

FACE TO FACE.

A Fact Related in Seven Well-Told Fables.

BY R. E. FRANCILLON, AUTHOR OF "A GREAT HEIRNESS," "QUITS AT LAST," "A REAL QUEEN," "EARL'S DAUGHTER," ETC., ETC.

FABLE THE SECOND—CONTINUED.

He'll come and stay with us at Millport for a year, and take a holiday of his own; and when the year's out, and he is broken a bit out of his own ways, he'll stay on another, and another, and another, for as long as he's spared. He'll always be Blackthorn, or Leys Croft, you see; the land will always be his, whether he lives there or no, only the trouble will be off his hands. Do you see? He'll lose neither the land nor you. So long and the short of it is, I'm off to-morrow to Hunchester to buy you a plain gold ring. We'll be married here, and then start for Millport, all three, as soon as Prestons' send down their man to see to the farm, and I've put him in the way. Darling, we will all be so happy there, as happy as the days are long.

And so she knew, or thought, as well as he. But she had grown so happy already during her season of twilight that she would willingly have lengthened it out without limit; and, though that marriage was brought face to face with her as a fact, the very idea of any greater happiness than the present assumed a sort of awe. One can but be happy—how can any change make us more?

"St. phen," she said, looking up into his face, "whatever you wish, I wish too. If I try, will you try to be the happiest man in the world?" "Darling! You'll make me that without trying," said he. "Give me your finger, please. No; not that, the fourth, of the left hand. Where's my measuring tape? Oh, here."

The surveyor got to work, and measured that vast estate which lies between the knuckles and the first joint of the fourth finger of the left hand of a girl.

The morning after this happy evening, Farmer Marriah, though it was but eight o'clock, had gone over well-nigh every inch of every field, had seen every man and woman at his and her task, and had done a good deal of hard head-work besides. For he was one of those farmers, rare and often misunderstood folk in those simple times, who put brains into the soil. He never did a single thing without knowing the reason why; and so (though this does not by any means follow) he prospered while others failed. So one can only judge that the brains he used were excellent brains. Returning to the house, a square, squat, stone building, without a garden lead about it to break its stare, and standing by the side of a yard and a garden without a blossom, he looked for himself, in a saucepan, about a pint of exceedingly thin gruel, and ate it, from the same vessel, with an iron spoon. The meal was cheap, if not satisfying; but then there was the gratification of feeling, with every mouthful, that it might have been beef or bacon, so that, not being either, at every mouthful something was saved, and therefore something gained. There was nobody to wait upon him, for Farmer Marriah kept no servants, and he had no horse or land than were needed for profitable work, and what profit could there be in keeping a cook or parlor-maid when he had hands of his own, and his own mouth to feed? He had breakfasted on that thin gruel, getting thinner and thinner, every day since he was one and twenty, and though it made the body lank, it made the pocket swell. He dined mostly on bread and cheese, or cold bacon, that wanted no cooking at all, except on Sunday, when he made potatoes and the week's odds and ends into a hot stew, to avoid waste; and he supped on gruel again, with a single tumbler of rum. He did keep ale for his men, because it was the only water on the water was a thing undreamed of; but even those ready and unceremonious omnivores who he had as a general rule that beer was beer, were driven to grumble, at times, of the smallness of Westland brew. For he was a neighbor when invited, and would then spare no expense, since the expense was not his own; but he kept no company at all. It need hardly be said, seeing that half the parish at least, and not a few of the tradesmen of Hunchester, were in his debt, that nobody in all that country was more respected than he; nay, it was whispered that he had the vicar himself under his thumb, and that he could buy up the Digbys themselves, who constituted the aristocratic element of that part of the world. Nobody had ever got the better of him in a bargain, and no eyes had ever seen the color of his money except his own.

And yet this man, so kind and grasping as he was, and apparently with no thought beyond adding guinea to guinea and field to field, was made by nature with passions of all kinds of intensity such as is given to few to feel. If one side of him had been a miser, the other would have gone through life at a gallop, or rather, at a storm. His magnificent self-command had come from his setting out with the fixed resolve of dying worth a certain sum; or rather, of making a certain sum in time to enjoy it, for a certain number of years before he died. For he was no fool; he did not treat the making and hoarding of money as an end. He fully meant some day to have his fling, and he preferred to have it at the latter end of life, when he should be able to afford it, rather than at the beginning, when he started upon Westland a comparatively poor man, in whose eyes Tom Blackthorn was a millionaire. However, as the time went on, *crecit aurum*, passion gradually went to sleep, and when the sun at which he had aimed at the outset was made and saved even before the time, he found that he ought to have aimed at a few thousand more before he began to spend.

Yet, even in the best-planned life, though it be grasped with the firmest hand, something must happen to throw things out of gear. It may be a battle of Waterloo; it may be a pair of eyes. Enoch Marriah's Waterloo had been the pair of eyes. One day Patience Blackthorn came home from school; and all the passion which had been frozen as it were to death in a bath of gold burst into flame. Then, for the first time—after he had fought against the fire and had

failed—he felt that he had put off being allowed to live too long; that, in short, he would before long have to think of growing old. He tried to pay attention to "go courting"; they called it there; but it was perfectly evident that the girl had not the least suspicion of his meaning. And, meanwhile, time was passing; every month he was a month older, while she seemed a month younger, and it was very plain that if he ever meant to live he must begin—as and a married man; the last thing that had ever entered his mind.

It would take long to tell how he tried to fight himself out of the desire to live himself and his money-bags and his plans of the future, and not particularly pretty child fresh from school, who knew nothing, it seemed, except how to laugh and how to spend. It would take longer to tell how, having been at last driven to conclude that love is fate, he took his policy from the spider and mesh by mesh, got that big fly, Leys Croft, first into his web and then between his claws. And then, by just five minutes, to have lost the game, and to a boy whose very existence he had not thought forgotten—it was cruelly hard. Ninety-nine men out of a hundred would have broken the web and given up the game. Enoch Marriah was the hundredth man; and, whether visiting his fields or feeding himself with gruel, he had but one thought—how to weave the web anew, and a stronger one this time.

Not that Enoch Marriah had become so much passion's slave that he would really ever pay Leys Croft, the price even for Patience Blackthorn. Mammon is not to be conquered by Cupid quite so far as that would go. His old web had been a scheme to gain both by one's ruse; his new one also must gain both. "Are you very busy there? I want a drum or carry a musket myself if it hadn't been for old Tom Blackthorn. To think that I should have been able to pay him back for half he's done—it seems like a dream. But for the better half, no, that's the worse business. I've seeped into the best watchmaker and jeweler's in the town. 'I want a gold ring—quite plain,' said he, with more of shyness than a man of rank in Millport ought to have felt when going to send to make a purchase in a dead-alive Hunchester.

But the man did not smile. Whatever he might have felt once on his own account, he had become callous to such things; even plain gold rings were only in the way of trade. So he pulled out a drawerful, large and small, real gold and sham, thick and thin.

Stephen had already, with his measuring tape, marked upon his own little finger the point where the right ring should go to fit the finger it was made for. Having chosen the thickest and the best, he was about to order it to be engraved on its inner surface with the posy he had chosen, when his eye was caught by another, which he had rejected for being perhaps a trifle more brilliant than the other, and which happened to be already engraved.

He took it up to read, and he started to see the words— "Love will find out the way."

There was, of course, nothing wonderful to find any common posy on any common ring. But so singularly (as he fancied) leaped with his own thoughts as he had come along the road, that the finger of Fate seemed to be pointing out the one ring in the world for which Patience Blackthorn. The very words he had thought of—the words of her own very song; and as it were writing themselves for him, without going through the cold-blooded process of being engraved, and without his own thoughts had flown before him to the shop, and had stamped themselves, fresh from his heart, upon the ring. Lovers are always finding such adventures, and always thinking them peculiar to themselves.

"I will take this," said he. The jeweler, who seemed a taciturn fellow, nodded, as if bridegroom's fancies were matters of course, and the purchase was made.

"It was really a very wonderful thing," thought Stephen. "It seems too strange to believe—finding a ring with just those very words. I'm glad there must be something out of the common in this ring; for, as there's something out of the common in the whole story, I shouldn't have believed such a story if I'd been told. Still, though, when one comes to think of it, it isn't likely Patience Blackthorn will be married with a common ring."

That was the whole of Stephen's business in Hunchester that day. Having had some cold meat and a glass of ale, for his walk had made him hungry, he set off to return to Leys Croft by the same road he had taken when he first reached the fifth milestone when it occurred to him that, as he was taking a holiday from his holiday, he might as well go home by way of the church where he was to be married. Of course he had seen the church many times before; but then it had been only a common steeple, now it was to become a sacred building indeed.

To get to Leys Croft by way of the church one had to leave the road, as I have said, the fifth stone from the town, and follow a narrow path that led to open fields to the top of some low hills, whence on one side one could see the lazy smoke and the minster tower of Hunchester, and a broad river beyond; on the other, the network of low, wooded slopes and narrow valleys in which were hidden Leys Croft and Westland, and many another ancient farm. His back turned to the minster tower and river, Stephen looked toward the woods and pastures, all in their gold and green, and smiling as if the landscape were alive and lapped in the utmost luxury of peace and verdure. He had broken his familiarity with the view, and he was able to regard the scenes in which he had been born and bred, and had learned to love, with traveled eyes. It seemed impossible with such a prospect before him, to remember that the world was at war, and that other prospects, just as peaceful of right, and as ready to smile with fruit and harvest, were at that very hour, maybe, the background of waste and carnage. Stephen knew all that, as every Englishman knew it, with his mind; but when he saw it, he knew things which which he knew no real concern. Probably it would never have entered his mind at all had it not been for that morning's momentary glimpse of glittering steel and the pale of flame. He followed the path down the other side of the hill, and vaulted over a church stile into a field that sloped down to a running stream shrouded in bushes and boughs. It was crossed by the most primitive of bridges, a single loose plank, while the bushes sloped down to the water, making Lilliputian cliffs and sands. It was here that Stephen, ages ago, had made his first attempts at angling, with a string and a hook; and truly happy. I wonder if it seemed? For old time's sake, he could not pass the bridge without just one more scramble into the recesses of the copse whence the brown water came sparkling out into the sunshine.

With such thoughts as these, the happiest young fellow in England, with one thought for himself and two for others, shortened the way to Hunchester, the county town. It was a dull place enough, except on Thursday, which was market-day. To-day, however, was Tuesday—the normally dull day in all the seven. It was therefore with some surprise that, as he went along Westgate street towards the Cross, he came upon a tall, thin, little crowd, mostly of boys and girls from the back alleys, but with others among them hurrying in the same direction as he, and shouting, while the corners were blocked up by knots of women, and the tradesmen were, by one consent, standing by their doors.

"What's up to-day?" Stephen asked one of these. "Oh, 'tis only the soldiers," answered the man. "A regiment on the march—bound for foreign service against old Boney. I hear sad. I wish, for my part, they'd gone another road; the red-coats do a sight more harm than good, unless they stay for a month—that's another pair of shoes. Do you want anything in my way this fine day? Hark—there they go!"

As the shop-keeper spoke, fives and drums far down the street shrilled and rattled into the "The British Grenadiers." Stephen could see the glittering points of the bayonets; and the ragged tail of the march broke out into a cheer.

"Poor fellows!" thought he. "And men among them with Patience's of their own, no doubt; it makes one's heart to be happy when one thinks of war. And I must have had to beat a drum or carry a musket myself if it hadn't been for old Tom Blackthorn. To think that I should have been able to pay him back for half he's done—it seems like a dream. But for the better half, no, that's the worse business. I've seeped into the best watchmaker and jeweler's in the town. 'I want a gold ring—quite plain,' said he, with more of shyness than a man of rank in Millport ought to have felt when going to send to make a purchase in a dead-alive Hunchester.

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IN MEMORIAM. A Beautiful Tribute to the Late General Gordon. Cruel suspense has given place to sad certainty. All conjectures as to the survival of General Gordon must now be placed beyond any doubt the fact that he fell stabbed by traitors in the midst of his faithful troops when Khartoum was betrayed. The end came as he expected it. Treachery achieved what overwhelming force had failed to effect, and the force of the Mahdi, admitted within the fortification by one of Gordon's Pashas, made short work of all who would not espouse their cause. The Notables were cut down to a man, the faithful remnant of Gordon's garrison seem to have been killed fighting hard to the last. Their children were spitted on the Arab spears; their women—but there is no need to detail the ghastly incidents of the sack of a city by the savage hordes of the African desert. The streets of the city, we are told, ran with blood. "The flame of the sword and the lightning of the spear" shone in the doomed city for a space, and when our relieving steamer arrived there was a multitude of slain and there was no end of their corpses. The terrible formula which summed up our policy in the Sudan has been as terribly fulfilled. The garrison, have been spared, and over the walls of the Sudan the Mahdi has now passed his bloody sword. Nothing has happened that was not foreseen. Far be it from us to profane such a moment as this with any vain reminiscences. In the sanctuary of our sorrow such revivings jar like the shriek of the wind. We weep over the grave of our dead. But it is precisely because he realized so vividly the approach of that savage orgie of carnage and of last that General Gordon twice months ago pleaded so earnestly against the evacuation of the Sudan, and it was in order to stave off this great tragedy he consented to go to Khartoum to do what he could. He has done what he could, and the catastrophe which with such heroic courage and such marvellous bravery he has averted for a whole year, has at last overwhelmed him and those whom he sought to save. "Red ruin" has fallen upon Khartoum—her children weep, and the women have become a prey to the spoiler, and the few brave men who through all the long siege have endured faithfully to the end in spite of sore privation, constant attacks, and a haunting sense of desertion and despair, were paid the penalty of their loyalty with their lives. The telegrams from Khartoum read like the scrolls of the Hebrew prophets on which were written the judgment of God upon the cities of old. All is over, and the curtain falls upon a scene of blood and desolation, only to be realized by those who remember the carnage of Cawnpore or the more recent horrors of Batak.

Khartoum has been evacuated by Gordon, and with Khartoum General Gordon has perished. Of that there can be no longer any doubt. A career of unsullied splendor has now culminated in a death worthy of the heroism which marked the earlier part of his life. He was a man of a noble and a true, who have felt the warm grasp of that generous hand now cold in death, who have seen the noble face of the man whose smile, or inspired to stringing after nobler things by the glowing ardor of his simple faith, can dissociate their keen sense of personal bereavement from those more general considerations which we spend the greater part of the nation to-day. There was no one who knew him but loved him. So brave he was and so gentle, so great and yet so humble, inspired at once by the sublimest ideals, and yet ever alive to the humanness of the world, he was a man who would have been a martyrdom and a victory. Said Mazzini, "are twin sisters, for martyrdom is also the benediction of Heaven." It is difficult for those of us who knew Gordon as a man and as a friend to believe that he should have died in such a manner. He was a man of a noble and a true, who have felt the warm grasp of that generous hand now cold in death, who have seen the noble face of the man whose smile, or inspired to stringing after nobler things by the glowing ardor of his simple faith, can dissociate their keen sense of personal bereavement from those more general considerations which we spend the greater part of the nation to-day. There was no one who knew him but loved him. So brave he was and so gentle, so great and yet so humble, inspired at once by the sublimest ideals, and yet ever alive to the humanness of the world, he was a man who would have been a martyrdom and a victory. Said Mazzini, "are twin sisters, for martyrdom is also the benediction of Heaven." It is difficult for those of us who knew Gordon as a man and as a friend to believe that he should have died in such a manner. 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