

MAY AGNES FLEMING

NORINE'S REVENGE, AND,
SIR NOEL'S HEIR

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Norine's Revenge, and, Sir Noel's Heir

NORINE'S REVENGE

CHAPTER I.

TWO BLACK EYES AND THEIR WORK

The early express train from Montreal to Portland, Maine, was crowded.

Mr. Richard Gilbert, lawyer, of New York, entering five minutes before starting time, found just one seat unoccupied near the door. A crusty old farmer held the upper half, and moved grumpily toward the window, under protest, as Mr. Gilbert took the place.

The month was March, the morning snowy and blowy, slushy and sleety, as it is in the nature of Canadian March mornings to be. The sharp sleet lashed the glass, people shivered in multitudinous wraps, lifted purple noses, over-twisted woolen clouds and looked forlorn and miserable. And Mr. Gilbert, congratulating himself inwardly on having secured a seat by the stove, opened the damp *Montreal True Witness*, and settled himself comfortably to read. He turned to the leading article, read three lines, and never finished it from that day to this. For the door opened, a howl of March wind, a rush of March rain whirled in, and lifting his eyes, Mr. Richard Gilbert saw in the doorway a new passenger.

The new passenger was a young lady, and the young lady was the prettiest young lady, Mr. Gilbert thought, in that first moment, he had ever seen.

She was tall, she was slim, she was dark, she had long loose, curly black hair, falling to her waist, and two big, bright, black, Canadian eyes, as lovely eyes as the wide earth holds. She stood there in the doorway, faltering, frightened, irresolute, a very picture – the color coming and going in the youthful, sensitive face, the luminous brown eyes glancing like the eyes of a startled bird. She stood there, laden with bundles, bandboxes, and reticules, and holding a little blinking spaniel by a string.

Every seat was filled, no one seemed disposed to dispossess themselves, even for the accommodation of youth and beauty. Only for six seconds, though; then Richard Gilbert, rose up, and quietly, and, as a matter of course, offered his seat to the young lady. She smiled – what a smile it was, what a bright little row of teeth it showed, dimpled, blushed – the loveliest rose-pink blush in the world, hesitated, and spoke:

"But, monsieur!" in excellent English, set to a delicious French accent. "But, monsieur will have no place."

"Monsieur will do very well. Oblige me, mademoiselle, by taking this seat."

"Monsieur is very good. Thanks."

She fluttered down into the seat, and Mr. Gilbert disposed of the many bundles and boxes and bags on the rack overhead. He was smiling a little to himself as he did so; the *role* of lady's man was quite a new one in this gentleman's cast in the great play of Life. The grumpy old farmer, with a grunt of disapprobation, edged still further up to the window.

"Monsieur can sit on the arm of the seat," suggests the young lady, glancing up with a pretty girl's glance – half shy, half coquettish; "it is so very fatiguing to stand."

Monsieur avails himself of the offer immediately, and finds he is in an excellent position to examine that very charming face. But he does not examine it: he is not one of your light-minded,

mustache-growing, frivolous-headed youths of three-or-four-and-twenty, to whom the smiling face of a pretty girl is the most fascinating object under heaven.

Mr. Gilbert casts one look, only one, then draws forth the *True Witness* and buries himself in the leading article. The last bell rings, the whistle shrieks, a plunge, a snort, and they are rushing madly off into the wild March morning. The young lady looks about her, the grumpy farmer is between her and the window, the window is all blurred and blotted; Mr. Gilbert is fathoms deep in his paper. She gives a little sigh, then lifts her small dog up in her lap, and begins an animated conversation with him in French. Frolo understands Canadian French, certainly not a word of English, and he blinks his watery eyes, and listens sagaciously to it all. The farmer looks askance, and grunts like one of his own pigs; the lawyer, from behind his printed sheet, finds the words dancing fantastically before his eyes, and his brain taking in nothing but the sweet-spoken, foolish little prattle of mademoiselle to Frolo.

He is thirty-five years of age, he is a hard-headed, hard-working lawyer, he has a species of contempt for all women, as bundles of nerves and nonsense, fashions and foolery. He is thirty-five; he has never asked any woman to marry him in his life; he looks upon that foolish boy-and-girl idiocy, called love, as your worldly-wise cynics do look upon it, with a sneer and a scoff. Pretty girls he has met and known by the score – handsome women and clever women, but not the prettiest, the handsomest, the cleverest of them all has ever made his well-regulated legal pulses beat one throb the quicker in all his five-and-thirty years of life. Why is it then that he looks at this little French Canadienne with an interest he has never felt in looking at any of the bright New York beauties he has known so long? Simple curiosity, no doubt – nothing more.

"She looks like a picture I once saw of Joanna of Naples," he thought, "only Joanna had golden hair. I hope the similarity to that very improper person ends with the outward resemblance."

He returned to his newspaper, but somehow politics and cable dispatches, and Our Foreign Relations, had lost their interest. Again and again, under cover of the friendly sheet, his eyes wandered back to that fair drooping face, that piquant profile, those long eyelashes, and the rippling black tresses falling from beneath the little hat. The hat was trimmed with crape, and the graceful figure wore dingy black.

"Who is she?" Mr. Gilbert found himself wondering "where is she going? and for whom is she in mourning?" And then, conscious of his own folly and levity, he pulled himself up, and went back for the dozenth time to the *True Witness*.

But – his hour had come, and it would not do. The low French babble to the dog rang in his ears, the dark mignonne face came between him and the printed page, and blotted it out.

"She is much too young, and – yes, too pretty to be travelling alone. I wonder where is she going; and if her friends will meet her? Very imprudent to allow a child like this to travel alone. She hardly looks sixteen."

His interest – fatherly, brotherly of course, in this handsome child was increasing every moment. It was something not to be explained or comprehended. He had heard of such imbecility as "love at first sight," but was it likely that he, a man of five-and-thirty, a lawyer, without an ounce of sentimentality in his composition should make an idiot of himself over a French Canadienne, a total stranger, a bread-and-butter-eating school-girl at his time of life. Not likely. She interested him as a pretty picture or marble Venus, or other work of art might – just that.

He did not address her. Lawyers are not bashful as a body. Mr. Gilbert was not bashful individually, but something, for which he knew no name, held him silent now. If that grumpy, overgrown farmer were only out of the way, he thought, instead of sitting sulkily there staring at the falling rain, he could no doubt find something to say.

Fate favored him, his evil angel "cursed him with the curse of an accomplished prayer." At the very next station the surly husbandman got up and left; and the mistress of Frolo, moving close to the window, lifted those two orbs of wondrous brown light to the lawyer's grave, thoughtful face, and the sweet voice spoke:

"Will monsieur resume his place now?"

Monsieur needed no second bidding. He resumed it, threw aside his paper, and opened conversation in the usual brilliant and original way:

"The storm seems to increase – don't you think so? Abominable weather it has been since March came in, and no hope of its holding up to day."

"Oh, yes, monsieur," mademoiselle answered, with animation; "and it is such a pity, isn't it? It makes one low-spirited, one can see nothing, and one does like so to see the country as one goes along."

"Was she going far?" the lawyer inquired.

"Oh, very far!" Mademoiselle makes a little Gallic gesture, with shoulders and eyebrows and hands all together to express the immensity of the distance.

"A great way. To Portland," with a strong accent on the name of that city. "Monsieur knows where Portland is?"

"Yes, very well – he was going there himself *en route* to New York. You, mademoiselle," he adds, inquiringly, "are going on a visit, probably?"

Mademoiselle shakes her pretty head, and purses her pretty lips.

"Monsieur, no – I am going home."

"Home? But you are French."

"But yes, monsieur, certainly French, still my home is there. Papa and mamma have become dead," the brown eyes fill, "and Uncle Louis and Aunt Mathilde have seven of their own, and are poor. I am going to mamma's relatives, mamma was not French."

"No?" Mr. Gilbert says in sympathetic inquiry.

"No, monsieur. Mamma was Yan-*kee*, a New England lady, papa French Canadian. Mamma's friends did not wish her to marry papa, and she ran away. It is five years ago since she died, and papa – papa could not live without her, and two years after the good God took him too."

The tearful brown eyes look down at her shabby black dress. "Monsieur beholds I wear mourning still. Then Uncle Louis took me, and sent me to school, but Uncle Louis has so many, so I wrote to mamma's brothers in Portland, and they sent a letter back and money, and told me to come. And I am going – Frolo and me."

She bends over the little dog, her lips quivering like the lips of a grieved child, and the lawyer's middle-aged heart goes out to her in a great compassion.

"Poor little lonely child!" he thinks, watching the sweet overcast face: "I hope they will be good to her, those Yankee friends." Then aloud. "But you are very young, are you not, to travel this distance alone?"

"I am seventeen, and I had to travel alone, there was no one to come with me. My Uncle Kent will meet me at Portland."

"You are Mademoiselle Kent?" he says with a smile.

"No, monsieur, my name is Bourdon – Norine Kent Bourdon."

"Have you ever seen those relatives to whom you are going?"

"Once. They came to see mamma when she was dead. There are three – two uncles and an aunt. They were very kind. I liked them very much."

"I trust you will be happy in your new home, Miss Bourdon," the lawyer says gravely. "Permit me to offer you my card. If you ever visit New York I may meet you again – who knows?"

The young lady smiles as she reads the name.

"Ah – who knows? I am going out as governess by-and-by. Perhaps I shall write to you to help get me a situation."

"What a frank, innocent child it is!" thought Mr. Gilbert, looking down at the smiling, trustful face: "other girls of her age would be bashful, coquettish, or afraid of a masculine stranger. But this pretty child smiles up in my face, and tells me her little history as though I were her brother. I wish I

were her brother, and had power to shield her from the hardships of life." "Any service in my power I shall always be happy to render you, my dear young lady," he said; "if at any time you apply to me, believe me I shall do my utmost to serve you."

Mademoiselle Norine Kent Bourdon looked up into the grave, genial face, with soft, trustful eyes that thanked him. She could not have defined it, but she felt he was a man to be trusted – a good man, a faithful friend and an honorable gentleman.

The train flew on.

As the afternoon wore away the storm increased. The trees rocked in the high wind, and the ceaseless sleet beat against the windows. Miss Bourdon had a novel in her satchel, an English novel, and she perused a few pages of this work at intervals, and watched the storm-blotted landscape flitting by. She made small French remarks to Frolo, and she refreshed herself with apples, ginger-bread and dyspeptic confectionery. But, all these recreations palling after a time, and as the darkness of the stormy March day closed, drowsiness came, and leaning her head against the window, the young lady fell asleep.

Mr. Gilbert could watch her now to his heart's content, and he did watch her with an interest all-absorbing, and utterly beyond his comprehension. He laid his railway rug lightly over her, and shielded her from all other male eyes, with jealous care. What was it that charmed him about this French girl?

He could no more have told you then than he could ever have told you afterward. It was written, it was Kismet; his fate had come to him as it comes to all, in unlooked-for form. She looked, the poetic simile came to the unpoetical mind of the lawyer – like a folded rose, the sweetness and bloom yet unbrushed from the leaves.

Mademoiselle did not awake until the train stopped; then she opened her eyes bewildered. But Mr. Gilbert gathered up the boxes and bundles, drew her hand under his arm, and led her out of the cars, and up to the big noisy hotel, where they were to stop for the night. Miss Bourdon took her supper seated beside her friend, at the long crowded table, and was dazzled, and delighted. It was all so new to her; and at seventeen, novelty is delight. After supper her protector gave her into the hands of a chambermaid, told her at what hour they started next morning, bade her good-night, and dismissed her.

Were Richard Gilbert's dreams that night haunted by the vision of a dark, soft face, two dark tender eyes, and the smile of an angel? Richard Gilbert only knows. But this is certain: when Mademoiselle Bourdon descended the stairs next morning he was standing at the dining-room door awaiting her, and his calm eyes lit up, as few had ever seen them light in his life. He led her into breakfast, and watched her hearty, school-girl morning appetite with pleasure. Then, there being half-an-hour to spare before the train started, he proposed a little stroll in the crisp, cool sunshine that had followed yesterday's storm. It was very fair, there in that lovely valley in Vermont, with the tall mountains piercing the heavens, and the silvery lakes flashing like mirrors below.

It was past noon when they reached Portland. The usual rush followed, but Norine, safe under the protecting wing of Mr. Gilbert, made her way unscathed. She looked eagerly among the crowd in the long depot, and cried out at last at sight of a familiar face.

"There, monsieur – there! Uncle Reuben is standing yonder with the blue coat and fur cap. He is looking for me. Oh! take me to him at once, please."

Mr. Gilbert led Miss Bourdon up to where a bluff-looking, middle-aged countryman stood – "Down East" from top to toe.

"Uncle," cried Norine, holding out both hands, eagerly, "I have come."

And then, heedless of the crowd, of Mr. Gilbert, mademoiselle flung both arms around Uncle Reuben's neck with very French effusion, and kissed him, smick – smack, on both cheeks.

"Hey! bless my soul! it is you, is it?" Uncle Reuben exclaimed, extricating himself. "It is, I swow, and growed out of all knowin'. You're welcome, my dear, and I'm right glad to have you with

us, for your poor mother's sake. You ain't a look of her, though – no, not one – Gustave Bourdon all over. And how did you manage on your journey? I tell you, we was all considerable uneasy about you."

He looked at her tall companion as he ceased, half suspiciously, half inquiringly, and Miss Bourdon hastened to introduce them.

"This gentleman is Mr. Gilbert, uncle. He has been very kind to me all the way. I don't know what I should have done but for him. He has taken care of me ever since we left Montreal."

"Thanky, sir – much obliged to you for looking after this little girl. Come along and spend the day with us at my place, Kent Farm."

"Thanks, very much," the lawyer answered; "I regret more than I can say that circumstances render that pleasure impossible. I must be in New York to-morrow, but the very next time I am in Portland I shall certainly avail myself of your kind invitation. Miss Bourdon, until that time comes, good-by."

He shook hands with her, and saw her led away by her uncle, with a feeling of strange, yearning regret. A two-seated country sleigh stood near. Uncle Reuben helped her in, took his seat beside her, tucked her up, said "Ga'lang," and they were off. Once she looked back, to smile, to wave her hand to him in adieu. One more glimpse of that brunette face, of that rare smile, of those black Canadian eyes, and the clumsy sleigh turned an acute angle, and she was gone.

Gone. A blank seemed to fall, the whole place turned desolate and empty. With a wistful look in his face he turned slowly away.

"Poor little girl!" the lawyer thought. "I hope she will be happy. She is so pretty – so pretty!"

CHAPTER II. A WISE MAN'S FOLLY

Mr. Richard Gilbert went to New York, and the girl with the black Canadian eyes and floating hair went with him – in spirit, that is to say. That dark, piquant face; that uplifted, gentle glance; that dimpling smile haunted him all through the upward journey; haunted and lit up his dingy office, and came between him and Blackstone, and Coke upon Littleton, and other legal lights.

Her bright, seventeen-year old face formed itself into a picture upon every page of those mouldering, dry-as-dust tomes, looked at him in the purple twilight, in the sunny mornings, in the dead waste and middle of the night. He had become "A Haunted Man," in short, Mr. Gilbert was in love.

And so, "how it came let doctors tell," all of a sudden Mr. Gilbert found that business required his presence Down East early in July. It was trifling business, too, understrappers in the office thought, that could very well have done without his personal supervision; but Mr. Gilbert reasoned otherwise; and, with a very unwonted glow about the region of the heart, packed his portmanteau, and started for Portland, Me.

The hot July sun was blazing in the afternoon sky and the streets of Portland were blistering in the heat, as the New York lawyer walked from the cars to his hotel. That important business which had brought him so many miles was transacted in a couple of hours, and then he returned to his hotel to dress and dine. Dress! – when had Richard Gilbert in his plain business pepper-and-salt suit and round-topped straw hat, ever taken so much pains with his toilet before, ever sported such faultless broadcloth in July, ever wore a diamond pin in his snowy linen, ever stood so long before the glass, ever felt so little satisfied with the result? When had the crow's feet around mouth and eyes ever shown so plainly, when had his tall, bald forehead ever appeared so patriarchal, when had he ever looked so dreadfully middle-aged, and plodding and priggish in his own legal eyes? Ah, when indeed?

He hired a light wagon and a bony horse at the nearest livery stable, and inquired the way to Kent Farm. Kent Farm was three miles distant, he found, and the white, dusty road lay like a strip of silver between the golden, green fields. The haymakers were at work, the summer air was sweet with perfume, the fields of buckwheat waved, the birds sang in the branches of the elms, the grasshoppers chirped until the drowsy air was alive, and far beyond all, more beautiful than all, the silver sea lay asleep under the sparkling sun. Pretty houses, all white and green, were everywhere; and more than one Maud Müller leaned on her rake, and looked up under her broad-brimmed hat as this thoughtful Judge rode by. He rode very slowly, so slowly that it was nearly an hour before he reached his destination and drew up at the gate of Kent Farm.

Had he been wise to come? What was this young girl, this child of seventeen, to him? What could she ever be? Youth turns to youth, as flowers to the sun. What if he found her the plighted wife of some stalwart young farmer, some elegant dry-goods clerk of the town? What? His heart contracted with a sharp, sudden spasm, and told him what?

Kent Farm at last. Half a mile from any other house, on the summit of a green, sloping eminence, an old red, weather-beaten farm-house its once glaring color toned and mellowed down by the sober hand of Time. A charming old place, its garden sloping down to the roadside, its lilac trees in full bloom. A wide-spreading old-fashioned garden, with rose bushes, and gooseberry bushes, currant bushes, sunflowers, and hollyhocks, and big gnarled old apple trees, mixed up in picturesque confusion.

Seated in a chair of twisted branches, under one of these crooked, blossoming apple trees, the sunlight tangled in her shining hair, and the mignonne face, sat Norine Kent Bourdon, reading a novel.

He opened the gate. Her book was interesting – she did not hear. He walked up the gravelled path, and drew near. Then she looked up, then half rose, in doubt for a moment, and then – to the

day of his death, until all things earthly, will Richard Gilbert remember the flush of joy, the flash of recognition, the glad cry of welcome, with which she flung aside her book and sprang towards him, both hands outstretched.

"Monsieur! monsieur!" the sweet voice cried. "Ah, monsieur! how glad I am to see you."

She gave him her hands. The lovely, laughing face the eyes of fathomless light, looked up into his. Yes, she was glad to see him, glad with the impulsive gladness of a little younger sister to see an indulgent brother, old and grave, yet beloved. But Mr. Gilbert, holding those hands, looking into that eager, sparkling face, drew no such nice distinctions.

"Thank you, mademoiselle. You have not quite forgotten me, then, after all?"

"Forgotten you, monsieur? Oh, my memory is better than that. You have come to pay us that promised visit, have you not? Uncle Reuben has been looking for you ever since the first of June, and Aunt Hester is never so happy as when she has company. You have come to stay, I know."

"Well, I'm not sure about that, Miss Bourdon. I may remain a week or two, certainly. New York is not habitable after the first week of July, but I am stopping at the Preble House. I am too much of a stranger to trespass on your good uncle's hospitality."

"You have been kind to me, monsieur, and you are a stranger no more. Besides, it is dull here – pleasant but dull, and it will be a second kindness to enliven us with a little New York society."

She laughed and drew away her hands. The golden light of the July afternoon gilded the girlish face, upon which the New York gentleman gazed with an admiration he did not try to hide.

"Dull," he repeated; "you don't find it dull, I should think. Your face tells a very different story."

Mademoiselle shook back her rippling satin hair, and made a little French *moue mutine*.

"Ah, but it is. Only the fields and the flowers, the trees and the birds, the eating and sleeping, and reading. Now, flowers and fields and birds are very nice and pleasant things, but I like people, new faces, new friends, pleasure, excitement, change. I ride the horse, I milk the cows, I pick the strawberries, I darn the stockings, I play the piano, I make the beds, I read the novels. But I see nobody – nobody – nobody, and it is dull."

"Then you prefer the old life and Montreal?"

"Montreal!" Miss Bourdon's black eyes flashed out, as your black eyes can. "Monsieur," solemnly, "I adore Montreal. It was always new and always nice there; bright and gay and French. French! it is all Yankee here, not but that I like Yankees too. Aunt Hester thinks," a merry laugh, "there never was anybody born like me, and Uncle Reuben thinks I would be an angel if I didn't read so many novels and eat so many custard pies. And, monsieur," with the saucy uplifted coquettish glance he remembered so well, "if *you* find out I'm not an angel don't tell him, please. I wouldn't have him undeceived for the world."

"I don't think I shall find it out, mademoiselle. I quite agree with your uncle. Here he comes now."

Reuben Kent came out of the open front door, smoking a pipe. He paused at sight of his niece in friendly colloquy with a strange gentleman. The next moment he recognized him, and came forward at once in hearty welcome.

"Wal, squire," Mr. Kent said, "you *hev* come, when I had e'enamost gi'n you up. How dye deow? 'Tarnal hot, ain't it? Must be a powerful sight hotter, though, up to York. How air you. You're lookin' pretty considerably spry. Norry's glad to see you, I know. That gal's bin a talkin' o' ye continual. Come in, squire – come in. My sister Hester will be right glad to see ye."

What a cordial welcome it was; what a charming agricultural person Mr. Reuben Kent, one of nature's Down East noblemen, indeed. In a glow of pleasure, feeling ten years younger and ten times better looking than when he had started, the New York lawyer walked up to the house, into the wide, cool hall, into the "keepin' room," and took a seat. A pleasant room; but was not everything about Kent Farm pleasant, with two large western windows, through which the rose and golden light of the low dropping sun streamed over the store carpet, the cane-seated chairs, the flowers in the

cracked tumblers, and white, delf pitchers. Traces of Norine were everywhere; the piano in a corner, the centre-table littered with books, papers, magazines and scraps of needle-work, the two canaries singing in the sunny windows, all spoke of taste, and girlhood. There were white muslin curtains, crocheted tidies on every chair in the room, a lounge, covered with *cretonne* in a high state of glaze and gaudy coloring, and the scent of the hay fields and the lilacs over all. No fifth-avenue drawing-room, no satin-hung silver-gilt reception-room, had ever looked one half so exquisite in this metropolitan gentleman's professional eyes. For there, amid the singing birds and the scented roses, stood a tall, slim girl, in a pink muslin dress – and where were the ormolu or brocatelle could embellish any room as she did?

Uncle Reuben went in search of Aunt Hester, and returned with that lady presently; and Mr. Gilbert saw a bony little woman with bright eyes and a saffron complexion. Miss Kent welcomed him as an old friend, and pressed him to "stay to tea."

"It's jest ready," she remarked, – a maiden lady was Aunt Hester, – "we've ben waitin' for brother Joe, and he's jest come. There ain't nothing more refreshing, I think myself, than a nice cup o' hot tea on a warm day."

Uncle Reuben seconded the motion at once.

"We can't offer you anything very grand – silver spoons and sech – as you get at them air hotels, but sech as it is, and Hester's a master hand at crawlers and hot biscuit, you're most mightly welcome. Norry, you fetch him along, while I go and wash up."

Miss Bourdon obeyed. Mr. Gilbert did not require all that pressing, if they had but known it. There was no need to apologize for that "high tea." No silver teaspoons, it is true, but the plated-ware glistened as the real Simon Pure never could have done; and no hotel in Maine, or out of it, could have shown a snowier table-cloth, hotter, whiter, more dyspeptic biscuits, blacker tea, redder strawberries, richer cream, yellower ginger-bread, or pinker cold-sliced ham. Mr. Gilbert ate ham and jelly, strawberries and tea, hot biscuit and cold ginger-bread – in a way that fairly warmed Aunt Hester's heart.

"And we calk'late on keeping you while you're down here, Mr. Gilbert," Uncle Reuben's hearty voice said. "It's a pleasant place, though I say it as hadn't ought to – a heap pleasanter than the city. Our house ain't none too fine, and our ways may be homespun and old-fashioned, but I reckon Norry and Hester kin make you pretty tol'bel comfortable ef you stay."

"Comfortable!"

He looked across at that face opposite; comfortable in the same house with her! But still he murmured some faint objection.

"Don't mention trouble, sir," said Uncle Joe, who was the counterpart of Uncle Reuben; "you've ben kind to our little Norry, and that's enough for us. Norry, hain't you got nothin' to say?"

"I say stay!" and the bewildering black eyes flashed their laughing light across at the victimized lawyer. "Stay, and I'll teach you to milk and make butter, and feed poultry, and pick strawberries, and improve your mind in a thousand rural ways. You shall swing me when Uncle Joe is too busy, and help me make short-cake, and escort me to 'quiltin' bees,' and learn to rake hay. And I – I'll sing for you wet days, and drive you all over the neighborhood, and let you tell me all about New York and the fashions, and the stores, and the theatres, and the belles of Broadway. Of course you stay."

Of course he stayed. It is so easy to let rosy lips persuade us into doing what we are dying to do. He stayed, and his fate was fixed – for good or for evil – fixed. That very night his portmanteau came from Portland, and the "spare room" was his.

Supper over, Uncles Reuben and Joe lit their pipes, and went away to their fields and their cattle – Aunt Hester "cleared up," and Miss Bourdon took possession of Mr. Gilbert. She wasn't the least in awe of him, she was only a bright, frank, fearless, grown-up child. He was grave, staid, old – is not thirty-five a fossil age in the eyes of seventeen? – but venerable though he was, she was not the least afraid of him.

She led her captive – oh, too willing, forth in triumph to see her treasures – sleek, well-fed cows, skittish ponies, big horses, hissing geese, goblin turkeys, hens and chicks innumerable. He took a pleased interest in them all – calves and colts, chickens and ducklings, ganders and gobblers, listened to the history of each, as though he had never listened to such absorbing biographies in all his life before.

How rosy were the lips that spoke, how eager the sunny face uplifted to his, and when was there a time that Wisdom did not fall down and worship Beauty? He liked to think of her pure and sweet, absorbed in these innocent things, to find neither coquetry nor sentimentalism in this healthy young mind, to know her ignorant as the goslings themselves of all the badness and hardness and cruelty of the big, cruel world.

They went into the garden, and lingered under the lilacs, until the last pink flush of the July day died, and the stars came out, and the moon sailed up serene. They found plenty to say; and, as a rule, Richard Gilbert rarely found much to say to girls. But Miss Bourdon could talk, and the lawyer listened to the silvery, silly prattle with a grave smile on his face.

It was easy to answer all her eager questions, to tell her of life in New York, of the opera and the theatres, and the men and women who wrote the books and the poems she loved. And as she drank it in, her face glowed and her great eyes shone.

"Oh, how beautiful it all must be!" she cried, "to hear such music, to see such plays, to know such people! If one's life could only be like the lives of the heroines of books – romantic, and beautiful, and full of change. If one could only be rich and a lady, Mr. Gilbert!"

She clasped her hands with the hopelessness of that thought. He smiled as he listened.

"A lady, Miss Bourdon? Are you not that now?" Miss Bourdon shook her head mournfully.

"Of course not, only a little stupid country girl, a farmer's niece. Oh! to be a lady – beautiful and haughty and admired, to go to balls in diamonds and laces, to go to the opera like a queen, to lead the fashion, and to be worshipped by every one one met! But what is the use of wishing, it never, never, never, can be."

"Can it not? I don't quite see that, although the ladies you are thinking of exist in novels only, never in this prosy, work-a-day world. Wealth is not happiness – a worn-out aphorism, but true now as the first day it was uttered. Great wealth, perhaps, may never come to you but what may seem wealth in your eyes may be nearer than you think – who knows?"

He looked at her, a sudden flush rising over his face, but Norine shook her black ringlets soberly.

"No, I will never be rich. Uncle Reuben won't hear of my going out as governess, so there is nothing left but to go on with the chicken-feeding and butter-making and novel-reading forever. Perhaps it is ungrateful, though, to desire any change, for I am happy too."

He drew a little nearer her; a light in his grave eyes, a glow on his sober face, warm words on his lips. What was Richard Gilbert about to say? The young, sweet, wistful face was fair enough in that tender light, to turn the head of even a thirty-five year-old-lawyer. But those impulsive words were not spoken, for "Norry, Norry!" piped Aunt Hester's shrill treble. "Where's that child gone? Doesn't she know she'll get her death out there in the evening air."

Norine laughed.

"From romance to reality! Aunt Hester doesn't believe in moonlight and star-gazing and foolish longings for the impossible. Perhaps she is right; but I wonder if she didn't stop to look at the moon sometimes, too, when she was seventeen?"

It was a very fair opening, given in all innocence. But Mr. Gilbert did not avail himself of it. He was not a "lady's man" in any sense of the word. Up to the present he had never given the fairest, the cleverest among them a second glance, a second thought. The language of compliment and flirtation was as Chaldaic and Sanscrit to him, and he walked by her side up to the house and into the keeping-room in ignoble silence.

The little old maid and the big old bachelors were assembled here, the lamp was lit, the curtains down and the silvery shimmer of that lovely moon-rise jealously shut out. Norine went to the piano, and entertained her audience with music. She played very well, indeed. She had had plenty of piano-forte-drudgery at the Convent school of the Grey Nuns in her beloved Montreal. She sung for them in the voice that suited her mignonne face, a full, rich contralto.

She sang gayly, with eyes that sparkled, the national song of Lower Canada: "*Vive la Canadienne*," and the New York lawyer went up to bed that first night with its ringing refrain in his ears:

"Vive la Canadienne et ses beaux yeux,
Et ses beaux yeux tous doux,
Et ses beaux yeux."

"Ah!" Richard Gilbert thought, "well may the *habitants* sing and extol the *beaux yeux* of their fair countrywomen, if those bright eyes are one-half as lovely as Norine Bourdon's."

He stayed his fortnight out at the old red farm-house; and he who ran might read the foolish record. He, a sober, practical man of thirty-five, who up to the present had escaped unscarred, had fallen a victim at last to a juvenile disease in its most malignant form. And juvenile disorders are very apt to be fatal when caught in mature years. He was in love with a tall child of seventeen, a foolish little French girl, who looked upon him with precisely the same affection she felt for Uncle Reuben.

"What a fool I am," the lawyer thought, moodily, "to dream a child like that can ever be my wife? A sensible, practical young woman of seven-and-twenty is nearer your mark, Richard Gilbert. What do I know of this girl, except that she has silken ringlets and shining black eyes, and all sorts of charming, childish, bewitching ways. I will not make an idiot of myself at my age. I will go away and forget her and my folly. I was a simpleton ever to come."

He kept his word. He went away with his story untold. He bade them all good-bye, with a pang of regret more keen than any he had ever felt before in his life. Perhaps the little brown hand of mademoiselle lingered a thought longer than the others in his; perhaps his parting look into those *beaux yeux* was a shade more wistful. He was going for good now – to become a wise man once more, and he might never look into those wonderful, dark eyes more.

Norine was sorry, very sorry, and said so with a frank regret her middle-aged lover did not half like. He might be unskilled in the mysteries of the tender passion, but he had an inward conviction that love would never speak such candid words, never look back at him with such crystal clear eyes. She walked with him to the gate; her ebon curls a stream in the July breeze.

"Will you not write to me sometimes?" Mr. Gilbert could not help asking. "You don't know how glad I shall be to hear of – of you all."

Mademoiselle Bourdon promised readily.

"Though I don't write very good letters," she remarked deprecatingly. "I get the spelling wrong, and the grammar dreadfully mixed when I write in English, but I want to improve. If you'll promise to tell me of all my mistakes, I'll write with pleasure."

So what were to be the most precious love letters on earth to the gentleman, were to be regarded as "English composition," by the lady. Truly, the French proverb saith: "There is always one who loves, and one who is loved."

Mr. Gilbert returned to New York, and found that populous city a blank and howling wilderness. The exercises in English composition began, and though both grammar and spelling might get themselves into hopeless snarls, to him they were the most eloquent and precious epistles ever woman penned. He had read the letters of Lady Mary Wortley Montague, but what were those vapid epistles to Miss Bourdon's? He watched for the coming of the Eastern mail; he tore open the little white envelope; he read and re-read, and smiled over the contents.

And time went on. August, September, October passed. The letters from Miss Norine Bourdon came like clock work, and were the bright spots in Richard Gilbert's hard-working, drab-colored life. He wrote her back; he sent her books and music, and pictures and albums, and pretty things without end, and was happy. And then the Ides of dark November came, and all this pastoral bliss was ended and over.

The letters with the Down-east post mark ceased abruptly, and without any reason; his last two remained unanswered. He wrote a third, and fell into a fever while he waited. Was she sick, was she dead, was she – . No, not faithless, surely, he turned cold at the bare thought. But what was it? The last week of November brought him his answer. Very short, very unsatisfactory.

"Kent Farm, Nov. 28, 1860.

"Dear Mr. Gilbert – You must pardon me for not replying to your last letters. I have been so busy. A gentleman met with an accident nearly three weeks ago, close by our house, broke his left arm, and sprained his right ankle. I have had to take care of him. Aunt Hetty has so much to do all the time that she could not. We are all very well, and send you our best wishes. I am very much obliged for the pretty work-box, and the magazines, etc. And I am, dear Mr. Gilbert, with the most affectionate sentiments,

"Norine K. Bourdon.

"P. S. – The gentleman is greatly better. He is with us still. He is very nice. He is from your city.

"N."

In the solitude of his legal sanctum, Richard Gilbert, with frowning brow and gloomy eyes, read this blighting epistle. His worst fears were realized, more than realized.

There was a gentleman in the case. A gentleman who absorbed so much of Miss Norine Bourdon's time that she could not answer his letters. And he was "greatly better" and he was from your city. Confound the puppy! He was young and good-looking, no doubt; and he must meet with his accident, at her very door; precisely as though he were enacting a chapter out of a novel. Of course, too, it was his arm and his ankle that were smashed, not his villainous face. And Norine sat by his bedside, and bathed his forehead, and held cooling draughts to his parched lips, and listened to his romantic, imbecile delirium, etc., etc., etc. She sat up with him nights; she read to him; she talked to him; she sang for him. He could see it all.

Mr. Gilbert was a Christian gentleman, so he did not swear. But I am bound to say he felt like swearing. He jumped up; he crushed that poor little letter into a ball; he strode up and down his office like a caged (legal) tiger. The green-eyed monster put forth its obnoxious claws, and never left him for many a dreary year. It was that atrocious postscript, so innocently written, so diabolical to read. "He is greatly better. He is with us still. He is very nice." Oh, confound him! what a pity it had not been his neck.

Suddenly he paused in his walk, his brows knit, his eyes flashing, his mouth set. Yes, that was it, he would do it, his resolution was taken. He would go straight to Kent Farm, and see for himself. And next morning at 8 o'clock the express train for Boston bore among its passengers Mr. R. Gilbert, of New York.

The train whirled him away, and as the chill, murky December landscape flew by, he awoke all at once to a sense of what he was about. Why was he going? what did he mean? to ask Norine Bourdon to be his wife? certainly not. To play dog in the manger, and keep some more fortunate man from loving and marrying her? most certainly not. Then why had he come? At this juncture he set his teeth, took up the *Herald* and scowled moodily at its printed pages all day long.

He slept that night in Boston, and next morning resumed his journey. He reached Portland before noon, dined at his usual hotel, and then, as the afternoon sun began to drop low in the wintry sky, set out on foot for Kent Farm.

How familiar it all was; how often, when the fields were green, the trees waving, and the birds singing, he had walked this road beside Norine. But the fields were white with snow to-day, the trees black, gaunt skeletons, and the July birds dead or gone. All things had changed in four months – why not Norine as well?

It was four by the lawyer's watch as he raised the latch of the garden gate, and walked up the snow-shrouded path. There stood the gnarled old apple tree, with its rustic chair, but the tree was leafless, and the chair empty. Doors and windows had stood wide when he saw them last, with sunshine and summer floating in; now all were closed, and the December blasts howled around the gables. There was no one to be seen, but the red light of a fire streamed brightly out through the curtains of the keeping-room.

He went slowly up the steps, opened the front door, and entered the hall. The door of that best apartment stood half open, light and warmth, voices and laughter came through. Mr. Gilbert paused on the threshold an instant, and looked at the picture within.

A very pretty picture.

The room was lit by the leaping fire alone. Seated on a low stool, before the fire and beside the sofa, he saw Norine. She was reading aloud the lovely story of *Lalla Rookh*. He had sent her the green and gilt volume himself. She wore a crimson merino dress, over which her black hair fell, and in the fantastic firelight how fair the dark, piquant face looked, the dark eyes were bent upon her book, and the soft voice was the only sound in the room.

On the sofa, perilously near, lay the "gentleman" of her letter – the hero of the broken arm and sprained ankle, who was "very nice." And Richard Gilbert looking, gave a great start.

He knew him.

His worst fears were realized. He saw a man both young and good-looking – something more, indeed, than good-looking. The face was thin and pale, but when was that a fault in the eyes of a girl! – a tall figure in a dark suit, brown hair, and silken blonde mustache artistically curled. Surely a charming picture of youth and beauty on both sides, and yet if Mr. Gilbert had seen a cobra di capella coiled up beside the girl he loved, he could hardly have turned sicker with jealous fear.

"Laurence Thorndyke," he thought blankly "of all the men in the wide world, what evil fortune has sent Laurence Thorndyke here!"

CHAPTER III.

MR. LAURENCE THORNDYKE

The little dog Frolo, curled up beside his mistress, was the first to see and greet the newcomer. He rushed forward, barking a friendly greeting, and the young lady looked up from the book she was reading, the young gentleman from the face he was reading at the same moment, and beheld the dark figure in the doorway.

Norine Bourdon sprang to her feet, blushing violently, and came forward with outstretched hand. It was the first time he had ever seen her blush – like that – the first time her eyes had fallen, the first time her voice had faltered. She might be glad to see him, as she said, but all the old, frank, childish gladness was gone.

"I have taken you by surprise," he said, gazing into her flushed face and shrinking eyes, "as I did once before. I get tired of New York and business very suddenly sometimes, and you know I have a standing invitation here."

"We are very glad — *I* am very glad to see you, Mr. Gilbert," Norine answered, but with an embarrassment, a restraint altogether new in his experience of her. "We missed you very much after you went away."

The young man on the sofa, who all this time had been calmly looking and listening, now took an easier position, and spoke:

"Six-and-twenty-years experience of this wicked world has taught me the folly of being surprised at anything under the sun. But if I had not outlived the power of wondering, centuries ago, I should wonder at seeing Mr. Richard Gilbert out of the classic precincts of Wall street the first week of December. I suppose now you wouldn't have looked to see *me* here?"

He held out a shapely, languid hand, with a diamond ablaze on it. The lawyer touched it about as cordially as though it had been an extended toad.

"I certainly would not, Mr. Thorndyke. I imagined, and so did Mr. Darcy, when I saw him last, that you were in Boston, practicing your profession."

"Ah! no doubt! So I was until a month ago. I suppose it never entered your – I mean his venerable noddle, to conceive the possibility of my growing tired practicing my profession. Such is the fact, however. Even the hub of the universe may pall on the frivolous mind of youth, and I've 'thrown physic to the dogs, I'll none of it,' for the present at least. My patients – few and far between, I'm happy to say, will get on much more comfortably, and stand a much better chance of recovery without me."

"Indeed! I don't doubt it at all. But your uncle?"

"My uncle can't hope to escape the crosses of life any more than poorer and better men. All work and no play makes, what's his name, a dull boy. There will be a row very likely, the sooner my venerated relative is convinced that my talents don't lie in the bleeding and blistering, the senna and salts line, the better. They don't."

"Don't they? It would be difficult to say, from what I know of Mr. Laurence Thorndyke, in what line they *do* lie. May I ask what you mean to do?"

"I shall go in for sculpture," responded Mr. Laurence Thorndyke, with the calm consciousness of superior genius. "Other men have made fame and fortune by art, and why not I? If my hypocondriacal adopted uncle would only shell out, send me to Rome, and enable me to study the old masters, I have the strongest internal conviction that –"

"That you would set the world on fire with your genius. That you would eclipse the Greek Slave. No doubt – I have known others to think so before, and I know the sort of 'fame and fortune' they made. How do you come to be here?" Very curtly and abruptly, this.

"Ah! – thereby hangs a tale," with a long tender glance at Norine. "I am the debtor of a most happy accident. My horse threw me, and Miss Bourdon, happening along at the moment, turned Good Samaritan and took me in."

"I don't mean that," Mr. Gilbert said, stiffly; "how do you come to be in Maine at all?"

"I beg your pardon. Tom Lydyard – the Portland Lydyards, you know – no I suppose you don't know, by the by. Tom Lydyard was to be married, and invited me over on the auspicious occasion. Tom's a Harvard man like myself, sworn chums, brothers-in-arms, Damon and Pythias, and all that bosh; and when he asked me down to his wedding, could I – I put it to yourself, now, Gilbert, could I refuse? I cut the shop. I turned my back on blue pills and chloral, I came I saw, I – mademoiselle, may I trouble you for a glass of lemonade? You have no idea, Mr. Gilbert, what a nuisance I am, not being able to do anything for myself yet."

"Perhaps I have" was Mr. Gilbert's frigid response. The sight of Norine bending over that recumbent figure gave him a sensation of actual physical pain. He knew what this languid, graceful, slow speaking young Sybarite's life had been, if she did not.

Just at that moment – and it was a relief, Aunt Hester entered, followed by Uncles Reuben and Joe. No restraint here, no doubt about his welcome from them, no change in the place he held in their esteem and affection. Tea was ready, would everybody please to come.

Mr. Thorndyke's fractured limb was by no means equal to locomotion, so Uncle Reuben wheeled him, sofa and all, into the next room, and Aunt Hester and Norine vied with each other in waiting on him. It comes natural to all women to pet sick men – if the man be young and handsome, why it comes all the more naturally.

Mr. Thorndyke wasn't sick by any means – that was all over and done with. He took his tea from Aunt Hester's hand and drank it, his toast and chicken from Norine and ate them. He talked to them both in that lazy, pleasant voice of his, or lay silent and stroked his mustache with his diamond-ringed hand, and looked handsome, and whether the talk or the silence were most dangerous, it would have puzzled a cleverer man than Richard Gilbert to tell. To sit there listening to Aunt Hester chirping and Uncle Reuben prosing, and see the blue eyes making love, in eloquent silence, to the black ones, was almost too much for human nature to endure. She sat there silent, shy, all unlike the bright, chattering Norine of the summer gone, but with, oh! such an infinitely happy face! She sat beside Laurence Thorndyke – she ministered to that convalescent appetite of his, and that was enough. What need of speech when silence is so sweet?

Supper ended, Mr. Thorndyke was wheeled back to his post in the front room beside the fire. Norine never came near him all the rest of the evening, she sat at the little piano, and poured out her whole heart in song. Richard Gilbert, full of miserable, knowing jealousy, understood those songs; perhaps Laurence Thorndyke, lying with half-closed eyes, half-smiling lips, did too. They were old-fashioned songs that the lawyer had sent her, favorites of his own: "Twere vain to tell thee all I feel," and "Drink to me only with thine eyes." Yes, the meaning of those tender old ballads was not for him. It was maddening to see Laurence Thorndyke lying there, with that conscious smile on his lips; he could endure no more – he arose with the last note, abruptly enough, and bade them good-night.

"What! so early, Gilbert?" Thorndyke said, looking at his watch. "What a dickens of a hurry you're in. You've got no clients in Portland, have you? and Miss Bourdon, is going to sing us half-a-dozen more songs yet."

Mr. Gilbert paid no attention whatever to this flippant young man. He turned his back upon him indeed, and explained elaborately to Uncle Reuben that it was impossible for him to remain longer to-night, but that he would call early on the morrow.

"He is very much changed," remarked Aunt Hester, thoughtfully; "don't you think so, Norry? He's nothing like so pleasant and free, as he used to be."

"Particularly grumpy, I should say," interposed Mr. Thorndyke. "'Pleasant and free' are the last terms I should think of applying to Richard Gilbert. Not half a bad fellow either, old Gilbert, but an awful prig – don't you think so, Miss Bourdon?"

"I like Mr. Gilbert very much," Miss Bourdon answered, strumming idly on the keys; "and I think him pleasant. He seemed out of spirits to-night, though, I fancy."

It was bright, frosty starlight as the lawyer walked back to town. He walked rapidly, his head well up, a dark frown clouding his face.

"Any one but Thorndyke – any one but Thorndyke!" he was thinking bitterly. Alas! Mr. Gilbert, would you not have been jealous of the Archbishop of Canterbury had that dignitary been "keeping company" with Miss Bourdon? "And she loves him already – already. A very old story to Laurence Thorndyke. Six-and-twenty years, a well-shaped nose, two blue eyes, a mustache, and the easy insolence of the 'golden youth' of New York. What else has he but that? What else is needed to win *any* woman's heart? And hers is his, for good or for evil, for ever and ever. He is the Prince Charming of her fairy tale, and she has caught his wandering, artist fancy, as scores have caught it before. And when I tell her the truth, that his plighted wife awaits him, what then? Little Norine! to think that you should fall into the power of Laurence Thorndyke."

Yes, she was in his power – for she loved him. Had it all not been so delightfully romantic, so like a chapter out of one of her pet novels, that first meeting, when Fate itself had flung him wounded and bleeding at her feet? Was it not all photographed forever on her mind, a picture whose vividness time never could dim! It had befallen in this way:

On the afternoon of the third of November Miss Bourdon had driven over in the light wagon from the farm to the city, to receive her usual, eagerly-looked-for package from Mr. Gilbert. It had been dark and windy from early morning. As the afternoon wore on, the sky grew darker, the wind higher. She got her bundle of books, visited one or two stores, one or two friends, and night had fallen before she turned old Kitty's head towards Kent Farm. A faint and watery moon made its way up through the drifts of jagged cloud, and the gale howled through the street as though it had gone mad. It was a lonely and unpleasant ride; but old Kitty could have made her way asleep, and Norine sang to herself as she drove slowly along. They were within a quarter of a mile of the house, when Kitty pricked up her red ears, gave a neigh of alarm, and shied from some long, dark object lying motionless across her path. Norine bent over and looked down. There, she saw, lying on his face, the prostrate form of a man.

Was he drunk, or was he dead? She was out in a twinkling, and bending above him. There was blood on his clothes, and on the dusty road. She turned his face over until the pallid moon shone upon it. Dead, to all seeming, the eyes closed, life and consciousness gone.

Fifteen minutes later, Mr. Laurence Thorndyke was lying in the best bedroom of Kent Farm, with Aunt Hester and Norine bending over him, and Uncle Joe scudding along on horseback for a doctor. All their efforts to bring him out of that fainting fit were vain. White and cold he lay; and so Norine Bourdon, with a great pity in her heart, looked first upon the face of Laurence Thorndyke.

CHAPTER IV. THE LAWYER'S WARNING

Mr. Gilbert appeared in no hurry to revisit his friends at Kent Farm. It was late in the afternoon of the next day before he came slowly along the quiet country road. He had passed the morning idly enough, staring from the hotel window, down at the peaceful street and the few straggling passers by. After his three o'clock dinner he had put on hat and overcoat, and leisurely taken his way over the familiar ground.

It was a gray December afternoon, with a threatening of coming storm in the overcast sky. A few feathery flakes whirled already through the leaden air, an icy blast blew up from the sea, the road was deserted, the dreary fields snow-shrouded and forsaken. And only yesterday it seemed he had walked here by her side, the golden grain breast high, and the scarlet poppies aflame in the gardens. His youth had come back to him with that sunlit holiday. If he had spoken then, who knew what her answer might have been. But he had let the hour and the day go by, and now it was too late.

The snow flakes were whirling faster and faster as Mr. Gilbert opened the gate and approached the house. He could see the rose light of the fire through the curtained windows, and a slight, graceful figure seated at one, sewing. The brown rattling stems of hop vines twining around it, like sere serpents, made a framework for the girlish head and fair young face. All the floss silk curls were bound back with scarlet ribbon, and the luminous black eyes were fixed on her work. They saw the tardy visitor, however, and with a bright, welcoming smile she sprang up, and ran to open the door.

"How late you are. We thought you were not coming at all. I have been looking for you all day." She held out her hand, far more like Norine of old than last night, and led the way back into the parlor. There on his comfortable sofa, by his comfortable fire, reposed of course the five feet, eleven inches of Mr. Laurence Thorndyke. Mr. Gilbert gave that invalid a nod several degrees icier than the elements out doors.

"Ah, you have come! I told Norine you would." – Norine! it had come to that then – "I know you to be one of those uncompromising sort of characters, Gilbert, who never break their word. Have you your cigar case about you? I should like a smoke."

"Miss Bourdon is present, Mr. Thorndyke."

"So she is – for which Allah be praised. But Miss Bourdon is the most sensible, as she is most charming of young ladies. She gave me *carte blanche* ages ago to smoke as much as I please. Didn't you Norry? She fills my pipe, she even lights it when this confounded shoulder twitches more than usual."

Richard Gilbert set his teeth with inward fury. To sit here, and listen to Laurence Thorndyke's insolent familiarity, his lover like – "Norry," drove him half wild.

"I have not my cigar case," he answered, more and more frigidly; "and if I had, I don't know that I should countenance such a trespass on common decency as to let you smoke one here. How long before your doctor thinks you fit to be removed?"

"Oh, not for weeks yet; it was a deuce of a fracture, I can tell you. Why, pray? My insignificant movements, as a rule, are all unworthy Mr. Gilbert's attention."

"Your uncle is my friend, sir," the lawyer replied, "and I prefer not to see him hoodwinked. I recommend you strongly to write and explain your position, or I shall take an early opportunity of doing so myself."

"Will you? How very kind you are. But isn't it a pity to give yourself so much unnecessary trouble? I believe Mr. Hugh Darcy did invest you with a species of authority over my actions, but at six-and-twenty, don't you think a fellow ought to be let loose from the leading strings? And what would you have? I couldn't help accepting Tom Lydyard's invitation. I couldn't help my horse taking fright and throwing me. I couldn't help breaking my arm, and spraining my ankle, and I can't help

being in the seventh heaven of happiness and comfort with two such nurses as Miss Kent and Miss Bourdon. Don't be unreasonable, Gilbert. Norine —*ma belle*, I am utterly exhausted with all this talking. What are you laughing at? Do pray favor me with my meerschaum and a light."

The pleasant lazy voice stopped, the pleasant smile turned upon Norine.

Miss Bourdon laughing at this passage of arms arose with alacrity to obey, and the lawyer, looking unspeakably grim got up, too.

"Permit me to say good-by, Miss Bourdon. I start for New York to-night. Can I see your uncle a moment before I go?" The door opened as he asked the question and Aunt Hester came into the room.

"I heard your voice as I passed through the hall," she said. "Surely you ain't going so soon?"

"I regret I must, my business requires my immediate return. I have only time to say good-by and speak a word to your brother. Where shall I find him?"

"In the stable, most likely. I'll go with you."

"Thanks. Farewell, Miss Bourdon."

Again their hands met, she looked perplexed and wistful, but she did not urge him to stay. With a second stiff nod to Mr. Thorndyke, the lawyer strode out of the room after Aunt Hetty.

"A word to her brother," muttered Mr. Thorndyke to himself looking after them. "I think I know what that means. 'That fellow, Thorndyke, is a spendthrift, a gambler, a flirt, an engaged man. Don't let him have anything to say to Norine.' That will be about the sum and substance of it. To think of his falling in love at his time of life, when he's old enough and big enough to know better. But then middle-aged fools are the worst of all fools. And you come a day after the fair, Mr. Richard Gilbert. Your word of warning is just two weeks too late. I owe you two or three little grudges for your *espionage* of the past, and for two or three little games blocked, and I think I see my way clearly to wiping them out at last. A thousand thanks my charming little nurse." Aloud to Norine, entering with pipe and pipe-light:

"What should I ever do without you?"

Mr. Gilbert, escorted by Aunt Hester, reached the stable, where Uncle Reuben stood busily curry-combing Kitty.

"I want to speak half-a-dozen words in private to you, Kent," the lawyer began, abruptly enough. "You will tell your good sister here at your convenience, if you see fit. You must excuse my seeming rudeness, Miss Kent, and say good-by, now."

He shook hands with her cordially, and watched her out of sight. Then he turned to her brother.

"We are quite alone?" he asked.

"Quite, squire. Take a seat."

He brought forward a stool, but Mr. Gilbert waved it away.

"No, no, what I have to say will take but a minute, and then I shall be going. I want to speak to you of that young man who is your guest – Laurence Thorndyke."

"Wal, squire."

"You have not known me very long, Mr. Kent, but I think, I hope, you have known me long enough to trust me, to believe what I say, to understand I have no selfish motive. It is for" – he paused a moment – "it is for your niece's sake I speak, you can hardly take a deeper interest in her welfare than I do."

Was there ever so slight a tremor in the grave, steady voice, or did Reuben Kent only fancy it? He paused in Kitty's toilet and looked at him keenly.

"Wal, squire?" he said again.

"Laurence Thorndyke is no fit, no safe companion for your niece. He is not a good man, he is as false as he is fascinating. She is only seventeen, she knows nothing of the world, nothing of such men as he, and believe me, Kent, it won't do."

Reuben Kent looked up, a sudden flash in his eye, a sudden redness in his face.

"Go on," he said, curtly.

"I am afraid Miss Bourdon cares more for him already than – " He paused again and averted his face. "You know what I mean. He is handsome, and she is only a girl. She will grow to love him, and he could not marry her if he would, he is already engaged, and unless I mistake him greatly, would not if he could. Mr. Kent, this young man will go away, and Norine will be neither the better nor the happier for his coming."

His voice was husky. Something of the pain he felt was in his face. The farmer stretched forth and caught the lawyer's hand in a hard grip.

"Thanky, squire," he said; "I ain't a man to jaw much, but I believe *you*, and am obliged to you for this. If that young jacknapes from York tries to come any of his city games down here, by the Lord Jehosaphat! I'll lay him up with something worse than a broken arm!"

"Can you not avert the danger?" suggested Mr. Gilbert. "It may not be too late. Send the fellow away."

"Wal, squire, you see that mightn't be doing the square thing by him. It would look unpleasantly like turning him out. No, I can't send him away until the doctor says he's fit to go, but, by ginger, I'll send her!"

"Will she go?"

Uncle Reuben chuckled.

"We won't ask her. I'll fix it off. We've some cousins thirty miles up country, and they've invited her time and again, but, somehow, we've never felt – Joe and me – as though we could spare her afore. It's powerful lonesome, I tell ye, squire, when Norry ain't around. But now – I'll take her to-morrow morning."

"The best thing you can do. And now, before it gets any later and stormier, I will be off. Good-by, Mr. Kent, for the present."

"Good-by, and thanky, squire, thanky. You'll be along again soon, hey?"

"Well, perhaps so," replied the lawyer, coloring slightly. "Take care of your niece, Kent, and good-by to you."

They parted at the gate. Reuben Kent watched the stalwart form of the lawyer out of sight, then walked slowly and thoughtfully back to the house and the sitting-room. Mr. Thorndyke, in a deep, melodious tenor, was reading aloud "Lucille," and Miss Bourdon, with flushed cheeks and glistening eyes of light, was listening.

The reading ceased at the farmer's entrance; the spell was broken, and Norine looked up.

"Has Mr. Gilbert gone, Uncle Reuben?"

"Yes."

He said it with unusual gravity, regarding young Thorndyke. The girl saw the change in his usually good humored, red-and-tan face, and went over and threw an arm around his neck.

"What is it, uncle? Something gone wrong?"

"No – yes. Nothing that can't be set right, I hope. Where's your aunt?"

"In the kitchen baking cake. Shall I run and call her?"

"No, I'll go myself."

He left the room. Mr. Thorndyke watched him.

"It is as I thought," he said to himself. "My label is up, 'dangerous.' What has Gilbert been saying? Has he given Uncle Reuben my whole interesting biography? Has he told him I drink, I gamble, I make love to pretty girls wherever I meet them? All right, my legal duffer; you have set your forty-years-old heart on pretty, black-eyed, belle Norine, and so have I. Now, let's see who'll win."

Mr. Kent found his sister in the kitchen, baking, as Norine had said, cakes for tea, their fragrant sweetness perfuming the hot air. In very few words he repeated to her the lawyer's warning.

"We might a seen it ourselves, Hetty, if we hadn't been blinder than bats. I'll take her up to Abel Merryweather's to-morrow, and just leave her thar till this ere chap goes."

"Will you tell her, Reuben?" Aunt Hetty asked.

"No; I kinder don't like to, somehow. She'll guess without any telling, I reckon. If I told her, she might tell him, there ain't never no countin' on gals, and then he'd be after her hot foot. Least said's soonest mended. Jest call her down to help you, Hetty, and keep her here as long as you can. What with his poetry reading, his singing, his fine talk, and good-lookin' face, he's enough to turn any gal's head."

"It was very good of Mr. Gilbert to tell you, Reuben."

"Very."

They looked at each other, and smiled. Poor Richard Gilbert! Your cherished secret was very large print after all.

"Mr. Gilbert's her best friend, and sets heaps by her," said Uncle Reuben rising. "Call the girl at once, Hetty."

He left the kitchen and Aunt Hester obeyed. Norine was summoned from "Lucille," and Mr. Thorndyke – to look after the cakes, to make tea, to roll out the short-cake, to butter the biscuits, to set the table. For once Aunt Hester turned lazy and left everything to Norine. She had not breathing space until supper was on the table.

After supper it was as bad. Contrary to all precedent, instead of going to the piano, Norine got a basket of socks to darn. She looked at the heap and the rents with laughing dismay.

"All these for me, Auntie! I'll never get through in the world, and I want to practice my new songs with Mr. Thorndyke."

"Mr. Thorndyke will excuse you, I am sure," Aunt Hetty answered quietly. "You sing a great deal more for him than you darn for me. You darn very badly – it is time that you learned something useful. Here is your needle and ball, my dear, go to work at once."

Miss Bourdon made a little wry face; Mr. Thorndyke's laughing blue eyes looked knowing. Love and music were to be exchanged for cooking and darning, all thanks to Mr. Gilbert.

Aunt Hester placed herself between her guest and her niece, and kept her post like a very duenna all the evening. No poetry, no music, no compliments, no love-making, only silence and sock-darning. Laurence Thorndyke reclining on his lounge, even his efforts at conversation falling flat, saw and understood it all perfectly. By Gilbert's order the ewe lamb was to be guarded from the wolf. And his spirit rose with the resistance.

"Guard her as you like," he said inwardly, – "watch her as you will, I'll baffle the whole of you yet. If I cared nothing for the girl, and I don't care much, I would still conquer you here, if only for the pleasure of paying off Richard Gilbert. Meddling old prig! There was that affair of Lucy West, he had to bring that to light, and old Darcy was within an ace of disinheriting me. He wants to marry this little black-eyed, sentimental French girl himself – more fool he – and it shall be my pleasant and profitable occupation to nip that middle-aged romance in the bud. I flatter myself I am rather more than a match for Aunt Hetty."

But Mr. Thorndyke was yet to learn whether he was or no. At no time, well or ill, was this elegant young doctor addicted to the vice of early-rising. It was mostly noon when, half-carried in the strong arms of Uncle Reuben and Joe, he reached the parlor.

Norine, however, was up with the lark – that is to say there were no larks in December, but with the striking six of the kitchen clock. On the morning following the stocking darning, as the family assembled together for their seven o'clock breakfast, Uncle Reuben said:

"Norry, I'm a going to give you a treat to-day – something you've been wanting this long time."

Norine opened her black eyes, and held the portion of buckwheat cake on her fork, suspended in space.

"A treat! Something I've been wanting this long time! You darling old dear, what is it?"

"Don't ask me, it's a secret, it's to be a surprise. Have you finished breakfast? Wal, run and put on the best duds you've got, while I go round and gear up Kitty."

"Kitty! Then we're going somewhere. Now Uncle Reuben – "

"It ain't a mite o' use, Norry, I ain't agoin' to tell. Be off and clap on your Sunday fixins, while I get around the cutter."

"You're going to take me to the city and buy me some thing – a silk dress, perhaps. Oh, uncle! what a dear old love you are! I'll be ready in ten minutes."

Uncle Reuben's heart smote him a little as he received Norine's rapturous kiss, but there was no drawing back. He left the house, while Miss Bourdon flew off singing like a skylark, to make her toilet. A new silk – yes, that was it – a new wine-colored silk with black lace trimming. If Mr. Thorndyke admired her in last winter's dingy red merino, how would he be dazzled by the wine-colored silk? In fifteen minutes her rapid toilet was made, and looking charming in her holiday attire she came running back to Uncle Reuben. The sleigh was drawn up before the door; she sprang into her seat beside him. Aunt Hetty, in the doorway, was smiling good-by, the bells jingled, the whip cracked, Kitty tossed her head and darted away into the frosty morning sunshine.

"*Not* going to the city, uncle!" cried Norine "now, where on earth can you be taking me?"

"To Merryweather's my dear," calmly responded Uncle Reuben, "where you have been teasing me to take you these three months. There! ain't that a pleasant surprise?"

There was a blank silence for a moment – the silence of great amaze. He looked at her askance. A surprise beyond a doubt, but a pleasant one. Well, that was another question. Her face had changed ominously all in a moment.

"To Merryweather's?" she repeated. "Thirty miles!"

"Exactly, my dear – to stay two or three weeks, as they've been wanting you to do. I didn't tell you, because I wanted to surprise you. I knew you would be pleased to death."

"But uncle I can't!" exclaimed the girl, vehemently. "I can't go. I have nothing to wear. My trunk and all my things are at home."

"Jest so; the cutter wouldn't hold your trunk; but Joe, he's going out 'bout the end of the week, and he'll fetch it. Make your mind easy, my dear; Aunt Hetty will forget nothin'."

Norine made no reply. The sunny face wore the darkest expression Uncle Reuben had ever seen it wear yet. Was Mr. Gilbert right – was the mischief done – was it too late, after all?

He drove on. The blank silence lasted. He had never dreamed the laughing face of his little Norine could wear the look it wore now. She spoke after a long pause, in a tone of sullen inquiry:

"I wish you had told me last night, Uncle Reuben. It seems very odd going off in this way. What will Mr. Thorndyke say?"

"What business is it of his?" placidly inquired Uncle Reuben.

An angry flush rose up over Norine's face.

"He will think it very strange — *very* strange; I did not even say good-by."

"I'll explain all that."

"And Aunt Hetty – how will she ever get along without me, with the house work to do, and Mr. Thorndyke to wait on, and everything."

"He won't be to wait on long, he'll be able to return to his friends in Portland in a week, and to tell the truth, I shan't be sorry to be rid of him. As for you, Norry, by the way you object, one would think you didn't want to go, after all."

Again Norine flushed angrily.

"I don't object to going," she said, in a tone that contradicted her words. "It is the manner of going I don't like. I do think you might have told me last night, Uncle Reuben."

Uncle Reuben stopped the cutter abruptly, and looked at her.

"Shall I turn and drive back?" he asked.

What could she say? The black eyes emitted an angry flash, the voice that answered was sharp and petulant.

"No – go on."

He drove on, without another word. Norine lay back in the sleigh, wrapped her cloak about her, pulled a little veil she wore, over her face, and was silent. A great fear, a great dismay, a great foreboding filled Uncle Reuben's heart. Had this girl lived with them so long, made herself so dear, and hidden the nature that was within her, after all? What lay under that sparkling surface that had seemed as clear as limpid water? Dark depths he could never fathom, depths undreamed of as yet by herself. Was she – he wondered this vaguely, with a keen sense of pain – the gentle, affectionate, yielding child they had thought her, or a self-willed, passionate, headstrong woman, ready, woman-like, to throw over her oldest and truest friends if they stood between her and the man she loved?

CHAPTER V. "I WILL BE YOUR WIFE."

Miss Bourdon's visit to the family of Mr. Abel Merryweather lasted just three weeks and two days, and unspeakably dull and empty the old red farm-house seemed without her. Uncle Joe had gone out with her trunk on Saturday, and with the news that everybody was well, and Mr. Thorndyke was to go for good the following Monday.

"To New York?" Norine asked, turning very pale.

"I reckon so," Uncle Joe responded, coolly; "that's to say, he's to stop a few days in Portland with his friends there; he's going to spend the rest of the winter South – so he told Hetty – down to Maryland somewhere."

Norine set her lips, and turned away without a word. She would have given half her life to be able to return with Uncle Joe, but she was far too proud to ask. Some dim inkling of the truth was beginning to dawn upon her. For some cruel reason they did not wish her to be with Mr. Thorndyke, and they had sent her here to be out of his way.

They were the dullest three weeks of the young lady's life. It was a pleasant place, too – Mr. Abel Merryweather's, with a jolly, noisy houseful of sons and daughters, and country frolics without end. Two months ago, Norine had looked forward to this visit with delight. But in two months the whole world had changed; and now, there was no sunshine in heaven, no gladness on earth, since a well-looking, well-dressed young man from the city would light her life with his smile no more.

Mr. Thorndyke did depart the following Monday. He had been considerably surprised on first missing Norine, and inquired of Aunt Hetty where she was. The reply was very brief and reserved.

"Uncle Reuben has taken her away to visit some friends."

Mr. Thorndyke fixed his large, blue eyes full upon the speaker's face. Aunt Hester, never looking at him, went on arranging the furniture.

"How long will she be gone?" he asked, at length.

"That depends upon circumstances," replied Miss Kent; "probably some weeks."

Mr. Thorndyke said no more. Aunt Hetty poured out his tea, arranged his buttered toast and boiled eggs, and left the room. It had been Norine's labor of love hitherto, Norine's bright face that smiled across the little round table, instead of the withered, sallow one of Aunt Hetty. He sat alone now over his noon-day breakfast, an inexplicable look on his handsome face.

"So," he thought, "they have gone even farther than I anticipated, they have spirited her away altogether. Poor little girl! pretty little Norry! I believe I am really fond of you, after all. I wonder if she went willingly?" he smiled to himself, his vanity answered that question pretty accurately. "It's rather hard on her, a modern case of Elizabeth and the exiles. It's all my friend Gilbert's doing, of course. Very well. It is his day now, it may be mine, to-morrow."

The intervening days were hopelessly long and dreary to Mr. Laurence Thorndyke. How fond he had grown of that sparkling brunette face, those limpid eyes of "liquid light," he never knew until he lost her. That pleasant, homely room was so full of her – the closed piano, the little rocker and work-stand by the window, her beloved books and birds. Life became, all in an hour, a horrible bore in that dull red farm-house. Come what might to ankle and arm, ailing still, he would go at once. He dispatched a note to his friends in Portland, and early on Monday morning drove away with Mr. Thomas Lydyard, his friend.

"Good-by Miss Kent," he said, as he shook hands with her on the doorstep. "I can never repay all your kindness, I know, but I will do my best if the opportunity ever offers. Give my very best regards to Miss Bourdon, and tell her how much I regretted her running away."

And so he was gone. Uncle Reuben watched him out of sight with a great breath of relief.

"Thank the Lord *he's* gone, and that danger's over."

Ah, was it? Had you known Mr. Laurence Thorndyke better, Reuben Kent, you would have known, also, that the danger was but beginning.

Mr. Thorndyke remained four days with his friends in the city, and then started for New York. Reuben Kent heard it with immense relief and satisfaction.

"He's gone, Hetty," he said to his sister, "and the good Lord send he may never cross our little girl's path again. I can see her now, with the color fading out of her face, and that white look of disappointment coming over it. I hope she's forgot him before this."

"Will you go for her to-day?" Aunt Hetty asked. "It's dreadful lonesome without her."

"Not to-day. Next week will do. She'll forget him faster there than here, Hetty."

It wanted but three days of Christmas when Uncle Reuben went for his niece, and it was late on Christmas eve when they returned. The snow was piled high and white everywhere. The trees stood up, black, rattling skeletons around the old house. All things seemed to have changed in the weeks of her absence, and nothing more than Norine Bourdon.

She sank down in a chair, in a tired, spiritless sort of way, and let Aunt Hetty remove her wraps. She had grown thin, in the past fortnight, and pale and worn-looking.

"You precious little Norry," aunt Hetty said, giving her a welcoming hug. "You can't tell how glad we are to have you back again; how dreadfully we missed you. I expect you enjoyed your visit awfully now?"

"No," the young girl answered, with an impatient sigh; "it was dull."

"Dull, Norry! with four girls and three young men in the house?"

"Well, it was dull to me. I didn't care for their frolics and sleighing parties and quilting bees. It was horridly stupid, the whole of it."

"Then you are glad to be home again?"

"Yes."

She did not look particularly glad, however. She leaned her head against the back of the chair, and closed her eyes with weary listlessness. Aunt Hetty watched her with a thrill of apprehension. Was her fancy for their departed guest something more than mere fancy? – had she not begun even to forget yet, after all?

She opened her eyes suddenly while Aunt Hetty was thinking this, and spoke abruptly.

"What did Mr. Thorndyke say when he found I was gone?"

"Nothing. Oh – he asked how long you were going to stay."

"Was that all?"

"That was all."

"Did he not inquire where I had gone?"

"No, my dear."

Norine said no more. The firelight shone full on her face, and she lifted a book and held it as a screen. So long she sat mute and motionless that Aunt Hetty fancied she had fallen asleep. She laid her hand on her shoulder. Norine's black, sombre eyes looked up.

"I thought you were asleep, my dear, you sat so still. Is anything the matter?"

"I am tired, and my head aches. I believe I will go to bed."

"But, Norry, it is Christmas eve. Supper is ready, and – "

"I can't eat supper – I don't wish any. Give me a cup of tea, aunty, and let me go."

With a sigh, aunty obeyed, and slowly and wearily Norine toiled up to her room. It was very cosy, very pleasant, very home-like and warm, that snug upper chamber, with its striped, home-made carpet of scarlet and green, its blazing fire and shaded lamp. Outside, the keen, Christmas stars shone coldly, and the world lay white in its chill winding sheet of snow.

But Norine thought neither of the comfort within nor the desolation without. She sank down into a low chair before the fire and looked blankly into the red coals.

"Gone!" something in her head seemed beating that one word, like the ticking of a clock; "gone – gone – gone forever. And it was only thirty miles, and the cars would have taken him, and he never came. And I thought, I thought, he liked me a little."

It was a dismal Christmas eve at Kent Farm; how were they to eat, drink and be merry with Norine absent. No she had not begun to forget; the mischief was wrought, every room in the house was haunted by the image of the "youth who had loved, and who rode away."

The New Year dawned, passed, and the ides of February came. And Norine – she was only seventeen, remember, began to pluck up heart of grace once more, and her laugh rang out, and her songs began to be as merry, almost, as before the coming and going of Prince Charming. Almost; the woman's heart had awakened in the girl's breast, and the old childish joyousness could never be quite the same. He never wrote, she never heard his name, even Mr. Gilbert had ceased to write. March came. "Time, that blunts the edge of things, dries our tears and spoils our bliss," had dried all hers long ago, and the splendor of Laurence Thorndyke's image was wofully dimmed by this time. Life had flown back into the old, dull channels, comfortable, but dull. No letters to look for now from Mr. Gilbert, no books, no music, everybody forgot her, Richard Gilbert, Laurence Thorndyke – all.

She sighed a little over the quilt she was making – a wonderful quilt of white and "Turkey red," a bewildering Chinese puzzle to the uninitiated. It was a dull March afternoon, cheerless and slushy, the house still as a tomb, and no living thing to be seen in the outer world, as she sat alone at her work.

"What a stupid, dismal humdrum sort of life it is." Miss Bourdon thought, drearily, "and I suppose it will go on for thirty or forty years exactly like this, and I'll dry up, and wrinkle and grow yellow and ugly, and be an old maid like Aunt Hetty. I think it would be a great deal better if some people never were born at all."

She paused suddenly, with this wise generality in her mind. A man was approaching – a tall man, a familiar and rather distinguished-looking man. One glance was enough. With a cry of delight she dropped the Chinese-puzzle quilt, sprang up, rushed out, and plumped full into the arms of the gentleman.

"Oh, Mr. Gilbert!" she cried, her black eyes, her whole face radiant with the delight of seeing some one, "how glad I am to see you! It has been so dull, and I thought you had forgotten us altogether. Come in – come in."

She held both his hands, and pulled him in. Unhappy Richard Gilbert! Who is to blame you for construing that enthusiastic welcome to suit yourself? In fear and foreboding, you had approached that house – you had looked for coldness, aversion, reproaches, perhaps. You had nerved yourself to bear them, and defend yourself, and instead —*this*.

His sallow face flushed all over with a delight more vivid than her own. For one delicious moment his breath stopped.

"And so you have thought of me, Norine!"

"Oh, so often! And hoped, and longed, and looked for your coming. But you never came, and you never wrote, and I was sure you had forgotten me altogether."

Here was an opening, and – he let it fall dead! He might be a clever lawyer, but certainly he was not a clever lover. He was smiling, and yes, actually blushing, and tingling with delight to his finger ends. Her radiant, blooming face was upturned to him, the black eyes lifted and dancing, and he looked down upon those sparkling charms, and in a flat voice – said this:

"We have had a great deal of snow lately. How are your uncles and aunts?"

But the young lady's enthusiasm was not in the least dampened. He was her friend, not her lover, he was a kindly gleam of sunshine across the dead level of her sad-colored life.

"They are all very well, thank you, Mr. Gilbert, and will be very glad to see you. Sit down and take off your overcoat. You'll stay for tea, won't you, and all night? Oh, how pleasant it is to see you back here again!"

Happy Mr. Gilbert! And yet, if he had stopped to analyze that frank, glad, sisterly welcome, he would have known it the most ominous thing on earth for his hopes. Had he been Laurence Thorndyke she would never have welcomed him like this. But just now he took the goods the gods provided, and never stopped to analyze.

"Perhaps I was mistaken after all about Thorndyke," he thought, "he has gone for good, and I never saw her look more brightly blooming. After all a girl's fancy for a handsome face, and a flirting manner, need not be very deep or lasting. It was only a fancy, and died a natural death in a week. How fortunate I spoke in time, and how clear and true she rings! I will ask her to be my wife before I leave Kent Farm."

He had come to stake his fate – "to win or lose it all," to lay his life at her feet, but he had hoped for nothing like this. He loved her – he knew it now as your staid middle-aged men do once in a lifetime. He had waited until he could wait no longer – she might refuse, he had little hope of anything else, but then at least, any certainty was better than suspense.

Mr. Gilbert's greeting from the Kent family was all that mortal man could look for. They had guessed his secret; perhaps they also guessed his object in coming now. He was very rich, and above them no doubt, but was there king or kaiser in all the world too good for their beautiful Norine.

He stayed to tea. After that meal, while Aunt Hetty was busy in the kitchen, and the men about the farm-yard, he found himself alone in the front room with Miss Bourdon. She stood looking out through the undrawn curtains at the still, white, melancholy winter night.

The first surprise and delight of the meeting past, she had grown very still. His coming had brought other memories rushing upon her as she stood here in that pretty attitude looking out at the frosty stars.

She was nerving herself to ask a question. Without turning round, and speaking very carelessly, she asked it.

"I suppose Mr. Thorndyke is in New York. Have you seen him lately?"

A jealous pang shot through the lawyer's heart. She remembered yet.

"I see him very often," he answered, promptly, and a little coldly; "I saw him the day I left. He is about to be married."

She was standing with her back to him, fluttering in a restless sort of way. As he said this she suddenly grew still.

"The match is a very old affair," Mr. Gilbert went on, resolutely; "he has been engaged nearly two years. His uncle, Mr. Darcy, wishes it very much. The young lady is an heiress, and extremely handsome. They are very much attached to one another, it is said and are to be married early in the spring."

She did not move – she did not speak. A blank uncomfortable silence followed, and once more poor Mr. Gilbert's heart contracted with a painful jealous spasm. If she would only turn round and let him see her face. Who was to understand these girls!

"What! all in the dark, Norry?" cried Uncle Reuben's cheery voice, as he came bustling in redolent of stable odors. "Come, light up, and give Mr. Gilbert a song."

She obeyed at once. The glare of the lamp fell full upon her, what change was it that he saw in her face? She was hardly paler than usual, she rarely had much color, but there was an expression about the soft-cut childish mouth, an unpleasant tightness about the lips that quite altered the whole expression of the face.

She opened the piano and sung – sung and played better than he had ever heard her before. She sang for hours, everything she knew – Mr. Thorndyke's favorites and all. She never rose until the striking of ten told her that bedtime had come.

The lawyer stayed all night; but in that pleasant guest-chamber that had lodged his rival last, he slept little. Was she in love with Thorndyke, or was she not? Impossible to judge these women –

any girl in her teens can baffle the shrewdest lawyer of them all. He lay tossing about full of hope, of love, of jealousy, of doubt, his fever at its very climax.

"I'll endure this torture no longer," he resolved, sullenly. "I'll ask her to marry me to-morrow."

With Richard Gilbert to resolve was to act. Five seconds after they had met, shaken hands, and said good-morning, he proposed a sleigh ride. The day was mild and sunny, the sleighing splendid, and a sleigh ride to a New Yorker a rare and delightful luxury. Would she go? Yes, she would go, but Miss Bourdon said it spiritlessly enough. And so the sleigh was brought round, and at ten o'clock in the crisp, yellow sunshine, the pair started.

But it must have been a much duller spirit than that of Norine that could have remained dull in that dazzling sunshine, that swift rush through the still frozen air. A lovely rose-pink came into her pale cheeks, a bright light into her brown eyes, her laugh rang out, she was herself as he had first known her once more.

"How splendid winter is, after all!" she exclaimed; "look at those crystallized hemlocks – did you ever see anything so beautiful? I sometimes wonder how I can find it so dreary."

"You do find it dreary, then?"

"Oh, so dreary – so long – so humdrum – so dull!" She checked herself with one of her pretty French gestures. "It seems ungrateful to say so, but I can't help it. Life seems hardly worth the living sometimes here."

"Here! Would it be better elsewhere?"

"Yes – I think so. Change is always pleasant. One grows dull and stupid living in one dull stupid place forever. Change is what I want, novelty is delight."

"Let me offer it to you then, Norine. Come to New York with me."

"Mr. Gilbert! With you!"

"With me – as my wife, I love you, Norine."

It was said. The old formula, the commonplace words that are to tell all that is in a heart full to overflowing. He sat very pale, beyond that and a certain nervous twitching of his face there was nothing to tell that all the happiness of his life hung on her reply. For her – she just looked at him blankly, incredulous – with wide open eyes of wonder.

"Your wife! Marry *you*! Mr. Gilbert!"

"I love you, Norine. It seems strange you have not known it until I tell it. I am double your age, but I will do my best to make you happy. Ah, Norine, if you knew how long I have thought of this – how dearly I love you, you would surely not refuse. I am a rich man, and all I have is yours. The world you have longed to see, you shall see. Be my wife Norine, and come with me to New York."

The first shock of surprise was over. She sat very still, looking straight out before her at the dazzling expanse of sun and snow. His words awoke no answering thrill in her heart, and yet she was conscious of a sense of pleasure. Be his wife – well, why not? The prospect of a new life broke upon her – the bright, exciting, ever-new life of a great city. She thought of that, not of Richard Gilbert.

"Speak to me, Norine," he said, "for Heaven's sake don't sit silent like this – only to answer no. For good or evil, let me have my answer at once."

But still she sat mute. She had lost Laurence Thorndyke – lost – nay he had never been hers for one poor second. He belonged to that beautiful, high-bred heiress whom he was to marry in the spring. She would read it in the papers some day, and then – her own blank, empty, aimless life spread before her. She turned suddenly to the man beside her, with something of the look her face had worn last night when she had first heard of Thorndyke's marriage.

"You are very good," she answered, quite steadily. "I will be your wife if you like."

"Thank Heaven!" – he said under his breath. "Thank Heaven!"

Her heart smote her. She was giving him so little – he was giving her so much. He had always been her good, kind, faithful friend, and she had liked him so much. Yes, that was just it, she liked him so well she could never love him. But at least she would be honest.

"I – I don't care for – I mean I don't love – " she broke down, her eyes fixed on her muff. "Oh, Mr. Gilbert, I do like you, but not like that. I – I know I'm not half good enough ever to marry you."

He smiled, a smile of great content.

"You will let me be the judge of that, Norry. You are quite sure you like me?"

"Oh, yes. I always did, you know, but I never – no never thought you cared for – Oh, dear me! how odd it seems. What will Uncle Reuben say?"

Mr Gilbert smiled again.

"Uncle Reuben won't lose his senses with surprise, I fancy. Ah, Norry, Uncle Reuben's eyes are not half a quarter so bright nor so black as yours, but he has seen more than you after all."

And then all the way home he poured into her pleased listening ear the story of her future life. It sounded like a fairy tale to the country girl. A dazzling vista spread before her, a long life in "marble halls," Brussels carpets, satin upholstery, a grand piano, pictures, books, and new music without end. Silk dresses, diamond ear-rings, the theatres, the opera, a carriage, a waiting-maid – French, if possible – her favorite heroines all had French maids, Long Branch, Newport, balls, dinners – her head swam with the dazzle and delight of it all. Be his wife – of course she would be his wife – to-morrow, if it were practicable.

But she did not say this, you understand. Her face was all rosy and dimpling and smiling as they drove home; and alas for Richard Gilbert, how little he personally had to do with all that girlish rapture. He saw that well-pleased face, and, like a wise man, asked no useless questions. She was going to be his wife, everything was said in that.

CHAPTER VI. BEFORE THE WEDDING

The sober March twilight lay low on the snowy earth when the sleigh whirled up to the door. The red firelight shone through the windows, and they could see Aunt Hetty bustling about the kitchen. Neither had spoken for a time, but now Norine turned to him, as she lightly sprang out.

"Say nothing of this to-night," she said, hurriedly; "wait until to-morrow."

She was gone before he could answer, and he drove round to the stable. Uncle Reuben was there, and Mr. Gilbert remained with him until Aunt Hetty's voice was heard calling them to supper. The lawyer was standing in the doorway, watching the solemn stars come out, a great silent gravity on his face. But oh, so happy, too – so deeply, unutterably happy.

The supper table was spread, lamp-light beamed, firelight glowed, and Aunt Hetty awaited them impatient, lest her warm milk biscuits and sugared "flap-jacks" should grow cold.

Norine stood leaning against the mantel, looking dreamily into the red fire. How pale she was, how strangely grave and thoughtful. Yet not unhappy, surely, for she glanced up in her lover's face with a quick blush and smile, and talked to him shyly throughout supper. Later still she played and sang for him the songs and pieces he liked best, played a game of euchre with him, and if she thought of Laurence Thorndyke, who had taught her the game, Richard Gilbert did not know it.

"She will learn to love me," he thought. "My pretty, dark-eyed darling! I will love her so much. I will so gratify her in everything. I will be so devoted, in all ways, that she cannot help it. Please Heaven, her life shall be a happy one with me."

Norine retired early. Her long drive had made her tired and sleepy she said; but she did not go to sleep.

Moon and stars shone crystal clear, pearly bright. She blew out her lamp, wrapped a shawl about her, and sat down by the window. Weirdly still lay everything, ivory light, ebony shadows, no sound but the rattling of the skeleton trees in the wintry night wind. No living thing was visible far or near. There was only the star-gemmed sky above, the chill, white world below. She could read her heart in the holy hush of the night, and look into the life that was dawning for her, by its solemn light. Richard Gilbert's wife! How strange and unreal that seemed. She liked him very much as she might have liked an indulgent elder brother, but love him – no! She might have deluded herself into thinking so, had Laurence Thorndyke's splendid image never dazzled her. She knew better now – the knowledge had come upon her all at once, transforming her from a child to a woman.

"If I had never met him," she thought, "I might have been a happy wife, but now! Now can I ever learn to forget him, and to give Mr. Gilbert his place?"

She covered her face with her hands, alone as she was. Alas for Richard Gilbert! congratulating himself at that very moment on having won for his very own the fairest, the sweetest, the truest of her sex.

Miss Bourdon sat mournfully musing there until long past bedtime, long past midnight. Moonlight and starlight paled presently, the prospect grew gloomy, the air bitter cold, and shivering and miserable, the girl crept away to bed. Even then she could not sleep – her nerves were all unstrung and on edge. She lay broad awake trying to imagine what her life would be like as Mr. Gilbert's wife. The fairy world of her dreams and her books would open to her. Costly dresses and jewels, a fine house in New York, her carriage and servants, summer travel and winter balls – all this he had promised her. And there in the midst of it all, once again she would meet Laurence Thorndyke. It would be part of the romance, she as the wife, he as the husband of another, and the weak silly heart fluttering under the bedclothes, gave a great bound. Then she remembered that it would be wicked to wish to see him – a sin to be happy in his presence; but do what she would, the hope of meeting him again, was at the bottom of her willingness to become the lawyer's wife.

When Norine descended to breakfast next morning, she found Mr. Gilbert standing in the open doorway, looking out at the frosty sunshine. He came forward to meet her, his face suddenly radiant.

"I have been waiting to waylay you," he said, smiling, "I want you to let me tell your uncle to-day."

"You are in a hurry," Norine answered, rather impatiently.

"Yes, my darling. Why should I not be? And I return to New York early next week. You say yes – do you not, Norine?"

She smiled, and gave him her hand. She had said "yes" to a more important proposition, he had been very good to her, why should she not please him?

"Do as you like, Mr. Gilbert. Tell my uncle if you choose."

"And if he consents, Norine – as I think he will – when shall I tell him our marriage is to take place? I want it to be soon, my dearest girl, very soon, for I don't feel as though I could live much longer without you. Come, my little wife! name an early day."

"Oh, I cannot! I don't know when. Next summer some time."

"That is indefinite," he laughed. "Allow me to be definite. Say early next May."

"No, no, no! that is too soon – greatly too soon! I couldn't be ready."

"Then, when? I won't be selfish, but you must be merciful, mademoiselle, and not keep me in suspense too long."

She laughed her old gay laugh.

"Patience, monsieur; patience stands chief among the virtues. Will June do – the last?"

"The first, Norine."

Aunt Hetty was coming through the hall. Norine darted away.

"Have it as you will! Don't you want me to help you with breakfast, auntie?"

Mr. Gilbert smilingly looked after his bright little prize, so soon to be his bright little wife, then turned to Aunt Hetty.

"Where is your brother this morning, Miss Kent? I wish to speak to him."

"In the stable, I think. Shall I go and see?"

"Not at all. I will go myself."

He walked away, humming a tune, in the happiness of his heart. Ah! shone ever winter sun so brightly before, looked ever the work-a-day world so paradisiacal as now! The earth and all thereon was transformed as with an enchanter's wand to this middle-aged legal gentleman in love.

Uncle Reuben, busy among his cattle, looked up in some surprise at sight of his early visitor.

"Don't let me interfere with your work, Kent," the lawyer said. "You can attend to your horses and listen, too. I must leave the day after to-morrow; my business has been too long neglected, and I have something of importance to tell you before I go. Something I hope – I believe, you will not be sorry to hear."

The eyes of the two men met. There was a peculiar smile on the lawyer's face, a happy light in his eyes, and Reuben Kent's countenance grew suddenly bright with intelligence.

"Is it about Norry?"

A smile and a nod answered him.

"Then I reckon I can guess. You have asked her to marry you?"

"Exactly. But how, in the name of everything wonderful have you found it out?"

Uncle Reuben's eyes twinkled shrewdly.

"I ain't a lawyer, Mr. Gilbert, but I can see as far into a milestone as any other man. Do you think I s'posed it was to see me and Joe and Hetty you came to Kent Hill so often? No, sir! I see you had a hankering after our little girl from the first."

Mr. Gilbert actually blushed. And he had guarded his precious secret so carefully, he had thought.

"Well, Mr. Kent, I trust I have your approval?"

Reuben Kent stretched out his big brown paw, and grasped the lawyer's white hand.

"I give her to you with all my heart, sir. I'd rather see her your wife than the wife of the President. I've been hoping this long time it would come to this. She's a good girl, as good as she's pretty, and I know she'll make you a good wife."

Not one word of the honor done them or her by the wealthy lawyer's offer – not one thought of it. In Reuben Kent's eyes no king or kaiser on the wide earth would have been too good for his beautiful Norine.

"And when is it to be, sir?" he asked.

"The wedding?" smiled Mr. Gilbert. "The first week of June. If I possibly can, I will run down here once or twice between this and then, but I am doubtful of its being possible. I have neglected business somewhat of late, and it has accumulated. You will tell your brother and sister, Kent?"

They walked back to the house together to breakfast. Norine saw in her uncle's face that he had been told, and blushed beautifully. How very, very near and real, it seemed to bring it, this telling Uncle Reuben.

Mr. Gilbert took her out for a walk after breakfast, and Uncle Reuben availed himself of the opportunity to inform his sister and brother. They were no more surprised than he had been, and equally pleased, but Aunt Hetty cried quietly, woman-fashion, for all that.

"We will miss her so much," she said; "the old house will seem like a tomb without her. He is a good man, a rich man, and a gentleman – I ought to rejoice for her sake, but it does seem hard at first to give her up for good."

"These things will happen, Hetty," said Uncle Reuben, philosophically, but sighing, too; "it's nater. We ought to think of nothing but the Lord's goodness in giving her such a man as Mr. Gilbert for a husband."

So it was settled. When Norine came back from her walk, Aunt Hetty kissed her, shook hands with the lawyer, and the betrothal was quietly over. There was no scene, and no tears, but the good wishes for both, were none the less heartfelt for that.

The day after to-morrow came. Mr. Gilbert went, and the preparations for the wedding began. Norine's "setting out" was to be on a scale of unprecedented magnificence. Uncle Reuben had money, and did not grudge spending it. Aunt Hetty took her into town, and a whole day was spent shopping – the big family carryall went home in the evening filled to repletion with dry goods. A seamstress and a dressmaker were engaged, both to come out on the following day, and Norine, in the pleasant bustle and hurry, actually forgot Laurence Thorndyke for eight consecutive hours.

The two seamstresses came to Kent Hill the following morning, and great and mighty were the measuring and cutting that ensued. The "keeping room," was given up to them and the bride elect, and all day long, and for many days after, their busy needles flew. Before the end of the week it was known far and wide that pretty Norry Kent, as she was called there, had made a great conquest, and was about to be married to one of the richest lawyers in New York.

Mr. Gilbert's letters came like clock-work every week, and Norine's replies went dutifully the day after. They were not much like love-letters on either side, particularly on hers, but Mr. Gilbert's were deeply and tenderly affectionate, better than all the rhapsodies ever written. His presents, too – and such presents, poured in, in a ceaseless stream. Jewelry that half turned the pretty bride's head with its dazzling splendor, laces that fairy fingers alone could have woven, pretty, costly *bijouterie* of all kinds.

"How good he is – how good he is!" Norine thought, in a burst of gratitude. "I ought to love him – I *will* love him – who could help it in time, and I will make him as happy as ever I can."

She might have kept her word; it would surely have been no impossible task to learn to love Richard Gilbert. She meant it in all sincerity – his generosity had already kindled a deeper feeling than mere gratitude in her heart. The dazzle of Laurence Thorndyke's image was slowly but surely dimming, and she could sing blithely once more as she bent over her work, or tripped about the rooms.

Who could be unhappy in white silk and lustrous pearls, orange blossoms and Mechlin lace, with rich rings a-sparkle on every finger, and glittering bracelets clasping the lovely arms? The color came back to Miss Bourdon's cheek, the girlish brightness to her lovely Canadian eyes – once more her gay girl's laugh rang out – once more the tripping French ballads made melody through the old gray rooms. You see she was not quite eighteen, poor child, and so much is possible for young persons of eighteen.

The weeks flew by – busy dreams; March passed, April passed. The wedding day was drawing very near. May came, mellow with sweet spring blossoms and sunshine, and the first half was over. The first Thursday in June was to be the day of days, not quite a fortnight off now. The world had woke up for her wedding, Norine thought, snow and dreariness were gone, spring, in Eden-like freshness and bloom was with them. All day long the birds sang in the sunlight; the garden was gay with odorous grasses and blossoms. In three days more the bridegroom would be here to claim his bride, to leave no more until he bore her away by his side. Yes, it was a new Eden. Kent Hill in its spring-tide resurrection, but, as once before, the serpent was close at hand.

CHAPTER VII. THE GATHERING STORM

The last week came – the last night of the last week.

A radiant moonlight night. Over the blue misty hill-tops the silver half-moon sailed, and at the garden gate stood the pretty bride elect, alone, gazing with eyes of dreamy darkness at the mystic light. No sound but the "sounds of the silence" broke her reverie, the twitter of a bird in its nest, the light flutter of the cool wind, the slipping of a snake in the underbrush. Green and silvery spread the wide fields of Kent Hill; dark, cool and perfumy the pine woods, long and white the dusty, high road – over all the sparkling stars and crystal moon.

Leaning on the gate, stood Norine. A trifle thinner and paler than of old, very pale in the cold, white moon-rays, but very fair and sweet the *mignonne* face. Something almost pathetic in the pallid beauty of the night touched her, the great dark eyes looked with wistful sadness up to the starry sky. She stood there thinking of the new life to begin in a few days now – the life that seemed to recede and grow more and more unreal the nearer it came. Its novelty and brightness blinded her no more – distance had lent enchantment to the view – to-night she only knew she was about to marry a man she did not love.

The past arose before her. Laurence Thorndyke's smiling, cynical, handsome face floated in the haze like a vision, her girl's fancy returned with tenfold sweetness and power. If he were only to be the bridegroom on Thursday next! A passionate longing to see him once more, to hear his voice, filled her whole soul with unutterable desire. In the moonlight she stretched out her arms involuntarily – in the silence she spoke, a heart-sob in every word:

"Laurence!" she cried, "come back!"

The restless leaves fluttered around her, the wind touched her face and swept by. She leaned wearily against the gate.

"Laurence!" she whispered, "Laurence! Laurence! If I could only see you once more – only once – if I knew you had not quite forgotten me – if I could only bid you good-by before we part forever, I think everything would be easy after that."

Had the thought evoked his phantom?

Who was that coming along the silent road? A tall, slender figure, wearing a loose, light overcoat, strangely, bewilderingly familiar. That negligent, graceful walk, that uplifted carriage of the head – surely, surely she knew both. She leaned forward in breathless expectation – her lips apart, her eyes alight. Nearer and nearer he came, and the face she had longed to see, had prayed to see, looked down upon her once more with the old familiar smile.

Laurence Thorndyke!

She leaned against the gate still in breathless hush, pale, terrified. She could not speak, so intense was her surprise, and the voice for whose sound she had hungered and thirsted with her whole foolish, romantic heart sounded in the silence:

"Norine!"

She made no answer; in her utter astonishment and swift joy she could only stand and gaze, speechless.

"Norine, I have come back again. Have you no word of welcome for your old friend?"

Still she did not speak – still she stood looking as though she never could look enough – only trembling a little now.

"I have startled you," he said very gently, "coming so unexpectedly upon you like a ghost in the moonlight. But I am no spirit, Norine – shake hands."

He leaned across the closed gate, and took both her hands in his warm, cordial clasp. They were like ice. Her eyes were fixed almost wildly upon his face, her lips were trembling like the lips of a child about to cry.

"Won't you speak then, Norine? Have I startled you so much as that? I did not expect to see you or any one at this hour, but I had to come. Do you hear, Norry? I had to come. And now that we have met, Norine, won't you say you are glad to see me again?"

She drew away her hands suddenly – covered her face and broke into a passion of tears. Perhaps she had grown hysterical, her heart had been full before he came, and it needed only this shock to brim over. He opened the gate abruptly and came to her side.

"Speak to me, Norine! My own – my dearest, don't cry so. Look up, and say you are not sorry I have come!"

She looked up at him, forgetful of Richard Gilbert and her wedding day, forgetful of loyalty and truth.

"I thought you had forgotten me," she said. "I thought I would never see you again. And oh, I have been so miserable – so miserable!"

"And yet you are about to be married, Norine!" At that reproachful cry she suddenly remembered the New York lawyer, and all the duties of her life. She drew her hands away resolutely in spite of his resistance and stood free – trembling and white.

"You are going to be married to Richard Gilbert, Norine?"

"Yes," she said, falteringly; "and you – you are going to be married, too?"

"I?" in astonishment; "I married! Who can have told you that?"

"Mr. Gilbert."

"Then it is the first time I have ever known him – lawyer though he be – to tell a falsehood. No, Norine, I am not going to be married."

She caught her breath in the shock, the joy of the words.

"*Not* going to be married! Not going – Oh, Mr. Thorndyke, don't deceive me – don't!"

"I am not deceiving you Norine – why should I? There is but one whom I love; if she will be my wife I will marry – not unless. Can you not guess who it is, Norine? Can you not guess what I have come from New York to say before it is too late? I only heard of your projected marriage last week – heard it then by merest accident. Ah, Norine! if you knew what a shock that announcement was. Ever since I left here I have been trying to school myself to forget you, but in vain. I never knew how utterly in vain until I heard you were the promised wife of Richard Gilbert. I could stay away no longer – I felt I must tell you or die. It may seem like presumption, like madness, my coming at the eleventh hour, and you the promised bride of another man, but I had to come. Even if you refused me with scorn, I felt I must come and hear my doom from your lips. They have urged me to marry another, an heiress she is, and a ward of my uncle's – he even threatens to disinherit me if I do not. But I will be disinherited, I will brave poverty and face the future boldly so that the girl I love is by my side. Helen is beautiful, and will not say no, they tell me, if I ask, but what is that to me since I love only you. Norine, tell me I have not come too late. You don't, you can't care for this elderly lawyer, old enough to be your father. Norine, speak and tell me you care only for me."

"Only for you – only for you!" she cried, "O, Laurence, I love you with all my heart!"

There was a sound as she said it, the house door opening. In the moonlight Aunt Hetty's spare, small figure appeared in the doorway, in the silence her pleasant voice called:

"Norine! Norine! come in out of the dew dear child."

Some giant hemlocks grew near the gate – Laurence Thorndyke drew her with him into their black shadow, and stood perfectly still. Brilliant as the moonlight was, Aunt Hetty might brush against them and not see them in the leafy gloom.

"I must go," whispered Norine; "she will be here in a moment in search of me. Laurence, let me go."

"But first – I must see you again. No one knows I am here, no one must know. When does Gilbert arrive?"

"To-morrow," she answered, with a sudden shiver.

"My darling, don't fear – you are mine now, mine only. Mine you shall remain." His eyes glittered strangely in the gloom as he said it. "We cannot meet to-morrow; but we must meet to-morrow night."

"No," she faltered, "no – no. It would be wrong, dishonorable. And I dare not, we would be discovered."

"Not if you do as I direct. What time do you all retire? Half-past ten?"

"Mostly."

"Then at eleven, or half-past, the coast is sure to be clear. At eleven to-morrow night I will be here just without the gate, and you must steal out and meet me."

"Laurence!"

"You must – you will, if you love me. Are you not my wife, or going to be in a few days, which amounts to the same thing. Will Gilbert stop here?"

"I don't know. Yes, I suppose so."

"Well, even if he does it will not matter. You can steal out unheard and unobserved, can you not?"

"Yes – no. I don't know. Laurence! Laurence! I am afraid."

"Of what? Of whom? not of me, Norine?"

She shivered a little, and shrank from his side.

"It seems so strange, so bold, so wrong. I ought not, it is wicked – I don't know what to do."

"Then you don't care for me at all, Norine?"

He knew how to move her. The reproachful words went to her heart. *Care* for him! He doubted that.

"You will come," he said, that exultant gleam in his eyes again, "my loyal little girl! I have a thousand things to say to you, and we can talk uninterruptedly then. When was your wedding to be?"

"Next Thursday."

"And this is Sunday night. To-morrow afternoon Gilbert will be here. You see how little time we have to spare, Norine. You must meet me, for on Thursday you shall be my wife – not his!"

"Norry! Norry!" more loudly this time, called the voice of Aunt Hetty, still in the doorway, "where on earth is the child?"

"Let me go – let me go!" Norine cried in terror, "she will be here directly."

"You will meet me to-morrow night, promise first?"

"Yes – yes – yes! Only let me go."

He obeyed. Retreating into the shadow of the trees, he watched her glide out in the moonlit path, and up to the gate. He heard her ascend the steps, and then Aunt Hetty's voice came to him again.

"Goodness gracious, child! where have you been? Do you want to get your death, out in your bare head and the dew falling like rain?"

He could not catch Norine's faint reply. A second more, and again Miss Hester Kent was shrilly to be heard.

"Land of hope! whatever ails you. Norry? You are whiter than the dead. Oh, I know how it will be after to-night – you'll be laid up for a week."

He heard the house door close. Then he was alone with the rustling trees, and the bright, countless stars. As he stepped out into the crystal radiance, his face shone with exultant delight – alas! for Norine! *not* with happy love.

"I knew it!" he thought to himself in his triumph; "I knew I could take her from him at the very church door. Now, Richard Gilbert! whose turn is it at last – who holds the winning trump in the game? You have baffled, and foiled, and watched me many a time, notably in the case of Lucy West

– when it came to old Darcy's ears through you, and he was within a hair's breadth of disinheriting me. Every dog has his day. Yours is over – mine has come. The wheel has revolved, and Laurence Thorndyke, gambler, trickster, libertine, as you paint him, is at the top. You have not spared me in the past, my good Gilbert, look to yourself now, for by all the gods I'll not spare you!"

While Mr. Thorndyke, with his hat pulled low over his brows, walked home to the obscure hotel at which he chose to stop, Norine was up in her room alone with her tumultuous heart. She had complained of a headache and gone at once. The plea was not altogether false – her brain was whirling, her heart throbbing in a wild tumult, half terror, half delight. He had come back to her, he loved her, she was going to be his wife! For over an hour she sat, hiding even in the dusk her happy face in her hands, with only this one thought pulsing through all her being – she was to be his wife!

By and by she grew calm and able to think. No thought of going to bed, or doing anything so commonplace as sleeping occurred to her. She wrapped herself in a shawl, seated herself by the window, and so for hours and hours sat motionless.

After all was love worth what she was about to give up for it – home, friends, a good man's trust, her soul's truth and honor? Was Laurence Thorndyke worth more to her than all the world beside, more than the peace of her own conscience. Richard Gilbert loved her, honored her, trusted her, she had taken his gifts, she had pledged herself to be his wife. This very day, dawning yonder over the hills of Maine, would see him here to claim her as his own forever. Was one sight of Laurence Thorndyke's face, one touch of his hand, one seductive tone of his voice sufficient to make her fling honor and truth to the winds, desert her best, her only friends, break her plighted husband's heart, and make her memory a shame and pain to them all forever? Oh, what a wretch she was, what cruel, selfish passion this love she felt must be!

The sun rose up between the fleecy clouds, filling the world with jubilant brightness, the sweet scents of sunrise in the country perfumed the warm air. Norine threw up her window and leaned out, worn and fevered with her night's vigil. That meeting under the trees seemed a long way off now, it was as if she had lived years in a few brief hours. Presently there was a rap at the door, and Aunt Hetty's voice outside spoke.

"Are you up, Norry? is your headache better, dear?"

"Much better, aunty – I'll be down directly."

"Breakfast will be ready in ten minutes," said aunty, and Norine got wearily up, and bathed her face, brushed out her tangled curls, shrinking guiltily from her own pallid face in the glass.

"How wretchedly haggard I look," she thought, drearily; "surely every one who looks at me will read my guilt in my face."

She went down stairs. Aunt Hetty nearly dropped the sweet, smelling plate of hot muffins at sight of her.

"You're whiter than a ghost, child!" she cried. "You told me you were better."

"I am better, aunty. Oh, pray don't mind my looks. Last night's headache has made me pale – I will be as well as ever after breakfast."

But breakfast was only a pretence as far as she was concerned, and the day wore on and the fair, young face kept its pallid, startled look. She could do nothing, neither read or sew, she wandered about the house like a restless spirit, only shrinking from that Bluebeard's chamber, where all the wedding finery was spread. How was she to meet Mr. Gilbert, and the fleeting hours were hurrying after one another, as hours never had hurried before.

The afternoon sun dropped low, the noises in the fields grew more and more subdued, the cool evening wind swept up from the distant sea. Norine sat in the wicker chair in the garden under the old apple-tree and waited – waited as a doomed prisoner might the coming of the executioner. A book lay idle on her lap, she could not read, she sat there waiting – waiting – waiting, and schooling herself for the ordeal.

Presently, far off on the white road, rose up a cloud of dust, there came the rolling of wheels, she caught a glimpse of a carriage. She clasped her hands together and strove to steady herself. At last he was here. Out of the dusty cloud came a buggy, whirling rapidly up to the gate – out of the buggy came Richard Gilbert, his eager face turned towards her. His quick eye had espied her; she rose up to meet him, calm in the very depth of desperation. Mr. Gilbert sprang out and caught both her hands in his.

"My dear, dear girl! My own Norine! how glad I am to be with you once more! But how pale you look. Have you been ill?"

"Oh, no – that is – only my old friend, headache. Here comes Aunty Hetty and Uncle Reuben to welcome you."

She drew back, thankful for the diversion, feeling hot and cold by turns, and not daring to meet his eye. Their laughter, their gay greetings were only a confused hum in her ears, she was looking at the clump of hemlocks, and feeling – oh, such a false, treacherous guilty creature.

"How dazed you look, little girl!" her happy lover said laughing; "am I such an ogre, then, in your sight?"

He drew her hand beneath his arm, with the air of one who assumes a right, and led her to the house. They were alone together in the parlor, and she was trying to call her wandering mind to order, and listen to him and answer his questions. She could see with terror that he was watching her already with grave, troubled eyes. What was it, this pale, still change in her? Dread of her approaching marriage, maiden timidity, or worst of all – was the thought of another man haunting her still?

Tea time came and was a relief; after tea, Mr. Gilbert proposed a walk. Norine took her hat passively, and went out with him into the hushed and placid twilight. The pale primrose light was fading out of the western sky, and a rising wind was tossing the arms of the hemlocks where she stood with another lover last night.

It was a very silent walk. They strolled along the lonesome road, with the primrose light growing grayer and grayer through the velvety meadows, where the quiet cows grazed. Something of the dark shadows deepening around them seemed to steal into the man's heart, and dull it with nameless dread, but there was no voice in the rising wind, in the whispering trees, in the creeping gloom, to tell him of what was so near.

A very silent walk – the last they would ever take. The little talking done, Mr. Gilbert did himself. He told her that all his preparations for his bride, all his arrangements for her comfort were made. Their home in New York's stateliest avenue was ready and waiting – their wedding tour would be to Montreal and Niagara, unless Norine had some other choice. But she would be glad to see once more the quaint, gray, dear old Canadian town – would she not?

"Yes, she would ever be glad to see Montreal. No, she had no other choice." She shivered as she said it, looking far off with blank eyes that dare not meet his. "Niagara would do very well, all places were alike to her. It was growing cold and dark," – abruptly this – "suppose they went home."

Something in her tone and manner, in her want of interest and enthusiasm, hurt him. More silently than they had come they recrossed the darkening fields. The moon was rising as they drew near the house, forcing its way up through dark and jagged clouds. She paused suddenly for a moment, with her pale face turned towards it. Mr. Gilbert paused, too, looking at the lowering sky.

"Listen to the wind," he said. "We will have a change to-morrow."

"A change!" she said, in a hushed sort of voice. "Yes, the storm is very near."

"And you are shivering in this raw night wind. You are white and cold as a spirit, my darling. Come let us go in."

His baggage had arrived – a trunk and valise stood in the hall as they entered. The sister and brothers sat in holiday attire in the keeping room, but very grave and quiet. The shadow that had fallen on Richard Gilbert in the twilight fields seemed to have fallen here, too.

Norine sat at the piano, her face turned away from the light, and played the melodies he asked for. From these she drifted gradually into music more in accordance with her mood, playing in a mournful, minor key, until Mr. Gilbert could endure the saddening sweetness no longer.

"Your music is very melancholy, my dear," he said quietly. "Will you not sing us something instead."

"Not to-night, I think. I find my headache has not altogether departed. If you will kindly excuse me, I will retire."

She got up as she spoke, lit a lamp, and with a brief good-night, was gone.

It was not yet ten o'clock, but there was little inducement to linger now. Mr. Gilbert owned to being rather fatigued, took his light, and departed. Before half-past ten all were in their rooms, the doors and windows secured for the night. By eleven all were asleep – all save one.

Norine sat at her window, her light shaded, her watch (one of Richard Gilbert's presents to his bride elect) open before her, gazing out into the gusty darkness, and waiting. Her hands were tightly clasped together, silent, tearless sobs shook her at times as remorse swept through her soul, and yet not for one minute did she think of withdrawing from her tryst. But she would not fly with Laurence Thorndyke – no, no! Every best impulse within her cried out she would not, she could not. She was a wretch for even thinking of it – a wretch for going to this meeting, but she would only go to say farewell forever. She loved him, but she belonged to another man; it would be better to die than to betray him. She would bid Laurence Thorndyke go to-night, and never see him more.

The threatening storm seemed drawing very near. The moon was half obscured in dense clouds; the wind tore around the gables; the trees tossed their long, green arms wildly aloft. Within the house profoundest silence reigned.

Half-past eleven! the hour of tryst; she seemed to count the moments by the dull beating of her heart. She rose up, extinguished her lamp, put on a waterproof, drawing the hood over her head, took her slippers in her hand, and opened the door. She paused and listened, half choked by the loud throbbing of her heart, by guilty, nameless dread. All was still – no sound but the surging of the trees without; no glimmer of light from any room. She stole on tiptoe along the passage, down the stairs, and into the lower hall. Noiselessly she unlocked the door, opened it, and was out in the windy dark, under the gloom of the trees. One second's pause, her breath coming in frightened gasps, then she was flitting away in the chill night wind to meet her lover. She reached the gate, leaned over it eagerly, straining her eyes through the gloom.

"Laurence!" she said, in a tremulous whisper. "Laurence, I have come."

"My own brave little girl!"

A tall figure stepped forward from beneath a tree, too warm hands clasped hers.

"Norry, you're a trump, by Jove! Come out at once. All is ready. You must fly with me to-night."

But she shrank back – shocked, terrified, yet longing with all her soul to obey.

"No, no!" she cried. "I can never go – never! never! never! O Laurence! I have come here to bid you good-by forever!"

His answer was to laugh aloud. His face was flushed his blue eyes gleaming – Mr. Laurence Thorndyke, bold enough at all times, had primed himself with brandy for to-night's work, until he was ready to face and defy devils and men.

"Good-by forever!" he repeated. "Yes, that's so likely, my darling. Come out here, Norry – come out. I've no notion of talking with a five-barred gate between us. So old Gilbert came down to his wedding this afternoon didn't he? By Jupiter! what a row there will be to-morrow, when the cage is opened, and the bird found flown."

He laughed recklessly aloud, as he opened the gate and drew her out.

"Not if I know it, Norry. No dry-as-dust, grim, solemn owl of a lawyer for my little Canadian rosebud, old as the everlasting hills, and priggish as the devil. No, no! we'll change all that. Before morning dawns you and I will be safely in Boston, and before another night falls you'll be my blessed

little wife – the loveliest bride from Maine to Florida, and I the most blissful of bridegrooms. All is ready – here are my horse and buggy – the sloop sails in an hour, and then – let them catch us who can!"

Either the excitement of his triumph, or the French brandy, had set Mr. Laurence Thorndyke half wild. He drew her with him, heedless of her struggles, her passionate protest.

"Can't go? Oh, that's all bosh, my darling! you've got to come. I love you, and you love me – (sounds like a child's valentine, don't it?) – and you don't care that for old Dick Gilbert. You won't go? If you don't I'll shoot myself before morning – I swear I will! You don't want me to shoot myself, do you? I can't live without you, Norry, and I don't mean to try. After we're married, and the honeymoon's over, I'll fetch you back to the old folks if you like, upon my sacred honor I will. Not a word now, my little angel, I won't listen. Of course you've scruples, and all that. I think the more of you for them, but you'll thank me for not listening one day. Here's the carriage – get in, get in, get in!"

He fairly lifted her in as he spoke.

Stunned, terrified, bewildered, she struggled in vain. He only laughed aloud, caught up the reins, and struck the horse with the whip. The horse, a spirited one, darted forward like a flash; there was a girl's faint, frightened scream.

"O Laurence! let me go!"

A wild laugh drowned it – they flew over the ground like the wind. Norine was gone! His exultant singing mingled with the crash of the wheels as they disappeared.

"She is won! they are gone over bush, brake and scar;
They'll have fleet steeds that follow, quoth young Lochinvar."

CHAPTER VIII.

FLED!

Mr. Gilbert went to his room, went to his bed, but he did not go to sleep. He lay awake so long, tossing restlessly, that, at last, in disgust, he got up dressed himself partly, and sat down in the darkness by his open chamber window; to have it out.

What was the matter with Norine? Headache; she had said – but to eyes sharpened by deep, true love, it looked much more like heartache. The averted eyes, the faltering voice, the pallid cheeks, the shrinking form, betokened something deeper than headache. Was she at the eleventh hour repenting her marriage? Was she still in love with Laurence Thorndyke? Was she pining for the freedom she had resigned? Was there no spark of affection for him in her girl's heart after all?

"I was mad and presumptuous to dream of it," he thought. "I am thirty-six – she is seventeen. I am not handsome, nor brilliant, nor attractive to a girl's fancy in any way – she is all. Yes, she is pining for him, and repenting of her hastily-plighted troth. Well, then, she shall have it back. If I loved her tenfold more than I do, and Heaven knows to love her any better than I do mortal man cannot, still I would resign her. No woman shall ever come to me as wife with her heart in the keeping of another man. Better a thousand times to part now than to part after marriage. I have seen quite too much, in my professional capacity of marrying in haste and repenting at leisure, to try it myself. I will speak to her to-morrow; she shall tell me the truth fearlessly and frankly while it is not yet too late, and if it be as I dread, why, then, I can do as better men have done – bear my pain and go my way. Poor, pretty little Norry! with her drooping face and pathetic, wistful eyes – she longs to tell me, I know, and is afraid. It is a very tender heart, a very romantic little heart, and who is to blame her if it turns to him, young and handsome as she is herself, instead of to the grave, dull, middle-aged lawyer. And yet, it will be very hard to say good-by."

He broke down for a moment, alone as he was. A great flood of recollection came over him – the thought of parting – now – was bitter indeed. A vision rose before him – Norine as he had seen her first, standing shyly downcast in the train, her dark, childlike eyes glancing imploringly around, the sensitive color coming and going in her innocent face. She arose before him again as he had seen her later, flushed and downcast, sweet and smiling, bending over Laurence Thorndyke, with "Love's young dream" written in every line of her happy face. Again as he had seen her that day when he spoke, pale, startled, troubled, afraid to accept, afraid to refuse, and faltering out the words that made him so idiotically happy, with her little, white, handsome face, keeping its startled pallor.

"Yes," he said, "yes, yes, I see it all. She said 'yes,' because it is not in her yielding, gentle, child's heart to say no. And now she is repenting when she thinks it too late. But it is not too late; to-morrow I will speak and she will answer, and if there be one lingering doubt in her mind, we will shake hands and part. My little love! I wish for your sake Laurence Thorndyke were worthy of you, and might return; but to meet him again is the worst fate that can befall you, and in three months poor Helen Holmes will be his bride."

Hark! was that a sound? He broke off his reverie to listen. No, all was still again – only the surging of the wind in the maples.

"It certainly sounded like the opening of a door below," he thought; "a rat perhaps – all are in bed."

He was looking blankly out into the windy darkness. This time to-morrow night his fate would be decided. Would he still be in this room, waiting for Thursday morning to dawn and give him Norine, or —

He broke off abruptly again. Was that a figure moving down in the gloom to the gate? Surely not, and yet something moved. A second more, and it had vanished. Was this fancy, too? He waited,

he listened. Clearly through the dusk, borne on the wind, there came to him the faint, far-off sound of a laugh.

"Who can it be?" he thought, puzzled. "No fancy this time. I certainly heard a laugh. Rather an odd hour and lonely spot for mirth."

He listened once more, and once more, fainter and farther off, came on the wind that laugh. Did he dream, or did a cry mingle with it? The next instant he started to his feet as the loud, rapid rush of carriage wheels sounded through the deep silence of the night. What did it mean? Had some one stealthily left the house and driven away? He rose, drew on his coat, and without his boots, quitted his room, and descended the stairs.

The house door stood ajar – some one had left them and driven away.

He walked to the gate. Nothing was to be seen, nothing to be heard. The gloomy night sky, the tossing trees, the southing wind, nothing else far or near.

"It may have been Reuben or Joe Kent," he thought, "and yet at this time of night and in secret! And there was a cry for help, or what certainly sounded like one. No need to puzzle over it, however – to-morrow will tell. A New England farm-house is about the last place on earth to look for mysteries."

Mr. Gilbert went to bed again, and, somewhere in the small hours, to sleep. It was rather late when he awoke, and an hour past the usual breakfast time when, his toilet completed, he descended the stairs. The storm had come in pouring rain, in driving wind, in sodden earth, and frowning sky.

Aunt Hetty was alone, the table was laid for two, a delightful odor of coffee and waffles perfumed the air. She looked up from her sewing with a smile as he bade her good-morning.

"I was just wondering if you and Norry meant to keep your rooms all day. Oh, you needn't make any apology; it is as easy to wait breakfast for two as for one. The boys and me" – (they were the "boys" still to Miss Hester Kent) – "had ours at seven o'clock. Now sit right down Mr. Gilbert, and I'll go and rout out Norry, and you and her can have your breakfast sociably together. You'll have a good many sociable breakfasts alone together, I dare say, before long. Gloomy sort of day now, ain't it?"

"Norine is not down then?" the lawyer said, startled a little, yet hardly knowing why.

"Not yet. She ain't often lazy o' mornings, ain't Norry, neither. You wait, though. I'll have her down in ten minutes."

He looked at her as though to say something, changed his mind suddenly, and took seat. Miss Kent left the room. Five minutes passed. Then she came rushing down the stairs, and back to his side, all white and frightened.

"Mr. Gilbert, Norine's not in her room! Her bed was not slept in at all last night!" She sat down all at once, pressing her hand hard over her heart. "I'm," she said, panting, "I'm very foolish, I know, but it has given me a turn."

He rose to his feet. He knew it then! As well as he ever knew it in the after time, Richard Gilbert knew it all at that moment, Norine had fled.

"It was she, then, who left the house last night," he said, in a hushed voice; "and it was a man's laugh! Was it – My God! Was it –"

He stopped, turning white with the horror of that thought.

"Call your brothers," he said, his voice ringing, his face setting white and stern as stone. "We must search for her at once. At all costs we must find her – must bring her back. Quick, Miss Kent! Your brothers! I am afraid Norine has fled."

"Fled!"

"Fled – run away from home, for fear of marrying me. Don't you understand, Miss Kent? Call your brothers, I say every minute may be worth a life – or more! Quick!"

She obeyed – stunned, stupefied by the shock, the horror of her amaze. The two men rushed wildly in, frightened by their sister's incoherent words. Rapidly, clearly, Richard Gilbert told them what he had heard last night, told them even what he feared most.

"Thorndyke has come back, and either persuaded her to run away with him or forcibly abducted her. I feel sure of it. I heard him laugh, and her cry last night as plainly as I hear my own voice now. There is not a moment to be lost. On with your coats! out with the horses, and let us be off. Better she were dead than with him."

They are gone, and the woman sits alone, stunned, speechless, unable to realize it, only dumbly conscious that something awful has happened. Norine has gone! Fled on the very eve of her bridal with another man. Norine – little Norrie, who but yesterday seemed to her as a young innocent child.

The woman sits and weeps alone by her desolate hearth. The men go forth into the world, and forget their grief for the time in the excitement of the search – the men, who have the best of it always.

All his life long that miserable day remained in Richard Gilbert's memory more as a sickening dream than as a reality. He suffered afterward – horribly – to-day he was too dazed to suffer or feel. Whether found or not, Norine Bourdon was lost to him forever; dumbly he felt that, but she must be found. At all costs, she must be brought back from Laurence Thorndyke.

The two men acted passively under his orders – awed into silence by the look on his set, white face. Even to them that day remained as a dizzy dream. Now they were at the station, listening to Gilbert's rapid, lucid inquiries and description, and the clerk shook his head.

"No," he said; "so far as he could recollect, no two parties answering the description, had left by the earliest train that morning."

Then Mr. Gilbert went backward, and tried the registers of the various hotels for the name of Thorndyke. It did not appear, but in one of the lesser hotels the question was solved.

"Thar hain't ben nobody here answerin' to that air," said the Down-East innkeeper; "but thar hes ben a chap callin' himself Smith – John Smith. That may be the cove you want. Likely's not, ye know, if he's ben up to any of his larks, he would give a false name, ye know. He come Saturday night – staid Sunday and Monday, paid his bill last evenin', and made himself scarce. Shouldn't be a mite surprised, now, if he's the rooster you're after."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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