

'I don't wonder, I'm sure, poor boy,' Charlie's god-mother said with a little snort of resentment, 'considering the whole world, myself included, looked on the two of you as being practically engaged. Now, Kitty, tell me truly, do you really care the least little bit in your heart for this Captain Reggie whatever-his-name is?'

Kitty flushed again, and was silent a moment.

'I like him, auntie, very much,' she said then. 'He is very charming, very fascinating—and perhaps I felt more flattered than I ought to have been by his attentions, for I discovered since that he makes love to every woman he sees, every pretty woman, at any rate,' she added, with a deprecating smile. 'But then,' shyly, 'I never felt the same, not a bit the same about him as I did about Charlie. I know—now—it's really Charlie I cared for all the time.'

'Well, then, hadn't you better make it up with the boy at once?' Miss Brereton began impatiently.

'But—but that is the worst of it, Aunt Mab,' Kitty answered, half-sobbing. 'I did try to make it up with him and—he would not have it. I met him only once since that night of the Blakeley's dance, and then—he was frightfully cold and distant, auntie. I was beginning to feel really wretched; so when I got a chance of speaking to him I tried to be as nice as ever I could, and said something about my birthday party—meaning—if he would only have understood—that I'd make up to him then for all my sins at the Blakeley's. But he only looked at me coldly and asked, "Is Captain Ponsonby to be a guest at your birthday party, too?" And when I said he was—for the Captain had practically invited himself, and I didn't see how I was to get out of it—Charlie said, "I'm afraid in that case, Kitty, I have another engagement." I really think it was very horrid of him, Auntie, don't you? After my stopping and making myself so very small? So then, of course, I flirted more than ever—'

'You little minx,' Aunt Mabel said, with a mingled severity and tenderness, 'you got only half of what you really deserved. Many a woman has missed her whole life's happiness by just such foolish tactics as you have been pursuing, and you may thank your stars, my dear little girl, that in your case it is not yet too late to make amends. Now, let me tell you a story, Kitty. Once or twice, you remember, you asked me how it was that I had never married, with all my wealth and good looks I was just as pretty or prettier even than you, child,' she added with a frank and engaging complacency. 'Well, I promised I would tell you some time, Kitty, and though it is a matter I have never cared to talk about, or have talked about by others, the story, I think, may as well be told now—perhaps better—than at any other time.'

'You know, Kitty, I was like yourself—an only daughter, your father's only sister; and like most other only daughters of well-to-do parents, I was, I'm afraid, just a little spoiled and over-indulged. I had, too, plenty of lovers and would-be suitors, some of them just as charming and fascinating as your Captain Ponsonby, I daresay. But of them all I really only cared for the one—I know it now, and felt it even then, for all my folly and hard-heartedness. Well, Archie Bentham was only a struggling young doctor, and as I had every comfort and everything I could possibly wish for at home, I did not see the use of settling down too soon as a poor man's wife, and kept putting him off time after time. At last, a rather good appointment turned up for him, but it was in Australia, and Archie never gave me a moment's peace till I had promised him that as soon as he had made ready a comfortable home and secured a sufficient practice out there, I would go out to him and become his wife. For all that, I made sure to enjoy myself in his absence, and thought altogether too little, I fear, of the poor faithful lover working so hard and so patiently for my worthless and selfish self at the other end of the world. The time came at last, however, when he would be put off no longer, and I had to promise him that I would get ready my trousseau and all necessary goods and chattels and start by a certain boat, which he would meet at the other end of the journey—the boats, I may add, did not go nearly as frequently in those days as now. Just at the end, all my friends were giving me farewell parties, and between the dissipation of these and the arrival of wedding gifts, and the selecting of dresses, etc., for my trousseau, I was—well, fairly off my head with excitement. And then, at the last moment, a friend of mine, Walt Harrington, a good-looking young squire with whom I had been flirting rather unpardonably, begged of me to wait yet another few days in order to attend a picnic which he wished to give in my honor. Well, weakly, I succumbed, and let the boat go, even though I knew my poor, patient Archie would be waiting to meet me on its arrival at Sydney. And even though Walt Harrington made me a proposal of marriage that day—as I had guessed he would—urging me to throw over my old lover

for good-and-all, I may tell you I didn't enjoy that picnic or the days that ensued the least.

A revulsion of feeling, a kind of remorseful longing had set in; and I now felt as anxious to be off and rejoin my patient and long suffering sweetheart as I had hitherto been slow and reluctant to do so. I wrote him a long, penitent letter, telling him not to be disappointed, that I would surely come by the very next boat. And when the day for my departure came, I said good-bye to all my friends and the easy, luxurious old life with the lightest and most joyous of hearts, feeling almost "fey," as the Scotch say, at the mere prospect of meeting and greeting my true love once more. Miss Brereton sighed heavily and the jewelled hands that had been lying idly in her lap gripped each other nervously.

'Well, Kitty, the boat reached Sydney, but there was no Archie there to meet it. I could not tell you the feeling of disappointment, of utter loneliness and desolation, which came over me as I scanned all the waiting faces on the pier, and saw that his was not amongst them. Then a momentary fit of anger came over me; he had done this by way of retaliation, to pay me off for my own cool and heartless disappointment of him a few weeks before! But even as the thought passed through my mind, a gentleman whom I had before noticed on the pier-head came up and spoke to me. He was my Archie's brother, the same who had obtained for him the appointment which had brought the two of us one after another to the far-off country. He was a little like Archie, but a good deal older, and with a quiet sadness of bearing altogether unlike my old love as I remembered him—youthful, gay, and bebonnair.

'My brother—he was not able to come down to the boat, so I came to meet you instead,' he said, after we had made sure of each other's identity. With hardly another word, he took charge of my luggage, and gave directions concerning it; then led me to the vehicle that was to carry us both to our destination.

A feeling of wretchedness that was not altogether disappointment, a feeling of sadness and foreboding, had by this time taken possession of me, but as we journeyed along through the busy crowded streets I took courage at last to say, "Archie—he is quite well, I trust?" It was so unlike him not to have come!

'My companion looked at me kindly, almost pityingly. "He is—not very well, I'm afraid," he said, guardedly; and something in the words, in the way they were spoken, set all my smouldering fears aflame.

"There is something wrong, I feel it, I know it," I said. "Tell me," laying my hand on his arm, "tell me the worst! Is he—is Archie dead?"

"No, Archie is not dead," the brother said, but there was no corresponding brightness in his face. "He is ill, upset; he worked too hard these few years back, took too little rest or relaxation, living with only one fixed object, one single idea in his mind, and then—he had a sudden shock, the effects of which still remain—may perhaps remain as long as he lives."

'With a blanched face, and a heavy, remorseful conscience (for who knew better than I the "one fixed object," the "one single idea" which possessed my lover's mind and heart?)—I gathered from the man sitting beside me, little by little, the history of what had really happened. Archie for the past four years had been working with a feverish energy, with a restless, untiring unselfishness, the sole object of which was to secure for me as a wife the same comfortable means and surroundings that I had been used to in my girlhood's home. Then, when this end was gained and he felt assured that at last I was really coming to him, his joy and excitement knew no bounds; and on the morning on which he had come to meet me at the boat, that morning which was to end in such bitter disappointment for him, his brother and all his friends were chaffing him on his radiantly happy looks.'

Miss Brereton sighed heavily, and was silent a few moments, as though wrapped up in regretful memories of the dead, irrevocable past.

'Well,' she went on, 'he did not find his bride awaiting him, and after a vain and fruitless search the poor fellow returned to his home, a sadly altered man. One ineradicable idea seemed to have taken possession of his mind and soul; his sweetheart must be ill, perhaps dead—else why did she not come to him as she had promised. It never entered his head, you see, that she could have wilfully and wantonly broken that promise for the sake of a frivolous day's amusement and the satisfaction of her own foolish vanity. Archie's brother tried all he could to console and reassure him, but the poor fellow would not be reassured; one thought had taken possession of him, had completely obsessed him—that I was dead, perhaps drowned on the journey out. The end of it was that the shock of his disappointment, acting on an overstrained mind and body, had made a mental and physical wreck of my poor devoted lover. He lived for just a year afterwards, and