

THE SECRET.

Sweet! I will tell you a secret,
If you will lend me your ear;
'Tis a wonderful, shining secret
Which none but you must hear.

Deep in the halls of ocean,
Is a radiant gem imperaled,
Well worth a monarch's ransom,
The light of the water-world.

But a golden-haired girl of the waters
Often tosses it up in her hand,
Not knowing its wealth and beauty,
Or refusing to understand.

I call to her sadly, sadly:
"Oh, maid of the blue depths afar!
Press the precious pearl to thy bosom,
And wear it there like a star."

"Dear water-witch! believe me,
A talisman it will prove,
Filling thy future soul-life
With beauty, and bliss, and love."

But she only laughs, shaking her tresses,
And calling her sisters down,
To see how she plays with the jewel,
Like the veriest meanest stone.

Sweet! do you know the secret?
In thy heart are those halls of the sea;
And the precious pearl there hidden
Is my passionate love for thee.

You still laugh? Beware! If this jewel
From your hand be lightly hurled,
You may search in vain for another
In love's deep wonder-world.

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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 XL.

THE GRASS WITHERETH, THE FLOWER FADETH.

As summer changed to autumn, and autumn darkened into winter again, a gloomy shadow fell upon Mr. Bain's orderly home, in High-street, Monkhampton, the forewarning shadow of death. Mrs. Bain, the gentle, thoughtful, managing house-mother, had surrendered the keys of store cupboards, and china closets, wine cellar and cellaret; and there were those in the household who felt that she had relinquished them for the last time. Never more would she reign with quiet unobtrusive sway in the narrow undivided kingdom of home.

She had returned from Cannes at the end of April, wonderfully benefited by the milder climate of southern France. Her friends were loud in their congratulations. She had found a means of cure, or at least of permanent alleviation of her complaints. Asthma or bronchitis need trouble her no more. She had only to pack her trunks and depart like the swallows, save for that encumbrance of luggage, at the approach of winter. The doctor, Mr. Stimpson, agreed to this, with some faint reservation. It is not for a family doctor to damp his patient's spirits. There is your family doctor, sympathetic and pensive, who gazes at you with deploring eyes, and appears to think you on the verge of the grave; and there is also the cheerful and jocose family doctor, who talks loud even in sick rooms, and affects to believe there is hardly anything the matter with you. Mr. Stimpson was a cheerful doctor and a great favourite in Monkhampton. Unhappily, this particular winter came upon the world with hardly a note of warn'g, tripping up the heels of autumn as it were; and while people were congratulating one another on the fine bracing autumnal weather, the frost-fiend suddenly tweaked them by the nose, and fogs which, had they known their place, would have held themselves in reserve for the dark days before Christmas, enveloped the close of October with a chilly gloom.

Mrs. Bain was taken ill with her chronic asthma before October was ended, and Mr. Stimpson declared decisively that the intended emigration to Cannes was out of the question this year.

"She couldn't bear the journey in her present state," he said to Shadrack Bain, who seemed full of anxiety, though he said little about his fears; "and by the time we get her round again, it will be too late in the year for her to travel."

So instead of departing to the pleasant shores of the Mediterranean, Mrs. Bain was confined to her own chamber, a large and comfortable apartment, overlooking the high street, from whose windows, when she was well enough to sit up, the invalid could see all that constituted life in Monkhampton.

"It's better than going abroad to be away from you all," Mrs. Bain said to her daughters, "and we are in the Lord's hands all the same here as in a better climate. If it is His pleasure, I shall get through the winter, Monkhampton won't kill me, and if it is His pleasure to take me I shall be content to go. I feel myself a burden to your father, my dears. A sick wife is nothing but a burden."

"You oughtn't to say such things, mother," remonstrated Matilda Jane, tearfully. "I'm sure father does nothing but fret about you since you've been so ill. If you could see him as he sits at table, so full of thought and trouble, you'd know how he takes your illness to heart."

"I do know that, my dear," replied Mrs. Bain, to whom her husband was chief among men, always just, always to be honoured, "and that's why I feel it will be a blessing for you all when it pleases God to remove me. Your father will know that he has done his duty to me, and been the best of husbands, and he'll soon leave off fretting. People easily make up their minds to a loss when the thing has happened. It's before hand they feel the most pain, while there's a little bit of hope mixed with their fears. No trouble that God ever calls upon us to suffer is half so bad to bear as we think it is beforehand."

And then, with many pious maxims, and quotations from Holy Writ, words which came from the heart as well as from

the lips, Mrs. Bain strove to console her daughters in advance for the loss which she felt very sure must ere long befall them. She was a woman of deep religious feeling, so thoroughly sincere and earnest that the formal phrases of Methodism had no sound of cant when she uttered them. It had been her greatest pride and her sweetest joy to bring up her children in the love and fear of the Lord. That sublime phrase was written on her heart, "In the love and fear of the Lord." And from no thought or action of her life was the influence of religion ever absent. Her simple, thrifty, unselfish life had been ruled on what she herself called gospel principle. She had been a bounteous friend to the poor of Monkhampton; a Dorcas in simplicity of living and attire—never choosing the best for herself—taking no more heed for her raiment than the lilies, and content with a homelier garb than that wherewith God decks the flowers of the field.

The only pang she had ever felt on her husband's account was the fear that he was somewhat given to worldliness. That, in spite of his regular attendance at the chapel, in Water-lane, twice every Sabbath, and on two evenings in the week, the things of this world had too firm a hold upon his spirit—that his bank-book occupied almost as important a place in his thoughts as his Bible—willing though he seemed to read the morning and evening chapter.

"I could bear poverty better than the thought that your father cared too much for the things of this world," Mrs. Bain said to one of her daughters plaintively.

The girl defended her father warmly.

"I think that is going a little too far, mother," she answered. "It's people's duty to get on in life, especially when they have families to provide for. I sometimes wish father was a little more worldly-minded, and would let us ride on horseback, as the Miss Horshaw's do, and even follow the hounds."

Mrs. Bain sighed, and moaned something about the incongruity of horsemanship and Biblical Christianity. She always came back to the Bible for strength in every argument; and in the Bible chariots and horses were generally associated with wickedness, and the Egyptians and the Philistines. She had done her utmost to teach her children the transitory joys of this life—and here was her Matilda Jane, her first-born, hankering for horsemanship, and even eager to hunt some innocent animal to death.

No man could have been a better or kinder husband than Mr. Bain in this mournful winter, when the shadow of approaching death forbade all Christmas joys, and made the season doubly sad, because it had been wont to be enlivened by some mild domestic festivity, extra good dinners, a family gathering of all the Pawkers and Bains, and those other families with which Pawkers and Bains had intermingled in the solemn bonds of matrimony.

Everyone in Monkhampton lauded Shadrack Bain's devotion to his sick wife. It was the habit of those simple townfolk to survey and remark upon the actions of their neighbours, as if all the houses had been verily of glass; and all Monkhampton agreed that in his character of husband Shadrack was a model for his fellow-townsmen. The Baptists said it was because Mr. Bain was a Baptist. The Church of Englanders declared that Bain was a good fellow in spite of his Methodistical nonsense.

It was known that he had been ready to take his wife to Cannes when her fatal illness came upon her; it was known that he spent his leisure evenings in her sick room; it was known that he had summoned Dr. Pollintory from Rougemont, the county town, to hold a consultation with Mr. Stimpson, not once, but three times, since Mrs. Bain had kept her room. What could domestic affection do more than this?

The twenty years which had gone by since his father's death had done much to strengthen Mr. Bain's standing in Monkhampton. A man cannot go on living in a substantial square-built house, and paying his way, and bringing up sons and daughters, without winning the respect of his fellow-townsmen.

It was known that every year which came to an end beheld an increase in Mr. Bain's worldly goods. The addition to his possessions might be much or little, but it was a well-known fact that Shadrack Bain saved money. He bought little odd bits of land here and there in obscure corners of the town—here half an acre and there a quarter, and here a dilapidated old house, only fit to be pulled down—until he had in a manner coiled himself in and out of the town like a serpent, so that no new street could have been planned in Monkhampton that would not cut through Shadrack Bain's property. Go to the right, or turn to the left, you must come upon some spot of earth that was the freehold of Shadrack Bain.

He had bought two or three speculative properties within the last year, perhaps hardly amounting altogether to three thousand pounds; yet it was an understood thing that he was getting rich, and that where in former years he had crept, he now began to stride.

A very dismal house was the habitation of the Bain family that winter. They all loved the mother, and to miss her quiet presence was to lose the keystone of the domestic arch. "Father," too, was beyond measure dull and self-absorbed. He rarely spoke to his daughters; he seemed unconscious of the existence of his sons, save in their capacity as his clerks, in which, to use their own unlicensed language, he was "down upon them to an awful extent." He worked in his office in all kinds of unlawful hours, and only entered the family dining-room to eat his unsocial and hurried meal, and to leave directly he had eaten.

The Perriam estate occupied him more closely than ever this winter, and two days in every week were spent at Perriam Place, or on the Perriam lands, riding the baronet's once cherished Splinter, which was kept in condition by Mr. Bain's occasional use. On these days he always took his luncheon at the Place, and sometimes shared that mid-day meal with the reluctant Lady Perriam. She felt that he was of use to her—that but for him her position would be a great deal worse than it was, and she schooled herself to be civil, friendly even in her manner to him; yet, lurking in her heart, there was always the same undefined fear of him, the same deep-rooted conviction that he knew her better than any one else in the world.

One day when they were seated at luncheon, far apart at the long dining table, but alone and unattended, Mr. Bain spoke of Edmund Standen.

"A very fine young fellow that," he said, "and a first-rate man of business, which one would hardly have expected of a lad brought up at his mother's apron string. Edmund Stan-

den would have come to the front if he had started in life without a sixpence."

How deeply that phrase hit Sylvia, remembering as she did her own cowardly fears, her own weak shrinking from the mere possibility of misfortune.

"Standen is to be manager at the bank next year," I'm told, and Sanderson goes to Rougemont in place of Mr. Curlew, who retires. He'll get six or seven hundred a year, no doubt, as manager. A nice thing, considering his mother's money, which must all come to him by-and-bye. I suppose he'll marry that little girl he's so sweet upon."

"Do you mean Miss Rochdale?" asked Sylvia, very pale, not knowing what he might tell her next.

"Yes, that's the name. The pretty dark-eyed girl who lives with his mother."

"They have been brought up together like brother and sister," said Sylvia. "They could hardly think of marrying, I should fancy."

"Should you? It's the common talk that they're engaged. I used to meet them strolling in the lanes round Hedingham in the summer evenings; but perhaps it was only in brotherly and sisterly companionship."

Sylvia answered not a word. What should she say? She had no desire to question Shadrack Bain. If this thing were true the knowledge of it must reach her soon enough, too soon, let it come when it would. She shrank from receiving her death blow through Mr. Bain.

"I could bear anything but that," she thought, meaning Edmund's marriage with any one except herself. "I could endure lifelong separation from him, but not to know that he was happy with another."

She could now venture to send for Mary Peter, the Hedingham dressmaker, without fear of reproof from Sir Aubrey, who need know nothing of that young person's coming. She summoned Mary on the day after this conversation with Mr. Bain, and received her in the morning room on the ground floor, that chilly apartment which the last Lady Perriam had adorned with a collection of shells and sea weeds in two ebony cabinets, and a neat book case, containing about two dozen of the dullest imaginable books. Mere, remote from Sir Aubrey's ken, Sylvia could detain Miss Peter as long as she pleased.

"I want you to make a dress for me, Mary," she said, with that lofty yet gracious air which became her as well as if she had been born in the purple. "Sir Aubrey insisted upon my employing Mrs. Bowker, of Monkhampton, and I always defer to him even in small matters; but I like your style best, and I mean to employ you occasionally."

"I'm sure you're very kind, my lady," answered Mary, to whom the days when she and Sylvia had been companions seemed very far off, so vast was the distance between them now.

Then came a discussion about the fashion of the dress, and then the usual questions, asked with a languid air, as if the inquiry were made rather out of civility to Miss Peter than from any interest Lady Perriam felt in the subject.

"Any news at Hedingham, Mary?"

"Well, not much, my lady. You know there never is no news to speak of in our dreadful dull place. Mrs. Toynbee and the young ladies have been to Badden Badden, and only came back in November, with all the Parisian fashions—and very 'ideos the Parisian fashions must be judging from Mrs. Toynbee's bonnet, with not so much as an apology for a curtain, and flowers sprouting out where you'd least expect to see them. It would be worth your while coming over to church just to look at Mrs. Toynbee's bonnet, and one can see that she thinks a deal of it too. But you never come to our church now, my lady."

"It's so far," said Sylvia, "I don't care about having the horses out on Sunday."

"That's very good of you," answered Mary wonderingly. "I think if I had horses I should never have 'em in the stable, I should so enjoy riding about."

"Is Mrs. Toynbee's bonnet the only event that has happened in Hedingham since the summer?" Sylvia asked languidly.

"Well, there isn't much else. There was a young gent from Oxford that stayed at the Vicarage, and was thought to be courting the youngest Miss Vancourt, but he went away and nothing came of all the talk. Hedingham is such a place for talk. They do say Mr. Standen is going to marry Miss Rochdale."

"I daresay that's true," said Sylvia, steeling herself against the pain that went along with every thought of that bitter possibility.

"Well, I don't know, I'm sure," replied Mary meditatively. "It does seem rather likely, though, as you say. Considering that he must have been so down-hearted at losing you, and he couldn't better console himself than by marrying a nice young lady like Miss Rochdale; so kind as she's been to his sister's children too, like a second mother to them—teaching the little girls, and everything, just as if she was no better than a nursery governess, instead of an independent young lady, with a nice income of her own."

"Oh, no doubt she is a model of all virtues," replied Sylvia, stung even by Mary Peter's praise of her rival. "A young woman who knows how to wind herself into people's affections; with her meek winning ways, and pretended unselfishness, yet seeking her own ends all the time. Just the kind of girl to succeed in any object she set her heart upon."

Mary Peter felt the bitterness in this speech, and prudently refrained from any reply. She asked some convenient question about the sleeve of the new dress, and then retired. Sylvia would gladly have detained her, to question her more closely upon what rumour said of Edmund and Esther, but she felt that she had said too much already—perhaps almost betrayed herself to this vulgar dressmaker.

"I do believe she still cares for him," Mary Peter said to herself as she went home with Sylvia's roll of silk under her arm. "She'd hardly have flown out like that about Miss Rochdale if she didn't."

(To be continued.)

We could not help laughing at an anecdote of a man accustomed to long prayers, who had persuaded a guest greatly against his inclination, to stay to breakfast. He prayed and prayed, till his impatient guest began to think of edging quietly away, and walking off, but in attempting it he walked up to the old man's son who was asleep in his chair. "How soon will your father have done?" whispered the guest. "Has he got to the Jews?" asked the boy in reply, in the same tone. "No, said the other." "Well, then he ain't half done," replied the boy, and composed himself again to his nap; whereupon he bolted at once.