

1882.

A PARTING WORD.

What! here again?—the same old tale.
The wrinkled, bearded visage too,
The aged figure, bent and frail,
Art thou the same?—it can't be true;
Art thou the year, the bright young year,
We welcomed in but yesterday?
Ah, no! thy age is feigned, I fear,
Thy garb is false; away I away!

Yet Time declares thy story's true,
Thou art the same, grown old so fast,
Already here to say adieu!
And join the e'er increasing Past.
Ah well! thy faults were many, yet
If in our power we'd bid thee stay,
It seems so short since first we met—
But Time, impatient, cries Away!

And where are now the hopes of a fair,
That round thy youthful moments shone?
Thou hast, 'tis true, fulfilled a share,
But many more are shattered, gone.
Hopes buried in the new made graves,
Whose tenants gayly hailed thy birth,
Or 'neath the rolling hungry waves
That rob the dearest homes of earth.

Good-bye, Old Year! thou art, I know,
No worse, no better, than the rest,
With twofold judgment thou wilt go,
By some condemned, by others blessed.
But Time is calling:—Hark! Adieu!
From bellies fall his trumpets ring.
"Give way, Old Year! admit the New!
The King is dead! Long live the King!"

The years! the years! how fast they go!
To-day they're new, to-morrow old,
And in their swift, yet chequered flow,
How brief man's tale of life is told.
A few for childhood's happy reign!
A few for youth to fling away!
A few to wish youth back, in vain!
A few for age, and then—Away!

Quebec, Dec, 1882.

E. A. SUTTON.

A SHOCKING STORY.

BY WILKIE COLLINS.

VII.

(Concluded.)

That night, lying awake thinking, I made my first discovery of a great change that had come over me. I can only describe my sensations in the trite phrase—I felt like a new woman.

Never yet had my life been so enjoyable to me as it was now. I was conscious of a delicious lightness of heart. The simplest things pleased me: I was ready to be kind to everybody, and to admire everything. Even the familiar scenery of my rides in the Park developed beauties which I had never noticed before. The enchantments of music affected me to tears. I was absolutely in love with my dogs and my birds—and, as for my maid, I bewildered the girl with presents, and gave her holidays almost before she could ask for them. In a bodily sense, I felt an extraordinary accession of strength and activity. I romped with the dear old General, and actually kissed Lady Catherine, one morning, instead of letting her kiss me as usual. My friends noticed my new outburst of gaiety and spirit—and wondered what had produced it. Is there any limit to the self-deception of which a human being is capable? I can honestly say that I wondered too! Only on that wakeful night which followed our visit to Michael's room, did I feel myself on the way to a clear understanding of the truth. The next morning completed the process of enlightenment. I went out riding as usual. The instant when Michael put his hand under my foot as I sprang into the saddle, his touch flew all over me like a flame. I knew who had made a new woman of me, from that moment.

As to describing the first sense of confusion that overwhelmed me, even if I were a practised writer, I should be incapable of doing it. I pulled down my veil, and rode on in a sort of trance. Fortunately for me, our house looked on the Park, and I had only to cross the road. Otherwise, I should certainly have met with some accident among the passing vehicles. To this day, I don't know where I rode. The horse went his own way quietly—and the groom followed me.

The groom! There is, I suppose, no civilized human creature so free from the hateful and anti-Christian pride of rank as a woman who loves with all her heart and soul, for the first time in her life. I only tell the truth (in however unfavorable light it may please me) when I declare that my confusion was entirely due to the discovery that I was in love. I was not ashamed of myself for being in love with the groom. I had given my heart to the man. What did the accident of his position matter? Put money into his pockets and a title before his name—by another accident: in speech, manners and attainments, he would be a gentleman worthy of his wealth and worthy of his rank. Even the natural dread of what my relations and friends might say, if they discovered my secret, seemed, in the entirely pure and entirely exalted state of my feelings, to be a sensation so unworthy of me and of him, that I looked round, and called to him to speak to me, asked him questions about horses, which kept him riding nearly side by side with me. Ah, how I enjoyed the gentle deference and respect of his manner as he answered me! He was

hardly bold enough to raise his eyes to mine, when I looked at him. Absorbed in the Paradise of my own making, I rode on slowly, and was only aware that friends had passed and recognized me, by seeing him touch his hat. I looked round and discovered the women smiling ironically as they rode by. That one circumstance roused me rudely from my dream. I let Michael fall back again to his proper place, and quickened my horse's pace; angry with myself, angry with the world in general—then suddenly changing, and being fool enough and child enough to feel ready to cry. How long these varying moods lasted, I don't know. On returning, I slipped off my horse without waiting for Michael to help me, and ran into the house without even wishing him "Good day."

VIII.

After taking off my riding-habit, and cooling my hot face with eau-de-cologne and water, I went down to the room which we called the morning room. The piano there was my favorite instrument—and I had the idea of trying what music would do towards helping me to compose myself.

As I sat down before the piano, I heard the opening of the door of the breakfast-room (separated from me by a curtained archway), and the voice of Lady Catherine—a-king if Michael had returned to the stables. On the servant's reply in the affirmative, she desired that he might be sent to her immediately. No doubt, I ought either to have left the morning-room, or to have let my aunt know of my presence there. I did neither the one nor the other. The inveterate dislike that she had taken to Michael had, to all appearances, subsided. She had once or twice actually taken opportunities of speaking to him kindly. I believed this was due to the caprice of the moment. The tone of her voice too suggested, on this occasion, that she had some spiteful object in view, in sending for him. I deliberately waited to hear what passed between them.

Lady Catherine began.

"You were out riding to-day with Miss Mina?"

"Yes, my lady."

"Turn to the light. I wish to see people when I speak to them. You were observed by some friends of mine; your conduct excited remark. Do you know your business as a lady's groom?"

"I have had seven years' experience, my lady."

"Your business is to ride at a certain distance behind your mistress. Has your experience taught you that?"

"Yes, my lady."

"You were not riding behind Miss Mina—your horse was almost side by side with hers. Do you deny it?"

"No, my lady."

"You behaved with the greatest impropriety—you were seen talking to Miss Mina. Do you deny that?"

"No, my lady."

"Leave the room. No! come back. Have you any excuse to make?"

"None, my lady."

"Your insolence is intolerable! I shall speak to the General."

The sound of the closing door followed. I knew now what the smiles meant on the false faces of those women-friends of mine who had met me in the Park. An ordinary man, in Michael's place, would have mentioned my own encouragement of him as a sufficient excuse. He, with the inbred delicacy and reticence of a gentleman, had taken all the blame on himself. Indignant and ashamed, I advanced to the breakfast-room, bent on instantly justifying him. Drawing aside the curtain, I was startled by a sound as of a person sobbing. I cautiously looked in. Lady Catherine was prostrate on the sofa, hiding her face in her hands, in a passion of tears.

I withdrew, completely bewildered. The extraordinary contradictions in my aunt's conduct were not at an end yet. Later in the day, I went to my uncle, resolved to set Michael right in his estimation, and to leave him to speak to Lady Catherine. The General was in the lowest spirits; he shook his head ominously the moment I mentioned the groom's name. "I dare say the man meant no harm—but the thing has been observed. I can't have you made the subject of scandal, Mina. Lady Catherine makes a point of it—Michael must go."

"You don't mean to say that my aunt has insisted on your sending Michael away?"

Before he could answer me, a footman appeared with a message. "My lady wishes to see you, sir."

The General rose directly. My curiosity had got, by this time, beyond all restraint. I was actually indelicate enough to ask if I might go with him! He stared at me, as well he might. I persisted; I said I particularly wished to see Lady Catherine. My uncle's punctilious good breeding still resisted me. "Your aunt may wish to speak to me in private," he said. "Wait a moment, and I will send for you." My obstinacy was something superhuman; the bare idea that Michael might lose his place, through my fault, made me desperate, I suppose. "I won't trouble you to send for me," I persisted. "I will go with you at once as far as the door, and wait to hear if I may come in." The footman was still present, holding the door open; the General gave way. I kept so close behind him, that my aunt saw me as her husband entered the room.

"Come in, Mina," she said, speaking and looking like the charming Lady Catherine of every-day life. Was this the woman I had seen crying her heart out on the sofa hardly an hour ago?

"On second thoughts," she continued, turning to the General, "I fear I may have been a little hasty. Pardon me for troubling you about it again—have you spoken to Michael yet? No! Then let us err on the side of kindness; let us look over his misconduct this time."

My uncle was evidently relieved. I seized the opportunity of making my confession, and taking the whole blame on myself. Lady Catherine stopped me with the perfect grace of which she was mistress.

"My good child, don't distress yourself! don't make mountains out of molehills!" She patted me on the cheek with two plump white fingers which felt deadly cold. "I was not always prudent, Mina, when I was your age. Besides, your curiosity was naturally excited about a servant who is—what shall I call him!—a foundling."

She paused and fixed her eyes on me attentively. "Is it a very romantic story?" she asked.

The General began to fidget in his chair. If I had kept my attention on him, I should have seen a warning to me to be silent. But my interest at the moment was absorbed in my aunt. Encouraged by her amiable reception, I was not merely unsuspicious of the trap that she had set for me—I was actually foolish enough to think that I could improve Michael's position in her estimation (remember that I was in love with him!) by telling his story exactly as I have already told it in these pages. I spoke with fervor. Will you believe it?—her humor positively changed again! She flew into a passion with me for the first time in her life.

"Lies!" she cried. "Impudent lies on the face of them—invented to appeal to your interest. How dare you repeat them! General! if Mina had not brought it on herself, this man's audacity would justify you in instantly dismissing him. Don't you agree with me?"

The General's sense of fair play roused him for once into openly opposing his wife. "You are completely mistaken," he said. "Mina and I have both have had the shawl and the letter in our hands—and (what was there besides?)—ah, yes, the very linen the child was wrapped in."

What there was in those words to check Lady Catherine's anger in its full flow, I was quite unable to understand. If the General had put a pistol to her head, he could hardly have silenced her more effectually. She did not appear to be frightened, or ashamed of her outburst of rage—she sat vacant and speechless, with her eyes on her husband and her hands crossed on her lap. After waiting a moment (wondering as I did what it meant) the General rose with his customary resignation and left her. I followed the General. He was unusually silent and thoughtful; not a word passed between us. I afterwards discovered that he was beginning to fear, poor man, that his wife's mind must be affected in some way, and was meditating a consultation with the physician who helped us in cases of need.

As for myself, I was either too stupid or too innocent to feel any forewarnings of the truth, so far. Before the day was over, the first vague suspicions began to find their way into my mind.

The events which I have been relating happened (it may be necessary to remind you) in the first part of the day. After luncheon, while I was alone in the conservatory, my maid came to me from Michael, asking if I had any commands for him in the afternoon. I thought this rather odd; but it occurred to me that he might want some hours to himself. I made the inquiry. To my astonishment, the maid announced that Lady Catherine had employed Michael to go on an errand for her. The nature of the errand was to take a letter to her bookseller, and to bring back the books which she had ordered. With three idle footmen in the house, whose business it was to perform such service as this, why had she taken the groom away from his work? The question obtained such complete possession of my mind—so worried me, in the ordinary phrase—that I actually summoned courage enough to go to my aunt, and ask if she saw any objection to sending one of the three indoor servants for her books in Michael's place.

She received me with a strange hard stare, and answered with an obstinate self-possession, "I wish Michael to go." No explanation followed. If I had planned to take a drive in my pony-carriage, Michael could easily deliver her letter later in the day. With reason or without it, agreeable to me or not agreeable to me, she wished the groom to go.

As she repeated those words I felt my first suspicion of something wrong. I begged her pardon for interfering, and replied that I had not planned to drive out that day. She made no further remark. I left the room, determined to watch her. There is no defence for my conduct; it was mean and unbecoming, no doubt. I was drawn on, by some force in me which I could not even attempt to resist. Indeed, indeed I am not a mean woman by nature!

At first, I thought of speaking to Michael; not with any special motive or suspicion, but simply because I felt drawn towards him as the guide and helper in whom my heart trusted at this crisis in my life. A little consideration, however, suggested to me that I might be seen speaking to him, and might so do him an injury. While I was still hesitating, the thought

came to me that Lady Catherine's motive for sending him to her bookseller's was to get him out of her way. Out of her way in the house! No; his place was not in the house. Out of her way in the stables! The next instant the idea flashed across my mind of watching the stable doors.

The best bedrooms, my room included, were all in front of the house. I went up to my maid's room, which looked on the court-yard; ready with my excuse, if she happened to be there. She was not there. I placed myself at the window, in full view of the stables opposite.

An interval elapsed—long or short, I cannot say which; I was too excited to look at my watch. All I know is that I discovered her! She crossed the yard, after waiting to make sure that no one was there to see her; and she entered the stables by the door that led to that part of the building occupied by Michael and by the two horses of which he had the special charge. This time I looked at my watch. Forty minutes passed before I saw her again. And then, instead of appearing at the door, she showed herself at the window of Michael's room; throwing it wide open. I concealed myself behind the window curtain, just in time to escape discovery, as she looked up at the house. She next appeared in the yard, hurrying back. I waited a while, trying to compose myself in case I met anyone on the stairs. There was little danger of a meeting at that hour. The General was at his club; the servants were at their tea. I reached my own room without being seen by anyone, and locked myself in.

What had she been doing for forty minutes in Michael's room? And why had she opened the window?

I spare you my reflections on these perplexing questions. Let me only say that, even yet, I was not experienced enough to guess at the truth. A convenient headache saved me from the ordeal of meeting Lady Catherine at the dinner-table. I passed a miserable and restless night; conscious that I had found my way blindly, as it were, to some terrible secret which might have its influence on my whole future life, and not knowing what to think, or what to do next. Even then, I shrank instinctively from speaking to my uncle. This was not wonderful. But I felt afraid to speak to Michael; and that perplexed and alarmed me. Consideration for Lady Catherine was certainly not the motive that kept me silent, after what I had seen.

The next morning, my pale face abundantly justified the assertion that I was still ill. My aunt, always doing her maternal duty towards me, came herself to inquire after my health before I was out of my room. No certain was she of not having been observed on the previous day—or so prodigious was her power of controlling herself—that she actually advised me to go out riding before lunch, and try what the fresh air and the exercise would do to relieve me! Feeling that I must end in speaking to Michael, it struck me that this would be the one safe way of speaking to him in private. I accepted her advice, and had another approving pat on the cheek from the plump white fingers. They no longer struck cold on my skin; the customary vital warmth had returned to them. Her ladyship's mind had recovered its tranquillity.

IX.

I left the house for my morning ride.

Michael was not in his customary spirits. With some difficulty, I induced him to tell me the reason. He had decided on giving notice to leave his situation in the General's employment. As soon as I could command myself, I asked what had happened to justify this incomprehensible proceeding on his part. He silently offered me a letter. It was written by the master whom he had served before he came to us; and it announced that an employment as secretary was offered to him in the house of a gentleman who was "interested in his creditable efforts to improve his position in the world." What it cost me to preserve the outward appearance of composure as I handed back the letter, I am ashamed to tell. I spoke to him with some bitterness.

"Your wishes are gratified," I said. "I don't wonder that you are eager to leave your place."

He reined back his horse, and repeated my words.

"Eager to leave my place! I am heart-broken at leaving it."

I was reckless enough to ask why. His head sank. "I daren't tell you," he said.

I went on from one impudence to another.

"What are you afraid of?" I asked.

He suddenly looked up at me. His eyes answered: "You."

Can you fathom the folly of a woman in love? Can you imagine the enormous importance which the veriest trifles assume in her poor little mind? I was perfectly satisfied—even perfectly happy, after that one look. I rode on briskly for a minute or two—then the forgotten scene at the stable recurred to my memory. I resumed a foot-pace and beckoned to him to speak to me.

"Lady Catherine's bookseller lives in the city, doesn't he?" I began.

"Yes, miss."

"Did you walk both ways?"

"Yes."

"You must have felt tired when you got back?"