

ASSUMPTION DAY EVENING HYMN.

Now is the day declining,  
Our Lady's holy day;  
I join my hands and view it  
In silence pass away.  
The sun, in sinking, kisses  
Once more the wood and mere,  
It seems a sign of parting  
Of our own Lady dear.

Their evensong are singing  
The birds, so low with glee;  
The lovely tune is sounding  
So sweet, so dreamily;  
The tree tops rustle softly,  
And as I upward peer,  
Methinks I hear a whisper  
Of our own Lady dear.

From the mead and from the forest  
The mist ascends in view;  
The flowers bow so lowly  
Beneath the pearly dew.  
The stars, e'er shining brighter,  
On azure shies appear;  
To me it seems a radiance  
Of our own Lady dear.

And thus the day's declining,  
Our Lady's holy day;  
I join my hands and see it,  
While praying, pass away.  
Sleep well until the morrow  
Ye forest, plain and mere;  
We all are resting safely  
With our own Lady dear.

—Beauties of Mary.

Melinda's Smile

I let the reins fall idly across Bluebell's sleek brown neck and gave way to a flood of useless regrets and vain imaginings of what might have been, till a voice from the footpath brought back my wandering thoughts with a rush. I raised my head to find Melinda — dazzling vision in blue cloth and white fur, by my side, with the same irresistible smile and her face and voice as fresh and sweet as spring itself.

"Good-morning," she said, gayly enough, but somewhere behind her smile I caught a glimpse of anxiety and—could it be?—apprehension.

"Good-morning," I knew that if I stopped the little—very little—peace of mind I had gained in my long, lonely ride would vanish like smoke; but Bluebell, from long habits, took the matter upon herself and dropped her head to graze by the roadside.

Melinda drew a small, bare hand from her white muff and stroked the sleek skin. I noticed how cunningly the bunch of violets nestled in the soft brown of her hair and wished that I were dead.

"Is it true?" I asked, knowing well enough that it was.

Melinda's head was still bent; perhaps that was why her voice was muffled.

"Yes," she said, "it is true."  
"Do you care for him?" I went on, and at this Melinda raised her head indignantly.

"You have no right to ask," she said, with flaming cheeks. "I—I am very fond of him, indeed."

"No," I said, bitterly, "I have no right — no right beyond the promise made so glibly, broken so lightly. I will ask no more questions. It must be easy indeed to be fond of such an income as Leonard's—with good looks into the bargain. Good-bye. I wish you luck, Melinda."

She caught my rein and Bluebell stopped again. She knew me and she knew Melinda. I had hired her many times before I went away, and we had always, somehow, met Melinda.

"You are very unkind," Melinda said, quickly. "It isn't the money — at least not much. You know how hard it is at home, with no money for anything nice — I'm sure we couldn't be much worse off if we were beggars — and mother grumbling and grumbling because Lisette and I were both engaged to poor people and Margaret and Mabel both growing out of their things as fast as old nurse makes them, and rather worried awfully with beastly bills."

I glanced at Melinda's tailor-made costume with a smile.

She flushed again. Her complexion is like pink and white apple blossoms. "I had to have some decent things when I was a gaged," she explained, hurriedly, "because of Leonard's relations and things calling; but they aren't paid for yet, so you needn't smile in that horrid, unbelieving way. . . . And then," she went on, "you went away all that time in South Africa about those wretched railways, and everybody said you would never make any money, and they said I was selfish and horrid and cruel, and Lisette would get engaged to the curate and Margaret was always crying because she couldn't go to parties and things. . . . and Leonard was always here, kind and nice to everybody and always doing generous things till at last I got quite fond of him. . . . You know I am very affectionate by nature."

"Evidently," said I.

" . . . And when you said you might be out for years and years more."

"Two years was what I said."

"And everybody kept bothering and bothering, and Leonard was so kind and patient, till I thought and thought and made up my mind at last to write and break it off. And I did."

"Yes," I said quietly, "you did. I

found your letter waiting for me directly I got back. It was a pleasant welcome home. The woman at my rooms knew I was coming, so she did not forward it. There is nothing more to be said, is there?"

"Wait a minute," said Melinda. "When you were away, I—er—wrote to you."

"You did," said I—"once a week for two years. I have got all your letters. They began with vows of eternal constancy, and they ended in—this!"

Her eyes were filled with tears. They were almost the color of the violets in her hat, and I wished she would finish what she had to say and let me go.

"I didn't think you'd mind so much," she said wistfully.

"I don't want to be rude," I replied, "but that is a lie—and you know it! Will you say what you have to say and get it done?"

"I want you to send back all my letters—that is all."

"All?" said I.

"Yes. I have sent back yours and your ring and the little turquoise bangle with the nuggest — and—oh! everything you gave me."

"Why should I send them back at all?" I asked. "They can't be pleasant reading to you now."

"It isn't that," she said; "it's because of Leonard. He doesn't know we were engaged, and he has such ridiculous ideas about broken engagements. He has a sort of theory that he won't marry a girl unless he is her first love."

"You are very foolish. There is not likely to be much happiness for you in the future if you begin to deceive him already. How can he help knowing we were engaged?"

"There is no reason why he should," said Melinda quickly. "I haven't told anybody outside—mother said there was no telling what might happen. Mabel and Margaret are too anxious for me to marry him, to let that out."

"But," said I, "while I have the letters you know they are quite safe."  
"I suppose so," she said, doubtfully; "but I should never be quite sure, and I should be so uneasy always, and you might die or something, and then just think how dreadful it would be for me if Leonard found it out."

"Ye—s," I said slowly. "But, on the other hand, I don't see why you should expect me to mind that. Why should I have any consideration for you? You had little enough for me!"

"Oh!" cried Melinda, "you are never going to be so cruel. You can't mean—you—"

"Yes," I replied, "I am — I can — I do. The letters were written to me, and at the time they were written I believe you meant what you said. All your pretty protestations of faith and constancy and undying love were as real then, I suppose, to you as, most unhappily, they seemed to me. They are all I can have now. You belong to Leonard. I will keep the letters."

Then I saw Melinda was getting frightened. She was really crying now, and I knew that immediately flight was the only thing for me. With Melinda happy and smiling I could be stern and unyielding, but I knew too well the power of Melinda in tears.

"Good-bye," I said, in a tone of gentle melancholy, and rode away, leaving her weeping pitifully by the roadside.

That night I dined with Melinda's uncle, the rector, and Melinda and her Leonard were there.

She had a sweet little voice and relied for effect on many small tricks of expression, and Leonard, who was big and bald and jolly, would listen to her by the hour with an expression of rapt ecstacy. She sang the "Tin Gee-gee," which seemed to me, under the circumstances, to be peculiarly appropriate.

Presently, about 0 o'clock, Melinda rose to go. She had a bad headache and would be so glad if dear auntie would excuse her.

"I am awfully tired, auntie," she said. "I hope everybody won't think I am very rude. No, Leonard, you really musn't come with me. It is only a run across the orchard, and I can slip through the side gate in the kitchen garden, and be in the house in five minutes."

Melinda crossed the room to me and held out her hand. Her face was almost as white as her dress, and when I took her hand I found that it was burning.

"Good-night," she said, and I noticed that for once she had forgotten the irresistible smile; "I suppose you won't be going yet?"

She spoke in a low voice and I started. Surely she didn't mean—

"I am going by the gate in the orchard," she went on, recklessly, with her eyes on the ground, and I was speechless.

"You ought to know it," she said, rather sadly.

I could hardly believe my ears. It could not be possible that she meant to ask me to meet her there. Even Melinda could not behave so badly so very soon. And then I remembered

the letters. Of course she only wanted to make another attempt to regain that tell-tale packet.

I let her hand fall—I had forgotten for the moment that I was holding it. It was from force of habit, I suppose.

"Yes," I said, "I ought to know it — I did once. But I have forgotten it now. Perhaps Leonard Crewe knows it better. You might ask him."

Again those violet eyes filled with tears.

"How can you be so unkind?" she whispered. "Good-night. Then you won't be going for a long time yet, I suppose?"

"Probably not," I said, calmly; and with a last glance of wistful appeal Melinda went into the hall to be carefully cloaked by the devoted Leonard. I heard his hoisterous voice for at least five minutes begging to be allowed to take her home, but as usual Melinda triumphed, for he came back presently with a glum look on his jolly face.

"Melinda seemed pretty well knocked up," he remarked, gloomily.

"She hasn't looked at all well the last week or two," said the rector, "I'm afraid the poor child has rather a tough time of it at home."

My heart pricked me. Perhaps I had been too harsh. Melinda had behaved very badly to me—she was an inconstant and mercenary little flirt—but, all the same, I loved her better than any one else in the world, and would have done anything to prevent her from being really unhappy.

"Come and have a game of solo," said the rector.

We played a hand or two, but my thoughts were not on the game. Was it possible that Melinda was still waiting at the gate? I felt that at all costs I must go and see.

"I'm afraid you must excuse me," I said. "I have a letter which simply must go by the 10 o'clock post. I will come in again for an hour, if you will allow me, when I have posted it."

So I left them and they settled down happily to three-handed nap — Leonard liked nap better than solo — and I slipped through the orchard to the lane at the other end which I knew so well. There was a little old worm-eaten gate in the lane leading into the kitchen garden of Melinda's home, and this was where I half hoped, half feared to find her.

When I found that she was not there, I was ashamed to own that I felt a little pang of disappointment. I had spent many pleasant half hours with Melinda at that gate. I felt almost sentimental, and a tender parting scene in the proper stage manner would have been, in my present frame of mind, rather pleasant than otherwise. I turned with a sigh to go home.

"It was too good to last," I told myself, dolefully. "Melinda is the most charming person in the world, but I ought to have known that pretty little mouth of hers meant weakness and inconstancy. I wish I had never gone away. I was a fool to trust to her promises. What mercenary beats her people must be! Poor little thing! No doubt she had an awful lot to put up with. I suppose I might as well be generous and burn those letters. It is all I can do for her now. I will have a tragic bonfire of all my hopes and happiness in the sitting-room grate when I get in and say good-bye to love for once and all."

I was staying in the end cottage of the long red row which made up the village, and my sitting-room was a pleasant little place with a lattice window. I pulled up the blind and drew my basket chair to the fading light.

"I might as well do the thing properly," I said, gloomily, "and make myself thoroughly miserable while I am about it. I will read them all through before I burn them; there must be quite a hundred. I can't go back to the rectory to-night. They will forget all about me if they are playing cards." I knew the rector and I knew Leonard.

I flung my hat viciously into a corner and went to my desk to get the letters. It was unlocked—nobody ever locks things in Pettover — and I lifted the lid and put my hand into the corner in which I had placed them. It was quite empty—the packet had gone!

I could hardly believe my eyes. I must have put them somewhere else in my sleep, and hastily I began to search the few drawers and cupboards my rooms contained. No; they had vanished as completely as if they had never been. I went to the door and called my landlady to tell her of my loss, though I had no hope of getting any information from her. One had only to look in her face to see that in that mass of vacant stupidity there was no room for curiosity or even common intelligence.

"Has any one been in," I asked, "while I've been out?"

"Not nobody as I knows on," she replied, with her mouth open.

"Have you been in all the evening?" I went on, in desperation.

"Me? Lor', no, sir. I've been up at the Red 'Ouse 'avin' a bit o' supper with out Martha Alice."

"Did you lock the door when you went out?"

"Me? Lor', no, sir. We never lock the doors afore bedtime. There's no one as 'ud break in ' Pettover — let alone there bein' nothin' to take."

"Well, they've found something at last," I said. "But what they want with a parcel of old letters beats me. Do you suppose they took them for banknotes?" And then I stopped suddenly, for I remembered some one who did want those letters.

Mrs. Leach stopped and picked up a large sheet of paper from under a chair by the door and handed it to me with a grunt.

"Is this something o' yours?" she asked; and I took it in my hand. It was the last page of a song. I read the words of the refrain:

"And a girl never looks at one-and-nine  
With a possible two-and-three."

Oh, Melinda, Melinda!

"Yes," I said, hurriedly; "it's — it's a part of a hymn I was singing to myself—a kind of requiem. Mrs. Leach, don't bother any more about the letters; it doesn't really matter; they were worth nothing." This was true in more senses than one.

Mrs. Leach went heavily down the passage and I was left alone.

I had ample time for reflection during the long hours before morning, and soon made up my mind what to do. It seemed to me that I owed a duty to myself. I had resolved much before my will to be generous to Melinda, but she had forestalled me with a little plan of her own.

"Now," I said to myself, "I shall play for my own hand."

I walked boldly up to the Red House and asked for Melinda. I noticed as I went through the hall that the linoleum was worn threadbare and that the stair carpets were in the same woeful plight, otherwise the place was much as it had been two years ago. Melinda's twin sister met me in the hall. They were seventeen and almost as pretty as she was herself. Margaret was surprised to see me, and held out a plump, unwilling hand.

"John!" she cried—"you?"

"Yes," I said, "it's John. You needn't try to hide the extreme pleasure you feel at my presence. I quite understand your feelings. Will you tell Melinda that I wish to see her alone?"

Margaret gathered her scattered wits.

"Melinda is out," she said, sweetly, and my heart sank. I am afraid I was lounging for the fray. I turned to go, but I was wise enough at this moment to look over my head. Melinda was hanging over the banisters, listening with evident interest to our lively conversation.

"I think you must be mistaken," I murmured, politely. "Melinda is just coming down."

She descended with a hanging head and burning cheeks, and after a short but animated discussion I found myself alone with her in the dilapidated old school-room. I shut the door and crossed to where she stood by the window.

"I congratulate you on your success," I said.

Melinda evidently expected more.

"What—what do you mean?" she faltered. "What success?"

I smiled. "Your success in getting rid of your headache, of course. You look wonderfully well this morning."

She didn't quite understand whether she was safe or not. She looked up inquiringly. Had I found out yet? Did I suspect? She didn't venture to speak, but she turned on the irresistible smile.

"I am glad you are quite well," I said coolly, "for I am afraid you will find what I have to say a little trying. You had better sit down."

Melinda looked frightened. She seated herself on the arm of the big, untidy sofa and kicked nervously at the floor. She had small feet and always wore such pretty shoes.

"Listen to me," I said, gravely. "Before we leave this room we have got to come to terms."

She groaned. "I know you're going to be horrid," she said, nervously rolling a sheet of music she held in her hand.

That sheet of music reminded me of something. I pulled the last page of the "Tin Gee-gee" out of my pocket and handed it to her.

"I think that is your property," I said.

The scarlet of her cheeks faded and she stared at me with wide open eyes.

"Where did you find it?" she asked.

"I will tell you that later on. First of all, Melinda, do you think you have treated me well?"

"I couldn't help it," she murmured, "You know it wasn't me."

"Perhaps not," I said. "At any rate, you cannot deny that you have broken your promise and, for anything you know to the contrary, ruined my life."

"I did it for the sake of the others," she whispered, in a voice that was almost inaudible.

"I don't believe it," I said, calmly.

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"I don't believe it! You have never thought of any one but yourself all your life. It's no good coming the noble self-sacrificing motive over me, Melinda, because it won't wash. You have thrown me over for Leonard, partly because he had a lot of money to buy you expensive dresses and diamonds and things, and could give you a big house, with a lot of servants to boss over, and partly because you are always influenced by the person who is nearest to you. I ought to have known you were as weak as water. You have made a jolly mess of a man's life, and yet you can be perfectly happy and comfortable."

Melinda sighed. "There never was a more unhappy girl than me," she said.

I laughed. "That's all nonsense. You are as pleased as you can be because two men are making themselves miserable about you. I don't know why we do—you certainly are not worth it. I wish to heaven, you weren't so confoundedly pretty!"

This encouraged Melinda to try the smile.

"So you still think me pretty, do you?" she said, softly.

Pretty! I groaned inwardly, for I knew that however plainly I saw Melinda's faults and however disgusted I was with her behavior, there was no mistaking the fact that I was more in love with her than ever. Pretty!

"Besides," she went on, "you are mistaken. There is only one man miserable about me, and that is you. Leonard isn't miserable. He is very happy, as indeed he ought to be."

"Yes," I said, grimly, "he ought indeed! But he won't be for long."

Poor Melinda! the thunderbolt had fallen at last.

"You—you—" she gasped — "you are going to tell him?"

"Yes," said I, "I am, unless—"

"Unless what?" eagerly snatching at any chance.

"Unless"—I spoke very slowly — "unless you break off the engagement and marry me."

Melinda gasped.

"John!" she cried, "you are mad! Marry you? After all this?"

"Yes," I said, trying to speak with a calmness I did not feel, "marry me. I dare say you are surprised that I should want to marry you now that I have found out your true character, but in spite of everything I care for you more than anything in the world, and I mean to have you in the end."

Melinda laughed defiantly and rose to go. "This is too much," she said. "You have gone a little too far, my dear John. I am engaged to Leonard. You are perfectly ridiculous! I have promised to marry him."

"Promises," said I, "are easily broken."

Melinda laughed again. "This promise will be kept," she said. "Good heavens! marry you, after all the trouble I had about it before. You are certainly mad. You had a situation then, with a small salary, while now — you are simply doing nothing. What do you propose to do to earn your living?"

"As you say," said I, "nothing."

"Ah!" said Melinda, "I thought so. No, thank you. If you think my ideal of happiness is bread and cheese and kisses, and not even a certainty about that, you are mistaken."

I smiled. "There might be a doubt about the bread and cheese," I said. Melinda stamped her foot. "Oh!" she said, "you are perfectly ridiculous! I don't care what you do—tell Leonard if you like. He won't believe you; you have no proof."

"Leonard will believe me," I replied, calmly. "He has known me as long, as he has known you, and he knows that I at least am to be trusted. Besides, you have forgotten one little thing, or perhaps you didn't know it. I have still the last letter you wrote to me — the letter breaking off our engagement. That was not among the others; I carry it about with me. And another thing, Leonard has some pretty distinct notions about honor. I don't think he would marry a girl who — well, to say the least of it, is unscrupulous enough to rifle a man's private desk. That sheet of music found in my room — with Mrs. Leach as witness — is proof enough."

And then Melinda saw that the game was up. She sank into the corner of the shabby sofa and began to cry; and, as I said before, I can resist Melinda in any mood but this one. I sat down beside her and slipped my arm round her waist.

"Melinda," I said, "don't cry. The game is certainly up, but there's no reason why we shouldn't have a fresh shuffle and deal again. It will be all the easier for a full knowledge of each other's cards."

There was no answer but a sob. I tried to see her face, but it was buried in the red sofa cushion.

"You know, Melinda," I said, gravely, "how much I have always cared for you. You know that if you don't have me my whole life is ruined. I made up my mind to be generous last night and to burn all your letters, and when I got in and found that you had taken them, I registered a vow that for the future I would play for my own hand alone. You shall never marry Leonard Crewe — that I swear! I can't force you to marry me against your will, but I can and will prevent you deceiving him. You don't play fair, Melinda."

Melinda moved a little. I could see one eye and a little pink ear.

"I am not really half as horrid as you think," she said, "But, oh! John, I do so hate being poor!"

I tried to turn her face.

"I believe you like me better than Leonard, after all," said I, smiling a little.

The sobbing had stopped. Melinda was evidently considering.

"Tell the truth for once," I persisted. "Is it Leonard you are crying for?"

Still no answer.

"Melinda!"

Still silence.

"Darling Melinda!"

There was a choking sound from the cushion. It couldn't be that she was laughing!

"It is nothing to laugh at," I said, sternly.

"I wish you weren't poor," whispered Melinda.

I took the little white hand and touched Leonard's gorgeous diamond ring.

"I am going to take this off," I said.

Melinda sighed deeply, but made no objection. I gently slipped it away from her finger.

"I am not poor," I said. "I have plenty of money for both of us. The South African railways were a success, after all, and I think I can even go so far as a diamond ring, Melinda."

Then at last she raised her head, and once more the irresistible smile was for me alone.

"Dear," she whispered, tenderly, "I have loved you all my life. I have been very foolish, I know, but if you will forgive me, I will never, never deceive you again."

I smiled. Melinda did not impose upon me.

"No," said I, "I'll take jolly good care you don't." — Pall Mall Gazette.