

AUTUMN HOURS.

The foxglove bells are tolling autumn hours,
The hours of ever-shortening silver day;
The hours that see the moon in full array
Rain on the earth her radiant ripening showers;
The hours when pilgrim corn-fields rest in bowers
Of final bloom, when reapers, binders come,
And wagons go and come from field to home
Oft till the stars sleep on their azure towers:
The twilight hours that hear the robin's lute:
The morning hours that see the spider's line
From branch to branch in dowy splendour shine:
The colder hours that see the bramble's fruit
Blush on its purple path, as Winter's foot
Is heard approaching on the lofty pine.

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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 XXI.—Continued.

Mr. Carew and his daughter did not approach Perriam by this chief entrance. At the edge of the park there was a little old church in the dell, enclosed by a crumbling old stone wall, in whose interstices hartstongue ferns thrived abundantly, and accessible by a narrow lane with a turnstile, through which one came straight into the park itself. The raised terrace of the Italian garden almost touched the wall within whose boundary the Perriams lay buried, in a narrow graveyard which held nothing but Perriams. And the level of the garden being considerably above the level of the church-yard, Sir Aubrey had the advantage of surveying his slumbering ancestors from an eminence, a spectacle conducive to meditation, and reflections of a Horatian character upon the brevity of life, and the mutability of things in general. The little church, an appendage of Perriam, the graveyard exclusively devoted to Perriams, impressed Sylvia with a sense of grandeur which all the gold of the Rothschilds, taken merely as gold, could not have inspired. That family distinction which comes from long establishment in the land, the deep-rooted family tree which has grown and flourished and spread its branches over the same spot almost from the beginning of recorded time as it were, is a kind of renown which seems peculiarly dazzling to the waifs and strays of humanity. Sylvia, who knew nothing of her father's history except his dishonour, felt this impression keenly; and Sir Aubrey, who in the apple orchard had seemed no more than a courteous elderly gentleman, acquired on his own domain an almost princely character.

The schoolmaster and his daughter crossed a stretch of level turf, and entered the avenue within a hundred yards of the house. Sylvia had never before been so near that stately pile. She had only seen it from the distance, grand and gloomy, standing aloof from the elms and beeches of the park, the cedars and maples of the lawn—on an island of barren gravel and turf laid out stiffly in the Italian style, with a Faunus and a Dryad, a Pan and a Syren, simpering on their pedestals at the angles of the walks.

The hall door stood open, but for ceremony Mr. Carew rang a bell, which made noise enough to have startled the establishment of the Sleeping Beauty. He had scarcely done so when he beheld a gentleman crossing the hall, a gentleman in a coat of somewhat antique cut.

"Good evening, Sir Aubrey," he said. "You see we are very punctual."

Sylvia pulled her father's sleeve.

"Papa, how can you be so stupid," she whispered, while the gentleman stood smiling inanely, with a look of considerable embarrassment.

The woman's quick eye had noted the difference of dress, of style, between the two brothers. The faces bore a marked resemblance, a likeness which in the half-light of the hall had been strong enough to deceive the schoolmaster.

"I beg your pardon," faltered Mordred Perriam, "you mistake me for my brother. We are generally considered alike. Pray walk in. Sir Aubrey expects you."

Sir Aubrey opened the dining-room door at this moment, and came out to welcome his visitors. Yes, there was a wide difference between the two men, but it was a difference of dress and style. The elder brother was as studious in his costume, and as well preserved in his person, as a French marquis of the old regime; while Mordred Perriam's high limp shirt collar, cambric frill, watered black ribbon and double eyeglass, nankeen waistcoat, and chocolate-coloured coat, ill cut hair, and shaggy eyebrows, bespoke the book-worm's indifference to the mutations of fashion, or the decay of his good looks. Even that chocolate coat was a mark of respect to his brother. Mr. Perriam was never happier than when loosely enveloped in a dressing-gown which age had rendered dear to him.

"How do you do?" cried Sir Aubrey. "So good of you to come. My brother, Mr. Perriam, Miss Carew—Mr. Carew, Mr. Perriam. Shall we take tea before we walk round the garden? Perhaps we had better. Miss Carew must want a little refreshment after her walk, and ladies are generally fond of tea. There will be light enough for the gardens afterwards, I have no horticultural specimens to show you; I leave the cultivation of curious plants to foolish old ladies, who want to spend their money. Perriam could only be Perriam if I squandered a fortune on orchids."

Mr. Carew murmured his acquiescence with a proposition which seemed incontrovertible, and Sir Aubrey led the way to the saloon, where tea had been prepared for the visitors on an oval table in the semi-circular bay, or alcove, at the end of the room. The china was Indian, and the silver tray and tea-kettle were specimens of that famous period which still takes highest rank among the connoisseurs of the silversmith's art. Some dry biscuits in a silver basket and a dish of early plums from the southern wall composed the somewhat unsubstantial meal; but the schoolmaster had not come to Perriam to eat or to drink, and sipped his tea out of the crimson and gold dragon china with supreme contentment. The baronet had placed Sylvia before the tray, with a ceremonious request that she would pour out the tea.

"I do it myself when my brother and I are alone," he said, "but it seems much more natural, as well as much more agreeable, to see a lady in that place."

Sylvia smiled. She felt an almost childish pleasure in handling those pleasant tea-cups, that antique tea-pot, and the curious old tea-kettle, mounted high upon four slim legs. Never before to-night had she poured tea out of a silver tea-pot; never before to-night touched such costly china. And then these things had a peculiar charm of their own, which lifted them above the common-place splendours of the Monkhampton shop windows. They possessed the double charm of age and rarity.

They lingered a little over that simple banquet, while the dusk deepened yonder on the cedar-shadowed lawn, and the butler, always slow to bring lamps and candles, left them to enjoy the gloaming. Sir Aubrey was in no hurry to break the spell that bound him. He was sitting by Sylvia, watching her white hands as they hovered about the tea things with such light, gracious movements. Why should he not have her always to pour out his tea, if he chose. There was no one to question his will. He was supreme master of his life and actions. Only destiny could interpose to prevent his being happy after his own fashion.

Musing thus, Sir Aubrey fell into a deep silence, which no other member of that small assembly ventured to break. They were there as his vassals, even Mordred, and if the prince were silent who among them should dare to speak? Nor was that stillness uncongenial to the summer dusk, or the splendid gloom of that spacious apartment.

Sylvia's keen eyes wandered here and there in the gloom. Why, the room was as large as Hedingham Church. That lofty ceiling, that florid cornice, impressed her with an unspeakable sense of grandeur. She thought of the school-house parlour, with its low ceiling, sustained by a clumsy whitewashed beam, in which a rusty iron hook or two, which no mortal hand seemed strong enough to extract, marked where ruder generations had hung their bacon to dry in the reek of the household hearth. What a contrast between those two rooms! The carpet here was like the turf on the Vicarage lawn, deep and soft, and silent beneath the heaviest foot-fall. The vast room, void of pictures, mirrors, and frippery of all kinds, had an almost awful look in the dusk. An Egyptian temple could have hardly been more solemn.

"Come," said Sir Aubrey, suddenly rousing himself from that long reverie, "We shall have very little light for the gardens; but you must come again, and see them better. Yes," with a desperate plunge, "you must come and dine with us some day next week."

Sir Aubrey heard his brother's startled movement in the dusk yonder. It was the slightest possible movement; an involuntary action, like the start which some people give at a vivid flash of lightning; but Sir Aubrey understood it. He knew that there was a wide difference between asking this schoolmaster and his daughter to tea, in a purely patronising way, as befitted the lord of the manor, and inviting them to dinner as if they were his equals.

"What would the county say?" thought Mordred, in mute horror. He saw very little of the county himself, and in the serene retirement of his kitchen garden cared very little what the county thought of him. But he had a fixed idea that his brother was bound to defer to the opinion of the county, and if he ever married at all to marry in accordance with the expectations of the county. Sir Aubrey had been engaged to a Duke's daughter; and the county would be slow to forgive him the disgrace of a discreditable alliance.

But Sir Aubrey had cast the die, and began to feel reckless. "After all, a man should live for himself," he thought. "Shall I have a vinegar-faced spinster to pour out my tea for the sake of the quarterings on her father's shield? At my age a man is bound to make the most of his life."

They went out into the garden, this being part of the programme, and a thing to be done as it were. Here, in the cool dusk, Sir Aubrey led his visitors along the stiff walks of the Italian garden, to that wide terrace from which, looking downward, they saw Perriam Church sheltered in its green dell, and the tombs of the Perriams showing grayish white against the surrounding foliage—such a quiet, half hidden little church and graveyard. Here, verily death must be a peaceful slumber; no jar of city traffic to stir the sleeper, no roar of steam engine to shake the mouldering dust!

Mr. Carew quoted Horace, involuntarily. Mr. Perriam, delighted at the opportunity, began a long story of a Venetian Horace which he had acquired—a wondrous bargain, only one volume being wanting, from a bookseller in Glasgow. Full of his story Mr. Perriam hooked his arms through the schoolmaster's and trotted him up and down the terrace, at his kitchen-garden pace, and thus, placidly unconscious of the mischief he might be doing, left Sir Aubrey and Sylvia alone together.

The stars were out in the clear summer heaven, and the girl's face looking up at that silver light seemed divinely beautiful, for all lovely things take new loveliness from the light of moon and stars. It was the face of one of Raphael's young Madonnas, serenely pensive, with lips half parted in a thoughtful smile, as if those deeply-dark eyes looked beyond the landscape they seemed to rest on, to some fairer spirit-land. Sir Aubrey contemplated the girl's face in silent admiration as she stood leaning a little against the sculptured vase, at an angle of the balustrade. Could anything so lovely be otherwise than good? he asked himself, with little doubt as to the answer.

It seemed to him that this outward perfection implied a corresponding beauty in the spiritual nature.

And indeed it is possible that in the soul that belonged to this perfect form there had once been all the element of goodness, needing only training for their development. Some natures are self-sustaining, like yonder cedar; others are but plants of a parasite growth, which need to be directed by the judicious hand of the gardener.

CHAPTER XXII.

"IN SOME, AMBITION IS THE CHIEF CONCERN."

Not very long did Sir Aubrey keep silence as he and Sylvia stood side by side beneath those tranquil stars.

There was one point upon which he was very anxious for enlightenment.

"Your father—when he honoured me with his confidence last night—appeared to me to take a very correct view of Mr. Standen's position with regard to yourself, Miss Carew," he said, coming to the point with the straightforwardness of a mind accustomed to dictate rather than to obey. "You are

too charming a young lady to enter any family which refuses you respect and affection. But fathers are apt to contemplate these subjects from a common-sense point of view, forgetting how far a daughter's feelings may be involved in the matter. I—I hope it is not so in this case. I hope you go with your father in his rejection of Mr. Standen."

Sylvia's heart beat very fast. Why should Sir Aubrey ask her a question, unless he meant to ask a still more particular question by and by? What could it matter to him whether she cared or did not care for Mr. Standen? And how should she answer him? To tell him the simple truth—to tell him that Edmund Standen was very dear to her, and that she had sworn to be faithful and constant in her love for him come weal, come woe—this was clearly her duty, her duty at once to Edmund and the sacred cause of truth. But to do this would be to put an end to Sir Aubrey's very evident infatuation—to destroy that splendid possibility which shone before her dazzled eyes to-night. And Sylvia had not acquired her ideas of life from a teacher who attached much importance to abstract truth. The lessons her father had instilled were hard lessons, taught in bitterness of spirit. He had taught her that to be happy meant to succeed in life—that poverty and contentment were incompatible. That to miss the one brilliant possibility which every life offers is to embrace ruin. "Every beautiful woman has her chance," he said to her, "if she knows how to wait for it." Now Sylvia's chance seemed to have come, after very little waiting. Fortune, the winged genius, stood by her side. She had but to stretch forth her hand to detain him—yet nothing was easier than to scare the bright stranger away. She deliberated before answering Sir Aubrey's question, and then with bold equivocation made a reply which committed her to nothing.

"I cannot help approving of my father's refusal. I have no wish to be looked down upon by Mrs. Standen."

"Looked down upon! I should think not!" cried the baronet indignantly. "Looked down upon by a provincial banker's widow. You, who are fit to be a duchess. But never mind Mrs. Standen," he went on, with some slight hesitation, "her insolence is not worth thinking about. The question I would venture to ask is—whether Mr. Standen, the young gentleman who gave you that book, has won your affection."

This question was too direct to admit of an equivocating answer. Sylvia must either tell the truth, or wrong her lover by deliberate falsehood. Happily neither man nor woman becomes altogether base in a moment. She could not pronounce that direct untruth which wisdom counselled. She would not forswear herself utterly. But in her reply she was only half true.

"Yes," she said slyly, "Edmund and I do care for each other, a little. Only there are so many obstacles in the way of our marriage that—"

"That you have both come to the conclusion that it is wisest to abandon all thought of it," cried Sir Aubrey eagerly. "I understand."

"No," said Sylvia, "Edmund is still anxious that I should marry him, but I—"

"You see the folly of such a marriage."

"Yes—and I am too proud to accept Mrs. Standen's suitor."

"Then I may venture to conclude that your heart is not deeply engaged?" asked Sir Aubrey, earnestly.

Sylvia sighed. If she had ever had a heart it was surely given to Edmund Standen. She remembered that thrilling voice, with its low tender tones; those dark grey eyes, with their fond protecting look; the sense of peace and security that her lover's presence had ever brought her; the deep trust which his trustfulness inspired. Hard to resign such gifts as these, which did, at times, even to her selfish soul, seem sufficient to make life sweet.

She sighed, and those thoughtful eyes surveyed the Italian garden, the park that surrounded it, the little old church in the dell, the undulating expanse of meadow-land, no less unbragous than the park. She knew that far beyond the limit of her gaze the land belonged to Sir Aubrey Perriam. She recalled that succinct lecture upon the extent of his wealth which her father had given her that evening. Could mortal love or truth—at best an uncertain quantity—weigh against these positive possessions? Could she for a moment hesitate, if Fortune offered her in one hand the heart of the man she loved, and in the other Perriam Place?

"And perhaps ten years hence, when my good looks are on the wane, and my temper soured by the struggles of poverty, I should discover that Edmund had grown tired of me," she thought, looking at the question in its varied aspects.

"But I love him, but I love him," urged her heart. "I love him, and I cannot surrender his love."

The stars shone down on the Italian garden. Faunus and the Dryad glimmered whitely athwart orange trees that had scented the air when Henry St. John paced those straight walks with his friend Sir Godfrey Perriam. It was a fair scene which Sylvia's enraptured eyes surveyed. Yet it was but a mess of pottage after all, against which her evil genius tempted her to barter that fair heritage—a woman's honour.

"Tell me the truth," pleaded Sir Aubrey. "Had this Mr. Standen won your heart?"

She could not answer no, but her coquetry and equivocation came to her aid.

"We had only known each other three months when he went away," she said, "and had not met very often in that time."

"Then your heart is not engaged?"

"Not very deeply. In fact I have hardly considered whether I have a heart. But I think I had better remind papa how late it is, Sir Aubrey. Mr. Perriam's interesting conversation may make him forget that we have an hour's walk home."

"You need not walk home. I have ordered the carriage to be ready for you at ten. Give me one more half-hour, Miss Carew. There is another question that I should like to ask you—yes, even to-night. It may seem strange and sudden, but when a man has once made up his mind there is no reason why he should hesitate."

He stopped, feeling that he had rushed almost unawares to the brink of a frightful precipice, a gulf from which, the plunge once made, there could be no retreat. He stopped, and drew breath, as it were, upon the very verge of that dire abyss. But for the runner who has rushed headlong to the edge there is no possibility of recoil. Sir Aubrey had but time to perceive his desperate position, ere he was over the brink.

"Is it possible," he said, "that this girlish heart, unwarmed by a youthful lover, could be touched by the deeper devotion of a man long past youth. Sylvia, there are impulses against which it is vain to contend—spells that all the wisdom