

Literature, &c.

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THE MERCHANT BRIDEGROOM.

'JOHNSON,' said Herman Miller, pausing as he was about to leave his counting house, 'let me have the pleasure of your company to-day at dinner: I have a great deal to say to.'

The quiet grey-headed man thus addressed bowed in silent acceptance of his invitation, and his employer passed on. He was a handsome man, about five and thirty, with an erect, animated carriage, and a bland open expression. More than twenty years before he had arrived in England a mere youth, with no possessions but those high qualities—talent, integrity, and the most preserving industry. Great were the obstacles which had beset his path, but, like a moral Hannibal, he had cut his way through them, and saw the rocks yield to his energies. Urbanity and good-feeling marked his rise, and economy and diligence had distinguished his progress: the shrewdest observers allowed that he deserved success, and few without satisfaction saw him attain it; for his conduct had disarmed competitors and competitors of the too prevalent disposition, to grudge the fortune, and misjudge the motives of those who outran them in the race of life. To great personal advantages, he added a happy address, at once unaffected and prepossessing; if he met his fellow-men with the free bearing of an independent spirit, and the consciousness of his achieved position, it was also with the open-browed good-humour and kindness which won regard, and gave evidence of a disposition to which no appeal of a high and generous character could be made in vain.

With the punctuality of the man of business, Johnson presented himself at the house of Mr. Miller some minutes before the hour of dinner. Pale, thin, and bent, the sixty winters which had passed over his head had evidently done ruthless work, but the last ten had secured him the friendship of Mr. Miller, and these had effected much to repair the previous ravage: on the dark background, created by early adverse circumstances, now lay feelings and expression that had grown out of gratitude, regard, and enjoyment of the comforts of life: respect for the integrity of his employer, and admiration of his talent, were mingled with attachment to his person, and interest in his concerns which rarely find place in the relations in which they stood to each other. Much of this was to be traced to the genial character of Herman Miller; recognising the essential equality of the nature with which he acted, he treated Johnson with a frank and generous cordiality that called out all that was kindly in his disposition.

Strongly contrasted were the men that met that day, and after dinner sat long in conversation of no ordinary interest and importance. Johnson, sedate and anxious, with more than his usual precision of appearance, was chiefly engaged in listening to details of the extensive and valuable business about to be temporarily committed (by what appeared to him a strange eccentricity of his employer) to his sole management and control; while Miller, confident and energetic, with a certain happy carelessness in his aspect, sat with his hand upon the head of a favourite hound, which had taken its accustomed place by his side.

Perhaps few hearts in the world at that moment sat lighter than Herman Miller's—with high health, with realised and prospective fortune, he was under the influence of hopes and feelings which shed the softest colours upon life. His heart had been for some time surrendered to an attachment of singular intensity. Accident had introduced him to a beautiful girl of humble fortune: left an orphan, her little portion had barely sufficed to educate her for her destination—a private governess, when her meeting with Herman Miller turned the current of her faith. Friends she had few to consult, and those she had were not sorry to be relieved of such responsibility as the degree of protection they afforded her involved; she therefore chiefly consulted her own heart, which immediately acknowledged the merits of Herman and responded to the sentiments he professed for her. Thus in the meeting with Johnson, Miller, in the midst of the review and explanation of his commercial affairs, had floating before him, like a transparent picture, his new prospects of happiness, and her image who was to be their partaker. His comprehensive mind, with rapid and decided action, traversed diverse fields of thought, yielding fountains of information, and a flow of instruction, at once clear, concise, and abundant, while simultaneously the under current of heightened feeling and infelt happiness swept through his heart, and quickened its pulsation.

'Now Johnson,' he exclaimed, as the evening gained upon their counsels, 'you see the whole of my scheme. All, during my absence will devolve on you. The trust is entire, as my confidence is perfect. I mean to be like a boat broke from its moorings and gone adrift upon a sunny sea. I deprecate—I denounce all annoyance; you will therefore know nothing of my whereabouts till you see me again.'

Still Johnson found something more to ask—recalled something which required further explanation—some clearer direction—suggested some probable or improbable contingency which might occur, willing to delay the moment of parting with his director and friend,

feeling how much the moral atmosphere of his life would lose in the event. At length the conference was broken up, and a change of character seemed instantaneously effected; for Johnson, under the influence of the excitement overcome his habitual taciturnity; and Herman lost his usual fluency. 'God bless you, Sir!' was reiterated again and again by the grateful clerk, while, touched and silent, the merchant expressively shook the hand of his honest delegate, and they parted—the one to pursue the old city process of turning and multiplying pounds, shillings, and pence; the other for a career of pleasure on the Continent, where he proposed to realise a scheme of PERFECT HAPPINESS.

It was a brilliant morning in May when Herman and Bertha, his young wife arrived in Paris, then some few years open to the influx of British travellers. Herman was a remarkable man, who had held, with wonderful tenacity, propensities of his nature in abeyance, so long as the warfare of life, and the struggles of fortune, had rendered them unsuitable indulgences; but now, privileged by the former prudence and its attendant success, he took the seals from the fountains, and they came leaping forth into the sunshine of the moral and material fortune he had achieved, with irrepressible force. His poetic temperament—his literary tendencies—the snatches of cultivation which had every now and then refreshed his commercial life, rose like tributary streams to swell the current of his happiness. Beyond all these was the choice he had made—Bertha was no less the companion of his mind, than the partner of his heart; day by day his self-gratulation grew as he traced in her transparent nature sympathies so kindred with his own and tastes so accordant. Her grace of person was to her beauty, what the sweetness of her temper was to her moral character, and her winning manners to her intellect—auxiliaries that fairly rivalled the higher attributes they accompanied.

So pleasurable is it to dwell on such a rare assemblage of harmonious circumstances, and breathe the air of a felicity so unique, that we would willingly join company with the wedded friends in their subsequent rambles through France and Switzerland. With feelings so affluent of enjoyment that they possess a power to gild, like sunshine, the coarsest materials of which life can be composed, they beheld the marvels of art, and the magnificence of nature, and at length made a pause upon the banks of Lake Lemon.

Hitherto with the exclusiveness of the happy, that highest and rarest aristocracy, they had shunned all association; but at Geneva they formed an acquaintance with a Madame Roden; travelling with two young daughters. In their company our Herman and his wife reached Milan. There Madame Roden met her husband, a German of rank, and when the friends parted, a promise was claimed and given, that ere the Millers returned to England, they would pay a visit to Roden Castle, a romantic place in the neighbourhood of Presburg. The prospect of this visit hung like a star in the onward horizon of Bertha, so much had she been won by these passing friends; they were the theme of frequent comment during the rest of her tour, till a new and engrossing scene opened upon her in Venice.

'Here,' she exclaimed, 'let us make a stay—in this scene of enchantment let us review and register all that we have seen and much that we have felt.'

When the moon rose that night it beheld them standing in the balcony of one of those palaces which seems to float upon the waters, gazing entranced upon a scene so suggestive to the imaginative faculty in which they abounded, so much in harmony with their feelings. Lavish luxury, peace, repose and love were present, and as Herman felt the magic of his position, he heightened the picture by contrasting it with all his early fortune threatened, and the toils and privations which had attended his progress.

The next morning and the next were given to the peculiar pleasures of the place, especially that calm delicious enjoyment which the gondola affords, when the moments seemed to melt away in tranquil beatitude, and our travellers might have said with the poet.

'Here simply to feel that we breathe—
That we live—
Is worth the best pleasures life
Elsewhere can give.'

On the third morning Bertha received letters from Madame Roden and her young daughters; Herman, leaving her to read them, strolled into the city and entered the Gran Bretagne; here a gratification which he had often sought in vain, and long desired, presented itself—a file of English newspapers. He hastily scanned one and then another, till his eye was caught by his own name—and where? among the list of bankrupts! At the moment the pulsation of his heart seemed arrested—the next a dimness obscured his sight. He rose with an effort from his chair and moved up and down a pace or two to recover himself and then again sat down before the fatal paper and riveted his eyes upon the hideous announcement.

How he had regained his home he could have rendered little account; he had never properly recovered the stunning effect of the first shock. When he entered the apartment where he had left Bertha, he found it vacant; he staggered to a couch in a recess and threw himself upon it: as he lay, through the long vista of a suite of rooms, he beheld her; she was arranging flowers and singing over her sweet employ. Presently she returned into the room and carelessly desecrating him, she snatched a letter from the table, and seating herself on a

low ottoman beside him, began to read. It was a pressing invitation for them to proceed immediately to Roden Castle, to assist at the celebration of an important anniversary.

'You must go,' said Herman, speaking with difficulty and in tones that made Bertha start and turn to him; another instant and she snatched aside the curtain that had partially veiled him as he lay, exclaiming,
'Herman, you are ill!'

'No—yes—no matter—you must go to Madame Roden—write directly—you must go—Where else—Oh, God! Oh, God!'

'Herman—my beloved—my life—what is this?'

She summoned servants; medical men were soon around them, but to no avail; sudden fever supervened, and ere nightfall Herman was raving in the wildest delirium.

Now it was that Bertha knew the depth, the strength of the attachment twined with her very heart-strings; day and night she was beside that bed of fever performing miracles of strength. What strength is there like the strength of love? Animated by that, how will the fragile woman endure and do a giant's work. During the long hours of the night Bertha listened to Herman's ravings; but could comprehend nothing; she heard him call on names of which she knew nothing. The sympathizing women round her, after a time, entreated her to seek repose.

'None—none!' she exclaimed, 'but death by his side. I can die with him, but not live a moment away from him.'

She suffered them to bathe her brow, to bind her hair at the bed side; but there she kept her place: her sleepless eye never left his face, no other hand ministered his medicines. To watch, to pray, when not called upon to tend him, was all the rest she took or seemed to require. At last the crisis came. He slept profoundly. All would depend upon the issue of that sleep. She knelt and watched, fearing the very breath that left her parted lips. An hour stole away—another and another. Still he slept; the conflict he had endured through many days required such repair. The sleep was calm; a moisture came upon the skin; the breathing was free and soft. She felt the angels of mercy were about her; and the untiring creature grew stronger with every protracted hour of increasing hope.

At length the sick man woke—softly as if a light veil had been lifted—and the first object on which his eyes rested was the face of his kneeling wife.

'Bertha! is it you, my love?' There was sanity and affection in the tone. Oh! the gush of holy gratitude that swept her heart; but, restraining every impulse, she crept softly to his pillow, and bending over him, wept unseen the first tears she had shed amid all her anguish.

'Have I slept long?' he asked. 'Let me get up. Not get up? To be sure I can—if you will only let me.'

Gradually he learned his weakness—gradually recollections gathered, and the cause of his prostration came upon him, but more calmly Bertha urged him to cultivate repose—not to speak.

'Nay, let me speak—not speaking did all the mischief—I feared to tell you, Bertha, the utter ruin that has overtaken us.'

'Talk not of ruin,' she said, 'there is no ruin while you live and love me. Speak—tell me all. Fear not for me—for you—with you I can bear anything.'

Now Bertha first learned the source of his sudden indisposition; she saw that to throw forth the secret was necessary to his peace, and yet she trembled at the effort he was making. 'No more,' at length she said, 'no more. I see it all. Now, love, let me speak; hear me dear Herman, hear me.'

He needed not the injunction, his eyes were riveted upon her face, marking every trait and turn of thought with intense emotion. Weak as he was, his intellect was again in full activity; the observation and study of character had been once his greatest pleasure, it was now his greatest interest. Neither had need to fear the scrutiny; her devotion was perfect; her energy equal to the event. With the calmest, gentlest tenderness, she soothed; she re-assured his spirit; told him that poverty had no terrors for her; and urged him to remember the moral wealth with which they were both inherent, and on which happiness was principally dependent. 'But one thing I would urge. You say that you must proceed immediately England, and alone. Why so? What may I not go with you?'

'Your situation,' he replied. 'The better speed that I shall make alone; the engrossing nature of the objects which demand me.'

'I submit,' she said, pressing his hand between both hers. 'Bid me stay, and I will stay. Call me, and I will come to you. I have no heaven but your arms; no health of heart, no peace of mind, but in your life—your love. Now rest; to-morrow we will talk of new plans, and future hopes.'

In a few days Herman declared himself equal to travelling, urging the imperative necessity of his presence in England, which Bertha had written to announce.

'All,' she said, 'is arranged. I have been very busy within these few days in preparing for the change which awaits both. I wrote to Madame Roden; reminded her that she had said she would give much for an instructress for her daughters as I should prove, and I asked for the office for a time. I accepted. This will secure my provision and protection during our separation.' Her voice faltered at the word. 'We shall go together as far Vienna.'

Her energy; the confidence in the future which she inspired, her indifference to personal

inconvenience; to the appliances that minister to mere appearance and parade; had a value beyond estimate at such a juncture. She took the initiative, and Herman with a secret solace in every new point of character she developed, yielded to her guidance. At Vienna he saw her enter the diligence to proceed to Presburg and then, concentrating all his thoughts upon his commercial difficulties, went forward to expediate his progress to England.

Among the conjectures which his mind received and rejected again and again, was want of faith on the part of Johnson, in whose hands had been vested the power of drawing on his banker to a large amount; but as he recalled the experience of the past years, which had teemed with evidence of the old man's recititude and attachment, he cast from him the suspicion, and felt convinced that if anything had happened to annul his honest purpose, it had been death, disease, anything but delinquency. Thus in a vain, but natural course of tormenting thought, he proceeded, intending to reach England by the way of Ostend, when he verified the old adage, that 'the more haste the worse speed.' He was stopped for the examination of his passport, and an impediment presented itself to his ignorance of the language in which he was addressed. He saw clearly that he was an object of suspicion.

The officials speak to him in German and French, but he understood neither. During his previous journey, his wife's knowledge of the French language, and the Roden's acquaintance with English, had shut from his view his deficiency and its probable consequences. For the time being the matter ended by his being conducted to prison. Few events of his life had annoyed him more than this. With a frame still suffering under debility and indisposition; with a prey to anxiety, and panting with the most intense desire for despatch, the weary hours of that night were the heaviest he ever passed. In the morning he was conducted into the presence of the superior officer. The original difficulty remained. Herman paused in perplexity, and then attempted to make himself understood by speaking Latin. The officer smiled and did likewise; but though the difficulty was thus diminished, the difference of their respective pronunciation was an insurmountable bar to the perfect communication necessary, till the official thought of pen and ink, and put his interrogatories into writing; they were immediately answered, and Herman was set at liberty. The cause of his detention had been the circumstance of his wearing a wig, which he did in consequence of having had his head shaved during his recent illness, and in his passport he was described as wearing his own hair.

His future progress was attended by no impediment worthy of note. Arrived in London, he sought out Johnson. It were difficult to have decided on which of the two, since the evening they had last met, the greatest change had been wrought. Anxiety had done haggard work on both. All was soon explained. The wreck of Mr. Miller's affairs had been contingent on the ruin of Fauntleroy, who had been his banker, and the depository of his whole fortune. Johnson, when the catastrophe occurred, knew not where to find his employer, and powerless to meet the demands upon his house, an act of bankruptcy and subsequent outlawry was the consequence.

Herman now knew the worst; he looked ruin in the face; but with less firmness than he would once have done; he was not now alone, to breast the storm, and bear the buffets of poverty. The arrangement of his commercial affairs, and though he might never reinstate his fortune; to re-establish his character, was his great, his all-engrossing object. Day and night, aided by the indefatigable Johnson, he pursued his purpose; his estate paid seventeen shillings in the pound, and, in the secret counsel of his heart, he resolved, that, if life were allowed him, a day should come that should see the rest liquidated. Thus far the principle of integrity was appeased; but he owed a large debt to prudence, which a long life of future discretion could scarcely retrieve. The folly, the madness of a commercial man going forth, as he did, with

'Youth at the prow, and pleasure at the helm'

could neither be forgotten nor forgiven by the jurors to whose peculiar scanning his case lay open; he could not, now that he calmly considered it, forgive it to himself. However, restored to the moral position his integrity commanded, his mind gradually righted, he looked upon the necessity of beginning life anew with increasing firmness, and felt, in the person of his wife, that he had a lien on happiness. Yet at times, with the apprehensive reaction consequent on his late rashness, and recent experiences of the conduct of some former florid friends, he would think of Bertha—would ask himself, if greatly brave and generous as she had been at the bursting of a storm, would she bear equally well the sullen weather into which it had subsided—the drearer waste of struggling fortune upon which it had thrown them? In the midst of these doubts and fears, which resulted from physical even more than moral causes, came her assuring and supporting letters; and Johnson, the honest, high-hearted, grateful old man, he rallied to the rescue valiantly. Resisting every proposal and attempt for placing him in other employment, he exclaimed,—

'No, no, Sir, we sink or swim together! You shall never get out of my reach again, believe me!'

Herman smiled and yielded, and was soon flung in helpless dependence upon his old friend. In the midst of considering a small plan of business, (having with a spirit of inde-