

Literary Selections.

THE TWIN SISTERS.

A TRUE STORY.

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

Concluded from last week.

We have said that Mr. Langley was a man of the world. He was strongly attached to his children; but he had a little of the selfishness and much of the reverence for wealth of a man of the world. As he now endeavored to determine mentally on his proper course of action—to disentangle the whole case from all its mysterious intricacies—to view it, extraordinary as it was, in its proper bearings, his thoughts began gradually to assume what is called "a practical turn." He reflected that he had another daughter besides the twin-sisters to provide for; and that he had two sons to settle in life. He was not rich enough to portion three daughters; and he had not interest enough to start his sons favorably in a career of eminence.—Mr. Streatfield, on the contrary, was a man of great wealth, and of great "connections" among people in power. Was such a son-in-law to be rejected, after all that had happened, without at least consulting his wife and daughters first? He thought not. Had not Mr. Streatfield, in truth, been the victim of a remarkable fatality, of an incredible accident, and were no allowances, under such circumstances, to be made for him? He began to think there were. Reflecting thus, he determined at length to proceed with moderation and caution at all hazards; and regained composure enough to continue the conversation in a cold, but still in a polite tone.

"I will commit myself, sir, to no agreement or promise whatever," he began, "nor will I consider this interview in any respect as a conclusive one, either on your side or mine; but if I think, on consideration, that it is desirable that our conversation should be repeated to my wife and daughters, I will make them acquainted with it, and will let you know the result.—In the meantime, I think you will agree with me, that it is most fit that the next communication between us should take place by letter alone."

Mr. Streatfield was not slow in taking the hint conveyed by Mr. Langley's last words.—After what had occurred, and until something was definitely settled, he felt that the suffering and suspense which he was already enduring would be increased tenfold if he remained longer in the same house with the twin-sisters—the betrothed of one, the lover of the other! Murmuring a few inaudible words of acquiescence in the arrangement which had just been proposed to him, he left the room. The same evening he quitted Langley Hall.

The next morning the remainder of the guests departed, their curiosity to know all the particulars of what had happened remaining ungratified. They were simply informed that an extraordinary and unexpected obstacle had arisen to delay the wedding; that no blame attached to any one in the matter; and that as soon as every thing had been finally determined, every thing would be explained. Until then, it was not considered necessary to enter into any particulars. By the middle of the day every visitor had left the house; and a strange and melancholy spectacle it presented when they were all gone. Rooms were now empty and silent, which, the day before, had been filled with animated groups, and had echoed with merry laughter. The social desolation of the scene was miserably complete in all its aspects.

Immediately after the departure of his guests, Mr. Langley had an interview with his wife.—He repeated to her the conversation which had taken place between Mr. Streatfield and himself, and received from her in return such an account of the conduct of his daughter, under the trial that had befallen her, as filled him with equal astonishment and admiration. It was a new revelation to him of the character of his own child.

"As soon as the violent symptoms had subsided," said Mrs. Langley, in answer to her husband's first inquiries, "as soon as the hysterical fit was subdued, Jane seemed suddenly to assume a new character, to become another person. She begged that the doctor might be

released from his attendance, and that she might be left alone with me and with her sister Clara. When every one else had quitted the room, she continued to sit in the easy chair where we had placed her, covering her face with her hands. She entreated us not to speak to her for a short time, and, except that she shuddered occasionally, sat quite still and silent. When she at last looked up, we were shocked to see the deadly paleness of her face, and the strange alteration that had come over her expression; but she spoke to us coherently, so solemnly even, that we were amazed; and knew not what to think or what to do; it hardly seemed to be our Jane who was now speaking to us."

"What did she say?" asked Mr. Langley, eagerly.

"She said that the first feeling of her heart at that moment, was gratitude on her own account. She thanked God that the terrible discovery had not been too late, when her married life might have been a life of estrangement and misery. Up to the moment when Mr. Streatfield had uttered that one fatal exclamation, she had loved him, she told us, fondly and fervently; now, no explanation, no repentance (if either were tendered) no earthly persuasion or command (in case Mr. Streatfield should think himself bound, as a matter of atonement, to hold to his rash engagement,) could ever induce her to become his wife."

"Mr. Streatfield will not test her resolution," said Mr. Langley, bitterly; "he deliberately repeated his repudiation of his engagement in this room; nay, more, he——"

"I have something important to say to you from Jane on this point," interrupted Mrs. Langley. "After she had spoken the first few words which I have already repeated to you, she told us that she had been thinking—thinking more calmly, perhaps, than we could imagine—on all that had happened; on what Mr. Streatfield had said at the dinner table; on the momentary glance of recognition which she had seen pass between him and her sister Clara, whose accidental absence, during the whole period of Mr. Streatfield's intercourse with us in London, she now remembered and reminded me of. The cause of the fatal error, and the manner in which it had occurred, seemed to be already known to her, as if by intuition. We entreated her to refrain from speaking on the subject for the present; but she answered that it was her duty to speak on it—her duty to propose something which should alleviate the suspense and distress we were all enduring on her account. No words can describe to you her fortitude, her noble endurance——" Mrs. Langley's voice faltered as she pronounced the last words. It was some minutes ere she became sufficiently composed to proceed thus:—

"I am charged with a message to you from Jane—I should say, charged with her entreaties, that you will not suspend our intercourse with Mr. Streatfield, or view his conduct in any other than a merciful light—as conduct for which accident and circumstances are alone to blame. After she had given me this message to you, she turned to Clara, who sat weeping by her side, completely overcome, and, kissing her, said that they were to blame, if any one was to be blamed in the matter, for being so much alike as to make all who saw them apart doubt which was Clara and which was Jane.—She said this with a faint smile, and an effort to speak playfully, which touched us to the heart. Then, in a tone and manner which I can never forget, she asked her sister—charging her on her mutual affection and mutual confidence, to answer sincerely—if she had noticed Mr. Streatfield on the day of the levee, and had afterwards remembered him at the dinner table, as he had noticed and remembered her?—It was only after Jane had repeated this appeal still more earnestly and affectionately, that Clara summoned courage and composure enough to confess that she had noticed Mr. Streatfield on the day of the levee, had thought of him afterwards during her absence from London, and had recognized him at our table, as he had recognized her."

"Is it possible! I own I had not anticipated—not thought for one moment of that," said Mr. Langley.

"Perhaps," continued his wife, "it is best that you should see Jane now, and judge for

yourself. For my part, her noble resignation under this great trial has so astonished and impressed me, that I only feel competent to advise as she advises, to act as she thinks fit. I begin to think that it is not we who are to guide her, but she who is to guide us."

Mr. Langley lingered irresolute for a few minutes; then quitted the room, and proceeded alone to Jane Langley's apartment.

When he knocked at the door, it was opened by Clara. There was an expression partly of sorrow on her face; and when her father stopped as if to speak to her, she merely pointed into the room, and hurried away without uttering a word.

Mr. Langley had been prepared by his wife for the change that had taken place in his daughter since the day before; but he felt startled, almost overwhelmed, as he now looked on her. One of the poor girl's most prominent personal attractions, from her earliest years, had been the beauty of her complexion; and now, the freshness and the bloom had entirely departed from her face; it seemed absolutely colorless. Her expression, too, appeared to Mr. Langley's eyes to have undergone a melancholy alteration; to have lost its youthfulness suddenly; to have assumed a strange character of firmness and thoughtfulness, which he had never observed before. She was sitting by an open window, commanding a lovely view of wide, sunny landscape; a Bible which her mother had given her, lay open on her knees; she was reading it as her father entered. For the first time in his life he paused, speechless, as he approached to speak to one of his own children.

"I am afraid I look very ill," she said, holding out her hand to him; "but I am better than I look; I shall be quite well in a day or two. Have you heard my message, father? have you been told?"

"My love, we will not speak of it yet; we will wait a few days," said Mr. Langley.

"You have always been so kind to me," she continued, in less steady tones, "that I am sure you will let me go on. I have very little to say, but that little must be said now, and then we need never recur to it again. Will you consider all that has happened, as something forgotten? You have heard already what it is that I entreat you to do; will you let him—Mr. Streatfield—" (she stopped, her voice failed for a moment, but she recovered herself again almost immediately.) "Will you let Mr. Streatfield remain here, or recall him if he is gone, and give him an opportunity of explaining himself to my sister? If poor Clara should refuse to see him for my sake, pray do not listen to her. I am sure this is what ought to be done; I have been thinking of it very calmly and I feel that it is right. And there is something more I have to beg of you, father; it is, that while Mr. Streatfield is here, you will allow me to go and stay with my aunt. You know how fond she is of me. Her house is not a day's journey from home. It is the best for everybody (much best for me) that I should not remain here at present; and—and—dear father! I have always been your spoiled child; and I know you will indulge me still. If you will do what I ask of you, I shall soon get over this heavy trial. I shall get well again if I am away at my aunt's—it——"

She paused; and putting one trembling arm round her father's neck, hid her face on his breast. For some minutes, Mr. Langley could not trust himself to answer her. There was something, not deeply touching only, but impressive and sublime, about the moral heroism of this young girl, whose heart and mind—hitherto wholly inexperienced in the harder and darker emergencies of life—now rose in the strength of their native purity superior to the bitterest, cruellest trial that either could undergo; whose patience and resignation, called forth for the first time by a calamity which suddenly thwarted the purposes and paralyzed the affections that had been destined to endure for a life, could thus appear at once in the full maturity of virtue and beauty. As the father thought of these things; as he vaguely and imperfectly estimated the extent of the daughter's sacrifice; as he reflected on the nature of the affliction that had befallen her—which combined in itself a fatality that none

could have foreseen, a fault that could neither be repaired nor resented, a judgment against which there was no appeal—and then remembered how this affliction had been borne, with what words and what actions it had been met, he felt that it would be almost a profanation to judge the touching petition addressed to him, by the criterion of his worldly doubts and his worldly wisdom. His eye fell on the Bible, still open beneath it; he remembered the little child who sat in the midst of the disciples, as teacher and example to all; and when at length he spoke in answer to his daughter, it was not to direct or advise, but to comfort and comply.

They delayed her removal for a few days to see if she faltered in her resolution, if her bodily weakness increased; but she never wavered; nothing in her appearance changed, either for better or for worse. A week after the startling scene at the dinner table, she was living in the strictest retirement in the house of her aunt.

About the period of her departure, a letter was received from Mr. Streatfield. It was little more than a recapitulation of what he had already said to Mr. Langley—expressed, however, on this occasion, in stronger, and, at the same time, in more respectful terms. The letter was answered briefly,—he was informed that nothing had, as yet, been determined on, but that the next communication would bring him a final reply.

"Two months passed. During that time, Jane Langley was frequently visited at her aunt's house, by her father and mother. She still remained calm and resolved; still looked pale and thoughtful as at first. Doctors were consulted; they talked of a shock to the nervous system; of great hope from time to time, and their patient's strength of mind; and of the necessity of acceding to her wishes in all things. Then the advice of her aunt was sought. She was a woman of an eccentric, masculine character, who had herself experienced a love-disappointment in early life, and had never married. She gave her opinion unreservedly and abruptly, as she always gave it.

"Do as Jane tells you!" said the old lady, severely; "the poor child has more moral courage and determination than all the rest of you put together! I know better than anybody what a sacrifice she has had to make; but she has made it, and made it nobly—like a heroine, as some people would say; like a good, high-minded, courageous girl, as I say! Do as she tells you! Let that poor, selfish fool of a man have his way, and marry her sister—he had made one mistake already about a face—see if he doesn't find out some day, that he has made another about a wife! Let him!—Jane is too good for him, or for any man! Leave her to me; let her stop here; she shan't lose by what has happened! You know this place is mine—I mean it to be hers, when I'm dead. You know I've got some money—I shall leave it to her. I've made my will; it's all done and settled! Go back home; send for the man, and tell Clara to marry him without any more fuss! you wanted my opinion—there it is for you!"

At last Mr. Langley decided. The important letter was written, which recalled Mr. Streatfield to Langley Hall. As Jane had foreseen, Clara at first refused to hold any communication with him; but a letter from her sister and the remonstrances of her father, soon changed her resolution. There was nothing in common between the twin-sisters, but their personal resemblance. Clara had been guided all her life by the opinions of others, and she was guided by them now.

Once permitted the opportunity of pleading this cause, Mr. Streatfield did not neglect his own interests. It would be little to our purpose to describe the doubts and difficulties which delayed at first the progress of his second courtship—pursued as it was under circumstances, not only extraordinary, but unprecedented. It is no longer with him or with Clara Langley that the interest of our story is connected. Suffice it to say, that he ultimately overcame all the young lady's scruples; and that a few months afterwards, some of Langley's intimate friends found themselves again assembled round his table as wedding guests, and congratulating Mr. Streatfield on his approaching union with Clara, as they had already congratulated him, scarcely a year back, on his approaching union with Jane!