

QUEER STORIES.

I.

HIS GOLF-MADNESS.

WHEN Edward Standard married Ethel Preston every one said it was a mistake, and that they were a very ill-assorted couple, and for once every one was right. To begin with, Edward was forty, and Ethel was barely twenty. Edward hated society, whilst to Ethel balls, routs, dinner-parties, flirtations were as the breath of her nostrils. And what made it worse, Edward, who had amassed a considerable fortune in the Colonies before he was middle-aged, had returned home for good and all, and, from being a man who lived laborious days, came to be one whose leisure hung heavily on his hands.

At the time he came across Ethel, and fell head over ears in love with her, he was beginning to find his enforced idleness intensely irksome. However, for the moment his engagement and prospective marriage gave him an object in life, and in a vague sort of way he expected that matrimony would prove an occupation rather than merely a condition of life, and felt more hopeful for his future.

He looked forward to and promised himself satisfaction from his pretty wife's constant companionship. He pictured himself and her pottering along through life together, content to take as many sweets as they could get, and to minimise the evils of existence by an inseparable and sympathetic union. Love was all-sufficing—at least, so books and songs were continually reiterating, and he expected to find they spoke the truth.

They would have a place in the country, and they would have horses and ride about together, and they would have a trout-stream and they would fish together, and they would have a garden and plant it together, and they would have a library and a billiard-room, and a music-room and a lawn-tennis court, and this, that, and the other, and they would read and play billiards and sing together, and lob balls backwards and forwards to one another, and do this, that, and the other to their very great mutual satisfaction. That was Edward Standard's dream, but Ethel Preston's was very different.

Her intention was that they should have a house in May-fair and live the life of a smart couple, and, like most smart couples, should see less of each other than of everybody else. Edward should belong to clubs and be away from home all day long, like other men were. She should have carriages and horses, and dresses and laces, and boxes at the Opera and at Ascot and Sandown, and her attendant fan-holders, which was the privilege of all pretty young married women. Not that she was vicious, but her one idea in life was to live and die smart, and certainly there would be little opportunity of doing either buried in the country with the one man in the world on whom all showiness would be worse than wasted. Dress was a passion with her, and what was the use of dressing without spectators? Edward might not care for that sort of life, but he would soon learn, like hundreds of others, to acquiesce in it. Men were such sentimental creatures before marriage—at least, non-society men like Edward were; but he would soon see that it was absurd to expect a girl to give up all her tastes and occupations just because she graciously consented to be his wife. From all of which it will be evident that Edward and Ethel were hardly the best assorted couple in the world.

Of the two dreams above mentioned Ethel's was the one most nearly fulfilled in the first year of their marriage. Edward, who was devotedly attached to his wife, gave her everything that she wished and that money could buy, but at the same time he did not conceal from her that the gay life she led and the separate existence to which he was condemned was anything but satisfactory to him.

Now Ethel, although she was not prepared to forego all amusements of a gay and fashionable life at her husband's

desire, was yet sufficiently attached to him to feel some compunction for his evident disappointment at the result of their matrimonial experiment. She, of course, did not see that she was to blame. It was so evidently his fault that he did not solace himself with occupations like to those of other men of her acquaintance. But still she was not so heartless as not to feel a desire that he should find some interest in life that would free her from what he considered her responsibility for his discontent. She was, on the whole, very well satisfied with her own life, for she was very pretty and very popular, but at the bottom of all her enjoyments was the bitter consciousness that her husband's unhappiness was a sort of reproach to her. If she could only rid herself of that she felt that she wanted nothing else. Not that she would have rid herself altogether of her husband if she could. There were times when she felt it the greatest relief in the world to have his quiet support to fall back upon, but then the craving for excitement and adulation and flattery would soon return upon her, and poor Edward's glimpses of paradise were never long enough to satisfy him.

Now, Ethel Standard prided herself on her powers of management. There was no doubt about it that she was blessed with a very nice tact, and, considering her youth, showed considerable dexterity in leading people by the nose. Diplomacy may be another name for "lying as a fine art," but Macchiavelism is not condemned by everybody. And Ethel produced a rather elaborate little fiction for the purpose of developing an enthusiasm in her husband which would relieve her from the reproach of neglecting him.

"Edward," she said, just before Whitsuntide, "I'm sick of London. We must get right away together alone into the country."

"Them's my sentiments exactly, my darling; where shall we go?" said Edward, delighted at the prospect.

"Oh, I've heard of a delightful place right on the top of the Cotswolds. The Saundersons have taken a house on Minchinhampton Common, and they say there's a dear little place with a lovely little garden close by to let. What do you say, dear; shall we spend Whitsuntide there?"

The crafty little woman said nothing about the golf bacillus which is said to abound in those high latitudes, nor did

she hint at the fact that the whole population of the neighbourhood surrounding

Mincing Hampton, Painswick Proud,
Beggarly Bisley, and Strutting Stroud,

talks, dreams, thinks, and energizes about caddies, and bunkers, and brassies, and fozzles, and putties, and gutties, and divots, and stymies, to the exclusion of almost every other consideration in life.

"Once," Tom Saunderson, an enthusiastic golfer himself, had said to her, "Once, Mrs. Standard, you get your husband to address a golf-ball with the object of emulating the average drive of a golfing friend, once he finds that the club oftener misses than meets that ball, and once you laugh at him for failing in his attempt, from that moment, in the words of a classic, 'he is a golfer. Nothing can save him; his days will be occupied with topping balls along the ground, and his nights with dreaming of balls flying through the air.' No idle man who has once taken up the fascinating pursuit has ever been known to abandon it; and many a man has given up the prosecution of learning, the hope of distinction, the carrying on of business, for the sake of pursuing 'gutties' and 'putties' to their destined holes."

These words had sunk deep into Mrs. Standard's mind, and, with Tom Saunderson's co-operation, she looked forward to the enthrallment of her husband; and certainly the results fully justified their anticipations.

The day after their arrival at Laburnum Lodge, Tom Saunderson called round. He carried in his hand a brassy.

"What's that thing?" said Edward.

"Oh, a golf club."

"What, do they play golf up here? I've never seen the game played."

"Never seen the game played, my dear fellow; why, no one does anything else here. What do you say to a walk round the links?"

"Oh, do let us," chimed in Ethel, running up at once to put on a hat.

"This is Pond Hole," said Tom Saunderson, after they had been walking a few minutes, and found themselves by the circular little piece of water which is paved, like another place, with good intentions—in the shape of golf-balls.

"You see that grassy corner there up among the trees, about a quarter of a mile away, that's Lancaster's Hole; you have to drive the ball from there, in as few strokes as you can, on to this green. Once on the green you try to putt the ball into this little hole."

He took a "gutter" out of his pocket, and threw it on to the green about ten feet from the hole.

"That looks easy enough," said Edward.

"It's harder than it looks," retorted Tom. Then, turning to Ethel, he said,

"The next hole is up over yonder, this side of the distant wall. That's the Gate Quarry Hole."

Meanwhile Edward was surreptitiously trying, with but little success, to putt the ball into the hole with the handle of his walking-stick. It was harder than he had expected.

"Oh, I should so like to see a drive," suddenly exclaimed Ethel.

"That's easily done," said Tom; and, dropping a ball, with a beautiful clean sweep he sent it flying away over the pond a hundred and fifty yards towards the Gate Quarry.

"Oh, that's lovely; do let me have a try," cried Ethel.

Tom tee'd a ball nicely for her, and by good luck she sent it a few yards over the greedy pond in front. Then nothing would satisfy her but that Edward should try to emulate her success, and Tom, not without a sly smile, deposited another ball in position.

Their victim then grasped the "brassy" tight with both hands, brought it back quickly with both arms well bent, rose on his toes, hit wildly at, and—entirely missed, the ball.

Ethel laughed merrily, and Tom said, "Try again."

He did try again, and this time hit the earth so soundly with the heel of the club, some six inches off the ball, that he broke the head clean off the handle. Then there was an end to their performance that journey, but from that moment Edward Standard had an object in life. From that day he followed a jack-o'-lantern, a will-o'-the-wisp which landed him in ruts, in quarries, in bushes, in ponds, and bunkers of all sorts. He invested in innumerable drivers, and brassies, and bulgers, and irons, and niblicks, and mashies, and cleeks, and spoons, and putters. In fine, before they left Laburnum Lodge he was a golf maniac of the most pronounced type.

When they returned to town, he cut a series of holes in the carpet of the billiard-room, and practised putting round the table. He became a member of every golf club that had a vacancy, and got put down for every one that was full. He spent at least four days a week, on the average, out of town, and was soon known on every green in the United Kingdom.

And Ethel Standard was abundantly satisfied. She could now enjoy herself with a clear conscience. She and her husband seemed to have reached a nice equilibrium in their lives. It was very satisfying to realise that now, for the first time since their marriage, her content was equalled by his.

"Teddy," she said to him one day at breakfast, "you remember it's Ascot next week?"

"Oh, is it?" he answered absently, turning over the leaves of the *Field*. "I hope it'll be decent weather. I shall be at St. Andrews."

"Indeed you won't my darling. You've got to take me to the races."

"My darling, I'm afraid that's quite out of the question. I've arranged with the two Fenwicks and Jack Loring to go up to-morrow (Sunday morning) by the Scotch express, and play a series of foursomes all through the week."

"Well, I do call that a shame. You knew I should want you for Ascot."

"My darling, I knew no such thing. Indeed, it's very difficult for me to know when you do want me. I'm sorry it should put you out; but really you have only yourself to blame."

"Oh, of course, of course, you never do anything wrong. I wonder you like your wife to go to races under the escort of any other man. I should have thought, at least, my husband was the proper person to take me to such places."

"Now, Ethel, you know you are talking nonsense. However, it's no use discussing the matter further. I cannot go with you, and there's an end of it."

Yes, and that was not only the end of their first battle on equal terms, but it was also the beginning of the complete emancipation of Edward Standard from the government of his wife.

But it is not our object to follow out the process by which the equipoise of life was soon a thing of the past. It is suffi-

cient to say that, whereas in the first year Ethel had ignored her husband's happiness, and neglected her domestic duties for the sake of routs, dinner-parties, flirtations, and balls, now, in the second year of their married life, Edward evidenced a devotion to putting-greens, hazards, and golf-balls which deprived Ethel almost completely of his society.

And then, of course, like every other human being, directly she had, by every means in her power, brought about a riddance, nothing would satisfy her but that she must have her plaything back again. In her heart of hearts she had always loved her husband, and now, deprived of his ever-ready attention, she found, to her dismay, a growing distaste for the frivolities to which she had up till now devoted herself. And then she grew frightened, for she found herself thinking, "I cannot live without some one to love me. Suppose I have lost Edward's love for ever? Well, if I have, he is as much to blame as I am, and he must take the consequences."

Indeed, so terrified did she become at the reckless thoughts which came into her head, and the persistent way in which the impassioned tones of one of her most constant esquires would recur again and again to her remembrance, that she sent a telegram there and then to Edward, who was at their golfing cottage in the country, announcing her intention of joining him the next day. A few hours brought back the following reply:—

Sorry. Cottage full of men. Come next week.

Had Edward Standard known what was in Ethel's mind, and what this rebuff meant to her, he would have given his guests summary notice to quit, but, as Nathaniel Hawthorne says in his tale of "David Swan," "we hear not the airy footsteps of things that almost happen." When he hesitated whether he should postpone Ethel's visit or not, he little guessed what, in his future and hers, hung in the balance.

That same evening Ethel addressed a letter to Captain Julian Carbine, care of E. Standard, Esq., Last Hole Cottage, Bulgam Common. It ran as follows:—

MY DEAR J.,—You, of course, remember the proposal you made to me when we parted at Lady Fortune's dance last week. I felt that I could not then possibly fall in with your plans. Edward has, however, again treated me with the most absolute coldness. I shall go down to the

place you mentioned, by the eleven o'clock train, the day after to-morrow (Wednesday) morning, unless you wire to me that you cannot meet me there. Do not forget to telegraph for rooms.—Yours, ever affectionately,
ETHEL.

On Tuesday morning Julian Carbine, who had been Edward Standard's guest at Last Hole Cottage since the previous Saturday, and had come down for a stay of ten days, suddenly packed up his traps and departed, leaving a message for his host, who was out at the time, that he was called to London on the most urgent business.

On the Thursday morning Edward Standard received the following letter. It was from one of Carbine's brother officers, and an intimate friend of his own. It ran as follows:—

[*Private.*]

DEAR STANDARD,—I hear that Julian Carbine is staying with you. It has come to my knowledge that he is in danger of being led into an exceedingly serious entanglement, from which, as his friend and yours, I would give my right hand to save him. It is quite impossible for me to get away this week, and I beg you to keep a sharp look-out on him, and, if he goes off at short notice, do you go with him and stick to him like a leech. If the worst comes to the worst, you may be able to head him off by showing him this letter.—I am, in great haste, yours ever,

BERNAL O'MALLEY.

The same morning Edward Standard found the letter written by his wife to Julian Carbine lying about, and read it. The meaning of the whole thing flashed upon him in an instant.

That afternoon he arrived at his house in Eaton-square, and learnt from the servants that his wife had left town yesterday morning, saying she would be gone for a week, but leaving no address.

He thereupon took a hansom and drove off to Julian Carbine's club.

"Yes," the porter said, "of course he knew Mr Standard, and would be happy to give him the address. There had been a letter only that very morning ordering everything to be sent on to the Captain at Cross-roads Cottage, Stow Plowden."

An hour later Edward Standard had taken train for the little Essex village.

In his heart murderous hate for a man who was false to him whilst yet eating his salt, and yearning, pitiful, reproachful love for a woman, hustled each other for place. Then

there flooded back upon him the early love for Ethel that had been swamped by the all-engrossing pursuit which he followed. After all, she had not been so much to blame in preferring her youthful amusements to a stay-at-home life with an old stick-in-the-mud like himself. If only he had had patience with her she would soon have tired of these frivolities, and by natural process have come back to his companionship. At any rate, he had no right, once having made her his wife, to neglect her as he had done for this pursuit of the will-o'-the-wisp which engrossed his every thought. It was sheer insanity this outweighing of a woman's love with a golf-ball. Oh! how he cursed himself to think that now the mischief was done, and nothing remained but the conventional retaliation, the customary shameful repudiation.

Good God! how he prayed that if it were possible this thing might be as though it were not. But his experience told him that, though God may do all things, even He cannot undo the past, and despair settled down upon his soul.

"Yes," they answered to his inquiry at the little station, "yes, there was just such a couple as he described stopping at Mrs. Jones's at the cross-roads yonder, the white house on the brow of the hill."

And Edward Standard strode forward up the hill, blindly eager to get the thing over, but utterly oblivious of the fact that, though he had rehearsed the scene to himself in a hundred different ways, he had not come to any definite conclusion as to how he proposed to comport himself.

"Captain Carbine at home?" he asked of the little maiden who opened the door, and who stood with open mouth scared by the sight of this bloodless-faced, savage-looking stranger.

"No, sir, he's jest gone out; but Mrs. Carbine's in, sir, if she'll do."

"Oh, yes, Mrs. Car—that is to say, the lady will do just as well," said Edward, with a grisly attempt at a smile, as he stumbled over his wife's new name.

"She's in there, in the parlour, sir," said the girl, intimating a closed door; "shall I tell her any name, sir?"

"No, thank you, she knows me; I'll announce myself."

With these words, Edward Standard seized the handle of the door and walked in.

There was a very smart and attractive-looking young lady sitting on the sofa. She rose as he entered.

"Oh, excuse me," said Edward, taken aback by the unexpected apparition. "I—er—the servant—er—said I should find Mrs. Carbine here. I beg your pardon; there must, I fear, be some mistake."

"Not in the least," was the exceedingly self-possessed answer. "I am Mrs. Carbine. To what am I indebted, may I ask, for this unexpected pleasure?"

"Oh, er—the fact is—I, er—by-the-bye—perhaps your husband will be in soon, and I had better say it to him."

Luckily for Edward Standard, at this moment the handle of the door turned and Julian Carbine stood in the room.

"By Jove, Standard," he said, holding out both hands to him, "this is, indeed, good of you. I should hardly have thought you could have got down so quickly from Gloucestershire in answer to my letter announcing my marriage and address. You have, I see, made the acquaintance of my wife already. I knew you would be great friends directly you met. Why, you must have started by the first train after receiving my letter. It is, indeed, good of you."

"Yes," said Edward, somewhat mendaciously, "I could not bear the idea of appearing cold in a matter which so deeply concerned your happiness, old fellow."

That evening, as he was saying "good-bye," Julian said to him,—

"By-the-bye, Standard, please apologise to Ethel for me for my not having answered a letter I received from her the day I left Laburnum Cottage, asking me to go down to Felixstowe with her to teach her golf. She wanted to surprise you by her play when next you met."