



Drawn by G. du Maurier.]

"I am spell-bound by the sight of Laura Matilda!"

[See "Colebs in Search of a Mulready Envelope."

CELEBS IN SEARCH OF A MULREADY ENVELOPE.

A Liverpool Romance.

IN THREE CHAPTERS.

CHAPTER I.

'WE MET—'T WAS IN A CROWD.'

IT was at a party Mrs. Furnival gave a few months ago that I first saw Laura Matilda. Mr. Furnival is chief of the great firm of Furnival and Co., one of the greatest mercantile houses in Liverpool. Everyone knows Furnival and Co., and if they do not, they ought, which makes it much the same thing.

Many a pleasant party has Mrs. Furnival given, but never shall I forget this memorable one at which I first saw Laura Matilda.

Would that my readers could see her as I saw her that night, all gauzy and shiny, a fairy in robes of blue and silver; she was most truly a phantom of delight, and I may also mention that she wore a wreath of roses. When first my eye fell upon her, she was standing by the piano, talking to Helen Furnival, who had been playing, and who is, I may mention here, in case I should forget it afterwards in the absorbing interest of my story, one of the jolliest girls in the world—never makes game of a fellow, and is an out-and-out brick.

I had been dancing with a tall girl—a very tall girl, five foot eight in satin boots—and had just yielded her up to a very small man, who pleaded her previous engagement to him, and having nothing to do, leant against the wall, pondering on human rashness, as displayed in the case of the small man who had just walked off with my partner. She was not too much for me, but a perfect extinguisher to one of his size. As I said, I was standing against the wall looking at nothing in particular, when my eye fell on Laura Matilda, as she stood talking to Miss Furnival, and assisting her friend in the buttoning of a glove. In

thinking over the matter since, I have never been able to account for the curious thrill which touched my very heart when I first looked at her. From head to foot I felt as if I were entirely composed of pulses going at the most tremendous pace; pulses in my hands, pulses in my chest, pulses in my knees, pulses in my elbows, dozens of them in my head, and the biggest of them all coming up my throat and choking me. Nothing can I do but gaze at her, until the beating pulses seemed all to stand still, and then rush up to the roof of my head. Heedless of the dancers passing me, indifferent to the music ringing in my ears, regardless of having my eyes almost brushed out of my head by whirling *jupons* (is not that the proper term?) dashing by, careless of all public opinion, I stood riveted to the spot, gazing at the fair vision. I was in a state of insensibility to all external objects but one; and so absorbed was I, that when the passing waltzers trod many times on my feet, I knew not, until long afterwards, what it was that had wounded my pet corn and my patent-leather boots. In a few words, it was a case of love at first sight; for before I had looked at her many minutes I was hopelessly in love, just as violently as we hear the young Russian prince is with the fair daughter of Denmark.

It was with some difficulty a little while after—I am afraid to say how long, for time passed so rapidly gazing at this peerless creature—I brought down my intellect to the present moment sufficiently to reply to Mrs. Furnival's offer of getting me a partner. I can never be sufficiently thankful for having had presence of mind enough to

make known my wishes to my kind hostess. 'Seize the moments as they fly,' Dr. Watts, or somebody says, and I lost not one in requesting to be introduced to the lady talking to Miss Furnival at the piano. I was almost bewildered at my own good fortune as we crossed the room, and too dizzy to take in more than that the presentation had taken place. 'Mr. Benson—Miss Jones;' so the bewitching creature was called Jones!

I believe I asked her for a quadrille; I know I must, for we stood up together at the side of one just forming, and if I asked her as I felt at the moment, there must have been a world of deep passion in my voice.

I am sorry now, since the opportunity is past, that I did not look at the other fellows, to see how they felt at my good fortune; but I am sure they were madly jealous when they saw who my partner was. Then I thought of what I had best say to her, but could not invent a single remark good enough to make to such a girl. There was a fellow opposite to me talking like steam to a girl, and I thought if I could only overhear one or two of his sentences, it might give me a start; but Mrs. Furnival's room was too wide for that. Then I heard the fellow next me say to his partner—

'Hot, isn't it?' and she said, 'Rather.'

So I said to myself, 'Well, that is as good a thing to begin with as any other remark;' and turning to Laura Matilda (I did not then know her Christian name) I said—

'Hot, isn't it?' and like the other girl she said, 'Rather!' and then I was, as the schoolboys say, stumped. Then it was our turn to advance, so I was not obliged to say anything more until the second quadrille had commenced, and in the meantime I turned over every subject I could think of, one after another; but not one idea would come. The more I searched, the less came; and to add to my dilemma, the fellow who first said 'Hot, isn't it?' had gone right on, and was now deep in 'Lady Audley's Secret,' and I had missed hearing how he had managed to reach it. Never was so unhappy a

wretch! We were again back in our places, and my time had come again, but I had nothing to say; all I could do, was—and Laura Matilda has since told me I did it to perfection—to look like a fool.

The reader should have been in my place to understand my rapture when my fair partner, as if divining my embarrassment, relieved it by opening the campaign herself, and saying in a sweet, low, hesitating voice,—

'Do you collect foreign postage stamps?'

Now, if there was a modern mania which my soul utterly abhorred, it was this passion for making collections of postage stamps. Never did I lose an opportunity of inveighing against it in the strongest language. The idea—the bare idea of filling up great albums with old used stamps! I could see no sense in it, no object in it, nothing to excuse people besetting you everywhere you went for trumpery stamps, entreating you to pledge yourself to collect for them rubbish only fit to be thrown behind the fire.

'And what is the use of it?' utilitarians naturally ask; and I never yet met the stamp collector who could give a satisfactory answer to this simple question. Shades of our ancestors! our sober forefathers of the Georges' times! come back and see to what we of this degenerate century have come!

It had come to this point with me, that I would not take life on the terms of being a martyr to this modern insanity. It was too bad that, because one happened to be learning business in a Liverpool counting house, his life was to be made a burthen to him. At this time I was in the habit of receiving on an average three letters per week from country cousins, all imploring, nay, even commanding me to send them by return of post a good many stamps, particularly those mentioned in a list enclosed; while a few kindly granted me a week to light on obsolete ones, all declaring it was absolutely necessary for their peace of mind they should have a large quantity without further delay. I do believe their belief in Liver-

pool and its stamps was as strong as poor Whittington's belief in the golden pavements of London; and that they thought the number of stamps thrown out of the counting-houses daily would require an additional force of able-bodied scavengers to clear away the heaps. There is my Aunt Dorothy, a fair type of the old ladies who plague you for them to be sold for charity, and who carry them down to the country, fleecing all the schoolboys in the neighbourhood in the sale of them, for the benefit of some pet society, at exorbitant prices. Refuse her stern commands if you dare—few do. Then there are all my cousins, from the young ladies who beseech of you, writing in a fine Italian hand, in which all the letters on a level with each other—the m's n's, i's, u's, w's, v's, g's, o's, and a's—look much alike; down through the various stages of text hand to round hand in the largest characters, the cry of all is, postage stamps! foreign postage stamps! and all refuse to be satisfied. Then there are my sisters, and they have schoolfellows—such sweet girls!—who are all collecting postage stamps. The very servants come to you begging for them. And the summing up of all is, that life is not worth having if this mania continues, and one is to spend it in a Liverpool counting-house. Why must the world combine to drive one into Bedlam?

Some days before Mrs. Furnival's party, a rumour had gone abroad that the house was going to send one of its young men out to China, and having a strong idea that I should be the one chosen, I had gone over to Birkenhead the evening before, to consult with my uncle there, as to what course I should adopt, supposing the offer were made to me. It was a matter for grave consideration, and much ventilation of private affairs; and believing uncle and I were quite alone in the dining-room, I had spoken very freely, not hesitating to mention names—when—imagine my horror—a small voice came from under the table, a child's voice, and said:—

'I wish you *would* go to China, cousin Harry, and send home lots of stamps.'

It was perfectly insufferable. I know I had no right to object to Charlie falling asleep under the table when he ought to have been in bed, but I seriously objected to him waking up and beginning about his stamps, as if there were nothing else in life of the slightest importance to be attended to but the accumulation of postage stamps.

I wonder Charlie had not more caution than to touch on the subject: it was a sign he was only half awake, and at the mention of any foreign country instinctively broke out into stamps, for I had been so beset and annoyed about these detestable things, that I had solemnly cautioned my most intimate associates, under a threat of immediate and deadly punishment, against naming the things in my presence, and Charlie had more than once been dismissed with a caution.

Little wretch! as his father hastily ejected him from the dining-room, and sent him sleepily staggering upstairs, coming crash, crash against the banisters, the last words I heard issuing from his infant lips were 'postage stamps.'

And now, this beautiful Laura Matilda had put to me the question, 'Do you collect foreign postage stamps?'

Never in all my life had I felt so guilty as at that moment. Had I taken the lives of all the sovereigns whose image is on the stamp of their respective countries, I could not have felt more justly condemned than I did when I saw Laura Matilda's soft beseeching eyes raised to mine, awaiting my reply.

In the first moments of despairing, longing at the commencement of the quadrille to find something to say to her, wild ideas, such as one finds in the 'Sorrows of Werther,' or in Miss Braddon's novels, about community of tastes and feelings, had rushed through my mind, and I felt certain that, could I but hit on the right theme, Laura Matilda and I should find ourselves one-souled; but now, how stunned I felt at Laura Matilda actually starting with

my *bête noire*. From that moment—shall I confess it?—a reaction set in in my opinions on the tabooed subject. I no longer hated stamps. Before I had had time to reply in these simple words, ‘No, Miss Jones,’ the revolution was gaining ground.

Then she said softly, oh! so softly, and so mournfully, ‘I am very sorry!’

And so was I, very, very sorry, and though I longed to say so, I could not. My lips seemed sealed, and I could only think the matter over pensively, as we advanced in the quadrille and performed our part. And as we set to one another and then stood still: ‘What could I do towards becoming one in soul with Laura Matilda on this subject?’ Then I asked her very respectfully, ‘Why are you sorry?’

Judging from the tempest in my own soul, I thought her reply would have been different. It chilled me slightly. ‘You would be sure to have some duplicates to give away.’

Now, to those readers who are not collectors, be it known that no collector requires more than one postage stamp of each variety, and supposing he have two of one kind, he puts one in his album, and the other, the duplicate of his own, he reserves either to exchange or give away to some friend who has it not. This is what Laura Matilda meant when she spoke of duplicates; people might mistake her meaning.

I sighed deeply, and inquired—‘Are you fond of stamps?’

Her reply was given with the deepest fervour.

‘O yes, I love them!’

Would she but love me and not the stamps, crossed my mind, but of course not my lips, our acquaintance was too new for that; but, having taken a deep resolution, I acted on it at once.

‘Shall I try and get you some?’

And she answered promptly and joyfully—‘Indeed, I wish you would, but I am quite sure that by to-morrow you will have forgotten all about them, and I shall never see one. What can you get me?’

This was business-like, but I had cast business to the winds, had

made her an offer without having the wildest idea of how to set about fulfilling it, and thinking in that case I might as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb, said—

‘What do you most wish for?’

And, in putting this question, I put it fully, determining that if it were even necessary to go abroad myself for those she required, it should be done, rather than that Laura Matilda should be disappointed.

‘I want South American, all kinds of South American, particularly Brazilian; I want Honolulu, and all kinds of Pacific Ocean ones, from those out-of-the-way places; I want some French Republics, old Indians, new Capes, obsolete Sydneys; but you need not be bringing me New Zealand, or New Indians, or those dreadful United States ones. That cauliflower head of Lincoln’s makes me sick to look at it, and people *will* persist in giving it to me. I always throw it in the fire when I get it.’

I lost not a moment in entering on my card the names of the required stamps, in the intervals between this and the next occasions on which we were required to dance, and my card read oddly, supposing that the entries stood for the names of my partners. For a valse, I found I had booked an ‘old Indian,’ and a ‘new Cape’ had been promised a mazurka, while a ‘Russian’ had me secured for a coming galop, not to speak of a quadrille marked ‘Turkey,’ which might be supposed to allude remotely to the coming supper.

Laura Matilda watched with glistening eyes my entry.

‘You look almost as if you intended to get them for me,’ she said; ‘but do not throw the card out of the window as you go home.’

Had swearing been allowable in polite and feminine circles, I should have at once made her believe, through its medium, that I was a man of my word; but that being impossible, I merely affirmed, as the Quakers say, that my future life should be devoted to the pursuit and acquisition of postage stamps. And all for Laura Matilda!

It was my happy fate to take Laura Matilda down to supper, not that I wished for any; but it was a delightful idea to know that for the next half-hour I should have nothing to do but attend to her wants.

There is a kind of young lady, very common in society, that, on being taken down to supper, and asked what she will take, invariably answers, 'Jelly;' or if anything lighter is to be had, she will choose it, say—grapes. Very young ladies act so in general, but I have often found them easily prevailed upon to eat something a little more substantial, apple tart, or even fowl and tongue.

Laura Matilda was not one of these delicately-appetised young ladies. I had no occasion to press her beyond the bounds of politeness to eat and be merry.

I had the satisfaction, nay, rather, gratification, of seeing her eat everything I recommended to her, and, when not eating, talk in the most eloquent manner. If I were struck by her charms upstairs, imagine how infatuated I became downstairs. Before we left the supper-room, she had confided to me her feelings on many subjects, and above all she informed me that she was staying at the Furnivals, and would be there for a week longer.

'So,' she added, 'I hope, Mr. Benson, you will look sharp about the postage stamps.'

I assured her I would do my best, and in the middle of my assurance a horrid creature came up, and claiming her as his partner, bore her off.

I had no further conversation with her until the party broke up; but whenever she passed me she gave me a knowing nod, which said plainer almost than words could speak it, 'Postage stamps.'

CHAPTER II.

HOW TO PROCEED?

The next morning I arrived at the office as usual, and sat down at my desk wondering how I should set about fulfilling Laura Matilda's wishes. Several of our fellows were mad on the subject, but as they

never dared to name it to me, I had no idea how they set about making a collection.

As good fortune would have it, one of the first to come in after me was young Griffin; and, considering him too slow a fellow to raise a laugh at my expense, I attacked him first:

'I say, old fellow, have you got any stamps to spare?'

'Eh!' said Griffin, scarcely believing the evidence of his own ears.

'Got any duplicates to give away?'

'Well, that's good! Have you turned collector?'

'It is not for myself; it is for another.'

'By Jove,' said Griffin, 'the world is coming to an end! but you are very welcome to any I have.'

So the good-natured fellow pulled out his pocket-book and emptied the contents on my desk.

'Now, explain them,' I said, 'for I do not know one from another.'

Griffin began, 'That is a United States, Lincoln's head, you see: that is a New Zealand, twopence. That is——'

In a word, Griffin had all the tabooed ones, and not one of those which Laura Matilda desired. Then I asked everyone in the office I knew to be a collector; but they all believed, or affected to believe, I was laughing at them, and declined to contribute. Then I thought of Charlie, over at Uncle John's; and that very evening I went across to Birkenhead.

I found my cousin Mary (who is one of the best girls in the world) sitting in the drawing-room at her work; my aunt was not in the room, and Charlie was seated beside Mary, sorting his stamps.

As soon as I had spoken to Mary, I said to Charlie, 'Let me see your stamps, Charlie.'

In a moment Charlie had jumped from his seat and put half the length of the room between him and me.

'Thank you,' he said; 'I was not born yesterday, cousin Harry.'

'What is the matter?' I asked.

'Don't I remember? I was never to let you see a stamp again as long as I lived.'

'But I have changed my mind,' I said. 'Come, Charlie, don't be disagreeable.'

To make a long story short, I induced poor Charlie to part with the most valuable of his collection, under specious promises of splendid exchanges, and left a deposit of five shillings with the boy as an earnest of my good faith.

The reader may imagine the delight with which I recrossed to Liverpool that night, having secured such prizes as only schoolboys ever have. It is very odd how they come to make such splendid collections.

The next morning I was able to pass calmly at my desk, secure in the possession of Laura Matilda's affection, which I considered I had purchased at a cheap rate; and I waited impatiently until I could leave the office and make a call I had intended on Mrs. Furnival.

Hurrying up Church Street to catch an omnibus which was to convey me to the suburb where our chief resided, who should I meet coming down but Helen Furnival and Laura Matilda.

Laura looked charming, in the daintiest Mary Stuart bonnet imaginable. She smiled, and blushed, and was so animated, and so glad to see me, and asked so enthusiastically after the stamps. It was a moment of intense pride to me when I took out my pocket-book, and showed her an envelope sealed and addressed to herself. She took it, and thanked me, oh, so very sweetly! and I thought I had never seen her look lovelier than at that moment. It was no use thinking now of going out to Mrs. Furnival's, so I joined the young ladies, and we all walked towards Bold Street together.

'Now,' said Laura Matilda to me, as we walked up the street, 'you have been so very kind about those stamps, Mr. Benson, I think I could not do better than ask you to do something else for me.'

How my heart throbbed! how loud my pulse beat at the sound of her words!

'Oh, pray do!' I stammered out; 'pray ask me to do something else for you, Miss Jones.'

'Well,' she said, 'you must know

I am dying for a Mulready envelope, and I want you to try and get me one.'

'You are dying!' I said, in consternation; 'why you really don't look at all like it.'

'Only for an envelope, stupid,' she said, laughing; 'I did not think you were so obtuse. Helen, darling, is he joking?'

Helen did me the justice to think I was quite serious, and said so.

'I really must have a Mulready envelope,' Laura Matilda said, 'and I cannot go home without one. What is Liverpool for, if not to provide postage stamps for the provinces? The end of it is, Mr. Benson, you must get me a Mulready envelope.'

'And, may I ask,' I said, with much humility, 'what is a Mulready envelope? Is it one of any peculiar shape or make, or is it for any particular purpose?'

'Did you ever!' cried Laura Matilda; 'no, I never heard of any one who did not know what a Mulready envelope was. Of course they were not in use in our recollection, Mr. Benson; but have you never seen or heard of them?'

Again I protested utter ignorance.

'They were the first envelopes used when the penny postage came in, or some time thereabouts—I never profess to remember dates, and the order in which things happen,—what is the good? You can always find some one else who will remember them for you; and it must wear one's brains out sadly. But these envelopes had a picture all round them; and sending your letter in one of them postpaid it.'

I could not remember ever having seen one; nor did I know any one who had; nor had I the slightest idea of where to look for one. I suppose I looked rueful, for Laura Matilda began to give an animated description of the indispensable envelope.

'First,' she said, 'in the middle is Britannia, with the big, sulky-looking lion at her feet, and she is sending out handfuls of little angels with letters across the sea, to camels and Chinese with pigtails, and elephants.

and Penn and the Indians; and there is the dog, too, with the Indians, that you always see poking his nose at nothing at all, and the usual tropical tree that has no end of prodigious fruit, and a reindeer in the distance, and two girls in the corner at a love-letter (I suppose it is one), and,—oh, Mr. Benson, it is a delicious envelope! and I hope you will get me one. I should so love—I mean, I should be so much obliged to you, if you would get it,—and, oh! please get it soon, for I am going home in a week; and I should rather have a blue one than a black one,—but the black will do if you cannot get the blue. It is a ravishing envelope, Mr. Benson!’

I felt my breath coming short at this description. Was ever such an envelope seen? I had my doubts, and feared Laura Matilda might be indulging in that most detestable of all amusements, quizzing.

‘If I knew where they were to be had,’ I said, in a faint voice, rather deprecatingly.

‘If I knew myself,’ said Laura Matilda, ‘I should not have asked you to get it for me. Like all great discoverers, you must search for it until you find it,—and, remember, if you do not get me one, I shall never speak to you again. So don’t expect it!’

With this terrific warning, accompanied by a threatening shake of her parasol, Miss Jones turned away and entered a shop, leaving me standing with Helen Furnival in the street.

‘Now,’ said Helen, ‘it is my turn to speak; I never attempt it when Laura is riding one of her hobbies. You will have to get the envelope. She is dreadfully in earnest about everything she takes in hand. That is, if you really value her good opinion—or, I suppose I should say, her regards,—for it seems to me that is the reward she holds out.’

‘Value her regards! That indeed I do, above everything I know on earth; and if they are to be won by a Mulready envelope, she shall have it, if I sweep land and sea for it.’

This I said in a melodramatic tone, feeling the occasion demanded

more than ordinary language. Miss Furnival laughed.

‘I am afraid sweeping the sea won’t help you; but inquiring among your friends on land may. In the mean time, have you any engagements for to-morrow evening? Mamma sent notes by the carriage down to the office, hoping the servant would find you and some of your friends still there. If you give me a verbal answer, I shall release you from answering mamma’s note; and,’ she added, laughing, ‘you will have more time to devote to the pursuit of the Mulready envelope.’

This was gratifying. Another evening with Laura Matilda! What engagement, made under no matter what circumstances, could stand before this invitation? I assured Miss Furnival I considered myself engaged from that moment; and she then dismissed me, saying they liked to buy Berlin wools without a gentleman, and she advised me to lose no time in my search.

As I turned away, I could not but ponder on the lovely enthusiasm displayed by Laura Matilda about the envelope. ‘Sweet girl,’ I said to myself, ‘of such bright material are made the minds of the great of this world. How did our Peabodys and our Brownes rise to wealth and eminence but by energy?’ And to have energy one must have enthusiasm. Laura Matilda had, indeed, looked the soul of enthusiasm as she demanded of me a promise to leave no stone unturned to procure the desired treasure. Her eyes sparkled, her mouth smiled, showing all her teeth, which, I am sorry to say, were anything but good, and she waved her parasol like the baton of a conductor at a musical performance. In a word, Laura Matilda looked even more enchanting under these circumstances than she had done the night of Mrs. Furnival’s party. I was ten times more her slave, I was her sworn knight—sworn to procure for my Dulcinea a Mulready envelope. Then from her my thoughts turned in sad comparison to myself. I was not enthusiastic about the envelope, only about Laura Matilda, and I

wondered if my dogged perseverance in this cause would stand me instead of a more brilliant quality.

Before I had half settled this point, I found myself over at Birkhead, for I had determined on first ascertaining if Charlie had the envelope.

CHAPTER III

HOPE.

I walked up to Hamilton Square, and found Mary at home. Charlie had not returned from school. To her I told my errand, suppressing, however, names and reasons, merely stating my need, my urgent need of a Mulready envelope.

'Charlie has not got one,' Mary said, 'nor do I know any one who has that would give it to you. I know it well; the boys bring these things to show them to me, and I have picked up a good deal of stamp jargon.'

I said, 'I wished she could instruct me a little,' for I thought it would be so pleasant to be able to talk stamps with Laura Matilda the next evening; but Mary laughed, and said, 'Stamps were a love-lesson, only to be learned by caring for them or for the collector.'

This was a random shot. I am sure Mary meant nothing by it, but I felt almost found out.

'Then I suppose you don't care enough for me, Mary, to try and get me the Mulready envelope?'

'I care enough for you,' she said, washing in a sky in a drawing she was doing, 'to set the boys inquiring among their schoolfellows. It is the best plan I know; and if you wish to enlist Charlie in your service, you had better repay those stamps you borrowed from him. You cannot hit a small boy in a tenderer spot than his stamp-book.'

'In that case I shall go away before he comes in, and take care to bring him some the next time I come.'

'When will that be?' Mary asked.

'I do not know. How soon is there a chance of you having the envelope for me?'

'I never said I would do more than inquire,' Mary said, holding her drawing at a little distance to see the effect; 'but, Harry, if you are in such haste for it, you ought to inquire in every direction for it yourself.'

'I am in great haste,' I said; 'it is dreadfully important, Mary, and I have only a week to look for it in.'

'Very well,' said Mary, quietly; 'you look as if you were going to lose your rest about it, cousin Harry.'

As she spoke, she looked up at me for a moment, and then resumed her drawing.

'That is as much as to say you won't lose your rest about it?' I said, annoyed at the calm way she took it.

She made no answer, but mixed a little of a cool grey colour, and went on putting it in.

'Do you not intend to answer me?' I said, at last, nettled I knew not at what.

'Your last remark? Certainly not.'

'Good morning,' I said, getting up. 'You would rather help some of those schoolboys than me, Mary. You used to be different.'

She laid down her brush, held out her hand, said 'Good morning,' and I went away.

I am sure I do not know why I fought with Mary, for I never had done so before; but after Laura Matilda's charming enthusiasm, Mary's calmness aggravated me. If she had not been so indifferent, I should have confided all about Laura Matilda to her; I generally did tell her of the girls I admired.

The next morning I had to screw up my courage to run the gauntlet of the office jokes, and go about inquiring seriously for the Mulready. I began with Griffin, but he wanted one for himself, and I went round them all in turn, but without success. Then came the evening of the party. Laura was dressed in pink, and looked, if possible, lovelier than she had done in blue; and she danced so gracefully, far outshining in every respect the other girls in the room. I danced seven times

running with her, and then Mrs. Furnival interfered, and requested we would both choose other partners. Very impertinent of her, I consider, for it was none of her business.

The next morning I began, as usual, inquiring in the office, but no one could give me any hope. Griffin advised me to advertise in the 'Liverpool Mercury,' and get the advertisement inserted in the place where the matrimonial advertisements always are; and Bigger, one of our fellows, drew up a copy for me, but I had not enough of courage yet to go through the jokes that this would entail on me. The advertisement, too, ran so obscurely, that the reader was puzzled whether Mulready was the advertiser, or whether he wanted me or I him, or whether the public was cautioned not to trust either of us, or whether some kind of new envelope was to be had for sale at my lodgings; and the dreadful fellow stuck up copies everywhere it was likely to escape the eyes of the principals in whose counting-house we were.

The next morning, as I was sitting at breakfast, a letter came by post for me, signed 'Hannah Cropper, New Brighton,' saying the writer had an envelope for sale, the kind she heard I had been inquiring for, and if I chose to become a purchaser, a personal interview could be had that day, &c., &c.

Here was good news. The wonder was, how she had heard of it so soon; but I felt exceedingly happy at the thoughts of concluding the business quietly down at New Brighton, without any of the fellows knowing anything about it; so I put the letter with Hannah's address in my pocket, and hurried down to the office. Two or three asked me had I got the envelope I wanted, but the majority showed no interest, so at dinner-time I avoided my companions, slipped down to the landing-stage, and took the boat down to New Brighton. It would lengthen my story too much to tell how I sought Hannah Cropper in every direction, and Hannah Cropper's house, but in vain; I returned towards evening, thoroughly tired

and annoyed. I went straight to my lodgings, and the first sight met my eye was another letter in Hannah's peculiar caligraphy.

Mrs. Cropper hoped this letter would be in time to stop me going to New Brighton, as it was Wavertree should have been in the note she before sent, but the person *as wrote it* made a mistake.

It was enough to put any one in a passion, but I determined, come what would, to go to Wavertree and find Hannah Cropper; and go I did; but after another day's fruitless searching I returned home, wishing Hannah neck and crop in the Mersey. By this time the Mulready envelope had become one of the standing jokes in the office, until I began to dread going in to my work; and it needed all my dreams of Laura Matilda, and the bright vision of her smiles crowning my success at last, to carry me through. I sat down next morning to breakfast with a horrid dread of what the day might bring forth in the shape of office jokes.

The morning paper was on the table, and the reader may imagine, if he or she can, for I cannot describe, my feelings when my eye fell on an advertisement on the first page of the 'Mercury,' just where I had often seen the wants of sighing Cœlebs depicted. Breathlessly I read—

'To Postage-stamp Collectors.

'For sale, a Mulready envelope, in good condition. Personal application necessary. Apply at No. — Prince's Park, on this day, between the hours of one and three.'

Now I had already to make my peace with Smith, our head clerk, for absenting myself on two consecutive afternoons, and here I required a third. I may as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb, I had before said, when embarking in this chase for Laura Matilda; so I said the same again, and started down to the office, feeling unwontedly light-hearted. As I had hoped, I was almost the first in, and had made my peace with Smith, and obtained permission for that day's half-holiday also, before the young men came troupin' in. I never saw

Smith so good-natured as he was that day, especially when I assured him that urgent private business would prevent me returning after dinner. I answered the usual number of querists that morning about the envelope, and then we fell to work, and the Mulready was lost sight of by all but me.

At half-past two o'clock I found myself alighting from the 'bus at the gate of Prince's Park, and with the address in my hand I proceeded to find the house by the number given in the advertisement. I paused not to look at the pond, nor the

rocks, nor the rock-plants, but turning my back on St. Paul's spire, quickly found the house. Such a fine one, too! 'Well,' I said to myself, 'if I lived here, I should be very sorry to sell my Mulready envelope.' And, after all, I was not wrong in my idea. I rang the bell, and a footman in model calves opened the door. I explained my business; he listened, staring.

'Yes,' I said, 'the advertisement said between one and three o'clock.'

'I don't hunderstand,' the man said, rather insolently.

'You are dull of comprehension,



then,' I said, using a form of expression I considered suitable to the man's rank of life, and again I repeated my question.

'Young man,' he said, with an air of exceeding patronage, 'you are quite mad. You are too respectable looking, and it is too early in the day for you to be the other thing, otherwise I would call the police, and give you in charge.'

I assured him I was both sober

and sane, but he shut the door angrily, saying he gave me five minutes to go off, and assuring me 'mad people never knew when they was mad.'

Slowly and sadly I retraced my steps, and walked into town, if not richer by a Mulready envelope, at least a little wiser than I had been three days before.

It was half-past three when I reached town, and I hurried at once

to the counting-house and took my seat at my desk, trying to attract as little observation as possible, but it was in vain, my tormentors were ready.

'I say, Benson, how is Hannah Cropper?'

'When did you hear from her, Benson? If I were you I would try for her at Rock Ferry, old fellow.'

'Splendid hand she writes for an old woman,' another would say.

'Which is the shortest way of coming into town from Prince's Park?' would be another question, and then Smith must come grinning out of his office, and ask how it was I had got that private and particular business over so soon?

I was nearly frantic. When business hours were over I rushed home, divided between a desire to throw myself into the Mersey, or run off to America and enlist with the Federals; and it took hours and a fabulous number of pipes to compose my ruffled spirits. The worst part of it all was, that the day before, when on my way to the Wavertree omnibus I had met Mrs. Furnival, and in the fulness of my anticipations of success I had by her sent a message to Miss Jones that I had heard of an envelope, which I hoped to get, and that she should have it before many days were over. This was the most mortifying part of all. It is very hard to forgive oneself for having been a fool.

The next morning I had much the same persecution to undergo that I had had on the previous day: even the old porter's grim face relaxed at the sight of my disconsolate one coming in, and with affected solicitude he asked—

'Well, Mr. Benson, have you got that 'ere envelope yet?' while every one of my companions had a new jest at my expense. Again I was glad to take refuge at home; but this time there was an unexpected drop of comfort in store for me. A letter in my cousin's handwriting lay on the table.

'No fear of her,' I said with relief, as I opened it; 'she is too much of a lady to play tricks on a

fellow, and too goodhearted to hurt one's feelings.' So I read—

'DEAR HARRY,—If you have not succeeded in getting the envelope you were inquiring for, you will be glad to hear I have great hopes of being able to procure one for you. A friend of mine has had a promise of one, which she expects to receive this week, and not caring particularly about it will give it to me. By next Monday, at farthest, she will be able to send it to me, and you may count on having it by the first post that leaves this after the Mulready comes to me.

'Affectionately,
'MARY.'

'Just like Mary,' I cried out in delight; 'now my troubles are at an end. Once Mary takes up a thing she is sure to carry it through all right. Now the fellows may laugh if they like: who cares?'

But I did care, nevertheless, for the jokes at the office were much worse than they had been yet, and I lived in hourly anticipation of some other practical joke being played off upon me. My one anchor, however, was my cousin Mary. I knew I could depend on her.

My week which Laura Matilda had given me was almost gone; but with Monday before me, and Mary's word, I felt quite easy in my mind, and on Saturday afternoon I went out to pay the Furnival ladies a visit, bold as a lion, and ready to defend myself if Laura Matilda reproached me for delay.

And reproach me she did, as we walked in the shrubberies, for kind Mrs. Furnival insisted on my remaining for the rest of the day, and I was exceedingly glad to do so. As I said, Laura Matilda reproached me severely with my tardiness in fulfilling her wishes; and though I had suffered deeply in her behalf, my sufferings were not of a kind to raise me in her estimation: she might perhaps have joined in the laugh against me. I defended myself as I best could, promised the envelope for Tuesday, and told her I loved her to distraction, and had done so from the first moment I laid my eyes upon her, the night of the

party This I thought would move her, and I swore to love her for ever, and die if she did not return my affection, and a great deal more to the same purpose.

Now this was the first time I had made a declaration of love to a young lady, and my knowledge of such matters was chiefly derived from novel reading. In picturing the scene beforehand to myself, I had thought over all my favourite heroines, how they received such a declaration. One would put her hand in yours as a token; another would speak and say something most loving; while a third would perhaps say nothing but look everything; nay, I had even read of one of a more demonstrative nature than most well-trained young ladies of our own day, who flung herself right into her dear one's arms.

None of these things Laura Matilda did. She only pulled some young tender shoots of laurel from the trees as we walked, and chewed them to extract the flavour of bitter almonds from them, an amusement naughty children are very partial to.

Then I implored her to speak, to give me some hope, and tried to take her hand; but both hands were so full of laurel leaves I could not hold them comfortably, and she declined to drop the leaves as I wished. I really could get no reply from her, only at intervals she would say, as she put a fresh leaf in her mouth,

‘Get me the Mulready envelope.’

And when I said she should certainly have it early next week, and began again, ‘Dearest,’ she would cut me short, and say, ‘When you get the envelope,’ until I began to understand nothing more was to be said until I got the envelope, and with this tacitly agreed upon between us we parted.

Monday came, and Tuesday, and still no envelope from Mary. I who had believed firmly in her that she would not deceive, or disappoint me. (The reader will perceive that I have omitted the description of the state of my mind on Sunday and Monday, for which see any modern sensation novel—I deal

merely with facts at this portion of my narrative.)

On Tuesday evening I had determined to go over and see what Mary was about; but when I returned home in the evening I found a note from her on the table.

‘DEAR HARRY,—I have been disappointed about the envelope, but hope a few more days will bring it. Is it very urgent?’

‘MARY.’

To this I replied, ‘It *is* very urgent, my dear Mary,’ and rushed into a rhapsody that must have astonished my sober cousin.

Wednesday evening I could stand it no longer, and went across to Birkenhead. Mary was out spending the evening, so I left a note in her workbasket and came away. Receiving no answer from her, I went over again on Thursday night, and was so fortunate as to find Mary alone. My aunt and uncle were out dining, only Charlie was with her, and having taken the precaution of buying him some stamps in a stationer's shop during the day, I had the satisfaction of seeing him take his cap and rush out to show his acquisitions to a friend.

When I asked Mary why she had not replied to my note, I found she had never received it, not having lifted the lid of her basket that day: so I proceeded to turn out the contents in search of my note, which I had thrust far down. Instead of my own note, I first came upon another, one which had been opened and read.

‘There,’ Mary said, seeing what I had come upon, ‘that is the last note I had from the friend who promised me the Mulready envelope. Read it.’

I opened it and read the following—

‘DEAREST MARY,—I have decided on having my bridesmaids in cerise: I hope that will suit you. I am sorry again to disappoint you about the Mulready envelope. The poor idiot who is to get it has positively promised it for Wednesday. He is the greenest goose you ever saw, and it is awful fun. I shall make

Bill die laughing about him when I go down to Leicestershire.

‘Yours, darling,

‘LAURA MATILDA JONES.’

I stopped half-way down the page and looked at the signature, and then feeling very faint, sat down on the nearest chair. Mary was preparing tea, and did not see me: I was glad she did not see me in my first agony. Then the pulses stood still with a vengeance. I made one tremendous effort at last, ‘How did you know Miss Jones?’

‘I was at school with her, and made one of those silly compacts green geese, as she would style them, make, to be each other’s bridesmaids; I do not wish to be hers, neither does mamma wish it, and she is to arrange it somehow that I need not go. I do not care for that style of girl. Laura takes it for granted I am going. She is in town buying her trousseau.

Then I made a clean breast to Mary, and told her all, and her honest indignation did me good. She was so kind as not to laugh at me, but I could see her amusement in her eyes.

‘Such horrid treachery,’ she said. ‘I shall let her know my mind, Harry, and you may depend upon my needing no cerise trimmings. I shall write her a note: you shall see it before you go, and if mamma approves of it, it shall go to-morrow morning. Green goose, indeed! I shall show her my opinion of “awful fun.”’

It was many weeks before I got over the mortification I suffered: it was only by making frequent trips to Birkenhead I could meet with consolation. The fellows in the office had got hold of as much of the story as supplied them with

laughing material, and I had a very hard time with office wit. It was an intense relief to be told one morning I was chosen to go to China; I had always been anxious for the appointment, and there was nothing to be done but provide an outfit, and say good-bye. So Mr. Furnival said; but I knew better. I had still to go over to Birkenhead, and discuss my journey with my relatives. When alone with Mary one day, I pressed her hard to come out with me, and only that I knew she was too good and true to make fun of me just then, I might have feared it from her answer, not like any of the heroines I had ever read of in fiction.

‘Yes, if you will promise to get me a Mulready—’

I stifled the last word very unceremoniously before it came out of her lips, and to do her justice, she has never once alluded to the unfortunate envelope since that day.

We are not yet married, but I hope by the time the readers of ‘London Society’ have reached the conclusion of my tale, that we shall be. And if they will only look at the list of passengers that leave England by the overland mail, the first that leaves after reading this, they will most probably see—‘For China—Mr. and Mrs. H. Benson,’ and I hope they will one and all wish us *bon voyage*. I am sorry I shall have no opportunity of hearing if every one is quite satisfied with the result of my disappointment about Laura Matilda. It takes a great weight off the author’s mind, when he knows that the reading world is perfectly satisfied with the matches his heroes and heroines make. I hope they are pleased with mine.

