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**A BELATED CONSCIENCE.**

Mr. Reginald Norton was rarely alone—principally, perhaps, because he detested solitude. His downtown office swarmed with callers during the day, and if, by any chance, he remained in his apartments at night, the outer bell rang on an average once every fifteen minutes. His present lack of society was due to his own carefully expressed wish to that effect. To be plain, he had retired to his den, after informing his colored man, Adonis, that he was out, no matter who might call, and that he was not to be disturbed on any account.

After carefully surveying his tall, becomingly dress-gowned figure in a long mirror, and casting an approving glance around at the pictures and other ornamental paraphernalia of his handsomely appointed lounging room, Mr. Reginald Norton sat himself down in a low chair by a small table, on which some delicate decanters and glasses reposed comfortably, and, sinking back with a sigh of relief, slowly extracted a small package of letters from the breast pocket of his dressing gown. Skimming them lightly through his fingers in such a manner that the light should fall upon their superscriptions, he selected a large square envelope from the bunch, and, extracting the letter from within it, began to re-read it for the fourth or fifth time within as many hours.

The handwriting was large and masculine, but the sheet's faint scent of orris root betrayed its feminine authorship. Norton took a sip of cognac and lighted a cigarette before scanning its lines once more.

"You dear old boy"—so it ran—"of course I'll marry you. My only wonder is that you did not ask me before. I suspected your intentions long ago, and really thought you were foolish to wait so long. You have surrendered to my multifarious charms at last, however, and my vanity tells me that it was your diffidence, and not lack of appreciation of that which you knew was yours for the asking, that caused you to hesitate until the last minute.

"Of course people will talk. They always will, no matter what one does. Despite the fact that I am only twenty-three, and not by any means hideous, they will surely say you married me for my money. A girl with seven millions of her own is frightfully handicapped. People will never give her credit for any attraction save that of money.

"As for you, dear boy, I am very proud of you, and I am certain that you, in your chilly, pessimistic way, are rather fond of me. You have money enough of your own, you know, to keep up appearances acceptably—why must one always be talking of this dreadful money question?—and with your good looks and my rather comfortable fortune, we ought really to make a very good combination, I think.

"Come and see me very, very soon, and we will try and convince ourselves that we have done wisely.

"MILDRED."

Norton laid the letter down carefully and called "Adonis!" The negro boy, whose grotesque hideousness of feature had caused his master to engage him at a much larger wage than that usually paid to such servants, and had inspired him to christen him with this strangely contradictory nickname, glided into the room. "Adonis," he went on, passing a slim, jeweled hand over his brow after the manner of a man who is endeavoring to recollect something, "did I order you to send some flowers this evening to Miss Knightworthy?"

"You did, sir," responded the boy, with great respect. "I attended to it

myself, sir, and they went an hour ago, from Thorley's—hyacinths and violets, sir."

"That is well," sighed Norton, a little wearily; "you may go, Adonis, and remember that I am not at home to anybody."

The black youth bowed profoundly and withdrew. As the door closed behind him, the man in the easy chair took a long, deep breath, and drew forth one of the other letters. It was somewhat crumpled and looked as if it had been handled a good deal. Norton's long white fingers trembled slightly as he held it up to the light.

The handwriting of this one was girlish to the last degree. The characters were pointed and faintly drawn, and there were queer little twists to the capitals, like those one sees in some patient little schoolgirl's copybook.

"Dearest Reggie," it began, "I am counting the days and nights until you are coming back. If you knew how beautiful everything looked, you, who love the country so much, would not hesitate an hour. All the roses and the lilacs are in bloom, and in the mornings when the dew is on them, they look so beautiful and smell so sweet. My pet blackbird, too—the one I have tamed and taught to know me—flies to my window and picks up the crumbs I have put there for him, and looks at me with such saucy, cunning eyes.

"Dear old Aunt Martha, who, as you know, is such a cross-patch, and thinks she has to scold just to show how much she loves me, frowns when I mention your name, and tells me a dozen times a day that you will never come back. And I laugh to myself when her back is turned, for I wouldn't for the world hurt her feelings, you know, and it makes me so happy to feel certain—yes, quite certain, Reggie—that you are coming very, very soon. You see, dear, I think I could bear it if I knew that something you could not help were going to keep you away from me; but if I were ever to know that you could ever be intentionally false to me—to me, your rosebud—it would quite kill me.

"But you are not going to be bad and wicked to me, are you, my dear old handsome, beautiful Reggie? Do you know, I take up your picture every night before I go to bed and kiss its lovely, severe old mouth and the dear little bits of gray about the ears and the temples, and then I say my prayers and I know that God blesses you and looks after you; because I ask him to, so very tenderly and humbly.

"I am not very old, dear, and not very wise, but I do love you so, and oh, Reggie, I trust you. You are my own beautiful, brave old sweetheart, and some day, if you will let me, I shall try to make you, oh, so happy! Write to me very soon, dearest, and tell me how long it will be before I may take you into the cool, beautiful woods again, and show you the squirrels and the violets—yes, and introduce you to the big, saucy blackbird. But this is much too long a letter, and I will close it. Good-night, dear, and God bless you; and remember that wherever you are and whatever may happen, I shall always love you. ROSEBUD."

Mr. Reginald Norton coughed slightly once or twice and passed his left hand across his eyes as he laid the letter down. Then he rose and paced once or twice the length of the richly-carpeted floor. Once he stopped in front of the tall mirror and, shaking his nervous fist at his own elegant reflection, gave utterance to the one expressive monosyllable, "Beast." As he took his seat and picked up another letter, addressed in the same handwriting as the last, but somewhat fresher in appearance, his bull terrier, an atrociously ugly beast, whose only attractive feature was his one luminous eye—the other had been torn out in a fight—

pushed his hideous face into his hand and squinted up at him appealingly. He stroked the head of the dog gently as he read:

"I am not going to complain, Reggie dear, but if you knew how it hurt me to wait and wait for your letter that, alas! never comes, I am sure you would not be so unkind. Do you know the old mail-carrier, a dear old fellow, with woolly gray hair and scarcely any teeth, looks at me so mournfully when he comes up to the gate where I am standing waiting for him. He must know by this time how I live in the hope of a letter, for he says the same thing each day: 'Ah ain't got nawthin' this mawnin', Missy, but ah'll hab a letter tomorrow, shorely.' He told me this morning that I was looking thin and 'fady,' whatever that may mean, and I guess Aunt Martha thinks I'm not very well, for she insists that I shall go to the mountains for a month or so. But I won't go to the mountains—no, nor anywhere—until I've heard something from you. Sometimes I have thought you might be ill, or away, only I saw something in one of the papers about your having made \$100,000 in stocks or something, and I think a person must be very well, indeed, to make money as fast as that.

"Dear, I am afraid it is very shocking of me to keep on writing to you again and again, when you do not send me a word in reply. But I can't help it. I have to write, for at times I feel as if my heart would burst if I didn't. Dear old sweetheart, won't you be good to me and tell me what it all means? You were very fond of your little girl once, you know, and you can't have forgotten—everything, I cannot really doubt you, but sometimes, for a minute, it seems as though I were never to see you again, and when I feel so, Reggie I want to die. Only a word or two, but you must tell me the truth, dear, frankly and fairly, because if I am to lose you, I had better know it now. I think it will kill me if you tell me that, but even that will be better than the doubt that is slowly torturing me to death. Tell me the truth, Reggie, and I'll try to bear it as bravely as I can; and whatever it may be, I shall not have one word of reproach for you. You made me so happy once that I think I can forgive you—almost anything. But write, write, write.

"ROSEBUD."

Norton laid this letter down and sat very still for some minutes, staring straight at the opposite wall without seeing it. His lips were compressed and his pallor had increased. His dog whined and pushed his head against his master's knee, but this time he received a kick for his pains. The man then picked up the last letter of all. It was very short and was fresher in appearance than any of the others. He read it slowly, stroking his chin reflectively with his unoccupied hand as he did so.

"You have broken my heart, my dear, but I will bear it as bravely as I can. I promised I would not reproach you, and I will not. But I cannot help feeling that it is a little unjust. What have I done that I should be tired of life at my age? For I swear to you, Reggie, that I cannot live without you, and that I do not care how soon death comes.

"Was it not rather a cruel letter you sent me? Not a word of love or tenderness—only cold, calm facts and advice. How you must have changed, old sweetheart! There was never such a lover as you were. There is something in my heart tells me it will not be for long, and oh, how tired I am! I cannot sleep at nights any more. I lie awake and count the stars that gleam through the little window beside my bed, and I pray and pray and pray for you until the tears choke me. You say we are never