

**FINLEY
MARTHA**

MILDRED AND
ELSIE

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Martha Finley

Mildred and Elsie

*"Through suffering and sorrow thou hast pass'd,
To show us what a woman true may be." —*

J. R. Lowell.

*"A lovely being scarcely form'd or moulded,
A rose with all its sweetest leaves yet folded." —*

Byron.

CHAPTER I

"'Tis beautiful when first the dewy light
Breaks on the earth! while yet the scented air
Is breathing the cool freshness of the night,
And the bright clouds a tint of crimson bear."

Elizabeth M. Chandler.

"A long, long kiss, a kiss of youth and love."

Byron.

Morning was breaking over the landscape; a cool, refreshing breeze, laden with woodland sweets and wild birds' songs, softly kissed Mildred's cheek and awoke her.

She started up with a low exclamation of delight, sprang to the open window, and kneeling there with her elbow on the sill and her cheek in her hand, feasted her eyes upon the beauty of the scene – a grand panorama of wooded hills, falling waters, wild glens and forests and craggy mountains, above whose lofty summits the east was glowing with crimson and gold.

Another moment and the sun burst through the golden gate and began anew his daily round, "rejoicing as a strong man to run a race."

The brightness of his face was too dazzling for Mildred's eyes, and her gaze fell lower down, where wreaths of gray mist hung over the valleys or crept slowly up the mountain sides. Presently it rested on one of the nearer hill-tops, and a sudden, vivid blush suffused her cheek, while a sweet and tender smile shone in her eyes and hovered about her lips.

But a sigh quickly followed, smile and blush faded away, and she dropped her face into her hands with a low-breathed exclamation, "Oh what shall I do? What ought I to do?"

There was a question of grave importance awaiting her decision – a decision which would in all probability affect the happiness of her whole future life on earth; yea, who should say its influence would not reach even into eternity?

She longed to take counsel of her mother, but that mother was far distant, and the question one the girl shrank from putting upon paper and trusting to the mails.

But a dearer, wiser, even more loving friend was close at hand, and to Him and His Word she turned for guidance.

Subdued sounds of life came to Mildred's ear ere she closed the Book; servants were astir setting the house to rights and preparing breakfast for the numerous guests, most of whom still lingered in the land of dreams.

Mildred made a rapid but neat toilet, then stole softly from the room, promising herself a stroll through the grounds while yet the quiet and dewy freshness of early morning lingered there.

In one of the wide cool porches of the hotel a young man paced to and fro with hasty, agitated step, glancing up again and again with longing impatience at the windows of a certain room on the second floor. Pausing in his walk, he drew out his watch.

"Only a brief half-hour!" he sighed. "Am I not to see her at all?"

But at that instant there stepped from the open doorway a slight, graceful, girlish figure in a dainty white muslin, a bunch of wildflowers in her belt, a broad-brimmed straw hat in her hand; and with a low exclamation, "Ah, at last!" he hurried to meet her.

She started slightly at sight of him and sent a hurried glance this way and that, as if meditating flight.

"O Mildred, don't run away! why should you avoid me?" he said entreatingly, holding out his hand.

There was a scarcely perceptible hesitation in her manner as she gave him hers.

"Good-morning," she said softly. "Is anything wrong? I think you look troubled."

"Yes, I am called away suddenly; must leave within the hour; a dear, only sister lies at the point of death."

His tones grew husky and her eyes filled with tears.

"Oh what sad news! I am so sorry for you!" she murmured.

He drew her hand within his arm and led her down a shaded alley.

"It is in your power to give me unspeakable comfort," he said, bending over her. "You wear my flowers; O dearest! is not that a whisper of hope to me? You have decided in my favor? is it not so?"

"O Charlie, don't ask me! I – I have not been able yet to see that – that I may – that I ought – "

"To follow the dictates of your heart? Is that what you would say?" he asked, as she broke off abruptly, leaving the sentence unfinished. "O Mildred! you cannot have the heart to refuse me this one crumb of comfort? We must part in a few moments – when to meet again neither of us knows. You have refused to pledge yourself to me, and I will not ask it now – though I solemnly promise you – "

"No, don't," she interrupted, struggling with her tears; "I would have you free – free as air; since I – I can promise nothing."

"I will never marry any one but you," he said with vehemence. "If I cannot win you, I will live single all my days. But you do care for me? You do love me? O Mildred! one word, only a word or a look, that I may not go away on my sorrowful errand in utter despair. Only assure me that I have won your heart, and I shall never abandon hope that this barrier may some day be removed."

She could not refuse him: she had not power to hide either her love or her grief that they must part; both had their way for a short space.

He had led her into an arbor whose sheltering vines would screen them from prying eyes; and there clasped in each other's arms, heart beating against heart, his bearded lip softly touching again and again her cheek, her brow, her quivering lips, they passed the few precious moments that yet remained to them.

He was gone; and as the last echo of his departing footsteps died away upon her ear there came over Mildred such a sense of utter desolation as she had never known before. Sinking down upon a rustic bench she hid her face in her hands, and for a few moments allowed her full heart to ease itself in a burst of weeping.

But this would not do; the breakfast hour drew near, and though it had been of late her aunt's custom to take that meal in bed, her uncle would expect to see her in her usual place at the table, and his keen eye would be quick to detect the traces of tears. The cousins, too, would notice them and not scruple to inquire the cause.

She hastily dried her eyes, rose, and leaving the arbor, strolled about the grounds, resolutely striving to recover her wonted cheerfulness.

She had made the circuit once, and again neared the arbor, when she heard her name called in sweet, childish treble, "Cousin Milly, Cousin Milly!" and as she turned in the direction of the sound, little Elsie, closely followed by her faithful mammy, came bounding toward her with a letter in her hand.

"Grandpa said I might bring it to you. Ain't you so glad, cousin?" she asked; and the missive was put into Mildred's hand, the sweet baby face held up for a kiss.

Mildred bestowed it very heartily, taking the little one in her arms and repeating the caress again and again, "Very glad, darling," she said, "and very much obliged to my pet for bringing it. Is it time to go in to breakfast, Aunt Chloe?"

"Massa Dinsmore say you will hab time to read de lettah first, Miss Milly," replied the nurse, dropping a courtesy.

"Then I will do so," Mildred said, re-entering the arbor.

"May mammy and Elsie stay wis you?" asked the baby girl coaxingly.

"Yes indeed, darling," Mildred said, making room for the child to sit by her side.

"Dere now, honey, keep quiet and don't 'sturb yo' cousin while she reads de lettah," cautioned Aunt Chloe, lifting her nursling and settling her comfortably on the bench.

Mildred had broken the seal, and was already too much absorbed in the news from home to hear or heed what her companions might be saying.

Elsie watched her, as she read, with loving, wistful eyes. "Did your mamma write it, cousin?" she asked, as Mildred paused to turn the page.

"Yes, dear; and she sends love and kisses to you, and wishes I could take you home with me when I go. Oh, if I only could!" And Mildred bent down to press another kiss on the sweet baby lips.

"Maybe my papa will let me go, if grandpa will write and ask him," returned the child, with an eager, joyous look up into Mildred's face. "But I couldn't go wisout mammy."

"Oh no! if you should go, mammy would go too; you can't be separated from her, and we would all be glad to have her there," Mildred said, softly caressing the shining curls of the little one, glancing kindly up into the dusky face of the nurse, then turning to her letter again.

It was with mingled feelings that she perused it, for though all was well with the dear ones beneath her father's roof, and the thought of soon again looking upon their loved faces made most welcome the summons home which it brought, there was sorrow and pain in the prospect of soon bidding a long farewell to the darling now seated by her side – the little motherless one over whom her heart yearned so tenderly because of the lack of parental love and care that made the young life seem so sad and forlorn, spite of all the beauty and wealth with which she – the little fair one – was so abundantly dowered.

As she read the last line, then slowly refolded the letter, tears gathered in her eyes. Elsie saw them, and stealing an arm round her neck, said in her sweet baby tones, "Don't cry, Cousin Milly. What makes you sorry? I loves you ever so much."

"And I you, you precious, lovely darling!" cried Mildred, clasping the little form close and kissing the pure brow again and again. "That is just what almost breaks my heart at the thought of – oh why, why don't you belong to us!" she broke off with a half-stifled sob.

A firm, quick step came up the gravel walk, and Mr. Dinsmore stood looking down upon them.

"Why, what is wrong? not bad news from home, I hope, Milly?"

"No, uncle; they are all well, and everything going smoothly so far as I can learn from my letter," she said, brushing away her tears and forcing a smile.

"What then?" he asked, "Elsie has not been troubling you, I hope?"

"Oh no, no, she never does that!"

"Breakfast has been announced; shall we go and partake of it?"

"If you please, sir. I am quite ready," Mildred answered, as she rose and took his offered arm.

"Bring the child," he said to Chloe; then walking on. "What is wrong, Milly? there must have been a cause for the tears you have certainly been shedding."

"I am summoned home, uncle, and glad as I shall be to see it and all the dear ones there, again, I can't help feeling sorry to leave you all."

"I hope not. Dear me, I wish we could keep you always!" he exclaimed. "But when and how are you to go?"

"Mother wrote that a gentleman friend – our minister, Mr. Lord – will be in Philadelphia in the course of three or four weeks, spend a few days there, then go back to Pleasant Plains, and that he has kindly offered to take charge of me. Mother and father think I should embrace the opportunity by all means, as it may be a long time before another as good will offer."

"And doubtless they are right, though I wish it had not come so soon."

"So soon, uncle?" Mildred returned brightly. "Do you forget that I have been with you for nearly a year?"

"A year is a very short time at my age," he answered with a smile.

But they were at the door of the breakfast-room, and the topic was dropped for the present, as by mutual consent.

CHAPTER II

"O my good lord, the world is but a word;
Were it all yours, to give it in a breath,
How quickly were it gone."

Shakespeare.

The end of the week found the Dinsmores and Mildred in Philadelphia, very busy with sight-seeing and shopping. Each one of the party was to be furnished with a suitable outfit for fall and the coming winter, and Mildred had a long list of commissions from her mother.

Mrs. Dinsmore showed herself keenly interested in the purchase of her own and her children's finery, languidly so in Mildred's; these procured, she immediately declared herself completely worn out and unfit for further exertion.

No one regretted it; Mildred had learned to rely to a great extent upon her own taste and judgment, and with Mr. Dinsmore's efficient help succeeded quite to her satisfaction in filling out the remainder of her list.

To him fell the task of buying for his little granddaughter, and Mildred was not a little gratified by being taken into his counsels and invited to assist his choice of materials and the fashion in which they should be made up.

Spite of some drawbacks to her pleasure, principally caused by Mrs. Dinsmore's infirmities of temper, Mildred thoroughly enjoyed her stay in the City of Brotherly Love.

It was drawing to a close, when, on coming down from her room one morning and entering the private parlor of their party, she was met by a joyous greeting from little Elsie.

"O Cousin Milly, I'm so glad! Grandpa has got a letter from my papa, and my papa says Elsie must go and buy some pretty presents for all the folks at your home. Isn't that ever so nice?"

"Thank you, darling, you and your papa," Mildred said, stooping to caress the child. "He is very kind, and I know your generous little heart can find no greater pleasure than in giving to others."

"She's a Dinsmore in that," her grandfather said with a proud smile; "they have always esteemed it the greatest luxury wealth can purchase. And Elsie is fortunately abundantly able to gratify herself in that way, and her father has given her carte blanche (subject to my approval, of course); so, my dear, you are not to object to anything we may take it into our heads to do."

He patted Elsie's curly pate as he spoke, and looked smilingly into Mildred's eyes.

"You are very kind now and always, uncle," the young girl responded, returning his smile and blushing slightly; "and I don't know that I have a right to object to anything that is not done for myself."

The entrance of Mrs. Dinsmore and her children simultaneously with the bringing in of breakfast, put a stop to the conversation.

"Well, Mildred, if it suits your convenience, we will set out at once upon this final shopping expedition," her uncle said as they left the table; and her consent being given, he directed Chloe to make Elsie ready to accompany them.

The child was in her element as they went from one store to another, and she chose, with the assistance of her grandfather and cousin, her gifts to Mildred's parents, brothers, and sisters.

At length they entered the largest jewelry establishment in the city, and Mr. Dinsmore asked to be shown some of their best gold watches for ladies.

"I am commissioned to select one for a lady friend," he said to Mildred in a grave, half-preoccupied tone as the jeweller promptly complied with his request, "and I want your assistance in making a choice."

"But I am no judge of a watch, uncle," she returned; "Elsie here could select about as well as I."

"Elsie shall have her say about it, too," Mr. Dinsmore said, looking smilingly from one to the other. "All I want from either of you is an opinion in regard to the outside appearance, while this gentleman and I will judge of the quality of the works."

They presently made a selection of both watch and chain satisfactory to all parties. Elsie chose a plain gold ring for Mildred, and one for each of her sisters, and they left the store.

Elsie whispered something to her grandfather as he took his seat beside her in the carriage.

He shook his head. "Wait till we get home," he said rather curtly; "we are going now to choose the new piano."

It was for the drawing-room at Roselands, and he took Mildred with him to try the instruments and tell him which she thought the best and finest toned.

Mildred was equally charmed with several – two in particular – and they had some little difficulty in fixing upon the one that should be ordered to Roselands.

"I will leave it undecided for to-day," Mr. Dinsmore said at length, "and will call again to-morrow."

On the way to their hotel, and when arrived there, little Elsie seemed all eagerness, yet kept it in check in obedience to an occasional warning look from her grandfather.

Mildred went directly to her room to remove her bonnet and shawl, then sat down in a low chair by the window to rest and think while awaiting the summons to dinner.

She had scarcely done so when there was a gentle tap, as of baby fingers, at her door, and Elsie's sweet voice was heard asking in eager, excited tones for admittance.

"Yes, darling, come in," Mildred answered; and the door flew open and the child ran in, closely followed by her mammy.

The small hands held a jewel-case, and the large, soft brown eyes were full of love and delight as she hastened to place it in Mildred's lap, saying, "It's for you, cousin; my papa said in his letter that Elsie might buy it for you."

She raised the lid. "See, Cousin Milly, see! Aren't you so glad?"

There lay the watch and chain they had helped Mr. Dinsmore select that morning.

A watch was a far greater luxury in those days than it is now, and this a costly and beautiful one. Mildred could scarcely believe the evidence of her senses; surely it must be all a dream. She gazed at the child in dumb surprise.

Elsie lifted her pretty present with dainty care, threw the chain round Mildred's neck, and slid the watch into the bosom of her dress; then stepping back a little to take a better view, "See, mammy, see!" she cried, clapping her hands and dancing up and down in delight, "doesn't it look pretty on cousin?"

"Jus' lubly, honey. Don't Miss Milly like it?"

Aunt Chloe's look into Mildred's face was half reproachful, half entreating. Could it be possible that her darling's beautiful, costly gift was not appreciated?

"Like it?" cried Mildred, catching the child in her arms and covering the little face with kisses, a tear or two mingling with them to the great wonderment of the little one; "like it? Oh it is only too lovely and expensive to be bestowed upon me! Sweet pet, you should keep it for yourself. Cousin Milly ought not to take it from you."

"Yes, papa did say so in his letter. Grandpa read the words to Elsie. And when I's big enough I is to have my mamma's watch."

"But it cost so much," murmured Mildred half to herself, as she drew out the watch and gazed at it with admiring eyes.

"My chile hab plenty ob money," responded Aunt Chloe, "and houses and land and eberyting ob dis world's riches; and she lubs you, Miss Milly, and ef you don' take dat watch and chain she will most break her bressed little heart. Won't you, honey?"

The child nodded, and the soft eyes gazing into Mildred's filled with tears. It was impossible to resist their eloquent pleading.

"Then cousin will accept it with her heartiest thanks, and value it more for the sake of the dear little giver than for its usefulness, its beauty, or its cost," Mildred said, taking Elsie on her lap and holding her in a close, loving embrace. "Dear little girlie," she murmured tenderly, "cousin will never intentionally rob you of the smallest pleasure or plant the least thorn in your path."

Another light tap at the door, and Mr. Dinsmore joined them. "Ah! that is right," he said with a smiling glance at the chain about Mildred's neck.

"Uncle, it is too much. You should not have allowed it. How could you?" Mildred asked half reproachfully.

"I only obeyed orders," was his laughing rejoinder. "Horace feels, as I do also, that we owe a debt of gratitude to your mother – to say nothing of the affection we have for you all; and he knows from the reports I have given him of his child that he could not afford her a greater gratification than the permission to do this. Beside, you have been extremely kind to her, and ought not to object to her making you some small return in the only way she can."

"O uncle! her love and sweet caresses have more than recompensed the little I have been able to do for her, the darling!" cried Mildred, heaping fresh caresses upon the little fair one.

Mr. Lord called that afternoon to report himself as arrived in the city, and to inquire if it were Mildred's intention to accept his escort on the homeward journey. His stay would necessarily be short – not more than two or three days.

Mildred met him with outstretched hand and eyes shining with pleasure. She had been so long away from home, was so hungry for a sight of anything connected with Pleasant Plains, that had she unexpectedly encountered Damaris Drybread she would very probably have greeted her with something like affection.

She perceived no change in Mr. Lord, except that he had a new set of teeth; he seemed to her in all other respects precisely what he was when she bade him good-by a year ago; but he was astonished, bewildered, delighted at the change in her. He had always admired her fresh young beauty, but it was as though the sweet bud had blossomed into the half-blown, lovely rose, with just a few of its petals still softly folded.

He blushed and stammered, answered her eager queries about old friends, and all that had been going on in Pleasant Plains since she left, in the most absent-minded way, and scarcely took his eyes from her face. In short, so conducted himself as to make his feelings toward her evident to the most careless observer.

"Mildred," said Mrs. Dinsmore, when at last he had taken his departure for that day, "if I were your mother you should stay from home another year before I would trust you to travel with that man!"

"Why, aunt, you cannot think him anything but a good man!" exclaimed the girl in astonishment.

"Humph! that's a question I don't pretend to decide. But don't, I beg of you, let him persuade you on the way that it is your duty to marry him. If he can only make you believe it's your duty, you'll do it whether you want to or not."

Mildred's cheek flushed hotly. "O Aunt Dinsmore!" she cried, "he could never be so foolish! why, he is old enough to be my father, and so wise and good; and I but a silly young thing, as unfit as possible for the duties and responsibilities of a – "

"Minister's wife," suggested Mrs. Dinsmore, as the young girl broke off in confusion. "Well, I don't know about that; you are pious enough in all conscience. But, Mildred, you positively must reject him; it would be a terribly hard life, and – "

"Aunt, he has not offered, and I believe, I hope, never will. So I am not called upon to consider the question of acceptance or rejection."

"That was very rude, Miss Keith – your interrupting me in that way," Mrs. Dinsmore said, half in displeasure, half in sport. "Well, if you will allow me, I shall finish what I had to say. I've set my heart on seeing you and Charlie Landreth make a match. There! why do you color so, and turn your head away? Charlie likes you – is in fact deeply in love, I feel perfectly certain, and doubtless will follow you before long. You may take my word for it that he would have proposed before we left the springs if it hadn't been for that sudden summons to his dying sister."

Mildred made no reply; she had kept her face studiously averted, and was glad that the entrance, at that moment, of a servant with a letter for Mrs. Dinsmore gave her an opportunity to escape from the room.

CHAPTER III

"And 't shall go hard,
But I will delve one yard, below their mines,
And blow them at the moon."

Shakespeare.

The sun was just peeping over the tops of the tall city houses as Mildred entered the carriage which was to convey her to the depot. Mr. Dinsmore and little Elsie – the two whom it was a grief of heart to her to leave – were with her; Mrs. Dinsmore and the others had bidden good-by before retiring the previous night, and were still in bed.

"Elsie, darling, won't you sit in cousin's lap?" Mildred said, holding out her arms to receive the child as her grandfather handed her in at the carriage door.

"No, no! she is much too heavy, and there is abundance of room," he said hastily.

"But I want to hold her, uncle," returned Mildred, drawing the little one to her knee. "I love dearly to have her in my arms, and this is my last chance."

"As you will, then; a wilful woman will have her way," he said lightly, as he settled himself on the opposite seat and the door closed upon them with a bang.

The rattling of the wheels over the cobblestones, as they drove rapidly onward, made conversation next to impossible; but Mildred was not sorry: her heart was almost too full for speech. She clasped little Elsie close, the child nestling lovingly in her arms, while they mingled their caresses and tears.

At the depot, too, where there was a half hour of waiting, they clung together as those who knew not how to part. Elsie's low sobs were pitiful to hear, but she stood in too great awe of her grandfather to indulge in any loud lament.

He, however, did not reprove her, but seemed to quite compassionate her grief, and tried to assuage it with promises of gifts and indulgences; for Mildred had succeeded to some extent in softening his heart toward the motherless little one – which she now perceived with joy and thankfulness.

His kindness to herself had been uniform from the first, and continued to the last moment. Not till he had seen her on board the train, and made as comfortable as possible, did he resign her to the care of Mr. Lord; then, with a fatherly kiss and an affectionate message to her mother, he left her.

As the train moved slowly on, she caught a last glimpse of him, and of Aunt Chloe standing by his side with the weeping Elsie in her arms.

Mr. Lord essayed the office of comforter.

"That is a sweet child, Miss Mildred, a very sweet child. And Mr. Dinsmore seems a noble man. These partings are sad – especially so when we are young; but let the thought of the dear ones to whom you are going, and of the better land where partings are unknown, console and cheer you now."

Mildred could hardly have commanded her voice to reply, and was glad the increasing noise of the train relieved her of the necessity for doing so, but she dried her eyes and resolutely forced her tears back to their fountain, calling to mind the lessons on the duty of cheerfulness taught her by her mother, by both precept and example.

And oh, it was joy to know that each mile passed over was bearing her nearer to that loved monitor! What a cheering thought was that! and scarcely less so the prospect of seeing Aunt Wealthy, with whom she and Mr. Lord were to spend a few days; Lansdale being not far out of their route in crossing Ohio.

At that day there was no continuous line of railroad from Philadelphia to Pittsburg. They traveled sometimes by canal, sometimes by stage, passing over the mountains in the latter. This proved the most exciting and perilous part of the journey, the roads being almost all the way very steep, and often lying along the edge of a precipice, to plunge over which would be certain, horrible death.

Much of the scenery was grand and beautiful, but the enjoyment of it greatly interfered with by the sense of danger. Many a time Mildred's heart seemed to leap into her mouth, and she sent up a silent but strong cry to God that he would keep the horses from stumbling, their feet from treading too near the verge.

There was one afternoon so full of terror of this kind, and importunate prayer for preservation, that she felt she could never forget it to the day of her death should she live to the age of Methuselah.

The stage was full: the back seat was occupied by our heroine and a young mother with a babe in her arms and another little one by her side; the remaining seats were filled with gentlemen.

"That fellow is drunk and in a terribly bad humor," remarked one of the latter, as the driver slammed the door to upon them and mounted to his perch.

"In no fit condition to guide those horses over the steep and narrow passes that lie between this and our next halting-place," added another uneasily. "You had an altercation with him, hadn't you, Blake?" addressing the first speaker.

"Yes, Mr. Grey, I had; what business had he to hurry us off in this style? Why, we were scarcely seated at the dinner-table when he blew his horn, and we all had to run to avoid being left."

"Quite true."

"That's so," assented several voices.

"And the same thing is repeated again and again, until it has become quite unbearable," Blake went on, his eyes sparkling with anger; "we pay for our food and have no chance to eat it."

"There seems to be some collusion between the innkeepers and drivers for the purpose of defrauding travelers," remarked Mr. Lord.

"Are we not going very fast?" asked the young mother, turning a pale, anxious face toward the last speaker.

"Yes, dangerously so." And, putting his head out of the window, he called to the driver, mildly requesting him to slacken his speed.

The reply was a volley of oaths and curses, while the whip was applied to the horses in a way that made them rear and plunge frightfully.

They had been toiling up a steep ascent, and now were skirting the mountain side, a high wall of rock on the one hand, a sheer descent of many hundred feet on the other.

Blake glanced from the window with a shudder, and turning a ghastly face upon the others, "We shall be hurled into eternity in another minute," he said, in a hoarse whisper.

Then voice after voice was raised, calling to the driver in expostulation, warning, entreaty.

"You are risking your own life as well as ours," cried one.

"I tell you I don't care!" he shouted back, with a fearful oath; "we're behind time, and I'll lose my place if I don't make it up. I'll get you to C – by half-past five, or land you in h – ll, I don't care which."

"O my children, my poor little children!" cried the mother, clasping her babe closer to her breast and bursting into tears. Then, in a sort of desperation, she thrust her head out of the window and shrieked to the man, "For the love of Heaven, driver, have mercy on my poor babes!"

The man was probably a father, for that appeal reached his heart, hardened as it was: there was instantly a very sensible diminution of their fearful velocity, though the stage still rolled on at a dangerously rapid rate; keeping them all in terror until at length it drew up before the door of a tavern; where they were to halt for their supper.

The gentlemen made haste to alight. Mr. Lord handed out Mildred, then the mother and her children.

"You must be very tired, ladies," he said, following them into the parlor of the inn, which was very plainly furnished with rag carpet, wooden chairs and settee, and green paper window-blinds, nothing tasteful, nothing inviting, except an appearance of order and cleanliness.

"Yes, sir, I am dreadfully tired," the strange lady answered, dropping into a chair and setting her babe on her knee, while she drew the older child to her side and wiped the tears from its cheeks, for it was sobbing pitifully; "that was a fearful ride, the jolting and shaking were bad enough, but the fright was ten times worse. And we're almost starved," she added. "My little Mary is crying with hunger. I hope they'll give us time to eat here. Do you know, sir, how soon the stage starts on again?"

"I will step out and inquire; also how soon the supper will be ready," Mr. Lord said, moving toward the door.

"Can I do anything for you, Miss Mildred?" he asked, pausing upon the threshold. "You are looking wretchedly pale and fatigued," he added, in a tone of concern.

The other gentlemen had gone to the bar-room; but at this moment Blake came to a window of the parlor, looking out upon a porch which ran along the whole front of the house. He looked red and angry.

"It seems the same game is to be repeated here," he said, addressing Mr. Lord; "the supper is not ready and the stage will leave in half an hour. There is every appearance of rain too; the night will be cloudy and dark, making travel over these mountains doubly dangerous. I propose that we all decide to remain where we are over night and let the stage go empty. If the whole party will agree in doing so, 'twill serve the rascal right, and perhaps teach him a useful and much needed lesson. What do you say, sir? you and your – daughter?"

"My lady friend," stammered Mr. Lord, coloring violently. "What do you think of the plan, Miss Mildred?"

Her cheek, too, flushed a rosy red as she answered eagerly: "Oh, let us stay, by all means! I'm sure it would be better a great deal, than risking our lives on such roads at night."

"Just what I think," said the other lady, "and my little ones are too tired to travel any farther to-night. I shall stay whether the rest do or not. I intend that the children and I shall have a chance to eat one full meal at any rate," she added to Mildred, as the gentlemen walked away together.

The call to supper followed almost immediately upon the announcement that no one would leave in the stage that night.

With the keen appetites they brought to it, our travellers found the fare excellent – good bread and butter, baked potatoes, ham and fresh-laid eggs.

Mr. Lord, seated between the two ladies, was very kind and attentive to both, but as usual did some absurdly absent-minded things.

"Do you really prefer salt to sugar in your coffee, Mr. Lord?" asked Mildred demurely, but with a mischievous twinkle in her eye, as she saw him draw the salt-cellar toward him and dip his teaspoon into it.

She had stayed his hand just in time. "Oh no, certainly not," he said, laughing to cover his confusion as he hastily emptied the spoon into his saucer. "It is a very pleasant evening," he remarked, sugaring his potato.

"Do you think so?" said Mildred, listening to the dash of the rain against the window, for the threatened storm had come. "Then I suppose, like the Shepherd of Salisbury Plains, you are pleased with whatever kind of weather is sent?"

"Certainly we all should be," he said. "But I was not aware till this moment that it was raining."

Mildred presently becoming interested in some talk going on between her opposite neighbors, had for the moment almost forgotten Mr. Lord's existence. She was recalled to it by a hasty movement on his part. He suddenly pushed back his chair, rose, and walked out of the room.

A glance at his saucer, half full of coffee, then at the laughing eyes of the other lady, enlightened our heroine as to the cause of his sudden exit.

"Salted coffee is not, I find, particularly palatable," he remarked, coming back and resuming his seat. "I am a sadly absent-minded person, Miss Mildred; you should watch over me and prevent such mistakes, as my mother does at home."

"I really do not feel equal to so arduous an undertaking," was her sprightly rejoinder.

"This is a lonely spot, not another house in sight, they say," remarked the mother of the children to Mildred, as they returned to the parlor. "I am timid about sleeping alone in a strange place, and should like to have a room adjoining yours, if you do not object, are not afraid of being so near a lioness and her cubs," she added, with a slight laugh. "I am Mrs. Lyon."

Mildred gave her name in return, and expressed entire acquiescence in the proposed arrangement, and being much fatigued with their journey they presently retired.

They were up and dressed betimes to make sure of their breakfast before the early hour at which the stage was to leave. But they were treated to a repetition of former experiences. The meal was delayed, and they had been scarcely ten minutes at the table when they heard the roll and rumble of the wheels and the loud "Toot, toot!" of the driver's horn, as the stage swept round from the stables and drew up before the tavern door.

There was a hasty swallowing down of another mouthful or two, a hurried scramble for hats, bonnets, and parcels, a crowding into the vehicle, and in a moment more it was toiling up the mountain side.

The appetite of no one of the party had been fully satisfied, and there was a good deal of grumbling and complaining from this one and that.

"I tell you, friends," said Blake, "it is high time there was a stop put to this thing. I have an idea in my head, and at the next stopping place, if we are hurried off in the usual style, I want you all to follow my example. If you will, these rascally fellows will find themselves outwitted."

"What is it?"

"What's your plan?" queried one and another, but the only answer was, "Wait and you will see, gentlemen."

"There is one thing I have thought of," Mrs. Lyon said to Mildred, "I'll have my own and the children's bonnets on always before we are called to the meals. If there should be some soiling of ribbons, it will be better than going hungry."

This driver was sober and quiet; the ride, in consequence, less trying than that of the previous afternoon. Between twelve and one they halted for dinner at another country inn.

There was, as usual, a little waiting time, then they sat down to an abundant and very inviting meal, but had not half satisfied their appetites when roll of wheels and toot of horn again summoned them to resume their journey.

Every eye in the party turned upon Blake. He sprang up instantly, seized a roast chicken by the leg with one hand, his hat in the other, and ran for the stage.

"All right!" cried Grey, picking up a pie. "I'll send the plate home by the driver, landlord," he shouted back, as he, too, darted from the door.

Looking on in dumb astonishment, the landlord saw bread, rolls, butter, pickles, cheese, and hard-boiled eggs disappear in like manner, and before he could utter a remonstrance the stage was whirling away down the mountain, not a passenger left behind, nor nearly so much food as would have remained had they been permitted to finish their meal at the table.

"Outwitted this time, sure as I'm born!" he muttered at length, turning back into the deserted dining-room and ruefully eyeing his despoiled board.

His wife came hurrying in from the kitchen.

"So they're off, and we'll have our dinner now. But," and she stared aghast at an empty platter. "I say, Jones, where is that chicken? Didn't I tell you that was for ourselves, and you wasn't to put a knife into it?"

"Neither I did," he answered half savagely, "and it's all the worse for us, seein' they've carried it off whole, and if I'd a cut it there might a ben part left on the plate."

"Carried it off!" she cried. "Well, I never! and it was the nicest, fattest, tenderest bit of a spring chicken ever you see!" – and with a groan she began gathering up the empty dishes.

"Take that newspaper out of my coat pocket and spread it over my knees, won't you, Grey?" said Blake, the moment they were fairly seated in the stage. "Now your jack-knife, please, and I'll carve this fowl. I fear it'll not be very scientifically dismembered," he went on, when his requests had been complied with, "but sufficiently so to enable me to make a tolerably equal distribution. What is your choice, ma'am?" addressing Mrs. Lyon.

The result of their *coup d'état* was a very comfortable, enjoyable meal seasoned with many a merry jest over the discomfiture of the foe, and the makeshifts they themselves were put to for lack of the usual table appliances.

CHAPTER IV

"Alas! my lord, if talking would prevail,
I could suggest much better arguments
Than those regards you throw away on me,
Your valor, honor, wisdom, prais'd by all.
But bid physicians talk our veins to temper
And with an argument new-set a pulse,
Then think, my lord, of reasoning into love."

Young.

By the time they reached Lansdale, Mildred was weary enough to be very glad of a few days' rest; rest whose delights were doubled and trebled by being taken in the society of her dear old aunt.

The travellers were received with the warmest of welcomes, Mildred embraced over and over again, and Mr. Lord repeatedly and heartily thanked for bringing her.

"Dear child, how you are improved!" Aunt Wealthy said the first moment they found themselves alone together.

"Have I grown, auntie?" Mildred asked with an arch smile, laying two shapely, soft white hands on the old lady's shoulders and gazing lovingly into her eyes, as they stood facing each other on the hearth-rug in front of the open fire-place in Miss Stanhope's cosy sitting-room; for it was a cool rainy evening, and the warmth of a small wood fire blazing and crackling there was by no means unpleasant.

"Not in height, Milly," Miss Stanhope answered, giving the young girl a critical survey, "nor stouter either; but your form has developed, your carriage is more assured and graceful, your dress has a certain style it lacked before, and – But I must not make you vain," she added, breaking off with her low musical laugh. "Come tell me all about your uncle Dinsmore and his family."

"And little Elsie, the sweet darling!" sighed Mildred. "Aunt Wealthy, she is a perfect little fairy: the sweetest, most beautiful creature you ever laid eyes on."

"Ah! I only wish I could lay eyes on her," the old lady rejoined. "Does she resemble her father in looks?"

"Not in the least: she is said to be the image of her mother;" and from that Mildred went on to dwell with minuteness and enthusiasm on all the charms of the little one, arousing in her companion a very strong desire to see and know Elsie for herself.

That subject pretty well exhausted, Mildred could talk of something else, and found a great deal to tell about the other Dinsmores, her own experiences in the South, and the incidents of her late journey.

They had seated themselves on a sofa. Mr. Lord, suffering from an attack of sick headache, had retired to his own apartment directly after tea, leaving them to the full enjoyment of each other.

"And have you come back heart whole, Milly, my dear?" asked the old lady, smiling into the eyes of her young relative and softly stroking the hand she held.

The question brought a vivid blush to the fair young face.

"Excuse me, dear child; I do not wish to pry into your secrets," Aunt Wealthy hastened to say.

"No, no, auntie dear, I do not consider it prying, or wish to keep my affairs from your knowledge. You and mother are the two I wish to confide in and consult."

And with many blushes, sighs, and now and then a few quiet tears, Mildred poured out the whole story of Charlie Landreth's and her own love for each other, and the barrier between them: Aunt Wealthy listening with deep interest and heartfelt sympathy.

"Don't despair, dear child," she said, caressing the narrator in tender, motherly fashion, "and don't give him up. We will join our prayers in his behalf, and the Lord will, in his own good time, fulfil to us his gracious promise to those who agree together to ask a boon of him."

"Yes, auntie, I do believe he will," Mildred responded, smiling through her tears, "if we pray in faith; for in asking for the conversion of a soul we shall certainly be asking that which is agreeable to his will. And yet – O auntie! it may be long years before our prayers receive the answer, and I – I may never see him again!"

"Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life," repeated Miss Stanhope in low, soft tones. "Milly dear, try to leave the future in the hands of Him who has said, 'I have loved thee with an everlasting love; I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee.'"

Both mused in silence for a little; then Miss Stanhope said, turning with a slight smile toward her young relative, "Milly, child, you are very attractive to the other sex."

Mildred colored and looked down. "Aunt Wealthy," she said, "I hope you do not think me a coquette?"

"No, child, no! I'm quite sure you are too kind-hearted to enjoy giving pain to any living creature."

"That is true, auntie; and for that reason I wish none would care for me in that way but the one I can care for in return."

"Yes, and therefore I wish" – Miss Stanhope paused, then in answer to Mildred's inquiring look concluded her sentence – "that some other escort had been found for you."

Mildred's cheek crimsoned. "Aunt Wealthy!" she exclaimed, "do you – do you really think he cares for me in that way? Oh I hope not. Aunt Dinsmore said something of the sort, but I hoped she was mistaken."

Miss Stanhope's only answer was a meaning smile and a slight shake of the head.

"Then, Aunt Wealthy, you must help me to avoid being left alone with him!" cried Mildred in a tone of apprehension and annoyance; "and I do hope there will always be other passengers in the boats and stages, so that he will have no chance to say a word."

"I'll do what I can, child; cling as close to me as you will, but you may rest assured he is bound to speak and have it out with you, sooner or later."

"He shall not if I can prevent him. How can he be so extremely silly! But indeed, Aunt Wealthy, I think you must be mistaken. He surely has too much sense to fancy me."

"You won't be rude, Milly? you won't forget the respect due to him as your minister?"

"Not if I can help it. Aunt Wealthy, you must help me by not leaving us alone together for a single moment."

"But, my dear, how are my household affairs to be attended to?"

"When we are all together and you want to leave the room, just clear your throat and give me a look, and I'll go first. Then you can readily excuse yourself on the plea of domestic matters calling for your attention; and he may amuse himself with a newspaper or a book until we rejoin him."

Miss Stanhope laughingly agreed to the proposed programme, and they carried it out during the whole visit.

Mr. Lord was very desirous to see Mildred alone, but found every effort to that end frustrated. Miss Stanhope seemed always in the way, and Mildred would accept no invitation to walk or drive unless her aunt was included in it. He had formerly considered the aunt quite a charming old lady, but changed his opinion somewhat at this particular time. Though undoubtedly a most excellent woman, and without a superior as a hostess, it was a decided bore to have to listen to and answer her talk when he was longing for a private chat with Mildred.

He bore the trial with what patience he might, comforting himself with the hope of a favorable opportunity for his wooing somewhere on the journey from Lansdale to Pleasant Plains.

Mildred was dreading the same thing, and fully resolved to prevent it if possible. Therefore, when the stage drew up for them at Miss Stanhope's gate, it was with very different feelings they perceived that it already contained several passengers.

"Safe for the present, auntie," whispered the young girl, as they folded each other in a last, lingering embrace.

"You can't expect to be so fortunate always," returned the old lady in the same low key, and with a humorous look. "Be sure to let me have the whole story in your next letter."

It was staging all the way now. Sometimes they travelled day and night; sometimes stopped for a few hours' rest and sleep at a wayside inn. It was on Monday morning they left Lansdale, and the journey was not completed until Saturday noon.

Through all the earlier part of the route they had plenty of company, the stage being always pretty well filled, if not crowded. Most of their fellow-travellers proved intelligent and agreeable, some, both ladies and gentlemen remarkably so; and the tedium of the way was beguiled by talk, now grave, now gay, and embracing a wide range of topics.

On one occasion a discussion arose on the propriety and lawfulness of intermarriage between Christians and worldlings. Some took the ground that it was a mere matter of choice; others that it was both dangerous and sinful for a follower of Christ to marry any other than a fellow-disciple, or one who was esteemed such.

Of these latter Mr. Lord was one of the strongest and most decided in the expressions of his sentiments and convictions, quoting a number of passages of Scripture to sustain his views.

During the whole of the conversation Mildred was a silent but deeply interested listener, her heart sinking more and more with each word uttered by Mr. Lord; for as her pastor and spiritual instructor, his expressed convictions of truth carried great weight with her, and seemed to widen the gulf between herself and him who was the choice of her heart.

Her only comfort was the hope that some day the barrier might be removed; but ah! many long years might intervene, and who should say that in the mean time Charlie would not grow disheartened and weary of waiting; or, incredulous of the love that could keep him waiting, allow some other to usurp her place in his affections?

These were depressing thoughts, and throughout the remainder of the journey they filled Mildred's mind almost constantly. It was only by a determined effort that she could shake them off and talk of other things.

In the course of that day and the next, which was Friday, the other passengers dropped off one by one, until, to her dismay, she found herself alone with Mr. Lord for the first time since they had left Lansdale.

The last to leave them was an elderly lady who had been occupying the back seat along with Mildred since the stage had started that morning. When it drew up before her door, Mr. Lord alighted and politely handed her out. On getting in again, instead of resuming his former seat, he took the one she had just vacated.

Mildred's heart gave a throb and the color rushed over her face, for she foresaw what would follow. Still she would foil him if possible, and perhaps their numbers might be presently again augmented as they rolled onward.

With that last thought in his mind also, the gentleman was disposed to seize his opportunity instantly. He cleared his throat, turned to his companion, and opened his lips; but with her back toward him she was gazing eagerly from the window.

"Look, look at those maples!" she cried; "was there ever more gorgeous coloring? How perfectly lovely the woods are! And the weather is delightful to-day. October is the pleasantest month of the year for travelling, I think."

"Any month and any weather would be pleasant to me with you for my companion," he said, "and nothing, my dearest girl, could make me so supremely happy as to secure you as such for the whole journey of life."

She feigned not to have heard or fully understood. "I for one have travelled quite far enough," she responded, still keeping her face toward the window. "I'm tired of it, and of being so long away from the dear home-circle. Oh, I am so glad that I shall be with them to-morrow, if all goes well!"

"God grant it, dear Mildred; I shall rejoice in your happiness and theirs, but – "

"Oh see!" she interrupted, pointing to a group of trees near the roadside, "what brilliant reds and yellows! And there! what a beautiful contrast those evergreens make!"

"Yes; God's works are wonderful and his ways past finding out," he answered devoutly, then kept silence; while for some minutes Mildred rattled on, hardly knowing or caring what she was saying so she might but avoid the necessity of listening to and answering the proposal he was evidently so desirous to make.

But his silence disconcerted her, he did not seem to hear her remarks, and at length she found herself too much embarrassed to continue them. For five minutes neither spoke, then he made her a formal offer of his heart and hand, which she gently but decidedly declined, saying she felt totally unfit for the position he would place her in.

He said that in that he could not agree with her; he had never met any one who seemed to him so eminently fitted for the duties and responsibilities he had asked her to assume. "And he loved her as he never had loved and never could love another. Would she not reconsider? Would she not be persuaded?"

She told him she highly esteemed him as a man and a minister, that she felt greatly honored by his preference, but could not love him in the way he wished.

"Ah," he said, "what a sad blunderer I am! I see have spoken too soon. Yet give me a little hope, dear girl, and I will wait patiently and do my best to win the place in your heart I so ardently covet."

She could not bring herself to acknowledge that that place was already filled, and he would not resign the hope of finally winning her.

During the rest of that day and the morning of the next he treated her to frequent, lengthened discourses on the duty of every one to live the most useful life possible, on the rare opportunities of so doing afforded by the position of minister's wife, and on the permanence and sure increase of connubial love when founded upon mutual respect and esteem, till at length a vague fear crept over her that he might finally succeed in proving to her that it was her duty to resign the hope that at some future day the barrier to her union with the man of her choice would be swept away, and to marry him on account of the sphere of usefulness such a match would open to her.

She heard him for the most part in silence, now and then varied by a slight nod of acquiescence in the sentiments he expressed, yet even from these scant tokens of favor he ventured to take courage and to hope that her rejection of his suit would not prove final.

It was a great relief to her that they were not alone for the last ten miles that lay between them and Pleasant Plains.

CHAPTER V

"Nor need we power or splendor,
Wide hall or lordly dome;
The good, the true, the tender —
These form the wealth of home."

Mrs. Hale.

Could that be home – that pretty, tasteful dwelling, embosomed in trees, shrubs, and vines? Mildred was half in doubt, for the house itself seemed to have grown as well as the vegetation that environed it. But yes, the stage was stopping; and there were father and Rupert at the gate, mother and the rest on the porch; every face beaming a joyous welcome.

How Mr. Lord envied them as the stage whirled him rapidly away, out of sight and hearing of the glad greetings!

We will not attempt to describe these: there were close embraces, tears of joy, low-breathed words of tenderness and love, of gratitude to Him who had preserved a beloved child in all her journeyings, and brought her to her home again in safety and health; and there were shouts of delight from the little ones, to whom it seemed half a lifetime since sister Milly went away.

"How we have missed you! and, oh, how glad we are to have you back again!" her mother said, looking smilingly at her, but with glistening eyes.

"She's changed," said Rupert, regarding her critically; "she's prettier than ever, and – and something else."

Zillah supplied the word – "More stylish."

"And you! why, you are a young lady!" exclaimed Mildred, gazing at her in astonishment.

"I'm fifteen, and taller than you, I do believe," returned Zillah, laughing and blushing.

"And how you're all grown!" Mildred went on, glancing round the circle.

"Except father and mother," laughed Rupert. "Haven't I nearly caught up to father in height?"

"So you have, and I shall be very proud of my big brother."

"Well, I declare, if you hain't come at last – thought you never was a comin'!" exclaimed a voice in Mildred's rear; and as she turned quickly about, a toil-hardened hand seized hers in a grasp that almost forced from her a little cry of pain.

"Yes," she said, "I have, and am very glad to find you here, Celestia Ann. You kept your promise."

"A heap better'n you did yours. Why you stayed more'n as long agin as you said you was agoin' to when you went off. Had a good time?"

"Yes; but I'm very glad to get home."

"So you'd ought to be. You look right down tired; and I reckon you are all that, and hungry, too. Well, I'll have dinner on table in about ten minutes;" and with the last word she vanished in the direction of the kitchen.

A look of expectant delight was on every face of the group about Mildred as the mother, saying, "Come, dear child, you will want to get rid of some of the dust of travel," led the way from the room, the others all following.

"Why, the house has grown too," was the young girl's delighted exclamation, as she was ushered into an apartment she had never seen before – large, airy, neatly and tastefully though inexpensively furnished; white muslin curtains at the windows, a snowy counterpane on the bed; everything new and fresh except the books in the hanging shelves on the wall, and some little ornaments which she recognized as her own peculiar property.

"Yes," her father answered, smiling fondly upon her, "so much so that we shall now have abundance of room, even with our eldest girl at home, and we hope it will be a very long while before she will want to run away again."

"Yes, indeed, father dear," she said, putting her arms around his neck; "oh, if you only knew how glad I am to get back!"

"This is your room, Milly; do you like it?" the children were asking in eager tones.

"Yes, yes, indeed! it is perfectly lovely! But, mother, it ought to be yours; it is larger and cheerier than yours."

"Ah! you are assuming to know more than you do, my child," laughed Mrs. Keith. "I, too, have one of the new rooms – there are six in all – and it is in every respect quite equal to this. But make haste with your toilet, for the dinner bell will soon ring."

They lingered at the table, eating slowly, because there was so much talking to be done – such pleasant, cheerful chat.

Then came the opening of Mildred's trunk, and the distribution of the purchases she had been commissioned to make, and of her own modest gifts to father, mother, brothers, and sisters, and the more expensive ones from Aunt Wealthy and the Dinsmore relatives. Of these last, little Elsie's were by far the most costly and valuable.

The children were wild with delight, the parents quietly happy in their pleasure, and gratified with the remembrances to themselves.

Mildred exhibited her watch and chain, calling forth exclamations of intense admiration and hearty congratulations.

"O sister Milly, how lovely!" cried Zillah; "I never saw anything so beautiful, and I'm so glad you have it! I don't believe there's another lady in town who has a gold watch."

"No, I presume not," returned Mildred, gazing down upon it with a pleased, but rather absent look, "and it is extremely pretty; yet not half so beautiful as the dear little giver." And then she launched out into the warmest of eulogies upon little Elsie – her loveliness of both person and disposition.

"She must have loads of money to buy you that splendid watch, and all these things for the rest of us," remarked Cyril.

"Yes, indeed! I'd like to be in her place," said Ada.

"I wouldn't," said Mildred; "and I don't believe you would, Ada, if you quite understood her position."

"Why?" the children asked, clustering close about their sister, with looks of surprise and eager interest; "tell us why. It must be nice to be so rich; to own houses and lands, and all sorts of things."

"Do not be too sure of that," said their father; "though poverty has its trials, wealth brings cares, and cannot of itself give happiness; in fact, it has sometimes proved a curse to its possessors. Remember our Saviour said, 'How hardly shall they that have riches enter into the kingdom of God.'"

"Yes," added Mrs. Keith; "and in another place he says, 'Take heed and beware of covetousness; for a man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth.'"

"But some rich people are good, aren't they?" queried Cyril. "I'm sure Milly said Elsie was."

"But she's just a baby girl," put in Don, "and maybe she'll get bad by the time she grows up."

"Now, boys, keep quiet, can't you? and let's hear what Milly's going to tell," said Ada.

Mildred glanced at the nearly emptied trunk, the piles of clothing on the bed and chairs, and shook her head. "Another time, children; I ought to be putting these things in place in the wardrobe and bureau."

"Oh! you're too tired. Sit down in the rocking-chair and rest while you talk, and I'll help you afterward to arrange your things," Zillah said; and with a word of thanks Mildred yielded.

Taking Annis on her lap, and glancing with a half smile from one eager, expectant face to another, "What would any one of you sell all the rest for?" she asked.

Several pairs of young eyes opened wide with astonishment. "Why, Milly, what a question!" "Not for anything!" "Not for all the world! You know we wouldn't!" were the answering exclamations; and then there were loving looks exchanged, and Don gave Fan a hug, while Cyril squeezed her hand and patted Annis on her curly head.

"It would be dreadfully lonesome not to have any brothers or sisters!" he said, with a long-drawn sigh of satisfaction.

"Little Elsie has none," said Mildred. "But what if we had no mother, children?"

"Milly, don't! what makes you say such things!" cried Fan, hastily releasing herself from Don, and running to her mother to hide her face in her lap with a half sob.

"No; what's the use?" Zillah asked huskily, while Ada's eyes filled and the boys looked distressed, as though the idea was too painful to contemplate.

"Just to convince you that little Elsie is not so much to be envied by us. She has no mother, has never seen her father, and does not know whether he loves her or not."

"Does she show any desire to see him?" asked Mrs. Keith, stroking Fan's hair.

"Oh yes, mother! yes, indeed! She talks a great deal about him, often wishes he would come home, and is never more interested than when he is the theme of conversation."

"I hope her grandfather and his wife love and fondle her?"

"Not at all; they treat her with almost unvarying coldness and neglect!" Mildred said, her eyes sparkling with indignant anger.

Then she went on to tell of various acts of injustice and oppression to which the little girl had been subjected since her coming to Roselands, and to give a pathetic description of her loneliness and unsatisfied yearning for the love of her kindred. In conclusion, Mildred asked, "Now would any of you change places with her?"

"No, no, indeed we wouldn't! Poor dear little thing! we're very sorry for her," the children cried in chorus.

"Mother, mayn't Elsie come here and be your little girl 'long with us?" asked Annis.

"I should gladly take her, darling, if I could," Mrs. Keith answered; "but she belongs to her father, and it is he who directs where she shall live."

"Tell us some more, Milly; tell about that beautiful Viamede," entreated Ada, putting an arm coaxingly round her sister's neck.

"Some other time; but now I must really go to work and finish my unpacking."

"No, you must go into another room and lie down for an hour or two," said her mother. "You need rest and sleep; and your sisters and I will set things to rights here."

Mildred objected. "Mother, dear, I have come home to ease your burdens, not to add to them."

"And which will you do by wearing yourself out and getting sick?" asked the mother, with a merry look and smile. "Set these younger ones a good example by prompt obedience to my direction. We want you bright for a good long talk after tea."

"But, mother, you always have so much to tax your time and strength, and –"

"Run away now, without another word," was the playful reply. "I'm neither busy nor tired this afternoon."

So Mildred went, slept soundly for a couple of hours, and toward tea-time came down to the sitting-room, looking quite rested and refreshed; very sweet and pretty, too, they all thought, in new and tasteful attire, and with her glossy brown hair becomingly arranged.

She found her mother and the older girls sewing.

"How nice you look!" Zillah said, surveying her admiringly. "That's a lovely dress, and made so prettily! Will you let me have mine made like it?"

"Yes, indeed, and help you make it, too. Mother, how have you managed with the sewing while I've been gone?"

"Pretty well, Milly. Zillah has become quite a needle-woman, and Ada does remarkably well, too, considering her imperfect sight. Housework suits her best on that account. They are dear, helpful girls – both of them."

"Milly, Milly," cried Cyril, rushing in from the grounds, "come and look at our gardens, and our hens and chickens, before it grows too dark."

"The gardens aren't much to look at now," laughed Zillah.

"But she can see pretty well what they have been, and we'll tell her the rest," returned Cyril, leading the way.

"Come, girls, we'll all go," Mrs. Keith said, folding up her work; "the rest of the afternoon and evening shall be a holiday, in honor of our wanderer's return."

There was, in truth, little to exhibit in the gardens now, save a few late-blooming fall flowers; but Mildred admired them, and listened with interest to the accounts given of what had been raised by each little worker during the past spring and summer.

And there was really a large flock of fowls, all in fine condition, promising plenty of eggs and poultry even through the cold winter months; for Rupert had built a snug hen-house to protect these feathered friends from the inclemency of the weather.

"Now this way, Mildred; I want to show you the vines I've trained over the front porch," Rupert said.

As they stood looking at the vines, the front gate opened and shut, and a firm, elastic step came quickly up the walk. Mildred turned and found an old acquaintance at her side.

"Wallace – Mr. Ormsby!" she exclaimed, offering her hand in cordial greeting, though the rich color surged over her face with the sudden recollection of his parting words, spoken a year ago.

"No; keep to the first name, please," he said in an undertone, as he grasped her offered hand. "Excuse so early a call, but I did not know how to wait. It seems an age since you went away."

"We are always glad to see you, Wallace," said Mrs. Keith. "You must stay and take tea with us; it is nearly ready. Come, we will all go in now, for the air is growing chilly."

Ormsby was by no means loath to accept the invitation. Mildred seemed to him lovelier than ever, and his eyes were constantly seeking her face, when politeness did not require him to look elsewhere. Enchanted anew by her charms of person, manner, and conversation, he lingered for an hour or more after tea, watching, hoping for an opportunity to breathe some words into her ear which should reach no other.

But parents, brothers, and sisters clustered about her, and soon other neighbors began to drop in to bid her welcome home – Dr. Grange and his daughter, Claudina Chetwood and her brother Will, and one or two others of those who were most intimate with the family. Then a look from Mr. Keith reminding Wallace of an important paper which should be drawn up that evening, he took a reluctant leave.

He paused an instant at the gate to glance back regretfully at the brightly lighted parlor windows and the comfortable-looking group within, of which Mildred was the centre.

A tall, muscular figure was approaching from the opposite direction as Ormsby, turning away with a sigh, hurried down the street toward Mr. Keith's office. There was an exchange of greetings as the two passed each other. "Good-evening, Mr. Ormsby." "How d'ye do, Sheriff?" – and each hastened on his way.

The next moment the tall man was standing where Wallace had been but now, gazing intently in at the same group; though, in truth, he scarcely saw any but that central figure – the graceful, girlish form so tastefully attired; the bright, sweet face, full of animation and intellect. He could not take his eyes from her – great, dark eyes, hungry and wistful – as for many minutes he stood resting his left hand on the top of the gate, the right arm hanging at his side.

At last, with a sigh that was almost a groan, he, too, turned and went on his way.

"She's prettier than ever – the sweetest thing alive," he murmured half aloud, "and I'll never forgit how good she was to me in that awful time when even my mother couldn't stand by me. But, for all that, 'tain't no ways likely she cares enough for Gote Lightcap to so much as ask if he's alive or no."

CHAPTER VI

"Ah me! for aught that I could ever read,
Could ever hear by tale or history,
The course of true love never did run smooth."

Shakespeare.

The callers departed to their own homes. Mr. Keith called the household together, and, as usual, closed the day with prayer and praise and the reading of the word of God.

The good-nights were exchanged, and presently Mildred sat alone in her own room, slowly taking down her wealth of rich brown hair, while thought, half troubled, half pleasurable, was busy in her brain.

A gentle tap on the door, then it was softly opened, and her mother stood by her side.

Instantly the dreamy look left Mildred's eyes, and they were lustrous with love and joy as she lifted them to the sweet face bending over her.

"Darling mother!" she cried, hastening to rise and bring forward the easiest chair in the room, "I'm so glad you have come. I am longing so for one of our old quiet talks."

"Ah! I knew it," Mrs Keith said, taking the chair; "I saw it in your eyes, dear child, and am as anxious for it as yourself. Oh, it is nice to have you at home again!"

"And so nice to be here. Mother dear, there have been times when I felt in sore need of your wise, loving counsels."

Shaking out her abundant tresses, she seated herself on a cushion at her mother's feet and laid her head in her lap, as she had been wont to do in childhood's days.

"Then I trust you carried your perplexities to a wiser Friend, whose love is even greater than that of the tenderest mother," Mrs. Keith said, gently caressing the silken hair and the blooming cheek.

"Yes, mother. Ah! what could I have done without that Friend?"

Then, with blushes and tears, she poured out the story of her love, and her refusal to engage herself, because the chosen of her heart was not a Christian man.

Mrs. Keith was a little surprised, a trifle disappointed. "I had almost set my heart on having Wallace for my future son-in-law," she remarked in a playful tone, "and no such objection could be brought against him."

"No," said Mildred, half averting her blushing face; "he is good and noble and true – a sincere Christian, I do believe, and I heartily respect and like him; but, O mother! why is it that the course of true love never will run smooth?"

"I think it does sometimes; at least often enough to prove the rule."

"I was in hopes it might have been out of sight out of mind with Wallace," Mildred said presently.

"No; Cupid's arrow had gone too deep for that. But perhaps it may prove so with the other, and you may yet learn to care for poor Wallace."

"No, mother; I am sure, quite sure, that I can never give him anything but the sisterly affection that is already his. Mother, I know girls who think it must be a delightful thing to have a number of lovers, but I don't find it so, there is so much that is painful and perplexing connected with it."

"Perplexing, my child!"

"Yes, mother. Do you – do you think it can ever be the duty of one who cannot marry the man of her choice to become the wife of another because it will open to her a wider sphere of usefulness?"

"Why that question, Mildred?" asked Mrs. Keith, in grave surprise.

"Because Mr. – Mr. Lord thinks I ought – that it is my duty to – to marry him; and though he did not convince me, he – he made me afraid it might be."

A very mirthful look had come into Mrs. Keith's eyes.

"My dear, silly little girl," she said, bending down to get a better view of the blushing face, "why did you not tell him you are quite unfit for the position he offered you?"

"I did, mother," Mildred answered, with sincere humility, "but he – still insisted. He has somehow formed a very mistaken opinion of me."

"That is a pity; but we will not let him sacrifice himself. I shall utterly refuse consent, and so will your father."

"But don't you think him a good man?" Mildred asked, lifting her head and gazing into her mother's eyes with a look of mingled relief and perplexity.

"Very good, but very unsuitable in disposition and in years for a husband for you, or a son-in-law for me. His absent-mindedness would put a great deal of care on your young shoulders. But, my dear child, leaving the question of his character and suitability in other respects entirely out of sight, the fact that you prefer another is quite sufficient of itself to make your acceptance of his suit both foolish and wrong. Nothing can make it right for man or woman to marry one while his or her heart turns more strongly to another. As to his argument that thus a wider sphere of usefulness would be opened to you, all I have to say is, that it is not, cannot ever be right to do evil that good may come."

Mildred drew a long sigh of relief. "O mother, I am so thankful that you take that view of it! and I am sure it is the right one. You have lifted half my load, but – "

"Can you not cast the other half on the Lord?"

"I do try to. But, mother, what do you think? would it be wrong for me to – "

"Follow the dictates of your heart?" Mrs. Keith asked, as Mildred paused, leaving the sentence unfinished. "My child, that is a question for you to settle with your own conscience. You have God's holy word to guide you, and in answer to prayer he will give you the guidance of the Spirit also. I will only say that it cannot be other than a dangerous experiment for a Christian to enter into the closest of earthly relations with one who is living for this world alone."

"Especially one so weak and ready to wander out of the way as I," sighed the young girl.

"Well, darling, you are young enough to wait; and let us hope all will come right at length. Ah! we may be sure of it, for 'we know that all things work together for good to them that love God; to them who are the called according to his purpose.' But it is growing late, and you ought to be resting after your long journey." And with a tender good-night they parted.

Mr. Lord filled his own pulpit the next day, both morning and evening, preaching with acceptance to his flock.

Mildred attended both services, but carefully avoided meeting the speaker's eye during the sermon, and slipped out of the church as quickly as possible after the benediction was pronounced. Each time she was delayed a little in her exit by the necessity of stopping for a shaking of hands and the exchange of a few words with friends and neighbors who stepped forward to greet and welcome her home; but others were crowding about the minister with the same kindly intent, and thus unconsciously assisted in her desired avoidance of him.

She was little less anxious to escape Wallace Ormsby, but in that was not so successful: he walked by her side in the morning, as far as their roads lay in the same direction; yet as Don held fast to one of Mildred's hands and Fan to the other, his talk was only on topics of general interest, the sermon, the Sunday-school, etc.

In the evening, as she stepped into the vestibule, she saw Wallace waiting near the outer door, and read his purpose in his eyes. She turned to Zillah, who was close beside her, seized her hand, and, holding it fast, whispered in her ear, "We'll walk home together. Be sure to keep close to me."

Zillah nodded with a roguish smile, and, to Wallace's no small annoyance, did as requested. Offering one arm to Mildred, he could do no less than ask Zillah to take the other, which she did with

alacrity. And all the way home she kept up a constant stream of talk, Mildred listening with inward amusement, Wallace wondering whether it was with a purpose, and wishing she was somewhere out of earshot of what he wanted to say to her sister.

The Keiths neither paid nor received visits on the Sabbath: so he bade the girls good evening at their father's door, and quietly wended his way to his lonely bachelor quarters over the office; while the girls, listening to his departing footsteps, exchanged a few words of congratulation on the one side and thanks on the other, mingled with a little girlish laughter at his expense.

"Mother," said Mildred, as they were about separating for the night, "I will be up in good season to-morrow morning and get breakfast, as Celestia Ann will of course be busy with her washing."

"Indeed you'll do no such thing," cried Zillah. "Ada and I will get breakfast and dinner to-morrow, and you're not to so much as put your nose into the kitchen. You're to play lady for a week at least, while you look on and see how nicely we can manage without you."

"I've played lady long enough, and –"

"Mother, isn't it to be as I've said?" demanded Zillah, not giving Mildred time to conclude her sentence.

"Yes, Milly, you and I can find enough to do out of the kitchen for the present, and we will let these young cooks have a chance to show what they can do," Mrs. Keith said, looking from one to the other with a proud, fond, motherly smile.

"I like to cook," put in Ada. "Milly, I can make nice cakes and desserts; they all say so. And Zillah and I made pickles and preserves this fall, mother only overseeing and telling us how. Celestia Ann wanted to turn us out of the kitchen and do it all herself, but mother said no – we must learn how."

Monday morning found the Keith household like a hive of cheerful, busy bees. Mrs. Keith and Mildred, busied together in the dining-room, washing and putting away the breakfast china and silver, which were never allowed to go into the kitchen, laid plans for the fall and winter sewing.

"I have been learning to cut and fit, mother," Mildred said; "taking lessons of one of Aunt Dinsmore's servants who is excellent at it; so now, if you like, I shall fit all the dresses of the family, beginning to-day with Ada's and Zillah's calicoes."

"I'm very glad, my dear," Mrs. Keith replied, "for really there is not a competent dressmaker in town. But I see I shall have to take care that you do not overwork yourself," she added, with an affectionate smile.

"Mother," said Zillah, putting her head in at the door, "we're nearly out of salt and sugar both. Who shall go for them?"

"Cyril and Don; it is a lovely day, and they will enjoy the walk. Mildred, there will be some little articles wanted about our dressmaking; suppose you go also and select them. The walk will be good for you, and you will like to see how the town has grown in your absence."

Fan and Annis put in an eager plea to be permitted to be of the party.

Mildred demurred. "I'm afraid, Annis, darling, you can't walk fast enough. Sister Milly wants to come back quickly because of the sewing."

"Never mind that; we will not deprive the darling of so great a pleasure merely to save a few minutes," the mother said, with a loving smile at the little, disappointed face, which instantly grew bright again. "Linger a little on the way, Mildred, and enjoy the sweet air and the beauty of the woods. These things were given for our enjoyment."

"Dearest mother! always so kind and thoughtful for each one of us," Mildred whispered, bending over her mother's chair to kiss the still fresh and blooming cheek.

Mildred had returned to her home entirely restored to health, and full of the old energy, and with a desire to accomplish a great deal in the way of relieving her mother's cares and burdens and promoting the material interests of each member of the family of loved ones. She had planned to do a certain amount of sewing that day, and was eager to begin; but she was learning the difficult

lesson of readiness to cheerfully yield her own plans and wishes to those of others, remembering that "even Christ pleased not himself."

With a face bright and sweet as the lovely October morning she made herself ready and set out on her errand; Fan clinging to one hand, Annis to the other, while the two little brothers now brought up the rear, now hastened on in front, or trotted alongside, as inclination dictated.

"Yonder comes the sheriff; we'll meet him in a minute," said Cyril presently.

"Who is sheriff now?" asked Mildred.

"Gotobed Lightcap. He's learned to write with his left hand, and they 'lected him sheriff last week. Everybody voted for him because they were so sorry for him. Wasn't it nice? Mother says the folks in this town are the kindest people in the world, she thinks."

"Yes, it was nice and kind," Mildred responded, looking a little curiously at the tall, broad-shouldered, masculine figure approaching from the opposite direction. In dress, in gait, in the intelligence of his countenance, he was an improvement upon the Gotobed of two years ago.

In another moment they had met. He lifted his hat with his left hand and bowed a little awkwardly, while a deep-red flush suffused his swarthy face.

Mildred colored slightly too, but greeted him cordially and without any other show of embarrassment, inquiring after his health and that of his family.

"We're all as well as common, thank ye, Miss Keith," he said, devouring her face with his eyes, "and I hope you're the same, and as glad to git back as all your friends is to see ye."

"Thank you, I do find it nice to be at home again," she responded, bowing and passing on.

Their way lay past her father's office. Ormsby, looking up from the deed he was drawing and catching a glimpse of her graceful figure as it hurried by, sprang up and stepped to the door just in time to see her go into Chetwood & Mocker's.

He was on the watch for her as she came out again, and waylaid her with an invitation to drive out with him that afternoon.

"Thank you," she said, with a winsome smile; "I fully appreciate your kindness, but – don't you think, after my long vacation, I ought now to stay at home and work? I had planned to do a good deal of sewing to-day."

"But the weather is so fine, and we ought to take advantage of these lovely days, which will so soon be gone," he said persuasively. "Let the sewing wait; 'twill be just the thing for the stormy days that will soon be upon us. I may come for you?"

"Yes," she answered, laughing and nodding good-by.

Zillah met her at the door, her eyes dancing with fun. "Mr. Lord's in the parlor with mother, and you're wanted there too."

"Oh, dear!" sighed Mildred; but, throwing off her hat in the hall, she went at once to meet the dreaded ordeal.

The gentleman rose on her entrance, and with beaming eyes and outstretched hand came eagerly forward to greet her. "My dear Miss Mildred, I have been telling your mother of my plans and wishes, and asking her consent and approval of my – the proposal I made to you the other day; and – "

"And she has declined to give them?" Mildred said, allowing him to take her hand for an instant, then hastily withdrawing it, her eyes seeking her mother's face, while her own flushed crimson.

"Yes, I have been trying for the last half hour to convince Mr. Lord how entirely unsuitable you are for the place and position he offers you," Mrs. Keith answered in a grave, quiet tone. "Come and sit down here by me," making room for her on the sofa by her side, "and we will try together to convince him."

"That will be no easy task," remarked the middle-aged lover, as Mildred hastened to accept her mother's invitation; then, standing before them and fixing his eyes admiringly upon the blushing, downcast face of the maiden, he went on to plead his cause with all the force and eloquence of which he was master.

He spoke very rapidly, as if fearful of interruption, and determined to forestall all objections, Mildred listening in some embarrassment and with much inward disgust and impatience.

These changed directly to almost overpowering mirthfulness, as the man, perhaps finding his false teeth, to which he was yet not fully accustomed, impeding his speech to some extent, in his intense interest in his subject, hardly conscious of the act, jerked them out, twirled them about in his fingers for an instant, then with a sudden recollection thrust them in again, his face turning scarlet with mortification and the last word faltering on his tongue.

Controlling her inclination to laugh, Mildred seized her opportunity. "Mr. Lord," she said, with gentle firmness, "please do not waste any more words on this subject, for I have no other answer to give you to-day than that which I gave before. Nor shall I ever have any other. I highly respect and esteem you, feel myself greatly honored by your preference, but – it is utterly out of my power to feel toward you as a woman should toward the man with whom she links her destiny for life."

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