

LITERATURE, &c.

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FANNY BENTLEY.

A TALE IN SIX CHAPTERS.

Chapter III.

THE OLD STORY.

TRULY a business-like looking place was that large shop of Titley Wilson's—draped all over with cachemeres, silks and satins; and young men bustling here and there, doing something and nothing every moment. William Bentley, a pale, delicate-looking man of five-and-twenty, sat by the desk, receiving the accounts, and, writing 'paid' thereon, handing them to an odd, large-headed boy, who took the receipts to the customers with as much grave importance as if he were giving a check valuable enough to liquidate the national debt.

'Here, climb up, youngster, and hand me down that bundle of shawls; there, to the right; no, not that, the one that leans to the left;—what a stupid you are, Matty,' continued the foppish, whiskered little shopman to him of the large head—'here, come down; you are a pretty assistant to a gentleman of the shawl department, ain't you? There!' exclaimed he; unceremoniously pulling down Master Matty, who found his level on all-fours behind the counter.

'I ain't a beast, Mr William,' growled Matty.

'Why, didn't you help, Bentley,' said whiskers. 'Ah, I ask pardon; I forgot; we ain't a shopman now, 'cos we're going to marry Miss Emily Wilson. There's a rise in the market—husbands at a premium, I should say.'

Whether William Bentley noticed the spleen of the pert shopman, may be quite a matter of opinion. He did not in any way acknowledge it, however, but continued very quietly writing at his desk; but, in spite of his calmness, it must have been sorely annoying to find himself the butt of the envious young men around him. Some asserted that he must in ladies' eyes be a pretty fellow, as he had won the stern heart of Emily Wilson—Matty knew best about that; some, that he was a cunning young fox; for having wheedled Titley Wilson out of his consent that he might marry his portionless daughter—Matty knew the most about that, too. He was a clever, useful fellow, that Matty, hopping about after every body's heels, like a jackdaw—picking up this, and picking up that, and turning all to account. Born in the service of Mr Wilson, he had seen and heard odd things between the uncle and niece—many wranglings about somebody's money having been applied in a wrong way—much about a sister's children—unacknowledged—marriage-plans, in case that wrong should become unpleasantly right—in fact, all sorts of odds and scraps: so that Matty had them all at his fingers' ends, and would let them out or pull them in as a first-rate equestrian would a dozen horses. Nobody could positively assert Matty was absolutely deformed: he was altogether queer; he could neither sport a hump nor crooked legs, and yet he looked defective every way; a long, flat body with something to carry it about, clad in shoes of an unaccountable size and thickness. He always protested that his mother had decided his to be the best hair in the family; a murky, dull tint it was, struggling half-way between a red and a brown—sometimes both, sometimes neither, sticking up *à l'armis* in all directions; his nose—such a nose! opposed to all humility—persisting to hold itself bolt up in the face of all the world; then his jaws—they would have done signal service in the hands of Sampson in his encounter with the Philistines. Yet Matty had a heart; a true, warm, loving heart, for at least two people in the world—William Bentley and his sister Fanny. Unused to anything like kindness; at Wilson's, he appreciated the mild words and good acts of William Bentley; and the snubbed and scouted boy bore on patiently, hoping that a better time might arrive for his kind friends. The plot was not yet ripe; he should be branded as an impudent deceiver should he reveal at once all he had been gleaning from his childhood.

This one day in particular seemed especially set apart for his benefit in the scolding and cuffing way. 'Never mind,' said Matty, half in rage, half in tears, 'never mind, the wretches; he'll find them out—Mr William will—I'll nab him, without seeming to try at it; I'll nab them, if they are to be nabbed; she's a kicker too, that delicate madam Emily.' Wiping his eyes and waddling into the shop (after having been at the beck and call of the whole family all day) and tapping William gently on the shoulder, 'I've got a message for you, sir,' said he, 'from the cottage, sir (the cottage was the private residence of Mr Wilson, in the environs of London). I've just come from there, sir; I've been backwards and forwards four times this afternoon. Miss Emily wants you to call a little earlier this evening, if it's possible, sir; she's something to say, sir. The wretches!' said Matty, *sotto voce*, as, not waiting for William's reply, he waddled back again to the inner shop, to indulge in divers invectives on the heads of the whole Wilson faction.

'Come in, dear William, the falling dews are very injurious; we will speak further on this subject at another time—I see it has distressed you.'

William could not choose but clasp the slight and elegantly moulded figure that leant

against his shoulder; could not choose but look the love he felt at sight of those sweet eyes turned appealingly to his: he little thought that every glance was tutored like a slave—that the false smile upon the rosy lips was heaven when compared to the false heart. Wrecked in her first, wild passion, she had become a fiend; and to thrust on others the like suffering of her betrayed and tortured breast was glory. Beautiful, fascinating and treacherous—such was Emily Wilson, to whom William had given the full deep love of his true and manly heart.

'Speak freely, dear Emily,' said he; 'I am sure that all you would urge must be for my sister's welfare. Come, now, who is this secret lover to whom you attach so much importance?'

'You have often heard me speak of Bertrand Lee?'

'Yes, often,' replied William, strongly emphasising the word often, and relaxing his arm from about her waist; why, he could scarcely tell; but he recollected that Matty had said much of this Bertrand having been a most welcome visitor at Wilson's cottage some two years previously.

'Yes,' continued Emily, 'he is the person, William, to whom your sister has become attached—an elegant man, and a most determined *roué*—one every way unfit to be the unrestrained companion of a poor girl.'

That word 'poor' grated strangely on his ears, and her voice seemed harsh and discordant; or it might be fancy that annoyed and irritated him.

'You told me once, Emily, this Lee was a great admirer and friend of yours. How is it that a young man of lax principles can be a fitter associate for one woman than another, merely because she holds a somewhat higher position in the world?'

'Oh, nonsense; there is a vast difference, believe me;—her voice was harsh then—but had I known him two years ago as I do now, he never would have been admitted to our table. His love, William! I call the offer of his love an insult to any woman—words put together for the occasion, words that have been bandied from one to another as his own vile, betraying heart may have willed it. The suffering, the agony which that man has caused; the sleepless nights, the racking thoughts, the wickedness of purpose—it was no illusion, her voice was tremulous—the crushing, wild despair that his desertion caused, must never be forgiven. I know it!—a dear friend of mine has cause to curse him.'

Her hand fell heavily by her side, as she loosened the ribbon round her throat; and then she threw herself listlessly into a garden-chair, absorbed in thought, totally un mindful of the man she had acknowledged as her future husband. Her face looked, in the calm twilight, pale as death; the dark, dilated eyes, far apart and filmy, gazed upon the evening sky, as though imploring heaven to grant the knowledge of her future fate. Emily knew but little of Fanny, as her pride had always stood in the way of her intimate association with a poor work-girl. She had merely been introduced; and one excuse following another had hitherto prevented all chance of her being invited to the cottage.

Had she noticed the quiet but painfully determined look with which William regarded her, those piercing eyes would have sunk beneath their straining lids; but she saw nothing—nothing but the dark vision of revenge in her own crushed heart, a train of sin that would spring a mine of endless woe to him, to her, to all!

'Good night, Emily,' said William; 'good night.'

'You are not going, dear; excuse my neglect, I was thinking!'

The very conclusion I had arrived at, said William, avoiding the glance of those eyes that had been 'heaven's light' to him. 'You will be better alone, Miss Wilson; and when I see you again I have no doubt but that there will be a vast difference in the affair you have so obligingly mentioned this evening. Good night!'

Not a touch of that dear hand, not a look till the gate was closed between them: there she stood as it were, just awakening from a confused dream; no power to speak, no apparent will to follow him. A hasty glance, and he turned from the elegant and tasteful garden, wondering how it was that the mist had so long clung to his bewildered eyes: he hastened on, a sorrowing, a determined, but not a despairing man. There was a strange sound in his tread that night that seemed like other footsteps; but when he turned no living thing was near—it was in the air, it was on the earth; it seemed to compass him, and yet was nothing; it hurried on his pace, and then retarded it; it was a whisper, and a voice of thunder; soft words, and then a wail of sorrow. The thick damp rose upon his brow; every nerve seemed braced for some fixed purpose; a close, dull throbbing of the pulse, an urging on of the heart, as if it would not wait so leisurely fulfil its deep determination. His mind at length seemed slightly wandering; he must have delayed upon the road, and forgotten where, for the clocks from the churches round about struck the hour of eleven; surely the distance was double that night, as he had only reached the little quiet street where Fanny lived as the chimes went the quarter past. A light was just visible over the closed shutters of the front parlour—poor Fanny's sole establishment. He tapped gently at the shutters, and the well-known knock was quickly answered by his sweet, fair sister.

'Dear William, how long it is since I have seen you.'

'Is it Fanny? And then for more than an hour they talked together.

'Do you work very hard, Fanny?' asked her brother.

'Oh, yes, very; mostly from eight in the morning till ten at night; and then I have two miles to walk home.'

'Alone, at that late hour—always alone, eh, Fanny?'

How provokingly near the edge of the table those snuffers must have been, to have fallen off just at that moment, troubling Fanny to stoop and pick them up, as she assured her brother that 'Mr Smith always called for Henrietta, and always saw her in safety half the way home, at least.'

With a slight sigh William jerked his hat over his eyes, and moved towards the door, in momentary forgetfulness of the object of his visit; but, hastily checking himself, he returned to the mantel-piece, where he had been leaning—

'Come, dear, let us talk seriously; I have some questions to ask, and I entreat candid answers.'

There was a distinct rap at the shutter—a pause; another, louder. Fanny quickly moved the table, as if to drown the noise.

'What was that, Fanny?' said William.

'What, brother?' replied she, advancing towards the window.

'Not one step,' said he, gently placing his hand upon her arm. 'I will answer this; you have a lover, one unknown to me; this is what I came to speak about. You have thought proper to conceal this from me; and I will now judge whether this secret visitor be a fit companion for my young sister, and at midnight, too.'

The girl's bright face grew red and pale by turns as, lowering his voice, he approached the window, bending low, lest the appearance of a third party should alarm the person in the street. Unclosing the shutters, he pressed one gently back; not a footfall, nothing but the hum of the distant vehicles and people; nothing visible but the long street and its line of gas-lamps.

'Aye,' said William, as he closed the shutters, 'something is wrong here.'

'Upon my word, William—dear brother, I did not know of any one coming here to-night.' This was prevarication, and he knew it.

'Fanny, bethink yourself of what you have said; you have deceived me. I have not deserved this. But I see you are sorry for it. God bless you, my dear sister, and preserve you.'

The words of truth and confidence rushed to her lips; but pride, the unconquerable demon of our fallen nature, stepped between, and placed his hard finger on the tongue of innocence and truth.

'Promise me one thing,' continued William, 'and that is, that you will neither unclose door nor window again to-night, nor exchange words with any one after I am gone.'

'I do promise,' and she flung her arms about his neck, and rested her flushed cheek upon his bosom. The little room looked brighter than usual; there seemed a light overhead, casting a tinge—not of the sun, nor of the moon—upon the poor and scanty furniture; there was no shadow, but a soft, pale light, shedding its glow over all; as though a spirit had unfolded its bright wings, and paused in air to gaze upon the simple scene.

Chapter IV.

JEALOUSY AND WRONG.

Two, three, four had struck, and still Fanny plied the busy needle; that order must be finished, as the vessel would be under weigh at sunset next evening, for her departure for India. In vain the weak fingers and nodding head proclaimed weariness; the time was not her own, she had sold it, sold it for an extra shilling; her almost bare feet demanded such sacrifice of rest. Poor girl! from her small weekly sum she had saved sufficient to purchase a few articles of furniture for her little room: no matter for the scantiness of comfort, no matter for the plain, worn, almost shabby things, they were her own, and made up that priceless treasure, a home! They had been bought by many an hour of cheerless labour, and almost every article could have told a tale of weariness and privation; but they were her own—and as she looked upon them, the tears would rise and the heart would bound with gratitude. William could lend but little aid, he had been received into the establishment of the plodding Mr Titley Wilson as an apprentice, merely from charitable motives; and now that the time of serving had been long expired, feelings of gratitude and love bound him to the only home he had known since the death of his dear mother. True, he had been shown but little kindness, and the salary was so small that it barely sufficed his wants; yet he felt it an imperative duty to do all in his power in return for the protection he had received—and a far stronger motive yet, the devoted love he had hitherto felt for the fascinating Emily. Little, therefore, had he to offer; and sometimes a cheap present, or a damaged article from the shop, magnificently bestowed by Mr Wilson, were all he had to give.

On, on went the busy needle; she would never come to the end of that full, tiresome skirt; and the embroidery dazzled her eyes so, that she could scarcely trace the pattern: leaves, flowers, and muslin were all in a confused maze; the relaxing fingers were for once unfaithful, and the work dropped lower and lower on her lap; the aching temples leaned upon her hands as she rested them on the small low table beside the rush-light sinking and flickering in the socket. An hour before, she had thrown open the shutters, that the first gleam of daylight might be visible, trusting to that for some knowledge of the time—not her time, she had seldom

any of her own, even for the natural rest which the poorest expect and seek.

Five, six, struck, and still the heavy sleep was on her: dreams of a freer life, dreams of the past and future, sped along before her sleeping eyes, soothing, softening as they came, and two dear forms were side by side in all. There were no doubts, no fears; sleep had done wonders; brushed back the thistles from her path, and strewn it over with the gay flowers of hope and trust, that ever make up the happier thoughts of buoyant youth.

'Shameful waste of time!' exclaimed she, as she awoke, weak and half wandering in her memory. Snatching up the fallen work, she strove to hurry on over the intricate pattern. It seemed all colours, brightened into small twinkling stars like rising sparks; then they faded, and left a dull reddish purple overspreading the flowers like a dense cloud; sinking back from exhaustion, she again closed her eyes, endeavoring to steady the torturing sight.

The morning sun shone cheerfully on the window, which was momentarily darkened by a shadow. Fanny looked up, it was gone; again, the shadow came; she could see it distinctly, even with her half-closed lids. She rose, and placing her face close to the glass, tried to discover if any one were beyond the shutter.

'Ah, is it you, dear William?—I must have no idling this morning; I have been very lazy; come, come in,' said she, sitting down to her work.

A figure stepped forward, and gaily greeted her, with a saucy laugh and a kiss of the gloved fingers. Fanny retreated hastily, waving her hand, as if like a magician's wand, it had the power to banish that form from her sight and heart for ever.

Bertrand Lee receded from the window with a grave and anxious look, and walked loitering down the street, often turning as he went, like one in expectation of a signal to solicit his return.

'Why, why has he come here again?' sobbed Fanny, covering her face with her hands; 'and after our decided parting, too! Heaven knows what that resolution cost me; but I felt it was a duty to my dear brother, and, come what might, I had resolved to abide by it. Surely he is gone now, and will not trouble me any more.'

He was not in sight. The church clock in the next square struck seven.

'Oh, mercy, what will become of me!' continued she, 'seven, and my work not near done! I must be at the shop by eight, and have so far to go. Mrs Perks will expect the whole of the order to be ready this morning. What folly; why did he come here? I was ill before, and now I am unfit for anything. I can not work; and she hurriedly folded together the dress that had cost so many hours of unrequited labor, tied on her bonnet and cloak, ready to begin another day of the routine of slavery. No refreshment; she had no time to think of her own wants; they must be quelled till the work was out of hand, and then—what then? Another and another day might come, of which privation the past and present were but true and bitter samples. Setting up a candle ready for her return at night, she hastily left her lonely, cheerless home.

Was it wrong of Bertrand Lee to meet her on the road? Not then; he had passed the night in good and serious thought, and sought her with the proud openness of a true and manly heart, to offer her his honorable hand; her firm decision had revealed to him the depth of the affection he had cherished for the pure and innocent girl, whose love he knew to be his own. Yes, poor and humble though she was, the bold man would dare, before the eyes of the upbraiding, scolding, proud ones of the world, to hold forth his simple flower, reared and culled from the choicest tree in nature's garden, simplicity and truth.

Letters had been lately circulated among his friends detrimental to Fanny's character—such cowardly and unpunishable shafts, as emanate from those who fear to or cannot, substantiate the calumnies they wing in secret; no name, no trace of the writer, but missiles so ingeniously woven and thrown, that they would have startled into a belief the most wary. William Bentley had also received the like communications; the writing was unknown to him, but the bitterness of the accusations, coupled with the name of Bertrand Lee, seemed so like the wild, unguarded words which she had used at their last meeting, that his conscious heart needed but little proof to point out the source whence her cruel bolt had fallen. But he loved Emily with all the blind fervour of a first affection; and had he shown more energy then, and confidently appealed to her better feelings to retract this mischief, much misery had been spared—much of the bitter cup turned aside that now seemed filled to overflowing.

Fanny, listen to me but for one moment, exclaimed Bertrand, as she rapidly passed him in silence and with averted looks; 'I have much to say.'

'Not one word, Mr Lee,' replied Fanny, 'but in the presence of my brother.'

'I mean you honor, truth; in that brother's presence I will, with your sanction, claim you as my future wife.'

A wild throbb seemed to shiver her slight frame; those words—she dared not trust them; that voice, whose tones found such responses in her own fond heart, spoke of honorable love. Was it but a gilded bait, that she might fall more readily into the attractive snare? 'Preserve me, heaven!' rose upon her pallid lips, but died away again without a sound. Onward she sped, threading streets she scarcely knew, to baffle him that he might