

My Romance

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do it; but they're just as satisfied with Mrs. Richards."

The second lady to be weighed was this same Mrs. Richards; or rather I think she weighed me. She was a soft, smiling little widow, who loved to have the babies round her, and stitch away at rag dolls and dolls' clothes for them. She played everyone's accompaniments, and, though she always said that she had no voice—and hadn't—she sang plaintive songs so delightfully that you never thought about the voice, only the singing. But when I asked her to sing one song, she put it aside, with a sad little smile.

"That song is dead," she said, "with something else in me. You understand."

And I understood, and bowed my head knowing that Kathleen Richards' romance was over, and that she wished in her honest way to warn me. We became great friends—after that; and I told her more about myself than I had ever told anybody—even the reason of my travels—and she looked at the stars—it was a warm tropical night—and nodded.

"You see," she said, clasping and unclasping her hands, "I am not good at expressing myself, but—you just love some one—or you don't. I don't think it is any use looking for a particular ideal. Some day you may find some one perhaps, and—she may be quite different, but—she will alter your ideal so easily. Jack wasn't—what I expected before I knew him; or even when I thought that I did—but—I cannot make up stories like you can; and I expect it will sound ridiculous to you, but—but I make up one little story so often. I think that Heaven is just—just a gate in a lane—where it begins; and I find Jack waiting there; and he says—'You've been a confounded long time coming, old girl; but I knew you'd come all right.' He'll never worry about my thinking of anyone else. Never! And I know he's waiting there; fidgeting with his mustache as he always did, if he was kept waiting."

She looked up at the stars and smiled; and I knew that I had learned one lesson, at least, by coming out of my study.

After that I abandoned the deliberate quest of romance; and the rest of the women on board seemed unromantic and uninteresting. For the last week I gained most of my new experience of life in the smoking room, playing bridge and mild poker and listening to some of the men who had lived.

I spent a pleasant week at Cape Town at the Queen's Hotel—my blessing on the man who advised me to go there—and began to wonder whether romance was coming to me in the shape of one—I wasn't sure which—of three bonny sisters; jolly, unaffected girls, half Dutch half English, born to make happy homes for some lucky fellows, as I have no doubt they have or will. But, when the English mail arrived, I understood how little these nice women really mattered to me. Beatrice had sent an amateur photo of the children and herself; and when I put it beside a snapshot of the ladies at the Queen's she looked like a race horse beside cart horses. They weren't common-looking girls either. It was simply that she had set my ideals a terribly high standard. She was such a pretty, graceful woman.

The children's letters made me feel very homesick. Bob's was written by himself, "but arnty rouled thee lines."

They called Beatrice ("auntie,") Elsa's hand had been guided; but Beatrice assured me in her pleasant letter that the composition was Elsa's own. "You may feel quite sure," she concluded, "that the children are well and happy, and that you will find everything right on your return. I hope you are finding your temporary habitations as comfortable as home. I am mean enough to hope not more comfortable!"

I wrote and assured her that no place could be so comfortable as she had made home for all of us.

After that I went up country for a fortnight, but did not find friends and became very dull and lonely. If there is a place in the world where one needs human companionship, it is South Africa. Loneliness—still, stony loneliness—is written all over the barren, brown hills, the hard, blue, birdless

skies, the bare, lifeless veldt, the miles and miles of sugarloaf ant-hills, the silent, brooding veldt dwellers themselves. I found their cities lonelier than the plains, and hustling Johannesburg the loneliest of all.

During that dreary fortnight I seemed to dwell in a world aloof, coming nearest to companionship with a broken-down man of seven languages who was head waiter at a hotel, and possessed the wisdom of Solomon, without the power of applying it. "The Transvaal is the best place in the world," he told me, "for leaving!" I took his advice and went on to Natal two days earlier than I intended, so as to arrive there as soon as the mail. I had two weeks' mails at once; two pairs of dear little letters from the children, two batches of papers from Beatrice and two long double letters from her; for she wrote separately about business and home affairs. "So, you see," the last one concluded, "I am managing all right. It is a great pleasure to manage things for you. I always remember that you have given me, not a situation, but a home. Thank you!"

After that my voyage to Europe seemed only the means to an end. As I met my letters I became more and more impatient to be home again. On the way from Egypt to Marseilles my impatience became positively worrying, and when I reached Marseilles, and received my letters there—one in faltering round hand, and one "guided," and two from Beatrice—I cut out the Mediterranean cruise and went straight home overland.

I was going to telegraph at first, but I decided to take them by surprise, as an additional pleasure. I arrived at the house at three in the afternoon, and walked round the back to the French windows unobserved. Then I heard voices and peeped in. Beatrice was sitting in the drawing-room, with Elsa squeezed in the armchair beside her, and Bob leaning against her knees, telling them a story. The children looked bonny but Beatrice seemed a trifle palé and thin, though she looked prettier than ever. I always considered her the prettiest woman I knew. I was afraid that she had been overworked and wor-

ried; and my heart went out to her with a warmth that I had never felt in my play at romance.

"The dear woman!" I thought. "How sweet she is!"

The story was about two little children, "such nice little children," who had "a very dear daddy"; and how he went away and came home. It was delightful to hear her fresh voice, and to watch her face while she told it.

"When he came," she said, opening her eyes and holding up her hands, "he brought them fourteen presents; one from every place he had been to"—I had told her that I intended that. "Just fancy! Fourteen lovely, foreign, funny presents!"

"And fourteen for their auntie," Bob suggested.

"No-o," she demurred, with her finger to her lips. "An auntie couldn't expect so many as that; but I dare say he brought her some, because—he knew that she did her best. He was a very kind daddy, and he loved the little children very much."

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