

ELECTIVE AFFINITIES.

A Novel.

TRANSLATED FROM THE GERMAN OF GOTTHE.

PART I.

CHAPTER XVIII. (Continued.)

"Laugh not, dear Mittler," continued Edward, "or laugh on as you will. I am not ashamed of this attachment, of this—if you please to call it so—foolish, frantic passion. No, I never loved before. It is only now that I know what love means. Till now, what I have called life was nothing but its prelude—amusement, sport to kill the time with. I never lived till I knew her, till I loved her, entirely and only loved her. People have often said of me, not to my face, but behind my back, that in most things I was but a botcher and a bungler. It may be so; for I had not then found in what I could show myself a master. I should like to see the man who outdoes me in the talent of love. A miserable life it is, full of anguish and tears; but it is so natural, so dear to me, that I could hardly change it for another."

Edward had relieved himself slightly by this violent unloading of his heart. But in doing so every feature of his strange condition had been brought out so clearly before his eyes, that, overpowered by the pain of the struggle, he burst into tears, which flowed all the more freely as his heart had been made weak by telling it all.

Mittler, who was the less disposed to put a check on his inexorable good sense and strong, vigorous feeling, because by this violent outbreak of passion on Edward's part he saw himself driven far from the purpose of his coming, showed sufficiently decided marks of his disapprobation. Edward should act as a man, he said; he should remember what he owed to himself as a man. He should not forget that the highest honor was to command ourselves in misfortune; to bear pain, if it must be so, with equanimity and self-collectedness. That was what we should do, if we wished to be valued and looked up to as examples of what was right.

Stirred and penetrated as Edward was with the bitterest feelings, words like these could have but a hollow, worthless sound.

"It is well," he cried, "for the man who is happy, who has all that he desires, to talk; but he would be ashamed of it if he could see how intolerable it was to the sufferer. Nothing short of an infinite endurance would be enough, and easy and contented as he was, what could he know of an infinite agony? There are cases," he continued, "yes, there are, where comfort is a lie, and despair is a duty. Go, heap your scorn upon the noble Greek, who well knows how to delude himself with the idea of his own good. Leave me, all you with dry heart and dry eye. Curses on the happy, to whom the wretched serve but for a spectacle. When body and soul are torn in pieces with agony, they are to hear it—yes, to be noble and hear it, if they are to be allowed to go off the scene with applause. Like the gladiators, they must die gracefully before the eyes of the multitude. My dear Mittler, I thank you for your visit; but really you would oblige me much, if you would go out and look about you in the garden. We will meet again. I will try to compose myself, and become more like you."

Mittler was unwilling to let a conversation drop which it might be difficult to begin again, and still persevered. Edward, too, was quite ready to go on with it; besides that of itself, it was tending towards the issue which he desired.

"Indeed," said the latter, "this thinking and arguing backwards and forwards leads to nothing. In this very conversation I myself have first come to understand myself! I have first felt decided as to what I must make up my mind to do. My present and my future life I see before me; I have to choose only between misery and happiness. Do you, my best friend, bring about the separation which must take place, which, in fact, is already made; gain Charlotte's consent for me. I will not enter upon the reasons why I believe there will be the less difficulty in prevailing upon her. You, my dear friend, must go. Go, and give us all peace; and make us all happy."

Mittler hesitated. Edward continued: "My fate and Otilie's cannot be decided, and shall not be shipwrecked. Look at this glass; our initials are engraved upon it. A gay reveler flung it into the air, that no one should drink of it more. It was to fall on the rocks and be dashed to pieces; but it did not fall; it was caught. At a high price I bought it back, and now I drink out of it daily—to convince myself that the connection between us cannot be broken; that destiny has decided."

"A las, alas!" cried Mittler, "what must I not endure with my friends? Here comes superstition, which of all things I hate the worst—the most mischievous and accursed of all the plagues of mankind. We trifle with prophecies, with forebodings, and dreams, and give a seriousness to our every-day life with them; but when the seriousness of life itself begins to show, when everything around us is heaving and rolling, then comes in these spectres to make the storm more terrible."

"In this uncertainty of life," cried Edward, "priced as it is between hope and fear, leave the poor heart its guide—star. It may gaze towards it, if it cannot steer towards it."

"Yes, I might leave it; and it would be very well," replied Mittler, "if there were but one consequence to expect; but I have always found that no one will attend to symptoms of warning. Man cares for nothing except what flatters him and promises him fair; and his faith is alive exclusively for the sunny side."

Mittler, finding himself carried off into the shadowy regions, in which the longer he remained in them, the more uncomfortable he always felt, was the more ready to assent to Edward's eager wish that he should go to Charlotte. Indeed, if he stayed, what was there further which at that moment he could urge on Edward? To gain time, to inquire in what state things were with the ladies, was the best thing which even he himself could suggest as at present possible.

He hastened to Charlotte, whom he found as usual, calm and in good spirits. She told him readily of everything which had occurred; for from what Edward had said he had only been able to gather the effects. On his own side, he felt his way with the utmost caution. He could not prevail upon himself even cursorily to mention the word separation. It was a surprise, indeed, to him, but from his point of view an unspeakable delightful one, when Charlotte, at the end of a number of unpleasant things, finished with saying:

"I must believe, I must hope, that things will all work round again, and that Edward will return to me. How can it be otherwise, as soon as I become a mother?"

"Do I understand you right?" asked Mittler.

"Perfectly," Charlotte answered.

"A thousand times blessed be this news!" he cried, clasping his hands together. "I knew the strength of this argument on the mind of a man. Many a marriage have I seen first cemented by it, and restored again when broken. Such a good hope as this is worth more than a thousand words. Now indeed it is the best hope which we can have. For myself, though," he continued, "I have all reason to be vexed about it. In this case I can see clearly no self-love of mind will be flattered. I shall earn no thanks from you by my services; I am in the same case as a certain medical friend of mine, who succeeds in all cures which he undertakes with the poor for the love of God; but can seldom do anything for the rich who pay him. Here, thank God, the thing cures itself, after all my talking and trying had proved fruitless."

Charlotte now asked him if he would carry the news to Edward; if he would take a letter to him for her, and then see what should be done. But he declined undertaking this.

"All is done," he cried; "do you write the letter to the poor fellow."

For this refusal she was vexed with him—as she frequently was. His eager, impetuous character brought about much good; but his over-haste was the occasion of many a failure. No one was more dependent than he on the impressions which he formed on the moment.

Charlotte's messenger came to Edward, who received him half in terror. The letter was to decide his fate, and it might as well contain No as Yes. He did not venture, for a long time, to open it. At last he tore off the cover, and stood petrified at the following passage, with which it concluded:

"Remember the night-adventure when you visited your wife as a lover—how you drew her to you, and clasped as a well beloved bride in your arms. In this strange accident let us reverse the providence of heaven, which has woven a new link to bind us, at the moment when the happiness of our lives was threatening to fall asunder and to vanish."

What passed from that moment in Edward's soul it would be difficult to describe! Under the weight of such a stroke, old habits and fancies come out again to assist to kill the time and fill up the chasms of life. Hunting and fighting are an ever-ready resource of this kind for a nobleman; Edward longed for some outward peril, as a counterbalance to the storm within him. He craved for death, because the burden of life threatened to become too heavy for him to bear. It comforted him to think that he would soon cease to be, and so would make those whom he loved happy by his departure.

No one made any difficulty in his doing what he purposed—because he kept his intention a secret. He made his will with all due formalities. It gave him a very sweet feeling to secure Otilie's fortune—provision was made for Charlotte, for the unborn child, for the Captain, and for the servants. The war, which had again broken out, favored his wishes; he had liked exceedingly the half soldiering which had fallen to him in his youth, and that was the reason why he had left the service. Now it gave him a fine exhilarating feeling to be able to resign it, under a commander of whom it could be said, that under his conduct death was likely, and victory was sure.

Otilie, when Charlotte's secret was made known to her, bewildered by it, like Edward, and more than he, retired into herself—she had nothing further to say; hope she could not, and wish she dared not. A glimpse into what was passing in her we gather from her Diary, some passages of which we think to communicate.

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