

A Foolish Young Man;

Or, the Belle of the Season.

CHAPTER XII.

Ida walked home through the rain very thoughtfully; but not sadly; for though it was still pelting in the uncompromising Lake fashion, she was half-conscious of a strange lightness of the heart, a strange brightness in herself, and even in the rain-swept view, which vaguely surprised and puzzled her. The feeling was not vivid enough to be happiness but it was the nearest thing to it.

And without realizing it, she thought, all the way home, of Stafford Orme. Her life had been so secluded, so solitary and friendless, that he had come into it as a sudden and unexpected flash of sunlight in a drear November day. It seemed to her extraordinary that she should have met him so often, still more extraordinary the offer he had made that morning. She asked herself, as she went with quick, light step along the hills, why he had done it; why he, who was rich and had so many friends—no doubt the Villa would be full of them—should find any pleasure in learning to herd cattle and count sheep, to ride about the dale with only a young girl for company.

If anyone had whispered, "It is because he prefers that young girl's society to any other's; it is because he wants to be with you, not from any desire to learn farming," she would have been more than surprised, would have received this offer of a solution of the mystery with a sense of incredulity; for there had been no candid friend to tell her that she possessed the fatal gift of beauty; that she was one of those upon whom the eyes of man cannot look without a stirring of the heart, and a quickening of the pulse.

No; she assured herself that it was just a whim of Mr. Orme's, a passing fancy and caprice which would soon be satisfied, and that he would tire of it after a few days, perhaps hours. Of course, she was wrong to humor the whim; but it had been hard to refuse him, hard to seem churlish and obstinate after he had been so kind to the night her father had frightened her by his sleep-walking; and it had been still harder because she had been conscious of a certain pleasure in the thought that she should see him again.

As she entered the hall Jessie came in by the back door with her apron full of eggs.

"I saw you come in, Miss Ida, so I thought I'd just bring you these to show you; they're laying finely now ain't they?"

Ida looked round, from where she stood, going through the form of drying her thick but small boots against the huge log that glowed on the wide dog-trot.

"Yes; that is a splendid lot, Jessie!" she said, with a smile. "You will have some to send to market for the first time this season."

"Yes, miss," said Jessie, deftly rolling the eggs in the basket. "But I'm thinking there won't be any need to send them to Bryndermere market. Jason's just been telling me that the new folks up at Brae Wood have been sending all round the place for eggs and butter and cream and fowls, and Jason says that he can get so much better prices from them than from Bryndermere. He was thinking that he'd put aside all the cream he could spare and kill half a dozen of the pullets—if you don't object, Miss Ida?"

Ida's face flushed, and she looked fixedly at the fire. Something within her protested against the idea of selling the dairy produce to the new people at Brae Wood; but she struggled against the feeling.

"Oh, yes; why not, Jessie?" she said; though she knew well enough.

"Well, miss," replied Jessie, hesitatingly, and with a questioning glance at her young mistress's averted face. "Jason didn't know at first; he said that selling the things at the new house was different to sending 'em to market, and that you mightn't like it; that you might think it was not becoming."

Ida laughed. "That's pride on Jason's part; wicked pride, Jessie," she said. "If you sell your butter and eggs, it can't very much matter whether you sell them at the market or direct. Oh, yes; tell Jason he can let them have anything we can spare."

Jessie's face cleared and broke into a smile; she came of a race that looks after the pennies and loves a good "deal." "Thank you, miss!" she said, as if Ida had conferred a personal favor. And they'll take all we can get, for there's a mortal size of folk up there at Brae Wood. William says that there's nigh upon fifty bedrooms, and that they'll all be full. His sister is one of the kitchen-maids—there's a cook from London, quite the gentleman, miss, with rings on his fingers and a piano in his own room—and Susie says that the place is all one mass of ivory and gold, and that some of the rooms is like heaven—or the queen's own rooms in Windsor Castle."

Ida laughed. "Susie appears to have an enviable acquaintance with the celestial regions and the abode of royalty, Jessie."

"Yes, miss; of course, it's only what she's read about 'em. And she says that Sir Stephen—that's the gentleman as owns it all—is a kind of king, with his own body servant and a—a—I forget what they call him; it's a word like a book-case."

"A secretary," suggested Ida. "Yes, that's it, miss! But that he's quite simple and pleasant-like and that he's as easily pleased as if he were a mere nobody. And Susie says that she runs out after dinner and peeps into the stables, and that it's full of horses and that there's a dozen carriages, some of 'em grand enough for the Lord Mayor of London; and that there's a head coachman and eight or nine men and boys under him. I'm thinking, Miss Ida, that the Court—the Court was the Wayne's place—or Bannardale Grange ain't half so grand."

"I daresay," said Ida. "Is the lunch nearly ready, Jessie?"

"Yes, miss; I was only waiting for you to come in. And Susie's seen the young Mr. Orme, Sir Stephen's son, and she says that he's the handsomest gentleman she ever saw, and she heard Mr. Davis tell one of the new hands that Mr. Stafford was a very great gentleman amongst the fashionable people in London; and that very likely he'd marry one of the great ladies that is coming down. Mr. Davis says that a duchess wouldn't be too fine for him, he stands so high and so—Susie says he's just what she says 'thank you' quite like a common person. But there, how foolish of me! I'm standing here chattering while you're wet through. Do 'ee run up and change while I put the lunch on, Miss Ida, dear."

When Ida came down her father was already at the table with his book open at his elbow, and he scarcely looked up as she went to her place. Now, as a rule, she gave him an account of her rides and walks, and told him about the cattle and the progress of the farm generally, of how she had seen a kingfisher or noticed that the trout were rising, or that she had started a covey of partridges in the young wheat; to all of which he seemed scarcely ever to listen, nodding his head now and again and returning often to his book before she had finished speaking; but to-day she could not tell him of her morning walk and her meeting with Stafford Orme.

So she sat almost silent, thinking of what Jessie had told her, and wondering why Stafford Orme should leave the gay party at the villa to ride with her. Once only in the course of the meal did her father speak. He looked up suddenly with a quick, almost cunning, glance, and said:

"Can you let me have some money, Ida? I want to order some books. There's a copy of the Percy 'Reliques' in the catalogue I should like to buy."

"How much is it, father?" she asked. "Oh, five pounds or will do," he said vaguely. "There are one or two other books."

She made a hasty calculation: five pounds was a large sum to her; but she smiled as she said:

"You are very extravagant dear. There is already a copy of the 'Reliques' in the library."

He looked confused for a moment, then he said:

"But not with these notes—not with these notes! They're valuable, and the book is cheap."

"Very well, dear," she responded, and she went to the antiqarian bureau and, unlocking it, took a five-pound note from a cedar box.

He watched her covertly, with a painful eagerness. "I suppose you have a large nest egg there, eh, Ida?" he remarked, with a quavering laugh. "No; a very little one," she responded. "Not nearly enough to pay the quarterly bills. But never mind, dear; there it is. You must show me the books when they come; I never saw the last you ordered, you know!"

He took the note with an assumption of indifference, and with a gleam of satisfaction in his sunken eyes. "Didn't you?" he said. "I must have forgotten. You're always so busy; but I'll show you these, if you'll remind me. You must be careful of the money, Ida; you must keep down the expenses. We're poor; very poor; you know; and the cost of living and servants is very great—very great."

He wandered off to the library, muttering to himself, with his book under his arm, and the five-pound note gripped tightly in the hand which he had thrust into the pocket of his dressing gown; and Ida, as she put on her habit, and went into the stable-yard to have the colt saddled, sighed as she thought that it would be nice to have just, for once, enough money to meet all the bills and buy all the books her father coveted.

But her melancholy was not of long duration. The colt was in high spirits, and the task of impressing him with the fact that he had now reached a responsible age and must behave like a horse, with something else before him in life than kicking up his heels in the paddock, soon drove the thought of the poverty from her mind; and she sent the blood leaping warmly and wildly in her veins.

She spent the afternoon in breaking in the colt, and succeeded in keeping Stafford Orme out of her thoughts; but he slid into them again as she sat by the drawing-room fire after dinner—the night's air often cool in the dales all through early summer—and recalled the earnestness in his handsome face when he pleaded to be allowed to "help her."

She sat up for some little time after her father had gone to bed, and as usual, she paused outside his door and listened. All was quiet there; but as she was brushing her hair she thought she heard his door open.

batling with the sudden fear which possessed her; then she stole out on to the corridor. The old man was standing at the head of the stairs as if about to descend; and though she could not see his face, she knew that he was asleep. She glided to him noiselessly and put her hand upon his arm softly. He turned his sightless eyes upon her, evidently without seeing her, and fighting against the desire to cry out, she led him gently back to his room. He woke as they crossed the threshold, woke and looked at her in a stupefied fashion.

"Are you ill, father? Is there anything you want?" she asked, as calmly as she could.

"No," he replied. "I am quite well; I do not want anything. I was going to bed—why have you called me?"

She remained with him for a few minutes, then left the room, turning the key in the door. When she had gone he stood listening with his head on one side; the door opened behind him and he looked with a sunning smile at the five-pound note which had been tightly grasped in it.

"She didn't see it; no, she didn't see it!" he muttered; and he went stealthily to the bed and thrust it under the pillow.

CHAPTER XIII.

The morning broke with that exquisite clearness which distinguishes the Lakes when a fine day follows a wet one; and, despite her anxiety on her father's account, Ida, as she went downstairs, was conscious of that sense of happiness which comes from anticipation. She made her morning tour of inspection of the stables and the dairy, and ordered the big chestnut to be saddled directly after breakfast. When her father came down she was relieved to find that he seemed to be in his usual health; and in answer to her question whether he had slept well he replied in the affirmative, and was mildly surprised that she should inquire. Directly he had gone off to the library she ran upstairs to put on her habit.

Her father was walking up and down the terrace slowly as she came out, and he raised his head and looked at her absently.

"I shall probably ride into Bryndermere, father," she said. "Shall I post your letters? I know you will be anxious for that one to the booksellers to go," she added, with a smile.

His eyes dropped and he seemed disconcerted for a moment, then he said: "No, no; I'll send it by Jason; I've not written it yet," and he turned away from her and resumed his pacing to and fro.

Ida went to the stable-yard and got on to Rupert by the aid of the stone mounting block from which the old stable-boy had climbed laughingly to the white horse which figures in so many pictures of the Merry Monarch, and rode out of the court-yard, watched with pride by Jason.

Before she had gone far he ran after her.

"If you're riding by West Hill, Miss Ida, perhaps you'd better look at the cattle shed there. William says that the roof's falling in."

"Very well," she called back in her clear voice.

"Oh, and, Miss Ida, there's a big stone washed out of the wall, then thinking it was to be put back or well have the meadows above flooded this winter."

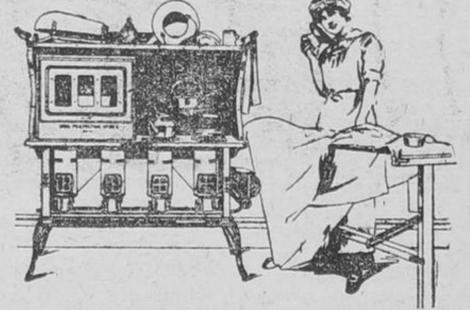
She laughed and nodded, and put Rupert to a trot, for she knew that while she was within hearing distance Jason would bombard her with similar tales of woe. Not a slate sill, or a sheep fell lame, but the matter was referred to her.

She had resolved that she would not ride straight to the stream, and she kept up the hill-side, but her eyes wandered to the road expectantly now and again; but there was no sign of a horse-man, and after half an hour had passed a sense of disappointment rose within her. It was quite possible that he had forgotten the engagement; perhaps on reflection he had seen that she was quite right in her objections to his strange proposal, and he would not come. A faint flush rose on her face, and she turned Rupert in the valley of the hill where she could not see the road. But she had no sooner got on top than she remembered that no time had been mentioned, or, if it had, that she had forgotten it. She turned down, saw Stafford riding along the valley in desperate haste, and yet looking about him uncertainly. Her heart beat with a quickened pulse, sending the delicate color into her face, and she pulled up, and leaning forward with her chin in her hand, watched him dreamily.

He rode the hunter, and he had made a change in his dress; in place of the riding suit, which had smacked of London and Hyde Park, he wore a rough but light coat, thick cord breeches and brown leather gaiters. She smiled as she knew that he had tried to make himself look as much like a farmer as possible; but no such air of birth and breeding which distinguished Stafford Orme; the air which his father had been so quick to detect and to be proud of. She noticed how well he sat the great horse, with what ease and "hands" he rode over the rough and treacherous ground. Suddenly with a wave of his hand came her relief and gladness on his handsome face as he spoke to the dogs, who clamored round him.

"I was so afraid I had missed you," he said. "I am late, am I not? Some people kept me after breakfast."

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"You are not late; I don't think any time was mentioned," she responded, quickly, though her heart was beating with a strange and novel sensation of pleasure in his presence. "I scarcely expected you."

He looked at her reproachfully. "Not expect me! But why?"

"I thought you might change your mind," she said.

He chuckled a quick response, and said instead:

"And now, where do we go first? You see I have got a bit heavier horse. He's a present, also, from my father. What do you think of him?"

She eyed him gravely and critically. "He's nice-looking," she said "but I don't like him so well as the one you rode yesterday. Didn't I see him slip just now, coming up the hill?"

"Did he?" said Stafford. "I didn't notice. To tell you the truth, I was so delighted at seeing you that I don't think I should have noticed if he had tumbled on his nose."

"Oh, it wasn't much of a slip," she said, quickly, to cover her slight confusion at his candid confession. "Shall we go down to the sheep first?"

"Anywhere you like," he assented, brightly. "Remember, I'm your pupil."

She glanced at him and smiled. "Very big pupil."

"But a very humble one," he said. "I'm afraid you'll add, 'a very stupid one' before long."

As they rode down hill Stafford stole a look at her unobserved. Ever since he had left her yesterday her face had haunted him, even while Maude Falconer, in all her war paint and sparkling with jewels, had been singing, even in the silent watches of the night, when—strange thing for him!—he had awakened from a dream of her; he had recalled the exquisitely lovely face with its gentle, girlish eyes, and he felt now, with a thrill, that she was even more lovely than she had been in his thoughts and his dreams; that the nameless charm which had haunted him was stronger, more subtle, than even his fancy had painted it. He noticed the touch of color just below her white slender column of a neck, and wondered why no other woman had ever thought of wearing a crimson tie with her habit.

"What a grand morning," he said. "I don't think I ever saw a morning like this, so clear and bright. Those hills there, look as though they were quite near."

"It's the rain," she explained. "It seems to wash the atmosphere. My father says there is only one other place which has this particular clearness and brightness after rain; and that's Ireland. There are the sheep. Now," she smiled, "do you know how to count them?"

He stared at her. "You begin at number one, I suppose," he said.

"But where is number one?" she said, with a smile.

(To be continued.)

Time Alone Would Tell.

Mrs. Ross had a daughter who was of the opinion that her voice was her fortune. The mother sent her to a well known vocal teacher for lessons, and after a short time called on the teacher to ascertain his opinion.

"Do you think," she asked the professor, "that my daughter will ever become a noted singer?"

"I gant zay," replied the professor. "She may. She dell me she gome of a long-lived family."

Not in the Picture.

Mr. Cyrus Green—Molly, what is that picture called in the catalogue?

Mrs. Green (reading)—Cows after Rosa Bonheur.

Mr. Green—By Gosh! I see the cows, but where is Rosa Bonheur?

An Unreasonable Demand.

"I say, old man, you've never returned that umbrella I lent you last week."

"Hang it all, old man, be reasonable; it's been raining ever since."

"I hope," said one wife to another, "that you never nag your husband." "Only when he's beating the rugs," said the second one. "When he is thoroughly irritated he makes a better job of it."

Magistrate—Officer, what is this man charged with? Constable—He's a camera fiend of the worst kind, yer worship. "But this man shouldn't have been arrested simply because he has a mania for taking pictures." "It isn't that, yer worship; he takes the cameras."

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