

JAQUES.

Rosalind. They say you are a melancholy fellow.
Jaques. I am so; I do love it better than laughing.
As You Like It.

What time, fair Autumn, musing, walk'd abroad;
She of the dreamy eye and bounteous breast,
And lip fruit-stain'd and calm brow loosely tress'd,
Her paths leaf-litter'd, and her gran'ries stored
With grain new garner'd from the widow'd fields:
What time thin mist made vague the passing days,
And sound grew sleepy, through the woodland ways
He moved, deep pondering as one who yields
His soul up to that twilight land of ghosts
And endless echoes, which men call the Past.

"Ay, ay!" he sigh'd, how little while do last
The glad green lives of all the leafy hosts
That feed the forest solitudes with sound,
And make a summer song throughout the land!
Ay, ay! how soon their corpses strew the ground,
Till bear and leaf-lorn all the wood doth stand
To front chill Winter and his winds!

So friendships fall from us and so loves die,
And leave us naked to adversity!

"A foolish world! a world of little lives
That dance and hiss a season in the sun,
Then wither from their places, one by one:
A world where never joy or hope survives
Its youth, but it is bitten by a frost;
Where much is missed and more is wholly lost;
Where love is dwarf'd, and faith untimely starved,
And death alone is liberal! How halved
With bitterness are all its sweets! how stain'd
With sin and suffering all it has attain'd!

Thus mused he in the forest, dim and drear,
Marking the fall'ring of the waning year,
Till western skies were fleck'd with cloudy bars,
And night, broad bosom'd mother of lone stars,
Stole o'er the fields, bereft of all their sheaves,
Yet still he linger'd amid ling'ring leaves.

[REGISTERED according to the Copyright Act of 1868.]

TAKEN AT THE FLOOD.

A NEW NOVEL.

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

CHAPTER XLII.

STARTLING NEWS FOR MR. BAIN.

Before leaving Monkhampton Mr. Bain had taken pains to impress upon his eldest son, a lad of sixteen, who had been exalted from a desk at the grammar school to a stool in his father's office, the necessity of keeping the absent head of the firm well acquainted with anything and everything that might happen at Perriam likely to affect his interests, were it ever so slightly.

"I don't see that anything can happen while I'm away," said Mr. Bain, after dwelling upon these instructions. "Everything has gone on like clockwork at the Place ever since Sir Aubrey's illness, and nothing less than his death could throw things out of gear. But there's no such thing as certainty in life, and one can't be too much on one's guard. You must call twice a week at the Place while I'm away, see Lady Perriam and hear how things are going on from her own lips."

The youth shrank shyly from the idea of such temerity. He had seen Lady Perriam's yellow chariot before shop doors in the High street, had beheld the lady herself come forth, beautiful and in splendid raiment, a being who scarcely seemed to tread the ground across which her graceful form passed. There was something appalling in the thought of making an uninvited morning call upon such a divinity.

"Suppose Lady Perriam refuses to see me?" suggested the youthful law-student.

"She'll not refuse if you say that it was my wish you should see her."

"I suppose she thinks a great deal of you, father," said Pawker. The eldest son had been christened Pawker in compliment to his mother's family.

"I believe I have some influence with her," replied Mr. Bain, with reserve.

"She's jolly handsome, isn't she?" exclaimed Pawker, betrayed by his enthusiasm.

"Jolly is not an adjective to be heard in a respectable household, Pawker," Mr. Bain remarked, sternly. "If I had said such a word in my father's presence, he'd have caned me."

This was a favourite form of reproof with Shadrack Bain. His children had been brought up in a wholesale awe of those punishments which they had just escaped by a generation.

Having given his son detailed instructions as to what he was to do, Mr. Bain left Monkhampton almost easy in his mind. If what Pawker had to tell were unimportant, he was to communicate with his parent by letter, but if the news were vital he was to telegraph.

For three weeks Mr. Bain remained quietly at Cannes, watching Amelia's lamp of life faintly reviving, till it burned dimly, yet with daily increasing steadiness, or so it seemed to the husband.

"She will last another summer," he said to himself, meditating upon this apparent return of strength. "Strange how many false alarms we have had since her health first began to fail. How long the attenuated thread holds out."

Pawker wrote to his father twice a week, like a dutiful son, and the head clerk wrote every other day, forwarding all important documents, or copies thereof, for his principal's perusal. Pawker's letters were as empty of intelligence as it was possible for letters to be. He told of his calls at Perriam Place, and how Lady Perriam had condescended to see him on every occasion, and had told him that Sir Aubrey's health was pretty much as usual. Pawker varied the wording occasionally, but the gist of his letter was always the same.

Three weeks at Cannes had more than exhausted the pleasures of that tranquil retreat. Perfect though Mr. Bain was in his capacity of husband, the monotony and seclusion of his wife's apartment, wearied him, and now that Mrs. Bain was obviously better, he began to meditate immediate flight. His business was not one to be left long with impunity, he told the gentle Amelia.

"You'll have Clara Louisa to keep you company when I am gone," said Shadrack; and Mrs. Bain submitted with all meekness to the loss of her husband's society as a melancholy necessity.

Mr. Bain, anxious as he had seemed to leave Cannes, did

not go back to Monkhampton without loss of time by the way. He had heard a great deal about the delights of Paris, from his fellow-townsmen, more given to pleasure than himself, men who deemed a week's holiday in the gay French Capital, the crowning reward of a year's drudging amidst the dullness of a country town. Heretofore, Mr. Bain had caught only flying glimpses of the wonderful city. But he was now determined to waste four or five days tasting those enjoyments in the way of dinners, *cafés chantants*, circuses, and so on, which his Monkhampton acquaintances had dilated upon so rapturously. He wanted to see if to dine at a noted Restaurant was really to rise to the level of the Gods, he wanted to hear the Theresa or Lolotte of the day—to see circuses which recalled the glories of Imperial Rome—to be able in a word to say, "I too have lived." He was a man who cared very little for pleasure, but he did not like being quite behind his neighbours in the knowledge of life.

So without saying a word of his intention to Mrs. Bain, lest he should grieve that gentle soul by the idea that he could prefer the novel dissipations of the capital, to her society, Shadrack left Cannes for Paris, meaning to put up at an hotel recommended to him by Tom Westropp, the auctioneer, one of the wildest spirits in Monkhampton. As he had said nothing of this Parisian holiday at Cannes, he meant to be equally reticent at Monkhampton; or if he alluded at all to his stay in Paris, he would put it down to the ever-convenient score, business. It was very easy to name some imaginary client as the person who had detained him.

Mr. Bain put up at the hotel so urgently recommended by Mr. Westropp. It turned out to be rather a dingy abode, not quite realizing the glowing picture presented by the auctioneer, who had perhaps unconsciously embellished the discourse of private life with the eloquence of the rostrum. The bed-chamber allotted to Mr. Bain was on the ground floor, abutting on a darksome court-yard. The coffee-room where Mr. Bain took his solitary breakfast of beefsteak and fried potatoes was not a lively apartment. Altogether Mr. Bain thought that he had seen many an English inn more attractive of aspect than this famous hostelry.

He took his fill of Parisian pleasures, saw all the horseship to be seen in the Champs Elysées, heard Theresa and Lolotte, dined to his heart's content, and made himself bilious with new sauces and unaccustomed wines, and in four days had had as much of Parisian life as he cared about. He went home yearning for Monkhampton, his office, his iron safe, his letter book. After the bustle of that strange garish city his native town seemed to him the one delectable spot on earth.

His clerk's letters had been wholly satisfactory, so he went home without any feeling of uneasiness, apprehending no mischief could possibly have arisen from his absence.

He had sent no intimation of return to his household, so that there was no dogcart to meet him at the station when he arrived at Monkhampton, at about five o'clock in the afternoon, having been travelling since seven o'clock on the previous evening.

He left his bag and portmanteau to be sent after him by a porter, and walked quietly home, opened the door, and went in. The house had its accustomed orderly look, not a chair out of its place. Nothing could have gone wrong here, he thought.

It was tea time, always a comfortable hour in homely middle-class houses—an hour of rest and respite from the care and toil of the day. Mr. Bain went into the dining-room, which was cheerfully lighted with gas, and a blazing fire. The healthy tribe of junior Bains was assembled round the capacious table, Matilda Jane ministering to their numerous wants. A substantial quarter loaf was succumbing beneath the slashing cuts of Humphrey, the second boy, while Maria, the third girl, was doling out a plain cake, a cake of such an unpretending nature that but for a few currants and a sprinkling of caraway seeds, it might have passed for bread. Pawker, a boy of luxurious habits, was kneeling before the fire, toasting muffins, bought with his own pocket money, muffins being luxuries which Mrs. Bain considered at once bilious and sinful.

Altogether there was an air of enjoyment in the party, which reminded Mr. Bain of a vulgar proverb about cats and mice, and he had a slightly offended feeling at seeing how comfortable his children could be without him. There was more noise than there was wont to be in his presence, the gas was flaming higher, the fire burned like a furnace.

At sight of the head of the household all mirth stopped. Every father of a family is more or less awful when he bursts upon the home circle without any note of warning.

"Good gracious, pa!" shrieked Matilda Jane, conscious of the open volume of a novel lurking beside the tea-tray, "What a start you did give me!"

"We've been expecting you every minute for the last four days," said Pawker, laying down his toasting-fork in the fender and abandoning his muffin to its fate. "Didn't you get my telegram?"

"What telegram?" inquired Mr. Bain uneasily.

"The one I sent to Cannes last Thursday. I made sure you'd come back as fast as the trains and boat would carry you."

Last Thursday—nearly a week ago. This was Wednesday.

"What did you telegraph about, boy?"

"To tell you of Sir Aubrey's death!"

"Sir Aubrey's death!" echoed Shadrack Bain, aghast. "Is Sir Aubrey Perriam dead?"

"Yes, father. He died suddenly on Wednesday night. We didn't hear of it till Thursday evening, only just in time to telegraph. The clerk said the telegram might not reach Cannes till Friday morning."

Mr. Bain had left for Paris by the night mail on Thursday evening.

"We got a letter from Clara Louisa on Monday to say that you'd left, and would be at home before her letter. So when you didn't come home, we didn't know what to think had become of you."

"You seem to have made yourself pretty comfortable under the circumstances," said Mr. Bain grimly. "Sir Aubrey dead! I can hardly bring myself to believe it. Dead, and I out of the way when he died. I wouldn't have had it happen for a great deal. Dead—buried, I suppose."

"Yes, father. The funeral was this morning—a very quiet funeral. I went over to have a look, though I wasn't asked. There were only Lady Perriam, Mr. Stimpson, and the servants for mourners."

"Mordred Perriam followed his brother to the grave, I suppose?"

"No father. Mr. Perriam has kept his room ever since you've been away. He's been getting queerer and queerer for

a long time people say, and now he's altogether gone—*non compos.*"

"People say! What people?"

"Well, the servants at the Place. I was up there yesterday afternoon, and had a longish talk with the house-keeper. I wanted to see Lady Perriam, you know, as it was your wish I should call upon her twice a week—but she hasn't seen anyone except Mr. Stimpson and the clergyman since Sir Aubrey's death. But I saw the house-keeper, and the old lady was uncommonly sociable, and told me a lot about Mr. Perriam,—and his queer ways. His brother's death has quite done for him, she says, and he won't look at anybody. Mrs. Carter, the nurse, has to wait upon him hand and foot, pretty much the same as she did upon Sir Aubrey."

"Humph," muttered the steward, "that's easily seen through. Mrs. Carter knows when she has a good place, and doesn't want to lose it. Now Sir Aubrey's gone she'll pretend her services are wanted by his brother. Has the will been read yet?"

"No, father. Lady Perriam said it was to be kept for you to read when you came back."

"Very considerate of Lady Perriam," replied Mr. Bain. "And now Matilda Jane, if there's no cold meat in the house you'd better get me a chop—or a steak. I've had nothing since I breakfasted at a coffee house near the London Bridge Terminus."

Matilda Jane flew to obey her father's behest. A sober quiet had descended upon the family circle. The more tender of the olive branches crammed their young mouths with plain cake, and stared open-eyed at the author of their being. Pawker, who being in the transition period between boy and manhood, had an exaggerated sense of his own importance, sipped his tea with affected ease, and tried to look as if he wasn't afraid of his father.

Startling as was the news of Sir Aubrey Perriam's sudden death, Shadrack Bain seemed to take it with admirable coolness. He took off his coat and wraps, settled himself in his arm-chair by the fire, and sat in meditative contemplation of the glowing coals, but with no shade of uneasiness upon his thoughtful brow. Sir Aubrey's death in no manner disarranged the plans which the land steward had made for his future life. On the contrary, it fitted in with them—it was one of the events of his programme—calculated upon ever so long ago. It had only come some years—say about ten years—before he expected it. One of the obstacles upon that broad high road, along which Mr. Bain designed to travel to the winning post had been removed.

About his late employer's will Mr. Bain felt no uneasiness. He had drawn up the document himself, a few months after Sir Aubrey's marriage; and he had no fear of the baronet having made any subsequent will. He knew that he had to the last enjoyed Sir Aubrey's fullest confidence, and that in the decay of thought and memory the invalid had leaned upon him as upon a crutch.

Thus there was nothing uncomfortable in Shadrack Bain's meditations as he sat by his warm hearth while the disordered tea table was restored to order, and cruet-frame and pickle-stand, beer jug and decanter, were set forth on a spotless table cloth neatly laid across that end of the table nearest to Mr. Bain's arm-chair.

Some natural sorrow he may have felt for the death of the man who had been in some wise the author of his fortunes, but in Mr. Bain's practical mind all undue lamenting for departed friends appeared at once foolish and morbid; a diseased indulgence, an irrational sensibility. He would have a band put upon his hat to-morrow, and by that outward mark of woe reduce his regret to a symbol. That done, he would feel he had done his duty to the dead.

Had the Perriam estate been about to pass to the unknown heir-at-law Mr. Bain would have felt considerable uneasiness and uncertainty. The heir-at-law might have cherished particular views of his own about the property and might have dismissed Mr. Bain from his stewardship, but providence, ever kind to the Bain family, had been pleased to bless Sylvia Perriam with offspring, and the existence of that baby boy, still struggling with the advance guard of his teeth, made things very smooth for Shadrack Bain.

Well did he remember the making of Sir Aubrey's will—how just at the last he had ventured to suggest that there should be some trustee named, to protect the estate of the expected heir, or the portion of the heiress—should fate refuse to grant Sir Aubrey a son—in the event of the Baronet's death before the child came of age.

Mr. Bain recalled Sir Aubrey's offended look as he said: "I hope you don't consider me such a very old man that I can't possibly live to see my children grow up."

"No, indeed, Sir Aubrey. I am only anxious to provide for a remote contingency," the steward had answered.

"You men of business are so tiresome. Very well, if I must appoint a trustee, put in your own name. It will do as well as any other!"

This happened to dove-tail into a corner of Mr. Bain's phantasmal edifice—that airy erection—built with profoundest calculation—which symbolised his future.

He put his own name into the will as trustee and joint executor with Lady Perriam. Beyond this Sir Aubrey left him the sum of one thousand pounds sterling, in acknowledgment of his honourable and devoted services during a prolonged period. It was not a large reward for services so untingering, so profitable to the employer, but Sir Aubrey did not make the bequest without a mental wronch. He did not like dividing his money after death; it seemed almost as bad as parting with it during his life.

Mr. Bain eat a well-cooked steak and a couple of pickled walnuts with as good an appetite as if there had been nothing on his mind. He liked this plain English fare, this solid beef and bread, washed down with amber-hued bitter beer, better than the untried kickshaws of the *Maison Dorée* or Philippe's. He liked the sober comfort of his home, the deferral companionship of his children, who worshipped him as a superior being, and trembled at the creaking of his boots. He liked the snug retirement of his office, where he spent the rest of that evening, looking through the record of work that had been done in his absence, and wasting some little time in thinking how Lady Perriam would be affected by her widowhood.

"Will she try to lure Edmund Standen back to her?" he asked himself. And this time his brow was darkly clouded, as if his thoughts were full of gloom.