

HELEN CHURCHILL'S LOVER.

The silvery gray of a summer dawn was spreading itself over the landscape, rendering soft and indistinct all familiar objects; yet, even seen by its dim, uncertain light, he looked more like one grown prematurely old by reason of hard work or withering care, than as if he had scarcely passed from youth to age by the ordinary gentle gradations.

His brow was lined, his hair silvered, and there was a stoop in his shoulders which told of hard and continuous toil; yet, notwithstanding these drawbacks, there were the remains of youthful beauty in the well-shaped head and clear gray eyes.

He had arrived at the neighboring town too late the evening before to catch the last train to this little out-of-the-way hamlet, too late to do aught but seek a bed there; but after three or four hours, the resting-craving to complete his journey so overpowered him that he rose and pursued his way on foot. And now with the delicate light of early morn silencing the birches, and dimpling the waters of the stream, he stood at length where his feet had not rested for fifteen years. But these fifteen years, awful as they had been at the time, seemed but as a dream now, scarcely to be recalled on waking, as he stood thus looking at each well-remembered spot.

With a sigh, the wayfarer brought back his straying thoughts from past to present, and became aware that the sun had risen, the birds were chirping forth an early song, and the dewdrops were glittering all around—on the rose-crowned hedge by which he stood, on the sprays of eglantine, and on the far away green meadows that lay between the village of Bythorpe and Bythorpe Manor, half-way up the wooded slopes opposite.

"At length I am home again," then he muttered; "at length," throwing his head back with a certain joyful gesture, and stretching out a rough, toil-worn hand, as if in token of greeting—"at length the years are over—the work is accomplished—the punishment wrought out—and I am back to claim my prize! Ah!"—starting slightly, as a voice addressed him with a brief "Good-morning."

"Good-morning—sir." Something in the stranger's appearance apparently brought forth that "sir," which had not formed part of the original sentence, but was hastily added on as he turned his head to see who had addressed him.

"You are about betimes," the newcomer went on. "It is not many of the gentry as troubles themselves with the sight of a summer sunrise."

"They miss much," said the stranger, briefly. "Though perhaps to us, who possibly have seen it nearly every morning of our lives, it is a common affair enough!"

The farmer looked at the speaker in some surprise, and he added immediately: "I have not seen it myself for many years—in England. You belong to Bythorpe," he went on, as if anxious to divert the conversation from any personal channels.

"Man and boy, I have lived here these fifty years. That is my farm," pointing with a proud, possessive air in the direction whence he had come, "Manor Farm."

"Then you are—" half escaped the lips of the other; but the words passed unnoted by his companion.

"Dick Stisted, of the Manor Farm," he repeated. "Mine now, as it was my father's before me, and will, please God, be my son's, by-and-by."

"A perfect life, Mr. Stisted. A home, a wife, and little ones. What could a man require more?"

"You do not possess them?" questioned the farmer, looking up, surprised at the energy in the stranger's voice.

"I am not married," he replied, briefly. "But," he hastened to add, fearing his reply might have been abrupt, "you know the place, you say; then perhaps you can tell me to whom belongs yonder house," pointing towards the distant towers of Bythorpe Manor. "But it may be I am detaining you?"

"No, no," replied Mr. Stisted courteously, "I'm not pressed for time. Yonder house belongs to Squire Churchill. The young squire we call him mostly about here, seeing that his father is dead not so long since."

"He is dead?"

"Ay, surely; and young Mr. Edward

has come into the place, and married a bonny wife, he has."

"The old Squire had a daughter, had he not?"

"Two. You know them?"

"I knew of them," the stranger replied, evasively. And then, pointing to a small white house that was visible through the trees—"And to whom does that belong?"

"That? Why, to Mrs. Sutton, poor body."

"And why do you pity her?"

"You must be a stranger indeed, sir, to ask why!"

"Then, enlighten me. Tell me the story."

"Story! It is a queer story. Almost too sad to call by such a name! She was the doctor's wife, a sweet pretty woman as ever I saw, fifteen years ago, with a fair, handsome boy, that she was that proud on, that it would have done you good but to see the two together. He, the doctor himself, was a bit cross-grained—leastways, so I've heard say—and all the more reason why the mother and son should think so much of one another."

"The father did not over-like it; still, he was open-handed with the young man, educated him finely; sending him to school and college, until it was easy seeing that the boy, who was fine-looking enough, was beginning to think no small things of himself. 'Tis said he even lifted his eyes to one of Squire Churchill's daughters—leastways, at the last. But I am not telling it to you straight on! You should come and see my wife, if you wish to hear the story well told."

"But was there such presumption?" inquired the listener. "You say this young man was well educated and good-looking, and perhaps" after a second's hesitation—"the lady liked him."

"He should have known his place better," said Mr. Stisted, sturdily; "leastways, he should have learnt it. What is a young lady's fancy worth? She was but sixteen. Squire Churchill's daughters were not for such as he. However, this love-making, or whatever they may chose to call it, was only discovered afterward, when every thing was brought to light. And in the mean time the tragedy came."

"Well?" asked the stranger, leaning forward with interest on his face.

"A murder was committed here. Yes, you may start. In this quiet village, where nothing was heard out of the common from one year's end to another; in this village—in that lane where it joins Squire Churchill's grounds—Squire Churchill's second son was found dead."

"And—?"

"And then, as I said before, it all came out about this poor young Sutton keeping company with Miss Churchill; for it seems the foolish young thing, not being able to see him elsewhere, had agreed to meet him in that lane on that very night; for one of the farm laborers saw them part, and her run up through the meadows home, only a few minutes before he heard a cry, and ran forward to find poor Master Harry lying there dead."

"Of course Mr. Sutton was taken up?"

"Of course, sir. But now comes the queer part of the story. For though he was tried, and it was proved most beautifully that he had killed Mr. Harry for telling him what he thought of his conduct, and was condemned to be hung and was afterwards only let off with transportation for fifteen years—yet now it seems—"

"That it was not he, after all?"

"How did you guess that? The other day there comes the news as another man has confessed to the crime on his death-bed, so that, after all, young Sutton has suffered all these years for what was no fault of his. Leastways, so the young Squire told us, t'other day. His mother always believed in him," he went on after a moment's pause. "It will come right some day," she often said to me: 'Mr. Stisted, it will come right some day. It is a miscarriage of justice.' His father died—could not lift up his head again; but his mother has aye waited."

Something like a sob burst from his companion, and Farmer Stisted looked up in surprise.

"I have heard something of this," he said, in a stammering fashion, in answer to the look. "I knew this man—that is, I have met him."

"Is that so, sir?" said the farmer, with fresh interest. "Ay, I remember

you said you had been long out of England. Well, I shall be glad to see him back, and shake him by the hand, and bid him forget the past. If there is little else, there is still his mother to come back to. What was he doing when you saw him, sir?"

"He had heard he was free."

"And what was he like? and was he minded to forget the past, and return to England?"

"He was a saddened, sobered man when I knew him, with only one hope left, out of the many life had once offered; and he was going home."

"And what was the hope, if I may make so bold as to ask? Perhaps he knew his mother had never believed the evil, and was waiting for him?"

"Maybe; but he did not speak of her, perhaps because he was so sure of her. He told me that the last night before he left England—you know—?"—the farmer nodded—"that he had an interview with—"

"Yes, yes," interrupted Mr. Stisted, sagely: "we heard all about it, though it was kept so dark. It was Miss Helen, bless you, the little yellow-haired Miss Churchill. Sixteen years ago nearly, so no harm in speaking of it now—and all so changed since! Well, she saw him to say 'Good-by.'"

"Yes, so this man told me; and that they parted, she saying that, let her people say or do what they might, she would await his return in perfect trust and patience."

"A pity he did not give his love to the other sister," remarked Mr. Stisted, "if all stories are to be believed."

"Why?"

"Because she was in love with him always; and plain though she was, Miss Jane was a good, true woman, and has never lifted her head or looked at another man since those sad days."

"Is that really true?"

"No call to misdoubt it, sir; any one in the village will tell you the same story; and, as I said before, 'twas a pity, seeing as every thing has worked round right, that it was not on Miss Jane as he set his affections; for being so plain, as you might say mayhap there would not have been such a great objection to his having her."

The stranger made no reply, apparently being lost in thought over Farmer Stisted's last words. And he continued:

"He would not have been such a bad match in those days, for her, at least; for he was a fine, gallant-looking young chap, with a pleasant word for every one."

"You remember him?"

"Yes, well. I never thought very ill of him, myself. A hasty word, a blow, these come over-quickly when the blood is young."

"Do you think I am like him?" The speaker drew himself up, and stood looking with something almost like anxiety into Farmer Stisted's red, comely face. "When I knew him," he added, "we used to be often thought to resemble one another."

"I can not see it myself, sir," said Mr. Stisted, slowly; "but then, sir, begging your pardon, it is not easy to draw comparisons between the young and the old."

The man addressed unfolded his arms, and leant once more against the stile, heaving a quick impatient sigh as he did so. "It is fortunate, is it not, Mr. Stisted, that hearts do not alter as quickly as faces do?"

"Nay, sir, I can not see as you're right there. Hearts grow older along with the faces they belong to, else husbands and wives would not get along as well as they do. As we grow older ourselves, we do not miss the youth in the face opposite; leastways, I don't in Maggie's," said the farmer, simply.

"Perhaps that is because you see the youth still there; you remember it, you see. But if you had grown old far apart, it would perhaps have been different."

"Maybe," replied Mr. Stisted, doubtfully, apparently a little out of his depths. "But come, it is time I was back at the farm. Perhaps you would like a bit of breakfast with us, sir? There'll be but little doing in the village yet awhile, and my wife will be glad to see you."

The stranger accepted the proffered hospitality, and he and the farmer turned away together.

Maggie proved quite as hospitable as her husband had predicted, and when breakfast had been partaken of, and Mr. Stisted had gone out to his work,

the stranger found himself lingering on still, talking to sweet, placid-faced Margaret Stisted.

He had half a mind to ask her about this village tragedy that was occupying his mind this morning; but "better not," he decided, "better wait now." And he had waited so long, that a little longer could not make much difference.

So he just dawdled on about the farm and the pleasant farm-garden long enough for the day's work to be well in hand, and then he wished his hostess "Good-bye," and with quick, impatient steps took his way to the village.

Once there, he walked straight to the footpath across the meadows that led up from Bythorpe Village to Bythorpe Manor; but at the entrance gate he paused, and gazed with tender eyes at the little house on the opposite of the road, that exactly faced him—the little creeper-covered cottage where the Doctor's widow lived.

He even made one half-step toward it; but "No," he murmured, "she comes first. We will go there together." But still he lingered, as if longing to pierce the mystery of those drawn blinds; and even as he thus paused there was the sound of horses' feet, and there came in view, down the narrow street, a carriage drawn by two fine chestnuts.

Before it the village children fell hastily back, and, standing on one side, gazed with mingled awe and admiration. And assuredly it was a sight to call forth admiration, for every thing seemed so perfect; the carriage itself, the prancing horses, the fair-haired girl, so like the young, lovely mother by whose side she sat, the two little golden-headed children opposite. There was surely no fault to be found anywhere.

Only, to a wayfarer standing by the roadside gazing at them, the sun seemed of a sudden to be darkened in heaven, the earth to have lost the beauty of a summer's morn.

"Helen!" he cried, in tones of anguish wrung from a breaking heart, but she did not hear.

She saw him, of course, for she was looking at him, wondering, maybe, who this stranger was in familiar little Bythorpe. But that was all.

The dust from the carriage wheels made thick the air for a moment, and when it cleared away the vision had vanished.

"Who is it?" he questioned, when he could command his voice, turning to a villager standing by his side.

"You lady? Lady Edmeade. She's goin' to Lunnon. She was daughter of the old Squire's," he added, "and married Sir Wilfred Edmeade."

"Has she been married long?"

"Let us see, now. 'Twill be fourteen years come August, for it was the same day, I mind well, as my youngest was born. Eh, but she has bonnie children," he murmured as he turned away.

And Robert Sutton found himself alone in the bright early sun, scarcely four hours since he saw it rise for what was to have been the happiest day of his life, and already the end had come.

He waited thus, reviewing this ending to his romance, for a few seconds; thinking of the sunny-haired, broken-hearted girl, who had clung to him those long, long years ago, the tears streaming down her cheeks.

"I believe in you, Robert. Whatever the world may say, I believe in you. Only swear to me that you will credit nothing against me that you may hear, for I will be true to you. And oh, Robert, directly you are free, come straight to me. I will wait, thought it be for years!"

And he had kissed her and sworn it. Now the oath was fulfilled—his part of it, at least; he had come back.

Then, those few brief seconds over, he crossed the little dusty road, passed the village school, whence issued the sound of many children's voices singing the morning hymn, and entered the low cottage opposite, and knelt with a great tearless sob at the feet of an old blind woman, who, putting out a withered hand, and stroking softly the curls so thickly strewn with gray, murmured, "My son, my son! Have you come, then, at last? Ah! it has been weary waiting; but I lived on, for I knew the truth must be known some day, and that then you would come home."—*Leisure Hours.*

It is difficult to establish a charge of vagrancy. So long as a young man eats regularly at a free-lunch table he has visible means of support.—*N. O. Picayune.*