

ROSE RAYMER

"I'm awfully sorry, my darling!" and the young squire of Morewood drew his betrothed closer to him, and kissed away the tears that were filling her eyes. "It's happened most unfortunately; but you do not blame me, do you?"

"Blame you?" echoed Celia Anstey, promptly. "Oh, no, no. How could I be so unjust? Of course it cannot be helped; only—only—"

He finished the sentence for her.

"Only it's very provoking that just as I have induced you to come here, to be introduced to my mother and sister, and make acquaintance with your home that is to be, I should be called away. I had planned a score of delightful walks and drives, and now they must all be postponed. Not," he added, "but what I hope to return to you in two or three days at farthest."

"Three days!" and Celia looked aghast.

She was a timid, nervous little creature; and though her reception at Morewood Hall had been a flattering one, she had not overcome her dread of the stately Lady Mary, her lover's mother, and the pale, melancholy young widow, Lady Mary's only daughter, who had not yet recovered from the shock of suddenly losing her husband and two children, stricken down with Indian fever.

To be left alone with these sad, silent women, or to wander *solus* about the great rooms of a mansion so large that she lost herself if she ventured to stir without Hartley's guidance, would be a trying ordeal, and Celia summoned up courage to protest against it.

"It's no use pretending to deny that I shall feel horribly forlorn without you. Indeed, I had better go back to my aunt's. I think I should prefer it."

"But, my love," the squire remonstrated, "there is my mother to be considered. She would be very much hurt, as well as surprised, if you were to run away from her like a frightened child from an ogress."

"No, I am quite sure you meant nothing unkind to her," he added, as Celia gave him a deprecating look. "And you will stay if only to oblige me. Think how much we have to settle before I call on the workmen who are to renovate the wing of the house that is to be yours. I mean to make my home worthy of my fair young bride, and shall want your opinion on five hundred and fifty matters connected with our alterations and improvements."

"Remember too," for Celia still looked unconvinced, "remember that although I am compelled to put in an appearance at the law courts by eleven of the clock to-morrow morning, there is nothing to keep me in town as soon as the case has been heard."

"And will it be heard directly?"

"I hope so." But the young man was forced to admit the unpleasant possibility of its being crowded out by more important ones, which would result in his detention for another day, or even more.

"It is very tiresome," sighed Celia, who felt that she could have borne the separation far better anywhere than at the Hall.

"Very," Hartley More assented. "Because a litigious fellow chooses to pick a quarrel with our local authorities over some question of right of way, I am subpoenaed to give evidence, and dragged from my home against my will! Pity me, my Celia, and don't—pray don't—make my vexation greater by running away from us!"

"Thus adjured, how could she refuse to stay quietly with Lady Mary till he could return? For her consent she was thanked, and praised, and caressed, the ardent lover forming all sorts of plans to make the time of his absence pass quickly."

"My mother shall take you into Birmingham to-morrow to select some new furniture for the room that is to be your boudoir; and lest I should not arrive till late, you shall invite the rector's daughters to fulfil their promise, and teach you to play lawn-tennis. On Thursday, if all goes well, I shall myself escort you to our local flower show, to rival the roses with these blushing cheeks. Should I be detained—which the gods forbid!—still go my dearest. I shall not be missed if my Celia lends them the light of her presence."

Then another thought crossed Hartley's mind. These arrangements, at which Celia pouted, asking how she could enjoy any other society while deprived of his, provided certainly for the afternoons and evenings of each, succeeding day; but during the long mornings which Lady Mary invariably spent with her daughter, who did not rise till noon, how would the lonely guest amuse herself?

But this question she scouted as unnecessary.

"Do not talk as if I had no resources of my own!" she cried, shaking her finger at him. "Have I not my pencil and color-box? And did I not pledge myself before I left home that I would carry back with me to my dear old aunts at least one faithful picture of Morewood Hall? I must keep that promise, and I have already seen half-a-dozen exquisite little bits of scenery on which I long to try my hand."

"While you are beside me," she added, softly, "my happiness makes me idle; but when you are gone, the hope of giving pleasure to you as well as my aunts shall make me busy. Who knows but that I may astonish you, monsieur, with the amount of work I shall get through while you are in London?"

Now Celia was a born artist, and Hartley More was proud of her talents.

He applauded the idea, and suggested as one of the subjects for her sketches a charming lakelet at no great distance from the house.

Celia smiled acquiescence.

"If I can do it justico I will, and I have also a great desire to sketch in water-colors that picturesque cottage we passed while driving yesterday. There was a delightful old woman in the porch knitting! Will she consent to sit to me, I wonder?"

Hartley More's face clouded a little, and there was some constraint in his tones as he expressed a fear that Granny Werner's cottage was at an inconvenient distance.

"You think so?" queried Celia, who did not feel disposed to relinquish her intention. "And yet I am a very good walker, as you are aware."

"I should prefer to see what you can make of that clump of beeches," said Hartley, ignoring this remark. "And there is the church; you could not have a better subject for your pencil than its old Norman tower. But I hope to return to you before you have spoiled your first sheet of paper."

However, this hope was doomed to be frustrated.

The case in which Hartley More's evidence was required lingered on in spite of his impatience, and he was detained in London for five of the longest, most tedious days he had ever endured.

While he was fuming and fretting in the chilly halls and corridors of the law-courts, with no other consolation than writing budgets to his betrothed, or selecting jewelry and books for her, Celia herself was striving to keep dullness at bay by hard work.

Lady Mary pronounced her a sweet little thing because she came to the breakfast-table punctually, answered cheerfully the few languid remarks made during the meal, and then went away till the luncheon bell rang, giving her hostess no further trouble.

"It was so nice," her ladyship said, "to have someone in the house who did not want amusing!" If she had been inclined to marvel at Hartley's choice, seeing that Celia was an orphan who had been reared by a couple of commonplace maiden aunts in straitened circumstances, she certainly could not regret it; the dear child was so amiable, so capable, and would take so much trouble off her hands, that she was delighted with her!

As a rule, Celia was not as unhappy as she had expected to be. Hartley's letters were all that the most exacting maiden could desire, there was much to see and admire in the old Hall, and the housekeeper was eager to display its treasures to her future mistress; and last but not least, she was bent on producing some sketches that would satisfy the most severe critic to whom she had ever submitted them, Hartley More himself.

"I am not satisfied with this!" she exclaimed, pushing from her a view of the lakelet, on which she had spent much pains. "I am sure I could do better with that delicious old tumble-down cottage and its old woman. Tell me, Mrs. Smith, how far is it to Granny Werner's?"

The housekeeper hesitated and looked dubious.

"There is a near cut across the park and out at the west lodge, but I wouldn't go there if I were you, miss. Granny's a queer body sometimes, and—"

"And what? Pray finish what you were saying! Is she reputed a witch?"

"That's just it, mem." Mrs. Smith responded. "Not that I take any account of such silly superstitions, but the old woman is odd, there's no denying it. And her place is dreadfully out of repair. If you've a fancy for drawing houses—there's the bailiff's close handy, spick-and-span new, and would make a pretty picture I've no doubt."

Celia smiled, promised to go and look at the bailiff's cottage, as Mrs. Smith advised; then tucking her sketch-book under her arm, did as wilful woman generally does—set all objections at naught and struck into the path that led across Morewood Park to the west lodge and Granny Werner's dilapidated dwelling.

It was a charming walk, and two or three ideas for landscapes were dashed into the young lady's book, to be elaborated at some future time. One of the rosy children of the lodge-keeper willingly acted as her guide to Granny Werner's, and Granny herself, sitting just within her cottage door, smiled a welcome as soon as she caught sight of her visitor.

She was not alone. A girl about eighteen, who had one of the prettiest yet most melancholy faces Celia had ever seen, was sitting at Granny's feet, resting her head against the knees of the aged woman, whose wrinkled hand was smoothing her soft fair hair.

But this young creature, after one startled glance at Miss Anstey, sprang away, to be seen no more, though once or twice during Celia's stay at the cottage she fancied she could hear the sound of stifled sobbing.

Granny Werner was very deaf, so it was rather a difficult task to make her understand the nature of her visitor's errand; but when she had been made to comprehend it, she was much flattered and laughed feebly.

"Dearie me, I never thought I'd be axed to put myself in a picture. What'll I look like? Maybe I shan't live to see, for it mun be slow work to make them niggling little marks and dots on a bit o' paper. It's unaccountable to me how you do's it. Yes, I'll sit for ye, missie, but how if I goes to sleep? I can't do without my naps, and a many of them, for I'm in my eightieth year, that I be."

When reassured on this point, she permitted Celia to pose her, and watched with much amusement the fair artist's proceedings.

"I hope I have not frightened your granddaughter away," Miss Anstey observed, when her model began to show signs of fatigue.

"Eh? I've no granddaughter. 'Twas only Rose Raymer; she were always fond o' me, poor soul!" the old woman answered sleepily; rousing up, however, to mumble thanks for the half-crown Celia put in her hand, with the promise of another on the morrow, when she proposed repeating her visit.