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Kit Kennedy

BY S. R. CROCKETT.

CHAPTER I.

THE BELLE OF THE PARISH.

The world is very fair at four of the morning during the heats of high summer. The flowers which have slept with drooping heads and during a few brief hours retracted their perfume, as a woman withdraws herself when she has ventured overmuch, prink themselves again and give forth a good smell.

So at least thought Christopher Kennedy, scholar and gentleman, as he aroused himself in the accustomed dawn to go forth to meet with Lilius Armour.

It was a strange time for wooing, yet their only; for Fate, which takes upon itself to interfere with all things, had made Christopher classical master in the academy of Cairn Edward, and Lilius the daughter of his chiefest enemy, Matthew Armour by name, farmer in the moor farm of Black Dornal, and Ruling Elder in the Cameronian congregation called the Kirk on the Hill.

For the Elder, having returned one night from the market of Dumfries, where he had both seen and heard Mr. Christopher Kennedy, had sternly forbidden one of his family to hold any further intercourse with that blasphemer and ribald, a man (so he declared) as alien from grace as he was outlaw from the Covenants.

This, had Matthew Armour known it, was an excellent device, only it came too late. For Lilius, his sole daughter and the desire of his eyes, was already so holden in the toils of the schoolmaster's bright glances and loving words that not for father or mother, kirk or covenant, would she break the bond.

So, exactly at four of the old-

fashioned gold-faced watch which had ticked all night by his bedstead in the house of Tibby Allen, spinster, gossip, and householder in Queen Street, Cairn Edward, Mr. Christopher Kennedy stepped out into the little white street of the burgh, clean swept of people, and with the sunshine flooding it silently and empty from end to end, just as if it were a fine summer Sabbath day during the morning diet of worship.

The young man appeared to consider it the most natural thing in the world that he should rise with the lark, and betake himself to the heather and woodland with his botanical case at his back. He offered no explanation when he returned at eight to his frugal breakfast, though he had not brought back a single plant and his boots were "a fair sight to be seen," as his landlady averred. "What wi' lashin' through the dew on the meadow and splashin' through the dubs o' the moss, they are nocht less than a disgrace. And how he can for verra shame expect a professin' Christian woman to clean them in time for him to gang to the schule at nine passes Tibby Allen's comprehension!"

But neither his landlady's caustic comment over the wall of the pig-stye at the yard-head to her neighbor, Mistress Sheepshanks, nor yet the window blinds which were so gingerly put aside with one finger to enable burghers' daughters, in extreme dish-able, to speculate on what took hand-some Christopher Kennedy tramping along the streets of Cairn Edward so early, had the slightest effect on that headstrong young man.

Yet despite his early rising Christopher had been late at the social club (christened by himself The Tuneful Nine) in the Cross Keys the night

before. Yesterday he had wrestled all day in the grammar school with the stupidity and the yet more irritable cleverness of the rural youth. He had slept the short, broken, uneasy slumber of overheated blood and un-governed temperament. Nevertheless, this morning he rose with a certain elastic readiness, humming a stave of a Greek song he had set to his own music as he drew on his clothes after a hasty bath. He was ready to walk ten miles before breakfast, help Lilius Armour to gather in her cows, make the prettiest and most convincing of love in the shady places of the loaning, encounter (if he had bad luck) the stern eyes of her father, and after all be back again in time to see the early 'prentices taking down their snuff-brown shutters, and stacking them in neat piles behind the shop doors in High Street of the little town, at the exact moment when his brother teachers were turning sleepily out of their beds to the music of the morning milk-cans rattling at their doors.

So, recklessly, and yet with a sort of kingly prodigality which to many women made him irresistible, the young classical master, concerning whose future his professors had entertained such great expectations, flung away with both hands the un-returning gold of love and youth.

He was easily first at the trysting-place. For half an hour he sat alone, whistling and twirling a spray of early hawthorn in his hand, on the edge of the heathery bank above the scanty pasture fields of the farm of Black Dornal. His post of vantage was situated just at the place where the great black and purple flow of peat-muir overlooked with sullen eyebrow the green fields, bowing trees, and white homestead buildings which till now had closed in the life of Lilius Armour. Here long day and short day she had been happy, lifting a light-heart carol level with the larks, and laying her head in as lowly a nest with the falling of the night—that is, till Christopher Kennedy came by and the song ceased.

Then in a moment all was changed. The old life grew inexpressibly dull, not to be thought of, or returned upon for a moment without a shudder—a dreary waste of time wanting alike profit, beauty, or happiness.

Lilius, too, like her lover, had slept but little and lightly that short, breathing, merciful night of latest May. She had been making up her mind to speak a word of soberest intent to the man she loved—always a difficult matter to a loving woman, who rightly and naturally would rather listen while such words are whispered in her ear.

At last she came out. The quick eyes of Christopher Kennedy saw her pass, a slender slip of a maiden enough, athwart the dusky tree-shadowed farmyard. Then she was momentarily lost to sight as she threw open the gate, ready for the cows she was to bring back with her upon her return. She reappeared presently a more definite flitting figure, her light summer print indefinite against the fresh whitewash of the barn wall. Then the long green loaning swallowed her, and only a fleck of shadowy sun-bonnet nodding over the hedge-rows or the glimmer of swift whiteness through a gap told the classical master of the approach of the girl who was risking so many things to meet him.

Rising from his seat he went forward a hundred yards to greet her, and then stood aside in a hidden nook to feast his eyes unseen upon her eager, untouched beauty as she came towards him. For the space of a blackbird's burst of song in the cop-pice behind him, he saw no further sign of his sweetheart. But as the song ceased he heard the patter of quick footsteps. And lo! there she was beneath him, her wide blue eyes looking eagerly ahead, her hair confined by a single ribbon as was the custom of the place and time, then as if resenting the restraint going spraying and tendriling down her back. Her lips were parted with expectation and the haste she had made uphill. Well might a man erect himself and hasten to meet such a maid as Lilius Armour was at twenty-two.

"Why, little girl," he said, smiling easily down upon her, "you are late this morning. What kept you? I have been waiting her more than half an hour!"

At the first unexpected sound of his voice she caught her hands together upon her bosom with a little frightened cry. She stood still a moment while Christopher Kennedy ran towards her down the bank. Then with her hands clasped and held beneath her chin she yielded herself to be gathered against his breast.

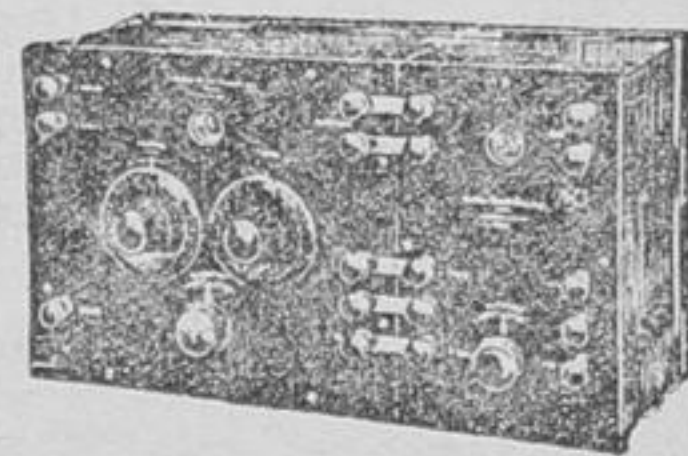
There she rested a little while breathlessly as in a shelter, while his hand caressed her shoulder and was lost among her hair. She tried to speak, but, something suddenly choking her utterance, she put her head down, and unclasping her hands she slid them up till they rested on the young man's shoulders.

"Lilius, Lilius—dearest," he said, reproachfully, trying to look into her eyes, "what is the matter? This is not like my girl—to break down like this. What have they done to you now? Have they been speaking against me again? Well, that is nothing new!"

Then, receiving no answer, he submitted with a sigh to the incomprehensible nature of women and let the girl weep her fill, only at intervals touching her lightly with his hand upon the further cheek which ran wet with warm tears. Once, too, he stooped and kissed her hair, from which the sunbonnet had fallen back, when

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he had first drawn her to him. Then he took the girl yet closer to him and was silent also.

After a little she exhausted herself, and rested quiet with her face against Kennedy's coat, nestling as a bird does in a safe covert in time of storm. Her bosom fluttered like a bird's, and a sharp dry sob clicked recurrently in her throat, so that he felt all her slender body shake within his arms.

"Now can you tell me?" he said, tenderly, and added nothing more. For, foolish in all else, this young man was wise in love—that is, if the object of love-wisdom be to win other love, not to hold it worthily when it is won.

"Be patient with me, Chris," she whispered, "be very patient, and I will tell you all. It is so hard, so hard for me at home. I want you to take me away. They speak against you all the time, or at least my mother does. My father says nothing, but I know his heart is more and more set to hate you ever since that night he saw you in Dumfries. O Chris, if you love me, how can you go to such places?"

The young man moved impatiently and uneasily under the hands which were laid upon his shoulders with so gentle a restraint. His bold admir-

ing gaze quailed before the honest upward appeal of the wet blue eyes now for the first time turned upon him. He hesitated before he spoke. (To be continued.)

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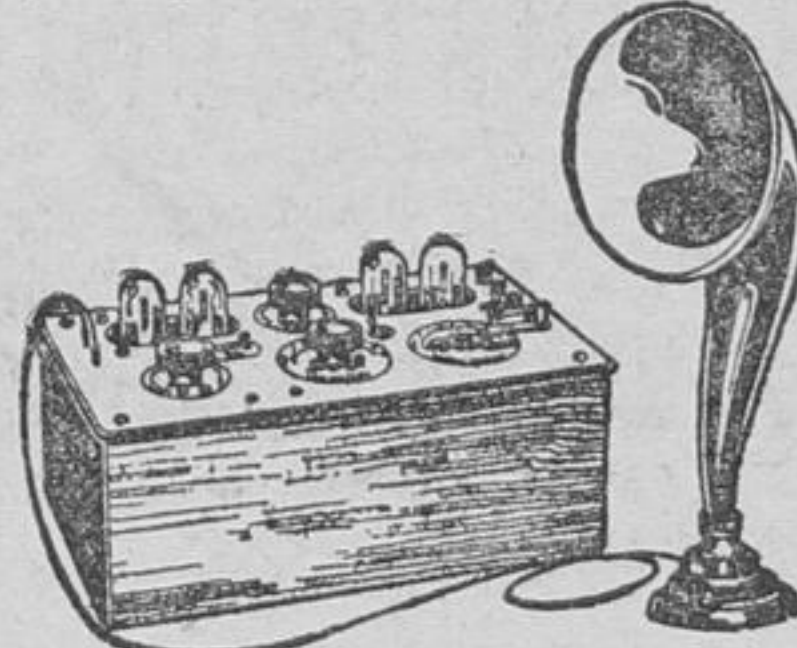
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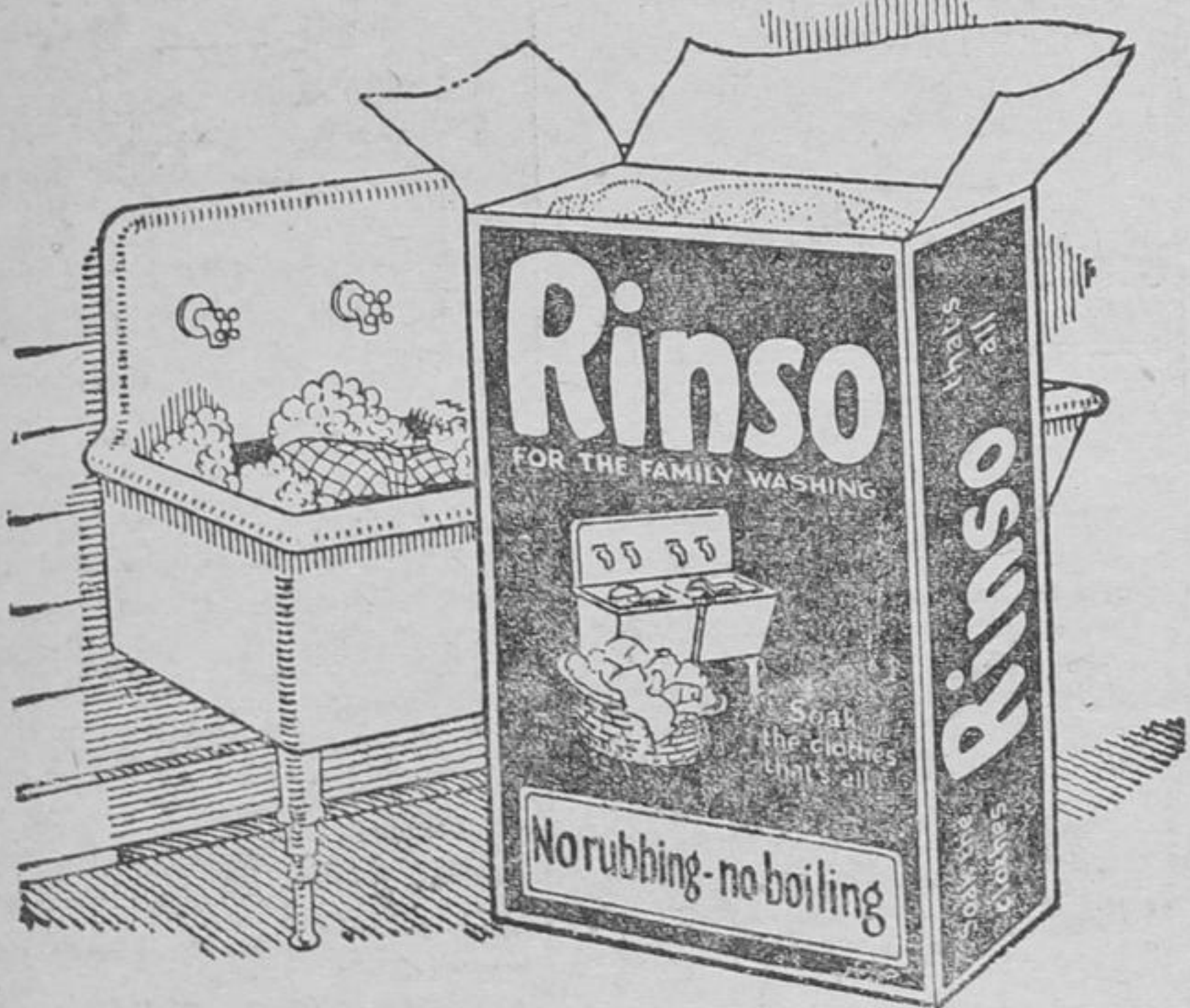
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