IN SPITE OF HERSELF.

Two of Mrs. Mortimer's excellent guests, gentlemen, were lolling in the smoking-room this lovely summer's morning, puffing lazily at their cigars as they endeavored to while away the time between breakfast and dinner in conversation and smoke.

One of them, who had just languidly informed his companion that his very marked attention to Isabel Whyte, his hostess's pretty but impecunious niece, was naught but "a little flirtation," was a tall, handsome man of about thirty years of age, with that unmistakable air of distinction which travel and good breeding stamp indelibly upon the face of those whom fickle fortune favors with her smiles. Leonard Ashley was a thorough man of the world.

The room in which the two men sat smoking opened through wide, French, windows on to the lawn, but on account of the heat of the morning sun the venetian blinds were drawn and the view of the garden shut off.

"Well, well, old boy," murmured, if you are not going any deeper than a bit of a flirtation," said Tom Mayne, after his friend's drawling reply to a little attempted advice. "But I tell you, old fellow, it looks extremely like an old fashioned courtship to outsiders, and the aunt has got her eye on it, and appears well satisfied with the turn affairs are apparently taking." His voice was quite a hint up in that quarter when you throw her over, and you had better take my advice and do it easy; commence now and cool off by stages, for you can't carry it much further without coming to some understanding. Oh, by the way, is the girl flirting too? Quite a bright little thing, she is. Pity there's not a penny in the family; that's the only drawback to her making a man a very clever little wife; but of course as it is, it's quite out of the question."

"Quite," drawled Ashley, lighting a fresh cigar. "Let's go down river and have a paddle before dinner," and the subject of Isabel Whyte was thrown away in smoke, as he lazily rose from his chair and walked to the window leading to the lawn.

As Ashley drew up the blinds and stepped out on to the terrace, a white muslin hustled round the corner of the building out of sight.

"Will Mr. Ashley join us at tennis this afternoon?"

It was Isabel who spoke, looking up brightly into the face of Leonard Ashley, who was by her at luncheon.

Pretty little Isabel, whose penniless virtues as a rich man's wife had been weighed in the balance and found wanting, was a favorite with all the men of the house who was playing with her heart, with her innocent, trusting, captivated soul looking out through here.

"Will you, Isabel, Miss Whyte, if I may play as your partner."

She blushed her assent, with her blue eyes fixed on her plate.

The game that afternoon must have proved remarkably pleasant to Isabel, whose flushed and eager face beamed with supreme satisfaction as she accompanied Leonard across the lawn after having been ignominiously defeated in five games.

Victory does not seem to be necessary to complete their happiness, however, for even Ashley showed an unusual earnestness as he walked by the side of Isabel with that exquisite sling of the shoulder, and his tall form bent slightly, as he talked in low tones to the girl.

His languid expression had given way to one of interest, and his heavy-lidded eyes snapped in a way that was in sharp contrast with his usual largnor.

"Remember, Isabel," he whispered, as he parted with her at the house, "I am to have all the dances this evening!"

"Yes, all."

With a tell-tale blush she sped up the stairs.

Leonard walked thoughtfully off to his apartment, a mixture of strange feelings creating a turmoil in his breast.

When he reached his room, before changing his toilet for the evening, he threw off his coat and hastily seating himself at the table began to write hurriedly a letter. He never ceased until the task which was a long one, was completed, except now and then to pause for a moment to find some suitable expression, for the wording of the epistle appeared to need considerable care.

He finished, at last, and carefully folding it placed it in an envelope, which he superscribed in his best hand:

"Wilfred Ashton, Esq., the Pines, Devon."

"There, uncle mine, this will be a little surprise for you at dinner to-morrow."

With these words he laid the letter upon the table and began with unusual care to arrange his evening dress.

"Come, Isabel, out here the moonlight is beautiful, and the air is sweet with the June flowers. We have ample time to enjoy a walk among the shrubberry before the next dance. This breeze will cool you; your face is flushed and heated. Besides," he whispered, bending tenderly over her, "I have something to tell you that will make it worth your wonder the stars and in the silvery moonlight. Come."

A strange gleam came into Isabel's eyes which Leonard did not see, and the thin lips were set in a straight line; but without a word she slipped her arm through his, and they moved out together into the glorious night.

For some moments they walked on among the trees and plants of the excellently kept park, without either speaking. He seemed nervous and ill at ease, apparently seeking for words to express his thoughts. She was waiting.

"Isabel," he said, finally, suddenly finding his voice as they reached a rustic bench at a remote part of the garden, "Isabel, let us here a moment, the moon is bright here, and I want you to read a letter I have written this afternoon. Will you?"

"Certainly, Mr. Ashley if you desire me to."

She spoke as though she felt no interest in the letter or its contents, and the tone was so different to her usual girlish, affectionate style, that Leonard looked quickly at her. She was not looking at him, but was gazing intently into the bushes at the other side of the path, and an expression of mingled pain and triumph, alike unusual to her, filled her eyes.

He did not see this, and taking the envelope from his pocket, which he had directed to his uncle that afternoon and left unsealed, he took the letter from it and handed it to her.

"Read it."

As he spoke all traces of his customary languid, careless manner left him, and his eyes sparkled with inward excitement as he eagerly watched her unfold and read the letter.

In an undertone, half aloud and half to herself, she read without changing her set expression:

"Dear Uncle,—I have changed my plans somewhat since I last talked with you, when you desired and I acquiesced, that I should pay my court to the daughter of your old friend. Time and since then my plans are altered, and feeling that you are now my nearest living relative, it is right you should know of my intentions. The amount of it all is I have given my heart into the keeping of Miss Isabel Whyte, who has yielded to my love, and consented to become the wife of your affectionate nephew, LEONARD."

"Ah, ha,—Let us hear from you."

As Isabel finished Leonard dropped on his knee, and taking her hands, cried, quickly,—

"Isabel, darling! may I send it? Will you give me the right? Say you will, dear. See I am waiting. You love me, you do love me, have seen it in your eyes and in your words. Speak, Isabel; do not look so cold and calm!"

She turned her eyes upon him, still with that strange expression, and, with a half smile, said,—

"Would not that be carrying the joke a trifle too far, Mr. Ashley?"

"Joke?" gasped Ashley. "What do you mean, Isabel? You cannot think I am speaking in jest!"

"I mean, Mr. Ashley, that the old gentleman, your uncle, would probably echo the sentiments of your friend, Mr. Mayne, and yourself, that I might make a man a very clever little wife, only there is not a penny in the family; and, of course, as it is, it is quite out of the question, quite! And not having any personal ill-feeling against your uncle, I must decline to make him the subject of so good a joke, and possibly put him thoroughly out of humor with his excellent nephew, all on account of 'a little flirtation'."

She finished speaking she rose to her feet, her lips set, and her eyes flashing with indignation.

Ashley said not a word. He felt the sting of his own words and was silent. The conversation which had occurred in the morning when he was yet struggling with the fear of his infatuation for Isabel in his heart even during what with him was but a flirtation, but with her a cruel reality until his cruel words had unnerved her and quickly driven her from him, and he knew that he had lost her; and oh! how doubly precious she seemed now that all hope of winning her had fled. He could not unsay those careless words which had so hopelessly wounded her sensitive soul, though he scarcely believed in the truth of them at the time. He was weary of her and had loved him that love was dead; or her womanly pride would henceforth smother it within her. In his remorse he bowed his head as she swept by him with a quiet nod.

She did not re-enter the drawing-room, but went at once to her apartment, where she locked the door, closed and locked the door, she threw herself upon the bed, in the agony of her heart found a vent in tears.

"Oh, I loved him!" she sobbed aloud. "How I loved him!" and then with a new burst of tears she wailed: "And now, even now, I love him, but I cannot forgive those cruel words."

"Really, Mr. Ashley, this is very sudden. Cannot your business be put off for a week or two? I am sorry to lose not Mr. Mortimer, who goes up to town to-day, attend to it for you?" inquired the fair hostess, at the breakfast-table, when Leonard had made known his intention of leaving that morning.

"Thanks, Mrs. Mortimer, but unhappily the nature of my business requires my personal attendance. I am extremely sorry to leave so shortly after which you have rendered so enjoyable that it is a pain to have to leave."

"Well, at least you will lunch with us on the cliffs, I proposed, and I will have you driven direct from there to the station in time for the afternoon train."

"I shall only too enjoy to enjoy the few extra hours in your society," answered Leonard, politely bowing to Mrs. Lorrimer, and casting a covert glance at Isabel, who, with head and her place beside him, having no reasonable excuse for changing it.

As he sat at the table he passed behind her chair a moment, and then with a sudden movement as though having nerved himself to speak, he bent over her.

"Miss Whyte," he said, "will you go?"

"Not this morning," she answered coldly. "I have a headache! I may join them after lunch, when the sun is not so hot."

She was avoiding him. He felt a sharp pain in his heart, but still persisting, he continued:

"In a week I shall be on the ocean, Miss Whyte; will you not grant me one favor before I go. For the sake of my —friendship if nothing else?"

She did not answer, but bowed her head assentingly.

"Go this morning to the cliffs."

Once more she nodded without a word, and he saw that she was hurt and thus. She felt that, for all, he loved her now, and he was going away for ever. He knew she loved him—loved him with all her artless, womanly heart but her pride had been wounded, and through that very love, and now she could not forgive him, though she felt he was suffering deeply for the wound he had inflicted. What could he want? Was he going to renew his attentions at her cost? Was he going to plead before her she felt her love could not hold out against his pleading. No, he felt his position too keenly for his pride to allow him to resort to the usual means. Pride was widening the breach between two hearts which a flirtation had commenced.

The cliff was a picturesque spot, and no more charming place could be selected for a picnic or outdoor lunch. It overlooked the river about fifty feet above the bank, and the cool, shady trees grew almost on the verge.

Isabel was looking thoughtfully over into the river, seated on a low flat stone, when Leonard joined her.

"Miss Whyte!"

She looked up quickly; her face was pale and intensely sad, but she never started or showed surprise at the sound of his. She had been thinking of him; he had been filling her thoughts. Why should his appearance startle her?

"Miss Whyte," he continued, "I asked you to come here to-day that I might say a few words to you before I went away that I could not in justice to myself, Isabel, my darling, I could not long, nor will I repeat anything which may pain you. First, for the words which you must have heard between myself and Mayne, I ask your pardon. I will not attempt to excuse them except to tell you that even love of you was unknowingly filling my heart. Isabel, look at me; even then you intentionally led me on that you might all the more surely strike your blow. I have come to-day, as I find, I bow to your indignation, but for all that is past, I love you now, deeply, devotedly, with all my heart, my very soul, as one loves but once. I could not go away without telling you this. Now, farewell."

He held out his hand as he spoke; his face was pale and set.

She took his hand mechanically, without meeting his eyes or speaking a word. He stood a moment, then, with a sigh, turned away and was gone.

For some time Isabel did not move, but remained sitting where she was, with her head looking unseemingly over over the river; then, with a little moan, she sank on the grass and buried her face in her hands.

"Oh, Leonard! Leonard!" she sobbed "come back to me!"

But Leonard Ashley was long since out of hearing, and once more her pride had ruled her heart.

But he was not destined to leave her so.

When Isabel had dried her eyes, and quieted her beating heart sufficiently to meet the rest of her party again, Ashley had driven away to the station, behind Mrs. Mortimer's lovely pair of grays.

The remainder of the afternoon passed like a dream to Isabel; her heart and brain were both absorbed with a dull, aching pain, until as the merry party were driving homeward, when the sun was slowly disappearing amid crimson clouds in the west, a man on horseback, driven at a furious speed, met them. Even the sight of this rider tearing along towards them, which immediately interested the balance of the party did not arouse the girl from her thoughts until he wheeled up alongside the carriage, and gasping for breath which he had ridden out, cried to Mrs. Mortimer: "There's an accident, a horse has bolted—Mr. Ashley at the house dead!"

At the mention of Leonard's name Isabel came out of her stupor, sat upright in the carriage, her pale face now actually livid; then came a heartrending shriek, and she fainted.

But had never's always easily exaggerated, and when the pleasure party arrived home, they did not find Leonard Ashley dead, although he had a narrow escape, and lay bruised and insensible in the drawing-room. The horses had become frightened and unmanageable at the sight of the railway, and running had thrown Ashley with great violence on the side of the road, and cutting an ugly gash in the back of his head, and rendering him with his black blood-matted hair and pale face, a fearfully corpse-like in appearance; but on the arrival of the doctor they removed him to the apartment he had occupied, and when he came to consciousness found that while his head was in a dreadful state with