



Love in the Abbey

Lady Ethel's Rival

LORD STERNE'S STORY.

"This is an excellent one," he says, leaning against the terrace and looking beyond her across to the river. "It is about a little girl who was a very good, quiet, soft-hearted little girl."

"Quite the opposite of me," says Kitty demurely.

"A gentle little thing, as yielding as straw that is tossed by ever so mild a breeze—a little thing that the old painters loved to take as their model when they wanted a blue-eyed shepherdess or Madonna. A wary, disappointed man happening to catch sight of her, as she played among her flowers on a summer evening, fancied, with one of those delusive imaginings which come across the wearied brain of such men, that he had found in her the key to new life and a fresh world. He thought he loved her—perhaps he did, who knows? He could not say yes or nay even now, if he were asked. He was one of those little men whom the world persists in calling great—great! because the fools who believe in him had inflated him with their own breath of adulation, had made the god of their own clay, and forgot their own handwork in their blind belief and worship. This little great man—possessing wealth, fame, a loud-sounding name, all of which he was heartily tired of, laid them at the feet of the little blue-eyed maiden, and prayed her to take them and consecrate them—to take his life, and breathe into it youth and hope and happiness. I do not think she could have refused, even if there were those about her who whispered in her ear how great a man had come to kneel at her feet—how great a lady she would be if she would but consent to sit beside him on his throne of fame and popularity.

She consented to bless this tired, worn-out monkey of a god, and for a time the great little man, full of his new fancy and his new life, was happy—for a time. How short it was, although it seemed to him as if it would last forever! The day on which the great little man and the little, soft-hearted girl were to be made one was then close at hand; all their world was full of congratulation and self-importance; the man himself was beginning to feel that life was not quite over, that there was still one thing more to weary of—a great thing to him. But when, on the night before the wedding, the little maiden came to him, with her blue eyes all wet with tears, and told him that it was not to

be, the bubble which had been dancing before his eyes—the bubble which looked so handsome in the sun, and so solid and long enduring—had burst! The little maiden had given her heart—the very thing the great little man wanted—to one who was not tired of the world, who did not need her so much, who perhaps did not love her so well, but whom she happened to love very dearly!

He paused a moment, his expressive face half scornful, half wistful, turned so that Kitty could see every line of it, and her eyes seemed riveted to it by a kind of fascination which, struggle against it as she would, overcame her. Her breath came with one or two little pants as he paused.

"What could he do?" went on Lord Sterne, in so low a voice that Kitty had to bend forward to catch the words—"she threw herself on his mercy, on his love of truth—and her truth pleaded for her. What could he do—only that which he did. He gave her to the other man; he stood beside the altar and listened to her soft little voice as she faltered out her promise to be that other man's wife—that other man who did not need her so much as did he! and then he went home to sit and watch the last remains of his bubble as it floated away, and to learn that for him there was nothing else left to weary of, that all was vanity and vexation of spirit, and that the game of life, with all its varied and complicated moves, was a game played but once and forever for him."

Kitty draws a breath almost of relief. For the first time in her life she has come across a real love story—the love story of the greatest man of his time! She can scarcely believe that it is not all a dream—that it is really the great Lord Sterne who stands there, leaning against the balcony with so listless, so weary a look on his handsome face. It is evident, too, that he has forgotten her also, for he takes a turn up and down for a moment, muttering to himself, but still not so low but that Kitty can hear him.

"What could I do? nothing, but let her go, and with her the last hope of my life! Thank God, she did not deceive me!" he says so heartily, with an inflection in his voice that makes Kitty's heart leap. "That shame, at least, was spared me—I should be thankful for that! I could forgive her all else, my sweet, pure-hearted little May child. But if she had deceived me—if she had—" he stops suddenly, and remembers Kitty almost with a start. "Miss Kitty!" he says, in quite a different voice, with a smile that is almost wild as the result of the sudden effort to come back from the past to the present, "this little story, which I am sure you are too kind to have listened to, has a moral lesson, and I am sure you are too kind to tell me that it was not to

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know, and that is, that you are never, never!—what an emphasis his dark gray eyes—they are dark now with some strong emotion—gives to the word—"that you are never to deceive the man who loves you. Go to him with all your heart in your hand, or put the hand when he asks for it behind your back! There is one thing no man worthy of the name will forgive, and that is betrayal. All your heart, Miss Kitty, or none."

Kitty raises her face slowly, and, with a start, he sees it is quite pale—nay, more, that the eyes that are lifted to his are—can he believe his own? are dim and wet!

With a sudden start, he holds out his arm.

"My child," he says, in his softest voice—and what a voice it is! It goes down to the bottom of Kitty's heart—right to the very bottom—"here have I been keeping you in the cold air listening to my prating! Come; let us go in."

Kitty rises, and puts her hand upon his arm. As she does so, a voice close at hand reaches her—a voice which she recognizes at once as her Cousin Ethel's.

"Is it not beautiful? Ah, Mr. Calthrop, if life could be all one pure moonlight night, how sweet it would be! How peaceful—how free from earthly dross one feels on such a night! Look! there is the river, sweeping like a silver snake through the meadow!—what an emblem of—ah!"

My Lady Ethel stops suddenly, and Mr. Calthrop feels the light touch of her arm tighten.

"Who is that?" she asks, in quite a different tone of voice.

"It looks like—it is Lord Sterne and your cousin, Miss Trevelyan."

"Lord Sterne and Kitty?" says Lady Ethel, in anything but a delighted tone.

"Yes, Lady Ethel," says Lord Sterne, who has led Kitty to the balcony, and now turns, as self-possessed, as free from any touch of sentiment, as different from the Lord Sterne of a minute ago, as is smiling from the gloaming of eve. "Yes; Miss Kitty and I have been holding a long and impassioned argument on the important question—should she take the precedent tortoise shell kittens of black?"

"I hope you have won the day—or, rather the night," says Lady Ethel, with a certain cold significance.

"I regret to say that I am—vanquished," retorts Lord Sterne, with a grave assumption of disappointed humility. "Miss Trevelyan is as hard to convince as the most bigoted fanatic, and meets all my arguments with a complacent incredulity and scorn, and, as he speaks, he looks down, with the old mocking smile, into Kitty's open face. But, for once, he does not meet mockery for mockery; the old defiance is not there; and, in place of some sharp, skittish retort, he finds the small, rounded arm drawn from his own, and Kitty, with her small, piquant face held indignantly aloft, walks off.

CHAPTER IX. A CHALLENGE.

"WHY, dear me!" exclaims Kitty, waking the next morning, sitting bolt upright in the little lace shrine which serves for a bed, sitting up and clasping her knees with one hand, while she tosses back the waves of hair that ripple over her face with the other. "Let me see; where am I? Oh, yes, of course; I remember—but why, I've been dreaming, for the first time in my life, I believe; dreaming I was buried alive in a coal mine with a grimy collar—is that the name for 'em?—like Lord Sterne, sitting and groaning beside me. That all comes of moping in the hermit's cave last night," she laughs. "Last night, let me see, how did it all end? Why, yes, of course I walked off after that piece of impertinence about the kittens, and went into the salon, and there they were all card playing and mumbling, and—and—I went to sleep in the middle of it!"

At this last recollection she colors furiously with a momentary mortification, then bursts into a low laugh of amusement.

"Yes, that was it; and they looked shocked, and papa sighed, and Ethel, dear paragon, smiled, and Lord Sterne sneered, and I crept up to bed. What he wanted to sneer for? Didn't he say himself that he was heartily tired of it? I suppose he hadn't the courage to go to sleep. It's wonderful how much I dislike that man!" She thinks this assertion over once or twice, and repeats it, picking the dainty counter-

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pane with one little pink forefinger meditatively. "Yes, I'm more sure than ever that I dislike him. What does he mean by talking sentiment, as Regy calls it, one-half hour and then sneering at one to one's face the next? I suppose he thinks 'I am a little schoolgirl he can play tricks with. That comes of being caught romping with Master Reginald. Oh, those horrid ruins! To think that I should fall into his arms. I'd rather have tumbled; I told him so—yes, I must be even with him. If one could only make him look stupid for one minute, and so pay him back; but," with a heavy sigh and a fling back upon the pillow, "you can't. I hate a great man that never makes a mistake or looks foolish; last night, even, when he sat there with his head in his hands and his face as long as a kite, he didn't look foolish as another man would; you couldn't laugh at him. Now there is one comfort in poor James," she colors a little at the name, "you can laugh at him, all day if you like, and enjoy it. Poor James. Well!"

This last ejaculation is uttered aloud in response to a sudden, heavy bang at the door which is evidently caused by a strong and willing hand.

"Well, what is it? who is it?"

"Kitty, are you awake?" comes back Lord Reginald's voice, properly subdued out of consideration for the occupants of the neighboring rooms.

"No," answers Kitty, instantly; "sound asleep. What is it?"

"Look here," says Lord Reginald, in a hushed voice, and in the tone which one person on the outside of the door uses when he wants to impress the other person inside. "Don't make a row."

"I won't," retorts Kitty, "the one you are making is quite enough."

"Come out of bed," says the boy, daringly, "and get close to the door, I want to whisper."

"I shall do no such thing," says Kitty, indignantly, but slipping out of bed the next moment and gliding noiselessly to the door.

"Well, what is it? I'm half frozen with the cold."

"Cold!" scoffs Lord Reginald contemptuously. "It's hot enough to make a nigger, you ought to have been up hours ago."

"Ought I? If that's all you have to say I'll go back to bed for the rest of the day."

"Look here, Kitty, I've come to do you a friendly turn. Look sharp and have your bath and come down to the stables, I'll wait for you."

"I dare say!" says Kitty suspiciously.

"No larks, on my honor!" asseverates the boy. "You look sharp, and with this parting exhortation he runs off.

(To be Continued.)

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