

**CONSEQUENCES**

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Consequences by Egerton Castle

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# CONSEQUENCES.

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PART I.  
GEORGE KERR.

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## CHAPTER I.

### HOW GEORGE KERR REPENTED AT LEISURE.

Popular proverbs—those short statements of long experience—must, from their very essence, be various and even contradictory on almost every question.

Concerning marriage especially—that most solemn, uncertain, and fatal of human engagements—do they wax numerous and conflicting, even as are the consequences of a bid at the eternal lottery.

“Happy the wooing that’s not a long a-doing,” is an acceptable maxim, and a wise, in the estimation at least of young and ardent love. It fits admirably with other well-known emotional prognostications anent the risky undertaking: “Happy is the bride the sun shines on,” and such-like. Alas that its natural cross, “Marry in haste and repent at leisure,” should ever prove equally opposite!

People who plunge headlong into very early matrimony have, as a rule, ample opportunity to test the pithiness of both proverbs.

Rapturous always their first impressions; but, in a little while, the inevitable sobering process once fairly started—with the whole of a life stretching drearily before them a lengthy series of wasted capabilities—grim their reflections on the endless consequences of one imprudent step!

The various aspects of leisurely repentance formed in the year 1857 a main theme in the mental existence of Mr. George Kerr, who was then aged twenty-three.

## 6 How George Kerr Repented at Leisure.

Arrived at the green door of his little house in Mayfair, he paused a moment in disheartened and bitter cogitation. No doubt she was lying in wait for him up-stairs, preparing a scene in punishment for their last quarrel. . . . No peace for him, night or day! Was it astonishing that he was sick—sick to death—of all this?

He turned the key in the door, and let himself in with a muttered curse on his unhappy home. Contrary to orders, when all had retired except himself, the lights were still blazing in the hall; on the other hand, the lamp had burned itself out in his smoking-room, and filled it with nauseating darkness. His savage pull at the bell brought the sleepy footman tumbling up-stairs before his eyes were well opened.

"Why are you not in bed—why is there a light in the hall?"

"Mrs. Kerr has not yet come in," said the man in injured tones.

"Not come in . . . ?"

There was a lengthy silence.

"You can go to bed," said George at last, with forced calmness. "First take that lamp away, and light the candles. I shall wait up for your mistress."

There had been nothing very particular about the day just elapsed. It had only differed in details from that of almost every day since chill disillusion had first entered into George Kerr's mad paradise—so few weeks after the irrevocable deed had been sealed—but it was destined to have far-reaching consequences.

From the very morning, as the youthful husband sat to a cold, ill-served, solitary breakfast—the mistress of the house as usual sleeping late in the day after the worldly exertions of the night—the sense of his injuries had been strong upon him.

Only a year ago, at that very hour, he was standing beside his bride in the solemn Cathedral of Seville, and in galling contrast to the high hopes, the proud rapture, which then had filled him, the dead failure of the present rose, specter-like, to mock him, and would not be laid again. He recalled how he had looked down with palpitating heart on the blushing, smiling face, lace-veiled, by his side; how the touch of the slim fingers, as he held them within his, thrilled him through and through; with what a tender earnestness, what faith and love—God knows!—he had vowed to cherish her till death;—recalled the tumult of joy with which he had led her down the aisle, his wife! . . .

It would be curious to look back on, in truth, if it were not almost maddening.

The quarrel had started, trivially enough, by his re-



## How George Kerr Repented at Leisure. 7

fusal to escort her to the ball that evening. In no humor to put himself out for her this day, he had vowed himself determined to have a quiet evening for once at any price. She pouted, protested, wept and stormed in vain, finally brushed away her tears, and, with sudden calm defiance, announced her determination to go alone.

"If you do," had retorted the husband, fairly roused, "I shall never forgive you." And thereupon he had flung himself out of the house, to seek in his club the peace and independence refused him in his home.

He had not dreamed she would have dared to disobey him openly; indeed, such an act of emancipation would have been considered so marked in those days of sterner social propriety that he had not for an instant contemplated seriously the possibility of her carrying out her threat; and his anger was deep indeed when he discovered the fact.

Gone to that infernal ball! Gone, in the very teeth of his command!

"Before heaven, she actually browbeats me!" he cried, as, once more alone, he paced the little room from end to end, gradually collecting his thoughts after the first blank confusion of his rage.

The silver clock on the mantelpiece struck twice in its chirpy way. She was enjoying herself, without doubt, not thinking of returning home for another hour or so, bathing her soul in the adulation that was as the very breath of life to her. Oh! he could see her, prodigal of smiles and those soft long looks which he had thought were for him alone, yielding herself, with all the voluptuous grace that had once enthralled him, to the delight of the dance. And her husband—dangling fool!—where was he?

He could hear the half-mocking inquiry some confidential swain would breathe into the dainty shell of her little ear, and Carmen's careless answer: "She did not know; at his club, she supposed."

And the "husband at home," viciously chewing the stump of an extinct cigar, seething, not in thoughts of jealousy—for passion had burned itself out long ago, and love had been stifled by ever-recurring disappointment—but in maddening anger at the despicable situation he had created for himself, swore a great oath that he would afford food for such laughter no longer.

Yet what to do? 'Ay, there was the rub!

He could not beat her, he could not break her—and she defied him.

The sense of his own impotence met him on every side.

"Yes, look at yourself!" he snarled, as he caught sight of

his morose face in the glass, and paused in his caged tramp to glare at it. "Look! think of your driveling folly, and despise yourself for one moment of weakness! You will now have to put up with the consequences, George Kerr, 'till death do you part!" . . . You are the guardian of a beautiful, brainless fool, whom you cannot control, with whom you have nothing in common but the chain which binds you together. He almost laughed aloud as he recalled the mad impatience, the tenacity, the determination with which he carried his point in the face of so many difficulties—unto this end!

And the thought of the dear old regiment he had sacrificed with so light a heart came over him with almost a passion of regret. It was the most glorious, surely, that ever glittered under the sun. Even now it was starting for another spell of doughty work in India, while he—here he was, white-faced, useless, with not even a show of happiness to set off against his waste of youth.

The weary minutes, feverishly ticked off by the little clock, had measured two leaden hours before the young man, storm-spent and heart-sick, could settle on a feasible plan of action. But at length, as the rays of dawning day were creeping through the curtain folds a glimmer of light broke over the chaos of his mind. She had promised to obey and honor him, as he to cherish her, but she was, even now, sinning against that vow. And if she refused to keep her part of the contract, why need he hold himself to his? Let her obey, as a wife is bound to obey her husband, or he would put her from him, and be surely justified before God and man in so doing.

George, under the relief of his new-found determination, flung himself on a deep arm-chair and gradually fell into a sort of drowsy, semi-conscious condition, from which a loud rattle of wheels and a sharp peal of the bell aroused him to a vivid sense of the moment's importance.

Drawing his weary limbs together, he rose with a stern composure to open the door to his wife.

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## CHAPTER II.

### HOW HE MARRIED IN HASTE.

It is an idle exercise of the mind, and yet one which has its fascination in moments of dreamy meditation, that searching back into the far past of our own or our neighbor's life for the distant cause, the seemingly unimportant event, which

may have been the starting-point in the present concatenation of things.

And yet, after all, what is often most striking in such reflections is the sometimes inconceivable smallness, even absurdity, of the incident which leads to such far-reaching results. A thought, a look, a word, is sufficient to start a new train of circumstances. Our existence has been rolling in its ordinary groove, we have been treading the road of everyday life, apparently without a prospect of ever diverging from it, when there comes a something so trivial as well-nigh to escape notice—a pebble which did but turn the wheel of fortune ever so little from its course, and, behold, what a change! What strange lands lie before us!—may be, what racking experiences in the narrow circle of our joy and pain!

That the present curious relations of the last two representatives of that ancient race, the Kerrs of Gilham, would never have come about save for certain side-events, seemingly irrelevant, in the life of their grandsire, is a fact which would doubtless much vex his sturdy old ghost were it brought home to him. And yet, again, these events would never have occurred had not the course of Lord Wellington's operations in the Peninsula obliged him to attack Marmont's strong position of Los Arapiles on the 22d of July, 1812, on which day was achieved the bloody victory now heralded "Salamanca" on the colors and standards of thirty-five of our regiments. During the course of that fierce struggle it fell to the lot of Lieutenant Kerr, whose captain had already been shot, to dislodge with a company of Highlanders a party of troublesome Imperial Voltigeurs from a certain crenelated village called Santa Maria de la Peña. At a critical moment he was, through the fortune of war, opportunely re-enforced by a party of the 3d "Ligeros," gallantly led by a Spanish officer, one Don Atanasio de Ayala, anxious in his burning national pride to imitate, if possible to rival, the exploits of the Northerners.

It was a hard-fought day. By the time the Imperials had sullenly but unequivocally yielded the ground, both the Spanish and the English officer were severely wounded. Discovered side by side, scarcely breathing, but still alive, they were carted off to experience together the horrors of a Peninsular ambulance. Both were young men, almost boys. They had seen each other at work, and in the close intimacy in which they were thus thrown cemented such a friendship as is made only amid hardships doughtily shared and dangers met in common.

Now, but for that breathless meeting on the torrid crags of Arapil el Grande, certain human existences would undoubtedly, in distant days to come, when Peninsular events had long