

who with the county generally, disapproved of Sir Aubrey's marriage. "She was only a parish schoolmaster's daughter. However," he added remembering his duty to his patron, "I believe she's a very amiable person, and as you say, devoted to Sir Aubrey."

"Quite a pleasing thing to see," said Dr. Crow, "thanks, my dear sir, you are very good," he added graciously, in acknowledgment of the neatly-folded bank note, which Mr. Stimpson gently insinuated into his hand.

The yellow chariot had been sent to meet Dr. Crow at the Hedingham Station, and now waited to take him back there. That stately equipage had scarcely driven away with its distinguished occupant when a humbler vehicle, a shabby-looking fly, drove round the broad gravel sweep before Perriam Place.

Mr. Stimpson had lingered at the door to watch the great physician's departure. He now waited to see the new comer.

"The nurse, I suppose," he said to himself.

The surgeon was right. A slender, pale-faced woman, alighted from the fly, and looked timidly about, as if in quest of some one to whom to address herself. She saw Mr. Stimpson, and hesitated, doubtful whether he were a servant or a gentleman, and whether, in the latter case, she might venture to speak to him.

She was decently but suitably clad in an iron-gray linsey gown, a black shawl and bonnet; but simple as these things were they were worn with a neatness that was almost grace, and the stranger looked like a lady.

"A superior-looking person," thought Mr. Stimpson, noting every detail with his observant eye.

He went forward as the flyman lifted down the stranger's poor little trunk, and relieved her from her evident embarrassment.

"You're the nurse Lady Perriam has sent for, I conclude?" he said.

"Yes, sir. Can I see Lady Perriam, if you please?"

"You shall see her presently. But I should like to have a few words with you first about the treatment, and so on. I am the family doctor."

"I am quite at your service, sir."

"Oh, you'd better get some refreshment first, and rest yourself a little. I can wait half an hour."

"No, sir, I won't trouble you to wait. I am quite ready to receive your instructions."

"So be it. I shan't be sorry to get home to dinner. Just step in here for a minute."

Mr. Stimpson led the way into the dining room, where the butler and his subordinate had just finished laying the table, for two only to-night. Sir Aubrey's accustomed place was a blank.

Here candles were lighted and a bright fire burning, and in this light the surgeon made a closer survey of the nurse's countenance.

Where had he seen a face which this recalled to him? He could not tell. Yet there was something in this careworn visage curiously familiar to him.

"I hope you have had plenty of experience," said Mr. Stimpson.

"I have had much experience of sickness, sir."

"Have you ever been a hospital nurse?"

"No, sir."

"Have you any certificates?"

"No, sir."

"That's a pity. You come here, as it were, without a character, and the place you are to fill is an important one."

"Lady Perriam knows me, sir. I should have thought that would have been sufficient. I am here as Lady Perriam's servant."

"It is sufficient as to moral character; but Lady Perriam's approval is hardly a certificate of capacity. She is too inexperienced herself to know whether you are capable of discharging the required duties."

"If you find me incapable you can dismiss me, sir," answered the woman, with a tone in which meekness was curiously mingled with a quiet firmness—a woman who might be "equal to either fortune"—able to face ruin calmly.

"Of course," returned Mr. Stimpson; "but I don't want to expose my patient to the hazard of an incompetent nurse. Have you ever attended upon a paralytic patient?"

"Yes, sir. I nursed an old gentleman so afflicted for nearly six months."

This was the truth. Even adversity's bitter school had failed to make Mrs. Carford a liar.

"You could refer me to the friends of that patient, I suppose?"

"If Lady Perriam should require such a reference, sir, I am able to give it," answered the woman with dignity.

"Very well," said Mr. Stimpson, "then we can but try you. I like your appearance. You seem to have seen better days."

The nurse let this suggestion pass unanswered. She put in no claim to bygone gentility.

"What is your name, by the way?"

"Carter, sir. Mrs. Carter."

"Good. I am Mr. Stimpson, of Monkhampton, Sir Aubrey's medical adviser for the last twenty years. Now for your instructions."

Mr. Stimpson gave his orders plainly and briefly, and was pleased with Mrs. Carter's intelligent manner of receiving those directions.

"Upon my word I think you'll do," he said, kindly; "and now I'm going home, and you'd better go and get something to eat."

"I'd rather see Lady Perriam first, if you please, Mr. Stimpson."

"Was there ever such a woman? Do you never eat? Well, you shall see your patroness. James, send Lady Perriam's maid to ask if her mistress will see Mrs. Carter."

Sylvia had risen to a height wherein she was not approachable without a certain amount of ceremony.

Mr. Stimpson drove away in his old-fashioned gig—a relic of that departed age in which it was the mark of respectability to keep a gig. Mrs. Carter waited in the hall till the servant should return with Lady Perriam's commands.

A plainly-dressed maid servant came down, at once upper housemaid and body servant to Lady Perriam, who had not been allowed the luxury of a handmaiden for her exclusive service.

"My lady will see you," she said, and Mrs. Carter followed her up the dark old staircase, along a wide gallery that led to Lady Perriam's dressing-room.

Here the wood fire and lighted candles made the darkly-

pannelled room almost bright. Lady Perriam sat before the fire in her glistening gray silk dress; the sunny brown hair making a coronet above the pale brow; those lovely hazel eyes dark with thought. It was a picture that sent a thrill to Mrs. Carter's heart. The room seemed splendid to eyes that had for many years looked only on poor and sordid surroundings.

Sylvia received the stranger as it behoved Lady Perriam to receive a dependent and inferior. She did not rise from her arm chair to offer the traveller welcome, but looked at her with a deliberate scrutiny, anxious to see whether her protégée's appearance were likely to bring discredit on herself.

"I am glad you have come here without loss of time, Mrs. Carter," she said, with a distant graciousness which did not invite familiarity; "and I hope you may be able to make yourself comfortable here."

"There is no fear of that, Lady Perriam," answered Mrs. Carter, in tones that faltered a little, though she tried to make them calm. "It is quite sufficient happiness for me to be near you."

"Apart from that source of happiness, which can count for very little, I should think, between people who are so strange to each other as you and I are, you will have, I trust, a comfortable home."

Mrs. Carter was still standing. No word, no gesture of Lady Perriam's had invited her to be seated.

"The comforts of such a house as this are very new to me, Madam, I shall know how to appreciate them," she answered quietly. She had schooled herself to command her tones by this time, but tears glittered in the faded eyes—tears which she quickly brushed aside, and of which Lady Perriam appeared unconscious.

"And you will know how to keep your own secrets, I hope, and those of other people. You will be dumb about any facts in my father's life which, in your former acquaintance with him, may have come to your knowledge."

"I am not likely to speak of your father, Lady Perriam."

"I shall consider that a sacred promise on your part."

"Let it be a promise—I shall not be tempted to break it."

"Very well, I will trust to your honour. And now tell me if I did wrong in sending for you—in believing that you must have some experience of sickness."

"You guessed rightly. In my struggles for a livelihood I have acted as sick nurse. Amongst other patients I had one afflicted with paralysis."

"That is fortunate. Then I shall not feel I am doing wrong in trusting you to attend upon my husband. Bear in mind that you will have to please our doctor, Mr. Stimpson, as well as me."

"I shall do my duty to the utmost of my power, Lady Perriam."

"You will occupy a room on this floor, near Sir Aubrey's. It has been got ready for you, I believe. You will take all your meals there, alone, and will have no occasion to associate with the servants. Your duties will not oblige you to sit up at night unless Sir Aubrey should become worse than he is now; but you will hold yourself ready to attend him at any hour of this night should his valet call you."

"I understand, Madam. I am not afraid of work, or late hours. I can be satisfied with very little sleep."

"I am glad to find you have one of the qualifications of a good nurse. Now you had better go to your own room—stay, I'll order some refreshment for you," added Lady Perriam, with her hand upon the bell.

"One moment, Madam!" said Mrs. Carter, stopping her.

"I want to thank you for your goodness in remembering one so fallen—so wretched—in providing a home for the desolate. I had no opportunity to acknowledge the gifts you sent me, for I feared lest any letter from me might compromise you. But I felt your goodness, not the less. And that in your exalted station, in a change of fortune wonderful enough to turn an older head than yours, that, despite such distracting influences you should remember my misery, pierces me to the heart. Ah! Lady Perriam, you can never know how deeply."

Sylvia's eyes—those eyes so little given to weeping—were dimmed by the time the woman had done speaking. The lashes drooped on her cheek, as she lowered her eyelids, as if to hide those tears.

"You owe me no thanks," she said, after a pause, "I am very glad to be of some service to you. I regret that the circumstances of my life prevent me serving you in any other way than that which opportunity offers. In spite of what you call my exalted position, I am by no means my own mistress."

"I can fully understand that, madam. It is only waifs and strays that are altogether free agents," said Mrs. Carter, bitterly. For her freedom had meant solitude and semi-starvation.

"I am glad to serve you," said Sylvia, "and I venture to hope that if I ever should need help of any kind you will be my friend."

"Yes, to the death!" answered the other with intensity.

"That means an unscrupulous friend, does it not?" asked Sylvia, musingly, looking down at the fire. "A friend who would not stick at trifles if an unpleasant service were required."

"It means devotion. You would not be likely to ask anything that involved wrong-doing."

"You had better not think too well of me. I make no claim to be considered faultless."

"No one is faultless, Lady Perriam, on this earth; but I hope and believe that you are as good and pure as humanity can be."

Sylvia sighed with a somewhat weary air, and was silent for a little while before replying to this last speech of Mrs. Carter's.

"I am the creature of circumstances," she said at last. "Women are too weak to rise above their destiny. I am something of a fatalist, Mrs. Carter."

"A dangerous doctrine, Lady Perriam."

"Is it? I am sorry for that. But come, you have had nothing to eat or drink since your journey, have you?"

"No; I was more anxious to see and thank you than to eat."

Sylvia rang the bell, and the maid appeared. "See that Mrs. Carter, Sir Aubrey's nurse, has dinner, or tea, or whatever she likes best in her own room," said Lady Perriam.

"You remember the instructions I gave you this morning."

"Yes, my lady, the room is ready, and I have taken in the tea things and a dish of cold meat for Mrs. Carter."

"You will give Mrs. Carter wine, or anything she pleases."

"Thank you, Lady Perriam, but I never take wine or beer."

"You are a teetotaler, perhaps?"

"I have taken no pledge, but a nurse cannot keep her head too clear. I shall take nothing but tea and coffee while I am in your service."

"That must be as you please. Good night."

"Good night, madam."

"You will begin your duties as soon as you have dined."

"Yes, madam; Mr. Stimpson has told me all I have to do," Lady Perriam bent her head courteously as the new nurse retired.

Martha led the way to another door in the same gallery, and ushered Mrs. Carter into a comfortably furnished bedroom. A fire burned cheerily in the wide basket shaped grate, and a round table, with a tea-tray and plates and dishes on spotless damask, had been drawn near the hearth. Such comfort, plain and unadorned as it was, struck Mrs. Carter deeply. When the servant had left her, she sat for a little while looking about her with wondering eyes. Such comfort seemed like a dream.

"Am I really to occupy such a house as this?" she thought hardly able to believe in her exalted fortune; "to live with my own daughter, and to see her every day; and yet never dare to open my arms and clasp her to my longing heart; to feel the words trembling on my lips, yet never dare to say, 'Child, I am your mother!'"

## CHAPTER XXXVIII.

### THE HEIR OF PERRIAM.

Weeks and months passed on, and Sir Aubrey Perriam's condition underwent little change either for better or worse. He had been struck down in the prime of life. He was now a helpless and, in all semblance, an aged man. His intellect, keen enough within its somewhat narrow range a few months ago, had now dwindled to the obscure and clouded mind of dotage. He was not mad; he had no wild delusions, no strange imaginings. The clouds that darkened his mind never opened to show him visions of the unreal. He held no mysterious converse with invisible interlocutors, he evoked no company of shadows out of the world of faery. He was only a foolish old man, with a weak memory and no interest in life, save in the most trifling details of his monotonous existence.

He, who had been formerly remarkable for the polish of his placid manners, was now captious and irritable, selfish and exacting. Unconscious how much he was demanding, he would have kept his young wife a perpetual prisoner to the sick room, and deprived her of all contact with the outer world, save during the hours when she walked slowly to and fro beside his invalid chair, upon the terrace above that peaceful hollow where the family vault awaited his coming.

Only by some exercise of diplomacy could Lady Perriam taste the joys of occasional liberty; but, as time wore on, she learnt how to manage her invalid husband, how to seem to comply without complying, how to avoid all hazard of irritating him, and yet have her own way. Mrs. Carter was of the utmost service to her in this matter, always able to smooth away difficulties, to appease the baronet's wrath when he was inclined to be angry—altogether an invaluable servant to Lady Perriam.

The nurse kept her solitary place apart from the household; rarely left her own or the invalid's room, save to take the air in attendance upon Sir Aubrey; held no converse with the other servants; scrupulously avoided all familiarity, yet was never uncivil.

The result of this uniform and blameless conduct may be easily imagined. Not one of the Perriam Place servants liked Mrs. Carter. She was pronounced proud, artful, secret; a person who, under the smoothest outward semblance, concealed the deepest and more dangerous designs. It was seen by the servants that Lady Perriam took more notice of Mrs. Carter than of any other dependent, and this weighed heavily against the nurse. Sylvia could hardly be said to be familiar even with Mrs. Carter, but she was kinder and more gracious to her than to anyone else in the household, and the servants talked of favouritism.

"I've served in this house, as girl and woman, for nigh upon forty years," said Mrs. Spicer, the housekeeper, "and I've never set out to be a favourite. I make my courtesy to Sir Aubrey to-day, if I meet him anywhere, as humble as I made my courtesy to him when I first came as scullery maid, a mere slip of a girl. But here is this Mrs. Carter living upstairs in her own room, and having her meals served up to her at her own table, and being waited on by them as is good enough to sit down with her any day in the week, I should hope."

"I think she's seen better days though, Mrs. Spicer," said Mary Dawe, the upper housemaid; "she has it in her looks and in her ways, somehow. Her hands are as white as curd-soap and as small as any lady's, and she has such a soft way of speaking; and I've seen her handwriting too—quite like a young lady at a boarding school."

"I suppose she's come over you with her quiet ways," answered the housekeeper.

"No, she's no favourite of mine; she's so silent, and she must be proud, or she'd scarcely keep everyone at a distance as she does; but she's always polite."

"Too polite!" muttered Mrs. Spicer. "She's like Lady Perriam herself. There's no getting at the bottom of her."

"Do you know," said Mary Dawe, "I've sometimes thought that she's rather like Lady Perriam in the face, allowing for age and all that."

"Allowing for a precious lot, I should think!" exclaimed Mrs. Spicer. "There's not much likeness between that poor faded thing and Lady Perriam."

Mary Dawe's suggestions were negated by general consent. No one could see any likeness between the nurse and her mistress.

Sir Aubrey had been in his helpless, melancholy condition about four months, and it was glowing midsummer weather once more, and the corn yellowing in the fertile fields between Hedingham and Perriam Place, when an event occurred which added considerably to Sylvia's importance, and made the future at once bright and smooth for her ambition.

The baronet's proudest hope was realised when he had lost all power to taste the sweetness of that once longed-for joy. His young wife bore him a son!

Merrily rang the chimes of Hedingham and Monkhampton, the one monotonous bell of Perriam Church clanging in amidst those sweeter peals, on the evening of the baby's birth