A MARRIAGE IN HIGH LIFE

VOL. I.

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PREFACE.

The following pages, which I now offer to the public, may, perhaps, not attract general interest; they contain merely a few passages in the history of the heart and feelings of an individual placed in singular and trying circumstances; but those who should recognize beneath the feigned name of Lady Fitzhenry, one whom they may remember to have seen in the gay scenes of fashionable life, will probably feel some interest in the events which occasioned her first introduction into the world, and her sudden disappearance from it.

THE EDITOR.

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MARRIAGE IN HIGH LIFE.

CHAPTER I.

A mon avis, l'Hymen et ses liens
Sont les plus grands, ou des maux, ou des biens;
Point de milieu; l'état du mariage
Est des humains le plus cher avantage.
Quand le rapport des esprits, des cœurs
Des sentimens, des gouts, et des humeurs,
Serre ces liens tissus par la nature
Que l'amour forme, et que l'honneur épure.
L'ENFANT PRODIGUE.

TOWARDS the end of a London spring, that is to say, about the middle of August, was married by special license, at her father's house in Harley Street, Emmeline Benson to Ernest, Lord Fitzhenry, only son of the Earl of Arlingford.

The ceremony was like most others of its kind; the drawing-room was crowded with relations and friends on both sides, dressed in congratulatory smiles, and new bridal finery.

Emmeline's father, an opulent city merchant and banker, appeared arrayed in a complete new suit for the occasion. The first gloss was not off his coat, which hung stiff upon him, as if not yet reconciled to the homely person to which it was destined to belong, while each separate bright button reflected the collected company. His countenance glowing with happiness, he busied himself in attentions to his guests, provoking, by his remarks, those congratulations which flattered his pride and parental fondness; and, with bustling joy, making the necessary preliminary arrangements for the ceremony about to take place, which was to raise his only and

beloved child to that elevated situation in life, in which it had ever been the first wish of his heart to see her placed, and which his partial affection thought her so well fitted to grace.

Mrs. Benson's feelings seemed of a less joyous nature, and sometimes, even a tear started into her eye, in spite of herself, when she endeavoured to smile in return to the kind wishes of her friends. She was too fond a mother not to feel painfully the loss of her daughter; and that feeling was not unmixed with anxiety, in giving her to one of whom (of late years at least) she personally knew but little.

All were now assembled excepting the bride and bridegroom. The father of the latter, apparently as much delighted as Mr. Benson himself with the intended union, being of course among the company. But Lord Fitzhenry did not appear! Various conjectures were formed as to his absence. One person declared he had observed his carriage at the door of his lodgings as he had passed; another, that he was certain he had seen him in a distant part of the town not long before. The delay was beginning to be awkward, and at every distant sound of wheels, both fathers looked anxiously along the street, but in vain.

Gradually the conversation of the guests lowered itself into whispers, as some new surmise was started with regard to the possible cause of this strange absence of the most important personage at so important a moment. But even these whispers died away from lack of new ideas on the subject, and the now total silence was only occasionally broken by the rustling of the clergyman's surplice, when he left his post before the large family prayer-book (laid open ready at the marriage ceremony)

with the benevolent wish, by some commonplace observation, to dissipate the unpleasant feelings which seemed to infect all present; or when he followed Mr. Benson to the window, whither he had taken up his station of observation in the hopes of being the first to give the much wished-for news of the approaching bridegroom. Poor Mrs. Benson's cheeks became momentarily of a deeper and deeper dye, and she betrayed her anxious agitation by the nervous twitching of the gold chain round her neck, to which was suspended her daughter's portrait, and the constant arranging of her lace shawl, which she regularly each time pulled off her shoulders. At last, the welcome rattle of a carriage driving furiously was heard. It stopped at Mr. Benson's door, and in a minute Lord Fitzhenry, with a flushed cheek, hurried into the drawing-room.

Awkward as such an entrance must naturally be, still his agitation seemed even beyond what the circumstances of the moment would have been likely to produce on a young man of the world.

Lord Fitzhenry, at twenty-seven, was remarkably good-looking; and on his countenance and whole figure was that stamp of high birth, which, even where beauty does not exist, more than compensates for its absence. The general character of his countenance was that of openness and good humour; but an agitated, even a melancholy expression now clouded it, which all noticed.

"Marriage is certainly an awful ceremony," whispered an elderly lady to Mrs. Benson; "and I am glad to see his lordship betraying so much feeling and seriousness at such a moment. It is a good sign in a young man." The poor trembling mother

scarcely heard the remark, nor was there much time for more observation, for Mr. Benson had already left the room, and in a few minutes returned, leading in his daughter.

Emmeline was nineteen. She was slightly formed, had a most winning countenance, innocent laughing eyes, and a delicate, fair complexion, although now deepened into crimson, in her cheeks, by the agitation of the moment, as was very apparent, even through the folds of the beautiful lace veil that hung all over her.

The marriage ceremony commenced immediately. As it proceeded, the bridegroom trembled violently. When called upon to pronounce his vow, his voice was scarcely audible; and as he placed the ring on his bride's hand, he nearly let it fall to the ground.

But all was soon finally said and done—so few are the words which, once read over, totally change our existence, and fix our fate in life for ever! The usual congratulations passed, and the chaise and four, decorated with bridal favours, rattled to the door.

Emmeline threw herself sobbing into her mother's arms—the first sob, since those of childhood, which had ever been wrung from her light heart. Her proud father gaily kissed her cheek, addressing her by her new title of "Lady Fitzhenry;" then, drawing her arm within his, hurried her down stairs, placed her in the carriage, into which the bridegroom followed, and the "happy pair" drove off as fast as four post horses could convey them.

How blank such moments are to those who remain behind! The company soon separated after the usual breakfast, and Mr. and Mrs. Benson were left alone.

All excitement, over the deserted mother's spirits then sank; mournfully she paced the now silent room, and mechanically removed from the table Emmeline's work-box, which she had left behind her, gazing on her name, engraven on the lid, till her tears burst forth. Her distress roused Mr. Benson from the trance of exultation in which he had been lost as he watched the last bridal carriage that had driven from the door, and he kindly hastened to his wife.

"Why, my good woman, crying! and on such a day! when you should be so happy—for shame! for shame!"

Mrs. Benson shook her head mournfully. "God grant it indeed *prove* a happy day! may our beloved child be so!" and she sighed deeply.

"Why, how can you doubt she will?" said her husband; "she has every thing this world can give; rank!" (and he laid a great stress on that word,) "riches, youth; and, for a husband, a most excellent and accomplished young man, of whom every one speaks well. None of your gamblers, jockies, spendthrifts. I am sure Emmeline and ourselves are the envy of all our acquaintance. Any one might be pleased and proud to see his daughter so well married."

Mrs. Benson again sighed, wiped away her tears, and then quietly returned to her usual avocations.

Meanwhile, Lord and Lady Fitzhenry travelled on, and a few hours brought them to Arlingford Hall, which, on his son's marriage, Lord Arlingford had given up to him, meaning to reside himself at a villa at Wimbledon; his health, which had of late been very precarious, making a near residence to town advisable.

Arlingford Hall, which was in Hampshire, had been completely repaired and refurnished for the new married couple; Lord Fitzhenry having himself been much there lately, superintending the alterations. At least, that occupation was always mentioned as an apology for his absence from town, and for his not attending more assiduously on his future bride.

During the journey, Lord Fitzhenry's agitation and abstraction rather encreased, and it could no longer escape Emmeline's observation. His conversation was forced; in his manner towards her he was punctiliously attentive and civil—but perfectly cold and distant.

When they arrived at Arlingford, all the servants were assembled in the hall to receive them; a numerous and respectable group, who, by the tears of joy which some of them shed, seemed most sincerely to partake in the supposed happiness of their young master. One of them, who stood apart from the rest, even ventured to address him with particular congratulation as with the familiarity of an old friend, and to give Emmeline his blessing.

"Thank you, Reynolds, thank you," said Fitzhenry hastily, as he shook the old man by the hand.

Emmeline's heart was cast in nature's best mould, and this simple action of her husband found its way to it. She smiling raised her tearful eyes to his face, but the expression she there found, soon made her again cast them down. The scene seemed to have totally discomposed him; and, in an awkward, hurried manner, thanking the rest of the servants, he led the way to the drawing-room. Dinner was ordered directly, and all seemed so zealous to serve their young master and mistress, that it was not long coming, but still there was an awful pause.

Lord Fitzhenry walked up and down the room, forced himself to speak, then, suddenly, as if recollecting that some degree of gallant attention was to be expected from him, a bridegroom of only six or eight hours, he hurried up to Emmeline and helped her off with her shawl; but his manner was so odd, so unlover-like, that it at last alarmed even her innocent, unsuspecting mind, and she timidly asked if he was not well. He started at her question, and seemed much embarrassed; but, after a moment's pause, replied, "The journey, the hurry, I suppose; indeed, I hardly know what, but something has given me a dreadful headache."

And then, as if roused by her remark to a sense of the strangeness of his behaviour, he put more force upon himself, showed her the public rooms, her own sitting room, in which were collected books, musical instruments, and every possible means of amusement. In answer to her enquiries, explained to Emmeline who were her new relations that hung framed on the walls; and, when she admired the comfort of the house, and particularly of her own boudoir, he said something about

hoping she would be happy in it, but the phrase died away in uncertain accents.

Dinner at length came to his relief; he then was attention itself, but the repast could not last for ever; and, when the servants had left the room, Lord Fitzhenry's embarrassment returned worse than before. Emmeline had lived so little in society, and, consequently, had so little the habit of general conversation—and the six years during which she and her husband had been separated, had so entirely broken off the first intimacy which had existed between them when children, that, timid in his company, and now unassisted and unencouraged by him, she felt it impossible to keep up any thing like conversation. It was, therefore, no small relief when, after an awkwardly protracted silence, she saw him leave the room.

As the door closed upon him, Emmeline involuntarily fell into a reverie not of the most pleasing nature. "This is all very strange!" thought she; and over her usually gay countenance a sadness crept. She sighed, she hardly knew why; and, when her thoughts wandered back to her former happy home, her parents, and their doating fondness, some "natural tears" stole down her cheek, and she felt herself, as in a dream, neglected and deserted.

But Emmeline was not *in love*; and her husband's behaviour, though it astonished her, and though she felt it was not what it ought to be, did not wound her heart as it otherwise would have done.

Emmeline was very young, even for her age. With a most superior mind and character, with tender, even romantic

feelings, her innocence and simplicity of heart were so great, and all her qualities had as yet lain so dormant, that her character was scarcely known even to herself; and, to common observers, she passed for a mere gay, good-humoured, pleasing girl. She was, however, no common character, nor what one would have supposed the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Benson to have been. Nature sometimes seems to amuse herself with playing such fanciful tricks; and Emmeline's natural superiority made it appear as if she had been thrown into a sphere totally different from that for which she had been originally designed, and that she now was only restored to her own proper station, when raised, by her marriage, to be the companion of Fitzhenry.

To explain how such a being came to be thus passively united to a man who seemed already to have repented the step he had taken, it will be necessary to go back a little in our narrative.

CHAPTER II.

Do I entice you? do I speak you fair?
Or rather, do I not in plainest truth
Tell you—I do not, nor I cannot love you?
MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM.

LORD ARLINGFORD had, early in life, entangled himself in pecuniary difficulties by every species of thoughtless extravagance, in which an expensive, fashionable wife had assisted him. Her fortune and health both soon declined, and a consumption rapidly carried her to the grave while still in the prime of life, and when her only child, Ernest, was but ten years old. That which extravagance began, indolence soon completed; and long before his son came of age, Lord Arlingford found himself, in the language of the world, to be totally ruined.

Mr. Benson had been always much employed and consulted by Lord Arlingford's family in all matters relating to business; and to him, in the present desperate situation of his affairs, his lordship was obliged to have recourse for advice and assistance. Mr. Benson had toiled all his life as a merchant, and was now one of the most opulent bankers in London. He had an only child; and to her he meant to bequeath all his wealth, provided she made a marriage to his choice; by which, he meant one in that rank of life, which, with all his useful good sense, he had the folly to imagine essential to human happiness.

Being every way an excellent man of business, Mr. Benson was appointed to be one of the trustees, into whose hands it was

now deemed necessary to consign Lord Arlingford's estate; in order, if possible, to retrieve his affairs, and protect the interests of his son.

One day, when talking over his difficulties with his client, and when Emmeline was but seven years old, Mr. Benson first proposed, in the form of a joke, as a means by which all might be set to rights, that their children should be united in marriage. He finished his speech by a loud laugh; but it was one of mere agitation, for he anxiously looked into Lord Arlingford's face to see how such a proposal agreed with the ancient, aristocratic pride of the Fitzhenrys.

Lord Arlingford for a minute made no reply; he kept his eyes fixed on the parchment he held in his hands. The table before him was covered with deeds, bonds, mortgages, and every awful sign of the irretrievable state of his affairs; and, strange as it may appear, he caught immediately at the idea, as to that which alone could save him from utter ruin. His answer, when at last it came, transported the ambitious banker with joy; and by degrees, and by constantly treating of the subject, the two fathers seemed to think it was a matter they had but to settle between themselves, and that there could be no difficulty whatever in a scheme which was to give to both, what they both wanted. Mr. Benson's promises were most liberal, and Lord Arlingford subdued all the hereditary pride of his feelings, and seemed quite content to lay himself and his family under obligations to a man on whom he in return conferred so much honour.

As a first step towards bringing about this favourite scheme, Ernest, when at home for his holidays, was constantly sent to

Mr. Benson's, where he was of course indulged in his every boyish fancy, and every species of amusement imagined for him in which little Emmeline could take a part.

On her birthday every year, a ball was given by Mrs. Benson, which was opened by her and young Lord Fitzhenry, while the two fathers looked on in admiration, and declared that they were born for each other.

At twenty, Fitzhenry left Oxford; he was then to remain abroad for three years; and, at his return, it was settled that the marriage should take place; although as yet, nothing had been said on the subject to either of those most concerned in the plan.

Before his departure, however, Lord Arlingford thought it proper to open the business to his son, and also to lay before him the embarrassed state of his affairs.

Such disclosures make little impression on young minds, to whom, as yet unacquainted either with its value or want, money is but a vague sort of blessing; and Lord Arlingford was forced to overcharge the picture to give it due influence on his son. He talked much of his own distresses, his sacrifices for the sake of his dear Ernest, and, when he had worked on his filial affections, mentioned merely as a passing thought the long projected plan of his union with Miss Benson. Ernest, starting, coloured, and stammered out some undecided words. But finding no *positive objection* made, Lord Arlingford pushed on the affair—praised Emmeline—(then only thirteen years old,) extorted from Ernest first, that he thought her a fine girl, and at last a sort of agreement that he would think of the proposal,

and, on his return from abroad, marry her, and make his father happy.

Mr. Benson was informed of the favourable progress of their scheme, which he furthered by every means in his power; and Emmeline was soon taught to look upon Ernest as her future husband. On his taking leave of them before his departure for the Continent, he kissed her smooth young cheek, addressing her by the name of his little wife. But neither the kiss nor the appellation brought even an additional tinge of colour into that cheek; although she might childishly have grieved at the loss of her almost only companion.

During the first months of his absence, Lord Fitzhenry wrote two or three times to Emmeline, once when sending her a watch from Geneva, and again with a chain from Venice; but he soon found more interesting occupations than composing letters for the capacity of a mere child: the boy had grown into a man, and if he did not actually forget the engagement into which his father had drawn him, he allowed it but little to occupy his thoughts.

Lord Fitzhenry first visited Italy; at Naples, he formed an intimacy with the English minister then residing there; and, on the removal of that minister to Vienna, Ernest followed him.

The three years allotted for his residence abroad, had already nearly elapsed; but, having acquired a taste for the habits of the Continent, Ernest begged for longer leave of absence; and by his letters, no less than by the accounts of all those who met with him, his foreign life seemed so much to have improved his mind and manners, that Lord Arlingford, whose purely worldly