

Miss Anstruther's Diamonds
by Caroline Conrad

“You know, dear, we are not in the least bit in love with each other,” Lucy Basset said, reaching up to pull my whiskers, and laying a coaxing cheek against my shoulder. “It would be very foolish for you and me to fall in love with each other; and we just won’t—*there!*”

And to emphasize the declaration, the softest little fingers in the world being still twisted in my whiskers, pulled my face down to a level with hers; and this girl who was not in the least bit in love with me, kissed me!

There’s a great many different ways of kissing, you know. There are cold lips, and dry lips, and oily lips that glide past your face like ghosts, and lips that you’d rather have a blow than kisses from; but Lucy’s kisses were like half-opened rose-buds, at five o’clock of a June morning.

Lucy herself was a whole garden of roses—dew, color, fragrance, and all. When she looked at you felt as if your whole heart was exhaling at your eyes; and when she smiled upon you, it did not matter what sort of thunder and lightening there was in any other part of the globe, it was distilled sunshine where you were. I don’t know if Lucy were pretty, but she had a lot of pretty characteristics. She was all quality, like golden wine that is better the longer you keep it, and that gets a new flavor every time you taste it—a more molten sparkle every time it drips over the beaker’s brim.

The beauty of her eyes was in their expression; of her hair in its brightness. Her face was a blossom, her hands birds, and if the white wings of her fingers fluttered across your horizon, you might as well be blind for all seeing anything else but her. In short, you see I was in love with Lucy, if Lucy was not in love with me; and it is my private opinion that we were very much in love with each other, in spite of Mrs. Anstruther’s parting admonition, that we were on no account to commit so absurd a blunder.

Lucy and I were both orphans. Lucy was the only niece to Mrs. Anstruther, whom she called Aunt Dora, and whose prospective heiress she was supposed to be, provided always she married to please her.

I was nephew to Mrs. Anstruther’s husband, who was dead, and heir to nothing but my wits—a rather slender property, Lucy derisively assured me, and scarcely likely to yield an income equal to the probable demand of a pair so extravagantly inclined as we.

“So you see it would never, never do,” Lucy would say, with a roguish pout of her rosy lips at me, “and Aunt Dora needn’t be one bit afraid, so far as I am concerned.”

Aunt Dora had been absent from the Grove some three weeks now, summoned away by the illness of a friend, just as I had got myself comfortably bestowed in her best chamber, with a dislocated shoulder, which injury had been received in a struggle with a refractory steed which had tired to run away with Miss Lucy.

Mrs. Anstruther was warranted in considering the incident as dangerously romantic in its tendencies and she left us together at the Grove with manifest reluctance. She had, however, great confidence in Lucy, and she gave her distinctly to understand, in my presence, that if we two made such ninnies of ourselves as to turn lovers while she was gone, we should never see the color of her money, either of us.

Well, for some days I, for one, felt like little else but groaning; and then gradually I became conscious of a velvet touch that swallowed pain, of a hovering face that might have been an angel's, of a voice deliciously attuned, that chorused all sort of soothing and coaxing speeches, with a "dear." I was petted and babied and pitied to an extent that I don't mind confessing here, and it was the means of my pretending sick a trifle longer than was really necessary; but I don't think many would have blamed me, under the circumstances. The consequence was, that I was only fairly established down stairs again when Mrs. Anstruther returned. She eyed Lucy and me very sharply, and we two bore the inspection with great demureness til, chancing to encounter glances, a spark from Lucy's roguishness lit me, and we went off into explosions of laughter that nearly took Mrs. Anstruther off her feet with amazement. However, she laughed too presently, and in the same breath announced that company was coming to the Grove the following week.

"Shall I go, Mrs. Anstruther?" I asked. "I am sufficiently recovered, I think."

"Certainly not," she answered, sharply. "Whatever mischief is done can't be made any worse by your staying; and it might be well, besides, for Lucy to have an opportunity of comparing you with other people. If I am not mistaken, she will know a gentleman when she sees him."

"If I don't, Aunt, it won't be the fault of Felix here," spoke Lucy, coming swiftly beside me, and slyly pinching my arm.

"Ta, ta, Miss Impertinence, Felix is very well, but wait till next week."

"I presume I shall, and considerably longer," Lucy answered, saucily.

"Miss Lucy Bassett, I should like to know what this means?" demanded Mrs. Anstruther, loftily.

"Nothing very serious; does it, Felix?" laughed Lucy. "We were too well warned, Aunty dear."

"I don't know about that," said Mrs. Anstruther, sailing from the room in a very evident passion, and sending for me to her apartment a half an hour after.

"I submitted to the curious tirade that followed, with mingled irritation and good-humor, and offered at least six times during the course of it, to leave the Grove that very day. But Mrs. Anstruther would not hear of such a proceeding. Lucy was waiting on the landing outside when I left her aunt, and as she stood on tiptoe to whisper in my ear, "You don't mind, do you, dear?" and left the warm print of rosy lips on my cheek. I can assure you I did not mind so much as I might.

When I left Mrs. Anstruther, I had fully intended to quit the Grove whether or no, the following day, but that half-dozen words with Lucy left me undecided again. I was an idiot for staying, first because I was deliberately sacrificing a very pretty prospect in life by not going, and second, because I might have known beforehand what sort of an experience the next week's would be likely to be. But men are idiots when a pretty girl is concerned, and I was a great deal more bewildered with Lucy than I owned to myself. I spoiled my own mess, too, with my conceit. I am willing to own that men are more conceited than women, but then they have so much more to make them so. Why, only think of one woman like Lucy Bassett making "sweet eyes" at you.

I am willing to own, at this day, that I had not at that time one misgiving as to how it was likely to turn with Lucy and me if I stayed. My going or staying was a mere question of self-abnegation. Should I stay and win the girl who loved me in the efface of Mrs. Anstruther's threats of poverty and starvation; or should I generously leave her to forget me as fast as she could, and bestow her matchlessness upon some prince of the crew that were coming to the Grove the following week.

I was not generous. I did not at all relish being forgotten, and I stayed.

Mrs. Anstruther's company came in due time—a house full of them, too—gentlemen and ladies; some married, some single; the young ladies pretty creatures enough, and the gentlemen good talkers and *well dressed*.

I understood well before the passage of the first day, what Mrs. Anstruther meant by her talk about *gentlemen*. She meant men who owed their right to be ranked above the "plebs" to their tailor. My best coat was of last year's cut, and a trifle seedy, having done duty alternately as every day gear and Sunday doggery. My boots were neither patent leather nor morocco, and my unmentionables, though as well kept as could possibly be, expected under the circumstances, had quite lost that beautiful shapeliness of limb which characterized those of Mrs. Anstruther's guests.

In vain I kept repeating to myself, "A man's a man for a' that," and "Dress doesn't make the man." I was humiliatingly sure that I wasn't half a man, because of my seedy garb.

Mrs. Anstruther watched me, and, I felt, rejoiced at my discomfiture, what she could see of it. Out of sheer revenge, I devoted myself to Lucy. Secure in Lucy's fondness for me, I took airs upon myself, and for every sneer I imagined flung at my clothes, I managed to make Lucy snub the sneerer.

I don't know quite how it was, I think I had taken a little too much wine that evening, and there was a County Leopold Keirst who was especially affected by Mrs. Anstruther for Lucy, and who was nothing loath himself. The man was the merest dandy, empty-headed as a rattle-box, positively nothing but clothes and title; but because I hated him for daring to aspire to Lucy, I insisted upon her openly insulting him, by dancing with me when she had promised him, and they had even got their places upon the floor. I suppose I was mad with jealousy, envy, and wine, and I saw Mrs. Anstruther shake her head at Lucy from a corner. I insisted that Lucy should dance with me instead of the Count, and she refused, of course.

Half an hour afterwards, carpet-bag in hand, I had left the house, and by morning was miles on my journey city-ward.

I had recovered my senses by that time, and was sufficiently conscious what an idiot I had made of myself.

Whatever conceit was left in me then, was taken out of me before the day was done.

As I got off the cars at noon, a strange man put his hand on my shoulder. I was arrested for stealing Mrs. Anstruther's diamonds. She had telegraphed to have it done, and Lucy had not hindered her.

It was odd, but I never felt myself more a man than at that moment. The touch of that terrible finder of disgrace was like the prick of a surgeon's lancet to a swooning consciousness. By noon of the next day Mrs. Anstruther herself come to the city to me in my prison cell.

The woman was positively wild about her diamonds.

"Only give them back to me, Felix, and I won't prosecute the thing. I've got money enough to hush the matter, and I will; and I'll set you up in business besides. Only give me back my diamonds, Felix. How could you have the heart to touch them? Why, man, they've been in the family more than two hundred years."

Mrs. Anstruther wrung her hands wildly as she pleaded, and clung to me when I would have risen from my chair.

"Madame," said I, "you will never see your diamonds more, if the return of them depends upon me."

"You ungrateful boy!" cried Mrs. Anstruther.

I smiled.

"After all I have done for you."

"I am aware that I owe Mrs. Anstruther one debt which it will be impossible for me to ever repay."

"Do you mean Lucy, sir? Give me back my diamonds, and you shall have her."

"Madame values her diamonds at a curious price."

"Do you mean to keep them in the face of everything? What good will they ever do you?"

“Madame forgets that there is a limit to durance vile, even for stealing diamonds. Many a man has toiled longer and harder for a fortune like that.”

Mrs. Anstruther thought I was in earnest. Her face whitened, and she trembled with agitation.

“Well, the, Felix,” she said, “if you are so hard as that, I must leave you to the law. I should have liked to have saved the diamonds, and avoid the disgrace to the family. But you will not permit me.”

“Mrs. Anstruther,” said I, putting a detaining hand on her arm, as she was going, “do you honestly believe I know any ting about your diamonds?”

She stopped and looked at me in an odd perplexity.

“Who else could?”

“When did you first miss them, Mrs. Anstruther?”

“In the morning after you went away.”

“When did you see them last before that?”

“I always look for them before I sleep. I did so that night.”

“And you did not retire of course till after your guests. Did they stop dancing before twelve?”

“I don’t know about that, but it was after two o’clock before I got to bed. I remember noticing it was so late as that before I sent Lucy away. I had her in my room, and talked to her pretty plainly about you.”

“Pray, Mrs. Anstruether, what time is the night express for the city due at the Grove?”

“Oh, at one o’clock, you know—“

She came to a sudden stop; her face turned red and white in a minute.

“What a horrible wretch I am!” she cried, covering her face with her hands, and then holding them both out to me. “Why, you must have been miles and miles away, before I told Lucy good-night. Felix, I am ashamed of myself. Can you ever forgive me?”

“It is of no consequence, Madame,” I said, frigidly.

“Indeed it is, but I will make it up to you. You shall see that I will, Felix.”

I was duly restored to honorable air again, and went back to the Grove with Mrs. Anstruther of the first train thereafter. But I had not forgiven her.

We had arranged that a detective should go down to the Grove on the same train with us, though not in company, to avoid suspicion.

Mrs. Anstruther looked grave and anxious during all that homeward ride. She was thinking of her diamonds, and I almost believe she would have been willing that the family should have been disgraced by my stealing them, for the sake of finding them again.

We reached the Grove at dark, and when the one o'clock express came in from the opposite direction the detective made his appearance, pretending to be a new guest.

Lucy met me like a new woman. I had not asked Mrs. Anstruther about her, and whatever her lovely speaking face might have said to me, if I had given it opportunity to express itself, it said nothing now but what my own did, and that was cold and stern as I could make it.

We were mostly at breakfast when Mrs. Anstruther's new guest came down, and was introduced to us as Mr. Clemens.

By the merest chance in the world, my eyes were on Count Leopold Keirst, as his fell, for the first time, on Mr. Clemens. An instantaneous change flashed over his countenance, a swift momentary pallor, that left his lips very white.

He sat near the door, and when I again looked in his direction, after Mr. Clemens had taken his seat, he had vanished.

Making a scarcely audible excuse to Mrs. Anstruther, I quitted the room also, and passed noiselessly up the carpeted stairway which led to the Count's apartment. But before I reached it, I heard his door open, and drawing back a step, heard him pass along to the opposite extremity of the hall, where a glass door opened upon the garden. As I caught the sound of his retreating footsteps, I followed, and looked through the blind after him.

But was that County Leopold? Scarcely, though there was something about him oddly like the Count; and then, in a moment, I knew him again, in spite of the disguise he had so quickly donned.

He crossed the garden, leaped the fence, and struck at a good round pace into a path which led across the fields toward the depot.

"Eureka!" I cried, audibly, and fleeing to the breakfast parlor, asked Mr. Clemens, with small ceremony, if I could have a word with him in the hall.

His face flashed eagerness while I told him my story, and before the last words were out of my mouth, he had snatched on hat from the hall rack for himself, crammed another on my head, and was dragging me towards the depot.

There was a train due at half-past nine, and we had hardly time to reach it, But we did reach it—Mr. Clemens entering at one door of the depot, while I sauntered idly through the other. Our man was that instant at the ticket office. He wheeled as Clemens put his hand on his, and flashed out a revolver. But the detective was too quick for him. With a wrench that left his arm helpless, he twisted the weapon from him, and then, in a very brief time, he had the handcuffs on him.

Clemens knew him the instant he fairly saw him. The Count Leopold Keirst was an old offender, no more a Count than Clemens himself, whom he had recognized first, and profiting by that recognition, would have neatly made his escape but for the chance which set me on his track.

We found Mrs. Anstruther's diamonds on him, unset, and sewed fast in a belt he had buckled round him. Mrs. Anstruther, when she heard the story, and beheld the proof in the return of her glittering treasures, rewarded me for my share in her good fortune with a single sentence:

“No one here knew of my absurd suspicion of you, Felix—not even Lucy.”

Lucy's sweet face was very pale as she met my flashing glance, but she did not quit her aunt's side.

“Can Lucy forgive me the much that has been amiss in me toward her?” I asked, sadly. “Let us at least be friends—*dear*.”

She flushed at the word, but did not lift her eyes.

“Ta, ta,” said Mrs. Anstruther: “friends indeed! I shall divide my money between you, and Felix may go into business with his share any day he likes. You'll be glad enough to make up with him, Miss.”

Whereat Lucy began to cry, and slipped out of the room before her aunt could stop her. She hid herself in her chamber the best part of the day; but I was on the watch, and I knew when she at last crept forth, in the dusk of evening, and stole into the music room.

My sweet girl looked a little frightened when I followed her, but she did not refuse to hide her fears on my shoulder, and so, without words we knew that we were all in all to each other once more.

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