

(For the Canadian Illustrated News.)

A CHANCE LEAF.

BY C. L. CLEVELAND.

Andrew Leslie, the country squire,
Man of local wealth and pride,
Stalked from the village, full of ire
That hotter grew with his thought and stride;
For one of the prying, gossiping band,
Had hinted that Harry Hunter was winning
The way to his daughter's heart and hand,
Which in Leslie's eyes, was worse than stinging.

"He, the penniless, brazen churl!
Nothing to back him, yet have dared
To think of marrying her—my girl!
And Lord but knows how she'd have fared
If their clattering tongues hadn't forked it out,
A runaway match—a scandalous chase!—
Ha, ha, Master Hal, I'll put to route
The plans that colour your impudent face."

And up the long road, and in the trim lane
That out through his own broad acres ran,
Cursing the youth again and again,
Strode the selfish and passionate man.
When out of the autumn woods there came
The lightest of breezes low and brief;
And just at his feet, like a half-spent flame,
Sank crisp and crimson, a maple leaf.

Back to the woods of years gone by,
Back, when the woods were green and sweet,
Strange that it softens the man's hard eye,
Strange that it slackens his hurrying feet,
But that wonderful leaf holds in its hands,
The light of beautiful eyes of yore;
And a gentle spirit quietly stands
At the door of his world-worn heart once more.

"O dear wife gone to the next abode!
Soul of my soul, and none beside!
Together we took the world's hard load,
Together bore it in hill and tide."
And bowing down in enobling pain,
A sorrowing prayer his spirit made,
And after his passion began to wane,
"Harry shall have her," he softly said.

"Who can say ought but praise the boy?
What against but a goldless hand?
But I will fill it till mutual joy
Shall make them happiest of the land."
And walking slowly along the lane,
He grew contented, for by his side
The old-time influence filled again
The misty airs of the autumn-tide.

And so on the genial New Year day,
Up from the church they rode together,
Harry and May, through the snowy way,
Up through the happy New Year weather,
And the sleigh struck music from the snow,
The sleigh bells mellowed the frosty air,
And the old man stood in the porch below,
To welcome his joyful, darling pair.

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TAKEN AT THE FLOOD.

A NEW NOVEL.

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

CHAPTER XLIV.—(Continued.)

"I don't see why we should sit here to talk, Edmund, since we have been talking more or less all the time we've been out, and are likely to go on talking all the way home."

"Yes, I never find myself at a loss for something to talk about when I am with you, Essie. I suppose that means community of tastes, sympathy, and so on, eh?"

"I suppose so."

"Perhaps, after all, my real motive was a smoke. May I have a cigar?"

"Of course, you may. You know I am used to your smoking."

"In that case I shall light up. These evening walks wouldn't be half so nice if you objected to the cigar, Essie."

"I dare say not. I think you would rather do without me than the cigar."

"I don't quite know about that," answered Edmund, gravely. "I am very fond of the cigar, it is true, and if you forbade it I should feel the deprivation sorely. But I don't see my way to get on without you. I never have been obliged to exist without you, you see, Essie. I can hardly judge what the flavour of life would be without Esther."

Esther's lip, unused to express scorn, curled ever so slightly at this remark.

"You did without me very well when you were in love with Sylvia Carew," she said. "I doubt if you were conscious of my existence in those days."

"Ah, Esther, that was a brief madness—a passing fever. While it lasted I was indeed hardly conscious of anything except my siren's charm. Never speak to me of that time, Essie. I want to forget it altogether. I want to put it out of my power to look back upon it. I want to blot it out of my book of life."

"Lady Perriam is free now. You might win her after all," said Esther, lurking bitterness audible in her tones.

"I would not have her, polluted by a falsehood. I would not take her, stained by the memory of her treason against me. No, Esther, I am not such a slave as you seem to think me. Lady Perriam's widowhood makes no difference to my feelings. Were she to usurp a man's right, and sue for my love, I would not yield it to her. I have put the thought of her out of my life for ever."

"I am very glad to hear that, for your own sake. For I do not believe she was ever worthy of you."

Edmund smoked for a minute or two before replying.

"No, Essie, she was not worthy of me," he said at last, "unworthy as I may be in many respects; for I was true, and

she was false. But there is one woman I know who is more than worthy of me, who is worthy of the best and truest lover that ever lived. I wish I could think myself not unworthy of her."

"Your new idol must be very exalted if you feel yourself so much below her in merit," said Esther, with a vain endeavour to speak lightly.

"She is the gentlest and most modest of women, yet I feel unworthy to ask for her hand, because I once suffered my fancy to be led astray by a worthless woman, when I ought to have found my happiness close at hand. Nay, Essie darling, I won't speak in parables any longer. It is you I love, you whose sweetness has healed my wounded heart. We have been very happy in our evening walks, Esther. Is there any reason, except my unworthiness, that we should not travel side by side to the end of life?"

The girl looked up at him shyly, yet with a steady light in her soft dark eyes.

"You are in no manner unworthy of me, Edmund," she replied, "but I will not accept less than your whole heart. I love you well enough to be your adopted sister all my life, yes, even to see you happy with another woman, and take comfort from the thought of your happiness. But if you offer me any other kind of love than a brother's I must have all or nothing. I will not have your heart if there is a corner of it that still belongs to Lady Perriam."

"Why do you mention that odious name?" cried Edmund, angrily. "Did not I tell you that I had put her out of my life—that for me there is no such person as Sylvia Perriam. Answer an honest man's honest question, Essie. Will you be my wife?"

The question was very plainly put. There was no purple light of love here to glorify the ancient theme. Yet Edmund seemed thoroughly in earnest. His tones and looks were tender and truthful; she who listened to him loved him too well not to be deeply moved.

"That is too serious a question to be answered hastily," replied Esther, gravely. "We are very happy as we are, Edmund. Let our peaceful life go on, and let your question remain unanswered a little longer, till you better know your own mind."

"I cannot know my own mind better than I do now. I want this question settled at once, Essie. I want to feel that I have a purpose in life—something to look forward to—something to hope for—something to dream about. I thought, while the pain of Sylvia's desertion was new, that I could never hope again, never weave the old dream of wife and home, without which a man's life is but a dreary business at best. Providence has been kinder to me than I deserved, Essie, when I told myself that for me hope and love must henceforth be idle words. I have learned to hope again, to love again, and you have been my gentle teacher."

"I never tried to set you such a lesson; at least, as regards the last part of the business," answered Esther, blushing. "Auntie and all of us were anxious to see you hopeful, but I don't think any one thought—"

"You don't think any one thought," echoed Edmund, laughing at the girl's embarrassment; "I know that my mother never cherished a fonder hope than that you and I should be one. You wouldn't disappoint her, would you, Essie, you who love her so well?"

"I have no thought but of your happiness, Edmund. You mustn't marry me just to please Auntie. That would not be the way to make your own life happy."

"My life cannot be otherwise than happy with your companionship, Essie. Long ago you were my ideal woman. Yes, when you were only a girl of sixteen. Then came that fatal dream, and my love was lured away from you. I know now what a false flame that was which led me over marshes of difficulty, only to land me in the slough of despair. Come, Esther, darling, you are too kind to refuse me forgiveness for a wrong that has cost me so dearly."

"I have nothing to forgive, Edmund. I cannot blame you for finding Sylvia Carew more attractive than I."

"Then, if there is nothing to forgive, all is settled; and you will be my sweet little wife."

The cigar had been thrown away ere this, and Edmund's arm had drawn Esther's slender form to his side, just as in twilights gone by Sylvia had nestled against his shoulder.

"You mean yes, Esther," said Edmund, trying to see her downcast eyes.

"You haven't even asked me if I love you."

"Suppose I am daring enough to fancy you do, just a very little, homoeopathically, and not allopathically."

"I love you with all my heart," she answered, with a little burst of feeling, feeling so long repressed that it gushed out in spite of her desire to be restrained, wise, thoughtful, for her lover, rather than for herself. "I have no wish but to make you happy."

"There is only one way of doing that, Essie. Be my wife. The sooner the better, sweet. I want to feel that I have an interest in life, that I have some one to work for. I hope you mean to be very extravagant, Essie, and spend all your money and mine too, so that I may have to work hard for our children. Now, darling, it's getting dark and cold, I hope I haven't detained you here too long. But it was the business of a lifetime we had to settle, even at the risk of rheumatism and influenza. Come, love. Do you know that is the best cigar that I ever smoked?"

They went home together, happy, through the deepening night. How could Esther doubt her lover when he had so little doubt of himself?

CHAPTER XLV.

MR. BAIN IS PUZZLED.

It had been the popular belief at Huddingham and Monkhampton that Lady Perriam's first use of her liberty would be to take flight from the splendid seclusion of "the Place," but to the surprise and even disappointment of the false prophets, who would have liked to see their vaticinations realised, Lady Perriam still continued to occupy the gloomy old rooms, and to take her lonely walks upon the Italian terrace. She had youth, beauty, liberty, wealth; all the world invited her to share its pleasures while the bloom was still upon her life; yet she was constant to the dreary existence she had lived with her sick husband, and seemed proof against all the temptations which allure youth.

Even Mr. Bain wondered and was not slow to express his wonderment at her solitary and secluded existence. He saw her looking pale, and even careworn, as if with sleepless nights, and urged the necessity of change of air and scene.

"You ought to spend a few weeks at Weston-super-Mare or Malvern," said the land steward, during one of his periodical visits to the Place; visits which Sylvia did her best to discourage, but which Mr. Bain continued as regularly as if he had received the warmest welcome. The Court of Chancery had made him guardian of the infant heir, according to the express wish of Sir Aubrey as recorded in his will, Lady Perriam having no one she could put forward against him. He was thus, for all practical purposes, master of the house she lived in; he could come and go as he pleased; and she felt that his power had been increased, instead of being diminished, by her husband's death.

She made her stand against him, however, and without actually defying him did her best to resist his growing power. "You are extremely kind, Mr. Bain," she said, when the steward suggested change of air, "but when I want advice I will take it from Mr. Stimpson."

"But you are looking ill, must be ill, I should think, and you don't call in Stimpson."

"When I want him I shall send for him."

"Very well, Lady Perriam. Of course I have no right to interfere beyond the warm interest I feel in all that concerns you."

Sylvia drew herself up haughtily at this speech. "Be good enough to confine your interest to my son's affairs," she said. "The Court of Chancery did not appoint you my guardian."

"I cannot be interested in the son without some anxiety about the mother. For St. John's sake you are bound to take care of your health. You are ruining your health, and even injuring your beauty, by the dismal life you lead here."

That expression "injuring your beauty" struck home. Lady Perriam looked in her glass directly Mr. Bain was gone, to see if he had told her the truth.

Yes, there was no doubt of it. She had a faded look already; her eyes were hollow, and their brightness was not the liquid lustre of happy youth, but a feverish brilliancy. She had a look of Mrs. Carter. She tossed off the light widow's cap impatiently, pushed back the thick hair from her forehead, and looked at herself with a searching scrutiny.

"Yes, there are wrinkles coming already," she said, "already, and I am not three-and-twenty. I think too much. I want rest of mind, change of scene. That man is right. I want change, fresher air to blow this faded look out of my face. But how can I ever leave this hateful house?"

Mr. Bain went home ruminating upon that brief conversation with Lady Perriam. He had perceived her startled look, fleeting as the expression was, when he spoke of her faded beauty.

"She wants to preserve her good looks," he thought. "Is it for Edmund Stenden's sake, I wonder?"

A change had come upon the respectable dwelling in Monkhampton, High-street, and this time the change was permanent. There was no further cause for the fluctuations of hope and fear. The mourning band which Mr. Bain had put round his hat after Sir Aubrey Perriam's death had been replaced by a deeper band which covered the hat almost to the top. Shadrack Bain was a widower. Mrs. Bain had revived considerably in the milder climate of Cannes. Her health, indeed, had so much improved as to renew hope in Clara Louise's breast; but just when she gave most hopeful accounts of the invalid, there came a sharp and sudden attack, which swept away this frail life as withered leaves are scattered before the autumn blast.

Long as their minds had been divided by hope and fear, this event was a terrible shock for all the sons and daughters. Ill-health had become, in a manner, their mother's normal state. They had grown accustomed to think of her as an invalid, but they had never prepared themselves for her loss. Deepest sorrow and deepest gloom descended upon the comfortable old square-built house, like a thunder cloud. The jingle of the house-keeping keys, the pride of being mistress of her father's house, gave Matilda Jane no pleasure. The absence of the gentle house-mother made too sad a blank in the love-bound circle of home.

Mr. Bain took his loss very quietly. People said he felt it all the more. But if his grief was deep it was not a passionate or vehement sorrow. His countenance, always serious and thoughtful, had a graver look now. He walked with downcast eyes, as if meditating upon the things of an unseen world. He became somewhat less regular in his attendance at the lengthy services in Water Lane Chapel. Whereon the Water Lane Chapelites, charitably disposed to a man of Mr. Bain's standing, told one another that the poor dear man could not bear to sit in the family pew without his Amelia.

In the Cemetery, just outside Monkhampton, a handsome stone memorial, of the square and solid order, an obelisk with a flame at the top, which looked rather more like a landmark for distant navigators than a tribute of affection to the dead, already testified Mr. Bain's devotion to his departed spouse. There had been no delay—the order had been given to the mason the day after the funeral—the handsomest monument he could supply for a hundred pounds.

After a month or so the land-steward's household returned to its normal state of methodical comfort. Matilda Jane had been too well drilled by the departed housewife to forget her teaching. Her eye was as keen as her mother's to scan the items in the butcher's book, and to detect a miscast of a column, or an error in the reckoning of ounces. Her hand was as steady as her mother's to weigh the grocery, and never made the servants' weekly half pound of tea too light or too heavy. The two domestics allowed that Miss Bain was just, though, if anything, closer than her mamma.

Now that home had lost its chief charm in the removal of a fond and faithful wife, Mr. Bain might be forgiven if he spent less of his leisure by the domestic hearth than he had been wont to spend of old. He rode more, and devoted more time to the inspection of the Perriam property. Not a broken hurdle or a loosened drain pipe escaped that piercing eye. He took a good deal of trouble about small improvements, especially on that part of the land in which Lady Perriam had a life interest. "If it were his own property," said the gossip, "Mr. Bain couldn't be more careful of it."

Twice in every week he called at Perriam Place; saw Lady Perriam, enquired after the health of his ward, and, if possible saw that small individual, who was apt to squall at sight of the guardian to whom the High Court of Chancery had confided his infant years. "It's a pity," nurse Tringfold said, "but Sir St. John doesn't take to Mr. Bain, and can't be made to take to him."

Sylvia reluctantly endured the steward's visits, and, though she always resented his interference, she was nevertheless com-