

The Story Page.

The Fitzallen Prize.

BY M. V. JONES.

They were those whom she did not know, and many whom she had never even seen before. Even those who were, themselves, disappointed in winning the prize, could not harbor any feelings of resentment toward the fair, young stranger, who bore her blushing honors so modestly.

During the time that Muriel was receiving her congratulations, a fine looking man of about forty-five years of age, had been standing at one of the great windows, a silent spectator of the scene. As soon as an opportunity presented itself, he moved forward, and holding out his hand, with a pleasant smile said:

"I hope Miss Raymond, that you do not object to receiving still another congratulation. Mine is sincere, if it is a little late. But I have a matter of business which I would like to talk over with you, if you would please step aside for a moment," and leading the way, he seated her in a corner of a large alcove window, where they were partly screened from view by the heavy curtains. "I beg your pardon Miss Raymond," he said, "for intruding myself, a perfect stranger, upon you in this fashion, but I have taken a great fancy to that little picture of yours and would like very much to possess it. I will pay fifty dollars for it, if you are willing to part with it."

Muriel sat perfectly silent a moment or two, the delicate color coming and going in her face. At length she managed to say "I am sure you are very kind. I had not thought of selling it; but if you could wait a little while, I would like to have a few days to think it over, and to consult mother before giving you any decided answer."

"Certainly Miss Raymond," he said, "you may have all the time that you wish, but perhaps if you would let me have your address, I might call at the end of the week, and learn your decision."

Muriel gave him her street and number which he jotted down in a little note book. "Here is my card," he said, and before she had time to read the name written upon it, he had bidden her good afternoon, and disappeared among the crowd.

"Mr. Fitzallen! Could it be possible that she had been talking to that noble, generous man? What a fine face he had and how kind and gentlemanly he was. I wonder why he never married," Muriel thought to herself. Perhaps he had a disappointment in his youth, there is rather a sad look in his fine dark eyes," and her tender heart felt a great pang of pity for the lonely man.

While these thoughts were passing through her mind she had remained seated where he had left her. At length recollecting that her mother was yet in ignorance of the joyful news and must be very tired waiting for her, she rose and hastened down the broad stair cases, closing her eyes as much as possible to the beautiful objects which surrounded her lest she be tempted to linger.

She passed out of the great doors through which she had entered but three short hours before, but how changed was everything. Now her feet seemed shod with wings, the birds sang more sweetly, the sky looked bluer than ever before. She was so absorbed in her own happy reflections as she eagerly hastened homeward that she scarcely noticed either the beautiful homes of the rich or the hovels of the poor.

At length she reached the door of the little cottage. She paused a moment in the hall in order to gain breath and to quell a little the excitement that was thrilling through every nerve. Then stepping softly forward she opened the door of the little room and peeped in. One glance sufficed to show her that her mother was scarcely less excited than herself. She sat propped up in bed, her hands tightly clasped and a bright red spot glowing in either cheek. Mrs. Raymond, hearing the door open, looked up, and their eyes met. Muriel's face told the whole story. We will leave you to imagine for yourself the meeting of joyous thanksgiving which they held, while we follow Mr. Fitzallen for a moment to his home.

After his interview with Muriel he at once left the building and proceeded to Ainsley Hall, his beautiful but lonely home. He had been greatly attracted by Muriel from the moment he had first seen her earnestly studying her picture in the exhibition room. His keen eye also had not failed to notice the evident poverty of her dress, and in his great kindness of heart he decided to help her by purchasing her picture. Moreover, her face had puzzled him greatly. "Where could he have seen her before, or whom could she resemble? And why should the sight of that fair, sweet face among the crowd send such a strange thrill through his heart?"

These thoughts puzzled him all the way home, and were still with him as he sat at his solitary dinner in the great dining hall. He was so silent and absent minded during the meal that the servant who waited on him

informed the cook "that master must have fallen in love he was so queer and quiet like."

"Perhaps when I call for her answer. I may see something that will help me to solve this problem," he said to himself as he retired for the night.

III.

"Mother," said Muriel, several days after the exhibition, "what are you going to do with the great fortune that has lately fallen to us?"

Mrs. Raymond was sitting up today for the first time, and had insisted upon helping Muriel a little with the sewing. She looked at her daughter a moment, her brown eyes full of motherly love and pride. "Rather," she said, "the fortune which my little daughter has brought to me by making the most of every little opportunity which God has given her. I have not decided yet what to do with the money. We must talk it over when I have gained a little more strength. But what about your picture, dear? Fifty dollars is an excellent price for it; but do just as you like about it."

"I don't know, mother. I would rather not part with it since it has brought me such good fortune, but then fifty dollars is too much for us to lose, and besides I cannot bear to disappoint Mr. Fitzallen after his kindness and generosity. But who can that be?" as some one knocked gently at the door. "That must be he now. He said he would call at the end of the week and this is Saturday. Let me put this soft white shawl over your shoulders, mother. There, now, you look like a queen; dear, my queen," she whispered softly.

With a hasty glance round to see that everything was in order, she crossed the room and opened the door.

"Good afternoon Miss Raymond, you see I am very prompt in fulfilling my engagement," Muriel received him with her graceful, modest courtesy, and then presented him to her mother.

"I am very pleased to make your acquaintance Mrs. Raymond," he said, "as well as that of your talented daughter." But as he took the chair which Muriel offered him a sudden change came over his face. The kindly, genial smile died away, giving place to a strange pavor.

Muriel who had seated herself a little distance from him, was greatly struck by this change. What could be the matter, could he have fallen suddenly ill?

Mrs. Raymond also was greatly puzzled, and not a little embarrassed by the sudden check in the conversation and the peculiar manner of her visitor.

"Pardon me Mrs. Raymond," he at length managed to say, "your face reminded me so strongly of a very dear friend whom I have not seen for many years that I was almost overcome for the moment. Perhaps you may be some relation of her's and hence the strange resemblance. She was but a girl when I last saw her, Miss Enid St. Clair."

Now it was Mrs. Raymond's turn to look bewildered, and Muriel started as that familiar name fell upon her ear, uttered by a stranger's lips. Her mother studied her visitor's face closely for a moment, and then a great light broke over her own. "Surely," she said, "I cannot be mistaken, you can be no other than the old friend of my girlhood days, Edwin Underwood."

"That is indeed my name," he said. "Why I changed it, I will explain at some other time. But have I really found you at last, Enid?" and Mr. Fitzallen, rising, took her hand warmly in his, while a deep glow spread over his expressive features as if of some sudden strong emotion.

After the excitement of the discovery had somewhat subsided, Mr. Fitzallen said, "But how is it, Mrs. Raymond, that I find you in such circumstances?" with an expressive glance round the plain little room, "when I left you in the midst of every comfort and luxury?"

Mrs. Raymond then proceeded to relate the story of her life, from the time of her marriage, Muriel being a deeply interested listener. She noticed that whenever her father's name was mentioned a deep flush rose to Mr. Fitzallen's face, and in her wise little head she wove quite a romance about by-gone days.

When Mrs. Raymond had finished her story Mr. Fitzallen rose and said, "I am indeed very sorry that toil and poverty have been your lot for five long years, but perhaps they have been a blessing in disguise. But for them Miss Muriel might not have tried for the Fitzallen prize and I would never have found you. But I see that all this excitement has been too much for you. My story can wait for another day. Good afternoon Mrs. Raymond, good afternoon Miss Muriel," and in another moment the door had closed behind him and they were once more left alone.

"Isn't it strange, mother, that he should prove to be an old friend of yours. But I wonder why he changed his name."

"I don't know Muriel. If I remember rightly, I think Fitzallen was his mother's name; but whatever his reason

may have been for changing it, I am sure it was a good one for his was always a blameless character. But your picture dear, you did not sell him after all."

"I didn't once think of it mother, but I can tell him when he calls again. You must be very tired after all this excitement, you had better lie down and rest for a while."

Mrs. Raymond was very tired and her head ached badly. Moreover she wanted to think over quietly the events of the last hour, so she followed her daughter's advice.

Silence now reigned in the room, broken only by the ticking of the clock and an occasional snapping of a thread. Muriel's young brain was very busy that afternoon. She had read but little fiction, and that only by the best authors, but even her inexperienced mind could not fail to read something of the expression in Mr. Fitzallen's dark eyes as he looked into her mother's sweet face. How pretty she had looked that afternoon, with the soft, white shawl draped over her shoulders, the faint pink color coming and going in her cheeks and her large brown eyes with their sweet, earnest expression.

But the dreams which Muriel wove in her young imagination we will not inquire into. Time alone could tell whether or not they would be realized.

IV.

A few days after the events just related Mr. Fitzallen called again at the little cottage. This time it was Mrs. Raymond herself who opened the door, Muriel having just gone to the library to exchange her book.

"Would you care to hear my story now, Mrs. Raymond?" he said, seating himself in an old fashioned armchair opposite her little rocker. "It will explain my change of name as well as some other little things at which you may perhaps have wondered."

"You know I left K— rather suddenly about a year before your marriage. I have a confession to make here which will probably surprise you. You remember that I used to call on you quite often, as many of the other young fellows did, but that I was losing my heart to you I suppose you did not even dream."

"I might have spoken and given myself a chance, but as I was rather a shy, reserved young fellow, and was only a clerk on a very moderate salary, I felt that it would be useless to do so. Moreover, I saw from the first that the talented young artist, Harry Raymond, was the successful one. My disappointment, however, was so deep and strong, that it was impossible for me to stay quietly there, and see you married to another. I resolved to go far away, and amid new scenes and occupations try to forget the face that haunted me even in my dreams."

"A few days after I had made this resolution I found me on board of a large ocean steamer bound for Canada. Well, to make a long story short, I obtained a position in Montreal as a bank clerk, and in time became president of the bank. Fifteen years after I left England, I received a letter from my grandmother's lawyer, stating that she had died, and had bequeathed to me the whole of her large fortune, as I was the sole heir, after the death of my sister Alice. In order to take possession of this fortune I must take my grandmother's name which was Fitzallen. I sailed at once for England and took up my abode in the old homestead in this city. I went to K— and made enquiries for you. I learned of your husband's death, but what had become of you, no one seemed to know."

"When I offered the Fitzallen prize in memory of dear Alice, I little dreamed that it would be the means of my finding you, but now that I have found you Enid I cannot bear to lose you again. That great house of mine is empty and desolate, and needs the touch of a woman's hand and a woman's presence to make it a home. Will you marry me, Enid? will you be my wife? Your daughter shall be my daughter and will take the place of dear Alice to me."

During the recital of this tale, Mrs. Raymond had remained perfectly silent, her eyes bent on the floor. She would not have been a woman, and certainly not the gentle loving woman that she was, if her heart had not been touched by this pathetic story of an unswerving affection and a lonely life.

When she raised her head, her beautiful eyes were swimming in tears and she laid her hand gently in his as she said:

"Yes, Edwin, if you want me to, I'm sure Harry would wish it."

When Muriel arrived home, flushed and breathless from her hurried walk, she paused in astonishment at the sight which met her eyes. Yes Mr. Fitzallen had actually imprinted a kiss on her mother's lips and her mother had not resented it.

Mrs. Raymond looked slightly embarrassed as she turned to her daughter; and a dry flush rose to her face as she said:

"Muriel, allow me to present to you your future father."