

took off the pearl-grey satin dress with its priceless Spanish point, two hundred years old—the white satin slippers—the muslin underskirts with their ruchings of Brussels lace—all the costly adornment upon which Sylvia had bestowed such interest a few days ago. She flung them from her now with a shudder of aversion, as if they had been more loathsome than Cinderella's rags.

Céline was about to unfasten the slender gold chain which held Edmund's last gift, the diamond cross.

"Leave that where it is," said Sylvia, stopping the girl's hand. "I shall wear that till I die."

"Was it possible that Madame's mind wandered a little?" mused Céline.

"Now give me the plainest dress I have," said Sylvia, when all the bridal finery had been taken away.

"But, Madame, there is the travelling dress all ready for you to put on—the dove-colour and blue—the bonnet the veriest gem. Mademoiselle Marchette said it was an inspiration. Why not the travelling dress?"

"Be good enough to do as I bid you. Give me my black cashmere."

"The mourning dress?—but Madame, to go into black again after the wedding—it would bring you misfortune."

A look from Lady Perriam stopped the girl's tongue. She brought the sombre mourning dress, which made Sylvia's face seem a shade more ghastly than it had done before.

"That will do," said Sylvia, "and now you can go. Tell the household my marriage has been put off—perhaps only till to-morrow—possibly still longer. You will see that my father has everything that he asks for. I want a few hours rest, and shall lie down. Don't disturb me till Mr. Standen calls this afternoon."

"Mr. Standen is going to call. They have not quarrelled, then," thought Céline. What can have happened to make her look so awful?"

She ran downstairs to discuss this strange event with Mrs. Tringfold, as they had discussed the course of their mistress's brief courtship. The other servants in the house were strangers, with whom Céline had no sympathy. They were left to wonder and speculate among themselves, while Mrs. Tringfold and Céline discoursed in the nursery with closed doors, and a cold chicken and a bottle of champagne from the marriage feast wherewithal to regale themselves.

"I don't believe there'll be any wedding breakfast at all," said Céline. "She wouldn't look as she does if the marriage was only put off for a day. There's something deeper than that."

"I never thought no good would come of it from the moment we went among them foreigners," said Mrs. Tringfold, with conviction. "There must be something altogether wrong about people when their own native land isn't large enough for 'em."

Sylvia sat alone in her misery—sat in the centre of the room, motionless, like a lifeless figure that had been put there. The broad mid-day sun streamed in at the window opposite her. The ruthless sun, which shines alike upon the just and the unjust—the happy and the despairing. Once she lifted her eyes to that glad summer sky, and thought how the sunlight and summer of her life had gone out for ever.

"I have tried to be fortunate as well as happy—tried to have all good things," she reflected, "and in trying for too much have lost all. I should have been a happy woman if I had been contented with a reasonable share of fortune—satisfied with having won Edmund's love, ready to fight the battle of life with him."

She remembered her father's words on the night of Sir Aubrey's first visit to the schoolhouse—

"There is a tide in the affairs of men,
Which taken at the flood leads on to fortune."

"I took that tide at the flood," she thought, "and it has drifted me to ruin."

She sat for an hour without change of attitude—and in that hour the vision of days that were gone passed before her like an unfolded scroll, a bitter retrospect, the picture of a life in which self had reigned supreme, and which had ended in deepest self-abasement.

She awakened from that long reverie at last, looked at her watch, found it was later than she had thought, hurriedly put on her bonnet and mantle—the crape bonnet with its large veil and narrow fold of white, the mark of widowhood—the loose cashmere mantle. Dressed thus, with her veil down, she was not likely to attract notice.

She took some money out of her jewel box, and put it into a small Morocco bag. This bag was all she took with her.

She opened the boudoir door, went out upon the landing, and listened. All was perfectly still in the house. She went down stairs, past the nursery, where she heard the voices of Céline and Mrs. Tringfold in earnest converse; went by with hardly a sigh of regret for her child, crossed the hall, opened the street-door softly, and slipped out.

Once in the street she flew along with light footsteps, turned the corner of the Crescent into a wide and busy road, hailed the first cab she saw, and stepped into it.

"Drive to the London-bridge Station," she said—"Brighton line."

She knew there were several ways of getting to France, and that one way was by Newhaven and Dieppe. If they followed her they would most likely take it for granted she had gone by the Dover and Calais route. By choosing the slower journey she would have a chance of escaping them—supposing that anyone took the trouble to follow her—supposing that anyone guessed she had gone to France.

At the station Lady Perriam found that there was a train which would start for Lewes in half an hour, and that she could get on with some little delay at Newhaven, but at Newhaven she would have to wait till midnight before the boat started for Dieppe.

She had no definite purpose in this flight—no plan for the future. No distant ray of hope beckoned her on. She only wanted to escape the shame of the present; not to hear Edmund's voice accusing and renouncing her; not to be brought face to face with her sin. She wanted to go to some corner of the earth, and die, nameless and alone.

The train carried her to Lewes, where she had to wait a weary hour and a half before another train took her on to Newhaven—a dismal pause in which that solemn scroll wherein her past life was recorded again unfolded itself, and again she thought how sweet her days might have been had she asked for less—had she been content to take her lot in blind submission from the urn of Fate—instead of trying to improve upon Destiny.

All that day she had eaten nothing, and for many past days had lived in a perpetual fever of hope and fear, always vaguely dreading that "something" which might happen to frustrate her scheme of the future; never able to repose in the calm assurance that Providence would rule her life for the best. By the time she took her place in the Newhaven train faintness increased almost to exhaustion. A mist dimmed her eyes, her limbs felt heavy and painful. The landscape swam before her like a troubled sea.

She had just strength to get out of the railway carriage to follow a porter to the hotel, but she had scarcely entered the sitting-room to which a chambermaid conducted her when she fell fainting to the ground.

The landlady was summoned, and hearing that the unconscious traveller had no luggage and no attendant, was only mildly sympathetic.

"You had better get her to bed, Jane, and send for the doctor," said the hostess, after various restoratives had been tried without effect. "She seems very bad."

CHAPTER LXIII.

A VOYAGE OF DISCOVERY.

Mr. Bain and his companion drove to the Great Northern Railway in silence, took their tickets for Hatfield, and started in the mid-day train with as brief exchange of words as was possible between them. In the railway carriage each gentleman had his newspaper, and each pretended to read it. One, the accuser, was cool enough, and was even able to take some interest in the markets and corn exchange, and other subjects that affected his own prosperity. He knew what lay before him. He was working out a scheme that had been deliberately concocted. He had sworn to have one or two things: Lady Perriam for his wife, or revenge. That Lady Perriam would ever be his wife seemed now beyond all hope, but he was going to have his revenge, and he was not ill-satisfied with himself. Nor would self-interest be sacrificed in the indulgence of this fierce desire of unregenerate mankind. If he could prove Sylvia Perriam the criminal he believed her to be, he must needs remain the sole guardian of her child. There was no one to dispute that office with him, and the Court of Chancery would have no ground for ousting him. During Sir St. John's years of tutelage he, Shadrack Bain, would be to all intents and purposes, the master of the Perriam estates.

To him therefore this journey was not a journey of despair. Yet some emotion the man must needs feel, if he was not a mere mechanical figure of some hard metal. He did feel a certain movement of the heart, an undefined sense of the awfulness of his errand. All that had happened to-day, Lady Perriam's horror-stricken countenance, her undisguised despair, her piteous entreaty to Edmund not to go with him to the madhouse, all had tended to confirm Mr. Bain in his belief that Sir Aubrey's death had been his wife's work, and that the prisoner to be unearched to-day knew of the crime, and would proclaim it were his lips unsealed.

"I know what Joseph Ledlamb is pretty well," mused Mr. Bain, "and I know that he'd lend himself to the concealment of the vilest crime that was ever done upon earth if he was paid well enough for his silence. It shall be my task to let the light in upon his snug little home. Lady Perriam reckoned upon too much when she fancied she could make use of a tool of my providing."

Edmund sat in silence behind his paper, thinking deeply, but not so much of what lay before him as of that strange scene in the vestry. Vainly did he strive to account for Sylvia's agitation upon any ground consistent with innocence. The despairing accents of her farewell still rang in his ear. Had she been guiltless would she have feared his desertion, could she, who knew the depth of his love, suppose that their parting would be final? Yet if guilty, what was the nature of her guilt?

That it was the hideous crime suggested by Shadrack Bain he did not for an instant imagine. Even had he been capable of believing in the infamy of the woman he loved, Sylvia's denial would have assured him of her innocence, at least upon this one point. Truth had spoken in her tones—truth had glorified her countenance in that one supreme moment, when with uplifted eyes and hands raised to Heaven she had asserted her innocence.

That she had committed an act of cruelty and injustice in sending Mordred Perriam to the dreary imprisonment of a private lunatic asylum, was just possible, and that she was smitten with shame at the revelation of this wrong. Alas! Edmund Standen knew too well that this enchantress, for whose sake he had made so many sacrifices, was not altogether stainless; that she was not free from the taint of selfishness. She might have been glad to get rid of a troublesome dependant—to clear her house of a tiresome old man. She might so far be culpable.

What would he do if he found that it was so, that she had allowed eccentricity to be treated as lunacy; that she had betrayed the trust left her by her husband, and had banished Mordred unnecessarily from the house of his own fathers? What should he do? Blame, reprove, and then forgive her; take her to his heart again, with all her errors on her head, and make it the business and duty of his life to reform and elevate her character.

This was the lover's resolve. He would set right the wrong she had done, and then forgive her. Even her sin should not part them.

At Hatfield Mr. Bain hired a fly, and after a good deal of talk with the driver, contrived to make him understand the direction in which he required to be conveyed. At first the flyman asserted that he never heard tell of no place within twenty miles called the Arbour. But after profound rumination and scratching his stubby hairs a little, opined that he did remember having had such a place pointed out to him on Crupskew Common, and "might it be a 'ouse where they took folks that was a trifle cranky?"

"That is the place," replied Mr. Bain, "drive us there as fast as you can."

"It's a seven mile drive," remarked the man dubiously, "fourteen mile there and back, and my fare will be fourteen shillings."

"I shall not dispute your fare."

"And something for myself."

"If you drive quickly there and back I'll give you a crown," said Edmund, eager to end the discussion.

"Very well, sir; you can't say fairer than that; jump in; only it's just as well to avoid disputes afterwards, you see; and it's a wicked road betwixt here and Crupskew Common."

The man drove off at a smartish pace, and the occupants of

his vehicle were soon made acquainted with the wickedness of the road. Noble prospects and rustic beauty may abound in the environs of Hatfield; but the road to the Arbour hugged the ugliness of the land. It lay in narrow lanes, and by the margin of waste patches of swampy level, where the sour land grew nothing but rush or thistle, dock or dandelion; by black and dismal waterpools; by scrubby groves of bare and stunted trees; by meandering ditches, across which pollard willows leaned side-long extending scraggy arms, like the octopus—such a landscape as that in which Macbeth and Banquo met the weird sisters. Yet no, Scotland would not furnish such small and insignificant ugliness. Her dreariest landscape owns the grandeur of size—over her most dismal plains the shadow of some distant mountain looms in rugged nobility, and the wind from wild deer walks rushes across the barren level like the breath of the Great Goddess Nature.

The scenery grew more hopelessly barren as the travellers approached the end of their journey. Crupskew Common, was a desolate flat, whose dull surface of soddened turf was varied here and there by a patch of stagnant water, here and there enlivened by a deponent-looking donkey, dragging some clog or fetter at its hind-legs—a convict donkey, condemned to penal servitude for life, if one might judge by his look and manner. On one side of the common was a narrow road, and along this the flyman drove till he came to a gate in a dilapidated fence, behind which appeared the windows of a square plaster-fronted house, which may have originally belonged to some tenant-farmer in a small way, a house to which neither wealth nor taste had added a single charm—the barest shell of a habitation, less habitable-looking than a gipsy's tent.

"This is the place I've heard folks call the Arbour," said the flyman, pointing to the dwelling with a disparaging turn of his whip.

In confirmation of his statement appeared an inscription in white paint on the slate-coloured door:

THE ARBOUR.—DR. LEDLAM.

"Wait for us," said Mr. Bain to the driver, as he and his companion alighted. "Now, Mr. Standen," he said, turning to Edmund, while they waited for the opening of the gate, "it is for you or for me to get this old man's secret out of him. That he has a secret, and one that will criminate Lady Perriam, is a fact upon which I am ready to stake every farthing I have in the world."

"I am here to see to the bottom of your scheme, sir," answered Edmund, sternly, "I believe nothing you assert, I admit nothing. I am here as Lady Perriam's husband to see her righted."

"You had better see Mordred Perriam righted first," returned Mr. Bain, with a sneer.

The door was opened after some delay by a slovenly maid-servant, who seemed loath to admit the visitors. It was not till Mr. Bain had told her that they were friends of Lady Perriam's that she abandoned her jealous guardianship of the threshold and let them pass into the garden.

Such a garden—a waste of weeds, and mould, and rough moss-grown gravel—a patch of grass that might once have been a smiling lawn, a damp and ancient willow weeping over a shrunken pond, on whose muddy bosom two dirty ducks disported themselves; a wilderness of potholes on one side, where the cheap and fertile scarlet runner ruled dominant, and the vegetable marrow sprawled its tough tendrils and flung blasted yellow gourds upon the weedy waste.

"I don't know as master will allow you to see Mr. Perriam," said the girl, "but I'll ask if you'll be so good as to step into the drawin' room."

The visitors complied with this request, and were forthwith ushered into an apartment which made some pretension to gentility. The walls were blotched with damp, and stained with mildew. The atmosphere was earthy, but the circular table boasted a gaily coloured cover, and was further adorned with a green glass inkstand, a paper maché blotting book, and a photograph album. An ancient cottage piano stood against one wall, a feeble old sofa faced it, a cheap print or two hinted at Dr. Ledlamb's taste for art. The room was in rigid order, and was evidently held sacred to the reception of visitors.

Here the steward and Edmund Standen waited for about a quarter of an hour, which seemed longer to both. There were footsteps in the room above, and a running up and downstairs, which might indicate confusion, and preparation of some kind, but Mr. Ledlamb did not appear.

"Are these people going to keep us here all day?" exclaimed Edmund, impatiently.

He went over to the fireplace and rang the bell, not an easy thing to do, for the wire was loose, and his first efforts only produced a distant jangling sound.

"What a house," he exclaimed. "What desolation and decay in everything."

This aspect of misery grieved his soul. It would be harder now to forgive Sylvia's sin. That she had placed her brother-in-law under medical restraint, deprived him of actual liberty, he, Edmund Standen, might have schooled himself to pardon. But he had expected to find her victim surrounded by all temporal comforts, in the care of a medical man of position and reputation, whose name alone would be a guarantee for the patient's good treatment.

To find him here—in this abode of misery—in a house on which abject poverty had set its mark! This was indeed a blow, and the young man—who a few hours ago had been a proud and happy lover—turned his back upon Shadrack Bain, and shed tears at the thought of that callous selfishness which had abandoned a harmless old man to such an existence as life in Dr. Ledlamb's rural retreat.

No answer came to the bell. There was a window down to the ground, opening directly on the weedy patch that had once been a lawn.

"I'll wait no longer," said Mr. Standen, who had brushed away the traces of his tears and hoped his weakness had escaped the eye of Shadrack Bain. "I'll explore this wretched hole for myself. You can come with me, or not, as you please Mr. Bain."

The maidservant appeared at the door just as Edmund opened the window.

To be continued.

The London Morning Post has entered upon its 101st year. It was founded November 2, 1772, and in its issue of November 2, 1872, devoted an article of eight columns to reminiscences of men and things a hundred years ago.