

"STRANGERS YET."

A Complete Story.

A table littered with business-papers, and a man, pen in hand, sitting with lowered head, bending studiously over the documents before him. The room, a study, is richly and handsomely furnished. The fire is blazing cheerfully; but the solitary occupant of the apartment looks sad and weary enough.

He lifts his head presently and looks across the table. It is not a happy face by any means; at this moment Jasper Gascoigne has the appearance of a broken-hearted man. He has laid aside the smiling mask that society demands, and the eyes gazing so steadily across the table, but seeing nothing, are filled with a pain that the outer world little guesses is far more natural than the every-day careless expression that he wears before his fellow-men.

After a little while he pushes away the papers, and, rising, stands leaning against the chimney-piece, looking down at the leaping jets of flame. He is tall and comely enough, for all the weariness of his face. The clustering brown hair is thick and curling, but the eyes and mouth are pitiful in their set sadness. The windows of the soul tell their own story of trouble and sorrow. There is no need for him to blot out the trouble by a smile; no eye sees him as the lines deepen in his forehead and his set mouth hardens.

The handle of the door turns; and in a second, even before the door fully opens, the expression of Jasper Gascoigne's face changes. It is grave still, but the pain has given place to a look of careless indifference as he glances up at his wife entering the room.

"Going out?" he asks, and wheels the arm-chair round to the fire.

"You forget this is the night of Lady Gordon's ball," she answers, speaking as carelessly as he had done himself.

"True; I had forgotten," and husband and wife stand for a moment side by side.

"Are you not coming?" she asks, with ever so slight an accent of surprise in her even tones as she looks up at him.

"No; I am busy tonight."

Her eyes follow his to the litter of papers. She shrugs her white shoulders disdainfully.

"You needn't mind those tonight unless you choose."

"Pardon me," he says, an old look coming into his face.

A silence falls between them. He goes back to his chair and bends once more over his work. She stands on the hearthrug, her eyes looking into the fire. The light shines on her white silk dress and flashes on the diamonds on her neck, her arms, her hair.

Everything about Milly Gascoigne speaks of wealth; the very lace on her dress represents a small fortune in itself; yet the expression on her face is hardly less miserable than her husband's was a few moments before. A fair sweet face it is, small and oval; the fair hair catches every gleam of light and keeps it there in its glossy coils; and the eyes, large, bright and brown, would impart beauty to any countenance.

"Jasper!"—she speaks without turning round.

"Well?" He looks up at her, standing, fair and lovely, in the radiance of fire and lamp light.

"Won't you come tonight?" she asks, her eyes still fixed on the fire.

"Do you want me?" he inquires; and his voice is calm enough, but a sudden yearning leaps into his eyes.

She does not see it, nor the hard expression that replaces the momentary tenderness at her answer.

"It would look better to have you with me," she says, trifling with her fan as she speaks.

"You are not usually so particular about appearances," laughs Jasper Gascoigne; and her lips twitch at the laugh and tone.

"It does not matter," she says coolly. Two lines of a song come into her mind—

"After years of life together,
After touch of wedded hands,"

A girl with a childlike voice had sung it the other evening, and for one second her husband's eyes had met hers. She is thinking of that look and that song now, as she stands not a yard from his chair, as cold and silent as himself.

A man-servant opens the door; the carriage is ready. Mrs. Gascoigne gathers up her fan and gloves; her handkerchief flutters to the carpet. Mr. Gascoigne picks up the scrap of lace and gossamer, and she takes it.

"Mrs. Beverly is coming with me," she vouchsafes. "I promised to call for her."

Jasper Gascoigne puts the white fleecy wrap carefully round his wife's shoulders and leads her out to the carriage.

"I hope you will enjoy yourself," he says, looking in at the window for a second.

"I dare say," is the cold indifferent answer.

He stands back without another word, and the carriage rolls away. Bare-headed in the chill night air he stands till it is out of sight, and then returns slowly across the hall to his study.

For fully twenty minutes he sits grave and thoughtful, his head leaning wearily on his hand; then, with a sigh that is akin to a sob, he once more takes up his work.

The Gascoignes' carriage rolls swiftly through the lighted streets. Milly, leaning back, looks straight in front of her, her lips tightly pressed together. She is too proud to allow even to herself that they are quivering because her husband is not at her side to-night, that it has all been a bitter, sad mistake. They have been married seven years—seven long years—and they are "strangers yet."

Wan sad faces branded with the stamp of want and misery grow sadder as they catch sight of the carriage rolling past and see for one brief instant a being so far above them lying back in silks and laces, a creature who has never known what it is to be cold and hungry and miserable. They know not that there is a pain far keener still.

Milly Gascoigne is thinking deeply; she has brought her trouble out into the light and scans its dark, hideous proportions hopelessly. Then she goes back to days long gone by. She is not Jasper Gascoigne's wife, but a child, white-faced and

miserable because her father is dying and in a few hours she will be alone in the world. She sees a room so dark that it is with difficulty she recognises the white drawn face on the pillow; she hears a voice say—

"Jarvis, I trust my child to you because of the friendship that has been between us all these years; be kind to her and guard her life's happiness. She will be rich; my little Milly will be an heiress. Jarvis, my old friend, let no man make her his wife who love her not with his whole soul. Promise."

All her life long the child remembers those words. Years after, when Milly leaves school and suitors woo the heiress, she remembers her father's dying words.

Looking back now, those days seem the happiest of Milly's life. Through a mist of blinding tears she sees Jasper Gascoigne's face coming in upon that life, and a scene of long ago is as free as it was then. She beholds a girl in a white dress lying her hand in a man's outstretched palm, too shy and proud to let him see by word or sign that he is more to her than aught else in the whole world, though she has promised to be his wife. He is grave too; but he says he loves her; and she remembers the strange agitation of Mr. Jarvis's face when Jasper Gascoigne, with her cold hand in his, leads her up to her guardian as his promised wife.

And then comes the beginning of the sad, bitter ending, the dark shadow that creeps up and takes its station between them before they are man and wife. A woman's voice, false and treacherous, blots out for ever the happiness in Milly's life. It is hinted that he has married her for her money; and Milly's heart is locked to Jasper Gascoigne for ever and ever. And thus, on her wedding-morning, cold and proud she stands beside him at the altar and makes her vows. And so the first stone of the barrier between them is laid.

The same voice laughingly tells him that he has married a lovely wife with no heart—some one had stolen it long before. The poison of the cruel words works well; he little knows that a woman's bitter jealousy has planned his lifelong misery. Husband and wife distrust each other; in all the years that follow they never draw one whit nearer to each other's heart. They have formed the nearest, dearest tie on earth; but they are "strangers yet." They have nothing in common; no sweet communion passes between those whom Heaven had joined together.

Ah, well, it is sad and weary work! The years go by, the weeks, the days. There is a little grave in the churchyard, a little life has ended; but husband and wife come no nearer in sorrow than in the days when the baby-fingers twined father's and mother's hands in one, and each drew back at the thrill when hand touched hand. The little messenger of love has gone, and Jasper Gascoigne knows not that his wife weeps scalding bitter tears as she lays the tiny baby-clothes away, that her heart aches with a sense of bitter loneliness, that she longs to put her arms about her husband's neck and weep out her sorrow on his breast.

And she? Milly never knows of his bitter grief and disappointment when the baby-hands are folded together in death, that he yearns for the love and sympathy his wife has not for him, and yearns in vain. "Strangers yet," they drift farther and farther apart. Milly knows no more of her husband's business and affairs than the veriest stranger; she knows not how he toils and works. Her lip curls as she spends the money he loves instead of herself; he makes no comment as bills come in for dress that would well-nigh ruin a rich man. She cares not how extravagant she is, and denies herself nothing that is likely for a moment to deaden the weary unsatisfied feeling that is always at her heart.

"How lovely Mrs. Gascoigne is looking to-night!" So the world says, and sees no farther than the smiling eyes, detects no ring of sorrow in the pleasant voice.

Milly does not dance much; and she never flirts. With all the sad estrangement, there has never been any trouble of that sort. She talks and smiles as society demands; and is conscious that she is one of the best-dressed women in the room; but the consciousness does not bring much pleasure. Milly catches herself feeling jealous of a girl in a white gown and dress who wears no jewelry; her whole "turn-out" must have cost very little, and yet there is something in the fresh young face which Milly Gascoigne, with all her wealth and beauty, lacks. Contentment shines out of the girl's happy eyes and hovers on her lips, there is an utter absence of care in the clear ringing voice. Milly looks after her as she passes by on a tall man's arm, and then turns to a lady at her side.

"Who is that?"—"Captain Haycroft."

"I don't mean the man—I mean the girl in the white dress."

"That little thing? Pretty, isn't she? Her name is Dorothy Levison; who is engaged to Captain Haycroft. It is a regular love-match."

Mrs. Gascoigne offers no comment; she looks at the crowd of fair women and brave men assembled to grace Lady Gordon's ball, and for once in society Milly appears what she really is, sad and weary at heart.

Lady Gordon notices the tired, listless look and comes across the room.

"I am sorry Mr. Gascoigne was not able to come to-night. I am so sorry he has been complaining."

A sudden gleam of interest comes into Milly's face. She looks with a puzzled expression at Lady Gordon, but that lady is totally oblivious of the surprise so plainly revealed in Milly's eyes and finishes her speech calmly.

"My husband met him on the day he had been to consult the doctor, and was quite shocked at his appearance; but I trust it is nothing serious."

"No," Milly says, with a little gasp; and for a second she turns as white as her dress. Then the sweet little mouth is closed firmly, and the world knows not what is passing in her mind.

Lady Gordon, with a few more polite sentences, passes on, heedless and unconscious that her words have fallen on deadened ears.

Through a mist that comes not of tears, but from faintness, Milly sees the crowd swaying past. Her husband ill, and she,

his wife, of all people in the world, to be ignorant of it! They are "strangers yet" indeed; and through the hum of voices and above the strains of dance-music she seems to hear a girl's voice singing and to see her husband's eyes give one brief look into hers as the words are wailed forth—

After years of life together,
After touch of wedded hands.

Ah, well, he married her for her money, and she will never let him see how she yearns and longs for the love and happiness that might have been! The light from the wax-tapers shines on her rich dress, her flashing jewels, and rests tenderly on the proud, sad face that has dropped its mask for once and looks pale and weary.

"You are very silent tonight, Mrs. Gascoigne," a man's voice is saying; and she answers without a smile—

"Yes, I am a dull companion tonight. I have a headache."

A headache she had nearly said, with the keen anguish of the weary wearing pain that sends the blood ebbing back from her face to the sad heart that has never beaten one pulsation quicker tonight for all the gay scene that holds such hollow mirth after all, such a bitter mockery of happiness.

For hours after his wife has gone, Mr. Gascoigne works, and busily too, at the pile of papers before him, bending over the table with knitted brows and compressed lips. He lays his pen down at last, lies back in his chair, and looks up at the ceiling. Such a haggard worn face it is. There is more than disappointment written there now, in the eyes gleam something that is akin to despair. Presently the firm mouth quivers and tears course slowly down his face.

He never raises his hand to wipe them away, never stirs, but remains leaning back in his chair till the bitter drops dry upon his cheek and his mouth has resumed its old stern expression. Then a weary sobbing sigh breaks from him as it against his will: for at that moment he pulls himself together, and, rising, paces up and down, backwards and forwards, his head bent low. The fire has burnt itself out long since. He pays no heed, and continues his weary pacing to and fro.

He is back at the table again, and apparently still deeply engrossed in his work, when Milly comes home. She stands gazing at the fire and not at her husband after she has entered the room looking a little paler, a little more tired, than she looked four hours before.

"Did you enjoy yourself?" Jasper Gascoigne speaks as though he has spent the long lonely hours very pleasantly.

Milly shrugs her shoulders with a gesture of indifference, and half turns her face towards him.

"It was not particularly amusing," she answers. She faces her husband as she speaks the next words. "Lady Gordon was asking after you."

"Was she?"

Mrs. Gascoigne's long lashes drop suddenly upon her cheek, the diamond necklace rises and falls a little quicker for a few moments, and then she is herself again.

"I am tired," she says; and her eyes rest on the papers on the table. "Are you going to stay up all night, Jasper?"

"My work is not finished yet," he answers, and looks at his wife standing before him in her rich dress.

She gathers her long train over her arm and smiles a scornful little smile. He is thinking, she tells herself, of the money she has brought him, the rich dowry that has made him the wealthy man he is. The bitter mockery of it strikes her. She knows she loves him, and she will die rather than permit him to discover the fact.

He raises his eyes and looks straight into the face with the unwise-like expression in the deep beautiful eyes. They fall beneath his gaze, and he cannot see the slowly-gathering tears. In all the years they have lived and known each other he has never once seen his wife cry—not even when she kissed her baby's dead face before the coffin-lid was screwed down; she had turned away, white and grief-stricken, to weep, not in her husband's arms, but alone.

One last attempt he makes—or rather it is the first Jasper Gascoigne has made in all the years of his married life, and as he speaks the blood rushes over his wife's face in a crimson tide.

"Kiss me, Milly!" he says, and stands before her, looking down with his whole soul pleading in his sad weary eyes.

But she never looks up. Milly misunderstands him to the last; and, if for one second she leans her head upon his breast with a feeling of intense happiness, she crushes the weakness directly and becomes cold and calm as his arms strain her tightly to him.

Fain would she wind hers about his neck and let woman's love have its way at last; but the feeling is conquered even before, with a calm smile, she lets him have the kiss he has asked for, and she draws herself from his embrace with a short mirthless laugh.

They have been nearer understanding each other at this moment than they have ever been during all the years of their married life; and now the short weak moment is over.

He heaves a weary sigh as his wife, without another word, crosses the room. She has reached the door when he speaks.

"Milly!"

It is almost a whisper; but she hears, though she makes no answer, and leaves the room without looking back.

She does so because her lips are quivering now beyond control and her tears falling heavy and fast. She knows not that all her life she will hear his voice calling her name, that her heart will ache with remorse and a bitter passionate pain for the awakening that comes too late.

Ghostly and gray, the chill morning light creeps in at the windows of the grim town-house—so dim and gray the light is still that it seems only to make the darkness more visible. A shadowy figure with a candle uplifted comes fitting down the wide staircase. Milly, with grave fear-haunted eyes and her hair hanging loosely over her shoulders, moves swiftly; she crosses the wide, cold hall, lays her hand upon the closed door of the study, and pauses with her fingers upon the handle, bending forward, listening, for fully a minute; then she opens the door and passes in, the flickering flame from the candle making varying and flashing bars of light as the slim white arm holds it above her head.

"Milly!" Her husband's voice, whis-

pering her name, is still in her ears; an indefinable dread—one of those vague presentiments that come to human beings once, or may be twice, in a lifetime—is knocking at her heart.

She has struggled and battled with the weakness; but it has conquered her at last and brought her down in the chill, ghostly dawn with a faint, sick feeling at her heart, which thumps and throbs as she enters the silent study.

It is not dark here; the steady glare of the gas is brighter than the struggling daylight without. Jasper Gascoigne is in the same chair still; he has fallen asleep, his head bowed down on his hands. The weary, dejected attitude is pitiful enough.

Milly, with sudden love and yearning in her eyes, comes forward and stands beside him.

"Jasper!"

In all her life she has never whispered his name as it falls from her lips now when he cannot hear it.

"Jasper!"—the word a little tremulous now.

He is so still, so quiet, with the light falling on his hair. Milly's fingers rest lightly on the bowed head.

"Jasper!" she says again, and shudders at the awful silence that follows.

There is no response, though her hand rests with unwonted tenderness on his hair, so still, so awful is the utter quiet of this sleep. Her hand passes from his head to the tightly-laced fingers. They are cold as ice, and she knows her husband is dead.

Next day all the world knows that Jasper Gascoigne is no more.

It is Sunday; and, when those who have known him pray to be delivered from sudden death, the familiar words, grown so common from constant use, come with terrific force, and for a few moments they realise how awfully solemn is that sudden death which they pray heaven to keep from them. They think of the widow, too, the saddest, most pitiful being in all the earth; and coming out of church they say one to another, "Poor Mr. Gascoigne! How sad it is—so terribly sudden!" Suddenly, as if any lengthened preparation can make the separation less bitter!

When the busy world begins again on Monday morning there is more to talk of than the mere sad circumstance of Jasper Gascoigne's sudden death. The world knows now that he died a ruined man, and whispers say that anxiety killed him; that all the keeping up of appearances, all the outward display of wealth, broke the poor heart at last; that with all the show of riches and prosperity, Jasper Gascoigne was not worth a penny.

The circle in which he moved has subject for conversation when the routine of another week commences, and it is found that one out of their number has dropped so suddenly out of their ranks. Ruin—utter, hopeless ruin—and the knowledge of it having killed him, the weary, gnawing uncertainty looked in his own heart for months, kept from his wife, kept above all from the busy, prying world without. The strain had given way at last, leaving him cold and dead, with meekly-folded hands and the lines on the weary brow smoothed out for evermore.

So he lies, his wife seated beside him with wild tearless eyes, ever fixed on the pale immovable features. He is dead; she will never hear his voice again!

The newly-made widow repeats these sad weary words again and again to her own heart; but no tears come to her relief. It is hardly like grief, this strange unnatural calm; no wild passionate weeping has lessened the agony of the pain, the sight of the still white face brings no rush of blinding tears. She sits beside him as still as poor Jasper Gascoigne himself, lying in the awful quiet of death. Only his face is peaceful in its deep repose; and hers—ah, the mere sight of it makes strangers weep while they whisper words of pity that she heeds not!

In one hand she holds her own photograph; she found it under her husband's folded arms. Her face was the last his troubled eyes had rested on.

Had she, his wife, been his last thought? Oh, the dread, awful mystery of his death! Milly thinks it all over and over again, with one thought growing in awful intensity with every throb of her pulses, each beat of her sorely-stricken heart; and remorse—not grief—breaks into sobbing sighs and yet brings no tears.

And then they take him away from her. She lays her lips on his, but makes no moan only whispers his name low under her breath as she takes her last long look at the face she had seen so cold, so indifferent to life. Fearless and white she stands in her widow's weeds and looks into her guardian's face with an expression that fills his eyes with a sudden rush of tears.

The funeral is over. Solemnly and slowly it wended its way through the streets. People wept as they stood by the open grave; but no tears moistened the haggard eyes of the dead man's wife. Dust to dust, ashes to ashes—life was over for one of those two, and they were "strangers yet."

She is dry-eyed still, as she stands in the freshness of her crape and sable garments and hears Mr. Jarvis tell her, in a voice scarcely audible, that Jasper Gascoigne's death has left her utterly unprotected for that when he died he was ruined, that during all that long night of agony before he bent his head and died he knew he was a ruined man, that the crash had come at last.

Mrs. Gascoigne hears him out, and, when he pauses, lifts her face to meet his gaze.

"But my fortune," she says slowly—"he could not touch that?"

At her words Mr. Jarvis shrinks and starts as if from a sudden blow, and bends his head low to avoid the eyes fixed upon his face. For some minutes there is a silence between them; then he speaks in a voice so low and broken that Milly had to bend forward to catch the words.

"You had no fortune," he says.

"Milly, bear with me; I alone am to blame."

A little surprise comes into her face at his agitation; he is shaking from head to foot.

"No fortune! Mr. Jarvis, I do not understand you."

No fortune, when the man who was buried this morning had married her for her money! A sudden shiver makes her tremble, too, as she looks at the grey-haired man opposite her.

He lifts his head at last and commences talking in a hard, mechanical voice, as if repeating something committed to memory.

"Milly, I have to tell you of a promise broken, a trust betrayed; I have to tell of

the basest, most dishonorable thing a man can do. It being unintentional is no excuse; the fact remains the same. Your father left your fortune in my charge; you will see how well I fulfilled his wishes. Mildred, I speculated with that money, and lost every shilling of it. I need not go into details now; you would not understand. Listen. There was one man I took into my confidence; he knew the whole unhappy affair; he was my friend—a tried, trusted friend—and between us we resolved that you should never know how your father's friend had failed in this trust. He toiled and toiled day and night to replace pound by pound the fortune that was to have been yours. The struggle killed him. Milly, pity and forgive me; that man was Jasper Gascoigne—your husband!"

The grief and trouble struggling in her face are pitiful to see, though her words are quiet enough in their utter hopelessness.

"One question more," she says. "Did I marry him?" She presses her hands tightly together and awaits the answer.

"Yes," replies Mr. Jarvis. "He married you because he loved you, and—"

But he breaks off at the wild wailing cry that comes from her lips.

"Oh, why did you not tell me? I thought, I thought— Oh, heaven, I see it all now!"

The bitter tears come at last, the tears of unavailing regret that bring no relief in their passionate pain.

For the poor broken heart lying so quietly in the grave all pain and suffering are over; he will never feel love's unsatisfied longing any more, never yearn to feel his wife's arms about his neck, to hear her voice whispering his name; but her life will be one long living sorrow.

A few moments pass, and apparently the bitter storm is over. Mrs. Gascoigne speaks with lips that in this life will never smile again.

"It would have been kinder to tell me," she says. "Mr. Jarvis, your silence was the greater wrong. You have broken my heart and his."

He hardly understands as he looks, not at the face of the woman he has wronged so utterly, but at the white trembling hands lying on her black dress.

"Milly, I meant to double your fortune—"

"Stop!" she cries, all her calmness giving way. "You tell me this when it is too late to make amends to him. You do not know how we misunderstood each other; we two, husband and wife, were farther apart than the veriest strangers on earth."

After a few more words she is left alone—alone with her husband's face and voice to haunt her memory as it will haunt her every day and night in the long years to come.

Mrs. Gascoigne drops out of the world. Five years pass, and poor Jasper Gascoigne is forgotten by all save the dark-robed figure who sobs so bitterly by his grave many a time and oft.

She is struggling and battling for life and daily bread, and the struggle is hard and bitter; full many a time is she tempted to lie down and die, for Milly is no heroine, only a broken-hearted woman who has learned the great lesson of resignation.

One morning she is absent from her daily round of duties. She is lying with a smile on her face; all the grief and pain are over for ever; she has met her husband again, and they are not strangers now.—*Selected.*

There was a man in my town,
And he was wondrous wise;
He jumped into a bramble bush
And scratched out both his eyes;
But, when he saw his eyes were out,
With all his might and main,
He jumped into another bush
And scratched them in again.

[Mr. Rudyard Kipling, who delights in odd, and quaint, and surprising things, has a fashion of beginning his clever stories with a rhyme that serves the double purpose of text and moral. I adopt the fashion by quoting one that fits my story. The stanza is from "Mother Goose's Melodies." But the story isn't. It is a page from real life, and a hundred persons would swear to the truth of it.]

THE FIRST JUMP.

Uncle Jerry Hamlin was fifty years old when he married. His mother "did for him" until he was forty. When that vigorous old lady moved up to the Methodist burying ground, Uncle Jerry stayed on at the homestead, closing his doors to all womankind. Once in a while Mrs. Weeks, the buxom widow across the road, carried him a Saturday night plate of beans—but she never went inside the house. It was just as well. If any housekeeper had penetrated that abode of dirt and desolation, her conscience would have cerved her to attack the cobwebs; and then it would have been an even chance whether she cleared them out or the spiders ate her up.

Uncle Jerry and the spiders got along together very well. They suited each other so perfectly that the sewing circle voted him a "settled old bach."

The sewing circle made a mistake. At fifty years of age, Uncle Jerry's thoughts turned wifelyward. Perhaps he felt that he had already eaten more than his "back of dirt" and ought to leave the rest for other single men. Perhaps he was lonely.

He should have gone across the road and wooed the widow Weeks. The sewing circle said so afterwards, and this time the sewing circle was right.

He didn't do it. Nor did he visit any other neighbor. Any one of a score would have welcomed him. Doubtless, the old man was too shy to open his heart to the women he had grown up with. Others have felt the same difficulty; hence, "matrimonial papers" and "correspondence bureaus."

So far as I can learn, his plan was first made known to Judelssohn, the peddler, while they two were bickering over a pair of suspenders.

"I know but I'd git married 'f I c'd find the right kind o' woman!" Uncle Jerry said suddenly, apropos of nothing in particular.

"A—ah?"

"I don't take no shine to any on 'em 'round here. I s'pose you see a good many, 'goin' 'round the way ye do?"

"Um—m—m?"

"I want a woman knows what's what!" Uncle Jerry pursued. "One th't won't be 'arnally trapasin' an' gaddin'."

D'know's 't makes much odds haow she looks, 's long 's she's got the git-up-an'-git-tew her. Know any likely ones?"

"A—ah?"

"I don't take no shine to any on 'em 'round here. I s'pose you see a good many, 'goin' 'round the way ye do?"