THE DIABOLICAL CIRCLE

COTTON

But you must understand that marriage, my daughter, is a most reverend and serious matter which should be approached in a manner fittingly considerate of its grave responsibility.

BETTY

Truly reverend and most serious, father,

but I like not so much of the grave about it.

COTTON

I fear thou lookest upon the matter too lightly. It is not seemly to treat such a momentous occasion thus flippantly.

BETTY

Nay, father, why consider it at all? Marriage is yet a great way off. Mayhap I shall never leave thee.

COTTON

Thou little thinkest that I may be suddenly called on to leave thee. The Good Word cautions us to boast not ourselves of the morrow, for we know not what a day may bring forth.

(She drops her knitting.)

BETTY

Father, thou art not feeling well. Perhaps——

COTTON

Nay, child, be not alarmed. 'Tis but a most necessary lesson to be learned and laid up in the heart. I will not always be with thee and I would like to be comfortably assured of thy future welfare before I go.

(She picks her knitting up again.)

BETTY

Be comfortably assured, then, I prithee; I have no fears.

(He brings his arm down forcibly on the arm of the chair.)

COTTON

Aye! There it is. Thou hast no fears. Would that thou had'st some!

(He looks up at the portrait.)

Had thy prudent and virtuous mother only lived to point the way, I might be spared this anxiety; but, beset by diverse difficulties in establishing the kingdom of God in this country, and sorely harassed by many hardships and by evil men, I fear me I have not propounded to thee much that I ought.

BETTY

In what then is mine education lacking? Have I not all that is fitting and proper for a maiden to know?

COTTON

(perplexed)

I know not. I have done my best, but thou hast not the proper attitude of mind befitting a maiden about to enter the married estate.

BETTY

(in protest)

Nay, but I am not about to enter the married estate.

COTTON

It is time.

BETTY

(pleading mockingly)

Entreat me not to leave thee, father, nor forsake thee; for whither thou goest I will go, and whither——

COTTON

(interrupting, stern)

Betty! It ill befitteth a daughter of mine to quote the Scriptures with such seeming irreverence—I would not be parted from thee, yet I would that thou wert promised to some godly and upright soul that would guide thee yet more surely in the paths of righteousness. There be many such.

BETTY

Yea, too many.

COTTON

What meanest thou?

BETTY

One were one too many when I would have none.

COTTON

(shaking his head)

Ah. Betty, Betty! When wilt thou be serious? There is a goodly youth among the friends surrounding thee whom I have often marked, both on account of his godly demeanor and simple wisdom.

BETTY

(nodding) Yea, simple.

COTTON

I speak of Adonijah Wigglesworth, a most estimable young gentleman, an acquaintance whom thou would'st do well to cultivate.

BETTY

Yea, cultivate.

COTTON

What thinkest thou?

BETTY

A sod too dense for any ploughshare. My wit would break in the turning.

COTTON

His is a strong nature, born to drive and not be driven. There is not such another, nay, not in the whole of Boston.

BETTY

Nay. I have lately heard there be many such!

COTTON

(testy)

Mayhap thou wouldst name a few.

(She holds up her left hand with fingers outspread.)

BETTY

(musing) Aye, that I can.

(She checks off one on the little finger.) There be Marcus Ainslee——

COTTON

A goodly youth that hath an eye for books.

BETTY

One eye, sayest thou? Nay, four; and since I am neither morocco bound nor edged with gilt, let us consign him to the shelf wherein he findeth fullest compensation.

COTTON

How now? A man of action, then, should appeal to thy brash tastes. What sayest thou to Jeremiah Wadsworth?

BETTY

Too brash and rash for me

(She checks off that candidate on the next finger.)

and I'll have none of him. There's Percy Wayne.

COTTON

Of the bluest blood in Boston.

BETTY

Yet that be not everything—

(She checks off another finger.) And Jonas Appleby——

COTTON

He hath an eye to worldly goods——

BETTY

(quick)

Especially the larder. To marry him would be an everlasting round between the tankard and the kettle.

(She checks him off.)

Nay, let me look yet farther—James Endicott. (And again.)

COTTON

Aye, there might be a lad for thee; birth, breeding, a well-favored countenance, and most agreeable.

BETTY

Yea, most agreeable—unto himself. 'Twere a pity to disturb such unanimity. Therefore, let us pass on. Take Charles Manning, an you please——

COTTON

It pleaseth me not! I know the ilk; his father before him a devoted servant of the devil and King Charles. With others of his kind he hath brought dissension among the young men of Harvard, many of whom are dedicated to the service of the Lord, with

his wicked apparel and ungodly fashion of wearing long hair after the manner of Russians and barbarous Indians. Many there be with him brought up in such pride as doth in no ways become the service of the Lord. The devil himself hath laid hold on our young men, so that they do evaporate senseless, useless, noisy impertinency wherever they may be; and now it has e'en got out in the pulpits of the land, to the great grief and fear of many godly hearts.

(He starts to his feet and paces the floor. She rises.)

BETTY

But Charles——

COTTON

(interrupting)

Mention not that scapegrace in my hearing.

BETTY

(persistent)

But, father, truly thou knowest not——

(Betty retreats to a safe distance, as if in reflex. She begins to peer out of the window.)

COTTON

(almost savage)

Name him not. I will not have it. Compared with Adonijah he is a reed shaken in the winds, whereas Adonijah resembleth a tree planted by the river of waters.

BETTY

Converse of the devil and thou wilt behold his horns. Even now he approacheth the knocker.

(The knocker sounds.)

COTTON

(stern)

Betake thyself to thine own chamber with thine unseemly tongue, which so ill befitteth a maid.

ADONIJAH

Good-morrow, reverend sir.

COTTON

Enter, and doubly welcome.

ADONIJAH

I would inquire whether thy daughter Betty is within.

COTTON

We were but speaking of thee as thy knock sounded. Betty will be here presently; she hath but retired for the moment. Remove thy wraps and make thyself in comfort.

(go get your chair bring to him)

And how is it with thee since I have seen thee last?

ADONIJAH

My business prospereth,

(mournful)

but not so finely as it might well do.

(The clock strikes four but is unnoticed by the two men.)

COTTON

Thou hast suffered some great loss?

ADONIJAH

But yes—and no—this matter of lending money hath many and grievous complications, not the least of which is the duplicity of the borrower. I but insist on the thirty pounds to the hundred as my due recompense, and when I demand it they respond not, but let my kindness lie under the clods of ingratitude.

(He straightens up and speaks with conviction.) They shall come before the council. I will have what is mine own.

COTTON

(righteous)

And it is not unbecoming of thee to demand it. I wist not what the present generation is coming to.

ADONIJAH

They have no sense of the value of money. They know not how to demean themselves properly in due proportion to their worldly goods, as the Lord hath prospered them. There be many that have nothing and do hold their heads above us that be worthy of our possessions.

COTTON

The wicked stand in slippery places. It will not always be thus. Judgment shall come upon them.

ADONIJAH

Aye, let them fall. I for one have upheld them too far. They squander their means in riotous living and walk not in the ways of their fathers.

COTTON

There be many such—many such—but thou, my lad, thou art not one of the multitude. As I have often observed to my Betty, thou standest out as a most upright and God-fearing young man.

ADONIJAH

(smug)

That have I ever sought to be.

COTTON

An example that others would do well to imitate.

ADONIJAH

(still smug)

Nay, others value it not. They be envious of my good fortune.

COTTON

A most prudent young man! Nay, be not so over- blushingly timid. Thou'rt too modest.

(Adonijah’s face falls.)

ADONIJAH

But Betty—doth she regard me thus?

COTTON

The ways of a maid are past finding out; but despair not. I think she hath thee much to heart, but, as the perverse heart of woman dictateth, behaveth much to the contrary.

ADONIJAH

(bright) Thou thinkest——

COTTON

(interrupting)

Nay, lad, I am sure of it. Betty was ever a dutiful daughter.

(All unseen, Betty peeks out of the clock with a look of mischeif.)

ADONIJAH

But I mistrust me her heart is elsewhere.

COTTON

Thou referr'st to young Manning without doubt. It can never be. 'Tis but a passing fancy.

ADONIJAH

Nay, but I fear Charles thinketh not so. I have been told in secret

(He leans forward confidentially.)

by one that hath every opportunity to know, that he hath enjoined Goodman Shrewsbury to send for—

(impressed)

a ring!

COTTON

(angry)

A ring, sayest thou?

ADONIJAH

(nodding) Aye, even so.

COTTON

But he hath not signified such intention here to me.

ADONIJAH

Then there are no grounds for his rash presumption?

COTTON

Humph! Grounds! For a ring! Aye, there'll be no diabolical circle here for the devil to daunce in. I will question Betty thereon.

(He rises.)

Do thou remain here and I will send her to thee. Oh, that he should offer daughter of mine a ring!

(Cotton leaves the room.

.

ADONIJAH

(frosty)

Good-afternoon, Sir Charles, mine host is absent.

CHARLES

(as he steps in)

My mission has rather to do with Mistress Betty. Is she in?

(Adonijah closes the hall door, then turns to Charles.

ADONIJAH

(grandiose and haughty)

Mistress Betty is otherwise engaged, I would have thee know.

CHARLES

Engaged?

(He bows.)

Your humble servant, I trust, hath the supreme pleasure of that engagement.

ADONIJAH

(with meaning)

Her father will shortly arrive.

CHARLES

(impatient)

Devil take her father. 'Tis Mistress Betty I would see. Where is she?

Prithee, why so sad?

(The grin becomes a chuckle.)

ADONIJAH

I do discern no cause for such unrighteous merriment.

CHARLES

'Tis none the less for all of that. I take life as I find it, and for that matter so do they all, even thou. The difference be in the finding.

(He whistles. Pause.)

ADONIJAH

(uneasy)

It is time her father did arrive.

CHARLES

Where then hath he been?

ADONIJAH

He but went in search of Betty.

CHARLES

Ah, then we'll wait.

(He whistles, while Adonijah paces about the room, glancing every now and then at the disturbing element of his peace, as if he would send him to kingdom come, if he only could. Pause.)

ADONIJAH

(with tried patience) Waiting may avail thee naught.

CHARLES

And thee? Nevertheless we'll wait.

(He continues to whistle. Adonijah takes another turn or two across the floor and lets out a feigned sigh.)

ADONIJAH

Methinks, her father's quest be fruitless.

CHARLES

(starting up) Ah, then, let us go.

Nay?(Adonijah, visibly relieved, sits down in the chair opposite.)

(amused)

(He sits down and relaxes as well.)

Ah, then, we'll wait.

(He whistles. Adonijah frowns. This did not go the way he predicted.)

ADONIJAH

(troubled)

'Tis certain Mistress Betty be not here.

CHARLES

Nay, if she be not here, then I am neither here nor there. I would wager ten pounds to a farthing she be revealed in time if she but will it. Wilt take me up?

ADONIJAH

It be not seemly so to stake thy fortune on a woman's whim.

CHARLES

(laughing)

Thou'rt right on it. If she will, say I, for if she will she won't, and if she won't she will.

ADONIJAH

False jargon! A woman has no will but e'en her father's as a maid, her husband's later still. (Enter Cotton, who freezes upon

seeing Charles, rallies quickly, and then proceeds.)

COTTON

(stiff)

Good day to you, sir.

(Charles rises then bows.)

CHARLES

And to you, sire.

COTTON

(To Adonijah)

I am deeply grieved to report that Mistress Betty is not to be found.

(Adonijah steals a sly and pompous look of triumph at Charles.)

CHARLES

(mock solemnity)

I prithee present my deep regrets to Mistress Betty. I will call again.

COTTON

God speed thee!

(As Charles exits Cotton places his hand affectionately upon Adonijah's shoulder.) (reassuring)

Come again, my son; Betty may not be afar off. I fain would have her soon persuaded of thy worth. Improve thy time.

ADONIJAH

(beaming)

Good morrow, sir; I will.

(As the door closes behind them Cotton slowly walks toward the fire, where he stands in complete revery. Still absorbed in thought he walks slowly out the door at the right. Betty peeks cautiously out, but hearing footsteps quickly withdraws. Cotton re- enters with hat on. He is talking to himself, reflectively.

COTTON

Where can she be? Mayhap at Neighbor Ainslee's.

(He exits

CHARLES

Blessed relief! Thou art in very truth, then, flesh and blood?

BETTY

And what else should I be, forsooth?

CHARLES

(laughing)

I marked thee for a mummy there entombed. (She pulls her hand away.)

BETTY

What? Darest thou?

CHARLES

A lively mummy now thou art come to, whilst I— (He utters a piteous sigh.)

I waited through the ages!

BETTY

(laughing)

A veritable monument of patient grief.

CHARLES

And Adonijah——

BETTY

Yea, verily, old Father Time but come to life. (Mimicking Adonijah:)

Thy waiting may avail thee naught.

CHARLES

In truth, it may avail me naught; thy father may be back at any time, while I have much to say, sweet Betty——

BETTY

(interrupting)

Nay, sweet Betty call me not.

CHARLES

Dear Betty, then, the dearest——

BETTY

(quick)

Yea, call me dearest mummy, Hottentot, or what you will, just so it be not sweet, like Adonijah. It sickens me beyond expressing.

CHARLES

Then, sweet Betty thou art not, say rather sour Betty, cross Betty, mean Betty, bad Betty, mad Betty, sad Betty.

BETTY

(dimpling, an idea) Nay, glad Betty!

CHARLES

Art then so glad? Wilt tell me why? In sooth, I know not whither to be glad, or sad, or mad. Sometimes I am but one, sometimes I am all three.

BETTY

Wilt thou tell me why?

(He steps closer and grips her left hand.)

CHARLES

Thou wilt not now escape it, for I will tell thee why, and mayhap this will aid me.

(He slips a ring, which he has had concealed in his pocket, on her finger.)

Hath this no meaning for thee?

(Her eyes sparkle with mischief.)

BETTY

Aye, 'tis a diabolical circle for the devil to daunce in!

CHARLES

(astonished)

A what?

BETTY

A diabolical circle for the devil to daunce in—so father saith. Likewise, Adonijah.

CHARLES

(still not getting it)

A diabolical circle—but what!—say it again, Betty.

BETTY

(very slowly)

A diabolical circle for the devil to daunce in. (She points at Charles.)

CHARLES

(Throws back his head and laughs.) May I be the devil!

BETTY

(Shaking her finger at him.) Then daunce!

(They take position, as though for a minuet. The knocker sounds. Betty runs to the window.

Aye, there's Adonijah at the knocker. Into the clock— hie thee—quick, quick!

CHARLES

(with mock reproach)

And would'st thou incarcerate me through the ages? (He turns to the clock.)

O timely sarcophagus!

ADONIJAH

Methought I heard a sound of many feet.

BETTY

(looking down)

Two feet have I; no more, no less.

ADONIJAH

(dry)

Aye, two be quite sufficient.

BETTY

An thou sayest the word, they yet can beat as loud a retreat as an whole regiment.

ADONIJAH

Thou dost my meaning misconstrue.

BETTY

Construe it then, I prithee.

ADONIJAH

I came not here to vex——

BETTY

Then get thee hence.

(He takes a step forward. Betty takes a step back.) But not behind me, Satan.

ADONIJAH

(another step)

And yet thou driv'st me to it.

BETTY

(another step)

Indeed, thou hast a nature born to drive and not be driven.

ADONIJAH

(complimented)

So be it, yet I scarce had hoped that thou would'st notice.

(advancing)

Born to drive, thou sayest, not be driven.

BETTY

(retreating)

Thou hast said it, born to drive. But what to drive I have not said. That knowledge hath my father yet concealed.

ADONIJAH

(eagerly)

Thy father, then, hath told thee——

BETTY

Thou wert born to drive!

(clock stuff)

(solicitous) What aileth thee?

ADONIJAH

(still staring) The time!

(She yawns.)

BETTY

It doth grow late.

ADONIJAH

But not consistently; it changeth.

BETTY

'Twas ever so with time.

ADONIJAH

Of a certainty they moved.

BETTY

Yea, verily, 'tis not uncommon.

ADONIJAH

But backwards!

BETTY

(joyful)

Why, then, my prayers are answered. How often I have prayed them thus to move! Yet hath it never come to pass.

ADONIJAH

Nay, had'st thou seen——

BETTY

Prithee calm thyself. Thou art ill.

(He again, places his arm across the back of the settee and moves closer to Betty.)

ADONIJAH

Sweet Betty!

(Betty looks out with a wry face. Beat.)

Thy indifference in no way blinds me to thy conception of my true value.

There was a time when I despaired—

Again! Did'st mark it? Something doth ail the clock!

BETTY

Yea, truly thou art ill. The clock behaveth much more to the point than thou.

ADONIJAH

As I was on the point of saying—

thy father hath given—

me to understand—

that thou art not averse to mine affections——

ADONIJAH

Now look! Mark the time!

(Cotton enters.)

COTTON

Tarry yet awhile, my son, the time doth not prevent thee.

ADONIJAH

Tarry? Time doth not prevent? Little knowest thou!

Aye, there it is, the diabolical circle. It is a charm. It harms her not, while all about me is askew. Whence came she here?

She neither came nor went, and yet she was not there and now she is. A manly form did enter. Yet hath vanished into thin air. Yea, verily, it was none other than the devil himself in one of his divers forms, of which he hath aplenty. The very clock indulgeth in unseemly pranks. A strange influence hangs over me. I cannot now abide. I must depart from hence. My conscience bids me go.

COTTON

Hold! Thou art mad!

BETTY

Nay, father, he is ill.

ADONIJAH

Aye, if I be mad, thy daughter be to blame. The spell did come upon me. I have seen strange things.

COTTON

What meanest thou?

ADONIJAH

(Pointing at Betty, who regards him wonderingly.) Thy daughter is a witch!

(She runs to Cotton.)

BETTY

Oh, father!

COTTON

(He consoles Betty and thunders at Adonijah.) What? Darest thou to being forth such an accusation?

ADONIJAH

Aye, while I yet have strength to order mine own will. We shall see what we shall see when the fires leap round the stake. All the diabolical circles the devil may invent or his helpmeets acquire will be of small avail when the leaping tongues of flame curl round you, false servant of the devil. I can delay no longer. I will repair to the council at once, and report what I have seen.

CHARLES

Thou goest to the council? Thou lackest evidence. Behold the devil an' thou wilt.

An' thou goest to the council with such a message, the devil will dog thy very footsteps. And match word of thine with word of truth in such a light that thine own words shall imprison thee in the stocks over Sunday.

BETTY

They will not burn me for a witch?

CHARLES

Aye, let them try it an they will

COTTON

Aye—let them!

(Beat. He starts up with a perplexed look.) But how cam'st thou here? Yea, verily, it seemeth to me thou did'st materialize out of thin air.

(He stares down Charles with piercing scrutiny.)

CHARLES

Nay, see through me an thou can'st. Thou wilt find me a most material shadow, the like of which no eye hath ever pierced. 'Twas not out of the air, but out of yonder clock that I materialized.

BETTY

(smart)

Yea, father, I put him there.

(Charles smirks at Betty for stealing his thunder. Cotton goes to the clock and opens it.)

COTTON

Of a truth, the evidence, all told, is here. Thou wert of a certainty in the clock.

And as far as pendulums are concerned,

thou certainly wert no improvement.

CHARLES

Aye, that I'll warrant. And may I never more be called to fulfil such position; the requirements be far too exacting for one of my build and constitution.

COTTON

But what extremity hath induced thee to take up thine abode in such a place?

CHARLES

Why, that came all in the course of events as I take it. When I returned a short time ago, hard upon mine heels came Adonijah; and, being loath either to leave the field or share it, I hid within the clock. Once there, the temptation to help time in covering its course grew strong upon me in the hope that Adonijah, misled by the lateness of the hour, would soon depart. Only I looked not for such a departure. Judge me not too harshly, sire, for I love thy daughter, and if thou wilt give thy consent to our marriage I will do all that becometh a man to deserve such treasure.

COTTON

I like not thy frivolous manner of wearing hair that is not thine own; it becomes thee not. And I strongly mistrust thine attitude toward the more serious things of life.

CHARLES

If my wig standeth between me and my heart's desire, why, I'll have no wig at all.

And as for mine outlook on life, I promise thee that hath but matched the outer trappings and can be doffed as quickly. I am as serious beneath all outward levity as any sober-minded judge and can act accordingly.

COTTON

See to it that thou suit the action to those words. My heart is strangely moved toward thee, yet I would ponder the matter more deeply.

(He turns to Betty, who has been absent-mindedly twirling the curls on the wig.)

And where is thy voice, my daughter? Thou art strangely silent—

(as an afterthought) for the once.

But it is of small wonder, since thou hast had enough excitement for one evening. Methinks that scoundrel, Adonijah, needeth following up. Do thou remain with Betty, Charles, and I will hasten after him.

CHARLES

Nay, thou need'st not trouble thyself regarding Adonijah. He hath much too wholesome a regard for the ducking-stool to cause further mischief.

COTTON

Nevertheless, I will away to the council and make sure.

(He plants his hat on his head and departs.) (Charles turns to Betty—who has carefully placed the wig on the settee-gazing demurely at the floor.)

CHARLES

And now to finish up where we left off. The devil hath led us a merrier dance than we suspected. Thou hast not truly given answer to the question I have asked of thee.

BETTY

What more of an answer would'st thou yet require?

CHARLES

Why, I have yet had none at all.

BETTY

Must tell thee further?

CHARLES

(grave)

Thou must.

BETTY

(mischievous)

Then, put the question once again.

CHARLES

Thou know’st the question, an thou wilt.

BETTY

An' thou know’st the answer.

(Charles takes her in his arms. She holds up her hand so that the ring sparkles.)

Look, Charles—the diabolical circle!