

"Not what we could wish, but what we must even put up with."

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THE

Vicissitudes of Bessie Fairfax.

CHAPTER I.

HER BIRTH AND PARENTAGE.

The years have come and gone at Beechhurst as elsewhere, but the results of time and change seem to have almost passed it by. Every way out of the scattered forest-town is still through beautiful forest-roads—roads that cleave grand avenues, traverse black barren heaths, ford shallow rivers, and climb over ferny knolls whence the sea is visible. The church is unrestored, the parsonage is unimproved, the long low house opposite is still the residence of Mr. Carnegie, the local doctor, and looks this splendid summer morning precisely as it looked in the splendid summer mornings long ago, when Bessie Fairfax was a little girl, and lived there, and was very happy.

Bessie was not akin to the doctor. Her birth and parentage were on this wise. Her father was Geoffry, the third and youngest son of Mr. Fairfax of Abbotsmead in Woldshire. Her mother was Elizabeth, only child of the Reverend Thomas Bulmer, vicar of Kirkham. Their marriage was a love-match, concluded when they had something less than the experience of forty years between them. The gentleman had his university debts besides to begin life with, the lady had nothing. As the shortest way to a living he went into the Church, and the birth of their daughter was contemporary with Geoffry's ordination. His father-in-law gave him a title for orders, and a lodging under his roof, and Mr. Fairfax grudgingly allowed his son two hundred a year for a maintenance.

[Pg 6]The young couple were lively and handsome. They had done a foolish thing, but their friends agreed to condone their folly. Before very long a south-country benefice, the rectory of Beechhurst, was put in Geoffry's way, and he gayly removed with

his wife and child to that desirable home of their own. They were poor, but they were perfectly contented. Nature is sometimes very kind in making up to people for the want of fortune by an excellent gift of good spirits and good courage. She was very kind in this way to Geoffrey Fairfax and his wife Elizabeth; so kind that everybody wondered with great amazement what possessed that laughing, rosy woman to fall off in health, and die soon after the birth of a second daughter, who died also, and was buried in the same grave with her mother.

The rector was a cheerful exemplification of the adage that man is not made to live alone. He wore the willow just long enough for decency, and then married again—married another pretty, portionless young woman of no family worth mentioning. This reiterated indiscretion caused a breach with his father, and the slender allowance that had been made him was resumed. But his new wife was good to his little Bessie, and Abbotsmead was a long way off.

There were no children of this second marriage, which was lucky; for three years after, the rector himself died, leaving his widow as desolate as a clergyman's widow, totally unprovided for, can be. She had never seen any member of her husband's family, and she made no claim on Mr. Fairfax, who, for his part, acknowledged none. Bessie's near kinsfolk on her mother's side were all departed this life; there was nobody who wanted the child, or who would have regarded her in any light but an incumbrance. The rector's widow therefore kept her unquestioned; and being a woman of much sense and little pride, she moved no farther from the rectory than to a cottage-lodging in the town, where she found some teaching amongst the children of the small gentry, who then, as now, were its main population.

It was hard work for meagre reward, and perhaps she was not sorry to exchange her mourning-weeds for bride-clothes again when Mr. Carnegie asked her; for she was of a dependent, womanly character, and the doctor was well-to-do [Pg 7]and well respected, and ready with all his heart to give little Bessie a home. The child was young enough when she lost her own parents to lose all but a reflected memory of them, and cordially to adopt for a real father and mother those who so cordially adopted her.

Still, she was Bessie Fairfax, and as the doctor's house grew populous with children of his own, Bessie was curtailed of her indulgences, her learning, her leisure, and was taught betimes to make herself useful. And she did it willingly. Her temper was loving and grateful, and Mrs. Carnegie had her recompense in Bessie's unstinting helpfulness during the period when her own family was increasing year by year; sometimes at the rate of one little stranger, and sometimes at the rate of twins. The doctor received his blessings with a welcome, and a brisk assurance to his wife that the more they were the merrier. And neither Mrs. Carnegie nor Bessie presumed to think otherwise; though seven tiny trots under ten years old were a sore handful; and seven was the number Bessie kept watch and ward over like a fairy godmother in the doctor's nursery, when her own life had attained to no more than the discretion and philosophy of fifteen. The chief of them were boys—boys on the plan of their worthy father; five boys with excellent lungs and indefatigable stout legs; and two little girls no whit behind their brothers for voluble chatter and restless agility. Nobody complained, however. They had their health—that was one mercy; there was enough in the domestic exchequer to feed, clothe, and keep them all warm—that was another mercy; and as for the future, people so busy as the doctor and his wife are forced to leave that to Providence—which is the greatest mercy of all. For it is to-morrow's burden breaks the back, never the burden of to-day.

A constant regret with Mrs. Carnegie (when she had a spare moment to think of it) was her inability, from stress of annually recurring circumstances, to afford Bessie Fairfax more of an education, and especially that she was not learning to speak French and play on the piano. But Bessie felt no want of these polite accomplishments. She had no accomplished companions to put her to shame for her deficiencies. She was fond of a book, she could write an unformed, legible [Pg 8]hand, and add up a simple sum. The doctor, not a bad judge, called her a shrewd, reasonable little lass. She had mother-wit, a warm heart, and a nice face, as sweet and fresh as a bunch of roses with the dew on them, and he did not see what she wanted with talking French and playing the piano; if his wife would believe him, she would go through life quite as creditably and comfortably without any fashionable foreign airs and graces. Thus it

resulted, partly from want of opportunity, and partly from want of ambition in herself, that Bessie Fairfax remained a rustic little maid, without the least tincture of modern accomplishments. Still, the doctor's wife did not forget that her dear drudge and helpful right hand was a waif of old gentry, whose restoration the chapter of accidents might bring about any day. Nor did she suffer Bessie to forget it, though Bessie was mighty indifferent, and cared as little for her gentle kindred as they cared for her. And if these gentle kindred had increased and multiplied according to the common lot, Bessie would probably never have been remembered by them to any purpose; she might have married as Mr. Carnegie's daughter, and have led an obscure, happy life, without vicissitude to the end of it, and have died leaving no story to tell.

But many things had happened at Abbotsmead since the love-match of Geoffry Fairfax and Elizabeth Bulmer. When Geoffry married, his brothers were both single men. The elder, Frederick, took to himself soon after a wife of rank and fortune; but there was no living issue of the marriage; and the lady, after a few years of eccentricity, went abroad for her health—that is, her husband was obliged to place her under restraint. Her malady was pronounced incurable, though her life might be prolonged. The second son, Laurence, had distinguished himself at Oxford, and had become a knight-errant of the Society of Antiquaries. His father said he would traverse a continent to look at one old stone. He was hardly persuaded to relinquish his liberty and choose a wife, when the failure of heirs to Frederick disconcerted the squire's expectations, and, with the proverbial ill-luck of learned men, he chose badly. His wife, from a silly, pretty shrew, matured into a most bitter scold; and a blessed man was he, when, after three years of tribulation, her temper [Pg 9]and a strong fever carried her off. His Xantippe left no child. Mr. Fairfax urged the obligations of ancient blood, old estate, and a second marriage; but Laurence had suffered conjugal felicity enough, and would no more of it. It was now that the squire first bethought himself seriously of his son Geoffry's daughter. He proposed to bring her home to Abbotsmead, and to marry her in due time to some poor young gentleman of good family, who would take her name, and give the house of Fairfax a new lease, as had been done thrice before in its long descent, by means of an heiress.

The poor young man who might be so obliging was even named. Frederick and Laurence gave consent to whatever promised to mitigate their father's disappointment in themselves, and the business was put into the hands of their man of law, John Short of Norminster, than whom no man in that venerable city was more respected for sagacity and integrity.

If Mr. Fairfax had listened to John Short in times past, he would not have needed his help now. John Short had urged the propriety of recalling Bessie from Beechhurst when her father died; but no good grandmother or wise aunt survived at Kirkham to insist upon it, and the thing was not done. The man of law did not, however, revert to what was past remedy, but gave his mind to considering how his client might be extricated from his existing dilemma with least pain and offence. Mr. Fairfax had a legal right to the custody of his young kinswoman, but he had not the conscience to plead his legal right against the long-allowed use and custom of her friends. If they were reluctant to let her go, and she were reluctant to come, what then? John Short confessed that Mr. Carnegie and Bessie herself might give them trouble if they were so disposed; but he had a reasonable expectation that they would view the matter through the medium of common sense.

Thus much by way of prelude to the story of Bessie Fairfax's Vicissitudes, which date from this momentous era of her life.

CHAPTER II.

THE LAWYER'S LETTER.

"The postman! Run, Jack, and bring the letter."

The letter, said Mr. Carnegie; for the correspondence between the doctor's house and the world outside it was limited. Jack jumped off his chair at the breakfast-table and rushed to do his father's bidding.

"For mother!" cried he, returning at the speed of a small whirlwind, the epistle held aloft. Down he clapped it on the table by her plate, mounted into his chair again, and resumed the interrupted business of the hour.

Mrs. Carnegie glanced aside at the letter, read the post-mark, and reflected aloud: "Norminster—who can be writing to us from Norminster? Some of Bessie's people?"

"The shortest way would be to open the letter and see. Hand it over to me," said the doctor.

Bessie pricked her ears; but Mr. Carnegie read the letter to himself, while his wife was busy replenishing the little mugs that came up in single file incessantly for more milk. A momentary pause in the wants of her offspring gave her leisure to notice her husband's visage—a dusk-red and weather-brown visage at its best, but gathered now into extraordinary blackness. She looked, but did not speak; the doctor was the first to speak.

"It is about Bessie—from her grandfather's agent," said he with suppressed vexation as he replaced the large full sheet in its envelope.

"What about *me*?" cried Bessie in an explosion of natural curiosity.

"Your mother will tell you presently. Mind, boys, you are good to-day, and don't tire your sister."

So unusual an admonition made the boys stare, and everybody was hushed with a presentiment of something going to happen that nobody would approve. Mrs. Carnegie had her conjectures, not far

wide of the truth, and Bessie was conscious of impatience to get the children out of the way, that she might have her curiosity appeased.

[Pg 11]The doctor discerned the insurrection of self in her face, and said, almost bitterly, "Wait till I am gone, Bessie; you will have all the rest of your life to think of it. Now, boys, you have done eating; be off, and get ready for school."

Jack and the rest cleared out of the parlor and pattered up stairs, Bessie following close on their heels, purposely deaf to her mother's voice: "You may stay, love." She was hurt and perturbed. An idea of what was impending had flashed into her mind. After all, her abrupt exit was convenient to her elders; they could discuss the circumstances more freely in her absence. Mrs. Carnegie began.

"Well, Thomas, what does this wonderful letter say? I think I can guess — Bessie is to go home?"

"Home! What place can be home to her if this is not?" rejoined the doctor, and strode across the room to shut the door on his retreating progeny, while his wife entered on the perusal of the letter.

It was from Mr. John Short, on the business that we wot of. To Mr. Carnegie it read like a cool intimation that Bessie Fairfax was wanted — was become of importance at Abbotsmead, and must break with her present associations. It would have been impossible to convey in palatable words the requisition that the lawyer was put upon making; but to Mrs. Carnegie the demand did not sound harsh, nor the manner of it insolent. She had always kept her mind in a state of preparedness for some such change, and the only sense of annoyance that smote her was for her own shortcomings — for how she had suffered Bessie to be almost a servant to her own children, and how she could neither speak French nor play on the piano.

The doctor pooh-poohed her remorse. "You have done the best for her you could, Jane. What right has her grandfather to expect anything? He left her on your hands without a penny."

"Bessie has been worth more than she costs, if that were the way to look at it. But she will have to leave us now; she will have to go."

"Yes, she will have to go. But the old gentleman shall never deny our share in her."

"The future will rest with Bessie herself."

[Pg 12]"And she has a good heart and a will of her own. She will be a woman with brains, whether she can play on the piano or not. Don't fret yourself, Jane, for any fancied neglect of Bessie."

"I am sadly grieved for her, Thomas; she will be sent to school, and what a life she will lead, dear child, so backward in her learning!"

"Nonsense! She is a bit of very good company. Wherever Bessie goes she will hold her own. She has plenty of character, and, take my word for it, character tells more in the long-run than talking French. There is the gig at the gate, and I must be off, though Bessie was starting for Woldshire by the next post. The letter is not one to be answered on the spur of the moment; acknowledge it, and say that it shall be answered shortly."

With a comfortable kiss the doctor bade his wife good-bye for the day, admonishing her not to fall a-crying with Bessie over what could not be remedied. And so he left her with the tears in her eyes already. She sat a few minutes feeling rather than reflecting, then with the lawyer's letter in her hands went up stairs, calling softly as she went, "Bessie dear, where are you?"

"Here, mother, in my own room;" and Bessie appeared in the doorway handling a scarlet feather-brush with which she was accustomed to dust her small property in books and ornaments each morning after the housemaid had performed her heavier task.

Mrs. Carnegie entered with her, and shut the door; for the two-leaved lattice was wide open, and the muslin curtains were blowing half across the tiny triangular nook under the thatch, which had been Bessie Fairfax's "own room" ever since she came to live in the doctor's house. Bessie was very fond of it, very proud of keeping it neat. There were assembled all the personal memorials of no moneyworth that had been rescued from the rectory-sale after her father's death; two miniatures, not valuable as works of art, but precious as likenesses of her parents; a faint sketch in water-colors of Kirkham Church and Parsonage House, and another sketch of Ab-

botsmead; an Indian work-box, a China bowl, two jars and a dish, very antiquated, and diffusing a soft perfume [Pg 13]of roses; and about a hundred and fifty volumes of books, selected by his widow from the rectory library, for their binding rather than their contents, and perhaps not very suitable for a girl's collection. But Bessie set great store by them; and though the ancient Fathers of the Church accumulated dust on their upper shelves, and the sages of Greece and Rome were truly sealed books to her, she could have given a fair account of her Shakespeare and of the Aldine Poets to a judicious catechist, and of many another book with a story besides; even of her Hume, Gibbon, Goldsmith, and Rollin, and of her Scott, perennially delightful. She was, in fact, no dunce, though she had not been disciplined in the conventional routine of education; and as for training in the higher sense, she could not have grown into a more upright or good girl under any guidance, than under that of her tender and careful mother.

And in appearance what was she like, this Bessie Fairfax, subjected so early to the caprices of fortune? It is not to be pretended that she reached the heroic standard. Mr. Carnegie said she bade fair to be very handsome, but she was at the angular age when the framework of a girl's bones might stand almost as well for a boy's, and there was, indeed, something brusque, frank, and boyish in Bessie's air and aspect at this date. She walked well, danced well, rode well—looked to the manner born when mounted on the little bay mare, which carried the doctor on his second journeys of a day, and occasionally carried Bessie in his company when he was going on a round, where, at certain points, rest and refreshment were to be had for man and beast. Her figure had not the promise of majestic height, but it was perfectly proportioned, and her face was a capital letter of introduction. Feature by feature, it was, perhaps, not classical, but never was a girl nicer looking taken altogether; the firm sweetness of her mouth, the clear candor of her blue eyes, the fair breadth of her forehead, from which her light golden-threaded hair stood off in a wavy halo, and the downy peach of her round cheeks made up a most kissable, agreeable face. And there were sense and courage in it as well as sweetness; qualities which in her peculiar circumstances would not be liable to rust for want of using.