

FAITHLESS MARGARET: A CHRISTMAS STORY.

BY FRANK BARRETT.



I.

R. CLYVE'S sure to be back soon, sir, for he's left the key in the door," said the housekeeper.

"In that case I'll wait for him," replied Mr. George Thornton, and without hesitation he opened the door and entered the empty chamber. The housekeeper looked after

him, hesitated a moment, and then descended to her rooms in the basement—her fears of thieves and vagabonds dispelled by the easy assurance, the gentlemanly bearing, and the good looks of the visitor.

"Not a thing altered," said Mr. Thornton to himself, as he looked round the room, "the same rows of awful books—no wonder that lawyers grow as yellow as their parchment with such indigestible food as that for their minds—the same hideous old engravings—the same comfortable old chair"—he sank into it as he spoke, with evident appreciation. His eyes were suffused with warm affection as they dwelt upon the objects that revived old memories. Then he lolled back in the roomy, comfortable chair, with his fingers knitted over his knees, and in this attitude of comfortable contemplation Geoffrey Clyve found his young friend when he opened the door.

"Geordie!" he exclaimed, crossing the room with his hand extended, "what brings you here?"

"Come to say good-bye, old man—leave England to-morrow."

"Where are you going?"

"To the North Pole if I can get there."

The two friends stood face to face, Clyve still grasping Thornton's hand with an expression of astonishment and interrogation in his kindly face.

"You have heard of the proposed expedition?" Thornton asked.

"Of course; I read the papers; but you, Geordie—"

"I have the honour to sail in the same vessel with Captain Blake. And why should I not go? I have no ties, too much money, and not enough moral stamina. Hardship will be good for me, and the Arctic Circle is about the only one where a man with my disposition can escape the vitiating influences of society."

"I dare say it will be good for you, Geordie—but—" Clyve gave an expressive shiver and sat down.

"Glad to see you sustain your old character, Clyve; the 'fossil' is as good a title for you now as it was six years ago, when the dear old dad put me into your hands for the final coach; and I suppose you won't move while the same stratum remains for you to lie in?"

"When do you expect to return?"

"In a couple of years."

"Then possibly the fossil will not be found in the same stratum."

"What do you mean? You don't think you're likely to die at forty, do you? I can't believe it is possible for a lawyer to die before he has completed his allotted amount of mischief. He's like a torpedo or bomb-shell. What deeds have you done? Why, I don't believe you've taken your first brief."

"Is it quite unlikely that I shall marry?"

"Perfectly."

"I don't think so."

"Are you serious, Clyve?" Thornton asked with a change in his voice from light badinage to earnest sympathy.

"Quite."

"Then with all my heart I wish you joy. It is worth coming from Hull to hear such news."

"Ah! the expedition sails from Hull. Did you come expressly to bid me good-bye?"

"Well, you know how I hate writing letters, old boy," Thornton said in the tone of apology an Englishman feels it necessary to adopt when his own good qualities are the subject of conversation.

Once more the old friends' hands met in a cordial grasp.

II.

NOTHING occurred to delay the expedition. At the appointed hour the three vessels left the English shore, amid the cheers and counter-cheers of the crews and their friends; and in a few weeks they were cut off from all communication with the civilised world. In the long dreary months that followed, Thornton experienced sufficient hardships to justify his anticipations. Nor were the moral results of physical endurance less than he expected. His mind acquired firmness and strength, and the best instincts of his heart were developed by the daily practice of self-denial and generosity in his intercourse with the men who shared with him the perils and sufferings of the undertaking.

Baffled in their first attempt to reach the Pole, the gallant party tried again and again, and only relinquished their purpose when signs of the approaching winter warned them of their fate should they remain. Their supplies were failing; the crews were weakened by disease and death, and to have lingered until the passage was closed with a barrier of ice would have been certain death for all. So after an absence of six-and-twenty months the men landed once more upon hospitable ground.

The enthusiasm with which they were met, the compliments showered upon them, were welcome at first, but Thornton soon wearied of the excessive gratulations.

"Blake," he said to his friend one morning, "there are five-and-twenty invitations to answer. I shall leave you to do it. Nature has made us men, and I for one object to society treating me as a lion. I

don't want to be stared at and watched when I'm feeding, so those dinners may be uneaten for me. These fine days can't last over the end of the month, and my soul longs for a day on the Thames with Oxford meadows on one side of me and Berkshire beeches on the other. I'm off."

And despite the remonstrances of his friend he packed a small bag, and took the mid-day train to Pangbourne.

"Now I'm safe," he said to himself, getting into a

"solitude." He had a good, strong, bass voice, and like most men who can sing, he was pardonably vain of hearing his own voice. So he sang the song through without interruption, and then fell to thinking of solitude in its various aspects.

"I shouldn't wonder if I became a regular confirmed old bachelor, with dusty old chambers, and a quiet happy content in my little microcosm just like old Clyve. I forget though, he is a married man now, and I suppose lives in a bower cooing to his



"SITTING ON THE GRASSY SLOPE BY THE WILLOWS" (p. 54).

canoe. "If I see any one I know upon the bank I can't ask him to take a seat in my ship. I am safe for a good afternoon of solitude and sweet reflection—on the miseries I have escaped. Think of wearing war-paint and responding to toasts such a glorious afternoon as this! If I go into Parliament I'll introduce a bill to do away with luncheons during the sunny months."

There seemed no likelihood of his meeting any one, and he paddled along the stream taking in the beauties of the wooded hills and blue distance, in quiet gratitude to the Giver.

"One must enjoy a scene like this alone and in silence," he murmured, and then with strange inconsistency he burst forth into song, the subject of which was

mate, instead of grinding Coke into his head in those musty old chambers. I wonder what kind of a spinster he married. I'll be bound he married her because no one else would have her. That's the old fossil's form. How he could ever bring himself to persuade a British jury to send a thief to prison I don't know. He would do it with tears in his eyes, I am sure. I can picture his wife to a hair—a figure like a Dutch doll, wearing a long-waisted dress with four or five flounces, green, and extended with a crinoline, I shouldn't wonder. A sad, simpering face, adorned with shining ringlets. Ah! I never thought of that—his unusual absence from the chambers in Pump Court! What does it imply other than a honeymoon? Oh, bliss and rapture!—dear old boy,

any way I hope *he* is happy, and as to her"—here he burst again into song :—

"Here's to the maiden of bashful fifteen;
Here's to the 'spinster' of fifty"—

Hang the lilies!"

This last exclamation referred not to the fair sex, but to certain lily-leaves in which he had unconsciously entangled the head of his canoe. He cleared himself, and taking a course to avoid further impediment, he again lifted up his powerful voice—

"Here's to the maiden of bashful fifteen—"

And there he stopped, for just before him, sitting on the grassy slope by the willows, was a maiden who, if not of bashful fifteen, certainly did not exceed eighteen, and had apparently lost nothing of her bashfulness.

She had been sitting there in the fading light of that October afternoon, with her hat swinging upon her idle fingers, and her eyes following the clouds across the blue sky with dreamy listlessness, when the voice aroused her from her reverie, and drew her attention to the approaching singer. Then as their eyes met he stopped suddenly with boyish confusion in his handsome bearded face. The situation was so droll that she felt inclined to laugh. She feared he must see the difficulty with which she controlled her mirth, and so looking down, blushed to the feathery edge of her rippling brown hair.

"By George! what a lovely little maiden!" thought Geordie as he passed; and he wished that the exigencies of paddling a canoe had not prevented his looking longer on the fair, soft face.

III.

"If you please, sir, Sir Gregory Philipson is in the coffee-room. Here's his card, sir, as he desired I would give you the moment you came in," said the landlord of the "Swan," at which excellent inn Thornton had engaged a room.

"Sir Gregory Philipson—who on earth is he?" asked Geordie of himself, looking at the pasteboard. Being unable to evolve an answer from his inner consciousness, he opened the door and entered the coffee-room with the card in his hand.

"No doubt about the identity—a Sir Gregory every inch of him," thought he, surveying the portly form of the florid, white-haired old gentleman reading the country newspaper through his gold-rimmed eyeglass. As Thornton shut the door, the old gentleman looked up, laid down the newspaper, and rising, said—

"Mr. George Thornton, I believe?"

"That is my name."

"You have my card. May I presume to ask if you are *the* Mr. George Thornton who took part in the late Arctic Expedition?"

"Oh, goodness!" thought Thornton, as he bowed in silent acknowledgment, "is there no escape?"

"By a curious accident I happened to read your name on the—ah—portmanteau you left in the parlour."

"Confound the black bag!" mentally ejaculated Geordie.

"And being very, very greatly interested in all concerning the discovery of the North Pole, I ventured upon that knowledge to—ah—wait for you and introduce myself."

Thornton murmured some unintelligible sounds significant of pride or joy, or some such emotion which he was far from feeling, and the baronet continued—

"You will pardon me, I am sure, and give me the honour of shaking hands with one who——"

"More butter!" groaned Thornton under his breath, and closed his ears to the remainder of that sentence.

"And now I will take another liberty, my dear sir. May I ask you if you have any engagement for the remaining part of the day?"

Geordie could not tell a lie though he wished to escape. He stammered, and finally admitted that he was free.

"Then, sir, I will beg you to dine with me. My residence is not a mile distant, and I expect the trap every instant."

"But I have no tail-coat," said Thornton.

"So much the better; I detest formality."

"And—and my boots are wet and muddy."

"Again so much the better. I can provide you with slippers and make you comfortable."

There was no escape for Thornton, so with the best grace he could command he accepted the hospitable baronet's invitation, and shortly afterwards was being carried off to "The Beeches," Sir Gregory's stronghold, as fast as the pair of ponies could go.

The baronet was not without visitors. Thornton, after being presented to the baronet's wife, was introduced to Mr. John Hamilton—"R.A.," Sir Gregory added in an undertone. "Another poor lion," thought Thornton—and then to Mrs. Hamilton and two little Hamiltons, and when these formalities were ended the baronet looked round the room and asked—

"Where is your sister, Hamilton? Where is our Margaret?"

"She went off alone to the meadow," answered Mrs. Hamilton; and then added as she looked through the window into the garden, "Here she comes."

The next moment Margaret entered the room by the open window, and being in her turn presented to Mr. Thornton, the two blushed once more; for, strangely enough, Miss Hamilton was the very young lady Thornton had seen sitting under the willows beside the river an hour before.

IV.

JOHN HAMILTON was an artist who had gained a high position, but not without struggling against difficulties which would have overcome a less indefatigable worker than he. He had brought his family into Berkshire that they might be near him while he worked among the gloriously tinted hills, and being discovered by the eccentric old baronet, was compelled to accept his invitation and make a residence of The Beeches so long as he stayed in Berkshire. There

was no escaping the hospitality of Sir Gregory. His pleasure in receiving friends and his pain in losing them were both so palpable, that it seemed but a proper return for one act of hospitality to accept another, and so those who came to The Beeches generally stayed.

In accordance with this rule Thornton accepted a couple of rooms, and wrote to London for supplies of linen and other requisites. He had an easy way of accommodating himself to circumstances at all times, but the surroundings here were so agreeable that one less difficult to please might have accepted them without difficulty. He liked Sir Gregory—when he had run over the gamut of compliment; several times and ceased to flatter; he liked Hamilton, and—he loved Margaret. He settled that in his own mind the very first day of their companionship, and altered his views entirely as to his fitness for bachelorhood. “Margaret is the sweetest, most innocent, tenderest little flower in the whole bouquet of women, and it is a ridiculous thing for a man to live alone when he has the chance of making such a soul as Margaret’s part of his existence. A bachelor smokes too much; he grows selfish and misanthropic; he is altogether a mistake.” Thus he thought.

He was thrown much into the society of the young girl. Mrs. Hamilton had her children to attend to, Hamilton was engaged in work from sunrise to sunset, and the baronet, with his customary benevolence, seeing these two young people of a marriageable age and condition, did nothing to interrupt a current of events which might flow towards a tranquil lake of happiness for two individuals whom he admired and loved. This was not an ordinary state of things, it must be admitted, but it is not from every-day occurrences that the little romances of life are gleaned.

Margaret having lived from childhood with her brother, and been constantly meeting artists in his studio, saw nothing *outré* in associating closely with Mr. Thornton. She was quite without suspicion of the result this association might produce. She liked taking long walks, but that she could not do alone; she liked scrambling up steep hill-sides among the crisp, odorless, fallen leaves, but it was impossible to scramble without a strong hand to help and guide her. It was the consciousness of his strength and her need that first awoke her love. She half doubted the feeling at first, she tried to deceive herself and think it was merely such friendship as she had felt for her brother’s friends; she tried not to like him so well, to find faults in him when he was with her, and to forget him when they were separated. And when she found it impossible to evade the honest truth she was sad. It is not with an awful sense of guilt, with an aching heart, with a desperate struggle to subdue the gentle beating of her heart, that a young girl usually discovers that she loves one man better than all the world. Yet it was so that Margaret Hamilton regarded her feeling for George Thornton.

“I cannot help it,” she cried, sitting upon her bedside at night, with her fingers knitted and white with convulsive pressure.

But one thing she could avoid, and did—the encouragement of this new yearning in her heart. She refused to go out for walks and scrambles, pleading headache and fatigue. Indeed, her pallor and the pained expression of her features justified the assertion to casual observers. Thornton’s eyes, more powerful with love, saw beneath the surface, however, and he was perplexed.

“It is not a little thing that troubles that dear young soul,” he said.

Seeing the young people separated after a week of close companionship the baronet was ill-pleased, and by subtle artifice contrived to leave them together one afternoon when Margaret had consented to walk through the woods with him and Thornton. For a while Geordie walked silently beside her, then suddenly he said—

“Margaret, I am a fellow unused to keeping secrets, and I must tell you what is on my mind now, come what will. Margaret, dear little Margaret, I love you, and if you will be my wife I will try to make you as happy as you make me.”

“Oh, no, no! do not speak of that. I am a naughty girl to let you see that—that——”

“That what, dear one?”

“Oh, let me go! do not take my hand. Let us find Sir Gregory.”

“No, I must hold you thus one moment—one moment while you answer me a question—yes, or no. Do you love me?”

The girl looked him in the face for a moment, her whole soul filling her eyes with tenderest regard, and then snatching her hand from his she covered her blushing face with her hands, and ran away, sobbing as she went.

Thornton followed her slowly until she was safe within the meadows of The Beeches, and then he walked straight away to Hamilton, who was working up the river, and told him the whole story.

“What a careless beggar I am!” said Hamilton, laying down his brush as Thornton finished, “I never thought there was any feeling between you. I am so accustomed to her talking and chatting with the fellows who come to the studio, and then when I am at work I forget everything else. And besides I never doubted that Margaret——”

“There is no necessity for apology. Nothing has happened which should not happen to a young girl. She must marry, and I hope I am not altogether objectionable.”

“It isn’t that, but—but the poor child—she is engaged!” groaned Hamilton.

“Engaged! No one has mentioned the fact; I have seen no one here.”

“She has been engaged two years. We don’t see him often—three or four times a year. It is a most prosaic affair—not a love-match at all on Margaret’s side—but we fancied that she was not capable of showing any decided feeling, and we knew the match would be to her advantage. I will tell you exactly how it happened: I was in great difficulties a couple of years ago, and had to defend a lawsuit. Thanks to my

counsel I won the day, and by his generous interest in my affairs I was placed in a better position than I had ever before possessed. This interest was due, I believe, to his love for Margaret—then only sixteen; and when he proposed to marry her, the child herself willingly accepted. She knew how much we all owed Clyde."

"Clyde?"

"Geoffrey Clyde. Is it possible you know him?"

"He is my dearest friend," murmured Thornton, dropping his head.

V.

THORNTON left The Beeches at once, only giving an indefinite answer to Sir Gregory's pressing invitation to renew his visit.

"You must promise to come at Christmas if not before. The Hamiltons have agreed to be with me at that time, and our party would be incomplete without you," said Sir Gregory.

"If it is possible," was the only answer Thornton would make; and he knew perfectly well that for him, alas! it would not be possible.

So Margaret was alone again, and the little romance of a fortnight was over. It seemed to her as if all the happiness of life was ended too. The date of her marriage was fixed for the spring, and her brother and his wife hoped that by that time she would have forgotten Thornton, and resumed her quiet passive tone of thought. They did not know the depth of the girl's nature, or how passionate the love of such a girl when once awakened could be. She could not forget the past, she could not think of the future without horror, and time only increased the intensity of her emotions.

A letter came from Geoffrey Clyde. He had broken his leg in a fall upon the mountains, and was under the doctor's hands at Constance, where he should have to stay for a time; but he trusted to be well by December, that he might spend Christmas with his friends and his little wife.

Margaret had scarcely strength to read the letter through. She sank into a chair, and sat trembling like one in the extreme of terror; and when her brother spoke some words of kindness to her, she threw herself into his arms, and cried like a little child.

"I must write to him and tell him all. He must

not marry me thinking I am the good little girl I was," she said, when her tears were shed.

"You have done nothing wrong, Daisy," said her brother gently.

"Oh, but I should not have allowed myself to like any one else!"

Poor child! as if she could help it!

So she wrote to Geoffrey Clyde, telling him how sorry she was that he had hurt himself, and promising to be ready to marry him in the spring if he would have her; but that she was not so simple and innocent as when he offered her his hand.

His reply did not come till Christmas Eve, and then it was forwarded to Margaret, who, with the family, had gone into Berkshire, and were assembled once more under Sir Gregory's hospitable roof. Margaret read the letter.

"Constance.

"MY DEAR MARGARET,—I have read your touching confession, and I love you more now than ever. I must keep you to your promise: you must marry and be happy. Almost as soon as this arrives your husband will claim you. God bless you in this season of joy, and make your life happy always.

"Yours affectionately,

"GEOFFREY CLYDE."

She handed the letter to her brother, and sat still with a beating heart. She felt already as if Geoffrey were at the door.

They were in the library waiting for the announcement of dinner when a sharp knock was heard at the hall door. Sir Gregory was busy showing the wondrous works of his watch to little Ethel—Hamilton's youngest child—and scarcely noticed the sound, but every one else knew who came, and looked anxiously towards the door. A step approached, and Mrs. Hamilton moved to open it. Poor Margaret rose from her chair, putting her hand upon her side unconsciously, as if to repress the beating of her agitated heart. The door opened, and in walked—George Thornton.

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"Why, you didn't think dear old Clyde would be such a brute as to marry a little girl who couldn't love him, did you?" asked Geordie, when their surprise and embarrassment were explained. "I found out where he was, and went to him, and before your letter came to him he had renounced his faithless Margaret. And I am the husband he has sent to claim you, you dear little Margaret."

WHAT TO WEAR.

CHIT-CHAT ON DRESS. BY OUR PARIS CORRESPONDENT.



WITH December comes a certain amount of decision as to fashions for winter wear; we begin to see not only what the milliners, dressmakers, and shops have provided, but what the public have bought or are most inclined to buy, and what style, amid an unusually large number in dressmaking, is

the prevailing one. Plush has been adopted with enthusiasm; we have plush bodices, entire dresses of plush, plush trimmings, plush bonnets and hats, and, newer than all, plush shoes, the plush in this case being closely woven, like velvet.

We are wearing such a profusion of machine-made laces that Calais is busy on this side of the Channel,