

common-place world about him, was evidently uplifted in imagination to the starry floor, and breathing the intoxicating atmosphere of the seventh heaven. His beautiful betrothed—spite of herself—looked charmingly conscious, and the fugitive color came and went upon her cheek with confusing distinctness and rapidity. Francis Herbert—pale, agitated, silent—would have seemed to be unobservant of anything around him, but for the frequent, half-abstracted glances he from time to time directed to the place which Clara—who had excused herself from appearing under the plea of headache—usually occupied. Mr. Merivale was unusually grave and reserved; his excellent lady irrepressibly fidgety and nervous: in fact, the only person present, with the exception of Sir Henry, who appeared at all self-possessed and at ease, was Agnes; and even her calm serenity was in some degree disturbed by the manifest discomposure of her relatives. The signal for leaving the table was joyfully welcomed by every one sitting at it, and the apartment was cleared in a twinkling. Mr. Herbert rode out on horseback, and did not return till dinner had been some time over. When he entered the dining-room he found no one there but Mr. Merivale and Sir Henry, the latter of whom withdrew to the drawing-room and the ladies a minute or two afterwards.

Francis Herbert swallowed two or three glasses of wine in quick succession; and Mr. Merivale presently said, "You appear to be strangely agitated, Francis. May I ask the cause?"

"No one has so good a right to do so, and to be truly answered," was the instant reply. "The plain truth is, sir,—and I hardly knew it myself till yesterday evening,—that I respect, admire, what dull, unmeaning words are these," he added, breaking into sudden vehemence, and starting to his feet,—that I love, worship, idolize, your youngest daughter, Clara!"

"Clara," echoed Mr. Merivale. Pooh! This is absurd. A man in years,—and I had hoped discretion,—love, worship, idolize a mere child!—for Clara is scarcely more."

"I knew you would say that," rejoined Herbert, with kindling fire. "I have said so to myself a hundred times during my visit here, as each day found me more hopelessly enthralled. That Clara is young is true; but the graces of her mind and person have far outstripped slow-footed Time; and I live but on the hope that she may one day be my wife."

"You can expect but one reply from me, Francis Herbert, to an aspiration so absurdly premature," said Mr. Merivale, with grave, almost stern earnestness. "It is this—"

"One word more," eagerly interrupted the young man, "I do not ask—I could not dream of asking, an immediate decision, either of you or Clara. I will wait patiently a year—two—three years, if you will, for that. All I pray for is permission to be near her the while, that I may strive to win the priceless jewel of her love; not by the flattery of protesting words,—these I will never use,—but by the silent homage of a heart which time will prove is wholly and for ever hers!"

"This rashly concluded," said Mr. Merivale, "you will perhaps have the kindness to listen to a few words of common sense. Your proposition

—translated into ordinary language, amounts to this:—that having taken a violent fancy—it is really nothing else—for a young girl just as it were at the threshold of life, you wish to deprive her of the opportunity of hereafter forming an intelligent and independent estimate of yourself, in comparison with others, by hampering her, in the eyes of the world, with an implied engagement, to the fulfilment of which, should your present inclination endure,—which, after what has passed, I must be permitted to doubt,—she would find herself morally coerced, however repugnant to her the sacrifice in the supposed case might be."

"Mr. Merivale, you libel—insult me!"

"I have no intention to do either. I quite believe in the present sincerity of the young-mammoth enthusiasm you have just displayed,—just as I believed a twelvemonth ago that you were in love with Eleanor—"

"I was self-deceived. It was esteem and admiration I felt for Eleanor—not this consuming love!"

"No doubt: and it is quite possible you are also *self-deceived* with regard to Clara! Tut—tut, young man, you may spare your exclamations; they will scarcely turn me from my purpose. However, I do not hesitate to say there is no one I would prefer as a son-in-law to you; and if, after a strict separation of certainly not less than two years—"

"Say separation for ever—you might as well," passionately interrupted Herbert: "not to see or communicate with each other for two years will be tantamount to that, I feel assured."

"Not if your mind holds; and Clara, who will then be only eighteen, is willing to accept you. My determination is at all events fixed and immovable; and, after what is passed, I must request that the period of probation may commence at once—to-morrow."

All to no purpose was it that Herbert implored, entreated, begged, for even a modification of these hard conditions. Mr. Merivale was deaf to all his pleadings, and further insisted that he should give his word of honor not to correspond directly or indirectly, with Clara, till the expiration of the stipulated period. He did so at last; and the interview terminated by Mr. Merivale saying, "You will write to me, of course, as usual; but let it be an understanding that this subject is to be avoided. And this for two sufficient reasons. One, that if you change your mind, the penning of excuses for doing so would be unpleasant to yourself; the other, that, supposing you do *not* change your mind, I have a strong distaste for the rapturous literature with which, I have no doubt, you would liberally favor me. And now, my dear boy, let us join the ladies."

At about noon the next day Francis Herbert left Oak Hall for France, *via* Southampton, but not till after he had obtained—thanks to Mr. Merivale's kind offices—a brief parting interview with Clara.

About a twelvemonth after Eleanor's marriage with Sir Henry Willoughby, and consequently in the second year of the onerous probation imposed upon Francis Herbert, two important events occurred in connection with the Merivale family. An uncle, with whom Clara had ever been the pet and darling, died, and bequeathed her the