

A LOST WIFE.

BY MRS. H. LOVETT CAMERON.

"It is downright wickedness, Freda, that is what it is! to treat holy matrimony in the way you do, and to throw discredit on the marriage service. I always hoped you were a good churchwoman, and knew the importance of that holy ceremony; but you talk of walking into church in that airy way in a bonnet, just as if it was of no more consequence than a pastry-cook's shop! But what can be expected of a girl who threw over the best match in the kingdom to marry a miserable army captain so poor you've got to wait a year before he can scrape up enough money to take furnished lodgings with! I wash my hands of you, Freda. I do indeed!"

I laughed. "Mark is not quite so poor as all that, aunt; don't be too unhappy over my fate. It is not because we are poor that we are going to wait. There are other family reasons which I need not enter upon. We shall not starve, at all events. Mrs. Thistleby will take care of that, for she is very rich."

"Oh, indeed!" with an appearance of renewed interest; "rich, is she? Well, my dear girl, I was just going to say that I should do myself the honor of calling upon Mrs. Thistleby when she comes back from abroad, and, of course, love, I hope you will stay here until you can go on to her house."

So it was settled; and Aunt Selina ended by kissing me affectionately. Making friends with Mamma was a Scripture precept which Mrs. Carr never failed to act up to.

All this time I had been longing to hear tidings of Mr. Curtis, but had been too proud to ask my aunt what she had heard about him. She would have interpreted such inquiries into a wish on my part to renew my engagement with him, and would have been quite capable of writing straight off to make overtures to him upon the strength of it.

I had not forgotten that she had told me that he looked ill and aged. I wondered whether it was my conduct to him which had altered him. I should have been very sorry to think so, and I could hardly believe it, for I did not think he had ever cared for me in any but a fatherly manner. But for my father's sake, and because he had been so uniformly kind to me, I felt that I should like to hear something of him.

One day during my visit to Mrs. Carr, I had gone out shopping by myself. I was in Bond street, coming out of Redmayne's shop, when a hansom cab, which was passing by, suddenly drew up with a jerk in front of it, and a lady wearing a very thick veil, beckoned violently and imperiously to me. I drew near wondering, and then saw to my surprise that it was Mrs. Featherstone.

"Freda! Miss Clifford! Is it possible that it is you?"

I drew back instinctively; my aversion to the woman who had traduced and reviled me in the day of adversity was as great as ever. "Oh, please don't turn away!" she said, in an entreating voice, strangely unlike the proud and haughty Clara Featherstone of old. "I have been longing so to meet you, and I did not know how to find you, or where you were. Please get into my cab; I am just going back to my lodgings, and I do so want you to come with me, for I have so much to say to you."

"To me!" I said, in surprise. "What can you have to say to me? I am no friend of yours—you have plenty without me—there is Mrs. Leith."

"Mrs. Leith! Do you suppose she would speak to me now—now all the world has turned against me! Don't keep me talking here, somebody might recognize me—do come with me!"

Something in the woman's face and voice told me that she was in trouble, and that for once she was genuinely in earnest. I hesitated no

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longer, but got into the cab with her, and we drove on.

When I came to be close to her, I perceived that she was terribly altered. Her dress, no longer radiant with bright colors, was shabby and worn, and her face looked old and haggard; there were deep lines scored upon it—lines of care, and almost, as it seemed to be, of want and poverty. I looked at her with amazement.

"Why has all the world turned against you, Mrs. Featherstone? and why do you speak of being in a lodging? Why are you not in your own house in Eaton Square? What has happened to you? Tell me, for I cannot understand."

"Do you not know?" she exclaimed, seeming to be much surprised in her turn. "Is it possible you have not heard?"

"No; I have heard nothing," I answered, bewildered. "I have been living for months in a most remote, out-of-the-world place in Yorkshire. All my friends, and my old associations, have been dead and buried to me—I have heard nothing."

"Then you do not know what happened to me last December? I thought everybody knew it."

Just then the cab drew up at a door in a miserable, dingy little back street—we had arrived at her lodgings. She let herself in by a latch-key, and we went upstairs into what is called "the drawing-rooms." Two wretched rooms, low, dark, and dirty, opening out of each other by the usual folding-doors. There was the round table in the middle of the room; the tarnished console, with its marble top, opposite the fire-place; the horse-hair sofa between the windows. On the mantle-place a case of dusty stuffed birds, flanked by cheap china figures of shepherdesses, under glass shades, and a dingy gas chandelier hung from the smoky ceiling. I glanced into the back room, through the half-open door; it looked if possible even more desolate and comfortless.

"It is rather a change from Ed-dington, isn't it?" said my companion, with a piteous smile, as she flung off her bonnet and sat down wearily in front of the table.

All my heart went suddenly out in pity towards my old enemy.

"Dear Mrs. Featherstone!" I exclaimed, "what dreadful thing has happened to you? I am sorry, indeed, to see you in such a place. Tell me what calamity has brought you to this?"

"I don't know why you should be sorry for me, Freda Clifford," she said, looking at me with a strange mixture of defiance and deprecation. "I dare say you will be glad when you hear—I know I should have been glad and triumphed if it had been you—if you had been the one that had been humbled; and, God knows, you have reason to hate me! So you never heard that I left my husband last December?"

"Left him?"

"Yes; with another man. Do you understand? I ran away from him. Don't look shocked, child; it's no uncommon case, after all!" and she laughed a harsh, bitter laugh.

"Oh! Mrs. Featherstone, how sorry I am! And—and the man?"

"The man has now left me. You will say it serves me right, I suppose."

"He will not marry you?"

"Oh! dear, no, he would not dream of it; he is years younger than I am. I was a fool, I suppose, to expect it. And now I am waiting my divorce, or rather Mr. Featherstone is. It won't make much difference to me; I have nothing but starvation to look forward to now."

"But your husband—will he not be merciful? If you are sorry, will he not take you back?"

"Mr. Featherstone? Gracious, no! He is only too glad to be rid of me! And again she laughed hardly and unmercifully.

I WAS SILENT FOR A FEW MOMENTS, not knowing what to say to her. I suppose if I had had a bad heart, or even a justly stern one, I should have felt that this woman, who had once so foully slandered me, was only now reaping the due reward of her evil deeds and ill-natured words. I suppose no one could have blamed me much had I said to her: "You have made your bed, and now you must lie in it. Can you expect pity or help from me, to whom you showed neither in my day of need?" But I must be a soft-hearted person, and be destitute of a feeling of proper pride, for no such speech came to my lips—I made her no speech at all, in fact; I only did what was essentially feminine and foolish, I sank down on my knees before her, and threw both arms round her neck.

"Oh! poor—poor Clara!" I cried, and tears of compassion rushed up into my eyes.

Clara Featherstone gave a sort of sob, and, turning away from me, hid her face in her hands.

"Oh! Freda," she said, "I knew you would be good to me, though heaven knows I don't deserve goodness at your hands, for I did all I could to injure you; and now it is strange, is it not, that you should be the only person in the world who can help me? You will not refuse to help me, will you, Freda?"

"Of course I will help you if I can," I answered; "but how? What good can I do! Why not go to your brother?"

"That is just it, Freda. My brother can help me, certainly, but he will not because of you."

"Of me?"

"Yes, I wrote to him and told him I was nearly starving, and so I am. I have had to sell everything I possess—one thing after another, literally to keep myself in food. So I wrote to George, and asked him out of his abundance to make me a small allowance—only £200 a-year; with that I could take a small cottage in the country, and do some embroidery for a ladies' needlework society that I used to subscribe to, and which would now, I think, give me employment. I could live, at all events. I thought George could not refuse me such a small request; but look at this."

She drew a note out of her pocket, and put it in my hands. I opened it and read:

TO BE CONTINUED.]

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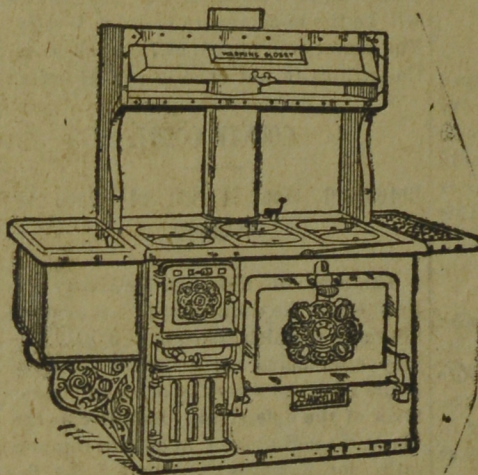
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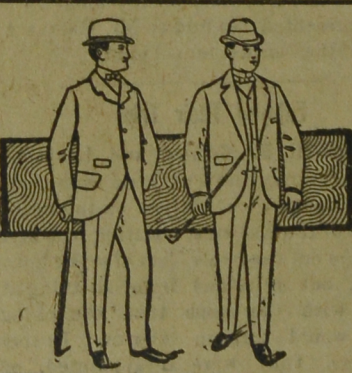
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