

# THE IRRESISTIBLE OGLE

BY JAMES BRANCH CABELL

*"But after SHERIDAN had risen to a commanding position in the gay life of London, he rather disliked to be known as a playwright or a poet, and preferred to be regarded as a statesman and a man of fashion who 'set the pace' in all pastimes of the opulent and idle. Yet, whatever he really thought of his own writings, and whether or not he did them, as Stevenson used to say, 'just for fun,' the fact remains that he was easily the most distinguished and brilliant dramatist of an age which produced in SHERIDAN'S solemn vagaries one of its most characteristic products."*

THE devotion of Mr. Sheridan to the Dean of Winchester's daughter, Miss Esther Jane Ogle—or "the irresistible Ogle," as she was toasted at the Kit-cat—was now a circumstance to be assumed in the polite world of London. As a result, when the parliamentarian followed her into Scotland, in the spring of 1795, people only shrugged.

"Because it proves that misery loves company," was Mr. Fox's observation at Wattier's, hard upon two in the morning. "Poor Sherry, as an inconsolable widower, must naturally have someone to share his grief. He perfectly comprehends that no one will lament the death of his wife more fervently than her successor."

IT was, oddly enough, at this same moment that Mr. Sheridan returned to his lodgings in Abercromby Place, deep in the reminiscences of a fortunate evening at cards. In consequence, he entered the room so quietly that the young man who was employed in turning over the contents of the top bureau-drawer was taken unprepared.

But in the marauder's nature, as far as resolution went, was little lacking. "Silence!" he ordered, and with the mandate a pistol was leveled upon the representative for the borough of Stafford. "One cry for help, and you

perish like a dog. I warn you that I am a desperate man."

"Now, even at a hazard of discourtesy, I must make bold to question your statement," said Mr. Sheridan, "although, indeed, it is not so much the recklessness as the masculinity which I dare call into dispute."

He continued, in his best parliamentary manner, a happy blending of reproach, omniscience and pardon. "Only two months ago," said Mr. Sheridan, "I was so fortunate as to encounter a lady who, alike through the attractions of her person and the sprightliness of her conversation, convinced me I was on the road to fall in love after the high fashion of a popular romance. I accordingly make her a declaration. I am rejected. I besiege her with the customary artillery of sonnets, bouquets, serenades, bonbons, theater-tickets and threats of suicide. In fine, I contract the habit of proposing to Miss Ogle on every Wednesday; and so strong is my infatuation that I follow her as far into the north as Edinburgh in order to secure my eleventh rejection at half-past ten last evening."

"I fail to understand," remarked the burglar, "how all this prolix account of your amours can possibly concern me."

"You are at least somewhat in-

volved in the deplorable climax," Mr. Sheridan returned. "For behold! at two in the morning I discover the object of my adoration and the daughter of an estimable prelate, most calumniously clad and busily employed in rumpling my supply of cravats. If ever any lover was thrust into a more ambiguous position, madam, historians have touched on his dilemma with marked reticence."

He saw—and he admired—the flush which mounted to his visitor's brow. And then, "I must concede that appearances are against me, Mr. Sheridan," the beautiful intruder said. "And I hasten to protest that my presence in your apartments at this hour is prompted by no unworthy motive. I merely came to steal the famous diamond which you brought from London—the Honor of Eiran."

"Incomparable Esther Jane," ran Mr. Sheridan's answer, "that stone is now part of a brooch which was this afternoon returned to my cousin's, the Earl of Eiran's, hunting-lodge near Melrose. He intends the gem which you are vainly seeking among my haberdashery to be the adornment of his promised bride in the ensuing June. I confess to no overwhelming admiration as concerns this raucous if meritorious young person; and will even concede that the thought of her becoming my kinswoman rouses in me an inevitable distaste, no less attributable to the discord of her features than to the source of her eligibility to disfigure the peerage—that being her father's lucrative transactions in Pork, which I find indigestible in any form."

"A truce to paltering," Miss Ogle cried. "That jewel was stolen from the temple at Moorshedabad, by the Earl of Eiran's grandfather, during the confusion necessarily attendant on the glorious battle of Plassy." She laid down the pistol, and re-

sumed in milder tones: "From an age-long existence as the left eye of Ganesh it was thus converted into the loot of an invader. To restore this diamond to its lawful, although no doubt polygamous and inefficiently-attired, proprietors is at this date impossible. But, oh! what claim have you to its possession?"

"Why, none whatever," said the parliamentarian; "and to contend as much would be the apex of unreason. For this diamond belongs, of course, to my cousin, the Earl of Eiran—"

"As a thief's legacy!" She spoke with signs of irritation.

"Eh, eh, you go too fast! Eiran, to do him justice, is not a graduate in speculation. At worst, he is only the sort of fool one's cousins ordinarily are."

The trousered lady walked to and fro for a while, with the impatience of a caged lioness. "I perceive I must go more deeply into matters," Miss Ogle remarked, and, with that habitual gesture which he fondly recognized, brushed back a straying lock of hair. "In any event," she continued, "you cannot with reason deny that the world's wealth is inequitably distributed?"

"Madam," Mr. Sheridan returned, "as a member of Parliament, I have necessarily made it a rule never to understand political economy. It is as apt as not to prove you are selling your vote to the wrong side of the House, and that hurts one's conscience."

"Ah, that is because you are a man. Men are not practical. None of you has ever dared to insist on his opinion about anything until he had secured the cowardly corroboration of a fact or so to endorse him. It is a pity. Yet, since through no fault of yours your sex is invariably misled by its hallucinations as to the importance of being rational, I will

refrain from logic and statistics. In a word, I simply inform you that I am a member of the League of Philanthropic Larcenists."

"I had not previously heard of this organization," said Mr. Sheridan, and not without suspecting his response to be a masterpiece in the inadequate.

"Our object is the benefit of society at large," Miss Ogle explained; "and our obstacles so far have been, in chief, the fetish of proprietary rights and the ubiquity of the police."

And with that she seated herself and told him of the league's inception by a handful of reflective persons, admirers of Rousseau and converts to his tenets, who were resolved to better the circumstances of the indigent. With amiable ardor Miss Ogle explained how from the petit larcenies of charity-balls and personally solicited subscriptions the league had mounted to an ampler field of depredation; and through what means it now took toll from every form of wealth unrighteously acquired. Divertingly she described her personal experiences in the separation of usurers, thieves, financiers, hereditary noblemen, popular authors, and other social parasites, from the ill-gotten gains of their disreputable vocations. And her account of how, on the preceding Tuesday, she, single-handed, had robbed Sir Alexander McNab—who then enjoyed a fortune and an enviable reputation for philanthropy, thanks to the combination of glucose, vitriol and other chemicals which he prepared under the humorous pretext of manufacturing beer—wrung high encomiums from Mr. Sheridan.

"The proceeds of these endeavors," Miss Ogle added, "are conscientiously devoted to ameliorating the condition of meritorious paupers.

I would be happy to submit to you our annual report. Then you may judge for yourself how many families we have snatched from the depths of poverty and habitual intoxication to the comparative comfort of a vine-embowered cottage."

Mr. Sheridan replied: "I have not ever known of any case where adoration needed an affidavit for foundation. Oh, no, incomparable Esther Jane! I am not in a position to be solaced by the reports of a corresponding secretary. I gave my heart long since; to-night I fling my confidence into the bargain; and am resolved to serve whole-heartedly the cause to which you are devoted. In consequence, I venture to propose my name for membership in the enterprise you advocate and indescribably adorn."

Miss Ogle was all one blush, such was the fervor of his utterance. "But first you must win your spurs, Mr. Sheridan. I confess you are not abhorrent to me," she hurried on, "for you are the most fascinatingly hideous man I have ever seen; and it was always the apprehension that you might look on burglary as an unmaidenly avocation which has compelled me to discourage your addresses. Now all is plain; and should you happen to distinguish yourself in robbery of the criminally opulent, you will have, I believe, no reason to complain of a twelfth refusal. I cannot modestly say more."

He laughed. "It is a bargain. We will agree that I bereave some person of either stolen or unearned property, say, to the value of £10,000—" And with his usual carefulness in such matters, Mr. Sheridan entered the wager in his notebook.

She yielded him her hand in token of assent. And he, depend upon it, kissed that velvet trifle fondly.

"And now," said Mr. Sheridan, "to-morrow we will visit Bemerside

and obtain possession of that crystal which is in train to render me the happiest of men. The task will be an easy one, as Eiran is now in England, and his servants for the most part are my familiars."

"I agree to your proposal," she answered. "But this diamond is my allotted quarry; and any assistance you may render me in procuring it will not, of course, affect in any way our bargain. On this point"—she spoke with a break of laughter—"I am as headstrong as an allegory on the banks of the Nile."

"To quote an author to his face," lamented Mr. Sheridan, "is bribery as gross as it is efficacious. I most unwillingly consent to your exorbitant demands, for you are, as always, the irresistible Ogle."

Miss Ogle bowed her gratitude; and, declining Mr. Sheridan's escort, for fear of arousing gossip by being seen upon the street with him at this late hour, preferred to avoid any appearance of indecorum by climbing down the kitchen roof.

WHEN she had gone, Mr. Sheridan very gallantly attempted a set of verses. But the Muse was not to be wooed to-night, and stayed obstinately coy.

Mr. Sheridan reflected, rather forlornly, that he wrote nothing nowadays. There was, of course, his great comedy, *Affectation*, his masterpiece which he meant to finish at one time or another; yet, at the bottom of his heart, he knew that he would never finish it. But, then, deuce take it! to have written the best comedy, the best farce, and the best burlesque as well, that England had ever known, was a very prodigal wiping-out of every obligation toward posterity. Boys thought a deal about posterity, as he remembered; but a sensible man would bear in mind that all this world's delicacies

—its merry diversions, its venison and old wines, its handsomely-bound books and fiery-hearted jewels and sumptuous clothings, all its lovely things that can be touched and handled, and more especially its ear-tickling applause—were to be won, if ever, from one's contemporaries. And people were generous toward social, rather than literary, talents for the sensible reason that they derived more pleasure from an agreeable companion at dinner than from having a rainy afternoon rendered endurable by some book or another.

So the parliamentarian sensibly went to bed.

MISS OGLE, during this Scottish trip, was accompanied by her father, the venerable Dean of Winchester. The Dean, although in all things worthy of implicit confidence, was not next day informed of the intended expedition, in deference to public opinion, which, as Miss Ogle pointed out, regards a clergyman's participation in a technical felony with disapproval.

Miss Ogle, therefore, radiant in a becoming gown of pink lute-string, left Edinburgh the following morning under cover of a subterfuge, and with Mr. Sheridan as her only escort. He was at pains to adorn this rôle with so many happy touches of courtesy and amiability that their confinement in the postchaise appeared to both of incredible brevity.

When they had reached Melrose another chaise was ordered, to convey them to Bemerside; and pending its forthcoming Mr. Sheridan and Miss Ogle strolled among the famous ruins of Melrose Abbey. The parliamentarian had caused his hair to be exuberantly curled that morning, and figured to advantage in a plum-colored coat and a saffron waistcoat sprigged with forget-me-nots. He chatted entertainingly

concerning the Second Pointed style of architecture; translated many of the epitaphs; and was abundant in interesting information as to Robert Bruce, and Michael Scott, and the rencounter of Chevy Chase.

"Oh, but observe," said Mr. Sheridan, more lately, "our only covering is the dome of heaven. Yet in their time these aisles were populous, and here a score of generations have besought what earth does not afford—now where the banners of crusaders waved the ivy flutters, and there is no incense in this consecrated house except the breath of the wild rose."

"The moral is an old one," she returned. "Mummy is become merchandize, Mizraim cures wounds, and Pharaoh is sold for balsams."

"You are a reader, madam?" he observed, with some surprise; and he continued: "Indeed, my thoughts were on another trail. I was considering that the demolishers of this place—those English armies, those followers of John Knox—were actuated by the highest and most laudable of motives. As a result we find the house of Heaven converted into a dustheap."

"I believe you attempt an apology," she said, indignantly. "Upon my word, I think you would insinuate that philanthropy, when forced to manifest itself through embezzlement, is a less womanly employment than the darning of stockings!"

"Whom the cap fits—" he answered, with a bow. "Indeed, incomparable Esther Jane, I had said nothing whatever touching hosiery; and it was equally remote from my intentions to set up as a milliner."

THEY lunched at Bemerside, where Mr. Sheridan was cordially received by the steward, and a well-chosen repast was placed at their disposal.

"Fergus," Mr. Sheridan observed, as they chatted over their dessert concerning famous gems—in which direction talk had been adroitly steered—"Fergus, since we are on the topic, I would like to show Miss Ogle the Honor of Eiran."

The Honor of Eiran was accordingly produced from a blue velvet case, and was properly admired. Then, when the steward had been dismissed to fetch a rare liqueur, Mr. Sheridan laughed, and tossed and caught the jewel, as though he handled a cricket-ball. It was the size of a pigeon's egg, and was set among eight gems of lesser magnitude; and in transit through the sunlight the trinket flashed and glittered with diabolical beauty. The parliamentarian placed three bits of sugar in the velvet case and handed the gem to his companion.

"The bulk is much the same," he observed; "and whether the carbon be crystallized or no, is the responsibility of stratigraphic geology. Fergus, perhaps, must go to jail. That is unfortunate. But true philanthropy works toward the benefit of the greatest number possible; and this resplendent pebble will purchase you innumerable pounds of tea and a warehouseful of blankets."

"But, Mr. Sheridan," Miss Ogle cried, in horror, "to take this brooch would not be honest!"

"Oh, as to that—" he shrugged.

"—because Lord Eiran purchased all these lesser diamonds, and very possibly paid for them."

Then Mr. Sheridan reflected, stood abashed, and said: "Incomparable Esther Jane, I confess I am only a man. You are entirely right. To purloin any of these little diamonds would be an abominable action, whereas to make off with the only valuable one is simply a stroke of retribution. I will, therefore, attempt to prise 't out with a nutpick."

Three constables came suddenly into the room. "We hae been tauld this missy is a suspectit theiving body," their leader cried. "Esther Jane Ogle, ye maun gae with us i' the law's name. Ou ay, lass, ye ken weel enough wha robbit auld Sir Aleexander McNab, sae dinna ye say naething tae your ain preejudice, lest ye hae tae account for it a'."

Mr. Sheridan rose to the occasion. "My exceedingly good friend, Angus Howden! I am unwilling to concede that yeomen can excel in gentlemanly accomplishments, but it is only charity to suppose all three of you as drunk as any duke that ever honored me with his acquaintance." This he drawled, and appeared magisterially to await an explanation.

"Hout, Mr. Sheridan," commenced the leading representative of justice, "let that flee stick i' the wa'—ye dinna mean tae tell me, sir, that ye are acquaintit wi' this—ou ay, tae pleasure ye, I nicht e'en say wi' this—"

"This lady, probably?" Mr. Sheridan hazarded.

"'Tis an unco thing," the constable declared, "but that wad be the word was a'maist at my tongue's tip."

"Why, undoubtedly," Mr. Sheridan assented. "I rejoice that, being of French extraction, and unconversant with your somewhat cryptic patois, the lady in question is the less likely to have been sickened by your extravagances in the way of misapprehension. I candidly confess such imbecility annoys me. What!" he cried out, "what if I marry! is matrimony to be ranked with arson? And what if my cousin, Eiran, affords me a hiding-place wherein to sneak through our honeymoon after the cowardly fashion of all modern married couples! Am I in consequence compelled to submit to the invasions of an intoxicated constabulary?" His rage was terrific.

"*Voilà la scule devise. Ils me con-*

*naissent, ils ont confiance dans moi. Si, taisez-vous! Si non, vous serez arrêtée et mise dans la prison, comme une caractère suspicieuse!"* Mr. Sheridan exhorted Miss Ogle to this intent with more of earnestness than linguistic perfection; and he rejoiced to see that instantly she caught at her one chance of plausibly accounting for her presence at Bemerside, and of effecting a rescue from this horrid situation.

"But I also spik the English," she sprightly announced. "I am appled myself at to learn its by heart. Certainly you look for a needle in a hay bundle, my gentlemans. I am no stealer of the grand road, but the wife of Mistaire Sheridan, and her presence will say to you the remains."

"You see!" cried Mr. Sheridan, in modest triumph. "In short, I am a bridegroom unwarrantably interrupted in his first *tête-à-tête*. I am responsible for this lady and all her past and its appurtenances; and, in a phrase, for everything except the course of conduct I will undoubtedly pursue should you be visible at the conclusion of the next five minutes."

His emphasis was such that the police withdrew with a concomitant of apologies.

"**A**ND now I claim my bond," said Mr. Sheridan, when they were once again free from intrusion. "For we two are in Scotland, where the common declaration of a man and woman that they are married constitutes a marriage."

"Oh—!" she exclaimed, and stood encrimsoned.

"Indeed, I must confess that the day's work has been a trick throughout. The diamond was pawned years ago. This trinket here is a copy in paste and worth perhaps some seven shillings sixpence. And those fellows were not constables, but just my cousin Eiran and two footmen in dis-

**guise.** Nay, madam, you will learn with experience that to display un-failing candor is not without exception the price of happiness."

"But this, I think, evades our bargain, Mr. Sheridan. For you were committed to pilfer property to the value of £10,000—"

"And to fulfill the obligation I have stolen your hand in marriage. What, madam! do you indeed pretend that any person outside of Bedlam would value you at less? Believe me, your perfections are of far more worth. All persons recognize that save yourself, incomparable Esther Jane; and yet, so patent is the proof of my contention, I dare to leave the verdict to your sense of justice."

Miss Ogle did not speak. Her lashes fell as, with some ceremony, he led her to the long French mirror which was in the breakfast room. "See now!" said Mr. Sheridan. "You, who endanger life and fame in order to provide a mendicant with gruel, tracts and blankets! You, who deny a sop to the one hunger which is vital! Oh, madam, I am tempted glibly to compare your eyes to sapphires, and your hair to thin-spun gold, and the color of your flesh to the arbutus-flower—for that, as you can see, would be within the truth, and it would please most women, and afterward they would not be so obdurate. But you are not like other women," Mr. Sheridan observed, with admirable dexterity. "And I aspire to you, the irresistible Ogle! you, who so great-heartedly befriend the beggar! you, who with such industry contrive alleviation for the discomforts of poverty. Eh, eh! what will you grant to any beggar such as I? Will you deny a sop to the one hunger which is vital?" He spoke with unaccustomed vigor, even in a sort of terror, because he knew that he was speaking with sincerity.

"To the one hunger which is vital!" he repeated. "Ah, where lies the secret which makes one face the dearest in the world, and entrusts to one little hand a life's happiness as a plaything? All Aristotle's learning could not unriddle the mystery, and Samson's thews were impotent to break that spell. Love vanquishes all . . . You would remind me of some previous skirmishings with Venus's unconquerable brat? Nay, madam, to the contrary, the fact that I have loved many other women is my strongest plea for toleration. Were there nothing else, it is indisputable we perform all actions better for having rehearsed them. No, we do not of necessity perform them the more thoughtlessly as well; for I find that with experience a man becomes increasingly difficult to please in affairs of the heart. The woman one loves then is granted that pre-eminence not merely by virtue of having outshone any particular one of her predecessors; oh, no, instead, her qualities have been compared with all the charms of all her fair forerunners and they have endured that stringent testing. The winning of an often-bartered heart is in reality the one conquest which entitles a woman to complacency, for she has received a real compliment; whereas to be selected as the target of a lad's first declaration is a tribute of no more value than a man's opinion upon vintages who has never tasted wine."

He took a turn about the breakfast room, then came near to her. "I love you. Were there any way to parade the circumstance and bedeck it with pleasing adornments of filed phrases, tropes and far-fetched similes, I would not grudge you a deal of verbal pageantry. But three words say all. I love you. There is no act in my past life but appears trivial and strange to me, and to the man who performed it I seem no

more akin than to Mark Anthony or Nebuchadnezzar. I love you. The skies are bluer since you came, the beauty of this world we live in oppresses me with a fearful joy, and in my heart there is always the thought of you and such yearning as I may not word. For I love you."

"You—but you have frightened me." Miss Ogle did not seem so terrified as to make any effort to recede from him; and yet he saw that she was frightened in sober earnest. Her face showed pale, and soft, and glad, and awed, and desirable above all things; and it remained so near him as to engender riotous aspirations. And on a sudden a seizure of trembling had possessed Mr. Sheridan and seemed painstakingly to experiment with every fiber of his body.

"I love you," he said again. You would never have suspected this man could speak, upon occasion, fluently. "I think—I think that Heaven was prodigal when Heaven made you. For to think of you is as if I listened to an exalted music; and to be with you is to understand that all imaginable sorrows are just the figments of a dream which I had very long ago."

She laid one hand on each of his

shoulders, facing him. "Do not let me be too much afraid! I have not ever been afraid before. Oh, everything is in a mist of gold, and I am afraid of you, and of the big universe which I was born into, and I am helpless, and I would have nothing changed! Only, I cannot believe I am worth £10,000, and I do so want to be persuaded I am. It is a great pity," she sighed, "that you who convicted Warren Hastings of stealing such enormous wealth cannot be quite as eloquent to-day as you were in the Oudh speech, and convince me his arraigner has been equally rapacious!"

"I mean to prove as much—with time," said Mr. Sheridan. His breathing was yet perfunctory.

Miss Ogle murmured, "And how long would you require?"

"Why, I intend, with your permission, to devote the remainder of my existence to the task. Eh, I concede that space too brief for any adequate discussion of the topic; but I will try to be concise and practical—"

She laughed. They were content. "Try, then—" Miss Ogle said.

She was able to get no farther in the sentence, for reasons which to particularize would be indiscreet.

