

"COME HOME, FATHER."

"Father, dear father, come home with me now!
The clock in the steeple strikes one;
You said you were coming right home from the shop
As soon as your day's work was done.
Our fire has gone out—our house is all dark—
And mother's been watching since tea,
With poor brother Benny so sick in her arms,
And no one to help her but me.
Come home! come home! come home!
Please father, dear father! come home."
Hear the sweet voice of the child,
Which the night winds repeat as they roam!
Oh, who could resist this most plaintive of prayers:
"Please father, dear father, come home."

"Father, dear father, come home with me now!
The clock in the steeple strikes two;
The night has grown colder, and Benny is worse—
But he has been calling for you.
Indeed he is worse—Ma says he will die,
Perhaps before morning shall dawn;
And this is the message she sent me to bring:
"Come quickly, or he will be gone."

"Father, dear father, come home with me now,
The clock in the steeple strikes three;
The home is so lonely—the hours are so long
For poor weeping mother and me.
Yes, we are alone—poor Benny is dead,
And gone with the angels of light;
And these were the very last words that he said—
"I want to kiss papa good night."

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TAKEN AT THE FLOOD.

A NEW NOVEL,

By the Author of "Lady Audley's Secret," "Strangers and Pilgrims," &c., &c.

CHAPTER LXIV.—Continued.

"You mean that you would stand by me so long as my acts were such as God and man would approve," said Sylvia, with a thoughtful look, "but if I went out of the straight course—if I asked you to do something that involved difficulty, or even danger, would you stand by me then?"

"Yes, Sylvia, if I could reconcile the act with my own conscience."

"Conscience!" exclaimed my daughter with a sneer, "Since when have you had a conscience?"

"From the hour of my wrong-doing. Remorse awakened my sleeping conscience."

"Well, mother, she exclaimed lightly, "I am not going to put your courage or your affection to the test. What could you do to help me? Nothing. You could not lighten my burden by a feather's weight."

"I don't think it is a very heavy burden for you to bear, Sylvia. You have all things which the world calls good."

"Let the world judge for itself and not for me," she cried contemptuously, "I have not the only blessing that could make life happy for me. I have lost the love of the only man I ever cared for."

"You must have made up your mind to live without that, Sylvia, when you married Sir Aubrey Perriam."

"Oh, I was dazzled, blinded, bewildered by my father's worldly arguments; stung by Mrs. Standen's insinuations. It seemed a grand revenge upon her to marry her son's superior. I forgot that I could not live without Edmund. I did not know my own heart—hardly knew that I had a heart. But I have seen him to-day. I passed him in Monkhampton High-street; saw scorn and regret both in his face, and came home—home to this dreary house—more completely miserable than I have ever been yet."

I tried to convince her of the wickedness of these regrets, this useless sorrow, but with no effect. She poured her tale of love and grief into my ear; told me of her brief engagement to Mr. Standen, his courage, his devotion, and how she had rewarded him by desertion. She humiliated herself to the dust, and though I was compelled to blame I could not withhold my pity.

"Is there any hope of release for me?" she asked at last, looking at me intently with those full, bright eyes, which are always most steadfast when there is some evil thought in her mind. "In Sir Aubrey's wretched state he cannot linger long, I should think."

"Do not cling to that wicked hope," I answered. "Mr. Stimpson told me only a week ago that Sir Aubrey's health has improved wonderfully within the last few months, and that, although he may never regain clearness of intellect or the active use of his left side, he may live to be a very old man."

"What a burden," she exclaimed, "a burden to himself and a burden to me! And we are to go dawdling on year after year with the same joyless objectless existence. When I married I thought I was to lead a life of splendour and pleasure—that the world would teach me to forget my forsaken lover. Do you think I should have been mad enough to enter knowingly upon such a life as this—the life of a convent or a prison? I was twenty times happier at the school-house. If I had only known it," she added, with a profound sigh.

I urged her to do her duty meekly and patiently so that she might feel the tranquil blessedness of a life well spent. I reminded her of her many advantages, and entreated her to contrast her life with the miserable existences which fill that nethermost world where poverty reigns supreme.

"Be happy that your husband is spared to you, and that by your devotion to him in his declining years you may prove your gratitude for the affection which has raised you from a village schoolmaster's daughter to be mistress of Perriam Place," I said, appealing to her worldliness as a last resource. "Be kind to him while you have the power. There is one in his house to whom you have not been over kind, and who may soon have passed beyond the reach of human kindness or unkindness."

"Whom do you mean?" Sylvia asked eagerly.

"Mordred Perriam. He has been slowly fading ever since the shock of his brother's seizure—slipping unawares out of life. He rarely complains, and his descriptions of his malady are so vague and rambling that it is hard to make out the nature of his sufferings. No one ever takes any notice of him. He is of no importance here—a figure always in shadow. I have spoken to Mr. Stimpson more than once about him, but Mr. Stimpson only shrugs his shoulders, and says that Mr. Perriam was always a poor creature—no stamina—organic derangement, will go off some day like the snuff of a candle. Poor fellow, I have done what I can for him, but it is very little."

"And do you really think he is dying?" asked Sylvia, in a half whisper.

"I will not say that; but I believe that his life hangs by the feeblest thread, a thread that may snap at any moment."

Sylvia was silent, and seemed lost in thought. "Have you ever noticed the resemblance between Sir Aubrey and his brother?" she asked at last.

"It is impossible for any one to avoid noticing so strong a resemblance."

"Do you think the likeness has increased since you have been here?"

"To a marked degree."

"And now one brother might easily be mistaken for the other?"

"By a casual observer, perhaps. Not by any one who was intimate with either of the brothers."

"But seen at a distance, or seen for a moment only, or in a half light, one might be mistaken for the other."

"Very easily."

I wondered at questions which seemed frivolous and purposeless. Sylvia said no more upon the subject, and dismissed me, after promising to conquer her grief, and to think no more of Edmund Standen.

For about six weeks life at Perriam went on in the usual way. There was only one change, but that was a marked one. Lady Perriam was a great deal kinder and more attentive to her husband. She spent more of her time in his room—never failed to be by his side when he took his airing on the terrace—read to him—conversed with him—bore with his fretful childish ways, and seemed in everything all that a wife should be.

In my foolish blindness I was proud of the change. I thought that my weak words had caused this improvement.

Mr. Bain left England, and about two days after his departure Mr. Perriam, who had up to this time been able to shuffle to and fro between his own rooms and his brother's, was utterly prostrated by a kind of low fever which followed a severe cold. I suggested to Lady Perriam that Mr. Stimpson should see her brother-in-law, but she said no, peremptorily. I was a better doctor for such simple ailments than Mr. Stimpson, she told me, and I was to nurse Mr. Perriam.

"Mr. Stimpson would give him saline draughts, and rob him of the little strength he has left," she said; "you can bring him round again with beef tea and jellies."

I obeyed, the illness appearing a very simple one. But I hardly took into account the low ebb to which the patient's strength had fallen.

He was not actually confined to his bed, but sat and dozed by the fire, in his easy chair. I went into his room and attended to him as often as I could venture to leave Sir Aubrey, who was always an exacting invalid. Mr. Perriam was all patience, received my attention with gratitude, and thanked me repeatedly, in his feeble voice, for my care.

He asked me to place his chair within reach of some bookshelves close behind the mantelpiece, but placed somewhat high. He could just manage to reach the lowest row of books without rising from his chair. Though too weak to read more than a few minutes at a stretch, it amused him to take down the books and turn the leaves, reading a line here and there.

He had remained in this state for two days, growing neither better nor worse, and I saw no reason for apprehension, feeble as I knew him to be.

Late on the evening of the second day I left Lady Perriam's dressing-room to take Mordred a basin of broth for his supper. It was between ten and eleven, the servants were all gone to bed, Jean Chapelain having retired early, complaining of gout. I had strong reason to suspect that this pretended gout was only a disguise for nightly intoxication. Chapelain's services in the sick-room had long been of the feeblest order. He assisted at his master's morning toilet, read a French novel to him occasionally, and sometimes appeared at ten o'clock to assist in putting Sir Aubrey to bed. For the rest of the evening he generally contrived to be missing. All was quiet in Sir Aubrey's room when I left Sylvia to go to Mr. Perriam. The baronet had gone to bed earlier than usual to suit the convenience of Chapelain, and was sleeping peacefully. I went through the passage of communication to Mr. Perriam's room. He sat in the armchair where I had left him, beside the wood fire, the ruddy blaze of the logs shining full upon him. At the first glance which I cast towards that motionless figure, I uttered a cry of fear, and hurried forward, setting down the broth-basin hastily as I passed the table. His head was thrown back upon the pillow I had placed to support it. One arm was raised above the head, but hung loose and nerveless. An open book lay on the pillow beside the drooping grey head. Mordred Perriam was dead. He might have died any time within the last hour. Only an hour ago I had arranged his pillows, and given him his dose of weak brandy and water. It was clear to me that he had raised himself to reach that volume from one of the higher shelves, and that this slight exertion had been enough to snap the feeble thread of life.

While I stood gazing at him in pained astonishment, a light step approached me, and, looking round, I saw Lady Perriam standing on the other side of the hearth, arrested spell bound, perhaps, by the aspect of that quiet figure in the arm chair.

"What has happened?" she asked.

"Mr. Perriam is dead."

"No, not Mr. Perriam. Sir Aubrey is dead. Mr. Perriam may survive him for many years."

Never had I heard her tone more decided. Never had I seen such a look of decision in her pale set face.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"I mean that the time has come for you to stand by me and help me as you promised you would do, when the time should come. I do not ask any desperate act from you. I only ask you to help me and be true to me. Sir Aubrey is dead in life, almost as dead as yonder corpse. What can it matter to him what name he bears in his living grave? What need he care whether he is called Aubrey or Mordred? As Mordred he

would have the same care—the same indulgence—not a desire of his feeble mind ungratified."

"What madness is this?" I exclaimed. "You can never dream of attempting to substitute this dead man for your living husband." "That is exactly what I do mean," she answered resolutely. "It matters nothing to that paralytic old man whether he occupies one set of rooms or another. But it matters a great deal to me to be free from the hateful bondage that chains me to this dreary house, to be Sir Aubrey's widow instead of his wife."

I need not record my remonstrances. All that a mother could say to dissuade her child from a desperate and wicked act I said, not once, but with passionate despairing iteration. Sylvia held firmly to her purpose, and told me, with every appearance of a fixed resolve, that if I refused to help her in this vile scheme, refused to set her free, as she called it, she would make away with herself before the dawn of to-morrow's light. She was utterly weary of her life, and would endure it no longer if she lost this one chance of freedom.

At last, in weakness and despair, I consented to an act which has poisoned my life with the bitterness of useless remorse. In the dead of the night, when all the house was wrapped in sleep, we contrived with infinite labour and trouble to remove Sir Aubrey on a couch from his own apartments to his brother's, dragging that heavy couch along the passage with as little sound as was possible, yet not without sufficient noise to have betrayed us, had any of the household slept at that end of the house. Fate favoured my daughter's crime, for we had the east wing entirely to ourselves, and there was little fear of our movements being overheard.

Lady Perriam acted with a presence of mind and energy that knew no limit. It was an opiate of her administering which enabled us to remove Sir Aubrey to his new quarters, it was her quick intelligence which arranged every detail of that evil work.

Before daybreak all was over, and Mordred Perriam lay upon Sir Aubrey's bed, his limbs composed in the last awful slumber, his beard and hair arranged so as to increase his likeness to the baronet, and that likeness stronger in death than it had ever been in life.

CHAPTER XLVI.

SIR AUBREY'S RETURN.

There was more in Mrs. Carford's manuscript; but what remained told only of her difficult service with the victim of that conspiracy in which she had been an unwilling actor. She described the misery of long and weary days spent with the invalid, who at times was fully conscious of the wrong that had been done him, and asserted his identity, and his claims as master of Perriam Place with vehemence and insistence; while at other times he lapsed into a state of dull indifference—vacant-minded—unconscious of anything beyond his physical comfort, his dinner, his wine, the temperature of his rooms, the warmth of his garments.

In every stage of his feelings Mrs. Carford was at hand, patient, unflinching, his comforter and friend, and to her in his lighter moments he clung with sincere affection. His guilty wife never approached him, shrinking from him with as deep a horror as if the quiet room where he sat had been the chamber of death. Mrs. Carford neglected no care, left no duty undone that might lighten the burden of that joyless life. This ceaseless labour, this continual anxiety, she accepted as her penance for the errors of her past life. Her deepest sorrow was for her daughter's guilt; her never-ending fear was for that day of retribution which she felt convinced must come sooner or later to the sinner.

All this was recorded at length in the manuscript which Sylvia's mother had given to Edmund Standen.

He rose from the perusal of that paper with the feeling that every hope and desire of his life had ended. Existence lay before him, a blank and sunless waste to be traversed, every star that had once lighted and beautified the distance extinguished for ever.

What was he to do with his life henceforward? Go back to Monkhampton, resume his situation in the Bank, work for his daily bread, live through all the scandal that would follow the revelation of Sylvia's crime; see the woods of Perriam Place in the distance, and be reminded every day how she whom he loved so fondly was banished for ever from that scene, in deepest disgrace and shame—existing only as a nameless wanderer—none knew where?

No, he could not return. That question was decided easily enough! He had £200 in hand, money he had saved from his salary, his wants in his mother's house being very few. He would go abroad—wander far from the scene of his disappointments for a year or so, and when he came back to England he would get a situation either in London, or one of the northern counties, where he would find himself among strangers who would never torture his ears with the name of Sylvia Perriam. It would be easy now for him to get employment in any English Bank, with such testimonials as he could obtain from the chiefs of the Western Union.

He wrote to Mr. Sanderson, the Monkhampton manager, touched briefly on the trouble that had changed all his plans—surrendered his position in the bank, and engaged Mr. Sanderson's friendship in the future, when he should have occasion to obtain a new employment. He wrote also to Mrs. Standen, telling her in the simplest words, without passion, or self-abasement, how cruel a disappointment had overtaken the hopes that had made him an exile from his home. He acknowledged that this blow seemed like retribution for his dishonoured vows to Esther, but he put forward no plea for forgiveness; he hinted at no hope for the future. He told his mother that, dear though she must ever be to him, his life was likely to be spent far from Dean House.

"I shall come to you gladly whenever you may summon me, my dear mother," he wrote, "but I shall only come in obedience to your summons, and I never again can enter Dean House except as a guest. You will say, and rightly, that I have fooled away all my chances of happiness; but you shall never have occasion to say that I am leading an unmanly or dishonourable life. I am going on the continent again to try and forget this latest grief amidst unfamiliar scenes. My career after my return to England will be one of honourable industry, and however you may blame your son for his past errors, with God's help you shall have no cause to blush for him in the future."

These two letters despatched Edmund Standen felt that he had but one more duty to do. That duty was to provide for Mrs. Carford's declining days. She was helpless, friendless, dying, and anxious as he was to leave England, he could not go without doing all that benevolence could do to ensure the