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One

The House of Jettan

If you searched among the Downs in Sussex, somewhere between Midhurst and Brighthelmstone, inland a little, and nestling in modest seclusion between two waves of hills, you would find Little Fittledean, a village round which three gentlemen had built their homes. One chose the north side, half a mile away, and on the slope of the Downs. He was Mr Winton, a dull man with no wife, but two children, James and Jennifer. The second built his house west of the village, not far from the London Road and Great Fittledean. He was one Sir Thomas Jettan. He chose his site carefully, beside a wood, and laid out gardens after the Dutch style. That was way back in the last century when Charles the Second was King, and what had then been a glaring white erection, stark-naked and blatant in its sylvan setting, was now, some seventy years later, a fair place, creeper-hung, and made kindly by the passing of the years. The Jettan who built it became inordinately proud of the house. Never a day passed but he would strut round the grounds, looking at the nude structure from a hundred different points of vantage. It was to be the country seat of the Jettans in their old age; they were to think of it almost as they would think of their children. It was never to be sold; it was to pass from father to son and from son to grandson through countless ages. Nor must it accrue to a female heir, be she never so direct, for old Tom

determined that the name of Jettan should always be associated with the house.

Old Tom propounded these notions to the whole countryside. All his friends and his acquaintances were shown the white house and told the tale of its owner's past misdemeanours and his present virtue – a virtue due, he assured them, to the possession of so fair an estate. No more would he pursue the butterfly existence that all his ancestors had pursued before him. This house was his anchor and his interest; he would rear his two sons to reverence it, and it might even be that the tradition which held every Jettan to be a wild fellow at heart should be broken at last.

The neighbours laughed behind their hands at old Tom's childishness. They dubbed the hitherto unnamed house 'Tom's Pride', in good-humoured raillery.

Tom Jettan was busy thinking out a suitable name for his home when the countryside's nickname came to his ears. He was not without humour in spite of his vanity, and when the sobriquet had sunk into his brain, he chuckled deep in his chest, and slapped his knee in appreciation. Not a month later the neighbours were horrified to find, cunningly inserted in the wrought-iron gates of the white house, a gilded scroll bearing the legend, 'Jettan's Pride'. No little apprehension was felt amongst them at having their secret joke thus discovered and utilized, and those who next waited on Tom did so with an air of ashamed nervousness. But Tom soon made it clear that, far from being offended, he was grateful to them for finding an appropriate name for his home.

His hopeful prophecy concerning the breaking of tradition was not realized in either of his sons. The elder, Maurice, sowed all the wild oats of which he was capable before taking up his abode at the Pride; the other, Thomas, never ceased sowing wild oats, and showed no love for the house whatsoever.

When old Tom died he left a will which gave Maurice to understand that if, by the time he was fifty years of age, he still refused to settle down at the Pride, it was to pass to his brother and his brother's heirs.

Thomas counselled Maurice to marry and produce some children.

‘For damme if I do, my boy! The old man must have lost his faculties to expect a Jettan to live in this hole! I tell ye flat, Maurice, I’ll not have the place. ’Tis you who are the elder, and you must assume the – the responsibilities!’ At that he fell a-chuckling, for he was an irrepressible scamp.

‘Certainly I shall live here,’ answered Maurice. ‘Three months here, and nine months – not here. What’s to stop me?’

‘Does the will allow it?’ asked Tom doubtfully.

‘It does not forbid it. And I shall get me a wife.’

At that Tom burst out laughing, but checked himself hurriedly as he met his brother’s reproving eye.

‘God save us, and the old gentleman but three days dead! Not that I meant any disrespect, y’know. Faith, the old man ’ud be the first to laugh with me, stap me if he wouldn’t!’ He stifled another laugh, and shrugged his shoulders. ‘Or he would before he went crazy-pious over this devilish great barn of a house. You’ll never have the money to keep it, Maurry,’ he added cheerfully, ‘let alone a wife.’

Maurice twirled his eyeglass, frowning.

‘My father has left even more than I expected,’ he said.

‘Oh ay! But it’ll be gone after a week’s play! God ha’ mercy, Maurry, do ye hope to husband it?’

‘Nay, I hope to husband a wife. The rest I’ll leave to her.’

Tom came heavily to his feet. He stared at his brother, round-eyed.

‘Blister me, but I believe the place is turning you like the old gentleman! Now, Maurry, Maurry, stiffen your back, man!’

Maurice smiled.

‘It’ll take more than the Pride to reform me, Tom. I’m thinking that the place is too good to sell or throw away.’

‘If I could lay my hand on two thousand guineas,’ said Tom, ‘anyone could have the Pride for me!’

Maurice looked up quickly.

‘Why, Tom, all I’ve got’s yours, you know very well! Take what you want – two thousand or twenty.’

‘Devilish good of you, Maurry, but I’ll not sponge on you yet. No, don’t start to argue with me, for my head’s not strong enough what with one thing and another. Tell me more of this wife of yours. Who is it to be?’

‘I haven’t decided,’ replied Maurice. He yawned slightly. ‘There are so many to choose from.’

‘Ay – you’re an attractive devil – ’pon my word you are! What d’ye say to Lucy Farmer?’

Maurice shuddered.

‘Spare me. I had thought of Marianne Tempest.’

‘What, old Castlehill’s daughter? She’d kill you in a month, lad.’

‘But she is not – dowerless.’

‘No. But think of it, Maurry! Think of it! A shrew at twenty!’

‘Then what do you think of Jane Butterfield?’

Thomas pulled at his lip, irresolute.

‘I’m not decrying the girl, Maurice, but Lord! could you live with her?’

‘I’ve not essayed it,’ answered Maurice.

‘No, and marriage is so damned final! ’Tisn’t as though ye could live together for a month or so before ye made up your minds. I doubt the girl would not consent to that.’

‘And if she did consent, one would not desire to wed her,’ remarked Maurice. ‘A pity. No, I believe I could not live with Jane.’

Thomas sat down again.

‘The truth of it is, Maurry, we Jettans must marry for love. There’s not one of us ever married without it, whether for money or no.’

‘’Tis so unfashionable,’ objected Maurice. ‘One marries for convenience. One may have fifty different loves.’

‘What! All at once? I think you’d find that a trifle inconvenient, Maurry! Lord! just fancy fifty loves, oh, the devil! And three’s enough to drive one crazed, bruise me if ’tis not.’

Maurice's thin lips twitched responsively.

'Gad no! Fifty loves spread over a lifetime, and you're not bound to one of them. There's bliss, Tom, you rogue!'

Thomas shook a wise finger at him, his plump, good-humoured face solemn all at once.

'And not one of them's the true love, Maurry. For if she were, faith, she'd not be one of fifty! Now, you take my advice, lad, and wait. Damme, we'll not spoil the family record!

'A rakish youth, says the Jettan adage,
Marriage for love, and a staid old age.

'I don't know that it's true about the staid old age, though. Maybe 'tis only those who wed for love who acquire virtue. Anyway, you'll not break the second maxim, Maurry.'

'Oh?' smiled Maurice. 'What's to prevent me?'

Thomas had risen again. Now he slipped his arm in his brother's.

'If it comes to prevention, old sobersides, I'm game. I'll make an uproar in the church and carry off the bride. Gad, but 'twould be amusing! Carry off one's brother's bride, under his stern nose. Devil take it, Maurry, that's just what your nose is! I never thought on't before – stern, grim old – now, steady, Tom, my boy, or you'll be laughing again with the old gentleman not yet underground!'

Maurice waited for his brother's mirth to abate.

'But, Tom, 'tis very well for you to counsel me not to wed without love! I must marry, for 'tis certain you'll not, and we must have heirs. What's to be done, I'd like to know?'

'Wait, lad, wait! You're not so old that you can't afford to hold back yet awhile.'

'I'm thirty-five, Tom.'

'Then you have fifteen years to run before you need settle down. Take my advice, and wait!'

The end of it was that Maurice did wait. For four years he continued to rove through Europe, amusing himself in the usual

way of gentlemen of his day, but in 1729 he wrote a long letter from Paris to his brother in London, declaring himself in love, and the lady an angel of goodness, sweetness, amiability, and affection. He said much more in this vein, all of which Tom had to read, yawning and chuckling by turns. The lady was one Maria Marchant. She brought with her a fair dowry and a placid disposition. So Tom wrote off to Maurice at once, congratulating him, and bestowing his blessing on the alliance. He desired his dear old Maury to quit travelling, and to come home to his affectionate brother Tom.

In a postscript he added that he dropped five hundred guineas at Newmarket, only to win fifteen hundred at dice the very next week, so that had it not been for his plaguey ill-luck in the matter of a small wager with Harry Besham, he would today be the most care-free of mortals, instead of a jaded creature, creeping about in terror of the bailiffs from hour to hour.

After that there was no more correspondence. Neither brother felt that there was anything further to be said, and they were not men to waste their time writing to one another for no urgent matter. Thomas thought very little more about Maurice's marriage. He supposed that the wedding would take place in England before many months had gone by; possibly Maurice would see fit to return at once, as he, Tom, had suggested. In the meantime, there was nothing to be done. Tom laid his brother's letter aside, and went on with his ordinary occupations.

He lived in Half-Moon Street. His house was ruled by his cook, the wife of Moggat, his valet-footman. She also ruled the hapless Moggat. Moggat retaliated by ruling his jovial master as far as he was able, so one might really say Mrs Moggat ruled them all. As Tom was quite unaware of this fact, it troubled him not a whit.

A month after he had answered his brother's letter, Tom was disturbed one morning while he sipped his chocolate with the news that a gentleman wished to speak to him. Tom was in his bed-chamber, his round person swathed in a silken wrapper of

astonishing brightness. He had not yet doffed his nightcap, and his wig lay on the dressing-table.

The lean, long Moggat crept in at the door, which he seemed hardly to open, and ahem'd directly behind his master.

Tom was in the act of swallowing his chocolate, and as he had not heard Moggat's slithering approach, the violent clearing of that worthy's throat startled him not a little, and he choked.

Tenderly solicitous, Moggat patted him on the back until the coughs and splutters had abated. Tom bounced round in his chair to face the man.

'Damn and curse it, Moggat! What d'ye mean by it? What d'ye mean by it, I say? Crawling into a room to make a noise at me just as I'm drinking! Yes, sir! Just as I'm drinking! Devil take you! D'ye hear me? Devil take you!'

Moggat listened in mournful silence. When Tom ceased for want of breath, he bowed, and continued as though there had been no interruption.

'There is a gentleman below, sir, as desires to have speech with you.'

'A gentleman? Don't you know that gentlemen don't come calling at this hour, ye ninny-pated jackass? Bring me some more chocolate!'

'Yes, sir, a gentleman.'

'I tell you no gentleman would disturb another at this hour! Have done now, Moggat!'

'And although I told the gentleman, sir, as how my master was not yet robed and accordingly could not see any visitors, he said it was of no consequence to him whatsoever, and he would be obliged to you to ask him upstairs at once, sir. So I—'

'Confound his impudence!' growled Tom. 'What's his name?'

'The gentleman, sir, on my asking what name I was to tell you, gave me to understand that it was of no matter.'

'Devil take him! Show him out, Moggat! Like as not 'tis one of these cursed bailiffs. Why, you fool, what d'ye mean by letting him in?'

Moggat sighed in patient resignation.

‘If you will allow me to say so, sir, this gentleman is not a bailiff.’

‘Well, who is he?’

‘I regret, sir, I do not know.’

‘You’re a fool! What’s this fellow like?’

‘The gentleman’ – Moggat laid ever so little stress on the word – ‘is tall, sir, and – er – slim. He is somewhat dark as regards eyes and brows, and he is dressed, if I may say so, exceedingly modishly, with a point-edged hat, and very full-skirted puce coat, laced, French fashion, with –’

Tom snatched his nightcap off and threw it at Moggat.

‘Numskull! D’ye think I want a list of his clothes? Show him out, the swarthy rogue! Show him out!’

Moggat picked up the nightcap, and smoothed it sadly.

‘The gentleman seems anxious to see you, sir.’

‘Ay! Trying to dun me, the rascal! Don’t I know it! Blustering and –’

‘No, sir,’ said Moggat firmly. ‘I could not truthfully say that the gentleman blustered. Indeed, sir, if I may say so, I think him a singularly quiet, cool gentleman. Very soft-spoken, sir – oh, very soft-spoken!’

‘Take him away!’ shouted Tom. ‘I tell you I’ll not be pestered at this hour! I might be asleep, damme! Tell the fellow to come again at a godly time – not at dawn! Now, don’t try to argue, Moggat! I tell you, if it were my brother himself, I’d not see him!’

Moggat bowed again.

‘I will hinform the gentleman, sir.’

When the door closed behind Moggat, Tom leaned back in his chair and picked up one of his letters. Not five minutes later the door creaked again. Tom turned, to find Moggat at his elbow.

‘Eh? What d’ye want?’

‘Hif you please, sir, the gentleman says as how he is your brother,’ said Moggat gently.

Tom jumped as though he had been shot.

‘What? My brother? What d’ye mean? My brother?’

‘Sir Maurice, sir.’

Up flew Tom, catching at his wig and cramming it on his head all awry.

‘Thunder an’ turf! Maurry! Here, you raving wooden-pate! How dare you leave my brother downstairs? How dare you, I say?’ He wrapped himself more tightly in his robe than ever, and dashed headlong out of the room, down the stairs to where Maurice awaited him.

Sir Maurice was standing by the window in the library, drumming his fingers on the sill. At his brother’s tempestuous entrance he turned and bowed.

‘A nice welcome you give me, Tom! “Tell him to come again at a godly time – I’d not see him if ’twere my brother himself,” forsooth!’

Thomas hopped across the room and seized both Maurice’s long, thin hands in his plump, chubby ones.

‘My dear Maurry! My dear old fellow! I’d no notion ’twas you! My dolt of a lackey – but there! When did you arrive in England?’

‘A week ago. I have been at the Pride.’

‘A week? What a plague d’ye mean by not coming to me till now, ye rogue?’ As he spoke, Tom thrust Maurice into a chair, and himself sat down opposite him, beaming with pleasure.

Maurice leaned back, crossing his legs. A little smile flickered across his mouth, but his eyes were solemn as he answered.

‘I had first to see my wife installed in her new home,’ he said.

For a moment Tom stared at him.

‘Wife? Tare an’ ’ouns, ye don’t waste your time! Where and when did you marry the lady?’

‘Three weeks ago, at Paris. Now I have come home to fulfil the last part of the Jettan adage.’

‘God ha’ mercy!’ ejaculated Thomas. ‘Not a staid old age, lad! Not you?’

‘Something like it,’ nodded Maurice. ‘Wait till you have seen my wife!’

‘Ay, I’m waiting,’ said Tom. ‘What’s to do now, then? The country squire, and half a dozen children?’

The grey eyes twinkled.

‘Tom, I’ll thank you not to be so coarse.’

‘Coarse? *Coarse?* Gad, Maurice, what’s come over you?’

‘I am a married man,’ replied Maurice. ‘As such I have — er — learned to guard my tongue. My wife —’

‘Maurry, couldn’t ye call the lady by her name?’ begged Tom. ‘Faith, I can’t bear those two words so often, proud though ye may be of them.’

Maurice flushed slightly and smiled.

‘Maria, then. She is a very — sweet, delicate lady.’

‘Lord! I’d made up my mind you’d wed a bold, strapping wench with a saucy smile, Maurry!’

‘I? Good God, no! My w— Maria is gentle, and meek, and —’

‘Ay, ay, Maurry, I know!’ hastily interrupted Thomas. ‘I must see her for myself, so don’t spoil the surprise for me, there’s a good fellow! Now have you breakfasted? No? Then come upstairs with me. Where’s that rascal Moggat? Moggat! Moggat! Ah, there you are! Go and prepare breakfast at once, man! And bring some more chocolate to my room.’ He wrapped the voluminous robe about him once more, and, seizing his brother by the arm, led him forth to the staircase.

Thus it was that Maurice Jettan brought home his bride. She was a gentle lady, with a sweet disposition; she adored her handsome husband, and duly presented him with a son, Philip. When the babe was shown to him, Tom discovered that he was a true Jettan, with all their characteristics. His father confessed that he saw no resemblance either to himself or to anyone, but he was nevertheless gratified by his brother’s remarks. Tom chuckled mightily and prophesied that young Philip would prove himself a Jettan in more ways than one. He hinted at a youth which should surpass his father’s in brilliancy, and Maurice smiled, looking proudly down at the red, crumpled face.

‘And,’ concluded Tom, ‘he’ll have a papa who can advise him in all matters of fashion better than any man I know. Why, Maurice, you will show him the fashionable world! You must