

**ALEX.
MCVEIGH
MILLER**

DAINTY'S CRUEL RIVALS;
OR, THE FATAL BIRTHDAY

Alex. McVeigh Miller

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Mrs. Alex. McVeigh Miller

Dainty's Cruel Rivals; Or, The Fatal Birthday

CHAPTER I.

"A SWEET GIRL GRADUATE."

"Her eyes
Would match the southern skies
When southern skies are bluest;
Her heart
Will always, take its part
Where southern hearts are truest.

"Such youth,
With all its charms, forsooth.
Alas! too well I know it!—
Will claim
A song of love and fame
Sung by some southern poet."

"It's a perfect godsend, this invitation!" cried Olive Peyton, with unwonted rapture in her cold voice.

"Yes, indeed!" assented her chum and cousin, Ela Craye, joyfully. "I have wondered over and over how we were going to buy our summer clothes and spare enough money for a trip, and here comes Aunt Judith's invitation to her country home just in the nick of time."

"And how lucky, to think of her step-son, Lovelace Ellsworth, getting home at last from Europe! Either you or I must capture him, Ela!" added Olive, eagerly, her black eyes sparkling with the hope of getting a rich husband.

But Ela Craye snapped shortly:

"We might—if only she had not invited Dainty Chase."

Olive frowned, but answered, courageously:

"Pshaw! aunt might just as well have saved her manners. Dainty can not possibly go. She hasn't a decent thing to wear at such a grand place as Ellsworth."

"She would look pretty in a rag, and we both know it. Dainty by name, and dainty by nature," Ela returned, gloomily, yielding reluctant homage to a fair young cousin of whose charms both were profoundly jealous.

Olive and Ela, who were school-teachers in the southern city, Richmond, Virginia, boarded with a widowed aunt who took this means of supporting herself and her only child Dainty, who had but just graduated at a public school, and hoped to become a teacher herself next year. They were poor, but Dainty, with her fair face and gay good-nature, was like an embodied ray of sunshine.

It had been very kind in the rich Mrs. Ellsworth to invite her three nieces to her grand West Virginia home, and to offer to pay the expenses of their journey. But for her generosity Dainty could not have gone; but now, at her mother's wish, she wrote, gratefully accepting the invitation.

"How thankful I am!" cried the mother, joyfully. "It's just what Dainty needs, this trip to the mountains! She looks so pale and wan since she graduated."

"So you really mean to let her go?" Ela exclaimed, with pretended surprise, while Olive added, spitefully:

"We thought Aunt Judith might be ashamed of her shabby clothes. She hasn't anything to wear, has she, but her last summer's gowns and the cheap white muslin she had for her graduation?"

"Mrs. Ellsworth knows we are poor, and that Dainty must dress plainly. I dare say she is too kind-hearted to be ashamed of her dead half-brother's only child," Mrs. Chase returned, spiritedly; while the thought would intrude, that if only Olive and Ela would pay their neglected board bills she might afford Dainty a new summer gown and dress.

She summoned up courage to hint this fact to them next day, but they met the timid appeal with angry reproaches.

"Don't think we are going to cheat you of our board bill because we can not spare the money till school begins next fall!" cried Olive, sharply; while Ela chimed in scornfully:

"To think of our own aunt dunning two orphan girls for board!"

The poor lady's face fell, thinking of the rent and the grocer's bill, both due, and not enough money in her purse to meet them; but she sighed patiently, and answered:

"I didn't mean to hurt your feelings, dears, but you know how poor I am, and that I must take boarders for a living! I'm sure I would be glad to board you for nothing if I could afford it, though, after all, I'm not really any kin to you, you know, only your dead half-uncle's widow."

It was true, what the sweet, patient woman said; she was not related to them at all, but she had boarded them at the cheapest rates, and been most kind and motherly. They had intended to pay what they owed that very day, but jealousy of her daughter, their lovely cousin, crept in between and made them withhold the pittance, in the malicious hope of preventing Dainty's trip to Ellsworth.

Both girls were handsome and stylish in their way—Olive, a tall, dark, haughty brunette of twenty-four, while Ela Craye was twenty-two, pretty and delicate-looking, with a waxen skin, thick brown hair, and limpid, long-lashed gray eyes. Each girl cherished a hope of winning the rich and handsome heir of Ellsworth, and they feared the rivalry of a girl as fresh and lovely as the morning, and with the rounded slenderness of eighteen, piquant features, rose-leaf complexion, delicious dimples, a wealth of curling golden hair, and large, deep, violet-blue eyes full of soul and tenderness.

How could Love Ellsworth, as his step-mother called him, keep from losing his heart to such winsome beauty joined to the exquisite timidity of a very innocent and shy girl? Olive and Ela knew but too well that finery would not cut much figure in the case. Dainty had a real French art in dress, and could look as lovely in a print gown as they appeared in their finest silks. Give her a cheap white gown, and a few yards of lace and ribbon, and she could look like a Peri just strayed away from paradise.

Her cousins fairly cudgelled their brains for some scheme to keep Dainty from going with them, and a happy thought struck them at last.

They knew that Dainty had never traveled alone in her life, and that she was an arrant little coward among strangers. If they could only give her the slip, she would sooner give up the trip than to follow alone.

They were to go on Wednesday morning, and Mrs. Chase and her daughter were up betimes, packing the girl's trunk with her freshly laundered clothing, after which the mother said:

"All is ready, dear, and you'd better go and tell Olive and Ela that breakfast will be ready in five minutes, for there's no time to lose."

But when Dainty knocked at the door of the room the girls shared together, it flew wide open, and she saw that it was vacant, while a note pinned on the pillow conveyed this explanation:

"Dear Aunt,—Just for a lark, we concluded, ten minutes ago, to start to Ellsworth to-night instead of in the morning. It will be so much cooler traveling at night, you know. As our trunks were sent down to the station this afternoon, we will have no trouble going, and will not wake you to say good-bye for fear of giving

you a midnight scare. It would be no use anyway, for we knew Dainty could not go with us, as her fresh ironed clothes would not be dry enough to pack till morning. So, good-bye, and tell her she can follow us to-morrow, if she is not afraid to travel alone. Hastily,
"Olive and Ela."

Dainty flew downstairs, the pearly tears streaming down her rose-leaf cheeks.

"They have done it on purpose, mamma! I knew all along they did not want me to go!" she sobbed, sinking into a chair by the window, quite unconscious that a tall young man stood outside, having just pulled the old-fashioned knocker at the cottage door.

In their excitement they did not hear him, and Dainty continued, in a high-pitched, indignant young voice:

"I didn't intend to tell you, mamma, but I overheard Olive and Ela saying to each other that they were sorry I was invited to Ellsworth, and planning not to pay their board so as to keep you from buying me anything new to wear."

Mrs. Chase's gentle, care-worn face expressed the keenest surprise and pain as she exclaimed:

"Oh, how cruel they were! And what good reason could they have for wishing to deprive you of the pleasure of such a trip?"

"Jealousy, mamma!" Dainty answered, with flashing eyes and burning cheeks. "They did not tell you all that was in their letter from Aunt Judith, but I overheard Olive saying that aunt's step-son, Lovelace Ellsworth, had returned at last from Europe, and that they must set their caps for him. They were afraid I might rival them. Ela said I would look pretty even in a rag, and she wished they could leave me at home. So you see"—bitterly—"they have succeeded in doing it."

"Certainly not, my darling, for you shall follow them this morning, and let them know you were not afraid to travel alone, as they no doubt hoped you would be!" exclaimed Mrs. Chase, indignantly.

"Oh, mamma, I dare not venture alone! I shall stay at home with you, and let them have Mr. Ellsworth!" protested Dainty; but just then the loud clangor of the door-knocker made both start in alarm.

Mrs. Chase stepped quickly out into the narrow little hall, and opened the door to a tall, handsome stranger, in whose dancing dark eyes she failed to read the fact that he had listened with interest to every word exchanged between her and her daughter.

With a well-bred bow he presented her with a card, on which she read, with astonishment:

"Lovelace Ellsworth

"Introduced to Mrs. Chase by Judith Ellsworth."

"I am Mrs. Chase, and I am glad to see you," she said, wonderingly, as she gave him a cordial handshake, and ushered him into the little parlor, where he saw a girl, fairer than any flower, wiping the tears away from lovely eyes that looked like violets drowned in dew.

"My daughter Dainty, Mr. Ellsworth," said the widow; and as he took the soft little hand, he did not wonder that her cousins had feared to risk her rivalry for his heart.

With his charmed eyes lingering on her perfect face, he explained:

"I have been in New York for a few days, and mother wrote me to stop in Richmond and join a party of her nieces who would start to-day on a visit to Ellsworth."

Dainty's bright eyes laughed through their tears as she replied:

"Oh, how sorry they will be to have missed you! But they went last night!"

"But were not you, Miss Chase, to accompany them?" he demanded; and she handed him the girls' note, saying, demurely:

"That explains everything."

Lovelace Ellsworth read it with a somewhat malicious smile, exclaiming:

"How fortunate that I came in time to protect you on your journey!"

Mrs. Chase hastened to say:

"We shall indeed be grateful for your escort, as Dainty was about to give up her trip through her timidity at venturing alone. Now, as soon as we have breakfast, she will be ready."

Oh, how angry Olive and Ela would have been to see that pleasant little party at breakfast, and afterward setting forth for the station in Ellsworth's carriage, Mrs. Chase accompanying to see her daughter off, and both of them perfectly delighted with their genial new acquaintance, of whom the mother could not help thinking:

"How admirably he looks at my bonny girl, as if indeed Olive and Ela were right in fearing her rivalry for his heart! And how good and true he looks, as if he might make any girl a kind, loving husband! What a grand thing it would be for Dainty—"

She broke off the thought abruptly, for the parting was at hand, and her daughter clung tearfully about her neck.

In a minute it was all over, and Dainty was seated in the parlor-car with Ellsworth by her side, saying in his musical voice:

"No more tears now, Miss Dainty; for you must try to amuse me, to make up for your cousins, who have left us in the lurch. But how glad I am they went on ahead of us—are not you? For we shall have such a lovely *tête-à-tête* journey!"

Dainty emerged from her wet handkerchief, like the sun from behind a cloud, blushing and dimpling with girlish mischief, as she exclaimed:

"But they will be so sorry! They will never get over it!"

She was only a girl, not an angel, so she could not help being pleased with the thought of the discomfiture of her scheming cousins who had so cleverly overreached themselves.

The train sped on through the beautiful sunshine of early June, leaving the heated city far behind, and Dainty's heart felt as buoyant as the morning, her journey was so pleasant and her companion so attractive, placing her so completely at her ease, except when he would fix his brilliant dark eyes so ardently on her face that she would blush in spite of herself and look down in sweet confusion while her innocent heart throbbed wildly with a new, sweet sensation almost akin to pain.

After one of these confusing episodes, Dainty tried to shake off her embarrassment by saying:

"Tell me all about Ellsworth! Is it indeed so grand that my aunt will be ashamed of me, as my cousins declared?"

"No one could be ashamed of *you*!" declared Ellsworth, with another glance that set her pulses beating wildly, though she answered, demurely:

"Thank you; but, of course, you are not a judge of clothes. Olive and Ela said I had nothing fit to wear at Ellsworth."

"I have never seen a prettier or more becoming gown than the one you have on now," he replied, with an approving glance at her crisp, freshly laundered blue linen, while he added: "We have some very nice young men in the neighborhood of Ellsworth, and I am sure they will all fall in love with you at sight."

"Flatterer!" she cried with shy archness; but his words and looks thrilled her heart, and made her think, with sudden passion:

"If only he would fall in love with me, I could excuse all the rest!"

What a change had come to the tired and weary schoolgirl of only yesterday! She was parted from her mother for the first time in her young life, among new scenes and strangers, and Cupid was

knocking at the door of her heart. Hitherto she had known only tranquil happiness and little sorrow. How would it be now?

"Love and pain
Are kinsfolk twain."

Love changes all the world to the heart that admits him as a guest; but Dainty was not wise enough to bar the charming little stranger out.

CHAPTER II.

"THE PRETTIEST GIRL IN THE ROOM!"

Golden curls, a snare for Cupid.
Eyes of blue, a treacherous sea,
Where Love's votaries sink drowning,
Wrecked on hidden reefs; ah, me!
Lips of bloom like June's red roses,
Lily throat and dimpled chin,
Glowing cheeks like fragrant posies,
Made for smiles to gather in.

—*Mrs. Alex McVeigh Miller.*

Meanwhile, Olive and Ela, having reached Ellsworth in a high state of glee at outwitting Dainty so cleverly, received a great shock on learning from their aunt that Lovelace Ellsworth had expected to accompany them from Richmond to his home.

Bitterness filled their hearts when they realized what would be the outcome of their malice—that instead of Dainty having to give up her trip through timidity at traveling alone, she would have the escort of the man from whom they had tried so sedulously to keep her apart.

They had told their aunt that they decided to come earlier because it would be cooler traveling at night, and accounted for Dainty's absence by declaring that she was not quite decided on coming yet, being reluctant to leave her mother alone. If she made up her mind to come anyhow, she would do so later, they said; but they were very careful not to add that Dainty was so timid she would very likely stay at home after their base desertion.

When they were alone, they commiserated each other on the failure of their deep-laid schemes.

"Only to think, that Dainty and Love Ellsworth are together at this moment, and will be all day long! I can see her now in my mind's eye! She is sitting beside him in the car, and the sunshine glints on her curly, golden hair, and brings out the deep pansy-blue, of her big, childish eyes, and the rose-leaf bloom of her flawless skin. She is laughing at everything he says, just to show how deep her dimples are, and how pearly her teeth, and how rosy her lips! It is enough to drive one mad!" cried Ela, not underrating the least of her rival's charms in her jealousy of them.

"We can never undo to-day's work, I fear," added Olive, most bitterly, in her keen disappointment; for the thought of seeing Dainty the mistress of Ellsworth was almost unbearable.

Since she had arrived at Ellsworth and seen how beautiful the estate was, nestling among the green hills of West Virginia, close by the famed Greenbrier River, she had been more anxious than ever to win the master of this grand domain, and a bitter hatred for gentle Dainty crept into her heart.

She knew that she was beautiful in a dark, queenly fashion, and she could only hope that Love Ellsworth would prefer her dark style to Dainty's fair and radiant one. On this chance hinged all her hopes, while Ela, on her part, wondered if he might not find a wealth of brown hair, waxen-skin, and limpid gray eyes as attractive as the more pronounced brunette and blonde types.

Late that afternoon Mrs. Ellsworth invited the two girls into her *boudoir*, saying she wished to have a private talk with them.

She was a woman of sixty years, with abundant snow-white hair, contrasted with piercing dark eyes. In her youth she must have looked like Olive Peyton, and she was still well-preserved and fine-looking for her time of life. Her relatives considered her eccentric and hard-hearted, and she was certainly a woman of strong prejudices and unbending will—fond of having her own way.

She now looked approvingly at her handsome, stylish nieces, and remarked, abruptly:

"I suppose neither of you girls have any idea why I invited you here, so I may as well inform you and get it over. In the first place, have either of you any entanglements?"

"Entanglements?" murmured Olive, questioningly.

"Entanglements?" echoed Ela, doubtfully, with a slight flush breaking through her usual pallor.

"I mean, are either of you engaged to be married?"—sharply.

"Oh, dear no!" cried Olive.

"No, indeed!" muttered Ela, still faintly crimson.

"Or—in love with anybody?" added their aunt, anxiously.

"Only with each other. We are chums and sweethearts," laughed Olive, as they looked at each other affectionately.

"Very good!" said curt Mrs. Ellsworth, smiling, as she continued: "And you are both as poor as church mice; I know that without asking. Now, don't color up and get angry. Poverty is inconvenient, but it's no disgrace. Besides, I intend to change all that."

While they stared at her in wonder, she nodded her white head sagely, adding:

"You two girls are the nearest kin I have in the world, and it's time I made some provision for your future. Well, I'm going to do it. That's why I sent for you to come to Ellsworth."

They began to murmur ecstatic thanks; but she cut them short, saying:

"You know that I have quite a large fortune left me by my husband, and that my step-son, Love Ellsworth, is a millionaire. Well, I propose to have you two girls succeed to these fortunes; one by inheritance from me, the other by marrying my step-son."

"Oh, oh!" they cried, their faces shining with delight; and their aunt went on, complacently:

"Love is heart-whole and fancy-free now, but he will fall in love some day and marry, and why not one of my nieces, I'd like to know? Both of you are as pretty as pictures, and I say to you, go in and win. The one that he chooses will be lady of Ellsworth, the other I will adopt as my heiress. How does the prospect please you? Better than drudging in a school, eh?"

They overwhelmed her with rapturous thanks that pleased and amused her at the same time; for she could guess well enough how they hated poverty and longed for riches.

"But why do you look so blank, Ela?" she added, suddenly, and the young girl answered, frankly:

"I was wondering why you invited Dainty Chase, if you wanted Olive or me to marry your step-son? She is the prettiest girl in the world!"

"Dainty Chase pretty? But that can not be. Her father, my half-brother, was a very homely man, and I never heard that his wife was a beauty. I felt sorry for the poor little thing, and wanted to give her a good time; that was why I invited her to come. Of course, I never saw her; but she is my half-niece all the same, and I owe her some kindness, though I don't want her to marry Love, or to inherit my money, so I hope I didn't make a mistake!" the old lady exclaimed, uneasily.

"Wait till you see her!" both girls cried at once, breathlessly, jealously.

"Is she indeed so pretty? But perhaps she will not come!" consoled Mrs. Ellsworth.

"She will be sure to come if Mr. Ellsworth calls for her. She will not miss such a chance to captivate him!" both girls assured her disconsolately; but they were very careful not to tell how badly they had treated their pretty cousin.

"But she is only a child—scarcely fifteen, I think."

"Oh, Aunt Judith! She was eighteen in May, and graduated in June. She is taller than I am!" cried Ela.

"Well, well, well, I am very sorry that I invited her, if there's any likelihood of her spoiling your chances with Love. But I can't believe she is so pretty till I see her, for John Chase was as homely as sin. Anyway, you girls must try to hold your own against her charms."

"We will try, now that we have you on our side, dear Aunt Judith. Perhaps Mr. Ellsworth may not admire blondes like Dainty. Besides, she is a vain, silly little thing, and very deceitful!" fibbed Olive, trying to prejudice her aunt against Dainty in advance.

Mrs. Ellsworth drew a sigh of relief, and replied:

"If that is the case, she can not charm Love Ellsworth, for he is the soul of truth and honor, and abhors deceit. But there is one thing I must caution you both about, if you wish to please my step-son, and that is, if you hear any of the servants gossiping about Ellsworth being haunted, do not mention it to him, as it makes him very angry, and he has turned away several servants for talking about it."

They both promised not to breathe such a thing to their host; and as Mrs. Ellsworth saw that they were secretly curious, she explained:

"Of course, you have noticed and admired the ivy-grown stone wing to the left of the mansion. It is all that is left of Castle Ellsworth, that was built before the Revolution by Love's ancestor, Baron Ellsworth. It has fallen into disuse now, and the servants declare it is haunted, but it makes Love perfectly furious to hear such reports."

When the girls were alone again they whispered to each other:

"If Dainty Chase finds out about the ghosts, she will be frightened almost to death, she is such a little coward!"

Sitting on the broad veranda at sunset, the cousins heard the whistle of the train at the station, miles away, that was to bring Dainty, if she decided to come.

"That is Love's train, if he comes," said their aunt. "But there must be some delay, or he would have telegraphed for the carriage."

CHAPTER III.

THE HAPPIEST DAY SHE HAD EVER KNOWN

Olive and Ela sighed with relief, hoping something had happened after all, to keep Dainty at home; but they would have been horrified if they had guessed that Ellsworth had not telegraphed his aunt, choosing to secure a trap at the station, and have a *tête-à-tête* drive over the road with winsome Dainty.

They had started even now, the young man driving a light buggy, with Dainty's trunk strapped on securely at the back. They went at a leisurely pace, for which he accounted by saying lightly:

"I hope you won't mind because we have to travel slowly. The road is rough, and the horse slow—what we call in the country a 'courting horse,'" smiling at her with quizzical dark eyes that made Dainty blush like a rose. "Do not be frightened. I will try to remember that I have known you but a day," he added, softly; and they were silent for a while, while Dainty's eyes drank in the sunset beauty of the mountain scenery.

"What a glorious view! I never before saw anything so beautiful!" she cried.

"Would you like to live in West Virginia?" he asked, eagerly.

"Oh, I don't know!" trembling somehow at his pointed tone, and adding, quickly: "I—I couldn't be happy anywhere without mamma!"

And yet she knew in her heart that this day of separation from all that she had hitherto known had been the most ecstatic of her whole life, filled with thrilling sensations that emanated from the attentions of the man by her side.

"Oh, there are looks and tones that dart
An instant sunshine through the heart;
As if the very lips and eyes,
Predestined to brave all our sighs,
And never be forgot again,
Sparkled and smiled before us then!"

Every glance and tone of Love Ellsworth subtly conveyed the impression that she was already dear to him, and that but for the fear of alarming the shy girl he would have declared his love at once, demanding her heart in return.

What wonder that the day had flown fast to both, and that the drive seemed all too short when, in the purple haze of twilight, they drove in at the gates of Ellsworth, and saw three ladies sitting on the porch watching them with what lively dismay the reader can well imagine.

"I fear you are tired from your tedious journey; but perhaps we can give you a novel ride in an airship while you are at Ellsworth. I have a clever neighbor who is inventing one," said Love, as he helped her from the buggy and led her up the steps to his aunt, under the fire of three pairs of disapproving eyes.

"Your niece, Miss Chase, madame," he said, presenting Dainty to her aunt, with a smile that maddened Olive and Ela, it was so tender.

Mrs. Ellsworth gave her a cordial greeting, saying kindly:

"I can see that you are not tired from your trip, but I will take you to your room to freshen up a bit;" and only pausing to present Love to Olive and Ela, she hurried her away, while he began to make himself agreeable with a secret, comprehensive amusement at the situation.

Mrs. Ellsworth led her niece up a splendid, wide oaken staircase, and along a large corridor to a beautiful room, a symphony in blue and white, where a maid was already lighting the wax candles in the polished silver candelabra on the dressing-table.

"Sheila will help you to unpack and make your toilet for dinner," she said, adding, as an after-thought: "You need not trouble to make an elaborate toilet, as there will be no one but ourselves, but to-morrow we will have some guests, among them several young men worth your while."

The tone was significant, as if her step-son did not count at all, and Dainty's heart sank as she turned away, leaving her alone with Sheila Kelly, the Irish maid.

"Shure, ye have but twinty minutes, miss, to make yer *twilight*, so best give me yer kays, and let me unpack whilst ye bathe," she said, in broadest brogue.

Dainty had conceived an instant aversion to the coarse-mouthed, sly-looking Irish girl, so she answered, quietly:

"You may bring me some flowers for my corsage—some of those pink roses I saw as we drove in—while I unpack the trunk myself."

CHAPTER IV. THE OLD MONK

The ill-looking maid flounced away, thinking resentfully that the pretty young lady was afraid to trust her with her keys, while Dainty, whose only reason had been an unwillingness to expose her simple wardrobe, proceeded to lay out a gown for the evening—a delicately embroidered white cashmere that no one would have suspected had been cleverly made over from her mother's bridal *trousseau*.

While she was dressing her hair with deft fingers, she was startled by a very unpleasant sound—a series of harsh, hacking coughs—seeming to proceed from the room next her own. She thought:

"Some one is ill in there. What a terribly consumptive cough, poor soul!"

Presently Sheila hurried in with a wealth of roses glistening with the fresh-fallen evening dew, and after thanking her, Dainty asked, curiously:

"Is there some one ill in the next room?"

"Shure, miss, there's nobuddy in the next room at all, at all, and not a sick crathur in the house. Why is it ye thought so?"

"I heard some one coughing in there—a tight, hacking cough, like some one in the last stages of consumption," Dainty answered; and instantly Sheila Kelly crossed herself and looked furtively behind her like one pursued, muttering:

"The saints preserve us! T' ould *monk*!"

"The old monk, did you say? Who is he?" exclaimed Dainty, sharply; but the maid shook her head.

"Don't ask *me*, miss, please—ask the young master about the *cough* ye heard, and shure he will tell ye, darlint," returned Sheila, with a somewhat nervous giggle and a second furtive glance behind her, as she added: "Better hurry up, now; ye've only five minutes before dinner is announced, ye see."

Dainty quickly pinned on a great bunch of the fragrant roses, and hurried down to the parlor, where she found the others waiting, Mrs. Ellsworth alone in an easy-chair, Olive and Love at the piano with Ela, who was playing the accompaniment for a sentimental song that Olive sang while Love turned the leaves.

At dinner the hostess managed to separate Dainty and Love as widely as possible, and when they left the table, she pursued the same course, leading Dainty to a distant seat, saying:

"Come and sit by me, dear. I have so many questions to ask you about your home and your mother; and I will tell you some interesting things about your papa's boyhood."

Her step-son, pleased at her seeming interest in his beautiful love, and unwilling to interrupt the flow of their mutual confidences, permitted the two other girls to monopolize him the whole evening; so that when bed-time arrived, he had not had the chance of a single word, except the formal good-night.

He went out then to smoke a cigar, and secretly deprecate Mrs. Ellsworth's selfishness in keeping such a lovely girl to herself all the evening, and the girls went upstairs to their rooms along the dimly lighted corridor.

Dainty slipped her hand through Ela's arm, whispering, nervously:

"Are your rooms close to mine, Ela?"

"No; mine and Olive's are down there at the end of the corridor, adjoining, and there are only vacant rooms next you."

"But that can not be, Ela, for I heard some one in the room next mine coughing horribly while I was dressing; but the maid denied that any one was in there, and muttered something about the old monk. What could she have meant?"

She fancied that Ela shuddered, and her eyes dilated with alarm as she returned:

"Good heavens! is that old wretch going to haunt us? Why, Dainty, don't you know about the family ghost of Ellsworth?—the wicked old monk, a relative of the family, who murdered one of the brotherhood, and fled to his old home, hiding himself in a dungeon here till he died of consumption. Well, it is said that he haunts the old wing of Ellsworth, and that whenever his awful, discordant cough is heard it forebodes evil to the hearer. But here is your door. Good-night!"—with a mocking laugh.

Dainty had never slept away from her mother's arms before. Lonely and nervous, she slipped into a white dressing-gown, and sat down by the window to watch the full moon sailing above the purple peaks of the mountain range, and listening in a sort of terror for the monk's cough; but the excitement of the day induced speedy sleep.

How long she rested there in the moonlight, sleeping heavily, like a weary child tired of playing, she could not tell, only that suddenly she started wide awake in terror, feeling as if a cold, icy hand had pressed her warm bosom, turning her cold as death.

Springing to her feet, she found she was not alone, for in the broad glare of the moonlight she saw by her side the tall form of a man gowned in a long black robe girdled with a rosary of beads, while his close-shaven face shone ghastly white under his black skull-cap, and the dull, fixed eyes had the awful stare of death.

With a piercing cry, Dainty sprang past the midnight visitant, rushed to the door, and throwing it open, bounded into the corridor, flying with terror-winged feet toward her cousin's room. Then she pounded on the door, shrieking, piteously:

"For God's sake, let me in!"

The door opened so quickly that Dainty, leaning against it, lost her balance, and fell blindly forward into the arms of the man who had opened it—Lovelace Ellsworth, who had not yet retired, because his heart and mind were so full of her he knew he could not sleep.

CHAPTER V. "ONLY A DREAM."

"Ah, sweet, thou little knowest how
I wake and passionate watches keep;
And yet while I address thee now,
Methinks thou smilest in thy sleep.
'Tis sweet enough to make me weep,
That tender thought of love and thee,
That while the world is hushed in sleep,
Thy soul's perhaps awake to me."

It was almost midnight, yet Love Ellsworth's lamp still burned dimly as he sat by his open window in the flood of white moonlight, going over and over in his mind the events of the day, unable to turn his thoughts from the artless little beauty who had charmed him so.

He was five-and-twenty, and he had had his little fancies and flirtations, like most young men of his age, but this was the first time that his heart had been really touched.

Love's glamour was upon him, and he could not rest or sleep for thinking of shy, winsome Dainty, whose charms had wiled the heart from his breast, so that it was with difficulty he had refrained from declaring his love and begging for her heart in return.

He mused, tenderly:

"How it would have startled her—shy little dove—if I had followed my impulse to tell her of my love during that blissful drive over from the station! But I must be patient, and woo her fondly a little while ere I dare to speak."

How vexed he was at his step-mother's selfishness in keeping Dainty by her side the whole evening, and leaving him to be entertained by the other two girls, whom he secretly despised for their meanness to Dainty.

It made him smile sarcastically to remember how palpably each girl had angled for his heart, giving him the sweetest smiles and most honeyed words, while expressing their chagrin at missing his company on their journey.

"If they could have guessed how glad I was of their absence, they would not have seemed so complaisant," he thought, recalling the happy day he had spent with Dainty; while he resolved to make sure of more like it by inviting some other fellows to Ellsworth, so that Olive and Ela might be provided with escorts, and not keep him from Dainty's side.

Before long, say a week at furthest, he would tell Dainty of his love, and ask her to be his wife. No use putting off his happiness, he thought; and if he could win the little darling, the wedding should follow soon—as soon as he could persuade her to name the day.

So, lost in these happy reveries, he sat at the open window till midnight, when he suddenly rose, stretched his full length, and exclaimed:

"Heigh-ho! I must not dream here all night, for—ah, *what* was that?"

For down the length of the broad corridor a piercing shriek was wafted to his ears, followed by the patter of flying feet, and a body was hurled violently against the door, while an anguished voice cried, entreatingly:

"For God's sake, let me in!"

He sprang to the door, tore it open, and the fainting form of Dainty fell forward into his arms.

"Good heavens!" he cried, in wonder and alarm; and at the same moment he heard the opening of doors and the sound of excited voices outside, as Mrs. Ellsworth, Olive, and Ela, in dressing-gowns, appeared on the scene, wearing faces of lively consternation.

"What is the meaning of these shrieks and this strange scene, Love?" demanded his step-mother, harshly—and suspiciously, it seemed to him.

Still holding Dainty's unconscious form most tenderly in his arms, he replied, haughtily:

"I know no more than you do, madame. I heard a frightened shriek in the corridor, then flying footsteps, and just as I flew to the door, and wrenched it open, Miss Chase fell fainting into my arms."

"Very romantic!" cried Olive, with an irrepressible sneer.

"Very!" echoed Ela, mockingly.

The young man flashed them an indignant glance, and added:

"The young lady must have been frightened badly, to judge by her condition; and I hope no one has been playing any silly pranks to make her unhappy."

The remark was so pointed that both girls colored angrily; and Mrs. Ellsworth cried, testily:

"Who would want to frighten her, I'd like to know? You're talking nonsense, Love Ellsworth; so please carry her to her room as quickly as possible, so that we can bring her out of that faint, and find out what was the matter."

Love obeyed in silence, holding the drooping form close to his heart, and longing to kiss the roses back to the pale lips and cheeks, but not daring to venture on such a boldness under the fire of the coldly disapproving eyes that watched him till he dropped the dear form on the soft bed, and withdrew, saying:

"I will send for a doctor, if you think it necessary."

"Oh, no, not at all," Mrs. Ellsworth answered, shortly; and he seated himself on a chair in the corridor, waiting impatiently for news of Dainty's recovery.

But it was a long time—almost an hour—before the door opened again, and Mrs. Ellsworth came out with Olive, saying:

"She gave us quite a turn, she was so long coming out of her swoon; but she is getting on all right now, and Ela will remain with her the rest of the night."

"But what was it that frightened her so?" he demanded, eagerly.

"Oh, it is too long a story for to-night. She can tell you herself to-morrow," replied Mrs. Ellsworth, vanishing into her own room, while Olive Peyton quickly followed her example.

There was nothing left him but to return to his own room and retire, and wait till morning for relief from his anxiety.

Sleep came after an hour's weary tossing, and in dreams of Dainty the brief night passed, and brought the beautiful summer morning with song of birds and perfume of flowers.

Making a hasty toilet, he left his room, and went into the grounds, where he gathered a large bunch of deep-red roses, and sent them to Dainty's room by a maid.

At breakfast she wore them at the waist of her simple white gown, and they contrasted with the pallor that lingered on her cheeks from last night's experience.

"I hope you are well this morning?" he said to her, anxiously; and she smiled pensively, as she answered:

"I am better, thank you. The sunlight has chased away all the terrors of the night, and I am wondering if indeed I could have dreamed that horrible thing, as Aunt Judith declares."

"So, then, you were frightened by something!" he exclaimed, tenderly. "Would you mind telling me all about it?"

"Perhaps you will think me very silly," she replied, dubiously, lifting her large eyes with a wistful look that thrilled his heart.

"No, indeed. Let me hear it," he cried; while the others waited in malicious joy, knowing how angry it always made him to hear any reference to the family ghost.

Dainty drew a long, quivering sigh, and began:

"There isn't much to tell, after all; only that while I was dressing for dinner, I heard in the next room the sound of a terrible hacking cough, several times repeated, as of some one in the last stages of consumption. When the maid came in I inquired about it, and she crossed herself piously, looking behind her as if in fear, while she muttered to herself about 'the old monk.' When I pressed her for an explanation, she denied that there was any sick person in the next room, or even in the house."

She paused timidly, wondering why his brow had grown gloomy as a thunder-cloud; but he said, with a kind of impatient courtesy:

"Well, go on."

Dainty's hands began to tremble as they toyed with the richly chased silver knife and fork; but she continued, falteringly:

"Afterward, when I was going back to my room, I told Ela what I had heard; and she laughed, and said that the family ghost of Ellsworth was a wicked old monk who had died of consumption."

"Ah!" he cried, with a keen look at Ela; but she was too much absorbed in her dainty broiled chicken to meet his glance.

Then Dainty resumed:

"I retired to my room, but I was nervous and restless, having never slept away from my mother before. I threw on a dressing-gown, and sat down beside the window to watch the moonlit scenery, and to muse on—mamma, wondering if she missed her child, and felt as lonely and depressed as I did. So I fell asleep in my chair, and was awakened suddenly by the touch of an icy hand, and a rasping cough in my ear. I started up. Oh, heavens! I was not alone! Beside me stood the figure of an old monk with a ghastly white face and glassy dead eyes!"

Her face went dead white, even to the lips, at the remembrance, and her voice sank almost to a whisper as she added:

"I shrieked aloud in my fear, and fled wildly from the room, meaning to seek refuge with Olive and Ela in their rooms; but—they tell me I made a mistake—and—and—disturbed you. I am very sorry. I hope you will forgive me."

But his face was stern and cold, and his voice had a strained tone as he answered:

"There was no disturbance. Pray don't mention it. I am only sorry that some one has played a mischievous prank on you—a servant, doubtless. Madame," sternly, looking at his step-mother. "I insist that you shall investigate the matter, and discharge the offender."

He looked back, still gloomily, at Dainty, saying:

"Since you are so nervous over the parting from your mother, let one of the maids sleep in your room at night; but pray do not give credence to any silly stories that are told you by any one regarding the mythical old monk. Ellsworth has never possessed a family ghost, and I am not superstitious enough to believe in the existence of spirits at all. So set your fears at rest. You doubtless dreamed it all, as your aunt declares."

"Of course she did," averred Mrs. Ellsworth, smoothly. And then the conversation turned to other things, while Dainty's heart sank like a stone in her breast, for she felt a subtle premonition that Love Ellsworth was displeased with her, and considered her weak and silly, else why those cold, disapproving looks, so different from yesterday's ardent glances, that told her throbbing heart so plainly that she was tenderly and passionately beloved!

CHAPTER VI. LOVE'S ROSY DAWN

It's an era strange, yet sweet,
Which every woman's heart has known,
When first her young heart learns to beat
To the soft music of a tone—
That era when she first begins
To know, what love alone can teach,
That there are hidden depths within,
Which friendship never yet could reach.

—*Phebe Carey.*

"Now," said Mrs. Ellsworth, while rising from the breakfast-table, "I have invited some young people to come and spend the day and play golf; so prepare yourselves for conquest, young ladies, as there will be several eligibles among them."

They wandered out into the beautiful grounds, and the beauty of the day and the scene made Dainty's sad heart brighter, until Ela, who had pertinaciously clung to her ever since they came out, observed, maliciously:

"You have offended Love Ellsworth beyond forgiveness by your story just now. Did you not know that he becomes violently angry at the merest mention of the family ghost, and has discharged several servants for gossiping over it?"

Dainty's heart sank heavily, for she recalled Love's lowering looks while she told the story he had insisted on hearing, and she could not doubt that Ela's words were true.

She said, faintly:

"How should I know it, Ela? You did not tell me last night."

"Did I not? Well, I meant to do so; but I must have forgotten it, and the mischief is done now. Love Ellsworth will never forgive you!" repeated Ela, with a malicious little chuckle.

Dainty's red mouth quivered with pain for a moment; then pride came to her aid, and cresting her golden head haughtily, she cried:

"Why should I care? Love Ellsworth is nothing to me!"

"I'm glad to hear it, for I thought, from the way you rolled your eyes at him last night and this morning, that you had lost your heart to him already, and I thought it a pity to show your heart to a man so plainly," gibed her tormentor, viciously.

"You were mistaken, Ela. I never thought of loving him, and I hope he did not think so," cried the proud child, fearfully.

"There's no telling what he thought. Men are very, very vain, and believe that every girl who gives them a glance is in love with them. I suppose Love Ellsworth is like the rest; and, rich as he is, I have no doubt he is a terrible flirt. But there comes a carriage load of young people, and perhaps you and I may catch a beau, too, Dainty; for Olive seems to have captured Love," glancing toward her cousin, who was indeed holding the young man in unwilling chains, while she lamented that her cousin Dainty was the most arrant little coward in the world, and always going into hysterics over some trifle, so that she and Ela had been very sorry she was invited to Ellsworth, feeling sure that her vagaries would cause dear Aunt Judith no end of trouble.

But in a minute he had to leave her side to welcome the newcomers—three young men and one girl—which paired the party into four couples; and after introductions all around, Dainty found that Love Ellsworth had fallen to her lot; whether by chance or his own design, she could not tell.

They went down to the golf ground, and played for an hour; but Ellsworth found his fair companion very shy and *distract* all the while; and when at last they all sat down beneath the trees to rest, he asked, anxiously:

"Are you offended with me, that you seem so cold and quiet?"

The wistful blue eyes turned gravely on his face.

"I thought you were offended with me, because of last night; you looked so angry while I was telling you of my scare," she answered, timidly.

"Angry with you, child? How could any one have the heart?" he cried. "I was angry, I own, but it was because I believed that some of the servants had played a cruel joke on you. But I have ordered a strict investigation, and if the plot is discovered, the guilty parties shall certainly suffer."

"Oh, if I could think it only a joke; but it seemed so terribly real!" she breathed, tremblingly; and he longed to catch her in his arms and kiss away her fears.

But the proprieties forbid this soothing process; so he hastened to assure her that it could not possibly be real, only a trick of some malicious person, who would certainly be discovered and punished.

"And now, Dainty," he said—"may I call you Dainty?" he added, tenderly; for she had looked up with a start.

She faltered, "Yes," and he proceeded in a low voice thrilling with passion:

"Dainty, you told me your story of last night, now I will tell you mine. When I opened my door at your frenzied knock, and you fell fainting into my arms, I longed to hold you there forever; for, darling, I lost my heart to you even before I saw your bonny face, as soon as I heard your sweet voice sobbing to your mother, inside the window, of the cruel treatment of your jealous cousins. When I came into the parlor, and saw you with the tears in your lovely eyes, I thought you fairer than any flower, and longed to kiss your tears away. All the way to Ellsworth I was longing to tell you that I loved you so I could not live without you, and that you must promise to be my cherished bride. Can you believe in a love so sudden and sweet and overwhelming as this I am confessing to you?"

"Yes, oh, yes!" the girl murmured, forgetting Ela's caution, that he must very likely be a dreadful flirt, and carried away by the fervor of his passion, and the responsiveness of her own heart.

Oh, what a beautiful light of joy leaped to his eyes at her encouraging reply!

"Bless you, my darling, bless you! Then our hearts have leaped to meet each other. You will promise to be mine?" he cried, eagerly, his glad eyes beaming on her face, the only demonstration of love possible under the circumstances, for they were in plain view of all the other couples.

She trembled with exquisite delight, sweet Dainty, and could not reply for a moment.

"Answer, darling," he pleaded. "Will you be mine? If you are too shy to speak, look at me with those tender blue eyes, and I will read my fate."

Slowly, bashfully, the long fringe of her lashes fluttered upward, and the glorious blue met the passionate dark ones in a long, lingering look that needed no words to tell of the love that thrilled either heart with deathless emotion; and he was content. He had won the prize.

CHAPTER VII. "THE TRAIL OF THE SERPENT."

"Your roses are fading in the hot sunshine, dear. Let us get some fresh ones," said Love to Dainty, anxious to draw her out of sight of the others, that he might seal their betrothal with a lover's kiss.

They moved away toward the rose-garden, followed by the angry, envious glances of Olive and Ela, who hated Dainty with jealous hate, now that they saw how little all their arts had availed to change her lover.

But Love and Dainty had forgotten their existence. They were in Arcady.

—"Love must kiss that mortal's eyes
Who hopes to see fair Arcady,
No gold can buy your entrance there,
But beggared Love may go all bare—
No wisdom won with weariness;
But Love goes in with Folly's dress—
No fame that wit could ever win,
But only Love may lead Love in;
To Arcady, to Arcady."

All around them the flowers bloomed in lavish profusion; the tender-eyed pansies, the golden-hearted lilies, the fragrant roses, shaking out perfume on the warm summer air, while the bees and the butterflies hurried from flower to flower, and overhead the blue sky of June smiled on the happy lovers—so happy, dreaming not of the darkened future.

Where some luxuriant shrubbery formed a convenient screen, Love drew Dainty aside, crying, ardently:

"I am dying to kiss you, my own little darling! May I?"

Without waiting for consent, he clasped her in his arms, and kissed her lips again and again, with the ardor of the honey-bee rifling the flowers of their sweets, till she struggled bashfully from him, crying:

"But the roses!"

"Come, then, we will get them;" and they sauntered on along the graveled path in a sort of silent ecstasy, until suddenly Dainty recoiled with a horrified cry:

"Oh, see that hideous viper!"

Love looked down and saw a large viper crawling across their path, its hideous head upraised in defiance, hissing venomously at their advance.

"See how angry it is! What a wicked glare in its eyes! See how its red forked tongue darts at us in rage! Oh, is it not an evil omen to our love?" half sobbed Dainty, drawing back and regarding the serpent with fearful interest mixed with unwilling fascination.

"Stand aside, darling, and I will make short work of the evil omen!" Love answered, gayly, as with two sharp blows of the racquet he carried in his hand he destroyed the ominous intruder on their peace, and kicked it aside, saying, soothingly: "Take that as an omen, darling, that I will always thrust aside whatever interferes between us and happiness."

"Oh, you are so strong, so brave! I am not afraid of anything while you are with me!" Dainty cried, clinging to the arm of her bold, handsome lover, who smiled on her so lovingly as he gathered

the beautiful roses to replace those he had sent her that morning, and that were now withering at her waist.

He took some of the fading flowers, kissed them, and placed them very carefully in his pocket-book, saying:

"I will always keep them in memory of the happiest day of my life!"

Dainty's heart thrilled with joy at the words; then she shuddered at the thought of how angry Olive and Ela would be because he loved her so well.

"Perhaps they will hate me, although I have not done them any wrong. I did not make him love me. It was God put it into his heart. But I can guess how they will sneer and say I was bold and forward, trying to get a rich husband. I wish he were poor—almost as poor as I am—so that I could tell them I love him for himself alone, which is true, though they will pretend never to believe it, in their jealous spite," ran her perturbed thoughts; for she could not get Olive and Ela quite out of her mind.

The dread of their spite and anger trailed its venom through her happiness as the hideous viper had trailed across the sunny path, making her cry out that it was evil-omened. Alas! that spite and jealousy were destined to work her as deadly ill as the serpent's fangs.

It was this subtle dread tugging at Dainty's heart-strings that made her murmur wistfully, as they retraced their steps:

"Let us keep our secret awhile yet, lest Olive and Ela should say I was too easily won."

"What do you care for their opinion!" cried her lover, disdainfully.

"Oh, but you do not know how cruel they would be, what cutting things they would say to me!" she cried.

And he laughed.

"Dainty, I believe you are an arrant coward, after all, as your cousin Olive told me this morning."

"Did she say so?"—angrily, the blue eyes flashing.

"Yes; she said you were the most cowardly girl on earth—afraid of your own shadow—and always in hysterics over something, so that she and Ela were sorry you came, dreading that you would annoy your aunt."

"Oh, it is false!" she cried, indignantly. "She only said it to turn your heart against me. And I—I will show her after this whether I am a coward or not!"

"That is right, my little sweetheart. I adore bravery in women, and I want you to prove Olive's story false," he cried, encouragingly; adding: "Of course, if you wish to keep our engagement secret awhile, I will consent to it; but it seems rather cruel to two of our visitors, who are already palpably jealous of me. But I warn you, Dainty, not to flirt with them, for I am the most jealous of men."

"You need not be afraid of me. I can think of no one but you, dear Love!" she whispered, with the loveliest blush in the world.

They rejoined their companions, and Love forced himself to obey the demands of conventionality by showing some attention to the other guests; but his heart was not in his courtesies. He could think only of the bonny sweetheart he had won by such headlong wooing.

"And it is only yesterday that I saw her first, my darling!" he mused, tenderly. "It was love at first sight with us both, it seems, and I take that for a sure sign that Heaven intended us for each other."

CHAPTER VIII. THE ELLSWORTH HONOR

"Of all that life can teach us,
There's naught so true as this:
The winds of Fate blow ever,
But ever blow amiss."

Since the world began there was never a truer, sweeter love, nor one that promised more fairly, but, alas! none over which threatening clouds of Fate ever hung more darkly.

Two weeks passed away, and the lovers kept the secret of their engagement with difficulty, for Love was passionately anxious to show his happiness to the whole world.

But Dainty's shrinking from her cousins' comments made her hold her lover to the compact of silence, hoping by delay to win from them more kindly thoughts.

And yet every one could see the handsome young pair were in love with each other.

They could no more hide their mutual tenderness than they could help breathing. Their glances turned so often to each other, their smiles were so tender, their voices had so soft a cadence when they called each other's names, that every one could guess the passion of their hearts.

Ellsworth and the surrounding neighborhood had been very gay the past few weeks.

Dances and picnics, moonlight rides and tea parties, all varied the programme, and contributed to the pleasure of Mrs. Ellsworth's beautiful nieces.

Dainty, even in her simple gowns and hats, was the beauty of every gathering, and might have been the belle of everything had she so chosen; but she was shy and cold with all other men, in her loyalty to her noble lover.

There came a day, toward the second week in July, when Mrs. Ellsworth asked her step-son for a private interview in her boudoir.

"I am obliged to speak to you on a very important subject," she said, anxiously.

He bowed inquiringly.

"Can you not guess the subject to which I refer?" she continued. "Have you forgotten the peculiar provisions of your father's will, by which you will be disinherited in my favor unless you marry on or before your twenty-sixth birthday?"

"I have not forgotten," he replied, calmly.

"Then perhaps you have forgotten that the first day of August will be your birthday?"

"I have not forgotten that, either," he replied, coolly.

The handsome old lady regarded him with some irritation, and snapped out:

"Then perhaps you will condescend to explain the reason for your strange shilly-shallying? Your birthday scarcely three weeks off, and your inheritance dependent on your marriage, yet not even engaged!"

"Dear madame, there is plenty of time yet," he replied, with provoking coolness.

"You expect, then, to be married on your birthday?"

"Certainly, madame. You can not suppose that I am going to remain single, and resign my birthright to you or any one?"—sarcastically.

"I scarcely thought you such a fool," she said, tartly; adding: "But I consider your behavior very strange. You are not yet engaged that I know of, and the bride ought to have more than three weeks to prepare her trousseau."

"That is all nonsense about an elaborate trousseau. She will need only a wedding and traveling-gown, and the other finery can be bought while we are on our wedding-tour in Paris," he returned, airily.

She exclaimed, suspiciously:

"Perhaps you are engaged already to some grand foreign lady, and intend to return to Europe in time to marry her on your birthday?"

"You are mistaken, madame. There is no girl in the world for me but one of our lovely Americans. That is why I came home from my wanderings. I wanted to choose one of my own beautiful country women to be my bride."

"I applaud your taste," she smiled. "I have traveled over the whole world, but I found no women as charming as the Americans; and I am glad you will choose one to reign at Ellsworth. But have you made your choice?"

"Ah, madame! that is hard to do among so many lovely girls," he replied, evasively.

She studied him gravely a moment, then exclaimed, boldly:

"I wish you would make your choice between my nieces, Olive and Ela."

"Dainty is your niece, too, I believe?"—coolly.

"Only my half-niece—the daughter of a half-brother I never loved. I simply asked her here through kindness to give her a good time. But with the other two it was different. I own to you I desired you to fall in love with one, and marry her, while I would make the other my heiress, thus settling them both luxuriously in life."

"Ah! And what did you expect to do for pretty little Dainty?"—curiously.

"Nothing. She would return to Richmond, and become a school-teacher"—irritably.

Love said nothing, only regarded her so gravely, that she snapped:

"Well, what do you say? Can you fall in with my plans?"

"Really, I can't say, you have taken me so much by surprise. Besides, the choice is very limited. Put Dainty in the balance with the other two nieces, and I will promise to choose between the three."

"Love, you are surely not thinking seriously of Dainty Chase for a wife? I assure you that she would not make a fitting mistress for Ellsworth. You admire brave, spirited women, I know, and Dainty is a weak, hysterical little coward, taking dreams for realities. Sheila Kelly assures me that every night since she has been sleeping in her room she has had a hysterical spell, declaring that she has either seen or heard the old monk, although nothing at all supernatural has happened to Sheila, showing that it is nothing but bad dreams and hysterics on Dainty's part. If she goes on in this way long, she will either lose her health or her reason; and I am thinking seriously of sending her home to her mother."

"You will do nothing of the kind. Write at once, and invite her mother to come to Ellsworth," he said, so sternly that she started with anger, exclaiming:

"I will not do it! Instead, I will send away this hateful girl who is trying to thwart all my hopes and plans for Olive and Ela!"

She saw by the pallor of his face and the flash of his eyes that she had gone too far, and her heart sank as he said, haughtily:

"Take care that you do not transcend your authority, madame, in thus threatening to send away the future fair mistress of my home! Yes, I will trifle with you no longer. You shall hear the truth, and govern yourself accordingly. Dainty Chase is my promised bride, and we will be married on the first of August, my happy birthday!"

She could have killed him for the pride and joy that rang in his voice, as he towered above her, proclaiming the truth. An insane rage rose within her, as she hissed:

"It is as I feared and suspected. The sly minx has made a fool of you, and you will be insane enough to marry her; but she does not love you. She only angled for you because you are rich! She had a lover in Richmond, poor like herself, whom she threw over as soon as she found she had a

chance to win you. Already he has followed her here, and they have had two secret meetings in the grounds at twilight. Even the servants are gossiping about it."

His eyes blazed, his face grew ashen, and his teeth clinched, as he stormed in bitter wrath:

"It is a hellish falsehood!"

"Do you say so? Then here are the proofs—the notes she lost, that were picked up by a servant, and brought to me. Read them, and be convinced!" she cried, in coarse triumph.

His eyes flashed on her like sheet lightning, as he clinched them in his hand.

"Read them!" she repeated, sharply; and she shrank back in bitter humiliation, as he thundered:

"Do you forget I am an Ellsworth—a descendant of that grand old race whose motto is: 'Honor before everything'?"

"Well?" she cried, cringingly.

"Do you think that an Ellsworth—a born Ellsworth, I mean, not one by the accident of marriage, like you—could stoop to the meanness of invading another person's private correspondence? It is the act of a hound, not a gentleman! No; I will not read these papers; but I will restore them to their owner, and she shall explain or not, as she will, the foul aspersion you have cast upon her honor in declaring she has another lover. I trust in her as I do in Heaven!" and he rushed violently from the room in search of Dainty.

CHAPTER IX.

"ALL THAT'S BRIGHT MUST FADE."

"I believe my faith in thee
Strong as my life, so nobly placed to be;
I would as soon expect to see the sun
Fall like a dead king from his height sublime,
His glory stricken from the throne of time,
As thee unworth the worship thou hast won."

Love found Dainty sitting in a large double swing out in the grounds, gently swaying to and fro, and with the fragment of a little song on her rosy lips as she waited for him to join her there.

As the beautiful face turned confidingly to his, Love knew that the sudden love-light in her eyes was reflected from her heart, and that he could not possibly have a rival in her affections.

When Dainty saw the pale, agitated face of her lover, she started in alarm, and the sweet song died on her lips as she exclaimed:

"Oh, Love, what is the matter? Are you ill, that you look so frightfully pale?"

Love took the swinging seat opposite her, and with an effort at calmness, answered:

"Do not be frightened, darling. I am not ill. Only very, very angry."

"With me?" she faltered, in dismay.

"Certainly not, dear little one!" he cried, tenderly; continuing with sudden vehemence: "I am angry with the schemers who are trying to part us from each other, darling."

"You mean Olive and Ela," she cried, quickly, the rose-bloom fading from her dimpled cheeks and her sweet mouth trembling as she sighed: "Oh, I knew that we were too happy for it to last and that something would happen! There was a shadow on my heart. That was why I was singing, as you came up:

"All that's bright must fade,
The brightest, still the fleetest,
All that's sweet was made
To be lost when sweetest;
Flowers that bloom and fall,
Buds that blight in springing,
These, alas! are types of all
To which our hearts are clinging."

"What a little pessimist you are, Dainty! Always turning your face to the darker side of life!" cried her lover, somewhat impatiently; adding: "Nothing shall happen to part us, my own little love; though if your aunt and cousins had their way, we would never see each other's face again. Listen, Dainty. They have told me falsehoods about you—that you had left a lover in Richmond; that he has followed you here, and has been sending you notes to meet him in the grounds."

"Shameful!" she cried, indignantly. "How could they be so wicked!"

"And," continued her lover, crumpling the letters into a ball and throwing them into her lap, "they gave me these notes to read, saying you had dropped them, and a servant had brought them to your aunt."

Dainty smoothed out the sheets and glanced at them calmly.

"Oh!" she cried comprehensively. "And did you read them, dear?"

"Certainly not! I could not stoop so low. Besides, I had perfect confidence in you, my dearest," he cried tenderly.

"Oh, Love, how noble you are to me! But your trust is not misplaced. I can explain all about these notes; so please read them now," said the young girl, earnestly, smoothing them out and holding them open before his eyes.

He read, with much amazement, the following notes in a neat, masculine chirography:

"Dear Little Dainty,—Will you meet me down at the gate about sunset? I have something very particular to say to you. I know your good heart will make you grant me this small favor. Do not fail me.

*"Yours, wretchedly,
Vernon."*

"My Cruel Darling,—Is it possible you can refuse my earnest prayer for one short interview? Oh, how you have changed since you left Richmond! Yet such a little while ago you swore you loved me as dearly as I loved you, and promised to marry me in December. I see how it is—that rich Ellsworth is winning you away from me. Oh, my love, I can not bear to lose you! Life would be worthless, even unbearable, if you forsook me now! Oh, let me see you once, just once, and you can not resist my pleadings! I curse the hour that your rich aunt tempted you from love and duty! Oh, return to your better self—come to me, dear! I will be waiting at the gate just at twilight. When you see me, you will repent that cold letter breaking our engagement. Come, oh, come, my love; my heart is breaking for you!

*"Despairingly,
Vernon."*

Love finished the reading, and looked up in amazement at Dainty's calm face.

She gave him a sweet, reassuring smile as she said:

"The case certainly looks dark against me, does it not, Love?"

"Yes," he replied, somewhat uneasily, in spite of his faith.

"And yet I can explain it all," she returned, happily; adding: "This Vernon Ashley was Ela Craye's lover. They were engaged; but Vernon is only a poor man, a stenographer in a bank, and when Aunt Judith invited her here, she heartlessly threw him over, hoping to catch a richer husband. He followed her to Ellsworth, and sent the first little note to me, begging me to ask Ela to grant him an interview. I asked her, but she refused in scorn; and when I carried him her refusal, he sent her this note of love and reproach. He also told me he would stay in the neighborhood several days, hoping she would relent. That is the true story, and if you wish to verify it, Love, you can easily find Mr. Ashley at Caldwell Station, and he will settle all your doubts."

"I have never had a doubt of you, my darling," he answered, bending forward to kiss her tenderly, as he continued: "But what shameful duplicity to deceive my step-mother with this false story, for I am sure she believed every word she was telling me! But never mind; I will get even with Miss Craye, be sure of that, Dainty. And now I have to tell you of another story. It is said that you have hysterical spells every night, declaring that you are haunted by the mythical old monk, with the consumption. Is this true?"

Instantly the fair, rosy face became pale and downcast, and Dainty shuddered as if an icy blast had swept over her lissom form.

"Oh, who has told you this?" she cried, regretfully.

"The story was told Mrs. Ellsworth by Sheila Kelly. Is it true?" he demanded, earnestly; and the girl bowed her golden head sorrowfully, faltering:

"Oh, do not be angry with me, Love, but it is true!"

"True? Then why have you kept it from me?" he cried.

"Oh, Love, they told me you always grew angry when you heard anything about the Ellsworth ghost. They warned me that you would never forgive the mention of it. But I can not tell you an untruth. Since you ask me, I must own everything, and take the bitter consequences."

She bowed her fair face in her little white hands, and her form shook as with ague, in spite of the heat of the July weather.

"Since I came to Ellsworth," she cried, "there has never been a night but I have been tortured by the sight or sound of that old sick man. In the dead of night I have felt his cold, clammy hand on my brow, and wakened, sobbing with fright, sometimes to see his dark form fading from sight, and the echo of his hollow cough ringing in my horrified ears. Yet that Sheila Kelly, on her cot across the room, slept heavily on and heard nothing. What secret agonies I have nightly endured only the angels can ever know, Love; but I bore it all rather than incur the risk of your anger and contempt. They had told you I was a coward, and I was trying to be brave, and not to tell you—to tell you—"

Her voice broke in a storm of choking sobs, and her lover caught her to his breast in a passion of sympathy.

"My own brave darling! How much you have endured, like a patient little martyr, without complaint! Yet I feel sure it is nothing but your too vivid imagination. You have heard the silly stories from the servants, and you dreamed the rest while stolid Sheila Kelly slept on unconscious. But this must not go on. I shall write to your mother to come to Ellsworth to stay with you until our wedding; and then, please God, you will forget, in the shelter of my love, all these nervous fancies."

"Our wedding!" she sobbed, bashfully, against his breast.

"Yes, darling, our wedding; for it must be very soon. I have never told you yet, love, that by the terms of my father's will I must marry on or before my twenty-sixth birthday, or forfeit my fortune to my step-mother."

"What a strange will!" she cried, forgetting her terrors in simple wonderment.

"Yes; my father had some peculiar notions. One of them was a rooted belief in the necessity, or expediency, of early marriages; and to insure my obedience to his wish, he framed his will in the fashion he did. But he was a good man, and I am not quarreling with his plans; for I would gladly get married to-day if you were willing, my precious girl," declared Love, kissing her as a fitting period to his sentence.

Dainty made no answer. She was fluttering with girlish timidity at thought of the early marriage he was threatening. She said to herself:

"I love him dearly, but I am afraid I shall not like to be married soon. I have not enough dignity to look like a married lady."

Unconscious of her girlish fears, Love continued, fondly:

"The first day of August is my twenty-sixth birthday, and we must be married on that day, my darling."

"Oh, I—" she began; but he stopped the objection with a kiss.

"You are going to say you can not get ready so soon; but you need not make many preparations, love. I want you to wear my mother's wedding-dress; it is so beautiful—a white brocade, veiled in costly lace. And we will be married at Ellsworth. That will be better than going back to the hot city for a wedding—do you not think so? Oh, I intend to have everything my own way, sweet; and so I shall write to your mother to-day to come at once to Ellsworth."

"But Aunt Judith—and the girls? They will be fearfully angry," she whispered, tearfully.

"Yes, they will be very angry, I grant you. But Ellsworth belongs to me, so they will have to behave or leave; and I fancy they will choose the former part. Now come with me to your aunt and cousins, and see how cleverly I shall pay them out for their meanness. Don't tremble so, my timid little love."

And taking her hand, he led her back to the house, to a long, vine-wreathed veranda, where the three ladies were sitting together.

Mrs. Ellsworth had just told them of Love's betrothal to Dainty, and they frowned when the happy lovers came among them hand in hand.

Love placed Dainty in a chair, then turned to his step-mother.

"Madame, Dainty has explained to my satisfaction the story you told me just now. One of these notes was written to her, the second one to Miss Craye, who will not deny that Vernon Ashley is her lover, and that Dainty only acted the part of a friend in trying to reconcile the estranged lovers."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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