



The Family Circle.

"Home, Sweet Home."

A Kiss Under the Mistletoe.

You are really going to hang up that sprig of mistletoe, Winifred?" said the stately Gertrude Ponsonby to her gay young sister, as she was arranging the decorations for a Christmas party, on a bright, cold December day.

"I certainly am, Queen Gertrude. Have you any objection?" asked Winifred, demurely, looking up in the face of her elder sister, whom she dearly loved, devoutly admired, and unscrupulously teased.

"I do—well—I do think it rather—what shall I say?—childish, unless it is somewhat too fast for our style of guests," replied the first speaker.

Winifred burst into a merry laugh.

"Poor darling! Refined! Perfect pity!" she said, throwing her arms around her sister's neck and kissing her, like a spoiled child as she was. "Don't be alarmed; Louis St. Aubyn shall be duly informed that the magic circle is reserved for 'fast damsels and for children,' and that Miss Ponsonby has no 'connection with either party.' There, only see how beautiful it looks! And, by the way, I asked old Stamford to find a white camellia for your hair, my queen, and he promised to rummage the conservatory for the said blossom. Will that plead my pardon?" she added, coaxingly.

"You are a provoking little creature; and Heaven help the man who ventures on such a tiresome, wilful darling," returned the elder sister, returning the girl's kisses with a protecting fondness.

"Ah, he would certainly be insane to attempt it, in the first instance!" returned the girl, dancing off in glee.

And Gertrude, grandly beautiful as she was, almost gave the palm of attraction, with a generous though doubting sigh, to the petite and piquante fairy.

They were the daughters of a widowed mother, but in easy circumstances, that enabled them to live in simple elegance, and mingle with the pleasant circle in their neighborhood; while the residence of a bachelor brother of their father's within a short distance of their villa, gave always the sanction of a host to their entertainments when they required his presence.

Within the last twelve-month a very pretty place in the immediate neighborhood had been purchased by a gentleman named St. Aubyn, a widower with an only son.

The father was a great invalid; but Louis had become so completely domesticated at "The Larches," (Mrs. Ponsonby's residence), and his father was so charmed with the high-bred mother and pretty daughters resident there, that the families had formed a closer intimacy than is some times the growth of years.

Still if there was any tenderer feeling than friendship on Louis St. Aubyn's part for his fair young neighbors, no one appeared to decide for which of the girls it was entertained; and it would have been difficult for the choicest observer to say whether the stately blonde Gertrude or the piquante brunette Winifred engrossed the largest portion of the young man's attention or thoughts. At any rate, neither of the parents appeared to object to the probable consequences of such an intimacy. Perhaps, as usual, they were blind to the feelings springing up before their eyes.

The evening arrived.

Gertrude was nearly ready; but though the beautiful hair was arranged in its most becoming style, she stood in a sort of dissatisfied pause before the cheval-glass.

"This horrid crimson flower will never do!" she murmured fretfully. "My pale blue silk can never stand such a vulgar contrast!"

And she glanced despairingly around at the fairy dress—all trimmed with delicate white lace, that accorded so well with her pale skin and soft bloom.

It was very trying, doubtless, for the only resource from the crimson camellia was an artificial

flower, which had already done duty at two balls and dinners.

But there was no alternative, and, with a deep sigh, she seized the French spray of lilies of the valley, which was her *pis aller*, and was in the very act of raising it to her hair, when Winifred burst joyously in.

"See, Gerty! here's a lovely white camellia—with such leaves! I never saw anything to equal them! There, be quick! See, I am dressed already!"

And very charming the little creature looked in her amber and black costume, that contrasted so well with her brilliant eyes and hair.

Gertrude gazed with delighted surprise.

"How good of old Stamford! I suppose he found me one at last," she said. "And what a beauty it is—like wax-work!"

She placed it among her fair braids as she spoke, while Winifred archly pinned a slip of paper on the toilette table.

Gertrude's eyes rapidly caught the words, "To Miss Ponsonby—from L. St. A."

"There, queen Gertrude, I hope you are happy now!" said Winifred, gaily. "But make haste down stairs! I only hope the mistletoe will not spoil all!" she added demurely, as she danced out of the room.

Gertrude soon followed. The slip of paper had disappeared when the maid entered to clean the room immediately afterwards.

Perhaps it was thrown away!

Louis St. Aubyn did not appear till an unusually late hour, and Gertrude's card was filled up far more closely than she wished in his absence; and it was while she was waiting with one gentleman, and just before a rapid succeeding quadrille, for which she was claimed by another, that he came into the ball room, and requested her first disengaged dance.

Poor Gertrude fancied he looked cold and formal; perhaps her own manner was somewhat piqued and annoyed; for he went off, and at the end of the quadrille he was not visible, till she caught sight of him at the side of a delicate, lovely-looking girl, to whom he was talking with great interest.

She did not even know her, and could only suppose some of their guests had brought an unexpected visitor in their party.

But a strange gloom came over her, and she stole away as the guests were resting and taking some refreshments, and hid herself in a small back apartment, which opened into a dining-room, where the celebrated mistletoe bough was hanging from the centre chandelier, between the rows of tables now awaiting for their guests.

She heard voices approaching, and as she drew back to listen, she could just perceive the figures of Louis St. Aubyn and the beautiful girl in whom he had before seemed so much interested.

"It is the dining-room; surely we must not come here," said a remarkably weak voice.

"Oh, yes; I may take such a liberty here. I am privileged, I believe, and it is so long since I have seen you, and we have such heart-touching matters to discuss—have we not Ada, *ma belle*?"

And Louis gave an arch smile, and bending down, whispered something that brought the color to the girl's fair cheeks.

Gertrude dared scarcely breathe; her very heart was choked and swelling with grief, and shame, and indignant pride.

Louis spoke once more, and her ears were strained to listen to the words.

"Yes, Ada, we can, I trust, both be happy now; but this is scarcely the time to enter on all I have to say. We must return; and I want to find Gertrude for the next dance. Hist!—by jove!—what a sprig of mistletoe! Just the very thing for the occasion!" And, drawing the fair Ada under the branch, he pressed a kiss on her lips.

She laughed—blushed—and with a half arch, half reproving tap on his arm with her fan, they went off together in the direction of the ball-room.

Poor Gertrude! she sat cold and sick, as if stricken by sudden illness.

She never had guessed, never confessed the extent of her love for Louis St. Aubyn till now.

And to hear such words, when actually wearing on her brow his volunteered gift, when she could recall such numberless looks and words, and even gestures, that could scarcely be interpreted as aught but the indication of honorable love.

It was a terrible blow, and one that fell most hardy on a singularly proud and deep nature.

She had committed herself. She had given even Winifred the insight into her mind. What could she do? Where could she hide herself till she had crushed down the agony, and taught herself to wear a mask that could not but deceive her nearest and dearest?

She felt that her very face must be wan and haggard, her voice constrained. She must wait till the first shock was over, and then brave all, and suffer torture like a Spartan or a sage Indian.

So with dry, tearless eyes and a cold hand, which mocked the burning brow it supported, she rested on a small couch in the recess, and listened mechanically to the music and dancing, and only wondered when the advent of the party to supper might risk her discovery, and cause a search for the missing daughter of the house.

She closed her aching eyes in utter weariness. Life seemed so dark to her now.

How could she ever trust anyone more, even if this deep pain was conquered?

The music and the tread of feet sounded as if the crowd had actually gone frantic. How could anyone be so happy, so gay, and she so miserable? Gertrude never knew how the minutes passed by till they certainly lengthened into an hour.

A kind of a dull apathy stole over her, and a voice said softly and doubtfully, "Gertrude—dear Gertrude, what is this?" she started as if in a deep slumber.

"Mr. St. Aubyn! This is extraordinary!" she said, gaspingly. "What could bring you here—in my private retreat?"

"I came to find you, Gertrude; your mother is anxious about you. She fears you are ill, to have left the dances so long."

"I am quite well. I will go to—mamma," she murmured. "I am not wanted. Please to leave me, Mr. St. Aubyn."

"Not wanted? Not by me!—and you have not danced with me yet, Gertrude!" he said, reproachfully.

"You must excuse me. No doubt you would only be missed elsewhere—where you ought to be," she said, irritated at his seeming treachery.

He stood for a moment in wondering silence. Then, to her excessive annoyance, he gave a slight but irresistible laugh.

"Can it be?—am I so happy?—are you, indeed, resenting a perhaps, natural mistake?" he said, a bright flash of triumph illumining his features.

Gertrude's eyes were downcast, and a dawn of suspicion that she might have been too hasty came on her mind.

"Perhaps you may have been here when I brought my cousin here for air, and for a few moments' talk after her long absence," he said, with an arch smile, "and to exchange mutual confidences, dear Gertrude?"

"I—I really do not know—it is no affair of mine," she said, reddening, and trying to rise and pass him; but he stood right before her.

"No, Gertrude, not till you have heard the explanation which is due to you, after all I have said in manner, if not in words," he said firmly. "The simple truth is, that my cousin Adelaide Fance, who has been as a sister to me since boyhood, has just unexpectedly returned with her mother to our house, and I knew that I might venture to bring them to your party, even at the last moment. She has been betrothed most happily in your absence, and I was exchanging congratulations with her, on her real and my wished-for happiness, when we strolled in here, and, I believe, enacted a foolish piece of sentiment into the bargain," he added, with a glance at the mistletoe.

"Gertrude," he resumed, drawing her more daringly towards him, "can you not guess what was the happiness I hope for, that I wished Adelaide to sympathize in? Will you not tell me whether you can love me, and whether this dear hand is to be given for life, as well as for the dance to Louis St. Aubyn, your true lover?"

She certainly did not speak; but then the said hand told a great deal instead of the lips.

And when they went into supper, Adelaide Fance's dark grey eyes looked significantly at her cousin and his companion when they passed near the mistletoe bough.

But Louis did not take advantage of its privilege. Perhaps he scarcely acknowledged its necessity in his present happy case.

Three months after, Gertrude and Adelaide were married on the same day to the lovers of their choice; and some twelve months after, when Winifred followed their example, Mrs. Fance and Mrs. Ponsonby agreed to share the home of the latter.

But, so long as she lived, Gertrude preserved that memorable branch of the mistletoe.

S. D.