

The Bloomfield Times.

FRANK MORTIMER,
Editor and Proprietor.

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BY
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MRS. HARTFIELD'S ESCAPE.

IT was not quite a year since Mr. George Hartfield, the leading solicitor in the market-town of Norbury, had returned from his honey-moon tour, bringing with him the prettiest little wife that the good old town had boasted for a long time. George was only thirty years of age, but his wife looked a mere girl, and was at least eleven years his junior; much to the disgust of more mature damsels who would be very willing to step into the proprietorship of the good-looking young lawyer and his prim, respectable old house, which was one of the most conspicuous dwellings in the upper and more rural part of High street. Mr. Hartfield had inherited an excellent business from his father, and was altogether a person of some importance in the opinion of the Norbury world at large and of himself particularly.

The wife was a shy, girlish creature, who seemed scarcely fit to be mistress of that big formal house, with its shining wainscoted walls and grim old furniture—furniture that had been fashionable in the days of George's grandfather-gloomy old mahogany four posters and walnut-wood presses in the polished panels whereof sentimental little Alice Hartfield, whose head was a kind of a branch station of the circulating library used to fancy she saw ghosts in the gloaming. In honest truth she did not take much to the house in High street, and looked back with fond regretfulness to the bright country home from which George had won her.

But Mr. Hartfield being of an arbitrary temper, and having convinced her that the old house was perfection, she had never ventured to hint her dislike. It must be owned that the evenings were long and dull for so girlish a matron.

George was often out—sometimes at a public dinner at Crown Hotel, sometimes at a social club at the same prosperous tavern, or playing billiards with bachelor clients—all in the way of business, of course, as he told his wife.

But the evening during which he was absent were not the less lonely on that account.

Mr. Hartfield employed three clerks; a gentlemanly young man, who was articled; a stripling, for copying and out-of-door works; and a gray haired old man, with a face upon which there was a look of melancholy. Mr. Bestow, the first mentioned, and Tom Dreger, the stripling, had christened him Old Dismal, and spoke of him commonly by that disrespectful sobriquet. If he ever heard the name, it apparently troubled him very little. He rarely spoke, except so far as his business required him to speak; and in the two years that he had been with Mr. Hartfield he had not advanced so much as one step towards intimacy with his fellow-workers.

He lived four miles out of Norbury, walking to and fro in all weathers, and no one had seen the inside of his home.

Her first year of married life closed in sorrow and disappointment for Alice Hartfield. The baby-stranger, from whose coming she had expected so much pleasure only opened its eyes to close them again forever upon this world. She dwelt upon this loss with a grief which seemed to her husband just a little exaggerated, and it is possible that her tears and sad looks drove him to the club at the Crown rather more often this year than previously.

He fancied she was perfectly happy with her books, and work and piano, in the interval between six and eleven o'clock, at which hour he punctually returned to his abode, as sober as when he left home, well pleased with himself and the world at large.

The young clerks commented very freely upon the solicitor's conduct in his domestic capacity.

"If I had such a pretty wife I wouldn't leave her alone evening after evening, as our governor does," remarked the stripling pertly; "I wonder he is not ashamed of himself."

"He ought to take her more into society certainly," replied Bestow, who was in

much request in that brilliant circle which constituted Norbury "society."

Mr. Morgan the old clerk, looked up from his desk with a sigh.

"What my funeral friend," cried Bestow; "do you mean to say you are interested in the subject?"

"I am very much interested in Mrs. Hartfield," the old man answered quietly; "she is always kind to me! It is a good sign when a woman of her age takes the trouble to be polite to an old man like me—a sign that the heart's in the right place. I wish her husband understood her better. I don't think she wants to be taken to tea parties, Mr. Bestow; but I do think she wants a little more sympathy."

This was a long speech for Mr. Morgan. The young men stared at him superciliously and then went on with their work. From the first day of her coming to be mistress of the old house, William Morgan had shown himself interested in his master's wife. He was always pleased to perform any little service for her, and seemed needlessly grateful for the smallest kindness at her hands. His way home took him the whole length of the town; and Mrs. Hartfield used to intrust him with her books to change at the circulating library, an office which he performed with much taste and discretion.

"I take the liberty to carry a volume home with me for the night at odd times," he said to her one day.

"What Mr. Morgan do you read novels?"

"No, madame; but I have a niece living with me, who is glad to skim the volumes of an evening."

"Indeed! You never spoke of her before. Is your niece married?"

"She—she is a widow, to all intents and purposes. Her husband deserted her three years ago, and left her and her child, a boy on my hands. But we are very happy together, I thank God!"

"The husband must have been a bad man."

"He was a most consummate scoundrel!" answered the old clerk, with suppressed intensity.

"How hard it must be for you to work for all three!" said Alice.

"It will be harder for the two that are left when I am gone. My niece is able to earn a little money at her needle, but very little. It is a dark lookout for the future."

One morning early in the spring, Mr. Hartfield came into the office with a very dashing gentleman, a new client, who had just come into a handsome fortune by the death of Squire Comberford of Comberford Hall, seven miles from Norbury. Edgar Comberford, the new proprietor, was a nephew of the old man, and had been a school-fellow of George Hartfield's fifteen years before. Since that time he had disappeared from the ken of Norbury, and was supposed to have led a wild life in foreign lands. He was eminently handsome and in high spirits at the accession to the Comberford Hall estate.

"There are the papers, title-deeds, leases, and so on," said George Hartfield, pointing to a japanned box on a shelf in the office; "do you want to see them?"

"Not I, George," answered Mr. Comberford, gaily; "it is quite enough for me to know that the lands are free from mortgages, and that the rents come in briskly. The papers couldn't be in better hands. Hallo! what's that?"

It was Mr. Morgan, the old clerk, who had put his head in at the door of the office and suddenly withdrew it.

"Only one of my clerks," answered George Hartfield. "Come in, Morgan!" he bawled; but the clerk did not reply, and the two young men left the office; Mr. Comberford to be introduced to his friend's wife.

He was not a little surprised by her grace and beauty, not a little fascinated by her shy, girlish manners. He stayed for dinner, and contrived to make himself eminently agreeable to both his host and hostess, giving an animated account of his adventures in Mexico during the last two years.

"I should never have come home from there, George, but for my uncle's death," he said. "I was thoroughly cleaned out when I left England, and meant to live and die abroad."

After this social dinner Mr. Comberford dropped in very often at his friend's house. He seemed to have some perpetual reason for seeing the solicitor on business, and happened by a kind of fatality to call when the master of the house was out. Would he leave a statement of his business with a clerk? No, he would wait; and he strolled unannounced into the little sitting-room at the back of the office where Mrs. Hart-

field spent her mornings. It was the prettiest room in the house, opening into a small garden, at the end of which there was a narrow creek, an inlet from the pretty river that flowed through Nasbury. By and by Mr. Comberford took to approaching the house by this way. He was an expert waterman, and spent a good deal of his time on the river. So it was an easy natural thing for him to moor his boat at the bottom of George Hartfield's garden and step lightly on shore. He always found Alice in her sitting-room, and he found a look in her face which told him his visits were not unwelcome. He was a thorough man of the world, and knew the danger of the game he was playing, nor did he yield without a struggle to the temptation that had overtaken him. Such a heart as he had, was hit harder than it had been of late years. The outside world of Norbury had not yet been awakened to the scandal of Mr. Comberford's frequent visits to the lawyer's house, nor was the lawyer himself alarmed by them; but the younger clerks were quick to remark upon the length and frequency of these morning calls and on George Hartfield's blindness to the fact.

Edgar Comberford had been settled in the hall for six months, when George Hartfield had occasion to go to Paris on business. He had intended to take his wife with him for the trip, but the weather was sultry and oppressive, and he went alone. Mrs. Hartfield seemed very little disappointed by this change in his plans. Mr. Comberford had assured her that Paris was utterly unbearable in July. It was upon his business that George Hartfield was engaged. He went to make a settlement with a Parisian money-lender who had advanced money to the young man in the days of his insolvency, and who now put in an exorbitant claim for the interest.

The first day of Mr. Hartfield's absence went by without any visit from Mr. Comberford; but in the evening, when the clerks were gone and Alice was sitting alone and very low-spirited, the peculiar sound of the boat grating against the wood-work at the bottom of the garden struck upon her ear, and brought a sudden blush into her cheeks. She looked up with a movement of surprise as Edgar Comberford came across the garden. He came in at open window with the air of a person who had a perfect right to be there, and seated himself opposite, Alice at the little table where she was drinking tea.

"I thought you would give me a cup of tea after my row, Mrs. Hartfield," he said, "and I could not pass the creek without begging for one. I dreaded going home to the desolations of the Hall—dreary, empty rooms and cross old housekeeper. I think I shall go back to Mexico before the year is out."

Alice gave a little start.

"What?" she said; "leave the Hall forever?"

"In all probabilities forever. A man seldom comes here a second time from such a place as Mexico."

"But why should you go back there—why should you get tired of the Hall so soon?"

"Why should I be tired of life altogether? Why should I try to run away from myself—from you?"

And then he went on to speak of his love for her—in dark hints rather than plain words. She tried to reprove him; to show that she was angry, but the attempt was a very feeble one. She could only insist that he should leave her immediately. He did leave her, but not immediately, and not till she had changed resistance into piteous entreaty.

The boat had scarcely shot away in the twilight when the door between the sitting-room and the office opened, and the old clerk, Morgan, appeared on the threshold.

"You here, Mr. Morgan!" exclaimed Alice, making a vain attempt to conceal her tears; "I thought all the clerks had gone."

"I had some letters to copy, Mrs. Hartfield. Can I do anything in the town for you to-night?"

"Nothing, thank you."

He lingered, twisting the brim of his shabby old hat, round in his thin, wrinkled hands.

"I wish to Heaven I might speak to you freely," he said, at last, "without offending or wounding you."

"About what?"

"About the man who has just left you?"

"Mr. Comberford, my husband's friend?"

"Your husband's direct, deadliest foe—and yours," answered the old man, passionately.

"What right have you to say that?"

asked Alice, trembling with indignation. "The right given me by knowledge of the world, and, above all, by my knowledge of Edgar Comberford."

"What knowledge can you have of Mr. Comberford? Did you ever see him before he came to this office?"

"Never, but his name is a word of dire meaning in my life. Ask him what became of the girl he stole away from an honorable home and left in a wretched London lodging-house four years ago. Ask him the fate of Bessie Raynor."

"Why should I trouble myself about his affairs? And who is this Bessie Raynor?"

"Never mind who she is, Mrs. Hartfield. She was a good girl before he met her.—She will never be a happy woman again. Ask him about her, if you doubt what I tell you, and you will see by his countenance whether he is innocent or guilty.—Knowing what I do, I am bound to warn you of his real character."

"I do not require any such warning," replied Alice, coolly; "Mr. Comberford is no more to me than any other client of my husband's. And I beg that you will not trouble yourself to dictate my conduct to him."

"I see that I have offended you."

"I do not like spies."

"I am no spy, Mrs. Hartfield. I am an old man, and have had bitter cause to know the wickedness of the world. Your sweet face has been a kind of light to me ever since your husband brought you home to this house. God forbid the light should ever be clouded!"

He bowed and left her—left her standing in a reverie, looking absently out upon the shadowy fields beyond the little garden and winding creek. She was angry, unhappy, bewildered.

"I wish George had taken me to Paris," she thought. "He ought not to leave me alone in a dreary old house like this to be insulted by a clerk."

After this evening she passed Mr. Morgan without speaking to him, much to the old man's concern. The days went by, and not one passed without a visit from Edgar Comberford, although in the first evening Alice had expressly forbidden him to call again during her husband's absence. He was not easily to be put aside. He knew the weakness of the girl's unschooled nature, and knew how to trade upon it. His tender talk of the life that might have been, had Alice been free—his glowing descriptions of distant lands which those two might have seen side by side, of countries where the commonest life was a kind of poetry—charmed her in spite of herself.—She knew the guilt involved in this dangerous pleasure, and hated herself for her weakness, and yet looked forward with a dull sense of dread to her husband's return. Nothing could tempt her to sin against him, she told Edgar, however unsuited they might be to each other. She was his wife, and would do her duty to the end of her life. But the temptor was not convinced.

One day she ventured to ask him about Bessie Raynor. He gave a little start at the sound of her name, but declared that it was strange to him; and Alice was weak enough to believe his assertion. It had been a mere ruse of the old clerk's to frighten her, she thought. The poor dismal old creature had tried to make her miserable about the only acquaintance that gave her any pleasure.

Mr. Hartfield had been ten days away, when Mr. Comberford came in upon Alice one morning with a grave countenance.—The neat little parlor maid was only just cleaning away the breakfast things when he came in, and lingered inquisitively to hear the meaning of this early visit.

"I am sorry to say I have rather bad news of your husband, Mrs. Hartfield," he said to Alice's expression of surprise.—"He has been taken ill with some kind of a low fever, which is a good deal about now. Don't be alarmed; it is nothing very serious; but he wants you to go across to him. His doctor, a Frenchman, has written to me, but there is an enclosure for you from the patient."

He handed her a slip of foreign paper, on which there were a few lines in her husband's hand.

"DEAR ALICE—Please come to me at once, if you are not afraid of the journey. Comberford can escort you, as he is wanted over here. Yours, &c., G. H."

"You'll not be afraid of the journey?" asked Mr. Comberford.

"Not at all; I should not mind going alone."

"But you see, I am due there, so you cannot deny me the pleasure of being your escort."

"It is not a very pleasurable occasion," said Alice, with some embarrassment, as she twisted the slip of writing round and round her finger. She was wondering if the strict moralists of Norbury would altogether approve of this journey.

Mr. Comberford gave her little time to think. He went into the clerk's office to tell Mr. Bestow of his employer's illness, and to make inquiries about the London trains. William Morgan looked up from the desk and watched him thoughtfully, as he lounged against the mantel-piece reading the time table.

There was no possibility of going to Paris earlier than by the night mail. Mrs. Hartfield would have to go first to London—a three hour's journey. There was a train left Norbury at a quarter to four in the afternoon, which would take the travelers in ample time for the Dover mail.—Mr. Comberford decided upon going by this, and left Alice in order to make his preparations for the journey. He did not, however, go back to the Hall, but fidgeted in and out of the lawyer's house several times in the course of the day on some pretence or other, spending the interval at the Crown, where he drank brandy and soda water to an extent that astonished the waiters. But in spite of all he had drunk, he looked pale and anxious when he came at three o'clock ready to take Mrs. Hartfield to the station.

Alice was just stepping into the fly when William Morgan came out of the house with a carpet-bag in one hand and a morocco office bag in the other.

"Why, where the deuce are you going?" asked Mr. Comberford.

"I am your fellow-traveler, sir; at least, I am going second-class by the same train."

"To London?"

"No, sir, to Paris. Mr. Bestow sends me across with papers."

"Why, what consummate folly of Bestow's! Your master is not fit for business. He won't be able to attend to anything for days to come."

"I hope he may be better than you think, sir. In any case I am bound to obey Mr. Bestow's orders."

He spoke in a mechanical kind of tone, nor did his countenance express the faintest interest in his work.

Mr. Comberford laughed grimly to himself as they drove away with the old man on the box.

"That old fool's company can make very little difference," he muttered, and then grew moodier than he was wont to be in Alice Hartfield's company.

He brightened considerably by and by, when they were alone in a first-class compartment, flying Londonward at express rate; and he succeeded in making Alice believe that her husband's illness was only a trifling matter, and that she had no occasion to be anxious about him.

"Men think so much of the slightest touch of illness," he said, "and are always in a hurry to summon their wives.—We are such selfish creatures, you see, and so miserable without the comfort of a woman's presence."

And then he went on to speak of his own solitary position.

"What is to become of me in the hour of sickness, Alice," he asked, "with no one but a gloomy old housekeeper to care for me?"

"You will marry by and by, I daresay, and have a wife to care for you."

"Never, Alice. There is only one woman on earth I care for, and if she cannot be my wife, I will go down to my grave a bachelor."

"You must not talk to me like that; it is taking a mean advantage of our companionship. You know that I am with you at my husband's wish."

"Yes, you have his orders for the journey. Poor, dear George, what a fine bold hand he writes, doesn't he?"

Mrs. Hartfield did not see the sardonic grin which accompanied this trivial remark, nor did Mr. Comberford again offend her by any allusion to his hopeless passion. It was pitch dark when they reached Dover, not a star in the sky, and a high wind blowing. There was considerable confusion in getting on board, and Mrs. Hartfield scarcely knew where she was till she found herself standing on the deck of a steamer arm-in-arm with Edgar Comberford, while the lamps of Dover receded rapidly from her vision. Her companion persuaded her to remain on deck.

"There is an atmosphere of sickness below that would inevitably make you ill," he said. "Let me find you a comfortable corner, where you can sit all night secure from wind and weather." [Concluded on second page.]