

stony stoop of atonement. She had begun life weighted with the burden of their iniquities.

The mother looked at her with a heart-rending gaze. Those faded eyes devoured her young beauty; love's fond yearning spoke in every look, yet fear kept the tremulous lips silent. Never had the sinner so deeply felt her sin. Years of remorse and sorrow weighed as nothing in this moment. The runaway wife looked at the child she had deserted, and felt her guilt as keenly as if it had been a thing of yesterday.

"How could I leave her," she thought. "What if James was hard and cruel, and that other pleaded so tenderly? I had my child. I might have sustained my heart with that comfort. I might have put that sacred shield between my weakness and temptation."

"You told me you were hungry," said Mr. Carew. "You had better eat your supper. It's late already."

His wife had not seemed conscious that food had been set before her. She watched Sylvia with eyes that could see nothing else; or only the past, which made a phantasmal background to that living picture. She stammered an apology, and began to eat, slowly at first, and with an absent air, then ravenously.

The bird, dismembered though he was, having served Mr. Carew for two dinners, was savoury. The cold potatoes, the bacon, and the home-made loaf, were luxury to one to whom plenty had been long unknown. She ate like one who had known starvation. Vague complainings, protestations of penitence, evoked no pity from Mr. Carew; but absolute hunger touched even his cold heart. In dim half-forgotten years he had loved this woman—with no self-sacrificing soul-absorbing devotion, but with just as much love as he was capable of feeling—and it moved him to see her brought so low.

He opened a cupboard and took out his bottle of claret—*en ordinaire* at fifteen pence a bottle—filled a tumbler, and gave it to her. It was the first direct kindness which he had shown her, and she looked up at him with a crouching gratitude—like a dog which had been beaten for wrong-doing, and then restored to his master's favour.

"That's kind of you, James," she murmured, after drinking a little of the somewhat crude vintage, "I haven't tasted wine since I was in the hospital."

"In the hospital—what for?"

"I got knocked down by a cab, and my arm was broken. They took me to the Royal Free Hospital. I was there six weeks. The happiest time I ever had—after—I left Germany."

"God help you!" cried Mr. Carew, with a groan. "Eat your supper."

Sylvia still lingered—fascinated by that spectral face. She had no yearning to fling her arms around this newly-discovered mother. She saw how worn and soiled those rags were, and could hardly have brought herself to touch them, for a love of external purity and a loathing of dirt were innate in Sylvia's mind. No new-fledged affections fluttered her heart, but by degrees a shuddering pity crept into that breast. She went to her father, and whispered in his ear.

"Where is—the person to sleep, papa?"

The question puzzled him. He looked at his unconscious subject doubtfully. Did she mean to plant herself upon him. Was this late arrival a deep laid scheme intended to saddle him with this woman's maintenance for the rest of his days. If he gave her, out of mere Christian charity, a shelter to-night, would she refuse to depart to-morrow morning. She was his very wife. No legal process had ever severed her from his table or his home. She could claim shelter and aliment from him if she pleased, and it would be hard for him to dispute the claim, impossible to deny it, without exposure that would mean ruin.

He looked at her doubtfully. He had had ample cause of complaint against her in those vanished years; but her sins had been vanity and extravagance, not hypocrisy or artifice. Yet she had ended by deceiving him. She had planned her flight secretly enough, no doubt. He could hardly believe in an unpremeditated elopement, even in one as reckless as that vain foolish woman. And, again, poverty engenders vices not original to the character; poverty teaches artifice, poverty destroys pride. All lofty sentiments are crushed out of being by that grinding wheel. So, at least, argued James Carew. A woman who had served such a long apprenticeship to destitution must be dangerous.

Sylvia stole to the window, lifted the blind to look out. The sky was dark, and the rain fell fast; noiseless summer rain, soft fertiliser of the beauteous earth. She went back to her father and whispered again. "Let her have my room, papa," she said, "I can sleep on the sofa here. You can't turn her out on such a night; and she looks ill."

"She can stay, then," answered Mr. Carew.

"If she makes any attempt to settle herself here I shall know how to meet it," he said to himself. "I am not a man to be caught in a trap of her setting."

So it was arranged that the wanderer should rest at the schoolhouse for that one night. Mr. Carew took care to specify the extent of his proffered hospitality. Rest elsewhere in Hedingham, save on the lee-side of a hay stack, there would have been none for her. That virtuous village had long been wrapped in restful slumbers, and had a mortal aversion to vagrants.

CHAPTER XV.

"ALAS! OUR LIPS ARE HELD SO FAR APART."

Sylvia took the wanderer upstairs to her own room—a mere cottage chamber in the roof, which sloped like that of a toy Noah's Ark. The furniture was of the poorest, but the girl's vanity had endowed it with a certain grace and prettiness. One could fancy Gretchen's chamber bedecked with the same girlish art. Purest white dimity curtains and draped casement and bed were tied back coquettishly with knots of green ribbon. The clumsy old walnut wood bureau had been rubbed with beeswax till it might almost have served for a mirror. A china vase of flowers on the dressing table made the atmosphere sweet with the scent of fresh lavender and spice-breathing carnations. The bare boards were scrubbed to spotless whiteness, and the oblong patch of faded carpet beside the narrow bed was neatly bordered with a cheap worsted fringe. The girl's aspiration for the beautiful was visible in every detail.

Mrs. Carford surveyed the room with that mournful deprecating gaze with which she had looked at Sylvia. Sweet shrine of innocent girlhood; how long since she, the sinner, had entered such a temple. There was a charm in this cottage chamber which made it fairer than the handsomest apart-

ment her varied life had ever shown her, from the luxury of satin wood and looking-glass in the Kilburn Villa, to the more tawdry splendour of continental hotels. And after the garrets that had sheltered her in later years, how gracious was this humble chamber! True that in shape and size it was hardly superior to those attics in the purlieus of Holborn, or the outskirts of the City-road, but its purity, its neatness, its perfume of flowers and sweet country air made it different as Paradise from Orcus?

"What a pretty room!" she said, falteringly.

"Pretty!" cried Sylvia, scornfully; "it's a miserable little hole, but I try to make it as decent as I can."

"Ah, you don't know what London rooms are."

"No, but I thought London was delightful. I hear everyone praise it."

"Then they have never known what it is to walk its streets penniless. Those endless stretches of burning pavement under a July sun! What desert in Africa can be worse? There are two Londons, Miss Carew—one lies to the west, and is a Paradise for the rich, the other spreads east, north, and south."

"Good night," said Sylvia, briefly, but not unkindly. She always widening, and is a Place of Torment for the poor."

could not conquer her shuddering horror of this woman; could not own that mass of rags for mother.

So she went down stairs, and left the wanderer to fall on her knees beside the bed, and bury her haggard face in the white coverlet, and kiss and sob over the lavender-scented sheets.

"Oh, my daughter, my daughter," she cried, "may thy beauty bear thee fairer fruit than mine has brought to me. God keep and guard thee from the snares of this troubled life. God give thee the lowliest lot, if it be but too humble for temptation."

Mrs. Carford was not a student of the human mind, and did not know that in some unquiet souls temptation may be self-engendered.

The temptation that was destined to attack Sylvia Carew took no common form, and sprang from the depths of her own subtle mind.

Morning came, fresh and fair. Thrushes and blackbirds sang their glad carols to the rising sun. The chanticleer's keen voice shrilled from the farm-yard; the skylark rose above wide fields of ripening corn. And Sylvia was glad of the morning, for night had brought her no slumber.

She had been laying broad awake on the sofa, which made a comfortable bed enough, thinking of that woman upstairs; thinking of her with anguish that gnawed her heart, until she fancied that no joys of after-days could ever take the taste of this bitter out of her mouth. Her mother! She shivered as the words shaped themselves, even in the silence of her soul. So degraded, so guilty, so destitute; and yet her mother. Sylvia's mind was not wide enough to see that in that very destitution, outcome of long sorrowful years, there lay the sublimity of atonement; that this mother in her rags and helplessness was the modern type of the true Magdalen; the woman who has washed out her sin in the deep gulf of earthly woe, and can look up to heaven, humble, but not despairing. Sylvia only comprehended that her mother had fallen. To her the poverty seemed the outward symbol of the fall.

Could she ever acknowledge this degraded one, even to her little world, above all to Edmund Standen? She clasped her hands before her face, shuddering at the thought. This horror, this depth of humiliation, must be avoided. She did not pause to consider how hard a thing it was for a child to deny its mother—a sin second only to denial of its God. She only thought of how the revelation of this woman's existence must be prevented; but here she felt herself helpless. If Mrs. Carford were to go out into Hedingham this very day, and tell her miserable story, who was to gainsay her—who was to deny her claim.

"If I were only rich," thought Sylvia, with a bitter sigh, "I would give her money, and she might go away and live peacefully somewhere, and never trouble us any more. But I am helpless and penniless, and shall be penniless all my life, I suppose."

She recalled Edmund Standen's hopeful talk about their future; and her keen intellect, sharpened in necessity's stern school, perceived how airy was the foundation on which he based the pillars of his palace. Claude Melnotte, painting that fancied home besides the Italian lake, was a conscious impostor. Poor Edmund, when he glibly set forth the charms of domestic life upon an unknown income, only imposed upon himself. Yet the suburban villa he described had hardly a surer foundation than Claude's marble roof.

"Shall I ever sink as low as that?" wondered Sylvia—*that* being the dismal figure on which she had gazed last night. The thought that such decay was possible, even for her, filled her soul with melancholy. She surveyed her lover's prospects with the cold eye of common sense.

Love sees everything in his own rose hue, fair as earth in the warm glow of a summer morning, or sunset's golden haze. Common sense revealed the picture with every line cut sharply against winter's dull gray sky.

Seriously, then, what were Edmund's prospects. Without experience of commerce or finance he hoped to obtain a situation in a bank, and four or five hundred a year, on the strength of his dead father's name. Suppose the situation were refused to him—or suppose he held it a little while, and, beguiled by a seeming promise of prosperity, they two began life together, until in some evil hour he lost his position at the bank, through incapacity, ill health, or sheer ill-luck.

The prospect was not enchanting.

Nor was there a wide choice of occupation for Mr. Standen. Young as he was he was almost too old to begin a learned profession, and to succeed in a profession now-a-days a man should have either superlative talent, or powerful friends. Friends Edmund had none, except his mother's grand relations, the de Bossineys who lived in a stoney looking mansion in the far west of Cornwall, and were unknown beyond the nearest post town. He was certainly clever; in the way in which five young men out of ten are clever. He had read a good deal, could talk well, possessed tastes decidedly intellectual; but of the genius of a Thurlow, a Blomfield, a Paget, he had as yet shown the world no indication.

Sylvia turned upon her sleepless couch and sighed, and hated Mrs. Standen a little more vehemently than before. Edmund was made to be a country gentleman of the new school, intelligent, philanthropic, useful in the vestry and at quarter sessions, and destined in ripe middle age to blossom into a member of Parliament. This was his vocation; and missing this, what could he be but a waif and a stray, a mere

weed tossed upon life's troubled ocean. And in a Fate so uncertain, his fellow-weed Sylvia had no wish to be entangled.

"But I love him too dearly to give him up," she said to herself, with another twist of her restless head upon that sleep-refusing pillow. "I never, never could give him up. Yet I almost wish that he could see the folly of our engagement and give me up."

Last night—before the coming of that fatal stranger—she had considered her father an inexorable tyrant. To-day he seemed to her only a man of the world.

It was but natural that to his worldly eyes the engagement must seem foolish—almost to idiocy.

"And how inconsistent Edmund is, poor fellow," she thought. "Only the day before yesterday he was for having our banns given out next Sunday, and yesterday he talked as coolly as possible about waiting a year for our marriage."

Whereby it will be seen that Miss Carew had taken it upon herself to overhear a conversation which so nearly concerned her own interests.

CHAPTER XVI.

"SO YOUNG AND SO UNTEXTERED."

Sylvia rose before six, flung open casement and door, and let the light of glorious day and sweet morning air in upon the parlour. She performed her toilet in the small scullery, where there was an ample supply of that cold spring water which is beauty's best balm. Then, arrayed in her neat print dress—washed and ironed by her own hands and always fresh—she swept and dusted the sitting-room—lit the kitchen fire—laid the breakfast table—gathered a bunch of newly opened flowers to brighten it—boiled some eggs—and made the tea.

The uninvited guest came down stairs while Sylvia was busied with these last duties. In the daylight, which is no friend to haggard faces or shabby garments, Mrs. Carford looked even older and more worn than she had looked last night; but she had contrived to dress herself in those limp and faded rags with a neatness which made them almost respectable. She had made good use of the big can of cold water in Sylvia's room to remove the stains of travel, the grime of flying smuts from the engine, the dust of the road. Her hair, whose faded auburn was almost obscured by advancing greyness, was now smoothly banded across the troubled brow. She had washed her poor rag of a collar before going to bed, and pressed it under Sylvia's big Bible, the gift of the kind Vicar. She had read a chapter in that sacred book before she lay down; perhaps with a more earnest spirit than had ever inspired its happier possessor.

Sylvia saw the poor attempt at decency, but felt that the woman looked not the less a pauper. She had seen women in the workhouse better dressed. She made a mental survey of her own limited wardrobe, considering whether she could spare a gown for this hapless creature. But the gowns were so few, and Sylvia needed them all; even the old ones, for they helped to save the new.

"I hope you slept pretty well," she said, in reply to the stranger's timid salutation.

"Thank you, Miss Carew. Yes, pretty well. I am not a sound sleeper at the best of times. I have such bad dreams."

"Indeed," murmured Sylvia, coldly. She dared not be friendly. It might give the intruder encouragement. And in her restless heart there was a voice that kept saying—"When will she go?"

"Dreams of the dead—or of those who are dead to me—for my dead are among the living. They visit me in my dreams, and are even kind. Yet the dreams are sad, because I know they are false. I keep saying to myself, 'It is only a shadow. It will fade!'"

Sylvia gave a faint sigh, and then began to cut bread and butter with a business-like air, as if to put an end to sentimentality.

"If there were not another world where all wrongs shall be righted—where we shall be permitted to begin new lives, warned by the experience of sorrow—who among us could bear the pain we suffer here. But there is—there must be a better life. Christ did not deceive us. This dark riddle will be solved above."

Mrs. Carford raised her eyes to the summer heaven with a look that made them once more beautiful. She was standing in the doorway, drinking in the fresh morning air. Sylvia repented her folly in leaving the door open. People might pass the gate and see the stranger, and be moved to enquire about her.

"You had better come away from the door," she said. "The morning air is chilly. Come and sit down to your breakfast. You needn't wait for papa—he's always late."

Mrs. Carford divined the motive of this polite speech.

"You don't want me to be seen," she said, coming away from the door.

"Oh," said Sylvia, blushing, "it isn't exactly that; but people in Hedingham do talk so."

Mrs. Carford gave a little sigh, and seated herself in the place indicated. Sylvia could not avoid taking the opposite chair, before the tea-pot, and thus the two found themselves seated face to face, for the first time within the memory of one of them.

The other remembered a smartly furnished nursery in a suburban villa, and a little petted child of two years old, in a white muslin frock bedizened with blue ribbons, sitting up in a high chair, pouring make-believe tea out of a toy tea-pot. The picture she saw to-day strangely recalled that phantom picture of the past.

"Do you take milk and sugar?" asked Sylvia politely.

"Who—I?"

The woman looked at her helplessly for a moment, and then burst into tears, the first she had been seen to shed since she had entered that house, save by the watchful eyes of those angels who guard penitent sinners.

Sylvia looked distressed, but kept her place, and did not stretch out so much as a finger towards the stranger.

"Pray don't cry," she said, "crying never does any good."

Mrs. Carford dried her tears, slowly, silently. She stole a look at the face opposite her, and its indifference pierced her heart.

"But she knows nothing," she thought, "why should I expect her to pity me?"

She had eaten eagerly last night; but the sharp pangs of hunger once relieved, appetite was languid. She drank her tea, eat one morsel of bread, and declined the egg which Sylvia offered.

(To be continued.)