

The Home Reading Circle

A DREADFUL OCCURRENCE.

Lord and Lady Wilmington lived in one of the oldest houses in B-Square-I am writing of thirty years ago, when the occurrence I am about to relate to you was fresh in every one's mind. There were scarcely any old houses in the square now, for as the leases have fallen in, new mansions have either been erected or the old ones have been restored and remodelled as almost to count as new habitations. But even so lately as thirty years ago there were several ancient tenements still standing. Solemn, sequestered, and ghostly mansions they were for the most part, with spacious apartments and lofty halls, adorned with Queen Anne moldings and hung with tapestries of far older date than that of the good queen who had given her name to such vast quantities of modern antique-and, I fear, often jerry-built-structures.

Lord Wilmington's house, at the date of the opening of my story, wore an even gloomier look than was habitual with it. For my lord and my lady had been abroad for the last three months, so Mrs. Mason, the housekeeper's footfall woke the dearest echoes as she stepped across the hall on her daily tour of inspection of the various rooms, accompanied by Jane Farmer, the upper housemaid. How Mrs. Mason longed for the return of her master and his young wife may be judged from a conversation which took place one morning between the old lady and a newly acquired under housemaid, a girl who had only arrived from the country late the previous night. As a rule a person of such vast importance as Mrs. Mason would have considered it beneath her dignity to converse on terms with such a chit of a girl as Ellen Parker. But now everything was changed. The "season" was long ago over, the autumn was upon them, the wind whistled dismally through the already half-dismantled trees in the square, and Mrs. Mason was positively glad of the opportunity of speaking to anyone fresh-even to an under housemaid.

"And where have my lord and lady gone to, m'm?" Ellen ventured to ask, before her first instructions in the duties of her new place had commenced. "Gone to? Where haven't they gone to, my dear? Why to Naples, and Corcora, and Rome, and Venice, and-and-I don't know where else."

"And they've been away three months-so Jane Farmer told me."

"Well, child, I was going to say five years, for it almost seems like that to me," replied Mrs. Mason, with a sigh of resignation. "But my almanac says three months two days. I looked at it this morning-as I do most mornings, for the matter of that-longing for their return."

"It's pleasant when they're here, I expect,"

"Well, it couldn't be much dimalter, could it? Why, the house is as still and lonely now as if it stood on a Yorkshire wold, instead of in one of the very best and most fashionable parts of London. Why, my dear, I have not almost almost a confidential tone, you wouldn't know it was the same house when my lord and my lady are here-such balls, such dinners, such concerts, such life, and such excitement you never saw in your life."

"It's hard work for servants, then, I suppose?" Ellen asked, not altogether disinterestedly.

"Well, maybe it is," the housekeeper replied, "but who would have heard they work for such a master and mistress? I know I don't! And I don't think anyone in the house does, either."

you're come to the wrong man, and no mistake."

"Oh, no, sir, it's not that, either."

"What is it, then?"

"My lord and my lady are coming home, unexpected."

"When? You don't say so! Why, I heard from my sister only a week ago, and there wasn't a word about their returning then."

"But my lady has had a sudden chill, and his lordship wants her to see her own doctor as soon as may be. Here's the letter, sir, I've just got it."

With that Mrs. Mason handed her visitor the letter from his lordship.

"Yes, this is unexpected, indeed," Mr. Reginald said, as soon as he had mastered the contents of his brother-in-law's note. "Tomorrow night, eh? You'll have all your work cut out to get things ready by then."

"So I was thinking, sir; and-and-" she paused.

"Could you help me, sir?" Mrs. Mason asked diffidently.

"I'm afraid I'm very little use dusting furniture, still."

"Oh, sir, I didn't mean that," the housekeeper replied, quite shocked at the implication.

"How can I help you then?"

"Why, sir, I was thinking, if you could go to the bank and get the plate chest it would save me a good deal of time and trouble."

"Certainly I will, if that'll be any assistance to you. Sure I can do nothing else?"

"No, sir, thank you very kindly, that's all I require."

"Then I'll be off," the young man replied, taking up his hat, and swinging himself out of his deep arm chair at the same time.

"You shall have the plate here in an hour," he said, as he reached the hall door, "if that's soon enough?"



He: For perfect enjoyment of love there must be complete confidence. She (of Chicago): I have heard pa say identically the same thing about sausages.

From "Life." Copyright, 1897, by Mitchell & Miller

and adding a few words of half-jesting reassurance, walked briskly down the square in the direction of his rooms in Jermyn street.

But in spite of the young man's confident tone, Mrs. Mason felt uneasy. Why, she hardly knew. Yet, battle as she would against it, the strange feeling of an impending evil returned to her again and again, filling her with direst forebodings.

"Suppose her ladyship is really-seriously-ill?" the poor woman kept saying to herself. "For more ill than his lordship likes to say; and when they bring her home it may not be her own living self he brings, but-No, no, that's too horrible even to think of! Suppose that new girl Ellen, she went on, her ruminations taking another turn-she's not been in our service before-suppose she should drop a light, and the whole house be-"

True to his word, in little more than the time specified the young man had returned. Two men from the bank accompanied him, and the assistant, in one of these the chest was soon safely deposited in the hall.

"There you are, Mrs. Mason," cried Mr. Reginald, surveying with satisfaction the work that had been so expertly accomplished, adding cheerfully: "Now, if there is anything else I can do for you, you've only to tell me."

"There is nothing else; I thank you, sir."

"Then I'll bid you good bye for the present. I'll be sure to come and see my sister soon after she arrives. Yes? You were going to say something?"

Mr. Crawford added, his quick eye noticing a kind of hesitancy in Mrs. Mason's manner, as though she desired to say something, but did not know how to say it. "What is it, Mrs. Mason?"

Thus encouraged, the housekeeper spoke out.

"Mr. Reginald-sir," the old lady said, "don't you think all this is very strange?"

"What is very strange?"

"My lord and my lady returning so unexpectedly."

"Well, I should think so, perhaps, if it were any one else than my sister and her husband that were concerned," he replied, smiling; "but you know by this time how capricious she is, and you know, too, how attentive he is to her slightest wish."

In another moment Mrs. Mason's face was pale as death, and she looked at Mr. Reginald as though she desired to say something, but did not know how to say it. "What is it, Mrs. Mason?"

Thus encouraged, the housekeeper spoke out.

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