

Sybil's Dilemma.

BY JULIA, LADY JERSEY.

CHAPTER I.



EVERYBODY said Lady Courteney was charming—Sybil Courteney, as her intimate friends called her—she was very pretty, very attractive, and perfectly aware of the fascination she could exercise over most men. She was a little spoilt, perhaps, by her constant success in the world, but scarcely worldly in the sense in which that word is generally used. She was clever and very amusing, and was always ready for any impromptu dinner or party where she thought she was likely to be amused. She was therefore a general favourite, and almost as much appreciated by her own sex as by the other. In 188—, the time when this little reminiscence begins, Lady Courteney appeared to have attracted the attentions of a young man, who was her constant companion and most devoted follower wherever she went. To judge from appearances, he had fallen desperately in love with her. It would be more difficult to define her feelings towards him. It was evident she was proud of her conquest, and being fond of admiration, was flattered by the devotion of Sir William Young, who was exceedingly handsome, very distinguished-looking, tall, fair, and self-possessed. Hitherto, while partly encouraging him, she had always avoided making any serious response to his repeated professions of deep and sincere attachment. But one day he was sitting with her in the boudoir of her lovely house near Hyde Park, and Sybil could see that he appeared to be more subdued and fascinated than usual, and to be suffering from a mixture of pain and happiness. Everything showed it, his attitude, his emotion, and the sound of his voice. And yet he had tried to overcome this love, which was fast becoming a passion. This struggle did not escape Sybil's penetration; all that Sir William thought, she was thinking at the same time; and her look was sometimes encouraging, sometimes reproachful, perhaps even foreshadowing a rupture. At last, after a long silence he said, "Why do you always treat me with such unbending rigour? You are your own mistress, you are free to love me, and I love you so much—too much; why did I ever know you?"

"Oh, I am tired of that word! I hear it repeated on all sides. If I were to listen to you, you would soon get tired of me—soon forget even the way to my house!"

"Do you not believe in love?"

"Perhaps, but under certain circumstances."

Sir William pressed her to explain. It was now Sybil's turn to be embarrassed; she blushed deeply, hesitated, and occupied herself with the folds of her dress. Sir William saw his advantage and pressed her again.

"Well," she replied, "I will be frank;" but again she hesitated, seeking for some subterfuge, and at last said, "I have loved, I have even suffered; now, I have got

over my feelings, I am free, happy, sought after, I have many friends; all I have to look forward to by-and-by is a husband."

Sir William bent his head, and appeared deeply hurt.

"What have I said to vex you?" said Sybil, quite unconcerned by his attitude. "You opened your heart to me, and pressed me to do the same; I have done so." And then offering him her pretty little hand, she added, "We shall remain, I hope, the same friends as before?"

He took her hand, clasped it in his own, and she felt that a tear had fallen upon it.

"You are very cruel, Sybil, but be it as you wish, only let me stay near you, be with you, and you will some day be touched by my faithful love."

Sybil got up and—without heeding his words—smilingly told him that he must now go, but that he might come to her opera box that evening at nine o'clock, "when," she said, "I will introduce you to a charming man who has been lately presented to me."

"Oh," replied he, with an accent of jealousy, "you have not told me of this before. But I will be punctual."

In the earlier part of the season, a new attaché had arrived at the French Embassy, Count Jules de Taverney. He had seen and known the world, and being above thirty, his beauty, for he was decidedly good-looking, was matured, and his experience and success in society added force to his expression. Sir William was more natural, more simple; he could not control or hide his emotions, while the Count boasted of his calmness, of his mistrust of women, and of the improbability of his again falling in love, even with a person so fascinating as Lady Courteney. She must have seen, under all this coldness, that he was not so impassive as he wished to appear, and it was this probably that tempted her to try and make his conquest. The opportunity, however, seemed unlikely to arrive; he avoided her on every occasion, and even declined to make her acquaintance, though much pressed to do so by his numerous friends.

One day, however, when he was in the diplomatic circle at the Drawing-room, looking in a desultory way at the many insignificant persons who passed before him, and when all was nearly over, Sybil made her appearance. He was so struck by the charm of her manner, and by her graceful prettiness, that he felt he could no longer resist the temptation of being introduced to her, and looked round for some one to perform the little ceremony. Lady Courteney showed neither eagerness nor pleasure when a mutual friend brought him up to her, but received him very naturally. It amused her to think that, despite all his resolutions, he had succumbed, and though he had steeled his heart against her, he could not resist the fascination of her eyes, so dark, so soft under their long lashes.

This was the beginning of the struggle between prudence and love in which he felt himself engaged. Count de Taverney knew Lady Courteney was a coquette, fond

of playing with men's feelings, untouched herself by their devotion, and therefore possessing a superior power over them. But all this counted for nothing; in his eyes he thought he was a match for her, and accepted the challenge. And so it happened that he found himself invited to her box at the opera, where Sir William was already in possession.

There is a comedy sometimes played by four persons, an actress and three actors, who adopt different names, past, present, and future. We do not go so far as the future, we will occupy ourselves with the past, Sir William Young—and with the present, M. de Taverney. We confess we are not much interested in the past, but singularly attracted by the present, and shall see, by-and-by, the development of the Count's feelings towards Sybil. He began with great prejudices against her, and a great determination not to be ensnared by her coquetry. He felt they were equally matched, and he looked forward to a flirtation which would amuse him during the remainder of the season.

Things went on in this manner for some time. Sybil was constantly in company with her two admirers, and it was difficult to guess which of them she most wished to captivate.

After the evening spent at the opera, poor Sir William felt that he was daily losing ground, but he would not give way to his rival. He became silent and depressed, while the Count, with his greater knowledge of the world and of society, amused Sybil with his anecdotes and agreeable conversation; at the same time carefully avoiding anything that might lead her to imagine he was seriously attracted towards her. He was neither more nor less gay, more nor less attentive; he was just the same as the first day he was introduced to her. This made Sybil furious, and it was now her turn to retaliate.

CHAPTER II.

IN the preceding chapter of this little sketch we left Lady Courteney between Sir William Young and M. de Taverney. By degrees, from various circumstances, Sir William seemed gradually to disappear from the scene; so that the Count was left more and more confronted and almost alone with this fair woman, whom he had thought at one time that he could subdue and bend to his will.

During the course of a struggle where his energy failed him every moment, he knew too well that the weakness was on his side and all the strength on hers; and at this period of our relation, none of his former friends and associates would in him have recognised the Jules de Taverney of earlier days. His habitual coldness, his calm manner, had given rise to a nervous irritation, the strongest he had ever experienced. He passed his days without rest, his nights without sleep. Henceforth he was quite incapable of continued application to any occupation; if he took up a book, it was laid down in ten minutes; indeed, he had reached that state that he only lived in Sybil. His letters to his mother, whose consolation and support he had ever been, became every day shorter. Jules was in love, and more deeply in love than he had ever been. In his younger

days—as in the life of most men—he had certainly passed through many an episode of love, some serious enough, and one of which had been fatally ended by death. But in vain he recalled to his memory any feelings of the past that could in any way resemble those from which he now suffered; the memories of the past were dumb. “To what purpose,” he said to himself, “are these past years of experience and sad trials, so much natural coldness, so much reason? This same heart which bleeds still, which has been so cruelly tried in its family affections, allows itself to be overcome and to be completely dominated by the most unexpected passion!” Reflections of this kind attacked M. de Taverney from morning till night, and gave him no repose. He felt he was gradually slipping down a dangerous descent; he tried to battle against it, to struggle to regain his equanimity, and without finding, we will not say a friendly hand (he did not wish to confide his secret to any one), but some dumb object, some branch to arrest his fall. Once or twice he said to Sybil, “I do not love you;” but Sybil knew he was not speaking the truth, and paid no attention to his words. He even passed twenty-four hours, twenty-four long hours without seeing her, but the day following at the accustomed hour he called at her house, and trembled with anxiety, with impatience till he was admitted into her boudoir. There he fell on his knees, he covered with kisses the most beautiful little feet in the world, and her hands so delicate and so white, which she was slowly drawing out of her black gloves. He descended the precipice more and more rapidly, and he left more madly in love with her than when he arrived. One day, however, he had enough strength of mind left, or at least he thought he had, to make an effort to free himself from the abject state of love into which he had fallen, and of which he was ashamed. He was humiliated at feeling himself no longer a free agent, and he resolved to try a measure which in such cases is supposed to be infallible, and which he had once before, a long time ago, tried with success.

He had a letter which had formerly been written to him by a gentle and tender-hearted woman, once his lover, now a sincere friend. This letter had no date, no signature, only an initial, and that a fancy one; the writing was an ordinary English writing, with no distinctive character, and there was therefore no indiscretion, no indelicacy, and especially no imprudence in making use of it. There was almost a fortunate coincidence in asking an old friend to help him out of the danger he was in. This letter had formerly been very pleasant and dear to Jules; now it was to be useful to him—it was the branch of the tree to the drowning man.

M. de Taverney took the letter and went to call on Lady Courteney, whom he did not find alone; there were other visitors, and he entered into the general conversation, which gave him leisure to look at Sybil, and also to mature his little plan. In a short time the visitors left; need it be said that this was sufficient to make his experiment impossible? Alone with this adorable creature whose every glance pierced his heart,

his courage left him, his plan was forgotten. Jules was one of those men whose nervous nature prevents their acting upon a tête-à-tête. Give them an audience, nay, one spectator only, they are masters of themselves, impassible, and fit for the occasion, ready with their reply. Deprive them of their audience, which is their support, they lose their head, they stammer and fall at the feet of their mistress and throw far from them the mask and the costume they had assumed.

But this time fate came to Jules's assistance and sent him the opportunity he was waiting for. A friend of Sybil's called and they all began talking of an indiscretion committed by some one, on some subject, which occupied Sybil and her friends, and there had been much whispering together as to the probable name of the man or the lady who had been so indiscreet.

"Who is it?" inquired Sybil of M. de Taverney, after naming two or three persons on whom suspicions might fall, and who, whenever such stories arose, were always placed at the head of the list.

"You do not know her," answered Jules.

"But still——"

"Would you like to see her handwriting?"

Sybil got up. Jules took from his pocket the letter without name and without date, and gave it to her, quite prepared, however, to get it from her, if she showed the slightest desire to keep it. But she simply read it, gave it back again, threw herself into her arm-chair, and, addressing Jules, said in the calmest voice, words which signified, "All is over between us."

This scene, though it had only lasted a few minutes, had completely exhausted Jules's energy. He got up, bowed to Sybil, shook hands with the visitor, who was quite unconscious of what had been going on before her, and left the room.

Here upon earth we ought certainly not to look for the recompense of our actions, and if we think that tomorrow will bring us the reward of the good instincts of the day before, we shall probably be disappointed. Jules had certainly given a brilliant proof of moral courage, which in a sort of way resembled the fortitude of a man who very slowly thrusts a dagger into his heart. He had set up a struggle between reason and love, sincerely hoping that reason would triumph. Alas! once more in the history of the human heart, reason was the weaker, and Jules returned to his house

more in love than ever. He threw himself on his bed and wept.

In the evening, he again tried to meet Lady Courteney—he went to a concert where he knew she was expected, but he did not see her; why did she not go to it? Was it chance or calculation on her part? He could not tell—he looked for her with an anxious feverish eye; he was pale, pre-occupied, and he soon departed to return to his dull dwelling, shedding tears of love, tears of rage—ashamed of the failure of his scheme.

He felt he was deserving of pity, but he would not ask pity from any one, yet he had near him a friend who was to be relied on, devoted and sincere; a man whose reason did not spoil his heart. He could have confided his grief to him, and in such acute misery it is a relief to be able to say, "I suffer—help me, advise me."

However, M. de Taverney had sworn to himself that he would not divulge his secret; he passed the night without sleep, the hours appearing even longer than they had appeared the preceding evening. In the morning he took a pen and wrote to Sybil. He scarcely knew what he said—but it must have been a very straightforward and unstudied letter. Many people would have said, Jules himself would have said, if he had not been so deeply in love, that under the circumstances it was the weakest letter that he could have written, and that probably Sybil had ever received.

He placed his pride at her feet, he told her in so many words, "I have tried to give up loving you and I find it is impossible. I am provoked with myself, but I adore you. It would have been more politic, more dignified, not to have confessed this—to have resigned you—to have placed an impassable barrier between us. But I cannot go away, I am chained to my profession here. I cannot escape from your all-pervading personality, from your beautiful eyes, they see everything. I am obliged to remain near you, and I adore you." He asked her to name an hour when he could call upon her—speak to her, tell her again and again what he had already so often told her—ask her pardon, for what? he did not know for what—but he begged her to let him fall at her feet and worship her. He sent the letter to Sybil, and her answer was . . . but I shall leave it to my readers to decide what answer they would have sent—what answer their own hearts would have prompted them to write.

