

THE COURSE OF TRUE LOVE.

BY MARY KYLE DALLAS.



In the land of tea-plants and pagodas, of joss-houses and fire-crackers, of moon-faced mandarins and almond-eyed maidens, a young Englishman sat writing a love letter.

A big bamboo screen shielded him from observation. His inkstand was a curious device that might have been made to order for his satanic majesty, and its contents were a solution of India ink.

A big blue china dragon, all claws and tail, standing upon a pedestal at his elbow seemed to gaze approvingly on his labour of love. A lantern of rainbow pattern swung overhead, swayed by every breath of air that floated in at the little window; and across the butterfly-haunted garden, which was planted in a regular gradation of colours, came the tink-tink-ti, tink-tink-ti of a Chinese lute, with the twanging of which some Chinese lady was solacing her solitude.

Despite all these celestial surroundings, however, the young Englishman's love letter was not addressed to any damsel of the Flowery Empire. The name upon the envelope, which had been carefully directed and laid ready, was 'Miss Susan Pettibone.' And this is what he wrote upon the crisp Chinese paper under his hand:

DEAREST SCAMAN.—Before I left you I told you how I loved you, and your sweet promise to be my wife some day has been with me ever since to make me happy.

But even when I spoke I could see very little prospect of anything that warranted me in asking you to be my wife, and I blamed myself bitterly for having been so selfish as to have bound you to an unucky mortal like myself.

You know my story, and how I dreamed of being a great dramatist, and how it was not until three managers and seven stars of the theatrical firmament had refused my tragedy, and twice as many my comedy, that I yielded to the urgent persuasions of my relatives and did something sensible.

I had no belief in my own business talent, and even as I held your hand in that last adieu, felt that it was quite probable that the respectable firm of Chung Fing and Tompkins Brothers would shortly return me to the agents who had forwarded me to them, labelled 'incompetent.'

Events, however, prove that others know me better than I knew myself. I have won the favour of Tompkins Brothers; Chung Fing beams upon me with an adorable smile whenever we meet, and I am offered a permanent position beyond all my hopes—a position that means present prosperity and future fortune.

To quote my own words, 'I yielded to the urgent persuasions of my relatives and did something sensible.' William's slang is expressive. I intend to 'hold on.'

In order to do so I must stay in China; I must live here in Hong Kong, and I must ask you to spend many of the best years of your life in this strange land, far from all your kindred, all your old associations. I do not doubt that you love me well enough to do so, as to me your presence would make any spot on earth seem a Paradise.

If I resign this position I am sure that I throw away my last chance of being one day a rich man; and let men talk of 'dross and filthy lucre' as they will, I do not love you out at the window. We are young, we can endure a little trial in the present for the sake of future good. You will come to me, darling, will you not?

And then followed many tender words, such as all lovers write, and at the end he signed himself:

Yours only and forever,
JACK VARLEY.

Shortly this letter went upon its way across the ocean, and from that moment the young man who had written so confidently waited in tremors of suspense for his answer; for he knew that this sweet little Susan Pettibone had a horror of heathen and heathen lands, and especially of the pig-tailed Mongolian, that passes description, and that this that he asked of her was the greatest test to which he could have put her love for him.

The tea-chests and China jars, the fans and umbrellas, the lacquer-work and the wondrous in ivory, the English citizens returning to their native land, the Chinese gentleman of rank about to visit our shores, and meekly seasick despite the red paper his friends have burned in his behalf, the missionaries' orphan children (there are always a few on board), the mail-bag, and all the miscellaneous freight of a merchant steamer from Hong Kong arrive in England at last quite safe, despite of much bad weather, and Cupid watches over Jack's love letter until it reaches the little old postmaster at Dodd's Corner, who looks at it through his glasses, and says: 'A Chany letter for Susan Pettibone! It's from her bean; he went there some time ago,' and places it in the division of the glazed letter-box marked 'P,' where Susan sees it, with rapturous eyes when she comes in that afternoon, fresh and cool, in her pale-blue muslin, with her pretty pounce parasol over her head.

'From Chany,' says the old man, with a knowing smile, and Susan blushes and runs away, but not quite home again.

She knows a little nook of the old farm-house orchard where an ancient pear tree shades a rustic bench. To this retreat she hies, and, sitting down, kisses the letter before she opens it, then cuts the ends with a hairpin, and draws the paper forth and reads what Jack has written; and as she reads her heart sinks within her, and at the last word she casts the letter on the grass, and, hiding her face in her handkerchief, sobs as though her heart would break. In all her life she has never wept so bitterly.

China! Jack wants her to come to him in China! To come to him! That of itself was dreadful enough. To go to be married! If it were only to France or to America! Susan can't feel this a coarse and common proceeding. It does not seem decorous to her to go to her betrothed; but if she should make that concession what fate awaited her?

Susan could not think of China as a residence with anything like composure. She felt sure that roasted rats and bird's-nest soup and a little rice must make up the bill of fare. She could never feel safe for a moment; she could never sleep an hour in peace. She should die of terror and misery. Oh, it was cruel of Jack to wish her to do such a thing! It proved that he did not love her.

She would have nursed him through the small-pox or the yellow fever, but she could not live among idolaters for his

sake. Oh, the visions of dirt and squalour, of knavery and leprosy, and of being made to attend 'joss-house' instead of 'meeting' that rose before little Susan Pettibone's fancy as she sat sobbing under the old pear tree!

You would hardly have known her as she went home in the twilight and stole softly up to her room, her countenance was as white as paper.

Her married sister, with whom she lived, ran upstairs after her. Susan was lying on her bed, with her face hidden in the pillow.

'What is the matter?' Hannah asked.

'Oh, don't talk to me!' sighed Susan.

'Tea is getting cold,' said the sister.

'Let it!' replied Susan, sharply.

'Something has happened, and of course it is something about Jack,' Hannah said, as she took her seat behind the tray; 'but it is not sickness or death, or she would not have been so snappish.'

'Very well,' said Hannah's husband, warningly; 'don't you say anything. Nobody can ever help sweethearts out of their troubles; they've got to do that themselves.' And though Susan showed unvoiced tokens of misery for a day or two, no notice was taken of her.

The girl grew calmer very soon; but the idea of China was none the less revolting, and at last she sat down and wrote to Jack Varley as follows:—

DEAR JACK.—I do care for you. But how can you ask me to live in China? How can you dream of living there yourself? It seems to me that to do so—unless it were as a missionary—would be to peril both body and soul. And how could I leave Hannah, or even Maria, though she is married a second time to Professor Pratt. Oh, Jack Jack, you must come home yourself. There must be a thousand places you can have. The idea of choosing one in China! I cannot come to you there; it is simply impossible altogether.—Your unhappy

SUSIE.

She wrote this on Saturday evening and said to herself that she would post it on Monday, and on Sunday she went to church. The more unhappy a woman is the more certain she is to be found in her place in the house of worship on the Sabbath.

It was a big, bare church; the pews were not too full. The old clergyman took for his subject the holy estate of matrimony, pointing out how husband and wife had frequently to leave friends and relations to live in distant lands. He said that a wife should cleave to her husband through everything, should be willing to endure anything for his sake.

Dorothy's heart grew softer. It was her duty to go out to Jack.

Once at home again she re-read the crumpled letter that she had cast from her in anger, and saw how thoroughly Jack explained everything. Ha could not do otherwise than as he did. Her heart grew all soft and warm once more.

'Dear Jack,' she said to herself, 'poor Jack! how you love me!' and on the impulse of the moment she drew pen and paper to her, and wrote as loving a letter as she knew how, promising to come to him, and enveloped it and sealed it with the old Pettibone seal that had been her father's, and went to bed happier than she had been for many days, and in the morning gave the letter to her brother-in-law to post, and went about her daily tasks, singing.

Toward evening it occurred to her that she had not torn up that first cruel letter, and she went and brought it from the red plush box in which she kept her stationery, and, just to give herself a lesson, decided to read it over before she burned it in the kitchen fire. She tore it from its envelope disdainfully and looked at it with contempt. In a moment more she was paling and flushing and trembling. She had made one of those horrible mistakes that some people are apt to make in moments of excitement—she had written the wrong letter to Jack, the dreadful first letter. In her hand lay the good, loving, tender one that she had written under the influence of that sermon.

At first she felt as if she could do nothing to blot out the deed; but shortly the thought came to her that if Jack really loved her he would be glad to forgive her. But now the second letter would not do, she must write another. And it could not be long if she wished it to go on the same steamer, and so she hastened to put the words on paper.

DEAR DEAR JACK.—Don't mind that first wicked letter of mine. I do not mean a word of it. I am sorry for it, and I will come to you whenever you ask me to do so.—Your loving

SUSIE.

Then how she sped down the road with it. More than one head was thrust out of the windows past which she flew, and some opined that one of Hannah's children had the croup, and that Susie was going for the doctor. But the girl stopped to speak to no one. If the mail should have gone before she arrived at the post office she felt that she must fail.

There was plenty of time, however. The boy had not come for the bag, and Susie sat down to regain her breath, and the postmaster's daughter turned to her with a laugh and a shrug of the shoulders.

'Here am I coaxing father to get a new counter,' she said, 'and father is as obstinate as ever. Look at the cracks in it.'

'The counter is good enough for me,' said the old man. 'I ain't goin' to get no new one. Scripture sez you can't patch old coats with new cloth, and a new counter in the old shop would be just as unseemly. Got a letter, Miss Susy? Seems to me two a day for a bean that's in Chany is more than his share.'

He took the letter from Susan just as a lady entered the place who had evident intentions of patronising the dry-goods department of the general store, which, as is usual in country places, was kept by the post-master, and the attention that the speech had drawn upon Susan was unendurable.

She hastily left the place, and did not know that old Mr Trickett laid her precious letter down upon the counter while he searched in the glass case upon it for pale blue ribbon, and that an unconscious movement of the customer's arm swept it into one of the great cracks in the walnut wood.

Susan watched from a distance until the boy came for the mail. Her heart was light once more. She even laughed a little to herself as she thought how Jack would read that first letter in despair, and be at once astonished and comforted by the second. Dear old Jack!

And then came days of waiting—at first hopefully, with smiles and blushes, then anxiously, then despairingly, and at last Susie did not wait at all. Summer had faded, autumn had gone, the deep snow of winter lay upon the

ground, and no letter had come from Jack Varley. She knew now that he would never write to her again, and she felt that she did not deserve it, if even in the first flush of terror and surprise she could have written as she did to one to whom she had given her promise, and who had said to her that her presence would make of any place on earth a Paradise.

Dodd's Corner was a quiet place, from which young men went out early, and where most of the heads uncovered in church were gray or white. Spinsters abounded—praiseworthy ladies who did wonderful things in the needlework line, and were not uncumely, but who had never had an offer of marriage—and a wedding was an unusual event.

Susie had two offers within ten years, both from elderly widowers. She declined them with thanks. She had settled down into the household aunt. Her eldest niece, a mere child when Jack had gone to China, had been away on a visit, and had won a heart. She was to be married soon.

Susie was helping to make the wedding-dress, and had gone down to the store to get some sewing silk. Mr Trickett, not grown much older in appearance, had the place still. There was the post-office as of yore. Miss Martha Trickett yet kept house for her father, and had not contrived to persuade him to get a new counter.

To-day, however, as Susie entered the door she saw no counter whatever. A pile of splintered wood lay in the centre of the floor.

Miss Trickett, with her arms akimbo, surveyed the wreck with a certain mild triumph, and the postmaster stood explaining matters to a little circle of auditors.

'You see,' he was saying, 'Squire Wackford and General Johnston is both hefty men, and they hadn't both erouter got onto the counter to onct. But seems as if the squire couldn't give his opinions on any important subject nowhere else, and the bar'l General Johnston usually takes for his seat warn't there, and this here question come up, and both of them was dilatin' on it from different points of view—one jest here and one jest here—when kerswass! down it come. Jest a wonder all their bones wasn't broke; and I don't know but the cat is under it somers now.'

'You've been loosing things down under it for years, ever since you closed it in to keep it from keelin' over,' said the daughter, kneeling among the debris. 'Why, here is a letter! Looks as old as the hills.'

A letter? Susan Pettibone turned at the word and saw that Miss Martha Trickett held in her hand an envelope dingy with dust but somehow familiar to her. It was the pale-green tint she had once used constantly. It was fastened with wax, which was unusual at Dodd's Corner. Was not that the impression of the Pettibone seal? She thrust her head over Martha's shoulder and read the address:

'Mr. J. Varley,
'With the firm of Chung Fing and Tompkins Bros.
'Canton, China.'

And she knew it was the letter she had written to Jack—the second letter, which was to make all right. The cruel one had gone to him. Fate had kept this back, and Jack, for all she knew, might have died out there in China during these ten long years. At least, if he were living he had married some one else long ago.

She stood petrified for a moment, and in that space of time Mr Trickett had snatched the letter from his daughter's hand and added it to the package ready for the mail-bag, and there before all the strangers Susie could not bring herself to cry out, 'Give it to me!' If she did Mr Trickett might be hurt for his old joke: 'One of them you writt to you bean in Chany, eh?'

So she bought her sewing silk and said to herself as she walked homeward:

'I brought a judgment upon myself, and must not rebel that it is (ind's will to punish me; and perhaps after all the letter may get to Jack, and he will know that I was not so bad as he has thought me.'

As she walked homeward, hope grew stronger, and she began to feel sure that Jack had loved her all these years and that all would come right as it did in the romances, and that some day she should open the cottage door to find Jack standing there with outstretched arms.

At that hour, though broad daylight at Dodd's Corner, it was evening in China, and Jack, in dress-coat and white gloves had just entered the drawing-room of one of the best English residences, and having presented himself to his hostess, had crossed the room to greet a lady who advanced smiling and holding out her hand. It was Mrs Stanforth, the young widow of a rather well-known diplomat. Jack Varley had for some time been making up his mind that he liked her and that she would be a suitable wife for him.

He had a general impression that most ladies would refuse to live in China. Mrs Stanforth declared she liked the place. He had some ideas also that she liked him. Now she startled him by saying:

'I am so glad to see you, Mr Varley; it is a good chance to say good-bye. I am going home by the next steamer.'

'Going home?' asked Jack, 'not positively?'

'Nothing is certain in this world,' the lady answered.

'But I intend to go, at this moment.'

Jack felt that if he did not speak that evening, he might forever after hold his peace.

'Let me try to persuade you to stay with us,' he said. He offered her his arm and led her to a quiet seat in the far corner of the room.

'Won't you stay for my sake, Mrs Stanforth?' he said. 'I have been hoping that you would so long, hoping, yet still afraid to speak.'

'Really, Mr Varley,' the lady said. 'You quite agitate me, and yet—'

'I am sure you will not be so cruel as to go,' said Jack.

'Mr Varley,' said Mrs Stanforth, 'not a word more now; I will write to you to-morrow.'

Some one approached; there was no more time for serious talk. Jack felt, however, that he need not despair.

It was early the next morning that he seated himself in the self-same room and at the self-same desk at which he had written his offer to Susan Pettibone.

Jack had an idea that sentiment and romance had both departed from his soul, but memory was busy with him that day. He thought of Susan, as he had dreamed of her all night.

He sighed once or twice before he put forth his hand and drew to him a lacquered box, which he unlocked, and taking

'No,' he said, 'I shall never be so fond of any one again; in fact, I shall never be in love again. I suppose all that goes with youth. Ah, Susie, you should have come to me!'