

Remember Me No More.

IN TWO INSTALMENT—PART II.

There had been a time when their paths had met and run on together for a while, when, perhaps, they had imagined they were destined so to continue side by side to the end; but that dream had been dispelled.

Cold estrangement—a change—had crept over them both, and before it was ever discovered—before its root was ever laid bare—Violet Traill had disappeared from the sunny old town, and nobody had been informed of her whereabouts.

The two younger sisters were away at school then. He had never seen them.

He knew Violet for a brilliant and beautiful girl, as good as she was merry and gay, and had it not been for the impenetrable reserve that had crept over her, and which, try to break it down as he might, was never overcome, he would have declared himself to be what he was in truth—her lover.

But he had had, and still possessed, a proud and happy nature, and they had parted, or, rather, she had slipped away during one of his temporary absences from Ledsbury, and he had never met or heard of her since, in spite of many efforts to trace her.

But he had never forgotten her. She had been the one woman of his life. He was a popular and courted member of society, and he had not withdrawn himself from it on account of this incident; but he had never cared to marry, and the fact might have been traced back to a year's pleasant friendship long before.

A commonplace story—one that goes on every day in the world around us, but full of sadness and disappointment all the same.

He had found and lost his ideal, with out, as he thought, any fault or failure on his side, and, until a few days ago, he had ceased to hope to meet that ideal again.

And Violet?

There was a much harder fate. The youthful gaiety was gone, crushed out of her for ever, it would seem.

Her face was sweet and beautiful still, but quiet and repressed.

She was not old yet, in spite of her silly sister's private sneers.

A girlish air still clung to her; her slender figure, unlined face, pretty teeth, and nut-brown hair, were all as Roger remembered them, and her singular charm would remain with her throughout her life.

No private worry had banished that, or ever could banish it.

Mere youth seemed an empty thing beside it.

The buoyancy of her sisters seemed giddy and florid in comparison.

In a few years, by the time they reached their present age, they would have developed into commonplace, ordinary young women, with hardly an attraction left; but she would never be commonplace.

She possessed charms of mind and manner as well as of appearance. Roger Derrick thought, watching her, and he wondered how it was that she had never married.

He was sure it was from her own choice. Perhaps just when the man had found out he loved her, she had adopted the same means for keeping him at a distance as she had adopted towards himself.

'No,' he said in answer to her abstracted remark. 'I did not seem as if I could ever see anything of you or your mother for a month or so before I went off for a sort of holiday to Ireland, and when I returned there was no trace of you left.'

'I grew very tired of Ledsbury,' said Violet perhaps as an explanation. 'And I thought my mother needed a change altogether, and so we made up our minds quite suddenly to come here. I had really very few friends, you know in Ledsbury; the people I knew there were nearly all merely acquaintances.'

She looked coolly reserved as though giving her companion to understand that she had been one of these latter, and Roger, remembering the old coolness between them, saw that she was still determined to keep him at a distance.

'And have you many friends here?' he asked.

'No, I see but little society,' she returned. 'I never cared so very much for it, and now prefer a quiet life, the quieter the better.'

'Yet your sisters seem to go about occasionally. I have met them several times,' he commented.

He resented her marked inhospitality; she would give him no encouragement to remain.

How like the Violet who had so snubbed him that last month in Ledsbury, yet how unlike the first dear Violet who had taught him to love her.

'Yes, my sisters are different,' she said. 'He could have almost said a suppressed sigh finished the sentence, but she hurried on, and he could not be at all sure about it.'

'I think they enjoy everything more than I ever did. Are you staying here long, Mr. Derrick?'

'For a month or two, I think,' he answered.

How hard it was to make any headway with her.

She looked so cold, and showed so plainly that she was merely making conversation. She evidently expected, and wanted him

to leave, and his pride rose again, as it had risen many times in the past.

She had informed him once during that last month in Ledsbury, that he had not offended her in any way, so he could not but see that it was sheer dislike and prejudice.

They were sitting thus awkwardly and constrainedly when the door suddenly opened, and Christie and Kitty hurried in, their faces beaming with delight at finding that, in spite of everything, they had been able to catch their caller.

CHAPTER IV.

Mr. Derrick seemed to spring to his feet with pleasure at their entry.

He was, in reality, relieved that the situation was broken up, but to the two girls and their sister it looked as though he were welcoming them almost rapturously.

They shook hands with him just as cordially, brimming over with friendliness. But the reception that had been given their friend did not escape Christie's observation.

'Just like Violet,' she thought angrily. 'Any man but Mr. Derrick, who, thank goodness, was determined to see us, would have gone away in disgust! As cold as ice—perfectly white with temper, and never offering him tea or anything. I don't care what she says afterwards, I shall order it now,' and she rang the bell sharply, while Kitty offered an explanation for their re-appearance.

She did not view matters quite as Christie had done; she thought it was rather nice of Violet to have entertained their caller and kept him for them, especially considering her usual scruples.

'We found we really couldn't stand more than a quarter of an hour of the "at-home," she stated. 'It was so hot and crowded, there was such an odour of tea and cake and flowers, all mixed up that it was quite overpowering.'

The truth being that they had just put in an appearance, heard that Derrick had told Madeline Brock he would not be able to attend, and had hurried back, full of the hope of finding him at Woodbine Cottage.

Christie sat down by the young man, as though well aware that he had intended to pay her specially the attention of his call, and began to talk away to him volubly.

She was very pleased, and she knew that she looked better than usual, and she was sure Mr. Derrick was appreciating the fact.

Perhaps she had some excuse, at this moment, for entertaining such a belief, for, Derrick was showing himself in a new light—a light in which Violet had never before seen him.

Filled with deep resentment and anger at the inexplicable conduct of the girl he loved and had only just met, after such a long absence, he had turned to the younger sister who struck him as bright, good-natured, and somewhat ordinary, girl and thrown himself into a rapid flirtation with her, Christie being only too ready to respond.

Their laughter and bright chat fell duly upon Violet's ears.

She did not know that Roger's heart was burning, and that he was perfectly reckless as to what she now thought of him.

She saw Christie's delighted smiles and Kitty's jealousy, and said to herself that he had evidently, as Christie had given out, been attracted by her.

The girl was young and good looking—why should he not be, after all?

Kitty was hovering about them, uneasy and out of temper, trying to attract his notice by first one remark and then another, offering him a photograph, a sheet of music, a portfolio of etchings, anything to draw his attention to herself.

She did not make much headway, however, until she asked a direct question, which arrested him through all his fire of repartee with his lively companion.

'Who received you when you first came, Mr. Derrick—mamma or Violet? It was awkward that we were both out wasn't it—the only two you knew?'

Kitty was determined at any rate that he should recognize her existence, for she knew that otherwise Christie's triumph afterwards would be very hard to bear.

Mr. Derrick paused, and the smile died out of his handsome eyes.

'Your sisters, Miss Traill, was in, but I was acquainted with her as well as with you,' he answered. 'I met her a long time ago.'

And he gave a glance across at Violet that flashed understanding and indignation.

'Acquainted with Vi?' echoed the two younger girls, turning towards their sister in the utmost amazement. 'Why, you never said so, Vi!'

And after their incessant mention of him too!

'Miss Traill did not consider me worthy of remembrance probably, Roger suggested, with a sneer that only Violet understood.'

'You are mistaken, Mr. Derrick,' she replied quietly; 'I remember you very well. Where did you know each other, Vi?'

asked Kitty.

She drew her elder sister into the conversation because she wanted to interrupt the other couple's devoted attention to each other.

She could hardly get a word, much less a look, from the handsome caller, while, as

for Christie, her conduct was really not only absurd, but forward.

'We met in Ledsbury,' explained Violet shortly.

She was pouring out the tea. Beside the smart attire of her juniors, her blue serge dress looked rather shabby, and the wind had ruffled her hair during her perambulations in the garden.

Moreover, she looked rather pale and spiritless, while they were—or, at any rate, Christie was—flushed with pleasure.

'Oh, Ledsbury? We were at school then,' exclaimed Kitty. 'Fancy Mr. Derrick turning up here unexpectedly after such a time! weren't you surprised, both of you? I expect you had a lot to talk about!'

A lot to talk about! Roger could almost have laughed—it was so remote from the fact.

Their sister, far from welcoming him in any such manner, had done her best to repel him by her coldness.

After devoting himself for some time further with marked embarrassment to Christie, the young man rose to take his leave. Christie was so elated by her conquest that she forgot to pour out the vials of her wrath upon her elder sister, as had been her intention.

'What did he say? Did he seem very sorry we were out?' she demanded eagerly.

'Yes, I am sure he would not have liked to miss you,' replied Violet.

'How on earth was it you never told us you knew Mr. Derrick? You have heard us talking of him incessantly,' exclaimed Christie.

'I did not think I should ever see him again,' said Violet, preparing to leave the room.

'Don't you like him? What an extraordinary person you are!' ejaculated the younger girl.

She was palpably elated and jubilant during the days that ensued, and Kitty was correspondingly sulky, refusing to take much interest in Roger's name, and deaf to her sister's calls upon her admiration.

But this was to be changed very shortly, and the positions were to be reversed.

A week after the call that had caused her such heart-burning, Kitty came in at the gate of Woodbine Cottage, bearing the most exquisite nosegay of household flowers that had ever been seen within that modest abode.

Her countenance bore a ludicrous expression of careless self-consciousness.

She marched into the house, and deposited the nosegay upon the table of the dining-room, where her family were assembled.

'What exquisite flowers!' ejaculated her mother. 'Where did you get them, Kitty?'

And she rose in admiration.

An instinct seemed to inform Christie, who was stitching some leathers in a hat, of what the answer would be.

She flushed crimson before it was uttered, and looked up towards Kitty defiantly.

'Mr. Derrick bought them for me,' replied that young lady, with great sang froid. 'I couldn't help accepting them; he was so determined I should have them. He got them from that lovely shop in Mortimer Street. He caught me up as I was turning into the town from the London Road.'

'And I expect you asked him for them, as you did the dances,' exclaimed Christie, green with chagrin.

'Really, my dear, you should not speak like that,' remonstrated Mrs. Traill.

She had no real control over her daughters, having foolishly indulged them; yet, occasionally, she curbed them sharply, and, as it seemed to them, unreasonably.

She was a woman of extremes, and without any real judgment.

It occasionally struck her that their easy tone and manner were not all that they should be, but generally she was far too lax with them, and let them behave as they would.

'She's only jealous that Mr. Derrick can look at any one but herself! I would not be so silly about a man who is the same to every girl, if I were you, Christie!' exclaimed Kitty, in a superior tone.

She was as puffed up over her triumph as her sister had been before, and continued so, while Christie was proportionately cast down, although she pretended that this was far from being the fact.

It was evident that there was going to be a struggle over Mr. Roger Derrick, and that he was inclining to divide his attentions.

In two or three days after Kitty's turn for notice he put in another appearance at the Cottage.

In spite of his pride and his reason, which latter told him plainly that he was wasting his time, he felt that he must see Violet again.

She showed no disposition to receive him as a friend, so he was constrained to affect a cordial acquaintance with her sisters.

By not confining his attention to one, he thought he might gain a footing in the family without transgressing the laws of honor.

He intended to be scrupulously balanced in his behavior to Christie and Kitty.

He did not how he could gain speech with their reserved sister unless he pursued this plan.

He never met her at any house; she seemed to have lost her old popularity in society, for no one spoke of her.

Yet how the thought of memory of such a woman remained with a man!

He was looking out and wondering about her all the time; but when he called at Woodbine Cottage she did not appear.

To his dismay, only Mrs. Traill and the two younger girls were present, though he made his call an unfashionably long one.

Mrs. Traill seemed to him to be nervous and ill at ease, he did not know why; Christie appeared colder than before; only Kitty was radiant.

With her he chatted as confidentially as at the last interview, he had chatted to Christie, watching the door all the while, with an anxiety that reminded him of the old days.

But Violet came not, and nobody explained her absence; and when he asked in

an indifferent tone whether she was not at home, Kitty answered, carelessly, that she could not tell him.

He was bitterly disappointed; he said to himself that she was purposely avoiding him.

But why should she do so? What had she done? He asked himself fruitless questions and the old trouble began again—a trouble that had really never left him.

After this, the hopes of both girls rose and fell alternately.

He haunted them; but they seemed equally attractive to him.

He was a skilful tactician, and gave neither cause for thinking she specially engaged his thoughts; at any rate, for a longer period than a couple of days.

He had no wish to raise false hopes, but he did not know how he should ever see or hear anything of Violet if he did not pursue his friendship with the two younger girls.

And they struggled desperately against each other to secure this pleasant, desirable party, who was so stupidly impartial, who never committed himself by a serious word, and yet loaded them with flowers and books and music, as nobody had ever loaded them before.

They were furious over his shuffling conduct, as each privately termed it; but neither possessed the dignity to let him find himself, for a short time, held at a distance.

Each was afraid of the other gaining an advantage; and so the silly game went on, and Violet viewed it dully and listlessly, and wondered why time should have so changed the man who had once seemed to her worthy of all respect and admiration.

CHAPTER V.

'My dear Vi, why should you not go, urged Mrs. Traill, 'just for this one occasion? It is not as though you had not met and liked the people. You liked Mrs. Beresford very much, and so did I, and I don't like you to retire so completely into the background. You are our beauty, you know.'

It was at the breakfast-table one morning that this remark was made, and Mrs. Traill looked persuasively across at her eldest daughter from a letter which was being handed about from one to another, and which contained an invitation to a ball in the neighbourhood from people Mrs. Traill and Violet had been forced to meet on more than one occasion, as well as the two younger ones, who persistently led a much gayer life than the rest of the family.

It was not often that Mrs. Traill alluded to her eldest daughter's rather remarkable fancy for a life of retirement—there was a silence preserved upon the subject, at any rate, before the other girls; but now it seemed to strike Mrs. Traill forcibly that it was not right or just that the girl should hide herself, as she was in the habit of doing; and she looked as though really desirous of Violet, for once, breaking through her rule.

'That's what we are always saying to her—that it is all bumping making herself so different from other people, and trying to get us to be the same,' said Christie, resenting, as did Kitty also, the quiet matter-of-fact statement of their mother that their attractions did not equal their sister's.

'There will be lots of people there who won't look any better than Vi, and I dare say she'll get as many partners as anyone else.'

'Get as many partners as anyone else? I should think she would, indeed!' exclaimed Mrs. Traill sharply. 'It is evident you have not gone out very much with your sister in society, or you would know that you would seem very small in comparison with her, Christie—either you or Kitty, or any of your companions! I never knew a girl more popular or admired than Violet.'

'Yes, mother; but you are speaking of a good long time back,' interposed Christie, more and more vexed. 'When Vi was our age I dare say she was very much admired but, really, I have never found Kitty or myself behind her now, and we could be as popular as she was, I haven't the least doubt, if we were allowed fair play.'

'About this ball, my dear,' said Mrs. Traill, ignoring Christie as though her complaining voice were not going on, and turning to her eldest daughter, who was paying no attention to what was being said by her envious and angry junior, except to treat it after her usual fashion—with silent contempt—'I wish you would oblige me by going.'

'We will talk about it afterwards, mother,' said Violet.

Her voice was low, and there was a slight significance in it.

'I would remain at home,' said Mrs. Traill. 'It really weighs upon me very much that you should not enjoy yourself like the others.'

She wore an almost harassed look as she repeated the invitation.

'There isn't the smallest reason of course, why she shouldn't. It's all nonsense, as we've always told you,' cried Kitty impatiently.

She and Christie were tired of the discussion, and they felt also a conviction that if they went they would be made to attire themselves in the dresses they had already worn more than once, while Mrs. Traill would find the means to present their sister with a smart new gown, and the thought of this did not please them by any means.

They did not reflect that, though their mother was naturally fond of them all, Violet was by far her kindest and most considerate child.

They were right about the dress, for when Mrs. Traill had with difficulty prevailed upon the girl to accompany them, she insisted that she should be fittingly attired.

'To please me, dear,' was always urged in answer to Violet's remonstrances against her extravagance, and when, on the night of the ball, the girl appeared in a soft

white silk, neither whiter or softer than her pretty neck and arms, with her glossy brown hair arranged even more charmingly than usual, and her starry eyes, smiling at her now unaccountably burst into frivolity, the two younger sisters were taken aback by the beauty they had always ignored and slighted.

'Poor old Vi' was a great deal more attractive looking than the generality of girls they met.

They would not own that she was more so than themselves—or, rather, each admitted to herself that Vi put the other in the shade—but they were certainly amazed.

'Really, she looks a lot better than Kitty!' thought Christie, and 'Chris can't hold a candle to her!' flashed into Kitty's brain; and so, though neither spoke her thought aloud, Violet had made a sensation, as, indeed, she invariably did, even though they would have died before they would have acknowledged it.

'You look quite nice,' they told her, with frank patronage. 'You ought to go out more. I dare say you would have been married long ago if you had.'

Violet laughed. She was used to such remarks from them, and she would have thought it waste of time to inform them that she had received more attention in one hour than they would have received during the two years they had been considered 'out.'

But they were to have their eyes opened in a manner that was not pleasing to them by any means.

Arrived at Mrs. Beresford's and ushered into the ball room with a crowd of other smartly dressed arrivals, they were warmly welcomed by their hostess, who, with many other people, was glad to see the elder and favourite Miss Traill for once accompanying her sisters.

Partners were introduced to all three, and it was speedily seen that Violet was to be the success of the evening.

Where Christie and Kitty were languidly requested for one dance, Miss Traill was eagerly asked for three—her programme could have been filled up two or three deep in a quarter of an hour.

Her reception as the star of the affair, which was a really brilliant one for Mapleshorpe, half the men having run down from town for it, showed her in a different light to Christie and Kitty from what they had ever believed possible.

Whenever they saw her, she was surrounded by a crowd, while they had frequently to sit watching her from the wall, ordinary girls among other ordinary girls—good-looking enough in their unfinished style, and lively and self-confident, but lacking some subtle attraction that made men throng about the sister they affected to patronize.

It was a bitter blow for them.

They had never expected such an experience.

Their light seemed quenched, and not even the women they met frequently, and who knew them much better than they knew Violet, afforded them any consolation for it appeared as if they also considered her superior in every way, and quite the prettiest and most fascinating member of the family.

It would have been useless, in this assembly, to hint that they considered her almost 'on the shelf.'

They would have been suspected of jealousy, and laughed at her for their pains.

So they had to bear the unpleasantness as best they could, and very hard they found it.

When Mr. Derrick entered the room their hearts flew up, for they knew that here, indeed, was a friend and admirer.

He promptly took three dances from each.

They hardly thought he would ask Violet for any, for it was evident that he and their sister did not get on together at all well; but they learned from him that he had already secured one from her—the only one she could give me, as he put it, in a voice they did not understand.

They were surprised he had asked for this dance before theirs, for, though they could not tell which of themselves he preferred, they knew he liked both of them better than he liked Violet.

He and their sister had been studiously cold to each other from the first.

The arrival of Mr. Derrick was almost the only thing of interest to them in this ball, for they were by no means the successes they had imagined they would be, but they felt reprieved and restored to self-respect by attention from him, the handsome and most sought-after man in the room.

They little knew or guessed what was passing in his mind, to what a determination he had arrived.

He seemed in their eyes brilliantly gay and handsome as usual, and they had not the penetration to perceive that he was a whit different.

They chatted away to him in their usual airy style, and felt sure the other Mapleshorpe girls envied them; but they perceived in him no change of any sort.

Yet Roger had arrived at the most important decision tonight that he could be called upon to make, in worldly matters: he had determined to put his fate to the touch—to win or lose it all.

'Yes, in spite of Violet Traill's studied coldness and reserve, her palable dislike to him, he knew he loved her madly, more madly than he had ever loved her before, and he intended to ask her tonight to be his wife to explain her prejudice against him, to give it up and love him, who could never be happy without her.

He could not, even if she refused him, be much more outside her life than he was at present; and if there were anything that could be explained away, how different it would all be, what a paradise the world would become!

It was worth trying for, even if he failed. So he was buoyed up by this resolve all the evening, and near the end came his dance with Violet, the queen of the festivity, as he had seen her so many times

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