

self towards Mr. Shorncliffe, remarked that if she carried her looking-glass and comb into connubial life, she would certainly give the most faithful reflection to her husband's least pleasant qualities, and comb his hair in a manner not contemplated by *coiffeurs*.

The neighbour tried to enter into her ideas of a pleasant conversation, but found himself so entirely opposed as to the required conditions that he contented himself at last by answering her at random; so they talked something in this manner—

'You go everywhere, Mr. Shorncliffe. I have seen you at five hundred places this season.'

'No, I think she is best in the "Grande Duchesse."'

'You are fond of dancing? I know you are.'

'I prefer Patti of the two.'

'Those are very beautiful flowers. I adore flowers.'

'I hear that this last novel is a failure.'

'Are you going to the Zoological next Sunday?'

'Yes. I heard her twice at Vienna before she came here.'

And so forth. But the worst of it—for Mr. Shorncliffe—was that the lady did not feel offended, but came to the conclusion that her neighbour was a little deaf, and that it was a well-bred thing to humour him.

It was a desperately long dinner; for Mr. Surbiton inclined to massive hospitalities, and thought there could never be enough of a good thing. But it came to an end, as even desperately long dinners must do; and when the ladies had all sailed out of the room—like a fleet of flowers—the gentlemen did what gentlemen always do on such occasions—took a little more wine, and tried to bring together the scattered elements of conversation. As for Harry Doncaster, he seemed, for the first time, aware of their presence—so engrossed had he been with his fair neighbour, who was not only by this time mistress of his heart, but of his head also; for his brain had gained new life from her beauty, and his fancies were exhilarated as if fresh from a feast of the gods. Mr. Hardcastle, who was on the other side of the table, nodded to him as he touched his glass with his lips, and his looks said as plainly as looks can say, 'I congratulate you.'

Shorncliffe was first in the drawing-room, and when Doncaster entered that apartment he found him engaged in conversation with Miss Surbiton, and pretending to take tea. To what extent he would have succeeded in interesting the young lady I cannot say; for he was cruelly treated shortly afterwards by his host, who drew him away to ask his opinion upon some important question connected with the City. Harry took the opportunity to slip into the vacant chair, and was once more master of the situation.

How they got there—by what pretence—and at whose suggestion—I know not; but in a few minutes the pair were miles away (drawing-room measure) in the conservatory.

There was no one near; and you may be sure that both were conscious of the fact. Miss Surbiton, indeed, so far appreciated it as to take the opportunity of asking a question which she would not have liked to ask with a chance of being heard.

'Pray excuse me, Captain Doncaster, for asking you; but where did you get that little turquoise ring you wear on your watch-guard?'

'Originally,' answered Harry, 'by the prosaic process of buying it, if I remember rightly; but how I came by it lately is more than I can tell. I thought I had given it away years ago. It seems, however, that I have been wearing it, for some little time, at least, next to my heart, for my servant found it in the side pocket of a coat. How it came there is a mystery to me, but I remembered it as being my former property.'

'You were at the Dragon Guards' ball at Brighton last week—I know you were—I saw you there. It was there that I lost the ring. It must have come off with my glove, which I dropped going out.'

A light broke in upon Harry Doncaster.

'I was an idiot,' said he, 'not to have connected the two circumstances before. It was I who found the glove. You were in the carriage, and had driven off before I could return it.'

'You found the glove? I thought it was Mr. Shorncliffe. He brought it back very unnecessarily, and made a great fuss about it at the Zoological Gardens on Sunday. He was a stranger to us then, though it seems that papa banks with him.'

'The fact is, I lost the glove by accident, and Mr. Shorncliffe appropriated it; but the ring, which I had not observed, was not then in it, and must have fallen out previously, and remained where I originally placed the glove. I ought to have quarrelled with Mr. Shorncliffe for his share in the proceeding, but have determined to forgive him in consideration of the temptation. His object was to use the glove for the purpose of getting an introduction to its owner.'

The pink coral gained a decided advantage over the ivory as Harry said these words.

'I consider his conduct highly impertinent,' said the lady; 'but it does not alter my opinion of him, for I did not like it from the first.'

'I will at any rate restore the ring,' said Harry, disengaging it from his chain, and placing it in its owner's hand.

Blanche Surbiton looked curiously at her companion as she received the ornament.

'Have you any recollection,' she asked, quietly, 'of the person to whom you gave it so long ago?'

'I remember her perfectly as she was then; but it is ten years since—just before I went into the service and to India—and she was then a little girl. Can it be that—'

And Harry paused to examine the possibility which suggested itself.

'She was a child of seven or eight years of age, and you gave the ring to her upon the beach at Brighton,' said Miss Surbiton, decidedly. 'She had ventured out a little too far, looking for seaweed, and had stayed upon a piece of rock until the tide—then coming in—surrounded her. She was in great danger, for she was too frightened to help

herself. You were walking upon the beach at the time, waded through the surf, and carried her on shore. She was nearly fainting—you were very kind to her—revived and soothed her—and ultimately gave her back to her servant, who had been talking to a soldier and came up at the last moment. On leaving the child you placed this little ring upon her finger, and she has always worn it since in remembrance of her deliverer.'

'I remember every incident you mention,' said Harry; 'and now that you bring the child to my mind I can recall her face in your own. But time makes great changes in young ladies who are not grown up.'

And here Harry Doncaster made an obvious remark or two about the influence of time being sometimes of a favourable character, which brought the pink coral to the surface again. Then he asked a question in his turn—

'Did you recognize me?'

'Immediately. At the ball I thought your face familiar to me, and soon remembered where we had met. You have changed very little—scarcely at all, indeed.'

Harry did not ask—and I dare say did not care—whether the tendency in his case had been favourable or otherwise; and the lady was not sufficiently gushing to volunteer the information. That the discovery of their old acquaintance gave pleasure to them both was easy to be seen; and when Mr. Shorncliffe—by the merest accident, of course—came presently into the conservatory, even that very assured gentleman arrived at the conviction that he was no welcome addition to the party.

CHAPTER IV.

WHOM SHALL WE MARRY?

'But how can I, as a man of honour, misrepresent my position, and conceal the fact of all these awful debts?'

Harry Doncaster asked this question of Mr. Hardcastle at breakfast next morning in the Albany, where, by the special desire of the occupier of A 1, the young officer had taken up his temporary quarters.

'As for your want of property—which will not be always a want, for you must have some one of these days, even if your brother marries, and you do not get the title and estates—I don't see that you need feel any embarrassment. Nothing can be more fair than a match of the kind. There is birth and position on the one side, there is money on the other. The Surbiton family, I am sure, will be charmed with the alliance. Your debts are awkward, of course; but a great many of them are of a kind which no man ought to pay in full if he can avoid it. If you will authorize me to arrange with the rascals, I will undertake to manage them, to make a compromise as to amount, and give you time besides; and moreover, I will explain the whole matter to Mr. Surbiton, who has the highest regard for me as a friend and a man of business, and will, I am sure, act upon my advice.'

Harry was enchanted at the idea of such a satisfactory settlement, and threw his scruples to the winds. Mr. Hardcastle's generous proffers touched him to the heart; it would be foolish and ungrateful to refuse them. The result was that Harry placed himself entirely in the hands of his new friend, and thought how happy the world might be if friends of the kind were more common.

Released from sordid cares, Harry Doncaster could venture to declare his love. Indeed, to tell the truth, he had gone a great way in that direction on the previous evening while in the conservatory, and he was in no want of an opportunity for meeting Blanche Surbiton again, for he had learned that she intended to ride in the Row that morning, accompanied only, servant excepted, by Miss Mankillen. So Harry, mounted as before by Mr. Hardcastle, went into the Row also, and there the two met, quite by accident of course, and Miss Mankillen, not being the kind of person to ride with a lady if she could get a man instead, did not trouble them long with her company, a fact upon which I suspect Blanche Surbiton had calculated when she asked her to go.

Harry and Blanche—you will excuse my familiarity with the young lady—after seeing Miss Mankillen inflict herself upon a nervous gentleman who was riding for his health, and was too weak to make resistance, took a canter together, which had the effect of leaving everybody behind, and then walked their horses and began to talk as people do when they have a great deal to say and know not how soon they may be disturbed. It was Harry who took the initiative in this decided course of action, and resuming the conversation from the point at which it had broken off in the conservatory, made such rapid progress that he arrived at the 'momentous question' with a celerity that surprised himself, to say nothing of his companion. However, he had not mistaken his ground, that was clear, and before anybody came up to talk to them, Harry had not only extracted as favourable an answer as a lady is likely to give who is agitated and has a horse to manage, but extorted a confession that for ten years past the childish fancy that mingled with her gratitude had been a sunny memory of her life, which had been lit up with the hope of meeting its object once more. So when they rejoined Miss Mankillen, or rather when Miss Mankillen rejoined them, they both looked so happy as to be decided objects of suspicion; indeed the pink coral in Blanche's face was sufficient evidence for conviction in any court of justice.

That afternoon, when Mr. Surbiton returned home—although retired from business he haunted the City upon various pretences—Mrs. Surbiton made to him an important communication—that Captain the Hon. Harry Doncaster had made an offer for their daughter's hand. Mr. Surbiton's answer, I am sorry to say, was coarse. He said 'Rubbish.' But it was not rubbish for all that, and Mrs. Surbiton assured him that the match was one of which she highly approved, the connection was so good, and would give them such an influential place in society, especially if her daughter should become a viscountess, of which there seemed every chance. The lady, in fact, was for accepting at once, and, what was more, celebrating the marriage as soon as possible, to prevent accidents.

But Mr. Surbiton, strange to say, did not seem to see the advantage, especially compared with another offer which had been made to him in the City for the hand of the same young lady. This, it appeared, was from no less a person than Mr. Shorncliffe, who had formally asked for his consent in the event of his obtaining that of the lady. The worthy gentleman respectfully, but firmly, avowed his preference for the monied suitor. 'What is rank to us?' he said, 'I am a self-made man, and everybody knows it. With the money I can give to Blanche, and that which Shorncliffe has, their position will be second to nobody's. We don't want empty handles to names, and to be hanging on to poor, proud families that will scarcely own us. I like to have the sinews of war that I have always relied on, not the gold lace and the gloss, that nobody cares about if they can get the other thing.' Mrs. Surbiton could not conceal her disgust at this commercial view of the question, and intimated to her husband, though in more polite and prosaic phrase, that however he might, on account of his wealth, have inherited some of the flowers of a social Eden, the trail of the City was over them all, and that she was ashamed of his mean way of looking at the position.

The position, indeed, was a very awkward one, for the harmony of the family, between whose heads nothing could more confidently be expected than a right royal row. But Mr. Surbiton had a fortunate preference for peace and quietness, and an idea occurred to him.

'I tell you what it is, my dear,' said he; 'it is of no use for us to quarrel about this business. People are never good judges of their own affairs. It is always better that they should take counsel's opinion, and I know of no man whose opinion I would rather take than that of Hardcastle. I have known him for these thirty years; he has always been my friend, and I have always found his advice put money in my pocket, and if by following it I have put some into his own, that is only fair. He is a clear-headed man of the world, and I promise you, if you agree, that I will be guided by his decision.'

Mrs. Surbiton did not directly make her election; but on the following morning, after a careful consideration of Mr. Hardcastle's character, and the peculiar circumstances of the case—the lady had considerable shrewdness and penetration, and saw into character rather more deeply than her husband—she consented to the compact, reserving to herself mentally the right of playing false if the decision went against her. It was a reservation which I cannot defend, but I am only recording facts, and perhaps I have no right to expose the aberrations of so respectable a lady. So Mr. Hardcastle was bidden to a private dinner, and the two gentlemen had a long discussion on the subject after the ladies had gone up stairs.

The result may be soon told. Mr. Surbiton put the case to his friend as one in which it was impossible for them to have a difference of opinion, and he made it a question, he added, only for the sake of peace and quietness, that is to say, to please his wife. Mr. Hardcastle at first seemed to agree with him entirely, and then proceeded to urge, with an adroitness for which he was remarkable, a long series of qualifications, the upshot of which was that he ranged himself unreservedly upon the side of the wife, and advised his old and valued friend so strongly in favour of the Doncaster alliance that the old and valued friend was fairly carried off his feet. Mr. Hardcastle said a great deal about the young lady's preference, of which he was well aware, and the duty of parents—he was solemn and pathetic upon this subject—to forward the happiness of their children irrespective of sordid considerations. Mr. Surbiton, although an affectionate father in his own way, was not greatly impressed by these arguments; but when Mr. Hardcastle dwelt upon the advantage given to capital by connection, and showed how, for the highest aspirations of finance, social position was indispensable, Mr. Surbiton was visibly moved. And finally, remembering how he had for thirty years followed his old and valued friend's advice with advantage—which advice he could not consider otherwise than disinterested, though the old and valued friend had always made something by it himself—he decided to take it in the present instance.

'But the young man has no money,' (Shorncliffe had told him that,) urged Mr. Surbiton, as a last appeal; 'and he has debts.'

'That is quite true,' replied Mr. Hardcastle, in his most smiling manner, and treating the question as if it were a mere bagatelle. But you cannot give your daughter less than twenty thousand pounds down, whoever marries her, besides the fortune you leave her in your will; and that will be sufficient for them—and his pay is something remember—until he comes into money of his own, even if he does not get the title and estates, which he will in all probability. As for his debts they are not very serious, and I shall be able to arrange for them. Leave that matter in my hands. I should add, by the way, that the twenty thousand pounds ought to be unfettered—and I really think that the alliance is cheap at the price.'

So Mr. Surbiton yielded, and the only uncomfortable feeling that he had when he rose from the table was the triumph that his compliance would give to his wife. He felt small, in fact, as a family man.

The marriage of Captain the Hon. Harry Doncaster with Blanche, daughter of John Surbiton, Esq., was duly celebrated at St. George's, Hanover Square. It was announced in the papers as a marriage in high life, and already the Surbitons felt themselves a part of the peerage.

CHAPTER V.

AFTER THE HONEYMOON.

Never did bride and bridegroom return from their wedding tour more happy than did Harry and Blanche. It was then that their troubles were destined to begin.

A country seat of the viscount's had been placed at their disposal until they made arrangements of their own; and on the third morning after their arrival, when they were seated at breakfast envying nobody in the world, a