



A MAID
OF
BAR HARBOR

BY HENRIETTA
G. ROWE



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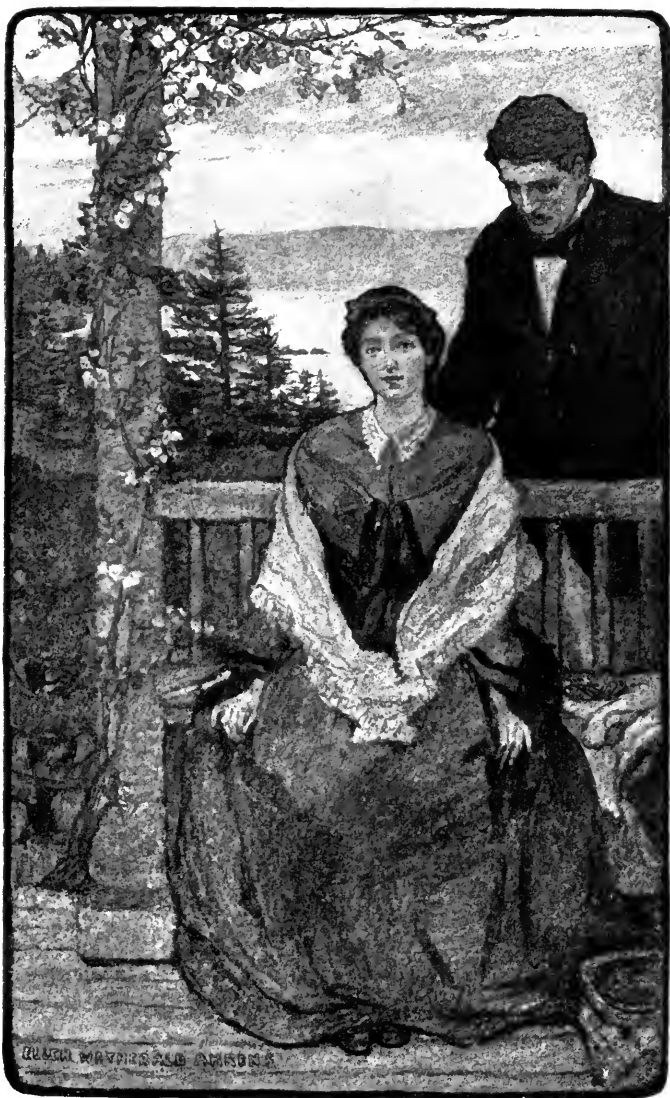
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A Maid of Bar Harbor







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By Henrietta G. Rowe

Author of "Re-told Tales of the Hills and Shores
of Maine," etc.

Illustrated from Drawings by

Ellen Wetherald Ahrens

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A Maid of Bar Harbor

CHAPTER I

BORN TO SOLOMON HADLOCK —

IN the early years of the last century the Maine farmer, in his hard struggle with the rocky soil and ungenial climate, found every power of mind and body taxed to its utmost to keep that soul and body together. Let his natural inclinations and tastes be what they might, he had no leisure either for the adornment of his home or the cultivation of those little refinements and courtesies that go so far to smooth the rugged front of toil, and make the husbandman's life what God meant it to be, the nearest akin to Eden of any calling upon the face of the earth.

It was the rule rather than the exception that a small, very small, house, rudely finished to begin with, and never subject to repairs so long as it would hold together, was considered good enough for the family, forming a strange contrast to the big barns, constructed with an eye to convenience as well as room, and actually making a warmer shelter for his stock than the rickety farmhouse did for his household.

The sarcastic comment of Augustus, when granting the prayer of Herod the Great to put his own son to death, that "it was better to be Herod's sow than his son," might, with almost as much truth, so far as creature comforts were concerned, have been applied to many a well meaning but hard-headed Yankee farmer half a century ago.

Shade trees, flowers, vines, and all the thousand and one pretty, inexpensive household adornments that now seem almost the necessities of life, were sternly tabooed as useless and extravagant outgrowths of a silly and misplaced pride, that deserved rebuke rather than encouragement. If the great square front yard contained a lilac and cinnamon rose-bush, no matter how straggling and untrimmed the poor things were, that was the utmost concession that the hard-worked owner could be expected to pay to the graces; and the rest of the space was suffered to grow up to rank weeds and grasses that it was too much trouble to keep down, while even the poor little flower beds on either side the front door, that the goodwife and her girls sometimes insisted upon, shared in the general neglect. Only the other side of the low, log fence great fields of yellow grain nodded and dipped with every passing breeze, as if in airy salute to their pretty, useless partners, the wild pinks; or tall rows of Indian corn flaunted their green banners and tasselled crests in proud consciousness of their importance and dignity in an atmosphere where utility was held the only beauty. Carefully cultivated, with every intrusive weed ruthlessly weeded out, no wonder they looked down upon the

poor dwarfed bluebells and gilliflowers hidden beneath the shadow of the riotous pigweed, or thrown completely into the shade by the vivid yellows of the native buttercup and mustard.

Life was hard at its best, and the constant hand-to-hand struggle of man with ungenial nature, while it seamed his face and bowed his shoulders with premature age, oftentimes blinded his eyes to the more spiritual meanings of life, and bred in his soul that most dwarfing and specious of all social heresies, that "man is to live by bread alone."

Then, too, the common inventions that now rob the farmer's life of its heaviest drudgery had never been so much as dreamed of, either indoors or out. Sowing, planting, and reaping were all done by slow and laborious hand-work, and when the threshing-machine was brought into use, displacing the time-honored flail of our fathers, it was regarded by many with wondering disapproval, — some even going so far as to pronounce it "an encouragement to laziness."

To ease the burden of toil in any way in those days was to risk the imputation of being a "shirk," and when Squire Hadlock, with a dim prophecy in his mind perhaps of the coming "cultivator," instead of tramping beside the harrow with which he was smoothing his fields preparatory to sowing, contrived a seat for himself upon it, thus saving his own legs and accomplishing his work quite as speedily and well, the whole town held up its hands as one man, and laughed loud and long at such a ridiculous innovation upon established custom.

“Next thing he’ll be contrivin’ some way ter *mow* settin’ still, — will be gettin’ him a chariot with scythes, most likely.”

And all the gossips, men and women, cackled and sniffed, and turned up their sage noses (behind the Squire’s back, you may be sure), some even hinting that the farmer was getting lazy with advancing years. Possibly, although the broad, well-cultivated acres, the big barns, and comfortable homestead gave no signs of decreasing vigor on the part of their owner, who, as he sits alone before the wide, old-fashioned kitchen fireplace on a certain sharp evening in November, his stockinged feet outstretched to the fire, and his brown, sinewy hands idly caressing the arms of the wooden rocker beneath, as if there might be some mysterious kinship between the sturdy, unyielding oaken fibre and the still harder grained and more unyielding make-up, mental and moral, of the man himself, makes a picture at once interesting and repellant.

As a direct descendant of one of the earliest settlers upon the Desert Island, he had always been accorded a certain right of leadership among his simple-minded neighbors that had, no doubt, helped to foster his naturally arrogant and opinionated temper. Hard-handed and hard-headed, he loved work for its own sake almost as much as for the gains it brought him, and he had little patience with, or pity for, weakness either of mind or body. If he ever noticed that his wife, a gentle, uncomplaining woman, grew paler and sadder as the years went by, it only awoke in him a feeling of half-irritable wonder that any

woman so well housed and fed, with only the work of her household to attend to, should peak and pine into such a faded middle age.

That he was a proud man nobody could doubt who noted the supercilious lines about his mouth, and the dignified carriage of his head,—unconscious both, and as truly a part of the man as the thick, iron-gray locks, and dark, cold blue of the eyes that never by any chance softened into tenderness, whatever the mood of their owner might be.

His newspaper had fallen idly upon his knees, and a smile of complacency softened the stern outlines of his face as he watched the slow-dropping embers, reading perhaps in their mysterious depths a leaf from that future that was already mapped out so clearly in his own brain.

“Four strong, stout, healthy boys! And every one after the same pattern,—no pindlin’, peakin’, half-breeds, but Hadlocks to the backbone. There’s Jotham, only fourteen, but doin’ a man’s work every day of his life; and David and Isaac, they both take to their books fairly well, so I guess I’ll have to send them to college,—make a lawyer and a doctor out of them, maybe. This one can share the farm with Jotham, (I’ve got enough f’r both), or, if he takes to a sea-faring life, I’ll fit him out with as fine a schooner of his own as any man could ask for.”

Not an “if” in the whole calculation. Of course nothing could interfere with his plans in regard to his own children, even their sex being a pre-arranged matter, and that the new comer whose advent was just now expected, and whose destiny was already

being so coolly mapped out, should venture to disappoint him in that particular, never entered his mind.

There were sounds of hurried steps and suppressed voices in the adjoining room, and then a feeble, imperative cry, that first piteous appeal of helpless infancy to the parental instinct that even the most brutalized seldom hear without a thrill of tender pity, and a little later, a neighbor, a brisk, kindly faced woman, came into the kitchen, and, without heeding his inquiring look, set herself to work to prepare the midnight lunch that country hospitality would, on no account, have omitted.

Now good Mrs. Higgins was not on the best of terms with the Squire, and so long as she volunteered no information in regard to the new baby, no power on earth would have forced the proudly obstinate man to volunteer either question or comment. Of course all was as it should be, or she would not have worn that provokingly satisfied look; and with a kind of undefined self-gratulation he watched from beneath his half-shut eyelids as she brought out the best gooseberry preserves, and a plate of delicate pound cake made expressly to give *éclat* to the occasion. The tea steamed hospitably upon the hearth, and the pitcher of rich, yellow cream waited for it upon the table, — a harmless substitute for the oldtime "caudle" with which our English forbears were wont to celebrate the addition of another twig to the ancestral tree.

There was nothing to find fault with there, and once more his mind reverted to that little morsel of help-

less humanity that had come into this world, destitute of even a name, and following a custom, handed down perhaps from some old, half-heathen ancestor who, in his divinations had simply substituted the Hebrew Scriptures for the Roman, he drew the little stand that held the family Bible closer to his side, and, taking advantage of Mrs. Higgins' temporary absence, opened the book at random, and with averted eyes, placed his unguided finger upon the verse that was to guide him in the choice of a name for the new-comer. The candle upon the tall wooden mantel shone down clearly upon the sacred page, and lighted up with startling distinctness the words that stared him in the face like a premeditated insult: "And she bare a daughter, and called her name Dinah."

Frowning, he replaced the book upon the stand with an irreverent thump that set the china upon the table all agig, and provoked a gentle titillation between the creamer and the hot-water pot, as if the two were rubbing noses together in glee over his discomfiture.

"I guess I'll let his mother pick out a name for this one," he muttered, rather ashamed, if the truth must be told, of his unreasonable petulance, and proportionally softened toward the meek little woman, who had never in all the years since she had crossed his threshold as a wife dared to claim a right that he saw fit to deny her.

"Most likely she'll want to tack a William Wallace or a Thaddeus of Warsaw onto him, but I guess the Hadlock in 'im'll hold its own;" and he chuckled audibly at his own wit, while to the doctor, who at that moment entered the room, he seemed to be

simply giving vent to the parental ecstasies natural to the occasion.

The little man advanced smilingly, and with a side glance at the temptingly spread table, took his station in front of the genial fire, and drawing aside his coat-tails disposed himself to catch as much of the warmth as possible without the incivility of turning his back upon his host.

"Fine child!" he purred comfortably. "Tipped the scales at eight and a quarter."

"Very fair, *very* fair," conceded the Squire, trying hard not to show his exultation. "*All* of my boys have been as rugged as young bear cubs. The Hadlocks are a tough race and a long lived. My grandsire was nigh on to a hundred when he died, and my father was in the nineties."

"Why, how you talk!"

The doctor had heard this same story of the longevity of the Hadlocks a score of times before, and had invariably replied with the same idiomatic formula. But to-night there was an absent tone in his voice, and he fidgetted uneasily as if in the expectation of something not altogether pleasant. Perhaps he was thinking, as doctors sometimes *do* think, that it was strange that the wives of those sturdy old patriarchs should have died comparatively young, and wondering if the compression of a soul had anything to do with its premature escape from the body.

CHAPTER II

— A DAUGHTER

“**A**HEM!” the doctor gave a reassuring flip to his coat-tails, and glanced across to his companion with a queer mixture of humor and apprehension in his kindly face.

“She bids fair to hold her own with the boys, I should say.”

He put forth this remark as a gentle “feeler,” but the Squire was too comfortably obtuse to comprehend his meaning.

“Ye-es, I s’pose she’ll be round before long. She’s always in a takin’ to be up and seein’ to things herself, and the boys do need ’er to look after their clo’es an’ vittles. Hired help don’t never keep an eye on things as you do yerself.”

Selfish old brute! The doctor was getting exasperated, but he hastened to say with an affectation of surprise:

“Why, you don’t think I was speaking like that of your wife, I hope. I referred to your little daughter of course; and I will say this for the wee lassie, that she’s the prettiest and most promising baby in the lot.”

Poor little unfortunate! to need a champion before her baby eyes had even seen the light of day,—her only sin her sex, but one that would never be forgiven

or overlooked by her hard-tempered, prejudiced sire.

"Do you dare to tell me that the new baby is a girl?"

His face was crimson with angry disappointment, and he glared at the doctor as if he longed to annihilate him for his unwelcome communication.

"To be sure," chirruped the little man sweetly, while with difficulty he concealed the satisfaction with which he saw his arrogant neighbor's discomfiture.

"I supposed that Mrs. Higgins had already told you, for with three boys in the family such a rarity as a girl is usually worth speaking about."

He smiled blandly, but the Squire could no longer control his angry impatience.

"A girl! A poor, useless, good-for-nothing GIRL! And that too, right in the face of my plannin' for another boy. What do you mean?" he added fiercely, forgetting civility, hospitality, and all the manly courtesies upon which he had always prided himself, "by standin' there smirkin' and grinnin' like a chessy cat? You've had the last dollar out of my pocket, let me tell you. I wouldn't call you in to doctor a sick cat."

"Very well."

The doctor was angry in his turn, but he was a gentleman and scorned to bandy words with his unreasonable neighbor, but as he drew on and buttoned his overcoat, he said with stern significance:

"It is well, that with such fathers as you in the world, there is a law to protect the lives, at least, of helpless childhood and womanhood. God knows," he added in a lower tone, as he turned his back upon the angry man, "that they need all the protection that

the law can give them in more cases than the world dreams of."

But the Squire had had time to recover somewhat from the first shock of his disappointment, and, thoroughly ashamed of his angry outburst, he hastened to apologize and urge the doctor to partake of the lunch in waiting for him, before starting upon his cold, homeward drive.

"I did n't mean to hold you responsible, doctor, for my disappointment, knowin' of course, that you ain't the least to blame for it. But I'd lotted so on them four boys, a farmer, a doctor, a lawyer an' a sea cap'n. That's the plan I'd staked out, and you know yerself how thunderin' mad it makes a man to have his plans stepped on, and nobody that he can make suffer for it."

"Somebody will suffer for it," thought the kindly man with a sigh, as he accepted the apology so far as to unbutton his coat and seat himself at the table, with the air of one still wavering between the stern desire to show his just resentment, and the fragrant wooing of the steaming teacup that made forgiveness seem, just then, one of the easiest and most amiable of the virtues.

He was very fond, this little country doctor of ours, of tracing backward the peculiar traits, mental and moral, of the men and women with whom his profession brought him into such close contact, and that last expression of the irate Squire still haunted him with a queer, uneasy persistency.

His host's profuse civilities, evidently intended to atone for his former rudeness, and the mild, matronly

discourse of Mrs. Higgins fell alike upon his ears as an unmeaning babble, and as he jogged slowly homeward along the lonely country road, the cold stars above, and beneath the frost-hardened earth upon which his horse's hoofs struck with a dull thud, only relieved now and then by the sharp crack of a broken twig, or a sudden ring and flash as the brute's steel-shod feet struck sharply against one of the flinty fragments with which the road was strewn, he beguiled the way with recollections of bits of family history that he had gathered from time to time from stories told by the Squire himself, or by some of the older inhabitants of the Island.

He could not be sure, but it was somewhere between 1750 and 1751 that the first Hadlock came to this country,—the hard, stern, determined man, who, after trying in vain for several years to win political power in the Massachusetts colony, sternly withdrew himself to the thinly settled province of Maine, establishing a home for his family,—the daintily bred English wife and their three stout boys—upon the Island, whose fierce cliffs frowning oceanward had a strange attraction for the man's fearless, defiant nature, while the fertile valleys lying inland appealed quite as strongly to his natural thrift and sagacity.

The old man had died full of years and honors, his sons too had one by one passed away, but now even down to the third and fourth generation the traits that had so strongly marked their common ancestor had never failed to reappear in his descendants. Brave, energetic, quick to take advantage of any sudden turn in fortune's wheel, and unsparing of

themselves or others so long as any material good could be gained by the struggle, they were good citizens and neighbors, with singularly rigid ideas in regard to their rights, both political and religious, and of such unquestioned honesty that the places of trust in the little community were more frequently filled by them than by any other family perhaps upon the whole Island. But there was another side to the Hadlock character that few comparatively knew anything about, and that was the home side.

Curiously enough, the Hadlocks had almost invariably been indebted to the "spindle side" of the house for the money with which they had started in life. From grandsire Hugh down to the present Squire it was the wife's dowry that had been the nest-egg from which her thrifty spouse had contrived to hatch out his lucky chickens, a state of things that would in ordinary cases have given a personally insignificant woman an undisputed position as the head of her own household at least, if no more. But the Hadlocks never, to a man, yielded a whit of their masculine supremacy. Nay, more, they managed by some unexplained power to so impress upon their gentler mates their own natural superiority as the original lords of creation, that each household naturally became a republic, free only in name, with a Cæsar at its head, whose will alone controlled and governed everything down to the smallest details.

If the more tender and sensitive of these well-trained wives usually faded and grew sad and still before her time, letting go her hold upon life, and dropping off as softly and silently as the spring

flower whose work is done, and the pale petals safely folded in mother earth's tender bosom before the heat and rush of the busy midsummer overtakes it, people only wondered that "such good providers and forehanded men as the Hadlocks should have such poor luck with their wives," — a question that the bereaved husbands themselves were wont to puzzle their brains over in hopeless bewilderment.

The Squire had remarked frankly to his young wife, on her complaining of a headache:

"Now, Cinthy, I don't want you to think I'm ha'ash or unfeelin', but I do think that half the headaches an' backaches that folks make such a towse over are just clear imagination. I ain't ever had an ache yet that I could n't work off, and 't would be a dreadful disappointment to me if you should turn out one o' the pindlin', complainin' kind, such as I remember my mother was. I honestly believe she might 'a' lived to a good old age if she'd only thought so."

And from that day Mrs. Hadlock never complained of either headache or heartache in her husband's presence. If her once rosy cheek grew pale, and her form thin and bent, it was no more than might be expected; "farmers' wives always faded young," and with this passing thought her husband calmly dismissed the subject from his mind. He held up his end of the yoke, why should n't she do the same?

When the poor woman once more crept out of her sick-room, looking so frail and white that it seemed as if any passing wind might blow her away, there was an added line of sorrow about the patient mouth, while the bent shoulders drooped as beneath an added burden.

“No wonder,” her husband grumbled, “that with that great young one forever in her arms she was such a long while getting up her strength.”

But it was not the care of the rosy smiling baby, who would lie for hours contentedly sucking her wee thumb between the succession of little cat naps that occupied the greater part of the first few months of her innocent life. It was the sad certainty that this, the most precious to her motherly heart of all her babies, was born to an inheritance so cheerless in its spiritual and mental repression, so colorless, so toilsome, that it wrung her heart with a fear that not all her pride and satisfaction in the child's growth and beauty had the power to dissipate.

“What had we better call her?” was the timid question with which she tried to propitiate her grim husband, and win perhaps some fatherly recognition for the little stranger.

The Squire removed his pipe from his mouth, and cast a look of cold indifference at the unconscious baby crowing in his wife's lap. “Call 'er anything you 're a mind to, f'r all o' me. ‘Disappointment’ would n't be a bad name for 'er.”

The mother bent her face until her cheek touched the little silken head upon her bosom, while a tear dropped softly, — a holy chrism — upon the baby forehead.

“I will call her ‘Comfort,’” she said gently.

And her husband, blind alike to the sad significance of tear and name, and seeing no reason to interfere with his wife's choice, allowed her for once to have her own way, unchecked and unhindered.

CHAPTER III

A DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE

“**I**T’S ever so much prettier than the scarlet beans or the hop-vine,” and the child, from her low seat upon the threshold of the back door, paused for a moment from her chopping to look up lovingly at the graceful clematis framing the rough doorway in a wreath of delicate, fairy-like blossoms.

“David said ’t wa’ n’t nothin’ but a weed, and made fun of me for diggin’ it up and settin’ it out here, and Jotham said he’d tell father that I was litterin’ the yard up with wild things. But now it’s grown so big and pretty, they like to sit in the shade of it as well as anybody.”

She laughed, such a sweet, wholesome, gay little laugh, that her sad-faced mother looked up from her bread kneading with a smile of tender satisfaction that faded the next instant, as she said, apprehensively:

“Yes, ’t is pretty, and it shades the door nicely for you to sit there when you’re choppin’ the curd or shellin’ peas. But I’m afraid,” with a little catch in her voice, as she glanced at the unsuspecting little face, bright with childhood’s unreasoning gladness, “that your father won’t let it stay there. He said only the other day that it was the worst thing to scatter its seeds that he ever saw, and he would n’t

have weeds coaxed to grow in his yard, when there was enough that he could n't get rid of."

"What?" and the childish face flamed up angrily. "Do you s'pose that he'd pull up my own vine, that I got in the woods, and planted here my own self? If he did, 't would be meaner 'n dirt, and —"

"There! there! That will do."

Mrs. Hadlock spoke with a sternness that she was far from feeling. For years unquestioning submission and obedience had been the rule of her own life, and the quick, independent temper of her little daughter kept her in a state of constant dread and alarm. What if, with growing years, she should be incautious enough to oppose her will in some matter to that of her hard-tempered sire? The very idea, with its long train of terrible consequences, — disinheritance and possible beggary for the creature she loved best in all the world, — sent such a chill to her timid heart that for a moment her nerveless hands refused their office, and the unknaded dough lay in a shapeless mass upon the board as, dropping into the nearest chair, she whispered pleadingly:

"Don't talk like that, child! You'll kill me if you do."

Comfort looked up, to see the slow tears stealing down the pale cheeks, and catch the look of anxiety in her mother's sad eyes, and in a moment more she was at her side, her rosy arms about her neck, and her sweet face, wet with childhood's ready tears, pressed lovingly to hers.

"I can't help thinking, mother dear," she whispered softly, with a quick glance over her shoulder at

the approaching form of Jotham, who was sauntering down the meadow road, with the empty beer-jug swinging in his idle hand. "But I won't say a word, if you don't want me to, if he pulls up all my flowers, — even the rose-bush that Granny Hedvig gave me."

Mrs. Hadlock smiled through her tears, while with a hurried kiss she put the child from her.

"He won't trouble the rose-bush so long as it is n't in his way. And likely as not he won't think of the vine again, — if nobody reminds him of it."

The little maid knew only too well what that last clause meant, for from her babyhood her ruder brothers had taken a mischievous delight in teasing and thwarting her in all her little plans and pleasures. With the two younger lads it had been merely a boy's natural enjoyment in teasing something that was too weak to pay them back in their own coin, and of whose real suffering they had not the smallest comprehension. But with Jotham, the elder and by far the harder-natured of the three, there was an ingrained, perhaps half-unconscious, antipathy to the bright, merry little sister, who had seemed to his selfish soul the one too many in the family group, and who had never in all her life trembled at his frown or cried at his harsh, unbrotherly taunts and sneers. "Ma'am's cosset," he delighted to call her, and the knowledge that this species of sister-baiting was a sport in which their father might be counted on not to interfere lent an added zest to their enjoyment of it.

She was only a girl, with all a girl's silly, babyish ways; and when David hung all her cherished rag

dolls in a ghastly row upon the smutty kitchen crane, and Isaac smashed the choice bits of china that had served for her mimic housekeeping, her wrath and grief were to them the funniest sight imaginable. "Spit-fire" and "pepper-pot" were the epithets familiarly bestowed upon her, while their mother's distressed remonstrances had little weight in the face of their father's unexpressed but no less evident enjoyment of their unkindly jests. And yet Comfort was a loving little creature, willing to put herself to any trouble and inconvenience to help others. But unfortunately that independence of spirit and keen sense of justice that had dwelt in great-grandfather Hugh had come down to her in full measure, and her hot blood boiled at the injustice of punishing her for an accidental injury to Jotham's sled, while the wanton destruction of her playthings was regarded as merely a good joke. Why was this difference made? And over and over in her solitary hours, the little maid pondered the question that so perplexed her childish brain.

She had returned to her tray of curd, and was chopping diligently to make up for lost time, when Jotham, a heavy, dark-browed youth, came up to the door, and throwing himself lazily upon the step, gave the empty jug a shove into the open doorway, with the peremptory:

"G'long and fill that jug, and see you're spry about it, too. I can't wait all day."

Comfort paid no attention but went on with her chopping.

"Ain't you goin' ter mind?" he cried threateningly.

"Not unless you ask me decent."

He glared at her half in anger, half in bewilderment, at such unheard-of audacity on her part.

"You'll fill that jug, or I'll know why," he growled through his set teeth.

The little face grew white as the curdled mass beneath her hand, but she never flinched. They were brave men of her race, who had faced cold and flood and hostile bullets for what they deemed their rights, and their blood was in her veins.

"I won't stir one step," she repeated stoutly, "till you *ask* me to fill the jug, — then I'll do it, and welcome."

And the brave little head with its crown of red-brown curls was lifted with an air of unconscious dignity, and the clear eyes looked at him unflinchingly as she added with a touch of pathos that was entirely wasted upon the angry boy:

"I wish you'd ask me to do things for you as you do the boys. I hate to be spoken to just as if I was a slave; and I'm sure I'm always willing to wait on you if you'll only ask me fair."

The clenched hand was lifted, when something — a vague instinct, let us hope, of the unmanliness of such a blow — made the boy lower it, and say with an affectation of indifference, as he slowly rose to his feet:

"I c'n fill it myself. But let me tell you, miss," he continued threateningly, "I'll be even with you f'r this ugly streak, — and you won't make nothing out of it either."

As he disappeared down the cellar stairs, Comfort watched him with something of apprehension as well



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as triumph in her telltale face. To be sure, she had won the day, but she well knew that he would fulfil his threat, and that she would be forced to pay heavily for her momentary victory, and instinctively she braced herself to meet the consequences of this her first protest against the sexual tyranny that she had suffered from since her earliest remembrance. He could n't hurt her pet kitten, for she was careful to keep the pretty creature out of the way when the boys were in the house; and all her playthings, since the scene of the improvised gibbet, had been safely stored in her own little bedroom. Perhaps he would take the time when she was going through that piece of woods on her way to school to jump out at her, and perhaps frighten her to death, and this thought was to her the most frightful of any that her imagination could conjure up.

A greedy listener to all the stories of wolves and bears, and Indians, — tales of pioneer life, that had not had time to grow dim and colorless with age, — that strip of unreclaimed woodland through which the road ran for three-quarters of a mile, was, to our simple little school girl a veritable "valley of the Shadow of Death," peopled with "satyrs and hobgoblins," and "full of doleful noises. In a word, every whit dreadful." And although Granny Hedvig's cottage stood about half way, and from there she was sure of Franz's company and protection, the knowledge that she would have to pass through that lonely, solitary road every day on her way to school, haunted her continually, even robbing her of her sleep sometimes when in the darkness her imagination

found time to conjure up pictures of possible perils and dangers lurking behind those dark, impenetrable pines, or creeping close to the narrow footpath under cover of the dense undergrowth, and snapping at her naked feet that always kept so warily in the very middle of the dusty road, afraid to risk the refreshing coolness and softness of the grassy sward on either side.

With a sensitive shrinking from ridicule, the child had carefully concealed her cowardly fears even from her mother, and only Franz Hedvig knew of the suffering that she underwent during her solitary walks to and from school. If he wondered at or tried to reason her out of her groundless terrors he never laughed at her for them, and many a morning her timid heart had leaped for joy at sight of his ragged straw hat bobbing in and out among the blackberry bushes that clustered thickly at the entrance of the wood, and it was these same berries that always served him as an excuse for coming so far out to meet his little friend.

"I thought some plums would taste good for granny's dinner," he would say apologetically, pretending not to notice Comfort's radiant face.

And with him by her side what a delightful, peaceful walk that haunted wood road became. The bobolinks answered back to his blithe whistle, while that fearsome rustle in the bushes was nothing in the world but a jolly red squirrel that, perched upon a stump, chattered and flourished his plummy tail as if he had nothing to do in life but to sit in the sun and enjoy himself.

Franz knew where all the prettiest wild flowers grew, and it was no fault of his if the "mistress" didn't have a big nosegay of ferns and sweet wild roses, or perhaps some paler forest beauty, to brighten her desk every morning all through the long, lusty northern summer.

Comfort was a social little body, and never lacked for playmates of her own sex and age, but of friends she had one, and one only, — the grandson of the old Swedish woman, Dame Hedvig, who lived in the little log cabin in the woods, and supported herself and Franz by spinning the beautifully fine flax thread that was in such demand with the thrifty housewives of the Island.

Franz was not a handsome boy, even Comfort would not have ventured to claim that distinction for him, indeed, her own brothers, dark-haired young giants, were far more comely to look upon than the freckled, sun-burned Swedish lad, who, even at his best had a slouchy loose-jointedness about him that made his ill-fitting clothes shabbier still, and gave no hint of the latent strength and endurance lurking behind that unpromising exterior.

Not seldom Franz's shrewd interference had protected his little friend from the petty tyranny of her brothers, and while they owed him no good-will on that account, his ready good-nature and skill in woodcraft made him a most desirable comrade, and exempted him from the small insults and ill-turns that otherwise they would have been only too glad to subject him to.

Fortunately the boy was not in the least sensitive

in regard to himself or his personal deficiencies, nor did he for an instant dream that honest poverty was an inheritance to be ashamed of. Thus he was good-naturedly invincible against any mean shaft of ridicule that might be levelled at him on account of his humble station or belongings. But there was one point upon which the good-tempered, not easily aroused lad was so sensitive that the hardest, most mischief-loving urchin in the whole district would have been shy of venturing hint or jest, and that was the good name of his grandmother.

That the dame was a character, in her way, cannot be denied, — a queer compound of great natural intelligence united with a love of the marvellous, that made her a perfect storehouse of old, weird legends that, in the eyes of her matter-of-fact neighbors, savored strongly of the supernatural. Among her other old Scandinavian possessions she claimed the gift of "second sight," and it is not strange that, in a day when ancient superstition still held sway over the vulgar mind to a great extent, the queer, friendless old woman, who persisted in wearing her national kerchief on her head instead of the conventional matronly bonnet, and who seldom exchanged visits with the goodwives thereabouts, should have gained the unenviable reputation of a witch, among the more ignorant and superstitious of her neighbors. To be sure, sensible folks laughed at the idea, but there was, as in every community, a class of narrow-minded, mystery-loving ones who found it more satisfactory to account for Granny Hedvig's peculiarities by calling her a witch than

by any more sensible or charitable solution of the question.

Of course some hint of this had not failed to reach the ears of Franz, and had aroused in his boyish soul all the native chivalry and fierce indignation, that a truly manly boy must necessarily feel as the only champion of age and helplessness.

CHAPTER IV

DAME HEDVIG

FOR several days after Comfort's rebellion she was on the alert constantly lest Jotham, in fulfilment of his threat, should spring some trap upon her. But as time passed on and nothing happened to cause her any special uneasiness, she gradually forgot her fears, and lapsed into her normal state of innocent security. Her brother was perhaps a shade more surly and unapproachable than usual, but that signified nothing. It was his usual manner in the house, and even his father, in moments of extreme exasperation, had been known to call him an "unlicked cub," — an epithet well applied to his rude, ungenial nature, housed in a form at once rough and strong, and singularly intolerant of outward culture. Only one thing had aroused the child's suspicions, as being so foreign from his usual practice that there were strong grounds for apprehension in it, although that of itself wore the guise of such unquestioning kindness that she was half ashamed of herself for regarding it as suspicious. One of a brood of chickens of a very rare kind that her father had procured at considerable trouble and expense had been found dead, close to the coop, and the irritated Squire had declared at once that Cherry must have killed it. In vain her little mistress declared, even with tears, that

such a thing was impossible, as it had been killed in the night, and Cherry always slept on the foot of her own bed, — a warm nest that it seldom vacated before the sun was high in the heavens and all about the farmhouse were astir.

Still unconvinced, the Squire relentlessly demanded reparation on the part of poor Cherry, whose innocent career would no doubt have been prematurely cut short but for the unexpected interference of Jotham in her behalf.

“I don’t believe the kitten had anything to do with it. ’T was a critter a good deal older and stronger than she is, that did that piece of mischief.”

The curiosity of the family was aroused, of course, by these mysterious hints, and even his father deigned to ask:

“Who or what, under the sun, do you mean?”

Jotham shook his head, and shut his heavy jaws with a snap.

“Catch him telling what he thought till he was *sure*. Wait a day or two and see if any more are killed, and then ’t would be time enough to speak.”

His father muttered something about not wantin’ his chickens used to catch a rogue, but he had a good deal of confidence in the sharpness and sagacity of his eldest born, and for the time the suspected Cherry was safe from his vengeance, although he kept a sharp lookout upon the unconscious pet that kept poor Comfort in a state of constant unrest, and made her start with terror whenever any unusual sounds from the back yard where the chicken coops were kept happened to reach her ear. All day

long she kept her pet in sight, and many times in the night she awoke from some frightful dream to reach out a trembling hand in the darkness, and softly stroke the little fluffy heap at her feet, to make sure that she was really there, safe and sound, and out of the reach of any possible temptation to try a chicken diet.

The short summer term of school was over, and when her daily morning tasks were done, nothing so pleased the child as to be sent on an errand to Granny Hedvig's cottage. She was slowly outgrowing her fear of the lonely road, but with the prospect of listening to one of the dame's stories while she watched her at her spinning, or helping Franz at some of his many tasks, she would willingly have braved actual as well as imaginary dangers rather than forego such a treat.

It was a beautiful morning early in September, and as she tripped along the narrow grassy pathway that led to the dame's cottage, she sang in her sweet childish treble a snatch from some old song that she had picked up somewhere, — as snowbirds will find out the tender, spicy seeds in which they delight where the rest of the world sees only a wide waste of unbroken snow, — the clear notes mingling pleasantly with the happy ripple of the brook close by the path, and the far-off whirr of the mill, nestling at the base of the mountain beneath whose friendly shadow the little cottage with its bit of garden had been content to shelter itself, protected alike from the fierce wintry tempests and the summer's short but intense heats.

Looking upward, one could see on every hand majestic peaks, cloud-capped and clothed with the living green of pine and hemlock, looking out unmoved upon the great, tossing, seething ocean, that knocks forever with foam-white hands against the Island's rock-ribbed gates, still denied, yet never ceasing through all these countless ages, to demand the secrets that wary nature has hidden deep within those impregnable walls of living rock, — forged in the very heart of the earth, and tossed upward by the mysterious powers that hold high carnival in those subterranean furnaces, — the "Cyclops" of the ancient poets, the "gases" of the modern scientist.

Born and bred in the midst of these grand, picturesque surroundings, Comfort had naturally associated them with the commonplace details of her simple life while the unconscious pleasure awakened in her by the sight of them when, as on this clear summer morning, they were at their fairest, might never have deepened into the intense poetic fervor of later years but for her childish association with one whose whole being was so steeped in the romantic lore of her own land that she deified, to a certain extent, every force and charm of nature until, beneath the shadow of those glorified mountains, and with the never ceasing pæans of the great ocean sounding forever in her ears, life be it ever so humble and plain, could by no possibility become "common or unclean." The little brook close by the pathway hurrying along over its rocky bed to join the large, stream below, laughing in the sunlight and darkling in the shadow, reminded her of that bright, wayward

little princess, Christiana of Sweden, of whom the dame loved so dearly to talk, while the tall, pink-plumed spireas that stood beside, bending tenderly over the dimpled water, were the stately maids of honor, standing guard over the little queen, and keeping back the vulgar herd of purse-proud dandelions and saucy touch-me-nots.

Comfort's life was in many respects a solitary one, and the pretty conceits that she fashioned from Dame Hedvig's legendary lore would have astonished, probably horrified, the sober, matter-of-fact home folks. With them a brook was a brook, a flower was a flower, and any attempt to idealize them would have been regarded as ridiculous, not to say actually wicked.

Among the household gods that our stern ancestors, following Jacob's example, buried beneath Plymouth Rock, that of Imagination, whose foster-mother had been the resurrected lore of heathen Greece and Rome, had been planted deeper than all the rest. And if some weak-hearted Rachel, still clinging with tender reverence to her old idol, had ventured to hide it in some unsuspected corner of her gray, toilsome life, she was forced to worship in secret, with no music or incense of popular approval to dignify it into respectability. The man who dared to look upon life through the poet's rosy spectacles was "love cracked," while the woman who found more beauty in the blue eyes of the growing flax than in that same flax woven into good, strong tow and linen garments was, to use a favorite, if rather ambiguous, phrase, "next door to a fool."

Mrs. Hadlock, poor, heart-hungry soul! had tried to satisfy her womanly cravings for something better in life than meat, and drink, and work, by stealthily training a few dwarfed garden flowers in an unoccupied corner beside the wall of the vegetable garden; and of late, by decking with the few stray bits of brightness that her husband's marital parsimony would allow her, the pretty little daughter, in whose childish grace and beauty she seemed to see again her own happy self in those old days whose memory had for her the sad sweetness of early violets upon the grave of one once loved. But with Comfort it was different. Her nature was so elastic, so self-dependent and hopeful, that it was easy for her to manufacture her own sunshine out of the stray glints that fell across her repressed and often lonely life.

Nobody quite understood the child's moods, — now blithe and merry as the red-capped cedar birds that, atilt on the lilac boughs, would peep into the dairy windows and peck fearlessly at the crumbs that the little maid scattered for them on the sunny sill. Again, silent, shy, with thought marks between the grave eyes, as if the childish brain was perplexing itself all too early with the unsolved and unsolvable problems of human life. Only the wise old woman, spinning for her bread, in the little woodland cabin, had an intuitive perception of the forces at work upon the girl's mind, and in her quaint fashion she contrived to drop many a hint and sage bit of advice or warning that her listener never forgot.

"I love dearly to study," she had said sadly one evening as she sat idly watching the delicate thread

that the dame's skilful fingers drew without seeming effort from the wisp of flax upon her distaff. "And I'm most always at the head of my class. But father says, all girls need to know is how to keep the house and take care of children. He says that if he could have his way, not a girl in the country should learn to do anything more than to just read her Bible and write her own name. The boys are going to college when they are old enough, but I'm to stay at home and help mother do the work."

"And why not?" hummed the dame, in a tone so low that it seemed scarcely more in the stillness than the monotonous murmur of the wheel. "Know you not, my Comfort, that it is the tender, the weak, the never-noticed ones that tame and shape the whole world? There was the cruel wolf Fenris that no cord could be found strong enough to bind, and the tender mountain sprites forged a chain, — soft it was and frail as a silken string, for it was made of six of the weakest things that can be found: the footfall of a cat, the beards of women, the roots of stones, the breath of fishes, the nerves of bears, and spittle of birds. Their smith was Patience, and his forge-fire Courage. And never yet has the wolf been strong enough to break the chain."

The child smiled, and the discontent faded from her face as she said brightly:

"I guess I know what you mean, Granny. But didn't it take an awful while to make that chain?"

"Aye, child, a very, very long time."

And the calm, old face under the folded kerchief took on a shade of tender sadness as she said gently:

“ But Patience and Courage can do all things in *time.*”

But to-day there were no perplexing questions troubling the little maiden as she hastened to do her mother's errand, and then at the dame's invitation to seat herself comfortably in the seat of honor, the only rocking-chair that the little cottage boasted, an ancient wooden affair with a bright patchwork cushion that Granny looked upon with honest pride, as a perfect marvel of taste and ingenuity. The log-cabin, small and unpretentious, was nevertheless as warm and cosy a nest as any pair of Arctic birds used to the long, inclement northern winters could desire. The outer walls, even the sharply sloping roof were covered all summer with a perfect network of wild creepers, that were already beginning to show here and there a crimson or bronze leaf against the russet background of rough logs; while the roses in which the mistress of the cabin delighted, and for slips of which she had bartered many a knot of her finest and smoothest thread, climbed about the low, four-paned windows, and put forth their fragrant blossoms and scarlet hips with equal boldness, sure of a loving welcome in whatever shape they might come.

On either side of the low sunny doorway stood an ash and an alder that Granny called Aske and Embla, from a tradition that when Odin the creator made man and woman out of these trees, these were the names bestowed upon them, and to keep up the conceit, the old woman always religiously hung her dish-cloths and strainer upon Embla, while the stur-

dier Aske was obliged to do duty as a support for the rake, hoe, and axe that Franz used in his daily work. There were only two rooms inside, and Franz slept in a bunk built against the kitchen wall, and filled to the top with the tender, spicy tips of pine and hemlock, laid "shingle fashion," layer above layer, until the elastic, fragrant mass became a couch fit for a king, — or any other lazy man troubled with insomnia. The great stone fireplace filled nearly one end of the principal room, and over it on a rough shelf was arranged a store of curious things, most of them relics of Granny's old home across the seas.

There was a queer old picture in a frame of curiously carved bone, intended to represent the god Odin, in the form of a venerable, sad-faced old man, with a long, white beard falling upon his breast, a wolf fawning at either knee, and his two ravens, Thought and Memory, perched upon his shoulders, whispering to him the dreadful story of all the sin and suffering in the world, that it was their mission to see and repeat. A collection of curious rocks and shells almost crowded the prosaic tinder box out of its place, and left only room enough for the mysterious oaken casket that held the mystic "runes" upon the reading of which Granny's reputation as a seeress was principally founded. Comfort was sometimes permitted as a great favor to handle these cherished "divining rods" that resembled in size and shape the wooden jackstraws that the children of the last generation were so fond of playing with. Very simple, childish things they looked, only little slender sticks of some kind of white wood, carved on both

sides with a great number of odd characters, and huddled together as it seemed without anything of law or order. But in the dame's practised hand they became all at once possessed of a wonderful power that the ignorant unhesitatingly pronounced supernatural, and which the old woman herself—good Lutheran as she was, and vowed to eschew the Devil and all his works—regarded with a kind of awesome wonder not unmixed with fear.

The gift of reading runes had been handed down in her family for many generations, and although always used gratuitously and in kindness had never proved a blessing to the seeress and those she best loved. They had foretold the death of Granny's young husband, of her son's ill-fated marriage and death, and lastly of her exile with her orphaned grandchild to the New World, where in comparative poverty she had reared him, a freeman among freemen, and strong in the hope that, in this land of liberty, where every man, whatever his birth and antecedents, may climb if he can and will, the bold blood of his Norse ancestors might win for him the fame and fortune that an untoward fate had denied to his sire and grandsire in the old home.

Many a time, urged by boyish curiosity, Franz had coaxed his grandam to "tell his fortune" with her magic sticks, but always in vain.

"It is the bitter runes that fall to me," she would say with a shudder, "and I shall no more read them for my own."

But this morning, after the boy had gone to his daily task at the mill, she had all at once become

possessed of an irresistible desire to try the runes in his behalf, and the opportune call of her little friend suggested an idea that she was prompt to take advantage of. That friendly childish hand instead of her own should shake the charmed box, thus making a break in the spell to avert the malignant influence that she so dreaded.

Naturally Comfort was delighted with the opportunity of thus gratifying her childish curiosity, and when the dame, with much ceremony, had spread a square of finest linen, yellow with age, and wrought in strange cabalistic devices by the hand of some old ancestress, upon the little round cherry-wood stand, the child was permitted herself to unlock the wonderful box, gathering the sticks into a compact bunch in her hand, to hold them for a moment suspended in solemn silence above the magic cloth, then letting them fall as they would, scattered in every direction, and crossing and recrossing each other in a score of fantastic shapes, from which Granny's skill was to divine something of the future of the lad so dear to both their hearts.

The old woman's brow was puckered into an anxious frown as she pored reverently above the fateful symbols, until, in evident desire to be rid of the child's curious regard, she cried suddenly:

"I can do nothing with Frigga crying without in the catnip patch. If my child will but go to her —"

"Of course I will, poor Frigga! I should n't wonder a bit if she'd been stung by those bees."

And forgetting all her interest in the runes and their possible revelations in her solicitude for the

cat, whose plaintive mew was every moment growing louder and more distressed, Comfort darted out of the cottage and in the direction of the catnip patch in such hot haste that she never noticed the strange gentleman who, sitting in the shadow of the trees on the other side of the foot-path, was busily at work sketching the cottage and its picturesque surroundings.

CHAPTER V

THE WIDDER SCRIPTURE'S SUMMER BOARDER

“FRIG-GA! Frig-ga!” called the childish voice, and “Frig-ga! Frig-ga!” repeated the mountain echoes, while the stranger under the maple across the way suspended his work for a moment to watch with a smile of amused interest the search going on in the catnip patch. The plot of carefully tended catnip was one of the peculiar institutions that Granny's neighbors were wont to turn up their noses at as one of the whimsies of a half-crazy old woman, although nobody could deny the fact that her bees, for whose sole benefit it was cultivated, were the best honey producers for many miles around.

“Let the critters do their own foragin’,” the other bee keepers would say. There were weeds enough growing wild all over the island without *coaxing* them to grow, and what were the bees good for if they could n't provide their own fodder? But Granny, with her Old World thrift, contended that to bees as well as men “time was money,” and if the little workers found their raw material near at hand they would waste no time in searching for it. And as a natural consequence of this wise economy, the row of old-fashioned straw hives bordering one side of the small clearing had a third more honey to spare

at the end of the season than any others in the neighborhood, while, owing to the peculiar aromatic flavor, Granny's honey was sure to find eager purchasers.

But it was not to the bees alone that that garden of sweet-scented purple blooms was a storehouse of tempting sweets. Frigga, the dame's pet cat, found it just the spot that her feline instincts prompted her to forage in, regardless of many a cruel sting from which her undefended nose had suffered during these perilous raids. For Frigga, be it understood, was no ordinary, tame-spirited puss, who once conquered is conquered forever. Far from that! The blood of a long race of bold Norse mousers ran in her veins, and no doubt she found it hard to forget that her own mother had dared the perils and inconveniences of an ocean voyage, as well as the privations of a pioneer life, and had been the petted friend and companion of her lonely mistress for many a long and toilsome year. Her glossy black coat showed not a hair of mongrel white, — only the soft velvety paws, always daintily scornful of smirch or speck, wore the hue of their ancestral snows; while the slow, stately grace with which she carried her long tail, as if it had been the train of some grand court lady, and the grave dignity with which she always repelled the smallest advance toward friendliness on the part of her plebeian neighbors said as plainly as words could have done:

"I am a cat of condition, and we 'll have no familiarities, if you please, ma'am."

But Frigga at ease in the warmest corner of the kitchen hearth, or curled up luxuriously in Comfort's

lap, and Frigga with the sting of an angry bee in her nose, were two altogether different animals. And now, borne in her rescuer's tender arms to the cabin, she moaned and whined, and rubbed with an impatient paw the injured member just for all the world as any ordinary cat would have done under like circumstances.

"O Granny! She's got a dreadful sting on her nose this time," cried Comfort distressfully, as soon as she caught sight of the old woman's face peering from the low doorway. "Do please hurry, and get something to put on it," and she held up her homespun apron with its woful freight, as one sure of sympathy and help.

To her surprise the dame seemed strangely indifferent to the sad plight of her pet. She only laughed rather absently, while her withered fingers toyed with the bit of thread that she held between them, and her eyes unnaturally bright, had a far-away look in them as if she were seeing something far beyond the narrow bounds of her own little domain,—a look that the child had never seen there before, and which puzzled and somehow awed her into a bewildered silence.

"And so the poor Frigga has had a taste of Frey's sword?" and she softly patted the head of the distressed animal. "But a pat of damp earth will soon make all right."

And while Comfort held the head of the struggling cat, the dame contrived to fasten the healing loam upon the injured member, too absorbed in her own thoughts to notice the approach of the stranger who, coming up unobserved, now stood watching

with evident interest the progress of the dame's surgery.

"It is for thy good, my Frigga," she murmured soothingly, without resenting in the least an angry scratch that the ungrateful patient bestowed upon her, "an thou wilt go into danger, thou must suffer for it."

Here a movement behind them suddenly caused her to drop the cat and turn to meet the laughing eyes of a stout youngish gentleman, whose dress as well as his unshaven lip showed that he was no dweller hereabouts.

"Begging your pardon," he said with a brusque courtesy that was as far removed from rudeness as from the prim ceremoniousness of the rustic strangers who sometimes dropped in at the cottage, out of curiosity or to bargain for some of her simple stores. "But will you kindly loan me a cup that I can drink from?" with a nod toward the shining little brook whose clear waters rippling over their pebbly bed looked very much cooler than they really were, as the dame well knew.

"If the gentleman will come in," dropping a modest courtesy after the fashion of her countrywomen, "he shall have something better than the warm brook water to drink."

As he seemed only too glad to accept her hospitality, she bustled about with pleased solicitude to see him comfortably seated, and as she placed a glass and pitcher of foaming mead upon the stand beside him, she explained with natural housewifely pride, that the honey used in the mixture was from her own

hives, and that more than a twelvemonth had passed since it was brewed,— excellences that the gentleman evidently appreciated, if one might judge by the relish with which he sipped the refreshing beverage, his bright, observant glance taking in meanwhile every detail of the quaint furnishings of the room, as well as the odd dress and old world speech and manners of its hospitable mistress. The “runes” had been hastily huddled into their box upon the entrance of the guest, but the linen stand cloth with its queer hieroglyphics still remained and caught the stranger’s eye as he replaced his glass.

“By your leave, madam,” and he lifted a corner of the cloth to examine it more closely, while his face lighted up with a smile of intelligent interest. “These Runic characters are not new to me,” he said by way of explanation. “I was in Norway almost two years studying the scenery of that country, and I learned something of these. I believe,” uncertainly tracing the silken lines with the tip of his pencil, “that this is some story about the god Frey, so far as I can make it out.”

“And so it is.”

The old woman’s cheek glowed, and her form grew suddenly erect as if a blast from her own northern mountains had all at once swept across her cheek, kindling the blood of youth once more in her veins, and bringing back the pride and joy of her half-forgotten girlhood, with the scent of her native pines.

“It is the story of how Frey lost his magic sword, and all for love. My great-great-grandam,” she added with pardonable pride, “wrought it with her

own fingers, of silken threads that her Viking lord brought to her from afar over the seas."

The stranger smiled good-humoredly.

"From one of his piratical raids," he appended with a bit of sly sarcasm, for which he immediately tried to atone by begging the dame to read the legend for him, declaring that his own skill only extended to the translation of a word here and there.

Little urging did Granny need, for she was in her element with such an interested and intelligent listener, and she would gladly have gone on for hours repeating the stories that had charmed her childhood, and which still held their brightness as undimmed by age or change as the silken threads of her grandmother's mystic embroidery.

"The god Frey," she began, translating the runes into the familiar vernacular of her day and neighborhood, "had a wonderful sword, that would fill a whole field with dead men did he once lift it, but he lost it for love, — and this is how it came about: One unlucky day he climbed up to Odin's throne, for from there he might look all over the world. And as he looked he saw a lovely maiden, — so fair and white was she that her naked arms made the air bright like sunshine whenever she waved them. And Frey the gentle loved her. And he grew pale and thin, and silent; and he ate nothing and drank nothing, neither would he come to the banquet of the gods, but sat apart in solitary places, dreaming ever of the beautiful maiden whose snowy arms had won from him his heart.

"Then Skirner the Crafty guessed his secret, and

he said: 'O Frey, son of Niord, and god of the rain, the sunshine, and the pleasant fruits, give me thy magic sword, and I will win for thee the maiden Gudrun to be thy bride.' So Frey gave him the sword, and the maiden listened to Skirner's honeyed words, and promised that when nine days and nights should have passed away she would wed Frey. Then Frey sang:

“ ‘ Long is one night,
Long are two nights,
How shall I hold out three?
Shorter hath seemed
A month to me oft,
Than of this longing time the half.’ ”

“And Skirner, after the sword had destroyed all his enemies, sold it to the King of the Bees, and the Bees have kept it unto this day.”

“But one bee parted with his because he was mad with poor Frigga,” put in Comfort, forgetting her shyness of the stranger in her interest in the story.

The gentleman laughed, such a frank, gay, good-humored laugh that our little maid never dreamed of resenting it.

“So the realism of To-day bruises the heels of an ideal Past,” he laughed half regretfully, then addressing the dame he asked with a show of kindly interest:

“Is this little lass your grandchild?”

“She is none of my kin.”

The gravity with which she emphasized the words seemed to strike her listener with an odd sense of some hidden meaning underlying the simple assertion,

for he regarded her sharply for a moment before rising to take his leave, with thanks for her hospitality and the courteous request that he might be allowed to repeat his visit.

"Why, that's the Widder Scripture's summer boarder," exclaimed Comfort, as his broad shoulders and careless straw hat disappeared from sight down the leafy avenue. "He's from the city, and he's staying here to paint pictures of all the places round here. The widder told mother that he had some of the prettiest ones she ever saw."

"And well he may make beautiful pictures with all this beauty before his eyes."

The old woman's glowing face was uplifted, and the dim eyes were turned yearningly toward the mountain peaks half veiled in the purple September haze, through whose rifts the gray and ruddy granite gleamed warm and bright in the idle sunshine, — a beautiful contrast to the sombre green of the low-growing pines with which the proud monarch deigned to "cover" his royal feet. Scarce a stone's throw away lay Witch Hollow Pond, — a brooch of diamond-studded lapis-lazuli upon the meadow's fair breast, while the soft lapping of waves upon the sandy beach of the not far distant cove could be distinctly heard in the noonday stillness, as the two outwardly so unlike, and yet with that mystic spirit bond so strong between them, stood at the humble, vine-framed door, silent and thoughtful, yet conscious of a joy too intense to be unmixed with pain. It was the same sensation that the child had been so often conscious of in listening to some old song, whose simple beauty

and pathos had brought the unbidden tears to her eyes.

Franz came whistling up the path, and the spell was broken.

“Halloo there, Granny, Comfort! What are you looking at?”

“Nothing,” replied the child, with an abashed laugh.

“Heaven,” murmured the dame with reverent tenderness. And she hastened into the house to spread the table for their noonday meal.

As the artist had said, — truly the practical treads ever upon the heels of the ideal.

CHAPTER VI

A NEIGHBORLY BODY

“**E**ARLY to bed and early to rise” was one of the Widow Scripture’s favorite maxims, and the heaviest trial that her summer boarder laid upon her much-enduring shoulders was the seven o’clock breakfast, that his late rising necessitated in her otherwise well-regulated household. Not that she endured this innovation upon long-established custom with patient equanimity by any means, for long before the loud-voiced clock in the kitchen corner had given its five matin strokes, her brisk step sounded upon the bare boards overhead, and her shrill tones awoke the echoes of the dusky old farmhouse with the familiar call:

“Come, Tabby, up with ye! It’s high time decent folks was out o’ their beds.”

And woe to the luckless Tabby if, counting upon her mother’s housewifely distractions, she ventured upon so much as one little “beauty nap.”

The widow was a strong-armed as well as determined woman, or she could never have transferred that hundred and ten pounds avoirdupois from the bed to the floor with such wonderful celerity as she did when her first summons was disregarded. And if the summer boarder had not been an uncommonly brave man he would have trembled in his own bed lest a similar experience might befall him too. After

the fashion of country homes of that day the best sleeping-room was below stairs, and as it was provided with wooden partitions, the energetic mistress of the house had no need to raise her voice above its usual pitch to reach the ears of the offending laggard in the next room, who could thus be conveniently talked at, when common prudence forbade a more direct address.

She raked open the bed of coals in the fireplace with a tremendous rattle of shovel and tongs, a thud of heavy wood, and the protesting creak of the burdened fire dogs that, like their mistress, had evidently never learned to bear life's burdens uncomplainingly. Then came the brisk, cheery snapping and crackling of the dry beechen logs, the not unmusical tinkle of the water against the iron sides of the tea-kettle, and above all the sharp, strident tones of the house mistress:

"Here, Tabby, you run out an' dig a mess o' per-taters f'r breakfast. An' don't you let the grass grow under yer feet, f'r I've got work enough on hand f'r to-day to keep a dozen women on the clean jump from sunrise to sunset."

And as the door slammed behind the obedient Tabby, she went on in the same elevated key, evidently indifferent to or oblivious of a long, sleepy sigh from the unfortunate boarder's room.

"I s'pose I've got ter fry them trout f'r breakfast or there'll be a terrible to-do. It's hard when a body puts herself out to cook, an' wash, an' iron f'r a stranger, — a great lazy man that can't find nothin' ter do in the world but ter paint pictures o' things

that folks can look at any time without costin' 'em a cent, — it's hard, I say, that he can't get up in time f'r 'is meals."

The bedstead in the next room creaks uneasily as if it had a conscience ill at ease, and the pork in the frying pan fizzes and sputters in sympathy, while the widow, with a grim smile slowly smothers the trout in meal, unheeding of its beautifully dappled and slender grace.

"Beauties?" she had repeated wonderingly, as the artist, after his yesterday's tramp had proudly produced them from his fishing basket, with a natural comment upon their brilliant coloring, — "I don't know what you mean by callin' a fish 'beautiful.' They're good wholesome eatin', but I must say I don't see where the beautiful comes in."

The artist smiled indulgently.

"Well, Mrs. Scripture," he asked with a glance at her hard, practical face, "what is your idea of beauty? Who or what do you call beautiful?"

The widow considered a moment, with her bare arms akimbo, while she regarded her questioner with a look at once pitying and triumphant, then suddenly throwing open the door of the "front room," she motioned her guest to enter, and with a smile of proud triumph pointed to a small, round stand occupying the place of honor beneath the narrow gilt-framed looking-glass.

"There, that's what *I* call han'some."

It was a spray of some kind of flower, presumably roses, ingeniously fashioned from tiny pink and white shells, and perched upon it, almost hiding it, with

his gaudy red and green plumage, was a stuffed parrot.

“Cap’n Scriptur’ brought it home with him from his last v’yage. It’s furrin, you see, — they don’t make nothin’ o’ this kind in these parts, — and he paid four dollars and thirty-seven cents f’r it. I would n’t sell it though f’r twice the money.”

Her voice faltered, and a tear stole down her withered cheek, — a wifely tribute to the sailor husband who had sailed away one fine morning and had never been heard from since, leaving his then young wife to grow old, and sharp, and grasping, in the desperate struggle to find bread and shelter for herself and child.

But a moment later she was scolding Tabby for her shiftlessness in allowing the biscuit to scorch, and bustling about getting the meal upon the table, as if work and worry were the real business of life, and love and sorrow simply episodes, to be passed over as of too little consequence to be long or often thought of.

Meanwhile the artist, as he took his favorite seat upon the worn block of granite that served for a doorstone, and watched the gray mists slowly creeping over the peaks on either hand, parting here with a shimmer of glowing scarlet, and there of russet and gold, as the setting sun’s rays fell upon their wooded sides now clothed in the triumphal glories of the ripened year, he recalled the scene just passed, and tried for the hundredth time perhaps to solve the problem that will perplex the thinking world for generations to come as it has perplexed ages preceding ours:

Is nature or education at fault when men and women go through the world as blind as dumb beasts to the natural beauties about them? Did our Lord's "Consider the lilies" have no meaning beneath the obvious one of God's protecting care? It has been said that "The undevout astronomer is mad," and the same words might be applied to the student of nature in any of her wonderful and varied forms.

There is a beauty in the fitness, the marvellous adaptability of each created thing, however humble, to its various needs and uses, that draws the soul upward from the created to the Creator, to the perfection of beauty that exists only in the Godhead, and we can see how a Phidias may have been as devout a man in his way as a Fra Angelico. And yet, it is an undeniable fact that, to the great mass of fairly intelligent people, the odd, the peculiar, the grotesque, has a far greater interest and charm than the actually beautiful.

Where one will look with illumined eyes and heart all aglow with reverent delight upon the grand and beautiful scenery of the White Mountains, ninety-nine will be far more interested and impressed by the strange, stony profile of the "Old Man of the Mountain," while crowds spend their breath and time in praising and wondering at the engineering skill displayed in the construction of the Green Mountain railway, who never have the smallest conception of the majesty and beauty of the outlook from the mountain's lofty summit. One is everywhere reminded of the old lady who looked upon Niagara

and the suspension bridge for the first time: "I don't call them Falls no great things," she declared, "because God made 'em, an' 't wa' n't nothin' for Him to do. But that bridge, — Good land! to think that any mortal man should 'a' been smart enough ter contrive that, jest fairly takes away my breath."

And yet, although we may be blind to the natural beauties about us, forgetting that the common and familiar loses none of its charms by that familiarity if we only choose to look upon it with reverent and willing eyes, there is a sentiment that springs up all unconsciously in even the dullest nature for the scenes that have been associated with their earlier years, — a kind of clannish affection for that small bit of the great earth that we have best known and enjoyed. Thus the born New Englander, transplanted to the prairies of the West, pines with homesick longing for the rugged mountains and pine-capped hills of his native State; the dweller by the seacoast may toil contentedly upon his inland farm, but he never ceases to long for a "sniff of salt sea air," and a sight of the grand, tossing, tumultuous sea familiar to his boyhood; and the country-bred man or woman, though successful and happy in a city home, seldom fails to keep in some corner of his or her metropolitan heart a tender memory of the old farmstead with its thousand and one little objects of interest and love, and as life wanes toward its setting it grows even dearer and more real than amidst the heat and bustle of the noonday.

Our artist had had experience of this feeling, and as he sat there in the chill of the now fast-falling

night, his mind reverted to those other days and nights across the seas, when, with a young man's steadfast belief in the superior charms of nature in the Old World, he had roamed from land to land, with pencil and sketch-book, ever patient, ever hopeful, and yet with a certain unsatisfied longing at his heart for the homelikeness, — the beauty that has in it something more than delights the eye, the tender personality that comes only from the heart, and makes the dull bit of painted canvas instinct with life and sentiment.

He had painted the Drusenfall, with its gigantic stony figure keeping watch and ward over the foamy mass leaping madly down the rugged face of the cliff, but all the time there danced before his mind's eye the wonderful waterfalls of his own land, — grander, fairer a thousandfold than this Thuringian beauty, — until he threw aside the half-finished picture in a spasm of self-disgust, and betook himself to the work of delineating some of the tamer and gentler features of the lands through which his wandering feet strayed. But forest, stream, and meadow, even the gorgeous hues of Italian sunsets, only recalled distracting memories of those of his own land, until, like the knight who spent a life-long exile in a vain search for the "Holy Grail" and found it at last at his own castle gate, our artist turned his face homeward, firm in the conviction that for majesty, grace and beauty no land could equal his own.

Years had passed since then, and he had won a fair share of fame and fortune in the busy world where he toiled and lived, but to the simple Island

folks he was just the "Widow Scripture's boarder," — a man who "was too lazy to work, and so painted pictures for a living." His unshaven lip and a certain foreign air in dress and manner, even his name (Humbre,) had an outlandish sound to their unaccustomed ears, and all tended to prove conclusively to the whole neighborhood that he was an "odd fish" anyway, and more than one prudent matron had taken upon herself to warn the widow to be on her guard against fortune-hunters, and men who, for aught she knew, might have a dozen wives already.

In time, however, the frank good fellowship and open handedness of the stranger won over the most suspicious to his side, one good woman even going so far as to admit that "if painting was a lazy trade, it was at least an honest one," while the widow herself stood up manfully in defence of her maligned boarder.

"I'll say this much fer 'im," she declared, "he's a clever, accommodatin' critter as you'd wish to see. Time an' ag'in when me 'n' Tabby's been up to our eyes in work, he's taken the hoe an' gone out into the garding, an' dug a mess o' pertaters f'r dinner jest as handy as if he had n't done nothin' else all his life. He ain't fussy either about what he eats — the only thing we don't hitch hosses on is napkins, — he sticks to it that he must have a clean one every meal, and I say two a week's enough f'r anybody."

It was true that the napkin question was the one bone of contention, as the widow had said, and on this particular morning it was the familiar tocsin that succeeded finally in arousing the sleeper from his

nap to the consciousness that it was time for honest folks to be astir.

“Now, Tabby, you slap them pertaters into the bake-kittle in short metre, an’ then run over to Mis’ Hadlock’s and borrow one of her flat-irons. Them pesky napkins that Mr. Humbre thinks he can’t eat without, had ter be washed yesterday, an’ I’ve got to iron ’em this forenoon or there’ll be a pretty kittle o’ fish. Step lively, now, there ain’t no time to waste.”

But Tabby hung back.

“Where’s yer own irons, ma’am?” she demanded.

“Hangin’ on the pole o’ the cheese-press,” was the prompt reply, “an’ I don’t propose to take ’em off when a neighbor’s got one that she can spare as well’s not.”

“But,” urged the reluctant Tabby, “the last time you borried hers she had to send for it four times before you could spare it, and you swore then that you never’d borry anything of her again as long as you lived.”

The widow’s sallow face reddened, but she drew herself up majestically and pointed one bony finger towards the door:

“*Put*, — you sauce box! Do you s’pose,” she added with serene unconsciousness of the fact that the boot might be considered on the other foot in this case, “that I’ll humor her in her ugliness? Hain’t I accommodated her time an’ ag’in in a hundred ways, besides standin’ her boys’ sass ever since they was born?”

And as Tabby unwillingly departed upon her

errand, her mother watched her with a disturbed and anxious face.

“I don’t see why some folks should be so much better off’n others, f’r the life of me. There’s Tabby now, as likely lookin’ an’ smart a girl as there is on the Island (if she is my young one), but I ain’t got the means to keep ’er dressed up all neat an’ trim as Mis’ Hadlock does Comfort, let me pinch an’ strain ever so hard. That girl never’s had to go bare-fut — onless she wanted to — a day in her life, and she always has new hair ribbons f’r meetin’ an’ examination days, while Tabby has to save her one pair o’ shoes f’r Sundays, an’ tie her hair up with a strip of calico.”

The aggrieved look still lingered as she replied crustily to her boarder’s cheery morning salutation:

“Yes, pleasant enough, I s’pose, f’r them that likes weather sharp enough ter take the hair right off o’ yer face. Time f’r frosty nights an’ mornin’s? Yes, of course ’t is. It’s always time f’r cold, or fog, or frost in this God-forsaken hole, where a body has ter jest scratch f’r a livin’, — an’ mighty mean livin’ at that.”

Her listener glanced at the comfortably spread table, the blazing fire, and homely conveniences of the room, and smiled indulgently. “I don’t suppose any one would be likely to make a fortune by farming here,” he admitted, “but there are plenty of other things that an enterprising man might go into besides cultivating the land. There’s some fine granite here, and — ”

“Don’t say ‘granite’ in this neighborhood, f’r the

land sakes!" and the widow held up both floury hands in horrified deprecation. "Diggin' granite come pretty nigh bein' the ruination of us all. It was Squire Hadlock's scheme, but some men from New Hampshire put 'im up to it in the first place. That back pastur' o' his is a master place for that kind o' stun, an' he got up a company an' undertook to work it. It was all pay *out* an' no pay *in*, till everybody got discouraged an' give it up as a bad bargain. I don't s'pose there ever was a more disapp'inted man than the Squire, for he'd lotted on making a fortune out o' that pastur', an' naterally them that lost by it laid all the blame on him, so he had cusses as well as losses to bear."

"That was hard on him," assented the artist absently, and as he took his seat at the table in obedience to the widow's hint that "time an' tide an' buckwheat cakes wait for no man," he wondered in an indifferent, idle fashion if that rough, picturesque strip of land sloping down to the sandy beach, and backed by the near grove of "lady" birches, of which he had only the day before made a charming study, could be the scene of the Squire's discomfiture. He had noticed the signs of an old quarry, and —

Just here his meditations were interrupted by Tabby, who burst into the room, her sunbonnet flying by the strings, and her rosy face fairly purple with excitement.

"Oh, ma! They're havin' the *awfulest* time down to the Hadlocks. Somethin' 's killed all the Squire's Dorkin chickens, an' Jotham's laid it to Granny

Hedvig's cat that she got Comfort to take care of while she was away f'r a week. The Squire's mad as a hatter, an' swears he'll have the cat's life, an' Jotham, he's all ready f'r the job, — got a rope ready to hang 'er with, — but Comfort's got 'er all cuddled up in her apron, an' won't give 'er up. Mis' Hadlock's cryin', an' the Squire's jawin', an' the boys are laughin' an' eggin' Jotham on. I should n't wonder a mite if Comfort had a fit or somethin', she's that white an' trembly."

The widow laid down her knife and fork, and, rising, wiped her mouth deliberately upon the roller towel, and as she took her trusty sunbonnet from its nail behind the door, she remarked resolutely:

"I ain't one to shirk a dooty, an' it's plain ter be seen that *somebody* ought ter interfere in this case. The Squire's a dretful masterful man, an' Mis' Hadlock's clever, but she ain't got no more backbone to 'er than a tow string. To be sure, Comfort's pretty gritty, but she's been put upon ever since she was born, by the whole lot of 'em, an' it's tough work holdin' 'er own with all of 'em ag'in' 'er. You see to the breakfast."

The conclusion of her remarks were intended for the special benefit of Tabby, who, thus defrauded of the privilege of accompanying her mother on her neighborly mission, took a truly feminine revenge upon the innocent boarder by serving his buckwheats upon the coldest plate she could find, and putting the scant allowance of cream into her own instead of his coffee, while she kept up a grumbling accompaniment to every mouthful:

“Ma’s always hankerin’ to get her fingers into other folks’s pies, an’ f’r my part,” with an aggrieved sniff, and a vicious shove of the butter plate towards the boarder’s end of the table, “I don’t care if she gets ’em scorched this time.”

Neither did the boarder, for that matter.

CHAPTER VII

“A DANIEL COME TO JUDGMENT”

AS Tabby had intimated, there was a terrible commotion going on in the Hadlock farmhouse, or rather in its dooryard, for the real scene of the contention was there, right in the fore-front of the desolated coop, whose three ghastly occupants were laid decently side by side upon a pile of chip dirt, all their pretty feathers ruffled and ragged, and those budding topnots that had been the pride of their own and their owners' hearts, trailing helplessly in the dust.

That Dame Hedvig's cat had been suspected of the murder was due entirely to the zeal and sagacity of Jotham, who declared with much show of reason that nothing smaller than Frigga could have overcome such well-grown chicks; adding, in confirmation of his theory, that he had himself heard a suspicious noise in the henhouse towards morning, and looking from his window had seen,—indistinctly of course, in the dim, gray light,—a creature he would almost swear was Frigga, stealing away toward the shed where a bed had been made for her by Comfort. The Squire in his anger had been only too ready to accept this circumstantial evidence against the stranger, and, hasty as usual, instantly ordered Jotham to kill her without further parley.

“She had n’t even the excuse of hunger,” he declared with a wrathful glance at poor puss, who, unsuspecting of danger, had just come out lazily blinking her sleepy eyes, to see what all the uproar was about, “for she has n’t eaten so much as a wing. It was pure deviltry.” And Frigga purred complacently, and rubbed her glossy side against his trousers’ leg, all unmindful of the terrible fate hanging over her.

A kick rewarded her civilities, and Jotham made a grab at her at the same instant, but luckily missed his mark, and in another moment Comfort had her in her arms, and with her apron wrapped protectingly about her, faced them all with a resolute, set face, that Jotham at least knew meant “war to the knife.”

“You sha’ n’t touch Frigga,” she cried, as Jotham made a feint of snatching the cat from her, “Granny trusted her to me, and I won’t let anybody hurt her.”

“But father says,” began Jotham, while the Squire interrupted with a stern “Give Jotham that cat, Comfort, this minute! She’s killed three of my biggest Leg’orns, an’ I’ll make sure that she don’t kill no more of ’em. Put ’er down, I say!”

Comfort grew white to her very lips, but she held the frightened creature all the closer.

“She never touched the chickens, I know, father,” she insisted.

Then with a pleading look that few fathers would have had the heart to resist, “Don’t let him hurt her, please. Granny trusted her to me, and I promised to take good care of her. I can’t let her be killed.”

Here Mrs. Hadlock, almost as much distressed as her child, timidly interposed with an argument that she thought might possibly influence her angry spouse :

“ You don’t want to do anything that ’ll make hard feelin’s, father. You know the old woman makes a perfect pet of the cat, and she ’ll lay it up against us as long as she lives if we should kill it.”

“ It’s her witch-cat,” broke in David, who was of a superstitious turn, and had perhaps a little secret enjoyment of the bold stand that his small sister was taking against the family tyrant and bully, that Jotham had long since grown to be. “ She always holds it in her lap when she tells the fortune sticks f’r folks; an’ Bud Riley swears he’s seen ’er ridin’ on its back through the air on stormy nights.”

The Squire sniffed, and Jotham grinned derisively.

“ What balderdash !” growled the old man. Then assuming his most determined air, he said sternly, “ Now, Comfort, I mean jest what I say. You give Jotham that cat before I can count ten, or I ’ll take ’er from ye, an’ give you one o’ the worst whippin’s that you ever had in all yer life, into the bargain.”

The child looked up into his face in horrified amazement. Indifferent, unloving, he had always been. She could not remember in all her life to have received a kiss or loving word from him, but neither had he been severe or harsh in his treatment of her. She was an encumbrance, the “ one too many ” in the family circle, and as such he had ignored her as far as possible, but she could not remember that he had ever laid his hand upon her in anger. This was the

first time that he had ever threatened such an indignity, and there was more of astonishment and incredulity than fear in the look with which she regarded him.

“But I *promised*, father,” she began, —

“One — two — ”

“Oh, father, I can’t let her be killed.”

“Three — four — five — ”

“Give it here, an’ stop yer foolin’ ! ”

But Frigga was by this time fully alive to the situation, and as Jotham accompanied his words with a clutch at her undefended head she dealt him a scratch that made him spring back with an exclamation of rage and pain.

“Darn the jade! I’ll pay ye f’r this,” with a grimace at the offending animal, — “I’ll make yer hangin’ a longer job than you ’ll like.”

Comfort shuddered, and held her precious charge still closer as the terrible count went on.

“Six — seven — ”

“Look here, Squire, seems ter me yer havin’ quite a time here. What’s the rumpus, hey?”

And the Widow Scripture’s faded sunbonnet made its appearance upon the scene, — fair as the white wing of an angel of deliverance in poor Comfort’s eyes, — while its owner, with the most innocent air imaginable, contrived to place herself directly in front of the weeping child, thus partially screening her from the sight of her angry father, who, irritated as he was at the unexpected interruption, could find no excuse for not giving a civil answer to his neighbor’s question.

"That's the trouble," he said grimly, with a nod in the direction of the dead chicks. "Three of my young Leg'orns killed, and we've found out that Granny Hedvig's cat did the mischief. Comfort's set 'erself up that she sha' n't be killed, but I'll —"

"Land sakes alive!" interrupted the dame briskly, "you don't say so? That cat kill them half-grown chicks? Well, well! 'Twa' n't a weasel or a skunk now, was it?"

The bait took. "Of course 't wa' n't," and Jotham's tone was hurried and a little apprehensive. "I've looked 'em over an' there ain't a mark of a tooth on 'em."

"Not even a cat's tooth?" she asked shrewdly. Then ignoring Jotham's evident discomfiture, she went on, with a sly, reassuring "nudge" of the trembling child behind her: "Now, Squire, let's take a squint at them dead chickens. Like as not they wa' n't killed at all, — died o' the gapes, maybe; I've heard o' sech things."

And as she led the way, the squire, however loath, could do no less than follow her lead, while the procession was swelled by Mrs. Hadlock and the boys, all curious to see what this novel coroner's inquest would prove.

Very solemnly the widow inspected each fowl in order, passing it to the Squire with the significant comment:

"Not a tooth mark on this one."

And when the examination was completed she summed up the result as follows:

"Necks wrung, — cats don't wring necks; not a

sign of a bite on one of 'em, — cats leave their tooth-marks on what they kill; an' the queerest of all, every one o' them dead chickens is a rooster. Now, I don't b'lieve that a cat would 'a' been considerate enough ter pick out the roosters an' leave the pullets."

The Squire's grim features relaxed into a smile.

"I guess you've got the rights of it, neighbor, this time," he said, "f'r I must say it looks like a piece o' mischief done with hands instead of claws an' teeth. What you waitin' fer?" turning sharply upon Jotham, who, growing red and white by turns, stood the very picture of guilty embarrassment. "Go into yer breakfast right off, an' don't stand there gapin' like a stuck pig. We've fooled away a good half-hour now, an' there's all that rye ter git in before another rain comes on."

Jotham waited for no second orders, but as he passed the sobbing child, who now crouched upon the doorstone, was shedding a flood of glad yet silent tears over her rescued charge, he bent down and hissed sharply in her ear:

"I've missed it this time; but don't you forget, I'll be even with ye yet."

The child's blue eyes twinkled saucily through her tears, and the defiant smile that Jotham so hated curved for an instant her red lips as she retorted:

"Folks that dig pits for others had better look out for themselves."

Angrily the youth raised his brawny hand, but Comfort laughingly dodged the blow, and hearing his father's step close behind, he hurried into the

house, with a guilty dread at his heart lest the death of the chickens should be traced to his own door, and he felt a still bitterer hatred toward the little sister whose sharp eyes had evidently penetrated his shameful secret.

"If she dares to tell tales about me I'll make life bitter fer 'er," was the evil thought that passed through his mind as he hastily devoured the smoking griddle-cakes upon his plate, taking no note apparently of the brisk chatter of the younger boys, who, delighted with this divertisement in their quiet lives, went over again and again all the features of that extraordinary barnyard tragedy with many vague surmises as to the author of the mischief.

"Ducky Welch's been drunk ever since he got home," remarked David, leisurely sipping his over-hot coffee, "an' I should n't be a mite s'rprised if him an' that Boody feller that he's got so thick with killed the chickens jest f'r mischief."

"It's lucky for Granny Hedvig that she's out of the way jest now," interrupted Isaac, to whom the name of the drunken sailor had served as a diversion from the subject in hand.

"Why?"

Mrs. Hadlock had just come in with a fresh relay of hot cakes, and her attention had been arrested by the boy's significant words, which seemed to intimate that some mischief was contemplated against the helpless old dame, and now she stood anxiously awaiting the reply to her question.

Jotham frowned at the boy, and David gave him a sly pinch under the table; but Isaac, heartily resent-

ing the bullying that, as the youngest brother, he was forced to undergo, was only too glad to annoy them by telling the little he knew about the matter.

“Why, Ducky Welch, an’ Tim Taylor, an’ that Boody feller got her to tell their fortunes before they started on their last voyage. An’ she promised ’em awful good luck, — said they’d have fair winds, an’ a quick trip, an’ somethin’ else she promised ’em, — I don’t jest know what ’t was, — somethin’ about a pot of gold that would make ’em all rich men, I b’lieve. Anyhow, it all turned out to be a lie from beginning to end. They had one or two terrible gales, — like ter been shipwrecked half a dozen times; an’ the cap’n was a perfect old screw, kep’ ’em on wormy biscuits an’ rotten meat, an’ when they was sick an’ could n’t work docked ’em of their wages. They swore if they ever got home again they’d pay the old woman f’r cheatin’ ’em so; an’ I heard Ducky tell Jotham yesterday —”

“Come, come! It’s time we was off,” and the Squire, who had paid little or no heed to the boys’ chatter, pushed back his chair with an impatient gesture, and hurried off to the scene of the day’s toil, his boys following with more or less reluctance; only Isaac, who was a born gossip, lingered a moment to reply to a question from his mother.

“Duck ’er, most likely. That’s what Boody told Jotham he’d like to do.”

As their footsteps died away and Comfort and her mother had leisure and room to sit down to their own breakfast, Mrs. Hadlock asked anxiously:

“When are Granny and Franz coming home?”

“To-morrow or next day. Granny was to have a week’s spinning for Mis’ Cap’n Hanley, and three days for the Seabirds.”

As she spoke she stooped to smooth Frigga’s soft back, to which the grateful animal responded with a low, confidential purr that did n’t seem to interfere in the least with her enjoyment of the saucer of rich, creamy milk with which her little hostess had supplied her.

Mrs. Hadlock looked worried and doubtful.

“I wish Mis’ Scripture had n’t been in such a hurry to get back home,” she said with the natural instinct that prompts a weak, dependent nature to turn to a more resolute one in any sudden perplexity.

“What Isaac said about them wild sailors’ threats worries me. They don’t reverence either God or man, and they’d think ’t was a good joke to scare an’ like as not half-drown that poor old body, just for a mad frolic. An’ she ain’t got no men folks round the house to defend her if worse comes to worst.”

Comfort’s childish cheek grew pale, but she tried to reassure herself as well as her mother with the reminder:

“Why, there’s Franz. He’d die before he’d let anybody hurt Granny.”

“But he’s only a boy,” and Mrs. Hadlock sighed. “An’ those drunken rascals might kill them both if their blood was up, without really meanin’ it, either. If she only would stay away until after their ship sails, I should be so thankful.”

Comfort said nothing, but she privately determined to put Franz upon his guard as soon as he should reach home, and meanwhile she must keep her own eyes and ears open for any chance hint that the boys, whom she strongly suspected of complicity in the plot, might let fall.

CHAPTER VIII

“LOTS WHICH I, A BOY, CAST IN THE HELM OF
FATE”

THE artist's visit to Granny's cottage was the first of many, and before the season was over the two—the quaint, dreamy old dame, wise in Nature's hidden secrets, yet simple as a child in the ways of the great world, and the thoughtful, beauty-loving man whose life mission was to interpret to duller lives and hearts the grand and beautiful mysteries of mountain, lake, and sea—had become, in the best sense of the word, friends. That special gift which Nature bestows with such motherly impartiality upon the poor and humble quite as often as upon the fortunate, favored ones of earth, of a quick and subtle apprehension of what others strive to express by pencil and song, was wonderfully developed in the solitary old woman, who, without a knowledge of the simplest rules of art was yet so quick to feel the beauty that her own hand had not the skill to portray, that there was inspiration even in the smile that lighted up her intelligent face when some familiar spot that she had long known and loved glowed in living beauty upon the painter's canvas.

To the artist it was an actual disappointment that Franz could not share his grandmother's enthusiasm

for landscape painting. They were “pretty,” the boy acknowledged, and he “liked to see them,” but that was all; nothing of the artistic, of the soul-sight with which Granny was endowed, and at first the artist set him down as a well-meaning, but uninteresting clown. For the old dame’s sake he had often employed him as a guide on his sketching excursions, and it was due to this close companionship that he gradually came to modify his first harsh judgment, and to respect the sterling good sense and manly self-respect that seemed to know as by intuition not only what was due to others, but to himself as well.

With the sturdy virtues of his race, Franz had been of course more or less influenced in his ideas of life and its uses by the atmosphere about him, — the practical, unimaginative atmosphere of early New England life. Moreover, from his childhood the boy had felt the pinch of poverty, and had looked forward with eager longing for the day when he should be old and strong enough to take upon his own young shoulders the burden that his grandmother had hitherto borne so cheerfully and willingly for both. Thus the thought that, with the generous recompense made him for his services as guide, he could add many a needed comfort to the poor little home before the cold winter should be upon them, made his long tramps by forest and shore doubly delightful, for, absorbed in his work, the artist little dreamed of the pleasure that the shy, silent boy found in listening for the first time to the correct speech and intelligent conversation of a really re-

fined, educated gentleman. In his own mind he wondered sometimes that this man, who seemed to his simple comprehension to know everything, should be content to spend his life in painting pictures when he might be out in the world, doing some great work for it and himself. But he wisely kept his thoughts to himself, and the artist dreamed as little of his admiration as of his dispraise.

It was the week following the episode related in our last chapter that the artist, with Franz for a guide and companion, had betaken himself to a retired nook near the shore and under the lee of a huge granite boulder, where the autumn sunshine lay warm and bright, and the ferns and trailing partridge vines were as fresh and untouched by the frost as in midsummer. There was no brook here for Franz to fish for trout in, and the artist as he arranged his traps wondered casually what the lad would find to occupy himself with. He noticed that, for the first time, he had sticking from the pocket of his rough pea-jacket an old and well-thumbed book, — "One of the old dame's 'sagas', most likely," he thought carelessly, and then dismissing both boy and book from his mind, he was soon absorbed in his own fascinating toil.

Higher and higher crept the sun, and industriously the artist's hand sketched line by line the sharp, uncertain outlines of the peaks towering in the dim distance, sharp and splintered from some long ago wrestle with the terrible force chained down in the hot heart of the earth to-day, adding a touch here and deepening a shadow there, while with

equal industry and preoccupation the sunburned lad, stretched at full length upon the sand with his open book beside him, and a little heap of sand and pebbles that he had built up for his experiments, arranged, rearranged, and made a series of liliputian tunnels in every direction with careful, steady hand, heedless that the first wave higher than its fellows would be sure to wash it all away.

“There, by George! I’ve got it.”

The artist looked up in surprise and laughed at the boy’s flushed, excited face.

“What is it?” he asked curiously, rising from his seat to look at the boy’s work. “What in the world have you been trying to study out, here?”

“How to make a road through a mountain to save going over it.”

And Franz rubbed his damp forehead until his sandy foretop bristled like the aureole about the heads of some of those ugly old saints that one is expected to go into raptures over in foreign cathedrals. Rather surprised and a good deal interested, the good-natured artist examined the ingenious model and listened with intelligent comprehension to the crude theory that in his boyish enthusiasm Franz felt sure that he had demonstrated the feasibility of.

“You see they might make holes —”

“Shafts.”

“Yes, that’s what this calls ’em;” and he consulted with an air of implicit confidence the columns of a tattered newspaper that he had taken from his pocket, and carefully unfolded with tender care for its dilapidated condition. “Yes, they might make

shafts here and there all the way acrost the top of the mountain to let the air in, (you see I've made mine in this sand-heap just so far apart) and they could let the light in, too, in the same way. I should think," with boyish complacency, "that a road like that would pay for itself in a little while."

"That would depend upon situation and the cost of construction, with many other things that a practical engineer would have to take into consideration. But how came you to think about it, anyway?"

The boy colored bashfully. It was evident that he had hitherto kept this dream of his life a secret.

"Well, I always liked to study into these things, and this book that used to be my father's," touching reverently with one bare toe the old volume lying on the sand, "gives a good many ideas about roads and bridges, and things of that sort. Then a year or so ago one o' them sports that come here fishin' f'r a spell every spring left this paper layin' round, and I found it and read in it somethin' about a tunnel that they're talkin' about through the Alps, (the same mountain, you know, that Bonnypart had sech a time crossin'), and I've been chewin' on it ever since, and tryin' to figger out how they'll fetch it."

Only a simple, rustic country lad, but evidently one of ideas,—crude and unformed of course, but with the possibilities that brains always insure their possessors whether circumstances allow of their development or not. The kindly artist had not the heart to throw cold water upon the boy's innocent enthusiasm, and yet how, with his poverty and ignorance of men and the world generally, could he

obtain the necessary instruction to make his natural gifts profitable? Still there was no disputing the fact that even this imperfect and rude plan showed a remarkable aptitude, a real genius for engineering that might, if properly trained, make Dame Hedvig's grandson one of the foremost engineers of his day.

Mr. Humbre said little at the time, but he took occasion on his next visit at the cottage to speak of the matter and urge upon the old dame the desirableness of the boy being allowed to follow his natural bent by accepting a place as apprentice in a large iron foundry, with the proprietor of which he himself had a personal acquaintance that would probably insure any protégé of his a situation.

“It would be a good school for him,” he urged, “and after the first two years he could be earning enough so that he could save up something to help him complete his engineering studies. It is no kindness to a youth to make his preparation for his life-work too easy for him. We all prize most that which we work the hardest for.”

But the old woman listened with a dissatisfied, not to say disgusted face. In her utter ignorance of the rapid strides that mechanical science was making in the world outside, the idea of her freedom-loving boy being tied down to the drudgery of the forge and workshop was peculiarly distasteful. If, like his bold viking ancestors, he had longed to follow the sea, and win fame and fortune upon its fraternal bosom, she would have bid him godspeed and have cheerfully borne the loneliness of her solitary life without a word of complaint. But to devote himself in all

the energy and strength of his young manhood to anything so prosaic, so different from anything that she had planned for him, was too disappointing to be contemplated for a moment, and with a querulousness in sharp contrast with her usual sunny good nature she blamed their new friend for encouraging such absurd fancies in the lad.

“He shall be no smith, no worker in grimy iron, my brave boy. It is fit work only for the dwarfs and mountain elves, this stealing of the iron from the dark bosom of the earth and hammering at it day after day, hidden from the sunshine, over some choking forge fire. My Franz has lived all his life in the free air and the sunshine, and, please the good God, he shall live there till he die.”

“But,” urged her friend, with an adroit turning of the tables that made her smile in spite of herself, “when you despise the smith’s calling you forget that one of the greatest of the Norse gods, the mighty Thor, was skilled in the use of the hammer. Don’t let your prejudices stand in the way of the boy’s real good. To be sure, he will have to begin at the bottom of the ladder and work his way up through a good deal of grime, and smut, and hard labor. But if he has the brains and the will, — as I believe he has, — to use the practical knowledge that he will get in his years of apprenticeship, he may make a good place for himself in the world. In these days, when railroads are being stretched over the country in every direction, a man of ability in that line has the chance to make himself rich, and famous in his specialty. The world,” he added, with a sigh,

“is far better pleased to honor the man who adds to its comforts and conveniences, than he who spends a lifetime trying to elevate and ennoble it.”

To Franz, the prospect of a chance to devote himself to the work that had so strange a fascination for him made him almost beside himself for joy, and for the first time in his life he listened with impatience to his grandmother's pleadings, vexed and mortified to find the calling that seemed to him the grandest and most alluring in the world treated as something beneath even a poor boy like himself.

“You don't know, Granny,” he persisted, in reply to her advocacy of a seafaring life, “what the life of a common sailor now-a-days is. Them fierce, free old sea-kings that you know about, sailed where they pleased, and did as they was a mind to after they got there. But that time has gone by, and sailors now get kicks an' cuffs, and like as not are half starved on mouldy bread and poor meat, with just pay enough to keep soul and body together. If that's what you call a 'free life on the broad, blue sea,' I must say I'd ruther steer clear of it.”

The dame caught her breath with something like a sob, and slowly twisted the linen thread between her deft fingers with an absent, preoccupied air. It was evident that the boy was a boy no longer. That one bright, bewildering glance into a possible future had brought to sudden maturity a host of manly plans and purposes that the careless, undirected life of the little woodland home would no longer satisfy. The young bird had found that there was a great world outside its own nest, and an instinct that would not

be repressed prompted it to try its wings for a higher and wider flight.

Poor granny! She had not looked for this so soon, and the tender, brooding love in her woman's breast fluttered painfully in an unavailing protest against that which reason told her was inevitable and might be — she would try very hard to think so — the very best thing for her nursling, after all. And so the old story of woman's love and sacrifice:

“to nurse, to rear,
To love and then to lose,”

was lived over again in the humble cottage, and the boy, who for sixteen years had been the light and joy of that lonely woman's life went out, — with as brave a heart, as true a purpose, and as high a hope, to battle with and overcome the forces that poverty and inexperience must meet in a selfish, indifferent world, as any mail-clad knight of old who sought to win name and fortune with the warlike sword, rather than the peaceful hammer.

“It shall be all for you, granny dear,” were his parting words. “We'll have a beautiful home one of these days, all our own too, where your tired fingers shall never have to spin any more, and where we'll be together always.”

“Yes, always.”

And far beyond her tear-blinded vision the lonely old woman saw that dream fulfilled, and that beautiful home where toil and care are not, and partings shall be no more, the thrice blessed rest of God's own house.

CHAPTER IX

“ALACK, I HAVE NO EYES”

THE lingering autumn crept slowly into winter and the little hamlet settled down contentedly to the quiet and isolation that was the inevitable lot of the Island folk at that inclement season. Every bit of news, no matter how unimportant, was hailed with eagerness as a ripple upon the dead sea of existence at that time, and this was perhaps the reason why the mad pranks of the sailor lads, who still hung about, waiting for the opening of the spring to ship for another cruise, were regarded with more leniency than usual, — more, in fact, than they deserved.

It is rather amusing to hear of midnight raids upon our neighbor's hen roosts so long as our own remain untouched, and if the old finger-post was torn down and buried in some secret place under the snow it was no great matter after all. Everybody in those parts knew the way to Somesville without its aid, and if by any chance a stranger should wander that way, why, any boy in the town could direct him. To be sure, the sedate farm and fisher folk listened with decorous displeasure to the stories rife in the neighborhood of the midnight orgies down to McNeal's disreputable shanty; and many a timid housewife, whose goodman was away at sea, was careful for the first time in her life to see that her doors and windows

were securely fastened at night; while bolder souls, like the Widow Scripture, took care to have it understood that a gun loaded with buckshot was in readiness for any untimely invader of their premises. One thing, strangely enough, the good people seemed to have overlooked, or to have counted as of small consequence, and that was the ill effect of such dissolute companionship upon their own boys. Even Squire Hadlock would listen with ill-concealed amusement to jests and stories, repeated at second hand by the boys, that were coarse and irreverent, not to say profane; while in reply to his wife's timid reminders of the evils that might come from such companionship he only replied with his usual scornful self-confidence that :

“ The boys are no molly coddles, to be tied to their mother's apron string all their lives. Let them mix with all kinds of folks, — 't will toughen their morals, just as all kinds of weather has toughened their bodies.”

Poor Mrs. Hadlock, what could she do? She had a mother's tender solicitude for her rude, often unfeeling boys, and many a night she lay awake into the “ wee sma' hours,” listening for Jotham's stealthy footfall upon the stairs, or Isaac's silly laugh and chatter that told only too plainly how his evening had been spent, and where. For Comfort, too, the winter brought new anxieties and cares, and even her mother little dreamed how heavy was the weight resting upon the child's uncomplaining shoulders, or what sad forebodings mingled continually with all her thoughts, sleeping or waking.

Before Franz and his artist friend left the Island, the lad had sought out his playmate, — his “little Comfort,” as in the innocence of his boyish heart he secretly styled her, and solemnly intrusted his grandmother to her care.

“I’ve fixed the house all up,” he said, manfully putting the best foot first, “and the lean-to is full of good, seasoned wood, all ready to burn. And she’s got plenty of potatoes, and fish, and rye meal (you know she won’t eat wheat flour,) and honey, and —”

“Mother says I may carry her a quart of milk every day,” interrupted Comfort, cheerily.

“Did she? That’s real good in her, — just like *you*, Comfort. But what I was going to say was, you think a good deal of Granny, don’t you?”

“I guess I do,” and the childish face glowed warmly. “I think more of her than I do of anybody else in the world except mother and — you.”

“I thought so,” returned the lad honestly, “and that’s why I took it upon me to ask you to look out for ’er a little through the winter. She can’t get out much after the snow comes, an’ I’m afraid she’ll get lonesome an’ down-hearted if you don’t see to ’er pretty often. So I’m going to leave ’er in your care.”

The child’s eyes sparkled with proud delight at the honor thus unexpectedly thrust upon her.

“I’ll take just as good care of her as you could do your own self,” she said gravely.

No noisy outburst of zeal, no eager assertion of her affection for her friends, but there was something

in the steadfast honesty of those clear, innocent eyes, a wordless promise, that went far to set the lad's anxious heart at rest, without further words. To be sure she was only a child, young and inexperienced, and yet Franz never for a moment doubted her ability or faithfulness. She was not like other girls of her age, well meaning but careless and changeable. Where others forgot, she remembered, and where they neglected, she never failed to keep her word. And knowing these things, the boy placed the most implicit confidence in her promise to care for Granny.

Mrs. Hadlock's permission for Comfort to make a daily visit to the cottage was easily obtained, and through storm and shine, through untrodden as well as beaten paths, the little maid with her pail of new milk, never failed each morning to make her appearance at Granny's door, not seldom with permission to spend the day if the dame seemed less cheerful and brisk than usual.

At first the absence of her grandson seemed to make little change in the always cheerful, blithe old woman. To be sure, her letters from him were few and far between, for postage was high in those days, and the Island mails infrequent. But she knew that he was pleased with his work, and that, thanks to Mr. Humbre's kind oversight, he had procured lodgings with a good woman who was willing to board him for the chores that he could find time to do after his working hours.

"So you see," he wrote, in speaking of this arrangement, "that I can save the allowance made me for

board to send to you, and in a couple of years perhaps I shall earn enough to bring you here, and we will have a little home to ourselves once more.”

Comfort must read this precious epistle aloud again and again, until the paper was so worn that it would scarcely hold together, and both dame and child knew every word of it by heart, and had wondered, and speculated, and tried to read between the lines after a fashion that would have astonished the boyish writer not a little could he have overheard them. But as the cold increased and the wintry days grew shorter Comfort’s watchful eye detected a change in her old friend. There were more often traces of tears upon the wrinkled cheeks, while the heavy, lack lustre eyes told their own sad story of sleepless nights and weary, lagging days. Her strength, too, began to fail, and for hours at a time she would sit, listlessly crouching in a corner of the wide stone fireplace, sometimes crooning to herself snatches from some old Norse ballad, or with a far away look in her tired eyes, studying the blazing embers, unheedful of all that the child could do to rouse her from her abstraction.

In vain Mrs. Hadlock, who was a frequent visitor at the cottage, urged the need of medical advice. Granny was obstinate. No, she had been her own doctor all of these years, and she would have no other now. So Comfort, under her direction, steeped wonderful mixtures of healing roots and herbs, that the old woman dutifully partook of, but in an indifferent, half-hearted fashion that showed how little faith she really had in their efficacy. Sickness in a

country neighborhood is a wonderful humanizer, and many a good housewife who had looked askance at the queer old Swedish woman, who told fortunes with a lot of little sticks, and insisted upon wearing a handkerchief over her head even to meeting, now hastened to proffer her services in nursing, and providing for her invalid appetite. But to their surprise and chagrin Granny courteously declined all their services, and only Comfort and her mother were allowed to minister to her in her growing feebleness. To them alone she spoke of the hopes that buoyed her up, in anticipation of the rest and peace that awaited her on the other side.

"No tears there," she read from her little Swedish Bible, following the dim text with one trembling finger; "no sorrow, no parting. Ah, but the good God has us in His keeping there as here."

As her hold upon earth grew weaker it was wonderful to see how the natural restlessness of her character seemed hushed into a calm peacefulness that was as far removed from apathy as from fear. She never complained now of loneliness, but her friends never left her long alone, and soon it came to be an understood thing, that Comfort should spend all her nights at the cottage. Not that any immediate change was apprehended, for Granny was not even confined to her bed, but in her feeble state a thousand little services were needed that the child could easily render, and, as Mrs. Hadlock said, it "would be heathenish to leave her all alone, with not a soul to speak to if she should want anything." Franz's old bunk in the kitchen recess had been prepared

for her, and the scent of the sweet, springy pine tips lent to her dreams a summer sweetness that they never would have known with one of her mother's fluffy feather beds beneath her.

“I dreamed of the green woods and wild roses, and thought I was wading in Duck Brook all night long,” she declared laughingly, as Granny, with some anxiety, inquired on the first morning after trial of the rustic couch if she had slept well. “With my eyes shut I smell the pine boughs and think it's summer.”

The cold, gray light of a December morning was just creeping in at the white-curtained window when Comfort awoke from one of these pleasant dreams to a realization that winter was not gone yet, let dreams say what they would, and softly creeping out of bed, with bare feet and hands tingling with cold, proceeded to rake open the embers that she had so carefully covered the night before, and with the skill of an experienced fire builder, to place forestick and kindlings in their proper order, filling in with plenty of dry pine chips that caught eagerly as they came in contact with the glowing coals, until the whole blazing mass rushed roaring and snapping up the wide chimney throat, filling the rude little room with an incense as sweet and pure as any that ever smoked upon Eastern altars.

Hurrying on her clothes, the little housekeeper bestirred herself to fill the iron teakettle, and hang it over the fire before raking open a corner among the hot embers in which to roast the potatoes that were to serve for her own breakfast, while Granny's bit of toast and cup of tea were delayed until the sun had

crept over the eastern hills and lay, a pale but cheery glint, upon the bare floor of the kitchen, then very softly she opened the door of the inner room, and as softly entered. Everything was as she had left it the night before, the blue and white coverlet was as smooth, the night draught in just the same spot on the little stand where she had placed it, and from her position it was evident that the old woman had scarcely stirred the whole night long.

“Are you awake, Granny?”

The sleeper started at the sound of her voice, and turning her face toward her regarded her, as it seemed, with a bewildered stare.

“Do you want your tea now, before you get up?” and she smoothed tenderly the white locks beneath the scarce whiter cap border.

“Tea?” The old woman passed her hand uncertainly over her forehead. “Why, no, not so early as this. I never eat my breakfast before it’s light, you know.”

Comfort’s face grew pale with a strange, undefined terror.

“But it is n’t dark, Granny, — it’s broad daylight. Don’t you see the sunshine on your bed, — there, close to your hand?”

Silently the tremulous old hand was outstretched, moving slowly over the spread until beneath the patch of sunlight it rested for an instant, then, joined by its fellow, was uplifted as in supplication.

“No,” quavered the low voice pitifully, “I can feel the sunshine, but I can see none of it. God’s pity!” and great tears rolled from beneath the

now closed eyelids, “It has come at last, and I am *blind.*”

“Blind! Oh no, not BLIND!”

And the child threw herself upon her knees beside the bed, and sobbed frantically; for once, she had no word of comfort or hope to bestow.

CHAPTER X

“THOUGH BLIND, MY HEART CAN SEE”

FOR the first time, Granny that day refused to leave her bed, or taste the nourishment that her little friend with loving care had provided for her. Her sudden blindness seemed but a part of the strange change that had all at once passed over her. Indeed, after the first she made no reference to it, but babbled continually of the scenes and friends dear to her girlhood, paying little or no heed to Comfort's efforts to arouse her to a comprehension of present needs and interests. The little parish church in her own beloved Norland village, decorated with green boughs and flowers for her bridal, the music of the maidenly choir, the grave, sweet voice of the old parish priest, as he read the quaint marriage service, —and Granny's weak tones grew stronger as she repeated with a slow, uncertain utterance, as of an unaccustomed reader, picking out word by word with laborious care, the printed page:

“I give thee in marriage this damsel, to be thy wedded wife, in all honor, and to share thy lock and key, and every third penny which you two may possess, or may inherit, and all the rights which Upland laws provide, and the holy King Erik gave.”

Wonderingly the child listened, while, regardless of her timid questionings, the old woman babbled

on, — of the gay bridal dress, with scarlet bodice, and sleeves of snowy linen of her own spinning, the crown of sweet wild roses and cypress, and the cherished silver ornaments that her great-great-grandmother wore before her, dwelling with innocent vanity upon their beauty and value, even as the girl herself might have done on that happy, love-blessed day, to which, pausing for a moment upon the threshold of eternity, the woman of seventy winters looked back as to the brightest, sweetest spot in all her toilsome, care-full life. The sad things, the bereavements and disappointments seemed to have passed entirely from her mind, leaving only memories of the brightness and love that had blessed her youth, and yet to her bewildered half-frightened listener those softly murmured words of tender endearment for one who for half a century had been but dust and ashes were more sad to listen to than any conscious outburst of grief could have been.

Anxiously as the hours crept by the child listened for her mother's footsteps at the door, but she listened and watched in vain. She could not know that a nervous headache was holding her an unwilling prisoner in her own room, and that Isaac, who had been despatched to the cottage soon after breakfast to see that all was well, had chosen to turn his steps in an exactly opposite direction, leaving the errand undone and in all probability forgotten.

Now and then Granny would arouse herself as if from a dream, and recognizing the voice of the weary watcher by her bed would grope for and stroke tenderly the trembling little hand, with a few feeble

words of grateful acknowledgment and affection. It was in one of these lucid intervals that Comfort, by much coaxing, induced her to drink the tea that she had kept hot for her and which seemed for the time to revive and refresh her, so that as the child took away the cup she said in a perfectly natural tone:

“Look in the till of the big chest, my child, thou wilt find the key under my pillow, and bring to me the box with the silver clasps.”

Comfort obeyed, and taking the oaken casket in her tremulous hand the old woman pressed a spring, thus making the lid fly back and disclosing a set of quaintly wrought silver ornaments, which she drew forth one by one, passing them tenderly between her shrivelled fingers, while a smile of satisfaction lighted up her wan face as she said softly:

“They are thine, my little Comfort, — thine only, when I am gone.”

The child's honest face flushed deeply with embarrassment.

“Oh no, Granny, not mine, — you forget Franz.”

But the old woman shook her head decidedly.

“Nay, but they are thine, not his. The runes gave to him gold and lands, but it was through thy hand they came. Thy hand,” she repeated with solemn emphasis, “holds alone the good fortune for my boy, and to thee only may be given these, that the brides of our house have worn for so many generations.”

She held out to her as she spoke a small silver cross, and with as much awe as curiosity Comfort

took the precious relic in her hand and with a kind of shy pleasure, as of one half doubtful of her right to do so, turned the beautiful bauble over and over with ever-increasing delight in its wonderful delicacy and grace. Even to her unaccustomed eyes it bore evidences of great antiquity and value. It was of solid silver, daintily wrought with intertwined thorns and palm leaves, typical of the agony and the triumph of Him who suffered thereon, while at the base, an emblem of that lingering heathenism that the Christianized Northman was so loath to quit his hold of, was a tiny hammer, with the familiar war cry of the ancient vikings, in old Norse characters:

“Thor aide!”

A slender, delicate chain of tiny silver links was attached to this heirloom, and before the child was aware of her intention, the old woman had clasped this about her neck, and unheeding her remonstrances, had hidden it beneath the waist folds of her homespun gown. Then evidently exhausted, she seemed to sleep, and gathering up the heavy silver ear-rings and bracelets that still lay scattered upon the bed, Comfort replaced them in their casket, trying at the same time to unclasp the chain about her own neck, that she might add the cross to the other relics, and lock them up safely until Granny should have some more rational ideas in regard to the disposal of them. But there was some trick in the clasp, and try as she would she could not loosen it, so with a half-guilty feeling as if she had in some way taken advantage of her friend's mental weakness, she crept into the kitchen, and replacing the casket in

the chest, which, in her hurry she forgot to lock, she seated herself by the window overlooking the path, where, with ever-increasing anxiety she strained her eyes to catch a glimpse of some passing neighbor to whom she might appeal for aid in her lonely vigil. But the hours crept slowly by and not a soul came near the solitary cottage, while in the deathlike stillness the child trembled and started nervously at the snapping of a spark, or even the gentle purring of Frigga who lay curled up upon the hearth-rug, only raising her head now and then to glance at the drooping form by the window, with a look of almost human intelligence in her great green eyes.

The early winter night was closing in, making the dim forest vistas so dark that, strain her eyes as she might, Comfort could not even distinguish the outlines of the white birches that straggled along on either side of the way like a procession of ragged penitents doing penance in the conventional white sheet. The wind had risen and whirled and twisted the tops of the shivering trees, making a weird moaning through their naked branches, and tearing from one just outside the window its latest relic of summer joys in the shape of a tiny bird's nest, which it flung all battered and forlorn against the pane to which our anxious little watcher's face was pressed. The child shivered, and instinctively stretched out a pitying hand toward the poor, wind-tossed waif.

"Poor birdies! they won't find you here when they come home in the spring," she whispered softly, half-frightened at the sound of her own voice in the stillness and the gloom. Then with a vague intuition of

the near approach of that mysterious messenger, whose dark wings seemed even now to be hovering unseen over the humble threshold, she broke into a passionate flood of weeping. “And I’m afraid you won’t find Granny here either, to scatter crumbs, and bits of flax for your nest.”

Again and again she crept on tiptoe into the old woman’s room, but only to find her still wrapped in that quiet undisturbed sleep. Her face was placid and calm, so that it was evident that she was not suffering, although her breathing was so faint that only by putting her ear close to the pallid lips could Comfort be sure that she really breathed at all.

Nine, ten, eleven, — and the childish watcher, unused to such a long vigil, had fallen asleep with her head upon the folded arms that rested in their turn upon the little cherry-wood stand in the shadowy, fire-lighted kitchen. All at once as by a touch she started up wide awake and listened breathless with terror. What could it be? She clutched the stand with both trembling hands and hushed her breathing to catch the sound of — what?

The wind was blowing fiercely, but it was not the wind that made that stealthy, crunching noise in the snow, as of heavy footfalls, or the familiar groaning and creaking of the tempest-tossed trees, that subdued murmur of human voices. In an instant it all came back to her; the half-forgotten threats of those rude sailors that, in the excitement of Franz’s departure and her anxiety over Granny’s increasing feebleness had slipped her mind altogether. In a drunken frolic they had come to carry out their

threat of vengeance upon the unprotected old woman, and Comfort had just time to spring to the door and slip the bolt into its socket before a heavy blow from the outside made it tremble, while a rude voice shouted through the midnight stillness :

“Avast there, ye ould witch! Open the door, or, be jabbers, I’ll brain ye wid yer own broomstick.”

Ducky Welch’s voice had betrayed him, thus making Comfort’s fears certainties, and in her desperation a courage before undreamed of came to her aid, and putting her lips close to the door she called out with a calmness that surprised herself :

“Go away, please. For Granny is very sick, and must n’t be disturbed.”

A shout of derisive laughter replied, and some heavy object was thrown against the door, making it shake fearfully, while the shower of kicks and blows rained upon it made it evident that the ruffianly assailants were determined to force an entrance, and that the frail barrier could not long withstand their united efforts unless strengthened in some way from within.

Despairingly the child glanced about the bare, defenceless little room when suddenly her eye fell upon the great oaken chest, and with a strength born of desperation, she managed to drag it from its place and use it as a prop for the yielding door, while half frantic at her own helplessness she climbed upon its lid and bracing her feet, tried with all her childish strength to uphold the trembling structure against which the mad rioters without were beating and

crowding, with fiendish oaths and cries of rage at this unexpected resistance.

They had come out primed for a frolic, and maddened by drink and a spirit of wanton mischief had thought it a good joke to frighten the “old witch” into giving them a drink of her famous mead, with threats of a “ducking” in some convenient snow-drift as a reward for telling their fortunes falsely.

Too tipsy to recognize Comfort’s voice, they had jumped at once to the conclusion that the speaker was no other than the old dame herself, and that her plea of sickness was only a ruse to get rid of them. And now to be baffled by a weak old woman, who not only refused them entrance into her cottage but actually had the boldness to barricade her door against them, was not for a moment to be endured, and with mingled oaths and yells of savage rage they kicked and beat against the door, shouting with drunken triumph as one of the panels fell inward with a crash and the living prop against it gave a wild shriek of pain and terror. Then through all, above all, the frantic child heard the shrill cry:

“Help! Help, my Comfort!”

And careless of everything but the safety of her old friend, the girl ran instantly at the piteous call, scarcely conscious of the falling timbers that came so near as to actually graze her shoulder as she leaped from the chest.

CHAPTER XI

“DEAD? WHO IS DEAD?”

EARLY in the evening Comfort had placed a lamp in the room of the sick woman with a vague, undefined instinct that, although useless to her darkened vision, there was something of companionship in the cheery little flame by whose light she now saw the deathly face and staring, sightless eyes of Granny, who, evidently aroused by the clamor of the marauders, sat bolt upright in bed, her snowy hair, escaped from the cap, streaming wildly over her shoulders, while in a voice weak and tremulous but shrill with terror, she called again and again:

“Help! Help! In the good God’s name, help!”

With an unreasoning impulse to protect her helpless charge at any risk to herself, the child flung herself upon the bed and clasped her arms closely about the trembling form.

“Don’t be scared, Granny,” she whispered reassuringly, although her tongue seemed suddenly stiffened with terror; “I won’t let them hurt you.”

Just then, with a howl of mingled rage and triumph, the whole riotous crew burst through the shattered door, and in an instant the outer room seemed full of shouting, struggling men, — men whose forms by the fading light of the dim kitchen fire appeared like some grotesque monsters, disguised as they were by

handkerchiefs tied over the lower part of their faces, and caps drawn low over their brows so that only their eyes, shining with fierce glee, were visible.

“Where’s the witch?” shouted half a score of voices, and then, coupled with a savage oath the demand: “Give us a glim!”

The cherished little stand, kicked into a wreck, was tossed upon the fire, and blazing up in a moment revealed to the child’s horrified eyes a scene of the wildest confusion. The broken door fallen inward had crushed the lid of the chest, so that the poor old dame’s hoarded store of linen was strewn from end to end of the kitchen, trampled upon and kicked into heaps by the rude feet, while chairs and settle alike shared in the wanton destruction.

With a faint moan Granny fell back upon her pillow, and frantic at sight of the general devastation, Comfort sprang from the bed and standing boldly in the doorway sobbed piteously:

“Don’t spoil Granny’s things! They’re all she’s got.”

Framed in the doorway she stood, a slight girlish form, the red gold of her hair shading a face so pure and innocent, so brave, too, in spite of the tearful eyes and quivering lips, that it seemed as if some pitying angel had interposed to save the helpless old dame from further insult and injury. At sight of her the intruders paused for a moment in evident confusion and surprise.

“Sure, an’ it’s one o’ her own spirits that she’s called oop!” muttered the burly ringleader, with a momentary superstitious terror that made him slink

back into the shadow; "we'd best be oot o' this, me lads, or we'll be afther findin' oorselves bewitched intirely."

Suiting the action to the word, he was making good his retreat, when a whispered word from one of his comrades checked him, and the next moment he had resumed all his ruffianly hardihood, and, unheeding the child's entreaties and cries, he lifted her in his strong arms as if she had been a feather, and tossing her into Granny's armchair, which, strangely enough, had survived the general wreck, he shouted gleefully:

"Coom on, me brave byes! We'll make the ould witch pay f'r this night's jinerin', or by the saints above us we'll pull the ould shanty doun over her hid."

As with mad laughter and threats the maudlin crowd rushed after him into Granny's room, Comfort, though half blinded by her tears, saw, as the fragments of the table flamed up brightly for an instant, one of the ruffians who had loitered behind his fellows, snatch something from the wreck of the chest, and hide it in his bosom. It was the work of an instant, but the gleam of metal as it caught the firelight betrayed the fact that it was no other than the little silver-bound casket containing Granny's precious heirlooms that was being thus stealthily confiscated, and with the frantic energy of despair, she grasped his arm as he rushed past her.

"They're Granny's, and if you steal them, I'll —"

A stinging blow across her cheek made her recoil with a cry of pain, and the next instant a sudden

hush replaced the rude clamor, and in a confused but strangely silent mass the mob crowded past her, making for the door in such frantic haste that she barely escaped being trodden under foot in their wild exit. What could it mean? She glanced into the old woman's room and saw that nothing had been disturbed and that the inmate was apparently calm and quiet. Without, she could hear their footsteps fast dying away in the distance, while not a single voice was lifted either in triumph or defiance. What power could thus suddenly have sobered and silenced that drunken rout?

Roused from her terrified bewilderment by the piercing cold, against which the shattered door could no longer serve as a protection, Comfort bestirred herself to prop up the wreck as well as possible, and by hanging before it the soiled and scattered blankets rifled from poor Granny's stores managed to make the room habitable for the night, then piling the great fireplace high with birchen logs, she hastened to the old woman's bedside with words of encouragement and cheer. She had expected to find her nervously excited, but to her surprise she seemed resting peacefully upon her pillow, her wan hands clasped as if in prayer, and a smile of perfect restfulness upon the pale face, — such a smile as in all these toilsome years the child had never seen there before. The little maid drew a long breath of relief, — she might not be so much the worse for the terrible experience, after all, and laying her cheek, still smarting from that cowardly blow, upon the pillow where her old friend's head was resting so peace-

fully, she whispered with a nervous sob that she could not control:

“They’re gone, Granny. And I’ve fixed up the door, and built a good, nice fire, so we sha’ n’t freeze before morning. Then I’ll run over home and get father or one of the boys to make the door all right again.”

But the old woman neither spoke nor moved.

“Didn’t you hear me?” she asked in a louder tone. “Oh, dear, they frightened you so! But I’ll get you something hot to drink, and that will make you feel ever so much better.”

And as she spoke she patted tenderly the clasped hands that rested without stir or motion upon the coverlet. What was there in that touch that sent a chill as of death to the child’s heart, and made her grasp the bed head for a moment to support herself? Dear old Granny! for her there could be no more of fear or sorrow. The pulseless hands were like ice, frozen into that eternal rest that, in His own good time, our Father will surely give to His beloved.

Comfort had never in all her life before stood in the presence of Death, and awestruck and grieved as she was, the idea of anything terrifying in that peaceful, pulseless clay never once occurred to her. Her fear of the living, of brutal, godless humanity had, in the space of one short hour transformed the dependent, timid child into the brave, resourceful woman, developing in her qualities that in the ordinary routine of daily life might have laid dormant for years. She had been forced to stand alone through an experience that might well have daunted one far older and bolder

than our simple, unworldly little maiden, and with a calmness that surprised herself, she kissed tearfully the cold, calm brow, and with a touch reverent as tender, smoothed decently the covering over the silent form and left it alone in the quiet, shadowed room, while she returned to the now comfortable kitchen, and drawing Granny's chair to the fireside, sat quietly down to wait the approach of the lagging dawn.

As she glanced sadly about the disordered room, her eye fell upon an object half hidden beneath the pile of tumbled linen, and picking it up she found as she had thought, that it was a mitten lost by one of the unbidden visitors in their raid upon the cottage. An eager flush rose to her pale cheek as taking the relic to the firelight she examined it with something more than childish curiosity. The raiders had been so disguised that, in the gloom and confusion she could only identify the ringleader, whose Irish tongue had betrayed him. But here was a proof of the identity of one at least, if the ownership could only be proved, and with a new, stern impulse firing her childish breast to bring to justice the villains who had without doubt been the immediate cause of her old friend's death, she examined it with eyes rendered sharp by that restless longing to discover some trace by which one of the culprits at least might receive the punishment that he so richly deserved. It was only a common double mitten of blue and white yarn, knitted in what the Island housewives called a “fox and geese” pattern, the same pattern that two-thirds of the men and

boys in the neighborhood had their mittens knit by. There was nothing peculiar about it, unless — she turned back the long, seamed wrist, and held it to the firelight to make sure of any private mark that might be there. Yes, there it was, carefully marked in cross-stitch with scarlet thread, the single letter "H."

She knew it in a moment as the work of her own fingers, and remembered that each one of her brothers had his mittens thus elaborated. With a sense of the keenest humiliation, sadder than sorrow over the dead, bitterer by far than any feeling of personal wrong, the child laid her weary head upon the cushion, Granny's own handiwork, as if resting it upon the bosom of a friend, and softly cried herself to sleep.

CHAPTER XII

“ I SMELL A RAT CLOSE BY ”

NATURALLY there was a great commotion in the little community when the story of the midnight assault and Granny's death was told, and Mrs. Hadlock was obliged at last to refuse to admit any one to see her little daughter, who, completely worn out with her watching and the terrible scenes through which she had passed, lay all day long upon her bed, speaking little, and then only when spoken to; weeping and starting nervously at the sound of a strange step or voice outside her door.

The Squire in his judicial capacity took upon himself to see that the effects of the deceased were safely locked up, to wait the appearance of the lawful heir, as well as to arrange for the inquest, which was to decide in what manner the old dame came to her death, and how far the invaders of her home were responsible for that event. Now, it would be a very harsh thing to say that the Squire was really glad that Granny was dead, so that he could hold an inquest over her, but to put it more mildly, if she must die, and an inquest was really necessary, it was very fortunate that he, — Solomon Hadlock, Esquire, Justice of the Peace and Quorum, should have the longed-for opportunity of proving his fitness for the office by presiding over that tribunal and “ sifting

the matter," to use his own words, "to the very bottom."

Seven good men and true were summoned to serve as a jury, and Mrs. Hadlock received orders to have a good fire in the front room, with plenty of chairs, as well as pen, ink, and paper to take down the deposition of the witnesses.

"I s'pose Comfort 'll have to testify?" she asked, with a quaver in her voice that made her husband glance at her curiously.

"Of course she will. Let me tell you," with the first display of fatherly pride that he had ever shown toward his little daughter, "that her testimony 'll be the settler. She was the only witness, an' it's her word that'll decide whether them fellers shall see the inside of State's prison or not."

Mrs. Hadlock turned pale as death, and leaned heavily against the dresser for support.

"Oh, no, father, it can't be so bad as that. They did n't lay a finger on 'er, — Comfort says so, an' —"

"What o' that? Did n't they scare 'er to death? an' didn't they break an' enter her house, an' smash an' burn her furnitoor? You'll find," bristling with importance, and glaring fiercely at his agitated wife as if he held her in some sense responsible for the crime, "that the law'll know how to deal with sech scamps, no matter what a silly woman may think about it."

Something like a moan burst from his wife's white lips.

"Perhaps," she faltered, "some of the boys right here in the neighborhood might have had a hand in

it. They did n't mean it for anything but a foolish joke, I suppose, and they did n't know that she was sick.”

“What difference does that make?” retorted her lord, swelling with virtuous indignation. “Do you s'pose that, as a magistrate, I'd shirk my dooty in this case? I don't care if 'twas the son of my next door neighbor, I'd find him guilty if he *was* guilty just as quick as I'd shoot a henhawk off 'n his barnyard fence. In sech times as these 't ain't no use tryin' to block the wheels of the law. I say, let them that has danced pay the fiddler.”

Comfort's face, too, wore a troubled, downcast look, at which her father secretly wondered. Why, when for the first time in her life she was to occupy a position of importance, should she look as scared and ashamed as if she was one of the accused instead of being chief accuser? Others, too, noticed her dejected air, and as the curious neighbors dropped in on the afternoon of the inquest, one after another, until the large sitting-room was crowded with eager women and girls, more than one inquisitive matron found herself unexpectedly foiled in an attempt to draw from the pale, silent child the story of that terrible night's experiences.

“Her father said she'd best not talk about it until after the inquest,” explained Mrs. Hadlock, uncomfortably conscious of the offended faces of the disappointed gossips, and to this the Widow Scripture, in her seat of honor nearest the door of the next room, where the hum of masculine voices could be distinctly heard, added her testimony — the testi-

mony of one who knew whereof she affirmed, for had she not been herself a witness in a breach of promise case, and knew all the ins and outs of a court of justice by personal experience?

“Yes, that’s accordin’ to law. Sometimes they lock ’em up f’r weeks before the court sets, so’t they can’t get the chance to make common talk of what they know.”

At this all the women and girls looked straight at Comfort with eyes of awful commiseration, making her blush and hang her head guiltily, while Tabby Scripture gave her apron a sly tweak, and whispered under cover of the general chatter:

“Have they got it in there to set on?”

Comfort looked bewildered.

“Got what?” she asked.

Tabby’s rosy face was drawn into a solemn pucker, and she lifted her hand with a warning gesture.

“Hush—sh! Don’t talk so loud. It? why I mean Granny Hedvig’s corpse, of course. Ain’t that what they’re settin’ on in there? Ma’am said ’t was.”

“Why—y, no,” and Comfort’s eyes were wide with wonder. “There’s nobody but some men in there with father, and when he calls me, I’ve got to go in and tell ’em all I know about poor Granny’s death. Oh, Tabby!” in a sudden burst of confidence, “what do you s’pose they’d do to me if I would n’t tell all I know?”

“I dunno, I’m sure, what they’d do to *you*, but ma says that in old times they used to squeeze ’em to death if they would n’t tell.”

“Used to what?” gasped Comfort.

“Squeeze ’em to death,” repeated the other with as much composure as if the terrible “*peine forte et dure*” were as much a matter of everyday occurrence in a nineteenth century Maine village as a cuff upon the ear or the application of a birch rod to the back of some refractory schoolboy.

“The way ’t was done,” went on Tabby with infinite relish, “they laid ’em down on their backs and tied their legs and arms to stakes driv into the ground, just like that picture of Saint Andrew’s in ma’s book o’ Fox’s Martyrs, — you’ve seen that?”

Comfort shook her head, she was too frightened to speak.

“Ain’t? Well, you ought to, it’s lots o’ fun lookin’ at the pictures. But about this squeezin’. After they’ve got ’em tied down good an’ strong, they pile a good-sized stun on their stomach, an’ then they say, — ‘Will ye tell now?’ If they say no, they pile another on top o’ that, askin’ every time if they ’ll tell, —”

A horrible pause, and Comfort’s voice was almost inaudible as she asked with a shudder:

“What if they won’t?”

“Then they ’ll keep pilin’ on the stones till you’re as flat as — as a pancake.”

Comfort leaned back against the wall, white and shivering, while her companion, really frightened at the effect of her vivid word-picture, tried, without taking any humiliating back tracks, to reassure her:

“Oh, law! you need n’t be scart, seein’ yer own father’s at the hellum. Besides,” with a sharp look, “there ain’t nothin’ that you’d object to tellin’, of course, eh?”

The color came slowly back to the child's cheek and brow as she said, in a voice scarce above a whisper:

"Whatever I tell, I shall tell the *truth*."

The low-spoken words probably never reached the ear of her companion, whose attention just then was attracted by her mother's loud tones as she dispensed her law knowledge with a liberal hand to the group of interested listeners about her:

"Yes, this breakin' an' enterin' is a pretty serious business, let me tell you. It's a State's prison crime even if they had n't scart the old woman to death. You don't s'pose," addressing Mrs. Hadley, who sat pale and anxious among them, saying little and taking no part whatever in the discussion as to who the culprits might be, "that they really stole anything? 'T would go hard with 'em if that could be proved."

All eyes were fixed upon the evidently agitated woman, who waited a full minute, apparently intent upon a dropped stitch in her knitting, before she replied:

"Their object don't seem to have been robbery, and we all know that the poor old soul had nothing of value that would be likely to be a temptation to a lot of drunken, mischievous boys."

Tabby pricked up her ears, and glanced shrewdly from the troubled face of the mother to that of her no less agitated daughter.

"I would n't be afraid to bet considerable," she thought, "that one o' the Hadlock boys was in that scrape, an' his mother an' Comfort knew it, too."

And fired with the zeal of discovery she stole un-

observed out to the back door, where she encountered Isaac, who, all agog with boyish curiosity, was hanging about, looking and listening with all his eyes and ears to catch the smallest hint of what was going on within, — for in deference to the importance of the occasion, the Squire had insisted upon the inquest being held with closed doors. Tabby smiled sweetly upon the boy.

“They ain’t left you to look out f’r all the hosses, have they?” she asked with flattering solicitude and a glance at the half-dozen well-blanketed animals scattered about the yard, while their owners were devoting themselves to the State’s service within. “Where’s the other boys?”

“Jote’s hangin’ round somewheres, — in the barn, I guess; an’ Dave’s down to the Cove ter get some tea f’r ma’am. He went long before dinner, an’ we hain’t seen hide nor hair of ’im sence.”

“Humph!” thought Miss Tabby complacently, as she strolled leisurely back into the sitting-room, “Dave’s the one, sure’s fate.”

And as Comfort just then, in obedience to her father’s summons, staggered rather than walked across the threshold of the door that some friendly hand held open for her, the girl’s not unkindly heart felt an unwonted throb of pity, and for the moment she devoutly wished that she had held her tongue about that horrible old witness business, that was outlawed years ago most likely. But it was too late to unsay it now, and pity was soon forgotten in an overweening curiosity to know what the outcome of it all would be.

CHAPTER XIII

“NAY, TELL IT ALL”

“COMFORT HADLOCK, advance and take the oath.” And the Squire, who had never in his life been present at an inquest before, and whose ideas were decidedly misty as to the usual formula on such occasions, frowned sternly upon his little daughter as she timidly “advanced” beneath the curious eyes of the lookers on, and at his bidding held up her childish hand to take the witness’s oath. “You solemnly promise on this Holy Book,” touching the Bible that lay in solitary state upon the table, “that you ’ll tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?”

The small uplifted hand trembled and wavered uncertainly.

“I’ll tell the truth, and nothing but the truth.”

Her voice was low and soft, but in the stillness her words were distinctly audible in every corner of the room, and not a man of them all doubted for an instant the sincerity of the promise thus honestly given. Only our old acquaintance the doctor, who had all these years kept up his friendly interest in the unwelcome baby, noted the omission with a feeling of passing wonder. Were there any reasons why the little maid should not tell *all* she knew? And with equal interest but more keenness perhaps

than his neighbors, the shrewd little man listened to the story of that dreadful night, the assault upon the cottage and the death of its aged mistress. As a medical man, he had already given his testimony that Dame Hedvig came to her death by chronic heart disease, aggravated and hastened, without doubt, by the terrible shock that the invasion of her home caused her, and Comfort's story corroborated his theory, thus making the marauders undeniably guilty of manslaughter. But now the duty of the jury was to find out who these marauders were, and the foreman hastened to ask with a gravity befitting the importance of the subject:

“Did you recognize any of these men who broke into the house?”

“Only Ducky Welch,” was the prompt reply, “I knew him by his voice. But they all had handkerchiefs tied over their faces, and the fire was so low that there was hardly any light in the kitchen to see anything by.”

“But wa' n't there some mark, somethin' about their build or their clo'es, that looked nateral? The one that stole the jewelry, now, he come near enough to slap yer face; could n't you give a guess as to who he was?”

The child's pale cheek grew a shade paler, but she answered steadily:

“His face was covered like all the rest, and he never spoke a word. Besides, I was so frightened and hurt by the blow, that I didn't really see him before he'd gotten away with the rest.”

The faces of the jury wore a dissatisfied look as

they exchanged glances of mingled doubt and perplexity.

“Do you mean to tell us that only sailor Welch said anything?” demanded a rough-spoken old farmer, in such a suspicious tone that Comfort colored uncomfortably; it seemed as if he half doubted her word. “Oh, no, I did n’t mean that,” she hastened to say. “They were all shouting and swearing, and threatening what they’d do if I did n’t unbar the door. But the voices were all so mixed up that I could n’t tell one from another. Only Ducky spoke Irish,” she added with childish simplicity, “and that’s how I knew him.”

“It ain’t likely,” put in the Squire, “that in all that crowd there wa’ n’t some that live hereabouts. There ain’t more’n half a dozen of them sailors in town, an’ the rest must ’a’ been recruits from our own neighborhood.”

At this suggestion several of the jury who were the fathers of grown-up sons began to show signs of uneasiness, and the disposition to question the witness further upon the identity of the accused parties visibly weakened. Not so the Squire, who, not ill pleased at the effect of his unwelcome hint upon the jury, took a hand at cross-questioning the witness himself.

“But could n’t you tell what they wore, — their coats or caps?”

“No; they all looked alike to me, they were so crowded.”

“They did n’t leave nothin’ behind ’em, — a handkerchief or a mitten, eh?”

It had come at last, and the child's face grew white as death while she gasped a scarcely audible affirmative.

The Squire's face beamed with proud satisfaction, and he rubbed his hands sharply together till the hard palms creaked and grated — like a rope rubbing against a wooden beam, Comfort thought, with a sickening horror that fairly took away her breath.

“Well, what was it? Tell us what you found, — remember you 're on yer oath.”

Her oath! Little danger was there of her forgetting it, when every beam and rafter of the suddenly hushed room seemed to send back the terrible echo. Even the tall eight-day clock in the corner with its monotonous “tick-tick” was slowly spelling out the fateful words: “Your oath! your oath!” She reeled dizzily and would have fallen had not the kindly doctor placed his own chair for her, while under cover of this little courtesy he took occasion to whisper reassuringly:

“Don't be frightened, little lass. Tell the truth, and nobody will blame or hurt you.”

But the Squire was growing indignant and not a little mortified. That a child of his should act so much like a simpleton, was not for an instant to be endured, and raising his voice with the combined authority of the parent and the magistrate, he said sharply:

“Tell us this minute what you found, if 'twa' n't nothin' but a gallus button.”

Comfort shut her eyes, she had not the courage to face his angry frown, while in the innocence of her

childish heart she prayed for courage to do right, — to speak the whole, terrible, shameful truth, let what would come of it.

“ I found a mitten, a man’s blue and white mitten,” she said steadily, although she could hear the beating of her own frightened heart above the words themselves.

And as at her father’s command she produced the article in question, a wild hope shot across her brain that perhaps after all the mark might go unnoticed or, if seen, fail to be traced to the right source. There were plenty of families in town whose names began with that initial, and if nobody should remember to ask directly if she recognized it, the terrible exposure that she so dreaded might not come even now.

This mitten was passed from hand to hand, and the Squire was the first to spy the private mark.

“ Marked with an ‘ H ’,” was his exulting comment. “ Well, well, — we’re on the track now, sure. Who is there whose name begins with an ‘ H ’ that would be likely to be in a scrape like this? ”

He did not notice the significant glances that passed from man to man, nor did he for an instant suspect that Comfort’s reluctance to produce this important piece of evidence had had its root in anything but childish diffidence or obstinacy. And he went on with the most unconcerned air imaginable to run over the names in the neighborhood beginning with “ H ”.

“ Hamet — their children are all girls; Higgins — there’s young Tom, but he’s been shut up in the house f’r a fortnight from the kick o’ that frisky colt o’ theirs; Hamor hain’t got a chick nor a child

in the world; then there's, let me see, — Why,” with a sharp glance at the foreman, “there's you, Hull. Where'd that Abel o' yours spend last Monday night?”

“In his bed, thank the good Lord!” thundered the farmer, in a towering rage, for Abel was noted for his good steady habits, and a breath of suspicion had never before fallen on him. “P'r'aps,” with a knowing glance about the room, “'f I can ask the little gal a question or two I can find out who owns that mitten without any more guessin'.”

The Squire nodded a stately assent, and the still irate Hull turned to Comfort with the sharply put question:

“Do you know whose mitten 't is?”

“Yes.”

Had a thunderbolt fallen in their midst it could not have created greater consternation than the utterance of that one word. Every man rose to his feet in the excitement of the moment, or leaned forward in his chair with staring, wonder-full eyes, while in the solemn stillness you might have heard a pin drop, as slowly the questioner asked:

“Who is it?”

Twice the girl's pale lips unclosed but no sound came from them. It was a terrible ordeal for one so young and tender, but the lesson learned at her Christian mother's knee could not so easily be unlearned, and in a tone shrill and sharp as of some tortured animal, she cried piteously:

“Oh, why did you ask me that? It belongs to *one of my own brothers*, — *either Fotham or David.*”

Then with a strange ringing in her ears she fell back into her seat, while the angry voice of her father and the nearer, kindly tones of the good doctor mingled strangely in her half-unconscious ears as the latter tenderly bore her from the room and gave her into her mother's arms, with the whispered warning:

"It's been too much for her nerves, with all she'd gone through before. It's no light thing," he added with a meaning emphasis, as his eyes met those of the frightened woman, "for a sister to have to tell that of her own brother that will put him into the State's prison, — if he can be caught."

A good, law-abiding citizen was our friendly little doctor, and who shall say that he had the least idea that his very natural comment would, as the Squire had expressed it, do anything to "block the wheels of the law," or that Mrs. Hadlock, in acting upon the warning thus given, should a little later take the time to air her scarlet stand cloth by hanging it from her chamber window, allowing her motherly affection to get the better of her love of justice? When Love and Reason fail to agree, Love is pretty sure to have his way, and if the poor, foolish lad escaped, to be henceforth a wanderer upon the face of the earth, nobody was any the worse for it.

Jotham when summoned before the tribunal over which his crestfallen father reluctantly presided, easily cleared his own skirts by producing *both* of his own mittens, while he unhesitatingly declared that the one shown him "belonged to Dave." Moreover, the sudden disappearance of that unfortunate youth, in the company of Ducky Welch and his disreputable

mates before, in the confusion, steps could be taken to arrest them, showed only too plainly that the suspicions against him were well founded.

The Squire was terribly humiliated, but he tried hard to hold up his head, and pretend that he had faith that time would unravel the mystery, and show that “the boy wa’ n’t so much to blame after all,” while Jotham made no bones of expressing his scorn and contempt for his runaway brother.

“Dave wa’ n’t never more ’n half baked,” he declared, with not so much as a single word of pity for the poor youth’s disgrace. “Why, in thunder, if he’d got into a scrape like that did n’t he stay an’ brazen it out like a man, instead o’ turnin’ tail like a whipped dog, an’ sneakin’ off nobody knew where?”

Why, indeed? Jotham was wise in his generation, and a faithful observer of his favorite maxim: “Better a lie well stuck to than the truth wavering.”

CHAPTER XIV

“O TIME AND CHANGE”

SPRING is apt to loiter in making her first appearance in the Desert Island, but when she once makes up her mind she throws herself heart and soul into the work of making things presentable after the frost, and ice, and gloom of winter. With true housewifely zeal she sweetens, cleanses, and furbishes up every dirty, cluttered, or unsightly spot from end to end of its rock-ribbed expanse, and decks it with lavish hand for the approach of June, fair bridal month of the year in our northern clime.

The spring succeeding Granny's death was no exception to the general rule, and Comfort, after the first sweet promise that the pussy willows brought, had a long season of impatient waiting, for it seemed even longer than usual before her eyes were gladdened by the brave yellow stars of the coltsfoot, upon whose sturdy heels came crowding the frailer blossoms, — the shivering anemones, the liverworts, and flaunting rock columbines, — all eager, it would seem, to make the most of their brief time by getting their new households well under way before the summer's uncongenial heat should force them into the background of a withered, unlovely old age.

The slow melting of the snow had left the roads in a very bad condition, and it was well into May before

our little maiden ventured to pay her longed-for visit to the deserted cottage of the Hedvigs. It was a clear bright morning as she walked down the narrow wood path, skilfully picking her way from stone to hummock, or springing lightly from side to side to avoid the treacherous mud whose depth and stickiness she had too often tested to try her weight upon it now.

The birds were singing as cheerily in the misty green of the budding tree-tops as if each little householder held a promissory note from the clerk of the weather that the full foliage should be all ready for a roofing the very day that the nests were ready for it. The air was sweet with spicy odors from the spruce and pine, and within hand's reach the young birches stretched out their slender arms, whose half-unfolded buds, creased and dimpled bits of rosy bronze, made one think of the chubby fist of a well-to-do Indian baby. The tiny green fans of the maples were feathered with the same ruddy hue, and the alder that stood by the entrance of the now silent cottage had hung itself from tip to trunk with tassels of brown and gold that dangled and swayed to every passing breeze and seemed to have a special attraction for Granny's bees, scores of whom hummed contentedly about its pollen-dropping twigs.

As they approached the cottage, Frigga, who was now Comfort's special charge, and who had kept close to her heels as usual, pricked up her ears and glanced over her shoulder at her young mistress with a startled, not to say frightened, look upon her wise old face.

“What is it, kitty?” laughed the child, glad to

shake off the gloom that the spot and its sad memories had cast over her. "Have you remembered Frey's sword all this time?"

Perhaps Frigga felt the reminder as a slur upon her courage, for she turned deliberately and walked off a little way into the woods, where, with a very dignified air, she sat herself down at the foot of an old stump, and pretended to be so interested in the gambols of a very lively young squirrel that she couldn't hear a word of the call that Comfort sent after her.

"Frigga, Frigga, you naughty kitty! come here this minute."

Her sweet, clear, young voice rang out pleasantly upon the still morning air, penetrating to the recesses even of the silent cabin.

"Comfort! I say, Comfort! Hallo, there!" and Franz, just as freckled and brown, and honest-eyed as of old, came from the cottage, looking for all the world, Comfort thought, as if he had never left it.

She rubbed her eyes and stared at him for a moment in dazed silence. Had all the dreadful things that had happened during these last few months been but a dream after all? and were Franz and Granny still safe and sound in the old home? For one bewildered moment she half expected to see the dame's kerchiefed head looking over her grandson's shoulder, and to hear again the familiar greeting:

"Good-morning to thee, my Comfort."

But the next moment it all came back to her,—Granny's death, and the shame and sorrow that had

fallen upon her own household, and with a wild outburst of grief, she cried between her sobs:

“Oh, Franz! To come back to this.”

The youth’s face that had beamed with pleasure at sight of his favorite playmate slowly darkened.

“Your father wrote me part, and the Widow Scripture told me the rest last night,” he said, stepping back into the desolate doorway, while the hand that had only a moment before held her own in its friendly clasp fell limp and undecided at its owner’s side.

The girl’s sensitive nature felt the unconscious recoil, and there was a pleading tenderness in her tones as she ventured upon the threadbare excuse that, in her heart, she felt was no excuse at all.

“Then you know that they were not really themselves, and did n’t half know what they were about. It was awfully wicked and mean,” she added in response to Franz’s look of stern disapproval; “but they were only boys, you know, and, — Oh, Franz!” with a sudden burst of tears that went farther to soften the angry youth than any elaborate defence could have done. “Dave would n’t have hurt a hair of Granny’s head, for the world, meaning to. And now he’s gone — shipped in a whaler that sailed about that time, we think, and never can see his home or mother again without being in danger of the State’s prison. We never have tried to excuse him for his share in the mischief, but is n’t his punishment heavy enough as it is?”

She had followed him into the cottage, where the chill, musty air made one more than ever sensible of the desolation and gloom that now reigned over the

once happy little home, and his face was turned from her as he lifted one familiar object after another, handling each with a tenderness that contrasted sharply with the cold constraint of his tone as, after an embarrassing silence, he asked irrelevantly:

“Did your father lock up the pictures and books, and the trinkets she thought so much of in the chest?”

“Yes, everything,” replied the child, with a shiver that was not all due to the unsunned air of the cottage. “He mended the chest, and mother packed all the bedding and the other things, — everything but the furniture and dishes, into it. The wheel was broken, and she took it home, because she thought it would be safest there until it could be mended.”

“That was right. She is welcome to keep it. And I want her and you, Comfort, to have all the bedding and other housekeeping things. I have n’t forgot,” and his voice softened into the old well-remembered tones, “how good you both were to poor Granny, and how much you did for her. I’m glad she gave you the silver cross,” — (so the widow had told him of that, too), “for I think if anybody deserves it you do.”

There was the old frank heartiness in speech and manner, while the grateful smile that lighted up his face as he turned it toward her, showed that the friendly words were not to be taken simply as a polite acknowledgment of his obligation to them on Granny’s account. What was it, then, that the girl missed, and that gave her an uneasy feeling of constraint that she had never known before in the

company of her old playfellow? She was not wise enough to analyze it; but—it was not quite fair in Franz to speak of obligations to them, just as if household stuffs and silver ornaments could pay for the tender love and care that it had been a pleasure rather than a task to bestow upon her dear old friend. Why could n't he have said “I want you to have Granny's things because she loved you, and you her,” instead of “You deserve them for taking such good care of her”?

Now there are, as we know, seven primary colors, and no one who is not color blind has any difficulty in distinguishing them. But it requires a delicate, carefully trained eye to detect the thousand and one varying shades and tints so wonderfully blended and absorbed that a green field may, in some lights, strike the eye as a vivid yellow, while the fog wreaths slowly dropping at sunrise from some far-off mountain peak may assume in turn the softened, uncertain hues of red, indigo, and violet, without actually representing either of these colors as a color.

Thus with human nature in its varying capacities for feeling and sentiment. Where one sensitive, finely wrought temperament feels the slightest inequality, the least jar upon its sensibilities, the great mass remain comfortably unconscious that there is any jar,—and if the red is only red enough, and the blue is of the conventional indigo, they can neither see nor feel the smallest lack in themselves or in the world about them.

Franz would not for the world have hurt the feelings of the little friend whom he loved dearly, after

his honest, unsentimental boy fashion, any sooner in fact than the girl herself would have given speech to the vague discomfort that his words had caused her. Those few short months of separation had wrought a change in the relations between them, so subtle and undefined that only the sensitive, impulsive nature of the girl-woman detected it, and without putting the feeling into words, shrank timidly into herself when the silver cross was referred to, while with an embarrassment for which she could not herself have accounted, she hesitated to speak of the prophecy and the circumstances under which the gift of the treasured heirloom had been made.

If it should come true, and Franz become rich and famous through her instrumentality, it would be time enough then to tell him of the old dame's partial prediction. And with this resolve once made, the uneasiness that had troubled her vanished, and with all the old, tender interest she listened to the story of his new life, and laughed and wondered by turns over the oddities and peculiarities of the people with whom he had come in contact.

"Mr. Humbre has been real good to me," he declared gratefully, as, gladly forsaking the chilly, darkened cottage, the two seated themselves upon a big, flat stone just outside the door, where the humming of the bees and the soft purling of the little brook close to their feet made a pleasantly familiar music to their accustomed ears. "He comes into the foundry to see me every once in a while, and twice he's invited me to his house to dinner Sundays."

Comfort's bright face beamed with pride and pleasure.

“How good that was in him!” she cried heartily. “But,” with a touch of feminine curiosity, “is he married? You said his house.”

“Oh, no. He and his mother, — she's a widow, — and his sister, Miss Delphine, and Lois Gregory, all live together in a splendid, great house. Why,” warming with his subject, “you never saw such fine things as they have. Their forks are silver, — just think of it, solid silver forks, — and the teapot, and pitcher, and sugar-bowl all silver, too.”

His listener drew a long breath of mingled wonder and delight.

“And such a dinner! Turkey, and all the nice fixin's with it; and after we'd got through with that, the hired girl cleared off the dishes and passed round plates with two or three kinds of pie on 'em, and after that — what do you guess?”

Comfort shook her head; such unheard-of luxury fairly took away her breath.

“Well, we had oranges and grapes, — great white fellers, sweet as honey, — and raisins and nuts to top off with. Lois Gregory slipped her orange into her pocket, and Mis' Humbre told me to, if I wanted to.”

“But the folks themselves?” broke in Comfort, with glowing cheeks. “Is Mr. Humbre's mother as nice as he is? and what is Miss Delphine like? and who is Lois Gregory?”

Franz laughed, the old, happy laugh that was so pleasant to hear.

“One at a time, Comfort, — one at a time. Yes —

no — well, Mis' Humbre is kind o' nice, and kind o' not. She means to be good and pleasant, I guess, but she makes you feel all the time as if she was standin' on a high ladder, and handin' things down to you. Miss Delphine is funny and bright, but she's that sharp that you never know just how to take 'er; and Lois Gregory is — ”

“What?” insisted Comfort, greatly interested.

“Well, she's a girl about your age I should say, and Mr. Humbre is her gardeen, because her father and mother are both dead, and she has n't any relations to look out for her.”

“My age?” repeated the girl, curiously. “And what is she like? How does she look, and is she pleasant to know?”

Franz's face grew very red and he gave a vicious poke with his foot at a harmless toad that had crept out into the grateful sunshine.

“Oh, land! She's too high and mighty to notice a poor boy like me. She's been brought up a lady, and knows almost everything, and Mr. Humbre wanted her to play the pianner when I was there, but she crawled out of it, pretending she had a headache. I caught her pokin' fun at my big boots, and when I dropped my fork at the table she giggled right out.”

“The mean, hateful thing!” cried Comfort indignantly, “to treat you like that, and you company, too.”

“We — ll, yes, 't was mean in 'er,” assented the boy with a reluctance that made his companion regard him with wondering eyes. “But I met her next day on the street, and she smiled and bowed as if I'd been a king, — and I was in my old workin'

clo'es, too. She 's as pretty as a picture, with black eyes that seem always laughing at you, and hair curling in little rings all round her face. And you never saw such pretty little dimpled hands, — just like a baby's.”

“I don't suppose that she has the dishes to wash,” remarked Comfort meekly, with an unconscious glance at her own brown and roughened palms.

“Oh, no indeed!” cried Franz calmly unconscious of the mild sarcasm underlying his companion's very natural comment. “They have lots of help to do the work. Ladies like them don't work, you know.”

Comfort smiled, but there was a little ache at her heart as she said, half sadly:

“It must be a fine thing to be pretty and rich, and have all the time you want to study or play. But I guess I'd rather have a mother to love and work for, after all. And that makes me think,” slowly rising from her seat, and drawing over her face the sun-bonnet that had fallen unheeded upon her shoulders as she listened to Franz's talk, “that it is time I was at home seeing to the dinner. I get almost all the dinners now,” she explained in reply to his surprised look, “for mother hardly ever gets up much before noon. She has n't been well since, —” she stopped short, and a hot flush overspread her face, as she added after a moment's pause, — “since last winter.”

But Franz did not notice her confusion. His thoughts were elsewhere, and calling to her to wait until he had locked the door, he walked along beside her, laughing and chatting, the same and yet not the same boy with whom she had walked this same path only one short year before.

CHAPTER XV

THE THIN EDGE OF THE WEDGE

FRANZ won golden opinions from the thrifty Squire by the shrewd, manful way in which he went to work to wind up affairs, and dispose of the few effects that had belonged to Granny. The half-dozen acres about the cottage, adjoining as it did his own back pasture, was readily purchased by the Squire for a new, crisp ten-dollar bill, — a very fair price for it considering that the soil was too thin and poor to be of any use as farming land, and the timber was small and scraggy, consisting largely of stunted white birches and ragged cedars, that made one think of a family of half-starved children under the rule of the proverbial step-mother, cuffed and buffeted by the merciless sea gales, and kept on the scanty commons that the poverty-stricken, ungenerous earth was loath to provide them.

“The cottage would make a good shingle camp,” reasoned the buyer, “and there was a fair show of cedar in the vicinity that would work up into shingles, and keep the boys out of mischief through the long winter days and evenings.”

The bees, strange as it may seem, found no ready purchaser in the little hamlet. Nobody wanted “the bother” of them, those who already kept bees having an idea that the introduction of a strange swarm

would give such offence to the present tenants that they would desert in a body; while those who had had no experience in bee-raising regarded the touchy little insects as a nuisance, to which it was best to give as wide a berth as possible. Franz did n't really know what to do with them.

"Granny used to sell a good deal of honey in the course of the year," he said to Comfort, as they stood together beside the fresh-springing, spicy-breathed catnip patch about which the bees were humming, evidently impatient for the appearance of the purple honey-cups. "If I could get anybody to look out for them, — they don't need a great deal of care, — they could have all the honey they wanted for themselves, and if there was any to sell we could divide the profits between us."

With a thoughtful face, Comfort slowly wound and unwound the strings of her calico sunbonnet around one slender brown finger, as she said hesitatingly :

"*I* might, I suppose. Granny showed me just how to manage them, and I ain't a bit afraid of them nor they of me. Perhaps, — well, if father will let me, I will take care of them for you."

"I don't doubt you could as well as anybody" (he would have believed her capable of flying if she had claimed that power), — "but your father hates bees. I've heard him say so time an' ag'in, and I don't believe he'd agree to your keepin' 'em."

"You can ask him?"

Yes he could, and did, and strange to say, won his consent to the arrangement. In truth, it astonished the Squire's family not a little the favor that he act-

ually put himself out to show to the grandson of Granny Hedvig. They could not know what a panacea it was to his terribly wounded family pride to be able to oblige in any way one who might, he well knew, have treated his advances with a scornful contempt that would, under the circumstances, have added greatly to his inward humiliation.

Franz, the soul of candor and justice, never on his part, after the first bitterness of the discovery of Dave's complicity in the cruel frolic that led to poor Granny's death had passed away, even thought of such a thing as blaming the innocent members of the family. He accepted the Squire's friendly overtures with the same frank, unsuspectingness that he did those of the wife and daughter, while Jotham's surly avoidance of his company, no less than Isaac's undesirable effusiveness, was so perfectly in keeping with the character of each that he thought little of it anyway.

Summer was close at hand before the youth was ready to return to the city and his work, and for several reasons it was a season long to be remembered by the various actors in our little neighborhood drama. First and foremost, it brought to the Widow Scripture applications for board from so many summer tourists that, spurred on by her few enterprising neighbors, and by Tabby, who had sundry little ambitions of her own, she decided to build an "addition," and after the fashion of her day and kind, she hastened to talk it over with each neighbor in turn, explaining the reasons why she felt called upon to take such an unprecedented step, as well as

the character of the change that she proposed making in the unpretentious farmhouse that had served her so faithfully as a peaceful and comfortable home for more than a score of years.

"You see," she explained to Mrs. Hadlock, as, knitting in hand, she settled herself for a neighborly afternoon chat, — "You see, Mr. Humbre, he wants me to take his mother an' sister, an' a Miss Ward, — his ward he calls 'er, so I s'pose she's his intended. An' there's four more o' them painter fellers that wants board, an' a sick man an' his little boy. I did think of fixin' up field beds in the shed chamber, an' me an' Tabby sleepin' in the barn. But we concluded that bein' city folks they might object to sleepin' in that way, so the best we could do seemed to be to build on."

Mrs. Hadlock's pale face was all aglow with interest. Poor soul, any diversion from her own sad thoughts was a godsend.

"Where are you goin' to put your addition?" she asked.

"I'm goin' to put on a two-story front."

The words were a whole mouthful, as the widow rounded and emphasized them to give due effect to their importance.

"Why, how you talk!" exclaimed her awestruck listener. "That'll make it big enough for a tavern."

"Yes, I reckon on four good-sized sleepin' rooms up stairs an' two down. I shall take what's the south front room now to feed 'em in, an' they can set in the new front room on the off side o' the entry. There's one thing I shall insist on, — yes, two, —

an' that is, I won't have the wimmin folks dabbin' round in the kitchen, washin' out a handkerchief or a pair o' stockin's, an' wantin' the flatirons jest when I want to be usin' 'em myself. Female boarders make an awful sight o' bother that way. An' the other is, I shall make a p'int of havin' my meals right on the dot, whether there 's anybody there to eat 'em or not. Why, Mis' Hadlock," warming with her pet grievance, "an angel from heaven could n't keep a man's dinner standin' f'r an hour after 't was cooked an' have it fit to eat."

"But," ventured her friend, "if these people pay handsomely for their board they 'll expect privileges. An' if they won't always be on time to their meals what can you do?"

"I 'll give 'em a cold dinner or two, an' that 'll bring 'em to their fodder, I guess. They need n't think I 'm goin' to all this trouble and expense jest f'r their convenience. Keepin' boarders f'r fun? Not by a long chalk. I can live without them, thank the good Lord! but they 'd find it a hard scratch to get along without me, — here, at any rate."

"They say," interrupted the Squire, who had entered the room while the widow was speaking, "that the pictures that Mr. Humbre and all the other artists have painted of places hereabouts have set folks all over the country crazy to come and see for themselves what Mount Desert is like. If that 's so, you mark my words, 't won't be long before there 'll be more boarders than there 'll be folks to board 'em."

"Oh, dear, I hope not," faltered Mrs. Hadlock, timidly. "Such an army of 'em! Why, they 'd take

the bread right out of our children's mouths. They'd eat everything up in the summer so 't when it come winter we should have a regular famine, such as they had in these parts in them cold seasons that I've heard my mother tell about."

The Squire laughed scornfully.

"Don't you worry about that yet awhile. Let 'em come, *I* say. We'll find room and vittles for 'em as long as they pay a fair price for 'em. The more boarders, the more money," he added, facetiously.

And the widow, comprehending his idea, laughed and nodded her approval.

Tabby, too, had her own plans and ambitions, some of which would have astonished her prudent mother beyond measure if the young woman had been incautious enough to make a confidante of her, which she was not. In Comfort's ear alone she poured the story of her hopes and aspirations, too secure in her own fancied sagacity and knowledge of the world to fear any adverse criticism from her modest neighbor. Life was such a tiresome, one-horse affair in that out of the way corner of the world; and a girl, let her be ever so smart and handsome, stood no chance at all of marrying well unless she could get acquainted with some rich young folks outside.

"What I've planned," confided Tabby, with a calm certainty that astonished her listener not a little, "is to make friends with some of ma's female boarders, an' get an invitation to come and visit 'em in the city, in the winter. Then they'll take me round an' introduce me to everybody, of course, and —"

“What?” asked simple Comfort.

Tabby laughed, and tossed her buxom head with a knowing air.

“How can I tell? Time will show. But I know one thing,” stiffening up so suddenly that the stiffly starched folds of her indigo calico rustled as aggressively as if they had been of the costliest brocade, “an’ that is, I’ll have something fit to wear out of this summer’s work, or I’ll know the reason why.”

Comfort drew a tired sigh. She had nothing against Tabby, but somehow she always wearied her terribly with her confidences. One must be an angel of unselfishness or very much in love with the speaker to be very long interested in a conversation that has forever as its objective point the all important “I.” But Tabby liked to talk, and she liked equally well to hear Tabby talk, especially if she talked about Tabby, so she went on with undiminished relish:

“I’m bound to have a new delaine dress made with a spencer, and a pair of green morocco shoes, and a string of blue beads, and a sunshade. And then, — well, I guess if there’s anything left over, I’ll have my picture taken.”

Comfort laughed merrily.

“You’ll be fine enough with all your new clothes to want a picture of yourself, but,” with a sudden remembrance of what Franz had told her about these same people who were to serve the aspiring Tabby as a ladder upon which she was to climb to social distinction, “do you suppose that Mr. Humbre’s folks will be as pleasant and easy to please as he is?”

Franz says they 're rich and have everything splendid at home, so I should be afraid they'd be kind o' proud and set up."

Tabby tossed her head with an air of saucy assurance.

"They won't try none of their stuck-up airs on us," she said, loftily. "We're to hum here, an' if strangers want to come an' look round, we'll treat 'em civil, but we won't stand no crowdin' nor pushin' from nobody, — not if 't was the President himself. We ain't the kind to sell our birthright f'r a mess o' potash."

Ah, Tabby, remember the text, "Let not him who putteth on his armor boast as him who taketh it off."

CHAPTER XVI

“BLAZING” THE WAY FOR FASHION

“IT is so dull, and last night I could n’t sleep at all with the tiresome beat, beat of those horrid waves on the shore. It was dreadful, and I honestly believe it will do me more harm than good to spend the summer here.”

Mrs. Humbre was a fair, delicate-featured woman, with a low, soft, dependent voice in which the querulous note was just now decidedly prominent. Her slender white hands, rather shrivelled, as the looseness of the costly rings that glittered upon her idle fingers made evident, were folded upon or rather half-buried in the snowy fleece of her knitted breakfast shawl, while with one daintily slippers foot she tapped listlessly upon the small parti-colored mat that her son Robert had brought with the rocking chair out upon the piazza for her use, immediately after breakfast.

“Now be sure to stay out here in this pure, sweet air just as long as you can,” had been his parting admonition, as he stooped to leave a good bye kiss upon her withered cheek, — a boyish habit he had never outgrown. “I expect great things for you from this summer by the sea.”

And as he shouldered his artist’s “traps,” and with his two friends set off down the road at an easy,

swinging gait, his well-knit figure seemed the personification of manly strength and vigor, while the group upon the piazza looked after him with varying emotions of pride, affection, and wonder.

“Robert is a fine-looking man,” remarked his mother with pardonable pride. “If he would only be a little more particular about his dress I’m sure there are few men who could compare with him.”

She glanced at her daughter, but Miss Delphine was sharpening her pencil, and for a moment did not answer, and when she did speak it was in reply to a question from Lois as to the intended route of the sketching party for the day:

“To Eagle Lake, I believe—that’s where they were planning last night to go to-day. Robert knows all the most beautiful places, he has been here so much, and he never is selfish even in his most precious ‘finds.’ He is always willing to show the others his own pet haunts, which is saying a good deal for the generosity of an artist.”

Lois yawned and looked longingly in the direction of the shore. “Come, Cousin Del,” she said coaxingly, “let’s go down on the beach and see what we can find. Robert says there’s some of the loveliest pebbles and shells that would do for my aquarium.”

Miss Delphine gave a good-humored nod as she busied herself in arranging upon the stand before her her drawing paper, and a soup plate containing a very unpromising but evidently curious specimen of the short-tailed crab common in that vicinity, and which she had captured in her early morning walk before the party were astir.

“Wait till I draw this fellow’s picture, and then I’ll go with pleasure, — if mother can spare us.”

Mrs. Humbre nodded her permission, but at the same time drew her chair a little farther away, while Lois, for want of something better to do, leaned over its back, and while softly stroking her hair, — smooth and glossy as gray satin beneath the delicate bit of lace called by courtesy a cap, — chatted in the low, soothing tone that the elder lady especially enjoyed.

“What do you think of it all, auntie? Do you suppose that you can manage to be comfortable here for three whole months?”

“Really I don’t know, but I would be willing to stay almost anywhere to please Robert.” And the sigh that accompanied the words was as soft and sweet as the breath of an æolian harp, — Mrs. Humbre did nothing ungracefully.

“The rooms are very bare and plain,” went on the lady, “but they are clean and airy, and, as Robert says, we did n’t come here to find luxuries, unless we count the sea air and bathing such. The woman herself seems a good cook and housekeeper, but, oh Lois! did you notice how disgustingly familiar she was? Shaking hands with Robert as if he’d been an old friend, and asking if his ‘ma and the other wimmin folks wa’ n’t jest about tuckered out?’ It was perfectly ridiculous, such assurance.”

Lois laughed, and patted caressingly the faded cheek.

“They’re awfully funny, both the woman and the girl, and I mean to have heaps of fun with them. Do

you know I caught that Tabby, as her mother calls her, cutting the pattern of my plaid wrap this morning. She did n't know that I was up, and when she did see me looking right at her, she did n't seem a bit abashed, just went on with her work, and when she'd finished, hung it up again with a nod at me, and a 'much obleeged.' But I'll have fun enough out of her to pay for it.”

“They're dreadfully ignorant and presuming,” sighed Mrs. Humbre, unmindful of the mischief in Lois's black eyes, “and nothing seems to daunt them. They act exactly as if we were invited guests, and that part of their duty was to entertain us.”

“Cousin Robert does n't seem to mind it,” suggested the girl demurely.

His mother made a gesture of annoyance.

“He's used to their ways, and does n't care how much they talk if they only serve his meals well, and keep things neat and clean about him. But with ladies, of course, it's different, and I'm terribly afraid,” sinking her voice to a mysterious whisper, “that they'll take the liberty of intruding their company upon us whenever they feel like it. The idea came to me in the dead of the night, and it worried me so that I never closed my eyes until after daylight. Now I cannot bear that.”

“Tell them so then,” interpolated Miss Delphine, putting the finishing touch to one of the crab's legs, and holding the picture up to get a good look at it. “If you don't want their company, say so.”

“Oh, dear! I could n't bear such a scene in my weak state of health,” cried the poor lady, really

terrified at the idea of asserting herself in the face of this big, masterful daughter of the people. Then as a heavy step sounded upon the floor, she added helplessly, "There she comes now; don't for the world have any words with her, for if I am unable to awe her with my presence, it will be much better to let Robert manage affairs for us."

Her daughter made no reply, and the next moment the calico short gown and wide blue apron came full sail around the corner, their wearer bearing on her arm a big basket of peas, and in one hand a splint-bottomed chair which she hastened to plant in Mrs. Humbre's close vicinity, while with a face beaming as much with hospitable good-will as with the heat and exertion of picking the peas, she remarked complacently :

"Well, this is what I call good growin' weather. I sowed these peas the twenty-first day of April, — ruther early the neighbors said, but peas'll stand a sight of cold. Now you see," holding out a handful of the plump pods, "these air as well filled as anybody'd want. Do you raise yer own vegetables?" after waiting a moment for a response.

"Certainly not. The market supplies us with them in abundance." An icicle would have been warm compared to Mrs. Humbre's tone, but the widow evidently took no notice of it.

"How do you like the looks of things about here, so fur?" she asked with a glance about her of comfortable proprietorship. "We kalkilate on doin' our best f'r strangers, an' if they ain't satisfied it's their own fault."

Lois giggled, and Miss Delphine bent lower over her drawing, but to poor Mrs. Humbre it was no laughing matter, and she replied very stiffly and with all the dignity she could muster for the occasion:

“The place is pretty enough. But as I came here for my health alone, I shall want to be very quiet and free from outside intrusion.”

“Oh, law! you need n’t worry about that,” cried the widow, cheerily, stirring up the peapods with so energetic a hand that her guest’s sensitive nerves were all a-quiver with actual pain. “I don’t imagine many of the neighbors will call,—you see, it’s a pretty busy time o’ year just now. But honestly now, ’f I was you, I’d try ter make some acquaintances. You’ve no idea how good company kind o’ chirks a body up when they get spleeny and down sperited.”

Mrs. Humbre sank back in her chair with such a dismayed face that her daughter felt it high time to come to the rescue:

“See, Lois,” and she held up a half-completed picture so that all could see it, “How is that?”

The widow stopped shelling peas, and looked curiously at the pencilled figure.

“That’s meant f’r a crab, ain’t it?” she asked.

Delphine meekly replied that it was, then turning her batteries upon the unsuspecting widow, she proceeded to put that worthy woman through a series of investigations that might have struck terror to the heart of the boldest scientist.

“Yes, I am greatly interested in the molluscs, and I have come here this summer on purpose to study

them. I suppose there are plenty of the *Cephalopoda* hereabouts, both naked and testaceous?"

She paused for a reply, but for once the widow's tongue refused to do its duty, and she only stared at her interlocutor with a look of such helpless bewilderment that Lois was almost convulsed with the laughter that she dared not give vent to.

"Wae-ell, yes. I dunno as I rightly understand."

"Oh, you know the species I mean," cried Miss Delphine with the most innocent smile that ever was seen.

"They have neither spine nor bones, and the nervous system consists of nervous knobs, — the ganglia as they are called, — that give off filamentous nerves in all directions. Living here all your life, you must be familiar with the bivalve molluscs, the *Pecten jacobus* and the *Ostra edulis*, yes *Mytilus edulis*, — you know them, of course?"

"No, thank the Lord! I never heard of sech monsters in these parts," gasped the widow, squirming like a half-boiled lobster. "I don't see," with a mighty effort to assert herself, "how sech lies could 'a' got round about us. We 're poor, honest, workin' farmer an' fisher folks, an' we hain't got no cannibals nor even savages amongst us."

"But the *Decapods*?" urged the new boarder with undiminished zeal and hopefulness, "I know there are plenty of them here. There's the *Cancer pagurus* and the *Pagurus Bernhardus*, *Astacus gammarus*, and the *Cragnon vulgaris*, and, —"

"Good Lord, deliver us!" and huddling her peas, pods and all, into her apron, the discomfited widow

fairly fled the field, leaving Miss Delphine to join her companions in a merry laugh over her well-won victory.

“The lobsters and shrimps finished her,” declared Lois, “and I believe they would me if I had to call them by those horrible old scientific names. Just think, auntie with your delicate nerves and lungs, to have to get up breath enough if you wanted to be helped to turkey, to say:

“I’ll thank you for some of the *Meleagris gallopave*, with a bit of the *Ostreaedulis* stuffing.”

Mrs. Humbre smiled languidly at her favorite’s wit, and Miss Delphine patted her shoulder approvingly.

“You’re coming on famously, after all. I’d no idea that you remembered that much of your natural history lesson. And now as a reward, I’ll take you with me this afternoon to see the ruins of the old Gregoire house. That will interest you if the jelly fish and sea anemones don’t.”

Lois’s bright face was all aglow with delight.

“That will be just splendid!” she cried. “I dearly love to know all about the people, and what they did, and how they looked who lived in the olden times. You know, cousin Del, that I always have my history lesson perfect. But I don’t like, and I never shall, to handle those nasty, slimy things that cling to the wet rocks or burrow in the sand, if they are interesting.”

“Neither do I,” interposed Mrs. Humbre with a dainty shiver. “And I don’t think such studies are either becoming or ladylike. For my part,” with a

reproachful look at her evidently unmoved daughter, "I don't see where Delphine got such masculine tastes, for I'm sure it has always been a peculiarity of the ladies of my family that they either fainted or went into hysterics at the sight of a mouse or spider. My mother and both my sisters were noted for their delicate sensibilities."

"No doubt, no doubt," returned Miss Delphine absently, never pausing an instant in her work, "but my sensibilities are not a bit delicate, you know. Here, you rascal (to the crab), keep still, will you?" tapping him on the head with her pencil, — a familiarity that made her mother shudder, — "I never belonged to the order of

' Ribbons and laces,
And sweet, pretty faces,'

but I honestly believe if I'd been born a man, I should have made a famous naturalist. It's in me."

Mrs. Humbre shrugged her shoulders with a pretty, half-petulant air, but said nothing. They had been all over this same ground a hundred times, more or less, the plan of attack being often slightly varied, while the defence was always and everywhere the same, — natural tastes and inclinations so strong that even the disabilities of sex and position could not discourage them.

Mrs. Humbre was one of those unfortunate hen mothers who, having hatched a pair of ducklings, could not for the life of her comprehend the longing that possessed them to paddle in forbidden waters, rather than peck their grains of golden corn in lux-

urious security under the shade of the traditional family dock and pigweed. Robert's Bohemian tendencies were a great trial to her, but since the world, her world, had condescended to honor him as a rising artist, she had grown very proud of him, although even now his careless indifference to the conventionalities that were the very breath of her nostrils, was a source of much secret annoyance and regret. But in her daughter's case the regrets had far more of the bitterness of disappointed maternal ambition than she would have cared to acknowledge, even while she bewailed “dear Delphine's unaccountable fascination for scientific studies.” A great belle in her youth, and even now, — faded and aged by ill health and indolent self indulgence, — a pretty, delicate woman, she had regarded her only daughter's lack of personal beauty as in some sense a slur upon herself, as if she had been put off with an inferior article in lieu of something commensurate with her own charms.

“To think,” she would bemoan to her confidential friends, “that I of all people, should be the mother of such a plain child as Delphine. She has the Humbre features, — well enough for a man, but so large and decided that they make a woman look like an Amazon. And such a figure! no more waist than my pug Flora. Try? of course I tried, faithfully, tearfully, I had almost said prayerfully, to keep stays on her when she was young enough to make a figure. But she would n't keep them on, declared she could n't breathe in them, and cut the laces as soon as she could get out of my sight. And since she grew up

she will not wear them. What can I do? She's a sight with a waist like that, and nobody knows it better than I, but I can only suffer in silence."

But in Lois Gregory, the child of an old friend whose death Mrs. Humbre had mourned as deeply as it was in her nature to mourn anybody, the disappointed mother found an unlooked-for panacea for her maternal woes. Pretty and graceful from her babyhood, and only too willing as she grew older to employ all the arts of dress and manner to enhance her charms, she was to the idle, *passé* woman of the world a resurrection of her own regretted past, — a beautiful creation, that under her training and tuition should in time burst upon the fashionable world, a vision of dazzling loveliness, in whose rosy reflection she might once more taste something of the proud triumphs of her own lost youth. Although Lois had been left almost penniless at her parents' death, Mrs. Humbre had, from motives of her own, given the girl to understand from the first that she was possessed of ample means of her own, upon which her guardian, Mr. Robert, drew for the funds needed in her education and support.

"She should never grow up with the feeling of dependence about her," reasoned the worldly wise woman, "for if she was to be a famous belle and make a brilliant match, — as she was sure to do with the advantages that she was to have, — she must have a proper pride in herself as a rich as well as beautiful woman, and that could hardly be if she was conscious of the truth that she was a penniless dependent upon the bounty of her friends."

Although not admitted to their mother's confidence in the matter, neither Robert Humbre nor his sister would for the world have stooped to remind the orphan of her dependence, and thus Lois had grown up from childhood to maidenhood surrounded by luxuries, and given every advantage of education that her city home afforded, never dreaming that the money so lavishly spent upon her was drawn from Mrs. Humbre's private purse. That her partial but ill judging protectress had not succeeded in quite spoiling the girl was due to two things. First and foremost was her own naturally warm and loving heart, that not all this injudicious petting and flattery had been able to harden, supplemented by Miss Delphine's always wholesome influence.

The strong common sense that this sturdy offshoot of the Humbres invariably brought to bear upon the many vexing questions of their daily life, served to dispel many a harmful illusion, and clear away many a foolish outgrowth of childish vanity and conceit that her mother's injudicious flattery had fostered. To be sure it was apt to be up-hill work, for Lois had a fair share of the self-will and obstinacy of the ordinary spoiled child, but Miss Delphine's perseverance and unflinching good temper accomplished much, especially in the educational line, and by constant leading, coaxing, and spurring, the naturally indolent student had really become quite well informed upon many subjects that school girls of her age, even in this day of good schools, know little or nothing about. Apart from this she was quick witted and original, and Miss Delphine remembered and quoted years afterwards

her comment upon the events of this their first day upon the Desert Island :

“Maybe we’re ‘blazing’ a path through these woods for other people to find their way by, just as those old Pathfinders used to do. Would n’t it be funny, though, if sometime we should come back here and find broad roads and big cities where we have to make our own paths now?”

“Too funny to be probable,” laughed Miss Delphine.

But for all that, she remembered the unwitting prophecy, and repeated it in after years with no little pride and satisfaction.

CHAPTER XVII

“A SUNSHINY WORLD FULL OF LAUGHTER AND LEISURE”

FOR a week or more Miss Delphine and Lois found ample amusement in wandering without other guide than their own wayward fancies, from end to end of the rock-strewn beach, hunting for the beautiful bits of feldspar and chalcedony that, worn smooth as glass by the constant washing of the tide for centuries, glowed in as many and delicate tints of red, green, and pearl as if some gnome in his rocky cavern beneath had, in sweeping out his doorway, scattered in wanton wastefulness the precious rubbish of chipped and rejected gems from his fairy workbench. Sometimes they climbed upon the great granite boulders, from which they could get a long look out to sea, and the girl listened with half-incredulous wonder as her companion explained how these same boulders, broken from the rocky foundations of the island, and carried seaward by the irresistible force of wind and wave, had, in the mighty tempests of the past, been tossed like egg-shells upon the beach, where they now lay stranded, huge hulks of earth-born granite, smoothed at their bases by the ever-lapping tides, and patched on their landward side with mosses and lichen, as varied in shape and color as a piece of crazy patchwork.

On many a bare ledge of level rock they found a pleasant excitement in tracing the long parallel lines scratched upon its telltale surface, — unmistakable hints of a time when that mighty glacial torrent came moving majestically down from Katahdin to the Atlantic, bearing upon its bosom great icebergs whose glittering peaks towered mountains high in the cold Arctic air, and marking with iron heel their footprints in the solid stone, — strange hieroglyphics in which future ages might read the story of that grand, terrible, voiceless march to the sea. They lingered about the fallen, weed-grown cellar of the old Gregoire mansion, where Lois, with a girl's love for the romantic and marvellous, exercised her wits reconstructing the old-time household, — picturing the stately Frenchman and his beautiful wife in the aristocratic seclusion in which the lord and lady of this Island castle must necessarily have dwelt, and where, cheered and charmed by the beauties that Nature spread so lavishly around them, they walked hand in hand down the sloping pathway of life to the "low green tent" at its end.

In retrospect all seemed transfigured and etherealized by the mists of the past just as the Island fogs, gray and formless in themselves, had power to cast about the mountains to whose rugged sides they clung, an ineffable mystery and charm, increasing rather than marring their beauty to the poetic mind:

"Like troops of angels climbing fearlessly
Into a dark, and rough, and hardened soul."

In vain Miss Delphine relentlessly brought to bear the local traditions upon the subject of the queer old

pioneers, declaring them “avaricious, slatternly, and addicted to snuff, rum, and Catholicism.” Lois preferred her own ideals to the Island folks’ distorted pictures, and more than once, unknown to her friends, she found a romantic satisfaction in decking with wreaths of wild flowers the neglected graves where the forefathers of the Island lay. But beach rambles and even the memories of the Gregoires were beginning to grow a bit tiresome, when, one beautiful sunny morning, — just the day to be out of doors, — Mrs. Humbre took to her room with one of her low nervous attacks, and as her daughter could not leave her, the girl was left for the first time to wander at her own sweet will wherever she would, with only the faintly murmured caution from amidst the fluffy depths of the invalid’s down pillow:

“Don’t get your feet wet, dear, — and don’t forget to wear your gloves, your hands burn so easily.”

“I think,” the girl said to herself as with a thrill of that proud exultation that one who tries, for the first time and alone, untrodden byways, is prone to feel, she strolled aimlessly down the dusty highway that led past the widow’s front door, “I think I’ll try that road that leads down towards the woods. Tabby said yesterday that it was the schoolhouse road, and went close to Granny Hedvig’s ‘hut.’ She’s a coarse, spiteful thing, that Tabby.”

And a listener would have been puzzled to see the connection between Tabby’s bit of local information and the sudden flash of Lois’s black eyes at that moment. Perhaps Tabby’s choice of words was un-

fortunate, but at any rate Miss Lois seemed to have no hesitation in availing herself of the information thus gained, for she set off with a brisk step down the narrow grass-grown road, that was now so seldom travelled by other than pedestrians that it looked in the distance, she thought, like a broad striped ribbon of gray and green, only flecked here and there with the gold of an intrusive buttercup or the violet of a bit of self-heal.

What a bright, sweet, blithesome morning it was! The memory of it came back to the girl many a time in after years, like some half-forgotten yet still beautiful dream, when tired and soiled with the dust of life's broader highway, she was glad at times to shut her eyes, and see again the fresh green sward, the starry-eyed daisies and golden buttercups nodding in neighborly fashion to each other, the buxom purple clover keeping watch and ward over his paler cousins, the sweet-breathed white and pink, to say nothing of that Puck among wild flowers, the flame-capped celandine, — pert, tricky little elf! — ready to resent in a moment the touch of rude or careless fingers. Here and there, standing stiff and graceless by the wayside, rose a tall spruce or pine, wreathed from top to toe with the fresh green leaves and feathery snow of the clematis, while crowds of sweet wild roses thrust inquisitive faces out from the shelter of alder thickets and nodded a friendly welcome to the charmed stranger. With eager delight the girl picked handfuls of the fragrant blossoms, decking belt and bosom with their delicate loveliness. There was a kind of delicious bravado in taking advantage of this lavish

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open-handedness on the part of Nature, as if one should say in wanton mood:

“ Give much, give more, and ever more,
Still grasp I, add I, to my store.”

The grasshopper's whirr and the occasional note of a paternal robin, too busy now in providing for the hungry youngsters at home to find time to practise those marvellous bravuras that a few weeks earlier had made the woodland vocal with music, were the only sounds outside of the never-ceasing, distant lapping of the waves upon the rocky beach that broke the midsummer stillness. In that atmosphere and amidst these surroundings, life seemed all at once to have become the sweetest, most blessed thing of which the imagination of man can conceive. Sorrow, disappointment, pain and death were as unreal and far away as were the ice, and snow, and chilling frosts of winter. It was joy enough to be, — to live, and move, and breathe in this blessed to-day, and let the future as the past take care of itself.

Delusions, say you? Yes, but thank God for these delusions, fleeting and short though they may be, and recall when perchance the storms of life beat over the shivering soul, and sorrow's icy touch chills the most hopeful heart, these blessed, heaven-sent spots in our pilgrimage, and let them be a promise, sure and unchangeable, of that rest beyond, in the Garden of our Lord where “the tender grapes appear; and the pomegranates bud forth; and the mandrakes give a pleasant smell, — all of which I have laid up for thee, O my beloved.”

It may have been some unexplainable attraction, or it may have been a glimpse of a pink sunbonnet flitting in and out among the leafy shadows, that served her as a guide, but it is sure that the girl was at no loss when she came to the scarce-trodden footpath, to know that it led to Granny Hedvig's cottage and to follow it unhesitatingly. Hut indeed! Why the little cottage was the most picturesque thing imaginable, with the clematis and wild morning-glories wreathing its low, log-built walls with garlands of white, and rose, and purple, while the roses that had been their mistress' pride and joy, now in full bloom, made the air heavy with their dainty perfume. The little brook rippled as placidly over its pebbly bed as if it had never known the let and fret of troublesome boulder or fallen tree trunk, while in the blossoming catnip patch the bees were humming, undisturbed in the least by the slender, girlish figure that walked so fearlessly among them, pausing often at one special hive where something unusual seemed to be going on.

Lois was not troubled with diffidence, neither did it enter into her head that she might be considered an intruder, and she had no hesitation in taking the most direct road to the gratification of her curiosity, although a wholesome dread of the bees themselves kept her outside their special domain, thus forcing her to raise her voice to a very unladylike key as she called abruptly:

“What is it? what are you doing with the bees?”

The girl started, and turning displayed a face beneath the pink sunbonnet browned, and by no means

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beautiful according to Lois's somewhat exaggerated standard, but very pleasing in its unaffected friendliness and utter absence of either suspicion or servility.

“I'm watching for them to swarm,” she said, with a look of honest admiration in her clear, straightforward eyes, as she took in at a glance the pretty, dainty figure, — from the broad gypsy hat of the finest Leghorn straw, to toe tips of the high, neatly laced boots. “Don't you want to see them?” she asked, with a momentary flush of embarrassment as she saw the glance of surprise that the city-bred Miss cast upon her. “They're all ready, I know, for I've heard the old queen scolding for the last two hours, and she'll be sure to start soon.”

“Scolding? The queen scolding?” repeated her listener, half indignant at the idea that the stranger was trying to quiz her.

Comfort laughed.

“I call it that,” she said with a quick look in the direction of the hive where an angry buzzing was going on, growing louder and more aggressive every minute. “You know that when a young queen is hatched out the old one is so mad that she tries to get at her to sting her to death. But the workers keep them apart, till at last the old queen won't stay there any longer, and for a long time you can hear, if you put your ear close to the hive, her hum growing louder and louder every minute, — then you may know that she's all ready to start out with a new swarm.”

“But why do they swarm?” asked Lois, straining her eyes to get a good look at the interesting insects.

“Because the hive is too full, and the part that

hold to the old queen go out under her lead and start a new colony. I've got a nice hive all ready that I coaxed my brother Isaac to make, and he promised to help me hive 'em, but he's gone off somewhere and I shall have to do the best I can alone."

"Oh, let me help!" and Lois fairly danced in her excitement,—this was better than all the old cellars on the Island. "What shall I do? and won't they sting me?"

"Not if you don't scare them," replied the other, with a tone of assurance that set her companion's rising fears at rest at once. "All you need to do is, when the swarm rises into the air, throw a handful of dust in their faces. That kind of bewilders them and keeps them from flying away, so they'll keep near and I can hive them."

"Oh, I can do that."

And all alive with the excitement of the occasion, off went the gloves that Mrs. Humbre had insisted upon, and turning back her cuffs with the air of a prize fighter, the new assistant declared her readiness to throw a handful, or,—if needed, a cartload—of dust into the eyes of the winged emigrants.

"There they come!" cried Comfort excitedly.

"Now," producing a long pole from which was suspended a thick woolen stocking, "just as soon as they rise, you throw the dust right among them, and I'll hold the stocking where they'll light on it."

Too much excited to think of possible danger to herself, as the winged crowd rose from the overcrowded hive, Lois tossed handful after handful of



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the yellow dust toward them, until as Comfort had predicted they settled down upon the convenient stocking, and with a gentle yet deft motion of the bearer's hand were easily transferred to the new hive, while both girls watched, scarcely daring to breathe, until the bewildered, uncertain movements ceased, and the new swarm took up its regular routine as if nothing had happened to disturb the even tenor of its way. Lois picked up her gloves and hat, and with a very red, heated face began to brush the dust from her disordered dress, while Comfort, all at once remembering that hiving bees was not as familiar a business to every girl as to herself, hastened to express her thanks, as well as her sense of the other's courage under what was, no doubt, to her a trying experience.

“I'm ever so much obliged to you for helping me, and I think,” — with a touch of shyness, — “that you must be the bravest girl in the world to dare to do it. I have helped Granny so many times, and the bees know me so well that I don't think anything of it myself, but lots of folks round here would have been so frightened that they would n't have dared to do a single thing.”

Lois actually blushed with pleasure. She had been called pretty, and charming, and sweet, and all that, ever since she could remember, but brave, — here was something to be proud of indeed! and it is doubtful if in the social triumphs of her later years the little maiden ever tasted a sweeter cup than this innocent, honest tribute to her yet fresh lip. It was a new sensation, too, this consciousness of being useful

to somebody, and at the same time awoke in her a feeling of half-unconscious fellowship that she had never in all her life felt toward any companion of her own age and condition. This little brown-faced country girl, in her plain home-made gown, ungloved and unshod, not a whit more tasteful or fashionable in her dress than the despised Tabby Scripture, had something about her that drew and kept the friendly interest of this stranger, who was in almost every respect as far removed from her as one of the same age and sex could well be.

On any ordinary occasion, Comfort would never have dreamed of intruding herself upon the "stuck-up city Miss," as Tabby bitterly called her, for the child had an honest pride of her own that would never have allowed her to expose herself willingly to the rebuffs of a social superior. But everything had come about so naturally and unexpectedly that there had been no time for ceremony, and in her own mind Comfort was now thoroughly convinced that the little lady had been grievously slandered by the jealous Tabby, while the girlish delight with which she regarded her beauty, set off by its dainty adornments, had in it not a trace of envy or jealous detraction.

In her way, too, Lois was quite as much in love with the little bee-keeper, and as they sat together in the shadow of the deserted doorway, and with girlish freedom talked of a thousand things dear to the lives if not the hearts of each, a sense of comradeship that had nothing whatever to do with the birth, education, or position of either, awoke in them, and made the

acquaintanceship thus oddly begun a promise of future enjoyment and possible profit to both.

“She’s the dearest, most innocent little thing you ever saw,” declared Lois in the family conclave that evening.

“You need n’t look so unbelieving, auntie,” as that very prudent chaperon shook her head with an air of gentle incredulity. “She’s a little lady, with all her country ways, and I mean to be real intimate with her while we’re here, for I’m tired to death having no girl to go round with.”

“Now, Robert,” began Mrs. Humbre, with a vague feeling that somebody ought to interfere with this unequal friendship, — but Robert for once was on the other side.

“Don’t trouble yourself, mother,” — he spoke gently, as he always did to his mother, but there was a decision in his tones that showed a more than common interest in the subject, as well as a determination that rather surprised his listeners. “This little Comfort Hadlock is an old friend of mine, and if Lois will take pattern by her in the womanly virtues of unselfishness, modesty, and perfect truthfulness, she may prove the very best friend that she could have.”

Miss Delphine looked up quickly from her book.

“Is she the one you told us of who barred the door of that old woman against the midnight robbers, and was forced at the inquest to testify against her own brother?”

Robert smiled at his sister’s characteristic way of putting it, but he replied with a glance at Lois’s eager glowing face:

“The same. And for my part, I think the defense of her helpless old friend, gallant as it was, required less courage than that truthful testimony that she gave at the inquest. Moral courage is always superior, to my mind, than physical, let the world say what it will.”

“Why, Cousin Robert, she’s as brave as Jennie Deans!” cried Lois, and Robert nodded. Evidently he thought so, too.

CHAPTER XVIII

“THERE IS NO WIND BUT SOWETH SEEDS”

“SHE needs mothering, poor child!” repeated Mrs. Hadlock to herself, as through the half-closed kitchen door she listened to the blithe chatter of the girls, for Lois had, by this time, become almost as much at home in the old farmhouse as Comfort herself. From the first, there had been something about the pretty, wilful, impulsive child that had appealed strongly to the good woman’s motherly sympathies, and she had almost unconsciously come to include her in all the little tender privileges and loving tendance that she lavished upon her own child.

Mrs. Humbre would scarcely have recognized the dainty, pert, self-conscious little lady in miniature, of her careful training, in the helpful, happy child who hunted eggs in the fragrant, high-heaped mows, picked the strawberries for her own supper, and actually helped Comfort in her dish-washing with as deft and neat a hand as if she had done nothing else in all her life. That warm, tender atmosphere of motherly love seemed to bring out all that was best and sweetest in the girl, whose inner nature unfolded petal by petal, under its wholesome sunshine, as certain flowers, fair but scentless, all at once acquire a fragrance before unknown when exposed to the proper climatic

influences. There is no doubt that children may be dry nursed into a healthful, vigorous maturity, but it is certain that those same children will carry about with them all their lives a sense of something lacking to their childhood, a right of which they have been defrauded,—the right to that “mothering” that every creature, from the bird that builds in the lilac at your door, to the cat upon the hearth-rug cuddling her helpless babies close to her furry breast, finds it the joy and duty of life to bestow. The mother who looks upon her innocent baby as an encumbrance, to be shifted as far as possible upon the shoulders of hirelings, is as great a monstrosity as the two-headed girl or the frog boy.

How often we hear the expression: “Tied down to a family of children.” That is just it,—“tied,” held, bound to home and all its sweet, helpful, purifying influences, bound by the silken cord of a love that, in its unselfish devotion, is nearest akin to the Divine of any that humanity can know,—set apart, as in a blessed shrine, from all the turmoil and tumult of the busy world outside. Happy, thrice happy the woman who, with conscious pride, wears these love-woven bands as the insignia of a royalty more to be desired than the diadem of princes.

But there are mothers,—and mothers; and Mrs. Humbre being one of the “and mothers,” it is not strange that while caring faithfully for the bodily needs of her young charge, she should feel that her duties were well fulfilled, and that its own mother could not have done better by the beautiful child than she had done. And Lois had never realized the

difference until, in this old farmhouse by the sea, she had learned something of the tender, unselfish nature of true motherhood, and had come to long unspeakably for something like it in her own life.

Comfort, on her part, was learning in a hundred little ways from this companionship to modify her ruder notions of speech and manner, to amend her grammar as well as her dress, and best of all to acquire an intense longing for a broader, higher type of education than her own little world afforded. In her eyes Lois was a paragon of learning, and Miss Delphine the wisest woman in the whole world. It was a perfect delight to guide her new friends to the various points of interest in the neighborhood, and to help to collect the specimens that the elder lady had so sharp an eye for. It was so strange that all her life she had looked upon these wonders of sea and shore without realizing half their beauty and rarity, and never did a teacher have a more zealous and apt scholar in scientific study than did Miss Delphine in the Squire's bright little daughter.

Under her directions she learned to prepare and press the beautifully colored seaweeds and mosses, and even to classify some of the commoner kinds, thus outdoing Lois, who was perfectly content to preserve their delicate beauty in a convenient form without troubling herself with their genealogies or social habits. In the shallow caves along the shore, where the tides of the ages have worn away the solid rock, leaving the cavernous mouths ever gaping helplessly at the incoming destroyer, were wonderful collections of animal and vegetable growths, — each a museum

in itself, overflowing with wonders to the intelligent stranger who was fortunate enough to discover its hoarded secrets. It was to one of these caves on a pleasant July afternoon that Miss Delphine and her girlish companions took their way, mainly on Comfort's recommendation, and as always under her guidance. In her researches the learned lady had never paid much heed to the sentiment that "The proper study of mankind is Man," — inarticulate Nature had always interested her much more than the peculiarities, physical, mental, or moral, of her own kind. But on this lazy, hazy summer afternoon, the sea-bronzed, dilapidated old fishermen dotted here and there along the beach, like heaps of rusty brown sea-kelp, seemed so congenial and in harmony with the rough, weather-beaten rocks and stunted pines and spruces along the shore, that she was inclined for once to encourage her companions in their girlish good-fellowship for these veterans of the sea, and their sunburned, barefooted children.

"There's old Sol!" cried Comfort, and somewhat to Miss Delphine's surprise, Lois seemed to recognize the individual at once, and hastened after her friend in the direction of a solitary figure sitting upon a rock and so busy in his work of mending a net that he was evidently unaware of their approach until they were close beside him, then civilly touching his battered sou'wester, he returned their greeting with a hospitable smile that made every wrinkle of his weather-worn face express a separate welcome.

"Yer sarvent, ladies!" rising from his seat with as much alacrity as his rheumatic limbs would

allow, and glancing a little doubtfully at the stranger lady.

“I’m loth ter disapp’int ye,” he went on, evidently under the impression that his services as a boatman were desired, “but Jake’s out fishin’ with the dory, an’ the pinkie leaks like a sieve.”

Comfort hastened to explain that they were out for a walk instead of a sail, and that their destination was the “Mermaid’s Cave,”—whereat old Sol scratched his grizzled head, and “allowed” that they’d “have ter step spry,” or they “wouldn’t get there while ’t was slack water. You see, ma’am,” addressing Miss Delphine, as the responsible member of the party, “she’s a nasty place, that air cave is, f’r a body ter get stranded in when the tide’s comin’ in. I raily think now that ’t would be safer f’r me ter take that pinkie o’ Bill Jones’s, an’ row ye over. That’ll save time, an’ I c’n keep a lookout so’t you won’t get caught onawares when the tide comes in.”

Miss Delphine cast her eyes along the rocky, far-stretching shore and was half persuaded, but Lois interposed impatiently:

“No, no, Cousin Del! it’s ever so much more fun to walk. I want to get some of those sea-urchins, and you know you promised you’d help us find a razor-shell.”

Miss Delphine yielded, though rather against her own judgment, and the fisherman, watching them as they walked away, ruminated with a look of apprehension on his weather-beaten old face:

“She do look kind o’ ugly,” scanning meanwhile the summer sky, over which a few fleecy white clouds

were leisurely sailing. "Dog Mounting 's hed his storm signal out ever sense the turn o' the tide. Here, you Mandy," stirring with his toe a small bundle of faded and tattered calico burrowing in the sand, behind a convenient rock, as shapeless, uncouth, and evidently as wild as the sand crabs that she was digging for, "what dandy craft's that, that Squire Hadlock's gal's got in tow?"

"Lor, gran'daddy, don't ye know? Well, you are green," piped up a small voice, with a laugh that had a queer, muffled sound as if the throat it came from was full of the Island fog. "Did n't ye ever hearn o' them city swells harborin' down ter the Widder Scripture's?"

"Why, yis, yis,—sure enuff," and the old man walked a little farther down the shore, and stretched his neck to get a good look at the retreating figures. "Schooner rigged, both of 'em, an' the little one carries a fair show o' buntin' " (evidently referring to the ribbons on Lois's hat). "See here, you Mandy," turning the ungainly figure around, and regarding it with a meditative eye, "mebbe if you had as trim a rig o' stompers on yer hoofs as that un, an' hed yer brush all slicked up an' braided smooth an' trim, even if ye did n't have no streamers ter decker with, and hed yer canvas all clean an' whole as them uns has, *you'd* look kind o' smart an' wholesome, too."

A hot flush of angry shame sprang to the freckled, sunburned face, and almost quenched the tears that filled her blue eyes as she turned them, half in anger yet full of tender reproach upon her grandfather.

"I hain't no lady, an' I hain't got nobody ter buy

me a lady's rigout, and if I hed, I should n't be nobody but 'Mandy' all the same. I did n't think, gran'daddy," and now the tears overflowed her eyes and ran unchecked down her hot cheeks, "I did n't think you 'd ever be ashamed of me."

"No more I hain't, sweetheart," cried the remorseful old man, with a hearty slap upon her shoulder, the nearest approach to a caress in which he ever indulged; — "ye 're the best cook on the Island, 'f I do say it, an' what Jake an' I 'd do without ye the Lord only knows. Ye see I was only kind o' spekilatin' " — (treading softly as if realizing that he was on dangerous ground,) "as ter how much better, — bein' clipper-built, — you 'd look in their riggin' than they do."

Mandy drew the back of one dirty little hand across her eyes, and a smile spread like sunshine over her childish face as she graciously accepted the old man's amende honorable. And yet somehow, the incautious words had left a wound that could not be easily healed, and the fisherman's little half-wild grand-daughter for the first time in her life, found herself painfully conscious of her bare feet and torn gown, as she slowly picked her way back to the humble cabin where, with her grandfather and the boy Jake, she had until now lived without a thought of anything better than its rough shelter and scanty resources afforded.

Now, the first thing that she did after re-kindling the decaying brands in the rude stone fireplace, was to bring out a wooden pocket comb from some obscure corner, and set herself resolutely to work to

comb out the tangles in her matted, sunburned hair. It was a tremendous undertaking, and the child tugged and pulled at the refractory snarls, until the pain brought the tears to her eyes, and a volley of explosives, more forcible than polite, from her lips. Still she persevered, for she had been born of a patient, determined race, and when the task was fairly completed, and the long, heavy locks neatly braided, their owner took a good long look at herself in the bit of broken looking-glass that graced the tall wooden chimney shelf, and gave a sigh of rare satisfaction.

“My brush is longer by two inches than that city gal’s,” she chuckled, holding out the long braid admiringly, “an’ now I’ll wash my face an’ han’s, an’ mend the biggest holes in my gown, an’ see what gran’daddy’ll say to me then.”

Poor little Mandy! You are getting your first taste of the unrest and dissatisfaction with self that civilization of every grade is sure to bring in its train, and without which neither nations nor individuals would ever have emerged from their original barbarism. There is a feeling of self-respect and honest satisfaction engendered by the consciousness of being neatly and fittingly attired, let satirists and stoics say what they will, and the woman who first invented a covering for her head, and clothed her naked shoulders with a mantle of her own weaving, was as truly the benefactor of her sex and species as she who to-day bravely contends for the right to make the most of the natural gifts bestowed upon her by her Maker.

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Many frivolities and belittling ideas and notions were to be introduced into the lives of, and grafted upon the sturdy old Island stock, by the incoming tide of fashionable pleasure seekers. But when we remember the greater breadth of thought, the refining and enlightening influences that necessarily have found their way through a thousand channels into the sleepy little community, awakening ambitions that are not all selfish and mercenary by any means, we must own that the wealth and material prosperity that Fashion has brought to the sea-girt Island is not the only or the best gift bestowed upon it. Poverty and isolation are strong barriers in the advance of any community, and whatever force overcomes them and throws open the gates to a neighborly interchange of civilities with the world outside, is and must be largely a beneficent one.

CHAPTER XIX

“A SEALÉD PALACE, RICH AND DIM”

IN spite of old Sol's prediction, the blue summer sea lay unruffled by so much as a cat's paw of wind, leaving a wide stretch of wet beach from which the tide had so lately receded that the heaps of seaweed were alive with the curious forms of animal life left by the inflowing wave, and the girls gladly loitered at the mouth of the cave, hunting for star-fishes and sea-urchins, — the first of every age and size from the tiny rosette with its five shapeless knobs sticking out in every direction, to the full-grown animal with its five mail-clad fingers capped with a watchful eye at the tip of each, and hundreds of tiny feet with which it crawls over the rocks and sands, searching for food to satisfy the ever hungry mouth beneath. It was rare fun to catch the curious things, and dropping them into one of the pools left by the retreating tide, watch them as they sucked in the sea water through the minute filter that Nature has provided in the shape of a little plate of lime, pierced with holes between two of the mailed fingers; and even Lois, despite her reluctance to touch the “slimy, creepy things,” could not resist the contagion of her companion's enthusiasm, and curiously watched this glutton of the sea at his feeding, even catering to his greed by now and then dropping a plump mussel

shell in his path, or stirring him up with the tip of one cautious finger, just to see him curl up the tips of his rays, and from all five of his red eyes dart a look of angry defiance at his tormentor.

The girls would have found amusement enough in these queer playfellows to have lasted them all the afternoon, but Miss Delphine was getting impatient to explore the cave, whose dim, dark recesses promised a far rarer treat to her scientific palate than those common if curious creatures that every heap of seaweed harbored a colony of. As they passed beneath the grim, overarching gateway, the sudden change from the warmth and sunshine that reigned without sent an involuntary chill to even Comfort's accustomed nerves, while Lois grumbled audibly, and Miss Delphine hurried forward as if half suspicious that her escort might fail her even now, and this bit of wonderland be left unexplored after all. Advancing a few yards from the mouth, the light grew dim, almost like twilight, while the echoing waves made a strange weird music in their ears that checked for a moment the girls' careless chatter, and sent a feeling of awe even to Miss Delphine's sober scientific bosom. The floor was of pale pink limestone, worn smooth as marble by the tide, and half hidden by dull green heaps of drifted seaweed, over which Lois stumbled helplessly, with many an impatient exclamation.

“I don't see what there is to look at in this damp, nasty hole!” she cried, catching at the rough walls of the cavern to steady herself. “It's so dark and pokerish that I can hardly tell rock from seaweed. Ugh!” with a frantic clutch at Miss Delphine's skirts,

"Some ugly thing hanging on the wall caught at my fingers. I just won't stay another minute, so there!"

But Miss Delphine only laughed, giving her a little reassuring shake, as she explained for her benefit, that "'T was nothing but a sea anemone, a beautiful harmless creature, that could n't hurt one if he would."

And now that their eyes were becoming accustomed to the dim light, the group plucked up courage enough to look about them with a wondering curiosity that had in it something of repulsion as well as pleasure. The walls of the cavern, never visited by the direct rays of the sun, were thickly covered with those marvellous growths that form the connecting link between animal and vegetable life, and lend plausibility to the theories of certain scientists who contend that both sprang from the same parent atom. There were anemones, clinging cuplike to the rock, with waving plumes of scarlet, green, and orange tentacles, and throwing off countless buds that in time would develop the same beautiful form and hues of the parent plant-animal. Pale green sponges, dripping with the briny moisture that the tide had left in their numberless canals; and thousands of the little shell fish called "acorn shells" securely anchored to the rock, and each waving a tuft of transparent threads like a curl of delicate hair, from the door of his shelly, cone-shaped home.

Miss Delphine was in her element, and her companions could do no less than listen to her enthusiastic comments.

"See here," calling their attention to the veritable

anemone whose chilly welcome had so disgusted Lois, “is n’t he a beauty? He’s one of the lasso-throwers that I described to you, Lois, — of the same family, you know, as the jellyfish and coral animal.”

“A beauty!” cried Lois, highly indignant. “An ugly, spiteful old thing, I call him. I should n’t wonder a bit,” ruefully examining the endangered finger, “if he’d poisoned me with his nasty lasso.”

“No danger of that,” and Miss Delphine deliberately proceeded to place her own finger in the midst of the feathery cluster. “The lassos are so minute that they make no impression upon a person’s skin, but they serve to paralyze the small slugs and sea worms upon which the creature feeds.”

Here Lois, who had been gradually getting up her courage, hastened to distinguish herself by a discovery on her own account:

“See here, Cousin Del,” peering curiously into a rocky crevice filled with water, “what a funny creature this is. He looks like a plump brown sausage.”

Miss Delphine was all alive with excitement.

“Where? where? Why, I really do believe you’ve found a sea-cucumber. Yes,” straining her eyes to get a good look at the sluggish creature as he lay motionless upon his rocky couch, “yes, there are the five stripes down his back, and oh, girls! do see those lovely purple tentacles about his mouth. I would n’t have missed him for the world.” And the speaker actually trembled with the joy and excitement of the unexpected discovery.

“If I can only get him, — where’s the pail, Comfort?”

And as Comfort hastily produced the pail filled with sea water that had been taken along with them for possible "specimens," Miss Delphine very gingerly introduced the tips of her fingers into the cucumber's bath, and with insinuating gentleness proceeded to lift the unresisting occupant from the water, when all at once, with a swift, gliding motion, the almost captive slipped from her hand, and in an instant, discharging from its body the water that formed nine-tenths of its bulk, simply effaced itself by shrinking into a crevice so small that even Lois's slender fingers could not reach him.

"That's one of his tricks," cried Miss Delphine, not a little disappointed, while both girls "wondered" in concert at his remarkable agility and power of reducing his bulk at will.

It was "as good as a museum," declared Lois, who, now used to the dusk and dampness, wandered fearlessly about the rocky chamber, insisting upon a minute examination of every new discovery, and enjoying herself immensely in playing the tutor to Comfort, whose bewilderment in the face of all these before unheard-of wonders was so funny that it called forth peals of laughter from her merry mate, and made the dim old cavern echo with the unfamiliar music. Miss Delphine was so occupied in filling her pail with rare specimens of these strange cave dwellers that she failed to notice the increasing gloom, until a sudden exclamation from one of the girls aroused her to a consciousness that the twilight was fast darkening about them, while the soft purr of the tide without had swelled into a hoarse, angry

note, that had something ominous and threatening to their startled ears.

“Bless my soul! I never dreamed that it was getting so late.” And closely followed by her girlish companions, Miss Delphine hurried to the mouth of the cave, where she stood for a moment, thunderstruck at the transformation that a few short hours had wrought in sky and ocean. The sea was of an angry green, and its hurrying waves, thickly dotted with white caps, — ominous of the coming storm, — were beaten down by the fierce north wind that whirled the foamy crests far to leeward, or dashed them against the grim face of the cliff in creamy patches, bespattering beach and boulder with the cold, salt spray. The fair islands that had lain almost within hailing distance upon the bosom of the placid summer sea were now hidden from sight in a thick gloom of gray fog; while the sea gulls, skirmishing with fearless wing the threatening waves, sent forth a shrill, boding cry, that to an imaginative mind might have seemed either a warning or a dirge. But Miss Delphine’s was not an imaginative mind, and after the first start of surprise with which she had recognized the coming storm, she lost no time in useless regrets or fears, but with a cheerful word of encouragement to Lois, took her hand, and led by Comfort, hastened across the rocky beach in the direction from which they had come a few hours before.

To the Island-bred girl the way though rough was by no means impassable, although the tide was now coming in so fast that they were soon drenched from

head to foot with the spray, and the rocks, made slippery by the damp, served as so many traps for their unused feet. They were now forced to abandon the smoother sand and clamber as best they could over the decaying tree trunks and débris that the ocean had flung from time to time upon the unreturning shore, and which now lay in hopeless confusion, bleached and battered by the remorseless hand of Time.

Lois was soon crying bitterly with fatigue and cold, while Miss Delphine tried hard to keep up her own spirits as well as those of her charge, by the hopeful prophecy that "the way would certainly be easier soon." But swiftly, surely, the gray damp fog closed in upon them, absorbing them into its cold, grim folds, making her feel, — Miss Delphine declared afterwards, — as if some giant antediluvian jellyfish was making a meal of them after his own peculiar fashion. Every landmark was hidden, not a mountain peak, not an island, not a familiar tree even was visible through the dense veil, while the sometime smiling, bland, and hospitable sea was transformed into a ravening beast of prey, whose every spring brought him nearer to their trembling feet, and sent the foam from his fierce lips upon their frightened, bewildered faces.

Dear, blessed, little Comfort! What would they have done without her cheery guidance and helpful suggestions? Inured to, and almost as much at home in the fog and tempest as the gulls themselves, she had need of little thought for her own comfort and safety, and with her help and encouragement the

hardest part of the tramp had actually been accomplished, when suddenly Miss Delphine's uncertain feet slipped, and she fell heavily to the ground, uttering a cry of mingled pain and dismay that terrified beyond measure her young companions, as they tried in vain to lift her from the wet sand upon which she had fallen. Lois sank helplessly upon her knees beside her, and took the cold damp hands in her own:

“What is it, Cousin Del?” she sobbed, “Where are you hurt?”

“It is my ankle, — I'm afraid I've sprained it.” And rallying all her powers of self control, the injured woman made a desperate effort to sit upright, and smiled faintly into the dismayed faces bending over her. “One thing is certain, I can't get away from here without help.”

Lois uttered a cry of despair, but Comfort's voice was steady and even cheerful as she said with a promptness that carried hope with it:

“It is n't very far from here to old Sol's cabin, as I reckon it. And if we can get you up a little farther among the pines, you'll be kind of sheltered from the spray, and with this shawl over you, maybe you won't so much mind waitin' while I run ahead and get somebody to come and help.”

“It seems the only thing to do,” admitted Miss Delphine, suppressing a groan, “but are you sure you know the way, and won't get lost in the fog yourself?”

Comfort actually laughed, a pleasant little ripple upon that great ocean of sound that roared about them.

“I could find my way in the darkest night that ever was,” she returned confidently; “and it won’t take me long either.”

Then half dragging, half supporting their almost helpless burden, the girls at length succeeded in establishing her in a comparatively comfortable spot under the shelter of a big boulder, out of whose side a young pine had sprung, whose lusty branches helped to keep the now fast-falling raindrops from her otherwise undefended head. Poor Lois was so completely exhausted that she could only nestle close to Miss Delphine’s side, and drawing the skirt of her flannel dress over her head, cling to her shivering but silent, too much spent to even reply to Comfort’s cheery admonition to “keep up a good heart and not to forget to keep a lookout along shore for the lantern that the old fisherman would bring with him in his search for them.” A moment more and the slender, active figure had faded into the mists, and the two, left alone in that desolate place, felt a new, strange sense of utter desolation creeping over them, as if the last link that bound them to their kind had been suddenly severed, and they left in the outer darkness of an unpeopled, impenetrable world of fog and mists.

Queer, weird fancies chased each other across Miss Delphine’s brain, — fancies that made her smile even in her pain and loneliness, for it was as if a band of tricky elves had chosen the Widow Scripture’s potato patch for their midnight revels. Ariels, in long, trailing robes of violet fog, beckoned to her from the overhanging cliff; while gray, filmy-winged

creatures, purple-haired like the ghosts of departed sea anemones, flitted, crept, and crawled over the wet sands and rocks, or held high carnival in the fast-filling pools that the rising tide had created. A quotation from Homer, learned long ago in her school days, came back to her there in the darkness and gloom, and poor little Lois actually shook with terror, thinking her delirious, as she muttered the words, not so inappropriate really, with the odor of decaying herring in their nostrils.

“ Now doth our ambush seem
Beyond endurance, for the noisome smell
Of those sea-nourished creatures sickens us,
And who could bear to sleep beside a whale ? ”

“ Oh, Cousin Del ! ” sobbed the girl clutching her arm in her nervous grasp, “ please talk about ‘ forminifira,’ or ‘ miliolites,’ or ‘ orbitolites,’ or any other ‘ lites ’ if you want to, but don’t quote poetry here or I shall go crazy, too.”

“ You ridiculous little goose ! ”

Miss Delphine laughed aloud and the spell was broken. The fog, the sea, and the creeping tide were only everyday things after all, and the two settled down in comparative comfort, keeping, as they had been warned to do, a sharp lookout for the promised light that was to be to them the herald of shelter, warmth, and it was to be hoped a good supper as well.

CHAPTER XX

“I LIKE STRONG MEN AND LARGE; I LIKE GRAY HEADS”

“LOOK 'ere you Mandy?”

Sol always gave a rising inflection to his voice when addressing this member of the family, that might mean either a doubt of her presence or of her personality, or even of both. Mandy on her side evidently understood the remark as an interrogative for after the manner of her race and place, she replied to it with another:

“Well, gran'daddy, what is it?”

The old man smoked his pipe meditatively for a few minutes before he deigned a reply, and when he did speak there was a foggy irrelevancy about his words that would have left a stranger completely in the dark as to what point he was steering for.

“They say, them as knows, that they're more likely to be caught nappin' on a wild night like this than when the moon shines.”

Mandy tossed a flapjack into the air and dextrously caught it brown side up, in the long-handled iron skillet, while her childish face, aglow in the firelight, suddenly assumed a troubled, anxious look, as she glanced across at the bent form of the old fisherman in the chimney corner, who rather from force

of habit than from any actual craving for the warmth, was spreading his big, toil-worn hands to catch as much as possible of the genial blaze.

“Gran’daddy, that ’s fool’s gold, jest as true ’s you live.”

“Mebbe ’t is, Mandy, an’ then ag’in, mebbe ’t ain’t.” And drawing from some secret pocket of his rough pea-jacket a battered leathern wallet, he produced from it a piece of soiled paper worn and creased by much handling, and bending nearer the fire began with much difficulty to trace out the irregular lines faintly visible by the flickering light; “Le’s see,—you steer straight up the road fur ’s Higgins’s ile shed then turn to yer left an’—see here, you Jake, yer eyes air younger ’n mine, du you call that a mark, or ain’t it nothin’ but a crease in the paper?”

Jake, a tall, shy, shambling lad, whose chief aim in life seemed to be, like that of the sea cucumber, to efface himself as far as possible from the sight and touch of humanity in general, approached awkwardly and looked over the old man’s shoulder with a furtive, half-uncertain air as of an undefended hermit crab looking out for a new house.

“Ya’as, she ’s a crease, I shou’d say.”

The old man gave a dissatisfied snort, and the youth scuttled back to his seat upon the dye-pot cover with such absurd haste that he came near overturning the little supper table, thereby calling forth a characteristic rebuke from Mandy, that seemed to bewilder him still more, for in his flurry he managed to dislodge the bit of board that served as a cover, and set himself fairly down into the odorous liquid,

that splashed not only over himself, but painted wall and floor with picturesque patches of the deepest indigo.

“Wa'al, you gump! you've been an' done it now,” cried the girl with a burst of derisive laughter that, coupled with his wretched plight, actually aroused the unfortunate lad to something like indignation.

“Try it yerself, 'f ye think it's fun gettin' ducked in a darnation old dye-pot,” he grumbled, as with Sol's help he managed to extricate himself from his unpleasant predicament, and stood erect with the sombre fluid dripping from every thread and ragged edge of his dilapidated trousers. “I call it a darned mean trick ter set a stinkin' old trap like that f'r a feller, and then set up a cackle when he's in.”

But Mandy's heart was as hard as the nether mill-stone.

“Hain't I told ye, time an' time ag'in, that that air cover was onsafe? And hain't you jest anchored yerself thar night after night, when you might 'a' had a stool f'r yerself, as well as the rest on us?”

Both tone and words were so exasperating that the offended Jake could find no terms in his limited vocabulary strong enough to express his feelings, and silently retiring, with his parti-colored rags still dripping fragrance, into the darkest corner of the cabin, he sullenly refused to join them at supper, although old Sol, whose hearty soul could not endure to see even a dog go hungry, condescended, after a fashion of his own, to “entreat” him.

“Come now, like a man,—an' don't skulk in a

corner like a hoss mackerel that's lost 'is tail. These jo-floggers air prime, an' make about the best ballast that a man c'n have f'r a night's cruise."

Jake said nothing, but Mandy took up the word with suspicious eagerness:

"What d' ye mean by that, gran'daddy?" she asked with the imperious air of one who knows that her word is law. "You don't mean that you're goin' gold diggin' to-night in this blow?"

The old man laid down his knife and fork, and drawing the back of his hand across his mouth in lieu of a napkin, slowly and gravely replied:

"That's jest what I'm goin' ter do. Did n't that feller that had the jaw with Cap'n Kidd's sperit, tell us we'd have ter take a dark night with a high wind, so 't the sperits 'd be under cover?"

"Ye-es," assented Mandy, with evident reluctance, while Jake from his corner gave vent to a queer, rumbling sound that might have been a groan, although it sounded very much like "darned old fool!" "But now, gran'daddy, you mark my words," and the small maid placed her hands on her hips, and assumed that attitude of feminine authority that the fisher wives of the hamlet affected on occasions of difference between themselves and their brawny lords, "you won't never find no money by diggin' for it. All the money you'll get 'll be dug out o' the sea with a trawl f'r a shovel."

The old man laughed a little shamefacedly as he took down the old tin lantern and proceeded to replace the half-burned candle with a fresh one.

"I believe there's gold thar, or I would n't 'a' spent all my hard airnin's in buyin' up a lot o' land that a

grasshopper 'd starve on. The man talked honest, and I hain't a bit o' doubt but what Cap'n Kidd's sperit told 'im was true. You see, a sperit, not havin' no use f'r money itself, would n't naterally begrutch it to anybody that 'd made a good use of it."

"Then what's he sneakin' round, keepin' an eye on it for?" demanded Mandy shrewdly. "I believe, gran'daddy," she added with solemn deliberateness, "that that air feller were a sucker, an' that he were jest playin' you with store-flies that had n't no meat in 'em."

The old man looked really mortified and hurt.

"Now Mandy, —" he began, but the sentence was never finished, for just then came a tap upon the door, and in an instant more the white, anxious face of Comfort Hadlock looked in upon them, and her voice, faint and hoarse from her hard walk through the damp, windy night, called out with the unceremoniousness that marked the intercourse of the simple villagers upon all occasions great and small:

"Uncle Sol, hurry up, do! Miss Delphine and Lois are back here a mile or so on the beach, — and Miss Delphine's hurt her ankle so't she can't step a step. I run ahead to get you to go and help them."

"Wa-all, so ye did, — so I will," cried the fisherman bestirring himself with a will, while Jake, emerging from his sulky retirement, seemed all at once inspired with new life, as, under the old man's directions, he bustled about, bringing out the only chair that the cabin afforded, — a broad, strong-armed, splint-bot-tomed affair, — which, with the aid of a couple of oars was speedily improvised into a very respectable sedan

chair, in which not only the helpless lady herself but her young companion, might, with some squeezing, be fairly well accommodated.

Comfort, though exhausted and wet, would willingly have gone back with the relief party, but upon this project old Sol very peremptorily put his foot.

“You c’n give me the bearin’s, an’ I c’n haul ’em in without no help from you. Besides,” with a quick glance at Mandy’s half-frightened face, “you c’n give my little gal a p’int or two as ter what ’ll need to be done fr’em, when they ’re once in port.”

So, after giving the needed directions, Comfort made herself at home in the little cabin, helping the bewildered Mandy to spread clean blankets upon her own bed, — which was in the farthest corner of the cabin, and in deference to her sex was modestly partitioned off with an old, much bepatched sail, that made an effective if not exactly elegant screen for the humble little bedchamber. The teakettle was hung over the fire, and Mandy, encouraged and aided by the “Squire’s gal,” soon had an appetizing supper ready for the coming guests: fresh herring, not two hours out of their native element, and fried to a delicious brown by Mandy’s experienced hand, a hot spider cake or, as Mandy called it, a “fresh smother,” lobster scarce cold from the kettle, and a cup of tea, strong, and black, and bitter, but wonderfully invigorating to tired bodies and strained nerves. With wide, wondering eyes, the small mistress of the cabin regarded the setting of the table, a task that Comfort took upon herself, spreading over it a bit of clean white canvas that she was fortunate enough to find among Sol’s

stores, and setting the few rude cracked dishes upon it in as tempting and orderly a fashion as possible.

“Me 'n' gran'daddy likes sweetenin' in our tea,” suggested Mandy, as she saw the dipper of molasses removed to make room for other dishes. “Our one 'stravagance he calls it.” And she looked at her companion with such untamed, innocent eyes, that the girl had not the heart to dispel her little illusion by hinting that this poor luxury of the fisherman's cabin would be regarded as a most undesirable addition to their meal, by the city-bred strangers.

“If they want their tea sweetened they can say so,” she said with assumed brusqueness, while Mandy, no longer concerned about the menu, watched and listened, running every other minute to the door to peer out into the damp darkness for a glimpse of the approaching lantern, and quite as often slipping slyly behind the canvas curtain to give a finishing pat to the humble little bed that, with its clean blankets, and downy pillows filled with sea-birds' feathers, was, to her uneducated eye the very tip-top of elegance, — a couch fit for one of the nereids. And yet, when the party actually arrived, wet, tired, but in remarkably good spirits, Mandy had vanished, — not a tag of her faded gown, nor even a glint of her yellow hair to reveal her hiding-place. Comfort was left to play the hostess, and after seeing them comfortably warmed and dried, to serve up the hot toothsome supper, to which all did full credit, Miss Delphine declaring that nothing in all her life had ever tasted so good as the fresh sweet fish and strong tea.

Lois, too, had regained all her natural vivacity,

and with that instinctive craving for admiration that was as much a part of herself as her eyes and hair, set herself to work to charm and bedazzle the unsophisticated fishermen, keeping old Sol open-mouthed with delighted wonderment over her merry chatter, and smiling so bewitchingly on Jake that, when it was suggested that he travel through all the darkness and rain to carry news of their safety to the anxious friends at home, he actually started off without a word of objection,—something so unprecedented on his part that the old fisherman looked after him in innocent amazement.

“What’s got ter the lad?” he exclaimed wonderingly; “I hain’t so sure,” with a comical glance at the bespattered floor, “but a duckin’ in the dye-pot’d do him good as often as once a week.” Then, to Lois’s intense delight, he went on to describe in his dry, humorous fashion, poor Jake’s strange mishap, with its uncomfortable consequences. Under cover of the general laughter, Mandy contrived to slip in from nobody could guess where, and timidly sheltering herself behind her grandfather looked out from under his arm, as silent, watchful, and shy as some half-tamed wild animal, which, while trusting the hand of its tamer, looks with distrustful wonder upon all the world besides.

Even Lois found her merry spells unavailing here. Not a word or smile could she wile from those shy, silent lips; while to Miss Delphine’s friendly advances the old man was forced to respond instead:

“She hain’t never had the chance, Mandy hain’t, ter get acquainted with folks,” and he rubbed her

timid head with his elbow, much as a fatherly cod might caress the young one swimming beside him, with a convenient flipper. "But the time'll come, 'fore soon, maybe, — who knows? that she'll hold up her head with the best. Fine clo'es, schoolin', an' a two-story house painted white —"

"With green blin's, gran'daddy," piped up an eager voice behind his chair.

"Yes, with green blin's," and the old man winked shrewdly at his amused audience, "an', — lemme see, what else?"

"A 'cordion to play on."

"Yes, a 'cordion; an' a pinkie all'er own, painted green, —"

"No, no, gran'daddy! white, with a green stripe round 'er." And forgetting in the delights of castle building all her shyness, Mandy actually climbed into the old man's arms, and with flushed cheeks, and restless hands stroking his gray-bearded face, poured forth in an odd jargon of sea and shore words and phrases the pent-up aspirations of her untrained soul.

Knowing how great must be the anxiety of her mother and brother, Miss Delphine was not at all surprised on rising from the breakfast table at an early hour the next morning, to hear the welcome sound of wheels and to catch sight of Robert's face as he drove up to the door where old Sol, with the unaccustomed honors of a host fresh upon him, stood beaming a most hospitable welcome.

"Ye'll find yer strays all right!" he shouted, giving the young man's hand a grip that made him

wince; “but ’f it had n’t been f’r me an’ Jake an’ the Squire’s little gal they’d ’a’ been in pretty poor sleddin’, I’m afraid.”

Miss Delphine was evidently of the same opinion, for besides expressing her heartiest thanks, she ventured with some diffidence to press upon her host a generous remuneration for his services, which was indignantly refused. He “did n’t sell kindness,” and in spite of all that Robert and his sister could urge, he proudly persisted in his refusal to accept money for his hospitality. It was his one pride, his right as an honest man and a householder to exercise his hospitality without let or stint to equal and superior alike, and the thanks of these rich, idle, city folks, whose lavishness was the wonder of the hamlet, was a bigger feather in his cap, according to his ideas, than any costly gifts that they might have bestowed upon him. But Mandy, ragged little Mandy, with her bare feet and her one shabby gown, what cared she for the privilege of hospitality upon which her grandfather so prided himself? But she did not know that he noticed her whispered words to the lady at parting, or that noticing them he was shrewd enough to guess their import, until, as the carriage disappeared around the curve he turned upon her with eyes of grave reproach.

“Mandy, come here.”

Mandy obeyed, with a hang-dog look that was in itself a confession of guilt.

“What did you say to them folks out thar?”

“I did n’t ask ’em for no money, gran’daddy,” cried the girl, the guilty crimson spreading to

the very roots of her hair, "I never did, honest true."

"Mandy," and now there was surprise as well as sorrow in his tones, "I would n't 'a' thought it of ye, truly I would n't." Mandy hid her face and cried softly into a corner of her ragged apron. "We're poor an' ignorant, the Lord knows, but we ain't got quite so low that we c'n demean ourselves ter take pay fr a common act of neighborly civility. Yes, pay, Mandy,—fr it amounts to the same thing whether it's in money or—"

"A new frock," appended the conscience-stricken Mandy.

"Yes, or a new frock. I don't want ter be ha'ash or onreasonable, an' I wa' n't never ashamed of yer ragged clo'es or yer bare feet—whatever ye think. But when it comes ter this, that a gran'darter o' mine'll try ter make my honest manhood pay fr fine feathers to deck 'erself out in, I'll own ter bein' that mortified that I'd be glad ter hide my head in the very first pigpen I come to."

"I won't take the frock, gran'daddy, 'f you say so," sobbed the culprit, "but oh! I did want it awful."

"An' you shall have it, Mandy," and there was something pathetic in the smile with which he regarded the sobbing girl. "I won't invest in that other piece o' land I 'lotted on; you shall have a frock an' some shoes into the bargain. How'll that do?"

"You're awful clever, gran'daddy."

And so both were satisfied.

CHAPTER XXI

“OF GENTLE BLOOD AND MANNERS”

THE injury to Miss Delphine's ankle proved not to be so slight as at first appeared, and greatly to her disgust the energetic lady was forced to confine herself to the house and her armchair for several weeks, during which time she solaced herself with studying the various specimens of island flora that the girls brought her, or, much to Comfort's delight, gave them a lesson now and then in reading, by letting them read by turns from some book that she thought likely to interest as well as instruct them. That was before the days of “object teaching,” so called, but Miss Delphine was a born teacher, and instinctively chose the best means that came to hand to interest her pupils, and incite them to study out for themselves many things that were not written down in the text books of their day. An old Indian pipe found in one of the shell heaps with which the island abounded served as a text for lessons on Sir Walter Raleigh, the settlement in Virginia, the discovery of tobacco, and the reign of Queen Elizabeth.

Here Lois was in her element, her imagination fairly revelling in pictures of the stately virgin queen and her gallant courtier, admiral, and poet; while the story of the brave cavaliers, who dared the dangers

of an almost unknown deep to plant the flag of their country upon the shores of a new world, sent the hot blood tingling to Comfort's finger ends, and made leathern jerkin and slashed doublet alike glorious in her eyes. The one was dazzled with the outside show and glitter, the other looked deeper for the unpurchasable jewel of manly worth and courage that no mean attire or circumstance could mar, or ducal coronet adorn.

It was this trait in the Squire's little daughter that, apart from all her innocent, winsome ways, made her a decided favorite with the blunt, unaffected woman, whose honest soul had been for years constantly fretted and annoyed by the petty inconsistencies and small subterfuges of a life where outside appearances were all, and where the soul might shrivel and harden like the kernel of a dry acorn if only the shell were smooth, and plump, and fair to look upon. Her own lack of tact had, as she well knew, gone far to lessen her influence in home and social circles, and none knew better than herself the opinion that her mother's fashionable friends held in regard to her, "So unladylike in her tastes, and a perfect dowdy."

She might have been a selfish, heartless, deceitful coquette, with no more heart in her bosom than the rocky figure of the Assyrian over yonder, but she would have been petted and caressed by her own sex, and adored by the other, even though behind her back they called her "jilt" and "flirt," possibly a harsher name. But Comfort, young and unsophisticated, while the soul of candor and honesty, had yet that rare gift, — rarer than most people suppose, —

of holding inflexibly to her own ideas of right and wrong without making herself in the least obnoxious to those of opposite opinions.

Of all things in the world Miss Delphine had a passion for symmetry, that nice proportion that the student of Nature finds everywhere in her vast realm, in which no part dwarfs or overtops another, but each performs its own functions in its own way without let or hindrance from the rest. And this mental and moral symmetry she had found where she would never have dreamed of looking for it, in the home-trained, unpretentious daughter of a plain Mount Desert farmer. Lois was delighted to see with what favor her friend was received by one and all. Even Mrs. Humbre, after the first uneasy suspiciousness with which she regarded the rustic dress and speech of the little country maiden, began to look upon her with an interest that gradually warmed into unqualified approval as she found that the girl was gifted with that unexplainable magnetic power by means of which her small hands were able to charm away the pain of an aching head,—a task that their owner gladly undertook whenever her services were needed,—to the nervous invalid’s great satisfaction and comfort.

“I don’t see,” remarked that lady one evening, as, attended by her family, she sat upon the western piazza, enjoying one of those superb sunsets seen nowhere but at Mount Desert, “I don’t see where that little Hadlock girl got her gentle, modest, unobtrusive manners. I don’t believe she could do a rude or awkward thing under any circumstances. And yet,

before we came here, I doubt if she ever was in the society of a really well-bred person in all her life."

Robert and his sister exchanged amused glances, as the former said in a meditative tone :

"I fancy she did n't 'get' them at all. They are a part of herself, not a graft upon the original wild stock."

"She is never awkward," interposed Miss Delphine, "because she has so little self-consciousness; and she is never rude because she consults other people's conveniences and tastes before her own."

"She is a very interesting and agreeable little girl," — and Mrs. Humbre frowned at Lois, who had carelessly trodden on Flora's tail, thus making that pampered pet give mouth to a sharp yelp. "I have been thinking that with proper training she would make an excellent maid for Lois, when the child is ready to 'come out.' I have half a mind to offer to take her to Boston with me and let Jane teach her dress-making so that she will understand the care and arrangement of Lois's clothes. Then she could learn hair dressing from Monsieur —, I know he would teach her to oblige me, and —"

"There, there, mother! That won't do at all. If you invite Comfort Hadlock to your home it must be as Lois's friend and equal, not as her servant."

The group looked at him for a moment in silent astonishment. The sentiment was what might have been expected from one so democratic in his ideas, but the unwonted sharpness of his tones, and more than all, the angry flush that rose to his face as he indignantly repudiated the thought of offering a

menial position to the free-born island maiden, sent a thrill of apprehensive wonder to Mrs. Humbre's jealous soul. What if he had taken the notion into his head to adopt and educate this girl, who had inspired them all with such a friendly interest? It would be just like him, such a quixotic scheme, and Delphine would be sure to aid and abet him in it. Such a project if formed must be promptly nipped in the bud, for it would never do to have a possible rival to Lois growing up under the same roof, and sharing in the same privileges that were the portion and right of her foster child.

Perhaps her son divined something of her thoughts, for after a moment's embarrassed silence he added in his ordinary tone of gentle tolerance:

“Begging your pardon, mother, for my warmth, but if you knew the Hadlocks as I do, you would never have imagined the possibility of carrying out such a scheme. They are not poor people, and the Squire is, in his way, one of the proudest men I ever knew. There is plenty of room at home for his daughter, and if he chooses he is amply able to give her as good an education as even Lois will have.”

“Isaac is going to college,” interrupted Lois, who knew all the ins and outs of the Hadlock family, “and he is n't half as bright, and does n't care half as much about learning things as Comfort does. But her father says, a woman's place is in her chimney corner.”

Miss Delphine laughed, but there was no mirth in her laugh as she murmured under her breath:

“So poor little Comfort is one of the unfortunate

ones who are to crowd and squeeze themselves into the niche that ages of narrow prejudice have been hollowing out for them, without the smallest regard to their tastes or feelings."

"What nonsense you talk, Delphine," sighed Mrs. Humbre plaintively. "Now for my part, I think that the home and family circle are where a woman really belongs, and where she ought to find her highest enjoyment."

And with this sweetly virtuous sentiment, the gentle dame gathered Flora into her arms, while she cast a look of undisguised disapproval, not to say disgust, at the stern, sad face of her daughter, — that daughter whose restless yearning for something higher and better than the idle life of a lady of leisure, were far less intelligible to her than the dyspeptic pug's uneasy grunts and groans.

Robert said nothing, but under cover of the gathering shadows, his hand furtively sought his sister's, and its reassuring clasp spoke volumes of sympathy to the lonely, dispirited woman whom love — even the love that first welcomes us to life and follows us beyond the grave, — seemed to have passed by.

Mrs. Humbre was right in her supposition that this was Comfort's first intimate companionship with what might be called cultivated society, but even she, with her exaggerated notions of the benefits of such companionship, would have been surprised at the beauty and wealth of the new world that was every day opening before the girl's delighted vision. For the first time in her life she saw a mother and sister treated with a tender deference, a protective thought-

fulness of which in her own home and life she had never dreamed. The thousand and one little courtesies that Robert Humbre paid as a matter of course to the ladies of his family, — the looking out for their comfort and convenience before his own; placing for his mother the easiest chair, and bringing the needed covering for her shoulders, or the stool for her feet; always ready to put aside his own book or paper to join in the conversation about him, and never too busy or self absorbed to listen to his mother's complaints, or Miss Delphine's latest discovery in regard to the habitat of some rare plant or animal with an unpronounceable name.

“He acts,” thought the girl, with a feeling akin to worship, as she watched this man who, to her simple instincts, seemed a God-chosen Saul, — towering as far above the ordinary man morally and intellectually as did the son of Kish above his physically inferior brethren, “he acts just as if he thought his mother and sister as good as himself if they are only women, and as if he loved them a good deal better because they are not as strong and big as he is.”

“A gentleman!” the words so often heard acquired all at once a newer and nobler significance, and when Miss Delphine told them the touching story of Sir Philip Sidney, and the cup of water put away from his own parched lips that the dying soldier might drink instead, no doubt she would have smiled in puzzled bewilderment if she could have read the thought passing through the mind of her simple pupil: “He would have done just the same.”

With the restlessness of a petted invalid, Mrs.

Humbre was continually on the lookout for some new distraction to break the monotony of her quiet seaside life, and one day she surprised everybody by desiring her hostess to bring down from the attic her linen wheel, and let her see the process of spinning. An eminent artist of Robert's acquaintance had lately delighted the picture-loving public with a beautiful representation of the Puritan maid Priscilla at her spinning wheel, and poor Mrs. Humbre was devoured with envy at the praises bestowed upon it.

"I have always thought," she declared, "that he put his spinner on the wrong side of the wheel, and now that there is a chance to prove it I am determined to see whether the artist or myself is in the right."

But the widow, who, in learning her duties as landlady, had not had her affections greatly drawn out toward the exacting, purse-proud lady, was by no means willing to indulge her curiosity at the expense of her own hard-earned leisure.

"My wheel's all out o' gear," she grumbled ungraciously, "and if 't wa'n't, I hain't got no time to play spin, when there 's work enough ter be done ter keep half a dozen ordinary wimmin on the clean jump from mornin' till night. Mebbe though," with a sarcastic emphasis that Tabby, who had her own grievances, readily understood, and returned with a spiteful sniff,—"mebbe Miss Hadlock 'll let that gal o' hers lug old Granny Hedvig's wheel over here, an' spin on it f'r a spell, seein' she don't seem ter have nothin' ter do but to hang round my front piazza."

The wheel referred to had been mended, and Comfort, under her mother's teaching had learned to spin a little, — “enough,” as she modestly allowed, “to show how it was done.”

Mrs. Humbre was all interest and excitement. Here was something new, a “real curiosity,” she declared, and she examined and admired the foreign wood of which it was made, and passed her delicate hand over the polished surface, wondering at its satin smoothness, in which she declared she could see the reflection of the slender distaff about which the pale yellow flax was deftly wound, — the work of Granny's own hands, for the original stock had not been exhausted by Comfort's few lessons in spinning.

“Now, Lois, you bring me that copy of Mr. Squire's picture. And, Comfort, you sit right down and begin to spin. I want to compare you with the picture, and see for myself.”

The girls gladly obeyed, and Mrs. Humbre leaning back luxuriously in her easy-chair, with gold-rimmed eye-glasses carefully adjusted, proceeded with all the airs of a competent connoisseur, to compare the pictured spinner with the real one.

“Ye-es, it is the same side, but really, — look here, Delphine, is n't that arm in the picture raised a trifle too high? Comfort's is the proper angle, of course, and I think this Priscilla's is a bit higher.”

Miss Delphine dutifully left her drawing and took a critical survey of the contrasted arms.

“Perhaps so, — yes, on the whole, I should say that it was a little higher.”

“There!” cried the lady, highly elated with her

own artistic sharpness, "I thought so. Now, what will Robert say, I wonder, when I point out the blunder to him? He thinks Mr. Squire is such a wonder. I really believe he looks up to him as a second Titian, when, as I've told him a hundred times, he's not a bit superior to himself. But that is Robert's great weakness to be always thinking other people superior to himself. Now I believe in a becoming modesty in everybody;" — and removing her eye-glasses, the speaker proceeded with great deliberateness to polish them upon a corner of her delicate cambric handkerchief, — "but never to be satisfied with one's own work, to be forever reaching and straining after something higher, is, according to my ideas, perfect nonsense. I don't see any call for it."

Miss Delphine glanced from her mother's characterless face to the two bright, interested ones bending over the flax wheel, — Comfort drawing with slow, uncertain fingers, the pale, shining thread from the wisp of flax upon the distaff, and Lois, full of delighted curiosity over the, to her, wonderful feat.

"Better strive and fail, than never strive at all," she said. But her mother was settling herself comfortably for a nap, and did n't even hear her, which, all things considered, was perhaps just as well.

CHAPTER XXII

“THOU POOR BLIND SPINNER: WORK IS DONE”

“**L**OOK, Comfort! What is that paper?”

And Lois, with girlish curiosity, carefully drew from among the threads of flax upon the almost exhausted spindle, a sheet of thin foreign-looking paper, and smoothing out the creases, tried to spell out the queer, crabbed characters:

“It is dated ‘Upsala, Aug. 2d, 1851,’ and it’s signed” — spelling out with difficulty the signature at the bottom of the page, “‘Gustaf Larsson, Prof. of Mathematics in the University of Upsala, Sweden.’”

“I know who that is,” cried Comfort eagerly. “He is an uncle of Franz’s mother, and I remember carrying the letter to Granny, myself, — father brought it home from Somesville, and mother sent me over with it.”

“But what made her hide it in such a funny place?” broke in Lois, delighted to find something that promised to have a mystery in it. “If you had n’t happened to use up the flax it might have stayed there for years, for there’s only a little bit of flax between that and the spindle.”

“I think I know why she wanted to put it out of sight,” admitted Comfort with a very grave face. “You see the Larsson family thought themselves very much above the Hedvigs, who always worked

with their hands instead of being scholars, and they disowned their young cousin when she married Granny's son, and never even answered the letter telling of her death. Granny resented this dreadfully, for she was proud of her son and she loved his wife dearly, and I've heard her say more than once that Franz was all Hedvig, and that she'd have no Larsson meddling with him, and making him ashamed of his own father."

Miss Delphine's attention had by this time been attracted, and taking the letter she examined it with an interest and curiosity equal to that expressed by the girls:

"It is written in Swedish," she said regretfully, "and I don't know a word of that language. We must wait till Robert comes, and get him to read it for us."

This, Robert was only too willing to do, and the contents proved a matter of surprise as well as congratulation to the friends of Franz Hedvig. It was addressed quaintly to:

"ULRICA HEDVIG, wife of August Hedvig, deceased,
L'isle des Monts-desert,
State of Main, County Hancock,
U. S. A."

The contents of the letter, while stiffly courteous, were worded in such a way that it was easy to understand how the sensitive family pride of the old dame must have been wounded by it, and why, under the influence of that irritation, she had chosen, after her own whimsical fashion, to put it out of the possible

sight of anybody by hiding it in the flax that she was just then winding about her distaff. Whether she would ever have revealed the contents to Franz if she had lived to see him again, is doubtful, but they read as follows :

TO MISTRESS ULRICA HEDVIG :

As the nearest living kinsman of your grandson, Franz Hedvig, I feel it my duty to take upon myself the expenses of his education, always provided that he has inherited something of the scholarly tastes of his mother's family. Having neither wife nor child of my own, I will take sole charge of him, and God willing, will make of him an honest man. If some responsible person will communicate with me on his behalf, I will forward the necessary funds for his journey to this place.

GUSTAF LARSSON

Prof. Mat. Uni. Upsala, Swe.

“Short and — tart!” laughed Miss Delphine, but her brother seemed rather saddened than amused.

“Poor Granny! Here was a demand from one whose very name was hateful to her, to give into his hands the boy who was her one treasure, — the hope and pride and comfort of her life. I knew her so well that I can understand something of the pain that she must have suffered, not only at the idea of a lasting separation from him — but from the ever-present fear that he would learn to scorn the humble stock from which he sprang.”

Comfort had drawn close to his side as he was speaking, and the grateful smile that brightened her sweet face spoke far more eloquently than words

could have done the thanks that this kindly tribute to her old friend called forth from her faithful soul.

“Granny said that this great-uncle of Franz’s was a dried-up old book-worm, and if he could get his hands on the boy, he would squeeze all the manhood out of him in that laboratory of his.”

The girl spoke soberly enough, although her keen sense of humor brought the warm color into her brown cheek, and sent a crowd of mischievous dimples playing about her comely mouth.

“She has the making of a beautiful woman in her,” was the thought that passed through the mind of brother and sister at the same moment, while the former remarked aloud with characteristic decision: “The boy is alone now and unprotected, and if he chooses to do so, there is nothing to hinder his acceptance of his kinsman’s kindly meant offer. Don’t you remember, Delphine,” with a critical re-examination of the Norse professor’s signature, “that Mr. Gosse spoke of a professor at Upsala, where he studied when he was abroad, whose name was Larsson?”

Miss Delphine rubbed her forehead reflectively.

“The one who was such an odd character,—and whom the students nicknamed ‘old double equations’?”

“Yes, I am inclined to think that this is the man. I will write Franz, and send him the letter, and when I get home I will hunt Gosse up, and see what he says about the boy’s probable chances with the old fellow.”

Miss Delphine nodded her approval while Lois,

who always had a word to say, asked with some sharpness:

“But is n’t he going to be an engineer? I’m sure you said yourself, Cousin Robert, that he had a perfect genius for it. And now, if he goes off to this foreign university to live with that rusty, crusty old uncle, how is he going to learn engineering, I should like to know?”

Robert laughed indulgently, and made a feint of pinching the small ear that, in company with the cheek close beside it, was just then of a suspicious crimson.

“He will get there just the training that he needs for his profession,” he said. “These Swedish universities turn out a completely equipped class of students, and if this uncle is really able to carry out his promises, the boy’s chance to make something of himself is of the best.”

“He’ll go,” Comfort said, as she told her mother the wonderful story of the discovered letter. “He don’t feel as Granny did about his mother’s kin, and I know he’ll decide to go.”

Her mother looked at her in mild surprise.

“How do you know?” she asked wonderingly. “It’s a long way over the sea to that country that Granny came from. I’ve heard her tell many a time of the long, tedious voyage, and what she suffered from sickness and rough weather.”

“Franz won’t mind that, if he sees the road to fortune beyond it.”

“But he’ll have to leave all the friends he’s got in the world behind him.”

The gentle woman's voice trembled a little in her sympathy for the motherless lad, but the girl's tones were steady and hopeful.

"He will make new friends, — everybody likes Franz, he is so bright and pleasant. And besides," — her fingers sought the slender chain about her neck, toying unconsciously with its dainty links, as she added, with a shade of tender regret: "now that Granny is gone, there is nobody that he will miss very much."

The short bright summer wore away only too fast, and with the first hint of frost Mrs. Humbre declared herself pining for the comforts and privileges of home, insisting, too, that it was high time for Lois to return to her studies, and more than hinting that the girl had had quite enough of the rustic companionship of which she had been so unaccountably fond. So to the regret of all but herself, the lady and her family took their departure, leaving the widow Scripture a richer woman, not only in money, but in the experience that to the keeper of summer boarders may not be estimated in dollars and cents. To Comfort Hadlock the departing visitors left a legacy of awakened ambitions and scarce comprehended longings that might, as time would show, prove either a blessing or a bane.

Immediately upon his return home, Mr. Humbre hunted up his old acquaintance, the Swedish student, and found as he had suspected, that the eccentric professor and Franz Hedvig's kinsman were one and the same. Acting upon this knowledge, he wrote

him, at the boy's request, giving the facts in regard to his character and present circumstances, with the addition of a warm personal recommendation of the lad to the kindness and assistance which he so richly deserved. In due time the promised funds were received, with a letter that, in spite of its prim formality, showed an awakened interest in the youth and set to rest whatever doubts his kind friend might have felt in regard to his welcome in the new home.

Comfort judged rightly when she predicted that the parting from his old friends and neighbors would not be a lasting sorrow to Franz's sanguine, sunny nature. Not that he was cold or unfeeling, but he was young and light hearted; and the future stretching out so temptingly before him dazzled him with the rainbow hues of happy anticipation, while the deeper springs of his emotional nature remained as yet untouched by the fingers that would in time call from them the sweetest strains of joy or the minor notes of disappointment and sorrow. To Comfort he wrote with boyish frankness of his plans and hopes, winding up with a declaration of never-dying friendship for the old playmate whose childish devotion had made comfortable the last days of the one he had loved best in the world.

“For dear old Granny's sake,” he wrote, “I shall always be your friend, even if we never see each other again. And I never shall forget either that, if it had n't been for you, I might never have known of the letter that has brought such good fortune to me. It was you who found the letter, or I might

never have seen it at all, and all this splendid chance of an education would have been lost to me."

Comfort's heart throbbed with pleasure as she read the unconsciously significant words, and she pressed the little silver cross more closely to her bosom, with a thrill of glad satisfaction that she had indeed earned the right to wear it honestly and without reproach.

Granny's prediction, bewildering and scarce comprehended at the time, had, as the months crept by, grown somehow peculiarly distasteful to her unfolding womanly instincts. Franz was dear, — as dear as an own brother could have been, — and had it not been for that premature unfolding of his grandmother's scheme she would never have troubled to analyze her feelings toward him at all, but have accepted his friendly confidence in just the same spirit in which it was offered.

To her loyal, sincere nature it had been a real pain, to feel that at heart she could not bring herself to look upon her boyish playmate with the reverent affection that the simple old dame seemed to think a natural consequence of their boy and girl friendship. Then, too, she had by constant association with the superstitious daleswoman come to have a childish faith in the mystic runes as in some way the arbiters of her own destiny, and that Franz could only reach the grand future in store for him through her means, she never thought of doubting. And now his own words had unwittingly solved the vexing problem, and removed a weight from her heart and conscience that she had so long borne unshared and in silence. It was as he had said,

her hand that had brought the fateful letter to light, and the feeling of helpless responsibility that had rested so heavily upon her young shoulders was changed to one of cheerful complacency and thankfulness that the task assigned her by an inflexible Fate had been so early and happily accomplished.

Letters came occasionally from Lois to cheer the long, lonesome winter, nor were these the only token of her summer friends' kind remembrance. At Christmas came a box from Miss Delphine of carefully selected books,—a small library in themselves,—every volume having been carefully chosen with reference to her special needs and associations. Lois had added a few volumes of poems and some of Scott's novels, while away down in the bottom of the box was a beautifully illustrated copy of Shakespeare, with annotations in pencil upon almost every page, showing that it was a well-read and evidently favorite text-book of the donor. Upon the blank leaf were the words, written in the same peculiar hand, that had traced the marginal notes:

“A thorough knowledge of Shakespeare is an education in itself, and no one familiar with its beauties can be called illiterate.

Your friend,

ROBERT HUMBRE.”

“How kind in him to take so much trouble!” Mrs. Hadlock exclaimed again and again, as, with the hectic flush deepening upon her thin cheeks, and her hands trembling with nervous delight, she turned

over page after page of the beautiful volume, with the eager enjoyment of one tasting for the first time a draught for which he has all his life longed and thirsted in vain.

Very faithfully and thoroughly Comfort studied the books that Miss Delphine's thoughtfulness had provided, and wider and wider grew her mental horizon from day to day. But dearer, closer to her heart than all else were the wonderful creations of the great dramatist, read by the bedside of her dying mother during many a sad midnight vigil, when the hacking cough would not let the poor invalid sleep, and nothing could distract her mind and soothe her tired nerves like a reading from that marvellous book that had, from the first, proved such a delight to her. Could Robert Humbre, in his busy, over-full life, have heard the words of grateful praise bestowed upon him for that one simple, already half-forgotten act of considerate kindness, that had proved such a solace to those two sad hearts in the old farmhouse by the sea, it is probable that he would have been quite as much surprised as touched at the unlooked-for tribute. He could not know how, even at the last, his gift soothed and quieted the feverish unrest of the dying woman, or how, on a certain never-to-be-forgotten night in the early spring, when all nature was waking to new life and vigor, the faithful watcher by her bed, listening by turns to the faintly falling breath and the low, far-off murmur of the sea, whispering its sad prophecies to the still night air, heard again the familiar request.

"I can't sleep, dear, with the sound of the tide in

my ears all the time. Read me again about that island where the old magician and his daughter lived, and had spirits to wait upon them.”

And the girl read, in her soft, soothing voice, the lines that she had gone over so often that she needed no help from the dim candle to render them correctly :

“The isle is full of noises,
Sounds and sweet airs, that give delight, and hurt not.
Sometimes a thousand twanging instruments
Will hum about mine ears, and sometimes voices,
That, if I then had waked, after long sleep,
Will make me sleep again; and then in dreaming,
The clouds methought, would open, and show riches
Ready to drop upon me; that, when I waked
I cry'd to dream again.

The sick woman smiled, and her thin, nerveless hand was laid tenderly upon her child's bowed head as she whispered dreamily :

“That seems like our own island, Comfort. I lay here day after day, and listen to all the pleasant sounds that the spring brings us, and when the window is open I can smell the salt spray, and hear it lap — lap on the rocks just as it has done ever since I can remember, and just as it will go on doing after I am gone, and I shut my eyes and wonder if Heaven itself can really be more beautiful and sweeter.”

Comfort's tears were dropping silently upon the pillow where she had laid her head close, close to that dear one, as if her own warm, strong-breathed presence could keep at bay the chill shadow that was silently creeping over the pale, sweet face.

“I wouldn’t ask for a better Heaven,” sighed the dying woman, “if only, — only —”

Ah, that “if only” ever has and ever will mar the beauty of every earthly Paradise,— the sorrow, the pain, the disappointments, the sickness, and the death that dog our footsteps forever through this beautiful world that even its Divine Creator called “good.” The Heaven of negatives that inspiration pictures for us is surely the best adapted to the comprehension of the dwellers upon this earth of change and sorrow.

“They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more, neither shall the sun light on them, nor any heat, — and God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes.”

CHAPTER XXIII

“MONEY IS A GOOD SOLDIER, SIR, AND WILL ON”

A CITY by the sea, — a fair, bright, beautiful city, whose foundations are of jasper, of chalcedony, and of amethyst, and within whose rock-ribbed chambers the great pulses of the ocean beat ceaselessly to-day, even as they beat when this gray old earth was young, and God's voice sounded through the terrible stillness: “Let the waters be gathered together in one place, and let the dry land appear.” A city to be proud of, with its grand hotels, its stately churches, and its beautiful, picturesque summer cottages where wealth and fashion wedded to taste and leisure, have lavished what would have seemed a princely fortune to the simple island folk a few years previous to the date at which this chapter opens. The natural beauties and advantages of the island had been opened to the world by the artists, who first discovered and transferred those beauties to canvas, and shortly after the close of the Civil War, when business was good and the spirit of speculation ran high, shrewd men, wise in the signs of the times, began to find land upon the Desert Island a profitable investment, and hotels and cottages sprang up as by magic to meet the ever-increasing demand for seasonable accommodations.

The advance guard of this great army of pleasure seekers, charmed by the unrivalled grandeur and beauty of the scenery, the sea air and boating, came to rest and recuperate from the cares of business or the wearying demands of society, and few returned home disappointed or unrefreshed. But as the years slipped by a different class of visitors made their appearance, and the plain-living islanders were bewildered with the glare and glitter of this, their first glimpse of fashionable dissipation, — a glitter as inappropriate in this one of Nature's pet haunts as if one had decked the wild-roses with pink satin bows, and put gold-bowed eye-glasses upon the red squirrels that frisked and chattered in every tree top. Heretofore, the strangers had in a way affiliated with the natives, paying them fairly for their hospitality, laughing good naturedly at their rustic solecisms, and bearing with equal good humor the salty flavored jests that, as unseasoned landsmen, they were not seldom made the subject of.

A fair degree of prosperity smiled upon the rocky isle, and life, while growing broader and fuller with every passing year, had lost little of its honest simplicity and self-respect by this unlooked-for contact with the outer world. But with the influx of fashionable travel all this was changed. When the island folk, like the Romans of the empire, became possessed with the idea that money is the great good, and that the chief aim of man is or should be the getting of it, the whole course of thought and feeling naturally changed with it. The sturdy independence that would once have scorned an unearned penny,

now, under the demoralizing influence of an open-handed, often wasteful snobbishness, learned to swallow the contemptuous sneers and jibes of the stranger within its gates for the privilege of pocketing his money; while simple souls who had been content with a modest competence, learned to be heartily ashamed of themselves and their unambitious past, and to cherish a vague discontent that brought them neither rest nor happiness.

This much of the island as a whole, — now let us see what changes the years have in passing wrought in the fortunes of our friends in the farmhouse by the sea.

That Squire Hadlock should after the death of his wife have fallen into a weak and premature old age was as great a cause of wonder to himself as to his neighbors and his family. Idle and listless, he neglected the work that had for years filled his life full of its restless hum and bustle, and spent his days sitting silent and moody in the chimney corner, or wandering from room to room of the lonely house, peering expectantly into each, and then turning away with a disappointed sigh, and the muttered “I would n’t ’a’ thought I’d missed ’er so.” At the beginning of the war Isaac enlisted in the army, and met his fate at Shiloh, but even the news of his death seemed to have little effect in rousing the old man from his gloomy abstraction. “She ’d ’a’ felt it,” was all the comment that he made, although all through that day and the next he visited her room oftener than usual, patting with his tremulous hands the unpressed pillow and coverlid, as if through his failing

brain some dim idea of a needed consolation that he had no power to bestow, was trying to make itself understood.

In business matters he was rational enough, and readily acceded to Jotham's suggestion that he should make a will, disposing of his property before his mind should be so shattered that he was unable to do so legally. The document was drawn up, signed and witnessed in due form, with only one dissenting voice and that was good Doctor Peabody, who had been called in as a witness, and who now took it upon himself, as Comfort's first friend and well wisher in this world, to put in a plea for the girl, who had been left entirely dependent upon the bounty of her brother for even a roof to shelter her.

"Do you realize, Squire, that you've left Comfort about the same as homeless and penniless by this will?"

The old man tapped impatiently the arm of his easy-chair.

"I don't believe in leavin' money to girls. They don't know what to do with it if they have it, and they either throw it away themselves, or let somebody else throw it away for 'em. Jotham'll see that she don't suffer, and then, most likely, she'll get married,—most girls do."

"But if she don't?" persisted the little doctor with a heightened color. "Marriage isn't a certainty, by any means. And with a handsome property like yours, it's only fair that she should have her share, married or not."

"That's so," put in the other witness. "Where

there 's only these two, Jotham and Comfort, they ought to share alike, I think. I don't believe in makin' fish o' one child and flesh of another.”

A little flush crept to the old man's sallow cheek, — faint but significant as the glow of an unquenched coal beneath a veil of dead, gray ashes.

“Well, mebbe you 're right,” he muttered uneasily. “You” (to the lawyer) “may put a coddycil into that will givin' my darter Comfort this house f'r her own as long as she lives and wants ter occupy it. If she dies intestate it goes to Jotham or his heirs. Moreover, I give and bequeath to her, and to her heirs and assigns f'rever, that back pastur' down by the shore where the old granite quarry is, with the proviso that she ain't never to sell or give it away without the permission of her brother, Jotham Hadlock. Two disapp'intments ought to bring good luck to somebody.”

The shrill cackle that accompanied the last sentence emphasized the joke that his old neighbors, who had known all about his disappointed hopes in both directions, fully comprehended; and as they took their leave, it was with the sad consciousness that their intercession in behalf of the slighted girl had gained nothing for her, after all, but a barren, rocky waste of pasture land, — picturesque, to be sure, with its shelving ledges dipping their mossy feet almost into the surf, while a background of dusky pines and cedars, with tangled thickets of blackberry and raspberry, made a picture that an artist would have dwelt upon with pleasure, but for

all practical purposes it was as useless as a waste of barren sand would have been.

If the girl knew of this cruelly unjust division of the property, it made no difference in her treatment of the infirm, dependent old man. Perhaps his unfeigned sorrow for her, whose loss had so recently shadowed her own young life with a grief that had seemed for the time to dry up all the springs of hope and gladness in her heart, touched her with a tender sympathy that not all his unfatherly indifference and neglect had the power to chill or discourage. "He must," she reasoned, "have really loved her, in spite of all his harsh, domineering ways, or he would not have been so completely broken down by her death." With this thought ever uppermost, she bore patiently with all his caprices, and cheerfully sacrificed health, strength, and even the rare leisure that had been so precious to her, to his convenience and comfort.

It could not be expected that she should mourn for him at his death as she had mourned for the tender, ever-loving mother who had gone before, and yet, when she returned from her father's grave and sat down alone in the silent, solitary old farmhouse, it seemed to her that, of all creatures on the face of God's earth she was the most desolate. Even Jotham's ungracious presence would have been a comfort, — a companionship of kin, if not of heart and soul, — but even that poor solace was denied her, for Jotham was no longer an inmate of his father's house. Several months previous to his father's death he had married Tabby Scripture, and the young couple had taken up their abode in the

now spacious and modernized dwelling that some merrily inclined summer boarder had christened “The Widow’s Mite.” Not that the widow had in the least relaxed her hold upon the guiding rein, but as she said in reference to the projected marriage, “a man was handy ’round the house to chore, and drum up slack-payin’ boarders.” In fact the match had proved a very good one in more ways than one, and more satisfactory to all parties concerned than might have been anticipated by those who knew them best. Jotham’s grumpiness and ill-temper troubled nobody so long as he attended to his own part of the work, while his domineering tendencies were kept in check by his wife and mother-in-law, who fully appreciated their position as the real proprietors of the establishment, and never hesitated from any tenderness or delicacy of feeling to remind him of the fact whenever he showed signs of rebelling against the dominant female element.

Above all things, better even than his own way, the young man loved money and the respect and importance that money brings its possessor, and as he grew older and wiser in the ways of the world, he learned to assume a certain polish of manner, and a heartiness that might easily pass for genuine good-fellowship and kindness. It was not long before the newspaper correspondents began to speak of him in their letters as the “genial and accommodating host of the — House,” and even his old neighbors, while admitting that he was “tight-fisted and sharp at a bargain,” allowed that no man on the island was doing more for its advancement and prosperity than

he. It was such a convenience to have a ready market for all their fresh fruits and vegetables, and if the prosperous, well-fed landlord haggled over every quart of strawberries, and had a nose that could tell at a sniff just how long to a minute a fish had been out of its native element, he paid for everything down in good hard cash, and nobody could accuse him of cheating a soul out of his dues.

Success wins confidence at home as well as abroad, and when, after a few years of married life, her son-in-law proposed to the widow to sell her house and invest the proceeds in a big hotel, — he had made up his mind to build at Bar Harbor, — she was not inclined to scorn the idea as she would once have done, although too cautious to close with his proposal without looking the ground all over, inch by inch.

“ You say the tide o’ travel is to’ards Bar Harbor? Well, mebbe ’t is, I don’t say ’t ain’t, but we’ve got to remember that Bar Harbor ain’t all the world. There’s Sou’west Harbor an’ Nor’east Harbor, both on ’em places that ain’t ter be grinned at by them that ain’t got no teeth.”

“ That’s a fact, — that’s a fact! ”

Jotham had trained himself so long and thoroughly in this form of polite concession that it slipped as naturally from his tongue in reply to a theological problem as to a pretended catch of fish by a summer boarder who did n’t know a trout from a catfish.

“ But it’s the folks with the money that are stuck on Bar Harbor, and that’s what’s going to make it

the hub o' the island. They've begun building cottages, an' — I don't mind telling you, though I should n't want it spoke of outside, there's been parties here lately from Boston an' New York buyin' up buildin' lots, to put up cottages to rent. That means business, an' them that's first in the field gets the best cuts."

The widow's face flushed crimson with excitement.

"Sho, now! why how you talk! Parties from Boston an' New York?" she repeated, half dazed with the magnitude of the idea. "Why, Jotham, next thing we know they'll be crowdin' us off into the sea so's ter get our places. New York parties! Well, well, I never!"

Jotham laughed.

"We've got ter hang on tooth an' nail 'f we don't want ter be shoved one side," he said, evidently well pleased with the impression that he had made. "Now I've been talkin' with some of these speculators, an' they've made me a good offer for that timber land of mine on the west side. There's a good outlook to'ards the sea, an' it's uneven an' rocky enough in all conscience ter suit anybody. What I get f'r that with the ready money that I've got on hand and what you can get f'r this place, I reckon I can put up a smashin' tavern, — a 'hotel' I s'pose we shall have ter call it, — that'll astonish the natives. An' you'd better believe," he added, with a shrewd twinkle in his hard eyes, "that I'll charge smashin' rates, too. There's lots o' folks that'll willin'ly pay five dollars f'r a dinner of wilted vegetables an' stale fish, that'd turn up their noses at the same

things all fresh an' sweet if they was charged only fifty cents f'r the meal."

The widow looked at her son-in-law in open-mouthed admiration. "Well, well! You do beat all f'r spellin' out things," she said. "Why, when you an' Tabby set out that I should raise my board from one to two dollars a day, I was actually skairt, for I was afraid my rooms 'd stand empty all summer."

"But they was all full, an' you had to turn away crowds," reminded Jotham with a complacent grin. "Now I mean ter put on lots o' style, — act when I give a man a room as if I was turnin' myself out o' house an' home f'r his accommodation, an' takin' his five dollars a day with an air as if I was doin' him the greatest favor in the world. That's the kind o' thing folks pay well and willin'ly for, an' when they come next year they'll bring all their friends with 'em."

And so the widow was persuaded, and the hotel was built, — a wonder to the simple townsfolk, who flocked in crowds to admire its size and beauty, and to speculate in private whether in future years it would be known as "Hadlock's Folly," or honored as the pioneer of a long line of stately spacious edifices that should bring honor and prosperity to the as yet only half-awakened hamlet.

CHAPTER XXIV

“A LITTLE MORE THAN KIN, AND LESS
THAN KIND ”

“ WELL, Mandy? ”
“ Well, Comfort? ”

Democracy pure and simple, — for Mandy never dreamed that the relations between herself and the young mistress of the farmhouse demanded that tacit acknowledgment of inferiority on her part that a prefix would have been, according to her notions. Had n't she known Comfort Hadlock all her life, and was she going to begin to “Miss” her at this late day? Not she. But on the other hand, did n't Comfort, after her poor old grandfather's death had left her homeless and friendless, offer her a home under her own roof, and had n't she been the kindest and most patient of teachers, — training her into her own neat, dainty household ways, and smoothing down her half-tamed nature until few would have recognized in the modest, neat-handed Phyllis of the Hadlock farmhouse, the neglected, half-savage little maid of the old fisherman's cabin? And Mandy never for an instant forgot or belittled her obligations to the gentle girl, and even while bravely maintaining her own right to social equality, would willingly have laid down her life, if need be, to save that of the only being in the world who, besides her dead grandfather, she had ever really loved.

This morning it was evident that something of unusual importance was being debated in the little family conclave, and Mandy's childish face wore a look of bashful indecision as her companion said encouragingly:

"There 's nothing like trying, and if you don't succeed you've nothing to lose. Jotham's head waiter has promised to see that the cards and bouquets are placed by the plates of the right people, and all you'll have to do is to take the flowers over just before dinner, and the next morning go and get any orders that may be left for you. I really believe you'll make quite a nice little sum of it if you'll only try."

Mandy wrinkled her forehead reflectively.

"But s'pos'n' they should think a quarter of a dollar too high? It does seem a pretty steep price f'r flowers that are growed so easy as sweet peas, and lady's delights, and sweet clover. Now, if I had some sturtions and Chiny oysters, —"

"Nasturtiums and China asters," gently corrected Comfort.

"Yes, if I had something of that kind I should have more of a face to charge for 'em, but I'm afraid, —"

"That they are so common with us is no proof that they are not beautiful to city folks. Why, I've read that our common mullein is kept in conservatories in England, where they call it the 'American Velvet' plant; and last summer all the ladies here wore yellow-weed and buttercups, and even white-weed in their belts and bosoms on all occasions.

Tabby said that goldenrod and field daisies, as they called them, were all the fashion, and some even carried home roots of them for their private conservatories. You see they have all the rare, cultivated flowers in plenty at home, but Mount Desert flowers are as great a rarity as Mount Desert air and scenery.”

“They must be hard up,” grumbled Mandy, only half convinced even now. But she went to work for all that, to cull the blossoms in her modest garden beds, while Comfort occupied herself in writing in her pretty, delicate hand, upon a score or more of neat cards, with a bit of bright ribbon in the corner of each:

“Orders for corsage and buttonhole bouquets can be left with the clerk of the hotel.”

“I think ’twas awful clever in Mr. Chase to take charge of an order-book for us,” remarked Mandy, who, having a natural gift for arranging flowers, was busily at work making up the tiny nosegays that were to serve as an advertisement of her dainty wares. “But I’m dreadfully afraid the big bugs’ll make fun of my poor little posies, and think they ain’t worth the buyin’.”

“‘Afraid never climbed the mountain,’”

quoted Comfort, with a reassuring smile. “I remember, long ago,—that summer when Mrs. Humbre and her family were here,—how Miss Delphine loved the sweet peas and southernwood that the Widow Scripture always had in her garden. Even Mrs. Humbre, who didn’t care at all for simple

things, used to wear bachelor's-buttons in her belt, because she said they were the favorite flower of the German emperor, and had a kind of aristocratic look."

Mandy tied together a spray of pink and white peas, a bit of forget-me-not, and blue-eyed grass, with the dainty curling leaf tip of a carrot for a background, and as she held it up to note the general effect, she asked with a sudden show of interest:

"What's become o' them Humbres,— do you know?"

There was no reason in the world why Comfort's tell-tale face should flush so hotly from brow to chin, or why her voice should all at once grow low and tender as she replied, after a moment's pause:

"They went to Europe the next year after they were here, that is the ladies did, so that Lois could study music in Germany. But Mr. Humbre enlisted on the breaking out of the war, and served all through it,—"

"Lost 'is arm, did n't he?" asked the scarce sympathetic listener.

"Yes," and the girl caught her breath with something like a sob. "Yes, his right arm. He came out of the war with a general's shoulder-straps, but all his hopes as an artist were lost forever."

"That's too bad." Mandy spoke briskly, unmindful of the pitiful tenderness underlying her companion's words. "But where are they now?"

Comfort's face was bent over her work, and it was a full minute before she replied to the question.

"Lois has n't written me for more than a year, but

in Franz's last letter he said that they were about starting for home. That was six months ago, and they are probably at home long before this.”

“How is he, — Franz Hedvig, getting along?”

This was a question that Comfort was well used to hearing, for, knowing that he had corresponded with her ever since he went to Sweden, the good folks not unnaturally jumped to the conclusion that the boy and girl friendship had ripened into a stronger and tenderer sentiment, although the easy, unembarrassed manner in which she always spoke of him should, long ago, have disabused them of that idea.

“Very well, I hope. Since his graduation and his uncle's death he has spent most of his time in Germany, where he has been one of the royal engineers, with very fair pay and a good prospect of rising in his profession.”

She did not choose to speak of the ambitious hopes that he had confided to her alone, — of the precious invention that, if he could only get the means to perfect it, and bring it before the eyes of the scientific world, must needs prove a stepping-stone for him to fame and fortune. With a woman's unquestioning trust, she firmly believed in the ultimate success of his plans, and none but herself guessed how bitter had been her disappointment when a project that she had counted on as an aid to him came to nothing in her weak hands.

As religiously as one would keep a registered vow, she had year by year put aside Franz's share of the “bee money,” so called, and as the busy little workers had thriven and increased wonderfully under her

wise care, the sum laid by each season had assumed very respectable proportions to her unaccustomed eyes, so that upon the youth's graduation she wrote with pardonable pride of the amount in her hands, asking his directions as to the disposal of it.

His reply was not only a disappointment, but a humiliation as well.

"I would rather," he wrote, "that you kept it yourself, Comfort, — you ought to have it after all your trouble and care, and I hope you will decide to keep it. But so small a sum would do me little good, just now, and if you are determined, as you say, that I shall have the benefit of it, you may use it to buy back Granny's few acres of land. I hated to sell them when I did, but I could do no better then, and no doubt your father will be glad to have them off his hands. If I should ever come back to the old home, as I hope to do some day, I would like to feel that I could call the small estate that she felt so much pride in, my own."

It was all sensible and clearly stated, — Franz always spoke to the point, — but to have that precious hoard that she had accumulated penny by penny, and which she had counted over and over with ever increasing pride and triumph, as the years went by, regarded as not worth the trouble of transportation, gave her a real heartache that she would have been at a loss to make plain to Franz, of all people in the world. So she simply followed his directions without a word of question or cavil, reclaiming not only the original acres but adding an adjoining lot, at her father's suggestion, as of possible value in some

distant future when the building lots might be in greater demand than now.

The papers were all legally executed, and Franz acknowledged their receipt in a jocosé postscript attached to his next letter:

“Title deeds received all right. Now I am a landed proprietor, and I do hope I shall never be forced, like old Monsieur Gregoire, to sell my estate at a dollar an acre to anybody who wants just room enough to set his log cabin on.”

After her father's death, Franz resolutely refused to claim any of the “bee money,” and as she had now a good market for it, it added quite a sum to Comfort's yearly income—an income drawn from the produce of her garden and the small salary paid her as teacher of the village school through the summer. Both Jotham and his wife ignored her as far as possible, the former driving as hard a bargain with her for the vegetables, honey, and fresh eggs that she supplied him with, as with any hard-handed farmer or fisherman on the island.

Curious summer visitors, attracted by the refined and delicate face, no less than by the sweet voice that on Sundays filled the pretty Gothic church with its pure melody, were briefly informed that she was “the girl who kept the village school.” And never by any chance did the bustling, pretentious, and gorgeously attired landlady of the — House present any of her guests to the gentle, modestly dressed girl, whom they so often met in their walks and rides, as “my husband's sister.” Ashamed of the relation-

ship? That could hardly be, for, apart from a natural grace and courtesy of manner, Comfort's taste in dress was unquestioned,—even Mrs. Tabby reluctantly admitting that “Comfort's ten-cent gingham never looked out of place anywhere, for she wore 'em as the rich folks wore their silks and laces, just as if they grew on 'er.”

Jotham, suave and smiling to his guests,—the very type of the popular landlord,—had another side for the sister, whom his narrow, mean soul hated with all its strength. If she had been obsequious and humble, flattering his masculine vanity by deferring to him on all occasions, and pretending, if she did not think, that he was the greatest man in the world, he might have despised and slighted her, but he would never have hated her as he did now. Sometimes it almost seemed like the hatred engendered by a secret fear, for there was a bravado in his manner toward her, an unconscious challenge that seemed oddly at variance with his habitual indifference and feigned contempt. Had Comfort been capable of that vice of little minds, envy, she must have felt keenly the difference between her own narrow, confined life, and the opportunities and privileges that her sister-in-law enjoyed without stint.

With the establishment of the new hotel, Mistress Tabby had withdrawn from any share in the house-keeping department, and in the royal seclusion of her own apartments received and entertained those guests who, either from a desire to be amused by the would-be lady's airs and graces, or for more prudential motives, paid court to her, and flattered her with

the idea that the wife of a Bar Harbor landlord was necessarily a princess in her own right, and should be treated with the deference due to her rank and position.

“It is cheaper to keep on the soft side of the landlady than to fee the waiters,” shrewdly remarked a lady guest, whose pedigree was a good deal longer than her purse. And as there were plenty of these thrifty souls at Bar Harbor, the portly Tabby, like the old dame in the legend,

“Sitting nursed by man and maid,
Felt still her heart grow prouder,”

until, no longer satisfied with her annual winter visits to the great cities of her own land, she felt an ambition stirring beneath her gay matronly feathers to “see Rome,” — to be able to say to travelled diletantes, with an air as assured as their own: “I, too, know Raphael and Michael Angelo, and have swept the dust of the Vatican with my own flounced and Hamburg-trimmed petticoat.”

Better even than this, would be the power to set right any untravelled slip of aristocracy upon the vexed question of some Parisian fashion, with the ultimatum, “I know, for I’ve been there.”

So Tabby, taking advantage of a promising excursion party, went to Europe, and having thoroughly “done” the Old World in three months, was at home again, — a little fatter, a little finer as to dress, and more than a little coarser and more arrogant than when she went away.

Comfort had not seen her since her return, but her

ears had rung with the wonderful stories of "Jotham's wife's fine dresses and splendid jewelry and things," — the "things" representing any number of foreign ornaments and articles of vertu, from the Swiss carving of a rooster match-safe to one of Guido's Madonnas (copied right from the original).

It was not in Comfort's nature to make any disparaging comment upon her sister-in-law, but Mandy was not so forbearing, and sometimes expressed herself upon the subject with a tartness that nobody wondered at, and with which most of her listeners either secretly or openly sympathized.

"Been acrost the seas, and seen all the sights, has she? Well, as to that, lots o' folks could go if they'd only demean to half starve their help, so 's ter sell the leavin's to the Indians in the camp back here. I know f'r a fact, that Tabby Hadlock makes more money in a season sellin' the scraps from the boarders' plates, instead of lettin' her table girls have 'em, than them girls' wages come to. I would n't work for 'er if I was starvin'."

Cherishing this opinion of the travelled dame, it is not strange that Comfort's honest-souled little handmaiden should have seen with an uncomfortable feeling of repulsion, as with her basket of flowers she passed in the kitchen entrance, the mistress herself in spotless morning dress, laying down the law to the steward in a mincing, affected tone, while she emphasized her words with a stubby forefinger upon which glittered conspicuously a diamond of considerable value.

"Now I want you to remember that my lemon is to be thoroughly rolled before it is squeezed into the

glass, — and brought to me just ten minutes before the gong strikes.”

The steward bowed respectfully.

“I will see that it is done, madam.”

And as the flattered Tabby sailed grandly away, Mandy's shyness was all forgotten in a burst of triumphant laughter, as one of the table girls, seizing the lemon threw it on the floor, and rolling it beneath one of her substantial feet, called merrily to her mates:

“I'll give her lemon a squeezing that'll bring out the flavor.”

The steward was old at his business, and he found it convenient just then to look the other way, — Mistress Tabby might as well eat her peck of dirt in that form as any other.

CHAPTER XXV

“I’VE BEEN TO LONDON TO SEE THE QUEEN”

IT was a bright June morning, and Comfort Hadlock sat in her favorite seat upon the warm door-stone, putting the finishing touches to a new gown that she was making for Mandy, and singing softly to herself, so softly that her voice scarcely rose above the hum of the bees, that haunted the clematis overhead. There are days that we all have known, when the restfulness of perfect peace seems to fill all the placid atmosphere, when the air while warm and balmy is invigorating, and not a harsh or misplaced note is to be heard in the whole grand symphony of Nature about us. And such a day was this, with its cloudless sky and brightly shimmering sea, that, as the girl’s eyes, full of a wordless content, watched it, seemed like the breast of some mighty, mail-clad warrior, whose foam-white beard curled softly above and around the glittering hauberk, as if the two were one and inseparable now and forever. Swiftly her needle flew, for she remembered that school would begin in two weeks at the farthest, and that then her needle must of necessity give place to pen and pencil.

For three summers she had taught the village school, and although no special bargain had been made between herself and Jotham, who was the agent this year,

there was a tacit understanding that she was to fill the place as heretofore. Mandy’s new venture had proved a success, her simple nosegays finding a ready sale among the summer visitors who had thus early made their appearance, and Comfort took a benevolent pleasure in the pride and delight of her faithful satellite, who was overjoyed at the thought that she was able to add in this way to the general housekeeping fund. Not that the girl had ever been an idle dependent upon her friend’s bounty, for without her watchful ministry Comfort would have missed a score of little luxuries that, with her other duties, she could never have found time to provide for herself, to say nothing of the companionship that made her forget for the time, in its full, overflowing vitality, the loneliness and silence of these memory-haunted rooms. Nor did the fisherman’s little maid disdain on occasion to try her hand in a small way at her grandfather’s calling, and always so successfully that not only was the family larder the richer, but many a dollar found its way into their hoard from the sale of her finny trophies.

And now as she stepped briskly about her household tasks within, stopping now and then to exchange a merry word with her young mistress in the open doorway, her face wore a look of such perfect content that Comfort, as she bent over her sewing, smiled to herself with moistened eyes, as she recalled the forlorn little figure, ragged and draggled, with unkempt hair and tear-stained face, that, on that sad evening when, after her father’s funeral, she sat all alone in the silent house, came timidly in at the door,

— never stopping for the ceremony of knocking, — and creeping close to her side, whispered in a voice tremulous with pity as well as cold:

“Don’t ye want me ter ’bide with ye till yer gits a little used ter pullin’ a single oar? I know what ’t is.”

And from that hour the lonely little waif had freely shared her bit and sup, repaying a thousand-fold by her affectionate devotion the time and patience expended upon her. With that natural womanly desire to “mother” something, — a desire that finds its outcome in the little girl’s tender devotion to her doll as really as when, in later years, she gladly denies herself that she may expend all her means and energies upon the adornment of her child, — Comfort took an innocent pride in dressing her protégé as prettily and neatly as their small means would permit, and Mandy’s simple print and gingham gowns were as daintily and tastefully planned and finished as if they had been fashioned of the costliest silks. The girl was growing tall and womanly, and her kind friend thought, with pleased satisfaction, how well she would look in the pretty gingham that fitted so perfectly her slender, well-rounded form.

“There,” with a satisfied sigh, as she shook out the crisp, fresh folds, “your dress is all finished, even to the loops to hang it up by. Now if you will bring me that muslin for your apron I will cut and baste it, so that you can make it yourself when you have time.”

Mandy’s face shone delightedly.

“I’m ever and ever so much obliged. Yes, I’ll get —”

She stopped so suddenly that Comfort looked up

in some surprise, as a shadow fell across her folded hands, and there was Mrs. Tabby, in all the full-blown luxuriance of a rose-colored silk tea-gown, and hat fairly bristling with French daisies, mincing down the grassy pathway, her high-heeled slippers making her pace quite as ungainly as that of her heathen sister on the other side of the globe. Comfort rose to receive her with a momentary feeling of embarrassment, for this was the first time that her sister-in-law had deigned to show her face at the old farm-house since her return from abroad, months before, and it was not in human nature to be oblivious of, or quite unresentful of the slight. But Mistress Tabby had an axe to grind, and, with the crafty diplomacy of her kind, she assumed an air of affectionate cordiality that made the suspicious Mandy, who was peeping from a convenient doorway, shrewdly suspect that some mischief was in the wind.

“Oh, you dear, dear girl! How glad I am to see you once more.”

And she clasped the “dear girl” in such a close embrace that her own taut laces creaked with the unwonted strain.

“I’ve been dying to see you ever since I got home, but I ain’t been well, an’ the boarders are beginning to come, an’,—well, the truth is, Mr. Hadlock can’t bear to have me out of his sight a minute, I’ve been gone so long, you know.”

Comfort assented with an amused smile, as she invited her flushed visitor into the cool, shaded parlor; but Mrs. Tabby sank down upon the sheltered doorstone with a sigh of oily satisfaction.

"It's too hot to go into the house," she panted; "I'll set right down here, — I can get my breath better in the open air, — an' I've got sights of things to tell you about."

Comfort quietly resumed her sewing, and her visitor went on to unburden her mind of its promiscuous hoard.

"Oh, how I wish you could see *Paree*, — dear, beautiful *Paree!*" clasping her fat hands in an ecstasy of gorgeous retrospection. "With its splendid shops, an' churches, an' gardings, an' the bullyvards, — there you see all the big bugs from everywhere, ridin' on horseback or in the stunnin'est carriages, with ribbons on the whip an' the horses' heads that must have cost all of four an' six a yard; an' the gentleman that drove an' the one that rid behind both dressed to kill, with gold lace on their coats an' white kid gloves, jest as if they was goin' to a weddin'."

"Did you see the Palace of the Tuileries, and the Louvre, and the old prison of the Conciergerie where poor Marie Antoinette was confined?" asked Comfort with eager interest, as Tabby paused for a moment to take breath.

The travelled lady regarded her with calm disdain.

"Them old duds! why, nobody goes to see them now. They're all gone by, an' folks that go to *Paree* now go to see something new and stylish. Why," warming with her subject, "you can get more new wrinkles in the way of dress than you could get anywhere else in the world. Do you see this?" turning up one fat shoulder to call her listener's attention to

the muslin cape she wore; “well, I got the pattern of this from one that belonged to a real countess that was stayin’ at the hotel where we was. They call it a ‘commyeelfe’ over there, an’ you’ll laugh to know how well I worked it to get the pattern.”

Comfort smiled, but made no comment, and Mrs. Tabby went on with infinite relish to tell the story of the confiscated cape pattern:

“She was awful stylish, and high toned, and all that, you know,—looked right over our heads if she happened to meet us (just as if some of us could n’t ’a’ bought ’er twice over). But her maid was a social body, and knew enough English to make considerable talk. So I found out lots of things that I never should have known any other way, about how much her dresses cost, and what jewelry she had, and why she didn’t live with her husband, and all that sort of thing, you know. Well, one day I saw her going out and she had on one of these new kind of capes, so I said something to Marie, the maid, about its being a stylish thing, and the maid smiled and hunched up her shoulders, (a way all them French women have), and says she:

“‘Ah, we! Madame is always commyeelfe.’ That was just what I wanted, the name, you see,—so I went to a dressmaker’s shop and told the woman what I wanted. She didn’t seem to know what I meant at first, but I ketched up a piece of muslin that was layin’ there and folded it as well as I could, and threw it over my shoulders. And she froze to the idea right off, and I got my cape, though I had to pay an outrageous price for it. But, as I told Mr.

Hadlock, when I went away, I was going to go the whole hog or none."

Comfort was only human, and as she glanced at her sister-in-law's complacent face and heard her boast of the money that in her ignorance she had wasted upon a mere trifle, the temptation grew strong within her to undeceive her by the simple explanation of the real meaning of the Frenchwoman's phrase. Tabby richly deserved the mortification and chagrin that she would feel if once she knew of her ridiculous blunder, and few, under the circumstances, would have refrained from telling her of it. But with Comfort the temptation was only momentary, and she was soon so interested in Tabby's further communication that she forgot all about it for the time.

"But who do you think I run acrost in one o' them German towns, — (I forget the name of it now,) somebody that you an' me used to know years ago?"

"Not the Humbres?"

"Yes, the Humbres, — the old woman and her daughter, and Lois Gregory. And, queerest of all there was Franz Hedvig, as big as life, tagging round after that Lois, jest as if there wa' n't such a body as Comfort Hadlock in the world."

She glanced sharply at Comfort's interested face, evidently curious to see how this bit of foreign gossip would be received. But the girl was so startled and surprised that she took no heed of her scrutiny.

"Is it possible? Franz wrote of meeting them in Berlin, but I never guessed that he might be in-

terested in Lois. But,” she asked with sudden apprehension, “ did Mrs. Humbre approve of the intimacy? ”

“ Not much,” and Tabby laughed spitefully. “ She was sick all the time, had some kind of a stroke, I believe, and the young folks had it all their own way, for the old maid daughter had all she could do to tend out on her mother. The old woman was cross as a bear with a sore head, so the chambermaid told me, and from what I knew of her I don’t doubt it.”

“ And you think Lois really cares for him? ”

There was an anxious strain in the girl’s voice as she put her question. That Lois, beauty and belle as she was, was expected to make a grand match, and had been trained and tutored for that very purpose, Comfort well knew, and could it be possible that for her own selfish gratification she would trifle with a heart as true and loyal as that of Franz Hedvig must needs be? She would not believe it, and her gossipy visitor was puzzled and rather taken aback by the frank, unaffected interest that she certainly took in the love affairs of these two, one of whom had for years been accredited with being her own sweetheart.

As Mrs. Tabby at length rose to take her leave a sudden thought seemed to strike her, and she remarked carelessly:

“ There, I came pretty near forgetting the errand that Mr. Hadlock sent by me: He wanted me to tell you that he’d like to buy that old pastur’ o’ yours. We’re going to keep two or three cows of our own

this summer, and he's sold all his own pastur' land an' had ruther buy than hire. He said he'd drop in in a day or two an' talk it over."

Her parting "Come in and see us some day," was spoken with such a hurriedly indifferent air, that as Comfort watched the big rose-colored cloud disappearing from sight down the long, grass-bordered highway, a strange feeling came over her, — as if all this pretended cordiality, so different from her usual manner, had been intended as a blind, and that her mission once accomplished, she had dispensed with it as quickly as possible. In vain she blamed herself for this unwonted suspiciousness, but all through the day that false ring in her visitor's parting communication rang in her ears and would not be forgotten. It haunted her with an uneasy foreboding of coming ill as she sat alone in the twilight, — Mandy having dropped into a neighbor's for an hour, — so that she was very glad of the diversion when the Widow Scripture's familiar voice broke in upon her solitude, and forced her to turn her attention to something outside of her own moody fancies.

The widow was full of business as usual, talking of certain improvements that they had made in the house and its arrangements, of the guests, the help, the lateness of the season, of everything, in fact, but her daughter and her foreign experiences. Comfort was the first to introduce the subject.

"Tabby had a fine time abroad, she tells me. I'm glad she enjoyed herself so well, and is at home again safe and sound."

The widow started nervously. "Where did you

see ’er?” she asked with a sharpness that the subject scarcely seemed to warrant.

“ She made me a long call this forenoon,” returned Comfort pleasantly.

Her companion shuffled her feet uneasily, and there was a tone of mingled anxiety and suspicion in her voice as she asked, after a moment’s pause :

“ What ’d she have ter say? ”

“ Oh, she told me all about the sights in Paris, and her meeting with the Humbres and Franz Hedvig in Germany. I knew,” she added with a little hesitation, remembering the widow’s prejudices, “ that Mrs. Humbre had been in poor health for a long time, but I did n’t know before that she was a paralytic.”

The widow gave an unsympathetic grunt.

“ She can be just as lazy as she wants to now,” she sniffed. “ I really think that’s long’s she’s got somebody to wait on ’er, she’s as well contented in bed as she’d be anywhere.”

Comfort did not feel herself called upon to champion the absent lady, and after a few more irrelevant remarks, the good woman rose to take her leave, lingering in the doorway to pick a bit of sweet clover, with the low-spoken reminder :

“ I give yer mother this root the summer before she died, and somehow the smell of it brings her back to me.”

Tears sprang to Comfort’s eyes as she stood there in the quiet starlight. For some reason she felt strangely desolate and unprotected, — Oh, if that mother were only with her now !

Suddenly with a quick, resolute movement, the

widow turned, and laid a trembling hand upon the girl's shoulder, as she whispered sharply in her ear:

"Don't you sell one foot o' yer land to Jotham at any price." Then disregarding the girl's exclamation of astonishment, she hurried away with the muttered: "It's a mean bird that fouls its own nest, — but I can't see your mother's child cheated, nohow."

CHAPTER XXVI

“ HE THAT IS GREEDY OF GAIN TROUBLETH HIS OWN HOUSE ”

WHAT could the widow's warning mean? It was evidently spoken with reluctance, and under the softening influence of some tender recollections of the gentle woman, whose harmless life had been lived out in that old farmhouse, like a wandering morning-glory vine that Comfort had once watched as it crept unawares into the cellar windows, and wreathing the rough stone wall with its delicate tendrils and pale pink and purple trumpets, had tried its best to cheer and beautify the deep gloom, although the sunlight for which it pined never gladdened it into the riotous luxuriance that was its birth-right. All through her morning tasks the girl pondered with an anxious heart the significant words that meant, if they did not say: “Don't trust your brother, — he will wrong you if you do.”

Comfort's womanly heart shrank with sensitive dread from the thought that her only relative in the wide world, — the brother who had lain an innocent baby upon the breast of their sainted mother, — could find it in his heart to wrong her, as his mother-in-law had intimated. Jotham had always been harsh, and with increasing prosperity coldly neglectful of her, but that he would deliberately plan to do her

an actual wrong she could not and would not allow herself to believe.

Her father had been harsh and stern but he had been the soul of honor, and although he had bequeathed her a barren heritage, hedging even that about with restrictions that left her only the uncertain power of veto, he had evidently believed in the will as well as the wisdom of his favorite son to act for her best good in the matter should the unlikely question of a sale ever arise. There had been some talk lately in the neighborhood that land was rapidly increasing in value, and that desirable building lots would soon command fabulous prices. But this was mere speculation, and Comfort had never thought of it in connection with her own barren, rocky possessions. Perhaps Jotham wanted to speculate on it, and she decided, when he should make the promised call, to ask him frankly in regard to the matter.

Mandy, unsuspecting of the secret trouble of her young mistress, had gone off in high spirits with her basket of nosegays, as usual, and Comfort sat down by the open window with her sewing to await the appearance of her brother who, she felt a secret intuition, would take the time when she was sure to be alone to make his visit. Yes, there he was, hurrying along the road that led from the pasture. He had evidently been taking a survey of the land, for in his hand he carried a slender birch switch with which he was absently whipping off the heads of the unoffending buttercups and daisies,—a habit, as Comfort remembered with half a smile, that he had had from boyhood.

Unnoticed herself, she watched him with eyes made keen by her newly aroused suspicion, as he came briskly up the path, not as one bent upon a leisurely morning call, but with an air that meant business, sharp, prompt, unscrupulous,—the gait, the air, the look bespoke the man whose sole aim in life was gain. And yet, when his sister met him with her frank, kindly welcome, and invited him into the well-remembered room where their mother always sat, even pressing upon him the easy-chair that was especially devoted to her use during the last years of her life, a momentary flush as of shame passed over his hard face, and he glanced uneasily at his father's picture upon the wall opposite, as if half afraid that those stern lips might open to denounce him as false to his trust as a man and a brother. But he was not a man to be swayed by fancies, and after a moment's embarrassed silence he came straight to the object of his visit.

“ I can't stop but a minute, Comfort. I've got a hundred things to see to this mornin', but I jest dropped in to talk about that pastur', — Mis' Hadlock told you that I'd take it off o' yer han's? ”

Comfort nodded, and in spite of the gathering heaviness about her heart she could not refrain from a smile at the little affectation of speaking to her of Tabby as if she had been a stranger. But Jotham was as oblivious of the smile as he was ignorant of the thought that lay beneath.

“ You see, ” he went on, “ I've been thinkin' that land ain't no good to you, but it might do to pastur' some o' my hosses in, — ”

“They should have agreed upon the kind of animal beforehand,” thought Comfort, with a remembrance of Tabby’s plausible story of yesterday. And at that moment a new spirit was born within her, a calm determination that she would be neither coaxed nor bullied into selling this land that her father had bequeathed her, that she would exercise the right of woman no less than man to stand on the defensive for her rights.

“I’ve been thinkin’,” went on the unsuspecting Jotham, “that seein’ I’m gettin’ along fairly well in the world, an’ you’re all the one that’s left of our family, that ’t won’t hurt me to pay you more’n the land is really worth.”

He straightened himself with an assumed air of benevolence that sat ill upon him, and called up the blushes to Comfort’s sensitive face, — he had not the grace to be ashamed of himself, but his sister was ashamed for him.

“Well?”

She spoke but the single word, with an effort, for he had paused evidently expecting a reply.

“Yes, I’ll give you, — lemme see,” — counting up the acres on his fingers, “I’ll give you a hundred and twenty-five dollars if you’ll give me a deed of the whole. Pay you the cash right down, an’ we’ll have the deed made out this very day.”

In his eagerness he had overshot the mark, for his haste was in itself a confirmation of her suspicions, and in a few calmly spoken words she refused his offer.

“I shall not part with the property at any price,

for the present,” she said, turning away her eyes from his angry, astonished face. “I have heard that the price of land about here is steadily rising, and if I can hold it a few years I may get thousands instead of hundreds for it. At any rate it seems wise to wait.”

She tried to speak lightly, playfully, even, but her brother was in no mood for pleasantries.

“Who has been putting such devilish nonsense into yer head?” he blustered. “It’s a lie, and nobody but a fool would believe it. Did she, — the old woman, tell you that?”

Comfort was thankful that she could give a truthful negative, on hearing which the angry man by a great effort controlled himself, and for the first time in their lives, deigned to reason with his refractory sister.

“Now, Comfort, you jest put all that nonsense out o’ your head, an’ listen to reason. I don’t pretend that land ain’t higher here now than ’t was ten years ago, — that stan’s ter reason, for this is a growin’ place, as every fool knows. But let me tell you it makes a mighty sight o’ difference where the land is. That old pastur’ ain’t nothin’ but rocks an’ bushes, and nobody in their senses ’ll ever think of buildin’ on it. These rich folks that pay fancy prices f’r house lots want some land round ’em that they can lay out in walks an’ drives. I tell you the land won’t be worth a boodle more ten years from now than it is to-day, — an’ let me tell you a hundred an’ twenty-five dollars don’t grow on every bush.”

But Comfort once decided no power on earth could move her.

"Perhaps you're right," she said steadily; "but I'm not going to sell the land at present. It costs nothing to keep it and I'll run my risk."

Jotham looked at her with the old hatred in his eyes that had looked out of those same windows years ago when as a child she had boldly asserted her independence of his authority.

"You're doin' it jest to spite me. I know yer tricks of old," he cried savagely, forgetting his prudence in his disappointed rage. "But let me tell you one thing, my lady,"—he lowered his voice almost to a whisper and bent forward until his hot breath, stifling with the fumes of his morning draught, smote upon her shrinking cheek, "you're in my power, an' I never will give my consent to yer sellin' an acre of that land to anybody else, if 't would make you a millionaire."

Comfort stared at him, fairly stunned at such unheard-of malice.

"You wouldn't allow me to sell my own land that my father left to me if I could get enough for it to make me independent?" she asked incredulously.

"No," and the angry man ground his teeth together like some enraged animal. "The old man left it so that you couldn't sell a foot of it without my consent, and that consent I swear you never shall have. I'd see you starve in the gutter first."

"You can't mean it, Jotham?"

The girl's tones were sadly incredulous, and she looked with wistful eyes at the hard, set face of him who should have been her protector rather than her tyrant. But the mean animal nature of the man was

uppermost, and nothing but humble submission and compliance with his wishes could have touched him. That, all the honest independence of the girl's nature forbade, and her pale cheek only grew a shade paler, and the lines about her mouth more determined as she listened to his unmanly tirade.

“ You've always set yerself ag'inst me, from a young one, and I ain't forgot the day that you'd 'a' drove me off and branded me as a thief, as you did Dave, if I had n't been too cute f'r ye.”

“ Were you — too — ”

The speaker's lips were white as ashes, and her eyes sought his face with a frightened stare that evidently recalled him to his senses, for he burst into a harsh laugh that had more of fear than mirth in it.

“ What do you mean, you fool? I only meant yer will was good enough to have brought us both into trouble if you could.”

He was trembling from head to foot, — was it from passion or fear? And there was that stern, pictured face looking down upon him with its eyes that seemed to read every thought, every memory, even, that floated through his troubled brain, while the soft chintz covering of the chair against which he leaned his head reminded him of the touch of a tender, motherly hand, and he seemed to hear the whispered words that no mortal ear but his own had listened to :

“ Whoso repenteth and forsaketh his sin shall find mercy.” He roused himself and looked about him. Comfort's head was bowed upon the table beside her and she was crying softly, the bees were humming cheerfully about the morning-glory vine that crept

over the window, and without, the voice of the returning Mandy was heard singing a merry tune.

Foiled, angry with his sister and himself, he assumed an air of cold indifference, as he rose to go with the significant warning:

“You ’d be wise to think better of it. An’ if you do,” he added in a sharp whisper that might not reach the ears of the girl outside, “you can come to me and say so. I shan’t never make you the offer a second time.”

He was gone, and when a few moments later Mandy came into the room she found its occupant with pale, tear-stained face, but able to smile back kindly to her bright bits of village gossip, and even after a little to take a decided interest in something that the girl’s sharp ears had overheard, and her sharper intelligence quickly caught at the significance of.

“While I was waiting for Mr. Chase to take the flowers out of the basket, I heard a strange man say: ‘I understand that that belongs to Hadlock’s sister, — how can he sell it?’ Of course I pricked up my ears at that, and the other says, ‘It’s in his care, he tells me, and he has the sole right to dispose of it. He has promised to let us have it for twenty thousand, and we can make a fair profit on that.’ You could ’a’ knocked me down with a feather,” went on Mandy excitedly. “Only think of it! *Twenty thousand dollars!* Why, my heart come right up in my mouth, and I thought f’r the minute I should ’a’ choked. Mr. Chase had to speak to me three times before I even heard him, and when he gave me the three silver dollars and some change, I just longed to

toss 'em into the air, and holler so that everybody could hear me: ‘What’s three dollars to folks that’s rich as Comfort and me are?’”

Comfort smiled, but there were tears in her eyes as she said:

“I’m afraid we shall be no better off for this offer. My brother objects to my selling the land.”

Mandy’s face fell.

“I s’pose he thinks they’ll bid higher still, ruther’n not get it,” she said ruefully. “But you know a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush, and with twenty thousand dollars we should be rich, and not have to worry and plan about the things that we need to eat and wear.” And the excited girl laid her head down in Comfort’s lap, and sobbed out all her grief and disappointment.

“’T would be such a help, and nobody knows but you and I how much we need it.”

CHAPTER XXVII

“THAT OLD HOUSE OF YOURS THAT GAVE SUCH
WELCOMES OFT TO ME”

“WE have never wanted for anything that we really needed, and we are just as well off now as we ever have been.”

Thus Comfort cheered the heart of her little handmaid, and although Mandy found it hard to come out of her rosy cloud of anticipation into the dull, gray atmosphere of the old everyday life, she was a sensible body, and tried hard to make the best of things as they were, without adding to her mistress' burdens by useless pinings and regrets.

It was several days after Jotham's visit, and Comfort's disturbed mind was gradually settling back into its normal state of cheerful serenity. Jotham had been terribly disappointed in the failure of the grand speculation that he had evidently thought himself so sure of, and in his unreasoning anger he had threatened what, upon second thought, he would himself see the meanness and injustice of. No doubt the property would increase in value, and when the first keen edge of his wrath should be a little blunted, he, her own brother, would scorn to stand in the way of her realizing a fortune from it.

It is wonderful the amount of loving ingenuity that some women expend in inventing excuses for the

fathers, the husbands, and the brothers, over whose faults the broad mantle of their own unselfish love is thrown, to hide not from the world alone but from their own eyes as well, the glaring deformities of character that their owner himself will not take the pains either to amend or hide. Comfort had had little reason to love her unbrotherly brother, but he was her mother's son, and of her own blood and name, and in spite of all his neglect and abuse she could not find it in her heart to condemn him utterly.

“He is kinder at heart than he seems,” served her as it has done thousands of her wronged yet loving sisters since the world began, and will so long as it stands.

She had been busy all the morning looking over her text books in preparation for her school duties which would begin as usual on the following week, and when glancing from the window she saw Mandy returning with her empty flower basket, she glanced at the clock in surprise. She had no idea that it was so late, the time had passed as it always did when absorbed in her books, unheeded. It seemed a little strange that the girl should loiter about the kitchen instead of coming directly to report herself as usual, and stranger still when, on calling to her, she received no reply. Perhaps she was sick or had met with ill luck in selling her flowers; and ready with help and sympathy, Comfort gathered her books hurriedly together and sought the kitchen, guided by a faint, smothered sound that sounded suspiciously like suppressed sobs or moans. With her head resting on the kitchen table, and her arms flung above it in an attitude of

the deepest dejection, Mandy seemed the very picture of despair, while the sobs that she was trying bravely to suppress shook her slender frame from head to foot and sent an apprehensive thrill to Comfort's heart, as, laying a tender hand upon the bowed head, she asked in a half whisper:

"What is it, Mandy? Are you sick or hurt?"

The girl lifted her head and brushed back the hair that had fallen over her face, with an unsteady, reluctant hand. Her face was discolored and swollen with weeping, and her whole body seemed to share in the general dejection, — it was as if all its sinews had suddenly become flaccid and prostrate.

"No, I ain't sick nor hurt, but, —"

"What is it?"

If Comfort's heart sank, her will was strong, and in her voice there was no hint of the fear that possessed her. The girl sat up and tried to smile through her tears, but the smile was sadder than the tears.

"I suppose I must tell you but I hate to dreadfully. When Mr. Chase was putting the flowers into water to keep them fresh till the people called for them, Mr. Hadlock came in and wanted to know what he was doing. When he told him, he snapped out that he did n't hire a clerk to sell other folks' wares, and he would n't have any more of it. Mr. Chase tried to excuse himself by sayin' that as 'twas for his own sister he did n't s'pose he'd have cared. But he wouldn't hear a word, and he turned to me and ordered me out of the house, just as if I'd been a beggar or a thief."

And Mandy's tears burst forth afresh, while her companion tried in vain to comfort her.

“I would n't mind it, — he's cross just now with me about that land. And you can find a market for your flowers at some of the other hotels, — the — House is n't the only place at Bar Harbor where the guests are fond of flowers. I would n't be discouraged at such a little thing as that, — I'm not.”

The girl looked at her with a world of tender pity in her wet eyes.

“I have n't told you the worst,” she went on in a lowered tone, “but I s'pose I shall have to tell you. I went into Dunham's store on my way home, to get some thread, and while Mr. Dunham was doing it up he asked me how it happened that you wa'n't going to keep the district school this summer. I just stared at him for a minute; my mouth was that dry that I could n't make a sound, but at last I made out to ask: ‘Why?’ ‘Why,’ said he, giving me a surprised look, ‘the agent, Mr. Hadlock, came to my house yesterday, and engaged my Maria to keep the school. I thought by that that his sister did n't want it.’”

Comfort dropped into the nearest chair, while a strange, suffocating feeling came over her, and she put out a trembling hand, groping as if for something to steady herself.

“Maria Dunham to have my school?” she stammered.

Then as if all at once taking in the full significance of the words, she covered her face with her hands, while the silent tears trickled through her slender

fingers, and dropped unheeded upon the spotless folds of her neat morning gown. Very bitter were those tears, and yet the bitterness was not all that of disappointment and anticipated poverty. It was the cruel blow to her feelings, the blow that, coming from a brother's hand seemed heavier than she could bear.

It was now Mandy's turn to play the comforter.

"There, there! I would n't take it so to heart 'f I was you. The summer's a good time to be poor in, for it costs less to live than at any other season. And there's the honey, and the eggs, and the garden truck, and flowers. Oh, law!" with an airiness that would have been amusing if it had been a whit less pathetic "we can live like pigs in clover, and if worse comes to worst, I can take up gran'daddy's trade. I'll bet I could catch fish enough in the course o' the summer to buy our wood and flour f'r the winter."

Comfort rose from her seat, and putting her arms around the girl, kissed her tenderly, — a rare expression of affection from this true daughter of New England, with whom kisses were too rare and precious a coin for everyday use. Mandy felt the tender significance, and blushed rosy red with modest pleasure, as, with her hand instinctively seeking the tiny chain about her neck, Comfort said, with an attempt at hopefulness:

"Granny used to say that no one with health and a fair show of sense need either beg or go hungry in this great land of ours, where there is work for everybody, if he will only do it. And now I will put away my books and start the fire, while you pick the peas

for dinner; the work that comes next to hand is always the best, — one must catch the nearest goslings before he can get the red-winged goose.”

The momentary depression had passed, and they were lifted once more to the dead level of everyday needs and duties. And who shall say that the friendless girl, fearlessly facing a dark and doubtful future, as she went about her homely tasks with a firm trust and hope in her young heart that the God of her fathers had power to keep His own, let the outlook be ever so cloudy, was not as brave and heroic in her way as the ever-famous yeoman legislator, who stood manfully in his place in the halls of his State capitol, and spoke long and well upon the important question of the fisheries, by the light of candles, while the world without was in the fearful darkness of a total solar eclipse?

There are many grades of poverty, and those that by their abject physical suffering appeal most strongly to the sympathies of the public, are not always those who feel the burden most heavily. Warmed, fed, and decently clothed they are satisfied, but how many struggle through life, the victims of respectable penury, not able to dig and with too much honest self-respect to beg; harassed and tormented with alternate fears and hopes, losing heart and courage under the pressure of constant disappointments, and at last sinking into premature graves, under a weight that cannot longer be borne.

To Comfort Hadlock, refined and proudly self-respecting, the necessity of thrusting herself into the arena of struggling men and women who strive by

force or fraud to gain a foothold for themselves among the bread-winning masses, to be forced to practise the pinchings and scrimpings from which her generous soul revolted, was inexpressibly terrible. There was, too, the depressing consciousness that she was really weaponless. Debarred by her father's narrow theory of the mental inequality of the sexes, from the education that she had so longed for in her earlier days, she had, while making the most of the opportunities that had come in her way, missed the necessary discipline and order of study that a proper school training would have given her, and while above the average in general information she was perfectly conscious that she would be sure to fail in certain important studies if subjected to a competitive examination for a higher grade of school than that of her own small village.

"I am perfect in nothing," she sadly acknowledged to herself as she sat alone in the shadows that evening, trying until her brain reeled, to think of something by which she might support herself and the equally friendless Mandy. There was factory work,—but her heart sank like lead at the thought of exchanging the congenial quiet and spotless cleanliness of her own home for the bustle, the bare unattractiveness, and worst of all, the undesirable companionship of a factory boarding house. It might be necessary, but she would not yet allow herself to think of a banishment from all the sweet, familiar sights and sounds of her seaside home, to toil for her bread amidst the noisy clatter of busy looms, and the endless stretch of weary beams and bars, in an atmos-

phere where neither the salt breath of the friendly sea, nor the softer winds of the perfumed spring could ever come.

There was nothing in her of that adventurous spirit that finds a pleasant exhilaration in buffeting the adverse tides of the great world without. The daughter of Cynthia Hadlock had inherited her gentle mother's love for home and home duties. There was her kingdom, her rest, her inspiration, and from its windows she could look out upon the world outside with its inventions, its philanthropies, and its marvellous discoveries in science, with a more intelligent appreciation, a clearer vision, perhaps, than if her eyes had been blurred and her ears bewildered with the dust and din of the near conflict. She was so absorbed in her anxious thoughts that she failed to hear Mandy's step upon the stairs, or comprehend until it was twice repeated, the announcement:

“Here's a letter for you.”

“From Franz,” was her thought as, with listless, unhastening hand she lighted the lamp upon her dressing table, and holding the letter close to the slowly kindling blaze, read with some surprise the address and postmark.

“It's from Boston,” she said to the waiting Mandy, “and I think it's Miss Humbre's handwriting. I thought they must be at home by this time,” she added as she broke the seal, and with a face by turns surprised, wondering, and pleased, read the four closely written pages, then slowly refolding it, she returned it to the envelope with: “What do you think? Miss Delphine writes to know if I will take

her mother, herself, and Lois to board this summer. She offers to pay liberally for the privilege, as she calls it, and seems anxious to come, as her mother is an invalid, and cannot bear a hotel or boarding house, as she must have perfect quiet."

Mandy clapped her hands gleefully.

"I knew that letter had good news in it, — I felt it in my bones. That'll a good deal more 'n make up for the loss of the school, won't it? When they coming?"

"As soon as we can be ready for them. But, Mandy, Mrs. Humbre is sick and nervous, and very likely hard to get along with. Can we be patient and attentive, let her say what she may?"

Mandy's face looked the reproach that she would not speak. "I can bear what you can," she said shortly.

"But," as bent upon holding up the shady side to her own as to her handmaid's eyes, "we shall have to work hard to satisfy these people, who have been all their lives used to the best of everything."

"Yes," assented Mandy.

"And we must remember," she went on in an unfaltering voice while in the dim light the sensitive color that mantled cheek and brow was unnoticed, "that they are not coming here as invited guests, but simply as boarders, and if they feel and show something of their social superiority, we must n't resent it or take it to heart."

"No."

"I used to know and love Lois dearly. But that was years ago, and she's a fashionable young lady

now, and of course it is not to be expected that she will remember our childish friendship as I do.”

What a sensible, prudent, matter-of-fact view, to be sure. But as Comfort laid her head upon its pillow that night the memory of her old playmate brought the tender tears to her eyes, and a smile to her lips as she recalled a line of Miss Delphine’s letter :

“We all, and Lois especially, long for a sight of the dear old farmhouse and its dearer little mistress.”

CHAPTER XXVIII

“I TELL YOU LOVE HAS NAUGHT TO DO WITH
MEETNESS OR UNMEETNESS”

EVERYTHING was ready, and to-day the guests were to arrive. What a blessed thing it had proved that Squire Hadlock, instead of following the neighborhood fashion of small houses and big barns, had consulted his own individual tastes and conveniences in the rearing of the comfortable old farmhouse, with its high, airy rooms, every one of which had its full share of sunshine and of the bracing sea breezes; quaint and many cornered, like his own rough, angular nature, with the same capabilities of ornamentation and engrafted graces that the man in his proud self-sufficiency had scorned to avail himself of, but which in this, the unresisting work of his hands, had been taken advantage of by Comfort's dextrous fingers, so that the neat, well-ordered rooms had blossomed into a beauty and brightness that surprised even herself when the work was fairly completed.

Over Lois's room she had lingered longest, and upon it she had bestowed a hundred loving attentions and dainty touches. The room had been chosen not only for its size and sightliness, but for a certain grace and fitness in its furnishings that no other apartment however pleasant could boast. The

wall paper was bright with the pale pink tint of clambering wild-roses, that matched well the full muslin curtains looped back with pink ribbon, and the pretty painted furniture and toilet set all of the same hue and pattern.

It was late for wild-roses, but Granny's climbing rose was in full bloom, and of these the girls gathered handfuls, filling every vase and pitcher with their creamy blooms until the whole house smelled like a rose garden. Roses everywhere, in chambers, parlor, and hall, “the queen of flowers,—a fitting welcome to the queen of hearts,” whispered Comfort with a shy little laugh, all for her own benefit (she had long ago learned the wisdom of keeping her foolish little fancies to herself). They seemed strained and affected to other ears, as she well knew. She thought, too, of Tabby's story, and recalled the memory of her first meeting with Lois in the catnip patch. So she brought from among the old dame's tenderly cherished stores a cup of painted china, quaint and grotesque in its rude adornment and coloring, but highly prized by Granny in her lifetime, as a relic of her girlhood's home, and filling this with the purple, spice-breathed catmint, she placed it by itself upon an unoccupied bracket in a corner of the girl's room.

“Granny, the bees, and — Franz! I wonder if she will read the riddle.”

And she tried to recall the pretty, wilful, yet affectionate child as she had last seen her, wondering meanwhile with a secret fear that she could not shake off, if all these years of luxurious ease and

fashionable dissipation had changed the old playmate that she had loved so fondly, past recognition.

"I shall understand from the very first word and look, even, what we are to be to each other," she said to herself. At that moment the signal-whistle of the boat sounded in her ears, warning her that the meeting she so dreaded and at the same time longed for was at hand.

Mandy was bustling about, hurrying up the dinner, and after putting a few finishing touches to the table, Comfort, too nervous to stay indoors, betook herself to the foot of the lane where, under the shade of the two great elms that had from time immemorial stood sentinel upon either side of the gateway, she watched with wildly beating heart the approach of the expected coach. There it was, — she could catch the glitter of the horses' head-gear before she could make out the carriage itself, — and they were driving more slowly than usual, on Mrs. Humbre's account probably. Was it, could it be Mr. Humbre on the seat with the driver, shading his eyes with his hand, and looking so earnestly in her direction? And that little gloved hand waving from the window, as the coach swept up to the door, and a face, bright, eager, with tremulous lips, and cheeks flushed rosy red with joyful recognition:

"Comfort! dear, blessed little Comfort!"

Fairly speechless with mingled emotions of joy and wonder, Comfort felt herself clasped in a pair of loving arms, while a shower of tender kisses fell upon cheeks, lips, and brow.

"Why haven't you grown in all these years, you



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lazy little beach pea?” And both girls laughed through happy tears at the remembrance of this old-time pet name that Lois had not in all these years forgotten. “Only see,” and she put one arm about the slight figure and drew her closer to her side, while her dark eyes danced with mingled joy and fun,—“What a wee thing it is,—only up to my shoulders!” with a final hug that said more than any spoken words of endearment could have done.

“Come, come, Lois! Don’t be so silly,—don’t you see that I am almost fainting in this close carriage? I shall be glad to get to my room as soon as possible, when your raptures are over.”

The sharp, querulous tones, familiar though sharpened by time and habit, recalled Comfort to a sense of her duties as hostess, and with a guilty blush and murmured word of regret, she hastened to welcome her other guests,—Mrs. Humbre languidly touching her proffered hand with the tips of her nerveless fingers, while Miss Delphine gave her a friendly kiss, and Robert, holding for an instant her trembling hand in his own, looked searchingly, she could almost fancy admiringly, into her glowing face.

“Time has dealt more kindly with you than with us,” he said, with the old gentle courtesy. But there was a note of pain in the pleasantly spoken words, that Comfort, sadly conscious of that empty sleeve, understood in part at least.

Mrs. Humbre deigned to express her approval of the cool, airy, daintily appointed chamber that had been assigned her, and when Miss Delphine came down to dinner, leaving her comfortably asleep, she

threw herself into the wide-armed old rocking-chair by the open window, with a sigh of relief, that told its own story of the weary, thankless thralldom that had been her portion for the last three years.

“You’ve no idea, Comfort,” she said, with a smile of unfeigned satisfaction, and dropping all at once into the easy familiarity of other days, “what a rest and satisfaction it is to have such a pleasant, quiet, homey home to bring my mother to for the summer. We’ve travelled round from pillar to post ever since she was able to be moved, because she would not come home. She wanted Lois to go everywhere, and she would n’t hear a word of our leaving Europe so long as the girl was sought after and admired. Now that Robert has put his foot down and insisted upon our coming home, I really think that she is going to be better contented here than she has been anywhere for a long time; and I hope it will do her good,— I know it will me.”

She tried to laugh, but Comfort noted with pain the sad lines of patient endurance that had deepened about the once firm mouth, and the whitened hairs that had crept prematurely into the dark, heavy locks that had been their owner’s one pride in the old days.

Lois, with her travelling dress hastily exchanged for a cool white wrapper, was flitting in and out like a domesticated butterfly, merrily bantering the shyly delighted Mandy, feeding the little yellow chicks in the coop outside with crumbs from the table, and leaving an offering by Miss Delphine’s plate in the shape of a crimped tansy leaf with a globe of dull

gold in its bosom, and now and then bursting into a stray fragment of song, as blithe and effortless as the carol of a robin.

“Lois is half wild, I do believe,” laughed Miss Delphine. “The poor child is tired to death of the hedged-in, conventional life she has lived for the last few years. Yes,” in reply to Comfort’s wondering comment, “yes, she has been greatly admired, and has lived in a constant whirl of pleasures ever since she left school. But don’t you know,” lowering her voice unconsciously, evidently from force of habit, as if this bit of social heresy was something to be spoken in an aside, “that people with brains and heart are apt to get dreadfully tired of the inevitable monotony of such an existence? There is plenty of outside show and glitter, but smooth words and smiles, and stale compliments come in time to pall upon one, like a diet of ice-cream and cake. In fashionable life people seek for novelties as for hid treasure, and happy the lucky she who finds one, — she calls together her friends, her kinsmen, and her neighbors, to rejoice with her, and make the most of it before it melts into the dull, flat ditch-water of common usage.”

Comfort laughed. Miss Delphine was the same shrewd, crisp, quaint-spoken body that she had ever been, and even Lois’s merry affectionateness seemed less a part of old-time memories than these characteristic bits of unworldly wisdom that came so naturally from her lips.

“Did General Humbre, your brother, — travel with you after the war was over?”

“Yes, he was with us most of the time, — all of

the time, in fact, after mother's last attack. You know, I suppose," and a spasm of pain passed over her face, "that he lost his right arm in the war?"

"Yes, I knew it."

As by a common impulse the two women looked questioningly into each other's faces.

"But you did not know perhaps that he has been learning to use his brush and pencil with his left hand? Most men," continued Miss Delphine, a proud flush rising to her dark cheek as she spoke, "would have thought their life-work in that line finished, but Robert is made of firmer stuff. And for my part, I look upon his patient persistence in the work that God meant him to do, in the face of such a terrible disability, as more heroic than the charge in which he led his men to victory, and gave his right arm for the cause that he loved."

A few natural tears dropped upon the speaker's clasped hands, and blurred her vision so that she failed to see the answering fire in her listener's downcast eyes. Robert was her's here, her's alone, — and why should any other woman feel her soul kindle at his praises? That night as the two girls sat alone in Lois's chamber, Comfort ventured for the first time to speak the name that had been uppermost in her thoughts all day long. Lois had, without any comment, removed Granny's cup of purple blooms from the dusky corner where it had been placed, and as she sat before the glass, brushing out the soft waves of her beautiful hair, her eyes rested oftener upon the modest, homely blossoms than upon the fair reflection opposite.

“What about Franz Hedvig? You saw him in Germany?”

Comfort's voice faltered a little as she put the question, and Lois turned upon her with a sharpness that astonished, and for the moment somewhat disconcerted her.

“And what if I did? What is he to you? Did he tell you that — that he met us there?”

The words came tumbling one over the other so exactly as they used to do in the mouth of the child Lois, when angry or excited, that Comfort, after the first moment of embarrassment, laughed outright.

“One question at a time, — do you remember how Miss Delphine used to say that to you? What is Franz to me? You know, as well as I, that he is my old friend and playfellow, — as dear almost as a brother; and for his dear old Granny's sake as well as his own, I have kept up a friendly correspondence with him all these years. He mentioned once or twice meeting your party in Germany. Will that do?”

There was an arch significance in the words and the smile that accompanied them that made Lois turn hastily away to hide the blushes that, in spite of her, betrayed the secret of her love for the young engineer.

“Is that *all* he told you?” she asked, trying to speak indifferently, as she made a feint of gathering up her long hair into the silken net that was to confine it.

“What was there more for him to tell?”

The girl's tell-tale blushes, no less than her un-

called-for display of feminine jealousy, had betrayed her secret, and Comfort's friendly heart was lightened as to Franz's possibly hopeless attachment. She could afford to be a bit mischievous and oblige her companion to take the initiative in the forthcoming confidence.

"Oh, nothing! I did n't know but he might have spoken of those excursions that we made up the Rhine, — they were just lovely. I used to tell Franz — Mr. Hedvig — that they were like what the Hudson would be five hundred years hence. It will take all that time to get the newness worn off, and mellow the picture down as it should be. Oh, you need n't look so knowing," with a playful nip at her friend's ear, "Cousin Del always went with us, and Robert usually made one of the party. Do you know," with a little undertone of triumph, "that Robert has the highest respect for, and confidence in — him?"

"But what did Mrs. Humbre say?"

Lois's bright face clouded, and her eyes had a dangerous gleam in them, as she said in a half whisper:

"She said everything that was hateful and unjust, — called Franz a low-born adventurer, and me an ungrateful fool. O Comfort!" and the girlish bosom heaved convulsively with mingled grief and passion, "you don't know what I've suffered from that woman. She brought me up with the idea that I was a rich girl, and that I must marry money, and a title if I could, — let me despise the man ever so much. I did n't care much about it anyway, at first, for I liked to be admired and flattered, and have a

good time without any worry for the morrow. But when I came to know and — like Franz, I just hated the thought of marrying any one but him; I told her so, and that it was no use to try to coax me into giving any encouragement to that little smirking French count that had followed us from Paris, and that she was bound I should have. Then she told me that I had been all these years a dependent upon her bounty, and that I was under obligations to do as she wished in such an important matter. And I was that wild with shame and rage that I really believe that if it had n't been for Cousin Del I should have left her then and there, and married Franz, although I know I should be nothing but a helpless burden upon the poor fellow, for she took care to bring me up so that I have n't a single gift that I could make myself useful with.”

It was the most natural thing in the world for Comfort to take the pretty creature in her arms, and kiss the tears from her hot cheeks, with murmured words of tender soothing.

“If Franz has no money, he is rich in youth and health and manly courage. And, Lois,” with a sudden thought that almost took away her breath, “he may be rich in money, too. I don't mean a millionaire, but with enough to push that invention that is sure to make his fortune, if he can only get the means to introduce it.”

Lois pushed back the damp rings from her flushed forehead, and looked eagerly into her friend's face.

“What — what do you mean?”

Then as Comfort spoke of the land of which he

held the deed, and the reported rise of real estate in that neighborhood, she clapped her hands delightfully.

“I’ll write him this very night,” she cried, “and tell him to come right home and see about it. To think, Comfort, that your little speculation on his account may be the means of making his fortune. But you’ve been his good angel always, and should have been his love.”

There was a wistful tenderness in the concluding words, and as she bent for her good-night kiss, Comfort felt the grateful tears upon her cheek, and her heart thrilled at the significant whisper:

“I hope you’ll be as happy yourself some day as you’ve made me.”

CHAPTER XXIX

“ WITH MARSHAL CAROUZER AND OLD
LADY MOUZER ”

MISS Delphine's hopeful prediction in regard to the improvement in her mother's health seemed to be in a fair way of being fulfilled, for after a rest of a few days, Mrs. Humbre declared herself so much better that she was able to be helped down stairs, and on sunny days to have her invalid's chair brought out upon the wide, vine-shaded piazza, where, with Miss Delphine and Lois to read to her, Comfort to bathe her head with fragrant waters or chafe her always cold hands between her own warm, moist palms, and Robert to talk to, she was tolerably comfortable and contented. Her former experience of the loneliness of the place had scarcely prepared her for the congenial society that she soon found herself a centre of. Fashionable friends who had half forgotten her existence during her long stay abroad were only too glad to renew their acquaintance at this time and place, and scarcely a day passed that the interesting invalid, in the daintiest of embroidered wrappers, with rose-colored knots of ribbon judiciously disposed to lend, if possible, a bit of color to her faded cheek, did not hold an informal reception, usually upon the piazza, where the flickering shadows of the vine leaves playing

over her listless figure lent something of their airy grace to her still helplessness, and helped not only her friends but herself to forget for the time the seclusion and pale quiet of the sick-room.

After a few days of stand-offishness Mrs. Humbre had graciously condescended to accept the situation, and treat her young hostess with the same friendly familiarity as did her daughter and Lois, while the modest unobtrusiveness of Comfort herself, who had not the slightest desire to force herself upon the notice of these stately dames and chattering damsels, relieved her from any embarrassing possibilities in the way of introduction, etc.

Lois, to be sure, took special pains to impress upon her young lady friends the desirability of an acquaintance with this, her "first love," as she playfully called her, and Comfort, ever gentle and tolerant of others, listened with girlish curiosity to their reminiscences of where they had been and what they had seen, finding as the novelty wore off, and her ears ceased to be charmed by the names of people and places that awoke a crowd of interesting memories in her mind, that by a very little stretch of the imagination she might easily fancy herself listening to a knot of her rustic girl neighbors, comparing notes on their way home from a spelling bee or singing school. It was like the game of "what he said, and what she said, and what the world said" played over and over, with so little variety that the listener secretly wondered how they could keep it up indefinitely. To be sure there was this consolation that each had her own way of telling the same

story, thus making something like variety in the perpetual round of uninteresting gossip. One young lady especially had a wonderful gift of forgetting the names of the persons and places that she was talking about, and the foreign gossip that made up the principal part of her conversation ran something after this fashion :

“ O, Lois, you remember that General, what-d’yecall-’im, — the tall Russian that we met at — where was it — that pleasant little place in France — or was it in Italy? (I never can remember names of places) but at any rate, he had the fiercest eyes — you remember him? He sat at the table with the — what was the name of that English family with the three daughters, — that awful homely family? ”

“ Johnson? ” suggested Lois at random.

“ Yes, Johnson, that’s the name. Well, after you came away, he was challenged by the brother of that Miss — I can’t think of her name, but she always wore pink morning gowns, to give her some color, I suppose, for she was frightfully sallow, — you know who I mean, her father was connected some way with western railroads, had made a fortune in that line? ”

“ Miss Barham. ”

“ The very one. Well, one of her brothers challenged him, because he boasted at his club that he’d have a finger in the old gentleman’s pocket before he was many months older. And this brother, — was it Tom or Dick, I can’t think which they called him, — ”

“ Augustus, ” laughed Lois.

“So it was. I don’t wonder you laugh, I’ve such a wretched memory. But as I said, the officer and young Barham had a meeting outside the city walls with pistols and coffee for two, you know. But the police got wind of it and arrested them both, and they had to swear to keep the peace. And when we came away, I had it from good authority, that Miss Barham had ordered her trousseau of Worth.”

If tame, such gossip was certainly harmless, but Comfort’s cheeks burned and all the honest womanliness of her nature rose indignantly at the spiteful aspersions and hints that formed the staple of some of the elder dames’ conversation, as they strove in their own way to cheer and enliven the invalid. Nobody was quite right, — there was an “out” in every character, no matter how correct the outer life might be. The mothers of marriageable daughters were invariably “manœuvring” for a rich son-in-law. The girls themselves were either “shameless fortune hunters” or “outrageous flirts,” while the very worst construction was put upon every little mistake or blunder if there was even the shadow of a mystery about it. One rich maiden lady, whose tongue was as long as her purse, spent much of her leisure in “cheering up poor, dear Mrs. Humbre,” and Comfort listened astounded to the impertinent questions and comments of this so-called lady.

She “had heard that Delphine was preparing some scientific papers for a leading magazine, — was that so? and if so, how much did she expect to be paid for them? Did she support herself by her writing, or did

everything have to come out of poor Mrs. Humbre's own income? It was such a pity that she could n't have married some foreign professor, — everybody hoped she would when she went away, — there was so little chance for a woman of her age, and a blue stocking at that, — the men fought shy of that kind. And was it true that Lois refused a French count because she was in love with that Swedish engineer? And (she had heard, but did n't really believe it,) that she (Mrs. Humbre) had actually threatened to turn the girl into the street if she did n't give up Hedvig? Was Robert making anything with his pictures now that he could only paint with his left hand? She had heard that it was understood among his brother artists that he never would be able to do much in that line, and would n't it be wiser, while his war record was fresh in men's minds, to apply for some kind of a place under government? He might get a very respectable salary, — enough at any rate for a single man to live on.”

And so on and on, until the conventional smile upon poor Mrs. Humbre's face seemed frozen there, and Comfort could scarce resist the temptation to turn the insolent tale-bearer from her door without further ceremony. How strange that Mrs. Humbre, to whom her almost daily visits were a continual torture, should receive her with smiling cordiality, and upon her departure urge her to renew the visit. Did that elegant cottage with its rich furnishings, where the most delightful musicales and “ pink teas ” regaled the outer and inner man after the most approved fashion, make palatable the bitter morsels

that the mistress of the mansion forced her ill-fated friends (?) to swallow upon occasion? It must be so, for Mrs. Humbre was never weary of expatiating upon the elegance and costliness of Miss ——'s establishment, or her thoughtful kindness in inviting her for a day's visit, although the poor soul kept her bed for a whole week afterwards.

But this was only one side of the picture. Frivolity and vulgar pride did not have it all their own way in this bit of Vanity Fair, — these rose like foam to the surface of society, and the casual on-looker might not penetrate to the still, deep, pure waters beneath. Less numerous, less showy, and far less assuming, they came, once and in most cases again and again, the friends of Robert Humbre and his sister, quiet, thoughtful men and women, simple hearted as children out for a holiday, whose eyes and hearts rejoiced at the beauty and grandeur about them, and who drew inspiration from every simple wayside flower as gratefully as from the mighty ocean or the cloud-wreathed granite peaks reflected on its broad bosom. Artists, poets, students, and lovers of Nature in all her varying shapes and moods, souls so uplifted beyond the petty aims and rivalries of the little world that danced and flirted, or lounged and yawned about them, that they dwelt, as it were, apart in an atmosphere of their own, — cool, healthful, and invigorating to body and soul. There were names among them that the island maid had for years regarded with reverential awe, as of beings too far removed from the dull homeliness of everyday life to be approached with any familiar-

ity by ordinary mortals, but rather as devotees approaching a shrine. Now she wondered to find them the simplest hearted, most modest and approachable of mortals, with aims and ambitions so lofty that their own littleness beside the giant intellects that they must needs worship afar off, taught them that they must tread softly and humbly in the footsteps of the great masters that had gone before.

Mrs. Humbre, poor, tired, harassed soul, spent many a restful hour listening to the easy chat, never by any chance stilted or pragmatistical, with which some learned professor or gifted author whom Robert had brought in to see her contrived to fill rather than fritter away the idle interim between breakfast and the noon lunch. Now, indeed, Comfort listened, whenever she could snatch a half hour of leisure, to conversation that neither humiliated nor jarred upon her womanly sensibilities, and if in her heart she shared the pride with which the mother and sister of Robert Humbre saw the respect and unfeigned friendliness with which these honored him, nobody was any the wiser for it.

It was no light task, as she had foreseen, to provide acceptably for these unconsciously critical guests, and as the morning always found her busied with household duties, it soon came to be an understood thing that, after his daily call upon his mother, Robert should find some excuse for a visit to the kitchen to pass a pleasant hour in the company of its bright, cheery little mistress, — gravely insisting upon his right to make himself useful by picking over berries or shelling the peas for dinner, — a feat

that Mandy, ever mindful of his missing hand, viewed with curious, wondering eyes.

Miss Delphine, busy with her pen, smiled, well pleased at the echo of a laugh so blithe and hearty that it seemed to bring the boy Robert back to her, while Lois joyfully declared that "Cousin Robert was actually himself again."

Comfort, with that instinctive delicacy that never seemed to take note of anything different in his condition from that of other men, had all unconsciously applied the most soothing balm to his irritated feelings that could have been found.

To a man of his temperament, proud of his physical manliness and conscious of the powers with which Nature had endowed him, the pity that he had been forced to endure had been the bitterest trial that had fallen to him. With a morbid sensitiveness he had shrunk from the curious or sympathetic eyes that always seemed to spy at a glance that empty sleeve, and to ask mutely the oft-repeated question: "How and where did you lose it?"

Even the tender sympathy, the thousand and one little unconscious reminders in the way of unwonted services and womanly tendance that his sister and Lois bestowed upon him, annoyed and humiliated him. But Comfort had never from the first seemed to even notice it. His proffered services were never refused, and after a time merrily claimed, with a gay effrontery as free and unembarrassed as that of Lois, who, by the way, had taken upon herself the airs of a full-fledged housekeeper, haunting the kitchen and pantry, and gravely insisting that nobody in the

house but herself could compound a salad or froth a custard properly.

It was a little bewildering sometimes to have so many cooks with spoons in the broth, and Mandy now and then secretly rebelled, declaring that “so much clatter and gabble was enough to drive a body’s wits to the seven winds of heaven,” and solemnly predicting that, on some unlucky day not far distant they would probably find their cucumbers sweetened or their coffee salted if this state of things was allowed to continue. But somehow the domestic tangles smoothed themselves out naturally enough, and Robert and Lois mixed and meddled, with plenty of laughter and fun, and a careless inconsequence that made Comfort at times shake in her shoes for the success of her most important dishes.

The roomy, sweet-smelling old kitchen, spotlessly neat in all its appointments, was a “Little Trianon” to the world-tired man, as well as to the novelty-loving girl, and Mrs. Humbre wondered in vain “what they could find in that hot kitchen, full of the fumes of cookery, to care to stay in it?” Fumes! Why the fragrance of that plump, delicately spiced loaf as it came brown and savory from the oven was enough to make an epicure’s mouth water; even the flies clinging to the outside of the screen door and peeping longingly in had the sense to know that it was pleasanter inside than out. The poetry of life is not by any means confined to the parlor and drawing-room, nor does it scorn at times to nestle in the folds of a kitchen apron. Parnassus pastured sheep on its green sides, and the Grecian Penelope wove as in-

dustriously as any Yankee farmer's wife of ye olden times.

Very naturally Mrs. Humbre preferred the cool quiet of the piazza or her own chamber, with the companionship of her chosen cronies, whose glowing reports of the boatings and picnics, the "hops" at the hotels, and the musicales and lawn parties given by the various cottagers, were almost as good as being able to attend in person. The younger people had plenty of invitations to join the pleasure parties of all descriptions, and while Miss Delphine usually declined on the plea that her mother could not be left alone, Robert and Lois sometimes accepted, although the latter declared that "even watermelon parties and buckboard rides were a bore, unless you could pick your company."

Pleasantest and most restful of all, to all, were the boatings on those calm, sweet summer evenings, with Robert at the helm, and the three girls ready by turns to assume the rôle of either crew or passengers. Never did two at least of that merry party forget those evenings, when the starry sky above and the placid deep below were like a dream of heaven in their majestic loveliness, when the graceful yachts and sail-boats at anchor off shore painted their fluttering pennons and tapering masts against a blue-gray background of lightly curling mists, through which the blue of sky and ocean was just discernible. In shore the countless lights of hotels and cottages, like watchful, unwinking eyes, kept watch and ward over the fair summer city where Wealth and Fashion had planted their gilded gonfalon, and taken possession of the

land in the name of His High Mightiness the Prince of this world. Amidst such scenes and in such companionship it was wonderful how one's own individual anxieties and cares seemed all at once to drop from his burdened shoulders into the friendly, all-embracing bosom of the great deep, and how very small and insignificant the worries and annoyances of the day became.

Miss Delphine forgot to speculate if her last article would find acceptance with the editor of the magazine to which, with much fear and trembling, she had sent it; Lois played absently with the modest pearl ring that encircled her slender finger, looking with a dreamy smile toward the little inlet beyond which the clustering pines and cedars pointed out the hiding place of that low log-built cabin, now decayed and deserted by all but the creeping vines that tenderly hid its infirmities beneath their own all-embracing loveliness.

And Robert and Comfort Hadlock looked shyly into each other's eyes, and read — what?

CHAPTER XXX

“OH, I SEE THEE OLD AND FORMAL, FITTED TO
THY PETTY PART”

MRS. HUMBRE sat alone in her chamber, and thought and thought, trying in vain to think her way out of the dilemma that, all unexpectedly, had arisen to confront her, and ruffle the tide of selfish self-absorption upon which her barque had for so many years lazily floated. That Robert, fastidious and proud of his name and race, a man of the world, admired and caressed by that world, with high artistic hopes for the future, should stoop to share his name and honors with this little, unknown, untutored rustic, was gall and wormwood to the proud woman whose hopes had all centered in her son from his babyhood, —her pride in him taking the place of that true, unselfish motherly love that it was not in her nature to bestow.

That Comfort was a sweet, modest, gentle-mannered girl she freely admitted. Indeed, she had made no secret of her liking for her, or of the pleasure and relief that she found in her tender ministrations. But that Robert, her son, should look upon her with eyes of love, should pass by with cold indifference the wealthy, high-bred girls of his own clique to ally himself with this nameless and dowerless maiden, was something too monstrously absurd to be even thought of as a possibility. But what could she do?

Robert was not the man to be interfered with or even advised in so delicate a matter as this,—his mind made up no power on earth could change it. Ridicule, argument, entreaty would all rebound harmlessly from that nature, true as steel, and utterly incapable of change or wavering. If he had even for a single instant shown the least sign of being ashamed of this infatuation — as she mentally termed it, — there would have been some faint hope that change of scene and absence might restore him to his senses. But as she looked backward, she saw with dismay that from the first he had sought the girl's society so frankly and openly that it was plain to be seen that he considered his love for her an honor to himself, and if successful in his suit would proudly expect the congratulations of his friends.

There was no side upon which he could be attacked with any hope of success, and Mrs. Humbre peevishly admitted to herself that she might as well make the best of the situation and pretend, if she could not feel, a motherly interest in her future daughter-in-law. Fortunately, she had not committed herself in the least when her son had hinted to her of his hopes, and he had left her with the comfortable conviction that from her he had no opposition to expect. And as a plan, suddenly formed, developed in her mind, — a plan by which, without exposing herself to blame, she might after all spoil this untimely romance and prevent the impending mesalliance, — her spirits rose, and she laughed softly to herself, while she patted complacently the head of the sleeping pug curled up in her lap.

“I have it! Now, my pet, we ’ll spin a nice little web, all smooth and fine and silky, — but the silly little fly ’ll find it no easy thing, once in, to get out again.”

A step sounded without, and she gave the ear of the pug a pinch that made the pampered pet set up a shrill howl, which naturally drew the attention of Mandy, who was passing just then.

“Does he want his lunch, mum?”

Mandy had a soft side toward dogs, and was perfectly willing to cater to the wants, real or fancied, of this aristocratic specimen. Mrs. Humbre opened her half-closed eyes and looked up languidly at the sound of her voice.

“Ah, is it you? No, I think not yet; he had a bad dream, probably; his digestion has been bad lately. But you may step to my daughter’s door and say that I would like to see her.”

“Why, she ain’t in, mum,” in a tone of surprise; “you was on the piazza yerself when she went out to walk, all of an hour ago.”

“Oh, yes, I remember now. But where is Miss Lois?”

“In ’er room. Shall I call ’er?”

“No, no, don’t interrupt her, she has letters to write this morning. I wonder,” with an affectation of diffidence that made Mandy eye her curiously, “if Miss Comfort could spare me half an hour this morning? I feel one of my nervous headaches coming on, and if she would bathe my head for a little I think it might pass off.”

“Of course, to be sure she will,” responded the unsuspecting Mandy, who had long since learned that

the invalid's wishes were the law of the household, and that, at the cost of any inconvenience or self-sacrifice, her slightest needs must be attended to by all beneath the same roof.

Now Mrs. Humbre knew just as well before as after the girl's communication that her daughter and Lois were well out of the way, so that she had nothing to fear from their inopportune appearance during the interview that she had planned with Comfort, but a crooked way of doing things suited her much better than a straightforward one. It would not have been like her to say directly, “My head aches, and if Comfort can spare the time, I would be glad to have her bathe it.” She considered herself a very sagacious and shrewd woman, and it had been one of the many regrets of her life that she had never been given the opportunity for exercising her talents for intrigue in some courtly or diplomatic circle. Her conversation usually abounded in mysterious hints and vague prophecies, that sometimes led the uninitiated into the belief that she was really the depository of a vast store of marvellous secrets, that but for her remarkable powers of repression, would long before this have spread confusion and tumult throughout the community of which she was the wisely silent center. But a very short acquaintance usually served to reveal the poor lady's shallowness, and on this occasion her over-profuse apologies and even tender welcome sent a chill of indefinite apprehension to Comfort's heart.

What could she be about to do or say? And the girl's thoughts flew back, as if to gather strength and

courage, to that last evening upon the moonlit sands, with the calm summer sea, furrowed as by countless shares of glistening silver, the soft lapping of the incoming tide at their feet, and above, over the highest mountain peak, a great yellow star, gleaming with a friendly, reassuring light, as if some angelic watchman upon those overlooking heights was swinging his lantern over the fair summer city nestled below, with the comfortable assurance: "Ten o'clock! and all's well." Never, so long as life and reason were hers, could she forget that hour, with its atmosphere of peace and joy, when with her tremulous hand in his firm clasp, Robert Humbre had told his love in his own manly, earnest, straightforward fashion, and prayed her to be the comfort and inspiration of his life.

"Comfort, little Comfort," he had softly repeated, and there was a quaver in the strong man's voice that told that his soul was stirred to its very depths; "it seems to me now, as I look backward, that I have loved you from that very day, years ago, when, a shy, sweet-faced child, I first saw you at poor Granny Hedvig's cottage. It was the pure, womanly soul in you, looking out of those childish eyes, that responded all unconsciously to the unsatisfied longings of my own nature and drew me to you, little as I understood it then."

The girl's eyes were downcast and her lip trembled, but, woman-like, she could not forbear to toy with this wondrously sweet stranger, this love that, all unlooked for, had entangled his wings in the dull gray web of her everyday life.

“The impression could scarcely have been very deep,” she murmured, with a pretense of playful incredulity, “when, for all these long years, you have made no effort to see me again.”

But he was too much in earnest to respond in the same strain.

“No,” he returned, gravely, “you were for years simply a sweet, tender memory, that somehow never grew indistinct or colorless. Half unconsciously the scenes that here had charmed me with their grand, majestic beauty and the bright little maid in their midst seemed strangely intermingled, I could not think of them separately. And in the often weary hours of camp life, on the bed of pain in the hospital, and in the gay, bustling life that we led abroad, when I would shut my eyes on it all and smell again the breath of the great, free ocean, and listen to its never-ceasing murmur, there always mingled with them the picture of that soft-voiced, tenderly helpful little maid, whose innocent eyes had never in them a shadow of guile or deceit. O Comfort,” and she seemed to feel again the trembling of the hand that held her own in a clasp that was in itself an appeal from heart to heart, “you who have been a comfort and blessing to others all of your life, will you come into my life and be the comfort and blessing that I so much need?”

From her childhood he had been her ideal, her model of all that was high and true and noble in man, and that he should stoop to her! Why, it was as if that sentinel star up there in heaven should long to fold to his bosom one of these pale evening primroses whose faint perfume the evening breeze

was bearing to them at that moment, and yet, a love at once proud, pure, and trustful welled up from her over-full heart, a love self-respectful, as became the recipient of such a princely gift.

“If I be dear to someone else, then should I be to myself more dear.”

And it was with maidenly pride as well as trust that she had plighted her troth to this man whom the great world without would account as so greatly her superior in every way.

And yet, so far, that thought had had no power to mar her happiness. This was no boy's love, — the whim or fancy of an hour, forgotten in the next, — but the deep, tender sentiment of a thoughtful, mature man, who had found in her his soul's mate and in her modest, unadorned womanhood, had discerned the softening, spiritualizing influence that his grave, self-controlled life needed.

It may seem strange that no prudential considerations, no thought of the possible opposition of the family of Robert Humbre to his choice had as yet crossed her mind. Not a cloud had arisen to dim the sunshine of her new-born happiness, not a doubt or fear had found lodgment in her unsuspecting breast. For the first time in all her life she had tasted of the blessedness of a love strong to protect and shelter, and this of itself, to one who had even from childhood been the bearer of others' burdens, the care-taker and supporter of those she loved, comforted and cheered her woman's heart, and made the future seem to her illumined vision, one long vista of restful, love-sheltered happiness, —



ELLEN WETHERALD-PAHRENS

“A sunshiny world, full of laughter and leisure,
And young hearts untainted by sorrow or thrall.”

But now, in a moment as it were, while, with even tenderer touch than usual she passed her soothing hands across the aching forehead of Robert Humbre's mother, and marked with a suddenly sharpened vision, the hard, proud lines that time had drawn upon that once fair face, her heart sank within her, and the little cloud, at first no bigger than a man's hand, grew little by little, shutting out the sunshine of hope and love, and brooding darkly like an impalpable presence over them, as Mrs. Humbre, in her sweetest, softest tones, went on to talk of her own family affairs with a freedom that was in itself suspicious.

“I think one reason why I have these headaches so often lately is because I worry so much about Robert.”

She felt the electric thrill of the soft palm that rested upon her forehead, and with a woman's intuition, knew beyond a doubt that the love that Robert had taken no pains to hide was known and returned. Suspicion had become certainty, and hardening her heart she went on, lowering her voice to a confidential tone.

“My husband at his death left his whole fortune unreservedly to me, to do as I pleased with. Of course I paid the expenses of Robert's education, but as soon as he was able to earn an income from his art he naturally preferred to be independent, and he was fast accumulating a fortune, when he was foolish enough to leave all and enlist in the army. There he lost his arm, and with it all hopes of ever winning even a competency by his own exertions.”

She paused a moment as if expecting some comment, but as her listener remained silent, she asked directly :

“ You see for yourself that that leaves him at present entirely dependent upon me ? ”

“ It would seem so. ”

There was surprise and something of incredulity in her tones, nothing more, and while the wily woman would gladly have had a look at the face above her, she could not obtain even a glimpse without a noticeable effort that would in itself seem suspicious, and she was forced to content herself with surmises as to the effect of her revelations.

“ Of course, as my own son, I am perfectly willing to help him, as I have told him a hundred times, but he is proud, and the feeling of dependence weighs upon him terribly. Why, he has aged more in the last year than he should have done in ten, and all that I can do or say seems to have no effect in lessening the feeling of humiliation that he groans under. I have turned the matter over in my mind until my brain has whirled, and still I can see only one way in which it is possible for him to regain his self-respect, and with it his peace of mind, and that is for him to marry a fortune. Don't misunderstand me, dear,” as Comfort gave a low, involuntary cry of pained astonishment, “ I did n't mean to marry any lady simply and solely for her money (I would n't be so mercenary as that for the world), but that in marrying he must be prudent enough to look out that the lady has a fortune that will suffice for both. Now I shall betray no confidences, but there is a

young lady, — an heiress in her own right, and a lovely, accomplished girl besides, — whom I have every reason to think would not say him nay, if he would put aside that false pride of his, and ask her hand in marriage.”

A shudder ran through the girl’s frame, but her voice never wavered as she asked with simple directness :

“Do you mean that he — loves this lady that you speak of, but because of his poverty will not ask her to become his wife ? ”

Mrs. Humbre laughed uneasily.

“I did n’t say so, did I ? But this much I will say that Robert Humbre, wedded to poverty and obscurity, would be the most wretched man alive, and to guard against any such foolhardiness on his part, I shall certainly disinherit him if he marries without my consent.”

Miss Delphine’s voice and step upon the stair was a welcome interruption, and Comfort was glad to excuse herself from further attendance upon her tormentor, and in the welcome solitude of her own room, try to collect her distracted thoughts, and look bravely into the face of this terrible revelation, letting reason rather than passion judge how far his mother’s judgment of Robert Humbre was correct. It could not be that he, a man in the prime of life, gifted as few men are, was an idle dependent upon his mother’s bounty, tamely wearing the yoke that galled and tortured him, because of a foolish pride that forbade him to seek in honorable channels an independent livelihood. That his own mother would

thus belittle and misrepresent him for purposes of her own seemed incredible to the simple-minded girl. In spite of his luxurious home-surroundings, he was a man of simple tastes and habits, and the idea of his happiness being dependent upon outside surroundings seemed to her a false one. But on the other hand we are all more or less the creatures of habit, and if these costly comforts that he had been all his life used to were to be withheld, would he not feel all the humiliation and discomfort that his mother had foreshadowed?

The hints that Mrs. Humbre had thrown out about the desirable heiress, only waiting like a ripe plum for him to open his mouth, she put aside with a smile of contempt. His love for herself she never for an instant doubted, the question was would that love make or mar his life? Of herself, of her lonely, desolate life without him, she could not, would not think. If in the acceptance of his love she would really add to his burdens, make his dependence more bitter, perhaps, even, by bringing upon him his mother's displeasure, deprive him of his rightful inheritance, would her love have the power to make up to him the loss of home, friends, and patrimony?

Over and over again through that long remembered day, did she ask herself the question, and slowly but surely the conviction grew, that in the present state of affairs, it would be a wrong to the man she loved to become his wife. The future was not without hope, for Jotham might relent, and instead of a penniless bride she might be welcomed by his family as the upbuilder of his fortunes. Then, too,

his own dreams of artistic triumphs might be realized, and the support of a wife be no burden upon him or his. Yes, it was that very burden of indebtedness for the grudging bounty of that selfish, proud woman. There was the sting that not all her reasonings, not all the power of her loving devotion was able to dull. The honest pride of her race shrank from this humiliation, even for love's sake, and in her inmost soul she knew that she was unequal to it.

She would have gloried in toiling for the man she loved, in bravely keeping step with him, let the path be smooth or rugged, and in bearing cheerfully her share of the inevitable burden of life. But even for his sake she could not bow her neck to the yoke that would ever wound and humiliate her,—the yoke that Mrs. Humbre herself admitted pressed so heavily upon her own son that it was wearing the life and courage out of his young manhood, and reducing him to the pitiable condition of a family pauper. With her strong faith in him she believed that, unburdened by family ties, he would soon work out his own independence, and until that day should come, for his sake, for both their sakes, it would be wisest and best that he should be untrammelled by promises even.

“He will see it as I do, and wait,” she concluded hopefully, as at last she turned her face to her tear-wet pillow and slept the dreamless sleep of youth and hope, and an untried faith in a happy future.

CHAPTER XXXI

“COMFORTING VOICE,
I PRAY YOU BE MY WIFE’S VOICE”

WHY is it that a man in love is the most unreasonable, pig-headed, wilfully blind animal upon the face of the earth? He may be possessed of all the manly virtues of courage, self-control, and endurance, he may be a very Solomon for wisdom, be just, clear-headed, and sensible, but let him be overtaken by that amiable madness that we call love, all these virtues count for naught. Reason, entreaty, argument are alike wasted upon him, so long as his eyes are dazzled and his ears charmed with the rainbow shimmer and rustle of the boy-god’s wings, — will, reason, self-interest are all dominated by that one overmastering passion, nor was Robert Humbre an exception to the general rule.

At first he met Comfort’s objections with tender raillery. Did she suppose that the loaf that overfed the one might not be made to suffice for two? To be sure, he was not a rich man, but he was fast re-learning his old artistic touch and even if that dream should prove an illusion, the income that he derived from his father’s property would alone support them comfortably if not luxuriously.

“The income?”

And the girl’s face grew very pale, and her eyes

looked searchingly into his own, with a startled, half-doubtful expression, that puzzled him.

“ I should have explained that my father at his death, while he left the bulk of his property to my mother, arranged for the payment of a yearly income to each of us — my sister and myself — that let what would happen, we might be sure of a support at least as long as we lived. During the years that I was earning a livelihood with my pencil I allowed the income to accumulate, and since leaving the army I have found the sum saved very welcome as a means of support. Are you satisfied with my financial report, little Yankee ? ” — with a laugh as tenderly mischievous as the kiss that accompanied it.

Comfort smiled, but there was a troubled look in her eyes, and as the momentary blush faded, her cheek took again the pallid hue of doubt and perplexity. Painful as it was to her to know that the mother of Robert Humbre had demeaned herself to so misrepresent matters in regard to his financial standing, the truth as coming from his own lips had taken a world of vicarious mortification from off her heart, and awakened a hope that perhaps, after all, her boasted power to disinherit him at will had quite as little foundation as the fiction of his present dependence upon her bounty. Her heart beat thick and fast with alternate hope and fear, as in a voice scarce above a whisper, she put the question whose answer must be either the seal or knell of her own happiness.

“ But can she, — your mother, disinherit you at the last, if she pleases ? ”

A dark flush rose to the man's forehead, and for the first time Comfort saw the lurid fire of anger in her lover's eyes, as he replied with evident reluctance to her question :

"She has a right to dispose of her own share, which comprises two-thirds of the whole estate, as she pleases. My father had the utmost confidence not only in her discretion but in her maternal devotion, and no doubt he honestly believed that by putting this power into her hands, he secured us from any dangerous business or matrimonial entanglements."

He laughed, but there was no mirth in the laughter. It was evident that the pride of the man was sorely wounded by this threatening sword constantly suspended over his head, from his youth up. It was not so much the threatened loss of the money, that should be his by right, but the feeling that his birth-right, — the God-given, inalienable right of the first born, — could be set at naught by the mere whim of another, even though that other was his own mother, that touched him to the quick. That she would take advantage of her power to wrest from him the fair heritage to which he was born, he had never for an instant imagined, and when Comfort with tearful persistence, urged her determination never to be his wife without his mother's consent, he was by turns incredulous, hurt, and angry. It was ridiculous, the most preposterous idea that had ever entered the brain of a woman, — or man either, for that matter, — that when he loved and would wed the dearest and noblest girl in the whole world, his mother would

disinherit him, merely because that helpful little hand that he was so proud to claim was not lined with gold. Why, it was plain that she was herself in love with her. He had heard her praise scores of times her womanly grace and tender helpfulness. Of course she would be only too proud and glad to welcome her as a daughter.

Then as Comfort still persisted in her determination that the welcome should be a preliminary to their betrothal, her lover actually lost his temper at what he honestly considered her obstinacy. Should he go like a child in pinafores to ask his mamma's leave before he ventured to pluck the fruit for which his soul longed? Should he, a man, with a man's brain and heart, ask the consent of any human being to plight his troth to the woman he loved?

It was putting him into the pitiable category of imbeciles and dependents to ask such a thing of him. And poor Comfort, bruised, and hurt, and half persuaded by his impetuous flood of argument, entreaty, and reproaches, to follow the leadings of her own heart, and trust the future to take care of itself, was tempted to yield her will to his, and as his wife face fearlessly his mother's scorn and anger.

Had her love been a whit less unselfish she would have given up the struggle, and allowed herself the peace and rest for which her tired heart cried so importunately. But for his sake they must wait, must trust to time and circumstances to soften down the opposition that he, manlike, chose to ignore the possibility of. Something, many things might happen to reconcile the proud dame to their marriage. If

she could only have confided to him the facts in regard to her own heritage he might better have understood the motives that prompted her seemingly unreasonable opposition to his will. But here family pride and the ties of kinship sealed her lips. How could she say to this honorable, upright man, whose respect was almost as precious to her as his love :

“ My own brother is a villain, who refuses to allow me to sell my land for what would be to me a fortune, because he thinks that, in time, under the cruel pressure of want and poverty, I will part with it to him for a song, to keep myself from starving.”

To only one friend in the world could she confide the shameful secret, and as the days slipped by, each bringing nearer the return of Franz Hedvig to his boyhood's home, her bruised and aching heart felt a revival of hope and courage.

Once, twice, she had written to her brother, — for she felt herself unequal to a personal interview, — and with all the eloquence of which she was capable, implored his leave to dispose of that part of her land that the speculators had already made her a generous offer for.

“ I shall never,” she reasoned, “ dispose of it for less than the sum already offered. And so long as I have my health and strength, I shall be under no necessity of selling it for the means of living comfortably and honestly.”

To the first of these notes came the hard, brief answer :

“ Sell it to me, or keep it, just as you please.”

To the last no reply whatever was vouchsafed.

But what could Franz do in the case? The law could not be appealed to, for the clause in the will was direct and explicit. The land could not be sold without Jotham's consent. No threat of exposure could move him, for there was the plausible excuse ever ready to his hand, that “land was every year increasing in value, and that therefore it was the kindest and wisest thing that could be done to hold it for a higher bidder.” To appeal to his brotherly sympathies, to his honor as a man, would be worse than useless, — and yet, in their boy and girl days, Franz had always been her friend and helper.

Shrewd and sagacious by nature, he had that in-born faculty, as rare as it is precious, of finding the right end by which the skein, however tangled, might be unwound, — simple and easy enough in his hands, however puzzling it might have seemed to everybody else. That the knots in his own love skein were being so easily untied, thanks to her prudence and foresight, rejoiced the girl's unselfish heart, and in listening to Lois's tender confidences, and glowing pictures of the future, she often forgot for the time her own troubles, — Mrs. Humbre's cold scorn, Miss Delphine's ill-concealed anxiety, and hardest of all, Robert's reproachful face, that told its own story, in spite of the loving words and attentions under which he strove to hide his bitter disappointment. With a persistency that seemed to have little in it of hope or courage, he devoted himself so entirely to his art that his mother's plaintive prediction that he “was working himself to death,” really seemed confirmed by the thinness of his cheek and the dark circles about his eyes, as each

evening he joined the little circle at the farmhouse, sitting in their midst, a listener rather than a sharer in the household gossip, always kind and thoughtful of others and yet in some unexplainable way, apart from them, as if the doors of his heart, having once felt the magic touch of love upon their barred portals, could never again unclose to the hand, however tender, of another.

In her secret soul, Comfort knew that the blame rested at Mrs. Humbre's own door,—that it was for her, and her alone, to speak the word that would bring sunshine once more into these overshadowed lives, and yet there was an atmosphere about her of constant reproach, unconscious, perhaps, but none the less real, that made her feel that all regarded her as the blamable one.

While secretly delighted at the turn that matters had taken, Mrs. Humbre, with characteristic deceit, calmly ignored her own responsibility in the affair, taking pains to treat and speak of her son with a motherly solicitude, as if he had in some way been most shamefully dealt with, while to Comfort she vouchsafed only the coldest and briefest of courtesies. That the object of her attentions evidently chafed under this obtrusive display of sympathy, made not the least difference to the wily dame. Robert must on no account be allowed to marry this dowerless, unfashionable girl, and yet he must be made to feel that it was the girl's fault and not hers.

Although he was too proud to confide to her the story of his disappointment, she knew quite as well how matters stood as if she had listened to the whole

discussion, and so long as she could evade any actual appeal to her motherly authority, and thus ignore the fact that her opposition was the real lion in the way of her son's happiness, she might still retain his love and confidence, without appearing openly as the disturber of his peace. If this girl really had pride enough not to force herself unwelcomed upon her, Robert would in time, like other men, get over his fancy, and when he decided to marry, would make a match worthy of himself and the name he bore. Underlying this fixed determination that he should marry a fortune was a secret undreamed of by her family, that seemed to make a wealthy marriage a necessity to him.

Although the fortune left by her husband had been a large one, her own extravagant, self-indulgent habits had greatly reduced it, and to make this up she had secretly invested in promising ventures that had invariably proved failures, so that at this time her income barely sufficed to provide for the actual necessities of herself and Lois. In fact, it was due in a great measure to this state of her finances that she had come to give her consent to the girl's marriage with the young engineer, whose prospects now seemed so bright that her future, as his wife, was better assured than it would be as a dependent upon her now uncertain bounty. Jealously resenting any interference in her business affairs, she had contrived to keep her children in ignorance of the real state of her finances, not only her pride but her love of power being concerned to keep up the appearance of an authority that had really, — could they have only

known it, — become but a bladeless sword in her feeble hands.

Of all the inmates of the farmhouse Lois was naturally the least disturbed by the little melodrama going on about her. Franz was on his way home at last, and any day she might see his familiar form coming up the lane, with the easy, swinging step that she remembered so well, and hear again the frank, cheery tones that to her were the sweetest music in the world. Every day, rain or shine, she paid a visit to Granny's ruined cottage, for fresh roses wherewith to bedeck the rooms, and her bonny self as well; and at last, because she could think of nothing else to do, she must needs resurrect Granny's old flax wheel from the dust and rubbish of the attic, and under Comfort's inefficient tutelage, set herself to work to learn to spin flax, — taking care always to have the wheel close to the open door, so that Franz in approaching the house, could not fail to see her at her graceful task.

"It would make it seem like home to him," she explained, in reply to Miss Delphine's rather contemptuous expressions of surprise, and she "only wished that the old cabin was in some kind of shape, so that she could have the wheel there, and Granny's own chair beside it, to give him a real home welcome."

It would have been quite useless, and in a way cruel, to have reminded the happy girl that Franz was one of the most unpoetic of mortals, and there was not the least likelihood that he would know Granny's roses or her flax wheel from any others. Lois would have manufactured a romance in three

volumes from a cedar door post, only giving her the smallest bit of sentiment wherewith to glorify it, and if Franz, unimaginative, straightforward, cool-headed Franz, had no power to see through her rose-colored spectacles, why, in all probability, she would be able to see enough for both, and like scores of sensible men before him, he would placidly enjoy the reflection of the rainbow that he had no power to see at the first hand.

CHAPTER XXXII

“WE ARE NOW IN THE HEIGHT OF THE SEASON”

THE ferry-boat was steaming gallantly across the Bay, and a young man leaning carelessly over her deck railing, straightened himself for a long, sharp, eager look at the fast-approaching roofs and spires of Bar Harbor. Was it a mirage, or had some potent enchanter suddenly transformed the quiet hamlet into this busy, bustling summer city by the sea? He rubbed his eyes as if to clear them from some cheating mist, and with a low whistle of mingled astonishment and incredulity, exclaimed beneath his breath:

“Bar Harbor! But where has Bar Harbor gone to?”

A figure at his side put up an inquisitive eye-glass and stared at him for a moment in mute bewilderment, then all at once awaking to the fact that this stranger, whose foreign dress contrasted so oddly with his unmistakably Yankee speech, might be worth the expenditure of some of his carefully hoarded courtesies, he took upon himself to explain, after the manner of his kind.

“Oh! aw! Yes,—it’s Baw Hawber, and no mistake. Most chawming spot on earth,—finest women to be seen at, aw—any watering place awn this side the big ditch. Plenty of fun going awn,—hops and

drives, and boating and flirting, — baw Jove! I never can bear, you know, to tear myself away.”

The young man addressed thrust his hands into his pockets, and looked down upon his diminutive companion with a kind of benevolent wonder, much as a kindly tempered mastiff might regard a skye-terrier who had ventured upon offering him some small doggish civilities.

“ Ah, yes. Beg your pardon, but did I understand you to say that this new Bar Harbor was entirely given over to the fashionable pleasure seekers? There seems to me a good deal of business going on, — such wonderful growth must have made things pretty lively for the island folks.”

“ Aw, yes, — I suppose so. The natives feather their own nests, without a doubt. They make you pay, aw, — a dollar or so every time you turn wound, — it’s perfectly pweposterous. But then, you know, when you’re with the Womans you must do as the Womans do, — you understand?”

“ Of course, if one herds with the Romans,” laughed the other good naturedly. “ But in speaking of the diversions here you did n’t mention ‘rocking.’ That used to be a great favorite with summer visitors here, years ago.”

“ Wocking did you say? Weally, I don’t think I catch on, you know.”

“ It was nothing but clambering over the rocks hunting after marine specimens or sea-birds’ eggs. Very innocent fun, but the people who came here then seemed to enjoy it.”

“ Tewibly destructive to clothing!” and the speaker

gave a dainty shiver, and hastily brushed a cinder from the cuff of his gray travelling coat. "Such boistwous sports are, aw, not in good fawm with the uppaw classes that fwequent Baw Hawber now-adays."

"Indeed. Well tastes change at Bar Harbor as elsewhere, I suppose." Then turning to the captain, a lank, sharp-eyed man, with a wary look upon his weather-beaten face, he asked curiously: "Are all those big buildings hotels? It looks from here as if the place was pretty much all hotel."

There was a half-reluctant wrinkling of the parchment-like skin about the mouth of the person addressed that was meant to do duty for a smile, but his speech was slow and meditative as became the man and his subject.

"Wa-ll, yes, there 's a pretty fair sprinklin' o' them kind o' buildin's, to be sure, but they be chock full every season. I tell you," drawing closer, and speaking confidentially, "the man that knows how to run a hotel at Bar Harbor can make money hand over fist. Yes," illustrating his simile with a corresponding motion of his own leathery extremities, — "hand over fist. Do you see that big one over there where Sol Higgins's ile shed used ter stand? Yes, — well that's Jote Hadlock's hotel, — he and his mother-in-law, the Widder Scripture, own it together. 'T was one o' the first on the ground, and he's grown rich keepin' it. Last year he sent his wife (she 't was Tabby Scripture), to Europe, and they do say she cut an awful swathe there, — spent money like water, went to see the queen and the wax works and the

bear gardings, and — the Lord knows what not. She’s been so toppin’ sense she got back that you can’t touch ’er with a ten-foot pole. Thinks she’s head an’ shoulders above good, nice, stay-at-home girls, like Mandy f’r instance. But money makes the mare go here as well as everywhere else.”

He sniffed discontentedly, but the stranger’s eye turned with a look of pleased recognition to his now familiar face, and he stretched out his hand with the unaffected cordiality of an old friend who is sure of a welcome.

“Why, Jake! I thought you looked natural, but I never should have known who it was if you had n’t mentioned Mandy.”

“Why-y, yis,” and the proffered hand was rather coolly accepted, as with possible reservations. “It’s Jake sure enough, but, — blast me ’f I can call your name.”

“Hedvig — Franz Hedvig, — you have n’t forgotten?”

“Oh, Lord! No, no, — not by a long chalk!” and Franz’s hand ached with the wrench he gave it.

“Well, well, I never! After all these years, to come back to this.”

The proud exultation of the native Bar Harborite in the grandeur of his own transformed hamlet spoke in every glance of his eye, and in the tone and emphasis with which he pronounced that significant “this.” It was a grand pictured volume in itself, and carried a world of meaning to Franz’s sympathetic apprehension, who might have read something like this between the lines: This fair summer city of

palaces, where wealth and fashion, and beauty hold their court; where Nature and Art unite to charm the jaded senses, and the fresh, bracing northern air paints as impartially the cheek of faded beauty as, a few weeks later, it will play the tirewoman to the forest leaves that now deck the green woodland arches, and, like the oaks of Dodona, rustle with mystic meaning to the ears attuned to receive their prophecies. Fashion and folly, wisdom and art, the gamester's cards and the clergyman's cassock. Youth hand in hand with Joy, and Age ever casting longing looks backward, or hopefully facing a faith-illuminated sunset. Men and women of every age, class, and condition, all intent upon the pursuit of happiness in one form or another, make up the sum of human life in this fair and stately playground of the American pleasure seeker.

Here, too, come the "lions" of the world, of every stripe and degree, — political, moneyed, literary, and artistic, — of whose roar the dainty Unas of fashion have no fear, for in their silken bands of elegant leisure even the most ferocious forgets for the time that he has claws and fangs at need, and good naturedly poses upon the drawing-room rug, like any innocent, harmless domestic cat. Here is the lion that somebody heard "roar in the lobby," — a grand, stately, sagacious beast, whose roar has, upon occasion, shaken the halls of Congress and made even the dome at Washington reverberate with its thunder. Here, too, comes the African lion, hardy, patient, determined, a pathfinder through worse than Indian jungles, whose mighty paw has swept aside the rub-

bish of centuries, uncovered the hidden sources of mighty rivers, and let in the life-giving sunlight of civilization upon lands lying in the darkness and gloom of heathendom.

The roar of the Asiatic lion, musical as the chime of silver bells, is telling in melodious numbers of white dromedaries, with gemmed and silken housings, who bear dark-eyed maidens, beautiful as houris, upon their stately shoulders; of palm gardens, of chariot races, and sweetest of all, of Him whose mission to earth was to save and to bless fallen humanity. If the golden shekels wherewith the Judæan lion be-dazzles the eyes of men make some foolish souls forget that honor, truth, and love are more precious than gold, and more to be desired than hid treasure, why, it is not to be laid to the account of the long-descended beast himself. The lust of the eyes and the pride of life will make a god of Mammon so long as the world stands.

But to return to the incoming steamer, with Franz Hedvig and Cap'n Jake upon her deck, the former eagerly searching for some old remembered landmark that would at least assure him that his homecoming was not all an illusion. There were the cliffs, tall and dark and grim as of yore, the sea as blue and bright, and the numberless islands lying green beneath the summer's sun, just as they had lain years ago when he had taken a last sorrowful look at their wave-washed shores. Here and there a fisherman's dory with its patched sail scarcely flapping in the light breeze met his eye, but the bay was gay with smartly rigged yachts, flying bunting enough to

equip a navy if judiciously distributed; sailboats and steam-boats of every size and build; while anchored off shore lay the dark hull of a man-of-war, with the Russian Bear floating from her masthead. Cap'n Jake followed the direction of his eye as it rested upon the last-named craft, and remarked with considerable asperity:

"Sech a time as they've been makin' over them Rushers! Cosetin' an' pettin' 'em as if they'd come from another spear. Dress a jackass up in furrin uniform, with plenty o' buttons an' gold lace, and nine wimmin out o' every ten would swear that he was the finest figger of a man that the Lord ever made."

Franz laughed. Jake at least was the Jake of other days, and the temptation to draw him out was not to be resisted.

"Say," with a nod over his shoulder, at the tourist, who had withdrawn himself somewhat and was languidly waving his handkerchief in response to a signal from the shore, "Say, Jake, that's a new kind of animal that Bar Harbor seems to have imported along with her hotels and cottages,— what do you call it?"

The cynical philosopher cast a look half scornful, half sorrowful at the specimen in question, then without a shadow of mirth in eye or tone, gravely responded:

"Well, they go by the name o' 'sports' up Canady way, the New Yorkers call 'em 'swells,' an' the Vermonters 'coots,' but with the Boston an' Bar Harbor folks they're mostly known as 'dudes.' They're

harmless and pretty peaceable generally, but I never could see, to save my soul, what the Lord made 'em for, unless 't was to kind of encourage tailorin' an' shoemakin'. Their only real business seems ter be to dress up an' look pretty, an' between whiles they dance an' flirt a little, or let some girl take 'em out rowin'."

The boat was now fast nearing the shore, and Cap'n Jake was obliged to break off his confidences with a few hurried words of welcome, and a cordial invitation to visit him in his new home.

"I've got the nest all ready and furnished," he whispered with rather a sheepish air, "but Mandy, she won't leave Comfort Hadlock alone, — so there 't is."

He was gone, and as the boat swung up alongside the crowded wharf Franz could scarcely disabuse himself of the idea that he was really a stranger among these unfamiliar scenes, and that the quiet, peaceful memories of years had been but a dream, after all. Nobody recognized him, although many glanced curiously at the stout, well-knit figure in its foreign dress, — for the young man wore the undress uniform to which his rank in the corps of Royal Engineers entitled him. Once upon firm land he glanced quickly, searchingly about him. Every face, whether of man or woman, wore the cold, unrecognizing look of a stranger, and a sharp pang of disappointment shot through his heart as he remembered how many times during these long years he had pictured this home coming, and the welcome he fondly fancied he would find awaiting him, and now —

“Carriage, sir! Rodick House!” shouted a hack driver at his elbow.

The name was a familiar one, and he brightened up, shaking off the gloom that had oppressed him, with a half-ashamed smile.

“I wonder if Dan’ll know me?” he thought, as he pointed out his luggage to the driver. He was about to enter the carriage, when a hand was laid upon his shoulder, and the voice of Robert Humbre called out in glad welcome:

“Franz Hedvig! Welcome home, old fellow! I’ve been on the lookout for you every time the boat has come in for the last two weeks.”

What a sudden breaking away of the clouds those few hearty, unaffected words of friendly greeting had effected, and as the two rode together to the hotel, they talked and laughed with a boyish gleefulness that made the blood flow faster in their veins, as if all these intervening years with their cares and crosses had been but a changeable dream, leaving only a broken, indistinct memory of their more sombre features. “Dan” did know his old friend, and gave him a right royal welcome, and in spite of his impatience to report at the farmhouse, the afternoon shadows had begun to lengthen before Franz could tear himself away from the old acquaintances who, one after another, on hearing of his arrival, dropped in to see him.

Robert had considerably vanished, and with a heart swelling high with love and hope, the young man set out for the longed-for visit, taking the same road that his bare, boyish feet had so often trodden, and with every inch of which he was as familiar as with the

face of his best friend. There were the choke-cherry bushes already glowing with their racemes of crimson fruit (how well he remembered the pleasant, puckery taste of the tiny drupes), and he could not resist the temptation even now to climb the fence and help himself as in his boyish days, when stolen cherries had a flavor that honestly earned ones seemed, somehow, to lack. The creamy-white elder blooms and bright-faced buttercups had a homely welcome for him, while the pretty hedge sparrow perched upon the topmost rail of the orchard fence sang just the same song, and preened his dainty feathers with the same air as did his great-great-grandfather before him. If men had changed and grown old, Nature had not, and the gladness of his heart found expression in a whistled tune, so blithe and care free that the sparrow tilted his saucy head to catch the note, and an ambitious bobolink started up from the neighboring clover field, and tried his best to join in the wordless chorus.

CHAPTER XXXIII

“FLOW SOFTLY, RHYMES, — HIS HAND IS ON
THE DOOR”

IF Franz had imagined that his arrival was unknown at the farmhouse all this time, he was greatly mistaken, for Mandy, who was ordering her dinner at the village market, and at the same time keeping a sharp lookout for the incoming boat, had caught sight of him as he rode with General Humbre to the hotel, and had lost no time in carrying the news home, thereby throwing the whole household into a ferment of delighted anticipation.

Apart from her own natural longing to see him, Comfort could not but enter heart and soul into Lois's rapturous delight, and if Miss Delphine who, to use the common phrase, had “never been there herself,” wondered a little over the girl's enthusiastic, and, it seemed to her, extravagant expressions of joy, her kind heart would never have allowed her for an instant to dampen that joy by appearing indifferent to it. Even Mrs. Humbre, having once resigned herself to the inevitable, magnanimously refrained from any slighting comment, even going so far as to suggest that an order be sent to her dressmaker in Boston immediately, to have the necessarily limited trousseau gotten ready as soon as possible.

“If, as you say, my dear, he will have to sail for Europe by the first of October, you will have to be married here, and a wedding dress would be just foolishness, with nobody to see it. I will write Madame to make your travelling dress handsome enough for you to be married in and — oh, did you know that the Rt. Rev. Bishop Hianmity was expected here next month? We must have him perform the marriage ceremony, and I should like to ask Miss Van Tucker, —”

“The old cat!” muttered Lois under her breath.

“And young Tadpole and his sister, —”

“They’ll be frogs one of these days when their rich Aunt Betty dies, — yes?”

“And Mrs. Stuyvesant Smythe (you know what splendid wedding presents she always gives).”

“Oh, the jingling of the guinea!” quoted Lois, half angry, half ashamed of all this sordid calculation, and yet, laughing in spite of herself, at the idea of the incongruous elements that were to be brought together on the occasion of her marriage, — then soberly: “I’m afraid they would n’t consider it any honor, auntie, to be invited to a marriage like mine. Franz and I are very prosaic, common kind of folk, once out from under your wing, and the few thousands that he will get from the sale of his land will only serve as a stepping-stone to something greater. To people who pay a hundred thousand dollars for a summer cottage, our little fortune, important as it is to us, will make us of very little importance to them.”

Mrs. Humbre sighed, and looked reproachfully at

her foster-child. "And to think that you might, if only —"

"There, there, auntie, — none of that, please."

And emphasizing her words with a kiss, Lois hurried off to find Comfort, and consult with her as to the probable time it would take Franz to change his clothes, and eat his dinner (that is, if his impatience would allow him to wait for dinner), and walk the scant quarter of a mile to the farmhouse, — allowing, of course, the few minutes that he would naturally spend with Robert. To Comfort's suggestion that he might be detained by meeting old friends, who would be sure to claim his attention if it was once known that he had arrived, Lois was incredulous, almost indignant.

"Who, pray, did he come across the ocean to see? a lot of old codgers, whose names even he had probably forgotten by this time, or his promised wife? He must be a queer kind of a lover who would hang about the hotel talking to Tom, Dick, and Harry, when his lady-love was waiting for him not fifteen minutes' walk away. Wouldn't it be well to have an early lunch, so that they could get into their afternoon dresses before he came? For her part, she should wear that beautiful embroidered muslin that she had on in Vienna that evening, — the first time she had met him after they went abroad. It was dreadfully out of style, to be sure, but it was always becoming, and with a cluster of those rosy bronze woodbine leaves from Granny's cabin it would be charming, quite unique, and —"

"Antique," supplemented her friend teasingly.

With the knowledge that Franz was really at home

again, Comfort's heart had grown strangely light and hopeful, and she was equally ready to sympathize with or jest at the whimsical fancies of his volatile bride-elect. But as the hours, in spite of the early lunch, dragged wearily by, Lois's high spirits sank, little by little, until, after passing through the various stages of unrest, disappointment, and the deepest despondency, she reached that of dignified resentment, where she firmly declared her determination to refuse to see him when he did come. “If indeed he comes at all,” with a scorn that her tears belied.

Very likely, now that he was sure of her, she had lost all value in his eyes, — that was always the way, — it is what men want, not what they have that is dear to them. Perhaps, — stranger things had happened, — he had met with some one he liked better, some beauty and heiress who had made him forget his penniless fiancée across the Atlantic, and now he delayed his coming, dreading to break the news to her. Not that he need trouble himself, — she was willing to give him back his plighted troth whenever he wished it, — no doubt she could find a bridegroom as easily as he a bride. And by way of relieving her overcharged feelings, she sat down at the parlor organ near the open window, and sang religiously through from beginning to end (and without so much as a glance at the village road, in plain sight) the song that tells the sad fate of “The three old maids of Lee.”

Her usually clear, sweet voice was so hoarse and husky with tears that only a lover's ear could have recognized it, and even he, as he stood unseen in the

open doorway, wondered if it could be the bright winsome girl whom he had pictured hastening to meet him, all smiles and blushes, who sang with drooping head and doleful accents the mournful refrain:

“And there they are, and there they’ll be,
To the end of the chapter, three times three,—
Those three old maids of Lee.”

The tender touch of loving hands upon her startled shoulders, and kisses that no other had the right to give, upon cheek and lips, broke the spell of jealous doubt and fear, and with a glad cry the girl forgot her wounded dignity, and all that dreary list of imagined infidelities, and laid her head upon her lover’s breast, shedding tears no longer of doubt but of loving certainty.

“You were a long time getting here,” she faltered at last, with a weak attempt at reproachfulness.

Franz’s own eyes were moist, and his voice a trifle unsteady, as he hastened to apologize.

“So many old friends crowded to see me that I could n’t get away, although I was dying to.”

A dreadfully natural and prosaic reason, but Lois took it as complacently as if a tornado or earthquake had been the real cause of the delay that made such a commotion in her own day, and it is doubtful if, even at this hour, Franz has quite unravelled the mystery of that mood that so bewildered him by its fantastic intermingling of pathos and humor.

As Comfort had foreseen, Franz proved himself the very friend in need that she had hoped for, and while he listened with honest indignation to the story

of her wrongs, he cheered her with hopeful prophecies of better times in the near future.

“Jotham is a big man among the Bar Harborites, and he would n’t like to have it known, for his own sake, that he was cheating his sister out of her rights. So long as you are willing that I should try what I can do, I’ll just put the matter to him in such a light that he’ll be ashamed to stand in the way of your happiness any longer.”

“I’m afraid you don’t know him,” urged the girl doubtfully, “but perhaps he will listen to you.”

And Franz in his heart was very sure that he would. Jotham had met him with such a show of hearty good-will, and had even put himself out a good deal to aid him in the disposal of his land, — indeed his good offices had added several hundreds to the modest fortune realized from the sale of his small patrimony, — and with the unsuspecting hopefulness of his nature, the young man believed it would be an easy thing for him to gain for Comfort the permission she wished.

From Lois’s eager confidences, no less than from his own observation, he soon learned how matters stood between his friends, and he honestly believed that if Jotham only knew how deeply his sister’s happiness was involved, he would be ashamed to stand in the way of her marriage with a man of Robert Humbre’s character and position. With these thoughts in his mind, he took occasion to make an early call upon the prosperous publican, who, in the fulness of his hospitality, actually invited him into the inner sanctuary of his establishment, where the affable

Tabby received him (figuratively speaking) with open arms.

It was so delightful to see him again, and did he remember that evening at Baden-Baden, and how beau-ti-fully the band played, and what fun it was to watch the people at the gaming tables, and how horribly the mineral water tasted (though one had to drink it for fashion's sake), and the promenading and the riding and the crowds of elegantly dressed folks! Oh, it was heavenly! And Tabby turned up the whites of her eyes, and clasped her pudgy hands in a very ecstasy of retrospection. And Franz, who had seen scores of just such silly dames before, good naturedly followed her lead, and laughed and chatted about nothing, venturing now and then upon a prettily turned compliment that threw the flattered Tabby into a perfect twitter of delight.

She bantered him about his forthcoming marriage, and at last, in the fulness of her neighborly kindness, actually hinted that, if he desired, the spacious parlors of the — House would be at their disposal for a wedding reception. Nothing would give her greater pleasure than to present her guests and friends to them, — adding, with a naïveté that made the young man smile shrewdly behind his blond mustache:

“It is so romantic this match of yours, and everybody is on tiptoe to get a look at you. Three of the most aristocratic ladies who own cottages here, and who never spoke to me before, asked an introduction when they heard that we were old friends, and I might be able to help them to an acquaintance with you. It is so dull here just now,” she continued

plaintively. “Earlier in the season there was an escaped convict from Siberia, and a real Chinese mandarin. But they’ve been gone some time now, and there really is n’t anybody uncommon enough now to interest people.”

Franz laughed outright, and the steady blue eyes sparkled with mischief.

“I’m afraid Lois might object to being put up for a show, in default of a supply of convicts and mandarins,” he said, with a sly drollery that the obtuse Tabby failed to see the reason for. “For myself, I’d submit to almost anything in that line to gratify my friends.”

He bowed so courteously that Tabby thought he really meant to compliment her, and was flattered and pleased accordingly. But after he had gone, and she had time and space for reflection, her natural shrewdness began to get the better of her vanity, and an uneasy remembrance of the mocking mischief in his eyes, made her reflect with annoyance:

“Comfort’s filled his ears with stories about us, and that’s why, inside, he’s making fun of us all the time. I told Jotham only yesterday that I’d bet anything she’d put him up to get our consent to her selling that land.” A heavy frown darkened her matronly face, and a greed as cruel as that of her sordid mate distorted for a moment her unguarded features. “But I’ll risk Jotham.”

The words came hissing through her shut teeth, with a venomous emphasis that few would have given the shallow, vain, easy-going woman the capability of, and she glanced involuntarily toward the empty chair

where her late visitor had sat, as if challenging that mute witness to mar her confidence in the hardness and cunning that had heretofore been her best weapons in an encounter with the world generally. Suddenly the glitter of some small object on the carpet beneath the chair attracted her attention, and picking it up she found it to be a small silver key of a peculiar shape, that she had noticed suspended from the young man's watch chain, her attention having been called to it by his habit when in conversation of absently playing with it, in which way it must have become detached, and fallen unheeded upon the carpet at his feet. Her first impulse was to ring for a call boy, and send the trinket to its owner, who was, as she well knew, closeted with her husband in his private office. Then, struck with a sudden thought, she withdrew her hand, and with a strange pallor creeping over her face, began to examine more minutely the curious toy.

It was not a watch key, that could be seen at a glance, and as Tabby turned it over and over, searching in vain for some sign or inscription upon it, the frightened look gave way to one of dogged determination, as, having first taken care to secure the door of her room, she seated herself before the handsome escritoire that occupied a conspicuous place in the inner room, and with a key from her own chatelaine, unlocked the upper part, and selecting one of the smaller drawers, pressed her thumb firmly against the spring that confined it. It was not the first time by many that she had, unknown to him, penetrated to this her husband's private repository

for such valuable papers as he did not care to leave in his office desk, and she knew just where to put her hand upon the curiously carved oaken box, black with age, and bound with bands of tarnished silver, that had grown dim by long seclusion and disuse. She knew, for her husband had once in confidence acknowledged as much, that, for want of a key the casket had never been opened since it came into his possession. More than this, she remembered that years ago, on his first visit after Granny's death, she had seen a small silver key in Franz's possession, and overheard him telling her mother that it was the key to the stolen casket, and that Mrs. Hadlock finding it under the old woman's pillow, after her death, had kept it for him.

Could this be the key? Her brain reeled at the thought, and her fingers trembled so that she had much ado to fit the tiny instrument to the lock while a low, grating sound as she slowly and with considerable difficulty turned it, made her start and tremble with a nervous apprehension, that had in it more of superstition than actual fear of any possible danger to herself in thus intruding upon the hidden secret of years.

CHAPTER XXXIV

“WITH JEWELLED GAUDS, AND TOYS OF IVORY”

“**P**SHAW! Them old duds! Why, they ain’t worth five dollars, the whole parcel of ’em.” And Mistress Tabby cast disdainful glances upon the quaint silver ornaments, dulled and discolored as they were, that met her eyes upon the opening of the mysterious casket.

What she had really expected to find it would be hard to say. Perhaps visions of rare gems, heirlooms, handed down from some old Viking ancestor, had floated before her mental vision, and cheated her with the fancy that anything worth such careful hoarding must of necessity possess great moneyed value,—the only standard of worth of which she had any conception. And what had she found? Only a few tarnished silver trinkets that, resting upon their bed of faded purple velvet, seemed to taunt her with their worthlessness. Years of secrecy and darkness, and jealous seclusion, and this was the outcome of it all,—a pair of bracelets or anklets (they were big enough for the latter), and great unwieldy looking earrings, better suited to an Indian brave than to be worn in the delicate ear of a fashionable lady.

As she impatiently closed the lid of the casket and replaced it in the cobwebbed corner where it had lain undisturbed for so many years, there came a tap at

the door of the room, and a feminine voice called from without:

“Can I come in?”

“In just a minute.”

And hastily closing the *escritoire*, Mrs. Tabby hastened to unlock the door of her chamber and admit her visitor, a slender, dark-eyed woman, in dainty morning negligée, who threw herself into the easiest chair in the room with a long-drawn sigh and the discontented comment:

“I’m completely worn out with this everlasting planning and contriving for other people. I do wish that somebody would scare up an idea of her own, once in a while, and not call on me to rack my brains for their benefit, every time.”

Tabby smiled significantly, but it was not her place to remind the complaining visitor that that was just what she was there for, to serve upon occasion, as the getter-up of fanciful costumes for those who were willing to pay handsomely for the originality and artistic skill by which they were to benefit, so she only said:

“There are people here who would hire somebody to breathe for ‘em if they could. But how are things getting on? Have most of the ladies decided on their costumes?”

“Decided!” and Mrs. Lane, — or as she was known to the Bar Harbor fashionables — Madame Blondine, rolled up her eyes and shrugged her graceful shoulders with a Frenchified air. “I am half wild with their quibbles and silly notions. Why is it,” letting her hands fall helplessly upon the arms of her

chair, and lifting eyes at once appealing and desperate to the face of her landlady, "that every woman over forty wants to take the part of a flower girl or a Hebe?"

Tabby laughed good naturedly, — she was still young enough herself to enjoy this fling at her elders.

"I'm sure I don't know. But how is it with the girls?"

Madame wrung her slender hands distractedly.

"Worse still. Why, that little chit of a Kitty Vandermere insists upon going as a nun, and Pet Tadpole will personate Bar Harbor Fog, — all in grey tulle, without a bit of color to lighten her up — just think of it! I've talked and reasoned and implored, but all to no purpose, — I might as well talk to the fog itself. It's awfully provoking."

But somehow Tabby did n't seem to lay it to heart so very much that two of the belles of the season should persist in making frights of themselves at the forthcoming masquerade.

"But there are the Celandines, — they are lazy and indifferent enough to let you have your own way, and choose whatever you think best."

"Yes," and Madame brightened up a little, "and I'm determined that they shall make a sensation just to spite those other wilful things, if for nothing else. I've an idea, — are you sure," sinking her voice to a mysterious whisper, and peering sharply about her, even under the chairs and couch, — "that there is nobody within hearing?"

Tabby hastened to reassure her.

“Ah, well, I don’t mind telling you, although I wouldn’t have it get out for the world, — but I’m tired to death of all these Greek goddesses, and queens, and flower girls, and gypsies, — they’re completely worn out, as stale as stale can be, — so I’m going to try something new in getting up costumes for the Celandines.”

“What is it? Do tell!” urged the curious Tabby. Madame looked at her with a doubtful air.

“Did you ever hear of the Norse goddess of spring, Freya? or of Thor the Thunderer?”

She evidently expected a negative, but Tabby had not quite forgotten the legends with which Granny Hedvig used to delight the children of the neighborhood, and somewhat to the customer’s surprise she returned an animated

“Oh, land! Yes, indeed! I knew all about them years ago.”

“What, really?” and Madame seemed for a moment somewhat disconcerted, — she had not calculated upon finding this vulgar, under-bred woman, whom she secretly despised, so well up in Norse mythology, — “Well, I shall dress young Celandine as Thor and his sister as Freya.”

“Even to the cats?” laughed Tabby.

“Yes, we have two splendid coon cats that we have hired for the occasion, and Miss Celandine and I practice them two or three hours every day in her room. You would be astonished to see how tractable they are, — she drove them in the silken harness that I contrived, for almost half an hour yesterday, and they never once balked. You may guess what a big plate

of chicken they got for a reward that time. Miss Celandine was perfectly wild with delight."

"But could you hire the costumes, too?"

"No," and Madame's tone bespoke the triumph of a great mind over seemingly insurmountable difficulties, — "with the help of her maid I made them myself."

It was just a little spiteful in Tabby to withhold the praise that the ingenious lady's feat certainly deserved, but Tabby could be spiteful on occasion, and the Celandines had never condescended to notice her, so she only asked with hardly a trace of the curiosity that was inwardly consuming her:

"Really? Well, how did you make out?"

"Admirably. The costumes are perfect with only one exception, and that is the silver ornaments that Freya should wear. If there was only time Miss Celandine could send to New York and have some made to order, but it is too late now. We have tried everywhere to buy, hire, or borrow something of the kind, but nobody has anything that is antique enough for our purpose, and I suppose we shall have to make some modern stuff do. But it just breaks my heart to see a lot of bangles and modern trumpery putting to shame the royal velvet and graceful draperies of a Norse goddess."

For a full minute Tabby pondered the question, "should she, or should she not?" Madame had it in her power to do her no end of favors in the social line, and it was wise to keep the right side of her. Then there were the Celandines, young and foolish, and very rich, and a loan just now was sure to be re-

paid, not only by some elegant token of their gratitude, but in a way that would be of even more value to her aspiring soul, — a recognition of her claims to social equality. It could do no possible harm to let these hidden trinkets see the light for one evening, and no human being would for an instant mistrust that they were not the young lady's own property, — they might have been an heirloom in her own family, — who would know? To Madame she remarked with feigned reluctance as, taking from its hiding place the oaken casket, she proceeded to unlock it before her eyes:

“I have some silver ornaments that are old enough, if that's what you want. They have been in my husband's family for generations (O Tabby!), and he's very choice of them. I have n't never had 'em on myself, but if they'd do Miss Celandine any good, she's welcome to the use of 'em.”

The smile of polite indifference with which the costumer at first sight regarded the tarnished trinkets vanished as she regarded them more closely, and an eager crimson rose to her cheek as she cried excitedly:

“Why, they're lovely! exquisite! They might have been made to wear with this costume. See here,” taking a bit of chamois skin from her pocket and touching up one of the earrings with the skill of a professional, — “what a dainty thing it is, — a cat's head, with tiny emeralds for eyes, — and see, the whiskers are separate hairs of silver wire as fine and delicate as pussy's own. How perfect this twig of pine that forms the support is, with its cones and bits

of needles, each one wrought as carefully as if the workman had been engraving a gem instead of working in such common metal as silver."

"They are very old," stammered Tabby, bewildered and in truth rather alarmed at the unexpected disclosure of the value and rarity of the hitherto undervalued trinkets.

And Madame, unconscious of her companion's growing perplexity, went on innocently enough to express her thanks for the timely loan.

"I was never so relieved and thankful in my life as I am for these ornaments, and if I can oblige you in any way I shall be only too happy to do so. You have decided on the Sea Nymph's costume for yourself? Yes? Well, I'll get a bandeau of pearls for your hair, and I know where I can borrow a clasp for your girdle, — two sea-urchins of green jasper, — that will be just the thing."

Tabby swallowed down her half-spoken refusal to let the ornaments go out of her hands, after all, and with a troubled consciousness that she was "in for it," she decided that there was nothing left for her to do but to run her risk, as it was not in the least likely that any harm could come to the treasured relics during the few hours that the masquerading belle would have occasion to wear them. One precaution she took, however, in parting with them, and that was to remove them from the casket where they had so long rested, which casket she hastened to lock and replace in the secret drawer, with the confidential comment, "They are Mr. Hadlock's property, and it will be just as well not to let him know that I

lent them, — men are so fussy, you know, about anything that belongs to them.”

Madame smiled grimly, — she had been twice married herself.

The precaution proved a wise one, for that very night, awaking from an uneasy dream, Tabby saw with silent astonishment her husband, by the dim light of a night lamp, searching in that private drawer, and as his hand touched the oaken casket he uttered a low exclamation of relief.

“Thank goodness! That’s all right.”

“What in the world are you after there, this time o’ night?”

If he had been a whit less nervous and startled himself he could not have failed to notice the tremulous, frightened tones of his wife’s voice, but he was too absorbed in his own anxious speculations just then to spare a thought to her.

“I’ve been looking,” he stammered with a guilty shrinking from even her eyes, “to see if that box (that you know about) is all safe. I dreamed that Franz Hedvig had it, filled with gunpowder, and that he was going to blow us up with it, and I couldn’t sleep till I’d made sure that ’t was safe.”

“Stuff and nonsense!” blustered Tabby, shaking in every limb, “What could have set you out to think of such a thing?”

Her husband shut the drawer with a stealthy motion as of a thief fearing detection.

“Why, I s’pose ’t was what he said to me about Comfort to-day that put the idea into my head.”

Tabby was wide awake now, and as she sat up in

bed furtively watching his motions, her eyes shone with a light that was not all anger, — there was fear as well as rage beneath the sharply put question:

“What business is it of *his*? He don’t want to marry her himself, does he, after all?”

“No, but he wants that Humbre to. And Comfort, who’s as proud as the devil, won’t have him without his mother’s consent. That the old lady never ’ll give while she’s poor.”

Tabby lay back on her pillow with a cruel laugh.

“That’s the way the wind blows, is it? So, my lady, if she can get your consent to sell her land, is going to get in with the top knots, and have the chance to crow over *us*.”

Jotham shut his heavy mouth with a vicious snap.

“Not if I know myself,” he growled savagely, “and I said as much to Hedvig. Says I, ‘Comfort Hadlock knows who she can sell that land to, and I swear before God, that as long as I live, she never shall sell it to anybody else.’”

“What did he say to that?”

“What do you suppose?” with a harsh laugh.

“Called me an unnatural brother, of course, and swore he’d bring me to terms yet. He’s the same blustering fool,” went on Jotham, with the superiority of one who feels his own position secure, — “ready to burn his own fingers pulling other folks’ chestnuts out o’ the fire, but I guess he ’ll find it hard work drivin’ me. I ain’t one o’ the sort that stands much o’ that kind o’ nonsense.”

True, — and yet Tabby, as she laid her head once more upon its pillow, wished with all her heart that

the contents of that fateful casket were safe in her own hands once more, and that she had not yielded to that foolish impulse to risk even a possible exposure in her desire to conciliate the social powers whose notice she ambitiously coveted.

CHAPTER XXXV

“RICH AND RARE WERE THE GEMS SHE WORE”

FOR several weeks the fancy dress party that the guests of the — House had arranged for had been the subject of interesting discussion and comment among the pleasure-loving fashionables of Bar Harbor, and an amount of invention and shrewd finesse had been expended on the selection and arrangement of costumes, — that must be kept a profound secret even from one's most intimate friends — to have equipped and managed a miniature Worth's here in the very stronghold of Yankee republicanism.

Madame's services were in constant demand, and it must be confessed that the petulant complaints of that much beset woman were not without cause, for, while professing to defer to her taste and judgment, nineteen out of every twenty were sure that their own ideas were far better, and thus kept her continually harassed and hampered by the alternate importunities and objections that her experienced hand was expected to dispose of as easily as if they had been so many irresponsible cobwebs. Knowing that her own reputation was at stake, the costumer naturally tried her best to contrive costumes suitable to the age and personal characteristics of each, but it would seem in most cases that Queen Elizabeth's

looking-glass must have been the only one in use, judging from the youthful characters that certain portly, middle-aged matrons and scrawny spinsters insisted upon personating. It would never do for the hired artist to say — “You are too fat and coarse to personate Titania, — or too lean and sallow to venture on the rôle of Cleopatra.” No indeed, — she could only venture on the delicate reminder, “A Queen Catharine or possibly a Ceres would better fit your style, madam,” or “Why not try a gipsy fortune-teller or a Breton peasant woman? Either costume could be made very striking and picturesque.”

Again and again these hints and suggestions were repeated, and just as often certain individual instances of wonderful stage rejuvenations, brought about by arts of the toilet, were produced as unanswerable arguments, until the very name of Maggie Mitchell and her illustrious compeers became, to put it politely, a stench in poor Madame’s nostrils, who went so far at times in her desperation as to wish that the author of “Mignon” had died before the production of that popular drama.

Of the party at the farmhouse two only were care-free enough to feel any special interest in the approaching fête. Secure and happy in her own love, Lois could not believe that the uncertainty and gloom hanging over her friend would not be in time dispelled, and as Comfort was too unselfish to insist upon sharing her troubles with another, it came about, as is usual in such cases, that those nearest her half forgot that she had any troubles to share. As for Franz, aside from his enjoyment of Lois’s

pleasure, he had all the natural curiosity and interest of a young man who has, as yet, merely tasted the foam upon the cup of pleasure, and finding the taste pleasant, naturally concludes that the sweetness increases the deeper he drinks. Then, too, it was very pleasant to have his costume planned and commented upon by his partial mistress, who took such an innocent, unaffected pride in its fitness and becomingness. James Fitzjames, in hunting gear, with plumed cap and dress of Lincoln green, wearing his silver bugle and knightly belt and spurs with an unconscious grace that Lois pronounced "kingly," was really, for the time being, as truly the disguised Scottish monarch as the disguised Swedish engineer, and if the maiden in

"Satin snood, and silken plaid, and golden brooch,"

clinging to his arm as they entered the large, brilliantly lighted room on that eventful evening, had not broken the spell with the whispered comment, "Mrs. Winstanley makes a beautiful Madame Recamier," he would most surely have forgotten to doff his cap to the mistress of ceremonies, unconsciously exercising his royal prerogative, and while all stood bare in the room, he alone would have worn the cap and plume of the monarch.

It was such an entirely new experience, this masquerading in the dress and character of another, and cool and unimaginative as he was, both by nature and habit, he found himself completely bewildered and charmed by the unwonted scene. Plumed knights in glittering mail promenaded through the

stately rooms with gipsy maidens or Swiss peasant girls upon their arms; Cedric, the Saxon, lisped his delicate compliments into the willing ear of Mary, Queen of Scots; a friar in gown of gray with a hempen girdle flirted shamelessly with Lady Washington; and a Roman soldier with clumsy good-will was helping Lady Macbeth to adjust her train over her arm in preparation for the coming waltz.

Franz's brain whirled, and he was glad that Lois could do the talking for both until he should have time to get his bearings, and make sure that this glittering phantasmagoria was not, after all, the foolish imagery of a sleep-bewildered brain. Little by little the mists cleared away, and he began to recognize beneath their foreign feathers the familiar shapes and features of his more or less familiar acquaintances. A good-natured dowager, with her two pretty daughters, wearing the guise of the Primrose portraits, gave them a cordial greeting; Tabby Hadlock's ruddy face looked out from a cloud of sea-green tulle, with a furtive, anxious glance; while pages, queens, monks, and nymphs, in passing, one and all saluted them in the English tongue and after the English fashion — not a “salve” or “pax vobiscum” by any chance dropped from Roman or priestly lips. And Franz, with lightened eyes, soon found himself able to share in Lois's amusement at incongruities of dress and feature visible everywhere about them, as they walked leisurely through the now crowded rooms, commenting, and in turn being commented upon, by the gay assemblage.

“See that couple,” and Lois gave her cavalier's

arm a little pinch to call his attention to the pair in question.

“Ichabod Crane and Katrina Van Tassel. They are gotten up capitally, but who would have thought that such a dude as Dicky Tandem would have chosen that character? Lute Marven makes a good Katrina, though, if only she were a little plumper; and Jimmy Fitz as ‘Peter, Peter, pumpkin eater,’ is first rate (if one only leaves out the second line). Madame Golden and Sam are just the ones for Mrs. Partington and Ike; but who ever saw a black-eyed, black-haired Queen Elizabeth before, or a Puck in velvet knee breeches?”

The gentle “Ellen” was getting rather critical, and her gallant escort, while sharing her amusement, was far more easily imposed upon by the false lights that art had hung out to hide the decay of nature, and more than once brought down upon his devoted head the merry banter of his sharper-eyed companion.

“That’s a wig, and, — why, she’s *enamelled*, — (fifty years old, if she’s a day). Bleached, — you dear old innocent! Never heard of such a thing? Why, it’s as common as painting the eyebrows and eating arsenic for the complexion. Don’t look so horrified. Somebody will notice and wonder what I am saying to you.”

And the silken plaid was “mantled with modest care” over a breast so shaken with merriment at his innocence of fashionable mysteries, that Franz was thankful for the interruption occasioned by a new arrival that for some reason seemed to attract everybody’s attention and occasion a sudden lull, in

which the soft tinkle of silver bells could be distinctly heard throughout the crowded rooms.

“The god Thor, and Freya, goddess of spring,” announced the usher, and every eye was turned to the handsome pair who at that moment entered the room.

Yellow haired, tall and stately, came the Scandinavian deities, the god in tunic of purple velvet, upon the breast of which gleamed in silver the raven of Odin. His leggings, sandals, and belt were clasped with the same precious metal, while upon the handle and head of his massive silver hammer gleamed costly gems that flashed and burned as the light struck them, like sparks of living fire. Beside him came the fair goddess, gravely guiding her span of cats, docile as ponies in their silken harness, from the collars of which were suspended silver bells that tinkled musically as the well-trained animals trotted before her into the brilliantly lighted room, with an unconcern as perfect as that assumed by their stately mistress. Over an under tunic of primrose silk, the beautiful Freya wore a mantle of green velvet, upon which was painted with exquisite skill garlands of violets, of crocuses, and hyacinths, with pale yellow primroses that seemed to have been flung fresh from their native woods upon the rich background. A garland of pine confined her flowing locks, while upon arms, bosom, and shoulders gleamed the pale brilliancy of silver in the most fanciful and unique designs.

“Let us get a little nearer,” suggested Lois. “I want to get a good look at those lovely ornaments.

Where in the world could Virginia Celandine have found them? They look like something that has been handed down for generations from mother to daughter, — and the Celandines, with all their money, are new people, you know.”

Franz smiled with just a hint of mischief in the smile.

“She probably had them made for the occasion. A skilful workman can imitate designs a thousand years old just as well as those that were made yesterday.”

But Lois was wiser in such matters than her companion.

“No,” she urged, with her eyes still fixed upon the charmed ornaments, that they were now near enough to observe closely, “that is no modern jeweler’s work. Look at those earrings, — I’ve seen some of that work in the museums abroad, and I should know it anywhere. Why, — what?” and she stared half frightened into her lover’s pale, agitated face.

“What is it, Franz, are you ill?”

The young man controlled himself by a mighty effort. “Let us get out of this crowd, where we can be by ourselves a few minutes,” he urged in a voice so strained and harsh that Lois scarcely recognized it, and as they found themselves secure from observation in one of the curtained recesses, she asked again with an anxious tenderness that was its own excuse for the seeming importunity, “Do tell me, Franz, what is the trouble?”

Thus adjured, the young man tried to smile reas-

suringly, but there was a hard, cruel look in his eyes that brought the tears to the girl's own, and made her timidly withdraw the hand that she had laid upon his arm. Unlike himself, he seemed for once oblivious of her pain.

“Did you ever know,” he asked half reluctantly, as if loath to turn back to the long-closed page, “of the jewel casket that one of the wretches stole, who broke into her cabin and frightened my poor old grandmother to death?”

“Yes,” was the softly murmured reply. “I know,— Comfort tried to take it from him and he struck her.”

“That casket,” continued her companion, still in that low, deep tone of concentrated passion, “held the family ornaments of silver that had been the bridal gift of the Hedvigs for more generations than we have any account of. They were of such a peculiar pattern that I should recognize them anywhere; and more than that there was a private mark upon them that no stranger would be likely to notice, but by which I could establish their identity beyond a question. And,” he bent his head, and spoke in a fierce whisper, “the ornaments that that girl is wearing to-night are the very same that were stolen from Granny's cabin years ago.”

“Impossible!” cried Lois incredulously. “Where could Virginia Celandine get Granny's ornaments? They are like, but they can't be the same.”

Franz shook his head decidedly. The first shock of his discovery over, his clear brain and steady will regained their power, and enabled him to pierce at once to the heart of the seeming mystery.

“ She either bought or borrowed them, and that very recently, for I have reason to think that in all these years whoever had the casket in his possession has not been able to get at the contents, — unless indeed he should destroy the casket, which he would be very unlikely to do.”

“ Why do you think so ? ”

“ Because, while it shuts with a spring, it could only be opened with the key belonging to it, and that key the thief never had, for it came into my possession and I have worn it as a watch charm until three days ago, when, in calling upon the wife of Jotham Hadlock, I lost it.”

The two looked silently into each other's eyes, half dreading to speak the thought that was in the mind of each.

“ He is Comfort's brother,” pleaded Lois.

Franz nodded — he had no need of the reminder.

“ And he has lived all these years with that sin on his soul ! ” went on the girl, with a half-pitying wonder. “ And if this is as we suspect, you can ruin him in the eyes of the world that he has worked so hard to win the respect of ? ”

“ Yes.”

“ And you will ? ”

The young man's thoughts flew back over the wide waste of years, and he seemed to hear again the tender tones of the woman who had loved him better than all the world beside, — the woman who, old and weak and defenceless, had been hurried to her death by a mob of drunken boors, insulted, threatened and robbed by their brute hands, with

only a child — a tender, loving, brave child, — to stand between her and insult.

The devotion of the sister half cancelled the debt of the brutal, unnatural brother, and there was an unwonted moisture in Franz's eyes as he said thoughtfully:

“Let him do her justice, and I shall make no effort to bring upon him the punishment that he so richly deserves, — the price of my silence will be her right to do what she will with her own.”

CHAPTER XXXVI

“PITFALLS IN THE PATH THEY DAILY TREAD”

“YES, indeed, I’ve known Virginia for years, ever since we were at school together, and when the dancing begins I’ll introduce you, and you can engage her for a waltz. Then you can get a good look at the ear jewels, and make sure that they are the ones you think.”

Lois, in the excitement of unravelling an interesting mystery, had forgotten everything but the absorbing question of the identity of the ornaments worn by Miss Celandine, and there was so much enjoyment in following up the clew thus unexpectedly given, that she entirely overlooked for the time all possible consequences to the parties concerned. It was no difficult matter for Franz to secure the fair Freya for a waltz, and as they floated down the long room to the bewitching strains of the orchestra, the goddess gradually relaxed her dignity, and condescended to chat familiarly with “Lois Gregory’s foreign lover,” receiving his compliments upon the beauty and originality of her costume with a girlish smirk and simper that one would scarcely have expected from the stately Norse goddess.

“Yes, I flatter myself that Ted and I made quite a sensation. But I had no end of trouble in training those

cats, and as it was, I expected every minute that the treacherous creatures would give me the slip, and spoil it all. And then the girl who was to paint the mantle only brought it home an hour before it was time to dress. I thought I should have gone distracted, I was that anxious, and Madame and my maid were at their wits' end to keep me from crying, and spoiling my eyes for the evening.”

“What a shame that would have been !”

Surely the young man's good genius must have taught him the art of blending indignation with the proper amount of sympathy, for the susceptible Virginia was perfectly charmed with his air and manner, and as a natural consequence grew more and more communicative.

“It really seemed providential,” she went on in a flattering undertone, while her pine-crowned head almost touched his shoulder, “about the bracelets and earrings.” Franz's heart gave a sudden bound, and he made an awkward misstep that his partner graciously pretended not to notice. “You see,” she went on, secretly pleased at his evident confusion, which she naturally attributed to the effect of her own charms, “there was no time after the selection of the character for me to get ornaments made that would be fitting for it, and Madame and I tried everywhere to find some. But everything in that line was so frightfully modern, that we were almost in despair, when, all unexpectedly we came across these,—you never could guess where.”

“At Bee's?” suggested the young man with a flattering show of interest.

The goddess shook her pine-wreathed tresses with an air of playful mystery:

“Now, you naughty man, — you know better than that. Why, these ornaments are hundreds of years old.”

“Is it possible?” taking the opportunity thus given for a long and satisfying look at the relics in question. “But if the question is not impertinent, who could have had such wonderful antiques in his or her possession?”

“That’s the funny part of it,” laughed his unsuspecting partner, with a quick glance around to make sure that they were not overheard, “They belong to Mrs. Hadlock, the landlady of the — House.”

“Why, where could she have gotten them?”

Freya looked mysterious.

“We can only guess.”

She spoke with the grave deliberateness of an oracle, and Franz was forced to curb his impatience until it should please her to resume the story, which it was evident she longed yet rather hesitated to tell.

“I don’t suppose,” she said at length, “that it’s just fair for me to tell, so long as she was kind enough to lend them to me, but of course you won’t say anything about it. Well, she pretended to Madame that they were heirlooms in her husband’s family, (a likely story!) and the oaken casket that she took them from was black with age, while the silver bands and even the jewels themselves were so tarnished that it was plain to be seen that they had n’t been disturbed for years.”

“Did her husband know she lent them?”

“Not he,” and the speaker laughed mischievously.

“And she took precious good care that he should n’t find it out, by re-locking the empty casket and putting it back into the drawer she took it from.”

“But they belong to him?”

“Certainly, his wife acknowledged that much. And Madame and I think we know how he came by them.”

Franz looked the question that he could not trust his voice to ask.

“We think that he got them from some representative of an old but impoverished family who was unable to pay his board, and so left these heirlooms as security. That would account for his keeping them hidden out of sight so jealously, and for his wife not daring to let him know that she had lent them.”

“How wise you are. You should have been a Pallas instead of a Freya,” laughed the young man merrily.

This girl’s incautious revelations had made everything clear, and in the exultation of the moment his spirits rose so lightly that he could scarce refrain from giving speech to the triumph that thrilled every nerve of his body. Crafty, secretive as he had ever been, the thief and housebreaker was caught at last, and on only one condition could he escape the inevitable consequences of his crime.

The constancy and unselfish devotion of Comfort Hadlock should now be rewarded, and the proud, hard man who had scorned and hated his unoffending sister, would find himself indebted to that same sister for his exemption from a felon’s punishment. Until now, Franz had never thought that more than one of the Hadlock’s could have been concerned in

that dastardly deed whose memory even now made his blood boil with fierce resentment. Dave's flight had stamped him as guilty, and nobody had for an instant suspected that the elder brother might be as deeply implicated as the more timid fugitive.

The Squire had died in the comfortable belief that in his only remaining son he had left an honorable representative of his race and name, while the unquestioned business ability and character for fairness that Jotham had won from his fellow-townsmen seemed a natural fulfilment of the promise of his young manhood. Could it be that his wife knew the secret of that stolen casket, from which she had foolishly unearthed the proofs of her husband's guilt? The question recurred to him again and again, as every now and then throughout the evening he caught the eye of a certain substantial sea-nymph watching him with a look of anxious scrutiny, that had in it something of actual terror. And as, towards the close of the revels, he lingered for a moment in the almost deserted hall to exchange a few private words with Lois, he put the question to her:

“Does his wife know where he got the jewels?”

Lois nodded knowingly.

“How can she help it?”

“I don't know,” and the young man's voice had a half-doubtful tone as if he would gladly exonerate, in part at least, his old play-fellow. “She may not know all the circumstances, or that the discovery of them makes him liable to a trial for manslaughter, — you know that was what the jury at the inquest decided the mauraunders guilty of.”

A portière near which they were standing was pushed hastily aside, and Tabby Hadlock's face looked out at them, so pale and agitated that no words were needed to prove that she had been playing the part of eavesdropper.

“Come in here,” she whispered with a frightened clutch at Lois's hand, “come right in here, and let me have a talk with you.”

There was no resisting the importunity of those imploring eyes and tones, and the two silently followed her into the small withdrawing room, now conveniently vacant, where, dropping into the nearest chair, she asked without any circumlocution:

“How did she come to tell you where she got them? and will Jotham have to go to State's prison if he is tried and proved guilty of being one of them that broke into Granny Hedvig's house that time?”

Franz nodded; he would not add to her pain by any wordy explanation.

She saw the pity in his face, and womanlike, hastened to take the blame upon her own shoulders.

“They never've been any good to 'im, for he never's seen the inside of the box even. I was the one that opened it, with a key that you dropped in my room the other day; and he did n't know a thing about my lendin' them to Miss Celandine. But,” with a sudden hopefulness, “they ain't hurt a bit, and I'll send 'em back to you to-morrow morning safe and sound. Won't that make it all square between you and him?”

“No.” And Franz's voice was so firm and unrelenting that the frightened woman felt despairingly

that her proffered restitution of the stolen property would not alone cancel the debt for which outraged filial affection now demanded a stern repayment. "His possession of the stolen property proves him guilty also of the deeper crime, and for that crime I will have him arrested unless he will agree to give his sister a written permit, allowing her to sell the land that her father willed to her, to whom she pleases."

Tabby caught her breath with a mingled cry of surprise and despair.

"Oh, he never, never will do that!" she urged. "I believe he'd die before he'd come down to that."

"There are some things dearer than life," and the young man spoke with a calm deliberateness that was like the voice of doom to the half-distracted Tabby. "A man's good name among men, for instance. And if he is called upon publicly to answer for his crime, although he may by some legal technicality escape the full punishment, his reputation will receive a blow from which it will never recover. He will understand all this, and do you suppose that he will let his hatred of his sister or even his lust for gain keep him from buying his safety at the price offered?"

Tabby's only reply was a groan, and producing his tablets, Franz pencilled a few lines upon one of the blank leaves, which he handed her with:

"There is the permission for him to sign, and if by to-morrow I receive the casket and this note signed with your husband's name, I solemnly promise never to try to bring him to punishment for the crime of his youth. If not, you know the consequences."

Then drawing Lois's arm through his own, he bade

the weeping Tabby a courteous good-night, and left the room with the assurance strong within him that to-morrow's sun would bring rest and happiness to the twain, whose unselfish friendship for himself had, from first to last, been the inspiring and helpful influence that had directed his life from youth to manhood, even up to the sunshiny love-blessed present. Nor would he mar the gentle girl's happiness by opening her eyes to the fact, hitherto unsuspected, of Jotham's complicity in the house-breaking affair. It was better that the discovery of the stolen jewels should remain a secret, and that she should be allowed to believe that her brother's tardy compliance with her wishes was due to the all-powerful influence of his old schoolfellow and neighbor.

“She has a large share of her father's pride of race,” he explained to Lois, as they were on their way home from the party, “and the knowledge that her brother was a thief as well as burglar would be a drop of bitterness in her cup as long as she lives. Besides — Robert is a good fellow, and would not let himself think any the less of her for it — but a man cannot, even if he is honestly in love, forget all at once the honest prejudices of a lifetime, and it is his boast that not one of the Humbre blood has ever disgraced it by an alliance with crime in any shape.”

“But don't you feel,” questioned Lois, with a mischievous little laugh, “as if you were somehow compounding felony by letting this man go scot free, when you know that he richly deserves punishment?”

Franz looked grave, — he took the question more seriously than she had intended it.

"No," he said, after a moment's thought. "If I, who am the only one wronged, am satisfied with the restitution of the stolen property, I see no reason for any outside interference. Perhaps," he added smiling and not unwilling to turn the tables upon his teasing companion, "I am not so zealous to uphold the majesty of the law as I should be if I could fairly count myself a citizen of the Republic."

This was a sensitive point, and Lois caught it up sharply, as he knew she would.

"What nonsense!" she cried, "just as if living a few years in Germany was going to make a German of you,—and I've declared all my life that I never would marry a foreigner. Really you ought to be ashamed of yourself to talk like that."

Of course the young man was properly penitent, but as he lifted her from the coach, with a good-night kiss upon a smiling but very sleepy face, she remarked, with a sudden recollection of the subject under discussion some time before:

"I know you're right about keeping our discovery secret, but honestly, I shall feel dreadfully mean to keep a secret from Comfort, of all people in the world."

"For her own good and happiness," reminded Franz.

"Yes," with a look at the darkened window of her friend's room. "But I'm awfully glad that she is n't sitting up for me. I want time to get used to the situation, or I shall be sure to give it all away without in the least meaning to."

CHAPTER XXXVII

“’T IS WE TWO, ’T IS WE TWO, ’T IS WE TWO
FOR AYE”

UNDER the circumstances, Franz, in spite of a hundred formless misgivings that, however foolish, had served to drive sleep from his eyes, through the silent hours of the night, was not at all surprised at receiving early in the day by the hand of a special messenger, the casket of jewels and the written permit signed in Jotham Hadlock's crabbed, unmistakable hand. The young man examined the signature with curious interest. What years of secret fear and shame, perhaps of remorse, those reluctantly penned characters represented! Hate, as unnatural as it was undeserved, had joined hands with avarice to wrong out of her rightful inheritance the gentle girl, whose unobtrusive yet self-respectful life had ever been a silent reproach to him, and for which he hated her with all the strength of a mean, self-centered nature. Now this unlooked-for humiliation had fallen upon him like a lightning flash from a summer sky, — the threat of a discovery that would in an hour shatter at one blow the fair hopes and promises of a lifetime.

Drawn by a natural impulse, Franz had, upon receiving the promised package, hastened away from the gay distractions of the crowded hotel, betaking

himself to the more congenial quiet and solitude of the deserted cabin, where, seated upon the old moss-covered doorstone, he now proceeded to examine at his leisure the revered treasure, and recall with dim eyes but a smile of natural satisfaction the memories of those other days and the fateful promises that were being so strangely and unexpectedly fulfilled. A hundred long-forgotten scenes of his boyhood, its hopes, its plans, its troubles and pleasures,—the many mickles that make up the muckle of a boy's life,—danced before his mind's eye, as much a reality for the moment as the yellow and white butterflies that fluttered their wings in the sunshine before his natural vision, and as a favorite type of the soul's resurrection, led his mind by a whimsical combination of ideas, back to one of the games dear to his boyish fancy, and called in default of a better name, the "planting game." While toying absently with the restored ornaments, he found himself half unconsciously adapting the game to the present subject of his thoughts, in which his own fortunes and those of his old neighbors were so strangely intermingled.

"Plant a sin, and what will come up?"

Was it his own voice, or the echo of the surf beating ceaselessly upon the rocky shore—never silent, never weary, beating on and on, through countless æons,—as unmindful of the hum and stir of human life upon that shore as was the little brook flowing at his feet, of the humming bees that flitted to and fro, dry winged above its dancing waters? Who can tell? Nevertheless, clear and distinct upon the still morning air it came, stirring even the dusky depths

of the old cabin to something like life with the stern, relentless reply:

“Retribution.”

And it was a righteous retribution that had overtaken at last that proud, hard man, this relentless unearthing of his secret sin and shame, and Franz could almost find it in his heart to pity him in his silent humiliation and unavailing rage. To know that it was in another's power to brand him as a thief in the worst and most shameful sense of the word, must, to a man of his proud, suspicious nature, be like the fabled sword of Damocles, ever suspended over his head, ready at any moment to fall, bringing ruin and destruction in its train. A more careless-tempered man might, with comparative ease, give the whole matter the go by, so long as the world outside remained in ignorance of his guilt, but Jotham Hadlock was cast in a different mould. Intense, sullen, hard, and determined, he had inherited a depth and breadth of character that would not allow him to regard the discovery of his crime as a small matter so long as even one fellow-being held in his bosom the shameful secret. The stern, narrow conscientiousness of a long line of God-fearing ancestors had become in him an equally stern and far more narrow form of intense self-worship. And the Dagon of Self thrown from his high place, even though secrecy and deep darkness might cover his terrible humiliation, could never again feel the proud security of an unquestioned and flawless deity. He was proud too of the old name, proud of its unsullied honesty and thrift, and just so long as that secret sin of his

youth remained close locked in his own breast it had troubled him little. To him, as to many another, the unresurrected sin had been but mouldering clay, that, when thrown into the balance with a long record of honest, decent outward living, weighed no more than any other handful of dead dust. Discovery alone could reanimate it, and make of it a lash to drive the guilty soul to desperation.

Franz was not at fault when he decided that the punishment already meted out to the guilty man was a sufficiently heavy one, while the drop that would make his cup of humiliation and secret rage run over would be his sister's prosperity and happiness, brought about by his own act, and in spite of him. Now, too, he must carry the pleasant news to Comfort, making glad the faithful heart that, through all these years had been so true to their childish friendship, and, — oh, there were many things, now that she was at liberty to dispose of that much coveted strip of land alongshore, in which he could advise and aid her. His own small patrimony had been fairly disposed of, and he inly decided that while free from the clutch of her grasping brother the inexperienced girl should not be cheated by some shrewd speculator into selling her birthright for a penny less than its full value.

It was one of those perfect summer evenings peculiar to the breeze-swept shores of the Desert Island, and Mrs. Humbre sat in her own room listening with wonder-wide eyes to the story that Miss Delphine was telling with a relish that proved how warm was her heart toward their young hostess.

“And you say that the land has been disposed of for fifty thousand dollars?”

The words were spoken with respectful emphasis, although the speaker made a wry face as if somehow they were not quite palatable to her.

“About two-thirds of the land,” returned Miss Delphine, with her usual exactness. “They are the most desirable lots, but the others may in time become equally valuable.”

Mrs. Humbre picked at the lace frills of her dressing gown and sighed resignedly.

“She is really a very sweet girl, and it is well for her that she won't be left to fall a prey to some designing fortune hunter. I am glad that everything was arranged between her and Robert before this happened, so that nobody can say that he married her for her money.”

Miss Delphine checked the laugh that rose to her lips. It was well that her mother should take her own way of meeting a condition of things too strong for her control, in fact, she had always been one to submit gracefully to the inevitable, and it would be much pleasanter all round that she should do so now. A bride of her own fashionable set would of course have pleased her much better than this simply reared country girl, but even Miss Delphine was surprised at the genuine warmth with which her mother offered her congratulations to Comfort upon her accession to wealth and consequent importance.

“You are not one to be spoiled by riches,” she said frankly, as she drew the girl to her side and kissed her blushing cheek with something like

motherly tenderness. "And I am sure that you will be as gentle and tender a wife to Robert as if you had come to him, as the Scotch say, without a penny in your pack."

And there were tears in her eyes, real, genuine tears, — drops from that fountain of maternal love that years of narrow, unresisted selfishness had not been able to choke entirely even in that world-hardened heart.

There was a double wedding a few weeks later in the old farmhouse, and now Mrs. Humbre actually forgot her languor in superintending the bridal arrangements that, in deference to her wishes, were more elaborate than the young people themselves really cared for, or that Lois had at the first planned for herself.

"What is the use of a wedding without wedding finery?" she urged in reply to the objections of the prospective brides to receiving at her hands the veils of costly lace that she had taken care to order for them. "Besides, do you think I am going to let that envious Kate Sevier boast that my adopted daughter and my son's fiancée can't wear as costly veils as that upstart niece of hers who was married last winter?"

It seemed really cruel to cross her at this time, and so she had her way, and the brides wore the conventional satin and lace and orange blossoms, Lois alone protesting against the pearls that, at the last moment, her foster mother pressed upon her as part of the bridal array.

"No," she said with gentle firmness, "I will wear only the family jewels of the Hedvigs, — the silver

ear jewels and bracelets that have been the bridal ornaments of Franz’s family for centuries.”

And Mrs. Humbre, who had an immense reverence for the “long descended,” could make no further objections.

Never before, as on that bright September morning, had the friendly sunshine looked in upon the old-fashioned farmhouse decked out in such gay attire. It was a transformation that nobody would have deemed possible who had looked upon the sober, unadorned rooms in their everyday homespun. Mrs. Humbre had suggested that a florist be employed to decorate the rooms with the conventional palms and hothouse flowers, but Comfort’s loyal heart recoiled from this as a kind of desecration of the dear old home, and in this she had her way. With their own tasteful hands the young people had decked the modest rooms with trailing evergreen and long streamers of bronze and crimson woodbine from Granny’s cottage, ferns and pine tops filling every odd nook and corner, while wild asters and golden-rod made a shimmer of purple and gold everywhere. The pale beach-pea in her rose-colored hood looked shyly down from the tall, moss-draped wooden mantels, and jostled with neighborly freedom the pink and white trumpets of the convolvulus that, fresh from their morning bath of dew, shook out from their faintly perfumed depths a hundred fragrant if wordless “God-speeds” upon the waiting air.

As Comfort passed with pale cheeks but with a glad smile in her brown eyes, through the old familiar rooms, grown so dear to her faithful heart by all the

tender associations of years, the present seemed to fade as in a dream, and as she laid her cheek lovingly against the faded chintz covering of that ever sacred old arm-chair where her loved had sat with the tired hands folded, waiting for the long, long rest that He giveth His beloved, she seemed to feel once more the touch of those dear hands upon her bent head, and to hear again in those never-to-be-forgotten tones the words of that oft-spoken prayer:

“God bless and keep my Comfort.”

The voices of Mrs. Humbre and Lois, discussing and admiring the bridal gifts in an adjoining room, the faint echo of Mandy's tones softly singing as she went about her work behind the closed kitchen door, the shrill piping of the canary in his gilded cage, and the rustle of leaves in the old elm outside, all blended in one indistinct murmur; and awed as by the trailing of an invisible robe through the silent room, the girl's whole soul rose up within her in this hour of sacred joy, while as spoken by unseen lips came the glad refrain:

“And she shall be blessed.”

That the wedding guests were rather an oddly assorted company could not be denied, but that only added, as Mrs. Humbre complacently remarked, to the uniqueness and simple grace of the occasion. A bevy of Lois's girl friends, foremost of whom were Virginia Celandine and her brother, formed a pleasant contrast to the few sharp-faced, cold-eyed matrons who, as Mrs. Humbre's special guests adorned(?) the scene. Scholarly if sometimes cynical men, and dreamy-looking artists, with here and there an erect

figure in the old army blue that Robert would always look upon as the badge of a friend and brother, were scattered everywhere throughout the pleasant rooms, while Tabby, in her finest Parisian gown, flitted to and fro, self-elected mistress of ceremonies, confiding to everybody who would listen to her that,

“ Mr. Hadlock was so sorry that he could n't be at home to see his sister and dear General Humbre married, — it just broke his heart to be away at such a time.”

The Widow Scripture, stiff and starched, but showing her satisfaction in every line of her shrewd face, formed the important center of a group of old neighbors and their wives, while Mandy, her eyes brimming with happy tears, kept close to the side of Cap'n Jake, slyly nudging him when any especially fine costume crossed their vision, and flushing proudly at the thought that all these fine folk were gathered here to do honor to one who had been the best friend of her own unfriended girlhood.

No stranger bishop, but the old white-haired pastor, who had watched with eyes of fatherly solicitude the girl from infancy to maidenhood, pronounced the beautiful benediction of the church over the wedded pair, while good Doctor Peabody, at his own request, gave away the bride with an air of such triumphant assurance that a stranger would certainly have been deceived into the belief that the daughterless little man had been an adept in the business for a score of years at least.

Considering that all her life Comfort had been inured to the cold of our long Maine winters, the

reason given by her newly wedded lord for spending their honeymoon abroad, somewhat against his mother's wishes, might have been considered a rather flimsy one if anybody had been disposed to cavil at it.

"These winters on the Maine coast are so trying to the constitution, and I think Comfort really needs the change that the climate of Southern Europe will give her."

Then after Franz and his bonny bride were fairly established in their German home it would be so delightful to drop in upon them at some unexpected moment, — almost like a sniff of Mount Desert air. Then Rome, Florence, and Vienna must be visited, and Comfort would so enjoy a sail up the Rhine. They must take in England and Scotland, of course, — must visit the Highlands, and try a ride in a jaunting-car, — and so on and on until Miss Delphine brought him to his senses with the pertinent inquiry, —

"How many years do you intend to remain abroad, Robert?"

"Poor, dear Mrs. Humbre behaved beautifully," so all her friends declared, and Comfort in her heart gratefully acknowledged the effort that Robert's mother certainly made to put aside her natural maternal jealousies, and welcome with kindly smiles and good wishes the bride of his choice.

Miss Delphine gave her blessing with an odd mixture of humor and pathos.

"I hope you will be as happy as the day is long; but if either of you should find yourselves disap-

pointed in the life matrimonial, my advice is to turn your attention to the study of natural history. I’ve tried it, and I know that it’s the very best panacea for an aching and hungry heart that can be found.”

And Mandy? Why, really, after the fashion of the world generally, I had forgotten all about the little fisher maid in my interest in her betters. But Cap’n Jake had not been so forgetful, and when Comfort, with mingled tears of joy and sadness, turned from her island home to go out into new and untried paths, one of her many sources of satisfaction was the knowledge that that home, with all its tender associations, would not be left to the care of unsympathetic strangers, but be cared for as faithfully under Mandy’s tendance as it had been under her own. For, with a self-sacrifice that did him credit, the gallant captain consented to rent his beloved cottage, and in deference to the wishes of his promised bride, to aid her in the task of keeping bright and immaculate the home that Comfort, so long as she lived, would hold as her own, to be loved and, if possible, re-visited as often as each year should bring around the time for the year’s rest and recreation.

The wedding over, the hasty adieux given, and now there is nothing to do but to “clear away” the half-withered flowers and ferns, to brush up the carpet, draw the curtains, and see that Mrs. Humbre has her glass of iced milk that Miss Delphine is too busy with her packing to attend to.

It was very doleful and lonesome, Mandy thought,

and a few dejected tears trickled down her nose as she went about her preparations for dinner, — the last that she was to prepare for the “summer boarders,” who were to leave by the afternoon boat. And yet, one could not be altogether miserable with the prospect of a wedding of one’s own a week later, to say nothing of the handsome presents bestowed upon her by the parted as well as the parting guests.

“Gran’daddy would say, ‘Don’t take ’em, Mandy,’ I s’pose. But time has changed at Bar Harbor sense he died, and if he was alive now I hain’t a doubt but he ’d say, like all the rest, ‘Take all you can get, and make the most of it.’”

THE END





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