

(For the Canadian Illustrated News.)

A MOTHER'S BIRTHDAY.

(From the Italian.)

I.

Again the blissful day's return
 Endeared by memories old we greet,
 But for the thoughts that in us burn
 How can we find expression meet?
 Mother, our hearts o'erflow with love,
 And fain would utter all they feel,
 But ah! our lips refuse to move
 And all our love to thee reveal.

II.

If thou our helpless infant years
 Didst kindly tend by act and prayer,
 To soothe thy sorrows, calm thy fears—
 Let this, in turn, be now our care.
 And let us ever of all days
 Highest esteem the happy morn
 That gave thee, mother, beyond praise,
 A blessing to thy sons unborn.

JOHN READE.

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TAKEN AT THE FLOOD.

A NEW NOVEL.

By the Author of "Lady Audley's Secret," "Strangers and Pilgrims," &c., &c.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE WRECK OF A LIFE.

The woman entered with a nervous, furtive air, as if she were not quite sure whether that dimly lighted parlour might not be in some way a trap,—which might close upon her to her undoing. She looked around the room curiously,—wonderingly,—and from the room she looked at the schoolmaster.

"Yes," he said, answering the look. "It's a change, isn't it? Nothing splendid here—nothing to swell a woman's vanity or to feed her pride."

"The place looks very poor," replied the woman, falteringly, "but I've long been used to poverty." Then with a little gush of feeling he looked straight in his face, and said, "Hav'n't you one kind word for me, Carford, after all these years?"

"Drop that name, if you please," he said, angrily. "Here I'm known as James Carew. You could only have tracked me here by that name."

"Don't say tracked you here, James. I should never have troubled you if there'd been any other creature upon this earth to whom I could appeal in my distress."

"What, have you used them all up—worn them all out—all the fops and flatterers who used to swear by the pretty Mrs. Carford?"

"I want so little, James, pleaded the woman, not replying to this sneer, "I expect so little."

"I'm glad of that," cried Mr. Carew, "this is no place to foster large expectations. Why, woman, do you require to be told that the utmost I have been able to do in all these years has been to find bread for myself and my child? Do you want words to tell you that, when you see me here?"

He surveyed the room with ineffable contempt; the woman watching him all the while with hollow haggard eyes, and tremulous lips.

"This room is a palace, James," she said presently, "compared with the holes that I have occupied."

She seated herself with a shrinking air, as if doubtful whether the privilege of sitting in that room might not be denied her—seated herself where the light of the one candle shone full upon her wan face.

It was a face that had once been beautiful, that was seen at a glance. Those large hazel eyes, seeming larger for the hollowness of the cheeks, haggard as they were, had not lost all their lustre. The delicate features neither years nor sorrow had changed; yet on all the face there was a stamp of ruin, a decay beyond hope of restoration. Never again could bloom or freshness brighten that image of departed beauty. Like a ghost appeared this woman to the eyes that had seen her in her prime. The schoolmaster contemplated her for a little while thoughtfully, then turned away with a sigh. Such decay is sadder than death.

Yes, she had been pretty; and her face bore a painful likeness to another face, now in its flower of loveliness. Those eyes were Sylvia's eyes grown old. Those delicate features had the same modelling. But all the glory of colouring which made Sylvia resemble a picture by Titian this face had lost. A pale grayness was its pervading tint. The loose hair that strayed unidly across the deeply-lined forehead was of the same faded neutral hue as the shrunken cheek. If ever the ghost of beauty walked this earth, this was that sorrowful phantom—a shade which seemed to say to youth and loveliness, "Behold how fleeting are your graces!"

A history of women's decadence might have been written from this woman's dress. The flimsy gray silk gown, worn at every seam, stained and smeared with the dirt of years—the wretched rag of a shawl which had once called itself black lace, but was now the colour of the grass in Hyde Park after a hot summer—the bonnet, a thing compounded of scraps from a milliner's rag bag—the gloves, last sacrifice to civilization, shrunk with exposure to bad weather till they could scarcely cover even those wasted hands. Genteel penury had reached its ultimate limit.

"How did you find me?" asked Mr. Carew, after a pause, during which the woman had watched his face closely, trying to read hope there.

"Mr. Miles, the cashier, met me in Holborn one day, and seeing me so poor asked me why I did not apply to you. He had seen you in the church here one day when he had come down for a week's fishing in this neighbourhood and he remembered you. He told me that you seemed comfortably off, and might help me a little. This happened quite three years ago. I did not want to come to you, James. I knew I had no right. I waited till starvation drove me here."

"Starvation," cried the schoolmaster, "If you had enough

money to pay your journey down here, you must have been a long way off starvation."

"A few shillings did that. I came by a cheap excursion train to Monkhampton. I borrowed half-a-sovereign from my landlady—a good soul, who has been very patient with me."

"Your friend would have done better to keep her money. I have not ten shillings to give you. Good heavens! is there no corner of the earth remote enough to shelter a man from the eye of the world? To think that fellow Miles should spy me out even here!"

"He spoke quite kindly of you, James."

"Curse his impertinence! What right had he to mention my name? To you of all people!"

"Oh, I know I had no right to come to you," said the woman, with abject humility. "There is no pity, no forgiveness—at least, none on earth—for a wife that has once wronged her husband."

"Once wronged!" cried James Carew, with intensest bitterness. "Once wronged? why, your life was one long series of wrong against me. If it had been but your falsehood as a wife—well, there are men whose philosophy is tough enough to stretch to forgiveness! I don't say I am one of those. But it is just possible that, had your one crime been your flight with that scoundrel, time might have taught me to think less hardly of you."

Worms are said to turn when trodden on. A curious sparkle glittered in Mrs. Carford's wan eyes; her lip curled with irrepressible scorn.

"My crime served as a set-off against yours, James," she said quietly. "But for that you might have stood in the felon's dock."

"But for that! Mr. Mowbray could not afford to prosecute the husband of the woman he seduced, for the error of which her extravagance was the chief cause."

"My extravagance! Oh, James, don't be too hard upon me. Who was it most loved show and splendour, and prided himself on his hospitality, and was never satisfied unless life was all pleasure? Who was it that belonged to half a dozen clubs, where one might have sufficed him? Who attended every race meeting, and won and lost money so fast that his bewildered brain lost count of gains and losses? My extravagance, indeed! What was a dressmaker's bill against settling day at Tattersall's, or the price of an occasional box at the opera against a run of ill-luck at Crockford's? And, how was I to know that we were living beyond our income when I saw you spare nothing to gratify your own fancies. I knew you were only a salaried manager in that great house, but I knew your salary was a large one, and that you occupied a position of influence which your father had held before you. What was I but a school-girl when you married me; and what experience had I to guide me? Do you think I should have been reckless if you had told me the truth; if you had only been frank and confessed that we were on the brink of ruin? that you had falsified the accounts of the house, and lived in hourly fear of discovery?"

"Confess to you!" cried the husband, scornfully; "confess to a doll that only lived to be dressed and made pretty. Where was I to look for a heart under all your finery? No, I preferred trusting to the chapter of accidents rather than to such a wife as you. I thought I might tide over my difficulties. The deficiency was large, but one great stroke of luck on the turf might have enabled me to make things square. I went on hoping in the face of ruin, till one day I went to my office to find a strange accountant going through my books; and came back to my house a few hours later to discover that my wife had eloped with my employer."

"That guilty act saved you from a convict's cell," said the woman.

"At the price of my dishonour," answered the schoolmaster.

"The same night brought me a letter from my betrayer—the honoured guest at my board—the innocent victim of my fraud, as I had believed him—informing me that my defalcations had been long suspected, and had now been proved with mathematical exactness by an examination of the books. The letter, curt, and without signature, informed me further that the house would spare me the disgrace of a prosecution on condition that I withdrew myself from the commercial world, and refrained from any future attempt, to obtain credit or employment in the city of London. Of the wife he had stolen from me the villain who penned the letter said nothing."

There was a pause—James Carew stopped exhausted by passion which was not the less intense because he held it well in check.

"What was I to do? Submit gamely to my dishonour, or follow the scoundrel who had stolen my wife? If I followed him, if I asserted an injured husband's right of satisfaction, he would bring my defalcations against me. I had signed his name to bills for my own advantage. He could denounce me as a forger. I had kept back moneys that ought to have come to him. He could charge me with theft. Vain to say that I meant to redeem the bills—that I hoped to replace the money—The thing was done."

He paused again, breathless, and wiped the drops from his forehead. The very memory of those days revived the old passion.

"I dreaded the felon's fate. But I was a man and not a worm. So I followed you and your seducer—found you, after a long hunt, at Lucerne. How could such guilty souls face the sublimity of nature? Mowbray behaved a shade better than I could have hoped. We fought, and I wounded him, and left him in the arms of his valet, in a little wood not five hundred yards from the hotel where I found you both. I came back to England, wandered about aimlessly for a little while; carrying Sylvia with me, always expecting to be arrested; and finally came down here penniless. I found the post of village schoolmaster vacant; applied for it, and after a little delay obtained it, with no better recommendation than a bearing which my patrons were pleased to think that of a gentleman. That is the sum of my history. Yours, I doubt not, can boast more variety."

"Only the varieties of sorrow and remorse, James," answered the wife, with a heart-broken sigh. "I was not so guilty; so lost to shame as you deem me. The burden of my sin weighed heavy upon me. I pined for my child. I felt the sharp sting of dishonour. Grief made me a dull companion; and the day came when I saw weariness in the face that had once known only smiles for me. I felt then that the end was near. My sacrifice had won happiness neither for myself nor the man who still professed to love me. We wandered about the continent till he grew tired, and talked of going back to England. I was heart sick of those garish

foreign cities, but the thought of returning filled me with horror. I should see people I had known—people who knew my story. I told him my dread, and for the first time he answered me with a sneer, 'There's not much fear of your friends recognizing you,' he said. 'You forget how changed you are.' I looked in my glass a little while afterwards, and saw how truly he had spoken. My beauty was gone."

"And soon after this mutual discovery, your lover left you, I suppose," said Mr. Carew.

"No, that last shame was spared me. I left him. I felt that the chain dragged heavily, and conscience, which only the thought of his affection could stifle, awoke with all its terrors. I could hardly have found courage to tell my wretched story to a pastor of my own faith, but there was a good old priest who sang mass at a little chapel in the Tyrol, where we had wandered, an old man whose face promised pity. I went to him, and told him all. He bade me consider that if I wished to reconcile myself to offended heaven, my first act must be to leave the path of sin. I told him that I was penniless, but that I thought if I could get to one of the great cities of Germany I might obtain employment as a governess, or travelling companion; in short some situation where a knowledge of languages would be valuable. The good old man lent me a few pounds, enough to take me to Leipzig, and support me there while I looked about me. Just at first fortune seemed to favour my efforts, and I thought heaven was reconciled with me. I obtained a situation in a school, to teach English, French, and Italian. The pittance was small, but my chief need was a shelter. Out of that pittance I contrived to repay the good priest's loan, and clothe myself decently. All went well with me till an evil hour, after I had been three years at the school, and had won the principal's good word by my industry, one of my old friends brought a pupil to the school, a woman who had admired my face and jewels, and shared my opera-box, and a dozen other pleasures. She saw me, recognized the wreck of her former acquaintance, and told the principal my story—not too gently. I was dismissed that day, and had to begin the world again, without a character and without a friend. I need not weary you with the rest of my story. Indeed I have not strength to tell it. Enough that I have lived. I have hung on to the ragged edge of society, been daily-governess in poor neighbourhoods, danced in the ballet at a theatre in the City Road, gone out as a dressmaker's drudge at fifteenpence a day—but though often face to face with starvation—I have never applied to Horace Mowbray for help."

"I read his marriage in the papers some years ago," said James Carew, "a great marriage, one that must have doubled his fortune. I suppose he is a millionaire now?"

"Mr. Miles told me that he is very rich," answered the woman, with a sigh. "He seemed to wonder at my rags."

"And not to give you credit for your penitence," said her husband, with his cynical laugh. "This world is not a good place for penitents."

"James," said the woman, with a sudden appeal, "will you give me something to eat. I am faint with hunger. I have had nothing but a penny biscuit all this long day."

"Well, I'll give you a meal. You don't ask to see your daughter—a queer kind of mother."

"I don't want her to see me," said the woman, shuddering. "Heaven knows how my heart aches at the thought of her, but I couldn't face her in these rags."

"Couldn't you?" exclaimed the schoolmaster; "then you mustn't stay here. This house is not large enough to keep people apart. It isn't like our snug little box at Kilburn, with its drawing-room and boudoir, and smoking-room, and study. If you want something to eat, Sylvia must bring it."

"Don't let her know who I am," said the mother, trembling, and turning with a scared look towards the door.

"She shall know nothing, unless she has been listening all the time, which is not impossible."

He opened the door leading into the kitchen, and called Sylvia. The staircase led out of this room, and at the sound of her father's voice Sylvia came fluttering down the stairs. But it was just possible that a light footstep might have only a minute before ascended.

There was a pale, unquiet look in the girl's face, but she said not a word.

"There is a half-famished wanderer in there," said her father. "Bring her whatever you can find for supper."

Sylvia opened her little larder, and produced the carcass of a fowl, a scrap or two of bacon, some cold potatoes, and a loaf. She spread a napkin on a tray, and set out these viands with a neatness which was habitual to her—even though her hands trembled a little as they performed the task. Then with that tray in her hands she went into the parlour.

The wanderer looked at her, and she at the wanderer, both faces with something awful in their expression—as flesh and blood may look at a ghost. And indeed each saw a phantom in the face of the other. One the spectre of the past—the other the shade of the future.

"This is what I was," thought the mother.

"This is what I may be," said the daughter.

Sylvia set the tray down before the woman, looking at her all the while with a half-shrinking curiosity. That pale wan countenance, where all colour seemed effaced by gray spectral shadows, was so terribly like her own. She beheld her own lineaments, with all their beauty vanished. "What," she wondered, "is beauty so dependent on colour and freshness and youth that, though the lines remain, all is lost when youth is gone?"

She remembered Mrs. Stauden's handsome middle age. The fine face in its matronly repose, the clear bright eyes, and the ripe bloom of the cheek.

"Care is the destroyer of beauty," she thought, "and not Time. God keep me from such a life as my mother's."

She had heard all. Her curiosity had been awakened by her father's manner, and she had taken care to make herself acquainted with the cause of his agitation. She had heard every syllable, for the doors fitted but loosely in that old house, and the voices had sounded as clearly as if she had been in the same room. Horrified, heart-sick, she had heard of her mother's shame, her father's dishonour. But though she had a shuddering compassion for the weaker sinner, her chief pity was for herself. By these sins she had been robbed of her birthright. Her parents' wrong-doing had condemned her to a youth of obscurest penury. They had started fair on the road of life, and of their own guilty wills had wandered off into bramble-choked bye-ways, among thorns and briars which wounded her innocent limbs. They had enjoyed their brief day of pleasure, and plucked the flowers in the golden valley of sin; but for her there had been only the rugged