

Literature.

MUTUAL CONFESSIONS.

By the author of "Wilful Winnie," etc.

Besides the grand staircase at Hauteville House, there is a smaller one leading to the summer parlors and suites of bed and dressing rooms above. It runs up the south wall of the great hall, and, on the first landing, an opening has been pierced, from which one can look down into that magnificent apartment, where amidst the tapestries and banners and suits of armour pertaining to the Marquis's ancestry, his stage struck Marchioness gives the theatrical entertainments that have created such a sensation in the fashionable world.

It was on the evening devoted to a dress rehearsal of that favorite play of amateurs, "The Lady of Lyons," that a young man, coming down the staircase we have mentioned, stopped suddenly on the lower landing to gaze at the very pretty picture the window-like opening presented. It was curtained with crimson draperies and one shaded lamp lighted it sufficiently for him to see that a slender girl was leaning on the balustrade intently watching the performers in the hall below, from which arose the murmur of many voices.

But just as he paused she drew back, and threw herself on to a settee, clasping her hands above her head, as if she felt very weary.

The movement tossed back from her head the hooded sortie-du-bal of pale blue and swansdown she was wearing, and the light fell softly on pale, pure features and tresses that glistened like gold.

A diamond ring sparkled on one of her fingers—a ring that was all too large, for, as she brushed back a wave of the sunny hair that had fallen over her forehead, the precious circlet slipped off and rolled away from her across the carpet.

With a cry of dismay she sprang up to find it, but the hitherto unnoticed stranger was yet more prompt than she, and it was from his hand she received it.

Her voice was as sweet as the face over which the rosy coloring of health came and went, as she expressed her thanks, adding, with a look of concern, the ejaculation:

"What should I have done if I had lost it?"

"Do you prize it so highly?" the young man asked, with a pang of something like jealousy quickening his pulses already. She was so youthful not more than seventeen or eighteen years could have passed over her head—that surely this ring could not be the gift of an affianced lover!

She opened her soft gray eyes a little at the question.

"It is a brilliant of the first water, and without a flaw," she said, holding it up for his inspection. "I must be more careful with it."

"For the donor's sake?" that same jealous pang prompted the young man to query, though, seeing her stop and retreat a step or two, as if half offended, made him instantly repent it.

"Forgive me; that was an impertinent question, which nothing could justify my putting to you. Please forget it."

He bowed, as if intending to withdraw, yet lingered, while she hesitated, then gave him a bewitching smile, though, at the same time, increasing the distance between them by moving nearer to her seat. Eventually she resumed it, saying, however, as she did so:

"You were going to watch the actors. Pray do not let my being here prevent it."

These words were spoken so graciously that he stayed, and took up a position opposite hers. The curtains on either side would have shaded both of them from observation, had anyone in the hall cast a glance upwards; but a dispute had arisen between two of the principal performers which was so warmly contested that it absorbed the attention of all their companions.

Had they, however, rehearsed their parts with all the eloquence they could command, they would have found but indifferent auditors in the modern Romeo and Juliet, now engaged in a dialogue of their own.

It was the same old story of sighs and looks, smiles and blushes, with a few faltering words, commonplace enough, yet fraught with immense significance both to the speaker and the listener—five minutes ago, strangers, yet already feeling as if they knew each other well, and wondering how, and when, they might hope to meet again.

"You are staying at Hauteville House?" he inquired.

"Yes," she replied, "with my god-mamma, Lady Milverton. And you?" she added, shyly.

"No, unfortunately. I am often here; but I leave town tomorrow, and do not return until Saturday. Then perhaps—"

"Then," she repeated trying to speak lightly, "I—we—shall be at the Crystal Palace. One of Lady Milverton's proteges sings at the concert, and she has promised to be present and take as large a party with her as she can. Afterwards we dine there, and stay for the fireworks."

"And he will be there—the giver of that ring?"

"Indeed, no. He is dead." She raised the diamond to her lips, reverent-

ly. "And that is why his ring is so precious."

"I am sorry to have reminded you of aught that makes you sad. I have to beg for forgiveness again. Prove that you grant it by giving me your hand. You will not? Unkind!"

He was gently reminded that they had not been introduced to each other.

"True; I do not know by what name to remember my fair friend."

"It is a very simple one. I wish my godmamma had given me her own, but she preferred another; so I am—Lucie."

"After one of the sweetest and fairest of the virgin martyrs. Will Saint Lucie's namesake remember me in her orisons?"

"For whom," she asked demurely, "shall I invoke her aid, that he may be purged of the crime of flattery?"

"I am called Sedley by those who love me."

"And by those who have the honor of a brief acquaintance."

Instead of replying, the young man took a card out of an ivory case, and presented it to her; but as in doing so he tried to retain in his hand she extended, Mistress Lucie's pretty cheeks became of a deeper hue than before, and she faltered that she must go.

Nor did he venture to detain her, but saying, "The Crystal Palace, Saturday," took his departure too.

His meditations were of a very similar character to those of Lucie, who locking herself into her chamber, sat down before the mirror that reflected her blushes.

"It is the first time," quoth she, "that a man's eyes have told me I am pretty. Was I wrong to stay and listen to him? It was very pleasant. I hope I shall see him again; but heigho! he belongs to the fickle sex and may have forgotten me already."

But he had not; for when the crowd of eager sight-seers at the Crystal Palace made a rush for the best points for securing a view of the pyrotechnic display, and Lucie was separated from her companion, it was his voice that reassured her, his strong arm that sheltered her from the press, and guided her to a place where she could see every brilliant flight of rockets, and yet be almost alone with him.

"How good you are, Sir Charles!" she cried gratefully.

From the card he had given her she had learned that her admirer was a young baronet Sir Charles Alderby; but the sound of his name on her lips seemed to displease him.

"Do not call me that! It is too stiff and formal. Let me hear you call me Sedley, and only Sedley."

"I must not stay here to call you anything," she murmured. Dear Lady Milverton will be uneasy about me."

"But it will be impossible for you to rejoin her at present," Lucie was assured; "even if we knew where she is. As soon as the throng disperses, I will take you to her."

So Lucie—nothing loth—stayed by the side of her lover.

The night was intensely dark, save when a burst of colored fire lit up the scene, and enabled him to gaze at her downcast face, and grow more and more deeply in love with it.

Before she caught sight of Lady Milverton, and sprang towards her, she had made an admission that she sometimes walked in Kensington Gardens, after the heat and glare of the day had melted into the calm and soft gray of the twilight.

It was not positively an assignation and yet, on the following evening, they met beneath the green trees of the gardens, parted with reluctance, and promised to meet again.

"It is very wrong," said Lucie. "Lady Milverton would be angry with me if she knew. Shall I tell her?"

"Leave me to do that. When shall I ask an interview with her ladyship? Tomorrow?"

But Lucie cried: "No, no!" in startled tones. "She might forbid me to see or speak with you again."

So it was determined that their sweet secret should be kept a little longer, and they separated. He, thinking, with smiling satisfaction, what a good match the world would say, he had made when he wedded the goddaughter and adopted child of that wealthy peeress, Lady Milverton; she, delicious dreams of being presented at Court on the occasion of her marriage with Sir Charles Sedley, Baronet, as she had learnt from the "County Families," of estates and ancestral halls in half dozen different counties.

But Lucie's eyes were full of tears when next she met her lover. Lady Milverton's youngest daughter had suddenly developed symptoms of lung disease, and by the advice of the family physician, her alarmed mother was going to hurry with her to a more equal climate than we in our island home can boast of.

"We start in a couple of days, and it may be months or even years, before we return, for Lady Milverton has never liked England since her husband died, and talks of settling abroad. She has a charming villa on the borders of the Lago Maggiore."

"But you, my Lucie, cannot, must not go with her. You are mine, and I will not part with you. We can be married to-morrow, by special license. Dear girl you must consent! How could we submit to such a long separation?"

Lucy hesitated, hinted that he could

follow her, protested that she could not take such a step without Lady Milverton's sanction, yet finally consented to meet him early on the morrow, and become his wife.

Both were nervous and agitated; both were evidently conscious of the importance of the act they were meditating; yet both murmured, "we shall never regret it," and were firmly resolved to be united before making Lady Milverton aware that Lucie did not intend accompanying her across the Channel.

The sun did not shine on their project. It was through mist and rain, her bridal array hidden beneath a waterproof, her trembling hands scarcely able to hold a streaming umbrella, that Lucie met her bridegroom elect under the portico of the church where their nuptials were to be celebrated.

His face was as pale and grave as hers. Was it from the chilling atmosphere of the morning or from other causes?

"One moment ere we present ourselves before the clergyman," he whispered agitatedly. "I find that I cannot be the treacherous scoundrel I have schemed to be! I love you with all my heart, my Lucie. Be mine, and my life shall be devoted to you. I will be the truest, the fondest of husbands and requite you with the tenderest devotion for the sacrifice of your pride you will make—if I am as dear to you as you tell me—for the sake of your Sedley."

"You are bewildering me," she faltered.

"What do you mean?"

"Can you bear to hear that the card I gave you was not mine? That I am not your equal in rank, or position, but—actually in trade, earning my living by my own exertions."

"What trade?" Lucie demanded, looking as if she were on the eve of fainting.

"Tell me—tell me at once."

There was a long pause before the reply came.

"I am a hairdresser. I had been sent by Monsieur Millefleurs, my employer to dress the Marchioness's hair, and had stayed to give some instructions to her maid when I first saw you. Oh, Lucie I have been what fate made me. I am not to blame for the obscurity of my birth, and for nought else have you any cause to scorn me. Those who are best acquainted with my whole life will confirm what I say, when I declare that, until I deceived you, not a dishonorable action can be laid to my charge. I loved you as soon as I saw you, and hid the truth, lest my beautiful lady should shrink from me in disgust."

There was another pause. He was holding both those trembling hands in a fervent clasp; he was trying to learn his destiny from Lucie's eyes, but they were averted.

"I, too, have a confession to make," she said at last. "While you were my employer, I did not add that I am the only child of her deceased gardener, and that ever since I left the orphanage which she placed me, I have been in her establishment as schoolroom-maid, or attendant on her younger daughters."

"But I found you at Hauteville House—"

"Waiting for her ladyship, on whom I was in attendance that evening, because her own maid was ill. You found me wearing one of her sortie-du-bal, with which she had me shield myself from the draughts of the staircase; and she left in my charge the diamond ring that was all too loose for her own finger. The ring she valued highly, because it had been her late lord's. If you thought me the rich ward of my godmother, you are rightly punished."

"And you—if you have only encouraged my addresses because you believed me to be a baronet—" cried Sedley with rising anger; but he was not allowed to finish his speech.

"Spare me, even as I will spare you, and believe me when I assure you that I did not come here this morning to be married under false pretences, but to tell Sir Charles Sedley the truth."

As she finished speaking, Lucie turned away and left the portico.

After a little hesitation, he would have followed; but she had seen and signalled a cabman, into whose vehicle she stepped so quickly, that when he sprang in pursuit he only caught a glimpse of his lost bride, lying back in the seat in an attitude of the deepest grief, her face hidden in her handkerchief.

Lady Milverton did not stay in Italy very long after all. The little girl on whose account she went thither, quickly regained her health, and there was no reason why her ladyship, who was of a lively disposition, should not resume her place in London society.

The beginning of the season found her domiciliated once more in Park Lane, and thither Mark Sedley—now promoted to a partnership with the great Monsieur Millefleurs—went one evening to arrange the peeress's abundant tresses for a tableau vivant.

The pretty somewhat pensive demoiselle, in a tasteful dress of black silk, who presided in Lady Milverton's dressing room, was Lucie, lately promoted; and by her burning blushes, Mark Sedley saw that he was not forgotten.

He lingered, on pretence, till the lady quitted the maid.

"Do we meet here, Lucie?" "The expressiveness of that had always been to fill."

"I have always thought of you kindly Mr. Sedley, and blamed myself for what happened."

"And I have cursed the folly that made me, in my eagerness to marry a lady forget the villainous part I was acting towards the girl who loved and trusted me."

"I have been so unhappy!" sobbed Lucie.

"And I have been the most miserable man in existence, for I heard that you were married."

"And believed it?" she queried reproachfully. "As if I could have loved anyone but you!"

And so the reconciliation was complete, and perhaps the reunited lovers will go through their future lives more happily for the chastening recollection of past errors, even though they were atoned for by MUTUAL CONFESSIONS.

That quick wit is not confined to cities was proved the other day by a young woman who was rambling along one of our roads.

She was dressed smartly, and when she met a small, bare-legged urchin carrying a bird's nest with eggs in it, she did not hesitate to stop him.

"You are a wicked boy," she said, "How could you rob that nest? No doubt the poor mother is now grieving over the loss of her eggs."

"Oh, she don't care," said the boy, edging away; "she's on your hat!"

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