

The Story.

A Proud Wife.

A STORY IN TWO PARTS—PART THE FIRST.

THE YOUNG COUPLE.

We were scarcely more than boy and girl when Gilbert and I made up our minds to be married. Friends laughed at us after the usual fashion—a few condescended to advise us, I remember—but we thought that we knew our own minds better than they did who sought to influence us, and we became man and wife. We were not children, though we had begun life early. Gilbert was alone in the world, and I had only a mother to study, whose wishes went with my own, and who relied too much on my judgment.

Gilbert and I were what the world called a clever couple. We commenced life with fair prospects ahead, and I thought that we should both have the patience to wait for fortune, and courage to strive through the usual difficulties to obtain it. Gilbert was only one-and-twenty when he married me, and I was seventeen; but he was strong, self-reliant and energetic I believed, and I felt that his perseverance would make him his name in good time. He was neither weak nor vain. He saw the struggle with the crowd before the race was won, and he asked me very gravely whether I could be content for years with a modest income and a little house, knowing that contentment would ever be with him, and not with his surroundings. He had chosen engineering for his profession. He had genius; he had passed his examination with that high honor which I was assured he would do; and before he was three-and-twenty years of age he had obtained a post of importance that was likely to lead to something great one day. Gilbert's income was not large at first. He was to work up to greatness by degrees, and there was a small addition of seventy-five pounds a year on my side to back us in our first start together.

I had begun to write for the magazines, following at a distance in the footsteps of a father who had killed himself by editor's work. It was said, and in my way earned a few pounds occasionally, almost against my husband's wishes. He would grow eloquent at times on the folly of my aspirations, demonstrate to me plainly enough how impossible it was that I could ever be more than a literary drudge, an "outsider" as he termed it, and how it militated against his dignity, and lowered himself as "lord and master," to see me working with himself for home.

Had we been blessed with children, I might have reasoned with him in those dark days of which I treat—those days of early struggles together, at which I look back longingly, and see how happy they were—but I know how proud a man he was; and as he advanced slowly in his profession, so I drew him back from mine—if I could ever call it mine—and let him work for both of us.

Yes, they were happy struggles after all. Our little household embarrassments were also pleasant jesting when our hearts were young, and our friends were of our own seeking. We made no profession of being better off than we were; the few to whom we were well known understood our position, and believed in our advancement. We were ambitious, perhaps, but we kept our ambition to ourselves. I was the happier of the two possibly, for I was more easily contented, and I loved him better, I think that still, for all my great mistake. Had we remained poor all our lives, I should not have experienced one regret at linking myself with Gilbert Graham, unless his looks or words had been significant of his own disappointment. I say that now as fearlessly as I said it to him long ago, when we were rising in the world.

It was when we were beginning to rise that we encountered the first shadow, and this is how it came about:—

Gilbert, before he was four-and-twenty, had attracted the attention of the scientific public to a new theory of his own as regarded the construction of railway-bridges—a theory that drew attention to his name, and gained him some reputation amongst those whom in his career it was necessary to study.

We rose from that period. Gilbert's fame extended; men well known in the profession sought him out; old friends reappeared, and fresh friends started up—or rather those acquaintances whom society calls friends. Let me mention one man in particular, for the unwitting cause of my trouble—a man who meant well in his way, and who, after a fashion, liked and even respected my husband; but who, before I had cause for one reproach, cost me many a heart pang. Young wives will understand me, though only a few men will see fair reason for my first grief, when I say that he was my husband's friend more than he was mine. He sought Gilbert out, and—here is the secret—he took him away too much from home. He had been a schoolfellow of my husband's; he had risen in the world very rapidly, and was a rich man at six-and-twenty—rich, not by his own exertions, but by those of his uncle, who had died rich, and bequeathed to him the savings of long years. When Charles Ewell was a poor young man, I liked him better; it was his sudden wealth that seemed to set me against him, even before he stepped between Gilbert and me. It was not envy at his sudden rise that disturbed me, for no one congratulated him more from the heart than Gilbert and I; it was his new manners, which Gilbert did not see, or would not see, but which I was certain he had assumed with the greater dignity which his higher position had entailed upon him. Society knows these men—these youths who have not been born rich, but have had riches thrust upon them—and not like them much, for all the court it pays them. Wealth had not spoiled Charles Ewell more than it would have spoiled most men; it had altered his character, and given a new turn to his thoughts, and it had rendered him very objectionable to me. It has always been a mystery to me that Gilbert was in this matter less clear-sighted than myself; that with all his shrewdness and his genius he was so easily blinded by the showy manners of his friend. He was the last man to be affected by them in any way prejudicial to his interest, but they changed him for all that, and they sowed the seeds of discontent within him.

Charles Ewell married very well in the new sphere to which he had been raised, and we hired a brougham for the occasion, and went to his wedding, where his friends turned up their eyes at our horses, and laughed at our back conveyance; as well they might, perhaps, for there was a great

deal to laugh at, and we had had some fun out of it ourselves driving to Hanover Square. We went, also, to Mr. Ewell's grand home in May Fair, in due course, to stately dinners and still more stately balls, where the ladies looked disparagingly at my toilette, and Charles Ewell informed my husband what everything had cost in the room—what he had given for his pictures, what he was going to give for his new carriage. It was this parvenu habit, this common trait of the upstart, which irritated me most, because it impressed my husband a great deal, although he was not slow to smile at this restless vanity of his friend.

"I hope, Gilbert, your friend's grandeur will not set you against our little home," I said to him one night when we were returning in a cab from one of Charles Ewell's dinner parties.

He had been looking very thoughtfully over my head until my voice aroused him, then he started and laughed pleasantly.

"Oh, no, Ellen. His grandeur will not disturb my philosophy, though I would not mind changing houses with him."

"And wives?"

"No, I would take my wife to the big house, and she should shed more gladness around me there."

"Is there not gladness enough in the old home," I asked somewhat anxiously.

"To be sure there is. I am not envious—I am the last man to covet my neighbour's goods," he said lightly, "or to wish that little Charles's luck had fallen to my share. He is a good fellow, who deserves to succeed in the world. How welcome he made us, Ellen."

"Yes, very welcome, certainly."

"I think that he paid us more court than he did the rest of his guests."

"Yes, he seemed anxious to show that our position in life made no difference to him."

"Ah! you speak satirically, Nell," he said. "You don't like Charles; and it is his grand home that seems to cast a shadow upon yours. You must not wish that we were better off yet awhile—presently we shall spread our wings, girl, and have a soul above our shabby little crib in the Wandsworth Road; and if we never have quite so many silver spoons and forks as Charles Ewell, still we will drop the electro-plate, and soar upwards."

This was only turning my weapons against myself, and I could only smile at him, till the satire that he couched in his last words more forcibly suggested the new truth.

"I don't despise wealth, Nell," he continued, to my surprise, beginning again in his old soothing manner towards me, and ending with the old bitterness towards a something or other that was not apparent. "I hope to grow rich in good time; to have as good a house and keep as good a table as half those people whom we have met to-night, and whose only claim at Charles's place was the money that they had made in the city. By Jove! there was not an intellectual man among them—amongst them was a well-off lot, that's all. When my turn comes, see what friends I will have; the worst of it is, it can't come very soon."

I fancied that he sighed then; that it was his first sigh of regret at the position he occupied. We spoke of our own future the rest of the way home, and forgot Charles Ewell's rise to fortune. We spoke of our patience to wait, and courage to fight the battle of life, with an undivided love to keep us strong; and when our small maid-servant opened the door, we contrasted her with Charles Ewell's plush-clad lackey, and had one jest at the odious car airion.

But this was, after all, the beginning of trouble. I date all our restless discontent, all our mistakes and misconceptions, from that night when the first sign was made that he was dissatisfied with the progress he had made in life, despite all the success he had achieved. He did not appear to have that confidence in his own genius which carries a man so far forward into his future that he mentally rises above his present obscurity; and there ensued periods of re-acton, when he fancied that he was going back in the race, and that fame and honour were never to come to his side. We had our crises when he had become known to the profession as a man of no common order of intellect. Fame comes before money, as a rule, and I have said that Gilbert made many friends, Gilbert's income might have been three hundred a year, not more, when we were still a young couple, and had changed, for the sake of position, into a larger house further west. Here we entertained, in a humble way at first, those friends who we thought valued us more for ourselves than for the entertainment we could afford them; or those friends, again, whom Gilbert asserted it was necessary to keep up with, even at a loss to ourselves, which was a theory I never wholly understood. And we did not save money; indeed, had a hard struggle at times not to fall back into debt.

This was a greater struggle than Gilbert ever knew; for I concealed from him in every way that I could—all the petty household cares which rose to the surface occasionally. I knew how much they would have disturbed him from his studies, and vexed him for days afterwards; and I did my best with our income, gratified by the knowledge that he was generally ignorant that at any period of a past week there had been a sharp corner to turn. Men, I suppose, never give us credit for all the efforts we make to keep down the house-keeping expenses. They are engrossed with their business, and believe that there is no trouble in paying a few tradesmen's bills. Now and then there was a little contretemps to face, and an extra demand to make upon his purse; and then Gilbert would do his best with me to stem the tide, and would decline invitations, and work hard at home until our heads rose above water once more. Once I fell ill—at an inopportune period, when I should have been at my strongest and best—and there were nurses to hire, and a physician to consult. I recovered to find that all things had fallen into array, and that there were formidable bills to confront. Still we lived down difficulties, worked hard, and were after all tolerably happy in our way. There were only a few up-hill years to surmount, I told him, and then we could smile at our past trials, and that happiness we had ever found in their midst, cheered by the love that had never grown less between us. He would grow eloquent in his turn then, paint his future as I had never dared to paint it for him, speak of me as his best adviser and truest friend, until Charles Ewell, or men like him, whom I need not introduce here, confronted him once more.

It was at my own house that the greatest blow fell at last. Mr. Ewell and his wife were there, and a few friends had been summoned to meet them. Gilbert had been inclined at first to extravagance in his ideas for our party, and I had had

to combat his high notions, and to remind him that we were not yet rich enough to launch forth. It had been a successful little party in its way, though we had dispensed with a French cook and the highest-priced wines. I was a young wife, and proud of my home and my husband, and it vexed me to know that Gilbert would half apologise to his friend Ewell for his small establishment and the general apertances around him, whenever this grand young man favored us with his company. On that night I detested him. I was a woman, not a heroine, and words that he uttered, and that I heard by chance, set my heart against him for ever.

"You don't come to see me, Charley, for my splendid dinner or my old brands," Gilbert was saying as I passed him, "but for the sake of that old friendship which dates from the school-form."

"And for the sake of that friend's genius, which is so surely working its way, Gilbert—which we all see and respect," was the courteous answer enough.

Then my husband's saturnine mood asserted itself, and I could see his face shadow and his brow contract as he confessed to his friend all the opposition that was still in his way, just as he had confessed to me many times before, and been reasoned out of by my brighter prophecies. When I returned five minutes afterward, Gilbert had just concluded his long catalogue of the difficulties in the way of a man rising to independence in that profession which he had chosen for himself. Charles Ewell's reply I heard and never forgave.

"Ah! but you don't think, Gilbert," he said, "how you have risen in comparison with the nine hundred and ninety-nine men of your own age and profession. Risen in the face of every obstacle, with a house to keep up, and a wife to support, at an age when no man in your position, as a rule, thinks of taking such expenses on himself."

Gilbert should have spoken warmly here, for indirectly it had been implied that I was the barrier in the way of his advancement.

"Yes, I married early enough, Charley, but—I don't regret it," he added, after a pause, as though most men in his circumstances would have done so.

"As a single man, your income would have been ample for your wants," Ewell continued. "You could have travelled, and thus have benefited by the experience of all lands, instead of clinging to your own insular prejudices, and at thirty-five you might have chosen your wife from the first families in the land."

"I should have chosen Ellen," he said laughingly, and as I stole away I said Heaven bless him for that answer.

I was wretched for the remainder of the time Gilbert and Charles Ewell sat together. I could think only of my husband, and see on his gloomy brow, as I watched him from the distance, the shadow of the dangerous thoughts his friend had placed there. They sat and talked together in a low tone, forgetful of the company around them, and my nervous fancies, if they were merely nervous fancies, suggested that Gilbert's face grew darker every instant, and that he nodded his head more than once to the insidious reasoning of his friend.

Later in the night, when our guests had gone, and we were alone together, the gloom still lingered on my husband's face, and no effort of my own could dissipate it.

"Has anything occurred, Gilbert, to annoy you this evening?" I asked.

"Nothing, Nell; it has been a very pleasant evening."

"I thought Charles Ewell might have said something to vex you," I said quietly.

"He is too good a fellow for that. What a pity it is, Nell, that you do not like him much. No man would do more to help me rise in the world than he."

"Or to render you discontented with the present, from which you would escape."

Then I told him of the chance words that I had heard, and of the mortification that I had experienced in hearing them, till I broke down, like the sensitive woman that I was then. His arms were around me, and he drew me to his side to reason with me—to assure me that he was not dissatisfied with his success in life; on the contrary, very grateful for it, and that he was content to wait with me patiently for the better fortunes that he thought were on their way to us.

"Yes, but he spoke of your early marriage as a mistake," I said pertinaciously; "of me as a clog upon your industry and is to hang around your neck for many years, and be always a something that you must drag upwards with yourself."

"No, he did not speak so forcibly as that, Nell," he answered. "You never do Charley justice—you never will. If he said that it would be easier for me to have saved money as I single man than as a Benedict, why, there was no great harm, and a little truth in the assertion."

"Yes, and that assertion implied the hindrance that I had been to you. Oh, Gilbert! and you think that too—you see that without me you might have been a richer man, and nearer the mark at which you aim."

"What does it matter? I am satisfied, Ellen. I have nothing to regret. I have been lucky in my profession, and in the wife who supports me in my efforts."

So we became reconciled to the present again, and I believed all that he had told me for a few days—a few weeks, until a new change came over him, which I did not comprehend, and yet which I could but guess was connected with myself.

There was the heavy look upon his face that I had seen on the night Charles Ewell dined with us, and spoke of me as Gilbert's dead weight, and I connected it truly enough with the man who called himself my husband's friend. It was in taking Gilbert with the change in him that the truth escaped.

"You have seen Mr. Ewell lately, Gilbert," I said.

"Yes; how did you know that?"

"I fancied that you must have met him, for, forgive me for the thought, I fancy that you are never your old self afterwards."

"It is an ungenerous thought, Ellen."

"He has spoken of me again. Perhaps he has—"

"Pardon me, but he has not mentioned your name," said Gilbert quickly. "See how you leap to conclusions that are unworthy of you, in your new and strange dislike to him. He has offered me, Ellen, a post abroad."

"Indeed, and you—"

(To be Continued.)