

In the Modern Vein

An Unsympathetic Love Story

By H. G. Wells

Of course the cultivated reader has heard of Aubrey Vair. He has published on three several occasions volumes of delicate verses,—some, indeed, border on indelicacy,—and his column “Of Things Literary” in the “Climax” is well known. His Byronic visage and an interview have appeared in the “Perfect Lady.” It was Aubrey Vair, I believe, who demonstrated that the humour of Dickens was worse than his sentiment, and who detected “a subtle bourgeois flavour” in Shakespeare. However, it is not generally known that Aubrey Vair has had erotic experiences as well as erotic inspirations. He adopted Goethe some little time since as his literary prototype, and that may have had something to do with his temporary lapse from sexual integrity.

For it is one of the commonest things that undermine literary men, giving us landslips and picturesque effects along the otherwise even cliff of their respectable life, ranking next to avarice, and certainly above drink, this instability called genius, or, more fully, the consciousness of genius, such as Aubrey Vair possessed. Since Shelley set the fashion, your man of gifts has been assured that his duty to himself and his duty to his wife are incompatible, and his renunciation of the Philistine has been marked by such infidelity as his means and courage warranted. Most virtue is lack of imagination. At any rate, a minor genius without his affections twisted into an inextricable muddle, and who did not occasionally shed sonnets over his troubles, I have never met.

Even Aubrey Vair did this, weeping the sonnets overnight into his blotting-book, and pretending to write literary *causerie* when his wife came down in her bath slippers to see what kept him up. She did not understand him, of course. He did this even before the other woman appeared, so ingrained is conjugal treachery in the talented mind. Indeed, he wrote more sonnets before the other woman came than after that event, because thereafter he spent much of his leisure in cutting down the old productions, retrimming them, and generally altering this ready-made clothing of his passion to suit her particular height and complexion.

Aubrey Vair lived in a little red villa with a lawn at the back and a view of the Downs behind Reigate. He lived upon discreet investment eked out by literary work. His wife was handsome, sweet, and gentle, and—such is the tender humility of good married women—she found her life’s happiness in seeing that little Aubrey Vair had well-cooked variety for dinner, and that their house was the neatest and brightest of all the houses they entered. Aubrey Vair enjoyed the dinners, and was proud of the house, yet nevertheless he mourned because his genius dwindled. Moreover, he grew plump, and corpulence threatened him.

We learn in suffering what we teach in song, and Aubrey Vair knew certainly that his soul could give no creditable crops unless his affections were harrowed. And how to harrow them was the trouble, for Reigate is a moral neighbourhood.

So Aubrey Vair’s romantic longings blew loose for a time, much as a seedling creeper might, planted in the midst of a flower-bed. But at last, in the fulness of time, the other woman came to the embrace of Aubrey Vair’s yearning heart-tendrils, and his romantic episode proceeded as is here faithfully written down.

The other woman was really a girl, and Aubrey Vair met her first at a tennis party at Redhill. Aubrey Vair did not play tennis after the accident to Miss Morton’s eye, and because latterly it

made him pant and get warmer and moister than even a poet should be; and this young lady had only recently arrived in England, and could not play. So they gravitated into the two vacant basket chairs beside Mrs. Bayne's deaf aunt, in front of the hollyhocks, and were presently talking at their ease together.

The other woman's name was unpropitious,—Miss Smith,—but you would never have suspected it from her face and costume. Her parentage was promising, she was an orphan, her mother was a Hindoo, and her father an Indian civil servant; and Aubrey Vair—himself a happy mixture of Kelt and Teuton, as, indeed, all literary men have to be nowadays—naturally believed in the literary consequences of a mixture of races. She was dressed in white. She had finely moulded, pale features, great depth of expression, and a cloud of delicately *frisé* black hair over her dark eyes, and she looked at Aubrey Vair with a look half curious and half shy, that contrasted admirably with the stereotyped frankness of your common Reigate girl.

"This is a splendid lawn—the best in Redhill," said Aubrey Vair, in the course of the conversation; "and I like it all the better because the daisies are spared." He indicated the daisies with a graceful sweep of his rather elegant hand.

"They are sweet little flowers," said the lady in white, "and I have always associated them with England, chiefly, perhaps, through a picture I saw 'over there' when I was very little, of children making daisy chains. I promised myself that pleasure when I came home. But, alas! I feel now rather too large for such delights."

"I do not see why we should not be able to enjoy these simple pleasures as we grow older—why our growth should have in it so much forgetting. For my own part—"

"Has your wife got Jane's recipe for stuffing trout?" asked Mrs. Bayne's deaf aunt, abruptly.

"I really don't know," said Aubrey Vair.

"That's all right," said Mrs. Bayne's deaf aunt. "It ought to please even you."

"Anything will please me," said Aubrey Vair; "I care very little—"

"Oh, it's a lovely dish," said Mrs. Bayne's deaf aunt, and relapsed into contemplation.

"I was saying," said Aubrey Vair, "that I think I still find my keenest pleasures in childish pastimes. I have a little nephew that I see a great deal of, and when we fly kites together, I am sure it would be bard to tell which of us is the happier. By-the-by, you should get at your daisy chains in that way. Beguile some little girl."

"But I did. I took that Morton mite for a walk in the meadows, and timidly broached the subject. And she reproached me for suggesting 'frivolous pursuits.' It was a horrible disappointment."

"The governess here," said Aubrey Vair, "is robbing that child of its youth in a terrible way. What will a life be that has no childhood at the beginning?"

"Some human beings are never young," he continued, "and they never grow up. They lead absolutely colourless lives. They are—they are etiolated. They never love, and never feel the loss of it. They are—for the moment I can think of no better image—they are human flower-pots, in which no soul has been planted. But a human soul properly growing must begin in a fresh childishness."

"Yes," said the dark lady, thoughtfully, "a careless childhood, running wild almost. That should be the beginning."

"Then we pass through the wonder and diffidence of youth."

"To strength and action," said the dark lady. Her dreamy eyes were fixed on the Downs, and her fingers tightened on her knees as she spoke. "Ah, it is a grand thing to live—as a man does—self-reliant and free."

“And so at last,” said Aubrey Vair, “come to the culmination and crown of life.” He paused and glanced hastily at her. Then he dropped his voice almost to a whisper—“And the culmination of life is love.”

Their eyes met for a moment, but she looked away at once. Aubrey Vair felt a peculiar thrill and a catching in his breath, but his emotions were too complex for analysis. He had a certain sense of surprise, also, at the way his conversation had developed.

Mrs. Bayne’s deaf aunt suddenly dug him in the chest with her ear-trumpet, and some one at tennis bawled, “Love all!”

“Did I tell you Jane’s girls have had scarlet fever?” asked Mrs. Bayne’s deaf aunt.

“No,” said Aubrey Vair.

“Yes; and they are peeling now,” said Mrs. Bayne’s deaf aunt, shutting her lips tightly, and nodding in a slow, significant manner at both of them.

There was a pause. All three seemed lost in thought, too deep for words.

“Love,” began Aubrey Vair, presently, in a severely philosophical tone, leaning back in his chair, holding his hands like a praying saint’s in front of him, and staring at the toe of his shoe,—“love is, I believe, the one true and real thing in life. It rises above reason, interest, or explanation. Yet I never read of an age when it was so much forgotten as it is now. Never was love expected to run so much in appointed channels, never was it so despised, checked, ordered, and obstructed. Policemen say, ‘This way, Eros!’ As a result, we relieve our emotional possibilities in the hunt for gold and notoriety. And after all, with the best fortune in these, we only hold up the gilded images of our success, and are weary slaves, with unsatisfied hearts, in the pageant of life.”

Aubrey Vair sighed, and there was a pause. The girl looked at him out of the mysterious darkness of her eyes. She had read many books, but Aubrey Vair was her first literary man, and she took this kind of thing for genius—as girls have done before.

“We are,” continued Aubrey Vair, conscious of a favourable impression,—“we are like fireworks, mere dead, inert things until the appointed spark comes; and then—if it is not damp—the dormant soul blazes forth in all its warmth and beauty. That is living. I sometimes think, do you know, that we should be happier if we could die soon after that golden time, like the Ephemerides. There is a decay sets in.”

“Eigh?” said Mrs. Bayne’s deaf aunt, startlingly. “I did n’t hear you.”

“I was on the point of remarking,” shouted Aubrey Vair, wheeling the array of his thoughts,—“I was on the point of remarking that few people in Redhill could match Mrs. Morton’s fine broad green.”

“Others have noticed it,” Mrs. Bayne’s deaf aunt shouted back. “It is since she has had in her new false teeth.”

This interruption dislocated the conversation a little. However—

“I must thank you, Mr. Vair,” said the dark girl, when they parted that afternoon, “for having given me very much to think about.”

And from her manner, Aubrey Vair perceived clearly he had not wasted his time.

It would require a subtler pen than mine to tell how from that day a passion for Miss Smith grew like Jonah’s gourd in the heart of Aubrey Vair. He became pensive, and in the prolonged absence of Miss Smith, irritable. Mrs. Aubrey Vair felt the change in him, and put it down to a vitriolic Saturday Reviewer. Indisputably the “Saturday” does at times go a little far. He re-read “Elective Affinities,” and lent it to Miss Smith. Incredible as it may appear to members of the Areopagus

Club, where we know Aubrey Vair, he did also beyond all question inspire a sort of passion in that sombre-eyed, rather clever, and really very beautiful girl.

He talked to her a lot about love and destiny, and all that bric-à-brac of the minor poet. And they talked together about his genius. He elaborately, though discreetly, sought her society, and presented and read to her the milder of his unpublished sonnets. We consider his Byronic features pasty, but the feminine mind has its own laws. I suppose, also, where a girl is not a fool, a literary man has an enormous advantage over any one but a preacher, in the show he can make of his heart's wares.

At last a day in that summer came when he met her alone, possibly by chance, in a quiet lane towards Horley. There were ample hedges on either side, rich with honeysuckle, vetch, and mullein.

They conversed intimately of his poetic ambitions, and then he read her those verses of his subsequently published in "Hobson's Magazine:" "Tenderly ever, since I have met thee." He had written these the day before; and though I think the sentiment is uncommonly trite, there is a redeeming note of sincerity about the lines not conspicuous in all Aubrey Vair's poetry.

He read rather well, and a swell of genuine emotion crept into his voice as he read, with one white hand thrown out to point the rhythm of the lines. "Ever, my sweet, for thee," he concluded, looking up into her face.

Before he looked up, he had been thinking chiefly of his poem and its effect. Straightway he forgot it. Her arms hung limply before her, and her hands were clasped together. Her eyes were very tender.

"Your verses go to the heart," she said softly. Her mobile features were capable of wonderful shades of expression. He suddenly forgot his wife and his position as a minor poet as he looked at her. It is possible that his classical features may themselves have undergone a certain transfiguration. For one brief moment—and it was always to linger in his memory—destiny lifted him out of his vain little self to a nobler level of simplicity. The copy of "Tenderly ever" fluttered from his hand. Considerations vanished. Only one thing seemed of importance.

"I love you," he said abruptly.

An expression of fear came into her eyes. The grip of her hands upon one another tightened convulsively. She became very pale.

Then she moved her lips as if to speak, bringing her face slightly nearer to his. There was nothing in the world at that moment for either of them but one another. They were both trembling exceedingly. In a whisper she said, "You love me?"

Aubrey Vair stood quivering and speechless, looking into her eyes. He had never seen such a light as he saw there before. He was in a wild tumult of emotion. He was dreadfully scared at what he had done. He could not say another word. He nodded.

"And this has come to me?" she said presently, in the same awe-stricken whisper, and then, "Oh, my love, my love!"

And thereupon Aubrey Vair had her clasped to himself, her cheek upon his shoulder and his lips to hers.

Thus it was that Aubrey Vair came by the cardinal memory of his life. To this day it recurs in his works.

A little boy clambering in the hedge some way down the lane saw this group with surprise, and then with scorn and contempt. Reckless of his destiny, he turned away, feeling that he at least could never come to the unspeakable unmanliness of hugging girls. Unhappily for Reigate scandal, his shame for his sex was altogether too deep for words.

An hour after, Aubrey Vair returned home in a hushed mood. There were muffins after his own heart for his tea—Mrs. Aubrey Vair had had hers. And there were chrysanthemums, chiefly white ones,—flowers he loved,—set out in the china bowl he was wont to praise. And his wife came behind him to kiss him as he sat eating.

“De lill Jummuns,” she remarked, kissing him under the ear.

Then it came into the mind of Aubrey Vair with startling clearness, while his ear was being kissed, and with his mouth full of muffin, that life is a singularly complex thing.

The summer passed at last into the harvest-time, and the leaves began falling. It was evening, the warm sunset light still touched the Downs, but up the valley a blue haze was creeping. One or two lamps in Reigate were already alight.

About half-way up the slanting road that scales the Downs, there is a wooden seat where one may obtain a fine view of the red villas scattered below, and of the succession of blue hills beyond. Here the girl with the shadowy face was sitting.

She had a book on her knees, but it lay neglected. She was leaning forward, her chin resting upon her hand. She was looking across the valley into the darkening sky, with troubled eyes.

Aubrey Vair appeared through the hazel-bushes, and sat down beside her. He held half a dozen dead leaves in his hand.

She did not alter her attitude. “Well?” she said.

“Is it to be flight?” he asked.

Aubrey Vair was rather pale. He had been having bad nights latterly, with dreams of the Continental Express Mrs. Aubrey Vair possibly even in pursuit,—he always fancied her making the tragedy ridiculous by tearfully bringing additional pairs of socks, and any such trifles he had forgotten, with her,—all Reigate and Redhill in commotion. He had never eloped before, and he had visions of difficulties with hotel proprietors. Mrs. Aubrey Vair might telegraph ahead. Even he had had a prophetic vision of a headline in a halfpenny evening newspaper: “Young Lady abducts a Minor Poet.” So there was a quaver in his voice as he asked, “Is it to be flight?”

“As you will,” she answered, still not looking at him.

“I want you to consider particularly how this will affect you. A man,” said Aubrey Vair, slowly, and staring hard at the leaves in his hand, “even gains a certain éclat in these affairs. But to a woman it is ruin—social, moral.”

“This is not love,” said the girl in white.

“Ah, my dearest! Think of yourself.”

“Stupid!” she said, under her breath.

“You spoke?”

“Nothing.”

“But cannot we go on, meeting one another, loving one another, without any great scandal or misery? Could we not—”

“That,” interrupted Miss Smith, “would be unspeakably horrible.”

“This is a dreadful conversation to me. Life is so intricate, such a web of subtle strands binds us this way and that. I cannot tell what is right. You must consider—”

“A man would break such strands.”

“There is no manliness,” said Aubrey Vair, with a sudden glow of moral exaltation, “in doing wrong. My love—”

“We could at least die together, dearest,” she said discontentedly.

“Good Lord!” said Aubrey Vair. “I mean—consider my wife.”

“You have not considered her hitherto.”

“There is a flavour—of cowardice, of desertion, about suicide,” said Aubrey Vair. “Frankly, I have the English prejudice, and do not like any kind of running away.”

Miss Smith smiled very faintly. “I see clearly now what I did not see. My love and yours are very different things.”

“Possibly it is a sexual difference,” said Aubrey Vair; and then, feeling the remark inadequate, he relapsed into silence.

They sat for some time without a word. The two lights in Reigate below multiplied to a score of bright points, and, above, one star had become visible. She began laughing, an almost noiseless, hysterical laugh that jarred unaccountably upon Aubrey Vair.

Presently she stood up. “They will wonder where I am,” she said. “I think I must be going.”

He followed her to the road. “Then this is the end?” he said, with a curious mixture of relief and poignant regret.

“Yes, this is the end,” she answered, and turned away.

There straightway dropped into the soul of Aubrey Vair a sense of infinite loss. It was an altogether new sensation. She was perhaps twenty yards away, when he groaned aloud with the weight of it, and suddenly began running after her with his arms extended.

“Annie,” he cried,—“Annie! I have been talking *rot*. Annie, now I know I love you I cannot spare you. This must not be. I did not understand.”

The weight was horrible.

“Oh, stop, Annie!” he cried, with a breaking voice, and there were tears on his face.

She turned upon him suddenly, with a look of annoyance, and his arms fell by his side. His expression changed at the sight of her pale face.

“You do not understand,” she said. “I have said good-bye.”

She looked at him; he was evidently greatly distressed, a little out of breath, and he had just stopped blubbing. His contemptible quality reached the pathetic. She came up close to him, and, taking his damp Byronic visage between her hands, she kissed him again and again. “Good-bye, little man that I loved,” she said; “and good-bye to this folly of love.”

Then, with something that may have been a laugh or a sob,—she herself, when she came to write it all in her novel, did not know which,—she turned and hurried away again, and went out of the path that Aubrey Vair must pursue, at the cross-roads.

Aubrey Vair stood, where she had kissed him, with a mind as inactive as his body, until her white dress had disappeared. Then he gave an involuntary sigh, a large, exhaustive expiration, and so awoke himself, and began walking, pensively dragging his feet through the dead leaves, home. Emotions are terrible things.

“Do you like the potatoes, dear?” asked Mrs. Aubrey Vair at dinner. “I cooked them myself.”

Aubrey Vair descended slowly from cloudy, impalpable meditations to the level of fried potatoes. “These potatoes—” he remarked, after a pause during which he was struggling with recollection. “Yes. These potatoes have exactly the tints of the dead leaves of the hazel.”

“What a fanciful poet it is!” said Mrs. Aubrey Vair. “Taste them. They are very nice potatoes indeed.”