

MISS BEE.

BY GEORGE MANVILLE FENN.

CHAPTER I. TWO OLD FRIENDS.

My dear Jack! My dear Tom! Then a sturdy grip and the warmest of hand-shakings, the two afternoon old fellows each resting his left on his friend's shoulder...

'It's like old times, Tom, to get a good grip of your fist,' said Dr. Banks. 'Why, Jack, you make me sniff the air; and I begin thinking of pair-cars and tubs, and—oh, dear me! It's thirty years ago!' cried Mr. Thomas Hensley...

'By George! it is, old man,' cried the doctor. 'In beginning to think Nature's an impostor. She don't give fair measure, I'll swear. Thirty years? Don't seem like ten. Only I say, Tom, what a very wide parting you've got.'

'Hah! humph! yes,' said the old solicitor, passing a thin white hand over his shiny bald head with a rueful look, which changed to a smile as he retorted: 'Rather frosty up atop of your mountain, though, Jack.'

'Eh! frosty? By George! yes,' replied the doctor, giving his shaggy grizzly hair a rub which seemed to make it start up all over in silver flames. 'It wasn't grey years ago, Tom. But here I am. Thought I'd give you a look-up. Kout you out of your pounce-box for a bit. Left my patients to Bee, and I'm going to have a week's raking along with you, dog. We haven't had a bit of fun together these thirty years.'

'Humph, no!' said the old solicitor, shaking his head. 'No. And he looking very stern and uncompromising as his eyes wandered round his dingy room, over ancient volumes bound in law calf, supposed to be sheltered on their shelves from sooty London dust by curtains of tea-leaf green; over battered tin boxes with people's names in dirty white paint, and here and there the word "Exors.," and, altogether, Mr. Thomas Hensley seemed the very last person in the world to go raking, as his visitor called it—his visitor, the hearty, florid man with a breezy aspect of the country about him, as he stood glowing, and brightening one of the dingiest chambers in the old Inn of Court.'

'Humph, no,' repeated the lawyer, shaking his head, and for the moment growing more yellow and grim and legal-looking. Then his eyes fell upon the flower in his old friend's button-hole. They rose to his ruddy face, then to his bright, clear eyes, and the effect was that a flash came into his own; a war of memories of early manhood swept over him; the wrinkles in his brow grew less deep, the crow-feet at the corners of his eyes were stretched flat, and the creases on either side of his mouth grew deeper and were joined by others that seemed to improve his countenance; and raising his hand from the doctor's shoulder, he slapped it down again.

'Why, it was boat-race day, Jack; and we dined at the Winecellar.' 'To be sure we did; and went to the Princess afterwards,' said the doctor. 'Wrong, you dog!' cried the lawyer. 'It was the Adelphi—Wright and Paul Bedford, and Madame Celeste and Miss Woolgar.'

'We'll compare notes about the bairns over our wine.'

CHAPTER II. THE SECOND GENERATION.

'Old gents enjoying themselves, 'm, reg'lar,' said Charles, the waiter. Bottle of Chamberlain, 'm—to be shown, first, to the fire.'

The 'old gents' were enjoying themselves at the old-fashioned hotel in Covent-garden, for Doctor Banks had declined to go to his friend's club; but it was in a very quiet fashion. They had had the dinner they had chosen, and were sitting sipping their wine and smoking their cigars, taking over old times, and growing young in the effort. The hour had arrived for ordering a cab to take them to the theatre, but they had ordered a bottle of Chamberlain instead, and no lease was the better for the price of two stalla that night. There was so much to talk about, so much to recall of the times when they were boys together at Rugby—'at Oxford—of what had taken place since.

'Ah, Tom, the time has gone by like a dream, I can't believe I am so old. But I'm glad the world has prospered so with you, old fellow.'

'I suppose it has,' said the lawyer, dreamily, 'in every way save one.'

'Ah, yes,' said the doctor, bending forward to lay his hand upon the other's knee. 'My trouble, too, lad. God bless her! She was a sweet lady. She might have been my dear wife's sister. Strange, Tom, that we should both be called upon to bear the same sorrow the same year. Twenty years ago, lad, twenty years ago.'

There was silence in that room for some time. The place looked dim and solemn too, lit as it was only by four wax candles in old fashioned plated candlesticks, which were reflected in a weird fashion from the polished mahogany table, while it needed no very active imagination to suggest that the massive old sideboard was the entrance to a family vault, and the bronze tea urn upon the corner table only devoted to the preservation of cinerary remains.

The silence was broken by the trickling sound of wine poured from the cobwebbed bottle, and then, as if moved by one impulse, the old friends rose, and in silence drank a toast—to the memory of the dead.

As they let down their empty glasses and resumed their seats, the lawyer blew his nose loudly, while Dr. Banks, a fine, hearty, florid specimen of a simple country gentleman, made no pretence, but wiped his eyes slowly, and said humbly, 'God knows best.'

There was another silence, and then the candles seemed to burn up more brightly—perhaps it was only the illusion of the old friends' eyes—and then the doctor said aloud— 'Yes; we live again in our children, Tom. Now then, what sort of a chap is your Fred? 'Eh? My Fred? Splendid fellow, Sir. Thorough English gentleman. Took honors at his college; devoted to his profession. Getting quite a good practice, young as he is.'

dart, fresh complexion, brown hair, clear grey eyes, straight nose, ruddy lips, with the top curled up, and a voice like an opera singer.'

'Quite a belle, I wonder she is not engaged,' said the lawyer, smiling. 'Might have been half a dozen times, but she laughs at it all, Tom. Our last curate went away on purpose to hang himself.'

'And did he?' 'No; he turned Anglican instead, and has got into trouble about vestments. By George! though, you'd like my Bee. She's a splendid girl, bless her! but I've quite spoiled her.'

'Indeed?' 'Yes,' said the doctor, with a sigh. 'You see, Tom, when that trouble came upon me, it about drove me wild, and I quite worshipped the poor little child her mother had left to my care. I wouldn't let a soul touch her. I used to always wash and dress her myself, and take her out with me on my rounds. Why, she could't have been four when she used to stop in my gig and the reins perhaps for a couple of hours, when I was seeing some patient out in the marsh, while Dick, my old retriever, would sit before the horse's head. She was my companion down in our lonely place; and if it had not been for her I should have gone melancholy mad. She saved me, Tom, from drink, I'm sure she did. Oh, Tom, you can't understand how I've loved that girl.'

'I think I can, Jack,' said the lawyer, with his lip quivering a little. 'You forget that I was left much in the same way.'

'Yes; but you were always such a long-headed, clever fellow, Tom; you wouldn't spoil your boy.'

'And I don't believe you've spoiled your girl, Jack. I don't, 'pon my soul.'

'Ah, but I have horribly. Fancy what a life for a tender girl, with no companion but a rouch country doctor in a buccolic parish.'

'But you've had her well educated?' 'Oh, yes. Taught her a lot, too, myself. We read together—she reads Greek like an Athenian.'

'Oh, I couldn't think of it. They've never seen one another. 'But there is a railway down to your parts, and an inn.'

'Railway, Tom? Inn? Don't talk stuff. There's a warm welcome for the young dog if he'll come, and I can give him some of the best shooting and fishing in the county. But—oh, no, it wouldn't do.'

'Why not?' 'Hang it all, Tom! My Bee married! Why, what would become of me? 'Become of you, you selfish old humbug? Why, you could attend their children when they had the measles. There, I shall send Fred down to see her, and if the young folk like each other, they shall marry.'

'Hang it all, Tom! gently!' cried the doctor. 'My Fred wants a wife.'

'Does he?' 'He don't know it, but I do. I think he works too hard, and wants change; the change that sweet, pure English home life would give him. I should like to see him married to a good woman.'

'Should you?' 'Such a one as the daughter of my old friend would be.'

'Thank you, Tom,' said the doctor, changing his tone. 'But I say, though, old man,' he added, laughing and bantering again; 'suppose we should not like your Admirable Crichton? 'No fear of that. You'd be sure to like the lad, Jack.'

'I swear you'd fall in love with my girl, Tom,' cried the doctor, excitedly. 'Then he shall come down and see her, Jack; and I hope it will be a match. They won't be poor.'

'No, that they won't,' said the doctor. 'Well, I'm very glad, Jack,' said the lawyer, rubbing his hands. 'I don't know that I am,' responded the doctor. 'I came up to town for a bit of fun, and I'm beginning to regret it.'

'Yes, Fred, and I've had a tearfully dissipated week—hardly done a stroke of work.'

'Glad of it, dad. You work much too hard.' 'So do you, sir; and I've made an engagement for you to go and spend a few days at the doctor's.'

'But I don't know him, father.' 'Not know him? Well, but I do. Pish! He's my oldest friend—a true gentleman. Why, Fred, he'll look upon you as if you were his son.'

'Well, it's very kind of him, I'm sure.' 'You like the country, and will be delighted with the place. Charming part, and—er—er—there; I'll be perfectly frank with you, my boy, John Banks has a daughter.'

'And you two have settled that I am to go and fall in love with her?' 'Yes, and marry her, Fred. We are very old friends, and it would be most agreeable to us both if such an alliance were formed. She's a charming girl, too; Fred; and really, my dear boy, I think it's the best thing you can do.'

Here Mr. Hensley leaned back in his chair with a sigh of content, and said to himself, 'Thank goodness, I've got over that.' But he looked at his son with dismay the next minute, as a slight flush came into the young man's cheek, and he said, rather warmly, 'Really, my dear father, this is most absurd.'

'Absurd? What, to find you a lovely wife?' 'To make special arrangements like this without consulting me. Hang it all, father, a man don't take a wife as if she were a brief.'

'Oh yes, he does, my boy, often,' said the lawyer—'brief endorsed so many guineas.'

'I'm not going to,' said Fred Hensley. 'Now don't be rash, my dear boy, there's nothing settled. I only saw John Banks off this morning, and our parting words were that we would say nothing to the young people, but that you should just go down and see the young lady, and if a mutual liking sprang up, well and good—and if it did not—'

You didn't take me when you went courting.' 'Hem! No,' said his father, and the matter, as they say in the House of Commons gallery, 'dropped'; Fred going down alone to Bellethorpe, and walking in three miles from the station, to where the doctor's house was pointed out, and nodding his satisfaction at the aspect of the place, with its trim lawns, enormous yew-hedges, and glass-houses full of flowers and fruit.

TO BE CONTINUED.

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