

BOOK OF THE WEEK.

AN HONEST MAN.*

The appropriate title of this graceful tale of Jacobean times aptly describes the simple character of its central figure, John Feast, a wealthy merchant of the City of London.

Not that he had accumulated wealth, for his own share of the business had been modest, though sufficient.

But Elias Tudway had been of the sort with whom money bred, and when he died, being unable to take it with him, he left it to his partner, John Feast.

After having made ample provision for those dependent upon himself and his deceased partner, and having provided in perpetuity for the feeding of twelve poor at the church of All Hallows, where he himself weekly worshipped, there seemed no more for him to spend upon, unless time showed him somewhat.

John's romance—it should be noted that he was a bachelor little short of forty—started by the reception of a note addressed to his late partner, requesting the return of a valuable jewelled fan left with him as a security for money lent. A mysterious letter it was, the mystery which took him some pains to unravel.

The ownership was at last traced to the wife of Sir Charles Otterby, and he set out to seek her, and to return her property. His first meeting with her after his perilous quest in the Lake Country was under romantic circumstances.

It was an old house with walls of prodigious thickness and windows set far back on account of the storms of winter. A silent house! From without came the sound of falling water and the sound of wind and rain, but faintly, by reason of the walls' thickness, within was no sound at all. More than anything John noticed the silence and the feeling of great remoteness.

The woman who dwelt here awhile alone, with a serving maid, was no girl, but in her maturity. Tall, deep-chested, supple as a willow, yet with a strength rare in women. I do not think it ever came to John to think her beautiful; she was she, as the sun is the sun, and the moon the moon.

It was Aurelia, Lady Otterby, whom he had all unwittingly stumbled upon in her retreat from her fashionable gay, and from all accounts, flighty life. John was John, and he accepted her hospitality from the storm without in simple faith.

Though meeting under such strange and isolated conditions they were neither of them constrained and self-conscious. The lady's manner, like herself, was not like any other. She was neither bold nor bashful, but free; it was as if she had known John always, as if they were friends of old standing. He felt it, though as yet he did not so much as know her name.

The next morning he bade her farewell, still unknowing that it was the lady whom he was seeking. He had found his princess; of that he was alone conscious.

"You mount here," she said; "here is the end of the fairy tale."

He stopped abruptly; she met his eyes, then for some reason her own dropped (one thinks they were not wont to drop before a man's regard); a faint colour crept under her skin.

"The end," she repeated. "It is good-bye and thank you."

"Till we meet again," he said.

"We shall not meet," she said. "Never again—not in time, or in your eternity."

"I understand there will be waiting," he said. "I can wait—to eternity if need be."

Notwithstanding, it was no great while before he met her again, and this time it was in the intimacy of my lady's tiring room, amid her frivolous and fashionable circle.

Having stated that he wished to see her ladyship on a matter of business, he was ushered into the room where she was still making her toilet. She in *deshabille*, two gallants fencing with articles from her toilet table, one of whom undexterously overset a pomade pot at her elbow. She called him a name more apt than delicate, and turned to throw a comfit at him.

John stopped in the doorway; she who had turned was she from whom he had parted under the larch trees.

She meets John that same evening and explains what she meant in her farewell for eternity at the house Drysike. She tells him that the name of Aurelia, lady of Sir Charles Otterby, is plenty spoken of. "If you rode northward, seeking Lady Otterby, there's no doubt you heard of her, both before and after you stayed at the house Drysike. What d'ye think of it?"

"Of the house Drysike and the time there?" John said. "A belated spring granted for a little while to one whose year is growing old."

"Is it that to you?" she said, her voice low with remorse.

"A very perfect memory," he said.

There are two Aurelia Otterbys. She tells him that the woman of Drysike is the one. "I said when I bade you farewell there it was for eternity—now you perceive it. Go your ways. Mine are not of them, and never can be."

But John, being of a steadfast nature, constituted himself her devoted knight, and in the end his devotion is rewarded. Worthless Sir Charles meets his death by the hand of a Jacobite who had a grudge against him.

John and Aurelia were married in the February of that year, when it snowed, after the Feast of St. Valentine, and the apple-trees did not blossom till oak-apple day; yet a summer of exceptional beauty and an autumn of abundant fruit.

With this charming little allegory the story closes. We can heartily commend it—a simple chronicle, told with rare delicacy.

H. H.

* By Una L. Silberrad. (London: Hutchinson).

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