

The young men whose unexpected arrival caused so much commotion at Oak Hall will require a few introductory words only. Mr. Francis Herbert, but recently of age, and a well-principled, amiable person, though of somewhat rash and impulsive temperament, was the possessor of a considerable estate in the neighbourhood of Bath,—much improved during his long minority by the care of his guardian, Mr. Merivale,—as well as of a large amount of personal property. He was, in fact, an altogether *bon parti* in the estimation of careful and ambitious mothers—equally, perhaps, with Sir Henry Willoughby, of “the Grange,” near Taunton, save as respects the title—an advantage counterbalanced in some degree by the circumstance of the dowager Lady Willoughby being still alive, in prime health, and entitled by her husband’s will to fifteen hundred per annum, charged upon the son’s inheritance. Sir Henry was three or four years older than Francis Herbert, and of a far more jocund, sanguine temper and disposition, which mood of mind was, however, somewhat toned down on the occasion of this visit by the fear that Herbert was as irretrievably in love with the divine Eleanor as he himself was. There were other differences between them. Francis Herbert was a ripe scholar, and had carried off the honors of a senior Wrangler at Cambridge University: Sir Henry, it was said through carelessness and inattention,—for he had good natural talents,—had been plucked at Oxford. When I have further stated that although Francis Herbert was unquestionably goo-blooming, Sir Henry was, by general admission, much the handsomer man, I shall have written all that need, in this stage of my narrative, be premised of either of them.

The days passed pleasantly away with the young people; and long before the expiration of the month, to which the visit of the gentlemen was limited, it was perfectly clear that Sir Henry was desperately in earnest with regard to Eleanor, and that the stately beauty vouchsafed him as much encouragement as a well-bred, modest maiden might. This was far from disagreeable to either of the young lady’s parents; but that which greatly puzzled Mr. Merivale was, that Francis Herbert appeared to be perfectly resigned, or indifferent, to the success of Sir Henry’s suit. “A whimsical fellow this *ci-devant* ward of mine,” he would often mentally exclaim. “A twelve-month ago, if I had not prevented him, he would have made Eleanor an offer in form; and now, I verily believe his weathercock fancy points to Clara! To Clara, positively,—a child in years, though, to be sure, somewhat womanly in appearance for her age. If it proves so—but it will be time enough to consider of a serious answer to such a proposal when it shall have been seriously made.”

Two days before the expiration of the month, Mr. Merivale was detained rather late by his magisterial duties at Taunton, and finding, when he reached home, important papers that required immediate examination, he withdrew to the library without previous communication with his family or visitors. About eleven o’clock the girls came, one by one, to wish papa good-night; but, pre-occupied as he was, neither the bright flush which mantled Eleanor’s patrician features, nor

the flurry and confusion of manner so unusual with her, arrested his attention. The girlish delight and importance visible in the sweet countenance of Agnes passed equally unnoticed. Not so the stone-pale, yet gleaming and excited aspect, and nervous agitation exhibited by Clara. He was effectually startled out of his magisterial meditations; and the thought arose more vividly than before in his mind, how changed and womanly she had become, in manner and expression, within the last two or three weeks. He was about to question her, but upon second thoughts refrained from doing so, kissed and bade her good night.

She hardly had been gone a minute when Mrs. Merivale came into the library. She, too, was excited,—tearful,—yet smiling through her tears. Sir Henry Willoughby, fortified by a letter from his mother, had formally proposed for the hand of Eleanor, and been conditionally accepted—that condition, of course, being her parent’s consent. “I would not have you disturbed,” said Mrs. Merivale, “but I promised you should see his note this evening. Here it is, and also Lady Willoughby’s very kind letter. There cannot, I think, be any doubt as to how we should decide?”

“None whatever, Emily. The girl has drawn a prize in the matrimonial lottery.”

“And well deserves to have done so, Archibald,” replied the mother, with some quickness.

“No doubt—no doubt. She has my free consent and blessing. But there is another matter I am desirous to speak of. What can be the meaning of the agitation I observed in Clara just now?”

“I can hardly say: but I think Francis Herbert is in some way connected with it.”

“I myself judged so: but have you no proof of this?”

“A slight one only. It seems that about dusk this evening, when the girls, with Sir Henry, and Herbert, were walking in the garden, Clara and Herbert became separated from the rest by a considerable distance. At last Eleanor bade Agnes seek them, as it was getting chilly and time to withdraw in-doors. Agnes obeyed, and as she approached the end of the garden, heard Francis Herbert speaking in earnest, agitated tones; *what* he said she could not distinguish, but hurrying on she found that he was thus addressing Clara, who in tears and almost fainting, supported herself with difficulty against the fountain there. The moment Agnes came in view, Herbert ceased speaking, Clara dried her tears, took her sister’s arm, and murmuring some indistinct excuse for the emotion she could not conceal, walked with her towards the house, slowly followed by Herbert. I thought it best to defer questioning her,—but what Agnes witnessed can have, it seems to me, but one interpretation.”

“No doubt; and a very absurd text it is, however interpreted. We shall probably be more enlightened on the matter to-morrow. In the mean time, as Sir Henry is waiting to see me, we had better adjourn to the drawing-room at once.”

The party assembled at breakfast on the following morning at Oak Hall appeared very ill at ease and anxious, always with the exception of Sir Henry Willoughby, who, spite of his well-bred efforts to subdue himself to the level of the