

Libbey Laura Jean

**Kidnapped at the Altar: or,
The Romance of that Saucy
Jessie Bain**



Laura Libbey

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Kidnapped at the Altar; Or, The Romance of that Saucy Jessie Bain

Chapter I. SOME YOUNG GIRLS FIND LOVE SO SWEET; TO OTHERS IT PROVES A CURSE

It was a magnificent evening, in balmy June, on the far-famed St. Lawrence.

The steamer "St. Lawrence" was making her nightly search-light excursion down the bay, laden to her utmost capacity.

The passengers were all summer tourists, light of heart and gay of speech; all save one, Hubert Varrick, a young and handsome man, dressed in the height of fashion, who held aloof from the rest, and who stood leaning carelessly against the taffrail.

The steamer was making its way in and out of the thousand green isles, the great light from the pilot-house suddenly throwing a broad, illuminating flash first on this and then on that.

As the light swept across land and water from point to point, Varrick lightly laughed aloud at the ludicrous incidents, such as the sudden flashing of the light's piercing rays on some lover's nook, where two souls indulging in but one thought were ruthlessly awakened from sweet seclusion to the most glaring publicity, and at many a novel sight, little dreaming that at every turn of the ponderous wheels he was nearing his destiny.

"Where are we now?" he inquired of a deck-hand.

"At Fisher's Landing, sir."

The words had scarcely left his lips ere a radiant flood of electric light swept over the jutting bit of mainland. In that instantaneous white glare Varrick saw a sight that was indelibly engraved upon his memory while life lasted.

The dock was deserted by all save one person – a young girl, waving her hand toward the steamer.

She wore a dress of some white, fleecy material, her golden hair flying in the wind, and flapping against her bare shoulders and half-bared white arms.

"Great heavens! who is that?" Varrick cried.

But as he strained his eyes eagerly toward the beautiful picture, the scene was suddenly wrapped in darkness, and the steamer glided on.

"Who was that, and what place was it?" he asked again.

"It was Fisher's Landing, I said," rejoined the other. "The girl is 'Saucy Jessie Bain,' as they call her hereabouts. She's Captain Carr's niece."

"Has she a lover?" suddenly asked Varrick.

"Lord bless you, sir!" he answered, "there's scarcely a single man for miles around that isn't in love with Jessie Bain; but she will have none of them."

"There's a little story about Jessie Bain. I'll tell it to you, since you admire the girl."

But the story was not destined to become known to Varrick, for his companion was called away at that moment.

He could think of nothing else, see nothing but the face of the girl he had seen on the dock at Fisher's Landing.

This was particularly unfortunate, for at that moment Hubert Varrick was on his way to be married on the morrow to the beautiful heiress, Miss Northrup.

She was a famous beauty and belle, and Varrick had been madly in love with her. But since he had seen the face of Jessie Bain he felt a strange, half-defined regret that he was bound to another. He was not over-impatient to arrive at his destination, although he knew that Gerelda Northrup and a bevy of her girl friends would undoubtedly be at the dock to welcome him.

This proved to be the case, and a moment later he caught sight of the tall, stately beauty, who swept forward to meet him with outstretched jeweled hands and a glad welcome on her proud face.

"I am so delighted that you have come at last, Hubert," she murmured.

But she drew back abashed as he attempted to kiss her, and this action chilled him to the very heart's core.

He was quickly presented to Gerelda's girl friends, and then the party made their way up to the Crossmon Hotel, which was only a few yards distant, Varrick and Miss Northrup lagging a little behind the rest.

"I hope you have been enjoying your outing this season, my darling," said Varrick.

"I have had the most delightful time of my life," she declared.

Varrick frowned. It was not so pleasant for him to hear that she could enjoy herself in his absence. Jealousy was deeply rooted in his nature.

"Is there any special one who has helped to make it so pleasant?" he asked.

"Yes. Captain Frazier is here."

"Have you been flirting with him, Gerelda?" he asked.

"Don't be jealous, Hubert."

"I am jealous!" he cried. "You know that is the curse of the Varricks."

By this time they had reached the hotel. Throngs of beautiful women crowded the broad piazzas, yet Varrick noticed with some pride that Gerelda was the most beautiful girl there.

"You must be very tired after your long journey," she murmured. "You should retire early, to be fully rested for to-morrow."

"Do you mean *you* wish to retire early?" asked Hubert, rather down-hearted that she wanted to dismiss him so soon. "If you think it best I will leave you."

Was it only his fancy, or did her eyes brighten perceptibly?

A few more turns up and down the veranda, a few impassioned words in a cozy nook, and then he said good-night to her, delivering her to the care of her chaperon.

But even after he had reached his room, and thrown himself across his couch, Varrick could not sleep.

The sound of laughter floated up to him.

Though it was an hour since he had bidden Gerelda good-night, he fancied that it was her voice he heard in the porch below; and he fancied, too, that he knew the other deep rich voice that chimed in now and then with hers.

"That is certainly Frazier," he muttered.

Seizing his coat and hat, he donned them hurriedly, left his room, stepped out of the hotel by a rear entrance, made a tour of the thickly wooded grounds, until at last, from his hiding-place among the trees, he could gain an excellent view of the brilliantly lighted piazza, himself unseen.

His surmise had been but only too true.

Mad with jealous rage, Varrick turned on his heel.

He rushed down the path to the water's edge. A little boat was skimming over the water, heading for the very spot where he stood. Its occupant, a sturdy young fisherman, was just about to secure it to an iron ring, when Varrick approached him.

"I should like to hire your boat for an hour," he said, huskily.

Varrick wanted to get away, to be by himself to think.

The bargain was made with the man, and with a few strokes from his muscular arms the little skiff was soon whirling out into the deep waters of the bay. Then he rested on his oars and floated down with the tide.

Suddenly a clear and yet shrill voice broke upon his ear.

"Halloo! Halloo there! Won't you come to my rescue, please?"

Varrick could hear the girlish voice plainly enough, but he could not imagine whence it came.

Again the shrill cry was repeated. Just then he observed a slight figure standing down near the water's edge of the island he was passing.

Varrick headed for the island at once, and as he drew so near that the face of the girl could be easily distinguished, he made a wonderful discovery – the girl was Jessie Bain.

"I am so glad for deliverance at last!" she cried.

"How in the world came you here?" exclaimed Varrick.

"I came out for a little row," she said, "and stopped at this island for some flowers that I had seen here yesterday. I suppose I could not have fastened my boat very securely, for when I came to look for it, it was gone; and, oh! my uncle would be so angry; he would beat me severely!"

Somehow one word brought on another, and quite unconsciously pretty little Jessie Bain found herself chatting to the stranger, who vowed himself as only too pleased to row out of his way to see her safely home.

"Your home does not seem to be a happy one," he said at length.

"It wouldn't be, if they could have their way. It used to be different when auntie was alive. Now my cousin beats me badly enough, and Uncle John believes all she tells him about me. But I always get even with her.

"In the morning my cousin went to her work (she clerks in one of the village stores), but before she left the house she picked the biggest quarrel you ever heard of, with me – because I wouldn't lend her the only decent dress I have to wear. She expected her beau from a neighboring village to come to town.

"I would have lent it to her, but she's just the kind of a girl that wouldn't take care of anything, unless it was her own, and I knew it would be ruined in one day.

"It took me a whole year to save money enough to get it. I sold eggs to buy it, and, oh, golly! didn't I coax those chicks to lay, though!"

Varrick could not help but smile as he looked at her.

And she was so innocent, too. He wondered if she could be more than sixteen or seventeen years old.

"About four o'clock she sent a note to the house, and in it she said:

"'Dear Cousin Jessie, I am going to bring company home, so for goodness' sake do get up a good dinner. I send a whole basket of good things with the boy who brings this note. Cook them all.'

"Well, I cooked the supper just as she wanted me to do. Oh! it was dreadfully tempting, and right here let me say, whenever there's a broken cup or saucer or plate in the house, or fork with only two prongs, or a broken-handled knife, it always falls to me. My cousin always says: 'It's good enough for Jessie Bain; let *her* have it.'

"I prepared the dainty supper, ran and got every good knife and fork and plate and cup and saucer, and hid them under an old oak-tree fully half a mile away.

"I left out on the table only the broken things, to see how she'd like them.

"By and by she and her beau came. I ran out the back door as I heard them cross the front porch.

"Oh! but wasn't she mad! I watched her through the window, laughing so hard I almost split my sides, and she fairly flew at me. Then I went down and jumped into my little boat, and pushed away for dear life, to be out of her reach. I rowed down to this island, thinking to fetch her back some flowers to appease her mighty wrath; but I was so tired that I fell asleep. I was frightened nearly to

death when I awoke and saw that it was dark night. I had a greater fright still when I discovered that my little boat was gone – had drifted away."

Varrick had almost forgotten his own turbulent thoughts in listening to the girl.

"Are you not afraid of punishment?" he asked, as they neared Fisher's Landing.

He could see a quick, frightened look sweep over the girl's face.

"I don't know what they will do with me," she said.

"If they attempt to abuse you come straight to me!" cried Varrick, quite forgetful in the eagerness of the moment what he was saying.

By this time they had reached Fisher's Landing. He sprung from the skiff and helped her ashore.

"Good-night, and thank you ever so much," she said. And with a quick, childish, thoughtless motion, she bent her pretty head and kissed the strong white hand that clasped her own.

He had been so kind, so sympathetic to her, and that was something new for Jessie Bain.

He watched her in silence as she flitted up the path, until she was lost to sight in the darkness.

Then he re-entered his boat and made his way slowly back to the bay.

The spacious corridors of the grand Hotel Crossmon were wrapped in silence when he reached it.

He half expected to see the two whom he had left in that flower-embowered lovers' nook at the end of the piazza still sitting there.

Then he laughed to himself at the folly of the thought.

Chapter II.

FATE IS AGAINST SOME PEOPLE, FROM THE CRADLE TO THE GRAVE

Change is the law of wind and moon and lover —
And yet I think, lost Love, had you been true,
Some golden fruits had ripened for your plucking
You will not find in gardens that are new.

L. C. M.>

When Gerelda Northrup bid Captain Frazier good-night, and linked her arm within her mother's, and retired to their apartments, Mrs. Northrup could not help notice how carefully her daughter guarded the great crimson beauty rose she wore on her breast.

The mother also noticed that the handsome captain wore a bud of the same kind in the lapel of his coat.

"My dear," she said, "I think you are going a little too far with Captain Frazier. It will not do to flirt with him on the very eve of your marriage with Hubert Varrick."

"There isn't the least bit of harm in it, mamma," Gerelda answered. "Captain Frazier is a delightful companion. Why shouldn't I enjoy his society?"

"Because it is playing with edged tools," declared Mrs. Northrup. "The captain is desperately in love with you."

"You should not blame him for lingering by my side to the very last moment."

"Trouble will come of it, I fear," returned the other. "He is always at your side."

"Save your lecture until to-morrow. I am sure it will keep. Do please ring the bell for my maid; it is nearly eleven o'clock, and I must not lose my beauty-sleep."

Gerelda Northrup knew in her own mind that all her mother said was but too true; but the spirit of coquetry was so deeply imbedded in her nature that she would not resign her sceptre over her old lovers' hearts until the last moment.

Of course the captain understood thoroughly that all her love was given to Hubert Varrick, and that it was only a very mild flirtation with himself she was indulging in.

She would have trembled could she have read the thoughts of Captain Frazier at that very moment.

In his elegant apartment, at the further end of the corridor, the captain was pacing the floor, wild with his own thoughts.

"My God! can I live through it?" he muttered. "How can I live and endure it? How can I stand by and see the girl I love made another man's bride, without the mad desire to slay him overpowering me? If I would not have the crime of murder on my soul, I must leave this place to-night, and never look upon Gerelda's beautiful face again. One day more of this would drive me mad. Great Heaven! why did I linger by her side when I knew my danger? There are times when I could almost swear that Gerelda cares quite as much for me as she does for Hubert Varrick. If I had had a fair chance I think I could have won her from him. No, I will not see her again – I will leave here this very night."

The captain rang the bell furiously, and called for a brandy and soda.

Soon after he left the hotel, saying that he would send for his luggage later.

But even after he had done all that, Captain Frazier stood motionless in the grounds watching the darkened windows of Gerelda's room.

The fire in his brain, produced by the potion he had taken, made sad havoc with his imagination. He thought of how the knights of old did when the girls they loved were about to wed rivals.

Was he less brave than they? And he thought, standing there under the night sky, how cleverly the gypsy had outwitted Blue-beard at the very altar to which he had led his blushing brides.

Great was Miss Northrup's consternation the next morning when she learned through a little note left for her that Captain Frazier had taken his departure from the Crossmon Hotel the preceding night. A sigh of relief fell from her red lips.

"Perhaps it is better so," she said.

A messenger who brought a great basket of orchids and white roses, entered.

Hidden among the flowers, Gerelda found a little note in Varrick's handwriting:

"I hope my darling rested well. Heaven has made the day beautiful because it is our marriage morn."

It was an odd notion of Gerelda's to steal away from their elegant city mansion and her dear five hundred friends, to have the ceremony performed quietly up at the Thousand Islands, with only a select few to witness it.

Great preparations had been made in the hotel for the approaching marriage. The spacious private parlors to be used were perfect fairy bowers of roses and green leaves.

Up to this very morning Miss Northrup's imported wedding-gown had not arrived. Mrs. Northrup and Hubert Varrick were wild with anxiety and impatience over the affair. Gerelda alone took the matter calmly.

"It will be here some time to-day," she averred. "The wedding will be delayed but a few hours, after all, and I don't know but that I prefer an evening wedding to a morning one, anyhow."

It was almost dark ere the long-looked-for bridal *trousseau* arrived. Varrick drew a great breath of relief.

He welcomed the shadows of night with the greatest joy. He never afterward remembered how he lived until the hour of eight rolled round.

He had not long to wait in the little anteroom where she was to join him. The few invited guests who were so fortunate as to receive invitations were all present.

A low murmur of admiration ran around that little group as the heavy silken *portières* that separated the anteroom from the reception parlor were drawn aside, and Hubert Varrick entered with the beautiful heiress leaning on his arm.

In her gloved right hand she carried a prayer-book of pearl and gold. A messenger had brought it, handing it to her just as she was about to enter the anteroom.

"It is from an unknown friend," whispered the boy, so low that even Varrick did not catch the words. "A simple wish accompanies it," the boy went on, "and that is, when the ceremony is but just begun, you will raise the little book to your lips for the sake of the unknown friend who sends it to you."

Gerelda smiled and promised, thoughtlessly enough, that she would comply.

"Are you ready, my darling?" said Hubert.

His thoughts were so confused at the time, that he had paid little heed to the messenger or noticed what he had brought to Gerelda, or what their conversation was about, or that the boy fled like a dark-winged shadow down the corridor after he had executed his errand.

She took her place by his side. Ah! how proud he was of her superb beauty, of her queenly carriage, and her haughty demeanor! Surely she was a bride worth winning – a queen among girls!

Slowly and solemnly the marriage ceremony began. Varrick answered promptly and clearly the questions put to him. Then the minister turned to the slender, staturesque figure by his side.

"Will you take this man to be your lawful, wedded husband, to love, honor, and obey him till death do you part?" he asked.

At that moment all assembled thought they heard a low, muffled whistle.

Before making answer, Gerelda raised the beautiful pearl and gold prayer-book and kissed it. She tried to speak the words: "I will;" but all in an instant her lips grew stiff and refused to utter them.

No sound save a low gasp broke the terrible stillness.

She had kissed the little prayer-book as she had so laughingly and thoughtlessly promised to do, ere she uttered the words that would make her Hubert Varrick's wife. And what had happened to her? She was gasping for breath – dying!

The little book fell unheeded at her feet, and her head drooped backward.

With a great cry, Hubert Varrick caught her.

"It is only a momentary dizziness," said Varrick, half leading, half carrying her into the anteroom and up to the window, and throwing open the sash.

"Rest here, my darling, while I fetch you a glass of water," he said, as he placed her in a chair and rushed from the room.

The event just narrated had happened so suddenly that Mrs. Northrup and those in the outer apartment were for the time being fairly dazed, unable to move or stir.

And by the time they had recovered their senses Hubert had reappeared with a glass of water in his hand.

Mrs. Northrup was too excited to leave her seat; but the rest followed quickly on Hubert's heels to the anteroom.

One instant more and a wild, hoarse cry in Varrick's voice echoed through the place.

The room was empty! Where was Gerelda? There was no means of exit from that room save the door by which he had entered. Perhaps she had leaned from the window and fallen out. He rushed quickly to it and glanced down, with a wild prayer to Heaven to give him strength to bear what he might see lying on the ground below. But instead of a white, upturned face, and a shimmering heap of satin and lace, he beheld a ladder, which was placed close against the window; and half-way down upon it, caught firmly upon one of the rounds, he beheld a torn fragment of lace, which he instantly recognized as part of Gerelda's wedding veil.

He could neither move nor speak. The sight held him spell-bound. By this time Mrs. Northrup reached his side.

"Oh! I might have known it, I might have guessed it!" she wildly cried, clutching at Varrick's arm. "She must have eloped with – with Captain Frazier," she whispered.

"Hush!" cried Varrick. "I know it, I believe it, but no one must know. I see it all. She repented of marrying me at the eleventh hour, and ere it was too late she fled with the lover who must have awaited her, in an agony of suspense, outside."

All the guests had gathered about them.

"Where is Miss Gerelda?" they all cried in a breath.

"She must have fallen from the window," they echoed; and immediately there was a stampede out toward the grounds.

In the excitement of the moment no one noticed that Hubert Varrick and Mrs. Northrup were left behind.

"Help me to bear this dreadful burden, Hubert!" she sobbed, hoarsely. "I think I am going mad. I thank God that Gerelda's father did not live to see this hour!"

Great as her grief was, the anguish on the face which Hubert Varrick raised to hers was pitiful to behold.

She was terrified. She saw that he needed comfort quite as much as herself.

The minister, who had entered the room unobserved, had heard all. He quitted the apartment as quickly as he had entered it, and hurried through the corridor to his friend Doctor Roberts.

"The greatest blessing you could do, doctor, would be to come to him quickly, and give him a potion that will make him dead to his trouble for a little while."

Chapter III.

"WHEN THOSE WE LOVE DRIFT AWAY FROM US THEY ARE NEVER THE SAME AGAIN – THEY NEVER COME BACK."

"Only a heart that's broken,
That is, if hearts can break;
Only a man adrift for life,
All for a woman's sake.
Your love was a jest – I now see it —
Now, though it's rather late;
Yes, too late to turn my life
And seek another fate."

Although search was instantly instituted for the missing bride-elect, not the slightest trace of her could be discovered.

Was she Hubert Varrick's bride or not? There was great diversity of opinion about that. Many contended that she *was not*, because the words from the minister: "Now I pronounce you man and wife," *had not yet been uttered*.

No wonder the beauty had found it difficult to choose between handsome Hubert Varrick and the dashing captain.

Varrick was a millionaire, and Captain Frazier could easily write out his check for an equal amount.

The matter was hushed up quickly, and kept so quiet that even the simple village folk at Alexandria Bay never knew of the thrilling event that had taken place in their very midst at the Crossmon Hotel. If the simple fisher-folk had but known of it, a tragedy might have been averted.

Mrs. Northrup was the first to recover from the shock; grief gave place to the most intense anger, and as she paced the floor excitedly to and fro, she vowed to herself that she would never forgive Gerelda for bringing this disgrace upon her.

With Varrick the blow had been too severe, too terrible, to be so easily gotten over. When morning broke, he still lay, face downward, on the couch upon which he had thrown himself. The effects of the sleeping potion they had so mercifully administered to him had worn off, and he was face to face once more with the great sorrow of his life.

They brought him a tempting breakfast, but he sent it away untasted. He sent at once for one of the call-boys.

"Buy me a ticket for the first steamer that goes out," he said. "I do not care where it goes or what its destination is; all I want is to get away."

Still the boy lingered.

"Well," said Varrick, "why do you wait?"

"I had something to tell you sir."

"Go on," said Varrick.

"There is a young girl down in the corridor who insists upon seeing you, sir. I told her it was quite useless, you would not see her; and then she fell into passionate weeping, sobbing out that you *must*, if but for a moment, and that she would not go until she had spoken with you, if she had to remain there all day."

"Where is she?"

"In the corridor without, sir."

Varrick crossed the room and stepped out into the corridor. He saw a little figure standing in the dim, shaded light.

She saw him at the same moment, and ran toward him with a little cry, flinging herself with a great sob at his feet.

"Oh, Mr. Varrick!" she cried.

"Why, it's little Jessie Bain!" he exclaimed in wonder, forgetting for the time being his own misery.

"It's just as you said it would be, sir – they have turned me out of the house. And you said, Mr. Varrick, if they ever did that, to be sure and come straight to you – and here I am!"

Varrick's amazement knew no bounds.

What should he do with this girl who was thrust so unceremoniously on his hands.

"If it had not been for you and your kind words, I should have flung myself in the St. Lawrence," continued the girl, "for I was so desperate. How kind Heaven was to send you to me to help me in my hour of greatest need, Mr. Varrick."

"Come into the parlor and let us talk this matter over," said Varrick. "Yes, I will surely help you. I will go and see your uncle this very day."

"I would not go to him," cried the girl. "I swear to you I would not! When I tell you this, you will not wonder that I refuse. In his rage, because I came home so late last night, he shot at me. The ball passed within a hair's-breadth of my heart, for which it was intended, and the powder burned my arm – see!"

Hubert Varrick was horror-stricken. The little arm was all blackened with smoke, and burned with the powder. There was need for a doctor here at once.

"If I went back to him he would kill me," the girl sobbed. "Oh! do not send me back, Mr. Varrick. Let me stay here where you are.

"You are the only being in the whole wide world who has ever spoken kindly to me. I can do quite as much for you as I did for my uncle. I can mend your clothes, see about your meals, and read the papers to you, and – "

"Hush, child!" said Varrick. "Don't say any more. It is plain to me that you can not be sent back to your uncle. I will see what can be done for you. You shall be my *protégée* for the present."

"How young and sweet and fair and innocent the girl is!" he told himself.

Placing the girl in the housekeeper's charge, he had a long consultation with Doctor Roberts.

"If you will allow me to make a suggestion," returned the doctor, "I would say, send Jessie Bain to school for a year, if you are inclined to be philanthropic. She is a wild, beautiful, thoughtless child, and it has often occurred to me that her education must be very limited."

"That will be the very thing," returned Varrick. "I wonder that this solution did not occur to me before. I am going away to-day," he added, "and wonder if I could get you to attend to the matter for me, doctor?"

"I will do so with pleasure," returned Doctor Roberts. "In fact, I know the very institution that would be most suitable. It's a private boarding-school for young ladies, patronized by the *élite*, and I feel assured that Professor Graham will take the greatest possible pains with this pretty, neglected girl, who will be heir only to the education she gets there, and her youth and strength with which to face the battle of life."

When the result of this conference was told to Jessie Bain, she sobbed as if her heart would break.

"I don't want to leave you, Mr. Varrick!" she cried, "indeed I don't. Let me go home with you. I am sure your mother will like me. I will be so good to her."

It was explained to her that this could not be. They could scarcely pacify her. It touched Hubert Varrick deeply to see how she clung to him.

He parted with her in the doctor's home, whence she had been taken, leaving his address with her, with the admonition that she should write to him every week, and tell him how she was progressing with her studies; and if she wanted anything she was to be sure to let him know.

He went back to the hotel to bid good-bye to Mrs. Northrup; but somehow he could not bring himself to say one word to her about Jessie Bain.

As he boarded the evening boat for Clayton there was not a more miserable man in all the whole wide world than Hubert Varrick. He paced the deck moodily. The thousands of little green islands upon which the search-light flashed so continuously, had little charm for him. Suddenly as the light turned its full glare upon a small island midway up the stream, rendering each object upon it as clearly visible as though it were noonday, under the strong light Hubert Varrick's eyes fell upon a sight that fairly rooted him to the spot with horror.

In that instantaneous glance this is what he saw: A young and lovely girl crouching on her knees, in the long deep grass under the trees, her arms outstretched in wild supplication, and bending over her was the dark figure of a man. One hand clutched her white throat, and the other hand held a revolver pressed to her white brow. The slouch hat he wore concealed his features. The girl's face, framed in that mass of curling dark hair, the white arms – great God! how strangely like Gerelda's!

Was he going mad? He strained his eyes to see, and a terrible cry of agony broke from his lips.

"Captain!" he shrieked, "somebody, anybody, get me a life-boat, quick, for the love of Heaven! Half my fortune for a life-boat – quick!"

As he cried aloud, the island was buried in darkness again.

Chapter IV.

"THE GIRL WHO PLAYS AT FLIRTATION MAY FIND SHE HAS GRASPED A TWO-EDGED SWORD," SAID THE HANDSOME YOUNG CAPTAIN, LOOKING FULL IN GERELDA'S BEWITCHING, HAUGHTY FACE

The captain who was passing, stopped short and looked at Hubert Varrick in amazement as he cried out, wildly:

"Get me a life-boat, somebody – anybody! Half my fortune for a life-boat!"

"What is the matter?" asked the captain, sharply. "Has some one fallen overboard?"

When Varrick answered in the affirmative, the captain gave orders that a life-boat be at once lowered by the crew, calling upon Varrick to point out, as near as he could, where the drowning man was.

"I will go, too," Varrick answered, springing into the boat; and an instant later the boat was flying over the waves in the direction which Varrick indicated.

"Which way, sir?" asked the man at the oars.

"Straight toward that little island yonder," was the hoarse reply. "Make for it quickly! Here, take this bank-note, and, in Heaven's name, row sharp! No one is drowning, but there is a young and lovely girl at the mercy of some fiend on that island yonder!"

The man dropped his oars.

"If you had told our captain that, he would never have sent out a life-boat," declared the man. "He thought it was some one drowning near at hand, for the story of Wau-Winet Island is no news to the people hereabouts."

"What do you mean?" cried Varrick.

"I can tell you the story in a very few words, sir," returned the man; "and surely there's no one more competent to relate it than myself. I can relate it while we are rowing over to Wau-Winet Island:

"Some six months ago a stranger suddenly appeared in our midst. He purchased Wau-Winet Island, and a few days later a score or more of workmen appeared one night at Alexandria Bay, and boarded a tug that was to take them out to the island.

"These workmen were all strangers to the inhabitants around Alexandria Bay, and they spoke in a different language.

"They lived upon the island for a month or more, never once coming in contact with the people hereabouts.

"All their food was brought to them. Soon their mysterious manners became the talk of all the country round.

"In a month's time they had erected a grand stone house – almost a castle – hidden from any one who might chance to pass the island, by a net-work of trees.

"At length the gray-stone house was completed, and the strange, uncanny workmen took their departure as silently as they had come.

"The people were warned to keep away from the place, for the workmen had left behind them a large, ferocious dog who menaced the life of any one who attempted to land on Wau-Winet Island.

"Only last night an event happened which I shall never forget if I live to be the age of Methuselah. I was standing near the dock, when suddenly some one laid a heavy hand on my shoulder.

"Glancing up with a little start, I saw the man who had so lately bought Wau-Winet Island standing before me. By his side, leaning heavily upon his arm, yet swaying strangely to and fro, as

though she were scarcely able to keep her feet, was a woman in a long black cloak, and her face covered by a thick veil.

"Before I had a chance to speak, the gentleman bent down and whispered hoarsely in my ear:

"I want you to row us as quickly as possible, to Wau-Winet Island. You can name your own price.'

"I wish to God I had refused him. I started to help the lady into the boat, but he thrust me aside and helped her in himself, lifting her by main strength.

"For an instant she swayed to and fro, like a leaf in a strong wind; but he steadied her by holding her down on her seat, both of her hands caught in his.

"I had scarcely pushed out into midstream ere I fancied I heard a low, choking cry. The woman had wrenched one of her hands free, and like a flash she had torn off her thick veil, and then I saw a sight that made the blood run cold in my veins, for over her mouth a thick scarf was wound, which she was trying to tear off with her disengaged hand.

"Her companion caught her hand with a fierce imprecation on his lips, and the struggle that ensued between them made the boat rock like a cradle. In an instant he had forced her back into her seat, and drawn the veil down over her face again.

"But in that brief instant, by the bright light of the moon, I had caught a glimpse of a face so wondrous in its loveliness and its haughtiness that I was fairly dazed. I did not know what to do or say, I was so bewildered.

"'You must make quicker time!' cried the gentleman, turning to me.

"At last we reached the island, and despite her struggles, he lifted her out of the boat. Then he thrust a bill into my hand, saying grimly, 'You can return now.'

"But while he was speaking, never for an instant did his hold relax upon the girl's arm, though she writhed under his grasp.

"I hesitated a moment, and he turned to me with the look of a fiend on his dark, handsome face.

"'I said you might go,' he repeated.

"'I will double that sum if you know how to keep your tongue still,' the man said, thrusting another bill into my hand.

"As I pushed out into midstream the girl grew frantic. With an almost superhuman effort she succeeded in removing the woolen scarf which had been wound so tightly about her mouth, then with a cry which I shall never forget while life lasts, she shrieked out piteously, as she threw out her white arms wildly toward me:

"'Help! help! Oh! help, for the love of Heaven! Don't desert me! Come back! oh, come back and save me!'

"The blood fairly stood still in my veins. Her companion hurled her back so quickly that she completely lost her balance, and fell fainting in his arms.

"'Go!' he cried, angrily, 'and not one word of what you have seen or heard!'

"'I can not desert a lady in distress, sir,' I answered.

"With a fury such as I have never seen equaled, he turned and faced me in the moonlight.

"'I will give you just one moment to go!' he cried, his right hand creeping toward his hip-pocket – 'another moment to get out of sight!'

"I knew that it was as much as my life was worth to remain where I was; so, despite the girl's pitiful entreaties, I rowed back slowly into midstream and down the river.

"I fairly made my boat fly over the water. I headed straight for Clayton – the nearest village – and there I told my startling story to the people. In less time than it takes to tell it, a half dozen of us started back for Wau-Winet Island. Arriving, we crept silently up the steep path that led to the house. My loud ringing brought the gentleman himself to the door. I shall never forget the fire that leaped into his eyes as he saw me; but nothing daunted, I said to him determinedly:

"I have come here with these men to aid the young girl who appealed to me for help a little while ago.'

"My companions pressed close behind me, until they filled the wide entrance hall and closed in around him.

"You are certainly mad!' he cried. 'There is no young lady on Wau-Winet Island, nor has any woman ever put foot upon it at least since it has been my property,' he added.

"Do you mean to say that I did not row you and a young lady over to this island within this hour, and that she did not appeal to me for help?' I asked.

"Certainly not!' he declared promptly.

"You must be either mad or dreaming to even think of such a thing,' he continued, haughtily. 'However,' turning to my companions, 'seeing that you have had the trouble of coming here – brought by this lunatic – you are welcome to look through the house and satisfy yourselves. In fact, I beg that you will do so.'

"Much to his surprise, we took him at his word."

Chapter V.

THE MYSTERIOUS HOUSE ON LONELY WAU-WINET ISLAND

"We searched the stone house from cellar to garret in hopes of finding a trace of the beautiful girl I felt sure was imprisoned within its grim walls, the owner following, with a look of defiance on his dark, handsome face.

"She *must* be on this island,' I declared, vehemently. 'I rowed you and her over here.'

"It is quite true that you rowed *me* over here, my good fellow, but no fair lady accompanied me, unless it might have been some mermaid. I hope you are satisfied,' said he, turning to my companions, 'that the man who has brought you here has played you a trick.'

"And now stranger, you ask me to take you to Wau-Winet Island on just such a mission, and I answer you that it would be as much as our lives are worth."

"It is evident," returned Hubert Varrick, excitedly, "that there is some fearful mystery, and it is our duty to try to fathom it if it is within our power."

"As you say, sir," replied the man.

At this moment the skiff grated sharply upon the sand, and the two men sprung out.

They had scarcely proceeded half the distance to the house when they were suddenly confronted by a man.

"Who are you, and what do you want here?" he asked.

"I must see the master of Wau-Winet Island," returned Varrick, sternly. "Are you he?"

"No," returned the man, rather uneasily. "He left the island scarcely five minutes ago in his boat. I am only the man working about the place."

"Tell me," cried Varrick, earnestly, "was there a lady with him? I will pay you well to answer me."

The man's gaze shifted uneasily.

"There was no lady with him. I suppose that you have heard the strange story about this island, and have come to investigate the matter. Let me tell you, it is more than annoying to my master. Had he heard it he never would have bought the place. As it is he has left it for good and all to-night, and is going to advertise the place for sale. If they had told my master, when he came here to buy, the story that a young and beautiful woman was supposed to have been murdered here many years ago, and that at nights her spirit haunts the place, he never would have bought it. Other people imagine that they seen it; but we, who live here, never have."

The man told this with such apparent earnestness and truth, that Varrick was mystified. Had his eyes deceived him? They evidently had. And then again he told himself that, thinking so much of Gerelda, he had imagined that the face he had seen for a moment in the flash-light bore a striking resemblance to hers. And he persuaded himself to believe that the fisherman's story was a myth.

He well knew that, of all people in the world, fishermen loved to spin the most exaggerated yarns, and be the heroes of the greatest adventures.

He got out of the matter as gracefully as only Varrick could, apologizing for his intrusion, and expressing himself as only too pleased to know that his imagination had simply been at fault.

"Will you come in?" asked the man, turning to him. "My master has always given orders that we are to be very hospitable to strangers."

"You are very kind, and I thank you for your courtesy," returned Varrick, "but I think not. We will try to cut across the bay and catch the steamer further down."

So saying, he motioned his companion to enter the boat.

The little boat containing the two men was scarcely out of sight, ere the door of the mysterious stone house opened quickly, and a man came cautiously down the path.

"What did they want?"

"They wanted to see you, Captain Frazier," answered the servant.

"What about?" asked the other hoarsely.

"They saw you and – and the young lady when you were out in the grounds, a little while since, as the search-light went down, and they came to – to rescue the young lady. I – I succeeded in convincing them that their eyes had deceived them, and told them that you were so annoyed at that senseless tale that you had gone away from the island; that you did not intend to come back, your aim being to sell the place."

"Bravo, bravo, McDonald!" exclaimed Captain Frazier – for it was he. "Upon my soul, you did well! You are reducing lying down to a fine art."

"I made quite a startling discovery, sir," said McDonald. "It was the same man who made you all the trouble last night, bringing those people here."

Captain Frazier frowned darkly.

"But that is not all, sir," added McDonald. "Mr. Varrick was with him."

The name fell like a thunder-bolt on Captain Frazier's ears. He started back as though he had been shot.

"Has he succeeded in hunting me down so quickly?" he cried.

"So I thought when I first saw him, sir. But, to my great amazement, I soon discovered that he was totally ignorant of who lived on the island – that it was yourself. The fisherman had been telling him the story about the young lady, and he had come to investigate it. I soon convinced him that there was nothing in the story, and that he was only another one added to the list that the same fisherman had played that practical joke on. He was angry enough when he took his departure."

"Are you sure of this, McDonald?" asked Captain Frazier.

"Quite sure."

Captain Frazier gave a sigh of relief. He had fancied himself so secure here. Even the servants did not know him by his own name.

"If I thought for a moment that he suspected my presence here, I would lose no time in getting away from Wau-Winet Island, and taking *her* with me."

"You need have no fear, sir," returned the man.

For an hour or more Captain Frazier paced slowly up and down under the trees, smoking cigar after cigar in rapid succession.

"It is a terrible thing," he muttered, "when love for a woman drives a man to the verge of madness. I swore that Gerelda should never marry Hubert Varrick, if I had to kill her. But I have done better. He will never look upon her face again."

At length he walked slowly to the house. He was met on the porch by a little French maid who seemed to be looking for him.

"Well, Marie?" said Captain Frazier.

"I have been looking for you, sir," returned the girl quickly. "I can do nothing with mademoiselle. She will not speak; she will not eat. She lies there hour after hour with her beautiful face turned toward the wall and her white hands clasped together. She might be a dead woman for all the interest she evinces in anything. I very much fear, sir, that she will keep her vow —*never to speak again—never in this world.*"

"You must keep close watch that she does not attempt to make away with herself, Marie," he continued, earnestly. "Heaven only knows how she obtained that revolver I took away from her out in the grounds to-night. She was kneeling down in the long grass, and had it already pressed to her temple, when I appeared in the very nick of time and wrenched it from her little white hand. She

would do anything save drown herself to escape from here. Her father lost his life that way, and she would never attempt *that* means of escape, even from *this* place."

"She even refuses to have her bridal-dress removed," said the maid; "and I do not know what to do about it. She has uttered no word since first she crossed your threshold; she will not speak."

Captain Frazier looked troubled, distressed.

Would Gerelda keep her vow? She had said when she recovered consciousness and found herself on the island, and the boatman gone:

"I will never utter another word from this hour until I am set free again. You are beneath contempt, Captain Frazier, to kidnap a young girl at the altar."

He never forgot how she looked at him in the clear moonlight as he turned to her, crying out passionately:

"It is your own fault, Gerelda. Why did you draw me on to love you so? You encouraged me up to the last moment, and then it was too late for me to give you up."

Chapter VI.

THE SWEET AND TENDER LETTERS THAT SUDDENLY CEASED TO COME

Gerelda Northrup neither spoke nor stirred.

"You drew me on – ay, up to the very last moment – or this would never have happened. I come of a desperate race, Gerelda," he went on, huskily, "and when you showed me so plainly that you still liked my society, even after you had plighted your troth to another, I clung to the mad idea that there was yet hope for me, if we were far away from those who might come between us. On this lone island we will be all the world to each other – 'the world forgetting, by the world forgot.' Marry me, Gerelda, and I will be your veritable slave!"

He never forgot the look she turned upon him.

"When your anger has had time to cool, you will forgive me, my darling," he pleaded, "and then I am sure you will not say me nay when I beg for your heart and hand. I shall not force you into a marriage. I will wait patiently until you come to me and say: 'Robert, I am willing to marry you!'"

He remembered how she had turned from him in bitter anger and scorn too terrible for any words. He had given her over into the hands of Marie, the little French maid.

She offered no resistance as the girl took her hand and led her into the house; but there was a look on her face that boded no good, while the words she had uttered rang in his ears: "I shall never speak again until you set me free!"

Twice she had made the attempt, during the forty-eight hours which followed, to take her own life, and both times he had prevented her. Even in those thrilling moments she had never uttered a word. She kept her vow, and Captain Frazier was beside himself at the turn affairs had taken.

But what else could he have done, under the circumstances? He could not stand by and see her made the bride of another.

Only that day, by the merest chance, Frazier had found out about Hubert Varrick practically adopting the village beauty – saucy little Jessie Bain – and that he had secretly sent her to a private school, to be educated at his own expense, and he lost no time in communicating this startling news to Gerelda, and giving her proof positive of the truth of this statement.

He saw her face turn deathly white, and he knew that the arrow of bitter jealousy had struck home; but even then she uttered no word. But when darkness gathered she stole out into the grounds, and tried to end it all then and there, and she would have succeeded but for his timely happening upon the scene at the very moment that the flash-light had shone so suddenly upon her.

Yes, the story concerning Jessie Bain had come like a thunder-bolt to Gerelda Northrup. She had fallen on her face in the long green grass, and was carried into the house in a dead faint.

Only heaven knew what she suffered when consciousness came to her. She was almost mad with terror at finding herself snatched from the arms of her lover at the very altar – kidnapped in this most outrageous manner.

She pictured her bridegroom's wild agony when he returned with the glass of wine which he had hurried after, and found her missing.

But the knowledge that he had consoled himself so quickly by taking an interest in some other girl almost took her breath away. Then she sent a note to Captain Frazier. It contained but a few words, but they were enough to send him into the seventh heaven of delight. They read as follows:

"Prove to me, beyond all shadow of a doubt, that Hubert Varrick is really in love with the rustic little village maid you speak of to such an extent that he has secretly undertaken the care of her future, and, madly as I love him, I will give him up and marry you within six months from this time. But, in

the meantime, you must return me at once to my home and friends. This much I promise you: I shall not see Hubert Varrick until this matter has been cleared up."

To this note Frazier sent back hurried word that she should have all the proof of Hubert Varrick's perfidy that she might ask.

There was but one thing which it was impossible to do, and that was to set her free during the six months' probation.

This was impossible. He could not do it; he loved her too madly. He would go away, if she liked, and leave her to reign "queen of the isle." She should have everything which heart desired – everything save permission to leave the place.

To this Gerelda was forced to submit.

"If I were convinced that Hubert Varrick loved another, life would be all over for me," she moaned again and again.

Meanwhile, as days and weeks rolled by, and no tidings reached Hubert Varrick of the bride who, he supposed, had deserted him at the very altar, his heart grew bitter against Gerelda.

He plunged into his practice of law, with the wild hope that he might forget her.

The only diversity that entered his life was the letters which he received from little Jessie Bain. Girl-like, she wrote to him every day.

"I do wish you would adopt me, guardy," she wrote one day, "and bring me home; I am so tired of this place. The principal always calls upon me to look after all the little young fry in his school. Morning and night I have to hear their prayers and hunt the shoes and stockings that they throw at one another across the dormitory. Each one denies the throwing, and I slap every one of them right and left, to be sure to get the right one. I'm sick and tired of books. I wish I could come to you."

Suddenly the letters ceased, and, to Varrick's consternation, a week passed without his hearing one word from little Jessie Bain, and he never knew until then, how deep a hold the girl had on the threads that were woven into his daily life.

In his loneliness he turned to the letters, and read and reread them. It was like balm to his sore heart to find in them such outpourings of love and devotion.

Was she ill? Perhaps some lover had crossed her path.

The thought worried him. He was just on the point of telegraphing, when suddenly there was a rustling sound at the open French window, a swish of skirts behind him, and the next instant a pair of arms were thrown about his neck.

"Now don't scold me, guardy – please don't! I am going to own up to the truth right here and now. I ran away. I couldn't help it, I got so tired of hooking young ones' dresses and hearing their prayers."

With an assumption of dignity, Hubert Varrick unwound the girl's arms from about his neck. But somehow they had sent a strange thrill through his whole being, just such a thrill as he had experienced during the hour in which he had asked Gerelda to be his wife, and she had answered in the affirmative.

He tried to hold her off at arm's-length, but she only clung to him the more, giving him a rapturous kiss of greeting.

The story of little Jessie Bain had been the only one which Hubert Varrick had kept from his mother.

It seemed amusing, he had told himself repeatedly, for a young man of five-and-twenty to be guardian, as it were, to a young girl of sixteen – that sweet, subtle, dangerous age "where childhood and womanhood meet."

"Aren't you glad to see me, Mr. Varrick?" cried Jessie.

"Glad?" Hubert Varrick's face lighted up, and before he was aware of the action, he had drawn her into his encircling arms, bent his dark, handsome head, and kissed the rosy mouth so dangerously near his own. There was a sound as of a groan, from the door-way, followed by a muffled shriek, and

raising his eyes in startled horror, Hubert Varrick saw his lady-mother standing on the threshold, her jeweled hands parting the satin *portières*.

"Who is this girl, and what does this amazing scene mean, Hubert?" cried Mrs. Varrick.

Jessie Bain looked at the angry lady in puzzled wonder. She nestled up closer to the handsome, broad-shouldered fellow, murmuring audibly:

"Why don't you tell her that I am Jessie Bain, and that you are my best friend on earth?"

The lady had heard enough to condemn the girl in her eyes.

She advanced toward her, livid with rage, and flung the girl's little white hands back from her son's arm.

"Go!" she cried, quivering with rage; "leave this house instantly, or I will call the servants to put you into the street? It's such girls as you that ruin young men!"

"Mother," interrupted Hubert, "Jessie Bain must not be sent from this house. If she leaves, I shall go with her!"

Chapter VII.

EVERY YOUNG GIRL WOULD LIKE A LOVER. AND WHY NOT? FOR LOVE IS THE GRANDEST GIFT THE GODS CAN GIVE

A thunder-bolt falling from a clear sky could not have startled the proud Mrs. Varrick more than those crushing words that fell from the lips of her handsome son – "Mother, if you turn Jessie Bain from your door, I go with her!"

Mrs. Varrick drew herself up to her full height and advanced into the room like an angry queen.

"Hubert," she cried, in a tone that he had never heard from his mother's lips before, "I can make all due allowance for the follies of a young man, but I say this to you: you should never have permitted this girl to cross your mother's threshold."

"Give me a chance to speak a few words, mother," he interrupted. "Let me set matters straight. The whole fault is mine, because I have not explained this affair to you before. I put it off from day to day."

In a few brief words he explained.

In her own mind, quick as a flash, a sudden thought came to her that there was more behind this than had been told to her.

She had wondered why Gerelda Northrup, the beauty and the heiress, fled from her handsome son at the very altar. Now she began to think that she might have had a reason for it other than that which the world knew.

She was diplomatic; she was too worldly wise to seek to separate them then and there. She said to herself it must be done by strategy.

"This puts the matter in quite a different light, Hubert," she said; "and while I am slightly incensed at your not telling me about this affair, I can readily understand the kindly impulse which prompted you to protect this young girl. But I can not allow *you* to outdo me; Jessie must consider *me* quite as much her friend as you. She shall find a home here with us, and it will be pleasant, after all, to see a bright, girlish face in these dull old rooms, and hear the sound of merry laughter."

This remark threw Hubert off his guard.

"That is spoken like my noble-hearted mother!" he cried, enthusiastically. "I knew you could not be angry with me when you understood it."

The girl stepped hesitatingly forward. From the first instant that she beheld her standing on the threshold, she had conceived a great dislike and fear of Hubert's haughty lady-mother. Even the conversation and explanation which she had just listened to did not change her first impression.

Thus it happened that Jessie Bain took up her abode in the magnificent home of the Varricks.

But Hubert's mother made it the one object of her life to see that her son and this attractive girl were never left alone together for a moment.

He had seemed heart-broken over the loss of Gerelda Northrup up to the time that Jessie had entered the house; now there was a perceptible change in him.

He no longer brooded for hours over his cigars, pacing up and down under the trees; now he would enter the library of an evening, or linger in the drawing-room, especially if Jessie was there.

Had it not been for her son, and the terror from day to day in her heart that Hubert was learning to care for the girl, proud Mrs. Varrick would have liked Jessie Bain, she was so bright, so merry, so artless.

She lost no opportunity in impressing upon Jessie's mind, when she was alone with the girl, that Hubert would never marry, eagerly noticing what effect these words would have upon the girl.

"Wouldn't that be a pity, Mrs. Varrick?" she had answered once. "It would be so cruel for him to stay single always."

"Not at all," returned Mrs. Varrick, sharply. "If a man does not get the one that is intended for him, he should never marry any one else."

"And you think that he was intended for Miss Northrup?" questioned Jessie.

"Decidedly; and for no one else."

"Then I wonder Heaven did not give her to him," said Jessie.

Mrs. Varrick looked at her keenly.

"A man never has but one love in a life-time," she said, impressively.

A fortnight had barely passed since Jessie had been under that roof, and yet every one of the household noticed the difference in handsome Hubert Varrick, and spoke about it. He was growing gayer and more debonair than in the old days, when he was paying court to the beautiful Gerelda Northrup. Of all subjects, the only one which he would not discuss with his mother was the future of Jessie Bain.

She had on one occasion asked him, with seeming carelessness, how long he intended to care for this girl who was an utter stranger to him, and suggested that, since she would not go to school, his responsibility ought to cease.

"I have bound myself to look after her until she is eighteen," he answered.

"I want to have a little talk with you, Hubert, on that subject," she said. "Will you listen to me a few moments?"

"As many as you like, mother," he answered.

"I want to ask you if you have ever thought over what a wrong step you are taking in giving this girl a taste of a life she can never expect to continue after she leaves here?"

"You should be glad that she has a little sunshine, mother."

"It is wrong to place a girl in a brilliant sunshine for a few brief days, and then plunge her into gloom for the rest of her life."

"She has not been plunged into gloom yet, mother."

"If she could marry well while she is with us, it would be a great thing for her," went on Mrs. Varrick.

"Don't you think she is rather young yet? What is your opinion about that, mother?"

"It is best for a poor girl to marry as soon as a good offer presents itself, I believe. I have been thinking deeply upon this subject, for I have noticed that there is a young man who seems to be quite smitten with the charms of Jessie Bain."

Her handsome son flushed to the roots of his dark-brown hair, and he laughed confusedly as he said:

"Why, how very sharp you are, mother! I did not know that you noticed it."

"Of course he is not rich," continued Mrs. Varrick, "but still, even a struggling young architect would be a good match for her. She might do worse."

"Why, what in the world do you mean, mother?" cried Hubert Varrick. "What are you talking about?"

"Why, my dear son, have you been blind to what has been going on for the last fortnight?" she returned, with seeming carelessness. "Haven't you noticed that the young architect who is drawing the plans for the new western wing of our house is in love with your *protégée*?"

She never forgot the expression of her son's face; it was livid and white as death. This betrayed his secret. He loved Jessie Bain himself!

Chapter VIII.

A MOTHER'S DESPERATE SCHEME

"What makes you think the young architect is in love with Jessie Bain, mother? I think it is an absurd idea."

"Why do you call it absurd?" returned Mrs. Varrick. "It is perfectly natural."

Hubert turned on her in a rage so great that it fairly appalled her.

"Why did you permit this sort of thing to go on, mother?" he cried. "It is all your fault. You are accountable for it, I say."

Mrs. Varrick rose from her seat and looked haughtily at her son, her heart beating with great, stifling throbs. In all the years of their lives they had never before exchanged one cross word with each other, and in that moment she hated, with all the strength of her soul, the girl who had sown discord between them, and she wished that Heaven had stricken the girl dead ere her son had looked upon her face.

"I am sure it is nothing to you or to me whom Jessie Bain chooses to fall in love with," she answered, coldly. "You forget yourself in reproaching *me* with it, my son," and with these words she swept from the room.

The door had barely closed after her ere Hubert threw himself down into the nearest chair, covering his face with his hands.

He had loved Gerelda Northrup as few men love in a life-time, but with the belief that she had eloped with another, growing up in his heart, he had been able to stifle that love, root it from his heart, blossom and branch, with an iron will, until at last he knew if he came face to face with Gerelda she would never again have the power to thrill his heart with the same passion.

And, sitting there, he was face to face with the truth – that his heart, in all its loneliness, had gone out to Jessie Bain in the rebound, and he knew that life would never be the same to him if she were to prefer another to himself.

He rang the bell sharply, and in response to the summons one of the servants soon appeared.

"Send the architect – the young man whom you will find in the new western wing of the house – to me at once. Tell him to bring his drawings with him."

Hubert Varrick paced nervously up and down the library until the young man entered the room.

"You sent for me, Mr. Varrick," he said, with a smile on his frank, handsome face, "and I made haste to come to you."

"I wish to inspect your drawings," he said, tersely, as he waved the young man to a seat.

Frank Moray laid them down upon the table. There was something in Varrick's manner that startled him, for he had always been courteous and pleasant to him before.

Varrick ran his eyes critically over the pieces of card-board, the frown on his face deepening.

"I hope the plans meet your approval, sir," said the young man, very respectfully. "I showed them from day to day, as I progressed, to Miss Jessie Bain, and she seemed very much interested in them."

Those words were fatal to the young man's cause. With an angry gesture, Varrick threw the drawings down upon the table.

"Your plans do not please me at all," he returned. "Stop right where you are. Return to your firm at once and tell them to send me another man, an older man, one with more experience – one who can spend more time at his business and less time in chattering. Your sketches are miserably drawn!"

Frank Moray had risen to his feet, his face white as death.

"Mr. Varrick," he cried hoarsely, "let me beg of you to reconsider your words. Only try me again. Let me make a new set of drawings to submit to you. It would ruin my reputation if you were to send this message to the firm, for they have hitherto placed much confidence in my work."

"You will leave the house at once," he said, "and send a much older man, I repeat, to continue the work."

The poor fellow fairly staggered from the drawing-room. He could not imagine why, in one short hour, he had dropped from heaven to the very depths of Hades, as it were.

Varrick breathed freely when he saw him leave the house and walk slowly down the lilac-bordered path and out through the arched gate-way.

A little later Jessie came flying into the library. Varrick was still seated at the table, poring over his books.

"Where is Mr. Moray – do you know?" she asked, quickly – "I want to return him a paper he loaned me this morning. I have been looking everywhere for him, but can not find him. There is something in the paper that you would like to hear about too."

"Sit down on this hassock, Jessie, and read it to me," he said.

"Oh, no! You want to make fun of me," she pouted, "and see me get puzzled over all the big words. Please read it yourself, Mr. Varrick."

"Suppose you tell me the substance of it, and that will save me reading it," he said.

"Oh, I can do that. There isn't so much to tell. It's about a fire last night on one of the little islands in the St. Lawrence. No doubt you have heard of the place – Wau-Winet Island. The mysterious stone house that was on it has been burned to the ground. The owner was away at the time. It is supposed that everyone else on the island perished in the flames."

Hubert Varrick listened with interest, but he never dreamed how vitally, in the near future, this catastrophe would concern him.

He thought of his strange visit to that place, and that no doubt the owner was none too sorry to see it laid to ashes, as he had acknowledged that it had caused him much annoyance owing to the uncanny rumors floating about that the place was haunted by a young and beautiful woman whose spirit would not be laid.

Then, in talking to Jessie during the next half hour he entirely forgot the fire that had occurred on that far-away island in the St. Lawrence.

He broached the subject that the architect had gone for good, narrowly watching Jessie's pretty face as he told her.

"Oh! I am so sorry," she declared, disappointedly, "for he was such a nice young man; and in his spare moments he had promised to teach me to sketch;" and her lovely face clouded.

"Would not I do as well?" asked Hubert Varrick, gently, as his hand closed over the little white one so near his own.

The girl trembled beneath his touch. In that one moment her heart went from her, and she experienced the sweet elysium of a young life just awakening to love's bewildering dream.

"Would I not make as good a teacher?" repeated Varrick, softly; and he bent his dark, handsome head, looking earnestly into the girl's flushed face.

"Perhaps," she answered, evasively; and she was very much relieved to hear some one calling her at that moment.

Mrs. Varrick heard of the proposed sketching lessons with great displeasure. Despite all that she had done and said, she saw these two young people falling more and more in love with each other with every passing day.

"How can I stop it? What shall I do?" she asked herself night after night, as she paced the floor of her *boudoir*.

She fairly cursed the hour that brought lovely, innocent little Jessie Bain beneath that roof, and she wished she knew of some way in which to get rid of the girl for good and all.

She paced the floor until the day dawned. A terrible scheme against the life and happiness of poor Jessie Bain had entered her brain – a scheme so dark and horrible that even she grew frightened as she contemplated it.

Then she set her lips together, muttering hoarsely:

"I would do anything to part my son and Jessie Bain!"

Chapter IX.

GERELDA'S ESCAPE FROM WAU-WINET ISLAND

The fire at Wau-Winet Island, as the papers had explained, had taken place during the owner's absence. No one knew how it had happened; there seemed to be no one left to tell the tale.

When Captain Frazier returned that evening and found the place in ruins, he was almost wild with grief. In his own mind he felt that he knew how it had come about.

In her desperation to get away, Gerelda had fired the house. But, for all that, she had not succeeded in making her escape, as the flames must have overtaken her.

Those who watched Captain Frazier had great difficulty in preventing him from flinging himself headlong into the bay, he seemed so distracted over the loss of Gerelda, the girl whom he loved so sincerely.

The truth of the matter was, Gerelda had not fired the place. It had been caused by a spark from an open fire-place; and in the confusion and the darkness of the night she had succeeded in making her way out of the house and down to the shore.

With trembling hands she had untied one of the little boats which lay there rocking to and fro, had sprung into it, and ere the flames burst through the arched windows of the stone house she was far across the bay, and was soon lost to sight in the darkness. She had taken the precaution to seize a long cloak and veil belonging to the maid, and these she proceeded to don while in the boat.

By daylight she found herself drifting slowly toward a little village, and as the lights became clear enough to discern objects distinctly, she saw that the place was Kingston.

At this Gerelda was overjoyed, for she remembered her old nurse, whom she had not seen since early childhood, lived here. The sun was shining bright and clear when Gerelda Northrup stepped from the boat and wended her way up the grass-grown streets of the quaint little Canadian town.

By dint of inquiry here and there, she at length found the nurse's home – a little cottage, almost covered with morning-glory vines, setting back from the main road.

Although the nurse had not seen Gerelda since she was a little child, she knew her the moment her eyes rested upon her face, and with a cry of amazement she drew back.

"Gerelda Northrup!" she gasped. "Is it you, Miss Gerelda, or do my eyes deceive me?"

She had heard of the great marriage that was to take place at the Crossmon Hotel, at Alexandria Bay, and heard, too, the whispered rumor of the bride-elect's flight; and to see her standing there before her almost took Nurse Henderson's breath away.

She looked past Gerelda, expecting to see some tall and handsome gentleman, with a grand carriage drawn up at the road-side, waiting for her. The girl seemed to interpret her thoughts.

"I have come alone," she said, briefly. "Won't you bid me enter?"

"That I will, Miss Gerelda!" cried Nurse Henderson, laughing and crying over her.

But when she drew her into the house, and took off the long cloak she wore, she was startled beyond expression to see that she wore a bridal-dress all ruined and torn.

Nurse Henderson held up her hands in wild alarm.

"Oh, Miss Gerelda!" she cried; "what does it mean? I am terrified!"

"Do not ask me any questions, I pray; I am not able to answer them just yet. Some day I may tell you all, but not now."

The old nurse placed her on a sofa, begging her to rest herself, as she looked so pale and worn, saying that she might tell her anything she wished, a little later, when she was stronger.

It was a fortnight before Gerelda had strength to leave her old nurse's home, and during that time she had made a *confidante* of old Nurse Henderson, pledging her beforehand never to reveal the story she had told her. Nurse Henderson listened, horror-struck, to the story.

"I am going to see for myself, Henderson," she added, in conclusion, "just how much truth there is in this affair. If I find that Hubert Varrick has been so false to me, it will surely kill me. I am going there to see for myself."

"You do not seem to realize, my dear," said Nurse Henderson, "that the people say you eloped with his rival, and that he believes them."

"He should have had more confidence in me, no matter what the world says!" cried Gerelda, with flashing eyes. "He should have searched for me. I have often thought since, that Heaven intended just what has occurred to test his love for me. I firmly believe this. I intend to disguise myself, and go boldly to his home and see for myself whether the report is false or true. Of course, a rival would not stoop to make up any falsehood against him and pour it into my ears. You will help me to disguise myself, Henderson?"

"I have thought it all out," continued the heiress, "while I have been under this roof, and I have been trying to gain strength for the ordeal. Let me tell it to you, Henderson, and you will marvel at my clever plan. You know that from a child I could always do exquisite fancy-work. Well, I mean to make use of that talent. Mrs. Varrick – Hubert's mother – has always said she would give anything to find a person willing to come to her home who could do just such fancy-work, and decorate her *boudoir*. Now, I mean to go there in disguise, show her a sample of my work, and say that I gave many lessons to Gerelda Northrup, and she will be only too glad to have me come to her home at any price. Then I can see for myself just how much my lover is grieving over my loss. He may be pining away – ay, be at the very gates of death, probably. In that case I shall reveal my identity at once.

"Oh, Miss Gerelda, you could never go through all that! *You* toil, even for a day, for any one? Oh! pray abandon such a mad idea. Believe me, my dear, such an idea is not practicable."

But all her persuasion could not influence the girl to abandon her plan.

A few days later a tall, slender woman robed in the severest black, with a cap on her head and blue glasses covering her eyes, walked slowly up the broad, graveled path that led to the Varrick mansion.

Mrs. Varrick was seated on the porch. She looked highly displeased when the servant approached her, announcing that this person – indicating Gerelda – desired particularly to speak with her a few moments.

"If you are a peddler or in search of work, you should go round to the servants' door," she said, brusquely.

Gerelda never knew until then what a very cross mother-in-law she had escaped.

"Step around there, and I will see you later," said Mrs. Varrick.

This Gerelda was forced to do. She waited in the servants' hall an hour or more before Mrs. Varrick remembered her and came to see what she wanted. When she saw the samples of fancy-work her eyes lighted up.

"They are very beautiful," she said, "but I am not in need of anything of the kind just now. If you call round here a few months later, I might find use for your services."

Gerelda had been so confident of getting an opportunity to stay beneath that roof, that the shock of these words nearly made her cry out and betray herself.

"Is there no young lady in the house to whom I could teach this art?" she asked.

As she spoke these words she heard a light foot-fall on the marble floor, and the soft *frou frou* of rustling skirts behind her, and she turned her head quickly.

There, standing in the door-way, she beheld Jessie Bain.

Chapter X.

LIFE WITHOUT LOVE IS LIKE A ROSE WITHOUT PERFUME

For an instant these two young girls who were to be such bitter rivals for one man's love looked at each other.

"Oh, what exquisite embroidery!" cried Jessie. "Are you going to buy some, Mrs. Varrick?"

"I am thinking of engaging this young person to come to the house and make some for me, under my supervision," she returned.

"I would give so much to know how to make it!" exclaimed Jessie.

"If this young woman will give you instructions, you can take them," said Mrs. Varrick.

At that moment Hubert Varrick entered.

"What is all this discussion about, ladies?" he asked.

Gerelda uttered a quick gasp as he crossed the threshold. Her heart was in her eyes behind those blue glasses. She had pictured him as being worn and haggard with grieving for her. Did her eyes deceive her? Hubert Varrick looked brighter and happier than she had ever seen him look before, and, like a flash, Captain Frazier's words occurred to her – he had soon found consolation in a new love.

"This woman is an adept at embroidering," said Jessie, "and she is to teach me how to do it. When I have thoroughly learned it, the very first thing I shall make will be a lovely smoking-jacket for you."

"Oh, thank you!" exclaimed Hubert. "Believe that it will be a precious souvenir. I shall want to keep it so nice, that I will hardly dare wear it, lest I may soil it."

The girl laughed a little merry laugh. It was well for her that she did not turn and look at the stranger just then. Mrs. Varrick was making arrangements with her, but she was so intently listening to that whispered conversation about the jacket, that she scarcely heard a word she said. She was only conscious that Mrs. Varrick had touched the bell for one of the servants to come and show her the apartment she was to occupy.

"May I ask the name, please?" Mrs. Varrick said.

"Miss Duncan," was the reply.

From the moment Miss Duncan – as she called herself – entered that household her torture began. It was bad enough to be told by Captain Frazier of her would-be lover's lack of constancy; but to witness it with her own eyes – ah, that was maddening!

"Would that I had never entered this household!" she cried out.

She was unable to do justice to her work. Her whole life merged into one desire – to watch Hubert Varrick and Jessie Bain.

She employed herself in embroidering a light silken scarf. This she could take out under the trees, and see the two playing lawn-tennis on the greensward just beyond the lilac hedge.

There was not a movement that escaped her watchful eyes during the whole live-long day. And during the evenings, too. Would she ever forget them?

Yes, Captain Frazier was right – Hubert Varrick had forgotten her.

She could see that Mrs. Varrick had no love for the girl. Indeed, her dislike was most pronounced; and she felt that Hubert must have done considerable coaxing to gain his mother's consent to bring the girl beneath that roof.

When she learned from the housekeeper that Hubert Varrick was her guardian, her rage knew no bounds.

It was at this critical state of affairs that Hubert Varrick received a telegram which called him to New York for a fortnight.

Mrs. Varrick heard this announcement with a little start, while Jessie Bain heard it with dismay. To her it meant two long, dreary weeks that must drag slowly by before he should return again. No one knew what Miss Duncan thought when she heard the housekeeper remarking that Mr. Hubert had gone to New York.

Late that afternoon she was startled by a soft little tap at her door, and in response to her "Come in," Jessie Bain entered.

"I hope I have not interrupted you," said Jessie; "but I thought I would like to come and sit with you, and watch you while you worked, if you don't mind."

"Not in the least," answered Miss Duncan.

For a few moments there was a rigid silence between them, which Miss Duncan longed to break by asking her when and where she first met Hubert Varrick.

But while she was thinking how she might best broach the subject, Jessie turned to her and said, "I don't see how you can work with those blue glasses on; it must be such a strain on your eyes;" adding, earnestly: "But I suppose you are obliged to do it, and that makes considerable difference."

"You suppose wrong," returned Miss Duncan, with asperity. "I do it because it is a pleasure to me."

"Oh!" said Jessie.

"It distracts my mind," continued Miss Duncan. "There are so many sad things that occur in life, that one would give anything in this world to be able to forget them."

"Have you had a great sorrow?" asked Jessie.

"So great that it has almost caused me to hate every woman," returned Miss Duncan; adding: "It was love that caused it all. You will do well, Miss Bain, if you never fall in love; for, at best, men are treacherous."

The girl flushed, wondering if the stranger had penetrated her secret.

But she had been so careful to hide from every one that she had fallen in love with handsome Hubert Varrick, it was almost impossible to guess it.

As Jessie Bain did not reply to the remark which she had just made, Miss Duncan went on hurriedly, "There is not one man in a thousand who proves true to the woman to whom he has plighted his troth. The next pretty face he sees turns his head. I should never want to marry a man, or even to be engaged to one if I knew that he had ever had another love.

"By the way," she asked, suddenly lowering her voice, "I am surprised to see Mr. Varrick looking so cheerful after the experience he has had with his love affair."

"He was too good for that proud heiress," Jessie declared, indignantly. "I think Heaven intended that he should be spared from such a marriage. I – I fairly detest her name. Please do not let us talk about her, Miss Duncan. I like to speak well of people, but I can think of nothing save what is bad to say of her."

With this she rose hastily, excused herself, and hurried from the room, leaving her companion smarting from the stinging words that had fallen from her lips.

"The impudent creature!" fairly gasped the heiress, flinging aside her embroidery and pacing up and down the floor like a caged animal. "I shall take a bitter revenge on her for this, or my name is not Gerelda Northrup!"

The more she thought of it, the deeper her anger took root. They brought her a tempting little repast; but she pushed the tea-tray from her, leaving its contents untasted. She felt that food would have choked her.

The sun went down, and the moon rose clear and bright over the distant hills. One by one the lights in the Varrick mansion went out, and the clock in the adjacent steeple struck the hours until midnight. Still Gerelda Northrup paced up and down the narrow room, intent upon her own dark thoughts.

One o'clock chimed from the steeple, and another hour rolled slowly by; then suddenly she stopped short, and crossed the room to where her satchel lay on the wide window-sill. Opening it, she drew from it a small vial containing white, glistening crystals, and hid it nervously in her bosom; then, with trembling feet, she recrossed the room, opened her door, and peered breathlessly out into the dimly lighted corridor. No sound broke the awful stillness.

Closing the door gently after her, the great heiress tiptoed her way down the wide hall like a thief in the night, her footfalls making no sound on the velvet carpet. Jessie's was the last door at the end of the corridor. Miss Duncan knew this well. But before she had gained it she saw Mrs. Varrick leave her room and step to Jessie's.

She remembered Mrs. Varrick did not like the girl. A score of conjectures flashed through her mind as to the object of that surreptitious visit; but she put them all from her as being highly impracticable and not to be thought of.

The morrow would tell the story. She must wait patiently until then, and find out for herself.

How thankful she was that she had not been three minutes earlier. In that case Mrs Varrick would have discovered her. And then, too, a tragedy had been averted.

She took the vial from her bosom, and with trembling hands shook its contents from the window down into the grounds below, and threw the tiny bottle out among the rose bushes, murmuring:

"If it is ever done at all, it must not be done that way."

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