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THE VILLAGE CURATE.

AT an age when the human mind is most susceptible of, and too often imbibes, a passion for voluptuous pleasure; ere yet experience her sage precepts had impressed, Lord Belfont inherited a splendid fortune. His levees were crowded with the most fashionable part of the world: the voice of flattery incessantly sung his praise, and bestowed on him every virtue that could ennoble man. His rank in life and extensive fortune introduced him into the first families in England; and overtures of marriage were made to him by the parents and guardians of the greatest beauties of the age; but Belfont, though not insensible to the charms of beauty, was not yet become the vassal of their power.

The attention which he invariably received from the whole circle of his acquaintance, it might reasonably be supposed, was very acceptable to the inexperienced Belfont; but, notwithstanding his extreme youth, and ignorance of men and manners, he suspected the sincerity of those encomiums which flattery bestowed on him; and the pliant voice of adulation had made little impression on his mind.

At once, to prove the integrity of his pro-

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fessed friends, he carefully spread a report that, by one imprudent step, he had precipitated from Prosperity's flowery mount, into the barren vale of Poverty. Swift as wildfire ran the evil tale; and those very doors which, as it were by magic, opened at the approach of the rich and happy Belfont, were now barred against the ruined spendthrift.

To give his distress an air of certainty, he made several applications for assistance to his once vowed eternal friends, which were invariably treated with a mortifying contempt. To the fair rivals of his affections he addressed his tale of sorrow; here, too, neglect was his fate. Belfont, dispossessed of the means to gratify their fondness for dress, amusement, and pleasure, was an object no longer worthy of their regard.

Reflecting on these events, he exclaimed—
“How wretched are the children of Fortune! the poor man, in his hour of distress, finds a friend, but the rich, when he ceases to be so, is disregarded by those whom his former bounty fed, and who have not charity enough to give to his misfortunes even the costly sigh of pity!”

In the midst of his contemplation, a servant entered the room, and announced the arrival of Lord Bremere, who, returned from a country excursion, had just heard of his friend's misfortune, and hastened to relieve his necessities. As he approached, Belfont,

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rising from his chair, ran to meet him. "It is some consolation," said he, "for the disappointments I have experienced, to find the man whom I most valued not unworthy the esteem I bore him. This," continued he, "more than recompenses the ingratitude of those mercenary wretches, who cannot recollect the features of their friend when shaded by the veil of affected distress."

The conclusion of Belfont's address forcibly struck Lord Bremere, who repeated the words, "affected distress!" adding, with much surprise, "Are, then, your misfortunes bred of the idle tattle of the town?"

"No, my lord," returned Belfont; "not from those contemptible beings, who eagerly busy themselves with every body's affairs, while they neglect their own, and who are only industrious in the propagation of scandal, but from myself arose the tale of my distress. I invented it merely to prove the sincerity of those protestations of eternal friendship, which every day the siren flattery whispered in my ear, and which, to speak the truth, were become most intolerably disgusting. Among my female friends," he continued, "a lady on whom I looked with partial eyes, and who, in fact, had made some faint impression on my heart, had the cruelty to smile at my distress: but I thank her for her contempt; it has broke asunder those chains her beauty had forged to hold my heart in bondage."

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“And what does your lordship mean to make of this discovery?” enquired Bremere.

“My resolutions, Charles,” returned Belfont, “and your ideas, I will venture to say, are of an opposite nature. You, perhaps, imagine that I shall return to the fashionable world, refute the opinion it entertains of my distress, and reproach it for its ingratitude!”

“What else can you possibly propose?” asked Bremere.

“Convinced of your lordship’s integrity,” replied Belfont, “I shall not hesitate to repose in your breast the secret of my resolves. The sudden death of my uncle,” continued he, “has gave me an ample fortune; the enjoyments of which, in the vulgar opinion of mankind, ensures the constant possession of happiness. Alas! how mistaken is such a notion! it is true, my every wish is gratified but one. You smile, Charles, and already anticipate that yet unaccomplished wish; yes, my friend! the society of a virtuous female, whose bosom is awake to the soft touches of humanity, and who will not, to the offspring of distress, refuse the tributary sigh of pity, nor from the needy sufferer withhold the sacred boon of charity, is what I am now in search of. In the higher circles of life,” added he, “my pursuit has proved abortive, and, assuming the appearance of the rustic cottager, I mean to seek it in humbler scenes.”

It was in vain that Lord Bremere endea-

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voured to dissuade his friend from his purpose. Belfont remained inflexible to all his entreaties; and having drawn from his friend an assurance of inviolable secrecy, they parted;—Bremere to the haunts of giddy fashion—Belfont to prepare for his visit to those of rural felicity.

After a short repast, Belfont, leaving directions with his steward for the management of the family in his absence, retired to rest; and, at an early hour, while the sons of riot and dissipation were returning from their nocturnal revels, he left his splendid mansion, and in the humble garb of a peasant, with a few necessaries tied up in a handkerchief, began his retreat from the metropolis. His name and title were only known in Grosvenor-square; at present he contented himself with the less dignified appellation of George Trucman, and all traces of Lord Belfont were for a time vanished.

Having continued his walk for near three hours, he found himself somewhat fatigued, when an inn opportunely presenting itself to view, afforded him an opportunity of resting his weary limbs, and satisfying the craving of nature, which exercise had rendered more than acute. The obsequious host soon furnished him with an excellent breakfast; which having finished, he mounted the Norwich stage, that had arrived during his repast, and at the close of day found himself in that city.

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Meanwhile Bremere, mixing with the circle of Belfont's late acquaintance, heard with silent indignation the illiberal and unjust reflections that were cast on the supposed misconduct of his friend.

The impertinent enquiries with which his ears were assailed from all who knew him in the habits of friendship with Belfont, were almost too much for his temper to bear with composure; and he was often on the point of violating the promise of secrecy his friend had extorted from him, to vindicate his character from the aspersions of slander.

Seated one evening in a box at Drury-lane Theatre, he was seen by Lady Caroline Blandish from the opposite side of the house, who, without ceremony, immediately came round to him. "So, my lord," said she, entering the box, "what is become of your friend Belfont? Have you seen him lately? How does he bear his misfortunes? I am really sorry for the unfortunate youth."

"My friend," replied Bremere, "is infinitely obliged to your ladyship for the concern you take in his distress."

"Why you know, my lord," returned Lady Caroline, "one can't help being concerned for the distresses of those who were of one's acquaintance. I profess," continued she, "the news of his ruin astonished me prodigiously; and, I assure you, I felt myself extremely hurt at it; for his lordship had paid me much attention, and I began to think I

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had made a conquest. It is, however," added she, "very fortunate that the affair ended as it did; for, you know, it would have been a shocking thing to have involved one's self in such difficulties."

"True, madam!" replied Bremere, who, by her ladyship's discourse, found she was the person to whom Belfont alluded as having attracted his particular notice; "but, after all, whatever diminution the fortune of Lord Belfont has received, be assured it is still sufficient to support the woman whom he shall honour with his hand, in a style of elegance that might soothe the most extensive vanity!" and, without waiting her ladyship's reply, bowed, and wished her good-night, disgusted with the affected concern she expressed for his friend's imaginary distress, which was but ill calculated to conceal the spirit of malevolence that rankled in her bosom.

Lady Caroline stood some minutes after Bremere's departure in a fixed astonishment; she knew not what construction to put upon his words; but, after a short consideration, she concluded what he had said was only to shelter his friend from the censure of the world, and to enforce the opinion that his affairs were not so desperate as they had been represented. With these ideas she rejoined her company; and in discoursing on other topics, Belfont and his misfortunes escaped her memory.

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And now, gentle reader, let us banish from our thoughts the giddy Lady Caroline, and attend the steps of Belfont, whom, hereafter, if you please, unless it should be found necessary to use his real name, we will distinguish by that of Trueman. Having spent a few days at Norwich, in examining those objects most worthy the notice of a traveller, he left that city, and continued his excursion till he found himself, for the first time, on his own estates, in the midst of his tenantry.

Totally unknown to his tenants, and equally so to his steward, he had an opportunity of informing himself of the oppression which the former bore, and the abuse which the latter committed. It was near sun-set when he arrived at a pleasant village on the borders of the sea, which contained what is there called an inn. Here he took up his quarters: having deposited his bundle in the room where he was to sleep, he repaired to the kitchen; and setting himself among the rustics assembled over their evening gotch of nog, joined in their discourse.

The conversation chiefly turned on the transactions of the village; and among a variety of anecdotes detailed by the inhabitants, the recent misfortunes of their worthy curate most attracted the notice of Trueman. The incident dwelt strongly on his mind; and, fatigued as he was by his day's walk, he determined before he slept to make himself acquainted with the narrative of a man

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of whom his parishioners spoke in such high terms of approbation. When the company retired, he invited the landlord to partake of his beverage; who, being a communicative sort of a person, and one who had a considerable share of humanity interwoven in his composition, readily complied with True-man's request to relate the misfortunes of the worthy pastor.

"I will tell you, Sir," said he, "the story of Parson Benley. You must know, Sir, that he is the curate of our parish. The living, which is the gift of my Lord Belfont, belongs to a clergyman, who lives in the west; and, though it brings him in a good three hundred pounds a-year, he gives his curate only forty pounds out of it. So that, you see, the master gets two hundred and sixty pounds for doing nothing, as one may say, while the servant, who does every thing, is obliged to be contented with scarcely a seventh part of that sum; and though the good woman, his wife, brought him a large family, he could never get any increase of salary. This made him determine on taking a farm; which, by the death of one of his neighbours, became vacant. But I don't know how it was, though he worked as hard as any day-labourer in the parish, and his wife was as industrious as a bee, they cou'dn't, as the saying is, bring both ends together; and, to make short of the matter, my lord's steward seized on his stock, which not being

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sufficient to pay all arrears, the hard-hearted rascal clapt him into the county-gaol."

"And his family," asked Trueman, "what are become of them?"

"His wife and four children," returned the landlord, "three fine boys, from ten to thirteen years old, and a daughter grown up, are in a cottage hard by, that belongs to me. The overseer of the parish, who is a crabbed sort of fellow, and a friend of the steward, was for sending them to the workhouse. But, 'No,' says I; 'hold, neighbour Bruin, while my roof can give them shelter, and I can provide them with a meal to eke out the earnings of their own industry; and you must know, Sir,' said he, with a significant nod, 'I am pretty warm—they shall never endure the wants and hardships of a prison! For what,' says I, 'is your workhouse but a dungeon, where the poor eat little and labour hard.' But, Sir," continued the landlord, "not only I, but the whole village, was against their going there; and the inhabitants all cheerfully spare a little towards the family's support; nay even the labouring cottager, out of his hard earnings, throws in his mite."

"And what," enquired Trueman, "is the amount of the sum for which the unfortunate man is now confined?"

"The whole debt," replied the landlord, "I am told, is about three hundred pounds; a sum by much too large for the inhabitants

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of our parish to raise without injuring themselves, or, depend upon it, he would soon be snatched from the hard gripe of the law."

Every particular which related to this worthy man, Trueman enquired with an earnestness that displayed the philanthropic sentiments of his mind, and intimated not merely a wish, but a fixed determination, to rescue the indigent sufferer from the horrors of a prison, and restore him to his disconsolate family. Impressed with this generous sentiment, he retired to bed, meditating on the means by which he might effect his laudable designs, so as to give the least offence possible to the delicacy of suffering virtue, and conceal the hand that loosed the chains of bondage, and gave once more to the drooping captive the possession of liberty.

After proposing to himself many plans, he at length determined to walk the next day to a post town about three miles off, and inclose notes to the amount of Mr. Benley's debt, in a letter to that gentleman.

In his return, he saw, at a short distance before him, a female and a little boy. The youth carried a little basket, which seemed too heavy for his feeble strength to support. The female had, in each hand, an earthen jug; and having out-walked her companion, had seated herself on a stile, to wait his coming up. Trueman accosted the youth, and offered to assist him in carrying his

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load; a proposal which the youngster readily accepted; telling him at the same time, that he had been to a neighbouring farmer for cheese and butter; and that his sister, then waiting for him at the stile, had got two jugs of milk for his brothers' breakfasts, who were at home with his mother. "And what is your name, my little fellow?" said Trueman. "Benley, Sir," answered he, "and we live in yonder cottage," pointing to a small house across the meadow.

Trueman, who longed for an introduction to the disconsolate family of the indigent, but worthy curate, was highly gratified with this piece of intelligence.

"Charlotte," said the youth, as they drew near the female, "here is a gentleman has kindly carried my basket for me; and, as you complain the jugs are too heavy for you, I dare say, he will help you too."

"That I will, most readily; and esteem myself obliged in having permission so to do," said Trueman, placing the basket on the ground, and bowing to Miss Benley. "You are very kind, Sir," said Charlotte; "but I am ashamed that Henry should have given you so much trouble; he is an idle boy, or he would not have thus intruded on your politeness."

"Call it not intrusion," returned Trueman; "the young gentleman asked not my assistance, and my service is voluntary."

The blushing Charlotte accepted, with re-

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luctance, the assistance of the gallant stranger, and permitted him to attend her to her humble dwelling. Trueman, a stranger to the undisguised charms of nature, viewed, with a joy bordering on rapture, the personal accomplishments of his fair companion.—“And, oh!” said he, to himself, “should she wear a mind pure and unstained as is her lovely form, she were a treasure worth the proudest monarch’s love!”

The lovely maid, unconscious of her power to captivate, received with unconcern the compliments which Trueman paid to her beauty; and, impressed by his gallantry, answered with polite indifference every question of the enamoured youth.

With her eyes fixed on the ground, she saw not the man with whom she conversed: those features, which beauty claimed her own, that form, where grace with elegance was allied, met not the view of the sorrowing Charlotte; and, before he could impress his lovely auditor with a favourable thought, the painful moment arrived when he was to bid her adieu, or suffer the restraint which the presence of her family would lay him under.

Harry Benley, the youth to whom Trueman had offered his assistance, eased of his burden, had reached home some time before the arrival of his sister. Having informed his mother of the stranger’s civility, the good woman walked to the wicket-gate, that formed an entrance to the garden, to welcome her

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daughter's return; and, thanking Trueman for his politeness, invited him to partake of their morning's refreshment, which he readily accepted.

"I am sorry," said the venerable matron, "that my means and my inclination to make you welcome, are not in unison with each other; but that which I have to give, I give freely. There was a time," added she, with a sigh, and stopped to wipe away the tear which reflection urged——.

"I have heard of your misfortunes, Madam," interrupted Trueman, "and I sincerely sympathise in your sufferings; but do not," continued he, "yield to despair. The hand which inflicts distress can also bestow happiness; and, though the pitiless storm of stern Adversity to-day bears hard and heavy on our defenceless roof, to-morrow Prosperity's cheering sun may raise our sinking hopes, and repair the ravages of the ruthless blast."

Here the discourse was interrupted by the arrival of breakfast, which Charlotte had prepared. Mrs. Benley, however, could not help noticing the remark and the language of her guest, which she seemed not to expect from a person in the habit of a peasant. Trueman found that he had excited surprise; and, as soon as their repast was over, in a few words, gave a feigned story of his life; concluding with his intention to reside a few months in the village,

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and requesting permission to visit them.— Mrs. Benley assured him, that the society of a man possessing such sentiments as he had expressed, would always be to her acceptable; and, with a promise to renew his visit on the morrow, he took his leave. Mrs. Benley and her lovely daughter, in the mean time, could not avoid making their observations on the strangeness of the visit, and the visitor, while he congratulated himself on the completion of his wish for an introduction to the amiable family.

The voluntary contributions of the surrounding peasantry, that so amply supplied the wants and necessities of Mrs. Benley and her family, were not confined to the narrow limits of this obscure village: the venerable pastor, in the gloomy confines of a prison, tasted of the grateful bounty; and the sorrows of the wretched captive found alleviation in the affectionate concern of his parishioners. Not a week passed, but some one of the village attended the market; and none ever entered the gates of the city without paying a visit to Mr. Benley.

It was on one of these market-days, that Farmer Welford, having disposed of his samples of corn to a purchaser, waited on the good old man. He found him in a small room, remote from the thoughtless herd of debtors, who sought to bury their cares in riot and dissipation, indulging the religious habits of his mind, and pursuing his pious

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meditations. The sight of any of his parishioners was a cordial to the drooping spirits of Mr. Benley. He received them with undissembled pleasure. His anxieties, his griefs, though not forgotten, were suppressed, while conversing with his friends; but at the moment of separation, they returned with increased poignancy, and it required the utmost efforts of his mind to support the painful—"Adieu."

"Eternal God!" exclaimed the weeping father, "must I no more enjoy the sweets of liberty? Shall I no more behold my humble cot? and must those shrubs, those flowers, which Art has taught to twine around my lattice, unfold to some stranger's eye their fragrant bosoms? Must I no more, at close of day—the fond partner of my bosom leaning on my arm, the sweet pledges of our mutual love in playful fondness attending our steps—must I no more at this sweet hour, along the deepening vale extend my rural walk, attentive to the thrush's song, or the happy milk-maid's artless ditty? Must I no more, on the brow of some beech-crowned hill, my station take, to view the stately vessel scud before the breeze? or down the sloping cliff, urge my peaceful way; and, on the sea shore, pensive listen to the lashing waves, and mark the frothy surge's due retreat? No! these joys are vanished; happiness flies my void embrace; and misery, want, and wretchedness, press

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hard on my declining years. These were the pleasures which faithless Fortune once bestowed. How changed the scene! Here, when Night her sable mantle o'er the face of heaven begins to spread, nothing is heard but the dismal rattling of chains; doors of massy iron, grating on their hinges, appal the timid soul; while horrid oaths, and dreadful imprecations, wound the listening ear. O Welford! my soul sickens at the scene; and philosophy scarce can shield my mind from the horrors of despair.

At this moment the gaoler entered the room, with a letter for Mr. Benley. "The hand is unknown to me," said he, looking at the superscription. "It has a goodly outside," said the gaoler; "pray Heaven, it proves not like the world, fair without and foul within."

"Why, truly, friend," returned Mr. Benley, "your satire upon the manners of mankind is not unreasonable. It is, I fear, the maxim of too many of the present age to conceal the depravity of the heart beneath the specious appearance of honesty. This, however," continued he, breaking the seal, "I think bodes no harm; I will, therefore, inform myself of its contents."

Here sat the reverend father, with placid countenance and mind serene, prepared to meet, with complacency, the smiles of Fortune, or to combat, with success, the frowns of Adversity. Near him stood the gaoler,

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whom Nature had cast in too soft a mould for the iron-hearted profession; and on his right hand was seated the honest farmer. In the countenance of these, Hope's dawning smile was sweetly contrasted with the dusky frown of trembling Fear. Now Hope shot forth her brightening beam; now Fear veiled, with her murky cloud, the gilded prospect; and each, by turns, the balance swayed. At length Mr. Benley, raising his eyes from the letter, ended their suspense. "It is well, my friends," said he, "Goodness is still extant, and Innocence enjoys the guardian care of Providence. The contents of this letter will best explain my meaning:—

"To the Rev. J. Benley, at the Castle of Norwich.

REVEREND SIR,

"The inclosed notes, which I find, on enquiry, will cover the whole of your debts, wait your acceptance. They are the gift of one on whom Fortune has bestowed more than he can claim on the score of desert; and who anxiously hopes, while it restores to you those most enviable blessings, liberty and domestic happiness, he has left no clue by which a discovery of the donor may be effected."

Here the gaoler broke out in a swearing fit of joy; the farmer, whose emotions were too violent for utterance, could only express his pleasures by his looks; while the grateful pastor threw himself on his knees, and, in a

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fervent pathetic address to the Giver of all Goodness, poured forth the grateful transports of his soul.

While the bounty of the generous Trueman was thus employed in releasing the worthy curate from the horrors of a prison, he himself was no less assiduous in soothing, by every act of benevolence and hospitality, the anxiety of the family at home. His urbanity and complacence had already obtained him the good opinion of Mrs. Benley, and the amiable Charlotte began to view him with a sisterly regard. If the graces of his person pleased her eye, his generosity of sentiment, and nobleness of soul, excited her admiration and esteem. Trueman cultivated her good opinion with an anxious solicitude, that bespoke her dear to his heart; and he had the happiness to know that he was not indifferent to the object of his love.

With the assistance of his communicative landlord, he was become acquainted with every transaction that had occurred in the village for at least twenty years back; and from this source he had the painful information of innumerable abuses which his faithless steward had committed on his industrious tenantry; all which he was determined speedily to redress, and to punish with severity their ungrateful author. On this subject were his thoughts employed in one of his evening walks, when he was roused from his meditations by the sudden excla-

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mation of a female voice; and raising his eyes, beheld, on the opposite side of the hedge, the fair object of his affections endeavouring to avoid the importunities of a gentleman who was pursuing her.

“Stay, lovely Charlotte!” said the stranger: “Why, my fair enslaver, do you fly me thus?”

“Why, Sir,” returned the affrighted girl, “are you so importunate?”

“Because,” answered he, “I wish to remove the cloud of sorrow that hangs on your brow. In short, because I love you. Who could behold beauty such as yours, and live a stranger to affection?”

“Affection!” returned the lovely girl, while the glow of honest indignation increased the vermillion of her cheeks; “view your recent conduct to my father, then say if affection bore a leading feature there.”

“On honourable terms,” said he, “I sought your hand, which you in scorn refused. Had then your father laid on you his commands, and forced you to be mine, he had escaped my just resentment.”

“My choice was free, Sir,” said the indignant maid, “and perhaps it was my nature’s fault I could not love you. But excuse my abruptness,” added she, withdrawing from her persecutor; “should we be seen thus discoursing, the discovery would not add to my reputation.”

“This contempt, child, is very pretty,”

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said the unfeeling monster; then, rudely snatching the struggling beauty to his loathed embrace, impressed on her lovely lips the guilty purpose of his passion. At that instant rage and indignation fired the soul of Trueman, who, darting through the hedge, seized the rude ravisher by the throat, and hurled him to the ground. "Detested monster," cried the enraged youth, "I know thee well! Thou art the faithless steward of the misused Belfont. Already has thy fame reached thy master's ears; nor think, vile ingrate, that he will suffer thy villanies to escape with impunity. Then taking the almost fainting Charlotte by the hand, he hasted from this fallen Lucifer, leaving him to the torment of his guilty thoughts, and in utter astonishment at the mysterious words.

The fluttered spirits of the amiable Charlotte hardly supported her from the presence of her base assailant, before she sunk lifeless in the arms of her deliverer; who, urged by fear, placed her on a bank, and ran for water to a neighbouring rivalet, and besprinkled her features with the cooling drops. Soon, to his wishes, she unclosed her lovely eyes; and, fanned by the gentle breezes, recovered from this state of transitory death. "You tremble still, my Charlotte," said the enamoured youth, "and, by your disordered looks, seem to doubt your safety."

"O no!" faintly answered the grateful

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fair; "where Trueman is suspicion has no dwelling."

"Enchanting sweetness!" exclaimed the enraptured lover, catching her hand and carrying it to his lips. "Oh! my lovely Charlotte, never till this hour of danger did I know how dear an interest in my heart you held. Would my sweet girl but kindly listen to my artless tale, would she but give my ardent passion one approving smile—"

"Alas!" interrupted Charlotte, rising from her seat, "I have no smiles to give. On any other subject I will hear you; but till again my father breathes the air of freedom, till from the chains of bondage he is freed, I have foresworn all joy."

"Till that blest period," said Trueman, "when fortune shall cease to persecute thy venerable sire, and give the captive to his weeping friend, my passion in concealment's painful bosom shall dwell immured, if then thou wilt give my artless tale attention! This only do I ask; grant me but this, and Hope, like a fond parent, shall nurture my love, and lull to rest each intrusive care"

"Then, by my hopes of bliss hereafter," said the lovely maid, "I vow, when that happy hour arrives, I will not chide thy fondness. But tell me, if you know, what means this sudden joy, that through the village reigns? how sweetly sound the merry bells, while every breeze from yon shouting throng wafts the breath of Pleasure."

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“And see,” said Trueman, “where to my Charlotte’s cottage they bend their steps! it is, methinks, no vulgar cause that swells this loud acclaim; but, see! your brother comes, the harbinger to happiness!”

“Oh, Charlotte!” said Harry, as he drew near them; “our dear father is come home again. Farmer Welford brought the news that he was on the road, and the whole village went to meet him;—they took the horses from the chaise, and dragged him to our cottage. My mother cries for joy, and sent me to seek after you. Make haste, my dear sister, my father longs to see you. And do you, Mr. Trueman, come too; my mother has told him what a kind friend you have been. I will run back, and say you are coming.”

“Now, now, my Charlotte,” said Trueman, “indulge this flood of joy, nor check the soft emotions of the soul. These tears become thee, which, like the fleeting shower that bates the summer’s day, give fresh lustre to the charms of nature.”

“Is that which I have heard derived from truth?” asked the astonished Charlotte; “or is it but the dream of fancy? My father released from prison! By whom?” “Why,” said Trueman, “should you question whence the gracious bounty came? It is sufficient that he is returned. Think, my dear Charlotte, the measure of his bliss incomplete, till in his paternal embrace he folds thy lovely form. Hasten, then, to increase and

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share his merited happiness." Then, folding her arm in his, he hurried towards her dwelling.

Mr. Benley, at the moment of their approach, was seated at the door of the cottage, surrounded by many of his parishioners, when Charlotte, breaking from Trueman, rushed into her father's arms, exclaiming, "My dear, dear, dear father!" The enraptured parent mingled the tears of fond affection with those of filial gratitude, and every countenance beamed with smiles of joy. Nor was the welcome of the worthy Trueman wanting in cordiality; but when the lovely Charlotte related her rescue from the hated Sandford, the murmur of applause fell from every tongue, while the grateful father strained the gallant stranger to his heart by the endearing name of son.

The return of the worthy pastor to his mourning flock was celebrated by the inhabitants as a sort of jubilee. Every one strove to excel his neighbour in acts of courtesy. Stores of viands were conveyed from all parts of the village; and while, by the pale light of the moon, sprightly youth led up the merry dance, cheerful age sat and quaffed the nut-brown ale, talked over the feats of former days, and in thought grew young again.

Charlotte, the lovely Charlotte, no more a prey to grief, no more the victim of despair, listened to the impassioned breath of

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love. The gallant Trueman forgot not to claim, nor did the blushing maid refuse, the promise she had made; and before the hour of parting came, her tongue confirmed the passion which her eyes revealed.

Every transaction that had occurred since Lord Belfont's arrival in the village he had transmitted to his friend Bremere; and, on confirmation of the oppression which his steward had exercised upon his tenants, inclosed the discharge of that unfeeling wretch, with an order to deliver his accounts to Mr. Benley, whom he appointed his successor. A letter, announcing to this gentleman his appointment, also accompanied the packet which Bremere duly forwarded from London in the manner his friend had directed. By this time Bremere, on the permission of Belfont, who now intended to assume his real name and character, had refuted the opinion which had been entertained of the derangement of his lordship's finances. The whole was declared to be a feint; and no one was more affected at this unexpected discovery than Lady Caroline Blandish, the former object of Belfont's regard.

The sensations of Sandford, on reading his lordship's letter, were such as are familiar only to the guilty mind. In addition to his inhuman treatment of the worthy curate, and libidinous designs on the honour of his child, he had been guilty of the most barefaced acts of fraud on his employer; and

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conscious that he had wasted the property of another man in extending his own ambitious prospects of greatness, the conflict became too painful for him to bear. The perturbation of his mind brought on a violent fever, which, as he refused every medical assistance, soon terminated his miserable existence.

Far different were the feelings of Mr. Benley on the perusal of this epistle. That which the ambitious Sandford lost by pride, he through humility had acquired. The salary annexed to the office of steward amounted to £300 a year, an acquisition which Mr. Benley as little expected as his release from prison. "How variegated," exclaimed he, "is the life of man! his morn of infancy rises immersed in clouds, and the louring tempest carries ruin in its aspect. Aeon, the friendly breeze of Fortune disperses the threatening storm; Prosperity's golden sun sheds forth its cheering rays, enervates the chilling blasts of bleak Adversity, and decks the evening of his days in smiles of joy."

"And oft the ministers of Fate reverse the pleasing scene!" said Trueman, who had entered the cottage unobserved, while Mr. Benley was speaking.

"You come very opportunely, my dear friend," said Mr. Benley, "to share the pleasure which our new acquired fortune gives;" and after having informed Trueman

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of the contents of that letter (which himself had written), said he had discovered the bounteous hand.

“To-morrow,” continued Mr. Benley, “we purpose leaving this humble dwelling, and once more take possession of our former mansion, where, I hope, my dear friend, we shall enjoy the pleasure of your company.”

“You do me infinite honour, Sir,” said Trueman, “and I will study to deserve your favour. But where is Miss Benley, Sir?”

“I believe you will find her in the garden,” replied Mr. Benley. Trueman walked to the bottom of the garden, and found his lovely Charlotte seated in a bower of osiers, which herself had reared. Trueman’s approach roused the weeping maid; she started from her seat, hurried a letter into her pocket, and, with wildness in her air, darted an angry look at the astonished youth.

“Why, my lovely Charlotte!” said he, alarmed at her strangeness, “why do you thus angrily fix on me those streaming eyes?”

“Answer me faithfully,” said she; “art thou what thou seemest, or, beneath that mean attire dost thou not hide—Ha! my fears are true! the blush of guilt has crimsoned over thy face, and that confused air, that sudden start, proclaim thee false!”

“Tell me,” said Trueman, recovering himself, “the grounds on which you have raised this unkind suspicion of my honor?”

“This will inform you, Sir,” replied Miss

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Benley, drawing from her bosom a paper—
“A friend of Miss Benley advises her to be on her guard. Trueman is not what he seems; but, beneath the appearance of rustic honesty, harbours designs destructive of her peace and honour.” “Now, Sir, what can you plead to this charge?” asked the suspicious maid. “Miss Benley,” said Trueman, in a firm and animated tone, “to the charge here preferred against me, that I am not what I seem, I plead guilty; but to the rest, with all my soul, I pronounce it a base falsehood, which, at the peril of my life, I will prove on its author, if ever Fortune shall make the traitor known.” “Less warmth, methinks, Sir,” said the angry maid, “will better serve the cause of truth.”

“Less warmth, madam,” returned Trueman, “would confirm me the guilty wretch your hard thoughts and this vile scroll have made me. But tell me, Charlotte, if I can repel, by truth indubitable, this unjust arraignment of my honor, what reward I may expect!”

“Oh!” said the half-forgiving nymph, “clear but thyself of these gross suspicions, with which I do confess my mind is filled; appear but the man my fond wishes have formed thee; and, though Fortune, while she raised me to the giddy heights of greatness, should sink thee to the lowest ebb of poverty, I would reject the crowned monarch’s hand to share thy honest love!”

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"Then dismiss thy fears," said the enraptured lover, "and know, that he who thus prostrates himself at thy feet, a willing slave, is the happy Belfont."

"Lord Belfont!" exclaimed the astonished Charlotte.

"Yes, my dear girl," he returned, "the rich, the happy Belfont lives the vassal of your power. In the haunts of titled grandeur, amid the sumptuous domes of greatness, I sought for beauty, worth, and honour; for pure, disinterested love; but fruitless was my search. In the calm sequestered shades of human life, in the person of my lovely Charlotte, I have found them; nor would I, for all else beneath the canopy of heaven, forego the envied prize. But tell me, lovely girl," continued he, "from what envious hand didst thou receive this vile defamer of my truth?"

"Last night, when dancing on the green," replied Miss Benley, "a letter fell from your pocket. I took it up unobserved, and after the company retired perused its contents; from these I learned that you were in disguise."

"And the rest," replied Belfont, "your fears supplied?"

"Even so, my lord," in soft confusion replied the lovely maid.

"Then, truly," said Belfont, "you had reason for suspicion. But come, my lovely bride, for such I may now call you," continued his lordship, "let us disclose our

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mutual passion to your parents. Their approbation gained, we then will name the happy day."

The yielding fair-one gave him her hand, and he led her to the cottage, where he found Mr. Benley on the point of going out. "May I entreat a moment's conversation before you leave us, Sir?" asked his lordship.

"Aye, my good Sir, an hour's, if you please," replied Mr. Benley.

"Thus it is, Sir," said Belfont; "your daughter has beauty, worth, and innocence. To say I barely love her falls far short of the measure of my affections. I sought, I gained her fond regard; and it is now our mutual wish, with your consent, to exchange at the altar our holy vows, and sign a contract of eternal love."

"How say you, Charlotte?" asked Mr. Benley; "in this does Mr. Trueman speak the wishes of your heart?"

"He has my free consent, Sir, to what he now proposes," answered the blushing maid.

"The request is somewhat sudden," resumed Mr. Benley; "it is true I have found you worthy, and your merit well deserves the treasure which it seeks; but a tender regard for the happiness of my child forbids me to give a too precipitate answer; and some little enquiry, methinks, is necessary to—"

"True," interrupted Belfont, "it is a matter that requires the most serious consideration; and the reluctance which you feel

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to decide this important request, gives additional worth to your character. An accident," continued his lordship, "has revealed to the fair object of my wishes—or I should have worn the mask a few days longer—that he who sought to win her love was not the lowly peasant he appeared. With angry voice she questioned my fidelity, and charged me, Heaven knows how wrongfully, with meditating designs against her honour. To repel this unjust suspicion of the purest passion that ever warmed the breast of a man, I threw aside disguise, and confessed myself the happy Belfont."

"Your lordship does not mean to sport with our misfortunes?" said the astonished parent.

"No, on my honour!" replied his lordship; "that which I have proposed it is my most earnest wish should be accomplished."

"Then take her, my lord," said Mr. Bentley, presenting to him his daughter's hand; "and may she prove deserving of your love!"

"Thanks! a thousand thanks!" returned the grateful youth, "for the precious gift. And now, Sir, by your leave, we will again assemble our rustic friends, and spend the night in merriment; and to-morrow, yes! if my Charlotte will indulge the fond request, to-morrow's sun shall light us to the bridal-bed!"

The lovely maid smiled consent, and Mr.

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Benley hastened to the village, where the joyful tidings soon spread. The tenants flew with cheerful haste to pay their duty to their illustrious landlord, and none refused the invitation of his lordship.

“Joy reigned, and pleasure lit the smiling scene.”

The dance, the song, the catch, and mellow ale, went round; while time flew swiftly on, and night, almost unobserved, resigned her sable reign. The ruddy morn peeped over the misty mountain's top, and the gairish sun, with more than usual brightness, rose to grace the nuptials of the happy pair. Transplanted from the vale of humble life into the gay parterre of stately grandeur, the virtues of the beauteous Charlotte in all their native splendour shone. The enamoured Belfont, each returning day, found in his lovely consort new beauties to admire; while a numerous offspring, emblems of the race from whence they sprung, heightened the pleasures of the marriage state, and filled the measure of their earthly bliss.



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