

"We get on very well together," he said trying his hardest to be tender, "but I'm afraid the life is rather a dull one for her."

"You speak with a refinement of accent which I should hardly have expected in—"

"In a Hedingham schoolmaster," said Mr. Carew. "I don't know about that. I daresay I'm very much behind the new order of national schoolmasters who are expected to be compendiums of learning. But I came to Hedingham in the good old times, when all people wanted in a village schoolmaster was the ability to spell decently, and write a fair hand."

Mr. Carew might have added that in this happier era certificates of character were not so sternly scrutinised as they are now-a-days.

"Have you been so long at Hedingham?" enquired Sir Aubrey.

"Fifteen years."

"You surprise me! With your education I should have supposed you would have long ago sought and obtained a much better position."

Sylvia gave a quick impatient sigh. This was the very thought she had so often uttered.

"Papa doesn't know the meaning of ambition," she said.

"No, I have no ambition." "Man wants but little here below, nor wants that little long." Why disturb the brief span in which he may enjoy his little by fruitless endeavours to make it great. "The gods want nothing," said the Greek, "and the man who wants least comes nearest to the gods." I have schooled my desires better than I have taught the village children, and like Goldsmith's model pastor feel myself 'passing rich with forty pounds a year.'"

Mr. Carew might have added, that unlike the ideal pastor, he spent the forty pounds strictly upon himself, and thus stretched the money to its utmost limit.

"I admire your philosophical spirit, sir," said the baronet, approvingly. "If there were more men of your temper there would be fewer revolutions. Yet for your daughter's sake I can but think it a pity you should have been contented with a position so far below your powers."

Sylvia gave another sigh.

"Oh, papa never thinks of me," she said, "so long as he has a servant, to whom he need pay no wages, he is quite satisfied."

Now this was not an amiable speech, and from lips less lovely might have seemed wanting in filial respect. But Sir Aubrey looked at the lips and did not weigh the words that had escaped through that rosy gate. He was thinking how lovely, how intelligent the girl was, and what a hard thing it seemed that she should be buried alive in such a place as this—pretty and rustic indeed to contemplate as a picture in the summer twilight, but no fitting home for a beautiful young woman.

He rose hastily, went across the grass to the Vicar and Mr. Spilby, who were leaning against the palings talking prodigiously, Spilby with a pencil and note book in his hand. There was too dangerous a witchcraft about that fair young face. Witchcraft that might lure a man to his ruin.

"In my position a man cannot afford to be foolish," thought the baronet. Perriam Place and all its appurtenances hung round his neck, as it were—a millstone which he could not shake off. "If I were a youngster, I might make a fool of myself and marry that girl," he thought.

Yet in a young man with his life before him such an act would have been more desperate than in a man of Sir Aubrey's age, with whom the best part of life was over, and who might surely choose what comfort he liked for his declining years. Never, perhaps, was a man more free to please himself than Sir Aubrey. Near relations he had none, save his brother, the harmless eccentric Mr. Perriam, who was considered hardly quite right in his mind. There was really nothing to prevent his pleasing himself; except his own prejudices. But these were strong. He had a magnificent idea of his own importance. The grandeur of his place in the world. He had never done anything in competition with his fellow men; and therefore he had never failed. Nothing had ever happened to weaken his faith in himself.

As a young man he had been affianced to the daughter of a Duke. The Duke was poor, but of loftiest lineage. The girl, Lady Guinevere, had died a month before the day appointed for the marriage, and the blow had fallen heavily on Aubrey Perriam. The portrait of his betrothed still hung in his study at Perriam, and he rarely looked at it without a regretful sigh.

This disappointment, or rather the memory of the disappointment, for it had long ceased to be more than a sorrowful memory, had kept Sir Aubrey single all these years. With the recollection that his Guinevere was the sweetest of women, there mingled always the thought that she was also the daughter of one of England's oldest dukes. He met with innumerable pretty women, and agreeable women, who would have been glad to become Lady Perriam; but there was not one worthy to occupy the place that Guinevere was to have filled. They might have brightened his hearth with all the tender joys of home; but they could not have given him children a ducal grandfather. Sir Aubrey took that fact to heart, and remained single.

Yet in every pathway there lurks a snare. Sir Aubrey's tastes were artistic. He had his ideal, his dream of perfect beauty, which he never thought to see realised save on the canvas of his favourite, Titian. And lo, he had found this dream-picture, this impossible flower of human life, which poets have sung, and painters have painted through all the ages. He had found his ideal, here, in the village of Hedingham—on his own property—but a few miles from the house in which he dwelt.

He listened politely to all Mr. Spilby's ideas about the new schoolhouse. Mr. Spilby was of opinion that the present building was worn out, used up, that it would hardly hold together for a month longer.

"Weather-tight it has not been for the last ten years," said Mr. Spilby, with profound contempt, "and how those blessed old cob walls have contrived to hold together at all passes my understanding."

"I'm afraid they must all hold together a year or two longer, Spilby," said the Vicar. "But you may give us your specification as soon as you like. We shall know where we are when we've got that."

Sir Aubrey pretended the deepest interest, and when Mr. Spilby departed to pick up his gig at the Inn, and drive back to Monkhampton, the baronet still lingered, and this time did not refuse the Vicar's offer of a bottle of claret. The Vicarage was on the other side of the churchyard. They had but to

pass beneath the gloom of the cypress that had shaded Edmund and Sylvia's farewell, cross a more open part of the village burial ground, and the comfortable looking windows of the Vicar's substantial dwelling were before them. A low wall only divided the Vicarage garden from the place of tombs. Clumps of dahlias and rose-covered arches rose gaily beyond the grassy mounds, and above the moss-grown head stones, the lighted windows of Mr. Vancourt's drawing-room shone out cheerily. Croquet hoops, scattered balls and mallets still adorned the lawn.

"Rather a singular man, that schoolmaster of yours," said the baronet, as they sauntered through the churchyard, "a man who has seen better days, I should think. Do you know anything of his antecedents?"

"Not a tittle. He came here before my time, you know."

"I wonder how he got the situation. He doesn't talk like a West country man."

"No, I don't think he belongs to this part of the country."

"Yet Carew is a West country name."

"It is—and a good one. I've tried more than once to find out what Carews he belongs to. But he's uncommonly close—there's no getting at the bottom of his mind. He's not an agreeable man, by no means, but he's a very good schoolmaster."

"What stipend does he get?"

"Forty pounds a year, coals, candles, and the schoolhouse."

"Poor fellow! And he speaks like a gentleman. The daughter is interesting, too. Do you know much of her?"

"I've seen her change from bud to blossom. She was a slip of a child of twelve, or so, when I first came here."

"She looks amiable—a gooish kind of girl, I should think."

"As good as the generality of girls, I daresay," says the Vicar, in a tone that was not complimentary to the species. "My daughters tell me she's vain, but as I don't find that they themselves are entirely free from that feminine weakness, I don't attach much weight to the accusation. So pretty a girl as Sylvia can hardly help knowing she is pretty."

No word of village scandal nor of blemish in the girl's fair fame. Sir Aubrey was glad of that. But he pushed the question still further. "Your daughter said something this afternoon about certain reports which had prevented her being quite so kind to Miss Carew lately as she had in the past," he said. "Do you know the nature of those reports?"

"Reports," cried the Vicar, almost in a passion. "Hedingham is full of reports. The very air engenders reports. If you go out of your house after dark—a report! If you take an unaccustomed walk before breakfast—a report! If a stranger dines with you—the fact is reported. You can hardly eat your dinner in the solitude of your own home without being talked about. You eat poultry when other people eat meat. You are going to the dogs. You dine on a cold sirloin and a salad. You are a miser. I have no patience with village scandal mongers, and my detestation of their gossip is so well known that very few of their inventions ever travel my way. As for Sylvia Carew, I have known her from a child, and I have never seen any reason to think ill of her."

Sir Aubrey was glad. It was not to be supposed that what men said or thought about this village beauty could be of any consequence to him; yet in his heart of hearts he was glad.

CHAPTER XIII.

AN UNINVITED GUEST.

While the baronet was making himself agreeable in the Vicarage drawing-room, and pretending to mistake Mr. Vancourt's wholesome Mudoc for Chateau Margaux, a curious scene was taking place in the school-house parlour—a scene of more dramatic intensity than any which had ever been enacted there since Mr. Carew came to Hedingham.

Night closed, dark and starless, as the schoolmaster drew his blind, and seated himself at the little table to read his newspaper by the light of a pair of candles, the second of which was only lighted while Mr. Carew read. With his small pittance it was a matter of some importance whether he burned one or two candles; so when he folded his paper and laid it aside it was Sylvia's care to extinguish the second candle.

For a man who lived so much apart from his fellow-men Mr. Carew was singularly fond of the newspaper. Books interested him little, though he had read a good deal at some period of his life. But the newspaper he devoured—watching the careers of public men—and most of all of commercial men, and noting every step in their progress. Very often had Sylvia seen him lay aside the journal with a heart-piercing sigh—a sigh such as the lost in the underworld may have flung after Virgil and Dante as the light of those radiant countenances faded slowly from them and left all dark. Long as he had lived in this quiet seclusion it was evident that he had still yearnings—that still in his breast there were smouldering fires not to be extinguished. Sometimes he would burst out into a sudden passion, and frown Sylvia with a homily upon the crooked ways of Destiny, the insecurity of earthly fortune. But not from a spiritual stand point did he survey the question—not with heavenly hopes did he entreat his child to fortify herself. He took a purely carnal view of the subject, and taught her that this human life was a jumble of contradictions in which some few pushing indefatigable spirits got the best of it. These chosen ones reigned above the general chaos, and contrived to enjoy themselves. But for the mass life meant hopeless confusion.

Sylvia listened, and agreed with the preacher. She was very ready to find fault with a system which compelled her to wear faded gowns and home-made bonnets. Whether Fate or Society were most to blame, she hardly knew; but she felt there was something amiss—that life was a riddle beyond her power to read aright.

To-night, however, Mr. Carew was unusually cheerful in his demeanour. He whistled a scrap of Italian music softly, as he drew down the blinds—a reminiscence of his opera-going days.

"You may sing me a song, Sylvia," he said, "while I smoke another pipe."

The girl seated herself at the piano and obeyed. But as her thoughts were following Edmund Standen she chose the saddest melody in her scanty repertoire. He was at Southampton, most likely, by this time, she thought, pacing the lamp-lit streets of the strange town, sad and lonely, and longing for her company. So she sang a pensive little song of Sir Walter Scott's, set to a mournful strain—

The heath this night must be my bed.
The broken curtain for my bow.

My lullaby the warder's tread,
Far, far from love and thee, Mary:
To-morrow eve, more stilly laid,
My couch may be my bloody bed,
My vesper song, thy wail, sweet maid,
It will not waken me, Mary.

Mr. Carew did not take notice of the song. The sweet pensive voice soothed him as he smoked, and meditated, more hopefully than he had done for some time.

He told himself that his daughter had made a conquest. Sir Aubrey Perriam was evidently impressed—aye, and deeply—by her exceptional beauty. There were looks and tones which it was impossible to mistake. And again, why had the baronet come this evening. That pretended interest in the new school house was the shallowest of artifices. Sir Aubrey had come there to see Sylvia, and for no other reason.

Such admiration might end in nothing, of course. It was most likely to end in nothing. It was not supposed that a man of fortune and position who had lived single to between fifty and sixty years of age, escaping the various snares which must have been laid for him, would fall captive to the charms of a village beauty.

"Men are such base slaves to the world they live in, that it would be too much to hope that this man might have courage to please himself," pondered Mr. Carew. "However much he admires my daughter, he will be stoic enough to turn his back upon us and forget all about her."

Sylvia had told her father of that little scene in the orchard, and how she had caught Sir Aubrey Perriam at Blindman's Buff, and how he had kissed her hand afterwards like a courtier of the old school. Fealty to Edmund in no wise forbade that she should be gratified by such homage to her beauty; yet had Edmund ventured to admire any one but herself, she would have objected strongly.

To-night, even while she was singing, her thoughts wandered from Edmund to the baronet, and she wondered why he had come this evening, and if other people noticed that admiring look in his eyes when he spoke to her. Poor Edmund. If he had only been master of Perriam Place, instead of being dependent upon the will of a tyrannical mother!

"Look here, Sylvia," said her father, when he had smoked out his pipe. "Your fine Mr. Standen and I had a few plain words together to-day. You must have managed matters more artfully than even the generality of women to keep me in the dark till the last moment."

"What was the use of speaking, papa," returned the girl with her indifferent air, "I knew you'd be against us. And we've only been engaged such a short time."

"Engaged, indeed," cried the schoolmaster contemptuously. "You don't tell me that you mean to marry a beggar."

"I mean to marry Mr. Standen," answered the girl firmly. She looked her father full in the face, and he knew that the look was a defiance.

"I should have thought you had enough of beggary."

"He will work for me," she said, with that steady look. Her father felt the taunt. What effort had he ever made to lift his child from the dismal swamp of poverty? "Edmund will work for me," repeated the girl. "Why should he not prosper? He is young and hopeful, and will not sit down and fold his hands, contented with beggary, like that miserable sluggard those droning boys talk about."

"I don't know how to argue with a woman," exclaimed Mr. Carew, scornfully. "There are depths of silliness to which a man cannot reduce his understanding. Marry Edmund Standen, if you like. Proclaim to everyone in Hedingham that you and he are engaged to be married; and if you mar as brilliant a prospect as ever a girl had you'll have only yourself to blame by-and-by, when you and your husband are starving."

"A brilliant prospect," echoed the girl with a bitter laugh; "what brilliant prospect can I have here?" She glanced disdainfully at her surroundings, and laughed again—not pleasantly.

"What should you say to being mistress of Perriam Place?" The girl laughed a third time, but this time with less bitterness. "Poor papa," she said compassionately, "can you be so foolish as to attach any importance to Sir Aubrey's notice?"

"Great events have sprung from small beginnings," answered her father sententiously. "But if you marry Edmund you shut the door in the face of fortune."

Sylvia gave an impatient sigh.

"I wish you wouldn't put such nonsense into my head, papa. It only makes me uncomfortable. Mistress of Perriam Place, indeed, just because an elderly gentleman has paid me a compliment or two. Was there ever such absurdity?"

Mr. Carew said nothing, but began to read his newspaper. Sylvia fidgetted with her work basket, but made no attempt to work. That foolish speech of her father's had strangely disturbed her. She gave another sigh, heavier than the first.

"You don't know how good Edmund is, papa," she said pleadingly. "You don't know how dearly, how truly he loves me."

"I know that he has not a shilling of reliable income," answered her father, "and I consider that enough for me to know about any man who wants to marry my daughter."

"I wish he were richer. But Mrs. Standen may relent some day," said Sylvia, musingly. "He is so good and brave, and true; and thinks no more of sacrificing his prospects for my sake than if it were but throwing away a faded flower."

"A convincing fact that he's an arrant fool," said her father, "and never likely to succeed in life."

"Is that a rule, papa? Yet, if clever people always succeeded, you ought to have done better."

"I don't pretend to cleverness. I have been a fool in my time—ay, fooled to the top of my bent. Hark, child," he said, starting, "What's that?"

It was a timid knock at the outer door, at an hour when visitors were rare at the school house. The little Dutch clock in the kitchen had struck ten, a late hour for Hedingham, bedtime even for the gentry, unless they had company. The most dissipated of Hedingham dinner parties was over at eleven, and darkness had descended upon the dinner givers by a quarter past.

To a nervous temperament any unexpected summons is alarming, were it even the most timid tap at a street door, and to-night Mr. Carew's nerves were somewhat overstrung. That notion about the baronet's fancy for his daughter, shadowy as it was, had excited him.

He went to the door and opened it cautiously; as if prepared to behold a burglar with mask and lantern, or perhaps some modern spring-heeled Jack. But the figure he saw was by no means alarming; only a woman's slender form, clad in