

TAKEN AT THE FLOOD.

A NEW NOVEL.

By the Author of "Lady Audley's Secret," "Strangers and Pilgrims," &c., &c.

CHAPTER XXXVII.—Continued.

The Perriam honeymoon had been a very quiet business. The entresol in the Faubourg St. Honoré was not the palatial home which Sylvia had supposed so great a man as Sir Aubrey would inhabit even in the land of the stranger. Sir Aubrey had taken his bride to all the usual shows—the Louvre, Luxembourg, the great old churches, where Sylvia gazed wonderingly at statues, and gold and colour, the *Jardin des Plantes*, the Hotel Cluny, Napoleon's Mausoleum, the fountains at Versailles, and the long terrace at St. Germain. All these things Sir Aubrey had shown her; but, wonderful and beautiful as they seemed to the untravelled rustic, a shadow of dullness hung over them all. The numerous churches tired her, before she had seen half of them. The vast palaces with their endless pictures palled upon her weary senses. Sir Aubrey, with every wish to be kind, instructive, and explanatory, always contrived to bring her away from the objects which most interested her. He marched her from place to place. There was no lounging, no pleasant loitering. No long, sultry day dawdled away in that deep wood at St. Germain. Yet Sylvia fancied that she and Edmund might have so wasted a day had they two been bride and bridegroom.

Sir Aubrey took his wife to the *Théâtre Français* on one solitary occasion to see Molière's "Femmes Savantes," but put his veto against all other theatres as disreputable.

The weather was sultry during the greater part of Sylvia's honeymoon, and the great wide streets of the wonderful city were dim with a warm vapour that whispered of fevers and cholera. Sir Aubrey's habits were early, and the evening, the only period when Paris is tolerable in summer time, was a period of imprisonment for Sylvia. She was playing chess with her husband in the stifling little saloon by the light of a pair of wax candles, while the city was gay with many voices, and music, and light, yonder on the boulevards where the night wind blew freshly. Sylvia went back to England with the impression that Paris was a splendid city, but not a gay one.

They returned to Perriam Place and Sylvia received the homage and obeisance of the household; and in the moment of that triumph it seemed to her an all sufficing joy to be mistress of Perriam, and all these dependants. Whatever surprise these domestics had felt at their lord's strange marriage, had been carefully smoothed out of their faces. They welcomed James Carew's daughter as respectfully as they could have welcomed Lady Guinevere herself.

Those improvements and alterations which Sylvia had planned with so much satisfaction before her marriage were not yet put in hand. Indeed a very short space of married life had shown Lady Perriam how little power she had over her lord, and how little liberty of action she was likely to enjoy; and, perhaps even worse than this, how small was to be her command of money. She knew that her husband had wealth that surpassed by ten fold the measure of his expenditure; yet she derived neither pleasure nor power from his riches.

He looked unutterable surprise the first time she asked him for money.

"My dear child, what can you want with money?" he asked, as if they had been on a desert island where the circulating medium was useless.

"I—I should like a little to spend," Sylvia answered, childishly. She had not forgotten that wretched woman in Bell-alley, Fetter-lane. Tenderness of heart was not Sylvia's strong point, yet it irked her to live amidst all these solid splendours, satiated with temporal comforts, and to feel that in all likelihood her mother was starving.

"To spend for the mere pleasure of spending," said Sir Aubrey, like a wise father—one of dear Maria Edgeworth's model parents, for instance—remonstrating with his little girl. "My dear Sylvia, is not that rather a childish reason?"

"But I didn't mean to say that. Of course, I want the money, or I shouldn't have asked you for it. I thought you would give me an allowance, perhaps, when we were married."

"I have thought of that," replied Sir Aubrey, as if it were a matter demanding profound consideration, "and I intend to do so—ultimately. But really your wants must be infinitesimal. You have the dresses and other garments you bought before our marriage."

"The dresses are getting shabby," said Sylvia. "I wore them all the time we were in Paris."

"A month," said Sir Aubrey. "I have worn this coat nearly eighteen months."

"Then it's time you had a new one," cried Sylvia, sorely tried. "But I'll go on wearing my shabby dresses, if you like. It doesn't much matter; I never see any one except you and Mordred."

"I hope you have sufficient respect for me to dress as nicely to please me as you would to win the admiration of strangers," returned Sir Aubrey, with his offended air.

"I can't dress nicely without money to buy clothes," replied Sylvia. "Women's dresses are not like men's coats—they don't wear everlastingly."

"Then it's a pity women do not adopt more substantial materials. Neither the linsey-wolseys our grand-mothers wore for use, nor the brocades which they kept for state occasions, required to be renewed every three months. The chairs in our bedroom are covered with dresses of my grandmother's. However, it is not your fault that the age is frivolous, and I can't be angry with you for following the fashion of your day. I'll give you a cheque for twenty pounds, and before that is gone I will arrange your allowance of pocket money. There, my love, don't let me see any more tears in those pretty eyes."

Sir Aubrey wrote the cheque, and fancied that he had acted with supreme liberality.

Sylvia sent half this money to Mrs. Carford, in the shape of a ten pound note. She brought a dark silk dress with the remaining ten pounds, for, having talked of wanting a new dress, she was obliged to show Sir Aubrey that she had bought one.

Shortly after this the baronet informed his wife graciously

that he had decided upon allowing her two hundred a year, payable quarterly, for her personal expenditure, and this he evidently considered a most liberal allowance. Sylvia thanked him warmly, and was indeed grateful for anything which should be hers without question. All her dreams of refurnishing the library, and replacing the faded curtains in the saloon with amber satin were quite over. She knew that in Sir Aubrey she had found a new master. It was a more exalted bondage than her servitude to her father, but it was bondage all the same.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THOU LOOK'ST SO LIKE WHAT ONCE WAS MINE.

Time wears the beauty off all temporal blessings. That stately old yellow chariot, which had been at first a source of pride to Lady Perriam, by degrees became almost loathsome, so dismal were her lonely drives. Sir Aubrey preferred pottering about his farms on Splinter to promenades in the yellow chariot, so Sylvia had that equipage to herself and her own thoughts. It was like a state prison upon wheels. Beautiful as was the scenery round Perriam Sylvia soon grew weary of nature's loveliness. Before she had been a month at the Place she knew the landscape by heart, the hill-sides from which she saw the distant sea, the ferny lanes down which the great coach went staggering and rumbling, into pastoral valleys, whose cob-walled cottages looked the chosen abodes of peace and contentment.

Lady Perriam looked at those rustic houses with a strange perplexed feeling. She had not been happy when she lived in a cottage, yet now that she inhabited a mansion it seemed to her as if those humbler dwellings must hold the secret of happiness. She was very lonely. Her lord's society gave her no delight, the park and gardens of Perriam Place became as a desert to her weary eyes. She paced the Italian terrace day after day, and looking down at the peaceful graveyard below the marble balustrade envied those Perriams who no longer knew life's weariness.

The few county families with whom Sir Aubrey condescended to maintain a tepid acquaintance, paid their formal visits to the new mistress of the Place, and were not a little surprised at the graceful ease of manner with which Lady Perriam received them. She was in no wise abashed by these magnates of the land. But others came as well as the county people. Mrs. Toynbee, and her two over-dressed daughters were among the earliest of Sylvia's visitors. The manufacturer's wife came with the intention of patronising Lady Perriam, but was not slow to discover from Sylvia's icy reception that patronage was not exactly the tone to take here.

"We always said you would marry well, my dear," said Mrs. Toynbee, almost taking credit to herself for Sylvia's elevation. "You had an air so far above your station."

"My father was a gentleman before he was a parish school-master," answered Lady Perriam coolly. "I never pretended to a higher station than that of a gentleman's daughter."

"Of course not, my love; but you know there are lines of demarcation; everyone could see how superior you and Mr. Carew were, yet the gentry couldn't associate with you quite on equal terms, however much they might wish it. I'm sure I, for one, would have been charmed to have you at my parties—quite an ornament to them—but one's friends make such remarks if one steps ever so little way over the boundary line."

"Yes, Mrs. Toynbee, no doubt persons of your position must be punctilious. The trading classes are full of narrow-minded prejudices; but with people of Sir Aubrey's rank it is quite different. Their position is not dependent on any one's approval or opinion. My carriage has been waiting for the last half hour, Mrs. Toynbee," added Lady Perriam, ringing the bell; "will you permit me to wish you good morning." And the magnificent Mrs. Toynbee, the richest woman in Hedingham parish, found herself bowed out by the village school-master's daughter.

"Did you ever see such insolence," cried this outraged female as she spread out her silken draperies in the amplitude of their splendour, and settled herself in her luxurious landau, new from the coachbuilders, and with all the latest improvements in landaus.

"Of course not, ma, but you might have saved us such a humiliation if you'd taken my advice," retorted Juliana Toynbee, acrimoniously.

"Nasty thing!" exclaimed Edith, the second sister, meaning Lady Perriam.

"To treat us like that when I was going to be a friend to her, out of right down charity," continued Mrs. Toynbee. "What can she know about giving dinner parties, or any of the things that become her station. What she wants is a clever and experienced friend at her elbow, to put her in the way of doing things in the right style. My dinners have been talked of from one end of the country to the other, and I shouldn't have minded any trouble to put her in the right way if she'd shown herself grateful."

"It isn't in her to be grateful," returned Juliana; "and as to visiting at Perriam, I wouldn't darken her doors if she was to send us a formal invitation once a week. Besides, everyone knows Sir Aubrey is as close as he will be, and I don't suppose she'll ever have the chance of giving parties."

And thus these ladies drove home, talking of Sylvia all the way, very warm as to their tempers, and very flushed as to their faces, and it was solemnly voted in the Toynbee household that Sylvia, Lady Perriam, was to be counted among the dead.

The day came when Sylvia was to see Edmund Standen for the first time, since that sorrowful parting by the tomb of the de Bossineys. She heard of his return soon after it happened; heard it from the lips of Mr. Bain, who announced the fact carelessly enough, yet contrived to watch the effect of that announcement upon Sylvia. One bright hectic spot flamed in the delicate cheek, but faded before Sir Aubrey had time to notice it.

"Mr. Standen has gone into the bank," said the steward, not unwilling to prolong the discussion. "The Western Union, as they call it, since its been made a joint stock bank. It has set people talking a little. Nobody thought young Standen would have gone into business. He has plenty to live upon, or will have after his mother's death, though I believe at present he is quite dependent on the old lady."

"I feel no interest in Mr. Standen or his affairs," remarked the baronet, with dignity; so Mr. Bain said no more.

For several Sundays after their arrival at the Place Sylvia and her husband attended the little church in the dell, where

a mild incumbent performed two services every Sunday, for the enlightenment of a sparse congregation drawn from adjacent hamlets. Then came a fine sunny Sabbath at the beginning of December, and Sir Aubrey proposed that they should go to church at Hedingham. "I like Vancourt's sermons better than Smallman's," said the baronet. "We may as well drive over to Hedingham."

Sylvia felt a kind of catch in her throat, which prevented her saying yea or nay to this proposition. She should see him again then, that Edmund Standen whom she had once sworn to love eternally. She dreaded seeing him, yet desired to see him, to look on the unforgotten face, were it but for a moment.

The church looked bright and gay on that wintry morning, bright with the cheerful December sunshine. Sir Aubrey owned a large square pew in the chancel, which was the most aristocratic part of the edifice, a pew placed as near the altar rails as it could be placed, in a manner within the sanctuary; a pew that was sumptuously provided with crimson cushions, luxurious foot-stools, prayer books of largest type, bound in crimson Russia, and emblazoned with the Perriam coat of arms. Prayer books in which good King George was prayed for assiduously.

These chancel pews were on a higher level than the body of the church, and from Sir Aubrey's pew Sylvia commanded a full view of the Dean House party, who occupied a pew in the central aisle. There they all were; Mrs. Standen; the delicate looking widow from Demerara, with a little girl of six years old at her side; Esther Rochdale and Edmund; all in mourning, a very sombre looking party.

Not once during the service did Edmund's eyes wander in Sylvia's direction, yet she felt that he was aware of her presence. Those dark eyes of his were for the most part bent rigidly upon his book. Sylvia remembered his old manner, which, though devout, was scarcely so attentive to the mere letter of the services.

Sir Aubrey and his wife left the church by a little side door; it was one of the privileges of the chancel people to use this door; but in the churchyard Sir Aubrey was button-holed by a brother landowner, and while they were standing in the narrow path, close by that too well remembered monument of the de Bossineys, Edmund and Esther Rochdale passed them. For one moment only the young man looked at Sylvia. Such a look! Contempt so scathing is not often expressed in one brief flash of disdainful eyes, one curve of a scornful lip. Deadly pale, yet with a look of unshaken firmness, her jilted lover passed her by, and the sharpest pain her heart had power to feel Sylvia felt at that moment.

"I hope I may never see him again," she thought, as the yellow chariot bore her back to Perriam, "never unless I were free to win back his love. I know I could win it, though he may despise me now, if I were only free to try." And she looked at Sir Aubrey, and began to speculate how long a man of that age might live—five years—ten—fifteen—twenty perhaps. Nay an existence so placid and temperate as Sir Aubrey's might flow smoothly on for another half-century.

Did she wish him dead? Did a thought so dark as to be in itself a crime ever enter her heart? It had come but too near that with Lady Perriam. She had never shaped an actual wish, but she had calculated the measure of her husband's days, and had pictured to herself what might happen when he should take his rest with those other Perriams in the churchyard in that green hollow, where harts-tongue fern pushed its curved leaves between the crumbling stones of the old gray wall.

What a marvellous change that one event of Sir Aubrey's death would make in her existence. She would have five thousand a year, her very own, to squander as she pleased; instead of a pittance of two hundred a year, doled out to her quarterly. And she would be free—free to recover Edmund Standen's love, were it possible for him to forgive her.

"I don't believe he could be angry with me very long," she thought, "or that he could shut his heart against me. He would remember those happy summer evenings. All the past would come back to him in a breath, and all his love with it."

There was one fear which tortured Sylvia whenever her thoughts drifted that way. What if Edmund should marry Esther Rochdale. She felt sure that Esther was fond of him. She had made up her mind about that long ago; and it was an understood thing in Hedingham, where people knew, or affected to know, the most secret desires of their neighbours, that Mrs. Standen wished to see those two married. What more likely than that she would now try to patch up an engagement between them?

"His sister will help her no doubt," thought Sylvia, "and between them they will worry him into marrying that little dark thing."

She remembered Esther's winning gentleness, her soft dark eyes with their pensive pleading look; not a girl, against whom a man could steel his heart for ever, one might think.

The thought of this possibility added a new sting to Lady Perriam's keen regret. It made even the dullness of her life more bitter. She was glad to keep Mary Peter in her dressing-room for an hour's chat now and then, when that young person brought her home some new garment, and to hear her gossip about the Hedingham people, and sometimes a little about the occupants of Dean House.

Sir Aubrey happened to interrupt this friendly gossip one day, and after Mary Peter had retired, frozen by the baronet's urbanity, he expressed himself somewhat strongly upon the subject of his wife's familiarity with a village mantua-maker.

"I was not familiar with her," pleaded Sylvia. "I let her talk—that was all."

"My love, to let a person of that kind tattle is to be familiar with her. It presupposes an interest in their conversation which it ought to be impossible for you to feel."

"She talks about people I used to see before I was married," said Sylvia.

"But with whom you have nothing more to do, and in whom your interest ought to have ceased with your marriage. Pray let me never see that young woman again."

"She makes my dresses," remonstrated Sylvia; "I don't see how I can get on without her."

"Are you so childish as to suppose that there is only one dressmaker at your service? You can have your gowns made by Mrs. Bowker, of Monkhampton, a very proper person."

Sylvia sighed and submitted. So Mary Peter, who could talk of Edmund, recalling memories that were at once sweet and sad, was banished from Perriam Place. Little as Sylvia had cared for this humble friend, she felt life more lonely without her occasional society. Her father was away still, rejoicing in the sunshine of a warmer sky, on the shores of the Mediterranean, just contriving to exist at a third-rate board-