

"BONNY KATE." A TALE OF SOUTHERN LIFE.

BY
CHRISTIAN REID.

CHAPTER XXIV.—(Continued.)

"One moment!" His voice is a little hoarse as he stands before her. "Forgive me if I detain you—I cannot let you go like this! Kate, my Kate!"—he takes her hands in his passionate clasp—"believe, if you like, the worst that can

crouching on the cold granite, weeping for a man who has only made a plaything of her heart. Pride and courage are not quite dead within her. Hearing the steps approaching for the second time, she drags herself to her feet and mounts the terrace.

Mr. Proctor, who is about to descend to the



Tarleton accuses Vaughn of swindling.

be said of me, in all save my love for you. But my whole heart is yours—and yours only. That I swear. Can you forgive nothing for love's sake? Can you not for to-night—to-night only, sweetheart—let all this go like an idle tale, and tell me once more that you love me?"

"How dare you ask it?" she cries, indignantly. "Do you think me so weak, so vain, as to be satisfied by words like these? You admit everything; you offer no explanation; you only talk of forgiveness for love's sake. Such love is not worth considering. Let me go!"

But instead of letting her go, he catches her to his heart and kisses her with a vehemence that almost takes away her breath.

"Don't be angry!" he says, when he releases her. "I shall never take such a liberty again. Whatever the future brings, remember that I love you."

With these words he turns; for one moment she hears his quick tread crushing down the gravel—then silence falls.

She sinks down where he has left her, and leans her face on the cold, granite steps—feeling as if her heart was dying away within her. A great wave of longing sweeps over her. Pride, self-respect, what are these compared to hearing his voice again? Though that voice still sounds in her ears, and his kiss is still burning on her lips, a terrible consciousness of loss falls upon her like an overwhelming weight. "Whatever the future may bring"—does that mean they are not to meet again? Has she indeed sent him away for ever? Oh, blind rashness! Oh, bitter mistake! Already she feels and knows, to the centre of her soul, that her heart has passed irrevocably into his keeping, and that his idle fancy is more to her than another man's most ardent devotion.

Presently she hears the tramp of horses' feet on the avenue, the sound of voices on the piazza of the house, but she does not stir. A sense of recklessness has come over her. Let them miss her!—let them wonder where she is!—let them come and find her if they like! What does it matter? What does anything matter, when she has seen all that makes life worth possessing (so the passionate heart says to itself) vanish from her hopelessly and forever?

At the house, meanwhile, she is missed by one person at least. "Where is Miss Kate?" asks Mr. Proctor, looking round; but no one can tell him where she is.

"She was on the piazza a little while ago," says Janet. "I don't know what has become of her. Perhaps she may have wandered round the terrace."

"I'll go and see," says Mr. Proctor, rising, with a consciousness that here is his opportunity.

He walks along the terrace without finding her, but Kate hears his step, and knows that she must rouse herself. It will not do to be found

garden, thinks that it is a ghost which suddenly rises before him in the starry dimness. He recoils for an instant, then steps forward with a laugh.

"So it is you!" he says, eagerly. "They told me at the house that you had probably wandered round the terrace."



"Can you forgive nothing for love's sake?"

"Yes," answers Kate. "I was restless—too restless to stay in-doors. When did you get back?"

"A few minutes ago. Are you tired?"—as she turns toward the house—"won't you take a turn here? The night is—a—very pleasant."



"For Heaven's sake see if he is dying."

"It does not matter—I can if you like," she answers, indifferently. All her dread of being alone with him has vanished. She feels thoroughly careless. Let him say what he likes—it does not matter. And anything is better than showing her tear-stained face in the drawing-room.

They walk along in silence for a minute. If Mr. Proctor's thoughts were not so absorbed by the task before him, he would probably wonder that she shows no interest in, or curiosity about, the news from Arlington. In fact, everything connected with the subject has escaped her mind. She only remembers that Tarleton has come—and gone. Pacing the level path abstractedly, her eyes fixed on the glittering stars, with which, from horizon to horizon, the great purple arch of heaven is ablaze, she almost forgets the presence of the man by her side, until his voice makes her start.

"You must know what I want to say," he begins, abruptly. "I have made no secret to you or any one else of the fact that I love you. I've loved you now for a long time, and I should have spoken before, but you have never, until the past few days, given me any encouragement."

He tries to take her hand as he speaks, but she draws it away, and, to his surprise, bursts into tears. The poor fellow is confounded—not knowing that these tears were too near the surface not to rise again at the least provocation; that those sobs were only checked by a strong effort a few minutes before. Kate hardly knows herself why she weeps, except that this honest, simple avowal, from one to whom she has never given a throb of regard, touches her with pity and pain, and a fresh sense of her great desolation, contrasted as it is with the fancy of the man who so lightly won and lightly lost her.

"Oh, I am so sorry!" she says, in the midst of her sobs. "I have been afraid that you cared for me, and I tried not to encourage you, for it is a terrible thing to love and—and not be loved in return. I did not mean to seem glad the other day. It was very foolish of me. I like you, but I do not love you; and I can never think of marrying you. But I would rather kill myself than bring trouble on any one by my fault—especially on any one who likes me a great deal better than I deserve to be liked."

"Nobody could like you better than you deserve to be liked," says Mr. Proctor. "There's no need for you to blame yourself. As I told you, you've never given me any encouragement, and as for your being glad to see me the other day—well, that did me good, even if you didn't mean anything by it. But won't you think of marrying me?" he goes on, in a persuasive tone. "I love you dearly, and I would try to make you happy."

"I am sure you would be all that is kind," Kate interrupts, "but please don't say anything more about it. I can never think of it—never possibly!"

This is spoken with so much decision that a pang of jealousy stirs in Mr. Proctor's breast. He thinks of Vaughn—of Tarleton. One of them is of necessity his rival—since a rival must be in the question when a woman, without apparent cause, refuses such an offer as his.

"I know," he says, "that I have not the advantages that some men have. I can't pay compliments and things of that kind which women like—at least people say they like—but I should be glad and proud if you would marry me to-morrow, and that is more than others, who like so well to flirt, would probably say."

Kate's tears dry at this, as if a fire had scorched them. So even here it meets her—the humiliating truth! Even this man's obtuse glance has seen how lightly she has been held, how carelessly trifled with! There is but one step from compassion to anger, and that step she takes.

"Does a man always prove his love by insults?" she asks, turning to him. "But you will never have an opportunity of saying anything like that—anything so cruel and so unprovoked—to me again. I was sorry for you a minute ago. Now I am not sorry at all. It has been no fault of mine that you have chosen to fall in love with me. I have shown you plainly that I felt nothing more than friendly liking for you. But if I ever feel that again, I shall have to forget what you have just said."

"But I meant no harm!"—Good Heavens, I meant no harm!" he cries, as she turns to leave him. "Don't go!—pray listen to me! I only meant—"

"It does not matter in the least what you meant!" she says—pain, pride, and mortification mingled in her usually sweet voice. "I have heard enough. My answer can never be different. You had better try and forget me as soon as possible—that is all I can say."

With this cold comfort, she turns and flies toward the rear of the house, where her entrance can be made unobserved.