

The Reconciliation

H. G. Wells

Temple had scarcely been with Findlay five minutes before he felt his old resentments, and the memory of that unforgettable wrong growing vivid again. But with the infatuation of his good resolution still upon him, he maintained the air of sham reconciliation that Findlay had welcomed so eagerly. They talked of this and that, carefully avoiding the matter of separation. Temple at first spoke chiefly of his travels. He stood between the cabinet of minerals and the fireplace, his whisky on the mantel-board, while Findlay sat with his chair pushed back from his writing-desk, on which were scattered the dozen little skulls of hedgehogs and shrew mice upon which he had been working.

Temple's eye fell upon them, and abruptly brought his mind round from the topic of West Africa. "And you," said Temple. "While I have been wandering I suppose you have been going on steadily."

"Drumming along," said Findlay.

"To the Royal Society and fame and all the things we used to dream about—how long is it?"

"Five years—since our student days."

Temple glanced round the room, and his eye rested for a moment on a round greyish-drab object that lay in a corner near the door. "The same fat books and folios, only more of them, the same smell of old bones, and dissection—is it the same one—? In the window. Fame is your mistress?"

"Fame," said Findlay. "But it's hardly fame. The herd outside say, 'Eminence in comparative anatomy.'"

"Eminence in comparative anatomy. No marrying—no avarice."

"None," said Findlay, glancing askance at him.

"I suppose it's the happiest way of living. But it wouldn't be the thing for me. Excitement—but, I say—!" his eye had fallen again on that fungoid shape of drabbish-grey—, "there's a limit to scientific inhumanity. You really mustn't keep your door open with a human brainpan."

He went across the room as he spoke and picked the thing up. "Brainpan!" said Findlay. "Oh, that! Man alive, that's not a brainpan. Where's your science?"

“No. I see it’s not,” said Temple, carrying the object in his hand as he came back to his former position and scrutinising it curiously. “But what the devil is it?”

“Don’t you know?” said Findlay.

The thing was about thrice the size of a man’s hand, like a rough watch-pocket of thick bone.

Findlay laughed almost naturally. “You have a bad memory—it’s a whale’s ear-bone.”

“Of course,” said Temple, his appearance of interest vanishing. “The bulla of a whale. I’ve forgotten a lot of these things.”

He half turned, and put the thing on top of the cabinet beside Findlay’s dumb-bells.

“If you are serious in your music-hall proposal,” he said, reverting to a jovial suggestion of Findlay’s, “I am at your service. I’m afraid—I may find myself a little old for that sort of thing—I haven’t tried one for ages.”

“But we are meeting to commemorate youth,” said Findlay.

“And bury our early manhood,” said Temple. “Well, well—yes, let us go to the music-hall, by all means, if you desire it. It is trivial—and appropriate. We want no tragic issues.”

When the men returned to Findlay’s study the little clock in the dimness on the mantel-shelf was pointing to half-past one. After the departure the little brown room, with its books and bones, was undisturbed, save for the two visits Findlay’s attentive servant paid, to see to the fire and to pull down the blinds and draw the curtains. The ticking of the clock was the only sound in the quiet. Now and then the fire flickered and stirred, sending blood-red reflections chasing the shadows across the ceiling, and bringing into ghostly transitory prominence some grotesque grouping of animals’ bones or skulls upon the shelves. At last the stillness was broken by the unlatching and slamming of the heavy street door and the sound of unsteady footsteps approaching along the passage. Then the door opened, and the two men came into the warm firelight.

Temple came in first, his brown face flushed with drink, his coat unbuttoned, his hands deep in his trousers’ pockets. His Christmas resolution had long since dissolved in alcohol. He was a little puzzled to find himself in Findlay’s company. And his fuddled brain insisted upon inopportune reminiscence. He walked straight to the fire and stood before it, an exaggerated black figure, staring down into the red glow. “After all,” he said, “we are fools to quarrel—fools to quarrel about a little thing like that. Damned fools!”

Findlay went to the writing-table and felt about for the matches with quivering hands.

“It wasn’t my doing,” he said.

“It wasn’t your doing,” said Temple. “Nothing ever was your doing. You are always in the right—Findlay the all-right.”

Findlay’s attention was concentrated upon the lamp. His hand was unsteady, and he had some difficulty in turning up the wicks; one got jammed down and the other flared furiously. When at last it was lit and turned up, he came up to Temple. “Take your coat off, old man, and have some more whisky,” he said. “That was a ripping little girl in the skirt dance.”

“Fools to quarrel,” said Temple slowly, and then woke up to Findlay’s words. “Heigh?”

“Take off your coat and sit down,” said Findlay, moving up the little metal table and producing cigars and a siphon and whisky. “That lamp gives an infernally bad light, but it is all I have. Something wrong with the oil. Did you notice the dodge of that stone-smashing trick?”

Temple remained erect and gloomy, staring into the fire. “Fools to quarrel,” he said. Findlay was now half drunk, and his finesse began to leave him. Temple had been drinking heavily, and was now in a curious rambling stage. And Findlay’s one idea now was to close this curious reunion.

“There’s no woman worth a man’s friendship,” said Temple abruptly.

He sat down in an easy chair, poured out and drank a dose of whisky and lithia. The idea of friendship took possession of him, and he became reminiscent of student days and student adventures. For some time it was, “Do you remember” this, and “Do you remember” that. And Findlay grew cheerful again.

“They were glorious times,” said Findlay, pouring whisky into Temple’s glass.

Then Temple startled him by abruptly reverting to that bitter quarrel. “No woman in the world,” he said. “Curse them!”

He began to laugh stupidly. “After all,” he said, “in the end.”

“Oh, damn!” said Findlay.

“All very well for you to swear,” said Temple, “but you forget about me. ’Tain’t your place to swear. If only you’d left things alone—”

“I thought the password was forget,” said Findlay.

Temple stared into the fire for a space. “Forget,” he said, and then with a curious return to a clarity of speech, “Findlay, I’m getting drunk.”

“Nonsense, man, take some more.”

Temple rose out of his chair with a look of one awakening. “There’s no reason why I should get drunk, because—”

“Drink,” said Findlay, “and forget it.”

“Faugh! I want to stick my head in water. I want to think. What the deuce am I doing here, with you of all people?”

“Nonsense! Talk and forget it, if you won’t drink. Do you remember old Jason and the boxing-gloves? I wonder whether you could put up your fives now.”

Temple stood with his back to the fire, his brain spinning with drink, and the old hatred of Findlay came back in flood. He sought in his mind for some offensive thing to say, and his face grew dark. Findlay saw that a crisis was upon him and he cursed under his breath. His air of conviviality, his pose of hearty comforter, grew more and more difficult. But what else was there to do?

“Old Jason—full of science and as slow as an elephant—! But he made boxers of us. Do you remember our little set-to—at that place in Gower Street?”

To show his innocent liveliness, his freedom from preoccupation, Findlay pushed his chair aside, and stepped out into the middle of the room. There he began to pose in imitation of Jason, and to give a colourable travesty of the old prize-fighter’s instructions. He picked up his boxing-gloves from the shelf in the recess, and slipped them on. Temple, lowering there on the brink of an explosion, was almost too much for his nerves. He felt his display of high spirits was a mistake, but he must go through with it now.

“Don’t stand glooming there, man. You’re in just that state when the world looks black as ink. Drink yourself merry again. There’s no woman in the world worth a man’s friendship—that’s agreed upon. Come and have a bout with these gloves of mine—four-ounce gloves. There’s nothing sets the blood and spirits stirring like that.”

“All right,” said Temple, quite mechanically. And then, waking up to what he was doing, “Where are the other gloves?”

“Over there in the corner. On the top of the mineral cabinet. By Jove! Temple, this is like old times!”

Temple, quivering strangely, went to the corner. He meant to thrash Findlay, and knew that in spite of his lighter weight he would do it. Yet it seemed puerile and inadequate to the pitch of absurdity, for the wrong Findlay had done him was great. And putting his hand on something pale in the shadow, he touched the bulla of the whale. The temptation was like a lightning flash. He slipped one glove on his left hand, and thrust the fingers of his right into the cavity of the bulla. It took all his fingers, and covered his knuckles and the back of his hand. And it was so oddly like a thumbless boxing glove! Just the very shape of the padded part. His spirits rose abruptly at the sudden prospect of a savage joke—how savage it would be, he did not know. Meanwhile Findlay, with a nervous alacrity, moved the lamp into the corner behind the armchair, and thrust his writing-desk into the window bay.

“Come on,” said Findlay, behind him, and abruptly he turned.

Findlay looked straight into his eyes, on guard, his hands half open. He did not see the strange substitute for a glove that covered Temple’s right hand. Both men were gone so far towards drunkenness that their power of observation was obscured. For a moment they stood squaring at one another, the host smiling, and his guest smiling also, but with his teeth set; two dark figures swaying in the firelight and the dim lamplight. Then Findlay struck at his opponent’s face with his left hand. As he did so Temple ducked slightly to the left, and struck savagely over Findlay’s shoulder at his temple with the bone-covered fist. The blow was given with such tremendous force that it sent Findlay reeling sideways, half stunned, and overcome with astonishment. The thing struck his ear, and the side of his face went white at the blow. He struggled to keep his footing, and as he did so Temple’s gloved left hand took him in the chest and sent him spinning to the foot of the cigar cabinet.

Findlay’s eyes were wide open with astonishment. Temple was a lighter man by a stone or more than himself, and he did not understand how he had been felled. He was not stunned, although he was so dulled by the blow as not to notice the blood running down his cheek from his ear. He laughed insincerely, and almost pulling the cigar cabinet over, scrambled to his feet, made as if he would speak, and put up his hand instinctively as Temple struck out at him again, a feint with the left hand. Findlay was an expert boxer, and anticipating another right-hand blow over the ear, struck sharply at once with his own left hand in Temple’s face, throwing his full weight into the blow, and dodging Temple’s reply.

Temple’s upper lip was cut against his teeth, and the taste of blood and the sight of it trickling down Findlay’s cheek destroyed the last vestiges of restraint that drink had left

him, stripped of all that education had ever done for him. There remained now only the savage man-animal, the creature that thirsts for blood. With a half-bestial cry, he flung himself upon Findlay as he jumped back, and with a sudden sweep of his right arm cut down the defence, breaking Findlay's arm just above the wrist, and following with three rapid blows of the bulla upon the face. Findlay gave an inarticulate cry of astonishment, countered weakly once, and then went down like a felled ox. As he fell, Temple fell upon the top of him. There was a smash as the lamp went down.

The lamp was extinguished as it fell, and left the room red and black. Findlay struck heavily at Temple's ribs, and Temple, with his left elbow at Findlay's neck, swung up his right arm and struck down a sledge-hammer blow upon the face, and again and yet again, until the body beneath his knees had ceased to writhe.

Then suddenly his frenzy left him at the voice of a woman shrieking so that it filled the room. He looked up and crouched motionless as he heard and saw the study door closing and heard the patter of feet retreating in panic. Then he looked down and saw the thing that had once been the face of Findlay. For an awful minute he remained kneeling agape.

Then he staggered to his feet and stood over Findlay's body in the glow of the dying fire, like a man awakening from a nightmare. Suddenly he perceived the bulla on his hand, covered with blood and hair, and began to understand what had happened. In a sudden horror he flung the diabolical thing from him. It struck the floor near the cigar cabinet, rolled for a yard or so on its edge, and came to rest in almost the position it had occupied when he had first set eyes on it. To Temple's excited imagination it seemed to be lying at exactly the same spot, the sole and sufficient cause of Findlay's death and his own.

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