

Thus things went on, with every appearance of general satisfaction.

"I ought to be completely happy," Edmund said to himself, more often than a man who was really happy would have made the remark. Indeed happiness has so subtle a flavour that we rarely recognize the taste of that wine of life while yet it lingers on our lips. It is afterwards that we look back and say we were happy. Few talk of happiness in the present tense.

Edmund found that his present content lacked the charm of that brief period of delight in which he had been Sylvia's lover. He tried to recall the old day-dream of a happy home, only changing the central figure. The same bright picture of the domestic hearth, but with a difference in the wife who sat beside it. Vain endeavour. He found that the picture would not compose as well as of old. It had even lost the old glow and colour. He shut his eyes upon the outer world, and tried to lose himself in dreams of future happiness, but the dreams would not come. So Mr. Standen became more than ever devoted to business, worked longer hours at his desk, made himself hateful to his subordinates by his unflinching attention to every detail, and went home of an evening too tired sometimes for the twilight walks which were so sweet to Esther Rochdale—too tired even to sing their favourite duets,—glad to sit in the easy chair opposite his mother's while Esther sang or played to him. She did both with exquisite expression, and often brought the tears to her lover's eyes, but the tears he shed were not for her. They were weak regretful tears for one he knew to be unworthy of them. Vainly did he struggle against regrets which he felt to be both weak and wicked. This struggle was at its height when Lady Perriam's letter was handed to him one morning among his business letters at the Bank. Sylvia had been too prudent to direct her epistle to Dean House.

The letter was of the briefest.

"Dear Mr. Standen,

I have a communication to make to you which I think you ought to hear. I dare not ask you to call upon me, lest you should compromise yours:—if and me by such a visit. Will you, therefore, meet me to-morrow evening, at nine o'clock, in Perriam Churchyard?

Yours faithfully,

SYLVIA PERRIAM,

Perriam Place,

Wednesday."

This seemed cool and business like. The letter of a woman who had forgotten there had been so tender a tie between her and the man to whom she wrote. Edmund twisted the small sheet of perfumed paper between his fingers for a long time, pondering on that strange appeal. Should he grant this audacious request, knowing as he too well knew the weakness of his own heart? His first answer to that request was a forcible negative. He would not go.

Then came after-thoughts, which are apt to be fatal. Would she have written to him thus if she had not had strong reasons for sending him such a letter? What communication could she make to him? There was but one secret he would care to hear from those lips, and to hear that now would be worse than futile.

She would tell him, perhaps, that the infidelity which had gone very near to break his heart had been no willing act of hers. That influences stronger than he could imagine or believe had forced her to that unwomanly falsehood. That her father's greed, and not her own ambition, had made her the wife of Sir Aubrey Perriam. She might tell him all this, but to what avail? Could she stand blameless in his sight, she would be no nearer to him than she was now, for he was the affianced husband of Esther Rochdale. It was just possible, however, that she did not seek this meeting in order to extenuate her sin against him. She might have some pressing need of his help. He knew that she was friendless. He was a man of business. He had once loved her. To whom would she be more likely to appeal than to him?

"I should be a craven if I refused to grant her request," he said to himself; and wrote two or three lines in answer to Lady Perriam's letter promising to be in the churchyard at the hour she named.

The letter was no sooner posted than Edmund Standen began to repent having written it. He thought how bad a look such a secret meeting would have in Esther's eye, should some unlucky hazard bring it to her knowledge. And people who live in villages are set round with spies.

Should he write another letter, recalling his promise? He debated that point all the afternoon, but did not write any such letter.

As the day grew later a guilty feeling crept over him, and he shrank from the idea of seeing Esther Rochdale and his mother before he had kept his appointment with Lady Perriam. He ordered his dinner from a tavern, and stayed at the bank after office hours, looking into accounts, and writing business letters; stayed there till the Monkhampton clocks chimed the quarter before eight.

From the bank to Perriam was about an hour's walk. Mr. Standen gave himself a quarter of an hour's margin, but instead of walking at a leisurely pace, and keeping himself cool, as he intended, he walked his fastest, walked himself almost into a fever, and entered the little lane leading to Perriam Church at half-past eight, having done the distance in three-quarters of an hour.

He had nothing to do for the next half-hour but smoke a cigar or two, stroll in and out among the moss-grown old grave stones, muse like the meditative Hervey on life's mutability, and regret his own foolishness in having allowed Sylvia Perriam to entrap him into this evening rendezvous.

Bitterly did he think of his false love as that long half-hour wore on, and yet he yearned for her coming; and at the first sound of a light footfall on the terrace above him felt his heart beating, just as it used to beat in summer evenings gone by when he had waited for his mistress under the chestnut tree;—the same fervour, the same impatience, the same passion as of old, although he was Esther Rochdale's promised husband.

The light step came along the terrace, and he saw a black robed figure pause by a low iron gate, open it, and then descend a little flight of steps to a gate opening into the churchyard. The moon was at the full, and Sylvia's beauty had a phantasmal look in that soft silver light as she came slowly towards him, slender and shadowy in her flowing black dress only the face shining out from that sombre darkness of drapery, ivory pale.

"This is very good of you," she said falteringly, holding out her little ungloved hand with a doubtful gesture.

Hard to keep the leash upon passion. He had intended to be cold as ice—unimpressionable as a family lawyer. But he took the tremulous hand in his, and held it in as tender a clasp as when he had deemed this girl all innocence and truth.

"Good of me!" he said. "I suppose you knew you had only to beckon and I should come. But before you say one other word to me, let me tell you what, as an honest man, I am bound to tell. I come here as Esther Rochdale's affianced husband."

"I knew that when I wrote to you," answered Lady Perriam, her eyes fixed upon his face, fever bright, but steadfast. "I knew that you could only come here as Miss Rochdale's engaged lover, but before you married I thought it right you should know the truth about me."

"I know quite enough, Lady Perriam," answered Edmund, letting go the little hand, and putting on that armour of coldness which he had meant to wear from the first. "I know that you jilted me in order to marry my superior in wealth and position. Do I need to know any more?"

"Yes. You need to know why I did it," answered Sylvia in a voice that thrilled him. Its ringing tone sounded like truth. For passion has a truth of its own—the truth of the moment.

"A woman has a thousand good reasons for every wrong she does," returned Edmund. "I am content to know that I was wronged without entering into an examination of causes. The effect was all sufficient."

"Do you think it was for my own sake I married Sir Aubrey?"

"Certainly. Since you were the person to benefit by such an alliance."

"Can you imagine that I who loved you so dearly would have deserted you, unless I had been compelled to that act by an overpowering necessity?"

"What necessity should compel you, save your own ambition. You had shown me, often enough, your horror of poverty. You shrank from the future I offered you, which must have begun with a struggle for maintenance. It was not enough for you that I was hopeful; it was not enough that I promised to work for you. Sir Aubrey could give you wealth and splendour in the present, and you chose Sir Aubrey."

"I chose Sir Aubrey because my mother was starving in a garret in London, and to marry him was my only hope of maintaining her. You were brave. You were ready to begin life without a penny, and to work for me. If I burdened you with myself—blighted your prospects—lost your inheritance—could I also burden you with the support of my mother? Yet I must do that, or let her starve, if I married you. For my mother's sake I sacrificed my own happiness, and married Sir Aubrey Perriam."

Edmund gazed at her for some moments in sheer bewilderment. Her looks and tones were full of truthfulness—earnestness so thrilling could hardly be false. He believed her in spite of himself.

"How was it that I never heard of your mother, or heard of her only as one who had long been dead? You told me that you had never seen her face, that she died while you were an infant."

"So I believed until the night after the school feast," answered Sylvia, and then briefly, yet with a graphic force that conjured up the scene before his wondering eyes, she told him of that night visitant—the penitent mother—depicted all her misery, but affected a deeper pity than she had ever felt for it, and touched the listener's compassionate heart. She described their parting, how the broken-hearted mother had kissed and blessed her, and how she (Sylvia) had promised to help and befriend her, were it at the cost of her own happiness.

"Within a week of that parting Sir Aubrey asked me to marry him. I remembered my promise to my mother. I knew that if I married him it would be easy to keep my promise; if I married you, almost impossible. I thought how unfortunate our marriage would be for you; how great a sacrifice it was to cost you; and I prayed God for strength of mind to renounce you, and to marry the rich old man who could give me power to rescue my mother from a life of unmitigated wretchedness. Was I so utterly contemptible as you seem to have thought me, Edmund?"

"Contemptible," cried Edmund; "no, Sylvia, not contemptible; but mistaken, fatally mistaken. I would have toiled for your mother as willingly as for you—worked for her ungrudgingly—and whether our home were rich or poor she would have shared it."

"You do not know what you are saying, Edmund. My mother was not one you could have acknowledged without some touch of shame. She had been a sinner."

"And had repented. I would not have been ashamed of her penitence. She should have lived with us in peace and security, and none should have dared to question her past life."

"Oh!" exclaimed Sylvia, with a cry of despair, "if I had but known you could be so generous."

"You had no right to question my generosity—or my humanity. This was a case for common humanity rather than generosity. Do you think I would have let my wife's mother starve?"

"You might have found life so hard, Edmund."

"I would have fought the battle let it be ever so hard. I would have kept sheep in Australia if I couldn't earn our bread in England."

Sylvia was silent. That picture of Australian sheep farming, though noble enough in the abstract, had no fascination for her. Yet, as circumstances had shaped themselves, she would gladly have been an emigrant's hard-working helpmeet rather than the thing she was, burdened with one dark secret that weighed her to the ground.

"I have told you all the truth, Edmund," she said, after a pause in which they had both seemed lost in thought, Edmund leaning upon the rusty railings of a tomb, his face hidden from Lady Perriam, as if he feared to let her see the workings of a countenance which might have revealed too much of the mind's fierce struggle with over-mastering passion.

"I have told you all," she repeated, "can you forgive me?"

"I have nothing to forgive. You did what you deemed was right. I can only regret that you had not greater confidence in my affection and in my power to help those you love. I hope that you secured your own happiness by an act which nearly wrecked mine?"

"My own happiness!" she echoed drearily. "Do you think it was for my happiness to forsake you. Do you think I was all falsehood when I hung upon your neck that day in Hedingham churchyard?"

No answer. He stands like a rock, looking straight before

him with a cold, steady gaze, ordering his heart to be still, that heart whose passionate beating belies his outward calm.

"Have you ever doubted my love for you, Edmund?" asks Sylvia, stung by this merciless calm.

"No more than I doubted that the summer roses bloomed that year—and withered," he answers. "Your love died with them."

"It never died. It filled my heart when I deserted you. Yes, when I stood before God's altar with Sir Aubrey Perriam it was you I saw standing at my side. It was to you I uttered my vows, it was to you I swore to love and honour and obey. 'The rest was all a bad dream.'"

Still silence, a pause, during which Sylvia feels as if her heart were slowly congealing, as if she were standing in the Norse God's icy palace, freezing to death.

Then came a question asked in slow, level tones, as if it were the most commonplace inquiry.

"Was this the communication you had to make, Lady Perriam?"

"Yes; what else should I have to say to you? Yes, I sent for you to tell you this; you shall not give Esther Rochdale your heart without knowing the secret of mine. I never ceased to love you. I was never really false to you. I flung away my own peace for the sake of a desolate, despairing creature, who had but one being in all the world from whom to hope for succour. And now I am free once more—free and rich—and true to you. Will you forget all your old vows, the deathless love you have so often told me about? Will you forsake me to marry that prim pattern of provincial perfection, Miss Rochdale?"

"Spare your sneers against my future wife, Lady Perriam. Yes, I am going to marry Miss Rochdale, and if I am not as happy with her as I once hoped to be with you, it will be my folly, and no missing grace or charm in my wife that will be to blame."

"Which means that you do not care for her," cried Sylvia.

"Oh, Edmund, I know how contemptible I must seem in your eyes to-night, even more despicable than when I seemed to be false to you. I know what a hideous offence against conventionality I have committed, that I have almost shut myself out from the rank of virtuous women by this self-sought meeting. Despise me as much as you please, Edmund; I know full well how deep a shame I have brought upon myself by this reckless act; but I can bear even that. Marry Esther Rochdale. Yes, you are right. She is worthy of you. She is good, pure, true—all things that I am not. Marry her, and forget me. I am content now that you know the truth. Blot me from your memory, Edmund, for ever, if you like—but if you do remember me, think at least, that I was not utterly base. And now leave me, and go back to Miss Rochdale."

She stretched out her arm, with a gesture of dismissal. Till this moment Edmund had stood by the ivy-wreathed railings of the Perriam tomb, fixed, immovable, sturdily battling with that demon of weak and foolish love which had him cast truth, honour, loyalty to the winds, and clasp this false idol to his breast. But now, as she retreated from him slowly in the moonlight—a phantom-like figure gliding out of his reach—the fatal folly mastered him, the passion he had never conquered once more enslaved him. He stretched out his arms—three eager steps brought him to her side—and once again she was held to his heart—held as if never more to be set free.

"Leave you, forget you, go back to another woman! No, Sylvia, you know I cannot do that. You knew that, when you lured me here to-night, you would have me at your feet. I have come back to your net. You have called me back. You would have it so, for good, or evil. I am dishonoured, perjured, weakest and worst among men, but I am yours, and yours only!"

To be continued.

Literary Notes.

A project is under consideration for establishing in London a "News Club," for members of the press, authors, and publishers. The Duke of Argyll's "Reign of Law" is about to appear in a Norse dress, by the Froken Augustra Rudmose of Fersley—a young Danish lady.

A free library, and about 10,000 volumes as a commencement, are about to be presented to the town of Macclesfield by Mr. D. Chadwick, the borough member.

The new novel by Auerbach, which has been expected for some time, is announced to be published in March. The title will be "Waldfried, a Family History."

The new romance of Victor Hugo, "Quatre-vingt-treize," appeared on the 19th of February, published by MM. Michel Levy Frères. It forms three volumes octavo, and is in three parts, entitled: 1st, "En Mer;" 2nd, "A Paris;" and 3rd, "En Vendée."

Florence Marryat (Mrs. Ross Church), author of "Love's Conflict," &c., made her debut as a dramatic reader in the City Hall, Glasgow, on the 28th ult., when she read selections from "Guy Mannering" and "The Lady of the Lake," accompanied by the incidental music.

A Life of Christ, by the Rev. F. W. Farrar, D.D., Master of Marlborough College, and Chaplain in Ordinary to the Queen, is now in preparation, and will be shortly published in two volumes, by Messrs. Cassell, Petter, and Galpin. Each volume will contain an illustration from an original sketch, made expressly for the work, by Mr. Holman Hunt.

The world is fast forgetting Mrs. Barbauld, we fear; so we are glad to hear that Messrs. Bell and Sons are about to publish a little work, "Memoir of Mrs. Barbauld, including Letters and Notices of her Family and Friends," by her great-niece, Anna Letitia (Mrs.) Le Breton. The volume will contain a medallion portrait of Mrs. Barbauld.—*Athenæum*.

The *Athenæum* says that in Mr. Freeman's "Historical Series for Schools," the "History of Germany" will be the next to appear, and will be immediately followed by the "History of America." The German history is by Mr. James Sime. The "History of the United States of America" has been written by Mr. J. A. Davis, Fellow of All Souls, Oxford.

The concluding volume (the fourth) of the late Lord Lytton's "Parisians" contains a preface by the present lord, stating that his father intended this work to be accepted with "Keats's Chillingly" and "The Coming Race," as exponents of the same idea. "The Parisians" breaks off near to its completion, death having arrested the author's hand in the midst of a sentence.

The *Athenæum* contains the following paragraph:—"In our last week's number we said that the trustees of the British Museum had resigned their patronage into the hands of the Government. This statement, we have been informed, is incorrect. However, the trustees will, we believe, in all probability take the step before long, and, indeed, would have done so by this time but for the dissolution of Parliament."