

and it seems natural that my thoughts should be busy with my youth, which, I somehow feel, ends with to-day, and of which, until you went away, you were a part. For you, a new life is just beginning. Mine is but the same old story; only it seems as if the rest of it would be what they call in books an 'appendix.' I write this letter to wish you joy and peace and all that your heart most craves.

"I think I know you well enough to be sure that you would not have married without love, and love is the greatest thing in the world. May all its fulness and blessedness be yours, now and in the time to come,—so prays the friend of your earlier years.

"Eleanor Gray."

She addressed this letter to "Thomas Rhodes, care of John Riding, Esq., Denver, Colorado." She sealed and posted it, and then the thirty-year-old young woman felt that she had indeed turned the last page of her youth, and the "appendix" of her life was already begun.

It was not long after this that a new-comer to the quiet old town of Ryefield made Miss Gray's acquaintance. Here at last—so it seemed—came the veritable knight of romance of whom Eleanor had dreamed. Austin Bland was poet and painter both; one glory was not enough for him. He had come to the little Connecticut town to paint some of its beguiling bits of stream and meadow-land, some of its famous old trees that seemed fairly human, they had lived so long and were so full of wayward individuality. His pictures, he said, were for sale; his poems, on the other hand, were not the property of the world. He supposed it was unfortunate, but the truth was, he was utterly subjective. His verses, such as they were, were the very cry of his heart; and surely they did not belong in the market-place!

From the first, Bland seemed to take an especial interest in Eleanor. Naturally this interest flattered her. It had been many years since any man had so persistently sought her society, and now, here in her "appendix" of life, came the conquering hero, ready to turn subject for her sake, eager to paint her charms and to sing her praises. Was it, then, for him that she had unconsciously been waiting, and was it when she was past thirty that she was really to begin to live? It seemed so, just at first.

Bland had brought one or two good letters,—for even in rural Ryefield letters were necessary,—and he had met Eleanor at a high tea at the rectory, the very first week after his arrival. It was the glorious mid-summer—the long golden days when the sun seems so in love with earth that he sets reluctantly; when all the world is at its best, and the birds sing its praises, and the butterflies flutter lazily about as if to see in what a beautiful sphere they are allowed to pass their little day. There were soft mists at evening in the valley of the Quinebaug—mists that followed the splendour of the setting sun, and fled before the rising moon.

Austin Bland never tired of saying how infinitely precious it all was. Sometimes he studied the trees, and sometimes he studied Eleanor. He sketched her as Cleopatra, whom she certainly did not resemble; as Iseult, whom she might have been; as fair Rosamond with the fatal cup in her hand; as herself in a score of attitudes. He wrote verses to her in French metres—rondeaux, triolets and ballades; and these, he told her, were for her only—that cry of his heart which none other than herself must hear.

At last there came a July twilight. Bland and Eleanor had been watching the sunset together. He had been talking about his theories of sunset effects.

"I must see you to-morrow," he said. "Shall it be at three o'clock? I have something to say to you."

"Yes; at three, if you will," she answered; and then he was gone, and she sat musing in the waning light. Of course he was coming to ask her to be his wife. His whole manner had expressed his intention. She was as certain of it as if he had already spoken. Why was she not more exultant? Why did she always feel just a little tired when they had been for some hours together? Of course it would be a glorious destiny to be what he had called her—the queen of his art, to share his ambitions, to be the confidant of his dreams. She ought surely to be grateful to fate, and surely she was. At thirty, no doubt, the time for ecstasy is past. She looked out into the vague distance, and saw someone walking toward her under the trees that fringed the highway. There seemed something familiar in the coming figure. She caught her breath quickly. Were her eyes deceiving her? No; it was—it absolutely was—Tom Rhodes! As one in a dream, she got up and moved forward to meet him; for he had turned in at the gate now.

She seemed hardly to know what strange thing stirred in her thirty-year-old heart when he took her hand in a strong, close clasp.

"You, Tom?" she cried, "you?"

"Yes, Eleanor; the same old Tom."

"And your wife? Where is she?"

"Here, darling, if only I can win her."

"What!"

"Yes. I am not Thomas J. Rhodes. He is my second cousin; from Connecticut also, but from quite another part of the State. I am Thomas Rhodes, at your service—the same Tom who loved you years ago, and has never thought of marrying any other woman. You made me feel, in the old days, that it would be of no use to speak to you, and so I went away. But when I got your letter, and knew that you were Eleanor Gray still, I resolved that if I did not win you, it should not be because I was too cowardly to ask. At least you have a right to know how long and well I have loved you. I have done no great things; I am neither hero nor poet nor statesman; but I have lived a clean, honest life, and there is not one page of it I am ashamed that you should read."

"You loved me—me—all this time?" she cried; and there was a little choking quiver in her voice.

"Yes," he answered solemnly. "I loved you, and you only, then and now and always; but you have not answered me yet, darling."

"Oh, I forgot that; but you know, don't you?"

And indeed Tom knew; for the eyes that looked into his lit the growing dusk with their great light of joy, and the lips that had been strangers hitherto to a lover's kiss yielded themselves to his once and forever. Eleanor was won.

After all, thirty was not old age. These two found that they were young enough still for ecstasy. The moon came up in the east and looked at them curiously. Yes they were certainly lovers. The moon has got used to lovers, for she is neatly six thousand years old; and she is not likely to make a mistake. Eleanor wondered that she could ever have fancied herself too old for joy. She wondered yet more that she had not known from the very first that it was Tom, and Tom only, to whom she belonged.

At last she told him about Austin Bland.

"I have been trying all summer to love him," she said frankly. "I thought it was the thing to do; but I had got a little tired of trying. He is coming to see me at three o'clock to-morrow, because he has something important to say to me."

Tom laughed as a successful man may.

"Well, I shall be away just then. I am going to Boston to get a ring wherewith to fetter you to good faith. Deal gently with the erring. I shall be back by the seven-o'clock train to console you for his loss."

The next afternoon Austin Bland was punctual. He came as one who wears the willow. Sadness was in his voice and on his brow. A weed on his hat would not more clearly have emphasized him for sorrow's own.

"I go," he said; "I go this very night from you who are the queen of my art, and I must never see your too fair face again."

"What!" cried Eleanor, startled for once from her stronghold of composure.

"No, never! I am to be married next month to some one who loves me—but ah, she is not you! I have let myself forget all in the supreme joy of your presence; but I must forget no longer. Pity me! You can afford me so much grace. Circe, I dare not drink your cup."

It was really quite a masterly exhibition of histrionic power. It was hard-hearted and ungrateful of Eleanor to smile at it, as I am afraid I am bound to confess that she did.

"I am to be married almost as soon as you are," she said amiably, "to Mr. Tom Rhodes, one of the owners of the Wheel of Fire mine. But do not let us lose sight of each other. Your sketches of Ryefield scenery are quite too lovely. I should like to give you an order for some of them, that in far-off Colorado I may not altogether feel bereaved of the old home."

"You are only too good—too good and kind," Austin Bland said mournfully; "but ah, I must really never see you again. Goupil & Co. are my agents. Farewell, queen of my summer!"

And he made his exit, this knight of the sorrowful countenance, after the most approved theories of romance. At half-past seven o'clock Eleanor told her little tale of the afternoon to Tom Rhodes; and then she said, with a laugh, "So you see I couldn't have had him, after all; you are only Hobson's choice."

"No, thank God! I am Eleanor's."