

The Bloomfield Times.

FRANK MORTIMER, }
Editor and Proprietor.

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The Bloomfield Times.

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WHISTON'S COMPROMISE.

POOR Annie Johnstone found the problem of keeping the wolf from the door—the wolf which no king or parliament can extirpate—more difficult to solve daily. She sat behind her little dingy counter writing a letter, with but small chance of a customer coming in to interfere with the work of composition.

"MY DEAR UNCLE WILLIAM—Papa told me I was never to apply to you, because you helped him once, and had refused to do so again, and you were displeased because we tried to keep a shop, which indeed has been a very lame attempt, for there is no chance of the shop's keeping g. I disobey him now, because I do not know what else to do. I have not seen or heard of papa for five days, and I almost fear that something may have happened to him, though he often has to hide for a little time, because of creditors; for he has not been much more successful in getting to sell coal or wine on commission, or as an agent for insurance companies, than I have been as a confectioner, and he has not brought me any money now for a long time. He hinted to me that he might go abroad, but I hardly think he would have done that without letting me know; and yet he was always so afraid of his letters being stopped, and helping people to trace him, that he may have done it. If the rent is not paid by Monday, I shall be turned out of the house, and then what am I to do? You see, dear Uncle William, I am obliged to write to you, because I have no one else to ask; and if you will not put me in the way of earning my living somehow, I must positively beg, and that would even be more discreditable than selling, or trying to sell pastry, wouldn't it? It is really not my fault; I have tried my best, and dined on stale buns for days and days.

Your affectionate niece,
"ANNIE JOHNSTONE."

She directed this letter to "William Johnstone, Esq., Joss House Villa, Southend," and laid it on the counter before her, just as a customer came in—a very young man, with very shiny boots and hat, brilliant gloves, and a natty umbrella, who saluted on entering, in a manner not customary amongst Englishmen, who generally remain covered in a shop, however attractive the mistress of it may be.

"Good morning, Miss Johnstone," said he, in an embarrassed way; "I have come for my luncheon."

If the youth looked embarrassed, the girl looked vexed. She colored over her forehead, and knit her brows strangely, considering how few customers she had, and how great was her need of them. Her reply, too, was as impolitic as the expression of her countenance, being an intimation that she was afraid she had nothing to offer him.

"O," he replied, "I never eat heavy luncheons; just a basin of soup and a glass of sherry."

"I have no soup, and the sherry is out."

"Well, now I think of it, I am tired of soup; I had sooner have a sandwich and a pint bottle of Bass."

"I cannot give you those either," said she.

"O, well," he persisted, "it's of no consequence. Here is some pastry, and I am very fond of pastry; and that, with a bottle of ginger-beer—"

The girl, who had been constraining herself with difficulty, now broke out, "You can get a good luncheon at a dozen places close by!" she exclaimed with uncalled-for vehemence: "why do you not go to one of them?"

"I—like this best," he stammered.—"Your pastry, though not, perhaps, quite what you might call new, appears to agree with me better; or I mean, you know—"

"You come here out of charity!" cried the girl, bursting into tears. "You think I am poor and want custom, and so you come here and try to eat—stuff; and I am sure you go where you can get proper food somewhere else afterward. It is not my fault if I can't have things nice!"

"O, for goodness' sake!—O, don't cry! O, my pretty—I mean to say, I don't know what I am saying," cried the youth in great distress. "Well, if you must have the whole truth. I do not come here for your stale tarts, but because I fell in love

with you through the window one day; and every time I have come here I have fallen more and more in love with you; and if you will not love me back, and promise to marry me, I'll—I don't know what I won't do; there!"

Seeing that his fair charmer did not give any signs of being further offended, but only left off crying, and looked down in confusion, the youth took courage, dropped his gloves into his hat, and his hat on a little round table, and leaned his elbows on the counter over against Annie, who did not draw back; and thus the young people's heads were not separated by any very cruel distance.

"What nonsense," she murmured. "It may be nonsense to expect you will ever love me," replied the youth; "but it is serious earnest that I have not been able to get you out of my head all this month trying what I would; and all my friends are wondering what is the matter with me. If I have not the chance of getting you for my wife, I do not care whether I pass my examination or not." That is sense, I hope."

"But you are so young."

"I'll bet I am older than you!"

"O, but that is nothing. And then—you are a gentleman."

"And so are you a lady," said the youth. "O, I learned all about you from your father. I saw him leaving this house one day, and a little while afterwards I met him in a smoking room and we happened to get into conversation. He told me how he had lost his property in unfortunate speculations—on the turf and otherwise—and how, instead of sitting down helplessly, as so many young ladies who have been brought up in luxury would do, you tried to earn a living so pluckily. And that made me love you still more."

"Did you tell my father you knew the shop, and had seen me?"

"Why, no; I did not like to do that."

"Why?—Ah, I know the reason; he borrowed money of you!" cried Annie, coloring with vexation.

"Only a trifle—the veriest trifle."

"And I cannot even repay that. You see how hopeless and foolish an engagement between us would be."

"No, I don't."

"I have nothing in the world, and no expectations."

"No more have I," cried the lad, with exultation. "I have nothing in the world, I have no expectations. Why, we were ordained for each other."

In the course of further parley, it transpired that the young man's name was Edward Whiston; that he was articled to a solicitor, and had just served his time; also that he had gained applause in private theatricals, and had an idea that his real vocation was the stage—an evident resource in case Mr. Johnstone, the father, did not turn up, and Mr. Johnstone, the uncle, refused to receive his niece, a state of affairs which would render an immediate marriage prudent. Annie did not quite see the logic of this, but owned that her distress at seeing Mr. Edward Whiston (well N—ned) come in for a bad lunch every other day was caused by a peculiar objection to receive charity from him, which would not have occurred to her in the case of any human being. Smith, Brown, Jones, or Robinson might have killed themselves with bad picnics, and while wondering at their taste, she would have pocketed their shillings with rejoicing.

Finally, it occurred to Ned Whiston to look at his watch, and the position of the hands drew a whistle of dismay from his lips. "Nearly three!" he cried; "and Jenkins is waiting for my return to go and get his dinner." And with a hurried hand-squeeze he took his departure.

Next day at 1.10 he reappeared, followed by a man bearing a tray, which contained oysters, stout, and slices of cold beef.

"Since it hurts your feelings to feed me with your wares, I have brought my own luncheon," said Ned when he and Annie were alone again. "There is double what I can eat, I see; will you not help me out with it?"

So they ratified their engagement with oysters and porter seated opposite to each other at a little marble-topped table; and when the meal was concluded, they felt as if they had been acquainted for months.

On returning so late to the office the day before, Ned Whiston had been subjected to troublesome questioning as to what he had been doing with himself all the time; so he took care to leave early to day, announcing his intention of returning at the same hour on the morrow.

But on the following morning he was sent off to Chester with certain important

deeds. That was on the Thursday, and he did not get back till Saturday night; and as he lived at home, some fifteen miles out of town, with observant relatives, he could not get away on the Sunday without exciting awkward curiosity; so that it was not till luncheon time on Monday that he entered Dreary street with a throbbing heart. The shutters were up at No. 10.—Poor Ned felt for a moment as if his heart and lungs had struck work. Was she dead? No, impossible. Her father perhaps; he had disappeared suddenly, and might have committed suicide. The idea of disturbing a recent sorrow made him drop the bell handle without ringing, and look round for a likely place for information. There was a brush shop immediately opposite, and the portly dame who kept it was standing in the doorway, eyeing him with a certain curiosity. She had a good natured look about her, so he crossed the road, and asked her if she knew what was the matter.

"Lor!" exclaimed the woman; "and I who thought you would perhaps tell me; sure you were a friend or relative, or something, I thought, going there most days the last month or more!" And she seemed quite injured.

"I only went as—a customer," said Ned, "but I have got to take a certain interest, and so seeing the shop shut up—"

"I see, I see; you look quite pale; come in and sit down. Lor, I've been a young girl myself, and I remember hearing how Jim was took when he first heard I had the measles. No, it's nothing of that sort; she went away quite well, as far as I could see, only crying."

"She has gone away, then?"

"Bless you, yes; didn't I say so? A gentleman, not her father, came in a cab at twenty-five minutes past ten yesterday morning, or perhaps it might be a little bit nearer the half hour; I saw him because my room looks out on the street, and I was before the glass putting on my bonnet for church. My husband used to go to the chapel, and I believe, prefers it now, only I won't put up with nothing so vulgar.—What gentle-folks do you see at chapel? I say to him. Why, look at the carriage company as goes to church, compared to—"

"What aged gentleman?" interrupted Ned.

"Well, middle-aged, or as he was got up, youthful, perhaps we might say elderly. Well, he got out, and quickly went into the house, leaving the cab waiting; and as I felt a sort of interest in that Miss Johnstone, poor thing, her father being such a regular bad un, I waited too, and gave up my church for once; not but what I hold that it brings luck to—"

"Exactly; I agree with you. And how long did the gentleman stop?"

"Till 12 o'clock, keeping the cab waiting; which would have been much cheaper to have paid the first off, and taken another. And then he came out followed by Miss Johnstone, who had a box which the cabman took and put on the roof."

That was all the information Ned Whiston could get at the time; but when he revisited the spot later in the day, he found a weakened man with a very sour expression on his face coming out of No. 10, and asked him if he knew what had happened.

"Yes," replied the man, "the father's drowned, and the daughter's hooked it, and I am done out of my rent—that's what has happened."

CHAPTER II.

When Mr. William Johnstone was a young man and a nominal barrister, it was considered that he bore some resemblance in face and figure to the Prince Regent; and, since nature had molded him after the fashion of the first gentleman in Europe, he considered it his duty to act accordingly; so he dressed himself hideously, attended prize fights and cock-pits, intrigued, played high, got frequently intoxicated, stuffed his head with a prodigious quantity of scented snuff, and imitated his royal prototype in every other way that his constitution and purse would allow.—By the time he was 30, however, both began to give out, he so wisely determined to retire into the country with a rich wife. Dissolute men are very fond of falling back upon this latter plan for retrieving their broken fortunes, but women are not quite so foolish as satirists make out, and do not always fall in with these prudent little arrangements. Mr. Johnstone, however, was more fortunate; the royal resemblance that had been his bane, now proved his remedy, and, coupled with an insinuation that perhaps there might be a natural reason for it, proved too much for the loyal heart of a dyer's widow, who was not, as scandal reported, quite double her second hus-

band's age, and whose temper was therefore naturally soured by the persistency with which people whom they met on their wedding tour would mistake them for mother and son. After his marriage Mr. Johnstone happily refrained from assimilating his domestic arrangements to those of his royal prototype, but the ruling passion broke out when he came to build a home for himself on a small estate belonging to his wife near the mouth of the Pavilion alluded to; a style of architecture which suited Mrs. Johnstone also well enough, as, in addition to the associations, more than half the rooms in the building could be used for nothing but the storing up of jams and pickles, the concoction of which articles was the delight of her life. She managed to preserve herself—whether with sugar or vinegar, I decline to state—for fifteen years after marriage, and then she turned to mould, leaving her husband in a position to set up a grocery, had he been so minded. He was not; neither did he relapse into the sowing of wild oats, perhaps because his morals had improved, but also because it was doubtful whether the soil would stand a second crop. He visited London only occasionally, and then his flag was pulled down. Hoisting and lowering that flag was his morning and evening amusement. On royal birthdays and coronation days he fired twenty-one small cannons, going from one to another with a red-hot poker, which was quite a sight. Otherwise he vegetated, and differed from a turnip principally in being occasionally bored and entertaining vague wishes that some eligible woman would look him up and marry him. But the years passed away; George the Fourth became the prey of worms and satirists; a generation sprang up which knew little of that model gentleman, and had the bad taste to dislike that little. Mr. Johnstone could not now have gone about with ten yards of table-cloth round his neck, and coat buttons between his shoulder-blades, without causing the very sheep to baa at him. He modified his apparel, therefore; but his heart clung to the old times, and hugged the old resemblance; so he still had his wig made up in the exact imitation of the ex-dandy's hair, still adopted his favorite attitudes, still took scented stuff. With his elder and only brother he had not, of late years, been on good terms. He owed him no grudge for having been born first; he forgave him for selling the small landed estate which had been in the family for a respectable number of years; but when he disgraced the name, by a succession of petty tricks and contrivances for raising a few pounds, and especially when he tried to make a milch cow of him, he quarreled with him. His enmity dissolved, however, in the news of his death by drowning while crossing over the Jersey, and he hurried to London at once, and brought Annie to his Chinese home, with dispatch and secrecy. "I am glad to adopt you, my dear," he said, "but I do not want to adopt all your creditors."

It had been a struggle to Mr. Johnstone to break up the ordinary routine of his existence by establishing his niece as mistress of what had now for years been a bachelor home; but it almost always pays to do the right thing, and he was rewarded for his conquest of habit and indolence by being released from the thrall of his housekeeper a tyrannical, stupid, pilfering, tipling dame to whom he had not dared to mention his intentions with respect to Annie, which, indeed, had from the circumstances of the case been necessarily conceived and executed very suddenly, and upon whom this niece of her master's (term of courtesy) burst therefore like a thunderbolt from a clear sky.

Annie's society had one curious effect upon her uncle; it resuscitated all his hankering after a second marriage. For if he was to have a lady at the head of his house why, he reasoned with himself, should it not be a wife? So a flirtation which had been budding between Mr. Johnstone and Miss Plumtree, of Southend, for the last three years, began to throw out decided shoots. It was not so very absurd. Mr. Johnstone was a little over sixty, and Miss Plumtree was a little over forty. Both were comfortably off, and had calm and sober leanings toward matrimony. Miss Plumtree was not only forty, but fair and fat—just such a figure as the monarch of Mr. Johnstone's soul would have admired and this fact tended greatly to feed the mature flame. Then there was increased intimacy, for whereas he had only met occasionally before his niece came to live with him, he now saw her almost daily, a fervent friendship having sprung up between her and Annie.

They were sitting together now in a wil-

low pattern summer-house, on the brink of a small pond. A fine dish of the fruit stood on the table between them, with which, needlework, and confidential chat, they were beguiling the morning not unpleasantly.

"And so you have never heard of him since?" said Miss Plumtree.

"Never," replied Annie.

"Just like all the men, dear; 'Out of sight, out of mind.'"

"Nay, I do not blame him, poor fellow. I do not see how he could have found me out, if he tried ever so hard, I left so suddenly, so mysteriously."

"O, well," sighed Miss Plumtree, "if he had been his great-grandfather, he would have discovered you somehow; but young men are not what they were; they are so selfish, so listless, everything is too much trouble to them. And you never hinted anything about it to your uncle?"

"O, no," said Annie; "besides he does not take hints; you must speak out plainly if you want him to understand your wishes."

"Hum," said Miss Plumtree.

"And then," continued Annie, "he was so young, and not in a position to marry for ever so long; and the acquaintance was so short; and his friends would be sure to disapprove; so that altogether, perhaps, it is better as it is."

"And do you love him still, dear?"

"I think I do; he was kind, you see, when I had no one else, and—"

"There, don't cry, dear. Have a strawberry."

Annie recovered her equilibrium, and turned the subject. "I can't think what has happened to Uncle William," she said; "he does take such a funny interest in how I look all of a sudden. He takes in a paper with the fashions in it, and stands looking critically at me with his hands on one side and his eyes screwed up, for minutes together; and then he walks round me gravely as if I were a horse; indeed, I expect him to say, 'Come up; tuck, tuck; come over!' every moment, or to look in my mouth. And if my hair is not done, or my dress cut according to the fashion plates he scolds me. And then he takes me over to Southend whenever he hears that a packet is coming in, and waiks me up and down that long pier. And he is always on the lookout for concerts or entertainments of any kind we can go to. Can you explain it?"

"I think I can give a guess," said Miss Plumtree; "in fact, I expect that my influence may have something to do with it. The plain truth is, my dear, that he wants to get you married."

"No!" cried Annie, with a jump. "But he told me distinctly, when I first came here that, though I might expect to be provided for in his will, I must not look for any dowry, or even much of a trousseau, in case I were to marry; and that did not look much like great anxiety on the subject."

"No, dear; but his views have undergone a change. The fact is that he does your humble servant the honor to wish—"

"O, and you will take him won't you? It will be nice to call you aunt, and have you living in the house," cried Annie, enthusiastically.

"Well, dear," continued Miss Plumtree, "it seemed to me that the opportunity was a good one for advancing your interests, so I refused to give him a definite answer while you were unsettled; not but what I would sooner have you for a companion, of course but it does not do to be selfish; and as your uncle is inclined to be what we may call careful in his money matters, which is often the case with those who have been somewhat extravagant in youth, I thought a little stimulant to his generosity would be beneficial. Hush! here he comes. Can anything be the matter?"

Something the matter? Indeed there was; nothing less than a threat of losing his late wife's property, and being reduced once more to the straits which had driven him into permanent matrimony thirty years before. One of those Doctors' Commons grubbers, who live by holding out that they have discovered something to somebody's advantage,—which generally turns out to be a fraudulent mare's nest, but every now and then—just often enough to tempt fresh flocks of gulls—proves to be a discovery of real importance—had fished up evidence that the late Mrs. Johnstone had by rights only a life-interest in her first husband's property; and having thereupon discovered the person who, under such circumstances would be the claimant, he had put himself into communication with him.

Said claimant proved indeed to be in the legal profession, which was a disappointment for the grubber; but as there was really something in the evidence he had lit upon, his time was not entirely thrown away.

This was the startling information which was conveyed to Mr. Johnstone in the hard, sharp tones of a lawyer's letter, and which he now communicated in his distress to Miss Plumtree and Annie. They cheered him with sanguine speeches; and when he had gathered his wits together, he started for London to seek an interview with his solicitor.