

SCORN FOR SCORN.

A CONTINUED STORY.

"I don't know what letters you may have received yesterday or any other day," I answered angrily; "but you certainly had none from me, seeing that I never wrote to you in my life, nor ever wished to do so."

I blurted out the last words, for the detestable idea had come to me that he somehow fancied I wanted to correspond with him, and thus carry on our friendship; and I forgot that I had once had such a wish.

He put his hands into one of his pockets and brought out a soiled and tumbled letter, which he presented to me, saying— "Look at it! Tell me—did you not write that?"

I opened it impatiently, but with a feeling of curiosity. To my horror, I recognized my own writing. I read—

"Dear Mr. Tredennick—I beg to thank you for the offer of marriage you have made me and regret—"

I dropped the letter as if it were a live coal and stared helplessly at my rejected suitor who had no suit to press; then I covered my face with my hands.

"You did write it?" he cried, looking amazed as though he had never thought that I had written it.

"I suppose I did," I muttered behind my fingers.

"Then why did you deny it?" he asked angrily.

"I wrote it; but I never sent it," I gasped.

"But why did you say you had a letter from me?" he persisted.

"I never said it."

"But you have just confessed that it was you who did say it!" he cried angrily.

"You say it here—in the letter!"

Things had become clearer to me by this time. It was still a mystery unfathomable how the letter had gone to him after being—as I believed—torn up and burnt. What was clear to me was that I had really and most unexpectedly—beyond my wildest dreams—had the pleasure and triumph of informing Mr. Kenrick Tredennick how mistaken he was in thinking I wanted to marry him. Still I did not want him to know how silly I had been to think about him at all, or to know that the letter was only a joke or a fiction, and not deadly earnest. I pondered what to say, and he misunderstood my silence.

"Tell me the truth, child!" he almost thundered. "I believed you were the most innocent, transparent little creature in the world; and now I find you are a mass of falsehood and—"

"I am not!" I cried, to passionate indignation. "I have said nothing that is not true. The letter is true too—or would be, if I wrote it; and I meant every word of it and I am glad it was sent to you."

"I am sure I don't know why," he said, his voice softening from bitterness to sadness. "We had been very good friends; but—I am sorry to say it—I never wrote to you."

"I never said you did. I should think you didn't!" I answered hotly. "You would hardly have been so foolish."

"Then why on earth did you write to me?"

"I didn't—but exactly—that is, I wrote that letter, but I never meant it to go to you, of course. It was a sort of a joke."

"But it came by post to the club. Somebody must have posted it."

"I am certain I did not," I cried. "How could I? I don't know the name of your club."

"Then you did not address the envelope?"

"I am sure I did not. I could not."

"I wish I had kept it," he said. Then he put his hand into his pocket and brought out a heterogeneous collection of papers. On sifting them, he found an envelope addressed "Kenrick Tredennick, Esq., Junior United Service Club."

"Did you not address that?" he asked.

"No, I never heard of such a club. I don't know any but the Carlton and the Reform. That is Helen's writing, I added, as I suddenly made the discovery.

He took it from me and compared it with his writing. To him it seemed a careful imitation. To me it did not look in the least like mine, but quite like Helen's.

"I see it is only copied from yours," he said; "but it cannot be your cousin's. Why should she do such a thing? And, besides, she denied all knowledge of it. She could not have sent it unless she had received it from you to send."

"She must have picked it up; she was in my room," I said eagerly, for I had not yet remembered the screen of darkness I provided for her by blowing out the candle.

"Still there remains the mystery," he said, after a long pause, "why you wrote that letter. Had you any reason at all—any fellow?"

"No, I had not," I answered coldly, remembering the reason most distinctly. "It was merely a joke."

"No, a very friendly joke," he said reproachfully. "I had fancied we were good friends; and yet you could not have been thinking of me kindly, to say the least."

His manner touched me very much in spite of myself; it was so like his old manner—the manner that had taught me something of what it would be like to have a dear friend—that I might have forgotten my dignity if I had not repeated Helen's words to myself to keep my pride up to the mark.

"I suppose I was not thinking at all," I replied carelessly. "One cannot be always in solemn earnest."

"And is that the way you would have answered me if I had written you that letter?" he asked.

"Exactly," I answered, with a horrid little laugh to keep myself from softening, for I felt perilously near crying. Of course I must stick to it; I could not admit that my mind had changed in less than three days, any more than I could admit the letter to be a pretence.

"Of course," he rejoined hastily, "I do not quarrel with the substance of your letter. Nonsense! Who should?" she exclaimed. "Violet knows hardly a soul—no one capable of a practical joke. By-the-by, why do you believe such a letter was written?"

"Because I have had her answer."

"Oh, that is awkward!" said Helen sympathetically. "Then you are engaged involuntarily? Well, you will have to stick to it. You must not enlighten her, poor thing!"

"But," he stammered, "she has refused me!" Then he tried to laugh it off, but the attempt was a sad failure.

"Refused you? Impossible!" cried Helen. "You must have misunderstood. She has been shy—afraid of saying too much, or uncertain of your meaning."

"Oh, there is no uncertainty on her part!" he said bitterly. "Here is her letter—you may read it for yourself. It is not so tender that there is any sacrifice in showing it."

They were alone at the far end of a conservatory. Every one was crowding to the staircase to see the royalties arrive. He took a letter from his pocket and handed it to Helen.

"It is certainly her writing and her style," she said, handing it back to him after a brief perusal. "She might have done it more amiably—more gracefully—more like a lady; but she is a little spiteful, and does not understand the meaning of gratitude. I suppose she does not think you nearly good enough for her. I told you she was saving herself for a duke. But don't think unkindly of her—it is not her fault; paupers are naturally proud."

"Not her fault—the little child!" he exclaimed. "But I shall not let her rest in delusion. I will put the mistake right. To be refused by a girl that one would no sooner think of marrying than one would a—founding baby! But we must go—the Prince and Princess are there. Come along! I will pay her off—the conceited little monkey!"

"After all," said Helen, "it might have been worse—she might have accepted you. That would have been a fix."

They all went off to town, to their balls and routs, and rides in Rotten Row, and left me at home like Cinderella. I was very glad, I told myself—the house was so much pleasanter without them. The gardens in their fresh loveliness were so much sweeter and fairer than parks or formal shops, and the trees in their young green would surely laugh to scorn such miserable attempts at foliage as London squares could show. My philosophy was assisted by my ignorance as much as my pride, for I did not know then how fresh and green and luxuriant London trees could be. Well, I was Cinderella; but had not Cinderella the best of it, after all?

Nevertheless, when, on the next Thursday after their departure, I heard that Mr. Kenrick Tredennick had called to see me, and was in the drawing-room, I did not for one moment imagine that he was the delivering fairy-prince.

"What do you think is the matter?" I asked tremulously of the maid who brought the message. I had turned cold and ghly. I was sure Lady Tredennick was dead, and he had come to break the news and get the house ready for her funeral.

"I'm sure I can't say, miss," said the servant. "He looks like having had bad news for you."

I hurried to the drawing-room.

"I know what it is," I cried, without any attempt at conventional salutation—"they are dead! It's of no use beating about the bush; I know it—at least I know somebody is dead! Is it Lady Tredennick?"

He looked so genuinely amazed and confounded that I recovered my senses and saw that I had made a mistake.

"What is the matter then?" I asked sharply, out of temper with myself for having made such a mistake. "You look as if you had bad news. I have no money to lose, so it can't be that. Has Sir Humphrey lost his?"

"Certainly not," he answered confusedly. "I came to make an explanation—or rather to ask for one."

"An explanation?" I echoed; and, as his manner had changed at each word from confusion to anger, my own indignation and sympathetically changed too.

"Yes," he made a long pause here; then he said, turning very red in the face and speaking unemotionally, "I am afraid a

mistake has been made. You had a letter?"

"Yes," I answered, puzzled as to how he could know and what it could matter to him. I very seldom had a letter; but it did happen that I had had one that morning from Lucy Berdell, who had gone to school.

"Well, I must tell you—that letter was a forgery."

"What nonsense!" I cried. "It was nothing of the sort! As if anybody would forge that sort of a letter!"

"I assure you I did not write it!" he said earnestly. "I am sorry; but, after all, it falls most heavily upon me, doesn't it?—with a little pretense at a laugh; then, as if recollecting himself, he added, "Still I prefer naturally that you should know that a mistake has been made, and that I had not the faintest intention or inclination to write you such a letter."

"But who on earth—I don't understand," I stammered.

"I am sorry to disappoint—no—I mean, to let you know," he went on hurriedly. "Perhaps I should have been silent, and made you a present of the triumph, such as it was, I meant to write and explain. I came in person only on a sudden thought at the last moment; for I fancied I could do it better—more kindly—if I saw you. Not that you had any such scruples in your treatment of me," he said bitterly. "You certainly might have done even the most ungracious thing in the world more graciously."

"I haven't the least idea of what you are talking about," I interposed impatiently when he gave me a chance.

He stared at me for some moments, and then a light seemed to dawn upon him.

"Why, that must be a forgery!" he exclaimed. "Do you mean to say that you did not write a letter I received yesterday evening?"

"I am not so vain, I hope, as to think it possible for a girl to be ready to marry me after four days of acquaintance, any more than it would be possible for me to think of asking her. But let me suggest that on future occasions you should let them down gently, poor fellows."

There was nothing more to say, of course. I shook hands and wished him good-bye as graciously as if he had offered me a deadly insult; but, when he had gone, I nearly cried my eyes out. After all, he had been very kind, and I had not by one word expressed any sorrow for the wound I had given him; and I knew that he was gone out of my life for ever, and that the world was cold and blank as it had never been before. Worse still, I knew I had only myself to thank for it. In my deep repentance I almost forgot Helen's share in the mischief, while I thought of the tenderness that had come into his voice and of his stern face when he said good-bye.

The months rolled on, the season passed and Lady Tredennick took Helen on a round of visits. I heard nothing more of Kenrick; the house was filled for Christmas, but he was not among the guests.

I left off dreaming about courts and grooms. All through my sweet lonely summer, all through the golden autumn and the dark winter, I dreamed new dreams—er, sweeter dreams—of what might have been, but I enjoyed them none the less because they were sad. They were painted for me in the Christmas fires—dreams at rays of what might have been, never of what might be still. I had no thought for the future. Had I not staid it? Had I anything sweet and dear of my own but the past?

No, for a whole year did I meet Kenrick Tredennick again, and then it was by a most unlikely accident. Helen was married to an old lord who had already buried three wives. I knew that they had never seen Kenrick to speak to since the reception at the Foreign Office; and no doubt Helen had reasons of her own for suspecting that no chain of accidents prevented him from meeting her and from accepting Lady Tredennick's invitations to Crix Knowsley. So she took her old lord for better for worse, and her mother being left daughterless, I was taken to Scotland in the following autumn in Helen's place.

One day we—the house-party—were invited to lunch on a yacht that was lying in the bay beneath our Castle walls. It was Lord Westhill's yacht; he and a party of men were cruising about the Hebrides, and had put in here for provisions and letters. He was our hostess's nephew, and he invited us all for that day. They were going to sail in the evening, to take advantage of a change of wind, or he would have been delighted to bring his friends to the Castle.

The first man I saw when we found ourselves on board was Kenrick Tredennick. He started, and so did I; but the awkwardness was all on my side. He came forward with his old sweet smile, and said—

"This is an unexpected pleasure. With all these people about, nobody noticed that I was strangely silent after the first formal evening. I was so confused by the sudden restoration of some of my prettiest letter dreams that I could not speak. Alas, it could be no memory of dreams that I dimly about!"

After luncheon we were taken on a little cruise to one of the lonely rocky islands of the Hebrides—a romantic coast. We landed, and, to my surprise, I found Kenrick helping me ashore, and he walked on at

my side in the most natural manner possible.

"Is Crix Knowsley looking as pretty as ever?" he asked.

"I suppose so. I shall not think it is so lovely after seeing this—Scotland I mean," I said disparagingly.

"It is very pretty, though; we had some nice rides there, hadn't we? Do you remember."

His voice set my heart beating so fast that I could hardly speak.

"Yes," I said, with a little gasping sob of retrospective regret.

"That was not a very nice letter of yours, was it?" he went on, laughing in a forced way.

"I do think you might let it be forgotten," I interposed. "It is never meant for you, you know; and it is too bad that you should remind me of it."

"But it was meant for me. You owned it, and you stuck to it. You said that you meant every word of it, and that you were of the same opinion still."

"But I am not!" I cried hastily, meaning that I admitted I had been unnecessarily rude.

"You are not?" he questioned eagerly, looking down into my face. "Do you mean that you would not write it now if I were to write asking you to be my wife?"

"I mean I would not be so rude," I stammered. "I was angry; I did not know what I said. I am sorry now that you had the pain, but I was glad at the time that the letter had gone to you, however it went. I liked to think that it had made you hate me."

"But you didn't do that," he said gravely; "you gave me greater pain than you expected. You showed me that I was made, deeply, truly in love with you; I found it out at once, as I could not have done so soon but for the enlightening power of your letter. Violet, would you make the same answer, now? If you knew I have thought of you ever since—how I have dreamed of you!"

"You cannot forgive it," I whispered. "It was too cruel—too dreadful."

"I can easily forgive it if you will say—which I half believe—that it was not true."

"It can never be forgotten—nothing can atone for it!" I sobbed, as his arms stole round me.

"Yes, you can write me a new letter to-night that will cancel every sentiment expressed in the old one. Do you love me, Violet—do you love me now?"

Not half so much as I loved you then," I answered, laughing through my happy tears. ALISON BECKLER.

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