

[Concluded from First Page.] Rosy Maurice was engaged to Mr. Wilbraham.

The shock to her father of her rupture with Stephen Moreland, utterly unexpected as it was, had been even greater than she had expected; for he had set his heart on the match, which, in every point, except, perhaps, the difference of age, was an altogether unexceptionable one. But he was too sensible a man and too tender a father to fight long against the inevitable, and he at last yielded an unwilling consent to the new engagement, but with the proviso that a year should elapse before it was ratified.

"It will take longer than that to reconcile me to it," Sir John said. "I don't like the fellow, I haven't faith in him. He'd no business to make love to you when he knew, as everybody did, that you were engaged to another man. I say nothing about you, Rosy; it'll take me many a year to get over that."

But now the old man, if not satisfied, was to a certain degree resigned to the match. He tried, for Rosy's sake, to like his future son-in-law, and as, in point of appearance, manners, family and fortune, there was no fault to be found with him, he resolved to make the best of what he could not prevent.

Of course the lovers were happy; that it is hardly necessary to state. George Wilbraham was the very man to be the *beau ideal* of eighteen. Not one girl in a hundred is in the least to be depended on in her judgment of a man till she is some way out of her teens. A beauty-man, who rides and dances well, and who knows it, who is tolerably agreeable, and who has the manners of a gentleman, is safe to captivate the hearts—that is to say, to make a very strong (though perhaps by no means indelible) impression on the surface of the hearts—of nineteen girls in twenty, before they have put ten and ten years together; not to talk of those who are susceptible to similar attractions for many years later.

And yet young love is so sweet and pure and natural a thing, that it is very hard to impugn it. Shall we despise spring's blossoms because they are not summer's fruit? Shall we frown on the gambols of young white lambs because they are not staid sober sheep, who have been shorn so often that they know the ways of men, and mistrust them?

They rode together, did our lovers; they drove together; they sang together in the long winter evenings, badly enough, and not always quite in tune; but with hearts in harmony, what did that signify? And George presented Rosy with the very smallest and most hideous Skye terrier that could be had for love or money—the dog-fancier had had him from "a party" who had taken a month in compassing the stealing of him; and though Rosy hated Skye terriers and all ugly things, however costly, she got up a spurious affection for the creature, and tried to believe that in a big head, a thin neck, and a long lean body, lay the true line of beauty.

Were there ever times when Rosy remembered that with Stephen the conversation never used to flag, as it did now and then at present? that Stephen had no dread or horror of a wet day, and no sense of *ennui* under it? that he never was annoyed at trifles, and that, on the whole, though more than ten years older than George, his views of things in general were infinitely fresher, and brighter, and more hopeful, than those of that handsome young man?

I cannot say; but I know what Sir John thought on the subject.

However, it was Rosy, and not Sir John, who was to marry George, so perhaps it was not of so much consequence.

Rosy and her lover were riding one day among the lanes in the neighborhood of Halliday Hall, unattended by a groom. In the hedge, some singularly rich and beautiful clusters of holly-berries attracted Rosy's notice, and she expressed a wish to have them. George dismounted, gathered some sprays—not without maledictions on the prickles—and having presented them to his lady-love, prepared to remount.

But the animal he rode—a nervous, fidgety chestnut mare—taking some freak into her pretty head, set herself immediately in opposition to such a proceeding. No sooner did her master's foot approach the stirrup, than she wheeled rapidly round, repeating the action two or three times in succession. A dark fury passed over the young man's face, and gathering up the reins tightly, and swearing a fierce oath between his teeth, he began kicking the mare's ribs till each blow sounded with the dull thud of a pick-axe in an old plastered wall.

"Oh, George, George!" Rosy exclaimed, in the distress of her tender heart; "oh, don't kick her so; it'll only make her ten times worse, and you may hurt her dreadfully. Oh, don't, I beseech you, George!" as a yet heavier kick resounded on the side of the plunging, terrified creature, whose mouth was also bleeding from the pressure of the bit.

"D—n her!" exclaimed George, savagely, "I'll teach her to play me these tricks!" and kick, kick, went his double-soled boot into the mare's ribs again.

Rosy turned away her horse's head and rode homewards. In a few minutes, she heard the plunging and panting of the mare behind her, but she continued her course without looking round. In another moment, George was by her side.

He glanced at her furtively, and saw the tears wet on her cheek. This, far from touching, annoyed him; but he knew not how to commence conversation. He was half angry, half ashamed, and wished to appear indifferent.

"I don't think she'll try that game again," he said. "I was determined not to give in."

"Not even when I entreated you," Rosy said, without turning her head.

"My dear Rosy, what can women know about managing horses? Besides, there's nothing like determination; it's no use to let yourself be bullied by man or beast. I never do, and I never will."

They rode home in silence. There was no singing that evening, and the hours passed heavily; everybody was glad when bed-time came.

But next day George brought Rosy a bunch of roses that might vie with those of June, and made some sweet, and quite original, speeches about their being less fresh, less lovely, than his Rose; and so they kissed and made friends, and all was sunshine again.

Stephen had once given Rosy some slight offence. He had not made her any peace-offering; but he had begged her pardon, acknowledged himself in the wrong, and promised never to repeat the error.

At Halliday Hall, it had been the custom, from time immemorial, to greet Christmas in most hearty fashion. For some years after Lady Maurice's death, the habit had been discontinued; but as his children grew up, Sir John had resumed it, and this year a large party had been invited to stay in the house.

One morning, Mr. Wilbraham strolled into Rosy's *sanctum*, where she always contrived, even when the house was fullest, to have a couple of hours to herself after breakfast.

He sat down by the fire, and began pulling her dog's ears, a resource he not unfrequently indulged in when out of humor or when conversation was slack.

"I say, Rosy, a deuced annoying thing has happened to me this morning."

"Dear George, what?" Rosy said, all sympathy.

"I've opened a letter that wasn't intended for me. It was for Wilmingham; but the address was badly written, so they brought it me, and I opened it without looking at the outside; and though, of course, I didn't read it, I see it's from a woman."

"Well, but you told him, of course, how the thing was?"

"No, I didn't."

"You did not! What have you done with the letter?"

"Locked it up."

"Oh, George, why did you not give it to him at once, telling him of the mistake? Even if he had been a little annoyed, he'd have seen it was not your fault."

"I don't know. He's a deuced stiff, punctilious fellow."

Rosy was struck dumb. To keep a letter addressed to another man, probably a letter of deep and delicate significance to him, through fear of provoking his displeasure by frankly owning the accident that had thrown it into the wrong hands!

When she spoke again, both her face and her voice were altered.

"George, the longer you wait to give the letter, the worst by a great deal it will be."

He made no reply, but continued to pull Fairy's ears till she winced and turned her round brown eyes on him piteously.

"George."

"Well?"

"Take the letter, there's a dear boy, and give it to Mr. Wilbraham directly."

"Oh, dence take the letter! I wish I'd pitched it into the fire at once. I can't give it now. What shall I say for not having told him before?"

"George," Rosy said, with deliberation, but with a pale cheek and trembling hand, "it *must* be done!"

"Must! who says 'must'?"

"I do."

"And if I answered 'won't'?"

"Then we should part."

In violent agitation, he rose, and took two or three turns in the room, muttering. Then he came back to the fire, and stood leaning on the mantel-piece. Rosy could not see his face distinctly, but she noticed the convulsive clench of his hands.

She softened her voice a little, but maintained its firmness.

"Will you do it, George?"

"Yes, I'll do it. But if you ever drive me into such a corner again—"

Without finishing the sentence, he dashed out of the room, and Rosy saw him no more in private for the rest of the day.

Nor did she desire to do so. Her confidence in him had received a shock it was impossible speedily to recover from, and while under the immediate impression of it, she felt she could not treat him as she was wont to do.

In spite of herself, Stephen's words rose in her mind: "That man will never love you as I love you—it is not in him. He is not worthy of you."

And even were that the worst, but it was not; and Rosy shrank under the bitterest of all humiliations, that of the sense of shame in the man she loved.

Some days elapsed, and the lovers were still on a footing of coolness and half-avoidance—on Mr. Wilbraham's part, more than half. Was he, then, sulky and resentful in addition to his other short-comings? Day by day, hour by hour, Rosy's bitterness of heart grew and strengthened. But still, to keep it from her father, she gave no sign.

But the climax of matters was yet to come.

A week passed by. Mr. Wilbraham was gone, and the lovers were, as far as appearances went, nearly restored to their usual footing, when one morning Sir John came to his daughter with an open letter in his hand.

"Very odd and very annoying this, Rosy," he said. "Wilmingham writes to me that a letter of importance, addressed to him here, has never reached him. He has made every inquiry, and has actually traced it to this house; but there the clue stops. I have questioned the servants, but every one denies all knowledge of the letter. And yet, you know, it must be one of them. What's to be done?"

Rosy sat with her back to the light, so that her father did not see the changes that came over her face.

"What day ought the letter to have reached Mr. Wilbraham?" she asked.

She would hope while it was possible to do so.

"On the 23d—yesterday week."

There was a moment's pause. Then Rosy got up from her chair, and stood beside her father.

"Papa, I know what became of the letter. Ask me nothing, I beseech you; only be assured there is no fault of mine in the matter. I will write to Mr. Wilbraham, and explain all. Leave me his letter. Dearest papa, you will trust me? Perhaps some day you may know everything; but ask me not now."

Her father consented and left her. The instant she was alone, she sat down at her desk and wrote as follows:

"DEAR MR. WILMINGHAM: An accident has just brought to my knowledge the fate of your missing letter. At this moment, I cannot tell you whether it has been destroyed or concealed, but as soon as I can ascertain the fact, you shall know it.

"I can tell you no more now; and I appeal to you, as a gentleman, to ask me no further questions, and to believe that I am blameless in this matter. Yours sincerely,

"R. MAURICE."

She folded but did not seal the letter, and rang the bell.

"Tell Mr. Wilbraham I want to speak to him."

He sauntered in listlessly.

"Well, what's up now, Rosy—you want to speak to me?"

"Read these letters," she said, putting Mr. Wilmingham's and her own into his hands.

He glanced at the signature of the first, and became livid.

"What have you done with that letter?" Rosy said, her voice still unflinching.

"Burnt it."

"What are you waiting here for?" she said, after a moment's pause.

"Rosy, hear me!"

"I have nothing to hear from a coward and a liar! Go!"

He passed through the door, and they never met again.

Twelve months after Rosy and Stephen had parted, she wrote to him: "DEAREST STEPHEN: A year ago, I made a dreadful mistake. You were

then the chief sufferer, my poor dear Stephen; but since then I have suffered horribly—yes! more than you could have done. There is no man living but yourself to whom I could write as I am now writing—to whom, after treating him as I have treated you, I could say, return to me; let the past be obliterated, and take me as the Rosy you loved a year ago. But I know you, and I know that twelve months of absence have not changed your heart, or made it forget or cease to love me, unworthy as I may have been of such a heart's love.

"So I come, Stephen, dearest, in deep humility, to lay my fate in your hands, and to say that I am yours, if you will consent to take me.

"R. M."

Readers, I give you each three guesses as to the purport of Stephen's answer.

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