

THE
VILLAGE
GLEANER:

OR
INTERESTING TALE.



BY
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THE
VILLAGE CURATE,
A TALE.

"The good, for Virtue's sake, abhor to sin."—CREECH.

At an age when the human mind is most susceptible of, and too often imbibes, a passion for voluptuous pleasure; ere yet experience the 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 sang 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 man and manners,

he suspected the sincerity of these eononiums which flattery bestowed on him; and the plaint voice of adulation had made little impression on his mind.

At once to prove the integrity of his professed friends, he carefully spread a report, that, by one imprudent step, he had been precipitated from prosperity's flowery mount into the barren vale of poverty. Swift as wild fire 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 spend-thrift.

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, neglected 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 costless sigh of pity!

In the midst of his contemplations, a servant entered the room, and announced the arrival of Lord Bremere; who, returning from a country excursion,

had just heard of his friend's misfortune, and hastened to relieve his necessities. — As he approached, Belfont, 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 by the 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," continued he, "a lady on whom I looked with partial eyes, and who, in fact, had made some faint impressions on my heart, had the cruelty to smile at my distress; but I thanked her

for her conterapt; it has broken asunder those chains her beauty had forged to hold my heart in bondage."

"And what use does your Lordship mean to make of this discovery?" inquired 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 opinions it entertains of my distress, and reproach it for its ingratitude."

"What else can you purpose?" 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 given 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 as-

suming the appearance of the rustic cottager, I mean to seek it in humbler scenes!’

It was in vain that Lord Bremere endeavoured to persuade his friend from his purpose. Belfont remained inflexible to all his entreaties, and, having drawn from his friend all assurance of inviolable secrecy, they parted; Bremere to the haunts of giddy passion; 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 Trueman; and all traces of Lord Belfont were for a time vanished.

Having continued his walk for near three hours, he found himself fatigued: when an inn, opportunely presented itself to view, afforded him an opportunity of resting his weary limbs, and satisfying the cravings of nature, which exercise had rendered more than commonly 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 the day, found himself in that city.

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 inquiries 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 expersions 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, sans 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 as-

tonished 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 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 stile of elegance that might sooth 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 concluded, what he had said was only to shelter his friend from the censure of the world, and to encourage the opinion that his affairs were not so desperate as they had been represented. With these ideas, she joined her company : and Belfont and his misfortunes escaped her memory.

And now, gentle reader, let us attend the steps

of Belfont; whom, hereafter, we shall distinguish by that of Trueman. Having spent a few days at Norwich, he left that city, and continued his excursion, till he found himself, for the first time, in the midst of his tenantry.

Totally unknown to his tenants and his steward, he had an opportunity of informing himself of the oppression which the former bore, and the abuses which the latter committed. It was near sun-set when he arrived at a pleasant village on the border of the sea, which contained, what is there called an inn. Having deposited his bundle in the room where he was to sleep, he repaired to the kitchen, and seated 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 of the inhabitants, the recent misfortunes of their worthy curate most attracted the notice of Trueman. The incident dwelt strongly on his mind; and he determined to make himself acquainted with the narrative of a man of whom his parishoners spoke in such high terms of approbation. He invited the landlord to partake of his beverage; who being a communicative sort of person, and one who had a considerable share of humanity interwoven in his composition, readily com-

plied with Trueman'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 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 never could 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 industrious as a bee, they couldn'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 sufficient to pay all arrears, the hard-hearted rascal clapt him into the country 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

hy, that belongs to me. The everseer of the parish who was a crabbed sort of a fellow, and a friend of the steward, was for sending them to the workhouse. But 'No,' says I; 'hold neighbour Bruing, 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,' said 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 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 of our parish to raise without injuring themselves; or, depend upon it, he would soon be snatched from the 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 enclose notes to the amount of Mr Benley's debt, in a letter to that gentleman. This appeared to him the best method he could devise, as it would leave no traces that might lead to a discovery from whom the merited bounty came. Thus resolved, he yielded to the soft embraces of sleep; and in the morning rose to execute his benevolent purpose.

In his return, he saw a female and a little boy. The youth carried a basket, which seemed too heavy for his feeble strength to support. The female had in each hand a jug; and, having outwalked 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 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 had got two jugs of milk for his brother's breakfast.—‘ And what is your name?’ said Trueman.—‘ Benley, sir; and we live in yonder cottage,’ pointing to a small house.

‘ Charlotte,’ said the youth, ‘ 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, and esteem myself obliged 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; the young gentleman asked not my assistance, and my service is voluntary.’

The blushing Charlotte accepted the assistance of the gallant stranger. Trueman viewed, with a joy bordering on rapture, the personal accomplishments of his fair companion. ‘ And, oh! said he, ‘ should she wear a pure mind, and unstained as is her lovely form, she were a treasure worth the proudest monarch's love!’

The lovely maid answered with indifference every

question of the enamoured youth. The gloomy prospect of futurity had robbed Miss Benley of that vivacity, which, in her happier days she was wont to possess.

Harry Benley 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 daughter's return; and thanking Trueman for his politeness, invited him to partake of their morning's refreshment.

'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.—'

'I have heard of your misfortunes, madam,' interrupted Trueman; and I sincerely sympathize in your sufferings. But do not yield to despair. The hand which inflicts distress can also bestow happiness; and though the pitiless storm of stern adversity to day beats hard and heavy on your defenceless roof, to-morrow prosperity's cheering sun may raise your sinking hopes, and repair the ravages of the ruthless blast.

Mrs Benley and her daughter could not avoid making their observations on the strangeness of the visit; while he congratulated himself on the completion of his wish for an introduction to this amiable family.

It was on a market day that Farn or Welford waited on the good old man. He found him in a small room, pursuing his pious meditation. The sight of any of his parishioners was a cordial to the drooping spirits of Mr Benley. His griefs, though not forgotten, were suppressed while conversing with his friends; but at the moment of separation, they returned with increased pungency, and it required the utmost effort of mind to support the painful 'Adieu!'

'Eternal God!' exclaimed the weeping father, 'must I no more enjoy the sweets of liberty! 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 to Mr Benley—'The hand is unknown to me,' said he. '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 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.'

'It is well,' 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 Reverend John Benley, at the Castle of
Norwich:

'Reverend Sir,—The enclosed notes, which I find, on enquiry, will cover the whole of your debts, wait 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 into a swearing fit of joy, the farmer could only express his pleasure with his looks, while the grateful pastor threw himself on his knees, and poured forth the grateful transports of his soul to the Giver of all goodness.

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 bene-

volence and hospitality the anxiety of the family at home.

With the assistance of his landlord, he was become acquainted with every transaction that had occurred in the village. In one of his evening walks he was roused from his meditations by the sudden exclamations of a female voice; and, raising his eyes beheld the fair object of his affections endeavouring to avoid the opportunities of a gentleman who was pursuing her.

'Stay, lovely Charlotte!' said the stranger, 'Why do you fly me thus?'

'Why, sir, are you so importunate?'

'Because 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! view your recent conduct to my father, then say if affection bore a leading feature there.'

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

'My choice was free, sir; and, perhaps it was my nature's fault, I could not love you. But excuse my abruptness, should we be seen thus discoursing, the discovery would not add to my reputation.'

'This contempt, child, is very pretty! but it shall

not divert me from tasting the ripe beauties of these matchless charms.' 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! I know thee well. Thou art the faithless steward of the abused Belfont. Already has thy fame reached thy master's ears: nor think, vile ingrate, that he will suffer thy villianies to escape with impunity.' Then taking the almost fainting Charlotte by the hand, he hastened from this fallen Lucifer.

The spirits of Charlotte hardly supported her from the presence of her base assailant, before she sunk lifeless into the arms of her deliverer; who, urged by fear, placed her on a bank, and ran for water to a neighbouring rivulet, and besprinkled her features with the cooling drops. Soon she unclosed her lovely eyes and recovered.

'You tremble still, my Charlotte, and by your disordered looks, seem to doubt your safety.'

'O no!' where Trueman is, suspicion has no dwelling.'

'Enchanting sweetness! 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 '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 friends, 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 shall nurture my love, and lull to rest each intrusive care.'

'Then, by my hopes of bliss hereafter,' said the maid, 'I vow, when that happy hour arrives, I will not chide thy fondness. But tell me, what means this sudden joy that through the village reigns?'

'And see,' said Trueman, 'where to my Charlotte's cottage they bend their steps!—But see! your brother comes, the harbinger of happiness.'

'Oh, Charlotte!' said Henry, '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 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, 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 bathes the summer's day, gives fresh lustre to the charms of nature.'

' Is that which I have heard derived from truth, 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 the measure of his bliss is complete, till in his paternal embrace he folds thy lovely form. Hasten, then, to increase and share his merited happiness.' Then folding her arm in his, he hurried towards her dwelling

Mr Benley was seated at the door of the cottage, surrounded by many of his parishoners, when Charlotte rushed into her father's arms, exclaimed — ' My 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 was celebrated by the inhabitants of the parish 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.

Every transaction that had occurred since Lord Belfont's arrival in the village, he had transmitted to Bremere; and on confirmation of the oppression his steward had exercised, enclosed the discharge of that wretch; with an order to deliver his accounts to Mr Benley whom he appointed his successor. A letter announcing to this gentleman his appointment, which Bremere forwarded from London, in the manner his friend had directed. By this time Bremere had refuted the opinion of the derangement of his Lordship's finances. Declaring the whole to be a feint.

The sensations of Sandford, on reading his Lordship's letter, were such as are familiar only to the guilty. And brought on a violent fever which soon terminated his miserable existence.

Far different were the feelings of Mr Benley—who informed Trueman of the contents of the let-

ter and told him he had discovered the bounteous hand that gave him liberty.

'I have compared this letter of my Lord Belfont with the one I received when under confinement, and I find both exactly corresponding. To his Lordship I attribute the benevolent act. To-morrow we purpose leaving this humble dwelling, and once more take possession of our former mansion, where I hope, we shall enjoy your company.

'You do me infinite honour, sir: and I will study to deserve your favour. But where is Miss Benley?' 'I believe you will find her in the garden, she and her mother will keep you company, while I visit my friends in the village.'

Trueman walked into the garden, and found his lovely Charlotte seated on a bower which she herself had reared. She had a letter in her hand, which as she perused, the tears fell from her sorrowing eyes, she hurried the letter into her pocket and darted an angry look at the youth.

'Why, my lovely Charlotte! do you thus angrily fix on me those streaming eyes?'

'Answer me faithfully,' said she; 'art thou what thou seemest? or, beneath mean attire, but ill according with thy polished manner. Ha! my fears are true! The blush of guilt has crimsoned thy face, that sudden start proclaim thee false!'

'Tell me,' said Trueman, 'the grounds you have raised suspicion of my honour.'

‘ This will inform you, sir ; a friend of Miss Benley advises her to be on her guard. Trueman is not what he seems, but harbours designs destructive of her peace and honour.

‘ Now sir, what can you plead to this charge ?

‘ Miss Benley, that I assuredly love you ; and as to the charge that I am not what I seem, I plead guilty ; but the rest I pronounce is a base falsehood. But tell me, if I repel by truth indisputable this unjust arraignment of my honour, what reward I may expect ?

‘ Clear thyself of these suspicions, and appear the man my fond wishes have formed thee, and I would reject the greatest crowned monarch’s hand to share thy regard and favour.’

His Lordship then made himself known, and pressing his suit ardently, gained her affection, they exchanged holy vows, and signed a contract of eternal love, and immediately communicating the same to her parents, he threw disguise aside, and confessed himself to be the happy Belfont. The rejoicing parents gave their free consent ; and hastening to the village, the ceremony was performed with due solemnity, amid the acclamations of the delighted tenantry, who hastened cheerfully to pay the duty due to their illustrious landlord.