

A Pen-and-Ink Effect

By Frances E. Huntley

HE was writing a letter, and, as his pen jerked over the paper, he smiled with a fatuous softness. She had betrayed herself so helplessly—had cared so much. And he? Well, yes, he had cared, too, a little; who could have been quite unresponsive to that impetuous inquiring tenderness, that ardent generous admiration? He remembered it all, with amused regretful vanity—the summer evenings by the window, the gay give-and-take of their talk, the graver moments when their eyes met, and hers spoke more eloquently than words. “Eager tell-tales of her mind”—how often he had quoted Matthew Arnold’s line when he thought of her eyes! It might have been written for her; and when he had told her so, she had not been angry. Little goose! She ought to have been, of course—but he might say anything, he knew.

Well! they had been pretty days, those; “a fragrant memory”—(she had taught him some of her phrases)—and now they were over. Quite over! The involuntariness of his sigh pleased him, and the reluctance with which he took up his pen again seemed to complete the romance of the moment.

She knew already. That was certain; he had sent a telegram on his wedding-day, thinking it might not be quite so bad if she knew he had thought of her even then. And now he was writing.

Not

Not to her—dear, no! he had too much tact, knowledge of the world, for *that*, he hoped; but to her father. They had been “pals”; he was so much older than she, “quite fatherly,” he used to say, delighting in her conscious look. . . . So it was natural, quite natural, for him to write and tell him how it had happened.

For in some ways it was a queer business, not quite what had been expected of him, and yet—what every one had expected. *That* he knew, and it galled him sorely. It was hardly a *mésalliance*, but—a mistake? He felt that it might be called one; a horrid saying jingled in his ears, “There’s no fool like an old fool”—and yet he had chosen it so, always guessed that it would end so. Romantic? No! There was the sting—not even romantic.

But she? Would she look at it in that way? Would she smile and think that he had made a mess of it, compare herself mentally—her fastidious high-bred self—with his bride and—pity him? He moved restlessly. No, she wouldn’t; he knew her better. She would mind—mind horribly. Her mouth would set itself, her eyes would look bright and pained—oh! she was brave enough; but she would be silent, sadder than her wont, and—envious? His smile grew broader. Poor little dear!

Well, his letter would be some comfort. He had finished it; now to read it over. . . . Yes! all was admirably conveyed, the regret, the remembrance, the veiled messages to her, the (he rather liked this part)—the hinted depreciation of his choice, the insinuated unhappiness and foreboding—and then the allusion to “his wife” . . . in fancy he heard the sharp quick breath, saw the darkening of the blue eyes, the pain of the firm little mouth. . . . But perhaps she might not read it at all; men didn’t hand letters round. He must provide for that. It was written for her, she must see it. How should he manage? Ah! that was it!

“Your

“Your daughter will help you to make out my scrawl” in a prominent postscript ; that was clear enough. Now to post it.

The end of the little episode, so delicate, so transient ! Men were rather brutal, weren't they ? Well, when girls fell in love and were so charming ! It *was* a shame, though, he thought, complacently. Poor little dear ! The letter slid into the box.

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Everything was going on just the same—and he was married. But then she had always known it must end so—every one had known it. There were two sorts of knowing, though, she thought, drearily.

It all seemed quite natural ; even having no letter to expect when the post came in seemed so natural, and it *had* been the roseate moment of the day. Did everything happen so ? It was odd. Browning's poignant question came into her head : “Does truth sound bitter as one at first believes ?” She used to imagine he had been wrong for once (“that omniscient Browning of yours”), but now that she knew. . . .

How *was* it ? She could laugh quite naturally, read and be interested in her book. Stay, though ! Yesterday she had been reading a story in which the heroine had reminded her of herself, and had, of course, loved and been beloved. She had shut that book hastily and taken up a volume of essays, but soon she had reopened and devoured it with envious, aching eyes.

That was the day after the telegram had come. It had stung her a little, though it had pleased her too. So even at that moment he had thought of her ; but how sure he had been ! . . . It galled her ; and, besides, it seemed to proclaim it all to the curious eyes around her. They were her own people, and she loved them and they her ; but their eyes were curious. She caught stolen glances, interchange

change of looks, imagined them talking of her, "Does she mind?" "Not so much as I expected"; oh, the torturing *espionage* of family life. If she could only be quite alone! She recalled the scene. From her bedroom window she had seen the telegraph boy, had thought nothing of it, telegrams were so frequent. "Effie! Effie!" First her youngest brother, wide-eyed, observant, when the room-door burst open; then her father, half-understanding, but innately unsympathetic for "love-affairs," gratified, too, at the remembrance of him, careless or unconscious of the intolerable under-meaning of the message. Something had told her what it was, what the pink scrawl contained; she had felt a burning rebellion, a hard hatred of somebody or something.

"A telegram? from whom?" Her voice was sharp and cold. "From Luttrell?" This was one of the things she loathed—that she called him "Luttrell," *tout court*; her morbid sense of humour saw the painful absurdity of it—to speak so of a man you cared for! Incredible! yet she did it. Was anything in life what you had once fancied it?

"From Luttrell?" Bravado had forced the name from her—and if it should not be from him? Even now she could recall the lash of the stinging thought.

"Yes—from Luttrell. Funny fellow! fancy his thinking of sending it! Like to see it?"

She had taken it with a laugh at the "funny fellow," had read it

"So he's really married. Well, she's a pretty girl, and a clever girl; I daresay he'll be very happy. A very clever girl."

How often, in her wayward moments, she had laughed with Luttrell over the "canonisation" of the newest *fiancée* or bride! "She had fulfilled the whole duty of woman!" she used to declare with ironic grandiosity, and he used to smile admiringly at her

her spirited nonsense—and now it was he himself ! But she must say something.

“ Yes, she’s pretty. Clever ? Well, I never had the pleasure of her acquaintance.” The tiny thrust had relieved her a little. “ And where do they go for their honeymoon, I wonder ? ”

It was said : “ they,” “ their honeymoon.” Had her voice really sounded so thin and cold ? She had felt just like it, “ thin and cold,” a meagre, desolate sort of creature. “ Meagre ! ” how descriptive ! Her lips curled into a small morbid smile. She remembered the odd sensation.

Well, that was over ; the telegram-scene was two days ago now, and she was going down to lunch in that odd, dreamy sort of way, as if she was walking on air—everything was so natural, yet so unreal ! . . . “ The post just in ? What letters ? ” she said, carelessly, passing through the hall.

“ One from Luttrell.”

“ Why, Effie, Luttrell doesn’t seem absorbed in his bride,” her eldest brother said, reading his own letters. “ Strikes me he’d rather——”

She could have struck him—but this must be answered in its own vein. Would it never end ? “ Bored on the honeymoon, I suppose ; they say every one is.”

“ He wouldn’t be, though of course he’d pretend he was——” her father laughed, opening the envelope. “ Dear, dear ! what a scrawl ! I can’t read it . . . Effie, you read it out.”

“ No, indeed. I can’t bear reading things aloud.”

“ Well, I can’t. Take it, and read it to yourself, then ? ”

“ You’d better both read it.”

“ Over his shoulder,” one of the brothers said, mockingly.

Well, if it had to be done.

She stood and read it over her father’s shoulder.

It was long, illegible ; she spelt it out slowly to her wondering, faltering heart. This was what he had written—this ?

“ A nice letter, very friendly. Eh, Effie ? ”

“ Yes, very—nice. Very—friendly. ”

She escaped.

In her room at last. “ He wrote that ? *That ?* ”

Her eyes met the wide dark ones in the mirror.

“ Poor girl ! oh, the poor, poor girl ! ” The mirror looked clouded, vanished quite, grew clear again.

“ To think I could ever have loved him ! ”

For a moment she hid her shamed, white face.

“ Feel up for a game of tennis, Ronald, Sydney, Edith ! ” her voice pealed out. One must do something to work off this mad joyous thrill of freedom, liberty . . . looking forward !

She dashed down the stairs with a wild whirl of frills and lace-edges.



