worse was that Mrs. J.'s last inquiry had disturbed Araminta and the hated Smith, and they also were looking inquiringly at me.

"Pray, ma'am, were you—you—not speaking of your chil—children?" I stammered.

"Children! No, sir," she exclaimed, drawing herself to her full height; "I spoke of my husbands!"

Involuntarily I drew my chair a few paces from the terrible woman from whose clutches I was bent upon rescuing Araminta. It was very rude and pointed of me, but I could not help it. Lucky for my purpose was it that this revelation had not come sooner. Had I known how things were I could not have had courage to escort Mrs. J., from church so frequently. No matter, my design was now nearly accomplished. Araminta, I felt sure, would soon be mine, and it would be my care to see that she should not follow the fearful example of her mother.

I recollect nothing of what transpired after this until I found myself outside the house with Smith by my side. He had been talking some time ere I listened, but suddenly my ears caught the name of Araminta, and then I became all attention.

"You have influence, great influence, as any one can see, with her mother. You might put in a word for me."

"Why?" I inquired mechanically.

"Because you might be enabled to gain her consent to our marriage."

"To your marriage? Marriage with whom?"

"Why, with Araminta, of course. Don't you know that if the girl marries without her mother's approval she loses £300 a year."

"What! Have you proposed to her?"

"Not yet, but I mean to shortly. That's why I want you to talk about it to the old woman."

"What," I observed, "is filthy lucre when weighed against true love?"

"Exactly," said he; "but I don't care about the girl without the money."

This, then, was the mean, contemptible creature who had been held up to me as a paragon among men. He could not dissociate Araminta from her yearly income; the two must come together, or she should never bear his name. O, paltry scoundrel! Had he been short and I tall I would have crushed the life out of him as he stood before me. But nature has made me a short man, and Smith towers a foot above my head, so prudence repressed all bellicose inclination.

We had now arrived at a road where he had to take one direction and I the other. He wrung from me a half promise that I would say what I could in his favor, and then we parted. I was glad to be quit of him, for I now knew that he had entered the lists for Araminta, and I wanted to mature my own plan of action. I resolved to declare my passion the next night.

The resolution with which I retired to rest was strengthened when I arose, and from the first hour of business to the time when I returned to my lodging my purpose remained unaltered. When and under what circumstances was it best to proffer my suit? Twilight? Yes, in the twilight's holy calm—in that romantic hour when the shadows deepen, and all around gives token of the approach of night, I would address to her words of love.

I saw it all, and dressing myself with scrupulous care, strode forth upon my mission. As I paced the strip of path which led to the porch of my beloved, I saw through the parlor window, in the gleaming, a hand wave welcome to me. A thrill of delight ran through me as I felt that it must be her, my beloved.

So well had I become known at the little villa that it was not necessary I should be announced by the servant. She, with a knowing smile, motioning with her finger toward the parlor door, gave me to understand that the object of my search was within and alone.

Quickly turning the handle of the door, I entered the apartment sanctified by her presence. As I had anticipated, she was alone. Seated in front of the window, she had evidently been expecting my approach, and, betrayed by the exultation of the moment, had waved her hand as she saw my form emerge from the shadow cast upon the path by the tall hollyhocks. I knew that her face was beaming with smiles, although in the gloom of the apartment I could not see a feature. I could picture the rosy flush upon her cheek, her bright glance towards me, and the pouting of her lips that would murmur, 'Urian, dear, I love you.' I knew all this was expressed on my Araminta's face, by the tremulousness of her hand and the quivering accents in which she said how delighted she was to see me.

I did not ask my beloved the usual question relative to the state of her mamma's

health, as I feared this would lead to the Medusa herself being summoned to pay her respects to me, but went straight to the cause of my visit, dreading lest Smith should forestall me. Drawing my chair closer and closer to hers, we rang the usual changes upon the topic of the weather, and then with the exhaustion of the subject came an interval of silence—a hush of nature as it were. Still nearer to her I approached; then taking her willing hand in mine, I murmured, 'Dearest.'

She had evidently been expecting the avowal of my love, for, without drawing back her hand, she whispered, 'Urian, dear, go on, I do so like to hear you talk.'

Thus encouraged, I proceeded: "Sweetest, you bid me talk. Ah, love, had I ten thousand tongues they could lisp no name so treasured as your own. Dearest, I love you—you know it. Long has my heart been yours. Why have my visits here been so frequent? Because, dearest, you were the magnet that attracted me. Tell me, may I not call you mine?"

"Oh! Urian, this is so sudden, so unexpected—give me time to consider."

"Not an hour, not a moment," I exclaimed, in the mad enthusiasm of my love. "I would have my answer at once—this anxiety I cannot brook."

"Then, Urian, I will be yours, and yours alone."

In a moment I had clasped her waist, and imprinted a kiss upon her cheek. "That ratifies our compact. Now tell me, dearest, how long is it since you knew I loved you?"

"Oh, a long time, Urian, dear—a very long time, almost as long as I have known you. But you have not yet told me how we are to live, Urian. You know I have a small income but it is not sufficient for us both."

Three hundred pounds per annum a small income! 'Twas thus slightly she spoke of her wealth. Oh! how I loved the girl! I felt the inferiority of my position at once, but I summoned courage and told her of my income and prospects.

"Oh, Urian, dear," she murmured, her head resting upon my shoulder and her face upturned to mine, "I am more than satisfied, the arrival of this moment."

"Then, my betrothed, you confess to having loved me ere my avowal."

Never shall I forget the ecstasy that filled my soul as she replied, hesitatingly, "Yes, Urian, almost from the commencement of our acquaintance."

Darling girl! "And what, dearest," I continued in my delicious joy; "what trait in my character charmed you most, what led to my winning your heart? Was it my poetic genius?"

"Oh, no, 'twas your resemblance to Algy."

"Algy? do you mean your stepfather?"

"No, my second husband."

Great Powers! I had proposed to the Gorgon of a mother. In the horrible poetic twilight I had mistaken Mrs. Johnson for her daughter. The fatal resemblance of voice and height proved my betrayal, and I sank back in my chair dumb-founded.

Next Wednesday, what some people call an interesting ceremony, is to be gone through at the Church of St. Magnus-cum-Little-Benjamin. If I survive till then, I am to be dragged to the hymeneal altar by Mrs. Johnson; and immediately after she has legally become Mrs. Quick, the detestable Smith is to wed the lovely Araminta and her £300 per annum. For me there is nought but genteel poverty and petticoat government. I feel it is coming. Should my spouse be again widowed (as is more than likely), may the earth lie light upon my blighted corpse!

Kept his Promise.

A boy borrowed a tool from a carpenter, promising to return it at night. Before evening he was sent away on an errand, and did not return until late. Before he went, he was told that his brother should see the article returned.

After he had come home and gone to bed, he inquired, and found that the tool had not been sent to its owner. He was much distressed to think that his promise had not been kept, but was persuaded to go to sleep, and rise early and carry it home the next morning.

By daylight he was up, and nowhere was the tool to be found. After a long and fruitless search, he set off for his neighbor's in great distress, to acknowledge his fault. But how great was his surprise to find the tool on his neighbor's door-stone. And then it appeared from the print of his little bare feet in the mud, that the lad had got up in his sleep and carried the tool home, and gone to bed again, without knowing it.

Of course a boy who was prompt in his sleep was prompt when awake. He lived respected, had the confidence of his neighbors, and was placed in many offices of trust and profit.

If all the grown folks felt as this boy did, there would be a good many tracks of bare feet found some of these bright mornings; and what piles of tools and books would be found lying at their owner's doors.

A young widow being asked after her husband's health, answered, with a soft, quiet smile, "He's dead, I thank you."

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