

been the original Eve you would have worsted the serpent,' her husband said in his leisurely voice. 'How d'ye do, Merreday. I met Halstead just now.' He sat down very slowly. 'No soup or fish, is the entree cold? It's the first duty of an entree or a sweet at this time of year to get itself iced. What was I saying? Oh, I met Halstead looking radiant an hour ago. Upon my life I believe he's been up to something. I heard the other day that he was after that handsome Lambert girl. By the way, old Lambert, by all accounts, is very shaky; had a queer attack at his club the other day.'

'Something sent Merreday back very quickly to Eccleston square. As he let himself in with the latch-key Halstead came out of the smoking-room. 'Come in here,' he said 'I want to tell you something.'

Merreday followed him curiously. Halstead went up to the fireplace, looked for a match-box, struck a light, and put it to his pipe before he spoke.

'I—I'm engaged to Helen Lambert. I've grown fond of her lately.' He stopped, but Merreday was silent, as if he did not quite take it in. 'I didn't want to tell you before. I didn't know if she'd have me.'

Merreday looked at him for a moment blankly, then the radiant look came over his face, and he burst out joyfully, with genuine rejoicing—

'You are in luck; shake hands, old man; she's splendid! You are in luck.'

'Yes, I think I am. Have some soda water?'

'Splendid luck!'

'Thank you,' said Halstead, with a little smile.

'You are a cool beggar, though, upon my soul; as cool as the morning. I should be chanting on the housetop if I were going to marry a girl like that. I believe you'd take the day of judgment without turning a hair.'

An amused smile came into Halstead's eyes. 'Perhaps,' he said. Merreday looked at him critically for a moment.

'By Jove, though,' he exclaimed, 'you'll make a splendid couple. It will be like the marriage of the sun and moon, and the little stars shall be your children. When is it to be?'

'As soon as possible,' Halstead answered calmly; 'in a month probably. There's nothing to wait for.'

'I'll be your best man. The number of weddings I've seen through in Cairo!'

'You shall see mine through,' Halstead said with a dreamy look on his handsome face.

'I wonder,' said Merreday, as he walked up and down his own room an hour later, 'if he knows how to make love to that girl. I wouldn't mind betting that he barely kissed her, if he did at all.'

CHAPTER IV.

Mrs. Lambert was well content. Her step daughter's marriage was to take place on the 1st of July, and the day had nearly arrived. There were no exciting incidents in the engagement. Laurence Halstead was thoroughly in love with his pretty fiancée, though he didn't talk to her much; but he did everything else that was generous and lover-like. Perhaps as the day drew near his silence, which was that of an interested and thoughtful rather than a reserved man, gave way a little, and he always listened to her happy talk with an expression on his face that satisfied her. Love-making was a little out of his line, he never knew what to say to women, still less how to make tender speeches, and to this girl, for whom he cared with all his heart, it seemed unnecessary to protest overmuch, as though his love were a doubtful quantity that needed constant assurances to strengthen her confidence in it. He thought of everything that could give her happiness. Travel? She should go everywhere. He pictured to himself the delight of showing her all the places that as yet were but dreams to her. Music? They would have a couple of stalls twice a week when there was opera, and he had a little day dream of treating her to a box for the season later on, so that she might have the pleasure of inviting her friends. Books! Oh, yes. He fitted up a little room to be dedicated wholly to her in Eccleston Square, and was quite elated when he saw the compact shelves designed for it by a Girton girl, who had turned lady decorator. He put on them all that he thought would please her best, and a little smile came over his face as he took up the volumes of Herbert Spencer, and remembered Merreday's remark that she would read him in another year.

'Very well done,' said the demon, as he looked over the shelves. 'Poetry and fiction, a dash of the classics, a little biography, a spice of travel, a few mere reference-books ingeniously put into a corner, some philosophy, and a little unadulterated unbelief to leaven everything. Now, if I were making a library for myself or the woman of my heart, I should say the Bible and Shakespeare, Continental Bradshaw, Army and Navy Store list, and Whitaker's Almanac—quite enough for any man or woman who lives.'

'But then you are a scoffer at books, remember. I added the speculative philosophers to the library,' Halstead went on apologetically, 'because a woman likes to affect a little unbelief at some time or other. It never goes very deep, and it gives her an intellectual margin.'

'An intellectual excuse for going to the devil, and thinking it praiseworthy,' said Merreday, in his dogmatic manner.

'And then,' said Halstead, with a certain hesitation, 'I hope we shall discuss all manner of things.'

'Discuss all manner of things!' groaned Merreday to himself. 'Oh, you consolidated idiot. A woman would rather that the man she loved kissed her, and told her she was a darling—which I expect you never do—than discuss heaven and earth and the debatable land called purgatory with the greatest sage on earth.'

But Halstead knew his fiancée better than Merreday imagined. There

had been signs—unknown to herself, but clear enough to him—that she would not be satisfied without an intellectual side to her life, just as there had been signs—a flush in her eye, or a quick, eager word—that showed she would wake up by and by into a woman, of whom the girl, with her indefinable longings, was only a germ.

Meanwhile life was a very desirable thing to her. She was a little subdued perhaps, and her happiness had an element of reverence in it. She felt sometimes as if she were going to marry an archangel and live in a cathedral to the sound of church music; she knew this was absurd, but she rather liked the feeling and encouraged it. It had seemed quite presumptuous at first to call him Laurence, but she grew used to it, even ventured on Lal sometimes, and once when he brought her some moonstones set with brilliant she was so carried away with excitement that she put her arms up round his neck of her own accord and kissed his coat collar. Altogether she was thoroughly content; moreover, she knew that she was pleasing her step-mother and satisfying her father by marrying Lal: but had they suddenly turned against him, and had he been transformed to a crossing-sweeper, she would have taken him all the same.

'Oh, I am very happy,' she said to him one day; 'it is such a wonderful thing that you should want to marry me.' He looked down at her with his quiet smile.

'Now, I think it is remarkable that you should want to marry me.' She rubbed her cheek against the back of his hand by way of answer, and he thought it a very good one. Suddenly he asked with an amused expression in his eyes, 'Have you made up your mind yet where you will go for your honeymoon?'

'Oh! I don't care in the least if I only go with you.'

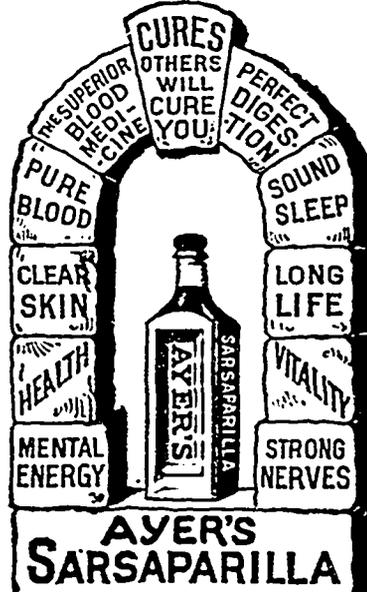
'You are not likely to go with anybody else,' and then they both laughed, and Lal grew quite talkative, and told her that he had been thinking of Paris and Lucerne or of the Mediterranean. They might rush down to Marcellus, it would be very hot there, but they could get a boat on to Genoa, and so to the lakes and on up to Monte Generoso.

'It would be lovely,' she sighed, 'but it is all new to me, so you must arrange it.'

'We'll leave that to Frank; he prides himself on fulfilling every possible duty of a best man, and he appears to take as much interest in our wedding as if it were his own.'

'Yes, doesn't he?' she answered. 'Last night he was miserable because they had not carried out his designs for the bridesmaid's bangles properly, and he has arranged everything for mother. It seems rather a pity that he should throw away so much energy, and not be married himself as well.'

(To be Continued.)



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