

FEBRUARY.—ST. VALENTINE'S DAY.



ALTHOUGH we live at a very enlightened period, and are disposed to regard rather slightly the wisdom of our ancestors, there still exist, happily, some few amongst us, who, despite of progress and the march of intellect, are content to tolerate ancient observances. For myself, I honestly admit that I belong to the old school. I confess a memory very tenacious of holidays; I am a very chronicler of birthdays, and anniversaries generally; for Saints' days, great and small, I have a kindness, if not a veneration—from the Feast of St. Stephen, the first Christian martyr, to the Feast of St. Valentine, the merriest, if not the wisest, saint in the calendar. For the latter I seem to have a peculiar sympathy, since I can trace back my recollections of it to somewhere about my sixth year—now, alas! almost forty years ago.

I well remember the unwelcome reception which greeted me on that eventful 13th of February, as, at my ordinary bed-time, I opened the door of the nursery, and found the servants assembled in full conclave, with the sole exception of the footman, who was, I suspect, mounting guard over the occupants of the dining-room. "And who sent you up so early, Miss?" demanded she, who in the nursery held special dominion; with a clutch of the shoulder, half-slap, half-shake, ostensibly directed to the improvement of my carriage. Before I could reply, the good-natured cook, whose diplomacy was of a more suave character, came to the rescue, promising me tea and toast if I would afterwards go quietly to bed, as they were about to write letters to their friends, and could not possibly be interrupted. To this compromise I was fain to accede, and even now I recollect the incidents which seasoned this meal; the whirl of the tea-cups and the fortunes discovered in the grounds; the "fair young man" promised to the housemaid, and the "dark sailor" who fell to the lot of the cook. Unluckily, my open mouth and staring eyes revealed an interest too intense in these mystic rites; and I was hurried off to bed, whence I could hear a great deal of laughing, talking, scratching of pens, and a lavish tearing up of paper. Certain poetical effusions (whether original, or copied from the "Polite Letter-Writer," my literary experience did not enable me to determine) were at length read aloud, and met with unbounded applause; copies, however, were refused, which was pronounced rather unhandsome between friends "as might be trusted." The kindly goodwill to their correspondents, evinced in the majority of these missives, was not, I regret to say, universal. I have a distinct impression that a communication of an offensive character, was addressed to a nameless somebody, who ranked in the estimation of society, as "a stuck-up Miss;" and that a debate ensued, whether a green paper pair of gloves should be enclosed to her, as indicating her forsaken condition, or a yellow pair, betokening jealousy. Something I heard about despatching Joe to the post-office the next morning to intercept the letters before they were put into the letter-bag (which was always opened by the head of the household); and then I fell asleep.

I have not forgotten the arch look of my father when the bag was brought in at breakfast the next day. "Plenty of letters this morning—eh, Pursell!" said he, with a knowing look at the servant, as he opened it. "Why should there be more letters than usual?" inquired my simple-minded mother. "Only two I declare," he continued, "and both for myself; not a Valentine for any one, not even for you, my pretty pet; but, never mind, lovers and valentines will come in plenty by-and-by." "I wonder, Charles," said my mother reprovingly, "that you can talk such nonsense to the child;" then, turning to the servant, she observed, that it gave her pleasure to find no member of her household encouraged such idle and unprofitable correspondence. My father laughed again. Pursell, I think, tried to look sympathetic and respectful with his mistress, and *knowing with his master*; but, finding the combination a difficult one, muttered something about the door bell; and quitted the room. The good-humour which reigned in the nursery that evening was quite exuberant, and I was pronounced the best of children.

My next recollection of this eventful anniversary was at that well-known establishment for young ladies, Acacia House, Kensington—kept at that time by the late Miss Frigid—now the Montpelier Collegiate Institution for Ladies, under the Lady Principalship of Madame Surveil. Although one of the junior pupils, my former experience enabled me to interpret the signs of the times: the eager consultant watchfulness of the elder girls, and their visible impatience of juvenile society; the Frigid herself, as the day approached, were none of them mysteries to me. It was an ordainment of the presiding deity, that the equilibrium of our minds

should not be disturbed by the distribution of letters until the duties of the morning had been accomplished. Our digestive faculties, however, were less tenderly protected, for the half hour before dinner was the period set apart for the enjoyment of our correspondence. On St. Valentine's Day, the young ladies had elicited from a friendly domestic the welcome fact, that "Missis had a heap of letters for them," and they awaited, with ill-dissembled impatience, the moment at which they usually assembled around Miss Frigid's table, to receive their treasures. The department of that lady was unusually bland, as she announced her regret that she had no letters for the young ladies. She ought, perhaps, to add, she continued, that certain communications had reached Acacia House, but of such a character that she had felt in committing them at once to the flames, she only anticipated the desire of the ladies to whom they were addressed. She felt gratification, too, in sparing them the feeling of indignation which such impertinences were calculated to awaken in well-regulated minds. With a look of bland decision, Miss Frigid swept out of the room, leaving behind her quite as many indignant emotions as from the aforesaid well-regulated minds she could have expected, though whether directed precisely in the quarter she desired, may be a matter of doubt. Kate Aguillette (only daughter of Colonel Aguillette, of Woolwich) went into real hysterics of disappointment, having intended to patronise society very largely on the strength of the numerous tributes to her charms, which she had reason to expect would pour in from a coterie of young gentlemen—then engaged in the service of their country, and the study of military strategy in that garrison.

Of my own personal experiences of St. Valentine's Day, I shall say but little. I received, perhaps, somewhat less than the average number of letters, of rather above the average style; and here I may observe, *en passant*, that it was remarkable how much the general character of these effusions harmonized with that of the popular literature of the day. During the time of the ballad poetry of Sir Walter Scott, they were usually of a genial and chivalrous cast; but when the fierce fashion of Byron set in, nothing short of blackness and blight could do justice to the intensity of passion of these Conrads and Laras of modern times. I could almost fancy, that in my early youth the shadow of Old Maidism must have hung over me, for one long extract from Hayley's "Triumphs of Temper" hailed me as a sort of *Serena rediviva*; and once a full page from Miss Bowdler's "Love of Solitude" complimented me upon the *penserosa* character of my tastes and habits. None of these addresses, however complimentary, terminated in any practical result; and it is strange that, in the whole range of my Valentine experiences, I have only met with two cases that ever did so. In the one instance, a gentleman—who, though past the first flush of youth, and seriously interested in the lady, could not summon courage to address her *viva voce*—tendered his homage for five successive years, in the shape of a lock of hair; the white threads in which, increasing in number after every interval, seemed gracefully suggestive of the danger of delay on her part. A dark tress at length requited the silent but constant lover, and for many a year those two fates have been united. In the second instance, the interference of St. Valentine was rather incidental than direct; but at any rate it was equally successful.

Ladies of all ages and conditions are accused of entertaining a particular penchant for the clergy, and in my own person I am most ready to admit the truth of the impeachment; for surely, if the Church is our venerable mother, to cherish her sons is but a sisterly duty. Similar views being entertained by the other members of my family, it happened that the young Incumbent of our village became, soon after his arrival there, a more frequent guest at the Hall than the courtesies of country visiting rendered absolutely necessary. Although the High Church party considered him too liberal to Dissenters, and the Low Church found it impossible to profit fully by sermons preached in a surplice, Mr. Hargreaves was acknowledged by all to be an excellent young man, who did his duty thoroughly, but might be richer with advantage. (Blackwell-cum-Tithe-ridge is a perpetual curacy only, rated in the clergy list at £193 16s. 5d. per annum). The beneficial influences of his society soon evinced themselves in the increased interest taken by my second niece in the ancient matrons, and other objects of charity which the village afforded; and when the young Divine avowed one evening, with unconscious enthusiasm, that he considered Mary the sweetest name in the calendar, I began, though no match-maker, occasionally to ponder the question, whether good principles, good talents, and good lineage, might not worthily match with a good fortune, even though a pretty girl were attached to it. The practical decision of this point, however, rested not with me, and my speculations respecting it seemed doubly vain and profitless, when the visits of our pastor waxed gradually fewer and shorter. I noticed in our chance encounters that he looked as though keeping an anticipatory Lent, and also that Mary had become subject to headaches and ennui. Not liking to see grave faces where I had been accustomed to meet glad ones, I resolved, after some hesitation, to call at the parsonage, and see what medicaments I could offer for the mind or suggest for the body of its occupant. Our friend's staid housekeeper ushered me into the study, promising to fetch her master, who was then engaged in a colloquy respecting the grate for the vestry. I turned to the table to take up a book, when lo! there lay spread out before me, pure and spotless, three of Mr. De la Rue's most elaborate lace-bordered Valentines. For the first time in my life, I was horrified at the sight; for what would have called forth only a sympathetic smile in other young men, seemed undignified and unbecoming in a clergyman. I thought, too, of poor Mary, and sighed as I did so; in fact, when the culprit stood before me, I could hardly collect myself sufficiently to respond to his courtesies. He in his turn became surprised, and followed the direction of my eyes, still fixed on the evidences of his guilt. He took them up, and a faint colour and a fainter smile were perceptible on his countenance, as he inquired if I did not think them beautiful, and added, that he hoped they would give pleasure to her for whom they were intended—one little susceptible of enjoyments, but well worthy of all her friends could afford her. He read my surprise in my looks, and then forth came the mystery. He had an only sister, at once the care and object of his life. A fearful fever had visited her some years before, which, whilst sparing her life, and many of her personal attractions, had reduced her mental powers to the simplicity of childhood. Her memory, he added, by one of those strange instincts which science has failed to elucidate, whilst blank to almost all beside, was still alive to expressions of admiration and the pleasures of a first Valentine. "So, year by year," he continued, "I strive to keep alive this remembrance, and add a drop of honey to the tasteless cup of life."

His confidences did not end here. His love; the doubts and misgiving of success, which had almost overwhelmed him; the hopes he had scarcely dared to indulge, all were laid bare before me. I bade him—how could I do otherwise?—come up to the Hall and plead his own cause, in his own words. The sequel may easily be guessed. If he had been charming before, the episode of the afternoon rendered him irresistible. My good brother was vanquished by a hint that Mary's headaches might become chronic; and, with a mention of the merry wedding we had on the 14th of February last, I conclude these Reminiscences of St. Valentine's Day.