MISS HELEN'S LOVERS.

The brawling river drowned his last words, which he had addressed more to himself than to her.

She clasped her hands tightly, and did as he told her. She looked and listened, she forgot him, she forgot herself, her eyes grew dim with wonder and with awe, her quickened breath rose and fell sharply.

Before the eternal beauty of those hills and vales, before the overwhelming majesty of God's creation, her puny "pride of life" was annihilated. She turned to him for sympathy as a child might turn.

"And I shall go away and forget it!" she sighed and then added, slowly—

Oh, Memory shield me from the world's poor strife,
And give these scenes thine everlasting life.

She was astounding him by this departure; but he said again, in that familiar formula which, like one of Humpty Dumpty's words did duty with him for a reflection—

"It's ripping!"

"It makes me good," she said—"makes me want to be good. Nothing else matters. All the things we value are nothing—they are ridiculous. I want only to be good."

He nodded. He knew, or guessed, what she meant: but he was a genuine John Bull, to whom gush is impossible. Only upon a very great emergency was a glimpse below his leveled surface to be obtained.

He kept his eyes on her glowing face in lieu of those glorious waters. She caught his glance, hesitated, blushed, and then jumped to her feet.

"We ought to go," she said; and as he did not dispute her assertion, she retraced her steps, he following in her wake.

As a matter of course, but with complete authority, Mr. Jones took Helen's guidance into his hands. He helped her into the cart, wrapped a light rug over her knees, and negatived her ardent desire to drive herself decidedly.

"Lean back," he said. "That seat is pretty comfortable, and you must be tired."

"I'm not the least tired. I should like to drive."

"Are you used to driving?"

Yes."

She was accustomed to driving the Rector's rough gray pony, which lived in the paddock, and was twenty years old.

"Then you shall take the reins presently. She's fresh at starting, and I know her ways. She will soon cool down. Do you mind my smoking?"

"Not if the wind won't blow it in my face," she candidly replied. She did not share the modern damsel's oft-asserted passion for the fragrance of tobacco.

"The wind is the other way, and I'm half a foot above you," he urged with some natural anxiety.

"Then smoke, by all means."

He thrust his hand into his pocket.

"I haven't a light," he told her, "so I can't.

And he mounted to her side and they started.

Few mild enjoyments equal that soothing sense of drowsy well-being in which a tired frame revels as it is driven through the balmy air of a warm summer evening, with a fresh horse between the shafts that covers the ground with a long, easy equal stride—traversing, too, such wild and wondrous scenery as beggars description.

Helen's face still wore the reflection of that softened intensity of feeling which it had caught by the river side. The long hours she had passed in the open air had lulled the aggressive vivacity of her youth; the spirit of mischief no longer sharpened her eyes; her dimples played faintly in her soft cheeks. She was gentle, therefore more womanly, and for that reason a thousand times more winning than before.

He and she were talking as though they had been friends from childhood. If that cool, brotherly demeanor of his was assumed for her deception, it was a clever and seductive mask.

"How did you like Jack Peel?" he was asking her. "You and he spent the day together pretty well, didn't you?"

"He sat next me on the drag. I liked him—a little; but he hates everybody, and doesn't admire anything."

"I suppose he admires Mrs. Peel?"

"Isn't she pretty? I didn't know she was married—at least, not to him."

"You mean she flirts? Oh yes, she does."

"She is very pretty and amusing."

"She's a butterfly, but a man wants more than color, down, beauty, to live upon. That sort of thing is stunning but you want sunshine to show it off. A butterfly isn't much to admire on a wet day. A good deal of rain falls in Devon—and elsewhere."

"On a wet day one can stay indoors."

Helen had a suspicion that she was a butterfly, her high spirits were fatiguing.

"A butterfly indoors; think of the fluttering on the window-pane."

"A butterfly can't help being a butterfly."

"No more than a chrysalis can help being a chrysalis. Both are very nice in their way, but I have no wish to own either the one or the other. Don't argue with me, please, I'm not up to it, but I know what I mean and I know what I like. I want a wife far better than I am myself, some one who would keep me up to the mark, some one who would do what I told her, and yet some one whom I should only tell to go her own way because I should know her way to be wise and straight. I couldn't stand any woman whom I had to look after, it would knock the love clean out of me."

All this rather overwhelmed Helen, she did not know how interesting this lady in the clouds had lately become to Mr. Jones.

"So you would like to marry an angel," she remarked, with a malicious smile, "poor angel!"

He laughed.

"Poor angel," he repeated glancing at her. "How can an angel be poor, Madam? The sense of her superiority would keep her rich, and me humble. No angel, however angelic, for me."

"You are hard to please."

"On the contrary I am always pleased but never satisfied."

"I think a man ought to be very thankful if he persuades any woman, of any sort, to be his wife," retorted Miss Mitford, yawning deliberately.

Her words and her yawn disconcerted her companion and for some minutes they drove on in silence. As a rule, the honored girls to whom he confided his sentiments concerning the future Mrs. Jones hung upon his words as though they were oracles; but if they were discreet, they committed themselves by no comments, looking all they did not say, for those sentiments of his had been known to change repeatedly.

Mr. Jones had warned Helen that she would require a steady nerve and strong head if she was to enjoy the view, and he was right, for the road on which she found herself was hewed out of the hillside. It was a ledge cut on the side of a mighty cliff which towered perpendicularly overhead on the left hand and on the right descended a sheer precipice, a thousand feet, into the sea.

The width of the road upon which the dogcart was traversing was broad enough to admit of two carriages driving abreast. A low wooden paling had been roughly extemporized on the extreme verge of the precipice, but this every here and there had crumbled away and disappeared, leaving no barrier, however frail, between the traverser of that giddy pass and an appalling death.

For the first few minutes of the crossing Helen tried to admire the view.

"How beautiful—" she murmured below her breath, struggling for those steady nerves with the possession of which she had been credited. "Oh, Mr. Jones," with a sudden collapse of courage, "please, be careful!"

At her words he reined in the horse.

"Don't you like it? Shall we turn back? I can turn in a moment."

Turn! her head reeled at the thought.

"Oh, no; go on. I like it. I'm not afraid. Only you won't drive fast? You will keep close to the side, won't you?"

"You are quite sure that you would not rather go back? I can take you home the other way, you know."

"No, no; go on. I shall get used to it in a moment. It is only just at first—and those seagulls flying out below us make me dizzy, and the sea, wriggling, and like a wrinkled walnut, such a long, long way below."

"Don't look straight down; look right out across the bay. There are a dozen fishing-smacks sailing down, with those tawny sails set which you admire."

"Oh, lovely," she said. "How long is this—this New Cut?"

He was walking the horse very slowly, and the cart was hugging the cliff side.

"A quarter of a mile," he answered. "If we went more quickly, it would sooner be over."

"Yes, but I would rather go slowly, if you don't mind."

"When we round that corner" (pointing to a distant curve of the cliff which concealed any further sight of the road) "we soon turn inland, and get into a lane with twenty feet of solid bank on either side."

"We shall get there in ten minutes?" interrogatively.

"About that. You are giddy," anxiously. "I am so desperately sorry that I brought you. You told me the other day that you could stand any height, or I should not have thought of bringing you."

"I'm getting better; I didn't know I should mind. It is very stupid of me. I'm so sorry."

She was fighting bravely against her fear, despising her swimming head and the sickening quivers of faintness that unstrung her muscles.

"Will you get out and walk?"

This palliation of her misery was forbidden by the thought that, to allow of her descent from the cart, the horse would have to step nearer to the edge of the cliff, in which case she knew she should scream.

She shook her head.

"Shall I tell Phil to lead the mare?"

He was much concerned, for she had grown very pale, and the smile she forced to her lips was piteously unreal.

"Yes, I should like that," her voice shook. "Thank you."

But, as Phil alighted to obey this astonishing order, a sudden sharp sound above their heads startled them. They looked up. Down the rugged face of the cliff, hurled from crag to crag, whirling like a gigantic bird through the air, a gray, struggling mass was seen to descend until it fell, with a dull, sickening thud—such a sound as haunts memory for a lifetime—upon the road in front of the trembling mare. She stopped, backed a pace or two, plunging and rearing in terror; then, answering to the voice and hand of her master, she dashed forward. They passed that grim and shapeless mass, lying motionless and blood-streaked on the road, in safety, but the wheel of the cart grated against the wooden paling that guarded the edge of precipice, and shivered it to splinters. Then, at a mad gallop, the mare raced on. The air hissed past them; the cart rocked like a swing; the cliffs seemed to rush out to meet them; startled seagulls whirled around them; below in the yawning deep the sea reeled.

Once Helen put out her hands and caught at the reins. With rough fury he bade her keep still, and she obeyed.

Round the perilous sweep of the cliff they tore, whirling again, so near their death that he set his teeth, thinking the end had come. One fraction of an inch to the right and nothing would save them, but again the frantic mare answered to his voice and his grip of the reign. She swerved ever so little to the left and rushed safely by—on, on, scudding like a cloud before the wind—on, on, until sky, sea, clouds, and cliffs mingled in one staggering panorama.

Helen sat motionless. Once, when the thought of her mother beset her, she had clutched at the reins; otherwise she had not moved, nor had she spoken. Through her mind the memory of heroes who had faced death without fear came and strengthened her. Though no one should know it, she would not quail or shudder; she would not be afraid; she would die hard. She was one of those "who do not mind death, but can not bear pinching."

But when the danger was past, when the blessed shelter of high banks rose on either side, when the mare's gallop sank to a canter, and from a canter to a trot, when they were safe and the hideous sight of sea and cliff was left far behind, then came the demon reaction to unnerve her.

It was a deep and fervent "Thank God!" which broke from her companion, that loosened the floodgates of her tears. Till then he had not spoken, nor had he looked at her; but when he turned and she heard those words, saw the expression in his dark eyes, which met hers, she burst out into weeping.

She clung to his arm, she buried her face against his shoulder, she trembled and wrung her hands. A long hill lay before them. The mare's trot had subsided into a quiet walk. He put his arm round her, comforting her as though she were a frightened child.

"There, there; it's all right—you are quite safe. Don't cry. You shall never go near the place again."

She was so unstrung and beside herself that she sobbed her heart out, as if it were her father's shoulder against which she hid her eyes; she was oblivious as to whose protecting arm supported her, or whose hand patted her soothingly, as though she was a baby to be quieted by such treatment.

"What fell?—What was it?—It was killed."

"A sheep, poor brute! Don't talk of it. Think of something else."

"I can't"—shuddering—"I daren't open my eyes; I am afraid I should see it."

"I wouldn't open them just yet. You will be all right in a minute."

"I should not really have touched the reins, I only put out my hand."

"It was a case of life or death. I hadn't time to be gentle. I'm awfully sorry. I deserve to be shot."

His encircling arm held her more closely as he spoke, but during the pause which followed, Helen drew away from him, covering her face with her hands.

"Look here, don't give up like this," he said, rather alarmed. "You have been so plucky all the time." The compliment was undeserved, but she did not dislike it on that account.

"I can't help it—I can't indeed!"

Her voice came thick and low, her hands fell down from before her deathly face; she tried to smile, and then murmuring, "I don't feel very well," she fell back again upon his shoulder. She had fainted.

On the summit of the hill which they were mounting was a country inn; thither Bertie, supporting the girl with a now aching arm, drove fast. Assisted by the host, he lifted Helen from the cart and carried her into the house. In the inn-parlor stood that horse-hair sofa, oft described because the memory of its discomforts is not easily obliterated, peculiar to wayside hostelries and seaside lodgings; upon it Mr. Jones laid his burden. He was almost as pale as she; he kept his head, but he was horribly frightened; he fully believed her to be dead, and would not be reassured by the landlady, who told him that "her Mary Kate falled away a score o' times last summer."

They doused Helen's pretty head with water and chafed her white hands; they fanner her with a newspaper and burned feathers and held salts under her nose. Every suggestion which the landlady made Bertie executed with feverish anxiety. But when at length he poured teaspoonful after teaspoonful of cooking brandy between her pale lips, it had at last the desired effect; she coughed once or twice, turned her head on the crochet antimacassar, and slowly opened her eyes.

CHAPTER IX.

Helen soon sat up and declared herself quite well. She was astonished, but somewhat gratified, to discover that she had fainted; her health had hitherto been unromantically robust—a little delicacy was interesting and a novelty. Besides which, during the interval of unconsciousness, the agonizing agitation (which had thus culminated) had subsided; save for some throbbing pulses in her temples, she felt just as usual. Mr. Jones was as astonished as he was relieved by her rapid recovery, and presently left her, ostensibly to see to the mare and to keep a look-out for Phil, for whose nerves great concern was certainly due. A minute later, Helen, who was looking out through the open window, saw him cross the road to a gateway, where he halted, and taking both a cigar-case and a match-box from his pocket, proceeded to light a cigar, there was no dearth of matches in that box; he struck several before he accomplished his object. Helen watched, her face alight with a smile. To please her he had not smoked, and yet he would not let her know that he sacrificed his pleasure to her comfort. How nice of him!

In a girl's vision a little circumstance may be made to do duty for a great one: it grows or diminishes at her will. Helen chose that this virtue should grow, even as the gourd of Jonah.

Throughout their homeward drive his conduct left nothing to be desired. He was most tender of her shaken nerves—never before had the dogcart been driven so cautiously. Never before had the strong and surefooted mare been walked uphill and down alike to save any risk to her wind in the first, and any danger to her knees in the second, instance. Both horse and groom were a little impatient of these precautions and anxious to get to their journey's end, while their master grudged each flitting field as it passed, and reached Carnation Cottage before he had told Helen a tenth of the hundred things he had to tell her.

When the door in the cob wall surrounding Carnation Cottage had closed, shutting the graceful, blue-gowned figure from sight, he heaved a stupendous sigh, for an eternity lay between him and the following morning when he promised himself the pleasing duty of presenting a little enameled watch, set with the initials H. M. in glittering brilliants, now reposing in his pocket, to its delighted owner.

Miss Mitford, with a watering pot in her left hand and a spud, which she used, as old men use an index finger, to emphasize her words, in the right, hovered round her niece until bedtime. Again and again Helen had to retail the account of their escape, though the horror of the time half returned as she painted it in words, and she would gladly have turned her thoughts elsewhere. Miss Mitford was sorry for Helen, but she not unjustly singled out the sheep as the nucleus of her interst and sympathy. She wondered to whom it belonged, whether it was a valuable animal, why Providence had not bestowed upon it a greater penetration.

"The want of sagacity in sheep is remarkable, love. Instead of avoiding their natural enemy, the dog, they approach him, though they possess no weapon of defense! They continually walk over the edge of the cliffs, following the gulls, I presume, dear, and forgetting their lack of wings. As a term of opprobrium for the dull I should prefer 'sheep' to 'ass' as less coarse and more appropriate."

Helen refused the mutton chop and custard pudding proffered her but she made great havoc with a dish of strawberries and cream, and her spirits did not flag. She never discovered that she was overtired until she went to bed, and then she found that the events of the past day had impressed themselves vividly and deeply upon her brain.

Hitherto as soon as she had laid her nut-brown head on the pillow, she had fallen asleep; but that night she could find no comfort among the lavender scented pillows; she tossed and turned for hours. Her thoughts would allow her no rest, they flew tumultuously back to that "New Cut" and dragged her again and again through every occurrence of that homeward drive.

Ten days after the Rivers Meet picnic the two Misses Jones might have been seen pacing up and down the corridor at Newton Hall in grave and low-toned conversation. The subject under discussion was of such importance as to lower their high-pitched voices and banish their eternal smiles. Patricia's temper was ruffled, her forehead was puckered, her eyes, blank and sombre as holes burned in a blanket, were dark with gloom. She took the lead in the debate. Anastasia listened; though her engagement to Major Mason—that gentleman by whose side she had been seated during the drive to the picnic and the man of her choice—had been that day announced and she had every reason consequently to be gay, she, too, was profoundly solemn.

"He is so obstinate," the elder Miss Jones was saying, "you ought to know what he is; if I was to hint that we are nervous, it would probably decide it at once and the wrong way. Just to show his independence, he would do it. He is quite infatuated, he hangs about the beach or the village half the day. Yesterday in the broiling sun he toiled up with a pot of orchids to that little earwiggy place. I believe he has been there on some excuse or other every afternoon this week. He went to church twice on Sunday and walked back with her after the service, carrying that ridiculous old aunt's spectacle case. I saw him."

"Good gracious, what am I to do, Pat? If Bertie means to marry her, who is to prevent him? Unfortunately, you can't lock up a marriageable young man, and only let him loose when the right person is about. Let the poor fellow amuse himself; he means to marry Lucy—Gussie says so. If we interfere it would be fatal; he won't stand advice."

"I wouldn't interfere with him, but I should like to give the girl a hint. She is very proud. I am sure she would take the slightest hint at once."

Anastasia paced on in silence. As long as she was allowed to remain neutral, she did not mind what happened; she had few objects in life beyond the attainment of her own desires. She wanted her brother to marry Lady Lucy, certainly—not for his happiness, but because a Lady Lucy for a sister-in-law was a solid advantage for herself.

"I don't know that. Bertie's a tremendous catch. A cart-load of hints wouldn't put a sensible woman off twenty thousand a year."

"I shall tell her he is engaged to Lucy."

"She will congratulate him, and you'll catch it."

"I shan't—Bertie is never rude. If I make a breach, they won't have time to patch it up in these three days. Once get him off without a *fiasco*, he will forget her, and be thankful to me for keeping him out of it."

"Well, Pat, do what you think is right, if you don't mind risking a row. Bertie mayn't jump down your throat, but I've seen him angry once or twice in my life. Interfering with a love affair is like interfering in a dog fight—you don't get thanks from either side; you'll be lucky if you don't get bitten."

When the sisters met before dinner, and Patricia was questioned about the success of the stratagem she confessed herself baffled. She was afraid Miss Mitford did not intend to take any hint, and Patricia's invitation she had refused.

"She would hardly speak to me," that young lady complained; "but I managed to say how good it was of her to console my brother. 'Don't over-console him, Miss Mitford,' I said, 'or Lady Lucy Freemantle won't quite like it, you know.' She's a collected sort of girl. She looked at me as if she had not heard what I said, then she made some irrelevant remark about the weather and went off to play with a little child whom she held by the hand. I can't think what Bertie sees in her; she is positively forbidding. But perhaps, for all her calmness, she heard me right enough, and if so, I did not toil over that awful shingle for nothing. She is the sort of woman who prefers dignity to common sense—the very person who would fling a fortune into the sea rather than cross a gutter to get it."

Meanwhile, up on the hill at Carnation Cottage, poor Miss Mitford was overpowered by the exuberance of Helen's mirth. She had returned from the shore in fantastic and exultant spirits. She laughed and sung and joked until Miss Mitford sat down exhausted on the garden seat with the tears of laughter rolling down her cheeks, and a faint petition to the girl "to be quiet and go away, for pity's sake!" breaking between her gasps.

But Helen was gone out of earshot, and had entered the porch before her aunt had finished her sentence or her laughter.

The wonderful vivacity of hers lasted throughout the evening, and reappeared with her at breakfast next morning. If she was not very hungry, she was so talkative that her want of appetite passed unnoticed. Throughout the morning she he ped her aunt to stick the verbenas and prick out the seedling gloxinias. It was tiring work; by lunch-time Helen was looking fagged, and Miss Mitford was full of self-reproaches when she saw that it was so.

"You shall rest this afternoon, my love. You can lie on the sofa and read that charming book by Miss Gwynne-Hughes. You will be sure to sleep. I am going to call at the Priory—I have ordered a fly for the purpose—but you need not accompany me, though, to be sure, I should have liked your society."

"I will come," said Helen.

But by the time the fly had arrived she had changed her mind. She was certainly a little tired; she would take her aunt's advice and rest.

The resting was of an odd kind; it drove her again and again to the glass, before which she arranged her air and prinked with deliberation and anxiety. It sent her into the garden to gather more flowers to adorn the drawing-room, which was already a perfect flower garden itself; it compelled her to mount to her bed-room and hastily don a certain pink cotton dress which she had heard admired not many days previously. Again it drove her back to the drawing-room, whither she wandered to and fro until the tinkle of the gate bell, reaching her listening ears, seemed to remind her of her fatigue; for she sank down into an arm-chair, took up a book, and was at once engrossed in its perusal. She did not notice a shadow pass the window, nor when the door was opened, did she immediately look up; but as Sarah announced—"Mr. Flight, if you please, miss," she started, the book fell to the floor, and in that full, clear voice, for the tones of which this poor unwelcomed visitor had yearned to hear again, she exclaimed—

"Oh, it is you?"

Though this greeting was not reassuring, it had been wrung from Helen's astonishment, and the next moment she had risen with outstretched friendly hand to meet him. In a moment he saw that she had changed. Hope whispered that the change was to his advantage. Her manner had altered; the coquettish defiance, varied with cold disdain, with which she had formerly met his advances had gone—a stereotyped politeness had usurped its place.

Born and bred in women is the art of fence. Never did swallow swoop more lightly, more swiftly, more restlessly after his evening meal than Helen flew from subject to subject. Her ease, her frank friendliness, and her command of topic, voice, and smile might have answered Mr. Flight's question better than any word, if he would have been content to read those lucid signs, and thus saved them both unnecessary pain.

At first the sound of her voice and the sight of her beauty was bliss sufficient, but soon he grew impatient of the chit-chat in which he was taking a secondary part. He made several unsuccessful efforts to change the subject, and then, remembering that Dr. Abercrombie remarks that no woman can talk for more than twenty minutes without cessation, he obstinately held his peace and waited for the inevitable pause. It came—he seized his opportunity, and hurled his declaration into the interval.

It was the old, old story. What a remarkably dull, tiresome, threadbare old tale it is when told by the wrong person—and the wrong person somehow seems conscious of the failue and bungles over its recital, emphasizes the wrong points, and hashes the whole thing! If he who is right is not exactly eloquent, he need say so little, and brevity is the soul of wit.

When she found that it was impossible to avert a scene, Helen cast her eyes on the ground and listened patiently and silently to what he told her. She sat in a low arm-chair, face to the light. Mr. Flight tried to read his fate in her downcast face; how it had altered—not a touch of the disdain he dreaded, no mocking curve of lip, but a steady, thoughtful brow, a woman's gentleness softening each line.

A woman, conscious of her weakness, sides, I think, almost without exception, with the weak. Her sympathies are for the unsuccesful; her tenderness for the feeble who fails. Her love may go elsewhere, but her love is her fate, and with the direction of its flight she has little to do. Helen's awakened heart ached for the speaker, though it beat no whit the faster for his words. But to those who ask for love, compassion is no boon.

When, with a faltering voice, Helen declared that she could never, never, never be his wife, that neither long years, nor his devotion, nor his prospects, nor the wishes of her parents, nor her poverty, nor his unhappiness could ever, by any possible chance, alter one jot or tittle of her determination, it mattered very little to him whether she pitied or hated him. Though with her eyes brimming with tears she gave him both her hands, and never drew them away when his grasp crushed her slight fingers; though she did not reprove him when he laid his lips on them; yet passion-blinded as he was, he could not detect any sign of relenting from her attitude.

She who, even under the suspicion of reproof, had flared into hot anger and retort, now hung her head when his misery wrung forth some bitter reproaches from him, and murmured, humbly—

"I know, I know; I am so sorry; but I didn't believe—I didn't understand. Forgive me."

He found it difficult to credit that such true, deep, absorbing love as he felt could meet with no return—that it had been born only to die: he felt that he was hardly treated, and so he was. But life is hard, and things go wrong with us more often than they go right; into each life the rain falls heavily, and if we do not happen to see our neighbor drenched to the skin, we may rest assured that he has not escaped his share of ducking, although he may be dry and trim enough when we chance to meet him.

It was bad luck that induced Miss Mitford's front gate bell so soft a tinkle that the sound escaped Helen's sharp hearing; it was bad luck which caused her to stand in full sight of the open window when Mr. Flight held both her hands in his and stooped to kiss them; it was an unlucky impulse that made her wrench away those hands and dart guiltily a yard or two asunder from the young man when the drawing-room door was opened and "Mr. Jones" was announced.

If the visitor felt surprise or annoyance at the tableau presented to him, his manner did not betray him. His self-possession was admirable; he even covered Helen's confusion and Mr. Flight's awkward preoccupation by a flow of conversation, and when the latter took his leave, and the lady accompanied him, in answer to his earnest petition, to the front gate, he concealed a most rancorous irritability under a suave smile.

(To be Continued.)

Eligible.

Puck: "I don't see how you ever got into the New York Yacthing Association. You have no yacht."

"No; but I've got a wine cellar and a yachting cap."

The origin of the widow seems to be enveloped in a haze. The widow is neither born nor maid.