

Choice Literature.

A HILL-COUNTRY IDYL.

Kitty McKissen looked at her brother and sighed, and the sigh was accompanied by a glance of admiration. Hugh McKissen was certainly a fine specimen of young mountain manhood. Tall and muscular, with a lithe and sinewy form, whose graceful proportions even the half-coat, half-sack, called "a hunting shirt," could not disguise; a frank and pleasant expression, and a voice that, in spite of a rather nasal tone when its owner was excited, was full and musical—Hugh was worthy of feminine admiration. He was singularly ignorant of his attractions, and, though bold in peril, fearing neither man, bear nor catamount in single fight, was timid in the presence of women, his mother and sisters excepted. The owner, subject to his mother's liferight of a thousand acres of mountain land of which one third was rich "bottom tom" or level land, with horses in stall, cattle in meadow and steers on the hill-range, he was at seven-and-twenty a bachelor, while his fellows were heads of families by the time they had come to manhood. He loved his mother and sister, who worshipped him, and he was content.

Kitty McKissen was not his sister, however, nor was she his kinswoman. Eighteen years before, John Markham came there from the East, and bought a little "bottom-patch" of sixty acres, and settled on it with his wife. He built a log-cabin, set to work awkwardly to cultivate a few girdled acres, and tried to accommodate himself to an unusual position. Folks around, naturally suspicious of strangers, thought he must have done something wrong to make him leave home. He brought books, not over a hundred in number, which the neighbours deemed to be a great library. His house was neat, owing to his young wife's tastes. The neighbours said: "It's stuck round with thing-a-mijigs till it's a plum sight!"

Markham worked hard and so did his wife, and soon after their coming, Kitty was born. She was christened Catharine Burnett. Three months after her birth her mother died, and Mrs. McKissen who had just left a child of nearly the same age, offered to nurse Kitty—an offer thankfully accepted. But John Markham caught cold by exposure, it settled upon his lungs, and in less than a year he died, leaving his little possessions to his child. Kitty thrived and soon became known as a McKissen, the circuit-riding baptismal certificate to the contrary notwithstanding. She and Hugh, who was a nine-year-old boy when she came, had been brought up together. When she was half-grown, Peter McKissen was killed by the fall of a girdled tree, and Kitty became the mainstay of the house, for old Mrs. McKissen, who was ten years senior to her husband, had been half-paralytic for years, and passed her time in hobbling between her bed, the kitchen-table and the fireside, where she comforted herself with her cob-pipe, frequently re-filled. As foster-mother, she was the only one Kitty had known, and the love between the two was strong.

Frank and good-natured, as well as athletic, Hugh was a popular young man—his fellows accepting his lead and young women receiving his attentions courteously. But he never threw the handkerchief at any particular fair one, treating all with a shy deference. They did not come up to the standing of Kitty, who had inherited some of the refinement of her mother; and who, having read her father's books over and over again, was credited with a vast amount of learning. That kind of knowledge did not interfere with her housewifely qualities, for she was known to be the best cook and baker, as well as the best butter-maker and neatest housekeeper in the county. Hugh measured all other girls by her Procrustean standard. Beside, Hugh was not matrimonially inclined. His home was too comfortable, and he was in no hurry to bring a strange woman there.

But Mrs. McKissen thought it high time for her son to marry, and spoke to him about it.

"What's the need, mother?" he responded. "I'm comfortable, and so are you. Why should I bring a strange girl here—one that ain't used to us and our ways, upsetting things?"

"You needn't do that neither," said his mother.

But Hugh was too obtuse to take the hint and went out to salt the cattle. But he communed with himself as he went.

"I might spark Lucy Campbell," he thought. "She's been East to school, and she's sort of high-flyer, but she's pretty. Old Jim Campbell's well off, and he has only young Jim and Lucy. I dunno. I'll speak to Kitty about it. And there she is at the cows, now."

Kitty was there with her milk-pails, and Hugh broached the subject at once. She looked up, blushed a little and then looked down and listened.

"Lucy Campbell," she cried. "So, Boss! Why don't the cre'tur' keep still? Lucy Campbell's a nice girl; a little sharp-tempered, but you're not; and she never turns a hand to anything around the house; but you're not looking for a housekeeper. Give down, Boss!"

"Well, there's Nancy Stallins. Nancy's people are not so well off as Lucy Campbell's; but they do say that Nancy is the most industrious girl in the neighb'r'd."

"Yes," said Kitty; "yes, she's a worker. She never cleans up her dirt, though; and she—she chews snuff. You don't like tobacco in that way, do you, Hugh?"

"M—mph!" ejaculated Hugh. "Well, I dunno what to do. Mother, she's at me to marry, and I declare, except the two, I can't think of a girl I'd like to have, unless—well, there ain't one."

"You stupid!" said Kitty, pettishly.

"Eh?"

"This boss is the most stupid cow I ever saw. Now Bullface!"

And Kitty stooped with her pail and began a fresh milking.

"See here," said Hugh. "Did you ever see such an uncertain chap as that Si Doss? He's been here four times this week about buyin' a cow, stays around hours at a time, and ain't made up his mind yet. 'Pears to me he don't know a good thing when he sees it."

"There are a good many young men in the same fix, I allow," said Kitty. "Si Doss appears to me not to be one of that kind. He knows what he wants, I fancy."

And then, with her filled pail, Kitty moved off to the spring-house.

Hugh stood a minute, salt bag in hand, forgetful of his cattle, when he saw Si Doss riding up, and then dismounting. Si tethered his horse to the pendant limb of a beech-tree, and then strode forward. He had the reputation of being the most forward young man in the county; but he had a very embarrassed air now.

"Howdy, Hugh."

"Howdy, Si."

"Folks all well?"

"Yes. Your'n?"

"Fus'-rate, thank'y. Our best brood sow's sort o' limplish. I allow she's been eatin' somethin' afore we brought her outen the woods."

"Likely."

And then the two stood like exhausted receivers. At last Doss broke out:

"I've been allowin' to get married."

"Yes?"

"I'd like you to put in a good word for me."

"Me? Who's the girl?"

"Kitty McKissen."

"Not—our—Kitty?"

"Yes. I'm not quite sure whether she favours me or not. I've been aroun' some, but somehow I ain't got the nerve to speak out. Couldn't you soun' her an' find out?"

"Our Kitty? Why Si, she's a little girl. She's too young."

"She's eighteen years old. I hearn Miss McKissen say so. You know, though, I'm tol'able well-to-do, an' don't owe no man a dollar. I love the very ground she walks on."

"Well," said Hugh, after a pause, "we'll see about it. Anything new?"

"There just is. There's a fellow down to the town—a furriner from the East—got up in store-clothes an' mighty sassy-lookin', an' he's been inquiren' about John Markham's folks. Sez he's a kin to 'em an' 's gwine to come out and hunt up Kitty."

"No! What's his name?"

"Calvin Burnett. He's a lawyer where he lives."

"Burnett? Must be kin to Kitty's mother. You told him whar she is?"

"Yes; and thar he comes now, on Sol Dingess's claybank mar'. Can't ride worth shucks, nuther."

It was a sprucely dressed stranger who rode up, and, leading his mare, came toward them. It was not necessary to tell his kinship, for he "favoured" Kitty, as they say in the hills. The same eyes and forehead, but he had a square chin. He explained his business.

"Come into the house, Mr. Burnett," said Hugh. "Kitty will be back from the spring house, presently."

Doss was anxious to learn everything, but as no one asked him to remain, went off reluctantly. Presently Kitty came in, and the newcomer introduced himself as her first cousin, the son of her mother's brother.

"Of course," said Burnett, "I am very glad to know a near relative, especially when she's a pretty girl; but I did not come for that. I am here on business. Do you know anything of your father's history?"

"No, sir."

"Oh, don't 'sir' me, Kitty; we are own cousins. Call me 'Cousin Cal.' Your father ran off with my aunt, having married her against grandfather's command. Grandfather disowned her, and was very bitter. But when he died, he left one-half of his property to father absolutely, and the other half in trust. The nature of the trust was explained in a sealed paper, not to be opened until after father's death, and to be carried out by his executor. I believe father knew its nature. The trust money increased under my father's prudent management, and that share of the estate amounts to more than what I inherit. It is nearly twice as much. I opened the paper, and the instructions are that I am to pay it over to the heir or heirs of Catherine Markham. I am satisfied, from inquiry, that you are the heir, Kitty, and I am ready to transfer to you, under the proper legal forms, nearly ninety thousand dollars. I congratulate you, Kitty. You will be able to live at the East, as comfortably as possible, on an income sufficient, I suppose, for a single gentlewoman."

Ninety thousand dollars! The amount dazed Kitty, and struck the McKissens dumb. It was a fairy tale, and the young lawyer looked like an enchanter. Hugh was considered rich there, with less than a fifth of the sum; but ninety thousand dollars!

At last Kitty asked:

"Mr. Burnett—Cousin Calvin—must I live there to get the money?"

"No. You can live where you like; but if you want to enjoy life, the East is the place for you. You are your own mistress, or, at least, will be at twenty-one. In the meanwhile, the court here will probably let you name your own guardian and trustee."

"Thank you, cousin. I am glad to know you; glad to have this unexpected fortune, and would be glad to see a place that I've heard so much of. But the only kin I ever knew, though not of my blood, are dear to me. This is my, only home. I may visit the East, but I could not stay there."

The news of Kitty's wonderful inheritance soon spread. Rumor increased it by an additional cipher. It was heard of with a thrill of awe and envy. It was said that the dashing young "furriner" was to marry Kitty, and take her away immediately; and Josiah Doss was in the gulf of despair. Hugh knew better, so far as Kitty's views went, but he felt a sinking at the heart. Kitty would stay, but with such a fortune in possession she seemed out of the common sphere.

Burnett, while the legal forms were go-

ing on, amused himself by studying this cousin, who was so readily accommodating herself to circumstances and the McKissens, especially Hugh. It required no penetration to see that the latter was in love with Kitty, but seemed not to quite realize his own feelings; and that Kitty loved Hugh, and knew it.

"That young man is bright enough in some things, but very stupid in this," said the lawyer to himself. "I'll play the good genius, for the fun of the thing."

The court, at Kitty's instance, appointed Hugh McKissen her guardian and trustee, to the scandal of the young folk, who thought she should have chosen some older man. Hugh and Burnett had divers conferences before affairs were over. At one of these the lawyer said:

"What a very pretty girl Cousin Kitty is! Don't you think so, Mr. McKissen?"

"Ye-es."

"She'll make a figure when she gets into society, too. She is one of the rough gems that take to polish kindly."

"M-m."

"The fact is, I admire her the more the more I know her. I must try and persuade her to leave the mountains."

"Kitty McKissen isn't one of that kind," said Hugh. "You heard her say that she would stay here, and she is one to keep her word."

"I beg your pardon, Mr. McKissen," said Burnett. "Her proper name is Catherine Markham, and she is not likely to change it—in this place. No offence to you; but the name is a good one, and sounds well; but it would sound better if it were changed to Burnett, in my judgment."

And then Burnett walked off, to take a stroll through the hills, leaving Hugh confused and indignant.

"Confound his impudence!" cried Hugh. "Mrs. Burnett! He's after Kitty's money. Kitty marry him?"

Hugh walked out to cool himself and met Kitty coming from the spring-house; for Kitty was born to love cows and chickens, and her money had not changed her ways. She nodded. Hugh kept at her side, and as she reached the porch he said: "I—I want to have a talk with you, Kitty."

"All right. Sit down on the porch, then, and I'll listen."

"Kitty—I—the fact is—"

"Yes?"

"The fact is— You don't care for Burnett, do you?"

"Care for him? Of course I do. He brought me good fortune; he's my own cousin, you know, and he's a very nice man, too."

"Are you—going—to marry with him?"

"What a question! I suppose you can ask it as you are my guardian. I don't see how I could; he's not a Mormon, and he has a wife already."

"Oh, Kitty, you know I—"

"Well, I don't know, till I know what it is I know."

"Kitty, I love you."

"Of course you do; we were brought up together."

"It's not that, Kitty; but why can't we marry?"

"You never asked me, Hugh."

Hugh asked then with a vengeance. He poured out his feelings in a flood of words. Kitty didn't interrupt him. She liked it. But when he paused for sheer want of breath, she quietly put her hand in his, and said:

"You ought to have known that I loved you, Hugh."

When Burnett came back he divined the state of affairs at once.

"Mr. McKissen," he said, dryly, "I presume that Miss Burnett will have the approval of her guardian in this matter."

Kitty did go to the East, but it was as Kitty McKissen, and with her husband. After their return there was a house put up on the McKissen place, which was the wonder of the neighbourhood, both of itself and furnishings.

"Such doings!" said Nancy Stallins to a gossip. "You know the house—built outer bricks and rocks—a sorter cross atwix' a co't-house an' a meetin'-house; an' enough rooms in it for a tavern. But I was inside; six wagonloads o' things was put in; the floors are kivered all over. Yes!" continued Nancy, with the bitterest climax, "kivered with kiverlids!"