

people's love stories, because you are never going to have any of your own."

She sat down again at her bureau, but the train of thought and the emotions aroused were not easily laid to rest; and as the twilight deepened round her, memory awoke, and Hilda was back again in a past long since dead, and to all intents and purposes buried. Her girlhood, her eager impulsive girlhood, rose before her; and the days when, like every woman worthy of her name, she had looked forward to the fulfilling of her womanhood, dreamt happy dreams of the gifts that lay waiting for her in the heart of life. And, instead of love, only friendship had been given to her: *bon camaraderie* in place of that for which her eager young soul craved. She saw it all again—the garden, whose grass was silvered with daisies; the cedar tree, dark against the blue sky of June; in the great bed of Scotch roses, whose fragrance came back to her now in the twilight. And beside her the man who was her friend no more. His face was silhouetted against the grey dimness that crept about her room; she saw it almost as distinctly as if it had actually been there; the grave, strongly cut face that once in those far-off days had been her world. To play with the fire had seemed so very easy then; and she had argued to herself so speciously that there was no reason why a man and a girl should not be friends, without any question of a closer tie between them. Oh! he had been honest with her, that man with the strong face and steady eyes. He had never played with her or deceived her, or led her to believe that he meant more than he honestly did mean. They were to be friends—friends only; the old, old fallacy which for succeeding generations repeatedly proves itself a fallacy. But whilst on the man's side it remained friendship—the quiet friendship of good comrades—on the girl's side it grew to that greater thing beside which friendship pales into nothingness. Poor, impulsive, eager girl, Hilda, sitting in the twilight, whilst the orange hue faded from the sky, smiled a smile of infinite pity over her self of long ago—the self who, at twenty, had given her love to a man who wanted none of it. To the woman who looked back, the fallacy of it all was easy to understand.

With a touch of resoluteness that belonged to her character, Hilda thrust the old memories aside, switched on the light of her electric lamp, drew a clean sheet of paper towards her, and picked up her pen.

"If, when you were twenty, you had no power to win a man's love, you certainly have no power to do it now, you poor thing," she said decidedly. "Stop repining, write your love stories, and be ready to make yourself agreeable to-night at Mrs. Lechmere's 'At home.' Buck up!"

"TAKE pity on me, and tell me who everybody is; remember, after five years of hinterlands, I am almost a stranger in a strange land." The speaker—tall and spare, with bronzed, rugged face, and well-knit frame—looked down at his companion with a pair of the brightest of blue eyes and a little whimsical smile.

"Tut, tut," she answered lightly, touching his arm for a moment with the tip of her fan, "you won't long be a stranger in a strange land. We are mighty fond of lions even in these degenerate days, and you—"

"But I don't wish to be a lion." A look of genuine alarm crossed the bronzed face. "I've done nothing to make such a horror possible. I've simply—"

"Jack Heberden, you have simply been where nobody had been before you, and you got there in spite of every sort of difficulty. Nature and man could put in your way. For these things Fate and the English nation will make a lion of you, whether you like it or no. Just for to-night you happen to be under my wing, more or less unknown. After to-night—"

"Never mind 'after to-night,'" the man interrupted, looking down at the old lady with an amused and tender twinkle in his blue eyes, "let me have one hour of enjoyment and time to breathe. Tell me who everybody is. It is refreshing to see pretty women in pretty clothes again."

Old Lady Neville chuckled softly.

"Don't have too many illusions about the pretty women," she said, with a share of brusqueness; "they haven't very pretty souls behind those charming faces. I warn you, Jack, you will find that five years have made a great difference. A good many old ideals have been knocked down, and the new ones"—she shrugged her shoulders—"well, if you are what you used to be, you won't give a farthing-piece for the new ones. They call me old-fashioned and behind the times"—a grim look crossed the attractive old face—"but I answer: 'Thank Heaven—yes, I am.'"

"What's the matter with the times?" The traveller's blue eyes twinkled with amusement. He seated himself on the couch beside the old lady who had been his good friend through a motherless boyhood.

"The times are out of joint," she quoted; "women have forgotten how to be womanly; goodness is an absurdity; love—just romantic nonsense. Women may still have pretty faces, but upon my word I don't know what they've done with their hearts and souls."

"When I was out in the wilds, I used sometimes—" he began, when his old friend cut him short.

"We mustn't stay in this corner talking platitudes," she said briskly, being still what Jack remembered her in the days of his youth—a creature of impulse; "come with me, and I'll introduce you to the latest products of English society. A month hence you shall tell me what you think of the modern woman."

Jack laughed. Lady Neville's whims had always amused him, and he knew the sound goodness of heart that lay beneath the surface manner. He was ready enough to follow her round Mrs. Lechmere's crowded drawing-room, being introduced to this person or that, deriving much quiet entertainment from his companion's sharp little speeches, which everyone knew masked the kindest nature in the world.

"Now, this is a friend with whom I am always falling out," Lady Neville exclaimed suddenly, as they paused near the door of the conservatory, just inside which stood a tall woman, simply gowned in black. "This is Miss Hilda Marriott. Miss Marriott persists in writing sentimental stories, when she ought to be turning out scathing, scurrilous satire. I tell her she doesn't use as she should the brains with which Heaven has blessed her."

"Miss—Hilda—Marriott?" The traveller spoke the words quickly, a curiously eager look leapt into his blue eyes, a look which Hilda saw and entirely failed to interpret. "I think I have read some of Miss Marriott's stories."

"Then you have read delightfully sentimental nonsense which bears no relation to the dull facts of life," said the old lady cheerfully, with a nod and a smile at Hilda. "I'll leave you to discuss her sentimentalities. I see Mrs. Bowen, and I have a bone to pick with her."

The man and woman, left alone, looked at each other with a smile.

"She is my godmother," Jack Heberden said quickly, "and the dearest soul living."

"That is just what I think about her," Hilda, too, spoke quickly. "She has been a good friend to me, though we do fall out over my writing. She wants it to be smarter—and I—"

"You couldn't stoop to that," he broke in so vehemently that she looked up at him with startled eyes. "I—you see—I read some of your stories when I was out in the wilds—and some of the literature chance threw in my way had so-called smart writing in it. Oh! no, you couldn't stoop to write smartly."

He looked at her with so absolute a conviction on his face and such a light flashed into his eyes that the colour mounted into her face, and an odd little thrill ran along her pulses. She had no idea who this tall man, with the spare frame, the rugged face, and vivid blue eyes, could be. In introducing him Lady Neville had omitted to mention his name, and Hilda only gathered vaguely that he had been somewhere in the wilds, but what wilds or why he had been there she had no glimmering notion. She liked his boyish directness of manner; something in her own simple and straightforward nature responded to the simplicity which seemed an integral part of his; and he, looking down at her, smiled—a sudden, flashing smile that gave him an absurdly boyish look.

Against the background of palms and flowering plants her slight figure was clearly silhouetted. Her gown, of some soft shade of grey blue, that made him think vaguely of the soft blue shadows of a summer evening, suited the fairness of her skin and the grey of her eyes. The subdued light fell upon her hair, and he saw that its brown coils were touched with white; but a little flashing reflection ran through his mind that the crown of her hair added something distinguished to the tall, slight form; and as she smiled back at him an answering smile his observant eyes noted the graceful curve of her lips, the lines of tenderness into which they naturally seemed to fall.

"What a mother she would make!" With lightning rapidity the thought came and went in his brain, even whilst he heard his own voice say: "Shall we sit down over there under the roses?"

I should like to tell you—how I came across your stories."

HILDA followed where he led her across the conservatory to a seat placed close against the wall, upon which great yellow roses hung in lavish profusion. Their fragrance filled the place, mingling with the other scents of heliotrope and the cool, wet moss and dripping ferns about a splashing fountain. Those mingling fragrances and the soft sound of falling water lulled Hilda into a strange repose, yet the strong, eager voice of the man by her side awoke within her heart echoes of a past that was—the same? No, no! not at all the same. She pulled herself into a more upright position on the bench, thrusting into the background of her mind a picture that had all at once flashed unbidden before it—the picture of a daisy-strewn lawn, a cedar tree against the sky of June, Scotch roses in the great bed by the lawn—and she—

"One of my 'boys'—we call the porters 'boys,' you know—brought me in a bundle of magazines one day." Her companion's voice struck across her thoughts and banished the old visions. "I was down with fever. We were hung up in a nasty, swampy district, and where the 'boy' had found the things I couldn't imagine. It turned out afterwards that they had belonged to an Englishman who had been surveying up there; he had left them behind him, and they were a godsend to me. Fever makes a poor thing of a man, and I was a very poor thing; your stories put new heart into me."

"I am so glad," she answered. "You seemed to have the faculty for making the best of everything," he went on, his eyes fixed on her face, over which, at his words, the colour flashed vividly; "in everything I read of yours there was an upward trend—you never dragged humanity down."

"I have tried," Hilda began; but he went on speaking dreamily, heedless of her interruption, his eyes still bent upon her face:

"But it wasn't only that. The stories that appealed to me most were your love stories—they were so sincere, they rang so true. I have never read any others like them, any others that gave me such a sense of reality."

"Oh!" Hilda gasped, with a laugh that had in it a sound suspiciously like a sob, "oh! how funny, how dreadfully, dreadfully funny!"

Supreme amazement looked at her out of Heberden's blue eyes; astonishment for a moment held him dumb; then he exclaimed impetuously:

"Why do you say that?"

"Because"—again she laughed, the little laugh that veiled a sob—"because—they aren't real a bit."

"What do you mean?" The gleam of his eyes held hers; the entire simplicity and sincerity of the man drew from her an answering simplicity and sincerity.

"I have to write love stories because my editor wants them," she said abruptly; "but I know nothing about them—really. I am one of the lookers-on at life."

"Then you have looked on to some purpose," he replied, "and I think"—he paused—"you have picked out all the best you have seen and wrapped it round with some of the beauty of your own soul!"

Hilda did not lift her eyes. It had become strangely impossible to meet the blue eyes that scanned her face—and that odd thrill ran once more along her pulses. She had tried to speak, but speech failed her, and she did not know whether she was most relieved or most sorry when a chattering, laughing group of other guests strolled into the conservatory; and instinctively she rose. Heberden and she moved back into the crowded drawing-room, and other acquaintances claimed her attention. But a curious sense of being in dreamland was upon her, and it did not seem to her strange that, when she went away, the stranger with the vivid blue eyes should say to her in his eager, boyish voice: "May I come to see you, and tell you some more about those stories of yours I have read?"

It only seemed natural—as natural as that she should answer:

"Yes—please come. I have rooms in Branchdale Road. I should like to hear—about your travels."

"I DON'T think I can understand it in the least." "Can't you—understand it in the least?" The tender mockery of the man's tones set Hilda's heart throbbing. "Is it so very hard to understand?"

"Almost impossible," she exclaimed vehemently; "almost impossible."

"But why—tell me why?" and Jack Heberden paused on the narrow footpath and laid a gentle