

A Page from the Book of Folly

By Richard Garnett

I

“That owned the virtuous ring and glass.”—*Il Penseroso*.

“Aurelia!”

“Otto!”

“Must we then part?”

They were folded in each other’s arms. There never was such kissing.

“How shall we henceforth exchange the sweet tokens of our undying affection, my Otto?”

“Alas, my Aurelia, I know not! Thy Otto blushes to acquaint thee that he cannot write.”

“Blush not, my Otto, thou needest not reproach thyself. Even couldst thou write, thy Aurelia could not read. Oh these dark ages!”

They remained some minutes gazing on each other with an expression of fond perplexity. Suddenly the damsel’s features assumed the aspect of one who experiences the visitation of a happy thought. Gently yet decidedly she pronounced:

“We will exchange rings.”

They drew off their rings simultaneously.

“This, Aurelia, was my grandfather’s.”

“This, Otto, was my grandmother’s, which she charged me with her dying breath never to part with save to him whom alone I loved.”

“Mine is a brilliant, more radiant than aught save the eyes of my Aurelia.”

And, in fact, Aurelia’s eyes hardly sustained the comparison. A finer stone could not easily be found.

“Mine is a sapphire, azure as the everlasting heavens, and type of a constancy enduring as they.”

In truth, it was of a tint seldom to be met with in sapphires.

The exchange made, the lady seemed less anxious to detain her lover.

“Beware, Otto!” she cried, as he slid down the cord, which yielded him an oscillatory transit from her casement to the moat, where he alighted knee-deep in mud. “Beware!—if my brother should be gazing from his chamber on the resplendent moon!”

But that ferocious young baron was accustomed to spend his time in a less romantic manner; and so it came to pass that Otto encountered him not.

II

Days, weeks, months had passed by, and Otto, a wanderer in a foreign land, had heard no tidings of his Aurelia. Ye who have loved may well conceive how her ring was all in all to him. He divided his time pretty equally between gazing into its cerulean depths, as though her lovely image were mirrored therein, and pressing its chilly surface to his lips, little as it recalled the warmth and balminess of her.

The burnished glow of gold, the chaste sheen of silver, the dance and sparkle of light in multitudinous gems, arrested his attention as he one evening perambulated the streets of a great city. He beheld a jeweller's shop. The grey-headed, spectacled lapidary sat at a bench within, sedulously polishing a streaked pebble by the light of a small lamp. A sudden thought struck Otto; he entered the shop, and, presenting the ring to the jeweller, inquired in a tone of suppressed exultation:

"What hold you for the worth of this inestimable ring?"

The jeweller, with no expression of surprise or curiosity, received the ring from Otto, held it to the light, glanced slightly at the stone, somewhat more carefully at the setting, laid the ring for a moment in a pair of light scales, and, handing it back to Otto, remarked with a tone and manner of the most entire indifference:

"The worth of this inestimable ring is one shilling and sixpence."

"Caitiff of a huckster!" exclaimed Otto, bringing down his fist on the bench with such vigour that the pebbles leaped up and fell rattling down: "Sayest thou this of a gem framed by genii in the bowels of the earth?"

"Nay, friend," returned the jeweller with the same imperturbable air, "that thy gem was framed of earth I in no-wise question, seeing that it doth principally consist of sand. But when thou speakest of genii and the bowels of the earth, thou wilt not, I hope, take it amiss if I crave better proof than thy word that the devil has taken to glass-making. For glass, and nothing else, credit me, thy jewel is."

"And the gold?" gasped Otto.

"There is just as much gold in thy ring as sufficeth to gild handsomely a like superficies of brass, which is not saying much."

And, applying a sponge dipped in some liquid to a small part of the hoop, the jeweller disclosed the dull hue of the baser metal so evidently that Otto could hardly doubt longer. He doubted no more when the lapidary laid his ring in the scales against another of the same size and make, and pointed to the inequality of the balance.

"Thou seest," he continued, "that in our craft a very little gold goes a very great way. It is far otherwise in the world% as thou, albeit in no sort eminent for sapience, has doubtless ere this ascertained for thyself. Thou art evidently a prodigious fool!"

This latter disparaging observation could be safely ventured upon, as Otto had rushed from the shop, speechless with rage.

Was Aurelia deceiver or deceived? Should he execrate her, or her venerable grandmother, or some unknown person? The point was too knotty. to be solved in the agitated state of his feelings. He decided it provisionally by execrating the entire human race, not forgetting himself.

In a mood like Otto's a trifling circumstance is sufficient to determine the quality of action. The ancient city of which he was at the time an inhabitant was traversed by a large river spanned by a quaint and many-arched bridge, to which his frantic and aimless wanderings had conducted him. Spires and gables and lengthy façades were reflected in the water, blended with the shadows of boats, and interspersed with the mirrored flames of innumerable windows on land, or of lanterns suspended from the masts or sterns of the vessels. The dancing ripples bickered and flickered, and seemed to say, "Come hither to us," while the dark reaches of still water in the shadow of the piers promised that whatever might be entrusted to them should be faithfully retained. Swayed by a sudden impulse, Otto drew his ring from his finger. It gleamed an instant aloft in air; in another the relaxation of his grasp would have consigned it to the stream.

"Forbear!"

Otto turned, and perceived a singular figure by his side. The stranger was tall and thin, and attired in a dusky cloak which only partially concealed a flame-coloured jerkin. A cock's feather peaked up in his cap; his eyes were piercingly brilliant; his nose was aquiline; the expression of his features sinister and sardonic. Had Otto been more observant, or less preoccupied, he might have noticed that the stranger's left shoe was of a peculiar form, and that he limped some little with the corresponding foot.

"Forbear, I say; thou knowest not what thou doest."

"And what skills what I do with a piece of common glass?"

"Thou errest, friend; thy ring is not common glass. Had thy mistress surmised its mystic virtues, she would have thought oftener than twice ere exchanging it for thy diamond."

"What may these virtues be?" eagerly demanded Otto.

"In the first place, it will show thee when thy mistress may chance to think of thee, as it will then prick thy finger."

"Now I know thee for a lying knave," exclaimed the youth indignantly. "Learn, to thy confusion, that it hath not pricked me once since I parted from Aurelia."

"Which proves that she has never once thought of thee."

"Villain!" shouted Otto, "say that again, and I will transfix thee."

"Thou mayest if thou canst," rejoined the stranger, with an expression of such cutting scorn that Otto's spirit quailed, and he felt a secret but overpowering conviction of his interlocutor's veracity. Rallying, however, in some measure, he exclaimed:

"Aurelia is true! I will wager my soul upon it!"

"Done!" screamed the stranger in a strident voice of triumph, while a burst of diabolical laughter seemed to proceed from every cranny of the eaves and piers of the old bridge, and to be taken up by goblin echoes from the summits of the adjacent towers and steeples.

Otto's blood ran chill, but he mustered sufficient courage to inquire hoarsely:

"What of its further virtues?"

"When it shall have pricked thee," returned the mysterious personage, "on turning it once completely round thy finger thou wilt see thy mistress wherever she may be. If thou turnest it the second time, thou wilt know what her thought of thee is; and, if the third time, thou wilt find thyself in her presence. But I give thee fair warning that by doing this thou wilt place thyself in a more disastrous plight than any thou hast experienced hitherto. And now farewell."

The speaker disappeared. Otto stood alone upon the bridge. He saw nothing around him but the stream, with its shadows and lights, as he slowly and thoughtfully turned round to walk to his lodgings.

III

Ye who have loved, et cetera, as aforesaid, will comprehend the anxiety with which Otto henceforth consulted his ring. He was continually adjusting it to his finger in a manner, as he fancied, to render the anticipated puncture more perceptible when it should come at last. He would have worn it on all his fingers in succession had the conformation of his robust hand admitted of its being placed on any but the slenderest. Thousands of times he could have sworn that he felt the admonitory sting; thousands of times he turned the trinket round and round with desperate impatience; but Aurelia's form remained as invisible, her thoughts as inscrutable, as before. His great dread was that he might be pricked in his sleep, on which account he would sit up watching far into the morn. For, as he reasoned, not without plausibility, when could he more

rationality hope for a place in Aurelia's thoughts than at that witching and suggestive period? She might surely think of him when she had nothing else to do! Had she really nothing else to do? And Otto grew sick and livid with jealousy. It of course frequently occurred to him to doubt and deride the virtues of the ring, and he was several times upon the point of flinging it away. But the more he pondered upon the appearance and manner of the stranger, the less able he felt to resist the conviction of his truthfulness.

At last a most unmistakable puncture! the distinct, though slight, pang of a miniature wound. A crimson bead of blood rose on Otto's finger, swelled to its due proportion, and became a trickling blot.

"She is thinking of me!" cried he rapturously, as if this were an instance of the most signal and unforeseen condescension. All the weary expectancy of the last six months was forgotten. He would have railed at himself had the bliss of the moment allowed him to remember that he had ever railed at her.

Otto turned his ring once, and Aurelia became visible in an instant. She was standing before the mercer's booth in the chief street of the little town which adjoined her father's castle. Her gaze was riveted on a silk mantle, trimmed with costly furs, which depended from a hook inside the doorway. Her lovely features wore an expression of extreme dissatisfaction. She was replacing a purse, apparently by no means weighty, in her embroidered girdle.

Otto turned the ring the second time, and Aurelia's silvery accents immediately became audible to the following effect:

"If that fool Otto were here, he would buy it for me."

She turned away, and walked down the street. Otto uttered a cry like the shriek of an uprooted mandrake. His hand was upon the ring to turn it for the third time; but the stranger's warning occurred to him, and for a moment he forbore. In that moment the entire vision vanished from before his eyes.

What boots it to describe Otto's feelings upon this revelation of Aurelia's sentiments? For lovers, description would be needless; to wiser people, incomprehensible. Suffice it to say, that as his lady deemed him a fool he appeared bent on proving that she did not deem amiss.

A long space of time elapsed without any further admonition from the ring. Perhaps Aurelia had no further occasion for his purse; perhaps she had found another purse-bearer. The latter view of the case appeared the more plausible to Otto, and it hugely aggravated his torments.

At last the moment came. It was the hour of midnight. Again Otto felt the sharp puncture, again the ruby drop started from his finger, again he turned the ring, and again beheld Aurelia. She was in her chamber, but not alone.

Her companion was a youth of Otto's age. She was in the act of placing Otto's brilliant upon his finger. Otto turned his own ring, and heard her utter, with singular distinctness:

"This ring was given me by the greatest fool I ever knew. Little did he imagine that it would one day be the means of procuring me liberty, and bliss in the arms of my Arnold. My venerable grandmother—"

The voice expired from her lips, for Otto stood before her.

Arnold precipitated himself from the window, carrying the ring with him. Otto, glaring at his faithless mistress, stood in the middle of the apartment with his sword unsheathed. Was he about to use it? None can say; for at this moment the young Baron burst into the room, and, without the slightest apology for the liberty he was taking, passed his sword through Otto's body.

Otto groaned, and fell upon his face. He was dead. The young Baron ungently reversed the position of the corpse, and scanned its features with evident surprise and dissatisfaction.

"It is not Arnold, after all!" he muttered. "Who would have thought it?"

"Thou seest, brother, how unjust were thy suspicions," observed Aurelia, with an air of injured but not implacable virtue. "As for this abominable ravisher—" Her feelings forbade her to proceed.

The brother looked mystified. There was something beyond his comprehension in the affair; yet he could not but acknowledge that Otto was the person who had rushed by him as he lay in wait upon the stairs. He finally determined that it was best to say nothing about the matter: a resolution the easier of performance as he was not wont to be lavish of his words at any time. He wiped his sword on his sister's curtains, and was about to withdraw, when Aurelia again spoke:

"Ere thou departest, brother, have the goodness to ring the bell, and desire the menials to remove this carrion from my apartment."

The young Baron sulkily complied, and retreated growling to his chamber.

The attendants carried Otto's body forth. To the honour of her sex be it recorded, that before this was done Aurelia vouchsafed one glance to the corpse of her old lover. Her eyes fell on the brazen ring. "And he has actually worn it all this time!" thought she.

"Would have outraged my daughter, would he?" said the old Baron, when the transaction was reported to him. "Let him be buried in a concatenation accordingly."

"What the guy dickens be a concatenation, Geoffrey?" interrogated Giles.

"Methinks it is Latin for a ditch," responded Geoffrey.

This interpretation commending itself to the general judgment of the retainers, Otto was interred in the shelving bank of the old moat, just under Aurelia's window. A rough stone was laid upon the grave. The magic ring, which no one thought worth appropriating, remained upon the corpse's finger. Thou mayest probably find it there, reader, if thou searchest long enough.

The first visitor to Otto's humble sepulchre was, after all, Aurelia herself, who alighted thereon on the following night after letting herself down from her casement to fly with Arnold. Their escape was successfully achieved upon a pair of excellent horses, the proceeds of Otto's diamond, which had become the property of a Jew.

On the third night an aged monk stood by Otto's grave, and wept plentifully. He carried a lantern, a mallet, and a chisel. "He was my pupil," sobbed the good old man. "It were meet to contribute what in me lies to the befitting perpetuation of his memory."

Setting down the lantern, he commenced work, and with pious toil engraved on the stone in the Latin of the period:

"HAC MAGNUS STULTUS JACET IN FOSSA SEPULTUS.
MULLER CUI CREDIT MORTUUM ILLUM REDDIDIT."

Here he paused, at the end of his strength and of his Latin.

"Beshrew my old arms and brains!" he sighed.

"Hem!" coughed a deep voice in his vicinity.

The monk looked up. The personage in the dusky cloak and flame-coloured jerkin was standing over him.

"Good monk," said the fiend, "what dost thou here?"

"Good fiend," said the monk, "I am inscribing an epitaph to the memory of a departed friend. Thou mightest kindly aid me to complete it."

"Truly," rejoined the demon, "it would become me to do so, seeing that I have his soul here in my pocket. Thou wilt not expect me to employ the language of the Church. Nathless, I see not wherefore the vernacular may not serve as well."

And, taking the mallet and chisel, he completed the monk's inscription with the supplementary legend:

“SERVED HIM RIGHT.”