

trician aspect which made him look like one of Vandyke's portraits in modern costume.

He thanked Sylvia courteously for her attention to him during his illness, and was kinder than usual to her, forbearing to criticise her conduct in trifles, and to lecture.

"My dear," he said, "I have given you no present since I put my mother's diamond keeper upon your finger. It belonged to her mother's mother, you know, and has a higher value from association than from the worth of the stones, which are of the purest water, but small."

Sylvia gave a little regretful sigh. She had once supposed that diamond hoop to be the forerunner of a shower of gifts, plenteous as that golden rain which descended on Danae.

"I have not given you jewels, Sylvia, partly because I do not care to see a woman bedizened with precious stones, but more because I do not wish to be associated in your mind with rich gifts. When I am dead and gone you will be rich—rich enough to be the match for some adventurer, should you be so foolish as to marry again."

Hereupon Sir Aubrey opened an oval morocco case, in which reposed on black velvet a necklace of single diamonds, each as large as a prize pea. The silver setting was so light as to be hardly visible. The necklace seemed a circlet of liquid light.

Sylvia's eyes sparkled, she gave a gasp of mingled surprise and delight.

"How lovely!" she exclaimed.

"It is yours, my love," answered the baronet, in his placid way. "I bought that necklace for a duke's daughter, but death stole my promised bride—I give it now to my true and kind wife."

Lady Perriam, not easily melted, burst into a flood of tears. "God keep me true to you, in thought as in deed," she cried passionately. "But I am not worthy of your kindness."

"You have been my patient nurse, my faithful companion," answered Sir Aubrey, gently. "Dry your tears, my dear. A diamond necklace is not a thing to cry about."

"I am very proud of your gift, it is more splendid than anything I ever dreamed of. But it is your kindness that touches me," said Sylvia.

She remembered how mean she had thought him because he had doled her out a small allowance of pocket money; how she had ascribed the dreariness of her life to his desire to save expenditure; and, behold, he threw a gift worth ever so many thousands of pounds into her lap, as carelessly as if it had been a handful of summer blossoms.

"When shall I wear these diamonds?" she asked herself—or rather enquired of Destiny—as she clasped the necklace around her throat before the glass in her dressing room. "Perhaps, if Sir Aubrey is inclined to be indulgent, he will take me to London this year, and let me see the world. It is hard to have wealth, and jewels, and a title, and youth, and good looks, and yet to be buried alive at Perriam Place."

The next day was the brightest of the new year, but Sir Aubrey protested against the yellow chariot when Mr. Stimpson, who was still in attendance, recommended a quiet drive.

"I detest being shut up in a coach," he said. "I'd rather take a little walk in the garden with Lady Perriam."

"So be it, then," replied the doctor, who wished to make his regimen agreeable to so profitable a patient. "I don't know that a walk mightn't be better than a drive. Only be sure you don't fatigue yourself. Just a gentle stroll up and down that delightful terrace, with Lady Perriam's arm for a support."

It was about three o'clock in the afternoon when Sir Aubrey and his wife went out for this promenade. A bright, tranquil springlike afternoon, only the gentlest west wind faintly stirring the evergreens, a calm blue sky, with fleecy clouds, and a gentle sunshine upon the landscape. There had been much rain lately, and the pastures looked emerald bright against the dark arable lands, while here and there the first tinge of green showed faintly on the southward fronting hedgerows.

"A beautiful world, my dear," said Sir Aubrey, as he surveyed the varied prospect. "I have seen a good deal of it, but I have found nothing so good as Perriam."

"Perriam is very nice," replied Sylvia, meekly; "but you will show me a little more of the world some day, won't you, Sir Aubrey?"

"Yes, my love, we will travel a little more by-and-by, when I am stronger. I wish your life to be happy. I fear you have had rather a dull winter; but then happily you are not used to society."

"No," answered Sylvia, "perhaps that's why I long for it more than other people."

"True, the unknown is ever delightful. You remember what Pope says: 'Man never is but always to be blessed.'"

"I hate Pope," replied Sylvia impatiently, upon which Sir Aubrey gave her a brief lecture on the folly of hating a poet whose philosophy is as correct as his versification is brilliant.

The effort appeared to exhaust him, for he drooped a little on his second perambulation of the terrace.

"I am not so strong as I fancied myself this morning," he said, "I feel a little shaky in spite of the support of your arm. I'll go back to the house after this walk."

They lingered a little for Sir Aubrey to rest on the spot where they had stood when he asked Sylvia to be his wife. Sir Aubrey looked down at the little green churchyard with a dreamy gaze. The very spirit of tranquility pervaded the scene. The gray old church tower, with its quaint corbels and water spouts and varied tints of moss and lichen stood out clearly defined against the clear cold sky. Death wore its softest aspect in that placid valley.

Mild as the atmosphere was the invalid shivered.

"I'll go indoors, my love," he said; "I am not strong enough for walking yet."

They went back to the house, Sir Aubrey leaning a little on Sylvia's arm, and sighing once or twice during the journey, as if it were rather a troublesome business. The invalid returned to his easy chair by the fire in the saloon, where Sylvia gave him his book, a volume of the "Spectator," whose leaves he turned listlessly now and then, reading a page here and there, and smiling faintly at the familiar passages. She arranged the little table by his chair, on which he kept a book or two, the day's newspapers, and a glass of weak sherry and water, and then prepared to take her place on the opposite side of the hearth, where it was her wont to beguile the slow hours with fancy work. Novels, and, indeed, modern light literature of all kinds, Sir Aubrey set his face against; thus woman's favourite amusement was, in a manner, forbidden to Lady Perriam.

But the baronet begged his wife to enjoy the afternoon sunshine. "Finish your walk, my dear," he said graciously,

you can come back to me when you are tired of the terrace. I am always glad to have you near me, but you have been too long a prisoner."

Sylvia obeyed. She was very tired of that spacious saloon, with its unchanging splendour—chairs and tables always in the same positions—no variety, no look of life or movement. She was glad to be alone with her own thoughts, which of late had taken shapes that disturbed and perplexed her. Sir Aubrey's unsettled health gave rise to agitating conjectures. She knew very well that there was guilt in many of these meditations. These visions of a possible future; but she had never acquired the habit of ruling her own thoughts; she let them drift as they would, and the image which oftenest filled her mind was the image of one whom it was the first duty of her life to forget.

She walked to and fro for about an hour, and was beginning to think of returning to her post by the fireside and her duties of nurse and comforter, when she heard a distant step on the gravel walk, firm, light, and quick—a step that reminded her of Edmund Standen's. She knew that the step could hardly be his; Mr. Standen's presence in that place scarcely came within the limits of the possible; yet the sound set her heart beating vehemently, so weak was that undisciplined heart.

She walked towards the other end of the terrace, and saw the well-known figure of Mr. Bain, the lawyer. He had been away from Monkhampton for nearly a month, in the south of France with his ailing wife, whom the doctors had ordered to the shores of the Mediterranean, as her sole chance of surviving the severe winter. Difficult as it was for Shadrack Bain to leave business, he had performed his duty as a husband, escorted his wife to Cannes, and stayed with her until her health had been in some measure re-established. Monkhampton had been loud in his praises for this domestic loyalty, though some among his clients had grumbled a little at the loss of their astute adviser.

It had been no small relief to Sylvia so escape the searching gaze of those keen eyes. From the very beginning of her acquaintance with Shadrack Bain, Sylvia had felt that here was a man who was in the habit of looking deeper than the surface of things, and that she had need to guard her secret thoughts against his watchfulness. He had always been courteous to her—nay, had evinced the most profound respect by his every word and action. Yet, knowing no more of him than that he was a good man of business, and a trusted agent of Sir Aubrey's, she felt an undefinable fear of his influence. Or, in a word, she fancied that he knew her.

He approached her with his usual grave politeness—not ceremonious—but gravely respectful.

"Good afternoon, Lady Perriam. I have just been with Sir Aubrey. He has been kind enough to ask me to stay to dinner—and as the dew is falling, he suggested that I should request you to come in doors."

"There is no dew yet awhile," answered Sylvia, somewhat impatiently. Sir Aubrey had a tiresome way of ordering her about through the medium of Mr. Bain. "I shall walk a little longer."

"May I be your companion during that time?" asked Mr. Bain.

"I have no objection," replied Sylvia, coldly. She would have given a great deal to keep Mr. Bain for ever outside the gates of Perriam—yet subservient as he appeared, she felt that he was just the kind of man to make her pay dearly for anything like incivility.

"Your permission sounds almost like an interdiction," said the agent, "yet I will venture to remain. Sir Aubrey must have been very ill while I was in France."

"Not worse than he has been several times this winter." "Indeed. Yet I see so marked a change in him. I don't know how to describe it, but it struck me at the first glance and I was pained to perceive it."

"Do you think he is dangerously ill?" asked Sylvia, turning upon him with a quick, bright light in her eyes.

"No, Lady Perriam. I do not think there is much danger of your being left a widow yet awhile," answered Mr. Bain, with inscrutable gravity.

"You really frightened me with your talk about a change in Sir Aubrey. I can see no change myself—and Mr. Stimpson says he is improving daily—that there is nothing wanted but the warm weather to make him quite well and strong again."

"I am glad Mr. Stimpson is so hopeful. The change which struck me so painfully was perhaps more in Sir Aubrey's manner than his appearance—there was an altered tone—a feebler manner—an indecision about everything he said. I was talking to him nearly an hour about business, and I had plenty of time to observe him. In a word, he is not the man I left less than a month ago."

Sylvia was silent. She remembered her own discovery of Sir Aubrey's uncertain memory—that almost childish habit of repeating his speeches. Did death come thus in this slow decline of the faculties? Sir Aubrey was by no means an old man. It was not time for memory to grow dim—for sight to fail—for hearing to grow faint.

"Let us go back to the house," said Lady Perriam. "If once Sir Aubrey gets that idea of dew into his head he will fidget himself till I am indoors."

"You have reason to be proud of such thoughtfulness on his part," remarked Mr. Bain.

"Yes, 'tis very kind—but rather tiresome," returned Sylvia, who was more candid with Mr. Bain in trifles than with other people—having that inward conviction that he could see through small artifices.

She went back to the saloon before going up stairs to dress for dinner—went back dutifully, to see if her husband had any further need of her attendance. Though there had been still a soft gray light in the Italian garden, here in the saloon reigned deepest dusk. So much of the waning day was excluded by the ample draperies of those seven tall windows. The seven windows looked white and wan in the twilight, like seven tall ghosts. The fire had burned low, and only shed its ruddy glow in the region of the hearth.

Lady Perriam stood by the door looking in, Mr. Bain standing just behind. Sir Aubrey sat with his arm hanging loosely across the arm of the chair, his head lying back against the cushions, an open book at his feet. He had fallen asleep, no doubt.

"I won't disturb him," said Sylvia. "Mr. Stimpson said rest was of great importance."

"I think I'd better replenish the fire," suggested Mr. Bain. "It will go out directly if it isn't attended to."

He went softly towards the hearth, Sylvia still waiting near

the door, to see if that replenishing of the fire would awaken Sir Aubrey.

Mr. Bain knelt down, and put a couple of dry logs gently on the ashes. The dry wood began to sputter and crackle immediately. An ornamental brass screen, wide and tall, guarded the invalid from those flying sparks of burning wood.

The recumbent figure never stirred. The agent, still on his knees, looked round at his employer. The dry log burst into a sudden blaze which lighted all the room, and shone full upon Sir Aubrey's face. One quick, startled look at that face, and the agent sprang to his feet, and pulled the bell rope. A bell rang in the distant offices with a loud shrill peal that sounded through the house. The agent bent over that motionless figure, loosened the neckcloth, raised the head, all quietly enough, Lady Perriam looking on all the while, with unutterable terror in her colourless face. She had rushed to the hearth when Mr. Bain rang the bell.

"Do you think he is dead?" she asked, in an awful whisper.

"No, I can feel the beating of his heart. Send a messenger to Mr. Stimpson on the fastest horse in the stables," continued Mr. Bain to the servant who appeared in answer to that loud summons. "If Mr. Stimpson is out, when he gets to Monkhampton, let him fetch Dr. Cardross—if he's out, let him go on to Mr. Byfield. He must ride for his life, mind, and not lose a minute in getting off. And let another messenger—John Bates, he is a sharp fellow—go to Dr. Tapsall, of Hedingham. Sir Aubrey has an attack—I fear paralysis. Tell someone to fetch Chaplain."

Chaplain, the valet, had heard that shrill peal of the bell, and was by his master's side before the other servant had left the room. There was no time lost. Mr. Bain and the valet laid Sir Aubrey on a sofa, in the most comfortable position they could place him in, and this done, there was little more to do than wait the coming of medical aid. Perriam Place stood midway between Monkhampton and Hedingham. Either way the messenger would have three miles to ride, the doctor three miles to come.

"There's no hope of anybody being here under an hour," said Mr. Bain, who had been wonderfully self-possessed throughout.

Lady Perriam sat like a statue, and was hardly less white than the sculptor's veinless marble. Her eyes alone moved, and they kept wandering restlessly from yonder prostrate form upon the sofa to the anxious faces of the agent and the valet.

"Is there any danger?" she asked, always referring to that one, last, awful hazard of death. She had wished her husband dead, but the wish had been but a vague thought. She shrank appalled from the realization of that half-formed desire. There is something peculiarly awful in a wicked wish being gratified almost as soon as it is formed. It is like the direct interposition of Satan.

"A first attack is rarely fatal," answered Mr. Bain, as calmly as if he had been a physician of long practice. "There is every reason to hope that Sir Aubrey may be quite restored in a few days. But it is rather alarming while it lasts."

"Alarming!" echoed Lady Perriam. "It is horrible. Is he quite insensible, do you think?"

"I am not sure. He seems half asleep. I'm afraid this arm is paralysed. It hangs so helplessly."

"And is so cold," said the valet, who was on his knees by the sofa, chafing the lifeless hand.

The dreary hour of waiting wore on, Sylvia sitting silent and unobtrusive, Mr. Bain and the valet doing what little they could, yet afraid to do much lest they should do the wrong thing. The ticking of the clock on the chimney-piece had an awful sound in that mournful stillness. The wood ashes fell lightly on the hearth. Sir Aubrey's troubled breathing was painfully audible.

By-and-by, after half an hour's waiting which had seemed half-a-day to the watchers, they were startled by feeble, half-articulate sounds. They came from the pale lips of Sir Aubrey, who was striving painfully for speech.

When he did speak, after that laborious effort, his voice was dull and hollow. So might Lazarus have spoken when he came out of the cavern at his Master's bidding. To Sylvia those strange tones sounded like the voice of the re-arisen dead.

"Have I been asleep?" asked Sir Aubrey, in imperfectly formed syllables, as if in awful mockery of the child's first efforts to shape the words he hears from others.

"Yes, Sir Aubrey."

"Very long?"

"For some time."

The dim grey eyes looked wonderingly about.

"Why, is it dark already? Why don't they light the lamps?"

"We thought this subdued light was better for you, Sir Aubrey."

"Better for me! I'm not an invalid—I don't mean to be an invalid any more," mumbled the baronet, always with the same effort, the same uncertain articulation.

They did their best to prevent his talking much, or exciting himself; but, in trying to raise himself presently, he discovered that one side of his body was powerless.

"What is this?" he asked, more distinctly than he had spoken before, as if an awful fear gave force to his accents.

"I can't move; I've lost the use of one side. What does it mean?"

Neither the agent nor the valet answered this anxious question. They looked at each other doubtfully. The valet murmured some soothing speech in his own tongue.

"I know what it means," said Sir Aubrey, "it is paralysis, the one disease I have dreaded ever since I saw my grandfather wheeled about Perriam in a Bath chair, with his head hanging on one side, when I was a little boy. And yet I hardly thought it would seize me. I thought Mordred might be stricken; he has always been a weak, ailing creature. I never thought I should be the one."

CHAPTER XXXVI.

LADY PERRIAM ENGAGES A SICK NURSE.

Mr. Stimpson came in a little less than an hour from the time when the messenger started in quest of him. The man had found him at home, and the old surgeon had driven over to Perriam as fast as a good horse and a light gig would take him. He made his examination, ordered the invalid to be taken up to his bedroom, and suggested an immediate telegram to a famous London physician.