

Stories.

LOVE VS. BARONET.

CHAPTER II.

A RETROSPECT.

Sir James Francis Ashley, Bart., and William Fairbank Esq., of Fairbank Towers, Surrey, had been fast friends ever since the baronet could remember. The two families had been on intimate terms for generations, and were slightly connected by blood. Since the death of Sir James' father, the late Sir Lionel Ashley, third of the title, William Fairbank had acted to him almost in the capacity of a parent. Of late, however, the youthful baronet had been drifting by degrees into somewhat loose habits, and had come to be on familiar terms with some persons who would hardly have been received in good society. Among other things he had begun to speculate in stocks, but, as is usually the case with inexperienced investors, he lost heavily on his first ventures. As far as superficial appearance went he was not at all bad-looking, but in spite of his faultless dress and aristocratic mien, there was something cold and calculating in his look which gave the beholder an unfavourable impression. Although his morals were not as high as they might have been, still he was far from dissolute, and was considered an excellent matrimonial catch by the match-making mammas of the country, who accordingly baited their hooks for him with many a fair and well-dowered maiden.

William Fairbank was a country gentleman, of a family which had for a long time possessed great landed property in Surrey, but the present, and, besides his son, a youth of sixteen, the only representative of the line, had sold the greater portion of the estate, which had been fast depreciating in value during the extensive agricultural depression of the year 18—. A man of impulsive and generous nature, highly sensitive and strictly honorable in all his dealings, intensely proud of his name and ancient family, his chief characteristic was the passionate love he bore his son. When selling out his land he had clung tenaciously to the old country seat, with its broad expanse of verdant lawn, its exquisite old-fashioned gardens, and its spreading park, with

many a tame deer grazing through the dark shade of the lofty oaks; the historic and almost baronial castle whose walls had echoed to the tread and voices of generations of Fairbanks.

One bright, clear day in June, the baronet was driving in great haste and a stylish yellow dog-cart up the long and shaded avenue which led to the massive stone portico of the Towers. All around, the birds were raising their paeon of joy, the butterflies were flitting from flower to flower, the summer sun was streaming through the branches, and the ground was everywhere bespangled with daisies and cowslips, and all the other flora which an English spring brings forth in such luxuriant abundance. But the baronet was not in a mood to appreciate the beauties of Nature; for he was busily engaged in estimating the probabilities of his latest speculation in Turkish Loan, into which he had sunk nearly ten thousand pounds, turning out successfully. Despite his previous losses, he seemed confident that this time he was bound to recoup himself fully, and it was in a gay and cheerful tone that he saluted the grey-headed old gentleman who came out to meet him.

"Well my dear boy, how are you this morning? What has happened to make you so jubilant?"

"Nothing in particular, my dear uncle! Only I've been buying up a lot of stock that I think will pay me back nearly all my losses."

"You must have got a pretty sure thing there. What have you been investing in now? John, take Sir James' horse round to the stables and have him seen to. Come in, baronet, and let's talk it over."

"Yes, Uncle," answered the baronet, as the two walked into the old man's "sanctum." "You see it's this way. You know the Turkish Loan has been going up slowly of late. Well; I've been informed by someone who ought to know (young De Koven, you've met him, haven't you? He's supposed to be a high authority on Turkish affairs,) he told me privately, that these loans were bound to rise; that the Government was never more secure, and all that sort of thing. So I put £10,000 into it, when it was going at a song, and it's risen half a point already."

Here the baronet produced a letter of a foreign and business-like appearance, which he carefully