

a little serious talk with you, Mr. Carew. Your daughter has told you the motive of this visit, perhaps."

"She hinted at something, which I could hardly believe possible. I thought my poor child, in utter ignorance of the world, might naturally mistake gallantry for—"

"For affection," said Sir Aubrey. "I am not skilled in the art of gallantry, Mr. Carew, and when I spoke to your daughter the other night—too hastily, perhaps—I spoke straight from my heart."

"And your words went straight home to hers, Sir Aubrey," answered the schoolmaster, with feeling. "Need I say how deeply I feel the honour you have conferred upon my daughter. Yet when I reflect upon the disparity—"

"In our ages?" said Sir Aubrey, quickly.

"No, Sir Aubrey, in your social position. If I objected to my daughter's union with a banker's son, whose family opposed the marriage, have I not still stronger reason to object to a marriage which all the country will condemn?"

"Do you imagine, sir, that I exist only to please my neighbours?" cried Sir Aubrey, haughtily. "The lady I choose for my wife, sir, ascends at once to my own level, and let me see any gentleman or lady in this country who will presume to disparage her. Come, Mr. Carew, let us discuss this subject from a business point of view. I have proposed for your daughter's hand, and she has done me the honour to accept me without reserve. The preliminaries of the marriage are all that you and I have to settle."

"Will you take a seat, Sir Aubrey, and allow me to light the candles?" said Mr. Carew, leading the way into the dusky parlour.

"You needn't light candles. We can talk just as well in the twilight," said the visitor, seating himself just within the doorway.

Mr. Carew was not sorry to remain in that friendly half-light. Who could tell what questions the baronet might intend to ask him—questions upon which his daughter's future fortune might depend—questions which might tax his ingenuity to the uttermost to answer satisfactorily. It was some advantage to keep his face in the shadow.

"When a man of my age makes such a proposal as I have made to your daughter," began Sir Aubrey, "it is only natural to suppose that he is moved by a deep and powerful feeling. I have heard of love as swift and sudden as this love of mine, and ridiculed it, many a time before to-day. I now confess, in all humility, that I underrated the power of the god. He has avenged himself upon my infidelity, and has transformed the unbeliever into a fanatic."

He paused, sighed gently, as if regretting his own abasement, and then went on in the same half-meditative tone.

"You say the county, which has its own standard of right, will take objection to my marriage with your daughter, Mr. Carew. I am prepared for that. I will go further and say I know that they will ridicule my infatuation—set me down as a dotard, at fifty-seven years of age, laugh at the old man and his fair young wife. In answer to all this I can only say that I know my own heart, and that it is not mere admiration for your daughter's beauty which has influenced my conduct. I should despise myself could I think that I had been caught by a pretty face; like the brainless moth which seeks its destruction in the flame that dazzles and allures it. No, Mr. Carew, I love your daughter honestly, and sincerely, in all purity and truth; and I am willing to trust the remnant of my days to her keeping."

"Nay, Sir Aubrey, at fifty-seven a man has hardly passed the prime of life."

"Have you any objection to offer to this marriage, sir?" asked Sir Aubrey, with a stately condescension, as if fully aware that the question was an empty courtesy.

"Objection! I am deeply honoured by your choice. I feel more pride than I can venture to express, lest I should lapse into seeming servility."

"Not another word, Mr. Carew. I feel that however humble your present position may be you were born to occupy a better one."

"I was, Sir Aubrey. My father was a merchant of some standing, who sent me to Eton and Oxford, and suffered me to marry and begin life with the idea that I was a man of independent means. His failure and death within three years of my poor Sylvia's birth left me a pauper. This employment, humble though it is, was the best that offered itself to the ruined Oxonian, who had neither trade nor profession. You may say, perhaps, that I might in all these years have endeavoured to improve my condition. I can only answer that whatever energies I ever had were deadened by the blow that reduced me from delusive affluence to actual poverty. The little I can earn here has sufficed to maintain my child and myself. The retired life has suited my habits and inclinations; and thus I have never taken arms against a sea of troubles, but have rather preferred the obscurity of this peaceful haven."

"I understand," said Sir Aubrey. "And you had no wife to share or lighten your struggles. She died before your misfortunes?"

"Yes, my wife was dead."

"I inferred as much."

There was a pause. Sir Aubrey had something more to say, but hardly knew how to say it. He was a rich man, and he had told himself that this Mr. Carew might entertain an exaggerated notion of a wealthy bridegroom's liberality. He might count upon profiting to some large extent by his daughter's union with the lord of the manor. It was for Sir Aubrey to undeceive him at once upon this point.

"Your daughter having done me the honour to accept me, and there being no impediment to our marriage, it appears to me, Mr. Carew, that the event cannot take place too soon; unless, indeed, Sylvia should desire delay; a wish which I should infinitely regret, for where there is so great a disparity of years that wish might indicate uncertainty of purpose."

"My daughter has no such wish, Sir Aubrey," replied Mr. Carew, promptly. "But a woman can hardly pass from the position of my daughter to that of your wife without some trifling preparations in the way of *trousseau*."

"Of course. But in all her arrangements I hope Miss Carew will remember that I am a man of the simplest habits; that I see hardly any society, and that I utterly abhor the frivolities of fashion."

"I have no doubt that she will be proud to be ruled by your superior judgment in all things," replied the schoolmaster, who was beginning to feel a shade of anxiety. There had been, so far, not a syllable that hinted at any improvement in his own circumstances. Sir Aubrey had not uttered the important word *settlement*. And it was a word which Mr.

Carew felt could hardly issue from his lips. To betray his expectation of profit from the marriage would seem like bargaining for the price of his daughter.

While he was meditating this, somewhat uncomfortably, Sir Aubrey relieved his doubts by becoming business like.

"With regard to settlements," he said, "I conclude that as you can give nothing to your daughter, you will not entertain any exaggerated expectations upon that point. I will freely own to you that I do not understand, or approve, the modern system of making a wife independent of her husband. Dependence is one of woman's sweetest attributes—her most winning charm. I should not like my wife—were she a nobleman's daughter—to possess an independent income during my lifetime. I shall, therefore settle nothing upon Sylvia."

Mr. Carew's heart grew heavy. Why, at this rate, Edmund Standen might have been a better match than Sir Aubrey.

"But I shall settle two or three thousand a year—say five thousand—upon my widow. When I die Sylvia shall have that income, and the Dowry House—now let off, and worth two hundred a year."

"Sir Aubrey," said the schoolmaster with a dignified air, "far be it from me to dispute the justice or the generosity of any decision you may arrive at. I am certainly inclined to think that for my daughter's future comfort, and your exemption from small worries, it might have been wise for you to settle upon her some moderate allowance in the way of pin money, were it only three or four hundred a year, which would have made her independent, so far as concerns a woman's trifling requirements."

"A woman's trifling requirements," echoed Sir Aubrey; "you don't mean to tell me that your daughter, brought up in this cottage, would require three or four hundred a year to buy gowns and bonnets?"

"Certainly not, Sir Aubrey. But charity makes a large item in a lady's expenditure, and Sylvia, as the mistress of Perriam, could hardly come to you for every half-crown she wanted to give to a sick cottager."

"Good heavens, sir," cried the baronet, "do you suppose that I cannot make my wife an allowance for pocket money, when she is my wife, without binding myself to pay her so many hundreds a year upon a piece of stamped parchment before I marry her? I will amply provide for your daughter in the event of my death; but I will never consent to render her independent of my bounty during my lifetime."

The schoolmaster murmured a vague assent; but felt more and more uncomfortable. "How am I to profit by such a marriage?" he wondered. "Am I to sit in the gate like Mordecai, and to be not a jot better off for my daughter's advancement?"

Again Sir Aubrey came to his relief.

"As regards yourself, Mr. Carew," he began, graciously, "I have reflected that it could hardly be satisfactory to you to occupy your present position—honourable as that position is—when your daughter is Lady Perriam. I shall therefore request you to accept a hundred a year, which I shall be very happy to remit to you by quarterly payments, in lieu of your present stipend, and which will enable you to live in quiet independence—"

the baronet was about to say "elsewhere," but checked himself lest the phrase should sound like a sentence of banishment,—in any locality most agreeable to yourself."

"You are very good, Sir Aubrey. I place my future entirely at your disposal," answered the schoolmaster.

"A hundred a year! A poor pittance, although twice as good as my present income," he thought, deeply disappointed by the baronet's narrow views on the subject of settlements. He had fancied that an elderly lover would be lavish—ready to empty his coffers at the feet of his idol. And here was Sir Aubrey, driving as hard a bargain as if he had been Shadrack Bain, cheapening a herd of store oxen at Monkhampton cattle fair.

A hundred a year! It seemed a pitiful result of such a wondrous event as the baronet's subjugation. Mr. Carew could only comfort himself with the idea that Sylvia, once married, must assuredly acquire some power over her husband's purse, and that it would be hard if her father were not something the better for her altered fortunes.

"You spoke just now of Sylvia's *trousseau*," said Sir Aubrey, who felt more at his ease now that he had expounded his views. "I have not forgotten that necessity. Perhaps you will contrive to give your daughter this little packet without offending her delicacy. It contains a hundred pounds in bank notes."

James Carew took the small parcel, and his faded face flushed faintly at the mere thought of its contents. How long it was since he had held as much money in his hand. The day had been when a hundred pounds would have made an insignificant item in the vast sum of his needs; but of late years sovereigns had been as drops of his heart's blood, so dear had it cost him to part with them.

"I shall be obliged if you will bear in mind what I said just now about simplicity of attire," said Sir Aubrey, when Mr. Carew had murmured his acknowledgment of the lover's first gift. "A woman cannot be too plainly dressed for my taste; nor does Sylvia's beauty need adornment."

Sylvia opened the gate while her elderly lover was speaking, and came across the dusky garden. Sir Aubrey went out to meet her, almost as eager as if he had been twenty-five instead of fifty-seven. Business-like and deliberate as he had been in the adjustment of monetary questions, he became enthusiastic at sight of Sylvia.

"My sweet one," he said, detaining her in the garden, "I have seen your father, and settled everything. And now I want you to name the happy day that is to make us one."

That sudden appeal made Sylvia tremble. What, was her doom so near? She had thought it a grand thing to be Lady Perriam, while that change of fortune appeared still distant. She had forsworn herself—renounced her lover—become a renegade. Yet at the near approach of that brilliant fortune for which she had sacrificed all lesser things, there came a revulsion of feeling. If she could by any possibility have drawn back at this last moment, she would have done it, recalled her renunciation of Edmund, become once more the happy girl who had pillowed her head upon her lover's breast, and felt herself brave enough to face even poverty for his sake.

But it was all too late for turning back. Sir Aubrey's patrician hand had drawn hers gently through his arm with an air of proprietorship.

"Let it be as soon as possible, my dear," he said, in a tone that was half lover-like, half fatherly, "the autumn will soon

be upon us, and I should like to spend September in Paris. I am always glad to get away from the falling leaves."

Paris seemed a name of enchantment to this untravelled girl. Not Damascus, Balaora, or Bagdad—no city she had ever read of in the Arabian Nights—could have more the sound of a fairy tale.

"I should like to see Paris," she said, forgetting her tardy remorse.

"We will spend our honeymoon there, love!" replied the baronet, who had made up his mind about it before he came to woo. It would be an inexpensive honeymoon. Lodgment in his *entresol* would cost him nothing. There would only be some slight difference in the terms of his contract with the *traiteur* who supplied his table.

"Your father agrees with me that there is no motive for delay, except for the brief time you may require to have two or three dresses made," said Sir Aubrey. "We will be married very quietly in yonder church some morning, before any of the village gossips have had time to discover our intention."

"That will be nice," said Sylvia, somewhat listlessly, "but I should have liked a few months' delay."

"A few months! What for?"

"The question was embarrassing."

"How can you be sure that you really care for me—that your regard for me is anything more than a passing fancy?" she faltered after a pause.

"I have no doubt as to my feelings," replied Sir Aubrey, with offended dignity. "Perhaps it is you who are doubtful about yours."

"No, indeed!" cried Sylvia quickly. Not for worlds must she offend him. Was not the die cast? She might keep back her letter to Edmund, which was not yet posted, but she could not undo her interview with Mrs. Standen. The next mail would doubtless carry a full account of that interview to her lover. And was it likely he would forgive her for having rejected his mother's offered friendship—for having renounced him deliberately in the very hour of his mother's relenting? Sylvia felt that Edmund was lost to her, and that there was nothing for her between marriage with Sir Aubrey and ignominious downfall.

Reflection showed her that her own interest demanded a speedy marriage. What would be her position if Edmund came back and denounced her? He might be cruel enough to tell Sir Aubrey how fondly she had loved him; with what oft-repeated vows she had sworn to be true. What might not a betrayed lover do to proclaim her baseness? The best possible shelter would be Sir Aubrey's name. No one would dare to assail or to insult Sir Aubrey Perriam's wife.

"Come, Sylvia," said the baronet tenderly, "if you love me ever so little you will not ask for delay. It is in your power to make my life very happy. Why should not my happiness begin as soon as it can? Remember, my sweet one, when you accepted my offer the other night you linked your life with mine. You can hardly unlink it again, unless you really repent your promise."

"No, no. I do not repent. I am honoured, proud, happy, in the knowledge of your love."

"Then we will be married this day month," said Sir Aubrey, sealing the bond with a courteous kiss.

Sylvia made no objection. It is not for the beggar girl to dictate to King Cophetua.

CHAPTER XXVI.

MR. BAIN PLEADS THE CAUSE OF THE WIDOW.

Sir Aubrey, always an early riser, breakfasted a little earlier than usual on the morning after his interview with Sylvia, and mounted his favourite Splinter directly after breakfast, to ride into Monkhampton. The day was dull and cloudy, and the landscape had not its usual smile as he walked his horse along the hilly road between Perriam and the market town.

Rather a quiet place, Monkhampton, at this hour of the morning. There were two or three sleek vestrymen lounging near the door of that uninviting building the Vestry Hall, disputing about sewer rates, and the advisability or non-advisability of an additional twopence in the pound, lately a point in discussion. The bells were ringing for a week-day service, and a few respectable matrons and a sprinkling of young ladies might be seen wending their way to the parish church; but commerce seemed to be hardly awake in Monkhampton at a quarter-past ten in the morning.

Sir Aubrey drew rein at a house near the beginning of the high street, in a neighbourhood where the town touched the border of the country, and where the houses boasted larger gardens than in the heart of Monkhampton. The house before which the baronet stopped was strong, and solid, and square, and respectable—a house which insolvency could never have inhabited, one might fancy, so boldly did it stare the world in the face—so aggressive was the look of its ponderous iron railings. It was built of dull, yellow bricks, picked out with red, and had three rows of windows, five in a row on the two upper floors, two on each side of the hall door. The steps were as white as hearthstone could make them; the windows as bright as if they had been cleaned this morning, but no flower-pot, no birdcage, no frivolity of any kind decorated those windows. The two on the left of the door were draped with crim-on curtains of a substantial moreen, that assumed the stiffest, straightest folds possible to a textile fabric; the windows on the right were screened as to the lower panes by wire blinds, stern barriers against the prying gaze of passers-by, which said as plain as words could speak, "We guard the sanctity of a lawyer's office."

On the large brass plate, which gave additional dignity to the tall grained and varnished street door, appeared the following inscription:—

Mr. Shadrack Bain,
Solicitor and Land Agent.

Sir Aubrey gave Splinter to his groom, turned the brazen handle of Mr. Bain's door and went in, without further ceremony.

The houses in Monkhampton were, as a rule, thus accessible to the public, and Sir Aubrey was familiar with the habits of his agent. The door on the right of the entrance had the word "Office" painted on its panels, in severe-looking black letters. This door Sir Aubrey opened, and confronted his land steward, who was seated at a desk opposite the door, plodding through a lease with a pencil in his mouth, ready to take note of any flaw in the agreement.

Shadrack Bain was a man of that doubtful and indefinite age which is sometimes called the prime of life. Time had as yet traced no wrinkle on the land steward's brow, amply provided