

A DEADLY DILEMMA.

When Netta Mayne came to think it over afterward in her own room by herself, she couldn't imagine what had made her silly enough to quarrel that evening with Ughtred Carnegie. She could only say, in a penitent mood, it was always the way like that with lovers. Till once they've quarrelled a good round quarrel, and afterwards solemnly kissed and made it all up again, things never stand on a really firm and settled basis between them. It's a move in the game. You must thrust in there before you thrust in quarts. The Roman playwright spoke the truth, after all, a lovers' quarrel begins a fresh chapter in the history of their love-making.

It was a summer evening, calm, and clear and balmy, and Netta and Ughtred had strolled out together, not without a suspicion at times of hand locked in hand, on the high chalk down that rises steep behind Holmbury. How or why they fell out she hardly knew. But they had been engaged already some months, without a single disagreement, which of course gave Netta a natural right to quarrel with Ughtred by this time, if she thought fit: and as they returned down the hanging path through thecombe where the will orchids grow, she used that right at last, out of pure unadulterated feminine perversity. The ways of women are wonderful; no mere man can fathom them. Something that Ughtred said gave her the chance to make a half petulant answer. Ughtred very naturally defended himself from the imputation of rudeness, and Netta retorted. At the end of ten minutes the trifle had grown apace into a

pretty a lovers' quarrel as any lady novelist could wish to describe in five chapters.

Netta had burst into perfectly orthodox tears, refused to be comforted, in the most approved fashion, declined to accept Ughtred's escort home, and bidden farewell to him excitedly for ever and ever.

It was all about nothing, to be sure, and if two older or wiser heads had only stood by unseen, to view the little comedy they would sagely have remarked to one another, with a shake, that before twenty-four hours were out the pair would be rushing into one another's arms with mutual apologies and mutual forgiveness. But Netta Mayne and Ughtred Carnegie were still at the age when one takes love seriously—one does before thirty—and so they turned away along different paths at the bottom of thecombe, in the firm belief that love's young dream was shattered, and that henceforth they two were nothing more than the merest acquaintances to one another.

"Good-bye, Mr. Carnegie," Netta faltered out, as in obedience to her wishes, though much against his own will, Ughtred turned slowly and remorsefully down the footpath to the right, in the direction of the railway.

"Good-bye Netta," Ughtred answered, half choking. Even at that moment of parting (for ever—or a day), he couldn't find it in his heart to call her "Miss Mayne" who had so long been "Netta" to him.

He waved his hand and turned along the foot-path, looking back many times to see

Netta still sitting inconsolable where he had left her, on the stile that led from thecombe into the Four-acre meadow. Both paths to right and left, led back to Holmbury over the open field, but they diverged rapidly, and crossed the railway track by separate gates, and five hundred yards from each other. A turn in the path, at which Ughtred lingered long, hid Netta at last from his sight. He paused and hesitated. It was growing late, though an hour of summer twilight still remained. He couldn't bear to leave Netta thus alone in the field. She wouldn't allow him to see her home, to be sure, and that being so, he was too much a gentleman to force himself upon her. But he was too much a man, too, to let her find her way back so late entirely by herself. Unseen himself, he must still watch over her. Against her will, he must still protect her. He would go on to the railway, and there sit by the side of the line, under cover of the hedge, till Netta crossed by the other path. Then he'd walk quietly along the six-foot way to the gate she had passed through, and follow her, unperceived, at a distance along the lane, till he saw her back to Holmbury. Whether she wished it or not he could never leave her.

He looked about for a seat. One lay most handy by the side of the line the Government engineers had been at work that day, repairing the telegraph system. They had taken down half a dozen mouldering old posts, and set up new ones in their place—tall, clean, and shiny. One of the old posts still lay at full length on the ground by the gate, just as the men had left it at the end of their day's work. At the point where the footpath cut the line, was a level crossing and there Ughtred sat down on the fallen post by the side, half-concealed from view by a tall clump of willow-herb waiting patiently for Netta's coming. How he listened for that light footfall. His heart was full, indeed, of gall and bitterness. He loved her so dearly, and she had treated him so ill. (Who would ever have believed that Netta, his Netta, would have thrown him over like that for such a ridiculous trifle? Who indeed? and least of all Netta herself, sitting alone on the stile with her pretty face bowed deep in her hands, and her poor heart wondering how Ughtred, her Ughtred, could so easily desert her. In such strange ways is the feminine variety of the human heart constructed. To be sure, she had of course dismissed him in the most peremptory fashion, declaring with all the vows propriety permits to the British maiden, that she needed no escort of any sort home, and that she would ten thousand times rather go alone than have him accompany her. But, of course, also, she didn't mean it. What woman does? She counted upon a prompt and unconditional surrender. Ughtred would go to the corner, as in duty bound, and then come back to her, with profuse expressions of penitence for the wrong he had never done, to make it all up again in the orthodox fashion. She never intended the real tragedy that was so soon to follow. She was only playing with her victim—only trying, woman-like, her power over Ughtred.

So she sat there still, and cried and sobbed on, minute after minute, in an ecstasy of misery, till the sunset began to glow deeper red in the western sky, and the bell to ring the curfew in Holmbury Tower. Then it dawned upon her slowly,



"NETTA AND UGHTRED HAD STROLLED OUT TOGETHER."