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978-1-108-00128-1 - The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Heroines: In a Series of Fifteen Tales, Volume 3

Mary Cowden Clarke

Excerpt

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TALE XI.

BEATRICE AND HERO; THE COUSINS.

"A pleasant-spirited lady. There's little of the melancholy element in her."

"Is she not a modest young lady? * * she is the sweetest lady that ever I looked on."

Much ado about nothing.

A sound cuff.

"What do you hit me for?"

Another. "Give it up! Will you give it up?"

"No!"

Another cuff. And a box on the ear. "Give it up, I say!"

Another "No" was about to be bawled; and a look in the lout's eye gave token that it would probably be accompanied by a return of the blows he had received; but suddenly he seemed to think better of it. Muttering something about being "too near master constable's house, or he'd ha' kept it as sure as he was alive," the boy flung down the demanded toy, turned on his heel, and made off.

The little girl who was thus left victress of the field, picked up the doll, brushed the dust off its smart skirts, arranged its ruffled head-dress, ascertained that its nose was neither cracked nor flattened, nor its eyes damaged, and then triumphantly walked up to another little girl, who had stood aloof during the affray, and restored the plundered favorite to her arms.

"Oh, I'm so glad to have her back! My beautiful new doll that my father gave me only yesterday!" exclaimed the child, hugging it to her, and smiling through the tears that still glittered on her cheeks.

"Why did you let him snatch it from you?" said the other little girl.

"Why didn't you run after him, and force him to give it up?"

"He was such a great fierce lad—I couldn't—I didn't dare;" replied she.

"Why didn't your sister run after him, then, for you, and thump him,

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till he gave it up ?” persisted the first little girl, looking towards a young boy who stood by, rubbing his knees, his back, and his elbows alternately ; looking very scared, and very disconsolate ; with a few big tears rolling down his face ; and evidently in all the discomfiture of having only just recovered his legs.

“ I’m not a girl, miss !” he blurted out, with a half shame-faced, half indignant glance at the beautiful, spirited face that was eyeing him. “ What made you take me for a girl ? Don’t you see my dress ?” And he cast a look of sheepish pride at his legs, which certainly were cased in masculine fashion.

“ Don’t I see your tears ? What’s crying but the trick of a girl ?” said she, with a motion of her lips that made him wince. “ Why didn’t you fly after the fellow, instead of standing blubbering there ?”

“ He knocked me down !” said the boy. “ He took good care to make sure of me, before he snatched at Hero’s doll. How could I fly, miss, when he knocked me down ? It’s not so easy to fly, let me tell you, when a fellow sends you sprawling.”

“ But I suppose you could have scrambled up again, couldn’t you ? Unless you thought it more prudent to lie still. But for the sake of your sister’s doll, you might have——”

“ She isn’t my sister,—she’s my cousin !” interrupted the boy, glad to seize upon any point of defence, that he could safely maintain.

“ Never mind, Gaetano, I have my doll again ;” said its owner ; and then, with her kind sweet tone, she turned to the little girl who had so bravely rescued it for her, and thanked her, in a manner so pretty and earnest, as to bespeak her unmistakably the young lady born and bred.

The children fell into talk ; and began to question each other how it was they happened to be out alone, how they had met, who they were, and so forth.

It appeared that the little girl, Hero, was the governor of Messina’s daughter, his sole child and heiress ; that the young boy, Gaetano, was the son of her uncle, Antonio. That they had left the palace in the morning, for a walk, attended by a servant ; but that some show, or public procession, had suddenly attracted a crowd, in which they had been separated

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from their attendant. The other little girl, when she learned their names, uttered an exclamation of surprise. She told them that she was their cousin; that her name was Beatrice. That she was bound to their house, at the very time she encountered them; and that, singularly enough, the circumstance which had occasioned Hero and Gaetano to lose sight of their attendant, had also separated her from the person who was entrusted with the charge of bringing her from her native place to Messina.

Beatrice was an orphan. Her mother had married a poor lieutenant, contrary to the will of a rich maiden aunt; and, in consequence, had been cast off, disavowed, denounced. She had lived in seclusion, in a distant part of the island, enjoying the society of her husband, when the intervals of his military duties allowed him to be with her; and finding her chief happiness in the cultivation of her child's mind and disposition. While her husband lived, she had little missed the family ties she had broken for his sake; but he fell in battle; and then, beneath the stroke of this sudden affliction, her heart learned to acknowledge that she had been unfeeling and ungrateful, in not having better striven to soften the resentment of one who had brought her up, and centred all her hopes in the niece who so cruelly disappointed her; it learned to feel that she had been unmindful of the affectionate bonds in which she had once lived with her brothers, Leonato and Antonio; it learned to perceive that she had suffered pride and unrelenting—with their ever-strengthening, ever-hardening barriers,—to interpose between her aunt and herself, and that she had allowed coldness, and indifference, to estrange her from her best friends. She felt that it was now too late to attempt the recovery of her aunt's favor; but, on her death-bed, she bequeathed her little girl to the guardianship of Leonato, beseeching him to be a father to her orphan child.

It was on her way to her future home, that Beatrice happened to witness the incident which brought her so unexpectedly acquainted with her young relations. She saw the ruffianly lad snatch the child's doll; she saw neither the little girl nor her companion make any attempt at resistance; and her own immediate impulse was to force him to yield his prey. How she succeeded has been seen.

“But what shall we do? We none of us know our way? I don't—

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you don't, Hero ; and of course you don't, miss ?—Beatrice, I mean. Of course, cousin Beatrice, you can't be expected to know the streets here in Messina, or the way to the governor's palace (that's my uncle),—you, who have never lived here ;" said Gaetano. " Oh dear, oh dear, how provoking it is of Matteo to have let us stray so ! Where can he be, I wonder ? You don't see him anywhere, do you, cousin Hero ? "

" No, cousin ;" she replied.

" Oh dear, how could he be so careless of us ? " repeated Gaetano, with a look deplorably helpless.

Beatrice took her handkerchief out of her pocket, and held it towards him.

" What's this for ? " he said.

" I thought you might be going to cry again, and would want it to wipe your tears ;" replied Beatrice. " With that rueful look and tone, what but weeping should follow ? "

" Ah, it's all very well ;" said the boy ; " but we're very young, and oughtn't to be left alone. My father and my uncle will both be rarely angry with Matteo, when they hear how he lost us, staring about him."

" But how are they to hear ? " returned she. " You are no tale-bearer, sure, to bring a poor serving-man into disgrace ? "

" Why, when a servant neglects his duty, what are we to do, miss ? " said Gaetano.

" Not tell tales, miss ; certainly not tell tales ;" replied she.

" Why do you call me ' miss, ' cousin Beatrice ? I've told you already, I'm no girl. If it's because you are displeased at my calling you miss, now that I know you for my cousin ; you should recollect that it isn't so easy all of a sudden to get into the way of calling a strange little girl by her name. It seems so familiar ; and I don't know how it is, but you're not one to be familiar with, I think."

She laughed. " And you should recollect that it isn't so easy to treat you as a boy, when I see you behave like a girl. But, come, I'll forgive your calling me ' miss, ' if you'll let me call you so."

" No, no ;" he said ; " I'd rather not. I won't be called so ; and I'm sure I don't wish to call you ' miss. ' Nay, I like calling you Beatrice, much better. Only, let me get accustomed to it, cousin."

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“Very well, cousin. Meantime, cheer up, put on a bold face, and enquire our way for us, at some house;” she said.

“I don’t know—I never did—I’m not accustomed to speak to strangers;” hesitated he.

“And if you never begin, you certainly never will be accustomed. Are you afraid of getting bad habits? Or do you intend to go through the world without speaking to any but your intimates?” she said.

“I don’t know what you mean;” said he, with a puzzled look. The boy stood gazing in her face for a moment or two; but there was something in that clear eye, and in the turn of that lip, that made him cast down his eyes, and bite his lip.

“Shall we try if this way will lead us right?” said Hero, pointing down a street that looked invitingly cool; there was a fountain in the centre, shaded by a broad-spreading chesnut-tree; round which stood a group of women, washing, and filling pitchers; some men watering their mules; the animals whisking away the flies with their tails, shaking their long ears, and drawing refreshing draughts from the marble basin, through their bright and tasseled head-gear.

“Stay, suppose I just ask that lad, who is lounging in yonder door-way, whether this turning will do;” said Beatrice, stepping forward as she spoke, and addressing her enquiry to a sturdy hobbedehoy, who was idly chipping splinters off the door-post with the end of a bill he poised in his hand.

“Thou know’st not whom thou’rt questioning, little girl;” he said, looking over his shoulder at her in a lordly manner; “’twere a pity of thy life, an’ thou were’t to question me too closely, seeing that I am the constable’s eldest son; and seeing moreover, that thou art, or I’m much mista’en, no better than thou shouldst be. ’Tis my father’s calling to apprehend all aspicious people, and vagroms; and were I to tell him that I have seen you three chits loitering about here for some time past, he’d charge you be accused in no time. I’ve had my eye on you, I promise ye; and think not over well of your looks, I tell ye honestly.”

“What dost thou see in our looks, that hits not thy taste, fellow?” said Beatrice.

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"Nay, 'fellow' not me, little girl, nor 'thou' not me, if thou be'st wise. 'Tis not for mendicomes and vagabonds to make too familiar with a limb of the law,—a limb, a very member,—being as I am, constable's son, and likely to be constable myself, one of these days."

"We are neither beggars nor thieves, law-limb;" she replied; "we but seek to know our way; we only ask——"

"You only 'ask!' What is asking but begging, I should like to know? What is wandering, but going astray; what is going astray, but erring; what is erring, but wickedness; and what is wickedness, but the high-road to thieving? Trust me, I think you're no more virtuous than you should be."

"Who is, Jack? Let us all try and be as good as we may, we can scarce hope to be more good than we should and ought to be."

"What mean you, by calling me 'Jack,' little girl? 'Tis none of my name. Another proof of error, in thee, thou see'st."

"No error—nor proof of error—but a plain truth, as I will prove. I call thee Jack; for art thou not Jack—in office?"

"I am not in office yet; though 'tis not to be doubted there's a goodly dearth of brains here, to make me exceed to my father's office hereafter. The meritless sire makes the meritless son; and my father has long been known for the most meritless man to be constable in Messina. So, thou see'st, Jack-in-office is not my title now, whatever it may be by-and-by; and thou only commit'st thyself more and more, each word thou speak'st, little girl; and will force me to commit thee to my father's comprehension, if thou have not a care."

"Heaven deliver us from any of the family comprehension, which I think is none of the most promising, to judge by the sample. It sufficeth not, even to direct us the right road;" said Beatrice, turning away, with Hero and Gaetano, who had been for the last few minutes plucking at her skirts to prevent her from getting them into trouble with this foolish lad.

They instinctively turned down the inviting-looking street; and when they reached the spot where the fountain stood, Hero said she should like to sit down and rest, under the shady tree. There was a wooden bench, ran round its trunk; and here the three children seated themselves, watch-

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ing the good-humoured women, as they laughed and talked over their splashing task, with the muleteers, and the rest of the men grouped around.

“How pleasant the water looks! How it sparkles, and plashes down from the dolphins’ mouths! The sound is as welcome as the sight!” said Hero. “How delicious a draught of it would be.”

“I’m so thirsty!” said Gaetano, in his lackadaisical tone of lament.

“Why don’t you drink, then?” said Beatrice.

“I can’t;” said he. “I can’t drink from the basin, where the mules are dipping their noses in, and fouling the water; and where the women are muddling it with their linen.”

“We might perhaps find a reason why you should drink with mules; but as for your making a wash-tub serve you for the nonce, that might be an unfitting utensil, for such a lady-like boy as my cousin Gaetano;” said Beatrice. “Why can’t you make a drinking-cup of your hand, and hold it beneath one of the fresh streams from the dolphin-mouths?”

“It’d splash so;” said Gaetano.

“And signorina Gaetano would be wet through, and mayhap, take cold!” laughed Beatrice. “I suppose, too, she is too modest,—too timid in speaking to strangers, to ask one of these good people to help her. But you are tired, Hero, and would be glad of a draught from the fountain. I’ll try what can be done.”

Beatrice advanced among the men and women, and said in a frank, raised voice:—“Is there any one here, who will lend a horn, or a cup of any kind, to a little girl who is thirsty?”

For a moment, there was a look of wonder at the beautiful child who stood thus amidst them, with her clear eyes, and fearless voice; the next, several pocket drinking-cups of horn, leather, or wood, with which most of them were provided, were heartily proffered.

After they had all three partaken of the welcome refreshment, Beatrice said, in her firm ringing tone:—“If any one of you will show us the way to the governor’s palace, signor Leonato will join his thanks to ours, for the kindness his daughter has received at your hands, good friends.”

There was a murmur of surprise ran through the crowd; and then there was a loud shout:—“Evviva signor Leonato! Long live our noble governor!”

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Beatrice was warmly welcomed to her new home, by all its inmates. Her uncle Leonato grew to love her no less proudly and fondly than his own child ; her uncle Antonio was entertained with her sprightliness and confirmed bearing, so different from his own boy's ill-assured ways ; Hero felt as if a sister had been suddenly vouchsafed to her ; and Gaetano was perplexed, pleased, vexed, and interested with her, all at once. He had been a sickly infant, was still a delicate child, and was therefore petted, humoured, and indulged in all his whims and whinings, his fears and his fancies, until he was the spoiled boy,—the half-girl,—that so amazed and amused Beatrice, when she first saw him.

Like all cowardly children, he was always getting into hurts and accidents ; like all over-cautious children, he was always getting into scrapes ; like all self-pitying children, he was always getting into trouble. He was ever dreading something about to happen, or lamenting over something that had happened. He was in a perpetual state of uneasiness and fret. His face was always lengthened ; his air discomfited ; his lips ready to quiver, and his eyes ready to fill,—or rather to brim over ; for they were generally moistened, and glistening, preparatory to a shower, at the least word or event.

“Hark ! There's that unhappy boy ! Howling again, I declare !” said Beatrice to Hero, as sounds of lamentation reached them, in an alley of the garden, where the two little girls were walking together. “What can be the matter now, I wonder ? Some portentous trifle, or terrible nothing, I suppose, as usual. He certainly is the most unhappy of children ! Unhappy in the misfortunes that befall him, unhappy in his sense of them. Poor Gaetano ! ‘Gaetano, the infelicitous,’ I call him.”

“You should not nick-name him, coz ;” said little Hero ; “I don't think he likes it. He has been accustomed to have his own way, and he won't choose to be laughed at.”

“I shall give him no choice ; I shall try and laugh him out of some of his whimsies, whether he will or no ;” answered Beatrice.

“But do it by degrees, then ; be very gentle with him ; for he's not strong, poor little fellow ;” said tender-hearted Hero.

“His pate's not strong, assuredly. Pooh ! It'll do him good to be

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bantered; he must learn to bear a joke, or he'll never be worth anything. A boy that can't take a joke, will never be able to defend himself against a blow. Coolness and fortitude are main things in both cases, for victory."

"You ought to have been a boy yourself, cousin Beatrice, you are so fearless and so firm; and know so well what a boy ought to be;" said Hero.

"I like courage, in boy or girl;" said Beatrice. "A girl needn't be unseemly bold, or forward, for having a strong heart; any more than a boy need be an unfeeling brute for knowing how to face danger. But here comes infelicitous Gaetano."

He was making his way hastily towards them, when a large hornet happening to fly close by his ear, made him start aside; his foot tripped, he stumbled, and fell headlong; his face flat upon the gravel-path. He cried lustily. The girls both ran to pick him up.

"His nose bleeds!" exclaimed Hero.

"Oh, the blood!" he said, turning pale; and my hands are grazed! See here! Oh dear! oh dear!" and he burst out a-crying afresh.

"Dear little cherub!" said Beatrice.

"Are you pitying me, or are you laughing at me?" he said. "What do you mean by cherub? I'm no cherub, cousin Beatrice."

"No? Don't you 'continually cry?' You are ever proclaiming your right to the title. Here, let me wipe away the marks, and when you don't see them, perhaps you'll forget the wounds; they're not very deep; only a scratch or two."

"But they smart so, you can't think. And my nose, oh, my nose! See how it keeps bleeding!"

"Stay, I'll run into the house for something to stop it;" said Beatrice; "and when the blood has done flowing, you can dry up your tears, you know, at the same time."

"Are you angry with her, Gaetano?" said his cousin Hero, peeping into his face; as Beatrice flew away to bring sponge and water, and to get help.

"Oh, no! I'm never angry with cousin Beatrice, tease me as much as she will;" said he, his tears subsiding into sobs; "she never seems to do it from malice—but as if she couldn't help the fun of it. I suppose it's

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funny to her, though it's not so to me." And he sighed in his lachrymose style.

"If it's not pleasant to you, what if we beg her not to tease you any more?" said Hero.

"No, no ; I don't wish her to give up teasing me. I don't know how it is, but somehow, though I'm provoked with her, I rather like it. She looks so bright with good-humour, while she's joking me, that I feel pleased, even though I'm teased. Did you ever notice, cousin Hero, how her eyes sparkle, and how her lip curls, when she's rating me ? I look at her face, and then I can't feel angry. It's very odd ; but I can't."

"I'm glad of it ; for that shows you have a good temper of your own, dear Gaetano," said Hero ; "and so, I know, you have. But so has Beatrice too, for all she loves to plague and torment you a little. See how good-naturedly she helped you up, and now runs off to fetch something that'll cure you. Let us go and meet her."

Some few years had gone by without incident, after Beatrice's domestication at her uncle Leonato's house ; when, unexpectedly, he received a message from the countess Giustina, his aunt, to say, that now his young daughter was beyond babyhood, she wished to see her, and make acquaintance with her, as the individual in whose person would eventually centre the honors of their house. This countess Giustina, was an old lady of very dignified notions. She was proud of her patrician blood, proud of her relations ; proud of their independent position, yet proud of the added importance they derived from their connection with her. This countess Giustina, was the aunt whom the mother of Beatrice had mortally offended by her marriage ; as an alliance far beneath that which her niece had a right to form. The old lady was a strict disciplinarian ; she thought that it was her pride, her sense of honor, her idea of what was due, which were wounded by this match. They were, but not solely. Her affections had received a stab deeper than all the rest. Her heart had been more warmly fixed upon this girl,—whom she had brought up, and fostered from the very hour which orphaned the little creature and its brothers,—than she