

tion. But when I saw how completely I was forgotten, and when I found that the role of house-hunter was to be forced upon me, I played the part to the best of my ability. Upon my word, you almost persuaded me, between you, that I had returned home for the express purpose of playing golf on sodden grass in the winter time. I had half a mind to—

"We should have known you in a minute without those blue glasses," Martha struck in, still with uncompromising severity, and I understood quite well how she reproached herself for not recognising her old favourite. "But what with covering your eyes, and covering your mouth," she frowned at Jim's long, fair moustache, "and covering—"

"I should have known you anywhere, Martha, covered or—I should have known you in goggles and a respirator! As for these," indicating the spectacles, "I told you at the time of the sunstroke that I should have to wear them until my sight was fully restored. Yes, yes, my darling, I am all right now, and can dispense with them quite well; I wish I had thought of it sooner."

Jim's lips were again pressed to mine, and he was whispering tender, foolish, passionate words of endearment.

"My little one, my own sweetheart, how beautiful you've grown! Speak to me, dear. Tell me I am not dreaming; that it is really you I am holding in my arms at last—at last! Oh, I can scarcely believe in my happiness!"

I could scarcely believe in mine! My world, in the space of one short hour, had become transformed and glorified. A wild joy was throbbing at my heart, a strange, intoxicating delight filled my soul. In my utter content I could have lain where I was for hours; gazing at Jim, listening to him, receiving his caresses. But there stood Martha, and she was crying so quietly and copiously that it seemed almost cruel to disturb her. Still, there are situations when the

presence of a third person is a little embarrassing, and I felt that this was one of them.

"Martha," I said, smiling into my lover's eyes, "I think you had better remove the bill, for Mr Hurrell seems determined to take possession at once! And we don't want more than one such tenant."

The bill was on a board in the garden, and Martha, with a muttered "No, indeed!" hurried away to take it down.

"The idea," I murmured then, "of kissing me like that before Mrs Hewitt!"

And this was all I could find to say to Jim after a separation of sixteen years!

CHAPTER VI.

"A romance of the Middle Ages! Don't talk nonsense!" said Jim, a few hours later, as with his arm round my waist we passed from the dining-room, where we had partaken of "high tea," to the drawing-room, where the lamps had been lit and a blazing wood fire gave us the cheeriest of welcomes.

"Of course, I know," he went on, holding me before him with both hands "that you are twenty-nine—or rather, that you will be next week; but you don't look— No, stand still! I have not half done admiring you yet—you don't look a day over twenty; and in your violet velvet gown, with these soft lace ruffles at your throat and wrists, you are adorable, my Patricia."

Before Jim's bright, searching gaze my colour came and went, and he laughed mischievously.

"You remind me," he said, "of the child Pat who used to stand just—so! A little criminal awaiting sentence; do you remember?"

"Am I likely to forget? Your sentences were out of all proportion to my crimes, Jim."

"Oh, I don't think so; you were mostly very naughty—but such a charming culprit, such an odd and fascinating little creature! Come,

look up, my darling, I want to see the love-light in your eyes. What eyes, Pat! Oh, it is like heaven just to see your face again!"

"It is a heaven you might have enjoyed six months ago," I said sedately, as he drew me down beside him on the couch.

"No, Pat, I think not. Your first offer—I wince!—was hardly one that any man with a grain of self-respect would accept. Even if I had been the poor man you thought, I should still have declined to be the pensioner of a woman who, believing her heart to be dead, proposed to marry me from a sense of duty. As it happened, though, I was not poor; for the land in which I had invested Uncle Tim's savings turned out more valuable than I anticipated. I knew there were vast mineral stores beneath the surface, but I did not expect to find gold—and gold in large quantities! I am a rich man, Pat, and what I want, what I have always wanted, is your love, sweetheart, not your money."

"I am glad I offered you the money without the love," was the unexpected comment I made upon this long oration.

"Pat!"

"Yes, I am glad; because it was your answer to that letter that made me feel—I mean, that made me think—that is, that made me know—"

"Yes, yes," cried Jim, impatiently; "that made you feel, and think, and know—what?"

"Oh—can't you see? Don't you understand?"

"See! Understand! Of course not. The man doesn't live who can fathom a woman's motives. But I can tell you this, Miss Lang: you were fortunate in being out of reach of my arm when that letter arrived, for it put me into one of the biggest rages—"

"But that was just the beauty of it," I began, provokingly, and immediately collapsed, for before my startled eyes Jim triumphantly waved an

envelope—an envelope containing, oh! I knew only too well, what.

"Your second offer!" said Jim, smiling.

at my confusion. "What, are you ashamed of having written words that brought me the greatest joy of my life? Oh, Pat, Pat, you are just one of the small pieces of inconsistency that a man breaks his heart for."

He restored the letter to his pocket-book.

"You may ask me for it again on our wedding-day," he said, taking my eager, outstretched hand into his own. "How soon will that be?" I inquired anxiously.

Whereupon Jim, turning away his head, begged me not to press for an early day.

"I only landed at Plymouth last night," he murmured apologetically, "and I'm fatigued. Give me time."

"Oh, Jim," I cried, with a joyous peal of laughter, "what a tease you are still!"

"And what a tantalising child you are still!"

"How could you leave a letter like that unanswered?" I asked reproachfully.

"Is not my presence here sufficient answer? I was at the Oturo diggings when this dear letter reached Invercargill. It was sent on to Dunedin, there to wait till called for. Of course, had I known my little girl would find her heart so suddenly, and give it me so fully and freely—what a beautiful blush, Pat!—I would have arranged for letters to be forwarded. As it was, I only received this six weeks ago, and winding up my affairs with a despatch that bewildered the colonial mind, I took the first steamer home. I doubt if a letter could have come quicker."

"You might have telegraphed," I said, thinking of the cruel suspense of the last few months.

"And given you the opportunity for escape! How can I feel sure of you, Pat? There, there, my darling, do not let those tears drop. See! I

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