

on the hill again,—there is a fine view from it,—and that you would like me to show it to you. But no doubt your scientific friend will be more at home there, and far more interesting than I should be. He'll be able to tell you all about it,—the proper dates, you know, and whether it is an Elizabethan, or a Norman, or a Gothic structure."

This elaborate piece of scathing sarcasm is delivered with much unction.

"How silly you are!" says Kitty, softly. "I had quite made up my mind to see the dear old ruin to-day; but if you won't take me I shall go with no one. Don't be unkind, Jack."

It is only on very rare occasions she makes use of his Christian name, and now he accepts her mention of it as an apology for her late evil behavior, and grows instantly radiant.

"Do you mean that?" he asks, and is reassured by a swift but very friendly glance. "Come on, then," he says, eagerly; "let us get there before the others. But I think you needn't have been so awfully unkind all through dinner, you know."

So they walk away together through the rustling autumn leaves and snapping underwood towards the old haunt in question. And as they go a silence strange yet full of a rare content falls upon them. Sir John lights his cigar, Miss Tremaine plucks the stray wild grasses as she goes, but no word breaks the stillness of the evening as they pass by rippling streams, and under branching trees, through brake and fern, until they reach the summit of the hill. Once as they step across a tiny rivulet, a very baby of a stream, that full of glad song rushes babbling onwards through flowery meads straight to the arms of its mother the river, Sir John takes her hand to help her over it, and, having taken, retains it, until at length the ruins rise before them grand and stately even in decay.

Kitty, seating herself upon a huge stone, sighs gently and looks around her. Sir John, standing against the trunk of a tree, flings away the end of his cigar and looks at Kitty. The walk has brought a faint flush into her cheeks, a brightness to her eyes; a lurking softness curves the corners of her lips, making her perfect mouth even more lovable than usual. The evening is falling. Afar in the thicket a solitary bird gives forth its music, breaking into song half tinged with melancholy. Some sudden thought strikes Sir John; straightening himself, he goes up to Kitty and stands beside her.

She starts a little as he comes close to her, as one might whose thoughts were far away, and turns up her beautiful eyes to his.

"I thought you were going to speak to me," she says, as though in apology for the involuntary start.

"So I am," says Blunden, quietly. "I have been thinking, Kitty,"—taking his second cigar from his mouth and deliberately knocking the ash from it,—"that I should like to make you a present, if I was quite sure you would accept it."

"Be absolutely certain, then," says Miss Tremaine, without hesitation, all unconscious of what is coming. "I perfectly adore getting presents."

"You promise, then, to accept mine?"

"Indeed I shall,—if it is a nice one."

"It is, rather. I want to give you"—he waves his hand slightly towards the rich and glowing landscape that lies all round and far below them—"all this."

Kitty flushes crimson. She rises slow to her feet, and, after one irrepressible glance, turns her face away, so that he can see only the clearly-cut profile.

"Well, that is a present!" she says, in a low tone, with a rather nervous laugh. "It is not every day one gets an estate thrown at one's head."

"At one's heart," corrects he. "There is only one trifling obstacle in the way of your accepting it—"

"And that is—"

"Its present master. If you do consent to take it, I am afraid you must take me with it." He has spoken without any appearance of haste, but now he pitches away the unoffending cigar and moves so that in spite of her late effort to avoid his scrutiny her eyes must meet his. "Look here, Kitty," he says: "I like you better than any woman I ever met. Will you marry me?"

"What a proposal!" returns she, with a little pale smile. "It quite destroys all one's previous notions of the fitness of things. I certainly thought, when you did make up your mind to lay your hand and fortune at my feet, you would have done it in some more orthodox fashion."

"You thought I should propose, then?"

"I knew it,"—calmly,—"I felt sure of it." She is piqued at the apparent coolness of his manner.

"And—did you feel equally sure you should say 'Yes' when the time came?"

"I have not said yes yet," replies she, with undiminished calm.

Sir John regards her curiously. There is surprise, disquietude, even admiration, in his glance, and perhaps a little offence.

"I wonder if you care in the very least for me?" he asks, presently.

"I wonder if you care for me?"—hastily.

"I think you may be utterly sure of that," replies he, with some warmth.

"There is nothing on earth more certain. Up to this I have not been an enthusiastic admirer of the marriage-state. It is a very powerful inducement indeed that has made me not only willing but anxious to become 'Benedick the married man.'"

"Is it in such a light—as a grievance—you regard marriage?" asks she, a sudden gleam in her large dark eyes.

"Marriage in general; not marriage with you."

"You flatter me,"—with some faint bitterness. "Are you quite sure, Jack, you are not asking me to marry you because you feel it your duty to settle down, and because I have a handsome face?"

"If you are going into morals," says Jack, "you will floor me at once. I fancied," reproachfully, "you knew me well enough to understand that duty and I are two. I hate the very sound of it. I protest I never yet did a dutiful action without repenting it bitterly afterwards. As to settling down, I am not dreaming of doing that. You know you wouldn't like it, and I don't see why a fellow can't enjoy himself quite as much after his marriage as before,

if—er—people are only reasonable. And I should like you, Kitty, to take as much good out of your life as it is capable of affording you."

"I dare say I should be able to manage that," says Kitty, more mildly.

"Then as to the eventual ownership of Coolmore,—why, if I never marry there is always Arthur. However you may doubt my affection for—others, you must at least believe in my regard for him; and if he should inherit the estate, dear old boy, I only hope it may do him good. With reference to your other question, I dare say there is something in it. I detest ugly women, as you know, and you, I think, have quite the most beautiful face in the world. That is certainly one reason why I love you."

"And yet"—wistfully—"it is quite ten minutes ago since we began this conversation, and until now you have never mentioned the word 'love.'"

"While you"—quickly—"have never mentioned it at all."

"How could I? I was waiting to be questioned. You said, 'Will you marry me?' You never said, 'Do you love me?' and, what is far, far worse, you did not say, 'I love you.'"

"Perhaps it was because I saw so little necessity for saying it that I forgot it. You must know—you have known for a long time, Kitty—how dearly I love you. I confess I have spooned other women,—have, perhaps, made a point of telling them I adored them, simply because I didn't, but believe me now when I say no woman ever held my heart in her keeping except you. And it is because the feeling I entertain for you is so different from that I have felt for those others that I have seemed cold to you."

"I accept your apology," says Kitty, smiling until her lovely lips part company, as though to show the white and even teeth within. "It is a very honeyed one, and—I like honey. Yet forgive me that I had a fancy to be wooed as other women are."

A slight moisture dims her eyes, the hand that rests in his trembles, a quiver supplants the smile upon her lips.

"You are unlike all other women," says Blunden, with sudden and passionate tenderness, that, coming from one usually so *nonchalant* and careless, seems doubly earnest. "You are far above the very best I ever met. My sweet,—my darling,—never again, [however silent I may be on the subject, doubt my love for you. And you, Kitty, tell me with your own lips that you return my love."

"I have loved you a long time," whispers Kitty, in soft lingering tones that only reach his ear as he stoops to hear them.

"Do you know you have not accepted me yet?" says Sir John, presently, when they have partially come to their senses, and to a tardy recognition of the fact that after all the earth has not given place to heaven.

"No? Then I sha'n't commit myself any further," says Miss Tremaine, with a gay laugh. "They say it is a wise thing always to leave one's self a loop-hole by which to escape. I shall certainly not bind myself by any more rash promises. I consider I have said quite enough for one day."

* * * * *

Down in a mysterious hollow Sir John has tea for them, as he promised; after which they all drive back to their several homes, beneath a sky studded with early stars, like the azure gown of a court dame rich with jewels, the Tremaines reaching the Towers rather later than they had anticipated.

Gretchen, running through the hall, hat in hand, goes straight to the library and up to Dugdale, who with glad eyes flings down his book and holds out his hand to her.

"What a day it has been!" he says. "What a month,—a year! Welcome home again."

"Ah! you have been lonely," Gretchen answers, with contrition. "I knew it. Several times to-day I said to myself, 'How I wish he had some one to speak to!' It was most unfortunate that papa and mamma should have gone to the Mallocks this week."

"You thought of me, then, even in the midst of your amusement?"

"Very often," says Gretchen, with an earnestness very sweet but unconsciously cruel. "I felt you would miss us terribly."

"Yes. I missed you terribly." There is the least possible emphasis on the "you." "You were good to come to me so soon. I heard the hall door open, and knew your step as you ran along the hall. Well,—and you enjoyed yourself?"

"Immensely. It was a charming picnic, and no mistakes were made."

"And now for your promise," says Dugdale.

"What a horrible memory you have! I—I don't think I spoke to Tom Scarlett all through dinner," replies she, shaking her head, and making a mean effort at evasion.

"And afterwards?"—remorselessly.

"Afterwards—" She hesitates. "Tom is a very silly person," she says, at last, in an apologetic tone. "I don't think it is quite fair. Mr. Dugdale,"—putting out her hand with a charming glance full of entreaty,—"*absolve me from that promise.*"

"I absolve you," says Kenneth, slowly, taking her hand. "You are right: it would not be fair to Scarlett. Nevertheless I think I showed wisdom in what I said of him the other day."

"No, it is only nonsense," persists Gretchen, gravely. "You must not believe that."

"Why do you call me Mr. Dugdale? You mother and Kitty both call me Kenneth."

"They both have known you so much longer."

"That is a mistake. You have seen me oftener in these last few weeks than they have seen me in their lives."

"If it will please you," says Gretchen, gently, and rather shyly, "I too will call you Kenneth."

"Thank you," replies the young man, in a low voice, more replete with gratitude than the occasion altogether requires. He is still holding her hand. The lamps upon the centre-table are burning low; the curtains are drawn; perhaps he can hardly see very distinctly in the dull soft light, because presently Gretchen, raising her eyes, finds he is gazing at her very intently. She colours, and laughs a little.