

THE STORY OF TWO LETTERS.

BY MARY BASKIN.

MY DARLING GIRL,—It is so long since I commenced an epistle of any sort to you, that I am almost at a loss now; and yet I fancy it is not for the want of matter. Is it quite, really, a trifling thing, dear Emmie? I mean your engagement to Mr. Trearton. I could scarcely realise it that day—in the street—when you told me; and so you are really engaged, and I am too! How strange that both our *affaires des cœurs* should come off so close together! My dear girl, I cannot in writing tell you all the happiness I wish you, it wants the emphasis of a good hug and heaps of kisses. I do so want to hear the whole story; from the last I heard of his writing, and your refusal of him. I also wish to tell you about myself, but it is too much to do in a letter. I intended writing to you directly after seeing you in Kensington—I suppose you were ordering part of your *trousseau* at Barker's—but conflicting emotions have kept me quiet until just lately, you have literally haunted me night and day. I feel I must write, even if it is only half a letter. The night before last I dreamt of you so much, and in my dream you came here and spent several days: we were as happy as mortals could be, going back into the old days in spirit; we lived out of doors—reading, working, singing, and writing until you declared you did not want to break through the spell, dreading your return to town life and its gaieties. Emmie, why should not my dream be realised? You have said so many times you would come, and have only been twice during all these years. If it were only for a day or two, you know how gladly we would welcome you; and no preparation is needed for such a visit; come just as you are, and we shall be glad! We are very dull now, the last of our friends went on Monday; or else ever since I came home our house has been crammed, and you can imagine, better than I can describe, how onerous my duties as part hostess have been. However, the pleasure of our friends' society overruled all that, but it will make some excuse before you for my long silence, about which you upbraided me when we met in Kensington that day. I will confess it was not the only reason. I felt that you would not care to hear, for I had been (I must say it, dear) so disappointed in you the last month or two of my stay in your dear old town. As you know, I am unfortunately of a hot and jealous disposition over those I love. I know it, and bitterly do I regret the fact; but, Emmie, you did give me cause; even now I feel that you did, though I look back with calmness of temper—which always supervenes such outbursts—upon the past. I was to blame, greatly as usual, but you did neglect me—though not so much as I thought—for fresh faces and talk. I did lose faith in you, and I could not bear it! and so much as I regret it now, I did not even come to see you all, and say good-bye; but I felt I could not. You had had not called at Earstfield, as you said you would; nor, to all appearance, did you care that I was going for ever, as it seemed. All this Emmie, my old friend, and a crowd of other more or less painful reasons, has kept me from writing during this time. Now “for the memory of the past.” I am obliged to reopen our correspondence this wet dismal afternoon as I sit in my little room; and for the sake of that memory I ask you, dear girl, to forgive all my wrong-doing in this our estrangement, and to write me, soon, one of your old letters, as a proof that all is well between us once again. Please give all fond and sincere messages to your mother and father from me; I have not, nor ever shall, forget them or their kindness to poor little me. With much of loving thought to your dear self, I subscribe myself now, as I ever was, your loving old “water-spider,” Eva.

The old school nickname, “water spider,” given in consequence of some of her outlandish ways, conjured up a whole host of visions which I had believed to be forgotten. I heard the merry quips and jokes go round once more. I again lent a hand at all sorts of practical jokes, and was Eva's bosom friend.

Poor Eva, gay, light-hearted child; friend of my youth; *confidante* of all my girlish joys and sorrows; I sometimes wish the grave had closed over you rather than that I should have seen you in so strange a world as the one you afterwards inhabited!

As you, my readers, will see, there had arisen a cloud of mutual misunderstanding between two girls whose friendship

dated back to the junior classes of Madame Pantou's teaching.

Looking into the past, I wonder if I was at all to blame in it; her reproach concerning my not calling at Earstfield was entirely unmerited: I had called, but not finding her at home, had pencilled a few words of love and inquiry upon the back of my card, and given it to the servant for safe transmission. I could only conclude that it had been forgotten, and thus the coolness on Eva's part had arisen. At school she had been most passionate in her evidences of love for me, until they obtained for her the nickname of “lover”; so it was with regret I watched the decline of her affection, while I seemed powerless to aid in its restoration. There was also another g which crept in and deterred me from attempting such a task, possibly the reason why I felt my powerlessness to win back her love. I did not really want it! Strange rumours had been busy with her name and it was first whispered, then broadly spoken, that she had, with her wifeliness, stolen another woman's love, knowingly and unscrupulously.

At first I repudiated such a suggestion with fierce scorn, declaring her incapable of such a thing; my opinion was modified when again *fact* asserted that Eva—my bosom friend, to whom I had confided my brightest hopes, as well as my darkest struggles against unbelief—was engaged to marry a Secularist; not only such an one, but a Secularist having a prominent place in their body, working untrusting for the destruction of the belief which is the salvation of the world! She—the girl who had knelt by my side, hand clasped in hand, while we sought for help to lead true and noble lives. Who had trusted even while I doubted, living in the clear sunlight while I traversed the valley—had renounced her God, her creed, her friends, to enter upon the dark wilds of such a life as this marriage would lead to. I determined to know her no more as an intimate friend, for fear the growth of my unbelief should be strengthened by her words, her new mode of life. Then a rush of the old feeling came over me, so that, meeting her, I had promised to call; entreating her to visit us in her turn.

I called; with what effect you have seen. Months passed away, and no communication bridged over the gulf which was yawning between us, until that afternoon in Kensington, to which she referred in her letter. I was walking with Gerald Trearton, when, face to face, I met Eva with Stanselton R.—the well-known Secularist.

In a moment everything was at the mercy of the present; her face flashed its old brightness into mine, and the sweet rare tones of her voice were dulling my ears to aught else; for was she not my first love—even though a woman.

Our respective *fiancées* stood on one side while we exchanged our congratulations; for, in the happiness of the moment, I actually *congratulated* her upon her engagement. Then we laughed in the old happy way, catching up and rejoicing in our girlish glee until I was literally bewitched, and begged her to renew our old love and friendship. The next news was the letter which I have faithfully transcribed.

What the result was any girl can answer. A day later I was standing upon the platform of a certain railway station, waiting to be conveyed to Eva.

We met with the old enthusiasm, the same rapturous glee as that which had characterised our schooldays then—a shadow came between us while we realised that the past was, after all, a dead past and nothing more.

If I tried for ever I could not tell you the history of the days which followed, they were so strange, so unique to me. I used to think, as all women do, that no other woman could love as I loved, with the same fervour, the same truthness. Alas! I never knew the burning passion of love as Eva did; it seemed almost to consume her with its intensity.

As I noticed her more closely, I was shocked at the change in her; the delicate white hands were covered with the faint blue tracery of veins in which the blood circulated at fever-heat, while the long fingers did little else than restlessly interlace themselves; never still, as happy hands are.

Then she was as restless as her fingers were: no quiet dreaming now. “I do not want to think,” she would aver when I suggested that she would weary herself, “sometimes I wish I could be the ocean, ever ebbing and flowing, never still; I love the sea until I feel as if it fascinates me almost into its arms. You look surprised.”

“Eva, darling, are you happy?”

“Yes, yes! can you not see that I am?”

“My happiness makes me quiet and still, as if I dared not breathe upon its hush of joy: yours seems so strange to me.”