

now going home for a little while, and perhaps, on my return, I will bring Mortimer with me. Shall I?" and she stooped down and kissed Dess' smiling lips in all the sincerity of her loving heart.

"My happiness is inexpressible, Mabel. You may tell Mortimer to come, if his heart is unchanged."

"You may expect him, then," Mabel said, laughingly, as she left the room.

Almost the first person she encountered on reaching the store was Mortimer Gray. "Come in the parlor, Mortimer," she said, "I have something to say to you, that is of vital importance to us both."

When the two had entered the parlor, she motioned him to a seat, while she threw herself into an easy chair facing him. She hardly knew how to broach the subject, but broach it she must, so she began—

"I have been thinking of late, Mortimer, that the engagement existing between us can not bring happiness to either of us. It is worse than folly for a couple to wed, loving only as we do. With all friendly feeling and due respect to you, I release you from our engagement."

Mortimer was surprised, but his face did not turn a shade paler, and his voice was as calm as usual as he replied—

"I will release you, Mabel. I hope only that I have said or done nothing to offend you. I see you look unusually happy, however, and I am glad for your sake."

"I think you, too, will be more than happy when I have told you all, Mortimer," the girl said, with an arch look. "There is a dear little girl down at Mr. Kingston's, who has been very ill. She is better now, though, and she told me to tell you, that if your heart was loyal, to come to her at once."

The glad light that shone in the depth of the speaker's blue eyes inspired Mortimer Gray's heart with happiness, and, rising to his feet, he exclaimed, eagerly—

"Tell me all, Mabel. There is more—what is it?"

"Be calm, please," the girl said, laughingly. "Give me time, and I will tell you, not all, but enough. Little Dess Watson has come to life again, and is only too anxious for your appearance."

Mortimer waited to hear no more. Seizing his hat, he rushed from the room, and up the valley road, neither turning to look to the right nor the left. Mabel walked out on the porch to gaze after him, just as a horseman dashed up to the house. The next moment George Watson had her frail little hand clasped in his, as he said—

"You wrote that letter, Ma—Miss Randall, I mean. Your eyes tell me that all is well."

"Yes, all is well, Mr. Watson. You must not go to her just now, however. Mortimer Gray just flew away in that direction like a bullet shot out of a rifle," Mabel said, laughing lightly, as she turned to re-enter the house, followed by the newcomer.

The young man was cordially welcomed by her father, and half an hour passed away, in which time they discussed freely the event of Dess' return. A few minutes later, when George essayed to take his departure, Harry would not hear to it, saying, as he stood himself between the young man and the doorway—

"You shall not go a step until you have dined with us. I can imagine your anxiety to see your sister, but just now, if you should rush in upon the happy pair, you might be the means of interrupting a very loving scene."

"Poor Mortimer was fairly beside himself with delight when I told him that his loved one still lived," Mabel said, laughing merrily. "Wait until after tea, and, with your permission, I will accompany you," she added.

Half an hour later, as they were walking up the valley road, the young man said, as he gazed full into his companion's fair face: "You are almost an enigma, my little friend. I can not imagine how you can refer to Mortimer as my sister's lover, when you are his betrothed bride. And yet you seem happy."

"He has always been her lover," Mabel replied, "and now he is wholly hers. I have released him from the unpleasant bondage that existed between us."

"Unpleasant! What do you mean, Mabel?"

"Simply that we did not love each other. He was honest, and told me the true state of his feelings toward me; while I, on my part, was equally candid. We became engaged, but not happy."

"And I would have staked my life that he alone possessed your heart. I must tell you something, Mabel—I will tell you—and then you can drive me from you forever if you choose."

Impulsively the young man took the girl's white hand in his own; and as she gazed up into his deep, earnest eyes, she was thrilled by the love-light that shone in their depth.

"I love you, Mabel. It is a secret which I never dared to reveal, believing that you and Mortimer loved each other. You are the only woman, besides my mother and sister, that I have ever loved; and, though I know you can never care for me more than as a friend, it has relieved me to tell you, nevertheless."

"Oh, George, why did you not tell me this long, long ago, when it cost me such an effort to try to give you up?" Mabel asked, laying her hand, which the young man had suddenly released, on her shoulder.