

Select Tale.

MY COUSIN WILLIAM. A SIMPLE TALE.

I was as sure as one human heart could be of another that my cousin William loved me. Not that we ever spoke of such a thing, being more children—I seventeen, he eighteen—keeping June holidays at our grandmother's house. It was an understood thing in our family that no cousins were allowed to fall in love or marry, so our fondness was of course mere brother-and-sister liking. I thought it so till one evening, coming home from the rectory, my grandmother and the doctor being a long way behind, we stood looking up at Orion, and there, in the starlight, under the yew-hedge, William kissed me.

William kissed me. I smile as I write it now—but then, though I said not a word, nor either, when I parted from him and went to my own room, I lay awake half the night weeping. Of course we could never marry—in fact, the notion of marriage rarely crossed my thoughts; but William had kissed me.

We had only been at The Ivies three weeks since the two families of which he and I were the last children—yet for a fortnight I had owned quite well that William liked me, and the last few days I had begun dimly to think that I liked William. Not that we were ever foolish as young people of our age; but he was too manly to "pay attention"—I was too frank to play the young lady in love. Besides, what couple could do so sentimental with a parcel of children ever their heads? I think we were hardly alone together a minute all day long. But some-thing in that quaint country-house, our lives together day by day—from the early morning when I woke to hear his step on the gravel-walk, and his whistle along the garden-row, and his window—through field-rambles, and rides, and afternoon saunters up and down the yew-tree walk—until the last quiet afternoon, when his merry face grew serious, and his careless, boy's voice, low, manly and sweet, as he read the evening chapter for grandmother. Then we used to bid good-night on the staircase, and my heart sank back into its grave self, till his whistle came with the bird's morning songs at my window, and I woke up again to another happy day.

Thus I had lived, thinking only of each hour as it passed—each morning, evening, noon and night, until—William kissed me. I woke up at dawn, feeling sad and strange. My head ached—it was not used to weeping and wakefulness. Why had I been so foolish? And all for nothing! For in the broad sunshine at first it seemed like nothing—And little Ada crept into my bed, and put her sleepy lips to mine. She did not know any, it must have been meant that, he would not have done it else, for he was of a shy, earnest nature, though so merry—William loved me.

Still I felt strange—happy, but strange. William was not in the room when I came down to breakfast, but there was the little white rose that I always found on my plate. I took it up—it looked different to all the other many roses he had given me. But when he came in with Ada in his hand, and one of his own little brothers riding on his back, we said, "Good morning, William," "Good morning, Mary," in our usual way. He was so merry, and looked such a mere boy, it seemed impossible that we were in truth such children. It was absolutely ridiculous in me to have had such serious, even sad thoughts, as I had had the few hours before.

So all the morning we became children again, William and I among our two sets of young folks, and except for an occasional grave look beyond his years, or a sweet, fond, quiet smile turned downward on me when we walked together, I should have thought it all a mistake of mine that he was, or wished to be, any thing beside what everybody knew he was—my loving cousin William.

I do not think he could tell—or any one—from any word or manner of mine—that I had ever for a single hour felt as aught but his cousin Mary.

We made the most of that day, for it was the last when we two should be sole regents of the little flock at the Ivies. Another guest was coming—a grown-up young lady, twenty-one years old, an orphan, and her own mistress. She had been educated abroad, and now was going, or wishing to go again on the continent, as a governess, so she said, and wrote to grandmother, who rather unwillingly invited her here, which we were all very sorry for, as none of us knew the least of the world about her except that her name was Melanie Blaquiere.

William pulled many comical, wry faces

at having to drive to the coach to meet her, and seemed quite determined not to like Miss Blaquiere at all.

"Oh, Mary, Mary," he said, as he put me and Ada and James out of the phaeton, to walk home; "we are so happy, just you and I and the children. When shall we have one of our old drives and walks again?"

Ab, when, indeed! I could see his fond, kind look, as he leaned over the carriage—the look which only came into his eyes when they turned toward me. William, William, we all change—little blame to us for it; but your eyes spoke true that day.

We gathered at the hall door, in great curiosity, to see William come back with Miss Blaquiere, who to us was quite an awful personage. A governess, too. We hoped she would always sit in the parlor, and pay visits with grandmother to the rectory and elsewhere, and take no notice of us. We pitied William, and wondered whatever he would find to talk to her upon during the long drive home.

But he seemed to have got through it pretty well—at least to judge by the way they both were laughing as they drove up the garden, and William handed her down with the grace and self-possession of a grown-up cavalier. I ought to have said, that though but eighteen, he was very manly-looking, strong and tall.

Miss Blaquiere was quite a little person, and not grave or ancient in the least; she hardly looked so old as I. I did not notice whether she was pretty until William called me aside and asked me if I did not think her so? I said, "Yes," of course, as indeed any body would. She had a skin like a rose-leaf, delicate features, laughing eyes. In fact, her face had but one fault, though William looked astonished when I mentioned it—a certain opacity of expression, like a beautifully shaped lantern with the light taken out. For all else, though rather Frenchified, she was very agreeable indeed. The children liked her—William, yes, William evidently liked her. Into such an abundance there was no need for me to throw in my mite, so I hesitated a little, to see and judge first, being always rather stingy in the small coin of love.

Melanie—everybody called her Melanie after she had been here a week and a half—had now been with us a week, joining in all our amusements, playing with the children, though not quite so much as she did at first, saying they tired her; and she seemed very soon to grow tired of things and people. She had bestowed an immensity of friendship and confidence on me when she first came; but gradually it faded out. It might be my fault—I do not know. But I may as well tell the truth, I did not like Melanie Blaquiere.

It was not out of selfishness or wicked jealousy, God knows. Because so sure was I of—things which no one else saw or guessed—that it never entered my mind to be jealous. William might talk with her, or walk with her, and she seemed to like hanging on his arm, and patronizing him as a woman of twenty-one will patronize a boy of eighteen, yet it never troubled me in the least, any more than if she had been Miss Miles, the rector's sister, who kept his house, and was, no body knew, how old. It never entered into my head as a probability that—what any one more worldly-wise must have seen was not only possible, but extremely probable.

Still I did not like Melanie. She made a confidante of me, doubtless wishing to show off before a simple country maiden seventeen years old; and then I found out by slow degrees her real character. There is not many women like her. I trust in God! at least, not Englishwomen. Suffice it, that she was altogether false, a painted shrew, a beautiful foulness, a creature that revered nothing, believed in nothing, loved nothing, a woman with some brain, no heart and no soul.

Of course, being young and inexperienced, I was some time in finding out the whole of this, but I very soon saw enough to make me shrink from her, shocked and deceived. I kept it to myself—there was no one at the Ivies for me to tell any thing to but William—and how could I tell William?

Nevertheless, our way of life, at the Ivies was completely altered, and the change came very gradually—so that no one noticed it, scarcely even I, until I began to find out that I was left all day ever with the children, while she and William were habitually together. At last the little ones grumbled—saying cousin William was not so nice as he used to be—that he was getting too much of a man to play with them now; and liked best to go about all day with Melanie. One day they told him so to his face, and William blushed scarlet, but said nothing. This struck me as strange, for he was of a quick temper, and could not avoid giving word for word. When he went away, I scolded the

children quietly for teasing him, and showed them that it was only his good nature and politeness to a stranger. And I truly thought so myself—knowing, or believing, how impossible it was a noble lad like William could have any sympathy with such a woman as Melanie, Blaquiere. For her—she would get tired of his company, as she did of every thing else, and set him free as soon as she found some one else equally useful.

This came to pass. The rector and his sister called, and like most other folk, took a very great fancy to Miss Blaquiere. There had not been such a charming girl in the village for years, Miss Miles said. Such a merry, warm-hearted, innocent young thing! "Warm-hearted!" "innocent!"—Heaven help us all! But I had not courage to be that mean thing—a backbiter and tell-tale; and she would soon be clear away; so I held my tongue.

The second week of Melanie's visit matters changed. There was nothing but dining and going between the Rectory and the Ivies. No wanting of William continually to take her walks and rides. She was well satisfied with the pudgy little rector and his prosy sister for company. True, she made game of them for our entertainment every night; but then she went out with them again next day.

William had never cared for the Miles's; still he went there with or for Miss Blaquiere every day. He said it was but polite, as he was the only gentleman at the Ivies, and she was my grandmother's guest. But often he came home alone, and wandered about the garden restless and cross. For now, sometimes, the children said, and alas! I could not deny it, that sweet-tempered, kind cousin William, was "very cross indeed."

"Can't you stay with us one afternoon—just this one afternoon?" cried Ada, calling to him from the hay-field, where we were all sitting. "Nobody wants you at the rectory to-day, and we want you dreadfully, cousin William."

He was very fond of Ada always. He came and sat down with us on the haycock. "Why are you not at Meriton Abbey to-day, with Melanie and the Miles's? You like Meriton."

"No—I did not want to go." "Perhaps," Ada said wickedly—she was a precious little thing—"perhaps, cousin William, nobody wanted you?" Melanie said so, for I heard her.

He looked startled a moment, then laughed. "Oh, so did I. It was only her jest—she is such a merry creature, isn't she, Mary?"

"Very merry." "I don't think you like her as much as the rest do?"

"Do I not, William? Well, I can't like every body. Do you like her so very much, then?" For I wanted to know if he did, and had so rare opportunities now of asking him any serious question.

But he passed this off with a jest, and went on plucking the thorns off a branch of wild roses.

"Why do you do that? Who is it for?" "Only Melanie; she wants it for her hair to-night, and one wouldn't like her to wear any thorns."

"I hate Melanie," said Ada, pettishly. "You never do any thing for us children now; it's always Melanie. I shouldn't wonder if, supposing you were big enough, you wanted to be Melanie's sweetheart. The maids say so." And Ada, after having thrown her shaft, ran away.

"Oh, William!" I turned to him, half-languing at the idea. His face startled—even shocked me. "Oh, William!"

"It's quite true, Mary." He rose up, and left me sitting by myself alone.

"How well I remember that long, still afternoon, lying on the hay, with Ada and the rest playing a little distance off, and the sound of scythes sharpening, and wood-pigeons cooing in the plantation, and the great wide starry blue sky overhead, with not a single cloud.

I hope no one will think that I was what people call "disappointed." That William and I should ever be married, which I always knew a thing as impossible as that the sun should go down eastward through that midsummer sky. As soon as he went out into the world, our cousinly fondness would of necessity "fade into the light of common day;" but it was sweet while it lasted. And now to find it all a mistake—to know myself only second in his thoughts—that though he dearly liked me, he loved Melanie Blaquiere.

It was suffered when young, suffered and over soon, in a few hours, so far as any personal pain was concerned, but at the time it was a sharp pang. For years the scent of a hay-field made me turn sick and cold.

By supper-time, when we met, I had conquered every thing; he was my dear cousin

William once more, and I was his faithful cousin Mary.

Now began a new life—full of new interests, pains and fears; we never said another confidential word together: but since I could read William's heart in his face, my eyes were rarely off him from morning till night. He was greatly altered; it was more a man's passion than a boy's that was consuming him. He did not follow her about, or whine, or sigh, or make a fool of himself, as young lovers generally do; but I sometimes caught him gazing at her when no one saw, and I felt he would have laid down his life for that woman.

That woman, who was—what I knew her to be.

If William had loved a girl of his age—a girl he could have married—above all, a good innocent, noble girl; but for him to love Melanie Blaquiere! Whether he thought it hopeless I cannot tell; probably no young lover ever does think the maddest passion quite hopeless; but any one in their senses could see that Melanie cared no more for him than she did for any one else who was amusing and useful to her, while the use and amusement of them lasted. As for marrying William, why, she had told me over and over again that she only wanted "un bon parti"—that love was mere nonsense and sham, that all husbands were alike after the honeymoon. "It would be very convenient for her to be married soon," she said, "instead of going out governessing; and as for the bridegroom, why, she would take whatever Heaven sent, and be thankful."

She repeated this to me with smiles and snarls, one night when she sat at my bed's foot, having come home from a party at the rectory. And that very evening William had been talking to grandmother and me, arguing whether, instead of his beginning the world as a clerk in his father's bank, it would not be wiser for him to dash at once across the seas to Australia, work hard, grow rich, and come back in a few years a man, and a prosperous man, to settle in England? Poor boy! I knew as well as if he had told me, what was in his bold, brave, tender heart! I sickened when I looked at Melanie Blaquiere.

Things went on thus a few days longer. Sometimes she stayed at home, went about with him, was merry and kind, and William was his own happy self once more. Then she changed her manner, and he was miserable. Sometimes, in a dim, vague way, he let me guess at his sufferings—me, his cousin Mary, that he was so fond of always. But if, made half desperate for his sake, I hinted a word against his idol, he only said sharply, "Oh, I forgot you don't like her, Mary," and was silent altogether.

So I found it was no use for me to do anything but sit by mutely and watch.

The holidays were nearly over. William was going home. His education was finished now, and he was immediately to commence the hard duties of life. Perhaps, in their daily routine, this fatal, silent passion—for, of course, conceived so early and for such an unattainable object, it could not be any thing but silent—would fade away. I hoped so. All I longed for was to get his departure safe over. Strange! I committed the days—the hours—till William went away.

The last evening came. It was a soft, warm, rainy July night; but I had been indoors all day, and I went out even in the midst of the rain. I walked up and down by the yew-hedge which sheltered me. The children were all in bed; my grandmother, Melanie and William I had left in the drawing-room. At last I thought of something I had forgotten to tell William. I had been putting his books and clothes together, as, indeed, he asked me, and it was a pleasure to do anything for him. I did it almost in a motherly fashion: he seemed now such a deal older than I.

I came in and went straight to the drawing-room. My grandmother was gone to bed; the other two were there. Melanie sat on the sofa, laughing immoderately. William stood opposite; there was a dark flush on his face; but he stood unflinching and firm. I knew—I guessed. Oh, poor William.

"Stop, Mary, don't run off—the best joke in the world. William says—shall I tell her, William?"

"No—yes," he added, recovering himself. "I am neither afraid nor ashamed, Mary. I have been telling her what you know—that I love her dearly; that if she will wait until I am my own master, and have a home to offer, I will marry her."

He said it so quietly, earnestly, in such manly simplicity withal, that even Melanie could not laugh any longer at the boy. She only said, lightly,

"Nonsense! How can you be so foolish, William? Why, I am a woman and you are only a lad of eighteen. Marry me, indeed!"

"I will. I will make myself worthy to be your husband. You don't know how much

older I have grown since I loved you. Boy as you call me, I can feel like a man; I can act like a man, strong and brave, to meet the battle of the world—if you only love me, Melanie.

It was the truth he spoke; his voice steady, passionate and low, gave evidence of that; even Melanie seemed to believe it.

"Very likely—I don't doubt it. You are a fine fellow. I always liked you, William, but I couldn't wait for you—I couldn't indeed."

"Don't jest. I love your merry smiles; but speak earnestly this once, dear Melanie. You are not so much older than I. In three years I shall be of age—you will be only twenty-four. Give me till then—hold yourself free till then."

"Oh, Mary, what an obstinate lad it is!—Why, I have had a dozen boys sighing and dying for me, and I never had the least trouble with them before. They were quench'd at a word, poor fellows? Really, William, you must have a little sense. This love-making is very inconvenient to me just now."

"Is it?" He flamed up. "May I ask why?"

She began to titter and play with her handkerchief. "Well, perhaps I had better tell you—you'll know it to-morrow. You see, William, I have a great liking for you. In fact, under some circumstances, I might have had a nice, harmless little flirtation with you; but I'm going to give up all that sort of thing."

"Melanie!" "Stop. No need to look so glad. I am going—to be married."

William stood, quiet as a stone.

"Yet," I said, "you told us all you were not engaged. It was just like you. Who is the fortunate man?"

"Don't sneer; he is fortunate. It isn't every pretty girl that would take up with such a round dumpling of an old parson. But love's all stuff and folly. Since he wants me, why I'll have him. I hate teaching, and I shall make a very comfortable, dashing Mrs. Miles."

She danced about the room in exuberant pleasure. Her end attained, there was no need to burthen herself with more virtuous disguises. The mask fell and showed herself to William as I had seen her, and prayed that he might see her, for many, many miserable days.

He sat down, leaning on his hands. It must have been a cruel moment—the moment that shattered forever his boyish dream—a dream so intense, so unlike a boy's, that I doubt if any one would have broken it save she herself. But his nature was so intrinsically pure and noble—it so revolted from every thing false, or foul, or mean, especially in a woman—that one glance into this girl's real heart, or rather the thing which did duty for one, and the charm was snapped forever.

"William," I whispered, touching his hand. He caught mine and clasped them hard.

"I know you are true, my cousin Mary."

Then he rose and walked direct to Melanie, who stood pulling her curls out at the glass.

"Well, William, are you cured?"

"Quite," he said, after a grave bend and smile. "Miss Blaquiere, I thank you for your confidence. I hope your marriage will be as happy—no, happier than it deserves to be."

"And you won't say any thing of this little affair of yours, or go and break your heart about me either?"

"Certainly not!"

Melanie seemed annoyed at his coolness. "You are the stupidest, oddest fellow I And there's Mary crying like a water-pot. Well go to her, she'll comfort you."

"She will always," said William in a low voice, as he put his arm round her and gave her a kiss on the forehead, tender, brotherly, but, oh! not like the first.

He went away next morning. His life and mine sloped wide apart. We did not meet again for many, many years.

My cousin William is a middle-aged man now, a prosperous man too, a husband and father of a large family. He comes now and then to see my sisters and me, in our quiet cottage; we are very happy in his coming, and rather proud of speaking to the neighbors about "our cousin William."

We never spent another summer at the Ivies, and never shall again. I told him one day lately that the yew-hedge had been cut down. "What yew-hedge?" he said; and with difficulty remembered it. But I saw it, and see it still sometimes very clear, like a picture in a dream, all in the soft dusk of that midsummer night, with Orion shining through the trees. And however foolish it was, and however much better things are as they are than as they might have been, I feel glad that I was William's first youthful fancy, that I had this first, shy, innocent, boyish kiss, and that he had mine.