

# *The Bath Comedy*



by  
*Agnes & Egerton Castle*

*Mary Randall  
Christmas 1900*



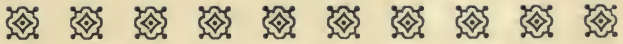
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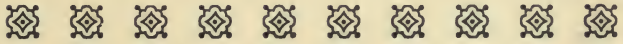


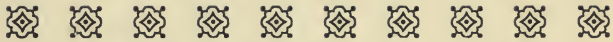


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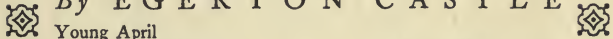


*The* BATH COMEDY

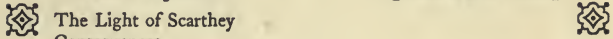




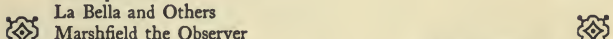
By EGERTON CASTLE



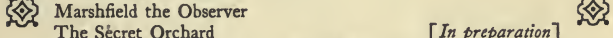
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The Pride of Jennico [With Agnes Castle]



The Light of Scarthey  
Consequences

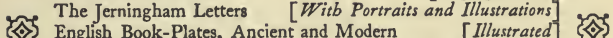


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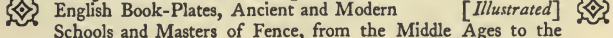


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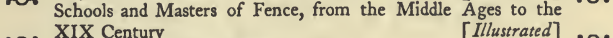
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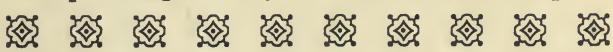
Schools and Masters of Fence, from the Middle Ages to the

XIX Century [Illustrated]



Le Roman du Prince Othon

[A rendering in French of R. L. Stevenson's PRINCE OTTO]



*The* BATH  
COMEDY

By AGNES and EGERTON CASTLE  
*Authors of "The Pride of Jennico."*



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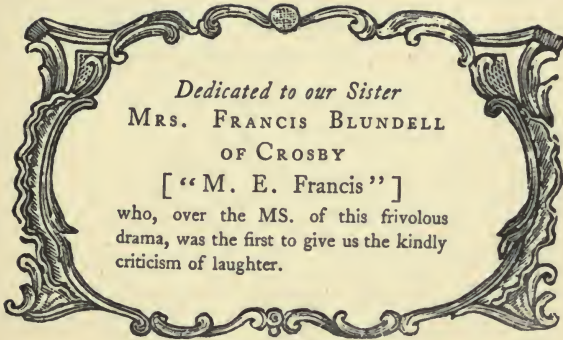
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GIFT

Randall



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## P R E F A C E



*THE Royal Crescent—*

“Open we here on a Spring day  
fine”

*the first scene of this Bath  
Comedy.*

*The precise year, however,  
may not be given. A  
sufficient reason for reticence in the matter  
of exact date will be found in the un-  
fortunate predicament of the then Bishop  
of Bath and Wells: undoubtedly a most  
mortifying episode in the life of an in-  
variably dignified Divine. Now there were  
several Bishops of Bath and Wells dur-  
ing the second half of the 18th century,  
and this trifling lack of circumstantiality will  
do away with the least trace of scandal.*

*The second half of the century, however, is ad-  
mitted.—The fact, indeed, would be revealed  
at once to the curious in the matter, by the  
mention, on the one hand, of the King’s Circus,  
(which dates from the last years of second  
George) and, on the other, by the reference to  
Bathwick Meadows as a solitary site and*

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*still fitted at the time to an "honourable meeting," whereas it has been known as a place of popular resort (under the name of Sydney Gardens) since the year 1795.*

*A few other points, again (should anyone think worth his while to consider so trifling a question), might serve to fix within a few lustres the date of Mrs. Kitty Bellairs' cantrips as they affected, among other things, Lady Standish's domestic happiness, Mr. O'Hara's connubial hopes and my Lord Verney's sentimental education.*

*It may be noticed, for instance, that the gentlemen wear their swords. That was, as most people know, a distinction strenuously denied them so long as the immortal Master of Ceremonies, Mr. Richard Nash, reigned as "King of Bath." Now, his autocratic rule came to an end before George the Third was King. As another landmark, it will be recalled that the notorious and indecorous encounter between Richard Brinsley Sheridan and that unpleasant personage Captain Matthews was the last duel with swords fought*



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*in the Kingdom; and it was fought in 1772. Furthermore, our Captain Spicer (whether veraciously or not) claims to have been a favoured pupil of the famous Angelo—and such a perfecting course in the Noble Art could not have been acquired before the early sixties. Then, again, there is still a good deal of powder in our actors' head-dress. The slippers of our actresses are still delicious and high-heeled; the sandal of the nineties has not yet made its dreadful appearance. And the ladies' visard, if not so universal as it once had been, is still an accepted institution.*

*It will suffice, in short, to say of our characters (if once more we may be allowed to paraphrase some of Mr. Austin Dobson's dainty verses) that*

*They lived in that past Georgian day,  
When men were less inclined to say  
That "Time is Gold," and overlay  
With toil their pleasure. . . .*

*Those were, on the whole, rather more joyous times than our own, and more different than the mere lapse of one century seems to account*



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*for. The gentlemen, then, dressed almost as handsomely, prinked and plumed themselves as elaborately, as the ladies. Gallantry, in both senses, and ready wit were their most precious claim: a fight was considered a full remedy to a slight, a sharp epigram to an injury. Heavy drinking was held an indispensable accompaniment to good-fellowship; and love-making was a far suppler art than seems known to this more earnest century—a pastime for “the quality,” something on par with the gambling passion. “Virtue,” not modesty, was woman’s fair fame. A forcible abduction would at a pinch be argued as an undeniable compliment. Life ran like a dance, then, with merry, tapping heels and light-hearted interchange of partner: those old-world days were much younger than ours!*

*So much for the times, and for the characters. For scenery we have this gem among prosperous towns.—The grey stone city of wealthy, sedate residences, arranged with noble architectural effect in broad straight streets, wide open squares, parades, terraces, crescents; tier*



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*upon tier, on the slope of a hill down to the water's edge; set serenely in a wooded valley, with much green in perspective beyond the lazy, slowly winding Avon.*

*Indeed, of its kind Bath is unique among the cities of Europe. Deprived as it is, by modern conditions, of its former social attractions, it is still one of the most beautiful.*

*Like so many very old towns, it has had a long Roman existence: its luxurious baths and other remains testify to its splendour when it was known as Aquæ Solis. It filled, also, an important place in the land as a Mediæval Borough, wall-girt and defensible: of that period the Abbey Church, the "Lantern of England," remains a handsome bequest. But, on the surface at least, there is now nothing to recall vividly any older past than the days of periwig, of powder and patches, of "wine and walnut" wit. Its characteristic charm, one which happily the present age has had little power to efface, is par excellence that of the 18th century; for it was in early and middle Georgian years that, with a strange*



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suddenness, "The Bath" became an accepted centre of fashion and pleasure and assumed its special physiognomy of leisure, wealth and exclusiveness.

This old-world air still hangs about the residential part of the Town, and in a singularly haunting way. In those broad streets, calm and silent and almost deserted at most hours; in those high-windowed houses, typical of stateliness and cold elegance rather than of lolling comfort, the very atmosphere seems to this day redolent of "Chippendale" notions. The sordidly plain modern dress of man is painfully incongruous; the rattling cab is a discord. It would be a relief, much more than an astonishment, to note an obvious three-cornered hat, a broad-skirted coat, on one's fellow man; to hear on the flags the regular tramp of Chairmen swinging along some dainty charge, deliciously powdered and rouged!

The course of an hundred and odd years has obliterated some scenes, and modified all to some extent. Orange Grove has lost, 'tis





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*true, much of its discreet character; and its neighbouring chocolate rooms (so handy to intrigues) are now only memories. The Assembly Rooms are shorn of all fashion. The new Great Pump Room is not quite a replica of the old, though it has retained its general air.—But the Crescents, Royal and Lansdowne, the Circus, Gay Street and Queen Square, the Parades, and the flags of Abbey Place, are still for us. At certain hours, if we have the mood, we can readily people them again in our mind's eye with notable guests of "The Bath" in its great days . . . Dr. Johnson and my Lord Chesterfield, Pope, Oliver Goldsmith, Sheridan, Smollett, Chatham, Gainsborough, Fanny Burney, according to the fleeting thought—all "faithfuls" of the Spa—Greatness, Literature, Art, mere Fashion. Or, again, shall we say Squire Bramble, or Lydia Languish or Sir Anthony Absolute; or blushing, too ingenuous Evelina . . . ?*

*Why, the place is alive with suggestion! Here a house front, with its carved stone*



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wreaths and urns and bosses, with its pedimented windows or its shell-canopied door (still provided with its long since honorary link-extinguisher) if you look at it inquiringly, seems ready to tell its tale of by-gone life. But, unlike that of so many buildings of a past age, the tale of a house in Bath rarely takes the earnest romantic turn: it is irresistibly a "Comedy," comedy of intrigue and manners, of fashion and all its consequent frivolity (with perhaps just a little pathos, but never beyond the limits of elegance)—*comédie à la Français*, mostly. *Je trompe, tu trompes, nous trompons . . . !*

In this guise the first stately building at the western extremity of the Royal Crescent, its pilasters, its stone steps and curvetting iron-work, clamoured to tell of Lady Standish's so nearly disastrous experiment on her husband's credulity. The corner house of Gay Street near George Street (opposite the alluring old-book store of Mr. Meehan—the genial Bath Antiquary) proclaimed at all the pores of its crumbling stones, as clearly as if the



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*commemorative tablet had duly been erected, that the warm-hearted Irishman, the Honble. Denis O'Hara, had dwelt there in the year 17—.* There is another house, at the southern corner of Queen Square, adorned with Cupids' heads and cornucopiæ, which, beyond all manner of doubt, in that same year was the "lodging" (*Fashion spoke of lodgings then!*) of the ingenious young widow Bellairs. In the same manner the middle building, facing west, of Pierrepont's Street (one of the most correct in Bath) has still all the conscious air of having sheltered once that most excellent young man, Lord Verney.

One of the drawbacks of setting down a comedy in narrative form is the necessary curtailing of all descriptive passages and explanatory ethical disquisitions; in such a frame pen and ink pictures of scenery and the rendering of atmosphere are out of place.

Let it therefore be borne in mind that, in this Butterfly Drama, with the exception of the penultimate scene enacted at the Inn in Devizes, the scenery is altogether cast in or

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*about the handsome old grey town; in its lofty-ceiled, polished-floored rooms, rather bare; on its broad pavement, clean and trim and as little crowded as any conventional stage. Of the rest it must be understood that we are in the midst of what has been extolled as "the Bath manner," and that throughout, as was said of another, but world-wide known, "Bath Comedy,"*

"Love gilds the scene, and woman guides the plot!"

*A. and E. C.*

*49 Sloane Gardens*

*London, S. W.*

*April, 1900*

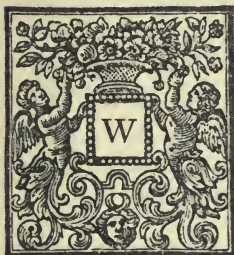
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# THE BATH COMEDY

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## SCENE I.

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“WHAT? My sweet Lady Standish in tears!”  
Mistress Kitty Bellairs poised her dainty person on one foot, and cast a mocking, somewhat contemptuous, yet good-humoured glance at the slim length of sobbing womanhood prone on the gilt-legged, satin-cushioned sofa.

“Tears,” said Mistress Kitty, twirling round on her heel to look at the set of her new sacque in the mirror and admire its delicate flowered folds, as they caught the shafts of spring sunshine that pierced into the long dim room from the narrow street, “tears, my dear, unless you cry becomingly, which I would have you know not one in the thousand can, are a luxury every self-respecting woman ought to deny herself. Now I,” said Mistress Kitty, and tweaked at a powdered curl, and turned

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## THE BATH COMEDY

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her head like a bird for a last glimpse at the mirror before sinking into an arm-chair and drawing closer to her afflicted friend, "have not shed a tear since I lost my first lover, and that is—I will not say how many years ago. I was a mightily precocious child! When I say a tear, mind you, 'tis a figure of speech. Far be it from me to deny the charm of a pearly drop—just one: enough to gather on the tip of the finger, enough just to suffuse the pathetic eye. Oh, that is not only permissible, 'tis to be cultivated. But such weeping as yours—sobs that shake you, tears that drench the handkerchief, redden the eyes, not to speak of the nose—fie! fie! it is clean against all reason. Come!" with a sudden gentle change of tone, putting her hand on the abased head, where fair curls luxuriated in all their native sunshine, "what is it all about?"

Lady Standish slowly and languidly drew herself into a sitting posture, and raised a countenance marred out of its delicate

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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beauty by the violent passion of her grief. Swimming blue eyes she fixed upon the Mistress Kitty's plump, dimpling face.

"Alas!" she breathed upon the gust of a sigh that was as wet as an April breeze, and tripped up by a belated sob. "Alas! you see in me the most miserable of women. Alas! my heart is broken!"

Here the kerchief, soaked indeed beyond all possible utility, was frantically held to streaming eyes once more.

"Mercy!" cried the pretty widow, "you could not take on worse if you had the small-pox: you, a three-months' wife!"

"Ah me!" moaned Lady Standish.

"So," said Mistress Kitty, "he has been a brute again, has he? Come, Julia, weep on my bosom. What is it now? Did he kiss you on the forehead instead of on the lips? Or did he say: 'Zounds, madam!' when you upset a dish of tea over his waistcoat? Or yet did he, could he, the monster!—nay, it is not possible, yet men are so—could he have whispered that Lady Caro-

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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line looked—passable last night?”

Lady Standish rose to her feet, crumpled her kerchief in one small hand, and faced her friend with tragic passion.

“It is useless to blind myself,” she said. “Cease to gibe at me, pray, Mistress Bel-lairs; I must face the truth! My husband loves me no longer. Oh! Kitty, Kitty,” dropping from her height of tragedy very quickly and landing on a whimper again, “is it not sad? I have tried, heaven is my witness, to win him back by the tenderest love, by the most pitiful pleading. He has seen me weep and pine. ‘Rob me of your love,’ I have told him, ‘and you rob me of life.’ And he, he—oh, how shall I tell you? As the days go by he is with me less and less. He walks abroad with others. His evenings he gives to strangers—ay, and half his nights—while I may sob myself to sleep at home. I saw him to-day but for two minutes—’twas half an hour ago. He entered here upon me, looking, ah Kitty! as only he can look, the most



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elegant and beautiful of men. I was singing, piping as a poor bird may to strive and call its mate to the nest. He passed through the room without a word, without a sign; he that used to say 'twas heaven to sit and listen to my voice. 'What!' I exclaimed as he reached the door, 'not a word for poor Julia?' Kitty, at the sound of that cry wrung from my heart, he turned and frowned, and said—— (Oh, oh, oh!)"

"Ha!" said Mistress Kitty, "what said he?" ("Heaven help him!" said she aside; "the woman's a fountain.")

"He said," sobbed Julia, "'Mayn't a man even go for a stroll?' Oh, had you but heard the cold indifferent tone, you would have understood how it cut me to the heart. I ran to him and laid my hand upon his sleeve, and he said——"

Again grief overcame her.

"Well, what said he?"

"He said—oh, oh!—he said, 'Julia, don't paw me.'"

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Mistress Kitty Bellairs, the reigning toast of Bath, the prettiest woman, in the estimation of her admirers, in all England, and the wittiest, laughed low to herself, then rose from her chair, took her tall friend by the shoulders, and walked her up to the mirror.

“Look at yourself,” said she, “and look at me.”

Lady Standish winced. The contrast between her own dishevelled hair, her marbled swollen countenance, her untidy morning gown, and the blooming perfection of the apparition beside her, was more than she could contemplate. Kitty Bellairs—as complete in every detail of beauty as a carnation—smiled upon herself sweetly.

“My dear,” said she, “I have had thirty-seven *declared* adorers these three years, and never one tired of me yet. Poor Bellairs,” she said with a light sigh, “he had two wives before me, and he was sixty-nine when he died, but he told me with

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his last breath that 'twas I gave him all the joy he ever knew."

Lady Standish ceased weeping as suddenly as if her tears had been mechanically turned off. She regarded the widow earnestly.

"Now, child," said Mistress Bellairs, with all the authority of her twenty-six years, "here we have been four weeks acquainted, and you have more than once done me the honour of saying that you considered me your friend."

"'Tis so," said Lady Standish.

"Then listen to me. There are three great rules to be observed in our dealings with men. The first rule comprises an extraordinary number of minor details, but briefly and comprehensively it runs thus: *Never be monotonous!* Second rule: *Never let a man be too sure of you!* Oh! that is a wonderful wise maxim: reflect upon it. Third: *Never, never let a man see how—well, how far from lovely you can look!* Tush, tush, you are a better-looking woman than I

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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am, but not when you have been blubbering, and not when you are fretful.”

Lady Standish suddenly sat down as if her limbs could support her no more. She looked up at the ceiling with tear-dimmed eyes.

“Pray,” said Mistress Kitty inquisitorially *ex cathedra*, “how many times a day do you tell that unfortunate man that you love him? And, worse still, how many times a day do you want him to say that he loves you? I vow ’tis enough to drive him to cards, or wine, or something infinitely worse that also begins with a w! And, pray, if you spend all you have, and empty your purse, do you think your purse becomes a very valuable possession? ’Tis a mere bit of leather. Nay, nay, keep your gold, and give it out piece by piece, and do not give it at all unless you get good change for it. Oh,” cried Kitty, a fine flush of indignation rising scarlet behind her rouge, “I marvel that women should be such fools!—to act the handmaid where

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they should ever rule as mistress; to cast forth unsought what they should dole out only to the supplicant on bended knee. Hath a man ever had from *me* an unsolicited avowal? Have I ever thrown the most ardent lover more than a 'perhaps,' and 'it may be,' a smile, a dimple, a fingertip? (What they have stolen I have not given, that is obvious! And, besides, 'tis neither here nor there.) And pray, Lady Standish, since when have you left off putting on rouge and having your hair tired and powdered, and wearing a decent gown of mornings and a modish saçque, and a heel to that pretty foot, a jewel in the ear and a patch beneath the lip?"

Lady Standish had ceased contemplating the ceiling; she was looking at her friend. "But, madam," she said, "this is strange advice. Would you have me coquette with my husband, as if—God forgive me for even saying such a thing—as if I were not wife, but mistress?"

"La, you there," said Mistress Bellairs,

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and clapped her hands, "there is the whole murder out! You are the man's lawful, honest wife, and therefore all tedium and homeliness, all fretful brow and tearful eye. God save us! who shall blame him if he seek a pleasant glint of vice to change him of you?"

There fell a silence. Lady Standish rose indignant, grew red, grew pale, caught a glimpse of herself again in the mirror, shrank from the sight, and crept back to the sofa with a humble and convicted air. Then she cast a look of anguished pleading at Mistress Bellairs' bright unfeeling countenance.

"Tell me," she said with a parched lip, "what shall I do?"

"Do!" cried the widow, rising with a brisk laugh, "get some powder into your hair, and some colour into those cheeks! And when Sir Jasper returns (he left you in tears, he will be sullen when he comes home; 'tis a mere matter of self-defence) let him find you gay, *distrante*; say a sharp

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thing or two if you can; tell him you do not need his company this afternoon. Ah, and if you could make him jealous! 'Tis a very, very old trick, but then, you see, love is a very old game, the oldest of all. Make him jealous, my dear, make him jealous and you'll win the rubber yet!"

"Jealous!" cried the three-months' wife, and all the blood of the innocent country girl leapt to her brow. "Oh, madam, how could that be?"

"Look out a beau, nay, two or three, 'tis safer! Talk discreetly with them in the Pump-Room, let them fan you at the ball, let them meet you in Orange-Grove. Or, if you have not spirit enough—and indeed, my sweet life, you sadly lack spirit—start but an imaginary one, merely for the use of your lord and master: I wager you he will rise to the fly."

"I am afraid Sir Jasper could be *very* jealous," said the other uneasily. "I remember before we were wed, when my cousin Harry would ride with me to the meet,

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oh, how angry Sir Jasper was! He swore he would shoot himself, ay, and he was all for shooting Harry too."

"But he was not the less ardent with you on the score of it, I'll warrant him," said the experienced Mistress Bellairs.

"Ah, no," said Lady Standish, and her lip trembled over a smile, while the ready water sprang to her eyelashes, and: "Ah, no!" she said again. "Indeed, he loved me then very ardently."

"And he'll love you so still if you have but a spark of courage. Get you to your room," said the widow, goodhumouredly, "bustle up and play your part. Where is that woman of yours?"

She pushed Lady Standish before her as she spoke, herself rang the call-bell for the tirewoman, and gave a few pregnant suggestions to that worthy, who advanced all sour smiles and disapproving dips. Then she strolled back into the drawing-room and paused a moment as she slipped on her long gloves. Next she drew a letter



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from her pocket and began to read it with a thoughtful brow.

“No, no, Sir Jasper,” she said half aloud, “you’re a fine gentleman, and a pretty fellow, you have a neat leg, and an eloquent turn of speech, but I will not have the child’s heart broken for the amusement of an idle day.”

She took the letter between each little forefinger and thumb as if to tear it, thought better of it, folded it again and thrust it back into its place of concealment.

Presently she smiled to herself, and walked out of the long open window across the little strip of garden, and so through the iron gate into the shady back street.

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# THE BATH COMEDY

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## SCENE II.

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SIR Jasper Standish halted on the flags of the Royal Crescent in front of his own door and his face darkened. He took a pinch of snuff.

“Now! I shall find my lady in tears. What a strange world it is! The girl you woo is as merry as a May day: the wife you wed is like naught but early November. Equinoctial gales and water enough to drown the best spirits that ever were stilled. ’Tis a damp life,” said Sir Jasper, “and a depressing.”

He sighed as the door was thrown open by the footman, and crossed the hall into the morning-room, where he had left his lady weeping. He beheld a flowered brocade, a very shapely back, and a crisp powdered head outlined against the window, and thought he had come upon a visitor unawares.

“I crave ten thousand pardons,” quoth he,

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and swept from his gallant head his knowing three-cornered hat. But slowly the figure at the window turned and he saw his wife's eyes strangely brilliant over two pink cheeks, beneath the snow of her up-piled hair.

“Julia!” said he in amaze, and stared and stared again. (“And did I doubt my own taste?” thought he to himself. “Why, she is the prettiest woman in Bath!”) “Expecting visitors, Julia?” He smiled as he spoke: in another minute that arm, shining pearl-like from the hanging lace of her sleeve, would be round his neck, and those lips (how red they were, and what a curve!) would be upon his. Well, a loving woman had her uses.

“No,” said Lady Standish to his query. She dropped the word with a faintly scornful smile, and a dimple came and went at the corner of her lip. There was a patch just above the dimple. Then she turned away and looked forth into the still, solemn, gray and green Crescent as before.

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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Sir Jasper stood bewildered. Then he put his hat upon a table and came up to his wife and placed his arm round her waist. "My sweet life," said he, "your gown is vastly becoming."

"Sir Jasper," said Lady Standish, "you do me proud." She slipped from his embrace, sketched a curtesy, and moved to the next window.

Sir Jasper passed his hand across his brow. That was Julia, Julia his wife, sure enough; and yet, faith, it was a woman he did not know!

"You are mightily interested in the Crescent," said he, with some humour.

My lady shrugged her shoulders.

"I believe you were vexed with me this morning, love," said he.

"I, vexed?" said she. "Nay, why should I be vexed?" and then she tapped her foot and looked at the clock. "These servants grow monstrously unpunctual," she said; "are we not to dine to-day?"

He glanced down at the tapping shoe, its

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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little pointing toe and curving heel. 'Twas a smart shoe, and boasted a diamond buckle in a knot of rose-coloured ribbon. "Egad!" said he, "I doubt if there is another foot in Bath that could slip into that case."

And Sir Jasper was a connoisseur! His opinion of himself, his faith in his own discrimination (which had waned sadly these last days) began to rise again, not disagreeably. He smirked. My Lady Stan-dish, who, after a way that only women can practise, seemed absorbed in the contemplation of the empty Crescent the while she was intent upon each shade of expression upon her husband's countenance, felt a sudden glow of confidence in her own powers that she had never known before. The game she had started with a beating heart and a dry throat began to have a certain charm of its own. Was it so easy really? Was a man so lightly swayed? There was contempt in the thought, and yet pleasure. Was all a woman's loving

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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heart to count for so little, and a pretty gown, a new shoe, a coquettish manner for so much? Ah, there was bitterness in that! But yet the immediate result of this new method: that look in his eye, that softening of his lip, it was too sweet to be forborne. Kitty was right!

Sir Jasper took her hand.

“It wants,” said he, “full half an hour to dinner-time, love. Nay, do not draw your hand away. You are vexed with me? I left you weeping; ’twas unkind.”

“Weeping?” said Julia, and her heart fluttered to her throat, so that she could hardly speak, and Kitty’s maxims kept dancing before her eyes as if written in letters of fire. “Make him jealous—oh, if you make him jealous you will win the rubber yet!”

“If I wept,” said she, “must my tears have been for you?”

“How now?” said Sir Jasper, and dropped the little hand that struggled so gently yet determinedly to be free.

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## THE BATH COMEDY

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“Oh, dear me,” said Lady Standish, “how droll you men are!” She shrugged her shoulders and laughed affectedly. Like all budding actresses, she overdid the part. But Sir Jasper was too much stirred, too much bewildered, to be critical. Moreover his armour was not without vulnerable joints, and with a wanton word she had found one at the first pass.

“How now?” said he. “Madam, and what might that mean?”

Lady Standish trilled the bar of a song, and again directed her attention to the view.

“Julia,” said her husband in a deep voice. “Julia,” he repeated, with a threatening growl of passion.

“Sir?” she said, and tilted her little head. “Who then were your tears for, if they were not for me? What signify these manners? What do these insinuations mean? By Jupiter, I will have the truth!” His face flushed, the veins on his temples swelled, his nostrils became dilated.

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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Lady Standish lifted the hanging lace of her sleeve with one hand and examined it minutely.

“I would rather,” she said, and her voice shook, “I would rather you did not question me, Sir Jasper.” Then she flashed upon him in anger, swift and lovely as he had never seen her flash before. “You go your own way free enough,” she said. “These last three weeks you have not spent one evening in my company, and half your days are given to others of whom I know nothing. Oh, I am not complaining, sir! I did complain, but that is over. I was wrong, for I see adversities have their advantages.” Here she smiled. (Had the man but known how near she was to tears!) “Your neglect leaves me free.”

“Free!” cried Sir Jasper, and choked. “Free! Good heavens, free! What in the name of God do you mean? Free, madam?”

“Sir Jasper,” said Lady Standish, looking at him very earnestly, “you will never



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## THE BATH COMEDY

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hear me ask again whose society it is you find so much more attractive than your wife's."

"Indeed," cried Sir Jasper, and hesitated upon a gust of anger, at a loss in which direction to drive it forth.

"No," said my lady, "and I expect the same good taste from you. 'Tis not too much to ask. Indeed, you should rejoice if I have found consolation for your absence. "

He broke out with a fearful oath, and almost leaped upon her.

"Consolation!" He plunged his hands into his powdered hair, and quivered into silence for the very impotence of words.

"I said 'if,'" said she. She was surprised to find how readily the words came to her; and yet her hands were clammy with fright, and her breath ran short between her rouged lips. "Let us leave it at the 'if.'" She turned to the window and leant against it, drew her kerchief and fanned herself

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## THE BATH COMEDY

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Passing along the railings opposite the Crescent, not twelve yards distant, a tall, slender young gentleman of attractive appearance, though very dark in complexion, caught sight of her lovely glowing face, stared first in unconscious admiration, then with recognition, and finally, blushing swarthily, saluted with some appearance of agitation. Lady Standish, aware that her husband had approached close behind her, and hearing in every creak of his satin coat the flattering emotion of his senses, felt herself driven more and more by the unknown demon of mischief that had taken possession of her. She fluttered her little handkerchief back at the young gentleman with a gesture that almost indicated the wafting of a kiss.

“Death and damnation!” cried Sir Jasper, “before my very eyes!”

He seized her by the wrist and flung her down upon the settee. “Nay,” he cried, “there may be husbands that would put up with this, but I am not of them. So

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## THE BATH COMEDY

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that is the Consoler! That is the Beau for whom you prink yourself with such fine feathers, whom you lie in wait for at the window to make signals to and smirk at! Oh, my innocent country daisy! Faugh! I might have known you were too fond—hypocrite!” He dashed at the window and burst its fastenings.

“Hey! you, you my Lord Verney, a word with you!” Sir Jasper was already foaming at the mouth.

The slim gentleman paused, surprised.

“Oh, heavens!” cried Lady Standish, “what have I done? Sir Jasper! my husband!” She threw herself upon him. “Sir Jasper, what do you suspect? Oh, heavens!” She was half fainting and scarce could articulate a coherent word. “It was all to tease you. It was but the sport of an idle moment. Oh, I implore you, believe me, believe me!”

“Ay, deny!” cried he. “Deny what I have seen with my own eyes! Let me go, madam.” He thrust her aside, and bare-

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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headed dashed down the stairs and out of the house toward Lord Verney, who, with a bashful, yet a pleasant smile, began to retrace his steps.

“’Tis a fair day, Sir Jasper,” said he courteously, and then became aware of Sir Jasper’s convulsed face, and noted that Lady Standish, whom but a moment before he had beheld all smiling beauty, now clung despairingly to the window-post, her countenance ghastly behind her rouge. Lord Verney was a shy young man.

“ Ah—ah, good-morning,” said he, bowed politely, and turned with celerity.

Sir Jasper flung a look of infinite derision and contempt toward his wife.

“ You have chosen,” it seemed to say, “ a pretty hare.” Then he arrested the slim, swift figure with an aggressive shout:

“ Stand—stand, Lord Verney—Lord Verney—a word with you.”

The youth stopped, wheeled round, and: “ I am at your service,” said he. A certain pallor had replaced the ingenuous young

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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blushes upon his cheek, but into his eye there sprang a fine spark of spirit.

Sir Jasper marched upon him, and only halted when his six feet of sinewy bulk were within a yard of the stripling's willowy shape. His hot red-brown eyes shot fire and fury, death and annihilation upon the innocent young peer. His full lips endeavoured to sneer, but rage distorted them to a grimace through which his white teeth shone forth ferociously.

"Come, come, we understand each other," said he; "will you walk with me? There is no time like the present, and a couple of friends are easy to come by."

"'Tis vastly well," said Lord Verney with an attempt at dignity that betrayed the boy in every line of him. Then all at once colour flushed into his face again and his rigid demeanour was broken up. "Come, devil take it all, Sir Jasper," said he, "and what is it about?"

Sir Jasper threw bloodshot eyes upward.

"This fellow," quoth he, appealing to

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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heaven—"oh! this pretty fellow! You want reasons, my Lord Verney?"

Lord Verney blushed and stammered. Gad, he'd like to know what he had done. He was at Sir Jasper's disposition, of course, but before drawing swords on a man—— Sir Jasper uttered a sound which was between a groan and a roar. He indicated with sweeping gesture the figure of Lady Standish strained in anguish watching, clinging still to the window-post. Then he hissed: "I know!"

"Sir Jasper!"

"I know, I tell you," repeated Sir Jasper, "let that suffice."

"Good heavens," gasped Lord Verney, "here is some most grievous mistake! Do you mean, sir—am I to understand, Sir Jasper—? 'Tis monstrous." White dismay and crimson confusion chased each other across his candid brow. "Surely you do not mean me to understand that Lady Standish has any connection with this extraordinary scene?"

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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Sir Jasper's trembling hand was furiously uplifted, then blindly sought his sword-hilt, and then dropped in impotent disgust at his side.

"My lord," said he, "Lady Standish is the pearl of womanhood, I would have you know it! There never breathed a female more virtuously attached to her husband and her duty—I would have you know it!" His face was quite horrible to look at in its withering sarcasm. "My quarrel with you, sir, is——" He paused and cast a roving eye upon the young gentleman, who now began to show unequivocal signs of fear. A jealous husband, a contingency that may have to be met any day—but a raving maniac!

"'Tis the shape of your leg that displeases me, sir. You have a vile calf, I can not endure that so offensive an outline should pass and repass my windows."

"I understand, Sir Jasper, yes, yes," said Lord Verney soothingly, backing as he spoke and casting nervous eyes round the

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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empty street. "And so, good-morning." He bowed and turned.

"Rat!" cried Sir Jasper, and shot forth a clutching hand.

"I will bear it in mind," cried Lord Verney. "Good-morning, good-morning!" He was fleeing away on a swift foot.

"Rat! Rat!" screamed the enraged baronet, starting in pursuit. But his passion made him clumsy. He stumbled, lurched, struck his foot against a stone, fell upon his knee and rose in another mood: one of darkling, sullen determination for revenge.

Lord Verney was a timid young man. Had it been with anyone else that this scene in the Royal Crescent had taken place, all Bath would have known within the hour that Sir Jasper Standish had been seized with sudden lunacy. But Lord Verney was of those who turn a word over three times before they speak and then say something else. Moreover, he was not sure that he himself had cut a brilliant



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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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figure in the amazing duologue, so he held his tongue upon it.

As the day grew, however, he began to have a curious recollection of Lady Standish's lovely smiling greeting and of that little gesture with the white handkerchief, which had almost seemed like the blowing of a kiss (here his very ears would grow hot), then of Sir Jasper's inexplicable wrath, and of the stricken figure by the window! Could it be? 'Twas impossible! Nay, but such things had been. When the dusk fell he made up his mind and sought the counsels of that fashionable friend who was kind enough to pilot his inexperience through the first shoals and rocks of Bath life. This gentleman's name was Spicer. He called himself Captain: of what regiment no one knew.

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# THE BATH COMEDY

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## SCENE III.

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SIR JASPER came striding back to the house. In the morning-room he passed his wife without a word.

“Sir Jasper,” quoth she, and shot out a timid hand, “oh, Sir Jasper, will you not listen to me? This is the most terrible mistake. Sir Jasper, I swear I am true to you, not only in deed, but in every inmost thought.” “Do not swear, madam,” said he, and shut the door in her face.

Ten minutes later he sallied forth again. She heard his steps ring out: they sounded very desperate. She sat on the pink-striped settee in a misery too deep this time for tears. How puerile, how far away, seemed the morning’s storm! She sat with her hands locked and her eyes starting, revolving terrible possibilities and fruitless plans for preventing them. Dinner was served

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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in vain. Her ladyship's woman brought her a dish of tea. This poor Julia drank, for she felt faint and weary. Then a sudden thought struck her.

“'Tis Mistress Bellairs who made the mischief,” she thought, “now she must mend it.” She dashed off a despairing note to the lady and dispatched her black page with all possible celerity.

“I have foilowed your advice,” ran the quivering lines, “to my undoing. You told me to make Sir Jasper jealous; I tried to make him jealous, and succeeded far too well. He fancies there is something between me and Lord Verney. Poor young man, I have spoken to him but three times in my life! There will be a duel and they will both be killed. Come to me, dear Mistress Bellairs, and see what is to be done, for I am half dead with fear and anguish.”

The dusk was falling when, with incredible celerity, the sedan-chair of Mistress Bellairs rounded the corner at a swinging pace; her bell-like voice might be heard from within rating the chairmen with no gentle tone for their sluggishness.

“'Tis snails ye are—snails, not men. La! is there one of you that is not a great-

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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grandfather? It is not, I would have you know, a coffin that you are carrying, but a chair. Oh, Gad, deliver me from such lazy scoundrels!”

In a storm she burst open the door; in a whirlwind tore through the passage. Lady Standish’s obsequious footmen she flounced upon one side. Into that afflicted lady’s presence she burst with undiminished vigour. “So,” said she, “these are fine goings on! And why Lord Verney, may I inquire?” “Oh, Mistress Bellairs,” ejaculated her friend, with a wail, “’tis indeed terrible. Think of Sir Jasper’s danger, and all because of my folly in listening to your pernicious advice!”

“My advice!” cried Mistress Kitty. “My advice—this is pretty hearing! Here, where is that woman of yours, and where are those stuffed owls you keep in the hall? What is the use of them, if they do not do their business? Light up, light up—who can speak in the dark?” She ran from one door to another, calling.

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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“Oh, dear!” sighed Lady Standish, and leant her distraught head against the cushions.

“Come, come,” cried Mistress Bellairs, heedless of the presence of footmen with tapers, and lady’s-maid with twinkling curl paper. “Sit up this minute, Julia, and tell me the whole from the beginning. It is no use your trying to extenuate, for I will know all that has happened.”

But before her friend, whose back was beginning to stiffen under this treatment, had had time to collect her thoughts sufficiently for a dignified reply, Mistress Kitty herself proceeded with great volubility:

“And so, madam, not content with having a new young husband of your own, you must fix upon Lord Verney for your maneuvers. Why, he has never so much as blinked the same side of the room as you. Why, it was but yester-night he vowed he hardly knew if you were tall or short. Put that out of your head, my

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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Lady Standish, Lord Verney is not for you. Oh, these country girls!"

Lady Standish rose, quivering with rage. "Be silent, madam," she said, "your words have neither sense nor truth. I was ill-advised enough to listen to your unwomanly counsels. I tried to deceive my husband and God has punished me."

"Ah," said Mistress Kitty, "deceit is a very grievous sin. I wonder at you, that you must fix upon Lord Verney. Oh, Julia!" here her voice grew melting and her large brown eyes suffused. "You had all Bath," she said, "and you must fix upon Lord Verney. The one man I thought . . . the one man I could have . . ."

Oh, how did you dare? Nay! It is a blind," she cried, flaming again into indignation and catching her friend by the wrist. "There was more in your game than you pretend, you sly and silken hypocrite! If he is killed, how will you feel then?"

"Oh," exclaimed Lady Standish, "cruel

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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woman! Is this your help? Sir Jasper killed!"

"Sir Jasper? Sir Fiddle!" cried Mistress Kitty, with a fine scorn. "Who cares for Sir Jasper? 'Tis my Harry I think of. Oh, oh!" cried the widow, and burst into tears. Lady Standish stood confounded.

"What!" cried she, "*you* love Lord Verney?"

"'Tis the only man of them," sobbed Kitty, "who does not pester me with his devotion—the only one who does not come to my call like a lap-dog. If I look at him, he blushes for bashfulness, and not for love; if his hand shakes, it is because he is so sweetly timid, not because my touch thrills him. I had set my heart," said Mistress Kitty through her clenched teeth—"I had set my heart upon Lord Verney, and now you must needs have him ki—ki—killed before I have even had time to make him see the colour of my eyes."

"Oh, oh!" sighed Julia Standish, still beyond tears.

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## THE BATH COMEDY

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And:

“Oh!” sobbed Kitty Bellairs, quite forgetful of red noses and swollen lids.

There was a silence, broken only by the sobs of the widow and the sighs of the wife.

Then said Mistress Kitty, in a small, strangled voice: “Let this be a lesson to you never to deceive.”

“I never told a single lie before,” moaned Lady Standish.

“Ah!” said Kitty, “there never was a single lie, madam. A lie is wed as soon as born, and its progeny exceeds that of Abraham.”

The two women rose from their despairing postures, and, mutually pushed by the same impulse, approached each other.

“What is to be done now?” said Lady Standish.

“What is to be done?” said Mistress Bellairs.

“Let us seek Sir Jasper,” said his wife, “and tell the whole truth.”



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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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Kitty, through wet eyelashes, shot a glance of withering scorn upon her friend.

“Ay,” she said sarcastically, “that would be useful truly. Why, child, let you and I but go and swear your innocence to Sir Jasper, and ’twill be enough to establish you steeped in guilt in the eyes of every sensible person for the rest of your life. No,” said she, “better must be thought of than that. We must act midwife to the lie and start the little family as soon as possible.”

“I will lie no more,” said Lady Standish.

“I am told,” said Mistress Kitty musingly, “that Lord Verney has learnt swordsmanship abroad.”

“Oh, cruel!” moaned the other.

Mistress Kitty paused, bit a taper finger, scratched an arch eyebrow, drew white brows together, pondered deeply. Suddenly her dimples peeped again.

“I have it!” said she. “’Tis as easy as can be. Will you leave it to me?”

Lady Standish began to tremble. She had

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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wept much, she had not eaten, her heart was full of terror. Faintness she felt creep upon her.

“What will you do?” she said, grasping after the vanishing powers of reflection with all her failing strength.

“Do?” said Mistress Bellairs. “First of all, prevent the duel. Will that serve you?”

“Oh, yes,” cried Julia, and grew livid behind her rouge.

“She has got the vapours again,” thought the other. “What a poor weak fool it is!”

But these vapours came in handy to her plans; she was not keen to restore Lady Standish too promptly. She called her woman, however, and helped her to convey the sufferer to her room and lay her on the couch; then she advised *sal volatile* and sleep.

“Leave it all to me,” she murmured into the little ear uppermost upon the pillow; “I will save you.”

Lady Standish groped for her friend’s

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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hand with her own that was cold and shaking. The ladies exchanged a clasp of confidence, and Mistress Bellairs tripped down to the drawing-room.

“Now,” said she to herself, “let us see.” Sudden inspiration sparkled in her eye. She plunged her hand into the depth of the brocade pocket dangling at her side, drew forth sundry letters, and began to select with pursed lips. There was Sir Jasper’s own. Those gallant, well-turned lines, that might mean all or nothing, as a woman might choose to take them—that was of no use for the present. Back it went into the brocade pocket. There was a scrawl from Harry Verney, declining her invitation to a breakfast party because he had promised (with two m’s) my Lord Scroop to shoot (with a u and an e). Kitty Bellairs looked at it very tenderly, folded it with a loving touch, and replaced it in its nest. Here was a large folded sheet, unaddressed, filled inside with bold black writing. A crisp auburn curl

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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was fastened across the sheet by an emerald-headed pin.

“Most cruel, most beautiful, most kind!” were its ardent words, “most desired, most beloved! Was it last night or a hundred years ago that we met? This is the lock of hair the loveliest hand in all the world deigned to caress. It became upon that moment far too precious a thing for its poor owner. He ventures, therefore, to offer it at the shrine of the goddess who consecrated it. Will she cast it from her? Or will she keep it, and let it speak to her, every hair a tongue, of the burning flame of love that she has kindled in this mortal breast? Did I dream, or can it be true?—there was a patch above the dimple at the corner of your lip. I kissed it. Oh, it must have been a dream! One word, fairest:—When may I dream again?

“Your own and ever your own.

“P. S.—The lock was white before you touched it, but you see you have turned it to fire!”

Mistress Kitty read and smiled. “The very thing!” Then she paused. “But has the woman a dimple?” said she. “Has she? Never mind, something must be risked. Now, if I know men, Sir Jasper will spend the whole night prowling about, trying to discover confirmation of his suspicions.”

The letter was folded up. “It must seem as if dropped from my lady’s bosom.

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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Here, at the foot of the sofa, just peeping from behind the footstool! A jealous eye cannot miss it!"

The deed was done.

She caught up her cloak and hood, glanced cheerfully round the room, satisfied herself that the letter showed itself sufficiently in the candle-light to attract a roving eye, and, bustling forth, summoned her chair for her departure in a far better humour than that which had marked her arrival.

"They could not fight till morning," she said to herself, as she snuggled against the silken sides. "Now heaven speed my plan!" She breathed a pious prayer as her bearers swung her onward.

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❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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SCENE IV.

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OR the first time for over a fortnight Sir Jasper returned to the very fine mansion he had taken for the Bath season, before the small hours.

It was about ten o'clock of the evening that his impatient hand upon the knocker sent thunder through the house, startled the gambling footmen in the hall below and the fat butler from his comfortable nook at the housekeeper's fireside and his fragrant glass of punch. The nerves of the elder footman were indeed so shaken that he dropped an ace from his wide cuff as he swung back the door. Breathing hot lemon-peel, the butler hurried to receive his master's cloak and cane. The ribbons of Mistress Tremlet's cap quivered over the staircase: the whole household was agog with curiosity, for her ladyship's woman had told them to a

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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tear the state of her ladyship's feelings. Sir Jasper cursed freely as he entered, struck the younger footman with his cane over the calves for gaping, requested a just Creator to dispose of his butler's soul with all possible celerity, and himself obligingly suggested the particular temperature most suitable to it; then strode he to the drawing-room with the brief announcement that he expected the visit of some gentlemen.

He looked round scowlingly for his wife. The room was empty and desolate in spite of bright chandeliers. He paused with a frowning brow, stood a moment irresolute, then shaped his course for the stairs and mounted with determined foot. In my lady's dressing-room, by one dismal candle, sat her woman, reading a book of sermons. She had a long pink face, had been her ladyship's mother's own attendant, and much Sir Jasper hated her. She rose bristling, dropped him a curtesy eloquent of a sense of his reprobation; and he felt that

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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with every line of the homily she laid by on his appearance she had just damned him as comfortably as he the butler.

Oh, Lud, Lud! (thus she prayed Sir Jasper in a frightful whisper) would he in mercy walk softer? My lady was asleep. Her ladyship had been so unwell, so indisposed, that she, Megrim, had seen the moment when she must send for the apothecary, and have Sir Jasper looked for all over Bath. Sir Jasper did not seem to realize it, but my lady was of a delicate complexion: a tender flower! A harsh look from Sir Jasper, an unkind word, much less cruel treatment, and she would slip through his fingers. Ay, that she would!

Sir Jasper cast a lowering suspicious look around. He glared at the woman, at the corners of the room, at the closed door. He felt his hot jealousy sicken and turn green and yellow within him. He stretched out his hand toward the lock of his wife's door; but Mistress Megrim came between him and his purpose with determined



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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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movement, her stout bust creaking in its tight stays.

“No,” said she, “no, Sir Jasper, unless it be across my dead corpse!” Here she trembled very much and grew red about the eyes and nose.

“Pshaw!” said Sir Jasper, and walked away, down the stairs again and into the empty, lighted drawing-room. First he halted by the window, where Lady Standish had stood and smiled upon Lord Verney. Then he went to her writing-desk, and laid his hand upon the casket where she kept her correspondence, then withdrawing it with a murmured curse, turned to the chair where she sat, and lifted up her bag of silks. But this he tossed from him without drawing the strings. Another moment and his eye caught the gleam of the letter so artfully hidden and exposed by Mistress Bellairs. He picked it up and surveyed it; it bore no address, was vaguely perfumed, and fell temptingly open to his hand. He spread

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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the sheet and saw the ruddy curl. Then his eyes read in spite of himself. And as he read the blood rushed to his brain and turned him giddy, and he sank on the settee and tore at the ruffles at his neck. For a moment he suffocated. With recovered breath came a fury as voluptuous as a rapture. He brought the paper to the light and examined the love-lock.

“Red!” said he, “red!”

He thought of Lord Verney’s olive face, and looked and glared at the hair again as if he disbelieved his senses. Red! Were there two of them, a black and a ruddy? Stay; oh! women were sly devils! Lord Verney was a blind. This, *this* carrot Judas was the consoler! “There was a patch above the dimple at the corner of your lip. I dreamed I kissed it.” Sir Jasper gave a sort of roar in his soul, which issued from his lips in a broken groan. The dimple and the patch! Ay, he had seen them! Only a few short hours ago he had thought to kiss that dimple with a husband’s lordly

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## THE BATH COMEDY

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pleasure. That dimple, set for another man!

“Blast them! blast them!” cried Sir Jasper, and clenched his hands above his head. The world went round with him, and everything turned the colour of blood. The next instant he was cold again, chiding himself for his passion. He must be calm, calm, for his vengeance. This lock he must trace to its parent head, no later than to-night, if he had to scour the town. He sat down, stretched the fatal missive before him, and sat staring at it.

It was thus that a visitor, who was announced as Captain Spicer, presently found him. Captain Spicer was an elongated young gentleman, with a tendency to strabism, attired in the extreme of fashion. He minced forward, bowing and waving white hands with delicately crooked fingers.

His respects he presented to Sir Jasper. He had not up to this had the pleasure and honour of Sir Jasper's acquaintance,

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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but was charmed of the opportunity—any opportunity which should afford him that pleasure and honour. Might he, might he? He extended a snuff-box, charmingly enamelled, and quivered it toward his host. Sir Jasper had risen stiffly; in his dull eye there was no response.

“You do not, then?” queried Captain Spicer, himself extracting a pinch and inhaling it with superlative elegance and the very last turn of the wrist. “And right, my dear sir! A vicious habit. Yet positively,” said he, and smiled engagingly, “without it, I vow, I could not exist from noon to midnight. But then it must be pure Macabaw. Anything short of pure Macabaw, fie, fie!”

Sir Jasper shook himself, and interrupted with a snarl:

“To what, sir, do I owe the honour?”

“I come,” said Captain Spicer, “of course you have guessed, from my Lord Verney. There was a trifle, I believe, about—ha—the shape of his nether limbs. Upon so

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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private a matter, sir, as his—ahem—nether limbs, a gentleman cannot brook reflection. You will comprehend that my Lord Verney felt hurt, Sir Jasper, hurt! I myself, familiar as I am with his lordship, have never ventured to hint to him even the name of a hosier, though I know a genius in that line, sir, a fellow who has a gift—a divine inspiration, I may say—in dealing with these intimate details. But Gad, sir, delicacy, delicacy!”

Sir Jasper, meanwhile, had lifted the letter from the table, and was advancing upon Captain Spicer, ponderingly looking from the lock of hair in his hand to that young gentleman's head, which however was powdered to such a nicety that it was quite impossible to tell the colour beneath.

“Sir,” interrupted he at this juncture, “excuse me, but I should be glad to know if you wear your hair or a wig?”

Captain Spicer leaped a step back, and looked in amaze at the baronet's earnest countenance.

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## THE BATH COMEDY

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“Egad!” he thought to himself, “Verney’s in the right of it, the fellow’s mad. Ha! ha!” said he aloud, “very good, Sir Jasper, very good. A little conundrum, eh? ‘Rat me, I love a riddle.” He glanced toward the door. Sir Jasper still advanced upon him as he retreated.

“I asked you, sir,” he demanded, with an ominous rise in his voice, “if you wore your own hair?” (“The fellow looks frightened,” he argued internally, “’tis monstrous suspicious!”)

“I,” cried the Captain, with his back against the door, fumbling for the handle as he stood. “Fie, fie, who wears a peruke nowadays, unless it be your country cousin? He, he! How warm the night is!”

Sir Jasper had halted opposite to him and was rolling a withering eye over his countenance.

“His mealy face is so painted,” said the unhappy baronet to himself, “that devil take him if I can guess the colour of the fellow.” His hand dropped irresolute by

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## THE BATH COMEDY

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his side. Beads of perspiration sprang on Captain Spicer's forehead.

"If ever I carry a challenge to a madman again!" thought he.

"Your hair is very well powdered," said Sir Jasper.

"Oh, it is so, it is as you say—*Poudre à la Maréchale*, sir," said the Captain, while under his persevering finger the door-handle slowly turned. An aperture yawned behind him; in a twinkling his slim figure twisted, doubled, and was gone.

"Hey, hey!" cried Sir Jasper, "stop, man, stop! Our business together has but just begun."

But Captain Spicer had reached the street door.

"Look to your master," said he to the footman, "he is ill, very ill!"

Sir Jasper came running after him into the hall.

"Stop him, fools!" cried he to his servants, and then in the next breath, "Back!" he ordered. And to himself he

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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murmured, "'Tis never he. That sleek, fluttering idiot never grew so crisp a curl, nor wrote so sturdy a hand; no, nor kissed a dimple! *Kissed a dimple!* S'death!"



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# THE BATH COMEDY

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## SCENE V.

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As he stood turning the seething brew of his dark thoughts, there came a pair of knowing raps upon the street door, and in upon him strode with cheery step and cry the friends he was expecting.

“Ah, Jasper, lad,” cried Tom Stafford, and struck him upon his shoulder, “lying in wait for us? Gad, you’re a bloodthirsty fellow!”

“And quite right,” said Colonel Villiers, clinking spurred legs, and flinging off a military cloak. “Zounds, man, would you have him sit down in his dishonour?”

Sir Jasper stretched a hand to each; and, holding him by the elbows, they entered his private apartment, and closed the door with such carefulness that the tall footmen had no choice but to take it in turns to listen and peep through the keyhole.

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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“Tom,” said Sir Jasper, “Colonel Villiers, when I begged you to favour me with this interview, I was anxious for your services because, as I told you, of a strong suspicion of Lady Standish’s infidelity to me. Now, gentlemen, doubt is no longer possible; I have the proofs!”

“Come, come, Jasper, never be down-hearted,” cried jovial Tom Stafford. “Come, sir, you have been too fond of the little dears in your day not to know what tender, yielding creatures they are. ’Tis their nature, man; and then, must they not follow the mode? Do you want to be the only husband in Bath whose wife is not in the fashion? Tut, tut, so long as you can measure a sword for it and let a little blood, why, ’tis all in the day’s fun!”

“Swords?” gurgled Colonel Villiers. “No, no, pistols are the thing, boy. You are never sure with your sword: ’tis but a dig in the ribs, a slash in the arm, and your pretty fellow looks all the prettier for his

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## THE BATH COMEDY

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pallor, and is all the more likely to get prompt consolation in the proper quarter. Ha!”

“Consolation!” cried Sir Jasper, as if the word were a blow. “Ay, consolation! damnation!”

“Whereas with your bullet,” said the Colonel, “in the lungs, or in the brain—at your choice—the job is done as neat as can be. Are you a good hand at the barkers, Jasper?”

“Oh, I can hit a haystack!” said Sir Jasper. But he spoke vaguely.

“I am for the swords, whenever you can,” cried comely Stafford, crossing a pair of neat legs as he spoke and caressing one rounded calf with a loving hand. “’Tis a far more genteel weapon. Oh, for the feel of the blades, the pretty talk, as it were, of one with the other! ‘Ha, have I got you now, my friend?’—‘Ha, would you step between me and my wife? or my mistress? or my pleasure?’—as the case may be. ‘Would you? I will teach you, sa—sa!’

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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Now—now one in the ribs! One under that presuming heart! Let the red blood flow, see it drop from the steel: that is something like! Pistols, what of them? Pooh! Snap, you blow a pill into the air, and 'tis like enough you have to swallow it yourself! 'Tis for apothecaries, say I, and such as have not been brought up to the noble and gentlemanly art of self-defence.”

“Silence, Tom,” growled the Colonel; “here is no matter for jesting. This friend of ours has had a mortal affront, has he not? 'Tis established. Shall he not mortally avenge himself upon him who has robbed him of his honour? That is the case, is it not? And, blast me, is not the pistol the deadlier weapon, and therefore the most suited? Hey?”

Sir Jasper made an inarticulate sound that might have passed for assent or dissent, or merely as an expression of excessive discomfort of feeling.

“To business then,” cried Colonel Villiers. “Shall I wait upon Lord Verney,

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## THE BATH COMEDY

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and suggest pistols at seven o'clock tomorrow morning in Hammer's Fields? That is where I generally like to place such affairs: snug enough to be out of disturbers' way, and far enough to warm the blood with a brisk walk. Gad, 'twas but ten days ago that I saw poor Ned Waring laid as neatly on his back by Lord Tipstaffe (him they call Topsy Tip, you know) as ever it was done; as pretty a fight! Six paces, egad, and Ned as determined a dog as a fellow could want to second. 'Villiers,' said he, as I handed him his saw-handle, 'if I do not do for him, may he do for me! One of us must kill the other,' said he. 'Twas all about Mistress Waring, you know, dashed pretty woman! Poor Ned, he made a discovery something like yours, eh? Faith! ha, ha! And devil take it, sir, Tip had him in the throat at the first shot, and Ned's bullet took off Tipstaffe's right curl! Jove, it was a shave! Ned never spoke again. Ah, leave it to me; see if I do not turn you out as rare a meeting.'

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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“But stay,” cried Stafford, as Sir Jasper writhed in his arm-chair, clenched and unclenched furious hands, and felt the curl of red hair burn him where he had thrust it into his bosom. “Stay,” cried Stafford, “we are going too fast, I think. Do I not understand from our friend here that he called Lord Verney a rat? Sir Jasper is therefore himself the insulting party, and must wait for Lord Verney’s action in the matter.”

“I protest,” cried the Colonel, “the first insult was Lord Verney’s in compromising our friend’s wife.”

“Pooh, pooh,” exclaimed Stafford, recrossing his legs to bring the left one into shapely prominence this time, “that is but the insult incidental. But to call a man a rat, that is the insult direct. Jasper is therefore the true challenger; the other has the choice of arms. It is for Lord Verney to send to our friend.”

“Sir!” exclaimed the Colonel, growing redder about the gills than Nature and

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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port wine had already made him, "sir, would you know better than I?"

"Gentlemen," said Sir Jasper, sitting up suddenly, "as I have just told you, since I craved of your kindness that you would help me in this matter, I have made discoveries that alter the complexion of the affair very materially. I have reason to believe that, if Lord Verney be guilty in this matter, it is in a very minor way. You know what they call in France *un chandelier*. Indeed, it is my conviction—such is female artfulness—that he has merely been made a puppet of to shield another person. It is this person I must find first, and upon him that my vengeance must fall before I can attend to any other business. Lord Verney indeed has already sent to me, but his friend, Captain Spicer, a poor fool (somewhat weak in the head, I believe), left suddenly, without our coming to any conclusion. Indeed, I do not regret it—I do not seek to fight with Lord Verney now. Gentlemen," said Sir

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## THE BATH COMEDY

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Jasper, rising and drawing the letter from his breast, "gentlemen, I shall neither eat nor sleep till I have found out the owner of this curl!"

He shook out the letter as he spoke, and fiercely thrust the telltale love-token under the noses of his amazed friends. "It is a red-haired man, you see! There lives no red-haired man in Bath but him I must forthwith spit or plug, lest the villain escape me!"

Colonel Villiers started to his feet with a growl like that of a tiger aroused from slumber.

"Zounds!" he exclaimed, "an insult!"

"How!" cried Jasper, turning upon him and suddenly noticing the sandy hue of his friend's bushy eyebrows. "You, good God! You? Pooh, pooh, impossible, and yet . . . Colonel Villiers, sir," cried Sir Jasper in awful tones, "did you write this letter? Speak—yes or no, man! Speak, or must I drag the words from your throat?"



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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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Purple and apoplectic passion well-nigh stifled Colonel Villiers.

“Stafford, Stafford,” he spluttered, “you are witness. These are gross affronts—affronts which shall be wiped out.”

“Did you write that letter? Yes or no!” screamed Sir Jasper, shaking the offending document in the Colonel’s convulsed countenance.

“I?” cried the Colonel, and struck away Sir Jasper’s hand with a furious blow, “I? I write such brimstone nonsense? No, sir! Now, damn you body and soul, Sir Jasper, how dare you ask me such a question?”

“No,” said Sir Jasper, “of course not. Ah, I am a fool, Villiers. Forgive me. There’s no quarrel between us. No, of course it could not be you. With that nose, that waistcoat, your sixty years! Gad, I am going mad!”

“Why, man,” said Stafford, as soon as he could speak for laughing, “Villiers has not so much hair on all his head as you hold in your hand there. Off with your

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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wig, Villiers, off with your wig, and let your bald pate proclaim its shining innocence."

The gallant gentleman thus addressed was by this time black in the face. Panting as to breath, disjointed as to speech, his fury had nevertheless its well-defined purpose. "I have been insulted, I have been insulted," he gasped; "the matter cannot end here. Sir Jasper, you have insulted me. I am a red-haired man, sir. I shall send a friend to call upon you."

"Nay, then," said Sir Jasper, "since 'tis so between us I will even assure myself that Tom has spoken the truth, and give you something to fight for!" He stretched out his hand as he spoke, and plucked the wig from Colonel Villiers' head.

Before him indeed spread so complete an expanse of hairless candour, that further evidence was not necessary; yet the few limp hairs that lingered behind the Colonel's ears, if they had once been ruddy, shone now meekly silver in the candle-light.

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## THE BATH COMEDY

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“I thank you,” said Sir Jasper, “that is sufficient. When you send your friend to call upon me, I shall receive him with pleasure.” He handed back the Colonel’s wig with a bow.

The Colonel stood trembling; his knotted hand instinctively fumbled for his sword. But, remembering perhaps that this was eminently a case for pistols, he bethought himself, seized his wig, clapped it on defiantly, settled it with minute care, glared, wheeled round and left the room, muttering as he went remarks of so sulphurous a nature as to defy recording.

Sir Jasper did not seem to give him another thought. He fell into his chair again and spread out upon his knee the sorely crumpled letter.

“Confusion!” said he. “Who can it be? Tom, you scamp, I know your hair is brown. Thou art not the man, Tom. Oh, Tom, oh, Tom, if I do not kill him I shall go mad!”

Stafford was weak with laughter, and tears

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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rolled from his eyes as he gasped:

“Let us see, who can the Judas be? (Gad, this is the best joke I have known for years. Oh, Lord, the bald head of him! Oh, Jasper, 'tis cruel funny! Stap me, sir, if I have known a better laugh these ten years!) Nay, nay, I will help thee. Come, there's His Lordship the Bishop of Bath and Wells, he is red, I know, for I have seen him in the water. Gad, he was like a boiled lobster, hair and all. Could it be he, think you? They have a way, these divines, and Lady Standish has a delicate conscience. She would like the approval of the Church upon her deeds. Nay, never glare like that, for I will not fight you! Have you not got your rosary of red polls to tell first? Ha! there is O'Hara, he is Irish enough and rake enough and red enough. Oh, he is red enough!”

“O'Hara!” cried Sir Jasper, struck.

There came a fine rat-tat-tat at the door, a parley in the hall, and the servant announced Mr. Denis O'Hara.

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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‘‘Talk of the devil,’’ said Stafford.  
Sir Jasper rose from his armchair with  
the air of one whose enemy is delivered  
into his hands.

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# THE BATH COMEDY

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## SCENE VI.

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THE Honourable Denis O'Hara, son and heir of Viscount Kilcrouney in the peerage of Ireland, entered with a swift and easy step, and saluted airily. He had a merry green eye, and the red of his crisp hair shone out through the powder like a winter sunset through a mist.

"Sir Jasper," said he, "your servant, sir. Faith, Tom, me boy, is that you? The top of the evening to ye."

Uninvited he took a chair and flung his careless figure upon it. His joints were loose, his nose aspired, his rich lace ruffles were torn, his handsome coat was buttoned awry; Irishman was stamped upon every line of him, from his hot red head to his slim alert foot; Irishman lurked in every rich accent of his ready tongue.

Sir Jasper made no doubt that now the

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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Lothario who had poached on his preserves, had destroyed his peace, had devastated his home, was before him. He turned to Stafford and caught him by the wrist. "Tom," whispered he, "you will stand by me, for by my immortal soul, I will fight it out to-night!"

"For God's sake, be quiet," whispered the other, who began to think that the jealous husband was getting beyond a joke. "Let us hear what the fellow has got to say first. The devil! I will not stand by to see you pink every auburn buck in the town. 'Tis stark lunacy."

"But 'tis you yourself," returned Sir Jasper, in his fierce undertone—"you yourself who told me it was he. See, but look at this curl and at that head."

"Oh, flummery!" cried Stafford. "Let him speak, I say."

"When you have done your little conversation, gentlemen," said Mr. O'Hara good-naturedly, "perhaps you will let me put in a word edgeways?"

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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Sir Jasper, under his friend's compelling hand, sank into a chair; his sinews well-nigh creaked with the constraint he was  
\* putting upon himself.

“I have come,” said Denis O’Hara, “from me friend Captain Spoicer. I met him a while ago, fluttering down Gay street, leaping like a hare with the hounds after him, by St. Patrick! ‘You’re running away from someone, Spoicer,’ says I. And says he, ‘I’m running away from that blithering madman Sir Jasper Standish.’ Excuse me, Sir Jasper, those were his words, ye see.”

“And what, sir,” interrupted Sir Jasper in an ominous voice—“what, sir, may I ask, was your purpose in walking this way to-night?”

“Eh,” cried the Irishman, “what is that ye say?”

“Oh, go on, O’Hara,” cried Stafford impatiently and under his breath to Standish, “Faith, Jasper,” said he, “keep your manners, or I’ll wash my hands of the whole matter.”



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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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“Oh, is that the way with him?” said O’Hara, behind his hand to Stafford, and winked jovially. “Well, I was saying, gentlemen, that to see a man run, unless it be a Frenchman, is a thing that goes against me. ‘Why, what did he do to you?’ said I (meaning you, Sir Jasper). ‘Oh,’ says me gallant Captain, ‘I went to him with a gentlemanly message from a friend, and the fellow insulted me so grossly with remarks about my hair, that sure,’ says he, ‘’tis only fit for Bedlam he is.’ ‘Insulted you,’ says I, ‘and where are ye running to? To look for a friend, I hope,’ says I. ‘Insults are stinking things.’ ‘Sure,’ says he, ‘he is mad,’ says he. ‘Well, what matter of that?’ says I. ‘Sure, isn’t it all mad we are, more or less? Come,’ says I, ‘Spoicer, this will look bad for you with the ladies, not to speak of the men. Give *me* the message, me boy, and I will take it; and sure we will let Sir Jasper bring his keepers with him to the field, and no one can say fairer than that.’”

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## THE BATH COMEDY

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Sir Jasper sprang to his feet.

“Now, curse your Irish insolence,” he roared; “this is more than I would stand from any man! And, if I mistake not, Mr. O’Hara, *we* have other scores to settle besides.”

“Is it *we*?” cried O’Hara, jumping up likewise. “’Tis the first I’ve heard of them—but, be jabers, you will never find me behind hand in putting me foot to the front! I will settle as many scores as you like, Sir Jasper—so long as it is me sword and not me purse that pays them.”

“Draw then, man, draw!” snarled Sir Jasper, dancing in his fury. He bared his silver-hilted sword and threw the scabbard in a corner.

“Heaven defend us!” cried Stafford, in vain endeavouring to come between the two.

“Sure, you must not contradict him,” cried O’Hara, unbuckling his belt rapidly, and drawing likewise with a pretty flourish of shining blade. “’Tis the worst way

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## THE BATH COMEDY

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in the world to deal with a cracked man. Sure, ye must soothe him and give in to him. Don't I know? Is not me own first cousin a real raw lunatic in Kinsale Asylum this blessed day? Come on, Sir Jasper, I'm yer man. Just pull the chairs out of the way, Tom, me dear boy."

"Now sir, now sir!" said Sir Jasper, and felt restored to himself again as steel clinked against steel. And he gripped the ground with his feet, and knew the joy of action.

"Well, what must be, must be," said Stafford philosophically, and sat across a chair; "and a good fight is a good fight all the world over. Ha, that was a lunge! O'Hara wields a pretty blade, but there is danger in Jasper's eye. I vow I won't have the Irish boy killed. Ha!" He sprang to his feet again and brandished the chair, ready to interpose between the two at the critical moment.

O'Hara was as buoyant as a cork; he skipped backward and forward, from one

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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side to another, in sheer enjoyment of the contest. But Sir Jasper hardly moved from his first position except for one or two vicious lunges. Stafford had deemed to see danger in his eye; there was more than danger—there was murder! The injured husband was determined to slay, and bided his time for the fatal thrust. The while, O'Hara attacked out of sheer lightness of heart. Now his blade grazed Sir Jasper's thigh; once he gave him a flicking prick on the wrist so that the blood ran down his fingers.

“Stop, stop!” cried Stafford, running in with his chair. “Sir Jasper's hit!”

“No, dash you!” cried Sir Jasper. And click, clank, click, it went again, with the pant of the shortening breath, and the thud of the leaping feet. Sir Jasper lunged a third time, O'Hara waved his sword aimlessly, fell on one knee, and rolled over.

“Halt!” yelled Stafford. It was too late. Sir Jasper stood staring at his red blade.

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## THE BATH COMEDY

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“You have killed him!” cried Stafford turning furiously on his friend, and was down on his knees and had caught the wounded man in his arms the next second. “Devil a bit,” said O’Hara, and wriggled in the other’s grasp, too vigorously indeed for a moribund, found his feet in a jiffy and stood laughing with a white face and looking down at his dripping shirt. “’Tis but the sudden cold feel of the steel, man! Sure I’m all right, and ready to begin again! ’Tis but a rip in the ribs, for I can breathe as right as ever.” He puffed noisily as he spoke to prove his words, slapped his chest, then turned giddily and fell into a chair. Stafford tore open the shirt. It was as O’Hara had said, the wound was an ugly surface rip, more unpleasant than dangerous.

“Let us have another bout,” said O’Hara.

“No, no,” said Stafford.

“No, no,” said Sir Jasper advancing and standing before his adversary. “No, Mr. O’Hara, you may have done me the

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## THE BATH COMEDY

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greatest injury that one can do another, but Gad, sir, you have fought like a gentleman!"

"Ah!" whispered O'Hara to Stafford, who still examined the wound with a knowing manner, "'tis crazed entoirely he is, the poor dear fellow."

"Not crazed," said Stafford rising, "or if so, only through jealousy.—Jasper, let us have some wine for Mr. O'Hara, and one of your women with water and bandages. A little sticking-plaister will set this business to rights. Thank God, that I have not seen murder to-night!"

"One moment, Stafford," said Jasper, "one moment, sir. Let us clear this matter. Am I not right, Mr. O'Hara, in believing you to have written a letter to my wife?"

"Is it me?" cried O'Hara in the most guileless astonishment.

"He thinks you are her lover," whispered Stafford in his ear. "Zooks, I can laugh again now! He knows she has got

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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a red-haired lover, and says he will kill every red-haired man in Bath!"

"Sure I have never laid eyes on Lady Standish," said O'Hara to Sir Jasper, "if that is all you want. Sure, I'd have been proud to be her lover if I'd only had the honour of her acquaintance!"

"Mr. O'Hara," said Sir Jasper, "will you shake hands with me?"

"With all the pleasure in loife!" cried the genial Irishman. "Faith, 'tis great friends we will be, but perhaps ye had better not introjuce me to ye'r lady, for I'm not to be trusted where the dear creatures are concerned, and so 'tis best to tell you at the outset."

The opponents now shook hands with some feeling on either side. The wound was attended to, and several bottles of wine were thereafter cracked in great good-fellowship.

"There is nothing like Canary," vowed O'Hara, "for the power of healing."

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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It was past midnight when, on the arm of Mr. Stafford, Denis O'Hara set out to return to his own lodgings.

The streets were empty and the night dark, and they had many grave consultations at the street corners as to which way to pursue. If they reeled a little as they went, if they marched round King's Circus, and round again more than once, and showed a disposition to traverse Gay Street from side to side oftener than was really required by their itinerary, it was not, as O'Hara said, because of the Canary, but all in the way of "divarsion."

"Sir Jasper's a jolly good fellow," said Lord Kilcrone's heir as he propped himself against his own door-post, and wagged the knocker with tipsy gravity. "And so are you," said he to Stafford. "I like ye both." Here he suddenly showed a disposition to fall upon Stafford's neck, but as suddenly arrested himself, stiffened his swaying limbs and struck his forehead with a sudden flash of sobriety. "Thun-



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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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der and 'ouns," said he, "if I did not clean forget about Spoicer!"

He was with difficulty restrained by Stafford (who, having a stronger head, was somewhat the soberer), with the help of the servants who now appeared, from setting forth to repair his negligence. By a tactful mixture of persuasion and force, the wounded gentleman was at length conducted to bed, sleepily murmuring:

"Won't do at all—most remiss—affair of honour—never put off!" until sleep overtook him, which was before his head touched the pillow.

Meanwhile Sir Jasper sat, with guttering candles all around him, in the recesses of an armchair his legs extended straight, his bandaged wrist stuffed into his bosom, his head sunk upon his chest, his spurious flash of gayety now all lost in a depth of chaotic gloom. Dawn found him thus. At its first cold rays he rose sobered, and could not have said whether the night had passed in waking anguish or in hideous

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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nightmare. He looked round on the cheerless scene, the blood-stained linen, the empty wine-glasses with their sickening reek, the smoking candles, the disordered room; then he shuddered and sought the haven of his dressing-room, and the relief of an hour's sleep with a wet towel tied round his throbbing head.

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# THE BATH COMEDY

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## SCENE VII.

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MISS MISTRESS BELLAIRS was up betimes. In truth she had slept ill, which was a strange experience for her. What her thirty-seven lovers had never had the power to wring from her—a tear and a sleepless night—this had she given to the one man who loved her not.

She was tortured with anxiety concerning the danger which her caprice (or, as she put it, Lady Standish's inconceivable foolishness) might have brought upon Lord Verney. At daybreak she rang for her maid, and with the eight o'clock chocolate demanded to be posted with all the news of the town. She was of those who possess the talent of making themselves served. The chocolate was to the full as perfumed and creamy as ever, and Miss Lydia was bursting with tidings of im-

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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portance, as she stood by her lady's couch. "Well, Lydia, well?" cried her mistress, sharply.

"Oh, Lud, ma'am, the whole town's ringing with it! My Lady Standish has been found out. There, I for one never trust those solemn prudes that ever keep their eyes turned up or cast down, and their mouths pursed like cherries. 'You would not be so proper if there was not a reason for it,' I *always* think."

"Lydia," said Mistress Bellairs, "do not be a fool. Go on; what has Lady Standish been found out in, pray?"

"Oh, ma'am," said Lydia, "it ain't hard to guess. 'Tis what a woman's always found out in, I suppose. But, Lud, the shamelessness of it! I hear, ma'am," she came closer to her mistress and bent to whisper, almost trembling with the joy of being tale-bearer to such purpose, "I hear Sir Jasper found Colonel Villiers there yesterday afternoon. Oh, ma'am, such goings-on!"

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## THE BATH COMEDY

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“Pshaw!” said Mistress Kitty.

“Well, they’re going to fight, anyhow,” cried the girl, “and Sir Jasper tore off the Colonel’s wig and beat him about the face with it, ma’am, and the Colonel’s been like a madman ever since, and he vows he will shoot him this morning.”

Mistress Bellairs gave a sigh of relief.

“Let them shoot each other,” said she, sinking back on her pillows and stirring her chocolate calmly. “I do not find the world any better for either of them.”

“But that is not all, ma’am, for poor Sir Jasper, no sooner had he thrashed the Colonel, than he finds Mr. Denis O’Hara behind the curtains.”

“Denis O’Hara!” exclaimed Mistress Bellairs, sitting up in amaze. “You’re raving!”

“No, ma’am, for I have it from Mr. O’Hara’s own man; and did not he and Sir Jasper fight it out then and there, and was not Mr. O’Hara carried home wounded by the Watch?”

“Mercy on us!” exclaimed the lady.

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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“And that is not all, ma’am,” said the maid.

“You frighten me, child.”

“There is Captain Spicer, too, whom you can’t a-bear, and Lord Verney.”

“Lord Verney!” cried Mistress Kitty.

“Ay, ma’am; he and Sir Jasper are going to fight this morning. Sir Jasper’s going to fight them all, but Lord Verney is to be the first, for Sir Jasper found him kissing Lady Standish yesterday at noon; the others were later on. So it’s my lord comes first, you see, ma’am.”

“La, girl,” cried Mistress Bellairs with a scream, and upset her chocolate, “going to fight this morning? ’Tis not true!” Her pretty face turned as white as chalk under its lace frills.

“Yes, ma’am,” pursued the maid, gabbling as hard as she could. “Yes, ma’am, first there’s Lord Verney. Sir Jasper, they say, behaved so oddly to Captain Spicer, who brought the first challenge, that Lord Verney sent another by a chairman this

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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morning. And then Colonel Villiers. Of course, as Mr. Mahoney says (that's Mr. O'Hara's man, ma'am), Sir Jasper is safe to kill Lord Verney, and Colonel Villiers is safe to kill Sir Jasper. But if the Colonel do not kill Sir Jasper, then Sir Jasper will fight Captain Spicer! La, ma'am, the chocolate's all over the bed!"

"Oh, get out of that, you silly wench," cried Mistress Bellairs; "let me rise! There is not a moment to lose. And where is Sir Jasper supposed to fight my Lord Verney? (Give me my silk stockings, useless thing that you are!) I don't believe a word of your story. How dare you come and tell me such a pack of nonsense? But where are they supposed to fight? Of course you must have heard the hour?" She was pulling silk stockings over her little arched foot and up her little plump leg as fast as her trembling hands would obey her.

"I do not know where, ma'am," said the maid demurely, "but the Colonel is to meet Sir Jasper in Hammer's Fields at

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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noon, so I suppose my Lord Verney and he will be fighting about this time.”

“Oh, hold your tongue,” cried her mistress; “you’re enough to drive one mad with your quacking!”

Not a dab of rouge did the widow find time to spread upon pale cheeks, not a dust of powder upon a black curl. The pretty morning hood was drawn round a very different face from that which it usually shaded; but who shall say that Kitty, the woman, running breathless through the empty streets with the early breeze playing with her loose hair, was not as fair in her complete self-abandonment, as the fashionable lady, powdered, painted, patched and laced, known under the name of Mistress Bellairs? Her small feet hammered impatiently along, her skirts fluttered as she went. She would not wait for a coach; a chair would have sent her crazy.

At the turning of the Crescent, another fluttering woman’s figure, also hooded,



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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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also cloaked, also advancing with the haste that despises appearances, passed her with a patter and a flash. They crossed, then, moved by the same impulse, halted with dawning recognition.

“Mistress Bellairs!” cried Lady Standish’s flute-like voice.

“Julia Standish!” screamed Mistress Bellairs. They turned and caught at each other with clinging hands.

“Oh, heavens,” said Mistress Bellairs, “is what I hear true? Is that devil Sir Jasper going to fight Lord Verney this morning? Why, Verney’s but a child; ’tis rank murder. You wicked woman, see what you have done!”

“Ah, Mistress Bellairs,” cried Julia, and pressed her side, “my heart is broken.”

“But what has happened, woman, what has happened?” cried Kitty, and shook the plaintive Julia with a fierce hand.

“Sir Jasper will not see me,” sobbed Julia, “but I have found out that he is to meet my Lord Verney in an hour in Bath-

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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wick Meadows. There have been messages going backward and forward since early dawn. Oh, Heaven have pity on us!"

"Where are you going?" cried Kitty, and shook her once more.

"I was going to Lord Verney to plead for my husband's life," said Lady Standish, and the tears streamed down her face like the storm-rain upon lily flowers.

"The Lord keep you," cried Mistress Bellairs with feelings too deep for anger; "I believe you are no better than an idiot!"

The most heroic resolves are often the work of a second! "Now go back home again, you silly thing," said Kitty. "'Tis I—yes, Lady Standish, you do not deserve it of me—but I will sacrifice myself! I will prevent this duel, I will go to my Lord Verney!"

"You," said Julia, and wondered, and but half understood the meaning of the words.

"Go home, go home," said Mistress Kitty, "and I tell you that if I do not

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## THE BATH COMEDY

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make Lord Verney fail at the meeting, my name is not Kitty Bellairs!”

Lady Standish hesitated, and meekly bowed her head, turned and began to retrace her steps, her slim figure bending and swaying as if the fresh morning wind were too stern for her.

Mistress Bellairs looked at her watch.

“Did she say an hour?” murmured she to herself. “Then, ten minutes before the looking-glass and ten minutes to get to my lord’s lodgings, and I will find him about to start. ’Tis his first affair of honour, poor boy, and he is sure to be as early at it as a country cousin to a dinner-party.”

The sun broke out from a cloudy sky, and Mistress Bellairs shook herself and felt her spirits rise. A dimple peeped in either cheek.

“After all,” said she as she tripped along, and the dimples deepened as the smile broadened, “who knows? ’Tis an ill wind that blows nobody good.”

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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My Lady Standish returned home. The servants stared at her curiously as she crossed the hall. Mistress Tremlet, the housekeeper, passed her with pursed lips. Her own maid, she knew, was dissolved in tears and plunged in Doctor Persel's discourses against heresy. White as new-fallen snow was her conscience, nevertheless she felt herself smirched in the eyes of all these people. Yet she cared not.

Outside Sir Jasper's dressing-room she listened. She could hear him stamp about as he made his toilet, and curse his man. She put out her hand to knock, but the memory of his stern repulse to her last appeal robbed her of all courage.

"I will not go in upon him," thought she, "but when he comes out I will speak."

"These swords," said Sir Jasper within, "I will take in the carriage. I expect Mr. Stafford and a friend to call for me in half-an-hour. Do you understand, sirrah? And hark ye, where are the pistols?"

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## THE BATH COMEDY

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“Pistols!” echoed Lady Standish, and her heart beat to suffocation.

There was a pause.

“Here, Sir Jasper,” said the valet then.

“Now, mark what I say,” said Sir Jasper impressively. “Lord Markham will call at eleven. Let the curricle be in waiting; tell my lord that I will meet him five minutes before the half-hour at Hammer’s Fields. Forget at your peril! You are to take these pistols there yourself. Stay, tell my Lord Markham that if I am not at the *rendezvous*, ’twill only be because I have not life enough left to take me there, and he must make it straight with Colonel Villiers. Have you understood, rascal? Nay—damn you!—I will give you a letter for my Lord Markham.”

“Oh God! Oh God!” cried poor Lady Standish, and felt her knees tremble, “what is this now? Another meeting! The Colonel! . . . In God’s name how comes he upon Colonel Villiers? Why, this is wholesale slaughter! This is insanity!

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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This must be prevented!" She caught her head in her hands. "Sir Jasper's mad," she said. "What shall I do? What shall I do? They will kill him, and I shall have done it. Why now, if Kitty prevents the first duel, cannot I prevent the second? Oh, I am a false wife if I cannot save my husband. Heaven direct me!" she prayed, and to her prayer came inspiration.

There was the Bishop, the Bishop of Bath and Wells! That reverend prelate had shown her much kindness and attention; he would know how to interfere in such a crisis. He was a man of authority. Between them could they not force the peace at Hammer's Fields, and could not Sir Jasper be saved in spite of himself, were it by delivering him into the hands of the law?

Lady Standish flew into her room and called the sniffing Megrim.

"Paper and ink," cried she, "and get you ready to run on a message. 'Tis a matter of life and death."

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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“My lady,” said Megrin primly, “I will serve your ladyship in all things that are right; but I hope I know my dooty to my Creator; and stoop to connive at irregularities, my lady, I won’t and never will.”

She had been ready to condemn her master overnight, but the talk in the servants’ hall had, as she expressed it, “opened her eyes.” And what woman is not ready to judge her sister woman—above all, what maid to condemn her mistress?

Lady Standish stared.

“What means this?” said she. “You shall do as I bid you, Mistress Megrin. How dare you!” cried Lady Standish with a sudden flash of comprehension. “Why, woman, my letter is to the Bishop!”

“Oh,” quoth Mistress Megrin, still with reserve yet condescending to approval, “that is another matter! Shall I,” she sniffed, “be stricter than becomes a Christian? Shall I refuse aid to the bruised sinner or to the smoking lamp whose con-

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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science is awakened? May his lordship be a tower of strength to your ladyship along the rocky paths of penitence—Amen!”



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# THE BATH COMEDY

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## SCENE VIII.

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IN ten minutes a fair lady may do much to enhance her fairness. As Mistress Bellairs took a last look at her mirror, while Lydia bustled out to call a hired chair, she bestowed upon her reflection a smile of approval which indeed so charming an image could not fail to call forth. Then she huddled herself in a mysterious and all-enveloping cloak, caught up a little velvet mask from the table, and sped upon her errand. She sallied forth as the gallant soldier might to battle, with a beating heart yet a high one.

Lord Verney and Captain Spicer had just finished breakfast at the former's lodgings in Pierrepont street, near North Parade. Captain Spicer, babbling ineptly of his own experience as a duellist, of his scorn of Sir Jasper's lunacy, yet of his full

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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determination to slay the vile madman, had done ample justice to his young principal's table. But Lord Verney, his cheek now darkly flushed, now spread with an unwholesome pallor, found it hard to swallow even a mouthful of bread, and restlessly passed from the contemplation of the clock and the setting of his watch to the handling of his pistols, or the hasty addition of yet another postscript to the ill-spelt, blotted farewell epistle he had spent half the night in inditing to the Dowager his mother: "In case, you know . . ." he had said to his friend, with a quiver in his voice.

Captain Spicer had earnestly promised to carry out his patron's last wishes in the most scrupulous manner.

"My dear lord," he had said, grasping him by the hand, "rely upon me. Gad, Sir Jasper is a devil of a shot, I hear, and of course, he, he! we all know the saying—the strength of a madman. But no sooner has he laid you, Harry, than I vow,

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## THE BATH COMEDY

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upon my honour, I shall hold him at my sword's point. I will revenge thee, Harry, never fear of that. 'Twill be a mighty genteel story, and the world will ring with it. Egad, he will not be the first I have spitted as easy as your cook would spit a turkey. Have I not learnt of the great Angelo Malevolti himself? He, he—'A woman's hand,' he would say, 'and the devil's head!'

Here Captain Spicer shook out his bony fingers from the encumbering ruffles and contemplated them with much satisfaction.

"Oh, hang you, Spicer, be quiet, can't you!" cried Lord Verney petulantly.

The Captain leant back on his chair and began to pick his teeth with a silver toothpick.

"Pooh, these novices!" said he, as if to himself. "Keep your nerves steady, my lord, or, stab me, I may as well order the mourning-coach before we start. He, he! 'Tis well, indeed, you have a friend to stand by you!"

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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A discreet tap was heard at the door, and Lord Verney's impassive new servant (especially engaged on his behalf by the Captain, who indeed, some ill-natured wag had it, shared his wages and perquisites) stood in the doorway.

"There is a lady downstairs, my lord," he said in his mechanical voice. "She particularly requests to see your lordship and will take no denial, although I informed her that your lordship was like to be engaged until late in the morning."

Lord Verney merely stared in amazement; but Captain Spicer sprang up from his chair, his pale eyes starting with curiosity.

"A lady, Gad! Verney, you dog, what is this? A lady, Ned? Stay, is she tall and fair and slight?"

"No, sir, she is under-sized, and seems plump, though she is wrapped in so great a cloak I could hardly tell."

"Pretty, man?"

"Cannot say, sir, she wears a mask."

"A mask? He, Verney, Verney, this is

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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vastly interesting! And she won't go away, eh, Ned?"

"No, sir, she must see his lordship, she said, if only for five minutes."

"Plump, under-sized, masked," ejaculated Captain Spicer in burning perplexity. "Gad, we have ten minutes yet, we will have her up, eh, Verney? Show her up, Ned."

The servant withdrew, unheeding Lord Verney's stammered protest.

"Really, Captain Spicer," said he, "I would have liked to have kept these last ten minutes for something serious. I would have liked," said the lad with a catch in his voice and a hot colour on his cheek, "to have read a page of my Bible before starting, were it only for my mother's sake, afterward."

The led Captain threw up hand and eye in unfeigned horror.

"A page of your Bible! Zounds! If it gets out, we are the laughing-stock of Bath. A page of your Bible! 'Tis well no one heard you but I."

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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“Hush!” said Lord Verney, for in the doorway stood their visitor. ’Twas indeed a little figure, wrapped in a great cloak, and except for the white hand that held the folds, and the glimpse of round chin and cherry lip that was trembling beneath the curve of the mask, there was naught else to betray her identity, to tell whether she were young or old, well-favoured or disinherited. But it was a charming little hand, and an engaging little chin.

Lord Verney merely stood and stared like the boy he was. But Captain Spicer leaped forward with a spring like a grasshopper, and crossing his lean shanks, he presented a chair with the killing grace of which he alone was master. The lady entered the room, put her hand on the back of the chair, and turned upon Captain Spicer. “I would see Lord Verney alone, sir,” she said. It was a very sweet voice, but it was imperious. The masked lady had all the air of one who was accustomed to instant obedience.

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## THE BATH COMEDY

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In vain Captain Spicer leered and languished; the black eyes gleamed from behind the disguise very coldly and steadily back at him. Forced to withdraw, he endeavoured to do so with wit and elegance, but he was conscious somehow of cutting rather a poor figure; and under the unknown one's hand the door closed upon him with so much energy as to frustrate utterly his last bow.

Kitty Bellairs deliberately turned the key in the lock, and put it in her pocket. Lord Verney started forward, but was arrested by the sound of his own name, pronounced in the most dulcet and plaintive tone he thought he had ever heard.

“Lord Verney,” said Kitty, flinging back her cloak and hood and allowing her pretty brown curls, and a hint of the most perfect shape in Bath, to become visible to the young peer's bewildered gaze. “Lord Verney,” said she, and clasped her hands, “a very, very unhappy woman has come to throw herself upon your compassion.”

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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“Madam,” said Lord Verney, “what can I do for you?” His boyish soul was thrilled by these gentle accents of grief; he thought he saw a tear running down the white chin; the rounded bosom heaved beneath its bewitching disorder of lace. He glanced at the clock and back at the suppliant in a cruel perplexity. “Madam,” said he, “time presses; I have but a few minutes to give you. Tell me, madam, how can I serve you? To do so will be a comfort to me in what is perhaps the last hour of my life.”

The lady gave a cry as soft as a dove’s, and as plaintive.

“Oh,” said she, “it is true, then, what I heard?” and the white hands were wrung together as in extremest anguish.

“Madam,” cried he, with outspread arms, and, though without daring to touch her, drawing closer, so close as to hear the quick catch of her breath and to inhale the subtle fragrance of violets that emanated from her.



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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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“ Oh,” said she, “ it is true!” She staggered and caught at the fastenings of her cloak and threw it open.

“ You are faint,” he cried, strangely moved; “ let me call.”

But she caught him by the hand. Her fingers were curiously warm for one seized with faintness, but the touch of them was pleasant to the young man as never woman’s touch had been before. Out flew the fellow hand to keep his prisoner, and they clung round his great boy’s wrist.

He never knew how, but suddenly he was on his knees before her.

“ You are going to fight,” said she, “ to fight with Sir Jasper. Oh, my God, you do not know, but it is because of me, and if you fight it will break my heart.” She leant forward to look eagerly at him as he knelt. Her breath fanned his cheek. Through her mask he saw beautiful black eyes, deep, deep. How white the skin was upon her neck and chin—how fine its grain! What little wanton curls upon her

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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head! What a fragrance of flowers in the air! How he longed to pluck that mask away—and yet how the very mystery lured him, held him!

“Who are you?” said he, in a low quick whisper. “Let me see your face.”

She forbade his indiscreet hand with a little shriek.

“No, no, no, you must never see, never know; that would be terrible.”

Then he placed both his hands, all unconsciously, upon hers, and then she caught them both and held them, and he felt that her weak grasp was to him as strong as iron.

“Why do you fight?” said she. “Tell me.” He blushed.

“’Tis for nothing, the merest misunderstanding. Sir Jasper is mad, I think.”

“Sir Jasper is jealous,” breathed she, and nearer came the gaze of the eyes. “Is it true that you love Lady Standish?”

“I?” cried he vehemently, and rapped out a great oath, so eager was he to deny. “I? No! God is my witness. No!”

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## THE BATH COMEDY

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“Then do not fight,” said she.

He wanted to look at the clock; he wanted to spring up and rush to the door; he was conscious that Spicer was knocking gently, and that it was time to go where the conventions of honour called him. The soft clasp held him, and the mysterious eyes. He was a very boy, and had never loved before, and—she was masked!

“Let me advise you,” said she. “Believe me, your welfare is dearer to me than you can imagine—dearer to me than I ought to tell you. Believe me, if you give up this duel you will live to be glad of it. Sir Jasper will thank you no later than this very day, as never man thanked man before. And you will make me so happy! Oh, believe me, your honour is safe with me.”

“Only let me see your face,” said he, while Spicer knocked louder. “I will see her, and kiss her,” he thought to himself, “and that will be something to carry to my death.”

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## THE BATH COMEDY

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“How dare you ask it?” she said. “Must I grant your request when you refuse me mine?”

“And if I grant you yours,” said he, as his heart beat very fast, “what will you give me?”

“Oh, give,” said she, “give! Who cares for gifts? A man must take.” Her red lip beneath the mask here became arched so bewitchingly over a row of the whitest teeth in all the world, that Harry Verney, whose head had been rapidly going, lost it and his heart together.

“That is a challenge,” said he, drew a hand away and lifted it to the mask.

“Ah, traitor!” she cried, and made a dainty start of resistance. His fingers trembled on the soft scented locks.

“You shall not,” said she, and bent her head to avoid his touch, so that as he knelt their faces were closer together than ever.

“Oh!” cried he, and kissed her on the chin beneath the mask.

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# THE BATH COMEDY

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## SCENE IX.

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Y lord," clamoured Captain Spicer at the door, "the coach is waiting and we have but half-an-hour to reach Bathwick Meadows. Egad, Lord Verney, would you be last at the meeting?"

Lord Verney sprang to his feet. The words, the impatient raps penetrated to his dizzy brain with sudden conviction.

"Heavens!" cried he, and glanced at the clock, and made a leap for the door.

"And will you go," said the stranger, "without having seen my face?"

He ran back to her and then back to the door again, distracted, as you may see a puppy dog between two calls. Finally he came back to the lady with a new and manly dignity upon him.

"I must go," he said. "Would you show yourself as kind as you seem, madam,

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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remove your mask that I may see you before I go."

Outside Captain Spicer was dancing a sort of hornpipe of impotent impatience, and filling the air with shrill strange oaths.

Mistress Bellairs put the lean swarthy boy very composedly on one side by the merest touch of her hand, then she went over to the door, unlocked it and admitted Captain Spicer, green and sweating.

"I am coming, Spicer," cried Lord Verney desperately, and made a plunge for his hat and cloak, murmuring as he passed the lady: "Oh, cruel!"

Kitty Bellairs nibbled her little finger and looked at the clock.

"It will not take you, you know," said she, "more than five minutes to drive down to the Bathwick ferry, therefore if you start in three you will still have twenty-six to spare. My Lord Verney, will you give me those three minutes?"

Lord Verney flung aside hat and cloak

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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again, his face glowing with a dark flush. "Oh," cried he, like a school-boy, "for God's sake, Spicer, wait outside!"

"Nay," said Mistress Kitty, smiling to herself under her mask, "nay, I have need of Captain Spicer."

Lord Verney's face fell.

"Come hither," said she, and took him crestfallen by the hand and brought him to the table, where lay the writing materials he had been using but a little while ago. "Here," said she, "is a sheet of paper. Sit down, my lord, and write, write," she said, and tapped his shoulder; "write, sir—thus:—

“ ‘ Lord Verney begs to inform Sir Jasper Standish that he understands the grounds of the quarrel between them to lie in a gross misconception of Lord Verney's feelings for Lady Standish.’ ”

"Write, write!" She leaned over him, dictating.

Half spellbound, yet protesting incoherently, he began to cover the page with his awkward scrawl.

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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“Quick!” said she. “(Child, how do you spell quarrel?) Never mind, on with you:

‘Lord Verney begs to assure Sir Jasper that, so far from presuming to entertain any unlawful sentiments for Lady Stan-dish, he has never addressed more than three words to her or as many glances at her in his life; that his whole heart is given to another lady, the only woman he has ever loved and ever will love.’ ”

The pen nearly dropped from Lord Verney’s fingers. He started and turned round on his chair to gaze in rapture into the countenance of his mysterious visitor, and again was at once attracted and foiled by her mask.

“Surely you would not contradict a lady?” she whispered in his ear. “Haste, we have but one minute more. Here, give me the pen, I will finish.” She snapped the quill from his hand, her curls touched his cheek as she bent forward over him to the page. Swiftly her little hand flew:

“If upon this explanation Sir Jasper does not see his way to retract all the offensive observations he made to Lord Verney, Lord Verney will be ready to meet him as arranged without an instant’s delay. The truth of all these statements is guaranteed by the woman Lord Verney loves.”



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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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She seized the sheet and folded it.

“Now, Captain Spicer,” said she, “take your coach and hie you to Sir Jasper’s house, and if you bring back an answer before the clock strikes, I will let you take off my mask, and that will save you from dying of curiosity and, also, give you something to tattle about for the next month. Oh, you will find Sir Jasper,” she said; “he is a seasoned hand, and does not, like your virgin duellist, make it a point of honour to bring his high valour to the *rendezvous* twenty minutes before the time.”

Within his meagre body Captain Spicer carried the soul of a flunkey. He would have given worlds to rebel, but could not.

“So long as it is not a put-off,” said he. “Not even for a fair one’s smile could I barter a friend’s honour.”

Kitty held the letter aloft tantalizingly and looked at the clock.

“If you won’t be the bearer,” said she,

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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“I will send it by the chairman, and then you will never know what is in it. Moreover,” said she, and smiled archly, “if Sir Jasper apologizes to Lord Verney, which, upon receipt of this letter, I make no doubt he will, you can take his place, you know, and will not be done out of a gallant meeting.”

“Of course, ha, of course!” cried Spicer with a yellow smile.

Laughing, Mistress Kitty closed the door behind his retreating figure.

“Now,” said she.

“Oh, what have you done, what have you made me do?” cried Harry Verney in a sudden agony.

“Hush,” said Mistress Kitty. “Did I not tell you your honour was safe with me? Do you not believe me?” said she meltingly. “Ah, Verney!” She put her hand to her head, and at her touch the mask fell. He looked at her face, blushing and quivering upon him, and once more fell on his knee at her feet.

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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“Oh, tell me your name!” cried he, pleadingly.

“Why, Lord Verney,” she said, “how ungallant!” She smiled and looked bewitchingly beautiful; looked serious and reproachful, and he fell beyond his depths in rapture.

“Why, you know me, you know me well,” said she, “am I not Mistress Bellairs, Kitty Bellairs—am I not Kitty?”

“No, no,” cried he, “I never knew you till this hour, madam, Mistress Bellairs, *Kitty!* I see you,” he cried, “for the first time! Oh, God, be kind to me, for I love her!”

“And yet,” she whispered archly, “they say that love is blind.”

Upon this he kissed her as he had kissed her beneath the mask; and if anything could have been sweeter than the first kiss it was the second.

Ah, love, how easy an art to learn, how hard to unlearn!

While Harry Verney thus forgot the

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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whole world, his first duel, and the code of honour, Sir Jasper sat inditing an answer to his communication:—

“ Sir Jasper Standish has received my Lord Verney’s explanation in the spirit in which it is offered. He is quite ready to acknowledge that he has acted entirely under a misapprehension, and begs Lord Verney to receive his unreserved apologies and the expression of his admiration for Lord Verney’s gallant and gentlemanly behaviour, together with his congratulations to him and the unknown lady upon their enviable situation.”

Captain Spicer did not offer to supply his principal’s place in the field. Indeed, he displayed to Sir Jasper, who received him with the most gloomy courtesy, the extreme suppleness of his spine, and pressed his unrivalled snuff upon him with a fluttering and ingratiating air.

When he returned to Pierrepont Street he found the mysterious stranger already in her sedan, Lord Verney leaning through the window thereof, engaged in an earnest whispering conversation. Captain Spicer jocularly pulled him back by the coat-tails and inserted his own foolish face instead.

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## THE BATH COMEDY

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The lady was masked and cloaked as he had left her.

“Madam, I have done your errand,” said he. “It was,” said he, “a matter of difficult negotiation, requiring—ahem—requiring such tact as I think I may call my own. Sir Jasper was vastly incensed, one might as well have tried to reason with a bull. ‘But Gad, sir,’ said I, ‘would I, Captain Spicer, come with this message if it were not in accordance with the strictest rule of honourable etiquette?’ That floored him, madam——”

Here Mistress Kitty snapped the letter flickering in his gesticulating hand with scant ceremony, turned her shoulder upon him, read it and handed it out to Lord Verney, who had lost no time in coming round to the other window.

“Now,” said she, “bid the men take me to the Pump Room.” She leaned her head out, and Lord Verney put his close to hers, and there followed another conclave.

“Madam, madam, I demand the fulfilment

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\* ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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of your promise!" from the other side came Captain Spicer's clamouring thin voice. "Verney, my good fellow, I must request you to retire, there is a compact between this lady and me——"

"A compact?" said the mask turning her head.

"Oh, madam, the vision of that entrancing countenance!"

He strove to unfasten the chair door, when: "What?" cried she, "and rob you of all the charm of uncertainty and all the joy of guessing and all the spice of being able to take away the character of every lady in Bath! Oh," she said, "I hope I have been better taught my duty to my neighbour!" Out went her head again to Lord Verney; there was another whisper, a silver laugh. "On, men!" she cried.

Lord Verney skipped round and in his turn dragged the discomfited Captain out of the window and restrained him by main force from running after the retreating chairmen and their fair burden.

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# THE BATH COMEDY

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## SCENE X.

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ORD MARKHAM was a person of indefinite appearance, indefinite age and indefinite manners. He wore an ill-fitting wig, but he had a high reputation as a man of honour. He sat beside Sir Jasper on the front seat, while on the back sat Tom Stafford; and the curricule sped cheerily along the up-and-down Bath streets out into the country budding with green, down, down the hill, to Hammer's Fields by the winding Avon. Sir Jasper's face bespoke great dissatisfaction with life at large, and with his own existence in particular. Tom Stafford was beginning to feel slightly bored.

“’Tis an early spring,” said Lord Markham, in the well-meant endeavour to beguile away the heavy minutes and distract his principal's mind. “’Tis very mild

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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weather for the time of year, and the lambs are forward."

"Ugh!" said Sir Jasper.

"Speak not to him of lambs," whispered Stafford; "do not you see he is all for blood and thunder?"

Then he added maliciously: "There is but one animal in the whole fauna that Sir Jasper takes an interest in at present; and that's not easy, it seems, to find in these purlieus, though we know it does haunt them; 'tis the red dear!" He chuckled, vastly delighted with the conceit.

"Let us hope we shall not have rain," said Lord Markham; "these clouds are menacing."

"Nay, they will hold up for half-an-hour. Enough to serve our purpose," growled Sir Jasper, and tipped the horses with the lash so that they spurned the slope.

"But we shall get wet returning," pleaded the well-meaning earl, "I said so all along; 'twould have been better to have gone in a coach."



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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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“I vow,” cried Sir Jasper with a sudden burst of spleen, “I vow that I have it in my heart to wish that Villiers’ ball may speed so well that I may feel neither rain nor shine, coming home again. Home again,” said he, with a withering smile; “blast it, a pretty home mine is!”

“And a pretty cheerful fellow you are to bring out to a merry meeting,” quoth Stafford from the back, “and a nice pair of fools you and the Colonel be, plague on you both! And when you are shot, ’twill be a fine satisfaction to think that your wife can console herself with the owner of the red curl, eh? What are you going to fight old Villiers about, I should like to know?”

“You do know,” growled Sir Jasper, then he exploded. “You goad me, sir; do *I* want to fight Villiers? Is not this business the merest fooling; sheer waste of time when the real fellow—villain!—has eluded me?” His hold on the reins tightened, he

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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laid on the whip, and the curricule swayed as the horses leaped and plunged.

“Really,” said Lord Markham, “I wish I had come in a coach.”

And: “Hold on,” cried Stafford, “hold on, Jasper; we don’t all want to leave our bones in this business.”

There came a pause in the conversation. They bowled along a more level road with the wind humming in their ears, and the rhythmic trot of the grays beating a tune. Then Stafford remarked vaguely:

“I have a notion there will be no duel to-day at Hammer’s Fields, Jasper, that you will be able to return with undiminished vigour to the hunt of the unknown culprit.”

“How now,” cried Sir Jasper fiercely, “have you heard from Villiers? Are they all rats nowadays? Verney first, then that Spicer, then the Colonel? No, no, the fellow was mad with me, sir; and—Gad! —the offence was mine!”

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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“Nevertheless,” said Stafford unmoved, “I happen to know that Colonel Villiers’ man was sent in all haste for his physician, Sir George Waters, at such an unconscionable hour this morning, that Sir George despatched the apothecary in his stead, and the apothecary found our fire-eating Colonel roaring in a fit of the most violent gout ’tis possible to imagine. So violent, indeed, that poor Mr. Wigginbotham was soundly beat by the Colonel for not being Sir George. Villiers’ foot is as large as a pumpkin, old Foulks tells me; I had it all from Foulks over a glass of water in the Pump Room this morning, and zooks, sir, his false teeth rattled in his head as he tried to describe to me the awful language Colonel Villiers was using. He’s to be Villiers’ second, you know, but he swore ’twas impossible, rank impossible, for any man to put such a foot to the ground.”

They were rounding the corner of Hammer’s Fields as he spoke, and Stafford’s

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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eyes roaming over the green expanse of grass rested upon the little group drawn up toward the entrance gate.

“Unless,” he went on, “the Colonel comes upon crutches. No, zounds! ha, ha! Jasper, I will always love you, man, for the capital jokes you have provided of late. Strike me ugly if the old fellow has not come—*in a bath-chair!*”

“Really,” said Lord Markham, “this is very irregular. I have never before been privy to a duel where one of the combatants fought in a chair. And I am not sure that I can undertake the responsibility of concluding arrangements in such circumstances.”

“Blasted nonsense!” said Sir Jasper with all his former urbanity of demeanour. He flung the reins to his man as he spoke, and clambered down from the curricule. Stafford had gone before him to the gate and was now stamping from one foot to another in exquisite enjoyment of the situation.

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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“(Ha, ha, ha!) Hello! Morning, Colonel, sorry to see you this way! (Ha, ha!) Have you brought another bath-chair for our man? Oh come, yes. ’Twon’t be fair if he do not sit in a bath-chair too! Say, Foulks, you wheel one chair, I’ll wheel the other, and we will run them one at the other and let them fire as soon as they please. Gad, what a joke!”

Colonel Villiers turned upon his volatile friend a countenance the colour of which presented some resemblance to a well-defined bruise on the third day; it was yellow and green with pain where it was not purple with fury.

“Mr. Stafford, sir, these jokes, sir, are vastly out of place. (Curse this foot!) Mr. Foulks, have the kindness to explain. . . . Major Topham, explain to these gentlemen that I have come out to fight, sir, and that fight I will, by the living jingo!” He struck the arm of the chair in his fury, gave his suffering foot a nasty jar and burst into a howl of rage and agony.

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## THE BATH COMEDY

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“Stap me,” said Stafford, “I’d as soon fight an old bear! Whisper, Foulks, is he going to shoot in his cage—beg pardon, I mean his chair?”

“Such is his intention,” said Mr. Foulks, grinning nervously as he spoke, and showing the set of fine Bond street ivory already referred to by Mr. Stafford. “But it strikes me it is somewhat irregular.”

“Somewhat irregular?” ejaculated Lord Markham. “It is altogether irregular. I decline to have anything to say to it.”

Sir Jasper remained standing gloomily looking at the ground and driving his gold-headed malacca into the soft mud as if all his attention were directed to the making of a row of little tunnels.

“What is the difficulty, what is the difficulty?” bellowed Colonel Villiers. “You wheel me into position, and you mark the paces, eight paces, Foulks, not a foot more, and you give me my pistol. What is the difficulty—blast me, blast you all, I say! What *is* the difficulty?”

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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“The combatants will not be equal,” suggested Major Topham. “I told Villiers that I will gladly take his place.”

“No, no, no!” screamed the old man, turning round, and then, “Oh!” cried he, and screwed up his face. And then the gout had him with such fury that he gripped the arms of his chair and flung back his head displaying a ghastly countenance.

“I remember,” champed old Foulks, “the dear Duke of Darlington insisted upon fighting Basil Verney (that’s Verney’s father, you know), with his left arm in splints, but as my Lord Marquis of Cranbroke, his Grace’s second, remarked to me at the time——”

“Oh, spare us the marquis!” interrupted Stafford brutally. “Let us keep to the business on hand, if you please. The whole thing is absurd, monstrous! Look here, Jasper, look here, Colonel, you two cannot fight to-day. How could you be equally matched even if we got another bath-chair for Jasper? We cannot give him the

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## THE BATH COMEDY

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gout, man, and 'twould be too dashed unfair. Gad, Colonel, you would shoot too well or too ill, 'twon't do! Come, come, gentlemen, let us make a good business out of a bad one. Why should you fight at all? Here's Jasper willing to apologize. (Yes you are, Jasper; hold your tongue and be sensible for once; you pulled off his wig, you know. Gad, it was not pretty behaviour, not at all pretty!) But then, Colonel, did not he think you had cut him out with his wife, and was not that a compliment? The neatest compliment you'll ever have this side the grave! He was jealous of you, Colonel; faith, I don't know another man in Bath that would do you so much honour, now-a-days."

"Oh, take me out of this!" cried the Colonel, suddenly giving way to the physical anguish that he had been struggling against so valiantly. "Zounds, I will fight you all some day! Take me out of this. Where is that brimstone idiot, my servant? Take me out of this, you devils!"



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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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Between them they wheeled his chair into the road, and his screams and curses as he was lifted into the coach were terrible to hear.

“Lord, if he could but call out the gout!” cried Stafford. “Look at him, gentlemen! Ha! he has got his footman by the periwig. Oh, ’tis as good as a play; he is laying it on to the fellow like a Trojan! Why, the poor devil has escaped, but his wig is in the Colonel’s hands. Ha, ha, he has sent it flying out of the coach! Off they go; what a voice the old boy has got, he is trumpeting like an elephant at the fair! Well, Jasper, what did I say? No duel to-day.”

“Do not make so sure of that,” said Sir Jasper. He was moving toward the curri-  
cle as he spoke, and turned a sinister face over his shoulder to his friend.

“Oh,” cried the latter, and fell back upon Markham, “the fellow’s look would turn a churn full of cream! No, I will not drive back with ye, thankye, Sir Jasper, I

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## THE BATH COMEDY

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will walk. Devil take it," said Stafford, "I don't mind a little jealousy in reason myself, and if a husband has been given a pair of horns, I don't see why he should not give somebody a dig with them; but if I were to drive home in that company, I'd have no appetite for dinner. Come, gentlemen, 'tis a lovely day, let us walk." So Sir Jasper rolled home alone, and, as his coachman observed a little later, as he helped to unharness the sweating horses, "drove them cruel!"

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# THE BATH COMEDY

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## SCENE XI.

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LADY STANDISH was one of those clinging beings who seem morally and physically to be always seeking a prop. Before adversity she was prostrate, and when his lordship the Bishop of Bath and Wells was ushered into her sitting-room, half an hour after Sir Jasper's departure for Hammer's Fields, he found the poor lady stretched all her length upon the sofa, her head buried in the cushions.

"Dear me," said his lordship, and paused. He was a tall, portly, handsome gentleman with sleek countenance, full eye, and well-defined waistcoat. Could human weakness have touched him, he would have felt a pride in those legs which so roundly filled the silk stockings. But that human weakness could ever affect the Bishop of Bath and Wells was a thing that dignitary (and

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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he gave his Maker thanks for it) felt to be utterly inconceivable.

“Lady Standish,” said the Bishop; then he waved his hand to the curious servants.

“Leave us, leave us, friends,” said he.

Lady Standish reared herself with a sort of desperate heart-sickness into a sitting posture and turned her head to look dully upon her visitor.

“You come too late,” she said; “my lord, Sir Jasper has gone to this most disastrous meeting.”

“My dear Lady Standish,” said Dr. Thurlow, “my dear child,” he took a chair and drew it to the sofa, and then lifted her slight languid hand and held it between his two plump palms. “My dear Lady Standish,” pursued he, in a purring, soothing tone. If he did not know how to deal with an afflicted soul (especially if that afflicted soul happened to belong to the aristocracy and in preference inhabited a young female body), who did? “I came upon the very moment I received your

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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letter. I might perhaps have instantly done something to help in this matter, had you been more explicit, but there was a slight incoherence . . . very natural!" Here he patted her hand gently. "A slight incoherence which required explanations. Now tell me—I gather that your worthy husband has set forth upon an affair of honour, eh? Shall we say a duel?"

Lady Standish gave a moaning assent.

"Some trifling quarrel. Hot-headed young men! It is very reprehensible, but we must not be too hard on young blood. Young blood is hot! Well, well, trust in a merciful Providence, my dear Lady Standish. You know, not a sparrow falls, not a hair of our heads, that is not counted. Was the—ah—quarrel about cards, or some such social trifle?"

"It was about me," said the afflicted wife in a strangled voice.

"About you, my dear lady!" The clasp of the plump hand grew, if possible, a trifle closer, almost tender. Lady Standish was

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## THE BATH COMEDY

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cold and miserable, this warm touch conveyed somehow a vague feeling of strength and comfort.

“About me,” she repeated, and her lip trembled.

“Ah, is it so? And with whom does Sir Jasper fight?”

“With Colonel Villiers,” said she, and shot a glance of full misery into the benign large-featured face bending over her.

“Colonel Villiers,” repeated the Bishop, in tones of the blankest astonishment.

“Not—eh, not—er, *old* Colonel Villiers?”

“Oh, my lord,” cried Lady Standish, “I am the most miserable and the most innocent of women!”

“My dear madam,” cried the Bishop, “I never for an instant doubted the latter.” His hold upon her arm relaxed, and she withdrew it to push away the tears that now began to gather thick and fast on her eyelashes. The Bishop wondered how it was he had never noticed before what a *very* pretty woman Lady Standish was,

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## THE BATH COMEDY

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what charming eyes she had, and what quite unusually long eyelashes. It was something of a revelation to him, too, to see so fair and fine a skin in these days of rouge and powder.

“And yet,” sobbed Lady Standish, “’tis my fault too, for I have been very wrong, very foolish! Oh, my lord, if my husband is hurt, I cannot deny ’tis I shall bear the guilt of it.”

“Come, tell me all about it,” said the Bishop, and edged from his chair to her side on the sofa, and re-possessed himself of her hand. She let it lie in his; she was very confiding. “We are all foolish,” said Dr. Thurlow, “we are all, alas! prone to sin.” He spoke in the plural to give her confidence, not that such a remark could apply to any Bishop of Bath and Wells.

“Oh, I have been very foolish,” repeated the lady. “I thought, my lord, I fancied that my husband’s affection for me was waning.” “Impossible!” cried his lordship. But he felt slightly bewildered.

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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“And so, acting upon inconsiderate advice, I—I pretended—only pretended, indeed, my lord—that I cared for someone else, and Sir Jasper got jealous, and so he has been calling everybody out, thinking that he has a rival.”

“Nevertheless,” said the Bishop, “he has no rival. Do I understand you correctly, my dear child? These suspicions of his are unfounded? Colonel Villiers?”

“Colonel Villiers,” cried she, “that old, stupid red-nosed wretch! No, my lord, indeed, there is no one. My husband has my whole heart!” She caught her breath and looked up at him with candid eyes swimming in the most attractive tears.

“Colonel Villiers!” cried she. “Oh, how can you think such a thing of me? But my husband will not believe me; indeed, indeed, indeed I am innocent! He was jealous of Lord Verney, too, and last night fought Mr. O’Hara.”

The Bishop smiled to himself with the most benign indulgence. His was a soul



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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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overflowing with charity, but it was chiefly when dealing with the foibles of a pretty woman that he appreciated to the full what a truly inspired ordinance that of charity is.

“My dear child, if I may call you so, knowing your worthy mother so well, you must not grieve like this. Let me feel that you look upon me as a friend. Let me wipe away these tears. Why, you are trembling! Shall we not have more trust in the ruling of a merciful Heaven? Now I am confident that Sir Jasper will be restored to you uninjured or with but a trifling injury. And if I may so advise, do not seek, my dear Lady Standish, in the future to provoke his jealousy in this manner; do not openly do anything which will arouse those evil passions of anger and vengeance in him.”

“Oh, indeed, indeed,” she cried, and placed her other little hand timidly upon the comforting clasp of the Bishop’s, “indeed I never will again!”

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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“And remember that in me you have a true friend, my dear Lady Standish. Allow me to call myself your friend.”

Here there came a sound of flying wheels and frantic hoofs without, and the door-bell was pealed and the knocker plied so that the summons echoed and re-echoed through the house.

“Oh, God!” screamed Lady Standish springing to her feet, “they have returned! Oh, heavens, what has happened? If he is hurt I cannot bear it, I cannot—I cannot!” She clasped her head wildly and swayed as if she would have fallen. What could a Christian do, a gentleman and a shepherd of souls, but catch her lest she fall? Half mad with terror she turned and clung to him as she would have clung to the nearest support.

“Have courage,” he purred into the little ear; “I am with you, dear child, have courage.”

So they stood, she clasping the Bishop and the Bishop clasping her, patting her

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## THE BATH COMEDY

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shoulder, whispering in her ear, when Sir Jasper burst in upon them.

It was his voice that drove them apart, yet it was neither loud nor fierce, it was only blightingly sarcastic.

“So!” said he.

What was it Stafford had said: “There’s the Bishop of Bath and Wells. He’s red, as red as a lobster, from top to toe! They have a way, these divines.” Oh, Stafford knew doubtless: all Bath knew! Sir Jasper cursed horribly in his heart, but aloud only said: “So!”

Lady Standish flew half across the room to him with a joyful cry, but was arrested midway by his attitude, his look. The Bishop said “Ahem” and “ahem” again, and then said he:

“I rejoice, I rejoice, Sir Jasper, to see you return unscathed. Lady Standish has been greatly distressed.”

“And you,” said Sir Jasper, drily, “have been consoling her.”

“To the best of my poor power,” said

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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the Bishop, and felt, he knew not why (if indeed it were possible for him to feel that way!) a shade uncomfortable.

Sir Jasper closed the door and bowed.

“I think,” said he, “I ought to crave pardon for this intrusion.”

“Oh, Sir Jasper!” cried my lady.

Her husband turned toward her for a second. She wilted beneath his eye and sank into a chair.

“Oh, Sir Jasper,” said she, maundering, “the Bishop has been very kind. I have been so unhappy about you.”

“I see,” said Sir Jasper, “that his lordship has been very kind. His lordship, as I said, has been administering consolation.”

Here all at once his stoniness gave way.

• He walked toward the Bishop and bent a ghastly face close to the florid uneasily smiling countenance.

“My lord,” said Sir Jasper, “your cloth will not protect you.”

“Sir!” ejaculated the divine.

“Your cloth will not protect you!” repeated

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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Sir Jasper in that voice of strenuous composure that seems to tremble on a shriek.

“Oh, shepherd, *you!*”

“Sir!” cried the Bishop, “do you mean to insinuate——”

“I insinuate nothing,” cried the other and sneered. “So, madam,” he turned again to his wife, “this is your choice, eh? You were always a pious woman, were you not? You would like to have the approval of the Church upon your acts, would you not?” Indescribable was the sarcasm upon his lip.

“Really,” said the Bishop, “I am seriously annoyed.” He looked reproachfully at Lady Standish. “Madam,” said he, “I came to you, as you know, in pure charity, in unsuspecting friendship. I was not prepared for this.”

“Ha, ha,” said Sir Jasper with a hideous laugh. “No, sir, I have no doubt you were not prepared for this. Pure, ha—unsuspecting—this is pleasant! Be silent, madam, these groans, these crocodile tears, have no

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## THE BATH COMEDY

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effect upon me. Come, my Lord Bishop, your sanctimonious airs cannot take me in. Have I not read your letter? Oh, you have got a very fine head of hair, but I know . . . *there is a curl missing!* Ha, Julia, you should take better care of your love-tokens.”

“I vow,” said Dr. Thurlow, majestically, “that your behaviour, your words are quite beyond my poor comprehension.—Madam, I pity you from my heart!—Sir Jasper, sir,” folding his arms fiercely, “your servant. I wish you good-morning.” He strode to the door, his fine legs quivering with indignation beneath their purple silk meshes.

“No!” said Sir Jasper, and seized him roughly by the skirts. “No, you do not escape me thus!”

“How now!” cried the Bishop, the veins on his forehead swelling, and the nostrils of his handsome Roman nose dilating. “Would you lay hands upon the Lord’s anointed? Let go my coat, Sir Jasper!”

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## THE BATH COMEDY

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He struck at Sir Jasper's retaining hand with his own plump fist clenched in a fashion suggestive of pulpit eloquence.

"Ha! you would, would you?" exclaimed Sir Jasper, and leaped at the Episcopal throat.

The next instant, to his intense astonishment, Sir Jasper found himself in an iron grip; lifted into the air with an ease against which all his resistance was as that of a puppet; shaken till his teeth rattled, and deposited on the flat of his back upon the floor.

"Oh, help, help, help!" screamed Lady Standish.

"Really," said the Bishop, "I don't know when I have been so insulted in my life. 'Tis the whole Church, sir, the Church of England, the State itself, that you have assaulted in my person!"

He stood glaring down on the prostrate foe, breathing heavy rebuke through his high dignified nose.

"You have committed blasphemy, simony,

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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sacrilege, rank sacrilege," thundered Dr. Thurlow.

Sir Jasper gathered himself together like a panther, and sprang to his feet; like a panther, too, he took two or three stealthy steps and, half crouching, measured the muscular Bishop with bloodshot eyes, selecting the most vulnerable portion of anatomy. He panted and foamed. The air was thick with flying powder.

Lady Standish flung herself between them. "In mercy, my lord," she cried, "leave us—leave us!"

Here the door opened and butler and delighted footmen burst into the room.

The Bishop turned slowly. The grace of his vocation prevailed over the mere man. "May Heaven pardon you," he said. "May Heaven pardon you, sir, and help you to chasten this gross violence of temper. And you, madam," said he, turning witheringly upon the unfortunate and long-suffering lady, "may you learn womanly decorum and circumspection!"



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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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“You shall hear from me again,” growled Sir Jasper, murderously. — “Toombs,” cried he to the butler with a snarl, “show the Bishop the door!”

The Bishop smiled. He wheeled upon them all a stately back, and with short deliberate steps withdrew, taking his cane from the footman with a glassy look that petrified Thomas, and refusing Mr. Toombs’ proffered ministrations as he might have waved aside a cup of poison. “*Vade retro Satanas,*” he seemed to say; and so departed, leaving his pastoral curse voicelessly behind him.

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# THE BATH COMEDY

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## SCENE XII.

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“OW beautiful you are!” said Lord Verney. He was sitting on a stool at Mistress Bellairs’ feet. She had abandoned to him one plump taper-fingered hand. The gay little parlour of the Queen Square house was full of sunshine and of the screeching ecstasy of Mistress Kitty’s canary bird. “How beautiful you are!” said he; it was for the fourth time within the half-hour. Conversation between them had languished somehow. Kitty Bellairs flung a sidelong wistful look upon her lover’s countenance. His eyes, gazing upward upon her, devoured her beauty with the self-same expression that she had found so entrancing earlier in the day. “Deep wells of passion,” she had told herself then. Now a chill shade of misgiving crept upon her.

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## THE BATH COMEDY.

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“His eyes are like a calf’s,” she said to herself suddenly.

“How beautiful——” thus he began to murmur once again, when his mistress’s little hand, twitching impatiently from his grasp, surprised him into silence.

“Oh dear! a calf in very truth,” thought she. “Baah—baa ooh . . . What can I have seen in him? ’Twas a sudden pastoral yearning . . . !”

“May I not hold your hand?” said he, shifting himself to his silken knees and pressing against her.

Yet he was a pretty boy and there was a charm undoubted in the freshness of this innocence and youth awakening to a first glimmer of man’s passion.

“Delightful task——” she quoted under her breath, and once more vouchsafed him, with a sweep like the poise of a dove, her gentle hand.

As it lay in his brown fingers, she contemplated it with artistic satisfaction and

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## THE BATH COMEDY

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played her little digits up and down, admiring the shape and colour of the nails, the delicate dimples at the knuckles. But Lord Verney's great boy's paw engulfed them all too quickly, and his brown eyes never wavered from their devout contemplation of her countenance.

"How——"

Mistress Kitty sprang to her feet.

"I vow," she cried, "'tis my hour for the waters, and I had clean forgot them!"

She called upon her maid:

"Lydia, child, my hat!—Lord Verney, if it please you, sir, your arm as far as the Pump Room." ("At least," she thought to herself, "all Bath shall know of my latest conquest.")

She tied her hat ribbons under her chin.

"How like you the mode?" said she.

And, charmed into smiles again by the rosy vision under the black plumes, she flashed round upon him from the mirror.

"Is it not, perhaps, a thought fly-away? Yet 'tis the latest. What says my Verney?"

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## THE BATH COMEDY

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The poor youth vainly endeavoured to discriminate and criticise.

“It is indeed a very fine hat,” said he .

“and there seems to be a vast number of feathers upon it.” He hesitated, stammered. “Oh, what care I for modes! ’Tis you, you——”

“What are you staring at, girl?” cried Mistress Bellairs sharply, to her Abigail.

“Out with you!”

“Well, my Verney?” said she. “Mercy, how you look, man! Is anything wrong with my face?”

She tilted that lovely little piece of perishable bloom innocently toward him, as she spoke. And the kiss she had read in his eyes, landed with unprecedented success upon her lips.

“Why, who knows?” thought she, with a little satisfied smile, as she straightened her modish hat. “There may be stuff in the lad, after all!”

She took his arm. Dazed by his own audacity, he suffered her to lead him from

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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the room. They jostled together down the narrow stairs.

“How beautiful you are!” said he; and kissed her again as they reached the sombre dark-panelled vestibule.

“Fie!” said she with a shade of testiness and pushed him back, as her little black page ran to open the door.

The kiss, like his talk, lacked any heightening of tone—and what of a lover’s kiss that shows no new ardour, what of a vow of love that has no new colour, no fresh imagery? But the trees in Queen Square were lightly leafed with pale, golden-green. The sunshine was white-gold, the breeze fresh and laughing; the old grey town was decked as with garlands of Young Love. “He is but new to it,” she argued against her fleeting doubts, “and he is, sure, the prettiest youth in all Bath.”

Love and Spring danced in Mistress Kitty’s light heart and light heels as she tripped forth. And Love and Spring gathered and strove and sought outlet in Verney’s soul

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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as inevitably, and irresistibly, and almost as unconsciously as the sap in the young shoots that swayed under the caress of the breeze and amorously unfurled themselves to the sunlight.

The Pump Room was cool and dim after the grey stone street upon which the young year's sunshine beat as fierce as its youth knew how. The water droned its little song as it welled up, faintly steaming.

"Listen to it," quoth Mistress Kitty. "How innocent it sounds, how clear it looks!"

With a smile she took the glass transferred to her by Verney, and: "Ugh!" said she, "how monstrous horrid it tastes, to be sure! 'Tis, I fear," she said, again casting a glance of some anxiety at her new lover's countenance, "a symbol of life."

"Yet," said he, "these waters are said to be vastly wholesome."

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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“Wholesome!” cried Mistress Kitty, sipping again, and again curling her nose upward and the corners of her lips downward, in an irresistibly fascinating grimace. “Wholesome, my lord! Heaven defend us! And what is that but the last drop to complete their odiousness! Wholesome, sir? I would have you know ’tis not for wholesomeness I drink.” She put down her glass, undiminished save by the value of a bird’s draught. “Do I look like a woman who needs to drink waters for ‘wholesomeness?’”

“Indeed, no,” floundered he in his bewildered way.

“There are social obligations,” said she, sententiously. “A widow, sir, alone and unprotected, *must* conform to common usage. And then I have another reason, one of pure sentiment.”

She cocked her head and fixed her mocking eye upon him.

“My poor Bellairs,” said she, “how oft has it not been my pleasure and my duty



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## THE BATH COMEDY

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to fill such a glass as this and convey it to his lips? In his last years, poor angel, he had quite lost the use of his limbs!"

Lord Verney had no answer appropriate to these tender reminiscences; and Mistress Kitty, having, it seemed, sufficiently conformed to the usage of Bath, as well as sacrificed to the manes of the departed, turned briskly round, and leaning against a pilaster began to survey the room.

"La! how empty!" quoth she. "'Tis your fault if I am so late, my lord. Nobody, I swear, but that Flyte woman, your odious Spicer, sir—ha, and old General Tilney. Verily, I believe these dreadful springs have the power of keeping such mummies in life long after their proper time. 'Tis hardly fair on the rest of the world. Why, the poor thing has scarce a sense or a wit left, and yet it walks! Heaven preserve us! why, it runs!" she cried suddenly with a little chirp, as the unfortunate veteran of Dettingen, escaping from the guiding hands of his chairman, started for the door

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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with the uncontrolled trot of semiparalytic senility.

“And that reminds me,” said Mistress Kitty, “that Sir George is most particular that I should walk five minutes between every glass. Here comes your estimable aunt, Lady Maria, and her ear-trumpet, and the unfortunate Miss Selina. I protest, with that yellow feather she is more like my dear dead Toto than ever.”

“Was that your pet name for your husband?” murmured Lord Verney, in a strangled whisper.

“Fie, sir!” cried the widow. “My cockatoo—I referred to my cockatoo.” She sighed profoundly. “I loved him,” she said.

He looked at her, uncertain to which of the lamented bipeds she referred.

“Selina,” cried Lady Maria, in the strident tones of the deaf woman persuaded of her own consequence (the voice of your shy deaf one loses all sound in her terror of being loud)—“Selina, how often must I

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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tell you that you must dip in my glass yourself? Who's that over there? Where are my eyeglasses? Who's that, did you say? Mistress Bellairs? Humph! And who's she got with her in tow now? Who did you say? Louder, child, louder. What makes you mumble so? Who? Verney—Lord Verney? Why, that's my nevvv. Tell him to come to me this minute. Do you hear, Selina, this minute! I won't have him fall into the net of widow Bellairs!"

The cockatoo topknot nodded vehemently. Poor Miss Selina, agitated between consciousness that the whole Pump Room was echoing to Lady Maria's sentiments and terror of her patroness, took two steps upon her errand, and halted, fluttering. Lord Verney had flushed darkly purple. Mistress Kitty hung with yet more affectionate weight upon his arm and smiled with sweet unconsciousness. For the moment she was as deaf as Lady Maria.

The latter's claw-like hand had now

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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disengaged a long-stemmed eyeglass from her laces.

“’Tis indeed,” she pronounced in her commanding bass, “my nevvv Verney with that vile Bellairs!—Nevvy! Here, I say!—Selina, fool, have you gone to sleep?”

An echo, as of titters, began to circle round the Pump Room. The painted face of Lady Flyte was wreathed into a smile of peculiar significance, as she whispered over her glass to her particular friend of the moment, Captain Spicer. This gentleman’s pallid visage was illumined with a radiance of gratified spite. His lips were pursed as though upon a plum of super-delicious gossip. He began to whisper and mouthe. Young Squire Green approached the couple with an eager ear and an innocent noddy face that strove to look vastly wise.

“I assure you,” mouthed the Captain.

“Was I not there?”

“In his bedroom?” cried Lady Flyte with a shrill laugh.

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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Lady Maria's cockatoo crest rose more fiercely. It seemed to Kitty Bellairs as if she heard the old lady's jaws rattle. It was certain that in her wrath she squawked louder than even the late lamented Toto. Then Mistress Kitty, who, to say the truth, began to find the scene a little beyond enjoyment, felt the young arm upon which she leaned stiffen, the young figure beside her rear itself with a new manliness.

“Pray, Mistress Bellairs,” said my Lord Verney, he spoke loudly and, to her surprise, with perfect facility, even dignity, “will you allow me to introduce you to my aunt, Lady Maria Prideaux?—Aunt Maria,” said he, and his voice rang out finely, imposing a general silence, “let me present Mistress Bellairs. This lady has graciously condescended to accept me as her future husband. I am the happiest and the most honoured of men.”

The last sentence he cried out still more emphatically than the rest, and then

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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repeated it with his eye on Kitty's suddenly flushed cheek, almost in a whisper and with a quiver of strong emotion.

The astounded Mistress Kitty rose from her deep curtsey with a swelling heart.

"The dear lad," she said to herself. "The dear, innocent chivalrous lad!"

There was almost a dimness in her brilliant black eye. Her emotion was of a kind she had never known before: it was almost maternal.

Under stress of sudden genuine emotion, the wit of intrigue in the cleverest woman falls in abeyance. Mistress Bellairs found no word out of the new situation.

Lady Maria's deafness had increased to an alarming extent.

"Gratified, I'm sure," she mumbled, stuck out her dry hand and withdrew it before Mistress Bellairs had had time to touch it. "My future wife," bawled the budding peer, in his aged relative's ear.

It was curious to note how old Lady Maria seemed suddenly to have become.

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## THE BATH COMEDY

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Huddled in herself she nodded vacantly at her nephew.

“Thank ye for asking, child,” said she, “but the waters try me a good deal.”

Lord Verney attempted another shout in vain.

“So Sir George says,” remarked my lady. “’Tis the very eye of my poor dear Toto,” thought Mistress Bellairs.

Lord Verney looked round in despair. Miss Selina thought him monstrous handsome and gallant and her poor old-maid’s heart warmed to the lover in him. She approached Lady Maria and gently lifted her trumpet.

Lady Maria, glad enough of a diversion, applied it to her ear with unwonted affability.

“What is it, my dear? Any sign of the Duchess?”

“Your nephew,” said Miss Selina in modest accents, “your nephew, my Lord Verney, wishes to inform you that he is about to contract a matrimonial alliance

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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with the lady he has just introduced to you.”

Miss Selina blushed behind the mouth-piece as she made this announcement. Then she cried: “Oh,” with an accent of suffering, for Lady Maria had rapped her over the knuckles with the instrument.

“Matrimonial fiddlesticks!” said Lord Verney’s aunt. “Selina, you’re a perfect fool!—Madam,” remarked the wraith of the departed cockatoo, inclining her crest with much dignity toward the blooming Kitty, “I wish you good-morning.”



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# THE BATH COMEDY

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## SCENE XIII.

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HERE must have been a curious magic in the words, "My future wife," for no sooner had he pronounced them than Lord Verney became several inches taller, a distinct span broader and quite unreasonably older. In fact, from boyhood he had stepped to man's estate. He looked down protectingly at the little woman hanging on his arm. The seriousness of responsibility settled upon his brow.

"Ah! Verney," quoth Mr. Stafford, flicking a hot brow, as he dashed in out of the sunshine, powdered with white dust from his walk and still bubbling with laughter. "Ah, Verney, playing butterfly in the golden hours while other fellows toil in the sweat of their brow! Jingo! lad, but you've lit on the very rose of the

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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garden.—Mistress Kitty Bellairs, I kiss your hand.”

At this Mistress Kitty felt her future lord's arm press her fingers to his ribs, while he straightened his youthful back. “Mr. Stafford,” began he in solemn tones, “this lady——”

But she, knowing what was coming, interrupted ruthlessly.

“And pray, Mr. Stafford,” quoth she, cocking her head at him with those bird-like airs and graces that were as natural to her as to any mincing dove—Mistress Kitty being of those that begin by making eyes in their nurses' arms, before they can speak, and end in a modish lace night-cap for the benefit of the doctor—“and whence may you come so late, and thus heated?”

“Whence?” cried Mr. Stafford, and overcome by the humour of his recollections, roused the solemn echoes of the Pump Room by his jovial laugh. “Ah, you may well ask! from the merriest meeting it

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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has ever been my fate to attend. Oh, the face of him in his chair, between his gout and his temper! And fire-eating Jasper all for bullets; and old Foulks' teeth ready to drop out of his head at the indecorousness of it all!—Spicer, man, aha! hold me up.—Oh, madam,” cried Mr. Stafford, wiping tears of ecstasy from his eyes and leaning as unceremoniously against Spicer as if the latter's lank figure were a pilaster specially intended for his support—“oh, madam, I could make you laugh had I the breath left for it.”

“Indeed,” cried Mistress Kitty, plunging in again, as it became evident to her that Lord Verney, with the gentle obstinacy that was part of his character, was once more preparing to make his nuptial statement. “Mr. Stafford, please speak then, for in sooth it seems to me a vastly long time since I have laughed.”

“Gad! you actually make *me* curious,” put in Mr. Stafford's prop.

“Oh dear, oh dear!” sighed Mr. Stafford,

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## THE BATH COMEDY

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in a fresh fit, “ha, ha! By the way, Verney, weren’t you also to have walked with the jealous husband this morning?— Ah, by the same token, and you too, Spicer? Gad. I’m glad you didn’t, for if either of you had put lead in him I’d have missed the best joke of the season. Gad, I may say so. He, he, aha-ha, ho, ho!”

“Mr. Stafford,” said my Lord Verney, as solemn as any owl, while Mistress Kitty, caught by the infection of the genial Stafford’s mirth, tittered upon his arm, “I have deeper reason than you think of to rejoice that the absurd misunderstanding was cleared up between Sir Jasper and myself. This lady and I——”

“Oh dear, the joke, the joke!” cried Mistress Bellairs, with loud impatience, and stamped her little foot.

“Oh, my fair Bellairs,” gasped Mr. Stafford, “had you but been there to share it with me!”

“This lady——” quoth Lord Verney.

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## THE BATH COMEDY

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“I wish indeed I had been!” cried she. And in very truth she did.

“Mistress Bellairs,” said the determined lover, “has consented to make me the happiest of men.”

“Eh?” cried Mr. Stafford, and stopped on the edge of another guffaw.

Mistress Kitty cast down her eyelids. She felt she looked demure and almost bashful, and she hated herself in this character.

Mr. Stafford was one of the thirty-seven lovers of whom the lady had spoken so confidently, and as such was far from realizing the solemn meaning of Lord Verney’s announcement.

“Ah, madam,” cried he reproachfully, “is’t not enough to keep me for ever in Hades, must you needs add to my torture by showing me another in Paradise? But, my little Verney,” he went on, turning good-naturedly to his young rival, “it is but fair to warn you that you will be wise to pause before getting yourself measured for your halo: the Paradise of this lady’s

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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favour is (alack, do I not know it?) of most precarious tenure."

"This lady, sir," said Lord Verney, with rigid lips, "has promised to be my wife."

It was fortunate that Mr. Stafford had a prop: under the shock he staggered. Man of the world as he was, the most guileless astonishment was stamped on his countenance.

Oh, how demure looked Mistress Kitty! Spicer, a trifle yellow, became effusive in congratulations — congratulations which were but coldly received by his patron.

"Ah, Kitty," whispered Mr. Stafford in Mistress Bellairs' shell-like ear, "do you like them so tender-green? Why, my dear, the lad's chin is as smooth as your own. What pleasantry is this?"

Kitty scraped her little foot and hung her head. Mistress Kitty coy! And yon poor innocent with his air of proprietorship — 'twas a most humorous spectacle!

"I'm sure, Verney," cried Mr. Stafford, "I wish you joy, ha, ha! with all my

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## THE BATH COMEDY

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heart! And you, madam, he, he,—forgive me, friends—the thought of Sir Jasper’s duel is still too much for me. Ha, ha! Support me, Spicer.”

“She’ll marry him, she’ll marry him,” cried Spicer with bilious vindictiveness, looking over his shoulder at the couple, as they moved away.

“Marry him!—never she!” cried Stafford. “Kitty’s no fool. Why, man, the little demon wouldn’t have *me!* She loves her liberty and her pleasure too well. Did you not see? She could not look up for fear of showing the devilment in her eye. Cheerily, cheerily, my gallant Captain!” cried the spark, and struck the reedy shoulders that had buttressed him, in contemptuous good-natured valediction. “You need not yet cast about for a new greenhorn to subsist upon.”

Mistress Kitty, glancing up at her Calf, found, something to her astonishment and further displeasure, a new expression in his

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## THE BATH COMEDY

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eyes. Ardour had been superseded by an unseasonable gravity.

“The creature is a complete menagerie!” she thought to herself, indignantly. “I vow he looks like nothing but an owl in the twilight!”

They wandered together from the Pump Room on to the Abbey Flags, and so, slowly, into the cool and shady Orange Grove; and in a sequestered spot they sat them down on a stone bench.

“When a man,” said he, “has been, as I have, brought face to face, within the space of one short morning, with the great events of existence, Death and Love, how hollow and how unworthy do the mock joys and griefs of Society appear to him!”

“Oh la!” said she. “You alarm me. And when did you see Death, my lord?”

“Why,” said he, with his innocent gravity, “had you not intervened, my dearest dear, between Sir Jasper and me, this morning, who knows what might have happened?”



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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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“Oh, that!” said she, and her lip curled. “Ay,” said he, “where should I be now, Kitty? The thought haunts me in the midst of my great happiness. Had I killed Sir Jasper, could I have looked upon myself other than as a murderer?”

“Oh, fie, fie,” interpolated his mistress impatiently, “who ever thinks of such things in little matters of honour!”

In her heart she told herself that the young man showed a prodigious want of *savoir-vivre*. In all candour he proceeded to display a still greater lack of that convenient quality.

“On the other hand, had I fallen, and that indeed was the more likely contingency, it being my first affair of the kind, I tremble to think in what state my soul would have appeared before its Maker.”

His voice quivered a moment.

“My Lord Verney,” cried Kitty, turning upon him a most distressed countenance, “you have no idea how you shock me!” And indeed he had not.

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## THE BATH COMEDY

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He took her distress for the sweetest womanly sympathy, and was emboldened to further confidence.

“I blush to tell you,” he said, “that since I came to this gay Society of Bath, my life has not been all my conscience could approve of. The pious practices, the earnest principles of life so sedulously inculcated in me by my dear mother, have been but too easily cast aside.”

“Oh dear!” cried Kitty in accents of yet greater pain.

“When we are married, my dear love,” pursued Lord Verney, quietly encircling his mistress’s little waist with his arm as spoke, but, absorbed as he was in his virtuous reflections, omitting to infuse any ardour into his embrace, “we shall not seek the brilliant world. We shall find all our happiness with each other, shall we not? Oh, how welcome my dear mother will make you at Verney Hall! It has always been her dream that I should marry early and settle on the estate.”

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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Little shivers ran down Kitty's spine. "Is it your intention to live with your mother when you are married?" she faltered, and leaned weakly against the inert arm.

Enthusiastically he cried that the best of mothers and he could never be parted long.

"Oh, how you will love her!" he said, looking fondly at the Kitty of his imagination.

"From your tenderest years she sedulously inculcated in you earnest principles and pious practices, did she not?" murmured the Kitty of reality, with what was almost a moan.

"She did indeed," cried the youth.

Mistress Kitty closed her eyes and let her head droop upon his shoulder.

"I fear I am going to have the vapours," said she.

"'Tis, maybe, the spring heats," said he, and made as if he would rise.

"Maybe," said Mistress Kitty, becoming so limp all at once that he was forced to

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## THE BATH COMEDY

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tighten his clasp. He glanced at her now in some alarm. She half opened bright eyes, and glimmered a languid little smile at him.

“At least,” thought the widow, “if we must part (and part we must, my Calf and I) we shall part on a sweet moment. What, in a bower, every scent, every secret bird and leaf and sunbeam of which calls on thought of love, and I by his side, he to prate of his mother! And at least he not bleat of my beauty again, my name is not Kitty!”

She sighed and closed her eyes. The delicate face lay but a span from his lips.

“I fear indeed you are faint,” said he with solicitude. “My mother has a sovereign cordial against such weakness.”

Mistress Bellairs sat up very energetically for a fainting lady.

“Your mother . . . ,” she began with a flash of her eye, then checked herself abruptly. “Adieu, Verney,” said she, and stretched out her hand to him.

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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“Adieu!” he repeated, all bewilderment.

“Ay,” said she, “there chimes the Abbey its silly old air. How long have I been with you, sir, alone? Fie, fie, and must I not think of my reputation?”

“Surely, as my future wife . . .” said he.

“Why then the more reason,” she said cutting him short; “must I not show myself duly discreet? Think of your lady mother! Come, sir, take your leave.”

A moment she was taunting; a moment all delicious smiles.

“I’ll make him bleat!” she thought, and stamped her foot upon it.

“As far as your door?” said he.

“Not a step,” she vowed. “Come, sir, adieu.”

He took her hand; bent and kissed her sedately.

“I will,” said he, “go write the news to my mother.”

“Oh go!” said she and turned on her heel with a flounce and was out of sight, round the corner of an alley, with a

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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whisk and flutter of tempestuous petticoats, before his slow boy's wits had time to claim the moment for the next meeting.

There were actually tears in Mistress Kitty's eyes as she struck the gravel with her cane. She rubbed her cherry lips where his kiss had rested with a furious hand.

"'Twas positively matrimonial," she cried within herself, with angry double-threaded reminiscence—"the Calf! Did ever woman spend a more ridiculous hour—and in Heaven's name, what's to be done?"

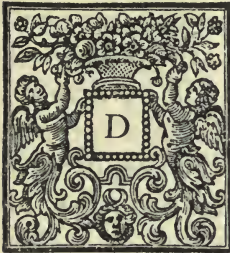
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# ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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## SCENE XIV.

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ENIS O'HARA appropriately lived in Gay Street. As all the world knows, Gay Street runs steeply from the green exclusiveness of Queen Square, to the lofty elegance, the columnal solemnity of the King's Circus. Being a locality of the most fashionable, Gay Street was apt to be deserted enough at those hours when Fashion, according to the unwritten laws of Bath, foregathered in other quarters.

Toward eight o'clock of the evening of the day after his duel with Sir Jasper, Mr. Denis O'Hara, seated at his open window, disconsolate in a very gorgeous dressing-gown and a slight fever fit, found it indeed so damnably deserted that the sight of a sedan-chair and two toiling chairmen coming up the incline became quite an object of interest to him.

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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“To be sure,” thought he, “don’t I know it’s only some old hen being joggled home to roost, after losing sixpence and her temper at piquet. But sure, what’s to prevent me beguiling myself for a bit by dreaming of some lovely young female coming to visit me in me misfortune? Sure, it’s the rats those fellows are, that not one of them would keep me company to-night! There’s nobody like your dear friends for smelling out an empty purse. Musha!” said Mr. O’Hara, putting his head out of the window, “if the blessed ould chair isn’t stopping at me own door!”

A bell pealing through the house confirmed his observation.

“It’s a woman! By the powers, it’s a woman! Tim, Tim, ye divil!” roared Mr. O’Hara, “come to me this minute, or I’ll brain ye.”

Conscious of his invalid *negligé*, he rose in his chair; but, curiosity proving stronger than decorum, was unable to tear himself from his post of vantage at the window.



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## THE BATH COMEDY

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“Oh! the doaty little foot!” he cried in rapture, as arched pink-silk instep and a brocade slipper of daintiest proportion emerged, in a little cloud of lace, from the dim recesses of the chair, upon his delighted vision.

He turned for a moment to bellow again into the room:

“Tim, you limb of Satan, where are you at all? Sure, I’m not fit to be seen by any lady, let alone such a foot as that!”

When he popped his head once more through the window, only the chairmen occupied the street.

“It’s for the ground floor, of course: for the French marquis,” said O’Hara, and sat down, feeling as flat as a pancake.

The next instant a knock at the door sent the quick blood flying to the red head. The “limb of Satan,” more generally known as Tim Mahoney, an ingratiating, untidy fellow, with a cunning leer and a coaxing manner, stood ogling his master on the threshold; then he jerked with his

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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thumb several times over his shoulder, and grinned with exquisite enjoyment.

“What is it?” said O’Hara fiercely.

Tim winked, and jerked his thumb once more.

“Speak, ye ugly divil, or by heavens I’ll spoil your beauty for you!”

“Your sither!” cried Tim, with a rumbling subterraneous laugh.

“Me sither, man?”

“Ay, yer honour,” said the scamp, who, as O’Hara’s foster-brother, was well aware that his master boasted no such gentle tie. “Sure she’s heard your honour’s wounded, and she’s come to visit you. ‘I’m Mither O’Hara’s sister,’ says she——”

“And am I not?” cried a sweet voice behind him, “or, if not, at least a very, very dear cousin, and, in any case, I must see Mr. O’Hara at once, and alone.”

“To be sure,” cried O’Hara, eagerly rising in every way to the situation, and leaping forward “Show in the lady, you

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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villain!—Oh, my darling!” cried the Irishman, opening generous arms, “but I am glad to see ye!—Tim, you scoundrel, shut the door behind you!”

The visitor was much enveloped, besides being masked. But there was not a moment’s hesitation in the ardour of Mr. O’Hara’s welcome.

“Sir, sir!” cried a faint voice from behind the folds of lace, “what conduct is this?”

“Oh, sither darling, sure, me heart’s been hungering for you! Another kiss, me dear, dear cousin!”

“Mr. O’Hara!” cried Mistress Bellairs, in tones of unmistakable indignation; tore off her mask, and stood with panting bosom and fiery eye.

“Tare and ages!” exclaimed the ingenuous Irishman. “If it isn’t me lovely Kitty!”

“Mistress Bellairs, if you please, Mr. O’Hara,” said the lady with great dignity.

“I am glad to see, sir, that that other passion of which I have heard so much

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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has not interfered with the strength of your family affections.”

She sat down, and fanned herself with her mask, and, looking haughtily round the room, finally fixed her gaze, with much interest, upon the left branch of the chandelier.

For a second, Mr. O'Hara's glib tongue seemed at a loss; but it was only for a second. With a graceful movement he gathered the skirts of his fine-flowered damask dressing-gown more closely over the puce satin small clothes, which, he was sadly conscious, were not in their first freshness, besides bearing the trace of one over-generous bumper of what he was fond of calling the ruby-wine. Then, sinking on one knee, he began to pour a tender tale into the widow's averted ear. “And it's the fine ninny ye must think me, Kitty darling—I beg your pardon, darling; ma'am it shall be, though I vow to see ye toss your little head like that, and set all those elegant little curls

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## THE BATH COMEDY

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dancing, is enough to make anyone want to start you at it again. Oh, sure, it's the divine little ear you have, but, be jabbers, Kitty, if it's the back of your neck you want to turn on me—there, now, if I was to be shot for it, I couldn't help it—with the little place there just inviting my lips."

"Keep your kisses for your sister, sir, or your cousin!"

"What in the world—— And d'ye think I didn't know you?"

"A likely tale!"

"May I die this minute if I didn't know you before ever you were out of the ould chair!"

"Pray, sir," with an angry titter, "how will even your fertile wits prove that?"

"Sure, didn't I see the little pink foot of you step out, and didn't I know it before ever it reached the ground?"

"Lord forgive you!" said Mistress Kitty gravely. But a dimple peeped.

He had now possessed himself of her hand, which he was caressing with the

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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touch of the tentative lover, tenderer than a woman's, full of mute cajoling inquiry. "I hope the Lord *may* forgive me for setting up and worshipping an idol. I believe there's something against that in the commandments, darling, but sure, maybe, old Moses wouldn't have been so hard on those Israelites if they'd had the gumption to raise a pretty woman in the midst of them, instead of an old gilt Calf."

At this word, Mistress Kitty gave a perceptible start.

"Oh, dear," said she, "never, never speak to me of that dreadful animal again! Oh, Denis," she said, turning upon him for the first time her full eyes, as melting and as pathetic just then as it was in their composition to look, "I am in sad, sad trouble, and I don't know what to do!"

Here she produced a delicate handkerchief, and applied it to her eyelashes, which she almost believed herself had become quite moist.

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## ❖ THE BATH COMÉDY ❖

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“Me jewel!” cried Mr. O’Hara, preparing to administer the first form of consolation that occurred to him.

“Be quiet,” said Mistress Kitty testily. “Get up, sir! I have to consult you. There, there, sit down. Oh, I am in earnest, and this is truly serious.”

Mr. O’Hara, though with some reluctance, obeyed. He drew his chair as near to the widow’s as she would permit him, and pursed his lips into gravity.

“You know my Lord Verney,” began the fascinating widow.

“I do,” interrupted the irrepressible Irishman, “and a decent quiet lad he is, though, devil take him, he makes so many bones about losing a few guineas at cards that one would think they grew on his skin!”

“Hush,” said she. “*I can’t abide him!*”

Mr. O’Hara half started from his armchair.

“Say but the word,” said he, “and I’ll run him through the ribs as neat as——”

“Oh, be quiet,” cried the lady, in much exasperation. “How can you talk like that

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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when all the world knows he is to be my husband!"

"Your husband!" Mr. O'Hara turned an angry crimson to the roots of his crisp red hair. Then he stopped, suffocating.

"But I don't *want* to marry him, you gaby," cried Mistress Kitty, with a charming smile.

Her lover turned white, and leaned back against the wing of his great chair. The physician had blooded him that morning by way of mending him for his loss of the previous night, and he felt just a little shaky and swimming. Mistress Kitty's eye became ever more kindly as it marked these flattering signs of emotion.

"The noodle," said she vindictively, "mistook the purport of some merely civil words, and forthwith went about bleating to all Bath that he and I were to be wed."

"I'll soon stop his mouth for him," muttered Mr. O'Hara, moved to less refinement of diction than he usually



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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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affected. "Oh, Kitty," said he, and wiped his pale brow, "sure, it's the terrible fright you've given me!"

Here Mistress Bellairs became suddenly and inexplicably agitated.

"You don't understand," said she, and stamped her foot. "Oh, how can I explain? How are people so stupid! I was obliged to go to his rooms this morning—a pure matter of friendship, sir, on behalf of my Lady Standish. Who would have conceived that the calf would take it for himself and think it was for *his* sake I interfered between him and that madman, Sir Jasper! 'Tis very hard," cried Mistress Kitty, "for a lone woman to escape calumny, and now there is my Lord Verney, after braying it to the whole of Bath, this moment writing to his insufferable old mother. And there is that cockatoo aunt of his looking out her most ancient set of garnets and strass for a wedding gift. And, oh dear, oh dear; what *am* I to do?"

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## THE BATH COMEDY

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She turned over the back of her chair, to hide her face in her pocket-handkerchief. In a twinkling, O'Hara was again at her feet.

“Soul of my soul, pulse of my heart!” cried he. “Sure, don't cry, Kitty darling, I'll clear that little fellow out of your way before you know where you are.”

“Indeed, sir,” she said, flashing round upon him with a glance surprisingly bright, considering her woe. “And is that how you would save my reputation? No, I see there's nothing for it,” said Mistress Kitty with sudden composure, folding up her handkerchief deliberately, and gazing up again at the chandelier with the air of an early martyr, “there's nothing for it but to pay the penalty of my good-nature and go live at Verney Hall between my virtuous Lord Verney and that paragon of female excellence and domestic piety, his mother.”

“Now by Saint Peter,” cried O'Hara, springing to his feet, “if I have to whip

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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you from under his nose at the very altar, and carry you away myself, I'll save you from that, me darling!"

"Say you so?" cried the lady with alacrity. "Then, indeed, sir," she proceeded with sweetest coyness, and pointed her dimple at him. "I'll not deny but what I thought you could help me, when I sought you to-night. There was a letter, sir," she said, "which yester morning I received. 'Twas signed by a lock of hair——"

"Ah, Kitty!" cried the enraptured and adoring Irishman, once more extending wide his arms.

"Softly, sir," said she, eluding him. "Let us to business."

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# THE BATH COMEDY

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## SCENE XV.

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“UT you must understand,” said the lady, “that you carry me off against my will.”

“To be sure,” said he. “Isn’t poor Denis O’Hara to run away with you

merely to save your reputation?”

“So if I scream, sir, and give you a scratch or two, you will bear me no malice?”

“Bear you malice, is it?” said he, stopping to kiss each finger-tip of the hand which he contrived somehow should never be long out of his clasp. “Me darling, sure, won’t I love to feel your little pearls of nails on my cheek?”

“And spare no expense upon chaise or horses,” said she.

“Eh?” cried Mr. O’Hara, while a certain vagueness crept into his gaze. “Me dear love, the best that money can produce—that money can produce,” said Mr.

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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O'Hara, and his eye rolled under the stress and strain of an inward calculation: ("There's my grandfather's watch; I'm afeared the works are not up to the gold case, but it might run to four guineas. And there's my jewelled snuff-box that the Chevalier gave my father—no dash it, that's gone! There's my silver-hilted sword—I could exchange it for a black one and perhaps five guineas. And there's my three sets of Mechlin.")

While he cogitated, the lady smiled upon him with gentle raillery; then she popped her hand in her pocket and drew forth a well-filled case.

"And did you think," said she, laying the case on the table, "that I would have the face to ask a *rich* lover to elope with me?"

"Faith," said he, pursuing now aloud his silent addition, "there's the gold punch-bowl too! I vowed as long as I'd a drop to mix in it I'd never part with the thing; but, sure, I little guessed what was in store for me—that will make twenty guineas or

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## THE BATH COMEDY

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more. Put up your money, Kitty; I'll not consent to be paid for carrying you off, except," said he, "by your sweet lips."

"Now listen, sir," she cried, lifting up her finger, "you're a poor man."

"I am that," said he.

"And I," said she, "am a rich woman."

"Oh!" cried he, "Kitty, my darling, and sure that's the last thing in the world I'd ever be thinking of now. When I laid my heart at your feet, my dear, 'twas for your own sweet sake, with never a thought of the lucre. What's money to me," said he, snapping his fingers, "not *that*, Kitty darling! I despise it. Why," he went on with his charming infectious smile, "I never had a gold piece in my pocket yet, but it burned a hole in it."

She listened to him with a curious expression, half contemptuous, half tender. Then she nodded.

"I well believe you," said she. "Come, come Denis, don't be a fool. Since the money is there, and we know for what

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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purpose, what matters it between you and me who puts it down."

"Ah," he cried, with a sort of shame, abandoning his light tone for one of very real emotion, "you're an angel! I'm not worthy of you, but I'll try, Kitty, I'll try." The lady looked slightly embarrassed.

"I protest, sir; I cannot have you going on your knees again," she cried sharply, "and it's getting late, and the business is settled, I think."

"Leave it to me," said he; "sure, I could do it blindfold."

"Have the post-chay at the corner of Bond Street and Quiet Street, 'tis the darkest in Bath, I think."

"Ay, and the relay at Devizes, for we'll have to push the first stage."

"And after?" said she, and looked at him doubtfully.

"And after that—London. And sure I know an old boy in Covent Garden that will marry us in a twinkle."

She nibbled her little finger. The rapture

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## THE BATH COMEDY

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evoked on his countenance by this last prospect was not reflected upon hers.

“But you forget,” said she, “that I am to be abducted against my will, and what will people say if I marry you at the end of the journey without more ado?”

“Oh, faith,” said he, without a shade of uneasiness, “shouldn’t I be a poor fellow if I did not contrive to persuade you on the way. And then, what would the world say if you did not marry me after travelling all night with such a wild Irish devil? Sure,” said he, with a wink, “what else could a poor woman do to save her reputation?”

“True,” said she, musingly, and tapped her teeth.

She tied on her mask once more and drew up her hood, passive, in her mood of deep reflection, to his exuberant demonstrations. At the door she paused and looked back at him, her eyes strangely alluring through the black velvet peep-hole, her red lips full of mysterious promise beneath the black lace fall.



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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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“And I never asked,” said she, in a melting tone, “after your wound? Does it hurt you? Will you be able, think you, to face the fatigues to-morrow night?”

“Ah, I have but one complaint, Kitty,” he cried, “and that’s my mortal passion for you. And when a man’s weak with love,” he said, “sure it’s then he’s the strength of twenty.”

“Not a step further,” said she, “than this door. Think of the chairmen and Bath gossip. Good-night.”

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# THE BATH COMEDY

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## SCENE XVI.

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AND now, child, what's the town talk?" said Mistress Bellairs. The nights were chilly, and a log crackled on the hearth. Kitty, in the most charming *déshabillé*, stretched a pink slippered foot airily towards the blaze.

"La, ma'am," said Miss Lydia, as with nervous fingers she uncoiled one powdered roll and curl after another, "all the morning the gossip was upon Sir Jasper's meeting with Colonel Villiers at Hammer's Fields. And all the afternoon——" she paused and poised a brush.

"All the afternoon? Speak, child. You know," said her mistress piously, "that I had to spend my evening by the side of a dear sick friend."

"Well, ma'am," said the maid, "the talk

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## THE BATH COMEDY

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is all about your own marriage with the young Lord Verney."

"Mercy, girl," cried the lady with a little scream, "you needn't hit my head so hard with those bristles! What's taken you? And what do people think of that?"

"Why, ma'am," said the Abigail, wielding her brush more tenderly, and permitting her irritation to betray itself only in the sharp snap of her voice, "my Lord Verney's man says he pities anyone that will have to go and live with her old la'ship at Verney Hall."

"Ha!" said Kitty, and gave herself a congratulatory smile in the handglass.

"And Mr. Burrell, ma'am, that Lady Maria Prideaux's butler, and a wise old gentleman he is, he says the marriage'll never take place, ma'am, for neither his own la'ship, nor the lady at Verney Hall, would allow of it, ma'am."

"Oh, indeed?" cried Mistress Bellairs, stiffening herself, "that's all they know about it! Lydia, you untruthful, impertinent

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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girl, how dare you tell me such a story?" "I'm sure I beg your pardon, ma'am," said Lydia, sniffing. "I'm sure I up and told Mr. Burrell that if you'd set your heart on wedding such a poor ninny as Lord Verney—I beg pardon, ma'am, I'm sure he'll be a very nice young nobleman, when his beard begins to grow—'twas not likely a deaf old cat like his mistress could prevent him. And I told Lord Verney's man, ma'am—and an impudent fellow he is—that you'd soon teach the dowager her place, once you were mistress in Verney Hall."

"Well, well," said the lady, mollified, "and what says the rest of your Bath acquaintance?"

"Squire Juniper's head coachman says his master'll drink himself to death, as sure as eggs, on the day that sees you another's, ma'am. He's been taking on terrible with Madeira ever since he's heard the news. And the Marquis' running footman, he says 'that Lady Flyte'll have it

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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all her own way with his lordship now, and more's the pity, for,' says he, 'her la'ship's not fit to hold a candle to the widow;' excuse the language, he knows no better, his strength is mostly in his legs, ma'am. And Mr. Stafford's jockey says, ma'am, that in his opinion you're a lady as will never be drove again in double harness."

"Did he say so, indeed!" said Mistress Bellairs, reflectively. "Well, my good creature, and what say you?"

"La!" said the maid, and the brush trembled over her mistress's curls, "I say, ma'am, that if you was to make such a sacrifice, you so young, and lovely, and so much admired, I humbly hopes you might pick out someone livelier than my Lord Verney."

"Now, whom," said Mistress Bellairs, in a tone of good-humoured banter, "would you choose, I wonder? What would you say to the Marquis, Lydia?"

"Oh, ma'am! His lordship is a real nobleman—as the prize fighters all say—and a

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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better judge in the cockpit, Mr. Bantam, the trainer, says, never breathed, drunk or sober; and no doubt when he's sober, ma'am, he'd make as good a husband as most."

"Well, well, girl, enough of him. What of Mr. Stafford, now?"

"Oh, Mr. Stafford, ma'am, that's a comely gentleman; not one bit of padding under his stockings, and an eye 'twould wheedle the very heart out of one's bosom. And, no doubt, if you ever thought of him, ma'am, you'd see that he paid off the little French milliner handsome. He's a very constant gentleman," said Miss Lydia, with a suspicion of spite.

"Pooh," cried the lady, and pushed her chair away from the fire, "what nonsense you do talk! And pray what thinks your wisdom of Mr. O'Hara?"

"Lud! ma'am," cried the guileless maiden, "that's the gentleman as was found behind Lady Standish's curtains."

"If you were not a perfect idiot," cried

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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the widow, "you would not repeat *that* absurd tale, much less expect me to believe it. Mr. O'Hara has never even spoken to Lady Standish."

The unusual warmth in her mistress's tone struck the girl's sharp wits. She glanced quickly at the lady's reflection in the glass, and made no reply.

"Come," said Mistress Bellairs, "what else have you against him? Is he not handsome, child?"

"Why, ma'am, handsome enough for such as like red hair."

"And merry, and good company?"

"Oh, ma'am, none better, as half the rogues in Bath know."

"Tush—you mean he is good-natured, I suppose?"

"He never said 'no' in his life, ma'am, I do believe, to man or woman."

"Well, then?" cried her mistress testily.

"And generous," gabbled Lydia, charmed by the cloud she beheld gathering on the brow reflected in the glass. "Open-handed,

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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ma'am. Mr. Mahoney—that queer peculiar servant of his—many a time *he's* told me, ma'am, that his only way to keep his wages for himself, and seldom he sees the sight of them, is to spend them at once, for his good master is that free-handed, ma'am, he'd give the coat off his servant's back." "I'm quite aware," said the lady loftily, "that Mr. O'Hara's estates in Ireland are slightly embarrassed."

"I don't know what they call it, ma'am," cried Lydia shrilly. "It's not a ha'porth of rent the old lord's seen these twelve months. Last year they lived on the pictures. And now it's the plate, I'm told. But, indeed, ma'am, as Mr. Mahoney says, what does it matter to a gay gentleman like Mr. O'Hara? Sure, he's the sort, as he says to me only yesterday, that would come to a fortune on Monday and be sending to the pawnshop on Saturday."

"You may go to bed, Lydia," cried Mistress Bellairs, rising hastily; "you've half deafened me with your chatter."



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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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Left alone the little lady sat down by the fire in a melancholy mood.

“The sort that would come to a fortune on Monday, and be sending to the pawnshop on Saturday . . . I’m afraid it’s true. Yet, I believe, he loves me, poor Denis! I vow,” she said to herself, “’tis the only one of them all that I could *endure*. Yes, I could endure Denis, vastly well . . . for a while at least. And now,” said she, “what’s to be done? Oh, I’d be loath to baulk him of the pleasure of running away with me! ’tis the only decent way indeed of breaking with my Lord Verney. And it certainly struck me that Master Stafford was mighty cool upon the matter. I’ve been too quiet of late, and that odious Bab Flyte thinks she can have everything her own way . . . . But, I’ll be rescued,” she said, “at Devizes—I shall have to be rescued at Devizes. My poor dear; he may be happy at least for an hour or two . . . as far as Devizes!”

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## THE BATH COMEDY

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Her brow cleared; the dimples began to play.

“We shall see,” she smiled more broadly, “if we cannot prod his Calfship into a night trot. ’Twill do his education a vastness of service . . . But the poor creature,” she reflected further, “is scarce to be depended on. Who knows whether his mother would approve of his breathing the night air . . . I must,” Mistress Kitty’s pretty forehead became once more corrugated under the stress of profound thought—“I must,” she murmured, “have another string to my bow, or my sweet O’Hara will marry me after all. Dear fellow, how happy we should be from Monday . . . till Saturday! Who? Who, shall it be? . . . My Lord Marquis might take the *rôle* in earnest and spoil my pretty fellow’s beauty. Squire Juniper? He would sure be drunk. And Master Stafford? Oh, *he* may stay with the French milliner for me!”

Suddenly the lady’s perplexed countenance

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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became illumined. "Sir Jasper?" she said. "Sir Jasper—the very man! The good Julia—I owe it to her to bring matters to an *éclaircissement*. And, Sir Jasper—oh, he richly deserves a midnight jolt, for 'tis owing to his monstrous jealousy that I am put to all this trouble. 'Twill be a fine thing indeed," thought Mistress Bellairs with a burst of self-satisfied benevolence, "if I can demonstrate to Sir Jasper, once for all, the folly into which this evil passion may lead a man."

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# ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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## SCENE XVII.

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F you please, my lady," said Mistress Megrin, "I should like to quit your ladyship's service." "How?" cried Lady Standish, waking with a start out of the heavy sleep of trouble, and propping herself upon her elbow, to gaze in blinking astonishment at the irate pink countenance of her woman. Lady Standish looked very fair and young, poor little wife, with her half-powdered curls of hair escaping in disorder from the laces of her night-cap, and her soft blue eyes as full of uncomprehending grief as a frightened baby's.

Mistress Megrin gazed upon her coldly and her old-maid's heart hardened within her.

"No, your ladyship," said she, with a virtuous sniff, "I shouldn't feel as I was

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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doing my duty to her ladyship, your mother, nor to my humble self, were I to remain an hour longer than I could help, the Handmaid of Sin.”

“Oh, dear,” said Lady Standish, letting herself fall back on her pillows with a weary moan, “I do wish you’d hold your tongue, woman, and allow me to rest! Pull the curtain again; oh, how my head aches!”

“Very well, my lady,” ejaculated Megrim, all at once in a towering passion. “Since you’re that hardened, my lady, that a sign from Heaven couldn’t melt your heart—I allude to that man of God, his lordship the Bishop (oh, what a holy gentleman that is!); and, my lady, me and Mistress Tremlet saw him out of the pantry window as he shook the dust of this House of Iniquity from his shoes; if that vessel of righteousness could not prevail with your ladyship, what hopes have I that you’ll hear the voice of the Lord through me?”

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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“Megrim, hold your tongue,” said her mistress in unwontedly angered tones, “pull the curtains and go away!”

With a hand that trembled with fury Mistress Megrim fell upon the curtains and rattled them along their pole. Then she groped her way to Lady Standish’s bedside and stood for some seconds peering malevolently at her through the darkness.

“I wouldn’t believe it, my lady,” she hissed in a ghastly whisper, “although indeed I might have known that such a gentleman as Sir Jasper would never have taken on like that if he hadn’t had grounds. But you’ve mistaken your woman, when you think you can make an improper go-between of me! Oh,” cried she, with a rigid shudder, “I feel myself defiled as with pitch, that these fingers should actually have touched sich a letter!”

“For goodness sake,” moaned the lady from her pillows, “what are you talking about now?”

“My lady,” said Megrim sepulchrally,

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## THE BATH COMEDY

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“when that minx with her face muffled up in a hood, came and had the brazen boldness to ask for me this morning, saying she had some lace of your ladyship’s from the mender’s, and that it was most particular and must be given into my hands alone, my mind misgave me. ’Twas like an angel’s warning. The more so as there isn’t a scrap of your ladyship’s lace as has been to the mender’s since we came here.”

“Mercy, Megrin, how you do ramble on! I can’t make head or tail of your stupid story.”

Even a dove will peck.

“Ho, do I, my lady! Can’t you indeed? Perhaps your ladyship will understand better when I tell her, that that same bold thing had no lace at all—but a letter. ‘Give it to your mistress,’ says she, ‘in secret, and for your life don’t let Sir Jasper see it.’”

“Well, give it to me,” said Lady Standish, “and hold your tongue, and go and pack your trunks as soon as you like.”

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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“Ho, my lady,” cried the incorruptible Megrin, with an acid laugh, “I hope I know my Christian duty better. I brought the letter to my master, according to the Voice of Conscience. And now,” she concluded, with a shrill titter, “I’ll go and pack my trunks.”

Yet she paused, expecting to enjoy Lady Standish’s outburst of terror and distress. There was no sign from the bed, however, not even a little gasp. And so Mistress Megrin was fain to depart to her virtuous trunks without even that parting solace. Meanwhile, with the pillow of her spotless conscience to rest upon, and deadened to fresh disturbances by the despairing reflection that nothing for the present could make matters much worse between her and her husband, Lady Standish, without attempting to solve the fresh problem, determinedly closed her weary eyes upon the troubles of the world and drifted into slumber again.



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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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“I shall catch them red-handed,” said Sir Jasper.

This time all doubt was over; in his hand lay the proof, crisp and fluttering. He read it again and again, with a kind of ghastly joy. Unaddressed, unsealed, save by a foolish green wafer with a cupid on it, the document which Mistress Megrin’s rigid sense of duty had delivered to him instead of to his guilty wife, was indited in the self-same dashing hand as marked the crumpled rag that even now burned him through his breast-pocket like a fly-blisther.

“I never get a wink of sleep, dreaming of you, dearest dear, so soon to be my own at last! The chay shall be drawn by horses such as Phœbus himself, my darling, would have envied. And, so you fail me not, we shall soon be dashing through the night—a world of nothing but happiness and love before us. I could find it in my heart to bless the poor foolish individual who shall be nameless, since, had it not been for my lovely one’s weariness of him, she might never have turned to the arms of her own devoted,

RED CURL!

“P.S.—I’ll have as good a team as there is in England (barring the one that shall bring us there), waiting for us at the Black Bear, Devizes. We ought to arrive before midnight,

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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and there shall be a dainty trifle of supper for your Beautyship—while the nags are changed. Ah, my dear, *what* rapture!”

Indescribable were the various expressions that crossed Sir Jasper’s countenance upon the perusal and re-perusal of this artless missive. Now he gnashed his teeth; now snorts of withering scorn were blown down the channels of his fine aquiline nose; now smiles of the most deadly description curled and parted luridly his full lips.

“Ha, ha!” said Sir Jasper, “and perhaps the poor foolish individual may give you cause for something less than blessings, Master Carrots! And I think, madam, your beautyship may find at Devizes something harder to digest than that trifle of supper! Till then, patience!”

He folded the letter, placed it beside its fellow, and once more, with a sort of bellow, he cried, “*Patience!*”

“Well, Lydia?” said Mistress Bellairs.

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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She had but just finished her chocolate, and looked like a rose among her pillows. "Well, madam," said Lydia, still panting from her hurried quest, "'tis safe delivered. I gave it into Mistress Magrim's own hands, and——"

"And can you reckon," said the lady, smiling at the amusing thought, "upon her bringing it straight to Sir Jasper?"

"Ah, Lud, ma'am, yes. I told the sour, ugly old cat, that if her master caught sight of it, Lady Standish would be ruined. You should have seen how she grabbed at it, ma'am!"

"Lydia," said her mistress, looking at her admiringly, "I question whether I'd have risked it myself; you're a bold girl! But there, if anything fail, you know that rose-coloured pelisse remains hanging in my closet."

"Never fear, ma'am," said Lydia, smiling quietly to herself, as she pulled her mistress's long pink silk stocking over her hand, and turned it knowingly from side

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## THE BATH COMEDY

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to side, looking for invisible damage, "the pelisse is as good as mine already."

"But, think you, was Sir Jasper at home?" said Mistress Bellairs, after a few moments' reflection.

"I made sure of that," said Lydia triumphantly, peeling off the stocking. "I thought it best to go in by the mews, ma'am, and I heard that Sir Jasper had not left the house since that little—that little affair with the Bishop, you know, ma'am. But all the night, and all the morning, he kept William and Joseph (those are the grooms, ma'am) going backwards and forwards with challenges to the Bishop's lodgings."

"Oh!" cried Kitty, and kicked her little toes under the silk counterpane with exquisite enjoyment, "and what does the Bishop answer, I wonder?"

"Sends back the letter every time unopened, ma'am, with a fresh text written on the back of it. The texts it is, William says, that drive Sir Jasper mad."

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## THE BATH COMEDY

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“Oh! oh! oh!” cried Mistress Kitty faintly, rolling about her pillows. “Child, you’ll be the death of me! . . . Well, then, to business. You know what you are to do to-night?”

“No sooner are you gone to the Assembly Rooms this evening, ma’am, than I take a letter from you for Lady Standish, and this time deliver it myself to her own hand, and, if needs be, persuade her to follow your advice, ma’am.”

“Right, child; thou shalt have the gold locket with the Turkey stones——”

“Thank you, ma’am. Well, then I’m to scurry as fast as I can to the corner of Bond Street and Quiet Street, and watch you being carried off by the gentleman. And then——”

“Be sure you wait till the chaise has well started.”

“Yes, ma’am, of course! When you’re safely on the London Road, I’ll go and give the alarm at the Assembly Rooms.”

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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“Remember, you ask first for Lord Verney.”

“Oh, ay, ma’am. ‘My mistress is carried off, is carried off! Help, help, my lord!’ I’ll say. Oh, ma’am, I’ll screech it well out, trust me.”

“Don’t forget,” said her mistress, whose mood became every moment merrier, “don’t forget to say that you heard the ravisher mention London, by Devizes.”

“Well, ma’am,” said Lydia, “I thought of saying that he first flung you swooning upon the cushions of the chay; then, stepping in himself, cried out to the coachman, with an horrible oath, ‘If you’re not in Devizes before twelve, I’ll flay you with your own whip, and then hang you with it to the shaft!’”

“Aha, ha, Lydia,” laughed her mistress. “I see I must give you a gold chain to hang that locket upon. But pray, child,” she added warningly, “be careful not to overdo it.”

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# THE BATH COMEDY

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## SCENE XVIII.

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THE livelong day Lady Standish had not beheld the light of her lord's countenance.

Upon their last meeting, his behaviour to the Bishop having roused in her gentle bosom a feeling as nearly akin to resentment as it was capable of harbouring, she would not be (she had resolved) the one to seek him first. She had, therefore, passed the day in her own apartment in writing to her mother, and in practising her last song to the harp—a piece of audacity and independence which she expected would have goaded Sir Jasper into an instant interview with herself.

When the dusk rose, however, and the candles were brought in by the round-eyed handmaid, whose ministrations replaced those of Megrim (the latter was still

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## THE BATH COMEDY

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packing, and seemed like to take some weeks in the process), and the said round-eyed damsel immediately began to inform her mistress that Sir Jasper had set forth in his coach, Lady Standish's small flame of courage began to flicker woefully.

"Alone?" she asked, in white dismay.

"Please, my lady, Mr. Bowles was driving, and there was Mr. Thomas behind, my lady."

"Pshaw, girl! Had Sir Jasper no *friend* with him?"

"Oh yes, my lady; there was Mr. Stafford, a box of pistols, Mr. Toombs says, and a bag of swords."

"Heavens!" cried Lady Standish. "Again!—and whither went they?"

"Please, my lady, Mr. Toombs says they took the London Road."

Fain would the round-eyed maid have lingered and told more, but Lady Standish waved her hand faintly, and so dismissed her.

An hour later, Lydia, brisk with import-



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## THE BATH COMEDY

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ance, and sparkling with conscious power, found the much-tried soul sunk in a sort of apathetic weariness of misery.

“Mistress Bellairs’ love, my lady, and will you read this letter at once?”

Lady Standish took the letter from the black-mitted hand.

“Please, my lady, ’tis of the utmost importance,” said Lydia, “and I was to wait and see if I could not be of use to you.”

Something magnetic in the girl’s lively tone gave impetus to Lady Standish’s suspended energies. She broke the seal.

“My sweet child,” wrote Mistress Kitty. “If you want to know what has become of your husband, you will instantly take a chaise and start off for the Black Bear at Devizes.

“Your true friend,

“K. B.

“Postscriptum.—Do not go alone. Get some old hag (if possible Lady Maria Prideaux) to accompany you. You will find her in the Assembly Rooms. She’s as curious as our first mother—you can easily persuade her. *This is good advice!*”

“I am much too ill,” cried Lady Standish, upon a moan. “Tell your mistress,” said she, looking vaguely in Lydia’s direction,

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## THE BATH COMEDY

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“that indeed 'tis quite impossible I should do as she suggests.”

“Very well, my lady,” said Lydia cheerfully. “I'm sure I shouldn't trouble myself if I was you. Gentlemen *must* have their diversions, I always say. If ladies would but shut their eyes a little more, 'twould be for the peace of all parties. Indeed, my lady, though my mistress would be angry to hear me say so, I'd go to bed, for you look sorely tired, and Sir Jasper'll be glad enough to come home bye-and-bye.”

“Wretched girl,” cried Julia, and her eyes flashed, “what dost thou mean?”

“La, now!” said Lydia, all innocence, “how my tongue do run away with me, to be sure! Why, my lady, what can a poor servant-maid like me know of the goings on of gentles? 'Tis but a few words of gossip here and there.”

“Oh, merciful heavens, *what* gossip mean you?”

“My lady, have a sip of *volatile*, do! Oh,

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## THE BATH COMEDY

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my mistress would be like to kill me if she knew what I've been saying! 'Poor Julia,' she cried when she got the news. 'Poor Julia, my poor confiding Julia! Oh, the villain, the monster!'"

"Good God, and whom did she refer to?"

"Lud, madam, how can I tell? '*It shall not be!*' cries my mistress, and down she sits and writes off to you, as if for bare life."

Lady Standish, rising from her seat, rushed to the light, and with starting eyes and bristling hair began to read afresh her fond Kitty's missive.

"La, my lady," cried the guileless Lydia, "you're all of a shake! I'd never be that upset about Sir Jasper. Why, if your la'ship'll allow me to say so, all Bath knows how jealous he is of your la'ship; and, certain, that shows a husband's affection."

"True," cried Julia, "that's true, girl!"

"And as for those who say, my lady, that some men are so artful that they put

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## THE BATH COMEDY

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on a deal of jealousy to cover a deal of fickleness, I'd despise myself if I was to pay heed to such mean suspiciousness."

"My cloak!" cried Lady Standish. "Megrim, Susan!" She flew to the hall. "My cloak, let a post-chaise be ordered immediately!"

"If I may make so bold, my lady," said Lydia, retiring gracefully with the conviction of a well-accomplished errand, "don't forget to take Lady Maria with you, if you can. The gentlemen have such a way of turning tables on us poor women—at least," said the damsel demurely, "so I've heard said. And 'tis a long lonely road, my lady!"

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# THE BATH COMEDY

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## SCENE XIX.

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MISS BELLAIRS took her departure early. Attired in unusually sober colours, floating in an atmosphere of chastened, matronly dignity, she had shown herself this evening, thought Lord Verney, quite worthy to be his mother's daughter-in-law.

"Monstrous dull," Lady Flyte called the pretty widow's demeanour.

Beyond a *gavotte* with Lord Verney, she had not danced, but sat for half-an-hour on the chair next to Lady Maria, who presented her with the vision of a shoulder-blade which had seen better days, and an impenetrability of hearing which baffled even Kitty's undaunted energy.

When Verney had tucked her up in her sedan, she insisted upon the young peer allowing her to proceed home unescorted.

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## THE BATH COMEDY

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“Indeed,” said she, “I pray, nay, I order you. People talk so in this giddy place, and have you not your aged aunt to wait upon? I am sure,” said Mistress Kitty piously, “that your dear mother would wish it thus.”

He submitted. He had no doubt that his mother would indeed entirely concur with such sentiments, and blessed his Kitty for her sweet reasonableness.

“Good-night, then,” she said, thrusting her pretty face out of the window with a very tender and gentle smile.

“Good-night,” he replied, with his young, gracefully-awkward bow.

She fully expected to hear his footstep pursue the chairman, for she had not been able to refrain from throwing her utmost fascination into that parting look. But nothing broke the silence of the parade save the measured slouching tramp of the bearers.

At once disappointed and relieved, she threw herself back in her seat.

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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“What, not a spark left,” said she, “of the fine flame ’twas so easy to kindle this morning! ’Tis the very type of the odious British husband. Let him be but sure of you, and the creature struts as confident of his mastery as the cock among his hens. Lord!” she shuddered, “what an escape I have had! We women are apt to fancy that very young men are like very young peas, the greener, the tenderer, the better; whereas,” said the lady, with a sigh, “they are but like young wine, crude where we look for strength, all head and no body, and vastly poor upon the palate.”

She sighed again and closed her eyes, waiting for the moment of the impending catastrophe with a delicate composure. In truth, Mr. O’Hara conducted the performance with so much *brio* as to convince Mistress Bellairs that he had had previous experience of the kind.

At the dark appointed corner the two muffled individuals who, each selecting

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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his own astonished chairman, enlaced him with overwhelming brotherly affection, seemed such thorough-paced ruffians in the dim light, that Mistress Kitty found it quite natural to scream—and even had some difficulty in keeping her distressful note down to the pitch of necessary discretion.

And her heart fluttered with a sensation of fear, convincing enough to produce quite a delightful illusion, when she found herself bodily lifted out of her nest and rapidly carried through the darkness in an irresistibly close and strong embrace.

“Oh, oh, oh!” cried the lady, in a modulated sequence of little shrieks.

“Merciful heavens!” she thought to herself, with a great thump of the heart, astonished at her ravisher’s silence, “what if it should be someone else after all?”

But the next instant the rich brogue of a tender whisper in her ear dispelled all doubt.

“You’ve forgotten the scratches, my



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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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darling," said O'Hara, as he laid her preciously upon the cushions of the chaise.

Here Mr. Mahoney and his comrade—which latter bore a curious resemblance in build and gait to one of the sporting Marquis's own celebrated gladiators—came running up to take their seats. In leaped O'Hara—the coachman lifted his whip, and the team that Phœbus might have envied started up the length of Mil-som Street in style.

The chairmen, drawing their breath with some difficulty after their spell of strangulation, stared in amazement at the clattering shadow as it retreated up the steep street; and then back, and in fresh amazement, at the yellow guinea which had been pressed, and now glinted, in their palm.

Presently a simultaneous smile overspread their honest countenances.

"A queer go," said the first, easing and

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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readjusting his necklace. "Lud, the little madam did squeak!"

"I'd let them all squeak at the same price," said the other, pocketing his coin, and resuming his place in rear of the sedan. "But come, Bill, we must go report this 'orrible crime. Rabbit me!—what's that?"

A blood-curdling wail had risen out of the night, from his very elbow it seemed. It circled in frightful cadence, and died away in ghostlike fashion.

"'T—'tis but a sick cat, I hope," stammered the first chairman, and dived for the chair-poles in marked hurry.

"O—o—o—o," moaned the voice, "oh, my mistress!" There was a flutter, a patter, and: "Merciful heavens, you wretches!" cried Mistress Bellairs' devoted Abigail, emerging like a gust of wind from the blackest shadow of Bond Street and falling upon the nearest chairman with a well-aimed flap of her shawl, followed up by a couple of scratches. "Wretches,

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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monsters, you've let my mistress be carried away! Oh heavens, my unhappy mistress!" cried Lydia, and rent the night with her cries.

Mistress Kitty's chair had no sooner left the precincts of the Assembly Rooms when my Lady Standish's post-chaise came clattering round the corner.

Lord Verney, who was just about to go in again, arrested by curiosity, turned to wonder at a visitor who arrived in so unwonted a conveyance. Recognising Lady Standish he was somewhat abashed and somewhat disconcerted, but felt he could do no less than advance through the crowd of foot and chair men and offer his hand.

"Oh, pray, Lord Verney," said she in a strenuous whisper, "conduct me to your aunt, for I have great need of her help and counsel. Take me to her at once," said the poor lady, in ever-increasing agitation.

They passed through the elegant throng, she unconscious alike of recognition,

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## THE BATH COMEDY

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comment, or titter, he feeling to his boy's marrow, the sensation created by her travelling gear and distraught appearance.

"Would I were back at Verney Hall," thought he, and found that this wish had been long gathering in his heart.

No need of an ear-trumpet for Lady Maria now. The dowager recovered her powers of hearing with almost miraculous celerity.

"Oh, Lady Maria!" said Lady Standish, holding out both her hands. And incontinently she burst into tears. "Oh, Lady Maria, Sir Jasper has left me, I am in sad trouble! I'm told he has gone to Devizes. I must follow him. You are my mother's oldest friend; will you give me the support of your company and protection?"

There was quite a buzz in the interested circle. Lady Maria nodded round, charmed with the situation; bristling with delighted curiosity, she was more like Mistress Kitty's cockatoo than ever.

"Poor young thing, poor young thing,"

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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she said, patting Lady Standish's hand; "your mother's oldest friend, quite so—quite right and proper to come to me. And so Sir Jasper's left you; so Sir Jasper's gone; and with whom, my dear?" Lady Maria fondly believed that she spoke these last words in a gentle aside; but never had her sepulchral bass resounded more sonorously. Lady Standish's faint cry of shocked disclaimer was, however, completely drowned in the fresh rumour, lacerated by shrill feminine shrieks, which now arose in the vestibule of the Assembly Rooms and rapidly advanced.

"My Lord Verney! My mistress! Where is my Lord Verney?" wailed the distraught Lydia, who thoroughly enjoyed her *rôle*. A hundred voices took up the cry; the astounding news passed from group to group: "The pretty widow has been carried off!" "Mistress Bellairs has been abducted!" And then, in counter clamour and antiphone: "And my Lady Standish is looking for Sir Jasper."

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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Meanwhile, before Lord Verney, dumb and suffocating under a variety of emotions, Lydia, wringing her hands and with the most thrilling notes of tragic woe (as nearly copied from Mistress Susanna Cibber as she could remember), narrated her tristful tale.

“He flung my unhappy mistress, swooning and shrieking, into the chaise. And ‘drive like the devil,’ cries he in a voice of thunder to the coachman. ‘I’ll flay you with your own whip and hang you to your own shaft,’ says he, ‘if you’re not in Devizes before midnight!’”

“Devizes!” cried Lady Standish with a scream. Hanging on Lydia’s utterance, every word of which confirmed the awful suspicion that had entered her heart, she now could no longer doubt the real extent of her misfortune.

“Oh, Lord Verney, save my mistress!” Lydia’s pipe dominated the universal chorus with piercing iteration.

And now Lady Maria’s bass struck in again.

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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“What did I say?” cried she triumphantly. “Nevvy, you’d better go to bed! you’re well out of her. Julia, my dear, don’t faint, we can catch them at Devizes yet. Someone tell that wench to stop that screeching! Julia, come! You’ve got the chay, I understand. Fortunately, my house is near; we shall just call for Burrell and make him ride behind with his blunderbuss. Child, if you faint I wash my hands of the whole affair. We’ll nip them, I tell you, if you’ll only brisk up.”

“I won’t faint,” said Lady Standish, setting her teeth.

Lord Verney suddenly awoke to the fact that he had been grievously injured and that he was in a towering passion. Spluttering, he demanded vengeance of gods and men. Post-chaise, ho, and pistols, forthwith! “My sword!” cried he, feeling for the blade which, however, according to the regulations enforced by the immortal Master of Bath Ceremonies,

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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was absent from its natural post on his noble hip in this polite assembly.

“Come with me,” cried Captain Spicer, clapping his patron on the shoulder in a burst of excitement. “I’ll stand to you, of course, lad! You’ll want a witness. Gad!” exclaimed the amiable Captain, “we’ll have Sir Jasper’s liver on the spit before crow of cock!”



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# THE BATH COMEDY

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## SCENE XX.

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THE side-rays of the chaise-lamps played on the widow's soft, saucy face, threw beguiling shadows under her eyes, and fleeting dimples round those lips that seemed perpetually to invite kisses.

Cosily nestling in the corner of the carriage, her head in its black silk hood tilted back against the cushions, in the flickering uncertain gleam, there was something almost babyish in her whole appearance; something babyish, too, in her attitude of perfect confidence and enjoyment.

Denis O'Hara, with one arm extended above her head, his hand resting open on the panel, the other hand still clasping the handle of the door, gazed upon the woman who had placed herself so completely in his power, and felt smitten to

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## THE BATH COMEDY

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the heart of him with a tenderness that was well-nigh pain. Hitherto his glib tongue had never faltered with a woman without his lips being ready to fill the pause with a suitable caress. But not so to-day.

“What’s come to me at all?” said he to himself, as, frightened by the very strength of his own passion, he could find no word at once ardent and respectful enough in which to speak it. And, indeed, “What had come to him?” was what Mistress Kitty was thinking about the same time. “And what may his arm be doing over my head?” she wondered.

“How beautiful you are!” babbled the Irishman at last.

Mistress Bellairs suddenly sat up with an angry start. It was as if she had been stung.

“Heavens!” cried she, thrusting her little forefingers into her ears. “Mr. O’Hara, if you say that again, I shall jump out of the chay.”

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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Her eyes flashed; she looked capable of fulfilling her threat upon the spot.

“Me darling heart,” said he, and had perforce to lay his hands upon her to keep her still. “Sure what else can I say to you, with my eyes upon your angel face?” Apparently the lady’s ears were not so completely stopped but that such words could penetrate.

“’Tis monstrous,” said she in hot indignation, “that I should go to all this trouble to escape from the bleating of that everlasting refrain, and have it buzzed at me,” she waxed incoherent under the sense of her injuries, “thus at the very outset!”

“My dear love,” said he, humbly, capturing the angry, gesticulating hand, “sure me heart’s so full that it’s just choking me.” She felt him tremble beside her as he spoke.

Now the trembling lover was not of those that entered into Mistress Kitty’s scheme of existence. She had, perhaps, reckoned,

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## THE BATH COMEDY

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when planning her escapade, upon being made to tremble a little herself. She had certainly reckoned upon a journey this evening that should be among the most memorable in the annals of her impressions. O'Hara bashful! O'Hara tonguetied! O'Hara with cold fingers that hardly dared to touch hers! O'Hara, the gay rattler, with constrained lips!

This was an O'Hara whose existence she had not dreamed of, and for whose acquaintance, to say the truth, she had small relish. "What has come to you?" she cried aloud, with another burst of petulance.

"Faith," said he, "and I hardly know myself, Kitty darling. Oh, Kitty," said he, "'tis vastly well to laugh at love and play at love; but when love comes in earnest it takes a man as it were by the throat, and it's no joke then."

"So I see," said she, with some dryness. O'Hara clenched his hand and drew a laboured breath.

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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Straining, slipping now and again, breaking into spurts of trot, to fall into enforced walking pace once more, the gallant team had dragged the chaise to the summit of the great rise at a speed quite unprecedented, yet comparatively slow.

Now the way lay down-hill. The coachman waved his whip. Bounding along the fair road the wheels hummed; the night-wind fanned them through the half-opened window, set Mistress Kitty's laces flapping on her bosom, and a stray curl of Mr. O'Hara's dancing on his pale forehead.

The exhilaration of the rapid flight, the crack of the whip, the mad rhythm of the hoofs, the witchery of the night hour, the risks of the situation, the very madness of the whole enterprise, all combined to set the widow's gay blood delightfully astir, mounting to her light brain like sparkling wine.

What! were all the accessories of the play to be so perfect, and was the chief

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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character to prove such a lamentable failure in his part? What! was she, Kitty Bellairs, to be carried off by the most notorious rake in Bath, only to find him as awkward, as dumb, as embarrassed with the incomparable situation as the veriest greenhorn? "It shall not, and it cannot be," said she to herself. And thereupon she changed her tactics.

"Why," said she aloud, with the cooing note of her most melting mood, "I protest one would think, sir, that you were afraid of me."

"Aye, Kitty," said he, simply; "and so I am."  
"Oh, fie!" she laughed. "And how have I alarmed you? Think of me," said she, and leaned her face towards him with a smile of archest wit, "not as a stranger, but as a sisther, as a dear, dear cousin." His eye flamed back at her. Her merry mood was as incongruous to his sudden, storm-serious growth of passion as the gay lilt of a tambourine might be to a solemn chant.

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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“I think of you,” he said, and there was a deep thrill in his voice, “as my wife that is to be.”

And so saying he fell upon his knees in the narrow space, and tenderly kissed a fold of her lace, as one, from the knowledge of his own fire, afraid of a nearer touch.

The word “wife” had never a pleasing sound in the lovely widow’s ears. From neither the past nor the future did it evoke for her an attractive picture.

Coming from those lips, by which it was the very last name she desired to hear herself called, it aroused in her as pretty a fit of fury as ever she had indulged in. “Now, indeed, is the murder out!” she cried. “Oh, you men are all alike. As lovers—all fire, capsicums, Indian suns! Bottles of Sillery always bursting! Torrents not to be stemmed . . . . But, lo! you let the lover once fancy himself the husband, let the vision of the coveted mistress but merge into the prospect of the secured

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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wife . . . Merciful heavens, what a change! For fire we have ice; for the red, biting capsicum, the green, cool cucumber; for joyous, foaming Sillery, the smallest ale; small ale—nay, toast and water!” cried Mistress Kitty, lashing herself to finer frenzy. “And if the mere sense of your security thus transforms the lover in you, what a pleasing prospect, indeed, lies before the wedded wife! No, thank you, sir,” said the lady, and pushed the petrified O’Hara with an angry foot, “I have had one wintry, toast-and-water husband, and that shall be enough for my lifetime. Thank God, it is not too late yet!” she fumed. “I am not yet, sir, Mistress O’Hara.”

And in the very midst of her indignation: “This will,” she thought, “simplify the parting at Devizes.” But no whit was her wrath thereby abated, that the fool should have spoiled her pretty ride.

For a moment, after the angry music of her voice had ceased to ring, there was



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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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a breathless silence, broken only by the straining progress of horses and chaise up the sides of another hill. Then O'Hara broke forth into a sort of roar or wounded tenderness, passion, and ire. Flinging himself back upon his seat, he seized her wrist in a grip, fierce, yet still gentle under its fierceness.

“How dare ye!” cried the man, “how dare ye doubt my love! Sure the flames of hell are cold compared to me this minute. May my tongue wither in my mouth, may it be cut out of my jaws and never speak a word of sense again, may I be struck dead at your feet, Kitty, for the rest of my life, if it's not gospel truth! Listen to my heart,” he cried, with yet greater vehemence, pressing her captive hand against his breast, “isn't it *Kitty, Kitty, Kitty*, . . . that it's saying? Sure it's nothing but a bell, and your name is the clapper in it! . . . And you to be railing at me because it's so much I have to say that never a word can I bring

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## THE BATH COMEDY

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out! Oh," pursued Mr. O'Hara, waxing louder and more voluble still, "sure what could I say, with my heart in my mouth stopping the way? Look at it, you cruel woman; isn't it all yours, and aren't you sticking pins into it for sheer devilment, this minute? God forgive me, that I should say such a thing of an angel! Look at it, now, Kitty! Is that the heart of a cucumber? . . . If you had said a love-apple itself. . . . Och, indeed, it's the real cool cucumber I am, and it's toast and water that's running through my veins like fire! . . . Laugh, madam, laugh, it's a grand joke entirely! make a pin-cushion of the cucumber! See, now, is that small ale that bursts from the wounds? Upon my soul," he cried, arrived at the height of his tempest, "I have a mind to show you the colour of it!"

He reached violently towards the back seat for his sword as he spoke, and Mistress Bellairs, suddenly arrested in her delighted paroxysm, was sufficiently

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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convinced of the strength of his feelings to stop him with clinging hands and clamouring little notes of terror.

“ O’Hara! madman!—for God’s sake, Denis!”

“ Ah!” cried he. “ It’s not hot enough I was for ye. It’s the cold husband you’re afraid of. Ah, Kitty, you’ve stirred the sleeping dog, you mustn’t complain now if you can’t put out the fire.”

So saying, he turned and clasped her in an embrace that left her scarcely breath to scream, had she so wished, and had indeed the kisses which he rained upon her lips allowed her space in which to place a protest.

Her light soul, her easy shallow nature, was carried as it were off its feet in the whirlwind of a passion the mere existence of which, with all her experience, she had never even guessed. To say the truth, so much as she had deemed him vastly too cold, so now she found him vastly too hot. She was a woman of niceties, an

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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epicure in life and love, and nothing met with her favour but the delicate happy mean. This was a revelation, with a warning. "Mr. O'Hara," she gasped, at length released, fluttering like a ruffled dove, all in anger and fear, "such treatment! For a gentleman, sir, you strangely forget yourself." She laid her hand on the window strap. "Not a word, sir, or I will instantly give the order to turn back."

"Oh," cried the unhappy lover, and tore at his hair with desperate fingers, filling the ambient air with flakes of powder which shone silvery in the moonlight. "You drove me to it. Ah, don't be frightened of me, my darling; that hurts me the worst of all. I'm quiet now, Kitty."

His labouring breath hissed between his words, and his satin coat creaked under each quivering muscle.

"I'm as quiet as a lamb," said he; "sure a baby might put its head in my jaws—the devil's gone out of me, Kitty."

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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“I’m glad to hear it, sir,” said she, unappeased. She sat, swelling with ruffled plumes, looking out of the window, and biting her lips.

“A moon, too,” she thought, and the tears almost started to her eyes, for the vexation of the wasted opportunity and the complete failure of a scene so excellently staged. “How wise, oh, how wise I was, to have secured my exit at Devizes!”

“I frightened her,” thought O’Hara; and in the manly heart of him he lamented his innate masculine brutality and formed the most delicate chivalrous plans for the right cherishing in the future of the dear lady who had confided herself to him.

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# THE BATH COMEDY

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## SCENE XXI.

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IN the white moonlight Sir Jasper Standish paced up and down the cobblestoned yard with as monotonous a restlessness as if he had been hired this night to act the living sign at the *Bear Inn*, Devizes.

Each time he passed the low open window of the inn parlour, in which sat Mr. Stafford by the dim yellow light of two long-tongued tallow candles, the baronet would pause a moment to exchange from without a few dismal words with his friend. The latter, puffing at a long clay pipe, endeavoured in the intervals to while away the heavy minutes in the perusal of some tome out of mine host's library—a unique collection and celebrated on the Bath Road.

“Tom Stafford,” said Sir Jasper, for the twentieth time, “how goes the hour?”

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## THE BATH COMEDY

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“Damned slowly, friend,” said Stafford, consulting with a yawn the most exact of three watches at his fob. “To be precise, ’tis two minutes and one third since I told you that it wanted a quarter of midnight.” Sir Jasper fell once more to his ursine perambulation, and Stafford, yawning again, flicked over a page. He had not reached the bottom of it, however, before Sir Jasper’s form returned between him and the moonlight.

“What,” said the injured husband, “what if they should have taken another road?”

“Then,” cried Stafford, closing his book with a snap between both his palms, tossing it on to the table and stretching himself desperately, “I shall only have to fight you myself, for this most insufferably dull evening that you have made me spend, when I was due at more than one rendezvous, and had promised pretty Bellairs the first minuet.”

“It shall be pistols,” said Sir Jasper, following his own thoughts with a sort of

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## THE BATH COMEDY

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gloomy lust. "Pistols, Tom. For either he or I shall breathe our last to-night."

"Pistols with all my heart," said Stafford, stopping his pipe with his little finger.

"Only do, like a good fellow, make up your mind—just for the sake of variety.

I think the last time we considered the matter, we had decided for this"—describing a neat thrust at Sir Jasper's waistcoat through the window with the long stem of his churchwarden.

"There's more blood about it, Jasper," he suggested critically.

"True," murmured the other, again all indecision. "But pistols at five paces——"

"Well—yes, there's a charm about five paces, I admit," returned the second with some weariness, dropping back again into his chair. "And we can reload, you know."

"If I fall," said Sir Jasper, with the emotion which generally overtakes a man who contemplates a tragic contingency to himself, "be gentle with her. She has sinned, but she was very dear to me."



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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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“She’ll make a deuced elegant widow,” said Stafford, musingly, after a little pause, during which he had conjured up Lady Standish’s especial points with the judgment of a true connoisseur.

“You must conduct her back to her home,” gulped Sir Jasper, a minute later, slowly thrusting in his head again. “Alack, would that I had never fetched her thence. . . . Had you but seen her, when I wooed and won her, Tom. A country flower, all innocence, a wild rose. . . . And now, deceitful, double-faced!”

“’Tis the way of the wild rose,” said Stafford, philosophically. “Let you but transplant it from the native hedgerow, and before next season it grows double.”

Here the speaker, who was always ready with a generous appreciation of his own conceits, threw his head back and laughed consumedly, while Sir Jasper uttered some sounds between a growl and a groan.

The volatile second in waiting wiped his eyes.

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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“Go to, man,” cried he, turning with sudden irascibility upon his friend, “for pity’s sake take that lugubrious countenance of thine out of my sight. What the devil I ever saw in thee, Jasper, to make a friend of, passes my comprehension: for, of all things, I love a fellow with a spark of wit. And thou, lad, lackest the saving grace of humour so wofully, that, in truth, I fear—well—thou art in a parlous state: I fear damnation waits thee, for ’tis incurable. What! in God’s name cannot a man lose a throw in the game of happiness and yet laugh? Cannot a husbandman detect a poacher on his land and not laugh as he sets the gin? Why,” cried Mr. Stafford, warming to his thesis, and clambering lightly out of the window to seat himself on the outer sill, “strike me ugly! shall not a gentleman be ever ready to meet his fate with a smile? I vow I’ve never yet seen Death’s head grin at me, but I’ve given him the grin back—split me!”

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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“Hark—hark!” cried Sir Jasper, pricking his strained ear, “D’ye hear?”

“Pooh!” said Mr. Stafford, “only the wind in the tree.”

“Nay,” cried Sir Jasper; “hush man, listen.”

An unmistakable rumbling grew upon the still night air—a confused medley of sounds which gradually unravelled themselves upon their listening ears. It was the rhythmical striking of many hoofs, the roll of wheels, the crack of a merciless whip.

“Faith and faith,” cried Stafford, pleasantly exhilarated, “I believe you’re right, Jasper; here they come!”

The moonlight swam blood-red before Sir Jasper’s flaming eye. “Pistols or swords?” queried he again of himself, and grasped his hilt as the nearest relief, pending the decisive moment.

Out slouched a couple of sleepy ostlers, as Master Lawrence, mine host, rang the stable bell.

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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Betty, the maid, threw a couple of logs on the fire while the dame in the bar, waking from her snooze, demanded the kettle, selected some lemons, and ordered candlesticks and dips with reckless prodigality.

Mistress Kitty, peering out of the carriage window, her shoulder still turned upon the unhappy and unforgiven swain, hailed the twinkling lights of the *Bear Inn* with lively eyes.

While the chaise described an irreproachable curve round the yard, her quick glance had embraced every element of the scene. Sir Jasper's bulky figure, with folded arms was leaning against the post of the inn door, awaiting her approach—retribution personified—capriciously illumined by the orange rays of the landlord's lantern. Out in the moonlight, shining in his pearl gray satin and powdered head, all silver from crest to shoe-buckle, like the prince of fairy lore, sat Stafford

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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on his window-ledge, as gallant a picture to a woman's eye, the widow had time to think, as one could wish to see on such a night.

"Oh," she thought, "how we are going to enjoy ourselves at last!"

And being too true an artist to consider her mere personal convenience upon a question of effect, she resolved to defer the crisis to the ripe moment, no matter at what cost. Accordingly, even as O'Hara cried out, in tones of surprise and disgust: "Thunder and turf! my darling, if there isn't now that blethering ox, Sir Jasper!" Mistress Kitty instantly covered her face with her lace, and swooned away on the Irishman's breast.

Sir Jasper charged the coach door. "Blethering ox!" he bellowed. "I'll teach you, sir, what I am! I'll teach that woman—I'll, I'll——"

Here Stafford sprang lightly to the rescue. "For Heaven's sake," said he, "think of our names as gentlemen; let it be swords

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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or pistols, Jasper, or swords *and* pistols, if you like, but not fistycuffs and collaring. Be quiet, Jasper! And you, sir," said he to O'Hara, as sternly as he could for the tripping of his laughter, "having done your best to add that to a gentleman's head which shall make his hats sit awry for the remainder of his days, do you think it generous to give his condition so precise a name?"

"O hush," cried O'Hara, in too deep distress to pay attention either to abuse or banter, "give me room, gentlemen, for God's sake. Don't you see the lady has fainted?"

With infinite precaution and tenderness he emerged from the chay with his burden, elbowing from his path on one side the curious and officious landlord, on the other the struggling husband.

"Oh what have I done at all!" cried the distracted lover, as the inertness of the weight in his arms began to fill him with apprehension for his dear. "Sure, alanna,

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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there's nothing to be afraid of! Sure, am I not here? Och, me darling, if——”

But here Sir Jasper escaped from his friend's control. “I'll not stand it,” cried he. “'Tis more than flesh and blood can endure. Give her up to me, sir. How dare you hold her?” He fell upon O'Hara in the rear and seized him, throttling, round the neck.

“I'll dare you in a minute, ye mad divill!” yelled O'Hara, in a fury, no whit less violent than that of his assailant. Thus cried he, and choked.

In the scuffle they had reached the parlour.

“Oh, Jasper, Jasper, in the name of decency!” protested Stafford, vainly endeavouring to pluck the baronet from off the Irishman's back. “And you, Denis lad, I entreat of you cease to provoke him. Zooks, my boy, remember he has some prior claim—what shall I say? some little vested interest——”

“I'll stuff him with his own red hair!”

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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asseverated Sir Jasper, foaming at the mouth as, under a savage push from O'Hara's elbow he fell back, staggering, into Stafford's power.

"Prior claims—vested interest is it! Some of you will have to swallow those words before I'll be got to swallow anything here," swore Denis O'Hara, almost gaily, in the exaltation of his Celtic rage. "Sure, 'tis mad, I know ye are, lepping mad, Sir Jasper, but ought you not to be ashamed of yourself before the lady? She's quivering with the fright. . . . Lie here, my angel," said he, vibrating from the loudest note of defiance to the tenderest cooing. "Lie here; there's not a ha'porth to frighten ye, were there fifty such two-penny old crazy weather-cocks crowing at you!"

So saying, he deposited his burthen tenderly in the leather-winged arm-chair by the fire-place, and turned with a buoyant step toward Sir Jasper.

"Come out," said he, "come out, sir.



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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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“Sure, leave him alone, Tom, ’tis the only way to quiet him at all. Sure, after our little game the other night, wasn’t he that dove-like poor fellow, a child might have milked him?”

The quivering form in the chair here emitted a scale of hysterical little notes that seemed wrung from her by the most irrepressible emotion. And:

“Oh, oh,” exclaimed Mr. Stafford, unable, in the midst of his laughter, to retain any further grip upon his friend.

“My darling,” once more began the solicitous O’Hara, turning his head round towards the arm-chair, but——

“Judas!” hissed Sir Jasper, and furiously interposed his bulk between the Irishman and his intention.

“Faith,” cried Stafford. “Can’t you cover that head of yours somehow, O’Hara? I vow the very sight of it is still the red rag to the bull . . . The bull, aha!”

“Ha! ha! ha!” broke, this time uncontrolled, the merriment from the chair.

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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The three men were struck into silence and immobility.

Then, on tip toe, Mr. Stafford approached and peeped round the wing of the arm-chair. He looked, and seemed blasted with astonishment; looked again and made the rafters ring with his sonorous laugh, till the apprehensive landlord in the passage and the trembling dame in the bar were comforted and reassured by the genial sound.

The high feminine trill of Mistress Kitty's musical mirth rang in sweetly with his. "Oh, Kitty Bellairs, Kitty Bellairs!" gasped Mr. Stafford, shook his finger at her, felt blindly for a support, and rolled up against Sir Jasper.

The baronet straightway fell into an opportunely adjacent chair and there remained—his legs extended with compass stiffness, his eyes starting with truly bovine bewilderment—staring at the rosy visage, the plump little figure that now emerged from the ingle-nook.

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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“Oh dear, oh dear!” faintly murmured Stafford, and with a fresh breath he was off again. “Aha ha ha! for an ox, my Jasper, thou hast started on a lovely wild goose chase—as friend O’Hara might say.”  
While:

“Mercy on us!” rippled the lady. “I protest, ’tis the drollest scene. Oh, Sir Jasper, Sir Jasper, see what jealousy may bring a man to!”

“Musha, it’s neither head nor tail I can make of the game,” said O’Hara, “but sure it’s like an angel choir to hear you laugh again, me darling.”

The guileless gentleman approached his mistress as he spoke, and prepared to encircle her waist. But with a sudden sharpness she whisked herself from his touch.

“Pray, sir,” she said, “remember how we stand to each other! If I laugh ’tis with relief to know myself safe.”

“Safe?” he echoed with sudden awful misgiving.

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## THE BATH COMEDY

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“Aye,” said she, and spoke more tartly for the remorseful smiting of her own heart, as she marked the change in his face. “You would seem to forget, sir, that you have carried me off by violence.—treacherously seized me with your hired ruffians.” Her voice grew ever shriller, as certain rumours which her expectant ears had already caught approaching, now grew quite unmistakable without, and hasty steps resounded in the passage. “Oh, Mr. O’Hara, you have cruelly used me!” cried the lady. “Oh, Sir Jasper, oh, Mr. Stafford, from what a fate has your most unexpected presence here to-night thus opportunely saved me!” At this point she looked up and gave a scream of most intense astonishment, for there, in the doorway, stood my Lord Verney; and, over his shoulder, peered the white face of Captain Spicer all puckered up with curiosity.

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# THE BATH COMEDY

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## SCENE XXII.

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'HARA drew himself up. He had grown all at once exceedingly still. Mr. Stafford, gradually recovering from his paroxysms, had begun to bestow some intelligent interest upon the scene. There was a mist of doubt in his eyes as he gazed from the victimised, but very lively, lady to her crestfallen "violent abductor," and then to the gloomy countenance of the new-comer on the threshold. There seemed to be, it struck him, a prodigious deliberation in Mistress Kitty's cry and start of surprise.

"What is my pretty Bellairs up to now? Well, poor Irish Denis with all his wits is no match for her anyhow, and, faith, she knows it," thought he. Aloud he said, with great placidity: "Fie, fie, this is shocking to hear!" and sat, the good-

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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humoured Chorus to the Comedy, on the edge of the table, waiting for the development of the next scene.

Sir Jasper, wiping a beaded brow and still staring, as if by the sheer fixing of his bloodshot eye he could turn these disappointing puppets into the proper objects of his vengeance, was quite unable to follow any current but the muddy whirl of his own thoughts.

Lord Verney alone it was, therefore, who rose at all to Mistress Kitty's situation.

"Are *you* the scoundrel, then," said he, marching upon O'Hara, "who dared to lay hands upon an unprotected lady in the very streets of Bath?"

"Monstrous!" remarked Captain Spicer behind him. Then jogging his patron's elbow, "Twas well spoke, Verney, man. At him again, there's blood in this."

Mr. O'Hara looked steadily at Lord Verney, glancing contemptuously at Captain Spicer, and then with long, full searching at the beguiling widow.

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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She thought to scent danger to herself in the air; and, womanlike, she seized unscrupulously upon the sharpest weapon in her armoury.

“Perhaps,” she said, with an angry, scornful laugh, “Mr. O’Hara will now deny that he and his servants attacked my chairmen in the dark, threw me, screaming with terror, into his carriage, and that his intention was avowedly to wed me by force in London to-morrow.”

All eyes were fixed on the Irishman, and silence waited upon his reply. He had grown so pale that his red head seemed to flame by contrast. He made a low bow.

“No, Kitty,” said he, in a very gentle voice, “I deny nothing.” Then sweeping the company with a haughty glance. “This lady,” said he, “has spoken truth; as for me, I am ready to meet the consequences of my conduct.”

His eyes finally rested once more on Lord Verney. The latter grew white and then

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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scarlet; while Spicer whispered and again jogged.

“Of course,” blustered the youth, and wished that he had the curious digestion of his contemporaries, that his stomach did not so squeamishly rebel at the prospect of a dose of steel, “of course, sir, you must be aware——”

“It shall be swōrds,” interrupted the irrepressible Spicer; “and gad, sir, what my noble friend will have left of your body I will myself make mince of this night! Aye, sir,” said the captain, astonished at his own valour, slapping his bony chest and beginning to squint as was his wont under excitement; “I will fight you myself, sir.”

“Fight *you!*” exclaimed O’Hara, suddenly stung into magnificent contempt. “Fight *you*, sir?” he ran a withering eye over the grasshopper anatomy of the toady as he spoke, “*you*, sir, you, the writer of that dirty note this morning, bidding me apologise—apologise!” cried Denis, with his



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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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most luscious brogue, "to the man, Sir Jasper there, for having insulted you on the subject of your miserable mealy head—fight you, sir? Sure, rather than fight you," said Mr. O'Hara, searching for the most emphatic asseveration conceivable, "I'd never fight again for the rest of my life! But I'll tell you what I'll do for you: next time you thrust that ugly face or yours within the reach of me arm O'll pull your nose till it's as long as your tongue, and as slender as yer courage, damme!"

"Oh, gad! what a low scoundrel," murmured Captain Spicer, withdrawing quickly several paces, and with an intensified cast in his eye, "'tis positive unfit for a gentleman to speak to him."

"Now, my lord," said O'Hara, resuming his easy dignity.

But that her comedy should drift into tragedy was none of Mistress Kitty's intentions. Briskly stepping between the laboriously pugnacious Verney and the

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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poor Irishman whose eye (for all his present composure) shone with the lust of the fray, she thus addressed them collectively and in turn :

“Shame, shame, gentlemen, I protest! Is it not enough that a poor woman’s heart should be set a-fluttering by over much love, must it now go pit-a-pat again for over-much hate? My Lord Verney, think of your mother. Think of her, of whose declining years you are the sole prop and joy; recall to mind those principles of high morality, of noble Christian duty, which that paragon of women so sedulously inculcated in you!” Her voice quivered on the faintest note of mockery. “Oh, what would that worthy lady’s feelings be, were you to be brought home to her—a corse! What, ah what indeed! would *your* feelings be if, by some accident,” here she shot involuntarily what was almost the suspicion of a wink in the direction of O’Hara, “you had to answer for the life of a fellow-creature

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## ❖ THE BATH-COMEDY ❖

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before to-morrow's dawn? Why, you could never open your Bible again without feeling in your bosom the throbbing heart of a Cain." She stopped to draw breath.

Mr. Stafford, one delighted grin, slid the whole length of the table on which he sat with dangling legs, to get a fuller view of the saucy face: "Incomparable Bellairs," he murmured to himself with keen appreciation. And: "So, ho, my noble friend," thought he, as he shot a glance at the solemn Verney, "now do I know what has closed to you for ever the gates of Paradise."

"And you, Mr. O'Hara," resumed the lady, turning her eye, full of indefinable and entrancing subtleties upon the honest gentleman, "would you have me forgive you this night's work? Do not, then, do not force this impetuous young man to an unnecessary quarrel. Allow him to withdraw his challenge. Do that in *atonement*, sir," said she, with much severity of

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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accent; but her eye said sweetly enough, "Do that for *me*," and gave further promise of unutterable reward.

"Madam," said O'Hara, glancing away as if the sight of her beauty were now more pain than pleasure to him, "'tis for my Lord Verney to speak; I am entirely at his orders. I understand," and here, for all his chivalrousness, he could not refrain him from a point of satire, "I understand, ma'am, that you have given him the right to espouse your quarrels." "Most certainly," said the crimson Verney, who had been monstrously uneasy during his lady's sermon, not only because every word of it hit some tender point of his abnormally developed conscience, but also because of an indefinable sensation that he was being held up to ridicule, "most certainly, sir, it is as Mistress Bellairs' future husband that I find it incumbent—that I find myself forced, reluctantly—no, I mean——" here he floundered and looked round for Spicer,

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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who, however, was ostentatiously turning his back upon the proceedings and gazing at the moon. "In fact," resumed the poor youth, falling back on his own unguided wits, "I have no alternative but to demand satisfaction for an attempt on the honour of the future Lady Verney."

"Mercy on us!" cried Mistress Kitty, with a shrill indignant little scream. "Oh, fie, my lord, who would have deemed you so bloodthirsty? Before heaven," she cried piously, glancing at the raftered ceiling, "before heaven, it would be the death of me, were there to be quarrelling, strife, contention for me—for *me!* Who am I?" she said with the most angelic humility, "that two such gallant gentlemen should stake their lives for me? Rather," said she, "will I give you back your word, my lord. Indeed," this with a noble air of sacrifice, "I feel Providence has but too clearly shown me my duty. Hush, hush, Verney, bethink yourself. How could I ever face your mother (were you indeed

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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to survive the encounter) with the knowledge that I had exposed you to danger; that for me you had loaded your soul with blood-guiltiness!"

She shuddered and looked delicious.

"Child," said she meltingly, as Lord Verney faintly protested, "it must be so. I have felt it more than once; you are too young." There was a conviction in her voice that gave no hope of reprieve, and Lord Verney, who had already found out that Mistress Bellairs was too dangerous a delight to pursue with comfort, accepted his sentence with a Christian resignation that did justice to his mother's training.

"All, all must now be over between us," said Kitty pathetically, "save a gentle friendship! Your hand, my lord."

She reached for his clumsy paw with her determined little fingers.

"Mr. O'Hara," said she, turning round.

"*I forgive you.* Your hand also, sir."

If the clasp she extended to Verney was purely official, that with which she now

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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seized O'Hara's cold right hand was eloquent enough with quick and secret pressure. But, for the first time in his life, perhaps, O'Hara was slow in returning a woman's token.

"Shake hands," ordered Mistress Bellairs decisively, and joined the belligerent's palms.

Here Stafford sprang jovially to the assistance of the pretty peacemaker.

"Right, right," cried he. "Shake hands on it like good fellows. Fie! who could keep up a feud under those beaming eyes?—Never be downcast, Verney, lad! what did I tell thee, only yesterday, in the Pump Room, about thy halo?—Denis, my boy, I've always loved thee, but now I'll love thee more than ever, if only thou wilt mix us a bowl of punch in right good Irish fashion, so that in it we may drown all enmity and drink good friendship—and above all toast the divine Kitty Bellairs!"

"Hurroosh," cried O'Hara, and with a

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## THE BATH COMEDY

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valiant gulp determined to swallow his own bitter disappointment and flood in a tide of warm gaiety the cold ache in his heart. "By all means," cried he, wrung Verney's hand with feverish cordiality, and gave one last sadly-longing look at Kitty and his lovely delusive dream.

Then spinning round upon himself he demanded loudly of the willing landlord, lemons and "the craythur—a couple of bottles, my friend—a bowl of sugar and a trifle of wather—the smaller the kittle the better it boils." And: "Wake up, man," cried he, slapping Sir Jasper on the back so that the powder flew from that baronet's cue. "Sure we're all happy, now."

"Where's my wife, sir?" said the gloomy husband, springing to his feet fiercely.

"I've been made a fool of between you, but all this does not tell me where my wife is! Stafford, man, I see it now: this has been a blind." He struck his forehead.

"Ha, yes I have it now, it was a false scent—the villain, the fox is off with her



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## THE BATH COMEDY

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on another road, with his tongue in his cheek, grinning to think of me sitting and waiting for them at Devizes!—Tom, the chaise, the horses! There's not a moment to be lost!"

"Devil a horse or chay for me, sir," cried his friend. And nodding at Kitty: "I know when I'm in good company," he pursued, "if you don't. Sit down, man, there's punch brewing. Your vengeance will keep hot enough, ha, ha, but the punch won't."

"Glory be to God," cried O'Hara, staring at Sir Jasper as if he were a natural curiosity, "I've known many a madman, but I never knew one mad enough yet to run away from a punch-bowl!"

With lace ruffles neatly turned back from his deft hands, O'Hara began to peel the lemons.

"Do you," now said Captain Spicer with an ingratiating chirp. "Do you really care for *quite* so much peel in the bowl . . . ahem?"

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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The speaker stopped suddenly and seemed to wither quite away under a sudden look from the punch-brewer (who had made a movement as though to put his knife and lemons down and employ his fingers differently) and the next instant found him whispering in Stafford's ear:

"You're a man of the world, I know, friend Stafford," said he. "No doubt you will laugh at my over-nice sense of delicacy, but just now, in his ravings, poor O'Hara made a kind of threat, I believe, about pulling my nose. What would *you* advise me to do in the matter? Look over it, eh?"

"Certainly," cried the spark, with a glance of the most airy contempt. "Look over it, *as straight as you can*. Look over it, by all means, but as you value the symmetry of that ornament to your countenance, Captain Spicer—if I were you I should keep it well-buttered."

With an art of which he alone was mas-

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❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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ter, Captain Spicer hereupon vanished from the company, without being missed.

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# THE BATH COMEDY

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## SCENE XXIII.

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IS an orgy!" exclaimed Lady Maria.

"Oh, Jasper!" sobbed Lady Standish.

"'Twould be interesting to know," further trumpeted Lady Maria, "which of these gentlemen is supposed to have run away with the widow Bellairs?"

"Oh, Kitty," sobbed Lady Standish.

"My God!" said Sir Jasper, laying down his reeking glass and hardly believing his eyes.

Mistress Kitty (seated between O'Hara and Stafford at the end of the table, while Lord Verney and Sir Jasper faced each other), continued, unmoved, to sip her fragrant brew and cocked her wicked eye at the newcomers, enjoying the situation prodigiously. She laid an arresting hand upon the cuffs of her neighbours, who, all polite amazement, were about to spring

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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to their feet. "Keep still," said she, "keep still and let Sir Jasper and his lady first have their little explanation undisturbed. Never intermeddle between husband and wife," she added demurely, "it has always been one of my guiding axioms!"

"Well, Sir Jasper Standish, these are pretty goings on!" cried Lady Maria, "for a three month's husband. . . . (Hold up, my poor dear Julia!) Profligate!" snorted the old lady, boring the baronet through with one gimlet eye. "Dissolute wretch! highwayman!"

"I demand," fluted Lady Standish's plaintive treble (in her gentle obstinate heart she had come to the fixed resolution of never allowing Sir Jasper out of her sight again), "I demand to be brought back to my mother, and to have an immediate separation."

"Running away with women out of the streets of Bath!—A lady," (sniff) "supposed to be engaged to my nevvv! Poor deluded boy—"

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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“And my dearest friend!—oh, Jasper! *How could you?*”

Sir Jasper broke in upon his wife’s pipe with the anguished roar of the goaded: “The devil take me,” cried he, “if I don’t think the whole world’s going mad! *I* elope with the widow Bellairs, Lady Maria, ma’am? *I* treacherous, my lady? Ha!” He positively capered with fury and wounded feeling and general distraction, as he drew the incriminating documents from his breast, and flourished them, one in each hand, under the very nose of his accusers. “What of Red Curl, madam! What of the man who kissed the dimple, madam? what of your lover, madam!”

In his confusion he hurled the last two demands straight in Lady Maria’s face, who with all the indignation of outraged virtue, exclaimed upon her deepest note: “Vile slanderer, I deny it!”

Here Mistress Bellairs deemed the moment ripe for her delicate interference.

“My lovely Standish,” she cried, “you look

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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sadly. Indeed I fear you will swoon, if you do not sit. Pray Mr. Stafford, conduct my Lady Standish to the arm-chair and make her sip a glass of cordial from the bowl yonder."

"Oh, Kitty!" cried Lady Standish, and devoured the widow's face with eager eyes to see whether friend or enemy was heralded there.

"My dear," whispered Kitty, "nothing could be going better. Sit down, I tell you, and I promise you that in ten minutes you will have Sir Jasper on his knees."

Then running up to Sir Jasper and speaking with the most childlike and deliberate candour:

"Pray, Sir Jasper," said she, "and what might you be prating of letters and red curls? Strange now," she looked round the company with dewy, guileless eyes, "*I* lost a letter only a day or two ago at your house—a," she dropped her lids with a most entrancing little simper, "a rather private letter. I believe I must have lost it in

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## THE BATH COMEDY

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dear Julia's parlour, near the sofa, for I remember I pulled out my handkerchief—" "Good God!" said Sir Jasper, hoarsely, and glared at her, all doubt, and crushed the letters in his hand.

"Could you—could *you* have *found* it, Sir Jasper, I wonder? Mercy on me! And then this morning . . . 'tis the strangest thing . . . I get another letter, another rather private letter, and after despatching a few notes to my friends, for the life of me, I could not find the letter any more! And I vow I wanted it, for I had scarce glanced at it."

"Oh, Mistress Bellairs!" cried Sir Jasper. "Tell me," cried he panting, "what did these letters contain?"

"La!" said she, "what a question to put to a lady!"

"For God's sake, madam" said he, and in truth he looked piteous.

"Then, step apart," said she, "and for dear Julia's sake I will confide in you, as a gentleman."



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## THE BATH COMEDY

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She led him to the moonlit window, while all followed them with curious eyes—except Verney, who surreptitiously drank his punch, and slid away from the table, with the fear of his aunt in his heart. And now Mistress Kitty hung her head, looked exceedingly bashful and exceedingly coy. She took up a corner of her dainty flowered gown and plaited it in her fingers.

“Was there,” she asked, “was there anything of the description of a—of a trifling lock of hair, in the first letter—’twas somewhat of an auburn hue?”

“Confusion!” exclaimed the baronet, thrust the fateful letters into her hand, and turning on his heel, stamped his foot, muttering furiously: “Curse the fool that wrote them, and the feather-head that dropped them!”

“And what of the fool that picked them up and read them?” whispered Mistress Kitty’s voice in his ears, sharp as a slender stiletto.

She looked him up and down with a fine disdainful mockery.

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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“Why will you men write?” said she meaningly. “Letters are dangerous things!” He stood convicted, without a word.

“La! what a face!” she cried aloud now. “I protest you quite frighten me. And how is it you are not overjoyed, Sir Jasper? Here is your Julia proved whiter than the driven snow and more injured than Grise-lidis, and you not at her feet?”

“Where is she?” said Sir Jasper, half strangled by contending emotions.

“Why, there, in that arm-chair in the ingle-nook.”

Mistress Kitty smoothed her restored treasures quite tenderly, folded them neatly and slipped them into the little brocade bag that hung at her waist.

“Indeed, Lady Standish,” said Mr. Stafford—“a glass of punch will do you no harm.”

“Punch?” echoed Lady Maria—then turning fiercely on her nephew: “What, my Lord!” said she, “would your mother say?”

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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Why you are positively reeking with the dissolute fumes!"

"My dear Lady Maria," interposed the urbane Stafford, "a more cordial, a grateful fragrance to heighten the heart after fatigue and emotions, a sovereign thing, madam, against the night air—the warmest antidote. A sip of it, I assure you, would vastly restore you."

"I," she said, "I, drink with the profligate and the wanton! The deceiving husband and the treacherous friend!" She gave the fiercer refusal for that she felt so strongly in her old bones the charm of his description.

"Pooh, pooh! my dear ladies, if that is all," said Mr. Stafford, "then, by Heaven, let the glass circulate at once! Indeed, your La'ship," turning to Lady Standish, "so far from our good Jasper having anything to say to Mistress Bellairs' presence here to-night, let me assure you that he and I set out alone at an early hour this evening, with no other object but to be of service

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## THE BATH COMEDY

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to your ladyship—whom your anxious husband had been led to believe was likely to come this way . . . somewhat—ah—unsuitably protected as he thought.”

Then he bent down and whispered into Lady Standish’s pretty ear (which she willingly enough lent to such consoling assurances): “As for your friend,” he went on, “our delightful if volatile Bellairs—she came here with a vastly different person to Sir Jasper: poor O’Hara yonder—who’s drinking all the punch! She will tell you herself how it happened. . . . But, gracious stars, my dear Lady Maria, have you not yet been given a glass of the—of Mr. O’Hara’s restorative!”

“Allow me,” cried Kitty, who, having just settled Sir Jasper’s business for him, had now freedom to place her energies elsewhere. “Dearest Lady Maria—how sweet of you to join us in our little reconciliation feast!” She took a brimming glass from O’Hara’s hands and held it, with a winning smile, for Lady Maria’s acceptance.

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## THE BATH COMEDY

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“Madam!” responded the matron, scowled, drew her voluminous skirts together and became impenetrably deaf.

“Ah,” cried the widow on her topmost notes, “Madam, how I should have revered such a relative as yourself! Next to the joy of calling my Lord Verney’s mother, *my* mother, would have been that of calling his aunt, *my* aunt! But the dream is over, Lord Verney and I can never be more to each other than we are now.”

“Eh?” the Dowager recovered her hearing. “What’s that, what’s that, nevvvy?”

“’Tis alas, true,” said Lord Verney, with great demureness, “Mistress Bellairs has given me back my word.”

“Forgive me, dear Lady Maria,” trilled the widow.

“Mercy on us!” ejaculated the old lady; then, as if unconsciously, groped for the glass in Mistress Kitty’s hand.

“Sit down, sit down all!” cried Mistress Bellairs. Stafford echoed with a jovial shout. There was a call for a fresh bowl.

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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O'Hara's eyes began to dance, his tongue to resume its glibness. And Lady Maria was surprised to find how long her tumbler took to empty, but, curiously, never failed to be looking the other way when Mistress Bellairs with tenderest solicitude plied the silver ladle in her direction.

"I hope," said the ancient lady, now wreathed in smiles, "I hope that Mr. O'Hara's cordial is not really stronger than Madeira wine—which my physician, that charming Sir George, says is all I ought to drink."

"Madeira?" cried Mr. O'Hara, "Madeira wine is a very fair drink . . . it is a fine stirring dhrink. But 'tis apt, I'm afraid, to heat the blood overmuch. Now Claret . . . ?" he went on, pursuing the thesis, "Claret's the wine for gentlemen—only for the divil of a way it has of lying cold upon the stomach . . . after four or five bottles. . . . Do I hear you say: 'Port,' over there, Tom me boy? I'll not deny but that Port has qualities, it's strong, it's

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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mellow—but it's heavy. It sends a fellow to sleep, and that's a terrible bad mark against it; for 'tis near as bad for a man to sleep when he has a bottle going, as when he has a lady coming. Then there's Champagne for you: there's exhilaration in Champagne, 'tis the real tippie for a gentleman when he's alone—in a *tete-a-tete*—but 'tis not the wine for great company. Now, my dear friends," said O'Hara, stirring his new brew with the touch of a past master, "if you want to know a wine that combines the fire of the Madeira with the elegance of the Claret, the power and mellowness of the Port with the exhilaration of the Champagne—there's nothing in the world can compare to a fine screeching bowl of Brandy Punch!"

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❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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SCENE XXIV.

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WHEN Mistress Kitty had sipped half a glass with great show of relish and rakishness, and Lady Standish, under protest, had sucked a few spoonfuls; when Lady Maria, stuck in the middle of her fourth helping, protested that she really could not finish the tumbler and forthwith began to show signs of incoherence and somnolence; when O'Hara broke into snatches of song, and Lord Verney began to make calf's eyes afresh at the lost Mistress Kitty; when Sir Jasper, hanging round his wife's chair, showed unequivocal signs of repentance and a longing for reconciliation, and Stafford himself became more pointed in his admiration of Mistress Kitty and a trifle broader in his jests than was quite consistent with his usual breeding; the little widow deemed it, at last, time to break up the party.



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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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There was a vast bustle, a prodigious ordering and counterordering.

“Never mind me,” whispered Stafford, ever full of good humour and tact, into Sir Jasper’s ear, “take your wife home, man, I’ll sleep here if needs be.”

“Not a foot,” asserted O’Hara, apparently quite sober, and speaking with the most pleasant deliberation in the world, “not a foot will I stir from this place, so long as there is a lemon left.”

“The cursed scoundrel,” cried Lord Verney, babbling with fury as he returned from the stables, “the scoundrel, Spicer, has driven off with my curricle!”

“Then shall we be a merry trio to drink daylight in,” said Stafford, and cheered.

“Come, *dear* Lady Maria,” said Kitty. “I shall take care of you. I will give you a seat in my chaise; we shall drive home together.”

“Certainly, my dear, certainly,” mumbled the dowager; “who is that remarkably agreeable person?” she requested to know

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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of Stafford in her prodigiously audible whisper. "My dear," she turned again to Kitty, "I like you wonderfully. I cannot quite remember your name, my dear, but we will go home together."

"Dear, *dear* Lady Maria!" cried Mistress Kitty, honey sweet. "My Lord Verney, give your arm to your revered relative—mind you lead her carefully," she said, with all the imps in her eyes dancing, "for I fear Mr. Stafford's cordial has proved a little staggering—*after the night air!* And warn her ladyship's attendant to be ready to escort us back in my carriage." Then, taking advantage of Sir Jasper's absence—that gentleman might even then be heard cursing his sleepy servants in the yard—Mistress Kitty ran over to Lady Standish, who stood wistful and apart at the ingle-nook.

"My dear," she murmured, "the game is in your own hands."

"Ah, no!" returned the other. "Oh, Kitty, you have been an evil counsellor!"

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## THE BATH COMEDY

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“Is this your gratitude?” retorted Kitty, and pinched her friend with vicious little fingers. “Why, woman, your husband never thought so much of you in his life as he does now! Why, there has never been so much fuss made over you since you were born. Are these your thanks?”

“Oh, for the moment when I can fly to his bosom and tell him all! My foolish endeavour to make him jealous, my sinful pretence that he had a rival in my heart!”

“What?” exclaimed the widow, and her whisper took all the emphasis of a shriek. “Fly to his bosom? Then I have done with you! Bring him to his knees you mean, madam. Tell him all? Tell him all, forsooth, let him know that you have made a fool of him, all for nothing; let him think that you had never had an idea beyond pining for his love; that no other man has ever thought of you, that he has never had a rival, never will have one, that you are merely his own uninter-

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## THE BATH COMEDY

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esting Julia whom nobody wants. Why, Lady Standish, 'tis laying down the arms when the battle is yours. Sheer insanity! Prodigious, prodigious!" cried Mistress Kitty. "Is it possible that you and I are of the same sex?"

Bewildered, yet half convinced, Lady Standish listened and wondered.

"Be guided by me," whispered Kitty again. "Indeed, my dear, I mean well by you. Keep your secret if you love your husband. Keep it more precious than you would keep your youth and your beauty; for I tell you 'tis now your most valuable possession. Here," said she, and she took a letter from her famous bag and thrust it into Julia's hands, "here is what will bring him to his knees! Oh, what a game you have upon this drive home if you know how to play it."

"What is this, now?" cried Lady Standish. "Hush!" ordered Kitty, and clapped her friend's hand over the letter. "Promise, promise! Here comes your lord!"

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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Sir Jasper had approached them as she spoke; he now bowed confusedly and took his wife's hand. But:

"A word in your ear," said Mistress Kitty, arresting him as they were about to pass out. "A word in your ear, sir. If a man has a treasure at home he would keep for himself, he will do well to guard it! An unwatched jewel, my good sir, invites thieves. Good night!"

And now in the great room of the *Bear Inn* were left only three: the two gallant gentlemen, O'Hara and Stafford, and Mistress Kitty.

Mistress Kitty's game had been successfully played out; and yet the lady lingered.

"Good night," she began, then shot a glance at Stafford. "I wonder," she said innocently, "if my carriage be ready, and whether Lady Maria is well installed?"

"I will see," said Stafford simply, and vanished.

O'Hara stood by the table, slowly dip-

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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ping the ladle into the punch and absently pouring the liquor back into the bowl again. She sidled round to him.

“Denis!” said she.

He turned his wildly-bright eyes upon her, but made no answer.

“I’m going back,” said she, and held out her hand.

He carefully put down the ladle, took the tips of her little fingers and kissed them. But his hands and his lips were cold.

“Glory be to God,” said he, “it’s a grand game you played with me . . . . the Bath Comedy entirely, Kitty.”

Then he dropped her hand and took up the punch-ladle again with down-cast looks.

“Will you not give me your arm to my carriage?” said she, after a slight pause.

“Ah, Kitty, sure haven’t you broke my heart for me, and has not the punch robbed me of my legs!”

His wild bright eyes were deeply sad as he turned them on her, and he was pale as death.

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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She drew back quickly, frowned, hesitated, frowned again, and then brightened up once more.

“Then, sir,” said she, “when your legs are restored to you, pray let them conduct your heart round to my lodgings, and we shall see what can be done towards mending it.”

She dropped him a curtsey and was gone. As Stafford folded her into the chaise, he whispered:

“If ever *I* have a chance of running away with you, Kitty, I’ll take very good care not to let you know which road *I* mean to choose!”

. . . . .

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# THE BATH COMEDY

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## SCENE XXV.

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As the carriage rolled home-wards, on the Bath Road, Lady Standish, both hands folded over the mysterious letter, sat staring out of the window with unseeing eyes. The dawn had begun to break upon a cloudless sky; the air was chill and brisk; mists wreathed white scarves over the fields. She felt conscious in every fibre of her being that Sir Jasper was eagerly contemplating her in the cold grey light. Heart and brain were in a turmoil; the anguish, the violent emotions, the successive scenes of the last forty-eight hours passed again before her mind like a phantasmagoria. Partly because of Mistress Bellairs' advice and partly because of a certain womanly resentment, which, gentle as she was, still reared itself within her, she did not even cast a look upon her husband, but sat mutely gazing at the land.



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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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Presently she became aware that he had slid an arm behind her waist. She trembled a little, but did not turn to him.

“Julia,” said he, in a muffled uncertain tone, “Julia, I—I have done you injustice.” Then, for jealousy is as ill to extinguish as a fire that smoulders, a flame of the evil passion leaped up again with him. “But you must admit,” said he “that I had cause. Your own words, I may say your own confession—”

Lady Standish turned her head, lifted heavy lids and for a moment fixed upon him the most beautiful eyes in the world. “Nay,” said she, “I made no confession.” Her tongue trembled upon other protestations, yet Kitty’s warning carried the day. “Tell me,” said he, and bent to her, “tell me *was* it Lord Verney after all?”

Lady Standish again raised her eyes to his face, and could such a thing have been possible in a creature whose very being was all tenderness, he would have sworn that in her gaze there was contempt.

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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“Sir Jasper,” said she, “it never was Lord Verney!” And then she added: “Has there not been enough of this?”

As she spoke she moved her hands and involuntarily looked down at the letter she held. Then she sat as if turned to stone. The letter was in Sir Jasper’s writing and addressed to Mistress Bellairs!

“What have you there?” cried he.

“Nay,” said she, “I know not, for ’tis not my letter. But *you* will know.” And she held it up to him, and her hand did not tremble, yet was a cold fear upon her. “You wrote it,” she said. He stared and his countenance changed, utter discomposure fell upon him.

“Julia,” cried he, “Julia, upon my honour! I swear ’twas nothing, less than nothing, a mere idle bit of gallantry—a jest!” As he spoke he fell upon one knee in the chaise, at her feet.

“Then I may read it?” said she.

“Ah, Julia!” cried he, and encircled her with his arms. She felt the straining eager-

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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ness of his grasp, she felt his heart beat stormily. With a sudden warmth she knew that after all his love was hers.

Then she had an inspiration worthy of a cleverer woman, but love has his own geniuses. She disengaged herself from his embrace and put the letter into his hand.

“Take it,” said she.

“Julia,” he cried and shook from head to foot, and the tears sprang to his eyes, “I never gave her a serious thought. I vow I hate the woman.”

“Then tear it up,” said Lady Standish, with a superhuman magnanimity that almost turned her faint.

He rose and tore the letter into shreds quickly, lest she should repent, and flung them out of the window. She watched the floating pieces flutter and vanish. In her secret soul she said to herself:

“Mistress Bellairs and I shall be very good friends at a distance!”

Her husband was kneeling at her feet again.

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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“Angel,” cried he pleadingly, and once more she was in his arms; and yet his jealous heart kept growling within him, like a surly dog that will not be silenced.

“Julia,” said he in her ear, “but one word, one word, my love! Julia, is there anyone, anything between us?”

“Oh, that,” she said, and smiled archly, “that, sir, you must discover for yourself.” Her head sank on his shoulder as she spoke.

“You torture me!” he murmured. But she knew that he had never kissed her with such passion in all his life before.

As her chaise followed on the road, some hundred yards or so behind Sir Jasper's, Mistress Bellairs, sitting beside Lady Maria (who snored the whole way with rhythmic steadiness) gazed across the livid fields towards the low horizon where the slow fires of dawn were pulsing into brightness. She was in deeply reflective mood.

In her excited, busy brain she revolved

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## ❖ THE BATH COMEDY ❖

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many important questions and weighed the gains and losses in her game of "Love and Hazard" with all the seriousness of the gambler homeward bound after a heavy night.


"At least, she thought upon a little sigh, with some complacency, "I did a vastly good turn to my Lady Standish. But the woman is a fool, if a sweet one, and fools are past permanent mending. I did well," thought she, "to condemn the Calf—there is no doubt of that." She glanced at Lady Maria's withered countenance, unlovely and undignified in her stupor—"The menagerie would have been the death of me promptly. . . . But, my poor O'Hara! How could I ever have called him a cucumber? *There* was love for the taking, now—yet no! Worshipper, vastly well; but husband? not for me, not for me! Bless me," she cried to herself testily; "is a woman to have no choice between mid-winter, green spring, or the dog days? If I ever allow myself to be abducted again,

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## THE BATH COMEDY

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'twill be with your Man of the World—one with palate enough to *relish me* without wanting to swallow me at a gulp.” She paused in her train of thought to laugh at the recollection of Mr. Stafford’s parting speech. “There is an easy heart for you!” she murmured. “A gallant gentleman with as pretty a wit as O’Hara himself, and every whit as good a leg. Perhaps,” thought Mistress Kitty, yawned and grew sleepy; nodded her delicate head; dreamed then a little dream and saw a silver Beau in the moonlight, and woke up with a smile. The spires of Bath Cathedral pierced silver grey through a golden mist; far beneath her gaze, as the chaise began to tip the crest of the great hill, like a silver ribbon ran the river. “Perhaps. . . We shall see,” said the widow.

A decorative border framing the text, featuring ornate scrollwork, acanthus leaves, and clusters of flowers at the corners and midpoints.

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