

KITTY'S PUNISHMENT

IN TWO INSTALMENT—PART II.

But it might have been from some instinct, for there, almost concealed by the night, was the figure of a man, who was studying the building intently.

It might, of course, be some tramp, for members of that fraternity frequently passed the farm, but somehow Kitty knew that it was not a tramp, but Reggie, come to look upon her home even at this late hour.

She could not distinguish his features, but she knew it was he, and her heart bounded.

How he must love her—simple, ignorant little rustic though she was.

It was more like Romeo or some troubadour of romance than an admirer of the prosaic nineteenth century.

'Dear silly fellow, what a long walk back he will have!' she murmured, when, after some time, the figure moved away in the darkness, slowly and cautiously, as one unaccustomed to the spot. 'It's a pity he can't stay nearer here; but he knows his own way best, of course, and one's relatives always make themselves disagreeable if one falls in love, especially a man's relatives, I think. Heigho! I wonder what poor old auntie and uncle would say if they thought Kitty had a young man round the place I suppose they'd think her a forward, bold young wix, who had no business to be growing up!'

CHAPTER IV.

It was a glorious afternoon in Greatover Woods, and Kitty enjoyed herself as she only could when in Reggie's company.

The flowers bloomed all the more sweetly, the sun shone more brightly, the birds sang more gaily when they were together; and in the deep, shady seclusion of the woods they could not be an object of curious scrutiny from the inhabitants of Northford.

Reggie was anxious not to be observed or stared at, and, naturally, Kitty did not want it reported that little Miss Wood from the Primrose Farm, was making assignments with a handsome stranger three or four miles from home.

So they were very cautious, and avoided the paths that were likely to be frequented.

'So you came to look at the house last night, sir?' Kitty said, with a smile and a happy little blush as they strolled beneath the trees Reggie her hand within his arm, after the manner of rustic sweethearts.

'Come to look at the house! What house?' demanded Caloney.

'What affection! What house? Why, the farm, of course,' she laughed. 'Why, he's ashamed that I caught him, actually!'

'Not ashamed at all, dearest; only, I wasn't there. What made you think so?' asked her lover.

'Why, I made sure it must be you,' she returned puzzled. 'A man was standing in the dark in the lane, looking every where most carefully, and I—'

'And, you didn't recognize him?'

'No it was too dark; but I—'

'And where were you, may I ask?'

'Oh, I was going up to bed, and stopped to look out of the staircase window, and there I saw someone I thought was you—'

'Which is the staircase window?'

Kitty described this and the rest of the house to her lover, who asked her many interested questions, and declared it must be a picturesque old place.

'Oh, it is!' assented Kitty. 'Artists have occasionally asked to go over it. There is a very old mantle-piece in my uncle's bedroom that people admire very much.'

'I am a bit of an artist,' said Reggie. 'I think I must ask to go over it sometime when I call upon Aunt Milly,' laughing. 'I'll tell you who the fellow must have been, darling—one of my rivals.'

'You have no rival!' exclaimed Kitty hotly.

'I don't mean that, dearest,' pressing the hand that lay in his. 'I mean some unfortunate fellow who has a fancy for you. I don't mean that you would encourage another man at the same time as myself, I know what a true little heart you have. But, confess, isn't there any chap who casts sleep's eyes in your direction? and he smiled down into her pretty face.'

Kitty admitted that a youth who had known her nearly all her life thought more about her than was quite convenient always.

'But I am sure he was not the man near the farm last night,' she said. 'I don't believe that would be his style at all, and I've never known him to do anything like it before. No; I suppose it was just a tramp. Something like that, I expect,' agreed Reggie.

A couple of nights afterwards, however, as Kitty was hurrying home rather late from a choir practice, she came upon two men in the dusk, who were walking round the Primrose Farm and examining it curiously point by point.

One was a short muscularly built individual of about twenty-nine, with chestnut beard, the other was Reggie.

As Kitty ran up almost against them, Reggie started, but seeing who it was by looking closely into her face, he exclaimed aloud in wonder—

'Why, I had no idea it was you, Miss Wood. Where have you been so late?' he asked. 'My cousin and I were walking down this way, and I took a fancy for looking at your picturesque old house. He is most interested in it, being an architect, and an artist into the bargain. What did you say about the porch and that gable, Will?'

And he turned to his companion and touched him on the arm.

'Oh, they are very fine examples indeed, said the cousin, of whom Kitty could see but little in the gloom. 'Very fine! We must be getting back, now, though, old fellow,' and then he turned away, raising his cap to Kitty, and Reggie squeezed her fingers in his in a significant clasp.

This must be one of the cousins he had not wished to encounter, she thought, as she hurried into the house, and that was why the man had borne him away so hastily.

Yet she did not think she had ever seen the face with the chestnut beard in the neighbourhood before; but then, she had not beheld it very clearly now in the gathering darkness, so she could not be sure of anything distinctly.

She did not see how anyone could admire the old farmhouse; but then, she was not an artist, and it appeared that this cousin of Reggie's was, as well as himself.

Kitty wondered whether the cousin had heard anything about her from Reggie.

He had given her one scrutinizing glance, but had veered off so sharply that it was plainly to be seen he was in a hurry.

The next afternoon—the day being Sunday—Kitty attended the service at the old grey parish church, and on coming out was overtaken in the road by Jim Delamere.

He looked rather grave and a trifle careworn, which was a state of things Kitty had never known in him before.

'I wanted to talk to you Kitty,' he began gently.

'All right, Jim,' she replied, in a friendly tone, though somehow she could not help suddenly feeling that her old play-fellow was going to take her to task over something or other that had displeased or wounded him. 'Why did you not join us after church this morning?'

'Because your uncle and aunt were with you, and I wanted you privately,' he returned, avoiding her inquiring glance.

'The fact is, Kitty,' he said, in a sort of burst, 'I saw you a couple of days ago in Greatover Woods with—with a fellow—a stranger—a good-looking chap, and—and there was something about it that I didn't like.'

Kitty had first flushed red as Jim spoke, but by the time he had ended she had become rather pale.

They had wanted to keep it a secret—she and Reggie—about his being down here, and how on earth should she explain the footing upon which they stood to Jim, who was now regarding her earnestly?

'Why—why shouldn't you like it? What do you mean?' she stammered.

How much had he seen or heard?

'Well, there was an air of secrecy about it, somehow,' said Jim, in a low tone.

'How is it we've never heard anything about him—this friend of yours, Kitty? Can't I be told something?'

And he spoke so humbly, and with an accent of such pain underneath his appearance of composure, that Kitty could not turn upon him angrily, though she felt

vexed and uneasy.

'Well, I don't know that there is anything to tell, or that I can tell you, Jim,' she said awkwardly. 'I met him at Aunt Mapleson's, or rather, when I was with her, and now he has come here, and—and that's all.'

'Not all!' expostulated Jim. 'You see, I could tell that—you thought a good deal of him in a minute. But, Kitty, I wasn't very much taken with him myself—'

Kitty burst into a laugh.

'How amusing you are, Jim!' she cried.

'Do you think I ever thought you would be?' 'No, it wasn't from any feeling like that, exclaimed young Delamere earnestly. 'I assure you, wherever I had seen that chap, good-looking though he is, I shouldn't have thought much of him. Kitty, do—do your people know him?'

Kitty blushed, and made a movement of impatience.

'I don't see what business that is of yours, really, Jim,' she broke out after a moment. 'Were you spying upon us in the woods?'

Young Delamere declined to answer. He knew Kitty, and he knew Kitty knew him; but he read that she was ashamed and he drew his own conclusions.

'I suppose they haven't even heard of him?' he said tentatively.

'How you do bother, Jim! Kitty returned, blushing still deeper. 'They haven't heard anything about him, if you want to know.'

And she tossed her head.

'Don't you think they ought to, he said gently.

Kitty wanted to be angry, very haughty and dignified; but somehow it seemed impossible to be angry with Jim, especially Jim in this mood.

She guessed that the sight of herself with Reggie Caloney had been a shock to him, and that he was suffering what he would not tell her, and she could see he disapproved of her clandestine acquaintance with the stranger; but he was not making himself really disagreeable in the matter, so that she could not fly into a violent rage, although he was putting her in the wrong with every sentence.

'Are you going to tell them?' she demanded with weak satire.

'No; I think you will do that, after all, Kitty,' he replied seriously. 'I am not sure it would be my duty. I know you—at least, I am nearly sure I do—and I can't think you are altogether comfortable in keeping a thing like this from the people who have brought you up, and to whom you owe a duty. Besides, your own common-sense must tell you that, if all's right and square, there can't be any need for concealment.'

'Ah, you don't understand the circumstances!' she exclaimed eagerly.

'No circumstances could make it right for you to be meeting any man—particularly a stranger you can only have known a few weeks—clandestinely,' observed Jim firmly. 'No fellow who was all right and meant well would ask you to do so, Kitty. If he loves you, and you love him—with a gulp—he should go to your uncle and aunt about it. Why should he not?'

Kitty had been writhing inwardly at these remarks and kicking about the dust with the point of her shoe uncertainly.

She looked up at last and spoke in a subdued tone of voice.

'He is going to call upon them,' she said.

She could admit this much without injuring Reggie, or disobeying his wishes; and, in spite of a vexation against Jim, she could not quarrel with him.

She felt his love for her was sincere and unselfish, and she longed to be able to turn round and explain Reggie's peculiar circumstances to him, to satisfy him that her lover was not behaving dishonorably.

Jim turned a little pale at her speech, but spoke out bravely.

'I'm glad of that,' he said, with a sort of relief. 'There's never any good in secrecy about a matter of that sort. Besides which I am sure it would never satisfy you, Kitty.'

'I don't know—I'm quite happy,' she murmured.

She did not like to confess that things might have gone on in secret indefinitely as far as she was concerned, had it not been for Reggie's own suggestion that he should call upon her aunt.

Her infatuation for her handsome lover had gained such a hold upon her that it might have led her into a quagmire of deceit, had not Caloney himself opened the way out of it by desiring to know her people.

And the next week he called.

From the large, pleasant, low-ceiled dining-room that had once gone by the name of the parlour, Kitty saw him approaching in the sunshine, looking leisurely about him, and she wondered, with a frightened fluttering of the heart, how he

would state his business, how introduce himself, how the whole affair would go off?

She was relieved and surprised that he had had the good luck to time his visit during the absence of her uncle, for old Wood had gone to attend a big cattle show at Warnham, and would not be back until late in the evening.

Kitty had been wishing all day that she had been able to let her lover know this; that he might, perhaps, take advantage of the occasion, but she had only learned the old farmer's intention at breakfast.

She had not said one word to her aunt concerning her acquaintance, but while she was trembling, and her heart beating with agitation at his visit, Reggie had knocked loudly and calmly at the front door, a stout maid-servant had admitted him, and he was ushered into the presence of Kitty, and old Mrs. Wood, bearing so undisturbed and unembarrassed a front, that Kitty almost gasped for breath in her admiration of his coolness and daring.

He shook hands lightly with her, and then turned to her elderly relative, who was regarding him with an amazed and bewildered look, and introduced himself with the utmost ease and aplomb, as a friend of her sister Mrs. Mapleson, whom he had had the pleasure of meeting, together with Miss Wood, a short time before, at Tor Bay.

'And finding myself unexpectedly in this neighbourhood, and remembering to have heard a great deal about this beautiful and quaint old farmhouse, I ventured to call and renew my acquaintance with Miss Wood,' he stated; and sinking into a chair by the old lady's side, he made himself so agreeable to her, that she was carried by storm, and even had she desired to treat his visit as an intrusion, had not the time or the power to do so allowed her.

Reggie talked to her in a sort of gentle whirlwind, by which she was carried off her feet, as it were, and carried along willy nilly.

But, as a matter of fact, Mrs. Wood had not desired to make herself disagreeable.

She was a little flustered by the unexpected apparition of a young, handsome, elegantly dressed gentleman, in her old-fashioned dining room; but once she had got over the nervousness and surprise, she was quite taken with his charming manners.

He sat with his back almost turned to Kitty, and never glanced at her, giving his whole attention to the old lady, who was in no way suspicious—the mention of her sister being enough for a passport for him.

Much as Kitty had always admired his easy grace, his tact and diplomacy upon this occasion rendered her almost breathless.

How superior he was to anybody else, as he sat talking so pleasantly and deliberately to her aunt, who, it was easy to see, was quite won over by him.

He made every other man in Northford, even poor Jim, appear a sort of bumpkin, for they lacked the 'dash' and 'go' that distinguished his every word and look and gesture.

Yes, it was a very happy afternoon, after all, for Reggie succeeded in ingratiating himself most thoroughly with the old lady, and he was invited to remain to the old-fashioned country tea, which had not yet been superseded by the slighter and more elegant meal which is qualified by the adjective 'afternoon.'

At Primrose Farm, in spite of as many fashionable innovations as Kitty could introduce, the farmer and his wife approved of everything 'solid' and 'satisfying' and 'good,' and therefore, after Mr. Caloney had succeeded in winning his way with the mistress of the house, she bustled away to her store-rooms and cupboards, and Kitty and her lover were left a blissful five minutes of solitude a deux.

Kitty was very jubilant over Reggie's triumph and congratulated him upon his wonderful address, his self-possession, and his winning fascination.

'Was I not spurred on by the thought of you?' he returned fondly. 'I felt I might have certain prejudices to conquer in your family, so I did my best.'

'But how could you talk so well upon farming and agriculture pursuits when you belong to town and society, and quite an other world from poor old auntie's?'

Kitty wondered in admiration.

Reggie reminded her that his uncle did not live wholly in town, but possessed a country estate, as did most of his friends and acquaintances, and then the old lady came back, and the visitor craved permission to examine the carving over the front door and the windows, which had attracted his notice as he came up the path.

So he and Kitty went out and wandered round, while Mrs. Wood viewed them leniently from the dining-room, very

proud in her heart of hearts that her sister and her niece had been able to make so desirable an acquaintance.

And then they all had tea together, and the mistress of the house, pleased that it attracted such genuine admiration, undertook to show Mr. Caloney some of the best points inside, particularly the finely carved old mantle-piece in the bedroom upstairs, for which attention Reggie expressed himself very grateful.

'My uncle would so enjoy this sort of thing,' he said to Kitty. 'I am returning to London to night, and I must tell him all about this old bit of carving. I don't ever remember,' he added gratefully to his hostess 'having seen such a delicate and yet powerful piece of work.'

Kitty's heart fell at the tidings that he was leaving so soon, and her pleasure at the success of the call faded; but at the very end, as they said good-bye in the porch, he told her that, though it was imperative he should be in town that same night, he might be down again in Northford in a couple of days.

'For I can't bear to part from you for even an hour,' he told her, and Kitty was comforted.

It had been a very happy day, and Mrs. Wood was quite loud in Reggie's praises as she and her niece sat together in the evening, and her husband returning in a very good humor, he was regaled with an account of 'Julia's friend' who had called to see Kitty, at which Uncle John (for a wonder) uttered no word of complaint, but even admitted it was a pity he had been out of the way.

CHAPTER V.

Kitty went up to bed in an enviable frame of mind, and fell into happy dreams, of which she and Reggie were heroine and hero.

She had been asleep it seemed to her, a very long time, when some slight sound awakened her, the sound, as it were, of a catch being pushed back somewhere.

She felt she could only have been dreaming the sound, however, after listening in vain for a minute or two for the repetition of it.

The big old house was perfectly quiet, except for the ticking of the eight-day clock, which stood outside her door, on the broad landing, and she was again falling into a doze, when another sound caused her to start up once more—this time a loud, though muffled noise, as though a heavy bag had been dropped with a thud upon the wooden floor.

This time Kitty sprang up in bed, and her heart began to beat furiously.

What could the sound mean, and from whence did they proceed?

She crept to her door to listen, and while she was standing there with her ear pressed to the oak, an alarming remembrance came, that it was one of those days when she and her aunt were always nervous—when old Wood had returned from market with a large sum in his pocket to be taken over on the following day to the bank.

This time it was nearly £400.

Suppose—oh, suppose these mysterious sounds should mean that burglars were breaking into the house to obtain this money! For of course it must occasionally be guessed that the farmer returned with heavy bargains from the shows and fairs he attended.

The remembrance had just sprung upon her and redoubled her fears, when the frightful realization of them was made known to her by a sudden terrifying hub-bub proceeding from the far end of the long landing, at which lay her uncle's bedroom.

It did not take her an instant to discover what had happened, for it seemed something to which she had always looked forward with dread, and which the deed had rendered almost—but it was none the less horrible for that—more so, perhaps.

'From the farmer's room came hoarse, muffled cries of 'Help' mingled with a sound of scuffling and repeated falls.

Then the door seemed to be torn open, and she could hear a weak crying in her aunt's voice of 'Murder!' upon the landing—a terrified, helpless crying, which it was not likely could be heard by the servants sleeping above.

In spite of her intense fear, the sound of these cries from the old pair seemed to infuse life and determination into the girl, who had been standing shivering in the dark.

She burst out upon the landing suddenly and rushed to the old woman, who was wringing her hands frantically and uttering her useless wails.

She speechlessly motioned to Kitty from whence the noise proceeded, although there was no need to do so, for the bedroom door was ajar, and the sturdy old