

Literary Selections.

THE TWIN SISTERS.

A TRUE STORY.

BY W. W. COLLINS, AUTHOR OF "ANTONINA."

Among those who attended the first of the King's levees, during the London season of 18—, was an unmarried gentleman of large fortune named Streatfield. While his carriage was proceeding slowly down St. James' street, he naturally sought such amusement and occupation as he could find in looking on the brilliant scene around him. The day was unusually fine; crowds of spectators thronged the street and the balconies of the houses on either side of it, all gazing at the different equipages with as eager a curiosity and interest, as if fine vehicles and fine people inside them were the rarest objects of contemplation in the whole metropolis. Proceeding at a slower and slower pace, Mr. Streatfield's carriage had just arrived at the middle of the street, when a longer stoppage than usual occurred. He looked carelessly up at the nearest balcony; and there, among some eight or ten ladies, all strangers to him, he saw one face that riveted his attention immediately.

He had never beheld anything so beautiful, anything which struck him with such strange, mingled, and sudden sensation, as this face.—He gazed and gazed on it, hardly knowing where he was, or what he was doing, until the line of vehicles began again to move on. Then—after ascertaining the number of the house—he flung himself back in the carriage, and tried to examine his own feelings, to reason himself into self-possession; but it was all in vain. He was seized with that amiable form of social monomania, called "love at first sight."

He entered the palace, greeted his friends, and performed all the necessary Court ceremonies, feeling the whole time like a man in a trance. He spoke mechanically, and moved mechanically—the lovely face in the balcony occupied his thoughts to the exclusion of everything else. On his return home he had engagements for the afternoon and evening—he forgot and broke them all; and walked back to St. James' street as soon as he had changed his dress.

The balcony was empty; the sight-seers, who had filled it but a few hours before, had departed—but obstacles of all sorts now tended only to stimulate Mr. Streatfield; he was determined to ascertain the parentage of the young lady, determined to look on the lovely face again—the thermometer of his heart had risen already to Fever Heat! Without loss of time, the shopkeeper to whom the house belonged was bribed to loquacity by a purchase. All that he could tell in answer to inquiries, was that he had let his lodgings to an elderly gentleman and his wife, from the country, who had asked some friends into their balcony to see the carriages go to the levee. Nothing daunted Mr. Streatfield questioned and questioned again. What was the old gentleman's name?—Dimsdale. Could he see Mr. Dimsdale's servant? The obsequious shopkeeper had no doubt that he could; Mr. Dimsdale's servant should be sent for immediately.

In a few minutes the servant, the all-important link in the chain of love's evidence, made his appearance. He was a pompous, portly man, who listened with pompous attention, with a stern, judicial calmness to Mr. Streatfield's rapid, and somewhat confused inquiries, which were accompanied by a minute description of the lady, and by several explanatory statements, all very fictitious, and all very plausible. Stupid as the servant was, and suspicious as all stupid people are, he had nevertheless sense enough to perceive that he was addressed by a gentleman, and gratitude enough to feel considerably mollified by the handsome *douceur* which was quietly slipped into his hand. After much pondering and doubting, he at last arrived at the conclusion that the fair object of Mr. Streatfield's inquiries was a Miss Langley, who had joined the party in the balcony on that morning, with her sister; and who was the daughter of Mr. Langley, of Langley Hall, in —shire. The family were now staying in London, at —street. More in-

formation than this, the servant stated he could not afford—he was certain he made no mistake, for the Misses Langley were the only very young ladies in the house that morning—however, if Mr. Streatfield wished to speak to his master, he was ready to carry any message with which he might be charged.

But Mr. Streatfield had already heard enough for his purpose, and departed at once, for his club, determined to discover some means of being introduced in due form to Miss Langley, before he slept that night—though he should travel round the whole circle of his acquaintance—high and low, rich and poor—in making the attempt. Arrived at the club, he began to inquire resolutely for a friend who knew Mr. Langley, of Langley Hall. He disturbed gastronomic gentlemen at their dinner; he interrupted agricultural gentlemen who were moaning over the prospects of the harvest; he startled literary gentlemen who were deep in the critical mysteries of the last Review; he invaded billiard-room, dressing-room, smoking-room; he was more like a frantic ministerial whipper-in hunting up stray members for a division, than an ordinary man; and the oftener he was defeated in his object, the more determined was he to succeed. At last, just as he had vainly inquired of everybody that he knew, just as he was standing in the hall of the club-house thinking where he should go next, a friend entered, who at once relieved him of all his difficulties—a precious, an inestimable man, who was on intimate terms with Mr. Langley, and who had been lately staying at Langley Hall. To this friend all the lover's cares and anxieties were at once confided; and a fitter depository for such secrets of the heart could hardly have been found. He made no jokes—for he was not a bachelor; he abstained from shaking his head and recommending prudence—for he was not a seasoned husband, or an experienced widower; what he really did, was to enter heart and soul into his friend's projects—for he was precisely in that position, the only position in which the male sex generally take a proper interest in match-making; he was a newly married man.

Two days afterwards, Mr. Streatfield was the happiest of mortals—he was introduced to the lady of his love, to Miss Jane Langley. He really enjoyed the priceless privilege of looking once more on the face in the balcony, and looking on it almost as often as he wished. It was perfect Elysium. Mr. and Mrs. Langley saw little or no company—Miss Jane was always accessible, never monopolized—the light of her beauty shone, day after day, for her adorer alone; and his love blossomed in it, fast as flowers in a hot-house. Passing quickly by all the minor details of wooing, to arrive sooner at the grand fact of the winning, let us simply relate that Mr. Streatfield's object in seeking an introduction to Mr. Langley was soon explained, and was indeed visible enough long before the explanation. He was a handsome man, an accomplished man, and a rich man. His two first qualifications conquered the daughter, and the third the father. In six weeks Mr. Streatfield was the accepted suitor of Miss Jane Langley.

The wedding-day was fixed—it was arranged that the marriage should take place at Langley Hall, whither the family went, leaving the unwilling lover in London, a prey to the business formalities of the occasion. For ten days did the ruthless lawyers—those dead weights that burden the back of Hymen—keep their victim imprisoned in the metropolis, occupied over settlements that never seemed likely to be settled. But even the long march of the Law has its end, like other mortal things; at the expiration of ten days all was completed, and Mr. Streatfield found himself at liberty to start for Langley Hall.

A large party was assembled at the house to grace the approaching nuptials. There were to be *tableaux*, charades, boating trips, riding excursions, amusements of all sorts—the whole to conclude (in the play-bill phrase) with the grand climax of the wedding. Mr. Streatfield arrived late; dinner was ready; he had scarcely time to dress, and then bustle into the drawing room, just as the guests were leaving, to

offer his arm to Miss Jane—all greetings with friends and introductions to strangers being postponed until the party met round the dining table.

Grace had been said; the covers were taken off; the loud, cheerful hum of conversation was just beginning, when Mr. Streatfield's eyes met the eyes of a young lady who was seated opposite at the table. The guests near him, observing at the same moment that he continued standing after every one else had been placed, glanced at him inquiringly. To their astonishment and alarm, they observed that his face had suddenly become deadly pale—his rigid features looked struck by paralysis. Several of his friends spoke to him; but for the first few moments he returned no answer.—Then, still fixing his eyes upon the young lady opposite, he abruptly exclaimed, in a voice the altered tones of which startled every one who heard him:—"That is the face I saw in the balcony! that woman is the only woman I can marry!" The next instant, without a word more either of explanation or apology he hurried from the room.

One or two of the guests mechanically started up, as if to follow him; the rest remained at the table looking at each other in speechless surprise. But, before any one could either act or speak, almost at the moment when the door closed on Mr. Streatfield, the attention of all was painfully directed to Jane Langley. She had fainted. Her mother and sisters removed her from the room immediately, aided by the servants. As they disappeared, a dead silence again sank down over the company—they all looked round with one accord to the master of the house.

Mr. Langley's face and manner sufficiently revealed the suffering and suspense that he was secretly enduring. But he was a man of the world—neither by word nor action did he betray what was passing within him. He resumed his place at the table, and begged his guests to do the same. He affected to make light of what had happened; entreated every one to forget it, or if they remembered it at all, to remember it only as a mere accident, which would, no doubt, be satisfactorily explained; perhaps it was only a joke on Mr. Streatfield's part, rather too serious a one he must own. At any rate, whatever was the cause of the interruption to the dinner, which had just happened, it was not important enough to require everybody to fast at the table of the feast. He asked it as a favor to himself that no further notice might be taken of what had occurred. While Mr. Langley was speaking thus, he hastily wrote a few lines on a piece of paper and gave it to one of the servants. The note was directed to Mr. Streatfield; the lines contained only these words:—"Two hours hence, I shall expect to see you alone in the library."

The dinner proceeded, the places occupied by the female members of the Langley family, and by the young lady who had attracted Mr. Streatfield's notice in so extraordinary a manner, being left vacant. Every one present endeavored to follow Mr. Langley's advice, and go through the business of the dinner, as if nothing had occurred; but the attempt failed miserably. Long blank pauses occurred in the conversation; general topics were started but never pursued; it was more like an assembly of strangers than a meeting of friends; people neither ate nor drank, as they were accustomed to eat and drink; they talked in altered voices, and sat with unusual stillness, even in the same position. Relatives, friends, and acquaintances, all alike perceived that some great domestic catastrophe had happened; all forboded that some serious, if not fatal, explanation of Mr. Streatfield's conduct would ensue; and it was vain and hopeless—a very mockery of self-possession, to attempt to shake off the sinister and chilling influences that recent events had left behind them, and resume at will the thoughtlessness and hilarity of ordinary life.

Still, however, Mr. Langley persisted in doing the honors of his table, in proceeding doggedly through all the festive ceremonies of the hour, until the ladies rose and retired. Then, after looking at his watch, he beckoned to one of his sons to take his place; and quietly left

the room. He only stopped once, as he crossed the hall, to ask news of his daughter from one of the servants. The reply was that she had a hysterical fit; that the medical attendant of the family had been sent for, and that since his arrival she had become composed. When the man had spoken, Langley made no remark but proceeded at once to the library. He locked the door behind him, as soon as he entered the room.

Mr. Streatfield was already waiting there.—He was seated at the table, endeavoring to maintain an appearance of composure, by mechanically turning over the leaves of the book before him. Mr. Langley drew a chair before him; and in low, but very firm tones, began the conversation thus—

"I have given you two hours, sir, to collect yourself to consider your position fully—I presume, therefore, that you are now prepared to favor me with an explanation of your conduct at my table to-day."

"What explanation can I make?—what can I say or think of this most terrible of fatalities!" exclaimed Mr. Streatfield, speaking faintly and confusedly; and still not looking up—"There has been an unexampled error committed!—a fatal mistake, which I could never have anticipated, and over which I had no control."

"Enough, sir, of the language of romance," interrupted Mr. Langley, coldly; "I am neither of an age nor a disposition to appreciate it. I came here to ask plain questions honestly, and I insist as my right, on receiving answers in the same spirit. You, Mr. Streatfield, sought an introduction to me—you professed yourself attached to my daughter Jane—your proposals were (I fear unhappily for us) accepted—your wedding-day was fixed—and now, after all this, when you happen to observe my daughter's twin sister sitting opposite to you—"

"Her twin sister?" exclaimed Mr. Streatfield; and his trembling hands crumpled the leaves of the book, which he still held while he said—

"Why is it, intimate as I have been with your family, that I now know for the first time that Miss Jane Langley has a twin sister?"

"Do you descend, sir, to subterfuge, when I ask you for an explanation?" returned Mr. Langley. "You must have heard of her and over again, that my children, Jane and Clara, were twins."

"Upon my word and honor, sir, I declare that—"

"Spare me all appeals to your word or your honor, sir. I am beginning to doubt both."

"I will not make the unhappy situation in which we were all placed still worse, by answering your last words, as I might at other times feel inclined to answer them," said Mr. Streatfield assuming a calmer demeanor than he had hitherto displayed. "I tell you the truth when I tell you that, before to-day, I never knew that any of your children were twins. Your daughter Jane has frequently spoken of her absent sister Clara, but never spoke of her as her twin sister. Until to-day I have had no opportunity of discovering the truth; for until to-day, I have never met Clara Langley since I saw her in the balcony of the house in James' street. The only one of your children who was ever present during my intercourse with your family in London, was your daughter Clara—the daughter whom I now know for the first time, as the young lady who really arrested my attention on my way to the levee—whose affections it was really my object to win in seeking an introduction to you. To me the resemblance between the twin-sisters has been a fatal resemblance; the long absence of one, a fatal absence."

There was a momentary pause as Mr. Streatfield sadly and calmly pronounced the last words. Mr. Langley appeared to be absorbed in thought. At length he proceeded, speaking to himself—

"It is strange! I remember that Clara left London on the day of the levee, to set out on a visit to her aunt; and only returned here two days since, to be present at her sister's marriage. 'Well, sir,' continued Mr. Streatfield, 'granting what you say, granting that we a