

MAY AGNES FLEMING

A CHANGED HEART: A
NOVEL

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A Changed Heart: A Novel

CHAPTER I.

MISS MCGREGOR AT HOME

It was a foggy night in Speckport. There was nothing uncommon in its being foggy this close May evening; but it was rather provoking and ungallant of the clerk of the weather, seeing that Miss McGregor particularly desired it to be fine. Miss Jeannette (she had been christened plain Jane, but scorned to answer to anything so unromantic) – Miss Jeannette McGregor was at home to-night to all the élite of Speckport; and as a good many of the élite owned no other conveyance than that which Nature had given them, it was particularly desirable the weather should be fine. But it wasn't fine; it was nasty and drizzly, and sultry and foggy; and sky and sea were blotted out; and the gas-lamps sprinkled through the sloppy streets of Speckport blinked feebly through the gloom; and people buttoned up to the chin and wrapped in cloaks flitted by each other like phantoms, in the pale blank of wet and fog. And half the year round that is the sort of weather they enjoy in Speckport.

You don't know Speckport! There I have the advantage of you; for I know its whole history, past, present, and – future, I was going to say, though I don't set up for a prophet; but the future of Speckport does not seem hard to foretell. The Union-jack floats over it, the State of Maine is its next-door neighbor, and fish and fog are its principal productions. It also had the honor of producing Miss McGregor, who was born one other foggy night, just two-and-twenty years previous to this "At Home," to which you and I are going presently, in a dirty little black street, which she scorns to know even by name now. Two-and-twenty years ago, Sandy McGregor worked as a day-laborer in a shipyard, at three and sixpence per day. Now, Mr. Alexander McGregor is a ship-builder, and has an income of ten thousand gold dollars per year. Not a millionaire, you know; but very well off, and very comfortable, and very contented; living in a nice house, nicely furnished, keeping horses and carriage, and very much looked up to, and very much respected in Speckport.

Speckport has its Fifth Avenue as well as New York. Not that they call it Fifth Avenue, you understand; its name is Golden Row, and the abiders therein are made of the porcelain of human clay. Great people, magnates and aristocrats to their finger-tips, scorning the pigmies who move in second and third society and have only the happiness of walking through Golden Row, never of dwelling there. The houses were not brown-stone fronts. Oh, no! there were half-a-dozen brick buildings, some pretty, little Gothic cottages, with green vines, and beehives, and bird-houses, about them, and all the rest were great painted palaces of wood. Some had green shutters, and some had not; some were painted white, and some brown, and some stone-color and drab, and they all had a glittering air of spickspan-newness about them, as if their owners had them painted every other week. And in one of these palaces Mr. McGregor lived.

You drove down Golden Row through the fog and drizzle, between the blinking lamps, and you stop at a stone-colored house with a brown hall-door, and steps going up to it. The hall is brilliant with gas, so is the drawing-room, so are the two parlors, so is the dining-room, so are the dressing rooms; and the élite of Speckport are bustling and jostling one another about, and making considerable noise, and up in the gallery the band is in full blast at the "Lancers" – for they know how to dance the Lancers in Speckport – and the young ladies dipping and bowing through the intricacies of the dance, wear their dresses just as low in the neck and as short in the sleeves as any Fifth avenue belle dare to do.

Very pretty girls they are, floating about in all the colors of the rainbow. There are no diamonds, perhaps, except glass ones; but there are gold chains and crosses, and bracelets, and lockets and

things; and some of the young ladies have rings right up to the middle joint of their fingers. The young gentlemen wear rings, too, and glittering shirt-studs and bosom-pins, and are good looking and gentlemanly. While the young folks dance, the old folks play wallflower or cards, or take snuff or punch, or talk politics. All the juvenile rag-tag and bobtail of Speckport are outside, gaping up with open-mouthed admiration at the blazing front of the McGregor mansion, and swallowing the music that floats through the open windows.

Sailing along Golden Row, with an umbrella up to protect her bonnet from the fog, comes a tall lady, unprotected and alone, and "There's Miss Jo, hurrah!" yells a shrill voice; and the tall lady receives her ovation with a gratified face, and bows as she steps over the McGregor threshold. Ten minutes later, she enters the drawing-room, divested of her wrappings; and you see she is elderly and angular, and prim and precise, and withal good-natured. She is sharp at the joints and shoulder-blades, and her black silk dress is hooked up behind in the fashion of twenty years ago. She wears no crinoline, and looks about as graceful as a lamp-post; but she is fearfully and wonderfully fine, with a massive gold chain about her neck that would have made a ship's cable easily, and a cross and a locket clattering from it, and beating time to her movements on a cameo brooch the size of a dinner-plate. Eardrops, a finger-length long, dangle from her ears; cameo bracelets adorn her skinny wrists; and her hair, of which she has nothing to speak of, is worn in little corkscrew curls about her sallow face.

Miss Joanna Blake is an old maid, and looks like it; she is also an exile of Erin, and the most inveterate gossip in Speckport.

A tremendous uproar greets her as she enters the drawing-room, and she stops in considerable consternation.

In a recess near the door was a card-table, round which four elderly ladies and four elderly gentlemen sat, with a laughing crowd looking on from behind. The card-party were in a violently agitated and excited state, all screaming out together at the top of the gamut.

Miss Jo swept on in majestic silence, nodding right and left as she streamed down the apartment to where Mrs. McGregor stood, with a little knot of matrons around her – a lady as tall as Miss Jo herself, and ever so much stouter, her fat face hot and flushed, and wielding a fan ponderously, as if it were a ton weight. Mrs. McGregor, during forty years of her life, had been a good deal more familiar with scrubbing-brushes than fans; but you would not think so now, maybe, if you saw her in that purple-satin dress and gold watch, her fat hands flashing with rings, and that bewildering combination of white lace and ribbons on her head. Her voice was as loud as her style of dress, and she shook Miss Jo's hand as if it had been a pump-handle.

"And how do you do, Miss Blake, and whatever on earth kept you till this hour? I was just saying to Jeannette, a while ago, I didn't believe you were going to come at all."

"I could not help it," said Miss Jo. "Val didn't come home till late, and then I had to stop and find him his things. You know, my dear, what a trouble men are, and that Val beats them all. Has everybody come?"

"I think so; everybody but your Val and the Marshes. Maybe my lady is in one of her tantrums, and won't let Natty come at all. Jeannette is all but distracted. Natty's got lots of parts in them things they're having – tablets – no; tableaux, that's the name, and they never can get on without her. Jeannette's gone to look for Sandy to send him up to Redmon to see."

"I say, Miss Jo, how do you find yourself this evening?" exclaimed a spirited voice behind her; and Mrs. McGregor gave a little yelp of delight as she saw who it was – a young man, not more than twenty, perhaps, very good-looking, with bright gray eyes, fair hair, and a sunny smile. He was holding out a hand, small and fair as a lady's, to Miss Blake, who took it and shook it heartily.

"Jo's very well, thank you, Mr. Charles. How is your mamma this evening?"

"She was all right when I left home. Is Val here?"

"Not yet. Have you just come?"

The young gentleman nodded, and was turning away, but Mrs. McGregor recalled him.

"Isn't your mother coming, Charley?"

"No, she can't," said Charley. "The new teacher's come, and she's got to stay with her. She told me to bring her apologies."

The ladies were all animation directly. The new teacher! What was she like? When did she come? Was she young? Was she pretty? Did she seem nice?

"I didn't see her," said Charley, lounging against a sofa and flapping his gloves about.

"Didn't see her! I thought you said she was in your house?" cried Mrs. McGregor.

"So she is. I mean I didn't see her face. She had a thick veil on, and kept it down, and I left two or three minutes after she came."

"She came to Speckport in this evening's boat, then?" said Miss Jo. "What did she wear?"

Charley was bowing and smiling to a pretty girl passing on her partner's arm.

Mrs. McGregor nodded, and Charley sauntered off. The two ladies looked after him.

"What a nice young man that Charley Marsh is!" exclaimed Miss Jo, admiringly, "and so good-looking, and so steady, and so good to his mamma. You won't find many like him nowadays."

Mrs. McGregor lowered her voice to a mysterious whisper.

"Do you know, Miss Jo, they say he goes after that Cherrie Nettleby. Did you hear it?"

"Fiddlestick!" said Miss Jo, politely. "Speckport's got that story out, has it? I don't believe a word of it!"

"Here's Val!" cried Mrs. McGregor, off on a new tack; "and, my patience! what a swell he's got with him!"

Miss Jo looked round. Coming down the long room together were two young men, whose appearance created a visible sensation – one of them, preposterously tall and thin, with uncommonly long legs and arms – a veritable Shanghai – was Mr. Valentine Blake, Miss Jo's brother and sole earthly relative. He looked seven-and-twenty, was carelessly dressed, his clothes hanging about him any way – not handsome, but with a droll look of good humor about his face, and a roguish twinkle in his eyes that would have redeemed a plainer countenance.

His companion was a stranger, and it was he who created the sensation, not easy Val. Mrs. McGregor had called him a "swell," but Mrs. McGregor was not a very refined judge. He was dressed well, but not overdressed, as the slang term would imply, and he looked a thorough gentleman. A very handsome one, too, with dark curling hair, dark, bright, handsome eyes, a jetty mustache on his lip, and a flashing diamond ring on his finger. There was a certain air militaire about him that bespoke his profession, though he wore civilian's clothes, and he and Val looked about the same age. No wonder the apparition of so distinguished-looking a stranger in Mrs. McGregor's drawing-room should create a buzzing among the Speckport bon ton.

"My goodness!" cried Mrs. McGregor, all in a flutter. "Whoever can he be? He looks like a soldier, don't he?"

"There came a regiment from Halifax this morning," said Miss Jo. "Here's Val bringing him up."

Mr. Val was presenting him even while she spoke. "Captain Cavendish, Mrs. McGregor, of the – th," and then the captain was bowing profoundly; and the lady of the mansion was returning it, in a violent trepidation and tremor, not knowing in the least what she was expected to say to so distinguished a visitor. But relief was at hand. Charley Marsh was beside them with a young lady on his arm – a young lady best described by that odious word "genteel." She was not pretty; she was sandy-haired and freckled, but she was the daughter of the house, and, as such, demanding attention. Val introduced the captain directly, and Mrs. McGregor breathed freely again.

"Look here, Val!" she whispered, catching him by the button, "who is he, anyway?"

Val lowered his voice and looked round him cautiously.

"Did you ever hear of the Marquis of Carrabas, Mrs. McGregor?"

"No – yes – I don't remember. Is he an English nobleman?"

"A very great nobleman, Ma'am; famous in history as connected with the cat-trade, and Captain Cavendish is next heir to the title. Mrs. Marsh can tell you all about the Marquis; can't she, Charley?"

Charley, who was ready to burst into a fit of laughter at Mrs. McGregor's open-mouthed awe, took hold of the arm of a feeble-minded-looking young gentleman, whose freckled features, sandy hair, and general resemblance to the family, proclaimed him to be Mr. Alexander McGregor, Junior, and walked him off.

"And he came from Halifax this evening, Val?" Mrs. McGregor asked, gazing at the young Englishman in the same state of awe and delight.

"Yes," said Val, "it was there I got acquainted with him first. I met him on my way here, and thought you would not be offended at the liberty I took in fetching him along."

"Offended! My dear Val, you couldn't have pleased me better if you had been trying for a week. A Markis and a Captain in the Army! Why, it's the greatest honor, and I'm ever so much obliged to you. I am, indeed!"

"All right," said Val. "Speckport will be envious enough, I dare say, for it's not every place he'll go to, and all will want him. You'll lose Jane if you're not careful, though – see how he's talking to her."

Mrs. McGregor's eyes were dancing in her head. A dazzling vision rose before her – her daughter a Marchioness, living in a castle, dressed in satin and diamonds the year round! She could have hugged Val in her rapture; and Val reading some such idea in her beaming face, backed a little, in some alarm.

"I say, though, wasn't there to be tableaux or something?" he inquired. "When are they coming off?"

"As soon as Natty Marsh gets here; they can't get on without her."

"What keeps her?" asked Val.

"The new teacher's come to Mrs. Marsh's, Charley says, and Natty is stopping in to see her. There's the captain asking Jeannette to dance."

So he was; and Miss Jeannette, with a gratified simper, was just laying her kidded fingers inside his coat-sleeve, when her brother came breathlessly up.

"Look here, Janie! you'd better not go off dancing," was his cry, "if you mean to have those tableaux to-night. Natty's come!"

CHAPTER II. NATHALIE

Mrs. McGregor's drawing-room was empty. Everybody had flocked into the front parlor and arranged themselves on seats there to witness the performance; that is to say, everybody who had no part in the proceedings. Most of the young people of both sexes were behind the solemn green curtain, with its row of footlights, that separated the two rooms, dressing for their parts. The old people were as much interested in the proceedings as the young people, for their sons and daughters were the actors and actresses.

Captain Cavendish and Mr. Val Blake occupied a front seat. Val had a part assigned him; but it did not come on for some time, so he was playing spectator now.

"I saw you making up to little Jane, Cavendish," Val was saying, sotto voce, for Miss Janie's mamma sat near. "Was it a case of love at first sight?"

"Miss McGregor is not very pretty," said Captain Cavendish, moderately. "Who was that young lady with the red cheeks and bright eyes I saw you speaking to, just before we came here?"

"Red cheeks and bright eyes!" repeated Val, putting on his considering-cap, "that description applies to half the girls in Speckport. What had she on?"

Captain Cavendish laughed.

"Would any one in the world but Val Blake ask such a question? She had on a pink dress, and had pink and white flowers in her hair, and looked saucy."

"Oh, I know now!" Val cried, with a flash of recollection; "that was Laura Blair, one of the nicest little girls that ever sported crinoline! Such a girl to laugh, you know!"

"She looks it! Ah! up you go!"

This apostrophe was addressed to the curtain, which was rising as he spoke. There was a general flutter, and settling in seats to look; the orchestra pealed forth and the first tableau was revealed.

It was very pretty, but very common – "Rebecca and Rowena." Miss Laura Blair was Rowena, and a tall brunette, Rebecca. The audience applauded, as in duty bound, and the curtain fell. The second was "Patience" – "Patience on a monument smiling at Grief." On a high pedestal stood Miss Laura Blair, again, draped in a white sheet, like a ghost, her hair all loose about her, and an azure girdle all over spangles clasping her waist.

At the foot of the pedestal crouched Grief, in a strange, distorted attitude of pain. The face of the performer was hidden in her hands; her black garments falling heavily around her, her hair unbound, too, her whole manner expressing despair, as fully as attitude could express it. The music seemed changing to a wail; the effect of the whole was perfect.

"What do you think of that?" said Val.

"Very good," said Captain Cavendish. "It goes considerably ahead of anything I had expected. Patience is very nice-looking girl."

"And isn't she jolly? She's dying to shout out this minute! I should think the glare of these footlights would force her eyelids open."

"Who is Grief?"

"Miss Catty Clowrie – isn't there music in that name? She makes a very good Grief – looks as if she had supped sorrow in spoonfuls."

"Is she pretty? She won't let us see her face."

"Beauty's a matter of taste," said Val, "perhaps you'll think her pretty. If you do, you will be the only one who ever thought the like. She is a nice little girl though, is Catty – the double-distilled essence of good-nature. Down goes the curtain!"

It rose next on a totally different scene, and to music solemn and sad. The stage was darkened, and made as much as possible to resemble a convent-cell. The walls were hung with religious pictures and statues, a coverless deal table held a crucifix, an open missal, and a candle which flared and guttered in the draft. On a prie-dieu before the table a figure knelt – a nun, eyes uplifted, the young face, quite colorless, raised, the hands holding her rosary, clasped in prayer. It was Evangeline – beautiful, broken-hearted Evangeline – the white face, the great dark lustrous eyes full of unspeakable woe. Fainter, sweeter and sadder the music wailed out; dimmer and dimmer paled the lights; all hushed their breathing to watch. The kneeling figure never moved, the face looked deadly pale by the flickering candle-gleam, and slowly the curtain began to descend. It was down; the tableau was over; the music closed, but for a second or two not a sound was to be heard. Then a tumult of applause broke out rapturously, and "Encore, encore!" twenty voices cried, in an ecstasy.

Captain Cavendish turned to Val with an enthusiastic face.

"By George, Blake! what a beautiful girl! Evangeline herself never was half so lovely. Who is she?"

"That's Natty," said Val, with composure. "Charley Marsh's sister."

"I never saw a lovelier face in all my life! Blake, you must give me an introduction as soon as these tableaux are over."

"All right! But you needn't fall in love with her – it's of no use."

"Why isn't it?"

"Because the cantankerous old toad who owns her will never let her get married."

"Do you mean her mother?"

"No, I don't, she doesn't live with her mother. And, besides, she has no room in her heart for any one but Charley. She idolizes him!"

"Happy fellow! That Evangeline was perfect. I never saw anything more exquisite."

"I don't believe Longfellow's Evangeline was half as good-looking as Natty," said Val. "Oh! there she is again!"

Val stopped talking. The curtain had arisen on an old scene – "Rebecca at the well." Evangeline had transformed herself into a Jewish maiden in an incredibly short space of time, and stood with her pitcher on her shoulder, looking down on Eleazer at her feet. Sandy McGregor was Eleazer, and a sorry Jew he made, but nobody except his mother looked at him. Like a young queen Rebecca stood, her eyes fixed on the bracelets and rings, her hair falling in a shower of golden bronze ripples over her bare white shoulders. One would have expected black hair with those luminous dark eyes, but no ebon tresses could have been half so magnificent as that waving mass of darkened gold.

"Nice hair, isn't it?" whispered Val. "Natty's proud of her hair and her voice beyond anything. You ought to hear her sing!"

"She sings well?" Captain Cavendish asked, his eyes fixed as if fascinated on the beautiful face.

"Like another Jenny Lind! She leads the choir up there in the cathedral, and plays the organ besides."

Captain Cavendish had a pretty pink half-blown rose in his button-hole. He took it out and flung it at her feet as the curtain was going down. He had time to see her bright dark eye turn upon it, then with a little pleased smile over the spectators in quest of the donor, and then that envious green curtain hid all again.

"Very neat and appropriate," criticised Val. "You're not going to wait for the introduction to begin your love-passage, I see, Captain Cavendish."

The captain laughed.

"Nothing like taking time by the forelock, my dear fellow. I will never be able to thank you sufficiently for bringing me here to-night!"

"You don't say so!" exclaimed Val, opening his eyes, "you never mean to say you're in love already, do you?"

"It's something very like it, then. Where are you going?"

"Behind the scenes. The next is 'Jack and the Beanstalk,' and they want me for the beanstalk," said Val, complacently, as his long legs strode over the carpet on his way to the back parlor.

There were ever so many tableaux after that – Captain Cavendish, impatient and fidgety, wondered if they would ever end. Perhaps you don't believe in love at first sight, dear reader mine; perhaps I don't myself; but Captain Cavendish, of Her Most Gracious Majesty's – th Regiment of Artillery did, and had fallen in love at first sight at least a dozen times within quarter that number of years.

Captain Cavendish had to exercise the virtue of patience for another half-hour, and then the end came.

In flocked the performers, in laughing commotion, to find themselves surrounded by the rest, and showered with congratulations. Captain Cavendish stood apart, leaning against a fauteuil, stroking his mustache thoughtfully, and looking on. Looking on one face and form only of all the dozens before him; a form tall, taller than the average height, slender, graceful, and girlish as became its owner's eighteen years; and a face inexpressibly lovely in the garish gaslight. There was nobility as well as beauty in that classic profile, that broad brow; fire in those laughing blue eyes, so dark that you nearly mistook them for black; resolution in those molded lips, the sweetest that ever were kissed. The hair alone of Nathalie Marsh would have made a plain face pretty; it hung loose over her shoulders as it had done on the stage, reaching to her waist, a cloud of spun gold, half waves, half curls, half yellow ripples.

Few could have worn this hair like that, but it was eminently becoming to Nathalie, whom everything became. Her dress was of rose color, of a tint just deeper than the rose color in her cheeks, thin and flouting, and she was entirely without ornament. A half-blown rose was fastened in the snowy lace of her corsage, a rose that had decked the buttonhole of Captain Cavendish half an hour before.

Val espied him at last and came over. "Are you making a tableau of yourself," he asked, "for a certain pair of bright eyes to admire? I saw them wandering curiously this way two or three times since we came in."

"Whose were they?"

"Miss Nathalie Marsh's. Come and be introduced."

"But she is surrounded."

"Never mind, they'll make way for you. Stand out of the way, Sandy. Lo! the conquering hero comes! Miss Marsh, let me present Captain Cavendish, of the – th; Miss Marsh, Captain Cavendish."

The music at that instant struck up a delicious waltz. Mr. Val Blake, without ceremony, laid hold of the nearest young lady he could grab.

"Come, Catty! let's take a twist or two. That's it, Cavendish! follow in our wake!"

For Captain Cavendish, having asked Miss Marsh to waltz, was leading her off, and received the encouraging nod of Val with an amused smile.

"What a character he is!" he said, looking after Val, spinning around with considerable more energy than grace; "the most unceremonious and best-natured fellow in existence."

The young lady laughed.

"Oh, everybody likes Val! Have you known him long?"

"About a year. I have seen him in Halifax frequently, and we are the greatest friends, I assure you. Damon and Pythias were nothing to us!"

"It is something new for Mr. Blake to be so enthusiastic, then. Pythias is a new rôle for him. I hope he played it better than he did Robert Bruce in that horrid tableau awhile ago."

They both laughed at the recollection. Natty scented her rose.

"Some one threw me this. Gallant, wasn't it? I love roses."

"Sweets to the sweet! I am only sorry I had not something more worthy 'Evangeline,' than that poor little flower."

"Then it was you. I thought so! Thank you for the rose and the compliment. One is as pretty as the other."

She laughed saucily, her bright eyes flashing a dangerous glance at him. Next instant they were floating round, and round, and round; and Captain Cavendish began to think the world must be a great rose garden, and Speckport Eden, since in it he had found his Eve. Not quite his yet, though, for the moment the waltz concluded, a dashing and dangerously good-looking young fellow stepped coolly up and bore her off.

Val having given his partner a finishing whirl into a seat, left her there, and came up, wiping his face.

"By jingo, 'tis hard work, and Catty Clowrie goes the pace with a vengeance. How do you like Natty?"

"Like' is not the word. Who is that gentleman she is walking with?"

"That – where are they? Oh, I see – that is Captain Locksley, of the merchant-service. The army and navy forever, eh! Where are you going?"

"Out of this hot room a moment. I'll be back directly."

Mrs. McGregor came up and asked Val to join a whist-party she was getting up. "And be my partner, Val," she enjoined, as she led him off, "because you're the best cheat I know of."

Val was soon completely absorbed in the fascinations of whist, at a penny a game, but the announcement of supper soon broke up both card-playing and dancing; and as he rose from the table he caught sight of Captain Cavendish just entering. His long legs crossed the room in three strides.

"You've got back, have you? What have you been about all this time?"

"I was smoking a cigar out there on the steps, and getting a little fresh air – no, fog, for I'll take my oath it's thick enough to be cut with a knife. When I was in London, I thought I knew something of fog, but Speckport beats it all to nothing."

"Yes," said Val, gravely, "it's one of the institutions of the country, and we're proud of it. Did you see Charley Marsh anywhere in your travels. I heard Natty just now asking for him."

"Oh, yes, I've seen him," said Captain Cavendish, significantly.

There was that in his tone which made Val look at him. "Where was he and what was he doing?" he inquired.

"Making love, to your first question; sitting in a recess of the tall window, to your second. He did not see me, but I saw him."

"Who was he with?"

"Something very pretty – prettier than anything in this room, excepting Miss Natty. Black eyes, black curls, rosy cheeks, and the dearest little waist! Who is she?"

Val gave a long, low whistle.

"Do you know her?" persisted Captain Cavendish.

"Oh, don't I though? Was she little, and was she laughing?"

"Yes, to both questions. Now, who is she?"

Val's answer was a shower of mysterious nods.

"I heard the story before, but I didn't think the boy was such a fool. Speckport is such a place for gossip, you know; but it seems the gossips were right for once. What will Natty say, I wonder?"

"Will you tell me who she is?" cried Captain Cavendish, impatiently.

"Come to supper," was Val's answer; "I'm too hungry to talk now. I'll tell you about it by-and-by."

Charley was before them at the table, helping all the young ladies right and left, and keeping up a running fire of jokes, old and new, stale and original, and setting the table in a roar. Everybody was talking and laughing at the top of their lungs; glass and china, and knives and forks, rattled and jingled until the uproar became deafening, and people shouted with laughter, without in the least knowing what they were laughing at. The mustached lip of Captain Cavendish curled with a little

contemptuous smile at the whole thing, and Miss Jeannette McGregor, who had managed to get him beside her, saw it, and felt fit to die with mortification.

"What a dreadful noise they do keep up. It makes my head ache to listen to them!" she said, resentfully.

Captain Cavendish, who had been listening to her tattle-tittle for the last half-hour, answering yes and no at random, started into consciousness that she was talking again.

"I beg your pardon, Miss McGregor. What was it you said? I am afraid I was not attending."

"I am afraid you were not," said Miss McGregor, forcing a laugh, while biting her lips. "They are going back to the drawing-room —*Dieu merci!* It is like Babel being here."

"Let us wait," said Captain Cavendish, eying the crowd, and beginning to be gallant. "I am not going to have you jostled to death. One would think it was for life or death they were pushing."

It was fully ten minutes before the coast was clear, and then the captain drew Miss Jeannette's arm within his, and led her to the drawing-room. Mrs. McGregor, sitting there among her satellites, saw them, and the maternal bosom glowed with pride. It was the future Marquis and Marchioness of Carrabas!

Some one was singing. A splendid soprano voice was ringing through the room, singing, "Hear me, Norma." It finished as they drew near, and the singer, Miss Natty Marsh, glancing over her shoulder, flashed one of her bright bewitching glances at them.

She rose up from the piano, flirting out her gauze skirts, and laughing at the shower of entreaties to sing again.

"I am going to see some engravings Alick has promised to show me," she said; "so spare your eloquence, Mesdames et Messieurs. I am inexorable."

"I think I will go over and have a look at the engravings, too," said Captain Cavendish.

She was sitting at a little stand, all her bright hair loose around her, and shading the pictures. Young McGregor was bending devoutly near her, but not talking, only too happy to be just there, and talking was not the young gentleman's forte.

"Captain Cavendish," said the clear voice, as, without turning round, she held the engraving over her shoulder, "look at this – is it not pretty?"

How had she seen him? Had she eyes in the back of her head? He took the engraving, wondering inwardly, and sat down beside her.

It was a strange picture she had given him. A black and wrathful sky, a black and heaving sea, and a long strip of black and desolate coast. A full moon flickered ghastly through the scudding clouds, and wan in its light you saw a girl standing on a high rock, straining her eyes out to sea. Her hair and dress fluttered in the wind; her face was wild, spectral, and agonized. Captain Cavendish gazed on it as if fascinated.

"What a story it tells!" Nathalie cried. "It makes one think of Charles Kingsley's weird song of the 'Three Fishers.' Well, Charley, what is it?"

"It is the carryall from Redmon come for you," said Charley, who had sauntered up. "If you are done looking at the pictures you had better go home."

Natty pushed the portfolio away pettishly, and rose, half-poutingly.

"What a nuisance, to go so soon!"

Then, catching Captain Cavendish's eye, she laughed good-naturedly.

"What can't be cured – you know the proverb, Captain Cavendish. Charley, wait for me in the hall, I will be there directly."

She crossed the room with the airy elegance peculiar to her light swinging tread, made her adieux quietly to the hostess, and sought her wrappings and the dressing-room.

As she ran down into the hall in a large shawl, gracefully worn, and a white cloud round her pretty face, she found Captain Cavendish waiting with Charley. It was he who offered her his arm,

and Charley ran down the steps before them. Through the wet fog they saw an old-fashioned two-seated buggy waiting, and the driver looking impatiently down.

"I wish you would drive up with me, Charley," said Natty, settling herself in her seat.

"Can't," said Charley. "I am going to see somebody else's sister home. I'll take a run up to-morrow evening."

"Miss Marsh," Captain Cavendish lazily began, "if you will permit me to – " but Natty cut him short with a gay laugh.

"And make all the young ladies in there miserable for the rest of the evening! No, thank you! I am not quite so heartless. Good night!"

She leaned forward to say it, the next moment she was lost in the fog. He caught one glimpse of a white hand waved, of the half-saucy, half-wicked, wholly-bewitching smile, of the dancing blue eyes and golden hair, and then there was nothing but a pale blank of mist and wet, and Charley was speaking:

"Hang the fog! it goes through one like a knife! Come along in, captain, they are going to dance."

Captain Cavendish went in, but not to dance. He had come from curiosity to see what the Speckportonians were like, not intending to remain over an hour or so. Now that Natty was gone, there was no inducement to stay. He sought out Mrs. McGregor, to say good-night.

"What's your hurry?" said Val, following him out.

"It is growing late, and I am ashamed to say I am sleepy. Will you be in the office to-morrow morning?"

"From eight till two," said Val.

"Then I'll drop in. Good night!"

The cathedral clock struck three as he came out into the drizzly morning, and all the other clocks in the town took it up. The streets were empty, as he walked rapidly to his lodgings, with buttoned-up overcoat, and hat drawn over his eyes. But a "dancing shape, an image gay" were with him, flashing on him through the fog; hunting him all the way home, through the smur and mist of the dismal day-dawn.

CHAPTER III.

MISS ROSE

Eight was striking by every clock in the town, as down Queen Street – the Broadway of Speckport – a tall female streamed, with a step that rang and resounded on the wooden pavement. The tall female, nodding to her acquaintances right and left, and holding up her bombazine skirts out of the slop, was Miss Jo Blake, as bright as a new penny, though she had not had a wink of sleep the night before. Early as the hour was, Miss Jo was going to make a morning call, and strode on through the fog with her head up, and a nod for nearly every one she passed.

Down Queen Street Miss Jo turned to the left, and kept straight on, facing the bay, all blurred and misty, so that you could hardly tell where the fog ended and the sun began. The business part of the town, with its noise and rattle and bustle, was left half a mile behind, and Miss Jo turned into a pretty and quiet street, right down on the sea-shore. It was called Cottage Street, very appropriately, too; for all the houses in it were cozy little cottages, a story and a half high, all as much alike as if turned out of a mold. They were all painted white, had a red door in the center, and two windows on either side of the door, decorated with green shutters. They had little grass-plots and flower-beds in front, with white palings, and white gate, and a little graveled path, and behind they had vegetable-yards sloping right down to the very water. If you leaned over the fences at the lower end of these gardens, on a stormy day, and at high tide, you could feel the salt spray dashing up in your face, from the waves below. At low water, there was a long, smooth, sandy beach, delightful to walk over on hot summer days.

Before one of the cottages Miss Jo drew rein, and rapped. While waiting for the door to open, the flutter of a skirt in the back garden caught her eye; and, peering round the corner of the house, she had a full view of it and its wearer.

And Miss Jo set herself to contemplate the view with keenest interest. To see the wearer of that fluttering skirt it was that had brought Miss Jo all the way from her own home so early in the morning, though she had never set eyes on her before.

Uncommonly friendly, perhaps you are thinking. Not at all: Miss Jo was a woman, consequently curious; and curiosity, not kindness, had brought her out.

The sight was very well worth looking at. You might have gazed for a week, steadily, and not grown tired of the prospect. A figure, slender and small, wearing a black dress, white linen cuffs at the wrists, a white linen collar, fastened with a knot of crape, a profusion of pretty brown hair, worn in braids, and low in the neck, hands like a child's, small and white. She was leaning against a tree, a gnarled old rowan tree, with her face turned sea-ward, watching the fishing-boats gliding in and out through the fog; but presently, at some noise in the street, she glanced around, and Miss Jo saw her face. A small, pale face, very pale, with pretty features, and lit with large, soft eyes. A face that was a history, could Miss Jo have read it; pale and patient, gentle and sweet, and in the brown eye a look of settled melancholy. This young lady in black had been learning the great lesson of life, that most of us poor mortals must learn, sooner or later, endurance – the lesson One too sublime to name came on earth to teach.

Miss Jo dodged back, the door swung open, and a fat girl, bursting out of her hooks and eyes, and with a head like a tow mop, opened the door. Miss Jo strode in without ceremony.

"Good morning, Betsy Ann! Is Mrs. Marsh at home this morning?"

"Yes, Miss Jo," said Betsy Ann, opening a door to the left, for there was a door on either hand; that to the right, leading to the drawing-room of the cottage, and a staircase at the end leading to the sleeping-room above; the door to the left admitted you to the sitting-room and dining-room, for it was both in one – a pleasant little room enough, with a red and green ingrain carpet, cane-seated

chairs, red moreen window-curtains on the two windows, one looking on the bay, the other on the street. There was a little upright piano in one corner, a lounge in another; pictures on the papered walls; a Dutch clock and some china cats and dogs and shepherdesses on the mantel-piece; a coal-fire in the Franklin, and a table laid for breakfast.

The room had but one occupant, a faded and feeble-looking woman, who sat in a low rocking-chair, her feet crossed on the fender, a shawl around her, and a book in her hand. She looked up in her surprise at her early visitor.

"Law! Miss Blake, is it you? Who'd have thought it? Betsy Ann, give Miss Blake a chair."

"It's quite a piece from our house here, and I feel kind of tired," said Miss Jo, seating herself. "Your fire feels comfortable, Mrs. Marsh; these foggy days are chilly. Ain't you had breakfast yet?"

"It's all Charley's fault; he hasn't come down stairs yet. How did you enjoy yourself at the party last night?"

"First-rate. Never went home till six this morning, and then I had to turn to and make Val his breakfast. Charley left early."

"Early!" retorted Mrs. Marsh; "I don't know what you call early. It was after six when he came here, Betsy Ann says."

"Well, that's odd," said Miss Jo. "He left McGregor's about half past three, anyway. Did you hear they had an officer there last night?"

"An officer! No. Who is it?"

"His name is Captain Cavendish, and a beautiful man he is, with a diamond ring on his finger, my dear, and the look of a real gentleman. His folks are very great in England. His brother's the Marquis of Cabbage – Carraways – no, I forget it; but Val knows all about him."

"Law!" exclaimed Mrs. Marsh, opening her light-blue eyes, "a Marquis! Who brought him?"

"Val did. Val knows every one, I believe, and got acquainted with him in Halifax. You never saw any one so proud as Mr. McGregor. I didn't say anything, my dear; but I thought of the time when lords and marquises, and dukes and captains without end, used to be entertained at Castle Blake," said Miss Jo, sighing.

"And what does he look like? Is he handsome?" asked Mrs. Marsh, with interest; for Castle Blake and its melancholy reminiscences were an old story to her.

"Uncommon," said Miss Jo; "and I believe Mrs. McGregor thinks her Jane will get him. You never saw any one so tickled in your life. Why weren't you up? – I expected you."

"I couldn't go. Miss Rose came just as I was getting ready, and of course I had to stay with her."

"Oh, the new teacher! I saw a young woman in black standing in the background as I came in; was that her?" said Miss Jo, who did not always choose to be confined to the rules of severe grammar.

"Yes," said Mrs. Marsh; "and what do you think, Miss Blake, if she wasn't up this morning before six o'clock? Betsy Ann always rises at six, and when she was rolling up the blind Miss Rose came down-stairs already dressed, and has been out in the garden ever since. Betsy Ann says she was weeding the flowers most of the time."

"She's a little thing, isn't she?" said Miss Jo; "and so delicate-looking! I don't believe she'll ever be able to manage them big rough girls in the school. What's her other name besides Miss Rose?"

"I don't know. She looks as if she had seen trouble," said Mrs. Marsh, pensively.

"Who is she in mourning for?"

"I don't know. I didn't like to ask, and she doesn't talk much herself."

"Where did she come from? Montreal, wasn't it?"

"I forget. Natty knows. Natty was here last night before she went up to McGregor's. She said she would come back this morning, and go with Miss Rose to the school. Here's Charley at last." Miss Jo faced round, and confronted that young gentleman sauntering in.

"Well, Sleeping Beauty, you've got up now, have you?" was her salute. "How do you feel after all you danced last night?"

"Never better. You're out betimes this morning, Miss Jo."

"Yes," said Miss Jo; "the sun don't catch me simmering in bed like it does some folks. Did it take you from half-past three till six to get home this morning, Mr. Charles?"

"Who says it was six?" said Charley.

"Betsy Ann does," replied his mother. "Where were you all the time?"

"Betsy Ann's eyes were a couple of hours too fast. I say, mother, is the breakfast ready? It's nearly time I was off."

"It's been ready this half-hour. Betsy Ann!"

That maiden appeared.

"Go and ask Miss Rose to please come in to breakfast, and then fetch the coffee."

Betsy Ann fled off, and Charley glanced out of the window.

"Miss Rose is taking a constitutional, is she? What is she like, mother – pretty? I didn't see her last night, you know."

"What odds is it to you?" demanded Miss Jo; "she's not as pretty as Cherrie Nettleby, anyhow."

Charley turned scarlet, and Miss Jo's eyes twinkled at the success of her random shaft. The door opened at that instant, and the small, slender black figure glided in. Glided was the word for that swift, light motion, so noiseless and fleet.

"Good morning," said Mrs. Marsh, rising smiling to shake hands; "you are an early bird, I find. Miss Blake, Miss Rose – Miss Rose, my son Charles."

My son Charles and Miss Blake both shook hands with the new teacher, and welcomed her to Speckport. A faint smile, a shy fluttering color coming and going in her delicate cheeks, and a few low-murmured words, and then Miss Rose sat down on the chair Charley had placed for her, her pretty eyes fixed on the coals, her small childlike hands fluttering still one over the other. Betsy Ann came in with the coffee-pot and rolls and eggs, and Mrs. Marsh invited Miss Jo to sit over and have some breakfast.

"I don't care if I do," said Miss Jo, untying her bonnet promptly. "I didn't feel like taking anything when Val had his this morning, and your coffee smells good. Are you fond of coffee, Miss Rose?"

Miss Rose smiled a little as they all took their places.

"Yes, I like it very well."

"Some folks like tea best," said Miss Jo, pensively, stirring in a third teaspoonful of sugar in her cup, "but I don't. What sort of a journey had you, Miss Rose?"

"Very pleasant, indeed."

"You arrived yesterday?"

Miss Rose assented.

"Was it from Halifax you came?"

"No, ma'am; from Montreal."

"Oh, from Montreal! You were born in Montreal, I suppose?"

"No, I was born in New York."

"Law!" cried Mrs. Marsh, "then, you're a Yankee, Miss Rose?"

"Do your folks live in Montreal, Miss Rose?" recommenced the persevering Miss Jo.

The faint, rosy light flickered and faded again in the face of Miss Rose.

"I have no relatives," she said, without lifting her eyes.

"None at all! Father, nor mother, nor brothers, nor sisters, nor nothing."

"I have none at all."

"Dear me, that's a pity! Who are you in black for?"

There was a pause – then Miss Rose answered, still without looking up:

"For my father."

"Oh, for your father! Has he been long dead? Another cup, if you please. Betsy Ann knows how to make nice coffee."

"He has been dead ten months," said Miss Rose, a flash of intolerable pain dyeing her pale cheeks at this questioning.

"How do you think you'll like Speckport?" went on the dauntless Miss Jo. "It's not equal to Montreal or New York, they tell me, but the Bluenoses think there's no place like it. Poor things! if they once saw Dublin, it's little they'd think of such a place as this is."

"Halte là!" cried Charley; "please to remember, Miss Jo, I am a native, to the manner born, an out-and-out Bluenose, and will stand no nonsense about Speckport! There's no place like it. See Speckport and die! Mother, I'll trouble you for some of that toast."

"Won't you have some, Miss Rose?" said Mrs. Marsh. "You ain't eating anything."

"Not any more, thank you. I like Speckport very much, Miss Blake; all I have seen of it."

"That's right, Miss Rose!" exclaimed Charley; "say you like fog and all. Are you going to commence teaching to-day?"

"I should prefer commencing at once. Miss Marsh said she was coming this morning, did she not?" Miss Rose asked, lifting her shy brown eyes to Mrs. Marsh.

"Yes, dear. Charley, what time did Natty go home last night?"

"She didn't go home last night; it was half-past two this morning."

"Did she walk?"

"No; the old lady sent that wheelbarrow of hers after her."

"Wheelbarrow!" cried his mother, aghast. "Why, Charley, what do you mean?"

"It's the same thing," said Charley. "I'd as soon go in a wheelbarrow as that carryall. Such a shabby old rattle-trap! It's like nothing but the old dame herself."

"Charley, you ought to be ashamed of yourself. Did you go with her?"

"Not I! I was better engaged. Another gentleman offered his services, but she declined."

"Who was it? Captain Locksley?"

"No, another captain – Captain Cavendish."

"Did he want to go home with Natty?" asked Miss Jo, with interest. "I thought he was more attentive to her than to Jane McGregor! Why wouldn't she have him?"

"She would look fine having him – an utter stranger! If it had been Locksley, it would have been different. See here, Miss Rose," Charley cried, springing up in alarm, "what is the matter?"

"She is going to faint!" exclaimed Miss Jo, in consternation. "Charley, run for a glass of water."

Miss Rose had fallen suddenly back in her seat, her face growing so dreadfully white that they might well be startled. It was nothing for Miss Rose to look pale, only this was like the pallor of death. Charley made a rush for the water, and was back in a twinkling, holding it to her lips. She drank a portion, pushed it away, and sat up, trying to smile.

"I am afraid I have startled you," she said, as if necessary to apologize, "but I am not very strong, and –"

Her voice, faltering throughout, died entirely away; and, leaning her elbows on the table, she bowed her forehead on her hands. Miss Jo looked at her with compressed lips and prophetic eye.

"You'll never stand that school, Miss Rose, and I thought so from the first. Them girls would try a constitution of iron, let alone yours."

Miss Rose lifted her white face, and arose from the table.

"It is nothing," she said, faintly. "I do not often get weak, like this. Thank you!"

She had gone to the window, as if for air, and Charley had sprung forward and opened it.

"Does the air revive you, or shall I fetch you some more water?" inquired Charley, with a face full of concern.

"Oh, no! indeed, it is nothing. I am quite well now."

"You don't look like it," said Miss Jo; "you are as white as a sheet yet. Don't you go near that school to-day, mind."

Miss Rose essayed a smile.

"The school will do me no harm, Miss Blake – thank you for your kindness all the same."

Miss Jo shook her head.

"You ain't fit for it, and that you'll find. Are you off, Charley?"

"Very hard, isn't it, Miss Jo?" said Charley, drawing on his gloves. "But I must tear myself away. Old Pestle and Mortar will be fit to bastinado me for staying till this time of day."

"Look here, then," said Miss Jo, "have you any engagement particular for this evening?"

"Particular? no, not very. I promised Natty to spend the evening up at Redmon, that's all."

"Oh, that's nothing, then. I want you and your mother, and Miss Rose, to come over to our house this evening, and take a cup of tea. I'll get Natty to come, too."

"All right," said Charley, boyishly, taking his wide-awake. "I'll take two or three cups if you like. Good morning, all. Miss Rose, don't you go and use yourself up in that hot school-room to-day."

Off went Charley, whistling "Cheer, boys, cheer!" and his hands rammed down in his coat-pockets; and Miss Jo got up and took her bonnet.

"You'll be sure to come, Mrs. Marsh, you and Miss Rose, and come nice and early, so as we can have a chat."

"Certainly," said Mrs. Marsh, "if Miss Rose has no objection."

Miss Rose hesitated a little, and glanced at her mourning dress, and from it to Miss Jo, with her soft, wistful eyes.

"I have not gone out at all since – since –"

"Yes, dear, I know," said Miss Jo, kindly, interrupting. "But it isn't a party or anything, only just two or three friends to spend a few hours. Now, don't make any objection. I shall expect you both, without fail, so good-bye."

With one of her familiar nods, Miss Jo strode out, and nearly ran against a young lady, who was opening the gate.

"Is it you, Miss Jo? You nearly knocked me down! You must have been up with the birds this morning, to get here so soon."

The speaker was a young lady who had been at Mrs. McGregor's the previous night; a small, wiry damsel, with sallow face, thin lips, dull, yellow, lusterless hair, and light, faded-looking eyes. She was not pretty, but she looked pleasant – that is, if incessant smiles can make a face pleasant – and she had the softest and sweetest of voices – you could liken it to nothing but the purring of a cat; and her hands were limp and velvety, and catlike too.

Miss Jo nodded her recognition.

"How d'ye do, Catty? How do you feel after last night?"

"Very well."

"Well enough to spend this evening with me?"

Miss Catty Clowrie laughed.

"I am always well enough for that, Miss Jo! Are you going to eclipse Mrs. McGregor?"

"Nonsense! Mrs. Marsh and Miss Rose are coming to take tea with me, that's all, and I want you to come up."

"I shall be very happy to. Are Natty and – Charley coming?"

Miss Jo nodded again, and without further parley walked away. As she turned the corner of Cottage Street into a more busy thoroughfare, known as Park Lane, she saw a lady and gentleman taking the sidewalk in dashing style. Everybody looked after them, and everybody might have gone a long way without finding anything better worth looking after. The young lady's tall, slight, willowy figure was set off by a close-fitting black cloth basque, and a little, coquettish, black velvet cap was placed above one of the most bewitching faces that ever turned a man's head. Roseate, smiling,

sunshiny, the bright blue eyes flashing laughing light everywhere they fell. Her gloved hands daintily uplifting her skirts, and displaying the pretty high-heeled boots, as she sailed along with a very peculiar, jaunty, swinging gait.

And quite as well worth looking at, in his way, was her cavalier, gallant and handsome, with an unmistakable military stride, and an unmistakable military air generally, although dressed in civilian's clothes. As they swept past Miss Jo, the young lady made a dashing bow; and the young gentleman lifted his hat. Miss Jo stood, with her mouth open, gazing after them.

"A splendid couple, ain't they, Miss Blake?" said a man, passing. It was Mr. Clowrie, on his way to his office, and Miss Jo, just deigning to acknowledge him, walked on.

"My patience!" was her mental ejaculation, "what a swell they cut! He's as handsome as a lord, that young man; and she's every bit as good-looking! I must go up to Redmon this afternoon, and ask her down. Wouldn't it be great now, if that should turn out to be a match!"

CHAPTER IV. VAL'S OFFICE

Among the many tall, dingy brick buildings, fronting on that busy thoroughfare of Speckport, Queen Street, there stood one to the right as you went up, taller and dingier, if possible, than its neighbors, and bearing this legend along its grimy front, "Office of Speckport Spouter." There were a dozen newspapers, more or less, published in Speckport, weekly, semi-weekly, and daily; but the Spouter went ahead of them all, and distanced all competitors.

At about half-past seven o'clock, this foggy spring morning, two individuals of the manly sex occupied the principal apartment of the printing establishment. A dirty, nasty, noisy place it generally was; and dirty and nasty, though not very noisy, it was this morning, for the only sound to be heard was the voice of one of its occupants, chattering incessantly, and the scratching of the other's pen, as he wrote, perched up on a high stool.

The writer was foreman in the office, a sober-looking, middle-aged man, who wore spectacles, and wrote away as mechanically as if he was doing it by steam. The speaker was a lively youth of twelve, office-boy, printer's devil, and errand-runner, and gossip-in-chief to the place. His name was in the baptismal register of Speckport cathedral, William Blair; but in every-day life he was Bill Blair, brother to pretty Laura, whom Val Blake had eulogized as "such a girl to laugh."

Laughter seemed to be a weakness in the family, for Master Bill's mouth was generally stretched in a steady grin from one week's end to the other, and was, just at this present moment. He was perched up on another high stool, swinging his legs about, chewing gum, looking out of the window, and talking.

"And there goes Old Leach in his gig, tearing along as if Old Nick was after him," went on Master Bill, criticising the passers-by. "Somebody's kicking the bucket in Speckport! And there's Sim Tod hobbling along on his stick! Now, I should admire to know how long that old codger's going to live; he must be as old as Methuselah's cat by this time. And there, I vow, if there ain't Miss Jo, streaking along as tall as a grenadier, and as spry as if she hadn't been up all night at that rout in Golden Row. What a frisky old girl it is!"

"I tell you what, Bill Blair," said the foreman, Mr. Gilcase, "if you don't take yourself down out of that, and get to work, I'll report you to Mr. Blake as soon as he comes in!"

"No, you won't!" said Bill, snapping his gum between his teeth like a pistol-shot. "There ain't nothing to do. I swept the office, and sprinkled this floor, and I want a rest now, I should think. I feel as if I should drop!"

"The office looks as if it had been swept," said Mr. Gilcase, contemptuously; "there's the addresses to write on those wrappers; go and do that!"

"That's time enough," said Bill; "Blake won't be here for an hour or two yet; he's snoozing, I'll bet you, after being up all night. Look here, Mr. Gilcase, did you know the new teacher was come?"

"No," said the foreman, looking somewhat interested; "has she?"

"Came last night," nodded Bill; "our Laury heard so last night at the party. Her name's Miss Rose. Did you know they had an officer last night at McGregor's?"

"I didn't think the officers visited McGregor's?"

"None of 'em ever did before; but one of them was there last night, a captain, by the same token; and, I expect, old McGregor's as proud as a pig with two tails. As for Jane, there'll be no standing her now, and she was stuck-up enough before. Oh, here's Clowrie, and about as pleasant-looking as a wild cat with the whooping-cough!"

A heavy, lumbering foot was ascending the steep dark stairs, and the door opened presently to admit a young gentleman in a pea-jacket and glazed cap. A short and thick-set young gentleman,

with a sulky face, who was never known to laugh, and whose life it was the delight of Master Bill Blair to torment and make a misery of. The young gentleman was Mr. Jacob Clowrie, eldest son and hope of Peter Clowrie, Esq., attorney-at-law.

"How are you, Jake?" began Mr. Blair, in a friendly tone, knocking his heels about on the stool. "You look kind of sour this morning. Was the milk at breakfast curdled, or didn't Catty get up to make you any breakfast at all?"

Mr. Clowrie's reply to this was a growl, as he hung up his cap.

"I say, Jake, you weren't at McGregor's tea-splash last night, were you? I know the old man and Catty were there. Scaly lot not to ask you and me!"

Mr. Clowrie growled again, and sat down at a desk.

"I say, Jake," resumed that young demon, Bill, grinning from ear to ear, "how's our Cherrie, eh? – seen her lately?"

"What would you give to know?" snapped Mr. Clowrie, condescending to retort.

"But I do know, though, without giving nothing! and I know your cake's dough, my boy! Lor, I think I see 'em now!" cried Bill, going off in a shout of laughter at some lively recollection.

Mr. Clowrie glared at him over the top of his desk, with savage inquiry.

"Oh, you're cut out, old fellow! you're dished, you are! Cherrie's got a new beau, and you're left in the lurch!"

"What do you mean, you young imp?" inquired Mr. Clowrie, growing very red in the face. "I'll go over and twist your neck for you, if you don't look sharp!"

Mr. Blair winked.

"Don't you think you see yourself doing it, Jakey? I tell you it's as true as preaching! Cherrie's got a new fellow, and the chap's name is Charley Marsh."

There was a pause. Bill looked triumphant, Mr. Clowrie black as a thunderbolt, and the foreman amused in spite of himself. Bill crunched his gum and waited for his announcement to have proper effect, and then resumed, in an explanatory tone:

"You see, Jake, I had heard Charley was after her, but I didn't believe it till last night, when I see them with my own two blessed eyes. My governor and Laury were off to McGregor's, so I cut over to Jim Tod's, to see a lot of terrier-pups he's got – me and Tom Smith – and he promised us a pup apiece. Jim's folks were at the junketing, too; so we had the house to ourselves. And Jim, he stole in the pantry through the window and hooked a lot of pies and cakes, and raspberry wine, and Tom had a pack of cards in his trowsers pocket. And we went up to Jim's room, and, crackey! hadn't we a time! There was no hurry neither; for we knew the old folks wouldn't be home till all hours, so we staid till after three in the morning, and by this time Jim and me had lost three shillings in pennies each, and the three of us were about ready to burst with all we had eat and drank! It was foggy and misty coming home, and me and Tom cut across them fields and waste lots between Tod's and Park Lane, when just as we turned into Golden Row, who should we meet but Charley Marsh and Cherrie. There they were, coming along as large as life, linking together, and Charley's head down, listening to her, till their noses were nearly touching. Me and Tom laughed till we were fit to split!"

Mr. Blair laughed again at the recollection, but Mr. Clowrie, scowling more darkly than ever, replied not save by scornful silence. Bill had his laugh out, and recommenced.

"So you see, Jake, it's no go! You can't get the beautifulest mug that ever was looked at, and you haven't the shadow of a chance against such a fellow as Charley Marsh! O Lor!"

With the last ejaculation of alarm, Bill sprang down from his perch in consternation, as the door opened and Mr. Val Blake entered. He had been so absorbed chaffing Mr. Clowrie that he had not heard Val coming up-stairs, and now made a desperate dash at the nearest desk. Val stretched out his long arm and pinned him.

"You young vagabond! is this the way you spend your time in my absence? What's that about Charley Marsh?"

"Nothing, sir," said Bill, grinning a malicious grin over at Mr. Clowrie. "I was only telling Jake how he was being cut out!"

"Cut out! What do you mean?"

"Why, with that Cherrie Nettleby! Charley Marsh's got her now!"

"What!" said Val, shortly; "what are you talking about, you little rascal?"

"I can't help it, sir," said Bill, with an injured look, "if I am a rascal. I saw him seeing her home this morning between three and four o'clock, and if that don't look like cutting Jake out, I don't know what does!"

"And what were you doing out at three o'clock in the morning, Master Blair?"

"I was over to Tod's spending the evening, me and a lot more fellows, and that was the time we were getting home. I don't see," said Bill, with a still more aggrieved air, "why we shouldn't stop out a while, if all the old codgers in the town set us the example!"

Val released him, and strode on to an inner room.

"See if you can attend to your business for one morning, sir, and give your tongue a holiday. Mr. Gilcase, was the postman here?"

"Yes, sir. The letters and papers are on your table."

Val disappeared, closing the door behind him, and Master Blair turned a somersault of delight and cut a pigeon-wing afterward.

"Get to work, sir!" shouted Mr. Gilcase, "or I'll make Mr. Blake turn you out of the office!"

"Mr. Blake knows better," retorted the incorrigible. "I rather think the Spouter would be nowhere if I left; Do you know, Mr. Gilcase, I think Blake has some notion of taking me into partnership shortly! He has to work like a horse now."

Val had to work hard – no mistake about it, for he was sole editor and proprietor of the Sunday and Weekly Speckport Spouter. He is sitting in his room now – and a dusty, grimy, littered, disordered room it is – before a table heaped with papers, letters, books, and manuscript of all kinds, busily tearing the envelopes off sundry overgrown letters, and disgorging their contents.

"What's this? a private note from Miss Incognita. 'Would I be so kind as to speak to the printers; they made such frightful mistakes in her last sketch, filled her heroine's eyes with tars, instead of tears, and in the battle-scene defeated Cromwell and his soldiers with wildest laughter, instead of slaughter!' Humph.

"It's her own fault; why don't she write decently? Very well, Miss Laura, I'll stick you in; you think I don't know you, I suppose. Come in."

Val looked up from his literary labors to answer a tap at the door. Mr. Gilcase put in his head.

"There's a gentleman here wants to see you, sir. Captain Cavendish."

Val got up and went out. Captain Cavendish, in a loose overcoat, and smoking a cigar, was lounging against a desk, and being stared at by Messrs. Clowrie and Blair, took out his cigar and extended his hand languidly to Val.

"Good morning! Are you very busy? Am I an intruder? If so, I'll go away again."

"I'm no busier than common," said Val. "Come in, this is my sanctum, and here's the editorial chair; sit down."

"Is it any harm to smoke?" inquired the Captain, looking rather doubtful.

"Not the least. I'll blow a cloud myself. How did you find your way here through the clouds of fog?"

"Not very easily. Does the sun ever shine at all in Speckport?"

"Occasionally – when it cannot help itself. But when did you take to early rising, pray? You used to be lounging over your breakfast about this hour when I knew you in Halifax."

"Yes, I know – I'm a reformed character. Apropos, early rising seems to be the style here. I met two ladies of my acquaintance figuring through the streets ever so long ago."

"Who were they?"

"Your sister was one; Miss Marsh, the other."

"Natty, eh? Oh, she always was an early bird. Were you speaking to her?"

"I had the pleasure of escorting her to her mother's. By the way, she does not live with her mother, does she?"

"No; she lives with old Lady Leroy, up at Redmon."

"Where is Redmon?"

"About a mile from Speckport. Natty walks it two or three times a day, and thinks it's only a hen's jump. Redmon's a fine place."

"Indeed."

"Not the house exactly – it's a great barn – but the property. It's worth eight thousand pounds."

"So much?" said Captain Cavendish, looking interested. "And who is Lady Leroy?"

"The wife – the widow of a dead Jew. Don't stare, she only gets the title as a nickname, for she's the greatest old oddity the sun ever shone on. She's a cousin of Natty's mother, and Natty is to be her heiress."

Captain Cavendish's eyes lightened vividly.

"Her heiress! Is she very rich, then?"

"Immensely! Worth thirty thousand pounds or more, and the stingiest old skinflint that ever breathed. Natty has been with her over a year now, as a sort of companion, and a fine time she has with the old toad, I know."

"And there is no doubt Miss Marsh is to be her heiress?"

"None at all – the will is made and in the hands of Darcy, her lawyer. She has no children, and no relatives that ever I heard of nearer than Miss Marsh. She was old Leroy's servant when he married her – it happened in New York, where he made his money. This place, Redmon, was to be sold for debt; Leroy bid it in dirt cheap, and rented it, employing Darcy as his agent to collect rents, for there is quite a village attached to it. After the old fellow's death, a year and a half ago, his venerable relict came here, took up her abode at Redmon, with as great an oddity as herself for a servant. She took a great fancy to pretty Natty after awhile, and got her to go up there and reside as companion."

"And those Marshes – what are they? like the rest of Speckport – begging your pardon! – nobody?"

"Family, you mean? That question is so like an Englishman. The father was a gentleman. His profession was that of engineer, and his family, I have heard, was something extra in England; but he made a low marriage over here, and they would have nothing more to do with him. Mrs. Marsh was pretty, and as insipid as a mug of milk and water, caring for nothing in the world wide but sitting in a rocking-chair reading novels. He married her, though; and they lived quite in style until Charley was fourteen and Natty twelve years old. Then Mr. Marsh had a stroke of paralysis which left him altogether incapable of attending to his business, of doing anything, in fact, but teaching. He started a school, and got a salary for playing the organ in the cathedral, but he only lived two years after. Before he died they had to give up their fine house, dismiss their servants, auction their furniture, and rent the cottage they live in now. Miss Natty, sir, kept the school, gave music-lessons after hours, took the organ Sundays, and supported the family for the next three years; in point of fact, does to this day."

"How is that?" said Captain Cavendish. "Mrs. Leroy pays her a salary as companion, I suppose?"

"She does; but that's only a pittance, wouldn't pay her mother's bills in the circulating library. Natty refused to go to Redmon unless under certain conditions. She would retain the school, the organ, and her music pupils as usual, only she would engage another teacher for the school, coming there one hour a day to superintend. That would take about four hours a day, the rest was at the service of Lady Leroy. Her ladyship grumbled, but had to consent; so Natty went to live up at Redmon, and between all has her hands full."

"She is indeed a brave girl! What are her duties at the old lady's?"

"No trifle! She reads to her, retails all the news of the town, writes her letters, keeps her accounts, receives the rents, makes out the receipts, oversees the household – does a thousand things besides. If she had as many hands as what's his name, the fellow in the mythology, – Briareus, wasn't it? – the old vixen would keep them all occupied. By the way, did you see Charley this morning when you were in?"

"I wasn't in, I left Miss Natty at the door. I say, Val, you didn't tell me last night who that pretty girl was I saw him with in the window. She was not a guest, though I'll take my oath there wasn't a young lady present half so pretty, save the belle of Speckport herself. Who was she?"

"Cherrie, otherwise Miss Charlotte Nettleby. A little flirting piece of conceit. She has had the young men of Speckport tagging after her. Rumor set Charley down lately as one of her killed or wounded; but Speckport is always gossiping, and I paid no attention to it. It seems it's true though, for that young scamp Blair in the next room saw him escorting her home this morning."

"What was she doing at the house if not invited!"

"How should I know? Cherrie is everywhere – she knows the servants, I suppose."

"Oh, is that it? Then she is nobody."

"I wish she heard you! If ever any one thought themselves somebody it's the same Miss Cherrie. She aspires to be a lady – bless your heart! – and that foolish boy is to be entrapped into marrying her."

Val stopped to knock the ashes off his cigar.

"Well; and what then?" asked the captain.

"Why, Natty will go frantic, that is all. She thinks the Princess Royal not half good enough for Charley."

"Is Miss Cherrie's position in life so low, then?"

"It's not that. Her father is a gardener, a poor man, but honest and respectable enough. It's Cherrie herself; she's a shallow, vain, silly little beauty, as ever made fools of men, and her vanity, and her idleness, and her dress, and her flirtations are the scandal of the town. Not that anything worse can be said of little Cherrie, mind; but she is not the girl for Charley Marsh to marry."

"Charley is a gentleman; perhaps he isn't going to marry her," suggested Captain Cavendish, with a light laugh, that told more of his character than folios could have done.

"Being a gentleman," said Val, with emphasis, "he means to marry her if he means anything at all."

And the young officer shrugged his shoulders.

"*Chacun à son goût*. I must be going, I believe. Here I have been trespassing on your time these two hours."

"The day's young yet," said Val; "have you any engagement for this evening?"

"I believe not, except a dinner at the mess-room, which can be shirked."

"Then come up to Redmon. If you are a student of character, Mrs. Leroy will amply repay the trouble."

"I'm there! but not," said Captain Cavendish, laughing, "to see Mrs. Leroy."

"I understand. Well, good morning."

"Until then, *au revoir*."

Mr. Bill Blair, perched on his high stool, his elbows spread out on the desk, stared at him as he went out.

"Cracky, what a rum swell them officer chaps are? I say, Clowrie, wouldn't Cherrie like that cove for a beau? He would be safe to win if he tried it on, and Charley Marsh would be where you are now – nowhere."

And little did Mr. William Blair or his hearers think he was uttering a prophecy.

CHAPTER V.

KILLING TWO BIRDS WITH ONE STONE

Captain Cavendish, looking very handsome and distinguished in the admiring eyes of Speckport, lounged down Queen Street, and down half a dozen other streets, toward the sea-shore. The tide was ebbing as he descended to the beach, and the long, lazy swell breaking on the strand was singing the old everlasting song it has sung through all time. Its mysterious music was lost on Captain Cavendish; his thoughts were hundreds of miles away. Not very pleasant thoughts, either, judging by his contracted brow and compressed lips, as he leaned against a tall rock, his eyes looking out to sea. He started up after awhile, with a gesture of impatience.

"Pshaw!" he said; "what's the use of thinking of it now? it's all past and gone. It is Fate, I suppose; and if Fate has ordained I must marry a rich wife or none, where is the good of my puny struggles? But poor little Winnie! I have been the greatest villain that ever was known to you."

He walked along the beach, sending pebbles skimming over the waves as he went. Two fishermen in oilcloth trowsers, very scaly and rattling, were drawing up their boat, laden to the water's edge with gaspereaux, all alive and kicking. Captain Cavendish stopped and looked at them.

"Your freight looks lively, my men. You have got a fine boatload there."

The two young men looked at him. They were tall, strapping, sunburnt, black-eyed, good-looking fellows both, and the one hauling up the boat answered; the other, pulling the fish out of the nets, went on with his work in silence.

"Yes, sir, we had a good haul last night. The freshet's been strong this spring, and has made the fishing good."

"Were you out all night?"

"Yes; we have to go when the tide suits."

"You had a foggy night for it, then. Can you tell me which is the road to Redmon?"

The young fisherman turned and pointed to a path going up the hillside from the shore.

"Do you see that path? Well, follow it; cut across the field, and let down the bars t'other side. There's a road there; keep straight on and it will fetch you to Redmon. You can't miss the house when you get to it; it's a big brick building on a sort of hill, with lots of trees around it."

"Thank you. I'll find it, I think."

He sauntered lazily up the hillside-path, cut across the fields, and let down the bars as he had been directed, putting them conscientiously up again.

The road was a very quiet one; green meadows on either hand, and clumps of cedar and spruce wood sparsely dotting it here and there. The breeze swept up cool and fresh from the sea; the town with its bustle and noise was out of sight and hearing.

He was walking so slowly that it was nearly half an hour before Redmon came in sight – a large weather-beaten brick house on the summit of a hill, with bleak corners and reedy marshes, and dark trees all around it, the whole inclosed by a high wooden fence. The place took its name from these marshes or moors about it, sown in some time with crimson cranberries and pigeonberries, like fields of red stars. But Captain Cavendish only glanced once at Redmon; for the instant it had come in sight something else had come in sight, too, a thousand times better worth looking at. Just outside the extremity of the fence nearest him there stood a cottage – a little whitewashed affair, standing out in dazzling contrast to the black cedar woods beside it, hop-vines clustering round its door and windows, and a tall gate at one side opening into a well-cultivated vegetable garden.

Swinging back and forward on this gate was a young girl, whom Captain Cavendish recognized in a moment. It was a face that few young men forgot easily, for its owner was a beauty born; the figure was petite and plump, delightfully rounded and ripe indeed, with no nasty sharp curves or harsh

angles; the complexion dark and clear, the forehead low, with black, arching brows; the eyes like black beads; the cheeks like June roses; the lips as red, and ripe, and sweet as summer strawberries, the teeth they parted to disclose, literally like pearls, and they parted very often, indeed, to disclose them. The hair was black as hair can be, and all clustering in little short, shining rings and kinks about the forehead and neck. Captain Cavendish had seen that face for the first time last night, in the window with Charley Marsh, but he was a sufficiently good judge of physiognomy to know it was not necessary to be very ceremonious with Miss Cherrie Nettleby. He therefore advanced at once, with a neat little fiction at the top of his tongue.

"I beg your pardon," he said politely, "but I am very thirsty. Will you be kind enough to give me a drink?"

Miss Cherrie, though but nineteen in years, was forty at least in penetration where handsome men were concerned, and saw through the ruse at once. She sprang down from the gate and held it open, with the prettiest affectation of timidity in the world.

"Yes, sir. Will you please to walk in."

"Thank you," said the captain, languidly, "I believe I will. My walk has completely used me up."

Miss Cherrie led the way into the cottage. The front door opened directly into the parlor of the dwelling, a neat little room, the floor covered with mats; a table, with books and knickknacks in the center; a lounge and a rocking-chair, and some common colored prints on the walls. It had an occupant as they came in, a sallow, dark-eyed girl of sixteen, whose hands fairly flew as she sat at the window, netting on a fisherman's net, already some twenty fathoms long.

"Ann," said Cherrie, placing a chair for their distinguished visitor, "go and fetch the gentleman a drink."

The girl turned her sallow but somewhat sullen face, without rising.

"There ain't no water in," she said, curtly.

"Go for some now," said Cherrie. "I'll knit till you come back."

"No, no!" hastily interposed Captain Cavendish. "I beg you will give yourself no such trouble. I am not so thirsty as I thought I was."

"Oh, we'll want the water anyhow to get the boys' dinner," said Cherrie, throwing off her scarlet shawl. "Go, Ann, and make haste."

Ann got up crossly, and strolled out of the room at a snail's pace, and Miss Cherrie took her place, and went to work industriously.

"Is that your sister?" he asked, watching Cherrie's hand flying as swiftly in and out as Ann's had done.

"Yes, that's our Ann," replied the young lady, as if every one should know Ann, as a matter of course.

"And do you and Ann live here alone together?"

Cherrie giggled at the idea.

"Oh dear, no. There's father and the boys."

"The boys, and are they –"

"My brothers," said Cherrie. "Two of 'em, Rob and Eddie. They fish, you know, and Ann, she knits the nets."

"Are those you are now making for them?"

"Yes, these are shad-nets. I hate to knit, but the boys pay Ann for doing it, and she does them all. I guess you'll be pretty thirsty," said Cherrie, laughing as easily as if she had known him for the past ten years, "before Ann gets back with the water. She's horrid slow."

"Never mind. The longer she is away, the better I shall like it, Miss Cherrie."

Miss Cherrie dropped her needle and mesh-block, and opened her black eyes.

"Why, how did you find out my name? You don't know me, do you?"

"A little. I trust we shall be very well acquainted before long."

Cherrie smiled graciously.

"Everybody knows me, I think. How did you find out who I was?"

"I saw you last night."

"No! did you, though? What time? where was I?"

"Sitting in a window, breaking a young gentleman's heart."

Cherrie giggled again.

"I'm sure I wasn't doing any such thing. That was only Charley Marsh."

"Only Charley Marsh. Had you and he a pleasant walk home this morning?"

"Now, I never. How did you know he saw me home?"

"A little bird told me. I only wish it had been my good fortune."

"Oh, what a story!" cried Cherrie, her wicked black eyes dancing in her head; "I wonder you ain't ashamed! Didn't I hear you wanting to ride home with Miss Natty. I was peeking out through the dining-room door, and I heard you as plain as could be."

"Well, I wanted to be polite, you know. Not having the honor of your acquaintance, Cherrie, I knew there was no hope of escorting you; so I made the offer to Miss Marsh in sheer despair. Now, Cherrie, I don't want you to get too fond of that brother of hers."

Cherrie giggled once more.

"Now, how can you! I'm sure I don't care nothing about him; but I can't help his talking to me, and seeing me home, can I?"

"I don't know. I wouldn't talk too much to him, if I were you; and as for seeing you home, I'd rather do it myself. There is no telling what nonsense he may get talking! Does he come here often?"

"Pretty often; but all the young fellows come! Sandy McGregor, Jake Clowrie, Mr. Blake, Charley Marsh, and the whole lot of 'em!"

"What time do they come?"

"Evenings, mostly. Then, there's a whole lot of Bob and Eddie's friends come, too, and the house is full most every night!"

"And what do you all do?"

"Oh, ever so many things! Play cards, sing songs, and carry on, and dance, sometimes."

"May I come, too, Cherrie?"

"You may, if you like," said Cherrie, with coquettish indifference. "But the young ladies in Speckport won't like that!"

"What do I care for the young ladies in Speckport! Oh, here's the water!"

Ann came in with a glass, and the captain drank it without being the least thirsty.

"Bob and Eddie's coming up the road," said Ann to her sister; "you knit while I peel the potatoes for dinner."

"I am afraid I must go," said Captain Cavendish, rising, having no desire to make the acquaintance of the Messrs. Nettleby. "I have been here nearly half an hour."

"That ain't long, I'm sure," said Cherrie; "what's your hurry?"

"I have a call to make. May I come again, Miss Cherrie?"

"Oh, of course!" said Miss Cherrie, with perfect coolness; "we always like to see our friends. Are you going to Redmon?"

Captain Cavendish nodded, and took his hat. Pretty Cherrie got up to escort him to the gate.

"Good-bye, Miss Cherrie," he said, making her a flourishing bow. "I will have the pleasure of calling on you to-morrow."

Cherrie smiled most gracious consent.

As he turned out of the gate he encountered the two young fishermen who had directed him to Redmon. They were Cherrie's brothers, then; and, laughing inwardly at the memory of the late interview with that young lady, he entered the grounds of Redmon.

"She's a deuced pretty girl!" he said, slapping his boot with a rattan he carried; "and, faith, she's free and easy! No nonsensical prudery about Miss Cherrie. I only hope I may get on as well with the golden-haired heiress as I seem to have done with the black-eyed grisette!"

He opened the wooden gate, and sauntered along a bleak avenue, the grounds on either hand overrun with rank weeds, and spruce, and tamarack, and fir trees, casting somber gloom around.

The house, a great red barn, as Val had said, looked like a black, grimy jail; the shutters were closed on every window, the hall-door seemed hermetically sealed, and swallows flew about it, and built their nests in security on the eaves and down the chimneys. There was a great, grim iron knocker on the door, and the young man's knock reverberated with a hollow and ghostly echo through the weird house.

"What a place for such a girl to live in!" he thought, looking up at it. "Her desire for wealth must be strong to tempt her to bury herself alive in such an old tomb. The riches of the Rothschilds would not induce me."

A rusty key grated in a lock, the door swung open with a creaking sound, and the bright face of Nathalie Marsh looked out.

She smiled when she saw who it was, and frankly held out her hand.

"You have lost no time, Monsieur. Walk in, and please to excuse me a few moments. I must go back to Mrs. Leroy."

They were in a long and dismal hall, flanked with doors, and with a great, wide, old-fashioned staircase sweeping up and losing itself somehow in the upper gloom. Natty opened one of the doors, ushered him into the reception parlor of the establishment, and then flew swiftly up the stairs and was gone.

Captain Cavendish looked about him, that is, as well as he could for the gloom. The parlor of Redmon was furnished after the style of the cabin of a certain "fine ould Irish gentleman," immortalized in song, "with nothing at all for show." No carpet on the dreary Sahara of floor; no curtains on the gloomy windows; no pictures on the dead, blank waste of whitewashed walls; a few chairs, a black, old mahogany table, a dreary horsehair sofa, about as soft as if cushioned with bricks; and that was all. The silence of the place was something blood-chilling; not the squeak of a mouse relieved its deathlike quiet.

Five, ten, fifteen, twenty minutes passed, and the captain, getting desperate, was seriously thinking of making his escape, when a light step came tripping down the stairs, and Natty, all breathless and laughing, came breezily in.

"Are you tired to death waiting?" she laughed gayly. "Mrs. Leroy is dreadfully tiresome over her toilet, and I am femme de chambre, if you please! It is over now, and she desires me to escort you to her presence, and be introduced. I hope you may make a favorable impression!"

"But what am I to do?" said Captain Cavendish, with an appalled face. "How am I to insinuate myself into her good graces? Where is the key to her heart?"

"The key was lost years ago, and her heart is now closed. Don't contradict her, whatever you do. Hush! here we are!"

They had ascended to a hall like the one below; flanked, like it, by doors. Natty, with a glance of wicked delight at his dolorous face, opened the first door to the right, and ushered him at once into the presence of the awful Lady Leroy.

Something – it certainly looked more like an Egyptian mummy than anything else – swathed in shawls and swaddling-clothes, was stuck up in a vast Sleepy Hollow open arm-chair, and had its face turned to the door. That face, and a very yellow, and seared, and wrinkled, and unlovely face it was, buried in the flapping obscurity of a deeply-frilled white cap, was lit by a pair of little, twinkling eyes, bright and keen as two stilettos.

"Mrs. Leroy," said Natty, her tone demure, but her mischievous eyes dancing under their lashes, "this is Captain Cavendish."

"How d'ye do, Captain Cavendish?" said Mrs. Leroy, in a shrill, squeaking voice, like a penny whistle out of tune; "sit down – do! Natty, can't you give the young man a cheer?"

Natty did not cheer, but she placed a chair for him, whispering, as she did so, "Speak loud, or she won't hear you."

"What's the weather like out o' doors?" inquired the old lady, scanning him from head to foot with her little piercing eyes; "be the sun a-shining, hey?"

"No, Madam," said Captain Cavendish, in a loud key, "it is foggy."

She had paid no attention to his reply; she had been staring at him all the time, until even he, cool as any man of the world could be, got a trifle disconcerted. Natty, sitting demurely near, was enjoying it all with silent but intense delight.

"So you're the young English captain Natty was telling me about. You're not so handsome as she said you were; leastways, you ain't to my taste!"

It was Natty's turn now to look disconcerted, which she did with a vengeance, as the dark, laughing eyes of the young officer turned upon her.

"Miss Marsh does me too much honor to mention me at all," he said, speaking more at the young lady than to the old one.

"Hey?" inquired Lady Leroy, shrilly. "What's that? What did you say?"

"I was saying how remarkably well you were looking, ma'am," said the captain, raising his voice, "and that this Redmon is a very fine old place."

"It's not!" screamed Lady Leroy, viciously; "it's the hatefulest, daftest, uncomfortablest hole ever anybody set foot in! Natty!"

"Yes, ma'am!" said Natty. "What is it?"

"Is old Nettleby planting them potatoes to-day?"

"Yes, of course he is."

"He'll plant Carters where he ought to plant Early Blues! I know he will!" cried the old lady in an ecstasy of alarm; "run out as fast as you can, Natty, and tell him not to plant any Carters in the three-cornered field. Run, run, run!"

Natty knew Lady Leroy a great deal too well to expostulate. "I will be back directly," she said, in a low voice, the laughing light in her eyes still, as she passed her visitor; "do not get into trouble if you can help it, in my absence."

She was gone, and Lady Leroy, with her eyes fixed on the opposite wall, seemed to have gone off into a fit of musing. Captain Cavendish tried to look about him, which he had not ventured to do before, under those basilisk eyes. It was a large square room, like all the rest in the house, and stiflingly close and warm. No wonder, for a small cooking-stove was burning away, and every window was closed and shuttered. A bed stood in one corner, an old-fashioned clock ticked in a loud hoarse voice on the mantel-piece, a small round table stood at the old lady's elbow, and the floor was covered with a carpet that had been Brussels once, but which was dirty, and colorless, and ragged now. There was an open cupboard with dishes, and a sort of pantry with a half glass door, through which he could see boxes and barrels, hams and dried beef, and other commissary stores. The chair matched the flinty sofa down stairs, and the only thing to attract attention in the room was a green cabinet of covered wood that stood beside the bed. While he was looking at it, the old-fashioned clock began striking twelve in a gruff and surly way, as if it did it against its better judgment. The sound woke the old lady up from her brown study – woke her up with a sharp jerk.

"It's twelve o'clock!" she exclaimed shrilly, "and I want my dinner! Call Midge!"

This was addressed to Captain Cavendish, and in so peremptory a tone that that gallant young officer looked alarmed and disconcerted.

"Call Midge, I tell you! Call her quick!" yelled Lady Leroy in an excited way. "Call Midge, will you!"

"Where is she? Where will I call her?" said the young man, in considerable consternation.

"Open that door, stupid, and call Midge!" cried the old woman, violently excited; "call her quick, I tell you!"

Thus ordered, Captain Cavendish opened the door and began calling loudly on the unknown lady bearing the name of Midge.

Out of the gloom and dismalness below a hoarse voice shouted in reply, "I'm a coming;" and Captain Cavendish went back to his seat. The voice was that of a man, and of a man with a shocking bad cold, too; and the step lumbering up stairs was a man's step; but for all that, Midge wasn't a man, but a woman. Such a woman! the Egyptian mummy in the arm-chair was a Parisian belle compared to her. Between three and four feet high, and between four and five feet broad, Midge was just able to waddle under the weight of her own fair person, and no more. A shock of hair, very like a tar-mop, stood, bristling defiance at combs and brushes, up on end, like "quills upon the fretful porcupine." To say she had no forehead, and only two pinholes for eyes, and a little round lump of flesh in lieu of a decent nose, would be doing no sort of justice to the subject; for the face, with its fat, puffy cheeks, was altogether indescribable. The costume of the lady was scant, her dress displaying to the best advantage a pair of ankles some fifteen inches in circumference, and a pair of powerful arms, bare to the shoulders, were rolled up in a cotton apron. With the airy tread of an elephant inclined to embonpoint, this sylph-like being crossed the hall and stood in the doorway awaiting orders, while Captain Cavendish stared aghast, and backed a few paces with a feeble "By Jove!"

"What do you want, ma'am?" inquired the damsel in the doorway, who might have been anywhere in the vale of years between twenty and fifty.

"Get my dinner! It's after twelve! Don't I always tell you to come and get my dinner when you hear the clock strike twelve?"

"And how do you suppose I can hear that there clock half a mile off, down in that kitchen!" retorted Midge, sharply. "I ain't jest got ears as sharp as lancets, I'd have you know. I'll take the key!"

Mrs. Leroy produced a key from a pocket somewhere about her; and Midge, rather jerking it out of her hands than otherwise, unlocked the pantry, and began busying herself among the forage there. Mrs. Leroy's keen eyes followed every motion as a cat follows its prey, and Captain Cavendish gazed too, as if fascinated, on the fairy form of Miss Midge. In passing to and fro, Midge had more than once caught his eye, and at last her feelings got the better of her, and, pausing abruptly before him, with her arms akimbo, burst out, "Look here, sir! I don't know who you are, but if you're a doggertype-man, come to take my picter, I'd jest thank you to be quick about it, and not sit there gaping like – "

"Midge!" called a ringing voice in the doorway. It was Nathalie, her face stern, her voice imperative. "Midge, how dare you speak so?"

"Oh, never mind!" said Captain Cavendish, who, in the main, was a good-natured young officer. "I deserve it, I dare say. I have made an unpardonably long call, I believe. Mrs. Leroy, I wish you good morning."

"Good morning!" said Mrs. Leroy, without looking at him, all her eyes being absorbed in the doings of Midge in the culinary department. "Natty, you let him out."

Natty did so, and they both laughed when at a safe distance.

"What did you do to Midge?" she inquired, "to tempt her to pour the vials of her wrath on your head, as she was doing when I came in."

"Staring very hard, I am afraid! Where is Barnum, that he does not get hold of that domestic monstrosity?"

"Oh, hush!" said Natty. But the warning came too late. Midge, descending the stairs, had heard the speech, and gave the speaker a look so baleful and vindictive, that, had he been troubled with those feminine miseries, nerves, might have haunted him many a day. He smiled at it then, but he remembered that look long after.

"She is acutely sensitive, dull as she seems," said Natty, with a pained look. "I am sorry she heard you."

"I am sincerely sorry for my thoughtless words, then, Miss Marsh, if they pain you."

"She saved Charley's life once," said Natty, "when he was a little fellow. I have always liked Midge since, and I believe she loves me with the faithful and blind fidelity of – but no irreverence – a dog. A slighting word rankles in her memory long."

"I shall fetch her a peace-offering the next time I come, which, by the way," he said, coolly, "is to be this evening, with your permission. Blake is to be my chaperon on the occasion."

"I regret I shall not see either of you then; but," said Natty, with a funny look, "no doubt Mrs. Leroy will be delighted to entertain you till her bedtime comes, which is precisely nine o'clock."

"Not see us? Are you – "

"I have promised to spend the evening out. When I was with the gardener a few moments ago, Miss Blake came in and asked me to spend the evening with her. Mamma and Miss Rose, the new teacher, are to be there, and I could not refuse."

"Then I shall postpone my call. Oh, there is a summons for you! How impatient your old lady is!"

They shook hands, and parted. Captain Cavendish lit a cigar, and went smoking, meditatively, down the dreary avenue, and out into the highroad. Standing near the gate was pretty Cherrie, and a refulgent smile greeted him from the rosy lips. He lifted his hat, and passed on; for standing in the doorway was the stalwart young fisherman of the beach.

"Two very pretty girls!" he mused, over his Havana; "*belle blonde, et jolie brunette*. It's extremely convenient their living so near together; one journey does for both. I think I understand now what is meant by the old adage of killing two birds with one stone."

CHAPTER VI.

AN EVENING AT MISS BLAKE'S

The establishment of Miss Joanna Blake was not on a scale of magnificence. Miss Jo's only parlor being about ten feet square, was not too grandly vast at any time, and not exactly adapted for the mirthful throng to disport themselves in. The style of furniture, too, was, some people might think, on a trifle too grand a scale for its dimensions. When Val, and his fourteen or fifteen friends aforesaid, lit their cigars, tilted back their chairs, elevated the heels of their boots on the piano or table, and all puffed away together, the parlor became rather obscure, and a stranger suddenly entering might have conceived the idea that the house was in flames; and that, perhaps, was the reason the parlor always smelt like a tobacconist's shop. Besides the parlor, Miss Jo had a dining-room and a kitchen, and two bedrooms, in the floor, though, and she did her own work.

In the parlor of No. 16 Great St. Peter's Street, the lamp was lit, the drab moreen curtains let down, and the table set for tea. There was a snowy cloth on the mahogany which hid the marks of the bootheels and the stains of the punch-tumblers, and the china cups and saucers, and the glass preserve-plates and butter-dish, and spoon-holder, not to speak of the spoons themselves, which were of real silver, and had cost a dollar a piece, and had a big capital "B" engraved thereon, glittered and flashed in the light. There was buttered toast, and hot biscuit, and pound-cake, and fruit-cake, and mince-pie, and quince-jelly, and cold chicken, and coffee and tea – all the work of Miss Jo's own fair hands; and Miss Jo herself, rather flushed with the heat, but very imposing and stately to look at in a green poplin dress – real Irish poplin at that – and a worked collar a finger-length deep, presided at the tea-tray, and dispensed the hospitalities of the festive board. Val, sitting opposite, did his part, which consisted chiefly in attempting to pass the cake-plates, and spilling their contents, of upsetting everything he touched, and looking mildly but reproachfully at the refractory object afterward. Mrs. Marsh was there, placid, and insipid, and faded, and feeble, as usual; and Miss Rose was there, pale and pretty; and Miss Clowrie was there, smiling and soft of voice, and deft of touch, and purring more than ever; and Miss Blair was there, laughing at all the funny things, and rosy as Hebe herself; and Charley Marsh was there, making a martyr of himself in the attempt to be fascinating to three young ladies at once; and everybody had eaten and drank, forced thereto by Miss Blake, until they were, as Charley forcibly put it, "a misery to themselves." So a move was made to adjourn, which just consisted of pushing their chairs about five inches from the table, not being able to push them any further, and Miss Jo began rattling among the tea-things, which she called clearing them off. Miss Catty, always sweet and obliging, and that sort of a thing, insisted on helping her, and Charley opening the upright, clattered a "Fisher's Hornpipe" in spirited style.

"Come and sing us a song, Laura – that's a good girl," he said, while Val, making an apology, slipped out. "Come and sing 'The Laird o' Cockpen.'"

Miss Blair, all smiles, took her seat, and sung not only "The Laird o' Cockpen," but a dozen others of the same kidney.

"What do you think of that?" inquired Miss Blair, triumphantly rising up, with a finishing bang. "Who says I can't sing? Now, Miss Rose, you sing, I know."

"Of course she does," said Charley. "Miss Rose, permit me to lead you to the instrument."

Miss Rose looked as though she were about to excuse herself, but that impulsive Laura Blair ran over and caught her by both hands.

"Up with you! We won't take any excuses. Charley, the young lady is at your mercy, lead her off."

Charley promptly did so. Miss Rose, smiling graciously, ran her white fingers over the yellow keys, and looked up at him.

"What shall I sing, Monsieur?"

"Anything you please, Mademoiselle. I am prepared to be delighted with 'Old Dan Tucker,' if you chose it."

The white fingers still ran idly over the keys, breaking into a plaintive prelude at last, and in a voice, "low and sweet" as Annie Laurie's own, the song began. The words were those of a gifted young American poetess; the melody, a low sweet air, in a melancholy minor key – Miss Rose's own, perhaps.

The sweet voice faltered a little toward the close; but as a buzz of congratulation ran around the circle she arose hastily. Arose to find herself face to face with two gentlemen who had entered as she began her song, and who had stood silently listening with the rest. It was Captain Cavendish and Val; and the young officer's face wore a look no one in that room had ever seen it wear before – a pale and startled look of anxiety, almost of fear – and as she faced them he backed a few paces involuntarily. Miss Rose, evidently taken completely by surprise, started visibly, growing white and red by turns. But Val was introducing them, and only he and one other present saw the changing faces of the twain. That other was Miss Catty Clowrie, whose eyes were as keen as any other cat's, and who watched them furtively, with vividest interest. Miss Catty was enough of a mathematician to know there is no effect without a cause. What, then, was the cause of this? It was easily enough answered. Captain Cavendish and Miss Rose had met before, and had known each other well, though they were now bowing as perfect strangers. The elegant officer had recovered all his high-bred sangfroid, and was smooth and bland as sweet oil; but Miss Rose's face had settled into so deadly a pallor that Mrs. Marsh, albeit not the most eagle-sighted in the world, noticed it.

"Dear me, Miss Rose, how pale you are! Aren't you well?"

Miss Rose murmured something about the heat, and subsided into the most shadowy corner she could find; and Charley created a diversion by sitting down to the piano himself and rattling off a jingling symphony.

In the midst of it carriage wheels rolled up to the door of No. 16, and the first-floor bell rang loudly a minute after.

"That's Natty," said Charley.

Miss Jo met her in the hall and escorted her to her bedroom, which was the dressing-room for the evening; and presently Miss Nathalie came in, dressed in black silk, trimmed with black lace, and all her beautiful golden hair falling in glittering ringlets over her shoulders, her cheeks glowing with the rapid ride through the night air. Brilliant she looked; and Captain Cavendish's heart, or whatever the thing is that does duty for a heart with men of the world, quickened its beating a little, as he shook hands. Nathalie kissed Miss Rose, sitting so very still in her quiet corner.

"My pale little girl! Here you sit like a white shadow, all by yourself. Charley, what on earth are you shouting there?"

"Now, Natty, it's your turn," said Miss Jo.

"Here's the cards," said Charley, laying hold of a pack. "While Natty's singing we'll play 'Muggins.' Does anybody here know 'Muggins'?"

Nobody did.

"What a disgrace! Then I'll teach you. Miss Jo, I'll sit beside you. Come along, captain; here Laura, Catty, Val, mother; Miss Rose, won't you join us?"

"Don't, Miss Rose," said Natty, who was playing a waltz. "They're nothing but a noisy set. Come here and sing with me."

Natty sung everything – Italian arias, French chansonettes, German and Scotch ballads; her full, rich soprano voice filling the room with melody, as on Sundays it filled the long cathedral aisles. Natty's voice was superb – Miss Rose listened like one entranced. So did another, Captain Cavendish, who made all sorts of blunders in the game, and could not learn it at all, for watching the two black figures at the piano – the little pale girl with the modest brown braids, and the stately heiress with

her shining yellow curls. Catty Clowrie watched them and the captain, and the game too, noting everything, and making no mistakes. A very noisy party they were, every one laughing, expostulating, and straining their voices together, and Charley winning everything right and left.

"I say, Cavendish, old fellow! what are you thinking of?" cried Val. "This is the third time I've told you to play."

Captain Cavendish started into recollection, and began playing with the wildest rapidity, utterly at random.

"Look here, Natty," called Charley, as the card-party, more noisy than ever, broke up; "I say it's not fair of you to monopolize Miss Rose all the evening. Here's Captain Cavendish has lost all his spare change, because he couldn't watch the game for watching that piano."

Miss Rose retreated hastily to her corner; Natty wheeled round on the piano-stool.

"What noise you have been making. Have you finished your game?"

Charley jingled a pocketful of pennies – Speckport pennies at that – as large as quoits.

"Yes, we have finished, for the simple reason I have cleaned the whole party completely out, and I have won small change enough to keep me in cigars for the next two months. Who's this?"

"It's somebody for me," said Natty, starting up; "that's Rob Nettleby's knock."

"Don't go yet, Natty," said Val, "it is too early."

"It is half-past ten; I should have been off half an hour ago. Miss Blake, my things, please."

Miss Jo produced a white cloud and large cloak, and Natty's move was a signal for all to depart. Catty, Laura, Miss Rose, and Mrs. Marsh's mufflings had to be got, and the little parlor was a scene of "confusion worse confounded."

Val strolled over to where Captain Cavendish was making himself useful, helping Miss Marsh on with her cloak.

"Natty, I'll go home with you, if you like," said polite Val; "it will be rather a dismal drive up there with no one but Rob Nettleby."

"Mr. Blake is forestalled," said Captain Cavendish, coolly. "Miss Marsh has accorded the honor to me."

"All right," said Val, "I'll go home with Laura Blair, then. Charley can take care of the other three, for Catty lives next door."

Lady Leroy's carryall, with Cherrie Nettleby's elder brother for driver, was waiting at the door. Good-byes were said, Natty kissed her mamma, Laura and Miss Rose, but only shook hands with Miss Clowrie. Captain Cavendish noticed the omission as he seated himself beside her, and they drove off.

"I don't like her," said Natty; "I never did, since I was a child. She was such a crafty, cunning little thing in those days – a sort of spy on the rest of us – a sort of female Uriah Heep."

"Is she so still?"

"Oh, no; she is well enough now; but old prejudices cling to one, you know. I don't like her, because I don't like her – an excellent female reason, you understand."

"Does your brother share your prejudices, Miss Marsh?" asked the young officer, with a meaning smile.

"Charley? I don't know. Why?"

"Because I fancy the young lady is rather disposed to regard him with favor. I may be mistaken, though."

Natty suddenly drew herself up.

"I think you are mistaken, Captain Cavendish. Catty Clowrie has sense, whatever else she may lack, and never would dream of so preposterous a thing."

"Pardon! it has been my mistake, then. You seem to be all old friends in this place."

"Oh," said Natty, with her gay laugh, "every one knows every one else in Speckport, and a stranger is a marked being at once. Apropos of strangers, what a perfect darling that Miss Rose is."

"How very young-ladylike! Miss Rose does not sound like a family name; has she no other cognomen?"

"Her letter to me was signed W. Rose. I don't know what the 'W' is for. I think she has the sweetest face I ever saw."

"What a lovely night it is?" was Captain Cavendish's somewhat irrelevant answer; and had the moon been shining, Natty might have seen the flush his face wore. Perhaps it was the sea-breeze, though; for it was blowing up fresh and bracing, and a host of stars spangled a sky of cloudless blue. The monotonous splash of the waves on the shore came dully booming over the rattle of their own carriage-wheels.

"What are the wild waves saying? Miss Rose and I have a bond of sympathy between us: we both love the sea. I suppose," said Natty, going off into another subject, "Mrs. Leroy will read me a lecture for my long stay, when I get back."

"Will she not be asleep?"

"Asleep? No, indeed; I believe if I staid out for a week she would never close an eye until I got back."

"Is she so very fond of you, then?"

"It is not that; though I think she is as fond of me as it is in her nature to be of anything, except," with another laugh, "eating and money. It is fear that keeps her awake; she dreads being left alone."

"Why? Not from an evil conscience, I trust."

"For shame, sir. No, she always keeps a large sum of money in her chamber – you saw that queer cabinet – well, in that; and she is terribly scared of robbers, in spite of all our bolts and bars."

"She should not keep it about her, then."

"Very true; but she will. I sleep in the room next hers, and I presume she feels my presence there a sort of safeguard against burglars. In Midge she has no confidence whatever."

"And yet I should consider Midge the greatest possible safeguard. The sight of her might scare away an army of robbers."

"Now, now!" cried Natty. "I shall not have Midge abused. She is the most faithful and trustworthy creature that ever lived."

"Perhaps so; but you will own that she is not the most lovely. When I was a boy at Eton, I used to read German legends of beautiful princesses guarded by malignant spirits, in uncouth human forms. I thought of the stories this morning when I was at Redmon."

"That's a compliment, I suppose," said Natty, "but I don't relish compliments, I can tell you, at Midge's expense. Here we are at the cottage."

"What cottage is it?" Captain Cavendish asked, forgetting suddenly that he had spent half an hour there that very morning.

"The Nettlebys. The father is our gardener; the sons, the whole family, make themselves useful about the place, all but Cherrie, who is more for ornament than use. Here we are at Redmon, and there is the light burning in Mrs. Leroy's window."

"Does it burn all night?" he asked, looking up at it.

"No; it is a beacon for me. I must go to her room the first thing now, give an account of myself, and extinguish it. Good-night; I hope you will enjoy your solitary journey back."

"I shall have pleasant thoughts of a lady fair to keep me company. Are you sure you can get in?"

"Midge is opening the door now; once more, good-night."

Waving her hand to him, she was gone while she spoke. Midge stood blinking in the doorway, holding a candle above her head, which tar-mop was now tied up in a red flannel petticoat.

She shaded her eyes with her hand, peering out at the tall figure in the loose overcoat; and when she made sure of his identity, slamming the door to with a bang that left no doubt of her feelings toward him.

"Midge, why did you do that?" Natty said, reprovingly.

"Because I never want to see his wicked face here, Miss Natty; that's why!" cried Midge, shrilly; "and I don't want to see him with you, for he is a villain, and he will turn out one, if he was ten officers, ten times over."

But Natty was flying up the polished stairs with a new happiness at her heart, singing as she went a snatch of "Love's Young Dream."

CHAPTER VII.

TOO MANY IRONS IN THE FIRE

Mr. Val Blake was a young gentleman possessing a great many admirable virtues, among others the fearful one of always saying what he thought. Another, not quite so terrible to society, was that of early rising. The sun, whenever that luminary condescended to show its face in Speckport, which wasn't so very often, never found him in bed, either winter or summer. Val might be up until two o'clock in the office, as he sometimes was in busy seasons, such as election times, but that never prevented his rising at half-past four the next morning, as bright as a new penny.

Val had escorted Miss Laura Blair home from his sister's little sociable – not only escorted her home, in fact, but had gone in with her. It was past eleven then, but Papa Blair had invited him to blow a friendly cloud, and Val had accepted the invitation. There they sat, smoking and talking politics until after one, and it was half-past when he got back to No. 16 Great St. Peter's Street; but for all that, here he was next morning at the hour of six, coming striding along the sea-shore, a pipe in his mouth, and a towel in his hand. Val had been taking a sea-bath, his invariable custom every fine morning, from the first of May to the last of October, to the alarming increase of his appetite for breakfast. There were few to be met on the sand, at that hour, except in the fishing seasons; and the fishermen not being in yet from the night's work, the shore was entirely deserted. The editor of the Speckport Gazette had not the shore all to himself after all; for, as he passed a jutting bowlder, he came in view of a fluttering figure walking slowly on before. The black dress waving in the breeze, the slender form in the long black mantle, the little straw hat, and the brown braid were familiar by this time.

Miss Rose, the pretty little school-teacher, was taking an early constitutional as well as himself, with a book for her only companion. Val's long legs were beginning to measure off the sand in vast strides, to join her, when he was forestalled most unexpectedly. Starting up from behind a tall rock, in whose shadow on the warm sand he had been lying, his hat pulled over his eyes to protect him from the sun, a gentleman came forward, lifted his hat, and accosted her. Val knew the gentleman quite as well as he did the lady, and stopped. At the sound of his voice coming so suddenly, she had recoiled with a suppressed cry, but at sight of whom it was, she stood perfectly still, as if transfixed.

There was a path up the hillside – the very path Captain Cavendish had been shown by the young Nettlebys the day before. Val turned up this, with his hands in his pockets, and his mind in a state of soliloquy.

"I'm not wanted, I expect; so I'll keep clear! There's something queer about this – they were both taken aback last night, were they not? She's a pretty little thing, and he's been in Montreal, I know; was quartered there before he was ordered to Halifax. I suppose it's the old story – he always was a flirt, and his handsome face sets the girls loony wherever he goes. Miss Rose looks sensible, but I dare say she's as bad as the rest."

Val's suspicions might have become certainty had he been listening to the conversation of the young officer and the little school-teacher; but there was no one to listen, except the waves and the wind, and the seagulls clanging over their heads.

"Winnie!" Captain Cavendish was hurriedly saying, "I knew you would be here, and I have been waiting for the past half hour. No, do not go! Pray stay and hear me out."

"I must go!" Miss Rose said, in a violent tremor and agitation. "You have nothing to say to me, Captain Cavendish. I cannot be seen here with you."

"There is no one to see us – the shore is deserted! Winnie! you must stay."

She had turned to go; but he caught her hand, his own face pale as hers had turned.

"Let go my hand, sir!" she cried, in so peremptory a tone that he dropped it at once; "every word you speak to me is an insult! Let me go!"

"Only one moment, Winnie."

Again she interposed, her eyes quite flashing.

"Have the goodness, Captain Cavendish, to be a little less familiar; to cease calling me Winnie."

"What shall I call you, then?" he said, with a strange look, "Miss Rose?"

She turned away, and made a little passionate gesture with her hand.

"You have no right to call me anything – to speak to me at all! I do not know what evil fate has driven us together here; but if you have one feeling of honor, Captain Cavendish, you will leave me in peace – you will let me alone. My lot is not such a happy one that you should wish to destroy the little comfort I have left."

Her voice choked and something fell on her book and wet it. The face of the English officer looked strangely moved for him.

"Heaven knows, Winnie, I have no desire to disturb it; I have been a villain – we both know that – but destiny was against me. I am poor; I am in debt – I was then – what could I do?"

"Will you let me go?" was her answer, without turning her averted face to him.

"Am I, then, utterly hateful to you?" he asked, with some bitterness. "You have soon forgotten the past, but I deserve it! I do not ask what chain of circumstances brought you here; I only ask, being here, that you will not reveal the story of – of what is past and gone. Will you promise me this, Winnie?"

"What right have you to ask any promise of me?" she demanded, her gentle voice full of indignation.

"Very little, I know; but still, I want the promise, Winnie, for your own sake, as well as for me."

"I am not likely to tell; the story of one's own folly is not too pleasant to repeat. And now, in return, Captain Cavendish, I want, I demand, a promise from you! We met last night as strangers, as strangers let us meet henceforth. Go your own way. I shall not molest you, never fear; and be generous enough to grant me the same favor. My life is to be one of hard work. I do not regret that. Let me find happiness in my own way, and do not disturb me any more."

"And it has all come to this!" he said, moodily, looking out over the wide sea. "Well, Winnie, let it be as you wish, only I never thought you could be so unforgiving."

"I have forgiven long ago; I want to try and forget as well!"

She walked rapidly away. Only once had she looked at him all the time – after that first glance of recognition, her face had been averted.

Captain Cavendish watched her out of sight, took two or three turns up and down the sand, and then strolled away to his lodgings. His rooms were in the Speckport House, fronting on Queen Street; and after disposing of his beefsteak and coffee with a very good appetite, he seated himself near an open window, to smoke no end of cigars and watch the passers-by.

A great many passers-by there were, and nearly all strangers to him; but presently, two young men went strutting past, arm-in-arm, and, chancing to look at his window, lifted their hats in passing. A sudden thought seemed to flash through the officer's mind as he saw them, and, seizing his hat, he started out after them. It was young McGregor and Charley Marsh, and he speedily overtook them.

"I have been sitting there for over half an hour," he said, taking Charley's other arm, familiarly, "watching society go by, and you two were the first I knew. Being tired of my own company, I thought I would join you. Have a cigar?"

"You find Speckport rather slow, I suppose?" said Charley, lighting his weed. "I should myself, if I had nothing to do."

"Oh, I am used to it; and," with a droll look, "I have discovered there is more than one pill to kill time, even in Speckport."

"Already! where do you mean?"

"Prince Street, for instance."

Charley laughed, and young McGregor smiled.

"You go there, do you? Well, I have lived all my life in Speckport, but I have never set foot over the threshold you mean, yet."

"Nor I," said young McGregor. "By George, wouldn't the old man look half-a-dozen ways at once if he thought I would dare look at it twice."

There was a smile on Captain Cavendish's face, half of amusement, half of contempt.

"I am going there now, and was about asking you to accompany me for an hour's amusement. Come on, better late than never."

Charley hesitated, coloring and laughing, but McGregor caught at the invitation at once.

"I say, Marsh, let us go! I've always wanted to go there, but never had a chance without the governor finding it out, and kicking up the deuce of a row!"

"I have the entree," said Captain Cavendish; "no one will be the wiser, and if they should, what matter? It is only to kill time, after all."

But still Charley hesitated, half laughing, half tempted, half reluctant. "That is all very well from Captain Cavendish, nephew of a baronet, and with more money than he knows what to do with; but it's of no use going to that place with empty pockets, and medical students, it is proverbial, never have anything to spare. No, I think you must hold me excused."

"Oh, confound it, Charley," exclaimed McGregor, impatiently, "I'll lend you whatever you want. Fetch him along, captain; what he says is only gammon."

"Perhaps," said the captain, with a cynical smile, "Mr. Marsh has conscientious scruples – some people have, I am told. If so –"

He did not finish the sentence, but the smile deepened. That mocking smile did more to overthrow Charley's resolution than any words could have done. He turned at once in the direction of Prince Street: "The only scruples I know anything about relate to weights and measures, and I believe these are in a dram. I have a couple of hours before dinner; so until then, I am at your service, captain."

The trio turned into Prince Street – a quiet street, with staid rows of white houses, and only one of any pretension, at one of its quiet corners. Captain Cavendish ran up the steps, with the air of a man perfectly at home, opened the outer door and rang the bell. There were few people passing, but Charley and McGregor glanced uneasily about them, before going in, and closed the street door after them with some precipitation.

Charley had told the captain he was at his service for two hours, but over four passed before the three issued forth again. Charley looked flushed, excited, and in high spirits, so did Alick McGregor; but Captain Cavendish, though laughing, was a trifle serious, too. "I had no idea you were such an adept, Mr. Marsh," he was saying, "but you must give me my revenge. Better luck next time."

"All right," said Charley, in his boyish way, "whenever you like, now that the ice is broken. What do you say, Mac?"

"I'm your man. The sooner the better, as I intend keeping on until I make a fortune on my own account. Would not the governor stare if he knew the pile I made this morning."

As they passed into Queen Street, the town clock struck three. Charley looked aghast.

"Three o'clock! I had no idea it was two. Won't they be wondering what has become of me at home. I feel as though I should like my dinner."

"Dine with me," said the captain; "I ordered dinner at half-past three, and we will be in the nick of time."

The two young Speckportians accepted the invitation, and the three went up crowded Queen Street together.

Streaming down among the crowd came Miss Cherrie Nettleby. One kid-gloved hand uplifted her silken robe, and displayed an elaborately embroidered under-skirt to the admiring beholder; the other poised a blue parasol; and, gorgeous to behold, Miss Nettleby flashed like a meteor through Speckport. All the men spoke to her – all the women turned up their fair noses and sailed by in delicate disdain. Charley blushed vividly at sight of her.

"Don't blush, Charley," drawled young McGregor, "it's too young-lady-like, but I suppose you can't help it any more than you can being in love with her. Good afternoon, Miss Cherrie."

Miss Cherrie smiled graciously, made them a bow that ballooned her silk skirt over the whole sidewalk, and sailed on. Charley looked as if he should like to follow her, but that was next to impossible, so he walked on.

"Cherrie comes out to show herself every afternoon," explained Alick; "you don't know her, Captain Cavendish, do you?"

"I have seen her before, I think. A very pretty girl."

"Charley thinks so – don't you, old fellow? Half the young men in the town are looney about her."

"I must make her acquaintance, then," said Captain Cavendish, running up the hotel steps. "The girl that all are praising is just the girl for me. This way, gentlemen."

While the triad sat over their dinner and dessert, Miss Nettleby did her shopping – that is, she chatted with the good-looking clerks over the counter, and swept past the old and ugly ones in silent contempt. Cherrie was in no hurry; she had made up her mind before starting to go through every drygoods store in Speckport, and kept her word. It was growing dusk when the dress was finally bought, cut off, and paid for – a bright pink ground, with a brighter pink sprig running through it.

"Shall we send it, Miss Nettleby?" insinuated the gentlemanly clerk, tying it up with his most fascinating smile.

"Of course," said Cherrie, shaking out her skirts with an air; "Mr. Nettleby's, Redmon Road. Good evening, Mr. Johnston."

Cherrie was soliloquizing as she gained the street.

"Now, I do wonder if he'll be home. They have tea at six, I know, and it's only a quarter to six, now. I can say I want a book, and he'll be sure to come home with me. I must see that new teacher."

Walking very fast Cherrie reached Cottage Street as the clocks of Speckport were chiming six, and the laborers' bells ringing their dismissal. Catty Clowrie was standing in her own doorway, but Cherrie did not stop to speak, only nodded, and knocked at Mrs. Marsh's door. Betsy Ann opened it and Cherrie walked into the sitting-room, where a fire burned, warm as the afternoon had been, and Mrs. Marsh, with a shawl about her and a novel in her hand, swayed to and fro in her rocking-chair. Miss Rose in the parlor was trying her new piano, which Natty had ordered that morning, and which had just come home.

"Dear me!" said Mrs. Marsh, looking up from the book and holding out her hand, "is it you, Cherrie? How do you do? Sit down."

Cherrie did so.

"I've been out all the afternoon shopping for Miss Natty, and I thought I would call here before I went home to ask you for another book. That last one was real nice."

"Of course. What were you buying for Natty?"

"Oh, it was only a calico dress for Midge; it's being sent up. Mrs. Marsh, who's that playing the piano?"

"That's Miss Rose, Natty's teacher. Have you seen her yet?"

"No. How nice she plays. Don't she?"

"She plays very well. And so you liked that last book – what's this it was – 'Regina,' wasn't it?"

"Yes," said Cherrie; "and oh, it was lovely. That earl was so nice, and I liked Regina, too. What's that you're reading?"

"This is 'Queechy' – a very good story. Did you ever read 'The Lamplighter?' I'll lend you that."

"Thank you, ma'am," said Cherrie. "It's getting late. I suppose I must go."

"Stay for tea," said Mrs. Marsh, who liked Cherrie; "it's all ready, and we are only waiting for Charley. I don't see where he's gone too; he wasn't home to dinner, either."

"I saw him this afternoon," said Cherrie; "him and young McGregor and Captain Cavendish were going up Queen Street."

"Was he? Perhaps they had dinner together there. How did you know Captain Cavendish, Cherrie?"

"I saw him at Redmon. He was up all yesterday forenoon. I guess he is after Miss Natty."

Mrs. Marsh smiled and settled her cap.

"Oh, I don't know. Take off your things, Cherrie, and stay for tea. It's of no use waiting for Charley. Betsy Ann, bring us the teapot, and call Miss Rose."

Cherrie laid aside her turban and lace, and was duly made acquainted with Miss Rose. Cherrie had heard the new teacher was pretty, but she had hoped she was not so very pretty as this, and a pang of jealousy went through her vain little heart. She had stayed for tea, hoping Charley would partake of that repast with them, and afterward escort her home; but it commenced and was over, but that young gentleman did not appear.

Miss Rose played after tea, and Cherrie lingered and lingered, under pretense of being charmed; but it got dark, and still that provoking Charley did not come. Cherrie could wait no longer, and a little cross and a good deal disappointed, she arose to go.

"You will perish in that lace mantle," said Miss Rose, kindly. "You had better wear my shawl; these spring nights are chilly."

Cherrie accepted the offer, rolled her lace up in a copy of the "Speckport Spouter," and started on her homeward journey. The street lamps were lit, the shop windows ablaze with illumination, and the cold, keen stars were cleaving sharp and chill through the blue concave above. A pale young crescent moon shone serene in their midst, but it might have been an old oil-lamp for all Miss Nettleby cared, in her present irate and vexed frame of mind. But there was balm in Gilead; a step was behind her, a man's step, firm and quick; a tall form was making rapid head-way in her direction. Cherrie looked behind, half frightened, but there was no mistaking that commanding presence, that military stride, in the handsome face with the thick black mustache, looking down upon her. Cherrie's heart was bounding, but how was he to know that.

"I knew it was you, Cherrie," he said, familiarly. "Are you not afraid to take so long and lonely a walk at this hour?"

"I couldn't help it," said Cherrie, all her good humor returning. "There was no one to come with me. I was down at Mrs. Marsh's, and Charley wasn't home."

"I don't want you to go to Mrs. Marsh's, and I am glad Charley wasn't home."

"I didn't go to see Charley," said Cherrie, coquettishly. "I wanted a book, and I wanted to see Miss Rose. Do you know where Charley is?"

"He is up at Redmon."

"And you are going there, too, I suppose."

"I am going to see you home, just now. Let me carry that parcel, Cherrie, and don't walk so fast. There's no hurry, now that I am with you. Cherrie, you looked like an angel this afternoon, in Queen Street."

As we do not generally picture angelic beings in shot silks and blue parasols, not to speak of turban hats, it is to be presumed Captain Cavendish's ideas on the subject must have been somewhat vague. Cherrie obeyed his injunction not to hurry, and it was an hour before they reached the cottage.

Captain Cavendish declined going in, but stood in the shadow of the trees, opposite the house, tattling to her for another half hour, then shook hands, and went to Lady Leroy's, where he and Charley and Mr. Blake were to spend the evening.

Val and Charley were there before him, the former having but just entered. The captain had not seen Val, but Val had seen the captain, and watched him now with a comical look, playing the devoted to Nathalie.

In Mrs. Leroy's mansion there was no lack of rooms – Natty had two to herself – sleeping-room adjoining the old lady's, and a parlor adjoining that. It was in this parlor Natty received her own friends and visitors, and there the three gentlemen were now. Natty's rooms were the only light and cheerful ones in the vast, gloomy old house, and Natty had fitted them up at her own expense. Delicate paper on the walls; pretty drawings and landscapes, in water-colors, the work of her own artistic fingers, hung around; a lounge, cushioned in chintz; an arm-chair, cushioned in the same; attractive trifles of all sorts, books, a work-table, and an old piano – made the apartment quite pleasant and home-like. The only thing it wanted was a fire; for it was essentially a bleak house, full of draughts – but a fire in any room save her own was a piece of extravagance Lady Leroy would not hear of. So the gentlemen sat in their overcoats; and Lady Leroy, who had been wheeled in, in her arm-chair, looked more like an Egyptian mummy than ever.

Midge sat behind her, on her hunkers, if you know what that is; her elbows on her knees, her chin between her hands, glaring balefully on Captain Cavendish, making himself fascinating to her young mistress. If that gallant young officer had ever heard the legend of the Evil Eye, he might have thought of it then, with Midge's malignant regards upon him.

Lady Leroy, who dearly loved gossip, was chattering like a superannuated magpie to Val and Charley. Mr. Blake was giving her what he knew of the captain's history.

"His uncle," said Val, "is a baronet – a Yorkshire baronet at that – and Captain Cavendish is next heir to the title. Meantime, he has nothing but his pay, which would be enough for any reasonable man, but isn't a tithe to him."

"And he wants a rich wife," said Lady Leroy, with a spiteful glance over at him. "Ah! I see what he's coming after. Natty!"

"Ma'am!" said Natty, looking up, and still laughing at some anecdote Captain Cavendish had been relating.

"What are you laughing at?" she said, sharply.

"Only at a story I have been listening to! Do you want anything?"

"Yes. Go into my room and see what time it is."

"We bring Time with us," said Mr. Blake, producing a watch as big as a small football; "it's five minutes to nine."

"Then it's my bedtime! Natty, go and make me my punch. Midge, wheel me in, and warm the bed. Young men, it's time for you to go."

Captain Cavendish and Val exchanged an amused glance and arose. Charley stepped forward and laid his hand on the arm-chair.

"I'll wheel you in, Mrs. Leroy. Stand clear, Midge, or the train will run into you. Go ahead, fellows, I'll be after you."

"You must not mind Mrs. Leroy's eccentricities, you know," said Natty, shaking hands shyly and wistfully at the front door with the captain. "Mr. Blake is quite used to it, and thinks nothing of it."

"Think better of me, Miss Marsh. I do not mind her brusqueness any more than he does; in proof whereof I shall speedily pay my respects at Redmon again. Good night!"

"Tell Charley to overtake us. Good night, Natty!" called Val, striding down the moon-lit avenue, and out into the road.

Captain Cavendish lit a cigar, handed another to his companion, took his arm and walked along, thinking. The Nettleby cottage was in a state of illumination, as they passed it; and the shrieks of an accordion, atrociously played, and somebody singing a totally different air, and shouts of laughter, mingling together, came noisily to their listening ears. Val nodded toward it.

"Cherrie holds a levee every night – the house is full now. Will you come in? 'All the more the merrier,' is the motto there."

"No," said the captain, shrinking fastidiously; "I have no fancy for making one in Miss Cherrie's menagerie."

"Does the objection extend to Miss Cherrie herself?" asked Mr. Blake, puffing energetically.

"What do I know of Miss Cherrie?"

"Can't say, only I should suppose you found out something while seeing her home an hour ago, and standing making love to her under the trees afterward."

Captain Cavendish took out his cigar and looked at him.

"Where were you?"

"Coming through the rye – I mean the fields. The next time you try it on, take a more secluded spot, my dear fellow, than the queen's highroad!"

"Oh, hang it!" exclaimed the young officer, impatiently; "it seems to me, Blake, you see more than you have any business to do. Suppose I did talk to the little girl. I met her on the road alone. Could I do less than escort her home?"

"Look here," said Val, "there is an old saying, 'If you have too many irons in the fire, some of them must cool.' Now, that's your case exactly. You have too many irons in the fire."

"I don't understand."

"Don't you? Here it is, then! This morning, bright and early, I saw you promenading the shore with Miss Rose. This evening, I saw you making up to Cherrie Nettleby; and, ten minutes ago, you were as sweet as sugar-candy on Natty Marsh. No man can be in love with three women at once, without getting into trouble. Therefore, take a friend's advice, and drop two of them."

"Which two?"

"That's your affair. Please yourself."

"Precisely what I mean to do; and now, Val, old boy, keep your own counsel; there's no harm done, and there will be none. A man cannot help being polite to a pretty girl – it's nature, you know; and, dear old fellow, don't see so much, if you can help it. It is rather annoying, and will do neither of us any good."

Perhaps Captain Cavendish would have been still more annoyed had he known Val was not the only witness of that little flirtation with Cherrie. As that young lady, when he left her, after watching him out of sight, was about crossing the road to go into the house, a voice suddenly called, "Hallo, Cherrie! How are you?"

Cherrie looked up greatly astonished, for the voice came from above her head. Was it the voice of a spirit? – if so, the spirit must have a shocking bad cold in the head, and inclined to over-familiarity at that. The voice came again, and still from above.

"I say, Cherrie! You put in a pretty long stretch of courting that time! I like to see you cutting out the rest of the Speckport girls, and getting that military swell all to yourself."

Cherrie beheld the speaker at last; and a very substantial spirit he was, perched up on a very high branch of a tree, his legs dangling about in the atmosphere, and his hands stuck in his trowsers.

"Lor!" cried Miss Nettleby, quite startled, "if it ain't that Bill Blair! I declare I took it for a ghost!"

Bill kicked his heels about in an ecstasy.

"Oh, crickey! Wasn't it prime! I ain't heard anything like it this month of Sundays. Can't he keep company stunning, Cherrie? I say, Charley's dished, ain't he, Cherrie?"

"How long have you been up there, you young imp?" asked Cherrie, her wrath rising.

"Long enough to hear every word of it! Don't be mad, Cherrie – Oh, no, I never mentions it, its name is never heard – honor bright, you know."

"Oh, if I had you here," cried Miss Nettleby, looking viciously up at him, "wouldn't I box your ears for you!"

"Oh, no, you wouldn't!" said Bill, swinging about. "How was I to know when I roosted up here that you were going to take a whack at courting over there. I was going over to Jim Tod's, and, feeling tired, I got up here to rest. I say, Cherrie? would you like to hear a secret?"

Cherrie would like nothing better, only before he told it, she would rather he got down. It gave her the fidgets to look at him up there. Bill got lazily down accordingly.

"Now, what's the secret?" asked the young lady.

"It's this," replied the young gentleman. "Do you know who Captain Cavendish happens to be?"

"I know he's an Englishman," said Cherrie; "all the officers are that."

"Yes; but you don't know who his folks are, I bet."

"No. Who are they? Very rich, I suppose?"

"Rich!" exclaimed Mr. Blair, contemptuously. "I say, Cherrie, you won't tell, will you? It's a secret."

"Of course not, stupid. Go on."

"Say, 'pon your word and honor."

"'Pon my word! Now go on."

"Well, then," said Bill, in a mysterious whisper, "he's – Queen Victoria's – eldest – son!"

"What!"

"I told you it was a secret, and it is. I heard him telling my boss – Blake, you know, and they didn't think I was listening. Queen Victoria, when she was a young woman, was married secretly to a duke, the Duke of Cavendish, and had one son. When her folks found it out – jimminy! wasn't there a row, and the Duke was beheaded for high treason, and she was married to Prince Albert. Now, you'll never tell, will you, Cherrie?"

"Never!" answered Cherrie, breathlessly. "Well?"

"Well, Captain Cavendish was brought up private, and is the right heir to the throne; and he expects his mother to leave it to him in her will when she dies, instead of the Prince of Wales. Now, if he marries you, Cherrie, and I am pretty sure he will before long – then you are Queen of England at once."

"Now, Billy Blair," said Cherrie, puzzled whether to believe his solemn face or not, "I do believe you're telling lies."

"It's true as preaching, I tell you. Didn't I hear 'em with my own ears. That chap's sure to be King of England some day, and when you're queen, Cherrie, send for Bill Blair to be your prime-minister. And now I must go – good night."

CHAPTER VIII. VAL TURNS MENTOR

Miss Nathalie Marsh was not the only person in existence who took a violent fancy to the pretty, pale little school-mistress, Miss Rose. Before the end of the month, Speckport pronounced her perfection; though, to do Speckport justice, it was not greatly given to overpraise. Indeed, it was a common saying with the inhabitants that Speckport would find fault with an archangel, did one of these celestial spirits think fit to alight there, and the very person most vehement in this assertion would have been the first in the backbiting. Yet Speckport praised Miss Rose, and said their Johnnys and Marys had never get on so fast in their A B abs, before, and the little ones themselves chanted her praises with all their hearts. If she appeared in the streets, they rushed headlong to meet her, sure of a smile for their pains. They brought her flowers every morning, and a reproachful look was the severest punishment known in the schoolroom. The old women dropped their courtesies; the old men pronounced her the nicest young woman they had seen for many a day, and the young men – poor things! fell in love.

There was some one else winning golden opinions, but not from all sorts of people. Only from young ladies, who were ready to tear each other's dear little eyes out, if it could have helped the matter: and the man was Captain George Cavendish. Speckport was proud to have him at its parties; for was he not to be a baronet some day? and was his family in England, their Alma Mater, not as old as the hills, and older? But he was an expensive luxury. Their daughters fell in love with him, and their sons spent their money frightfully fast with him; and all sons or daughters got in return were fascinating smiles, courtly bows, and gallant speeches. He was not a marrying man, that was evident; and yet he did seem rather serious with Nathalie Marsh. Miss Marsh was the handsomest girl in Speckport; she would be the richest, and she was for certain the only one that ever had a grandfather – that is, to speak of: in the course of nature they all had, perhaps; but the grandfathers were less than nobody – peddlers, rag-men, and fish-hawkers. But her father and grandfather had been gentlemen born; and it is well to have good blood in one's veins, even on one side. So the young ladies hated Miss Marsh, and were jealous of each other; and that high-stepping young heiress laughed in their face, and walked and talked, and rode and sailed, and sang and danced with Captain Cavendish, and triumphed over them like a princess born.

It was June, and very hot. Speckport was being grilled alive, and the dust flew in choking simooms.

Cool through all the heat, Captain Cavendish walked up Queen Street in the broiling noonday sun. Charley Marsh and Alick McGregor walked on either side of him, like that other day on which they had met Cherrie; and Charley's face was flushed and clouded, and young McGregor's drawn down to a most lugubrious length. They had just come from Prince Street – an every-day resort now; and Charley and McGregor seldom left it of that late without clouded expression. Captain Cavendish was laughing at them both.

"All in the downs!" he cried; "nonsense, Marsh. One would think you were ruined for life."

"I soon shall be at this rate. I owe you a small fortune now."

"Only fifty pounds," said the captain, as carelessly as if it were fifty pence, "a mere trifle."

"And I owe you twice as much," said young McGregor, with a sort of groan; "won't there be the dickens to pay when it's found out at home."

"Don't let them find it out, then," said Captain Cavendish, in the same off-hand manner.

"That's easily said. How am I to help it?"

"Your father has a check-book – help yourself."

"That would be killing the goose that lays the golden eggs," said Charley. "Let the old man find that out and good-bye to Alick's chance of ever seeing Prince Street again. Here are my quarters – no use asking you in to hear the row old Leach will make at my delay, I suppose."

He nodded, with his own careless laugh, and entered the office of Doctor Leach. Captain Cavendish looked at his watch.

"Half-past eleven! I believe I owe your people a call, McGregor; so *en avant*!"

Miss Jeannette McGregor was at home, and received the captain and her brother in her boudoir, a charming little room, with velvet-pile carpet, gilding, and ormolu, and medallion pictures of celebrated beauties set in the oval paneled walls. A copy of Longfellow, all gold and azure, was in her hand; she had once heard Captain Cavendish express his admiration of the great American poet; and having seen her brother and he coming up the front steps, she had arranged this little tableau expressly for the occasion. If there was one young lady in all Speckport who more than another sincerely hated Nathalie Marsh, or more sincerely admired Captain Cavendish, that one was Miss McGregor. She had long been jealous of Natty's beauty, but now she detested her with an honest earnestness that, I think, only women ever feel. She kissed her whenever they met; she invited her to every party they gave; she made calls at Redmon: and she hated her all the time, and could have seen her laid in her coffin with the greatest pleasure. It is a very common case, my brethren; Judas Iscariot was not a woman, but kisses after his fashion are very popular among the gentler sex.

"Evangeline," said Captain Cavendish, taking up her book; "I always liked that, but never half so well as since I came to Speckport."

"Because you saw Miss Marsh in the character," said Jeannette, laughing, as young ladies must, in these cases.

"Miss Marsh took her character very well, but that is not the only reason why I shall long remember that night."

A glance accompanied this speech that brought a glow to Miss McGregor's cheek and a flutter to her heart. Captain Cavendish was a clever man. He had more irons in the fire than even Val knew of, and allowed none of them to cool; and it does take a clever man to make love discreetly to half-a-dozen women at once.

"Natty looked stunning that night," put in Alick; "she is the handsomest girl in Speckport."

"You think so – we all know that," said Jeannette, flashing a spiteful glance at him; "you have been making a simpleton of yourself about her for the last two years. Why don't you propose at once."

"Because she wouldn't have me," blurted honest Alick; "I wish to heaven she would! I would soon do the popping."

"Faint heart never won fair lady; take courage and try," said the captain.

Jeannette looked at him with her most taking smile.

"Are you quite sincere in that, Captain Cavendish?"

"Quite! Why not?"

"Oh, nothing! Only rumor says you are going to carry a Bluenose bride back to Merrie England."

"Perhaps I may. You are a Bluenose, are you not, Miss Jeannette?"

Before Jeannette could answer, a sort of shout from Alick, who was at the window, took their attention. Miss McGregor looked languidly over.

"Oh, how noisy you are! What is it, pray?"

The door-bell rang loudly.

"It's Natty herself and Laura Blair. You ought to have seen Natty driving up, captain; she handles the ribbons in tiptop style, and that black mare of Blair's is no joke to drive."

Before he had finished speaking, the door opened, and a servant showed in the two young ladies. Miss Jeannette sprang up with the utmost effusion, and kissed each on both cheeks.

"You darling Natty! It is ages since you were here. Laura, how good it is of you to fetch her! for I know it must have been you."

"So it was," said Laura, shaking hands with Captain Cavendish. "I haven't time, I haven't time, is always her cry. I tell her there will be time when we are all dead – won't there, captain?"

"I presume so, unless at the loss of Miss Laura Blair the whole economy of creation blows up with a crash."

"And so you see," said Laura, sitting down on a chair, and flirting out her skirts all around her, "I drove up to Redmon this morning, with a great basketful of English strawberries the size of crab-apples, as a coaxer to Lady Leroy; and through their eloquence, and the promise of another, got her to let Natty come to town with me on business."

"On business;" said Captain Cavendish; "that means shopping."

"No, sir, it doesn't; it means something serious, and that you must take share in. You, too, Jeannette, and you, Alick, if we run short."

"Thank you," said Alick, "what is it?"

"Why, you know," began Miss Blair, with the air of one about entering upon a story, "there's that Mrs. Hill – you know her, Alick?"

"What! the wife of the pilot who was drowned in the storm last week?"

"That's the one," nodded Laura. "Well, she's poor – Oh, dear me! ever so poor, and her two children down in the measles, and herself half dead with rheumatism. I shouldn't have known a thing about it only for Miss Rose. I do declare Miss Rose is next door to an angel; she found her out, and did lots of things for her, and told me at last how poor she was, and asked me to send her some things. So then I made up this plan."

"What plan?" inquired Jeannette, as Laura stopped for want of breath, and Nathalie sat listening with an amused look.

"Oh, didn't I tell you? Why, we're going to have a play, and every one of us turn into actors; admission, half a dollar. Won't it be grand?"

"And the play is Laura's own," said Nathalie; "nothing less than the adventures of Telemachus dramatized."

"That is delightful," said Jeannette, with sparkling eyes. "Have I a part, Laura?"

"To be sure, and so has Natty, and myself, and Captain Cavendish, and Val Blake, and Charley Marsh, and as many more as we want. The new wing that pa has built to our house is just finished, and, being unfurnished, will make a lovely theater. Only a select number of tickets will be issued, and the place is sure to be crowded. The proceeds will be a little fortune to Mrs. Hill."

"You should have given Miss Rose a part, as she was the head of it," suggested Alick.

"She wouldn't have it. I tried hard enough, but she was resolute. She is such a timid little thing, you know, and she would make a lovely nymph, too."

"What part have you assigned me?" inquired Captain Cavendish.

"Being a soldier and a hero, you are Ulysses, of course; Charley is Telemachus; Val is Mentor – fancy Val with flowing white hair and beard, like an old nanny-goat. Jeannette, you will be Calypso; Natty will take Eucharis; I, Penelope. I wanted Miss Rose to be Eucharis – the part would have suited her so well."

"I don't believe it would come natural to Charley to make love to her," said Alick; "he'll have to, won't he, if he is Telemachus?"

"You must change the casts, Miss Blair," said the captain, decidedly. "If Telemachus is to do the love-making, I must be Telemachus. Mr. Marsh and I must change."

"You would make such a nice Ulysses," said Laura, meditatingly, while Nathalie blushed; "but please yourself. You must all spend the evening at our house, and when the whole *dramatis personæ* are gathered, we can discuss and settle the thing for good, fix the rehearsal and the night of the play. Don't fail to come."

"You need not be in a hurry," said Jeannette, as Laura rose and was sailing off; "stay for luncheon."

"Couldn't possibly – promised to leave Natty back safe and sound in an hour, and it only wants ten minutes now. If we fail one second, she will never get off for rehearsals. Remember, you are all engaged for this evening."

The two long parlors of the Blairs were pretty well filled that night with young ladies and gentlemen, and a very gay party they were. There was so much laughing and chaffing over it, that it was some trouble to settle preliminaries; but Laura was intensely in earnest, and could see nothing to laugh at, and Captain Cavendish coming gallantly to her aid, matters were arranged at last. Charley Marsh, who was a Rubens on a small scale, undertook to paint the scenery, superintend the carpenters and the machinery of the stage. The young ladies arranged the costumes; everybody got their parts in MS.; rehearsals were appointed, and some time before midnight the amateurs dispersed. In the June moonlight, the English officer drove Nathalie home, and it was not all theatricals they talked by the way. There was a good deal of trouble about the thing yet, now that it was finally started. In the first place, there was that tiresome Lady Leroy, who made a row every time Natty went to rehearsal, and required lots of strawberries, and jellies, and bottles of old wine, to bring her to reason. Then they bungled so in their parts, and wanted so much prompting, and Miss Elvira Tod, sister to the Rev. Augustus, who was tall and prim, and played Minerva, objected to wearing a tin shield, and wanted to keep on her hoops.

"Now, Miss Tod," expostulated Laura, ready to cry, "you know the goddess Minerva always is painted with a breastplate, to conceal her want of a bust; and as for your skeleton, you would be a nice goddess with hoops – wouldn't you?"

On the whole, things progressed as favorably as could be expected; and the eventful night was announced, tickets were issued and eagerly bought, and Speckport was on the qui vive for the great event. When the appointed night came, the impromptu theater was crowded at an early hour, and with nothing but the upper-crust, either; the military band, which formed the orchestra, played the "Nymph's Dance" ravishingly, and amid a breathless hush, the curtain rose.

Mrs. Hill, the destitute widow, was made happy next day by some twenty pounds, the produce of the play, and Speckport could talk of nothing else for a week. The Speckport Spouter even went into personalities. "Miss Nathalie Marsh," that journal said, "as Eucharis, astonished every one. The fire, the energy, the pathos of her acting could not be surpassed by the greatest professionals of the day. Captain Cavendish, as the hero, performed his part to the life – it seemed more like reality than mere acting; and Mr. C. Marsh as Ulysses, and Miss Laura Blair as Penelope, were also excellent."

On the morning after this laudatory notice appeared in the Spouter, a young gentleman, one of the employees of that office, walked slowly along Queen Street, his hands thrust deep in his coat-pockets, his cap very much on one side of his head, and his face lengthened to preternatural solemnity. The young gentleman was Bill Blair; and that he had something on his mind was evident, for his countenance was seriously, not to say dismally, meditative. Reaching the office, he walked deliberately up-stairs, entered the outer room, swung himself nimbly up on the handiest stool, and began flinging his legs about, without the ceremony of removing his cap. Mr. Clowrie, the only other occupant of the apartment, looked at him over his desk with a frown.

"I thought Mr. Blake told you to be here at half-past six this morning, and now it's a quarter past eight," began Mr. Clowrie; "if I was Blake, I would turn you out of the office."

"But you ain't Blake!" retorted Master Blair; "so don't ruffle your fine feathers for nothing, Jakey! If you had been up till half-past one this morning, perhaps you wouldn't be any spryer than I am."

"What kept you up till that time? Some devilment, I'll be bound."

"No, it wasn't," said Bill; "our folks, the whole crowd but me, streaked off to the theatre; so as I couldn't see the fun of playing Robinson Crusoe at home, I just went over to Jim Tod's to have

a game of all-fours, and a look at the pups, and they're growing lovely. I didn't mean to stay long, but some of the rest of the fellows were there, and Jim had a box of cigars, and a bottle of sherry he had cribbaged out of the sideboard, and it was all so jolly I'll be blowed if it didn't strike twelve before we knew where we were."

"Well, now you've come, go to work, or there will be a precious row when the boss comes."

"Blake won't row," said Bill, nodding mysteriously; "but I know where there will be one before long. Cracky, won't there be a flare-up when it's found out!"

Mr. Clowrie laid down his pen and looked up.

"When what's found out?"

"That's my secret," replied Bill, with a perfect shower of mysterious nods. "I saw the rummiest go last night when I was coming home ever you heard tell of."

"I don't believe it," said Jake, disdainfully; "you're always finding mare's-nests, and a lot they come to when all's done!"

"Jake, look here! you won't tell, will you?"

"Bosh! go to work. What should I tell for?"

"Well, then," said Bill, lowering his voice, "I've found out who stole that hundred pounds from old McGregor."

"What?"

"You remember that hundred pounds old McGregor had stole a week ago, and that went so mysteriously? Well, I've found out who took it."

"You have!" cried Mr. Clowrie, excited; "why, there's a reward of fifty dollars out for the thief!"

Bill nodded again.

"I know it, but I ain't going to apply. You won't tell – honor bright!"

"I won't tell! who was it?"

"Don't faint if you can! It was his own son, Alick!"

"Wha-a-t!"

"I tell you it was; I heard him say so myself, last night."

Mr. Clowrie sat thunderstruck, staring. Master Blair went on:

"Charley Marsh is in the mess too – I don't mean about the money-stealing, mind! but him and Sandy McGregor are galloping the road to ruin at a 2.40 rate!"

"What do you mean?"

Bill looked round as if fearful the very walls would hear him.

"They go to Prince Street, Jake! I met them coming out of a certain house there past twelve o'clock last night!"

"By ginger!" exclaimed Mr. Clowrie, aghast. "You never mean to say young McGregor stole the money to gam – "

"Hu-sh-sh! I wouldn't have it found out through me for the world. It's all the work of that dandified officer; he was with them in a long overcoat, but I knew him the minute I clapped eyes on him. They were talking about the bank-note, and the captain was laughing and smoking away as jolly as you please; but I saw Charley's face as they passed a gas-lamp, and I swear he was as white as a ghost!"

"I suppose he'd been losing."

"I reckon so, and Alick didn't look much better. That captain's a regular scape – he's after Cherrie Nettleby as regular as clock-work now."

Mr. Clowrie scowled suddenly, but Bill clattered on:

"I saw him twice last night; once before I met them in Prince Street. It was about nine, and Cherrie was with him. There the two of them were standing, like Paul and Virginny, at the gate, making love like sixty! That Cherrie's the precioussest fool that ever drew breath, I do think. Why don't you – "

He stopped short in consternation, for the door swung open and Val strode in, and, as he had done once before, collared him. With the other hand he turned the key in the lock to keep out intruders, and Bill fairly quaked, for Val's face looked ominous.

"Now, look you, Master Bill Blair," he began, in a tone exceedingly in earnest, "I have been listening out there for some time, and I have just got this to say to you: if ever I find you repeat it to mortal man or woman, as long as you live, I'll break every bone in your body! Do you hear that?"

Yes, Master Bill heard, and jerked himself free with a very red and sulky face.

"Don't forget now!" reiterated Val; "I'll thrash you within an inch of your life, as sure as your name's Bill! And you, Clowrie, if you want to keep yourself out of trouble, take my advice and say nothing about it. Now get to work, you, sir, and no more gossiping."

Val strode off to his own room, and sat down to look over a file of exchanges, and read his letters. But he could neither read nor do anything else with comfort this morning. The boy's gossip had disturbed him more than he would have owned; and at last, in desperation, he pitched all from him, seized his hat, and went out.

"I played Mentor the other night on the stage. I think I'll try it in real life. Confound that Cavendish; why can't he let the boy alone? I don't mind McGregor; he's only a noodle at best, and the old man can afford to lose the money; but Charley's another story! That Cherrie, too! The fellow's a scoundrel, and she's a – ! Oh, here she comes!"

Sure enough, tripping along, her blue parasol up, her turban on, a little white lace veil down, a black silk mantle flapping in the breeze, a buff calico morning-wrapper, with a perfect hailstorm of white buttons all over it, sweeping the dust, came Miss Nettleby herself, arrayed as usual for conquest. The incessant smile, ever parting her rosy lips, greeted Val. Cherrie always kept a large assortment of different quality on hand for different gentlemen. Val greeted her and turned.

"Where are you going, Cherrie?"

"Down to Mrs. Marsh's. I've got a book of hers to return. How's Miss Jo?"

"She's well. I'll walk with you, Cherrie; I have something to say to you."

His tone was so serious that Cherrie stared.

"Lord, Mr. Blake! what is it?"

"Let us go down this street – it is quiet. Cherrie, does Captain Cavendish go to see you every evening in the week?"

"Gracious me, Mr. Blake!" giggled Cherrie, "what a question!"

"Answer it, Cherrie."

"Now, Mr. Blake, I never! if you ain't the oddest man! I shan't tell you a thing about it!"

"He was with you last night, was he not?"

"It's none of your business!" said polite Cherrie; "he has as much right to be with me as any one else, I hope. You come yourself sometimes, for that matter."

"Yes; but I don't make love to you, you know."

"It wouldn't be any use for you if you did," said Miss Cherrie, bridling.

"It's a different case altogether," said Val; "you and I are old friends – he is a stranger."

"He's not! I've known him more than five weeks! If you only came to preach, Mr. Blake, I guess you had better go back, and I'll find Mrs. Marsh's alone."

"Cherrie, I want to warn you – the less you have to do with Captain Cavendish the better. People are talking about you now."

"Let 'em talk," retorted Miss Nettleby, loftily; "when Speckport stops talking the world will come to an end. I'll just do as I please, and talk to whom I like; and if everybody minded their own business, it would be better for some folks."

With which the young lady swept away majestically, leaving Mr. Blake to turn back or follow if he pleased. He chose the former, and walked along to Dr. Leach's office. Charley was standing, looking out of the window, and whistling a tune.

"Hallo, Val!" was his greeting, "what brings you here? Want a tooth pulled, or a little bleeding, or a trifle of physic of any kind? Happy to serve you in the absence of the doctor."

"No, I don't want any physic, but I have come to give you a dose. Are you alone?"

"Quite. Leach went to visit a patient ten minutes ago. What's the matter?"

"Everything's the matter! What's this I hear you have been about lately?"

"Turning actor – do you mean that? Much obliged to you, Val, for the puff you gave me in yesterday's Spouter."

"No, sir, I don't mean that! Isn't Alick McGregor a nice fellow to rob his own father and you his aider and abettor? Fine doings that!"

Charley fairly bounded.

"Oh, the d – ! Where did you find that out?"

"Never mind, I have found it out; that is enough!"

"Is it known? Who else knows it?"

"Two that are not quite so safe to keep it as I am! No, I won't tell you who they are. Charley, what are you coming to?"

"The gallows, I suppose; but I had no hand in that. If McGregor took the money, it was his own doings, and his father could spare it."

"What did he want of it?"

"Am I his keeper? How should I know?"

"You do know! When did you turn gambler, Charley?"

Charley turned round, his face white.

"You know that, too?"

"I do! McGregor stole the hundred pounds to pay a gambling-debt to Captain Cavendish. And you – where does your money come from, Marsh?"

"I don't steal it," said Charley, turning from pale to red; "be sure of that!"

"Come, my boy, don't be angry. You know I don't deserve that speech; but surely, Charley, this sort of thing should not go on. Where will it end?"

"Where, indeed?" said Charley, gloomily. "Val, I wish you would tell me how you found this out?"

"Pshaw! do you really expect to go in and out of the most notorious gambling-house in Speckport, at all hours of the day and night, and it not be discovered? You ought to know this place better."

"That is true; but how did that infernal business of McGregor's leak out? No one knew it but ourselves."

"It has leaked out, and is known to two persons, who may blow on you all at any moment."

"And I wanted to keep it from Natty. Val, old fellow, do tell me who they are."

"You know I won't; it would do no good. Charley, I wish you would stop in time."

"Stuff! it's no hanging matter after all. Dozens go there as well as I!"

"You won't give it up, then?"

"Not until I win back what I have lost. My coffers are not so full that I can lose without trying to win it back. Don't talk to me, Blake, it's of no use; win I must, there is no alternative. Won't Alick go into white horror when he finds the murder's out?"

Val turned to leave.

"You're going, are you?" said Charley. "I need hardly tell you to keep dark about this; it will only mar, not mend matters, to let it get wind. Don't look so solemn, old boy, all's not lost that's in danger."

Val said nothing – what was the use? He passed out and went home to his domain.

"I knew how it would be," he said to himself, going along; "but I have done my duty, and that's satisfactory. I'll keep my eye on you, Captain Cavendish, and if ever I get a chance, won't I play you a good turn for this!"

CHAPTER IX. WOODED AND WON

"And if ever I find her going prancing round with him any more," said Lady Leroy, clawing the air viciously with her skinny fingers, "or letting him come home with her again, I'll turn her out of doors, I will, as sure as your name's Midge."

"Which it isn't," said Midge; "for I was christened Prisciller. And as for turning her out, you know right well, ma'am, you can never get along without her, so where's the good of your gabbing."

The dialogue between mistress and maid took place, of course, in the former's room, which she rarely left. Midge was preparing her ladyship's dinner, all the cooking being done in the chamber, and all the edibles being kept under lock and key, and doled out in ounces. Midge and Lady Leroy fought regular pitched battles every day over the stinted allowance awarded her; and Natty had to come to the rescue by purchasing, from her own private purse, the wherewithal to satisfy Midge. No other servant would have lived at Redmon on the penurious wages the old lady grumbly gave, probably on no wages at all, considering the loneliness of the place, its crabbed and miserly mistress, and hard work; but Midge stayed through her love of Nathalie, and contradicted and bickered with Lady Leroy from morning till night. In the days when the Marshes were rich and prosperous, Midge had been a hanger on of the household, doing pretty much as she pleased, and coming and going, and working or loafing as she liked. She had saved Charley's life once, nearly at the risk of her own, and loved him and Nathalie with a depth of self-sacrificing and jealous tenderness few would have given her credit for. Nathalie was good to her always, considerate and kind, putting up with her humor and querulousness, and ready to shield her from slights at any time. Midge scolded the young lady roundly on many an occasion, and Natty took it good-humoredly always. She was out now, and Lady Leroy's wrath had been kindled by something that had happened the preceding night, and which she had found out through Cherrie Nettleby, for Midge told no tales. Captain Cavendish, contrary to her express orders, had seen Nathalie home from a little sociable at her mother's. Val, Miss Jo, Laura Blair, Catty Clowrie, Jeannette and Alick McGregor, Charley, and Captain Cavendish only had been there; for some sick pauper had sent for Miss Rose, and she had gone, glad to escape. Cherrie had seen the captain and Miss Marsh pass the cottage, and, spiteful and jealous, had tattled next morning. Lady Leroy disliked Captain Cavendish – she did most people for that matter, but she honored him with especial aversion. Nathalie had gone off after breakfast to Speckport, to attend to her music-pupils and visit the school. Cherrie had come in afterward to retail the town-gossip, and had but just departed; and now the old lady was raging to Midge.

"I tell you, Midge, I don't like him!" she shrilly cried, "I don't like him, and I don't want him coming here."

"No more don't I," retorted Midge, "I'd go to his hanging with the greatest pleasure; but where's the odds? He don't care whether we like him or not; he only laughs and jeers at both of us, so long as she does."

"It ain't her he likes," said Lady Leroy, "it's my money, my money, that I've pinched and spared to save, and that he thinks to squander. But I'll be a match for him, and for her too, the ungrateful minx, if she thinks to play upon me."

"She ain't an ungrateful minx, ma'am!" sharply contradicted Midge; "she's better nor ever you were or ever will be! She lives shut up here from one week's end to t'other, slavin' herself for you, and much she gets for it! She can do what she likes with the money when you're dead!"

Lady Leroy's face turned so horribly ghastly at this speech that it was quite dreadful to look at. The thought of death was her nightmare, her daily horror. She never thought of it at all if she could,

and thus forcibly reminded, her features worked for a moment as if she had a fit. Even Midge grew a little scared at what she had done.

"There, ma'am!" she cried, "you needn't go into fits about it. My speaking of it won't make you die any sooner. I dessay you're good for twenty years yet, if your appetite holds out!"

The old woman's livid face grew a shade less deathlike.

"Do you think so, Midge? Do you think so?"

"Oh, I think so fast enough! Folks like you always is sure to spin out till everybody's tired to death of 'em. Here's your dinner ready now; so swallow it, and save your breath for that!"

The sight of her meals always had an inspiring effect on the mistress of Redmon, and Natty was for the moment forgotten. Perhaps it might have spoiled her appetite a little had she seen the way that young lady was returning home, and in what company. Not walking discreetly along Redmon road, and not alone. In the pretty boat, all white and gold, with the name "Nathalie" in golden letters – the boat that had been poor Alick McGregor's gift – a merry little party were skimming over the sunlit waves, reaching Redmon by sea instead of land. The snow-white sail was set, and Nathalie Marsh was steering; the sea-wind blowing about her tangled yellow curls, fluttering the azure ribbons of her pretty hat, deepening the roses in her cheeks, and brightening the starry eyes. She sang as she steered, "Over the Sea in my Fairy Bark," and the melodious voice rang sweetly out over the wide sea. Near her Captain Cavendish lounged over the side, watching the ripples as they flew along in the teeth of the breeze, and looking perfectly content to stay there forever. Beside him sat Laura Blair, and, near her, Miss Jo Blake. Laura was often with Miss Jo, whom she liked, partly for her own sake – for she was the best-natured old maid that ever petted a cat – and partly for her brother's, whom Miss Blair considered but one remove from an angel.

The quartet had "met by chance, the usual way," and Nathalie had invited him to have a sail. She had rowed herself to town in her batteau, but the sail back was inconceivably pleasanter. As the batteau ran up on the beach below Redmon, Natty did not ask them to the house, but no one was surprised at that. They accompanied her to the gate, Captain Cavendish slinging the light oars over his shoulder.

"And you will be at the picnic day after to-morrow, without fail," Laura was saying to Nathalie.

"Can't promise," replied Natty. "Mrs. Leroy may take it into her head to refuse permission, and I have been out a great deal lately."

"I don't care," said Laura, "you must come! If Mrs. Leroy turns inexorable, I will go up with a basket of oranges and let them plead in your behalf. You see, captain, we have to 'stay that old lady with flagons and comfort her with apples' when we want Natty very badly, and she turns refractory."

"All the oranges in Seville would not be thrown away in such a cause. By all means, Miss Marsh, come to the picnic."

Speckport was famous for its picnics, and excursions by land and water. This one was the first of the season, and was to be held on Lady Leroy's grounds – a pretty high price having to be paid for the privilege.

"There won't be any fun without you, Natty," said Miss Jo; "I won't hear of your absenting yourself at all. Is Miss Rose to have a holiday on the occasion?"

"I offered her one, but she declined; she did not care for going, she said."

"What a singular girl she is!" said Laura, thoughtfully; "she seems to care very little for pleasure of any kind for herself; but the poor of Speckport look upon her as an angel sent down expressly to write their letters, look after them in sickness, make them beef-tea, and teach their children for nothing. I wish you would make her go to the picnic, Natty, and not let her mope herself to death, drudging in that horrid school-room."

Captain George Cavendish, leaning on the oars he had been carrying, seemed not to be listening. He was looking dreamily before him, seeing neither the broad green fields with the summer sunlight sleeping in sheets of gold upon them, nor the white, winding, dusty highroad, nor the ceaseless sea,

spreading away and away until it kissed the horizon-sky, nor tall Miss Blake, nor even the two pretty girls who talked. It had all faded from before him; and he was many a mile away in a strange, foreign-looking city, with narrow, crooked streets, filled with foreign-looking men and women, and priests in long black soutanes, and queer hats, and black nuns and gray nuns, and Notre Dame nuns and Sisters of Charity and Mercy, all talking in French, and looking at each other with dark Canadian eyes. He was back in Montreal, he saw the Champ-de-Mars, the Place d'Arme, the great convents, the innumerable churches with their tall crosses pointing to the heaven we are all trying to reach, and he saw himself beside one – fairer in his eyes than all the dusky Canadian beauties in the world, with their purple-black hair and great flashing black eyes. "Winnie! Winnie! Winnie!" his false heart was passionately crying, as that old time came back, and golden-haired, violet-eyed Nathalie Marsh was no more to him than if she had been but the fantasy of a dream. He had flirted and played the lover to scores; played it so long and so often that it had become second nature, as necessary as the air he breathed; but he had only loved one, and he seemed in a fair way of going on to the end. He had been a traitor, but he could not forget. The girl he had jilted was avenged if she wished for vengeance: no pang he had ever given could be keener than what he felt himself.

A laugh aroused him, a merry, girlish laugh. He awoke from his dream with a start, and found them all looking at him.

"So you have awoke at last," laughed Laura. "Three times have I told you we were going, and there you stood, staring at empty space, and paying no more attention than if you were stone-deaf. Pray, Captain Cavendish, where were you just now?"

Before he could answer, the gate against which Nathalie leaned was pushed violently open, and the thick dwarfish figure and unlovely face of Midge was thrust out – not made more prepossessing by an ugly scowl.

"Miss Natty," she shrilly cried, "I want to know if you mean to stand here all day long? It's past two now, and when you go up to the house, perhaps the old woman won't give it you – and serve you right, too!" added Miss Midge, sotto voce.

"So late!" Nathalie cried, in alarm. "I had no idea of it! Good-bye, Miss Jo; good-bye, Laura. I must go!"

She had smiled and nodded her farewell to the captain, and was off like a dart. Midge slammed the gate in their faces, and went sulkily after.

In considerable consternation, Nathalie ran up-stairs and into the awful presence of the mistress of the house. She knew well she was in for a scolding, and was bracing herself to meet it.

Lady Leroy had never been so furiously angry since the first day the young lady had entered beneath her roof, and the storm burst before Miss Marsh was fairly in the room. Such a tempest of angry words, such a tornado of scolding, such a wrathful outbreak of old woman's fury, it has been the ill-fortune of but few to hear. Nathalie bore it like a heroine, without flinching and without retreat, though her cheeks were scarlet, and her blue eyes flashing fire. She had clinched one little hand involuntarily, and set her teeth, and compressed her lips, as if to force herself not to fling back the old woman's rage in her face; but the struggle was hard. Passionate and proud Nathalie's nature was, but the fiery steeds of pride and passion she had been taught, long ago, at her father's knee, to rein with the curb of patience. But I am afraid it was not this Christian motive that held her silent always under Lady Leroy's unreasonable abuse. Ambition was the girl's ruling passion. With her whole heart and soul she longed for wealth and power, and the first of these priceless blessings, in whose train the second followed, could only be obtained through this vituperative old bel-dame. If Nathalie let nature and passion have their way, and flung back fury for fury, she would find herself incontinently turned out of doors, and back again, probably, the day after, in that odious school-room, wearing out her heart, and going mad slowly with the dull drudgery of a poor teacher's life. This motive in itself was strong enough, but of late days another and a stronger had been added. If she were Miss Marsh, the school-mistress, Captain Cavendish, the heir of a baronet, would doubtless admire, and

– have nothing whatever to say to her; but Miss Marsh, the heiress of Redmon and of Lady Leroy's thousands, was quite another thing. He was poor now, comparatively speaking; she knew that – how sweet it would be to lay a fortune at the feet of the man she loved! Some day in the bright future he would lay a title at her fair feet in return, and all her dreams of love, and power, and greatness, would be more than realized. Not that Nathalie for one instant fancied George Cavendish sought her for her fortune – she would have flung back such a suspicion furiously in the face of the profferer – but she knew enough of the fitness of things to be aware that, however much he might secretly adore her rose-hued cheeks, golden hair, and violet eyes, he could never marry a portionless bride. On this tiger-cat old Tartar, then, all these sweet dreams depended for their fruition; and she must pocket her pride, and eat humble pie, and make no wry faces over that unpalatable pastry. She must be patient and long-suffering now, that she might reign like a princess royal hereafter; so while Lady Leroy stormed and poured no end of vials of wrath on her ward's unfortunate head, that young person only shut her rosy lips the harder, and bated her breath not to reply. We are so strong to conquer ourselves, you see, when pounds, shillings, and pence are concerned, and so weak and cowardly to obey the commands of One who was led "as a lamb to the slaughter, and who opened not his mouth." So Nathalie stood, breathing quick, and only holding herself from flying at her tormentress by main force, and Lady Leroy stormed on until forced to stop from want of breath.

"And now, Miss," she wound up, her little eyes glaring on the young lady, "I should like to know what you've got to say for yourself."

"I have nothing to say," replied Nathalie, speaking for the first time.

"Oh, I dare say not! All I say goes in one ear and out t'other, doesn't it, now? Ain't you ashamed of yourself, you minx?"

"No!" quietly said Nathalie.

Mrs. Leroy glared upon her with a look of fury, horribly revolting in that old and wrinkled face.

"Do you mean to say you'll ever do it again? Do you mean to say you'll go with that man any more? Do you mean to say you defy and disobey me? Tell me!" cried Lady Leroy, clawing the air as if she were clawing the eyes out of Captain Cavendish's handsome head, "tell me if you mean to do this!"

"Yes!" was the fiery answer flaming in the girl's crimson cheeks and flashing eyes, "I defy you to the death!" But prudence sidled up to her and whispered, "Heiress of Redmon, remember what you risk!" and so – oh, that I should have to tell it! – Nathalie Marsh smoothed her contracted brows, veiled the angry brightness of her blue eyes under their sweeping lashes, and steadily said:

"Mrs. Leroy, you know I have no wish to willfully defy or disobey you. I should be sorry to be anything but true and dutiful to you, and I am not conscious of being anything else now."

"You are – you know you are!" the old woman passionately cried. "You know I hate this man – this spendthrift, this fortune-seeker, this smooth-spoken, false-hearted hypocrite! Give up this man – promise me never to speak to him again, and then I will believe you!"

Nathalie stood silent.

"Promise," shrilly screamed Lady Leroy, "promise or else –"

She stopped short, but the white rage in her distorted face finished the sentence with emphasis.

"I will promise you one thing," said Nathalie, turning pale and cold, "that he shall not come to Redmon any more. You accuse him unjustly, Mrs. Leroy – he is none of the things you say. Do not ask me to promise anything else – I cannot do it!"

What Lady Leroy would have said to this Nathalie never knew; for at that moment there came a loud knock at the front door, and Miss Marsh, only too glad to escape, flew down to answer it.

The alarm at the outer door proved to come from Charley Marsh; and Nathalie stared, as she saw how pale and haggard he looked – so unlike her bright-faced brother.

"What ails you, Charley?" she anxiously asked. "Are you sick?"

"Sick? No! Why should I be sick?"

"You are as pale and worn-looking as if you had been ill for a month. Something has gone wrong."

"I have been up all night," said Charley, omitting, however, to add, playing billiards. "That's why. Nathalie," hurriedly and nervously, "have you any money? I can't ask before that old virago up-stairs."

"Money! Yes, I have some. Do you want it?"

"I want you to lend me as much as you can, for a short time. There!" he said, impatiently, "don't begin asking questions, Natty. I want it particularly, and I will pay you back as soon as I can. How much have you got?"

"I have nearly twenty pounds, more or less. Will that do?"

"It will help. Don't say anything about it, Natty, like a good girl. Who's in?"

"No one but Mrs. Leroy. Won't you come up?"

"I must, I suppose. Get the money while I am talking to her, and give it to me as I go out. What a solemn face you have got, Natty!"

He laughed as he spoke – Charley's careless, boyish laugh, but Nathalie only sighed as they ascended the stairs together.

"Mrs. Leroy has been scolding ever since I came from town. If ever a fortune was dearly bought, Charley, mine will be."

"Paying too dear for your whistle – eh? Never mind, Natty! it can't last forever, and neither can Lady Leroy."

All the shadow had gone from Charley's brow, and the change was magical. Whether it was the promise of the money, or his natural elasticity of spirit rebounding, he knew best; but certainly when he shook hands with the mistress of the domain, the sunshine outside was not brighter than his handsome face. Mrs. Leroy rather liked Charley, which is saying folios in the young man's favor, considering how few that cantankerous old cat admitted to her favor – but every one liked Charley Marsh.

While Nathalie went to her own room for the money, Nathalie's brother was holding Mrs. Leroy spell-bound with his brilliant flow of conversation. All the gossip and scandal of Speckport was retailed – business, pleasure, fashion, and fights, related with appetizing gusto; and where the reality fell short, Mr. Marsh called upon his lively imagination for a few extra facts. The forthcoming picnic and its delights were discussed, and Charley advised her to strain a point and be present.

"Midge can wheel you about the field, you know, in your chair," said Charley. "You won't take cold – the day's sure to be delightful, and I know every one will enjoy themselves ten times better for having you there. You had better come. Val Blake and I will carry you down stairs!"

To the astonishment of Nathalie, Mrs. Leroy assented readily to the odd proposition; and Charley departed, having charmed the old lady into utter forgetfulness, for the time being, of her antipathy to Captain Cavendish. Speckport could talk of nothing for a week beforehand but the picnic – the first of the season. All Speckport was going, young and old, rich and poor. Admission, twenty-five cents; children, half price.

The Redmon grounds, where the picnic was to be held, were extensive and beautiful. Broad velvety fields, green lanes, among miniature forests of fragrant cedar and spruce, and all sloping down to the smooth, white sands of the beach, with the gray sea tramping dully in, and the salt spray dashing up in your face. And "I hope it won't be foggy! I do hope it won't be foggy!" was the burden of every one's cry; the fog generally choosing to step in and stay a week or two, whenever Speckport proposed a picnic. How many blinds were drawn aside in the gray and dismal dawn of that eventful morning, and how many eager pairs of eyes, shaded by night-cap borders, turned anxiously heavenward; and how delightedly they were drawn in again! for, wonderful to tell, the sky was blue and without a cloud, and the sun, rising in a canopy of rose and amber, promised all beholders a day of unrelenting sunshine.

Before nine o'clock the Redmon road was alive with people – all in gorgeous array. Before ten, the droves of men, women, and children increased fourfold, and the dust was something awful. The sun fairly blazed in the sky; had it ever shone so dazzlingly before, or was there ever so brilliantly blue a sky, or such heaps and heaps of billows of snowy white, floating through it? Before eleven, that boiling seaside sun would have grilled you alive only for the strong sea-breeze, heaven-sent, sweeping up from the bay. Through fiery heat, and choking dust, the cry was "still they come," and Redmon grounds swarmed with people, as the fields of Egypt once swarmed with locust. A great arch of evergreens surmounted the entrance-gate, and the Union Jack floated loyally over it in the morning sunshine. The clanging of the band and the roll of the drum greeted your delighted ears the moment you entered the fairy arch, and you found yourself lost and bewildered in a sea of people you never saw before. The swings were flying with dizzying velocity, young belles went up until the toes of their gaiters nearly touched the firmament, and your head reeled to look at them. Some two or three hundred ladies and gentlemen were tripping the light fantastic toe to the inspiring music of a set of Irish quadrilles; and some eight hundred spectators were gathered in tremendous circles about them, looking on, gazing as if never in all their lives had so glorious and wonderful a vision as their fellow-sinners jiggling up and down, dazzled their enchanted eyes. The refreshment tents were in such a crowded and jammed and suffocating state, that you could see the steam ascending from them as from an escape-valve; and the fair ones behind the tables, bewildered by two dozen clamorous voices, demanding the attention of each one at once, passed pies and tarts, and sandwiches and soda water, and coffee and cakes frantically and at random, and let little boys feed in corners unnoticed, and were altogether reduced to a state of utter imbecility by the necessity of doing half a dozen things at one and the same time. Pink and blue, and yellow and green ribbons fluttered, and silks and muslins and bareges trailed the grass and got torn off the waist by masculine bootheels; and the picnic was too delightful for description, and, over all, the fiery noonday July sun blazed like a wheel of fire, and the sea wind swept up fresh and delicious, and the waves sang their old song down on the shore, and no one listened to their mystic music or wondered, like poor little Paul Dombey, what they were saying.

No one! Yes, there was one sitting on a green bank, all alone, who had been very busy all morning until now, arranging tables and waiting on hungry pleasure-seekers, making little boys and girls behave themselves, and swinging little people who could get no one else to attend them. The breeze that set the tall reeds and fern at fandangoing waved her black barege dress, and flung back the little black lace veil falling from her hat. Tired and hot, she had wandered here to listen to the waves and to the tumult behind her.

What were the thoughts of the man who leaned against a tall tamarack tree and watched the reclining figure as a cat does a mouse? There are some souls so dark that all the beauty of earth and heaven are as blank pages to them. They see without comprehending, without one feeling of thoughtfulness for all the glory around them. Surely it were better for such to have been born blind. This man saw no wide sea spreading before him, glittering as if sown with stars. There was more to him worth watching in one flutter of that thin black dress on the bank than in all the world beside, and he stood and watched with his eyes half closed, waiting until she should see him.

He had not to wait long. Some prescience that something out of harmony with the scene was near, made her restless. She rose up on her elbow, and looked round – a second after, her face flushed, she was up off the grass and on her feet. The man lifted his hat and advanced.

"Pardon my intrusion, Winnie – Miss Rose, and – no, no – I beg you will not go!"

She had made to turn away, but he himself interposed – something of agitation in his manner, and it was but rarely, indeed. Captain George Cavendish allowed himself to be agitated. She stopped gently enough, the surprised flush faded out from her face – that pretty, pale face, tranquil as face could be, was only very grave.

"If you have anything to say to me, Captain Cavendish, please to say it quickly. I do not wish to be seen here."

"Is it such a disgrace, then, to be seen for one poor instant with me?" he said, bitterly.

She did not reply, save by an impatient tapping of one foot on the grass, and a backward glance at the crowded grounds.

"Winnie!" he broke out, passionately, as if stung by her manner, "have you turned into a flirt? Have you entirely forgotten what is past? You cannot – you cannot have ceased altogether to care for me, since I cannot, do what I will, forget you!"

Miss Rose looked at him – steadily, quietly, gravely, out of her brown eyes. If he had hoped for anything, that one look would have shivered his air-castles as a stone shivers brittle glass.

"I told you once before, Captain Cavendish, that such words from you to me were insults. The past, where you are concerned, is no more to me than if you had never existed. I have not forgotten it, but it has no more power to move me than the waves there can move those piles of rock. No! I have not forgotten it. I look back often enough now with wonder and pity at myself, that I ever should have been the idiot that I was."

His face turned crimson at the unmistakable earnestness of her words.

"Then I need scruple or hesitate no longer," he said, launching his last pitiful shaft. "I need hesitate no longer, on your score, to speak the words that will make one who is rich and beautiful, and who loves me, happy. I came here willingly to make what atonement I could for the past, by telling you beforehand, lest the shock of my marriage –"

He stopped in actual confusion, but raging inwardly at the humiliation she was making him feel – this poor little pale schoolmistress, whom he could have lifted with one hand and flung easily over the bank. She was smiling as she listened to him, a smile not of mockery or disdain, only so gallingly full of utter indifference to him.

"There is no atonement necessary," she said, with that conscious smile still hovering on her lips; "none, I assure you. I have no hard feelings toward you, Captain Cavendish, nothing to resent or forgive. If I was an idiot, it was my own fault, I dare say, and I would not blot out one day that is gone if I could. Marry when you will, marry as soon as you please, and no one will wish you joy more sincerely on your wedding day than I."

It half-maddened him, that supreme indifference, that serene face. He knew that he loved her, herself, and her alone; and while he fancied her pining and love-lorn, he was very well satisfied and quite complacent over her case. But this turn of the story was a little too mortifying to any man's pride to stand, and the man a lady-killer by profession at that.

"I don't believe it," he said, savagely, "you have not forgotten – you cared for me too much for that. I did not think you could stoop to falsehood while playing the rôle of a saint."

Miss Rose gave him a look – a look before which, with all his fury, he shrank. She had turned to walk away, but she stopped for a moment.

"I am telling no falsehood, Captain Cavendish: before I stoop to that, I pray I may die. You know in your heart I mean what I say, and you know that you believe me. I have many things to be thankful for, but chief among them, when I kneel down to thank God for his mercies, I thank him that I am not your wife!"

She walked slowly away, and he did not follow her; he only stood there, swallowing the bitter pill, and digesting it as best he might. It was provoking, no doubt, not to be able to forget this wretched little school-ma'am, while she so coolly banished him from her memory – so utterly and entirely banished him; for Captain Cavendish knew better than to disbelieve her. He had jilted her, it is true, as he had many another; but where was his triumph now? If he could only have forgotten her himself; but when the grapes were within his reach, he had despised them, and now that they grew above his head, and he did want them, it was exasperating that he could not get them.

"Pah!" he thought bitterly, "what a fool I am! I could not marry her were she ever so willing now, any more than I could then. This cursed debt is dragging me to – perdition – I was going to say, and I must marry a fortune, and that soon. Nathalie Marsh is the richest girl in Speckport, therefore

I shall marry Nathalie Marsh. She is ten times more beautiful than that little quakeress who is just gone; but I can't love her, and I can't forget the other."

Captain Cavendish leaned against the tamarack a long time, thinking. The uproar behind him and the roar of the surf on the shore blended together in a dull, meaningless tumult in his ears. He was thinking of this marriage de convenance he must make, of this bride he must one day take home to England. He was a gambler and a spendthrift, this man, over head and ears in debt, and with no way but this one of ever getting out of it. From his friends in England? He had no friends in England on whom he could rely. His only rich relative, his uncle, the baronet, had taken it into his head, at the age of fifty-five, to get married; and what was more, there was an heir, a young gentleman of five months old, between him and the baronetcy. His commission had been purchased by his uncle, and it seemed all he need ever expect from him. He had never seen service, and had no particular desire to see any. He must marry a rich wife – there was no alternative – and he knew the power of his handsome face extremely well. He had no fear of a refusal; there was no use in delaying; he would make the heiress of Redmon happy that very day.

The sun was going down behind the waves, in an oriflamme of gold and crimson and purple and rose, flushing the whole sky with its tropical beauty, when the young officer turned away to seek for his future wife. As if his thoughts had evoked her she was coming toward him, and all alone; her white dress floating mistily about her, all her golden curls hanging damp and loose over her shoulders, and her cheeks flushed with the heat. She had taken off her hat, and was swinging it by its azure ribbons, as she came up; and she looked so beautiful that the young Englishman thought that it would not be so very dreadful a thing to sell himself to this violet-eyed sultana after all.

"Truant!" said Nathalie, "where have you been all the afternoon? I thought you had gone away."

"And all the time I have been standing here, like Patience on a monument, wishing you would come up."

"Did you want me, then?"

"When do I not want you?"

Nathalie laughed, but she also blushed. "Then you should have gone in search of me, sir. Mrs. Leroy wants to go home now, and I must go with her."

"But not just yet. I have something to say to you, Nathalie."

And so here, in the hot warmth of the red sunset, the old, old story was told – the story that has been told over and over again since the world began, and will be told until its end, and yet is ever new. The story to which two little words, yes or no, ends so ecstatically, or gives the deathblow. It was yes this time; and when Nathalie Marsh, half an hour after, went home with Mrs. Leroy, she was wondering if there was one among all those thousands – one in all the wide world – as happy as she!

The last red glimmer of the sunset had faded out of the sky, and the summer moon was up, round and white and full, before the last of the picnickers went home. And in its pale rays, with his hands in his pockets, and a cigar between his lips, Captain Cavendish went home with Cherrie Nettleby.

CHAPTER X. FAST AND LOOSE

Miss Nathalie Marsh was not the only young lady who received a proposal that memorable picnic-day. Flashing in and out among the other belles of Speckport, and eclipsing them all as she went, the belle of the bourgeois, par excellence, came Miss Cherrie Nettleby, quite dazzling to look at in a pink and white plaid silk, a white lace mantle, the blue parasol you wot of, the turban-hat, with a long white feather streaking round it, and the colored white lace veil over her blooming brunette face. Miss Nettleby had fawn-colored kid gloves, an embroidered kerchief sticking out of her pocket; and, to crown all, two or three yards of gold chain around her neck, and hanging ever so far below her waist. An overgrown locket and a carnelian cross dangled from the chain; and no giddy young peacock ever strutted about prouder of its tail than did the little black-eyed belle of these glittering fetters. She had only received the chain, and locket, and cross the night before; they had come in a box, with a huge bouquet, under the weight of which a small black boy staggered, with the compliments of Captain Cavendish, and would Miss Nettleby do him the honor of accepting them? Nettleby did him the honor, and was not able to sleep a wink all night for rapture. A gold chain had been the desire of her heart for many and many a day; and, at last, some good fairy had taken pity on her and sent it, with the handsomest man in Speckport for her ambassador. Cherrie's ecstasies are not to be described; a chain from any one would have been a delightful gift; but from Captain Cavendish, one smile from whom Cherrie would have given all the rest of her admirers for, delightedly. She had hugged Ann in her transports, until that young person, breaking indignantly from her, demanded to know if she had gone mad; and she had dressed for the picnic, expecting to have the young Englishman devotedly by her side the whole day long, before the aggravated and envious eyes of all Speckport. But Cherrie had never made a greater mistake in all her life; the blue parasol, the pink silk, the white lace mantle, and fawn-colored kid gloves were powerless to charm – Captain Cavendish never came near her. He had not come at all until late, and then he had driven in in the McGregor barouche, with the heiress of that house by his side, resplendent to look at; and he had walked about with her, and with Miss Laura Blair, and Miss Marsh, and sundry other young ladies, a step or two higher up the ladder of life than Miss Nettleby, but he had not once walked with her. He had passed her two or three times, as he could not very well help doing, since she had put herself straight in his way; and he had nodded and smiled, and walked deliberately on. Cherrie could have cried with chagrin; but she didn't, not wishing to redden her eyes and swell her nose there, and she consoled herself by flirting outrageously with everybody who would be flirited with.

As the afternoon wore on, Cherrie began to experience that fatigue which five or six hours' dancing in a blazing July sun is apt to engender, and informed her partner in the quadrille she was roasted to death. The partner – who was Mr. Charles Marsh, and who had been her most devoted all day – was leaning against a stout elderly gentleman as against a post, fanning himself with his straw wideawake, leisurely set that headpiece sideways on his brown locks and presented his arm.

"I thought you would come to that by-and-by, Miss Nettleby, in spite of your love of dancing. Quadrilles are all very well in December, but I can't say that I fancy them in the dog-days. Suppose we go down to the shore and get a whiff of fresh air."

Miss Nettleby put her fawn-colored kid-glove inside Mr. Marsh's coat-sleeve, and poising her azure parasol in the other hand, strolled with him to the beach. On their way, Nathalie, standing with Captain Locksley, young McGregor, and a number of other gentlemen and ladies, espied them, and her color rose and her blue eyes flashed at the sight.

"Egad! I think they'll make a match of it!" laughed Locksley. "Charley seems to be completely taken in tow by that flyaway Cherrie."

Nathalie said nothing, but her brow contracted ominously as she turned impatiently away.

"Oh, that's nothing," said the Reverend Augustus Tod; "it's the fashion to go with Cherrie, and Charley is ready to follow fashion's lead. The little girl will settle down some day, I dare say, into a sensible, hard-working fisherman's wife."

Even Nathalie laughed at the idea of Miss Nettleby hard-working and sensible; and that young lady and her escort sauntered leisurely on to the breezy seashore. The sun was dipping behind the western waves, the sky all flushed and radiant with the scarlet and golden glory of its decline, the blue sea itself flooded with crimson radiance. Even Mr. Marsh was moved to admiration of its gorgeous splendor.

"Neat thing in the way of sunsets, Cherrie," he remarked, taking out a cigar, and lighting it.

"What a nice magenta color them clouds is!" said Miss Nettleby, admiringly; "they would make a lovely dress trimmed with black braid. And that mauve cloud over there with the yellow edge, I should like to have a scarf of that."

"Well," said Charley, "I can't get you the mauve cloud, but if there's a scarf at all like it in Speckport you shall have it. By the way, Cherrie, where did you get that chain?"

"You didn't give it to me, anyhow," replied Miss Nettleby, tossing her turban. "I might wait a long time for anything before I got it from you."

"I didn't know you wanted one, or I might. I wish you wouldn't take presents from anybody but me, Cherrie."

"From anybody but you!" retorted Cherrie, with scorn. "I'd like to know the time you gave me anything, Charley Marsh?"

"Come now, Cherrie, I don't want to be mean, but that's a little too bad!"

"I suppose you're hinting at that coral set you sent me last week?" said Cherrie, in a resentful tone. "But, I can tell you, there's lots of folks, not a thousand miles off, would be glad to give me ten times as much if I would take it."

"Don't take their gifts, Cherrie; there's a good girl; it's not ladylike, you know; and some day you shall have whatever you want – when I am rich and you are my wife, Cherrie."

"The idea!" giggled Cherrie, her color rising, "your wife, indeed; I think I see myself!"

"Wouldn't you have me, Cherrie?"

He was still smoking, and still looking at the sunset – not seeing it, however. Poor Charley Marsh, light as was his tone, was exceedingly in earnest. Miss Nettleby stole a glance at him from under the blue parasol, not quite certain whether he were in jest or in earnest, and her silly little heart beating a trifle faster than was its wont.

"I suppose, Mr. Marsh," said the young lady, after a moment's deliberation, thinking it best to stand on her dignity, "you think it a fine thing to make fun of me; but I can tell you I ain't going to stand it, if you are a doctor, and me only a gardener's daughter. I think you might find something else to amuse you."

"I'll take my oath, Cherrie," said Charley, throwing his cigar over the bank, "I never was so much in earnest in all my life."

"I don't believe it," said Miss Nettleby.

"What's the reason you don't? Haven't I been going with you long enough? What did you suppose I meant?"

"I didn't suppose nothing at all about it. You aren't the only one that pays attention to me."

"No; but I don't think any of the others mean anything. I intend to marry you, Cherrie, if you'll consent."

Cherrie tossed her turban disdainfully, but in her secret heart she was in raptures. Not that she meant to accept him just then, with Captain Cavendish in the background; but neither had she the slightest intention of refusing him. The handsome Englishman had given her a gold chain, to be sure, but then he had also given her the cold shoulder all that day; and if things did not turn out with

him as she could wish, Charley Marsh would do as a dernier resort. Cherrie liked Charley, and he could make her a lady; and if she failed in becoming Mrs. Cavendish, it would be a very nice thing to become Mrs. Marsh, and half the young ladies in Speckport would be dying of envy. Cherrie thought all this in about two seconds and a half.

"Well, Cherrie, have you nothing to say?" inquired Charley, rather anxiously.

"Mr. Marsh," said Miss Nettleby, with dignity, remembering how the heroine of the last novel she had read had answered in a similar case, "I require time to pon – ponder over it. On some other occasion, when I have seriously reflected on it, you shall have my answer."

Mr. Marsh stood aghast for a moment, staring at the young lady, and then went off into a fit of uproarious laughter.

"Well," demanded Cherrie, facing round rather fiercely, "and what are you laughing at, sir?"

"Oh, I beg your pardon, Cherrie," said Charley, recovering from his paroxysm; "but really you did that so well that I –"

Charley came near going off again; but, seeing the black eyes flashing, recovered himself.

"Come, Cherrie, never mind Laura-Matilda speeches, but tell me, like a sensible little girl, that you like me, and by-and-by will be my wife."

"I'll do nothing of the sort!" cried Miss Nettleby, in a state of exasperation, "either now or at any other time, if I don't choose. You'll just wait for your answer, or go without."

She sailed away as she spoke, leaving Charley too much taken aback, not to say mortified, to follow her.

"Hang it!" was Mr. Marsh's exclamation, as he turned in an opposite direction; "the idea of getting such an answer from that girl! What would Natty say? She would think it bad enough my proposing at all, but to get such a reply."

Yet, even in the midst of his chagrin, he laughed again at the recollection of Miss Nettleby's speech – careless Charley, who never let anything trouble him long.

"She'll come to it, I dare say," he reflected, as he went along, "and I can wait. I do like her, she's such a pretty little thing, and good, too, in the main, though rather frivolous on the surface. Well, Miss Rose, how are you enjoying yourself?"

Miss Rose's fair, sweet face was rather a striking contrast after Cherrie's, but Charley was not thinking of that, as he offered her his arm. Cherrie in the distance saw the act, and felt a pang of jealousy.

"He's gone off with that pale-faced school-mistress, now," she thought, resentfully. "I dare say she'd be glad to catch him, if she could. Oh!"

She stopped short with an exclamation half suppressed. She had come upon Captain Cavendish leaning against a tall tree, and talking to Nathalie Marsh. Another jealous pang pierced the frivolous heart, and – I am sorry to tell it – she crept in close under the tree, with the blue parasol furled, and – yes, she did – she listened. Listened for over twenty minutes, her color coming and going, her breath bated, her hands clenched. Then she fluttered hurriedly off, just in time to escape them, as they walked away, plighted lovers.

There was a little clump of cedar-bushes, forming a sort of dell, up the side of the bank. Cherrie Nettleby fell down here in the tall grass, dashing the blue parasol down beside her, crumpling the turban, soiling the white feather, and smearing the pink dress, tore off the gold chain, and burst into such a passion of spiteful, jealous, and enraged tears, as she had never before shed in her life. To think that all her hopes should have come to this; that the gold chain was only a glittering delusion; all his pretty speeches and lover-like attentions only hollow cheats, and Nathalie Marsh going to be his wife! Cherrie seized the chain in a paroxysm of fury, as she thought of it, and hurled it over the bank.

"The hateful, lying, deceitful scamp," she passionately cried. "I hate him, and I'll go and marry Charley Marsh, just for spite."

Charley was not hard to find. He was playing quoits with a lot of other young Speckportians; and Miss Catty Clowrie was standing gazing admiringly on, and ready to talk to him between whiles. Cherrie tapped him on the arm with her parasol, and looked shyly up in his face with a rosy blush. But the shy look and the blush were exceedingly well got up, and Charley dropped the quoits with a delighted face.

"Cherrie! what is it? Have you made up your mind, then?"

"Yes, Charley! You didn't believe I was in earnest that time, did you? I do like you, and I will be your wife as soon as ever you like."

Did Miss Catty Clowrie, standing unheeded by, with ears as sharp as lances, hear this very straightforward avowal? She had flashed a keen, quick glance from one to the other; had dropped her vail suddenly over her face, and turned away. Neither noticed her.

Charley was in raptures, and might have fallen on Miss Nettleby and embraced her there and then, only that before that maiden had quite finished speaking, Nathalie confronted them, her face haughty, her step ringing, her voice imperious.

"Charley, Mrs. Leroy is going home, and desires you to come immediately and assist Mr. Blake."

"Oh, bother!" cried Charley, politely, "let her get some of the other fellows; I can't go."

"Charley!"

"Why can't she get McGregor, or some of the rest?" said Charley, impatiently; "don't you see I'm playing quoits, Natty?"

"I see you're doing nothing of the sort, sir, and I insist on you coming this instant! Don't trouble yourself about Miss Nettleby, she has legions of adorers here, who will only be too happy to attend her home."

Miss Marsh swept away like a young queen; her violet eyes flashing, her perfect lips curling. Charley turned to follow, saying, hurriedly, as he went:

"I'll be back in half an hour, Cherrie, wait for me here."

"Proud, hateful thing!" exclaimed Cherrie, apostrophizing the receding form of Miss Marsh; "she looked at me that time as if she scorned to touch me! Wait until I am her brother's wife, we will see who will put on mistress." From where she stood, Cherrie could see the party for Redmon come. Charley and Val Blake wheeled Mrs. Leroy in her chair of state over the grass, that mummy having consented to be exhumed for the occasion, and having been the chief curiosity and attraction of the picnic. Nathalie walked on one side, and Midge on the other, but Captain Cavendish did not make one of the party now, for the moment they were out of sight, that gallant officer hurriedly walked deliberately up to her. Cherrie tossed her turban again, and curled her lip suspiciously, not deigning to notice him by so much as a glance.

"Come, Cherrie, what's the matter?" he began, in a free and easy way; "how have I got into disgrace?"

"Oh, it's you, Captain Cavendish, is it?" said Cherrie, loftily, condescending to become aware of his presence, "I don't know what you mean."

"Nonsense, Cherrie! What is the matter? Come, now, be reasonable, and tell me what I have done."

"You haven't done anything to me," quite frigidly, though; "how could you?"

"That's precisely what I want to know. Where is that chain I saw around your neck a short time ago?"

"In my pocket. You had better take it back again. I don't want it."

Captain Cavendish stared. Miss Nettleby, grasping the parasol firmly, though the sun had gone down, and the moon was rising, with a very becoming glow in her cheeks, and bright, angry light in her eyes, looked straight before her, and addressed empty space when she spoke.

"There is some mystery here, and I am going to get at the bottom of it," he said, resolutely; "Cherrie, let me go home with you, and see if we cannot clear it up by the way."

"With me?" said Cherrie, stepping back, and looking at him disdainfully; "why, what would Miss Marsh say to that?"

A light broke on the captain.

"Miss Marsh! Why, what have I to do with Miss Marsh?"

"A great deal, I should think, after what passed between you over there on the beach."

"Cherrie! where were you? Not listening?"

"I was passing," said Miss Nettleby, stiffly, "and I chanced to overhear. It wasn't my fault if you spoke out loud."

Even Captain Cavendish stood for a moment non-plussed by this turn of affairs. He had no desire his proposal to Miss Marsh should become public property, for many reasons; and he knew he might as well have published it in the Speckport Spouter, as let Cherrie find it out. Another thing he did not want – to lose Cherrie; she was a great deal too pretty, and he fancied her a great deal too much for that.

"Cherrie, that was all an – an accident! I didn't mean anything! There are too many people looking at us here, to talk; but, if you will go home, I will explain by the way."

"No," said Cherrie, standing resolutely on her dignity, but trying to keep from crying, "I can't. I promised Mr. Marsh to wait for him."

"Oh, confound Mr. Marsh! Come with me, and never mind him."

"No, Captain Cavendish; I think I'll wait. Charley thinks more of me than you do, since he asked me to marry him this afternoon, and I am going to do it."

Captain Cavendish looked at her. He knew Cherrie's regard for truth was not the most stringent; that she would invent, and tell a fib with all the composure in life, but she was palpably telling no falsehood this time. He saw it in the triumphant flash of her black eyes, in the flush of her face, and set his teeth inwardly with anger and mortification. "How blessings brighten as they take their flight!" Never had Cherrie Nettleby looked so beautiful; never had her eyes been so much like black diamonds as now, when their light seemed setting to him forever. Captain Cavendish believed her, and resolved not to lose her, in spite of all the Charley Marshes in the world.

"So Marsh has asked you to be his wife, has he? Now, Cherrie, suppose I asked you the same question, what would you say?"

"You asked Miss Marsh to-day, and I think that's enough."

"I did not mean it, Cherrie. I swear I did not! I am fifty times as much in love with you as I am with her."

And Captain Cavendish was speaking truth. Humiliating as it is to say so of one's heroine, the black-eyed grisette was a hundred times more to his taste than the blue-eyed lady. Could they have changed places, he would have married Cherrie off-hand, and never given one sigh to Nathalie. It was the prospective fortune of that young lady he was in love with.

"Cherrie, you don't believe me," he said, seeing incredulity in her face, "but I swear I am telling the truth. Let me prove it – give up Charley Marsh and marry me!"

"Captain!"

"I mean it! Which of us do you like best – Marsh or I?"

"You know well enough," said Cherrie, crying. "I like you ever so much the best; but when I heard you asking Miss Natty, I – I – " here the voice broke down in good earnest, and Cherrie's tears began to flow.

Captain Cavendish looked hurriedly about him. The last rays of the sunset had burned themselves out, and the moon was making for herself a track of silver sheen over the sea. The crowd were flocking homeward, tired out, and there was no one near; but in the distance his eagle eye saw Charley Marsh striding over the dewy evening grass. Poor Charley! The captain drew Cherrie's arm

inside his own, and walked her rapidly away. They were out on the Redmon road before either spoke again.

"I did not mean one word of what I said to Miss Marsh. But I'll tell you a secret, Cherrie, if you'll never mention it again."

"I won't," said Cherrie. "What is it?"

"I should like to share her fortune – that is, you and I – and if she thinks I am in love with her, I stand a good chance. I should like to be richer than I am, for your sake, you know; so you must not be jealous. I don't care a straw for her, but for her money."

"And you do care for me?"

"You know I do! Are you ready to give up Charley, and marry me?"

"Oh!" said Cherrie, and it was all she replied; but it was uttered so rapturously that it perfectly satisfied him.

"Then that is settled? Let me see – suppose we get married next week, or the week after?"

"Oh! Captain!" cried the enraptured Cherrie.

"Then that is settled too. What a little darling you are, Cherrie! And now I have only one request to make of you – that you will not breathe one word of this to a living soul. Not a syllable – do you understand?"

"Why?" said Cherrie, a little disappointed.

"My dear girl, it would ruin us both! We will be married privately – no one shall know it but the clergyman and – Mr. Blake."

"Mr. Blake? Val?"

"Yes," said Captain Cavendish, gravely, "he shall be present at the ceremony, but not another being in Speckport must find it out. If they do, Cherrie, I will have to leave you forever. There are many reasons for this that I cannot now explain. You will continue to live at home, and no one but ourselves shall be the wiser. There, don't look so disappointed; it won't last long, my darling. Let Charley still think himself your lover; but, mind you, keep him at a respectful distance, Cherrie."

They reached the cottage at last, but it took them a very long time. Captain Cavendish walked back to Speckport in the moonlight, smoking, and with an odd little smile on his handsome face.

"I'll do it, too," he said, glancing up at the moon, as if informing that luminary in confidence. "There's a law against bigamy, I believe; but I'll marry them both, the maid first, the mistress afterward."

CHAPTER XI.

HOW CAPTAIN CAVENDISH MEANT TO MARRY CHERRIE

The clerk of the weather in Speckport might have been a woman, so fickle and changeable in his mind was he. You never could put any trust in him; if you did, you were sure to be taken in. A bleak, raw, cheerless, gloomy morning, making parlor fires pleasant in spite of its being July, and hot coffee as delicious a beverage as cool soda-water had been the day before; a morning not at all suited for constitutionals; yet on this cold, wet, raw, foggy morning Charley Marsh had arisen at five o'clock, and gone off for a walk, and was only opening the front-door of the little cottage as the clock on the sitting-room mantel was chiming nine. Breakfast was over, and there was no one in the room but Mrs. Marsh, in her shawl and rocker, beside the fire which was burning in the Franklin, immersed ten fathoms deep in the adventures of a gentleman, inclosed between two yellow covers, and bearing the euphonious name of "Rinaldo Rinaldi." Miss Rose had gone to school, Betsy Ann was clattering among the pots in the kitchen; the breakfast-table looked sloppy and littered; the room, altogether dreary. Perhaps it was his walk in that cheerless fog, but Charley looked as dreary as the room; his bright face haggard and pale, his eyes heavy, and with dark circles under them, bespeaking a sleepless night. Mrs. Marsh dropped "Rinaldo Rinaldi," and looked up with a fretful air.

"Dear me, Charley, how late you are! What will Doctor Leach say? Where have you been?"

"Out for a walk."

"Such a hateful morning – it's enough to give you your death! Betsy Ann, bring in the coffee-pot!"

Betsy Ann appeared with that household god, and a face shining with smiles and yellow soap, and her mistress relapsed into "Rinaldo Rinaldi" again. Charley seemed to have lost his appetite as well as his spirits. He drank a cup of coffee, pushed the bread and butter impatiently away, donned his hat and overcoat, the former pulled very much over his eyes, and set out for the office.

Charley had enough to trouble him. It was not only Cherrie's desertion, though that was enough, for he really loved the girl with the whole fervor and strength of a fresh young heart, and meant to make her his honored wife. He was infatuated, no doubt; he knew her to be illiterate, silly, unprincipled, false and foolish, a little dressy piece of ignorance, vanity, selfishness and conceit, or might have known it if he chose; but he knew, too, she was a beautiful, brilliant, bewitching little fairy, with good-natured and generous impulses now and then, and the dearest little thing generally that ever was born. In short, he was in love with her, and love knows nothing about common sense; so when he had seen her walk off the previous evening with Captain Cavendish, and desert him, he had leaned against a tree, feeling – heaven only knows how deeply and how bitterly. Once he had started up to follow them, but had stopped – the memory of a heavy debt contracted in Prince Street, owing to this man, and hanging like an incubus about his neck, night and day, thrust him back as with a hand of iron. He was in the power of the English officer, beyond redemption; he could not afford to make him his enemy.

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