



CATHOLIC CHRONICLE.

VOL. XVIII.

MONTREAL, FRIDAY, OCTOBER 11, 1867.

No. 9.

THE MAIDEN'S DREAM.

A TALE OF OLD LONDON.

(From the Lamp.)

The great highways outside 'London fayre city' were margined with green turf and fresh hedgerows; and, on the selfsame ground, now heavily burdened with dingy bricks and mortar, there were fields of vivid scarlet, where the poppy flaunted its glaring flowers; and fields of gold, where the corn was beckoning for the sickle; and thicket woods, where the oak-tree towered, and the squirrel hid his store of hazelnuts and acorns, and the ringdove cooed mournfully to her mate.

In the front shop of one of the picturesque houses on the road running westward from Oldbourne Bars, two men were at work at their trade of harness-making, and, behind the diamond-cased window above, sat a maiden—a young and pretty maiden,—sewing. She was singing, too,—warbling softly a simple ditty, whose sweet, mellow freshness added yet another grace to the bright and cloudless afternoon.

But young Stephen Foreman, the fellmonger of Fleet-street, just then passing by the house on some business pretext or other, had a heavy shadow on his brow when he took his eyes from their close regard of the diamond-cased window. For—the truth must be spoken,—Mistress Unity Holly, as she saw two grey eyes belonging to a well-made young tradesman, lingering sadly on her, ceased singing with a very grave look, not to say a frown, was busily plying her fingers on her needlework.

'She's at it again, father,' said one of the harness-makers in the shop below, an intelligent, but delicate-looking lad of eighteen. 'Stephen has just gone by with a face as long as the shaft of a waggon. You ought to speak to Unity, for the way she treats that young man is most vexatious and cruel. He is as smart and pleasant a lad as you'd find in the city, and it is a shame she should jilt him so scandalously. Now she's on, and now she's off: one minute there's smiles, the next there's tears. I know very well, if a girl conducted herself in such a manner to me, what I should do.'

'It is a pity,' said the father, a hard-looking man with iron grey hair; 'and it grieves me as much as it angers you. But, since your poor mother died, Unity has had nobody to advise her; and her wayward humour has had its full vent. But she is a good girl, and I think, after all, that her behaviour to Master Stephen is only her playfulness. I warrant she does not like him the less for it. My boy, you have not come to the knowledge of the lasses' ways yet.'

'That may be, father; but I cannot look at her conduct in the light you do, for the simple reason that I happen to know things about her that you do not.'

The old man dropped hisawl, and looked anxiously into the face of his son. The latter continued his work in which he had become suddenly interested.

'Sam,' at last ejaculated the old man, 'if you know of anything serious, don't play with it, but tell me the worst at once. What is it you know?'

'Well,' said the young man, striving to reassure his father with a smile, 'it is not so bad, perhaps, as your fears have just pictured; but I'll tell you the grounds I have for my suspicions in the matter. Unity, we know, has a comely face and figure, and a soft voice; but she has also a very simple, innocent heart. Now, Sarah Massey has lately made friends with her, and, though Sarah is handsome and dainty, she is as deceitful as the duce, and I know there is something behind the modesty in her eye. Moreover there are secrets between them which turn Unity's face as crimson as 'can be; for I have seen them after they have been whispering and giggling together.'

'Fish!' interrupted the old man, turning impatiently to continue his work; 'what's all this long preamble? My anxiety on Unity's account has caused me to make a bugbear of nothing.—I tell thee again, my boy, you don't know the lasses yet.'

'Stop a bit, father. You can put two and two together as well as any man; and when you have heard all I have got to say, and sum it all up in a lump, you can't help judging as I have done, even though I don't fathom the lasses yet. Last May-day, to avoid mixing with the riff-raff at the Maypole in the Strand,—you know that some of our neighbors raised one in the meadow close by. Well, some of the court gallants happened to be passing that way, and would join in the sport, and one of them made up to Unity and paid great court to her. Before that time, she and Stephen were billing and cooing at all times and in all corners; since then you know there has been a striking difference.'

'And have you seen this fellow with Unity since?' inquired the old man.

'No; but I believe that this Madam Massey brings her letters, for I have seen papers pass between them.'

'I'll lay await for the fellow, and leather him within an inch of his life,' passionately exclaimed the old man.

'That's a dangerous game to play. Leather is a poor tool against the sharp steel of a sword. No, we must find a surer scheme of punishing him than that.'

'Then I'll give Mistress Unity a severe reprimand, and take her down a peg or two. But, no; I couldn't do that,' said the old man, in a subdued and reflective tone. 'I ought to rebuke her in calm words, and point out to her duty; but I am no speaker except when anger beats my blood, and the words stick in my throat, and I do more harm than good. Would that your dear mother had not died.'

'Would she had not,' echoed his son, sorrowfully; 'but we must take care of poor Unity, father, for it is only the want of a fit adviser that is dangerous to her.'

'Mistress Sarah Massey shall never cross the threshold again,' said the father, resolutely.

'Stop, father,' returned Sam Holly. 'You must let her come twice more so that we may watch her proceedings, and take measures to stop their goings on accordingly.'

The old man reflected for a few moments.

'Perhaps you are right,' said he, at last.—'But, no, why should I lose faith in my only daughter, and play the spy upon her actions.—She won't play false to me; I'll go ask her the meaning of it all; and the old man at once proceeded to carry out his resolution.'

Meanwhile Unity, in her bower above, had never raised her voice in song, since the passing of Stephen Foreman. She had been pondering deeply, and seemingly with sorrowful results, for her eyes were swimming in tears.

'What shall I do?' she anxiously asked herself. 'This handsome young nobleman swears he is breaking his heart for me, and I am sure Stephen is unworthy, even if he cares anything at all about me, for he has quite deserted me since May-day. And now this morning to pass by without even looking at me, much more calling in and saying, "Good morning!" I don't care a farthing for this fine gentleman, though he has a much softer tongue and gentler manners; but if Stephen treats me like this, I am sure I shall begin to love the other.' And thus the naughty little head kept deceiving the wayward little heart. In fact, that extent did it go, that the blue eyes could stand such perfidy no longer, and poured down such a shower of tears, that they for a time beat the evil counsels out of the field, and the sweet face shone just as you may have seen a daisy, choked with dust, and flinging with heat, brighten up after a gentle summer shower.

Now, ye little airy sprites and ministering fairies, ply fast your willing poisons, and bring Stephen at this moment to his mistress's feet.—So you may save a world of mischief, perhaps grief, and make two loving hearts rejoice, while, in language not spoken in commonplace life, their lips and eyes shall tell of the delicious joy that is born of reconciliation, for who does not know that—

'The falling out of faithful friends,
Renewing is of love.'

But somehow these same mysterious little messengers, who might do so much good, if it pleased them not better to make mischief their aim, appear in the present case to be hard at work in bringing about *contresens*, and uncomfortable coincidences, and awkward surprises, and such like; for just then, of all the wrong persons that could possibly present themselves at that time, who but Mistress Sarah Massey (unperceived by Master Holly and his son), stepped in.

At the first sound of footsteps on the stairs, Unity hastily dried her eyes, and 'put herself to rights,' so that when Sarah Massey appeared, her eyes had more than their wonted lustre, while her cheeks bore the feverish flush of her recent agitation.

'Well, I'm sure you do look charming this afternoon, Unity, dear. What would not Lord What's-his-name, give for a sight of you just now? Surely I never saw your eyes look brighter, or yourself more handsome. But what is the matter, dear?' she drawled as one would talk to a weeping child. 'You don't smile or look pleased. Come, come, I've got such good news for you. I've been asked to give you this letter from one who loves you devotedly.—Oh, you may depend upon it, a certain person is deeply smitten.' Thus she rattled, as she fumbled first in her bosom and then in her capacious pocket; and then in the bosom of her dress again, and back again to the pocket at her side.

'Dear me,' said she, with vexation, 'what can have become of it?—I certainly brought it out with me, for that was what I came for. But never mind, dear, there was nothing private in it; so as I read it, I can tell you all it said.'

'But,' said Unity, fearfully, 'what if you have lost it in the road, and somebody should pick it up and read it, what would folks say?'

'Make your mind easy on that score, Unity; there was no name in it whatever, neither that of the person who wrote it, nor hers to whom it was sent. Well, dear, I must tell you what it contains. Let me see; it begins with "Dearest Unity."'

'But,' interrupted Unity, 'you said there was no name in it whatever.'

'Nor is there,' eagerly returned Sarah. 'Let me see, what did I say? "Dearest angel,"—yes, that was it,—"most adorable being," and then there was a lot of hard words, all sounding so pretty, but I can't remember them, only that he said, "I will give up my life, my soul, my fortune for your sake;" and last of all he prays you, oh, so earnestly and pitifully, to meet him this evening beneath the three elms.'

'I am sure I never understand a tithe of what he writes,' said Unity, pouting her rosy mouth and contemptuously tossing her head.

'More do I, my dear; but isn't it nice? Of course you will meet the poor, forlorn, handsome, rich young man?'

'I don't think I shall do anything of the kind.'

'Oh, but, dear, think of being the wife of a nobleman, and making your father and brother gentlemen, and springing that nasty Stephen Foreman.'

'I am sure I don't know what to do,' said the silly little thing. 'Oh, that my dear mother was alive, I should then have some one to advise me in my troubles.'

'But, my dear, am not I your adviser and your friend? and do you think I would lead you into anything that was not good for you? No, I'd rather die first. Now, with your comeliness I want you to make your fortune, as you deserve, and not remain all your life a miserable citizen's wife. Why, you would grace a palace. So, as I am older than you, prithee take my counsel, and meet this young nobleman to-night, as he wishes you.'

And by such pernicious stuff did Sarah Massey deceive the simplicity of poor Unity; and when she departed, as she did after she had administered a great deal more of her foolish though dangerous talk, she left Unity in such feelings.

Mischief was particularly ripe that beautiful afternoon; for just at the moment when old Holly had his hand on the latch, with the intention of admonishing his daughter, there entered from the street door a neighbor with a broad grin on his face, the effect of whose appearance was to make Master Holly defer his purpose until the visitor had departed.

'Good morning, Good-morn Holly and Sam,' said he,

'The rose is red, the violets blue,
The pink is sweet and so are you

[with a playful poke at Sam].

If you'll be mine, I will be thine;

and so on. What is it, eh? Ha! ha! ha! ha! Cupid is flying about with a great deal of business on hand (which, worse luck, is more than I have) this lovely day, and dropped some of the contents of his letter-bag. You may well look surprised both of you; it's enough to make one crack his sides with laughing; and the laughing visitor indulged in another hearty 'Ha, ha, hee!'

'Now, look ye here at what I've just found in the road close by. It's a regular out-and-out love letter, such as you don't get treated with a sight of more than once in your life—amber-scented and everything.'

Now, Master Holly's temperament was of the serious cast, not easily provoked to laughter, and not easily sympathetic with frivolity of any description. In the general way, therefore, he would not have hesitated to show his contempt at so trivial a cause for excessive mirth; but just now he was for the first time conscious of feelings of a different kind, anxious curiosity being perhaps the uppermost.

'Don't let that boy see it,' said the visitor, with a comical wink, and in a tone of good-natured raillery; 'the young rascal will learn about those things quite time enough.'

The reader will have already divined that the letter just found was one lost by Mistress Massey. In truth, there was no doubt as to the party for whom it was intended, for it commenced with 'Dearest Unity'; from which fact it will be seen that Sarah Massey had preferred that truth should be sacrificed rather than painful apprehension should have been roused by her carelessness.

Old Holly was exceedingly wroth when he read the stilted missive; and the bearer thereof, finding how much the father's feelings were agitated in the matter, changed his tune, and pulled a suitably long visage.

'Give me it,' said the old man, huskily. The request was immediately granted, and finding affairs were looking somewhat sad-coloured, the gossip soon quietly withdrew; so that father and son were for the second time, *tele a tele*.

'This makes good all you have surmised,' said the old man. 'Take and read it, and let us think what we shall do about it.'

Sam accordingly took the epistle, and, having read it, his face suddenly brightened, and he said—

'Unity cannot have seen this; and if she has not, she cannot keep the appointment; but somebody else can keep it for her.'

'Somebody with a cudgel, do you mean?' said the old man, catching instantly his son's humor.

'No,' said Sam, with a flashing eye, and in a tone which bespoke the fulness of his meaning; 'with a sword, which I have been taught to use as well as the best. Let me, then, meet him on even terms, and call him honourably to account for the insult he offers us.'

Holly marked the enthusiasm of his son, and it kindled a like warmth in the old man's breast. As for the danger attending such an exploit, he felt little apprehension, for he had the fullest confidence in the skill of his son, knowing that Sam's maternal uncle [a famous fencer] had taken a pride in making his nephew a master of the rapier. But yet Holly was not the man to countenance any rash enterprise, and there was much to be considered before such a resolve was come to.

'Don't let us go too fast,' said he. 'What if this stranger gallant should be seeking Unity in all honor and good meaning? Wouldn't it be most churlish in us to treat him?'

'Where is the honor,' said his son, indignantly, 'in these secret assignations? Where is the good meaning in shunning you as he does, instead of coming frankly and avowing his wishes, and asking for your sanction thereto? No; he is a mean, sneaking, sneaking knave, whose idea of true manliness and gentle breeding is the deceiving and betrayal of the simple and the innocent.'

'You speak warmly,' said his father, 'and I like to see you show such feeling; but it seems to me that, before we condemn and punish this young man as you propose, we ought to be first sure that he is guilty of evil intentions. He may have private reasons for his secrecy, and yet mean honorably to Unity.'

'Then,' said Sam, 'I will first ask him, and his answer shall faithfully guide my course.'

'Nay; to a question on such a subject his pride might easily take offence, especially when it comes from one younger and of lower standing than himself. Methinks if I undertook the task it would be more prudent.'

Sam's eyes were turned inwardly for a moment; then suddenly they lighted up, and his face became brightened by a smile.

'I have it!' he cried.—'I have it! I know a plan which will answer admirably. Look here—'

But we will not continue the dialogue, it being sufficient to state that a mode of operation was planned which, while it did not clash with the old man's cautious temperament and sense of strict justice, was decisive and retributive enough to suit the young man's warmer feelings.

As well as could be told from the one-handed clock which tick-tocked so gravely in the corner of the neat little sitting-room behind the collar-maker's shop, it was full half an hour after the time arranged for the tryst at the three elms, when suddenly the parlor became the scene of a commotion of an extraordinary kind. Bearing tenderly in his arms the insensible form of Unity Holly, his face symptomatic of great excitement and exertion, there entered a well-favored young man, who proceeded to deposit his burden on the couch, and to make instant and anxious efforts to call back the truant life.

Returning consciousness had just given notice of its approach by means of a heavy sigh, when, with a most anxious face, Master Holly entered and, a few words from the other having been spoken in reply to the old man's eager inquiries, the latter was left alone with his daughter.

A few more deep-drawn, heavy sighs, and a wild, frightened stare, and then Unity was sufficiently recovered to look anxiously round the room, and to clutch, with nervous energy, her father's hand.

'Oh, father,' she burst forth 'tell me. It has been a dream?'

'What has been a dream, Unity?' said her father, with a plying smile.

'Oh, yes, I know it must have been a dream,' she continued, with a shudder, and a painful convulsion of her face. 'But I'll tell you all, dear father.' She paused a moment; then with a blush, in the midst of which beamed forth a beautiful expression of ingenuous confidence, she said, 'Without your knowledge I made the acquaintance of a strange gentleman who professed himself very fond of me, and I partly encouraged him. This person sent to ask me to meet him at the three elms this evening. Now, I did not love him, but somebody was very cruel to me, and her eyes filled with tears, and I thought rather than disappoint his earnest wishes, that I could do me no harm if I met him once more.'

'Is this the dream, Unity?' interrupted her father.

'Oh, no, that is the truth; but I am now going to tell you what I hope is the dream.—Well, I did not know what to do, and could think of nothing else, and was in dreadful agitation, when I think I must have sobbed myself to sleep; and I thought that I went out, still in great trouble of mind, torn by doubt as to whether I did right or wrong, and thinking of my dear mother, and how wicked and willful I was, and that I ought never to have encouraged this strange man, but to have laid me down and died, when of a sudden I felt a creeping all over me that made me tremble and dizzy, and on looking up I saw a figure some hundred yards before me on the other side of the road. That figure, father, O heavens! the face was like mine, only paler and ghostly. It was as though I saw my own wretched feelings in a glass. The dress, too, was black—the mourning I wore for my dear mother. How could I take it for aught but a ghostly omen of ill! Nevertheless, I could not help going on, though I did not know how I moved, or whether I was myself, or that was pale Me in black, and though frozen with terror, I helplessly followed. At last my feelings so overcame me, that I was fain to sit me down for a minute on the bank, and try to recover myself a little. When I felt a little better and got up again, the black figure was gone, but I still went on in that direction as though my feelings did not belong to the body that was with me, but belonged to the ghost.—I reached sight of the three elms at last, but Heaven knows how, when a chill again crawled over me, on beholding my black counterpart with wrimple down, seated by the side of the person whom I was to meet. It was quite dusk, and something made me (for I could not help myself), go as near as possible to the two who were talking, though I hid myself from them, and at last sat me down on the same seat with them, with the tree between us.' Unity stopped to heave a deep sigh and to collect her mind, by covering her face for a few seconds with both her pretty hands. 'Then what seemed in my first confusion to be a humming in my ears grew into shapeable words, and I heard them talk—him I mean, for he was talking to me, and though my spirit seemed to speak also, the form to my senses. With hot words and mellow voice, he swore that his love for me was unspeakable; he promised me riches in abundance, and pleasure undreamable, and he spoke so fondly—so fervently. But a murmur, in a hollow, yet something familiar voice, came from the black figure at the moment that a question rose in my bosom, and I waited curiously for the answer.—"He would ever, ever love and protect me, and of course we should wed." A cold suspicion crossed my heart—an angry sound came from the ghost. But he urged me to fly with him, unheeding my now growing doubts and distrust. Then his voice changed from loving, softness and gentle entreaty to that of angry command and as the resentment of my soul arose, and disgust at my own simpleness, and as his honeyed guile gave place to all other feelings, loud and wrathful words burst forth, the scuffing of stubborn feet followed, and looking up I was struck dumb with awe on seeing the gallant start back as with astonishment, draw his sword, and make as if it were a thrust at his companion. In my dream she also took a sword, and they fought with deadly meaning in their movements. Oh, the sight seemed to make my soul quiver with horror, and I remember only that I strove vainly to scream. With fear and anguish I was voiceless, and I seemed to glide into nothingness, while steel was rasping against steel and voice against voice.—Then I was caught up into the air by some who seemed like—like Stephen Foreman, and I remember nothing more of it but that he—he—appeared to—'

Here there is no doubt Unity was endeavoring to clear up to her dimmed remembrance the mysterious means taken by Stephen to restore her to consciousness, though there seems to be no adequate reason for her blushing so violently as she did in the effort to remember or explain the circumstance.