

"Yes, sir—wishing you your health—we was three days in Brussels after we left Antwerp—where I didn't see nothing worth looking at but the Poll parrots in the Zoological gardens. My lady was three days at Brussels seeing all the sights—pictures and churches—and the battle of Waterloo. And then we left as abruptly as we'd left Antwerp, and came back to London, where we stopped one night at the hotel, and the next morning Mr. Standen came to say as he had found a furnished house to suit in Willoughby Crescent, and before Sir St. John's dinner time we was all comfortably settled, and glad I was to find myself among my rational fellow creatures once more, instead of those jabbering Belgees."

"Do you know why Lady Perriam came back to London so suddenly?" asked Mr. Sadgrove, prompted by a whisper behind the door.

"No, sir—not any more than that I heard my lady tell Mr. Standen one day at Brussels, when I went to her room to fetch the baby—one can't help having ears—that there was no place like London; and that people were free to do what they liked there without any one noticing them. 'London's like a forest,' she said, 'we shall be lost in it, Edmund.' It used to give me the cold shivers down my back to hear her call him by his christian name, and Sir Aubrey not cold in his coffin, as you may say."

The door behind Mr. Sadgrove now gave a gentle creak, or groan, which, in the language of the spirits, meant that Mr. Bain had heard enough, so Mr. Sadgrove forthwith paid Mrs. Tringfold her legacy, ten glistening new sovereigns, which made the young man's mouth water, and dismissed her, very well satisfied with what she had heard to her advantage.

"Well, Mr. Bain, did I manage it all right?" asked John Sadgrove, with conscious merit, as Shadrack Bain emerged from the adjoining chamber.

"You couldn't have done it better, John, and here's the sovereign I promised you. But you must beg a few hours' liberty to-morrow morning, and go with me to the Church where Lady Perriam thinks she is going to be married. I may find you useful as a witness."

"I'll run round to the office to-morrow morning to ask leave of absence, and be back here at half-past nine," answered John Sadgrove, blithely. "Are you going to put a stop to the marriage?" he asked.

"I think it's more than likely I shall," replied Mr. Bain, with a grim smile.

CHAPTER LIX.

JUST CAUSE FOR IMPEDIMENT.

It was the morning of Sylvia's second marriage—that union which was to be the blessed fulfilment of all her girlish dreams, which was to bring her nothing but happiness.

Restless had been her slumbers through the night that was gone, and haunted by awful dreams. Not once, but several times, in vague and various shapes the event of the coming day had been enacted. Sometimes the scene had been lifelike enough, the circumstances possible—some element of reason in the fabric of her vision; at other times all had been dense darkness and wildest confusion. She had been drifting with her lover over storm-driven waves. They had stood together on the bare and empty deck of a wrecked vessel, while a priest in splendid vestments, such as she had seen at St. Gudule, in Brussels, had recited the marriage service; and, behold! just as he had joined their hands, a gigantic wave rose, white-crested, and broke over the ship, sweeping away priest and bridegroom, and leaving her alone, whirling madly onward over that hideous ocean.

In another dream they had been together on some tropical waste of level sand, under a copper-coloured sky, the sultry air thick with hot white vapour, and every now and then a cloud of burning sand blown over them by the sudden blast of a hot wind. Here, too, they knelt side by side, and a voice that came, the dreamer knew not whence, repeated the words of the marriage service; but before it was ended, the bride looked at her companion, and saw that he had fallen dead at her side, and saw a flock of vultures swooping down upon him through that awful sky.

It was broad day when she awoke from this last vision. She started up in her bed, her forehead damp with the cold dews of fear, and looked at the summer light shining in upon her through the uncurtained windows.

"Thank God, it was only a dream!"

She sprang up, rang for Céline, and began the operations of the toilet, though it was only six o'clock. Céline remonstrated politely, urged upon her mistress the duty of looking her loveliest in her wedding bonnet, the most delicious chapeau of white chip, ostrich feathers, and palest mauve, the faintest suggestion of half-mourning as a delicate compliment to the departed Sir Aubrey.

"It's no use talking, Céline!" replied Lady Perriam impatiently, "I shan't attempt to sleep any more! I have had such horrible dreams."

"Horrible dreams, on the eve of so happy a union, ma'am, Madame, c'est incroyable!"

"It is true, nevertheless. I suppose I have had too much anxiety lately."

"A cause des dents du pauvre petit," said Céline naively. There had been trouble lately about Sir St. John's dental development, and the maid imagined that maternal solicitude might have disturbed her lady's slumbers.

Sylvia felt considerably refreshed after a cold bath, a cup of strong tea, and an elaborate toilet. She looked lovely in her wedding dress of palest gray satin, trimmed with heavy Spanish point lace—a matronly costume, which rendered the youthfulness of her beauty all the more striking.

"And now run down stairs and get me my letters," she said to Céline, as the clock on the chimney piece struck nine, "the post must have come by this time."

The only letter she thought of was a possible greeting from Edmund—one loving line perhaps to welcome the day. She had communicated with the housekeeper at Perriam Place, and ordered that letters should be sent to her, but of any such letters she had no thought this morning.

Céline came back with a bulky little packet, wrapped in the thickest and creamiest paper, sealed with several seals—a jeweller's parcel, evidently. This was Edmund's greeting. She also brought a letter—a foreign letter—addressed to Perriam Place, in a delicate, nervous hand, a hand Sylvia knew very well, and re-addressed to Willoughby Crescent, in the housekeeper's clumsy characters.

This letter was from Mr. Carew. His epistles were not frequent, and their purport was generally either to ask or acknowledge money. He had continued his easy life in the

south of France—only varying it by an occasional fortnight in Paris, and Sylvia had every reason to suppose that he would spend the rest of his days in that agreeable exile. She had been sufficiently liberal to him, and they corresponded in most affectionate terms; but Sylvia did not sigh for re-union with the father in whose companionship she had spent so many years of her life.

She opened Edmund's packet first. It contained a ruby velvet case with her monogram—her new monogram, S. S., in gold, and inside the case, on a bed of white satin, reposed a diamond cross—the gems of large size and purest colour.

Upon a slip of paper in the case Edmund had written these lines:

"Wear this to-morrow, dearest, for my sake, instead of the jewels you showed me last night. I should like to think that you wore my gift rather than Sir Aubrey's on that solemn day which is to unite us for ever."

"My own generous Edmund!" murmured Sylvia, and unbidden tears clouded her eyes as she kissed the letter and the cross.

She had shown him her diamond necklace, Sir Aubrey's gift, the day before, and had asked him, half in sport, if she should wear it on her wedding day.

She clasped the cross on her neck before she even thought of her father's letter. The diamonds flashed out between folds of rich lace, which veiled the narrow opening of her Raphael-shaped bodice.

When her lover's offering had been adjusted to her satisfaction, with much enthusiasm and ejaculation on the part of Céline, Lady Perriam seated herself at the breakfast table to sip a second cup of tea and to read her father's letter.

"You can go now, Céline," she said, "but come to me at a quarter to ten, to arrange my bonnet and veil."

Mr. Carew's letter was briefer than usual, for in the calm retirement of his unoccupied life he had found time to write to his daughter with considerable amplitude. He prided himself on being able to write a good letter, and his epistles had been for the most part as elaborate as those of travellers who have an eye to publishing their effusions later in a permanent form at the request of friends.

To-day the letter was brief, and the tidings it contained were not agreeable. Sylvia's brow darkened as she read it.

My Dear Sylvia,

After two years' residence in this genial clime, I find my health established, and that nature has, in some measure, compensated herself by profound rest, for the wear and tear of those years of toil which had made me an old man before my time. With renewed strength I find reawakening within me those yearnings for home and country which are, I suppose, innate in every breast. You are now your own mistress, rich, and secure in the noble position which your attractions won for you. If I come now to sit beside your hearth—or perchance to dwell at a short distance from your house in some modest retreat of my own—I shall not feel myself an intruder. I am coming, therefore, my dear child, to claim your affectionate welcome, to taste the sweets of your bounty. You have been most generous to me during my exile, but I crave something more than pecuniary aid. I languish for your society, your ever dutiful regard. I shall be with you, perhaps, in a day or two after you receive this letter. For the first time, therefore, I may venture to close my sheet with *au revoir* instead of adieu.

Your ever attached father,

JAMES CAREW.

"One would imagine my evil genius had put it into his head to come back, and at such a time!" thought Sylvia. "I wonder whether I have an evil genius. Most people would say no, for I have been so lucky. But then the devils we read of gave their slaves all their desires at the outset."

She tried to calculate the time that must elapse before her father could arrive in England, but his letter was too vaguely written. It was dated nearly a week ago. If he had followed it quickly he might be in England already.

He would go straight to Perriam Place, no doubt, find her absent, obtain her address from the housekeeper, who would be awed by his paternal authority, and come to Willoughby Crescent in quest of her. Hope whispered that he might come too late.

A bell rung loudly while she was still standing with the letter in her hand, a bell that sent a thrill of fear through her heart, though it might be a common-place summons enough.

She had been breakfasting in a boudoir that had been extemporised for her, a bright little apartment, adjoining her dressing-room. This room was held sacred to her privacy, and when a masculine step sounded presently on the landing, she told herself it must be Edmund. No one else would venture to intrude at such an hour.

Céline opened the door and screamed—"Madame, it is Monsieur, your father!"

Another moment and Sylvia—shedding tears of vexation—was clasped to her father's breast. Not so fondly would he have clasped her in the old days when he was the parish schoolmaster, and she his unrecompensed handmaiden. It may be that severance had taught him the value of this only daughter.

"My love," he exclaimed, with emotion, "this is rapture. I knew not the feelings of a father's heart till this moment."

For half a minute or so he indulged those feelings, and shed, or seemed to be shedding, paternal tears upon Sylvia's soft brown hair. After that gush of emotion he put her suddenly away from him.

"Let me look at you, my love," he exclaimed—"let me see how these two years have ripened your young beauty. Yes, the bud is expanding into a blossom, but it has not lost the freshness of its early bloom. But, my sweet Sylvia, what in heaven's name is the meaning of this dress at this early hour? Has fashion invented some morning assembly? What is the meaning of this almost bridal attire?"

Sylvia looked him straight in the face, nerving herself for a battle.

"It simply means that I am going to be married," she answered in her coolest, hardest tones—tones that meant "no surrender."

"You—are—going—to be married?" ejaculated Mr. Carew, "six months after your husband's death—such a husband as Sir Aubrey Perriam!"

"I know that it may seem strange to you—to the world," answered Sylvia, "but I do not hold myself accountable to the world, or to you. I consult my own feeling *this time*. I sacrificed myself once to win comfort and ease for you. It would be a poor return if you were to reward that sacrifice by opposition, now that I seek happiness for myself."

"The world will say hard things of you for this marriage, Sylvia."

"Let the world say what it will. The world is always hard—hard to the rich—harder to the poor—hard to beauty—hard to virtue. Let the world hate me. I am my own mistress. I am tired of a lonely, unprotected life, and I am going to marry the lover of my youth, the only man I ever loved. Is that such a wicked act?"

"It is an improper act to marry six months after your husband's death."

"I suppose if widow-burning were the fashion in this country you would come and ask me to perform suttee rather than outrage society," said Sylvia with a bitter laugh. "You sold me to the highest bidder, and you have profited by the bargain, and are likely to profit by it for the rest of your life. What more do you want? Did you intend to make a second barter—to find another rich man to pay you the price of my broken heart?"

"This is unkind, Sylvia. If I profited in a small degree by your union with Sir Aubrey you profited largely. And I think you were as much gratified to become Lady Perriam as I was to see you raised to that proud position. Let us not dispute, my love. For your own sake I would entreat you to postpone your marriage. There is no reason you should not marry Mr. Standen, when a decent interval has elapsed. But if I have any influence with you I will exert to the utmost to hinder your taking a step which will be the ruin of your name."

"You have no influence with me; you exhausted all your stock of influence when you persuaded me to marry Sir Aubrey Perriam. You shall not come a second time between me and the man I love."

"Sylvia!" cried her father desperately, "cannot you understand that I have no objection to make to your ultimate union with Mr. Standen? I only ask you to respect the laws of society, and to delay this marriage, if only for six months."

"Delays are dangerous," answered Sylvia. "Who knows what might happen in six months?"

"What have you to fear—you, who have youth, wealth, and beauty? Edmund Standen has everything to gain by marrying you."

"He might not always think so. Come, dear father," said Sylvia in a lighter tone, "don't let us spoil this reunion by a needless dispute. You have always taken your way in life, let me take mine, unassailed by advice or interference. Do this and we shall always be good friends. Oppose me—and—" she finished the sentence with a shrug of her shoulders, which was easy of interpretation.

"What then?" asked Mr. Carew.

"In that case I should try to forget that I have a father."

"Very well, Sylvia, take your own way. After all it is your reputation and not mine that is at stake—why should I trouble myself about the matter. I have never been in the habit of making myself unhappy about other people's business. Let us say no more about it. Perhaps you will be good enough to give me some breakfast. I went down to Perriam yesterday, found that you were living in London, got your address from the housekeeper, and came back to town by the evening mail. I slept at the Great Western Hotel, and in my impatience to see you would not even wait to breakfast before coming here."

"You shall not suffer for that sacrifice," said Sylvia gaily. She was eager to conciliate this unwelcome parent, now that he showed himself amenable to reason. She rang the bell, ordered the best breakfast the house could produce at five minutes' notice, and presently Mr. Carew found himself seated at a well-furnished table, with his daughter opposite to him, the aroma of choicest Mocha ascending to his nostrils, and a rush-bound flask of Maraschino at his elbow.

"After all, papa, if you will only take things pleasantly your unexpected arrival is not inopportune," said Sylvia, ministering to her parent's wants with daintiest care. "You can go to church with me. I shall feel a less desolate creature if I have your arm to lean on."

"My love, no one is desolate with five thousand a-year," said Mr. Carew, sententiously. "For people with such an income the world teems with friends."

"Yes, friends who are enemies in disguise—wolves in sheepskins," answered Sylvia, bitterly. "I shall not waste my money in paying for such friendship. My only hope of happiness is with the man who loved me for my own sake when I was your penniless daughter."

Mr. Carew ate his breakfast, wound up with a couple of glasses of Maraschino—tiny Venetian goblets, emblazoned with gold—and discreetly held his peace. After all—as he had remarked just now—his daughter's too speedy marriage would make no difference to him; it was she who must suffer the world's scorn.

They drove to the church—the new Gothic temple with its painted windows, which made patches of luminous colour in the half-light in the narrow vaulted aisles. Edmund was waiting for them in the vestry—looking as happy as a bridegroom should look. No remorseful thought troubled him to-day. Mind and heart were alike filled with one subject, and that was Sylvia.

He was surprised to see Mr. Carew, but welcomed him cordially, ready to forgive and forget the schoolmaster's insolent reception of his proposal two years ago. To-day was no day for the remembrance of old injuries. Marriage would be but a sorry business if every man were not a Christian on his wedding day.

"My Sylvia," said the bridegroom proudly, as he drew her a little aside from the clergyman and Mr. Carew, and looked at her with fond admiring eyes, "how lovely you have made yourself, as if satin and pearl were needed to enhance your beauty. If you had come to me in rags, if you had come to me a beggar-girl out of yonder street, I should love you every bit as well. My Sylvia!—mine at last!—mine for ever from to-day."

"Are you ready?" asked the clergyman, who had remained politely unconscious of this sentimental episode.

"Quite ready," answered Edmund, putting Sylvia's arm through his, and moving towards the door.

"Not quite, I think, when you have heard what I have to tell you," said a strong voice from the threshold. The half-opened door was pushed aside, and Mr. Bain entered the vestry.

Sylvia gave a cry of despair—a shriek that echoed loud in the vaulted aisles on the other side of the door—and hung herself upon her lover's breast.

"He shall not part us!" she said. "Edmund, Edmund, be true to me, let him say what he will."

(To be continued.)