

Libbey Laura Jean

Daisy Brooks: or, A Perilous Love



Laura Libbey

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CHAPTER I

A warm day in the southern part of West Virginia was fast drawing to a close; the heat during the day had been almost intolerable under the rays of the piercing sun, and the night was coming on in sullen sultriness. No breath of cooling air stirred the leafy branches of the trees; the stillness was broken only by the chirping of the crickets, and the fire-flies twinkled for a moment, and were then lost to sight in the long grasses.

On one of the most prosperous plantations in that section of the country there was a great stir of excitement; the master, Basil Hurlhurst, was momentarily expected home with his bride. The negroes in their best attire were scattered in anxious groups here and there, watching eagerly for the first approach of their master's carriage on the white pebbled road.

The curtains of Whitestone Hall were looped back, and a cheerful flood of light shone out on the waving cotton fields that stretched out as far as the eye could reach, like a field of snow. The last touches had been given to the pillars of roses that filled every available nook and corner, making the summer air redolent with their odorous perfumes. Mrs. Corliss, who had maintained the position of housekeeper for a score of years or more, stood at the window twisting the telegram she held in her hand with ill-concealed impatience. The announcement of this home-coming had been as unexpected as the news of his marriage had been quite a year before.

"Let there be no guests assembled—my reasons will be made apparent to you later on," so read the telegram, which puzzled the housekeeper more than she cared to admit to the inquisitive maid, who stood near her, curiously watching her thoughtful face.

"Pears to me it will rain afore they get here, Hagar," she said, nervously, and, as if in confirmation of her words, a few rain-drops splashed against the window-pane.

Both stood gazing intently out into the darkness. The storm had now commenced in earnest. The great trees bent to and fro like reeds before the wind; the lightning flashed, and the terrific crash of roaring thunder mingled with the torrent of rain that beat furiously against the casement. It seemed as if the very flood-gates of heaven were flung open wide on this memorable night of the master's return.

"It is a fearful night. Ah! happy is the bride upon whose home-coming the sunlight falls," muttered Mrs. Corliss under her breath.

Hagar had caught the low-spoken words, and in a voice that sounded strange and weird like a warning, she answered:

"Yes, and unhappy is the bride upon whose home-coming rain-drops fall."

How little they knew, as they stood there, of the terrible tragedy—the cruelest ever enacted—those grim, silent walls of Whitestone Hall were soon to witness, in fulfillment of the strange prophecy. Hagar, the maid, had scarcely ceased speaking ere the door was flung violently open, and a child of some five summers rushed into the room, her face livid with passion, and her dark, gleaming eyes shining like baneful stars, before which the two women involuntarily quailed.

"What is this I hear?" she cried, with wild energy, glancing fiercely from the one to the other. "Is it true what they tell me—my father is bringing home his bride?"

"Pluma, my child," remonstrated Mrs. Corliss, feebly, "I—"

"Don't Pluma me!" retorted the child, clutching the deep crimson passion-roses from a vase at her side, and trampling them ruthlessly beneath her feet. "Answer me at once, I say—has he *dared* do it?"

“P-l-u-m-a!” Mrs. Corliss advances toward her, but the child turns her darkly beautiful, willful face toward her with an imperious gesture.

“Do not come a step nearer,” cried the child, bitterly, “or I shall fling myself from the window down on to the rocks below. I shall never welcome my father’s wife here; and mark me, both of you, I hate her!” she cried, vehemently. “She shall rue the day that she was born!”

Mrs. Corliss knew but too well the child would keep her word. No power, save God, could stay the turbulent current of the ungovernable self-will which would drag her on to her doom. No human being could hold in subjection the fierce, untamed will of the beautiful, youthful tyrant.

There had been strange rumors of the unhappiness of Basil Hurlhurst’s former marriage. No one remembered having seen her but once, quite five years before. A beautiful woman with a little babe had suddenly appeared at Whitestone Hall, announcing herself as Basil Hurlhurst’s wife. There had been a fierce, stormy interview, and on that very night Basil Hurlhurst took his wife and child abroad; those who had once seen the dark, glorious, scornful beauty of the woman’s face never forgot it. Two years later the master had returned alone with the little child, heavily draped in widower’s weeds.

The master of Whitestone Hall was young; those who knew his story were not surprised that he should marry—he could not go through life alone; still they felt a nameless pity for the young wife who was to be brought to the home in which dwelt the child of his former wife.

There would be bitter war to the end between them. No one could tell on which side the scales of mercy and justice would be balanced.

At that instant, through the raging of the fierce elements, the sound of carriage wheels smote upon their ears as the vehicle dashed rapidly up the long avenue to the porch; while, in another instant, the young master, half carrying the slight, delicate figure that clung timidly to his arm, hurriedly entered the spacious parlor. There was a short consultation with the housekeeper, and Basil Hurlhurst, tenderly lifting the slight burden in his strong, powerful arms, quickly bore his wife to the beautiful apartments that had been prepared for her.

In the excitement of the moment Pluma was quite forgotten; for an instant only she glanced bitterly at the sweet, fair face resting against her father’s shoulder, framed in a mass of golden hair. The child clinched her small hands until she almost cried aloud with the intense pain, never once deigning a glance at her father’s face. In that one instant the evil seeds of a lifetime were sown strong as life and more bitter than death.

Turning hastily aside she sprung hurriedly down the long corridor, and out into the darkness and the storm, never stopping to gain breath until she had quite reached the huge ponderous gate that shut in the garden from the dense thicket that skirted the southern portion of the plantation. She laughed a hard, mocking laugh that sounded unnatural from such childish lips, as she saw a white hand hurriedly loop back the silken curtains of her father’s window, and saw him bend tenderly over the golden-haired figure in the arm-chair. Suddenly the sound of her own name fell upon her ear.

“Pluma,” whispered a low, cautious voice; and in the quick flashes of lightning she saw a white, haggard woman’s face pressed close against the grating, and two white hands were steadily forcing the rusty lock. There was no fear in the fiery, rebellious heart of the dauntless child.

“Go away, you miserable beggar-woman,” she cried, “or I shall set the hounds on you at once. Do you hear me, I say?”

“Who are you?” questioned the woman, in the same low, guarded voice.

The child threw her head back proudly, her voice rising shrilly above the wild warring of the elements, as she answered:

“Know, then, I am Pluma, the heiress of Whitestone Hall.”

The child formed a strange picture—her dark, wild face, so strangely like the mysterious woman’s own, standing vividly out against the crimson lightning flashes, her dark curls blown about the gypsy-like face, the red lips curling scornfully, her dark eyes gleaming.

“Pluma,” called the woman, softly, “come here.”

“How dare *you*, a beggar-woman, call me!” cried the child, furiously.

“Pluma—come—here—instantly!”

There was a subtle something in the stranger’s voice that throbbed through the child’s pulses like leaping fire—a strange, mysterious influence that bound her, heart and soul, like the mesmeric influence a serpent exerts over a fascinated dove. Slowly, hesitatingly, this child, whose fiery will had never bowed before human power, came timidly forward, step by step, close to the iron gate against which the woman’s face was pressed. She stretched out her hand, and it rested for a moment on the child’s dark curls.

“Pluma, the gate is locked,” she said. “Do you know where the keys are?”

“No,” answered the child.

“They used to hang behind the pantry door—a great bunch of them. Don’t they hang there now?”

“Ye—es.”

“I thought so,” muttered the woman, triumphantly. “Now, listen, Pluma; I want you to do exactly as I bid you. I want you to go quickly and quietly, and bring me the longest and thinnest one. You are not to breathe one word of this to any living soul. Do you understand, Pluma—I command you to do it.”

“Yes,” answered the child, dubiously.

“Stay!” she called, as the child was about to turn from her. “Why is the house lighted up to-night?”

Again the reckless spirit of the child flashed forth.

“My father has brought home his bride,” she said. “Don’t you see him bending over her, toward the third window yonder?”

The woman’s eyes quickly followed in the direction indicated.

Was it a curse the woman muttered as she watched the fair, golden-haired young girl-wife’s head resting against Basil Hurlhurst’s breast, his arms clasped lovingly about her?

“Go, Pluma!” she commanded, bitterly.

Quickly and cautiously the child sped on her fatal errand through the storm and the darkness. A moment later she had returned with the key which was to unlock a world of misery to so many lives.

“Promise me, Pluma, heiress of Whitestone Hall, never to tell what you have done or seen or heard to-night. You must never dare breathe it while you live. Say you will never tell, Pluma.”

“No,” cried the child, “I shall never tell. They might kill me, but I would never tell them.”

The next moment she was alone. Stunned and bewildered, she turned her face slowly toward the house. The storm did not abate in its fury; night-birds flapped their wings through the storm overhead; owls shrieked in the distance from the swaying tree-tops; yet the child walked slowly home, knowing no fear. In the house lights were moving to and fro, while servants, with bated breath and light footfalls, hurried through the long corridors toward her father’s room. No one seemed to notice Pluma, in her dripping robe, creeping slowly along by their side toward her own little chamber.

It was quite midnight when her father sent for her. Pluma suffered him to kiss her, giving back no answering caress.

“I have brought some one else to you, my darling,” he said. “See, Pluma—a new mamma! And see who else—a wee, dimpled little sister, with golden hair like mamma’s, and great blue eyes. Little Evalia is your sister, dear. Pluma must love her new mamma and sister for papa’s sake.”

The dark frown on the child’s face never relaxed, and, with an impatient gesture, her father ordered her taken at once from the room.

Suddenly the great bells of Whitestone Hall ceased pealing for the joyous birth of Basil Hurlhurst’s daughter, and bitter cries of a strong man in mortal anguish rent the air. No one had noticed how or when the sweet, golden-haired young wife had died. With a smile on her lips, she was dead, with her tiny little darling pressed close to her pulseless heart.

But sorrow even as pitiful as death but rarely travels singly. Dear Heaven! how could they tell the broken-hearted man, who wept in such agony beside the wife he had loved so well, of another mighty sorrow that had fallen upon him? Who was there that could break the news to him? The tiny, fair-haired infant had been stolen from their midst. They would have thanked God if it had been lying cold in death upon its mother's bosom.

Slowly throughout the long night—that terrible night that was never to be forgotten—the solemn bells pealed forth from the turrets of Whitestone Hall, echoing in their sound: “Unhappy is the bride the rain falls on.” Most truly had been the fulfillment of the fearful prophecy!

“Merciful God!” cried Mrs. Corliss, “how shall I break the news to my master? The sweet little babe is gone!”

For answer Hagar bent quickly over her, and breathed a few words in her ear that caused her to cry out in horror and amaze.

“No one will ever know,” whispered Hagar; “it is the wisest course. The truth will lie buried in our own hearts, and die with us.”

Six weeks from the night his golden-haired wife had died Basil Hurlhurst awoke to consciousness from the ravages of brain-fever—awoke to a life not worth the living. Quickly Mrs. Corliss, the housekeeper, was sent for, who soon entered the room, leaning upon Hagar's arm.

“My wife is—” He could not say more.

“Buried, sir, beneath yonder willow.”

“And the babe?” he cried, eagerly. “Dead,” answered Hagar, softly. “Both are buried in one grave.”

Basil Hurlhurst turned his face to the wall, with a bitter groan.

Heaven forgive them—the seeds of the bitterest of tragedies were irrevocably sown.

CHAPTER II

One bright May morning some sixteen years later, the golden sunshine was just putting forth its first crimson rays, lighting up the ivy-grown turrets of Whitestone Hall, and shining upon a little white cottage nestling in a bower of green leaves far to the right of it, where dwelt John Brooks, the overseer of the Hurlhurst plantation.

For sixteen years the grand old house had remained closed—the plantation being placed in charge of a careful overseer. Once again Whitestone Hall was thrown open to welcome the master, Basil Hurlhurst, who had returned from abroad, bringing with him his beautiful daughter and a party of friends.

The interior of the little cottage was astir with bustling activity.

It was five o'clock; the chimes had played the hour; the laborers were going to the fields, and the dairy-maids were beginning their work.

In the door-way of the cottage stood a tall, angular woman, shading her flushed and heated face from the sun's rays with her hand.

"Daisy, Daisy!" she calls, in a harsh, rasping voice, "where are you, you good-for-nothing lazy girl? Come into the house directly, I say." Her voice died away over the white stretches of waving cotton, but no Daisy came. "Here's a pretty go," she cried, turning into the room where her brother sat calmly finishing his morning meal, "a pretty go, indeed! I promised Miss Pluma those white mulls should be sent over to her the first thing in the morning. She will be in a towering rage, and no wonder, and like enough you'll lose your place, John Brooks, and 'twill serve you right, too, for encouraging that lazy girl in her idleness."

"Don't be too hard on little Daisy, Septima," answered John Brooks, timidly, reaching for his hat. "She will have the dresses at the Hall in good time, I'll warrant."

"Too hard, indeed; that's just like you men; no feeling for your poor, overworked sister, so long as that girl has an easy life of it. It was a sorry day for *me* when your aunt Taiza died, leaving this girl to our care."

A deep flush mantled John Brooks' face, but he made no retort, while Septima energetically piled the white fluted laces in the huge basket—piled it full to the brim, until her arm ached with the weight of it—the basket which was to play such a fatal part in the truant Daisy's life—the life which for sixteen short years had been so monotonous.

Over the corn-fields half hid by the clover came a young girl tripping lightly along. John Brooks paused in the path as he caught sight of her. "Poor, innocent little Daisy!" he muttered half under his breath, as he gazed at her quite unseen.

Transferred to canvas, it would have immortalized a painter. No wonder the man's heart softened as he gazed. He saw a glitter of golden curls, and the scarlet gleam of a mantle—a young girl, tall and slender, with rounded, supple limbs, and a figure graceful in every line and curve—while her arms, bare to the elbow, would have charmed a sculptor. Cheek and lips were a glowing rosy red—while her eyes, of the deepest and darkest blue, were the merriest that ever gazed up to the summer sunshine.

Suddenly from over the trees there came the sound of the great bell at the Hall. Daisy stood quite still in alarm.

"It is five o'clock!" she cried. "What shall I do? Aunt Septima will be so angry with me; she promised Miss Pluma her white dresses should be at the Hall by five, and it is that already."

Poor little Daisy! no wonder her heart throbbed painfully and the look of fear deepened in her blue eyes as she sped rapidly up the path that led to the little cottage where Septima grimly awaited her with flushed face and flashing eyes.

“So,” she said, harshly, “you are come at last, are you? and a pretty fright you have given me. You shall answer to Miss Pluma *herself* for this. I dare say you will never attempt to offend her a second time.”

“Indeed, Aunt Septima, I never dreamed it was so late,” cried conscious Daisy. “I was watching the sun rise over the cotton-fields, and watching the dewdrops glittering on the corn, thinking of the beautiful heiress of Whitestone Hall. I am so sorry I forgot about the dresses.”

Hastily catching up the heavy basket, she hurried quickly down the path, like a startled deer, to escape the volley of wrath the indignant spinster hurled after her.

It was a beautiful morning; no cloud was in the smiling heavens; the sun shone brightly, and the great oak and cedar-trees that skirted the roadside seemed to thrill with the song of birds. Butterflies spread their light wings and coquetted with the fragrant blossoms, and busy humming-bees buried themselves in the heart of the crimson wild rose. The basket was very heavy, and poor little Daisy’s hands ached with the weight of it.

“If I might but rest for a few moments only,” she said to herself, eyeing the cool, shady grass by the roadside. “Surely a moment or two will not matter. Oh, dear, I am so tired!”

She set the basket down on the cool, green grass, flinging herself beside it beneath the grateful shade of a blossoming magnolia-tree, resting her golden head against the basket of filmy laces that were to adorn the beautiful heiress of whom she had heard so much, yet never seen, and of whom every one felt in such awe.

She looked wistfully at the great mansion in the distance, thinking how differently her own life had been.

The soft, wooing breeze fanned her cheeks, tossing about her golden curls in wanton sport. It was so pleasant to sit there in the dreamy silence watching the white fleecy clouds, the birds, and the flowers, it was little wonder the swift-winged moments flew heedlessly by. Slowly the white lids drooped over the light-blue eyes, the long, golden lashes lay against the rosy cheeks, the ripe lips parted in a smile—all unheeded were the fluted laces—Daisy slept. Oh, cruel breeze—oh, fatal wooing breeze to have infolded hapless Daisy in your soft embrace!

Over the hills came the sound of baying hounds, followed by a quick, springy step through the crackling underbrush, as a young man in close-fitting velvet hunting-suit and jaunty velvet cap emerged from the thicket toward the main road.

As he parted the magnolia branches the hound sprang quickly forward at some object beneath the tree, with a low, hoarse growl.

“Down, Towser, down!” cried Rex Lyon, leaping lightly over some intervening brushwood. “What kind of game have we here? Whew!” he ejaculated, surprisedly; “a young girl, pretty as a picture, and, by the eternal, fast asleep, too!”

Still Daisy slept on, utterly unconscious of the handsome brown eyes that were regarding her so admiringly.

“I have often heard of fairies, but this is the first time I have ever caught one napping under the trees. I wonder who she is anyhow? Surely she can not be some drudging farmer’s daughter with a form and face like that?” he mused, suspiciously eyeing the basket of freshly laundered laces against which the flushed cheeks and waving golden hair rested.

Just then his ludicrous position struck him forcibly.

“Come, Towser,” he said, “it would never do for you and me to be caught staring at this pretty wood-nymph so rudely, if she should by chance awaken just now.”

Tightening the strap of his game-bag over his shoulder, and readjusting his velvet cap jauntily over his brown curls, Rex was about to resume his journey in the direction of Whitestone Hall, when the sound of rapidly approaching carriage-wheels fell upon his ears. Realizing his awkward position, Rex knew the wisest course he could possibly pursue would be to screen himself behind the magnolia branches until the vehicle should pass. The next instant a pair of prancing ponies, attached to a basket

phaeton, in which sat a young girl, who held them well in check, dashed rapidly up the road. Rex could scarcely repress an exclamation of surprise as he saw the occupant was his young hostess, Pluma Hurlhurst of Whitestone Hall. She drew rein directly in front of the sleeping girl, and Rex Lyon never forgot, to his dying day, the discordant laugh that broke from her red lips—a laugh which caused poor Daisy to start from her slumber in wild alarm, scattering the snowy contents of the basket in all directions.

For a single instant their eyes met—these two girls, whose lives were to cross each other so strangely—poor Daisy, like a frightened bird, as she guessed intuitively at the identity of the other; Pluma, haughty, derisive, and scornfully mocking.

“You are the person whom Miss Brooks sent to Whitestone Hall with my mull dresses some three hours since, I presume. May I ask what detained you?”

Poor Daisy was quite crestfallen; great tear-drops trembled on her long lashes. How could she answer? She had fallen asleep, wooed by the lulling breeze and the sunshine.

“The basket was so heavy,” she answered, timidly, “and I—I—sat down to rest a few moments, and—”

“Further explanation is quite unnecessary,” retorted Pluma, sharply, gathering up the reins. “See that you have those things at the Hall within ten minutes; not an instant later.”

Touching the prancing ponies with her ivory-handled whip, the haughty young heiress whirled leisurely down the road, leaving Daisy, with flushed face and tear-dimmed eyes, gazing after her.

“Oh, dear, I wish I had never been born,” she sobbed, flinging herself down on her knees, and burying her face in the long, cool grass. “No one ever speaks a kind word to me but poor old Uncle John, and even he dare not be kind when Aunt Septima is near. She might have taken this heavy basket in her carriage,” sighed Daisy, bravely lifting the heavy burden in her delicate arms.

“That is just what I think,” muttered Rex Lyon from his place of concealment, savagely biting his lip.

In another moment he was by her side.

“Pardon me,” he said, deferentially raising his cap from his glossy curls, “that basket is too heavy for your slender arms. Allow me to assist you.”

In a moment the young girl stood up, and made the prettiest and most graceful of courtesies as she raised to his a face he never forgot. Involuntarily he raised his cap again in homage to her youth, and her shy sweet beauty.

“No; I thank you, sir, I have not far to carry the basket,” she replied, in a voice sweet as the chiming of silver bells—a voice that thrilled him, he could not tell why.

A sudden desire possessed Rex to know who she was and from whence she came.

“Do you live at the Hall?” he asked.

“No,” she replied, “I am Daisy Brooks, the overseer’s niece.”

“Daisy Brooks,” said Rex, musingly. “What a pretty name! how well it suits you!”

He watched the crimson blushes that dyed her fair young face—she never once raised her dark-blue eyes to his. The more Rex looked at her the more he admired this coy, bewitching, pretty little maiden. She made a fair picture under the boughs of the magnolia-tree, thick with odorous pink-and-white tinted blossoms, the sunbeams falling on her golden hair.

The sunshine or the gentle southern wind brought Rex no warning he was forging the first links of a dreadful tragedy. He thought only of the shy blushing beauty and coy grace of the young girl—he never dreamed of the hour when he should look back to that moment, wondering at his own blind folly, with a curse on his lips.

Again from over the trees came the sound of the great bell from the Hall.

“It is eight o’clock,” cried Daisy, in alarm. “Miss Pluma will be so angry with me.”

“Angry!” said Rex; “angry with you! For what?”

“She is waiting for the mull dresses,” replied Daisy.

It was a strange idea to him that any one should dare be angry with this pretty gentle Daisy.

“You will at least permit me to carry your basket as far as the gate,” he said, shouldering her burden without waiting for a reply. Daisy had no choice but to follow him. “There,” said Rex, setting the basket down by the plantation gate, which they had reached all too soon, “you must go, I suppose. It seems hard to leave the bright sunshine to go indoors.”

“I—I shall soon return,” said Daisy, with innocent frankness.

“Shall you?” cried Rex. “Will you return home by the same path?”

“Yes,” she replied, “if Miss Pluma does not need me.”

“Good-bye, Daisy,” he said. “I shall see you again.”

He held out his hand and her little fingers trembled and fluttered in his clasp. Daisy looked so happy yet so frightened, so charming yet so shy, Rex hardly knew how to define the feeling that stirred in his heart.

He watched the graceful, fairy figure as Daisy tripped away—instead of thinking he had done a very foolish thing that bright morning. Rex lighted a cigar and fell to dreaming of sweet little Daisy Brooks, and wondering how he should pass the time until he should see her again.

While Daisy almost flew up the broad gravel path to the house, the heavy burden she bore seemed light as a feather—no thought that she had been imprudent ever entered her mind.

There was no one to warn her of the peril which lay in the witching depths of the handsome stranger’s glances.

All her young life she had dreamed of the hero who would one day come to her, just such a dream as all youthful maidens experience—an idol they enshrine in their innermost heart, and worship in secret, never dreaming of a cold, dark time when the idol may lie shattered in ruins at their feet. How little knew gentle Daisy Brooks of the fatal love which would drag her down to her doom!

CHAPTER III

In an elegant boudoir, all crimson and gold, some hours later, sat Pluma Hurlhurst, reclining negligently on a satin divan, toying idly with a volume which lay in her lap. She tossed the book aside with a yawn, turning her superb dark eyes on the little figure bending over the rich trailing silks which were to adorn her own fair beauty on the coming evening.

“So you think you would like to attend the lawn fête to-night, Daisy?” she asked, patronizingly.

Daisy glanced up with a startled blush,

“Oh, I should like it so much, Miss Pluma,” she answered, hesitatingly, “if I only could!”

“I think I shall gratify you,” said Pluma, carelessly. “You have made yourself very valuable to me. I like the artistic manner you have twined these roses in my hair; the effect is quite picturesque.” She glanced satisfiedly at her own magnificent reflection in the cheval-glass opposite. Titian alone could have reproduced those rich, marvelous colors—that perfect, queenly beauty. He would have painted the picture, and the world would have raved about its beauty. The dark masses of raven-black hair; the proud, haughty face, with its warm southern tints; the dusky eyes, lighted with fire and passion, and the red, curved lips. “I wish particularly to look my very best to-night, Daisy,” she said; “that is why I wish you to remain. You can arrange those sprays of white heath in my hair superbly. Then you shall attend the fête, Daisy. Remember, you are not expected to take part in it; you must sit in some secluded nook where you will be quite unobserved.”

Pluma could not help but smile at the ardent delight depicted in Daisy’s face.

“I am afraid I can not stay,” she said, doubtfully, glancing down in dismay at the pink-and-white muslin she wore. “Every one would be sure to laugh at me who saw me. Then I would wish I had not stayed.”

“Suppose I should give you one to wear—that white mull, for instance—how would you like it? None of the guests would see you,” replied Pluma.

There was a wistful look in Daisy’s eyes, as though she would fain believe what she heard was really true.

“Would you really?” asked Daisy, wonderingly. “You, whom people call so haughty and so proud—you would really let me wear one of your dresses? I do not know how to tell you how much I am pleased!” she said, eagerly.

Pluma Hurlhurst laughed. Such rapture was new to her.

The night which drew its mantle over the smiling earth was a perfect one. Myriads of stars shone like jewels in the blue sky, and not a cloud obscured the face of the clear full moon. Hurlhurst Plantation was ablaze with colored lamps that threw out soft rainbow tints in all directions as far as the eye could reach. The interior of Whitestone Hall was simply dazzling in its rich rose bloom, its lights, its fountains, and rippling music from adjoining ferneries.

In an elegant apartment of the Hall Basil Hurlhurst, the recluse invalid, lay upon his couch, trying to shut out the mirth and gayety that floated up to him from below. As the sound of Pluma’s voice sounded upon his ear he turned his face to the wall with a bitter groan. “She is so like—” he muttered, grimly. “Ah! the pleasant voices of our youth turn into lashes which scourge us in our old age. ‘Like mother, like child.’”

The lawn fête was a grand success; the *élite* of the whole country round were gathered together to welcome the beautiful, peerless hostess of Whitestone Hall. Pluma moved among her guests like a queen, yet in all that vast throng her eyes eagerly sought one face. “Where was Rex?” was the question which constantly perplexed her. After the first waltz he had suddenly disappeared. Only the evening before handsome Rex Lyon had held her jeweled hand long at parting, whispering, in his graceful, charming way, he had something to tell her on the morrow. “Why did he hold himself so strangely aloof?” Pluma asked herself, in bitter wonder. Ah! had she but known!

While Pluma, the wealthy heiress, awaited his coming so eagerly, Rex Lyon was standing, quite lost in thought, beside a rippling fountain in one of the most remote parts of the lawn, thinking of Daisy Brooks. He had seen a fair face—that was all—a face that embodied his dream of loveliness, and without thinking of it found his fate, and the whole world seemed changed for him.

Handsome, impulsive Rex Lyon, owner of several of the most extensive and lucrative orange groves in Florida, would have bartered every dollar of his worldly possessions for love.

He had hitherto treated all notion of love in a very off-hand, cavalier fashion.

“Love is fate,” he had always said. He knew Pluma loved him. Last night he had said to himself: The time had come when he might as well marry; it might as well be Pluma as any one else, seeing she cared so much for him. Now all that was changed. “I sincerely hope she will not attach undue significance to the words I spoke last evening,” he mused.

Rex did not care to return again among the throng; it was sweeter far to sit there by the murmuring fountain dreaming of Daisy Brooks, and wondering when he should see her again. A throng which did not hold the face of Daisy Brooks had no charm for Rex.

Suddenly a soft step sounded on the grass; Rex’s heart gave a sudden bound; surely it could not be—yes, it was—Daisy Brooks.

She drew back with a startled cry as her eyes suddenly encountered those of her hero of the morning. She would have fled precipitately had he not stretched out his hand quickly to detain her.

“Daisy,” cried Rex, “why do you look so frightened? Are you displeased to see me?”

“No,” she said. “I—I—do not know—”

She looked so pretty, so bewildered, so dazzled by joy, yet so pitifully uncertain, Rex was more desperately in love with her than ever.

“Your eyes speak, telling me you *are* pleased, Daisy, even if your lips *refuse* to tell me so. Sit down on this rustic bench, Daisy, while I tell you how anxiously I awaited your coming—waited until the shadows of evening fell.”

As he talked to her he grew more interested with every moment. She had no keen intellect, no graceful powers of repartee, knew little of books or the great world beyond. Daisy was a simple, guileless child of nature.

Rex’s vanity was gratified at the unconscious admiration which shone in her eyes and the blushes his words brought to her cheeks.

“There is my favorite waltz, Daisy,” he said, as the music of the irresistible “Blue Danube” floated out to them. “Will you favor me with a waltz?”

“Miss Pluma would be so angry,” she murmured.

“Never mind her anger, Daisy. I will take all the blame on *my* shoulders. They are unusually broad, you see.”

He led her half reluctant among the gay throng; gentlemen looked at one another in surprise. Who is she? they asked one of the other, gazing upon her in wonder. No one could answer. The sweet-faced little maiden in soft, floating white, with a face like an angel’s, who wore no other ornament than her crown of golden hair, was a mystery and a novelty. In all the long years of her after life Daisy never forgot that supremely blissful moment. It seemed to her they were floating away into another sphere. Rex’s arms were around her, his eyes smiling down into hers; he could feel the slight form trembling in his embrace, and he clasped her still closer. With youth, music, and beauty—there was nothing wanting to complete the charm of love.

Leaning gracefully against an overarching palm-tree stood a young man watching the pair with a strange intentness; a dark, vindictive smile hovered about the corners of his mouth, hidden by his black mustache, and there was a cruel gleam in the dark, wicked eyes scanning the face of the young girl so closely.

“Ah! why not?” he mused. “It would be a glorious revenge.” He made his way hurriedly in the direction of his young hostess, who was, as usual, surrounded by a group of admirers. A deep crimson

spot burned on either cheek, and her eyes glowed like stars, as of one under intense, suppressed excitement.

Lester Stanwick made his way to her side just as the last echo of the waltz died away on the air, inwardly congratulating himself upon finding Rex and Daisy directly beside him.

“Miss Pluma,” said Stanwick, with a low bow, “will you kindly present me to the little fairy on your right? I am quite desperately smitten with her.”

Several gentlemen crowded around Pluma asking the same favor.

With a smile and a bow, what could Rex do but lead Daisy gracefully forward. Those who witnessed the scene that ensued never forgot it. For answer Pluma Hurlhurst turned coldly, haughtily toward them, drawing herself up proudly to her full height.

“There is evidently some mistake here,” she said, glancing scornfully at the slight, girlish figure leaning upon Rex Lyon’s arm. “I do not recognize this person as a guest. If I mistake not, she is one of the hirelings connected with the plantation.”

If a thunderbolt had suddenly exploded beneath Rex’s feet he could not have been more thoroughly astounded.

Daisy uttered a piteous little cry and, like a tender flower cut down by a sudden, rude blast, would have fallen at his feet had he not reached out his arm to save her.

“Miss Hurlhurst,” cried Rex, in a voice husky with emotion, “I hold myself responsible for this young lady’s presence here. I—”

“Ah!” interrupts Pluma, ironically; “and may I ask by what right you force one so inferior, and certainly obnoxious, among us?”

Rex Lyon’s handsome face was white with rage. “Miss Hurlhurst,” he replied, with stately dignity, “I regret, more than the mere words express, that my heedlessness has brought upon this little creature at my side an insult so cruel, so unjust, and so bitter, in simply granting my request for a waltz—a request very reluctantly granted. An invited guest among you she may not be; but I most emphatically defy her inferiority to any lady or gentleman present.”

“Rex—Mr. Lyon,” says Pluma, icily, “you forget yourself.”

He smiled contemptuously. “I do not admit it,” he said, hotly. “I have done that which any gentleman should have done; defended from insult one of the purest and sweetest of maidens. I will do more—I will shield her, henceforth and forever, with my very life, if need be. If I can win her, I shall make Daisy Brooks my wife.”

Rex spoke rapidly—vehemently. His chivalrous soul was aroused; he scarcely heeded the impetuous words that fell from his lips. He could not endure the thought that innocent, trusting little Daisy should suffer through any fault of his.

“Come, Daisy,” he said, softly, clasping in his own strong white ones the little fingers clinging so pitifully to his arm, “we will go away from here at once—our presence longer is probably obnoxious. Farewell, Miss Hurlhurst.”

“Rex,” cried Pluma, involuntarily taking a step forward, “you do not, you can not mean what you say. You will not allow a creature like that to separate us—you have forgotten, Rex. You said you had something to tell me. You will not part with me so easily,” she cried.

A sudden terror seized her at the thought of losing him. He was her world. She forgot the guests gathering about her—forgot she was the wealthy, courted heiress for whose glance or smiles men sued in vain—forgot her haughty pride, in the one absorbing thought that Rex was going from her. Her wild, fiery, passionate love could bear no restraint.

“Rex,” she cried, suddenly falling on her knees before him, her face white and stormy, her white jeweled hands clasped supplicatingly, “you must not, you shall not leave me so; no one shall come between us. Listen—I love you, Rex. What if the whole world knows it—what will it matter, it is the truth. My love is my life. You loved me until she came between us with her false, fair face.

But for this you would have asked me to be your wife. Send that miserable little hireling away, Rex—the gardener will take charge of her.”

Pluma spoke rapidly, vehemently. No one could stay the torrent of her bitter words.

Rex was painfully distressed and annoyed. Fortunately but very few of the guests had observed the thrilling tableau enacted so near them.

“Pluma—Miss Hurlhurst,” he said, “I am sorry you have unfortunately thus expressed yourself, for your own sake. I beg you will say no more. You yourself have severed this night the last link of friendship between us. I am frank with you in thus admitting it. I sympathize with you, while your words have filled me with the deepest consternation and embarrassment, which it is useless longer to prolong.”

Drawing Daisy’s arm hurriedly within his own, Rex Lyon strode quickly down the graveled path, with the full determination of never again crossing the threshold of Whitestone Hall, or gazing upon the face of Pluma Hurlhurst.

Meanwhile Pluma had arisen from her knees with a gay, mocking laugh, turning suddenly to the startled group about her.

“Bravo! bravo! Miss Pluma,” cried Lester Stanwick, stepping to her side at that opportune moment. “On the stage you would have made a grand success. We are practicing for a coming charade,” explained Stanwick, laughingly; “and, judging from the expressions depicted on our friend’s faces, I should say you have drawn largely upon real life. You will be a success, Miss Pluma.”

No one dreamed of doubting the assertion. A general laugh followed, and the music struck up again, and the gay mirth of the fête resumed its sway.

Long after the guests had departed Pluma sat in her boudoir, her heart torn with pain, love, and jealousy, her brain filled with schemes of vengeance.

“I can not take her life!” she cried; “but if I could mar her beauty—the pink-and-white beauty of Daisy Brooks, which has won Rex from me—I would do it. I shall torture her for this,” she cried. “I will win him from her though I wade through seas of blood. Hear me, Heaven,” she cried, “and register my vow!”

Pluma hastily rung the bell.

“Saddle Whirlwind and Tempest at once!” she said to the servant who answered her summons.

“It is after midnight, Miss Pluma. I—”

There was a look in her eyes which would brook no further words.

An hour later they had reached the cottage wherein slept Daisy Brooks, heedless of the danger that awaited her.

“Wait for me here,” said Pluma to the groom who accompanied her—“*I will not be long!*”

CHAPTER IV

“Daisy,” said Rex, gently, as he led her away from the lights and the echoing music out into the starlight that shone with a soft, silvery radiance over hill and vale, “I shall never forgive myself for being the cause of the cruel insult you have been forced to endure to-night. I declare it’s a shame. I shall tell Pluma so to-morrow.”

“Oh, no—no—please don’t, Mr. Rex. I—I—had no right to waltz with you,” sobbed Daisy, “when I knew you were Pluma’s lover.”

“Don’t say that, Daisy,” responded Rex, warmly. “I am glad, after all, everything has happened just as it did, otherwise I should never have known just how dear a certain little girl had grown to me; besides, I am not Pluma’s lover, and never shall be now.”

“You have quarreled with her for my sake,” whispered Daisy, regretfully. “I am so sorry—indeed I am.”

Daisy little dreamed, as she watched the deep flush rise to Rex’s face, it was of her he was thinking, and not Pluma, by the words, “a certain little girl.”

Rex saw she did not understand him; he stopped short in the path, gazing down into those great, dreamy, pleading eyes that affected him so strangely.

“Daisy,” he said, gently, taking her little clinging hands from his arm, and clasping them in his own, “you must not be startled at what I am going to tell you. When I met you under the magnolia boughs, I knew I had met my fate. I said to myself: ‘She, and no other, shall be my wife.’”

“Your wife,” she cried, looking at him in alarm. “Please don’t say so. I don’t want to be your wife.”

“Why not, Daisy?” he asked, quickly.

“Because you are so far above me,” sobbed Daisy. “You are so rich, and I am only poor little Daisy Brooks.”

Oh, how soft and beautiful were the eyes swimming in tears and lifted so timidly to his face! She could not have touched Rex more deeply. Daisy was his first love, and he loved her from the first moment their eyes met, with all the strength of his boyish, passionate nature; so it is not strange that the thought of possessing her, years sooner than he should have dared hope, made his young blood stir with ecstasy even though he knew it was wrong.

“Wealth shall be no barrier between us, Daisy,” he cried. “What is all the wealth in the world compared to love? Do not say that again. Love outweighs everything. Even though you bid me go away and forget you, Daisy, I could not do it. I can not live without you.”

“Do you really love me so much in so short a time?” she asked, blushing.

“My love can not be measured by the length of time I have known you,” he answered, eagerly. “Why, Daisy, the strongest and deepest love men have ever felt have come to them suddenly, without warning.”

The glamour of love was upon him; he could see no faults in pretty little artless Daisy. True, she had not been educated abroad like Pluma, but that did not matter; such a lovely rosebud mouth was made for kisses, not grammar.

Rex stood in suspense beside her, eagerly watching the conflict going on in the girl’s heart.

“Don’t refuse me, Daisy,” he cried, “give me the right to protect you forever from the cold world; let us be married to-night. We will keep it a secret if you say so. You must—you *must*, Daisy, for I can not give you up.”

Rex was so eager, so earnest, so thoroughly the impassioned lover! His hands were clinging to her own, his dark, handsome face drooped near hers, his pleading eyes searching her very soul.

Daisy was young, romantic, and impressible; a thousand thoughts rushed through her brain; it would be so nice to have a young husband to love her and care for her like Rex, so handsome and so

kind; then, too, she would have plenty of dresses, as fine as Pluma wore, all lace and puffs; she might have a carriage and ponies, too; and when she rolled by the little cottage, Septima, who had always been so cruel to her, would courtesy to *her*, as she did when Pluma, the haughty young heiress, passed.

The peachy bloom on her cheeks deepened; with Daisy's thoughtless clinging nature, her craving for love and protection, her implicit faith in Rex, who had protected her so nobly at the fête—it is not to be wondered Rex won the day.

Shyly Daisy raised her blue eyes to his face—and he read a shy, sweet consent that thrilled his very soul.

“You shall never regret this hour, my darling,” he cried, then in the soft silvery twilight he took her to his heart and kissed her rapturously.

His mother's bitter anger, so sure to follow—the cold, haughty mother, who never forgot or forgave an injury, and his little sister Birdie's sorrow were at that moment quite forgotten—even if they had been remembered they would have weighed as naught compared with his lovely little Daisy with the golden hair and eyes of blue looking up at him so trustingly.

Daisy never forgot that walk through the sweet pink clover to the little chapel on the banks of the lonely river. The crickets chirped in the long green grass, and the breeze swayed the branches of the tall leafy trees, rocking the little birds in their nests.

A sudden, swift, terrified look crept up into Daisy's face as they entered the dim shadowy parlor. Rex took her trembling chilled hands in his own; if he had not, at that moment, Daisy would have fled from the room.

“Only a little courage, Daisy,” he whispered, “then a life of happiness.”

Then as if in a dream she stood quite still by his side, while the fatal ceremony went on; in a confused murmur she heard the questions and responses of her lover, and answered the questions put to her; then Rex turned to her with a smile and a kiss.

Poor little thoughtless Daisy—it was done—in a moment she had sown the seeds from which was to spring up a harvest of woe so terrible that her wildest imagination could not have painted it.

“Are we really married, Rex?” she whispered, as he led her out again into the starlight; “it seems so much like a dream.”

He bent his handsome head and kissed his pretty child-bride. Daisy drew back with a startled cry—his lips were as cold as ice.

“Yes, you are my very own now,” he whispered. “No one shall ever have the right to scold you again; you are mine now, Daisy, but we must keep it a secret from every one for awhile, darling. You will do this for my sake, won't you, Daisy?” he asked. “I am rich, as far as the world knows, but it was left to me under peculiar conditions. I—I—do not like to tell you what those conditions were, Daisy.”

“Please tell me, Rex,” she said, timidly; “you know I am your—your—wife—now.”

Daisy blushed so prettily as she spoke. Rex could not refrain from catching her up in his arms and kissing her.

“You *shall* know, my darling,” he cried. “The conditions were I should marry the bride whom my mother selected for me. I was as much startled as you will be, Daisy, when you hear who it was—Pluma Hurlhurst, of Whitestone Hall.”

“But you can not marry her now, Rex,” whispered the little child-bride, nestling closer in his embrace.

“No; nor I would not if I could. I love you the best, my pretty wild flower. I would not exchange you, sweet, for all the world. I have only told you this so you will see why it is necessary to keep our marriage a secret—for the present, at least.”

Daisy readily consented.

“You are very wise, Rex,” she said. “I will do just as you tell me.”

By this time they had reached Daisy's home.

“I will meet you to-morrow at the magnolia-tree, where first I found my little wood-nymph, as I shall always call you. Then we can talk matters over better. You will be sure to come while the dew sparkles on your pretty namesakes?” he asked, eagerly.

Before she had time to answer the cottage door opened and Septima appeared in the door-way. Rex was obliged to content himself with snatching a hasty kiss from the rosy lips. The next moment he was alone.

He walked slowly back through the tangled brushwood—not to Whitestone Hall, but to an adjoining hostelry—feeling as though he were in a new world. True, it *was* hard to be separated from his little child-bride. But Rex had a clever brain; he meant to think of some plan out of the present difficulty. His face flushed and paled as he thought of his new position; it seemed to him every one must certainly read in his face he was a young husband.

Meanwhile Daisy flitted quickly up the broad gravel path to the little cottage, wondering if it were a dream.

“Well!” said Septima, sharply, “this is a pretty time of night to come dancing home, leaving me all alone with the baking! If I hadn’t my hands full of dough I’d give your ears a sound boxing! I’ll see you’re never out after dark again, I’ll warrant.”

For a moment Daisy’s blue eyes blazed, giving way to a roguish smile.

“I wonder what she would say if she knew I was Daisy Brooks no longer, but Mrs. Rex Lyon?” she thought, untying the blue ribbons of her hat. And she laughed outright as she thought how amazed Septima would look; and the laugh sounded like the ripple of a mountain brook.

“Now, Aunt Seppy,” coaxed Daisy, slipping up behind her and flinging her plump little arms around the irate spinster’s neck, “please don’t be cross. Indeed I was very particularly detained.”

Septima shook off the clinging arms angrily.

“You can’t coax *me* into upholding you with your soft, purring ways. I’m not Brother John, to be hoodwinked so easily. Detained! A likely story!”

“No,” laughed Daisy; “but you are dear old Uncle John’s sister, and I could love you for that, if for nothing else. But I really was detained, though. Where’s Uncle John?”

“He’s gone to the Hall after you, I reckon. I told him he had better stop at home—you were like a bad penny, sure to find your way back.”

A sudden terror blanched Daisy’s face.

“When did he go, Aunt Seppy?” she asked, her heart throbbing so loudly she was sure Septima would hear it.

“An hour or more ago.”

Daisy hastily picked up her hat again.

“Where are you going?” demanded Septima, sharply.

“I—I—am going to meet Uncle John. Please don’t stop me,” she cried, darting with the speed of a young gazelle past the hand that was stretched out to stay her mad flight. “I—I—must go!”

CHAPTER V

“I say you shall not,” cried Septima, planting herself firmly before her. “You shall not leave this house to-night.”

“You have no right to keep me here,” panted Daisy. “I am—I am—” The words died away on her lips. Rex had told her she must not tell just yet.

“You are a rash little fool,” cried Septima, wrathfully. “You are the bane of my life, and have been ever since that stormy winter night John brought you here. I told him then to wash his hands of the whole matter; you would grow up a willful, impetuous minx, and turn out at last like your mother.”

Daisy sprung to her feet like lightning, her velvet eyes blazing, her breath coming quick and hot.

“Speak of me as lightly as you will, Aunt Septima,” she cried, “but you must spare my poor mother’s name! Oh, mother, mother!” she cried, flinging herself down on her knees, and sobbing piteously, “if you had only taken me with you, down into the dark cruel waters!”

“I only wish to Heaven she had!” fervently ejaculated Septima.

At that moment a quick, hurried step sounded on the gravel path without, and John Brooks hastily entered the room.

“Ah! thank God! here you are, Daisy. I was over at the Hall for you, and they told me you had left some hours before. I knew you had not been home, and I was sorely afraid something had happened you.”

Ah! how little he knew! Something had happened to her, the darkest and cruelest shadow that had ever darkened a girl’s life was slowly gathering above her innocent head, and was soon to break, carrying in its turbulent depths a sorrow more bitter than death to bear.

John Brooks glanced inquiringly from the one to the other, intuitively guessing he must have interrupted a scene.

Daisy had struggled up from her knees to a sitting posture, putting her hair, curled into a thousand shining rings, away from her flushed face.

“Have you been scolding Daisy again, Septima?” he asked, angrily, taking the panting little damsel from the floor and seating her upon his knee, and drawing her curly head down to his rough-clad shoulder, and holding it there with his toil-hardened hand. “What have you been saying to my little Daisy that I find her in tears?”

“I was telling her if she did not mend her willful ways she might turn out like her moth—”

“Hush!” exclaimed John Brooks, excitedly. “I shouldn’t have thought you would have dared say that. What does Daisy know of such things?” he muttered, indignantly. “Don’t let your senses run away with you, Septima.”

“Don’t let your senses run away with you, John Brooks. Haven’t you the sense to know Daisy is getting too big for you to take on your knee and pet in that fashion? I am really ashamed of you. Daisy is almost a woman!” snapped Septima, scornfully—“quite sixteen.”

John Brooks looked at his sister in amazement, holding little Daisy off and gazing into the sweet little blooming face, and stroking the long fluffy golden curls as he replied:

“Ah, no, Septima; Daisy is only a child. Why, it seems as though it were but yesterday I used to take her with me through the cotton-fields, and laugh to see her stretch her chubby hands up, crying for the bursting blossoms, growing high above her curly golden head. Pshaw! Septima, Daisy is only a merry, frolicsome, romantic child yet.”

Daisy nestled her tell-tale face closer on his broad shoulder to hide the swift blushes that crept up to cheek and brow.

“Look up, pet,” he said, coaxingly, “I have news for you.”

“What—what is it?” gasped Daisy, wondering if he could possibly have heard of her romantic marriage with Rex, turning white to the very lips, her blue eyes darkening with suspense.

“Come, come, now,” laughed, John, good-humoredly, “don’t get excited, pet, it will take me just as long to tell it anyhow; it is something that will please you immensely.”

He drew from his breast pocket as he spoke a thick, yellow envelope, which contained several printed forms with blank spaces which were to be filled up. There was something in his voice which made Daisy look at him, but her eyes fell and her cheeks flushed hotly as she met his glance.

Daisy was not used to keeping a secret locked up in her truthful little heart. She longed to throw her arms around his neck and whisper to him of her mad, romantic marriage, and of the handsome young husband who loved her so fondly.

Daisy knew so little of real life, and less of love and marriage, up to the time she had met Rex! Her heroes had been imaginary ones, her ideas of love only girlish, romantic fancies. It was all very exciting and charming. She was very fond of handsome Rex, but she had yet to learn the depths of love which, sooner or later, brightens the lives of lovable women.

Daisy looked at the envelope with a wistful glance.

“I am going to make a lady of you, my little sunbeam. I am going to send you off to boarding-school. That’s what you have always wanted; now I am going to humor your whim.”

“But I—I do not want to go now, Uncle John. I—I have changed my mind.”

“What!”

“I—I don’t want to go off to boarding-school now. I had rather stay here with you.”

John Brooks laid down the pipe he was just lighting in genuine surprise.

“Why, it’s only last week you were crying those pretty eyes of yours out, teasing to be sent to school. I—well, confound it—I don’t understand the ways of women. I always thought you were different from the rest, little Daisy, but I see you are all the same. Never two days of the same mind. What is the reason you’ve changed your mind, pet?”

“Indeed, I don’t want to go now, Uncle John. Please don’t talk about it any more. I—I am happier here than I can tell you.”

John Brooks laughed cheerily.

“It’s too late for you to change your mind now, little one. I have made arrangements for you to start bright and early to-morrow morning. The stage will be here by daylight, so you had better start off to bed at once, or there will be no roses in these checks to-morrow.”

He never forgot the expression of the white, startled face Daisy raised to his. For once in her life Daisy was unable to shake him from his purpose.

“I know best, little one,” he said. “I mean to make a lady of you. You have no fortune, little Daisy, but your pretty face. It will be hard to lose my little sunbeam, but it is my duty, Daisy. It is too late to back out now; for once I am firm. You must start to-morrow morning.”

“Oh, dear, oh, dear!” sobbed Daisy, throwing herself down on her little white bed when she had reached her own room, “what shall I do? I can’t go without seeing Rex. I never heard of a girl that was married being sent off to school. I—I dare not tell Uncle John I am somebody’s wife. Oh, if I could only see Rex!” Daisy springs out of bed and crosses over to the little white curtained window, gazing out into the still calm beauty of the night. “If I only knew where to find Rex,” she mused, “I would go to him now. Surely he would not let me be sent away from him.” She turned away from the window with a sigh. “I must see Rex to-morrow morning,” she said, determinedly. And the weary little golden head, tired out with the day which had just died out, sunk restfully down upon the snowy pillow in a dreamless sleep, the happiest, alas! that poor little girl-bride was to know for long and weary years.

A dark, dreamy silence wraps the cottage in its soft embrace, the moon, clear and full, sails tranquilly through the star-sown heavens, and the sweet scent of distant orange groves is wafted through the midnight breeze. Yet the dark-cloaked figure that walks quickly and softly up the graveled walk sees none of the soft, calm beauty of the still summer night. She raises the brass knocker with a quick, imperative touch. After a wait of perhaps ten minutes or so Septima answers the summons,

but the candle she holds nearly drops from her hands as she beholds the face of her midnight visitor in the dim, uncertain flickering glare of the candle-light.

“Miss Pluma,” she exclaims, in amazement, “is there any one ill at the Hall?”

“No!” replies Pluma, in a low, soft, guarded whisper. “I wished to see you—my business is most important—may I come in?”

“Certainly,” answered Septima, awkwardly. “I beg your pardon, miss, for keeping you standing outside so long.”

As Pluma took the seat Septima placed for her, the dark cloak she wore fell from her shoulders, and Septima saw with wonder she still wore the shimmering silk she had in all probability worn at the fête. The rubies still glowed like restless, leaping fire upon her perfect arms and snowy throat, and sprays of hyacinth were still twined in her dark, glossy hair; but they were quite faded now, drooping, crushed, and limp among her curls; there was a strange dead-white pallor on her haughty face, and a lurid gleam shone in her dark, slumbrous eyes. Pluma had studied well the character of the woman before her—who made no secret of her dislike for the child thrust upon their bounty—and readily imagined she would willingly aid her in carrying out the scheme she had planned.

Slowly one by one the stars died out of the sky; the pale moon drifted silently behind the heavy rolling clouds; the winds tossed the tops of the tall trees to and fro, and the dense darkness which precedes the breaking of the gray dawn settled over the earth.

The ponies which the groom had held for long hours pawed the ground restlessly; the man himself was growing impatient.

“She can be up to no good,” he muttered; “all honest people should be in their beds.”

The door of the cottage opened, and Pluma Hurlhurst walked slowly down the path.

“All is fair in love’s warfare,” she mutters, triumphantly. “Fool! with your baby face and golden hair, you shall walk quickly into the net I have spread for you; he shall despise you. Ay, crush with his heel into the earth the very flowers that bear the name of *Daisy*.”

CHAPTER VI

Under the magnolia-tree, among the pink clover, Rex Lyon paced uneasily to and fro, wondering what could have happened to detain Daisy. He was very nervous, feverish, and impatient, as he watched the sun rising higher and higher in the blue heavens, and glanced at his watch for the fifth time in the space of a minute.

“Pshaw!” he muttered, whisking off the tops of the buttercups near him with his ebony walking-stick. “I am not myself at all. I am growing as nervous as a woman. I think I’ll read little sister Birdie’s letter over again to occupy my mind until my sweet little Daisy comes.”

He sighed and smiled in one breath, as he threw himself down at full length on the green grass under the trees. Taking from his pocket a little square white envelope, addressed in a childish hand to “Mr. Rexford Lyon, Allendale, West Virginia, Care of Miss Pluma.” Rex laughed aloud, until the tears started to his eyes, as they fell on the words “*Care of Miss Pluma*,” heavily underlined in the lower corner.

“That is just like careless little romping Birdie,” he mused. “She supposes, because *she* knows who *Miss Pluma* is, every one else must certainly be aware of the same fact.”

He spread out the letter on his knee, trying hard to while away time in perusing its pages.

Rex looked so fresh and cool and handsome in his white linen suit, lying there under the shady trees that summer morning, his dark curls resting on his white hand, and a smile lighting up his pleasant face, it is not to be wondered at he was just the kind of young fellow to win the love of young romantic girls like Daisy and Pluma—the haughty young heiress.

Slowly Rex read the letter through to the end. The morning stage whirled rapidly past him on its way to meet the early train. Yet, all unconscious that it bore away from him his treasure, he never once glanced up from the letter he was reading.

Again Rex laughed aloud as he glanced it over, reading as follows:

“Dear Brother Rex,—We received the letter you wrote, and the picture you sent with it, and my heart has been so heavy ever since that I could not write to you because big tears would fall on the page and blot it. Now, dear old Brother Rex, don’t be angry at what your little Birdie is going to say. Mamma says you are going to marry and bring home a wife, and she showed me her picture, and said you was very much in love with her, and I must be so too. But I can’t fall in love with her, Brother Rex; indeed, I’ve tried very hard and I can’t; don’t tell anybody, but I’m awfully afraid I sha’n’t like her one bit. She looks stylish, and her name Pluma sounds real stylish too, but she don’t look kind. I thought, perhaps, if I told you I did not like her you might give her up and come home. I forgot to tell you the blue room and the room across the hall is being fixed up for you just lovely, and I am to have your old one.

“P.S.—And we received a letter from Mr. Lester Stanwick, too. He says he will be passing through here soon and wishes to call. When are you coming home, Rex? Don’t bring any one with you.

“*Your loving little sister,*
“*Birdie.*”

“There’s no fear of my bringing Pluma home now,” he laughed, whistling a snatch of “The Pages’ Chorus.” “Birdie won’t have anything to fear on that score. I do wish mother hadn’t set my heart on my marrying Pluma. Parents make a mistake in choosing whom their children shall marry and whom they shall not. Love goes where it is sent.”

He looked at his watch again.

“By George!” he muttered, turning very pale upon seeing another hour had slipped away, “I can not stand this a minute longer. I *must* see what has happened to Daisy.”

With a nameless fear clutching at his heart—a dark, shadowy fear—like the premonition of coming evil, Rex made his way rapidly through the tangled underbrush, cutting across lots to John Brooks’ cottage.

He had determined to call for Daisy upon some pretext. It was rather a bold undertaking and might cause comment, still Rex was reckless of all consequences; he *must* see Daisy at all hazards; and when Rex made up his mind to do anything he usually succeeded; he was as daring and courageous as he was reckless and handsome.

Once, twice, thrice he knocked, receiving no answer to his summons.

“That’s strange,” he mused, “exceedingly strange.”

Hardly knowing what prompted him to do it, Rex turned the knob; it yielded to the touch, swinging slowly back on its creaking hinges.

“Good heavens!” he ejaculated, gazing wildly about him and as pale as death, “Daisy is gone and the cottage is empty!”

He leaned against the door-way, putting his hand to his brow like one who had received a heavy blow; and the bare walls seemed to take up the cry and echo, mockingly, “Gone!”

The blow was so sudden and unexpected he was completely bewildered; his brain was in a whirl. He saw a laborer crossing the cotton-fields and called to him.

“I was looking for John Brooks,” said Rex. “I find the cottage empty. Can you tell me where they have gone?”

“Gone!” echoed the man, surprisedly. “I don’t understand it; I was passing the door a few hours since, just as the stage drove off with John Brooks and Daisy. ‘Good-bye, neighbor,’ he called out to me, ‘I am off on an extended business trip. You must bring your wife over to see Septima; she will be lonely, I’ll warrant.’ There was no sign of him moving then. I—I don’t understand it.”

“You say he took Daisy with him,” asked Rex, with painful eagerness. “Can you tell me where they went?”

The man shook his head and passed on. Rex was more mystified than ever.

“What can it all mean?” he asked himself. “Surely,” he cried, “Daisy—dear little innocent blue-eyed Daisy—could not have meant to deceive me; yet why has she not told me?”

The hot blood mounted to his temples. Perhaps Daisy regretted having married him and had fled from him. The thought was so bitter it almost took his breath away. Rex loved her so madly, so passionately, so blindly, he vowed to himself he would search heaven and earth to find her. And in that terrible hour the young husband tasted the first draught of the cup of bitterness which he was to drain to the very dregs.

Poor Rex! he little knew this was but the first stroke of Pluma Hurlhurst’s fatal revenge—to remove her rival from her path that she might win him back to his old allegiance.

Early that morning there had been great bustle and stir in the Brooks’ cottage. In vain Daisy had attempted to steal quietly away into her own little room and write a hasty line to Rex, which, if all other means failed her, she could send to him by one of the men employed in the fields, begging him to come to her at once. Septima would not leave her to herself for a single instant. Even her writing-desk, which had stood on the bureau in the corner for years, was gone. Poor little Daisy cried out to herself—fate was against her.

“I should like to say good-bye to the old familiar scenes, Septima,” she said, making a desperate effort to meet Rex by some means. “I should like to see the old magnolia-tree down in the glade just once before I go.”

“Nonsense,” replied Septima, sharply, a malicious smile hovering about the corners of her mouth. “I guess the trees and the flowers won’t wither and die of grief if you don’t bid them good-bye; it’s too late now, anyhow. See, here is the stage coming already,” she cried, glancing out of the

window, “and here comes John with his valise and umbrella. Make haste, Daisy; where’s your gloves and satchel?”

For one brief instant Daisy stood irresolute; if she had only dared cry out to them “I am a bride; it is cruel to send me away from Rex,” what a world of misery might have been spared her! but her lips were sealed.

“Well, well,” cried John Brooks, hurriedly entering the room; “not ready yet, little girlie? We must be off at once or we will miss the train.”

In vain Daisy protested brokenly she could not go, and the agony in those blue uplifted eyes would have touched a heart of stone. Still John Brooks believed it would be a sin to comply with her request. Go to school she must, for Heaven had intended a cultured mind should accompany so beautiful a face. Half lifting, half carrying the slight figure in his powerful arms, Daisy was borne, half fainting and sobbing as though her heart would break, to the vehicle which stood in waiting.

On through the fragrant stillness of that sunshiny summer morning the jolting stage rolled rapidly on its way, crossing the little bridge where she had lingered only the night before with Rex, her husband; they would soon reach the alder bushes that skirted the pool. The next bend in the road would bring her in sight of the magnolia-tree where Rex would be awaiting her.

Ah, thank Heaven, it was not too late! she could fling out her arms, and cry out: “Rex, my love, my darling, they are bearing me from you! Save me, Rex, my darling, save me!”

John Brooks sat quietly by her side silently wondering what had come over little Daisy—sweet, impulsive little Daisy—in a single night. “She is only a child,” he muttered to himself, “full of whims and caprices; crying her eyes out last week because she could not go off to school, and now crying because she’s got to go.”

Swiftly the stage rolled down the green sloping hill-side; in another moment it had reached the alder bushes and gained the curve of the road, and she saw Rex lying on the green grass waiting for her. The sunlight drifting through the magnolia blossoms fell upon his handsome, upturned, smiling face and the dark curls pushed back from his white forehead. “Rex! Rex!” she cried, wringing her white hands, but the words died away on her white lips, making no sound. Then the world seemed to close darkly around her, and poor little Daisy, the unhappy girl-bride, fell back in the coach in a deadly swoon.

CHAPTER VII

“Poor little Daisy!” cried John Brooks, wiping away a suspicious moisture from his eyes with his rough, toil-hardened hand, “she takes it pretty hard now; but the time will come when she will thank me for it. Heaven knows there’s nothing in this world more valuable than an education; and she will need it, poor little, motherless child!”

As the stage drove up before the station Daisy opened her blue eyes with a sigh. “I can at least write to Rex at once,” she thought, “and explain the whole matter to him.” Daisy smiled as she thought Rex would be sure to follow on the very next train.

John Brooks watched the smile and the flush of the rosy face, and believed Daisy was beginning to feel more reconciled about going to school.

“I hope we will get there by noon,” said John, anxiously, taking the seat beside her on the crowded train. “If we missed the train at the cross-roads it would be a serious calamity. I should be obliged to send you on alone; for I *must* get to New York by night, as I have some very important business to transact for the plantation which must be attended to at once.”

“Alone!” echoed Daisy, tremblingly. “Why, Uncle John, I was never away from home alone in my life!”

“That’s just the difficulty,” he answered, perplexedly. “I have always guarded my little flower from the world’s cruel blasts, and you are unused to the rough side of life.”

“Still, I *could* go on alone,” persisted Daisy, bravely.

John Brooks laughed outright.

“You would get lost at the first corner, my girlie! Then I should have to fly around to these newspaper offices, advertising for the recovery of a little country Daisy which was either lost, strayed, or stolen. No, no, little one!” he cried; “I would not trust you alone, a stranger in a great city. A thousand ills might befall a young girl with a face like yours.”

“No one would know I was a stranger,” replied Daisy, innocently. “I should simply inquire the way to Madame Whitney’s, and follow the directions given me.”

“There! didn’t I tell you you could never find the way?” laughed John until he was red in the face. “You suppose a city is like our country lanes, eh?—where you tell a stranger: ‘Follow that path until you come to a sign-post, then that will tell you which road leads to the village.’ Ha! ha! ha! Why, my dear little Daisy, not one person in a hundred whom you might meet ever heard of Madame Whitney! In cities people don’t know their very neighbors personally. They are sure to find out if there’s any scandal afloat about them—and that is all they do know about them. You would have a lively time of it finding Madame Whitney’s without your old uncle John to pilot you through, I can tell you.”

Daisy’s last hope was nipped in the bud. She had told herself, if she were left alone, she could send a telegram back at once to Rex, and he would join her, and she would not have to go to school—school, which would separate a girl-bride from her handsome young husband, of whom she was fast learning to be so fond.

“I could have sent you under the care of Mr. Stanwick,” continued John, thoughtfully. “He started for the city yesterday—but I did not receive Madame Whitney’s letter in time.”

He did not notice, as he spoke, that the occupant in the seat directly in front of them gave a perceptible start, drawing the broad slouch hat he wore, which concealed his features so well, still further over his face, while a cruel smile lingered for a moment about the handsome mouth.

The stranger appeared deeply interested in the columns of the paper he held before him; but in reality he was listening attentively to the conversation going on behind him.

“I shall not lose sight of this pretty little girl,” said Lester Stanwick to himself, for it was he. “No power on earth shall save her from me. I shall win her from him—by fair means or foul. It will be a glorious revenge!”

“Madame Whitney’s seminary is a very high-toned institution,” continued John, reflectively; “and the young girls I saw there wore no end of furbelows and ribbons; but I’ll warrant for fresh, sweet beauty you’ll come out ahead of all of ’em, Pet.”

“You think so much of me, dear good old uncle,” cried Daisy, gratefully. “I—I wonder if any one in the world could ever—could ever care for me as—as you do?” whispered Daisy, laying her soft, warm cheek against his rough hand.

“No one but a husband,” he responded, promptly. “But you are too young to have such notions in your head yet awhile. Attend to your books, and don’t think of beaus. Now that we are on the subject, I might as well speak out what I’ve had on my mind some time back. I don’t want my little Daisy to fall in love with any of these strangers she happens to meet. You are too young to know anything about love affairs. You’ll never rightly understand it until it comes to you. I must know all about the man who wants my little Daisy. Whatever you do, little one, do upright and honestly. And, above all, never deceive me. I have often heard of these romantic young school-girls falling in love with handsome strangers, and clandestine meetings following, ending in elopements; but, mark my words, no good comes of these deceptions—forewarned is forearmed. Daisy, you’ll always remember my words, and say to yourself: ‘He knows what is best.’ You will remember what I say, won’t you, Pet?”

He wondered why the fair, sweet face grew as pale as a snow-drop, and the cold little fingers trembled in his clasp, and the velvety eyes drooped beneath his earnest gaze.

“Yes,” whispered Daisy; “I shall remember what you have said.”

In spite of her efforts to speak naturally and calmly the sweet voice would tremble.

“Bal—ti—more!” shouted the brakeman, lustily. “Twenty minutes for breakfast. Change cars for the north and west!”

“Ah, here we are!” cried John, hastily gathering up their satchels and innumerable bundles. “We must make haste to reach the uptown omnibus to get a seat, or we shall have to stand and cling to the strap all the way up. I’m an old traveler, you see. There’s nothing like knowing the ins and outs.”

“Have a coach uptown, sir? Take you to any part of the city. Coach, sir?” cried innumerable hackmen, gathering about them.

Daisy tightened her hold on John’s arm. She quite believed they intended to pick her up and put her in the coach by main force. One of them was actually walking off with her reticule.

“Hold there, young man,” cried John, quickly, recovering the satchel. “Don’t make yourself uneasy on our account. We would be pleased to ride in your conveyance if you don’t charge anything. We have no money.”

The loquacious hackmen fell back as if by magic. Daisy was blushing like a rose, terribly embarrassed. John Brooks laughed long and heartily.

“That’s the quickest way in the world to rid yourself of those torments,” he declared, enjoying his little joke hugely. “Why, Daisy, if you had come on alone some of those chaps would have spirited you away without even saying so much as ‘by your leave.’”

Mme. Whitney’s Seminary for Young Ladies was a magnificent structure, situated in the suburbs of Baltimore. On either side of the pebbled walk which led to the main entrance were tall fountains tossing their rainbow-tinted sprays up to the summer sunshine. The lawn in front was closely shaven, and through the trees in the rear of the building could be seen the broad rolling Chesapeake dancing and sparkling in the sunlight. The reputation of this institution was second to none. Young ladies were justly proud of being able to say they finished their education at Mme. Whitney’s establishment.

As a natural consequence, the school was composed of the *élite* of the South. Clang! clang! clang! sounded the great bell from the belfry as Daisy, with a sinking, homesick feeling stealing over her, walked slowly up the paved walk by John Brooks’ side toward the imposing, aristocratic structure.

Poor little Daisy never forgot that first day at boarding-school; how all the dainty young girls in their soft white muslins glanced in surprise at her when Mme. Whitney brought her into the school-

room, but she could have forgiven them for that if they had not laughed at her poor old uncle John, in his plain country garb, and they giggled behind their handkerchiefs when she clung to his neck and could not say good-bye through her tears, but sunk down into her seat, leaning her head on her desk, bravely trying to keep back the pearly drops that would fall.

When recess came Daisy did not leave her seat. She would have given the world to have heard Rex's voice just then; she was beginning to realize how much his sheltering love was to her. She would even have been heartily glad to have been back in the little kitchen at the cottage, no matter how much Septima scolded her.

All the girls here had the same haughty way of tossing their heads and curling their lips and looking innumerable things out of their eyes, which reminded Daisy so strongly of Pluma Hurlhurst.

Most of the girls had left the school-room, dividing off into groups and pairs here and there. Daisy sat watching them, feeling wretchedly lonely. Suddenly a soft white hand was laid lightly on her shoulder, and a sweet voice said:

"We have a recess of fifteen minutes, won't you come out into the grounds with me? I should be so pleased to have you come." The voice was so gentle, so coaxing, so sweet, Daisy involuntarily glanced up at the face of the young girl bending over her as she arose to accompany her. She put her arm around Daisy's waist, school-girl fashion, as they walked down the lone halls and out to the green grassy lawn. "My name is Sara Miller," she said; "will you tell me yours?"

"Daisy Brooks," she answered, simply.

"What a pretty name!" cried her new-found friend, enthusiastically, "and how well it suits you! Why, it is a little poem in itself."

Daisy flushed as rosy as the crimson geraniums near them, remembering Rex, her own handsome Rex, had said the same thing that morning he had carried her heavy basket to the gates of Whitestone Hall—that morning when all the world seemed to change as she glanced up into his merry brown eyes.

"We are to be room-mates," explained Sara, "and I know I shall like you ever so much. Do you think you will like me?"

"Yes," said Daisy. "I like you now."

"Thank you," said Miss Sara, making a mock courtesy. "I am going to love you with all my might, and if you don't love me you will be the most ungrateful creature in the world. I know just how lonesome you must be," continued Sara. "I remember just how lonesome I was the first day I was away from mamma, and when night set in and I was all alone, and I knew I was securely locked in, I was actually thinking of tearing the sheets of my bed into strips and making a rope of them, and letting myself down to the ground through the window, and making for home as fast as I could. I knew I would be brought back the next day, though," laughed Sara. "Mamma is so strict with me. I suppose yours is too?"

"I have no mother—or father," answered Daisy. "All my life I have lived with John Brooks and his sister Septima, on the Hurlhurst Plantation. I call them aunt and uncle. Septima has often told me no relationship at all existed between us."

"You are an orphan, then?" suggested the sympathetic Sara. "Is there no one in all the world related to you?"

"Yes—no—o," answered Daisy, confusedly, thinking of Rex, her young husband, and of the dearest relationship in all the world which existed between them.

"What a pity," sighed Sara. "Well, Daisy," she cried, impulsively, throwing both her arms around her and giving her a hearty kiss, "you and I will be all the world to each other. I shall tell you all my secrets and you must tell me yours. There's some girls you can trust, and some you can't. If you tell them your secrets, the first time you have a spat your secret is a secret no longer. Every girl in the school knows all about it; of course you are sure to make up again. But," added Sara, with a wise expression, "after you are once deceived, you can never trust them again."

“I have never known many girls,” replied Daisy. “I do not know how others do, but I’m sure you can always trust my friendship.”

And the two girls sealed their compact with a kiss, just as the great bell in the belfry rang, warning them they must be at their lessons again—recess was over.

CHAPTER VIII

In one of the private offices of Messrs. Tudor, Peck & Co., the shrewd Baltimore detectives, stood Rex, waiting patiently until the senior member of the firm should be at leisure.

“Now, my dear sir, I will attend you with pleasure,” said Mr. Tudor, sealing and dispatching the note he had just finished, and motioning Rex to a seat.

“I shall be pleased if you will permit me to light a cigar,” said Rex, taking the seat indicated.

“Certainly, certainly; smoke, if you feel so inclined, by all means,” replied the detective, watching with a puzzled twinkle in his eye the fair, boyish face of his visitor. “No, thank you,” he said, as Rex tendered him an Havana; “I never smoke during business hours.”

“I wish to engage your services to find out the whereabouts of—of—of—my wife,” said Rex, hesitatingly. “She has left me—suddenly—she fled—on the very night of our marriage!”

It hurt Rex’s pride cruelly to make this admission, and a painful flush crept up into the dark rings of hair lying on his white forehead.

Mr. Tudor was decidedly amazed. He could not realize how any sane young woman could leave so handsome a young fellow as the one before him. In most cases the shoe was on the other foot; but he was too thoroughly master of his business to express surprise in his face. He merely said:

“Go on, sir; go on!”

And Rex did go on, never sparing himself in describing how he urged Daisy to marry him on the night of the fête, and of their parting, and the solemn promise to meet on the morrow, and of his wild grief—more bitter than death—when he had found the cottage empty.

“It reads like the page of a romance,” said Rex, with a dreary smile, leaning his head on his white hand. “But I must find her!” he cried, with energy. “I shall search the world over for her. If it takes every cent of my fortune, I shall find Daisy!”

Rex looked out of the window at the soft, fleecy clouds overhead, little dreaming Daisy was watching those self-same clouds, scarcely a stone’s throw from the very spot where he sat, and at that moment he was nearer Daisy than he would be for perhaps years again, for the strong hand of Fate was slowly but surely drifting them asunder.

For some moments neither spoke.

“Perhaps,” said Mr. Tudor, breaking the silence, “there was a previous lover in the case?”

“I am sure there was not!” said Rex, eagerly.

Still the idea was new to him. He adored Daisy with a mad, idolatrous adoration, almost amounting to worship, and a love so intense is susceptible to the poisonous breath of jealousy, and jealousy ran in Rex’s veins. He could not endure the thought of Daisy’s—his Daisy’s—eyes brightening or her cheek flushing at the approach of a rival—that fair, flower-like face, sweet and innocent as a child’s—Daisy, whom he so madly loved.

“Well,” said Mr. Tudor, as Rex arose to depart, “I will do all I can for you. Leave your address, please, in case I should wish to communicate with you.”

“I think I shall go back to Allendale, remaining there at least a month or so. I have a strong conviction Daisy might come back, or at least write to me there.”

Mr. Tudor jotted down the address, feeling actually sorry for the handsome young husband clinging to such a frail straw of hope. In his own mind, long before Rex had concluded his story, he had settled his opinion—that from some cause the young wife had fled from him with some rival, bitterly repenting her mad, hasty marriage.

“I have great faith in your acknowledged ability,” said Rex, grasping Mr. Tudor’s outstretched hand. “I shall rest my hopes upon your finding Daisy. I can not, will not, believe she is false. I would as soon think of the light of heaven playing me false as my sweet little love!”

The dark mantle of night had folded its dusky wings over the inmates of the seminary. All the lights were out in the young ladies' rooms—as the nine-o'clock call, "All lights out!" had been called some ten minutes before—all the lights save one, flickering, dim, and uncertain, from Daisy's window.

"Oh, dear!" cried Daisy, laying her pink cheek down on the letter she was writing to Rex, "I feel as though I could do something *very* desperate to get away from here—and—and—back to Rex. Poor fellow!" she sighed, "I wonder what he thought, as the hours rolled by and I did not come? Of course he went over to the cottage," she mused, "and Septima must have told him where I had gone. Rex will surely come for me to-morrow," she told herself, with a sweet, shy blush.

She read and reread the letter her trembling little hands had penned with many a heart-flutter. It was a shy, sweet little letter, beginning with "Dear Mr. Rex," and ending with, "Yours sincerely, Daisy." It was just such a dear, timid letter as many a pure, fresh-hearted loving young girl would write, brimful of the love which filled her guileless heart for her handsome, debonair Rex—with many allusions to the secret between them which weighed so heavily on her heart, sealing her lips for his dear sake.

After sealing and directing her precious letter, and placing it in the letter-bag which hung at the lower end of the corridor, Daisy hurried back to her own apartment and crept softly into her little white bed, beside Sara, and was soon fast asleep, dreaming of Rex and a dark, haughty, scornful face falling between them and the sunshine—the cold, mocking face of Pluma Hurlhurst.

Mme. Whitney, as was her custom, always looked over the out-going mail early in the morning, sealing the letters of which she approved, and returning, with a severe reprimand, those which did not come up to the standard of her ideas.

"What is this?" she cried, in amazement, turning the letter Daisy had written in her hand. "Why, I declare, it is actually sealed!" Without the least compunction she broke the seal, grimly scanning its contents from beginning to end. If there was anything under the sun the madame abominated it was love-letters.

It was an established fact that no tender *billets-doux* found their way from the academy; the argus-eyed madame was too watchful for that.

With a lowering brow, she gave the bell-rope a hasty pull.

"Jenkins," she said to the servant answering her summons, "send Miss Brooks to me here at once!"

"Poor little thing!" cried the sympathetic Jenkins to herself. "I wonder what in the world is amiss now? There's fire in the madame's eye. I hope she don't intend to scold poor little Daisy Brooks." Jenkins had taken a violent fancy to the sweet-faced, golden-haired, timid young stranger.

"It must be something terrible, I'm sure!" cried Sara, when she heard the madame had sent for Daisy; while poor Daisy's hand trembled so—she could scarcely tell why—that she could hardly bind up the golden curls that fell down to her waist in a wavy, shining sheen.

Daisy never once dreamed her letter was the cause of her unexpected summons, until she entered Mme. Whitney's presence and saw it opened—yes, opened—her own sacred, loving letter to Rex—in her hand.

Daisy was impulsive, and her first thought was to grasp her precious letter and flee to her own room. How dared the madame open the precious letter she had intended only for Rex's eyes!

"Miss Brooks," began madame, impressively, "I suppose I am right in believing this epistle belongs to you?"

A great lump rose in Daisy's throat.

"Yes, madame," answered Daisy, raising her dark-blue eyes pleadingly to the stern face before her.

"And may I ask by what right you dared violate the rules and regulations of this establishment by sending a sealed letter to—a man? Your guardian strictly informed me you had no correspondents

whatever, and I find this is a—I blush to confess it—actually a love-letter. What have you to say in reference to your folly, Miss Brooks?”

“I’m sure I don’t know,” sobbed Daisy.

“You don’t know?” repeated madame, scornfully. “Not a very satisfactory explanation. Well, Miss Brooks, I have fully determined what steps I shall take in the matter. I shall read this letter this morning before the whole school; it will afford me an excellent opportunity to point out the horrible depths to which young girls are plunged by allowing their minds to wander from their books to such thoughts as are here expressed. What do you mean by this secret to which you allude so often?” she asked, suddenly.

“Please do not ask me, madame,” sobbed Daisy; “I can not tell you—indeed I can not. I dare not!”

An alarming thought occurred to madame.

“Speak, girl!” she cried, hoarsely, grasping her firmly by the shoulder. “I must know the meaning of this secret which is so appalling. You fear to reveal it! Does your guardian know of it?”

“No—o!” wailed Daisy; “I could not tell him. I must keep the secret.”

Poor little innocent Daisy! her own words had convicted her beyond all pardon in the eyes of shrewd, suspicious Mme. Whitney, who guessed, as is usually the case, wide of the mark, as to the cause of the secret Daisy dare not to reveal to her guardian or herself.

“My duty is plain in this case,” said madame. “I shall read this as a terrible warning to the young ladies of this institution; then I will send for Mr. John Brooks, your guardian, and place this letter in his hands.”

“Oh, no, madame, in pity’s name, no!” sobbed Daisy, wildly, kneeling imploringly at her feet, her heart beating tumultuously, and her hands locked convulsively together. “Do not, madame, I pray you; anything but that; he would cast me out of his heart and home, and I—I could not go to Rex, you see.”

But madame did not see. She laughed a little hard, metallic laugh that grated, oh, so cruelly, on Daisy’s sensitive nerves.

When one woman’s suspicions are aroused against another, Heaven help the suspected one; there is little mercy shown her.

“Man’s inhumanity to man” is nothing compared to woman’s inhumanity to woman.

Mme. Whitney had discovered a capital way to score a hit in the direction of morality.

“No,” she said, laying the letter down on the table before her. “Arise from your knees, Miss Brooks. Your prayers are useless. I think this will be a life-long lesson to you.”

“Oh, madame, for the love of Heaven!” cried Daisy, rocking herself to and fro, “spare me, I beseech you! Can nothing alter your purpose?”

“Well,” said madame, reflectively, “I may not be quite so severe with you if you will confess, unreservedly, the whole truth concerning this terrible secret, and what this young man Rex is to you.”

“I can not,” wailed Daisy, “I can not. Oh, my heart is breaking, yet I dare not.”

“Very well,” said madame, rising, indicating the conversation was at an end, “I shall not press you further on the subject. I will excuse you now, Miss Brooks. You may retire to your room.”

Still Daisy rocked herself to and fro on her knees at her feet. Suddenly a daring thought occurred to her. The letter which had caused her such bitter woe lay on the table almost within her very grasp—the letter, every line of which breathed of her pure, sacred love for Rex—her Rex—whom she dared not even claim. She could imagine madame commenting upon every word and sentence, ridiculing those tender expressions which had been such rapturous joy to her hungry little heart as she had penned them. And, last of all, and far the most bitter thought, how dear old John Brooks would turn his honest eyes upon her tell-tale face, demanding to know what the secret was—the secret which she had promised her young husband she would not reveal, come what would. If his face should grow white and stern, and those lips, which had blessed, praised, and petted, but never scolded her—if those lips should curse her, she would die then and there at his feet. In an instant she had resolved upon

a wild, hazardous plan. Quick as a flash of lightning Daisy sprung to her feet and tore the coveted letter from madame's detaining grasp; the door stood open, and with the fleetness of a hunted deer she flew down the corridor, never stopping for breath until she had gained the very water's edge.

Mme. Whitney gave a loud shriek and actually fainted, and the attendant, who hurried to the scene, caught but a glimpse of a white, terrified, beautiful face, and a cloud of flying golden hair. No one in that establishment ever gazed upon the face of Daisy Brooks again!

CHAPTER IX

“Where is Miss Brooks?” cried Mme. Whitney, excitedly, upon opening her eyes. “Jenkins,” she cried, motioning to the attendant who stood nearest her, “see that Miss Brooks is detained in her own room under lock and key until I am at liberty to attend to her case.”

The servants looked at one another in blank amazement. No one dared tell her Daisy had fled. The torn envelope, which Daisy had neglected to gain possession of, lay at her feet.

With a curious smile Mme. Whitney smoothed it out carefully, and placed it carefully away in her private desk.

“Rex Lyon,” she mused, knitting her brow. “Ah, yes, that was the name, I believe. He must certainly be the one. Daisy Brooks shall suffer keenly for this outrage,” cried the madame, grinding her teeth with impotent rage. “I shall drag her pride down to the very dust beneath my feet. How dare the little rebel defy my orders? I shall have her removed to the belfry-room; a night or two there will humble her pride, I dare say,” fumed the madame, pacing up and down the room. “I have brought worse tempers than hers into subjection; still I never dreamed the little minx would dare openly defy *me* in that manner. I shall keep her in the belfry-room, under lock and key, until she asks my pardon on her bended knees; and what is more, I shall wrest the secret from her—the secret she has defied me to discover.”

On sped Daisy, as swift as the wind, crushing the fatal letter in her bosom, until she stood at the very edge of the broad, glittering Chesapeake. The rosy-gold rays of the rising sun lighted up the waves with a thousand arrowy sparkles like a vast sea of glittering, waving gold. Daisy looked over her shoulder, noting the dark forms hurrying to and fro.

“They are searching for me,” she said, “but I will never go back to them—never!”

She saw a man’s form hurrying toward her. At that moment she beheld, moored in the shadow of a clump of alders at her very feet, a small boat rocking to and fro with the tide. Daisy had a little boat of her own at home; she knew how to use the oars.

“They will never think of looking for me out on the water,” she cried, triumphantly, and quickly untying it, she sprung into the little skiff, and seizing the oars, with a vigorous stroke the little shell shot rapidly out into the shimmering water, Daisy never once pausing in her mad, impetuous flight until the dim line of the shore was almost indistinguishable from the blue arching dome of the horizon. “There,” she cried, flushed and excited, leaning on the oars; “no one could possibly think of searching for me out here.”

Her cheeks were flushed and her blue eyes danced like stars, while the freshening breeze blew her bright shining hair to and fro.

Many a passing fisherman cast admiring glances at the charming little fairy, so sweet and so daring, out all alone on the smiling, treacherous, dancing waves so far away from the shore. But if Daisy saw them, she never heeded them.

“I shall stay here until it is quite dark,” she said to herself; “they will have ceased to look for me by that time. I can reach the shore quite unobserved, and watch for Sara to get my hat and sacque; and then”—a rosy flush stole up to the rings of her golden hair as she thought what she would do then—“I shall go straight back to Rex—my husband!”

She knew John Brooks would not return home for some time to come, and she would not go back to Septima. She made up her mind she would certainly go to Rex. She would wait at the depot, and, if Rex did not come in on the early train, she would go back at once to Allendale. Her purse, with twenty dollars in it—which seemed quite a fortune to Daisy—was luckily in her pocket, together with half of an apple and a biscuit. The healthful exercise of rowing, together with the fresh, cool breeze, gave Daisy a hearty appetite, and the apple and biscuit afforded her quite a pleasant lunch.

Poor Daisy! The pretty little girl-bride had no more thought of danger than a child. She had no premonition that every moment the little boat, drifting rapidly along with the tide, was bearing her rapidly onward toward death and destruction.

Daisy paid little heed to the dark rolling clouds that were slowly obscuring the brilliant sunshine, or the swirl and dash of the waves that were rocking her little boat so restlessly to and fro. The hours seemed to slip heedlessly by her. The soft gloaming seemed to fall about her swiftly and without warning.

“I must turn my boat about at once!” cried Daisy, in alarm. “I am quite a long way from the shore!”

At that moment the distant rumbling roar of thunder sounded dismally over the leaden-gray, white-capped water; and the wind, rising instantly into a fierce gale, hurled the dark storm-clouds across the sky, blotting the lurid glow of sunset and mantling the heavens above her in its dusky folds.

Daisy was brave of heart, but in the face of such sudden and unlooked-for danger her courage failed her. The pretty rose-bloom died away from her face, and her beautiful blue eyes expanded wide with terror. She caught her breath with a sob, and, seizing the oar with two soft, childish hands, made a desperate attempt to turn the boat. The current resisted her weak effort, snapping the oar in twain like a slender twig and whirling it from her grasp.

“Rex! Rex!” she cried out, piteously, stretching out her arms, “save me! Oh, I am lost—lost! Heaven pity me!”

The night had fallen swiftly around her. Out, alone, on the wild, pitiless, treacherous waves—alone with the storm and the darkness!

The storm had now commenced in earnest, beating furiously against the little boat, and lashing the mad waves into seething foam as they dashed high above the terrified girl. No sound could be heard above the wild warring of the elements—the thunder’s roar, the furious lashing of the waves and the white, radiant lightning blazing across the vast expanse of water, making the scene sublime in its terrible grandeur.

“Rex! my love, my life!” she cried, in the intense agony of despair, “you will never know how well I loved you! I have faced death rather than betray the sweet, sad secret—I am your wife!”

Was it the wild flashing of the lightning, or was it a red light she saw swinging to and fro, each moment drawing rapidly nearer and nearer? Heaven be praised! it was a barge of some kind; help was within her reach.

“Help!” cried Daisy, faintly. “Help! I am alone out on the water!” she held out her arms toward the huge vessel which loomed up darkly before her, but the terrified voice was drowned by the fierce beating of the storm.

Suddenly her little boat spun round and round, the swift water was drawing her directly in the path of the barge; another moment and it would be upon her; she beat the air with her white hands, gazing with frozen horror at the fatal lights drawing nearer and nearer.

“Rex, my love, good-bye!” she wailed, sinking down in the bottom of the boat as one end of the barge struck it with tremendous force.

Leaning over the railing, evidently unmindful of the fierce fury of the storm that raged around him, stood a young man, gazing abstractedly over the wild dashing waves. A dark smile played about the corners of his mouth, and his restless eyes wore a pleased expression, as though his thoughts were in keeping with the wild, warring elements.

Suddenly, through the terrible roar of the storm, he heard a piteous appeal for help, and the voice seemed to die away over the angry, muttering waves. He leaned over the railing breathless with excitement. The thunder crashed almost incessantly, and there came a stunning bolt, followed by a blinding blaze of lightning. In that one instant he had seen a white, childish face, framed in a mass of floating golden hair, turned toward him.

One instant more and she would be swept beneath the ponderous wheel, beyond all mortal power of help; then the dark, hungry waters closed cruelly over her, but in that one instantaneous glance the man's face had turned deadly pale.

“Great God!” he shrieked, hoarsely, “it is Daisy Brooks!”

CHAPTER X

On the evening which followed the one just described in our last chapter, Pluma Hurlhurst sat in her luxuriant boudoir of rose and gold, deeply absorbed in the three letters which she held in her lap. To one was appended the name of Septima Brooks, one was from Rex's mother, and the last—and by far the most important one—bore the signature of Lester Stanwick.

Once, twice, thrice she perused it, each time with growing interest, the glittering light deepening in her dark, flashing eyes, and the red lips curling in a scornful smile.

"This is capital!" she cried, exultingly; "even better than I had planned. I could not see my way clear before, but now everything is clear sailing." She crossed over to the mirror, looking long and earnestly at the superb figure reflected there. "I am fair to look upon," she cried, bitterly. "Why can not Rex love me?"

Ah! she was fair to look upon, standing beneath the softened glow of the overhanging chandelier, in her dress of gold brocade, with a pomegranate blossom on her bosom, and a diamond spray flashing from the dark, glossy curls, magnificently beautiful.

"I was so sure of Rex," she said, bitterly; "if any one had said to me, 'Rex prefers your overseer's niece, Daisy Brooks, with her baby face and pink-and-white beauty,' I would have laughed them to scorn. Prefers her to me, the haughty heiress of Whitestone Hall, for whose love, or even smile, men have sued in vain! I have managed the whole affair very cleverly!" she mused. "John Brooks does not return before the coming spring, and Septima is removed from my path most effectually, and if Lester Stanwick manages his part successfully, I shall have little to fear from Daisy Brooks! How clever Lester was to learn Rex had been to the Detective Agency! How he must have loved that girl!" she cried, hotly, with a darkening brow. "Ah, Rex!" she whispered, softly (and for an instant the hard look died out of her face), "no one shall take you from me. I would rather look upon your face cold in death, and know no one else could claim you, than see you smile lovingly upon a rival. There is no torture under heaven so bitter to endure as the pangs of a love unreturned!" she cried, fiercely. She threw open the window and leaned far out into the radiant starlight, as the great clock pealed the hour of seven. "Rex has received my note," she said, "with the one from his mother inclosed. Surely he will not refuse my request. He will come, if only through politeness!" Again she laughed, that low, mocking laugh peculiar to her, as she heard the peal of the bell. "It is Rex," she whispered, clasping her hands over her beating heart. "To-night I will sow the first seeds of distrust in your heart, and when they take root you shall despise Daisy Brooks a thousand-fold more than you love her now. She shall feel the keen thrust of a rival's bitter vengeance!"

Casting a last lingering glance (so woman-like!) at the perfect face the mirror reflected, to give her confidence in herself for the coming ordeal, Pluma Hurlhurst glided down to the parlor, where Rex awaited her.

It would have been hard to believe the proud, willful, polished young heiress could lend herself to a plot so dark and so cruel as the one she was at that moment revolving in her fertile brain.

Rex was standing at the open window, his handsome head leaning wearily against the casement. His face was turned partially toward her, and Pluma could scarcely repress the cry of astonishment that rose to her lips as she saw how pale and haggard he looked in the softened light. She knew but too well the cause.

He was quite unaware of Pluma's presence until a soft, white, jeweled hand was laid lightly on his arm, and a low, musical voice whispered, "I am so glad you have come, Rex," close to his elbow.

They had parted under peculiar circumstances. He could fancy her at that moment kneeling to him, under the glare of the lamp-light, confessing her love for him, and denouncing poor little clinging Daisy with such bitter scorn. His present position was certainly an embarrassing one to Rex.

“I am here in accordance with your request, Miss Hurlhurst,” he said, simply, bowing coldly over the white hand that would cling to his arm.

“You are very kind,” she said, sweetly, “to forget that unpleasant little episode that happened at the fête, and come to-night. I believe I should never have sent for you,” she added, archly, smiling up into his face, “had it not been at the urgent request of your mother, Rex.”

Pluma hesitated. Rex bit his lip in annoyance, but he was too courteous to openly express his thoughts; he merely bowed again. He meant Pluma should understand all thoughts of love or tenderness must forever more be a dead letter between them.

“My mother!” he repeated, wonderingly; “pardon me, I do not understand.”

For answer she drew his mother’s letter from her bosom and placed it in his hands.

He ran his eyes quickly over the page. The postscript seemed to enlighten him.

“The course of true love never runs smooth,” it ran, “and I beseech you, Pluma dear, if anything should ever happen, any shadow fall upon your love, I beseech you send for Rex and place this letter in his hands. It would not be unwomanly, Pluma, because I, his mother, so earnestly request it; for, on your love for each other hangs my hopes of happiness. Rex is impulsive and willful, but he will respect his mother’s wishes.”

No thought of treachery ever crossed Rex’s mind as he read the lines before him; he never once dreamed the ingeniously worded postscript had been so cleverly imitated and added by Pluma’s own hand. It never occurred to him for an instant to doubt the sincerity of the words he read, when he knew how dearly his mother loved the proud, haughty heiress before him.

“I heard you were going away, Rex,” she said, softly, “and I—I could not let you go so, and break my own heart.”

“In one sense, I am glad you sent for me,” said Rex, quietly ignoring her last remark. “I shall be much pleased to renew our friendship, Miss Pluma, for I need your friendship—nay, more, I need your sympathy and advice more than I can express. I have always endeavored to be frank with you, Pluma,” he said, kindly. “I have never spoken words which might lead you to believe I loved you.”

He saw her face grow white under his earnest gaze and the white lace on her bosom rise and fall convulsively, yet she made him no answer.

“Please permit me to tell you why, Pluma,” he said, taking her hand and leading her to a sofa, taking a seat by her side. “I could not,” he continued, “in justice to either you or myself; for I never knew what love was,” he said, softly, “until the night of the fête.” Again he paused; but, as no answer was vouchsafed him, he went on: “I never knew what love meant until I met Daisy—little Daisy Brooks.”

“Rex!” cried Pluma, starting to her feet, “you know not what you say—surely you do not know! I would have warned you, but you would not listen. I saw you drifting toward a yawning chasm; I stretched out my arms to save you, but you would not heed me. You are a stranger to the people around here, Rex, or they would have warned you. Sin is never so alluring as in the guise of a beautiful woman. It is not too late yet. Forget Daisy Brooks; she is not a fit companion for noble Rex Lyon, or pure enough to kiss an honest man’s lips.”

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