

WE WISH YOU A MERRY CHRISTMAS!

Here comes a sweet dear,
Her Pussie caressing,
To wish us good cheer
And each Christmas blessing.

"Tis little Miss Muffet!
Not she famed of yore
In nursery lore,
Who sat on a tuffet
And ate curds and whey.
Until a big spider
Came crawling beside her,
And drove her away.
No, this is a new one,
A flesh-and-blood dear,
Who lives with us here:
A genuine true one,
Whose eyes look right through one.
Unknowing of fear,
She scared at a spider!
Do you wish to deride her?
You know not our dear.
If you say so 'tis clear:
Should a spider alight on her,
Think you 'twould frighten her?
Without any fuss,
She would wave her hand—thus,
Or blow a puff—so
And off it would go.

Our sturdy Miss Muffet
With Boreas dares buffet.
In tipper of fur,
What are wild winds to her?
With hands in her muff, it
Is clear she can rough it
In stormiest weather.
She's a hat on, or bonnet—
Which is it?—and on it
A very fine feather:
Equipped for a walk
This keen frosty morning.
And utterly scorned
The cold altogether.
But first she must talk
With Pussie a bit.
Ere going, as fit,
So there's plenty of chatter
In pussy-cat patter.
With many a kiss
Interjected by Miss:
Her speech softly purring,
And Pussie purring
An answer most fit:
At least she'll aver
'Tis well known to her
As hers is to it!

"Now Puss! that's enough
Of fondling and nursing!
My case you are turning!
Jump down from my mud!"

Miss Muffet at last
Is off walking fast.
What delight to behold her,
Glancing back over her shoulder,
Sweet smiling and nodding
As onward she's plodding!
You darlingest Miss,
I blow you a kiss!

J. L.

A SHOCKING STORY.

BY WILKIE COLLINS.

I.

I hear that the "shocking story of my conduct" was widely circulated at the ball, and that public opinion (among the ladies, in every part of the room, declared I had disgraced myself.

But there was one dissentient voice in this chorus of general condemnation. You spoke, madam, with all the authority of your wide celebrity and your high rank. You said:—"I am personally a stranger to the young lady who is the subject of remark—I am not even acquainted with her name. If I venture to interfere, it is only to remind you that there are two sides to every story. May I ask, in the interest of mercy, if you have waited to pass sentence on her until you have heard what she has to say in her own defence?"

These just and generous words produced (if I am correctly informed) a dead silence. Not one of the women who had condemned me had heard me in my defence. Not one of them ventured to answer you.

How I may stand in the opinions of such persons as these, is a matter of perfect indifference to me. Not because I am a woman of extraordinary fortitude, but because I shall soon be beyond the reach of London gossip and London scandal. My good husband has received a foreign appointment which places us in an honorable and independent position. We leave England in a few days; and we are not likely to return to our country for some years to come. Under these circumstances, may I speak of my heartfelt gratitude? may I own how anxious I am to stand well in your opinion? I cannot contemplate my approaching departure, without feeling eager to satisfy you that I am not unworthy of the interest you have taken in seeing justice done to a stranger. I shall be so proud of bearing away with me even the most trifling expression of your sympathy! Will you read my little story, and decide for yourself if I deserve the hard things that have been said of me? Yes, I am sure you will!

II.

Who am I—to begin with?

I suppose I shall best answer that question by describing myself as one of the fortunate persons who are possessed of advantages of birth. My father was the second son of an English nobleman. My mother was the lineal descendant of one of the oldest families in South Germany. I lost both my parents when I was sixteen years

old; and I went to live with my uncle (my father's younger brother), who was also appointed my guardian until I came of age. His wife (my aunt by marriage) brought him a handsome fortune. She, too, belonged to the higher rank of society.

You will find, as I go on, that I abstain from mentioning any family names. The motives which—if they did not absolutely lead to my marriage—did certainly hasten it, are connected with the discovery of an event which must never be traced to the persons concerned in it. For this reason I have marked my narrative "private;" and I trust to you not to let it be seen by other eyes than yours. If I mention my uncle by his military title, as "the General," and if I change my aunt's Christian name, I shall keep a secret which I feel bound by the strongest motives of gratitude and honor to respect—and, at the same time, I shall place my position before you unreservedly in its true aspect. To have done all the sooner with the troublesome question of names, I may add that I bear my German mother's Christian name, "Wilhelmina." All my friends, in the days when I had friends, used to shorten this to "Mina." Be my friend so far, and call me Mina, too.

My troubles began with—what do you think? With nothing better and nothing worse than the engagement of a new groom.

This seems, no doubt, a very odd way of appealing to your interest, at the outset of my story. Fortunately, I am writing to a just woman, who will suspend her opinion until she knows a little more of me.

We were in London for the season. At the time I am speaking of, I had lived for five years under the protection of my uncle and aunt. When I think of the good General's fatherly kindness to me, I despair of writing about it in any adequate terms. To own the truth, the tears get into my eyes, and I cannot write at all. As for my relations with Lady Catherine, I only do her justice if I say that she performed her duties towards me without the slightest pretension, and in the most charming manner. At past forty years old she was still universally admired, though she had lost the one attraction which distinguished her before my time—the attraction of a perfectly beautiful figure. With fine hair and expressive eyes, she was otherwise a plain woman. Her unassuming cleverness and her fascinating manners were the qualities no doubt which made her popular everywhere. We never quarrelled. Not because I was always amiable, but because Lady Catherine would not allow it. She managed me as she managed her husband, with perfect tact. With certain occasional checks—exceptions which only proved the rule—she absolutely governed the General. There were eccentricities in his character which made him a man easily ruled by a clever woman. Defering to his opinion, so far as appearances went, my aunt generally contrived to get her own way in the end. Except when he was at his club, happy in his gossip, his good dinners, and his whist, my excellent uncle lived under a despotism, in the happy delusion that he was master in his own house.

Prosperous and pleasant as it appears on the surface, my life had its sad side for a young woman.

In the commonplace routine of our existence, as wealthy people in the upper rank, there was nothing to ripen the growth of the better and deeper capacities in my nature. Heartily as I loved and admired my uncle, he was neither of an age nor of a character to be the chosen depositary of my most secret thoughts, the friend of my inmost heart, who could show me how to make the best and the most of my life. With friends and admirers in plenty, I had found no one who could hold this position towards me. In the midst of society I was, unconsciously, a lonely woman. My happiest moments were those moments when I took refuge in my music and my books. Out of the house, my one diversion, always welcome, and always fresh, was riding. Without any false modesty, I may mention that I had lovers as well as admirers; but not one of them produced an impression on my heart. In all that related to the tender passion, as it is called, I was an undeveloped being. The influence that men have on women, because they are men, was really and truly a mystery to me. I was ashamed of my own coldness—I tried, honestly tried, to copy other girls; to feel my heart beating in the presence of the one chosen man, as it did certainly beat, for example, when I went out hunting with the General. But it was not to be done. When a man pressed my hand, I felt it in my rings, instead of my heart.

Don't suppose I am writing in this way about myself, out of mere vanity. I am trying to prepare you for what is to come. If I can only enable you to see some of the defects and weaknesses of my character, as clearly as I can see them myself, you will, I think, feel more indulgent towards me when I make my confession. And perhaps you will be all the readier to remember that I had neither mother nor sister to confide in at a time when I most wanted a word of advice.

This said, I have done with the past, and may get on to the strange events which have associated themselves with a later time.

III.

I have mentioned that we were in London for the season. One morning, I went out riding with my uncle, as usual, in Hyde Park.

The General's service in the army had been in a cavalry regiment—service distinguished by merits which justified his rapid rise to the high places in his profession. In the hunting-field, he was noted as one of the most daring and most accomplished riders in our country. He had always delighted in riding young and high-spirited horses; and the habit remained with him after he had quitted the active duties of his profession in later life. From first to last he had met with no accidents worth remembering, until the unlucky morning when he was out with me. His horse, a fiery chestnut, ran away with him, in that part of the Park-ride called Rotten Row. With the purpose of keeping clear of other riders, he spurred his runaway horse at the rail which divides the Row from the grassy enclosure at its side. The terrified animal swerved in taking the leap, and dashed him against a tree. He was dreadfully shaken and injured; but his strong constitution carried him through to recovery—with the serious drawback of an incurable lameness in one leg. The doctors on taking leave of their patient, united in warning him (at his age, and bearing in mind his weakened leg) to ride no more restive horses. "A quiet cob, General," they all suggested. My uncle was sorely mortified and offended. "If I am fit for nothing but a quiet cob," he said bitterly, "I will ride no more." He kept his word. No one ever saw the General on horseback again.

Under these circumstances (and my aunt being no horsewoman), I had apparently no other choice than to give up riding also. But my kind-hearted uncle was not the man to let me be sacrificed to this disappointment. His own riding-groom had been one of his soldier-servants in the cavalry regiments—a quaint, sour-tempered old man, not at all the sort of person to attend on a young lady taking her riding-exercise alone. "We must find a smart fellow who can be trusted," said the General. "I shall inquire at the club."

For a week afterwards, a succession of grooms, recommended by friends, applied for the vacant place.

The General found insurmountable objections to all of them. "I'll tell you what I have done," he announced one day, with the air of a man who had hit on a grand discovery; "I have advertised in the papers."

Lady Catherine looked up from her embroidery with the placid smile that was peculiar to her. "I don't quite like advertising for a servant," she said. "You are at the mercy of a stranger; you don't know that you are not engaging a drunkard or a thief."

"Or you may be deceived by a false character," I added, on my side. I seldom ventured, at domestic consultations, on giving my opinion unasked—but the new groom represented a subject in which I felt a strong personal interest. In a certain sense, he was to be my groom.

"I'm much obliged to you both for warning me that I am so easy to deceive," the General remarked satirically. "Unfortunately the mischief is done. Three men have answered my advertisement already. I expect them here tomorrow to be examined for the place."

Lady Catherine looked up from her embroidery again. "Are you going to see them yourself?" she asked softly. "I thought the steward—"

"I have hitherto considered myself a better judge of a groom than my steward," the General interposed. "However don't be alarmed; I won't act on my own sole responsibility, after the hint you have given me. You and Mina shall lend me your valuable assistance, and discover whether they are thieves, drunkards, and what not, before I feel the smallest suspicion of it myself."

IV.

We naturally supposed that the General was joking. No. This was one of those rare occasions on which my aunt's tact—infallible in matters of importance—proved to be at fault in a trifle. My uncle's self-esteem had been touched in a tender place; and he had resolved to make us feel it. The next morning a polite message came, requesting our presence in the library, to see the grooms. My aunt (always ready with her smile, but rarely tempted into laughing outright) did for once laugh heartily. "It is really too ridiculous!" she said. However, she pursued her policy of always yielding, in the first instance. We went together to the library.

The three grooms were received in the order in which they presented themselves for approval. Two of them bore the ineffaceable mark of the public-house so plainly written on their villainous faces, that even I could see it. My uncle ironically asked us to favour him with our opinions. Lady Catherine answered with her sweetest smile: "Pardon me, General—we are here to learn." The words were nothing, but the manner in which they were spoken was perfect. Few men could have resisted that gentle influence—and the General was not one of the few. He stroked his moustache, and returned to his petticoat government. The two grooms were dismissed.

On the entry of the third and last man, we all three opened our eyes with the same sensation of surprise.

If the stranger's short coat and tight trousers had not proclaimed his vocation in life, we should have taken it for granted that there had been some mistake, and that we were favoured with a visit from a gentleman unknown. He was between dark and light in complexion, with

frank clear blue eyes; quiet, modest, intelligent-looking; slim in his figure; easy in his movements; respectful in his manner, but perfectly free from servility. "I say!" the General blurted out, addressing my aunt confidentially, "he looks as if he would do, doesn't he?"

I expected to see Lady Catherine's invariable smile. For once, the smile seemed to be not ready. "It rests with you to decide," she answered in lower tones than usual.

"Step forward, my man," said the General. The groom advanced from the door, bowed, and stopped at the foot of the table—my uncle sitting at the head, with my aunt and myself on either side of him. The inevitable questions began.

"What is your name?"

"Michael Bloomfield."

"Your age?"

"Twenty-six."

"My aunt's interest in the proceedings seemed to be slackening already. A little weary sigh escaped her. She leaned back resignedly in her chair.

The General went on with his questions:—"What experience have you had as a groom?"

"I began learning my work, sir, before I was twelve years old."

"Yes! yes! I mean, what private families have you served in?"

"Two, sir."

"How long have you been in your two situations?"

"Four years in the first; and three in the second."

The General looked agreeably surprised.

"Seven years in only two situations is a good character in itself," he remarked. "Who are your references?"

The groom laid two papers on the table.

"I don't take written references," said the General.

"Be pleased to read my papers, sir," answered the groom.

My uncle looked sharply across the table. The groom sustained the look with respectful but unshaken composure. The General took up the papers, and seemed to be once more favorably impressed as he read them. "Personal references in each case if required, in support of strong written recommendations from both his employers," he informed my aunt. "Copy the addresses, Mina. Very satisfactory, I must say. Don't you think so yourself?" he resumed, turning again to my aunt.

Lady Catherine replied by a courteous bend of her head. She looked at the groom absently, like a person whose mind was otherwise occupied. The General went on with his questions. They related to the management of horses; and they were answered to his complete satisfaction. "Michael Bloomfield, you know your business," he said, "and you have a good character. Leave your address. When I have consulted your references, you shall hear from me."

The groom took out a blank card, and wrote his name and address on it. I looked over my uncle's shoulder when he received the card. Another surprise! The handwriting was simply impeccable—the lines running perfectly straight, and every letter completely formed. As this perplexing person made his modest bow and withdrew, the General, struck by an after-thought, called him back from the door.

"One thing more," said my uncle. "About friends and followers! I consider it my duty to my servants to allow them to see their relations; but I expect them to submit to certain conditions in return—"

"I beg your pardon, sir," the groom interposed. "I shall not give you any trouble on that score. I have no relations."

"No brothers or sisters?" asked the General.

"None, sir."

"Father and mother both dead?"

"I don't know, sir."

"You don't know! What does that mean?"

"I am telling you the plain truth, sir. I must have had a father and mother, of course. But I never heard who they were—and I don't expect to hear now."

He said those words with a bitter composure which impressed me painfully. Lady Catherine was far from feeling it as I did. Her languid interest in the engagement of the groom seemed to be completely exhausted—and that was all. She rose, in her easy graceful way, and looked out of window at the courtyard and fountain, the house-dog in his kennel, and the stable doors beyond. My uncle's eyes followed her; he asked if she were tired. Her back was turned on him, in the position which she now occupied. She only answered, "No," without looking round.

During this interval, the groom remained near the table, respectfully waiting for his dismissal. The General spoke to him sharply, for the first time. I could see that my good uncle had noticed the cruel tone of that passing reference to his parents, and thought of it as I did.

"One word more, before you go," he said. "If I don't find you more mercifully inclined towards my horses than you seem to be towards your father and mother, you won't remain long in my service. You might have told me you had never heard who your parents were, without speaking as if you didn't care to hear."

"May I say a bold word, sir, in my own defence?"

He put the question very quietly, but, at the same time, so firmly that he even surprised my aunt. She looked round from the window—then turned back again, and stretched out her hand towards the curtain, intending as I sup-