

(Written for the Canadian Illustrated News.)

MY LITTLE ROOM.

Alone I sit within this little room,
Which first I entered nigh three years ago,
And which since then has been to me a home.
Tomorrow it will be my home no more.

Well, what of that? The world is very wide,
And men in bondage struggle to be free!

Ah yes, but even hermits love their caves,
And men have even loved their prison walls.
Say what we will, we cannot leave the spot
Where we have lived for years without a sigh.
Even though we hate the cause that brought us there.

It is a wonder, then, that I feel sad,
Who have been happy in this little room.
To think that it shall know my face no more?
For in this room I've said, and done, and thought
What I shall never say, nor do, nor think
In any other spot upon this earth.

The same is true of any other place
On which we set our feet. This little room.
What is it, that it was not, ere I came,
Save older, and no better for the wear?
And yet, indeed, it seemeth part of me.
I know not how nor why; but this I know—
My heart is full of sorrow, leaving it.

How often have I paced its length and breadth!
How oft my eyes have wandered o'er its walls.
Till every pattern on the paper seemed
A living thing! How often have I made
Strange forms from out the specks that dim the white
Upon the ceiling, till I almost feared
My own imaginings would dart on me!
How oft on summer evenings I have watched
That slow meandering river turn to gold,
And watched it till the gold became as lead.
(As it is now) while, on the mountain side,
The trees in panoply, rank over rank,
Stood, as the rebel giants stood of old.
Showing bold faces to the face of Heaven!
How often have I seen the maiden moon
Trace through the night a pretty silver bow,
And then with virgin bashfulness retire!
How often has the wind, like school-boy friend
Whistling a signal tune, admission sought
There, at the window, and then scampered off
Around the cable, muttering reproach.
Leaving me sad, for I heard his voice
Give forth the self-same music long ago.
Before my feet had trod this little room!

Dear is each corner of my little room.
Dear each familiar object—every one
Speaks to me now of happy days gone by.
Dear is that window, through whose pane the sun
Has sent his myriad couriers of light
Ninety-five millions of celestial miles
To grace with smiles from heaven my little room.
How oft, when frigid, fairy artists drew
Their frost-encumbered fancies on those panes.
Have I, regardless of their chilly art,
Paid homage to their deadly enemy,
That fiery monster, who, if treated well,
Is kind and gentle; but if overfed,
Is thankless, fierce, insatiate, terrible!
But, in his friendly mood, on winter nights,
I loved within the door of his black cave
To peep and see him crack with noisy teeth
His dole of food, and watch his merry eye
That set whate'er it rested on aglow;
And then shut up his cave and hear him sing
Such pleasant songs as warmed old Winter's heart!

Oh! many a winter's night have I thus sat,
And, peopling my domain with forms I loved,
Held sweet communion, asked and heard reply.
There came, too, sometimes unwitted guests;
And I have lain upon a weary couch,
Bound hand and foot with sorrow, till the touch
Of Hope unloosed the cords; or some bright spark
Of gentle wit remembered lit the place
With smiles of happy faces, dear to me.

Oh! happy winter nights, most happy now
You seem, when you are gone—for ever gone.
Next winter I shall miss thee, little room!

And I will go away and be forgotten,
And other forms will enter by that door,
And sit in this same spot where I am now,
And all that I have thought and feared and hoped,
For nigh three years, within this little room,
Will be no more remembered than the dream
That's whispered in a sleeping infant's ear.

What matter? Yet the veriest stoic loathes
To be annihilated in the hearts
Of those who knew him—to be trodden down
Unconsciously by those whom he has loved.
Like last year's leaves, in cold oblivious dust,
Hope whispers: "Thou wilt not be all forgotten."
Some one will give thy memory a sigh.
And, many a time, when thou art far away,
These walls shall bear kind blessings on thy head,
And God may hear them, too, and answer them."

And yet, in spite of Hope, I'm very sad
At thought of leaving thee, my little room!

JOHN READE.

THE LETTER OF MY DEAD WIFE.

My young wife died on the 9th of January, 186—, giving birth to a daughter, which followed her to the grave immediately after.

How I survived that period and that whirlwind of grief surprises me. I had won my wife against odds. I was poor and proud, and when taunted by her father with the words, "fortune hunter," I swore that I would earn an independence and then claim her. I kept my word. For five long years I laboured as only a man urged on to his labour by one absorbing passion can work. For five long years I scarcely saw her, but when my long work was ended we were married, and she made my life happy indeed.

But soon! oh, how much too soon! came the great trouble, and I lost her!

I resolved upon travel; my medical man advised change of climate, of scene, of people, and of association; mechanically I assented to his suggestion, mechanically I took my seat one lovely summer's morning (the 19th June) in a first-class carriage en route for Paris, and where afterwards I cared not.

I bribed the guard to lock the door that I might indulge in my own sad musings without fear of intrusion, and had wrapped myself up in a fanciful security when, just as the train was about to start, a small valise was pitched in through the window, followed by a hat-box, and while we were actually in motion the door was unlocked, and a man, jumping lightly over the luggage, which strewn the floor of the carriage, subsided into a seat exactly opposite mine.

One feels almost an aversion towards a new comer in a railway carriage. With what ill-will the passenger at a wayside station is received by the occupants of a well-heated compartment, when the door opens to admit the rush of a piercing wind, a dash of rain, and probably a damp body.

I was almost savage with the faithless official, and disgusted with the intruder. I felt irritated to a degree that I could scarcely account for; and, rolling myself into a corner, I gazed steadfastly out into the country, as though an agent for a telegraph company employed to count the poles.

The stranger, coolly collecting his luggage and divesting himself of a courier bag which hung across his shoulder, proceeded, with the nonchalance of a Queen's messenger, to prepare to smoke; and, having selected a cigar, and biting off the end, languidly observed, "No objection to smoking."

"This is not a smoking carriage," I replied.

"Really?"

"I object!"

"Really?"

There was a cool impertinence in the tone that roused my anger, and I turned round and gazed at him.

He was a well-built handsome man, apparently about five-and-thirty. His eyes were small and glittering as those of a rat. His moustache very bushy, and carefully pointed. He was dressed in a grey tweed travelling suit; his gloves were yellow, and in one hand he held a very handsome Russian leather cigar-case, with the initials C. B. engraven thereon, in the other the unlighted cigar and fusee.

The state of nervous excitement under which I laboured would have led me to attempt anything; and although I felt that at any other time I should be physically unequal to an encounter with this man, there was that within me that temporarily gave me a superhuman strength.

"I object," I again repeated, the words oozing from between my clenched teeth.

"Your objection shall not affect my resolve in the least, and I shall smoke." So saying, he lifted his right foot, laid it delicately across his left knee, and adjusting the fusee, rubbed it deliberately against the dry leather of the sole. The combustible portion of the match fell off. "Confound it, the only one I had; I must wait till we get to Canterbury."

I was so eager for a contest with this man that this was a source of intense disappointment. If I had a light about me indeed I should have presented it to him for the purpose of bringing the question to an issue.

"I imagine if you tried you would find one," I sneered.

"Can you give me a light?" he asked.

"I cannot."

"Wait till we get to Canterbury, and I'll smoke you dry as an Egyptian mummy."

"I shall."

This closed our conversation. I leaned back into the corner of the carriage, an unaccountable hatred against this man enveloping every thought. I did not stay to reason with myself. I did not ask, Is this trifle of lighting a cigar worth so much of bad and bitter emotion? I did not admit a ray of hope that, ere we reached Canterbury, the vengeful feeling should pass away. No; I longed with the craving of a gambler for the moment when the game was to be renewed; and no pilgrim ever desired to gaze upon the green stone at Mecca with a greater fever than I did to behold the spires of the grand old cathedral.

The shadow was upon me. The black cloud was looming overhead.

Onwards dashed and shrieked the train. Through the meadows laden with the perfume of the summer dew. Past rivulets sparkling in the golden sunlight. By villages, towards which by-and-by the mowers would wend their joyous way when the sun would be red in the West. Everything looked bright and beautiful, yet I could not share the brightness or the beauty, for the grief and rage were warring in my breast, and my heart, which an hour before had been steeped in tears, was now bathing in the glow of anger. For a moment I was myself again; we were approaching the village of D—, where I first met her who was lost to me for ever. There stood the old church with its ivied tower, the rooks whirling round and about it as of yore, unmindful of the time when I used, with bated breath and throbbing heart, to watch her as she wended her way to offer up her pure prayers within its sacred walls. On the right lay—Hall, where I first bathed in the inexhaustive glories of love's young dream. There the corpse where I dared breathe my burning hopes. I could gaze no longer; and, burying my face in my hands, I gave myself up to one of those reveries during which the hour, the place, the circumstances of my surroundings, were utterly forgotten, and I wandered by her side as in the olden time, and all was light, and joy, and love. How long this day dream may have lasted, and why I awoke from it until the train stopped, I cannot tell, but when I looked up, my companion was engaged in reading a letter—an ordinary looking letter, written upon pink note paper. Suddenly my attention became rivetted—closer—closer—very nerve in my body began to tingle, my heart gave one mighty bound, for the handwriting was that of my dead wife.

An icy sickness crept over me. The small portion I could read showed me words that should be explained, words of to me—unfathomable mystery. I felt as if I should swoon, my brain began to throb, and for a moment I was almost insensible. Then in a voice that startled me from its very hollowness, I said,

"When did you receive that letter?"

He looked up, smiled, and resumed his reading of it.

"When did you receive that letter?"

"Excuse me if I refuse to comply with your request."

"You must tell me."

"You're a cool hand, 'pon my soul!" he exclaimed.

"I beg of you to answer my question."

"I don't understand it."

"My question is"—and I was as cool as ice, though my brain was on fire—"when did you receive the letter you are now engaged in reading?"

"What if I refuse to answer your question, which I consider grossly impertinent?" he replied, angrily.

"You must tell me. You must give it to me. You have no right to it!" I shouted.

"You are either mad or drunk, but whichever it is, you shall neither know when I received this letter, nor shall you become possessor of it as long as I can control my tongue or make use of my arms."

He was preparing to replace it in his pocket.

Mine it should be.

Without a moment's hesitation I made a snatch at it.

He was too quick for me, but, in throwing back his hand to avoid my grasp, his fingers relaxed their hold, and the letter flew out of the open window.

We were travelling at the rate of forty miles an hour. Houses, trees, hedges, and telegraph-posts flashed past. The letter must be mine. It must be regained.

Houses, trees, hedges, and telegraph-posts flashed past. The one absorbing idea rushed through my mind. I did not hesitate the tenth part of a second. Houses, trees, hedges, and telegraph-posts flashed past. I threw open the door, and stood upon the step.

Houses, trees, hedges, and telegraph-posts flashed past. My companion seized my arm.

Houses, trees, hedges, and telegraph-posts flashed past. I sprang forward.

"God save me!" I said.

A horrible crash! A million of lights!

When I recovered consciousness I found myself in a reclining position, and surrounded by a number of strange faces.

I could not realize the situation for some moments; and when at length my reason began to assert itself the whole truth flashed upon me. I endeavoured to rise, but found so much pain in moving that I desisted.

"Do not stir, sir," said an elderly man, who was engaged in bathing my temples. "We've sent for a doctor, and we expect him every moment."

As he was speaking the medical man arrived.

He made a careful examination, and pronounced that, as far as his judgment went, the bones were unbroken, that a contused cut on the temple might prove troublesome, and that immediate and careful removal and rest would be essential.

I listened to all this, and more, as the doctor gave his directions to the man who was engaged in bathing my head, and whom I subsequently learned was foreman of a gang of plate-layers engaged in repairing the line at the place where I had alighted. He described me as bounding along the line like a huge ball, and that my escape was nothing short of a miracle.

"Here, sir, is his watch, and keys, and pocket-book," added the foreman, handing the articles mentioned to the doctor.

I sat up and fervently returned thanks to him whose name was the last on my lips ere springing from the carriage.

"Five pounds to any man who will bring me a letter written on pink paper. It dropped from the carriage right-hand window from London, about half a minute before I fell out."

The workmen looked at each other, then at me, and lastly at the doctor, evidently under the impression that I was raving.

"Five pounds, men! What are you staring at? Now then, men, stir yourselves! Don't you want to earn a five-pound note handy?" cried the foreman.

In an instant off they started, tearing along the line in the direction indicated.

"Do not excite yourself, sir, it is sure to be found," said the doctor, his finger on my wrist. "Had you fine weather in town?"

This was to distract my attention; but the good man little knew that my whole life was concentrated on the discovery of that tiny piece of pink paper.

"Do not stir, sir; pray do not. I insist on it," cried the doctor, endeavouring to restrain me from rising.

I shook him off, and stood upon my feet, very sick, very giddy, but still able to stand.

It appeared an age. I felt agonized with apprehension lest it should not be found.

"How long have I been unconscious?" I asked of the foreman, who stood respectfully by.

"About twenty minutes, sir."

"Did any trains pass up the line, either way, since?"

"No, sir."

"Then the letter must be safe. I feared that the wheels of the up-train might have caught and annihilated it."

At this moment there was a shout, and one of the men came running towards us waving something in his hand.

"He has it, sir," said the foreman.

The man approached nearer—nearer; my head began to swim, nearer—nearer; that for which I had ventured my life, eye, and would again, was mine. I held out my hands mechanically; with a last effort I clutched the letter which the breathless navy tendered to me, thrust it into my bosom, and fainted away.

"At what hour does the train start for Canterbury?"

"Four o'clock, sir."

"What delay shall I have in Canterbury, so as to be able, if necessary, to catch the tidal train?"

"Thirty-two minutes, sir."

"Can I telegraph?"

"To, sir. Lord bless you, sir, it's enough for us to see the wires. A telegram here would set us crazy."

These questions were addressed by me to the station-master at the B— Station, to which I had been carried by the navvies on an improvised litter during my second period of unconsciousness.

My head had been dressed, brandy and water administered, and, although against the strongest remonstrances of Doctor Flethurst, the kind and accomplished physician who attended me, I resolved to push on—to track and follow, if necessary, to the uttermost limits of the earth, my companion of the morning, and compel him, with a sword at his throat or a revolver at his breast, to explain the purport of the letter of my dead wife.

It was undated.

These are the words:

Thursday.

"DEAREST,

"Why have you not written? I cannot understand it. You have no idea how perplexed I have been by your silence. I am compelled, as you are aware, to be very careful, lest our letters should be discovered; but I have taken every precaution. Come at once. I think our lucky star is in the ascendant."

"FANNIE."

This was the letter.

The paper was fresh and glossy, but it wore the unmistakable signs of much folding and unfolding. The manufacturer's name was stamped on one corner. In vain I turned it over and over in the hope of a faint clue as to date; not a scratch—not a blot. Would it have been Fannie's letter were it blotted? Not!