

A Wedding Gift.

By Rita.

The presents lay piled about the large and beautiful room set aside for their arrangement. The long table which ran down its centre held its share, but still there were jewels and silver and scores of dainty trifles awaiting the attention of the girl, whose business it was to place and ticket them.

The jeweller's assistant, sent by a special Bond Street firm, had just completed his task. He professed himself tired of "the show." Such things were no novelty to him. The girl, who was also an employee of another firm, noted for the artistic presentment of wedding gifts, was just as tired as the assistant. But she knew she must stay on till the last article had been assigned its place—the last card of the donor affixed to the gift.

They made a brave show, those presents. Silver plate—exquisite glass—delicate china; cutlery, jewellery, ornaments; books, cheques; toilet sets in silver and ivory, laces fans; household furniture of Sheraton or Chippendale; Rose du Barri mirrors, Sevres and Saxe China, paintings, engravings, albums and photograph frames; scent cases; glove boxes and satchets—all the hundred and one dainty and expensive trifles that wealth lavishes on wealth, in order to prove that to "her who hath much, much more shall be given!"

Kate Perren stood for a few idle moments, surveying these costly gifts, wondering a little whether the bride cared about them; wondering also a little what that bride was like. If this was a love match or a mere Society marriage. If she were happy or merely passively miserable, as so many brides she had seen. Girls who had looked at their wedding-presents with strange, defiant eyes; girls who had been pale and wistful-eyed; girls whose lips seemed quivering with longing to say a word that should set them free, and yet knew that the word must never be uttered.

Of what sort or condition was this present martyr. This Miss Doris Carisford, of 1001 Princess Gate.

"Well, I'm sure you can finish all right," said the jeweller's assistant. "There's not much more to do. I'm off now."

She bade him good evening, and then resumed her own task. A responsible one—and one for which only accredited and known experts were engaged by the firms who made such work their province.

It seemed odd to Kate Perren that she should be employed in such labor. She—who once had been rich, beloved, honored—and now knew herself friendless, parentless and fortuneless. So runs the world. So sports the wind of Fate!

The door opened quietly, as the girl stood arranging the last row of bewildering uselessness. She was stooping over one of the numberless jewellers' cases. It was still in her hand as she half turned her head. The November dusk had crept on apace, and she had switched on one electric light. Through the open door came a gleam of ruddy firelight, the tinkle of cups and spoons, the chatter and laughter of girlish voices. The man who had left that group, and been ordered to see how the presents looked, stood staring at Kate as if she had been a ghost. She—pale as death, stood staring back at him. Her hand fell to her side, the case dropped to the ground, making but slight noise as it touched the soft carpet.

The door was shut abruptly. The intruder came quickly forward.

"Kate! God in heaven! You . . . and here? What does it mean?" She caught hold of the table. It seemed to her as if the whole room spun round. As if she were afloat on its giddy circles.

Had the dead returned to life—or what miracle was this? "Gerald! It can't be! . . . I—I heard you were dead."

"Was that why I could find no trace of you—hear nothing. I was reported 'missing.' I know. I had been badly wounded, and the Boers got me. I was six months in hospital; then I woke to

my senses and to reason. I came home at once. I sought for you immediately. You had disappeared—no one knew where. I advertised, I did everything I could; all no use. Kate, why did you do it—why keep me in ignorance? Unless—"

"Oh, no! Gerald—no! I had not changed. But my father was ruined. The shock brought his death, and my mother's followed it. I had to go out into the world; to earn my own living. I had—"

"Oh, Kate! Kate! My poor, pretty Kate!"

He had his arms about her. For one blissful moment she rested in them; safe, sheltered—happy once again. For one moment. Then she felt their release of her; the eyes to which her own turned in sudden bewildering appeal were eyes in which the old love and the new joy struggled against some invading foe. They were not Gerald's eyes; only the haggard, agonized eyes of a man distraught, perplexed, desperate.

"Kate—" he groaned. "Oh, my God, is it possible you don't know—"

"Know—what?"

He looked from her white face to the table, with its glittering array. He

wondered if ever fate had played a crueler trick on any man? How was he to tell her?

"You are not dead—you are alive; you have come back," she faltered. "And—what does anything else matter?"

"For to-day," he said, "nothing else matters seeing you and I stand face to face again. Have you changed, Kate? Do you love me still?"

"God knows I do," she said. "Oh, the miserable, awful months! the cold, empty years—gone now, gone for ever. Only—I forgot, Gerald, I am very poor. Everything has changed, except my heart—"

"Your heart and yourself," he groaned. "Oh, my darling, what am I to do?—How can I tell you?"

She drew back a step. Her voice rang out sharply. "Gerald! What is it? You're not—married?"

"Not—yet," he said.

She felt as if a cold hand clutched her hand. Fear—horror—terror struggled against this new warm stream of love and life and hope regained.

"Not yet . . . that means—"

"It means," he said, with a harsh, dry laugh, "that you stand here to-night arranging the presents for—my wedding day."

"Gerald!" she gasped, and would have fallen, but for his supporting arm. "Oh—No! No! Not yours—not yours, Gerald! This is some horrible jest, or am I dreaming? I have dreamt so often that you returned—but always to me."

Oh, my dear, always to me. . . ."

Her voice broke. She looked at him with all her wounded soul in those brimming, anguished eyes, looked for denial—for answer—for anything save what she saw. Shame and despair.

"Oh, why did you come back," she cried suddenly. "Why . . . if only—"

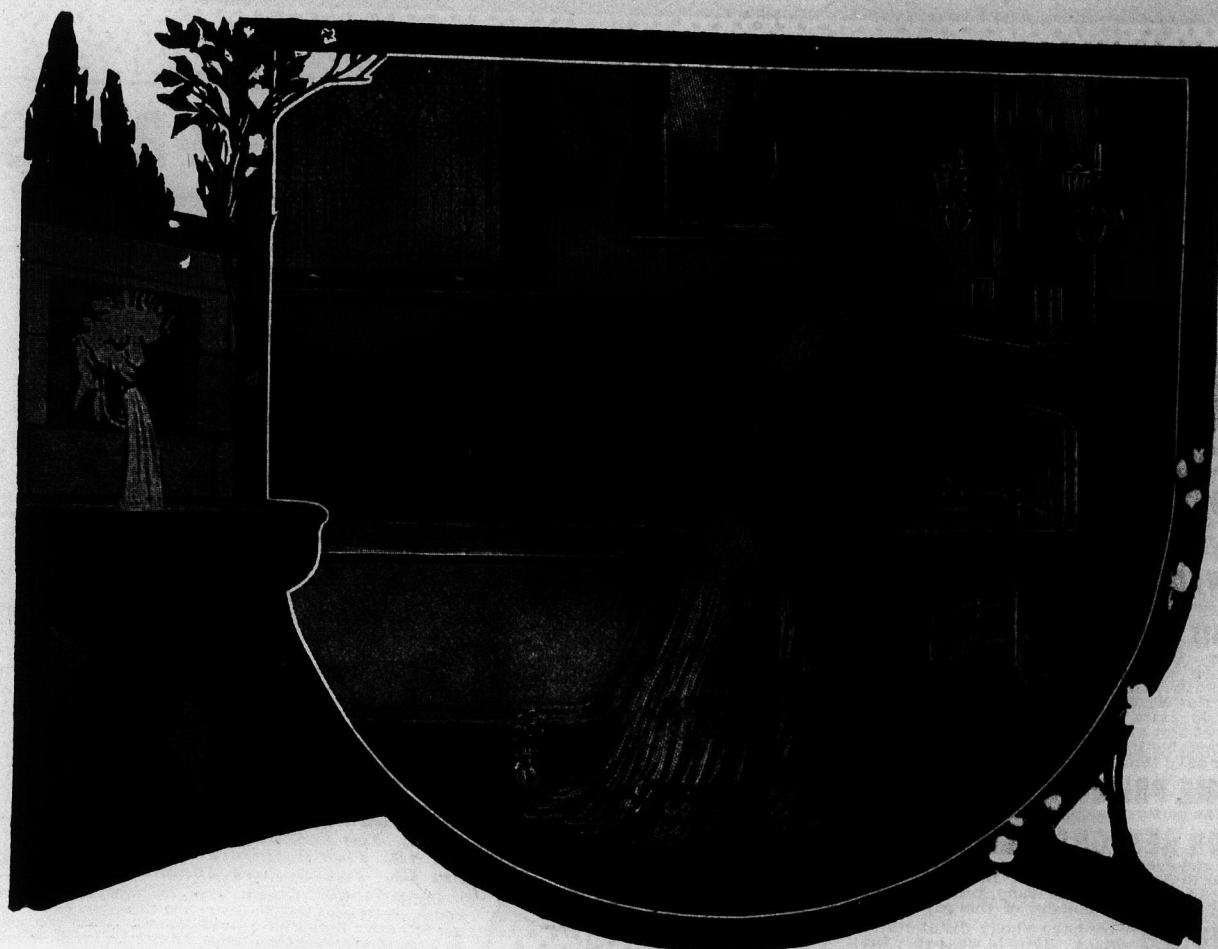
"I don't love her," he broke in with sudden passion. "I never have nor ever shall love any woman save yourself, my Kate. But—how can I explain? How tell you? It must seem as if I was faithless, and yet, God knows, I was not that. I was hurt—angry. I thought if you had really loved me you would not have left me to this blank silence. I thought perhaps you had ceased to care—had married—and then she—"

"Ah! She . . . Who is it, this girl you will marry to-morrow? Does she—love you?"

"Yes," he said bitterly. "That's the worst of it. If she did—not—"

But Kate drew her little head up proudly. "No—don't say that. There's such a thing as honor. A man's honor. You entered into this contract as a free agent, did you not?"

"I—I suppose so. I don't know how it came about. These things happen every day. A few meetings, a few dances—the routine of the season—a moonlight night; a glass too much of champagne—a flattery of a girl's open preference—one or all of



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