

A Foolish Young Man;

Or, the Belle of the Season.

CHAPTER XLII

She did not resist, but resigned herself to his embrace, as if he still had the right to take her in his arms, as if she still belonged to him. She had been under a great, an indescribable strain for several hours and his sudden presence, the look in his eyes, the touch of his hands, deprived her of the power of thought, of resistance. To her and to him at that moment, it was as if they had not been parted, as if the events of the last few months were only visionary.

With surrender in every fibre of her being she lay in his arms, her head upon his breast, her eyes closed, her heart throbbing wildly under the kisses which he pressed passionately upon her lips, her hair, the while he called upon her name, as if his lips hungered to pronounce it.

"Stafford!" she said, at last. "It's really you! When—? Her voice died away, as if she were speaking in a dream and her eyes closed with a little shudder of perfect joy and rest.

"Yes; it's I!" he responded, in a voice almost as low as hers, a voice that trembled with the intensity of his passion, his joy in having her in his arms again. "Last night I came down by the first train—I waited at the station for it—I came straight from the docks."

She drew a happy sigh. "So soon? And you came straight here? When I saw you just now, I thought it was a vision; if the dogs had not been here—I remembered that dogs do not see ghosts. Oh, Stafford, it is so long, so very long, since I have seen you, so sad and dreary a time! Tell me—ah, tell me everything! Where have you been? But I know! Stafford, did you know that I saw you the day you sailed?" she shuddered faintly. "I thought that was a vision, too, that it was my fancy; it would not have been the first time I had fancied I had seen you." He drew her to the bank, and sinking on it held her in his arms, almost like a child.

"You saw me! You—there in London! And yet I can understand, dearest, I did not hear of your trouble until a few weeks ago. But I must tell you—"

"Yes, tell me, I long to hear! Think, Stafford! I have not heard of you—since I saw you at the concert in London one night—"

"He started and held her more tightly. "I looked round and saw you; and when you turned and looked up towards me, it seemed as if you must have seen me. But tell me! Oh, I want to hear everything!"

The spell wrought by the joy of his presence still held her reason, her memory,

in thrall; one thought, one fact, dominated all others: the fact that he was here, that she was in his arms, with her head on his breast as of old. And the spell was on him as strongly; how could he remember the past and the barrier he had erected between them?

"I went to Australia, Ida," he said in a low voice, every note of which was pitched to love's harmony; it soothed while it rejoiced her. "I met a man in London, a farmer, who offered to take me out with him. You saw me start, you say? How strange, how wonderful! And I, yes I saw you, but I could not believe my senses. How could it be my beautiful, dainty Ida, the mistress of Herondale, standing on the dirty, equalid quay! I went with him and worked with him on his cattle-run. Do you remember how you taught me to count sheep, Ida? How often when I was riding through solitary wastes I have recalled those hours, every look of your dear eyes, every curve of those sweet lips—hold them up to me, dearest—every tone of your voice, the low, musical voice, the memory of which had power to set every nerve tingling with longing and despair. The work was hard, it seemed unceasing, but I was glad of it; for sometimes I was too weary to think; too weary even to dream of you. And it was sad business dreaming of you, Ida; for, you see, there was the waking."

"Do I not know?" she murmured, with something like a sob, and her hand closed on his shoulder.

"My employer was a pleasant, genial man, my fellow-laborers were good fellows; I could have been happy, or, at least, contented with the life, hard as it was, if I could but have forgotten; if I could even for a day have lost the awful hunger and thirst for you; if I could have got you out of my mind, the memory of you out of my heart—but I could not!"

He paused, looking straight before him; and gazing up at him, she saw his face drawn and haggard, as if he still thought himself separated from her. Then, as if he remembered, he looked down at her and caught her to him with a sudden violence that almost hurt her.

"But I could not; you haunted me, dearest, all day and all night! Sometimes, when the men were singing round the camp fire, singing and laughing, the sense of my loss would come crushing down upon me and I'd spring to my feet and wander out into the starlit silence of the vast plains and spend the night thinking of all that had passed between us. At other times, a kind of madness would catch hold of me, and I'd join the wildest of the gangs, and laugh and sing, and drink with the maddest of the lot."

She drew a long breath of comprehension and pity, and hid her eyes on his breast. He bent and kissed her, murmuring penitently:

"I'm not fit to kiss you, Ida. I did not mean to tell you, but—I can't keep anything from you, even though it will go against me. One night the drinking led to fighting and I stood up to a son of Arak, a giant of a fellow; and we fought until both of us were knocked out; but I remember him going down first, just before I fell. I went from bad to worse. The owner of the run—it was called Salisbury Plain—spoke a word of warning, and I tried to pull up, tried to take to the work again and forget myself in it; but—ah, well, dearest, thank God you would not understand that you cannot know what a man is like when he is at odds with fate, and is bed-fellow with despair."

"I not!" she murmured again, with the fullest understanding and compassion. "Oh, Stafford, there have been times, black times when I learned to know why some women fly to drink to drown their misery and our misery is as keen, yes, keener than yours. For we are so helpless, so shackled; we have nothing else to do but think, think, think! Go on, dearest! I seem to see you there!"

"Thank God you could not!" he said, huskily. "The black fit passed for a time and I settled down to work again. One day there was an attack upon the farm by the blacks, as they are called. I was fortunately at home, and we managed to beat them off and save the stock. It was a valuable one and my employer, thinking too highly of my services, made me a present of half the value. It was a generous gift, a lavish one, and altogether un-called for."

"Oh, Stafford, do you think I don't know that you risked your life, as plainly as if I had been told, as if I had been there!" she said, her eyes glowing, her breath coming faster.

Stafford colored and turned away from the subject.

"It was a large sum, and Mr. Joffler—that is the name of the owner of Salisbury Plain—advised me to invest it in a run of my own; there was enough to buy a large and important one. I went down to Melbourne to see the agents, and—there no such thing as fate, or chance, Ida? Indeed there is!—as I was walking down one of the streets, I heard my name spoken. I turned and saw the stableman from the 'Woodman Inn,' Mr. Groves's man."

"Henry," murmured Ida, enviously; for had he not met her lover!

"Yes, he was surprised, but I think glad, to see me; and we went to a hotel and talked. For some time I couldn't bring myself to speak your name; you see, dearest, it had lived in my heart so long and I had only whispered it to the stars and in the solitary places, that I—I shrank from uttering it aloud," he explained with masculine simplicity.

Ida's eyes filled with tears and she nestled closer to him.

"At last I asked after the people, and nervously mentioned the Hall and—"

"Miss Ida. Then the man told me. What else is there to tell, dearest, that I had on her head and stroked her hair soothingly, pityingly."

"He told me that your father was dead, had died suddenly, and worse—for it was worse to me, dearest—that you had been left poor, and well-nigh penniless."

She sighed, but as one who sighs, looking back at a sorrow which has passed long ago and is swallowed up in present joy.

"I asked him where you were, and when he told me that you had left the Hall, and that it was said you were working for a livelihood, that you were in poverty, I—dearest, I felt as if I should go mad. Think of it! There was I, all those thousands of miles away, with all that money in my possession, and you, the queen of my heart, the girl I loved better than life itself, in poverty and perhaps wanting a friend!"

"When I had taken my passage," he went on, succinctly, "I sent Henry up to the run to fill my place, and with him a letter to explain my sudden departure; and the next day Heaven being kind to me—I should have gone out of my mind if I had had to wait—we sailed. I stood at the bow, with my face turned towards England, and I craved the days before I could get there and begin my search for you."

"And you came here, Stafford, first?" she said, to lead him on; for what an unspeakable bliss it was to listen to him!

"Yes; I knew that I should hear some tidings of you here. There would be a lawyer, a steward, who would know. I little thought, hoped, to see you yourself, Ida. I came from the station to-night to look at the old place, to walk where we had walked, to stand where we had stood. I stopped under the trees here and looked at the house, at the terrace where I had seen you, watched for you. I could see that men had been at work, and I thought that you had sold the place, that the new people were altering it, and I cursed them in my heart; for every stone of it is sacred to me, and they, as I stood looking, and asking myself where you were, the dogs came. Even then it did not occur to me that you were still here—at the Hall—and when I saw you—"

He stopped, and laughed shortly, as a man does when his emotion is almost too much for him.

"I'd made up my mind what to write to you; but, you see, I had no thought, no hope, of seeing you; and now—ah, well, it's hard to think of anything, with you in my arms! But see here, Ida, there isn't any need to say anything, is there? You'll come back with me to that new world—"

What was it, what word in the tender, loving speech that, like a breath of wind sweeping away a mountain mist, cleared the mist from her mind, woke her from her strange dream-like condition, recalled the past, and, alas! and alas! the present. With a low cry, a cry of anguish—one has heard it from the lips of a sufferer waking from the anodyne of sleep to fresh pain—she tore herself from his arms and with both hands to her head, stood regarding him, her face white, something like terror in her eyes.

"Ida!" he cried, rising and stretching out his hands to her.

She shrank back putting out her hand as if to keep him off.

"Don't—don't come near me! Oh, how could I have forgotten!—how could I? I must have been mad!"

She wrung her hands and bit her lips as if she were tortured by the shame of it. His arms fell to his sides, and he stood and looked at her.

"Ida, listen to me! I—I, too—had forgotten. It—it was the delight of seeing you. But, dearest, what does the past matter? It is past, I have come back to you. She turned to him with suppressed passion.

"Why did you leave me?" came painfully from her white lips.

His face grew red and his eyes fell before her. Here and there, at times his sacrifice of her to his father's need had seemed not only inexcusable but shameful; the shame of it now weighed upon him.

"Ida, listen to me!" for, as he had hesitated, she had turned from him with a gesture of repudiation. "Listen to me! There was nothing else for me to do; fate left me no alternative. My father—Ida, how can I tell you!—my father's good name, his reputation, were in my hands. He had done so much for me—everything! There has never been a father like him; my happiness stood between him and ruin—ah, not mine alone, but yours—and I sacrificed them! If you knew all you would forgive me the wrong I did, great as it was. I think now, if the time were to come over again, that—yes, I should have to do it!" he broke out. "I could not have stood by and seen him ruined and disgraced without stretching out my hand to save him."



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"It was for your father's sake?" she said, almost inaudibly.

"Yes," he responded grimly. "And it saved him—saved his good name, at any rate. The rest went—you have heard?"

She made a gesture of assent. He drew a long breath, and held out his hand to her.

"Can you not forgive me, Ida? If you knew what the sacrifice cost me, how much I have suffered—see here, dearest—he drew still closer to her—"let the past go. It shall, I swear! There is a limit to a man's endurance, and I have passed it. I love you, Ida, I want you! Come back with me and let us live for each other, live for love, dearest, I will teach you to forget the wrong I did you. It's very little I have to offer you, a share in the hard life of a farmer out there in the wilds; but if you were still mistress of Herondale, instead of poor—"

Half unconsciously she broke in upon his prayer.

"I am still—what I was. I am not poor. My father was a rich man when he died."

Stafford regarded her with surprise, then he moved his hand, as if he were waving away the suggestion of an obstacle.

"I am glad for your sake, dearest; though for my own I would almost rather that you were as poor as I thought you; that I might work for you. Why do you stand and look at me so hopelessly? What else is there to divide us, dearest?"

Her lips opened and almost inaudibly she breathed:

"Your honor."

He winced and set his teeth hard. "My honor!"

"Yes, you have pledged your word, you have made your bargain—the price was paid, I suppose; you say so. Then in honor you belong to—her."

The color flamed in his face and his eyes grew hot.

"You cast me off—you drive me back to her!" he said scarcely knowing what he said.

"Yes!" she responded, faintly. "You belong to her—to her only. Not to me, ah, not to me! No, no do not—come near me, do not touch me! I had forgotten—I was mad—but I have remembered, I am sane now."

Driven almost beyond himself by the sudden revulsion from joy and hope to doubt and despair, racked by the swift stemming of his passion, Stafford's unreasoning anger rose against her; it is always so with the man.

"You send me away—to her! You—you do it coolly, easily enough! Perhaps you have some other reason—someone has stepped into my place—"

It was a cruel thing to say, even in his madness. For a moment she cowered under it, then she raised her white face and looked straight into his eyes.

"And if there has, can you blame me? You cast me aside—you sacrificed me to your father's honor. You had done with me," her voice vibrated with the bitterness which had been her portion for so many dreary months. "Was the world, my life, to cease from that time forth? For you there was—someone else, wealth, rank—for there was there to be nothing, no consolation, no part or lot in life! Yes, there is one—one who is both good and noble, and—"

She broke down and covering her face with her hands turned away. Stafford stood as turned to stone, as if he had lost the sense of sight and hearing. Silence

reigned between them; the dogs who had been sitting watching them, rose and shivering, whined complainingly, as if they were asking what was amiss.

It was the woman—as always—who first relented and was moved to pity. She moved to the motionless figure and touched him on the arm.

"Forgive me! I—I did not mean to wound you; but—it is true, we cannot undo the past. It is there, as solid, as unmovable, as that mountain; and it is between us, a wall, a barrier of stone. Nothing can remove it. You—you will remember your honor, Stafford?" Her voice quavered for a moment, but she steadied it. "You—you will not lose that, though all else be lost? You will go to her?"

He looked at her, his breath coming thick and painfully.

"Oh, dearest! you are hard—" he broke out at last.

"I am just! Oh, my dearest, my dearest!" She took his hand and laid it against her cheek, her lips. "Don't you see how much it costs me to send you away? But I must! I must! Go—oh, go now! I—I cannot bear much more!"

His hand fell—it shook—fell softly, tenderly on her head.

"God forgive me for the wrong I have wrought you, the tears I have caused you!" he said, hoarsely. "Yes, I dare say you're right, and—I'll go! Let me see you go back to the house—One kiss, the last, the last! Oh, Ida, life of my life, soul of my soul!"

He caught her to him, and she lay in his arms for a moment, her lips clung to his in one long kiss, then she tore herself away from him and fled to the house.

Stafford went on to "The Woodman," where Mr. Groves was surprised, and, it need scarcely be said, overjoyed to see him. To him, the young man was still "Mr. Stafford," and he eyed him with an amazed and respectful admiration; for though Stafford had never been a weakling, he had grown so hard and muscular and altogether "fit" that Mr. Groves could not refrain from expressing his approval.

"Ah, there is nothing like roughing it, Mr. Stafford, sir," he said, "I can tell in a minute when a man's 'grit' right through, and been doing square and honest work. It seems strange to us—commoner folk that you gentle-folks should be so fond of going through all sorts of hardships and perils for just the fun of it; but, after all, it's not to be wondered at, for that's the kind of spirit that has helped Englishmen to make England what it is. But you're looking a trifle pale and worn to-night, sir. I've no doubt it's the want of dinner. If I'd known you'd been coming—but you know I'll do my best, sir."

He did his best, and Stafford tried to do justice to it; but it was almost impossible to eat. And he checked the almost overmastering desire to drink too much.

(To be continued.)

"It is the duty of everyone to make at least one person happy during the week," said a Sunday School teacher. "Now, have you done so, Johnny." "Yes," said Johnny promptly. "That's right. What did you do?" "I went to see my aunt, and she was happy when I went home."

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