

THE TWO BACHELORS.

(From Chambers Journal.)

The warm August days, ripened into mellow September. Since the night of Jack's reverie, a change had certainly come over him, but as yet he left me uninformed as to the cause. Sometimes his old gaiety would return, but it was sure to be followed by a fit of more sombre silence than before. I chaffed him about it often, but his testy replies invariably shut me up. We never met Miss Hallam, and the only time we saw her was in the morning among her flowers, or in the evening, when, after having ravished us with her music, she stepped out on the balcony, leaning on her father's arm, to enjoy the moonlight. On such occasions Jack seemed strangely affected, and would either break forth into voluminous praises of her grace and beauty, or sit gazing mutely at the apparition. Such a state of affairs led me naturally enough to the conclusion, that whatever was the matter with Ferrars, the fair cantatrice had something to do with it.

One afternoon we resolved to have a row down the loch, and as I crossed the lawn with an oar over each shoulder, I chanced to glance at Colonel Hallam's window, where the two ladies were seated sewing. The younger one was scanning mine with a half-amused expression in her brown eyes; and as Jack came sauntering down the gravel-path with a hand in each pocket, I quietly said: 'Miss Hallam's at the window.'

He looked in the direction I indicated, and, to my surprise, he immediately blushed up like a girl.

'Why, Jack, old fellow, what's the matter?' I asked, with a smile I could not repress. Miss Hallam was viewing us with the aid of an opera-glass.

'Pshaw! Harding, get on board quick, and row as well as you can,' he answered, throwing himself into the stern of the boat, in a position where the sunshine struck forcibly on his handsome face and auburn locks.

I bent as gracefully as I could to my oars—I had been a fair oarsman at Cambridge—and soon the little craft was skimming far over the sunlit ripples.

As it was still early when we returned, we strolled down the road until it would be time to go in for dinner, when, turning a corner, we came suddenly upon Miss Hallam—and her father, mounted on a couple of splendid grays. As she cantered past us with a smile, her beautiful face flushed with the exercise, I certainly thought I had never seen anyone half so lovely. Her perfect form; the grace of every fold of her dark-green riding-habit; the indescribable coils and twists of her brown hair, with the sunshine shading it to gold; the coquettish little felt hat turned up on one side, with its dancing plume and streaming gossamer—combined to make up a charming tout ensemble, which was altogether irresistible. Jack had stared after her in open-mouthed admiration for such an indecent length of time, that I was constrained to accuse him.

'Ferrars, you admire Miss Hallam,' I said.

He had his head bent, and was kicking the dead leaves with his with feet as he walked. When he raised his blue eyes, they were filled with the expression of a passion I had never noticed in them before, and which had fully corroborated the four words he uttered, as his eyes met mine: 'I do love her!'

Strange as it may seem, I was thunderstruck at the announcement. Much as I had noticed the change in Ferrars, I had hesitated to ascribe it to the circumstances of his being in love. I protested and raged against such folly—falling in love with a lady with whom he had never exchanged a single word. For answer, a passionate confession was poured into my astonished ears, in which he vowed he must, and would win her. Matters were made considerably worse when we received our letters that evening informing us of business engagements requiring our immediate return to town. It would be impossible for us to remain more than three days longer.

'Humph! your time is rather limited, Ferrars,' I said, with more sarcasm than sympathy. 'You'll be a pretty sharp fellow if you woo and win a handsome girl in three days.'

The next morning he came down to breakfast looking pale and haggard. I don't believe he had slept all night, but I made no enquiries, as I felt annoyed at this alarming impulse of my old friend, and was altogether out of temper with this adventure of his. He ate little or no breakfast, and looked so dejected, that at last my sympathies were aroused, and I shouted cheerfully: 'Cheer up, old fellow; we'll manage it all beautifully, and you'll go up to London the accepted suitor of Miss Hallam.'

Gradually he became more animated, and began to talk, and finally quite shocked me by declaring that he was going to write and propose to Miss Hallam that very day. I considered him to be simply mad, but he had apparently thought it well over, and was determined what course to adopt.

'But, Jack, the thing is preposterous,' I argued; 'she knows nothing about you. Can you expect anything but a distinct refusal?'

'And what would you recommend?' he asked, curling his upper lip as he waited for my advice.

'Why, get introduced to her first, and wait at least until you know her a little before you make such a proposal,' I said.

'Have I not been waiting for the last two months?' he answered. 'And do you forget that in two days I must leave this place? There is no time for waiting now; it must be action, immediate and peremptory!'

'And are you quite determined to do—this—this thing?'

'Quite.'

'And will nothing persuade you that it is an extremely

foolish action, and one which will be certain to defeat all your wishes?'

'Under the circumstances, I consider it the only thing to be done.'

I succumbed. In difficulties of a different nature he had generally proved a better diplomatist than I, and perchance his skill might extend to this department also.

'Well, if it must be action, as you say it must, action let it be; you must write your proposal,' I said, pulling out the writing-materials with alacrity, and placing a chair for Jack at the desk; and after a full hour's scribbling down and scratching out, a clean copy was penned, which ran as follows:

DAIL D'ARROUCH LONGE, Sept. 22, 1861.

DEAR MISS HALLAM—I regret that circumstances have prevented me making your acquaintance ere I address to you words, which, I pray, you will not think lightly of from the mere fact that I have never spoken to you. Since I came here, two months ago, you have excited my intense admiration, which feeling has lately ripened into a deep and passionate love.

My business engagements now demand my immediate return to London, but I feel that I cannot go without first learning from you my fate. I make you now an honourable offer of my hand in marriage, and beseech you not to think lightly of it, as on your decision must depend my life's happiness or misery. If possible, an answer per to-day's post will very much oblige.—Yours respectfully,

JOHN FERRARS.

'That will do,' I said, holding the sheet, covered with Jack's neat handwriting, at arm's length. 'Concise; to the point, not too spoony; slightly formal; but under the circumstances it is better so.'

Jack folded the letter and addressed it; and with serious misgivings at my heart, which I dared not express, I walked with him to the post-office, and saw him drop the missive into the box. We did nothing all day but lounge about the house and garden, waiting anxiously until the postman would bring the letters in the evening. At length the weary day passed, and the letter-carrier arrived; and sure enough there it was, a little pink note, addressed to John Ferrars, Esquire. My heart beat as quickly as if it were my own happiness that was at stake as Jack broke the seal. I looked over his shoulder, and what we both saw was:

Wednesday Afternoon.

DEAR MR FERRARS—I accept the great honour you have done me. Before, however, meeting you, I would like you to see papa, and obtain his consent to our engagement.—

Yours, sincerely,

EUNICE HALLAM.

There is an old adage that says 'truth is stranger than fiction,' and if I ever felt the force of it, it was as I read that note. Contrary to all my expectations, Jack had actually been accepted! He bore his good fortune with much more equanimity than I did, his only remark being: 'Eunice—what a pretty name!' While I, with strangely mixed feelings, actually got up a 'hurrah!'

The next difficulty was, how or where to meet Colonel Hallam and obtain his consent. An idea seized me; I had seen the old Colonel walk down the road a short time before. 'Stay you here,' I said to Jack; and putting on my hat, off I bolted. I had not gone far when I espied the colonel leaning on a wire-fence watching some workmen digging a drain. Pretending to be interested in the same pursuit, I walked up to him, and made some remark regarding the work. Thereafter we got upon the most friendly terms, which ended, as I intended it should, by his walking home with me, and coming into the house to join us in a rubber at whist. I conducted him into the dining-room, and went for Jack. He began to get slightly nervous when he heard what I had done, but I told him not to say anything to the colonel about his daughter to-night, only to make himself as agreeable as he could. I then instructed Mrs Mason to set down the very best she had in the house for supper, and went to entertain our interesting guest. We found him a charming old gentleman. At whist, he and dummy beat Jack and me; and possessing an inexhaustible fund of humorous stories, the time passed so pleasantly that it was twelve o'clock before he rose to go.

A cordial invitation to visit him was extended to us, as we bade him good night in the hall, which was exactly what I wanted, and meant we should have. Pulling a grave face, I said: 'Nothing would have given us greater pleasure had we been staying longer, but we were to leave for London the day after to-morrow.'

'Then you must spend to-morrow evening with me,' was his hearty rejoinder. 'I will take no refusal.'

And to this arrangement we agreed. 'A thousand thanks to you, Bob; you're a capital fellow,' said Jack, gratefully grasping my hand as we separated for the night.

'Ferrars!'

'Hollo!'

'Are you ready?' I was donning my dressing-suit preparatory to presenting myself in Colonel Hallam's drawing-room.

'Yes.'

'Come here, then.'

He came in, dressed for conquest evidently, and looking faultlessly handsome. I surveyed him critically. There was not an item amiss, from the *négligé* arrangement of his auburn curls, to the polish of his patent leathers.

'How do I look?' he asked, with a gay laugh, and a satisfactory glance at his magnificent proportions in the mirror.

'Like a Polish prince,' I answered. 'Miss Hallam may have many lovers, but I'll bet a new hat she never had a better looking fellow than you. Now, look here; you'll do exactly as I tell you, and not diverge one iota from the rule I lay down. Ask for Colonel Hallam, and

say you wish to see him alone. When the first greetings are over, you'll explain to him that Mr. Harding is detained for a short time with a little packing he had to finish, and that you did not wait for him, as you had something to communicate to him—the colonel. Then pitch into the subject nearest your heart; tell him of your business and social connections, and don't neglect to impress him with the fact that you're your mother's only son, and heir to her fortunes and estates. These sort of things go a long way with the old boys.'

Having thus delivered my advice to Jack, I sent him off to push his sentimental fortunes with Colonel Hallam, and sat down pensively to smoke a cigar, before following him. About half an hour afterwards I sallied forth, and a minute or two later found me ringing at the colonel's front-door. My heart beat audibly, as, following the servant up-stairs, I heard the sound of a piano, and Miss Hallam's voice merrily humming a bar or two of some lively air, and felt much relieved when the door of the library was thrown open, and I found myself ushered into the presence of only Colonel Hallam and Jack. One glance at Jack's flushed and radiant face, as he stood leaning against the marble mantle-piece, sufficed to assure me that all had gone 'merry as a marriage-bell' with him and with a feeling of thankfulness I returned the colonel's cordial greeting.

'Come away, now, and see the ladies; I know this boy is getting impatient,' he said, with a twinkle in his eye, as he laid his hand familiarly on Ferrars' shoulder.

'It's all right, old boy, and I'm the happiest fellow alive,' whispered Jack, as we followed the colonel down-stairs; but I had only time to grasp his hand and give it a squeeze of congratulation, when the drawing-room door was opened, and we entered.

The elder lady was seated on a couch beside the fireplace, where a fire had been lighted, for the evenings were getting chill; the younger was leaning on the grand piano, engaged in looking over some music. Both stood erect when we entered. The colonel, going over to the elder lady, took her hand, and led her forward, saying as he did so: 'Eunice, I have much pleasure in introducing Mr. Ferrars to you.—My daughter, Mr. Ferrars.'

Ferrars turned deadly pale. 'And—and—the other—lady?' he gasped, looking round at the beautiful young lady standing at the piano.

'My wife.'

I don't suppose our consternation could have been greater had a bomb-shell entered the apartment. Jack would have fallen had I not supported him. Every one seemed to take in the situation at a glance. Miss Hallam did not faint or scream, or do anything which a younger or more sentimental lady in similar circumstances might have done, but she blushed as deeply as her faded complexion would allow of, and, covering her face with her hands, said: 'Oh, how dreadful! he has thought Nelly was my father's daughter.' Mrs Hallam glided to her side and led her from the room, while the colonel and I applied restoratives to poor Jack's colourless lips.

'Poor fellow, muttered the colonel; I see his unlucky mistake. I wish, for the sake of everybody concerned, this had not happened.'

'This explains the ready acceptance of Ferrars' proposal, and the Colonel's willing agreement to let his daughter marry a comparative stranger,' I inwardly growled, in disdain of the whole business, as I loosened the tie which Jack had so carefully arranged an hour before.

When he had somewhat recovered, we took him home, and laid him on the sofa in the dining-room. I sat by him all the evening, and although he did not seem in the least excited or feverish, he kept asking me such strange questions, and seemed so unconscious of all that had transpired, that I was afraid his brain was affected. I, however, was determined that we should not on any consideration remain a day longer in Dail d'Arroch; and summoning Mrs Mason, I instructed her to get our traps ready, as we required to be off by the first steamer in the morning. 'Mr. Ferrars did not feel very well,' I added, in reply to a glance of inquiry she cast at Jack as he lay motionless on the sofa. He has had unpleasant news from home.'

My conscience smote me for the deliberate falsehood I uttered, but I felt that some excuse was necessary for the prostrate condition of Ferrars. But Mrs Mason was so profuse in her expressions of sympathy, that somehow or other I could not help conjecturing that she guessed somewhat of the truth.

At seven o'clock the next morning, a close carriage was drawn up to the door, and Jack and I were driven for the last time down the trim avenue, and arrived at the pier in good time to catch the steamer. Ferrars' manner was unnatural and excited, and I felt as if I dared not leave him for an instant. What need to relate our miserable journey south; enough to say that when we reached London, Ferrars was in the delirium of fever.

The attack proved a virulent one, and for six weeks he lay partly unconscious, even after the delirium had left him. When at last he began to recover, I took a run down to the Isle of Wight with him, leaving him in charge of his mother, who was staying there. In the course of six weeks he came back, looking almost as well as ever. He showed me a letter which he had received from Colonel Hallam, in which that worthy gentleman expressed his deepest sympathy. The letter went on to say that the writer had adjusted matters at home as delicately as he could; and that, had he for a moment supposed that Mr. Ferrars had mistaken his wife for his daughter, his friend should have been spared the unfortunate denouement in the drawing-room.

The occurrence which so nearly cost him his life was never again reverted to by us. And up to this date at least, he seems quite contented with his bachelor chambers and the society of his old friend Bob Harding.

[THE END.]