The Bride

M. P. Shiel

Table of Contents

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"He shall not see the rivers, the floods,

the brooks of honey and butter"—Job.

They met at Krupp and Mason's, musical−instrument−makers, of Little Britain, E.C., where Walter had been employed two years, and then came Annie to typewrite, and be serviceable.

They began to "go out" together after six o'clock; and when Mrs. Evans, Annie's mamma, lost her lodger, Annie mentioned it, and Walter went to live with them at No. 13 Culford Road, N.; by which time Annie and Walter might almost be said to have been engaged. His salary, however, was only thirty shillings a week.

He was the thorough Cockney, Walter; a well−set−up person of thirty, strong−shouldered, with a square brow, a moustache, and black acne−specks in his nose and pale face.

It was on the night of his arrival at No. 13, that he for the first time saw Rachel, Annie's younger sister. Both girls, in fact, were named "Rachel"—after a much−mourned mother of Mrs.

Evans'; but Annie Rachel was called "Annie," and Mary Rachel was called "Rachel." Rachel helped Walter at the handle of his box to the top−back room, and here, in the lamplight he was able to see that she was a tallish girl, with hair almost black, and with a sprinkling of freckles on her very white, thin nose, on the tip of which stood collected, usually, some little sweats. She was thin−faced, and her top teeth projected a little so that her lips only closed with effort, she not so pretty as pink−and−white little Annie, though one could guess, at a glance, that she was a person more to be respected.

"What do you think of him?" said Annie, meeting Rachel as she came down.

"He seems a nice fellow," Rachel said: "rather goodlooking. And strong in the back, you bet."

Walter spent that evening with them in the area front−room, smoking a foul bulldog pipe, which slushed and gurgled to his suction; and at once Mrs. Evans, a dark old lady without waist, all sighs and lack of breath, decided that he was "a gentlemanly, decent fellow." When bed−time came he made the proposal to lead them in prayer; and to this they submitted, Annie having forewarned them that he was "a Christian." As he climbed to his room, the devoted girl found an excuse to slip out after him, and in the passage of the first floor there was a little kiss.

"Only one," she said, with an uplifted finger.

"And what about his little brother, then?" he chuckled—a chuckle with which all his jokes were accompanied: a kind of guttural chuckle, which seemed to descend or stick straining in the throat, instead of rising to the lips.

"You go on," she said playfully, tapped his cheek, and ran down. So Walter slept for the first night at Mrs. Evans'.

On the whole, as time passed, he had a good deal of the society of the women: for the theatre was a thing abominable to him, and in the evenings he stayed in the underground parlour, sharing the bread−and−cheese supper, and growing familiar with the sighs of Mrs. Evans over her once estate in the world. Rachel, the silent, sewed; Annie, whose relation with Walter was still unannounced, though perhaps guessed, could play hymn−tunes on the old piano, and she played.

Last of all, Walter laid down the inveterate wet pipe, led them in prayer, and went to bed. Most mornings he

and Annie set out together for Little Britain.

There came a day when he confided to her his intention to ask for a rise of "screw," and when this was actually promised by His Terror, the Boss, there was joy in heaven, and radiance in futurity, and secret talks of rings, a wedding, "a Home." Annie felt herself not far from the kingdom of Hymen, and rejoiced. But nothing, as yet, was said at No. 13: for to Mrs. Evans' past grandeurs thirty shillings a week was felt to be inappropriate.

The nest Sunday, however, soon after dinner, this strangeness occurred: Rachel, the silent, disappeared. Mrs. Evans called for her, Annie called, but it was found that she was not in the house, though the putting away of the dinner−things, her usual task, was only half accomplished.

Not till tea−time did Rachel return. She was then cold, and somewhat sullen, and somewhat pale, her lips closing firmly over her projecting teeth. When timidly questioned—for her resentment was greatly feared— she replied that she had just been looking in upon Alice Soulsby, a few squares away, for a little chat: and this was the truth.

It was not, however, the whole truth; she had also looked in at the Church Lane Sunday School on her way: and this fact she guiltily concealed. For half an hour she had sat darkly at the end of the building in a corner, listening to the "address." This address was delivered by Walter. To this school every Sunday, after dinner, he put down the beloved pipe to go. He was in fact, its "superintendent."

After this, the tone and temper of the little household rapidly changed, and a true element of hell was introduced into its platitude. It became, first of all, a question whether or not Rachel could be "experiencing religion," a thing which her mother and Annie had never dreamt of expecting of her. Praying people, and the Salvationist, had always been the contempt of her strong and callous mind. But on Sunday nights she was now observed to go out alone, and "chapel" was the explanation which she coolly gave. Which chapel she did not specify: but in reality it was the Newton Street Hall, at which Walter frequently exhorted and "prayed." In the Church Lane schoolroom there was prayer−meeting on Thursday evenings; and twice within one month Rachel sallied forth on Thursday evening—soon after Walter. The secret disease which preyed upon the poor girl could hardly now be concealed. At first she suffered bitter, solitary shame; sobbed in a hundred paroxysms; hoped to draw a veil over her infirmity. But her gash was too glaring. In the long Sabbath evenings of summer he preached at Street corners, and sometimes secretly, sometimes openly, Rachel would attend these meetings, singing meekly with the rest the undivine hymns of the modern evangelist. In his presence, in the parlour, on other nights, she quietly sewed, hardly speaking. When, at 7 p m., she heard his key in the front door her heart darted toward its master; when in the morning he flew away to business her universe was cinders.

"It's a wonder to me what's coming to our Rachel lately," said Annie in the train, coming home; "you're doing her soul good, or something, aren't you?"

He chuckled, with slushy suction−sounds about the back of the tongue and molars.

"Oh, that be jiggered for a tale!" line said: "she's all right."

"I know her better than you, you see. She's quite changed— since you've come. Looks to me as if she's having a touch of the blues, or something."

"Poor thing! She wants looking after, don't she?" Annie laughed, too: but less brutally, more uneasily. Walter said: "But she oughtn't to have the blues, if she's giving her heart to the Lord!

People seem to think a Christian must be this and that. A Christian, if it comes to that, ought to be the jolliest fellow going!"

This was on a Thursday, the night of the Church Lane prayer−meeting, and Walter had only time to rush in at No. 13, wash his face, snatch his Bible, and be off. Rachel, for her part, must verily now have been badly bitten with the rabies of love, or she would have felt that to follow to−night, for the third time lately, could not fail to incur remark. But this consideration never even entered a mind now completely blinded and entranced by the personality of Walter.

Through the day her work about the house had been rushed forward with this very object, and at the moment when he banged the door after him she was before her glass, dressing in blanched, intense and trembling flurry, and casting as she bent to give the last touches to her fringe, a look of bitterest hate at the projection of her lip above the teeth.

This night, for the first time, she waited in the chapel till the end of the service, and walked slowly homeward on the way which she knew that Walter would take; and he came striding presently, that morocco Bible in his

hand, nearly every passage in which was neatly under−ruled in black and red inks.

"What, is that you?" he said, taking into his a hand cold with sweat.

"It is," she answered, in a hard, formal tone.

"You don't mean to say you've been to the meeting?"

"I do."

"Why, where were my eyes? I didn't see you."

"It isn't likely that you would want to, Mr. Teeger."

"Go on—drop that! What do you take me for? I'm only too glad! And I tell you what it is, Miss Rachel, I say to you as the Lord Jesus said to the young man: 'Thou art not far from the kingdom of heaven.' "

She was in it!—near him, alone, in a darkling square, yet suffering, too, in the flames of a passion such as perhaps consumes only the strongest natures.

She caught for support at his unoffered arm; and when he bent his steps straight homeward, she said trembling violently: "I don't wish to go home as yet. I wish to have a little walk. Do you mind, Mr. Teeger?"

"Mind, no. Come along, then," and they went walking among an intricacy of streets and squares, he talking of "the Work," and of common subjects. After half an hour, she was saying:

"I often wish I was a man. A man can say and do what he likes; but with a girl it's different.

There's you, now, Mr. Teeger, always out and about, having people listening to you, and that. I often wish I was only a man."

"Oh, well, it all depends how you look at it," he said. "And, look here, you may as well call me Walter and be done."

"Oh, I shouldn't think of that," she replied. "Not till—"

Her hand trembled on his arm.

"Well, out with it, why don't you?"

"Till—till we know something more definite about you— and Annie."

He chuckled slushily, she now leading him fleetly round and round a square.

"Ah, you girls again!" he cried, "been blabbing again like all the girls! It takes a bright man to hide much from them, don't it?"

"But there isn't much to hide in this case, as far as I can see—is there?"

Always Walter laughed, straining deep in the throat. He said: "Oh, come—that would be telling, wouldn't it?"

After a minute's stillness, this treacherous phrase came from Rachel: "Annie doesn't care for anyone, Mr. Teeger."

"Oh, come—that's rather a tall order, any one. She's all right."

"But she doesn't. Of course, most girls are silly, and that, and like to get married—"

"Well, that's only nature, ain't it?"

This was a joke; and downward the laugh strained in his throat, like struggling phlegm.

"Yes, but they don't understand what love is," said Rachel.

"They haven't an idea. They like to be married women, and have a husband, and that. But they don't know what love is— believe me! The men don't either.".How she trembled!—her body, her dying voice—she pressing heavily upon him, while the moon triumphed now through cloud glaring a moment white on the lunacy of her ghostly face.

"Well, I don't know—I think I understand, lass, what it is," he said.

"You don't, Mr. Teeger!"

"How's that, then?"

"Because, when it takes you, it makes you—"

"Well, let's have it. You seem to know all about it."

Now Rachel commenced to tell him what "it" was—in frenzied definitions, and a power of expression strange for her. It was a lunacy, its name was Legion, it was possession by the furies; it was a spasm in the throat, and a sickness of the limbs, and a yearning of the eye−whites, and a fire in the marrow; it was catalepsy, trance, apocalypse; it was high as the galaxy, it was addicted to the gutter; it was Vesuvius, borealis, the sunset; it was the rainbow in a cesspool, St. John plus Heliogabalus, Beatrice plus Messalina; it was a transfiguration, and a leprosy, and a metempsychosis, and a neurosis; it was the dance of the mænads, and the bite of the tarantula, and baptism

in a sun: out poured the wild definition in simple words, but with the strife of one fighting for life. And she had not half done when he understood her fully; and he had no sooner understood her, than he was subdued, and succumbed.

"You don't mean to say—" he faltered.

"Ah, Mr. Teeger," she answered, "there's none so blind as those who will not see."

His arm stole round her shuddering body.

Everyone is said to have his failing; and this man, Walter, in no respect a man of strong mind, was certainly on his amatory side, most sudden, promiscuous, and infirm. And this tendency was, if anything, heightened by the quite sincere strain of his mind in the direction of "spiritual things": for, under sudden temptation, back rushed his being, with the greater rigour, into its natural channel. On the whole, had he not been a Puritan, he would have been a Don Juan.

In an instant Rachel's weight was hanging upon his neck, he kissing her with passion.

After this she said to him: "But you are only doing this out of pity, Walter. Tell the truth, you are in love with Annie?"

He, like Peter, tumbled at once into a fib. "That's what you say!"

"You are," she insisted, filled with the bliss of the fib. "Bah! I'm not. Never was. You are the girl for me. When they went home, they entered the house at different times, she first, he waiting twenty minutes in the street.

The house was small, so the sisters slept together in the second−floor front room; Walter in the second−floor back; Mrs. Evans in the first−floor back, the first−floor front being "the drawing−room."

The girls, therefore, generally went to bed together: and that night, as they undressed, there was a row.

First, a long silence. Then Rachel, to say something, pointed to some new gloves of Annie's, asking: "How much did you give for those?"

"Money and kind words," replied Annie.

This was the beginning.

"Well, there's no need to be rude about it," said Rachel. She was happy, in paradise, despised Annie that night.

"Still," said Annie, after a silence of ten minutes before the glass, "still, I should never run after a man like that. I'd die first."

"I haven't the least idea what you're talking about," replied Rachel.

"You have. I should be ashamed of myself, if I were you."

"Talk away. You're a little fool."

"It's you. Throwing yourself at the head of a man who doesn't care for you. What can you call yourself?"

Rachel laughed—happily, yet dangerously.

"Don't bother yourself my girl," she said.

"Think of going out every night to meet a man in that way: look here, it's too disgusting of you, girl!"

"Is it?"

"You can't deny that you were with Mr. Teeger to−night?"

"That I wasn't."

"It's false! Anyone can see it by the joy in your face."

"Well, suppose I was, what about it?"

"But a woman should be decent, I think; a woman should be able to command her feelings, and not expose herself like that. Believe me, it gives me the creeps all over to think of."

"Never mind, don't be jealous, my girl."

The gentle Annie flamed!

"Jealous! of you!"

"There isn't any need, you know—not yet."

"But I'm not! There never will be need! Do you take Mr. Teeger for a raving lunatic? I should go and have some false teeth put in first if I were you!"

Thus did Annie drop to the rock−bed of vulgarity; but she knew it to be necessary in order to touch Rachel, as with a white−hot wire, on her very nerve of anguish, and, in fact, at these words Rachel's face resembled white iron, while she cried out, "Never mind my teeth! It isn't the teeth a man−looks at! A man knows a finely built woman when he sees her—not like a little dumpy podge!"

"Thank you. You are very polite," replied Annie, browbeaten by an intensity fiercer than her own. "But still, it's nonsense, Rachel, to talk of my being jealous of you. I knew Mr. Teeger six months before you. And you won't know him much longer either, for I don't want to have mother disgraced here, and this is no fit place for him to lodge in. I can easily make him leave it soon—"

At this thing Rachel flew, with minatory palm over Annie's cheek, ready to strike. "You dare do anything to make him go away! I'll tear your little—"

Annie winked, flinched, uttered a sob, no more fight left in her.

So for two weeks the situation lasted. Only, after that night, so intense grew the bitterness between the sisters, that Annie moved down to the first−floor back, sleeping now with Mrs.

Evans who dimly wondered. As for Walter, meanwhile, his heart was divided within him. He loved Annie; he was fascinated and mesmerised by Rachel. In another age and country he would have married both. Every day he came to a different resolve, not knowing what to do. One thing was evident—a wedding−ring would be necessary, and he purchased one, uncertain for which of the girls.

"Look here, lass," he said to Annie in the train, coming home, "let us put a stop to this. The boss doesn't seem to be in a hurry about that rise of screw, so suppose we get spliced, and be done?"

"Privately?"

"Rather. Your ma and sister mustn't know,—not just yet a while."

"And you will still keep on living at the house?"

"Well, of course, for the time being."

She looked up into his face and smiled. It was settled. But two nights afterwards he met Rachel on his way home from prayer−meeting; at first was honest and distant; but then committed the incredible weakness of going with her for a walk among the squares, and ended by winning from her an easily granted promise of marriage, on the same terms as those arranged within Annie.

When, the next day at lunch−time, he put his foot on the threshold of the Registrar's office to give notice, he was still in a state of agonized indecision as to the name which he should couple with his own.

When the official said, "Now the name of the other party?" Walter hesitated, shuffled with his feet, then answered:

"Rachel Evans."

Not till he was again in the street did he remember that Rachel was the name of both the girls, and that liberty of choice between them still remained to him.

Now, from the day of "notice" to the day of wedlock, an interval of twenty−one clear days must by law, elapse, and Walter, though weak enough to inform both the sisters of the step he had taken, was careful to give them only a vague idea of the date fixed. His once clear conscience, meanwhile, was grievously troubled, his feet in a net; he feared to speak to God; and went drifting like flotsam on the river of chance.

And chance alone it was which at last cast him upon the land. The fifth day before the marriage was a Bank Holiday, and he had arranged with Rachel to go out with her that day to Hyde Park, she to wait for him at an arranged spot at two o'clock. At two, then, at a street−corner, stood Rachel waiting, twirling her parasol, walking a little, returning. Walter, however, did not appear, and what could have happened was beyond her divination. Had he misunderstood or missed her? Though incredible, it was the only thing to think. To Hyde Park, at any rate, she went alone, feeling desolate and ennuyée, in the vague hope of there meeting him.

What had happened was this: Walter had been half−way toward the rendezvous with Rachel, when he was met in the street by Annie, who had gone to spend the day with a married friend at Stroud Green, but had returned, owing to the husband's illness. Seeing Walter, her face lit up with smiles.

"Harry's down with the influenza," she said, "so I couldn't stay and bore poor Ethel. Where are you going?"

For the first time since his "conversion" twelve years before, Walter, with a high flush, now consciously lied.

"Only to the schoolroom," he said, "to hunt for something."

"Well, I am open to be taken out, if any kind friend will be so kind," she said fondly.

Now he had that morning vowed to himself to wed Rachel; and by this vow he now again vowed to be bound. All the more reason why, for the last time, he should "take out" Annie.

"Come along, then, old girl," he gaily said: "where shall we go?"

"Let us go to Hyde Park," said Annie. And to Hyde Park they went, Walter, ever and anon, stabbed by the

bitter memory of waiting Rachel.

At five o'clock the two were walking along the north bank of the Serpentine westward toward a two−arched bridge, which is also pierced by a third narrow arch over the bank: to this narrow arch, since it was drizzling, they were making for shelter, when Rachel, a person of the keenest vision, sighted them from the south bank. She was frantic at once. Annie, who was supposed to be at Stroud Green! What treachery! This, then, was why . . . She ran panting along the bank, toward the bridge, then over it, northward, and now heard the two under the arch, who stood there talking—of the wedding. Unfortunately, just here is a block of masonry, which prevented Rachel from leaning directly over the arch to listen. Yet the necessity to hear was absolute: so she ran back clear of the masonry, and bent far over the parapet, outwards and sideways toward the arch, straining neck, body, ears, and anyone looking into those staring eyes then would have comprehended the doctrine of the Ferine Soul. But she was at a disadvantage, heard only murmurs, and—was that a kiss? Further and further forth she strained. And now suddenly, within a cry, she is in the water, where it is shallow near the bank. In the fall her head struck upon a stone in the mud.

For three days she screamed continuously the name of Walter, filling the street with it, calling him hers only. On the third night, in the midst of a frightful crisis of cries, she suddenly died.

"Oh, Rachel, don't say you are dead!" cried Annie over her.

The death occurred two days before the marriage−day, and on the next, Walter, well wounded, said to Annie: "This knocks our little affair on the head, of course."

Annie was silent. Then, with a pout, she said: "I don't see why. After all, it was her own fault, entirely. Why should we suffer?"

For the feud between the sisters had become cruel as death; and it outlasted death: Annie, on the subject of Rachel and Walter, being no longer a gentle girl, but marble, without respect or pity.

And so, in spite of the trepidations and hesitancy of Walter, the marriage took place, even while Rachel lay stretched on the bed in the second−floor front of No. 13.

The ceremony did not, however transpire without hitch and omen. It was necessary, first of all, for Walter to forewarn Annie that he had given notice of her to the Registrar by her second name of "Rachel"—a mad−looking proceeding that was almost the cause of a rupture which nothing but Walter's most ardent pleadings could steer him clear of. At any rate it was to "Rachel," and not to "Annie" that he was, as a matter of fact, after all married.

After the ceremony, performed in their lunch−time, they returned to business together in Little Britain.

At ten o'clock the same night, as he was going up to bed, she ran after him, and in the passage there was a long, furtive kiss—their last on earth.

"Twelve o'clock?" he whispered intensely.

She held up her forefinger. "One!"

"Oh, say twelve!"

She did not answer, but drew her palm playfully, across his cheek, meaning consent, for Mrs.

Evans was an inveterately heavy sleeper. He went up. And, careful to leave his door a little ajar, he extinguished his candle, and went to bed. In the apartment nearby lay stark in the dark—with learned, eternal eyelids and drowsy brow—the dead.

Walter could not but think of this presence close at hand. "Well, poor girl!" he sighed. "Poor Rachel! Well, well. His way is in the sea, after all, and His path in the Great Deep, and His footsteps are not known." Then he thought of Annie—the little wife! But instead of Annie, there was Rachel. The two women fought vehemently for his thought—and ever the dead was stronger than the living. . . . Instead of Annie there was Rachel—and again Rachel.

At last he could hear twelve strike from a steeple, and sat up in bed, listening eagerly for the door to open, or a footfall on the floor.

A little American clock ticked in the room; and in the flue of the chimney was a sough and chaunt just audible.

Suddenly she was intensely with him, filling the chamber— from nowhere. He had heard no footstep, no opening of the door: yet certainly, she was with him now, all suddenly, close to him, over him, talking breathlessly to him.

His first sensation was a shuddering which strongly shook him from head to foot, like the shuddering of

Russian cold. She held him down by the shoulders; was stretched at length on the bed, over him; and the room seemed full of a rustling and rushing, very strange, like starched muslins rushing out in stormy agitation. She was speaking, too, to him in breathless haste, whimpering a secret gibberish which whimpered like a pup for passion—about love and its definition, and about the soul, and the worm, and Eternity, and the passion of death, and the nuptials of the tomb, and the lust and hollowness of the void. And he, too, was speaking, whispering through his pattering teeth, saying: "Sh−h−h, Rachel—Annie, I mean—sh−h−h, my girl—your ma will hear! Rachel, don't—sh−h−h, now!" But even while he kept up this "sh−h−h dear—sh−h−h, now," he was conscious of the invasion of a strange rage, of such a strength as if energy was being vehemently pumped into him from some behemoth omnipotence. The form above him he could hardly discern, the room was so dark, but he felt that her garment was flowing forth from her neck in a continuous flutter, with the rustling of the starch of a thousand shrouds, like the outflow of a pennant in wind; and the quivering gauze seemed now to swell and fill the chamber, and now to sink again to the size of woman. And ever the rhapsody of love and death went on, mixed with the chattered "Sh−h−h, Rachel—Annie, I mean," of Walter; till, suddenly, he was involved in an embrace so horrible, felt himself encompassed by a might so intolerable, that his soul fainted within him. He sank back; thought span and failed in darkness beneath the spell of that lullaby; he muttered, "Receive my spirit. . . ."

After two days Walter, still unconscious, died. His disfigured body they placed in a grave not far from Rachel's.