

THE MORTLAKE PEERAGE.

(From Chambers's Journal.)

CHAPTER I.

When I was a very young man I was curate of Knutsfield. In the spring of 18—my rector was taken ill, and had to go abroad; and I was left in charge. Shortly after his departure, I received a visit from an old college companion named Stanhope. He was a young man of good family and high connections, and one whom I very much respected. He told me that he was in love with, and engaged to be married to, a young lady, whose friends were abroad; and asked me if I would unite them in holy matrimony. At first, I objected; but he pleaded so hard, and produced a letter from my pretty cousin Emily, urging me to comply with his request, that in the end I consented. Mr. Stanhope wanted to get a special license; but I stipulated that if I was to perform the ceremony, the marriage should be by banns. To this he agreed; and the banns were duly published, he having in the meantime taken up his abode in the parish.

On the day appointed for the marriage, there was a considerable congregation assembled in the church; for the villagers had somehow got wind of the affair, and their curiosity was excited.

The bride was a most beautiful girl. Her glance was like a sunbeam; no one could look at her without an emotion of pleasure. Immediately after the ceremony, the young couple started, as I then supposed, on their wedding tour, and I saw nothing more of them. About twelve months after the wedding, I heard that Mr. Stanhope had obtained a good appointment, and had gone out to India.

More than two years elapsed without anything occurring to recall these incidents to my mind. My rector's health had in some measure been restored, and he was back at the rectory. I had been very hard worked during his absence, and needed rest; so I started on a two months' tour in Switzerland. The incidents of my holiday have nothing to do with this narrative, so I shall at once proceed to state what happened on my return. Of course, the first thing I did was to go up to the rectory to pay my respects to my superior. As soon as the ordinary courtesies had been complied with, the rector said: 'I am in a state of great perplexity. I had an application the other day for a certificate of the marriage of George Spencer Stanhope and Caroline Amelia Craven, said to have been solemnised by you in July 18—; but I cannot find it.'

'Not find it!' I exclaimed, in deep surprise. 'It was duly performed, and duly registered.'

'It is not there now,' replied the rector. 'I have searched carefully; and so did the lawyer's clerk who applied for it.'

'I must see into this,' I replied. 'If the entry is not there, the register must have been tampered with.'

I started off at once, and examined it carefully; and I found, without doubt, that a leaf had been extracted. I taxed my memory as to the marriages which had been solemnised about the same time, and found that at least two others were missing. By whom this fraud had been committed, I could not divine. I questioned the clerk and sexton; but though they distinctly remembered the marriage taking place, they averred that no one had been allowed access to the register without my permission or that of the rector.

I consulted a member of a legal firm with whom I had done business, and in whom I had the greatest confidence; and he caused affidavits to be prepared, setting forth that a fraud had been committed, and attesting that a marriage had been duly solemnised between George Spencer Stanhope and Caroline Amelia Craven, and entered in the register on the 28th of July 18—. These were duly sworn to by myself, the clerk, and the sexton; and were deposited by me in the hands of the legal firm I have previously mentioned.

Shortly after this, I obtained a living in London, and the whole of the incidents connected with this matter had again passed from my mind; when a rumour reached me that Mr. Stanhope had, in consequence of the death, by accident, of his uncle the Earl of Mortlake, very unexpectedly succeeded to the title, and was coming home from India. I called on him shortly after his return, and was received with the greatest cordiality. Of course, the first thing I did was to ask after his wife. For a second or two, he did not answer me; but I noticed that he turned very pale. At last, mastering his emotion, he said: 'She is dead.' I was about to condole with him, when he checked me: 'Do not say any more about it; the subject is too painful for me to discuss at the present moment.'

Not long after this, I met my cousin—who, by the way, had jilted me and married Sir A. Colville, a baronet with large landed estates—and I asked her about her young friend, expressing my regret at her early death.

'Who told you she was dead?' she asked.

'George Stanhope, himself,' I replied.

'Very strange!' she said, musingly.

'What is strange?' I asked.

'That I should not have heard of it.'

'Then, were you not aware of the circumstance till I informed you of it?'

'No; I know nothing but what you have told me.'

'I do not want to be inquisitive,' I pursued, 'but I must ask you one more question: When Mr. Stanhope went to India, did his wife accompany him?'

'No; she remained in England.'

I could not quite understand Lady Colville's manner. She seemed shocked and pained; the subject appeared to be as distressing to her as it had been to Stanhope. She was silent for a time, and then she went on: 'I wish,

Lionel, you and I had not been mixed up with that affair. I hope no evil will come of it.'

'What should, my dear cousin?'

'I cannot exactly tell. The awkward part of the business is that I feel certain there was a child born of the marriage.'

'Why is that awkward?'

'Don't you see that if the child is living, and is a boy, the boy would be Lord Mortlake's heir?'

'Of course he would.'

'But,' she replied with emphasis, 'I do not believe that he knows of the child's existence.'

'Then the sooner he is informed of it, the better,' I replied.

'But I do not know if the child is alive or dead.'

'I shall, with your permission, make it my business to ascertain,' I replied.

'I would rather you did nothing of the kind,' she said quickly. 'If Lord Mortlake applied to me, I should give him all the information I could. He is one of the most amiable and honourable men I know; and we may therefore rest assured that if he desires secrecy on any point, he has good and valid reasons for it.'

'That may be perfectly true,' I replied. 'I have the fullest trust in Lord Mortlake's honour. But there is one thing more I have to say—the register at Knutsfield has been tampered with; the leaf containing the entry of the marriage has been abstracted. What does that mean?'

'I cannot even conjecture; but rest assured that Lord Mortlake had nothing to do with it.'

'Well, at least you can tell me how they became acquainted, and why you took such an interest in Miss Craven's affairs. I should not have solemnised the marriage, had it not been for your solicitation.'

'I know very little; but what I do know I will tell you.—When I was a child, Caroline Craven and I were schoolfellows, and I was her bosom-friend. Her mother and mine had also been schoolfellows, and their friendship had continued after marriage. Mrs. Craven was a sickly, rather weak-minded woman, but at the same time well educated and well bred. It was considered that when she married the rich Mr. Craven, she had made a good match; but I doubt very much if she was happy. He was a pompous, purse-proud man; and not very popular among his friends. As I have said, Caroline Craven and I went to the same school at Barminster. It was kept by the Misses Onslow. They were well connected and highly cultivated women; but they were also narrow-minded, and prim and punctilious. Caroline was a wild, giddy girl, full of spirit, and full of talent, and, as you know, very beautiful. It was towards the end of our residence at this establishment, just when we were thinking of being released from our studies and coming out, that Mrs. Craven fell ill, and was ordered to the south of France for change of air. My father and mother accompanied her and her husband; and we were sent back to school for another year. Caroline remonstrated when she heard of this decision, and vowed she would not go back to school; but it was only an evanescent feeling; she knew her father's stern character too well to think of disobeying him.

'When the midsummer holidays came, which it had been arranged we should spend with Lady Mansfield at Hampton Court, we were packed off on a visit to some friends at Tregothnan, in Cornwall, as Lady Mansfield was too ill to receive us. I suppose it was thought that we could not get at any mischief in such an out-of-the-way district as Tregothnan. But when two girls of eighteen and nineteen are left to their own devices, mischief is sure to follow, especially when one of them is of so impetuous and impulsive a nature as Caroline Craven. In our walks and wanderings in the neighborhood of Tregothnan Park, we made the acquaintance of your friend Mr. Stanhope. He was our constant companion for many weeks; and it soon became evident that he and Caroline were deeply attached to each other. Mr. Stanhope was in those days poor; and Caroline knew that her father would never consent to her union with a poor man, however good his family might be. Still, as Mr. Stanhope was as impulsive as she was, they agreed to get married first, and obtain his consent afterwards; and I weakly consented to aid them. The marriage took place, as you know, and we all returned to Tregothnan. I never saw two people so devotedly attached; they seemed to live only in each other's presence.

'At last the vacation came to an end, and we had to return to Miss Onslow's. The parting between the lovers was a very painful one; but it had to be endured; and as Caroline could not make up her mind to face her father's anger, all sorts of vows were meanwhile exchanged.

Caroline was always inclined to put off the evil day; and so it was arranged that as soon as Mrs. Craven was convalescent, she should be informed of the marriage; and through her influence, Caroline hoped to obtain her father's forgiveness. Instead, however, of recovering, as it was expected, Mrs. Craven took the fever, and died at Rome. This was a death-blow to poor Caroline's hopes; and shortly after that, my father and mother returned to England, and I was taken from school; since which, I have never seen my friend or heard from her. I heard that Mr. Craven did not intend to return to England, and eventually that he had settled at Florence; but the friendship between the families ceased at the death of Mrs. Craven; and since then I have lost sight of my friend altogether.'

My cousin's narrative threw very little light on the points I wished to have elucidated—namely, Was the girl I had married to Lord Mortlake really dead? If she was not, what had become of her? At one time, I felt a strong inclination to proceed at once to Lord Mortlake, and open all my mind to him, and seek in that direction a solution

of the mystery; but on consideration, I came to the conclusion that such a course was not advisable—that it was no concern of mine, and that I had better let the matter rest.

More than thirteen years had elapsed since the ceremony which forms the ground-work of this narrative took place at St. John's, Knutsfield, and in the interval I had been preferred to a charge in the district of Canterbury. It was while in residence here that I was induced to proceed further with the investigations I have already described. In the ancient city of Canterbury there resided a maiden lady by the name of Onslow. She was moving in good society, and was considered a very kind benevolent lady. After a time, it came to my knowledge that she had formerly kept a ladies' school. On hearing this, my old curiosity returned, and I determined to call on Miss Onslow, and ascertain if she was the same person who had been preceptress to my cousin and Miss Craven.

Miss Onslow proved to be a very stately old lady, very tall and very angular, with strongly marked features and dark piercing eyes. I took a dislike to her the first instant I sat my eyes upon her; but that does not matter. I apologised for my intrusion, and was received most graciously.

'I understand,' I said, 'that you formerly kept an establishment for the education of young ladies?'

'Yes,' she replied; 'at York House, Barminster.'

'Just so. And among your pupils, some thirteen years since, you had a Miss Emily Skeffington, now Lady Colville?'

She answered in the affirmative.

'You also had at the same time a pupil named Caroline Amelia Craven?'

'A bad girl, sir—a very troublesome girl,' she said with much vehemence.

'Possibly. But we will not discuss Miss Craven's qualities. How long did she remain after Miss Skeffington left?'

'Miss Onslow's brow darkened; she hesitated for a few seconds, and then replied: 'Some length of time—nearly a year, I should think. Her mother died abroad; and when her father sent for her, she was too ill to travel.'

'Did she remain in your establishment the whole of that time?'

'No; she was so ill, that at last we had to take her to the seaside.'

'What was the nature of her malady?'

'We did not quite know.'

'Did not the medical man give you some clue to her ailment?'

Miss Onslow gazed at me haughtily and defiantly, but she made no answer. 'Never mind,' I went on as blandly as I could. 'I will ask you another question, which I am sure you will at once answer. Did you know that Caroline Craven was married?'

She stared, and grew very pale, but replied at once and most emphatically: 'No.'

'But Miss Craven must have told you she was.'

'Girls who are in that situation,' she answered quickly, 'always say that; but there were no valid proofs'

'In that situation? What am I to understand?'

'I really do not see, sir, what right you have to cross-question me in this manner,' she said haughtily.

'Very true, madam; I certainly have no right to question you; but it will be wise on your part to answer, because I have good reasons for probing this matter to the bottom, and I would rather do it quietly than otherwise.—Now tell me,' I went on, 'what am I to understand by the phrase "in that situation?"'

'She was about to become a mother,' she answered doggedly.

'The girl being in that situation, and asserting that she was married, what steps did you take to take to ascertain if there was any truth in her statement?'

'None. She had no certificate; and we did not want to create a scandal by publishing the facts to the world.'

'Did you make this known to her father?'

'No. If the truth had got wind, even supposing the girl to have been really married, it would have ruined us.'

'True. You thought nothing about the girl or her future prospects; all that you did was to hush the matter up and pack her off to the seaside. What was the name of the place you took her to?'

'Sandgate, a small watering-place in Kent.'

'And the child—what has become of it?'

'It died a few months after its birth.'

'Of that you are certain?'

'Yes; of that I am certain.'

'And the mother, what became of her?'

'She went to Florence to her father.'

'Is she alive or dead?'

'I cannot say. I heard nothing of her since she left us.'

I cannot say that I was quite satisfied with the lady's mode of answering my questions; but at the same time I felt that I had no reasonable grounds for questioning the truth of her statements; so I merely thanked her, saying that she would oblige me if she would give me the address of the person with whom Mrs. Stanhope lodged, and also that of the medical practitioner who attended. She complied at once; and folding up the paper, I was about to leave the room, when she interposed, and earnestly entreated me not to publish to the world her share in the matter.

'At present,' I said, 'I have no intention of so doing; but I can make no promise. If the child is really dead, as you state, no good purpose could be served by such a course. Before, however, I am satisfied upon that point, I must have better evidence than that which I now possess; and with that I bowed and left the room.'

(To be Continued.)