MAB.

Story of a Love Thrice Offered and Twice Rejected

[From ...]

"Mab, do you know what I want to say?"

"Yes. You are going away. Alice has just been telling me."

I looked at him quietly, straight into his eyes. If four years had taught me nothing else, it had taught me some amount of self-control; I could speak in steady tones glance at him with calm, unfaltering glances, though my heart was sick and sore and aching.

"I am sorry you are going," I said, steadily, in the regretful tone in which a friend may speak; "sorry for our sakes. But for your sake I am glad. It will be such a splendid opportunity."

He did not answer me. He rose from his seat and walked to the door. After a minute I rose, too. Standing in the doorway leaning against the creeper-covered framework, we faced each other.

"That was not what I came to say," he observed at last.

"You're not going?"

"Whether I go or stay, Mab, depends on you," he replied slowly, looking down at me.

My vaunted self-possession deserted me a little then; I was conscious that a wave of color swept into my face; my glance fell. I was angry with myself for the blush; with an effort I raised my eyes and looked at him again.

"You want my advice. You must tell me all about the proposed expedition first; I scarcely understand well enough to advise you."

"I don't want you to advise me."

He looked down at me steadily.

"Mab, you know what I want—you know as well as I do. I have tried again and again to speak to you—you know that, too. You have always prevented me. But now I must speak. I love you, Mab; if you will give me any hope, I will stay in England, but if not—if I am no use here, if there is no hope for me—I may as well go."

There was a note of deep feeling in his voice that set my heart beating madly, joyfully. But next moment I was reasoning with my unreasonable happiness, bitterly smiling at it.

"You do not believe in my love," he continued, in his quiet, steady tone. "I have felt your incredulity. But you must believe, Mab."

"I do believe," I returned. I believed that he loved me, but I believed, too, that his love was based on pity. I believed that it was a forced growth, which he had carefully fostered, and which, if the care and encouragement which he had bestowed on it were withdrawn, would die an easy and natural death. Four years ago he had learnt that I cared for him; the thought of my unrequited love had pained him constantly; he had been very sorry for me, very grateful to me; he had longed and striven to pay the debt of affection which, unasked, I had bestowed. And his heart had answered the demand he made upon it. He loved me. I had watched his love grow, read it in the softer glances which nowadays he gave me, heard it in the gentler, less masterful tones with which he spoke to me. But such love was humiliating—more humiliating than his indifference had been. He loved me, not inevitably, but of deliberate, anxious desire.

"I do believe," I said. "I think you love me—but I think, too, that if you try you will forget me."

"Mab, you are cruel!" he exclaimed in a quiet voice, but reproachfully.

He made no further protest, no stronger denial. Protests were not much in Ned's way, but I chose to ignore that truth. In my pride and bitterness I chose to tell myself that he knew he would, if he tried, forget. Love which is based on gratitude and pity will die an easy death when the basis of gratitude and pity has been withdrawn.

"You think me fickle, Mab. Perhaps I deserve your judgment; I have proved fickle once. I shall not change again, I think."

He qualified his assertion by "I think," for Ned's statements were always temperate—but there was little doubt expressed in his voice and glance. He came a step nearer me and took my hands in his and looked down into my eyes. In spite of myself, I let my soul for one long blissful moment drink its fill of happiness. My heart danced; my head was light with intoxicating joy. Then resolutel I struggled away from the love that tempted me; again I called pride to my aid.

"Ned, tell me one thing. Will you answer one question—truthfully?"

"As many questions as you like—truthfully, you may be sure."

"Did you love me at first because you thought that I loved you?"

"At first, perhaps so. I am not sure. The beginning of my love dates a long way back."

I drew my hands from his, and put them tightly together behind me.

"Ned—lately—" I asked—"what have ... Have you fancied I still ... you?"

... hesitated for a moment. Then: answered, truthfully, "I have ... You have often been cold ... and sometimes a little cruel; but ... believe in your heart you love me; I have read your love in a thousand ways."

"You have been mistaken," I returned, harshly. "You have read what doesn't exist."

He was silent for a few moments' space.

"You do not love me, Mab?" he asked, in a grieved tone through which a thread of surprise ran. That note of surprise braced my pride, which his sorrow would have otherwise softened. "You used to love me!"

"Why should I be more constant than you? I was a child—no more than a child. Why will you always remember that childish folly against me? One outgrows one's childish loves and hates."

"Is that my answer, Mab?"

"Yes."

I turned away from the door of the summer-house; I went slowly a little way along the garden path. He followed.

"You will very quickly forget me, Ned," I said; and I stopped hastily, in time to check a sob that rose.

"We need not discuss that question," he replied.

"In a year or two you will be rather glad that I refused you."

He half smiled. "You hold one view of my character, Mab, and I another," he responded, quietly.

Very slowly we walked toward the house. When we reached it, I spoke again.

"Shall you—go away?" I faltered.

"Yes. You have decided that point for me," he replied.

CHAPTER III.

May-day—a breezy pleasant day of alternate showers and sunshine. In the garden the laburnum tree is just touched with yellow; the lilac is budding; the trim beds are golden still with the last of the daffodils.

As my step-father has just reminded me, this is my thirtieth birthday. Mabel has kissed me in her gentle fashion and wished me many happy returns of the day; my step-father has smiled, and sighed, and slightly shrugged his shoulders.

"At the age of thirty, my dear, an unmarried woman prefers her birthday to be forgotten," he remarks.

"I prefer it to be remembered," I reply, briskly. "Thank you for your good wishes, Mabel."

"Thirty!" says my step-father in a musing tone. "Thirty!" he repeats,

"I AM NOT AN OLD MAID YET, PAPA."

and sighs. "Thirty!—Well, I suppose an old maid is useful in a family."

I laugh. "I am not an old maid yet, papa."

"No?"

His mild interrogative tone is certainly provoking; my own tone has something, I admit, of spinster-like sharpness as I reply.

"I feel quite as young as I desire to feel."

"That is satisfactory. It is not every one who at thirty still feels herself to be an ornament in the matrimonial market."

I turn away silently; but my silence serves no purpose.

"An ornament—but relegated to the shelf," continues my step-father, in a musing tone, with a contemplative smile.

"Age has, at all events, its advantages, papa. Sarcasms at thirty fail to touch one."

He professes not to hear me. "As far as I can see, my dear, Barnet seems to leave you to grace that shelf."

I have carried the pinafore I am making to a distant window. I, too, profess to be deaf to the words which I will not hear.

"Let me give you credit for one virtue," the smooth voice continues. "You are patient. You have smiled on Barnet for thirteen years, and still are unwilling to regard the task as hopeless!"

I have said that sarcasms no longer have the power to hurt me; but the ... is vain. In spite of my thirty ... I turn away now with burning ... anger and with ... eyes ... the garden. The ... children are in the school-room at their lessons and my own sisters are all married and gone. The lawn is closely shaven, smooth as silk; the box-borders trim as ever; the beds are guiltless of a weed. I take the path which nine years ago I took with Alice, and I stop now as I stopped then at the little rustic summer-house beside the pathway. I lean in a musing, pensive mood against the framework of the entrance and look absently before me at the dancing branches wet with rain, at the moving patches of light and shadow that the branches cast upon the path, at the lilies-of-the-valley beneath the wall, at the bed where by and by the sweet peas will blossom.

The sweet peas were blossoming on that morning, nine years ago, when Ned and I stood here together. My thoughts travel slowly back across those nine years, recall their history, and slowly return to dwell upon the present—the joys and sorrows of to-day.

"Many happy returns of the day to you."

I start and turn my head. Round the path behind the summer-house Ned had come suddenly upon me, he stands close beside me, holds out his right hand and smiles in calm, friendly, unembarrassed fashion.

"Thank you. You remember my birthday, then?"

"Yes. My memory is very good, you know. It is part of my equipment as a scientist."

Ned stands, as he stood nine years ago, in the doorway facing me. Nine years have aged him. He is nearly forty; his thick hair is turning a little gray, his short, bushy beard is sprinkled with gray threads here and there, his frank eyes seem to have receded further beneath the grave, thoughtful brows, his figure has grown more square, more set; the truth must be told, he looks middle-aged!

He looks gravely and quietly at me. His manner this morning is very different from his manner on that far-away morning of nine years ago. Now there is no suggestion of love-making. His voice takes no tender modulations, his glance does not linger long with soft meaning on my face. I am thirty; he is approaching forty—we are grown prosaic!

Prosaic?—are we? I can not speak for him; but I can speak for myself. Nine years ago my heart never ached so badly, never beat so quickly, as it aches and beats to-day. I stand in a quiet pose, my hands loosely clasped before me, and perhaps I look as calm as he, but the calmness is surface deep—no more.

We stand and chat quietly about many things. For the last few weeks he has been from home; and he asks me about the small events that have happened in his absence; and I ask him about the visit he has paid.

"I am not sorry to get back again," he says; but he says it in that sober, matter-of-fact tone which admits of no flattering personal interpretations.

"You are tired at last of traveling?"

"Not of traveling—but of country house visits," he replies, with a grave yet humorous smile. "Yes, I believe you are right," he admits, after a moment, smiling quickly but gravely again, "I am tired of wandering."

"The African explorer is settling down into a stay-at-home country squire," I answer.

"For awhile."

"You do not expect the jog-trot life to suit you?"

"Not for long." He does not sigh, and yet there is a suggestion of a sigh in the voice in which he answers.

"Whilst there are worlds to explore you will never be content!"

His gray eyes rest on me. They do not exactly smile; it would be difficult to correctly describe the expression in their depths. They rest on me with a long look; then he glances slowly away at the slender rain-laden branches of the laburnum, which sway lightly in the breeze and shake down showers of rain-drops which sparkle in the sunlight as they fall.

"While life lasts, Mab, I shall never be content," is all he says; but his tone has a little thrill of deep meaning, and for a moment my heart stands still then bounds forward at a passionate speed that keeps me silent whether I will or no.

For nine long years the record of our talk with one another has been a record of safe commonplaces, impersonal, unemotional. Only at rare intervals across that desert of years have I caught a glance, a tone, that has made me wonder whether the love I refused to take is dead? Nine years ago I put happiness away from me proudly, impetuously. For nine years I have known regret, loneliness, bitter heartache. To-day I have, perhaps, too little pride, as nine years ago I had too much. If I thought he still cared for me, his silence should not stand between us; I would let no ceremonies, no conventionalities spoil our lives.

"Why are you—not content?" I asked. My tone is steady with an effort.

[To be Continued.]

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