

'You see, it was this way, Kathleen,' he went on. 'A friend of mine gave me the chance to buy this house at a great bargain—' He was going to explain that getting the house at such a good figure would leave him a larger sum of ready money to spend on the honeymoon which they had planned with so much happiness, when the girl interrupted him.

'A bargain!' indignantly. 'That's all you think about! I suppose you think I'm a great bargain, too!' The words were inspired by her keen disappointment, and were no sooner out than she was sorry.

A slow flush rose to the young man's face. He said nothing for a tense moment, then his response was incisive, with concentrated anger.

'No, I think you are a very poor bargain for a man in my circumstances since you have only sneers for the home that I can provide. I was warned—unguardedly—that I could not come up to your expectations, nor those of your family.'

'Indeed!' Kathleen interrupted him, proudly; 'it is too bad you did not heed the warning. However, it is not too late to rid yourself of such a poor bargain, Mr. Hunter. Under the circumstances,' she added with superlative dignity, 'perhaps it is just as well for both of us to find out our mistake in time.'

At the careful finality of the girl's tone, Jack awoke to whither the war of words was tending.

'Do you mean to say, Kathleen,' he said, sternly, 'that this is the end—after all our planning—all our hopes—' He paused. 'Can you be so heartless—so mercenary?' he stumbled on, further increasing the girl's anger by his choice of words.

'Did you bring me here to insult me?' she blazed out, and before he could reply she was off the porch and in a second the vicious slam of the gate proclaimed that she was gone for good. Anger, consternation, and misery played for mastery on Hunter's face. Misery finally conquered, and it was a very pale and dejected young man who went out to his car. Before starting, he turned and took one long look at the house, then gave an appraising glance up and down the street. He could see what he had overlooked before in his eagerness over the very real bargain, that the street was narrow, the houses poor, and many of them unkempt and ugly. The lawns were straggly and suffering from lack of water; untidy children played about, and more or less untidy mothers could be glimpsed here and there on dingy porches or porch swings, whose monotonous squeak began to get on Hunter's already irritated nerves. In the illuminating light of Kathleen's scorn he saw the place in a different aspect—in all its sordidness as it must have appeared to her, fresh from her dreams of the new home they had planned together.

'Good heavens!' he groaned, 'what an idiot I have been!' The sigh that followed seemed to come from the depths of his soul.

'No use following her now!' he sighed gloomily as he started off. 'I suppose she wouldn't get in if I did catch up with her; and, anyhow, I'd better wait till her anger has cooled.'

The wait proved a wearisome process. He decided to hold off till evening, but a dozen times he took down the receiver of the telephone, only to change his mind with more or less of a cold chill a moment after. Only by a strong effort of the will did he keep away from the house until 8 o'clock. Then it was Kathleen's mother who greeted him.

'Isn't Kathleen home?' he said, trying to keep the disappointment out of his voice.

'Why, didn't you know she had gone away?' was the surprised rejoinder.

'Gone away?' blankly. 'No. Where did she go?'

'She left this afternoon for a visit with her cousin Emily at Frankfort. I supposed you knew. In fact I rather got the impression that you were to take her to the station, for I was at my bridge club, and her father is out of town.'

Hunter's mind was in a daze. 'No, I didn't know anything about it,' he admitted slowly.

'That's odd,' remarked Mrs Jamieson, with perplexity in her voice. 'Weren't you here this morning?'

'I might as well tell you the truth, Mrs. Jamieson,' he said, with a ghastly smile. 'Kathleen and I had—we had a little difference this morning, and—'

'Oh!' she interjected, 'that accounts for everything! I couldn't understand her sudden desire to go to Frankfort, and her frantic haste to go to-day. So it was a lovers' quarrel, eh? What was it all about? Tell me,' she hesitated.

And he did. He told her with great detail the reasons why he had bought the house, expecting to fix it up and to live there only a short time until he could make a good sale.

'I didn't think of the neighborhood at all,' he admitted, rather shyly, but with a certain manly directness. 'I could see the possibilities in the house with its large airy rooms, so different from some of the houses we have looked at. I admit I should have given it more consideration, but it looked good to me—price and all—and all I could think of was living there—with Kathleen. I thought any place would be next door to heaven if she were there. But it seems girls are different,' he finished, bitterly.

Mrs. Jamieson smiled. 'Yes, they are different,' she answered, gently, 'but not always in the way you mean. The house, as the casket of the home, means so much more to a woman than it does to a man. The reason is characteristic and fundamental. And we can't remove it by argument, even if sometimes we find it a stumbling block in the path of agreement. Kathleen had been building air-castles, no doubt, and the reality was a little jarring after the dream.'

'I can see that,' he answered gloomily.

'Still, I'm disappointed in Kathleen,' her mother went on, in a worried tone. 'She really has great good sense, and she should have risen above any disappointment—'

'Oh, don't blame her!' he interjected. 'It was all my fault! I think I'll run down to Frankfort tomorrow and see her, and see if—'

Mrs. Jamieson interrupted him. 'That would be a foolish move,' she said most decidedly. 'You must allow me, as Kathleen's mother, to have a little voice in this. Of course I can't speak with a certainty until I have seen the house and neighborhood, but I think she is to be censured most strongly. She has acted childish, moreover, in running away like this without even consulting me or her father, and I, for one, think she is old enough to have acted with more sense and dignity. If you take my advice, you will let things stay as they are until the young lady returns. She'll be ready enough then to make up; if you seek her now, she will only flout you.'

'But how long will she be gone?' queried the miserable young man. 'How can I stand the wait?' fastening imploring eyes on his future mother-in-law.

'By making up your mind it's the best thing to do,' was the sensible reply. 'In the meantime you can take me to see the house, and if it is impossible, you can forget some of your worry in devising a plan to get rid of it. You have put your money in it, however, and you'll have to make the best of the situation.'

'You're very good to me, Mrs. Jamieson,' the young man murmured gratefully, 'after I've made such a mess of things.'

'It is a mess,' Mrs. Jamieson agreed, 'but not entirely of your making, and the wedding only a few months off, too. But, noting his downcast countenance, 'it will all come out all right, I'm sure. Cheer up,' she added comfortingly. 'I don't think she will stay away long. I expect she's dying to come back already, if the truth were known.'

As Mrs. Jamieson took her way upstairs, after the young man's departure, she owned to herself that the situation was one calculated to cause considerable worry. Her daughter's one paramount fault was stubbornness, a trait which she inherited from both her parents, and one which had at times given them great trouble. The parents had early recognised their own predominant fault in the child and had been very