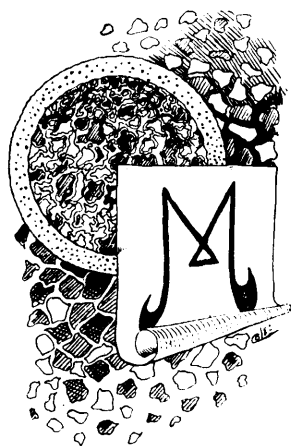


SIDNEY'S LOVE AFFAIR.

BY WALTON S. SMITH.

PART III.

'Twas But a Dream.



advisable to disturb him. It is so that a woman acts; if her affection is given to a man, be it in a motherly or sisterly way (or be it when her heart's purest and best love is poured out) she delights to study his comfort, and to minister to his wants.

This, however, is not the ponderous assertion of an authority on the subject. It is the humble, possibly the mistaken, idea of one, who, now that the remark has been made, would that he had not been so bold as to hazard a guess at that which no man knoweth. For it is not possible for the mind masculine to comprehend the shifting lights and shades whereby the impulses of a woman's heart are reflected.

Frank Merton threw away the stump of his cigarette, half raised himself on his elbow, then, under cover of the gathering dusk, indulged in a whole-hearted, comforting yawn. A yawn such as a man indulges in when he fancies the eyes of the world are not upon him. A yawn that was accompanied by a spasmodic stretch of his muscular limbs—a yawn, in fact, such as his soul loved!

But a pair of sharp, resentful blue eyes had marked the action; and a clear voice came, cutting the stolen luxury through and through as with a knife.

"It is dreadfully uncomfortable to have people performing all sorts of contortions under one's feet, Mr. Merton. I would move away but that the seat is such a nice one; and, besides, I was here first."

Poor Frank came at once to attention, and resumed the yoke that social requirements have tacitly agreed all men shall wear. He straightened his limbs and sat up, looking deprecatingly at the offended damsel.

"You have snubbed me three times already," he complained, in a voice lowered so as to be inaudible to all but her for whom the speech was intended. "What have I done?"

"Nothing;" in a tone of supreme indifference. "What should you have done? I merely object to have a restless, snake-like creature writhing at my feet; it makes me nervous!"

"Oh, I beg your pardon!" in a huffy tone. "Nobody likes to be called a writhing, snake-like creature!"

Miss Smiling looked furtively at him, and rejoiced to see that, at last, her sarcasm had pierced his armour. For the past hour she had been casting little veiled darts at him, sending them forth venomously, from between her pretty red lips. And lo! now he averred she had snubbed him three times. And it was only now he realized that she was offended. Verily it is a marvel how thick-skinned some men are!

"Why do you sit on a fellow so?" asked Frank, petulantly, after a short silence. "As a rule you are so good natured."

"Go to Miss Caldwell, then, if you are not satisfied." The moment she uttered the words she would fain have recalled them. She fancied his wits were subtle as hers, that he would read between the lines and discover the pique that was therein, beneath the indifference.

But Frank was too deep in his own wrongs for his brain to work through the web beneath which her true feelings lay concealed.

"Go to Miss Caldwell," he repeated indignantly.

"Why do you want me to do that?"

"Because," she answered, impulsively. "I know you admire her," then she laughed softly.

Frank's good humour was restored at once; he resumed his comfortable pose and said easily:—

"I might have known you were laughing at me; somehow, though, I didn't. Really I thought you were offended. Tell you rather a good joke, though;" and he raised himself so as to bring his face nearer to hers, and spoke in a subdued, confidential key:

"Poor old Sid is terribly gone there! He was quite scared when I pretended to be struck too. I did it to pay the beggar up for the way he monopolizes you. He does, sometimes, you know," and he looked saucily at her. "I get terribly jealous, too," he added, gravely. "Of course it is nonsense. Sid is the same to every girl, but I hate to see him going on so with you; although," he added, loyally, "he is one of the best fellows in the world."

She felt her heart go out to him; the steadfast way he stood up for his friend appealed strongly to her. But sternly she repressed all outward manifestation. And thus peace was restored between the two. That he had never known of a breach to be bridged, affected not the fact of its actual existence. Nor did it prevent him from experiencing a sense of delight in the friendly bearing she observed towards him.

Meanwhile Sidney March sat on in the gathering dusk, and gradually his mind returned to its normal state. From where he was he had an uninterrupted view of Miss Caldwell. And he found himself watching her with dreamy speculation.

How beautiful she was! And how infinitely removed from those jabbering triflers! He noted that though she occasionally looked from one to the other of those about her, and at times added a listless smile to the general laugh, she was obviously not attending to their talk. And there was that melancholy look on her face. Why had she that melancholy look? Why was she so absent and dreamy? Of what was she thinking? Pondering over some half formed ideal creation of her own sweet innocent fancy, maybe. In some dim Utopia,

perhaps, where dress is never alluded to, where frills, furbelows and the like are not. There men do not pay silly compliments, and nothing jars. What a treasure of a mind the girl must have to be sure!

And Sidney, carried away by his own ideal, indulged it with such persistence that ere long he had clothed the young lady with all possible and impossible graces.

Suddenly he heard his own name mentioned. Mrs. Peyton was speaking; she had noted his abstraction, and marvelled much at its being so prolonged. Now she spoke with the object of rousing him if possible.

"Sidney told me once, one might as well try to cause a commotion in the moon by throwing stones at the man, as hope to ruffle Mr. Merton by telling him of his faults." This was apropos to a chaffing remark of Mrs. Cowan's to the effect that she thought Frank was not above the folly of sentimental musings. The talk had turned to the proneness of woman to sentiment. Frank had brought down the wrath of the sex on him by contrasting the same unfavourably with the more practical nature of man. This Sidney was made aware of in the course of a very few minutes.

Miss Smiling said: "I don't see that sentiment is anything to feel ashamed of; it simply shows that one has imagination, and a natural longing for things above the sordid, uninteresting routine. Men have to bring everything down to facts and figures in their business, and so they lose their sentimental yearning. And that it is that makes them all so prosaic." And the speaker flashed a defiant smile at the complacent Frank. The latter still reclined gracefully at her feet, his head propped up on a cushion. He returned her smile, but made no reply. Evidently the subject was getting deep for him.

Miss Smiling seemed, however, well content to be smiled at by such a fine specimen of young manhood. She looked gratified, and arranged her face so that the profile was brought into a more becoming point of view for him. The darkness had well set in, but still there was sufficient light for Sidney to take note of this little by-play. Once his attention was aroused, his eyes were sharp to a degree. But the subject was one that interested him.

"Which is the more useful of the two," he demanded, gravely, addressing himself to the company in general, "the prosaic keenness of the busy man, or the sweet dreaming sentiment of the idle woman?"

They all looked up at the sound of his voice. "Why, Mr. March! have you been listening? We thought you were asleep, you were so quiet," remarked Mrs. Cowan.

"I have been deep in abstract contemplation," answered Sidney, grandly. He noted complacently that Miss Caldwell had turned with the rest, and was regarding him with a look of something akin to interest in her eyes. Now was his chance. Evidently his remark had roused her attention. He must strike while the iron was hot, and, if possible, weld their attention into a good impression. He leaned forward a little so as to have her face at a better angle for him to note any