THE FLOWERS COLLECTION

Spirit of the Age.

A FAMILY JOURNAL DEVOTED TO THE INTEREST OF THE HOME CIRCLE.

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Selected for the Spirit of the Age.

THE WIFE OF TWO HUSBANDS.

Late on a Christmas night, many years ago,(before you and I were born, dear reader,) a gay party sat around the fire in the library, at Clermont Hall, telling ghost stories. The day had been a fatiguing one, and between church in the morning, the tenants; dinner in the great hall,the family dinner at seven,the sabbath school children's Christmas tree,the tenants' dance,and serenade up on the lawn, by early moonlight, every one was glad enough to give up a dance which had been proposed, and sit down quietly to spend the evening in agreeable conversation. The group was not large, for General Clermont disliked great parties at Christmas— he only gathered his intimates about him at that happy time—a few relatives, an officer or two, who had come out safe in wind and limb from the long war—and left the list in Lady Clermont's hands. She made very few additions, on the present occasion she had asked only two of of her London friends; so the the party numered but eight in all. It was perhaps three years after peace had been proclaimed upon the Continent,and people met who had been long detained abroad, and in the warmth of their delight at seeing home and fatherland again, contrived to put society on a more intimate footing than it is often seen. Thus, the group of which I speak, might have been taken for the members of one family; so cordial and earnest were their manners towards each other. With one exception.

Let me describe them in order as the bright fire-light shines upon the circle. First, comes General Clermont—a tall, broad-shouldered, white haired soldier, who won his brigade at Waterloo, and left his bright arm upon that field. He has a stern, harsh countenance, and seldom smiles except when his young wife speaks to him. Jealous as Othello himself, somewhat irritable and hot-headed—yet, withal, kind-hearted, he has contrived, in the two years of his marriage, to make her fear, rather than love him. But this he does not know. At his feet, sits a noble stage-hound, with drooping ears, who blinks solemnly at the fire, yet starts from his incipient slumber at the least sound, and lays his grizzled muzzle affectionately upon his master's hand, and never fails to receive a caress. In the next chair reclines the general's old companion in arms, Colonel Denton, a widower of seventy, who has but just returned to England, bringing with him a young French officer, Maurice D'Estecourt, whose life the colonel had saved at Quatre Bras, and who accompanied him to England after peace had been proclaimed. He had accompanied him to Clermont Hall willingly—they had reached it that morning, full of health and spirits, and yet, at night, the young Captain of the "Garde d'Honneur," looked pale, and worn, and haggard, and pleading a sudden indisposition, preserved an unbroken silence, and shaded his eyes with his hand as he leaned back upon the cushions of the easy chair which the general had insisted upon arranging with his own hand, for the 'boy,' as he mentally called him. Boyish, indeed, he looked, with his beautiful regular features, and his long curling hair—yet he had won his epaulettes by the most daring bravery under the Emperor's eye, and there was a look at times in his face that told of the silent anguish of a man. And there was one present, who could translate that sorrowful look only too well.

Beside the young officer sat a complete contrast—a bustling Tory member of Parliament, whose vision was blind to anything that was not tied with red tape, and whose ears were deaf to all addresses not prefaced with 'My Lords and Gentlemen.' He had a name—he was called Sir Thomas Overton; but he was more generally known in polite circles as 'Lady Overton's husband.' At his elbow, and drawn back a little from the heat of the fire, sat a tall, sad-looking woman, apparently forty years of age, dressed in the deepest mourning. She was the Baroness Ralfenheim, a German lady who had lost her lover just as he became her husband, years before, and who had vowed to wear black till she exchanged it for her shroud. She was the only intimate friend Lady Clermont possessed, one who spent the greater part of the year under her roof. Lady Caroline Overton,the acknowledged leader of fashion, the toast of the young men, and the admiration of the old—how shall I describe her?—She was 'beautiful exceedingly,' with a graceful, *petite* figure, with regular features, a rosebud of a mouth, and the pearliest of teeth—the softest of blue eyes, the sunniest of golden hair, and a bloom like that in the breast of a damask rose—it was no wonder that she turned the heads of every one who approached her—we had better leave her in her loveliness, lest ours should begin to whirl also. By the side of the rose bloomed a lily. In other words, Lady Geraldine Clermont, sat at her left hand, thus making the circle complete. Her chair was drawn close to the marble fire-place, so that she sat a little in the shade. Even then, the purity of her complexion could easily be seen, and the dusky splendor of her eyes and hair. It was no wonder that the general looked at her so admiringly. She was the daughter of a needy Scotch Lord, who had died abroad, leaving his only child and her faithful nurse to return to England as best they might. Till peace was proclaimed they had dwelt secluded in a little lonely, French village, and then returning to their native land, the Lady Geraldine sought and found protection at the hands of her maternal uncle, Lord Clan-Alpine. It was among the Highlands that the good general had first met her, and enraptured with the elegance and majesty of her form, and the proud beauty of her face, he had laid his heart and fortune at her feet. She accepted them, and two years had passed since she spoke the marriage vows. Was she happy? To-night, at least she was much paler than usual, and an unutterable look of misery haunted the depths of her unquiet eyes. Conscious of this, she held a small screen before her face, complaining of the brilliant light of the fire. The general moderated it as much as he could, but still the screen that tantalized him was not laid aside, and he was forced to content himself by admiring the beautiful hand and arm that held it, and the small foot that rested on the hearth. Very much in love with the gallant soldier was, even after two years of marriage.

The great clock in the hall struck eleven, and Lady Caroline looked up and shrugged her shoulders, as the General finished a ghost story he was telling.

'My dear Sir Thomas,' she exclaimed, 'I positively shall not be able to sleep a wink to-night after hearing about all these ghosts and hobgoblins.'

Her husband looked surprised.

'My dear child, how can you be so foolish. No ghost will ever trouble you, depend upon it; indeed, if there are such things, the best way to get rid of them is to ———'

'Make a parliamentary speech, I suppose,' said his pretty wife, yawning. 'My dear General, be good, and tell us something a little less horrible, if you do not want to have me in convulsions all night.'

'I am really afriend I know no stories except such as I have told you,' said the general, looking very much ashamed of himself. 'But here is Captain D'Estecourt; perhaps he can oblige us.'

The young Frenchman started, and showed a face so pale, that the courteous host at once withdrew the proposition he had made.

'No, you are not fit, my dear Captain. I beg you not to exert yourself. I can see that you are really ill.'

'Thanks, General Clermont,' said a very musical voice. 'I have a wretched headache. But at any other time I shall be most happy to amuse Lady Overton, if it is in my power.'

He bowed gracefully to her, and as she met his dark eyes, the color deepened in her cheek.

'My week's penance will be lightened if he stays here,' she thought to herself. 'He is really as handsome as Apollo himself, and how very stupid my *caro sposo* looks beside him. *N'importe.*'—And she leaned back in her chair, and began laying plans to captivate the elegant invalid.

'I think I remember a tale, or rather, something in real life, that will interest the ladies, said Colonel Denton, looking up suddenly. 'It is very romantic, and pathetic, and all that sort of thing.'

Lady Caroline laughed.

'How unromantic of you, Colonel Denton 'all that sort of thing!' You should have said it will 'drown them in tears,' or, 'touch them to the heart,' or something of the kind.'

'As your ladyship pleases,' said the old soldier, bowing. 'But it really is a strange story. I heard it in France.'

The Captain opened his eyes, and looked interested.

'And a very pretty girl told it to me by the way. I was going to Paris on some staff business; the confounded postillion managed to overturn the carriage near a small village called Lazun, and, as a matter of course I had to stop there two or three hours, while the mischief he had done to the wheels was being required.'

'At Lazun!' exclaimed the young captain, in a hollow voice.

The baroness leaned suddenly forward to arrange her dress, and her eyes met his with a warning glance that restored his self-possession.

'Yes. Do you know the place?' said the colonel.

'Slightly. When I was a child, a dear sister of mine was taken ill on a journey and buried there.'

'Ah. Well, there are other people in the world, I imagine, who must have a sadder memory even than you of the place.'

'Go on, and pardon me for interrupting. I had not heard the name for years, and it startled me.'

Lady Clermont leaned back farther in her chair, and rested her head upon her hand, still holding the screen before her face. The baroness watched her uneasily, yet, from her position, was quite free from all observation herself. The colonel resumed his story

'I was strolling about the place, as I said before, swearing in English, I am afraid, at the delay and the pretty girl stood in the door of a small cottage, laughing at my woe-begone face. The garden in front was very pretty. The Provence roses were in bloom, and I am very fond of them, for they used to grow under my mother's window at home. I went and leaned over the fence and admired them, then I mustered courage enough to pull off my hat to her, and she smiled and courtesied in return.

'Mademoiselle,' I said, half doubtfully, 'this is your home?'

'Oui, Monsieur,' she said, running down and opening the gate. 'Monsieur has been so good as to admire my father's flowers. He is welcome to the best among them;' and she held the gate open for me, with a winning smile.

'Vive la France!' I thought to myself 'An English girl would have gone into hysterics if a stranger had spoken to her in such a way.'

'I took the goods the gods provided me, ladies and gentlemen, and walked down among the roses with a thankful heart,

'Monsieur is English,' said the girl, looking at my uniform. She might have known that by my accent, but she was too polite to say so.

'I am,' I answered. 'And yet, for all that you will not refuse to give me a rose. I love them for the sake of my mother, who is dead.'

'Pauline (that was her name) looked kindly at me, and gathering a cluster of the most perfect flowers, placed them in my hand without a word. I bent down and touched hers with my lips.

'That is the kiss of *peace*,' I said, playfully.—'Are you not glad, *ma belle*, that the war is over?'

'Ah the weary war! she sighed. 'And the Emperor—the poor Emperor——'

'You love him, then?' I said.

'A flush of genuine French enthusiasm crimsoned her cheek and fired her eye.

'I! I adore him! Vive Napoleon! Vive l'Empereur!' and she waved her kerchief in the air.

'And have you seen him?'

'Never.'

'How the French lored that man! I was wondering at it as I walked beside Pauline, when I struck my foot against something, and nearly fell over—I give you all leave to guess what!'

'How can we?' said General Clermont, looking interested. 'Pray go on, my dear fellow.'

'A little child's grave.'

There was a faint cry in the direction of Lady Clermont's chair, but it was lost in the general chorus of exclamations. The young Frenchman was lying silently back among his cushions as if asleep.

'Odd! wasn't it!' said the Colonel, pleased with the excitement he had caused. 'You may imagine how startled I was! It was the stone I had stumbled against—a plain marble cross, with a wreath of immortelles carved upon it No name—no date. Pauline watched me anxiously as I brushed back the rose bushes and searched for some trace of the little creature's name, or rank in life, and shook her head with a sigh when I gave it up.'

'Whose is it? Who can have selected such a place?' I exclaimed.

'Monsieur will not be angry if I tell him?'

'I—why should I be angry?'

'Because it compromises the honor of a countryman of his.'

'What the deuce! An Englishman? I don't believe it!' exclaimed the General, hotly, starting up in his chair.

'Pauline said there was a private marriage.—You see, some English lady, very young and beautiful, staid at Lozun for a long time during the war. A French officer saw her; they fell in love with each other, and as his regiment was not then ordered abroad, they met very frequently. Then came the tale of the private marriage. They lived in the little cottage, and planted the Provence rose I had been admiring. Almost a year passed by, then the young officer was suddenly ordered away. The young girl staid behind with her child, who had just come to make them happier than ever. Poor thing! if she had done any wrong, she suffered for it; for tidings came first of the expedition to Moscow, then news of the young officer's death. He had been sabred at the head of his regiment, and was left upon the battle field, among the dead. The mother had a brain fever on hearing the dreadful tidings.—When she recovered, and asked for her child, they could only show her its grave. So she left the cottage and the Provence roses, and no one ever saw her face again.'

'Why, where did she go?' asked Lady Caroline, who hardly knew whether to be shocked or grieved at the tale.

'God knows—I do not,' said the old soldier, bluntly. 'I only know I was very glad to leave the place. It made my heart ache to look at that little grave! I hardly think the poor mother herself could have looked at it more sorrowfullly than I.'

The screen trembled so violently in Lady Clermont's hand, that she aid it aside. The General looked at her, and turned pale.

'How long ago was all this?' he said in a constrained voice.

'Let me see, nearly five years—at least more than four.'

Lady Clermont and her friend exchanged a look as a cloud began to darken over the old man's brow; then the Baroness threw up her arms and uttered a stifled exclamation

'Help! help! the Baroness is fainting,' said D'Estecourt, starting from his chair. And before any one else could reach her, he bore her in his arms to the farther end of the room, and dashed the window open.

'How can I ever thank you enough for saving *her*; oh Margaret!' he murmured passionately, and the general hurrying up just at this moment, caught the last two words, and felt a load suddenly taken off his heart. No doubt the Baroness was the heroine of the story, and drawing a long breath of relief, he did his best to shield her from all observation.

'It was the heat, my dear friends; it was the heat, Geraldine,' he kept saying, 'and it is very late; past one o'clock. It is time we were all in bed. See, she is reviving; Geraldine my love, had you not better accompany your friend to her room?'

Lady Geraldine offered her arm in silence; the young Frenchman drew back; all shook hands, and gave each other the kind wishes of the season, and then the ladies left the room. In less than half an hour the gentlemen followed, and darkness and silence reigned in the lower rooms of the Hall.

But in an upper one, a little boudoir, opening out of the chamber of the Baroness, a strange scene was taking place. Two figures stood side by side, while the Baroness half reclined upon the sofa, was weeping bitterly; at last they threw themselves into each other's arms.

'I thought you dead, Maurice—I thought you dead believe me!' sobbed Lady Geraldine.

'*Enfant*—I do not doubt it: And not for worlds would I have come here, had I known whose guest I was about to become. There is but one thing left for me—I go at once.'

'Oh Maurice; my own; I never can part with you again! Take me with you.'

'Geraldine'—said the Baroness rising, 'you must, not! Maurice, persuade her for me.'

'Do not fear me,' said the young man, gently. 'Geraldine, you are as the life blood of my heart; and yet I leave you. The secrecy we were obliged to observe—the fact of our marriage by a Catholic priest, alone, makes it illegal *here*. The law would pronounce you *his* wife; not mine. You owe him much; you were happy with him till now; and his life is bound up in you. Geraldine——.'

'I know; know,' she said, withdrawing herself from his embrace. 'You are right, Maurice or his sake, this awful secret must not be made ublic. But are you going to-morrow?'

'To-night!' he said, passionately. 'Do you hink I can remain under the same roof with yo both? I arranged it this morning; in half a hour my servant will come, apparently with important despatches, and I shall go to-night.'

'Oh, are you going to forget me?'

'Think of the grave under the Provence roses before you ask me that,' he said, bursting suddenly into tears, and clasping her to his heart.

A post-chaise dashed into the court—dogs barked, and the great bell of the hall rang violently.

'It is Jacques, exclaimed the baroness. 'Grand Dieu! You will certainly be discovered!'

The husband and wife spoke for the last time those dear names—touched for the last time each other's lips—then Maurice was hurried away by their confidante, and Geraldine sank upon her knees.

'Oh, God protect him!' she cried. 'And help me to do my duty, for I am wretched.'

The Baroness glided softly back through the silent passages.

'He has gone—and all is safe! God help you both!' she said, leading her friend towards her chamber, and dismissing her with a kiss.

When the General entered, half an hour later, Geraldine's eyes were closed.

'Little one,' he said, cheerfully, 'our friend D'Estecourt has been suddenly called away to Paris. His servant was sent for him—I have just seen him off. By the way I believe he and the Baroness knew something of that story to-night. Very odd that the Colonel should happen to repeat it before them, was it not?'

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