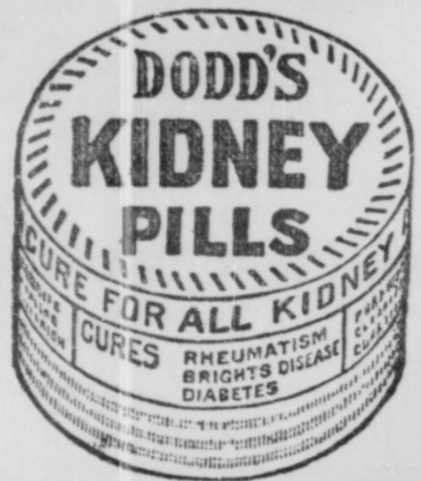


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BEER & GOFF GROCERS



The words seemed inappropriate to the bronzed face and manly figure of her visitor, and yet they fell like balm upon Harding's ear. Like every man, he forgot that Laura Vandeleur was a beautiful woman, younger than himself, and not without her own susceptibilities. He heard only the kindness of her tone and put it down to the innate motherliness of which he believed every woman to be possessed. He yielded his confidence at once. In a few broken sentences he told the story of his ill fated wooing, of Olwen's refusal of his proposal and her reason for hating him. "You see she had justice on her side," he ended gloomily, with a heavy sigh. "One can hardly expect a woman to forgive such an insult, such an injury, as I inflicted upon her."

"Perhaps not," said Mrs. Vandeleur softly. "Women feel these things so deeply, you see. Evidently Miss Dare is not a person who forgives very easily. Surely it would be better to put her out of your mind altogether, Maurice. Other women exist who like you, whom you have not injured."

She paused, a little ashamed of herself. For a moment it seemed to her as if she had absolutely proposed to him to marry her, but it had evidently not struck Harding in that light. He shook his head despairingly. "I shall never love another woman. I never saw one who touched me in the least until I met Olwen Dare."

Laura bit her lip, but recovering herself almost instantly she spoke with resolute cheerfulness. "There is one point I want to have quite clear, Maurice. Lionel Borrodale was your ward, I know, but wards are not often so submissive to their guardians as he seems to have been."

"His father had left me supreme control over him until he should be 25 years old. I could have cut off his income entirely for a time. With some men the threat of doing this would have been powerless, but Lionel hated exertion or hardship of any kind. After a little futile resistance he gave way, especially when I impressed upon him the bad account I had heard of the girl—not Olwen Dare, as it turned out, but the woman in charge of the school where she was working."

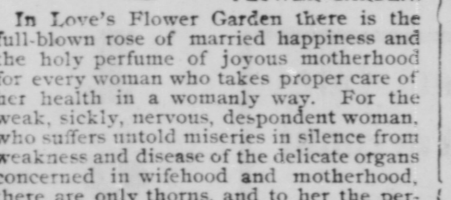
"You were careless about your facts, Maurice."

"Yes, and she blames me—who would not?—for that. I was so anxious at the time, you see, to free him from the toils of an adventurous, as I considered her, that I was ready to use any means that came to hand. I am punished now."

"So Lionel escaped, and afterward he went to Italy. You remember?"

"Yes; I think you once told me he met you there."

"He did. But I never told you, Maurice, all that I knew of him. Ultimately he died, as you know, from the effects of hard drinking and hard living. He began that downward career in Italy. Does this woman—this Olwen Dare—



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know the sort of man for whom she still cherishes a tendresse?"

"I don't suppose she does. I could not tell her, you know."

"No, I suppose not, but—some one else might."

"It would be no use. It is not only that she remembers Lionel, but also that she hates me."

"Ah!"

The long drawn intonation ended in a sigh. It was inscrutable, and Harding lifted his eyes to discover what it meant. He saw a lovely vision before him. The golden hair shone like the aureole of a saint around the sweet, pitying face, with its delicate coloring, its wonderful expressiveness of feature. He fancied that there was even a tear in the bewitching blue eyes. He had never seen Laura Vandeleur so entirely at her best.

It was a moment of weakness with him. He put out his hand impulsively. "Laura," he said, "you are a true friend. I know nobody like you. Won't you take pity on me and be my friend—always? You know how little I have to offer you, yet—there is only you who could in any way—"

He stopped abruptly. She had risen to her feet quickly, as if something had



"Maurice! Can it be you?"

stung her, thrilled her with sudden pain. Involuntarily her hand sought her heart. It had given a startling leap and was now beating so hard and fast that she could hardly find voice with which to utter what she wished to say.

"You don't know—you don't know what you are saying," she faltered at last. "You can't tell all it means—I think I might be able—in time—to make you happy, Maurice—but—"

"If you desert me, Laura, I shall have nothing left," said the man sadly and simply.

She stood on the hearth rug looking at him and tearing her handkerchief to rags between her restless hands. After a long pause she spoke in a stifled voice. "I will answer you in 24 hours," she said. "You must give me that time in which to think. I can say nothing now."

Then she pressed her torn handkerchief to her eyes and passed out of the room, leaving Maurice Harding to his own reflections.

CHAPTER IV.

Olwen Dare had gone back to a little cottage of her own, a place which she loved because it was so far from the maddening crowd of London life. It had a charming garden sloping down to the river, and whenever she was tired or sick at heart it seemed natural to her to go there and recruit herself. But the housekeeper wondered a little when she came in November, just when the garden was at its worst and there was a touch of dampness in all the rooms, which had been so bright and cheerful all the summer. But she said nothing about her surprise, to Miss Dare. Her mistress had a dignity of her own which did not permit of impertinent questioning.

To a visitor, daintily clad in fur and velvet, a woman of the world who had left London for a day's journey, the place seemed lonely and miserable in the extreme. Mrs. Vandeleur glanced round her, shrugging her shoulders a little and remarking to herself, with a pretty, cynical air: "She must be in love with him! Else why should she come to this place of desolation?"

She rearranged her veil, put up her hand to feel that the golden hair beneath the black toque with its bunch of violets was smooth and neat, then rang the bell at the door. She was admitted and shown into a quaintly furnished little drawing room, "all chintz and china," as she expressed it afterward, and left alone while the maid went to summon Miss Dare.

Laura Vandeleur was nervous, but she did not show her nervousness. It

was with a bewitching smile that she met Olwen, who looked pale and thin, yet beautiful, in a long black dress that seemed to express the tendency of her mind. She bowed politely, but her eyes told the question which she did not put into words—why was her visitor here?

"You will wonder why I have come," said Mrs. Vandeleur, "and indeed I hardly know what impulse possessed me to descend on you in this unceremonious manner. My only excuse is this—I am an old friend of a man you know, Maurice Harding."

Olwen's face froze at once. She motioned her visitor to a seat, but remained standing as she replied.

"Mr. Harding is an acquaintance of mine, certainly."

"Of course you know," said Laura, without further preamble, "that he has been very ill?"

Olwen sat down. It looked almost as though she could not stand any longer. "I did not know," she said faintly.

"It was fever. He was subject to it, but I do not think it returns unless he is suffering from mental distress or anxiety. I believe he is suffering very greatly in that way at present. You—perhaps you know why."

"I have no—no—knowledge of Mr. Harding's affairs," said Olwen, trying hard to retain her self possession.

"Have you not?" Mrs. Vandeleur looked wistfully at the girl. "Is it nothing to you that he is ill, weak, despondent? You see, we are old friends, he and I. He knew me when my husband was alive; he has been very good to me, and it was natural that he should tell me his story—forgive me if I speak too frankly—the story of his love for you and of the rejection which has caused him so much pain."

(To be Continued)

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