

The Peril of Richard Pardon.

BY B. L. FARJEON.

Author of "Great Porter Square," "Grif," "Blades-o'-Grass," "The Nine of Hearts," "Devlin the Barber," Etc.

CHAPTER VII.

In the morning my wife and I had a conversation about Samuel Fleetwood. Desiring to pay every attention to Mr. Wilmot during his stay with us, we thought it would add to his comfort if we assigned to Fleetwood the office of attending solely upon him. With the intention of apprising Fleetwood of his new duties, I was on the point of summoning him, when he made his appearance.

"Are you better this morning, Mr. Fleetwood?" asked my wife.

He replied, in a grateful voice, that he felt easier, and thanked her feelingly for some soup and jelly which she herself had prepared for him. My wife had that perfect knowledge of household duties and that perfect mastery of them which add so much to the comfort of a home. In soups, jellies, preserving, and pickling she was pre-eminent, and it was often a pleasure to her to busy herself in these agreeable services.

"I shall continue to make soup and jelly," she said to Fleetwood, "and other things as well, which you must take, knowing that I have specially prepared them for you, you will not neglect them."

"Everything that comes from you, madam," replied Fleetwood, "is valued and honored."

"These things will make you strong," said my wife, "and assist your recovery to perfect health."

There was no mournfulness or repining in the smile with which he answered her; it was gentle and resigned.

"We are in God's hands, madam," he said.

She gave him a compassionate look, and then, in her presence, I told Fleetwood what we had resolved upon with respect to Mr. Wilmot. He expressed a cheerful acquiescence, and promised to do everything that lay in his power for our expectant visitor.

"He is an old gentleman," I said, "and may require attendance in the night. You will sleep in the room adjoining his."

"Yes, sir," said Fleetwood; "and the master being settled, my wife left us, having household duties to attend to."

"You have something to say to me," I said, observing that Fleetwood lingered.

"I was coming to seek you, sir," was his response. "I found these in the garden this morning."

He produced my cigar-case, with its monogram of raised silver letters, and a lady's silver back-comb of peculiar design, which Mdlle. Rosalie usually wore in her hair.

"Why do you bring me this comb?" I asked. "It belongs to Mdlle. Rosalie."

"I know, sir; but the two were lying together, and I thought it right to bring them both to you."

His manner was not offensive, but it struck me as being more than ordinarily sad.

"There is nothing right or wrong in it," I remarked. "It is a simple accident that these two articles were found together. I must have dropped my cigar-case as I was walking in the garden last night." It impressed itself upon me here that speaking on the subject was unconsciously causing my annoyance, and I said a little testily "Take the comb to Mdlle. Rosalie, and tell her where you found it."

"I beg you to excuse me, sir," said Fleetwood, respectfully, "and to give the task to another person."

I was reminded of the promise I had tacitly conveyed to Mdlle. Rosalie that I would set her right with the man who regarded her with suspicion.

"Fleetwood, you do not like Mdlle. Rosalie!"

"I have the strongest dislike to her, sir."

"It has grown."

"I own to it, sir—to something almost like aversion."

"A short time since you communicated your dislike and suspicions to me. Time has not softened them?"

"It has strengthened them, sir. Perhaps I am wrong," and here he hesitated with an expression of pain in his face, "in speaking to you about Mdlle. Rosalie."

"Not at all. Go on, Fleetwood, if you have anything more to say."

"The new man in the garden, sir—Redwing—is the man she meets in secret in Ivybush Lane."

"I am aware of it."

Hitherto his eyes had been averted from me; now they were turned towards me in astonishment.

"I beg your pardon, sir," he said, "for interfering."

"There is no question of interfering, Fleetwood," I said. "It is that we have done a young lady an injustice. What I am about to confide to you is a secret; and, as it is not our secret, it must be respected. Mr. Redwing—it is, possibly, not his real name, but, in the circumstances, he may be excused for assuming it—is not Mdlle. Rosalie's lover. He is her brother."

"Indeed, sir!" said Fleetwood, in a tone of constraint.

"She has disclosed to me certain particulars of her past life which have satisfied me that we have not done her justice—you and I, mean. My wife and daughter are very fond of her. There is no need to say any more, is there?"

"No, sir; it is not for me to continue to harp upon the matter. But I cannot undertake to like her."

"I will not attempt to force your inclination; but I wish it were otherwise. Only you must not show any open dislike to her."

"I will bear in mind what you say, sir."

With that he took his departure, with, as I rightly divined, a feeling of disconsolation in his mind, which, I confess, was my feeling also. Fleetwood's manner had not entirely pleased me.

Later in the day I gave Mdlle. Rosalie her silver back-comb.

"O, thank you so much!" she exclaimed. "I was wondering what had become of it. Who found it?"

"Samuel Fleetwood," I replied.

"Ah!" she said, thoughtfully; "he is no friend of mine, and would do me an injury if he could. But I am armed now," she added, with a bright look; "you are my friend."

Day after day passed, and we heard nothing more of Mr. Wilmot. We were, however, quite prepared for his arrival. A suite of rooms was ready, and every morning Eunice placed fresh flowers in them.

I heard her and Mdlle. Rosalie conversing about my uncle.

"This Mr. Wilmot," said Mdlle. Rosalie, "is very, very rich."

"So para says," replied Eunice.

"A millionaire, perhaps?"

"Perhaps," said Eunice, laughing.

"He must be very good, then."

"How is that?"

"All rich men must be. They cannot help it."

This was an unsophisticated view, and it brought a smile to my own lips.

On the Wednesday in the week, the three ladies and I were standing on the lawn in front of the house. Mr. Mortlock was absent, and we were not sorry.

"Papa," said Eunice, "is Mr. Wilmot ever coming? He seems to have forgotten his promise."

"Mr. Wilmot never forgets a promise, Eunice," I said.

As I spoke we all turned our heads in the direction of the gates, being attracted by the sound of animated voices and footsteps; and presently two gentlemen came in view—Mr. Mortlock, and an old gentleman leaning on his arm. I knew my uncle instantly, although I saw at a glance that he had aged since we last met, and I hastened to meet him.

"Have I taken you by surprise, nephew Richard?" he asked (he had always addressed me thus). "But friend Mortlock knew I was coming by this train."

A pang of mortification shot through me. Why had "friend Mortlock" known? and not I? Why was he the chosen one? I concealed my mortification, however, and expressed my delight at seeing him. He nodded, and nodded—he was a little spare man, with not an ounce of superfluous flesh on his bones, and his head seemed to be set on springs—and shook hands with me cordially, and greeted my wife and kissed her, and then, holding Eunice's two hands in his, kissed her also.

"The privilege of old age, my dear," he said. "And you are Eunice. You have grown into a very lovely young woman. We shall be the best of friends—she is a shade of Harry narrowly, and there was a shade of Harry on his face. "Clarendon! Ah!"

Then he looked at Eunice, who was blushing and ill at ease, and at Harry again, who was nervous and awkward in the presence of a stranger who seemed to be criticising him, and not favorably; and then he turned his sharp eyes upon Mr. Mortlock, who met them smilingly, whereat Mr. Wilmot smiled, and nodded and nodded with great vivacity. These two appeared to understand each other without speaking. When his fit of nodding was over, my uncle, undoubtedly with malice prepense, claimed Harry's sole attention, leaving Mr. Mortlock the task of entertaining Eunice. I am sorry to say that this made Harry sullen, and his behavior was certainly not calculated to impress Mr. Wilmot favorably. However, this did not appear to displease my uncle, who took Harry as his partner in a rubber of whist, and even when Harry revoked it did not ruffle him. After the rubber my uncle proposed a game of chess, and checkmated poor Harry in twelve moves. Then my uncle called upon Mr. Mortlock to furnish entertainment, and this gentleman, with great willingness, applied himself to the task, and surprised us with a display of accomplishments of which he had hitherto made no parade. He related story after story; he gave imitations of singular people he had met in his travels; he sang in French, German, and Italian, and accompanied himself with the skill of a master. My wife, as I observed, disapproved of some of these songs, but Mr. Wilmot shook with laughter. Mdlle. Rosalie was called upon to contribute to the entertainment, and she sang admirably, and with great spirit. At length, to our relief, the evening came to an end. Harry had said good-night and had gone home unhappy. Eunice was miserable, and my wife and I were filled with disquieting reflections. Only Mr. Wilmot and Mr. Mortlock seemed to have enjoyed themselves and to have passed a pleasant time. My uncle bade Eunice and her mother good-night, and said that he fore-saw that his visit would be eminently agreeable.

"I breakfast late," he said. "Nephew Richard, you will see me to my room." Fleetwood was there when we reached it, arranging Mr. Wilmot's things for the night. Upon our entrance he retired, through a communicating door, into his own adjoining bedroom.

"Here is a faithful servant, sir," I said, beckoning to Fleetwood, "who will wait upon you and attend to your wishes while you remain with us. We thought it likely you might come without a valet."

"I have—I have," said Mr. Wilmot. "I discharged my scoundrel only yesterday; he had been with me fifteen years, and I discharged him at a moment's notice. Disregarded my orders, the scoundrel! Away he went—to the right about. Had he not disobeyed me, I should have provided for him. I am not the best-tempered man in the world; I know my feelings—I must have my way; I will have my way. Ah! I know what is in your mind. Right or wrong? Yes, right or wrong? I must have my way. Too old to learn, I am fixed—fixed—fixed, like an ancient tree. Ladies, you must not be displeaseed to learn that I am a very wilful, hot-headed, old gentleman. That is why I never married; I should have made my wife miserable, so one woman was spared. It was very thoughtful of you, nephew Richard, to give me a new valet. Fleetwood—is this your name?"

"Yes, sir," said Samuel Fleetwood.

"Good name—good name; I shall not forget it. I never forget anything. Two trunks and a valise of mine have by this time arrived at the house; I told the scoundrels if they used despach to half-a-sovereign. Here it is, give it to them, and take my belongings to my rooms and arrange things. Here are the keys; don't touch my papers, only my clothes and printed books."

Fleetwood sped off, and my uncle followed him with his eyes.

"Seems a willing scoundrel," he said. "Had him long, nephew Richard?"

"A great many years, sir."

"Faithful, you say?"

"As faithful a man as breathes."

"Good character?"

"The best."

He nodded and kept on nodding, till Eunice, selecting a small white rose, put it in his buttonhole.

"Thank you, my dear: I like attention. But why not one to your father?"

Smilingly she picked a flower, and put it in my coat.

"And why not one for friend Mortlock?" said my uncle.

With a heightened color and biting her lip, Eunice gave Mr. Mortlock a rose. He made no demur that she did not fasten it in his coat as she had fastened my uncle's and mine; but he took his revenge by placing the rose to his lips before he put it in his buttonhole.

"He has heart-disease," I said, "and, I am afraid, has not long to live."

"It is a pity, for he seems to be all you represented him. He has been assisting me in my money matters this morning. I have also had a visit from Mdlle. Rosalie. A charming person—a very charming person. Most persons are who take the trouble to make themselves agreeable, and who do not cross you." He held up his hand, and looked at the diamond ring on his finger which he had placed there the previous night. He had a remarkably white and shapely hand, of which he was evidently proud; and, indeed, wizened and pinched up as he was, he must be in his younger years have been a handsome, bright-eyed man. "By the way, nephew Richard, the young gentleman who was here last night and revoked at what? Have you known him long?"

"For somewhat over two years," I replied. "But my letter has explained—"

"What letter do you refer to?" asked Mr. Wilmot.

"The letter I sent you a little while since, to the care of your lawyers in London—"

"Ah, those letters!" said Mr. Wilmot, interrupting me again with a smile. "Would you believe, nephew Richard, that there are two boxes full of them, actually two boxes full? I burst out laughing when I saw them, and I quickly locked the boxes again. Life is too short for correspondence—and such correspondence! Circumstances, begging letters, requests for loans—no, I declined to wade through them. When I return to London I shall instruct someone to separate the wheat from the chaff, and then probably burn the lot—positively burn the lot without looking at them."

I was seized with consternation. My uncle had not read my letter announcing Eunice's engagement with Harry Clarendon; he was in ignorance that Eunice's heart was pledged to the young fellow; and he was now in my house with the intention of promoting Mr. Mortlock's suit. I was convinced of it, and presently the proof came, and left no shadow of doubt behind."

"I have better," he responded, "and you yourself shall be the judge. It is a lovely day; the air here is pure and salubrious; and beauty accompanies me." He bowed gallantly to Eunice and her mother, and continued to enliven the way by similar chatter, to which we listened without a sign of dissent, as we were in duty bound to do; but I, being able to interpret what was hidden from all others, except perhaps Eunice, saw that my uncle's utterances were disquieting to my wife; and it was upon her advice, "to say nothing to him to-day of Eunice's engagement," that I made no reference to what was nearest to our hearts.

In the evening, when dinner was over, Harry came, and was duly introduced.

"Clarendon!" exclaimed Mr. Wilmot; he eyed Harry narrowly, and there was a shade of Harry on his face. "Clarendon! Ah!"

Then he looked at Eunice, who was blushing and ill at ease, and at Harry again, who was nervous and awkward in the presence of a stranger.

"How do you do—how do you do?" he said, nodding at her as he had nodded at us. Once set going, it seemed difficult for him to stop. "Lenormand—Lenormand, I know a family of that name in Versailles. Any relation?"

"I have no relations, sir," said Mdlle. Rosalie, adding, with a glance at me, "out of England."

"Indeed, indeed," he said, "no relation out of England? Nephew Richard, I want to say that I have no relations, but first I wish to place this in safety." He motioned to Mr. Mortlock, who came forward with a dispatch-box, which I had observed to be carrying. "There is money in it, nephew Richard. I never travel without money. It is the open sesame everywhere, even among savages, my dear!" to this Eunice, "I have seen many, and it is surprising how quickly they learn the value of money."

"Your rooms are ready, sir," I said. "Will you see them now?"

"At once—at once. Carry the box for me. No, do not trouble, my dears. Nephew Richard and I will go alone; we will rejoin you presently."

We went up to his rooms together, and I was glad to hear him say that they were pleasantly situated.

"I hope you will make a long stay with us," I said.

"That depends—that depends. Let me thank you now for your courtesy to my friend Mortlock. He is full of your praises, of yours and your good family." A charming gentleman—an exceptionally charming gentleman. Do you not think so?"

To please him I replied, in a cheerful voice, "I could command that." Mr. Mortlock was a charming gentleman.

"That is as it should be—as it should be," I said.

"Let me find the portrait for myself," he said, and I handed him the album. As he turned over the pages I felt that consequences almost vital were trembling in the balance. "Yes," said Mr. Wilmot, pausing at a page, "this is the man—it is he!" He nodded and snarled at the bit of pasteboard. "Let us be sure. This is the father of the young man who played what he called chess with me last night?"

"Yes."

He closed the book. "Nephew Richard, you and I do not know much of each other."

"Not as much as I should have desired, sir."

"Well, well. Perhaps a closer acquaintance was not to be desired. Perhaps we have been better friends apart. It is often the case—often the case. I like you; I like your wife; I like your daughter. There are one or two others I like—only one or two. I like Mortlock; you like him, too; you said he was a charming gentleman. So he is—charming. There are men I like—some more, some less. They do not trouble me, because I do not allow them to trouble me. I wipe them out. I do not express my dislike; I do not