

# MY DIAMOND RING.

"Good-bye, old lady," shouted my father, as he drove out of the yard. "Mind and take care of yourself."

"No fear," I shouted back, as I nodded my adieu; and though the words were somewhat slangy, they were applicable enough, for I certainly felt no fear, though perhaps some girls in the same circumstances might have been rather nervous.

My father was a farmer, and often disposed of his live stock at cattle fairs. On the morrow of the day of which I write a large fair was to be held some twenty miles distant. Our three farm-servants had therefore started that evening to drive the beasts that were intended for sale about half-way on the road. They were going to put up for the night at a farmhouse, where resided a friend of ours, and then resume their journey about three o'clock next morning, in order to be in good time for the commencement of business. My father was driving into the town that night, as he would have to make all arrangements for the reception of the cattle.

So only myself and Sally, our maid-of-all-work, were left in the house. But we had been so left many a time before, and had become completely used to it. I was never accustomed to much company, so that, perhaps, accounted for my own being generally sufficient for me. Our house stood, as many farmhouses do, in the middle of the farm, and we were quite a mile away from any other habitation. People often pitied me, saying they wondered how I could bear such a solitary existence; but a great deal of their sympathy was utterly thrown away, for with my perfect health, daily occupations, keen love of nature, and a strong leaning towards literary pursuits, I was happy, and found nothing lacking in my life. And a new sweetness had recently come to be the crown and perfection. I only prized the sparkling diamonds on my finger because they constantly reminded me—not, indeed, that I needed thus reminding—of a love as changeless and bright as themselves.

"Not diamonds, Tom," I had pleaded when my lover brought the sparkling gems. "They are out of place on the finger of a farmer's daughter;" but he had only laughed, and said I was as true a lady as any in the land; so I had yielded, and had grown each day to hold more dear the circle that meant so much to me.

Happy thoughts are ever pleasant company. So that night after watching my father out of sight I turned again towards the house with a smile. It was an evening in July, but the day had been lowering, and the night seemed to be closing in early. As I passed through the yard I was accosted by a man who had for some weeks been working for my father. Those of my readers who are familiar with farm life may know that often in the harvest-time extra men are employed—men who not seldom prefer a comfortable "shake-down" amid the clean straw of the outer buildings rather than walk any distance to lodgings. Since this man had been with us he had each night slept cosily in a sheltered corner of the barn.

"A dark night, miss," he said, with his customary civility, as I passed him.

"Dark indeed," I answered in my usual chatty way. "I hope there will not be a storm, or the master will get wet ere he reaches his destination."

"Is he going far, ma'am?" asked the man, and I answered openly, "Yes as far as S——. He will stay the night in order to be in readiness for the fair early in the morning;" and then I ran on to the house, on the threshold of which I was met by Sally, wearing such a particularly demure and modest expression that I at once instinctively knew that she was about to ask a favor.

"If you please, ma'am," she began with much gravity, "do you think you could spare me for about an hour and a half to run up an' see my mother? She was so middlin' on Sunday that I've felt quite uneasy, an' if you could, ma'am——" and there Sally paused and looked at me entreatingly.

Now I did not believe this mild fiction the least bit in the world. I did not think that Sally's anxiety for her mother was at all overpowering, and I did remember that the way to the village would lead her exactly past the blacksmith's shop, where I had not the slightest doubt that sturdy Basil West would be on the look-out for her. I suppose I ought to have been shocked at the idea, but then you see I was young, and had a lover myself.

So I pretended to think that Sally's statement was correct, for, of course, it would not have done to let her suspect that I understood about Basil, and said very seriously:

"Yes, you may go for a little while, Sally, but be sure and do not be longer than an hour and a half, as I shall be all alone."

"Thank you, ma'am," said Sally joyfully. "I'll surely be back."

And with that she hastily put on her bonnet and shawl, and was soon out of the house.

Left to myself, I went into the dining room, but the atmosphere struck me unpleasantly, and the place altogether wore a cheerless aspect. Being summer-time we had no fire lit there, and the dull, gloomy evening seemed to demand something bright and pleasant.

"I will go into the kitchen," I said to myself. "There is a beautiful fire there, and I can take an easy-chair and make myself cosy."

So suiting the action to the word I was soon in front of the ruddy glow, comfortably seated with a favorite book in my hand.

The unshuttered window was at my left hand, and the unfastened door at the far end of the room. You may, perhaps, wonder that I did not secure the bolts of the door, but it never struck me to do so. All my life had I lived in that house, and was so thoroughly accustomed to it that I never thought of its loneliness. So I read on in placid enjoyment until suddenly I felt that somebody was looking at me through the window.

I raised my eyes quickly, and then I saw the man to whom a while ago I had been speaking. His gaze was fixed on the glittering ring on my fin-

ger, and something in his expression made me suddenly realize, with a sickening terror, that I was alone in that lonely house.

I sat literally petrified as I heard him making slow, stealthy steps towards the door, but as I heard his hand on the latch the blood resumed its flow in my veins, and with one intense prayer, "Lord, help me!" I was ready for him.

I turned with a smile.

"Oh, Donovan, is that you? Come in and bear me company by this good fire. I am quite glad you have come. I was just beginning to feel a trifle lonely."

The man was, I could see, thoroughly taken aback by my smiling graciousness, and knew not what to say. He muttered something; but I went on unheeding:

"Come in and sit down in this cosy corner and I will get you some supper. I am sure you must be tired of the cold things you buy in the village. I was just going to cook mutton chops. I will do some extra ones for you."

The coarse face watching me relaxed a little, and seeing this I sprang from my chair, though without any appearance of undue haste, and made my way into the larder. Thence I speedily emerged with the meat, which was soon merrily frying over the fire.

The appetising odour filled the kitchen as I deftly spread the cloth on the table and proceeded to lay on it all that could be required. And never once did I cease my flow of volubility till all was ready, and I hospitably invited Donovan to "draw up" and make himself comfortable.

He hesitated and looked quite sheepish. I do not believe the man had a particle of conscience, but he had a certain odd instinct of politeness, and he felt that we were rather an incongruous pair to thus sit down together.

"Afte. you, ma'am," he said awkwardly, but I laughed and answered:

"Nonsense! sit down while the meat is nice and hot."

Never shall I forget that meal! Each mouthful seemed as if it would choke me; and every now and again I caught the man's evil, covetous glance at the ring on my left hand. My one hope was in gaining time, and even then how could I be sure of help! If Sally returned alone what would two helpless women be against a strong, determined man? With what longing did I think of the muscular, brawney blacksmith. Oh, if he would only come! Surely, surely he would not let Sally walk across those dreary fields alone! Supposing that, seeing the light from the kitchen and guessing that I was there, he should leave his sweetheart at the entrance of the yard! Pray Heaven that he might remember that I had ever a kindly feeling toward lovers, and so would dare to bring Sally to the very threshold.

But all the time my thoughts were running thus, I was talking gaily to Donovan. What he thought of my unwonted affability I shall never know, but I am convinced that he never suspected my real motive. When at last he announced that he could eat no more, my heart sank, for nearly half an hour must yet elapse ere I dared hope for Sally and for "Basil the blacksmith."

Ah surely, surely my woman's wit could keep him at bay for one little half-hour longer. He had risen from the table, and stood looking at me. He was just about to speak, when I said easily:

"After supper a drink, Donovan. A glass of whisky will not come amiss, will it?" and I laughed merrily, though I could have screamed with terror and apprehension.

I knew that in offering him whiskey I was doing a desperate thing, as I could not tell how it would affect him. I knew that drink made some men like raging maniacs, and that others it quickly stupified. I might in this case hope for the latter, but I had to risk the former. And I must go into the solitary dining-room to get to the sideboard where liquors were kept. What if he should follow me, and there in the darkness deal me a deadly blow!

But Donovan evidently thought that I was thoroughly in his power, and that a little time mattered nothing. So I went on my errand and returned safely, and when I gave the glass into his hand he thanked me and drank my health with a considerable degree of gallantry.

I sat down by the side of the fire, and my heart began to beat in great suffocating throbs. For I saw the man begin to cast stealthy, furtive glances around, and once he looked at me with an expression that made my blood run cold.

"The master won't be home afore to-morrow, ma'am, will he?" he said suddenly.

"No," I answered, for of what use to deny that which I had once admitted.

He sat in silence for a full minute, and then, with a change of tone, said wheedlingly:

"That's a pretty ring ye have, on miss."

"Yes," I answered, and as I uttered the one word I tried to brace myself up strongly, for I knew the moment I had dreaded was come.

"Did your father buy it for you?" he went on.

"No," I answered briefly.

"Your sweetheart, may be?" queried Donovan with a cunning chuckle.

"Yes, my sweetheart," I replied, and with the word came a vivid recollection of Tom's tender eyes and stalwart figure, and I longed wildly for the reassuring clasp of his strong hand.

"He must be powerfully fond of you, miss, to buy a thing like that," pursued Donovan. "It would cost a sight of money."

"Did you ever have a sweetheart, Donovan?" I asked with a gay laugh. "Tell me about her."

Oh, for time—for time! I thought despairingly. What could I say or do to keep the man at bay for a few more minutes? Surely Sally would not be long. Surely Basil would come with her,