

A NEW YEAR'S GHOST.

BY ERNST WICHERT.

I.

EVE of the New Year! The clock in the tower of the ancient church on the market-place had already struck eleven, in the solemn tones familiar to the inhabitants for centuries. The streets were perfectly still. Whoever intended to greet the New Year merrily at a ball or the hospitable table of intimate friends, had been housed long ago, and those that found congenial society in taverns or beer-shops were not yet inclined to move. There was not a quieter hour of the night in the whole year, as the watchman truly remarked, than this closing one.

Poor Marie was alone in the house; it was her duty to keep awake until her employers returned.

Only a little more than a twelvemonth ago she had been universally called "pretty Marie," and since then she had undoubtedly grown still prettier, for she was in that spring-time of life when "all the buds are blooming" and daily unfolded fresh charms; but the few that now mentioned her called her "poor Marie." And they had good reason to do so.

"Pretty Marie" was the daughter of a petty official, but one whose services were needed by every body. Thus, though his salary was very small, he received a great many fees, which in the aggregate amounted to a much larger sum, so that he could defray his household expenses without having any anxiety about "making both ends meet." And as it was a saying of his that a man only lived once, and as he took no thought beyond the present hour, he unfortunately did not trouble herself about savings, but lived in a pretty house, kept a maid, bought handsome clothing for his wife and children, and always had a nice dinner to set before a chance guest on Sunday.

The pretty daughter, without seeking to do so, attracted a great many young men belonging to higher circles. It was so easy to obtain admittance to the house, and everything was so merry and unconstrained there. Perhaps one of them might have had serious intentions. Marie had certainly expected an offer of marriage from one young man, who was soon to have a good position. He had even given her his photograph. She willingly overlooked a slight limp he had.

This pleasant life ended very suddenly. Her young, vigorous father was confined to his bed by a severe illness. As he did not, on his recovery, spare himself in order to avoid farther diminution of his income, a second attack followed, and, after a few months of anxiety and grief, he was borne to the churchyard.

The funeral was "first-class;" the family considered this due to his memory, on account of their numerous relatives and friends. But the expenses swallowed up the greater portion of the small amount of property left by the dead man. The widow had a very small pension. The younger children were cared for by compassionate friends. Marie was "old enough" to be able to earn her own living.

It happened, fortunately, that she obtained a situation as "maid" in an aristocratic family. She had the lighter duties of a chamber-maid to perform, and also to help her mistress dress and to pour out tea in the evening. If required, she read aloud and made purchases. It was part of her service to be always well dressed, that she might appear in the street with her mistress, if desired. She led no easy life, but she was permitted, at least, to retain the appearance of a young lady.

This was of great importance to her. Perhaps she was not vainer than pretty girls

usually are, but she would not have married a man below her father's position in life, or one that did not possess an income that would enable her to live as she had been accustomed to do at home.

Her employers were to spend New Year's eve away, and the maid had received permission to seek her own pleasure. The coachman was in the stable with the horses, and the footman was keeping him company until the carriage was needed at one o'clock. Marie was alone in the sitting-room. She must keep awake to be ready to help her mistress undress when she returned.

She had locked or bolted all the doors leading into the corridor; no accidental entrance must startle her. The doors were high and narrow, enamelled in white with gold decorations, and surmounted by shell-shaped ornaments. The few rays of light from the street lamps, which made their way through the narrow opening between the heavy damask window-curtains, lingered almost entirely upon them, except when they occasionally glided to the decorations of the ceiling, the glass prisms of the chandelier, or the bronze candelabra protruding from the dark tapestry. Marie sat in the last room near a small lamp, whose dim light only illumined the table, which she had pushed near the stove. The stillness surrounding her seemed uncanny; there was no sound save the damp snow-flakes beating against the panes.

She was busy. On the table lay a hymn-book with a gilt cross upon its black cover, but it had long since been closed and laid aside for the New Year, which must be opened with pious thoughts. An open novel beside it had probably amused her for a while. Now, however, she was shuffling cards. Again and again she questioned them to learn what fate had in store for her during the coming year, but she never seemed to find what she expected or desired. The horrid cards! How stupid her employment was growing!

By way of a change she rose, went to the window, drew the curtain aside, and looked out. Whole stories of the opposite houses were brilliantly lighted.

"There," she thought, "are gathered those to whom the Old Year brought nothing but pleasures; now, with brimming glasses, they will joyously greet the new

one. Once we were just as gay. But that is all over. All my hopes are buried. One year will now pass like another in monotonous servitude, and nothing be left over from my scanty wages. What is the use of saving a few paltry pennies? A poor girl cannot get on in life if she remains virtuous. And the little pretty speeches—no one means them seriously. Rich people! Everything drops into their laps. And they really don't deserve it. But people don't ask about that. Whoever is destined to good luck has it. Ah, if I could once—"

Marie sighed deeply, went back to the little table, and took up the cards, but instantly flung them down again.

"They will only lie," she murmured; "fortune cannot be constrained. If one could only sleep!"

Taking the lamp, she went into her mistress' room to see again that everything was in order. There stood the two beds under a blue-silk canopy, the wardrobe with its richly carved-oak doors, and close beside it the baroness' tall Venetian dressing-glass, with the large lamps shining at each side and a soft fur rug in front of it. Marie glanced into the mirror as she passed it, and looked into it again on her way back.

"The baroness is just about my height," she thought; "but she isn't nearly so pretty. Ah, if she did not have such beautiful dresses and glittering jewels—"

Marie found nothing to do, and went back to her arm-chair by the stove. Taking up the novel, she read a few pages, then glanced through the last chapter. Her eyelids were so heavy, and her lips constantly parted in a yawn. She leaned her head on her hand, nodded, hastily straightened herself, and took another position. But the very next minute—

II.

"No, this won't do! New Year's eve mustn't be spent so. People must have some amusement. But how is one to find it, if one is all alone? Aha, but a girl isn't alone if she can see herself in a looking-glass. The baroness' costumes! It's such an innocent amusement to occupy one's self with one's own beloved person. Can any body be in less dangerous company?"

The thought darted into Marie's mind like a flash of lightning, and she could not re-



"SUDDENLY SHE SEEMED TO GROW RIGID."

sist the temptation. Hurrying lightly into the bed-room, she lighted the lamps on both sides of the mirror, advanced, retired, bowed her fair little head to the right and left, raised and lowered her round chin, laughed and showed her pearly teeth, looked sorrowful, and nodded to her image.

"A very pretty face, a dainty figure. Yes, indeed! We might as well confess it to each other. Who else looks like that? When one is a poor girl! Ah! if I were the baroness, and could have my hair dressed like hers, wear flowers, silks, and jewels! Then you would stare. Yes, you would."

Scarcely had the thought entered her mind, ere her slender little fingers were busy among her braids. How had she managed to seize brush and comb so quickly? How gracefully the little locks curled above her brow, how smooth the braids were! Now, a red and a white rose! The pasteboard box where the baroness kept her flowers was close at hand; she need only lift the lid. There, this little bouquet was the very thing. No, this one was still better—and this—suited her face bewitchingly.

But the ugly, dark, woollen dress, and the smooth, plain collar! She needed a silk dress, light-blue or white, trimmed with airy lace; and the shoulders—

"I wonder if the baroness locked the wardrobe. She often leaves the key. I'll see. What harm will it do? Just for fun. And this is New Year's eve! She won't know anything about it.

"Ah, how superb! It doesn't seem so when the baroness wears it herself. One is used to seeing her. But if I— Which dress shall I choose? Each one is handsomer than the other. But they are certainly not equally becoming to her. Pshaw! I'll try them all on. That will be the most fun, and there's plenty of time.

"This scarlet is too striking. This white satin—beautiful, but it needs rouge. The light-blue one—it looks so plain, and yet the material is extremely costly, and the trimmings—the lace! Yes, yes, you suit me. Marie, you look very aristocratic, really very aristocratic."

And she bowed to her image in the mirror, curtsied very low, and rose gracefully again, glanced coquettishly over her white shoulder, draped herself in a light shawl, played with a carved ivory fan.

"The toilette is complete. Nothing is wanting except some diamond ornaments. But they are really necessary! The baroness keeps hers in this little box. It is locked, of course. And she has taken the key with her. What a pity! This dress really requires jewels. It looks so unfinished without them, not a bit aristocratic. Just a necklace, a bracelet—

"I wonder if any of my keys would fit? Perhaps so. I might try. This one—or this? Too large—too small. But this one? Where is the harm? I don't mean to take anything! Ah, how easily the key turns! And the lid flies open directly. How they flash and sparkle! How superb!"

Hastily seizing the bracelets, she clasped them round her slender wrists, then fastened a glittering ornament on the left of the gleaming white satin robe. She thrust small glittering gems in the pink lobes of her little ears, put rings on her fingers, two or three on each. Nothing was left in the casket.

How beautiful the girl was! The mirror had never reflected a fairer face. Was this poor Marie? She could not weary of gazing at herself. Still, it would not have been unpleasant if a "certain person" could have admired her in all this magnificence; accidentally, of course, perhaps through the key-hole. Where was he now? Amusing himself somewhere, no doubt, without a thought of her.

The clock in the church-tower struck twelve slow, solemn strokes.

"They won't come back for an hour. There is no need of hurrying. I can hear the carriage when it goes for them. That will give me plenty of time to undress."

The deep tones sounded like the bass notes of a waltz which she hummed merrily.

She threw back her train, bent gracefully to and fro, sat down, flirted her fan, but always kept her eyes fixed steadily on the mirror. Suddenly she seemed to grow rigid, every trace of color faded from her cheeks, her terrified gaze rested on a spot just above the left shoulder of her image, which now also seemed petrified. The face of a man appeared in distinct outlines against the dark background.

Marie wanted to shriek, but she could not utter a sound. Could she have been mistaken? Certainly not in the fact that a man

was standing behind her. His eyes moved and the lips smiled sarcastically. But was it really the one of whom she had been thinking? True, the figure moved before her eyes, as though the lamp-light flickered incessantly, and the features constantly grew more indistinct. But the resemblance—Under the hooked nose a little, dark moustache twisted sharply upward at both sides, and the eyebrows curved upward in the same direction from the brow; the hair parted in two separate locks from the narrow forehead, and a small goatee seemed to lengthen the long chin. The face had not formerly appeared to her so intelligent, the eye-brows so much arched, nor the goatee so pointed. Yet, no mistake was possible. And the grey eyes sparkled so knowingly at her, she would have liked to sink into the earth.

"Sir," she began in a low, trembling voice, after she had somewhat recovered from the first fright, "with what object—"

"The most innocent one in the world, *fraulein*," he answered; "I have only come to express my sincere admiration, and to offer my services. You are certainly looking most charming. It would be a great pity, if you had dressed merely for yourself."

"But this dress—these jewels—" she began hastily, and then paused.

"I know what you are going to say," he answered smiling. "I am a thoroughly unprejudiced man. This dress, these flowers, and gems would not be any more becoming had destiny made you the wealthy woman from whom you borrow them. Your beauty has the best right to them."

"You apologize too kindly, sir," Marie ventured to reply.

He was now standing before her, attired in faultless evening costume, hat in hand.

"I have nothing to apologize for," he answered bowing courteously. "Everything natural explains itself. There are no justifiable distinctions between human beings, save those that nature has herself imposed. It is always a grateful task to level artificial ones. And one need only take a sufficiently high stand to see the disappearance of the petty scruples, which unhappily often paralyze energy."

These words greatly soothed Marie.

"If I only knew, sir," she said more cordially.

"Not who I am?" he interrupted.

"No, only whether I am not mistaken," she murmured in embarrassment.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"True, when a man is dressed for a ball, has had his hair curled, and donned a swallow-tailed coat of the latest fashion—But what is the use of calling everything by its right name? Let me be '*Sir Good Luck*' to you this evening. Indeed, I have no other occupation just now than to make myself useful to those that need me."

"That is very kind," said Marie, who was again somewhat puzzled. "Only I don't understand. I certainly thought I had locked the doors."

"Oh, such a mere external hindrance as that!" he answered, shrugging his shoulders. "I should dishonor my name if I let that deter me. But now, *fraulein*, we must not linger longer! We have barely two hours' time."

He advanced, his left foot dragging slightly at every step, and gallantly offered her his arm. She rested the tips of her fingers on it, but without moving, and asked in surprise what he meant.

He took her hand and held it firmly. She felt that any effort to withdraw it must be useless.

"My carriage is at the door," he replied, "In a few minutes we shall be at the New Year's ball, for which you have dressed so splendidly."

"No, no," she eagerly but not angrily replied.

Her heart was throbbing, and the blood crimsoned her cheeks.

"You ought to be sincere," he answered smiling. "When a lovely young lady puts on a ball-dress—and you were just humming a waltz."

"You heard that, sir—"

"Pray come without delay."

He drew her gently away, and she could not resist. A magnetic influence seemed to emanate from him. Marie closed her eyes as though fainting.

III.

THE next instant she was standing in the street. Her companion opened a carriage door, and lifted her in. She had barely time to see that two horses were harnessed to it, their nostrils appearing to send forth

showers of sparks. Nothing now seemed marvelous to her.

That was a drive. They appeared to be flying through the air. The wheels did not seem to touch the pavements at all. The horses' hoofs made no sound. The gas lanterns glided swiftly by. Suddenly Marie uttered an exclamation of terror.

"I've forgotten my gloves!" she cried.

"Oh, never mind that," replied her companion soothingly. "Why should a pretty little hand be disfigured by such an ugly thing? Do you want to hide all those handsome rings? Besides, everybody at our ball will have forgotten some trifle; it won't be noticed. They are in such a hurry to steal their pleasure— But here we are!"

A blaze of light was streaming from a spacious doorway into the street. Servants in showy livery darted out, and opened the carriage door. The first landing of the staircase was lined with a double row of gentlemen in dress-coats and white cravats. As the pair passed, Marie's companion limping slightly, they bowed like the ears of grain in a field when the wind blows over them. Up, up they went, over flight after flight of steps, covered with gay carpets and lighted with candelabra. The walls were lined with mirrors, and wherever Marie turned she saw herself.

At last they reached a vast hall, music greeted them, and dancers whirled by. A thousand gas jets were burning, but they looked like glowing coals, for the moon-like luster of electric globes outshone them. Every one seemed in motion, a vast circle, in which countless smaller circles were perpetually turning.

Marie tottered into the throng by her companion's side. Some one bowed before her. She felt herself seized by two powerful arms, and whirled around the hall. She had never danced so before. Her partner released her, and another instantly pressed forward. She had no time to rest. Her beauty seemed to exert a resistless spell on every one. A dozen were always waiting when she had made the circuit of the hall with one. And she fancied that some one was incessantly whispering into her ear:

"Quick, quick! Time is passing. We have only one second between the old and the new year."

Then she distinctly felt her partner draw

one of her rings from her finger. And she now perceived that several others were missing, which had doubtless been lost in the same way. The next partner also took his tribute, and so did the next. Marie was ashamed to say that the rings were not hers and submitted. The number of rings lessened. Then came the turn of the bracelets. Some one said, "We must pay for the music," and loosed the diamond clasp from her shoulder. Marie began to feel very much troubled. Where would all this end? But she was allowed no time for thought. They again drew her into the circle of dancers, whose faces all wore a greenish hue. The linked bracelet studded with diamonds became unfastened, and slipped down her dress. Many hands seized it, tore it to pieces, and divided the links. Again the dance whirled on.

Suddenly there was a movement among the crowd. Many fled to the outer doors, but found them locked. The owner of the hall had appeared, a corpulent, be-rouged dame, with elaborately dressed hair, who wore a scarlet robe, extremely low in the neck. Behind her walked a footman, carrying two plates, and occasionally shaking the gold coins they contained. It was obvious that every body that attended the ball was expected to pay due acknowledgment in ready money. Marie had nothing. Her companion, for whom she anxiously looked, had vanished. The scarlet lady measured her with an annihilating glance, and pointed to an adjoining room. She was forced to obey the sign. The doors were instantly locked behind her.

She was now alone with an old woman, who, without heeding her tears and entreaties, instantly set to work to strip off her silk dress. Then, throwing a ragged woollen shawl over her bare shoulders, she pushed her through a little side door, calling scornfully after her:

"A happy New Year, little daughter!"

Marie fancied she fell a long, long distance. At last she found herself lying on the snow in the street, with a keen wind drifting the flakes over her. She was shivering with cold, and drew the shawl closely around her, but it gave no warmth. Rising, she ran swiftly down the street, keeping close to the houses. She felt so sorrowful and sobbed aloud, trembling with

cold and fright. What should she do if she returned home? How dared she hope for pardon? And if she remained away, where should she go? The police would soon be on her track, and arrest her for a thief. Who would believe that she did not mean to take the baroness' valuables, and that she had been so badly treated? She could not even tell to what house she had been conveyed. She shuddered when she thought of the prison; it had been so vividly described in the novel she had just read. A thief? No, she would not survive that disgrace.

She turned into a narrow side street which led down to the river. It was not yet frozen solid, but the water lay motionless like molten lead, and the ice crystals glittered in the light of the lanterns burning on the quay.

On this side the shore was tolerably flat, the street led down to a raft moored to the bank by chains, and reached by a wooden bridge. Marie tottered across it, and kneeling on the edge, as the washerwomen do, leaned over and looked into the black water. She tried to pray, but in her agony could not even remember the Lord's prayer. That to save herself from disgrace she must plunge down, she felt sure, but she grieved so sorely for her young life. She wished that some one would give her a push from behind, that it might happen partly against her will.

Then she heard a loud noise very near. Several people came tramping heavily along. "Where is she?" was asked.

"There, there!"

Search was evidently being made for her. The voices grew louder. Two or three of her pursuers leaped on the raft behind her, tipping it upward. She fancied she heard the baroness speak, and finally call her by name. She dared not hesitate longer; a

movement of her body forward—she closed her eyes—clasped her hands—and—

IV.

RENEWED and violent pounding on the door. "Marie! Marie! Don't you hear? Can any body sleep so soundly?"

"Something must have happened to her? Send for a locksmith."

"Marie—Marie!"

"Your ladyship—"

"Ah! at last. Open the door!"

"I really—didn't mean—"

"Open the door, child! We want to get into the room."

"Into the room? Oh, heavens! Into the room—yes, the lamp— Directly, directly!"

The key was hastily turned.

"It is really you—my lady—and I—and everything was only—"

Marie rubbed her forehead, in which the edge of the book had made a deep mark, and her sleepy eyes.

"Pardon me—"

"But how soundly you slept!"

"And such a dream," said Marie. "If you knew— I shall never forget this New Year's eve as long as I live."

"Go to bed now, it's really very late. And a happy New Year, Marie."

"A happy New Year!"

What will it bring poor Marie? I can guess. A letter is on the way, and will be delivered by the postman early on the morrow, a letter addressed in a man's handwriting. Just where the envelope is gummed there is a little picture which, in the dim light, I mistook for a bursting bomb, but it really represents a flaming heart. It may be supposed that this emblem on a New Year's letter it not without meaning. But what is written inside—is the letter's secret.

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