

Viola's Lover

But it told upon him no food, no sleep, no rest would he take—this constant warfare that kept every nerve strained. It seemed to him that if he once gave way, even if only for a moment—if he opened his heart to the dreadful sorrow awaiting to be admitted—if he closed his eyes in rest—he must die. Colder and harder and prouder he grew, shutting himself and his sorrow in icy reserve; and at last Kate grew so miserable about him that she sent for Evelyn.

"I must talk to you, Eve," she said, "or my heart will break. I do not like to distress my husband—he is ill enough; and if Felix goes on like this much longer he will have a terrible illness, or he will die. What is the matter with him, Eve? He does not eat or sleep; he looks like a man who has been stoned; he grows so hard and cold that I am almost afraid of him. He does not even open his heart to me; he avoids me—he does not even look at me—who used to love me so well. What is the matter with him, Eve?"

Eve looked very pale and sad, her sweet face was clouded; but Kate, in her distress, did not notice it.

"I can tell you what is the matter," she replied, "I heard it this afternoon. Violet Hays has gone to London to be married."

Kate cried out that it was impossible—that it could not be—Violet Hays was betrothed to Felix.

"It is so," said Eve; "Miss Jane told me about it this afternoon, and fearing you would be in great trouble, I came to you at once. Violet broke off her engagement with Felix some short time since, and she is gone to London to be married."

"Married to whom?" cried Kate, in hot anger for her boy's sake.

"I do not know—she has so many admirers; but I believe it is some very rich man," said Eve, with the most wild excitement about it. She told my aunt the day before they started. And then remembering how Felix loved Violet, they both went together.

"I understand it all now," said Kate. "My poor boy has hidden it from us lest we should know what he suffered. Evelyn, does heaven punish treachery?"

"I am afraid so," she replied, gently. "You say that Felix has grown hard and cold. Tell me where he is, that I may go and see him."

"He is at the office," replied Mrs. Lonsdale. "Do go to him, Eve. He was always fond of you—he always trusted you. Go and try if you can comfort him."

A slight shadow of pain came over the sweet face; it passed in a minute.

"Yes," she said, thoughtfully, "he always trusted me. I will go and see what I can do for him."

Eve walked gently through the warm, sunlit streets. Many looked after her as she went on her mission of mercy—after the tall, graceful figure in the simple muslin dress, the blue trim on her fair, sweet face, as she walked along, thinking what she should say to him, a beautiful light shone.

She went into the office without any announcement—she had done so since she was a child. Only Felix sat there, his pale, haggard face bent over his papers, a shadow like death in his eyes. He looked up in wonder at his visitor. Eve, with her sweet face and strange light upon it, looked like an angel come to minister to him.

"Evelyn," he said, "you are an unexpected visitor."

She went round to him and stood by the side of his chair.

"Felix," she said, "I know what has happened, and I am come to comfort you."

"Comfort! Comfort seemed of devils," the poet sings. Eve" he laughed. "What comfort can you give me?"

She took the papers from his hands, and was started on that warm day to find his fingers as cold as death. She held them in her own—her sweet eyes filled with tears.

"Felix, you must not harden your heart against me, dear. You must not keep me outside it. We have been such true friends—such dear friends always. Do not be hard and cold and proud with me, dear friend."

"I will not, Eve," he returned, gently. "Heaven bless you, Eve!"

"Listen to me a little while, Felix," she said, and her voice stole like a strain of sweet music over his tired senses. "No man can know a greater sorrow than this sorrow of yours. The one you loved and trusted has been false to you. Violet has been false to you."

He shrank back with a cry at the sound of the words. She only clasped his hands the more tightly.

"Never mind the pain, Felix," she said. "It is right that you should accuse custom yours. I to hear the words and not shrink from them. Violet has proved false to you. I know how you loved her, and I know the words you use like a sharp knife."

"It is a terrible sorrow," she said; "no greater sorrow could have befallen you. But, Felix, do not let it harden you. Let us treat the visitation of sorrow so unwisely. Some, when the sorrow falls to their lot, happen their hearts—shut all tender feelings, all love, all affection away from them. To such persons God's dealing comes as a curse, not a blessing. Such sorrow as mine must be a curse," she returned, sadly.

"By no means. You know the old saying, 'Who can say in after years that what grieved their sorrow was evil?' But I loved her so dearly, Eve—and I have lost her."

"I know that you loved her; but, Felix, has there never been a misdeed done? Have you never heard of a man kneeling a woman and worshipping in her virtues that she never possessed? The very fact

that Violet could prove false to you proves also that she was unworthy of your love, that you thought her possessed of qualities quite foreign to her, and that she is not worth all this passion of regret."

"I loved her," was all he answered.

"I know, dear friend, I know," and Evelyn's voice was sweet as the cooing of a dove, "and it is a terrible grief to you. Felix, because you are such dear and true friends, I am come to talk to you about this sorrow. There are three ways in which men meet sorrow. The weaker part of them fly at once to drink, to dissipation, to a reckless kind of despair; they have no sobriety. You are above that. Others accept sorrow, they shut out all love and sympathy from their hearts; they grow cold and proud, so that no kindly influence reaches them. Others—and, dear friend, believe me, these are the noblest—accept sorrow, they part with the discipline of life—as a gift sent from Heaven, and while they accept it with humility, they bear it with dignity. It makes them nobler, grander, and better. It is an education. Which of the three classes will you join, Felix?"

"The last if I can, Eve," he said, slowly. He looked at the light on her fair face.

"Believe me," she went on, earnestly, "we shall not know until we come to do what great sorrows do for us, and then we shall thank heaven for them. There is something weak and cowardly in the idea of being beaten. The temptation to yield weakly to a great grief is one of the hardest that comes to us. It would be so much easier for you, Felix, to lie down and die than to do battle day by day, and so have to live your sorrow down."

"Yes, it would, Eve," he replied.

"A soul that has never suffered is but a puny soul," she said. "The strong and noble soul is the one that passes through the furnace of fire and comes out purer gold—not base metal or gold with an alloy—but pure, refined, true gold. The most noble men and women must all suffer; but that we shall never fathom. We only know that God sends pain—even to His best beloved He sends pain."

"Something in the brave face and the brave patient voice touched him. He looked up at her oddly.

"Surely, Eve," he said, "you have had no sorrow that you should speak in such a fashion?"

She smiled, and he thought how like her face was to that of pictured angels.

"Yes," she said, "I have a great sorrow; but it is dumb—it will never find a voice—it will die with me, and be buried in my grave."

"What has your sorrow done for you, Eve?" he asked after a time.

Again came the beautiful light on the sweet face.

"It has opened my heart," she replied, "it has killed my self-love, it has made my love and pity every one who has suffered, it has taught me that life is but short and that heaven is my true home."

"It shall teach me the same," he said, "if you will help me. I loved her so dearly that my loss has almost killed me."

His pride and self-control gave way; he sobbed like a child.

"My dear old friend," said Eve, and as simply as a child might have done it, she drew his hand upon her arm, and the first tears he shed over the great sorrow of his life fell kindly ministering hands.

From that day a change came over Felix Lonsdale; he went home even that same evening an altered man; he opened his heart to the love and sympathy that Kate had showed him. The proud, haughty coldness fell from him—he took the children in his arms and kissed the little faces. He said to himself that children of his own would never climb his knees—children of his own would never gladden his heart.

He did not suffer less—but it was in another fashion now. He worked harder than ever; he said to himself that if it were possible he would drown his sorrow in the hardest work he could find. And yet he did not know the worst; he only knew that Violet had broken her promise, and declared it impossible to marry him; he had not the faintest notion that her parents had talked to her and argued with her until she had been overruled by them. Still at Lilford—all but himself—knew that Violet was going to marry Sir Owen; it had been kept quite secret for some time, but now the day was fixed—the fourteenth of September—and there could no longer be any secrecy.

The whole place was in a ferment over it. There was to be a grand dinner given to all the tenants, to all the servants and dependents; and the bell-ringers had been told how many times a merry peal was to be rung on the old church bells in honor of the bride and bridegroom. The only persons who nothing of all this were the inhabitants of Vale House—the invalid father who saw no one but the doctor and Eve Lester, the kindly industrious young step-mother, and the young lover himself. No one cared to speak to them on such a subject and they were the last to hear of it. Even Evelyn, who never shrunk from trouble, shrunk from speaking to them about it.

Felix wondered one night when he came to Vale House, why she was so kind, so tender, and compassionate to him, why she hovered round him like a mother over a sick child, why she spoke such low, earnest words to him—so low, so beautiful, that his whole soul was stirred by them.

"Beautiful women are beautiful friends sometimes," said the vicar's wife to herself. "I would not have done such a thing."

Felix thought her strange; but he had almost ceased to wonder at a thing. Then he met his old friend, Dr. Ludlow. He stopped and spoke to him.

"I ought to be very busy with my

"Felix," she said, "listen to this, it is a verse I read last night in a poem by Adelaide Anne Procter. I copied it to read to you because I thought it so beautiful." She was sitting by his side in the attitude that painters of old gave to guardian angels, so full of love and protection. In her sweet, clear voice, she read to him:

"Who is the angel that cometh?"

Let us arise and go forth to greet him,
Not in vain
Is the summons for us to meet him.
He will stay
And darkness our path;
He will stay
A desolate night, a weary day,
Since in that shadow our work is done,
And that shadow our crowns are won.
Let us stay still while his bitter challenge
Slowly into our hearts is poured—
Blessed be that cometh
In the name of the Lord!"

"It is very beautiful," he said, when the sweet voice ceased—it was as though a strain of solemn music had died away—"very beautiful! I shall remember that angel's voice, when he comes, but tell me why you speak to me in this strain to-night? It seemed to me that on the face of every man who looks at you to-day have read pity; it must be fancy, but it seems to me so strange."

She could have told him that every man, woman and child in Lilford accept sorrow, that Violet Hays was to marry Sir Owen. She could have told him also that there was none among them who did not feel sorry for him and indignant with her.

He had almost begun to fear that there was something fresh concerning that unfortunate wife, he said—"people have been so strange with me. It cannot be my love story; no woman would do that. People all know, of course, that Violet has gone away to London, but I do not think any one out of our own household knows that she has broken with me."

Eve could not tell him; she could not help him, but she could help him not to look at her and say, "To-morrow will be Violet's wedding day." She turned away sick at heart when she remembered the treachery, the cruelty, and the delicate-sick at heart that she could not take the whole burden upon herself. She turned away sick at heart, but she could not say to him: "The girl for love of whom you are breaking your heart thinks so little of you, so little of your pain, that she is going to marry another man, to marry another man, whom you dislike."

She talked to him again in the same strain, of the grandeur and nobility of sorrow, the bravery of bearing pain, the cowardice of being hurt. He left him, she whispered to Kate: "Be very kind to him to-morrow, ma'am. He will stand sorely in need of it."

But even Kate did not dream what the words meant.

The harvest moon that night shone down upon many different scenes. It crept into a superb room in London, where Sir Owen, in a rich, gold-trimmed coat with many an oath, to a choice circle of friends, how he had outwitted the lawyer and carried off his bride.

"I shall have some fine amusement with me when I return to Garwood," he said. "He must have been as vain as Narcissus himself to think that any girl would prefer him to me."

His friends drank his costly wines and applauded him—each ignoble sentiment, each mean lie—until they could do so no longer.

The moon looked in at another window—the window of a magnificent chamber in a superb house. It shone on a young lady—on golden hair that was all disheveled and lying in silken profusion over the pillow on a fancy bed of a superb British costume—a lace veil of priceless value, a wreath of orange blossoms, white satin shoes, and white gloves, with a dress that had been made for the young lady by—on golden hair that was all disheveled and lying in silken profusion over the pillow on a fancy bed of a superb British costume—a lace veil of priceless value, a wreath of orange blossoms, white satin shoes, and white gloves, with a dress that had been made for the young lady by—

Lady Maude inherited her mother's peculiarly sympathetic nature. She was as gentle as she was beautiful, and the one thing in which she excelled was art. She would have made one of the finest painters of the day had she not been an earl's daughter; as it was her pictures were far superior to those of many well-known artists. It was at her solicitation that Lord Arlington returned home that autumn. She had seen the finest parts of Europe—the most picturesque, the most beautiful—she had seen the fine old woods round Bramber; and she loved them best in autumn, when the leaves were falling and the glorious tints on the foliage made a picture of tints of which she had never before dreamed. She had begged that they might spend the autumn at home, for the beauty of an English autumn surpassed anything which they could see elsewhere. Her wish was complied with, and she and the promised herself a few pleasant months.

She set out one morning with her sketch-book and pencils. The countess suggested that she should take a maid or a footman with her. Lady Maude laughed.

"No danger lurks in our English woods, mamma," she said, "if I were in Italy or Greece I might meet a few brigands; here, at Bramber, there will be nothing worse than the pretty brown hares and the little squirrels. I could not sketch at my ease with a great man waiting for me."

So she went alone into the Bramber Woods. She wanted a few sketches of English trees in their rufous-tinted autumn dress, and some of the fern and bracken in the green and blue. She had no fear. Why should she have any? The sky was blue, the sun bright and warm, the air full of music and song. As she entered the woods she fancied that she heard a faint chiming of distant bells.

"They are the old church bells of Lilford," she said to herself; "what a mellow, rich sound! I shall not hear it presently."

It died away as she entered the green glades; the sound could not penetrate the thick masses of foliage.

"I want oak, ash, and elm," she thought, "and here I shall find all three."

There was a broad open space, and a majestic oak spread out its great branches there. It was like a little kingdom in itself, this wonderful oak—a great green kingdom with a life all its own. Near it stood a very fine elm, and in the distance she saw the branches of a fine ash-tree. Not far from there was a pretty little brook, so clear that one could see the pebbles at the bottom of it; it ran with a sweet, musical ripple that was a song in itself. The birds were having an entertainment of some kind in the green kingdom of leaves, and the noise they made over it was continuous.

As she became absorbed in the keen delight of her sketching she forgot her feathered neighbors. They no longer disturbed her. The wind sounded like an Aeolian harp among the trees, but that was music she liked; the merry rabbits hopped among the bracken, and the squirrels played among the spreading boughs. It was all so still, so peaceful, so beautiful, that she thought she could sit there sketching forever. Once she was attracted, she fancied that from the long western glade on the other side of her there came the sound of reckless running footsteps, and then of a heavy fall, but after a moment or two she concluded that it was only the rabbits.

"They are having a steepleschag," she said, and laughed at the idea; then the pencil trembled in her fingers, for surely she heard the sound of the prostrate figure of a noble race, bitter sob. She could not be mistaken; they grew more bitter and deep, and then all was still. She tried to go on with her drawing, but her hand trembled, she could not penetrate herself that what she heard was fancy—all fancy. Something must have made the noise—she would go and see.

She was one of the most fearless of maidens; all the high courage and undaunted bravery of her race lived in her. She put her drawing materials aside and went toward the place whence the sound had proceeded. Her heart beat fast when she saw before her the prostrate figure of a man. There was no sobbing now, only a death-like silence, and the man lay with his face downward. She did not faint, or scream, or run away, but she raised her head and looked into his face. How handsome it was—just such a face as she had seen in marble in the dim light of old Roman galleries. Then she saw that on the temple, so white, so rounded, so full of idealism, there was a terrible wound. A moment's reflection showed her what the wound was. Just above him the branch of a tree. He must have been running in hot haste, and not seeing the branch with its sharp, jagged edge, had run against it. He had fallen there, and had swooned, probably because the blow had struck him.

"Violet," he said, "I am not Violet," she replied. "I saw his whole face change. 'Do you know me?' he said, 'you told me of the angel of pain, but the trial was more than I could bear.' 'I am not Eve,' she told him, gently; 'but from the dim, shadowed look in his eyes she knew that he did not know her.' Gently and quietly, with softest touch, she bathed his hot brow with the cool water of the brook, until she saw that his senses had returned to him, generally kept his intentions secret.

work," he said, "but those bells distract me. I have had to put away my writing. What are they ringing for, doctor?"

And the kind-hearted doctor looked sadly at him.

"Have you not heard?" he said. "No—I hear so little—I am so busy always. What is it for?"

But the doctor could not tell him. "Go as far as the church," he said; "the walk will do you good."

He went to the church, and there he found the doctor waiting for him. "Why are you ringing this merry chiming to-day?" he asked one of the ringers, a white-headed old man, whose arms were weary, and who sat resting on one of the green graves.

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He did not speak of Violet, but he told her the story of his father's bitter trials—how Mrs. Hardman's money was left to them, how happy it had made them, what plans and hopes they had built on it; then of the disputed will, the trial, the verdict; how his father's business had fallen away from him, and his old friends had one by one deserted him, until Eve Lester, and he told her now Eve had come to offer her fortune to them.

Lady Maude's eyes filled with tears as she listened.

"That is a girl after my own heart," she said. "That is just one of the things I should have done myself. But do you mean to tell me, Mr. Lonsdale, that this is the outcome of English law? I have never heard of so cruel a case. All who know your father know that he is as incapable of doing wrong as any man in England—in fact, he would not do wrong. He was one of the honestest and noblest of men. I have always heard him so highly spoken of. You do not mean to say that his old fellow-townsmen and the old friends who have known him for years stand aloof from him or this?"

She spoke with angry indignation that did his heart good to hear.

"It is true," he replied, "and what is more, they have withdrawn their assistance from him—some under one pretext, some under another. We have had a struggle such as few could understand, and my great fear is that my father will never be a strong man again."

"He wants a reaction," she said. "Swearing that would put him back in his place—that would reinstate him in public opinion; and he shall have it. I will tell this story, just as you have told it to me, to the end of the world, my father, I am sure this is one of the wrongs he will hasten to redress. I am glad that I have seen you, and that you have trusted me. There has been a gross miscarriage of justice."

"Human laws must always be more or less imperfect," returned Felix. "It is only the Divine law that has no flaw."

"I am more of Eva Lester," said Lady Maude. "Your fair, false Violet does not interest me, but Eve Lester does. I love noble women—tell me more of her."

He told her of her patience, her heroism, her noble, generous life; and Lady Maude, looking at him, wondered why, when he understood the beauty of her fair soul so well, he had not loved her in preference to Violet.

"Man were all the same," she thought; "a fair face will lead them in any direction. They lose their heads when beauty comes upon the scene; they are not strong-minded as we rule."

Then, with a smile, she looked up at Felix.

"The little mouse in the fable freed the lion. I will be the mouse in this instance, and I promise you such help for your father as shall make his trouble really a blessing in disguise."

He thought of Eve's words, and repeated them to her.

"Your friend Eve is right," she said. "Sorrow is often a blessing in disguise. I am glad I have met you; you will go home all the happier for knowing that the hour of your father's triumph is at hand. You will have something to distract your thoughts, from fair, false Violet and remember my promise, the fourteenth of September, her wedding day, will not be the most unhappy day of your life, after all."

He thanked her until the tears came into her eyes again; and then he told her that he was better, and asked her to let him walk with her to the end of the woods. When he writes to stand up, he looked white and ill—she almost feared for him; but the giddiness soon passed, and they walked together to where she had left her drawing materials. He thanked her again and again so simply and earnestly, she was ashamed. Then she left him, and went away home.

Felix had intended to take up his burden bravely and carry it nobly; but human love and human passion were too strong for him—he could not face the world just yet. He stayed all night in the shelter of the Bramber Woods, going hard battle with his despair.

He watched the sun set and the moon rise; he watched the golden stars come out one by one; he watched the black red shadows that the moon threw upon the grass; he listened to the wind as it sang its sweet song; he thought of all the moonlight nights on which he had met Violet. He had no faith for a few short moments, and dreamed that he stood under the wet lilac bushes with her; her arms were clasped around his neck, her beautiful face was raised to his, and he could not believe her false. He woke with a cry of rapture. There lay the cold moonlight, there stood the giant trees, and Violet had married Sir Owen.

All night he stayed there. It was the one terrible battle of his life. He was not ashamed to impart all his sorrow to the listening stars. They had listened to Genesis's wailing when beautiful Paris loved and loved. This story of man's love and woman's folly, of man's trust and woman's treachery, of love forsaken and forsown, was nothing new to them. There were times that night when he almost went mad. But Heaven blessed him, and death came not. The morning light found him pale, weak and exhausted; but that one fierce paroxysm had taken the sting of his sorrow away. It was better than if he had gone home and been ill for long days and weeks. That once fierce night of pain exhausted him. When it had passed he was too weak and too tired to suffer more.

He went home in the full light of morning. He found Kate waiting for him. She had guessed what had happened. She had not spoken of his absence, but she looked anxiously at his face when he came in. He bent down and kissed her, and she said, "Now I shall lie down my pain."

Kate looked sadly at the wound on his broad white brow.

"How did you get yourself so terribly, Felix?" she asked, and he told her. It was one of his great merits that he never spoke a false or evasive word.

"To be Continued."

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