

## Literature, &amp;c.

## THE SPIRIT OF THE MAGAZINES.

From Chambers's Edinburgh Journal for September.

## THE HEIR-AT-LAW.

## CHAPTER II.

MARY SELWYN rose early on the following morning, and when I joined her at breakfast, she had, in appearance at least, quite recovered her usual cheerfulness and equanimity. She had determined instead of writing, to go personally, and insist upon Clara's immediate return home. Another consternation awaited us: a note arrived from Mr Calvert, containing, besides the ordinary compliments, &c., a brief intimation that important affairs obliged him to leave that part of the country, and that some months would probably elapse before he could promise himself the pleasure of again calling at Beach Villa. 'Very extraordinary conduct this,' I exclaimed; 'upon my word, the man is a perfect riddle!'

'True,' was the low-voiced reply; 'and one which those who have duties to perform should not waste time in endeavouring to solve. Ah! here comes the fly Susan has ordered. Good-by, Gertrude, till the evening. We shall not be late home, I hope.'

It was, however, past ten o'clock before the fly returned, bringing the two Misses and Mrs Selwyn, the last still swelling and panting with the but partially abated storm of rage which Mary's determined insistence upon her sister's return with her to Beach Villa had thrown her into. Clara who, one could see, had been profusely weeping, retired to bed at once; but Mrs Selwyn, whose excitement precluded rest, or a wish for it, remained up to vent her indignation—first upon Mary, and when she had withdrawn, upon hapless me, who could not well refuse to listen. I gathered from the irate lady's objurgations, that there had been a violent scene at the Lumsdens; that Mary Selwyn's firmness prevailed with difficulty, and not till Clara herself—upon being reminded, I had no doubt, of her father's dying injunctions, ever a potent spell with her—had decided for her prim half-sister against her own mother. It seemed, moreover, that two gentlemen had been dangling after Clara—Captain Toulmin, the young lady's favorite it was intimated, and his friend, Mr Francis Herbert, the second son of the dowager Mrs Herbert, of Ashe Priory, the towers whereof were, on a bright clear day, dimly visible from the garret-windows of Beach Villa, whom Mrs Selwyn was evidently mad enough to hope might be hymenically caught in the meshes of her own and her daughter's ambition. This struck me as so utterly preposterous, the Herberts ranking amongst the highest magnates of that division of the country, that I could hardly forbear laughing in the silly woman's face. Reflecting, however, that maternal vanity has ever been a chartered dreamer, I maintained, though with difficulty, a serious expression of face; and Mrs Selwyn, having at last exhausted for a time the phials of her wordy wrath, muttered a sour good-night, and went to bed.

The next day but one, Beach Villa was let upon terms which had been several times previously refused; and within twenty-four hours of the completion of the bargain, the Selwyn family were on the road to Preston near which a habitation more suitable to their means had been taken for them by Mr Thornley. Personal intercourse with my young friends was thus necessarily terminated; and that by letter, chiefly from the swift coming on of trouble in my own home, soon became infrequent, and before I left Lancashire had entirely ceased. My father, a lieutenant in the royal navy, who had served with Nelson was released at last by the welcome hand of death from sufferings he had bravely borne for several years; and in about two months only my mother sickened of the malady which was soon to renounce both parents in their long home. In the presence of these griefs all minor regrets were of course rebuked and hushed; the Selwyns and their self-created difficulties for the time forgotten; and I nerved myself to pursue with hope and courage the strange and solitary path of life before me, and over which thick darkness had so heavily fallen.

It was some time before I succeeded in obtaining the engagement with Mrs Ansted; and how that terminated, together with the sudden apparition of Clara Selwyn, bewilderingly transformed into Mrs Francis Herbert, of Ashe Priory, the reader has already been informed. The only tidings which reached me after leaving Lancashire was a hurried answer to a question addressed by me to Mr Thornley, whom I met at the Euston Station, just as the train in which he had taken his seat was about to start. I had inquired after Mary Selwyn, and his reply was to the effect, that she had long since thrown herself away upon a mean adventurer of the name of Calvert, and was, he understood living in obscurity somewhere in Wales with her husband and one or two children. He had not time to add, that his information was solely derived as I afterwards knew, from Mrs Selwyn, or I should have more correctly estimated

the probable truth of the imputation upon Mr Calvert.

After this recapitulation of bygone events, it will not, I hope, appear surprising that I was bewildered by the unexpectedly announced and marvellous change in Clara's fortune, drawing after it a minor but still very appreciable improvement in my own. And, for the life of me, I could not at all realise that change. It seemed to be an impossible, dream-like extravagance—a *coup de theatre*, only to be met with in a play or a novel, and I was half tempted to doubt, whilst proceeding the next morning in a cab to the Clarendon, whether I should really find the Selwyns in that aristocratic hotel. So far, however, there was no illusion; Mrs Selwyn, who was looking exceedingly well, received, me with prodigious condescension, and *Redburn'd* me over again and again, with untiring self-complacency. With Clara, I was still 'dear Gertrude,' as in the old time; and her son a nice little boy of about five years of age, had, I found, been tutored to address me as his mother did.

Precisely at twelve o'clock, we set out in a travelling carriage, with four post-horses, for Ashe Priory—Mrs Selwyn being of opinion that journeying by rail was essentially vulgar and plebeian—and in due time were safely deposited at our destination. Arrived at that splendid abode, the feeling of unreality—a sense of the precarious tenure by which the lordly pile and its adjuncts must, I felt, be held by the present apparent mistress, returned upon my mind with aggravated force; and if I rightly read Clara's brightly flushing face, and nervous, unquiet looks the same thought was beating at her heart, as, encompassed in each others arms, we, with a shrinkingness, a timidity impossible to shake off, ventured through the stately and solitary apartments. 'Clara Selwyn'—thus ran my thoughts whilst making a hurried dinner-toilet—Clara Selwyn the indisputable mistress of all this splendour—impossible! The same law-legend-main which has enstaled her here in right of her son, will, I fear, by some counter-trick dissipate the glittering dream! In right of her son! Ay, that must be the substance which casts these ominous shadows! Clara's grandeur, at the best, can be commensurate only with the life of that frail boy; and not grandeur only, but bare competence; for now, when calling to mind the fragments of conversation between Clara and Mrs Selwyn during our journey, I remembered they talked of a legal opinion having been given that Clara's husband, Francis Herbert, having died before his elder brother, when he was consequently not possessed—seised, I recollect, the term was—of the property, she therefore, as his widow, was not entitled to her thirds of the personals. They spoke, too, of a sealed packet of papers found in the elder brother Edmund Herbert's escritoire, directed to an intimate friend of his, a colonial bishop, and of course duly forwarded, which it is thought, may possibly contain a will disposing of the large personals, the landed property being strictly entailed on the heirs male; and the alarming conclusion is, that the death of her son, the child heir-at-law, would at once hurl Clara from her present brilliant position into the abyss—by contrast made more terrible—of poverty and dependence! This boding train of thought pursued me as I sat at dinner—a cumbrously comfortless one, by the by, except to Mrs Selwyn, who really seemed to feel that dining with a tall lackey posted behind her chair was her natural though shamefully delayed destiny; and I intently scanned the *physique* of the pale boy, whom his mamma insisted should dine with us, in fruitless quest of decisive indications pointing to a brief or a prolonged life.

These panic terrors had, to a great degree subsided by noon on the morrow: the air was bright, clear, and invigorating to both mind and body: rest had restored the child's ruddy colour, and it was, after all, I reasoned in my improved mood of thought, likelier, or, at all events, quite as likely, that he would live to be the father of a family, as perish prematurely in his nomage. And the affair altogether, after a time no longer struck me as being so monstrously absurd, so utterly incredible. The servants, old as well as young, all acquiesced, undoubtingly, in the rule of the new dynasty; the numerous cards left by the notabilities for miles around were, to my silly thinking, so many attestations of the belief of those persons in the stability of the existing state of things: and I gradually ceased to torment myself by too curiously prying, or striving to do so, into the fatal and imprevision future.

Clara, notwithstanding Mrs Selwyn's vehement disuasion, did not delay writing to her sister Mary—Mrs Calvert—urging her, in the kindest terms, to come and take up her abode with her two sons at Ashe Priory. Mary's answer—dated from the neighbourhood of Douglas, Isle of Man, where she had resided since her marriage—was a refusal of the invitation at all events, for the present. She did not propose leaving home till the arrival of a gentleman, then abroad, to whom the settlement of her deceased husband's affairs had been intrusted. Clara, the letter stated had been misinformed with respect to her, Mary's pecuniary resources, which had always sufficed, net for the necessaries only, but for the elegances of life and would do so amply in the future.—One brief phrase alluding to the writers bereavement, was conclusive with me, spite of Mr Thornley's second-hand story, afterwards

very positively re-indorsed by Mr Selwyn, that Mr Calvert had been in every respect worthy of the strong love which dictated it. More immediately addressing Clara in the old tone of affectionate warning, Mary adjured her with almost pathetic earnestness, not spite of the present cloudless sunshine of good-fortune to rest her future happiness and peace upon worldly elevation and grandeur. This was repeated again and again, in varying terms, but always with a fervency which shewed they were not mere cant words of course, but grave and, in the writer's judgement, much needed-counsels. The menacing chance, then, that Clara's son might die during legal infancy, had painfully impressed her sister's mind as well as mine!—not prophetically, I could only hope and pray.

Although Mrs Calvert declined an asylum at Ashe Priory, another lady, the Hon. Mrs Toulmin whom her son, Captain Toulmin, had by his reckless follies, it appeared literally beggared gladly accepted it, when pressed upon her with much delicacy and generous feeling by Clara. A remarkable compound of pride and kindness buckram and benevolence, was that tall, pale, dignified, and very courteous personage. She could not but feel and that actually too, that Captain Toulmin the next male heir to the domains of her ancestors, as well as of the Herberts had been barred from the succession by the madcap marriage of his cousin, Francis Herbert with a beautiful nobody; yet did she soon come to love warmly the child of that marriage who alone stood between her own son and a splendid heritage; and was as proud of the charming mistress of Ashe Priory, as if Clara instead of being a mere parvenue, could have boasted of a pedigree as long and most unexceptionable as that of the last winner of the Derby. One curious trait in the good lady's character afforded us—that is, Clara and myself—much quiet amusement.

Most persons, I have heard, derive pleasure, like honest Dogberry, from being able to boast of their losses; but this, I suppose natural propensity, was, with the hon. Mrs Toulmin, exaggerated monomania. Over and over again, we used to watch her making elaborate and corrected estimates of the money-value of the family plate, jewels, furniture, books, horses, carriages—of every valuable, in brief, whereof she or her son—the same thing—had been despoiled by the law of succession, her self-importance evidently increasing, *pro rata*, with the vastness of the sums thus labouriously ascertained; and when, as sometimes happened, a property was spoken of in her presence—a farm for instance—of which she had not before heard, she would eagerly enquire its gross value, note it instantly with a pencil upon her ivory tablets, adding it to the previous total, and then mentally glorify herself upon the additional wealth she was thus proved to have lost! In sooth, my own opinion is, that all the Herberts were more or less of eccentric intellect. In the dowager Mrs Herbert before spoken of, the erratic mental predisposition manifested itself in a pride of lineage—of which I could give many ludicrous anecdotes—approaching to insanity in its fantastical extravagance; in Francis Herbert, on the contrary, it displayed itself in contemptuous disregard of the marital code governing his order; and in the Hon. Mrs Toulmin, not only as just related, but in other modes which it is needless further to allude to. Before this narrative is concluded the reader will perhaps discover additional proof of the soundness of my theory.

The presence of the Hon. Mrs Toulmin at Ashe Priory naturally drew after it that of Captain Toulmin; and it did not fail to occur to me, that Clara might have some notion of the kind when she pressed the invitation upon that lady. However that might have been, September was no sooner at hand, than Captain Toulmin rented a sporting-box in the neighbourhood, and thenceforth was a daily guest at the Priory. A gay, handsome, specious man of the world, of about, I should say, five-and-thirty, was Captain Toulmin; a gentleman of polished address withal, and completely master of the little arts of society, which, being constantly in requisition, are so effective in making a company reputation, and concealing essential defects of education and character. Fully determined, too, was he to render himself exceedingly agreeable to Mrs Francis Herbert, and to marry her, if her little boy's health should not—as it had already evinced some indecisive symptoms of declining—fatally decline. There was another frequent guest at the Priory, the Rev. Charles Atherley, rector of the parish, though only eight-and-twenty, possessor of a handsome income, and a very different man from Captain Toulmin; the fate of his timid matrimonial aspirations also depended, I could not help believing, upon that of Clara's son. 'Poor boy!' I silently soliloquised one afternoon, as, partially hidden by a sun screen, I watched the demeanour of the two gentlemen, who had been effecting to read, as an excuse for non-intercourse, both being implacably jealous of each other—'Poor boy! you little know with what intensity of interest they are contemplating the sudden pallor that has overspread your pretty face—the languid listlessness with which you have just laid aside your play-toys, and stretched yourself upon that couch.—You did not see, and seeing, would not have comprehended, the exultant flash, as lurid as fire from the bottomless pit, which broke from the dark eyes of the captain; no more than you

would the rector's involuntary glance—not of grief—quickly followed by the pang of self-reproach, which has sent him hurriedly across the room to you with those oranges and jujubes, and causes him to speak with such gentle tenderness, that you look up lovingly in his face and take his hand as if it were your mamma's or mine.' The good rector has since then often declared that my surmise wronged him; but I am not for that the less convinced that I was right. The truth was that he was over head and ears in love with Clara, and could not shut out from his mind, try as he might, an instinctive conviction, that were Mrs Herbert no longer the lady of Ashe Priory, and mother of the heir to the Herbert estates, Captain Toulmin would at once cease to be his rival; and moreover, that possibly the rectory, and something approaching to two thousand a year, might not, in that case be thought beneath her acceptance.

All this, I say, was as plain to me, a looker-on at the play of cross and selfish purposes in progress—lookers-on proverbially knowing more of the game than the actual players—as if the Rev. Charles Atherley, A. M., and Captain Toulmin, had told me so in as many words; but Clara's inclinations I could not so positively determine. I saw that the handsome *roue* was her shadow, whether she remained at home, or walked, or rode out, and that she was flattered pleased with his obsequious courtesies; but this was all; and she invariably, moreover, laughed off every attempt I made to treat the matter seriously. Then Mrs Selwyn was indefatigable in his praise, which I could very well understand and excuse; forasmuch that Captain Toulmin, being the next heir to the entailed estates after little Francis, a marriage with him would insure Clara's future, and of course her own, in any eventuality. The Hon. Mrs Toulmin also greatly favoured her son's apparent intention; and after much cogitation, and considerable influence by the recollection of what I heard Mr Calvert say of Captain Toulmin, I determined upon writing to Mary, and informing her of my conjectures, doubts, and fears; not forgetting to add an injunction to keep my name out of any controversy that might arise upon the subject. My letter was quickly responded to, and in person; Mary Selwyn—Mrs Calvert, I should say—making her appearance at the Priory as soon as a letter by return of post would have reached me. Surprised, delighted, I need hardly say Clara and I were to see her; and looking so wonderfully well, too, spite of the tint of recent sorrow which shaded and softened the fine glow of health and a certain matronly yet youthful grace and air which seemed so to speak, to radiate from her. I had no idea she would ever have been so handsome, and the same thought was, I saw, sparkling in her sister's eyes, Mrs Selwyn's greeting was of the coldest, grimmest; and her discontent was greatly increased the following day when Mary directly questioned her sister concerning Captain Toulmin; and upon receiving, what she deemed, unsatisfactory replies, preemptorily insisted, as if Clara was still a child, and she her absolute guardian that the intimacy should be forthwith and unmistakably broken off. This brusque mode of proceeding was certainly not in accordance with the dictates of Mary's usual calm good sense. Clara as might have been anticipated, accustomed as she had of late been to the most obsequious deference, would not tolerate such rude schooling, even from her sister; and Mrs Selwyn fired up with ungovernable fury. Mary soon recovered her rarely lost command of temper, listened for some time with unruffled composure to the dual storm she had rashly evoked and at last said in her quietest manner, in reply to a rude taunt of Mrs Selwyn's relative to her own comparatively beggarly match with that Calvert, and rising as she spoke to leave the room—'I do not reply to you as you deserve, because my father's wife and Clara's mother will always be at least passively respected by me, even when, as now, so grossly fails in respect to herself. Come with me Gertrude; I wish to speak with you.'

We passed out of the house, and for some time walked silently about the lawn and shrubberies, Mary, as I could feel by the trembling of her arm, for I did not like to speak or peep into her face, being very much agitated—I suppose in consequence of Mrs Selwyn's coarse and unfeeling allusion to her husband. After awhile, her emotion passed away, and she had recommenced questioning me of her sister's intimacy with Captain Toulmin, when that gentleman came galloping up the avenue, gallantly waving his hand as he neared the house towards the window of the apartment where we had left Clara and her mother. Mary's countenance flushed scarlet, and she said quickly: 'Go, Gertrude—go at once and inform Captain Toulmin—privately will be best—that I must speak to him privately in the library; you, of course, returning with him. This audacious insolence shall be endured no longer.'

I was a good deal startled by the energy of manner she displayed, as well as by her words, but nevertheless hastened promptly to perform her bidding. I awaited the captain's return from the stables in the hall, delivered my message *sotto voce*, at which he seemed a good deal surprised, but of course bowed graceful acquiescence, and followed me to the library. Mary was standing at one of the windows, and as the door opened, turned and confronted the nonchalant man of fashion with a commanding stern;