The Little Florist

THEY were neighbors.

He was a florist, and had hopes of making a good living. She was making a prosperous living by managing an inherited nursery. He was young. She was younger. There similarity ceased. He was rugged, uncultured, plain, though with a certain charm of virile, forceful homeliness difficult to analyze. She was pretty, college bred, aristocratic. He believed in brawn and brain. She believed in blood and breeding.

They were not neighborly. She called herself a "horticulturist." He was merely a florist. Of course, Dick Russell was a bachelor, and in love.

"Why don't you stick up a house on your grounds?" asked Uncle William one night as he and Dick sat smoking a good-night pipe in the porch.

"Can't afford it," said Dick, curtly. "I'm putting every penny I can raise into that gas machine I'm building in the nursery."

"Foolish, too!" grunted Uncle William.

"Mebbe so," assented Dick, grimly.

The months passed.

Dick said little, but read a great deal. One day he horrified Uncle William by requesting permission to put in a telephone.

"What for?" demanded he in a breath.

"'Cause I want it," said Dick.

So, in spite of opposition and dire predictions, the telephone was installed, connecting the house with the distant village of Prittlewell. His point won, and his crop money safely deposited in the bank, Dick threw himself heart and soul into the complexion of his queer gas plant. He bought miles of slender iron piping, and many tons of hard coal. He dug ditches and laid a portion of the piping around his orchard and at regular distances across it, until the ground looked like a gigantic gridiron. The unused piping (by far the larger portion) was stored away in the gas house. When the work was finished and the ditches filled in, curious neighbors commented on the "queer nozzles" which showed above the ground at intervals along the straight rows of buried pipes.

"Goin' to irrigate?" they asked.

"Mebbe," said Dick, grimly.

"How're you goin' to plow an' harrow with them things a-stickin' up in that way?"

The gas machine itself, situated in the center of the orchard, was, by aid of a stout building, stout shutters and a portly padlock, made curiosity proof. No one went into this building except Dick and two trusted workmen.

"It's perfectly scand'lous!" sniffed Aunt William one bitterly cold evening, as she sat by the kitchen fire mending a pair of Dick's socks.

"Which?" asked William, looking up from his newspaper absent mindedly.

"Dick's goin's-on."

"Where's he goin' now?" he asked, his mind still on the paper.

"Don't you know," she demanded, looking at him severely, "that Dick is a-spending ev'ry penny he's got in the world for a big black machine an' a lot o' rusty pipes?"

Uncle William looked crushed.

"Listen!" she said, suddenly, holding up one of Dick's socks warningly.

Borne on the crisp night air there came the distant ringing blows of hammer upon steel.

Just then the telephone bell rang loudly.

"Goodness me!" exclaimed William, almost dropping the lamp. Stepping to the instrument, he put the receiver to his ear.

"Is Dick Russell there?" asked an unfamiliar voice.

"No. He's away at work on his gas engine."

"Will you take a message to him at once?"

"Who're you?"

"Never mind me. Here's the message—it's important. Tell Russell that the weather clerk wires: 'Severe frost to-night. Good-by.'"

Uncle William gasped and turned to his wife.

"What's it all about?" she spluttered.

"Severe frost to-night," repeated he.

"What!"

"That's what the man said," persisted he.

"He's crazy," snapped Aunt William.

"Mebbe so. Mebbe. Folks say Dick's crazy, too. Mebbe we're all crazy."

And Uncle William reached for his boots.

"What are you goin' to do?"

"Do? Why cart this message over to Dick afore it gets froze on the way."

A tramp of about 200 yards through the snow brought Uncle William to the "gassy madhouse" (as Dick's neighbors politely called the structure).

"Who's that?" asked Dick's voice from within.

"Me—Uncle Bill."

"What's up?"

"There's to be a severe frost to-night. Weather expert says so. An' I'm a-freezin' out here."

Dick swung the door wide open.

"Come in," said he.

"So there's going to be a big frost to-night, eh?"

"That's the telephone message."

"Much obliged," said Dick. "Did you notice what the thermometer said when you left home?"

"It said five below zero."

Picking up the lantern, Dick hurried outside the door and consulted his own thermometer.

"Six below now," said he, thoughtfully.

Then, hastily giving some instructions to the workmen, he put on his coat and hat, took up the lantern again and turned to Uncle William.

"Uncle Bill," said he, earnestly, "I've been working and waiting a long time for this night. Sit still and get warm till I come back."

Dick went out.

Where had Dick gone?

Straight to Helen Remington. That is, as straight as a detour around the fence would permit. As he marched up the walk to the house (wherein he had never been out once in his life) he swung his uncle's lantern and stamped his feet to keep up his courage. He knocked on the door softly. His heart pounded fiercely.

"Who is there?" asked a puzzled, half-frightened feminine voice through the door.

"It's only Dick Russell," he said, quietly. "There's an important matter I must see you about."

Then she opened the door—haughtily, fearlessly.

"Come into the sitting-room, Mr. Russell," said the girl, frigidly.

"There's to be a big record frost to-night," said he, blushing like a girl.

"How do you know?"

"I've just had news from the weather bureau; and I've come to warn you."

"Have you warned the other neighbors?" she asked, quietly.

"No-o. That is, I—I—"

"Why haven't you?"

"Because I—well—bother it all!" he stammered, suddenly getting warm all over—"because I thought of you first. And I only got the news a few minutes ago. And I couldn't, if I wanted to, save all the orchards around here. But I can save yours—and my own—and Uncle Bill's."

"How?"

"With the gas plant I've been building, and—and—"

He hesitated, stopped.

"Never mind the details, Mr. Russell," she said, hurriedly, as she arose to her feet; "it is late, and there is your own garden to think of. Mine must take its chances, as it always has done. I thank you—"

"But," interrupted Dick, as he stood up and faced her—"but"—he began again—"I—I—"

Then a sudden comprehension swept through him; he understood her strange expression. The words he would have said died upon his lips. He marched out.

"There must be an unusually hard frost to-night," she thought.

She looked at the thermometer.

Eight degrees below zero!

She began to feel afraid; she had heard of the damage wrought by cold only a trifle more intense than this.

Looking out in the direction of Dick Russell's farm, she saw that his orchard was encompassed and crossed by systematic rows of yellow light-jets, blazing and smoking uncannily in the still air.

Then the truth came home to her.

He was not insane. He was merely a genius. He was right; she was wrong. He had come to her in manly helpfulness, and she had—

The tears came to her eyes. But not for long. Hurrying to the hall, she put on her heaviest boots and warm wraps, and stepped outside. But one thought possessed her—to find Mr. Russell and ask his forgiveness. The rest did not matter.

She found him, as fate would have it—alone.

Hearing footsteps, Dick raised his head.

"Helen!"

They looked into each other's eyes—hesitating, incredulous, mute.

Words came at last. "I misjudged you," she said, simply, humbly. That was all.

That night Dick "did things"—many things, rapid, clever things. He hurried Aunt William and the two men, Uncle William hurried two horses, and the two horses hurried load after load of spare iron piping to various places on Miss Remington's farm. But first, with great joy (and a file), Dick cut a wide opening in the fence. Under his vigorous strokes the wires parted with a vicious, reluctant snap, and the victorious besieger passed through into the promised land.

Quickly and deftly the men began coupling the lengths of pipe together; while Dick, with one hand almost frozen, went back to find his lost mitten. Finding it, the pipe-laying progressed with greater rapidity. Soon the Remington orchard was encompassed and crossed with lines of black tubing laid upon the snow-crust, each pipe-length pierced in the center with a tiny drilled hole.

Ten degrees below zero!

Wearied and cold the men staggered to the gashouse and sank exhausted on the floor. After a short rest Dick consulted the thermometer again.

Five below!

"I've done it!" he gasped, triumphantly.

As weeks and months went by the wisdom of Dick's "foolish idea" became more and more manifest; and, when crop-time came, the only orchards which bore fruit crops in that village were the three farms at Prittlewell. Dick's bank account grew prodigiously. The last remnant of Miss Remington's mortgage disappeared.

The breach in the fence barrier, once open, slowly widened; the sundered wires, once parted, refused to reunite. The way into paradise remained open. One night he asked a question—that question which has reechoed in the universe since time began—and Miss Remington, blushing, archly said: "Yes, Dick."—London Answers.

Kentland's Devotion

By HENRY HUMISTON.

TO Kentland's supreme disgust Mrs. Van Dolah's house party accepted with great enthusiasm Violet Harwood's proposal that they all go over to the park and skate on the lagoon.

Kentland looked around the snug little den on the second floor, with the open grate fire burning cheerily in one corner. He glanced through the half-drawn curtains into the billiard room beyond, which was foggy with smoke, and which resounded to the merry click of the billiard balls and the laughter of Mr. Van Dolah and Judge Stern, who were in the old people's class, and, therefore, exempt from going to skating parties when they didn't want to go. He looked ruefully at the dim little alcove at the head of the stairs and thought of how he had planned, after he had beaten all of the conceit out of Mr. Van Dolah and Judge Stern at billiards and smoked three pipefuls of tobacco, to sit in this alcove and have a nice, long, quiet talk with Violet. Then he pulled aside the curtain and looked out into the dark winter night with the gaslights flaring in the wind and the snow sifting gently down. The winter spectacle was more than he could bear. Kentland groaned and dropped the curtain with a shudder.

"Tom Kentland," said a voice at the door, "I think you're an idiot."

Kentland looked up to where Kitty Clover was standing in the doorway.

"O, thanks," he said, in his slow drawl. "You're too kind."

"I don't care," went on Kitty; "somebody had to tell you."

"And you considered yourself the chosen instrument?"

"Well," said Kitty, as she came into the den and sat down by Tom, "I really believe I am. I have known you so long, O, ages and ages, and because I am such an old friend I can say things to you that others don't."

"So careless of the others," said Tom, as he gazed sadly at the sparkling fire.

"Tom," Kitty looked at him severely; "I know that you are much in love with Violet."

"Fancy," said Kentland.

"Yes, you are, and there's no use denying it. And I know she likes you very much."

"Does she?" said Tom. "So much that she looks at me about three times a day. Where is she now, sitting on the steps with that little Harvard boy or singing at the piano while that fellow Towner, or whatever his name is, turns the music and looks like a cow whenever she happens to glance up at him?"

"It's your own fault," said Kitty. "A man is supposed to try and please the woman he loves. He should study what she likes and doesn't like and govern himself accordingly. While you, with all your supposed experience, act as though you didn't know the first principles of love making."

"No," admitted Kentland, "I suppose I am what they call a poor performer."

"It would be so easy," went on Kitty. "Violet adores devotion more than anything else. That is why she likes that Harvard boy, as you call him, and Mr. Towner. They are devotion itself, while you—well, you don't know what devotion means."

"Devotion," said Kentland, "means the state of being devoted to any one thing, person or object. Strong attachment. Ardent love or affection. P. P., of Latin devovere, de-vovere, to—"

"O, nonsense," put in Kitty. "Why can't you be sensible? Other men are devoted to Violet. She has grown to expect it. If a man isn't devoted to her then she thinks he doesn't care. You are so exasperating. Now, just the other evening, when we were talking about the fires and the Harvard boy had told how he had rescued a chum from the third floor of a blazing dormitory, and Violet had asked if anyone would rescue her in case the house burnt up, and all the men had eagerly volunteered, what did you say?"

"I don't know," said Kentland, shaking his head. "Something silly, I'll be bound."

"I should say it was," said Kitty. "You said you wouldn't rescue her unless she was in a tobacco warehouse, because you didn't like any smoke except tobacco smoke. Then, to make it worse, you said you didn't believe in rescuing people anyhow. That that was what firemen were paid for, and that you belonged to a union and couldn't rescue people because you were forbidden by your rules to do the work of other union men, which included the Amalgamated Firemen and Rescuers' association, and that if this house burned you would be compelled to sit in a saloon across the street and watch a fat fireman in a gum coat and a black helmet carry Violet from out the devouring flames to the safety of the street below."

"Well, that's what fat firemen are paid for," gently interposed Kentland.

"And," went on Kitty, "it made Violet angry. You might have pretended, anyhow, as long as there isn't the faintest chance of your being put to the test. Now, there's the skating party to-night. It's Violet that proposed to go. Hardly any of the men care about it, but because it's Violet's plan they have all taken it up. Everybody is making ready but you."

"It's so cold outside," said Kentland; "besides, I couldn't skate ten feet if I was paid a thousand dollars a foot."

"Suppose you can't skate! You could go along anyhow. Why, the sight of you sitting in the cold up on the bank of the lagoon would prove your devotion and do you more good than if you were actually skating and enjoying yourself."

"I don't take well to sitting on a snow bank in the dark," said Kentland. "I look nicer in front of a grate, with the ruddy firelight bringing my noble profile into strong relief against the dim background beyond."

Kitty rose with great hauteur. "As I said in the beginning, Mr. Kentland," said Kitty, "I say again: You are an idiot. I wash my hands of you. I wanted to help you. I don't care any more. If I were Violet I don't think I would ever look at you again." Then she marched sternly out of the room, and Kentland heard her tell the rest of the house party gathered at the foot of the stairs that he was too lazy to go skating.

The front door slammed and Kentland, looking out of the window, saw the party tramping away to the park. "I suppose I ought to go," he said, giving another dismal glance at the grate. He thought about it for awhile and then sadly went downstairs, put on his overcoat and cap and the white woolen mittens that Violet had given him, and went out into the darkness.

"Wow!" said Kentland to himself. "Confound skating parties, anyhow."

"Please, mister," whined a voice at his side, "gimme a dime; I'm freezing to death."

Kentland looked at the tramp for awhile. Then a brilliant inspiration seized him. "You come with me," he said to the tramp. He led him back to Mrs. Van Dolah's kitchen and gave him two cups of hot coffee and a generous slice of steak. Then he described to him a certain party of ten people who would be skating in a crowd in Lincoln park. He put his overcoat on the tramp, and the white mittens, and the cap.

"You go up to the park," he said, sternly, "and sit down near the bank in the snow somewhere so that you can be plainly seen from the lagoon. Don't sit near enough so that the skaters can come up and talk to you, but not too far away so that they can't take notice of this coat, and this hat, and these gloves. Sit somewhere near the electric light, but not too close. When this party sees you and waves at you, why, you wave back, and when you see them going to take their skates off you cut for this place as fast as you can. Don't try to talk to this party or I'll have you sent to the penitentiary for life. And don't run away with this coat, for if you follow my instructions I'll give you one of my old suits and overcoats to-morrow that will be just as good and a pair of shoes and a five-dollar bill into the bargain, and maybe you can blackmail me into doing something else for you. Now go on."

Kentland fairly pushed the tramp out of doors and then with a sigh of joy went back up the stairs four steps at a jump. He reached the den unobserved, and moving a screen so that he would not be seen from the billiard room he noiselessly secured a pack of cards and, lighting a cigar, sat down in front of the grate fire and gave himself up to the delicious abandon of solitaire. After he had beaten the 13 game twice he got down his favorite book and read it through. Then he sat in the window seat and smoked his pipe in silent comfort while he watched the falling snow outside.

Suddenly he heard a knocking at the side door. He hurried down and found the tramp outside. He hurriedly received back his overcoat, cap and gloves, while the tramp breathlessly told him that he had followed instructions to the letter. "They seed me lots of times," said the tramp, "and waved their mitts at me, and I give 'em the glad hand rite back agen. They're a-comin' home now." Kentland handed the tramp a five-dollar bill and gave him an address to call at the next day to get the promised old clothes. With a gurgle of joy the tramp faded away down the street and Kentland thoughtfully walked around in the snow on the top step and then rubbed his face with a handful of snow, until his countenance was a good, ruddy color. He hauled on his coat and mittens and reached the front hall just as the house party returned.

"Why in the world didn't you come home with us?" asked Kitty. "We all went over to where you had been sitting, but you were gone."

"Yes," said the Harvard boy, "you ought to have helped carry all those skates home. I say, we're just about turned to ice. Really, that was about the coldest skating I ever did."

"Well," put in Kitty, "I suppose Mr. Kentland is even colder than the rest of us. We were moving about while he had to sit still up in that terrible snow bank. Poor boy, I suppose he's just about frozen to death."

"I am afraid I have misjudged you all along," said Miss Harwood a half hour later, as she and Kentland sat in the cozy corner alone. "I thought you were rather—well—selfish, and that you wouldn't do anything but what suited your own pleasure, but when I saw you sitting away up there on the bank in the snow and waving back at us so that we might feel you were with us in our sport I knew that we had made a mistake. You can be awfully nice when you want to be."

Kentland resolved to give the tramp two suits of clothes instead of the one that he had promised. Later on in the evening, after more low-toned conversation with Miss Harwood, he decided to make it three and throw in another pair of shoes.—Chicago Tribune.