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## The Prince's Kiss

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*She Was a Sleeping Beauty by the Name of Mary Smith, and She Was Engaged; Then Came That Caress "Like a Bolt From the Blue."*

**M**OST love stories end with a kiss; this, however, begins with one. Rather an unusual sort of one, too! But to begin with the girl of the story. She, at that moment, appeared as one of the most usual sort of girls you could find. Commonplace little thing, most people thought her. Her name—Mary Smith—was a label. Her clothes you see everywhere—dark blue tailored suit, cream silk jumper (home knitted) just showing under the coat; small, neat hat, neat fur around neck, neat shoes and stockings, nice suede gloves.

Quiet neatness (a trifle dowdy) was the keynote of this Mary when you first see her.

She sat in the right hand corner of the third class carriage of a railway train that was just about to start out. Her back was to the engine. Above her head on the glass of the carriage window appeared the announcement, "Ladies Only."

Her umbrella and despatch case were in the rack. On her knee, a dark blue leather bag and a book, not a mere story, but a thoughtful treatise all about the trend of people's minds. This had been sent to her a week ago by her fiancé. He was an earnest young man to whom Mary had been engaged for two years, and he was on the teaching staff at a good school. Mary had not yet read this book. She had been saving it up for the railway journey, as she was off on a visit to the country house of some old family friends of her mother's.

You see how highly conventional, how quietly correct everything sounds? How eminently sedate, how arrestingly unlike what happened next?

For mark what did happen:

The train was just off, the whistle was at the guard's lips, when a sort of commotion occurred in the little crowd of see-ers-off collected on the platform.

The tall figure of a young man in a big brown raincoat and the close fitting leather cap which is worn by flyers, motorists and motor bicyclists came storming up to the train.

"Hurry up, sir! Take your seat!" cried a porter, and held open the door of the first class smoking carriage next to the "Ladies Only" in which Mary was sitting. The young man took no notice.

He sprang on to the footboard just in front of Mary. He thrust his flying capped head in at the open window, caught both hands of the girl sitting in the corner seat, drew them up to his chin, exclaimed in a fresh pleasant voice, "Well, good-by, darling! I hope you have a splendid time! The best of luck!" He then kissed her heartily; yes! kissed her on the mouth. And jumped back on to the platform and in amongst the group of people there assembled as the train moved out in a series of quickened jerks and a long, outstreaming scarf of white smoke from the engine.

He then walked back to the barrier, giving up his platform ticket with all the other people who had come to see friends off by that train. Those onlookers probably saw nothing more in that little parting scene than was to be observed any day of the week, on any train of the day, at any railway station in the country.

But to return to Mary Smith sitting there in that corner seat of that train as it sped into the country.

Mary gasping!

Mary, who had never seen that young man before in her life.

In that carriage for "Ladies Only" there were three other passengers, each occupying a corner seat. Opposite to Mary sat a school girl with two black pigtails dangling, an apple-cheeked face, a black straw hat with a hockey ribbon on it, and large gray eyes mirroring every thought that came into her mind. She was at the age (14) when only two thoughts ever did come; one was, "How lovely!" the other was "How awful!"

That latter, having observed that parting embrace, indignantly registered the thought, "How lovely!"

So it wouldn't have mattered her seeing it.

In the corner seat on the side next to Mary sat a hospital nurse in uniform. There were war ribbons on the corners of her coat, a strapped seat on her forehead under a little bonnet, and the look in her face of a woman who has watched so many amazing sights in the first 25 years of her life that for the rest of it she will be surprised at nothing whatsoever.

So it wouldn't have mattered her seeing either.

Unfortunately, the remaining corner seat was occupied by a lady who did matter.

She was going to stay with the same people that Mary was, having arranged a week ago that she and Mary should spend a month together. She was a distant cousin of Mary's mother, but a very prominent, other unattractive features outside black hair, keen eyes and an investigating look.

And when she turned this look upon the petrified Mary, Mary was starting to pick up her hat and her book from the floor where they had dropped at the moment when that

inexplicable farewell scene had been avalanched upon her. When she lifted her head again it was to meet this amazed, this gimletlike glance of her mother's distant (but too near at the moment) Cousin Elizabeth.

"I didn't know," began this lady, "that any of your brothers were at home now, Mary?"

"They're not," admitted Mary, feeling she was now in for it. "Harry's in British East Africa," she went on, talking to mark time, "and Bill has gone back to Canada, and Arthur has just sailed for China."

"O? I thought perhaps one of them had altered so much that I shouldn't know him again?" continued Cousin Elizabeth, eyes still firmly gimletted upon the face of the girl opposite to her.

It had often been said that "it was a pity dear Mary was rather pale and anaemic looking. She would have been quite good looking but for that. What she wants is a little more color." The uncle who said this might have been pleased to observe the improvement in dear Mary's complexion at this moment.

"But, of course, that gentleman just now didn't really look a bit like Arthur or Harry or Bill," added Cousin Elizabeth. "I suppose it was one of the cousins, Mary, that I haven't met?"

when he pranced up and behaved in that—that—that—manner!

"There are no manners left nowadays," decreed the spinster darkly. "Nothing but the break up of all decent conventions and tradition. An engaged girl! I don't know what poor Mr. Ferguson would say." (Mr. Ferguson was Mary's fiancé.) "Or your poor mother. Or the Homeleigh-Brownes" (these were the people where they were going to stay). "What they'd all think I cannot imagine!"

It was only too clear that Cousin Elizabeth meant to find out, by the simple process of letting all these people know the whole story!

The Homeleigh-Brownes were a cheery family who'd known Mary from her earliest childhood, who'd been nice to her from a sense of duty, but who'd always considered her the dullest of the dull.

When, two years ago, they'd heard she was engaged to a staid young schoolmaster, they'd all exclaimed, "She would. How suitable!" They'd all written prim notes to congratulate. They'd never dreamed of her as a girl to whom one could show a glimpse of real fun or chumminess, even though the eldest Homeleigh-Browne girl was engaged herself.

But now a change came o'er the spirit of their dream.

Cousin Elizabeth (that deadly nuisance who had invited herself for the weekend when they were giving a dance and all) had a tale to tell to Mrs. Homeleigh-Browne, about Mary Smith.

"Mary? My dear, there must be some extraordinary mistake."

"I wish I could think so," gloomily from Cousin Elizabeth. "I was myself shocked beyond words. I can only repeat to you what I saw with my own eyes" (she repeated it with zest) "and tell you that the girl had no explanation to offer, except such as no reasonable being could possibly accept."

The story, and Mary's unreasonable explanation, permeated to the rest of the family. Were they shocked beyond words? Sad to say, they revelled in it.

Mary, the meek and mouse-like Mary, the nice, quiet, sensible girl who had always been held up to them as a model? Mary, a dark horse? Mary, with the pearl ring of the blameless Ferguson gleaming on her engagement finger? Ha, ha!

Curiosity seethed in the household. Who was the other young man? What was at the bottom of it all?

Nobody actually said a word on the subject to their younger guest. Only—O, the difference in their behavior toward Mary Smith! Rightly, perhaps, they should have treated her more standoffishly than usual. But not they.

The reprehensible, the cheery family suddenly took Mary to their hearts! After all these years of family friendship (which means nothing) they found they could make a friend of the girl. She was human. They treated her as such. The girls confided in her various love affairs and near love affairs of which she had never, on previous visits, heard a whisper. They ran in and out of her bedroom and "talked trossseau" without restraint. She confided to them the sad news that her dance frock of pale blue georgette might not be finished in time for their dance, in which case she'd have to wear her ordinary dark dinner dress, and the eldest Homeleigh-Browne girl vowed that she'd lend Mary an absolutely stunning trossseau frock of her own that she'd got to go out to Egypt!

"It's a gorgeous color, Mary, and I'm sure you could wear a rich vivid color, now," said the other engaged girl, with emphasis on the "now."

As for the boys of the family, they also looked at Mary Smith with new eyes. They spoke to her with a new tone in their voices.

The medical student once said to her, "You know, Mary, I've the greatest respect for your young man Ferguson. Not that I've ever seen him. I go by the difference in you. Of course! You're a different girl since last time I saw you. You're alive. You're awake. This is the touch by love's finger that we hear such a lot about. Must be. You're the Sleeping Beauty come to life at last under the Prince's kiss. Lucky Prince! I mean, lucky, lucky Ferguson!"

"What nonsense," laughed Mary, quite aware that this old family friend was now ready to flirt with her himself. Certainly he was different. Before he had been bored and brotherly. She bloomed under the new treatment; sparkle, color, and animation lighted up her once rather colorless little face. Enormously she began to enjoy the visit to which she had come as the merest duty, knowing that it was as a duty that she had been invited.

The only blot on her enjoyment of her first twenty-four hours there was the stern face at meal times of Distant Cousin Elizabeth. Even that was not entirely a blot. In all her life nobody had been shocked at Mary before. Impossible to describe how the nice, quiet, sensible girl appreciated the charm of this novelty, just as she did the novelty of homage from young Homeleigh-Browne.

Both were a tonic that suited her! Only—

Only she was, a little nervous about letters from other people. Her mother! Her fiancé!

She knew that Cousin Elizabeth would have written to her mother. Now her mother was up in Scotland on a visit; with Sunday post in between this would mean delay. Mary's own letter would get to her mother first. What about a letter to her fiancé? Surely Cousin Elizabeth would not write direct to



He thrust his head in at the window and caught both hands of the girl.

A wild impulse took the badgered Mary. Supposing she did allow this to pass as a hitherto unmet cousin?

Too thin; too thin! Besides, think of the strings of questions that would ensue! The inquiries as to name, profession, place of residence! Further, Mary was a fundamentally truthful girl; so, at this juncture, she reacted to type. She blurted forth a straightforward, indignant "He wasn't even a cousin! I don't know who that man was!"

"Don't know who he was?" echoed Cousin Elizabeth, staring. The eyes of the other two people in the carriage turned also upon Mary. The nurse's with restrained amusement, the school girl's with an almost audible "How awful!"

"What can you mean, Mary, don't know who he was?" "I mean I don't know who he was any more than you know," faltered poor Mary, gazing round from one to the other of the three faces. "I mean I never saw him before that minute!"

"What? You mean to say he was a complete stranger and he came up like that and spoke to you? Did you hear him say 'darling'?" uttered Cousin Elizabeth with growing horror. "And, am I right, or did I dream it? Didn't he kiss you?"

"Yes," admitted the dazed Mary. "He certainly did." Here the eyes of the school girl opposite changed to their other expression. "How lovely!"

"It must have been a dangerous lunatic," declared Cousin Elizabeth. "I ought to write to the railway company and The Times and the police about it," she added largely. "Either the wretched creature was quite insane—"

"He didn't look insane," put in the nurse's cool professional tone. "Seemed perfectly normal, I thought."

"Or else he had been drinking, heavily."

Mary, without knowing why, protested quite warmly.

"No! He hadn't been drinking at all."

(Then blushed more deeply than ever.)

"Surely it must have been one thing or the other. Most extraordinary in either case."

Here the train drew in at the first stop. Both the other passengers prepared to alight. The nurse, twinkling, gave Mary a pleasant "Good afternoon" as she passed out. In the school girl's bright eyes there could plainly be read this variant of their usual comment, "How lovely, but how awful! How awful, but still, how lovely!"

It was soon obvious that the spinster's cousin's comment remained. "How disgraceful!"

Truth is stranger than fiction, it is therefore harder to believe. Whatever Cousin Elizabeth believed, it was not Mary's protestation, "I never set eyes on that man before; I mean, I certainly never looked at him in the crowd," uttered Elizabeth. "I was as much flabbergasted as you were