

The Quest of Sorrow

By Mrs. Ernest Levenson

I

IT is rather strange, in a man of my temperament, that I did not discover the void in my life until I was eighteen years old. And then I found out that I had missed a beautiful and wonderful experience.

I had never known grief. Sadness had shunned me, pain had left me untouched ; I could hardly imagine the sensation of being unhappy. And the desire arose in me to have this experience ; without which, it seemed to me, that I was not complete. I wanted to be miserable, despairing : a Pessimist ! I craved to feel that gnawing fox, Anxiety, at my heart ; I wanted my friends (most of whom had been, at some time or other, more or less heartbroken) to press my hand with sympathetic looks, to avoid the subject of my trouble, from delicacy ; or, better still, to have long, hopeless talks with me about it, at midnight. I thirsted for salt tears ; I longed to clasp Sorrow in my arms and press her pale lips to mine.

Now this wish was not so easily fulfilled as might be supposed, for I was born with those natural and accidental advantages that militate most against failure and depression. There was my
appearance.

appearance. I have a face that rarely passes unnoticed (I suppose a man may admit, without conceit, that he is not repulsive), and the exclamation, "What a beautiful boy!" is one that I have been accustomed to hear from my earliest childhood to the present time.

I might, indeed, have known the sordid and wearing cares connected with financial matters, for my father was morbidly economical with regard to me. But, when I was only seventeen, my uncle died, leaving me all his property, when I instantly left my father's house (I am bound to say, in justice to him, that he made not the smallest objection) and took the rooms I now occupy, which I was able to arrange in harmony with my temperament. In their resolute effort to be neither uninterestingly commonplace nor conventionally bizarre (I detest—do not you?—the ready-made exotic) but at once simple and elaborate, severe and florid, they are an interesting result of my complex aspirations, and the astonishing patience of a bewildered decorator. (I think everything in a room should not be entirely correct; and I had some trouble to get a marble mantel-piece of a sufficiently debased design.) Here I was able to lead that life of leisure and contemplation for which I was formed and had those successes—social and artistic—that now began to pall upon me.

The religious doubts, from which I am told the youth of the middle classes often suffers, were, again, denied me. I might have had some mental conflicts, have revelled in the sense of rebellion, have shed bitter tears when my faiths crumbled to ashes. But I can never be insensible to incense; and there must, I feel, be something organically wrong about the man who is not impressed by the organ. I love religious rites and ceremonies, and on the other hand, I was an agnostic at five years old. Also, I don't think it matters. So here there is no chance for me.

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To be miserable one must desire the unattainable. And of the fair women who, from time to time, have appealed to my heart, my imagination, etc., every one, *without a single exception*, has been kindness itself to me. Many others, indeed, for whom I have no time, or perhaps no inclination, write me those letters which are so difficult to answer. How can one sit down and write, "My dear lady—I am so sorry, but I am really too busy?"

And with, perhaps, two appointments in one day—a light comedy one, say, in the Park, and serious sentiment coming to see one at one's rooms—to say nothing of the thread of a flirtation to be taken up at dinner and having perhaps to make a jealous scene of reproaches to some one of whom one has grown tired, in the evening—you must admit I had a sufficiently occupied life.

I had heard much of the pangs of disappointed ambition, and I now turned my thoughts in that direction. A failure in literature would be excellent. I had no time to write a play bad enough to be refused by every manager in London, or to be hissed off the stage; but I sometimes wrote verses. If I arranged to have a poem rejected I might get a glimpse of the feelings of the unsuccessful. So I wrote a poem. It was beautiful, but that I couldn't help, and I carefully refrained from sending it to any of the more literary reviews or magazines, for there it would have stood no chance of rejection. I therefore sent it to a commonplace, barbarous periodical, that appealed only to the masses; feeling sure it would not be understood, and that I should taste the bitterness of Philistine scorn.

Here is the little poem—if you care to look at it. I called it

FOAM-FLOWERS

Among the blue of Hyacinth's golden bells
 (Sad is the Spring, more sad the new-mown hay),
 Thou art most surely less than least divine,
 Like a white Poppy, or a Sea-shell grey.
 I dream in joy that thou art nearly mine ;
 Love's gift and grace, pale as this golden day,
 Outlasting Hollyhocks, and Heliotrope
 (Sad is the Spring, bitter the new-mown hay).
 The wandering wild west wind, in salt-sweet hope,
 With glad red roses, gems the woodland way.

Envoi

A bird sings, twittering in the dim air's shine,
 Amid the mad Mimosa's scented spray,
 Among the Asphodel, and Eglantine,
 "Sad is the Spring, but sweet the new-mown hay."

I had not heard from the editor, and was anticipating the return of my poem, accompanied by some expressions of ignorant contempt that would harrow my feelings, when it happened that I took up the frivolous periodical. Fancy my surprise when there, on the front page, was my poem—signed, as my things are always signed, "*Lys de la Vallée*." Of course I could not repress the immediate exhilaration produced by seeing oneself in print ; and when I went home I found a letter, thanking me for the *amusing parody on a certain modern school of verse*—and enclosing ten-and-six !

A parody ! And I had written it in all seriousness !

Evidently literary failure was not for me. After all, what I wanted most was an affair of the heart, a disappointment in love,
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an unrequited affection. And these, for some reason or other, never seemed to come my way.

One morning I was engaged with Collins, my servant, in putting some slight final touches to my toilette, when my two friends, Freddy Thompson and Claude de Verney, walked into my room.

They were at school with me, and I am fond of them both, for different reasons. Freddy is in the Army; he is two-and-twenty, brusque, slangy, tender-hearted, and devoted to me. De Verney has nothing to do with this story at all, but I may mention that he was noted for his rosy cheeks, his collection of jewels, his reputation for having formerly taken morphia, his epicurism, his passion for private theatricals, and his extraordinary touchiness. One never knew what he would take offence at. He was always being hurt, and writing letters beginning: "Dear Mr. Carington" or "Dear Sir"—(he usually called me Cecil), "I believe it is customary when a gentleman dines at your table," etc.

I never took the slightest notice, and then he would apologise. He was always begging my pardon and always thanking me, though I never did anything at all to deserve either his anger or gratitude.

"Hallo, old chap," Freddy exclaimed, "you look rather down in the mouth. What's the row?"

"I am enamoured of Sorrow," I said, with a sigh.

"Got the hump—eh? Poor old boy. Well, I can't help being cheery, all the same. I've got some ripping news to tell you."

"Collins," I said, "take away this eau-de-cologne. It's corked. Now, Freddy," as the servant left the room, "your news."

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"I'm engaged to Miss Sinclair. Her governor has given in at last. What price that? . . . I'm tremendously pleased, don't you know, because it's been going on for some time, and I'm awfully mashed, and all that."

Miss Sinclair! I remembered her—a romantic, fluffy blonde, improbably pretty, with dreamy eyes and golden hair, all poetry and idealism.

Such a contrast to Freddy! One associated her with pink chiffon, Chopin's nocturnes, and photographs by Mendelssohn.

"I congratulate you, my dear child," I was just saying, when an idea occurred to me. Why shouldn't I fall in love with Miss Sinclair? What could be more tragic than a hopeless attachment to the woman who was engaged to my dearest friend? It seemed the very thing I had been waiting for.

"I have met her. You must take me to see her, to offer my congratulations," I said.

Freddy accepted with enthusiasm.

A day or two after, we called. Alice Sinclair was looking perfectly charming, and it seemed no difficult task that I had set myself. She was sweet to me as Freddy's great friend—and we spoke of him while Freddy talked to her mother.

"How fortunate some men are!" I said, with a deep sigh.

"Why do you say that?"

"Because you're so beautiful," I answered, in a low voice, and in my *earlier manner*—that is to say, as though the exclamation had broken from me involuntarily.

She laughed, blushed, I think, and turned to Freddy. The rest of the visit I sat silent and as though abstracted, gazing at her. Her mother tried, with well-meaning platitudes, to rouse me from what she supposed to be my boyish shyness. . . .

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What happened in the next few weeks is rather difficult to describe. I saw Miss Sinclair again and again, and lost no opportunity of expressing my admiration; for I have a theory that if you make love to a woman long enough, and ardently enough, you are sure to get rather fond of her at last. I was progressing splendidly; I often felt almost sad, and very nearly succeeded at times in being a little jealous of Freddy.

On one occasion—it was a warm day at the end of the season, I remember—we had gone to skate at that absurd modern place where the ice is as artificial as the people, and much more polished. Freddy, who was an excellent skater, had undertaken to teach Alice's little sister, and I was guiding her own graceful movements. She had just remarked that I seemed very fond of skating, and I had answered that I was—on thin ice—when she stumbled and fell. . . . She hurt her ankle a little—a very little, she said.

“Oh, Miss Sinclair—‘Alice’—I am sure you are hurt!” I cried, with tears of anxiety in my voice. “You ought to rest—I am sure you ought to go home and rest.”

Freddy came up, there was some discussion, some demur, and finally it was decided that, as the injury was indeed very slight, Freddy should remain and finish his lesson. And I was allowed to take her home.

We were in a little brougham; delightfully near together. She leaned her pretty head, I thought, a little on one side—*my* side. I was wearing violets in my button-hole. Perhaps she was tired, or faint.

“How are you feeling now, dear Miss Sinclair?”

“Much better—thanks!”

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"I am afraid you are suffering. . . . I shall never forget what I felt when you fell!—My heart ceased beating!"

"It's very sweet of you. But, it's really nothing."

"How precious these few moments with you are! I should like to drive with you for ever! Through life—to eternity!"

"Really! What a funny boy you are!" she said softly.

"Ah, if you only knew, Miss Sinclair, how—how I envy Freddy."

"Oh, Mr. Carington!"

"Don't call me Mr. Carington. It's so cold—so ceremonious. Call me Cecil. Won't you?"

"Very well, Cecil."

"Do you think it treacherous to Freddy for me to envy him—to tell you so?"

"Yes, I am afraid it is; a little."

"Oh no. I don't think it is.—How are you feeling now, Alice?"

"Much better, thanks very much." . . .

Suddenly, to my own surprise and entirely without pre-meditation, I kissed her—as it were, accidentally. It seemed so shocking, that we both pretended I hadn't, and entirely ignored the fact: continuing to argue as to whether or not it was treacherous to say I envied Freddy. . . . I insisted on treating her as an invalid, and lifted her out of the carriage, while she laughed nervously. It struck me that I was not unhappy yet. But that would come.

The next evening we met at a dance. She was wearing flowers that Freddy had sent her; but among them she had fastened one or two of the violets I had worn in my button-hole. I smiled, amused at the coquetry. No doubt she would laugh at me when she thought she had completely turned my head. She fancied me
a child!

a child! Perhaps, on her wedding-day, I should be miserable at last.

. . . "How tragic, how terrible it is to long for the impossible!"

We were sitting out, on the balcony. Freddy was in the ball-room, dancing. He was an excellent dancer.

"*Impossible!*" she said; and I thought she looked at me rather strangely. "But you don't really, really——"

"Love you?" I exclaimed, lyrically. "But with all my soul! My life is blighted for ever, but don't think of me. It doesn't matter in the least. It may kill me, of course; but never mind. Sometimes, I believe, people *do* live on with a broken heart, and——"

"My dance, I think," and a tiresome partner claimed her.

Even that night, I couldn't believe, try as I would, that life held for me no further possibilities of joy. . . .

About half-past one the next day, just as I was getting up, I received a thunderbolt in the form of a letter from Alice.

Would it be believed that this absurd, romantic, literal, beautiful person wrote to say she had actually broken off her engagement with Freddy? She could not bear to blight my young life; she returned my affection; she was waiting to hear from me.

Much agitated, I hid my face in my hands. What! was I never to get away from success—never to know the luxury of an unrequited attachment? Of course, I realised, now, that I had been deceiving myself; that I had only liked her enough to wish to make her care for me; that I had striven, unconsciously, to that end. The instant I knew she loved me all my interest was gone. My passion had been entirely imaginary. I cared nothing,
absolutely

absolutely nothing, for her. It was impossible to exceed my indifference. And Freddy! Because *I* yearned for sorrow, was that a reason that I should plunge others into it? Because I wished to weep, were my friends not to rejoice? How terrible to have wrecked Freddy's life, by taking away from him something that I didn't want myself!

The only course was to tell her the whole truth, and implore her to make it up with poor Freddy. It was extremely complicated. How was I to make her see that I had been *trying* for a broken heart; that I *wanted* my life blighted?

I wrote, endeavouring to explain, and be frank. It was a most touching letter, but the inevitable, uncontrollable desire for the *beau rôle* crept, I fear, into it and I fancy I represented myself, in my firm resolve not to marry her whatever happened—as rather generous and self-denying. It was a heart-breaking letter, and moved me to tears when I read it.

This is how it ended:

. . . . "You have my fervent prayers for your happiness, and it may be that some day you and Freddy, walking in the daisied fields together, under God's beautiful sunlight, may speak not unkindly of the lonely exile.

"Yes, exile. For to-morrow I leave England. To-morrow I go to bury myself in some remote spot—perhaps to Trouville—where I can hide my heart and pray unceasingly for your welfare and that of the dear, dear friend of my youth and manhood.

"Yours and his, devotedly, till death and after,

"CECIL CARINGTON."

It was not a bit like my style. But how difficult it is not to
fall

fall into the tone that accords best with the temperament of the person to whom one is writing !

I was rather dreading an interview with poor Freddy. To be misunderstood by him would have been really rather tragic. But even here, good fortune pursued me. Alice's letter breaking off the engagement had been written in such mysterious terms, that it was quite impossible for the simple Freddy to make head or tail of it. So that when he appeared, just after my letter (which had infuriated her)—Alice threw herself into his arms, begging him to forgive her ; pretending—women have these subtleties—that it had been a *boutade* about some trifle.

But I think Freddy had a suspicion that I had been “mashed,” as he would say, on his *fiancée*, and thought vaguely that I had done something rather splendid in going away.

If he had only stopped to think, he would have realised that there was nothing very extraordinary in “leaving England” in the beginning of August ; and he knew I had arranged to spend the summer holidays in France with De Verney. Still, he fancies I acted nobly. Alice doesn't.

And so I resigned myself, seeing, indeed, that Grief was the one thing life meant to deny me. And on the golden sands, with the gay striped bathers of Trouville, I was content to linger with laughter on my lips, seeking for Sorrow no more.