

The Guard Ring.

I had been reading "Undine" to a newly-made friend, hoping that the tender witchery of that charming fable might soothe for an hour or so the lingering pains and weariness of a tedious convalescence. The listener was a man of many and almost matchless gifts of nature, and well-equipped for the world's warfare by the advantages of a liberal education,—a gentleman of good family and fortune, yet somewhere there was a paralyzing blight upon these endowments.

He had been very ill and did not rally easily. His bodily strength returned slowly, and found but a feeble ally in the listless spirit which seemed to have a scant welcome for each succeeding day that, nevertheless, brought a renewal of life to one apparently too indifferent to value the precious respite.

During his protracted recovery he had a constant craving for books. He was not strong enough to read for himself, and he was not grateful for the services of masculine friends. Only a woman's voice was endurable to him, and out of a bevy of ladies, all anxious to comfort him, only two or three could really please him. In truth he was a good deal of a sybarite, who must not have his rose leaves crumpled. Women had always petted him, and although he expected as much from them, he was not an unthankful favourite.

He liked ponderous reading, too. But sometimes Homer and Virgil grew a trifle monotonous to his feminine readers, and the doings of the Spaniards in the Netherlands and the exploits of other historical human fiends in all ages and quarters of this afflicted world so horribly uncomfortable that he was willing enough to diverge into some of Tennyson's heavenly music—only Tennyson at his best would do—or content to be lulled by the sweet magical romance of a tale like "Undine."

The story was getting melancholy, the fate of the water-sprite being evident, when he said:

"Don't read any more now. Talk to me a little while if you are not tired."

"I should have chosen something more cheerful," I replied. "Though so pure and fanciful, Undine's history is sad and unsatisfactory."

"It is all the truer for that," he said. "I suppose there are some happy ones. We now and then see people who look happy, but I am afraid life is mostly unsatisfactory."

I saw that he wanted to talk, that he was in a mood whose tension needed that relief, and pointing to a diamond of extraordinary beauty upon his left hand, I remarked:

"That is a regal stone. Diamonds are often larger, but I have seldom seen one of such exquisite colour and lustre."

"Yes," he replied, "there are few handsomer. The cutting is perfect."

"And yet you only wear it as a guard," I said.

"Yes," he assented, "that is the use I make of it. I could better lose it than the ring I wear inside. That is all I have left to recall a time that comes, once at least, to each one of us. It floated to shore after my shipwreck. I bought the diamond for a guard."

"Shall I tell you about it?" he added, presently.

"I am sorry to hear that you have been shipwrecked," I answered. "One would think your bark should have had a prosperous voyage, but we all put out upon an unknown sea. You know I shall like to hear anything concerning yourself that you choose to tell me."

"You will think me foolish and weak, I dare say," he said. "But you won't laugh at me, and I am lonely and childish enough just now to be comforted by sympathy."

He took off the diamond, which shone with the tremulous light of Venus when she hangs at twilight in the darkening west, and was worthy to adorn her famous girdle—

"In which was every art and every charm
To win the wisest and the coldest warm."

And then removed the inner ring from his finger and handed it to me.

It was a fine black onyx, with a tiny spray of forget-me-nots most delicately engraved in their natural colours upon the polished surface, set in plain massive gold. Upon the circular part of the setting at the back of the jewel was inscribed: "For old acquaintance' sake."

"Of course there's a woman in it," I said, as I returned him the ring.

"There's always a woman in it when a man is crippled for life, and I am one of the fools who continue to love the hand that smote them," he answered, with a tone in his voice that was bitter, but not harsh. "Yes," he went on, "I loved her as Circe's dupes loved their false goddess, and she transformed me to what I am. I was once a better man."

"If I were to do my duty," I said, "I should tell you that no human creature is worth the cost of going wrong. This is a truth too sound to admit of dispute, and I could preach to you from that text and leave you no chance to contradict me; but truth itself is not always applicable. We are as nature makes us, and neither you nor I can always find comfort, though it is inherent there, in the inexorable law of right."

"You have heard," said he, "of Constance Latimer. I don't think you ever saw her, but you have been among people who knew all about her, and she is one of those who leave vivid recollections behind them both agreeable and otherwise. She made quite a stir in society when she was here visiting, but I was then absent."

"Did you fall into her fair hands?" I asked. "They were 'white wonders' like Juliet's I have been told, but had the touch of a sorceress. I have heard many things of her, but thought these little romances were mostly gossip, flavoured, perhaps, with a spice of envy. A woman, I dare say you know, must not be too beautiful and triumphant. Her less favoured sisters will not tolerate it. They will take measures, not always the most scrupulous, to inflict the penalties that usually appertain to victory."

"Yes," he assented, "I am afraid women are spiteful. But there is something to be said for them in that respect. They don't like to see pleasant things slipping away, and I suppose they can't help taking some revenge."

"Never mind the others," I answered. "Tell me about Constance. I fear her name was inconsistent with her behaviour."

"It is seven years since I first met her," he said. "We were fellow-passengers on an ocean steamship. She had been travelling in Europe with her parents. I had been in England on professional business,—sent there with an appeal to the Privy Council regarding a complicated case of disputed property. Some of the heirs were living in New York, some in England, and the matter had been publicly heard on both sides of the water. People said I had distinguished myself, and I was a good deal flattered. Existence on shipboard is a tiresome routine unless you have some peculiar interest to engage you. But from the hour I was introduced to Constance Latimer life was intensified to me by a passion that neither time nor heartless falsehood have had power to kill or cure. One would think I might have been cured before now, it is a surer process than killing, but I am not; and I would take her to-morrow gladly, knowing her deserts perfectly, for I am not at all a blind idiot about her, if I could get her, and think it a sweeter fate than the peace and security which a better woman's truth and love could provide for me."

He spoke with a passionate longing, which verified his assertion that he was not cured of his unhappy love.

"I have proved this," he resumed, "because I tried what solace there might be in the power of a better woman to give, and although deep wounds are sometimes healed and shattered lives patched up by that rather selfish process, my experiment resulted, as such attempts often do, and testified to the folly of putting new wine into old bottles. Do you know a song called 'The Garden?'" he continued. "There are some lines in it whose bitter truth and passion are the simple echo of that phase of my story."

"I made another garden, yea,
For my new love;
I left the dead rose where it lay,
And set the new above.
Why did the summer not begin?
Why did my heart not haste?
My old love came and walked therein,
And laid the garden waste."

"That must be a dismal discovery," I remarked; "but I fancy it is a not uncommon surprise to many, who, stung by treachery, have rushed at the tempting remedy in question. Love was so sweet in that happier day that they think any love will have the flavour of the spilt nectar, but are amazed to find that the cup offered by a strange hand contains no divine draught but only a quack medicine."

"Exactly," said he. "The cup that is infallible in the right hand holds a nostrum with all the individual magic left out. It is the play without Hamlet."

"But after all," I persisted, "I am encouraging you in a theory I do not myself believe. There is always compensation if we do not disdain a little patience, and will honestly accept our fate."

"Perhaps," he replied, "I shall never know, because that is just what men like me won't do. We won't accept our fate patiently and honestly try to make the best of it. We are filled with wrath and untameable regrets, of self-reproach and wild, foolish convictions, that our misfortune has been partly due to some fault or folly of our own, when all the while at the bottom of our despairing hearts we know, if we could bear to look at the truth, that there has been nothing wrong but the shallowness of a cold and fickle heart. Then we, perhaps, try to make 'another garden,' as the song says, and when we find that no better than a desert, we rush into no less profitable occupations. We play high and drink too much champagne, flirt without scruple or compassion with those who practice that accomplishment, and go generally to the bad."

"Oh, dear!" I responded to this tirade, "though I know you are all wrong, I see it is useless to contradict you. Tell me how it happened."

"What happened?" is not much of a tale to tell," he said. "Constance Latimer and I for a few happy days wove together a piece of life's web of a pattern, common enough I suppose, but to one of us, at least, glowing with a promise that was dearer than the joy of heaven. There was on board another man, who had been previously with her party and who was conspicuously her admirer; but she treated him with complete, even ostentatious indifference, and then threw him over entirely when I came in the way. The night before we reached port she and I were on the upper deck watching the glittering water through which we were cutting our way."

"What beauty," she said, "the motion of the vessel and the moonlight make. The crest of every wave is a frill of the most exquisite lace showered all over with diamond dust."

"The comparison would not have occurred to me, but it seemed such a natural thing for her to say, and gave me an opportunity of complimenting her upon a woman's delicate fancies."

"Oh, yes," she said, with a candour that made no pretence of rapture over the scene before us. "I was thinking how I should look in lace like that. If the lace-designers knew where to look for perfection in their art, what ideas they might get and what fabrics we should have to wear?"

"She was one of those women upon whom lace looks as natural as the bloom on their cheeks or the gloss on their hair."

"I want you to tell me what she looked like," I interjected. "I have heard the opinion of others as to her beauty."

"Well," he replied, "I suppose nobody denied her beauty, although the fact made the women—to be just, not all of them—savage. In height, shape and carriage she was graceful and distinguished looking, and her face was a faultless flower of loveliness. A soft complexion of that sea-shell pink hue which nothing spoils, dark brown sunny eyes, and darker brows and a little red mouth, and long rich gold-brown hair. That is what she looked like to me, and I think to others also."

"I knew," he continued, "we should scarcely have such another uninterrupted hour, and while we lingered about the moonlit deck that evening, with the humility and courage of honest love, I asked her to marry me. I told her that if I had won some prizes in life, or should gain more, such distinctions would henceforth be empty and worthless to me unless she consented to take a wife's share in them; and I spoke the simple truth, the truth then and now. She was not surprised, of course. She had known from the first what she could do with me, and was besides in the zenith of her power and accustomed to daily homage. She did not refuse or even discourage me, but said in a tone between jest and earnest:

"I have no rivals here. Wait till we get on shore for your answer. You are going to your world and I to mine. If you are in the same mind a month hence come and tell me over again what you have been saying to-night."

"I didn't complain of this probation, and a month later went to New York as she had bidden me. She accepted my proposals with a tenderness; that enraptured me, but wished me not to speak formally to her father and mother at that time, although they were aware of my errand. I agreed to this because I had such a few hours of delight at my command. I had engagements at home so important that only an interest superlative to all others could have overruled them for a moment, and I had to hasten back to defend a client whose life was hanging by a thread, a frail thread, too, for I knew the man to be guilty, and knew also that it would take all the skill of which I was master to persuade a jury that he was innocent."

"I went back to work like a giant refreshed with wine, and resolved that Constance should hear of my success. I saved the fellow, for which mankind owes me no thanks. He was an abominable specimen of our race, but it was my duty to rescue him from the penalty he had justly earned, if possible, and I did it. I got a good deal of praise for talking the jury into giving a favourable verdict. My brethren of the Bar said I was the only man among them who could have secured it, and it is no unwarrantable boast when I say that I stood high in my profession. I had only one thought, 'Will she be glad of my triumph? Will she take any pride in it?'"

"I wrote regularly to Constance telling her all my news, and always got pretty letters in return, and it was arranged between us that I should go to New York in the Christmas holidays and finally settle our engagement and the preliminaries of an early marriage. It was late in December when, one day sitting alone in my office making plans for a future which a minute later deserted me for ever, the postman handed me a letter from Constance."

"The sheet was full of selfish excuses, and weak, insincere self-reproach, and puerile explanations, and hopes that I would not be too much vexed or disappointed. I suppose she was really incapable of judging my feelings; but the meaning of it all was, and she made her meaning plain and decisive enough, that I was not to go to New York at Christmas, that she had changed her mind, had been mistaken in her regard for me, and was going to marry George Gillespie, who had been attached to her so long. Gillespie was the man who I told you was on board the steamer where I first saw her."

"Well, I could only take her at her word. I had no redress, and I would have scorned to squabble with a woman for her hand when she told me she wanted to give it to another man."

"Gillespie had been following her about for a long time I heard afterwards. He was neither cleverer nor handsomer than I, but he had far more money, though I was not a poor man. He could give her thoroughbred horses to drive, and bigger diamonds and rubies than I could afford, and lace, for that was her special point, of any fabulous price or pattern she chose to fancy. And she took him for these things. She said she liked me, and putting natural delusion aside, I think she did; but she liked a front seat in the world's tabernacles better, and couldn't resist such a prospect."

"I had pride and sense enough to make no lamentations to Constance. I did not even answer her letter. She would have liked a pathetic parting, but I was not quite silly enough to gratify her. I howled in private, but I have never been good for anything since,—neither work nor play has any savour in it. She took the core out of my life and left me the empty husk for my portion."

"The husk has its value," I said, "when it holds the grain, but none of us covet the shell when the kernel is lost. I should like to hear your own account of the new 'garden' you planned. I know what outsiders say."