

A POOR GENTLEMAN.

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A POOR GENTLEMAN.

CHAPTER I.

THE TWO FAMILIES.

THE house of Penton is one of the greatest in the county of which it is an ornament. It is an old house, but not of the kind which is now so generally appreciated and admired. It is not Elizabethan nor Jacobean, nor of the reign of Queen Anne. The front is Grecian, or rather Palladian, in heavy stone supplemented by plaster, with the balustrades of a stony terrace surmounting the level frontage of the single story, lofty, yet flat, which stretches like a screen across the higher cluster of building which forms the body of the house. When you turn the corner from this somewhat blank and low but imposing line you come upon the garden-front, which is of the livelier French order of architecture, with long windows, and many of them. The gardens are the pride of the house. These are arranged in terraces and parterres, brilliant with flowers, and there is even an elaborate system of water-works, a little out of order now, and a few statues here and there, half covered with lichens, yet not unworthy of better preservation. The rooms inside are lofty and sumptuous, intended for great entertainments and fine company, but the gardens are such as Watteau would have delighted in, and which he might have made the scene of many a *fête champêtre* and graceful group of fine ladies and fine gentlemen in costumes more brilliant than are now thought of. The grounds at Penton, indeed, are still filled at times with parties of gayly dressed people, and the lawns brightened by maidens in muslin and young men in flannels; but Watteau would have had no sympathy with the activities of lawn-tennis. That popular game, however, was not pursued with any enthusiasm at Penton. It was permitted rather than encouraged. There was no youth in the house. Sir Walter Penton was an old

man, and though he had, like most old gentlemen who figure in romance, an only daughter, she was not either young or fair. She was a lady of somewhat stern aspect, between forty and fifty, married, but childless. The household consisted of her father, her husband, and herself, no more. And there were many circumstances which combined to make it anything but a cheerful house.

Three or four miles from Penton, but on a lower level, lay the house of Penton Hook. It was on the banks of the river, planted on a piece of land which was almost an island in consequence of the curve of the stream which swept round it. The great house stood high on the brow of the bank, an object seen many miles off, and which was the distinguishing feature of the landscape. The smaller one—so small that it was scarcely worthy to be called a country-place at all—lay low. When the river was in flood, which happened almost every winter, Penton Hook stood dismally, with all its little gardens under water, in what seemed the middle of the stream. And though the Pentons all protested that the water never actually came into the house, which was raised on a little terrace, their protest was received by all their neighbors with shaking of their heads. Everything was green and luxuriant, as may be supposed. The house was so covered with creepers that its style was undefinable. A little glimmer of old red brick, delightfully toned and mellowed, looked out here and there from amid the clusters of feathery seed-pods on the clematis, and below the branches of the *gloire de Dijon* in winter. In the brighter part of the year it was a mass of leaf and flower; but during all the dark season, when the water was up, when the skies were dark, damp and dreariness were the characteristics of Penton Hook. The rooms looked damp, there was a moist look about the tiles in the little hall.

The paper was apt to peel off and the plaster to fall. There were many people who declared that the house was a very fever-trap, and everybody was of opinion that it must be unhealthy. It ought to have been so, indeed, by very rule of sanitary science. A kind Providence alone took care of the drainage. Mr. Penton did not know much about it, and took care not to inquire; for had he inquired it would probably have been necessary to do something, and he had no money to spend on such vanities. Neither, indeed, did there seem much occasion, for, notwithstanding what everybody said, eight young Pentons, tall and straight, and ailing nothing, with appetites which were the despair of their mother, grew up and flourished among the mud and damp, and set all prognostications at defiance.

Nothing could be more unlike than the two families who bore the same name, and lived within sight of each other. The one all gravity and importance and severe splendor: the other poor, irregular, noisy, full of shifts and devices, full of tumult and young life. Mrs. Penton, Sir Walter's daughter (for her husband, who was nobody in particular, had taken her name), went from time to time with the housekeeper through the ranges of vacant rooms, all furnished with a sort of somber magnificence, to see that they were aired and kept in order; while her namesake at the Hook (as it was called) schemed how to fit a bed into a new corner, as the boys and girls grew bigger, to make room for their lengthening limbs and the decorums which advancing years demanded. It was difficult to kill time in the one house, and almost impossible to find one day long enough for all the work that had to be done in it, in the other. In the one the question of ways and means was a subject unnecessary to be discussed. The exchequer was full, there were no calls upon it which could not be amply met at any moment, nor any occasion to

think whether or not a new expense should be incurred. Mr. Russell Penton, perhaps, the husband of Mrs. Penton, had not always been in this happy condition. It was possible that in his experience a less comfortable state of affairs might have existed, or even might still, by moments, exist; but so far as the knowledge of Sir Walter and his daughter went, it was only mismanagement, extravagance, or want of financial capacity which made anybody poor; they could not understand why their relations at the Hook should be needy and embarrassed.

“So long as one knows exactly what one’s means are,” said Mrs. Penton, “what difficulty can there be in arranging one’s expenditure? There are certain things which can, and certain things which can’t be done on a certain income. All that is necessary is to arrange one’s outgoings accordingly.”

“You see that, my dear,” Sir Walter would reply, “for you were born with the spirit of order; but there are some people who have no sense of order at all.”

The some people were the poor people at Penton Hook. These remarks were made on a day in winter, when the family at the great house were together in the library. It was a very comfortable room, nay, a beautiful one. The house was warmed throughout, and in December was genially, softly, warm as in May, no cold to be got anywhere in corridors or staircases. The fire in the library was a wood-fire, for beauty and pleasantness rather than for warmth. The walls were lined with books, dim lines of carved shelves with gleams of old gilding, and an occasional warm tone of mellowed Italian vellum here and there giving them a delightful covering. The large window looked across the country, commanding the whole broad plain through which the river ran. This landscape fell

away into lovely tones of distance, making you uncertain whether it was the sea or infinitude itself at which you were gazing, in far-away stretches of tender mist, and blueness and dimness, lightly marked with the line of the horizon. Over the mantel-piece there was one picture, the portrait of an ancestor of whom the Pentons were proud—a veritable Holbein, which was as good, nay, far better, than the most finely emblazoned family pedigree. There was no room for other pictures because of the books which filled every corner; but a port-folio stood open upon a stand in which there was a quantity of the finest old engravings, chiefly historical portraits. Amid this refined and delightful luxury it would be foolish to mention the mere furniture, though that was carved oak, and very fine of its kind. Sir Walter himself sat surrounded by all the morning papers, which, as Penton was not very far from town, were delivered almost as early as in London. Mrs. Penton had a little settlement of her own between the fire and one of the windows, where she made up her household accounts, which she did with the greatest regularity. Mr. Russell Penton was the only member of the little party who seemed at all out of place. He had no special corner which he made his own. He was a restless personage, prone to wander from the fire to the window, to look out though there was nothing particular to look at, nothing more than he saw every day of his life, as his wife sometimes said to him. He ran over the papers very quickly, very often standing before the fire, which was a favorite trick of his; and after he had got through that morning duty he would lounge about disturbing everybody—that is, disturbing Mrs. Penton and Sir Walter, who were the only people subject to be affected by his vagaries. He never had letters to write, though this is one of the first duties of man, of the kind of man who has nothing else to do. A man who has no letters to write should at least pretend to do so, assuming a virtue if he has it not,

in the leisure of a country house; or he should have some study, if it were only the amount of the rainfall; or he should draw and expound art. But none of all these things did Mr. Russell Penton do. And he had not the art of doing nothing quietly and gracefully as some men have. He was restless as well as idle, a combination which is more trying to the peace of your house-mates than any other can be.

Sir Walter was essentially well-bred, and the carpets were very thick, and the paneling of the floors very solid; but yet there is always a certain thrill under a restless foot, however steady the flooring is and however thick the carpet: and Mrs. Penton could not help seeing that her father now and then stopped in his reading and fixed his eyes and contracted his eyebrows with a consciousness of the movement. But after all it is difficult to find fault with one's husband for nothing more serious than walking from the fire to the window and from the window back to the fire.

Yet it was this rather detrimental and unmeaning personage who chose suddenly, without any reason at all, to cross the current of family feeling. "The spirit of order is a very good thing," he said, all at once, making his wife hold her breath, "but, in my opinion, when you have a large family a little money is still better." This speech was launched into the domestic quiet like an arrow from a bow.

"Better!" said Sir Walter, letting his newspaper drop upon his knees, and pushing up his spectacles upon his forehead the better to see the speaker, who was standing, shutting out the pleasant blaze of the log on the fire in his usual careless way.

“Gerald means,” said his wife, “that it is easier to keep things in order when there is money. I have heard people say so before, and perhaps it is true—to a certain extent. You know, sir, that when one has money in hand one can buy a thing when it is cheap; one can lay in one’s provisions beforehand. The idea is not original, but there is a certain amount of truth in it, I dare say.”

“No one supposed there was not truth in it,” said Sir Walter; “for that matter there is truth in everything, the most paradoxical statement you may choose to make; but these people are not without money, I suppose. They have an income, whatever the amount may be. They are not destitute. And so long as you have certain means, as you were yourself saying, Alicia, you know what you can afford to spend, and that is what you ought to spend by every law, and not a penny more.”

“Nothing could be more true,” said Mrs. Penton, with a look from under her eyelids to her husband, who was fidgeting from one leg to another, restless as usual; “and speaking of that,” she said, with curious appropriateness, “I have been anxious to ask you, papa, about the tapestry chamber, of which, you know, we have always been so proud. Mrs. Ellis and I have made a very odd discovery—the moth has got into one of the best pieces. We have done all we could, and I think we have arrested the mischief, but to put it right is beyond our powers.”

“Dear me! the tapestry!” cried Sir Walter; “that’s serious indeed—the moth! I should think you might have done something, you and all your women, Alicia, to keep out a moth.”

“One would think so, indeed,” she said, with a smile, “but it is not so easy as it seems. It is an insidious little creature, which gets

in imperceptibly. One only discovers it when the mischief is done. Gerald, who is so very clever in such matters, thinks we had better get a man over from Paris, from the Gobelins. It would be a good deal of trouble, but still it is the best way.”

“I was not aware that Gerald knew anything about such matters,” said Sir Walter. “As for the trouble, it is only writing a letter, I suppose. But do it, do it. I can not have any thing happen to my tapestry. A man from Paris will be a nuisance—they’re always a nuisance, those sort of fellows—but get it done, get it done.”

“I will write at once,” Mrs. Penton said.

“I remember that tapestry as long as I remember anything,” said the old gentleman, musing. “In the firelight we used to think the figures moved. It used to be my mother’s room. How frightened I was, to be sure! One night, I recollect, the hunters and the hounds seemed all coming down upon us. There, was a blazing fire, and it was the dancing of the flames, don’t you know? I was no bigger than that,” he said, putting his hand about a foot from the ground. The recollection of his infancy pleased the old man. He smiled, and the expression of his face softened. There was nothing cruel or unkind in his aspect. He was a little rigid, a little severe, very sure that he was right, as so many are; but when he thought of his mother’s room, and himself a little child in it, his ruddy aged countenance grew soft. Had there been another little child there, to climb upon his knee, it would have melted altogether. But Providence had not granted that other little child. He gave a wave of his hand as he dismissed these gentle thoughts. “But get the man from Paris, my dear; don’t let anything go wrong with the tapestry,” he said.

Mr. Russell Penton went out as his wife turned to her writing-table, and at once began her necessary letter. It was true that it was he who recommended that a man from Paris should be procured, but he had done it without any of that cleverness in such matters which his wife attributed to him. He was not, perhaps, a man entirely adapted for the position in which he found himself. He had occupied it for a long time, and yet he had not yet reconciled himself to that constant effort on his wife's part to make him agreeable to her father.

For his own part he had no desire to be disagreeable to Sir Walter or any man; he had married with a generous affection if not any hot romantic love for Alicia; for they were both, he thought, beyond the age of romantic love. She had been thirty-five, very mature, very certain of herself; while he, though a little older and a man who had, as people say, knocked about the world for a long time, and undergone many vicissitudes, was not at all so sure. She had picked him up out of—not the depths, perhaps—but out of an uncomfortable, unsettled, floating condition, between gentility and beggary; and had taken him into the warmest delightful house, and made everything comfortable for him. He had been very willing to make himself agreeable, to do what he could for the people who had done so much for him, and yet so unreasonable was he that he had never been able quite to reconcile himself to the position. He could scarcely endure those warning glances not to go too far, not to say this or that, or her pretenses of consulting him, of being guided by his counsels, the little speeches, such as had been made to-day, about Gerald being so clever—which was his wife's way of upholding her husband. He was not clever, and he did not wish to pretend to be so. He was not cautious, and he could not take the credit of it. He had been thought to be a fortune-hunter when he

married, and he was supposed to be a time-server now; and yet he was neither one thing nor the other. He was fond of Alicia and he liked Sir Walter well enough; yet there were moments when he would rather have swept a crossing than lived in wealth and luxury at Penton, and when the sacrifices which he had to make, and the advantages which he gained in return, were odious to him, things which he could scarcely bind himself to bear.

This was perhaps the reason why, as he went out, without anything to do or to think of, and looking across that wide, bare, yet bright, wintery landscape, losing itself in the wistful distance, caught the chimneys of Penton Hook appearing among the bare trees, there occurred to his mind a contrast and comparison which made his sensations still less agreeable. It was nobody's fault, certainly not his, not even Sir Walter's, that the Pentons at the Hook were so poor, that there were eight children of them, that it was so difficult for the parents to make both ends meet. Could Sir Walter have changed the decrees of Providence by any effort in his power, it was he who should have had those eight sturdy descendants. He would have accepted all the responsibilities gladly; he would have secured for those young people the best of everything, an excellent education, and all the advantages that wealth could give. But the children had gone where poverty, not riches was; and to Sir Walter and Alicia it was a wonder that their parents could not keep within their income, that they could not cut their coat according to their cloth, as it is the duty of all honest and honorable persons to do. Alicia in particular was so very clear on this point; and then she had turned to her table, and written her letter, and ordered the man to be sent from Paris from the great Gobelins manufactory to mend the damages made by the moths in the old tapestry! How strange it was! Russell Penton could not tell

what was wrong in it. Perhaps there was no conscious wrong. They had a right to have their tapestry mended, and it was pretty, he could not but confess, to see the old man forget himself and talk of the time when he was a child. What was that about a treasure which rust or moth could not corrupt? It kept haunting his ear, yet it was not applicable to the situation. It would be a thousand pities to let the tapestry be spoiled. And as for taking upon his shoulders the burden of Mr. Penton's large family, no one could expect old Sir Walter to do that. What was wrong in it? And, on the other hand, he could not find it in his heart to blame the poor people at the Hook who had so many cares, so much to do with their income, so many mouths to feed. It was not their fault, nor was it the fault of Alicia and her father. And yet the heart of the man, who was little more than a looker-on, was sore. He could do nothing. He could not even find any satisfaction in blaming one or the other: for, so far as he could see, nobody was to blame.

CHAPTER II.

PENTON.

THE family at Penton had not always been so few in number. Twenty years before the opening of this history there were two sons in the great house; and Alicia, now so important, was, though always a sort of princess royal, by no means so great a personage as now. She was the only daughter of the house, but no more; destined apparently, like other daughters, to pass away into a different family and identify herself with another name. The two brothers were the representatives of the Pentons. They were hopeful enough in their youth—healthy, vigorous, not more foolish than young men of their age, with plenty of money and nothing to do; and it was a surprise to everybody when, one after the other, they took the wrong turn in that flowery way of temptation, so smooth to begin with, so thorny at the end, which is vulgarly termed “life.” No such fatal divergence was expected of them when Walter came of age, and all the neighborhood was called together to rejoice. They were both younger than their sister, who was already the mistress of the house, and a very dignified and stately young lady, at this joyful period. Their mother had died young, and Sir Walter was older than the father of such a family generally is. He had, perhaps, not sufficient sympathy with the exuberance of their spirits. Perhaps the quiet which he loved, the gravity of his house, repelled them and led them to form their friendships and seek their pleasures elsewhere. At all events, the young Pentons “went wrong,” both of them, one after the other. Edward Penton, of the Hook, a young relation of no importance whatever, was much about the house in those days. He was the son of Sir Walter’s cousin, who had inherited the house at Penton

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