

ABOUT JOHN.

Dearest Bae, you would hear
About John?
People tell me that Cupid is blind:
In some cases, no doubt; but you'll find—
So I think—that mine's an exception:
I never expected perfection
In John.

He's stalwart and tall,
Has blue eyes,
Auburn hair, and an all but Greek nose:
A mouth rather—well, I suppose
You would say rather large. To my mind
A large mouth's not unplesant, combined
With blue eyes.

As to temperament—well,
I must say
That he's choleric, dear—hot and glowing—
Has tropical methods of showing
His feelings. That's nothing, of course:
I like energy, fire and force,
I must say.

Has he talent? you'll ask.
It is plain
He could write, for he talks very well.
Will be—so I fancy—a swell
At the Bar; for he's astutely though slow:
And that work is far better than show
Is quite plain.

I should like you to know
My dear John:
I feel sure you would quite think with me
That a better man never could be:
Not perfection, of course—I'm not blind:
I never expected to find
That in John.

DAE.

A ROMANCE IN REAL LIFE.

BY THE LATE E. C. GRENVILLE MURRAY.

ONE afternoon, some years ago, I was walking along a narrow old road which leads from Le Crotoy, a fishing village in Picardy, to the town of St. Valéry-sur-Somme. It was in the month of February, and one of those luckless days on which cold, wind and rain all seemed banded in league against the comfort of mankind: the sky, dull and lowering, presented to the eye nothing but a bleak, cheerless desert of gray, relieved only by troops of dark, ink clouds, which would at moments, as though flying the fury of a raging storm, roll pell-mell through the air like an army in rout, pouring down at the same time through the thick, black fog that covered land and sea like a pall a deluge of cold, heavy water, which occasional blasts of a violent north-west wind would lash into whistling, pelting and drenching gusts. It was wretched weather; and how I came to be out in it I am sure I forget; but perhaps it was that the morning had been a bright one, and that, beguiled by the clear winter sun, which threw its will-o'-the-wisp rays on my table like gold-edged invitation cards to be stirring, I had set out joyously in hopes of a good bracing walk on the hard, frost-dried roads, which, seen from my windows, gleamed smooth and glistening as white marble, or, again, in expectation of a gay stroll through the crisp, clean snow which draped the fields with its downy folds and reflected the morning light in opal tints like the glossy satin of a wedding-dress.

But in any case, and whatever may have been my reasons for so doing, certain it is that about noon I had ventured out; and equally so that some two hours after I had good reasons to regret my presumption, for at three, having already wandered far from home, I found myself tramping on the road I have named, wearily plodding my way through a slough of thawing snow, teeth chattering, eyes watering, and fingers numbed, whilst a wind fit to dethrone all the weathercocks in Christendom was ploughing up the earth in showers of mud around me, blowing my hat off my head and howling in my ears like a maniac who has broken his chains and got loose.

I groaned pitifully amidst all this: in the first place, because I had no umbrella; and in the second, because I had no companion to be drenched through with me; for it is a curious fact, and one aptly illustrative of the happy way in which man is constituted, that, whereas I should most certainly have scrupled to ask a dog out on such a day, yet I should have felt the most pleasurable relief in seeing a fellow-being soaked like a towel in my company. The fact is, man is a sociable animal, and, loving to share his emotions with his neighbours, steps into a puddle with a lighter heart when a bosom friend is being wetted to the skin by his side.

Lacking a partner, however, I trudged on alone, plish-plash-plash, through the clayey sludge, cold, dripping, and miserable, stopping occasionally to turn my back to the wind, or to tie up a wayward shoestring, and pondering dolefully in my mind that I had full two hours to go, not only before reaching home, but, perhaps, before finding a shelter of any kind. I think I must have been walking thus three-quarters of an hour when I suddenly heard the music of two pairs of hobnailed boots splashing in the dirt behind me, and forming between them a symphony, the charms of which those only who have been in the same predicament as I can appreciate. "Thank the Fates!" I murmured, and stopped to allow the comers to reach me, noting with a grim smile that they were covered with mud from top to toe, and as damp as a couple of Malvern hydropaths. Their plight was every whit as pitiable as mine; and, although the rain had not abated its flow, or the wind its strength, yet I almost felt as though it had grown fine again. Cor-

roborative proof of the sociability of the human race.

The two men, who were stepping along along the road in my direction, and reconciling me by their crestfallen demeanour with the inclemencies of the season, were peasants. The one was an old man, grey-haired, stooping, and apparently sixty years of age; the other, his son, as I afterwards found out, was a mere youth of, at the most, twenty. They were strikingly alike in physiognomy, notwithstanding the difference in their years, but neither had anything at all remarkable either in his looks or general appearance; both were small, clumsily-limbed, somewhat simple-faced, rather ugly; and, on the whole, they were a very commonplace, every-day-to-be-seen pair of countrymen.

Both mechanically raised their rusty beaver hats as they approached me; but after wishing me a short "Good-evening" continued, much to my surprise and no less to my disappointment, to walk on without taking the slightest notice of me, or, indeed, seeming to remember that I existed; and this, although I stepped by their side and tried to keep pace with them.

"This is poor weather," I observed, in hopes of starting a conversation with my fellow-wayfarers.

"Yes, sir," was the curt reply, and both relapsed again into silence, receiving in monosyllables, or with simple shrugs of the shoulders, every attempt of mine—and I made many—to renew an intercourse.

As such uncivil taciturnity is very rare amongst Frenchmen, I began to examine my companions with more attention than I had hitherto done, in order to discover, if I could, some clue to their strange behaviour. I scanned them curiously, and, it was then I noticed for the first time that their faces wore a look of the most profound dejection—so profound, indeed, that I wondered how it was that I had not observed it at once upon seeing them. Their features were pale and drawn; their eyes, rimmed with black, were cast moodily on the ground, and their heads, hanging heavily upon their chests, had seemingly a weighty load of sorrow to press them down.

Besides this, their gait was uneven, undecided, I might almost say spasmodical; they did not keep step, although close side by side, for now one and now the other, as though goaded by a troublesome thought which he wished to avoid, would of a sudden quicken his pace and break into a hasty, feverish walk, or, contrarily, as though held back by the chain of some unhappy reflection, lag in his stride and draw his hand across his brow with a gesture of pain.

Each seemed so wrapped in the gloom of his own musings as to be unconscious of all around him, and I began to feel angry with myself for having intruded upon the privacy of this grief with my idle and silly chattering. A feeling of remorse, too, sprang up in me as I remembered that for a moment I had accused these poor people of churlishness, and set down the sensitiveness of their sorrow to a sulky rudeness. There must be something very revolting to the feeling of our better nature in the sense of an injustice done even in thought, for I declare I felt for a minute as if I ought to confess my ideas to my companions, and beg their pardon for having wronged them, though only in mind. "Who knows," I muttered, "what efforts it may have cost them to answer me with the composure they did? and I am sure that I myself, under similar circumstances, should have suffered with the same forbearance the company of a stranger, whose presence must have been both irksome and galling?"

Once it seemed to me that the two turned to gaze earnestly into each other's eyes, and then to clasp their hands in a quick nervous grasp, as though each hoped, by so doing, to take from the other a part of the sorrow they appeared to share in common. Neither spoke, however, but the mute sympathetic touch was, doubtless, more eloquent than words. Once again both stopped, at once and together, as if their minds, acting in unison and following the same train, had arrived simultaneously at a point where rest and relief were needed. The old man placed his hand upon the boy's shoulder. "Courage, Henri!" he said, and hastily walked on.

Tears rose to my eyes, but how or why I can scarcely tell, unless it be indeed that grief is contagious, and that the angel who hovers over those who mourn cannot bear to see a heart indifferent; yes, tears started to my eyes, and pity with them. The features of the two peasants became transformed for me; they were no longer ugly and uninteresting; how could they be so, brightened by the halo with which sympathy crowned them?

"Have you far to go, sir?" suddenly asked the old man, breaking in abruptly upon the course of my reflections.

"About a league," I answered.

He made no reply, and we walked on again in silence, the rain continuing meanwhile to pour down in torrents, and the wind lashing itself by degrees into the fury of a hurricane.

After a few minutes we reached a spot where the road branched off in two directions; my path lay to the right. The wayfarers paused as though to take the left; both looked to me.

"This is no weather for such as you, sir, to be out in," said the elder considerably, but in the shy, hesitating tone usual to the poor when addressing those whom they fancy their betters. "If you go a league more in the plight in which you are, you will be in a sad state before reach-

ing home; and he pointed significantly to my clothes, every stitch of which was dripping with mud and water.

"Yes, indeed," I replied, "but what is to be done?"

"Why, sir," he answered, "two hundred yards or so from this I've a cottage, and, if nothing else, I can at least offer you a fire to dry yourself at."

Certainly I was in good need of a shelter, for I was tired as well as cold and wet; but still I am sure that I should have refused this invitation from the fear that it had been made out of mere courtesy, and that my acceptance of it might, in fact, be unwelcome. A few words spoken by the younger man convinced me, however, of the contrary.

"Yes, sir," said he, "come;" and he added, in a low voice to the other, "it will do mother good to have a visitor to divert her this evening. She will fret less."

"Thank you, then," I assented, moved now by a feeling of painful curiosity; and we all three marched on.

A few minutes' walk brought us in sight of a small one-storied cottage, built with flint-stones, and standing isolated near a tilled field of about two acres; before it stood a small kitchen-garden, and at one end of it an open shed half-filled with firewood. A thin wreath of blue smoke curling through its single chimney gave to the house, thanks to the desolate appearance of all the country around, an attractive look which on a finer day it might not have possessed.

"That's my home," exclaimed the old man, but as we approached it I noticed that both he and Henri slackened their pace and seemed to dread advancing: at last both stopped and began to whisper. They were evidently much moved, and the fear that I might be in their way occurring to me again, I told them of it, and expressed a hope that I was not intruding.

"No, no, sir," cried they together, turning their poor sorrow-thinned faces toward me, as though they had interpreted my words as a reproach. "No, no, sir, we are very glad to see you;" and they led the way to their cottage door. Here, however, they paused again, and looked dismally at me. Their emotion, too long pent up, was mastering them. "The fact is, sir," said the old man, trying, but in vain, to smile, as he saw my eyes fixed upon him—"The fact is, sir, we have not been quite happy—py, to-day—sir;" and he looked at me apologetically, as though his grief had been a fault to him, whilst two big tears, for a time kept in by an effort, rolled stealthily down his cheeks.

I am but a poor comforter even at the best of moments, but in this instance, not knowing upon what chord to touch, my speaking could be of very little avail, nevertheless, I hazarded a few consolatory words, such as we always have at hand to exhort sufferers to bear their ills with patience and look beyond the cloud surrounding them to hopes of better things; but I am afraid all I said was very meaningless, for the affliction of which I had been the witness, without knowing its cause, having in a manner impregnated my own heart, I was too much in need of comfort myself to be able to impart any to others. The two men thanked me, however, artlessly, naively, and seemed about to initiate me into the secret of their distress, when the cottage door by which we were standing opened, and a woman with an anxious, inquiring expression on her face came out to meet us. She was old, being perhaps fifty-five years of age, but Time had dealt less harshly with her features than Grief, and the wrinkles which furrowed her cheeks and contracted her forehead into thin, shrivelled folds showed less the footprints of departed seasons than the marks of that hard iron hand of Sorrow whose least touches sear more surely than fire. Her hair was white as spun-glass, and neatly confined under one of those high Norman caps of which the long starched frills, encircling the face, lend a cold, severe expression to the wearer: her gait was stooping, her steps feeble, and her whole appearance denoted lassitude and weakness. She was, as I guessed, the wife of the elder and the mother of the younger of my companions; and the glance she threw at these when she saw them told as plainly as the language of a wife's and mother's eyes can tell what a large and willing share she claimed of all their trials. As she appeared her husband hastily turned his face from her to dry his tears and to assume with a loving, simple hypocrisy a cheerful countenance, with which he fondly hoped to hide the trouble of his heart. "Madeleine," he said in a voice which, poor man! he meant to be gay—"Madeleine, I bring you a stranger very cold, very wet, and, I've no doubt, very hungry. You must try to—" but here he stopped short, his wife's eyes were fixed upon him with a look of quiet reproach.

"François," she asked in a low, slightly tremulous tone, "you have some news to give me?" and at the same time she glanced from him to her son. A moment's silence followed. Henri and his father exchanged a timid look, but before either had spoken the wife had thrown herself into her husband's arms; what need had she for an answer—she, who for years had been used to read every thought, every wish, every feeling of those she loved, long ere they gave expression to them?

I shall never forget that scene—father, mother and son clasped in each other's embrace, and giving free course to their grief in tears of which each tried to stop the flow from the other's eyes, forgetful of the bitter stream which ran from his own; each striving to find in his heart a word

of comfort for the other, and each seeking in vain a like word for himself.

"We must hope," faltered the old man.

"Yes, mother," echoed Henri, "we must hope."

"Ay, my poor boy," said Madeleine, "hope, hope!—in God!" and she pointed upward.

This was the story of the poor family, François Derblay was a peasant, born and brought in Picardy, and the son of poor parents, who, at dying, had left him little to add to what Nature had given him—a pair of strong arms and a sound, honest mind. With this fortune François had begun early to till the fields, and by the age of twenty-five had laid by a little store sufficient to marry on. His choice had been happy, and Madeleine, although poor and untaught, had been a good and loving wife to him. By her thrift and his own hard work his little store quickly increased, and within a few years Derblay reached the goal to which all poor Frenchmen so ardently aspire—the position of a landowner. He had bought himself a few acres of ground, and their produce was sufficient not only to feed his family, but also to enable him to lay by each year a little sum wherewith to enlarge his property. For some time, prosperous in all his undertakings, he was really happy, and at the age of forty could reasonably look forward to passing a quiet, comfortable old age; but, as so often occurs in life, at the very moment when the man deemed himself most secure in his ease, misfortunes began to rain upon him. Dazzled by the accounts of some successful ventures made by neighbours, Derblay began to dream of doubling his capital by speculation, and accordingly invested the two or three thousand francs of his savings in shares which were to bring him fifteen per cent., but which ultimately left him without a sixpence. To make matters worse, his land was bought by a railway company, and this sale, by placing in his hands a round sum of ready money, prompted him with the delusive hope of regaining his losses; he speculated again, and this time as unhappily as the first, swamping all his funds in some worthless enterprise, which on the strength of his prospectus he had believed "safe as the Bank of France." To fill the cup of his sorrows to the brim, four of his five children were carried off by illness, the only one spared being Henri, the youngest. At forty-eight, François and his wife but five years younger than himself, were thus obliged to begin life again, poorer than at first, for they had no longer youth, as when they married. They were not disheartened, however: they had their boy to live for, and set to work so bravely that after ten years' struggle they found themselves owners of the cottage and field I have described. Still, they were not happy, for a painful anticipation was constantly dwelling on their minds and souring every moment of their existence. Henri, their only boy, had reached his twentieth year, and the time had come when he must "draw for the conscription;" that is, stake upon the chances of a lottery-ticket the seven best years of his own life and all the happiness of theirs. This thought it was which, like a heavy storm-cloud, was day and night hanging over their peace, and throwing them into a tremor of doubt and sickening anxiety that made them watch the flight of each hour which brought them nearer to the minute they dreaded with aching, panting hearts. How should they bear it, how could they bear it, if their loved boy, their one child upon whom all their affections and all their hopes were centred, was enrolled and taken rudely from them against his will, as against theirs to be a soldier? How could they support this cruel bereavement at an age when, like having lost all its sweets for them, they lived but in the happiness and in the presence of their boy, and like weak plants drooping toward the earth, were kept from falling only by the young and vigorous prop beside them?

Had it come to this, that after all the projects, all the vows, all the prayers, all the charming aspirations made for the one hope of their declining years, the simple hazard of a figured paper was to be called upon to realize the dreams of their lives or to blast all their cherished schemes in a moment? to decide whether they should be happy or eternally afflicted, or, in short, whether they should continue to live or hasten quickly to their graves; for a seven years' separation would be an eternity to them, and how could they expect to drag themselves through it?

They were sad moments, those in which the parents asked themselves these questions, looking wofully before them, and neglecting the happiness they might enjoy in the present to mourn over its possible loss in the future; counting the hours as they raced by, and turning pale at the risks their son was to face, as though his hand were already in the urn and his fingers grasping the little ticket upon which was inscribed his destiny.

Ah, how often had they seen it in their dreams, that dreadful mahogany cylinder turning lazily upon its pivot and rolling in its womb, along with that of a hundred others, the fate of all that was dear to them on earth! How often, too, had their poor brains, racked and tired by doubt, fear and anguish, followed their child as he stood beside it, and grown dizzy as they watched him plunge his hand through its lid and tear open the little white slip which might be his sentence of slavery, his order of exile, or—O God! who knows?—his death warrant!

One night the father and mother had started up in their sleep together: they had dreamt