

BETWEEN FRIENDS.

BY JOHN HABBERTON.



MONGAREW and Puttenham were joint owners of the most successful general store in the large and flourishing town of Millway; they were also the most interesting portion of the store's contents.

The men of Millway liked them because they were the best natured of the merchants who were "square" in business, and also, because with their other commodities, Mongarew and Puttenham had the best assortment of good stories in town, and "kept up" this department of the stock with admirable industry and taste.

Women found the partners polite, truthful and obliging. The same might be said of other Millway shop-keepers, but there were two additional causes of the popularity of Mongarew and Puttenham with the fair sex; one of these no competitor could hope for, while the other he could not expect, unless he first went through a certain bereavement, for Mongarew was a bachelor, while Puttenham had been a widower so long that his grief was several years past the period of outward display.

As each member of the firm was on the sunny side of forty, had good manners, and was not bad looking, it is not necessary to explain further why both were held in high regard by the unmarried women of a town, which had not yet outgrown the size at which a shop-keeper is as good socially as any other man. It should be said, however, that both men were socially inclined, could be depended upon to take part in anything, from a Sunday School picnic to a masquerade dance, and that they frequently "entertained" in capital style in their bachelor quarters, which were the most spacious and handsomely furnished rooms in the town, and cared for by an old woman, who was a model cook.

It is a paradox which every one will understand, that the unmarried condition, which made the partners specially interesting to women collectively, was one which many damsels and widows endeavored to end for one partner or the other. No one could blame the dear creatures, for attractive unmarried men who are well established in business are scarce, even in large cities. One

of Millway's aspiring young women expressed the general sentiment of her competitors in the matrimonial race when she exclaimed one day at a lunch party, where Mongarew and Puttenham were being discussed as possible husbands for some one:

"Think of the comfort of marrying into the best general store in town."

Much effort and disappointment might have been prevented had the partners announced publicly the agreement they made, when they started in business together, that neither should marry, nor even become engaged to be married, until he was worth at least ten thousand dollars, aside from his share of the business. They had seen many another clever chap marry without counting the cost, and afterward seen him lose his spirits, his business, and perhaps his wife, to say nothing of leaving a large bill, long unpaid, at the observers' own store. On the other hand, a snug little business, with ten thousand dollars on the outside, was equal to any of the vicissitudes of wedlock—at Millway (happy Millway!)

The partners lived so loyally up to the spirit of this agreement that for several years neither of them weakened even so much as to indulge in a heartache—this, too, despite the fact that women's hearts were as sweet and women's faces as fair at Millway as anywhere else. Yet both men afterward thought, each for himself, that it was a startling coincidence that the very day a balance sheet showed each partner to be a full ten thousand dollars ahead of the business, was the first day that either saw the fascinating, bewildering, adorable Leah Rashwell.

The lady entered the store at a moment when no other customers chanced to be present, and although her attire was plain and her manner unassuming, her beauty, or some peculiarity of it, affected both men powerfully. Neither partner neglected business, however, and between them they succeeded in selling the new customer several dollars' worth of the little nothings which are everything to women. Millway women usually carried their purchases home with them, that being the custom of the town, but it was a rule at Mongarew and Puttenham's to assume that any ladylike stranger was from the city, and should have city treatment. So, after payment had been made, Puttenham asked:

"Where shall we send your purchases, madam?"

"To Mrs. Rashwell, at——"

"Your husband's initials, please?"

The lady looked pained and embarrassed, and her lips quivered a bit as she dropped her eyes and said :

"I have no husband. Send the things to Mrs. Rashwell, at Mrs. Wickerman's."

"It shall be done at once, madam. Good-day, madam."

As the lady left the store Mongarew remarked :

"That was a rather bad break you made, Putt."

"Why, Mongie," wailed Puttenham, who had red hair and the nerves that are supposed to accompany it, "how in creation was I to imagine her a widow? No veil—no black clothes; you don't mean to say that you noticed any indications of widowhood about her?"

"N—n—o, but I wasn't looking for any. All I saw was the most interesting, superb woman I ever laid eyes on. I wonder what her husband died of? If I'd been he I'd have stayed alive in spite of all the diseases and doctors in the world, with such a woman to live for. Such eyes! Such hands! Such expression."

"Yes, yes, yes; I saw all that myself, but it doesn't explain how I should have known that she was a widow. She's city folks—that's plain enough. Do you suppose city women don't wear black when they lose their husbands?"

"There's no telling—until the next time one of us goes on to buy goods. Still, I shouldn't be surprised if you've hit it; there's no knowing what new fancy city women may take into their changeable heads. 'Twill be bad for business, though, if any such fashion strikes our town."

Mongarew started for the door; Puttenham followed; saying :

"So she's stopping at Mrs. Wickerman's! Well, the old lady deals with us, so we'll know all about the widow before this time to-morrow. I hope the widow herself will drop in again; she's a close buyer, as I suppose you noticed, but——"

"She may look at goods here all day long, even if she doesn't buy a dollar's worth," interrupted Mongarew.

"Mongie," said Puttenham plaintively, "I wish you wouldn't take words out of my mouth. Don't take up the whole doorway, either; it isn't good shape for a man to stand with his arms akimbo, like a washerwoman. There—now I can get a look at her. Hasn't she style, though? Walks like a queen!"

That afternoon Mongarew added a column of figures four times before he was certain as to the total; in the meantime Puttenham was so particular about getting a proper messenger to

deliver Mrs. Rashwell's purchases that old Mrs. Wickerman's servant came to the store to ask what had become of those things that were to be sent up at once.

Next day old Mrs. Wickerman came into the store. Although several other customers were present, both partners made several attempts to wait on the old lady "out of her turn," and together to learn what were her orders. To their great relief they learned that she was in no hurry, and, indeed, preferred to wait, as she wished to speak to both of the firm about a personal matter. The other customers got things at their own prices that morning, and the store was soon cleared; then the partners invited Mrs. Wickerman into the private office in the rear of the store, gave her a very easy chair, and begged her to consider their time wholly at her service.

"Why, gentlemen," said the old lady, "'tain't a matter that I've any right to bother you about, but you're both so good-natured, and got so much head-piece, and always sympathetic like, that I thought you wouldn't mind helpin' me about her."

"Her?" echoed both partners in unison.

"Yes; I mean Leah Rashwell, poor dear, that I've known ever since she was a baby. She was in here yesterday, wasn't she? You saw her?"

"Saw her?" echoed Puttenham. "Just listen to that, Mongie!"

"Putt!" exclaimed Mongarew, severely, "keep your head on your shoulders, and don't disturb Mrs. Wickerman. Yes, ma'am, we saw her, and I wouldn't have missed the sight for——"

"Mongie," said Puttenham, in his sweetest manner, "keep your head on your shoulders, old man. Go on, please, Mrs. Wickerman."

"Yes," added Puttenham, "and tell us first how long her husband has been dead, and if not very long, why she don't wear mourning."

"He isn't dead," was the startling reply, "but he might as well be, as far as she is concerned, poor dear thing, for he is divorced."

"Then," said Mongarew, rising from his chair, and attacking the innocent circumambient air with both fists, "he ought to be dead, and I'd like to do the killing. Any man that would give any offense to that particular woman, is too mean to live!"

"You've taken the words out of my mouth once more, as you seem possessed to do, Mongie," complained Puttenham. "But

what can we do in the matter, my dear madam? Count on us for anything."

"And everything," added Mongarew.

"Thank you both, gentlemen. You see, it's this way. This is an awful town for talk about anybody that's new, and Leah's awful sensitive, and she only came here to get some rest and peace, because I nursed her through a fit of sickness once, way out East, when she was a little girl, and ever since then she's called me her second mother. Well, she's so handsome, and striking looking, that folks will begin to ask questions at once, and I ain't very good at keepin' secrets, and I thought if you two gentlemen wouldn't mind startin' the story that she's here for her health, and ain't goin' to stay long, and don't expect to be called on, it'll save her, and me, too, a heap of bother, because I don't need to tell you that the whole town will believe anything you say. 'Twon't be a lie if you say that you know all about her, because I'll tell you all you need to know."

"Tell us right away, ma'am," said Puttenham, drawing his chair close to the old lady. "and the more the better."

"Putt, do restrain yourself," said Mongarew, "and let's agree upon a plan for carrying out Mrs. Wickerman's desires. I think it would be wise to speak of her as a relation—I believe you said she calls you her second mother—a relation of one of our business friends, by whom we mean you, although of course we won't say so. If that does not satisfy public curiosity trust us to give answers which will leave people no wiser than they were."

"I always did say," replied the old lady, while gratitude and admiration beamed through her spectacles, "that you had tact enough to manage anything, Mr. Mongarew."

"But," suggested Puttenham, "to properly carry out my partner's plan, one of us at least, ought to be on speaking terms with the lady. Suppose I walk back home with you——"

"And I'll drop up there in the evening," said Mongarew, with a look such as Puttenham had never seen before on Mongarew.

"How is she fixed?" asked Puttenham. "Did the courts make the scoundrel provide for her properly?"

"No, the poor dear! She's going to try to get a school to teach as soon as she can. She had a splendid education six or eight years ago, and she thinks she's got some of it left."

"She can get a class in any school in this town, if our influence counts for anything," said Mongarew.

"But she shan't!" exclaimed Puttenham. "The idea of a—a

goddess like that wearing herself out over a lot of stupid young ones! There must be something better for her, and there shall be! Suppose I go up now, Mrs. Wickerman, while there's not much doing at the store?"

Puttenham returned in half an hour, and in an extremely talkative frame of mind. A few hours later he greeted Mongarew, on that gentleman's return from an evening call, with:

"Mongie, old man, I want to say something strictly between friends. I'm going to make love to Mrs. Rashwell, and I'm going to marry her, if she'll let me."

"Putt," was the reply, "I desire to say, also strictly between friends, that you'll do nothing of the sort, for I intend to make love to her and marry her myself, if she'll have me."

"Whew!" exclaimed the more excitable partner, dropping into a chair. "I never supposed that you——"

"You never supposed that I was a fool, did you? I've been waiting a good many years for the one woman of all the world. Well, I've found her. But say, old man, there oughtn't to be any trouble between friends—such friends as you and I have always been. Now let's have a fair understanding. Of course the lady herself must do the deciding. Let's each do his best, and may the best man win—the one the lady thinks the best. No tricks, though, such as I've been told that the best men sometimes play in such affairs. I won't say anything but good of you; you be square about me. Let's do the proper thing by her, too, so that nobody in town may imagine what we're up to and start a lot of gossip. That sort of thing, you know, would get to her ears sooner or later and make her miserable; besides, it might hurt us in business. There, I've said my say; now have yours."

"Mine? Well, old man, I say—shake!"

The next day was the busiest that Mongarew and Puttenham's store had ever known, although most of the customers did more talking than buying. Every one seemed to know of the new arrival and was curious about her; every one had heard from Mrs. Wickerman or from some one who had seen her, that Mongarew and Puttenham were the proper persons to question about Mrs. Rashwell. The partners went through the ordeal with true business tact, although they could not avoid praising the lady in a manner that made some other women go away more curious than when they came.

In the afternoon Mongarew stole time in which to take Mrs. Rashwell out for a drive; in the evening Puttenham called to

offer the firm's influence in getting the lady a school. Day by day each partner devised some excuse to see the lady; each was certain that he had only his business manner when other persons chanced to be present, yet a week had not gone by when at least a dozen women had told several other dozens that both Mongarew and Puttenham were dead in love with "the city widow," as Mrs. Rashwell was called. There was a perceptible change of manner in some of the feminine customers at the store, so one day Puttenham remarked, during a lull of business:

"Look here, Mongie; between friends—of course, I wouldn't breathe it to any one else, I'm afraid you've been giving yourself away in public, somehow, regarding her. You know who I mean, of course."

"Putt," replied Mongarew, with a slight frown, "allow me to recall a bit of Scripture to your mind; pull the beam out of your own eye before you try to pick motes out of mine. Why, you transparent infant, the way you looked at her yesterday when she came into the store to buy a spool of silk was enough to give you away to any one with eyes in his head. There were three or four other people in the store at the time, too."

"Mongie," replied Puttenham, with a pitying smile, "I wish you could have seen yourself as you passed the store with her yesterday, when you were driving. Anybody that didn't know you would have thought from the expression of your face that you were already married, and that your honeymoon was at the full, and without a cloud in front of it."

The subject of conversation was promptly changed, and each partner resolved to pull himself together, but the mischief seemed already done, so far as the general public was concerned. At least two spirited, yet patient, widows and five maidens "took away their trade" from Mongarew and Puttenham—a fact of which the partners became cognizant for themselves, by standing in their own doorway and surveying the business street at moments when not much was doing inside. Puttenham told himself that it didn't matter—he could better afford to lose fifty customers than lose Leah Rashwell, but Mongarew suddenly exclaimed:

"Between friends, old man, I think we'd both better make all possible haste in our affairs with the one woman of all the world. Whichever gets her, it will be a great thing for trade, for everybody takes a kindly interest in a bridegroom. She's no fool; our reputations are good, and I don't doubt that old Mrs. Wicker-man is singing our praises all day long."

"Ye—es, unless she smells a mouse, and doesn't approve of what we're up to. She's an old-fashioned woman; I've heard her say, more than once, that she didn't believe it right for divorced people to marry, especially if the divorce wasn't for serious cause, as she says Mrs. Rashwell's wasn't."

"Then the quicker we act, the better. I'll go up there at once, and——"

"Now, Mongie, between friends, do you think that would be fair?"

"Why not?"

"Because the man who speaks first has the best chance; women are made that way, provided that they haven't decided for themselves beforehand. There's no conceit about me, so I'm free to say that I haven't the slightest idea as to which of us she likes best. If she's like other folks, I should say we were about neck and neck in the race for her good graces, so we ought to play fair with each other at the finish."

"But how? We can't go together, and ask her which of us she'll have."

"No, but we can decide in some fair way which of us shall go first." Puttenham took a dollar from his pocket and continued: "Let's match; best two in three for the first chance to speak to her."

"Agreed," said Mongarew, taking a coin from the money-drawer and covering it with his hand. "Head or tail?"

"Head," replied Puttenham, his rosy cheeks turning pale as he spoke. Mongarew raised his hand, frowned, and said:

"Head it is. Now I match you."

Puttenham's hand trembled as he covered his coin. Mongarew's hand and coin came down like the crack of doom, as he said:

"Tail." Both hands were raised quickly; then Puttenham's cheeks regained their natural color, as Mongarew exclaimed:

"Hang it! Well, it's your first say."

Puttenham looked tenderly at his partner. There was a moment of silence, before he said:

"Between friends, Mongie—I wouldn't say it to any other man in such a case, but—let's make it best three in five."

"It's just like you, you dear old boy, but I never took advantage of you yet, and I'm not going——"

"You're not taking it; I'm giving it. Go on. Cover your coin. Head. That time you got it. Well, I feel better—for the

moment. Once again; I say tail—and I've missed it. Go ahead! Last call! If——"

At that very instant a stranger entered the store, a man of about the merchants' own age, and one whom both partners promptly "sized up," and correctly, as a physician.

"Gentlemen," said he, "will you kindly direct me to the house of Mrs. Wickerman?"

"Certainly, sir," replied Puttenham. "I hope the good old lady isn't ill?"

"Probably not, but I've been called, by a letter from her, to see a lady who is stopping with her."

"What? Mrs. Rashwell?" exclaimed Mongarew. "Why, she was the picture of health only yesterday."

"Ah! Quite likely. Still there are cases——"

"I can show you the way from the door, sir," said Puttenham. After acting on his suggestion, Puttenham returned, turned his coin in his hand several times, looked at it thoughtfully, and finally said:

"Between friends, Mongie, don't you think we'd better put off the last matching until—well, it wouldn't be exactly the thing to propose to a sick woman. Women are delicate creatures, and——"

"You're a gentleman, Putt, and so am I. But I feel like an invalid myself."

"Here's another, Mongie," sighed Puttenham.

Both were made to feel worse in a few moments, for Mrs. Wickerman's servant came into the store and said:

"The Missus says you're both to come up to the house right away." Then she disappeared before any question could be asked of her.

"It's something serious!" exclaimed Puttenham. "I'll bet it's heart disease; they say those brilliant beauties often have it. Lock the money drawer, old man, and let's hurry along. She may want us to witness a will or something."

As they hurried through the business street people stared at them and wanted to ask questions, but the two men were too busy with their own thoughts to pay attention to anyone. They were somewhat startled, however, on entering Mrs. Wickerman's house, to see the supposed invalid sitting beside the doctor and looking handsomer than ever.

"Gentlemen," said Mrs. Wickerman, "I've been dead set on bringin' these two people together again, for they never

ought to have separated. The minister will be here in a minute, and as Leah and the doctor are the kind that hate fuss and gossip, I didn't know of any closer mouthed two people than you to call in as witnesses."

Puttenham's jaw fell, but Mongarew succeeded in saying :

"We couldn't have asked a greater honor."

"You took the words out of my mouth, Mongie," said Puttenham.

The ceremony was short; when it ended, Mrs. Wickerman said :

"If I've got a right to say anythin', and I think I have, all things bein' considered, I want to say that for a lot of reasons I think the witnesses ought to be allowed to kiss the bride."

The partners blushed furiously, but the bride reassured them with a dazzling smile and gave a cheek to each.

It was remarked afterwards by several persons that when Mongarew and Puttenham returned to their store that day they walked arm in arm, and with the air of men who owned the town. Natives hurried to the store to ask what had been going on, but the only answer they got, until the happy couple had left the town, was :

"Merely a matter of business; our signatures were wanted for a business paper."

When at last they found themselves alone, Puttenham extended his hand and said :

"Mongie, I wouldn't have thought it two or three hours ago, but we've come out of this affair exactly even."

Mongarew extended his own right hand, passed the other across his lips, and replied :

"Putt, between friends, I've no hesitation in saying that we did—God bless her."