

HIS TWO CONSTITUENCIES.

CHAPTER I.

It was years since we had met. We parted in anger—she in tears. She smacked me—and I (that I should have to admit it) smacked her back.

"You're a nasty, horrid, cruel boy!" she said, sobbing.

The tears brought compunction, but the adjectives prevented avowal.

"Anyway, you're only a girlish girl."

"I'm not!" she responded, stamping her foot. So we parted.

When I came down from Oxford, many years after, it was deemed necessary that I should engage in some useful employment. My dear mother was most emphatic on the matter. I did not attempt to temperize.

"Mater," I said, "I leave the matter entirely in your hands; I have the greatest confidence in your discretion."

She kissed me tenderly, remarking that I had always been a good son.

We have an estate in Blankshire, and are in our little way country magnates. My mother, who is a woman of surprising energy, immediately commenced asking many curious people to her dinner parties. In a short time I was the accepted Conservative candidate, with (I was informed) fair prospects of ousting the Radical member at the next general election.

Politics were therefore my profession. Of course, I have to make speeches, but I am very intelligent, and people have published hand-books.

In the intervals, which were not short, I lived in London happily. London is a pleasant place, and I enjoy it. I went out a great deal, knew many nice girls, and irritated many mothers.

I once overheard a mother talk seriously to her daughter in a conservatory. I was behind an adjacent palm, and could not easily get away. She alluded to me unflatteringly, and wound up:

"He has only a thousand a year, and will never have much more. So you must not encourage Gerald Merivale. Now, mind, Gertrude."

Gertrude wept a little (I am sure of this, because her nose was a little red when we met later), and stopped encouraging me. I did not blame her. She was quite right. I confess I like a girl with robust common sense.

But it is not about Gertrude I am writing. It is of Alice Mansell, the "sbe" alluded to at the commencement.

Little Bobby Durden came to my club, and began to talk excitedly to me about a "stunner."

"You've no idesh," he said.

"It is not kind of you to say so."

"I'm talkin' about the girl. She's just come out, and, by Jove, isn't she a oner?"

"What girl?" I asked.

"Her name's Alice Mansell. My aunt, Lady Ockington, is running her. The daughter of Mansell, the Railway Jonny. They say she's a hundred millions."

I yawned a little. Ecstasies always bore me.

"I know as a fact," I replied, "that the figure you mention is considerably below the mark."

His jaw dropped. "Really!" he said. "O are you at your confounded sarcasm again?"

"Introduce me," I said "and you shall be the best man."

"Look here, let me tell you"—he began.

"You shall have as much wedding cake as you like," I interrupted, soothingly.

"You're a"—

"A regular tuck in."

"I tell you your an ass."

"You presume on your aunt," I said severely. "But you needn't introduce me. I had forgotten for the moment. I know her. She was my playmate I used to hit her. In fact, I think I adopted her. I forget whether as a sister or a daughter. One of the two. She is very fond of me."

"I always did think you conceited, but I'm dashed if ever—"

"Will she be at the Martens' this afternoon?" I asked.

He replied reluctantly in the affirmative.

"If I have time, I'll run in and see her," I said, taking up a newspaper.

"I suppose you'll kiss her," he said scoffingly.

"Certainly."

Bobby retired, uttering inarticulate sounds and red in the face.

CHAPTER II.

I went to the Martens' that afternoon. As I was entering the drawing room I encountered Bobby at the door. He grinned vindictively.

"She's in there," he said, jerking his thumb over his shoulder. "Go and kiss her."

I took no notice of his foolish remarks, or of the laugh from the group of men around him. It is better to ignore vulgarity when you have no repartee.

I crossed the room to speak to Lady Marten. The room was crowded. As I was speaking to her, Lady Ockington arose from her seat and came to her. She was followed

by a girl whom I recognized (though how she had changed and how beautiful she had grown!) as Alice.

While Lady Ockington was saying her adieus I turned to Alice. I saw she recognized me.

"Alice, my dear!" I said. I felt rather than saw Lady Ockington wheel about.

Alice put out her hand and smiled. I took her hand.

"What an immense girl you have grown!" I went on. "You've grown too big to kiss!"

She looked surprised, but I bent forward and kissed her lightly on the cheek.

"Mr. Merivale!" she said, but I thought she did not look offended.

"Oh, you must still call me Jerry," I said hastily. "I suppose you will be leaving school soon?"

Lady Ockington, who had been regarding me as if I were an intrepid frog, interfered. "Miss Mansell has left school some years," she said in an awful tone.

"Oh, she has a governess, I suppose. Well, Alice," I said, "I hope you are a better girl than you used to be."

"Alice, we must go," said Lady Ockington. "Good-bye," I said. I still held her hand.

"I will call some day and take you to the waxworks."

She smiled as she left me and followed Lady Ockington from the room. I was glad she smiled. I should not have acted as I did.

During this incident the stillness in the room was terrible. Conversation began again. I turned to Lady Marten and began to speak of Piner's coming play. But she was laughing convulsively.

"You wicked, dreadful young man," she said. "Mr. Durden told me what you intended to do, but I couldn't have believed you would have dared. Not even you. And Lady Ockington there!"

I protested that Miss Mansell and I were old friends. Nothing could shake her conviction that we had never met before, that I had kissed a girl who was an entire stranger.

This was the general impression, thanks to Bobby's foolish talk.

But I am not so bad as all that.

The next day I called at Lady Ockington's house. I did not expect to be admitted, but I felt it would be only kind to call.

The door was opened by an unintelligent page boy. Lady Ockington was out. Miss Mansell was in. Joy!

On the stairs I encountered the butler, who knew me. He directed a killing glance toward the lad. But it was too late.

Alice was alone in the room. She came to me with the prettiest air of confusion. I took her hand.

"Alice—Miss Mansell," I said, "for the last twenty-four hours my friends have been telling me that I have made a mistake. Did I make a mistake?"

"Mr. Merivale," she said, "for the last twenty-four hours Lady Ockington has been telling me you didn't make a mistake. Did you make a mistake?"

It was all right, she was smiling.

"Alice—Miss Mansell, I cannot tell a lie unnecessarily; it was not a mistake—it was intentional."

She shook her head.

"I don't think it was quite nice of you," she said.

I responded eagerly.

"You are quite right; it was horrid. But I have an explanation."

"Explain," she said, majestically. At the moment we heard a ring.

"It is Lady Ockington!" exclaimed Alice.

"Shall I hide?" I asked.

"We are going to the Pinkertons' to-night" she said, looking out of the window as Lady Ockington entered.

CHAPTER III.

The General Election was on. I had to make four speeches every night, besides canvassing during the day. I should have preferred not to. But I had an agent. He said he was my agent, otherwise I should have thought our positions were reversed.

Among other things he made me go to church on Sundays. It was necessary, he said, to conciliate the church people. We also went to the Methodist chapel to conciliate the Dissenters. The result was we annoyed both.

At the church I recognized a lady with Alice's black hair. She also had Alice's profile. In fact, it turned out to be herself. She was visiting her uncle, Colonel Western, with whom she had lived in her younger days.

I told my agent that our great defect was a want of lady canvassers. He proffered his wife. I accepted her, but said I would call on Colonel Western and see if I couldn't pick up a few more.

"But Colonel Western is opposed to us."

"He is most good natured," I replied. "I am sure he will lend us a few."

My agent sighed. He was a conscientious man, and had scruples as to whether I was a fit person for the House of Commons. "If he were only as sensible as some of his speeches!" he said to my mother once.

Nevertheless, I sent my mother over to Colonel Western's, and she returned in triumph with Alice, who, as it happens, was a radical of the most unbending principles.

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We used to canvass together. The agent's wife came, too. Alice thought this best. The agent expostulated at the absurdity and waste of time involved in three people doing the work of one. We pointed out how much more thoroughly the work was done. When we had all had a turn at the fortunate elector he was not in a condition to refuse his vote. But the agent would not be silenced till Alice got his wife to stop him with a glance. The polling day came. Alice and my mother, the agent and I drove from polling booth to polling booth. Towards eight o'clock the agent came to me dolefully, and said he feared my return was improbable. I was very sorry for the poor man. He had worked so hard. When I told my mother she burst into tears. She must also have been sorry for him. Alice comforted her like the dear, kind girl she is. "It is his own fault," said my mother, when she was comforted; "he is so flippant. I assured her he was most serious minded. "Who?" "The agent." She became sorrowful. Again Alice had to comfort her. To do so she said kind things about me, but my mother would not agree with her. "He has disappointed me. He will not obey me. I have begged and begged him to pay attention to Miss Western of the Castle. We should then have had their influence." She wept again. Alice comforted her. My mother went on. "He will not be serious. If he would only marry some solid, strong-minded girl! But, no he insists on going his own way. Yet I'm his mother." Alice turned her reproachful gaze on me. "I think it is very unkind of you not to marry when your mother tells you to." "But the ladies won't have me." "I don't believe you ever ask them." "To do so would be preposterous." "Take your case, for instance." "My case!" She blushed violently. My mother was startled. "Gerald, I forbid you to talk any more nonsense," she said, rising hastily and leaving the room. We were left alone. There was a silence, broken by Alice. "Did your mother really and truly ask you to propose to me?" "Really and truly." She reddened charmingly. "Why didn't you?" "I do! I do!" I responded eagerly, rising and going toward her. "Your mother is so sorry about you," she said. "She is so unfortunate in her son. I should like to make her happy"— She was silent, pondering. "If you are not returned to Parliament it will break her heart." She brightened up. "We will compromise the matter. If you are not returned, I accept you." She ran and told my mother, who entered the room between tears and smiles. "It seems a ridiculous arrangement; but Gerald is always absurd. I don't know what I want. I feel as if I were standing on my head." "Later on we went to the declaration of the poll. I was returned by a majority of twenty. My mother immediately began to weep bitterly. I looked at Alice. They were shouting for me to address the crowd. "I am an unfortunate man," I said. She was looking on the ground. "I always wanted to be an M. P.'s wife," she whispered. For the second time I kissed her in public.—Black and White.

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