

Literature, &c.

THE SPIRIT OF THE MAGAZINES.

From Chambers's Edinburgh Journal for September.

THE HEIR-AT-LAW.

CHAPTER I.

The annals of the British aristocracy have already furnished the historiographer with numerous chapters of family romance; but those archives of an order, wherein a place is esteemed by the many as the highest guerdon that beauty, bravery, genius, can win, must necessarily be inexhaustible in such revelations. Here is one that not long ago fell within my own experience; and by simple restoring the original names and localities—altered by me for reasons that will be obvious—it would in all essential particulars faithfully reproduce and episode in the domestic history of one of our great county families; not, it strikes me, interesting only from the collision and involvement of curious and striking incidents, but pointing an instructive moral, which they who run may read—although the catastrophe may not be thought to reach quite to the ideal standard understood by poetical justice—an objection to which the romance of real life will I fear, be always more or less obnoxious.

The bankruptcy, in 1842, of Mr Ansted, a city merchant, in whose amiable family, domiciled in one of the squares of Tyburnia, I had officiated as governess since I left Lancashire—a lapse of nearly seven years—threw me once more upon the world in search of dependent bread. As I was an orphan, and had no relative that I knew of capable of assisting me to reach a more eligible path of life, there was, of course, nothing before me but to obtain as quickly as possible, a like situation to the one of which Mr Ansted's commercial calamity had deprived me of: even that would not, I feared, and with reason, judging from the crowded state of the governess' columns in the Times, be of very easy accomplishment. Happily a caprice, that of advertising in my own name, Miss Redburn, instead of the stereotype 'A Lady,' dissipated my apprehensions, and in a very unexpected and startling manner. About three o'clock in the afternoon of the day my advertisement appeared, a fashionable barouche and pair dashed up to the door of the house in Upper Seymour Street, where I had taken temporary lodgings, and a lady alighted, elegantly attired in a slightly mourning carriage dress, whose important presence was instantly announced by a footman on the knocker, with a vehemence that brought half the first and second floor inhabitants of the quiet street to their windows. 'Is Miss Redburn at home?' was asked by a female voice, the rich tones whereof struck my ear familiarly. The scared serving-girl replied, I suppose, in dum show, by pointing to the door of my room; for with hardly a pause between, the same voice said: 'Thank you; that will do; I will introduce myself; and the next moment the carriage-lady was before me—in my arms! The flashing light of her dark brilliant eyes greeted me as joyfully as did her sisterly embrace and glad exclamation: 'Dear, dear Gertrude, I am so delighted to have found you! Surely,' she added with a gay laugh, and partially yielding to a sort of instinctive effort I made to free myself from her clasping arms—'surely you cannot have forgotten your old friend and pupil, Clara?'

'Clara Selwyn!' I exclaimed, forcibly releasing myself, as a dreadful thought arose involuntarily in my mind—'Clara Selwyn!'

The lady's flushed cheek and haughtily curling lip showed that my ungenerous suspicion was read aright. 'Yes,' she coldly replied, 'Clara Selwyn, when you know me, Gertrude, but Mrs. Francis Herbert not very long after you left Lancashire, and now for several years a widow.'

'Francis Herbert, of Ashe Priory?'

'Just so. Should that so much astonish you?' she added, glancing proudly at the mantle-piece mirror. 'You perhaps imagine that the magnificent Mrs. Herbert, the dowager, would have sufficient influence over her son to dissuade him from such a mésalliance. It did not prove so,' continued my charming visitor with a sweet silvery laugh, and resuming her previous caressing tone and manner: 'those are obstacles, dear Gertrude, which light-winged, youthful love easily overleaps; and we are privately married within, I think, six months of our first meeting.'

'Privately married?'

'Certainly. My husband's stately mother's many excellent qualities, both of head and heart, were strictly subordinate to her all-mastering pride of life, and to have asked her consent would have been an absurdity. Nay, the after-discovery of what had taken place almost prove fatal to her life, suffering as she did from disease in the heart. Happily, that peril passed away, and we were quite pour la prieur. Still forgiveness was not to be hoped for, and we left England to vegetate in obscurity abroad, till time and the stars should permit us to return and assume our proper position. Exile, poverty, in a comparative sense, added Mrs. Herbert—a dark cloud for a moment veiling her austere loveliness—would have touched me

little, but for the loss of my husband barely three years subsequent to our marriage. Since then I continued to reside in the south of France, with our only child, little Francis, and mamma till about two months ago, when the sudden death of Edmund Herbert summoned us home to fortune—greatness.'

'What a bewildering turn of the wheel! I read a notice of Mr. Edmund Herbert's death in the newspapers. He died of TETANUS, or locked-jaw, did he not, resulting from a gunshot wound in the hand?'

'Yes; and his mother, to whom he was devotedly attached, did not survive the shock more than a few hours. He was, you are aware, my husband's elder brother, and several years his senior, but had never married. I know him by reputation only—not, it so chanced, personally,—and that he was one of the highest-minded, most generous of men. But enough of this for the present. We shall have plenty of time hereafter for indulgence in gay or gloom re-encounters. My present business here, Gertrude, is to offer you a home at Ashe Priory, as preceptress to my son—as companion and friend to myself. You will not refuse, I see, she added, affectionately kissing me. 'We shall be sisters as we were in the old time. So extremely unfortunate—was it not?—that I to-day glanced over the advertisement part of the newspaper—so rare a thing for me to do.'

I expressed my grateful thanks as clearly as the strong emotion which agitated me permitted, and presently said: 'Your sister Mary, dear Mrs. Herbert, she who so well deserves happiness, has not, I fear, drawn a prize in the strange lottery of life?'

Beautiful Clara, variable and sensitive as a child, was instantly sad again. 'Alas! no; and she, is too, a widow. But Mary and her little boys must and shall,' she added, 'spite of mamma's unreasonable objections, take up their abode with us; and therein, Gertrude, I shall also need your aid and sympathy. But of this hereafter. That which we have now to understand thoroughly is, that you breakfast with us to-morrow morning at the Clarendon, Old Bond Street, where we have been staying for the last ten days, and whence we set off, at twelve precisely, for Ashe Priory.'

It was so settled; and Mr. Herbert left me, half doubtful that I had heard aright; and it was far into the night before my brain had ceased to throb and sparkle with the thick coming images—the rekindled memories of some twenty years—which her unlooked-for presence and strange news had awakened into life. A brief resumé of those thronging reminiscences must necessarily precede the telling of the story sequential to them, in which I was now about, unwittingly, to become an actor as well as auditor.

The Selwyns and ourselves were next-door neighbours, though living half a mile asunder, in a rural parish of Lancashire, the metropolitan village whereof—about a quarter of an hour's smart walk from our sequestered dwellings—was as dull, decorous, old world a place as could, I imagine, be found in the most agricultural country in Great Britain. Both families had been thus domiciled as far back as my own personal experience extended, but I knew that in his early manhood, Mr. Selwyn had attempted to practice as a solicitor in our little market town, with such lamentable fortune, that he contrived not only to lose the only suit of importance he had ever been entrusted with, but to blunder so outrageously in the conduct of it, as to render himself liable in heavy damages to his client. These first-fruits of his legal exertions, so disgusted Mr. Selwyn with the profession, that he resolved to espouse forthwith Mary Everett, the daughter of a deceased clergyman, and withdraw from ungenial business avocations to the sylvan quietude of Beach Villa, a largish and showy cottage orne, standing in its own grounds, of about an acre in extent, with the hope of there gliding through life unvexed by the cares, vanities, and ambitions of the rude, bustling, outer world. As he was possessed of a clear eight hundred a year, and married a gentle, well-principled, true-hearted woman, this expectation, though not destined to be realised, cannot, I think, be said to have been unreasonably based. His wife unfortunately died in giving birth to their first child, a girl; and deeply as Mr. Selwyn was thought to feel her loss, his nature so readily again yielded to feminine influence, that the orthodox year of mourning had barely expired, when he appeared for the second time at the marriage-altar—his bride on this occasion being Clara Stapleton, an intimate acquaintance of his first wife, though an altogether different person. Clara Stapleton must have been endowed with rare personal charms, for she was still singularly handsome sixteen years later, when I had attained an age capable of appreciating such attractions; but the spirit within matched ill with the unflawed beauty of its mortal covering. Not that Mrs. Selwyn was a bad person in a direct and positive sense; she would not have uttered an absolute falsehood—have committed a manifestly evil deed; but vanity and pretence—the prolific sources of not less real, if unspoken deceit, meanness and injustice—were her besetting sins. Though greatly bettered in circumstances by marriage, she quickly wearied of the dull monotony of Beach Villa; and as her empire over good, easy Mr. Selwyn was absolute, an absurdly pretentious style of living was attempted, which treble

her husband's income would hardly have justified. The result was not only pecuniary embarrassment, but frequent social mortification and discomfort at the hands of the local aristocracy, sought to be propitiated by a tinsel imitation of their own, after all, not very splendid glories. Two considerable legacies were squandered in bolstering up and prolonging Mrs. Selwyn's ambitious aim; but the end was visibly at hand by the time Clara, Mrs. Selwyn's only child by his second wife, was in her eighteenth year.

Mr. Selwyn had been for some time rapidly breaking—borne down, not by years, he was little more than five-and-forty, but by mind troubled—when the crash came, and put the finishing stroke on his broken fortunes and failing life. An execution which he could not pay out was sent into Beach Villa, and driven to extremity, he did that which, a few years previously, might have saved him—placed his affairs in the hands of his old friend, Mr. Thornley, a thorough man of business, and now, I have heard, one of the largest holders of railway stock in the kingdom. That gentlemen readily undertook the ungracious charge; and a thorough investigation ensued, by which it was ascertained that when all just claims were satisfied, not more than one hundred a year, at the utmost, would remain to the Selwyns, exclusive of Beach Villa—upon which there was a heavy mortgage—and its gew-gaw furniture. This decisive disclosure frightened Mr. Selwyn into submission, and she peevishly acquiesced in the discharge of the servants, with the exception of a maid-of-all-work, and the sale of the phaeton, horses, Clara's Arab pony, &c. Poor Mr. Selwyn did not long survive this calamitous downcome. I was at home at the time having not long previously returned from Liverpool, where I had been studying, to qualify myself for the precarious profession which, it had been for some time foreseen, would ere many years—perhaps months—be my only earthly resource; and being a good deal with Mr. Selwyn, I soon came to know that the carking anxiety which chiefly weighed upon his mind, was not for his wife, whose criminal follies, weakly acquiesced in by himself—that was the sharpest pang—had greatly lessened, not to say destroyed, the love he once bore her; nor for his eldest daughter, Mary, was his mind haunted by sinister forebodings—she would, he felt, walk erect and unwaveringly along the slipperiest and most perilous life-path she might be required to thread; but Clara what with that dangerous gift of unmatched loveliness—that impulsive ambitious disposition, derived from her mother, though, it might be hoped attempted to lotter issues—what in the dark future might become of her left unbuckled from the sordid world by his, her father's dastard lack of firmness! That was the sitting of death; and eagerly did his fainting spirit toil to devise means of atoning, if but partially, for his grievous fault. A will was drawn up and executed, by which Mary Selwyn who had just passed her majority, was constituted sole trustee of all he might die possessed of, and absolute guardian of her sister Clara. To the last, this thought dominated all others. I was present when the final summons came, and well do I remember that closing scene. His wife had been almost forcibly removed, at the dying man's request; her wild remorseful outcries rendering it impossible that he, feebly struggling in the close grasp of the Destroyer should fulfil the purpose nearest his heart—the earnest commending of Clara to her sister's watchful care and tenderness; and of impressing upon Clara that to her sister—not mother—she must look for counsel and guidance, and in all essential things yield her true and loving obedience. The pledges so solemnly demanded were as solemnly given by the weeping daughters; and a gleam of placid joy lit up for a moment the darkening eyes of the dying father, whose quivering lips, whilst his wasted hands rested upon the bowed heads of his children, seemed to be invoking a blessing on them. Presently, the feeble hands slipped aside, the slightly raised head fell gently back upon the pillow, and the faint light and smile passed away with a sigh, and the murmured ejaculation, 'Thy will be done.'

Death passing through a household but transiently darkens and interrupts its daily life. The old cares, duties, vanities, quickly resume, and till another arrow strikes, maintain their accustomed sway. Mrs. Selwyn's passionate self-reproaches soon changed to fretful lamentations over the cruel and quite unmerited reverse of fortune that had befallen herself and Clara—Mary, her step-daughter, never having been included within the circle of her selfish sympathies. Clara's radiant bloom stole gradually back to her cheeks—ay, and Mary's genial cheerfulness before long again cast its sunny glow on all around. A very admirable person was Mary Selwyn, of a rare sweetness of temper, and gentleness of disposition, combined with unbending firmness and rectitude of character—qualities which required not the attraction of physical beauty to win for her the love and esteem of all worthy hearts that came within the range of their unobtrusive influence. Not that Mary Selwyn was wanting in feminine comeliness and grace—very far, indeed, from that; but her beauty was of a more subdued, less striking type than that of her sister, and especially to unfamiliar eyes, seemed eclipsed in Clara's presence. Mary was now the whole stay and hope of the bereaved and impoverished family. Mrs. Selwyn ungrudgingly resigned

her the desperate task of keeping house upon a hundred pounds a year; a judicious economy took the place of careless extravagance, and the future gradually assumed a more hopeful aspect. It was settled, that as soon as Beach Villa could be advantageously let, they would seek a less expensive home, at a distance from the scene of their former comparative splendour; and in the meantime, Mary, with my assistance, set vigorously to work to perfect Clara's educational accomplishments, which a blind indulgence had permitted to fall in some respects sadly behind-hand. She was, however, apt and willing, and no longer interfered with by Mrs. Selwyn, who seldom, indeed, stirred out of her bedroom, made rapid progress.

Some five or six months had passed thus pleasantly and profitably away, when Mrs. Selwyn's ambitious longings, partially rebuked but ineradicable, unfortunately revived again in the dazzling light of her daughter's beauty, which she had finally persuaded herself, could not, if judiciously brought into play, fail to secure Clara and of course Clara's mother, a far higher position in the world than that mother's cruel folly had despoiled her of. It was quite true that the younger Miss Selwyn's rare personal gifts had begun to excite a sort of agitation in our corner of the county and that her name was in the mouth of every feather-headed fopling for miles around, suggesting sinister or fortunate auguries, as the envious or benevolently hopeful dispositions of the prophesiers determined.—One consequence of all this was numerous importunate calls at Beach Villa, under pretext of inquiring the terms upon which it could be let and of viewing the premises, by parties who had not the remotest intention of becoming tenants. As soon, however, as it came to be well understood that such visitors would see nobody but Mary Selwyn, or myself, if I happened to be there, the annoyance abated, to be renewed in some instances under a more decorous and less transparent mask. One gentleman of about my own age I judged, which was a few months more than that of Mary Selwyn, and to our unkind appreciation, of remarkably aristocratic appearance and manners, would not be denied an intimacy to which he had no legitimate nor conventional claim. Finding that Miss Selwyn's icy reserve could not be otherwise broken through Mr. Calvert, as he called himself, produced, with evident reluctance, blushing the while like a school-girl, and presented to Mary a letter written by her father—there could be no doubt about that—expressing the warmest thanks for some service or favour which the writer has received at the hands of the person addressed. Miss Selwyn read it with emotion, but presently remarked in a partly apologetic tone; 'There is no address, sir, at the foot of this note. You have the envelope of course.'

The gentleman, instead of firing up, as I should have thought he would at the implied suspicion, changed colour, and with something of agitation in his voice and manner said: 'No I have not; it has been mislaid or lost. But surely Miss Selwyn cannot think so meanly of me as to believe that I would assume, falsely and basely assume, to have rendered the trifling service alluded to; that I—I—'

He stopped for want of words or matter, and Mary, who had intently observed him, said; 'I do not believe so Mr. Calvert. Will you walk in?'

From this time, Mr. Calvert became a very frequent visitor indeed; but invariably, as I afterwards frequently recalled to mind with a pang of regret at my own want of penetration, at such hours that he would be sure of meeting with none but the family. I very much liked this Mr. Calvert withal; his conversation was refined and intellectual; and, witless dogmatist that I must have been, if what I heard of him about a year after my removal to London was correct, I—piquing myself, too, upon accurate preception of character, and especially male character—pronounced him to be a person of large conscientiousness and self-sacrificing amiability! Constancy, indeed, if we had rightly divined his mission at Beach Villa, was not of the number of his virtues, for it was before long very apparent to me that Mary Selwyn, not her all-conquering sister, was the compelling lodestone that drew him there; and it was becoming pretty clear, moreover, that his preference would at no great distance of time be reciprocated, when an unexpected incident shewed me, or seemed to do so, how little I comprehended Mr. Calvert, or the impulses by which he was governed.

Clara and her mother had accepted an invitation to pass a week with the Lumsdens, retired and tolerably wealthy trades-people who had removed not long before the Selwyn's downfall from our neighbourhood to a place about ten miles off; and a letter from Clara ostensibly to announce a prolongation of the visit, startled her sister and myself, not only by informing us that Captain Toulmin, son of the Hon. Mrs. Toulmin, a widow lady related to the Lumsdens; but by the girlish exultation of tone in which she wrote, evidently inspired by the belief that she had made a serious and important conquest.

Mary Selwyn was both vexed and angry.—'This meeting between Clara and Captain Toulmin,' she said, 'has, I have no doubt, been concerted between him and the Lumsdens—worthy, well-meaning people enough, but in-