

ON THE BRINK.

FRAGMENTS FROM A DIARY.

EDITED BY NED P. MAN.

We have known each other from our earliest childhood, yet it seems but as yesterday that we wandered together gathering kingcups and daisies in the meadows, those kingcups and daisies that Aimée's little fingers wove so deftly into wreaths and crowns and fashioned into wondrous balls whose creation was a work full of awe and mystery to me—great orbs of flowers, with all the petals outwards, as though growing from one common central root—but yesterday that we sought for berries in the wood, and lost ourselves, and wept like veritable babies that we were; but yesterday that we made, for we were not better than other children, our mud pies on the river bank, or laid out miniature grounds and built lilliputian houses on the sands of the lake shore; but yesterday that we drove out together in our carriage, with our dear, faithful, strong, but tenderly careful old Newfoundland Bruno between its shafts, looking lovingly askance at us out of his big, deep, intelligent brown eye; but yesterday that we sauntered, handed, through the deep shadows of the eventide, already "little husband" and "little wife" to each other, drawing vivid pictures of a future never-sullied bliss; but yesterday that the shadow of our first great sorrow fell on us—a sorrow of which we had not even dreamed, and which we did not realize when it fell—the shadow of my father's ruin. It seems, too, only yesterday that the sorrow which we did realize happened, the sorrow of our first parting. And that was to be for eight years.

I do not know exactly how it was arranged. I only know that it was arranged by an old friend of my father's. I suppose my father had been lamenting to him the failure of his hopes with regard to myself, that he had drawn a vivid picture to him of my fondness for Aimée, and of Aimée's fondness for me, of how he had watched the growth of our attachment, and had cherished the idea of one day seeing me the husband of his neighbour's child, and of how that idea must now be laid aside, for now I should never be rich enough to sue for her hand. And I suppose my father's old friend answered him in some such strain as this: had told him how he was childless, and how often he had wished that he might have a son, how, if he would, I should sit in his own counting house, and should have every chance given me that could have been given to a son of his own, and how, if during eight years I had stood the test of separation—for he stipulated that during those eight years there should be no communication between us—I should be admitted to a partnership with himself and should then marry my Aimée.

You see that the possibility of Aimée's not standing the test of separation was never once taken into account!

At least in any conversation that I ever heard or overheard I never knew that side of the question mentioned. And as I did not myself doubt my own fidelity, I had also the most implicit faith in hers.

And all this happened eight years ago, and now Aimée is twenty-one and I am twenty-five.

And we are going to be married—to-morrow!

So it seems that we have both stood the eight years' test, barring the few months that have been remitted us in order that due preparation might be made for the wedding to take place on the exact anniversary, and I have become a partner in due course and am in a position to marry my Aimée without shame.

Only I wonder if Aimée's affection never wavered, if she never, even for a moment, loved, if she never felt a warmer friendship even for some other who, with all the advantages of presence and the opportunity of expressing his admiration by word, and look, and action; some other, too, whose beauty of form, whose intellectual attainments, or whose mental ability, nay, whose depth of soul, may have far surpassed my own!

Bah! what if she has. Do I ask that she should be more than human? If she were she would no longer be a suitable wife for poor mortal me.

Why, I have a dozen souvenirs, more or less compromising, in my desk. I am going to burn them all to-night.

First, here is a letter from Laura, aged sixteen, written in the child's own blood too, the blood which she tells me she should be so extremely honourable to shed for me. O, Aimée, little do you know the cruelties which my allegiance to you has compelled me to perpetrate! And here is a lock of hair, the souvenir of a moonlight flirtation behind the cactuses—or the cacti, is it? shade of Lindley Murray, which?—And here a glove picked up at a picnic, and here—a portrait. Ah, here alone, Aimée, do my memories linger with something of guilt; yet you would forgive me, Aimée, if you knew all, and you would forgive her too, for she is dead; and, oh heavens, what a death to die, for she died as she had lived—alone. There! let us bundle all the trash together, and burn it out of our sight. On the threshold of heaven we must relinquish every taint of earth!

Yet I wonder if, when the freed spirit soars upward, it feels no regrets for aught it leaves behind, for I own these awakened memories have made me sad. Has Aimée, too, perhaps, her little *au'c-da-fe* in her own chamber. Does she, too, feel sad to-night?

Yet when I think of her as I first saw her on my return, and as I see her now, does not even such a suspicion become an injustice and a cruelty. Then she looked pale and weary as of one worn out with long watching and waiting, and pining. And now, the picture of health, and joy and happiness! Hebe herself never had fresher roses in her cheeks.

Shall I try to draw her picture with my pen? How can I do it? How can I analyse a beauty so ethereal which seemed to have no parts but which makes up one incomprehensible, mysterious, darling whole? Yet what more pleasant pastime for the lover, as he smokes to its end the stump of his last bachelor cigar, than to attempt such an analysis. Perhaps when I have picked my Aimée to pieces I shall find out she is really plain. Never mind, then I will console myself by the thought that then I may be ever such a little bit nearer being worthy of her.

Aimée then, as the novelists say, is neither petite nor tall, but of a good middle height for a woman; and her form is beautifully rounded, no, that is not the word; Aimée is as far from giving to the idea that she is round as that she is angular, but she has dimples instead of elbows, and her hands are

so charmingly soft you would think they had been "boned;" she is, indeed—

"Fashioned in Nature's best proportioned mould."

She has the whitest skin, without exception, that I ever saw, but her eyes are so deep a violet that they sometimes appear black; her lashes are black beyond a doubt, and very long indeed, and her eyebrows are much darker than I have ever seen in so fair a woman before. Her hair is golden, and as fine as floss silk. Her mouth is small and rosy, and her teeth regular and very white, but not *pearly*. In dress she has the best taste I ever knew, the secret of which is, she tells me herself, its extreme simplicity. She never wears rings, and her little hands are not rosy-tipped but wondrously white. She will wear a ring, however, to-morrow, *for the first time!* Add to the above any quantity of sunshine, and expression, and sweet dimples, and I have done all my possible to pourtray my Aimée. I will lie down and dream of her till morning.

Heaven bless her!

If only my father had lived to share our happiness now.

And so I close the faithful diary which I have so neglected of late, ending its last page on the last day of my bachelor life.

It has always been a relief to me in any great crisis of my life, in any great happiness or great sorrow, to write down events, sensations, thought. Let me see if it will be a relief to me now.

When I had closed my diary upon its last page, I went to bed and slept peacefully, only dreaming, as I had promised myself, of happiness and Aimée.

I was awakened by the usual tap at the door. I rose and went down through the garden of the inn to bathe in the swift stream at its foot. It was a bright, joyous morning, and the birds were singing blithely. I felt that I could sympathize with their songs with my whole heart.

I returned, and was dressing carefully and quickly when H— appeared. He was smoking a cigarette. He joined me in my cup of coffee.

We had given each other a great grasp of the hand when he came in and nodded. We were, at least I was, too full of happiness for words.

Now he was sitting down at the little table and idly breaking little fragments from a sweet cake into his cup. I dwell on these topics because I seem to see it all over again, and it is a relief to me.

"You are a lucky fellow," he said, "I wish I was in your shoes."

"I am sure I heartily wish you," I returned, "a happiness as great."

We went down. The carriage was at the door, the sleek horses proud of their ribbons. All the people in the old inn came out to see us drive off. There was a chorus of good wishes, and little eight-year-old Marie took off her shoe and flung it after us.

We drove quickly, about a mile, to the door of the little old church. The chateau was about two miles further on, up the long avenue. The villagers were thronging about the porch, and the churchyard, and in the road outside. There was a great cheering as we drove up.

The hot sun was glaring down upon the dusty road and the grey horses, upon the river and the rapids, and the still waters of the distant lake, and upon the rugged white and grey rocks which overhung them, glaring down upon the pebbled path by which we entered the shadowy porch and stood within the cool refreshing atmosphere of the church.

We waited, waited—Heaven knows how long we waited. It seemed to me like a thousand years; but there are times when moments seem *æres*. We waited till the aged curé sympathized, and H— suggested that last finishing touch to the toilette as the cause of the delay, as though it were Aimée's habitude to linger over her toilette. "But when one is dressing for the one grand occasion of one's existence," pleaded H—. We waited till I grew nervous and pale as the flags at my feet—we can feel ourselves grow pale sometimes—till I grew cold beside, and my blood seemed to curdle in my veins with some nameless dread; waited until a sensation began to run through the audience, and whispered surmises were current, whisperings which grew and grew till they surged audibly from end to end of the little concourse; waited till I felt sick, and faint, and giddy; waited till a horseman galloped up with the tidings that the bride was nowhere to be found, and that we were wanted to assist in the search!

We drove to the chateau. The bride's maids were there with white faces and in tears, the guests were there pale and awe-stricken; her father was there half distracted—swearing and cajoling, storming and pleading, by turns. I was shown her boudoir, her dressing room, with the white dress spread out in readiness. I was shown, for nothing was sacred for me now, the very bed where she had rested last night, which still bore the slight impress of her form.

It had been at first supposed that she had risen early and gone out to climb the cliff and take one last look of what had been for all her young life her home; to revisit once more her favourite haunts and nooks among the rocks. Her absence was thought nothing of at first. "She will be in presently," they said, "It never takes her any time to dress." But as the hours sped by and the time for church approached she had been sought for high and low, but no trace, no sign of her was found. Nothing was missing from the house or from her rooms but the little white wrapper and the dainty straw hat that was her ordinary garden costume. She had gone out then, as they had supposed, for a morning stroll, a farewell visit to her favourite spots. But what accident could have befallen her. Where was she now?

Later on a discovery was made which, while it seemed to offer a clue, yet further complicated the mystery. One of the wedding guests was missing. He was a young man, wealthy, and of good family, who had always openly expressed the greatest admiration for Aimée, yet had never been suspected of being a suitor of hers, or had ever been heard to say anything suggestive of more than the friendliest feelings and highest esteem in her regard.

Yet this man had ordered an extra post waggon and had taken his departure at daybreak, climbing the hill on foot, intending to rejoin his equipage at the summit of the steps and winding road.

A miller who had driven into the village with a load of sacks, stated that he had met the traveller beyond this point, and was sure that he was alone in the carriage, the fore part of which was open, the after part of the calèche being alone left standing as a protection from what promised soon to be a pitiless sun; that there was nothing particular in his appear-

ance, and that he had given him, the miller, a hearty "good day" in return to his salute.

There was no telegraph from Aimée's village in those days. I, to whom inaction would have been death, started at once in pursuit.

I found M. T— in his apartments in one of the principal hotels in Berne. He received me courteously, but expressed his surprise and concern at seeing me. "He had thought me," he said, "ere this the happiest man in the world."

"Yesterday," I replied, "I had thought so too. On your honour, and as you hope for salvation, can you tell me why I am not?"

"I am at a loss to understand your language," said he. "Pray have you any suspicion that I could?"

"The case is this," said I—"Mdlle. F— left her home at daybreak yesterday morning, as it is supposed to climb the cliff, and look for the last time at the home she was about to leave. She never returned. You left the village at daybreak; you climbed the cliff on foot, rejoining your vehicle at the summit of the hill. Now, I ask you, upon your honour did you speak to, see, hear, or murder Mdlle. F— in the interval?"

"I forgive the violence of your language," he replied softly, "in consideration of the extreme agitation which you have undergone, the painful suspense from which you still suffer. Permit me, however, most solemnly to declare that I never saw the slightest trace of the young lady in question from the time I left my carriage at the foot till I rejoined it at the top of the hill. This may easily be accounted for by the fact that no point on the most direct route for regaining the road is the best calculated to obtain a view of the village, and that any one occupying the most favourable position with regard to prospect, would be entirely hidden by the mountain-ash which grows luxuriantly near that point from the traveller upon the beaten footpath. Yet, though I never cast eyes on Mdlle. F—, I do not deny that that young lady monopolized my thoughts during the whole distance. To be quite frank with you, I had so learned to esteem and prize her, that I own I had resolved, in a great measure on that account, to travel, and thus to endeavour to forget that it is not to everyone, but only to the deserving (with a bow to me) that the prizes in Nature's lottery fall. I beg to proffer you my firmest assurances, however, that I never breathed a word to Mdlle. F— which could, by any possibility, in the slightest degree have offended the finest sense of honour."

"Now, then, that you are prepared to believe that the terrible news of this mystery is not without its share of sadness for myself, I will beg you to accept my services to assist you in its elucidation. Let me return with you to the chateau, and pursue our researches together."

Of course I accepted. We have done everything which mortal ingenuity can invent to clear up this dreadful secret. The only explanation is the almost incredible one that Aimée, knowing as she did every inch of the rocks by heart, should have ventured out upon the slippery, mossy ledge above the torrent, and then—Oh! horror—horror—horror!

T— and I, thus linked together by this mystery of fate, are about to seek in travel the forgetfulness which he was before about to seek alone. Sad that it should be necessary for us both now.

How a few short hours may bring about a complete revolution of our ideas, our views, our opinions, in regard of persons or things, which had become as firmly rooted as the daily customs of our lives; how a few critical moments may annihilate what might have been a life-long friendship, and show us the viper we have nourished in our bosom.

It is now nearly two years that T— and I had been fellow-travellers, and I had learned to like him, although his pursuits were often such as I did not care to participate. He was fond of pleasure, and his evenings, when we were in any city, were divided between the theatre, the gambling saloon, the billiard or the ball-room. He was a thorough man of the world, an adept at all games, whether of hazard or of skill, and thoroughly understood the art of extracting from circumstances the highest amount of pleasure that might be practicable for the moment.

But I had a deeper sorrow than he—a sorrow that was ever present with me, and unfitted me for the frivolous gaiety of a coarse, unfeeling world.

Thus it happened that my evenings were usually passed alone, in reading or in meditation, over a cigar, or in a solitary stroll upon beech or cliff, or over down or meadow, according to the nature of the place which we had chosen as our temporary resting-place.

But when our tent was pitched far from the busy haunts of men, where Nature reigned supreme, where there was not so much as a village beauty to attract his roving eye, there, with a wondrous versatility of talent, he became a most attractive and entertaining companion. Gifted and well-read, with great originality of idea, and a flow of language which clothed every phase of thought in fitting words, he would chatter by the hour together, never permitting me to perceive that he found me, as I must actually have been, a most uninspiring auditor, but seemingly unwearying in his endeavour, as I then thought, to amuse me, to interest me, to draw me out, to lead me to display my whole inner self before him, that my sorrow might lose half its bitterness by being participated—as I now know to *exist in the analysis of his victim's grief*.

This knowledge came to me but an hour since, and it came to me in this wise:—

We had occasion to-day to cross a river where the stream ran in torrents between rocks. It was just one of those places which it is easy enough to pass in safety if one makes the leap without forethought or hesitation, but where one moment's want of confidence is death. I had dared T— to follow me; when I looked back he had disappeared. Retracing my steps to the edge of the nearest crag, I perceived that he had missed his footing, and was hanging by one arm to a strong oak sapling which he had caught in his fall. Letting myself cautiously down upon a ledge of rock, and clinging with my limbs and one arm to a tree which was rooted in the crevices among the crags, I was able almost to reach his hand.

Rallying his energy for a spring, he succeeded in catching my hand in an uncertain grasp, but at the same moment the sapling tore away, and the arm on which he had hitherto depended hung as if dislocated by his side.

He was hanging now with his whole weight depending from my arm, my fingers not having a full, fair grasp even of his hand. His cigar was still between his lips. He raised with difficulty his other arm and removed it.