

"BONNY KATE." A TALE OF SOUTHERN LIFE.

BY
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CHAPTER XLIV.

"So it is, my dear.
All such things touch secret strings
For heavy hearts to bear.
So it is, my dear."

"What has happened to her? What did those people do to her?"

It is Mr. Proctor who asks this inevitable question—for firmly rooted in the minds of all Kate's friends is the opinion that "those people," to wit, Mr. and Mrs. Ashton, are in some manner accountable for the great change which has been wrought in her—when he finds himself alone with Janet, after his first meeting with the girl who, two years ago, embodied for him all that was brightest and most charming on earth.

Janet shakes her head gravely. "I am quite at a loss what to think," she answers. "In a degree, I know what has happened to her, but I do not know why it happened—and that puzzles me. But she says, and we must take her word for it, that the people of whom you speak were very kind to her—as kind as they know how to be. I confess it is hard for me to believe that, or anything else good of Florida Vaughn; but Kate would be torn by wild horses before she would say it if it was not so."

"Then what is the matter with her?" asks Mr. Proctor. "There is no good in saying she is 'out of health'—what has put her out of health? If ever there was a look of heart-break in any eyes on earth, it is in those eyes of hers," he goes on. "They used to be the most joyous I ever saw, and now they are the saddest."

"They are," says Janet. "It almost breaks my heart sometimes to see the look in them when she thinks no one is observing her—at sunset, for instance, when she gazes over the river, beyond the hills, like one who knows

"The weariness, the endless pain
Of waiting for some one to come
Who nevermore will come again."

"But for whom is she waiting?" says the young man; "or, rather, for whom has she ceased to wait?—for she gives me the idea of one who has said good-bye to hope. Janet, you are a woman, and women can read each other—you ought to be able to tell."

"I can tell something replies Janet. "Sit down here, and I will tell you all I know."

They have been strolling down the lawn in the soft, June twilight; and having now reached the bank of the little stream where Kate found her four-leaved clover, they sit down together on the warm, dry grass.

"Two heads are better than one, even if one is a blockhead," says Mr. Proctor, taking Janet's small hand in the clasp of his large one. "Tell me all you know. I don't ask from mere curiosity, but in order to see if there is anything to be done."

So Janet tells all that she knows—which is very little, and the mystery of which is beyond her fathoming. "Only this is certain," she says in conclusion—"Kate cares as much for Frank Tarleton as she ever cared, and yet there is some bar between them which she believes to be hopeless, and which is breaking her heart. She will not tell what it is—she will not say why she sent him away when he went to her and proved that she had suspected him of trifling without just cause—she will not give the least clew to what induced her to go abroad with the Ashtons, and so I cannot see what is to be done."

"Nor I," says Mr. Proctor, "for lovers' quarrels are things outsiders had best leave alone."

"But this is not a lovers' quarrel," says Janet. "Kate insists upon that. And it is not Frank Tarleton's fault—she insists upon that, also."

"Then, in the name of Heaven, whose fault is it?"

"That is the mystery—that is what I cannot find out. It is not in the least like Kate to be secretive—but for once she is so."

"It would not do to—to send for Tarleton, would it?" hazards Mr. Proctor, vaguely.

A flash comes into Janet's brown eyes. "That is likely!" she says. "Do you think if Kate was dying—and God knows she may be—she would wish us to put her so low as to send for a man who was always fickle as the wind, and who, by this time, no doubt, is sighing at some other woman's feet—indeed, for aught we know, may be married?"

Mr. Proctor is evidently unable to make any other suggestion, so he chews a piece of grass and the cud of meditation for several minutes before speaking again. Then he says:

"I told your cousin once that if I could serve her in any way, I would go to the end of the world to do it. I meant exactly what I said, and I mean it yet. I don't shine in counsel, as you perceive; but in action I think you might trust me. If now or hereafter you see anything to be done, let me know, and I will do it at any cost."

"I believe you would," says Janet, looking at him with affectionate eyes; "and if you don't hine in counse far better to act than to

talk; and best, the very best of all, to be a true-hearted gentleman."

There are others besides these two who would do much to serve Kate, to bring back the roses to her cheeks, and the starry lustre to her eyes; but as the days go on, deepening in summer loveliness, they bring no healing for her on their wings, nor does any means of cure reveal itself to the anxious eyes that watch her. Once she has tried to ride; but although the distance was short, and Diana's paces gentle, she was too much exhausted to repeat the experiment; so her exercise is limited to driving daily in the little phaeton, with Janet for whip. Along the winding, level road, by the river, where she and Tarleton so often cantered gayly, and where—for she can no more rid herself of these recollections than she can cease to breathe—she galloped at headlong speed the night she thought him dying, they bowl gently, when the rich sunset fires are kindled over the western hills, and the reflected glory glews on the tranquil breast of the river. Returning from one of these drives one evening, while the lingering twilight still holds the world under its spell of beauty, they find the family group as usual gathered on the piazza, but the tall young man who rises and comes forward to meet them, as Janet draws Madoc up, is not Will. In the dusk, neither of the girls recognize him until he speaks.

"How do you both do?" he says. "Kate, I am very glad to see you back again."

"Why, it is Randal!" cries Janet. "What do you mean by dropping down upon one like this?"

"Is there any harm in coming unannounced for once in a way?" he asks, with a slight laugh. "I have not been very well of late, and it is so horribly warm among bricks and mortar, that I got leave of absence and ran up here to the hills for a little coolness and rest."

He assists them out as he speaks, and Kate, who has not spoken yet, says, when he takes her hand:

"I am glad to see you again, Randal, and sorry that you are not well."

"Oh, my indisposition is only a trifle," he answers; but they have been giving me gloomy accounts of you, Kate. I hardly expected that a young lady who has been abroad for more than a year would come back an invalid."

"Why not?" she asks. "People die even in Paris, you know."

She says no more, but sitting down by her uncle begins to talk of her drive, and so it is that Randal does not see her until they go in to tea. Then, when the full light of the dining-room lamp falls on her, he, like every one else, is struck and shocked by the change in her appearance. He says nothing, but his eyes travel to her again and again, so full of wonder which is almost incredulous that, meeting them at last, she smiles.

"You can hardly believe that it is I, can you, Randal?" she says. "You think I must be an impostor, do you not? But the dogs all know me, so I must be Kate."

"You will be Kate as long as you keep your eyes and your voice," he replies; but you are more altered than—I thought possible."

"One can alter a great deal," she says, glancing with a little sigh into a mirror which once gave back the radiant bloom of a face which then well deserved the Homeric epithet of "joy-endowing."

The subject is not pursued beyond this point, for Kate's health is a topic the family are more inclined to shun than to discuss; but even after the frail figure and pale face have disappeared, they continue to haunt Randal's thoughts like an uneasy vision. It does not occur to him to connect Kate's failing health with the sacrifice which she made for him—since he did not learn then, and does not know now, the extent of that sacrifice; but, together with much weakness, he has also some good in his character, and prominent in the last is the capability of gratitude.

He does not forget that Kate saved him from moral and financial shipwreck when he was on the verge of both; and he is as sorry for her condition now as it is in his nature to be sorry for anything; in fact, he is so sorry that he takes Janet aside in the course of the evening and asks the oft-repeated question—"What is the matter with Kate?"

Janet is surprised by this proof of concern, for she has heretofore imagined and frequently declared that it is not in Randal to care for anything on earth beyond himself; but she reflects that it is according to the nature of things for Kate to win regard even from the selfish, so she answers him with the usual formula, giving the opinions of the doctors, and finally adding her own, as she sees—by the light of the moon falling broadly over them as they sit on the piazza—that Randal is interested.

"I am certain that I am living that her malady is more of the spirit than of the body," she says. "The doctors don't know what they are talking about—how should they? I do not doubt that she will die if this goes on, but I do doubt that it will be any physical disease which

will kill her—or at least any disease save what is brought on by regret and hopelessness. I always knew that love would be a terrible thing with such an ardent and faithful nature as hers," proceeds the speaker, with a heart-felt sigh; "but, in my worst anticipations, I did not think that it would kill her."

"Love!" repeats Randal. "Is that the matter? Who is she in love with?"

"She never has been in love with but one person," replies Janet. "Her heart is not a shuttlecock, like many people's—my poor Kate! I almost wish it was."

"With but one person!—then you must mean Tarleton! But I thought all that affair ended when she left here?"

"Which proves that you know very little about the matter. It is true that when Kate left here the affair was ended, because your friend, Mrs. Ashton, then Miss Vaughn, had made mischief and persuaded Kate that Frank was only trifling with her; but, as soon as he recovered from his wound sufficiently to be able to travel, he went straight to her, told the truth himself, and not only that, but confronted Miss Vaughn and made her tell it—or, at least, made her acknowledge that he had told it. Ah!" cries Janet, with kindling eyes, "there was a man for you! Women despise a laggard in love as much as they scorn a dastard in war; and Frank Tarleton could no more be the one than the other. When I heard of that, I forgave him everything that he had ever done or left undone, and I took him into my heart of hearts and crowned him there."

"I hope you told Proctor so," says Randal, with a slightly uneasy laugh—for praise of Tarleton is even yet far from music to his ear. "But I do not understand why, if things were made harmonious in this manner, Kate should be breaking her heart for him now."

"Nobody understands," says Janet, gloomily. "There is some mystery in the matter which cannot be brought to light. After this, and after Kate had rejected Mr. Fenwick because—

Miss Brooke says she told him—she was engaged to Frank Tarleton, she gave up the latter to go abroad with that odious Mr. Ashton. It is absolutely incomprehensible."

There is a moment's pause before—in a voice which he is not able to control as well as he should like to do—Randal says:

"And has she never explained to you why she did so?"

"Never; and that is one of the strangest parts of the matter. It is so unlike Kate to have a secret. She used to be as open as the day, and so she is now with regard to everything else. But nobody can draw anything from her about this. It was not Frank Tarleton's fault—that she declares—and beyond that she will not go. A necessity, which was a duty, forced them apart, she says; but, for the life of me, I cannot tell what necessity, or what duty it could possibly have been."

Silence follows. It is doubtful whether Randal can speak—he certainly does not do so. A knowledge of all that Kate has suffered for him and through him flashes on him like a revelation, and proves an overwhelming one. Selfish and weak though he may be, he has enough of manhood in him to shrink aghast at the thought of what a burden he has flung on the shoulders of a woman—of a tender, faithful and heroic girl. "If it is true—if she did this thing on that account—I deserve to be held up to the contempt of the world!" he thinks.

But to think this is one thing. To know what to do—to resolve what to do—quite another. At the mere imagination of uttering the truth, his tongue seems to cleave to the roof of his mouth, and, rising at last, he walks away in perturbation, leaving Janet alone.

CHAPTER XLV.

"Sweet is true love, though given in vain, in vain;
And sweet is death, who puts an end to pain.
I know not which is sweeter—no, not I:
Love, art thou sweet? then bitter death must be.
Love, art thou bitter? sweet is death to me.
O love, if death be sweeter, let me die."

If Randal looks haggard when he comes down to breakfast the next morning—thereby greatly exciting Mrs. Lawrence's anxiety—the fact is not remarkable. During the hours of the summer night he has slept little, despite the delightful coolness which the hills send through every open casement to make sleep a blessing and refreshment; and, when he rises, the disquieting thoughts which filled his pillow with thorns are still with him. If he were mailed in callous selfishness, as many people are, he would put Kate and her sacrifice aside as something beyond himself, and therefore beyond his orbit of interest; but he is not able to do this. The touch which opened his eyes seemed to open his heart as well, and, seeing his conduct painted in the colors of truth, he feels acutely all the consequences of it. What he does not see is how to remedy these consequences. There is no realization which should be more familiar to us, yet which at certain times comes upon us with the force of more overwhelming surprise, than the realization of our powerlessness to suspend the consequences flowing from our own actions. To-day it is in our power to turn the current of our lives to the right or to the left; to-morrow, having turned it, we can no more avert the merciless march of effect treading fast on cause than the river which is sweeping through dark forests and fertile plains can turn its waters back to the far, fair mountains which gave them birth.

Randal has vainly tried to persuade himself that the change in Kate is not a result of what

she did for him; but memory wakes, and, more terrible than a lion, recalls the expression of her face—which at the time he little heeded—when she gave him the cheque for which she had signed away her liberty and her love. He remembers the look in her eyes when to his question: "Did he give it to you as a free gift, Kate?" she answered, "No; but the conditions on which it was given only concern myself, and I am very glad to do anything to gain this." He asked no more, being too intent on his own great relief, but now he understands and reads all. "For every fault committed on earth, somebody must pay the cost," rings through his mind, like a sentence of doom; and for his fault, his grievous fault, he left Kate to pay the cost.

So through the hours of the night, while the girl of whom he thinks lies sleeping serenely as a child, with her curling lashes resting on her pale cheeks like the closed petals of a flower, his thoughts revolve in an unending circle. It is no wonder, therefore, that he looks badly when he descends to breakfast, or that he has scant appetite even for the pleasant meal set out amid roses, with the garden lying beyond the windows, and the notes of birds coming in with the balmy air, the floods of sunshine, and the odor of blossoming trees and shrubs.

Kate does not appear at breakfast, so he does not see her again until in the course of the morning he enters the sitting-room, and finds her admiring and discussing a squirrel which the children have brought in to exhibit. Randal looks on impatiently for a little while, then he bids the children "take the thing away," and when they have obeyed—for they stand very much in awe of him—he comes, sits down by Kate, and, greatly to her surprise, takes one of her hands, with which she is doing some crochet-work.

"How thin you are!" he says, looking at it compassionately. "There is hardly a feather's weight left of you. What does it mean, Kate?—what does it mean?"

"I fancy it means that I am wearing away 'like a snow-wreath in thaw,'" she answers, smiling.

"Wearing away to the land o' the leal!"

What tender expressions the Scotch have, have they not? I like that expression so much—"the land o' the leal!"

"I don't understand what has brought you to this pass," says Randal, going on with his own thoughts. "Janet tells me that she thinks your illness is more of the spirit than of the body."

"Janet is mistaken," answers Kate, quietly. "I have not a regret on earth—no, no one—so how could I be ill in the spirit? Don't trouble about me, Randal, pray! It is very good of you—but I wish you would not."

"How can I fail to trouble about you," he says, in a low voice, "when, for the first time—for the first time, Kate, as God hears me!—it has occurred to me that you are suffering from my fault?"

She looks up at him with eyes in which he reads only kindness and compassion.

"I am glad you have spoken of that matter," she says, lowering her voice as he had done, "because I am glad to tell you that if it were all to do over, with all that it cost multiplied a hundred-fold, I would do it gladly to have the pleasure of looking at my dear uncle, and thinking that I, even I, was able to have saved him from—well, you know from—well, you know from what. So it is with the rest; so it is with this old house, which is the home of honor and peace. I think: 'I have been allowed to save it'—and then I feel that that is enough to have lived for."

"And in saving it you have sacrificed yourself," says Randal. "Do I not see?—Kate, what was the condition on which Mr. Ashton gave you that money? I have a right to know—I have rested in selfish ignorance too long."

She shrinks away like one who avoids a rude touch. "Why do you wish to know?" she asks. "It is over and done with now."

"I wish to know because I must reckon up the full measure of my debt to you," he answers. "I can never discharge it—never on earth—but I must know. Kate, did you promise to give up Tarleton?"

But still she shrinks, and her eyes gather an expression of pain and sadness. Never, this side of eternity, will she think of how she bade farewell to all that made life worth living for, at Mr. Ashton's bidding, without feeling the old, bitter thrill of agony renewed.

"I see that you did," says Randal, after a minute's pause; "and I—I went away like a selfish coward, and left you to bear all the burden of my wrong-doing."

He buries his face in his hands, as he buried it on that day now far gone by, when he came to the girl in the full flush of her new-found happiness, and appealed for help. She gave it then as freely as it was in her to give all things, and now she gives what is more precious than "gold and a multitude of jewels"—kindly, generous words.

"It was not your fault, Randal," she says. "You could not tell that Mr. Ashton would make such a condition. Don't be sorry. I tell you again that I would rather have been allowed to do this thing, than to have been happy all my life long. Is not that enough?"

"For you, perhaps, but not for me," he answers, lifting his face. "Kate, is there no way of making things right again? I would hesitate at nothing—I think I should even be strong enough to tell—"