

CHOICE LITERATURE.

A TROUBLESOME CHARGE.

The Rev. Mr. Sterling was troubled. It was Friday, and he was supposed to be at work on Sunday's sermon; but he could not compose himself to the important task. He had written but two or three pages, and the following words were still wet:

"Divested of its Manichæan technicalities, the so-called Manichæan heresy—"

There he had abruptly stopped; and he now leant back in his chair, biting the end of his pen, while his eyes strayed towards a letter which he received that morning, and which lay on the table before him. Taking it up, at last, he proceeded to read it for the third or fourth time, his face wearing an expression of anything but satisfaction with its contents. It was from a brother, a physician settled at Dresden, and was to the following effect:

"Linden Platz, Dresden,
"Tuesday.

"MY DEAR ALEC.—I am going to inflict a visitor upon you, and must ask Mary's forgiveness and yours for giving so short notice. The Graf von Herzenberg has just told me that she is obliged to go to Edinburgh on business, and I have given her a letter of introduction to you. She has never been in our country before. Her husband, poor fellow, who was a very dear friend of mine, was killed in the war, and the poor body is quite alone in the world, so far as relations go. Her business refers to some property in Scotland in which she is interested, and which is about to come into the Court of Session. I don't expect you to bother yourself with her, but you can recommend her to a good man of business. Old Quirkie would be the man if he is alive; but the Parliament House is probably a different place now from what it was when I knew anything about it. You are sure to like the Graf, who is a very superior woman in every way, and a favourite in all quarters here, from the Court downwards. According to the time-table she will arrive at Waverley at half-past five on Saturday evening; and as I know Saturday is a busy day with you, you might send Tom into Edinburgh with the brougham to meet her.

"Your affectionate brother,
"JOHN STERLING."

The oftener the minister of Hopetoun read this letter, the less pleased did he appear with its contents; and his reflections, during and after the latest perusal, ran somewhat in this vein:

"What a nuisance it is! It's rather inconsiderate of John to send this foreign Graf down upon me at a moment's notice—or, at least, a few hours' notice, which comes to the same thing. I don't think I'm inhospitable, but really—!" Then he looked at the letter again. "I suppose she is some terrible old dowager, with all the ways and ideas of etiquette of a minor German Court. The house will be turned upside down, and my work interfered with, for an indefinite period. Well, well, I suppose I've nothing to do but resign myself to the infliction."

Mr. Sterling, however, looked anything but resigned as he sat at the table biting his quill in a manner that, for a man who was usually so mild-tempered, was almost vicious. In truth, the prospect which he had conjured up was not a pleasant one. He was a man of a shy, reserved disposition, very averse to society of any kind, and particularly to that of strangers. Even his necessary parochial visits were made with an effort.

Though he had a son of eighteen, Mr. Sterling was barely forty, having married when he was a very young man. Mrs. Sterling had died when her youngest child was only a few days old, and whilst the eldest boy was still in the nursery. Ever since, the widower had retired more and more into himself. He was rather inclined to regard his children as belonging to somebody else, and always felt a sense of relief when the girls were safely packed off to the College for daughters of ministers of the Church of Scotland, there to be under the eye of a married sister who lived in the neighbouring city of Edinburgh.

As for the children themselves, they were just what might have been expected from the manner in which they had been brought up. They were all naturally well disposed, or things might have been much worse, but their little faults had grown upon them through not having been corrected in time. They had practically never known a mother, and though in their way they were warmly attached to their father, it was as to a kind friend rather than to a loving and sympathetic parent. They never thought of asking him to join in their sports as other children do, and seldom went to him with their troubles. This might have been different had Mr. Sterling's married sister, who was supposed to keep house for him, been more fitted for her post. Miss Sterling was a somewhat lackadaisical lady, who spent most of her time on the drawing-room sofa, discovering new ailments, and treating chance victims to anecdotes of the aristocracy. The good lady's acquaintance with the great had been limited; but she made the most of it, and had remedied her deficiency by becoming as familiar with the lineage of our noble families, thanks to a careful study of Burke and Dod, as most of the members of those families themselves. As the children were quite sharp enough to take note of her weakness, they treated any feeble, and generally affected, remonstrance on her part with good-humoured indifference. "It was only Aunt Mary!"

Having satisfactorily disposed of the Manichæans early the next day, and having no particular duties to attend to, Mr. Sterling bethought him that it would be but courteous to meet his guest himself on her arrival in a strange land, instead of sending his son. At the luncheon-table he intimated his decision to that effect, much to the relief of Master Tom, who was at that age when the youthful Milton is usually a Young Marlowe so far as feminine society is concerned.

"One of the girls can come with me," Mr. Sterling said; and straightway Kate chimed in, "I will, papa."

At the appointed hour that evening the train from the South glided into Waverley Station, and Mr. Sterling and his daughter walked along the line of carriages that were rapidly disgorging themselves. As the minister peered into one compartment he saw that it contained a lady, muffled from top to toe in a great hooded mantle of white fur, who was collecting some small articles from the rack. As she turned her head the lamp-light fell on a bright youthful face that derived an attractive quaintness as well from the encircling fur as from a pair of eye-glasses daintily perched upon a decidedly patrician nose.

The lady's eyes met those of the minister, and, smiling, she extended a little gloved hand as she said, in a voice whose foreign accent made it as piquant as her face, "Mr. Sterling, is it not? I am right?"

"Jessie," said Tom Sterling oracularly, "I have conceived a great idea!"

He was leaning back in an easy chair before the fire, with his hands clasped behind his head, while his sister, seated at his feet, rested her head against his knees.

"I have a great—a brilliant idea," repeated Tom. "The House of Sterling, in the person of its heir, is about to contract a noble alliance. I shall espouse this foreign female. I shall sacrifice myself for my family at the shrine of this ancient and unprepossessing German party. I shall go to the altar like—"

"A calf!"

"Like a stoic, and heroically resign myself to the griffin." This was the young Sterling's playful corruption of "Grafin."

"Suppose the griffin won't have you?" suggested Jessie. Master Tom's reply was interrupted by a ringing laugh behind him, and, turning hastily, he confronted a pretty woman in a white fur cloak, who was giving way to an uncontrollable burst of merriment, while his semi-somnolent aunt was staring with all her eyes from her sofa, and his father and sister hovered uneasily in the back ground. Taking in the situation at a glance, he fled from the room with flaming face.

By the time dinner was over, and the party once more gathered in the drawing-room, the visitor had pretty well established herself as a favourite at Hopetoun Manse. The evening passed very pleasantly, and as the minister slowly mounted the stairs that night he could not help smiling at the recollection of his apprehensions of the day before. How grotesquely unlike the reality was the terrible intruder he had conjured up!

"Why," he said to himself, "I feel quite grateful to John. He didn't half do her justice. Her presence acts as a tonic and a sedative at once."

The simile was a just one. This dreaded visitant had not been a week within the minister's gates when she was the idol alike of the household and the neighbourhood. Her bright face and unaffected gaiety lighted up every chamber she entered, while her gentleness and tact smoothed many an asperity. The girls and the younger children vied in shewing their devotion to her, while Tom and she were the best of friends. Miss Sterling was insensibly roused out of herself, and sought her guest's advice on household matters, with good results; and the minister, to his surprise, found himself consulting her on various matters connected with the parish. "Surely," he thought, "this foreign Grafin must be a good fairy in disguise." Under her invisible wand the household had all at once grown brighter and more harmonious, and she formed the connecting link that drew its members closer to one another than they had ever been before.

But the holiday season quickly drew to a close. Tom and the girls had to return to their studies, and the case of "Hallyburton and others v. Herzenberg"—an involved dispute about certain "lands and tenements" into whose intricacies it is unnecessary to go—was sent down for an early hearing in the Court of Session.

Her cause was taken up by the whole neighbourhood, and there were most unpatrician rejoicings when the sun was finally decided in favour of "the alien."

Fain would her hosts have persuaded her to extend her visit indefinitely, but she shook her head. Her household, she declared, would be demoralized by the absence of its head, and her poor would think themselves forgotten. And so, in the early days of February, the good fairy of Hopetoun wrapped her fur mantle once more around her and took flight amid the tears of Willie and Gerie, some of whose elders felt half inclined to share their artless demonstrations of affliction and woe.

She was gone, and alas! it was but too apparent that her wand had ceased to wave. In a very few moments the minister noted, with a sigh, that the good influence which the guest had exercised upon his household, and which he had fondly hoped would be permanent, had all but passed away. Except that its head took a warmer interest in his family than before, and was altogether less of a recluse than he had been, Hopetoun Manse was soon just such a rickety, ill-ordered establishment as it had been before the Grafin's advent.

Just six months after the opening of this story Mr. Sterling again sat in his study pondering over a letter from his brother.

"Yes, I think I shall go. I want a holiday, and I haven't seen John for more than two years, and—and—yes I shall go."

And without more ado he opened his desk, and wrote off to his brother to say that, in consequence of the Prophet's patience and long-suffering, the mountain had made up its mind to come to Mahomet, and that this phenomenon would take place as soon as the necessary preliminaries had been gone through. Both Mr. Sterling's household and his Presbytery were surprised by the intimation that he desired to take a holiday; but the formal leave was readily granted, and on a pleasant July evening the two brothers shook hands at the Dresden Station.

The brothers were warmly attached to each other, and this, their first meeting for two or three years, was a genuine pleasure to both. They sat talking far into the night, now engaged in serious discussion, and anon breaking into boyish laughter over some quaint reminiscence. The Graf

von Herzenberg's name coming to the surface, the minister was at once enthusiastic.

"I can never thank you sufficiently, Jack," he said, "for sending us that charming woman. You never prescribed a better cure than her presence wrought in my household."

"I can quite believe all you say," he said, "knowing her as I do; but you will have to postpone your *dévoirs* a little. She has got up an excursion for to-morrow, a regular English picnic, for some of the young folks. When I told her I expected you to-night she pressed me to come and bring you with me; but my jaunting season has been over these twenty years, and I know your hermit-like ways of old. So I declined with thanks."

The other was silent for a minute or two; and then he glanced at the doctor, and said, with some hesitation:

"I don't see why we shouldn't join them, John. I'm afraid you're developing into an old cynic before your time, and the society of young people will do you good; and as for me, as you have often told me, I've been too much of a hermit. What say you to surprising the Grafin by accepting her invitation after all?"

John Sterling laid down his pipe and looked steadily at his brother.

"Why, Alec," he said after a pause, "I do believe—"

"What?" asked the minister, a little defiantly, his pale face flushing.

"Nothing," was the rejoinder, as the doctor carefully restored his meerschaum to its case, "except that as the Grafin's rendezvous is given for eight o'clock in the morning, it's time we were getting to bed."

Had Asmodeus unroofed the doctor's sleeping apartment that night he might have observed its occupant grin and chuckle knowingly as he composed himself to rest.

Next morning the countess was delighted to welcome two unexpected additions to her party. The picnic turned out to be a two days' excursion into the "Saxon Switzerland." The party was a large one, chiefly made up of English and American residents, with two or three tourists who had brought letters of introduction to the town, and not a few native Dresdeners. It was a very merry outing, and when it was over the minister to whom the scenery was most sincerely declared that he had never spent two pleasanter days in his life.

"You see what you lose," said the Grafin, "by shutting yourself up. We shall make quite a—what shall I say?—a butterfly of you before we let you leave Dresden."

Though he had scarcely admitted as much to himself the minister's visit to Dresden had been prompted not so much by fraternal affection as by a half-defined intention of asking the Grafin von Herzenberg to become his wife. The man of eight lustres does not rush into love with the impetuosity of the boy of five. Grizzling years, as the kindly cynic sings, clear the brain; but even "fifty years" is not insensible to woman's charms, especially the charms of such a woman as Angela von Herzenberg. Beyond all question the minister was over head and ears in love. For the first time in his life he had encountered his ideal—the one woman who could turn his home into paradise, and make a long, quiet idyl of his life. The thought had first struck him as a sad "might have been," and it was not for some time that it occurred to him, What if such happiness were still within his reach? For months he battled with the thought, telling himself that it was folly for a country minister to dream of an alliance with a foreign lady of rank; but the more he fought against his feelings, the stronger they became, and at last he had suffered them to draw him hither.

His brother had read his secret on the evening of his arrival in Dresden, and had watched the development of the little drama with considerable interest.

And so it came to pass that the minister took heart of grace the next evening under the trees, as he walked homewards with the Grafin, a little in rear of the rest of the party. It might have been his brother's encouragement that did it.

It might have been the influence of the hour and of the dreamy music that was gradually dying away in the distance; but, be that as it may, before he well knew what he was about he found himself addressing his companion by her Christian name—Angela! how sweetly strange it sounded, now that he pronounced it aloud for the first time, though he had repeated it a hundred times to himself—and asking her to be his wife. When he rejoined his brother his face told what her answer had been.

A few months later the minister once more obtained a brief leave of absence, and the papers announced the marriage at Dresden, of the Rev. Alexander Sterling to Angela, Grafin von Herzenberg. The wedding was an unostentatious one, as befitted the union of a couple who were both past their first youth, and when the bride left the altar she quietly dropped her title, preferring, with her customary good sense, now that she was a Scotch minister's wife, to be known simply as Mrs. Sterling.—*Cassell's Family Magazine*.

SUPPORTING THE GUNS.—WHAT WAS SEEN ON A BATTLE-FIELD.

Did you ever see a battery take position?

It hasn't the thrill of a cavalry charge, nor the grimness of a line of bayonets moving slowly and determinedly on; but there is a peculiar excitement about it that makes old veterans rise in their saddles and cheer.

We have been fighting at the edge of the woods. Every cartridge-box has been emptied once and more, and one-fourth of the brigade has melted away in dead and wounded and missing. Not a cheer is heard in the whole brigade. We know that we are being driven foot by foot, and that when we break back once more the line will go to pieces, and that the enemy will break through the gap.

Here comes help!

Down the crowded highway gallops a battery, withdrawn from some other position to save ours. The field fence is scattered while you could count thirty, and the guns rush for the hills behind us. Six horses to a piece—three riders to a gun. Over dry ditches, where a farmer would not drive his waggon, through clumps of bushes, over logs a foot thick, every horse on a gallop, ever rider lashing his