

Literature, &c.

The American Magazines

FOR MARCH

From Graham's Magazine.

PRESENTIMENT OR THE MARRIAGE CERTIFICATE.

BY MISS CAROLINE M. Sisson.

Just as the sun was sinking, one fine day in June, a carriage stopped at the gate of the old stone church, in Merton and two ladies, young, lovely and richly dressed, were handed out by a gentleman who had, for the last half hour been pacing up and down the church-yard, passing now and then to read the name on some moss-covered stone or leaning for a moment against one of the magnificent old trees that beautified and solemnized the spot. It seemed by his eager greeting, that he had been impatiently waiting the coming of the beautiful girls, whom he directly conducted into the church. Almost immediately after them the good old rector entered, leaning on the arm of his nephew, a slender, graceful youth, whom he had brought as witness of a ceremony whom he had been urged to perform in the most private manner. Reverently the old man opened his book and the young people silently placed themselves before the altar. The quiet of the lonely church, made more impressive by the shadowy dimness of the twilight hour, the full, deep, solemn voice of the rector and the low though earnest tones of the young respondents, which alone broke the almost painful silence, gave an air of sadness to that strange bridal, and when Robert Elliott signed that marriage certificate, as a witness, his hand trembled and his young heart sank with a sad foreboding of sorrow either to himself or the nuptial benediction. Silently and slowly the parties left the church, and as much to the surprise of the boy as to the horror of the good sexton who opened the gate to them, the bridegroom, after a few hurried sentences and a warm embrace, handed his weeping bride into the carriage, then pressing the hand of her sister, who was already seated, with a fervent "God bless you," and one glance of anguish, turned hastily away and mounting a horse which awaited him, rode off rapidly in one direction while the carriage immediately rolled away in another.

"I'm afraid they'll come to no good," said the sexton as he shut the heavy iron gate and placed the key in his stout leather pouch, touching his cap respectfully to the rector as he finished, and "good night master Robert" to the stripling who just then stopped and took from the pavement, where it had probably fallen from the hand of the bridegroom, in that hurried parting, a folded paper which he instantly recognised as the marriage certificate.

Looking into the pale abstracted face of his uncle he saw it would be of no use to speak to him of the paper then, for the old man was already far off in a reverie, such as he so often indulged in, that his old housekeeper used to say, "the minister lives in the other world, and only comes back once in a while to do somebody or other a kindness." Oh! that doing kindness! how delightful it was to that good old man.

He had ministered in that church for nearly forty years, and for more than twenty of them each time he entered the door, had passed the graves of his wife and six children she bore him, who had once made his hope and his heart so cheerful, and who were called on their bright spring-time to their better home above—no wonder that the old man "lived in that other world," he had so many treasures there—and yet no one ever said, "how ever much thought he had left on one of single days here—he was ever ready to receive a child into Christ's flock, to breathe a prayer and whisper comfort at the bedside of the dying, to speak kind, consoling words to the mourner, to give gentle counsel and faithful friendly warning, and to share his scanty purse with all who needed. No one ever saw him angry, no one ever saw him sad; serenely cheerful he went on his quiet way, honored, revered by all—too dreamy perhaps, too inactive for these impulsive days, but just suited to the time and place he lived in—a gentle shepherd leading a peaceful, happy flock. Robert Elliott was his sister's son, an orphan boy whom he was training to fill his own place, as he hoped, in after years, but those who saw the fire in the boy's dark eye and marked his proud, firm bearing, even in early youth, thought him ill-suited to the holy calling, and he himself had many a vision of honors gained and laurels won in a far different sphere from that secluded village. Still he remained at the parsonage, a dutiful and patient pupil, dearly loving the good old man to whom he was the last earth-flower; the only being out of heaven, he could call his own.

When Robert handed the certificate that evening to the rector, the old man's face saddened for a moment, and he said:

"They should have taken more care, put it in my prayer-book, my son; they will doubtless call for it soon, and to-morrow you must record the marriage for me in the parish register."

Robert placed the paper as desired, and seating himself on a low bench at his uncle's feet, began talking of the strange and secret marriage, saying:

"Did you know the parties before sir?"

"I never saw the bride or her sister till we met in the church, but I have known the

bridegroom, Richard Harding, since his boyhood, or rather I should say I knew him as a boy, for he has been many years absent from his country and I did not know of his return, till he came this afternoon to request me to perform the ceremony."

"The lady is very beautiful, very," said Robert thoughtfully, and to himself rather than to the rector, who, however, somewhat to the boy's surprise, replied:

"She is very beautiful, and I fear Richard has done wrong in persuading her to become his wife without the consent or knowledge of any of her friends except her twin-sister, who a school-girl, like herself, and of course as much a stranger here, is not a very safe counsellor."

"I wish you would tell me all you know of them, dear uncle," said Robert, "for I feel a strange interest in them. The lady is so gentle and lovely and the gentleman seemed so stern and cold, so prompt and determined. I almost hated him when he turned so abruptly from his carriage and rode off as if relieved at having performed a painful duty."

"Nay, Robert, you wrong him; he is summoned to attend his father immediately, who is only waiting his arrival there to sail from New Orleans for Cuba, where he has large estates which require his constant supervision, and where his son's assistance and society are particularly needful to him. Old Mr. Harding is an honorable and warm-hearted though eccentric man, and Richard knowing his excitable temper, dared not take his bride with him, and when I urged him, first to obtain his father's consent, and then come and ask her openly of her relatives, as a gentleman should do, he told me that to wait was to lose her forever, for her step-father was his father's bitterest enemy; and that she was the daughter of a British officer, who resided many years at Halifax and left, at his death, no fortune to the twin girl and a will, whose weak nature disqualified her to stand alone in the world, and whose polished manners and great beauty rendered her still very attractive. who had within a few months after her widowhood married a man of wealth and influence but of inferior rank, which so incensed the sister of her late husband, Col. Ormond, that she refused to have any intercourse with her, and threatened to bestow her little fortune on a charitable institution, instead of giving it to her nieces as she had often promised. The girls too soon felt themselves intruders in their step-father's house, and their aunt, who watched them jealously, seeing their unhappiness and learning its cause, determined to take them entirely to herself and bring them to New England, where they were to remain, at least till their education was completed. The weak, gentle mother was too happy to have them provided for, to object, and accordingly when the Cleopatra stopped at Halifax on her way from Liverpool to Boston, Miss Ormond and her nieces took passage in her, for the latter port, and among other fellow-passengers made the acquaintance of Richard Harding, who was returning from a pleasure trip to England. I did not know when the engagement was entered into between the young people, but I suspect not until they met recently in Boston, where Miss Ormond had established herself, and after having placed her nieces at the school about six miles from the place. They have been for more than two years in this country, most of which time Richard had spent with his father in Cuba. I believe this recent meeting with the Ormonds in Boston was purely accidental, and how he induced Edith to be married to him this day in Merton church I cannot say, nor how the fair sisters obtained permission of their aunt to leave her for the time necessary to accomplish it. But now, dear Robert, we must talk of other things more nearly concerning ourselves, for I have much to say to you before you leave me next week for College."

Kind and wise was the old man's counsel, and lovingly and reverently did the boy receive it, and often in his lonely after life did Robert remember the almost womanly tenderness with which the old man blessed him as he dismissed him for the night, putting back his dark ringlets and laying his thin pale hand caressingly upon them. And well might he remember, for never again was that dear hand laid lovingly upon him, never again did that sweet, calm voice bless him.

"Isn't the weather down yet, ma'am," said Sarah, opening the door of the little parlor, and adding in a half vexed tone. "I wonder he don't come when he knows my cakes will be all spoiled for him."

"You would not wonder," replied Mrs. Stanton, the housekeeper, "if you had heard him talking in his study with Robert till almost morning. I suppose they have both overslept themselves."

"Well, and sure it's a pleasure to talk to the boy any time, and the old gentleman was just beginning to say his last words afore he leaves for the school, ma'am, and sorry we'll be when he's gone."

They were interrupted by the agonized voice of Robert, crying—

"Mrs. Stanton, Norah come, come quick to the study; and in an instant both were standing at the study door, appalled at the scene within. In his high-backed arm chair close by the open window, just where Robert had left him the night before, sat the good rector looking so calm, so beautifully quiet, that for one moment they almost thought he slept; but the repose was too rigid for sleep and the two women passed and looked at each other with sad, troubled faces for several minutes, ere Mrs. Stanton pressed a cold hand in hers, and

murmering, "He is dead, poor old gentleman," burst into tears.

"Dead, dead?" cried Robert, "no, no, he is not dead; let me run for a doctor, for the neighbors; they will not say he is dead!" and he flew down the stairs all unheeding Norah who, wiping her fast-streaming tears with her apron, exclaimed:—

"Ah! ye've no need of a doctor; if he could not stay for the love of you, all the doctors in the land can't fetch him back, and indeed 'tis univariant to bother him with tripping, the dear saint that he is. Och hone, och hone."

The death of their beloved pastor spread so deep a gloom over the whole parish, so many hearts were heavy with sorrow, that Robert felt almost ashamed of the utter loneliness and desolation he felt while so sympathized in and shared his grief; yet he could not help saying to himself:

"Ah, they indeed all loved him, but they have all some one else to love. They have all father, mother, or some thing, but I am utterly alone, alone for a life-time in this glad social world. Its joy cannot be joy with no one to share it, and its sorrow, oh! what a human heart can bear it alone!"

Day after day the Summer sun rose and set and found Robert lingering yet in the lonely rectory pale and hopeless, and not until Mrs. Stanton told him that her grandson had come to take her to his home in a neighbouring village did he seem to comprehend that the house which had so long sheltered him was his home no longer. Then he roused himself, and with reverential care packed the few books and other articles which had belonged to his uncle—the furniture with the house was the property of the parish—and leaving them under the care of an old friend, took his own little property and departed for the city, where he immediately commenced his college studies. The new family arrived at the rectory and bright, young faces were seen at the windows and graceful figures occupied the rector's pew in church; yet still children went by the gate with a slower step and a pause in their mirthful talk, and many a matron wiped away a tear as her eye fell on the new white stone which marked the good old rector's quiet grave.

About four years after these events, Miss Ormond sat in the parlor of her niece, Cornelia, (who had been married several months previous to Lieutenant Frank Courtney of the United States army,) reading a newspaper, when she suddenly exclaimed:—

"What a strange advertisement!" and immediately read aloud. "Any person who can give any information of a certain Edith Merton, who was several years since privately married to the late Richard Harding, and who can bring proof of the marriage and of the lady's identity, will hear of something greatly to her advantage by calling on Edward Weston, attorney and counsellor at law No. 72—Street, Philadelphia."

"Strange, indeed," said Mr. Courtney, and turning to his wife he added, "Cornelia, was not Mr. Harding an acquaintance of yours, a lover of Edith's, or something like it, before you left Halifax?"

"Yes—no," stammered Cornelia, "that is, he was our fellow passenger from Halifax, and my sister liked, or— and blushing and confused she stopped abruptly, for just then Edith entered the room, and noticing the wondering looks of her Aunt and Mr. Courtney, and the confusion of her sister, asked anxiously what was the matter. Aunt Ormond immediately handed her the paper, pointing to the advertisement, which she had no sooner glanced at than her brain reeled and she sank fainting on a sofa. All was now confusion and anxiety. The secret which the sisters had so long and faithfully kept was revealed, and in the family council which followed it was decided that Mr. Courtney should proceed immediately to Philadelphia and learn all Mr. Weston could tell him of Richard Harding's death, and his life too, for, from the hour of his parting with her at the church door, his young wife had received no intelligence of him, and until she saw the advertisement was of course not aware of his death. It was strange the name should be Edith Merton, they thought, but perhaps Mr. Weston could explain it, so they wisely determined to say nothing of the affair until he knew all he could tell them. Mr. Courtney found Mr. Weston very ready to impart all the knowledge of the case he possessed, which was, briefly, that about a month previous to their interview, he had received a package from the United States consul at Cuba, containing a letter from that honorable gentleman, informing Mr. Weston of the recent death of Richard Harding, Sen.; also that the said Richard had, in his last illness, earnestly desired that the will and letter accompanying might be conveyed (as soon after his decease as possible) to Mr. Weston.

Harding and I were old school-fellows, and friends, and I was not surprised to find myself named executor of his will, though the document itself excited no little astonishment and seemed to promise some difficulty in its execution, since it expressly says in due form 'I bequeath all my estate, real and personal of whatever nature and wherever found, to Edith, wife of my late son Richard Harding, now residing if she be yet living, in parts unknown to me; and if she cannot be found within five years from the date hereof, I devise the same to James, the only son of my brother James Harding, of Boston, Mass., U. S. A. In the letter which accompanied the will he writes, 'Soon after we arrived at home after our last visit to the U. S., my son was seized with the

fever which terminated his life, and as I watched anxiously by him one day, he told me of his marriage with a beautiful and portionless girl, and besought not only my forgiveness for having acted without any sanction, but also my permission to remain as long as he was able to Massachusetts, and changing his bride, to bring her to our luxurious home, to allow him to remain in America with her. I was beside myself with rage, and forgetting the weakness of my boy, I loaded him with reproaches, swearing in my wrath that he should never again leave his West-Indian home, never again behold the being who had come between his love and me. When I stopped to take breath my boy had fainted. Horror struck, believing him dead, I summoned the attendants. He was soon restored to life, but not to consciousness, nor for one moment after did his delirium cease. He often murmured the names of Edith and Merton, but said nothing distinctly, so that I could learn nothing of the family of his wife, nor obtain the least clue to her station residence. I will not tell you how wretched my life has been since, how remorse and shame have haunted me, nor why I have resolved to bequeath my fortune (as a sort of atonement, a poor one I own, to the memory of my boy) to woman he loved, if she can be found. You will for our old friendship's sake, seek her diligently, and at the end of five years specified in my will, if you hear nothing of her, will deliver the property to my nephew, whom I hate though he is my only brother's son, but who ought in justice to inherit a portion of the fortune the germs of which, at least, I received from his grandfather."

After reading the letter, Mr. Courtney gave Mr. Weston the little information he could afford, and was surprised to learn from that gentleman that Mr. James Harding had already been to inquire if any claimant for the fortune had appeared.

"He is," added Mr. Weston, "a grasping, avaricious man, whom I detest almost as heartily as did his uncle, but unless you can furnish me with ample and unquestionable proofs of your sister-in-law Miss Ormond's being the lady who was married to Richard in Merton church in June, 18—, I shall be obliged to hand over the deeds of property to him at the end of five years specified in the will; but I presume you will have no difficulty. There is of course, a certificate, and the marriage is recorded in the parish register, and there were undoubtedly witnesses of the ceremony who must be found and requested to give their evidence. Be assured I will do all in power to place Miss Ormond, or rather Mr. Harding in possession."

Mr. Courtney anticipated no difficulty in obtaining the desired proofs, and with a light, hopeful heart he returned to his family. Great was his astonishment to learn from Edith that so far from being able to produce any proof of the marriage, she had nothing but her wedding ring, containing their initials and the date that there were no witness except her sister, and that she did not even know the officiating clergyman's name. She knew only that the girl was solemnized in Merton Church, and to Merton Aunt Ormond insisted on going, accompanied by Edith, immediately. A new life seemed given to the old lady.

Now that she had recovered from her anger and astonishment at the landscape marriage, she entered with all her youthful energy upon the task of proving it, insisted on going, accompanied by Edith called Mrs. Harding, much to her annoyance, and talked of their golden expectations to all their acquaintance. Poor Edith! she had given to Richard Harding the first warm love of her gentle heart, and for many a long week after his departure she had watched daily and hourly for his coming, or at least some slight token of remembrance, and day by day had her heart sickened with (worst of all sickness) hope deferred. Sometimes believing him faithless, and herself deserted, she would rush into society, where her beauty and grace made her even welcome, and in universal homage paid to her as reigning belle would forget for a moment the agony and desolation of her heart.

Sometimes she would weep herself ill, and assure her sister over and over again that he was dead. She knew he was dead, for if living he would not have deserted her. At length she ceased to speak of him, and gradually recovered the equable temper which made her so agreeable in early life. She seemed even to her sister to be happy, and to enjoy being a belle, though nothing of coquetry or lightness sullied the bright purity of her character. Since reading that important advertisement she was changed a being. Sad and pale, she shrank from society, even that of her most intimate friends, and her aunt could have scarcely imposed upon her a more painful task than the visit to Merton. It was made however, and was unsatisfactory. The sudden death of the good old rector had prevented the recording of the marriage; the sexton, not liking the new rector, or the new laws he made, had handed in his keys, and moved off to the far West. The rector's nephew was reading law in the office of Messrs. Parchment & Smoothwhit, of Michigan, and old Mrs. Stanton's failing memory only enabled her to say, "Robert was a good boy and she hoped no harm would come to him, for he went right away when his grandpa died, and nobody had heard of him since. What was to be done? Several letters were addressed to Robert Elliott without eliciting a reply, and Mr. Weston, unable to encourage his client, could only bid her wait patiently, and remind her that five years was not long to wait for such a fortune."