

Two Men's Love.

CHAPTER I.

Who am I, and where am I going? Well, my name is Kora Effingham, and I am going to the Priory, Coldermere, Westmorland, the residence of my aunt, Lady Ilfradene, who is my guardian, though I have never seen her.

You see, my mother died when I was born, and my father when I was twelve years old.

Now, my father had rather peculiar ideas as to a girl's upbringing, and his will desired that I should be kept at school, even during the holidays, until I reached my eighteenth birthday, when I was to take up my residence with my aunt.

Yesterday I attained the age of sixteen years, so this afternoon I am on my way, as I said a moment ago, to my aunt, and I cannot help speculating a good deal, as the train rushes northward, as to what my unknown relations will be like, for I forgot to say that I possess a cousin, Sir Nigel Ilfradene as well as an aunt.

I am still absorbed in these speculations when we suddenly stop at Gilman Junction, and here, for the first time, my privacy is invaded—by a young man with a Gladstone bag, a bundle of rugs, and an air of literature.

'By Jove, a lady!' I hear him mutter between his breath, as his eyes fall upon my small person; then, leaning a little forward, he goes on in a louder tone: 'I must apologise for my somewhat unceremonious entrance—which had been accompanied by a good deal of noise—but, if I hadn't absolutely flung myself into the first compartment in which I could find an empty seat, the train would have gone on without me; it is very crowded this afternoon. Do say that you pardon my rudeness.'

'Indeed, I have nothing to pardon,' I rejoin a trifle shyly.

'It is very kind of you to say so. If I had allowed this train to go without me, it would have meant my staying at the junction all night. I am going to a little, out-of-the-world spot called Coldermere, and, after this train, there isn't another one there until six o'clock to-morrow morning.'

'How very odd!' is my involuntary exclamation. 'I am going to Coldermere, too.'

'Are you?'—and he favors me with a glance which is a decidedly curious one, and which fills me with some little wonder. 'As you said, "How very odd!" Fancy two people, strangers to each other, alighting at Coldermere Station from the same train. I only hope that such an unprecedented event will not prove too exciting for the brains of the stationmaster and solitary porter.'

'I hope it won't,' I laugh, quite forgetting that I am talking to a man who is a perfect stranger to me. 'Is Coldermere, then, really such a very, very out-of-the-world place?'

'You are not acquainted with it, then?'

'Not in the least.'

'I will describe it to you as well as I can,'—again favoring me with a glance which I still cannot help thinking is a somewhat curious one. 'The village consists of certainly not more than twenty houses, with a population of, perhaps, a hundred inhabitants. It stands on the edge of a wild moor and the nearest town, Highminster, is twenty miles away.'

'Then how does it happen to possess a station?'

'Because it happens to possess a Lord of the Manor. Sir Nigel Ilfradene, of the Priory, is a "big gun," and the station was built for his convenience.'

Sir Nigel Ilfradene is my cousin, I say, quietly.

'Your cousin?' in a tone of surprise. 'Then, pardon the question, please; are you going to the Priory?'

'I am.'

'It is certainly not my fancy this time that he looks surprised, though what there is in my simple statement to cause him surprise, I cannot imagine.'

I have a good mind to ask him, and—yes, I will.

'Why are you surprised?' I ask, in the tone of one who means to be enlightened. 'Surely there is nothing surprising in what I said!'

'Not at all,' he returns quickly. 'It was only—'



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'Yes?' It was only—what?'

'That—or—that the Priory is such a dull place, that the idea of your living there did for a moment take me by surprise,' he answers, though with some confusion.

'But my aunt and cousin live there.'

'Very true.'

'And, if they do not find it dull, why should I?'

For a moment he is silent, then—

'Well, perhaps you will not,' he says, with a smile. 'To confess the truth, I was judging your feeling from my own. I am the sort of fellow who must—or—live in a crowd, you know.'

'I see,' returning his smile.

Then, after a moment's hesitation, I ask—

'Do you—are you acquainted with my aunt and cousin?'

Again, what is there in my simple question to cause anybody the least embarrassment?'

'Yet embarrassed by it my companion evidently is, and, for a full half-minute, he stares out of the window beside him in silence; then—'

'I have not the honor of Lady Ilfradene's acquaintance,' he says, slowly, 'but I am slightly acquainted with Sir Nigel. I wonder, Miss Ilfradene, if—'

'But I am not Miss Ilfradene,' I interrupt, laughing; 'I am Kora Effingham. My father was Lady Ilfradene's brother.'

'Thank you. I beg your pardon.'

'And now that you know to whom you are talking,' I go on, demurely, 'may I not know to whom I am talking?'

'Certainly,' with a bow. 'I am Leonard Josslyn, Miss Effingham—very much at your service.'

And then, for some unathomable reason, we both laugh.

The shadow of the evening is by this time beginning to draw over the flying landscape, and, as I sit gazing out into the warm summer twilight, I find myself mentally repeating those well-known lines of the poet Longfellow—

The day is done, and the darkness
Falls from the wings of night,
And a sweet star is waiting downward
From an eagle in his flight.

Thus far do I get in my reflections, when the voice of my fellow-traveller suddenly awakens me out of them, and, with something of a start, I turn towards him.

'I beg your pardon,' I murmur. 'You were saying—'

'That in another two minutes we shall reach Coldermere,' he responds, with a smile.

This is welcome news to me, and, springing to my feet, I gather my impediments together, so that, when the train does stop, I have nothing to do but to spring out upon the platform.

With anxious eyes, I gaze around me, while Mr. Josslyn kindly departs to the luggage van to rescue my trunk, and then, all at once, a deep, musical, though somewhat drawing voice falls upon my ears.

'I beg your pardon,' it says coolly, 'but I think you must be my cousin, Kora Effingham?'

'And you must be my cousin, Nigel Ilfradene,' I returned, shyly glancing up at the tall, dark man, who has emerged out of the gathering darkness.

'I am,' with a bow, but not making the least offer of his hand, which chills me not a little; the omission of a handshake seems such an unaccountable, not to say unfriendly, act, that I have given the dogcart in to meet you,' he informs me next, 'and it is waiting your convenience in the road. We can only take one of your boxes with us, the luggage cart will bring you rest in the morning, so if you will point out to me the particular one you wish to have with you, I—by the-by, I suppose you have them—the trunks, I mean—taken out of the luggage van?'

'A gentleman who travelled down with me from Gilman Junction is kindly seeing after them,' I answer; 'I believe you are acquainted with him—he is Mr. Leonard Josslyn—'

'Leonard Josslyn?' my cousin ejaculates, staring at me as though he thought me just a trifle mad.

'Yes, Leonard Josslyn,' I retort. 'He got into my carriage at Gilman Junction.'

But how did you come to—

The rest of Nigel's sentence, however, I am not destined to hear, for he abruptly cuts it short, as he sees Mr. Josslyn himself rapidly coming towards us.

He greets my cousin with a pleasant 'How do, Ilfradene?' which Nigel acknowledges merely with a shadowy nod; then he turns to me.

'Your trunks are ready, Miss Effingham,' he says, gravely. 'I have left them in the care of the porter; what shall I tell him to do with them?'

'Excuse me,' my cousin's slow, cold tones interpose ere I can speak. 'I will look after Miss Effingham's belongings; she need not trouble you any further, Mr. Josslyn.'

Beneath this most decided snub, Leonard Josslyn colours hotly, an angry gleam flashing into his blue eyes; then, lifting his hat, he would turn away without another word, only I detain him.

'Thank you,' I say, in grateful accents, and as he takes my extended hand into his warm, close clasp, the cloud leaves his brow, and he returns my smile.

'May I not say au revoir instead of goodbye?' he asks.

'Certainly; it shall be au revoir, Mr. Josslyn, if you wish it to be,' I answer, readily, 'and—with a wicked glance at Nigel, who looks colder, lazier, and more displeased than ever—I should like it to be au revoir, too; I hate the word goodbye.'

What his reply would be, I know not; I am destined never to hear it, for laying his

hand upon my arm, Nigel coolly leads me away, and, before I have recovered from my surprise at his audacity, I find myself seated in the waiting dog-cart. Then my cousin once more addresses me.

'Perhaps you will be kind enough to say now which of your trunks you wish to have with you,' he remarks, in chilling accents.

'The small black one with the strap round it,' I answer, in accents to match his own.

At last we are off. After bowling swiftly through the one only street which the village of Coldermere appears to possess, we turn into a broad, smooth road, stretching as far as the eye can see across the

The moon has by this time risen in all her glory, casting a flood of almost moon-tide radiance over the slumberous earth, sharply defining every bush, every brown-green rock, and turning the "bold torrent" which "high-rows down" the mountain, into a dazzling ribbon of virgin silver.

And then my eyes wander from the landscape to the face of the man beside whom I am sitting, and who has never once spoken since we left Coldermere Station. How dreadfully gloomy he looks; I wonder if this is his normal expression, or can I be the cause of it? For a minute I continued to meditate in silence, then—

'I certainly cannot congratulate you upon your conversational powers, Cousin Nigel,' I remarked, sarcastically. 'Pray, do you never talk, or is it that you don't consider me worth wasting your conversation on?'

'Whoever you like,' he answers, with a calm nonchalance which makes me downright angry.

'I think you are very rude,' I retort, elevating my chin at least three inches higher into the air than I am wont to carry it.

'Not at all,' is the reply. 'I say, "Whoever you like," because I know, from experience, how profitable it is to argue with one of your perverse sex.'

'Did ask you to argue?' I interrupt, my wrath increasing.

'Perhaps you did not; but, if I had answered that I never do talk, except when compelled to do so, or if I had said that you are not worth wasting my conversation on, you would certainly have started some sort of an argument, which must have been an utterly pointless one, seeing—'

'Pray do not trouble to explain any further,' I interrupt again. 'I am sorry that I "compelled" you to speak, but you may rest assured that I will trouble you very, very little in the future with my conversation.'

'Thank you,' and such is the coolness of his tone, the nonchalance of his manner, that I feel as though I could turn and rend him.

Again for a space there is a dead silence between us; then, to my secret, but carefully veiled, astonishment, Nigel suddenly, and of his own accord, addresses me.

'How did you come to make that fellow Josslyn's acquaintance?' he demands, curiously.

But it is my turn to be mute now, and, judging from the story stare I fix upon the horse's ears, I might be as deaf as one of the giant rocks we are constantly passing.

'Do you hear me, Kora? Nigel asks, in an impatient, not to say ill-tempered, tone finding that I do not speak. 'How did you come to make Josslyn's acquaintance?'

Still, silence is the only answer his question receives.

'Oh, very well, remain silent if you wish to do so,' he says at last, in a sort of doesn't-matter-to-me voice. 'But, if you don't answer my question, I shall draw my own conclusions from your silence. I shall conclude that you have become acquainted with him in some way of which you are now ashamed.'

With steadily increasing wrath I have listened to the above nasty speech, and now that it is finished, I turn upon its author with scarlet cheeks and flashing eyes.

'You may draw what conclusions you please,' I say, hotly. 'Your opinion is to me a matter of the most supreme indifference; but now that we are on the subject, I will tell you what my opinion of you is. When I started from school this morning, I sincerely hoped that my new relations would—would like me, even as I was prepared to like, to love them; but now—well, I am still prepared to love Aunt Di, for, judging from the letters she has sent me, she must be everything that is sweet and good; but you, Cousin Nigel—'

I pause.

'Yes, what of me?' he asks, with a very perceptible sneer.

'I—hate you!'

As calmly as possible he meets my angry gaze, not a muscle of his face moving beneath it, save that the corner round his mouth deepens and grows more haughty still; then, with a careless shrug of his shoulders, he removes his eyes from mine, softly muttering beneath his breath—

'Jove! what a little vixen it is!' and at the same instant, we abruptly turn into a broad winding avenue, at the further end of which is a double flight of stone steps, leading up to the front door of the Priory.

Without waiting for Nigel's assistance, I spring to the ground, and in another moment or two I am in the great marble paved entrance hall, shyly greeting my aunt.

'Welcome to the Priory, my dear,' she says, kindly, and, as I look up into the pleasant, handsome face bent above mine, I know that, however much I may detest my Cousin Nigel, I shall dearly love my Aunt Di.

CHAPTER II.

I have been three weeks in my new home, and, on the whole, I am very happy. As I thought she would be, my aunt is everything that is sweet and kind.

As to my cousin, I do not see very much of him, but quite as much as I want to see; I do not like him, and I never shall like him, I am perfectly certain.

At this particular moment I am wandering along the summit of the lofty cliffs which encircle this part of the coast as far as the eye can reach, and, suddenly, whom should I come face to face with but Mr. Leonard Josslyn, whom, somehow, I am constantly meeting in my walks.

He has hitherto been hidden from my view by a giant rock, locally known as the Priory's Cross, it being in the shape of a rude cross, but directly he does catch sight of me, he hurries forward with an eager smile and, nothing loth, I stop and greet him.

'A beautiful day, is it not?' I remark, brightly.

'It is, indeed,' he agrees. 'You are taking a walk; may I accompany you—a little way at any rate?'

'But I am not going any further,' I object; 'I was just about to retrace my way homewards, when we met.'

'Then may I not accompany you on your homeward journey? I am myself going to the Priory.'

'You are going to the Priory?' I ejaculate; and then, all at once remembering that my astonishment at his destination is not altogether polite, I go on hastily: 'Of course you may accompany me, Mr. Josslyn, if you wish to do so.'

'Thanks much. I shall not be in your way.'

'Decidedly you will not. I was only wishing five minutes before I met you, that I had a companion.'

'You are beginning to find life at the Priory rather dull, then, I am afraid?'

'Oh, no, I am not! Quickly; "not in a general way, that is, but there are moments when the—the most hermit-like people long for a little society."

'I see,—with his pleasant smile—"but surely Lady Ilfradene or Sir Nigel—"

'My Aunt, Mr. Josslyn,' interrupting him, 'never walks, except in the garden; she is something of an invalid, and much exertion is beyond her.'

'But Sir Nigel?' in a questioning tone.

'I beg your pardon, though, Miss Effingham, you will think me unduly curious, I am afraid—'

'Not at all,' I interrupt again, in my most gracious tone. 'I think if it is very kind of you to take an interest in—or my proceeding, and I don't in the least mind answering your question. You evidently labour under the delusion that I have only to appeal to my cousin when I feel a little lonely; but, Mr. Josslyn, I might just as well ask the man in the moon to descend to my trivial depths, as my cousin Nigel; besides, he has done condescend to bestow a fraction of his society upon me, I don't think I should enjoy it, for, to confess the truth, I am just a wee bit afraid of him.'

'You are afraid of him! Surely he has never dared to—to—'

'Box my ears,' I finish, demurely; 'oh, dear, no! It is his manner, which is so very superior; it always makes me feel that I am a mere school-girl. And then his temper; my own is certainly anything but angelic, but his—'

With an expressive shrug of my shoulders I pause, and Mr. Josslyn laughs.

'Yes, I can quite agree with you there,' he declares. 'I quite expect, too, that I shall get something more than a touch of his temper this morning.'

'You are coming up to the Priory, then, to see my cousin?' I question.

'I am.'

'Well, you won't find him at home; he has gone over to Surbiton, and will not be back much before seven o'clock. Can I deliver him any message from you, Mr. Josslyn?'

He hesitates; then slowly he draws a square white envelop out of an inside pocket in his coat, and holds it towards me.

'This letter, Miss Effingham—it you will kindly give it yourself to Sir Nigel as soon after his return home as you possibly can, you will be conferring a great kindness upon me, and—er—and—'

'Of course I will give it him, with pleasure,' I interpose, quickly.

'And now, Mr. Josslyn, you really must not come with me any further, now that you are not coming up to the Priory. You will have a sufficiently long walk back to Coldermere as it is.'

Judging from his face and manner, Mr. Josslyn would like to combat this last determination of mine; but after a moment's hesitation, he does not, and with a handshake we separate.

Of course, I tell Aunt Di of my meeting with him; but, for some inexplicable reason or other, I do not mention the letter for Nigel which is reposing in my pocket, and which I hand to that gentleman when we meet them in the drawing-room before dinner.

I cannot help fancying that he would

have submitted me to a cross examination of some sort concerning it, only that Aunt Di enters the room before he can put even one question to me.

He does not at once read the letter, but after a glance at its superscription, slips it into his pocket; and, whether he is pleased to receive it or not, his face continues to wear the haughty, inscrutable mask peculiar to it.

He does not join us in the drawing-room after dinner, but adjourns to his own particular suite of apartments; and at eleven o'clock Aunt Di and I seek our respective rooms, though I do not at once go to bed.

Instead, I pick up 'A Fair Admirer,' and prepare to indulge in a short read ere seeking the arms of Morpheus.

But my short read resolves itself into a long one, for—

'Ding-dong, ding-dong, ding-dong.'

With quite a nervous start I spring to my feet, letting my book fall to the floor. It is actually a quarter to twelve. Nearly a whole hour has elapsed since I said good night to Aunt Di.

I must certainly be going to bed now, or I shall be very apt to over sleep myself in the morning; and, thinking thus, I proceed with my nightly toilet, which finished, I cross to the window of my bedroom furthest from my bed, to draw up the blind.

It is a whim of mine to sleep with this blind up, that the morning light may early stream into my room.

What a beautiful night it is! So beautiful, in fact, that I cannot resist the temptation of gazing a while at the tarry scene which lies spread out before me.

Immediately beneath my window is a wide expanse of soft green turf, and, if there were such beings as sprites and elves they would surely be holding a merry revel upon it to-night.

Of course, these ever-flickering shadows are merely caused by the dancing leaves of the sentinel elms which skirt the lawn. The moon is responsible for much that is mysterious and weird, particularly when she is as bright as she is to-night; yet where her silver rays cannot penetrate, how very dark it is, almost—

But what is that?'

Vigorously I rub my eyes. No, I am not dreaming; a shadowy figure is crossing the grass-plot beneath me.

Upon whom, upon what am I gazing—upon a man, a woman, or—upon a visitant from another world?'

The figure is shrouded from its neck to the ground in a loose, dark garment of some sort, not unlike a monk's robe; while over its head, completely hiding its face, is drawn a hood or cowl.

Like one fascinated, I continue to stare down upon the weird form, until slowly it glides round the corner of the house, and is lost to sight.

Then, with a sudden icy chill tingling through my every vein, I creep into bed, though it is almost daylight ere I can go to sleep. And even then my sleep is haunted and disturbed by vague fears and broken dreams; so that I am not surprised when Aunt Di exclaims, over breakfast, that I am looking "dreadfully pale," and anxiously inquires if I am not feeling well.

'Oh, yes! thank you, auntie; I am quite well,' I answer. 'But—I did not sleep very profoundly last night. That is, perhaps, the reason why I am looking pale.'

'It is my belief, Kora, that you sit up reading when I send you to bed,' she declares, shaking her head.

'Well, yes, I do sometimes,' I confess. 'And you did so last night.' Nigel breaks in, with an abruptness which is startling.

'I did,' I agree, a touch of defiance involuntarily creeping into my tone; then fixing my eyes steadily upon his face, I go on: 'It was a quarter to twelve before I threw my book aside, and even then I did not go straight to bed. It was such a lovely moonlight night, that I stood gazing out into the garden for nearly half an hour.'

'You did what?' Nigel demands, curtly; and it is only my fancy, or is there indeed, a note of anxiety in his voice?'

It there is, I ignore it and continue, placidly—

'I stood looking out into the garden for nearly half-an-hour, so that it was past twelve before I went to bed.'

'Then it is no wonder that you look washed out this morning,' Nigel retorts, in his nastiest tones; and, without another word, he pushes his chair back from the table, and stalks out of the room.

I feel disgusted, and I believe that my disgust must be clearly written on my face, for, glancing at Aunt Di, I see that she is regarding me with a smile—a smile in which there is nevertheless, a touch of sadness.

'He is a perfect bear,' I declare angrily. 'Yes, he is, Aunt Di—at any rate, he is to me, and you know he is. Now, cousins—'

(CONTINUED ON FIFTEENTH PAGE)

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