

The Story of Felice

“MRS. MONTRESSOR has eloped with her husband’s most valued friend.”

So ran the tale from lip to lip in the small town of Burnley, not very far from the great metropolis.

It was quite true! A hard truth to the deserted husband, cowering from sight in his library—a palpable truth to the circle of fashionable gossips who had foreseen this coming end for some months. The wife had left her husband and her home—worse, if possible, she had left her child—Heaven be thanked, they had but one!—had left this child, a girl of four years old, to the mercy of what?—of the world, that small world centered in Burnley, to be alternately pitied, sneered at and shunned, for the sake of its mother, and its mother’s crime.

Sometimes, when he had calmer moods, the child, Felice, would be carried to his cell to look at him, to see if he would recognize her. But it was hazardous; for the child bore a cruelly beautiful resemblance to the mother, and the sight of her made him fancy she had returned, and was praying for his love, which maddened him more than ever. So at last this faint glimpse of his former joys was denied to him, the child rarely came, and the father pined away in miserable alternations of speechless despondency and raving delirium.

And the mother? Let us give a sketch of this woman’s life. She had been a child of poor parents, who apprenticed her to a fashionable milliner in the city. She was cursed, this girl, who was exceedingly frivolous, cursed with a beautiful face, and a most charming figure. She was only sixteen when she was thus flung into temptation of the sorest; for poverty was at her heels, following her like a devil, forever prompting her to vain wishes and longings after bright and beautiful clothing to enfold her fair and perfect figure.

One night, very weary and very disconsolate, she was forced to go, at a late hour, and on a wretchedly rainy night, far into the crowded streets, to take a lace dress home to the daughter of a wealthy merchant. All day long she had worked on this elegant robe, and she was tired, and hated the errand she was on, as much because she coveted the dress as that she was forced to wait on a girl as young almost as herself. It was a light parcel that she carried, and was fastened at each end loosely. When she reached the door of the lady’s house, the lower end of the parcel had become damp with the wet, the pins had given way, the paper was empty, and the dress gone! She sat down on the doorstep and cried. She had no money to replace the dress, and she should have to work and work for weeks before it was paid for. How could she help crying?

While she was sitting on the stone steps in this overwhelming sorrow, the door behind her opened, and a stream of light shone on her bare head, with its rich black hair falling round her well-turned shoulders. She looked up. A footman was showing a gentleman out, down the steps where she sat. He told her to go, and, very miserable in her heart, she moved away. The door was closed, the gentleman, a very young man, came up with her, passed her, stood still, and finally followed her. She was so wretched that she scarcely noticed him, she was thinking what she should do about the dress.

“Have you lost your way?” said a pleasant, cheery voice at her elbow.

What! was the gentleman speaking to her? Her heart beat rapidly.

She answered him. It was so grateful to her ears at the moment to hear such a light, gay-hearted tone. No, she said, not lost her way; she was only very, very miserable.

“Miserable!” he echoed, “and so young!”

She could not speak for her trouble.

He looked into her face, and added softly:

“And so pretty!”

She knew she was pretty, that was only the truth; but somehow she had never been so glad to hear another acknowledge it as at this moment. She looked up in the face with a little smile. The gentleman was a young lieutenant in the navy—a frank, warm-hearted fellow, self-indulgent, but not narrow-minded, with means enough to be generous without affecting his own wants. He induced her to tell all her misfortunes to him, and when she had gone through it all, he laughed. In his eyes, it was such a trifle to be wretched about. Would money, he asked, make her happy again? O yes! her trouble was because of the money. And would her eyes flash as brightly as they did just now—as he was sure they could when she was thinking of any one that loved her—that loved her very much indeed?

“There was no one,” she said, “no one that she knew loved her. Many people liked her.”

He pressed closer to her side.

“But you love some one yourself?”

“No—no one—yet.”

“Look up,” he said, “into my face. No more tears—that’s right; now take my arm.”

How kind he was! She forgot that she was only a milliner’s apprentice. What a contrast! half an hour ago she was cold, frightened, miserable—and now the dress was going to be paid for, and she was leaning on the arm of a handsome gentleman, who spoke nothing but pleasant, flattering speeches, and all he wished was that she could look happy.

Ugh! what a precipice was before her. Remember, this girl was very young, and poor; and then she was so vain. They continued their walk for some time, till she found that, unconsciously, she was near her home. It was late—very late—she was almost afraid to go home, she told him.

“Let us walk a little way further,” he said, in a voice a little changed.

They did so in silence. He was thoughtful, but she was only silent from the newness of her gratified vanity.

Again they returned to the door of her home—a poor place—and then he pressed into her hands notes and gold, and made her promise he should see her again. What was there hard in it to promise? He watched her in, saw a light ascend to a humble attic window, and when she drew the curtain across, she saw and waved her hand to him.

Gracie, as she was called, slept in a charmed atmosphere that night. In her dreams, gold was continually dug up at her feet—she had so much money that her hands could not grasp it together. Wherever she turned, money was lying before her delighted eyes—money in crowns and half crowns—in guineas—everything silver and gold, and all her own. It was like a story in the “Arabian Nights” she used to read. As for dresses, they lay about, in her dream, in heaps—such beautiful things! and all the time there was some one walking at her side and showing her where to go, and where to find still more money. What a dream it was! And she woke—to what?

To the delight of knowing that she should see the handsome stranger again, to behold that she really had money—a great deal of money in her possession—even if she replaced the dress, and for a few days she would keep its loss secret. How happy she was! How beautiful she looked! She bough some pretty material, and formed a light and charming bonnet; but she was very cautious in the display of this money, and wore these things by stealth only. Gracie met the young lieutenant again, again, and again. On his side it was infatuation; on hers, it was the intoxication of gratified vanity. Still they met.

At last, blinded to the crime she was sinking into, Gracie one night left her home, and returned no more. For months her parents sought for her, and blamed themselves as the cause of her flight. For these months she was sinfully happy. She was an apt scholar, and under good teaching, she became even accomplished. At last, the blow fell. Gracie found herself, one morning, alone in Liverpool. The ship Niagara had sailed, and bore on board Lieutenant L—, leaving her with no hope but a promise of return.

In the small town of Burnley, near London, which had its share of resident fashionables, and in which was kept up a continual flow of small excitements and petty dissipations, as the reflex of the still greater extremes of the vast city, an arrival caused a stir of speculation and gossip at any time. But when a lady, a beautiful young widow lady, appeared there, with her infant child as interesting as herself, all Burnley rose up in consultation as to her reception. It was impossible not to see what an acquisition she would form; her grace of manner was too marked for her not to have belonged to good society.

The doctor’s lady, on the word of her husband, introduced her at one of her *petit soupers*, and her triumph was complete. She was charming, and every one thought her so. The widow of a naval officer, she said, must naturally live in comparative seclusion, and only their extreme kindness had induced her to appear among them.

Mrs. Villiers was the name of the lady, and she was at once made the adoration of the gentlemen, as a beauty of the first water. After a very brief engagement, Mr. Montessor, an amiable and

wealthy solicitor, carried off this paragon, her child was treated as his own, and, indeed, he loved it more than the mother, whose pride in it arose from its likeness to herself in her fatal loveliness.

She was as unprincipled as she was beautiful, and within a year or two of her marriage, she was to be seen constantly in the society of a gay, wealthy friend of her husband's, who found himself drawn on, step by step, within the toils of this woman, until, driven to extremity by the peril of a discovery, he could no longer withhold an offer of protection in flight against the inevitable exposure which must soon take place. It was all arranged with deliberation on her side; there was no remorse, as there had been none on leaving her parents' roof in the first instance. She felt some natural compunction on leaving her child—but then, it was sure to be well provided for, and it was off her hands. Hence, she had only herself to think of. The scandal would soon die away into oblivion, and, in short, without more consideration than concerned themselves, the guilty couple met, and together fled to the continent. We have seen that Mr. Montessor was driven to a madhouse by this unsuspected ending to a match which, on his side, was based on the truest affection.

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It was about seven years after this even, that a child actress of wonderful promise made her appearance in one of the provincial theatres. Her beauty, her grace and pathos, were the wonder of theatrical circles. She was the rage. Wherever she went, crowded houses assembled to witness the touching impersonations of this child, who was positively become the fashion. The managers who engaged her had plays written expressly for the display of her talent, and they reaped a golden harvest out of the throngs she drew. Rarely, in one so young as this pretty and charming creature, had such grace, such intelligence, been seen; her sweet face alone would have captivated all hearts by the innocent candor of its expression.

It was no extraordinary event for sobs to be heard during her performance; for the child had that rare power of awakening sympathy in scenes of mimic woe, which very few could withstand. Usually these juvenile actresses have a measured utterance, which fails to touch the sympathies, and which is mere repetition of a stilted, clap-trap teaching, clever, as a feat of memory, but unnatural in expression and effect. The child Felice rose above these displays, and in her impersonations revealed sensibility and taste.

On one memorable occasion, when she had been more than usually successful, in a play which suited her peculiar powers, a singular incident occurred. The youthful heroine has been deserted while an infant by her mother, who, stung by remorse, afterwards attends her as nurse, and when she can no longer withhold the truth, declares herself as the mother of her she has so fondly tended. The passionate declaration is heard with joy by the child, who has instinctively loved her humble attendant, and the exclamation, "Are you indeed my mother?" was received with bursts of applause. But high above these signs of approval, rose a loud shriek of terror or dismay, as it seemed, and a woman's voice was heard, in piteous accents, screaming aloud:

"Take her away—do not let me see her, for the love of Heaven!"

There was a vast stir in the house, and then a prostrate form was borne out of the gallery. Some

poor woman had been over-excited by the scene, and had fainted helplessly away. The circumstance created a great deal of excitement in the house, and was made the subject of a few paragraphs in the provincial papers; but it only had the effect of heightening the public curiosity to see this child who could create so strong a sensation.

Some years after, and when Felice had grown past girlhood, she still maintained the position her talents had won her on the boards. She was no between sixteen and seventeen years of age, of a slender but perfect figure, with a modest and even serious expression, which did not, however, mar the exquisite beauty of her countenance. She had received many valuable presents while in the profession, but once there was peculiar significance attached to the circumstance attending the giving of one of them.

She had entered her dressing-room after an arduous part, and, weary and exhausted, seated herself before her glass, for the purpose of unrobing. Before her lay a small parcel addressed to herself. In a tattered piece of rag was enclosed a bracelet of considerable value, in the centre of which was a portrait. A folded paper bore these words:

“When you see the original of this, you will see one you should love by instinct. Keep it, and remember. The giver is reduced to extreme poverty, and dreads lest she should be forced to part from it. In your hands it must be guarded carefully. Remember!”

Who had placed it there? Beyond the dresser, who always had the key of the room, no one had been seen to enter it. The woman denied that the room had been left unguarded for a moment. How came it there? The ordinary people engaged about the establishment had seen no one who could give a clue to this mystery. A poor woman, a lace-mender, who was employed for the ladies, and who was the only person liable to be disengaged at the time, was questioned. No. She had seen no stranger in or near the room. The mystery remained unsolved.

It was a matter of conjecture that one so young and attractive as Felice should be able to keep aloof from so many admirers. That she did so was a certainty. No one could boast of a warmer look than affability of manner accorded, and to all alike. There were a few favored *habitués* allowed in the green room, and these occasionally drew her into conversation; but when this was the case, her manner was courteous, and her remarks revealed sense and good judgment, but never levity. Any one who watched her keenly would have observed a certain anxiety and nervousness when a stranger entered the room, and sometimes even disappointment would be visible on her features. Why was this? It was because she nursed a vague expectation—vague, even to herself, and it was impossible that strangers could hold a clue to the mystery.

Felice became more popular, more admired; again and again a rumor went the round of the papers that she was engaged in marriage; but all these rumors were untrue. At last, the frequent visits to the green room of a young collegian, who had, in one of her provincial tours, made her the object of his marked attentions, and who renewed them on her re-appearance in the metropolis, became a subject of gossip in the theatre. He was a young, handsome man, impetuous and ardent to a fault. It was evident to all that his admiration was sincere, and that his attachment deepened as Felice’s manner won his respect. She herself believed in his love when he ceased to address her in compliment, and refrained from the usual fulsome expressions which

formed nearly the only feature in the conversation of her admirers.

The girl shrank from these insinuations against her honor. Her pride confessed itself in reserve towards her young lover, which demanded from him inquiries as to the cause of her change of manner. She evaded explanation; but one night, after witnessing her performance, he left the stage box, from whence he had watched her every movement with fatal fascination, and as she crossed the stage in answer to a clamorous demand for her re-appearance, he begged with an earnestness unmistakable in his pale cheek and firm-set mouth, for a few moment's conversation. She could not speak, but led the way. It was the interval between the first and after piece, when the floods of muslin and shimmer of wings comprising the ballet, had just flitted out of the green-room, after innumerable *poses* before the large glass, and had thus left the room vacant when they took their position on the stage.

They were alone. He took her hand, and spoke clearly but rapidly.

“Felice, you must have seen, for I cannot hide my love for you. The thought of you possesses me utterly. Give me love for love. Speak!”

She drew back her hand, though at the same time she said, in a low voice:

“I do give it; for I hold you most dear of all who have ever addressed me.”

“You confess it!” he cried out, in a rapture of delight.

“Yes; and yet—”

She hesitated.

“Yet what? What is there to restrain our joy, our perfect joy?”

He drew her to his side. She shrank away with a look which chilled him.

“Though,” she murmured, “both of us confess this love, you know as well as I, that we must part.”

“Part!

“Part!” she repeated, firmly. “We are not equals, and we must resign this passion.”

“Now?” he asked, with impetuosity; “now, when you confess so much?”

“Yes; for in that confession exists the necessity of separation.”

He dropped her hands, and stood looking at her with dismay. Now he could no longer hide from himself this glaring, disagreeable truth. For a moment he was silent, but he felt a presentiment of evil. Looking up, he saw Felice surveying him with a melancholy earnestness, while a slightly

scornful curl of her lip betrayed her consciousness of the truth of their position. It was too true—she was his inferior. Stung by the knowledge that she could see this confession in his face, he spoke with precipitate warmth.

“I will not acknowledge the truth of your assertion to myself; but you force me to explain in what consists a real obstacle to our marriage at present. I am entirely dependent on another for my position in life. If I rebel against”—he hesitated—“against certain prejudices of society, in my choice, I lose caste, and worse, I must appear ungrateful to one whom I respect and venerate. But I will no longer act with deceit—give me your promise that you will not avoid my presence, or give another—”

She shook her head, sadly.

“Give another preference,” he added. “You shall hear of me yet, and with no slur upon my honor, for truth shall guide me in whatever path I may pursue.”

They parted. For weeks she neither saw him, nor received a line from him. Yet he never missed a night of her performance; unseen, he watched her leave the theater, and made himself aware of all her movements. He was waiting for the arrival in England of one who must decide his fate, and until then he kept from her presence with the rigid forbearance of a man of principle and honor. One night Felice was upon the stage, playing the character of the *Jewess*, before a crowded audience. Already she had approached the scaffold on which she is to be sacrificed to the flames, unaware of the rescue at hand. She trod with firm steps the pathway cleared by the crowd, she ascended the steps with proud composure, when, slowly turning round to face the audience, her glance fell upon the figure of her lover, who stood at the wings, watching, with looks of fear, her painfully real impersonation. By his side stood a gentleman of middle age, noble and distinguished in mien, upon whose face she gazed with an irrepressible and fascinated interest.

The scene faded from before her eyes; some strange emotion, to which she could give no name, thrilled her from head to foot. Fortunately, it was the end of the scene—the curtain dropped rapidly, and, partially recovering her self-possession, she was about to proceed to her own dressing-room. To do this, she must pass by the wing, and go through a passage facing the green-room door.

Her lover had disappeared from the spot on which he stood—gone without a word. With a presentiment of impending change—whether for good or ill she knew not—Felice stepped into the room to recover herself from a momentary faintness. It was not, as she supposed, empty. Leaning against the fireplace, and reflected to her enthralled sight in the large glass, which occupied nearly the length of one side of the room, was he who had stood near her lover; he at the first glance of whom she had been overcome by an involuntary magnetic shudder—by some uncontrollable emotion, however mysterious its source.

There he stood, gazing at her kindly, even sadly. And there, with eyes fixed upon his face, she traced, feature by feature, the original of the portrait entrusted to her in the bracelet, and which she had so sacredly preserved. And while she still looked, the accompanying words flashed

before her sight—those words which had haunted her young life with a sense of fatalism.

“When you see the original of this, you will see one you must love by instinct!”

The remembrance confused her by its imperative significance. He spoke. It was a full-toned, pleasant voice. She listened as in a dream.

“I have had a great wish to be introduced to you,” he said. “At my age I may use more freedom than a younger man. Allow me, then, to introduce myself as your very warm, though very recent admirer.”

She bowed her head, but could form no reply.

“I have,” he continued, “a greater interest in meeting you than you can surmise.”

Ha! Some strange truth was about to be revealed—what? She listened tremblingly.

“In the first place, then, you bear a singular, a marvelous likeness to one whom I—I loved very much in my youth. From a feeling of compunction, if from no other cause, I could wish to show you some kindness—any that I can, if it does not involve too much sacrifice.”

She looked up in wonder.

“I do not understand you,” she said.

“First,” he proceeded, “tell me, have you parents living?”

“No,” she said. “There is a little history attached to my early days, and I rarely speak of it.”

“You must,” he exclaimed, “to me!” Then, seeing her surprise, “Pardon me, it is necessary to your own happiness, and to that of one who loves you.”

She was again silent for a moment; but with an effort, she said:

“To explain my confidence, I must then tell you that when I speak I feel I am speaking to one whose face I know well, though I have never in my life seen you till now.”

“How?” he inquired, in amazement.

“Listen!”

She had placed her hand on his arm, in her earnestness.

“My mother—” she commenced.

“Hush! what was that?”

A sharp cry rang in their ears. Felice turned to a deadly paleness.

“It is nothing,” said the stranger, consolingly. “Some business of the stage.”

“No; they are not playing now.”

As she moved towards the door, a sound near at hand—a sound, half gasp, half groan—thrilled her heart with an undefined tear. She went out of the door. She paused and listened. In a moment the sound was repeated behind her, and, turning back, she beheld a huddled mass of rags at her feet, close to the door of the green-room.

It was no acted tragedy. There lay a wretched human form—a woman, gasping for very life, the life which welled out from her at every short, catching breath.

The stranger, on Felice’s cry for help, put his arm round this poor wretched woman and lifted her into the room. A piteous, shuddering groan escaped her lips, from whence flowed a thin, dark stream of blood. They laid her on one of the cushioned benches running round the room, and she appeared slightly to revive. As Felice lifted the long, snake-like tresses from the white but wrinkled forehead, she exclaimed:

“Poor suffering creature! it is the lace-mender to the theatre!”

The dying woman looked up in her face with gratitude, then, slowly raising her eyes to the gentleman at Felice’s side, she murmured, in broken tones, for she was already convulsed with the agonies of death:

“*She* knows me as a poor lace-mender. Lieutenant L—, what do *you* know me for?”

“Gracie! Good heaven! Gracie!—is it possible?”

“True!” she gasped. “Felice, *our* child! Where—where is that bracelet? ‘Twas I—I who placed it in your room.”

“O, my mother, it is here. I never part from it.” cried Felice.

“Right. He is—your father! Love him. I did once.”

She sank back. The lower jaw drew down in a convulsion ghastly to behold, the teeth chattered with their last agony, her breath ebbed slowly away, choked by the red streams that trickled slowly down; a shiver passed over the limbs like a wave, her face stiffened—Gracie was dead.

Felice felt herself drawn gently away from this fearful scene. Upon whose shoulder rested her head? It was her father’s. Whose hand then held hers with a tender pressure? It was her lover’s.

“Felice,” said Lieutenant L—, “he loves you. I have never married, and he is my adopted son. It

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was at his request I came here to judge of you. Little did I guess what revelations I should hear. My consent to your union is the only recompense I can make to her who lies there, dead. You are my own child, and your union will make you both my children.”

He turned to the lifeless body, and as he did so, he murmured, “Between us two there must be but one judge. I have failed in my duty to the past—may the happiness of our child’s future redeem that sin.”

Flag of our Union, April 14, 1866