

"Kate," says that lady, "ask Miss Brooke if her letters are ready for the mail. Your uncle is about to send to Arlingtonford."

This errand Kate willingly undertakes. Running up-stairs, she knocks at Miss Brooke's door, is bidden to enter, and opens it. In the centre of the apartment Miss Brooke is sitting, with a writing-case on the table before her. She looks up and smiles.

"So it is you, Kate," she says. "I thought it was a messenger for my letters. Come in. I will be at leisure in a moment."

"But it is the messenger for the letters," says Kate. "I have come to see if they are ready for the mail."

"Just ready," Miss Brooke answers, addressing one as she speaks. "But you need not take them down. I will ring for my maid."

"Let me ring," says Kate. She does so, and then comes back to the table. "May I look at them?" she asks. "What a clear, firm hand you write!"

"Look at that," says Miss Brooke, pushing one toward her. "It is a name which represents everything in the world to me."

Kate takes up the letter, and finds that the name which represents everything in the world to her companion is "Herbert Fenwick."

"A pretty name," she says. "Who is he?"

"My nephew," answers Miss Brooke. "Perhaps I am a foolish old woman, but he seems to me absolutely perfect. I should like you to know him, Kate. I hope you will know him. I have been trying to describe you to him. Poor fellow! His wife—a very sweet girl—died three years ago, and he has cared nothing for women since then."

"Oh!" says Kate. "He is a widower?"

"Yes, a widower, though not more than thirty. His wife only lived two years. See! here are their likenesses."

She opens a locket attached to her watch-chain, and Kate, full of interest, bends down to look at the faces contained therein. One is the face of a girl—a pretty, delicate blonde, with pearly skin, and the golden hair on which "light drops a diadem." The other is the face of a man—a grave, dark face, refined but not handsome, with deep-set eyes and intellectual brow.

"I like his face," says Kate. "He must be kind, and very sensible. As for the lady, how charming she is!—and yet—"

"And yet the earth is over her!"

says Miss Brooke, with a sigh. "Poor Clara! But life was not given to be spent in mourning," she adds, shaking her head with an air of admonition at the picture of Mr. Fenwick, "and I hope that Herbert will marry again before long."

"Oh, I hope not," says Kate. "It would be so much more poetical to be constant to the memory of this lovely lady until he dies."

"Poetical nonsense!" says Miss Brooke, sharply. "And so you would have him live thirty or forty years alone for the sake—Is that you, Emily?" as the door opens and her maid appears. "Take these letters down."

"If you please, ma'am, I was told to let Miss Kate know that the horses are at the door," says Emily.

"Dear me! and my habit not yet mended!" says Kate, flying from the room.

The mending of the habit does not occupy any considerable length of time, and, not long after, she appears on the portico, where she finds her uncle and Mr. Vaughn in conversation over the horses that stand before the door.

"You seem to be a good judge of horses, Mr. Vaughn," her uncle is saying as she comes out. "I have paid great attention to them," Mr. Vaughn answers, "and have acquired confidence in my judgment. Now, that horse of Tarleton's—"

But here he sees Kate, and stops short to look at her. In truth, she is well worth looking at, for a habit is one of the most becoming costumes a woman can wear—granting that she has any good looks, and if she has not, all costumes are very much alike to her. Kate's good looks, which are pronounced enough on all occasions, are this afternoon strikingly apparent. There is a suppressed excitement about her—of which she is herself only partly conscious—that lends new beauty to her face and new charm to her manner. Mr. Vaughn regards her approvingly, as they ride at an easy pace down the avenue. He is a connoisseur in feminine loveliness, and appreciates many points which would escape a more careful observation. The delicate, shell-like ear turned toward him, the slender neck which bears the head "as a branch sustains the flower of the year's pride," the well-shaped hand and wrist—all these he notes, together with the ivory skin, the radiant eyes, and sweet mouth. "She will do me credit!" he says to himself, with a sense that virtue is, sometimes at least, its own reward. He came to Fairfield in a frame of mind more akin to resigned melancholy than anything else—confident that the heaviest kind of "duty-work" lay before him—and to find that anything like pleasure to be gained from this duty-work is a great and unexpected relief.

Kate, on her part, begins to find him not disagreeable as a companion. She has grown more at ease with him, and his evident admiration arouses all the latent coquetry of her nature. Women often take to coquetry as men to strong drink, for the pure love of excitement—and something like this carries her forward. If she were in the least aware of the significance which her tones and glances bear to her companion, there can be no doubt that she would

restrain that "perilous lightnings" of her eyes, and restrict her speech to the simplicity of a schoolgirl's "Yes" and "No;" but the thought that he is doing more than merely amusing himself does not for an instant occur to her, and would be set down as sheer absurdity if it did occur.

So they ride on through the golden afternoon—Harry Lee and Daredevil behaving in an explanatory manner—until Kate is suddenly surprised to observe how near to the horizon the sun has sunk. She points to it as she turns her horse.

"We must go back," she says, "and ride briskly, too, or we shall be late for dinner. The sun will set in half an hour, and we are six miles from Fairfield."

"So far, do you think?" asks her companion.

"Fully that far; but we may shorten the road by making a cut through the Southdale plantation. Do you object to opening a few gates?"

Mr. Vaughn does object, but he refrains from saying as much. He only asks, "Are you sure you know the way?"

"Perfectly sure," she answers. "We turn in here," she adds, pausing before a gate fastened in a manner which makes it necessary for Mr. Vaughn to dismount in the dusty road in order to open it. This necessity is as little as possible to his taste, but he is too well-bred to express his opinion; so they ride in, following a plantation-road through a large cornfield.

"This is Tarleton's land, is it?" asks Mr. Vaughn, glancing round.

"Yes," Kate answers. "This is Southdale."

"It seems a fine plantation—a pity that he should lose it through recklessness!"

She flushes a little. Her heart is hot against Tarleton—hot with pain and resentment—but, nevertheless, she cannot hear such words as these without shrinking. When she is able to steady her voice to a sufficient degree of carelessness, she says:

"I do not think it is certain that Mr. Tarleton will lose it. Though it is heavily mortgaged, he hopes, I believe, to be able to save it."

"Impossible," says Mr. Vaughn, with quiet decision. "I chance to know something of his affairs, and he is hopelessly involved."

"But he means to sell his horses, and by that means, perhaps—"

"He has no horse of remarkable value except Cavalier, and I have the best possible reason for knowing that he is very much let down in his racing qualities. It is for that reason that Tarleton is anxious to sell him; but he will not get anything approaching the price he asks."

Kate is silent—a silence full of concern. She may have the best reason for believing that Tarleton has been trifling with her, but her nature is too affectionate and too unselfish for her to thereby lose at once all interest in what affects his life. "No doubt it was my fault," she thinks; "no doubt it was I who mistook amusement for something else. I will try not to be unreasonable; and I am sorry—oh, very sorry!—if what this odious man says is true."

The odious man, meanwhile, being rather near-sighted, draws up his horse, saying:

"Is this another gate before us?"

"Oh, no—only bars, and low enough not to trouble about," Kate answers. "Harry Lee will go over them easily."

Before her companion can remonstrate, she puts Harry Lee straight at the bars in question, and that good horse, too well trained to think of any foolishness, goes over beautifully. Mr. Vaughn, whether he likes it or not, has no alternative but to follow. He does this fairly well, and, riding up to Kate's side, says:

"Is it worth while to tell you that you ride more boldly and gracefully than any woman I ever saw? But pray, give a warning next time I may not be ready to follow so daring a leader."

Kate laughs, but there are no more tempting bars of just the right height. They cross several fields, and presently find themselves near the out-buildings of the house. One large gate which they are approaching leads directly into the stable-yard. "We must pass through these," says Kate, "and I wish there was time for a glimpse of the horses. Yonder comes some one to open the gate for us."

The "some one" proves to be the head man—half groom, half trainer—of the stable, who, strolling back and forth near the gate, sees the advancing equestrians, and, coming forward, opens it for them.

Kate nods her thanks in graceful, kindly fashion, as she rides past; but Mr. Vaughn reins up his horse abruptly.

"What, Pierce?" he says, "is it you?"

The tones makes Kate glance back, and she catches an expression on Pierce's face which is singular—an expression that can scarcely be described, but which strikes her as at once startled and crafty. Yet he answers respectfully enough:

"Yes, Mr. Vaughn, it's me. But I wasn't lookin' to see you here."

"I suppose not," says Mr. Vaughn. Then he lowers his voice and speaks for a few minutes rapidly—so rapidly and so low that Kate does not catch one of his words. Pierce answers in the same tone, after which Mr. Vaughn rides on and rejoins her.

"Excuse me," he says. "I did not mean to delay you, but I find that Tarleton's groom is an old acquaintance of mine, and I was asking him a question or two."

"I wished you had asked him to let us see

Cavalier," says Kate, "only it would have detained us so long that we should have lost all benefit from our short cut."

CHAPTER XV.

"Dost thou look back on what hath been?"

Tarleton does not return to Fairfield with Will, and the evening passes in rather dull fashion. Miss Vaughn, exhausted by her ride, or out of sorts from some other cause, declines to exert herself in any manner—is too hoarse to sing, is too languid to talk, and, after looking on at a game of whist for a little while, retires. Mr. Wilmer has returned to Woodlands, Mr. Proctor's place has not been filled by any new comers—although, as Janet candidly remarks, "affairs are undeniably stupid."

"You had your new cousin, however, so I don't suppose you found it so," she says to Kate, after they have sought their chamber. "You seem to get on with him very well. I begin to think that you are a born flirt!"

"No, I am not," says Kate. "I only endeavour to extract all the amusement I can out of everything—and everybody. There is no harm in that."

"I don't know. The people out of whom you extract amusement might think there was. Heigho! how very plain one looks after Miss Vaughn!"

"She is very handsome," says Kate; "but she strikes me as a beautiful animal. I am sure, if one could see her soul, it would be very insignificant and ugly."

"I consider that very uncharitable," says Sophy. "What can you possibly know about her soul?"

"And what kind of a soul has Mr. Vaughn?" asks Janet. "Is he also a beautiful animal? I thought Miss Brooke seemed a little uneasy to-night when you were with him at the piano. She looked at you so much, that her mind became quite distracted from whist, and she deliberately trumped her partner's trick."

"Probably she thought my young affections in danger of being trifled with," says Kate, with a careless laugh.

The next morning there is the usual uproar of horn and hounds before the break of day, and at breakfast Randal and Mr. Vaughn are the only gentlemen who appear.

"What, Randal!" says Kate. "Don't you mean to take a single run with the hounds before you leave the country?"

"I am not sure that I shall," replies Randal. "In my opinion, one's pillow is better than one's saddle at five o'clock in the morning."

"I agree with Kate in thinking that rather a singular taste," says Miss Vaughn. "If I were a man, I should like what are called manly sports, and I should certainly desire to excel in them."

Before Randal can answer, Mr. Vaughn says: "You would only desire to excel in them, Florida, if you liked them. Otherwise you would not care to undertake what requires an immense expenditure of energy and time, with little or no return."

"No return!" cries Kate. "You certainly have never enjoyed a chase, or you could not say that."

"And why are you not with the chase this morning, Mademoiselle Diana?" asks Miss Brooke, with a smile.

Mademoiselle Diana colours slightly. "I did not care to go," she says.

"That is something remarkable," observes Mrs. Lawrence. "You usually do care to go."

"One does not always want to leave one's pillow for the saddle at four o'clock in the morning, as Randal remarks," answers Kate.

"And one displays excellent taste in not wanting to do so," says Mr. Vaughn.

Then it flashes upon Kate, as she sees a significant smile on several faces, that she may be supposed to have remained at home in order to enjoy this gentleman's society, and a hot blush springs to her face in consequence of this reflection—which is taken by two people, at least, as added proof of the fact. Miss Brooke looks at her gravely. Can it be possible that, after all, the girl is likely to fancy Ashton Vaughn? "If so, I must try a stronger warning," she thinks.

Breakfast over, Miss Vaughn slips her hand into her brother's arm and proposes a walk. "I shall not keep you long," she says. "You know I am not partial to exercise of this description."

"Not with a merely fraternal escort," he says. "I have no objection to going, though I should like to light a cigar."

"Light it, then. I don't object to the odour of a cigar in the open air. In fact, I have some idea of learning to smoke, myself."

"Take my advice, and don't. Such things are in very bad taste. You may do what you like so long as you keep decorum and grace on your side. Accept that as a maxim."

"I have heard worse," she says. They have been by this time left the house, and the cigar is lighted, so she goes on: "Accept, in return, my congratulations. Your success is marked, and it has come sooner than I expected."

"I don't see that it is particularly marked," he answers; "but I entertain no doubt that the result will be satisfactory."

"And the girl herself is so much better than we expected. Have you written to Mr. Ashton?"

"No; I shall not write until everything is settled; but you might write, in the meanwhile, and describe her. He would trust your opinion, as that of a woman—women, as a rule, don't exaggerate the good points of their own sex—and he seems to admire you immensely."

"I really think he does; and he is such a fastidious iceberg, that even I am flattered by his admiration. He told mamma that I remind him of the Princess Somebody—a beautiful Russian, whom he had seen in Paris. I have half a mind to enter the lists against you for his fortune."

"You had better be content with gaining a fortune through the 'holy estate of matrimony.' When do you mean to give Merivale his answer?"

"When I like."

"You surely forget that you are playing with half a million!"

"Nor at all; but there are other half millions to be found, and I am not *passé* yet."

He turns to look at her as she walks by his side, her hand still in his arm. You are a very handsome woman, Florida," he says, quietly, "but take care that you don't overrate the power of your beauty, and take care, also"—his voice is very significant here—"that you don't go down on the rock which has wrecked many women. I fancy you know what I mean."

"Impossible to say whether I know or not, unless you tell me."

"I mean an infatuated passion. No, you need not draw your hand away. You know, as well as I do, that Frank Tarleton is a ruined man, and yet you cannot let him alone."

"What of that?" (a little defiantly.) "So that I do not marry him, you have no reason to complain."

"It is never wise to play with fire."

"Why not, if one has been already scorched? Don't waste words on me, Ashton. I shall marry to please you and mamma and myself, of course; but I will—I will take an hour or two of pleasure first! You are right in thinking that I care for Frank Tarleton more than for any other man I have ever known; but did that keep me from sending him adrift seven months ago?"

"And what good did sending him adrift do, if you bring the affair on again?"

"Set your mind at ease. The 'affair' will never be on again in the sense you mean. I think you ought to trust me on that point."

"But what arrant folly, to put in jeopardy such chances as you have, by deliberately wasting time in fooling with a man you don't intend to marry! What absurd, inconsistent creatures you women are at best!"

"I hope you don't consider me a specimen of women at the best!" she says, with a faint, self-mocking smile.

"Not quite," her brother answers, coolly, "or you would not be here now."

"How oddly people judge one, and how little anybody knows one!" she says, musingly. "You bring me in guilty of an 'infatuated passion,' and Frank Tarleton accused me yesterday of having no heart."

"I hope you'll keep him of that opinion. Now, I must take you back to the house, for I am going to Arlingtonford with Lawrence—poor devil! how well you are treating him!—on business connected with the races next week, and we shall stop at Southdale as we return, to see that horse of Tarleton's. I made an appointment with him yesterday."

"Do you think of buying the horse?"

"If he will take my price. I shall not give him."

While this conversation is in progress, Miss Brooke has been endeavouring to discover why Kate declined to join the hunt—but without success. She can elicit nothing more than was elicited at breakfast. "I thought I should like to sleep this morning," Kate avers. "I am very lazy at times."

"At rare times, then," says Sophy; "and I never heard of such a thing before in connection with fox-hunting."

But still Kate is non-committal. Nothing beyond the plea of laziness can be drawn from her. At last she declares that she will hear no more about the matter. "Surely, one may do as one pleases," she says. "There is no law compelling one to go fox-hunting!"

"Especially when one is better entertained at home," says Randal, sauntering in. "I think you begin to consider your new cousin very agreeable—eh, Kate."

"Do you mean Miss Vaughn?" asks Kate.

"Of course, I mean Miss Vaughn; you have been riding and walking and talking with her at such a rate!"

"Don't trust Kate!" says Janet. "She is, considering her age and opportunities, the greatest flirt I know. A month ago poor Mr. Proctor's star was in the ascendant; then, Frank Tarleton had some days of favour; now, it is Mr. Vaughn's turn. '*Le roi est mort! Vive le roi!*' seems to be her motto."

"But some kings are crowned for good," says Randal.

Kate catches Miss Brooke's glance at this moment, and laughs. "When I crown a king," she says, "you may be sure he will be of different stuff from Cousin Ashton."

The gentleman thus designated makes his appearance before long, and departs with Randal for Arlingtonford. "We shall not be back till dinner," the latter says to Miss Lawrence; and so the feminine household are left to their own devices.

They support the desolation with commendable fortitude. Miss Vaughn soon goes to her chamber, but the rest gather around Miss Brooke, as she sits in the drawing-room, and listen while she describes, in pleasant fashion, her travels abroad. The girls drink it all in eagerly. Quite one thing is it to read of London and Paris and Rome, and altogether another (in their fresh, simple lives) to talk with one who