VARIOUS

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Содержание

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THE BETROTHAL

Frances Seymour had been left an orphan and an heiress very early in life. Her mother had died in giving birth to a second child, which did not survive its parent, so that Frances had neither brother nor sister; and her father, an officer of rank and merit, was killed at Waterloo. When this sad news reached England, the child was spending her vacation with Mrs Wentworth, a sister of Mrs Seymour, and henceforth this lady's house became her home; partly, because there was no other relative to claim her, and partly, because amongst Colonel Seymour's papers, a letter was found, addressed to Mrs Wentworth, requesting that, if he fell in the impending conflict, she would take charge of his daughter. In making this request, it is probable that Colonel Seymour was more influenced by necessity than choice; Mrs Wentworth being a gay woman of the world, who was not likely to bestow much thought or care upon her niece, whom

she received under her roof without unwillingness, but without affection. Had Frances been poor, she would have felt her a burden; but as she was rich, there was some éclat and no inconvenience in undertaking the office of her guardian and chaperone—the rather as she had no daughters of her own with whom Frances's beauty or wealth could interfere; for as the young heiress grew into womanhood, the charms of her person were quite remarkable enough to have excited the jealousy of her cousins, if she had had any; or to make her own fortune, if she had not possessed one already. She was, moreover, extremely accomplished, good-tempered, cheerful, and altogether what is called a very nice girl; but of course she had her fault like other people: she was too fond of admiration—a fault that had been very much encouraged at the school where she had been educated; beauty and wealth, especially when combined, being generally extremely popular at such establishments. As long, however, as her admirers were only romantic schoolfellows and calculating school-mistresses, there was not much harm done; but the period now approached in which there would be more scope for the exercise of this passion, and more danger in its indulgence—Frances had reached the age of seventeen, and was about to make her début in the world of fashion—an event to which, certain as she was of making numerous conquests, she looked forward with great delight.

Whilst engaged in preparations for these anticipated triumphs, Mrs Wentworth said to her one day: 'Now that you are coming

out, Frances, I think it is my duty to communicate to you a wish of your father's, expressed in the letter that was found after his death. It is a wish regarding your choice of a husband.'

'Dear me, aunt, how very odd!' exclaimed Frances.

'It is rather odd,' returned Mrs Wentworth; 'and, to be candid, I don't think it is very wise; for schemes of this sort seldom or never turn out well.'

'Scheme! What scheme is it?' asked Frances with no little curiosity.

'Why, you must know,' answered her aunt, 'that your father had a very intimate friend, to whom he was as much attached all his life as if he had been his brother.'

'You mean Sir Richard Elliott. I remember seeing him and his son at Otterby, when I was a little girl; and I often heard papa speak of him afterwards.'

'Well, when young Elliott got his commission, your papa, in compliance with Sir Richard's request, used his interest to have him appointed to his own regiment, in order that he might keep him under his eye. By this means, he became intimately acquainted with the young man's character, and, I suppose, as much attached to him as to his father.'

'And the scheme is, that I should marry him, I suppose?'

'Provided you are both so disposed, not otherwise; there is to be no compulsion in the case.'

'It is a scheme that will never be realised,' said Frances; 'for, of all things, I should dislike a marriage that had been planned in

that way. The very idea of standing in such an awkward relation to a man would make me hate him.'

'That's why I think all such schemes better let alone,' returned Mrs Wentworth; 'but as your father desires that I will put you in possession of his wishes before you go into the world, I have no choice but to do it.'

'It does not appear, however, that this Mr Elliott is very anxious about the matter, since he has never taken the trouble of coming to see me. Perhaps he does not know of the scheme?'

'O yes, he does; but, in the first place, he is abroad with his regiment; and, in the second, he abstains upon principle from seeking to make your acquaintance. So Sir Richard told me, when I met him last year at Lady Grantley's fête. He said that his son's heart was yet perfectly free, but that he did not think it right to throw himself in your way, or endeavour to engage your affections, till you had had an opportunity of seeing something of the world. The old gentleman had a great desire to see you himself; and he would have called, but he was only passing through London on his way to some German baths, and he was to start the next morning.'

'And what sort of a person is this Mr Elliott?'

'I really don't know, except that his father praised him to the skies. He's Major Elliott now, and must be about eight-and-twenty.'

'And is he the eldest son?'

'He's the eldest son, and will be Sir Henry—I think that's

his name—by and by. But he's not rich; quite the contrary, he's very poor for a baronet; and I incline to think that is one of the reasons that influenced your father. Being so fond of the Elliotts, he wished to repair, in some degree, the dilapidation of their fortunes by yours.'

'So that I shall have the agreeable consciousness of being married purely for my money. I am afraid poor dear papa's scheme will fail; and I wish, aunt, you had never told me of it.'

'That was not left to my discretion; if it had been, I should not have told you of it, I assure you.'

'Well, I can only hope that I shall never see Major Elliott; and if he ever proposes to come, aunt, pray do me the favour to assure him, from me, that it will not be of the smallest use.'

'That would be foolish till you've seen him. You may like him.'

'Never; I could not like a man whom I met under such circumstances, if he were an angel.'

Thus, with a heart steeled against Major Elliott and his attractions, whatever they might be, Frances Seymour made her début; and, however brilliant had been her anticipations of success, she had the satisfaction of finding them fully realised. She was the belle of the season—admired, courted, and envied; and by the end of it, she had refused at least half-a-dozen proposals. As she was perfectly independent, she resolved to enjoy a longer lease of her liberty, before she put it in the power of any man to control her inclinations.

Shortly after the termination of the season, some family affairs

called Mr and Mrs Wentworth to St Petersburg; and as it was not convenient that Frances should accompany them, they arranged that she should spend the interval in visiting some families of their own connection residing in the country, who promised to take due charge of her.

The first of these, by name Dunbar, were worthy people enough, but, unfortunately for Frances, desperately dull; and the few neighbours they had happened to be as dull as themselves. There were neither balls nor routs to keep up the spirits of the London belle; and a tiresome drive of six or eight miles to an equally tiresome dinner-party, was but a poor substitute for the gaieties which the late season had given her a taste for.

Frances was not without resources. She was a fine musician, and played and sang admirably; but she liked to be told that she did so. At Dunbar House, nobody cared for music, nobody listened to her, and her most *recherchées toilettes* delighted nobody but her maid. She was *aux abois*, as the French say, and had made some progress in the concoction of a scheme to get away, when an improvement took place in her position, from the arrival of young Vincent Dunbar, the only son of the family. He was a lieutenant in a regiment of infantry that had lately returned from the colonies, and had come, as in duty bound, to waste ten days or a fortnight of his three months' leave in the dull home of his ancestors. As he was an extremely handsome, fashionable-looking youth, Frances, when she went down to dinner, felt quite revived by the sight of him. Here was something to dress for,

and something to sing to; and although the young lieutenant's conversation was not a whit above the usual standard of his class, it appeared lively and witty when compared with that of his parents. His small colonial experiences were more interesting than Mrs Dunbar's domestic ones; and his account of a tiger hunt more exciting than his father's history of the run he had had after a fox. Frances was an equally welcome resource to him. Here was an opportunity, quite unexpected, of displaying his most fashionable ties and most splendid waistcoats; here was a listener for his best stories, and one who did not repay him in kind, as his father did; and here were a pair of bright eyes, that always looked brighter at his approach; and a pair of pretty lips, that pouted when he talked of going away to fulfil an engagement he had made to meet some friends at Brighton.

As was to be expected, under circumstances so propitious, the young man fell in love—as much in love as he could be with anybody but himself; whilst his parents did not neglect to hint, that he could not do better than prosecute a suit which the young lady's evident partiality justified. Pleased with the prospect of their son's making so good a match, they even ventured one day a dull jest on the subject in the presence of Frances—a jest which, heavy as it was, aroused her to reflection. Flirting with a man, and angling for his admiration, is one thing; loving and marrying him, is another. For the first, Vincent Dunbar answered exceedingly well; but for the second, he was wholly unfit. In spite of her little weaknesses, Frances had too much sense not to see that the

young lieutenant was an empty-headed coxcomb, and not at all the man with whom she hoped to spend her years of discretion —when she arrived at them—after an ample enjoyment of the delights that youth, beauty, and wealth are calculated to procure their possessor. Her eyes were opened, in short; and the ordinary effect of this sort of awakening from an unworthy *penchant*—for attachment it could not be called—ensued: the temporary liking changed into aversion, and the attentions that had flattered her before became hateful. In accordance with this new state of her feelings, she resolved to alter her behaviour, in order to dissipate as quickly as possible the erroneous impression of the family; whilst, at the same time, she privately made arrangements for cutting short her visit, and anticipating the period of her removal to the house of Mrs Gaskoin, betwixt whom and the Dunbars the interval of her friends' absence in Russia was to be divided. In spite of her stratagem, however, she did not escape what she apprehended. Vincent's leave had nearly expired too; and when the moment approached that was to separate them, he seized an opportunity of making his proposals.

There is scarcely a woman to be met with in society, who does not know, from experience, what a painful thing it is to crush the hopes of a man who is paying her the high compliment of wishing to place the happiness of his life in her keeping; and when to this source of embarrassment is added the consciousness of having culpably raised expectations that she shrinks from realising, the situation becomes doubly distressing. On the present occasion,

agitated, ashamed, and confused, Frances, instead of honestly avowing her fault, which would have been the safest thing to do, had recourse to a subterfuge; she answered, that she had been betrothed by her father to the son of his dearest friend, and that she was not free to form any other engagement. Of course, Vincent pleaded that such a contract could not be binding on her; but as, whilst she declared her determination to adhere to it, she forbore to add, that were she at liberty his position would not be improved, the young man and his family remained under the persuasion, that this premature engagement was the only bar to his happiness; and with this impression, which she allowed him to retain, because it spared him and herself pain, he returned to his regiment, whilst she, as speedily as she could, decamped to her next quarters, armed with a thousand good resolutions never again to bring herself into such an unpleasant dilemma.

Mrs Gaskoin's was a different sort of house to the Dunbars'. It was not gay, for the place was retired, and Mrs Gaskoin being in ill health, they saw little company; but they were young, cheerful, and accomplished people, and in their society Frances soon forgot the vexations she had left behind her. She even ceased to miss the admiration she was accustomed to; what was amiable and good in her character—and there was much—regained the ascendant; her host and hostess congratulated themselves on having so agreeable an inmate as much as she did herself on the judicious move she had made, till her equanimity was disturbed by learning that Mr Gaskoin was expecting a visitor, and that

this visitor was his old friend and brother-officer, Major Elliott, the person of all others, Vincent Dunbar excepted, she had the greatest desire to avoid.

'I cannot express how much I should dislike meeting him,' she said to Mrs Gaskoin, to whom she thought it better to explain how she was situated. 'You must allow me to keep my room whilst he is here.'

'If you are determined not to see him, I think you had better go back to the Dunbars for a little while,' answered the hostess; 'but I really think you should stay, and let things take their course. If your aversion continues, you need not marry him; but my husband tells me he's charming; and in point of character, I know no one whom he estimates so highly.'

But Frances objected, that she should feel so embarrassed and awkward.

'In short, you apprehend that you will appear to a great disadvantage,' said Mrs Gaskoin. 'That is possible, certainly; but as Major Elliott is only coming for a day or two, I think we might obviate that difficulty, by introducing you as my husband's niece, Fanny Gaskoin. What do you say? You can declare yourself whenever you please, or keep the secret till he goes, if you prefer it.'

Frances said she should like it very much; the scheme would afford them a great deal of amusement, and any expedient was preferable to going back to Dunbar House. Neither, as regarded themselves, was it at all difficult of execution, since they always

addressed her as Fanny or Frances; the danger was with the servants, who, however cautioned to call the visitor by no other name than Miss Fanny, might inadvertently betray the secret. Still, if they did, a few blushes and a hearty laugh were likely to be the only consequences of the disclosure; so the little plot was duly framed, and successfully executed; Major Elliott not entertaining the most remote suspicion that this beautiful, fascinating Fanny Gaskoin was his own *fiancée*.

Whether they might have fallen in love with each other had they met under more prosaic circumstances, there is no saying. As it was, they did so almost at first sight. It is needless to say, that Major Elliott extended his visit beyond the day or two he had engaged for; and when Mr and Mrs Gaskoin saw how matters were going, they recommended an immediate avowal of the little deception that had been practised, lest some ill-timed visitor should inopportunely let out the secret, which had already been endangered more than once by the forgetfulness of the servants: but Frances wished to prolong their diversion till she should find some happy moment for the *dénouement*; added to which, she had an extreme curiosity to know how Major Elliott intended to release himself from the engagement formed by Colonel Seymour, in which he had tacitly, if not avowedly, acquiesced. It was certainly very flattering that her charms had proved sufficiently powerful to make him forget it; but that he should have yielded to the temptation without the slightest appearance of a struggle, did somewhat surprise her,

as indeed, from their knowledge of his character, it did Mr and Mrs Gaskoin. Not that they would have expected him to adhere to the contract, if doing so proved repugnant either to himself or the young lady; but under all the circumstances of the case, they would have thought his conduct less open to exception, if he had deferred entering into any other engagement till he had seen Miss Seymour. It was true, that he had not yet offered his hand to his friend Gaskoin's charming niece; but neither she, nor any one else, entertained a doubt of his intention to do so; and Frances never found herself alone with him, that her heart did not beat high with the expectation of what might be coming.

The progress of love affairs is no measure of time: where the *attrait*, or magnetic rapport (for perhaps magnetism has something to do with the mystery), is very strong, one couple will make as much way in a fortnight as another will do in a year. In the present instance, Major Elliott's proclivity to fall in love with Frances may have been aided by his persuasion that she was the niece of his friend. Be that as it may, on the thirteenth day of his visit, Major Elliott invited his host to join him in a walk, in the course of which he avowed his intention of offering his hand to Miss Gaskoin, provided her family were not likely to make any serious objection to the match. 'My reason for mentioning the subject so early is,' said he, 'that, in the first place, I cannot prolong my visit; I have already broken two engagements, and now, however unwillingly, I must be off: and, in the second place, I felt myself bound to mention the subject to you before speaking

to Miss Gaskoin, because you know how I am situated in regard to money-matters; and that I cannot, unfortunately, make such a settlement as may be expected by her friends.'

'I don't think that will be any obstacle to your wishes,' answered Mr Gaskoin, with an arch smile. 'If you can find Fanny in the humour, I'll undertake to answer for all the rest. As for her fortune, she'll have something at all events—but that is a subject, I suppose, you are too much in love to discuss.'

'It is one there is no use in discussing till I am accepted,' returned Major Elliott; 'and I confess that is a point I am too anxious about to think of any other.'

'Prepare yourself,' said Mrs Gaskoin to Frances: 'Major Elliott has declared himself to my husband, and will doubtless take an opportunity of speaking to you in the course of the evening. Of course, now the truth must be disclosed, and I've no doubt it will be a very agreeable surprise to him.'

When the tea-things were removed, and Frances, as usual, was seated at the pianoforte, and Major Elliott, as usual, turning over the leaves of her music-book, she almost lost her breath with agitation when the gentle closing of a door aroused her to the fact, that they were alone. Mr and Mrs Gaskoin had quietly slipped out of the room; and conscious that the critical moment was come, she was making a nervous attempt to follow them, when a hand was laid on hers, and– But it is quite needless to enter into the particulars: such scenes do not bear relating. Major Elliott said something, and looked a thousand things; Frances blushed and

smiled, and then she wept, avowing that her tears were tears of joy; and so engrossed was she with the happiness of the moment, that she had actually forgotten the false colours under which she was appearing, till her lover said: 'I have already, my dear Fanny, spoken on this subject to your uncle.'

'Now, then, for the *dénouement*!' thought Frances; but she had formed a little scheme for bringing this about, which she forthwith proceeded to put in execution.

'But, dear Henry,' she said, as, seated on the sofa hand in hand, they dilated on their present happiness and future plans—'dear Henry, there is one thing that has rather perplexed me, and does perplex me still, a little—do you know, I have been told you were engaged?'

'Indeed! Who told you that?'

'Well, I don't know; but I'm sure I heard it. It was said that you were engaged to Miss Seymour—the Miss Seymour that lives with Mrs Wentworth'–

'Do you know her?' inquired Major Elliott, interrupting her.

'Yes, I do—a little.'

'Only a little?'

'Well, perhaps I may say I know her pretty well. Indeed, to confess the truth, I'm rather intimate with her.'

'That is extremely fortunate,' returned Major Elliott.

'Then you don't deny the engagement?' said Frances.

'Colonel Seymour, who was my father's friend and mine, very kindly expressed a wish, before he died, that, provided there

was no objection on either side, his daughter and I should be married; but you see, my dearest Fanny, as there happens to be an objection on both sides, the scheme, however well meant, is defeated.'

'On both sides!' reiterated Frances with surprise.

'Yes; on both sides,' answered he smiling.

'But how do you know that, when you've never seen Miss Seymour—at least I thought you never had?'

'Neither have I; but I happen to know that she has not the slightest intention of taking me for her husband.'

'Oh,' said Frances, laughing at the recollection of her own violent antipathy to this irresistible man, who, after all, had taken her heart by storm—'I suppose you have somehow heard that she disliked the idea of being trammelled by an engagement to a person she never saw, and whom she had made up her mind she could not love; but remember, Henry, she has never seen you. How do you know that she might not have fallen in love with you at first sight?—as somebody else did,' she added playfully.

'Because, my dear little girl, she happens to be in love already. She did not wait to see me, but wisely gave away her heart when she met a man that pleased her.'

'But you're mistaken,' answered Frances, beginning to feel alarmed; 'you are indeed! I know Frances Seymour has no attachment. I know that till she saw you—I mean that—I am certain she has no attachment, nor ever had any.'

'Perhaps you are not altogether in her confidence.'

'O yes, I am indeed.'

Major Elliott shook his head, and smiled significantly. 'Rely on it,' he said, 'that what I tell you is the fact; but you have probably not seen Miss Seymour very lately, which would sufficiently account for your ignorance of her secret. I am told that she is extremely handsome and charming, and that she sings divinely.'

Five minutes earlier, Frances would have been delighted with this testimony to her attractions; and would have been ready with a repartee about the loss he would sustain in relinquishing so many perfections for her sake; but now her heart was growing faint with terror, and her tongue clove to the roof of her mouth. Thoughts that would fill pages darted through her brain like lightning—dreadful possibilities, that she had never foreseen nor thought of.

Vincent Dunbar's regiment had been in India; she knew it was one of the *seventies*; but she had either never heard the exact number, or she had not sufficiently attended to the subject to know which it was. Major Elliott's regiment had also been in India; and it was the 76th. Suppose it were the same, and that the two officers were acquainted—and suppose they had met since Vincent's departure from Dunbar House! The young man had occasionally spoken to her of his brother-officers; she remembered Poole, and Wainright, and Carter; the name of Elliott he had certainly not mentioned; but it was naturally of his own friends and companions he spoke, not of the field-

officers. Then, when she told him that she had been betrothed by her father, she had not said to whom; but might he not, by some unlucky chance, have found that out? And might not an explanation have ensued!

Could Major Elliott have distinctly discovered the expression of her features, he would have seen that it was something more than perplexity that kept her silent; but the light fell obscurely on the seat they occupied, and he suspected nothing but that she was puzzled and surprised.

'I see you are very curious to learn the secret,' he said, 'and if it were my own, you should not pine in ignorance, I assure you; but as it is a young lady's, I am bound to keep it till she chooses to disclose it herself. However, I hope your curiosity will soon be satisfied, for I have ascertained that Mr and Mrs Wentworth are to be in England almost immediately—they have been some time on the continent—and then we shall come to a general understanding. In the meantime, my dearest Fanny'–

But Frances, unable longer to control her agitation, took advantage of a slight noise in the hall, to say that Mr and Mrs Gaskoin were coming; and before he had time to finish his sentence, she started to her feet, and rushed out of the room.

On the other side of the hall was Mrs Gaskoin's boudoir, where she and her husband were sitting over the fire, awaiting the result of the tête-à-tête in the drawing-room.

'Well?' said they, rising as the door opened and a pale face looked in. 'Is it all settled?'

'Ask me nothing now, I beseech you!' said Frances. 'I'm going to my room; tell Major Elliott I am not well; say I'm agitated —anything you like; but remember, he still thinks me Fanny Gaskoin'–

'But, my dear girl, I cannot permit that deception to be carried any further; it has lasted too long already,' said Mr Gaskoin.

'Only to-night!' said Frances.

'It is not fair to Major Elliott,' urged Mrs Gaskoin.

'Only to-night! only to-night!' reiterated Frances. 'There! he's coming; I hear his step in the hall! Let me out this way!' and so saying, she darted out of a door that led to the backstairs, and disappeared.

'She has refused him!' said Mrs Gaskoin. 'I confess I am amazed.'

But Major Elliott met them with a smiling face. 'What has become of Frances?' said he.

'She rushed in to us in a state of violent agitation, and begged we would tell you that she is not well, and is gone to her room. I'm afraid the result of your interview has not been what we expected.'

'On the contrary,' returned Major Elliott, 'you must both congratulate me on my good-fortune.'

'Silly girl!' said Mr Gaskoin, shaking his friend heartily by the hand. 'I see what it is: she is nervous about a little deception we have been practising on you.'

'A deception!'

'Why, you see, my dear fellow, when I told Frances that you were coming here, she objected to meeting you'–

'Indeed! On what account?'

'You have never suspected anything?' said Mr Gaskoin, scarcely repressing his laughter.

'Suspected anything? No.'

'It has never by chance occurred to you that this bewitching niece of mine is'–

'Is what?'

'Your betrothed lady, for example, Frances Seymour?'

Major Elliott's cheeks and lips turned several shades paler; but the candles were not lighted, and his friends did not remark the change.

'Frances Seymour!' he echoed.

'That is the precise state of the case, I assure you;' and then Mr Gaskoin proceeded to explain how the deception came to be practised. 'I gave into it,' he said, 'though I do not like jests of that sort, because I thought, as my wife did, that you were much more likely to take a fancy to each other, if you did not know who she was, than if you met under all the embarrassment of such an awkward relation.'

During this little discourse, Major Elliott had time to recover from the shock; and being a man of resolute calmness and great self-possession—which qualities, by the way, formed a considerable element in his attractions—the remainder of the evening was passed without any circumstance calculated to

awaken the suspicions of his host and hostess, further than that a certain gravity of tone and manner, when they spoke of Frances, led them to apprehend that he was not altogether pleased with the jest that had been practised.

'We ought to have told him the moment we saw that he was pleased with her; but, foolish child, she would not let us,' said Mr Gaskoin to his wife.

'She must make her peace with him to-morrow,' returned the lady; but, alas! when they came down to breakfast on the following morning, Major Elliott was gone, having left a few lines to excuse his sudden departure, which, he said, he had only anticipated by a few hours, as, in any case, he must have left them that afternoon.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.