

ALMACK'S REVISITED :

OR,

HERBERT MILTON.

CHAPTER I.

AT that period of the year, when the western part of the metropolis again receives to its bosom the gay and eager votaries of fashion—when numerous well-packed and heavily-laden equipages may be seen in continual succession disgorging their contents in the vicinity of the squares—when hotel-keepers, who, during the dead season have been comparatively poor, and consequently proportionably civil, now commence the bustle of their business, and with it the extent of their extortion and impertinence—when the gentle nightingale, the Pasta of the grove, and pirate cuckoo, the Schinder wannes of the woods, enliven the dale and woodland with their early notes—when the first glad sunbeams of spring call from its winter prison each tender bud and fragrant blossom, robing the forest and the field in all the vigour of virgin foliage and vegetation, having, at the same time, the singular effect of scaring from the country every individual who can afford even a lodging in London; as if the sight of bare hedges, leafless trees, and withered herbage, alone possessed any picturesque beauties, or offered any rural charms to their eyes—when mothers and mantua-makers, alike interested in the important operation of match-making, (the principal occupation of all classes at this conjunctive moment,) pass in speculative review the list of youths who, since last season, have attained the emancipatory and nubible age of twenty-one; the former mentally appropriating to their daughters the actual possession, or future reversion of

coronets, bloody hands, or at least ample landed property ; while the others content themselves with the prospect of furnishing lace veils, costly dresses, and all the other momentous ingredients of the *Trousseau*.—Splendid and enchanting visions ! how often are ye formed, and, alas ! how often do a few short months dissipate the bright illusion, and destroy the goodly and maternal dream !—

At that gay period, when Peers, Meltonians, or green peas, are neither ashamed, the one to be seen or the other to be eaten in town—when the celebration of anniversary dinners, political meetings, and pious unions, cause the walls of Freemasons' Hall to ring alternately with the sounds of boisterous toasts, merry songs, often-repeated and tedious speeches of reform, or still more tedious and saintly hymns,—when charity balls and charity concerts, under the patronage of some fair decoys of Fashion, extract from the pocket of the unwilling beau his one pound one, and offer to his eager sisters or cousins their only chance of even inhaling the same air respired by the elect of the day—last sad resource of Almack's discarded applicants ;—when White's bow-window, once more crowded with its phalanx of critics, obliges many a "would be," to prefer the shady side of St. James-street, who has not courage to encounter the passing sarcasms which are shot from that fashionable battery, with the effect and celerity of balls from Mr. Perkin's steam-engine.—

Distressing moment ! when many an important personage, who before Easter lounged in all the ease and grandeur of a double Opera-box, embosomed in his well-furred coat—now yielding to increasing prices, descends to join the common ten-and-sixpenny herd, who choke the pit, contenting himself, like a fallen angel, with sighing and looking up from the depths of the black abyss upon the brilliant galaxy where erst he himself appeared a conspicuous and envied luminary ; or perhaps by way of revenge retires to the sea-side, for the benefit of his wife's health, lets his house for the season at an extravagant price, and lives rent-free for the remainder of the year. But I have already extended my catalogue of *whens* to an unnecessary length ; and as I conclude my readers have by this time

pretty well ascertained the season of the year to which I allude, and are anxious for me to commence my narrative, I shall without farther delay enter upon my subject.

At the period then to which I have referred, in the year 18—, a heavily laden post-chaise was seen to ascend Berkeley Square, and at length to draw up at the door of Mr. Thomas's Hotel. From the outward appearance of the equipage, its luggage, and attendant, there was every reason to surmise that the traveller had lately arrived from one of our Eastern possessions.

On the roof of the vehicle were fastened sundry boxes, parcels, and packages, of foreign and anomalous appearance; at all events, looking like any thing rather than the neatly-polished cases and convenient imperials of Messrs. Hudson; and what man with any taste or regard for his own comfort would either trust his coats or his boxes to the boots or springs of any other coach-maker?

A curiously-formed cage, in which an enormous cockatoo dangled to and fro, was attached to one of the front windows, whose shrill screams outnoised even the rumbling of the wheels or clattering of the horses' hoofs. A large yellow chest, which might on the banks of the Ganges have served as a load for a full-toothed elephant, was secured behind; while a native servant—his head enveloped in the ample folds of a snow-white turban, rings in his ears not much inferior in size to a fourth-form boy's hoop, and the mark of *caste* on his forehead—sat perched on the summit of two or three portmanteaus in front, endeavouring, with one hand grasping the bar and the other clinging to the leather of a spring, to preserve his equilibrium on this novel, and, to judge by the distortion of his countenance, not very agreeable palanquin, when every jolt or jostle threatened to dislodge some of his fine set of teeth, or dislocate limbs which had very much the curve and inclination of Saxon arches.

It was, however, evident, that the inmate of the machine was not only a personage of some wealth and importance, but that his arrival had been anticipated, and preparations made for his reception.

No sooner had the vehicle halted at the door than two or three tall footmen, with more than the usual proportion

of powder, fringe, and lace, headed by a man out of livery, having the portly bearing of a butler or steward, and followed by a string of waiters and porters, rushed into the street, while the master of the hotel and the very important personage his wife, advanced as far as the landing-place, and, without compromising their own dignity, proceeded to make their obeisance and offer their welcome to the new comer as they ushered him up-stairs to the suite of apartments prepared for his occupation.

Upon the first landing-place, the stranger, who was a man rather advanced in years, but of lofty carriage, dignified, and particularly gentlemanlike though stern appearance, was eagerly met by a still beautiful and interesting-looking woman, many years younger than himself.

At the sight of this fair personage the traveller extended his arms and quickened his pace, which hitherto had expressed more of Indian dignity and official solemnity, than any of that warm-hearted English anxiety when one is about to meet some dear loved object. A moment, however, sufficed to lock the couple in each other's arms.

"My dearest Sir Herbert,"—"My dearest Laura," was heard mutually to escape their lips as the door of the saloon closed upon them.

A tremendous uproar had, however, arisen down-stairs in consequence of a quarrel between Singée, the native servant, and one of the other domestics. The former, accustomed for many years to hold absolute control over the stranger's household in India, and to superintend the packing or unloading his master's elephants and travelling equipage, felt extremely indignant at the simultaneous rush made by the different assistants to remove into the house the varied contents of the carriage, not only without his orders, but even without the compliment of a single *salam*.. After rolling his dark eyes with the look of a demon, and grinning like an enraged tiger, he uttered a thousand curses in his native tongue, now and then breaking in with "He Massa Gorormighty leab him, Cackadoo up him Palakin! Why for debil, Gobernor no kick him, damn tiebs, at a bottom up a stairs? Och, Gorra! Gorra no touch him. Rajah Palaum! ok a bite him blood op a finger!"

The domestics, however, continued their operations, utterly regardless of the poor man's anger, and took no other notice of him than now and then saying, "Here, catch hold, Blacky!" as they handed out a parcel, which of course added to his fury and their amusement.

Singée had, however, borne all this hitherto, without coming to any overt act of violence, until he saw one of the footmen take possession of his master's writing-case, which the faithful native knew contained the traveller's most valuable papers; then losing all command of himself, he roared out, "Houka, raskill, no steal him, Srarbert pepper box!" and then feeling for his handjar, which was stuck through the fold of a shawl girdle, he made a rush at the servant, and would inevitably have put an end to the man's farther servitude in this world, had not his arm been fortunately arrested, and the dagger wrenched from his grasp by another domestic.

Deprived of his native weapon and bursting with fury, Singée, who was a man of immense muscular strength, now turned his rage against the well-dressed and highly powdered foe who had providentially saved his neck from the gallows. In an instant he darted at the footman, seized him by the waist with both his arms, while he fastened like a bull-dog with his teeth on the lackquy's well-studied tie; and then ensued a most terrific struggle between them, which none of the by-standers at first attempted to interrupt.

While the two combatants were straining every nerve for mastery, Rajah Palaum, who was no other than a peculiarly scarce and rare monkey of a large size, which the traveller intended as a present to the King, and who had hitherto remained a passive spectator, upon seeing his friend and companion Singée in danger of having his lungs rendered useless by the vice-like grasp of the brawny footman, after showing his teeth, and gabbling a short declaration of war, now sprung from his corner on the back of the latter, and seizing the but-end of the postilion's whip, commenced a tremendous attack upon the bare and powdered head of his friend's antagonist. Unable to resist this fresh reinforcement, the footman began to relax his efforts, while his foes redoubled theirs; and in an instant the two were seen rolling and floundering in

the kennel, where the two foreigners, unaccustomed to the mode of British fighting, and utterly regardless of the law of honour, which forbids striking a fallen foe, continued to batter the vanquished enemy without feeling or mercy; and where I am under the necessity of leaving them to the care of the spectators while I proceed to render some account of Sir Herbert and Lady Milton.

Sir Herbert Milton was the cadet of a junior branch of an ancient and distinguished family in the West of England. His father, who was himself a younger son, and had a large family to provide for, had been happy to accept for his boy a writership at one of our Presidencies in the East, in exchange, and as a sort of remuneration, for some important electioneering services rendered to the member of a neighbouring borough; his two elder sons being already provided for in the army, in which service they both terminated a short and early career.

Consequently, at the age of sixteen, with an order for fifty pounds per annum on an agent at _____ in his pocket, the usual quantity of shirts and stockings in his trunks, a liberal allowance of parental advice in his heart, and a tolerable proportion of Hindostanee and Bonny-castle in his head, the young Herbert was shipped off for India, either to make his fortune or die of bile, as Providence in its wisdom might afterwards direct.

Next to the convenient assistance which that very useful, healthy, and efficient colony of Sierra Leone affords to the War Office and Colonial Department, in disposing of and safely providing for a host of troublesome applicants, who infest the Duke's levee, or that of the President of the Board of Control, there is nothing that can be compared to a writer or cadetship in India, for a father anxious to provide for an enterprising son, especially if the station have the advantage of being a little unhealthy; for, in that case, advancement and promotion are on the one hand more rapid, and fortunes more speedily amassed, while on the other, if the jungle or any other fever should unfortunately prove fatal to the neophyte, a few tears, and a black coat, save a wonderful deal of care, trouble, and expense.

Herbert Milton had been from his earliest years a boy

of cold, uncongenial, and reserved disposition, coupled with the most firm, unbending resolution, and the most ardent desire for improvement. His unwearied application to his primer had early given great delight to the village pedagogue intrusted with the commencement of his literary pursuits; indeed it might have gladdened the heart of the worthy Mrs. Barbauld herself, as much as his propensity to economise his weekly pocket-money enchanted that of his father, from whom he regularly, it is true, asked for his gingerbread allowance, but never spent it. There were, however, occasions when he evinced the greatest liberality, amounting to profusion: this trait, (which was one of his leading characteristics through life,) added to a spirit of chivalrous honour and integrity, and an abhorrence of falsehood, excited the surprise and admiration of every one from his youngest days.

Indeed, to such a point did Milton carry this high and noble sentiment of honour, that from the period of his first introduction into the world, until the moment of my introducing him to the acquaintance of my readers, he was proverbial for never having uttered an untruth even in jest, as well as for never having broken a promise, however trifling and insignificant.

Many years had not passed over the head of the young adventurer in India, ere his unwearied attention to his duties, and his reputation for punctuality and integrity, attracted the attention, not only of the Government abroad, but that of the Court of Directors at home. For once, merit met with its reward; and his advancement and success were unusually rapid. He was appointed to fill employments, in which, had he followed the advice or example of his co-employés, he might speedily have amassed a colossal fortune, and converted the confidential situations he held into mines of wealth—even as his predecessors had done before him.

Possessing not alone the good opinion, but the unbounded confidence of the Governor-general, every opportunity was afforded him of increasing his fortune, by means which has hitherto been considered perfectly excusable. But Mr. Milton's appointment, as a high public servant, at once formed a new era, an absolute revolu-

tion in the administration of affairs. Instead of giving an indirect sanction, by winking at the common system of speculation, and of rendering himself, whenever the occasion offered, the ready medium of bribery, which had so long been carried on with impunity between the native chiefs and government officers, he was resolved to strike at the root of the evil, and if possible to put an end to a custom so detrimental to the justice of the laws, and so prejudicial to the interests of the Company.

It was Mr. Milton's wish to give to our official employments on the Indian Continent the same character for integrity and probity which they possess at home;—in short, to establish for them a reputation far different from that which they had hitherto merited and enjoyed; and it was to be expected, with such views of reform, openly professed and acted up to, and of which Mr. Milton gave the strictest example in his own conduct—joined to the cold, and unsocial manners which were natural to him,—that he should become rather an object of fear and respect, than of friendship and regard, to the different gentlemen who formed the society at the seat of Government.

His temperate and frugal habits, the spirit of economy which he had so early imbibed, and had continued to practise with the greatest severity, together with his love of study and taste for retirement, in a great measure secluded him from the parties of amusement and diversion, which most other residents were eager to enjoy.

Wrapped in the duties of his station, and permitting himself little recreation, Mr. Milton had hitherto remained a bachelor; indeed, he had allowed himself few opportunities of indulging in the society of the other sex, who, when they did meet, looked upon him, in despite of a very handsome person, as a man sworn to celibacy, and as utterly impenetrable as the Fort of Bhurtphore—and consequently gave up all idea of laying siege to the large fortune, which, though untruly, he was said to have accumulated. Having, however, nearly attained his fortieth year, Mr. Milton himself began to consider, that if ever he intended to marry, it was high time to look out for some fair person who might take upon herself the interesting functions of scolding his servants, spending his

money, contradicting himself, and rearing half-a-dozen children to assist in getting rid of his savings. Casting his eyes over the contents of the Indian female bazaar, Mr. Milton fixed his choice (for even here the men are privileged to throw the handkerchief) on Laura Crosbie, one of the most beautiful and amiable creatures that had ever been exported from the mother country for the speculative purpose of what is called "hooking a Nabob."

There is something peculiarly characteristic of the commercial spirit which pervades the people of this country, in thus converting the daughters of a family into mere articles of barter and exportation: it is strange to hear of whole cargoes of these fair consignments, migrating by every outward bound fleet, with a view of seeking husbands and establishments on the shores of Malabar, or the coast of Coromandel, where they are forwarded to the care, and consigned to the disposal, of some practised resident's wife, who herself had been shipped off, landed, and put up for sale in a similar manner, some years previous. On their arrival at the destined mart, hundreds of eager eyes await them, and they are quickly bargained and provided for according to their own merits, or the bill of lading despatched by the paternal merchant.

The success of these damsels is, however, rendered much more certain, and their hopes of advantageous matches considerably heightened, if they possess good manners, a few accomplishments, and, above all, if they claim connection, though in a distant degree, with the peerage, or if they happen to be niece or grand-daughter to a baronet, or cousin-german to a member of the lower House. What is called good connection is the first of all requisites; and a young lady possessing this advantage, may almost make her own selection, and even go as far as to refuse one or two of the first bidders.

Among these rare personages, this select band, Miss Crosby, the daughter of an ancient and respectable family in one of our most beautiful midland counties, had the good fortune to be numbered; and she had therefore scarcely recovered from the effects of the voyage, or been introduced into the society of the lady to whom she had been remitted, who was the wife of the highest official per-

sonage, ere she became an object of rivalry and admiration among the gentlemen of the settlement, whose legitimately or illegitimately acquired fortunes permitted them to enter into the hymenial market. A short time convinced Mr. Milton, who to the astonishment of every one now entered more into society, that Miss Crosby was the being of all others most calculated to ensure his happiness; while the young lady, on her part, flattered at the idea of being the first person who had ever been able to draw him from his retirement, or excite any other passion in his breast than the love of his official duties, or perhaps from one of the motives hereafter alluded to, appeared to receive his attentions with satisfaction, and at length yielded to the proposal conveyed to her through the lady of Mr. Milton's chief. In less than six months, then, after her landing in India, Laura Crosby became the wife of Mr. Milton; and although the disparity in their years was considerable, yet every possible happiness appeared likely to be the result of their union.

In the course of three or four years the marriage of Mr. and Mrs. Milton was rendered still more happy by the birth of two children: the eldest a girl, who lived but to attain its third year; the second a boy, the hero of the following narrative. From unremitting attention, during many months, to the care of the little girl, who had been a weak and sickly child from the period of its birth, and from subsequent grief at its loss, combined with the effects of climate and her second *accouchement*, the health of Mrs. Milton received so severe a shock, and became affected to such a degree, that the greatest apprehensions were entertained for her safety. It was therefore urgently advised by the physicians, and strongly recommended by Mr. Milton's friends, that measures should be immediately adopted for her return to Europe, as the only chance of saving her life.

Painful as this alternative must have been to both, Mr. Milton did not hesitate a moment in submitting to the opinions of the medical men, and was anxious to accompany her, but found it impossible to do so without serious loss, and the chance of marring for ever his now rapidly advancing career.

Every preparation being completed, which could afford comfort or pleasure to Mrs. Milton during the voyage, and arrangements having been made for her future establishment (in England) on the most liberal footing, with a sorrowful and almost breaking heart she bade adieu to her husband and infant boy, whose extreme delicacy rendered it impossible that he should accompany her.

It was not until the departure of his beautiful wife,—until he found himself alone with his infant child, that he discovered how dear Mrs. Milton was to him, and how necessary to his happiness; while he felt in its full force all the bitterness of her loss. His grief, it is true, was not expressed in a violent manner, but it was not the less deep and sincere. His former inclination for seclusion now increased to such a degree, that what was before a love of retirement, now almost appeared converted into misanthropy. Devoting himself to the care of his child, who was also destined in a short time to be taken from him, Mr. Milton shut himself up as far as his official duties permitted, and became almost inaccessible even to his few friends.

Many months had not elapsed ere the young Herbert, who had struggled on to his second year, evinced such symptoms of debility, that the only resource left was change of climate. It was therefore determined that the infant should be despatched forthwith to England. To this also Mr. Milton was obliged to consent; and when the child was taken away for embarkation, the grief he had felt at the departure of his wife was renewed, and rendered doubly painful by his being deprived of his only remaining comfort or consolation.

In the mean time Mrs. Milton, whose strength gradually improved as she approached the shores of her native land, arrived safely in England, and was received with open arms by her delighted parents and friends. Care, skilful advice, and judicious treatment, quickly wrought a favourable change, and restored her constitution to its wonted tone. Indeed, so completely was she re-established, that she anxiously looked forward to the idea of again proceeding to join her husband and child, or at least to hear of their speedy return to Europe; a possibility which

Mr. Milton, in his letters, hinted might not be far distant. By the same vessel, however, which conveyed the young Herbert to England, Mr. Milton communicated to his wife not only the anxiety he felt to be again united to her, but declared his intention of not delaying his stay in India beyond a period of three or four years. He therefore recommended her to renounce all idea of returning to India, pointed out the system he wished to be pursued with his boy, in the event of his life being spared, and urged her to the enjoyment of society and amusements, to which she was entitled from her connexions, her personal attractions; and the liberal allowance which he had^d made for her establishment. Year after year, however, rolled on, unforeseen delays occurred, and circumstances arose which induced him to procrastinate the period of his return, of which he still spoke, but with less eagerness. Time, that admirable corrective for all passions, griefs, or joys, not only softened his sorrows, but habituated him more firmly to the secluded and laborious life which he had adopted; at the same time, the many important affairs with which he was intrusted, the multiplicity of business, and with it the honour and credit which fell to his share, (a baronetcy having been conferred upon him,) in gratifying his ambition, in a great measure not only diverted his mind from those ties which otherwise would solely have occupied his thoughts, but entirely banished from his mind all idea of retiring from public life; insomuch, that a period of more than twenty years had elapsed between the departure of Lady Milton from India, and that of Sir Herbert's return to his native country, from which he had been absent upwards of forty-five years.