

"I do not dislike him," the girl faltered, and after putting on her hat and gloves, she walked out to meet her escort, to whom she bowed rather formally. He assisted her to the saddle and they cantered away appearing more like strangers than the lovers they really were.

Mortimer turned and left the window from which he had stood gazing after them, and wondered what had occurred between these two whom he esteemed so highly, to make them talk and act so strangely. But now, when he came to reflect awhile, he remembered that they had avoided each other's society for a long time past. Could it be possible that George loved fair Mabel, that he had proposed and she had refused him? No, he could not believe that; and yet something must have occurred to provoke this coolness which had so suddenly sprung up between them. While he was thus meditating the case, George and Mabel were galloping up the valley road, side by side but silent. He was thinking how much happier the girl would be if, instead of himself, Mortimer Gray was acting as her escort. He could not remember a time when he had seen her ride away with Mortimer, looking as she now did. Yet he did not blame her. Mortimer was by far the handsomer man, his manner was more free and ardent; and at last the poor fellow came to realize that no one had ever understood and appreciated his own nature as had his dearly beloved sister.

Such were the thoughts that occupied the young man's mind, as he rode beside the girl he loved, yet whom he dared not approach with the tender avowal which seemed ever ready to escape from his lips.

As they neared the head of the valley, and looked down upon the ruins of the old log hut in which happy Dess had been wont to sing the gay old ballads that had made the very woods ring with their mirth, a deep sigh, that was not lost to Mabel, escaped her companion's lips. Here and there lay skillet, frying pan and many other articles that her dear hands had touched; and here, right in their path, lay a calico scrap, the remnant of an old dress in which she had looked so pretty, so mischievously happy.

"How much he must have loved her," Mabel thought, as she gazed on the sad scene and then at the face of the unhappy man who rode silently by her side. Finally, her emotion almost conquered her pride and her young, tender heart went out to him in sympathy, in love.

"Allow me to condole with you, Mr. Watson," she said, as the tears rushed freely to her pretty blue eyes. "I think I can understand how you loved her, and I respect you for it."

George raised his eyes to look at her, and was surprised to see one solitary tear-drop glisten on the

long, black lashes that fringed the blue eyes. He longed to take her to his breast and confess his love, but he dare not. He would have liked to tell her of his affection for one who could fill Dess's place in his heart, but what would it avail him? Nothing, absolutely nothing. She loved another, and could never be more to him than a friend. A friend! How cold, how formal the name seemed to him.

"Thank you, Miss Randall," he murmured, at length, turning abruptly away from the bewildering influence of her sweet, pale face. "It was wrong in me to allow my emotion to disturb your peace of mind; but as I gazed on the ruins of the old hut in which we were so happy together, the sadness that filled my heart seemed so like the requiem of a dear, departed friend. Do not deem me weak, Miss Randall, but it is probable that I shall never again behold this sad scene, which invariably awakens me to the hopeless void in my heart."

"Why, you are not going away, Mr. Watson?" Mabel asked, a half-frightened look in her blank, pale face.

"Very soon," the young man replied, without looking up. "I have already engaged to dispose of my interest in the mine, and that is all I have to detain me here."

By this time they had turned their horses' heads toward home, and Mabel only wished the distance was lessened by considerable that she might the sooner hide away and weep out the grief of her aching heart.

"Believe me, Miss Randall, her companion continued, as he raised his brown eyes to look in to her face, which was now as white and immovable as a statue. "I shall esteem you as a dear, sympathizing friend. I shall never forget the care and attention you bestowed upon me, when I lay disabled and heart sick in your house. Within three days I shall bid adieu to Oak Dale, perhaps never to see the place again. All I ask is that you keep one little corner in your heart sacred for—for the sake of the friendship I entertain for you, and for which friendship I sincerely hope you will accord me your own."

His voice was low and tender, and it was only by a strong effort that Mabel managed to keep back the tears which were ready to well up from her heart. Her voice was calm, however, and somewhat haughty, George thought, as she replied—

"My friendship is freely given, Mr. Watson, if it is really worth the giving."

Nothing more was said, and they were soon at home. George assisted his companion from the saddle, and thanking him, she hurried away and was soon in her own room lying on the bed with her fair, white face buried in her hands. What power was it