

THE FALLEN LEAVES.

BY WILKIE COLLINS.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE capricious influences which combine to make us happy are never so certain to be absent influences as when we are foolish enough to talk about them. Amelius had talked about them. When he and Sally left the cottage, the road which led them away from the park was also the road which led them past a church. The influences of happiness left them at the church door.

Rows of carriages were in waiting; hundreds of idle people were assembled about the church steps; the thunderous music of the organ rolled out through the open doors—a grand wedding, with choral service, was in course of celebration. Sally begged Amelius to take her in to see it. They tried the front entrance, and found it impossible to get through the crowd. A side entrance, and a fee to a verger, succeeded better. They obtained space enough to stand on, with a view of the altar.

The bride was a tall buxom girl, splendidly dressed: she performed her part in the ceremony with the most unruffled composure. The bridegroom exhibited an instructive spectacle of aged Nature, sustained by Art. His hair, his complexion, his teeth, his breast, his shoulders, and his legs, showed what the wig-maker, the valet, the dentist, the tailor, and the hosier can do for a rich old man, who wishes to present a juvenile appearance while he is buying a young wife. No less than three clergymen were present conducting the sale. The demeanour of the rich congregation was worthy of the glorious bygone of the Golden Calf. So far as could be

judged by appearances, one old lady, in a pew close to the place at which Amelius and Sally were standing, seemed to be the only person present who was not favourably impressed by the ceremony.

‘I call it disgraceful,’ the old lady remarked to a charming young person seated next to her.

But the charming young person—being the legitimate product of the present time—had no more sympathy with questions of sentiment than a Hottentot. ‘How can you talk so, grandmamma!’ she rejoined. ‘He has twenty thousand a year—and that lucky girl will be mistress of the most splendid house in London.’

‘I don’t care,’ the old lady persisted, ‘it’s not the less a disgrace to everybody concerned in it. There is many a poor friendless creature, driven by hunger to the streets, who has a better claim to our sympathy than that shameless girl, selling herself in the house of God! I’ll wait for you in the carriage—I won’t see any more of it.’

Sally touched Amelius. ‘Take me out!’ she whispered faintly.

He supposed that the heat in the church had been too much for her. ‘Are you better now?’ he asked, when they got into the open air.

She held fast by his arm. ‘Let’s get farther away,’ she said. ‘That lady is coming after us—I don’t want her to see me again. I am one of the creatures she talked about. Is the mark of the streets on me, after all you have done to rub it out?’

The wild misery in her words presented another development of her character which was entirely new to