

ALEX. MCVEIGH MILLER

PRETTY GERALDINE, THE
NEW YORK SALESGIRL; OR,
WEDDED TO HER CHOICE

Alex. McVeigh Miller

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Salesgirl; or, Wedded to Her Choice**

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Miller A.

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Mrs. Alex. McVeigh Miller

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CHAPTER I.

ON THE THRESHOLD OF HER FATE

"If I could have my dearest wish fulfilled,
And take my choice of all earth's treasures, too,
Or choose from Heaven whatsoe'er I willed,
I'd ask for you!

"No one I'd envy, either high or low,
No king in castle old or palace new;
I'd hold Calconda's mines less rich than I
If I had you!"

"There is more charm for my true, loving heart,
In everything you think, or say, or do,
Then all the joys that Heaven could e'er impart,
Because it's you!"

She stood behind the counter in H. O'Neill's splendid dry-goods emporium on Sixth avenue—only one of his army of salesgirls, yet not a belle of the famous society Four Hundred could eclipse her in beauty—pretty Geraldine, with her great, starry, brown eyes lighting up a bewitching face, with a skin like a rose-leaf, and a low, white brow, crowned by an aureole of curly hair, in whose waves the sunshine was tangled so that it could not get free. Her round, white throat rose proudly from a simple, nun-like gown of fine black serge, unadorned save by the beauty of the form it fitted with easy grace.

She would have graced a queen's drawing-room, this lovely girl with her starry eyes and demure dimples, but untoward fate had placed her behind a glove counter in New York.

It was very cold up to ten o'clock that bright October morning, and the great throngs of fall shoppers were not yet out in force, so Geraldine had an idle moment in which to gossip with her chum, plump, gray-eyed Cissy Carroll.

They both belonged to an amateur dramatic society, and a generous manager had sent them tickets for the play that evening. It was of this anticipated pleasure that they were chatting joyously, when a low, deep, masculine voice spoke to Geraldine across the counter:

"Gloves, please."

She turned quickly toward her customer, and at the same moment a very exacting lady claimed Cissy's attention.

The shop was rapidly filling with elegantly dressed women of fashion, and they would have no more leisure that day.

Geraldine saw before her an elegant-looking gentleman—tall, broad-shouldered, graceful, with a clean-shaven face, clear-cut features, fair, clustering locks, and large, glittering, light-blue eyes, keen and clear as points of steel in their direct gaze, but with something unpleasant somehow in their admiring expression that made the pretty salesgirl drop her eyes bashfully, as he continued, easily:

"I have lost a bet of a box of gloves to a lady, and would like you to assist me in selecting some pretty ones to pay the debt."

"What size?" she asked, as she began pulling down the boxes.

"Sixes," he replied, and added: "She is a gay and pretty young girl—an actress."

"An actress!" Geraldine sighed, enviously, then smothered the sigh by saying, carelessly: "We both wear the same size of glove."

"Ah!" and the customer gazed admiringly at the slender, dimpled white hands sorting out the gloves, then continued: "And I am an actor, and it pleases me to tell you that I am Clifford Standish, the leading man in 'Hearts and Homes,' the society play you are going to see to-night."

He laid his elegantly engraved card before her, and she started with surprise and pleasure, faltering, eagerly:

"I—I am proud to know you—but how did you guess I was going to the theatre to-night?"

"I beg your pardon for listening, but I heard you and your chum talking about it while I stood at the counter waiting for you to notice me."

"Oh, did I keep you waiting? I am very sorry; and if the floor-walker had observed my inattention, I should have been scolded."

Clifford Standish drank in with keen delight the music of her voice, and thrilled with rapture at her rare beauty, so he answered, gallantly:

"He did not see you, and I was in no hurry, for it pleased me just to stand there and watch you. I was watching your spirited face and gestures and thinking that you would make a clever actress. You belong to an amateur dramatic society, do you not?"

"Oh, yes, and I enjoy it so much. It is the dream of my life to be an actress!" exclaimed Geraldine, impulsively, her eager, brown eyes shining like stars. Her beauty thrilled his blood like a draught of rare old wine, and he felt that here was the love of his life, for no woman had ever touched his heart as maddeningly as this one; so he answered, almost as passionately, in a swift, overmastering impulse to draw her within the circle of his life:

"A dream that may easily become a reality. Will you let me help you to become an actress? I am almost sure that I can secure you a position in my company."

"Oh, I would be so grateful," smiled Geraldine, her cheeks glowing crimson with joy.

"Then you will permit me to call on you and talk it over? Let me see—you will be at home this evening at seven o'clock, will you not? May I come for half an hour at that time?"

"If you please," she answered, eagerly, scribbling her address on the back of his card.

He took it with thanks, his keen, blue eyes gleaming with triumph at the success of his ruse, and then gave his attention to the gloves, which he paid for and directed to be sent to his hotel.

He lingered as long as he dared after the purchase, but another customer soon claimed Geraldine's attention, so he smiled and bowed himself away, leaving the young girl with a fluttering heart and blushing cheeks, the result of this chance, but fateful, meeting.

Geraldine and Cecilia were close friends, having come together from their country homes to seek employment among strangers in the great city. They roomed together in the third story of a cheap apartment-house, and Cissy, as her intimates called her, was like an older sister to the ambitious Geraldine.

Cissy was twenty-five, and her friend only eighteen, so she always assumed the role of adviser to her junior, and as they walked home from the store that evening, she said, reprovingly:

"My dear, I didn't like the young man who talked to you so glibly over the gloves this morning."

"Ah, Cissy, you don't know who that young man was, or you would be proud of his notice!" And Geraldine poured out a breathless account of her good fortune.

But, to her surprise, Cecilia answered, gravely:

"Oh, I heard a good deal that he was saying to you, and noticed, too, that he looked at you as if he would like to eat you up. But, dear Geraldine, please don't let him persuade you with his silly

flatteries to go on the stage. It's a hard life for a young girl, they say, and full of terrible temptations. Believe me, you are better off behind O'Neill's glove counter."

Geraldine's pride was cruelly wounded at Cissy's lack of sympathy in her pet ambition, and she answered, rashly:

"Cissy Carroll, you're just jealous, that's why you preach to me! I can't help being pretty and attractive, can I? And I know that if he had offered to make you an actress, instead of me, you'd have sung quite another tune."

Cecilia felt her friend's slur on her own attractiveness, and flushed with quick resentment.

She knew that she was not as beautiful as Geraldine, but she had the soft, plump prettiness of a gray dove, so attractive to many men, and she had not lacked for admirers, although, for reasons of her own, she was single still, so she tossed her pretty dark head, her gray eyes flashing scorn, and made no reply to the ungenerous attack.

Geraldine, still angry, continued, patronizingly:

"If you would like to be an actress, too, Cissy, I'll introduce the actor to you when he calls this evening, and ask him to get you a position."

"Pray, don't trouble yourself, for I sha'n't enter the room while he's there. I despise real stage people! They're most always shabby sheep, and their acquaintance no credit," returned Cissy, rudely, giving such mortal offense by the taunt that Geraldine did not speak another word to her on the way home.

They had two small rooms, and Cissy hastened to one to prepare their simple tea, so as to get ready for the theatre, but Geraldine hurried to beautify herself for her caller, putting on her best gown, a garnet cashmere, with velvet trimmings, and drawing her wealth of golden brown locks into the classic Psyche knot.

"Supper's ready!" called Cissy, curtly, from the next room.

"I don't want any, thank you," Geraldine answered, coldly, and, indeed, her excitement ran too high for her to eat.

So Cissy ate her solitary meal in snubbed silence, while the radiant Geraldine entertained her caller, for Clifford Standish soon came, and spent a delightful half-hour, having to tear himself away at the last minute to return to his stage duties. Then she and Cissy patched up a kind of truce, and went together to the play, returning at the close, Cissy silent and disapproving, and Geraldine more determined than ever to go on the stage.

The girls were very distant to each other after that, but Geraldine carried a high head, and clung to her purpose, encouraged by the handsome young actor, who called on her for a short while every evening, and gave her tickets to every performance, declaring that she inspired him to his best work by the rapt gaze of her appreciative eyes as she sat in the audience.

But Cissy would not accompany her friend again to the play, doing all she could in a quiet way to wean her from her infatuation, but in vain.

She thought that Geraldine was weak and vain and silly, and the latter believed that Cissy was jealous of her good fortune. She hoped that she would soon be able to go on the stage, and part from the girl who had grown so selfish and cruel. The breach widened between their once loving hearts, and neither tried to bridge it over by a kind, forgiving word.

Toward the end of the week, Geraldine said, coldly:

"I am not going to work to-morrow morning, Cissy. I asked for a day's holiday before I left the store yesterday."

"Why?" asked Cissy, curiously.

"Mr. Standish has invited me to go with him on an excursion to Newburgh to witness the firemen's parade there. The firemen are having a grand celebration, you know, with splendid music, a grand parade, and all sorts of firemen's games. I wish you were going, too, Cissy!" wistfully.

"Well, I don't, and I think you are imprudent to go alone with that strange actor—so there!"

"Well, come with us, Cissy, won't you? I don't think he would mind your going!"

"Oh, yes, he would! 'Two are company, three a crowd!'" Cissy quoted, flippantly, and she went alone to work the next morning, Geraldine having started at an earlier hour to take the day boat for Newburgh.

CHAPTER II. A FRIEND IN NEED

"I had a dream of Love.
It seemed that on a sudden, in my heart,
A live and passionate thing leaped into being,
And conquered me. 'Twas fierce and terrible,
And yet more lovely than the dawn, and soft,
With a deep power. It roused a longing
To do I know not what—to give—ah, yes!
More than myself! And—failing that—to *die*!"

"How lovely she is, this brown-eyed little beauty! My heart is really touched at last, and I would give the world to call her mine!" thought Clifford Standish, as he led Geraldine on the crowded boat and watched her sweet face glow with pleasure at the animated scene.

He said to her, in apparent jest, but secret earnest:

"There are some members of the crack company of the New York Fire Department on board this morning, going to Newburgh, to take part in the parade and games to-day. They are fine-looking fellows, in their bright, new uniforms, but I hope you won't lose your heart to any of them. I think fate has destined you for an actor's bride."

His ardent, meaning glance made the blood flow in a torrent to her cheeks, but she was saved the necessity of replying, for at that moment she saw a woman's handkerchief waved to him from the shore, and he exclaimed, in an embarrassed tone:

"I see a friend beckoning me. Will you excuse me for a moment?"

He ran hastily down the gang-plank, leaving Geraldine alone on the crowded deck among the good-natured throng of people in the nipping air of the early morning, for the sunshine had not yet pierced the fog that lightly overhung the beautiful Hudson.

But Geraldine did not mind the frosty air, for her dark-blue suit was both warm and becoming, and the merry crowd and the martial music played by the band inspired her to cheerful thoughts.

She passed the minutes so pleasantly in watching the animated faces about her that she did not realize how long Mr. Standish was absent, until suddenly the whistle blew, the gang-plank was drawn up, and the steamer moved away from shore, thrilling the girl with swift alarm over her escort's absence.

She looked about her with a keen, searching gaze, then back to the shore.

A crowd of people were leaving the wharf, but among none of them could she distinguish the stately form of Mr. Standish.

"What had become of her escort?" she asked herself, in terror, wondering if he had willfully deserted her like this.

A choking sob rose up in her pretty throat, and her eyes filled with frightened tears.

She thought, miserably:

"Oh, I wish I hadn't come! I wish I had listened to Cissy's warnings! Why did Mr. Standish treat me like this? He is a mean wretch, and I'll never, never speak to him again!"

Poor little Geraldine, so lovely and so impulsive, if she had kept to that resolution, this story would never have been written. Her life would have flowed on too quietly and happily to have tempted a novelist's pen.

But "fate is above us all."

She looked about her despairingly for a friendly face among all those strangers.

Her tearful eyes encountered the gaze of a fireman who had been covertly watching her ever since she came on board.

He was a magnificent specimen of athletic young manhood, his fine straight figure setting off to advantage his resplendent uniform of dark-blue, with fawn-colored facings and gilt buttons. His face was bold, handsome, and winning, with a straight nose, laughing dark-blue eyes, a dark, curling mustache, while beneath his blue cap clustered beautiful blue-black curls, fine and glossy as a woman's hair.

When Geraldine's appealing eyes met the admiring gaze of this young man it paused and lingered as if held by some irresistible attraction, and, advancing to her, he lifted his blue cap courteously from his handsome head, saying, kindly:

"You seem to be in trouble, miss. Can I help you?"

Thus encouraged by his kind look and tone, the girl faltered out her distressing plight:

"My escort went back on shore to speak to a friend, and was left behind. And I—I—don't know anybody—and have no ticket—and no money with me!"

Poor, troubled baby! How charming she was with those crimson cheeks and wet eyes, and that tremulous quiver in her low voice! The handsome fireman's heart went out to her so strongly that he longed to take her in his arms like a child, and kiss away her pearly tears.

But of course, he didn't obey that strong impulse. He only said, cordially:

"Don't let that little trifle worry you, miss. You must permit me to buy you a ticket, and to take care of you to-day, like a brother. Will you?"

How glad Geraldine was to find such a kind friend. Her heart began to rebound from its depression, and she exclaimed, gratefully:

"Oh, how can I thank you enough? I felt so frightened, so like a lost child, till you spoke to me! Yes, I shall be very grateful if you will buy me a ticket. I'll pay you when we get back to New York. And—and—till then, please keep this!"

She held out to him her sole ornament, a pretty little ring, and insisted, against all his entreaties, that he should hold it in pawn for her debt.

"You oughtn't to trust your engagement-ring to another fellow," he said, lightly, as he slipped it over his little finger.

Geraldine blushed brightly as she answered to this daring challenge:

"Oh, it's not my engagement-ring at all. I'm not engaged."

"I'm very glad to hear it," he replied, meaningly, then proffered her his card, on which she read, in a clear, bold chirography, the name: "Harry Hawthorne."

Geraldine bowed, and said:

"I haven't a card, but my name is Miss Harding—Geraldine Harding. I would like your address, please, so that I may return your money to-morrow."

"I am usually at the engine-house on Ludlow street—Engine Company No. 17. Driver, you see; and our splendid horses—oh, but you ought to see how they love me," enthusiastically; then pulling himself up with a jerk; "but, pray don't trouble to return the money. It will be better for me to call, will it not, and return your ring?"

She assented, and gave him her address; then he found her a seat, and as their boat plowed swiftly through the frothing waves, they fell into a pleasant chat, during which he said, courteously:

"I saw you come on board with Standish, the actor. Are you a member of his company?"

"Not yet; but I hope to be one soon. I'm only a salesgirl at O'Neill's now, but Mr. Standish has promised to help me to become an actress."

She read distinct disapproval in his dark-blue eyes as he said:

"But you will have to study a long while before you can make your debut."

"No, for I've already studied a great deal, and acted several parts in the amateur dramatic company to which I belong. Mr. Standish says I can go right on as soon as I secure a position."

"Perhaps you will regret it if you go on the stage," he observed, abruptly.

"Oh, no; for it is the dream of my life!" smiled Geraldine.

"Will your friends permit it?"

"I'm only an orphan girl, earning her own living, so I don't need to ask any one's leave. And I'm glad of that, for I'm ambitious, and want to rise in life. I'm tired of being the slave of the public at a dry-goods counter," cried Geraldine, with sparkling eyes.

He gazed at her admiringly, but he did not hesitate to say:

"It is only an exchange of slavery from the counter to the stage. You will be the slave of the public still. If you would listen to me, I would persuade you to remain where you are—until some good man marries you, and makes you the queen of his heart and home."

Geraldine tossed her shining head, and gave him a saucy smile, and retorted:

"That sounds like my chum's preaching, but I shall not listen to either of you. My heart is set on a stage career."

Harry Hawthorne gave her a grave look, but made no reply in words, and for a few moments they kept silence, while the gay, lilting music of the band filled up the pauses, and the sun pierced through the fog and smiled on the majestic steamer plowing her way through the blue, sparkling waves.

Geraldine felt intuitively that he disapproved of her plans, and maintained a pouting silence until he remarked, genially:

"I have an idea!"

She looked at him, questioningly, and he continued:

"The wife of our captain is on board to-day, going to Newburgh. Now, wouldn't it be pleasant to introduce you, so that she could look after you while I'm taking part in the firemen's games?"

Geraldine felt as if he were tired of her already, and eager to put her in charge of some one else, and her heart sank with a strange pain, but she did not permit him to see her mortification, she only gave an eager, smiling assent.

"I should like it very much, if the lady will be so kind."

"Then I will go and bring Mrs. Stansbury, if you'll wait here for us," and smiling at her, a friendly smile that warmed her chilled heart like a burst of sudden sunshine, he bowed himself away, and left the little beauty sitting alone by the rail.

She leaned her elbows on the rail, her dimpled chin in her hands, and watched the foamy waves with tender eyes as she thought how bonny he was, her handsome new acquaintance. Almost nicer, indeed, than Clifford Standish, or at least he would be, but for his absurd prejudice against her going on the stage.

"Won't Cissy be surprised when I have another handsome caller? I suppose she'll be cross, and wonder where I got another string to my bow," thought the budding coquette, with artless vanity.

She decided not to tell Cissy of the actor's strange conduct, for she would only say that he did it on purpose, and that it served her right.

"And I shall not give her the chance to crow over me, and say, 'I told you so!'" murmured Geraldine.

In the preoccupation of her mind, she did not notice that the rail she leaned on was old and weak, and had been mended at that very place. In the sudden indignation at the thought of Cissy's contumacy, she leaned yet more heavily upon it, and, with a sudden snap, the frail support gave way, precipitating its lovely burden into the water.

"Heaven have mercy!" shrieked poor Geraldine, as she went downward over the side of the boat—down, down down, into the churning, frothy waves.

In a moment all was terror, bustle, and confusion, the passengers all crowding to the side to look over, almost precipitating another accident in the excitement.

"Give way!" cried a stern, ringing voice, as the tall form of the fireman pushed through the crowd, and he demanded, hoarsely:

"What has happened?"

And a dozen voices answered that there had been an accident to the young lady he had been with just now. The rail on which she leaned had broken, throwing her into the water.

"My God!" he cried, supplicatingly, and sprang over the side to the rescue of the drowning girl!

CHAPTER III. A GALLANT RESCUE

"Awake, awake, oh, gracious heart—
There's some one knocking at the door!
'Tis Cupid come with loving art
To honor, worship, and implore.
Arise and welcome him before
Adown his cheeks the big tears start.
Awake, awake, oh, gracious heart—
There's some one knocking at the door."

Several moments of keenest suspense ensued, while the noisy and excited crowd watched the water where Geraldine's fair head had gone down beneath the surface.

Harry Hawthorne made a bold and gallant dive through the eddying circles on the water, and for a few breathless moments, he, too, was lost to sight.

The people shouted, in dismay and pity:

"They are both lost! They have been sucked under the boat by the swift current!"

Every face grew sad at the thought, and some tender-hearted women burst into tears.

It seemed terrible that those two beautiful young lives should have gone down so suddenly and tragically into the darkness of death.

But, suddenly, a low murmur of joy rose above the lamentations.

"See! see!"

The dark head of Harry Hawthorne had reappeared above the waves.

In another moment it was seen that he held Geraldine clasped to him with one arm, her white, unconscious face and dripping hair upturned to the light.

Supporting himself as best he could with one free arm, he halooed, loudly:

"Boat! boat!"

Oh, what a ringing cheer answered him—shouts of joy at the rescue; shouts of praise at his bravery!

In the meanwhile the steamer had been stopped, and a little boat let down. The men rowed quickly to Hawthorne, and drew him and his burden into safety.

The whole affair had passed off very quickly, but only the strength and bravery of one man had saved pretty Geraldine from a grave beneath the deep, sparkling waves of the beautiful Hudson.

As it was, she had sustained no injury, and soon recovered consciousness, looking about her with dazed eyes, to find her rescuer kneeling by her side, gazing at her with eager, dark-blue eyes, full of yearning anxiety.

"Oh, you need not look so frightened, Mr. Hawthorne. She is all right now, and I'm going to take her down stairs and lend her some of my dry clothes!" cried a gay voice, and the pretty young married woman to whom he had been about to introduce Geraldine when she fell into the river, now took the girl in charge and led her down stairs, saying, cheerily:

"You'll be all right directly. I'm going to get you some wine, and have you lie down and rest a while when you get on some dry clothes. Oh, you don't know my name, do you?"

"I am Mrs. Stansbury, and Harry Hawthorne was bringing me over to see you when you fell into the water. A mercy you wern't drowned, isn't it? You certainly would have been, only for his bravery."

Closeted in the little state-room, she continued:

"How fortunate that I brought along a little steamer trunk, expecting to spend several days with my mother in Newburgh. I can lend you an outfit, for we are almost the same size, aren't we? But I'll wager that Harry Hawthorne will not be able to borrow a suit big enough for him, and will have to remain 'in durance vile' until his own clothes are dry."

Her words proved true, and she and Geraldine did not see the handsome fireman again until just before they landed, when he joined them, looking fresh and bright, and none the worse for his ducking, excusing his absence by saying, gayly, that he had been hung over a line to dry.

His eager eyes sought Geraldine's, and he said, tenderly:

"You feel no worse for your wetting, I hope?"

"No, indeed, thanks to the coddling of Mrs. Stansbury and the other ladies, but"—and her low voice broke with grateful emotion—"how can I ever thank you enough?"

"Let my own keen joy in saving your life be my reward," he answered, lightly, but with an undercurrent of joy in his deep, musical voice, for it seemed to him that had she perished beneath the cruel, darkling waves, life would never have seemed the same to him again.

Yet he knew that it might never be possible to win her for his own. His rival, the handsome actor, might already be lord of her girlish heart.

The bustle of landing cut short any further interchange of words between them, and when they stepped on shore, Mrs. Stansbury said, in her cordial way:

"I have claimed Miss Harding for my mother's guest, and she will go with me to the ball to-night, and return to New York with you to-morrow. Now, I see mamma's carriage waiting. Will you come with us to luncheon before we go out to the parade?"

"I thank you, no, for some of the fellows are waiting for me now. But I will see you later. *Au revoir!*"

He smiled frankly at Geraldine, touched his cap, and hurried away, seeming to take away some of the sunshine with him, for her heart had gone out to him in a great wave of tenderness that blotted out the memory of Clifford Standish as though he had never existed.

She looked at her companion, and asked, naively:

"Why did you say I would go to the ball? I have no dress to wear."

"What does that matter? I have several sisters. One of them can lend you a white silk, I'm sure. Why, you pretty darling, I wouldn't have you miss that ball for the world! Perhaps you will meet your fate there!"

CHAPTER IV.

"TWO SOULS WITH BUT A SINGLE THOUGHT."

"In peace, Love tunes the shepherd's reed;
In war, he mounts the warrior's steed;
In halls, in gay attire is seen;
In hamlets, dances on the green.
Love rules the court, the camp, the grave,
And men below, and saints above;
For love is heaven and heaven is love."

It seemed like a pretty act in a new play to Geraldine, the crowding events of that delightful day. To be welcomed so cordially by Mrs. Stansbury's gentle mother, to ride through the crowded and gayly decorated streets, in the private carriage, to the hospitable red brick house full of pretty fun-loving girls, and to be installed as an honored guest in a dainty chamber, was a treat to the little working-girl whose life flowed in such a narrow groove of toil and poverty, and she thought, generously:

"Oh, I am very fortunate to find such kind friends, and I will always love them for their goodness to me. How I wish Cissy had come with me, for she would enjoy this so much."

Mrs. Stansbury entered with a great fluff of silk and lace over her arm, saying, cheerily:

"Here's the ball-gown I promised for to-night—Carrie's gown that she wore when she graduated last year. No, she doesn't need it. She has a blue silk-and-chiffon affair for the ball; so you'll be all right, won't you? And now let's go and have our luncheon, for we must hurry down town, where we have windows engaged to sit in and watch the parade. Oh, dear, I'm so sorry that my hubby, the captain, couldn't get away and come with us!"

They had a delightful luncheon, very enjoyable after their morning on the water, then the party of six—Mrs. Stansbury, her mother, Mrs. Odell, and her three daughters, Carrie, Consuelo, and Daisy, with pretty Geraldine—set out for the centre of attraction, Newburgh's "triangular square" at the junction of Water and Colden streets. Here the party had two large plate-glass windows over a splendid dry-goods store. From this vantage ground the scene presented, as the magnificent parade filed past, was one to be treasured long in memory.

It was a glittering spectacle, with thirty companies in line, and almost as many bands. Newburgh had not seen such a great day as this for years, with its glorious sunshine, brilliant uniforms, dazzling apparatus, splendid music, and throngs of appreciative people.

The crowd was enormous, the broad pavements packed with a living mass of humanity; the door-ways, balconies, windows, house-tops, a sea of faces. When the dazzling pageant swept by, the effect was kaleidoscopic. The bright gay uniforms of the fine-looking men, the beautiful caparisons of the prancing horses, the heavily plated, imposing engines, the light and graceful carriages, with their paintings and stripings, their images and lamps, their glass-and-gold reel-heads, their silver and gold jackets—all gleamed and glittered in the flashing sunlight like an Arabian Night's dream, and the hearty applause of the gazing crowds made the welkin ring.

Geraldine was charmed with everything, and her lovely, smiling face caught the upraised admiring glance of many a gallant fireman as the long column of thirty companies swept past to the ringing martial music of the accompanying bands. She forgot all her resentment against Cissy in her poignant regret that her chum was missing all this splendor and enjoyment.

But, strange to say, not one regretful thought wandered toward her lost cavalier, Clifford Standish.

She had forgotten him for the time, and her whole soul was thrilled with the present—permeated, enraptured with the thought of Harry Hawthorne, the handsome, dashing fireman who had so nobly saved her life. She loved him already, but she did not know her heart's language yet—her heart that had already elected him its king.

What though his position was an humble one, it was equal to hers, and Geraldine had never reflected that beauty like her own ought to win her a fine rich lover. She was in a whirl of bliss at the all-pervading thought that she had met her fate at last.

"He is mine, and I am his," ran the secret voice of her tender heart.

She watched the firemen eagerly as they paraded past, hoping for a sight of his face among them, so she did not hear the door open behind her until a hand touched her shoulder and she looked up with a start, her voice unconsciously betraying the rapture of her heart as she cried:

"Oh-h-h!—I thought you were in the parade!"

He smiled, radiantly, his heart thrilling with joy.

"No, I am not in the parade. That is, I chose not to be. You see, my company did not come, to take part, only a few of us fellows, so we can do as we like. We were offered seats in the carriages with the visiting firemen, and the others accepted. But I—I thought I would return and remain with you ladies."

His voice said "ladies," but his eyes said "you," and Geraldine thrilled deliciously.

Oh, how gay and happy she felt—happier than she had ever been in her whole life before. The dawn of love made the whole world roseate with sunshine.

And never had she looked more beautiful. The joy in her heart sent the warm blood leaping through her veins and made her eyes brighter, her cheeks redder, until she was dazzlingly lovely.

Harry Hawthorne remained with the party all the rest of the afternoon. Other young men joined them presently, admirers of the pretty Odell girls, and later on they repaired to the County Fair Grounds to witness some of the firemen's games taking place there.

Seated on the grand stand, by the side of Geraldine, Harry Hawthorne felt as proud and happy as a king, for the same sweet wine of Love that thrilled the girl flowed intoxicatingly through his veins.

"For what was it else within me wrought
But, I fear, the new strong wine of Love,
That made my tongue to stammer and trip
When I saw the treasured splendor, her hand,
Come sliding out of her sacred glove,
As the sunlight broke from her lip?"

The tournament and games of this afternoon were only a repetition by Newburgh firemen of the ones that had been participated in the previous day by the visiting companies—"consolation races," the chief merrily called them.

But the grand stand was packed and the entertainment was novel and interesting, as evidenced by the frequent applause of the crowd.

The exercises after the pretty tournament consisted mainly of hose-racing contests, in which firemanic skill was displayed at its best.

"You must explain the game to me. You see, I never thought much about firemen before, although I am deeply interested in them now," pretty Geraldine said, naively, to her delighted companion.

He thanked her with a kindling glance of pleasure, and answered:

"It will give me pleasure to explain it all to you, Miss Harding. It is very simple indeed, depending on the skill and dexterity of the men. In the first place, the rules of the game require fifteen men. They must run two hundred yards to the hydrant, with a hose cart, and from that point lay one hundred yards of hose, make a coupling, and screw on the pipe. But these technical terms are Greek to you, of course, so I will try to make it clear to you as they proceed."

He did so, and Geraldine, who was beginning to love all firemen, for the sake of the splendid one by her side, watched the contest with breathless interest.

But now arose a difficulty.

The Newburgh company had only fourteen good runners, and they must have a fifteenth one.

But the rules of the race required that no company should make use of the services of a member of another company.

It was finally decided that as the race was not for a prize, but simply for practice and amusement, the rule might be waived for one in favor of a visiting fireman.

Then a murmur arose among the firemen that suddenly swelled to a clamorous shout:

"Hawthorne! Hawthorne!"

Mrs. Stansbury, who sat on the other side of Geraldine, looked round, and exclaimed, gayly:

"They are calling you, Mr. Hawthorne. Why don't you go?"

"I prefer remaining here," he smiled back, though a slight flush rose to his brow as the calls continued more clamorously:

"Hawthorne! Hawthorne! Hawthorne!"

All eyes turned on him as he sat unmoved, and a delegation of firemen came to insist on his joining the race.

"Oh, do go, Mr. Hawthorne. I think it will be grand to join the race!" exclaimed Geraldine, enthusiastically, and he rose at once like a gallant knight who has no other wish than to do the behest of his lady-love.

Mrs. Stansbury whispered as he went away:

"He will win the race for them. He is a magnificent athlete, my husband says. And as for horses—well, you should see him control them! They love and obey him like a master, and he has a passion for them. He is a splendid fellow, though there is something rather mysterious about him. He has been driver for No. 17 two years, yet no one knows where he came from or aught about his family. But he is educated above his position, and has betrayed that he has lived abroad. We think he is English or Irish—perhaps a mixture of both. But, anyway, he is just magnificent, and the men and the horses both worship him alike. He has been a hero at dozens of fires, and has several medals of honor, but he will not accept promotion. He says he loves the horses, and will not give up driving. But look! the team is about to start!"

Every word she uttered only made Geraldine love Hawthorne more dearly, for what woman does not love a hero?

Geraldine watched the contest with flashing eyes; but, needless to say, she saw but one man, and she soon realized that the most thunderous applause was given to him.

"He is the swiftest runner of them all!" cried Carrie Odell. "Look how the men are dropping off! They cannot stand it. Seven, eight, nine, ten, have given up. Oh-h-h!"

"Another! And another!" cried her sister, Consuelo, and so it kept on till when they reached the finish they had only two men to open the hydrant, and screw on the pipe—a simple operation it would seem to a novice, but it is just here that the race is won or lost. Under the moment's excitement the couplers will likely find their nerves unsteady after the long run. But these two men made no false moves. They put on the pipe with indescribable speed, then ran on the remaining hundred yards to the judge's stand, Harry Hawthorne coming out ahead amid the deafening cheers of his admirers.

The judges took the time at the very instant that the pipe touched the ground, and after examining the coupling they found it all right, and announced the time as forty-six and one-fourth seconds.

The victors retired amid tumultuous applause, and another team prepared to run, Hawthorne returning very soon to Geraldine's side to sun himself in her admiring eyes.

"You were splendid, and I was proud of you!" she cried, innocently, unconscious of the tenderness her words implied.

"Thank you. I am proud that I pleased you; but I was sorry they made me run. I was trying to keep rested and fresh to dance with you at the ball to-night," he answered, lightly.

"And now you will be too tired—I am sorry for that."

How frankly she could talk to him, and yet they had been strangers only this morning; yet it seemed as if they had known each other years and years.

"No, I shall not be too weary to dance with you," he answered, tenderly.

Then others of the party claimed his attention, and Geraldine sat in a happy dream, thinking how heavenly it would be dancing with him to-night.

Presently the games were over, and the weary, happy throng departed—the Odells and their guests to make ready for the grand fireman's ball they were going to attend that night.

"Oh, I wonder what Cissy will say when I don't come back to-night? She will be uneasy about me; perhaps angry. But she will forgive me when I tell her how it happened, and what a lovely time I had," thought Geraldine.

But again she did not even think of Clifford Standish, or even wonder what had become of him. She was full of the dear, delightful present.

How delightful it was to be dressing for a grand ball, in white slippers and a fairy-like gown of white silk, and with white roses for her breast and hair. Geraldine felt like a Cinderella going to the ball with a prince, for Harry Hawthorne was coming to be her escort, and to her he was the handsomest man on earth, a veritable Prince Charming.

She looked at her reflection in the long mirror, with artless delight at her own beauty.

"How pretty I look! I hope he will think so, too, but perhaps he knows some one more beautiful," she murmured, uneasily.

CHAPTER V. RIVALS AND FOES

"We meet where harp and violin
Were singing songs of mirth,
Where creatures floated in the space
Almost too fair for earth.
He moved amid the surging crowd,
And by one single glance
My heart was lost, forever lost,
While swinging in the dance."

Oh, how Geraldine enjoyed the first two hours of the ball!

It was one of the most brilliant affairs ever given in Newburgh.

The dazzling lights shone on an animated scene, adorned with rich floral garnitures, and brightened by the rich uniforms of the firemen, mixed with the sober black of the ordinary citizen, and the gay gowns of the beautiful women.

Geraldine, with her golden fluff of hair, bright brown eyes, and shining white attire, was the cynosure of all eyes, and many a gallant fireman envied Harry Hawthorne, who was her partner so often in the joyous dance.

True, she would dance with any of them to whom he introduced her, but each one saw by the wandering glances of her brown eyes that Hawthorne was first in her heart and thoughts.

So the first two hours passed by like a dream of bliss.

Geraldine loved music and dancing and gayety, with all her heart. She loved, too, the congenial new friends she had made, and lost in the delightful present, she forgot for a time her feverish ambition to become an actress and shine upon the stage.

What exquisite rapture may be crowded into two hours—rapture that will linger in the memory till death blots out all. So it was with Geraldine.

When Hawthorne pressed her hand in the dance, and looked into her eyes, drinking in deep draughts the intoxication of her beauty and sweetness, the girl thrilled with a rapture akin to pain, and those moments of dizzy, subtle bliss so dazzling in their brightness, returned to Geraldine through all her life as her happiest hours—that hour in a woman's life when First Love "is a shy, sweet new-comer, and Hope leads it by the hand."

"New hopes may bloom, and days may come,
Of milder, calmer beam;
But there's nothing half so sweet in life
As love's young dream."

How sad that a shadow should fall so suddenly over Geraldine's happiness!

But as she stood at a window, panting from the dance, rosy and smiling, as she talked to Harry Hawthorne, a shadow suddenly came between her and the light, pausing by her side till she looked up and saw—Clifford Standish!

Alas! that his shadow should ever come between her and the dawning happiness of her life!

Alas! that she had ever met him, the handsome, unscrupulous actor, who stood there scowling at his splendid rival!

"Mr. Standish!" she exclaimed, with a violent start, and a strange feeling of annoyance, and he answered, impressively:

"How glad I am that I have found you at last!"

"Have you been looking for me?" she asked, coldly.

"Everywhere! And I beg ten thousand pardons for my seeming desertion of you. It was wholly an accident, and the fault of my friend, who detained me talking one minute too long. I followed you on the next steamer, but it was several hours late, and all the time my mind was distracted over what would become of you. Of course I knew you would find friends—a beautiful girl alone in a crowd will always find a protector; but," sneeringly, "not always a safe one!"

"I beg your pardon. It was I who protected Miss Harding," began Harry Hawthorne, wrathfully, and the girl started, and exclaimed:

"Mr. Standish, this is Mr. Hawthorne, a very kind gentleman who paid my fare on the boat after you left me without a ticket, and afterward jumped into the river and saved my life when I fell overboard. I owe him a debt of gratitude that I can never repay."

They bowed coldly, trying not to glare, each seeing in the other a dangerous rival.

Clifford Standish was not pleasant to look at with that steely glare in his large, light-blue eyes, and that angry compression of his shaven lips as he said, coldly:

"I thank you, sir, for your care of my friend during my enforced absence from her side. I will repay you the boat fare, and remain deeply indebted to you for saving her life. Of course it goes without saying that I shall now be honored with her company again, thus relieving you of her care."

Harry Hawthorne, with a dangerous flash in his dark-blue eyes, retorted, calmly:

"I beg your pardon. Her engagement with me for this evening gives me a right that I shall not relinquish unless at her desire."

Both looked at the beautiful, flushed face of the girl. She comprehended the sudden hate between them, and said, tremblingly, but with the sweet tones of the peacemaker:

"I think Mr. Hawthorne is right. My engagement with you was for to-day, and we were to have returned to-night, you know. But after you left me alone on the boat, I made new friends, and a very sweet, kind lady, well-known to Mr. Hawthorne, took charge of me and invited me to be her guest while I staid in Newburgh. It was under her chaperonage I came to the ball, and, with her consent, I accepted the escort of Mr. Hawthorne. I cannot break my engagement with him, and I have promised, also, to go back to New York in his care to-morrow."

Every word she uttered maddened him with secret fury. His face was livid as he almost hissed:

"I should like to see this lady who chaperoned you here. How do I know that she is a proper person!" he began, insolently, but at that moment a lady tapped him smartly on the arm with her fan, exclaiming:

"Ha, ha, ha! I like that, Mr. Standish! A proper person indeed. Well, I'm the person, and if you have any fault to find with me, my husband, Captain Stansbury, will settle it with you."

"Miss Odell!" he exclaimed, recoiling in surprise from the sight of the face of an old acquaintance.

"Mrs. Stansbury, please," she corrected him, then went on, gayly: "Do you remember our flirtation at Asbury Park three years ago? I haven't seen you since, have I? Well, I've been married two years now to the finest man in New York. But my sisters are single yet. Come with me and pay your respects to them before the german begins."

She dragged him reluctantly away, and then Hawthorne said, angrily:

"That fellow was inclined to be insolent, and I could scarcely refrain from pitching him neck and heels through this window!"

"Oh, please, please, do not get into any trouble with him on my account!" pleaded Geraldine. "He has been very kind to me, really, and I should not wish to offend him!"

"Do not tell me he is your lover—that you care for him!" exclaimed the young man, jealously.

"N-n-o, he is only a friend!" she faltered, and was glad when her partner for the next dance came to claim her hand.

She knew in her heart that Clifford Standish regarded her with more than a friendly liking, but she was not prepared to own it to impetuous Harry Hawthorne, so she was glad to get away from his inquisitive looks and words.

But the joy of the evening was ended now for pretty Geraldine.

Clifford Standish soon escaped from the Odell girls, and haunted Geraldine the rest of the time, not offensively, but with the assurance of a favored lover, torturing the poor girl who could not bear to wound his feelings, but whose reserved and distraught manner did not discourage his persistent gallantry, for he stood his ground, debarring the lovers from any pleasure in each other's society.

Once Hawthorne whispered to her, fiercely:

"There comes that cad back. He is annoying you. I see it by your altered looks. Will you not allow me to pitch him out of the window?"

"No—oh, no, you must not make a scene!" she shuddered, apprehensively.

"Then tell him yourself that you are weary of his persistent following," he urged.

"Oh, no, I cannot wound him so. He has been kind to me, and means no harm," she said, trying to make excuses that she felt he did not deserve.

But she escaped from the ball as soon as she could, glad to be rid of him, and spent a restless night, repenting the encouragement she had given Standish before she met Hawthorne.

"They both love me, and I can see that they will be bitter foes," she thought, in terror of some unknown evil.

The next morning Standish came at an early hour to call. He was acquainted with the girls, and they tried by merry banter to drive the threatening gloom from his brow; but all their efforts were dismal failures. He had eyes only for Geraldine, who was pale and perturbed under his reproachful glances, that seemed to say, bitterly:

"You are a cruel little coquette. You encouraged me to love you until you met that other fellow, and now you wish to throw me over."

CHAPTER VI. FORTUNE, THAT FICKLE GODDESS, FAVORS STANDISH

"Her winsome, witching eyes
Flash like bits of summer skies
O'er her fan,
As if to say, 'We've met;
You may go now and forget—
If you can.'"

Samuel M. Peck.

It was a great relief to Geraldine when Harry Hawthorne arrived with a cab to take her to the boat. Now at last she could escape her angry lover.

He rose, indeed, to take leave of the family, but he said to her:

"I shall see you again, Miss Harding. I go back to New York on the same boat."

He did so, but he did not judge it prudent to incur the wrath of Hawthorne by too persistent attentions. He preserved a coolly courteous demeanor toward both, devoting himself to some other friends whom he met on the boat.

But, toward the last, he approached Geraldine again, murmuring, pleadingly:

"I should like to call on you this evening, if you will permit me."

She blushed, and stammered:

"Please excuse me, as I have another engagement."

He saw her timid glance turn toward Hawthorne, and readily guessed that she had made an engagement with him.

Stifling an execration between closely drawn lips, he muttered:

"To-morrow evening, then?"

"Oh, yes, certainly," she answered, but with an air of restraint that made him furious.

"She would like to refuse if she dared, the little flirt," he thought, and when Geraldine and Hawthorne left the boat together, he looked after them pale with rage.

At that moment Cameron Clemens, one of the actor-friends he had met on the boat, slapped him on the shoulder, and said, teasingly:

"Hallo, Standish! that was a stunning little beauty! But what are you glowering at, man? Jealous, eh?"

"Jealous of a beggarly fireman? Bah, no! The little coquette will throw him over to-morrow."

"And pick you up again, eh? Consolatory, by Jove! But who is she, anyhow?"

"Oh, nobody but a salesgirl from O'Neill's. She scraped acquaintance with me in the store some ten days ago, and has been begging me to get her in my company ever since. You know how the pretty girls always run after actors, Clemens."

"And how ardently the actors encourage their attentions; oh, yes," smiled the other, who was a very handsome young fellow himself. He added, after a moment: "Is the girl stage-struck?"

"Yes, decidedly—member of an amateur dramatic society, and all that, you know. Wild to go on the stage, and I intend to get her in our company, just before we go on the road next week."

"But there's no vacancy."

"I'll get that little soubrette turned off. I owe her a grudge anyhow. She slapped my face when I tried to kiss her in a dark corridor one night."

"Oh, don't take revenge for that. She's a good little girl, that Bettie," said Cameron Clemens, who, although he was the villain in the play where Standish had the part of hero, was kind and generous at heart.

But Clifford Standish could not be brought to relent.

"She can get another place," he said, carelessly. "The manager can't afford to displease me. I'm drawing full houses every night. So out goes prudish Bettie, and in comes pretty Geraldine!"

"You don't think you can kiss her in a dark corridor, do you?"

"I shall kiss her when I please. In fact, I intend to marry the little beauty; so no attentions in that quarter, my friend."

"All right. I'll keep off the grass," returned the young actor, slangily, and turning to his friend, Charlie Butler, they went away together, leaving Standish to some bitter reflections, for his bravado was all put on. He feared that Geraldine was lost to him forever.

"He will be with her this evening, that villainous fireman, while I am plodding away on the stage," he thought, angrily.

But a most untoward fate helped him on when he feared that the game was lost to him forever—helped him on, and blighted all the springing hopes of poor Harry Hawthorne.

A morbid curiosity over his rival led him to stroll down on Ludlow street that afternoon, in the neighborhood of the engine-house, and he saw the horses dashing out attached to the engine, and the hated Hawthorne on the driver's seat, handling the reins with consummate skill, his handsome face aglow with excitement. An alarm of fire had come in, and he was hastening to the scene.

Clifford Standish hated his manly rival more than ever at this moment, but he impulsively joined the crowd that was running after the engine, intent on seeing the fire.

On went the engine in splendid style, the horses obeying Hawthorne's hand lovingly, their sleek sides shining, their manes streaming, their fine heads erect, their large eyes flashing, a sight to win the admiration of every gazer. Flying like the wind, their hoofs striking fire from the pavement, they turned the corner, and—Alas! what was that shriek that went up from hundreds of throats?

Their splendid onset was defeated. In turning the corner the wheels struck a car track at an angle, and the engine was overturned, the gallant steeds struggling in the dust with their noble driver.

Clifford Standish rushed forward with demoniac glee, muttering:

"My rival is dead beneath the engine! I am free of him forever!"

CHAPTER VII. THE POWER OF LOVE

"To look for thee—sigh for thee—cry for thee,
Under my breath;
To clasp but a shade where thy head hath been laid,
It is death.

"To long for thee—yearn for thee—burn for thee—
Sorrow and strife!
But to have thee—and hold thee—and fold thee,
It is life, it is life!"

It almost seemed as if Clifford Standish was destined to realize his diabolical hopes of his rival's death.

When Harry Hawthorne was drawn from his perilous position at the heels of the horses, he was found to be unconscious, and the blood pouring from a wound on his head.

An ambulance was called to convey him to the hospital, and the physician in charge looked very serious over the case.

"It is impossible to say yet whether he is mortally injured or not. He may simply be stunned from the bad cut on his head, or he may have sustained internal injuries," he said to the anxious crowd about him, and then the wounded man was lifted carefully into the ambulance, and driven to the Bellevue Hospital.

Clifford Standish turned away from the scene with a diabolical smile of triumph on his thin lips, hissing cruelly:

"The Fates have played me a good turn, and I will make the most of my opportunity. Whether Harry Hawthorne lives or dies, I will come between him and Geraldine so effectually that when he returns to her it will be impossible to win her from me. Of course, I shall not go near her this evening. She must be kept in ignorance of his accident, if possible, so that she may think he has forsaken her. Ha, ha, ha! what a weary waiting she will have for him this evening, and how angry she will be because he has broken his engagement."

Geraldine did, indeed, have a weary waiting for her lover, and her disappointment was keen and bitter at his failure to come.

But so absolute was her faith in him that she did not become angry, but thought, excusingly:

"Something has happened to detain him, surely. Perhaps he was called out to some dreadful fire. I shall be sure to receive a note from him to-morrow, explaining all, craving my pardon, and appointing another date to call."

She was so anxious, too, for Cissy to see him. She felt sure that her friend would like him better than she had liked Clifford Standish.

When she reached home that day, she rested a while, then went down to the store, and remained until closing time, returning with Cissy, who was cold and indifferent, for Geraldine's non-return the night before had filled her with alarm over the fate of the willful girl.

But Geraldine, eager for her friend's sympathy, put aside her former petulance, and poured into Cissy's ear the story of the day and night—the accident that had deprived her of the actor's company—the new friends she had made, her fall into the water, her rescue, her charming time at Newburgh

—except that her girlish heart had gone from her own keeping into that of noble, handsome, tender Harry Hawthorne.

But Cissy did not need to be told the latter. She read it in the blush and smile of the innocent girl.

"How does Love speak?
In the faint flush upon the tell-tale cheek,
And in the pallor that succeeds it; by
The quivering lid of an averted eye—
The smile that proves the parent to a sigh—
Thus doth Love speak.

"How does Love speak?
In the proud spirit suddenly grown meek
The haughty heart grown humble; in the tender
And unnamed light that floods the world with splendor,
In the shy touch of hands that thrill and tremble.
In looks and lips that can no more dissemble—
Thus doth Love speak!"

"Oh, Cissy, I want you to promise me to come in and see him to-night," pleaded Geraldine, humbly. "I am sure you will be charmed with him, he is so good and so handsome."

"So you said of Mr. Standish," reminded Cissy.

Geraldine blushed, but answered, warmly:

"I know I did; but—Mr. Hawthorne is nicer than the actor—oh, ever so much nicer! And"—slyly—"you will like him, Cissy, because he is as much opposed to my going on the stage as you are."

"Then I shall cultivate his acquaintance," declared Cissy, beamingly.

And she was almost as anxious for his coming that night as Geraldine was herself.

But, as we have seen, both were disappointed.

Harry Hawthorne lay ill and suffering at the hospital, and there was no one to tell Geraldine the story of his accident.

Her young heart was heavy with pain and wonder all the next day, but still no message came to explain or excuse his failure to keep his engagement.

Only some fair young girl as loving and tender as our sweet Geraldine, who has been disappointed as she was, can realize her silent grief that day as she stood behind the counter, patiently waiting on exacting customers and trying to seem cheerful and interested when she was longing to be alone in her own room, to bury her head in the pillow and have a good, comforting cry.

She was wretched with doubt and suspense.

And only yesterday she had been so wildly happy.

Late in the afternoon Clifford Standish came into the store to buy a pair of gloves.

He was bright, smiling, and elegant as ever, and chatted gayly with Geraldine.

"I have some good news for you this evening," he whispered, but the girl scarcely smiled.

She knew that he would not bring her any tidings of Harry Hawthorne, and it seemed to her that she cared for nothing else.

How strange is love when it enters the heart as a guest, shutting out interest in everything else—strange, subtle, sweet, and absorbingly selfish.

Geraldine forgot how well she had liked the actor, and how she had quarreled with Cissy for his sake.

His attentions were repugnant to her now, and she wished ardently to be rid of him.

But her tender, girlish heart reproached her for her fickleness, and she thought it would seem ungrateful to snub him now.

So she only smiled at him plaintively, assuming an interest she did not feel.

Bending across the counter, he whispered, so that Cissy could not hear:

"I beg your pardon, but did your new admirer—did he call last night?"

"No-o," faltered the girl, and she could hardly keep the tears from her eyes.

"Why, that is strange. What prevented him from keeping his engagement?"

"I do not know."

"You have not heard from him?" he exclaimed, in surprise.

"Not a word," she sighed, then added, quickly: "But I don't think he meant to break his engagement. Perhaps there was a fire, and he had to go."

"Very likely—but, then, he should have sent you an apology early this morning."

"Do you think so? Oh, I suppose he will come and explain in person," said Geraldine, with assumed indifference.

Another customer bustled up to claim her attention, and he bowed himself away, secretly exultant over the fact that she was utterly ignorant of Harry Hawthorne's fate.

"There is no one to come and tell her, and even if it gets into the papers, she is not likely to read it. A poor working-girl has little time for reading," he reflected.

Again his evil genius favored him.

When he went for his call on Geraldine that evening, he found a messenger-boy in the street with a letter for her from the Bellevue Hospital.

He took the letter from the boy, and gave him a quarter.

"I am going in to see Miss Harding now. I will deliver the letter," he said, affably, and the boy, who was in a hurry to get home to his supper, thanked him for the service, and turned away, rejoicingly.

The triumphant actor hid the letter in his breast, congratulating himself on having so easily obtained possession of it.

"I am very fortunate, for had the fickle little beauty received it, all would have been explained between them."

Geraldine came to the door to receive him, and he saw at once how much she had changed toward him by the simple fact that she had not adorned herself in her best gown, as usual, but wore her simple shop-gown of black serge.

She did not care whether she looked fair to him or not, and he quickly realized it, for he was an adept in reading the complex nature of woman. But he hid his chagrin, saying, admiringly:

"Perhaps you do not realize how pretty and demure you look in that black gown."

"Thank you," Geraldine said, listlessly, as she sank into a chair opposite, and tried to seem friendly and interested.

CHAPTER VIII.

"A GIRL HAS A RIGHT TO CHANGE HER MIND."

"Reprove me not that still I change
With every passing hour,
For glorious nature gives me leave,
In wave and cloud and flower.
And you and all the world would do—
It all but dared—the same;
True to myself—if false to you
Why should I reckon your blame?"

It made Clifford Standish secretly furious to see how near he had come to losing the charming little beauty on whom he had set his burning heart, and of whom he had felt so sure but a few days ago.

Her pale and pensive looks, her drooping eyes, her pathetic red mouth, all told that her heart was far away, and in his heart he cursed himself for inviting her to go on that fateful excursion to Newburgh, by which he had almost lost her forever.

But he had one chance now to retrieve his misstep, and he set about improving it.

"Well, I will tell you the promised good news!" he exclaimed. "I have at last secured you the wished-for position in my company."

"Oh!" cried Geraldine, starting, and clasping her little hands convulsively together.

But the exclamation was one of dismay rather than of joy.

His quick ear detected it, but he pretended to misapprehend her, and continued:

"I knew you would be delighted to hear it."

"Ye-es," she faltered, weakly; then bracing herself to escape the engagement. "But—but—perhaps I ought not to go on the stage. Cissy is opposed to it."

"Yes, I know—you told me that at first, but you said, also, that you did not care for her opinions—that you should do as you pleased."

Geraldine could not contradict him. It was perfectly true.

She sat speechless and embarrassed, feeling like a little bird caught in the fowler's net, while he continued, smoothly:

"Don't be afraid of Miss Carroll's displeasure. It's only envy and jealousy."

Geraldine, in her resentment against Cissy, had said this to him, too, and she comprehended that he was cleverly turning her own weapons against her now. She could only sit mute and miserable, with a forced smile that was more pathetic than tears.

"If I could leave this smile," she said,
'And take a moan upon my mouth,
And let my tears run smooth,
It were the happier way,' she said."

Clifford Standish continued:

"The position offered you is not as good as I could wish, but I shall manage to get you a promotion soon. Our soubrette is going to leave, and you can take her place as soon as you wish."

It was strange how tenaciously Geraldine's mind clung to the dread of Harry Hawthorne's disapproval. She did not wish to go on the stage now, and was eager for a loophole to escape.

"Oh, I don't think I'd like to take a soubrette's place," she cried.

"But last week you said you wouldn't mind it."

"Oh, why do you keep throwing up things I said last week?" she burst out, pettishly.

"Do you wish to forget them so soon, Miss Harding? Then you must be very fickle-minded, and I am sorry that I had that poor soubrette discharged for your sake!"

"For my sake! Oh-h-oh!"

"Why, certainly; because you were so anxious for a place, and I wished to please you above all things," tenderly; "and, of course, you know the manager dare not refuse anything reasonable that I ask, so I persuaded him to discharge poor Bettina."

"Oh, let her keep the place, do! It was cruel to turn her off."

"It is too late to replace her now. She has accepted an offer from a company that is going to remain in New York, and I shall have no end of trouble getting another girl to fill the place. I thought you wanted the chance so badly," reproachfully.

Geraldine flushed crimson, and the tears she had been fighting back brimmed over in her eyes.

"Oh, I have acted abominably," she sobbed; "but—but—a girl has a right to change her mind, hasn't she?"

"Certainly, if she doesn't mind putting every one out," stiffly.

He rose as if to go, walked to the door as if in anger, then relented, and stood looking back with intense eyes that compelled her to look at him deprecatingly.

Having gained this point, he said, gently:

"We are going on the road with our company in one week, and as our soubrette can stay with us a few days longer, I'll give you three days to make up your mind whether you will take the place or not. For who knows but that you will change your mind again?" and still smiling kindly at her, he quoted:

"'Tis helpless woman's right divine,
Her dearest right—Caprice!"

"Please go now," she answered, burying her face in her hands.

"I am going now, but I shall come back to-morrow evening, and hope to find you in a brighter mood," he answered, going out softly and closing the door.

He had purposely refrained from speaking of Harry Hawthorne, but he guessed well that it was he who had influenced her against the stage.

"Curse his meddling! But it shall avail him nothing. I shall conquer in the end. I have sworn to make her mine, and mine she shall be, the coquettish little darling," he muttered, resolutely.

The days came and went, while Geraldine waited patiently for the coming of Harry Hawthorne—waited all in vain, for he continued very ill at the hospital, and the note he had dictated to a nurse acquainting her with his accident she never received. It had fallen into the hands of his triumphant rival, Standish, who kept it hidden safely from that yearning young heart.

CHAPTER IX.

THE ACTOR MAKES HAY WHILE THE SUN SHINES

"Go! let me pray, pray to forget thee!
Woe worth the day, false one, I met thee!
Ever till then, careless and free, love,
Never again thus shall I be, love.
Through my soul's sleep thine the voice breaking,
Long shall I weep, weep its awaking,
Weep for the day when first I met thee,
Then let me pray, pray to forget thee!"

Two more days passed by, and still Geraldine heard nothing of Harry Hawthorne.

"Is it not strange—the way he has acted?" she said, at last, to Cissy, who answered:

"Yes; he has behaved so shabbily that you ought to put him out of your thoughts, dear."

"Oh, Cissy, do you believe that he never meant to come? That he was unworthy?" almost piteously.

"I'm afraid so, Geraldine, for even if something had happened to keep him away that evening, he has had ample time to explain and apologize since then; but he has not done so, and it looks as if he was a sad flirt, and only amused himself with you for the time, without giving you another thought since he left you."

Cissy believed what she said, and meant only kindness, but her frank words quivered like a thorn in Geraldine's heart.

Oh, how could she think of him as an unprincipled flirt, awakening an interest in a young girl's heart only for his own amusement?

But still she knew that such men existed, and that many broken hearts lay at their door.

The dread that Harry Hawthorne might be one of these heartless men awoke to life within her a fierce and burning pride.

"No man shall break my heart. I will forget Harry Hawthorne," she vowed, bitterly, to herself; and when the actor came that night, he found her bright and gay as of yore. She had put on over her tortured heart that mask of smiles which many a woman wears through life to deceive a carping world.

"'I have a smiling face,' she said,
'I have jest for all I meet,
I have a garland for my head,
And all its flowers are sweet,
And so you call me gay,' she said.

"'Behind no prison grate,' she said,
'Which slurs the sunshine half a mile,
Live captives so uncomforted
As souls behind a smile.
God's pity let us pray,' she said."

Clifford Standish was charmed with her new mood. He saw that a reaction had begun.

"I am glad to see you so happy, for I am sure that you have decided to go on the road with us," he exclaimed, coaxingly.

She shook her head, and laughed, gayly:

"Do not be too sure. You know you have given me until Sunday night to decide."

"But that is not far off—only twenty-four hours," he said, with a smile, for he felt sure of victory. As she made no reply, he continued:

"I have made a charming invitation for you for Sunday afternoon. Some of the leading members of our company are going to skate in the park to-morrow—you know this cold snap has frozen the lake beautifully—and they want me to bring you. Will you come?"

"Yes," replied Geraldine, quickly, glad of a diversion for Sunday afternoon, so that she need not mope alone with her miserable thoughts of how Harry Hawthorne had flirted with her for his own amusement.

For she had begun to lose faith in her handsome lover now. The leaven of Cissy's words had worked steadily in her mind.

And a cruel self-shame that she had given her love in vain was at war with the tenderness of her heart.

"Thank you. I am so glad you will go. I know you will like the trip and the company," he said; then, in a changed tone: "By the way, did that fireman ever keep his promise to call on you?"

"No," she answered, carelessly.

"Have you heard anything about him?"

"No, indeed, and I had almost forgotten the man until you recalled him to my mind," she returned, fibbing unblushingly.

"Ah! Then you will not mind what I have to tell you?" deprecatingly.

"Of course not. What is it?" carelessly.

"Well, of course, I thought it rude and strange his not keeping his appointment with you, and thinking something might have happened to the fellow, as you feared, I made some indirect inquiries at the engine-house, and found that he had returned to Newburgh the same day he brought you back to New York."

"Indeed?" she returned, with a paling cheek, whose pallor she could not control.

"Yes, he had gone back, but I did not like to tell you the truth. I waited for developments. But, to-day, I met Mrs. Stansbury on the street, and she told me something—well, see if you can guess?"

"Something very amusing, no doubt," she replied, carelessly.

"She told me she had just returned from Newburgh, and that she had left Hawthorne there, courting her sister, Daisy Odell. It seemed that he had been in love with the pretty little black-eyed thing some time, and fearing that she might get jealous of the attentions he had to pay you the day you were thrown on his care by my accidental desertion, he returned to make his peace with her, and has been lingering by her side ever since. Mrs. Stansbury was vastly amused over it all, and said to me, 'He flirted shockingly with that pretty little salesgirl, didn't he? but I hope she knew it was only fun! Give my love to her when you see her again!'"

Geraldine treated the matter with a seeming careless indifference, but, oh! the tumult of wounded love and pride that raged within her girlish breast!

"I was so fond of that woman, and she was only kind to me for the sake of a little amusement," she thought, with hot and burning cheeks at his tone when he repeated Mrs. Stansbury's contemptuous epithet, "that little salesgirl!"

To herself she said, angrily:

"I will not be a poor salesgirl any longer, to be twitted with my humble position in life. I will become an actress, and my talents will make me famous, so that these people will go to see me act, and be proud to say, 'I knew her once, but she is so rich and grand now that she would not stoop to renew the acquaintance.' As for Harry Hawthorne, who knows but that I may be able to pay him

back some day for the slight he put on me! I am no longer grateful to him for saving my life; for why should he have saved it, only to plant a thorn in my heart?"

But she did not tell Cissy what the actor had told her about Harry Hawthorne. She could not bear to confess her humiliation.

But she went with Standish to the park the next day, and while skating on the lake a vision of beauty and grace that attracted the eyes of admiring hundreds, she told him that she had decided to go with the company on the road.

"Although Cissy is very angry with me, and vows that I will repent it in dust and ashes," she added, uneasily.

"Don't listen to her croaking. She only envies your good fortune," he returned, reassuringly. "Why, you will soon be rich and famous, Miss Harding, for your beauty and talent will win you rapid promotion on the boards. Do you see how all those strangers have watched you on the ice to-day? It is because your face has already won you the sobriquet of 'the prettiest salesgirl in New York.' Soon it will be changed to 'the prettiest actress on the stage.' Will not that sound better?"

CHAPTER X. A CRUEL DISAPPOINTMENT

"Love, dear friend, is a sacred thing!
Love is not tinsel, silver or gold!
Love is a fragment of Heaven's own gate,
Broken in halves by God's hand, Fate,
And given two kindred spirits to hold
Who would colonize in our earth unknown,
'Tis whispered them: 'You may be thrown
Far apart—'"

Harry Hawthorne remained in the Bellevue Hospital ten days only, it having been discovered that his injuries were not internal, as at first feared.

His temporary unconsciousness had resulted from the severe cut on his head, and as this healed nicely, he grew better, and asked for his discharge from the hospital. Indeed, he would have recovered sooner but for a painful suspense and anxiety that augmented fever and restlessness.

The young fireman had been so deeply smitten by the charms of pretty Geraldine, that during his enforced confinement, the thought of her had never been absent from his mind. Love had sprung to life full grown within his breast.

When he was discharged from the hospital, he could not wait until evening to call on her. The ready excuse of the need of a pair of gloves took him to O'Neill's.

He did not wear his fireman's dress, but attired himself in an elegant suit of clothes, such as gentlemen wear to business. Thus arrayed, and looking as much the aristocrat as any Fifth avenue millionaire, he entered the store and went at once to the glove counter, his heart throbbing wildly at thought of seeing Geraldine again, and making an appointment to call on her that evening.

A whole row of smiling, pretty girls confronted him, but among them all he could not see his heart's darling, the lode-star of his dreams—sweet Geraldine.

He accosted the nearest girl—a plump, gray-eyed beauty—who fortunately proved to be Miss Carroll.

"I wish to have Miss Harding show me some gloves. Is she here?"

Cissy Carroll shook her dark head, and answered:

"Geraldine does not attend here any more. Can I show you the gloves?"

"If you please," he replied, and as she placed them before him, he took a pair, mechanically, in his shapely hand, but continued:

"I beg your pardon, but has Miss Harding gone to another store? She is a friend of mine. I wish to see her very much."

"Your name?" asked Cissy, with a quick suspicion of the truth, for he realized in his person Geraldine's description.

"I am Harry Hawthorne."

"I thought so. And I am Miss Carroll. Perhaps you have heard Geraldine speak of me?"

He smiled, and answered:

"Yes, as her 'chum Cissy.' She told me, also, that you roomed together."

"We did—but Geraldine has left me now."

She read the palpable disappointment on his face, and added, quickly:

"She had a talent for acting, and has gone upon the stage."

She saw him start as if she had struck him a blow in the face, and he grew lividly pale, as he asked:

"At what theatre?"

"Oh, she has left New York, and gone on the road with a stock company—the one that played 'Hearts and Homes' two weeks here. You may remember Clifford Standish, the leading man. He procured the situation for Geraldine."

Then, as she saw from his face that he was taking it quite hard, she added, with womanly curiosity:

"But how happens it that you are not acquainted with these facts? The papers had some very flattering paragraphs about the beautiful salesgirl who had left a New York store to adopt a stage career."

"I—I—haven't read the papers," he murmured, faintly, like one recovering from a blow.

"Oh, then you must have been away from New York—and poor Geraldine expecting you to call every evening. Why didn't you let her know?"

"I haven't been away from the city, Miss Carroll."

"Then why did you act toward her so shabbily?"

"Shabbily! Why I had a note written to her from the hospital, explaining that an accident had overturned my engine and seriously wounded me. I've been in Bellevue Hospital ten days, Miss Carroll. Look," and he showed her the scar on his head.

"Oh, it's a wonder you were not killed," said the girl, sympathetically.

"They thought I was at first, for I didn't recover consciousness until the next day. Then, as soon as I could think clearly at all, I thought of my broken engagement of the evening before, and wondered what she would think of me. I persuaded the nurse to write a little note for me, as I was too shaky myself, and sent it by the messenger-boy at the hospital. I hoped she would write me a line of sympathy, and that—perhaps—she might even be sorry enough to come and see me there. But I never received a word!"

"She did not receive your note. Your failure to come was a mystery to her always, Mr. Hawthorne."

"Why, that is very strange. I'll go back to the hospital and see that messenger. But—will you give me her address now?" eagerly. "I will write to her and explain."

Cissy blushed vividly, and said:

"I am sorry that I cannot, but the fact is I don't know where she is, for—we parted in anger, vowing to have no more to do with each other. I disliked Clifford Standish, and tried to persuade her not to go on the stage. She went in defiance of my advice—so she has not written to me."

CHAPTER XI. A CRUSHING SORROW

"Till now thy soul hath been
All glad and gay;
Bid it arise and look
At grief to-day!
For now life's stream has reached
A deep, dark sea,
And sorrow, dim and crowned,
Is waiting thee."

Miss Carroll was sorry for the young fireman, as she saw how pale and troubled his handsome face became at her tidings.

She exclaimed, sympathetically:

"Maybe Geraldine will get over her anger and write to me yet. She never stays angry long at a time. So, if she writes, I'll let you know."

"Thank you, a hundred times over," gratefully, "and may I call on you sometimes, to inquire?"

"Certainly," replied Cissy, who liked him as much as she had despised the actor. Almost every one has antipathies. The actor was one of Cissy's, no doubt.

Harry Hawthorne thanked her for her courtesy, paid for his gloves, and walked away with such a princely air that all the pretty salesgirls followed his exit with admiring eyes, and there was a swelling murmur of ejaculations:

"Oh, what a handsome fellow!"

"Isn't he perfectly magnif'?"

"Who is he, Cissy? A Fifth avenue millionaire?"

"Oh, no, indeed, girls; don't lose your wits! He's a fireman at the Ludlow street engine-house, that's all."

"Oh, then he must be a prince in disguise; and, come to think of it, millionaires are not usually good-looking, any way. I might have known he was poor, from his beauty. He was talking to you about Jerry Harding, wasn't he? Is she his sweetheart?"

"Perhaps so. Don't bother me! I don't know," laughed Cissy, cutting short their merry chatter.

Meanwhile the object of their admiration hurried away and returned to the hospital.

He had no trouble in finding the messenger-boy who had taken his note to Geraldine, and the youth, unconscious of having done wrong, very readily admitted that he had given the note to a gentleman, who said he was going in, and had offered to hand the letter to the lady.

"No harm done, I hope, sir?" he said, regretfully.

"Yes, more harm than you know. The man kept the letter, so the young lady never received it. It was something very important, too; and now she has gone away, and the mischief you did can never be undone."

"Oh, my! what a pity!" exclaimed the boy, readily guessing that here was a broken-off love affair. He looked pityingly at Hawthorne a minute, then continued: "I'm very sorry I made such a mistake. I thought the fellow was a gentleman. But I know him, and I'll get even with him for that trick—you see if I don't!"

"Who was he, Rob?"

"Why, that Standish that plays in 'Hearts and Homes.' An elegant swell, don't you know? Gave me a quarter, like a lord. But I'll hunt him up, and get back that letter."

"You are too late, Rob. He has gone on the road with his company."

"Whew! And the lady gone, too, with him?"

"Yes."

"Oh, what a kettle of fish! Of my mixing, too! Indeed, Mr. Hawthorne, I'm sorry; and, if I ever get a chance, I'll do that fellow up for his treachery, the villain!" cried the boy, so earnestly that the listener could but smile, for he had no faith in the possibility of such an event taking place.

He walked away, bitter at heart over the actor's treachery.

"He kept that letter, and managed to make trouble between us somehow, the cunning wretch!" he mused, sadly enough, for the case looked hopeless now.

Standish, having gained such a signal advantage over him in taking pretty Geraldine away, would follow it up by wedding her before his return.

"If I could find out where she is on the road, I might still write and explain all," he thought, with a gleam of hope that quickly faded as he recalled the treacherous nature of his rival.

"If I wrote to her, he would intercept my letter. He will be on the watch for that. There is no use trying and hoping. I have lost her forever—bonny, brown-eyed Geraldine!" he sighed, hopelessly.

As he returned to his work at the engine-house, he felt as if he had just closed the coffin-lid over a well-beloved face.

Such hopes and dreams as had come to him since he met fair Geraldine were hard to relinquish; they had brought such new brightness into his prosaic life; but he felt that all was over now.

True, he felt that he had made a strong impression on the girl's heart, but his rival would soon teach her to forget that he had ever existed.

But in a few days hope began unconsciously to reassert itself. He decided to call on Cecilia Carroll to inquire if she had any news.

He went that evening, and she told him that Geraldine had not written yet.

"But I found out from a manager the proposed route of the company, and I have written to her, and told her about you," she added, out of the kindness of her heart.

"Clifford Standish will take good care that she never receives your letter," he said, bitterly, as he told her how the actor had intercepted the note he had sent to Geraldine.

"I suspected as much, the grand villain!" cried Cissy, indignantly. "So now I shall write to her again and expose him!"

She did so, but no answer came to either of her letters.

Clifford Standish was too wily to permit Geraldine to receive them. He easily got possession of her mail, and destroyed it without a pang of remorse at his selfish heart.

CHAPTER XII. THE LETTER THAT NEVER CAME

"Write me a letter, my dear old friend,
I love you more and more,
As farther apart we drift, dear heart,
And nearer the other shore.
The dear old loves and the dear old days
Are a balm to life's regret;
It's easy to bear the worry and care
If the old friends love us yet."

Yes, pretty Geraldine, piqued and unhappy over her cruel disappointment in love, had joined the Clemens Company, the manager of which was also one of the actors—Cameron Clemens. He played the clever villain in "Hearts and Homes," his special play, while Clifford Standish took the hero's part.

Geraldine threw her whole heart into her work, and succeeded so well that she was promoted in a week, owing to the illness and withdrawal of the second lady from the company. It was the part of an *ingenue*, which just suited Geraldine's youth and *naivette*. She could act it to perfection without laying aside her pretty naturalness of manner.

They traveled from town to town, staying just a night or two in each place, usually drawing full houses, and Geraldine proved a great attraction, winning always so much admiration that it was a wonder her pretty little head was not turned by flattery.

It might have been had not her heart been so sore over its brief, broken love-dream.

To have known a man but two brief, bright, happy days, and not be able to forget him, it was absurd, she thought, in desperate rebellion against her own heart.

And yet, through the busy weeks of travel, study, and acting, Harry Hawthorne's image staid in her mind, and his voice rang through her dreams, sweet and low and tender as it had always been to her whenever he spoke.

In her waking hours she knew him light and false; in her dreams he was always tender and true, and inexpressibly dear.

"Last night in my deep sleep I dreamed of you—
Again the old love woke in me and thrived
On looks of fire, on kisses, and sweet words
Like silver waters purling in a stream—
A dream—a dream!"

Through all the changing days in which the silent struggle against a hopeless love went on in her young heart, Clifford Standish was ever near, patient, tender, devoted, telling her with his yearning eyes the love she was not ready to listen to yet.

And in spite of herself, Geraldine found a subtle comfort in his devotion.

It was a balm of healing to her proud heart, so deeply wounded by Harry Hawthorne's trifling. Many hearts have been caught in the rebound in this fashion, many true loves won.

True, there are many proud ones who do not prize a love they can only have because it has been scornfully refused by another.

They will say, resentfully:

"I will not accept a love that is given me only because it was left by one who did not prize it."

Others, more humble, will gladly accept the grateful love of a wounded heart that finds consolation in their tenderness.

Clifford Standish, madly in love with Geraldine, was glad to accept such crumbs of love as might fall to him from the royal feast that had been spread for Harry Hawthorne.

So he hovered by her side, he paid her the most delicate attentions, anticipating every wish, and found ample reward as he saw himself gaining in her grateful regard.

At the same time the arch-traitor was intercepting the few letters that came to her, and the ones she wrote to Miss Carroll.

For Geraldine had long ago gotten over her pet with her friend, since she knew in her heart how dear she was to Cissy, and that the girl had advised her for her own good.

Geraldine had found out that the career of an actress—even a young, pretty, and popular one—is not always strewn with roses.

She had to study hard, and she did not enjoy traveling all day, or even half a day, and then appearing on the boards at night. Sometimes the hotel accommodations of country towns where they stopped over were wretchedly indifferent. Sometimes her head ached miserably, but she must appear on the boards, all the same. And the free-and-easy ways of some of the company did not please the fastidious taste of the girl.

Now and then she found her thoughts returning to the old days behind the counter at O'Neill's with Cissy and the other girls, with an almost pathetic yearning. Secretly she longed to be back again.

How she wished that Cissy would write to her now, and beg her to return, so that she might have an excuse for following the dictates of her heart.

At last, believing that Cissy was too proud and stubborn to write first, she penned her a long, affectionate letter, through which breathed an underline of repentance and regret that her chum would be sure to answer it by writing:

"Come home, dear. I told you that you would get sick of being an actress."

But Geraldine was too weary and heart-sick to care for a hundred "I-told-you-so's" from the triumphant Cissy. What did it matter so that she got back to her dear old chum again and their cozy little rooms, and even to what she had once called her slavery behind the counter.

She recalled what Harry Hawthorne had told her about it being a slavery of the stage, too; then put the thought from her with an impatient sigh.

"What do I care what he said about it?" indignantly, then sighing, "even though I have found it to be, alas, too true!"

She wrote her letter to Cissy, and after that her heart felt lighter. She knew her chum would be glad to get the letter—glad to have her back.

"Dear, I tried to write you such a letter
As would tell you all my heart to-day.
Written Love is poor; one word were better!
Easier, too, a thousand times to say.

"I can tell you all; fears, doubts unheeding,
While I can be near you, hold your hand,
Looking right into your eyes and reading
Reassurance that you understand.

"Yet I wrote it through, then lingered, thinking
Of its reaching you what hour, what day,

Till I felt my heart and courage sinking
With a strange, new, wondering dismay.

"'Will my letter fall,' I wondered, sadly,
'On her mood like some discordant tone,
Or be welcomed tenderly and gladly?
Will she be with others, or alone?

"It may find her too absorbed to read it,
Save with hurried glance and careless air;
Sad and weary, she may scarcely heed it;
Gay and happy, she may hardly care.

"If perhaps now, while my tears are falling,
She is dreaming quietly alone,
She will hear my love's far echo calling,
Feel my spirit drawing near her own.

"Wondering at the strange, mysterious power
That has touched her heart, then she will say:
'Some one whom I love this very hour
Thinks of me, and loves me far away.'"

Poor Geraldine! what a hopeless waiting she had for the letter that never came!

How could he bear the wistful light in her sad brown eyes, the wretch who had robbed her young life of happiness?

In his keeping rested the letters of the two fond girls to each other—the letters that would have brought happiness to three sad hearts.

And the weeks slipped into months while they echoed in their souls the poet's plaint:

"The solemn Sea of Silence lies between us;
I know thou livest and thou lovest me;
And yet I wish some white ship would come sailing
Across the ocean bearing news of thee.

"The dead calm awes me with its awful stillness,
And anxious doubts and fears disturb my breast.
I only ask some little wave of language
To stir this vast infinitude of rest.

"Too deep the language which the spirit utters;
Too vast the knowledge which my soul hath stirred.
Send some white ship across the Sea of Silence,
And interrupt its utterance with a word."

It was two months now since they had gone upon the road, but not a word had Geraldine received. It seemed to her as if the past days were a dream, so different was her life now—all whirl, confusion, and excitement.

Once she had thought this would be charming. Now she found it the reverse.

How glad she was to hear that the company would go back to New York in time for Christmas. She was so tired of the West, where they had been all these weeks.

When they were on their homeward way, they stopped over for a night at a pretty West Virginia town a few hundred miles from New York.

They had come straight through from Chicago, and the stop-over was very agreeable to the weary members of the company.

They arrived in the afternoon, and the tired travelers, after resting a while at their romantic hotel on the banks of the beautiful Greenbrier River, set out to explore the little town of Alderson, first hurrying to the post-office for their letters, which they expected to be awaiting them there.

Geraldine did not expect any mail, poor girl! She waited at the door while Clifford Standish went in and came out with a little budget for himself.

"Nothing for you, Geraldine. It seems that Miss Carroll is still unforgiving," he laughed, without noting the sensitive quiver of her scarlet lips.

They walked on, and she pretended to be absorbed in contemplation of the beautiful mountain scenery, while he ran over his letters.

"Let us cross the railroad and walk on the bridge over there," she said, at last.

It was a beautiful sunny day, very calm and mild for December. They loitered on the broad bridge that spanned the romantic river between the two towns, Alderson and North Alderson, and while she watched the lapsing river and the mountain peaks against the clear blue sky, he read to her bits of his letters from New York.

"Here's one that will interest you," he laughed, meaningly, and read:

"Well, old fellow, there's nothing that I know in the way of interesting news just now, unless that a girl you used to be sweet on is going to be married to-morrow. It's little Daisy Odell, you know, of Newburgh. She's been visiting a married sister here, and caught a beau. He's a fireman named Harry Hawthorne, a big, handsome fellow, the hero of several fires. The marriage will take place at Mrs. Stansbury's, and I've an invitation to it."

He looked from the letter to her face, and saw that she was deadly pale and grief-stricken.

"Oh, will you let me read that for myself?" she gasped, as if she could scarcely believe him.

"Why, certainly," he answered, but as he was handing her the crumpled sheet, the wind caught it somehow, and fluttered it beyond reach over the rail and down into the river.

"Oh! oh! oh!" he cried, with pretended dismay, but his outstretched hand could not grasp it.

"It's gone; but no matter—the news must be true, for Charlie Butler wrote it, and he always tells the truth," he said, carelessly.

And how was the unsuspecting girl to know that no such words were written in the letter, and that it was from a woman, instead of Charlie Butler?

CHAPTER XIII. TORTURED TO MADNESS

"So the truth's out. I'll grasp it like a snake;
It will not slay me. My heart shall not break.

"I was so happy I could not make him blest!
So falsely dreamed I was his first and best!

"He'll keep that other woman from my sight;
I know not if her face be foul or bright;
I only know that it is his delight."

Geraldine was proud, very proud—and she thought she had quite overcome her hopeless love for Harry Hawthorne.

But the sudden, unexpected news of his marriage, that she never thought of doubting, struck her with the suddenness of an awful blow, beating down pride and reserve at one terrible stroke.

She realized all at once that her heart had still kept alive a little fire of hope burning before the shrine of its unacknowledged love. The quenching of this spark of hope was almost like the going out of life itself.

The other members of the party had gone on to the other side of the bridge and she was alone with Clifford Standish—alone with the agony of soul that blanched her sweet face to death-like pallor, and made her clutch at the rails, gasping out that she was ill, dying.

The arch-villain caught her swaying form and held it tenderly in his arms, while her white, unconscious face rested against his shoulder.

Some country people walking over the bridge at that moment stared in amazement, and going on to town, reported that, "those actor-folks were carrying on dreadful on the bridge—hugging right before folks."

But neither of the two participants was troubled over this sensation, Geraldine being unconscious, and Standish too much absorbed in her to heed aught else.

In a minute or two she sighed and opened her eyes.

"Oh!" she cried, as she met his eyes gazing deep into hers, and tried to struggle from his clasp.

"Wait. You cannot stand alone yet," he said, tenderly, then murmured: "Oh, Geraldine, it breaks my heart to find that you loved him, that low fireman, so unworthy of you; while I—I—have worshiped you ever since the hour I first saw you behind the counter, so bright and beautiful. I have been trying to win you ever since, and hoped—vainly hoped, as I see now—that I was succeeding. Oh, how did he succeed—this man you saw but a few hours—in winning your love?"

She struggled from his clasp, her strength returning, her face hot with blushes of fierce shame.

"It—it—is not true that I love him—no, no, no!" she faltered, wildly.

"But, my dearest girl, you fainted when you heard of his marriage."

"Oh, no, it was not that. I was tired, ill—from traveling, you know," cried poor Geraldine, who would have died rather than admit the truth which her pale, pale cheeks and trembling lips told all too plainly by their mute despair.

But her denial suited the actor's purpose, and he cried, gladly:

"Oh, I am so happy to hear you say you did not care for him. I feared—feared—that your kindness to me, your sweet smiles and ready acceptance of my attentions were only cruel coquetry."

"Oh, no, no," she murmured, helplessly, feeling herself drawn to him by every word he said. Had she given him cause, then, to believe she meant to accept him?

He caught her hand, and continued, fondly, eagerly:

"Oh, Geraldine, dare I hope you care for me after all? That you will let me love you, and you love me a little in return? Will you—be my wife?"

He saw her shudder as with a mortal chill; then pride came to her aid. She let him keep the hand he had taken, and she answered, faintly:

"Yes."

And then a great horror of what she had promised rushed over her. How could she be his wife when she did not love him? Such a marriage would be sacrilege!

Her head drooped heavily, and her eyes were half-closed as she listened despairingly to the words of grateful joy he poured out. Not one of them found an echo in her heart.

Until now she had been grateful to him for his kindness, but a sudden aversion took root in her heart now, and she felt that she would rather die than be his wife.

But, to save her life, she could not have opened her lips to take back her promise.

She knew how angry he would be, how he would accuse her of trifling and coquetry. She could not bring down on herself the weight of his wrath.

But to the day of her death Geraldine would never forget that hour on the bridge at Alderson—that hour into whose short compass were crowded so much pain and regret that she longed for death to end her misery.

Mechanically she heard the whistle of an approaching train coming over the track at the end of the bridge. The rumble and roar blent with the rush of the river in her ears as she said, wearily:

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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