

Sir Roger in Love Main Text

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Tuesday, July 10, 1711. By Richard Steele (1672-1729)

In my first description of the company in which I pass most of my time, it may be remembered that I mentioned a great affliction which my friend Sir Roger had met with in his youth,—which was no less than a disappointment in love. It happened this evening that we fell into a very pleasing walk at a distance from his house. As soon as we came into it, "It is," quoth the good old man, looking round him with a smile, "very hard that any part of my land should be settled upon one who has used me so ill as the perverse widow did; and yet I am sure I could not see a sprig of any bough of this whole walk of trees but I should reflect upon her and her severity. She has certainly the finest hand of any woman in the world. You are to know this was the place wherein I used to muse upon her; and by that custom I can never come into it but the same tender sentiments revive in my mind, as if I had actually walked with that beautiful creature under these shades. I have been fool enough to carve her name on the bark of several of these trees; so unhappy is the condition of men in love to attempt the removing of their passion by the methods which serve only to imprint it deeper. She has certainly the finest hand of any woman in the world."

Here followed a profound silence; and I was not displeased to observe my friend falling so naturally into a discourse which I had ever before taken notice he industriously avoided. After a very long pause, he entered upon an account of this great circumstance in his life, with an air which I thought raised my idea of him above what I had ever had before; and gave me the picture of that cheerful mind of his before it received that stroke which has ever since affected his words and actions. But he went on as follows:

"I came to my estate in my twenty-second year, and resolved to follow the steps of the most worthy of my ancestors who have inhabited this spot of earth before me, in all the methods of hospitality and good neighbourhood, for the sake of my fame, and in country sports and recreations, for the sake of my health. In my twenty-third year I was obliged to serve as sheriff of the county; and in my servants, officers, and whole equipage, indulged the pleasure of a young man, who did not think ill of his own person, in taking that public occasion of showing my figure and behaviour to advantage. You may easily imagine to yourself what appearance I made, who am pretty tall, rid well, and was very well dressed, at the head of a whole county,

with music before me, a feather in my hat, and my horse well bitted. I can assure you I was not a little pleased with the kind looks and glances I had from all the balconies and windows, as I rode to the hall where the assizes were held. But when I came there, a beautiful creature in a widow's habit sat in court, to hear the even of a cause concerning her dower. This commanding creature (who was born for destruction of all who behold her) put on such a resignation in her countenance, and bore the whispers of all around the court with such a pretty uneasiness, I warrant you, and then recovered herself from one eye to another, till she was perfectly confused by meeting something so wistful in all she encountered, that at last, with a murrain to her, she cast her bewitching eye upon me. I no sooner met it but I bowed like a great surprised booby; and, knowing her cause to be the first which came on, I cried, like a captivated calf as I was, 'Make way for the defendant's witnesses!' This sudden partiality made all the county immediately see the sheriff also was become a slave to the fine widow. During the time her cause was upon trial, she behaved herself, I warrant you, with such a deep attention to her business, took opportunities to have little billets handed to her counsel, then would be in such a pretty confusion, occasioned, you must know, by acting before so much company, that not only I but the whole court was prejudiced in her favour; and all that the next heir to her husband had to urge was thought so groundless and frivolous that, when it came to her counsel to reply, there was not half so much said as everyone besides in the court thought he could have urged to her advantage. You must understand, sir, this perverse woman is one of those unaccountable creatures that secretly rejoice in the admiration of men, but indulge themselves in no further consequences. Hence it is that she has ever had a train of admirers, and she removes from her slaves in town to those in the country according to the seasons of the year. She is a reading lady, and far gone in the pleasures of friendship; she is always accompanied by a confidante, who is witness to her daily protestations against our sex, and consequently a bar to her first steps towards love, upon the strength of her own maxims and declarations.

"However, I must needs say this accomplished mistress of mine has distinguished me above the rest, and has been known to declare Sir Roger de Coverley was the tamest and most human of all the brutes in the country. I was told she said so by one who thought he rallied me; but, upon the strength of this slender encouragement of being thought least detestable, I made new liveries, new-paired my coach-horses, sent them all to town to be bitted and taught to throw their legs well and move altogether, before I pretended to cross the country and wait upon her. As soon as I thought my retinue suitable to the character of my fortune and youth, I set out from hence to make my addresses. The particular skill of this lady has ever been to inflame your wishes and yet command respect. To make her mistress of this art, she has a greater share of knowledge, wit, and good sense than is usual even among men of merit. Then

she is beautiful beyond the race of women. If you won't let her go on with a certain artifice with her eyes, and the skill of beauty, she will arm herself with her real charms, and strike you with admiration instead of desire. It is certain that, if you were to behold the whole woman, there is that dignity in her aspect, that composure in her motion, that complacency in her manner, that if her form makes you hope, her merit makes you fear. But then again, she is such a desperate scholar that no country gentleman can approach her without being a jest. As I was going to tell you, when I came to her house I was admitted to her presence with great civility; at the same time she placed herself to be first seen by me in such an attitude, as I think you call the posture of a picture, that she discovered new charms, and I at last came towards her with such an awe as made me speechless. This she no sooner observed but she made her advantage of it, and began a discourse to me concerning love and honour, as they both are followed by pretenders, and the real votaries to them. When she had discussed these points in a discourse which I verily believe was as learned as the best philosopher in Europe could possibly make, she asked me whether she was so happy as to fall in with my sentiments on these important particulars. Her confidante sat by her, and upon my being in the last confusion and silence, this malicious aid of hers, turning to her, says, 'I am very glad to observe Sir Roger pauses upon this subject, and seems resolved to deliver all his sentiments upon the matter when he pleases to speak.' They both kept their countenances, and after I had sat half an hour meditating how to behave before such profound casuists, I rose up and took my leave. Chance has since that time thrown me very often in her way, and she as often has directed a discourse to me which I do not understand. This barbarity has kept me ever at a distance from the most beautiful object my eyes ever beheld. It is thus also she deals with all mankind, and you must make love to her, as you would conquer the sphinx, by posing her. But were she like other women, and that there were any talking to her, how constant must the pleasure of that man be who could converse with a creature—But, after all, you may be sure her heart is fixed on some one or other; and yet I have been credibly informed—but who can believe half that is said? After she had done speaking to me, she put her hand to her bosom and adjusted her tucker. Then she cast her eyes a little down, upon my beholding her too earnestly. They say she sings excellently; her voice in her ordinary speech has something in it inexpressibly sweet. You must know I dined with her at a public table the day after I first saw her, and she helped me to some tansy in the eye of all the gentlemen in the country: she has certainly the finest hand of any woman in the world. I can assure you, sir, were you to behold her, you would be in the same condition; for, as her speech is music, her form is angelic. But I find I grow irregular while I am talking of her; but indeed it would be stupidity to be unconcerned at such perfection. Oh, the excellent creature! she is as inimitable to all women as she is inaccessible to all men."

I found my friend begin to rave, and insensibly led him towards the house, that we might be joined by some other company; and am convinced that the widow is the secret cause of all that inconsistency which appears in some parts of my friend's discourse. Though he has so much command of himself as not directly to mention her, yet, according to that of Martial, which one knows not how to render in English, "Dum tacet hanc loquitur." I shall end this paper with that whole epigram, which represents with much humor my honest friend's condition.

"Quicquid agit Rufus, nihil est nisi Naevia Rufo;

Si gaudet, si flet, si tacet, hanc loquitur:

Caenat, propinat, poscit, negat, annuit,—una est

Naevia; si non sit Naevia, mutus erit.

Scriberet hesternae patri cum luce salutem,

Naevia lux, inquit, 'Naevia lumen, ave.'

"Let Rufus weep, rejoice, stand, sit, or walk,

Still he can nothing but of Naevia talk;

Let him eat, drink, ask questions, or dispute,

Still he must speak of Naevia or be mute;

He writ to his father, ending with this line,—

'I am, my lovely Naevia, ever thine.'"