

"BONNY KATE," A TALE OF SOUTHERN LIFE.

BY

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CHAPTER XXXIV.—(Continued.)

Kate looks aghast. Such a disparity of age seems to her youthful imagination fairly appalling. "Oh, how can you?" she cries. "Surely, there can be no reason—and you so beautiful!"

The sincerity of this protest makes Florida Vaughn smile, and this time not sarcastically. She lays her hand kindly on Kate's.



"Take a word of advice from me, my dear."

"Did I not tell you once before that I am done—done forever with sentiment?" she says. "I am beautiful, yes—and I must make the best of this beauty. I mean to make the best of it. I mean to be what newspapers writers call 'a queen of society,' and one needs position and wealth for that. Kate, will you share the fruits of my triumph? I like you; I can't help liking you, though we are so different, and though I gave you pain once—but that was for the best—you must feel, now, that it was for the best."

"Yes, I suppose it was," says Kate steadily. "The truth is always the best. You told me the truth, and I—I thank you."

If Florida Vaughn feels any twinge of conscience at these words, she betrays no sign of it. "I am sure it was for the best," she says. "There may be a brilliant future before you yet. But you have not asked—do you not care to hear!—the name of the man to whom I am engaged."

"I have not asked because I supposed that it would be only a name to me—but I shall be glad to hear."

"It was only a name to you until last night. Do you understand? What, not yet? Why, you foolish child, I am engaged to Mr. Ashton."



Fillippo, in the act of exchanging salutations with a black terrier.

"To Mr. Ashton!" Kate has a sensation of being morally knocked down. She can only stare at the speaker for a full minute. Then, "You can't mean it! You must be jesting!" she cries. "It is impossible!"

"It is fixed and positive," Miss Vaughn calmly replies. "We are to be married in February, and sail at once for Europe. Kate, I have come to tell you this, and to ask, also—will you go with us? Mr. Ashton feels that he owes something to you, and he will be glad to take charge of you, if you will allow him to do so. Stop! I see that you are about to answer

as you answered a little while ago; but listen to me first. Pride is a very fine quality, my dear, when one can afford to indulge it. When one can't afford it, the good things of life are infinitely preferable. And the things which I offer you are very good—ease, pleasure, admiration, brilliant opportunities. You are pretty enough to marry anybody. Kate, you are not a child—think twice before you say you will not come with us."

"I am sure you mean, to be kind," says Kate, "but what you propose is impossible. I cannot leave Miss Brooke."

"Miss Brooke is good enough in her way," says the other, "and has a position of solid respectability—but, even if she desired to do so, she can give you no such opportunities as I offer. Besides, you must consider whether your establishment with her is a definite and permanent arrangement."

"I don't see how that matters!" cries Kate, flushing impetuously.

"It is what principally matters. You cannot possibly think of going back and burying your self on that dreary plantation—I beg your pardon, but one must sometimes speak of things as they are. Now, the arrangement I propose will be definite and permanent. Pray promise to come with me"—her tone grows absolutely pleading—"you have no idea how different your life will be if you consent."

"It is quite impossible," says Kate. "I told you once that I would accept nothing from Mr. Ashton. Allow me to tell you so again. As for returning to Fairfields"—her voice chokes a little—"there is no place so dear or so pleasant to me; but—I may not go back to it."

These words—the tone in which they are uttered—explain everything to the woman of the world. She looks at Kate. "So you are to marry Herbert Fenwick?" she says.

The girl blushes as only a girl who still retains some old-fashioned ideas of love and marriage can blush. Most young ladies would answer with an evasion, or else utter one of those point-blank falsehoods which are esteemed "justifiable stories" in matters of the kind. Kate does neither. She says truthfully, "It is likely—but nothing is settled yet."

"If I were in your place, I should settle it as soon as possible," says Miss Vaughn. "He is an excellent match. Something of a prig, perhaps, but rich enough to make one overlook that. It is a little odd"—she laughs—"that Ashton was a suitor of his first wife—excuse me, I mean his wife. You are not his second yet."

"No woman could ask better fortune than to be," says Kate. That which is our own, we are quick to defend, and she begins to feel as if Fenwick is indeed her own.

"Very true," asserts her companion, "and I congratulate you heartily. After this, I suppose it is useless to say any more of the European plan; but you will come to my wedding, will you not?"

"I can make no engagement without consulting Miss Brooke, since I am under her care. By-the-by, she desires me to ask if Mrs. Vaughn and yourself will drive this afternoon and dine with us?"

"I cannot answer until I have seen mamma, who may have made an engagement since I left her. I will send you a note from the hotel. And now I must go. Mr. Ashton will be sorry to hear how entirely I have failed in my embassy."

"You have not failed for lack of kindness," says Kate impulsively. "Pray tell him so. It is very good of you to want me with you—I understand that. I hope—I hope you may be happy!" she adds in a tone which does not indicate a very sanguine view of the matrimonial arrangement.

"No doubt, I shall be happy—enough," answers Miss Vaughn, rising. "You are a good little thing to say it as if you really wished it. I will see you again before we leave. Good-bye."

When Kate announces her news at luncheon, she is a trifle disappointed to find that it does not excite a great deal of astonishment. After expressing a moderate degree of surprise, Miss Brooke remarks that a man is never too old to make a fool of himself—while Mr. Fenwick says, with a laugh:

"It is an admirable arrangement!"

Kate turns indignantly upon him. "How can you call it admirable?" she asks. "It seems to me dreadful! Why, Mr. Ashton is more than twenty-five years older than Miss Vaughn!"

"But what are years when heart's accord?" "That is very uncharitable and satirical—and not at all like you."

"Well, when tastes accord, then—will that do? Miss Vaughn has a taste for wealth, Mr. Ashton a taste for beauty. What can be more suitable than the manner in which both will be gratified?"

"It is odious!" cries Kate. "Of course, I have read of such things, and now and then heard of them; but one does not realize a thing until one sees it. And Miss Vaughn looked so beautiful to-day—almost more beautiful than I ever saw her."

"Which proves conclusively that she is no heart-broken victim of an arrangement *de convenance*."

"I am afraid poor Randal represents the heart-broken victim," says Kate. "I wonder what they will think at Fairfields! I must write to Janet at once. *A propos* of writing" (turning to Miss Brooke), "Miss Vaughn said that she would send a note to let us know whether or not her mother and herself can accept your invitation to drive and dine."

"And are we to have no ride?" asks Fenwick, in a discontented tone.

"That depends. If she says they cannot drive, then we may ride."

"Then I hope devoutly that she may say she cannot drive."

This hope is destined to disappointment. While they are still talking, a note is brought to Kate, who glances through it and says, "They accept both invitations." Then she looks at Fenwick, and says, "One should not be unreasonable. There are plenty of afternoons on which one can ride—to-morrow, for instance."

"To-morrow is a day too far. To-morrow, whatever the day be."

he answers. "The weather may change, or something else may happen."

"Why do you make such suggestions, Herbert?" says Miss Brooke, a little sharply.

"Is there anything terrible in the fact of the weather changing, or some other troublesome person interfering?" asks Fenwick, surprised.

His aunt did not answer, but after a few minutes she leaves the room, and then Kate says:

"Miss Brooke is not like herself to-day. I don't know what is the matter with her. She makes me think of a person who is expecting or dreading something."

"That is odd," says Fenwick. "She has nothing, that I am aware of, either to expect or to dread. Perhaps she is only a little nervous."

"She is more than a little nervous, and that is unlike Miss Brooke."

"Almost everybody is subject to variable moods," says Fenwick, who is himself in a mood to look on the bright side of everything—except a postponed ride. "Did your aunt elect come merely to announce to you her approaching marriage?" he inquires, as they rise and walk together to one of the windows overlooking the garden.

"Not altogether. She came partly to invite

me to accompany Mr. Ashton and herself to Europe."

"Indeed! May I ask what answer you gave to such a proposal?"



At this moment something touches her impatiently.

"Don't you know what answer I gave? I declined, with thanks, to take advantage of the brilliant prospects she held out to me."

"I should have declined without thanks. The offer was more an impertinence than anything else."

"I don't think she meant it so," says Kate, simply. "At all events, it is best to believe that people intend things kindly, until we know the contrary. She has nothing to gain from me."

"I am not sure of that. You would be a trump card in the hands of a woman playing for social empire."

"Do you think so?" She laughs. "I cannot fancy myself a trump card in any one's hands."

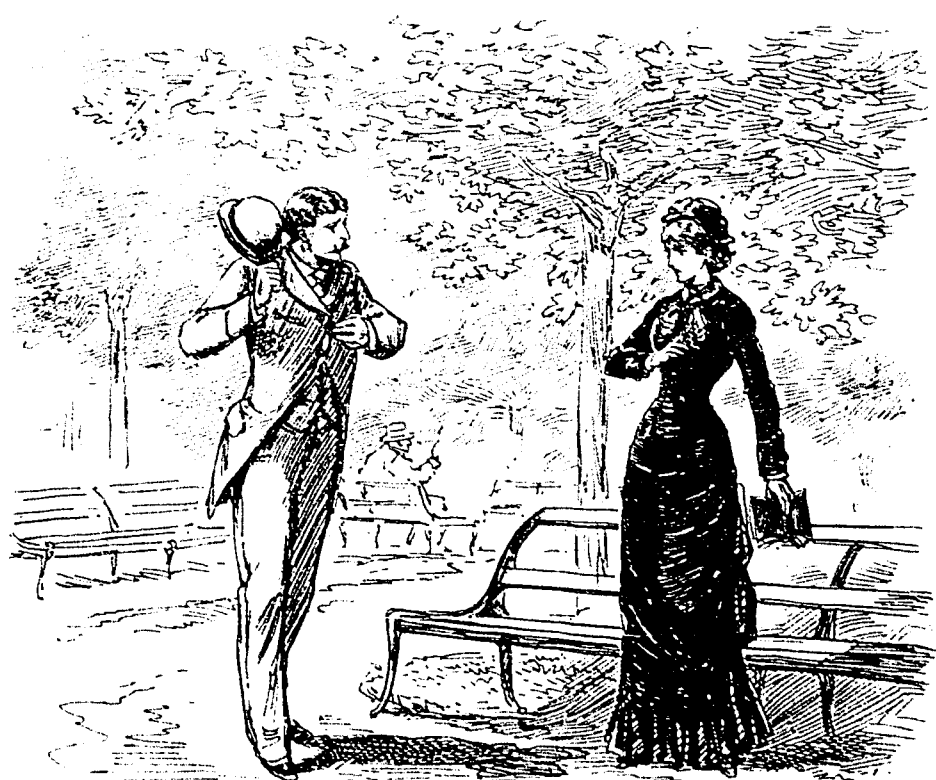
"What! not even a queen of hearts?"

"How absurd! I a queen of hearts?"

"Queen of one heart, at least," he says, taking her hand. "Kate, don't think me unreasonable—but can you not give me your promise, dear? You will make me very happy if you can do so; and, after all, what is the good of this uncertainty? It does not help you to forgetfulness. The struggle keeps remembrance alive in your heart; but if you put it aside and promise to be my wife, you will find peace. I feel certain of that."

She looks up at him, with the breath almost hushed on her parted lips. Why should she not give the promise for which he asks? It may be said that she has almost determined in her mind what her answer shall be; she has almost realized that it is her duty to accept the love and protection which he offers—why, then, can she not frankly tell him so?

There is no reason why she cannot, save only an instinctive longing for delay, which has no ground whatever. She is half tempted to say, "If you care to take me as I am, I will promise all you desire;" but some inner force seems to drag the words back before they are uttered. Are there such things as magnetic sympathies?



To find herself facing a pale agitated man.