

"Perhaps I have judged her too hastily," Edmund. Yet I hardly think I can have been wrong," replied Esther, mockingly. "I have seen her slap the poor little children."

"Seen her slap the poor little children," echoed Edmund scornfully. "If you had as much of the poor little children as Sylvia has, I don't suppose you'd refrain from an occasional tap. You go into the school-house once or twice a week in your *dilettanti* fashion, just when the humour takes you, and then you set yourself up as a judge, and pronounce sentence upon Sylvia, who has to endure the plague of those brats every day of her life."

Esther did not remind him that she did her work in the Sunday school regularly, and walked from Dean House to Hedingham to do it, in rain or sunshine, wind and storm, from year's end to year's end, whether the humour did or did not seize her—that she disregarded headache, and neuralgia, and all the pains to which humanity is subject, when duty called. She only answered him with a hardly audible sigh.

CHAPTER VIII.

BAD NEWS FROM DEMERARA.

"Here comes my mother," said Edmund, as the rustle of Mrs. Standen's dress sounded on the staircase. The bell clanged out its summons at the same moment.

"Why, how pale you look, child!" said Mrs. Standen, as she kissed her adopted daughter.

"Do I, dear Auntie? I've been in the garden a good while, and the morning is rather heavy. It has given me a slight headache."

"Poor little head, so busy and thoughtful for others," said Mrs. Standen, smoothing the girl's soft dark hair from the calm brow.

Mother and son kissed each other in the old hearty fashion. The cloud was quite gone. It had melted in those passionate tears wrung from the mother's wounded heart.

Five women servants came filing in. There was no indoor man at Dean House. Mrs. Standen loved the neat-handed Phillises of her own training, but would not have consented to be dominated over by a skilled butler. Two elderly women, the cook, and Mrs. Standen's confidential maid, and three buxom girls, parlour, house, and laundry maid, comprised the Dean House establishment.

Prayers were read, and the morning chapter, and breakfast began. Mrs. Standen had hardly taken her place in front of the urn when a shrill peal from the gate bell startled them all. This was essentially the visitor's bell. All tradesmen, and beings of an inferior order, save the postman, or an occasional stranger, entered by the stable gates.

"Who can it be so early?" exclaimed Edmund, thinking of Sylvia. Could she be ill, or in trouble of any kind? Had she sent for him?

The parlour-maid brought in one of those ominous yellow-covered messages which strikes terror to some simple hearts. It was before the days of postal telegraphs. This had been brought from Monkhampston by special messenger.

"Half-a-crown to pay, please ma'am," said the parlour-maid, laying the document by Mrs. Standen's plate, "and will you please sign the paper to say when it came."

The sight of that bilious-hued envelope agitated Mrs. Standen. Telegraphic messages were rare at Dean House. She looked at the paper helplessly.

"Let me do it for you, mother," said Edmund, looking at his watch. The telegram could not be from Sylvia, so he felt quite comfortable about its contents. Let the universe crumble, she was safe.

He scrawled the required figures on the paper, fished half-a-crown from the loose treasury in his waistcoat pocket, and gave paper and coin to the servant, while his mother read the message.

"What's it all about, mother?" he asked, apprehending no calamity. But his mother had grown deadly pale, and handed him the telegram without a word.

"From Hanside and Pengrose, Grays Inn, to Mrs. Standen, Dean House, near Hedingham."

"Sad news from Demerara by mail arrived last night. A friend telegraphed to us from Southampton, Mr. Sargent died suddenly of heart disease on the fifteenth of June. Mrs. Sargent seriously ill. Some one ought to go to her at once, if possible. Her brother would be best, as he could arrange business matters. We fear that Mr. Sargent's affairs are left in a far from satisfactory condition. The mail steamer for St. Thomas leaves Southampton at noon to-morrow. Letter to follow."

"Poor George—in the very prime of life—only six and thirty—and to be cut off suddenly," murmured Mrs. Standen, in tears.

"Oh, Auntie, what has happened?" asked Esther.

"George Sargent is dead. And to think of my dear girl, alone in a strange country. What are we to do, Edmund? How can I ask you to go to her?"

She thought of his infatuation—would he tear himself away from the land that held Sylvia Carew, even to succour a widowed sister?

"Need you ask me to do my duty, mother?" demanded the young man, quietly. "Of course I shall go to Demerara. Poor George! One of the best fellows in the world, but I fear by no means prudent. I dare say he has left his affairs in a state of muddle. Don't cry, dear mother. We'll send Ellen a telegram to say that I shall follow it as fast as the steamer will let me. I shall go up to London by the one o'clock express, and start for St. Thomas by the mail to-morrow."

"How good, how noble you are, Edmund!" exclaimed Mrs. Standen, to whose maternal mind this self-abnegation seemed almost Roman heroism.

"I am not afraid to leave Hedingham, mother," the young man said in a lower voice, for his mother's ear only, "I can trust in your honour, and have no fear that you will use your influence to part Sylvia and me while my back is turned."

"No, Edmund, I am not base enough for that. I will go and see her, if you like," with a great effort, "while you are away, and try to like her."

"Do, dear mother. You have but to know her in order to love her."

Edmund looked at his watch. It was not quite nine. He had three clear hours in which to bid Sylvia farewell, and speak to Mr. Carew. He was resolved to leave nothing unsettled. His engagement to Sylvia must be an established fact before he left Hedingham.

"What shall I do without you, Edmund," said the mother with a sigh, while he tried to hurry through his breakfast, eating and drinking mechanically.

"Come, dear mother, there's no occasion for despondency. I need not be away more than three months, at most. Six weeks for the voyage to and fro, and a month or so at Demerara. I am to bring Nelly back with me, I suppose?"

"Of course. What should she stay there for, poor child? She will have a pension, I suppose, but very little besides, if George has died in debt. He was always so reckless, and counted so much upon his expectations from his uncle the General. And now the uncle has outlived the nephew. How sad."

"*Vita summa brevis spem nos velat inchoare longam*," muttered Edmund. "It's dull work waiting for dead men's shoes."

"Tell your poor sister that she has still a home here, Edmund, that she need think of no other."

"And the children," enquired Edmund, with a wry face. "Are they to come here too? Let me see—there are three of them, aren't there? I think the last was the third."

"You might do something more than think about the number of your only sister's children," said Mrs. Standen, reproachfully.

"They come so fast, one hasn't time to get a fixed idea about them. Well, I'll bring her home, mother, little ones and all. I don't suppose you'll quite like their sticky paw marks upon the mahogany furniture, or their broken toys in the corners of all the rooms. But they'll help to amuse you and Esther when I am gone."

He spoke cheerily to comfort his mother; yet there was a weight of sadness at his heart notwithstanding. Three months—three long months—in which he and Sylvia were to be severed. That sweet face and those lovely loving eyes were to beam upon him no more.

"How I shall yearn for one touch of that little hand, and how I shall pine for my dove," he thought. "And how often in too delusive dreams I shall fancy her near me; only to awake to the bitter pain of separation."

He made short work of his breakfast, and started up, with an apology to his mother and Esther, to set out for Hedingham.

"You'll get my portmanteau packed, won't you, mother?" he asked. "You needn't have much put in, as I haven't the right kind of clothes for a tropical climate. I'll go to an outfitter in Cornhill and get properly rigged out. You can order the dog-cart for half-past twelve, and have the portmanteau put in. I'll be back by that time."

"Are you going to Hedingham?"

"Yes, I am going to have a little talk with my future father-in-law."

Mrs. Standen shuddered. It was bad enough to think of Sylvia as a daughter-in-law, but it was worse to think of Sylvia's father. The village schoolmaster. The man who had forty pounds a year, with a house to live in, coals, and candles. It was too dreadful to think that this humble official would by-and-by have a right to enter Dean House, would be a relation to its mistress by marriage.

"And the man looks and talks like a gentleman," thought Mrs. Standen. "That's the worst part of the business. There must be some good reason for his burying himself alive in Hedingham."

She sighed, not yet reconciled to the idea of her son's marriage; although, moved by a sudden impulse of gratitude and generosity, she had just now promised to visit Sylvia. She looked at Esther's earnest face, which was turned towards her, full of tender compassion. She looked and thought, with a sharp pang, of a hope which she had cherished for years, and abandoned only a few days ago. Tears came into her eyes, and she turned away her head with a heart-broken sigh.

"Dearest Auntie, why are you so unhappy?" asked the girl affectionately, "is it about poor Mrs. Sargent?"

"No, my dear. It is about my son. He has made up his mind to marry."

"Against your wish. I know all about it, dear Auntie. Edmund told me this morning."

Mrs. Standen turned towards her with a look of sharpest scrutiny, "And you are not—angry with him for such a choice?"

"Why should I be angry? All that I have to wish for is that he may be happy—and if he can be happy with Sylvia Carew, what does it matter that she is not his equal in social position? She is really very ladylike in her style and appearance, and better educated than you might expect."

"If he can be happy," repeated Mrs. Standen with intensity.

"Yes, Esther, it is that 'if' which troubles me."

CHAPTER IX.

SYLVIA AT HOME.

Hedingham looked its brightest in the morning sunshine as Edmund Standen walked along the little street in the valley, where the brawling brook ran merrily in front of the cottage and gardens, and under the green hedges, across which an inquisitive old white horse, or a comfortable looking cow, red like the rich loam of the valley, sometimes thrust a big clumsy head, with half stupid, half enquiring eyes.

The church yard wore its accustomed aspect of shady repose, as Edmund crossed it by the familiar foot way that led to the old school house. A shrill clamour of juvenile voices sounded through the open windows; for Mr. Carew's scholars worshipped Minerva and the Muses somewhat noisily. The old, old school-house, for which Mr. Vancourt, the vicar, was anxious to substitute a smart gothic erection, had a certain rustic picturesqueness of aspect likely to be wanting in the modern building. Houseleek and stonecrop grew undisturbed on the time blackened thatch, which sloped steeply down to the very windows of the school room and parlour. The upper story was entirely formed by that sloping roof, the bed chambers all angles, with latticed dormers peeping out between the slanting timbers of the gables. But the indefinable charm of antiquity pervaded the building. The cob walls, faced with crinkly looking plaster, were half hidden under the rich growth of century-old myrtles and climbing roses, the quarter of an acre of garden, where flowers and vegetables grew side by side in brotherly love, was bright with hollyhocks and carnations, big hoary lavender bushes, breathing their sweet perfume on the summer air, the scarlet blossoms of the humble bean, the gray-blue bloom of the onion.

To Edmund, this morning, the school house seemed a delicious dwelling place. He thought of the steamer, and the long weary voyage to Demerara, and longed to stay here and loiter away a tranquil existence in endless joy, instead of doing his duty in that state of life which Providence had assigned to him.

"If all other trades fail, I can turn schoolmaster," he reflect-

ed. "I wouldn't mind teaching stupid boys half the day, if I could spend the other half with Sylvia."

He opened the modest door which communicated with that part of the schoolhouse appropriated to Mr. Carew's residence. The door opened straight into the parlour, a fair sized room, poorly furnished, but neatly kept, and displaying some little attempt at adornment which looked like Sylvia's handiwork. White muslin curtains draped the two low latticed casements, a row of flower pots screened the window that faced the sun, a few cheap prints decorated the walls, a flowered chintz cover concealed the shabbiness of a decrepid sofa; three rows of books on hanging shelves and a smart china inkstand and desk on a little table brightened the recess by the fireplace; a pair of green glass candlesticks and a cracked china vase surmounted the high chimney-piece. It was not the room of a slovenly housewife, and Mr. Standen looked round him with admiring eyes. If his betrothed imparted grace even to such poor surroundings, what a charm would she lend to the fair home he hoped to give her.

Sylvia was busy in the adjoining room—a very small kitchen—for Mr. Carew's pittance did not allow him to keep a servant, and his daughter had to manage the household work as best she might. Happily for him she managed it deftly—kept their poor rooms the pink of cleanliness—cooked the epicure's small dinner to his perfect satisfaction—never left pails of water or empty jugs standing in his way—rose with the birds, and got through all the rough part of her work before the Hedingham gentry had risen from their pillows, in order that no one should see her in her common cotton gown, with sleeves tucked up to the shoulders. Happily for her own peace of mind the work of cleaning those few rooms was not enough to redden or roughen her pretty hands and arms. She had contrived to minister to her father from the time she was twelve years old, without injury to her growing loveliness. Indeed, her beauty may have been improved by that enforced activity which preserved the fresh bloom of her cheek, the liquid brightness of her eyes.

She heard the sound of the opening door, and her lover's footsteps, and came out of her kitchen, where she had been preparing the remains of yesterday's chicken for to-day's *frit-casole*. The happy look which Edmund knew so well flashed into her face, at sight of him, and then changed curiously to a look of fear.

"My darling, what is the matter?" he asked, folding her in his arms.

"You have come to tell papa," she said, "and I am frightened. I know he will be disagreeable—insult you, perhaps, if you tell him your mother's determination. Why not leave him in the dark, Edmund? Just ask his permission to marry me, and no more."

"My pet, you ask me to do a dishonourable thing," answered Edmund, kissing the fair forehead at the end of his sentence, lest the reproach should seem too severe; "and even if I tried to deceive your father I should most likely fail. He would ask for a settlement, or something of that kind, which he could hardly get from a pauper."

Sylvia shuddered at the word. It is hard to bid good-bye to one's brightest dream, and Sylvia's had been the fancy that she had won the lover she loved, and a rich husband, in Edmund Standen.

"I must tell Mr. Carew the truth, dear, and I can't tell it too soon," said Edmund firmly. "But I'm sorry to say I've more bad news for you this morning."

"Bad news! How can you have bad news? What more can your mother rob you of?"

"My bad news does not concern our fortunes, Sylvia, but our parting. I am going away from Hedingham for three long months."

The girl's cheek paled, but no tear clouded those brilliant eyes. She looked at him fixedly—her lips quivering.

"You have changed your mind—you are going to give me up!" she said.

"Give you up, when I am here to ask your father for your hand; to give him formal notice of our engagement."

"What is to part us then?"

"Duty, my sweet one, which calls me far away."

He told her about the news from Demerara, and his immediate departure. Sylvia paused and looked disconsolate. She had no sympathy with an unknown widow, above all when that widow was the very person for whose benefit her lover was to be robbed of his rightful inheritance.

"It seems hard that you should be obliged to go, Edmund," she said. "One would think your sister might find some one else to settle her affairs and bring her back to England, that is to say if she wants an escort. I thought married women were independent, and could do everything for themselves."

"But think of her trouble, Sylvia—her husband so awfully snatched away from her. They had been married six years, and it was a real love-match. I never knew people more attached to each other."

"What took them to Demerara?" asked Sylvia, still disconsolate.

"George was a barrister, with a very fair practice when he married, and he and my sister lived as happily as a pair of turtle doves, in a pretty little house at South Kensington. But two years ago he got a judgeship in Demerara. It was too good to refuse, so off they started, to my mother's regret. They used to spend a month with us every autumn."

"Of course," thought Sylvia, "scheming to cheat you out of your fortune."

"Sylvia," said Edmund earnestly, "this parting won't make any difference in your love, will it? You mean to be true to me?"

The loving eyes looked up at him, the little hands clasped his. What need was there of any further answer?

"I love you too dearly to change," she said, and then added meditatively, "I sometimes wish I didn't."

"But why, my own one?"

"Because I don't think our love is lucky for either of us. What has it given you but trouble in the present? What does it promise us in the future?"

"Happiness, darling. Happiness, which is not to be guaged by the measure of a man's banking account. Trust your fate to me, and we will be happy together, rich or poor. Already the clouds are lifting. My mother and I had a confidential talk last night, which ended pleasantly. She loves me with all her unselfishness heart, dear soul, in spite of her prejudices. And she will learn to love you too, my pet, in good time. She has even promised to come and see you while I am away."

"Even," repeated Sylvia, with over so faint a sneer, "I'm sure I ought to be grateful for so much condescension."