

LITERATURE.

THE PROBATION;

OR

THE THREE GRACES OF OAK HALL.

(Continued)

Francis Herbert swallowed two or three glasses of wine in quick succession; and Mr. Merivale presently said—

"You appear strangely agitated, Francis. May I ask the cause?"

"No one has so good a right to do so, and to be truly answered," was the instant reply. "The plain truth is, sir—and I hardly knew it myself till yesterday evening—that I respect, admire—what dull, unmeaning words are these," he added, breaking into a sudden vehemence, and starting to his feet—"that I love, worship, idolize, your youngest daughter, Clara!"

"Clara!" echoed Mr. Merivale. "Pooh! This is absurd. A man in years—and I had hoped discretion—love, worship, idolize, a mere child!—for Clara is scarcely more."

"I knew you would say that," rejoined Herbert, with twinkling fire. "I have said so to myself a hundred times during my visit here, as each day found me more hopelessly enthralled. That Clara is young in years is true; but the graces of her mind and person have far outstripped slow-footed Time; and I live but on the hope that she may one day be my wife."

"You can't expect but one reply from me, Francis Herbert, to an aspiration so absurdly premature," said Mr. Merivale, with grave, almost stern earnestness. "It is this—"

"One word more," eagerly interrupted the young man, "I do not ask—I could not dream of asking, an immediate decision, either of you or Clara. I will wait patiently a year—two—three years, if you will, for that. All I pray for is, that I may strive to win the priceless jewel of her love; not by the flattery of protesting words—these I will never use—but by the silent homage of a heart which time will prove is wholly and forever hers!"

"This rhapsody concluded," said Mr. Merivale, "you will perhaps have the kindness to listen to a few words of common sense. Your proposition—that having taken a violent fancy—it is really nothing else—for a young girl as it were at the threshold of life, you wish to deprive her of the opportunity of hereafter forming an intelligent and independent estimate of yourself, in comparison with others, by hampering her, in the eyes of the world, with an implied engagement, to the fulfillment of which, should your present inclination endure—which, after what has passed, I must be permitted to doubt—she would find herself morally coerced, however repugnant to her the sacrifice in the supposed case might be."

"Mr. Merivale, you libel—insult me!"

"I have no intention to do either. I quite believe, in the present sincerity of the young-manish enthusiasm you have just displayed—just as I believed a twelvemonth ago that you were in love with Eleanor—"

"I was self-deceived. It was esteem and admiration I felt for Eleanor—not this consuming love!"

"No doubt; and it is quite possible you are also self-deceived with regard to Clara! Tut—tut, young man, you may spare your exclamations; they will scarcely turn me from my purpose. However, I do not hesitate to say there is no one I would prefer as a son-in-law to you; and if after a strict separation of certainly not less than two years—"

"Say separation for ever—you might as well," passionately interrupted Herbert: not to see or communicate with each other for two years will be tantamount to that, I feel assured."

"Not if your mind holds; and Clara who will then be only eighteen, is willing to accept you. My determination is at all events fixed and immovable; and, after what has passed, I must request that the period of probation may commence at once—to-morrow."

All to no purpose was it that Herbert implored, entreated, begged, for even a modification of these hard conditions. Mr. Merivale was deaf to all his pleadings, and further insisted that he should give his word of honor

not to correspond, directly or indirectly, with Clara, till the expiration of the stipulated period. He did so at last; and the interview terminated by Mr. Merivale saying, "You will write to me of course, as usual; but let it be an understanding that this subject is to be avoided. And this for two sufficient reasons. One, that if you change your mind, the penning of excuses for doing so, would be unpleasant to yourself; the other, that, supposing you do not change your mind, I have a strong distaste for the rapturous literature with which, I have no doubt, you would liberally favor me. And now, my dear boy, let us join the ladies."

At about noon the next day, Francis Herbert left Oak Hall for France, via Southampton, but not till after he had obtained—thanks to Mr. Merivale's kind offices—a brief parting interview with Clara.

About a twelvemonth after Eleanor's marriage with Sir Henry Willoughby, and consequently in the second year of the onerous probation imposed upon Francis Herbert, two important events occurred in connection with the Merivale family. An uncle with whom Clara had ever been the pet and darling, died, and bequeathed her the large sum of thirty thousand pounds and upwards, thus rendering her, in addition to other attractions, one of the very best matches—in a money sense—the county of Somerset could boast. Just after this, Agnes Merivale had the good fortune, whilst on a visit to her sister, Lady Willoughby, in London, to attract and fix the admiration of Mr. Irving, a young, well-characterized, and wealthy M. P., for one of the Midland boroughs. The wedding, it was arranged, should take place a week or so previous to the end of the season, then about two months distant. Amongst the friends whom Mr. Irving introduced to the Willoughbys, was a Captain Salford, of the Horse Guards—a fashionable gentleman, of handsome exterior, insinuating manners, and, it was whispered by his particular friends, of utterly ruined fortunes.

The charms, personal and pecuniary, of Clara Merivale made a profound impression upon this gallant individual's susceptible heart; and she was instantly assailed by all the specious arts, the refined homage—the unobtrusive, but eager deference which practised men of the world can so easily simulate, and which, alas! tell so potently upon the vanity of the weariest-minded maiden. It was not, however, long before Captain Salford discovered that, flattered and pleased as Clara Merivale might be with his attentions, a serious overture should he venture to hazard one, would be instantly and unhesitatingly rejected. What the secret obstacle was that unexpectedly barred his progress he was not long in discovering—thanks probably to Lady Willoughby, who appears to have entertained a much higher opinion of him than he at all deserved. And eagerly did his plotting brain revolve scheme after scheme for sundering the strong, if not almost impalpable link which bound the separated lovers to each other. One mode of action seemed to promise an almost certain success. Captain Salford had met Francis Herbert frequently abroad, and thoroughly as he conceived, appreciated the proud and sensitive young man's character. He was also especially intimate with some of the Paris set with whom Herbert chiefly associated. Could he be induced to believe that Clara Merivale thought of him with indifference—or still better, that she was on the high road to matrimony with another, Captain Salford had little doubt that he would at once silently resign his pretensions to the favor of the fickle beauty—the more certainly and promptly that she was now a wealthy heiress—and leave the field free to less cupulous aspirants—in which eventuality, Captain Salford's excellent opinion of himself suggested that success would be certain. Thus reasoning, the astute man of the world persisted in his attentions to the frank, unsuspecting girl, at the same time taking care that the excellent terms on which he stood with her should reach Herbert's ear in as exaggerated a form as possible, through several and apparently trustworthy sources. This scheme his Paris friends soon intimated was working successfully, and he crowned it with a master-stroke.

At the time previously settled upon, the marriage of Agnes Merivale with Mr. Irving was celebrated, with all proper *clat*, and the wedded pair left town for the bridegroom's residence in Norfolk. On the same day the Merivales and Willoughbys started for Somersetshire, accompanied by Captain Salford and several others, invited to pass a few weeks at "The Grange." Imagine the astonishment of all these, with the exception of the contriver of the mischief,—and he indeed appeared the most surprised and indignant of all—for the lady's sake, of course—upon finding, on the arrival of the newspapers, the announcement of two weddings in their Fashionable Intelligence columns—one that of Agnes, second daughter of Archibald Merivale, Esquire, of Oak Hall, Somersetshire, to Charles Irving, Esq., M. P., the other, that of Clara, youngest daughter of Archibald Merivale, Esq., to Captain Salford, of His Majesty's Horse-Guards Blue! The blunder, it was concluded, had been caused by the reports of the likelihood of such an occurrence which had frequently appeared amongst the *on dits* of the Sunday papers, confirmed apparently by Captain Salford having accompanied the wedding party to church. Captain Salford volunteered to write a contradiction of the paragraph, and the matter was thought no more of. Indeed, there is no doubt that, with the exception of Clara herself, there was no one present that would have hailed, with more or less satisfaction, the event thus prematurely, at all events, announced; even Mr. Merivale's boasted keenness and sagacity, having failed to detect the heartless worlding beneath the polished exterior and plausible bearing of the aristocratic guardsman.

The lying paragraph effected its author's purpose, and that right speedily. The visit of Captain Salford had extended to about a fortnight, when he received some papers and letters from Paris, which appeared to excite him a good deal. Almost immediately afterwards he informed Lady Willoughby that he was under the necessity of leaving for London that very afternoon. Polite regrets were of course expressed; and it was afterwards remembered to his advantage, that his manner, the tone of his voice, when taking leave of Clara, were marked by a deep, respectful, almost compassionate tenderness, and Lady Willoughby averred that the practised actor's eyes were suffused with irrepressible emotion as he turned to leave her sister's presence. The next post explained, as they believed, the cause of the gallant captain's unusual agitation. It brought a number of *Galignani's* Paris newspaper, directed in his hand writing, in which they found the following paragraph—"Married on Tuesday last, at the chapel of the British embassy, the Honorable Caroline Wishart, to Francis Herbert, Esquire, of Swan House, near Bath, Somersetshire. Immediately after the conclusion of the ceremony the happy pair left Paris for Italy."

Something more than four months after this, Captain Salford dined with three or four of his intimates at the *Rocher Cancale*, Paris. The party were in exuberant spirits, and the exhilarating wine which followed the excellent dinner, so loosened their tongues and raised their voices that a gentleman enveloped in a large cloak, though sitting at some distance, with his back towards them, and apparently intent upon the newspapers, had no difficulty in following and thoroughly comprehending their conversation, notwithstanding that no names were mentioned.

"Poor fellow!" one of them remarked, in a tone of ironical compassion, "he was hardly in his right senses, I think, when he married."

"*Voilà du nouveau, par exemple*," showed another, with a burst of merriment. "I should like to know who ever did marry in his senses—except, indeed, that, like our gallant captain, here, he was about to win something like fifty thousand pounds, as well as a charming girl. By-the-by, Salford, is the day fixed for your union with the beautiful Clara?"

"Not the day, exactly; but let us talk of something else!"

"The fair maiden still demurs, does she?" persisted the questioner: "I had heard so. And

by the way, Ingolsby, who met our rashly married friend a day or two ago,—you are aware, I suppose, that he returned last week from Italy,—says it is plain the wound still bleeds, decorously as he strives to conceal it beneath his wedding robe."

"Bah!" exclaimed Salford; "time has a balm for all such griefs!"

"No doubt; only he is sometimes over tardy with his specifics."

"That which tickled me most," said another of the party, "was that delicious trick of Salford's in getting his pretended marriage inserted in the newspapers. I happened to call on the supposed jilted swain the very morning the paper reached him, and never saw I, before or since, a man in such a frenzy, by Jove, his fury was sublime, tremendous! and I really thought it would be necessary to pack him off to a *Maison de Sante*. Fortunately he recovered and married, out of hand, to show his spirit—a less pleasant catastrophe, in my opinion."

"I wish you'd change the subject," said Salford, peevishly. "It bores me to death. Everything is fair in love and war; and if the poor devil was tricked out of—Ha!"

No wonder the glass fell from the speaker's hand, and that he leaped to his feet as if a bomb-shell had exploded beside him; confronted as he suddenly was by the white face and burning eyes of Francis Herbert!

"Captain Salford," said a voice as cold and hard as if it issued from a statue, "allow me to return the favors which it seems you have bestowed upon me, in the only way at present within my power." As the last words left the speaker's lips, he lifted a glass of wine and hurled it in Salford's face! "No uproar, gentlemen, pray," continued Herbert,—"no blustering endeavor, captain,—unless you are a coward as well as a liar and villain,—to attract the notice of the waiters or of a passing gendarme. This matter can have but one termination and it is well it should be a quiet one. Monsieur le Capitaine Gregoire," he continued, stepping up to a French officer at the other end of the room, "a word with you if you please."

Five minutes afterwards Captain Salford and Francis Herbert, accompanied by their respective seconds, were being rapidly driven towards the Bois de Boulogne. Pistols had been procured at the Rocher. "There would hardly be light enough," gruffly remarked Capitaine Gregoire, but for the heavy fall of snow. As it is, we shall manage, I dare say."

He then placed his man; Captain Salford's second did the same; and no effort at accommodation being attempted, the signal was quickly sped. The simultaneous crack of the two pistols rang through the air, followed by a scream of mortal agony, and Captain Salford was seen to fall heavily, with his face upon the snow.

"It is finished with your antagonist," said le Capitaine Gregoire, approaching Herbert, who was apparently unhurt, though his eyes gleamed wildly. "And you?"

"Is—is—he—dead?" surged through the white, quivering lips of Francis Herbert.

"As Alexander," replied Gregoire. "Why is your hand there?" he added quickly: "you too, are hurt?"

"To death!" groaned Herbert, as he fell into his second's outstretched arms. "O God forgive me!"

On the precise day two years that Francis Herbert was exiled from Oak Hall, a parcel was delivered there by a servant in deep mourning. Mr. Merivale, to whom it was directed, opened it with trembling hands, and found that it contained a ring, which he at once recognised to have belonged to his daughter Clara; and a paper upon which was written in a feeble but well remembered hand—"When you receive this, my probation will be accomplished. This is your work and mine. I forgive you as I trust to be forgiven. The ring is Clara's—hers, too, will be my last thought. Farewell. F. H."

Francis Herbert was buried at Pere Le Chaise, and on each anniversary of his death an English lady—upon whose sad, mild features, the angel-beauty of her youth still shed a sun-set radiance—is seen to kneel and weep upon his grave. The lady is Clara Merivale.