

ELECTIVE AFFINITIES.

A Novel.

TRANSLATED FROM THE GERMAN OF GÖTTER.

PART II.

CHAPTER I.

There often happens to us in common life what, in an epic poem, we are accustomed to praise as a stroke of art in the poet; namely, that when the chief figures go off the scene, conceal themselves or retire into inactivity, some other or others, who hitherto we have scarcely observed, come forward and fill their places. And these putting out all their force, at once fix our attention and sympathy on themselves, and earn our praise and admiration.

Thus, after the Captain and Edward were gone, the Architect, of whom we have spoken, appeared every day of a more important person. The ordering and executing of a number of undertakings depended entirely upon him, and he proved himself thoroughly understanding and business-like in the style in which he went to work; while in a number of other ways he was able also to make himself of assistance to the ladies, and find amusement for their weary hours. His outward air and appearance were of the kind which win confidence and awake affection. A youth in the full sense of the word, well formed, tall, perhaps a little too stout; modest without being timid, and easy without being obtrusive, there was no work and no trouble which he was not delighted to take upon himself; and as he could keep accounts with great facility, the whole economy of the household soon was no secret to him, and everywhere his salutary influence made itself felt. Any stranger who came he was commonly set to entertain, and he was skillful either at declining unexpected visits, or at least so far preparing the ladies for them as to spare them any disagreeableness.

Among others, he had one day no little trouble with a young lawyer, who had been sent by a neighboring nobleman to speak about a matter which, although of no particular moment, yet touched Charlotte to the quick. We have to mention this incident, because it gave occasion for a number of things which otherwise might perhaps have remained long untouched.

We remember certain alterations Charlotte had made in the churchyard. The entire body of the monuments had been removed from their places, and had been ranged along the walls of the church, leaning against the string-course. The remaining space had been leveled, except a broad walk which led up to the church, and past it to the opposite gate; and it had all been sown with various kinds of trefoil, which had shot up and flowered most beautifully.

The new graves were to follow one after another in a regular order from the end, but the spot on each occasion was to be carefully smoothed over and sown again. No one could deny that on Sundays and holidays, when the people went to church, the change had given it a most cheerful and pleasant appearance. At the same time the clergyman, an old man and clinging to old customs, who at first had not been especially pleased with the alteration, had become thoroughly delighted with it; all the more because when he sat out like Philémon with his birds under the old linden trees at his back door, instead of the hums and hums he had a beautiful clean lawn to look upon; and which, moreover, Charlotte having secured the use of the spot to the parsonage, was no little convenience to his household.

Notwithstanding, however, many members of the congregation had been displeased that the means of marking the spots where their forefathers rested had been removed, and all memorials of them thereby obliterated. However well preserved the monuments might be, they could only show who had been buried, but not where he had been buried, and the where, as many maintained, was everything.

Of this opinion was a family in the neighborhood, who for many years had been in possession of a considerable vault for a general resting place of themselves and their relations, and in consequence had settled a small annual sum for the use of the church. And now this young lawyer had been sent to cancel this settlement, and to show that his client did not intend to pay it any more, because the condition under which it had been hitherto made had not been observed by the other party, and no regard had been paid to objection and remonstrance. Charlotte, who had been the originator of the alteration herself, chose to speak to the young man who, in a decided though not a violent manner, laid down the grounds on which his client proceeded, and gave occasion in what he said for much serious reflection.

"You see," he said, after a slight introduction, in which he sought to justify his peremptoriness; "you see, it is right for the lowest as well as for the highest to mark the spot which holds those whose dearest to him. The poorest peasant who buries a child, finds it some consolation to plant a light wooden cross upon the grave, and hang a garland upon it, to keep alive the memorial, at least as long as the sorrow remains; although such a mark, like the mourning, will pass away with time. These better off change the cross of wood into iron, and fix it down and guard it in various ways; and here

we have endurance for many years. But because this too will sink at last and become invisible, those who are able to bear the expense see nothing fitter than to raise a stone which shall promise to endure for generations, and which can be restored and be made fresh again by posterity. Yet this stone is not, which attracts us; it is that which is contained beneath it, which is entrusted, where it stands, to the earth. It is not the memorial so much of which we speak, as of the person himself; not of what once was, but of what is. Far better, far more closely, can I embrace some dear departed one in the mound which rises over his bed, than in a monumental writing which only tells us that once he was. In itself, indeed, it is but little; but around it, as around a central mark, the wife, the husband, the kinsman, the friend; after their departure, shall gather in again; and the living shall have the right to keep far off all strangers, and evil-wishers from the side of the dear one who is sleeping there.

"And, therefore, I hold it quite fair and fitting that my principal shall withdraw his grant to you. It is, indeed, but too reasonable that he should do it, for the members of his family are injured in a way for which no compensation could be even proposed. They are deprived of the sad sweet feelings of laying offerings on the remains of their dead, and of the one comfort in their sorrow of one day lying down at their side."

"The matter is not of that importance," Charlotte answered, "that we should disquiet ourselves about it with the vexation of a law-suit. I regret so little what I have done, that I will gladly indemnify the church for what it loses through you. Only I must confess candidly to you your arguments have not convinced me; the pure feeling of an universal equality at last, after death, seems to me more composing than this hard determined persistence in our personalities and in the conditions and circumstance of our lives. What do you say to it?" she added, turning to the Architect.

"It is not for me," he replied, "either to argue or attempt to judge in such a case. Let me venture, however, to say what my own art and my own habits of thinking suggest to me. Since we are no longer so happy as to be able to press to our breasts the in-urned remains of those we have loved, since we are neither wealthy enough, nor of cheerful heart enough to preserve them undecayed in large elaborate sarcophagi; since, indeed, we cannot even find place any more for ourselves and ours in the churches, and are banished out into the open air, we all, I think, ought to approve the method which you, my gracious lady, have introduced. If the members of a common congregation are laid out side by side, they are resting by the side of, and among their kindred; and, if the earth be once to receive us all, I can find nothing more natural or desirable than that the mounds which, if they are thrown up, are sure to sink slowly in again together, should be smoothed off at once, and the covering, which all bear alike, will press lighter upon each other."

"And is it all, is it all to pass away?" said Otilie, "without one token of remembrance, without anything to call back the past?"

"By no means," continued the Architect; "it is not from remembrance, it is from place that men should be set free. The architect, the sculptor, are highly interested that men should look to their art—to their hand, for a continuance of their being; and therefore, I should wish to see well designed, well-executed monuments; not sown up and down by themselves at random, but erected all in a single spot, where they can promise themselves endurance. Inasmuch as even the good and the great are contented to surrender the privilege of resting in person in the churches, we may, at least, erect there or in some fair hall near the burying-place, either monuments or monumental writings. A thousand forms might be suggested for them, and a thousand ornaments with which they might be decorated."

"If the artists are so rich," replied Charlotte, "then tell me how it is that they are never able to escape from little obelisks, dwarf pillars, and urns for ashes. Instead of your thousand forms of which you boast, I have never seen anything but a thousand repetitions."

"It is very generally so with us," returned the Architect, "but it is not universal; and very likely the right taste and the proper application of it may be a peculiar art. In this case especially we have this great difficulty, that the monument must be cheerful and yet commemorate a solemn subject; while its matter is melancholy, it must not itself be melancholy. As regards designs for monuments of all kinds, I have collected numbers of them, and will take some opportunity of showing them to you; but at all times the fairest memorial of a man remains some likeness of himself. This, better than anything else, will give a notion of what he was; it is the best text for many or for few notes, only it ought to be made when he is at his best age, and that is generally neglected; no one thinks of preserving forms while they are alive, and if it is done at all, it is done carelessly and incompletely; and then comes death; a cast is taken swiftly off the face; this mask is set upon a block of stone, and that is called a bust. How seldom is the artist in a position to put any real life into such things as these!"

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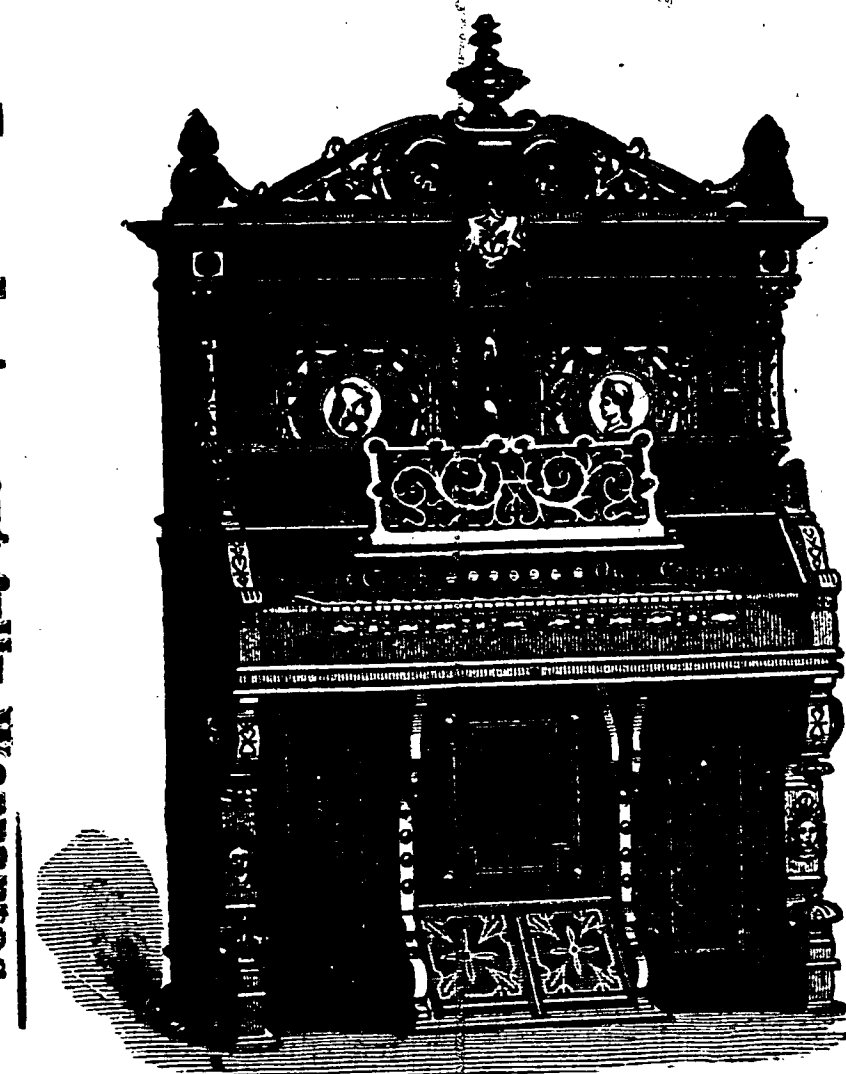
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