

AN ALTERED CIRCUMSTANCE

By ALEXANDER HARVEY

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My Dear Master:—

The rejection of a manuscript from your hand is an event of greater literary importance than the publication of no matter what by any other American author. Today, then, I make history.

You are aware that no severer critic than myself exists, that I take cruel pleasure in nailing a Noyes to my barn door, or in flagellating the fatuities of a Frost; let me further assure you that Cato himself was not less accessible to influence, or Brutus to the claims of friendship than your admirer and your friend who addresses these words to you.

Put therefore from your mind, I pray you, any suggestion that I wished to flatter you in my exordium. In all matters of art I yield no precedence to Rhadamanthus.

To prove it, let me say that I hold your style in abhorrence and your judgment in contempt, whenever you set yourself to praise. You have made Charles Hanson Towne ridiculous by hailing him a "Prince of Love" and preferring his barley-water to the ripe wine of Petrarch; your opinions have lost value in the very measure in which they have unveiled the radiant virginity of your nature. I can but bow my head as I think that nigh half a century of life on such a planet as ours has not abated your innocence. *Integer vitæ scelerisque purus Non eget Mauri jaculis, neque arcu; Nec venenatis gravida sagittis, Fusce, pharetra.* I, bearing such weapons and having used them, may now lay them aside, and return to my rejection of your manuscript.

You know in part what writings I have already published, and you will not suppose that I fear the noxiousness of a Summer; rather I might incline to err by seeking an opportunity to stamp out such cockroaches from the kitchen, instead of paying strict attention to the preparation of the banquet.

Nor is my action based upon any failure to appreciate your mastercraft. In such stories as "The Toe," "The Moustache," "Miss Dix" and many another you have shown yourself the Elisha on whom the mantle of Edgar Allan Poe has fallen. Ethereal as he was, you have spread wings in an Empyrean beyond his furthest flight.

In compensation, you have no such grip of earth as he had when he swooped down upon it.

Nothing in this miserable room of mine that I could pawn for bread! Twice within the week had my landlady reminded me that the trivial sum I owed for rent was overdue.

I lifted a worn and tattered volume on the subject of anatomy from the crazy table on which my little medical library reposed. A despairing inspection of its shabby state confirmed me in my fear. The maddest and most romantic Jew in Elizabethan drama would never have risked his farthing upon my entire treasure. Within the week I hoped to pass the examination that was to win me the precious privilege of practicing as a physician in New York. It seemed now that I must die of hunger in the streets meanwhile.

As I placed my poor book among its poorer companions and fell into a mood of pity for the fate that made them mine, a knocking knuckle sounded at the door. I ignored it altogether. I could not pay the rent. The hour of my doom had struck. I would yield it no welcome.

"Oh! You are in."

My landlady had not awaited my summons. She stood before me in her tall severity, a black-browed symbol of the last of all things. I smiled at her. Odd as it seemed to me then, I could smile into that grave face of hers.

"I have no money."

I said this with a sigh, although I had no longing for her pity. I thought I heard a sigh upon her own

It is but rarely that you strike home to humanity. That tale in which the husband arises from his coffin and in which a wife is won by flagellation are your strongest, and Poe has twenty stories to surpass them in that quality. You remember the Albatross of Baudelaire? "Ses ailes de géant l'empêchent de marcher." That is your case.

I know of no writer who uses the English language as you do. At your touch words take wings and fly. There is no story in your story; there is not even atmosphere. There is a faint and elusive impact on one's sensibility which is nowise linked with memory or even with imagination. You produce somewhat of the effect of a presentiment. It is impossible to publish a presentiment!

Your style defies the scalpel; you write as simply as de Maupassant, and in as mundane terms; but your characters have a quality similar to that which I have observed in the Hyperion of Keats, in Homer, in Ossian, and in the Prophetic Books of Blake. In each person of the drama we find what I must call "gigantism." We are not told, as by the crude method of Dante, that Thel is so many cubits high; his story is simple as a villager's; yet we are somehow aware that he is colossal, a being huge as heaven itself. There is no room in the universe for any figures but those actively present in the drama.

Your characters have not these Titan thews, this starry stature. You write of commonplace people such as we meet every day. But you have the gift of endowing them with most mysterious importance. The subtlety of your satire, the delicacy of your humor, are but the gossamer at whose center lurks the spider of your art most strange, remote and fascinating, a soul bizarre and sinister. It is a doom intangible as invisible, and by all paths as ineluctable as death. The expressed and comprehensible horror of Poe or of Hans Heinz Ewers holds no such terror.

I perceive that I must borrow the lady's privilege, and publish the story. . . . at least, another one!

With homage and devotion, my dear master, I offer the assurance of my impregnable esteem.

ALEISTER CROWLEY.

lips as she sank upon that rickety chair beside the table.

"But I have not come for the rent."

I fixed my gaze intently upon the head of dark hair that met my eye as her head drooped. She looked up at me suddenly.

"I have had to take refuge here," she explained, "from that man."

"Your husband?"

She bowed her head and for an interval there was silence. I had never taken too seriously the complaints this landlady perpetually made against him to whom she loved to refer as her brute of a husband. My landlord did not appear to me in the least brutal. He was, I understood, a sort of truckman, very irregularly employed for the time being in consequence of the congested traffic conditions in the city of New York.

"What has he done to you now?"

My voice had in it a ring of much impatience. The grievances of this woman had grown preposterous to me. That she saw at once. The dark eyes flashed proudly in her head. I had affronted this creature. I would be reminded of the rent.

Before the words escaped her lips the door was flung wide open. My landlord stood upon the threshold.

"Will you give me that money?"

I thought at first this question must be meant for me. The landlord, however, was gazing steadily at his wife. He did not heed my presence in the least.