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DOLLY'S SUITORS.

BY L. FROST RATTRAY.

DOLLY!
 'Yes, mother.'
 'I can't think why you and the doctor quarrelled.'

No answer came from a slim little figure sitting on a kitchen chair, peeling apples. Instead of reply, indeed, Dolly threw a piece of core at the quiet, inoffensive cat lying in front of the range, gravely contemplating as much of the cherry blaze from the fire as a closely shut grate would allow.

'Get up, you lazy animal, and go and look for some mice!'
 'Dolly,' said her mother, reprovingly, 'don't throw pieces of apple about! They're all to be picked up again, and now that we have our own work to do, we ought not to give ourselves any extra labour.'

'Dolly laughed, glad to think she had managed to change the subject of her mother's thoughts. Truth to tell, she was rather ashamed of her little quarrel with the steady young medical man who was slowly but surely making his way in his profession in the small New Zealand township.'

Dolly Daneston had no lack of suitors for her hand, though since her father's death, and their subsequent loss of fortune she had counted one or two less than formerly.

'But,' said Dolly, as she reckoned her admirers on her pretty little fingers, 'a man that only cares for you when you're rich isn't worth having,' with which original sentiment she was ready to dismiss the offenders with careless ease.

'Dolly,' cried Mrs Daneston a moment later, 'look out of the corner of the window. Isn't that Mr Trevor going past? Yes, it must be. See, he's turning in at the front gate. Run, child, and change your dress. Be quick or he'll see you in the passage.'

Dolly peeped out as desired, but made no effort to leave the kitchen and effect any change in her toilet.

'Oh, Dolly, you're too late; the front door is open, and he'd see you pass to your room!' cried Mrs Daneston in despair, as a sharp knock was heard.

'It's all right, mother,' said Dolly, composedly, as she put her basin of apples on the table, and removed a large check apron. 'Mr Trevor says he admires housewifely girls, and I almost think I'll ask him in here and set him to finish these apples. His hands are too white for a man, and apple does stain beautifully.' Dolly pulled a wry face at her marked fingers.

'You naughty girl,' Mrs Daneston exclaimed, subduing her voice lest it should reach the visitor's ears. 'Take him into the drawing-room, dear, and say it's the girl's day out.'

'But I'm the girl,' laughed Dolly, 'and I'm very much in.'

The next moment she was shaking hands with Mr Trevor, and inviting him into the house, whilst her mother was left in the kitchen to prepare the simple mid-day meal which had lately been substituted for the luxurious evening dinner of more prosperous days.

'Well, Dolly,' Mrs Daneston said impatiently, as her daughter applied herself to apple-peeling some twenty minutes later, 'what did he say?'

'Pretty Dolly's face was bright, and her eyes sparkled with anticipated pleasure. 'He wants me to ride his grey horse, mother.'

'Oh, Dolly! I do hope it's perfectly quiet and safe.'
 'I hope it's not quiet,' said Dolly. 'A meek and mild sort of an animal I really can't stand—or sit, I suppose I should say,' she added, after a moment's pause.

'But you can't ride alone with Mr Trevor, Dolly,' said the anxious mother, stopping in her work to look at the girl who was throwing the apple parings into a basket.

'At least unless you are engaged to him!' This was added in a tentative manner.

'Didn't I say it was a riding-party? I thought I told you last night how much I wished I could go, only I hadn't a horse. It seems Mr Trevor heard of my wish, and as he has a spare steed he offered to lend me one. His sister, Mrs Black, chaperones the party.'

Dolly made this elaborate explanation in a great hurry, and then ran off with her basket.

The riding party was what the society papers call a great success. That is, the day was fine, the girls becomingly hatted and habited, and the men properly attentive. Dolly saw a good deal of Mr Trevor, especially after she had accepted the offer of marriage which he made her as early in the day as an opportunity offered. Coming home they passed the doctor's house and met that worthy man just leaving his front door. His face clouded over as Dolly's ringing laugh fell on his ear, and he recognised her cavalier, of whom, in fact, he had always been a little jealous.

thing about Mr Trevor, mother, is that he is afraid of his own horses. The two he has are as meek as lambs. I must persuade him to sell the one I rode and get a beast with some "go" in it.'

'Do be careful, child. You are so utterly reckless. You had far better trust Mr Trevor's judgment about horses. I must speak to him myself.'

'Well, he's coming here to interview you to-morrow afternoon,' retorted Dolly. 'But just warn him, mother, that I have got a will of my own, and must always have my own way.'

Mr Trevor dolly called on Mrs Daneston, and though that lady felt she should never like him for a son-in-law as much as she would have liked the doctor, yet, having no real ground of objection, she was forced to accept him as Dolly's future husband. His income was larger than the doctor's, his father having been in trade, but his manners and conversation were by no means so refined and gentlemanly as Miss Daneston's cast off lover. For two or three weeks the affianced pair seemed well-contented with each other. Then the mother's quick eyes noted a certain impatience and restlessness in her daughter, and a carelessness about her toilet, together with a degree of slowness in going to the door to admit her fiancé on his frequent visits, which had not marked the early days of the betrothal. But she was a wise woman in her way, and held her peace. Dolly had persuaded Mr Trevor into buying her a more mettlesome steed than the one he thought safest for her. He still kept to his own steady animal, alleging in reply to his fiancé's chaff that one broken neck in the family would be quite sufficient. Dolly secretly dubbed him a coward, and began to despise him.

He had on various pretexts put off any riding excursions since the purchase of the new horse, but at length he came to the end of his excuses, and one afternoon Dolly, in high spirits, mounted the steed she had covered, and set forth with her rather reluctant escort. Mrs Daneston watched them ride away with a smile of pride at her daughter's graceful appearance on her lips, and a stifled sigh at her self-will in her heart.

A couple of hours later, as she was arranging their simple tea, Mrs Daneston was startled by a loud knock at the open door. She hurried into the passage, and a small urchin stood revealed on the verandah.

'I say, Mrs Daneston,' he called out in true colonial style, 'you're to get a room ready. Your girl's got hurt.'

'What?' gasped the frightened mother. 'Dolly hurt? How?'

'Her horse ran away and she was pitched off,' said the bearer of evil tidings, thoroughly enjoying the importance of his position. 'They're bringing her along now,' he added, as he glanced down the road.

And Mrs Daneston saw, with a terrible pain at her heart, a slow procession winding its way under the shade of the eucalyptus trees towards her cottage.

'Dolly! Dolly!' she cried, and ran out to meet them.

'Do not be alarmed, dear Mrs Daneston,' said the doctor, advancing to meet the poor, terrified woman. 'Dolly is only stunned, I hope. There are no bones broken.'

The girl was carried into the house under the doctor's careful supervision, and laid on her dainty white bed. She soon recovered consciousness, and a pretty colour stole into her cheeks as she recognised the pleasant bearded face which was so tenderly bent over hers.

Dolly's explanations of the accident were much confused, but that night she confessed to her mother that she detested Mr Trevor, who had proved far more anxious about his own safety than about hers. 'What can I do to get rid of him?' she kept on murmuring, half to herself and half aloud.

She seemed so distressed about it that Mrs Daneston at length said soothingly, 'Leave it to me, dear, I'll manage it for you.' And, lulled into peace by this promise, Dolly fell asleep.

'How is dear Dolly?'

The questioner was Mr Trevor, who was reported so much shaken by the accident that for three days he had not even been able to crawl down the road to inquire personally after his sweetheart. He explained all this at great length to Mrs Daneston, as he stood at her front door with rather an anxious look on his face. Several people had told him that Dolly must be very ill, as the doctor had been to the house at least twice every day.

'Well,' said Mrs Daneston, 'these accidents are always so uncertain. Sometimes the spine is affected, and the poor sufferer is crippled for life. The thought of my dear, beautiful girl deformed, or limping about on crutches all her days, ha, I can assure you, Mr Trevor, caused me the greatest uneasiness.'

Mr Trevor's face paled considerably. 'Good gracious, Mrs Daneston, is it as bad as that?' he cried.

'I don't say it is,' said the mother, 'but we must be prepared for changes. Still, of course, that would make no difference in your affection for my poor darling.'

on a different footing. Of course, I feel keenly for your daughter—I—in fact, Mrs Daneston, I am so terribly sensitive that the sight of so much suffering continually would be intolerably painful to me. And so—ahem—you must perceive that things cannot be the same between us as—
 —before Miss Daneston became a cripple.'

'Then, Mr Trevor, am I to understand you wish to break off the engagement?'

'Well, it comes to that, I suppose. But please understand that it is forced upon me most reluctantly by the very unfortunate circumstances which have happened. I am sure, dear Mrs Daneston, that no one will blame me in any way. It is quite evident that when anything of this kind happens, don't you know, a fellow is quite absolved from all that has passed.'

'Quite so, Mr Trevor,' said Mrs Daneston.

'Well then, I suppose there's nothing more to be said.'

'Shall I tell my daughter of your change of feeling, Mr Trevor?'

'Oh, ah! Yes, if you would. But it is not change of feeling at all, Mrs Daneston. Don't let her think that. Assure her of my unalterable affection, but explain that I am not well myself. That in fact I'm shattered, broken up, you know. So that we should make such a patched-up couple.'

'Two halves make a whole,' suggested Mrs Daneston.

'Oh, but not in this case,' Mr Trevor said, haughtily.

'I will tell my daughter, then, that the engagement is at an end.'

'Yes. Give her—ahem—my best sympathy, dear Mrs Daneston, and if there is anything I can do for her—'

'Short of marrying her,' put in the mother.

'That is hardly kind,' said the young man, flushing to the roots of his hair. 'I wish to spare her feelings—and yours—as much as possible, and you do not seem to at all appreciate my motives. I must wish you good-afternoon, Mrs Daneston.'

'Good-bye, Mr Trevor,' said the lady, and watched him walk quickly away. Then she smiled sweetly, and met Dolly in the passage.

'Oh, mother,' exclaimed the girl, laughing heartily. 'How could you tell such dreadful stories?'

'I told no stories, Dolly. I only suggested the sort of thing that might have happened after such an accident as yours.'

Dolly danced round the little sitting-room in a very un-cripple-like manner.

'Anyhow he's gone for good. Thank you so much, mother.'

'Why, here's the doctor,' said Mrs Daneston. 'I am afraid he must think you more ill than I do, as he finds it necessary to come so frequently. How shall we ever manage to pay his bill?'

Dolly blushed divinely, and her mother left the room to admit the medical man.

Two months later, Mr Trevor returned from a visit to Dunedin just in time to meet a happy wedding party emerging from the little church. He stared in blank surprise at the beautiful face of the bride, smiling and radiant, with no trace whatever of disfigurement from the accident. His eyes swept the graceful, upright figure, displayed to advantage in the tight-fitting white silk gown. Never, indeed, had Dolly looked more thoroughly charming and attractive.

Mr Trevor's face darkened. His gaze wandered past Dolly to Mrs Daneston.

'Detestable old humbug!' he muttered, and hurried away.

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