

KITTY'S PUNISHMENT,

IN TWO INSTALMENT—PART I.

CHAPTER I.

The morning was a glorious one, all sun and breeze, and Kitty Wood, as she stood on the steps of Port Lodge, a gay boarding house at Tor Bay, and looked up and down the street, thought the little white town smiled back at her and invited her to investigate it.

She was a new visitor to the place. Last night her aunt, Mrs Mapleson, a good, simple-minded, easy-going matron, had brought the girl here for a change of air—for a change altogether, it might be added, for Kitty had never been in a boarding house before, never left home alone, never even seen the sea.

It was a delightful experience to the unsophisticated little maiden of seventeen, to be, as it were, entering the world—her home life, with an elderly uncle and aunt at Primrose Farm, affording her few chances of gaiety, or any but the most humdrum of enjoyments.

She was therefore, on this June morning, brimming with health and spirits.

Her pretty feet, shod in country made shoes, longed to dance upon the stone steps.

Her blue eyes shone with anticipation, and some of her fellow boarders, watching her from the windows of the house, smiled at the transparent pleasure upon her countenance.

'There's that little country girl who came last night,' one said to another. 'Very pretty isn't she? Such an uncommon shade of hair! and not a bad figure, either if she were dressed a little more à la mode.'

'Not at all bad; but I prefer a simple holland frock, like that, myself. Though she and her aunt seem a very unpretentious pair, I heard the aunt mentioning to Mrs. Poland that she would be quite an heiress some day—the niece, I mean—as she lives with another aunt and uncle, who are very well off, at a farm in Berkshire.'

'Ah, really? Well, she looks an innocent little thing, and it's rather a treat to get a girl like that among the others here. I don't so much care for some of the people in the house,' observed the first speaker.

'Sh, my dear! somebody or other over there,' whispered her companion, hearing a slight movement, and glancing over her shoulder.

'Oh, only Mr. Caloney, and he is by no means one of those I was speaking about; rejoined the first speaker. 'I like him immensely; but some of the others, really—'

'I quite agree with you. And one does not know who half of them are or where they come from.'

'Precisely. But it's generally the case in all these places.'

Meanwhile, Miss Wood, ignorant of the encomiums passed upon her by the two ladies regarding her, was wondering how she should spend the time until lunch, her Aunt Julia preferring to remain indoors. 'Goosey, goosey, gander, whether shall I wander?' she hummed, looking out towards the cliffs, dotted with figures in cool morning attire, at the sunny esplanade, and the sea, flecked with dots and splashes of light.

Old boatmen were hiring out their gaily-painted craft; children were sitting on the strip of sand and shingle, in readiness for the fascinating 'Christys'; ladies were bobbing up and down in the water with sudden ecstatic shrieks, or complaints of its coldness, in spite of the June sun.

Everything was interesting—nay, delightful.

The only difficulty was, in what direction should she turn to gain the most amusement?

She was alone. It was a little bit of a drawback for the scene was so new to her that she wanted a companion to share her emotions.

She decided not to bathe until she had become acquainted with the other girls from the house.

She looked along the sea-front, but as fast she chose the cliffs, making up her mind to walk out along them for a good distance.

It looked so fresh high up there, and so bright and sunny.

Besides, Mrs. Mapleson would be sure to want her for a stroll nearer home later.

So she started off rapidly, looking around

her, at the unfamiliar scene with delight.

She was, as one of the speakers at the house had remarked, an innocent, very youthful-looking girl, shyer and simpler than most of the others there, and with nothing of an artificial tendency about her; indeed, she was so unsophisticated that she took everything in a trusting way that was extremely amusing to a certain class of persons, of which there were not wanting examples at Port Lodge.

Her eyes were blue, dark, half-roguish, half-sentimental.

She was exceedingly pretty, and, though not unconscious of it, by no means self-assured in consequence of the fact; but rather doubtful if what passed for good looks in Northford would be considered as up to the standard of Tor Bay.

She was not, therefore, filled with resentment, but rather with confusion and, in a manner, gratitude, when, as, after passing the second turnstile to the heights, she was uncertainly regarding her watch and the couple of miles directly in front of her, a tall and well-built form loomed suddenly beside her, with certain details of unsolicited information.

The gentleman was very handsome, and she had seen him, and, in fact, once spoken to him, before, and that was in the dining room at the boarding house.

The other visitors talked of him as Reggie Caloney, and he seemed very popular.

Therefore, it was evident it was good nature, or the possession of well bred manners, which brought him forward to speak to her now—simple Kitty Wood, who did not know her way about, and among all these gay groups and couples felt merely the rustic she was.

'Pardon me, Miss Wood, but I imagine you are wondering at what hour they lunch at the Lodge, Mr. Caloney remarked, as he advanced to her, from what point she did not know.

'One o'clock is the time.'

'Oh, thank you!' Kitty murmured blushing very much.

She felt so awkward and gauche at being thus unexpectedly addressed, that she could have almost regarded an essay self-possession as the greatest of all virtues at a moment like this, and Mr. Caloney held this virtue in a marked degree.

'So you see you have plenty of time for a very much longer stroll,' he went on, 'taking no apparent notice of her confusion. 'I was going in that direction myself—just for a constitutional, you know.'

'Oh, yes; it looks a very pretty way,' said little Miss Wood, wrenching a button off her glove in her nervousness that the young man—by far the handsomest she had ever seen—had begun to walk along by her side in the most matter of fact manner.

She hardly liked to do more than steal a timid glance at his dark eyes and hair, and clearly-cut features, as he kept pace with her rather uneven footsteps.

'I—suppose you know this place well?' she asked, for want of anything more original.

'Well, I know it about as much as one can know a place in a week,' he said. 'I only came down last Monday. I should have been here last month, only my uncle, Sir Charles West, was taken ill, and sent for me, and I've been knocking about with him all the time since. He has no one to look to but me, consequently I'm bound to give him what attention I can.'

'Oh, of course!' assented Kitty vaguely.

Mr. Caloney had a great charm, a great fascination.

He went on chatting in an easy way that was calculated to make this little seventeen year old rustic feel perfectly at home with him.

'And how do you think you will like Tor Bay, Miss Wood?' he inquired.

'Oh, I think it will be delightful,' she answered, 'Aunt Julia has brought me for a month at least.'

'And it is quite a change to you after town, I'm sure?' he went on.

Miss Wood could not help feeling slightly gratified at the mistake made by her companion.

She held her pretty head and shoulders more erect as she answered.

'I don't live in London,' she informed him. 'I come from Northford.'

'Yet I thought I heard you aunt saying

something—' began Mr. Caloney.

'Oh, Aunt Julia lives in town—at least at Norwood,' volunteered Kitty; 'but I don't live with her. My home is with another aunt and uncle.'

'And is Northford a nice part of the world?' inquired Mr. Caloney.

'In a way,' replied Kitty slowly and dubiously. 'It is very dull. At least, it seems dull to me. I don't go out very often. Uncle John does not care for it. He likes people to stay at home.'

'Ah! a literary recluse, I suppose!' observed the young man.

'To; oh, no—he is a farmer,' replied Kitty, with a little blush, for which she despised herself.

What did it matter to her that her companion's connections and relatives occupied such a much higher niche in the world?

'And he is so fond of work himself, although he's quite old, that he believes in seeing everybody else busy too. It is a very large farm,' she added, desiring to lift herself and her people a little in the estimation of her handsome and charming companion.

'A very worthy principle,' said Reggie Caloney, laughing. 'But I'm afraid I and you uncle should not agree, Miss Wood, for I'm one of the drones of the world. It's a great temptation to a fellow who has no need to work to be idle, don't you think so? It would do me all the good in the world to find myself without means for a time.'

'My uncle is a rich man,' said Kitty, 'but he does not very much like to spend his money.'

This was a mild explanation—very mild—for old Mr. Wood of the Primrose Farm, Northford, was a notoriously mean man—a man who hoarded up as much of his money as he could save from pure pleasure grudged having to pay his labourers their well earned wages, and kept his wife and niece rigidly economical, in spite of sense and reason.

'Oh, that's frequently the case,' commented Mr. Caloney; 'likes to count it up occasionally, and see it's all right, eh?'

'Yes,' replied Kitty, smiling. 'He has very large sums in the house sometimes. I often think what auntie and I could do with them if they belonged to us.'

'It is a foolish thing to keep a lot of money in one's house,' remarked Reggie.

'Oh, yes; but then it is only for a night or two at a time,' explained Kitty, 'when he has been arranging a sale of some of the stock, or returned from what he calls a heavy market—of course, it is soon taken to the bank at Grestover. One could do such a lot with money like that, travel and see the world, or entertain friends at home, or—'

Then she suddenly felt that she was talking too freely and unreservedly to this young man, who, in spite of his pleasant manner, was, in reality, a perfect stranger to her, and she stopped and turned the conversation into another channel.

She disliked, above everything, to be taken for a foolish little rustic; and she felt she had a way of liking to talk about her own affairs and interests to a sympathetic listener, such as Mr. Reginald Caloney, who, out of such sympathy or the possession of courteous manners, seemed to draw her out in an unusual degree.

The stroll proved so pleasant to both that they walked on and on until they had outstripped most of the other couples; and when they returned to the boarding-house, as the luncheon bell was ringing, the two ladies, who had discussed the pretty country girl in the morning, smiled significantly to see her accompanied by their favourite, Mr. Reginald Caloney.

CHAPTER II.

It was the evening before Kitty's return to her own home, and she was sitting upon the balcony at Port Lodge after dinner, with only Reggie Caloney for her companion.

It was dark—the darkness of nine o'clock on a July night—but light streamed out upon the balcony from the lamps in the drawing-room, and there was lamp-light also in the street below, up and down which gay throngs were patrolling, chattering, laughing, singing.

Tor Bay was gayer than ever. The little town was filling with 'trippers,' and Kitty sighed to think that she was leaving it.

There was an awning stretched over the balcony, and Kitty leaned back in a canvas chair with a gaudy Japanese parasol fastened behind it.

Reggie had one of her small brown hands in his, as he sat beside her on a fashionable but uncomfortable stool.

Yes; they had become lovers in the summer months they had passed together—the most glorious month the young girl had ever spent, and would, as she felt, ever spend again.

Every hour of every day had been a delight to her, and she had a vague fore-

boding that it would be impossible for just such a perfect summer idyll to repeat itself in any circumstances.

They were lovers, but not in any way declared ones.

To Kitty, in her youth and foolishness, it seemed quite enough that Reggie should have singled her out from among the other girls, to gaze into her eyes, to tell her, in his low, musical voice, that he loved her, to be ever at her side.

She did not desire any publicity, as a more worldly-wise and discreet maiden would have done.

She only smiled and blushed when Mrs. Mapleson, in her silly, easy-going way, rallied her upon the handsome young man's attentions.

She was fathomless deep in love with him—too much in love to think of herself at all, or of what was properly required of him.

He admired her so unmistakably, he haunted her so persistently, he was so different from anyone she had ever met in her cramped and simple life.

What wonder was it that the innocent, thoughtless child should dream of him from morning to night, should entertain no thought of anything or anybody but him, with his many fascinations and his easy, dashing way?

He was immensely popular with the other visitors.

His manners were so pleasant that without any effort, he captivated those who met him, and he seemed to scatter money around him, as some prince might have done carelessly and unthinkingly, so that Kitty was often almost startled by his generosity, and admired him with awe and wonder.

He was like some being from another world to the country girl from Primrose Farm—a world far above that in which she moved, just as his pale, clearly-cut face with its gay, dark eyes and satirical mouth was so much more attractive than any honest, stolid countenance she encountered in her everyday round.

He was a hero to her—hardly in touch with others of either his sex or her own—infinitely superior to the rest of the world.

It never occurred to unthinking Mrs. Mapleson—more foolish even than her niece—that there was anything really serious in this affair with the handsome stranger with whom they had become acquainted, by reason of living under the same roof.

She looked upon Kitty as too young, too much of a child, for her to trouble herself about her, and she knew her own girlhood, between thirty and forty years ago—had been full of just such 'fun' and 'nonsense.'

So she was never one of those who saw fit to worry over any younger charge.

'Girls would be girls,' she used to say knowingly, and a child as pretty as Kitty would, of course, attract a little notice.

'But, law, tell me to begin to be careful in five years time! she would have replied to any well-meant caution, and, therefore, pretty little Kitty had it all her own way, and was overwhelmingly happy.

'So this is your last evening,' Reggie said, as they sat side by side on the deserted balcony, and he squeezed the soft fingers lying in his.

'Yes,' replied Kitty, with a sigh. 'I don't believe I shall ever enjoy myself so much again. It seems to have passed like a day, the time. I do so hate the idea of Northford after all this!' and she leaned out over the curved iron rails and looked at the crowd, and the dark sea in the distance, with the long, lighted pier, and the boats with brilliant specks that shone on it from the obscurity beneath it.

All in the scene was dear to her; it was all connected with Reggie and her loved idyll, which had been a very happy one.

She did not expect anything from him; he had confided to her once that his old uncle, who was a sort of guardian to him, objected strenuously to any thought of his ever marrying.

'And he's one of those old cranks who would cut me off with a shilling if I did,' Reggie had said; and Kitty, satisfied with the present, had vaguely trusted that the future would somehow turn out to be pleasant too.

She was unthinking, like a child; to be with her handsome admirer was enough for the moment, and she through off any unwelcome thought that intruded for an instant occasionally, and persuaded herself that her happiness would not only last, but increase.

'What times we have had!' she went on. 'How nice it used to be on the water, with the sun and the blue sky above one; and the walks on the cliffs—oh dear! Tears in her eyes. 'It's very unpleasant that everything one enjoys comes to an end so soon, isn't it, Reggie?'

'We can write to each other,' he said, standing beside her with his arm around her waist; 'and I shall come down to Northford one of these days, only the worst of it is there are some people down

there that I don't want to run against. I told you; and it will be only on your account that I shall go near the place. You've stolen my heart, little Kitty, and I shan't be able to remain away from you, I know, however much I try,' and his lips met hers in the friendly darkness.

'It will be so miserable there without you,' said Kitty, with a sob, laying her head on his shoulder in passionate love. 'I don't know how I shall bear it all. You will come, won't you, Reggie? You won't forget me?'

'Kitty, what nonsense! You'll see me there as soon as I can manage it, of course darling. Only there's this difficulty Caloney explained reluctantly, looking into the girl's brimming eyes as they were raised to his, 'you'd have to meet me in the neighbourhood, somewhere—I mean, I couldn't come to your uncle's house, because they would see my secret in an instant, and naturally expect me to declare my intentions. Now to you, darling,—pressing her fingers tenderly—' my situation is known, and you understand; but your aunt and uncle couldn't, and there fore it would be a case of my either staying away altogether, or—'

But this idea was unbearable to Kitty.

Besides which, it was a sort of relief to her that her lover should not expect to visit Primrose Farm, as she was fully aware what opinions old John Wood would entertain upon the subject.

'Oh, Reggie, I would meet you anywhere, she exclaimed hastily and fervently, hardly daring to breathe lest he should suddenly declare his scheme impracticable, and stifling rather unpleasant qualms concerning her own conduct and what she was promising. 'I understand how different your case is from ordinary ones, and I know you love me and I love you, and shall never care for anybody else, she declared passionately, as a sort of excuse to herself for something out of the usual run of her life. 'I'm only afraid you'll forget all about me. I don't know how you could ever have looked at such a silly, ignorant little thing as I am, when you—'

'There you go again! What a foolish child you are! laughed Reggie, kissing her reassuringly. Haven't I told you scores of times that you're the only girl in the world for me, darling? I'm not my own master just at present, but let me get my chance, and we'll be married the same day. If I don't write, you'll see me before long, so don't go and worry about it, remember. I'm not always certain of my exact movements, because I must dance attendance on my uncle if he sends for me; but you'll be in my mind all the time till I see you, little girl.'

Kitty could not help feeling happy, even although their parting was so near.

How glorious it was to have a lover like Reggie! and how her friend, Nelly Chambers, would envy her could she but see him—Nelly, who was as full of sentiment and romance as herself.

He was like no other girl's lover, she was certain; and she went up to her bedroom that night more proud that he had chosen her than unhappy that she must leave him.

When she reached the little chamber she took a photograph out of a box she had brought with her from Northford, and looked at it critically and with a little contempt.

It represented a young man of two or three or twenty—younger than Reggie Caloney—with an open, frank, fearless face, of no particular beauty or distinction.

He was dressed in the uniform of the merchant service.

Kitty regarded the photo for some time, and then blushed as her eye caught a faded rose at the bottom of the box.

'What nonsense!' she exclaimed, tossing her head. 'What a little simpleton I must have been to think I might ever get to care for anybody like Jim! Suppose I had gone and bound myself to him when there was Reggie waiting here for me all the time? I'd better have done with all this sort of silliness!'

And she took the rose out of its cardboard resting place, and flung it into the street, where it was quickly trodden under foot by the merry throng.

CHAPTER III

Kitty's eyes were red with weeping when she alighted at the Northford station, for she had a carriage to herself all the way from town, and had occupied herself in sorry fashion.

She had had to bid Reggie farewell at Tor Bay, for he had told her that his arrangements did not admit of his leaving the little place for a time, and that a friend was panning down to stay with him for the end of the week.

She seemed, somehow, in her life, so far away from the lover whom she had set up as a sort of idol in her girlish heart.

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