

A CASE OF CONSCIENCE

Ernest Dowson

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I

IT was in Brittany, and the apples were already acquiring a ruddier, autumnal tint, amid their greens and yellows, though Autumn was not yet; and the country lay very still and fair in the sunset which had befallen, softly and suddenly as is the fashion there. A man and a girl stood looking down in silence at the village, Ploumariel, from their post of vantage, half way up the hill: at its lichened church spire, dotted with little gables, like dove-cotes; at the slated roof of its market; at its quiet white houses. The man's eyes rested on it complacently, with the enjoyment of the painter, finding it charming: the girl's, a little absently, as one who had seen it very often before. She was pretty and very young, but her gray serious eyes, the poise of her head, with its rebellious brown hair braided plainly, gave her a little air of dignity, of reserve which sat piquantly upon her youth. In one ungloved hand, that was brown from the sun, but very beautiful, she held an old parasol, the other played occasionally with a bit of purple heather. Presently she began to speak, using English just coloured by a foreign accent, that made her speech prettier.

"You make me afraid," she said, turning her large, troubled eyes on her companion, "you make me afraid, of myself chiefly, but a little of you. You suggest so much to me that is new, strange, terrible. When you speak, I am troubled; all my old landmarks appear to vanish; I even hardly know right from wrong. I love you, my God, how I love you! but I want to go away from you and pray in the little quiet church, where I made my first Communion. I will come to the world's end with you; but oh, Sebastian, do not ask me, let me go. You will forget me, I am a little girl to you, Sebastian. You cannot care very much for me."

The man looked down at her, smiling masterfully, but very kindly. He took the mutinous hand, with its little sprig of heather, and held it between his own. He seemed to find her insistence adorable; mentally, he was contrasting her with all other women whom he had known, frowning at the memory of so many years in which she had no part. He was a man of more than forty, built large to an uniform English pattern; there was a touch of military erectness in his carriage which often deceived people as to his vocation. Actually, he had never been anything but artist, though he came of a family of soldiers, and had once been war correspondent of an illustrated paper. A certain distinction had always adhered to him, never more than now when he was no longer young, was growing bald, had streaks of gray in his moustache. His face, without being handsome, possessed a certain charm; it was worn and rather pale, the lines about the firm mouth were full of lassitude, the eyes rather tired. He had the air of having tasted widely, curiously, of life in his day, prosperous as he seemed now, that had left its mark upon him. His voice, which usually took an intonation that his friends found supercilious, grew very tender in addressing this little French girl, with her quaint air of childish dignity.

"Marie-Yvonne, foolish child, I will not hear one word more. You are a little heretic; and I am sorely tempted to

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seal your lips from uttering heresy. You tell me that you love me, and you ask me to let you go, in one breath. The impossible conjuncture! Marie-Yvonne," he added, more seriously, "trust yourself to me, my child! You know, I will never give you up. You know that these months that I have been at Ploumariel, are worth all the rest of my life to me. It has been a difficult life, hitherto, little one: change it for me; make it worth while. You would let morbid fancies come between us. You have lived overmuch in that little church, with its worm-eaten benches, and its mildewed odour of dead people, and dead ideas. Take care, Marie-Yvonne: it has made you serious-eyed, before you have learnt to laugh; by and by, it will steal away your youth, before you have ever been young. I come to claim you, Marie-Yvonne, in the name of Life." His words were half-jesting; his eyes were profoundly in earnest. He drew her to him gently; and when he bent down and kissed her forehead, and then her shy lips, she made no resistance: only, a little tremor ran through her. Presently, with equal gentleness, he put her away from him. "You have already given me your answer, Marie-Yvonne. Believe me, you will never regret it. Let us go down."

They took their way in silence towards the village; presently a bend of the road hid them from it, and he drew closer to her, helping her with his arm over the rough stones. Emerging, they had gone thirty yards so, before the scent of English tobacco drew their attention to a figure seated by the road-side, under a hedge; they recognised it, and started apart, a little consciously.

"It is M. Tregellan," said the young girl, flushing: "and he must have seen us."

Her companion, frowning, hardly suppressed a little quick objurgation.

"It makes no matter," he observed, after a moment: "I shall see your uncle to-morrow and we know, good man, how he wishes this; and, in any case, I would have told Tregellan."

The figure rose, as they drew near: he shook the ashes out of his briar, and removed it to his pocket. He was a slight man, with an ugly, clever face; his voice as he greeted them, was very low and pleasant.

"You must have had a charming walk, Mademoiselle. I have seldom seen Ploumariel look better."

"Yes," she said, gravely, "it has been very pleasant. But I must not linger now," she added breaking a little silence in which none of them seemed quite at ease. "My uncle will be expecting me to supper." She held out her hand, in the English fashion, to Tregellan, and then to Sebastian Murch; who gave the little fingers a private pressure.

They had come into the market-place round which most of the houses in Ploumariel were grouped. They watched the young girl cross it briskly; saw her blue gown pass out of sight down a bye street: then they turned to their own hotel. It was a low, white house, belted half way down the front with black stone; a pictorial object, as most Breton hostels. The ground floor was a café, and, outside it, a bench and long stained table enticed them to rest. They sat down, and ordered absinthes, as the hour suggested: these were brought to them presently by an old servant of the house; an admirable figure, with the white sleeves and apron relieving her linsey dress: with her good Breton face, and its effective wrinkles. For some time they sat in silence, drinking and smoking. The artist appeared to be absorbed in contemplation of his drink; considering its clouded green in various lights. After a while the other looked up, and remarked, abruptly.

"I may as well tell you that I happened to overlook you, just now, unintentionally."

Sebastian Murch held up his glass, with absent eyes.

"Don't mention it, my dear fellow," he remarked, at last, urbanely.

"I beg your pardon; but I am afraid I must."

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He spoke with an extreme deliberation which suggested nervousness; with the air of a person reciting a little set speech, learnt imperfectly: and he looked very straight in front of him, out into the street, at two dogs quarrelling oversome offal.

"I daresay you will be angry: I can't avoid that; at least, I have known you long enough to hazard it. I have had it on my mind to say something. If I have been silent, it hasn't been because I have been blind, or approved. I have seen how it was all along. I gathered it from your letters when I was in England. Only until this afternoon I did not know how far it had gone, and now I am sorry I did not speak before."

He stopped short, as though he expected his friend's subtilty to come to his assistance; with admissions or recriminations. But the other was still silent, absent: his face wore a look of annoyed indifference. After a while, as Tregellan still halted, he observed quietly:

"You must be a little more explicit. I confess I miss your meaning."

"Ah, don't be paltry," cried the other, quickly. "You know my meaning. To be very plain, Sebastian, are you quite justified in playing with that charming girl, in compromising her?"

The artist looked up at last, smiling; his expressive mouth was set, not angrily, but with singular determination.

"With Mademoiselle Mitouard?"

"Exactly; with the niece of a man whose guest you have recently been."

"My dear fellow!" he stopped a little, considering his words: "You are hasty and uncharitable for such a very moral person! you jump at conclusions, Tregellan. I don't, you know, admit your right to question me: still, as you have introduced the subject, I may as well satisfy you. I have asked Mademoiselle Mitouard to marry me, and she has consented, subject to her uncle's approval. And that her uncle, who happens to prefer the English method of courtship, is not likely to refuse."

The other held his cigar between two fingers, a little away; his curiously anxious face suggested that the question had become to him one of increased nicety.

"I am sorry," he said, after a moment; "this is worse than I imagined; it's impossible."

"It is you that are impossible, Tregellan," said Sebastian Murch. He looked at him now, quite frankly, absolutely: his eyes had a defiant light in them, as though he hoped to be criticised; wished nothing better than to stand on his defence, to argue the thing out. And Tregellan sat for a long time without speaking, appreciating his purpose. It seemed more monstrous the closer he considered it: natural enough withal, and so, harder to defeat; and yet, he was sure, that defeated it must be. He reflected how accidental it had all been: their presence there, in Ploumariel, and the rest! Touring in Brittany, as they had often done before, in their habit of old friends, they had fallen upon it by chance, a place unknown of Murray; and the merest chance had held them there. They had slept at the Lion d'Or, voted it magnificently picturesque, and would have gone away and forgotten it; but the chance of travel had for once defeated them. Hard by they heard of the little votive chapel of Saint Bernard; at the suggestion of their hostess they set off to visit it. It was built steeply on an edge of rock, amongst odorous pines overhanging a ravine, at the bottom of which they could discern a brown torrent purling tumidly along. For the convenience of devotees, iron rings, at short intervals, were driven into the wall; holding desperately to these, the pious pilgrim, at some peril, might compass the circuit; saying an oraison to Saint Bernard, and some ten Aves. Sebastian, who was charmed with the wild beauty of the scene, in a country ordinarily so placid, had been seized with a fit of emulation: not in any mood of devotion, but for the sake of a wider prospect. Tregellan had protested: and the Saint, resenting the purely æsthetic motive of the feat, had seemed to intervene. For, half-way round, growing

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giddy may be, the artist had made a false step, lost his hold. Tregellan, with a little cry of horror, saw him disappear amidst crumbling mortar and uprooted ferns. It was with a sensible relief, for the fall had the illusion of great depth, that, making his way rapidly down a winding path, he found him lying on a grass terrace, amidst débris twenty feet lower, cursing his folly, and holding a lamentably sprained ankle, but for the rest uninjured! Tregellan had made off in haste to Ploumariel in search of assistance; and within the hour he had returned with two stalwart Bretons and M. le Docteur Mitouard.

Their tour had been, naturally, drawing to its close. Tregellan indeed had an imperative need to be in London within the week. It seemed, therefore, a clear dispensation of Providence, that the amiable doctor should prove an hospitable person, and one inspiring confidence no less. Caring greatly for things foreign, and with an especial passion for England, a country whence his brother had brought back a wife; M. le Docteur Mitouard insisted that the invalid could be cared for properly at his house alone. And there, in spite of protestations, earnest from Sebastian, from Tregellan half-hearted, he was installed. And there, two days later, Tregellan left him with an easy mind; bearing away with him, half enviously, the recollection of the young, charming face of a girl, the Doctor's niece, as he had seen her standing by his friend's sofa when he paid his adieux; in the beginnings of an intimacy, in which, as he foresaw, the petulance of the invalid, his impatience at an enforced detention, might be considerably forgot. And all that had been two months ago.

II

"I am sorry you don't see it," continued Tregellan, after a pause, "to me it seems impossible; considering your history it takes me by surprise."

The other frowned slightly; finding this persistence perhaps a trifle crude, he remarked good-humouredly enough:

"Will you be good enough to explain your opposition? Do you object to the girl? You have been back a week now, during which you have seen almost as much of her as I."

"She is a child, to begin with; there is five-and-twenty years' disparity between you. But it's the relation I object to, not the girl. Do you intend to live in Ploumariel?"

Sebastian smiled, with a suggestion of irony.

"Not precisely; I think it would interfere a little with my career; why do you ask?"

I imagined not; you will go back to London with your little Breton wife, who is as charming here as the apple-blossom in her own garden. You will introduce her to your circle, who will receive her with open arms; all the clever bores, who write, and talk, and paint, and are talked about between Bloomsbury and Kensington. Everybody who is emancipated will know her, and everybody who has a 'fad'; and they will come in a body and emancipate her, and teach her their 'fads.'"

"That is a caricature of my circle, as you call it, Tregellan! though I may remind you it is also yours. I think she is being starved in this corner, spiritually. She has a beautiful soul, and it has had no chance. I propose to give it one, and I am not afraid of the result."

Tregellan threw away the stump of his cigar into the darkling street, with a little gesture of discouragement, of lassitude.

"She has had the chance to become what she is, a perfect thing."

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"My dear fellow," exclaimed his friend, "I could not have said more myself."

The other continued, ignoring his interruption.

"She has had great luck. She has been brought up by an old eccentric, on the English system of growing up as she liked. And no harm has come of it, at least until it gave you the occasion of making love to her."

"You are candid, Tregellan!"

"Let her go, Sebastian, let her go," he continued, with increasing gravity. "Consider what a transplantation; from this world of Plotmariel where everything is fixed for her by that venerable old Curé, where life is so easy, so ordered, to yours, ours; a world without definitions, where everything is an open question."

"Exactly," said the artist, "why should she be so limited? I would give her scope, ideas. I can't see that I am wrong."

"She will not accept them, your ideas. They will trouble her, terrify her; in the end, divide you. It is not an elastic nature. I have watched it."

"At least, allow me to know her," put in the artist, a little grimly.

Tregellan shook his head.

"The Breton blood; her English mother: passionate Catholicism! a touch of Puritan! Have you quite made up your mind, Sebastian?"

"I made it up long ago, Tregellan!"

The other looked at him, curiously, compassionately; with a touch of resentment at what he found his lack of subtilty. Then he said at last:

"I called it impossible: you force me to be very explicit, even cruel. I must remind you, that you are, of all my friends, the one I value most, could least afford to lose."

"You must be going to say something, extremely disagreeable! something horrible," said the artist, slowly.

"I am," said Tregellan, "but I must say it. Have you explained to Mademoiselle, or her uncle, your your peculiar position?"

Sebastian was silent for a moment, frowning: the lines about his mouth grew a little sterner; at last he said coldly:

"If I were to answer, Yes?"

"Then I should understand that there was no further question of your marriage."

Presently the other commenced in a hard, leaden voice.

"No, I have not told Marie-Yvonne that. I shall not tell her. I have suffered enough for a youthful folly; an act of mad generosity. I refuse to allow an infamous woman to wreck my future life as she has disgraced my past. Legally, she has passed out of it; morally, legally, she is not my wife. For all I know she may be actually dead."

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The other was watching his face, very gray and old now, with an anxious compassion.

"You know she is not dead, Sebastian," he said simply. Then he added very quietly as one breaks supreme bad tidings, "I must tell you something which I fear you have not realised. The Catholic Church does not recognise divorce. If she marry you and find out, rightly or wrongly she will believe that she has been living in sin; some day she will find it out. No damnable secret like that keeps itself for ever: an old newspaper, a chance remark from one of your dear friends, and, the deluge. Do you see the tragedy, the misery of it? By God, Sebastian, to save you both somebody shall tell her; and if it be not you, it must be I."

There was extremest peace in the quiet square; the houses seemed sleepy at last, after a day of exhausting tranquillity, and the chestnuts, under which a few children, with tangled hair and fair dirty faces, still played. The last glow of the sun fell on the gray roofs opposite; dying hard it seemed over the street in which the Mitouards lived; and they heard suddenly the tinkle of an Angelus bell. Very placid! the place and the few peasants in their pictorial hats and caps who lingered. Only the two Englishmen sitting, their glasses empty, and their smoking over, looking out on it all with their anxious faces, brought in a contrasting note of modern life; of the complex aching life of cities, with its troubles and its difficulties.

"Is that your final word, Tregellan?" asked the artist at last, a little wearily.

"It must be, Sebastian! Believe me, I am infinitely sorry."

"Yes, of course," he answered quickly, acidly; "well, I will sleep on it."

III

They made their first breakfast in an almost total silence; both wore the bruised harassed air which tells of a night passed without benefit of sleep. Immediately afterwards Murch went out alone: Tregellan could guess the direction of his visit, but not its object; he wondered if the artist was making his difficult confession. Presently they brought him in a pencilled note; he recognised, with some surprise, his friend's tortuous hand.

"I have considered our conversation, and your unjustifiable interference. I am entirely in your hands: at the mercy of your extraordinary notions of duty. Tell her what you will, if you must; and pave the way to your own success. I shall say nothing; but I swear you love the girl yourself; and are no right arbiter here. Sebastian Murch."

He read the note through twice before he grasped its purport; then sat holding it in lax fingers, his face grown singularly gray.

"It's not true, it's not true," he cried aloud, but a moment later knew himself for a self-deceiver all along. Never had self-consciousness been more sudden, unexpected, or complete. There was no more to do or say; this knowledge tied his hands. *Ite! missa est!* . . .

He spent an hour painfully invoking casuistry, tossed to and fro irresolutely, but never for a moment disputing that plain fact which Sebastian had so brutally illuminated. Yes! he loved her, had loved her all along. Marie-Yvonne! how the name expressed her! at once sweet and serious, arch and sad as her nature. The little Breton wild flower! how cruel it seemed to gather her! And he could do no more; Sebastian had tied his hands. Things must be! He was a man nicely conscientious, and now all the elaborate devices of his honour, which had persuaded him to a disagreeable interference, were contraposed against him. This suspicion of an ulterior motive had altered it, and so at last he was left to decide with a sigh, that because he loved these two so well, he must let them go their own way to misery.

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Coming in later in the day, Sebastian Murch found his friend packing.

"I have come to get your answer," he said; "I have been walking about the hills like a madman for hours. I have not been near her; I am afraid. Tell me what you mean to do?"

Tregellan rose, shrugged his shoulders, pointed to his valise.

"God help you both! I would have saved you if you had let me. The Quimperlé Courier passes in half-an-hour. I am going by it. I shall catch a night train to Paris."

As Sebastian said nothing; continued to regard him with the same dull, anxious gaze, he went on after a moment:

"You did me a grave injustice; you should have known me better than that. God knows I meant nothing shameful, only the best; the least misery for you and her."

"It was true then?" said Sebastian, curiously. His voice was very cold; Tregellan found him altered. He regarded the thing as it had been very remote, and outside them both.

"I did not know it then," said Tregellan, shortly.

He knelt down again and resumed his packing. Sebastian, leaning against the bed, watched him trivial things, and he handed him from time to time a book, a brush, which the other packed mechanically with elaborate care. There was no more to say, and presently, when the chamber-maid entered for his luggage, they went down and out into the splendid sunshine, silently. They had to cross the Square to reach the carriage, a dusty ancient vehicle, hooded, with places for four, which waited outside the post-office. A man in a blue blouse preceded them, carrying Tregellan's things. From the corner they could look down the road to Quimperlé, and their eyes both sought the white house of Doctor Mitouard, standing back a little in its trim garden, with its one incongruous apple tree; but there was no one visible.

Presently, Sebastian asked, suddenly:

"Is it true, that you said last night: divorce to a Catholic?"

Tregellan interrupted him.

"It is absolutely true, my poor friend."

He had climbed into his place at the back, settled himself on the shiny leather cushion: he appeared to be the only passenger. Sebastian stood looking drearily in at the window, the glass of which had long perished.

"I wish I had never known, Tregellan! How could I ever tell her!"

Inside, Tregellan shrugged his shoulders: not impatiently, or angrily, but in sheer impotence; as one who gave it up.

"I can't help you," he said, "you must arrange it with your own conscience."

"Ah, it's too difficult!" cried the other: "I can't find my way."

The driver cracked his whip, suggestively; Sebastian drew back a little further from the off wheel.

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"Well," said the other, "if you find it, write and tell me. I am very sorry, Sebastian."

"Good-bye," he replied. "Yes! I will write."

The carriage lumbered off, with a lurch to the right, as it turned the corner; it rattled down the hill, raising a cloud of white dust. As it passed the Mitouards' house, a young girl, in a large straw hat, came down the garden; too late to discover whom it contained. She watched it out of sight, indifferently, leaning on the little iron gate; then she turned, to recognise the long stooping figure of Sebastian Murch, who advanced to meet her.