

The Nabob's Valentine.

IN TWO INSTALMENT—PART I.

CHAPTER I.

TRAVELLING COMPANIONS.

Denzil Brooke was the victim of an unjust will, or, at any rate, of a very capricious one.

His great uncle from whom three years ago he had inherited the family estate, had saddled it with a tyrannical condition.

It fell to Denzil to remain unmarried after his twenty-fifth birthday, the estate would be forfeited to a distant cousin.

Matrimony is not usually distasteful to young men of five-and-twenty, especially when, like Denzil Brooke, they have a healthy body, a clean mind, and an affectionate heart.

But we all know how certainly things, which in themselves are pleasant and desirable, become disagreeable the moment they are forced upon us.

This was the case with Denzil Brooke. He had been left to his own free will, he would probably have married within a year of his succession to the inheritance; as it was, he was within a month of his twenty-fifth birthday, and was not even engaged.

It was early in February when he put himself and his traps into the express train which started from Paddington for the West of England.

He was about to pay a visit to a bachelor friend near Taunton, a visit—as he was forced to own to himself—which was likely to lead to events of the first importance.

He had spent the Christmas holidays at a country house where he met a young lady with whom he fell in love.

She was lovely, graceful, and charming; and he believed she would have no objection to become Mrs. Denzil Brooke.

She was not his ideal, but then, how few men ever meet their ideals; how still fewer marry them.

He admired Estelle Montfort very much; he believed he could teach himself to love her, and he owned that he had already paid her such attentions as might justify her in considering him with the tenderest wishes of her heart.

Her home was within a few miles of Darlington the house to which he was going. He knew he should meet her, and in his own mind he had not the slightest doubt that she should make an offer of his hand.

It was essential that he should marry somebody before the eleventh of March, and it seemed as if the ladies had willed that that somebody should be Estelle Montfort.

The weather was bitterly cold. It was snowing heavily, too.

Denzil Brooke put his personal belongings on the rack above his head, spread his rug over his knees, and leaning back in his corner seat, prepared to take a leisurely survey of his fellow passengers.

He himself was personable enough, a little over middle height, with broad shoulders, and a fine, frank, honest face.

His quick eyes soon took in the appearance of his fellow travellers.

There were two old ladies, nervous and fidgety; one old gentleman, stout and genial; and a young lady who occupied the corner seat opposite to Denzil Brooke, and whose face he could not wholly see; for she looked out of the window with an air of absorption, and so kept it turned away from him.

Her profile, however, was lovely, and he found a distinct enjoyment in regarding it.

For quite a quarter-of-an-hour she sat looking pensively out upon the snowy landscape; then, with a faint little sigh, she turned round, and permitted Brooke a full view of her face.

It was a charming one, delicately tinted, and lighted up by a pair of lustrous eyes the colour of forget-me-nots.

They looked rather pensive just now; but Brooke felt sure they could melt with tenderness or dance with fun.

She took a book out of her satchel, and began to read.

Brooke did not object to this arrangement; it permitted him to study her unobscured.

Once, in turning the leaves of her book, she dropped her gloves, which lay on her knee.

In a moment he had picked them up and restored them, to be rewarded by a grave little smile and a 'Thank you,' uttered in the sweetest of voices.

The train thundered on through the dreary greenness of the February evening. The snow still fell; the stout, genial gentleman made a remark every now and again but for the most part there was silence.

Denzil Brooke was getting heartily sick of it.

In his soul, he was anathematizing the social prejudices which forbade him to enter into conversation with that lovely girl.

At the first stopping-place, the two elderly ladies departed; the train went on for another fifty miles, then stopped again, this time for nearly a quarter-of-an-hour.

'I shall get out and stretch my legs a bit,' remarked the stout gentleman.

He suited the action to the word, and thus Brooke and the young lady were left alone together.

'How I wish that old chap would get into another compartment,' thought Brooke 'but, of course, he won't; there's no such luck.'

But the Fates were kinder to him than his tears.

The minutes went slowly by, and the stout gentleman did not return. The moment of departure came.

'Take your seats—take your seats!' shouted the guard.

Doors were slammed to, the signal was given; then, at that critical moment, the stout gentleman dashed out of the waiting-room.

Brooke did a mean thing for which his conscience pricked him.

He kept the carriage door closed and himself out of sight.

The stout gentleman, in his bewilderment, rushed to the first door which friendly hands held open for him and sprang in.

The train started; and Denzil Brooke turned demurely round, and looked at the young lady with a flicker of laughter in his eyes.

Her color had deepened, and she looked very grave.

He longed to address her, but dared not; there was a something in her look which repelled audacity.

'I haven't gained much by that move,' he thought disconsolately. 'And serve me right. It was a mean thing to make that old fellow lose his place.'

On and on through the fast deepening night the train sped.

The young lady read her book with an assiduity which would have been highly gratifying to its author; Brooke leaned his head back on the cushion, and pretended to go to sleep.

Suddenly there came a terrible crash, followed by shrieks of alarm throughout the whole length of the train.

Brooke leapt to his feet; his companion turned pale.

The train came to a standstill. Brooke turned to the young lady.

'Don't be alarmed,' he said. 'We are certainly safe, and I don't fancy the accident is a very serious one. Let me help you out; then you will know you are safe.'

She held out her hand to him without speaking.

Here lovely eyes were dilated: her very lips were white. He saw she was about to faint.

Indeed, while he looked at her, her head drooped forward and she fainted away in his outstretched arms.

At that moment the guard came running along the side of the train.

'Is the lady hurt, sir?' 'Not at all. She has simply fainted. I can attend to her. Are we quite safe here? What's the damage?'

'No damage at all, sir—into the passengers, I mean. We've run into something; but luckily the engine driver and stoker jumped off in time, and the two carriages behind the engine had nothing but luggage in them. They're smashed, of course; but nobody's hurt.'

And the guard hastened away to reassure the other passengers.

With a sigh of relief Brooke addressed himself to the highly congenial task of restoring his fair companion.

How lovely she looked, even in her pallor, and with fast shut eyes.

The snowy lids, the long dark lashes resting on the velvet cheek, the sweet mouth, the exquisite profile: what a picture they made in the mellow lamplight.

He chafed the cold little hands, and poured a few drops of brandy between the pale lips, and presently had the satisfaction of seeing the colour steal faintly back to the white cheeks, and the sweet forget-me-not eyes unclose.

She gave a little shuddering sigh, and looked about her rather wildly.

'Was anyone killed? Oh, tell me! was her faint ejaculation.

'No one was ever hurt. It was not a very serious accident.'

'Oh!'

It was a long-drawn sigh of relief. She drew herself away from his supporting arm, and a faint pink blush suffused her cheek.

'Do you feel better?' he asked.

'Yes. It was stupid of me to faint. I can't tell you how much obliged to you I am for being so good to me.'

'Do take a little more of the brandy.'

'No, thank you; I would rather not. I am quite better. Please tell me about the accident. What was it?'

He told her what the guard had said. Then a cunning thought came to him, and he acted on it.

'Of course there will be a delay. Perhaps your friends will be alarmed. Will you let me send a wire for you?'

'Thank you; but it isn't necessary. I don't think my friends will feel alarmed.'

He bit his lip.

A rather mischievous smile dimpled the girl's mouth for a moment.

'He had wanted to discover her name and the address of her friends; she had not chosen that he should discover them.'

In a short time the line was cleared, and the train proceeded.

To Brooke's delight the stout gentleman did not trouble to return to his old quarters.

The young lady behaved charmingly, with the graceful reserve which one expects in well-bred girls, and yet with a gentle, grateful courtesy such as was due to her travelling companion after his attentions.

He was very attentive.

He insisted on her accepting a share of his rug; he regulated the blinds, the win-

down, the ventilator exactly to her taste; he offered books and papers; he did, in short, everything which was a good breeding could suggest to make himself agreeable.

The time passed very pleasantly.

All too soon Taunton Station was announced, and the young lady gathered up her belongings and prepared to take her leave.

Brooke had to travel further. 'You will be met, of course?' he said, anxiously.

'Yes, I think so. Good bye, and thank you so much.'

And she held out her prettily gloved hand.

He thrilled with pleasure as he took it and pressed it ever so slightly.

'I've done nothing to be thanked for. Good bye. I do hope you will be met.'

She stepped lightly out, and walked down the platform.

A servant in livery spoke to her, and she passed out of the station with him.

CHAPTER II.

ESTELLE.

The next day, fairly early in the afternoon, Brooke got into the dog cart which his host placed at his disposal, and drove over to Danby Croft, where the Honourable Mrs. Montfort lived with her daughter Estelle.

During his drive he felt ill at ease, and not in the best of spirits.

He was sure it was his fate to marry Estelle; but all the same he could not banish from his mind the lovely image of the girl he had met in the train.

'I don't suppose I shall ever see her again he mused, 'though if it wasn't for that confounded will, I'd hunt the county for her—and I'd find her; but where's the good? I must be a bridegroom in a month. Estelle is clearly my fate.'

He reached Danby Croft in the dreary grey twilight of the February evening, and was received in the hall by the elderly butler, and conducted to the drawing room.

He saw, at a glance, that the apartment had but one occupant—Estelle herself.

She rose, with a pretty air of embarrassment, and came across the room to meet him, a beautiful and graceful vision, in pale, primrose coloured robes, which fell about her slender form in soft, clinging folds, and trailed behind her on the purple velvet carpet.

She had a dark, rich beauty, of an Oriental, rather than an English, character.

Her complexion was pure and pale; but her eyes were dark as night itself, and her hair was of that bluey blackness which we see in the raven's wing.

Her brow, and nose, and chin were perfect; her mouth would have been perfect, too, if it had had less of pride and more of womanly sweetness.

As it was, Miss Montfort was accounted one of the loveliest girls in the county, and Brooke had certainly thought her the loveliest he had ever met—until last night.

'We are so pleased to see you, Mr. Brooke,' she said, as she gave him her hand. 'Mamma will be down directly.'

'But Mamma's not down directly.' It was nearly half an hour before she made her appearance, during which time Estelle enjoyed the privilege of a tete-a-tete with her guest.

Her looks told him she was happy in his presence. Her eyelids drooped deliciously; her cheeks were now and again mantled by a conscious blush.

She was very lovely, and her manner towards Brooke was sweetly alluring.

He could not help feeling some touch of tenderness towards her as she sat by his side, in her silken robes—sat so close to him that her snowy shoulder all but touched his arm, and he inhaled the fragrance of her breath and of her perfumed hair.

'I may as well get it over,' he thought. 'This time is as good as any other. If I'm to be married in a month, there's no time for shilly shallying.'

He leaned towards her and took her hand.

He opened his lips to make his offer, but closed them again very quickly and started as if he had received an electric shock.

Mrs. Montfort had entered the drawing-room, and with her was the girl he had met in the train!

He could not believe his own eyes.

Mrs. Montfort saw his confusion, and ascribed it to the fact that she had interrupted some sort of tenderness.

'Mr. Brooke, I can't tell you how delighted I am to see you,' she said, as she sailed forward to meet him. 'So good of you to come in such dreadful weather.'

He murmured some unmeaning compliment and looked towards the young lady, who still hovered rather timidly near the door.

Mrs. Montfort saw the look.

'Oh! I am forgetting that you don't know my young relative, Miss Annette Stanley. Mr. Denzil Brooke.'

'I can scarcely claim the honor of Miss Stanley's acquaintance,' said Brooke; 'nevertheless, we have met before. She was one of my fellow travellers in my journey from town.'

Annette held out her hand.

As he did so, he saw in her lovely eyes a look which he interpreted as meaning that he was not to dilate on the incidents of their journey.

He wondered a little, but discreetly said no more on the subject, and the next moment the door opened to admit another person—a gentleman this time.

'Mr. Brooke—Major Hommersley. Major, this is our kind friend, Mr. Denzil Brooke. You have heard of him, I know. Tell me isn't he the best of men, to drive over from Darlington to dine with us in such weather as this?'

'It depends upon the attraction which drew him,' replied the major, with a dry little smile and a half glance in the direction of Estelle.

Brooke flashed to the roots of his hair.

He saw it was an understood thing that he was in that house as Estelle's lover.

Major Hommersley looked about fifty

years of age; he was rather spare, and not very tall; his hair was thick and grizzled; his eyes were keen and twinkling.

He looked like a bachelor, and, as a matter of fact, he was one.

He was quickly followed into the room by the rest of the Danby Croft guests.

These were a couple of dowagers and three very ordinary men.

Mrs. Montfort was not a widow; but the Honourable Reginald Montfort seldom appeared at his own table.

All health was the excuse usually urged by his wife and daughter; but the initiated declared that the truth was, the honourable gentleman was so addicted to the brandy-bottle as to be rarely in a fit condition to leave his room.

The dinner-bell rang.

Mrs. Montfort went to the dining room on the arm of Denzil Brooke.

Annette Stanley came last of all with the major.

Brooke was placed beside Estelle; but Annette sat opposite to him.

Ever and again he stole a glance at her; and with each glance he felt afresh the charm of her loveliness.

Major Hommersley appeared greatly charmed with her.

His intentions, indeed, verged on tenderness; and if he had been younger and less grizzled, Brooke would have felt seriously jealous of him.

After dinner, when the gentlemen went into the drawing-room, the major again monopolized Annette.

Brooke, vexed and ill at ease, was compelled to seat himself near Estelle, in response to the smiling invitation of her eye.

However, the situation was not without its compensations.

He could, at any rate, get to know who Annette Stanley really was.

'I did not know you had a cousin, Estelle,' he remarked, trying to speak carelessly. 'Is the relationship on your father's side or your mother's?'

'There is not very much relationship; what there is is on my father's side. Annette is a fourth or fifth cousin—I hardly know which. She is an orphan and quite penniless. We thought it would be a charity to have her here.'

'Very kind of you, I'm sure,' murmured Brooke lamely.

Estelle seemed to consider for a moment or two; then she added, with an air of frankness: 'Well, I'm not sure that the kindness was altogether spontaneous on our part. You have heard me speak of my uncle, the Nabob?'

'Yes.'

As a matter of fact, the young man had heard of the Nabob almost too often.

He was Estelle's great uncle—his name Matthew Montfort; and he had made an enormous fortune in India, where he had spent his life.

As he was a bachelor, Estelle had great hopes that he might make her his heir.

To this end she, from time to time, wrote him affectionate letters, and sent him out enough embroidered slippers, cushions, rugs, and smoking caps to have served half-a-dozen nabobs of the first water.

Brooke was rich enough himself to dispense with any accession of fortune with a wife, and he would have liked Estelle better if she had not talked of her expectations quite so persistently.

Annette is related to Uncle Matthew in about the same degree as she is to us,' resumed Estelle. 'When he heard she was left penniless, he asked mamma to give her a home—for a time. I suppose he didn't like the idea of a relation of his coming to want. He said he would settle what was to be done with her when he came home. But he is very old, and I don't suppose he will ever come home at all. In the meantime, it looks as if Annette meant to settle something for herself; don't you think so?'

Brooke drew his brows involuntarily as he followed the glance of her eye.

'You don't mean the major?'

'Yes. They seem awfully chummy together. And why not? It would be a good thing for her. He is very comfortably off.'

'He is an old man.'

'Oh, dear, no! Forty-seven, I believe.'

'He looks older. I should have guessed him to be fifty-five.'

'Ah, that is because you men are so malicious to each other! The major is delightful. I don't wonder Annette likes him.'

'And she never saw him until last night? Their acquaintances has ripened rapidly?'

'Yes, hasn't it? But Annette has made herself wonderfully charming to him. You may depend upon it that she doesn't think him too old.'

Brooke did not answer.

He was still looking across the room to where Annette, sweet and lovely in her white dress, sat on a couch, while the sun-burned, grizzled major leaned over her, with admiration lighting up his keen grey eyes.

It was midnight before Mrs. Montfort retired to her chamber.

Denzil Brooke had driven himself back to Darlington, and the house-guests had all retired to their respective apartments.

The door opened, and Estelle, still in her flowing yellow robes, came swiftly in. 'Well!' said her mother. 'Do make haste and tell me.'

'There's nothing to tell. It's no use looking at me like that; I mean what I say.'

'He hasn't offered?'

'No.'

'Didn't I interrupt something when I came into the drawing room?'

'Yes, you did,' said Estelle bitterly, as she flung herself on a fauteuil, with anger sparkling in her eyes. 'I do believe he meant to say something then; but you came blundering in and spoilt everything.'

'But if he really meant to speak, he'll find another opportunity.'

'He won't!' cried Estelle, snapping her white teeth together viciously. 'It's my belief he's in love with that chit of an Annette.'

Mrs. Montfort looked very blank.

'Surely not, my dear.'

'He is! He hardly took his eyes off her and he looked fit to eat Major Hommersley because he kept beside her.'

'Oh, my dear, it's only a passing fancy. He wouldn't have come down here if he hadn't meant to make you an offer. And you know he must make up his mind. He can't afford to shilly shally. He loses the estate if he isn't married by the eleventh of March.'

'Yes; and a nice thing it he makes up his mind to marry that girl.'

'I'll never believe it of him,' cried Mrs. Montfort, in genuine distress. 'He did pay you a great deal of attention at the Bury-erleys. I'll never believe he means to throw you over.'

'I don't know about throwing me over,' said Estelle, gloomily. 'He never said a word of love. I wouldn't let him throw me over if I'd got a ghost of a claim on him; but I haven't. That's what makes it so exasperating.'

'Never mind, my dear,' said the mother soothingly. 'You are sure to do well with your beauty.'

'I don't know about my beauty,' retorted Estelle scornfully. 'What I do know is that I'm twenty-five years old, and have been hawked up the country and down the country, looking for a settlement, for the last seven years. Beauty doesn't last for ever, and it doesn't seem to be worth much even now. I've had lots of admirers but I haven't had one really decent offer. And we can't go on much longer. Papa gets worse and worse, and if uncle Mitthew does come, it is likely enough he will let people know we are not to get this money. If he was so bitter with papa thirty years ago, he's bitter with him still. We shall get nothing from him. He will, perhaps, leave it to that horrid Annette. It's all very well to talk about our uncle, the Nabob; but we know he dislikes us all. If I don't get settled before he comes home, I shan't have much chance afterwards.'

'Well, my dear, you will get settled,' said the good-natured mother, with another attempt at soothing. 'If you don't get Mr. Brooke, you'll get someone else. There are as good fish in the sea as ever came out of it.'

'Very likely; but they went catching, and I'm sick and tired of trying to catch them. I'm not going to be bussed at the last minute, and have all the work to do over again.'

'Then what will you do? questioned Mrs. Montfort anxiously.

'I shall marry Denzil Brooke!'

CHAPTER III.

AT THE BALL.

The next afternoon Brooke was tramping along a country road, alone.

He had been out with the guests, but had somehow got separated from his friends, and being new to the country, had lost his way.

He was glad to be alone, glad of the opportunity to look at his squarely in the face, and to ask himself whether he were in honour bound to offer his hand to Estelle Montfort.

After tramping along for a couple of miles, he came to the sensible conclusion that he need do nothing of the kind.

'I believe she would have accepted me if I had offered; but I can't even be sure of that. Certainly I should be a conceited popinjay to fancy she is in love with me. I never said a word of love to her, and my attentions were no more marked than those of lots of other fellows. At any rate, it's quite clear to me I'm not called upon to make her an offer now that I know I don't care for her as a man ought to care for his wife, and that's there's another girl for whom I could so care.'

Thus far had he got in his ruminations when he pulled up with a start, for 'the other girl' stood just before him.

He had turned a curve in the road, and had now to cross a stile.

At this stile Annette was standing, with her face turned to the setting sun.

He lifted his hat with his left hand, and held out his right to her with an unmistakable air of eager ass.

'Miss Stanley! what an unexpected pleasure!'

She flushed a delightful pink, and the flush made her more lovelier than ever.

'Mr. Brooke,' she said,