

**ALEX.
MCVEIGH
MILLER**

MY PRETTY MAID; OR,
LIANE LESTER

Alex. McVeigh Miller

My Pretty Maid; or, Liane Lester

«Public Domain»

Miller A.

My Pretty Maid; or, Liane Lester / A. Miller — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

CHAPTER I.	5
CHAPTER II.	7
CHAPTER III.	13
CHAPTER IV.	17
CHAPTER V.	19
CHAPTER VI.	24
CHAPTER VII.	26
CHAPTER VIII.	29
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	31

Alfred Thayer Mahan

My Pretty Maid / or, Liane Lester

CHAPTER I. A DESPERATE CHANCE

"How fast the river flows! How it roars in my ears and drowns the sound of your voice, my dearest! It is bearing me away! Oh, save me! save me!"

The river was the stream of Death, and the lone voyager floating out on its rushing tide was a loved and loving young wife.

The frail white hands clung fondly to her husband's as she rested with her head upon his breast, and the faint voice murmured deliriously on:

"How it rushes on—the wild river! How it rocks me on its broad breast! It is not so noisy now; it is deeper and swifter, and its voice has a lulling tone that soothes me to sleep. Hold me tight—keep me awake, dear, lest it sweep me away to the sea!"

Ah, he would have given the world to hold her back, his darling, the dearest of his heart, but the rushing torrent was too strong. It was sweeping her away.

Several days ago a beautiful daughter—her first-born after five years' wifehood—had been laid in her yearning arms.

But, alas! the first night of its birth, during a temporary absence of the old nurse from the room, the little treasure had been stolen from its mother.

Panic seized the whole household, and rigorous search was at once begun and kept up for days, but all to no avail.

The father was frantic, but, though he would have given his fortune for the return of the child, he was powerless; and now, as a sequel to this tragedy of loss and pain, his dear young wife lay dying in his arms—dying of heartbreak for the lost babe—poor bereaved young mother!

Tears rained from his eyes down on her pallid face as he strained her to his breast, his precious one, going away from him so fast to death, while outside, heedless of his despair, the golden sun was shining on the green grass, and the fragrant flowers, and the little birds singing in the trees as if there were nothing but joy in the world.

The old family physician came in softly, with an anxious, sympathetic face, and whispered startling words in his ear.

A look of aversion crossed the young husband's face, and he groaned:

"Doctor Jay, I cannot bear the thought!"

"I feared you would feel so, Mr. Clarke, but all my medical colleagues agree with me that nothing but the restoration of her child can save my patient's life. It is the desperate chance we take when we feel that all hope is lost."

"Then I must consent!"

"You are wise," the old doctor answered, tiptoeing from the room, only to reappear a little later, followed by the nurse with a little white bundle in her arms.

The low voice of the delirious woman went babbling on.

"Darling," murmured her husband, pressing his lips to her pale brow.

"Yes, yes, dear, I'm going away from you. Hark!"

The sudden wail of an infant had caught her hearing.

Her dull eyes brightened with returning intelligence, she moved restlessly, and the nurse laid a wailing infant against her breast.

"Dear mistress, can you hear me? Here is your baby back again."

They had taken a desperate chance when all hope seemed lost.

By the advice of the consulting physicians, another child had been substituted for the stolen one, and, at its helpless cry, hope crept back to the mother's breaking heart; the rushing waves ceased to moan in her ears, silenced by that little piping voice, and the sinking life was rallied.

She lived, and the babe grew and throve in its luxurious surroundings, and the mother worshiped it. No one ever dared tell her the truth—that it was not her own infant that had been restored to her arms, but a little foundling. No other child ever came to rival it in Mrs. Clarke's love, and it was this fact alone that sealed her husband's lips to the cruel secret that ached at his heart. He feared the effect of the truth on his delicate wife, taking every precaution to keep her in ignorance, even to moving away from his own home, and settling in a distant place.

Though he never relaxed his efforts to find his lost child, the years slipped away in a hopeless quest, and Roma, the adopted girl, grew eighteen years old, and her beauty and her prospects brought her many suitors.

In his heart Mr. Clarke hoped the girl would make an early marriage, for he was tired of living a lie, pretending to love her as a daughter to deceive his wife, while an aching void in his own heart was always yearning for his own lost darling.

CHAPTER II.

FATE IS ABOVE US ALL

It was six o'clock by all the watches and clocks at Stonecliff, and the girls at Miss Bray's dressmaking establishment hastily put up their work and were starting for home, chattering like a flock of magpies, when their employer called after them testily:

"Say, girls, one of you will have to take this bundle up to Cliffdene. Miss Clarke wanted it very particularly to wear to-night. Liane Lester, she lives nearer to you than any of the others. You take it."

Liane Lester would have liked to protest, but she did not dare. With a decided pout of her rosy lips, she took the box with Miss Clarke's new silk cape and hurried to overtake Dolly Dorr, the only girl who was going her way.

"What a shame to have to carry boxes along the village street late in the afternoon when every one is out walking! I think Miss Bray ought to keep a servant to fetch and carry!" cried Dolly indignantly. "Oh, look, Liane! There's that handsome Jesse Devereaux standing on the post-office steps! Shouldn't you like to flirt with him? Let's saunter slowly past so that he may notice us!"

"I don't want him to notice me! Granny says that harm always comes of rich men noticing poor girls. Come, Dolly, let us avoid him by crossing the street."

Suiting the action to the word, Liane Lester turned quickly from her friend and sped toward the crossing.

But, alas, fate is above us all!

Her haste precipitated what she strove to avoid.

Drawing the veil down quickly over her rosy face, the frolicsome wind caught the bit of blue gossamer and whirled it back toward the sidewalk. Jesse Devereaux gave chase, captured the veil, and flew after the girl.

She had gained the pavement, and was hurrying on, when she heard him at her side, panting, as he said:

"I beg pardon—your veil!"

A white hand was thrust in front of her, holding the bit of blue gauze, and she had to stop.

"I thank you," she murmured, taking it from his hand and raising her eyes shyly to his face—the brilliant, handsome face that had haunted many a young girl's dreams.

The dazzling dark eyes were fixed eagerly on her lovely face, and his red lips parted in a smile that showed pearly-white teeth as he exclaimed gayly:

"Old Boreas was jealous of your hiding such a face, and whisked your veil away, but out of mercy to mankind I concluded to return it."

"Thank you, very much!" she answered again, and was turning away when Dolly Dorr rushed across the street, breathless with eagerness.

"How do you do, Mr. Devereaux?" she cried gayly, having been introduced to him at a church festival the evening before.

"Ah, Miss—" he hesitated, as he lifted his hat, and she twittered:

"Miss Dorr; we met at the festival last night, you know. And this is my chum, Liane Lester."

"Charmed," he exclaimed, while his radiant black eyes beamed on Liane's face, and he stepped along by Dolly's side as she placed herself between them, intent on a flirtation.

"May I share your walk?" he asked, and Dolly gave an eager assent, secretly wishing her girl friend a mile away.

But as she could not manage this, she proceeded to monopolize the conversation—an easy task, for Liane walked along silent and ill at ease, "for all the world," thought the lively Dolly to herself, "like a tongue-tied little schoolgirl."

No wonder Liane was demure and frightened, dreading to get a scolding from granny if Jesse Devereaux walked with them as far as her home.

Liane lived alone, in pinching poverty, with a feeble old grandmother, who was too old to work for herself, and needed Liane's wages to keep life in her old bones; so she was always dreading that the girl's beauty would win her a husband who would pack the old woman off to the poorhouse as an incumbrance.

She kept Liane illy dressed and hard worked, and never permitted her to have a beau. Marriage was a failure, she said.

"What was the use of marrying a poor man, to work your fingers to the bone for him?" she exclaimed scornfully.

"But one might marry rich," suggested innocent Liane.

"Rich men marry rich girls, and if they ever notice a poor girl, she mostly comes to grief by it. Don't never let me catch you flirting with any young man, or I'll make you sorry!" granny answered viciously.

She had not made her sorry yet, for the girl had obeyed her orders, although her beauty would have brought her a score of lovers had she smiled on their advances, but Liane had not seen any man yet for whom she would have risked one of granny's beatings.

How would it be now, when her young heart was beating violently at the glances of a pair of thrilling dark eyes, and the tones of a rich, musical voice, when her face burned and her hands trembled with exquisite ecstasy?

Old Boreas, why did you whisk her veil away and show Jesse Devereaux that enchanting young face, so rosy and dimpled, with large, shy eyes like purple pansies, golden-hearted, with rims of jet, so dark the arched brows and fringed lashes, while the little head was covered with silky waves of thick, shining chestnut hair? What would be the outcome of this fateful meeting?

Sure enough, as they came in sight of Liane's humble home, there was granny's grizzled head peeping from the window, and, with an incoherent good evening to her companions, Liane darted inside the gate, hurrying into the house.

But at the very threshold the old woman met her with a snarl of rage, slapping her in the face with a skinny, clawlike hand as she vociferated:

"Take that for disobeying me, girl! Walking out with that handsome dude, after all my warnings!"

"Oh, granny, please don't be so cruel, striking me for nothing! I'm too big a girl to be beaten now!" pleaded Liane, sinking into a chair, the crimson lines standing out vividly on her white cheeks, while indignant tears started into her large, pathetic eyes.

But her humility did not placate the cruel old hag, who continued to glare at her victim, snarling irascibly.

"Too big, eh?" she cried; "well, I'll show you, miss, the next time I see you galivanting along the street with a young man! Now, who is he, anyhow?"

"Just a friend of Dolly Dorr's, granny. I—I—never saw him till just now, when he asked Dolly if he might share her walk."

"Um-hum! A frisky little piece, that Dolly Dorr, with her yellow head and doll-baby face! I don't want you to walk with her no more when he goes along, do you hear me, Liane? Two's company, and three a crowd."

"Yes, ma'am"—wearily.

"Now, what have you got in that pasteboard box, I say? If you've been buying finery, take it back this minute. I won't pay a cent for it!"

"It's finery, granny, but not mine. Miss Bray sent me to carry it to the rich young lady up at Cliffdene, and I just stopped in to see if you will make your own tea while I do my errand, for I shouldn't like to come back alone after dark."

"Better come alone than walking with a man, Liane Lester!" grunted the old woman, adding more amicably: "Go along, then, and hurry back, and I'll keep some tea warm for you."

"Thank you, granny," the poor girl answered dejectedly, going out with her bundle again, her face shrouded in the blue veil, lest she should meet some one who would notice the marks of the cruel blow on her fair cheek.

Her way led along the seashore, and the brisk breeze of September blew across the waves and cooled her burning face, and dried the bitter tears in her beautiful eyes, though her heart beat heavily and slow in her breast as she thought:

"What a cruel life for a young girl to lead—beaten and abused by an old hag whom one must try to respect because she is old, and poor, and is one's grandmother, though I am ashamed of the relationship! I fear her, instead of loving her, and it is more than likely she will kill me some day in one of her brutal rages. Sometimes I almost resolve to run away and find work in the great city; but, then, she has such a horror of the poorhouse, I have not the heart to desert her to her fate. But I could not help being ashamed of her when Mr. Devereaux saw her uncombed head and angry face leering at us out of the window. Never did I feel the misery of my condition, the poverty of my dress and my home, so keenly as in his presence. I do not suppose he would stoop to marry a poor girl like me, especially with such a dreadful relation as granny," she ended, with a bursting sigh of pain from the bottom of her sore heart.

The tide swept in almost to her feet, and the sea's voice had a hollow tone of sympathy with her sorrow.

"Oh, I wish that I were dead," she cried with a sudden passionate despair, almost wishing that the great waves would rush in and sweep her off her feet and away out upon the billows, away, from her weary, toilsome life into oblivion.

But here she was at the gates of beautiful Cliffdene, the home of the Clarkes, a handsome stone mansion set in spacious ground on a high bluff, washed at its base by the murmuring sea.

She opened the gate, and went through the beautiful grounds, gay with flowers, thinking, what a paradise Cliffdene was and what a contrast to the tumble-down, three-roomed shanty she called home.

"How happy Miss Clarke must be; so beautiful and rich, with fine dresses, and jewels, and scores of handsome lovers! I wonder if Mr. Devereaux knows her, and if he admires her like all the rest? He would not mind marrying her, I suppose. She does not live in a shanty, and have a spiteful old grandmother to make her weary of her life," thought poor, pretty Liane, as she paused in the setting sunlight before the broad, open door.

At that moment a superb figure swept down the grand staircase toward the trembling girl—a stately figure, gowned in rustling silk, whose rich golden tints, softened by trimmings of creamy lace, suited well with the handsome face, lighted by spirited eyes of reddish brown, while the thick waves of shining, copper-colored hair shone in the sunset rays like a glory. Liane knew it was Miss Clarke, the beauty and heiress; she had seen her often riding through the streets of Stonecliff.

"What do you want, girl?" cried a proud, haughty voice to Liane as they stood face to face on the threshold, the heiress and the little working girl.

"Miss Bray has sent home your silk cape, Miss Clarke."

"Ah? Then bring it upstairs, and let me see if it is all right. I have very little confidence in these village dressmakers, though Miss Bray has very high recommendations from the judge's wife," cried haughty Roma Clarke, motioning the girl to follow her upstairs, adding cruelly: "You should have gone round to the servants' entrance, girl. No one brings bundles to the front door."

Liane's cheeks flamed and her throat swelled with resentful words that she strove to keep back, for she knew she must not anger Miss Bray's rich customer. But she hated her toilsome life more than ever as she followed Roma along the richly carpeted halls to a splendid dressing room, where the beauty sank into a cushioned chair, haughtily ordering the box to be opened.

Liane's trembling white fingers could scarcely undo the strings, but at last she held up the exquisite evening cape of brocaded cream silk, lined with peach blossom and cascaded with billows of rare lace.

It was daintily chic, and had been the admiration of the workroom. All the girls had coveted it, and Dolly Dorr had draped it over Liane's shoulders, crying:

"It just suits you, you dainty princess."

The princess stood trembling now, for Roma flew into a rage the instant her wonderful red-brown eyes fell on the cape.

"Just as I feared! It is ruined in the arrangement of the cascades of lace. Who did it—you?" she demanded sharply.

"Oh, no, Miss Bray arranged it herself, I assure you," faltered Liane.

"It must be altered at once, for I need it walking out in the grounds with my guests to-night. You're one of the dressmaker's girls, aren't you? Yes? Well, you shall change it for me at once, under my directions. Hurry and rip the lace off carefully."

Liane's heart fluttered into her throat, but she protested.

"I—I cannot stay. I should be afraid to go home after dark. I am sure Miss Bray will alter it to-morrow."

"To-morrow! when I want it to-night? You must be crazy, girl! Do as I bid you, or I'll report you to your employer to-morrow and have you discharged."

Liane's throat choked with a frightened sob, and she dared not disobey and risk dismissal from Miss Bray and a beating from granny.

"I will do it, but I am terribly afraid to go home alone," she faltered, taking up the scissors and the garment.

"Nonsense! Nothing will hurt you. Here, this is the way I want it, and be sure you do not botch it, or you will have to do it all over again! Now, I am going down to dinner. I'll be back in an hour and a half, and you ought to have it done by that time!" cried the imperious beauty, sweeping from the room, though Liane heard her tell the maid in the hall to keep an eye on that girl from the dressmaker's, that she did not slip anything in her pocket.

The clever maid sidled curiously into the lighted dressing room, and, as soon as she saw the tears in the eyes of Liane and the crimson print on her fair cheek, she jumped to her own conclusions.

"You poor, pretty little thing, did Miss Roma fly in a rage and slap your face, too?" she exclaimed compassionately.

"Certainly not!" the girl answered, cresting her graceful chestnut-brown head with sudden pride. "Do you think I would allow your mistress to insult me so?"

"She would insult you whether you liked it or not," the maid replied tartly. "She has slapped my face several times in her tantrums since I came here, and I would have quit right off, but her mother is an angel, and when I complained to her, the sweet lady gave me some handsome presents and begged me to overlook it, because her daughter was somewhat spoiled by being an only child and an heiress. So I stayed for the kind mother's sake, and if Miss Roma really did strike you in her rage over the cape, let me tell Mrs. Clarke, and she will reward you handsomely to keep silence!"

"But I assure you Miss Clarke did not strike me!" Liane protested.

"There's the print of her fingers on your face to speak for itself, poor child!"

"That mark was on my face when I came," Liane answered, almost inaudibly, out of her keen humiliation.

"Oh, I see. What is your name?"

"Miss Lester—Liane Lester."

"A pretty-sounding name! I've heard of you before, Miss Lester—the lovely sewing girl whose grandmother beats her. All the village knows it and pities you. Why do you stand it? Why don't you run away and get married? You are so lovely that any man might be glad to get you for his bride."

The color flamed hotly into Liane's cheek. She was proud, in spite of her poverty, and it chafed her to have her private affairs so freely discussed by Miss Clarke's servant.

"Please do not talk to me while I'm sewing," she said firmly, but so gently that the pert maid did not take offense, but slipped away, returning when the cape was nearly done, with a dainty repast on a silver waiter.

"Mrs. Clarke sent this with her compliments. She heard about your being up here sewing, and felt so sorry for you."

Liane had not tasted food since her meager midday luncheon, but she was too proud to own that she was faint from fasting.

"She was very kind, but I—I really am not hungry," she faltered.

"But you have not had your tea yet, and one is apt to have a headache without it," urged the tactful maid, and she presently persuaded Liane to eat, although not before the cape was done, so great was her dread of Miss Clarke's coarse anger.

The maid had adroitly let Mrs. Clarke know all about Liane, and now she slipped a crisp banknote into her hand, whispering:

"Mrs. Clarke sent you this for altering the cape for her daughter."

Liane was almost frightened at the new rustling five-dollar bill in her hand. She had never seen more than three dollars at a time before—the amount of her weekly wages from Miss Bray.

"Oh, dear, I can't take this. It's too much! Miss Bray only gets five dollars for the making of the whole cape," she exclaimed.

"Never mind about that, if Mrs. Clarke chooses to pay you that for altering it, my dear miss. She is rich and can afford to be liberal to one who needs it. So just take what she gives you, and say nothing—not even to her daughter, who has a miserly heart and might scold her for her kindness," cautioned the maid, who pitied Liane with all her heart.

Liane cried eagerly:

"Oh, please thank the generous lady a hundred times for me! I love her for her kindness to a poor orphan girl. Now, do you think Miss Roma would come and look at the cape? For I must be going. Granny will be angry at my coming back so late."

"Here she comes now, the vixen!" and, sure enough, a silken gown rustled over the threshold, and Roma caught the cape up eagerly, crying:

"Ten to one you have botched it worse than before! Well, really, you have followed my directions exactly, for a wonder! That will do very well. You may go now, and if you think you ought to be paid anything for these few minutes' extra work, you can collect it off Miss Bray, as she was responsible for the alterations. Sophie, you can show the girl out," and, throwing the cape over her arm, the proud beauty trailed her rustling silk over the threshold and downstairs again.

"The heartless thing! I'd like to shake her!" muttered Sophie angrily, as she led the way out of the beautiful house down upon the moonlight lawn, adding:

"I'll go to the gates with you, so you won't get frightened at Mr. Clarke's big St. Bernard."

"What a beautiful night, and how sweet the flowers smell!" murmured Liane, lifting her heated brow to the cool night breeze, and the pitying stars that seemed to beam on her like tender eyes.

"Would you like some to take home with you? You will be welcome, I know, for the frosts will be getting them soon, anyhow," cried Sophie, loading her up with a huge bunch of late autumn roses, "and now good night, my dear young lady," opening the gate "you have a long walk before you, but I hope you will get home safely."

Liane opened her lips to tell the woman how frightened she was of the lonely walk home, but she was ashamed of her cowardice, and the words remained unsaid. With a faltering "I thank you for your kindness; good night," she clasped the roses to her bosom and sped away like a frightened fawn in the moonlight, down the road along the beach, a silent prayer in her heart that granny would not be angry again over her long stay, and accuse her of "galivanting around with beaux."

Sophie leaned over the gate, watching her a minute, with pity and admiration in her clear eyes. "What a beautiful creature!—a thousand times lovelier than Miss Roma!" she thought. "But what a cruel lot in life. It is enough to make the very angels weep."

CHAPTER III.

"MY PRETTY MAID."

There was not a more nervous, startled maiden in all New England that night than Liane as she flew along the beach, haunted by a fear of drunken men, of whom Stonecliff had its full quota.

And, indeed, she had not gone so very far before her fears took shape.

She heard distinctly, above her frightened heartbeats and her own light steps, the sound of a man's tread gaining on her, while his voice called out entreatingly:

"Elinor, Elinor! wait for me!"

The sea's voice, with the wind, seemed to echo the call.

"Elinor, Elinor! wait for me!"

But Liane did not wait. She only redoubled her speed, and she might have escaped her pursuer but that her little foot tripped on a stone and threw her prone upon the sands.

Before she could rise a man's arms closed about her tenderly, lifting her up, while he panted:

"Elinor, what girlish freak is this? Why wouldn't you wait for me, dear?"

Liane gasped and looked up at him in terror, but that instant she recognized him, and her fears all fled.

"Oh, Mr. Clarke, you have made a mistake, sir. You don't know me, although I know what your name is. I am Liane Lester!" she cried breathlessly.

He dropped her hand and recoiled in surprise, answering:

"I beg a hundred pardons for my apparent rudeness. I saw you flying along as I smoked my cigar above the hill, and your figure looked so exactly like my wife's that I flew after you. I hope you will find it easy to forgive me, for you do resemble my wife very much, and, although you are young and fair, you may take that as a compliment, for my wife is very beautiful."

"I thank you, sir, and forgive you freely. I have never seen Mrs. Clarke, but I have just come from your house, and was running home every step of the way because I had to stay till after dark, and I feared my grandmother would be uneasy over me!" faltered Liane, blushing at his intent gaze, for the wind had blown her veil aside, and her lovely features, pure as carven pearl, shone clearly in the moonlight.

"And I am detaining you yet longer! Excuse me, and—good night," he said abruptly, smiling kindly at her, lifting his hat and turning back toward Cliffdene, while he thought with pleasure:

"What a lovely girl! She reminded me of Elinor when she was young."

Liane thought kindly of him, too, as she hurried along.

"What a noble face and gracious voice! Miss Roma Clarke is blessed in having such a splendid father."

She had only granny, poor child; coarse, ugly, repulsive, cruel granny. She could not even remember her parents or any other relation. A lonely childhood, whose only bright memories were of its few school days, a toilsome girlhood, robbed of every spark of youthful pleasure; coarse scoldings and brutal beatings. It was all a piteous life—enough, as Sophie, the maid had said, to make the very angels weep in pity.

Strange, as she hastened on, how Jesse Devereaux's eyes and smile haunted her thoughts with little thrills of pleasure; how she wondered if she should ever see him again.

"Perhaps Dolly Dorr will make him fall in love with her, she is so pretty, with her fluffy yellow hair and big turquoise-blue eyes," she thought, with a curious sensation of deadly pain, jealous already, though she guessed it not.

The night was still and calm, and suddenly the dip of oars in the water came to her ears. She looked, and saw a little boat headed for the beach, with a single occupant.

The keel grated on the shore, the man sprang out, and came directly toward her, pausing with hat in hand—a tall fellow, dark and bewhiskered, with somber, dark eyes.

"Ah, good evening, my pretty maid. Taking a stroll all alone, eh? Won't you have a moonlight row with me?"

"No, thank you, sir; I am in a hurry to get home. Please stand aside," for he had placed himself in her way.

"Not so fast, pretty maid. It is good manners, I trow, to answer a stranger's courteous questions, is it not?" still barring her way. "Well, show me the way to Cliffdene."

The trembling girl pointed mutely back the way she had come.

"Thank you—and again: Do you know Miss Roma Clarke?"

"I have just seen her at Cliffdene," she answered.

"So she is not married yet?"

"Oh, no," Liane answered, trying to pass, but he caught her hand, exclaiming mockingly:

"Not married yet? Well, that is very good news to me. I will give you a kiss, pretty one, for that information."

"You shall not! Release me at once, you hound!" cried the girl, struggling to free herself.

But the insolent stranger only clasped her closer and drew her to him, the fumes of his liquor-laden breath floating over her pure brow as he struggled to kiss her shrieking lips.

And, absorbed in the conflict, neither one noticed a third person coming toward them from the town—an exceedingly handsome young man, who hurried his steps in time to comprehend the meaning of the scene before him, and then shot out an athletic arm, and promptly bowled the wretch over upon the wet sands.

"Lie there, you cur, till I give you leave to rise!" he thundered, planting his foot on the fellow's chest while he turned toward the young lady.

"Why, good heavens! Is it you, Miss Lester?" he cried, in wonder.

"Yes, Mr. Devereaux. I was hurrying home from an errand to Cliffdene when this man jumped out of his boat, and threatened to kiss me."

"Apologize to the lady on your knees, cur!" cried Jesse Devereaux, helping him with a hand on his coat collar.

The wretch obeyed in craven fear.

"Now tell me where you came from in the boat."

"From the nearest town," sullenly.

"Then get into that boat and go back to it as fast as you can row, and if you are ever caught in Stonecliff again, I promise to thrash you within an inch of your life."

The defeated bully obeyed in craven silence, but the gleam of his somber eyes boded no good to the man who had so coolly mastered him.

Devereaux and Liane stood side by side, watching the little boat shoot away over the dancing billows, leaving ripples of phosphorescent light in the wake of the oars. Then he turned and took her hand.

"You had quite an adventure," he said. "Why, you are trembling like a leaf, poor child!"

He felt like drawing her to his breast, and soothing her fears; but that would not be conventional. So he could only regard her with the tenderest pity and admiration, while clasping the trembling little hand as tight as he dared.

Liane was so nervous she could not speak at first, and he continued gently:

"It was rather imprudent for a young girl like you to be walking out alone after nightfall. Did you not know it, Miss Lester?"

She faltered nervously:

"Oh, yes, I knew it! I was frightened almost to death, but I—I could not help it!"

"Why?"

"My employer sent me on an errand to Cliffdene, and I was detained there until after dark."

"They should have sent some one to see you safely home."

"Yes," Liane answered, shivering, but not making any explanation. She hated in her simple, girlish pride to have him know how she had been treated by Roma Clarke.

"I—I must be going now. Thank you ever so much for coming to my rescue," she added, stooping to gather her roses, that lay scattered on the sands.

Jesse Devereaux helped her, and kept them, saying as he drew her little hand closely within his arm:

"I will carry them and see you safe home."

Arm in arm they paced along under the brilliant moonlight, with the solemn voice of the ocean in their ears. But they were heedless. They heard only the beating of their own excited hearts.

The mere presence of this man, whom she had never met till to-day, filled Liane's innocent heart with ecstasy.

To be near him like this, with her arm linked in his so close that she felt the quick throbbing of his disturbed heart; to meet the glances of his passionate, dark eyes, to hear the murmuring tones of his musical voice as he talked to her so kindly—oh, it was bliss such as she had never enjoyed before, but that she could have wished might go on now forever!

He made her tell him all that the stranger had said to her, and Liane felt him give a quick start when Roma's name was mentioned, although he said lightly:

"He must be some discarded lover of Miss Clarke."

"Yes," she answered, and, raising her eyes, she saw near at hand the wretched shanty she called her home.

How short their walk had been—barely a minute it seemed to the girl! But now they must part.

She essayed to draw her hand from his clasping arm, murmuring:

"I—I cannot let you go any farther with me, please! Granny does not allow me to walk out with—with gentlemen! She told me to come home alone!"

Jesse Devereaux protested laughingly, but he soon saw that Liane was in terrible earnest, her face pale, her great eyes dilated with fear, her slender form shaking as with a chill.

"Do you mean to say that you cannot have the privilege of receiving me sometimes as a visitor under your own roof?" he asked, more seriously then; but the girl suddenly uttered a low moan of alarm, and shrank from him, turning her eyes wildly upon an approaching grotesque form.

Granny had worked herself into a fury over Liane's long stay, and at last hobbled forth to meet her, armed with a very stout cane, that would serve the double purpose of a walking stick and an instrument of punishment.

And, in spite of her age, she was strong and agile, and Liane would have cause to rue the hour she was born when next they met.

She strained her malevolent gaze all around for a sight of the truant, and when they lighted on Liane and Devereaux, arm in arm, a growl of fury issued from her lips.

Before Liane could escape, she darted forward with surprising agility, and lifted her stout cane over the girl's shrinking head.

A start, a shriek, and Devereaux saw, as suddenly as if the old hag had arisen from the earth by his side, the peril that menaced Liane.

That descending blow was enough to kill the frail, lovely girl, the object of granny's brutal spite!

Another instant and the stick would descend on the beautiful head!

But Devereaux's upraised arm received the force of the blow, and that arm fell shattered and helpless by his side, but the other hand violently wrenched the old woman away from her victim, as he demanded:

"You vile beast! What is the meaning of this murderous assault?"

They glared at each other, and the old woman snarled:

"I have a right to beat her! She disobeyed my orders, and she belongs to me. She's my granddaughter."

"Heaven help me, it is true!" moaned Liane, as he looked at her for confirmation.

"Let me get at her! Let me get at her!" shrieked granny, intent on punishing the girl, and writhing in Devereaux's clutch.

But Devereaux, with one arm hanging helpless at his side, held her firmly with the other.

"You shall not touch her!" he said sternly. "You shall go to prison for this outrage."

At that both the old woman and the girl uttered a cry of remonstrance.

Devereaux looked at Liane inquiringly, and she faltered:

"The disgrace would fall on me!"

"Yes, yes, she is my granddaughter," howled granny eagerly, seeing her advantage. Devereaux comprehended, too. He groaned:

"But what can you do? You must not be exposed again to her fury!"

Granny glared malevolently, while Liane bent her eyes to the ground, meditating a moment ere she looked up, and said timidly:

"I think you are right. I cannot live with granny any more, for she would surely kill me some day. Let her go home, and I will go and spend the night with Dolly Dorr, who lives not far from here."

"You hear what Miss Lester says? Will you go home peaceably, while she goes to her friend for safety?" demanded Devereaux, eager to close the scene, for he was faint from the pain of his broken arm.

Granny saw that she was cornered, and cunningly began to feign repentance, whimpering that she was sorry, and would never do so any more if Liane would only come home with her now, for she was afraid to spend the night alone.

"She shall not go with you, you treacherous cat," he answered sternly, releasing her and bidding her angrily to return home at once.

Cowed by his authority, she could not but choose to obey, but as she started, she flung back one shaft:

"Better come with me, Liane, than stay with him, my dear. Remember my warnings about rich young men and pretty, poor girls! A beating is safer than his love!"

Liane's cheeks flamed at the coarse thrust, but Devereaux said earnestly:

"Do not mind her taunt, Miss Lester. I will always be a true friend to you, believe me!"

"You are a true friend already. From what horrors have you saved me to-night?" Liane cried, bursting into tears. "Your poor arm, how helpless it hangs! Oh, I fear it has been broken in my defense," and suddenly sinking on her knees, in an excess of tenderest gratitude, she pressed her warm, rosy lips to the hand that had so bravely defended her from insult and injury.

"Oh, you are a hero, you have saved my life, and I can never forget you!" she sobbed hysterically.

"Yes, my arm is broken; I must hurry back to town and have it set," he answered faintly. "I must let you go on to Miss Dorr's alone, but it is not far, and you are safe now. Good night," he murmured, leaving her abruptly in his pain.

CHAPTER IV. SECRET LOVE

Liane gazed after Devereaux's retreating form in bewilderment, her cheeks burning with the thought:

"He was angry because I kissed his hand! Oh, why was I so bold? I did not mean to be, but it made my heart ache to see him suffering so cruelly from his defense of my life! How pale he looked—almost as if he were going to faint. Oh, I love him!" and she wept despairingly, as she hurried to Dolly Dorr's, careless now of the beautiful roses that lay crushed upon the ground where they had fallen.

Dolly was sitting on her little vine-wreathed porch, singing a pretty love song, and she started in surprise as Liane came up the steps.

"Why, Liane, my dear, what is the matter? You are crying; your cheeks are all wet!" she cried, putting her arms about the forlorn girl, who sobbed:

"May I stay with you all night, Dolly? Granny has beaten me again, and I have run away!"

"I don't blame you! You should have done it long ago. Of course you may stay with me as long as you wish!" replied pretty little Dolly, with ready sympathy, that might not have been so warm if she had known all that had transpired between Liane and Devereaux, on whom she had set her vain little heart.

But Liane was too shy and nervous to tell her friend the whole story. She simply explained, when pressed, that granny had beaten her for walking with Devereaux that afternoon, and attempted it again because she was late getting home, after altering Miss Clarke's cape.

"So I ran away to you," she added wearily.

"That was right. We will all make you welcome," said Dolly cordially, sure that her father and mother, and her two little brothers, would all make good her promise.

"You should have seen them all peeping out of the window in amazement this afternoon when I came walking up with the grand Devereaux at my side," she continued consciously. "I asked him in, and he sat on the porch nearly half an hour talking to me. When he was leaving, I asked him to call again, and pinned some pansies in his buttonhole, and what do you think he said, Liane?"

"I could never guess," the girl answered, with a secret pang of the keenest jealousy.

"He said: 'What exquisite pansies! They remind me of Miss Lester's eyes—such a rare, purplish blue, with dark shadings.'"

Liane caught her breath with stifled rapture, that he had remembered her, but Dolly added wistfully:

"He must have read in my face that I was disappointed at not having a compliment, too, for he went on to say that my eyes were just like bluebells. Liane, which are the prettier flowers, pansies or bluebells?"

"I should say that it is all a matter of taste," Liane replied gently.

So presently they went upstairs to bed, but Dolly was so excited she talked half the night.

"Liane, have you heard of the Beauty Show that is to be held in the town hall next week?" she asked, as she rolled her yellow locks in kid curlers to make them fluffy.

Liane shook her head.

"No? Why, that is strange. Every one is talking about it, and they say that you and I are pretty enough to compete for the prize, although Miss Roma Clarke intends to exhibit her handsomest portrait."

"Is it a portrait show?"

"It is this way, Liane: A Boston artist has a commission to design the outside cover of a magazine for December, and he wants to get a lovely young girl for the central figure—a young girl taken from

life. So he has advertised for five hundred pictures of beauties, to be delivered by next week, when they will be exhibited on the walls of the town hall, and judges appointed to decide on the fairest. Of course, the artist himself is to be one of the judges, and they say that Mr. Clarke and Mr. Devereaux will be two of the others, but I don't know the rest. Don't you think it's unfair, Liane, to have Roma Clarke's father and lover for judges? Of course, they will show her some partiality in their votes."

Liane murmured with dry lips in a choking voice:

"Is Mr. Devereaux Miss Clarke's lover?"

"So they say, but I hope it's not true. I'm trying to catch him myself," confessed Dolly quite frankly. "I don't really think it's fair for Miss Clarke to compete for the prize, anyway. She ought to leave the chance to some beautiful, poor girl that needs that hundred dollars so much worse than she does!"

"A hundred dollars!" exclaimed Liane.

"Yes; just think of it! You must try for the prize, Liane."

"I don't know; I must think over it first. Wouldn't it seem conceited in me? As if I were sure that I was a raging beauty?" doubtfully.

"Why, so you are! Every one says so, and you can see it for yourself in the glass there! Prettier than I am, really!" Dolly owned magnanimously.

"Small good my pretty face has brought me!" sighed Liane.

"Well, it may get you that hundred dollars, if you try for it! And it might have gotten you a nice husband long ago, but for your cantankerous old granny! The idea of her slapping you for walking with that splendid Devereaux! But I'll give him a hint, when I see him again, never to go near you any more!" exclaimed Dolly, quite eager to give the warning, for she thought:

"I didn't like the way he talked about her eyes; for she had certainly made an impression on him, and I'm afraid I shouldn't stand much chance if she went in to win against me. So I'm glad of granny's opposition for once! If I'm lucky enough to marry him, I'll have Liane at my house for a long visit, and introduce her to some good catches."

Liane little dreamed of these shrewd thoughts in the pretty, little, yellow noddle, while Dolly prattled on:

"You have not seen the artist, either, have you? His name is Malcolm Dean, and he's quite a handsome fellow. I wish one of us could catch him, Liane! Why, I've heard he gets a fortune for everything he designs, and that magazine has promised him a fortune for their December cover."

"We had better go to sleep, Dolly, or we will be too tired to go to work in the morning," suggested Liane, and Dolly obediently shut her eyes and drifted off into dreamland.

CHAPTER V. ROMA'S LOVERS

Haughty Roma Clarke did not give another thought to the poor sewing girl who had pleased her fastidious taste so entirely in the alteration of her cape.

She threw the dainty wrap over her graceful shoulders, for the September evenings already grew chill, and wandered out into the grounds to watch for Jesse Devereaux, whom she expected to call.

Her restless, impatient nature would not permit her to wait patiently in the drawing room to receive him. She thought it would be so gloriously romantic to stroll about the grounds, clinging to his arm, the splendid moonlight etherealizing her beauty, the murmur of the sea in their ears, the fragrance of flowers all around them. She would not be bothered here with papa or mamma coming into the room to talk to Jesse, and breaking up their delightful tête-à-tête.

She went into a rose arbor near the gate, thinking that she would go out to meet him as soon as she heard the click of the latch.

She had been there but a few moments when Liane passed by with the maid, but she kept very still, though she thought:

"That girl is actually beautiful, and would look superb in good clothes instead of that simple, dark-blue print gown. How foolish it seems for poor girls to be pretty, when they can have nothing nice to set off their beauty. I suppose they must always be pining for riches. How that poor serving girl must have envied me while sewing on this cape! Well, I suppose Miss Bray will give her perhaps twenty-five cents for the extra work, and that will buy her a new ribbon. She ought to be glad that I made her alter it, giving her a little extra pay from her employer. Of course, she could not expect me to pay her myself. My allowance from papa is much too small to permit me the luxury of charity!"

She heard Sophie's light tread, as she returned to the house and muttered:

"I hate that maid. I know she tells tales of me to mamma, and that mamma believes everything, instead of scolding her for tattling! Never mind, Miss Sophie; see if I don't pay you off some time for your meddling! And as for giving you those old gowns you've been hinting for so long, I'd stick them into the fire first!"

She gathered a rose, pulled it to pieces viciously, as if it had been the pert maid she was demolishing, then sighed impatiently:

"Heigh-ho, how slow he is coming!"

The gate latch clicked, and she sprang up with a start, her eyes flashing, her heart throbbing with joy.

She looked out, and saw the figure of a man coming along the graveled walk.

As he came opposite she started forward, crying sweetly:

"Oh, Jesse, dear, is that you?"

The man stopped and faced her. It was her father, and he laughed merrily:

"Not Jesse, dear; but papa, dear!"

Roma recoiled in bitter disappointment, and said petulantly:

"Jesse promised to come. Have you seen him?"

"No, I only walked outside the gates a little way. I saw no one except a very lovely young girl coming from here. Do you know anything about her, Roma?"

"If she was dressed like a kitchen maid in a print gown, she was a girl from the dressmaker's who brought home some work," Roma answered carelessly.

"I did not notice her dress in the moonlight. I could not keep my eyes from her face, she was so very beautiful," Mr. Clarke replied, somewhat dreamily.

Roma shrugged her shoulders scornfully:

"A poor girl has no business to be pretty," she exclaimed.

Mr. Clarke frowned at the sentiment.

"Roma, I do not like to hear you express yourself so heartlessly. You would like to be pretty even if you were poor."

"I cannot even imagine myself poor like the common herd!" she retorted, tossing her beautiful head with queenly pride.

If she had been looking at the man before her, she must have seen that a strange look came upon his face as his secret thoughts ran sarcastically:

"Ignorance indeed is bliss, in this case."

But he knew he could never tell her the truth, much as he sometimes longed to do it, in a sudden anger at her ignoble nature. He could not love the girl who had been taken from a foundling asylum, and placed in the stead of his own lost darling. Ah, no, it was impossible! It seemed to him that there was nothing lovable about Roma, although his wife clung to her with devotion.

He looked at her as she faced him in the moonlight, so proud and confident of her position; her jewels gleaming, her silks rustling as she moved, and thought that, but for the chance that had brought her into his home, she, too, might now be dressed like a servant as she had so contemptuously said of poor Liane Lester.

He felt as if he should like to cast it into her face, the willful, insolent beauty, but he clinched his teeth over the bitter words.

"Heaven help me to bear my cross for Elinor's sake!" he thought.

Roma suddenly came closer to him, and placed her hand on his arm, saying coaxingly:

"Please don't be angry, papa, dear! I didn't mean to seem heartless!"

"I'm glad of that, Roma, for your heart should be full of sympathy, instead of contempt, for that poor, pretty, little sewing girl."

"Yes, papa," gently answered Roma, for she intended to ask him for some new jewels tomorrow, and did not wish to vex him.

"Tell me," he continued eagerly, "all that you know about this pretty Miss Lester."

"I know nothing, papa. I never saw her before this evening, when she brought home my work, and said she was one of Miss Bray's sewing girls. Why, what an interest you take in her, papa! Did you stop and speak to the poor girl?"

"She was running to get home in a hurry, and tripped and fell down; I assisted her to rise. We introduced ourselves, and then she went on; that was all," he explained. "Well, I will leave you to watch for Jesse, while I go and talk to your mamma."

Beautiful Roma looked after Mr. Clarke with angry eyes, muttering:

"The idea of scolding me, his daughter and heiress, about that insignificant little sewing girl! And he thought her very beautiful. I wonder if mamma would be jealous if she heard of his open admiration! I think I will give her a hint, and see!" and she laughed wickedly, while she again turned her eyes toward the gate, watching for her laggard lover.

"Why doesn't he come?" she murmured impatiently, for Roma was so spoiled by overindulgence of a willful nature that she could not bear to wait for anything. She was imperious as a queen.

As the minutes slipped past without bringing the lover, for whom she waited so eagerly, her angry temper began to flame in her great, red-brown eyes like sparks of fire, and she paced back and forth between the arbor and the gate like a caged lioness, her bosom heaving with emotion.

Jesse Devereaux, who had known her only as a bright, vivacious girl, would not have known his sweetheart now, in her fury of rage at his nonappearance.

Angry tears sparkled in her eyes, as she cried:

"If he could not keep his word, he should have sent an excuse. He must know I shall be bitterly disappointed!"

All the beauty of the night mattered nothing to her now. The moonlight, the flowers, the murmur of the sea, were maddening to the girl waiting there alone for her recreant lover. Love and hate struggled for mastery in her capricious breast.

Jesse Devereaux had been hard to win, but she prized him all the more for that, and she could not bear the least apparent slight from him.

"He did not care to come; he has let some trivial excuse keep him away! I will have to teach him that he cannot trifle with my love!" she vowed darkly, flying into the house in a passion.

Seating herself angrily at her desk, she wrote:

Mr. Devereaux: Your failure to keep your engagement with me this evening, without any apparent excuse, seems to me a sufficient excuse for breaking our engagement.

Roma.

She tore a sparkling diamond from her finger, wrapped it in a bit of tissue paper, and inclosed it in the letter, hurrying downstairs again and sending it off to Stonecliff by a messenger, with special directions to deliver it personally to Jesse Devereaux at his hotel.

Her feelings somewhat relieved by this explosion of resentment, Roma laughed harshly, murmuring to herself:

"He will be here the first thing in the morning to beg me to take him back, promising never to slight me so cruelly again. Of course, I will forgive him, after pouting a while, and making him very uneasy, but from this day forward he will have learned a lesson that I must be first with him in everything. I will never tolerate neglect, and he must learn that fact at once."

She was so agitated she could not go into the house just yet. She wandered about the grounds, trying to overcome her angry excitement before she went in, for she knew that her mother was sure to come to her room for a little chat before retiring, and she could not bear her questioning.

"Dear mamma, I know she idolizes me, but at times I find her very tiresome," she soliloquized. "How tired I get of her lecturing on the beauty of goodness, as if I were the wickedest girl in the world! I know I am not goody-goody, as she is, and I don't want to be! Good people don't have much fun in this world; they let the wicked ones get the advantage and run over them always. However, I shall be as sweet as sugar to her to-night, for I want her to help me tease papa to-morrow for that set of rubies I want!"

She leaned upon the gate, letting the cool wind caress her heated brow, waiting for her cheeks to cool, and her heart to thump less fiercely with anger before she went in to encounter her mother's searching gaze; but it would have been a thousand times better for her if she had gone to sob her grief out on that mother's gentle breast, than waited here for the fate that was swiftly approaching.

The dark, sinister-looking stranger who had insulted Liane Lester on the beach had rowed back to shore as soon as Devereaux was out of sight.

He was interested in Roma Clarke, as his questions to Liane had plainly shown.

He came slowly, cautiously, up to the gate, his heart leaping with hope as he saw a beautiful head leaning over it that he hoped and believed must be Roma's herself.

"What luck for me, and what a shock for her!" he muttered grimly, as he advanced.

At the same moment Mrs. Clarke was sending Roma's maid out with a message that it was so chilly she ought to come in, or she might take cold.

She would not listen to her husband's remonstrance that Roma was with her lover, and might not wish to be interrupted.

"Jesse can come in, too; I am sure he would not wish Roma to get sick out in the night air with nothing on her head!" cried the anxious mother.

"How you love that girl!" he cried testily, and she laughed sweetly.

"Are you getting jealous of my love for our daughter, dear? You need not, for the first place in my heart is yours, but remember how devoted I have always been to Roma, ever since she was born."

"I know, but has she ever seemed to show the right appreciation of your devotion?" he exclaimed abruptly.

A deep and bitter sigh quivered over the wife's lips, but she parried the question with a complaint:

"You are always insinuating some fault against my darling. Your heart is cold to her, Edmund."

He put his arms around her, and kissed the still lovely face with the passion of a lover.

"At least it is not cold to you, my darling!" he cried; and pleased at his love-making, she momentarily forgot Roma, and nestled confidingly against his breast.

He was glad that she could not know his secret thoughts, for they ran stubbornly:

"She is right. My heart is indeed cold to Roma. I shall be glad when Devereaux marries her and takes her away, and I do not believe it will break my wife's heart, either; for she seemed to bear it well enough when her daughter was away at boarding school those three years."

Meanwhile Sophie went away most reluctantly with her message, thinking:

"I am sure Miss Roma will not thank me for breaking up her tête-à-tête with her lover, for, of course, she is staying out just to keep him all to herself. But I cannot disobey Mrs. Clarke's commands, though I'll saunter along as slowly as I can, so as to give Miss Roma a little more time."

Sophie was an intelligent and good-hearted girl, and might have been invaluable to Roma, if she could have appreciated such a treasure; but by her selfishness and arrogance she had completely antagonized the young woman, who only stayed, as she had frankly told Liane, for Mrs. Clarke's sake.

As she strolled along, picking a flower here and there, and giving Roma all the time she could, she thought of Liane with pity and admiration.

"There's a lovely girl for you! If she had been rich instead of Miss Roma, I fancy she'd make a better mistress," she murmured, and then the sound of subdued voices came to her ears.

"There she is at the gate with Mr. Devereaux, sure!" she thought, as she saw two heads together, the man's outside, while the murmur of excited voices came to her ears.

"I hope they aren't quarreling already! She had trouble enough hooking him, to be sure!" she thought as she went forward noiselessly, perhaps hoping to catch a word.

She was rewarded by hearing Roma say:

"I will come outside and talk with you. We must not run the risk of being overheard by any one from the house."

The gate latch clicked as she stepped outside and joined her companion, a tall, dark man, whom Sophie did not doubt must be Jesse Devereaux.

She led her companion out toward the high cliff, washed at its base by the surging sea, and Sophie stole after them, thinking curiously:

"Now, what secret have they got, these two, that no one from the house must overhear, I wonder? It is very strange, indeed, and I'll bet they have a mind to elope, just to make a sensation! These rich folks will do any foolish thing to get their names and pictures in the papers! They think it's fame, but any jailbird can get published in the papers. Well, I'll follow you, my lady, and there's one from the house who will hear your secret in spite of your precautions."

She crept along after them, so near that if they had turned their heads they must have seen the skulking figure; but neither Roma nor the man looked back, but kept along the edge of the cliff on the narrow path, talking angrily, it seemed to Sophie, though their words were drowned by the roar of the sea, to the great chagrin of the curious maid.

"But they are certainly quarreling! Ah, now they are stopping! I don't want to interrupt them yet; so I'll hide!" she thought, darting behind a convenient ledge.

In the clear and brilliant moonlight the two figures faced each other, perilously near to the edge of the cliff, and Sophie, peering at them from her concealment, suddenly saw a terrible thing happen.

The man had his back to the sea, facing Roma, and both were talking vehemently, it seemed, from their gestures; when all at once the girl thrust out her foot and struck her companion's knee, causing him to lose his balance. The result was inevitable.

The tall figure lurched backward, swayed an instant, trying to recover itself, toppled over with a shriek of rage, and went over the cliff a hundred feet down into the foaming waters.

CHAPTER VI. AFTER THE CRIME

Sophie Nutter could hardly believe the evidence of her own startled eyes when she saw the terrible crime of her young mistress.

She knew that Roma was selfish and cruel, but she had never realized that such depths of wickedness were concealed beneath her beautiful exterior.

When she saw Roma push the supposed Jesse Devereaux over the face of the cliff to a dreadful death, the hair seemed to rise on her head with horror, and from her lips burst an uncontrollable shriek of dismay and remonstrance, while she tried to spring forward with outstretched arms in a futile impulse to avert the man's awful fate.

Too late! The writhing, struggling body went hurtling down over the high cliff, and struck the water with a loud thud that dashed the spray high in air. Then Sophie's limbs relaxed beneath her, and she fell in a heap like one paralyzed, behind the ledge of stones, while her terrified shriek went wandering forth on the air of night like a wailing banshee.

But Roma had shrieked, wildly, too—perhaps in nature's recoil from her own sin—so Sophie's protesting cry lost itself in dismal echoes. Then all grew still save for the voice of the sea and the dash of water churning itself to fury at the foot of the bluff.

The maid, crouching low in her concealment, heard Roma flying with terror-haunted footsteps from the scene of her awful crime, and muttered distractedly:

"She has murdered her handsome lover, the beautiful fiend! God in heaven alone knows why! I thought she loved the very ground he trod on!"

The maid was suffering from severe nervous shock. She sobbed hysterically as she thought of handsome Jesse Devereaux lying drowned at the foot of the cliff, and beaten by the cruel waves that would wash him out to sea when the tide turned, so that Roma's sin would be forever hidden from the sight of men.

"I will go and inform on her at once! She shall suffer the penalty!" she vowed at first; but when she thought of gentle, loving Mrs. Clarke her resolution wavered.

"It will kill her to learn of her child's wickedness, the good, gentle lady who has been so kind and generous to me! I do not know what to do! I would like to punish the daughter, and spare the mother, but I cannot do both," she groaned, in a state of miserable indecision.

It was some time before her trembling limbs permitted her to drag herself from the spot; and when she gained the house and her bed she could not rest. She tossed and groaned, and at length was seized with hysterical spasms, obliging the housemaid to call for assistance.

In the meantime Roma, far less excited than Sophie, had also retired to her room and flung herself down by the open window to await impatiently the inevitable good-night chat with her mother.

"I wish she would not come. Her affection grows really tiresome at times," she muttered rebelliously, as she heard the light footsteps outside her door.

Mrs. Clarke entered and sat down close to her daughter, putting her white hand tenderly on the girl's shoulder.

"Good girl, to come in when mamma sent for you," she said caressingly, as to a child.

"You—sent—for—me!" Roma faltered, in surprise.

"Yes, by Sophie. I feared you would take cold, bareheaded out in the night air."

"I have not seen Sophie," Roma muttered sullenly, with a downcast face.

"Why did Jesse leave so soon?" continued the mother curiously.

"He did not come. I have been walking in the grounds alone."

"But your papa said, dear—"

"Yes, I know; papa told you I was waiting for Jesse at the gate, but he never came. He disappointed me!"

"Why, that is very strange, dear. And you are grieved over it, I see. Your face is pale, and your whole frame trembles under my touch. Do not take it so hard, darling. Of course Jesse was detained. He will come to-morrow."

"He should have sent me an excuse, mamma!"

"He must have been prevented. I am sure he would not neglect you purposely. He will explain to-morrow."

Roma tossed her proud head, with a bitter laugh.

"I tell you, mamma, I will not brook such negligence. I have broken our engagement."

"Roma!"

The girl gave a reckless laugh of wounded pride.

"Yes; I sent him a note, with his ring, just now, setting him free."

"You were precipitate, Roma; you should have waited for an explanation."

"I did not choose to wait!"

"I fear you will regret it."

"I do not think it likely."

Mrs. Clarke gazed at her in sorrowful silence, whose reproach goaded Roma into adding haughtily:

"I wished to teach Jesse, early, a lesson that I am not to be neglected for anything; that I must be foremost always in his thoughts."

"But have you not gone too far in giving him this lesson? His thoughts will not belong to you now."

"He will bring back his ring, and beg me to take it back to-morrow."

"Are you certain, Roma?"

"As sure as I am of my life!" with a confident laugh.

"Well, perhaps you know him better than I do, Roma, but I fancied Jesse Devereaux very high-spirited—too high-spirited to bear dictation."

"He will have to bend to my will!" Roma cried arrogantly, and the gentle lady sighed, for she knew that her daughter made this her own motto in life. Power and dominion were hers by the force of "might makes right."

Mrs. Clarke rose with a sigh and touched Roma's cheeks with her lips, saying kindly:

"Well, I hope it will all come right, dear. Good night."

She returned to her own room, thinking: "Poor girl, she is the miserable victim of her own caprice. I could see that she is too terribly agitated to sleep an hour to-night."

CHAPTER VII. GRANNY'S REVENGE

The half dozen pretty young girls who served for Miss Bray were light-hearted, hopeful young creatures in spite of their poverty, and at their daily work they sociably discussed their personal affairs with the freedom and intimacy of friends. Beaus and dress were the choice topics just as in higher circles of society. Liane Lester was the only quiet one among them, granny's edicts barring her both from lovers and finery.

Dolly Dorr was turning them all green with envy the next morning by boasting of the attentions she had received from the grand Mr. Devereaux, when one of the girls, Lottie Day, interposed:

"He is not likely to call on you again very soon, for I heard Brother Tom saying at breakfast this morning that Mr. Devereaux had broken his arm by a fall last night."

A chorus of compassionate remarks followed this announcement, and Dolly exclaimed vivaciously:

"I wish I might be allowed to nurse the poor fellow!"

Nan Brooks replied chaffingly:

"Miss Roma Clarke might have some objection to that scheme. They say she is engaged to him."

"That's why I want a good chance to cut her out. The proud, stuck-up thing!" cried Dolly indignantly, and from the remarks that followed it was plainly to be seen that Miss Clarke was not a favorite among the pretty sewing girls.

Roma had never lost an opportunity to impress them with the difference in their stations and her own, as if she were made of quite a superior sort of clay, and the high-spirited young creatures bitterly resented her false pride.

Not one of them but would have been glad to see Dolly "cut her out," as they phrased it, with the handsome Devereaux, but they frankly believed that there could be no such luck.

In their gay chatter, Liane alone remained silent, her beautiful head bent low over her sewing to hide the tears that had sprung to her eyes while they talked of Jesse Devereaux's accident.

"It was for my sake!" she thought gratefully, with rising blushes, though her heart sank like lead when she heard them saying he was engaged to Miss Clarke.

"He belongs to that proud, cruel girl! How I pity him!" she thought. "Yet, no doubt, he admires her very much. She does not show him the mean, selfish side of her character, as she does to us poor sewing girls."

She would have given anything if only she had not yielded to her passionate gratitude, and kissed his hand.

"He was disgusted at my boldness. He believed I had given him my love unasked, and he turned away in scorn. Yet how could I help it, he was so kind to me; first saving me from that ruffian, then from granny's blows? Oh, how could I help but love him? And I wish, like Dolly, that I might be permitted to nurse him as some reparation for his goodness," she thought, her cheeks burning and her heart throbbing wildly with the tenderness she could not stifle.

Every way she looked it seemed to her she could see his dark face, with its dazzling black eyes, looking at her with an admiration and tenderness they should not have shown, if he were indeed betrothed to another. Those glances and smiles had lured Liane's heart from her own keeping and doomed her to passionate unrest.

She listened to everything in silence, nursing her sweet, painful secret in her heart, afraid lest a breath should betray her, until suddenly Ethel Barry, the girl next her, exclaimed:

"How quiet Liane is this morning, not taking the least interest in anything we say!"

"No interest! Oh, Heaven!" thought Liane, but Dolly Dorr interposed:

"You would be quiet, too, if you had been beaten as Liane was by granny last night, and forced to seek refuge with a friend."

Liane crimsoned painfully at having her own troubles discussed, but granny's faults were public property, and she could not deny the truth.

"She is old and cross," she said, generously trying to offer some excuse.

"You need not take up for her, Liane. She doesn't deserve it!" cried one and all, while Mary Lang, the oldest and most staid of the six girls, quickly offered to share her own room with Liane if she would never return to the old woman.

She was an orphan, and rented a room with a widow, living cozily at what she called "room-keeping," and the girls had many jolly visits taking tea with Mary.

Liane thanked her warmly for her offer.

"But will you come?" asked Mary.

"I cannot."

"But why?"

The girl sighed heavily as she explained:

"Granny came to Mrs. Dorr's this morning, all penitence for her fault, and begged me to come home, promising never to beat me again."

"Do not trust her; do not go!" cried they all; but it was useless.

"She is old and poor. How could she get along without me? She would have to go to the poorhouse, and think how cruelly that would disgrace me!" cried Liane, who had no love for the old wretch, but supported her through mingled pride and pity.

And she actually returned to the shanty that day when her work was done, much to the relief of the old woman, who feared she had driven her meek slave off forever.

"So you are back? That's a good girl!" she said approvingly, and added: "They may tell you, those foolish girls, that I am too strict with you, Liane, but I'm an old woman, and I know what's best for you, girl. It was through letting your mother have her own way that she went to her ruin; that's why I'm so strict on you."

"My mother went to her—ruin!" faltered Liane, flushing crimson, but very curious, for she had never been able to extract a word from granny about her parents, except that they were both dead and had been no credit to her while living.

"Yes, her ruin," granny replied, with a malicious side glance at the startled girl. "She ran away from me to be an actress when she wasn't but seventeen, and a year later she came back to me with a baby in her arms—you! She had been deceived and deserted, and you, poor thing, had no lawful name but the one she had picked out of a book—Liane Lester."

"Oh, Heaven!" sobbed the girl, burying her white face in her hands, thinking that this blow was more cruel even than one of the old woman's beatings.

At heart Liane had a strange pride, and she was bitterly ashamed of her low origin and her cruel grandmother, whom no one respected because of her vile temper.

To be told now that she had no lawful name, that her mother had been deceived and deserted, was like a sword thrust in the poor girl's heart.

She sobbed bitterly, as granny added:

"I didn't never mean to tell you the truth, but now that you are getting wild and willful, like your mother was, it's best for you to know it, and take her fate as a warning."

Liane knew the accusation was not true, but she did not contradict it; she only sobbed:

"Did my mother die of a broken heart?"

"No, indeed, the minx; she got well and ran away again, and left you on my hands."

"Is she living now?"

"She is, for all I know to the contrary. But she takes good care never to come near me, nor to send me a dollar for your support."

"I take care of myself, and you, too, granny."

"Yes, the best you can; but she ought to help—the ungrateful creature!" granny exclaimed so earnestly that she could scarcely doubt the truth of her story.

It was a cruel blow to Liane's pride, and up in her bare little chamber under the eaves that night she lay awake many hours sobbing hopelessly over her fate.

"I would rather be dead than the daughter of a woman who was deceived and deserted! Mr. Devereaux would never give me a second thought if he knew," she sighed, with burning cheeks, as she sank into a restless sleep, troubled with dreams in which her hero's magnetic, dark eyes played the principal part—dreams so sweet that she grieved when the cold gray light of dawn glimmered upon her face and roused her to reality and another day of toil.

Very eagerly the girls questioned her when she reached Miss Bray's as to granny's mood, and she answered quietly:

"No, she did not scold me or strike me this time; she was kind in her way."

But she did not tell them granny's way of kindness, for her heart sank with shame as she looked around the group of her light-hearted friends, thinking how different their lot was from hers; all of them having honorable parentage, and dreading lest they would not wish to associate with her if they knew she had no right to her pretty name, Liane Lester, that her wronged mother had simply picked it out of a story book.

Miss Bray had a hurry order this morning—a white gown ruffled to the waist—so she set all the girls to work, and as they worked their tongues flew—they knew pretty nearly everything that had happened in the village since yesterday.

The choice bit of gossip was that Miss Clarke's maid, Sophie Nutter, had left her, and gone to Boston.

"They say she had a sick spell night before last, and went out of her head, talking awful things, so that the servants were quite frightened, and called up their mistress herself. Sophie had hysterical spasms, and accused Miss Roma of dreadful crimes right before her mother's face," said Mary Lang.

"Miss Roma must have been very angry—she has such a temper," cried Dolly, as she threaded her needle.

"Oh, Miss Roma wasn't present, and her mother took steps never to let her find it out, you may be sure."

"It must have been something awful," said Lottie Day.

"I should say so! She declared to Mrs. Clarke she had seen Miss Roma push Mr. Devereaux over the bluff and drown him! Just think—when Mr. Devereaux had not been near the place, but was lying at his hotel with a broken arm!"

"It was all a dream," said Miss Bray from her cutting board.

"Yes, but she could hardly be convinced yesterday morning that she had not really seen Miss Roma commit a murder. They had to send for the doctor to tell her that Mr. Devereaux was really alive at his hotel, having broken his arm by a fall on the sands. They say she went off into more hysterics when she heard that, and muttered: 'A fall over the cliff was more likely, but how he escaped death and got to shore again puzzles me. And why did she do it, anyway? It must have been a lovers' quarrel. I must get away from here. She will be pushing me over the bluff next.' And she had her trunk packed and went off to Boston, though she looked too ill to leave her bed," added Mary Lang, who had had the whole story straight from the housekeeper at Cliffdene.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE BROKEN ENGAGEMENT

"Oh, how rash and foolish I have been!" thought Roma, the next day, when she heard of Jesse Devereaux's accident.

"His arm broken by a fall on the sands last night—most probably on his way to see me, poor fellow! And in my angry resentment at my disappointment I have broken our engagement! How rash and foolish I am, and how much I regret it! I must make it up with him at once, my darling!" she cried repentantly, and hurried to her mother.

"Mamma, you were right last night. I regret my hasty action in dismissing Jesse without a hearing. How can I make it up with him?"

"You can send another note of explanation, asking his forgiveness," suggested Mrs. Clarke.

"Oh, mamma, if I could only go to him myself!" she cried, impatient for the reconciliation.

"It would not be exactly proper, my dear."

"But we are engaged."

"You have broken the engagement."

Roma uttered a cry of grief and chagrin that touched her mother's heart.

"Poor dear, you are suffering, as I foreboded, for last night's folly," she sighed.

"Please don't lecture me, mamma. I'm wretched enough without that!"

"I only meant to sympathize with you, dear."

"Then help me—that is the best sort of sympathy. I suppose it wouldn't be improper for you to call on Jesse, at his hotel, would it?"

"No, I suppose not."

"Then I will write my note to him, and you can take it—will you?"

Mrs. Clarke assented, and was on the point of starting when a messenger arrived with a note for Roma, replying to hers of the night before.

In spite of his broken right arm, Jesse Devereaux had managed a scrawl with his left hand, and Roma tore it open with a burning face and wildly beating heart, quickly mastering its contents, which read:

Mr. Devereaux accepts his dismissal with equanimity, feeling sure from this display of Miss Clarke's hasty temper that he has had a lucky escape.

It was cool, curt, airy, almost to insolence; a fitting match for her own; and Roma gasped and almost fainted.

Where was all her boasting, now, that she would teach him a lesson; that he would be back in a day begging her to take back his ring?

She had met her match; she realized it now; remembering, all too late, how hard he had been to win; a lukewarm lover, after all, and perhaps glad now of his release.

Oh, if she could but have recalled that silly note, she would have given anything she possessed, for all the heart she had had been lavished on him.

With a genuine sob of choking regret, she flung the humiliating note to her mother, and sank into a chair, her face hidden in her hands.

Mrs. Clarke read, and exclaimed:

"Really, he need not comment on your temper while displaying an equally hasty one so plainly. He must certainly be very angry, but I suppose his suffering adds to his impatience."

"He—he—will forgive me when he reads my second note!" sobbed Roma.

"But you do not intend to send it now, Roma!" exclaimed Mrs. Clarke, with a certain resentment of her own at Jesse's brusqueness.

But Roma could be very inconsistent—overbearing when it was permitted to her; humble when cowed.

She lifted up a miserable face, replying eagerly:

"Oh, yes, mamma, for I was plainly in the wrong, and deserve that he should be angry with me. But he will be only too glad to forgive me when he reads my note of repentance. Please go at once, dear mamma, and make my peace with Jesse! You will know how to plead with him in my behalf! Oh, don't look so cold and disapproving, mamma, for I love him so it would break my heart to lose him now. And—and—if he made love to any other girl, I should like to—to—see her lying dead at my feet! Oh, go; go quickly, and hasten back to me with my ring again and Jesse's forgiveness!"

She was half mad with anxiety and impatience, and she almost thrust Mrs. Clarke from the room in her eagerness for her return.

It mattered not that she could see plainly how distasteful it was to the gentle lady to go on such a mission; she insisted on obedience, and waited with passionate impatience for her mother's return, saying to herself:

"He is certainly very angry, but she will coax him to make up, and hereafter I will be very careful not to let him slip me again. I can be humble until we are married, and rule afterward. Mamma will not dare leave him without getting his forgiveness for me. She knows my temper, and that I would blame her always if she failed of success."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.